

Unity and Non-duality: Vivekananda's Perspective

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Abstract

The theory of practical Vedānta or Neo- Vedānta was constructed by Sh-Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda. The new Vedānta or Neo- Vedānta is also Advantic as it holds Brahman as the ultimate Reality i.e. one without a second. Vivekananda integrates all the schools of Indian Philosophy and maintains that they are the various stages of spiritual development and are not opposite to one another. In Advaita Vedānta, Vivekananda has found huge practical significance in solving the individual as well as collective problems of everyday life. So, my aim in this paper is to analyze the practical aspects of Advaita Vedānta and how it is applicable in day-to-day life.

Keywords: Advaita Vedānta, Oneness, God, Non-dualism.

Introduction

Vedānta philosophy has three main schools. Vivekananda grouped all the schools of Vedānta under three heads that is, Dvaita (Dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (Qualified non-dualism) and Advaita (Non- dualism). He maintains that these three constitute three stages of religious development. For dualist, they construct the notion of God who generated this world and various jivas. When the jivas perform good actions, they receive good fruit and when they perform bad actions, they receive bad fruits from God. In this stage there is concept of hell and heaven and this stage belongs to common man. When we analyze the actions of a common religious man, we would notice dualism.

At the stage of qualified monism, they form the idea of God, soul and nature where soul and nature construct the body of God and thus, these three forms one unit. This stage also denotes a higher level of religious development. Here, the world is understood as an organism which is pervaded by the Supreme Self.

Lastly, at non- dualists stage, here forms the idea that there is only one reality. In this stage, the world and soul is just an illusion because they are same reality.

In accordance to Vivekananda, these are the three stages to realized non-dualism. We cannot go beyond non-dualism as there is no other path greater than unity. Vivekananda maintains that in the earlier stages of religious life, those who are Advaitins were necessarily dualist.

He was mainly propagating the idea that all the schools of Vedānta are not contradictory but they are the different stages of spiritual development. In this context, Vivekananda writes, "But this is my attempt, my mission in life, to show that the Vedānta schools are not contradictory, that they all necessitate each other, all fulfill each other, one as it were, is the stepping- stone to the other, until the goal, the Advaita, Tat Tvam Asi, is reached [1]."

According to Vivekananda, dualism and qualified dualism are lower stages of spiritual development. He compared dualist with a child and Advaitin with a rational man. This doesn't mean that Advaitins have the right to criticize dualists because sooner or later, a child is also on the path to become rational or spiritual man.

Vivekananda is proposing the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. Yet, his philosophy differs from Sankara as he did not make any distinction between God and Brahman. He maintains that the concept of māyā is not illusion rather it is a statement of fact that this jagat (world) is full of contradictions. He accepted all the views of Brahman which is based on genuine spiritual experience as the true of Brahman, the Supreme reality.

Practical Vedānta

In Neo-Vedāntic philosophy, Swami Vivekananda also reconciles the various paths of liberation. He has made Vedānta practical for man. The Neo-Vedānta is the beginning of its practical applications that are found in the life and teachings of Sri- Ramakrishna (Vivekananda's teacher). All the teachings of Sri- Ramakrishna were left to Swami Vivekananda in order to develop the philosophy

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of Neo-Vedānta and thus, establish the platform of practical Vedānta. So, Swami Vivekananda understood Sri-Ramakrishnan completely to be in a place to develop the super structure of Neo-Vedānta by its practical application.

The most important ideal of Vedānta is oneness. All things are one and there is no two. The difference is only in the degree of manifestation and not in kind. In the words of Vivekananda writes, "The difference between weakness and strength is one of degree; the difference between virtue and vice is one of degree; the difference between heaven and hell is one of degree; the difference between life and death is one of degree; all differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything. All is One, which manifests Itself, either as thought, or life, or soul, or body, and the difference is only in degree [2]." Sankara and Vivekananda were of the same view that reality is one. But, one thing that differ Vivekananda from Sankara is that Vivekananda displays with proof that philosophy of Advaita Vedānta can function in day-to-day life of human beings thereby resulting into the destruction of many societal conflicts. He admits that Vedānta must perform in every part of our life. He believes that Vedānta can guide into the hope life of many nations and thus, it makes the spiritual reality a social reality. Thus, in such a way his Vedānta differs from the old traditional Vedānta of Sankara and named as Practical Vedānta.

In India, Advaita Vedānta was meant only for a few monks and never to be practiced by the majority in everyday life. As a result, Vivekananda wants to change that scenario and give a new approach of Vedānta that affects all of us. He says Vedānta as a religion must be extremely practical. So, in our daily life we can apply Vedānta philosophy and it is not an impossible ideal.

So far as the meaning of practicality is concerned, we take it only in terms of material life. Further, we call those things as practical which can be reconciled with our selfishness. As we are ignorant of our real nature, we move mostly around those things which give us mental or physical comfort and it becomes practical to us. The western philosopher has wrongly understood human being as the combination of mind and body only. But human being also has the spiritual and emotional content and when we realize our true spiritual nature, it becomes the highest practicality for us. He says to get the balanced practicality there should be harmonic development of body, mind and spirituality. Thus, Vivekananda maintains that Vedānta is extremely practical but always in the sense of ideal and this ideal reminds us that we are divine 'Thou art that' [3].

The Vedānta admits that infinity is our real nature and it will never disappear but it will stay for all the time. Vivekananda says we should always remember that I am birth-less, deathless, omniscient, benevolent, omnipotent. He also admits that Vedānta calls upon to have a great faith in ourselves. The difference that arises between one man and another is because of the

existence or non-existence of faith in itself. When we have faith in ourselves, we will do everything. Those who do not believe in personal god are called as atheist. In this context Vivekananda writes "As certain religious of the world say that a man who does not believe in a personal God outside of himself is an atheist, so the Vedānta says, a man who does not believe in himself is an atheist [4]." So, atheists are not those who do not believe in God but those who do not believe in themselves. When Vivekananda talks about theism he means, those who 'believe in oneself' and this makes Vedānta more practical. The ancient religion point out that Vivekananda was an atheist who does not have faith in God. But the new religion admits that he is the atheist who does not have faith in himself. But this faith is not the selfish faith. This is because Vedānta is the doctrine of oneness. So, this means faith in all and this faith will construct a better world. In this context, Vivekananda says "He is the highest man who can say with true, I know all about my-self [5]."

Further, when Vivekananda talks about the doctrine of oneness, he means that everything is one, one existence. It is the similar life that expands through all beings starting from Brahman to the amoeba and not of kind. So, the only difference is in the degree of manifestation and not of kind. He also rejects the distinction between Kant concept of Noumena (thing in itself) and Phenomena (appearance of the world) and admits that there exist only one and that one is either Noumena or Phenomena. For realist, there are only Phenomena and for idealist, there are only Noumena. But by denying the distinction between the two, Vivekananda maintains that realist and idealist are not two opposite opinions but they are actually one and same thing. This is because reality is one, infinite and absolute. By emphasizing on the divinity of man and belief in one existence, Vivekananda has developed a unique philosophy which differs from other Vedāntins. He constructed his philosophy not only for human being but also for the whole society.

Humanism towards other

Swami Vivekananda strongly believes that all life is one. This means that the individual life and existence is not distinct from that of other because all the individuals are the sparks of the same entity. Also, he shows that all men are equal to each other and no class is superior from the other. When we have the spirit of oneness, we will identify ourselves with the community without having any idea of personal profit. He admits that the liberation of an individual is not a complete liberation if there is no total liberation of mankind. So, his humanism suggests that man who is an end in himself must also become a means to support humanity. In this context he writes "The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course, all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of temples [6]." So, the individual himself is the end, the means, the object and the subject.

According to Vivekananda, the happiness and welfare for all is dependent on rising freedom and equality of all. He also examines on the social-economic upliftment of the people. He says that our wish to raise others become possible only when we promote the community consciousness and removed the lower self of the individual. The aim of Vivekananda is to get back the strength and freedom of India by using of Practical Vedānta. He stated "These conceptions of Vedānta must come out, must remain not only in the forests, not only to work at the bar and the bench, in the fisherman that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying [7]." Poverty, in India is a major issue and this poverty is drawn based on subsistence line and not based on any good reputation of life. We cannot solve the problems that are facing through poverty until and unless we feel essential unity with those poor people and in this context Practical Vedānta shows the right path. Vivekananda also worked to free India from social evils like discrimination of caste, creed, race, religion, untouchables etc. He says the reason for the discrimination in society is because of the feeling of being privileged. So, if a person has more money than other, he wished to possess more privilege than those who have less money. He says privileged people have become ignorant of oneness and the affinity with others. But Vedāntins cannot receive any type of privilege like mental, physical or spiritual. He admits that in the exchange of knowledge India must become an equal to other nations and must stop her exclusive outlook. Therefore, he explained Vedanta both to the west and also to India and by doing this he displays that India possesses within herself the intellectual resources to her own liberation.

Vivekananda further maintains that Practical Vedanta not only works for the equality of humanity but it also works for animals and nature itself because they are not different from human beings rather, they are part of one existence. We can expect India to become a developed country only when we realize oneness in society and religion too.

Concept of Universalism for Vivekananda

The real theme of Vivekananda is to spread the world with both tolerance and universal acceptance. He says we should accept all religion as true.

There is no wrong in worshipping God through ceremonials and forms because it is the journey from truth to truth, from lower truth to higher truth.

In this context he writes "Truth is nobody's property; no race no individual can lay any exclusive claim to it.

Truth is the nature of all souls [8]." Vivekananda further says, in Hinduism there is no place for the objection of Islam, Christianity because it does not have any place for inequality. So, for all these reasons Hinduism is called as Sanatam Dharma. Vivekananda says by Hinduism, it does not mean one religion but a society in which all Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Brahmanas are included. So, to the heart of Swami Vivekananda none of the religions was foreign because for him, there is only truth and humanity.

Conclusion

The Neo-Vedanta of swami Vivekananda is a Practical Vedanta which have some features and makes it different from the old traditional Advaita Vedanta. He combined the 'mind' of Sankara and the' heart' of Buddha. The Practical Vedanta is the Vedanta that may inspire our individual life and national or international life. He wanted to establish a place where there is no discrimination of caste, creed, religion etc. and also, he wanted to show that for every religion the path is different but the truth or goal is same. The perfect remedy for many social evils will be the reality of one existence and realization of oneness with so called 'others'.

References

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