

## VIVEKANANDA'S PRACTICAL VEDANTA: A SOULFUL APPROACH TO HUMAN SOCIETY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Swami Vivekananda, the pioneer of modern India had great admiration to Samkara's Advaita Vedanta. Swamiji made the theoretical ideas of Vedanta philosophy very simple, so that human beings can understand it very easily and they can realize their highest reality in the society, i.e. God-in-himself (Tattvamasi). This paper is an attempt to highlight social values that underlies in Vivekananda's 'Practical Vedanta'.*

*According to Vivekananda, the Vedanta philosophy teaches men two great ideas. i) One is the fundamental unity of every being and ii) the other is to realize the divine nature within every being in the society. If men are able to understand these ideas, it will encourage them to perform their duties with much care and affectionate way and they will look upon and behave to other fellow beings as one's own soul. By this way Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta formulates not merely universal brotherhood, but universal oneness. Hence, it is through the spiritual upliftment that all kinds of discrimination, inequality and oppression can be removed from the society and we can build-up a liberated, free society open to all.*

***Keywords:** Practical Vedanta, Love, Spiritual oneness, Universal brotherhood.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda may be said to have been rooted partly in the teachings of his great master Sri Ramakrishna and partly to the Advaita Vedanta of Samkaracarya. From Sri Ramakrishna he received the message of serving Jiva as Shiva through the unique power of love; from Samkaracarya he learnt the message- Brahman is everything and everything is Brahman. These two great teachings are harmonized by

Vivekananda in his characteristic convincing way into what he calls 'Practical Vedanta'. The objective of this present paper is to explore the social values that underlie such Practical Vedanta system.

## PRACTICAL VEDANTA

Though Swami Vivekananda had great admiration for Samkara's Advaita Vedanta system, but he could feel that, the abstract Advaita Vedanta will have no use unless it is made practically useful for common man. His mission was to make the Vedantic spirituality applied to life's problem. It is the mission of Practical Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda maintained that the Vedanta, as a religion must be intensely practical. "We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta teaches oneness - one life throughout."<sup>1</sup>

The distinctive character of the Practical Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda lies in his tremendous effort to bring the philosophically sophisticated ideas and doctrines of Advaita Vedanta to the understanding of common man in a simple but triumphant way. Practical Vedanta is nothing but the abstract ideas of Vedanta which has to be brought to the level of a common man, so that he will be able to understand and follow its ideals in order to reach at the goal of life, i.e., freedom. In Swamiji's word, "If it be absolutely impracticable, no theory is of any value whatever, except as intellectual gymnastics. The Vedanta as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta teaches oneness- one life throughout. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life; they must enter into all our thoughts, and more and more into practice."<sup>2</sup>

Vivekananda made Vedantic principles practically applicable to the day-to-day problems of common man. Religion has to be made to find solution in it regarding common problems of human society. He declared "I believe in God, and I believe in man. I believe in helping the miserable. I believe in going even to hell to save others. I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth. However sublime be the theories, however well-spun may be the philosophy - I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.2, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1983, p.291. (henceforth CWSV)

<sup>2</sup> Lecture delivered by Vivekananda in London, dated 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1896 in *Practical Vedanta*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2004, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> CWSV, Vol.5, 1985, pp.50-52.

Thus Vedanta has not been restricted to mere theoretical doctrine alone but has taken on a new form in his hand. This new form has been designated differently by different interpreters- some regard it as New-Vedanta, but Swami Vivekananda himself described it as 'Practical Vedanta'.

## **SOCIAL ASPECTS OF PRACTICAL VEDANTA**

According to Vivekananda, Vedanta teaches two basic principles of life: the infinite divinity and strength of the soul is within every being and the fundamental unity of all beings. Man is divine by nature. 'Thou art That' - this is the essence of Vedanta. "All the powers in the universe are already ours. It is we who have put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark."<sup>4</sup> We have the infinite capacity within us. To think ourselves something vile and weak is our real sin. We can do anything. Thus the Vedanta teaches men to have faith in themselves first. Belief in this practicality will bring in self-confidence in the mind of the individual in such a way that whatever act he performs will be of the highest order. According to Vivekananda, "Believe, therefore, in yourselves, and if you want material wealth work it out; it will come to you. If you want to be intellectual; work it out on the intellectual plane and intellectual giants you shall be. And if you want to attain to freedom; work it out on the spiritual plane and free you shall be and shall enter into *nirvana*, the Eternal Bliss."<sup>5</sup>

This activity-oriented interpretation of Vedanta Philosophy necessarily leads man to become an active person in the society. In this way Practical Vedanta has assigned some function in an individual's life, only on the base of which the standard of a society will be changed. The standard of a society depends on the condition of the individuals and their surroundings. As Vivekananda said, "What we want is progress, development, realization. No theories ever made men higher. No amount of books can help us to become purer. The only power is in realization, and that lies in ourselves and comes from thinking. Let men think."<sup>6</sup>

Vivekananda emphasizes on spiritual and physical growth in his Practical Vedanta. He gives emphasis on renunciation and service. He said about the renunciation of the lower self, i.e. ego (*kacha ami*) and the manifestation of the higher self, i.e. inner soul (*pakka ami*); through individual's service in the society. The goal of life is to manifest the divinity in every movement of life in the form of service to God-in-humanity. By re-

<sup>4</sup> Lecture delivered by Vivekananda in London, dated 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1896 in *Practical Vedanta*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2004, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> CWSV, Vol.1, 6<sup>th</sup> impression, 2008, p.427.

<sup>6</sup> CWSV, Vol.4, p.336.

creating Vedanta Swamiji gave to humanity his lasting contribution in the form of Practical Vedanta, as he himself put it, “looks upon and behaves to all mankind as one’s own soul.”<sup>7</sup>

The central teaching of Vedanta is ‘Absolute Oneness of All’. “There are no two in anything, no two lives. There is but one life, one world, one existence. Everything is that One, the difference is in degree and not in kind. It is the same life that pulsates through all beings, from Brahman to the amoeba, the difference is only in the degree of manifestation. We must not look down with contempt on others....Condemn none, if you can stretch out a helping hand, do so. If you cannot, fold your hands, bless your brothers and let them go their own ways.”<sup>8</sup> All human beings are realizing the same goal and through their selfless service they are going towards the Absolute. From the standpoint of the highest ideal, the lowest animal and the highest man are the same. And when the individual realizes the Vedantic principle of ‘so’ham’, every action that he performs will be considered by him as the action of the Absolute and so it will be performed with much care and affection than ordinarily done and they will look upon and behave to other fellow beings as one’s own soul and as a consequence the development of the society will be much better.

Thus for Vivekananda, Practical Vedanta is the search for an ideal, i.e. oneness. This Vedantic spirit of oneness makes the individual identify himself with the community and serve it with a service motive without any personal gain. One has to realize his divinity and also to find the divinity with other beings. With this ideation, the whole life will be changed, as the tie of love will bind them together. Love for yourself means love for all, for you are all one. As Vivekananda said, “Love binds, love makes for that oneness. You become one, the mother with the child, families with the city, the whole world becomes one with the animals”.<sup>9</sup>

So, there cannot be any inherent distinction between one individual and the other, between the learned and the ignorant, all difference is due to external factors like opportunity, environment, etc. The same is true in respect of other differences on the basis of wealth, strength, intellect and even on spirituality. In the level of nations as well, there can be no question of superiority and inferiority. Vivekananda urged all the people of the society as a whole to work for the abolition of all privileges. He declares, “None can be Vedantists and at the same time admit of privilege to anyone, either mental, physical or spiritual, absolutely no privilege for anyone”.<sup>10</sup> According to him, all the work of the Advaita is to break down all these privileges. This view encourages us to

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Mohammed Sarfaraj Husain of Nainital, dated Almora, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1898 in *Selections from the Complete Works of S. Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2009, p.535.

<sup>8</sup> CWSV, Vol.2, p.299.

<sup>9</sup> Lecture delivered by Vivekananda in London, dated 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1896 in *Practical Vedanta*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2004, p.26.

<sup>10</sup> CWSV, Vol.1, p.423

look upon our fellow beings with kindness and compassion. The wise develops the quality of equal mindedness towards all. This attitude fosters fellowship and unity among individuals and nations.

## CONCLUSION

Happiness and welfare of the human society is based on promoting freedom and equality of all individuals. Swami Vivekananda laid emphasis on social unity for socio-economic-spiritual upliftment of the people. The desire to uplift others becomes well-established only when the lower self of an individual is erased and community consciousness promoted. Hence, it is through the spiritual upliftment that all kinds of discrimination, inequality and oppression can be removed and we can build-up a liberated, free society open to all, which will move forward through every individual's equal efforts. There will be no discrimination among the masses on the basis of caste, culture or attainment of knowledge in the society. Therefore, Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta formulates not merely universal brotherhood, but universal oneness. And with this idea individuals in society will get their 'lost self-confidence', which would inspire them to revive the social values which once were held in high esteem. Swami Vivekananda aimed to regain the strength and freedom of India by means of practical Vedanta.

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