

# Vedanta in the West:

## Past, Present, and Future

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### What Is Vedanta?

Vedanta is the culmination of all knowledge, the sacred wisdom of the Indian sages, the sum of the transcendental experiences of the seers of Truth. It is the essence, or the conclusion, of the scriptures known as the Vedas. Because the Upanishads come at the end of the Vedas they are collectively referred to as *Vedanta*. Literally, *Veda* means "knowledge" and *anta* means "end." Vedanta is a vast subject. Its scriptures have been evolving for the last five thousand years. The three basic scriptures of Vedanta are the *Upanishads* (the revealed truths), the *Brahma Sutras* (the reasoned truths), and the *Bhagavad Gita* (the practical truths).

### Some Teachings from Vedanta

Here are some teachings from the Upanishads: "Arise! Awake! Approach the great teachers and learn." "Aham Brahmasmi." [I am Brahman.] "Tattwamasi." [Thou art That.] "Sarvam khalu idam Brahma." [Verily, everything is Brahman.] "Whatever exists in this changing universe is enveloped by God." "If a man knows Atman here, he then attains the true goal of life." "Om is the bow; the Atman is the arrow; Brahman is said to be the mark. It is to be struck by an undistracted mind." "He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman." "His hands and feet are everywhere. His eyes, heads, and mouths are everywhere. His

ears are everywhere. He pervades everything in the universe." "Speak the truth. Practise dharma. Do not neglect your study of the Vedas. Treat your mother as God. Treat your father as God. Treat your teacher as God. Treat your guest as God." "What should I do with that [wealth] which would not make me immortal?" "The Infinite is bliss. There is no bliss in anything finite." "Lead us from the unreal to the real. Lead us from darkness to light. Lead us from death to immortality."

### **How Vedanta Came to the West**

In 1650, fifty Upanishads were translated into Persian under the patronage of Prince Dara Shikoh, a son of Sajahan, emperor of Delhi. From 1801 to 1802, those Upanishads were translated into Latin by Anquetil Duperron, a French scholar, under the title *Oupnekhat*. Schopenhauer read this Latin translation and later remarked: "In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death." In the late nineteenth century, Max Muller, Paul Deussen, and other German orientalists spread the Vedantic ideas in the West.

In 1846, the Bhagavad Gita was translated into English for the first time by Sir Charles Wilkins. Thomas Carlyle read the Bhagavad Gita and presented a copy to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was familiar with the Upanishadic truths and studied the Gita. He wrote a beautiful poem on the subject, entitled "Brahma," and an essay, "The Over-Soul." Emerson was the leader of the Transcendental Movement, which originated in Concord, Massachusetts, near Boston, and reached its height by 1840. The American Oriental Society was established in 1842. Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Edward Perkins Channing, John Greenleaf Whittier, Amos Bronson Alcott, and other

Transcendentalists brought the spirituality of India to the United States. "I bathe my intellect," wrote Thoreau, "in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and literature seem to be puny and trivial." Alcott was instrumental in bringing out the American edition of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, an epic poem on the life of Buddha.

### **"I Have a Message to the West"**

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda came to the United States to represent Vedic religion on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. After his great success at the Parliament, he lectured in various cities in the United States and became well known. On 30 December 1894, he told an audience at the Brooklyn Ethical Society: "I have a message to the West, as Buddha had a message to the East."

What did Vivekananda teach in the West? He taught Vedanta, the universal philosophy and religion of the Upanishads, which originated thousands of years ago in India. Western audiences heard something new in his message: Sectarianism, bigotry, superstition, and intolerance were all swept aside to make room for the harmony of all religions. It was an overwhelming message of goodwill and brotherly love.

Vivekananda redefined religion in the following statements for his Western audiences: "You must bear in mind that religion does not consist in talk, or doctrines or books, but in realization. It is not learning but *being*." "The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is an atheist who does not believe in himself." "Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man, and man unto God. Take religion

from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes. Sense-happiness is not the goal of humanity. Wisdom is the goal of all life.”

The supreme goal of human life, according to Vivekananda, is to manifest the divinity that is within all beings. How does one do this? Vivekananda described four paths, or *yogas*: *karma*, the path of unselfish action; *bhakti*, the path of devotion; *jnana*, the path of knowledge; and *raja*, the path of meditation. These *yogas* help people to become united with God. In fact, Vivekananda’s works on these four *yogas* are the manuals of practical Vedanta and a great contribution to the West.

### **Vivekananda’s Struggle**

Nowadays it is not difficult to teach Eastern religions in the West. As a pioneer, Swami Vivekananda paved the way so that future generations could move on smoothly. At present, American people are more liberal than they were during the 1890s. Robert Ingersoll, a famous American agnostic philosopher, told Swamiji: “Fifty years ago you would have been hanged if you had come to preach in this country, or you would have been burned alive.” Modern technology is making the world smaller day by day.

Missionaries polluted the minds of the American people by spreading misinformation about the Hindus, so they could raise money for their missionary work in India. When Swamiji arrived in America, he was asked questions like these: “Do the people of India throw their children into the jaws of crocodiles? Do they kill themselves beneath the wheels of Juggernaut? Do they burn their widows alive?” Sometimes he answered with reason and truth and sometimes he made fun of those ridiculous questions with witty answers. In Los Angeles he once replied to the crocodile question, “Yes, madam, but I was one who

escaped." In Detroit he said, "I was such a fat little baby that the crocodile refused to swallow me." In Minneapolis he said: "Yes, madam, they threw me in. But like your fabled Jonah, I got out again." Or, when the question applied to girls only, Swamiji replied, "Yes, madam, and nowadays all the babies are born of men." Or in response to the same question, "Probably because they are softer and more tender and can be more easily masticated."

On 16 February 1894 Swamiji told the following story to a reporter for the *Detroit Evening News*:

"I was traveling on the train from Minneapolis. An American gentleman came and sat down beside me. He asked me, 'Are you a Spaniard?' I replied, 'No, I come from India.' 'India? Where's that? I never studied jography [sic].' I told him, 'On the other side of the globe, in Asia.' 'O, you are a heathen.' 'Yes,' I answered, 'that's what they call me in this country.' 'Then you'll go to hell.' 'I hope not,' I said, 'for though you people with the thermometer below zero may not care so much, we who live in a hot country where it is 120 degrees in the shade, do not want to go where it is hotter.'" While getting down from the train that gentleman reminded Swamiji: "You're a heathen and you will go to hell. Don't you forget that."

Behind Vivekananda's success, there was much struggle and hardship. The persecution he suffered in his early days in the United States is truly amazing and even alarming. One day he was walking along a street in Boston. Seeing him in his turban and robes, some boys began to throw stones at him. He ran into a narrow lane and hid to save himself. Once in Chicago, an American man elbowed him down on the sidewalk. When Swamiji asked the man why he had behaved that way, he replied in surprise, "Oh, you know English!" Swamiji was refused service in a restaurant because of his complexion. At a dinner in Detroit,

when Swamiji was about to sip his coffee, he saw Sri Ramakrishna standing by his side, and heard him say: "Don't drink! That is poison!" When some missionaries tried to spread lies about him, his American friends urged him to defend himself. He replied: "Why should I attack in return? It is not the monk's place to defend himself. Besides, Truth will have its way, believe me. Truth alone triumphs."

### **Vedanta Societies in the West**

Swami Vivekananda taught in America and Europe during two visits to the West, spending a total of five years spreading the message of Vedanta. Four other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna -- Swamis Saradananda, Abhedananda, Turiyananda, and Trigunatitananda -- came to the West for varying periods. Swamiji established the Vedanta Society of New York in 1894 and the Vedanta Society of San Francisco in 1900. The Vedanta movement was continued by the next generation of monks of the Ramakrishna Order, who established centers in various cities in the United States. At present, there are thirteen affiliated Vedanta centers in the United States and Canada and nearly twenty branch centers under the Ramakrishna Order. Beyond that, there are many Vedanta centers all over the United States that are not affiliated with the Ramakrishna Order.

Our swamis work hard to spread the message of Vedanta by various means, such as lectures and classes, rituals and meditation, spiritual instruction and counseling, retreats and devotional singing, interfaith dialogue and children's classes, bookshops and Web sites. The monks of the Ramakrishna Order have translated into English many Vedanta works of literature, such as the Upanishads, the Gita, Brahma Sutras, and works of Shankara, and have written many books on Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, Vivekananda, and other

spiritual subjects. Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature has been translated into many languages, including German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, Lithuanian, Japanese, and more. The publications of the Ramakrishna monks have had a tremendous impact on the religious culture of the West. We might not have millions of members, but millions of Western intellectuals are aware of our movement. Our work is moving slowly but steadily.

### **The Future of Vedanta**

In the nineteenth century, the main focus of religion was on reason; in the twentieth century, it focused on humanism. If anyone were to ask me what type of religion will play a vital role in the twenty-first century, my answer would be mysticism. Mystics commune with God through love and contemplation. They exist in every religion, and they are in a class by themselves. Sri Ramakrishna said about mystics, "All jackals in the world howl in the same way." In other words, mystics of different religions may speak different languages, but their experience of oneness is always the same. A medieval Indian mystic wrote: "There may be different kinds of oil in different lamps, the wicks also may be of different kinds, but when they burn, we have the same flame and illumination."

Fanatics and fundamentalists in all religions quarrel and fight among, and between, themselves. In 1897 at Lahore, Swamiji told a Hindu fundamentalist: "I have the power to bring one-third of the population of the world under the banner of Sri Ramakrishna, but I have no intention of doing so. That would counteract my guru's great message of harmony, 'As many faiths, so many paths,' and a new sect would originate in India."

Nowadays in the West many people avoid organized religion because it seems to be polluted by corruption and politics. Monistic Vedanta has never been an

organized religion; it depends on experience and is not confined to any personal God, prophet, or book. Referring to interreligious relations, Swami Nikhilananda wrote: "Religions are human institutions [and] cannot be absolutely perfect, but God is perfect. Religion is not God, but shows the way to God. It is said that Satan was once asked how he would tempt a possessor of pure truth, and he replied that he would tempt him to organize it."

At present, some people say: We have read enough; we have heard many sermons; now we want experience. At present this sentiment is popular in the West. We live in an age when creeds are being shaken, dogmas are being questioned, and traditions are dissolving. Some Western thinkers have predicted that doctrine, dogma, and ritual will not be able to sustain religion in the twenty-first century. Because the Upanishadic religion is universal and free from doctrine, dogma, or creed, it will attract the world's liberal and intellectual individuals.

What kind of changes in Vedanta should we expect in this new millennium? Vedanta teaches the truth, which never changes. Two thousand years ago Christ said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Can this gospel truth be changed? The ten commandments of Moses and the four noble truths of Buddha will not change. A.N. Whitehead wrote: "Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development."

Similarly, Swamiji said: "Religion is growth. Religion is the realization of spirit as spirit, not spirit as matter." Vedanta cannot be a stagnant religion. Is there any difference between the Vedanta taught by Shankara and by Vivekananda? The answer is both "no" and "yes." Swamiji taught the same nondualistic Vedanta



that Shankara did. Shankara, however, refuted the qualified nondualistic and dualistic schools, whereas Swamiji said that those three philosophical schools of Vedanta are not contradictory but complementary. If you take pictures of the sun from morning to evening, each picture will be different -- but they will all be of the same sun. Shankara established his nondualistic philosophy by refuting seventy-two schools of thought; Swamiji taught the same nondualism through his jnana yoga and other lectures. He took the essence of the Upanishads and presented it to his Western audiences in modern, rational language that they could understand. He neither used Indian logic nor refuted any school of thought. This was something new. Furthermore, he introduced his practical Vedanta by saying: "Serve human beings as God." Actually there is no difference between "I am Brahman," and "Thou art That." According to the need of the age, Swamiji taught the moral, ethical, spiritual, practical, and universal aspects of Vedanta: the divinity of the Soul, the unity of existence, the Oneness of Godhead, and the harmony of religions.

Nowadays we see so much bloodshed and hatred in the name of religion. Seeing narrowness, bigotry, and various kinds of superstition among the dualistic religions, Swamiji said: "The monistic idea will come out of Vedanta, and it is the one idea that deserves to live. For this is the truth, and truth is eternal. And truth itself teaches that it is not the special property of any individual or nation.... Dualistic ideas have ruled the world long enough, and this is the result. Why not make a new experiment? It may take ages for all minds to receive monism, but why not begin now? If we have told it to twenty persons in our lives, we have done a great work." Despite the greatness of monistic Vedanta, it will never appeal to the masses because this ideal is too lofty for ordinary people.

Vedanta is not a missionary religion. It never uses force to convert people. Religion and love cannot be forced. There are three missionary religions of the world: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism spread through love and friendship. Long ago nations were ruled by monarchies; if the king and the queen were converted to a particular religion, their subjects were automatically converted to that religion. This is the way England, Italy, Gaul, and Spain were converted to Christianity during the time of Pope Gregory (590-604 A.D.). But those days are gone.

On 8 April 1900 in San Francisco, Vivekananda gave a lecture entitled "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" In this lecture, Swamiji pointed out that three things are necessary to make a religion: a book (scripture), a prophet, and a personal God. First, Vedanta does not believe that any one book can contain all the truths about God, the soul, and the Ultimate Reality. It says that all scriptures are in the category of lower knowledge, and that higher knowledge is the experience of the Ultimate Reality. Second, Vedanta pays respect to all the great souls of the world, but no one man or woman has ever become an object of worship among Vedantins. So there is no particular prophet in Vedanta. Third, Vedanta teaches a democratic God: Its God is not a monarch sitting on a throne. Vedanta teaches that the God Who is in everyone has become everyone and everything.

Observing the American love for democracy and freedom, Swamiji said: "There is a chance of Vedanta becoming the religion of your country because of democracy. But it can become so only if you can and do clearly understand it, if you become real men and women, not people with vague ideas and superstitions in your brains, and if you want to be truly spiritual, since Vedanta is concerned only with spirituality." He said: "No book, no person, no personal God. All these

must go. Worship everything as God — every form is His temple. All else is delusion. Always look within, never without. Such is the God that Vedanta preaches, and such is His worship.”

Swamiji admitted that books, prophets, rituals, ceremonies, and so on have their places. In this lecture Swamiji finally said: “The hour comes when great men shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the spirit by the spirit.”

As a blazing fire cannot be hidden, so the truths of Vedanta will not remain obscure forever. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Indian religious teachers came to the West to teach hatha yoga, meditation, Hindu scriptures and rituals. In 1976, during the bicentennial celebration of the United States, the Smithsonian Institution arranged a wonderful exhibition in Washington, D.C., where twenty-six pavilions were set up for each distinguished foreign visitor who came to the United States between 1776 and 1914. It also published a commemorative volume entitled *Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation (1776-1914)* that recorded their observations and contributions. Among those famous visitors, Swami Vivekananda was the only representative from India.

At present we need some genuine and dynamic teachers in the West who can demonstrate Vedanta religion in their lives and disseminate universal teachings of the Upanishads and the Gita without any commercial motive.

Sister Nivedita, Vivekananda's Irish disciple, wrote to Miss Josephine MacLeod on 11 April 1906: “You see, when we who understood Swamiji and remember him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence, for the work that he did. It will seem to be forgotten, until suddenly, in 150 or 200 years, it will be found to have transformed the West.”

Swami Vivekananda started the Vedanta movement in the West. One hundred years have passed since he left this world on 4 July 1902. Still his immortal spiritual teachings are flowing in the veins of humanity. One year before his *mahasamadhi*, he said: "I have given them enough for fifteen hundred years."