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Relevance of Practical Vedanta Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

Sujit Debnath

Guest Teacher, Department of Philosophy, Tripura University, Tripura, India

Puja Das

Guest Teacher, Department of Education, Tripura University, Tripura, India

Abstract

In this paper we made an attempt to discuss Practical Vedanta philosophy of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and its relevance in the modern world. We all know something about the Vedanta philosophy. But Vivekananda tries to give a new form to the traditional Vedanta philosophy. The New-Vedanta of Vivekananda is Advaitic in as much as it holds Brahman as ultimate reality is one. But it is different from the advaita Vedanta of Sankaracharya. Vivekananda's New-Vedanta philosophy reconciles both advaita (non-dualism) and dvaita (dualism) Vedanta philosophy. He views that, in New-Vedanta philosophy world is Brahman, and as world is Brahman worldly activity too is sacred and all self-less work is worship. All self-less activity is social as well as spiritual. Vivekananda's New-Vedanta philosophy tries to encourage individual to perform selfless activity. It tries to bring the social equality and oneness in society. Thus, he tries to give a new form to the Vedanta philosophy which is very practical and important for the development of the mankind.

Keywords: Practical Vedanta, Self less activity, Social, Spiritual, Oneness.

Introduction: In The New-Vedanta philosophy Vivekananda tries to show that, how teaching of Vedanta can be applied in the practical life of human being. He also intended to discover that, ideal of Vedanta is valuable not only in an ideal world rather it is also valuable in the practical world. He views that, in New-Vedanta philosophy world is Brahman, and as world is Brahman worldly activity too is sacred and all selfless work is worship. All self-less activity is social as well as spiritual. New-Vedanta philosophy of Vivekananda tries to encourage individual to perform selfless activity. It tries to bring the social equality and oneness in society. Thus, he tries to give a new form to the Vedanta philosophy which is very practical and important for the development of the mankind.

Advaita Vedanta Philosophy: As Vivekananda has been very much influenced by the Sankara Vedanta or Advaita Vedanta philosophy here we are giving a short discussion on

Advaita Vedanta philosophy. According to Samkara's *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy Brahman is the ultimate reality. It is the perfect and only existence. Brahman is the essence of all things. It is attribute less and unconditioned. For him Brahman is the only reality and this world is the illusory appearance. Individual soul is non-different from Brahman. We cannot describe Brahman through thought, word and deed. The best description of it is through the negative formula of '*neti neti*' or 'not this not this'

A brief discussion on New-Vedanta philosophy: The New-Vedanta of Swamiji is also *Advaitic* in as much as it holds that Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, is one without any second. But as distinguished from the traditional *Advaita* of Sankara it is a synthetic Vedanta which reconciles *Dvaita* or dualism and *Advaita* or non-dualism and also other theories of reality. In this sense it may also be called concrete monism in so far as it holds that Brahman is both qualified or *saguna* and qualityless or *nirguna*.¹

Swami Vivekananda tries to give a new form to Vedanta philosophy which is also known as Practical Vedanta philosophy. We know that throughout his life Vivekananda has discussed about the practical aspects of spirituality. The foundation of his New-Vedanta philosophy is laid by his teacher Sri Ramkrishna (1836-1886).² Both of them emphasize upon the practical nature of Vedanta. Vivekananda believes that, theory is very good, but any theory should have the practical nature. No theory is of any value if it is impracticable.³ He therefore, believes that, the Vedanta, as a religion must be practical. Vedanta teaches us oneness among all. It vanishes all differentiation between religion and the life of the world. Swamiji suggests that, the ideals of religion must cover all aspects of our life, they must be applicable more and more in to our practice. Swamiji points out that, "The Vedanta, therefore, as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta teaches oneness – one life throughout. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life, they must enter into all our thoughts, and more and more into practice."⁴

While discussing something about the Bhagavad Gita, Swamiji views that, "... it is the best commentary we have on the Vedanta philosophy – curiously enough the scene is laid on the battlefield, where Krishna teaches this philosophy to Arjuna; and the doctrine which stands out luminously in every page of the Gita is intense activity, but in the midst of it, eternal calmness. This is the secret of work, to attain which is the goal of the Vedanta."⁵

Vivekananda holds that, Vedanta never teaches anything which is impossible. One important sentence which is also known as Mahavakya in upanishad is '*Tatvamasi*' or 'Thou art That' which means you are divine. It indicates the unity of finite soul and infinite soul. Human soul is pure and omniscient.⁶ In order to give a practical meaning to such a Mahavakya Swamiji points out that, "The Vedanta teaches men to have faith in themselves first."⁷ Different religion teaches us that, those who do not believe in God they are atheist but the Vedanta says, a man who does not believe in himself is an atheist.⁸

Vedanta teaches that, there is no darkness in the world. We the ignorant people think that darkness is there around us. Actually there is no darkness or weakness in the world. Swamiji thinks that a foolish person can think himself to be weak or impure. Swamiji argues that, "All the powers in the Universe are already ours. It is we who have put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark. Know that there is no darkness around us. Take the hands away and there is the light which was from the beginning. Darkness never existed, weakness never existed. We who are fools cry that we are weak; we who are fools cry that we are impure. Thus Vedanta not only insists that the ideal is practical, but that it has been so all the time; and this Ideal, this Reality, is our own nature. Everything else that you see is false, untrue. As soon as you say, ' I am a little mortal being,' you are saying something which is not true, you are giving the lie to yourselves, you are hypnotizing yourselves in to something vile and weak and wretched."⁹

One central ideal of Vedanta is oneness. Swamiji believes that if any particular system teaches that animals are separate from men, Vedanta entirely denies that teaching. Vedanta suggests oneness of all soul. There is no difference between the soul of man and the soul of an animal. Swamiji points out that, "The difference between our lives is not in kind. The Vedanta entirely denies such ideas as that animals are separate from men, and that they were made and created by God to be used for our food."¹⁰ Some people believe that, it is quite lawful to kill animals for our food. Swamiji entirely denies this opinion. He views that, if man's soul is immortal, then the soul of other animals are also immortal. Here the difference is only in degree and not in Kind. The amoeba and man are same; the difference is only in degree. From the standpoint of absolute, all these difference vanish Swamiji realizes that people may not be very strict vegetarian but they should feel that to kill an animal for his food is wrong. People should know that it is a cruel task when they eat meat. Swami Vivekananda says that, "Oneness includes all animals. If man's life is immortal, so also is the animal's. the difference is only in degree and not in kind. The amoeba and I are the same, the difference is only in degree; and from the standpoint of the highest life, all these differences vanish. A man may see a great deal of difference between grass and a little tree, but if you mount very high, the grass and the biggest tree will appear much the same. So, from the standpoint of the highest ideal, the lowest animal and the highest man are the same. If you believe there is a God, the animals and the highest creatures must be the same. A God who is partial to his children called men, and cruel to his children called brute beasts, is worse than a demon. I would rather die a hundred times than worship such a God. My whole life would be a fight with such a God. But there is no difference, and those who say there is, are irresponsible, heartless people who do not know. Here is a case of the word practical used in a wrong sense. I myself may not be a very strict vegetarian, but I understand the ideal. When I eat meat I know it is wrong. Even if I am bound to eat it under certain circumstances, I know it is cruel. I must not drag my ideal down to the actual and apologise for my weak conduct in this way. The ideal is not to eat flesh, not to injure any being, for all animals are my brothers. If you can think of them as your brothers, you have made a little headway towards the brotherhood of all souls, not to speak of the brotherhood of man! That is child's play. You generally find that this is not very acceptable to many,

because it teaches them to give up the actual, and go higher up to the ideal. But if you bring out a theory which is reconciled with their present conduct, they regard it as entirely practical.”¹¹

Relevance of Swamiji’s New-Vedanta or Practical Vedanta philosophy: Before reaching to the relevance of his Neo-Vedanta philosophy, we would like to say that the entire life and all philosophical thinking of Swamiji are relevant to the modern age. If any person ignorant or learned come in to contact with any part of Swamiji’s philosophy will be impressed by it, and this will bring some change in his thinking and character. If I say something about the relevance of Swamiji’s New-Vedanta philosophy, I should say that his Neo-Vedanta philosophy has given a real nature to Vedanta philosophy. He has brought Vedanta philosophy to the life of common people. In the modern world we can see wrong discussion of religion as the cause of conflict and war. Aggressiveness is coming violently among men for the religion. In this situation it is real time to memorize Swamiji’s teaching of religion where Swamiji thinks about universal religion. We have already discussed that, his Neo-Vedanta philosophy teaches all people to be equal. In the book *Practical Vedanta* we find his thinking of Universal brotherhood. So, this is the real time to follow Swamiji’s teaching for the protection as well as development of the mankind. Swamiji says that, ‘To be good and to do good unto others – that is the essence of religion.’ He believes that truth is basis of all religion therefore; he suggests that people should have the tolerance towards other religions – it may be Hinduism, Christianity, Islam or other religion.

In order to give practical form to Vedanta philosophy Vivekananda observes that, people should see God in all life. He suggested seeing God in one’s own children as well as in others. Lord is equally present to all life. He regards the whole world to be the full of Lord. He opines that, “What existed was the Lord Himself. It is He who is in the child, in the wife, and in the husband: it is He who is in the good and in the bad; He is in the sin and in the sinner; He is in life and in death.”¹² Therefore, we should give proper respect not only to human life but also to all life. We should see divinity exist in them. We should remove all cruel nature exists in us. And then only it is possible to see a developed human society in the world.

Conclusion: From the above discussion we have come to know that, Swamiji’s New-Vedanta is a living and practical Vedanta. He has tried to apply the principles of Vedanta at the level of common people. Before his time, of course Vedanta philosophy was a valuable theory. But, he is the first man who has made it practical and applied its valuable teaching in the world. At the last we should say that, this New-Vedanta philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is relevant not only in modern life but it will remain equally relevant forever.

End notes:

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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, 11.
10. Ibid, 14.
11. Ibid, PP. 15-16.
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