

# Swami Vivekananda's Treatment of the Vedanta Philosophy in the Light of Physics

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Swami Vivekananda is a great exponent of Vedānta philosophy, who makes a remarkable attempt to analyse how some of the conclusions of modern physics are consistent with the ideas of ancient Vedānta. He admits that Vedāntic thought is consistent with physics. His concept of Practical Vedānta is the direct reflection of his practical outlook. His explanation of the ancient truths of Vedānta becomes acceptable to modern scientists and rationalists. Swamiji realises that science is not contradictory to the eternal spiritual principle and it is the foundation of Indian culture. Both science and eternal principles of Dharma are concerned with Truth. The world of modern physics is moving towards a knowledge which can lead towards the final unity in the universe and this unity is defined by Vedanta, the philosophical and metaphysical portion of Vedas, as the very basis of all existence and the ultimate goal of all knowledge. And Swami Vivekananda is the first remarkable figure who has given this unifying message to the Western world of science and technology.<sup>1</sup>

Vivekananda can be regarded as the foundational figure of a new 'holistic' science that can integrate modern physics and ancient spiritual speculations. He gives emphasis on the unification of Western science and Vedantic school of Indian philosophy. In the words of Vivekananda, "Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress because it would reach the goal. Thus, chemistry could not progress further when it would discover one element out of which all other could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its service in discovering one energy of

which all the others are but manifestations. And the science of religion would become perfect when it would discover Him, who is the one the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations. Thus is it through multiplicity and duality, that the ultimate reality is reached. Religion can go no further. This is the goal of all Science.”<sup>2</sup>

Vivekananda makes a great attempt to preach Vedānta in the light of Western science. He aims at to make the mystical and intellectual Vedanta ‘practical’ and to solve the problems of life. By the term ‘practical’ Swamiji means attainable by all people in the walks of life. The new profile of Vedānta which was given by Swamiji has come to be known as Neo-Vedānta, which leads to the relation of the ordinary life to spiritual *sadhana*, science to religion, matter to mind, the World to God and man to Brahman, the supreme Reality. Vivekananda, by admitting the relevance of the relation between science and Vedanta holds, “Science has proved to me that physical individuality is a delusion, that really my body is one little continuously changing body in an unbroken ocean of matter, and Advaita(unity) is the necessary conclusion with my other counterpart, soul.”<sup>3</sup>

Vivekananda admits the primacy of consciousness over matter. In 1961 Noble physicist Wigner asserts that the description of quantum mechanical process is not possible without explicit reference to consciousness. This statement really brings modern physics almost at the door of Vedānta. Regarding the concept of Māyā Vivekananda holds that Māyā is a statement of fact. Like Advaita Vedānta, Vivekananda also accepts Māyā as a power of the Creator. But, in Advaita Vedānta, Māyā is that power which creates illusion, which was not accepted by Vivekananda. He conceives Māyā as a fact about the nature of the world.<sup>4</sup> He defines Māyā in the words, “What you call matter or spirit or mind or anything else you may like to call them, the fact remains the same, we cannot say that they are, we cannot say they are not. . . . A fact yet at the same time, not a fact. This is a statement of facts, and this is what is called Māyā.”<sup>5</sup> Vivekananda identified Māyā with space, time and causation, (Desha-kala-Nimitta) though this concept was developed by Sankara.<sup>6</sup> According to him, one particular attribute which can be found in time, space and causation is that they cannot exist in isolation from

objects. It is not possible to have an idea of space without colour or limits or any connection of the things around. Though Vivekananda follows Sankara’s concept of Māyā, but he gives a modern logical interpretation.

Vivekananda, long before Einstein, clearly stated about the relativity of space and time. Swamiji holds that the one particular attribute one finds in time, space and causation is that they cannot exist separate from things. If there is an attempt about colour or limits or any connection with the things around-just abstract space. Similarly, it is not possible to have any idea of abstract time. Time depends on two events as well as space has to be related to outside objects and the idea of causation is also related with the idea of space and time.<sup>7</sup> Here, Vivekananda comes very close to those of Einstein.

Again, Vivekananda also viewed on the contradictory nature of the phenomenal world. In the words of Vivekananda, “This world has no existence’ what is meant by that? It means that it has no absolute existence. It exists only in relation to my mind, your mind and to the mind of every one’s else.”<sup>8</sup> Here, we can refer to Fritjof Capra, an American physicist. In the words of Capra, “To another pair of opposite concepts which is even more fundamental, that of existence and non-existence. This pair of opposite, too, is transcended by the atomic reality. We can never say that an atomic particle exists at a certain place, nor can we say that it does not exist. Being a probability pattern, the particle has tendencies to exist in various places and thus manifest strange kind of physical reality between existence and non-existence.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, another common aspect of physics and Vedāntais that of unity between the microcosm and macrocosm as well as man and the Ultimate reality. The microcosm contains in it the entire potentialities of the macrocosm. It is the view of the modern science that the world is homogeneous and each atom is composed of the same material as well as the whole universe also. Similarly in the Vedanta also atoms are defined as invisible. Though, the atoms are invisible, they can grasp the whole power and potency of the universe and that exactly what the Vedānist admits about Atman. In the similar way man is the most representative being in the universe, the microcosm, a small universe in himself. Thus, it leads us to admit the resemblance between the principle of the identification of

macrocosm and microcosm and the basic unity of man and the Ultimate Reality. This principle of identification belong to modern physics and Vedānta philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Again, Vivekananda brings to light the consistency between ancient Indian cosmology and modern science. Swamiji points out to a question –what is Prana? He Spandan himself admits that Prana is Spandan or vibration .And he compares this with Wave forms, because the motion is going in wave forms like- rising again, falling again.<sup>11</sup> Vivekananda, by referring to the Gita and the Vedānta, also defines individual self as Vibhu and in the light of physical evolution Swamiji preached that the bodies of different animals are really one, though there are differences , but in reality they are the different expression of the same series. In the words of Vivekananda, “The sum total of the energy remains the same, whatever the forms it may take. If you want a mass of energy at one end, you have got to put it in at other end; it may be in another form, but the amount of energy that should be produced out of it must be the same.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Vivekananda finds conformity with infinite energy. He defines soul as infinite and explores that all the creatures of the world from the lowest worm to the greatest saints all have this same infinite power, that is, the soul. They only differ in their degree of manifestation. Vivekananda was concerned with the Cartesian division of mind and matter where he found the root of western thinking about God and the universe. God is defined as the self-evolving cause of the universe, which is not different from Him. In western thought, this principle is defined as ‘naturalism’ and naturalism is the foundation of science and rationalism.

In this way, Vivekananda’s scientific treatment of the Vedānta philosophy is very significant. According to him, the Vedānta admits that the universe, with all its lives, have emerged from pure consciousness. He holds that Newton and Galileo are ‘Prophets of physical science’ and Upanisadic Rishis are ‘Prophet of spirituality’ and then very firmly explores that “the whole universe mental and material will be fused into one.”<sup>13</sup> Swamiji apprehended this holistic and mystical aspect and modern science would turn from matter to the transcendental consciousness, which is the hidden aspect of human being. It is the source of all existence.

In this way, this paper is a humble attempt of the exploration of the consistency between the different branches of science and the Vedānta philosophy and discloses how science is significantly approaching the conclusions of Advaita Vedanta system. Along with Swamiji there are many other thinkers who give emphasis on the assimilation of modern science and Indian philosophical speculations. In the words of Fritjof Capra, “ The dance of Shiva symbolizes not only the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, but also the daily rhythm of birth and death which is seen in Indian mysticism as the basis of all existence. At the same time, Shiva reminds us that the manifold forms in the world are maya- not fundamental, but illusory and ever-changing.-as he keeps creating and dissolving them in the ceaseless flow of his dance”<sup>14</sup> Besides Vivekananda, many western physicists like Heisenberg, Schrodinger and many others have been aware about the parallelism between physics and the Vedānta philosophy. Thus, Swamiji insisted that Vedantic speculations are consistent with modern science. His scientific exposition of the Vedantic thought is the appreciation to the attempt of the unification of these two, which leads us to accept the that the development of Physics and the philosophy of Vedanta are indeed interconnected.

#### Notes and references:

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2. Ibid.p.8
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5. Jitatmananda, Swami. *Modern Physics and Vedanta*. Paras Prints. Mumbai.p.60
6. Ibid.p.61
7. Ibid.p.61
8. Ibid.p.61
9. Capra, Fritjof. *The Tao of Physics*.Flamingo An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers.London.p.166
10. Jitatmananda, Swami. *Modern Physics and Vedanta*. Paras Prints.

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11. Vivekananda, Swami. *Advaita Vedanta The Scientific Religion*. Published by Advaita Ashrama. Kolkata. p.11
12. Ibid. p.24
13. Jitatmananda, Swami. *Modern Physics and Vedanta*. Paras Prints. Mumbai. p.156
14. Capra, Fritjof. *The Tao of Physics*. Flamingo An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers. London. p.270