Vivekananda's Goals and Virtues–II

GOPAL STAVIG

Synthesis of Indian and Western thought

Most important, Vivekananda in his intercultural communication presented Vedanta using conventional Indian religious concepts such as Nirguna Brahman, Ātman, moksha, the four yogas, karma, dharma, etc. He presented these ideas as clearly as possible. Working within Hinduism he faithfully conveyed the Indian beliefs in spiritual experience, renunciation, eternal truths, religious pluralism, freedom of religious thought, and universal cycles. These ideas arose primarily out of the internal evolutionary structural development of Hinduism and far less from India's encounter with the West.[26] Though he took an interest in the teachings of Jesus, he appeared to show little interest in Christian theology. The Vedantic ideology consists in a coherent system of doctrines and ideas that follow a logical structure, enabling a person to understand the deeper meanings of the world; and a comprehensive ethical set of ideals and principles providing normative values that guide one's actions. All aspects of religion entail an ideology, whether or not it is an explicit system or not. 'Ideology' is a noun signifying a system of interdependent beliefs, traditions, doctrines, theories, teachings, ideals, principles, ethics, and morals held by a group of people. They serve as a logical and philosophical justification for a group's system of ideas, patterns of behaviour, as well as its attitudes, and goals.[27]

In the West (particularly Europe) one important reason for the growing atheism and agnosticism over the last few centuries is that people have been receiving the best secular education while the higher religious philosophical ideas have been taught to only a small percentage of the people. In the past using vague highly technical religious philosophical terms and making ideas over-complicated, had slowed down their being accepted and understood by intellectuals in other fields and the general public. Swami Vivekananda realized this mistake and fortunately today there is a growing interest in the philosophy of religion.

To this day, the Western intellectual class has never properly understood Vivekananda's metaphysical ideas. Their paradigm of understanding is too limited and they did not have the proper *samskāras* to comprehend his message. They did not realize the many profound implications of his teachings in relation to their prevailing ideas. He expressed his life-work succinctly, 'To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry Philosophy and intricate Mythology and queer startling Psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, and popular and at the same time meet the

requirements of the highest minds—is a task which only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come some concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp. That is my life's work.'[28] He used as many Western terms as possible. For example, since most Westerners at that time were not familiar with the term Ātman he would use words like Soul or Self in its place.

One of Vivekananda's tasks was to make the apparent incommensurable Indian religious philosophical and Western scientific views commensurable. He accomplished this undertaking by developing a common vocabulary and conceptual framework understandable by both sides. Vivekananda was a master at translating Indian philosophical ideas into compatible concepts of the contemporary Western scientists. In some cases he presents ideas that modern science has not yet arrived at. In his religious teachings he emphasized the modern democratic values of equality, freedom, individuality, mass education, and social welfare.

In some respects Vivekananda explained the Vedanta philosophy in ways that it had never been taught before. In doing so he laid down the cardinal tenets of modern Hinduism. How was he able to accomplish this task? By creatively relating Vedantic ideas to the most prestigious areas of modern culture that include the advanced scientific theories of religion, philosophy, physics, biology (e.g., heredity and evolution), physiology, sociology, psychology, history, and other areas of thought. He had the creative ability to observe similarities, uniformities, and connections among ideas that were apparently disparate. In this way he was able to overcome the myth that Hinduism was 'Wholly Other' from Western thought. He corrected many misconceptions about India and her religion held in the West. The age-old principles, the eternal truths remain the same, but in an act of genius he brought out new meaningful implications and relationships for these ancient ideas. Another of his characteristics is that at times he would make an impression on people by coming up with the unexpected. In this way he would shake people loose from their habitual ways of thinking and teach them something new.

Vivekananda had a very strong sense of history, which he emphasized. He went back and studied the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gitā*, and *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra* to discover the Indian past. He realized that the answers he was seeking did not lie only in contemporary thought. So he wanted to discern what had they known in the past that had since been forgotten, and was missing from contemporary Indian thought. He knew it is a great mistake to reject the wisdom of the past. In addition, he had to pose new questions of the Indian philosophical tradition (questions the original thinkers had not asked), realizing their relation and relevance to the present situation. He derived new implications and relationships of old ideas that were in a state of potentiality in the ancient texts. Once he had retrieved the traditional Indian thought structure, he had to explain these ideas in a way that modern people could understand them. The past had to be recapitulated and transformed into a new beginning. For

example, he compared Sāmkhya cosmology with that of late 19th century modern physics and traditional Indian yoga with modern psychology. This opened up new possibilities not known to the traditional Sāmkhya cosmologists and Yoga philosophers.

Consequently, Vivekananda is recognized by Elizabeth De Michelis and Catherine Albanese as the Father of the Modern Yoga movement both in India and the West.[29] While the New England Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau had a glimpse of the higher vision, what they lacked was an in-depth spiritual methodology of how to attain this insight. Unlike rāja yoga, they did not teach others in detail how to develop their minds so they could reach these higher states of consciousness.

Professor David M. Miller of Concordia University in Montreal, Canada made the important point, in 'Swami Vivekananda's speeches to the Parliament, he was the first to set the tone, to establish the direction, and to provide the rhetoric that the dialogue of modernist Hindus with non-Hindus would take over the next one hundred years.... Vivekananda's presentation of Neo-Vedantic thought and action at the World's Parliament of Religions was an attempt, like the *Bhagavad Gita* and like Shankara before him, at a creative synthesis of the old and the new, in which, traditional and modern elements were in dynamic interaction.'[30] In other words, we admire the teachings of Krishna, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, etc. because they presented the Vedanta philosophy to some extent in a new and original way compared to their predecessors, as did Vivekananda. Western Indologists sometimes use the term 'Neo-Vedanta' which is questionable. For

example, the original Protestants of the 16th century referred to themselves as Christians, not Neo-Christians.

As Rama Srivastava points out, the ancient religious thinkers and philosophers of the world lived in a more restricted intellectual environment than we do, and consequently their writings are more limited. Direct contact with Western thought proved to be very beneficial for Indian thinkers causing them to develop a synthesis between Eastern and Western ideas. After making a sound study of Western thought, they became more comprehensive in producing a broader outlook.[31] Since the time of Shankara there has been a vast accumulation of knowledge. It is possible to incorporate some of it into Vedanta philosophy (which Vivekananda did) and increase its horizons. Vivekananda realized that a synthesis of Indian and Western thought would bring about a new universal form of knowledge that surpasses that of the past.

In other words, Vedanta in its ideal form is vast, while the limited expression of it in one period of time will be similar to, but not identical to the way it is thought of and practised in another century. From a historical standpoint, Vedanta is viewed as an evolving system of thought. As a living reality it is constant, but our interpretation of it varies somewhat from time to time. The same is true for other religions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Even Fundamentalism changes to some extent from one century to the next. Consequently, when a Divine Incarnation or a great sage or a prophet is born on earth, there is enough unsaid so that they can significantly expand on the prevailing religion. The escalation of ideas in other fields of thought can also be used to enlarge the religious idea base to some

extent. The historical movement of human life is never closed but opened to new horizons. Similarly in the West, once Vedantic ideas are understood, more appreciation will be given to the great Indian religious and philosophical thinkers of the past. Vivekananda was also interested in uncovering the glories of ancient India emphasizing their discoveries in the physical sciences, philosophy, religion, and literature.

Vivekananda's goal was to transform a national religion limited to the horizon of one ethnic group of people into a universal one. A truly universal religion is opened to everyone regardless of any other factor (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, culture, gender, age, income, education, occupation, etc.). He stated, 'The time is coming when these thoughts will be cast abroad over the whole world. Instead of living in monasteries, instead of being confined to books of philosophy to be studied only by the learned, instead of being the exclusive possession of sects and of a few of the learned, they will all be sown broadcast over the whole world, so that they may become the common property of the saint and the sinner, of men and women and children, of the learned and of the ignorant. They will then permeate the atmosphere of the world.'[32] 'Don't you see that the age for esoteric interpretation is over? For good or for ill, that day is vanished, never to return. Truth, in the future, is to be open to the world!' 'My idea is first of all to bring out the gems of spirituality that are stored up in our books and in the possession of a few only, hidden, as it were, in monasteries and in forests—to bring them out; to bring the knowledge out of them ... I want to bring out these ideas and let them be the common property of all, of

every man in India.'[33] When Vivekananda opposes the idea of special privileges he not only means wealth and power but also knowledge. In the past the ruling class tended to keep knowledge for themselves and not to give it out to the mass of people. They thought an educated public might rebel against them and demand more benefits. The Exoteric Age is replacing the Esoteric Age.

He presented a universal religion that is very broad in its ideas and methods, encompassing as many paths to Brahman-God as possible. A narrowly focused sect will attract only a limited number of followers. Vedanta is a broad philosophy that accepts many Avatāras and that it is the Divine Plan to have many religions existing at the same time. Members of other religions with different points of view are respected and inter-religious dialogue is encouraged. He mentioned, 'If there were no fanaticism in the world, it would make much more progress than it does now. It is a mistake to think that fanaticism can make for the progress of mankind. On the contrary, it is a retarding element creating hatred and anger, and causing people to fight each other, and making them unsympathetic. We think that whatever we do or possess is the best in the world, and what we do not do or possess is of no value.'[34]

Vivekananda universalized the Vedanta religion opening it to the people of all countries of the world, and all social classes. When two religious faiths meet he wanted it to be on a high spiritual and intellectual plane where they can learn from each other. Vivekananda realized this and encouraged Western Indologists like Müller and Deussen to work on their projects. The contributors to this movement include a wide variety of people

representing many nations and occupations, both genders, monastics and lay members.

Combining Sacred and Secular

In the West, improvements in a country generally come from making political, economic, legal, and societal alterations. Conversely, Vivekananda placed more emphasis on creating a society with a strong spiritual foundation. One of the main functions of a society and culture is to develop more spiritual, moral, and self-realized individuals. Changes in religion are required (religious determinism) in order to improve society, particularly in India. Religious virtues should be put into practice through universal education, democracy, creating a good life for the masses, and other humanitarian endeavours.

Vivekananda explains, 'It is absolutely necessary for the vast majority of human beings to have a personal ideal; and no nation can rise, can become great, can work at all, without enthusiastically coming under the banner of one of these great ideals in life…. Our heroes must be spiritual. Such a hero has been given to us in the person of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. If this nation wants to rise, take my word for it, it will have to rally enthusiastically round this name.'[35] What a wonderful ideal, to have an entire country centred around the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna.

The ideal should never be lowered in order to attract people. Vivekananda always presented the truths of Vedanta in the loftiest and most sublime way. He stated, 'The Vedanta preaches the ideal; and the ideal, as we know, is always far ahead of the real, of the practical, as we may call it. There are two tendencies in human nature: one to harmonize the ideal with the life, and the other to elevate the life to the ideal. It is a great thing to understand this, for the former tendency is the temptation of our lives.'[36]

Vivekananda expanded Vedanta to include secular knowledge of the physical, social, psychological, political, and historical sciences. The prior religious paradigms were overly restrictive, too limited in scope needing expansion. He stated, 'Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples.'[37] Vivekananda was probably the first person to show that the subtle realms of religion and philosophy are interrelated with the gross physical realm of physics and biology as presented by modern science, that the physical (gross), mental (subtle), and spiritual (causal) realms interact and are interrelated and unified. Representatives of each of these fields of learning are free to make valuable contributions to various aspects of Vedantic knowledge. He was also one of the first Vedantic thinkers to use the ideas of contemporary physics (e.g., matter, energy, thermodynamics) and biology (e.g., evolution, heredity) in defence of metaphysical ideas. He taught not only the harmony of religions but the harmony of the secular and sacred cultures and mentalities. Their conflicts in the past held back the development of new knowledge. With the spectacular expansion of new knowledge originating outside of the religious field, commentaries on scripture have been greatly enhanced.

He wanted to create a new understanding of religion that breaks down the barriers that cause the separation of

Brahman-God (sacred) from the world and humanity (secular). So he emphasized the principle of the identity of religion and the world, meaning Brahman-God is here and now, present in the depths of everything. It is the creative ground and unity of everything. He added, '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.'[38]

Since the medieval period the basic institutions of society (political, social, economic, etc.) have gradually liberated themselves from religious authority. As a consequence, religion has become peripheral and not central in many modern secular societies and universities. Vivekananda wanted religion to regain its original importance by harmonizing it with the other institutions of society to produce a 'Unity of Culture'. He sought a new synthesis to overcome the gap between religion and modern thought. Religion would not dominate over the other institutions, but it would become a more important vital factor and more integrated with the other aspects of people's lives. It is certainly an important contributor in maintaining a moral society and bringing about altruistic activity. Vivekananda realized that when many people gradually change their frame of mind about specific issues or circumstances, then a natural shift will occur that creates a transforming effect on society.

Vivekananda noted, 'Compare the great teachers of religion with the great philosophers. The philosophers scarcely influenced anybody's inner man, and yet they wrote most marvellous books. The religious teachers, on the other hand, moved countries in their lifetime.'[39] Vivekananda was not writing like the scholars only for a highly educated select elite group of individuals, but for as many people as possible who could grasp his message. In the past in Asia and Europe, philosophical and theological writings have been couched in a technical terminology (for example, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*) that few people could understand, and hence were the exclusive property of a very select group of erudite intellectuals. As a result, this knowledge did the world far less good than it could have. Even to this day, the most powerful political and business leaders of the world have a very limited understanding of the higher principle of religious philosophy. In most Western universities few classes are taught in this area at an advanced level and consequently most people have an inadequate knowledge of the subject. Only in modern times, primarily due to universal education and because of an expanded communication technology for the circulation of ideas, can this knowledge be transmitted to and learned in varying degrees by a large percentage of the world population irrespective of their position in society. This is an example of the 'Sociology of Knowledge' that social conditions (e.g., universal education, technology) have an effect on the knowledge taught (i.e. advanced religious ideas).

There have been great philosophical synthesizers like Plotinus, Shankara, and Thomas Aquinas who created comprehensive systems of religious philosophy. A problem is that they were so thorough and complete that they tended to finalize the study, and there was not much left for philosophers of future generations

to develop and work on (unless they disagreed with them). Following the 'Principle of Limits' they reached a temporary conceptual boundary and thus some stagnation followed. Since every ideological system is finite, it eventually reaches a theoretical limit beyond which (at least for the time being) no significant new modifications can be added to it. Since all religions are open to future conceptual growth, there is the possibility that the ideological system will be reinvigorated if new discoveries in other areas of study can be incorporated into it.

Conversely, Vivekananda mentioned the lack of time to develop his ideas in detail. This leaves room for a future expansion of his thoughts by relating them to more recent discoveries in many fields. Relating these new ideas with Vedantic teachings offers great potential for future study. He provided a vast number of suggestive ideas as part of a philosophical system that people in the future can work on and develop, thereby creating an open-ended rather than a closed system of beliefs. An intellectual tradition should have the ability to assimilate new material, while conserving its past principles and achievements. It is best if the tradition possesses unrealized potential for expansion, whereby ideas and principles that presently exist in partially developed form possess the capabilities for further progressive development. He left his ideas open to the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. Hinduism like any other religion is a living tradition that must adjust to the times and find new expressions for the eternal truths.[40]

In summary, Vivekananda's thinking is universal, deep, and profound, expressing the highest ideals, clear and easy to understand, practical, original, modern, and contemporary, and with room for expansion based on future implications. It is accurate and free from error, precise, relevant, has breadth covering a wide range of ideas, logically based on sound reasoning, and of significance and importance. ■

REFERENCES

26 Krishna Gupta, 'Religious Evolution and Social Change in India: A Study of the Ramakrishna Mission Movement', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1974), pp. 28-29, 36.

27 George Theodorson, *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), p. 195.

28 *CW*, V, p. 104.

29 Massimo Scaligero, 'Swami Vivekananda', *East and West* (Oct. 1950), p. 151; Elizabeth De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*, pp. 1-9, 90, 182.

30 David M. Miller, 'Modernity in Hindu Monasticism: Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Movement', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Feb. 1999), pp. 118, 124.

31 L. P. Vidyarthi, *Aspects of Religion in Indian Society* (Kedar Nath Ram Nath, 1961), pp. 30-31.

32 *CW*, II, p. 288.

33 *CW*, VIII, p. 271; III, p. 290; cf. II, p. 213; III, pp. 245, 427.

34 *CW*, I, p. 79.

35 *CW*, III, p. 315.

36 *CW*, II, p. 293.

37 *CW*, II, p. 140

38 *CW*, II, p. 291.

39 *CW*, II, p. 15.

40 Swami Atmarupananda, 'Swami Vivekananda's Spiritual Mind', *Prabuddha Bharata* (Jan. 2009), pp. 17-18.