

Buddha, Shankara, and Vivekananda

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Buddha, Shankara and Vivekananda stand like majestic Himalayan peaks on the vast landscape of the spiritual history of India. Five hundred years before Christ, Buddha taught the value of reason and how to rid ourselves of the shackles of superstition. He set in motion the 'wheel of dharma' and a moral order for humanity. But he was also compassionate and taught the gospel of non-violence. About a thousand years later, Shankara appeared on the scene and again taught the value of logic and reason and thus set in motion the modern philosophical tradition of Vedanta. About a thousand years after Shankara, Vivekananda taught that the highest religion is a combination of these two temperaments, the compassion of Buddha married with the intellect of Shankara. Thus will we have a religion of the future. This essay is about these three spiritual giants and their contribution to world philosophy.

In his essay on "The Absolute and Manifestation," Swami Vivekananda wrote¹:

In Buddha, we had the great, universal heart and infinite patience, making religion practical and bringing it to everyone's door. In Shankaracharya, we saw tremendous intellectual power, throwing the scorching light of reason upon everything. We want today that bright sun of intellectuality joined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful infinite heart of love and mercy. This union will give us the highest philosophy. Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples.

One should not conclude from this that Vivekananda is advocating a marriage of Buddhism and Vedanta, nor any specific religion or system of philosophy. Rather, what is being emphasized is the attitude towards life and experience as providing a universal religion that satisfies all people and all temperaments. For Vivekananda, religion did not mean an allegiance to a particular dogma or creed but rather a framework of thought with which to understand and process the myriad experiences of life and ultimately

attain enlightenment.

The advent of the Buddha was perhaps the most transformative event in world history, and yet the vast majority of Eurocentric history books make little mention of it. At a time when the world was torn apart by wars and conflicts, Buddha arose and gave the message of love and peace. Long before the advent of Christ, Asia was gripped by Buddha and his teachings. How did this phenomenal event come to be? It is true that Buddha's message was not fully understood by his disciples (which is why we have the varied forms of Buddhism). Even so, his core teaching survives to this day.

Around 600 BCE, Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha in the town of Lumbini near the town of Kapilavastu in modern day Nepal. The astrologers predicted he would be a monk and a world teacher and this startled the king. Thus, for almost thirty years, young Siddhartha lived a sheltered life in the royal palace inundated with every sensual pleasure one can imagine. In fact, he was forbidden to leave the palace. At the age of 16, he was married to a princess and they had a son. Yet young Siddhartha wondered what was beyond the palace gates. Around the age of 29, he secretly ventured out with an assistant of the palace to see what the world outside was like. The story goes that he had four dramatic encounters that changed his life. The first was the sight of an old man and he asked his assistant, "who is this and why is he limping?" The assistant replied, "He is an old man, and aging is a process of every human body." Next, he encountered a sick man, and again, he asked his assistant, to which he replied, "That is a sick man. Illness afflicts everyone." The third encounter was that of a dead body, and again when he asked his assistant, he replied, "That is a dead body. Death is the end of everyone." Finally, he encountered a monk in a saffron robe, and he asked him why he adopted such a life, and the monk replied, "To be free of misery."

These four encounters raised a host of existential questions in young Siddhartha's mind. Old age, illness and death were facts of life. Yet he had been sheltered from this truth all his life and made to believe that life was an immense pleasure garden. This is not the experience of the multitude of people. But then there was the monk, who said he chose the mendicant life to be free of misery. This appealed to the young prince. He could continue living in

the palace or he could renounce this comfortable life and take up the path of the mendicant. Truly, that must have been a night of crisis in the mind of the young prince. Then and there, he decided to renounce his comfortable life and rode off in the dead of night into the wilderness. The next day, he joined a group of monks who practised meditation and learned from them several techniques to elevate his level of consciousness. Although he advanced in this technique, he was not satisfied, as he had not found the answers to mitigate human misery. With five other monks, he left the group and wandered off to the Neranjara River in Uruvela and began to practise severe austerities. The monks believed enlightenment could be achieved by progressive fasting and so the young prince fasted until he was surviving on only tiny morsels of food. Legend has it that he was at death's door when a young village girl named Sujatha was passing by and offered him a bowl of rice pudding which he ate and which revived him. He realized that such extreme self-mortification which he had adopted as the means for salvation was not the way. This was a moment of enlightenment: Buddha had discovered the 'middle way,' or the madhya marga, as it is called in Sanskrit.

Sadly, his brother monks felt he had strayed from the path when he ate the bowl of rice pudding. When he taught about the middle path, they abandoned him. And so Buddha walked alone to the outskirts of the town of Bodh Gaya, and this experience finds expression² in the Dhammapada, a Buddhist text compiled after Buddha's death and in which are recorded many of his teachings: "If you do not find a companion, intelligent, one who associates with you, who leads a good life, lives soberly, ...walk alone like a king who has renounced his kingdom or like an elephant roaming at will in the forest. It is better to live alone rather than have the companionship of a fool. Let a man walk alone with few wants, like the elephant roaming in the forest."

On reaching Bodh Gaya, he sat under the Bo tree with a firm resolve not to get up until he had solved the mystery of life. *Jhāva sthane shusyatu me shariram* — "Let my body decay at this spot; I will not get up until I have found the way out." As his meditation went deeper during the night, a profound silence embraced his mind after he had put an end to all thoughts. His mind was like a vast lake on a windless day. Buddhist mythology says the demon Mara came to tempt him but that the Buddha remained unflinching and firm in his resolve. One may surmise that these are the hidden impressions of the past and that the Buddha silenced them all. But after silencing them, there emerged the thought of 'I' and when he examined this, it too disappeared. His ego-centric personality was literally blown off by this scrutiny and he attained nirvana. It was early morning and he had attained enlightenment. His joy was unbounded and he wanted to share it. But who was there? No one except the Earth goddess, and so in many Buddhist paintings depicting his enlightenment, we see him touching the earth with his index finger, to indicate that the Earth goddess was his only witness.

It is said the Buddha remained there for seven weeks alone after achieving enlightenment and that he was concerned that his

message was too profound for others to understand. Indeed, he had walked away from both of the extremes — from those who were engrossed in sensuality and those who were absorbed in asceticism. The mythology relates that Brahma appeared with the request that he teach for the good of humanity. Here again, we see the mythologization of what must have been a process of deep reflection for the Buddha. He must have seen that he must set in motion the great wheel of Dharma.

He walked back to the Deer Park outside the modern city of Varanasi and met his five companions whom he had left behind. They were still practising their austerities and were suspicious of the Buddha when they saw him approaching. But as soon as they conversed with him, they realized he had attained illumination and so they sat at his feet to be taught. The message of this first sermon is known as the 'four noble truths': everything is wrapped in suffering; suffering originates in desire; by eliminating desire we eliminate suffering; and the cessation of desire and suffering is achievable by following the eight-fold path. It is said that during this first sermon of the Buddha, one of the monks instantly attained enlightenment. The monk's mind must have been ripe and prepared for the teaching. Such is the advantage of spiritual practice: it prepares the mind for enlightenment and we never know when it may come.

Although Buddha's message was to think for oneself and not to follow tradition simply because one has been brought up that way, the old traditions and rituals re-emerged and this is why we have so many varieties of Buddhism today. Even the *Lalitavistara*, believed to be compiled around the 3rd century C.E., is a mythologized form of his biography.

The message of the Buddha then travelled across the Asian continent and to Europe and Indonesia. The original teaching, simple as it was and embodied in the four noble truths, turned out to be too difficult for the multitude. Buddha's rejection of all symbolism and mythology had the opposite effect. The masses needed symbols and so Buddha himself became the symbol. His teaching that each individual reaps what he sows and thus manufactures his own karma evolved into an elaborate theory of transmigration and gave rise to an exotic and colourful mythology of wrathful deities who help the aspiring devotee on the path of enlightenment. This iconography can be seen, for instance, in Tibetan Buddhism and varieties that exist in China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. In his lifetime, Buddha did not speculate on the existence of God, insisting that one should think for oneself and reform one's character. His philosophical teaching is non-dualistic in tone, as is seen, for instance, in the Diamond Sutra. "Does a Buddha say, 'I have attained enlightenment?' No, if he were to say so, he would be admitting that he had an identity and thus would not be enlightened." Echoing the words of Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, namely, 'veda aveda bhavati', the Buddha continues: "As a raft is used to cross a river, and once crossed, the raft is of no use and should be discarded, so also, all words, concepts, symbols must be discarded on being illumined."

The pristine message of the Buddha resonates again in the

teachings of Shankara, almost a thousand years later. Born in the eighth century C.E., Shankara lived a short life of 32 years. But in that time, he revived the teachings of Advaita Vedanta and wrote commentaries on all of the major Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras. His most prominent work, *Vivekachudamani*, extols the power of reason and inquiry on the path towards enlightenment. In this teaching, he is again in accordance with the Buddha's fundamental teaching, "atma dipo bhava", which means, "be a lamp unto yourself." Although Shankara insisted on the development of the power of reason and inquiry, he also realized the importance of devotion, or bhakti, and in this emphasis he diverges from the Buddha. In the Buddha, we see an emphasis on the moral and ethical side of human conduct, and with Shankara, we see an emphasis on the intellect. In this context, Swami Vivekananda wrote³:

Buddha brought the Vedanta to light, gave it to the people and saved India. A thousand years after his death ... Shankaracharya arose and once more revived the Vedanta philosophy. He made it a rationalistic philosophy. In the Upanishads, the arguments are often very obscure. By Buddha the moral side of the philosophy was laid stress upon, and by Shankaracharya, the intellectual side. He worked out, rationalised, and placed before men the wonderful coherent system of Advaita.

In his famous *Bhaja Govindam*, Shankara endorses the path of bhakti. The fabled story is that when Shankara was in Varanasi accompanied by his 14 disciples, he heard an elderly man teaching a student about grammatical rules. He was pained to see this since the old man, at his advanced age, should really have been spending his valuable time in cultivating devotion for the divine. Inspired by the moment, Shankara composed his famous hymn extolling the man to worship Govinda. Apart from its poetic beauty, the composition also conveys the essence of Vedanta. Shankara composed many more poems to the Mother Goddess and Shiva and taught the multitude the path of Bhakti, though this is generally unacknowledged and is often overshadowed by his writings on non-dualism.

The details of the life of Shankara are sketchy, much of it shrouded in myth and legend. Even the date of his birth is not certain. Most scholars agree that he was born sometime in the eighth century. The traditional dates ascribed to his life are from 788 to 820 CE. Born in Kerala, situated in southern India, Shankara demonstrated extraordinary intellectual powers at a young age. He was a *srutidhara*, one who could remember anything that he heard even if it was only once. Vivekananda, too, is said to have had this ability. It is said that by the age of three, Shankara could speak and read Sanskrit fluently. By the age of five, he had mastered the Vedas and the Vedangas. By the age of seven, he wrote his first book, titled *Balabodha Samgraha*. At the age of eight, he took up the life of the mendicant, giving a promise to his mother that he would return at the end of her life to console her, liberate her soul and perform the traditional brahminical rites.

Thus did Shankara begin his life as a monk at the age of eight. Walking towards the Narmada River, he met his guru, Govinda Bhagavatapada. On seeing his teacher, he spontaneously burst out with an advaitic hymn, now called *Nirvanasatakam*, familiar to all students of Vedanta. This hymn begins with the declaration, "I am neither the mind nor the intellect, neither the ego nor the mind stuff, I am pure consciousness and bliss, I am Siva, I am Siva." It is conjectured that Shankara lived with his guru for a period of at most four years and during this time composed various hymns and wrote several books, the most famous being the *Vivekachudamani*, or *The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*. After his period of discipleship, Shankara began his pilgrimage towards Kasi, at the young age of 12. With his guru's blessings and instruction to compose commentaries on the Brahma Sutras, Shankara proceeded towards northern India. On reaching Kasi, he stayed there four years writing his commentaries on the major philosophical works.

One of the traditional stories told of Shankara in Kasi is his meeting with a chandala, a person of lower caste. While walking through the narrow lanes of Kasi, he encountered the chandala, who he asked to move aside so that he could pass by and not touch him. To this, the chandala replied,

O wise sage. Who are you asking to move aside? If it is the body, then this body is made of the same material as your body and is inert and thus cannot move. If it is pure awareness, then this awareness is identical with yours and is omnipresent and thus there is no place where it is not. Thus we are the same. So who are you asking to move and for whom?

Shankara immediately recognised that he was in the presence of a realised being and composed a poem on the spot.

At the age of 16, Shankara surmised that the last days of his mother were near, and to keep his promise to her, ventured back to South India. On reaching home, he learned his mother was unwell and comforted her with his message of Advaita and the indestructibility of the soul. Finding that this message was not getting through, he switched to the singing of hymns in praise of Vishnu and Shiva and thus assuaged her pain. After she passed away, he performed the last rites. It is said that the local Brahmin priests did not want to assist him in that they felt he had violated the rule that a sanyasin should not perform the last rites. But as Shankara promised it to his mother, he performed these rites on his own, ignoring the injunctions of the priests.

Shankara's advent in India was at a time when Buddhism had already degenerated into ritualism and the pristine message of the Buddha had evaporated. Shankara revived the earlier Vedanta and, it is said, transformed many of the Buddhist temples into Hindu temples. Shankara was often called a hidden Buddhist. In his essay "The Sages of India," Swami Vivekananda wrote⁴:

Shankara ... showed that the real essence of Buddhism and that of the Vedanta are not very different but that the disciples did not understand the Master and have degraded themselves, denied

the existence of the soul and of God, and have become atheists. That was what Shankara showed, and all the Buddhists began to come to the old religion. But then they had become accustomed to all these forms: what could be done?

Vivekananda emphasizes that in this connection the contributions of Ramanuja were also important. As a result of his emphasis on bhakti, the masses began to rally 'round the worship of the divine ideal'.

Elaborating on the historical causes for the degradation of Buddhism, Swami Vivekananda wrote⁵, in his essay "The Sages of India," that the teaching of the Buddha, with its insistence on reason and high moral standards, did not adhere to the masses.

Unfortunately, such high ideals could not be well assimilated by the different uncivilised and uncultured races of mankind who flocked within the fold of the Aryans. These races, with varieties of superstition and hideous worship, rushed within the fold of the Aryans and for a time appeared as if they had become civilised, but before a century had passed, they brought out their snakes, their ghosts, and all the other things their ancestors used to worship, and thus the whole of India became one degraded mass of superstition.

Thus all ceremonials were revived and the Vedic ceremonials were replaced by new ones and there arose in their place "gorgeous temples, gorgeous ceremonies and gorgeous priests, and all that you see in India in modern times." Vivekananda continues, "I smile when I read books written by some modern people who ought to have known better, that the Buddha was the destroyer of Brahminical idolatry. Little do they know that Buddhism created Brahminism and idolatry in India."⁶

At the present moment, we are again confronted by a similar crisis in the modern world. With the advent of science and rational thought, many of the earlier traditional dualistic religions, with their theology of a creator God, are pretty much on the decline. Modern science has undermined the traditional religions and when modern man rejects these traditional religions, he also implicitly rejects the moral and ethical principles that these religions embody. As the English saying goes, the baby has been thrown out with the bath water. It is in this context that the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is significant. The central message of Swami Vivekananda is that both dualism and non-dualism are true and are essential for the human being. With his characteristic humor, he writes in his lectures on Bhakti yoga⁷:

If the buffaloes want to worship God, they will, in keeping with their own nature see God as a huge buffalo; if a fish wants to worship God, it will have to form an idea of God as a big fish. ... Man, buffalo, fish all may be supposed to represent so many different vessels and all these vessels go to the sea of God to get filled with water, each according to its own shape and capacity ... in each

of these vessels there is the same water of the sea of God ... so we cannot help seeing God in human form and therefore are bound to worship in that form.

Dualism is part and parcel of the embodied being. Thus, even though the path of enlightenment requires the cultivation of reason, as Buddha and Shankara stressed, we also need to cultivate devotion. We cannot help it. It is in the very fiber of the human being. This is beautifully expressed in the famous hymn of Hanuman in the Tulsidas Ramanyana:

*shri nathe janaki nathe abhede paramatmani
tathapi mama sarvasvaim ramah kamala-locana*

"I know that Vishnu and Rama are manifestations of the same Supreme Being; still my devotion is to the lotus-eyed Rama."

The crisis of the modern man is similar to the crisis in India at the time of Shankara. It is in this context that the message of Vivekananda is relevant. The error in Buddha's message was its insistence on pure reason alone. However, the individual is confronted with an ocean of emotions and this emotional energy must be re-directed in a creative and constructive fashion towards a divine and universal ideal. This is the essence of bhakti yoga, or the yoga of devotion. Although Shankara realized this dimension of the human being, he did not emphasize it enough; it was Ramanuja who gave more stress to this aspect of the human being. However, what is needed is a combination of the two. But Vivekananda says there is more than that. The human being is also a being of action. Thus, one must know how to act. One must know how to harness the physical energies and direct them towards a constructive and creative ideal. This is the essence of karma yoga, or the yoga of action. Again, underlying the human being is his psyche with its myriad forms of psychic processes that represent the inner workings of the mind. These processes are at the root cause of human behaviour and one must know how to harness the energy to which they give rise. This is the essence of raja yoga, or the yoga of psychic control. Thus Vivekananda in his writings revived the teaching of the four yogas to deal with the four faculties of the human mind, namely, thinking, feeling, willing and restraining. Although the message of the four yogas is evident in the Bhagavad Gita, it is Vivekananda who brought it into prominence and he had learned it at the feet of the great master, Sri Ramakrishna.

Born in the year 1863 as Narendranath Dutta in Kolkata, India, Vivekananda had a traditional upbringing at home, where he learned the mythological lore of the Hindu tradition as well as the foundations of the Indian philosophical tradition. At school and university, he became acquainted with European thought and Western philosophy. Thus, he was perfectly poised to evaluate both the Eastern and Western traditions and prescribe for the world a remedy for its malaise. But beyond this, he showed signs of an ardent spiritual determination at a very young age. Like Buddha and Shankara, he was dubious about orthodox religions and valued

reason as the foundation of life.

In 19th-century India, the adoption of the British educational system completely undermined the cultural and religious traditions of the nation. In 1835, Thomas Babbington Macaulay introduced, in the now famous (or infamous) "Minute on Education," his new policies for the schools and universities in India. According to this proclamation, English was to be the medium of instruction and Protestant missionary professors were to be put in charge of education. His goal was "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." He also wrote, in the same "minute," that there is not a single book written by any Indian that can match the intellectual brilliance of any author of the West. Haughtily he wrote, "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."⁸

Thus it is ironic that in the year after his "Minute on Education" was introduced and made policy in all the Indian schools and universities, there arose in Bengal, a man who was the antithesis of all that Macaulay would have defined as a "cultured person" – Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna was born in 1836 and came from a rustic background. Since childhood, he had a mystical temperament and was imbued with a fiery zeal to attain spiritual enlightenment. He never had formal education in the traditional sense of the term, but had educated himself by listening to the stories and teachings of the wandering minstrels. He practised yoga and meditation and many spiritual teachers came to him to instruct him on the various spiritual paths they had mastered. Thus he learned first-hand that religion is realization and not an adherence to a particular creed or a dogma. He realized the importance of both reason and devotion and advocated a synthesis of all the religious traditions, he himself having practised them all and having gained illumination through them.

Narendranath was eighteen years old when he first met Sri Ramakrishna. Trained in the Western educational system introduced by the British during colonial rule, Vivekananda initially scoffed at the message of Sri Ramakrishna and its insistence on bhakti or devotion. Yet he was innately convinced that Sri Ramakrishna had attained enlightenment. Thus, here was the meeting of the century. On one hand, Sri Ramakrishna represented the ancient traditions with their mystical past and the zeal for realization. On the other, Vivekananda represented the rational man, with his emphasis on reason as a means for enlightenment. As a result of having come into contact with Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda saw that what was needed was a fusion of these two traditions.

Vivekananda expanded this teaching to include also karma yoga and raja yoga, that is, the yoga of action and the yoga of psychic control. This expansion arose in his mind after the passing away of his Master and he took up the life of the wandering monk. Just as Buddha and Shankara had done centuries earlier, Vivekananda walked through the length and breadth of India. As he wandered through its rustic countryside, he saw the plight of the

multitude steeped in poverty and ignorance. How to revive the nation? He met with wealthy landlords and maharajas. They all recognized his spiritual stature. To them, he taught that they were only custodians of power and wealth and that this power and wealth was meant for distribution for the welfare of the masses.

It is clear that he was a master teacher and did not make any distinction between the high and the low. In one encounter⁹, he met a maharaja who said he was not in favour of the symbols and idolatry that were prevalent in Hinduism. To this, Vivekananda asked,

'Whose picture is this on the wall?' The assistant replied, 'Sir, it is the likeness of our Maharaja.' 'Please take it down and spit upon it.' The assistant screamed, 'What are you asking us to do, Swami? It is the likeness of our maharaja.' Vivekananda countered, 'Why, it is only a picture. Spit upon it. Anyone of you can spit upon it. I say Spit!' Everyone was taken aback and shocked at the instruction. Then Vivekananda said 'You see, maharaja, even though you are not bodily present in the picture, in a figurative sense, you are. When people see the picture, they are reminded of you. Similarly with the human being. When they worship a symbol, they are reminded of the divine through that symbol.'

Apart from the powerful philosophical message in the story, we also see the humorous side of Vivekananda.

In 1896, after his days of wandering, Vivekananda went to Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions, which was part of the World's Fair. In spite of its name, it was, it would seem, organized with a view to show the supremacy of Christianity. The whole event turned topsy-turvy when Vivekananda appeared and gave the Vedantic perspective that all religions, when faithfully followed, lead one to the ultimate state of enlightenment.

When we study Vivekananda's writings, we see that he presented Vedanta not as a system of Indian philosophy but as a universal framework with which to view life. All religions and spiritual traditions, nay all disciplines of human knowledge like art and science, are included in the ideal of Vedanta. They are unified under the four yogas. He summarised the entire philosophy in four aphorisms¹⁰:

Every soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas, or rituals or books, or temples or forms are but secondary details.

After his return from the West, Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission in India. Through it, he was able to attract strong individuals who would dedicate their lives for the welfare of the many. The mission provided a monastic framework

for those individuals who wanted to practise the four-fold yoga. However, the larger context of his vision seems to have receded into the background simply because superficial academicians saw him often as a “Hindu missionary” or cast him in the “Indian fold,” much to the detriment of global civilization.

For Vivekananda, embracing the four-fold yoga was not ‘Hindu’ or ‘Indian.’ This misconception has impeded the evolution of the human race. First and foremost, Vivekananda was a philosopher and his writings have simplified the esoteric thought of ancient India and made it accessible so that a child can understand it. Secondly, scholars have compartmentalized his thought under the category of “monism” and this hindered their further understanding of Vivekananda’s thought. This categorization and compartmentalization run counter to Vivekananda’s thought and philosophy.

From Vivekananda’s perspective, Vedanta is similar to science, and yet larger. Science is the framework by which we understand the external universe around us. It does not belong to any particular nation but rather to the whole world. Moreover, science is not a finished product. It is an evolving framework for understanding the world around us and ourselves. But the mandate of Vedanta is larger. Just as science studies external nature and has given rise to manifold disciplines such as mathematics, physics, chemistry and so on, Vedanta studies the internal nature of the human being and has given rise to the multitude of religious and philosophical traditions of the world. Moreover, the internal dimension also includes the external, since the division is merely one of psychological convention and convenience. In this sense, Vedanta includes science, too, since ultimately we are only sure of the internal. Thus it is most unfortunate that modern scholars have fallen into the trap of classifying Vivekananda’s thought in reductionist terms such as “Vedantism”.

To cite one example, it is well-known that Vivekananda met with the American philosopher William James when he was in Boston and spoke at Harvard University. From a recent paper¹¹, it becomes evident that James did not have a good grasp of Vivekananda’s philosophy and indeed that there were fundamental flaws in his understanding of it. By his own admission, James did not have a meditative temperament. In his paper, Norris Frederick writes: “Throughout his life, James suffered from depression, nervous conditions and a host of physical ailments. ... James described himself as someone who was not a suitable subject for things like meditative enlightenment.”¹² Perhaps he was right and his understanding was incomplete. Indeed, with a total misunderstanding of the concept of nirvana or enlightenment, James wrote, “The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life.”¹³ One may as well say that he who has decided to wake up from his sleep is afraid of the dream world and should really go back to sleep! Many scholars seemed to have missed the point. As Sri Aurobindo wrote, “Knowledge is not for the hasty mind but only for the dhira, who can sit long accumulating and arranging his store and does not rush away with fragments like a crow darting off with the first morsel of food on which it can seize.”¹⁴

Thus it is important to understand Vivekananda and his philosophy in a larger context. Even scholars err when they run off with opinions and categories. The four-fold yoga at the core of Vivekananda’s philosophy gives us a fundamental framework for the inner adventure and journey into the higher spiritual evolution. When viewed against the majestic landscape of Indian spiritual history, we see that Buddha, Shankara and Vivekananda were all insisting on the foundation of reason for the spiritual path. Given the realities of the human condition, Shankara emphasized bhakti yoga as well, though this is not so well-known. In Vivekananda’s philosophy, we see a marvellous synthesis of all the yogas. Although this message is as old as the Bhagavad Gita, it was lost over time. Vivekananda revived this perennial message and made it available for the entire world.

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NOTES

- ¹ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (hereafter referred to as CW), Volume 2, p. 140.
- ² The Dhammapada, Chapter 23, Verses 9-11.
- ³ CW, Volume 2, p. 139.
- ⁴ CW, Volume 3, p. 265.
- ⁵ CW, Volume 3, p. 263.
- ⁶ CW, Volume 3, p. 264.
- ⁷ CW, Volume 3, p. 55.
- ⁸ The entire text of the “Minute on Education” can be found at: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meaac/pritchett/00generallinks/ma-caulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html
- ⁹ Life of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 1, p. 269.
- ¹⁰ CW, Volume 1, p. 124.
- ¹¹ See Norris Frederick, William James and Swami Vivekananda: Religious experience and Vedanta/Yoga in America, William James Studies, 2012, Volume 9, p.37-55. Available online at: <http://williamjamesstudies.org/9.1/frederick.pdf>
- ¹² Ibid., p. 48.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 46.
- ¹⁴ “Record of Yoga”, p. 18, in: Volume 10 and 11 of Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo.

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