

Spread of Vedanta in the West Coast : Challenges and Possibilities

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Today's topic has three parts—Swami Vivekananda, the spread of Vedanta in the West Coast, and Vedanta. Let me take up the West Coast first. Though I do not want to burden you with lots of statistics, some are essential and relevant to our topic.

Swami Vivekananda, during his two visits to the West, travelled through the U.S.A. extensively, but it was only in the second visit that he went to the West Coast and visited California. West Coast is a very big one where we have Western Washington, Oregon, and then California. Swamiji visited California only, the southern West Coast you can say. He stayed mainly in Los Angeles and San Francisco bay areas, and a few surrounding places.

Swamiji, in his second visit to the West, reached London on 31 July 1899 and remained there till 16 August. He reached the American shores on 28 August and remained in the East Coast till 29 November. Then he moved to California on 3 December, 1899 and remained there up to 29 May, 1900. So roughly he stayed there for six months and delivered 79 lectures, apart from many parlour talks, morning talks and evening talks. As we all know, the subjects he dealt with did rotate round India, Indian civilization, its culture, religion, and ultimately, the unity of all.

Swami Vivekananda knew that his life was short. So he wanted to deliver his message as early as possible—the message for the West as Buddha had a message for

the East. That was in his mind. Therefore he poured out his heart in the southern West Coast of U.S.A. to be precise, and sowed the seeds of the future Vedanta movement which is now flowering and spreading though sometimes unperceived. Swamiji often used to say the dew drops fall on flowers unperceived, unheard, unseen, but they help beautiful roses to bloom.

When Swamiji returned to India for the first time he made India his centre. Similarly, when he went to the U.S. the first time he made its East Coast his centre. In the same vein we can say the West Coast turned out to be his centre during his second visit. Therefore, the title of the talk is justified.

Swami Vivekananda's universal teachings are working in the American society in many ways, though sometimes their source and roots are not perceived, and perceptible. Once, Swami Satprakashanandaji was asked: 'Will Vedanta take roots in the West?' He said: 'Yes, but the source may not be recognized.' Swami Vivekananda wanted to be 'a voice without form'. His matchless Master Sri Ramakrishna discarded fame as droppings of a crow. Thus both were not bothered about their names. They loved the whole humanity and preached whatever was good for the world without bothering about their names and fame.

Then, the question is, should we also not bother to find out its source? I think the effort to find out the roots are essential for

two reasons. First, to stop the tendency to heap rubbish on India and on its religion by some Western forces. They seem to preach the best part of the teachings of Vedanta in a manner as if they have made these discoveries. This is exactly happening. The second reason for our effort to find out the roots is to maintain the purity of the teachings for the welfare of the world. I am happy to acknowledge that some groups, both Indian and Western, are doing the first part to show that these essential teachings are from *Sanātanadharmā*. Our effort therefore should be for the second part, i.e. to try to keep the purity of the teachings so that they are not distorted due to the intermixing of other thoughts and thus becoming an instrument of misleading the society. These life-giving thoughts are not easy to appreciate and hold on to because it requires penance—*tapasyā*. The *Mundaka Upanishad* (3. 1. 5) says, ‘*Satyena labhyah tapasā hi eshah ātmā samyag-jnānena brahmacaryena nityam*’—‘The bright and pure Self is attainable through truth, complete knowledge and continence practised constantly.’ So you see, cultivating these divine qualities are not easy. Therefore some people should be there to cultivate such qualities and hold fast to the unadulterated truth.

What is happening in the Western world is that some institutions are flowering and growing very first, although, in fact, they are commercial establishments. We have to keep our distance from them, and here we have a pivotal role to play. Swami Satprakashananda was right when he used to say that it is well-nigh impossible to trace in how many ways the Indian and Vedantic teachings are being used in the West, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. When I was studying this phenomenon I found even terms like ‘vegetarianism’ have found a place in

Vedantic teachings in the West. There is a group that is trying to inculcate other ‘Indian’ values. I know a few psychologists who advise their clients on the basis of Patanjali’s *Yogasūtras*, but they never mention the source lest people discard and do not follow their advice. Therefore I say sometimes they do it intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. In the West that is the practice which is not very uncommon.

Before delving into the second part of our discussion, namely Swami Vivekananda, I would like to quote a verse from the Shankara’s *Vivekacūdāmani* or the crest jewel of spiritual discrimination. In Verse no. 37, Ācārya Shankara says,

*Shāntā mahānto nivasanti santo
vasantavallokaḥitam carantah /
Tirnāh svayam bhimabhavārnavam
janānahetunān anyān api tārayantah //*

—‘There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever.’

Swami Vivekananda is a perfect example of such a noble soul who had experienced the scorching heat of this relative world beset with numberless difficulties. But such wise souls—they cross these difficulties. They go beyond this terrible ocean of births and deaths. Such souls have no personal axe to grind. It is only for the welfare of the world that they roam about like spring air to spread the life-giving teachings for the good of the society, for the welfare of all people. When such great souls do something, they do it from such a higher and subtle plane that we fail to understand it.

We do not know why they have done it because it is very subtle. Say, this building of the Institute. We can see it. But we cannot

see those who worked on it, who planned it and executed it, and also the thought behind it. So when such great souls do something for the welfare of the society, we cannot see how they do it, and the thoughts behind it. Why? Because it is very subtle. Therefore, to understand Swamiji's mental attitude to help the world, one should meditate deeply on his mind. One day, when he was in the Thousand Island Park, Swamiji said to his students and admirers: 'Let us meditate on the heart of the lion.' That is to say, the lion's strength and valour. We should also meditate on Swamiji. What thoughts he had? How he struggled to deliver his message to the world and how his efforts were crowned with success? I would like to request you to feel one with that great teacher, the orator, the compassionate heart of the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna who spread his message worldwide. Let us feel the vastness, the greatness, the majesty of that regal character, his loftiest thoughts and his compassionate love for all.

Buddha also felt that this world is parched. Sri Ramakrishna too felt it. But they did not only feel, they did something concrete for the society. To understand their minds you are to meditate on their minds. So let us see who was Swami Vivekananda. He was not an ordinary mortal; he was 'a voice without a form'. In his own words, he had touched the feet of God, Sri Ramakrishna, a realized seer who saw and actualized the unadulterated truth. Moreover, he got a command, a charter, from God that he will have to teach humanity. 'Naren will teach'—Sri Ramakrishna wrote on a piece of paper. So, you see, Swamiji was not an ordinary mortal. According to Sri Ramakrishna, he was a *dhyānasiddha*, *nityasiddha*, *ishvarakoti*, one of the seven rishis, who belonged to the non-dual realm. He also mentioned that Narendra was comparable to a huge fish, a big container, a thousand-

petalled lotus, a boy with eighteen extraordinary qualities one of which had the power to make a person world-famous. Not only that, in the Cossipore Garden house, Sri Ramakrishna poured himself into his chosen disciple. So actually it was Sri Ramakrishna himself who preached in the West, who spread Vedanta in the West in the form of Swami Vivekananda.

In fact, Vivekananda was an idea personified, a principle encased in a form, as it were. Mother India produced him to disseminate and distribute her spiritual wealth to the entire world for its welfare. Swamiji said, 'That I went to America was not my doing or your doing; but the God of India who is guiding her destiny sent me, and will send hundreds of such to all the nations of the world. No power on earth can resist it'.

It is true. He was a vehicle for disseminating Indian culture and religion. What he did? Mere lecturing? Or spreading the soul-stirring message of Vedanta? In his own words, 'If there were another Vivekananda, he would have understood what Vivekananda has done!' In fact, he shook the foundation of this world—the world of thought. Actually, the world is nothing but thought. What it is that we see? It is our study, our reading of the outside and then we project everything out of it. For example, I am seeing you. By seeing you I am reading your nature and then projecting.

Thought is subtle. Even in the West Swamiji said that the Western culture has advanced itself by cohorts of armies, but the East is different. It spread out of love. Love is subtle, while physical power and strength are limited and the time will tell which one is stronger.

He said in another place, if survival of the fittest is the rule, then India is the strongest because it has survived the vicissitudes of so many calamities, so many

difficulties in every age. So India must be stronger than any other nation. Where are the Greeks now? Gone from the face of the earth. Where the Romans are now? It seems as if they have disappeared from the face of the earth. By contrast, India is shining, getting stronger and stronger even today. It is the victory of mental strength, the subtle power.

What Swami Vivekananda did is difficult to assess, as he was not different from Sri Ramakrishna, an Incarnation of God. In the *Gītā* Sri Krishna says,

*Janma karma ca me divyam
evam yo vetti tattvatah /
Tyaktvā deham punar-janma
naiti mām eti so 'rjuna // 4. 9 //*

—‘O Arjuna! He who thus understands the truth about my embodiment and My deeds—he, on abandoning his present body, is not reborn; he attains to Me.’

Sri Krishna says in the *Gītā* that He has no work in this world but still He works. He is birthless, yet He takes birth, as it were. If someone can understand this truth rightly he will have no rebirth. But it is difficult to understand this truth. So we have to meditate on Swamiji’s life in order to understand what he did and how he did. To his critics, his exhortations and teachings may not sound that great; rather they may appear simplistic; but what a challenge Swamiji took to convey in simple language the loftiest philosophy that can be understood by common man who have no idea about spirituality and yet it should be enough on which the pundits could write volumes. How difficult the task was can be understood by only those who have tried to do so.

In our scriptures you find endless ideas and in our society so many kinds of rituals, which apparently seem meaningless. But Swamiji found meaning in them and presented their significance in such a way

that it attracted the savants. Rabindranath said: If you want to know India, study Vivekananda. In Vivekananda everything is positive and nothing negative. The statement is absolutely true as Swamiji put even the negative ideas in such a way that it seems that they are relevant even today. That was his genius.

The real teacher has two qualities. First, he should have mastery over his subject. Secondly, he should know the difficulties and limitations of his students. He should also know how to overcome those difficulties. Swami Vivekananda knew all the difficulties because he himself struggled and went through them in his own life. That was why he could speak so lucidly. A real teacher has to come down to the level of his students so that they can understand what is taught. Even an ordinary teacher faces these challenges while teaching secular subjects. Swamiji, a knower of Brahman, also knew our difficulties. So he came down to our level of understanding and used the language and phrases that we are familiar with and understand. However, one thing must be remembered. Swamiji far excelled the ordinary teacher because he taught *adhyatmavidyā*, or the science of spirituality. In the *Gītā*, the Lord says,

*Rājā-vidyā rāja-guhyam
pavitram idam uttamam /
Pratyaksha-avagamam dharmyam
susukham kartum avyayam // (9. 2)*

—‘It is a sovereign science and a profound mystery, supremely sanctifying, demonstrable by experience, and yielding imperishable results; it is also easy to perform and is in agreement with moral law.’

So you see the importance and status of the most subtle knowledge that Swamiji taught us. It was his genius that enabled him to teach this *vidyā* in a very lucid and

comprehensible ways. And he made *logic* his tool to convince us, to convey the teachings. But he shunned the worship of logic as the Westerners do. Generally, they cannot go beyond logic. But Swamiji was a person who had taken the help of logic but remained unbound by logic.

Another grand feature of Swamiji's teaching is that he made a great departure from the teaching of the *Gītā* which says,

*Na buddhi-bhedam janayet
ajñānām karma-saṅginām /
Joshayet sarvakarmāni
vidvān yuktaḥ samācāran // (3. 26)*

—‘An enlightened person should not create confusion in the minds of ignorant people (by his conduct). Himself working with equanimity, he should made them interested in all activities.’

That is to say, do not destabilize those who are attached to this world and strike out at their childlike simplicity. But Swamiji thought otherwise. He was against this teaching. He said, we ought to uplift those who do not understand; we have to help them more than others. So he came down to our level to teach the loftiest philosophy. His teachings are as effective and unfailing as the arrows of Lord Rāma. They are also fascinating because he was a seer—truth personified. He gave us nothing but the truth because he lived those ideas. It is not theory. Again, he saw his Master and watched how he practised and lived those ideas. Therefore what he taught was natural. He taught the truth which is universal, like the sun which anyone can recognize and find convincing. Unfounded intellectual gymnastics is not truth, however convincing it may look like. That is why when we read Swamiji's words, they go straight to our heart. We do not need the help of anything to see the sun. The sun itself is self-illuminating and effulgent. As Swamiji says, ‘*Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to Truth or die.*’

Now, Swami Vivekananda taught various Vedantic subjects during the short span of his stay in California. The subjects he had taken up ranged from spirituality to history, from lofty perennial philosophy to story-telling, and, of course, Indian people, their customs, practices, and the spiritual heritage came up in his discourses again and again.

The main thing that he expounded was the sublime teachings of the Upanishads and the *Gītā*—in short, Vedanta which focuses on the divinity of man and the unity of the souls. These apart, he taught Rāja-Yoga, the science of controlling the mind, and developing its power and possibilities through concentration and meditation. He also taught about *Karma* (work) and its secret, *Bhakti*, the religion of love and devotion, the ideas of universal religion and the claims of Vedanta, the Reality and Its shadow among other things. Swamiji saw clearly that we have four avenues. We have hands to work, the brain to understand, the mind to concentrate, and also emotion. So, the universal religion, he explained there, should be such that it will support all the four avenues for our emancipation. So he preached Karma Yoga, Rāja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and also Jñāna Yoga. Swamiji used to ask that if the whole blood goes to one's head or feet, can we call him a healthy person? He said, no. The blood should be equally distributed throughout the body. Therefore all the four yogas are to be practised. Only then our hands will be strong enough to work, we will be able to manipulate our will, strengthen our feelings and concentrate more on something we think most valuable.

Then Swamiji taught the Vedas, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata*, narrated the stories of Jadabharata and Prahlād. He also discussed the doctrine of re-incarnation, laws of life and death. Christ's message, history of the Aryan race, and made a comparative study of Vedanta and

Christianity. Since the abstract ideas of the *Shruti* are difficult to comprehend, Swamiji made it practical and simpler using modern language so that his listeners could follow him. He did it in the light of his own and Sri Ramakrishna's realization. As a result, many American and Western savants recognized the value of his teachings and were influenced by him. As we know, they in turn tried to popularize Vedanta in the West. Among them mention may be made of Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, Frederick Manchester, Gerald Heard, Dr Joseph Kaplan, Huston Smith, J. D. Salinger, Henry Miller and others. These intellectuals disseminated these Vedantic ideas in their literature, lectures, stories, movies and so on. Even the movie, 'Star Wars', has many Vedantic teachings.

Some time ago, in August 2009, Miss Lisa Miller wrote an article in the *Newsweek* and named it, 'We are all Hindus now'. There she mentioned that about 76 per cent of people in the U.S. are Christians, but 65 per cent believe that 'many religions can lead to eternal life'. This idea was not central in Christianity. They thought that Jesus was the only way and goal. About thirty per cent of them, wrote Miller, call themselves 'spiritual, not religious'. More than a third of Americans now are preferring cremation and 24 per cent say they believe in reincarnation of soul. She further wrote: We are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like the traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, ourselves, each other and eternity.

The idea is not whether the Americans are increasingly becoming like the Hindus or Christians; the idea is that truth is prevailing and enriching the understanding of people and making them liberal and free from

mental slavery and prejudices.

Now the question: What should be the future of Vedanta? Let us take the imagery of the Ganga. When the Ganga descends on the plain it is calm and quiet, but it requires channelizing its water so that it does not cause floods and harm people; rather it should be beneficial to all. You see, dissemination of spiritual ideas is calmer than the flow of river water. By now the Vedanta movement has crossed the level of mock disapproval and opposition. It is now popular. This later phase is very significant. If sufficient care is not taken, in future it may be dangerous because of its popularity; it will proliferate with various distorted interpretations and may be divided into various factions. The social fabric of America and, for that matter, the Western societies in general, are in a challenging situation now. Strong individualism and consumerism have broken the majority of the families. Children go their own way. They have no place. Sometimes they cannot support themselves. Hardly they cook. They buy something and eat. People are in the grip of insurance companies and banks. They are afraid of various rules. In this context, Vedanta has got a very big part to play. Swamiji explained how to practicalize this Vedanta in day-to-day life. If in a family the husband thinks that the wife is divine and vice versa, and children also think their parents are divine, then only a healthy society can come up. If the mother is cooking, she should think that she is cooking for her God. If a person works in office, he should think he is working for his God. The businessman should think that all his clients are his God. A speaker should think that his audiences are his God. In this way Vedanta can be practised, according to Swamiji. ■

* This is the abridged and edited version of the speech Swami Chandrashekharaṇanda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society, Portland, delivered at the Institute on 15 May, 2017.