

Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy

(A REVIEW ARTICLE)*

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SWAMI HARSHANANDA

Swami Vivekananda once remarked: 'What is now wanted is a combination of the greatest heart with the highest intellectuality...and it is possible to have the intellect of a Shankara with the heart of Buddha. I hope we shall all struggle to attain to that blessed combination.' (*Complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2, P. 145). We can safely say that Swamiji personified in himself this ideal. And, it is the chief characteristic of his philosophy too.

In his eagerness to make religion more simple and appealing to the masses, Buddha overlooked the intellectual aspect and paid greater attention to the heart. In his anxiety to counter the power of logic of nihilism of the later writers on Buddhism and to re-establish the religion of the Upanishads, Shankara worked the other way. But modern Hinduism, ushered by Vivekananda and based on the principle of harmony of Ramakrishna, has got to synthesize these two aspects of religion, the heart and the intellect.

Dr. Tapash Sankar Dutta has made an honest and serious attempt to highlight this philosophy of Swamiji in the above-mentioned book, which is his doctoral thesis.

Comprising 12 chapters and spread over 300 pages, the work makes a good survey of all available literature on the subject and tries to evolve Vivekananda's philosophy out of it.

The first chapter which is a preamble, in-

*A STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF VIVEKANANDA (with reference to Advaita Vedanta and the great universal heart of Buddha). By Tapash Sankar Dutta, M.A., Ph.D. Published by Sribhumi Publishing Company, 79, Mahtama Gandhi Road, Calcutta-9. March 1982, pp. 316+10. Price: Rs. 50/-.

roduces the topic by making a survey of Vedic and Upanishadic literature as also the different schools of Vedanta. The author has particularly noted Vivekananda's refusal to accept gradations in the four well-known Yogas and according an independent status to Karma Yoga as a way of realization (p. 16). It is here that he has introduced the subject of the thesis through Vivekananda's words quoted in full.

The second chapter makes a rapid exposition of Advaita Vedanta. The third chapter deals with Vivekananda's exposition of the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara. Special attention has been paid to his explanation of the concept of Maya. "Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world—it is simply a statement of facts as they exist ... the very basis of our being in contradiction." The author has taken pains to show the positive approach of Vivekananda to Brahman and the world, as opposed to Shankara's negative approach. Though Swamiji's exposition of the Jnana Kanda aspect of Vedanta is identical with Shankara's, his exposition of Karma in his lectures on Karma Yoga and elsewhere, shows him in an entirely different light. Since Mayavada negates the world completely, a follower of Mayavada, is not obliged to remain in the world and work for himself or for others. However, a follower of Vivekananda whether a Sannyasin or a householder is obliged to serve others, not just out of compassion, but as manifestations of God Himself (pp. 44-45). Incidentally this shows that Swamiji himself was a combination of Shankara's intellect and Buddha's heart.

The next chapter deals with Buddha and Buddhism. While discussing the principle of dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*)

the author has tried to show its acunae (p. 58). It is interesting to note the author's remarks (p. 61), that Buddhism failed to offer mankind any permanent solution to life's manifold problems and that it will never be reinstated in the framework of modern society (p. 65).

The fifth chapter delineates Swamiji's views about Buddha and Buddhism and attempts at gauging their influence on him. Though Swamiji eulogized the universal love of Buddha ecstatically, he was also conscious of the harm done to our society by imposing the monastic way of life indiscriminately on all who were least qualified for it (pp. 68-69). Though he did not accept Buddha's denial of soul and God, he commended Buddha's way of life, unselfish to the core, which led to gigantic spiritual heights. He was an ideal Karma Yogin. But he also saw the danger inherent in the concept of a Karma Yoga bereft of the concept of soul (p. 80). Hence he supplied the missing link of the permanent soul, thus saving Karma Yoga and opening another wide path towards perfection.

The next chapter makes a comparative study of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta in the light of Vivekananda's observations. The author has ably pointed out (p. 83) how Shankara met and vanquished the devastating logic of the Buddhist philosophy by asserting the reality of Brahman on the basis of Sruti. It was the mistake of the later Buddhists that they developed dry logic instead of concentrating on the four noble truths and the eightfold path.

The seventh chapter expounds the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, since they form the basis of Vivekananda's philosophy. Sri Ramakrishna again, was the very embodiment of the teachings of not only the Upanishads but of all aspects of Hindu spiritual development. His immense and deep knowledge of the essence of scriptures was based not on punditry, but on direct experience. The general survey of his teachings does not fail to note his emphasis on the cultivation of Bhakti as the most efficacious means of Sadhana (pp. 110 and 118). The

speciality of Sri Ramakrishna's 'Sakti' *vis-a-vis* the 'Maya' of Shankara has also been recognized (p. 123). The four noble truths which Vivekananda often stressed, viz., the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of the Godhead, the unity of existence and harmony of all religions, were the direct result of Sri Ramakrishna's influence and training (pp. 129, 130). However, it was Sri Ramakrishna's concept of service to Jiva as Siva that stirred Swamiji to his greatest depths (pp. 138-141).

The eighth chapter entitled 'His (Vivekananda's) Philosophic Thought' is, by far, the most important chapter, containing the central theme of the thesis. Christening Swamiji's philosophy as "Neo-Vedantism", the author proceeds to unfold it in this chapter. The relevant points may now be briefly stated: This 'Neo-Vedanta' is no doubt Advaitism, but is more comprehensive than the traditional Advaitism. If the old Advaita Vedanta says 'All this is nothing', the new Advaita Vedanta says 'All this is nothing but Brahman.' It integrates all schools of Vedanta, instead of totally denying all other schools except itself. The theory of the Divinity of the soul and oneness of the universe is made practical, especially through service to Jiva as Siva. This presupposes a strong intellectual base and a heart of universal love. The fusion of Buddha's heart and Shankara's intellect has been achieved here. As a result Vedanta has been made practical. It has been brought out of forests and caves and broadcast among all people without any distinction. The effect of this, according to Vivekananda, would be astounding. Every person, whatever be his work or status, will become better in every respect (p. 165). Incidentally, this Vedantic view of life can solve the problems created by the wrong application of caste system in our life (p. 166). Following in the footsteps of Sri Ramakrishna's theory of Vijnana as superior to Jnana, Swamiji has solved the problem of antagonism among the three wellknown Vedantic systems by explaining them as three steps in the path to perfection, suitable to three different types of

spiritual aspirants (p. 168). Integration of the four wellknown paths of Yoga into a single harmonious path of Sadhana is another unique contribution of Vivekananda. The author opines that the greatest contribution of Vivekananda lies in his emphasis on collective liberation as opposed to individual liberation (p. 181). This is *Advaita par excellence*.

The ninth chapter devotes itself to show how Vivekananda's solutions to the economic and social problems of mankind are better than those of Marx. Whereas Marxism is based on materialism and atheism, Vivekananda's solutions are based on Advaita Vedanta. Though both are at one with regard to the evils of exploitation by capitalism, their solutions are poles apart. Vivekananda's call to the 'haves' to serve the 'have-nots' as God Himself and work for their upliftment provides a firm basis for both to co-operate and be happy, thus avoiding strife and bloodshed, which would be inevitable in a godless society.

The 10th chapter deals with 'Vivekananda—the Future Man' who left indelible footprints on the sands of time. The author has successfully attempted to show how Swamiji—unlike the philosophers of the old—did not explain away the world, but made religion intensely practical and applicable to solving the day-to-day problems of life in the world (p. 237). He defined religion as realization and made ethical life as necessary but subservient to it. He exhorted man to take all responsibility for his weaknesses or failures. He advocated the preaching of fearlessness to one and all. The author has called this a 'new-existentialism.' His new philosophy of work, of serving the Jiva as Siva, a philosophy which demolishes the distinction between the sacred and the secular, which declares that 'to labour is to pray', 'to conquer is to renounce', 'Life itself is religion', has successfully transformed the Marxian concept of labour as a means of self-fulfilment and economic sufficiency, to a means of manifesting one's potential divinity also (p. 247).

Swamiji's solution to the caste problem, that of 'levelling up' the society, in which task the Brahmins have 'to play a prominent role is the next topic discussed here. His prescription of 'renunciation and service' as the twin national ideals is dealt with at the end. All these show that Swamiji not only [preached but also personified in himself the ideal future man.

The next chapter entitled 'Vivekananda—the Eternal Spirit of Mankind' depicts Swamiji as a man of God, as a prophet whose utterances about India's ideal can be ignored only at our peril. We have to build a new society based on the best of East and West.

The last chapter concludes the thesis with relevant observations.

And now some general remarks on the book as a whole. There is no doubt that this is the first serious attempt at presenting Vivekananda's philosophy in a systematic way. But there are many repetitions, not only with regard to ideas, but also quotations—for instance, compare the quotations on pp. 165 and 185. Printing mistakes are fairly numerous (for eg. p. 14 "trance" for "trace"; p. 59 "philisophy" for "philosophy".) There are other mistakes also such as "wagmire" for "Quagmire" (p. 89), "joyful" for "jugful" (p. 104), "wondering" for "wandering" (p. 104 and 151), "illumed" for "illumined" (p. 181) and so on. The subtitle "A new Social Philosophy" is missing on p. 250. In the long list of Bibliography there are quite a few repetitions: Serial Nos. 17 and 281, 47 and 102, 56 and 59, 78 and 307. "Katha" has always been spelt as "Katho"! (pp. 6, 12, and 25).

In these days of soaring costs of paper and printing, the price is modest.

The author deserves the gratitude of all admirers of Vivekananda for this work. He can consider seriously, the bringing out of an abridged edition of this work at a reasonably lower price.