

The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda- Volume 9- Conversations and Interviews

FIRST MEETING WITH MADAME EMMA CALVE

(New Discoveries, Vol. 1, pp. 484-86.)

[The story of the first meeting of Swami Vivekananda and Madame Emma Calvé, as told in Calvé's autobiography, *My Life*]

. . . [Swami Vivekananda] was lecturing in Chicago one year when I was there; and as I was at that time greatly depressed in mind and body, I decided to go to him.

. . . Before going I had been told not to speak until he addressed me. When I entered the room, I stood before him in silence for a moment. He was seated in a noble attitude of meditation, his robe of saffron yellow falling in straight lines to the floor, his head swathed in a turban bent forward, his eyes on the ground. After a pause he spoke without looking up.

"My child", he said, "what a troubled atmosphere you have about you. Be calm. It is essential".

Then in a quiet voice, untroubled and aloof, this man who did not even know my name talked to me of my secret problems and anxieties. He spoke of things that I thought were unknown even to my nearest friends. It seemed miraculous, supernatural.

"How do you know all this?" I asked at last. "Who has talked of me to you?"

He looked at me with his quiet smile as though I were a child who had asked a foolish question.

"No one has talked to me", he answered gently. "Do you think that it is necessary? I read in you as in an open book."

Finally it was time for me to leave.

"You must forget", he said as I rose. "Become gay and happy again. Build up your health. Do not dwell in silence upon your sorrows. Transmute your emotions into some form of external expression. Your spiritual health requires it. Your art demands it."

I left him deeply impressed by his words and his personality. He seemed to have emptied my brain of all its feverish complexities and placed there instead his clear and calming thoughts. I became once again vivacious and cheerful, thanks to the effect of his powerful will. He did not use

any of the hypnotic or mesmeric influences. It was the strength of his character, the purity and intensity of his purpose that carried conviction. It seemed to me, when I came to know him better, that he lulled one's chaotic thoughts into a state of peaceful acquiescence, so that one could give complete and undivided attention to his words.

FIRST MEETING WITH JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER

(An excerpt from Madame Verdier's journal quoted in the *New Discoveries*, Vol. 1, pp. 487-88.)

[As told by Madame Emma Calvé, to Madame Drinette Verdier]

Mr. X, in whose home Swamiji was staying in Chicago, was a partner or an associate in some business with John D. Rockefeller. Many times John D. heard his friends talking about this extraordinary and wonderful Hindu monk who was staying with them, and many times he had been invited to meet Swamiji but, for one reason or another, always refused. At that time Rockefeller was not yet at the peak of his fortune, but was already powerful and strong-willed, very difficult to handle and a hard man to advise.

But one day, although he did not want to meet Swamiji, he was pushed to it by an impulse and went directly to the house of his friends, brushing aside the butler who opened the door and saying that he wanted to see the Hindu monk.

The butler ushered him into the living room, and, not waiting to be announced, Rockefeller entered into Swamiji's adjoining study and was much surprised, I presume, to see Swamiji behind his writing table not even lifting his eyes to see who had entered.

After a while, as with Calvé, Swamiji told Rockefeller much of his past that was not known to any but himself, and made him understand that the money he had already accumulated was not his, that he was only a channel and that his duty was to do good to the world — that God had given him all his wealth in order that he might have an opportunity to help and do good to people.

Rockefeller was annoyed that anyone dared to talk to him that way and tell him what to do. He left the room in irritation, not even saying goodbye. But about a week after, again without being announced, he entered Swamiji's

study and, finding him the same as before, threw on his desk a paper which told of his plans to donate an enormous sum of money toward the financing of a public institution.

“Well, there you are”, he said. “You must be satisfied now, and you can thank me for it.”

Swamiji didn't even lift his eyes, did not move. Then taking the paper, he quietly read it, saying: “It is for you to thank me”. That was all. This was Rockefeller's first large donation to the public welfare.

A DUSKY PHILOSOPHER FROM INDIA

(New Discoveries, Vol. 5, pp. 389-94.)

(To preserve the historical authenticity of the newspaper reports in this section, their original spelling has been largely retained; however, their punctuation has been made consistent with the style of the Complete Works. — Publisher.)

[An interview by Blanche Partington, San Francisco Chronicle, March 18, 1900]

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. . . Bowing very low in Eastern fashion on his entrance to the room, then holding out his hand in good American style, the dusky philosopher from the banks of the Ganges gave friendly greeting to the representative of that thoroughly Occidental institution, the daily press.

. . . I asked for a picture to illustrate this article, and when someone handed me a certain “cut” which has been extensively used in lecture advertisements here, he uttered a mild protest against its use.

“But that does not look like you”, said I.

“No, it is as if I wished to kill someone”, he said smiling, “like — like —”

“Othello”, I inserted rashly. But the little audience of friends only smiled as the Swami made laughing recognition of the absurd resemblance of the picture to the jealous Moor. But I do not use that picture.

“Is it true, Swami”, I asked, “that when you went home after lecturing in the Congress of Religions after the World's Fair, princes knelt at your feet, a half dozen of the ruling sovereigns of India dragged your carriage through the streets, as the papers told us? We do not treat our priests so”.

“That is not good to talk of”, said the Swami. “But it is true that religion rules there, not dollars.”

“What about caste?”

“What of your Four Hundred?” he replied, smiling. “Caste in India is an institution hardly explicable or intelligible to the Occidental mind. It is acknowledged to

be an imperfect institution, but we do not recognize a superior social result from your attempts at class distinction. India is the only country which has so far succeeded in imposing a permanent caste upon her people, and we doubt if an exchange for Western superstitions and evils would be for her advantage.”

“But under such regime — where a man may not eat this nor drink that, nor marry the other — the freedom you teach would be impossible”, I ventured.

“It is impossible”, assented the Swami; “but until India has outgrown the necessity for caste laws, caste laws will remain”. “Is it true that you may not eat food cooked by a foreigner — unbeliever?” I asked.

“In India the cook — who is not called a servant — must be of the same or higher caste than those for whom the food is cooked, as it is considered that whatever a man touches is impressed by his personality, and food, with which a man builds up the body through which he expresses himself, is regarded as being liable to such impression. As to the foods we eat, it is assumed that certain kinds of food nourish certain properties worthy of cultivation, and that others retard our spiritual growth. For instance, we do not kill to eat. Such food would be held to nourish the animal body, at the expense of the spiritual body, in which the soul is said to be clothed on its departure from this physical envelope, besides laying the sin of blood-guiltiness upon the butcher.”

“Ugh!” I exclaimed involuntarily, an awful vision of reproachful little lambs, little chicken ghosts, hovering cow spirits — I was always afraid of cows anyway — rising up before me.

“You see”, explained the Brahmin [Kshatriya], “the universe is all one, from the lowest insect to the highest Yogi. It is all one, we are all one, you and I are one —”. Here the Occidental audience smiled, the unconscious monk chanting the oneness of things in Sanskrit and the consequent sin of taking any life.

. . . He was pacing up and down the room most of the time during our talk, occasionally standing over the register — it was a chill morning for this child of the sun — and doing with grace and freedom whatever occurred to him, even, at length, smoking a little.

“You, yourself, have not yet attained supreme control over all desires”, I ventured. The Swami's frankness is infectious.

“No, madam”, and he smiled the broad and brilliant smile of a child; “Do I look it?” But the Swami, from the land of hasheesh and dreams, doubtless did not connect my query with its smoky origin.

“Is it usual among the Hindoo priesthood to marry?” I ventured again.

“It is a matter of individual choice”, replied this member of the Hindoo priesthood. “One does not marry that he may not be in slavery to a woman and children, or permit

the slavery of a woman to him.”

“But what is to become of the population?” urged the anti-Malthusian.

“Are you so glad to have been born?” retorted the Eastern thinker, his large eyes flashing scorn. “Can you conceive of nothing higher than this warring, hungry, ignorant world? Do not fear that the you may be lost, though the sordid, miserable consciousness of the now may go. What worth having [would be] gone?”

“The child comes crying into the world. Well may he cry! Why should we weep to leave it? Have you thought” — here the sunny smile came back — “of the different modes of East and West of expressing the passing away? We say of the dead man, 'He gave up his body'; you put it, 'he gave up the ghost'. How can that be? Is it the dead body that permits the ghost to depart? What curious inversion of thought!”

“But, on the whole, Swami, you think it better to be comfortably dead than a living lion?” persisted the defender of populations.

“Swâhâ, Swaha, so be it!” shouted the monk.

“But how is it that under such philosophy men consent to live at all?”

“Because a man’s own life is sacred as any other life, and one may not leave chapters unlearned”, returned the philosopher. “Add power and diminish time, and the school days are shorter; as the learned professor can make the marble in twelve years which nature took centuries to form. It is all a question of time.”

“India, which has had this teaching so long, has not yet learned her lesson?”

“No, though she is perhaps nearer than any other country, in that she has learned to love mercy.”

“What of England in India?” I asked.

“But for English rule I could not be here now”, said the monk, “though your lowest free-born American Negro holds higher position in India politically than is mine. Brahmin and coolie, we are all 'natives'. But it is all right, in spite of the misunderstanding and oppression. England is the Tharma [Karma?] of India, attracted inevitably by some inherent weakness, past mistakes, but from her blood and fibre will come the new national hope for my countrymen. I am a loyal subject of the Empress of India!” and here the Swami salaamed before an imaginary potentate, bowing very low, perhaps too low for reverence.

“But such an apostle of freedom —”, I murmured.

“She is the widow for many years, and such we hold in high worth in India”, said the philosopher seriously. “As to freedom, yes, I believe the goal of all development is freedom, law and order. There is more law and order in the grave than anywhere else — try it.”

“I must go”, I said. “I have to catch a train”.

“That is like all Americans”, smiled the Swami, and I had a glimpse of all eternity in his utter restfulness. “You must catch this car or that train always. Is there not another, later?”

But I did not attempt to explain the Occidental conception of the value of time to this child of the Orient, realizing its utter hopelessness and my own renegade sympathy. It must be delightful beyond measure to live in the land of “time enough”. In the Orient there seems time to breathe, time to think, time to live; as the Swami says, what have we in exchange? We live in time; they in eternity.

“WE ARE HYPNOTIZED INTO WEAKNESS BY OUR SURROUNDINGS”

(New Discoveries, Vol. 5, pp. 396-98.)

[An interview by the San Francisco Examiner, March 18, 1900]

Hindoo Philosopher Who Strikes at the Root of Some Occidental Evils and Tells How We Must Worship God Simply and Not with Many Vain Prayers.

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One American friend he may be assured of — the Swami is a charming person to interview.

Pacing about the little room where he is staying, he kept the small audience of interviewer and friend entertained for a couple of hours.

“Tell you about the English in India? But I do not wish to talk of politics. But from the higher standpoint, it is true that but for the English rule I could not be here. We natives know that it is through the intermixture of English blood and ideas that the salvation of India will come. Fifty years ago, all the literature and religion of the race were locked up in the Sanskrit language; today the drama and the novel are written in the vernacular, and the literature of religion is being translated. That is the work of the English, and it is unnecessary, in America, to descant upon the value of the education of the masses.”

“What do you think of the Boers War?” was asked.

“Oh! Have you seen the morning paper? But I do not wish to discuss politics. English and Boers are both in the wrong. It is terrible — terrible — the bloodshed! English will conquer, but at what fearful cost! She seems the nation of Fate.”

And the Swami with a smile, began chanting the Sanskrit for an unwillingness to discuss politics.

Then he talked long of ancient Russian history, and of the wandering tribes of Tartary, and of the Moorish rule in Spain, and displaying an astonishing memory and research. To this childlike interest in all things that touch

him is doubtless due much of the curious and universal knowledge that he seems to possess.

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 12.)

MARRIAGE

(New Discoveries, Vol. 5, p. 138.)

From Miss Josephine MacLeod's February 1908 letter to Mary Hale, in which she described Swami Vivekananda's response to Alberta Sturges's question:

ALBERTA STURGES: Is there no happiness in marriage?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Yes, Alberta, if marriage is entered into as a great austerity — and everything is given up — even principle!

Mrs. Edith Allan described a teacher-student exchange in one of Swami Vivekananda's San Francisco classes:

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: I am the disciple of a man who could not write his own name, and I am not worthy to undo his shoes. How often have I wished I could take my intellect and throw it into the Ganges!

STUDENT: But, Swami, that is the part of you I like best.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: That is because you are a fool, Madam — like I am.

THE MASTER'S DIVINE INCARNATION

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 17.)

From Mrs. Edith Allan's reminiscences:

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: I have to come back once more. The Master said I am to come back once more with him.

MRS. ALLAN: You have to come back because Shri Ramakrishna says so?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Souls like that have great power, Madam.

LINE OF DEMARCATION

(New Discoveries, Vol. 5, p. 225.)

From Mrs. Alice Hansbrough's reminiscences of a question-answer exchange following the class entitled "Hints on Practical Spirituality":

Q: Swami, if all things are one, what is the difference between a cabbage and a man?

A: Stick a knife into your leg, and you will see the line of demarcation.

A PRIVATE ADMISSION

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 121.)

From Mrs. Edith Allan's reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda's stay in northern California, 1900:

WOMAN STUDENT: Oh, if I had only lived earlier, I could have seen Shri Ramakrishna!

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (turning quietly to her): You say that, and you have seen me?

GOD IS!

(New Discoveries, Vol. 5, p. 276.)

Alice Hansbrough's record of a question-answer session after a class lecture:

Q: Then, Swami, what you claim is that all is good?

A: By no means. My claim is that all is not — only God is! That makes all the difference.

RENUNCIATION

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 11-12.)

From Alice Hansbrough's reminiscences of a question-answer session following one of Swami Vivekananda's San Francisco classes pertaining to renunciation:

WOMAN STUDENT: Well, Swami, what would become of the world if everyone renounced?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Madam, why do you come to me with that lie on your lips? You have never considered anything in this world but your own pleasure!

A GREETING

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 136.)

From Mr. Thomas Allan's reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda's visit to Alameda, California, 1900:

MR. ALLAN: Well, Swami, I see you are in Alameda!

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: No, Mr. Allan, I am not in Alameda; Alameda is in me.

"THIS WORLD IS A CIRCUS RING"

(New Discoveries, Vol. 6, p. 156.)

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA'S DISCIPLE

From Mrs. Alice Hansbrough's reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda's conversation with Miss Bell at Camp Taylor, California, in May 1900:

MISS BELL: This world is an old schoolhouse where we come to learn our lessons.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Who told you that? [Miss Bell could not remember.] Well, I don't think so. I think this world is a circus ring in which we are the clowns tumbling.

MISS BELL: Why do we tumble, Swami?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Because we like to tumble. When we get tired, we will quit.

ON KALI

(The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, Vol. I, p. 118.)

Sister Nivedita's reminiscence of a conversation with Swami Vivekananda at the time she was learning the Kâli worship:

SISTER NIVEDITA: Perhaps, Swamiji, Kali is the vision of Shiva! Is She?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: Well! Well! Express it in your own way. Express it in your own way!

TRAINING UNDER SHRI RAMAKRISHNA

(The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita, Vol. I, pp. 159-60.)

While on board a ship to England, Swami Vivekananda was touched by the childlike devotion of the ship's servants:

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: You see, I love our Mohammedans!

SISTER NIVEDITA: Yes, but what I want to understand is this habit of seeing every people from their strongest aspect. Where did it come from? Do you recognize it in any historical character? Or is it in some way derived from Shri Ramakrishna?

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: It must have been the training under Ramakrishna Paramahansa. We all went by his path to some extent. Of course it was not so difficult for us as he made it for himself. He would eat and dress like the people he wanted to understand, take their initiation, and use their language. "One must learn", he said, "to put oneself into another man's very soul". And this method was his own! No one ever before in India became Christian and Mohammedan and Vaishnava, by turn!

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