



# Competitive Study of Oriental and Occidental Philosophy: A Vivekananda Perspective

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## **Abstract:**

The study of philosophy has always been a quest to unravel the mysteries of existence, consciousness, and the universe. From the quiet meditations of Eastern sages to the fiery debates of Western thinkers, human civilization has charted diverse intellectual paths. Among the foremost figures who sought to harmonize these perspectives was Swami Vivekananda, the great Indian philosopher and spiritual leader. His vision, grounded in universalism, emphasized the need to synthesize the spiritual depth of the Orient with the rational rigor of the Occident.

This article explores the competitive study of Oriental and Occidental philosophy through the lens of Vivekananda's thought, reflecting on their differences, strengths, and the necessity of their integration in the modern world.

**Key Words: Oriental, Occidental, Philosophy, Enlightenment**

## **Introduction:**

The philosophical traditions of the East (Oriental) and the West (Occidental) represent two rich and profound approaches to understanding reality, existence, and human purpose. Oriental philosophy, encompassing schools such as Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, often focuses on introspection, spiritual unity, and the inner transformation of the self. It seeks to explore the infinite dimensions of consciousness and the interconnectedness of all life. In contrast, Occidental philosophy, with its roots in ancient Greek thought and its evolution through the Enlightenment and modernity, emphasizes rational inquiry, empirical methods, and the power of human reason to understand and transform the world. The dialogue between these traditions raises essential questions about the nature of truth, knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of human existence.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the most celebrated spiritual leaders of modern India, played a pivotal role in bringing these two traditions into meaningful conversation. His profound understanding of Vedantic philosophy, coupled with his exposure to Western intellectual traditions during his travels, allowed him to develop a unique perspective on the strengths and limitations of both systems. Vivekananda believed that the East and the West had much to learn from each other: the East, with its spiritual depth and inner harmony, could complement the West's material progress, scientific advancements, and emphasis on social organization.

For Vivekananda, philosophy was not merely an intellectual exercise but a way to address the pressing needs of humanity. He argued for a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought, envisioning a future where the spiritual insight of the East could be harmonized with the technological and rational achievements of

the West. This synthesis, he believed, could lead to a more balanced and holistic approach to life, fostering both inner peace and external progress.

In the following study, we delve into the comparative aspects of Oriental and Occidental philosophy, as seen through the lens of Vivekananda's vision. By examining their distinctive features and potential points of convergence, we aim to highlight the relevance of Vivekananda's ideas in the contemporary world, where global challenges demand both the spiritual wisdom of the East and the pragmatic ingenuity of the West.

## Philosophy: A Global Journey

Philosophy, as a discipline, transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. While its manifestations vary, the core objective remains the same: to answer the fundamental questions of existence, ethics, and knowledge.

- **Eastern Philosophy:**

Eastern philosophy encompasses the diverse intellectual traditions and spiritual practices that originated in Asia. Unlike Western philosophy, which often emphasizes rationalism, individualism, and the quest for objective truths, Eastern philosophies are typically holistic, focusing on interconnectedness, harmony, and the nature of existence within the universe. Rooted in ancient traditions, Eastern philosophy includes a wide range of schools of thought, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and others. Each offers profound insights into ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and the human condition.

### ❖ Core Themes of Eastern Philosophy

1. **Interconnectedness** and **Unity**  
A central theme in Eastern philosophy is the idea of interconnectedness—between individuals, society, and the cosmos. In Hinduism, the concept of *Brahman* reflects the universal reality underlying all existence, while Taoism emphasizes the *Tao* as the harmonious flow of life. This worldview challenges the notion of a separate, autonomous self, suggesting instead that individual identity is inseparable from the larger whole.
2. **Balance** and **Harmony**  
Eastern traditions often stress the importance of balance, both within the individual and in one's relationship with the world. The concept of *yin* and *yang* in Taoism symbolizes duality and the complementary nature of opposites, advocating a life lived in harmony with nature and its rhythms.
3. **Impermanence** and **Non-Attachment**  
Many Eastern philosophies emphasize the transient nature of life. Buddhism's *anicca* (impermanence) teaches that everything is in constant flux. Accepting this impermanence encourages non-attachment, a state of being that reduces suffering and fosters inner peace.
4. **Self-Realization** and **Enlightenment**  
Personal transformation and spiritual growth are common goals. In Hinduism, the journey of self-realization involves discovering the true self (*Atman*) and its unity with *Brahman*. Similarly, Buddhism offers the Eightfold Path as a guide to achieving enlightenment, a state of liberation from suffering.
5. **Practical Wisdom** and **Ethics**  
Eastern philosophies often merge theory with practice. Confucianism, for example, focuses on cultivating virtues like *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (ritual propriety) to foster societal harmony. Ethical living is seen as foundational to personal and communal well-being.

- **Western Philosophy**

Western philosophy is a rich and complex tradition that explores the fundamental questions of existence, knowledge, ethics, politics, and human nature. Spanning over 2,500 years, it has evolved through distinct periods, influenced by cultural, historical, and intellectual developments.

- **❖ Origins in Ancient Greece**

Western philosophy began in Ancient Greece around the 6th century BCE with the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus sought to explain the nature of reality using reason rather than mythological narratives. They questioned the nature of the cosmos, change, and the underlying principles of existence.

The classical period introduced towering figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who laid the foundations for Western thought: Socrates emphasized ethical inquiry and the importance of self-knowledge, using dialogue to uncover truth. Plato, his student, explored metaphysics, epistemology, and political philosophy, famously proposing the Theory of Forms and envisioning an ideal state in *The Republic*. Aristotle, Plato's student, developed a comprehensive system of philosophy encompassing logic, science, ethics, and aesthetics.

- **❖ Medieval Philosophy**

With the rise of Christianity, medieval philosophy merged Greek thought with theological concerns. Thinkers like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas sought to reconcile reason and faith. Aquinas' synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology became a cornerstone of Scholasticism.

Medieval philosophers tackled questions about God's existence, the nature of the soul, and the moral order of the universe, deeply influencing Western intellectual traditions.

- **❖ The Renaissance and Early Modern Philosophy**

The Renaissance (14th–17th centuries) ushered in a revival of classical knowledge and a shift toward humanism. Thinkers like Niccolò Machiavelli and Francis Bacon emphasized empirical observation and the practical application of philosophy.

The early modern period saw the rise of **rationalism** and **empiricism**:

- Rationalists such as René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz believed that reason was the primary source of knowledge. Descartes' famous dictum, *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), epitomized the quest for certainty.
- Empiricists like John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume argued that knowledge arises from sensory experience. Locke's ideas on natural rights and government deeply influenced Enlightenment political thought.

- **❖ The Enlightenment**

The 18th-century Enlightenment emphasized reason, science, and progress. Philosophers like Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant explored themes of liberty, human rights, and ethics. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* revolutionized epistemology by examining the limits and structure of human understanding.

- **❖ 19th and 20th Century Philosophy**

In the 19th century, philosophy grappled with the implications of industrialization, revolution, and scientific advancements: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel introduced a dialectical method and a vision of history as a rational process. Karl Marx applied Hegelian ideas to critique capitalism and

propose a materialist theory of history. Friedrich Nietzsche challenged traditional moral values and proclaimed the "death of God," emphasizing individual creativity and willpower.

#### ❖ The 20th century saw diverse movements:

Existentialism, with thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, focused on human freedom, responsibility, and meaning in a world without inherent purpose. Analytic philosophy, led by Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others, prioritized clarity and logical rigor. Postmodernism, with figures like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, critiqued grand narratives and emphasized the role of power and language in shaping knowledge.

#### ❖ Contemporary Philosophy

Today, Western philosophy continues to evolve, engaging with global challenges such as environmental ethics, artificial intelligence, and social justice. It remains a dynamic field that bridges historical inquiry and contemporary issues, fostering dialogue between cultures and disciplines.

Vivekananda recognized that both traditions, though distinct, addressed complementary aspects of human inquiry and that their combined wisdom could offer a holistic understanding of life.

#### • Oriental Philosophy: The Inner Search

Oriental philosophy finds its essence in introspection, spirituality, and the quest for liberation. The traditions of India, China, and other Asian cultures emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the transcendence of material existence.

#### ❖ Key Schools of Thought in Oriental Philosophy

##### 1. Vedanta:

Central to Indian philosophy, Vedanta teaches that the ultimate reality, Brahman, is infinite, formless, and beyond perception. According to Vivekananda, Advaita Vedanta, which posits the unity of the self (Atman) with Brahman, represents the highest spiritual truth. Self-realization and liberation (moksha) are achieved through meditation, ethical living, and knowledge.

##### 2. Buddhism:

Grounded in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhism emphasizes overcoming suffering through the Eightfold Path and mindfulness. Its practical approach to ethics and self-transformation complements Vedantic ideals.

##### 3. Chinese Tradition:

Taoism and Confucianism stress living in harmony with the Tao (the way of nature) and building ethical societies based on mutual respect. These philosophies highlight balance and the importance of aligning human life with cosmic principles.

#### ❖ Core Strengths of Oriental Philosophy

- **Spiritual Depth:** The spiritual depth of Oriental philosophy offers profound insights into the nature of existence and the human journey. By emphasizing harmony, self-awareness, and interconnectedness, these traditions provide pathways to transcendence and spiritual fulfillment. Whether through the quiet flow of Taoism, the moral grounding of Confucianism, the meditative liberation of Buddhism, the self-realization of Hindu thought, the intuitive simplicity of Zen, or the reverent practices of Shinto, each philosophy invites individuals to align their lives with universal truths. Together, they inspire a deeper understanding of life's meaning and our place within the cosmos, blending spirituality seamlessly into the fabric of everyday existence.
- **Holistic Vision:** Encompassing the diverse intellectual and spiritual traditions of Asia, offers a holistic approach to understanding the world and our place within it. Rooted in ancient texts, oral

traditions, and cultural practices, these philosophies emphasize interconnectedness, harmony, and the pursuit of wisdom through introspection and lived experience.

- **Meditation and Mindfulness:** Meditation and mindfulness in Oriental philosophy offer profound insights into the nature of the mind and the path to a fulfilling life. These practices encourage a shift from external distractions to inner awareness, fostering a sense of peace, clarity, and interconnectedness. By integrating these timeless principles into modern life, individuals can cultivate resilience and harmony in an ever-changing world. Beyond personal benefits, these practices hold the potential to transform societies by promoting empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. As more people adopt these practices, they contribute to a global movement toward a more mindful, peaceful, and sustainable way of living, bridging the wisdom of ancient traditions with the challenges of the contemporary era. In today's fast-paced world, the principles of meditation and mindfulness have gained global recognition for their mental and physical health benefits. Techniques adapted from Oriental traditions, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and yoga, are widely practiced to manage stress, improve focus, and enhance overall well-being.

However, Vivekananda cautioned against the inertia and fatalism sometimes associated with Eastern traditions, urging the East to adopt a more dynamic and progressive outlook.

- **Occidental Philosophy: Rational Exploration**

Western philosophy, shaped by the intellectual traditions of Greece, Rome, and Europe, emphasizes critical thinking, reason, and empirical inquiry. At its core, Occidental philosophy embodies a commitment to rational exploration—a pursuit of truth through reasoned argument and critical analysis. This tradition has not only shaped the intellectual landscape of the West but also influenced global thought, fostering cross-cultural dialogues and inspiring new ways of thinking. In today's interconnected world, the principles of rational inquiry and philosophical reflection remain vital. By engaging with the ideas of past and present thinkers, we continue to explore the profound questions of existence, morality, and knowledge, carrying forward the enduring legacy of Occidental philosophy. Its evolution reflects humanity's quest to understand the natural world and organize society.

#### ❖ Key Epochs and Thinkers in Western Philosophy

##### 1. Greek Rationalism:

Greek rationalism refers to the intellectual tradition that emerged in ancient Greece, characterized by the use of reason and critical thinking to explore fundamental questions about the universe, human existence, ethics, and knowledge. It represents a significant departure from mythological explanations of the world, emphasizing logical analysis and empirical observation as tools for understanding. The works of Greek philosophers i.e., Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid the groundwork for logic, ethics, and metaphysics. Aristotle's systematic approach to knowledge influenced fields ranging from biology to politics. Greek rationalism also influenced modern democratic thought and continues to inform contemporary discussions in philosophy and science.

##### 2. Medieval Scholasticism:

**Medieval Scholasticism** refers to the intellectual tradition that dominated European thought from the 9th to the 17th century, peaking during the High Middle Ages (12th–14th centuries). Rooted in the educational system of medieval universities, it sought to reconcile classical philosophy, particularly Aristotelian logic, with Christian theology.

##### 3. Modern Philosophy

Modern philosophy refers to a period of philosophical thought that began in the late Renaissance and continued through the Enlightenment and into the contemporary era. This era, spanning roughly from the 17th century to the present, marks a shift in focus from classical themes like metaphysics and ethics as seen in ancient Greek and medieval philosophy, to questions more aligned with the emerging scientific worldview, individual rights, and the nature of human experience. The Enlightenment heralded an era of

scientific inquiry, individualism, and human rights. Descartes' rationalism, Kant's transcendental philosophy, and Nietzsche's existentialism challenged traditional dogmas and reshaped intellectual discourse.

#### 4. Contemporary Movements:

In the 20th and 21st centuries, movements like existentialism, phenomenology, and postmodernism have emerged as significant philosophical frameworks, addressing the complexities of human experience in an increasingly dynamic and interconnected world.

- **Existentialism** focuses on individual freedom, choice, and responsibility. Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir emphasized the inherent subjectivity of human existence and the weight of creating meaning in an often absurd or indifferent universe. Their works highlight the tensions between personal freedom and societal constraints, inspiring individuals to confront their authenticity and autonomy.
- **Phenomenology** spearheaded by Edmund Husserl and expanded by Martin Heidegger, delves into the structures of human consciousness and experience. This approach seeks to uncover the essence of phenomena by analysing how they appear to us in our lived experience. Phenomenology has had a profound impact on fields like psychology, literature, and cognitive science, providing tools for exploring the interplay between perception, identity, and reality.
- **Postmodernism** emerging as a critique of grand narratives and universal truths, questions established structures and ideologies. Thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard challenged traditional ideas of power, identity, and history. By embracing pluralism, deconstruction, and skepticism, postmodernism reshaped how we view culture, language, and societal norms in a fragmented and media-saturated world.

These movements collectively highlight the shifting paradigms of modern thought, focusing on the intersections of freedom, identity, and the evolving structures of society amidst rapid technological, cultural, and ideological changes.

#### ❖ Core Strengths of Occidental Philosophy

Occidental philosophy has been a cornerstone of intellectual development in the Western world, emphasizing systematic inquiry, critical thinking, and the exploration of a wide array of subjects, including metaphysics, ethics, politics, and epistemology. Below are some core strengths of Occidental philosophy:

##### 1. Emphasis on Rational Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Occidental philosophy prioritizes reason and logical analysis as tools to understand reality. This tradition, rooted in ancient Greece with figures like Socrates and Aristotle, laid the foundation for the scientific method, systematic problem-solving, and structured debate, influencing fields from mathematics to governance.

##### 2. Focus on Individualism and Human Rights

A hallmark of Western philosophy is its emphasis on individual autonomy, dignity, and freedom. Thinkers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant championed personal rights and responsibilities, shaping modern democratic systems, ethical frameworks, and movements advocating equality and justice.

##### 3. Exploration of Metaphysics and Ethics

Western philosophy has deeply explored questions of existence, knowledge, and morality. By developing ethical systems (e.g., Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian deontology), it has provided tools to address complex issues in personal conduct, social justice, and global ethics.

## 4. Progress and Practical Application

Occidental philosophy is characterized by its focus on progress and applying ideas to real-world challenges. Political theories by Hobbes, Rousseau, and others have influenced the creation of modern states, while its drive for innovation has fuelled advancements in science, technology, and society.

While recognizing these strengths, Vivekananda critiqued the West's overreliance on materialism and neglect of spiritual values. He warned against the alienation and moral crises that often accompany a purely mechanistic worldview.

- **Vivekananda's Vision: Harmonizing the East and West**

Swami Vivekananda stands as a symbol of synthesis. His famous address at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions introduced Indian philosophy to the Western audience, emphasizing universal values and the interconnectedness of all religions and philosophies.

- ❖ **Key Aspects of Vivekananda's Perspective**

1. **Complementarity of Traditions:**

Vivekananda believed that the East and West represented two aspects of the human experience: spirituality and materialism. Together, they could offer a balanced approach to personal and societal development.

2. **Critique and Challenge:**

- To the East: He urged embracing science, rationality, and social reform while retaining its spiritual foundations.
- To the West: He advocated integrating spiritual practices and ethical principles into its technologically advanced but often spiritually barren culture.

3. **A Universal Approach:**

Vivekananda envisioned a future where humanity transcends narrow boundaries of race, religion, and nationality. His ideal was a global philosophy that harmonizes the contemplative wisdom of the East with the dynamic energy of the West.

- ❖ **Relevance in the 21st Century**

In the contemporary world, the dichotomy between Oriental and Occidental philosophies is increasingly blurred. Globalization has created an environment where cultures and ideas intermingle, making Vivekananda's insights more pertinent than ever.

1. **Mindfulness and Spirituality:**

Eastern practices like yoga and meditation have become mainstream in the West, addressing stress and fostering well-being.

2. **Scientific and Ethical Synergy:**

Innovations in science and technology are being informed by ethical considerations rooted in Eastern traditions, particularly in fields like environmental sustainability and artificial intelligence.

3. **Global Challenges:**

Issues such as climate change, inequality, and conflict require a combined approach, blending the East's emphasis on harmony with the West's problem-solving methodologies.

- **Conclusion: Toward a Unified Philosophy**

The comparative study of Oriental and Occidental philosophy, as articulated by Swami Vivekananda, reveals a profound truth: neither tradition is complete in isolation. While the East provides the spiritual foundation necessary for inner fulfilment, the West offers the tools for practical advancement and societal progress.

Vivekananda's vision is a call to transcend dualities and embrace a global perspective that celebrates diversity while seeking unity. In his words, "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached." This goal is not merely personal liberation but the collective upliftment of humanity through a harmonious integration of wisdom from all corners of the world.

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