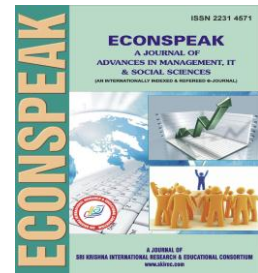




The Journal of Sri Krishna Research & Educational
Consortium

ECONSPEAK: A Journal of
Advances in Management, IT and
Social Sciences

Internationally Indexed & Listed Referred e-Journal



VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda was a great personality, contributing in various ways to the enrichment of the Indian culture. Vivekanand's philosophy of life arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses, He had also a realization that at least some of the social evils were due to the orthodoxy and superstitions prevalent in the society of the time. He had a deep conviction that this was due to a loss of faith in spiritual values. The deepest influence upon his thought is obviously of ancient Hindu philosophy- especially of the Vedanta. His idea of spirituality was not limited to any particular aspect of life, but it embraced the whole of it. He represented the very soul of Hinduism and its spiritual grandeur. His message of spiritualism contributed remarkably towards strengthening not only Hindu religion and society but also Indian nationalism. He revived Hindu spiritualism and established its superiority over other religions of the world. He also pointed out the weaknesses of Hindu religion and society. He made the Hindus realize the degraded position to which they had fallen and inspired them to regain their past glory. His contributions covered almost all aspects of life. He was particularly concerned with the spiritual Renaissance of mankind. The present paper focuses on the study of the Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of life which is for the good of the masses.

KEYWORDS: Hinduism, Spirituality, Religion, Philosophy, Life etc.

INTRODUCTION

Vivekananda's philosophy of life arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses. He had also a realization that at least some of the social evils were due to the orthodoxy and superstitions prevalent in the society of the time. He said, "**The highest use of life is to hold it at the service of all beings.**" (Works III: 84) He had a deep conviction that this was due to a loss of faith in spiritual values. The deepest influence upon his thought is obviously of ancient Hindu philosophy- especially of the Vedanta. It can safely be said that to a very great extent, Vivekananda is a Vedantist. The main body of his thought is derived from the Hindu scriptures-from the Upanishads and the Vedas. His basic belief in the essential unity of everything, that is, in the completely monastic nature of reality, owes its origin to the Vedanta. The distinction between 'an empirical point of view' and 'a transcendental point of view' that he so often makes and to which he refers time and again in order to solve certain apparent contradictions of his thought, is also borrowed from the Vedanta. It is true that Vivekananda always emphasizes the need of re-interpreting Vedanta in accordance with the demands and needs of the time; In fact, his philosophy itself is an attempt in that direction, but this remains a fact that some of the basic ideas of the philosophy of Vivekananda are derived from ancient Hindu philosophy-specially the Vedanta. In a certain sense, Vivekananda is influenced by Buddhist philosophy also. Buddha himself, even after attaining Nirvana, kept on roaming about and helping others in their struggles against suffering. Vivekananda fully recognizes the worth of such humanitarian and altruistic work. His own missionary zeal for service is influenced by this. Some of the Buddhistic ideals, like Samyak karma and Ajiva have also inspired Vivekananda a great deal.

Along with these Indian influences, he also carried, on his thought, the influence of Christianity. He was impressed by the strength of character, the soul-force that the man of the Cross possessed. He could see that it required a supreme spiritual strength to forgive the oppressor. From Christianity, therefore, Vivekananda takes up the idea of service and love. "**Blessed are they whose bodies get destroyed in the service of others.**" (Work III: 83) His conviction that man contains within him the spark of Divinity and his optimistic belief in the possibility of man's redemption contain elements that greatly resemble the Christian notion of the kingdom of God.

There were certain other influences too. For some time he was under the influence of Brahma Samaj, and it can be said that his strong feelings against the prevalent orthodox and superstitious rites were generated under that influence. Dayananda's emphasis on the indeterminate nature of reality and his practical insistence on the quality of fearlessness had left a deep mark on Vivekananda. Then, there was the Gita, with its emphasis on 'selfless work', was a source of constant

inspiration to Vivekananda. According to him, **“The Gita is like a bouquet composed of the beautiful flowers of spiritual truths collected from the Upanishads.”** (Work II: 189) **Work, work, work, day and night, says the Gita.** (Work IV: 130)

But the profoundest influence, in the light of which every other influence was remodeled and shaped, was that of his master – Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In fact, the story of the life of Vivekananda would have been entirely different, had he not come under the influence of Ramakrishna. It is said that Ramakrishna brought about a spiritual transformation in the personality and the mental make-up of Vivekananda. Swami Nikhilananda, speaking about this, says:

It was his Master who had taught him the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of God, the unity of existence and one more great thing, that is, the universality or harmony of all different religions. (53)

It is true that Ramakrishna initiated him into spiritual disciplines and meditation.

Vivekanand’s Philosophy of life: The philosophy of Vivekananda is idealist in more senses than one. Idealism may mean either idealism, or Idea-ism or Idealism as such. There is a difference between the second and the third senses of the term, although both can be example of Metaphysical Idealism. Metaphysical Idealism believes that the reality is ultimately spiritual or mental or ideal in character. Some Metaphysical idealists go on to hold that the ideal reality is of the nature of ‘Ideas’ finite or Infinite or Ideas objective and universal. Vivekananda is an idealist because he believes that the ultimate reality is essentially spiritual in character. According to him, **“It is a great thing to take up a grand ideal in life and then give up one’s whole life to it.”** (Work III: 168) He is also an idealist in the sense that he believes in the need of certain ideal values and recommends that a continuous and persistent effort should be made for the attainment of those values. His ‘idealism’ is therefore not unrealistic; idealism becomes unrealistic only when the ideal is nothing but a creation of one’s imagination. Vivekananda asserts that the ideal that he talks about is a living ideal capable of inspiring and attracting the man towards itself.

Vivekananda’s idealism is magnetic. An idealistic philosophy that is strictly monastic becomes abstract and comes to assert that reality has to be indeterminate. The One, it feels, cannot accept any distinction or qualification of any kind within it. Vivekananda very often describes reality in this fashion-in the fashion of the abstract monist. But, at many other places, the reality is given a monotheistic description and assertions about God’s characters are emphatically made. Now, one is at a loss to decide whether Vivekananda’s philosophy is strictly and abstractly monistic or monotheistic. He says, **“The monk is greater than a prince.”** (Work VIII: 89)

In fact, Vivekananda combines, in his thought, Abstract Monism and Theism. He is a Pantheist, and yet God, according to him, is personal. Consequently, we find two currents flowing almost side by side in the philosophy of Vivekananda, one that resembles Advaita Vedanta and the other that reminds one of the theism of the Bhakti-cult. Vivekananda is almost convinced that these two currents are not really two currents, that they are just two ways of looking at the Reality. But then, an attempt can be made to determine the features of both these aspects of his thought. Almost like an Advaitin, Vivekananda says that reality is one absolute Brahman. He emphasizes the monistic character of reality to such a great extent that he says that reality is one but not a 'whole'. According to Vivekananda, Absolute is perfect unity, and therefore the distinction between whole and parts completely vanishes. The concept of the absolute is arrived at by carrying the process of abstraction to its maximum possible limit, and that explains its strictly monistic character:

... God is neither outside nature, nor inside nature, but God and nature and soul and the universe are all convertible terms. You never see two things: it is your metaphorical words that have deluded you. (Works III: 214)

That is why the absolute has been described as indeterminate. You cannot properly attribute qualities to the Absolute. To attribute characters to the Absolute would amount to knowing the absolute and 'knowing the Absolute' is nothing but a contradiction-in-terms. Absolute is the unknowable, it does not admit even internal divisions. Like Sankara, Vivekananda also says that the Absolute can be described as Sat-Chit-Ananda. The concepts of Sat (existence) and Chit (consciousness) are similar to the Sat and Chit of Advaita Vedanta, but the concept of Ananda (bliss) has been greatly enriched by Vivekananda. Partly under the influence of Buddhism and partly under that of Christianity, Vivekananda makes 'love' the essential core of 'bliss', He asserts that ananda is in love.

In fact, Vivekananda believes that the religious urges and aspirations of man demand satisfaction, and that demand can be met only by a personal God. Vivekananda believes that Absolute and God are not two – which God is not a creation of Maya. These distinctions surely arise on account of ignorance or our limited ways of apprehension, but knowledge means the realization of the irrelevance of such a distinction. He says, **"The highest good is the realization of the self."** (Work VIII: 3)

This takes us to assert yet another character of God to which Vivekananda has given a unique importance. God, according to him, is a human God This assertion, far from being anthropomorphic represents a very great truth. It does not suggest that God has been cast in man's image; on the other hand, it suggests that man bears the spark of Divinity within himself. Vivekananda is conscious

that one of the great justifications of God is the fact that God is able to satisfy our urges and needs, and is able to provide to our life greater vitality and strength. Therefore, God has to be given some human attributes just in order to make communication possible. Therefore, Vivekananda says:

He has human attributes, He is merciful, He is just, He is powerful, He is almighty, He can be approached, He can be prayed to, He can be loved in return, and so forth. In one word, He is a human god, only infinitely greater than man. (Works II: 40)

But, this does not take away from Vivekananda his basic Vedantic convictions. He is convinced that properly speaking God cannot be described. Our language is inadequate to represent Him accurately. These attempts to represent the characters of God are nothing but our limited ways of trying to know the unknown. Vivekananda says:

You cannot describe Him by any language. All attempts of language, calling Him father, or brother, or our dearest friend, are attempts to objectify God, which cannot be done. He is the eternal subject of everything. (Works II: 184)

An attempt to determine the nature of the world naturally raises the question of its origin. Is the world a creation? This question becomes very significant in the philosophy of Vivekananda because Vivekananda conceives the cosmos more or less in Sankara's way. Sankara believes that in reality there has never been any creation. Creation, according to Sankara is unreal. It is true that he also comes to discuss the process of creation, but that has validity only from a lower – the empirical point-of-view.

Vivekananda tries to strike a balance between the two positions. He has to accept the basic monastic position of Advaita Vedanta, but he somehow gives to the world also a reality. God is the only real principle. It is true that in the state of realization, the distinction between the creator and the created would not exist, but for all practical purposes, creation has to be conceived as real. Creation can best be described as the expression of the creator infinite forms. Vivekananda raises the question, **"How has the Infinite – the absolute, become the finite?"** (Jnana 119-120)

Thus, the picture of the man that emerges in the philosophy of Vivekananda is an organized unity of the physical and the spiritual. Vivekananda never undermines the importance of the physical nature of man. The very fact that man is always asked to awaken his spirituality, presupposes that there is a side of man that is somewhat different from and yet akin to his spiritual nature. That is his physical nature. This uniqueness of his physical nature is also due to the presence of spirituality in him. Although Vivekananda, at least initially, does not deny reality to the physical side of man, he is convinced that this represents only his inferior nature. His real nature consists in his capacity of going beyond his physical nature. Vivekananda describes the true nature of man as Soul Force or

Atman. In his descriptions of the Atman Vivekananda has freely used even exaggerated expressions. Following the Gita, he describes the Atman thus:

It is the self, beyond all thought, one without birth or death, whom the sword cannot pierce or fire burn, whom air cannot dry or water melt, the beginning less and endless, the unmovable, the intangible, the omniscient, the omnipotent Being, that it is neither the body nor the mind, but beyond them all. (Works I: 141)

Vivekananda tries to explain the difference between soul's real nature and its apparent nature in various ways. He consistently maintains that the apparent diversity in no way affects the true nature of man. The self or soul is one all-comprehending existence, and it only appears as manifold. In fact, Vivekananda feels that it involves almost a contradiction to think of the soul's mortality. The soul is the embodiment of a forceful life; it is actually leading a powerful life. How can then it be involved in death, which is the negation of life? That is why; no individual can ever imagine his own mortality. If anybody tries to think about his own punishment, he will find the thought queer, if not entirely absurd. Vivekananda says that even to imagine my own annihilation, I shall have to stand by and look on as a witness. This inability on our part to imagine our own mortality is itself an evidence of the fact that we are after all immortal.

But, how can the soul realize immortality? What is the process of this realization? This process can be described in one word, it is yoga. What is yoga? This word normally is associated with two kinds of meanings. It may mean union or it may stand for a kind of a discipline. Vivekananda uses the term in a very comprehensive manner, and therefore, incorporates both these meanings in his sense of the word yoga. Thus, the path leading to the realization is the path of Discipline and Union. It would consist of certain disciplines – such disciplines as would enable the pursuer to have the feeling of union. These disciplines might relate themselves to cognition, or to feeling or to action or to a synthesis of all the three. Vivekananda favours the last, but his synthesis, although comprehensive, is of a particular type. He does not say that there is only one kind of yoga incorporating all these in it, on the other hand, he says that all these- the way of cognition, the way of feeling, the way of karma- are themselves different ways for the realization of immortality. They are not inconsistent with each other, they are not rival ways, and they are complementary to each other. Vivekananda is so comprehensive in his outlook that he includes even 'yoga' in the popular sense (as meditation through postural adjustment) as one of the alternative ways. Before emphasizing their synthetic or complementary characters it is better to have an idea of these ways.

Vivekananda says that renunciation is a necessary stage in the practice of Jnana-yoga. He says, **"To live in the world and not to be of it is the true test of renunciation."** (Work V: 272) Renunciation

demands getting rid of all selfishness and controlling the body, the mind and the senses, this is called vairagya. But, according to Vivekananda, there is a positive side of renunciation also; it is being impelled by nothing else but the longing to know the Brahma. This positive aspiration for knowledge is an essential condition of Renunciation. After this, concentration can be practiced. The entire energy of the body can be concentrated in the direction of knowledge. In the initial stages of concentration one can choose any form. He may even try to understand the various divine characters. In course of time this concentration will become intenser, and the individual may attain the stage of complete concentration or Samadhi, in which all kinds of distractions would melt away, in which even the distinction between the self and the Brahman, will not remain, and he will have a realization of oneness, of perfect unity. This is the Jnana-marga. This is the way of knowing God through intensity of feeling. Vivekananda says that strong emotions have the capacity to awaken and activate the potential powers of man. As such, it is possible to activate it so much that man is able to know God himself. Ordinary emotion can be converted into powerful feelings, ordinary love into Divine Love or Supreme Devotion. The Bhakti-marga is the way of pure love in which the object of love or devotion is not the finite or the limited, but the Supreme. This love will be universal love, love for all, because this will be based on the realization of oneness of everything. The first stage is the stage of external worship. The ordinary man is not able to concentrate on the subtler expressions of God, and hence he begins his worship in a gross manner. In this stage, idols and images, representations of Gods and Goddesses, incarnations -even prophets and Godmen- are all objects of devotion and worship. Idol-worship is the most popular form of external worship. Then, in the next stage, prayer and repetition of God's name, chanting of religious hymns and singing the songs of God's glory would become prominent. In the third stage, this kind of prayer is transcended, and in its place a sort of a silent meditation starts. Vivekananda says that in this final stage even this distinction vanishes, the devotee becomes almost one with the Supreme. This is a kind of inner realization – a vision of the omnipresent God. These are all stages of Bhakti, through which the devotee attains a realization and a feeling of the essential oneness of everything. Vivekananda says that this marga is the most convenient and the most popular of all the ways. It is natural to man, and it does not require any special aptitude or capacity or resources which other ways require. That is why this appears to be the easiest also. Vivekananda says:

Karma-yoga...is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and by good works. The Karma-yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatsoever. He may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation. He has got his own special aim of realizing selflessness, and he has to work it out himself. (Karma 131-132)

Such a description of karma-yoga shows that it emphasizes, first, the importance and value of the action, and secondly of unselfishness. The first emphasis shows that it does not recommend asceticism or a flying away from the world. Man has to remain in the world, in the midst of evil and good, and pain and suffering. And he has to work, and keep on working as well as he can. The second emphasis is still more important. The Karma-yogi has to work for unselfishness, which means that his work has to be non-attached. He has to work as if he is a stranger to the world, he must not allow any work to dominate over him or to bind him. Vivekananda says that one must work like a master and not like a slave. If one allows personal or selfish considerations regulate his actions, he has become a slave of his desires. One must be unattached. Vivekananda seems to be very much impressed by the Gita-Ideal of 'nishkamakarma' is that one must not expect anything in return of the action done. One must assume the permanent role of a giver, in which everything is given a free offering to the world. Vivekananda says:

He works best who works without any motive, neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the very highest ideal of Karma-yoga. (Karma 142-143)

Raja-Yoga is the way to the realization of immortality by controlling the mind and the body. This control is not like the control recommended by the Jnana-Yogi, it is controlling the mind and the body by subjecting them to certain physical and mental discipline. It is based on the pre-supposition that bondage is due to the distraction of the soul. Therefore, they must be brought under control so that the energy wasted by them may be saved and directed towards the Supreme. But, to control the body and the mind, a direct and forceful method has to be adopted. That is why in Raja-yoga a plan of physical and mental disciplines has to be worked out.

Although Vivekananda describes these four ways differently, he says that they are different ways for the realization of the same goal. These four different ways are recommended in view of the fact that men differ in their temperaments, dispositions and capacities. It is quite possible that a particular person is incapable of following the Jnana-marga, and finds the way of Devotion convenient and to his liking. Therefore, Vivekananda feels that one can choose the path he likes. If one follows any one of these paths with sincerity and earnestness, he will be able to reach the goal.

Conclusion: To conclude, his philosophy is for the good of the masses. It may safely be called a philosophy for laymen without ceasing to be one for the most elevated philosophers. He shows several paths to the ultimate reality and leaves it for everyone to choose his own. The relevance of his philosophy is sure to go on increasing in the world, which is sinking deeper into the darkness of

materialism and worldliness. It will serve as a beacon light forever in the future. The fact is that he sought to revive the core and the essential spirit of Hinduism after rooting out the evil out-growths that practically killed it. He was a social thinker and reformer in his own right. A unique nationalist, he wished to unite India with the force of religion and thus to ensure freedom for her.

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