

A Western Vedanta Tradition?

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I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO WRITE on the Vedanta tradition in the West, but we must first decide if such a thing exists. Vedanta in the West, yes, but a tradition? That implies at least two things. First, there must be something at least minimally cohesive that we can point to as ‘Western Vedanta’, something more than just ‘Vedanta teachings given in the West’. Second, tradition implies that this identifiable body of teachings has had some continuity through time. In other words, the fact that many teachers from different traditions have taught Vedanta in the West for more than a century doesn’t in itself constitute a Western tradition.

Vedantic influence has had some recognizable presence in the West since the time of Schopenhauer (1788–1860) in Europe and the Transcendentalists, sometimes dated from 1836, in America.¹ But this also doesn’t constitute a living tradition. It represents interest and influence.

At the time of Swami Vivekananda’s sojourn in the West, however, an incipient Vedantic tradition was seeded in the West. One could, in fact, date the beginning precisely to late 1894, when the swami said in answer to a question, ‘I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East.’² At that point he was no longer in America just to raise money for his work in India: he was there to give a message, to initiate a tradition.

Before returning to Swami Vivekananda it would be good to recognize that since his time there have been many other teachers of Vedanta, from many different traditions, that have taught in the West. There is found everything from the Bengal

Vaishnava tradition of ISKCON to the Advaita Vedanta of Sri Ramana Maharshi’s followers. To make a ‘Western Vedanta tradition’ out of this rich mix is impossible. Therefore, we should perhaps limit ourselves to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.

Even here the task is not easy, as we have a great deal of diversity within this one tradition: from the impersonal emphasis of Swami Ashokananda to the devotional and ritualistic accent of Swami Prabhavananda, from the scholarly emphasis of Swami Satprakashananda to the emphasis on karma yoga by others.

Where in all this do we find a tradition? Or should we look for a plurality of traditions? The thesis of this article is as follows: a genuine Western tradition of Vedanta is in the process of being formed. It is still fluid, immature, not yet defined. Many and diverse elements are going into its formation. Hopefully its mature form will also be diverse, multi-formed, rich, making room for all sorts of people of varying temperaments and levels of development. But it will, I think, be a Vedanta tradition that is recognizably Western. The rest of this article is not descriptive, but predictive, attempting to foresee the general shape of what is to come.

Two Ideas Critical to the Spread of Vedanta beyond India

Swami Vivekananda saw in the teachings of Vedanta a much-needed spiritual foundation for the emerging modern world. He also saw the harm which missionary religions had caused in the past, often unintentionally. To make of Vedanta a religion that would spread of its own inherent appeal, enhancing civilizations rather than conquering them, he honed two principles that were critical to his teaching beyond India.

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First, the swami held that every nation has an ideal which is its life, its purpose for being. As he says in 'Women of India':

[Each nation] represents a great ideal; towards that it is moving. And, therefore, it is rightly assumed that to understand a nation you must first understand its ideal, for each nation refuses to be judged by any other standard than its own. ... [Different countries develop] through such different ideas that to judge one people by the other's standard would be neither just nor practicable. Therefore we must know what the ideal is that a nation has raised before itself (8.55–6).

This is perhaps the swami's greatest single contribution to social thought: that the life of each nation is an ideal, which is its very purpose for existence, and losing which it dies. This idea he repeated often, giving the example of India, whose ideal was God or the realization of God. Because India as a whole had never strayed from that ideal, he would say, she had weathered every storm, every threat to her existence, while other nations had been born and were subsequently destroyed. Understanding this principle is the key to finding the seeds of a Western Vedanta tradition. Let us hold this idea in mind a moment while we examine another key idea of Swami Vivekananda's.

The swami also said:

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds—is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work. The Lord only knows how far I shall succeed (5.104–5).

Why was this at the heart of his life's work? Why so important? It is primarily important if Vedanta is to be a global force. The religions of the world are largely mythological in their thinking. Even when they tie their origins to historical occurrences, the interpretation of those occurrences is mythological. And the power generated from those occurrences comes from that mythological interpretation, not from the bare historical fact. It isn't the *fact* that a Jew named Jesus was born in Bethlehem that is important, it's the significance of that birth that's important. It isn't the fact that a black meteorite lies in the city of Mecca that's important, it's the significance of the Kaaba that inspires Muslims. It isn't the fact that a brahmana priest named Ramakrishna lived at Dakshineswar that's important, it's the meaning of his life that's important.

But mythology is not universal. A myth's meaning is seen only by those who are sensitive to its symbolic world and its presuppositions. The Kaaba is not sacred to a Christian. The Eucharist is not a sacrament to the Muslim. Ganesha is not a sacred image to a Jew. Each civilization has its own myths, tied to its culture and values, its history and geography. Principles, however, are universal. The principle of gravity might have been discovered by Newton in seventeenth-century England, but there is nothing English about the principle: it works just as well in Japan and on the moon and on Jupiter.

Swami Vivekananda saw that the Upanishads were interested in principles, not in stories, not in myths, and as such they presented a religion based on principles. He therefore sought to extract those principles from the Vedanta, seeing that they had great meaning for the world and knowing that only principles could find application everywhere in the world. He had seen first hand the damage done by missionary religions that remained tied to a mythology and culture as they spread. Unable to distinguish between universal principles and cultural myths, such missionary traditions destroyed whole cultures in the wake of their expansion.

Tying these two ideas together—this valuing of universal principles on the one hand and his

view that each nation had its own ideal that was its reason for existence on the other—we come to the heart of his method of teaching. He presented Vedanta as a religion of universal principles, untied from the great and beautiful cultural expressions they had found in India throughout the ages; principles that could be assimilated in any culture without doing that culture violence, principles that could be harmonized with each nation's ideal.

Respect for Each Culture

Thus we come to the central principle observed by the swami as he established Vedanta in the West: respect for the integrity of each culture. He went so far as to say: 'Never forget that a man is made great and perfect as much by his faults as by his virtues. So we must not seek to rob a nation of its character, even if it could be proved that the character was all faults' (8.269). This respect for the integrity of each culture will in time form a distinguishing feature of the Vedanta tradition in the West. American Vedanta will look different from the traditional Vedanta of India, and will likewise look different from the Vedanta of France or China or Zambia.

From this central principle, several ideas follow. First, in order to understand a culture's values and ideals we need to familiarize ourselves with its history, its struggles, its ethos. Swami Vivekananda did that, and others have as well. When Swami Shraddhananda was selected to go from India to San Francisco in the 1950s, Swami Ajayananda—who had himself worked in America—told him to study Abraham Lincoln if he wanted to understand the Americans. Swami Shraddhananda did so, and became a student and devotee of Lincoln, giving lectures on him, maintaining a library on him, using anecdotes from his life to illustrate spiritual ideas.

Swami Ashokananda, who was head of the San Francisco centre when Swami Shraddhananda arrived, asked his new assistant to learn some manual skill, '... otherwise the American monks won't re-

spect you'. And so, Swami Shraddhananda used to laughingly say, 'I became a grease monkey', meaning a mechanic who serviced the cars and trucks at the Olema retreat.

In his advice Swami Ajayananda recognized that the best ideals of America could be gleaned from a study of Abraham Lincoln's life and times, since the latter had struggled to understand those very ideals, struggled to find how they could be realized. And in his advice, Swami Ashokananda recognized the American respect for labour. This is a peculiarly American quality, not found to the same degree in Europe or elsewhere. In America, the person who actually does the work is respected more than the person who supervises or manages, whatever the work might be.

One might object, of course, that respect is only part of the story, as no one excoriated the West, including America, so strongly as Swami Vivekananda. And that is true. However, his scoldings flowed from a broader and more basic love, sympathy, and respect. Had they not, they would have had the effect of insults, and no one reacts favourably to insults.

Swami Vivekananda recognized that, as India's ideal was God, America's ideal was democracy. It would be hard to study America without coming to this conclusion. Not every Indian struggles for God, and not every American lives up to democratic ideals, the majority don't in both cases; but in each country the life force of the civilization is invested in struggling for its ideal, in manifesting its ideal, through trials and errors, through successes and failures.

American Vedanta will in time visibly reflect this struggle for democracy, an ideal which Swami Vivekananda found to be, at its core, Vedantic. The democratic institutions of America, the democratic processes, and most of all the democratic ethos of the people—all will be enlivened and spiritualized by recognizing a Vedantic foundation. The tradition of Vedanta in America will itself be coloured by this struggle to assimilate a Vedantic foundation under the ideal of democracy.

Specific Differences of Expression

How does this difference work itself out? In many ways; but let's take a simple concrete example. In traditional India the respect for spirituality is great, and that is reflected in the respect shown for the ideal of sannyasa, renunciation, which in turn expresses itself in the respect shown to sannyasins themselves. Combine that with the wonderful tradition of hospitality in India, which includes honouring the status of a guest, and sannyasins are shown great deference by devotees. If they are invited for food, they are given preferential seating, and may be given special plates and bowls and tumblers, and perhaps some extra delicacies that aren't available to all. This is a wonderful tradition that works in India because all understand what is behind it. As an Indian sannyasin told me when I was new in the Order, referring to a swami whom he considered fallen: 'I will be the first to bow and take the dust of his feet, because of the robe.' That is, he would be saluting an ideal, not a person—a beautiful lesson I've never forgotten.

In America, however, the special status shown to a sannyasin can, if overdone, go against the country's ideal of democracy. It isn't that one country's custom is right and another's wrong, it's that what works in one country doesn't work in another. The separating out of certain people and giving them preferential treatment in recognition of their status is something that works against the deep-seated instincts of an American. Yes, even in American society there are examples of preferential treatment, of course, but unless it is very muted and balanced by a nod to egalitarian values, it offends. And yes, Americans need to learn a spirit of personal service, but again, in tune with its own ideal.

France, similarly, is a democratic country, with deep roots of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, but how different the culture! In France, the ideal of *raison*, reason, is held high—much more so than in America. An aesthetic sense is not a nicety for the French but is a part of being fully human, and the French aesthetic is very different from that of the Japanese, for example. A French tradition of Ved-

anta will, when it matures, express the best of what being French means.

These projected differences will not be differences in the principles, but differences in the expression of those principles, including a distinct evaluation of these principles. Swami Vivekananda recognized that different cultures value principles differently. In India, personal purity is of central importance—guiding morality, etiquette, and all aspects of behaviour. Everything else is organized around this concept of personal purity. In the West, truthfulness and honesty are the central virtues, held much higher than personal purity. Both sets of values are important in spiritual life. The West needs to learn a greater sense of personal purity, and India similarly has room to learn certain values from the West, but a difference in relative valuing will probably remain, distinguishing the cultures and impacting the tradition of Vedanta in each.

And such differences are good. A species is in danger of extinction if its gene pool becomes too small. Internal diversity is needed for the health of the species. External diversity is also needed; that is, many different species are needed for the health of the whole web of life. Similarly, different languages are needed for the health of language itself. Different cultures are needed for the health of culture itself. Differences of thought are necessary, as Swami Vivekananda loved to point out, for the health of thinking itself: it is the clash of different ideas that stimulates thought. And differences in the national expressions of Vedanta will be healthy for Vedanta as well. Uniformity is not unity. In fact, the Western experience has been that enforced uniformity is a sure way to divide, to destroy unity. Unity comes by recognizing commonality—universals—underlying diversity of expression.

What are some other distinctive elements of a Western Vedanta that we can predict? One element that has been visible from the beginning—though not always understood and appreciated—comes from the West's intellectual history. Until modern times religion in the West had a strong element of dogmatism supported by formal ecclesiastical au-

thority. Every step of intellectual freedom in science and philosophy and the humanities was gained by struggling against this religious dogma and church authority. This centuries-long struggle for intellectual freedom still influences Western thought and behaviour. For example, to question a teacher, even to disagree or to argue, is not a sign of disrespect in the West, as long as the arguing is kept within certain bounds of civility. This is seen as a legitimate part of the process of coming to terms with ideas, testing them, understanding them, trying them out.

This can be a shock to the Indian spiritual teacher who is new to the West. In India there is a natural respect for the teacher, a greater respect for social order, for seniority and position. People in India often learn from a spiritual teacher more by observation and osmosis, by which I mean listening and absorbing rather than wrestling with the teacher's ideas. Yes, the Indian devotee may question also, but not so directly as is common in the West—a directness which is perceived by many Indians new to the West as challenging the authority of the teacher.

Similarly, 'the Vedas say' or 'the Gita says' or even 'Sri Ramakrishna says' is not an automatic argument-closer for the Westerner. 'The Bible says', or 'the Church says', was used too often in the past for Westerners to accept an equivalent. Is what you say true? Can it be tested? Or is it superstition? Is it just a belief with nothing to back it up? To the average Westerner, these are important questions and have nothing to do with challenging the authority of the speaker or disparaging the tradition. Yes, there are many, many Westerners who are obnoxiously aggressive and who argue just because they like to argue, and who don't really want to find the truth because it is more fun to be cynical. There's nothing good about that, nor does it do any good to entertain such people's dishonest negativity. But here we are talking about sincere students who are being intellectually honest.

Experience and Assimilation

In the Vedanta tradition the traditional test for the

validity of an idea or experience is threefold: *shruti*, *yukti*, and *anubhava*—scripture, reason, and experience. Is the idea supported by scripture? Is it reasonable? And is it based on replicable experience? For the Westerner, the last two tests are not a problem, but the relationship to scripture is different from that typically found in a practising Hindu. Thus, we see a distinction between Swami Vivekananda's statements about scripture in the West and his statements in India, because he recognized this difference. In the West he would emphasize that 'by the Vedas no books are meant' (1.6) and that 'all knowledge is Veda' (8.136). Such statements make an immediate appeal to the Westerner. Not that Indians don't understand or appreciate these statements, but there is a difference, I think, in the way such statements are understood and appreciated and evaluated, a difference that is clearly visible, a difference caused by very different histories, and a difference that will colour the developing tradition of Western Vedanta.

The Vedanta tradition in the West will necessarily have a different relationship to scripture and tradition, a different dynamic between teacher and disciple. None of this indicates that one is good and the other bad. The histories of the West and of India are so distinct that such differences become inevitable.

Another difference will be seen in the manner of worship, the place and nature of temples, the importance of congregational worship. For more than thirty years Hindu temples have been appearing in American cities, first as a rare phenomenon close to large metropolitan areas, now frequently even in more conservative parts of the country. Some are simple, existing in a former family home, purchased and converted to temple use by the Hindu community. Some are very large, ornate, and constructed specifically as a Hindu temple. Sometimes artisans are even brought from India to do stone or plaster work and other ornamentation. There are South Indian style temples and North Indian style temples, there are temples dedicated to specific deities. And there are community temples that try to serve the needs of Hindus from all parts of India.

These temples serve a great need in America and in Europe, though I'll speak specifically of America, since that is what I know first hand. They attract the Indian immigrant community, and provide a place for worship, for blessings, for sacraments like sacred thread investiture and marriage. They often serve as a place where the children of immigrants born in the US can learn about their culture, perhaps learn their parents' native language in a more formal way than at home. And so these temples serve not just as shrines to deities in the traditional Indian sense, but more as Hindu 'churches' in the American sense. Yes, American, because in this regard an American church is quite different from a European church. In America, churches are centres of social life, going far beyond religious services, and so the Hindu temples in America serve a similar need for immigrant Hindus.

However, looking into the future, what is the place of these temples? My own prediction is that the important function they serve now won't last. Children of Indian immigrant parents who are born in America are Americans. American culture is much more aggressive than European cultures, since America is a land of immigrants; everyone born here is as American as I am. The tendency in American culture has been towards assimilation, and it is the same for the children of Indian immigrants. The second generation of Indian children born here are usually distinguishable only by their coloration. The huge wave of Indian immigration of the last forty years can't last, and all signs are that it has already waned significantly. Jobs and opportunities are opening up in India. People are coming to America more and more for a short-term purpose, and then returning to India. In fifty years, I think the era of building traditional Hindu temples will be only of historical interest.

Just as Jewish practice has been deeply affected by its long association with its rebel child Christianity, so Hindu practice in America will in time be deeply influenced by this association. It already has been, as can be seen in our Vedanta societies, where there is a congregational service on Sunday

mornings. An offering plate for donations is typically passed around at these services, and there is often Sunday school for the kids. There is week-night 'Bible' study, in the form of Vedanta scriptural classes. The decorum observed in the Vedanta societies is more the decorum of a church than that of a Hindu temple, where talking or coming and going during worship is natural, and where children are allowed to play. People put on their 'church behaviour' when entering the shrine.

Much more could be said about the way 'congregational' Vedanta is changing and will continue to change as it adapts to the West. In interests of space, let me mention, without details, three other areas of change that seem likely.

First, there is no good provision for American Vedantins who want a marriage sanctioned and consecrated by their tradition, since sannyasins don't perform weddings and there are no Vedanta priests. This will in time have to be rectified in a way that doesn't compromise the institution of sannyasa.

Second, public pujas are likely to become more congregational, involving the congregation more than pujas in India, again because of the pattern set by Christianity and Judaism. Along with that, the symbolism involved in ritual worship will have to become more transparent to the Western mind than the symbols which are appropriate to Indian life and culture, so that the worship speaks to the Western mind directly. This can't be done by committee, but only by the deep assimilation of the Vedanta tradition of worship, until it finds new expression from the depths of someone immersed both in Vedanta and in Western culture.

Third, Vedanta went through a long period in India where it was competing with Nyaya and Vaisheshika, Sankhya and Yoga, Purva Mimamsa and Buddhism. Its development was impacted by centuries of mutual interaction with these competing schools. Just as Greek philosophy is still of great interest to Western thinkers, though its schools are long since dead, so these schools of Indian philosophy are of interest in India; not so in the West. It is therefore likely that, in time, Western Vedantists

will find more value in relating Vedantic thought to Greek and Christian and Jewish thought than to Nyaya and Vaisheshika. This isn't a value judgement, simply a statement of fact. Just as in India Vedanta absorbed many of the positive contributions of the other schools of thought into itself, so Western Vedanta may in time absorb the positive contributions of Christianity and Judaism and Hellenic thought into itself.

Three Conditions for a Western Tradition

The foregoing is by no means a thorough list of elements that will define Western Vedanta as it matures. These are simply a few casual observations of one person, though I am confident that these at least will be threads of the cloth of Western Vedanta. The whole cloth, however, will be far more complex, and there will surely be threads unimagined here that will assume great importance.

When will there be a real Western Vedanta tradition? When these three conditions are met:

First, the truths of Vedanta must be fully and naturally assimilated into the lives and experience of a number of Western devotees, such that their way of thinking, their way of interpreting experience, is Vedantic.

Second, the truths thus assimilated must begin to find expression in the literature and music, art and theatre, folklore and customs of countries like America and France, Argentina and Germany. Such expression must be indigenous, not borrowed from India, according to the genius of each country—though certainly there can and will be great enrichment by assimilating Indian cultural forms as well.

Third, there must be Westerners who have attained to the heights of spirituality, who have become living embodiments of Vedantic truth.

When these three conditions are met, there will be vibrant traditions of Vedanta in the West. Yes, 'trad-

itions' plural, because each country will give unique expression to Vedanta through its own tradition.

A great experiment is currently going on in the laboratory of many human hearts. Western men and women are assimilating the principles of Vedanta, remaking their lives according to these principles, reinventing themselves in the light of these principles. Slowly, as the principles come alive within them, their experience is being altered, not just their thinking. More and more will they begin to give natural expression to an indigenous Vedanta, not better or worse than the original, and not different just to be different, but gloriously diverse as nature itself is diverse. And this process of naturalizing Vedanta in the West must culminate in the production of men and women of illumination. At that point the tradition will have taken shape, and a description of Western Vedanta—not just a prediction—will be possible. PB

Notes and References

1. Schopenhauer was first introduced to Vedanta in 1814 by a translation of the Upanishads from the Persian into Latin. The translation, by Anquetil Duperron, had been published in Europe in two volumes in 1801 and 1802.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5:314.

Meditation tree at Ramakrishna Monastery, Trabuco

