**Vivekananda**

**Vivekananda**, original name **Narendranath Datta**, Datta also spelled **Dutt**, (born January 12, 1863, Calcutta [now Kolkata]—died July 4, 1902, near Calcutta), Hindu spiritual leader and reformer in [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India) who attempted to combine Indian [spirituality](https://www.britannica.com/topic/spirituality) with Western material progress, maintaining that the two supplemented and complemented one another. His Absolute was a person’s own higher self; to labor for the benefit of humanity was the noblest endeavor.

Born into an upper-middle-class family of the Kayastha (scribes) [caste](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caste-social-differentiation) in [Bengal](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bengal-region-Asia), he was educated at a Western-style university where he was exposed to [Western philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-philosophy), [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity), and [science](https://www.britannica.com/science/science). Social reform became a prominent element of Vivekananda’s thought, and he joined the [Brahmo Samaj](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brahmo-Samaj) (Society of Brahma), dedicated to eliminating child marriage and illiteracy and determined to spread [education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education) among women and the lower castes. He later became the most-notable [disciple](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple) of [Ramakrishna](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ramakrishna), who demonstrated the essential unity of all [religions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion).

Always stressing the universal and humanistic side of the [Vedas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Veda), the oldest sacred texts of [Hinduism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism), as well as belief in service rather than [dogma](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogma), Vivekananda attempted to infuse vigour into Hindu thought, placing less emphasis on the prevailing [pacifism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/pacifism) and presenting Hindu spirituality to the West. He was an activating force in the movement to promote [Vedanta](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vedanta) philosophy (one of the six schools of [Indian philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-philosophy)) in the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) and [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England). In 1893 he appeared in [Chicago](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chicago) as a spokesman for Hinduism at the World’s Parliament of Religions and so [captivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/captivated) the assembly that a newspaper account described him as “an orator by divine right and undoubtedly the greatest figure at the Parliament.” Thereafter he lectured throughout the United States and England, making converts to the Vedanta movement.

On his return to India with a small group of Western [disciples](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciples) in 1897, Vivekananda founded the [Ramakrishna Mission](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ramakrishna-Mission) at the monastery of Belur Math on the [Ganges (Ganga) River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ganges-River) near Calcutta (now [Kolkata](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kolkata)). Self-perfection and service were his ideals, and the order continued to stress them. He adapted and made relevant to the 20th century the very highest ideals of the Vedantic [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion), and, although he lived only two years into that century, he left the mark of his personality on East and West alike.