

Vedanta's Message For Our Time: Man's Need For The Eternal Philosophy

By Swami Tathagatananda

Since the advent of Shri Ramakrishna on the spiritual horizon of mankind, a new epoch of spiritual fraternity had been steadily unfolding. The West has been evincing its keen interest in the ancient truth of India's heritage. Shri Ramakrishna demonstrated the reality of Divinity by realizing the Truth in his own life. This re-authentication of the ancient truths in the life of Shri Ramakrishna is a great example of hope and inspiration. Shri Ramakrishna proclaimed the fundamental unity of all religions to a world plagued by hostility, disharmony and persecution, all in the name of religion. Swami Vivekananda broadcast that teaching to the world when religious truths and the subjects of God, Soul and immortality had lost their reality and made a mockery of religion. Various dogmatic theologies with their anti-rational and anti-humanistic attitudes had denigrated the image of religion, which was ultimately abandoned in the modern period. In that bleak, hostile world, Swami Vivekananda preached the sublime truth of Vedanta that speaks of man's spiritual depth and dimension. He taught about a new image of man as potentially Divine. According to Marie Louise Burke, "As Swamiji later wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda, 'I am careering all over the country. Wherever the seed of his power will fall, there it will fructify—be it today, or in a hundred years.' . . . Throughout his life, wherever he was and whatever he was outwardly doing, he permanently lifted the consciousness of all with whom he came in contact. It was truly said of him, 'Vivekananda is nothing if not a breaker of bondage'." The Vedantic idealism Swamiji taught—the unity of existence, universality of Truth and the divinity of man—brings new perspective to the motive of life. Truth is one—it can be approached by different methods. Vedanta has permeated the modern mind with its catholicity, universality and spiritual unity. Truth is to be personally experienced in our hearts, not circumscribed or limited by exclusivity and sectarianism. Each of us must be able to experience the immutable, divine Reality unconditioned by time, space, causality, name and form. Our struggle to experience that spiritual entity within us, which Vedanta calls the Self, is an abiding, joyous experience opening new vistas and making life meaningful.

Vedanta's Role in Forming a New World. A new spirit of universality has dawned upon the world. The present age is pressing this truth home. The perennial spiritual heritage of the world that is enshrined in Vedanta has cast its charming spell on the modern mind. Vedanta aims at the development of every phase of individual life and culminates in one's crowning spiritual achievement by following the spiritual idealism of the immanence of God. It does not advocate mere adherence. It encourages spiritual

discrimination, intellectual comprehension and meditation. The illuminating message born of intuitive personal experience of the great spiritual luminary Swami Vivekananda is spiritually surcharged and capable of transforming others. Marie Louise Burke has written, "It is only through understanding Swamiji's unbroken, luminous serenity and his immense, all-embracing love that one can understand the quality of his power. He moved the tides of man's thought much as 'the innocent moon, that nothing does but shine, moves all the labouring surges of the world.' Going his own way, he had altered the course of history." An article by Professor Woodbridge O. Johnson that appeared in the October 1960 issue of Hibbert Journal gives a hint of Vedanta's role in the world today. Prof. Johnson suggests that Paul Tillich's Copernican Christology "is gaining a wider and wider hearing with men of other faiths like Ramakrishna. . . . Jesus Christ is no longer the one and only complete and final creating and saving word of God . . . He is not the only supernatural saviour, but one of a plurality of saviours sent forth to save a plurality of intelligent races of beings on a plurality of worlds throughout the flow of time." Prof. Johnson dubs the older concept of Christology as "provincial" and "culture-centered rather than humanity-centered . . . geocentric rather than heliocentric" and concludes with these pregnant words: "The new Christology, if and when it becomes dominant, should transform the intolerant provincialism of Christianity into a new humanity and a new insight into the wideness of the divine mercy."

Vedanta does not accept two western concepts: the non-divine nature of man and belief in an extra-cosmic God. In the Western view, God is the Creator and therefore the subject; the soul is created and therefore the object—the two can never be the same. According to Vedanta, God is not only ultimate and absolute, God is intimate, nearer than our arteries, our inmost Being. God is both Creator and the created. Many voices are challenging other Christian tenets including revelation, miracles, and the historicity of Christ. The East-West religious literature is remarkable in sheer bulk, if not in illumination or significance. In the Western view, the created soul is not a transcendent entity—the impurities of the mind taint the soul (which is equated with the mind) and therefore the grace of a savior is required. According to Vedanta, the impurities of the mind can never taint the transcendent, ever-pure and immortal Self, which is not a created entity; therefore, the Self does not need the grace of a savior. When impurity is removed from the mind, the bliss of the Self is spontaneously experienced. Dr. James B. Pratt compares two views of the Soul in *The Religious Consciousness*:

In the Christian view, the soul's survival of death is essentially miraculous. The soul is conceived as coming into existence with the birth of the body, and the thing to be expected is that it should perish when the body perishes. This is prevented through the intervention of God who steps in to receive the soul and confer upon it an immortality which, left to itself, it could never attain. In India all this is changed. The soul's immortality has never been thought there to be dependent upon any supernatural interference or miraculous event, nor even upon God. There are atheistic philosophers in India, but they are as thoroughly convinced of the eternal life of the soul as are the monists or theists. For in India, the soul is essentially immortal. Eternity is in its very nature.

Verily the Self is the datum of all experience and knowledge. The Self is the only source of all virtue, happiness, peace, wisdom, power and knowledge. The crowning glory of life is Self-knowledge. This doctrine of the eternal, pure, self-luminous and infinite Self was developed in Vedanta alone.

Civilization and Spiritual Culture. Civilization is material; culture is spiritual. They may be respectively compared to the body and the Soul of man. One gives happiness, the other, peace and illumination. The human being is the focus of all values. The deep study of man by India's mystics revealed an infinite vista of human potential. According to Swami Vivekananda, man is the epitome of the cosmos: "Man is the most representative being in the universe, the microcosm, a small universe in himself." True spiritual culture humanizes life; without a spiritual outlook, there can be no high or enduring culture. Culture and self-control are synonymous—the realm of culture is the realm of values. A cultured multitude paves the way to human happiness. Man is desperately in need of India's Eternal Philosophy and its practical application in human life. The marked need to practice spirituality has long been observed. In 1973, The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Ramsay, spoke at the College of Preachers:

Young people are turning to Eastern religions and bypassing the Christian Church, because it has concentrated so much on practical activity. Contemplation has become very widespread in the modern world, and there is a worldwide longing for it. But the Christian Church has perhaps failed to be contemplative enough. We have concentrated so much on practical activity that Christian religion is being bypassed and young people are turning to other things because we have not practiced our religion in sufficient depth.

Christ's words, that "man does not live by bread alone but by every word that cometh from the mouth of God" is now being experienced in the west.

Yoga in the West. The marked attraction of the term "Yoga" (union with God) holds great promise for those who reject hackneyed religious doctrines like sin, "hellfire and brimstone", eternal damnation, perdition, confession and commandments. Geraldine Coster, an English psychoanalyst, was captivated by the spiritual philosophy of India and early caught its spark. *Yoga and Western Psychology*, her insightful study of Indian Yoga based on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali came out in 1934. It is the most popular book on the subject in the West since Swami Vivekananda's *Raja-Yoga* appeared in 1899. In her introduction, Coster compared Yoga to analytical psychology and concluded that there is a "crying need in the West for something parallel to eastern yoga":

[Yoga] contains the clue needed by the west if the analytical method and theory is to reach its fullest scope as a regenerating and re-creating factor in modern life. The more thoughtful among mankind are gradually outgrowing the belief that they . . . are going to be "saved" by some external intervention, and the idea is gaining ground that salvation is essentially from within. . . . It may be that the old psychological self-knowledge of the East will eventually give to some people an experimental proof of the reality of the world beyond the drop-curtain. . . . I am convinced that the ideas on which yoga is based are universally true for mankind . . . the yoga sutras of Patanjali do really contain the

information that some of the most advanced psychotherapists of the present day are ardently seeking. That there is a crying need in the West for something parallel to this eastern yoga many today would admit. . . . The key . . . lies in a sympathetic appreciation of the eastern approach to the problems of the interior life . . . [which] is neither atheistic nor superstitious; it is scientific and based upon actual experiment. Trained to accuracy of observation by generations of scientific research at the physical level, we in the West should be able to produce investigators who would experiment with the statements of writers such as Patanjali, and note the modifications required to suit Western intelligence . . . There are far more people who are deeply, despairingly concerned to find a greater reality here and now.

Jacob Needleman confirmed Coster's view: "a large and growing number of psychiatrists are now convinced that the Eastern religions offer an understanding of the mind far more complete than anything yet envisaged by Western science." William James gave his estimation of Yoga in his article, "The Powers of Men," published in American Magazine: "The most venerable ascetic system, and the one whose results have the most voluminous experimental corroboration is undoubtedly the Yoga system in Hindustan. From time immemorial, by Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, or whatever code of practice it might be, Hindu aspirants to perfection have trained themselves, month in and month out, for years. The results claimed, and certainly in many cases accorded by impartial judges, is strength of character, personal power, unshakability of soul." Many other Western psychologists attest the preeminence of Indian thought in the philosophy of yoga and its practice.

Popularization of Yoga. Noting the longing in the West for more leisure time in which to explore new potentials for well being through the reduction of stress, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi popularized the Transcendental Meditation Movement. The accredited Maharishi International University, a 2,000-room college in Fairfield, Iowa receives government funds for scientific research on the effects of meditation. Serious investigation confirms that meditation calms the mind and restores the personality to its rightful, harmonious balance. Five million people in more than sixty countries worldwide practice Transcendental Meditation. Its simple, non-religious technique is equably transmitted to people of all ages and levels of education and requires no change in belief or lifestyle. It is reported that the TM program "has been called a major scientific discovery because it permits a person to gain direct access to untapped inner resources . . . by increasing the order and [progressive] integration in the functioning of the nervous system [in terms of the expansion of consciousness]." Because TM improves human psychological and physiological capabilities, businesses introduce the program primarily for improved health and success in business environments, which are interested in increasing productivity and creativity. Some of the largest corporations set up in-house TM programs for all their employees, who more than double their productivity and sales. Over five hundred scientific studies at more than two hundred independent research institutions (including Harvard, UCLA and Stanford Universities) validate its effectiveness. Many students receive a Ph. D. from their work on the impact of meditation on health.

Vast numbers of Westerners hope to reduce tension, improve their health, prolong life and discover peace within themselves through Yoga. They are not turning to meditation strictly for a dedicated spiritual life. Hatha Yoga is practiced by individuals and taught at corporations, social organizations, hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and educational institutions. In the United States alone, “fifteen million Americans include some form of yoga in their fitness regimen—twice as many as did five years ago; 75% of all U. S. health clubs offer yoga classes,” according to an article in Time Magazine. Interfaith and ecumenical conferences on Yoga abound. Essays on the relevance of the Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation appear in scholarly publications. Eastern philosophy and Buddhism are subjects of serious study. The world’s scientists discuss “consciousness.” The Committee on Science and Technology, reporting to the U. S. House of Representatives, advises more research on the “Physics of Consciousness.” By default, as it were, thinkers of our time are reacting to grave ecological disturbances created by ruthless greed and the aimless sensate culture. They are trying to come to terms with the immanence of spirit.

Vedanta Solves the Significant Problems of Our Age. The great need at this moment in history is for a true philosophy of life that takes us beyond the realm of instincts and the mind to the wider and more profound region of the spirit. Swami Vivekananda wrote, “There is but one basis of well-being, social, political or spiritual—to know that I and my brother are one. This is true for all countries and all people. And Westerners, let me say, will realize it more quickly than Orientals, who have almost exhausted themselves in formulating the idea and producing a few cases of individual realization.” Aldous Huxley says, “Specifically human progress in happiness, virtue and creativeness is valuable, in the last analysis, as a condition of spiritual advance towards man’s final ends.” In *A Study of History: Universal States and Churches*, Arnold Toynbee brought historical perspective to the problems of the modern age, all of which highlight the need for India’s spiritual outlook and the practice of harmony in religions: “In a world materially linked together by the many inventions of Western technique, Hinduism and the Mahayana might make no less fruitful contributions than Isis-worship and neo-Platonism had once made to Christian insight and practice.” In *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* Toynbee wrote:

It seems to be a matter of historical fact that, hitherto, the Judaic religions have been more exclusive-minded than the Indian religions have. In a chapter of the world’s history in which the adherents of the living higher religions seem likely to enter into much more intimate relations with one another than ever before, the spirit of the Indian religions, blowing where it listeth, may perhaps help to winnow a traditional Pharisaism out of Muslim, Christian and Jewish hearts. . . . Pharisaism has been the besetting sin of the religions of the Judaic family, and this sin has brought retribution on itself in a tragic series of atrocities and catastrophes. The fruit of Pharisaism is intolerance; the fruit of intolerance is violence; and the wages of sin is death.

Toynbee indicated his appreciation of Vedanta’s catholicity:

I have come back to a belief that Religion holds the key to the mystery of existence; but I have not come back to the belief that this key is in the hands of my ancestral religion exclusively. . . . The Indian religions are not exclusive-minded. They are ready to allow that there may be alternative approaches to the mystery. I feel sure that in this they are right, and that this catholic-minded Indian religious spirit is the way of salvation for all religions in an age in which we have to learn to live as a single family if we are not to destroy ourselves.

The Eternal Philosophy of Vedanta is not exclusive—it transcends all limitations and classifications, yet remains immanent in life, informing all races and creeds. The most significant challenge in our time is to remove all forms of conflict by recognizing our divinity. The false perception that we are separate from divinity pits us against nature and each other and separates us from God. God is infinite, God is within us, God is bliss, purity and peace—God is all. Every true religion preserves potential elements for the transformation of the individual into the divine.

Unity of Existence and Harmony of Religions. There is a dire need today for spiritual and social harmony. Unprecedented tensions and dangers in our age appear together with great opportunities. Recent historical events have made us aware of both our spiritual inadequacy as well as the unity of life. There is an increasing awareness among the unorthodox of the necessity for religious tolerance and for the truth that many paths lead to the goal if they are followed with sincerity and dedication. We may directly know and be united with the real Self, the Atman, through meditation and spiritual practice, without the aid of any outside authority. We can achieve a balance if we keep in view a vision of the harmony of religions as Shri Ramakrishna lived and taught it and if we have the courage to apply ourselves to this task. “If one religion is true,” Swamiji says, “then all others must be true.” This cardinal teaching of Vedanta has captured the minds of the West, which has been traditionally influenced by dogmas, doctrines and creeds. Addressing this essential quandary of the modern age, Louis Renou wrote in *Religions of Ancient India*:

The fact remains that Hinduism provides an incomparable field of study for the historian of religion: its aberrations are many, but there is in it a great stream of mystical power; it manifests all the conceptions of religion, and its speculation is continually revealing them in a new light. It combines powers of constant renewal with a firm conservancy of fundamental tradition. In Bhakti and still more in Yoga, it has perfected unrivalled techniques of mystical initiation that contrast strongly with the frequently haphazard methods of spiritual training in the West. Above all, in the interpenetration of religion and dharma in general, and the reciprocal stimulus of abstract thought and religious experiment, there is an undying principle that, given favourable conditions, may well lead to a new integration of the human personality.

Swami Vivekananda had the highest regard for the rare insights given in the Vedantic scriptures for human welfare, happiness in life and the final attainment of freedom. Swamiji knew that this great, noble and life-giving philosophy could be implemented in the West. In the end, people will become tired of their own worldliness. Enduring

happiness and peace will come to those who will be able to harness the dormant potentiality of the divinity embedded within each human life. Healthy values of life are those fruits of the Soul which alone can bring transformation of our character. A really transmuted character enjoys the fruits of secular life and overall well being. Arnold Toynbee's remark is well taken:

In these circumstances, it might be forecast that, in the next chapter of the world's history, mankind would seek compensation for the loss of much of its political, economic and perhaps even domestic freedom by putting more of its treasure into spiritual freedom. . . . In a regimented world, the realm of the spirit may be freedom's citadel. . . . The spiritual field of activity, not the physical one, is going to be the domain of freedom."

Revivification of the West through the Ramakrishna Movement. The astounding impact of Swami Vivekananda, whose "tongue of flame" created history at Chicago's Parliament of World Religions in 1893, gave a spiritual jolt to the West. His transforming presence and message, beginning with "Sisters and Brothers of America!" and followed by nine more addresses at the Parliament, shed full light on the idea of the unity of religions embodied by Shri Ramakrishna. According to Marie Louise Burke, "not only was Hinduism created but a new religion for the world was given its first enunciation." The Parliament generated seminal intellectual interest in Vedanta. William James was at The Cambridge Seminars in Comparative Religion—a direct outcome of that interest. The journal, *American Mysticism*, reported:

In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James illustrated his comments on Vedanta with quotations from the published addresses of Swami Vivekananda. This was appropriate, for Vivekananda had gained international fame in the nineties as India's Vedanta emissary to the West. . . . Vivekananda has exerted a lasting influence upon mystical thought in America. From his lectures an organizational work of the nineties stems the present-day Vedanta Movement in the United States with its ten centers in Boston, New York, Los Angeles, and other cities, and its affiliation with the Ramakrishna Order, which has over a hundred centers in India and the rest of Asia, and one each in England, France, and Argentina.

Jacob Needleman also admired and acknowledged the spiritual contribution of the Vedanta Societies:

When considering the Indian influence in America, a special place must be reserved for the Vedanta Societies throughout the country. Historically, the Vedanta Society was the first Eastern religious tradition that took roots on our soil, having been brought here late in the nineteenth century by Swami Vivekananda, the chief disciple of the great Indian Master, Sri Ramakrishna. Intellectually, the influence of this form of Vedanta has been enormous.

"In fact," writes another scholar, "few other religious bodies of such Lilliputian size have equaled the movement's impact or historical significance." Long after Swamiji left America for the last time, Gerald Heard made the case for Vedanta in the West:

Indeed, we may say that the appearance of Vedanta in the West as a living religion and not as an academic study, is inevitable just because the religious heredity of the West has now outgrown the tight Hebrew pot of cosmology in which it had been growing for two millennia . . . Where were men to find a religion that was intense but not cruelly narrow, wide but not vague, loose but not tepid? Vedanta in the broad range that it is given by the Vedanta activity in America is the answer. And the very breadth of Vedanta, combined with its force, is bound to embrace and develop much that is now lying latent in our Western thought and spirit.

For more than a century now, the truths of Vedanta together with its values—the importance of meditation, selflessness, nonviolence and absence of dogmatism, have been entering into the collective consciousness of the West through the Vedanta Societies established by the Ramakrishna Order in India. Sylvain Lévi summarized the eternal significance of Shri Ramakrishna in a few words: “As Ramakrishna’s heart and mind were for all countries, his name too is a common property of mankind.” Well known French historian Amaury de Riencourt described the result of Shri Ramakrishna’s and Swami Vivekananda’s impact on the modern world: “From its modern awakening with Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, Eastern mysticism has begun to adapt its revelations to the entirely different cultural framework provided by science and technology, without in any way sacrificing what is valid in its traditional understanding of the phenomenon itself.”

Professor Huston Smith writes in *Secularization and the Sacred*, “For the first time since the Renaissance and the Reformation, western society is hearing . . . the suggestion that perhaps the contemplative life is the equal of active life.” Westerners are attracted to Vedanta’s non-proselytizing, living spiritual thoughts and practical values of life. They are gradually accepting and assimilating the great teachings of Vedanta on a progressively larger scale. The light of Vedanta has improved the original views of people who have been attending the Ramakrishna Centers lectures for ten years or more. Many Christians have abandoned their view of Christ as the exclusive savior of humanity and have come to accept Christ as one of the Divine Incarnations. Vedanta’s spirit of reverence for all religious paths has opened their minds and hearts and given them a more profound understanding of the spiritual values of life. Having experienced for themselves that Vedanta offers diverse methods of teaching for every type of personality and mental aptitude, if they return to their own places of worship it is with a more expanded and harmonious religious view. Playwright John van Druten claimed that he could “turn back” to Christianity following his embrace of Vedanta, because he had a more profound understanding of it in light of the Vedanta teachings.

The doctrines of Karma and Reincarnation are slowly finding a place in the minds of many people in the West. Scholarly books on these subjects continue to be published in the West. Though from the Byzantine times of Emperor Justinian in 553 A. D., Christianity has been preaching the idea of a single birth and death, when the great essayist Maeterlinck (1862-1949) encountered the Vedantic doctrines, he wrote: “There never was a more beautiful, a juster, a purer, a more moral, fruitful and consoling, nor to

a certain point a more probable creed than reincarnation. It alone, with its doctrine of successive expiations and purifications, accounts for all the hideous injustices of fate.”

Vedanta or Hinduism is known as Sanatana Dharma, the “Eternal Religion.” It has come to be defined as “a process, not a result, a growing tradition and not a fixed revelation.” Toleration, a peculiarly Indian idea, found expression at the dawn of India’s culture. India’s relations with the world in the past proved her toleration to be the world’s greatest fertilizer. The exceptional freedom that Hinduism grants its followers and its universal acceptance of other faiths ever draws the attention of great Western thinkers. Arnold Toynbee remarked, “In the past, intolerance had gained the mastery where higher religions of Judaic origin had been in the field, while ‘live and let live’ had been the rule where the Indian ethos had been paramount.” To broaden our outlook is a great gain. Toynbee’s opinion was that “on the spiritual plane, where one inch gained is of greater consequence for mankind than a mile gained in supererogatory additions to man’s command over non-human nature, traditional religion is still holding the lead.” Toynbee made a remarkable prediction: “In a chapter of the world’s history in which the adherents of the living higher religions seem likely to enter into much more intimate relations with one another than ever before, the spirit of the Indian religions, blowing where it listeth, may perhaps help to winnow a traditional Pharisaism out of Muslim, Christian and Jewish hearts.” Dr. Floyd H. Ross has written:

One of the most vital contemporary religious and educational movements in India today is the Ramakrishna Movement. Under the leadership of men trained in the spirit of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Centres are living examples of how the timeless truths of the past have value when they are continuously re-lived and reinterpreted in the present. . . . These Ramakrishna Centres in the West are playing their own part quietly in helping to prepare the way for the united pilgrimage of mankind towards self-understanding and peace.

Ours can be the supreme ideal that Shri Ramakrishna embodied—the intuitive experience of God within our hearts. It will bring us to a spiritual state of abiding peace, security and ultimate freedom. It will bring worldly peace and security also, for the world utterly depends upon those spiritually elevated individuals. In our present age, Vedanta’s breadth, penetrating psychological insight, wide cosmological sweep, and magnificent doctrine of monism give the greatest hope to suffering humanity.

ENDNOTES

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