

## **THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE**

### **Vedanta: Principle, Preaching and Practice Swami Swahananda**

The subject we have chosen is very pe-culiar. And I would like to present the subject from a slightly different standpoint. Swami Vivekananda, when he organized the movement in America, he called it 'Vedanta Society'. The first such society was set up in New York in 1895. But when he came back to India and started the spiritual movement, he called it 'Ramakrishna Mission'. He chose to do so because almost all the Hindu sects in India are Vedantic in some way or other. So Swamiji wanted to specify what type of Vedanta will be preached here in the name of his 'Guru'. In America he did not do it, he only described it in very general terms.

Till 1930 Vedanta was more or less preached through lectures at various conferences. It was highly academic and intellectual way of presentation in those days. India was also occasionally talked about here and there, especially the spiritual service that she rendered to the world at large. We know that Swami Abhedananda's *India and Her People* was prescribed in those days to Vedanta enthusiasts in America. The book was then much talked about.

Now things have of course changed as two million Indians have gone to America and another two million to Canada and many of them are highly qualified. So, people in the West are getting more and more familiar with various aspects of India.

When I was in Delhi before going to the United States in the 60s, there was an 'Orientation Course' organized by the Delhi University with the help of the US

Embassy. The Course intended to give some idea of India to students who were going to the West. It was Swami Nikhilananda who was the head of a centre in New York and a well-known speaker who took the initiative in this matter. He met Nehru when he came here, and said 'please give some knowledge of Indian religion and other things to young boys and girls who are destined to go to America. This is necessary because, whenever they are asked any question about India, they do not seem to know anything; they do not care for a religion at all'. As a result, the Government introduced the two-week Course that covered a wide range of topics—Brahman to Indian hairstyle. I was invited there once.

In America and other Western countries we preach Vedanta mainly as a principle. But prior to the preaching of the Indian swamis, Buddhism gained currency in European countries. Then, with the appearance of Romain Rolland, Max Müller and other people books were translated and the Upanishads became gradually known, but mainly in academic circles. Probably Swami Vivekananda was the first Indian who talked about Vedanta in the West in a special way. Of course, *Light of Asia* and other books had already made some good impression on the Western mind and Orientalists were there, who somewhat prepared the way for Vedanta. Carlyle presented a copy of the *Gita* to Emerson. The copy is still preserved in the National Library near Boston. So, some exposures to Vedanta were already there but not too much. Swami Vivekananda made it much popular, not merely the theory but more in the practical experience of things.

In our preaching today in the West, we lay stress on ten principal ideas related to Vedanta. The first idea is the idea of unity of existence, ie Brahman. Brahman and âtman are the two major ideas which are original contributions of the Indian thinkers to the spiritualthink-tank of the world.

As regards Brahman, three issues are there. What is the ultimate nature of Man? What is the ultimate nature of Nature? What is the ultimate nature of God? Advaita Vedanta says, all these three are one. But there are two other systems of Vedanta. They say there is but one reality, and that is God, a

personalized God. He has got a body which is the summation of all bodies. He has got a soul, but it is the summation of all souls. Madhva and others are more dualistic in form and sometimes they are included in the philosophical works and sometimes not because they are more theological. Most of the religious systems are not philosophical systems. They are, in fact, theological systems. Once I had an experience of meeting a big Jewish scholar. We were speaking from the same platform. After our talks, some questions were asked and we had to answer them. What amused me was that whenever an intellectual type of question came, the scholar said, 'Let the Swami answer this question. He is a philosopher, I am a theologian'

So Brahman idea, as Swami Vivekananda says, is 'Unique'. Because when you are rooted in this idea, you become moral, sympathetic, philanthropic and ethical as there is a feeling in you of the presence of the same Divine in all. So love becomes a natural concomitant of spiritual life.

The special contribution of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in this age is that they have made Vedanta dynamic, more useful in our actual day-to-day life. Their teaching and preaching of the Brahman idea theoretically comes very near to scientific and philosophical thoughts. So, people like it.

### Divinity of man

The second idea is the idea of divinity of man or the âtman idea. The question came: 'What is our nature?' And queries started from things which are known. Where is our âtman, if it is a reality? Though scientists and logicians and others dismissed its existence, we know it exists although we cannot demonstrate it physically. Thus we start enquiry from there. Who are you? Are you a body? That question comes first. Of course, the body is there and ordinarily we cannot think of our existence without our body. But if we analyse, we know this body would not last more than a hundred years. Temporary existence cannot be called a reality. At best it is a temporal reality. I put an American dress on an Indian girl. Today it is there, tomorrow it would not be there. So body is like that, it is not a permanent entity.

After the gross body comes the mind which is subtle and therefore difficult to define. Thinkers found it quite difficult to explain. But we know mind is there as it becomes sometimes too much with us. But the question is—are we the mind? No. Why? Because mind also changes all the time. Even the philosophical systems, especially the Indian systems, believe in the transmigration of souls with the mind continuing from birth to birth. But they also visualize a time when this mind will have a stop, when it will be negated.

Is there anything beyond our body and mind? The materialist says, there is nothing beyond. But they are cornered when they are reminded that nothing comes out of nothing. Here is a man hale and hearty. How can you say that he is nothing permanent? Cornered by this simple question, the materialists, except of course the agnostics, had to give up their position. What is agnosticism? 'I do not know if God exists or not' sort of attitude. The agnostics hold that nothing is known beyond material phenomena. So if somebody says 'I do not know', how can you argue with him? But with great confidence the Vedantist says, 'We know'. How? By our special methodology of anubhuti, or bodhi, or experience. They say, 'We do not accept your methodology.' The Vedantist replies, 'It does not matter. You have already agreed that you do not know the fundamental nature of things'. You know, it is one of the limitations of the sciences that you cannot know the fundamental nature of things because science deals with phenomena and the created things. 'Why it came' or 'How it came' is purely an idea of time and causation. You cannot ask that question regarding something which is not material, which is a transcendental reality.

Anyhow, Vedanta is the mouthpiece of all religions in some form or other. It asserts that man's original nature is not the body, not the mind. His essential nature is that he is the Spirit. That is the Vedantic idea. Man's nature is divine which is ever existing. What exists is divine. Man also is divine in this

sense. That is the core, the spiritual part of human being. Spiritual means that which is fine, indestructible and imperishable. This second idea very much influenced the American mind in the days of Swami Vivekananda, because in Christian theology the idea of sin was predominant in those days. Now they have toned it down. Higher religion of course talks about love of God and does not make much fuss about sin and all that. Anyhow that old tendency of Christian theologians has somewhat lessened nowadays. But since it is a basic part of their system, it is difficult for them to give it up.

Anyhow, at that time the Americans heard Swami Vivekananda's words that divinity is man's true nature. His famous saying—'Children of immortality! It is a sin to call you a sinner'—thrilled them. For the first time they discovered that they were not 'sinners' but the children of immortality. A tremendous exuberance came out of that discovery.

Secondly, Swami Vivekananda described freedom as the goal of spirituality, the goal of religion. But, according to traditional theologians, the goal was salvation. The Americans like the idea of freedom very much, as they do not believe in degradation of human beings. When the Europeans first migrated to America they found America was vast and empty. They found miles after miles one man could own. Thousand acres were nothing. Hundred miles, two hundred miles one man could own. So this is the vastness. And if you tell such people that 'you are nothing', it is psychologically impossible for them to accept that idea. But when they are told that 'you are everything', 'you are the master of the world' they will listen to you. So, when Swamiji uttered that bold Vedantic truth, they immediately gave him a hearing.

In America, when I go to different circles, except our Vedantic groups, normally they do not like to argue with us. They immediately go to theology based upon particular books. In one sense we also depend on the Vedas, but reasoning remains uppermost in our mind.

#### The idea of One God

The third idea Vedanta has is the idea of One God, the unity of Godhead. Different religions say different things. Hindus say like that, Muslims say like that. But how to reconcile all these? Ordinary people say, either you are right or I am right. And, of course, I am always right. That is the attitude. So the Vedantins say, 'No, all the people can be right at the same time. They give the analogy of a woman. She is mother to somebody, wife to somebody, sister to somebody. Even she may be the Prime Minister of a big country like India. But what is the total woman? She is the summation of all these descriptions plus something more.

It was difficult previously to put across that idea. But in this nuclear age, that is possible. We can tell them that as energy inherent in an atom can come out if you know how to smash it, similarly, in a tiny personality of a man or a woman, so much of energy is inherent. The possibility of manifesting that energy is there. This idea gradually began to be appreciated with the progress of science and other things, other discoveries.

When a child says, 'My mummy comes', the entire woman comes and transcends that also. In the same way, when Vedanta says that 'God is One', they are saying that there are different aspects or different ways of looking at God. But when a person realizes God, his look is usually partial, but he realizes the same God. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'It is purifying to take bath in the Ganga. But is it necessary to go on taking bath for 1500 miles, the whole course along which the Ganga flows? Anyhow you enter the Ganga, you get the benefit.' Similarly, 'I touch God' means I touch everything. When I touch a human being, I need not touch him from head to foot. So knowing God does not mean knowing God exhaustively. That is why S. Radhakrishnan, the former philosopher-President of India, said in one context that tolerance in Hinduism is a homage paid to the inexhaustibility of the Absolute.

Absolute is unlimited. But when It is viewed from different angles, It looks like this, looks like that and

so on. That is why Swami Vivekananda defined very scientifically that God is the Highest reading of the Absolute. Reading does not mean hundred per cent and it is not practicable either. The moment Infinite God is known to a finite mind or thought process, it is no more infinite and finite God is no God. Hinduism frankly says that. Vedanta says there is God's presence everywhere and take God as you like, according to your belief and capacity. But do not stay stuck there. Evolve the idea further and further, discourse its various aspects and go forward. So they said—unity of God.

If one God is there, understanding among religions is natural. Why is the quarrel among religions? God is the same. That is Sri Ramakrishna's contribution. The idea was there in the books, but Sri Ramakrishna recently pointed out through his direct personal experience that it is true. People like Mahatma Gandhi and those who are deeply spiritual, agree with Sri Ramakrishna. Gandhi wrote in one of his forewords that Sri Ramakrishna's life helps us to see God face-to-face. 'Here is a man in our contemporary time who realized God and conversed with God', he said.

So harmony of religions is a very natural thing. But conversion mars this spirit of harmony. All conversions are politically and socially motivated. Those who are coaxed to change their religion are fed with certain theory and belief. But believing something does not mean it is true. The Al-Qaida people believe that by killing people they go to heaven directly. Now the point is, how to control them? They are terrorists. If they are killed, they go to heaven. If they live, they are successful. How to solve this puzzle? Everybody is wondering.

Be that as it may, mere believing is not enough. Religion must produce good people. That is the major idea. So these are the four major ideas—the idea of oneness, the idea of divinity of man, the idea of One God, and the harmony of religions. What is the goal of life? Freedom. How to attain it? There are four methods which are called the four yogas. These yogas have scientific explanations. We think, we feel, we will. These are the three functions of the mind, three faculties of the mind. If these three are in the withdrawal condition, that is called the yogic or mystic states of the mind. Based on these states, Swami Vivekananda gave us the four yogas.

The idea of meditation

The next idea is the idea of meditation. Throughout the world, there is now a craze for meditation because many people have found it to be physiologically beneficial. That is why millions of people are practising some kind of meditation. But as they are not sure why they are doing it, half of them give up the practice after sometime because nothing dramatic happens.

Then, in Hinduism, there is an idea, and Vedanta supports it, that God is a woman, or a female. This idea appeals to people very much. Not only women, but also many men harbour such a notion. Once some study was made and it revealed that 70 per cent Americans believe that God can be a woman. Let me narrate a funny anecdote in this connection. The story runs like this: Three friends were sitting in a coffee-house discussing which was the original profession of the world. Then some lady told me, 'Swami, do not say profession, because oldest profession means something else. Please say, oldest occasion.' Then, one man said, 'My profession is the oldest'. 'What are you?' 'I am a doctor, a surgeon', he replied. 'How can you say this?' questioned another friend. And the surgeon said, 'Have'nt you read in the Bible how the world was created? How could it be possible without surgery?' 'Accepted!', said his friends.

The second man was still older. His companions asked, 'Who are you?' 'I'm an engineer and my profession is the oldest.' 'How do you know that?' the companions questioned. And the engineer said, 'The Bible says that out of chaos came the cosmos. Out of the disordered universe came the ordered universe. How it would have been possible, sir, without planning and engineering?' 'Agreed', the friends said. And now the third man was smiling. He said, 'Mine is the still older'. The engineer counter-questioned, 'How?' 'Just you have heard,' he said, 'that out of chaos came the cosmos. But

who brought in the chaos?’

Everybody kept quiet and that is all about the female God. Now, another idea that appeals very much to the Westerners is the idea of karma and rebirth. When some people ask them why they turn to Hinduism, one of the major answers they give is: ‘It is more logical in the sense of karma and remuneration’. Indeed, karma theory is rooted in reason. Otherwise, how do you explain the discrepancies in life? I am a poor man. I may be also a rich man’s son. I may be a boy or a girl. Why? If everything is fine with me, I do not ask questions. But if something goes wrong, I say, ‘Why me?’ In all the religions, philosophies and sciences, everything put together, three answers have been given.

First, thinkers, logicians, scientists and others say, it is a very natural thing that all people cannot be happy at the same time. Or, they say it is our luck, it is a chance. There is no satisfactory answer why I am chosen, I could be in the good group even. Still others say that in society, government, world order, etc., there is no ‘how’, or ‘why’.

The second answer given is that it is God who does everything. That God also is not very good because He has put me in the bad group! So instead of loving God, you will begin to hate God.

The third answer is that: Take it as your own fault, the result of your karma. But how is it possible to accept an adverse

situation as the result of my karma?

Suppose I am born blind. I have not done anything wrong. Where then is the role of my karma? The answer is, you must have a better sense of time. A girl gets up in the morning, she is spirited. The other girl looks exhausted. Why? God is neither unkind, nor partial. Try to find out what did you do last time. Actually when the other girl had a good night’s rest, you did not take it for some reason or other. So now you pay for it. That is the theory of karma. It is a concomitant idea. You cannot explain the present life without admitting the previous life. That is the basis of karma theory.

So among these three, karma theory is not merely the best, it is ‘the’ theory.

You may now say, we want proof that karma theory is the best theory. Again, this is one paradox of our life that when we talk about God or karma or some such things we want proof first. Otherwise we do not believe. But if we ask: ‘Does everybody believe that America is very great?’ The answer is ‘no’. In fact, nobody believes everything hundred per cent. Yet life goes on! Why then do you say ‘I must have proof. Then I shall believe in God’? Do you believe in your children? You are poor, still you spend all your money on children, your wife, your husband. Why? Half faith moves the world. Why then do you expect proof only in the case of God?

So these are the points we have discussed briefly—Brahman, âtman, One God, harmony of religions, freedom as the goal of life, four methods of attaining freedom, woman or female form of God, meditation, and, of course, karma and rebirth.

How do we preach these principles

These are the major principles. Now, how do we preach these in Western countries? That is a major and somewhat complex question. To put it simply, we adjust our work according to the requirements of the group we face. If we go to academic circles, we put the principles in one way, elsewhere we present them differently. We are more combative in academic circles. But in the presence of the devotees there is no use becoming combative. There our approach is casual and we try to explain things keeping in view their levels of understanding. We also talk about things that appeal to them most. They are average devotees, I am not talking about very highly intellectual people.

I remember one lady who wanted me to give a talk in a university telling me, 'Swami, all the humanities professors are Vedantic in view. But that does not mean they will become members of your society because academicians are always agnostic'. The lady was right in her assessment. Because the moment you take a side, you are out. You are no more an important person. That is the idea. So academic people take Vedanta in one way and the common men and women take it in different ways. So in preaching we stress the basic idea of the divinity of man. It appeals to them very much. There will be arguments for and against. All the same, the idea pulls them because they feel glorified. Swami Vivekananda always projected their good side, not the bad side. You cannot encourage, not only a child, but even a grown-up person by showing all his /her defects. You have to show their plus points which Swamiji did. Thus the dignity of man as an idea is very interesting and it creates a great impression on the minds of the Western people.

Then of course we preach the idea of harmony of religions. It is a major idea which all thinking people like to accept. Arnold Toynbee once predicted that by the 21st century, the entire world will have to accept the liberal ideas of emperor Ashoka, Gandhi and Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna out of his direct personal experience preached the equal validity of religions. Truth is there in every religion, he said firmly. This second idea is also accepted now by the Western people. Even the Muslims and Christians in this country believe that God is the same. Only theologians come and try to confuse them. But then, by analysis they come to believe in the same God. So that is another point that God can be in other religions also. Swami Vivekananda said that the theory of 'Ishta' (chosen ideal) can solve much of the religious quarrels of the world. According to your liking you worship and according to my liking I worship my chosen ideal or Ishta.

Then the concept of God as a woman. That is a wonderful idea. Not merely women, but men also like the concept. Seventy per cent of Americans believe that God can be a woman. That is an important idea. Patriarchal societies naturally believe that God is a male person. 'Have you got any woman Avatàra?' they ask and we are cornered. We try to escape by telling them that 'Holy Mother Sarada Devi is same with Sri Ramakrishna. We do not distinguish one from the other.'

By the by, when people of our circle get initiated, after some time they want Mother. Mother attracts them very much. Why? Because Mother is all-loving, all-forgiving. That is an important point. She does not find faults. A mother loves and praises even her bad child. God is like that. So the Mother-aspect, especially Holy Mother satisfies them very much. So we preach to them the life and compassion of the Holy Mother.

Then, as I said, we have to explain the karma theory whenever occasion arises. Many mothers come to us when their children turn wayward and become drug addicts or get involved in some unpleasant activities. 'What sin I committed, what mistake I committed that my boy has turned like this!' I try to assure them saying that it is not your fault. The karma theory has come with its own bundle of karma. According to the law of karma, I say, it is not the parents who choose their children, it is children who choose their parents. A soul is to be born. So it looks around—'Where shall I go?' Now if he did some meritorious work before, he should be born perhaps as a rich man's son. But if he did evil actions, he may be born in a rich family but as a sick man's son. That is the theological formulation of the karma theory. So this is the type of things we preach generally in America and other Western countries.

Spiritual life is of course rooted in deep thinking. It is an attitude. Work is an expression of thought. But real spirituality, I believe, is thinking. God is everywhere and I must serve God—that is the idea. God is present here and now. Swamiji said, 'Go and serve the poor'. We try to put into practice mainly this attitude, mainly this conviction in different life situations.

But we have the theistic practices also. 'Puja', for example, is a very popular practice. Our great Ashokananda Swami was an Advaitin. But he gave instructions to nuns and some monks that they must worship daily. 'Puja' is a means to develop devotion, develop love for God, develop the feeling of

the presence of the Divine. When you do puja daily with that attitude, feeling comes. You feel God is real. Other paths also may give such feeling but not so directly. Meditation, for example, is more difficult. So 'puja' has been introduced now. That gives believers of other religions some idea of what you are doing. So puja has become very popular. Other religious groups, I believe, are more celebration-oriented. We are basically not so celebration-oriented. But, I am afraid, in America we are gradually

succumbing to popular taste. People like celebration which means eating, singing and dancing. Of course, dancing we do not allow. But anyhow by and large these are the things people like.

Many people in America think we are serious people and we do not mind. Rather we think it is a compliment. Incidentally, a famous American professor, who subsequently became a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, approached a swami preaching in America and said, 'I want to realize God. I want to seriously practise spirituality.' Then the swami told him: 'Then you go to Vedanta Society. They talk about serious spiritual life. But they are very dry, no singing, no dancing.' Of course we also try to bring some variety nowadays. That is the idea of practice.

We do not insist in America that everybody should come for 'puja'. If you have not seen puja, we say 'come and sit'. That is an education itself. Then you can try to enter into it and increase your understanding of the philosophy behind puja rituals and all that.

Western system or Semitic religions are group-oriented, while Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are essentially individualistic. I make contact with God quietly. But sometime we must do it together. You may meditate in a group. In a way it is better because you cannot get up so easily. You look around and find that others are sitting quietly. So you cannot jump up as it may not look nice. In a sense a group meditation is better. Of course, you must have willingness. Otherwise you will not go there at all. But even willingness often fails because you do not have the determination.

Group meditation gives a sort of stamina. Nisthà or dedication comes out of it. Most men and women in the world are moral, not because they want to be moral, but because of social pressure. I am a drunkard. I love drinking. Then my child is born. I am afraid my child will be taking to drinking. So I give up or try to give up the habit. I once enjoyed telling lies, it was all right. But then I reasoned what my wife will think about her husband. So I stop telling lies. That is why it is said that social pressure and social expectations make you moral.

Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography said that nobody can be purely honest without a faith in God. Your real character will be revealed when you are not supervised at all by any authority how you behave. Unless there is faith, it will be difficult to remain honest morally, physically and so on. So these are some of the usual practices. We normally give meditation, japam (repetition of mantra) and some kind of private worship—minimum things. Even our centres do not do much. Only in our Hollywood centre we do elaborate worship. Our previous Swami introduced it. He believed in it. So we continue this almost like Belur Math. You have 100,000 people here, we may have 150 people there.

So these are the three ideas I have tried to present. Of course, I cannot exhaust them. First, Vedanta presents certain principles and we lay stress on some of them. Some of the principles are there in the background, either it is too intellectual or too difficult to put into practice. But, of course, you will come to discuss them. There is always a scope for discussion. And third, what they have to do. I know these. But why am I to do? The idea is that you do something with feeling. Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to tell the relief workers of the Math and Mission: 'Government has given the food for distribution among the public. But what are you going to give? You must add love to it. With respect you must give, with love you must give. That is your contribution.'

I remember Tagore. In one place someone asked, 'What is art?' He said, 'The table has four legs. To

have four legs is a necessity. But the moment you add a creeper on the wood, it is not necessary, but this is art.' Similarly, spirituality. Swami Vivekananda said, giving medicine is social service, helping humanity. But if you bring the idea of God in that person, it becomes spirituality, a spiritual practice. The only thing you add is a little thought, a little feeling. That is all.

Many in the West ask, 'Swami, what is a Guru?' Guru idea is also very prominent there and many groups present the Guru as their ideal. In our system, 'Ishta' is the ideal, but Guru is also respected. Guru, Ishta and mantra. We require meditation and meditation requires an object of meditation. Who gives it? A Guru gives it. He gives a Name, a mantra and also a discipline to be followed by the disciple. So these are the three major points I tried to bring to your notice. Every topic can be developed. But all the truth you do not give at the beginning. Holy Mother said, unless you are absolutely free from the clutches of desires, nothing will happen. Sri Ramakrishna said, spirituality without absolute purity is impossible. But that is possible step by step, as we normally do it. That is how we also normally try. But we have got our literature, we cannot escape. Scriptures will decide what we are going to tell. Sometimes it seems too much for them. Then we try to pacify them. We take everything very literally and that creates a problem. For instance, a lawyer, a good devotee, giving free service for many years, once came to me and said, 'Swami, I am in trouble because Ramakrishna's opinion is that doctors and lawyers will not be saved. I find that the only way out is to give up my profession!' Here Holy Mother comes to our help. She says, 'You have money? Share it'. Then some defects of the money will go away, though not hundred per cent. That is a compromise.

We had a Swami in England, Swami Avyaktananda, a disciple of the Holy Mother. An idealistic type. He used to say, 'No one can be honest in the dishonest society'. Society will compel you to come down and all that. Even if you do not want, situation will make you sometimes do something which you should not do. Of course, you may apply your will power. But it is difficult.

Until recently, most of the admirers of the Vedanta societies were whites. But now we have got so many Indians. Many of them are Belur Math devotees, initiated devotees. I started a centre in Washington a few years ago. There were three groups of Indians. So we avoided all the three groups. I put an American Swami there as in-charge. I am the in-charge, but in my absence he is in-charge. But I purposely said, 'I am not going into your groupings. If you believe, you come; if you do not believe, do not come.' Somebody said, 'Unless you put us in a committee, why should we help you?' 'Do not help', I said, and added, 'the city has got millions of people. I am satisfied if I get 200 people. Why should I care whether you come or not?'

Anyway, people gathered there and I found as many as 44 people came in two or three years. 'We are Belur Math devotees', they said. They saw a centre was started and they gathered around it. So, now it is easier to start centres. In those days it took about ten years.

\* This article is the abridged and edited version of Swami Swahananda's lecture delivered at the Institute on 16 December 2006. The Swami is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and the minister and spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, USA.