

LESSONS OF HISTORY

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When great historians are asked about what we learn from history, they reply that we learn nothing, that it tends to repeat itself, and humanity makes the same mistakes with mathematical regularity. This is because we never look back, we never reflect and ask ourselves the question “what do we learn” ? We don’t ask it at the individual level, nor at the level of community. We don’t ask it at the national level or the international level. This lack of reflection is really at the heart of the historian’s lament.

In the compass of a short discourse, it is difficult to cover such a vast topic and do it justice. So this talk will be on the lessons of history that I have learned.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad, the teacher tells the departing students:

svādhyāya pravacanābhyam na pramāditavyam.

Do not refrain from learning and teaching. That is, always put the question: “what do I learn from this”? This verse is often translated as ‘study and teaching.’ But as Swami Sarvagatananda has pointed out to us many times, the word *adhyāya* means ‘study’ and *svādhyāya* is *sva* plus *adhyāya* which means ‘self-study’ or learning. Thus, in whatever we study, in whatever we experience, we can always ask this question: what do I learn? Then, our studies become more meaningful, more purposeful. This is the essence of introspection.

What is history?

So what is history? Is it the story of battles and wars, of pillage and conquest, of man’s inhumanity to man, of meaningless dates and disconnected events? The way the study of history is presented in our schools, it would certainly seem so. It is no wonder that we get disgusted by such a study. It is in fact a wonder that students don’t go mad after such cramming of irrelevant facts. That only shows the resilience of the human brain.

Swami Vivekananda, in his essay, ‘The Future of India’ writes: “Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character building assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library ... If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world and encyclopedias are the Rishis.”

To this, we might add the dangers of modern society. The internet seems to have become some sort of divine oracle and everyone goes there to consult it, without thinking. Facts on the world wide web were placed there by individuals, often with some vested interest and we should exercise great caution in accepting anything there as true. The

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internet is the logorrhea of people with access to the computer and nothing more. It is hardly a divine oracle.

“True education,” Swamiji defines, “is the development of a faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently.”¹ “This is the systematic development of the mind. To me, the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts. If I had to do my education over again, and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment, and then with a perfect instrument, I could collect facts at will.”²

Thus, the mind must be trained to ‘will rightly and efficiently’ before it can begin the study of anything. That perspective is, as I said at the beginning, from the vantage point of learning. What does the study mean to me? How do I grow by this study? What is it that I learn? How does it help me in my interpersonal relationships?

We are the heirs of all the great thoughts of the past. We have inherited the spiritual wisdom of the saints and sages of all nations. Let us claim our inheritance and take up the spiritual history of the world. Sri Krishna’s teaching of karma yoga, or working with a detached, loving, concerned attitude will do me more good than knowing the date on which the Magna Carta was signed. (Actually, it was never signed. King John couldn’t read or write so he had to use his thumb print as signature!) Buddha’s teaching of the total view and the eightfold way will steer me through the problems of life than knowing the origin and cause of the 100 years war. (Can you believe it? There was a hundred years war between England and France!) Christ’s message of love and his sermon on the mount will guide us through the troubled days than learning by heart the ramblings and opinions of some tyrant politician.

I am reminded of a joke involving a history examination. The question asked of the student was: “Discuss the events and causes that led to the war of 1812.” The student drew a blank. Time was running out. So he wrote: “Before the war of 1812, there was the war of 1811 and before that ...” We can’t really say he was wrong!

So the study of history should be meaningful to our life, must enlighten us, enrich our moral and spiritual growth. In this endeavour, the study of the lives and teachings of the saints and sages of the world is most uplifting.

On this point, Swami Vivekananda writes in his essay, “The Great Teachers of the World,” that “by studying the lives of these great messengers, we find that each was destined to play a part, as it were, and a part only: that the true harmony consists in the sum total and not in one note. It is the same in the life of the races. No race is born to alone enjoy the world. None dare say so. Each race has a part to play in this divine harmony of nations; each race has its mission to perform, its duty to fulfil. The sum total is the great harmony!”

¹ Vol. 5, p. 231 of the Complete Works, 16th Edition.

² Vol. 6, p. 38 of the Complete Works, 16th Edition.

This is perhaps the first lesson of history we should learn: that every race and culture has produced men and women of noble character and that we may learn from a careful study of their lives. Our life becomes richer, deeper by such a study. No matter what we may say, we all need role models, examples, shining luminously in our consciousness, illumining the path of our life.

The value of study: to awaken a faith in oneself

When we study the lives of such great personalities, we find that our problems pale into insignificance. Our troubles and difficulties are nothing in comparison to the problems the great people had to wrestle with. By such study, we find the fountain of inspiration, a meaning for our own existence and endeavour, and the realization that we too have a part to play in this drama of life.

We begin to realize that if we are able to live a peaceable and prosperous life, it is because of the struggles and sacrifices of others behind us. We enjoy certain civil liberties today because someone had a dream and was willing to sacrifice his life for that dream.

“I have a dream.” Those words still echo in our consciousness from the corinthian pillars of the Lincoln memorial. Even to visualise that scene that happened less than forty years ago is electrifying.

We can still hear those words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “I have a dream. ... Let us not wallow in the valley of despair ... even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream. ...”

These words awaken a deep sense of gratitude. Thinking about it, reflecting on these struggles, establishes between us a spiritual kinship. We are part of that struggle. We are part of the whole. Thus, history is not in the past. It is around us in the living present if only we have eyes to see.

An intelligent study of history arouses in us a sense of enthusiasm, a faith in oneself. In his lectures on Practical Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda writes, “Throughout the history of mankind, if any one motive power has been more potent than others in the lives of great men and women, it is that of faith in themselves. Born with the consciousness that they were to be great, they became great. Let a man go down as low as possible, yet there must come a time when out of sheer desperation, he will take an upward curve and learn to have faith in himself. ... We can see that all the difference between man and man is due to the existence or non-existence of faith in himself. Faith in ourselves will do everything. I have experienced it in my own life and am still doing so, and as I grow older that faith is becoming stronger and stronger. The old religions said that he who did not believe in God was an atheist. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself.”

If the first lesson of history is the recognition that all nations have produced men and women of exalted character and that we can learn from them by studying their lives

and teachings, the second lesson is the realization that these exemplary figures had many difficulties and bitter experiences in their life that they overcame through a tremendous faith in themselves. We find them almost superhuman. Yet, when we study their early life, our lives are more exemplary than theirs.

To cite a humorous case, Mahatma Gandhi describes how in his student days training for the legal profession, he was required to attend the proceedings at Bombay High Court. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes, “I used to attend High Court daily but I cannot say that I learnt anything there. I had not sufficient knowledge to learn much. Often I could not follow the cases and dozed off. There were others also who kept me company in this, and thus lightened my load of shame. After a time, I even lost the sense of shame, as I learnt to think it was fashionable to doze off in the High Court.”³

Despite such sloppy study habits, we know how Gandhi later disciplined himself and became the moral and spiritual giant inspiring others to a similar endeavour.

In the Confessions of Saint Augustine, we find him saying that he should receive eternal damnation for all the sins of his youth. Yet, he transformed his character, changed his habits and through the power of prayer, became a spiritual giant whose writings had influenced the growth of Christianity for at least five centuries. Augustine would pray, “Too narrow is the house of my soul for You to enter into it; let it be enlarged by You. It lies in ruins; please build it up again ... Who else can I call upon than You?”

These examples inspire us for in them we see that it is through struggles, through failures and errors that spiritual giants have arisen.

On the theme of growth through errors, Swami Vivekananda writes in his lecture ‘The Great Teachers of the World’: “Let us think something new, even if it be wrong. It is better to do that ... We become wiser through failures ... Look at the wall. Did the wall tell a lie? It is always the wall. Man tells a lie - and becomes a god. ... The people who never think anything for themselves are not yet born into the world of religion; they have a mere jelly-fish existence.”

We should not have regrets about our mistakes. But rather we should learn from them. Failures are our stepping stones for spiritual growth, says Swami Vivekananda. If that be the case, let us pile them high and climb up to those celestial summits.

Originality in historical solutions

The third lesson of history is that nations and civilizations grow through the tapasya, self-discipline and spiritual evolution of a few creative and original individuals. We find them often retreating into a profound introspection, into a deep analysis of their past, with a serious discontent with the present condition of society and a passionate yearning to find a way out. We find this in the life of the Buddha, of Jesus Christ, of Mohammed, of Shankaracharya, and of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

³ M.K. Gandhi, Experiments in Truth, p. 96.

For example, in Buddha's life, we learn of how he was struck by the misery of the world, though being born as a prince, and brought up in the lap of luxury. He could not find comfort in personal happiness and thus renounced his princely life and wandered into the forest in search of the way out of human misery. There, sitting under the bo tree and vowing not to get up until he had found the solution, he attained enlightenment and taught the world the eight-fold way.

Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, he wandered in India teaching people how to liberate themselves from misery, how to get rid of clinging, selfishness, and superstition. Swami Vivekananda writes of the Buddha: "Consider his marvellous brain. No emotionalism. That giant brain never was superstitious. Believe not because an old manuscript has been produced, because it has been handed down to you from your forefathers, because your friends want you to - but think for yourself, search out truth for yourself, realize it yourself. ... One has to have a mind that is crystal clear; only then can truth shine in it."

A man who lived almost 3000 years ago can touch us in this way and influence us, inspire us is a remarkable fact. It is because of the power of his tapasya, the depth of his meditation and introspection. He was not satisfied with superficial solutions. He went to the heart of the problem and found the way out. That is why he is worshipped by millions around the world. He taught us self-reliance, and how to think for ourselves.

When we come to the life of Jesus 600 years later, we do not have any record of the tapasya, the disciplines, the meditations that he undertook. We have no indication of his spiritual practices. Yet, we do have his spiritual teachings as handed down to us in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you." Purify the mind and heart and you will find God.

The hands of Jesus have touched many lives and transformed them, stretching across the vast deserts of time. In all such transformed lives, we find a deep questioning, a profound introspection to penetrate into the heart of things.

To cite an example of recent times, Mahatma Gandhi writes of his first encounter with Christian teachings: "My friends were trying to convert me to Christianity. They told me that Jesus suffered and atoned for all the sins of mankind. Only he who accepts His great redemption can have eternal peace ... If this be the Christianity acknowledged by all Christians, I cannot accept it. I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin, I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin ... My difficulties lay deeper. It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically, there might be some truth in it ... I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice and a divine teacher."⁴

⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

We find again later the same introspective conflict in the life of Martin Luther King Jr. Only 40 years ago he walked on this land of America. Born as a son of a Christian preacher and himself a preacher, he could not understand the contradictions of the teachings, the contradictions in life and in society.

In his autobiography, he writes, “I guess I accepted biblical studies uncritically until I was about 12 years old. But this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being. I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At 13, I shocked my Sunday school by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly ... My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. The question arose in my mind: how could I love a race of people who hated me? ... This was the great question for a number of years.”⁵

He didn’t stop there and accept the state of things. Combining intellectual studies with a critical inquiry and a spiritual introspection, he weaved out a personal philosophy of effective action.

He wrote, “During the Christmas holidays of 1949, I spent my time reading Karl Marx to try to understand the appeal of communism ... I read Marx as I read all of the influential historical thinkers - from a dialectical point of view, combining a partial yes and partial no. ... I rejected his materialistic interpretation of history ... In spite of the shortcomings of his analysis, Marx had raised some basic questions. I was deeply concerned from my early teen days about the gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty. ... Capitalism was not the answer either ... Capitalism is more concerned about making a living than making a life. We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles, rather than by the quality of our service and relationship to humanity. ... Then I despaired about the power of love in solving social problems. I felt the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. I could not see how it could work in social conflict ... until I heard about Mahatma Gandhi ... As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism about the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. ... Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.”⁶

The philosophy of non-violent resistance of evil as embodied in the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. can also be applied in dealing with our own turbulent condition of the mind, and our own difficulties. Sometimes confronting our shortcomings head on is perhaps the wrong thing to do. It only strengthens them even more. When Swami Turiyananda asked Sri Ramakrishna how one controls the passions of the mind, Sri Ramakrishna answered, “You don’t control them. You give them a higher turn.” That is the secret. This is really non-violent, non-co-operation with evil. We give our energies, our aspirations, our desires a spiritual turn. We engage them in a constructive and creative direction.

⁵ The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., p. 7

⁶ Ibid., p. 23-24.

In fact, our lack of peace with ourselves leads to our lack of peace with others. Global conflicts are only a magnification of the problem at the individual level.

To summarize, there are three main lessons of history. The first is that all nations and races have produced men and women of exalted character and we can learn from a serious study of their lives and teachings. Since time is short, their lives are the only thing worth studying. The second is that each of these noble individuals had tremendous faith in themselves that they can transform themselves and that they *can* make a difference. Third, they followed this up by an intense yearning, a deep introspection and a fiery tapasya. And out of that came their life's work.

No system can make us. We have to make ourselves. In the life of Sri Ramakrishna we find this intense yearning, and intense tapasya. He had tremendous faith in himself. He always thought of himself as a child of God, a child of the Divine Mother. In his life, we see him ever eager to learn from everyone. "As long as I live so long do I learn," he would say. We see him practicing the spiritual disciplines of all the major religions, not academically as we tend to, but plunging into it headlong, forgetting his traditional past and merging into the spiritual ideal represented by that religion. Thus he realized the harmony of *all* religions.

This attitude of taking a total view, a wholesome view is even more important today than it ever was because we stand on the precipice overlooking the valley of self-destruction. For this is the age of specialization, where each of us knows more and more about less and less, with none of us having a global view. Today, we are about to put our future in the hands of computers. The society we have created is so fragile that if one plug is pulled, if one micro-chip fails to work properly, society comes to a standstill and we are all in the dark, literally.

Instead of technology being our servant, we have become servants of technology. Fifty years ago, it was said that science will give humanity the leisure to contemplate, to meditate and grow spiritually. The opposite has actually occurred. The leisure that we had has been taken away from us and filled it with more work. How many of us bring our work home and now that we are connected through the computer, the weekends and evenings are taken up replying to e-mail and so forth.

Science has unleashed a power without giving us the wisdom to use that wisely, to control it, to channel its use. "Increase of knowledge without increase of wisdom is increase of sorrow and suffering," as our Swamiji always reminds us. Nehru writes in his 'Discovery of India', "The very abundance of accumulated knowledge has made it difficult for men to take a synthetic view of the whole and he loses himself in some part of it, analyses it, .. and fails to see its connection to the whole. The vast forces science has released overwhelm him and carry him forward relentlessly and often an unwilling victim, to the unknown shores."⁷

This synthetic view or global perspective can only come from moral and spiritual strength. If science unleashes new forms of energy, it is for us to use it for the benefit of

⁷ Discovery of India, p. 572

all. That impulse can only come from moral strength because science has always taken a back seat in telling people how to use the new power.

In this context, Albert Einstein says that “the fate of the human race is more than ever dependent on its moral strength today ... We need to revive moral and spiritual values ... The example of great and pure characters is the only thing that can produce fine ideas or noble deeds. Money and power tempt its owners to abuse it, to bring pain to his fellow man.”

As a child, I remember reading about the mythological story of Matsya Avatara, the fish incarnation and Hayagriva, a demon who had the body of a human being but the head of a horse. This demon, Hayagriva, steals the Vedas from Brahma, the Creator. Then Vishnu incarnates as Matsya Avatara, the giant fish, and deluges the world to restore the Vedas to the hands of Brahma. Hayagriva is the human being who has not given up his animal tendencies and is a symbol of the modern man, dangerously armed with technology. This mythology is really psychology.

After writing his encyclopedic study of world history, Arnold Toynbee writes, “The world is, for the first time, being united on a literally world-wide scale. Today, we are in the midst of this transitional chapter of world’s history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. But this Western skill has not only annihilated distance, it has armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point-blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna’s testimony to the harmony of religions: here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family - and in the Atomic age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves ... The survival of the human race is at stake. Yet even the strongest and most respectable utilitarian motive is only a secondary reason for taking Ramakrishna’s and Gandhi’s teaching to heart and acting on it. The primary reason is that this teaching is right - and is right because it flows from a true vision of spiritual reality.”⁷

Thus, it is not by conquest and competition that peace is secured but rather through the spirit of co-operation and understanding. Looking at history, we see that empire after empire has fallen as a testimonial that conquest has never worked to bring unity. Only the spiritual empires of the world’s saints and sages, with their message of love and harmony are intact. It is for us to take it up and practice it in our lives.

Swami Vivekananda writes, “The more I study history, the more I find the idea of competition to be wrong. Some say that if man did not fight with man, he would not progress. I also used to think so. But I find now that every war has thrown back human progress by 50 years instead of hurrying it forwards. The day will come when man will

⁷ 30 August 1969, in Foreword to ‘India’s Contribution to World Thought and Culture.’

study history from a different light and find that competition is not necessary for evolution at all. ... For instance, there is a fire in a theatre, and only a few escape. The rest in trying to rush out crush one another down. That crush was not necessary for the salvation of the building nor for the two or three who escaped. If all had gone out slowly, not one would have been hurt. This is the case in life.”

Human society is an interdependent society. We can all progress through a spirit of co-operation. Our future depends upon it. May we all imbibe the spirit of learning from all the saints and sages of the world and imbued with faith in ourselves, dive deep into our own being. May we realise the interconnectedness of all life and live peacefully in a spirit of mutual co-operation. This is my prayer.