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**THE RELEVANCE OF VIVEKANANDA’S PHILOSOPHY-
PRACTICAL VEDANTA AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION**

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The relevance of any thought or philosophy is measured in terms of its pragmatic value to the people and the society. If it offers genuine solution to the problems faced by the society it is described as relevant. Again the question of relevance is related to the time factor. A certain theory or belief is relevant or may be relevant for the present and there may be concepts which are relevant for all times to come.

Vivekananda’s philosophy is relevant not only to the Indian society but to the world at large. It was relevant not only in the past, but even today and will be relevant for all times to come. It can be emphatically stated that most of the problems faced by humanity today can be solved to a great extent by applying the philosophy of Vivekananda.

Advaita Vedanta of Sankara is the cream of Indian Philosophy. If we leave aside Vedanta, very little of Indian Philosophy remains. The essence of the Vedanta is the philosophy of oneness or the essential identity of all souls. The individual soul (jivatman) is one with the absolute soul (paramatman). The Vedanta philosophy can be summarized in one dictum “aham brahmasmi (I am Brahman).

Swami Vivekananda, the illustrious son of India whose lectures shook the whole world was deeply moved by this philosophy of oneness preached by the Advaita. His uniqueness lay in the fact of transforming this Vedanta into Practical Vedanta which was not his own creation but his unfolding of the practical nature of Vedanta which is already implicit in the Vedanta philosophy itself.

Swami Vivekananda saw the future of religion in the Vedanta. As Vivekananda said in his writing, “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?”, “Is not the dualistic method based on falsehood? Are not all the religious practices often weakening and therefore wrong? They are based on a wrong idea, a wrong view of man. Would two wrongs make one right? Would the lie become truth? Would darkness become light? Vedanta is everywhere, only you must become conscious of it If Vedanta – this conscious knowledge that all is one spirit – spreads, the whole humanity will become spiritual”¹.

According to Vivekananda no theory is useful unless it can be practiced. The Vedanta as a religion must be intensely practical. Therefore the theory of the Vedanta must be capable of practicing. According to Vivekananda the differentiation between religion and life must disappear. As Gandhi said regarding his view of religion “you must watch my life, how I live, eat, sit, talk and behave in general. The sum total of all these in me is my religion”². To Vivekananda also the ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life.

The Vedanta preaches a great ideal which is not mere ideal but ideal in practice. There are people who have the mistaken belief that the ideal is a mere ideal, an utopia, difficult to be practiced in ordinary life. The Vedanta does not preach an ideal which is so lofty that it cannot be practiced. The ideal is that we are all divine (That thou art). Because all human beings are part of the divine, according to Vivekananda, there is nothing impossible for us. We can do everything. The great teaching of the Vedanta is to teach men to have faith in themselves. According to Vivekananda the solution of the problems of the modern world lay in the awakening of each soul to realize the divinity within himself. Vivekananda was fully convinced of the fact that the ancient heritage of India could serve as a light to world civilization. Vivekananda said that “the one ground that we have is our sacred tradition, our religion and upon that we shall have to build”³. Vivekananda with his practical application of Vedanta wanted his countrymen to be courageous, bold, independent and proud. Vedanta to him was a method by which a common man could mould their character. According to him the whole world requires a light and India alone has the light in the teaching of Advaita Vedanta. The foundation of the ideal of divinity in humanity will enable people all over the world to solve problems like spiritual, social, political and economic.

Vivekananda read all the contradictory doctrines found in the Upanishads from which arose the different schools – Advaita, Visistadvaita, Dvaita etc. Vivekananda read the Upanishads and ultimately came to the conclusion that the apparent contradictions in the Upanishads pointed out to a system which is a harmonious whole. To quote Vivekananda “Now I will tell you my discovery. All of religion is contained in the Vedanta and in the three stages of Vedanta Philosophy, Dvaita, Visistadvaita and Advaita one comes after the other. These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Everyone is necessary. This is the essential of religion. The Vedanta applied to the various ethnic customs and creed of India is Hinduism. The first stage dvaita applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe is Christianity, as applied to the Semitic group is Islam, the Advaita as applied in the Yoga perception form is Buddhism. Now by religion is meant the Vedanta, the application must vary according to the different needs, surroundings and other circumstances of different nations. You will find that philosophy is the same, the saktas, the saivas and others apply it each to their own special cult and forms”⁴. Vivekananda again and again pointed out to the fact that Vedanta should be brought out of the caves, temples, books etc. and should be applied in solving the practical problems of human beings in general. In Vivekanandas Neo Vedanta, he combines all the paths of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga. It is possible for a man to have the intellect of Sankara and the heart of Buddha. Therefore there must be a beautiful combination of all the paths but if any of these paths is followed sincerely it will definitely lead us to the ultimate goal that is moksa or liberation. Thus Swami Ranganathananda observes “He brings down Vedanta to fertilize the fields of common life so that life may be raised to unknown heights and made capable to taste Vedanta at its purest source”⁵.

Truth is eternal, which vibrated in the past, vibrates at present and will vibrate always. Religions differ but the essence of all religions is one and is common to all ages. Behind all the religions of the world there is a common urge, a search for oneness or unity. To unite under a common banner of oneness is the strongest urge of every human being on earth and this urge finds fulfillment in the religion of Practical Vedanta.

The concept of Practical Vedanta is the best gift presented by Vivekananda to the whole world. The present world is torn apart by differences – differences in religion, hence Vedanta has been the best solution to resolve the differences. The religion of the

Vedanta is dynamic, open, progressive and integral. It contains within it the best of all religions. Vedanta believes in all inclusive Brahman and not in a personal God. When we believe in a personal God, the concept of God differs from religion to religion. In the words of Vivekananda “So long as religion was in the hands of a chosen few, or of a body of priests it was in temples, churches, books, dogmas, forms and rituals, religion seems to be dying out. But when we come to the real, spiritual and universal concept, then and then alone religion will become real and being, it will come into our very nature live every moment, penetrate every pore of our society and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before”⁶.

The question of universal religion is closely associated with the name of Vivekananda. The general tendency of the followers of a particular religion is to focus his own religion as the highest or superior and condemn others as being inferior in status. This is the general tendency of the human mind. But such a person is not a true religious person because no religion preaches hatred or intolerance. As Christianity says “In my Father’s house there are various mansions”. Criticisms and condemnation according to Vivekananda is a vain way of spending our energies because in the long run we find that all our ideas are finally approaching the same goal and that most of our differences are merely differences of expression.

The view that one particular religion should be raised to the status of a universal religion was vehemently apposed by Vivekananda. Neither Hinduism nor Christianity nor any other religion, however tolerant and all embracing can be raised to the status of a universal religion. According to Vivekananda any attempt to bring humanity to one method of thinking had always been a failure and will always be a failure. No two human beings are alike. Even identical twins show different behaviour. Our tastes differ, aptitudes differ, inclinations differ, temperaments differ. We cannot make man conform to the same ideas. To quote Vivekananda “I am not against any sect. I am glad that sects exist, and I only wish they may go on multiplying more and more. Why? Simply because of this: If you and I and all who are present here were to think exactly the same thought, there would be no thoughts for us to think. We know that two or more forces must come into collision in order to produce motion. It is the clash of thought, the differences of thought that awakes thought..... Whirls and eddies occur only in a

rushing, living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water. When religions are dead there will be no more sects, it will be the perfect peace and harmony of the grave Variation is the sign of life and it must be there”⁷.

Thus everybody has his birth right to think the way he likes to believe in what he thinks right. But the question is: Is this basic right of a human being respected and honoured? The answer is ‘No’. If the answer would have been in the affirmative then the world would have been a paradise to live in. No wars, no conflicts, no hatred, no jealousies, no battles. But these negative attitudes occur within us because we do not realize the truth. Vivekananda puts the question before us: Are all the religions of the world really contradictory? According to Vivekananda the external forms in which the religions are clad may differ. The temples, churches, mosques, the scriptures, the rites and rituals of every religion may differ but there is the soul behind every religion, the essence behind all religions are not contradictory but they are supplementary. This is the great truth preached by Vivekananda.

Each religion represents a part of the great truth. It spends its entire energy in embodying a part of the great universal truth. So each religion has something to add to enrich the universal, truth not to exclude them. Sects after sects, religions after religions, systems after systems arise to each one embodying a great idea. Ideals must be added to ideals in order to enrich humanity. According to Vivekananda man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth. Thus all religions are different forces working for the better of mankind. Each of the religion has something to offer to mankind and hence not a single religion can be wiped out just as no natural force can be wiped out from the universe. The universal religion that we talk about is already there in an implicit form amongst all the particular religions though partially. As the universal brotherhood is implicit amongst mankind so also the case with universal religion.

But the problem lies when the part of the truth proclaimed by a particular religion is claimed to the whole, the finite claiming to be the infinite. Hence all religions are partially true. There must not be toleration according to Vivekananda for toleration implies to think that somebody is wrong but we are allowing him to live. Vivekananda believes in positive acceptance, of embracing all religions as true. So quote Vivekananda

“I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian’s church and kneel before the crucifix, I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in the Buddha and his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of everyone”⁸. According to Vivekananda universal religion is not the solution to the problems faced by the followers of the particular religions. In the Parliament of world Religions held at Chicago in 1893 Vivekananda emphatically cried out that it is the same Brahman which manifests in different forms and powers. He said “May He who is the Brahman of the Hindus, the Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhist, the Jehovah of the Jews, the Father in Heaven of the Christians give strength to you The Christian is not become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth”⁹.

Vivekananda was the great inspirer of youth. He had a vibrating message for all the youth. Vivekananda said that there is nothing impossible for the youth. He called upon the youth to refrain from brooding over failures and unhappiness. To quote Vivekananda “I am sure if you look back upon your lives you will find that you were always vainly trying to get help from others which never came. All the help that has come was from within yourselves. You had only the fruits of what you yourselves worked for, and yet you were strangely hoping all the time for help so our lives spent in hoping, hoping, hoping which never comes to an end You have everything, nay you are everything”¹⁰. When such a vision is realized the youth gets inspired. To them this very world which was formerly hell becomes heaven. The youth must realize that all the troubles and sufferings, the miseries and failures because of which there has been lot of unrest amongst the youth are due to their bindings but once they are free of the prejudices, all sufferings will cease, the youth will experience absolute freedom and happiness.

Vivekananda preached the humanitarian religion. He often quoted the Bible which says “If you cannot love your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you have not seen?” We should learn to see God in the human face instead of

seeing Him in the sky, the clouds, the heavens or in the images of clay and dead matter. According to Vivekananda we become religions only the day when we begin to see God in men and women. When this state of mind is achieved, everything on earth becomes pleasant even the thing that were formerly unpleasant to us. Every man and woman is the living God. Vivekananda referred to the old Persian story of the lover who knocked at the door of the beloved and was asked “who are you?” He answered “It is I” and there was no response. The second time the same thing happened. The third time when he was asked “who is there”? He replied “I am thyself, my beloved” the door opened. So is the relation between God and ourselves¹¹. Vivekananda did not care for spiritual liberation. He said that he would rather go to hundred thousand hells doing good to others (silently) like the spring which was his religion. Vivekananda taught us that there is no darkness, impurity or evil. Darkness is less light, impurity is less purity, evil is less good. No human beings are bad, they may be less good. When we see others with such spectacles all hatred will cease. There will be only love. Truth is within all human being. Our duty is only to search for it within ourselves and manifest it.

Vivekananda’s philosophy and message is more relevant today than in any other times due to the great unrest and confusion that is prevailing in today’s society. The message of Vivekananda that happiness lies not in things of the outside world but within one’s heart is the greatest teaching which he gave to the world. In the materialistic greed of today’s society, money and power rules the society. The greatest remedy for such evils lay in the path of renunciation which is inherited from the spiritual and religious cultures of the ancient times.

To Vivekananda happiness is within us but we look in vain to the world outside. To quote Vivekananda “Shall we go to a forest cave? What good would it do?” If the mind us not under control there is no use living in a forest cave for the same mind will bring disturbances there. We will find many devils in the cave because all the devils are in our mind. Today human evolution has come to a stage when we should look back into the treasures of the past – of spirituality, of renunciation, of self control etc. Enjoyment alone without consideration of social service leads to degeneration of the society. Vivekananda’s call for humanitarian service brings in the ideal of Dharma side by side with artha which are the ideals emphasized by the Purusarthas.

The advancement of science and technology, inventions and discoveries has made human life easy and comfortable but it has resulted in a stressful life, social confusion and unrest. There is a feeling of insecurity all around us. Vivekananda finds solutions to such problem by diving deep into one's spirituality and religion. Vivekananda's question 'Is Vedanta the Future Religion?' offers the answer in the affirmative. His concept of Practical Vedanta can be the best substitute for the particular religions of the world though according to Vivekananda all religions are good in themselves yet it must be admitted that people who emphasize on the external forces of religion tend to create hatred and bitterness. Practical Vedanta which is highly secular in nature can help to overcome many such evils in the society.

The present call for justice – social, economic and political, equality of status and opportunity, the right to education and emancipation of women, eradication of poverty of the masses and the molding of the youth of our country by overcoming fear are all the echo of what Swamiji preached and said. In no other times than today Vivekananda's ideal of "Arise, awake and rest not till the goal is reached" is more relevant.

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