# UNIT 3: VIVEKANANDA'S PRACTICAL VEDANTA

## UNIT STRUCTURE


3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 Influences on Vivekananda's philosophy

3.4 Main Tenets of Vivekananda's Philosophical Thought

3.5 Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta

3.6 Four Yogas to attain Freedom

3.7 Let us Sum Up

3.8 Further Reading

3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.10 Model Questions


## 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain Swami Vivekananda's life and his philosophy
- discuss the influences which had shaped Vivekananda's personality
- analyse Vivekananda's concept of Practical Vedanta.

## 3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit attempts to make you understand the life and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, a contemporary eminent Indian thinker of pre-independence India. Swami Vivekananda was born on 12$^{th}$ January 1863 in Calcutta. He was named as Narendra in his early life. His father was Biswanath Dutta and his mother was Bhubneswari.He passed his B.A.in 1884. He received his early education in Calcutta. He was an all-rounder proving excellence in studying, physical culture, music, literature, riding, swimming, wrestling etc.

From his childhood, he was very religious and curious by nature. As such, Vivekananda had good knowledge of Indian scriptures as well

as Western thought. In 1881, he happened to meet Rama Krishna Paramhansa at Dakhineswar. This meeting proved to be a turning point in the life of Vivekananda who accepted Ramkrishna as his friend, philosopher and guide. Vivekananda travelled extensively, almost the whole of India. Thereby, he realised the real social and economic condition of the Indians. He felt that in spite of being strong in spiritual heritage, Indian culture is not able to remove poverty and social evils. For this a spiritual revolution in India is of utmost necessity. That is why, after the demise of his teacher Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda himself took the responsibility of spiritual leadership of Indian people. He represented India and participated in the Parliament of Religions which was held in Chicago, America in 1893 and continued for seventeen days. He delivered eleven lectures on Hinduism in the Parliament. In fact, he is considered as a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and yoga in Europe and America.



### LET US SUM UP

Ramakrishna Paramhansa: (18th Feb. 1836- 16th August 1886) He was called as Gadadhar Chatterjee or Gadadhar Chttopadhyay at the childhood stage. He was an Indian mystic and yogi during the 19th century. His religious school of thought was known as Ramakrishna Mission. His chief disciple, Vivekananda took part the important role in this context. His guru, Tota Puri gave him the name Ramkrishna Paramhansa.

## 3.3 INFLUENCES THAT SHAPED VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHY

Vivekananda's philosophy arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses. He realized that gradually Indian people were losing faith in spiritual values. Therefore, he aimed at spiritual awakening among the Indians. He wanted to eradicate the religious rigidity and superstitions prevalent in the

society of that period. He advocated for a reformed religion so he made a spiritual awareness among the common people of the society.

Vivekananda's thought was deeply influenced by ancient Hindu Philosophy, specially by Vedanta philosophy. The main body of his thought was derived from Hindu scriptures – *Upanisads* and *Vedanta*. **His basic belief in the essential unity of everything, which is the** completely monistic nature of Reality, owes its origin to the Vedanta. His concepts of Man, Practical Vedanta are derived from the same source. It is true that he had emphasized on the need of re-interpretation of Vedanta in accordance with the demands and needs of the time. In fact, Vivekananda's philosophy is an attempt towards the end. For him, living a religious life is necessary for the spiritual upliftment of a person without which moksha or nirvana cannot be attained .This spiritual upliftment can be done by educating oneself with the teachings of Vedanta philosophy and apply these teachings in one's life.

In a certain sense, Vivekananda was inspired by Buddhistic ideal of Bodhisattva, Samyak Karmanta, Ajiva and humanitarian altruistic work. Vivekananda also took up the Christian ideal of service and Love. His conviction that man contains within himself the spark of Divinity and his optimistic belief greatly resemble Christian concept of kingdom of God. Again, Bhagavat Gita's ideal of Niskama Karma was a constant source of inspiration to Vivekananda.

But the profound influence that remodeled and shaped Vivekananda's life and mission was his Guru Ramakrishna Paramhansa. He taught Vivekananda the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of God-head, the unity of existence, the Universality or harmony of all religions. It was Ramakrishna who initiated him to spirituality.

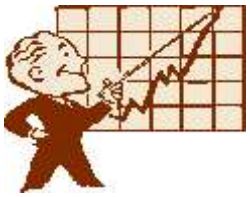
## 3.4 MAIN TENETS OF VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

Vivekananda has revitalized the Indian thought. He is regarded as a practical Vedantist. His Vedantic thought is not simply abstract

metaphysical system. Man is defined basically in terms of spirit. He spoke about practical spirituality. When a person thinks of himself as a body he forgets that he has a mind. Again when he thinks himself as a mind he forgets the body. But behind the body and the mind, the idea of immortality is inherent in man. In the philosophical thought of Vivekananda we observe the following tenets -

1. The main tenet of Vivekananda's philosophy is non dualism. According to him, ultimate reality is only One, not only in the present but in the past and in the future also.
2. Vivekananda was very confident about his own capacity. He urges others to keep their self confidence. He believes that the Brahman power is inherent in everyman. Religion is the manifestation of this divine power latent in man.
3. Vivekananda believes at heart that every man can realize God in his life.
4. Tolerance to all men is very necessary to realize God. There is no higher or lower, developed or undeveloped, great or small religion. Every religion enquires after the same truth.
5. Vivekananda wants to establish good relation between the East and the West. Therefore, he transcends the dogmatism of Hindu religion. Hence, he could address the men of other religions as sisters and brothers in the parliament of religions which was held in Chicago, America in 1893.
6. Vivekananda laid much importance upon freedom of human soul. This point is beautifully expressed in his practical vedantin concept.
7. Each soul is potentially divine.
8. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature both external and internal.
9. Man's essential essence is pure consciousness that is pure, free and eternal.
10. Man is united with the Infinite. Realization of this unity and it must be the aim of human being.

11. An infinite eternal man is real, unlimited by space, time and causality where as an apparent man is limited.
12. As much as man realizes identity with the Infinite, he can feel unity with whole human race.
13. Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man.
14. Religion is the manifestation of divinity already in man.
15. Serving man is serving God.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Q.1.: In which year was Swami Vivekananda born?

.....

Q.2.: Where did he take his early education?

.....

Q.3.: When did he met Ramkrishna Paramhamsa?

.....

Q.4.: In which year was the Parliament of Religions held?

.....

Q.5.: Was Vivekananda's philosophy influenced by ancient Hindu Philosophy?

.....

Q.6.: Was Vivekananda influenced by Buddhistic Ideal?

.....

Q 7: What is the main tenet of Vivekananda's political philosophy?

.....

**Q.8 Fill in the gaps:**

(a) Vivekananda was named as _____ in his early life.

(b) Vivekananda accepted _____ as his friend, philosopher and guide.

(c) The Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago, America in _____.

(d) Vivekananda is regarded as a _____ Vedantist.

## 3.5 VIVEKANANDA'S PRACTICAL VEDANTA

True to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda had great faith in the infinite potentialities of mankind. To him, man is like an infinite spring, coiled up in a small box, and the spring is trying to unfold itself; and all the social phenomena that we see are the result of this trying to unfold. Everyman has an opportunity within the limits of his present development of making himself better. We cannot unmake ourselves. Nor can we destroy the vital force within us. We have the freedom to give it different directions. Vivekananda says that men should be taught to be practical and physically strong. A dozen of such lions will conquer the world and not millions of sheep. Secondly according to him men should not be taught to imitate a personal ideal, however great. He said "Imitation, cowardly imitation never makes for progress. It is verily the sign of awful degradation in a man ....Do not imitate! Whenever you are under the thumb of others, you lose your own independence...Bring out through your own exertions what you have."

Thus, Vivekananda gives us a dynamic and progressive idea of man. His concept of man as a divine spirit is the great gift to both the East and the West. Man may see the soul of the universe through his own soul. The *Katha Upanisad* maintains that the non-dual Brahman, Pure consciousness, ever calm and blissful, ensouls all individuals and yet transcends them all. So also Vivekananda holds that the Infinite self-consciousness reveals through everyman. The important fact in human personality is the heightened sense of self-awareness that distinguishes man from all other beings. Man, with the power of introspection, can discriminate his real self, the knower within from his psychophysical constitution. The differences between one Jiva and another lies in their psychophysical structure and not in the nature of the indwelling self. The self is in essence pure, free, luminous and identical with Brahman. The inner self of all Jivas is the same Brahman. But its manifestation varies from man to man and it is due to his psychophysical constitution. As the same shining sun shines differently through different mediums, so also

the Pure Consciousness is immanent in the whole universe as the supreme principle; only it manifests differently through various beings.

Vivekananda emphasised on Pure Consciousness, Pure Bliss and Pure Existence. Inside the physical or gross body of man there is the bright body. This bright substance remains even after the death of man. It is believed that the gross body is manipulated by something else which is not material. It is the Atman through which the bright body works on the gross body. This 'bright body', means, according to Swami Vivekananda, 'suksma sarira' or subtle body. It is the receptacle of the mind. Atman is beyond the gross body and the subtle body, "It is not the mind even; it works on mind, and through the mind, the body. You have an Atman, I have another, each one of us has a separate. Atman and a separate fine body and through that we work on the gross external body."

Swami **Vivekananda makes a distinction between the apparent and the Real Man**. The psychophysical structure constitutes the **apparent man**. The self or Atman is the Real man. In his words, "The **Real Man**, therefore is one and infinite, the Omnipresent Spirit. And the Apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man...The apparent man however great he may be, is only a dim reflection of the Real Man who is beyond time and Space. It was never bound and cold not be bound. In the the apparent man, the reflection is limited by time, space and causation and is therefore bound...he appears to be bound, but really is not. This is the reality in our souls, this Omnipresence, this spiritual nature, this infinity. Every soul is infinite, and therefore there is no question of birth and death."

**Vivekananda's concept of man as divided into Apparent man and Real Man** is almost similar to Josiah Royce's view of self's. According to Royce, "A man has, as we sometimes learn, two selves – the inner and the outer, the nobler and baser. There is the natural man, who is by very essence evil, and the spiritual man, who is by nature good. It is to the natural man that the advice about self-abnegation is given; it is to the spiritual self that the well-known words of Burns make their stirring appeal. The fleshly self is the root of all evil. The spiritual self

belongs, by origin and by destiny, to a higher realm" The higher self is not originally myself at all but the spirit warring against the Flesh.

At a time when Sigmund Freud had hardly formulated his theory of the unconscious, Vivekananda spoke not only of the conscious and the subconscious but also of the super conscious. In the Western Psychology there is no conception of the super conscious. Only recently the parapsychologists headed by Dr. Rhine and others have come to admit the existence of Extra-Sensory Perception. With firm faith in Indian Psychology Vivekananda says, "The great task is to revive the whole man, as it were, in order to make him the complete master of himself. Even what we call automatic action of the organs within our bodies such as liver etc. can be made to obey our commands." He lays emphasis on the necessity of bringing the mind under control. So he does not stop with mere control of the conscious. "Just as unconscious work is beneath consciousness, so there is another work which is above consciousness. When this super conscious state is reached man becomes free and divine, death becomes immortality, weakness becomes infinite power, and iron bondage becomes liberty. That is the goal, the infinite realm of the super consciousness." Freud had hardly discussed the super conscious. So, Vivekananda says, "Consciousness is a mere film between two oceans, the subconscious and the super conscious." He further observes, "What does consciousness matter! Why it is nothing as compared to the unfathomable depths of the subconscious and the heights of the Super conscious." Practical Psychology directs first of all its energies in controlling the unconscious and we can do it according to Vivekananda. "But mind you, if the power of evil is in the unconscious so also is the power of good... True Psychology, would therefore, try to bring them under the control of the conscious."

## 3.6 FOUR YOGAS TO ATTAIN FREEDOM

The **Yoga Philosophy propounded by the sage Patanjali** is very helpful for man's physical, mental and spiritual development. Indian

philosophers from Yagyavalka to Sri Aurobindo have considered Yoga to be the most potent and indispensable method to attain mukti. For this man must know the Yogic techniques to control the body, mind, sense organs, intellect and ego so that he can realize the pure self. Yoga philosophy suggests a practical path, the way by following which man can realize the self.

The next important matter is how does human being attain freedom? Vivekananda says that by Yoga this freedom can be attained. The term yoga means both union and the way following which finite man can enjoy the bliss of the union with the Infinite Reality. **There are four yogas to attain freedom for human being corresponding to four aspects of human mind. These are (1) Karma Yoga (2) Jnana yoga (3) Bhakti yoga and (4) Raja Yoga**.

**(1) Karma Yoga:** It consists in performing detached actions and self-surrendering in the feet of God. Every man is to perform his duties only for duties sake without thinking of the fruit of the action. Karma yoga is the way of freedom by performing desireless actions. Such work leads to knowledge which in turn brings emancipation.

**(2) Jnana Yoga:** Jnana yoga is the way of realization of the truth that bondage arises due to avidya. The knowledge of Brahman within one's self is true knowledge. For acquiring knowledge of it, control of body, sense organ and motor-organs is necessary. Renunciation is an inseparable stage of the practice of jnana yoga.

**(3) Bhakti Yoga:** Bhakti yoga is the way to realize God through perfect devotion. It is the path of systematized devotion for the attainment of union with the absolute. According to Vivekananda man has the capacity to express the intense emotions and to utilize these in actions. Thus, emotions can be regularly guided to understand God. In this way ordinary emotion can be transformed to powerful emotion, ordinary love to divine love. This is called Bhakti marga. For this, earnest devotion is absolutely necessary. Bhakti is of two types – (1) Preparatory Bhakti, (2) Supreme Bhakti.

**(4) Raja Yoga:** It is the way of mukti propounded by the sage Patanjali in the regularization of body and mind and following concentrated in Samadhi. It is called Raja Yoga, because it is the shortest way to realize God. There are eight rules in Raja yoga which are known as Astanga Yoga – (1) Yama (2) Niyama (3) Asana (4) Pranayama (5) Pratyahara (6) Dhyana (7) Dharma and (8) Samadhi. Samadhi is of two types – (a) conscious and (b) unconscious. Vivekananda also advocates two types of freedom – (a) Jivan mukti and (2) Videha-mukti.

According to him, we are not individuals yet. We are struggling towards individuality and that is the Infinite; that is the Real nature of man. Hence "there is no individuality except in the Infinite." Thus, Vivekananda states that Infinite or the Spirit is only the individual. It cannot be divided nor broken into pieces. It is the same, single undivided unit forever and this is the individual man- the Real Man. The apparent man is struggling to manifest this individuality, which is beyond; evolution is not in the Spirit. The changes, which are going on in this world are not in the Spirit. They are evolution of nature and the manifestation of Spirit.

The traditional Hindu concept of life is that it is the bondage of the spirit in matter, and the goal of life is to escape from this prison house of matter. Vivekananda holds that life is not a prison but a battlefield, and every man has within him enough strength to come out of it victorious. His message to all suffering humanity is a message of strength and hope. His doctrine of strength is based on the potential divinity of man. "Say to your own minds, 'I am He, I am He' ... That is the truth, the infinite strength of the world is yours."

Some critics raise the point that Advaita Vedanta accepts Brahman as the only Reality at the cost of all others and thereby devalues human existence. Swami Vivekananda meets this criticism by holding that this is a wrong interpretation. The identification of Brahman and Atman shows that there is infinite strength and infinite possibilities in a man to become great and good. The difference between God and man is only of degree. Brahman manifests itself at different levels of

existence. Man is the supreme form of manifestation. According to Vivekananda, each man can realize his divine nature. The life of man is a self-evolving circle. It is his natural tendency to rise above his limitation and to be united with the universal self.

The human history reveals that the higher power and tendencies have been manifested again and again by different men at different times and at different places. These powers and tendencies are not superadded to human soul, they generate from within.Today human beings enjoy satisfaction using modern achievements of science. Among the discovereries, we ask ourselves -are we happy with this empirical world? Can we think or talk with others behind this world? These questions make man unhappy since nobody can escape from that. It is the ignorance due to which we are running after earthly enjoyments where as it remains unrealized that these fail to satisfy our inner self. The little individual self is the root cause of our distress. We should try to understand the true nature of our self. Our self is exactly the self of the absolute. The limited aspect of man is within the Infinite Reality.

Vivekananda was a firm believer of traditional vedantic philosophy and regards man as son of immortality. The same man enquires after the same human truth and reality. No theory regarding man is perfect and final up to this present day.

On the whole Vivekananda's ideal is to actualize the upanisadic ideal "Aham Brahmasmi" – I am Brahman.

Thus, Vivekananda is a true follower of Vedanta Philosophy. The only idea expressed throughout his whole philosophy is that finite man and Infinite Reality are essentially one. Infinite Reality is manifested through individual being. His view of man synthesizes the East and the West, the traditional and modern concept of man. Besides, his view is harmonious with the modern science also.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 9: State whether the following statements are true or false:**

(a) Vivekananda was born in 12th January in Calcutta. (True/False)

(b) He was named as Narendra in his early life. (True/False)

(c) He had met Ramakrishna in 1981. (True/False)

(d) The Parliament of Religion had continued for seventeen days. (True/False)

**Q 10: Fill in the Blanks**

(a) The main tenet of Vivekananda's Philosophy is _____.

(b) Vivekananda makes a distinction between _____ man and _____ man.

(c) There are ____ yogas to attain freedom for human being.

**Q 11:** Make a distinction between the apparent and the real man. (Answer in about 60 words)

.....

**Q 12:** What is Jnana yoga? (Answer in about 40 words)

.....

.....



## ACTIVITY 3.1

Vivekananda is a practical Vedantist. How do you establish it? Explain briefly.

**Ans. :**.....

.....

Yoga philosophy is very helpful for man's physical, mental and spiritual development. What are the yogas prescribed by Vivekananda for attaining freedom? Write briefly.

**Ans.:**.....

.....



## 3.7 LET US SUM UP

- Vivekananda was born in 1863 in Calcutta.
- Vivekananda is an eminent contemporary Indian thinker.
- He has revitalized the Indian thought.
- He is regarded as a practical Vedantist.
- The philosophy of Vivekananda is based upon the Advaitic ideal "Brahman Satyam, Jagat Mithya, Jivo Brahmaiva Naparah".
- Vivekananda urged man to be self confident.
- He makes distinction between the Apparent Man and Real Man. The psychophysical structure constitutes the Apparent Man. The self or atman is the Real Man.
- According to Vivekananda, human being attains freedom by practising Yogas. He emphasizes on Yoga practical psychology propounded by Patanjali.
- There are four Yogas to attain freedom – (1) Karma Yoga (2) Jnana Yoga (3) Bhakti Yoga and (4) Raja Yoga.



## 3.8 FURTHER READING

1. Swami Vivekananda. (1947). *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda*. Advaita Ashrama
2. Radhakrishnan. S.(1997). *The Principal Upanisads*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt. Ltd.
3. Lal, K. Basant. (1990). *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Benarsi Dass
4. Raju, P.T. (1995). *The Concept of Man*. Collins
5. Royce, Josiah. (1900) *The World and the Individual*. New Work: Mac Millan Co.



## 3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans. to Q. No.1:** Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863.

**Ans. to Q. No.2:** In Calcutta

**Ans. to Q. No.3.:** In 1881, Vivekananda met Ramkrishna

**Ans. to Q. No 4:** In 1893

**Ans to Q. No .5:** Yes

**Ans to Q. No. 6:** Yes

**Ans to Q No 7:** The main tenet of Vivekanada's philosophy is non-dualism.

**Ans to Q No 8:** According to Swami Vivekananda, the bright body implies 'suksma Sarira' or subtle body. It is the receptacle of the mind. Atman is beyond the gross body and the subtle body.

**Ans to Q No. 8:** (a) Narendra b) Ramkrishna Parmahamsa
(c) 1893 (d) Practical Vedantist

**Ans. to Q No 9:** (a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes (d) Yes

**Ans. to Q No 10:** a) Non-dualism (b) Apparent man and real man
(c) Four yogas

**Ans to Q No 11:** The psychological structure constructs the apparent man. The self or atman is the real man. The real man is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of the real man. On the other hand the apparent man is only a dim reflection of the real man who is beyond time and space.

**Ans to Q No 12:** It is considered one of the four yogas. It indicates the way out of ignorance which forbids us to get the knowledge of truth. Therefore, jnana yoga is considered one of the most important paths of salvation.



## 3.10 MODEL QUESTONS

**A. Very Short Questions**

**Q.1.:** In which year was Vivekananda born?

**Q.2.:** What was Vivekananda's early name?

**Q.3.:** Who was Vivekananda's friend, philosopher and guide?

**Q.4.:** Did Vivekananda participate in the Parliament of Religion?

**Q.5.:** Was he influenced by Buddhistic ideal?

**Q.6.:** 0n what was the Philosophy of Vivekananda based upon?

**Q.7.:** Vivekananda distinguishes between two aspects of man. What are these two aspects?

**Q 8:** Who is considered a practical vedantist?

**Q 9:** what is bright body, According to Vivekananda?

**Q 10:** Write the meaning of 'Ahom Brahmosi'.

**B. Short Questions (Answer in about 150 words)**

**Q.1.:** Briefly explain the biography of Vivekananda.

**Q.2.:** Explain briefly the influences that had shaped Vivekananda's philosophy.

**Q.3.:** Mention the tenets of Vivekananda's philosophy.

**Q 4:** Briefly explain the distinction between the apparent and the real man.

**Q 5:** What are the different kinds of yoga? Briefly explain.

**Q 6:** What are the eight rules found in Astagikamarga? Explain in brief.

**Q 7:** Write a criticism on Advaita Vedanta.

**C. Long Question (Answer in about 300-500 words)**

**Q.1.:** Discuss Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta.

**Q.2.:** Explain the Yogas mentioned by Vivekananda for attainment of freedom by human being.

**Q 3:** Discuss the main tenets of Vivekananda's philosophical thought.

**Q 4:** Explain the importance of yogas to attain freedom.

*** **** ***