

## ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda delivered four lectures on “Practical Vedānta”. Vedānta is one of the six major orthodox philosophical systems of classical India systematized by *Maharṣi* Vyāsa in his *Brahmasūtra* and later commented upon by several commentators, thus giving rise to several schools of Vedāntic thought.

At the outset, any researcher would face a question as to why did Swami Vivekananda name his philosophy as ‘Practical Vedānta’. Did he consider his philosophy to be the same as one of the systems of classical Vedānta? If the answer is ‘yes’, then the next question would be ‘which system of classical Vedānta did he adopt ? If the answer is ‘no’, then several other questions would arise. Did he combine the doctrines of one or more systems of classical Vedānta into a higher unity ? Or is the philosophy of ‘Practical Vedānta’ his own innovation ? Finally, what is the reason behind using the epithet ‘practical’ ?

In this thesis, two main problems will be addressed. First, the philosophical foundations of ‘Practical Vedānta’ will be explored. Lastly, it will be discussed as to how far did his philosophy differ from its ancient roots.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I have tried to show that his philosophy is not utopian and hence can be applied to ordinary living situations. As the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta preaches oneness, it views all beings as equal. Thus Vivekananda asserts that a religion can be built on Vedānta.

Vivekananda himself anticipates an objection that what Vedānta preaches is ideal and the ideal is beyond the real. So how can the ideal be put into practice ? The teachings of Vedānta may be realizable but not actually realized. If so, then Vedānta cannot be called practical. The central thesis of Vedānta is expressed by four *mahāvākya*-s, of which the principal is ‘*tattvamasi*’. It states ‘Thou art That’, that is, you are that pure consciousness. But an ordinary person never experiences himself/herself as identical with the divine consciousness. So, this identity with pure consciousness even being real does not appear to be so. That is why the Swami has considered it as an idealistic theory. But that does not make his theory impracticable. To say that the ideal of *Vedānta* is practical, Swamiji means that a person has to become aware of this identity which, on the Vedāntic view, actually exists in his individual self and the divine self.

Vivekananda maintained that every child must be taught that the self in him/her is the only God that is to be worshipped. This practice will help regain self-confidence and fearlessness in him/her. He felt that the rich treasure of the *Upaniṣadic* wisdom need to be brought at each doorstep so that each individual would be enlightened and transformed. The *Upaniṣad*-s preach us the message to be fearless as we are consciousness personified. He has uttered the famous mantra from the *Kāthopaniṣad* - “Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached” to ignite the dormant spirit lying in man.

Vivekananda remarks that each soul is potentially divine. Vedānta does not consider man as a sinner. According to him, it is utter folly to ascribe weakness or sin to our own selves by saying or thinking that ‘I am weak’ or I have committed a sin’. By

rectifying his mistakes, man can progress forward. When a man becomes aware of the glory of the self, he shines in his own radiance.

Vedānta speaks of the unity of all souls and speaks in favor of abolishing the division among men on discriminating factors. The same spirit is within everyone.

Someone might question as to why we should love each other and unite, refrain from inflicting harm on any fellow-being including men and animals. This question brings in the concept of *Vedāntic* morality. The answer to this question is that man should love his neighbor or his fellow being or even animals because all are his own selves reflected in other bodies only.

In the first chapter a brief exposition is given of Swami Vivekananda's philosophical thoughts based on his lectures on 'Practical Vedānta'. From these lectures it is clear that Vivekananda lays the foundation of his philosophy on Śaṅkara's system of Advaita Vedānta.

In the second chapter, it is shown that the philosophical foundations of Practical Vedānta can be traced back to the doctrines of Advaita Vedānta. It is the only school of Vedānta that admits the identity of every sentient being with the one, non-dual pure consciousness.

*Ācārya* Śaṅkara has propounded the theory of *advaitavāda* (monism) in which he holds that *Brahman* which is without any form or attributes is the only substance

which is transcendently real. By the term ‘*advaita*’ is meant the *pratyagātmā* which stands out to be real only as the locus of everything after the negation of all duality.

In the chapter *ārambhaṇādhikaraṇam*, *ācārya Śaṅkara* has endeavoured to establish that *Brahmaṇ* is the only reality and in proving so, he has established his tenet of *vivartavāda* in which he states that the world is not real. It is only superimposed on *Brahmaṇ* and appears to be real to us. In other words, the world is the *vivarta* (appearance) of *Brahmaṇ*.

The second chapter of this thesis explores the relation between the ancient philosophy of Advaita Vedānta propagated by Śaṅkara and the philosophy of Practical Vedānta. This chapter not merely establishes the fact that the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is based upon Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, but indirectly gives a defence of Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy also which requires practical implementation.

The third chapter shows that Sri Ramakrishna’s verbal teachings has developed into full-fledged doctrines in Vivekananda’s philosophy.

Sri Ramakrishna’s life bears testimony that truth can be realised even in this life. He was the only man who said to Vivekananda “I see Him (God) just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.” This bold assertion made Vivekananda feel that religion is a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world. It is that which relates the soul and the God.

Sri Ramakrishna held that *ahamkāra* or the sense of the ego in the form ‘I am rich’ obstructs the generation of the knowledge of the self. He calls this as ‘*avidyār āmi*’ (ignorant self). But, when an aspirant has the conviction that he is the same self, he loses the sense of his body and its associates.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, what a man thinks, he becomes so. If a man thinks himself to be free (*mukta*), he is free indeed and reversely, if he considers himself to be bound (*baddha*), he is bound indeed. He insists that a person must dare to say “...having chanted the name of God, I am above all bondage and sin. ....”!

Sri Ramakrishna described *nirguṇa Brahman* of the Advaitins as not having been defiled (*ucchiṣṭa*) because it is beyond the capacity of expression by the human tongue. Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings can be summarized in two points – (1) that the goal of human life is to realise God, the inmost spirit inherent in all sentient beings and (2) different religions take up different paths to reach the same goal of human life namely God-realisation.

In fact, the dictum of Śrī Ramakrishna “*yata matha tata patha*” meaning that there are as many ways to reach reality as there are creeds resonates an utterance of Sureśvarācārya, who writes, “*yayā yayā bhavet puṁsām vyutpattiḥ pratyagātmani/ sā saiva prakriyeha syāt sādhvī sā cā navasthita/*”

Vivekananda remarked once that Śrī Ramakrishna has taken birth on the soil of the earth to shower kindness to the destitute, to spread love in the hearts of those who are deserted, and to save those whose have been socially cast out.

In the fourth chapter it is said that religion is the end which can be practised through adopting morality as the means.

Vivekananda held that religious disharmony can be eradicated only by enhancing religious tolerance. Everyone has his own conviction to which he adheres. It is not desirable to criticise him so far as he is sincere.

A universal religion should be one which has space for all types of people. It should be able to realise the underlying philosophy which points to the one Existence lying behind the diversity in the universe. Universal religion is primarily based on the notion of universal brotherhood which is already existing not only among followers of a particular religion but also among all living beings.

Vivekananda claims that the question of morality and the principle of service to all living beings finds its solution only in the *advaita* theory. As *advaitavāda* treats everything as one entity, helping others implies helping one's own self and reversely causing harm to others injures one's own self. This chapter concludes with the note that the idea of seeing God everywhere and rendering service to Him in every form is the crux of the philosophy of *Vedānta*. The doctrine of service as advocated by Vivekananda is firmly based on the Advaita principle of “...*jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*.”

The fourth chapter of this thesis gives an exposition of Swami Vivekananda's concept of universal religion. This religion enjoins the duty of selfless service (*sevā*) to all fellow sentient beings. In fact this concept of *sevāyoga* is a unique contribution of Swami Vivekananda to the Vedānta tradition. The liberation of the individual self is

the summum bonum of the Vedānta philosophy. But practical Vedānta is directed towards two goals “ *ātmana mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*”, that is, it strives to bring about the individual’s liberation from all sufferings and is also committed to working relentlessly towards the welfare of all human beings.

In the fifth chapter, it is said that the science of yoga lies in the training of the body as well as the mind so that we learn to recognize the soul as distinct from the body. The solution lies in the power of concentration and meditation.

Swami Vivekananda insists that any work which a man performs must be an endeavour to bring out all the powers of the soul. He draws upon the ideal of disinterested action as preached in the *Bhagavadgītā* by Lord Krishna which says that man has the right to work only but not to expect its consequences.

Any and every human being is capable of experiencing the truth if he so desires and makes sincere effort. A man can be said to be religious only if he has succeeded to experience the truth embedded in religion himself.

The body and the mind are intimately related to each other. A balanced person is one who has a healthy body-mind set-up. In order to have control over our minds, we need to have control over our bodies first. It is by practising yoga that the *yogī* gets control of the internal forces and thereby the whole of nature.

The concept of *yoga* is central to practical Vedānta. Vivekananda was of the opinion that all acts of either *jñāna* or *karma* or *bhakti* are complementary to each other

because in each path, a practitioner strives to overcome the narrowness of his own self and makes an attempt to merge his own self with that of others to feel the sense of oneness.

Swami Vivekananda thinks that all the scriptures of ancient India converge to establish this single reality which is called the *Brahman* or *ātman* in the Upaniṣads. He makes it quite clear that the philosophy of oneness is this philosophy which infuses strength in man and makes him capable of realizing the ultimate truth that all beings are one with the supreme being.

Thus, Swami Vivekananda arrives at the conclusion that only the philosophy of Vedānta has the potentiality of being a practical philosophy and laying the foundation of a universal religion.

There is a significant difference between the yoga of the *Gītā* and Swami Vivekananda's conceptions of the four *yogas*. The *Gītā* never prescribes *jñānayoga*, and *karmayoga* for the same individual as their capabilities differ. Swami Vivekananda, on the contrary, believes that *sevāyoga* can be pursued only by an individual who has knowledge of his inmost self, practises *niṣkāma karma*, is devoted to the one supreme being and has control over his own mind and the senses.

A philosophy becomes acceptable not only by its exposition but also by its defence.



