

Vivekananda's Goals and Virtues-I

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Swami Vivekananda and his brother disciples came to revive the Indian civilization. Every human society is shaped by its own unique set of circumstances. Each civilization has its own culturally ingrained ideologies, customs, and cultural identity. Professor Wilhelm Halbfass explains Vivekananda's mission well:

Vivekananda became one of the leading figures of modern Hindu thought and self-awareness and an exemplary exponent of Hindu self-representation vis-à-vis the West. His appearance in the West, his self-understanding, and his activities within India are all interwoven in a peculiar way: During his first visit to the West, Vivekananda became the man who made history; the most influential shaper and protagonist of the Neo-Hindu spirit.... he is committed to propagating Hindu principles beyond the borders of India and to utilizing their international recognition in his efforts to regenerate Hindu self-awareness and self-confidence.... However, science is not the central issue in Vivekananda's rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Indian tradition. It is ethics, social commitment, and national identity itself, which he tries to draw from the sources of Hindu religious and metaphysical thought. The sense of identity and social initiative that he tries to awaken in his fellow Indians must not be a borrowed or derivative one. It must coincide with a sense of rediscovery and reacquisition of their own heritage ... They only have to readopt and transform into social action that which was always in

their possession. Their Vedanta must become a 'Practical Vedanta.'¹

Vivekananda is what is called a 'Grand Theorist' working more on the large-scale macro level rather than on the micro level, striving to be as broad and compressive as possible. Nothing he did was trivial. His ideas were characterized by depth and originality, broadness of scope, and the practical and theoretical importance and meaningfulness of the material he covered. When dealing with the particulars, he often does so in relation to a larger system of ideas of which they are a part. He was working in the direction of a 'Grand Unified Theory of Religious Philosophy'. His goal was to synthesize the three systems of Vedanta, each of the four yogas, and to some extent the six systems of Indian philosophy (*Darshanas*) into an internally coherent and consistent logical system of ideas. Unity, synthesis, and integration are the prevailing themes of Vivekananda's philosophy, religion, and social theory. In seeking unity, Vivekananda sometimes employs a system of logic that is akin to Aristotle's principle of locating a genus that connects two sub-classes or categories. He integrated elements that appear to be incompatible by identifying a higher order of generalization. Following Vivekananda's 'Dialectical Method', the higher aspects of the thesis and antithesis do not contradict but complement one another; in their totality they yield a broader understanding. The approach he employs is integrative (*sāttvic*) not destructive (*tāmasic*), striving for a universal

ideology, and a higher level of systematization. Buddha taught the 'Middle Way' or the 'Middle Path,' and the eminent Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) prescribed the 'Golden Mean' as a balance between two extreme forms of action. We might think of Vivekananda as following the 'Middle Path' not exactly as the Buddhists describe it, but in the sense that he often took the middle ground (*sāttvic*) between various points of view seeing the good in each. Knowledge is gained through unification, i.e., combining ideas and through division, i.e., breaking the concept into subgroups. He did not follow the opposite of synthesis which is the either/or methodology, where one accepts one view and then must reject the other. A false dichotomy is created where the options are presented as mutually exclusive. This practice has often been followed in the past.

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn (1922-96) came out with the highly influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that introduced the idea of a 'Paradigm Switch'. When a breakthrough occurs as Kuhn states, the success of the new paradigm draws people to it and a widespread consensus is formed bringing about collective progress. Traditionally the worth of a paradigm (such as the teachings of Swami Vivekananda) is judged in relation to five factors: correspondence to reality, internal consistency (within itself) and external consistency (in relation to other ideas), broadness of scope (importance and meaningfulness of the paradigm), easiness to comprehend, and pragmatic fruitfulness for further development. The Vivekananda paradigm has implications not only for India, but also for the whole world. According to Kuhn, a shift in paradigm can lead to a difference in one's experiences. Hence, some things that were considered vitally important in the older tradition might disappear, while other things

that were looked upon as trivial might become significant in the new tradition. The older terms and concepts are still used, but in a modified way taking on new meanings.²

Basic Themes

Vivekananda had an inner-directed personality in that he had the courage and self-confidence to act according to the dictates of his inner being, and not out of external pressure to conform to the established beliefs and norms of society. With a strong sense of mission, guided by his own conscience and values, he was willing to take risks and was willing to go against the grain if necessary. He motivated his monastic associates in order to create a high level of social cohesion. In this way his fellow monastics experienced a high *esprit de corp*, meaning a strong positive feeling concerning the welfare of each other; a high degree of consensus and an awareness of a common purpose and collective goals; a sense of belonging and intense group loyalty, and willingness to participate. Of all of the cities in the world outside of India he was internally directed by the Lord to spend most of his time in Chicago, Boston, New York, London, Los Angeles, and San Francisco and this is where the Vedanta Society in the West has developed best since that time.

Like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Jiva Goswami, and other Indian spiritual teachers that preceded him, Swami Vivekananda worked on two levels, the theoretical and the practical. The teachings of these seer-philosophers were more than academic, since they taught a powerful spiritual message leading to liberation (salvation). For them Vedanta is primarily a spiritually liberating path and only secondarily a metaphysical description of ultimate reality. The first level is that of 'pure reason', creating a body of theory, to supply new ideas concerning the nature of Brahman

(God), the cosmos, the four yogas, etc. The second area is that of ‘practical reason,’ to aid people in transforming themselves into better individuals. Their new vision of reality must be able to possess people’s minds and hearts, to exhibit a transforming power in their lives both in consciousness and behaviour. Vivekananda came not only to describe the world (theoretical or pure reason), but to change it (practical reason).

Consequently, he often uses strong motivational language to inspire people. Never dull, he wrote with great vigour, enthusiasm, and charm. He stated, ‘No amount of reasoning which I can give you will be proof to you, until you have demonstrated it for yourselves.’³ Theoretical Religion or Pure Religion like Pure Science is devoted to the investigation of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. With its emphasis on philosophy it is problem-solving in the theoretical domain. By comparison, Applied Religion like Applied Science is concerned with practical problems and their applications. It is problem-solving in the practical sphere. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Math. 5.8). Most Christians take this to mean they will see God after they die. As an example of his practical approach Vivekananda emphasized that they should strive to see God in this life.

With brilliant insight, Swami Vivekananda knew which people to select for the job and he skilfully motivated that person to take over the responsibilities and give a hundred percent effort. For example, he got Alasinga Perumal to initiate and edit the *Brahmavadin* (1895), twenty-four-year old B. R. Rajam Iyer to edit the *Prabuddha Bharata* (1896), and Swami Trigunatitananda to establish the *Udbodhan* (1899). While Vivekananda might offer occasional advice, he allowed other people great freedom in performing their tasks.

There are some differences between a motivational statement and a purely logical one. A perlocutionary act is a speech act used to persuade the listener to behave in a certain way. While in prior centuries the logical aspects of language were stressed, in the 20th century more attention is devoted to the pragmatic dimensions of language. This includes ‘attention to information about the context in which a speaker made the utterance and how those conditions allow the speaker to express one proposition rather than another. This strongly contextual element of pragmatics often leads to special attention to the goals that a speaker might achieve by uttering a sentence in a particular way in that context and why she might have done so. Thus, what a speaker means in saying something is often explained by an emphasis on the speaker’s intentions: to reveal to the hearer that the speaker wants the hearer to respond in a certain way and thus to get the hearer to respond in this way.’⁴ From a praxis point of view a statement should be understood in terms of the action-oriented intentions of the speaker.

The French Nobel Prize winning author Romain Rolland (1866-1944) made this statement about Vivekananda: ‘His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years’ distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!’ In his speeches and writings Vivekananda transmitted the highest spiritual knowledge, in a way that it would do the maximum amount of good. Consequently, when one internalizes the Swami’s thoughts, they become centres of

power that have the ability to change the person's behaviour and perception of the world.

Vivekananda was constructive, not destructive and consequently he introduced many changes into modern Indian religious thought. Swami Trigunatitananda initiated the Bengali *Udbodhan* journal under the direction of Swami Vivekananda who told him, 'In the *Udbodhan* we must give the public only positive ideas. Negative thoughts weaken men.... In language and literature, in poetry and the arts, in everything we must point out not the mistakes that people are making in their thoughts and actions, but the way in which they will gradually be able to do these things better. Pointing out mistakes wounds a man's feelings.'⁵ At the Parliament of Religions in 1893 Vivekananda stated, 'To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.'⁶ In the intellectual realm also a new creative idea often occurs as an expansion (not a full denial) of a prevailing idea by adding more elements to it to make it more compressive. In the realm of ideas what we often have is an approximation of the facts and with each discovery we get closer to the truth. Since there are degrees of truth, all of the major religions of the world should not renounce their positive ideas from the past, but expand on them.

Traditional religion should be supplemented by one that is inspired, rational, scientific, and innovative. Vivekananda stated, 'Why religions should claim that they are not bound to abide by the standpoint of reason, no one knows. If one does not take the standard of reason, there cannot be any true judgment, even in the case of religion.' When interpreting Vedanta in new ways, Vivekananda was able to take advantage of the many centuries of accumulative knowledge that was discovered in India and the West between the Medieval

period and the late nineteenth century. Vedantic ideas must be made compatible with this new knowledge drawn from other fields, and with the life events and situations that form a part of our modern world. Similarly, Shankara was influenced by religious philosophical ideas that were not known in the Upanishadic age. Rethinking these concepts, Vivekananda was able to provide a more comprehensive philosophical foundation for Vedanta. Most importantly, Vedanta has been greatly expanded to become inclusive rather than exclusive. A complete explanation takes into account as many perspectives as possible and attempts must be made to integrate and synthesize them. In the past the religions of the world made the mistake of rejecting too much and consequently they worked from too limited a perspective. In the Global Age the proper method is a spirit of cooperation and integral thinking, not dogmatic 'Conflict Theory', where one set of ideas is considered true (viewed from a limited standpoint) and everything else false. Considering the relationship between the sacred and the secular, *tamas* is one of conflict, *rajas* of competition, and *sattva* of cooperation. Vivekananda stated, 'If you want to help the world, do not condemn it. Do not weaken it more.' 'Some say that if man did not fight with man, he would not progress. I also used to think so; but I find now that every war has thrown back human progress by fifty years instead of hurrying it forwards.'⁷

In his lectures in the West, he tended to concentrate on the eternal principles, and generally had little to say about the details of contemporary politics, sports, entertainment, etc. He knew most of this was temporary and quickly forgotten. Unlike most people Vivekananda would study the same phenomena from many different standpoints. He was able to combine intuition (or inspiration) by means of a sudden, direct, and

valid conception of a new idea; reason by a consistent logical process of inductive, deductive, analytical, and synthetic cognition; and verification through empirical evidence.⁸ This is especially important in the Modern Age. Consequently, there is a tremendous scope to his teachings. World literacy rates were only 12% in 1820 and rose to 86% in 2016.⁹ Vivekananda realized this future trend would necessitate a more rational approach to religion.

In his writings and lectures he taught the highest philosophical truths to the people. Vivekananda made every attempt to make abstract religious philosophical concepts living realities, as concrete and understandable as possible. He performed the extraordinary feat of presenting Advaita Vedanta in a way that Westerners untrained in philosophy could have some idea of what he was saying. This is just the opposite of some philosophers who make every effort to express their ideas in an abstract (and often ambiguous) language as much as possible. One problem Vivekananda wanted to avoid is that in some areas of study it is difficult for educated people in other areas to understand their new ideas, one reason being that they purposely create a highly specialized list of new terms that most people are not familiar with. Though he spoke and wrote on the highest level, to inspire people Vivekananda used a charming, easy to read, and delightful literary writing style, because he knew that dry intellectualism would inspire only a few people to change their way of life. His writings are deep and follow a logical order. This is the idea behind writing a successful textbook. It should convey the highest ideas yet be understandable to as many educated people as possible.

For example, in connection with translating Sanskrit books into German, he advised Paul Deussen (1845-1919), a

Professor of Philosophy at Kiel University and the leading Indologist in Germany, that 'clearness of definition was of primary, and elegance of diction of very secondary importance.'¹⁰ The renowned Harvard psychologist-philosopher William James wrote to Sara Bull on August 2, 1900, 'I have just been reading some of Vivekananda's Addresses in England, which I had not seen. This man is simply a wonder for oratorical power.'¹¹ In 1897, when Swami Vivekananda resided in India, William James, Josiah Royce, Arthur Lovejoy, C. Everett, and others sent him a letter praising his work and stating, 'It is our hope that you will be able to return to us, in which event we can assure you the cordial greetings of old friends and the certainty of continued and increasing interest in your work.'¹²

In relation to the study of Vivekananda's idea there are two levels of hermeneutics (interpretation). The first deals with the meaning of what Vivekananda said and wrote. The second analyzes the implications of his writings and how they relate to other people's ideas and concepts. Following the latter approach, Vivekananda's thoughts possess the qualities and potentialities to develop into a vast ideological system that is meaningful, practical, and important. They meet a genuine need on the part of modern world society, embodying a universal and perennial reality and systems of values.¹³ Furthermore, they are related to the higher universal meanings, values, and norms of humanity. The implications of his ideas will self-unfold even more when they are significantly related to other existing higher-order conceptions. His ideas are the foundation, but the added on superstructure will combine his theories with those already in existence. There will be a quantitative and qualitative accumulation of the unfolded meanings of the thoughts he presented. This will stimulate the unfolding of their potential by

bringing into the open that which was hidden, and contribute to their development and growth. The result will be a system of ideas that are integrated, generalized, extended, and diversified. A multitude of specific ideas will expand into more highly generalized basic principles.¹⁴ All forms of higher knowledge are always in process and unfinished, open to further discoveries and development.

A recurrent theme is Vivekananda's Vedantic Humanitarianism aimed to help the poor and lift them up. He told an Indian interviewer in Madras, 'I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them.' 'Can you raise them? Can you give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature? Can you become an occidental of occidentals in your spirit of equality, freedom, work, and energy, and at the same time a Hindu to the very backbone in religious culture and instincts?'¹⁵

Federico Mayor (Zaragoza) from Spain, the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1987-99) mentioned in 1993 the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897, with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Three remarkable similarities were 'commitment towards universalism and tolerance', 'concern for the poor and destitute', and 'his preoccupation for human development with education, science, and culture as instruments for such development.'¹⁶

There are an amazing number of similarities between the humanitarian social ideas presented by Swami Vivekananda and those later taught by Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928-2024) and the contemporary Peruvian Christian Liberation theologians. Common themes are: allowing oppression to exist is immoral, to go to the poor, the oppressed people will help themselves, emphasis on practical applications, and these ideas are supported by the religious scriptures.¹⁷

T. K. N. Unnithan, Indra Deva, and Yogendra Singh relate that according to the scriptural tradition of India, 'A scholar or a thinker did not claim that he was saying anything new; he only claimed to be interpreting the *Vedas* or some other works which themselves were supposed to be based on the *Vedas*. Thus, such a genius as Shankaracharya expounded his philosophy through an interpretation (*bhāshya*) of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.'¹⁸ Since Vivekananda seldom claimed to be teaching anything new, the originality of his thoughts has sometimes gone unrecognized. For example, when he came up with an original thought, he did not give the idea a special label as, 'The Theory of' or 'The Principle of' that would be attached to its name. Possibly, when an Indian discovers something new they tend to say it is an old idea, and when a Westerner discovers an old idea they claim it is new. Indian philosophers tend to emphasize tradition and continuity in creative and critical thought, while Westerners stress innovation and new and novel ideas. Vivekananda wrote to Alasinga, the editor of the *Brahmavadin* Journal on 12th January, 1895, 'My name should not be made prominent; it is my ideas that I want to see realised. The disciples of all the prophets have always inextricably mixed up the ideas of the Master with the person, and at last killed the ideas for the person.'¹⁹

In many fields Vivekananda is a bold thinker who did not accept some of the prevailing Western ideas. To give some examples, in the field of history he vehemently criticized the 'Aryan Invasion Hypothesis' and he realized that the then popular doctrine of linear historical progress is too optimistic about the future of life on earth. In psychology he rejected the ideas that the unconscious mind contains only negative thoughts; that most aspects of character are formed in childhood rather than in prior lives; and he emphasized the superconscious mind and importance of thought vibrations. In philosophy and religion he opposed the idea that the mind originates as a blank tablet, *creatio ex nihilo*, and that the world had a beginning in time; and taught that miracles are possible working through laws of nature unknown to modern science. Members of the secular religion of Scientism cannot understand the levitation of Joseph of Cupertino or the mystic experiences of Sri Ramakrishna because they do not realize the limits of their knowledge. In physics he presented a scientific *pralaya* theory that explains events occurring before the singularity-big bang, implying that a total physical destruction of the universe does not mean that the universe or space and time are nonexistent at a subtler realm. In biology he criticized the inheritance of mental characteristics and taught that superior mental personality, and character traits (giving the examples of Buddha and Jesus) could not be explained by heredity or environment.

Principles are abstractions unless they are manifested through a personality. Vivekananda was *the personification* of his ideas. For new ideas to carry a conviction they must be personified. He showed that Vedanta could be lived and how it could be lived.²⁰

As Reverend Hugh Haweis (1838-1901), the prominent Anglican leader in England, noted, 'Vivekananda, the popular Hindu monk, whose physiognomy bore the most striking resemblance to the classic face of the Buddha ... This remarkable person appeared in England in the autumn of 1895, and although he led a very retired life, attracted numbers of people to his lodgings, and created everywhere a very deep impression. He seemed completely indifferent to money, and lived only for thought. He took quite simply anything that was given to him, and when nothing came he went without, yet he never seemed to lack anything; he lived by faith from day to day, and taught Yogic science to all who would listen, without money and without price.'²¹ They were good friends during the 1895-96 period when Vivekananda resided in London. Vivekananda lived not for himself, but to benefit others. He sacrificed his life for this one ideal.

If in his Second Coming, Vivekananda chooses to be an intellectual, he will be aided by the fact that: 1) after he passed away in 1902 there was an intellectual explosion in every major area of intellectual thought, 2) after 1902 a great deal of ancient knowledge was uncovered, and 3) some of the lectures (and new ideas) he presented were not recorded.

Four of Vivekananda's sources of knowledge are: First, what he learned from significant individuals. Swami Medhananda and Gayatriprana have pointed out that Sri Ramakrishna was the person who influenced Vivekananda the most. Ramakrishna personally trained him so he would be guided by his essential ideas. Second, Vivekananda sought out the prevailing ideas of the times by reading the available books and memorizing the encyclopedia. Third, Vivekananda acquired

much knowledge from the external environment. For example before he came to the Parliament of Religions he found out about the present state of India by travelling around the country, and in the United States he learned about the importance of organization. Vivekananda added a fourth way of acquiring knowledge mentioned by Sister Christine (1866-1930) in her memoirs, 'He told us that usually before a lecture he heard a voice saying it all. The next day he repeated what he had heard.'²² This phenomenon was also indicated by Ida Ansell (Ujjvala, 1877-1955).

In January 1900, Vivekananda stated at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, California, 'Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live?'²³ The word 'religious pluralism' has in many cases replaced the original phrase of 'religious toleration'.

Along this line, in 2006 Harvard professor Todd Pittinsky coined the term 'Allophilia' from Greek roots, meaning 'love or like of the other'. He did so because he was unable to find an antonym for prejudice in any dictionary. Pittinsky noted tolerance is not the opposite of prejudice, but is a midpoint between prejudice and positive intergroup relations.²⁴ The term 'Allophilia' refers to a positive attitude or affinity towards people from different cultures, ethnicities, religions, or social groups. It is an inclusive attitude that involves a genuine respect, appreciation, and empathy for individuals who belong to other backgrounds. Positive interactions and meaningful connections are encouraged with people from diverse communities. It plays a crucial role in promoting social harmony, unity, and cooperation among these people. Cross-cultural exchange and learning allow people to broaden their perspectives by gaining new insights. Fostering an appreciation for diversity, 'Allophilia' promotes understanding on a global level and intercultural communication.²⁵ In a globalized world 'Allophilia' is necessary to avoid mass destruction. ■

(To be continued)

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