

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



Rediscovering the Spiritual Foundations of Thought: The Enduring Relevance of Swami Vivekananda in Modern Times

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda, a visionary ambassador of Indian philosophy, tapped into the depths of his spiritual and philosophical heritage to introduce the transformative wisdom of Vedanta and yoga to the Western world, forever imprinting modern thought with the indelible mark of his profound insights. His spiritual teachings were rooted in the empowering conviction that within every individual lies a dormant divine potential, waiting to be awakened and realized, thereby transforming human existence into a manifestation of its highest, most radiant self. Spiritual basis of Vivekananda's core teachings which are going to be delineated here are Vedanta Philosophy, Universal religion, Practical Vedanta, Education and Personal development, Self-realisation and service. Vivekananda's philosophy was influenced by his guru Sri Ramakrishna, and he reconceived Advaita Vedanta as a nonsectarian, life-affirming

philosophy that provides an ontological basis for religious cosmopolitanism and a spiritual ethics of social service. He adopted innovative cosmopolitan approaches to long-standing philosophical problems, and his views on the limits of reason, the dynamics of religious faith, and the hard problem of consciousness are still relevant today. His Vedantic cosmopolitanism presents a profound and timeless vision for global harmony, social justice, and individual empowerment. By advocating for the inherent unity of all beings and the universal essence of all religions, his philosophy transcends cultural and religious boundaries, offering a pathway to a more compassionate and equitable world. In our contemporary phase, marked by rapid globalization and multicultural interactions, revisiting and applying Vivekananda's ideas can help foster a spirit of unity, tolerance, and mutual respect, essential for addressing the complex challenges of our time. In fact, revisiting the spiritual basis of his ideas and their relevance today involves examining his core teachings and how they can be applied to modern issues.

Key Words

Swami Vivekananda, Rediscovering, Foundation, Philosophy.

On Vedanta Philosophy

Central to Vivekananda's teachings is Vedanta, which emphasizes the unity of existence, the divinity of the soul, and the oneness of all religions. He espoused Vedanta, defining the grandest idea in the religion of the

Vedanta is that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths can be generalised into four, viz those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge.¹ Vedanta, derived from the ancient Indian scriptures known as the Upanishads, posits that the ultimate reality is Brahman, an infinite and formless consciousness that permeates everything. Swami Vivekananda interpreted Vedanta as a philosophy of unity, stressing that all beings are manifestations of this singular divine reality. Vivekananda was a proponent of Advaita Vedanta, which teaches that there is no fundamental difference between the individual soul (Atman) and Brahman. This non-dualistic perspective underscores the idea that all distinctions—whether of religion, race, or nationality—are superficial. The ultimate aspiration is to attain absolute liberation through the realization of Sat-Chit-Ananda, a state of supreme consciousness. Initially, ignorance veils our perception, and we behold only the fleeting phenomena of the world, unaware of the divine presence. However, as we awaken to the truth, our gaze shifts, and we behold God alone; the ephemeral universe dissolves, revealing the eternal essence that underlies all existence.² Swamiji went beyond the traditional Vedant philosophy, stating that every religion must serve the poor and downtrodden in order to remove poverty, ignorance, and disease. He envisioned a universal religion that transcends sectarian boundaries and asserted that all religions, despite their apparent differences, seek the same truth and lead to the same divine goal. This idea is rooted in the Vedantic view of unity in diversity. Vivekananda's cosmopolitanism is deeply humanistic, advocating for the upliftment of humanity through spiritual and moral development. He emphasized that true spirituality is not confined to rituals but is expressed through love, compassion, and selfless service.

Thus a closer look at the word “Vedanta” is revealing. Vedanta, a synthesis of ‘Veda’ (knowledge) and ‘anta’ (the ultimate goal), signifies the quest for transformative understanding, transcending mere intellectual pursuits. It seeks to illuminate our divine nature and our connection with the ultimate reality, recognizing the realization of our true essence as the fundamental purpose of human existence. Through the wisdom of Vedanta, we embark on a profound journey of self-unfoldment, where spiritual growth and self-realization entwine, leading us to the manifestation of our inherent divinity – the ultimate purpose of our existence. As we navigate this path, we are drawn inexorably towards the realization of our true nature, an awakening that may unfold in this life or beyond, for it is an immutable truth that our deepest essence is divine, and its discovery is the ultimate destiny of our soul.³

On Universal Religion

Vivekananda promoted the idea that all religions lead to the same truth and advocated for a universal religion based on spiritual experience rather than dogma. He envisioned a universal religion that transcends sectarian boundaries and asserted that all religions, despite their apparent differences, seek the same truth and lead to the same divine goal. This idea is rooted in the Vedantic view of unity in diversity. Swamiji embraced a pragmatic, rational, and inclusive approach to religion, prioritizing compassionate service to humanity over ritualistic practices. In contrast to traditional Vedantists, who viewed the world as illusory and unreal, Swamiji recognized the value of engaging with the world and its complexities, advocating for a nuanced and contextual understanding of spiritual truth. Vivekananda was probably the first philosopher in the history of Vedantism to speak so openly and definitely in defense of the reality of this world.⁴ His views on society were essentially and practically humanistic and it was based on his tremendous faith in the power of man. He opposed the oppressions based on caste distinctions and the practice of child marriage. He strongly urged providing opportunities for women to enable them to utilize their abilities. Vivekananda was influenced by Buddhist philosophy. He said, “The great glory of Buddha lay in his wonderful sympathy for everybody, especially the poor and ignorant.”⁵

On Humanism

In 1897, he crystallized his humanistic vision into a cohesive framework, building upon the foundational work he had laid since 1886. Through his tireless efforts over the preceding decade, he had carefully cultivated the groundwork for this revolutionary shift, ultimately giving formal expression to his transformative humanistic ideals. During the time around Christmas of 1892 he visited south of India and his journey from Ernakulam to

Kanyakumari was on foot. At Kanyakumari, he meditated on the ‘last bit of Indian rock’, known as the Vivekananda Rock Memorial. It was at this pivotal moment in his journey that Swami Vivekananda reflected on his profound encounters with the struggles of the impoverished across the nation, sparking a transformative epiphany that crystallized into his visionary concept of ‘One India’ – a unified and harmonious nation, where the disparities of class and creed would dissolve. This has now come to be called ‘The Kanyakumari Resolve of 1892’, to serve the needy or service to poor is service to God.⁶ Humanism is a transformative practice that enlarges the boundaries of the human self, marking a profound shift from a focus on individual interests to a compassionate engagement with the well-being of others, where the concerns of others become an integral part of one’s own being.⁷ Humanism, a philosophy that prioritizes human concerns and aspirations, posits the supremacy of human reason and agency. In alignment with Protagoras’ timeless assertion, Swami Vivekananda believed that humanity serves as the ultimate benchmark, evaluating the existence, significance, and non-existence of all phenomena through the lens of human perception and rational inquiry. Taking a profound leap beyond the Greek philosopher’s musings, he declared a paradigm-shifting truth: ‘The human individual is not just a part of the universe, but the universe itself, with every person containing the entirety of existence within. I cannot know the fundamental reality because I am that fundamental reality.’⁸ In summary, Vivekananda’s humanism is deeply rooted in the spiritual and philosophical traditions of Vedanta, emphasizing the divinity within each person, the unity of religions, selfless service, and the harmonious integration of science and spirituality. His teachings continue to inspire individuals around the world in their pursuit of personal and social well-being.

Practical Vedanta

Swami Vivekananda believed in applying Vedantic principles to everyday life. As a leading exponent of Vedanta and Yoga, he embodied a humanistic vision that celebrated the divine essence within every individual and elevated service to humanity to an act of worship. Through his groundbreaking work, he introduced the Western world to the transformative power of Indian philosophies, affirming the boundless potential and inherent worth of each person. His teachings on humanism are rooted in his interpretation of Vedanta, which is a philosophical foundation of Hinduism.⁹ Vivekananda stressed the importance of self-realization and self-discovery. He encouraged individuals to look inward, understand their true nature, and strive for self-improvement to unfold their latent potentials.¹⁰ One of the pillars of Vivekananda’s thought is the inherent divinity and oneness of all human beings. He believed that recognizing this unity is crucial for achieving global harmony and peace. According to him, every individual is a manifestation of the divine, deserving of respect and dignity. He emphasized for the removal of discrimination between man and woman between one sect and another, between one profession and another. By consecrating service to the poor as a form of worship, Vivekananda created a universal platform for harmony among different faiths, as the act of selfless service becomes the great equalizer, dissolving sectarian divisions and revealing the shared humanity that lies at the heart of all spiritual traditions.¹¹ His belief in the inherent divinity in every individual reflects in his Philosophy of Vedanta which visualises the true nature of the self (Atman) is divine, and recognizing this divinity is the key to realizing one’s full potential. One of Vivekananda’s famous teachings is the emphasis on serving humanity as a way to worship the divine. He believed that by serving others and working for the welfare of society, individuals can realize their own divinity.¹² Scientifically explanations of Swamiji above propositions can be understood . Our body is a vibrant, self-communicating entity, where a constant flow of intelligence orchestrates its various functions. Notably, our immune system plays a key role in this internal conversation, eavesdropping on our thoughts and emotions through neural peptides, which serve as chemical translators, conveying our mental landscape to our physical being. Our immune system is in intimate communication with our nervous system. In fact, immune cells can even make some of the same peptides the brain makes.¹³ Thus his teachings emphasize universalism and humanism, encouraging individuals to move beyond narrow identities and work towards the betterment of humanity. His ideas promote the realization of divinity in oneself and the importance of selfless service for the greater good . The desire to do good is highest motive power in man if only we have proper

attitude of service. He remarks that we must work and constantly do well, because it is a blessing to us. That is the only way to reach perfection. The source of misery is our stubborn attachment to specific outcomes and our work's results. To transcend this, embrace the wisdom of non-attachment, permitting your actions to unfold with effortless ease, like a lotus blooming in the muddiest of waters, yet remaining unsoiled; let your mind remain a tranquil lake, unruffled by the whispers of desire and expectation. The whole gist of Swamiji's sublimation of work in our life is that we should work like a master not as a slave.¹⁴

Education and Personal Development

For Vivekananda, education was a sacred catalyst for transformative self-discovery and spiritual evolution, empowering individuals to unlock their full potential, awaken their inner strength, and realize their divine essence. He believed in holistic education that fosters character and Spirituality. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of self-realization through meditation and introspection, combined with selfless service to others (karma yoga). Vivekananda stressed the importance of education as a means of personal and societal transformation, character building and spiritual growth, which can lead to the empowerment of individuals and communities. Vivekananda advocated for the integration of scientific inquiry and spiritual wisdom. In his view, science and religion were not opposing forces, but complementary facets of human understanding, each shedding light on the mysteries of existence and together revealing a more profound truth, and their harmonious union would lead to a holistic understanding of human existence.¹⁵ He emphasized fearlessness as a key virtue and of the firm belief that individuals should be confident in their own abilities and not be afraid to face challenges in life. Education system should not only impart academic knowledge but also should foster moral and spiritual development and thereby enabling individuals to lead fulfilling lives. For Vivekananda, the noble endeavor of 'man-making' was paramount. While the religious person places faith in a higher power, the humanist invests faith in the inherent potential of humanity. When we recognize the divine essence of Brahman residing within every individual, a profound shift occurs, and corrosive emotions like hatred, jealousy, greed, and anger naturally dissolve, giving rise to a harmonious and compassionate world.¹⁶

On Self-realisation with Karma yoga

The complete renunciation of mind at an instant, is not possible for an ordinary person. Only the reading of Vedanta or scriptures does more harm than good, the essence is to keep performing one own's task by doing selfless work for others, with discrimination of mind.¹⁷ As we learn to trust and surrender to our intuition's guidance, our inner channel dilates, permitting an increased influx of life force to animate our existence, synchronizing our heart, mind, and spirit with the celestial rhythm. The cells of our body actually receive more energy and are renewed and revitalized faster. When we harmonize our physical, emotional, and mental aspects, we experience a profound sense of aliveness, and our spiritual light, once obscured, now bursts forth with renewed vibrancy, illuminating our path and presence. Our body stays young, healthy, and beautiful, and radiates vitality.¹⁸ Swamiji emphasized the need of having a broader heart and liberal mind in serving the humanity in order to channelise the innate energy of self-spiritual rejuvenation. If we want peace of mind, we shall have to serve others to the best of our ability. The evolution of spiritual practices has been marked by distinct periods, each with its own transformative approach. Austerities once reigned supreme, followed by an era of devotion and divine love, and later, a phase of philosophical introspection and renunciation, each tailored to the needs of its time. But in modern times, Swamiji emphasized, unselfish service of others, karma-yoga, would quickly bring spiritual results.¹⁹ Subhash Chandra Bose rightly said "Swamiji was a yogi of unparalleled spiritual stature, attuned to the deepest truths, who had dedicated his life to the noble pursuit of elevating the moral and spiritual fabric of his nation and humanity as a whole, embodying the highest ideals of selfless service and spiritual leadership." The intricate relationship between spiritual advancement and high moral conduct to serve humanity is sine-qua-non, as it was reflected itself in the personality of S.C. Bose.²⁰ The philosophical legacy of Vivekananda represents a masterful integration of ĀEaEkarâcârya's Mâyâvada, with its nuanced understanding of the illusory and the absolute, and the Buddha's sublime humanism, with its

emphasis on empathy and the inherent value of all beings, giving rise to a distinctive and far-reaching vision of spiritual growth and self-realization.²¹ The releasing of limiting emotions of adversary and concentrating our mind on awakening the co-creative emotions of brotherly love and to be effective in our service to humanity assures a deeper connectivity with the inner self as well as God.²²

On Nationalism

Vivekananda's nationalism is inclusive and humane, focusing on the spiritual and moral upliftment of society. He envisioned a future India with a harmonious blend of different cultures and religions. He provided a spiritual basis to nationalism, emphasizing the need for individuals to be prepared for freedom and self-rule. He believed that true freedom can only be achieved through spiritual growth and self-awareness. Vivekananda's expansive humanism had far-reaching implications, extending beyond national borders to encompass a global vision of unity, cooperation, and mutual understanding, where diverse nations and communities could come together in a spirit of solidarity, empathy, and shared human experience.²³ He championed a holistic approach to emancipation, transcending mere political activism, by fostering a distinct Indian consciousness that harmoniously coexisted with universal humanism, thereby nurturing a sense of national identity without compromising the broader principles of humanity. At the heart of Vivekananda's philosophical framework was a profound humanism that transcended territorial boundaries, celebrating the shared essence of humanity and promoting cross-cultural understanding, thereby weaving a tapestry of global harmony and solidarity.²⁴ Here it is pertinent to quote Maulana A.K. Azad who poignantly observed that humanism and nationalism are complementary facets of a single entity, inseparable and interdependent. He fervently argued that the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of civilization are unbridled by geographical constraints, national borders, or the divisive forces of race, color, or creed, existing in a realm beyond the reach of artificial barriers. They might have originated in any part of the world but they are now the common heritage of mankind and are the joint property of all countries and nations.²⁵ Swami Vivekananda's advocacy on nationalism and humanism theory too revolved round the liberal and secular outlook of Indian nationhood moving towards collective upliftment of all.²⁶

Revisiting Vivekananda's spiritual ideas offers valuable insights and practical solutions for contemporary problems, emphasizing unity, compassion, and holistic development. In today's world of globalisation and multiculturalism marked by an increasingly interconnected world, Vivekananda's vision of Vedantic cosmopolitanism offers a framework for embracing cultural diversity while recognizing our shared humanity. It encourages respect for different cultural practices and promotes global solidarity. His teachings on selfless service and ethical conduct can inspire contemporary leaders to prioritize the welfare of all people and to lead with integrity and compassion. Vivekananda's emphasis on self-realization through meditation and introspection aligns with modern practices of mindfulness and can contribute to mental well-being and personal fulfillment.

Conclusion

In today's world, marked by religious conflicts, Vivekananda's message of the essential unity of all religions promotes tolerance and understanding. His emphasis on seeing the divine in every human being can inspire a more compassionate and humanistic approach to social issues like poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Today's Modern educational systems can benefit from his vision of holistic education that integrates intellectual, physical, and spiritual development. His ideas on selfless service and leadership can inspire ethical practices in business, politics, and social activism. Vivekananda's focus on self-empowerment and social service can be a model for personal development and community engagement in addressing global challenges.

The eternal relevance of Vivekananda's Vedantic cosmopolitanism lies in its ability to promote tolerance, inclusivity, and diversity, thereby strengthening pluralism and multiculturalism in a world grappling with divisions. His respect for all religions encourages open-minded discussions and mutual respect among different faith

traditions, which is essential for global peace. Similarly, by emphasizing the divinity within each person, his philosophy advocates for social justice and equality. This perspective can inspire efforts to combat discrimination, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. Thus it can be safely said that Vivekananda's ideas are relevant in today's society, where people are often divided along narrow lines of identity. His teachings promote unity, harmony, and the realization of a higher purpose beyond individual interests and will continue to inspire individuals to work towards a more harmonious and spiritually evolved society.

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