

PRACTICAL *VEDĀNTA* AND ITS ETHICAL MISSION*

LAXMIKANTA PADHI

For Vivekananda, *Vedānta* is the most ancient religion of the world; but it can never be said to have become popular. With all its emphasis on impersonal principles, *Vedānta* is not opposed to anything, though it does not compromise the truths which it considers as fundamental. Until 1896, the relationship between the set of ideas relating to the welfare of humanity and the theory of Practical *Vedānta* was not expanded by Vivekananda. It was during the period from 1891 to 1893 that Vivekananda discovered his personal appeal, life and mission the outcome being a planned programme of Practical *Vedānta*. Practical *Vedānta* received its fullest exposition in a series of lectures given in London in 1896. In all these lectures the basic theme was the practical relevance and ethical and social applicability of the Vedantic metaphysics of nondualism. The phrase ‘Practical *Vedānta*’ however, does not appear with any great frequency in Vivekananda’s recorded teaching.

One may say that *Vedānta* is the Upanishadic wisdom that is found at the end of the Vedas. But the question is: How can this Vedāntic wisdom become practical? *Vedānta* obviously appears very abstract to all of us in the present globalized world. It is quite natural that it should appear abstract because when we talk of ‘practicality’ in the modern world, we talk about being successful in life and how to succeed in life as a person, how to earn a lot of possessions and money. Therefore, it is the sense of achievement; sense of conquest, sense of establishing oneself in society is what we call ‘practicality’ in modern life. Vivekananda addressed this thought in his two famous lectures that was included in his ‘My Master’¹. The first was delivered in the USA and the other is in England. Addressing to the Western audience he said:

You have your own ideas of practicality and we have ours. You think it is very impractical for a person to talk about the soul and God and the other world and so on. But in India, if you go and say, ‘Come, enjoy the world, I will give you all the best things in the world’, then all the doors will be shut to you. But if you say, ‘Come, go to the top of that distant mountain and look at the tip of your nose for the rest of your life so that you can achieve liberation’, there will be thousands of people to follow you with food and clothing and all that you need. That is the kind of ‘practicality’ which we

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¹ Swami Atmapriyananda, *Harihara Tirtha Memorial Lecture* on 13 July 2007.

possess. Anything which concerns Spirit, anything which concerns God, anything which is related to the other world, we take that to be the most practicable thing in life and we want to experiment with it even to the point of death. And you are 'practical' in your own way. Suppose someone says in the West, 'I would look at my nose on top of the mountain and I am going to beg my alms', you see, all the doors will be shut to you. You may even be jailed for it. But if you say, 'Come, I want to enjoy the world', then there would be thousands of opportunities for enjoying the world. That is your practicality. That is not our practicality.

According to *Advaita* philosophy, we all are one and the cause of evil is the perception of duality. As soon as we begin to feel that we are separate from this universe then first come fear and then misery. Vivekananda claims that such self-realization leads to moral action. Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality. Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself: in loving another, I love myself. From this springs that the *Advaita* morality which has been summed up in one word: self-abnegation. The Advaitins say the individualized self which makes us different from all other beings, brings hatred, jealousy, misery, struggles and all other evils. And when this idea has been got rid of, all struggle will cease, all misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready; even to give up our lives for the lowest beings.

The ethical dimension of *Vedānta* is explained in terms of the oneness of human being's nature which provides the basis for universal love, justified by *Īśa Upaniṣad*, and the beneficial consequences of action undertaken in a spirit of detachment and selflessness, as taught by *Bhagbadgītā*. In this dimension, a doctrine of the necessity of actions was maintained but no connection is made to a necessary performance of *sevā* or service to humanity.

Vivekananda's ethical mission was geared towards revitalizing the effete, middle-class babus of Bengal and helping them gain confidence to counter the humiliation of British oppression. His famous project of 'man-making'² consisted of reminding a subject race of their true ethico-spiritual nature and their consequent

² Chowdhury, I. *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal* Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, p.135.

capacity to love. Masculinity and ethicality come together with the softer emotions³ in his statements like: ‘Be moral. Be brave...Cowards only sin, brave men never, no, not even in mind. Try to love anybody and everybody. Be a man and try to make those immediately under your care... brave, moral and sympathizing’. And again, more succinctly, ‘Try to be moral, try to be brave, try to be sympathizing.’ (*CWSV*, V: 3)

There are two different senses of ‘practical’ in Practical *Vedānta*.⁴ The first and foremost is practicality, suggests *engagement with life or the world* and hence is consistent with Vivekananda’s ethical ideal of ‘work as worship’. Secondly, it may imply direct apprehension of non-dualism in opposition to a mere theoretical understanding of it. This is evident in Vivekananda’s later lectures where he highlights that *Vedānta* is not simply an intellectual or propositional understanding that reality is non-dual but is a spiritual realization of Oneness.

The term Practical *Vedānta* occurs explicitly in an article published by *The Brahmavadin* in July 1897, which discusses the way to self conquest through purification of mind. The article refers to the great number of people ready to moderate human being’s physical suffering and asserts that mental and spiritual needs also need to be addressed through meditation⁵. The basic principle and imperative of Practical *Vedānta* is to serve humanity; to remove the sorrow and misery of others with a feeling of oneness with them. The practical nature of *Vedānta* is apparent in its claim to be more than “a merely intellectual system, devised for the practice of mental gymnastics. It is a plain and practicable path blazed by the brave, self-sacrificing pioneers”⁶. This is very much in line with the concept of practical religion. Vivekananda established a connection between the affirmation that ‘love itself is God’ and an ethical standpoint in his lecture ‘*Parābhakti* or supreme Devotion”. He argued that if we love this sum total, we love everything. Loving the world and doing it good will then come easily.”

³ V. Dalmiya, *The Metaphysics of Ethical Love: Comparing Practical Vedānta and Feminist Ethics*, SOPHIA, 2009: 48, p.222

⁴ Beckerlegge, G. *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service: A Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* Chap.12, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2006.

⁵ Anon, ‘*Practical Vedanta*’ Vol-2, No. 23, 17th July 1897 p. 271.

⁶ *Ibid*, P.272.

From 1895, references to *Vedānta* becoming prominent in Vivekananda's teaching in spite of his earlier negative responses to this philosophy. Hacker has described Vivekananda's ethical teaching as a distortion of 'traditional Advaitism coloured by exposure to positivism. Yet, for many critics, like Hacker,⁷ Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaitin principles in his theory of Practical *Vedānta* confirms that his special ethics were shaped by the progressive westernization of his ideas, achieved only at some considerable cost in his treatment of Advaitin tradition.

A theoretical conciliation between Advaitic ontological non-dualism (that transcends plurality) and morality (that makes sense only within such plurality) is brought about by distinguishing between *pāramārthika* and *vyavahārika* realms. In other words, Reality is ultimately One, but until the realization of *mokṣa*, the world of many-ness with its ethical codes is 'as real' as the terror caused by the illusory snake that is superimposed on the rope until a light is switched on.⁸ Thus, ethics is relegated to the domain of the *vyavahārika* level and Oneness to the higher *pāramārthika* level, thereby resolving the tension between *Vedānta* metaphysics and commonsense morality by plotting them at different points in the 'Order of Being.' However, Vivekananda may not be satisfied with such weak co-existence. Given the distinction of the levels of Reality, metaphysical non-dualism is not a resource for ethical reform: morality could continue to be grounded in conventional *Dharmaśāstras* because *Advaita* non-duality manifested itself at an entirely different level.⁹ However, for the kind of political resistance that Vivekananda was interested in, the metaphysical dictum of '*tat tvam asi*' needed to do real ethical work and actually motivate ethico-social change. Hence, Practical *Vedānta* tried to carry non-dualism itself 'into our everyday life, the city life, the country life, the national life, and the home life of every nation' (*CWSV*, II: 300).

In October 1895, *The Brahmavādin* included an article entitled "The Ethics of *Vedānta*' which asks for a 'foundation of ethical distinctions'. The discussion of

⁷ Hacker, P. *Philosophy and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Advaita*, edit. W. Halbfass, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, P.293.

⁸ V. Dalmiya, The Metaphysics of Ethical Love: Comparing Practical Vedanta and Feminist Ethics, SOPHIA, 2009: 48, p.222

⁹ Ibid. p.224

the question is woven almost entirely around the *Iṣa Upaniṣad*, which is said to give a clear account of ethics, acceptable equally to all the three branches of the Vedantin school of thought. Having claimed that human beings are not the mere creative of God; they are God themselves, the article affirms that it is the perception of the oneness of human nature, which is for the Advaitin the ultimate basis of universal love, and hence ethical conduct. We can find limited references in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that *Vedānta* has not neglected ethics. *The Brahmavādin* returned to social ethics in 1896 in an article entitled: 'The Social Ideal of the *Vedānta*', that touched one caste and referred to the *Iṣa Upaniṣad* and *Bhagavadgītā*.

Vivekananda's expectations of Practical *Vedānta* are mirrored at the outset by the authors writing in *The Brahmavadin*. There is concern to show that *Vedānta* offers more than the exercise in intellectual gymnastics and can cover the whole field of life. (*CSWV* II: 291). It was worked out not exclusively 'in the forest', but by individual rulers in the midst of the management of everyday affairs and *Gītā* is the best commentary upon this practical philosophy. Its practicality is seen to stem from its power to generate the realization of truth. Vivekananda locates the essence of *Vedānta* in the affirmation 'you are divine. This is oneness in which difference is a matter of degree but not of kind and in which love for ourselves means love for all, love for animals, love for everything. It is the great faith which will make the world a better place. Consequently, *Vedānta* beings with the glory of the human soul and of an ever-present reality that is concealed by ignorance but not sin (*CSWV* II: 294). Thus, everything is already within us and human beings can do anything and everything, as we are almighty. This is the first thing that those who want to be practical should learn. (*CWSV* II: 302)

Expanding on his famous slogan '*daridradeva bhava, mūrkhadeva bhava*' (The poor/the afflicted and the illiterate/the ignorant - let these be your God), Vivekananda says, 'What is more practical than worshipping here, worshipping you? 'I see you, feel you, and I know you are God' (*CWSV* II: 320-21). What is suggested here is that the transitions between 'seeing' the other, 'feeling' or loving the other, and 'knowing' the other as God, spells out the practice of Practical *Vedānta*.

Ethical systems, which take the authority from the will of a particular being revealed in a particular source, are criticized as 'partial' generalizations. Vivekananda

asserts that the monistic principle provides the basis for ethics and ventures to say that we can not get any ethics from any where else (*CWSV* II: 334). He refers to those born out of 'love and sympathy for suffering humanity in order to teach others the way, but argues that an embodied state can never be the goal of ideal from the Advaitins standpoint, because the body represents limitation (*CWSV* II: 349). The idea that loss of our little individuality will undermine morality and concern for others is dismissed as a common misapprehension (*CWSV* II: 351). He maintains that the highest ideal of morality and unselfishness goes hand in hand with the highest metaphysical conceptions (*CWSV* II: 355). Thus, the doctrines in Practical *Vedānta* might communicate an imperative to engage in what is known as the *sadhanā* of social service.

The practicality of *Vedānta* is explored entirely in terms of self realization. Though it could be argued that the selflessness engendered by self realization implicitly directs the individual to an active concern for others, no explicit connection is made between this and the very specific form of service to humanity. This is quite surprising that the theory of Practical *Vedānta* is often assumed to provide the necessary philosophical rationale for the *sadhanā* of social service, while service to humanity is held to be the practical outworking of this philosophy.

Following his return to India in 1897, Vivekananda offered a further account of his understanding of the *Vedānta* at Lahore where he stressed that "*Vedānta* is not restricted to *Advaita*". He wrote "I will go further and say that what we really mean by the word Hindu is really the same as Vedāntist" (*CWSV* III: 396). In the lectures on Practical *Vedānta* he argues that the concern of religion is not at odds with science, both are in search of unity in the midst of diversity; the theme of the *Upaniṣad* is to find an ultimate unity of things (*CWSV* III: 397). The 'That thou art' formula of *Chhāndogya Upaniṣad* is introduced to show that 'The Immanent One' is at last declared to be the same that is in the human soul'. This leads Vivekananda to conclude that *Advaita* has done for religion what modern science has done for cosmological theories namely; it has taken the universe out of the hands of an extra-cosmic deity.

Vivekananda repeated in Lahore the claim made in Practical *Vedānta* that *Advaita* and *Advaita* alone explains morality. And the scriptural reference provided as

the basis for the Advaitins is *Gītā*-13, 28: he who sees everyone in himself, and himself in everyone, seeing the same God living in all, he, the sage no more kills the ‘Self’ by the ‘self’. The root of strength and the dispeller of the weakness, according to Vivekananda, is the knowledge that the same Self is in all beings. Addressing the practicality of *Vedānta* he reduced its teaching to ‘believe in yourself first and then believe in anything else’. He lamented that one defect of *Advaita* was its being worked out too long on the spiritual plain only. Now the time has come when we have to make it practical and it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests. At this juncture his concern was to encourage all- whether a *Śūdra*, Woman or a Beggar - to work out Advaitin teachings in their everyday lives, explicitly stating that the belief in the self fostered by *Vedānta* will add the individual in commercial, intellectual and spiritual undertakings (*CWSV* III: 427).

Vedānta holds that no individual can be completely free unless every one else is also free (from oppression). In other words, we as individuals are obliged to act for a better society. Vivekananda was able to move beyond the prevalent dogmatic caste system which characterized Indian society and propose a theory of action which necessitated that each of us consciously acts towards bettering the lot of our fellow humans, if our goal is to ultimately liberate ourselves and become enlightened.

The ideas of the ethics of *Vedānta* have to be worked out in detail, and, therefore, we must have patience. As Vivekananda asserts, we want to take the subject in detail and work it up thoroughly, to see how the ideas grow from very lower ideals and how the one great ideal of oneness has developed and become shaped into the universal love; and we ought to study these in order to avoid dangers. It is feeling that works, that moves with speed infinitely superior to that of electricity or anything else. Do you feel? That is the question. If you do, you will see the Lord: It is the feeling that you have today that will be intensified, deified, raised to the highest platform, until it feels everything, the oneness in everything, till it feels God in itself and in others. The intellect can never do that. “Different methods of speaking words, different methods of explaining the texts of books, these are for the enjoyment of the learned, not for the salvation of the soul” (*Vivekaśūdhāmaṇi*, 58).

The *Vedānta* system begins with tremendous pessimism, and ends with real optimism. We deny the sense optimism, but assert the real optimism of the super-

sensuous. That real happiness is not in the sense organs, but above it; and it is in every human. The sort of optimism which we see in the world is what will lead to ruin the world is through the senses. Abnegation has the greatest importance in *Advaita* Philosophy. Negation implies affirmation of the real self. It is pessimistic as far as it negates the world of the senses, but it is optimistic in its assertion of the real world. Vivekananda says “If I am God, I am beyond the tendencies of the senses, and will not do evil. Morality of course, is not the goal of man, but the means through which this freedom is attained. The *Vedānta* says *Yoga* is one way that makes man realize this divinity. The *Vedānta* says that this is done by the realization of the freedom within, and that everything will give way to that. Morality and ethics will range themselves in their proper places”.

Any argument of Swami Vivekananda’s ethics must center on his strong nationalism articulated within a rigid binary of East and West. Since the militaristic and materialistic ‘West’ had successfully established its supremacy in India, resistance consisted in carving out a different sphere of power for the ‘East’ in its spiritual resources. But the colonial encounter had also opened up native society to being questioned by European modernity. Thus, it was important for the self-assertion of colonized subjects that the spiritual traditions they claimed as their own be capable of cleaning up the ills of poverty, caste-conflict, oppression of widows, child marriage, and the many other drawbacks in Indian society pointed out by the British. Situated in this context, Vivekananda’s project of Practical *Vedānta* is an attempt to make the abstract theory of classical *Advaita* relevant for an ‘enlightened’ ethics and social progress. To quote Vivekananda:

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 hypnotising yourselves into something vile, weak and wretched.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lectures on *Practical Vedanta* Part - I, (delivered in London, 10th November 1896.)

If we consider civilization as manifestation of divine in human beings, as Vivekananda conceived it to be, no society has made much progress so far. This is why we find that mildness, gentleness, self-control, tolerance, sympathy and so forth - the signs of a healthy civilization - have not taken root in any society on an appreciable scale, although we prematurely possess of a global village. The lack of basic necessities among the underprivileged all over the world is no less striking than the lack of morality among the educated privileged ones. For Vivekananda:

No church ever saved by itself. It is good to be born in a temple, but woe unto the person who dies in a temple or church. Out of it ... It was a good beginning, but leave it. It was the childhood place... but let it be ... Go to God directly. No theories, no doctrines. Then alone will all doubts vanish. Then alone will all crookedness be made straight... In the midst of the manifold, he who sees that One; in the midst of this infinite death, he who sees that one life; in the midst of the manifold, he who sees that which never changes in his own soul - unto him belongs eternal peace.¹¹

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¹¹ Lectures on *Practical Vedanta* Part-14, The Goal, (delivered in San Francisco, 27th March, 1900)