

Module 2 : Swami Vivekananda

Section 1 : The Nature of the Absolute Reality

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda was a staunch follower of Sri Ramakrishana Paramhansa who was his guru. He acquainted Swami Vivekananda with the ancient spiritual legacy of India in the form of Vedas and Upanishads. Swami Vivekananda condemned the path of renunciation to realize the self and god, and brought the collective consciousness back to the need of the hour by channelizing their minds to the action-oriented philosophy of ancient India in the form of his philosophy of Practical Vedanta. In this way he re-instilled the spark of action in the poverty-ridden masses of India which were a slave to foreign rule. He himself was a great proponent of Vedanta, and practiced Yoga as a means to salvation. His philosophy is thus a curious blend of *karma* (action) and *yoga* (salvation). He believed in practicing what he preached. He staunchly advocated the physical well-being of his disciples ahead of spiritual well-being for which he prescribed doing yoga as a routine. He founded the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 in Calcutta – the spiritual organizations engaged in social reform and social and spiritual upliftment of the weak and downtrodden. Its headquarter, Ramakrishna Ashram, was established at Belur in Calcutta during that period. In his historic address to the World Parliament of Religions, he for the first time, as a representative of Hinduism, put forward the idea of a universal religion. The lectures that he gave in his various tours across the globe are compiled together in 9 volumes published by Advaita Ashram, Kolkatta.

The Nature Of Absolute Reality

To delve into the nature of absolute reality has been the paramount objective of man since times immemorial. This ultimate reality has been conceived variously. For some, it is all divine. Whereas laymen called it God, philosophical thinkers called it Being. Thinkers and laymen in India called it Brahman ('n' silent). Vedas, the earliest philosophical treatises of the world defined the nature of this ultimate reality *Brahman* as pure consciousness without a trace of materiality, but full of bliss. This ultimate reality is not void, it is full of bliss. This is the entire truth about Brahman. That is why, Vedic *rishis* defined Brahman in one word as *Sat-chit-ananda* – Truth-Consciousness-Bliss.

Vedanta is the ending portions of the Vedas which are four in number. These ending portions are also called Upanishads which are 108 in number out of which 20 are considered to be principle. One thing, however is to be kept in mind is that, neither Vedas nor Upanishads have any author. They contain the mystical experiences of the great rishis in their moments of deep meditation... As such, Vedas are said to be directly inspired by the divinity. For that reason, Vedas are called the work of Divinity itself. Because of this reason, Vedas are called *apaurushya* – that is, one that is *not* the work of a mortal or *purusha*. Vedas, as such, are eternal.

Regarding the nature of Reality, Vivekananda deviated from his predecessors in the following way:

1. Dissolving the distinction between the ultimate reality (Brahman) and the personal way of looking and worshipping that reality in the form of God (*Ishwar*).
2. In spite of no distinction between Brahman and God, maintaining the necessity of Religion.
3. Doing away with rituals as means to attain Brahman.

Collectively all these three attempts can be called Vivekananda's views on the nature of ultimate reality as well as reviving of old Indian philosophy and orienting it to the needs of the contemporary times.

No distinction between Brahman and God :

As discussed earlier, Vivekananda was a thorough Vedantist. Vedanta philosophy takes God and ultimate reality, Brahman, to be one and the same thing. When the ultimate reality Brahman was looked at from the empirical viewpoint, it assumed various attributes related to mankind like love, goodness, morality etc. When people worshipped the ultimate reality in these attributes it was called God or *Ishwar*, otherwise in Brahman there is no distinction. Shankaracharya emphasized more the attribute-less or nirguna aspect of Brahman, whereas Ramanuja, another Vedantist, emphasized attributed or saguna interpretation of Brahman. For this reason, Shankaracharya's philosophy is called *Advaita* and Ramanuja's *Vishishtadvaita*.

Vivekananda rejected any distinction between Brahman and God. For him, the Absolute or the ultimate reality and God are one and the same thing. Unlike sophisticated philosophers, Vivekananda does not make distinction between the ultimate reality and God per se. This is also because of the social reformist nature of Vivekananda who believed that all concepts are redundant if they don't fit in with the simple mind of a layman for whom God and Reality would not be different. At times, Vivekananda called this reality Absolute which is one, unique and indeterminate. To be indeterminate means to be unable to define something. We can say that a certain thing is salty or sweet which is its determinate nature; like to be sweet is the determinate nature of sugar. But such attributions can't be made of the ultimate reality or the Absolute. To say that it is kind, compassionate, large-hearted, forgiving, is to fix it in boundaries. Vivekananda asserts that Absolute can't be bound in this way. The moment you try to define the Absolute through metaphors, you are trying to bind it, and Absolute is boundless.

Echoing the same thought is the concept of *Neti Neti* in the Upanishads. Neti-Neti means not this-not this. In this way all attributes are denied of the ultimate reality.

Vivekananda denounces both these measures and conceives ultimate reality to be beyond description. Though it can't be defined, it can be felt. Its nature is conceived to be full of bliss.. That's why it is called sat chit ananda- existence consciousness bliss.

Related to Vivekananda's rejection of distinction between Brahman and God is his paradoxical assertion of religion. One would think that if Vivekananda was so practical, a social reformist, a libertarian in approach that he did away with the old distinction between the two metaphysical concepts Brahman and God, bringing both to the plane of a layman's ken along with his dire opposition to rituals as way to attain any of them, he would denounce religion too. But, this itself is the paradox. To answer this paradox, Vivekananda takes recourse to human psychology and maintains that religion is the psychological need of a human being. He, rather, traces the growth of the idea of religion per se in the human psychology. During evolution of human race, remembering and worshipping of dead ancestors, keeping food for them, taking body to be housing an immortal soul and thus viewing the dead loved ones nearby in other forms of life, gave birth to the idea of religion.¹ He found traces of ancestor worship in all religions of the world be it Chinese, Babylonian, Egyptian etc. But Hindus' is an exception as Hinduism originated from nature-worship more than ancestor worship. The clear references to this are made in Vedas in which there is no reference to ancestor worship. Likewise for the ancient Greeks, Scandinavians or other Aryan races.

¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 57

Vivekananda finds these two views contradictory and reconciles it with a third view according to which religion stemmed out of man's struggle to go beyond the limitation of his senses. In his words, "Either man goes to seek for the spirits of his ancestors, the spirits of the dead, that is, he wants to get a glimpse of what there is after the body is dissolved, or, he desires to understand the power working behind the stupendous phenomena of nature. Whichever of these is the case, one thing is certain, that he tries to transcend the limitations of the senses. He cannot remain satisfied with his senses; he wants to go beyond them."² All the prophets of all the religions have some or the other time attained to that state of mind which is neither waking nor sleeping and realized the truth about world and ultimate reality. Only after that, they got the status of prophets or *Rishis* as we call them in India.³

² Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 59

³ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 60

Going further in this line, Vivekananda asserts that the idea of infinity attached to super-sensuous Being or the ultimate reality is found in all the religions— the Being having infinite power (omnipotent), infinite knowledge (omniscience), infinite presence everywhere (omnipresent). Then, Vivekananda asks, nowhere has seen such an ideal who is having all these infinite, super-sensuous attributes, but why still we believe in it? No one has ever seen, for example, an ideal human being, but we still believe in it. Why? Vivekananda here answers that it is because of our inherent nature to go beyond our senses, to

discover what our senses can't. "We are always struggling to raise ourselves up to that ideal. Every human being, whosoever and wheresoever he may be, has an ideal of infinite power. Every human being has an ideal of infinite pleasure.... But a few quickly discover that although they are struggling for infinite power, it is not through the senses that it can be reached."⁴ Rather, Vivekananda asserts a man is man only so long as he strives to rise above his nature – that means, does not tie himself to fulfilling desires of his own body, tied to the facts given by his senses and capable of discovering truths beyond them. This point needs a bit elaboration.

⁴ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 62

As long as we are tied to the fulfillment of our gross desires and sensual pleasures, we would be self-centred. We would never be able to connect to our fellow beings. We will be stark individualists whose life's only purpose is to serve our selfish ends. Consequently, there would be no morality in society. Morality is all about considering the welfare of the people along with our own and even sacrificing our selves for the greater common good.. This is why, Vivekananda says that unless man rises above his senses, there can be no morality, no ethics. But to rise above our nature, there should be some ideal to which we should strive. To fulfill this psychological need of the man, every religion provides the ideal of infinite super being which the disciples strive to attain. That is why, Vivekananda says that religion fulfils the psychological needs of a human being, and also that morality can't be founded without having the ideal of God. Religion in that sense is the highest motivation, the, "greatest motive power for realizing that infinite energy which is the birthright and nature of every man."⁵

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 2, p. 67

No rituals

To confine religion to rituals, dogmas, scriptures, churches, temples etc. is to confine the universal spirit of the religion and forbidding it to reach the far most corners of the world. The real, living, breathing religion, according to Vivekananda, is not just some chosen rituals that we perform at a certain point of day, with certain materials, chanting certain rhymes, but it is in our very breath, actions, every aspect of our life and society. Religion needs be aware and respectful of the existence of other religions and be liberal and more tolerating in their outlook. This is because, like different fingers try to point to the same moon, all the religions try to strive man to the same ultimate reality. As it is not appreciable the mutual conflict in the fingers for the man, so is harmful the mutual conflict among different religions for the spiritual well-being of the society at large. Only such a liberal and tolerant religion can attain the status of Universal Religion.

Instead of believing in the performance of rituals as a means to attain truth, Vivekananda preached about the self-realization as a means towards that. Religion, for Vivekananda, is at best maps of a country as if. They can at best show us the direction, rest we have to cover the path. Unless we realize our self, we are no better than atheists even if we have mugged up Bibles of the world. In the spirit of Vedanta, Vivekananda asserts that religion has to be realized now. To be religious means that we have to start from scratch without any religion, see and realize things on our own, then our own self, only we can say to have gotten religious.⁶

This point needs more elaboration. What Vivekananda prescribing here is not the blind following of what prophets or scriptures have told before? Vivekananda is as much a rationalist, as a religious preacher. A rationalist is one who goes by reason, evaluates things and events for their logicity, their rationale. If then something appears illogical to him, he declares it absurd, even if majority of the people are advocating it. Vivekananda was a great rationalist in this sense when he emphasized the self-realization as the only way to be religious and to attain the truth. Self-realization is more like self-discovery. We have to discover the truth on our own. Even though the old *rishis* have shared their experiences in the Vedanta for our benefit, we can at best read them, discuss them, and analyze them. But how would we ourselves have that experience? That would only be possible if we ourselves go their way and experience ourselves all what they had experienced. That is discovering the truth on our own. It is self- discovery or self-realization.

⁶ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 3, p. 13

Scriptures, like guides, at best can instruct us how to attain that experience. Vivekananda gives the example of a man who wanted to be a chemist, and who repeated every time he went to bed, "O Chemistry, come to me," but it never came. He groans to a chemist that why did he could not become chemist to which the chemist asks instead of repeating like that why did he not go to laboratory and burn his hands himself while trying all the acids and alkalis? That would have been the way to discover chemistry, and be chemist in the process. Religion is same, says Vivekananda.⁷ But, it could be asked, why one method should be applicable to everyone given that people have different temperaments, natures and attitudes? Would not it be gross injustice to thrust one single method of attaining truth to everybody disregarding their different natures? To this, Vivekananda again takes recourse to Vedanta philosophy and says that Vedanta acknowledges this difference and therefore asserts that divinity should be reached from any way possible. If one wants to reach it by rituals, then do so, provided that one's commitment is honest. If one wishes to go by studying scriptures, by all means, provided one should also understand what is written in them. What is more fundamentally required in every case is the self-realization of the seeker in every ritual, every reading of the scripture. One should not be prepared to buy everything what is written in them unless and until one's mind is not prepared to it. That way, we can be religious, as well as maintain diversity of attaining the truth. It is in this spirit that Vedanta does not say anything against other religions of the world. As Vivekananda points out – all religions are the maps of the reality, through different directions they point out to the same truth. But, the core of every religion converges at self-realization of the experiences occurred in that path, which every prophet of the world had it, but conveyed through its own unique way. The apparent diversity in the religions is due to this difference in interpretation, while underlying essence is the same.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Publication Department, Kolkata, Vol. 3, p. 14