

MODERN RELEVANCE OF PRACTICAL VEDANTA OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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(1) Modern Approach to Practical Vedanta

Swamiji's Practical Vedanta approach is also most appropriate for the modern spiritual aspirant whose intellect is sharpened by the technological education he/she receives in society. Never before in history were human beings so exposed to the dominance of reason over faith, and never was practical demonstration given so much preference over the intangible source of values. The scientific revolution initiated in the West swept the entire globe in a couple of centuries and in the process brought in new ways of not only education but also value assessment. This process in the West caused religion to be looked upon initially as a great obstacle to human progress and later as a harmless pastime. In the East similar confusion regarding religion could have prevailed if not for the efforts of Swami Vivekananda's exposition of religion. Swamiji foresaw the trends of the modern age and interpreted religion on scientific lines.

He boldly said: Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of Religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of the opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation. Not only will it be made scientific—as scientific, at least, as any of the conclusions of physics or chemistry— but it will have greater strength, because physics or chemistry has no internal mandate to vouch for its truth, which religion has. The modern spiritual aspirant, in this highly technological age, will surely be immensely gladdened to hear these words of Swamiji.

This bold approach is in sharp contrast with traditional Vedantic monasticism which generally stresses the distinction of Paramarthika (transcendental or absolute) and Vyavaharika

(relative) aspects of Reality and the importance of Adhikarawada (the argument that spiritual truths are to be told only to those with subtle and pure minds). Advaita Vedanta was regarded in India as an esoteric philosophy meant for only a few all-renouncing monks, never to be practiced by the majority in day-to-day life. Swamiji's advent changed that scenario. We shall try here to understand how Swamiji's new approach affects all of us in every-day life.

“Shankara left this Advaita philosophy in the hills and forests, while I have come to bring it out of those places and scatter it broadcast before the workaday world and society. The lion-roar of Advaita must resound in every hearth and home, in meadows and groves, over hills and plains” proclaims Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji's new approach of presenting Vedanta for the modern age is unique in the history of humanity; never before had anyone tried so boldly to teach Advaita to everybody irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion, ashrama of life (student, house-holder, recluse, monk), and adhikara-bheda (level of competency to grasp spiritual truths). He exhorts: Conceptions of the Vedanta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying.

In the Bhagavad-Gita we find Sri Krishna explaining the practical implementation of the spiritual ideal and also manifesting in Himself the teaching. This Holy Scripture has been the backbone of Indian religious life for centuries, but we Indians failed to make it practical, to make it work in our every activity. Sri Krishna had assured us that, ‘svalpamapyasya dharmasya trayate mahato bhayat’ – ‘practicing even a little bit of this dharma saves us from great danger’ and had further given the principle of practicing ‘mayi sarvamidam protam sutre manigativa’ – ‘God is the divine thread that unites all of us like the pearls in a garland’. Unfortunately for India, successive political subjugation added to her failure in practicing this great teaching regarding all spheres of life.

This lacuna of Indian culture is being rectified today with Swamiji's Practical Vedanta, which proclaims the ideal to everyone and encourages everyone to move towards it, from whatever level one finds oneself. It encompasses the whole gamut of life into this process and thus helps one move not ‘from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.’ No step is looked down upon or condemned; no activity of life is out of reach for practicing

spirituality. This is famously put by Sister Nivedita: If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.

(2) Teachings of Practical Vedanta

If we study Swami Vivekananda's works we find this theme running throughout. If we pay special attention to the lectures Swamiji delivered at London in November 1896 on Practical Vedanta, we can see him citing the Upanishads and explaining the following points:

- (1.) Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Development of the heart is more important than the head, and detached work as explained in the Gita is the key.
- (2.) The Impersonal includes and transcends the personal; all that is perceived or thought is Brahman. Seeing the divine in everything and everyone is the main goal.
- (3.) We have to become conscious of our real nature as Infinite Pure Consciousness, without which no virtue is possible.
- (4.) For long the dualistic approach has been tried and has been found wanting; now the non-dualistic approach is to be given a chance. From "dualism" to "non-dualism" through "qualified non-dualism" is one single journey—the progressive views of the one Infinite Self.

Swamiji emphasizes the all-pervasive nature of Reality and the divinity of man, thus making it the primary base for all functions of life. The new stress—on the omnipresence of Spirit rather than on the negative principle of maya—releases tremendous reserves of energy trapped in millions of people, especially among the working class masses. The central principle of Practical Vedanta is to bridge the gulf separating the sacred and the secular by converting work into worship and by stressing the potential divinity of the soul. Advaita Vedanta had for too long been identified with Maya, and became a philosophy of escape. Swamiji played down Maya and stressed the omnipresence, power, and glory of Brahman.

India's collective lack of implementation of Vedanta in life for many centuries resulted in social decadence and loss of political freedom. Swami Ranganathananda points out this mistake: We failed to stress this whole gamut of social virtues and graces, and to impart the relevant

secular education which is the source of them. Instead we stressed an other-worldly excellence with its passive virtues, with inaction as its watchword; we failed to understand that social welfare comes from an activist ethics in the context of interaction with other members in society. The result was that we failed to achieve the more attainable ideals of character, work-efficiency, public spirit, and general well-being, while equally failing to achieve the high ideal of mukti and the virtues and graces associated with so great an ideal. The high spiritual inaction of the mukti path and ideal became deformed into laziness, inertia, and human unconcern, along with a type of worldliness, or “a piety-fringed worldliness” as I prefer to call it, more harmful than the worldliness of the modern Western type, which has at least character-efficiency and human concern to enrich it.

This in effect gives rise to social virtues and graces which were missing in India for many centuries. Swami Bhajanananda puts it as this way: ‘The two great divisions of the Hindu way of life [are] known as *nivritti-marga* (way of withdrawal) and *pravritti-marga* (way of involvement). The two ways were traditionally regarded as distinct and meant for two different classes of people. This division was given legitimacy by the Advaita system with its theory of two levels of reality and of the self: the *paramarthika* (absolute) and the *vyavaharika* (relative). This view may be metaphysically valid but translated into common life it becomes a justification for perpetuating all kinds of social inequities. One of the efforts of Swami Vivekananda was to provide a unitary view of Reality which would integrate the two ways of life into one. Regarding this Swamiji said, “And what Ramakrishna Paramhansa and I have added to this is that the many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at different times and in different attitudes.”

If the infinite Pure Consciousness is the source of everyone and everything in the universe, then there are infinite ways in which It will manifest, and no manifestation can be looked on with contempt. Based on the immanent Spirit within, we have to develop a new way of looking at ourselves and others. Also, any work done with the new vision will purify the mind and help one attain the blessed state of union with Reality. This will help the process of progressive manifestation and yield the desirable by-products of values, character, and social-political-national progress.

Thus when the whole of life is viewed as a journey towards the ideal or as progressive manifestation of the infinite divine, everyone is given tremendous scope to practice spirituality in day-to-day life: If the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better student. If the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on.

Practical Vedanta's synthesis of Jnana and Bhakti along with selfless work not only makes the spiritual aspirant capable of realizing the Reality of Brahman but also gives him/her the scope for further expansion towards the Vijnani ideal explained by Sri Ramakrishna: vijnana means Knowledge with a greater fullness. Some have heard of milk, some have seen milk, and some have drunk milk. He who has merely heard of it is 'ignorant'. He who has seen it is a Jnani. But he who has drunk it has vijnana, that is to say, a fuller knowledge of it. After having the vision of God one talks to Him as if He were an intimate relative. That is vijnana.

(3) Message of Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Sarda Devi

Sri Ramakrishna's stress on development of 'ripe ego' over 'unripe ego' becomes the base for all activities in Practical Vedanta. In the words of Swami Ranganathananda, we have to move from "individuality" to "personality" by taking into account the "psycho-social evolution" relevant to the human phase; Mother Nature has equipped the human being with a cerebral system, unique among all species, for this purpose. The "unripe ego," trapped as it is in the organic structure of the human being, can never yield fruitful results beneficial to society and even to oneself, while the 'ripe ego,' based on the immanent God within all, helps us towards the ideal of "Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva" (serving humanity by looking at it as a manifestation of the Divine).

The life of Sri Sarada Devi is a perfect demonstration of this ideal; we find her performing all actions with this consciousness and thus making herself the guiding light not only to millions of ordinary souls but also to spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda and others. "No one is a stranger, my child: this whole world is your own!" This last utterance from her summarises the concept of Practical Vedanta.

We understand through their lives that life itself is religion and this integrated approach is best suitable for this age; this is also the revival of the ancient Rishi ideal of the Vedic period, according to Swami Bhajanananda: Sannyasa as an ideal and practice must remain as the core of

national life but the vast majority of people need an alternative ideal which will enable them to realize the highest Truth through self-control, service and meditation, without formally taking monastic vows. The ancient Rishi ideal satisfies these conditions. This is the ideal that the modern world needs, for only such an ideal can penetrate deep into society. And we believe that it is this ideal that Sri Ramakrishna has revived through his life and teachings.

(4) Modern Relevance of Practical Vedanta

Another characteristic of the modern age is globalization; we are witnessing a unique period in human history where technology and modes of transport have revolutionized the connectivity among nations. This, when seen from the entire unfolding of human drama on earth, is an appropriate stage for humanity. The great division of humanity represented by the Eastern view and the Western view of life is no longer viable, and the successful synthesis of the two weltanschauungs is the greatest need of the hour. The study of “external man” as a member of society is championed by the Western view, while the study of “man in depth” or “internal man” is the hallmark of the Eastern view. India for long neglected the “exterior” of man in preference to his inner nature, while the West in recent centuries ignored the “inner” and focused only on the “outer” side of man; these lop-sided views are hindrances to the full growth of humankind. Swamiji’s integrated approach addresses this concern completely; he wanted future humanity to be the perfect harmony of the two views. This gives universal appeal to his message.

We can observe in modern India many non-monastic NGOs and individuals working for the weaker sections of society in the spirit of new Vedanta. Many are also seen trying to realize the spiritual ideal while actively participating in social and domestic duties. Thus the slow but sure penetration of Swamiji’s ideas is unmistakable. Like most spiritual aspirants, even Swamiji wanted to be immersed in the bliss of the Infinite. He said to Sri Ramakrishna: “It is my desire to remain absorbed in Samadhi continually for three or four days, only once in a while coming down to the sense plane to eat a little food.” Thereupon Sri Ramakrishna said, “You are a small-minded person. There is a state higher even than that. ‘All that exists art Thou’: it is you who sing that song”.

This comprehensive understanding of Reality is not only richer and more satisfying to the aspirant but also is beneficial to others. If one follows Practical Vedanta he/she is on path of Vijnana, and the results of his/her practices and realizations are beneficial for society. Though

this aspect can also be found in Upanishads (sarvam khalvidam brahma, atmaiva idam sarvam, ishavyam idam sarvam, etc.) and other ancient scriptures, the stress given to it in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Sarada Devi is unique.

A study of world history of the last two centuries reveals the slow but sure influence of Swami Vivekananda's ideas. If we look particularly at Indian history, with special attention to it after the advent of Swamiji, we can observe the penetrating effect of his message in all fields of life. Swamiji's message first breathed new life in the dead bones of India and made it struggle for political freedom, inspiring many self-sacrificing martyrs. After attaining freedom, the nation started moving slowly but visibly toward a more activity-oriented temperament, till in last couple of decades it has picked up much speed and promises to "make India brighter, greater, much higher than she ever was" as the great Swami had prophesied. Slowly but surely Swamiji's ideas have penetrated the Western world too, and one can see a steady but tremendous upheaval in areas like religion, inter-faith understanding and psychology. We are indeed fortunate to play our roles in this human revolution initiated by Swamiji's Practical Vedanta.

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