



# VIVEKANANDA'S CONCEPT OF PRACTICAL VEDANTA-A STUDY

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Swami Vivekananda's teachings are mainly based on the ancient Vedanta philosophy of India. It was Vivekananda who first tried to make Vedanta a practical philosophy. In 1896 he delivered four lectures on 'Practical Vedanta' in London. In his first lecture on Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda gave the Vedantic message of unfolding the potential divinity of man, developing an unshakable faith on oneself, generating absolute fearlessness of any kind, and attaining complete freedom of the spirit, which is caged in mind body complex. In his second lecture he shows that Vedanta teaches us a very practical religion that God resides in each matter, each creature, as all are parts of Brahman. Again in the third lecture Vivekananda emphasizes on the fact that true religion consists on scientific foundation, not on blind faith and dogmas. In this lecture, Vivekananda put importance on the requirement of scientific religion. In the fourth lecture Vivekananda explained the Vedantic idea of the relation of particular to the universal.

**Key Words-** Vivekananda, Vedanta, Practical Vedanta, Brahman, Religion, Scientific.

**Introduction-** Swami Vivekananda's teachings are mainly based on the ancient Vedanta philosophy of India. It was Vivekananda who first tried to make Vedanta a practical philosophy. In 1896 he delivered four lectures on 'Practical Vedanta' in London. Before we go to these four lectures first of all let us have a look on his concept of Vedanta. When we examine Swami Vivekananda's observations on Vedanta the first thing we notice is his reliance on the Upanishads in preference to the Brahma-Sutra and its commentaries. Secondly, Vivekananda does not favour a fragmentation of Vedanta into different systems, Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita and Dvaitadvaita. He knew these systems and he valued them, but he himself took a holistic view of Vedanta. He said in his Lahore address of 12 November 1897 that it would be wrong, to confine the word Vedanta only to one system which has arisen out of the Upanishads. All these are covered by the word Vedanta. The Vishishtadvaitist has as much right to be called a Vedantist as the Advaitist. But such a statement raises a question and the question is: If Advaitavada and Dvaitavada are both Vedantic systems, which system is Vivekananda's own? R.K.Dasgupta, a noted writer on Vivekananda, in his article 'Swami Vivekananda's Idea on Vedanta' writes "Vivekananda's answer would be that all the systems are valid and he would call them all his own. In the broad spectrum of man's spiritual life there are many shades and hues and not one of them can be rejected. But if you would press him to tell you if he is a

dvaitavadi or advaitavadi he would say that advaitavad is the highest altitude of spiritual life and Vishishtadvaitavad, Dvaitavad and Dvaitadvaitavad are only steps towards it. However he would add that each step is a Vedantic step and one might not reach the highest altitude and yet have no regrets.”<sup>1</sup> From this it is obvious that according to Vivekananda Advaitavada is the highest form of the spiritual life of man. But he does not reject the other schools also. According to him the other schools are mere steps towards Advaitavada. Thus, in his view the Advaitavada of Sankara has got the highest value and others are only steps towards it.

**Objective of the Study**- This paper aims to elaborate Swami Vivekananda’s idea on practical Vedanta.

**Methodology** – Analytic Method has been applied to this paper.

### **Swami Vivekananda’s view of Practical Vedanta**

Swami Vivekananda went to western world with his message of Vedanta, which can be regarded as Vedanta in practice or practical Vedanta. His mission was to show the entire world the practical aspect of Vedanta philosophy. In 1896, he delivered several lectures on practical Vedanta in London. Vivekananda realized that, theory is good but, without practical application, it has no value. Such kind of theory just becomes intellectual gymnastics.

**First Lecture** - In the first lecture on Practical Vedanta delivered in London, on the 10<sup>th</sup> November of 1896, Vivekananda gave the Vedantic message of unfolding the potential divinity of man, developing an unshakable faith on oneself, generating absolute fearlessness of any kind, and attaining complete freedom of the spirit, which is caged in mind body complex. Vivekananda regarded Vedanta as practical philosophy on the ground that it is not the outcome of meditation in the forest only, but that, the very best part of it were thought out by persons which were busy in the everyday affairs of life - like ruling monarch.

In Vivekananda’s view that is the most impractical ideal or theory which asks us to give up our selfishness to follow the ideal. The practical ideal, reconciles our self-interest with the ideal that we have to follow. Though Vedanta preaches high ideal, but this is intensely practical. We can actualize it in our life. It says that actual should conform to the ideal. The present life should be made to coincide with the life eternal, not vice versa. Vedanta boldly asserts the divinity of every man. In brief, its ideal is ‘you are divine’, ‘Thou art that’. This is the essence of Vedanta. To understand it more clearly we can say that Vedantic divinity of men implies also the Vedantic principle of immortality of the soul. Eternal life is different from survival or death which is given to every embodied being. It is the transcendence of life and death. Birth and death, all these are entire nonsense when spoken of in connection with the soul.

**Second Lecture** -The second lecture on practical Vedanta was delivered in London, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1896. In this lecture Vivekananda stated that in Upanishads we get different stories of symbolic importance. In one of the

story we find that a boy being ordered by his guru went to a forest with some lean cows. His guru ordered him to come back when the cows increase into thousand. After few years one day, when the boy was with the cows he heard a big bull in the herd saying to him that they are now one thousand. So he should take them to his teacher and again said that he (the bull) would teach him something about Brahman. The bull and some other objects like fire, earth etc. said the boy that the whole universe is part of the Brahman. The idea of this story is that all voices of knowledge are inside us. The bulls and the other objects can not talk like man. Vedanta teaches us that human soul is the great store house of knowledge and our soul is the best teacher of us. The second idea we get from the story that of making the knowledge of practical Brahman. Vedanta teaches us a very practical religion that God resides in each matter, each creature, as all are parts of Brahman. Another practical import we get from the story that, the Vedanta does not deny the world, the person and the individual but explain them by showing their real nature. Vedanta gives everything a higher meaning. Before knowing Brahman, everything of the world for us mere matter and some disunited parts of the earth. When we know Brahman as everything, then fire, earth, matter, life everything transformed into Brahman, a spiritual oneness is established. The theme of Vedanta is to see the Lord in everything. To see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be. Vivekananda explains the practical nature of the Vedantic idea of salvation. He says that every religion deals with problem of destiny of man. Some religion holds that they who subscribe to their dogma will go to heaven, while rests are condemned to hell. But the Vedanta philosophy, according to Vivekananda, makes a distinction between going to heaven and attaining salvation. According to it, Heavens are transitory. They cannot be permanent because everything that has name and form must die. They are only temporary regions for enjoyment and suffering according to one's merits and demerits. After which one comes back to earth- consciousness to struggle there for further evolution. But the persons who have realized the impersonal absolute, the all-pervading existence-knowledge-Bliss and to attain that one need not go away anywhere or wait for the falling of the body. They recognize their oneness with Brahman. Such person does not care whether he goes to heaven or hell. That person becomes free while living here or get salvation. The idea of impersonal God of Vedanta is thrown away because it is against traditional religious institution and religious values. The Mohammedan says that there is no God but Allah. Vedanta says that there is nothing that is not God. The living God is within everyone. The only god to worship is the human soul within the human body.

**Third Lecture**- Vivekananda delivered his 3rd lecture on practical Vedanta in London, 17th Nov, 1896. True religion consists on scientific foundation, not on blind faith and dogmas. In this lecture, Vivekananda put importance on the requirement of scientific religion. He says that the philosophy of Upanishads is scientific and rational for a special reason that its teachings are formulated in agreement with two important laws of scientific thought. 1. Knowledge consists in referring the particular to general and the general to the universal 2. Explanations of the facts of nature are to be got from within Nature itself, not from extraneous agencies. According to Vivekananda, Vedic thought has applied these two principles, so Vedic thought can be regarded as scientific. If we observe the worship or religion of early Vedic period, we find that it starts with a large number of Devas as object of worship and adoration. They arrived at the conclusion of one God, of whom all others are expression only. So



also in the study of nature from several elements and forms of energy, they arrive at one stuff Akasa as the source of all elements, and prana as the matrix of all energies. Finally, Akasa and Prana are unified into the all-embracing prakrti (Nature), which has manifested as two Akasa and Prana.

The weakness of dualistic religion was first exposed in India by the Buddhists. They tried to show that the ideas of a God and soul are only gratuitous assumption, and are unnecessary to understand. The metaphysical position is also the same, as there is the controversy between substance and the attribute. In the ontological theory of dualistic school, it is held that there is something called 'substance' to which all qualities are related. In the same way, many philosophers say that behind the changing phenomena, there must be a changeless substance, a God, on background. Behind the change of mind and body, it is assumed that there is changeless substance, the soul. Against this dualistic view Buddhist argue that we have experience only of change. The assumption of a changeless background distinct from them is a needless assumption without validity. So, they argue that, there is only the 'change'. There is no unchanging substratum. There is no need for a permanent God; behind it. It is also unnecessary for Buddhist to assume a permanent self behind mind body complex. Vivekananda holds that the satisfactory solution to this problem is what the Vedanta gives. The Vedanta admits that there are no two entities as the changing and the changeless, the phenomenon and the noumenon, only one exists. When the one is seen, the other disappears. He explains the position with the help of rope snake illusion. When the snake is experienced in the rope, there are no two objects. There is only one object, rope. But when the snake is perceived, the rope disappears and when rope becomes visible, the snake disappears. The same logic is applicable to the problem of change and changeless. It is one and the same entity which appears as subject of change, but it is change less from the point of view of totality. Buddhists criticism of God and the soul can be assumed by non-dualistic view of Vedanta. Vedanta accepts all comprehending Absolute which is both change and changeless. It is feared that the Advaitic Absolute seeks to dethrone God and establish a kind of atheism. But according to Vivekananda, this is a misconception. The impersonal Absolute, on the other hand, can be the best justification of personal God, in so far as it is alone is capable of giving an explanation of duality through a higher synthesis and without invoking the aid of any extraneous agency. A personal God cannot be proved, but, if the impersonal Absolute is admitted, the personal can be explained as the highest reading of that Absolute by the human mind, in fact, all our knowledge consists only of various reading of the Absolute by human mind, so long as we are embodied beings, understanding of thing is possible only through our mind and senses. We have therefore to keep ourselves as the observer of the Absolute. Hence, for Vivekananda, Vedantic thought is in accordance with the laws of scientific thought

**Fourth Lecture-** The fourth lecture on practical Vedanta was delivered in London, 18th November 1896. In this lecture Vivekananda explained the Vedantic idea of the relation of particular to the universal. The question whether there is a permanent soul in each embodied being was the topic of contention between the Buddhists and the ancient Vedantists. The Buddhists reject the existence of any permanent soul opposed to a changing body-mind, on the ground that we have experience of only a change and not of any changeless substratum behind it. Vedanta

upholds that, there is only one entity which experienced at a time, either is change only or as changeless only. Either as attribute only or as substance only. According to Vivekananda, Advaita theory of the soul reconciles both these position. The position of the Advaita is that it is true that we cannot think of the substance as separate from the qualities, we cannot think of change and not change at the same time; it would be impossible. But the very thing which is the substance is the quality; substance and quality are not two things. It is the unchangeable that is appearing as the changeable. The unchangeable substance of the universe is not something different from the phenomena. The mistake consists in thinking of them as two entities or as two parts of an entity. When we experience ourselves as body- mind, then soul is nowhere in our experience. But when we experience ourselves as the soul, the body vanishes. Vivekananda holds that, according to Vedanta, permanence can be asserted only about the Absolute, the whole. For there is nothing beside the whole and the change is possible only where there are two, one stationary and the other moving. Vivekananda stated that, everyone is included in the whole and when this whole consciousness arises, the question of soul and body, of changeless and change of substance and attribute never remain. Then unitary consciousness arises. Even in this point, the reason demands further explanation as man is aware of their individuality and to preserve it. An evolving individuality can get a meaning only with reference to an infinite individual. To dualistic view point, which takes each individual as a separate unit evolving towards perfection, is acceptable for Vedanta in order to accommodate people who cannot rise to the level of non-duality.

**Conclusion** From the above discussion of Vivekananda's four lectures on Practical Vedanta the following points can be derived. In his first lecture he has shown us that the Vedanta philosophy is not a philosophy of the recluse. The Bhagavad Gita is its evident. The essence of Vedanta philosophy is the assertion of the divinity of man, as embodied in the cryptic saying; 'Thou art that'. The spirit of man is always pure and perfect which is beyond the circle of birth and death. Again it is the store house of all the power and glory. This means that all power is within us. So Vivekananda asked us to have self-confidence. We have to remember that not believing in the glory of our own soul is what the Vedanta calls atheism. This Vedantic principle has a great practical aspect. When we know ourselves as eternal self, then going to die, afraid of dying becomes mere superstition. It creates an immense faith on oneself. When we feel ourselves as fountain of divinity then, 'we are able to do this' or 'not able to do this', such ideas vanish from our mind. Vedanta teaches us to have faith in ourselves, as we all are eternal spirit, not simply a time space caged mind-body. Then we never deflected from path of duty and able to traverse every weakness. We can do everything we want to do. He stated, "As certain religions of the world say that man who does not believe in a personal God outside of himself is an atheist, so the Vedanta says, a man who does not believe in himself is an atheist"<sup>19</sup> Not believing in the glory of our own soul is what the Vedanta calls atheism. This ideal of Vedanta can be realized by everyone irrespective of race, sex or religion and in all possible condition of life.

In his second lecture we have seen that Vivekananda has shown us the practical method of teaching of the Upanishadic teachers. In the example we have seen that the Upanishadic teachers taught their students with the help

of the objects of the nature. The Upanishadic teachers with their practical method of teaching tried to make their students realize that there is nothing which is not Brahman. After knowing Brahman as everything, fire, earth, life, matter everything transformed into Brahman. Thus the central theme of Vedanta is to see Brahman in everything. This realization of oneness is the idea of salvation in Vedanta philosophy.

In his third lecture Vivekananda has tried to establish Vedanta as a scientific religion as Vedanta follows the two basic principles of science. In this lecture it is shown that there are no two entities in the universe. Everywhere there is oneness. The personal idea of God is not different from the Impersonal idea of it. As a matter of fact the personal is included in the impersonal.

In the fourth lecture Vivekananda tried to make us realize the presence of permanent soul as opposed to the Buddhists. According to Advaita both change and changeless exist. We can experience only one at a time, either change or changeless, but not both. According to Vedanta there Change and changeless are not two separate entities. The same changeless is appearing as changeable before us. The soul is changeless and the body is changeable. When one appears, the other vanishes. When we think ourselves as soul the body vanishes and vice versa. Vedanta has ascribed the quality of unchangeability only to the Absolute, Brahman, the Whole. There is nothing outside the whole. Everyone is included in the whole. When this is realized the question of soul and body vanishes. Again Vivekananda has preserved people's individuality also. An evolving individuality can get a meaning only with reference to an infinite individual.

All through his lectures on practical Vedanta Vivekananda adheres to the divinity of human being and this divinity should be worshiped. Rejecting all tough metaphysics, logic, we should simply spread the message of divines of all our-fellow beings to the world.

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