
UNIT 1 SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND AUROBINDO

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1.0 OBJECTIVE

Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo revolutionized and awakened the Indian philosophical mind. They brought with them a new and higher consciousness. They can be viewed as great masters of philosophy of “unity in diversity.” Surprisingly enough, they were also linked to each other. Sri Aurobindo was accosted by Swami Vivekananda through his dreams and was the one who prompted him to start his Sadhana. By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- understand the larger vision of unity in diversity implied in the teachings of these philosophers;
- know the central ideas of their philosophy; and
- assimilate their passion for the whole of humanity as one religion.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda was born in a well-to-do family of Calcutta. His early life was not very eventful. In 1881, he happened to meet Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa whom the former accepted as his philosopher and guide. After the death of Ramakrishna in 1886, he undertook an extensive travel of almost the whole of India. In 1893 he addressed the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago. After his return, he founded the Ramakrishna Ashram at Belur, near Calcutta. He breathed his last on the 4th of July 1902.

Aurobindo Ghosh was born on the 15th of August 1872 at Konanagar, West Bengal. He had his early education in the Loretto Convent School of Darjeeling, and was taken to England at an early age of eight. In 1885 he was sent to St. Paul’s school, London, where he developed a special fascination for some classical languages like Greek and Latin. On completing his studies he appeared for the I.C.S examination, was successful in the written test, but could not qualify in the riding test. In 1893 he came back to India and joined the Baroda State Service, where he found enough leisure to read ancient Indian Philosophy. He remained in Baroda for about ten years, after which he devoted himself to political work till he was arrested in 1908. During

his imprisonment he underwent a spiritual transformation, which took him to the ways of a Yogi. In April 1910, he shifted to Pondicherry, where he stayed till he breathed his last in 1950. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, began to publish the Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo in a uniform library edition and it continues to do so. These works contain all the writings published earlier in the 30-volume Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL), as well as around 4000 pages of new texts.

1.2 PHILOSOPHY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

Vivekananda is an idealist as he believes the ultimate reality to be spiritual. Reality is one absolute *Brahman*. Real is a ‘whole’ implies that there must be parts. But absolute is perfect unity, and therefore the distinction between parts and whole completely vanishes. The absolute *Brahman* is also beyond space, time and causation, and thus changeless. The changeless absolute is indeterminate without any attribute. However, the absolute can be described as *sat-chit-ananda*. Love is the essential core of *ananda* (bliss). Metaphysically speaking, reality is absolute *Brahman*, and the same reality viewed from religious point of view is God who is all-pervasive, present everywhere and in everything.

God

God is personal. We find two currents flowing in the philosophy of Vivekananda: one that resembles the Advaita Vedanta and the other one that reminds of the theism of the Bhakti-cult. He who is supremely real is also the object of our devotion and worship. An outright rejection of God is impossible as God is presupposed as the necessary support and ground of both the world and the soul. One may gather the following arguments for the existence of God from the teachings of Vivekananda: (1) Argument from Design: The vastness, harmony and the grandeur of the world lead us to suppose that there must be an architect, an intelligent designer of the universe. (2) Argument from Causality: Everything in the universe is by turn a cause and an effect. This causal series leads to an ultimate cause, which is the Uncaused Cause, the Absolute Being, God. (3) Argument from Unity: The universe expresses an essential unity of all things. The things that look very different from each other are really and basically one and the same. This fact of unity reveals the most underlying and unifying principle of all things, namely, God. (4) Argument from Love: Love consists in discovering oneself in the object of love. In the act of love, the distinction between ‘me’ and ‘thou’ would vanish. The conclusion is that the reality behind everything is just one, supreme principle of love: God. (5) Argument from Authority of Scriptures: So long as we have not been able to know and realize God, we can base ourselves on the authority of the scriptures. From the point of view of existence and reality, God alone is there, but from the point of view of our finite knowledge, scriptures appear to be prior, and we can rely on their authority in teaching about God. (6) Argument from Analogy: He takes up the analogy of a beautiful picture. That person enjoys a picture who looks at it without the intention of buying and selling. Similarly, the whole universe is the picture of God, which would be enjoyed by humans when all their desires have vanished. (7) Argument from Necessity of Notion: The notion of God is a necessity on various grounds. It is necessary because God is the Truth and Truth is necessary. In the same way, God is necessary because God is freedom. The fact of human freedom presupposes the ideal of absolute freedom which is Divine Freedom. Again God is necessary, because the very condition of existence involves God. (8) Argument from Intuition: Every human has the capacity to experience God directly through intuition if one is prepared to follow the path of rigorous religious discipline and meditation. The rational ‘proofs’ are needed only so long as the capacity to have a direct vision (intuition) is not developed.

World

Swami Vivekananda and
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World (cosmos) is God's creation, which is the expression of the Creator in finite forms. The Absolute has become the universe by passing through time, space and causation. Of course, this description implies that in Absolute there was neither time, nor space, nor causation since the Absolute is beyond all change. Space, time, and causation are not metaphysical realities, but mere forms through which God makes creation possible. Although a form is not a metaphysical reality, it is neither real nor false. The forms are like waves in an ocean. The waves are the same as the ocean, yet different. Similarly, the world is as real as the waves. *Jagat mithya* of Sankara, according to Vivekananda, does not mean mere illusion, but that which has no reality of its own, without any permanent value. It means that which is constantly changing. Creation is timeless. God is eternally creating. Creation and evolution go together.

Maya

Maya is the power of the Creator. It is the principle of change, which makes creation possible. But in Advaita Vedanta, *maya* is the power that creates illusion; it is that Divine *sakti* which has the capacity of deluding human into believing that the world is real. Vivekananda disagrees with this position. For him, *maya* reflects the fact of contradiction that the universe so clearly exhibits. For instance, wherever there is good, there is evil; wherever there is life, there is death, and so forth. Finally, all contradictions are to be resolved, and therefore, *maya* has to be superseded. But the superseding act does not completely cancel or negate that which is superseded. Even when *maya* gives way, it gives way only to find that all the time it was lying within the bosom of Brahman itself. Its being superseded does not take away from it its distinctive role that it had been playing so long. *Maya* is neither existence nor non-existence, but something in between Absolute Being and non-being.

Human

The picture of human that emerges in the philosophy of Vivekananda is an organized unity of the physical and the spiritual. Human is physically superior to all other animals because human's physical nature is better organized and exhibits a greater unity. This uniqueness of human's physical nature is also due to the presence of spirituality in the person. The true nature of *atman* is identical with *Brahman*. The two are basically identical and their difference is only apparent. Normally we do not have an awareness of this identity, but certain experiences and realizations can be taken as pointers towards this. The most usual example is the feeling that one is capable of such an identity.

Freedom and Karma

The real nature of human is freedom. It constitutes the very essence of the soul. It is not correct to say that freedom belongs to the soul since soul itself is freedom. Freedom does not mean absence of all kinds of determining factors. It does not mean 'no-determination' at all, but it means self-determination in which the free agent is not determined by anything else but by himself. In this way, freedom and karma no longer remain incompatible with each other. Karma determines human's nature, but it is human's karma. One's own actions create tendencies that bear fruit for the future. Secondly, karma does not contradict human's freedom. It is because final escape rests ultimately with one's own actions. By one's own good deeds, one can win over one's ignorance and suffering. That shows that human is basically free.

Immortality

Vivekananda admits that it is not possible to give an exact and scientific demonstration of the soul's immortality. However, this notion cannot be brushed aside as a delusion since a notion cannot keep on deluding generations after generations. The soul, in fact, survives death. This survival assumes the form of rebirth and finally the realization of immortality. True immortality can be attained only when the 'cycle' of birth and rebirth is stopped. The following are some of the evidences for immortality: (1) Simplicity of Soul: The soul is immortal because it is simple. Simplicity is the absence of complexity. What is liable to destruction is invariably something complex. (2) Infinite Potentialities: Human has infinite potentialities. Human has the capacity to go beyond every task that one is faced with. (3) Yearning for Liberation: Our yearning for liberation from death is a sign of immortality. For, our genuine desires do have a real object. It shows that our desire for immortality itself is an evidence of immortality.

Liberation and the Means

One of the most important concepts of Hinduism is that of *mukti* (liberation). The liberation can be attained through the practice of *yoga*. Of the numerous *yogas*, Vivekananda proposes the following four: *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga*, *jnana-yoga*, and *raja-yoga*. (1) In *Karma-Yoga*, work is not done due to compulsion, but out of a sense of duty. The *karma-yogi* works as a free being, unattached to all self-interest. Such work leads to knowledge, which in turn brings liberation. (2) *Bhakti-yoga* is a genuine search for the Lord in love. Love of God grows and assumes *parā-bhakti* or supreme devotion in which all forms and rituals vanish. In *bhakti-yoga*, one trains to control one's feelings and emotions and gives the soul higher and higher direction towards God. (3) *Jnana-Yoga* explains the meaning of 'Thou art that' and tells human that one is essentially divine. In *jnana-yoga* the entire energy of the body can be concentrated in the direction of knowledge. In course of time this concentration will become more intense, and the individual may attain the stage of complete concentration or *samadhi*. At this stage, even the distinction between the Self and Brahman will vanish. It is a stage of perfect unity. (4) *Raja-yoga* is the method of realization through the mystic union of the lower Self with the higher Self. It restrains the activities of the mind, and with the cessation of the activities of the mind, attachment and bondage disappears. It produces certain super-normal powers, which the aspirant should ignore so as to attain liberation. When a person goes into *samadhi* or superconscious stage, one comes out as a sage and attains metaphysical and transcendental knowledge.

Religion

Religion is a necessity of life. For, first, there is a longing of a higher kind which shows that religion is a necessary aspect of life. Second, religion is inevitable, and it cannot be given up. Trying to give up religion will itself become a religion. Third, the historical fact of the survival of religion itself – unlike politico-social institutions – is an evidence of its necessary character. *Origin of religion*: Religion originates in human's attempt to go beyond the senses. Human experiences uneasiness within when certain phenomena appear as beyond one's ordinary perception and understanding. *Nature of religion*: Religion is inherent in the very constitution of human. The nature of religion can be known by analyzing the religious sense, which is universally present with all the three elements in it: the cognitive elements, the feeling elements and the conative elements. These elements are never present in equal proportion or degree, but the nature of religion is determined by the preponderance of this element or that. For example, where there is a preponderance of feeling, religion tends to be mystical;

where there is emphasis on knowledge, religion is intellectual and abstract; and where there is predominance of volitional elements, religion becomes practical and ritual. But true religious consciousness harmonizes all these aspects into a unity. *Characteristics of religion:* (1) Supernatural Content: The supernatural content provides a religion with its uniqueness and distinguishes it from all other forms of disciplines. (2) Transcendence: Religion transcends not only the limitations of the senses, but also the power of reasoning or of pure intellectual deliberation. (3) Abstractions: Religious facts are more or less abstractions which are super-sensuous, like ‘the ideal unity,’ ‘the ideal of humanity,’ and so on. (4) Awakening of spirituality: To say that religion is a spiritual awakening is to emphasize that it begins in an awareness of the inadequacy of sense and reason. (5) Social and moral content: A distinction is usually made between morality and religion by saying that morality serves social purpose and religion has a value that transcends even the social. However, religion provides a secure foundation and an ultimate sanction to morality. Ethics will ever remain blind and chaotic without this sanction. (6) Mental exercise: Religion is the greatest and the healthiest exercise that the human mind can do. (7) Triple aspects of religion: Every religion has three aspects or contents such as philosophy, mythology and ritual. Philosophy underlies the whole scope of a religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means for reaching it. Mythology consists of legends and stories, which concretize philosophy. Ritual is made up of forms and ceremonies that keep men engaged religiously and provide them with structural and organizational unity. *Universal Religion:* A universal religion has the following features: (1) It must open its door to every individual who is free to decide one’s religion. (2) It must be inclusive of all sects superseding conflicts and tensions that often occur among the various sects. (3) The spirit of universal religion implies acceptance. Acceptance is not just tolerance, which is negative in its import, but positive acceptance in which respect is shown to everyone. God is the essence and ideal of universal religion. (4) Universal religion has to be acceptable to all minds satisfying the largest possible proportion of humankind. Universal religion must harmoniously balance all the aspects of religion namely, *philosophy, emotion, work, and mysticism.*

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
 b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain Swami Vivekananda’s view on Freedom and Karma.

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2) What are the means to liberation according to Swami Vivekananda?

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1.3 PHILOSOPHY OF SRI AUROBINDO (1872 – 1950)

Aurobindo is a non-dualist (advaitic), but different from that of *μαῶkara*. *Mḍyḍ* is the real power of *Brahman*, part and parcel of consciousness. It is the creative power of *Brahman* who descends through it to the world of matter. There is nothing that is not permeated by *Brahman* and thus everything is real. The conscious is permeated by the unconscious and vice versa. Both the conscious and the unconscious are powers of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is pure existence and it is the very nature of the power of *Brahman* to manifest itself as the world of finite objects and selves. Universe is the power of *Brahman* manifesting itself. In the process of evolution, all beings constantly return to *Brahman*. This return to the primordial power of Being results in the evolution of the spirit into higher forms of consciousness. For Aurobindo, unlike Darwin, all beings are the evolutes of the spirit. Every being has something in common with every other being. The ordinary distinction between the lower (plant) and the higher (animal) is not an essential distinction but only one of degree. The lower is constantly struggling to evolve into the higher, and the higher is always reflected in the lower. The universe is a constant evolutionary play between the lower and the higher, and the summit of evolution is the attainment of *saccidananda*.

The movement from spirit to matter and matter to spirit belongs to the very nature of the Absolute. It is *maya*, the power of the Absolute. If spirit is conscious and *maya* is unconscious, then both conscious and unconscious are not separate from each other, but belong to each other. The movements of descent (involution) and ascent (evolution) constitute a circular movement. Absolute Reality (*Brahman*) is *Saccidananda*: *Sat* (Being), *Cit* (consciousness), and *Ananda* (bliss). There are, in fact, nine stages of the descent and ascent of the Supreme Spirit into matter and from matter: Being (*Sat*), consciousness (*Cit*), bliss (*Ananda*), supermind, overmind, mind, psyche, life and matter.

Sat is pure existence, infinite, eternal, and indefinable. Being and becoming are both fundamental aspects of *Sat*. *Cit* is consciousness-force. All existence ultimately comes down to a movement of energy, a Force, and this Force is a conscious Force. *Ananda* is absolute delight or eternal and unlimited bliss. Hence, the Absolute, *Brahman*, is a conscious existence whose consciousness is limitless bliss. Of course, at the top is the Supreme Unmanifest *Saccidananda* since Reality, in the final analysis, is beyond its manifestations. Next comes *Saccidananda* made manifest, which is being, consciousness, and bliss. *Supermind* is direct-truth consciousness. It is the possession of truth, and not the construction of that truth. It is the consciousness by which the Divine knows its own essence and manifestations. It is consciousness that yields automatic action in harmony with the Divine essence. It is oblivious to the dichotomy of thing in the manifest universe even while it acts within that universe. An example could be someone's acting in the light of pure unselfish love where the distinctions between self, action, and the beloved are not made. *Overmind* is a kind of bridge between supermind and the lower levels of the human mind. Overmind-consciousness knows the unity of things. But its action is deliberate, not automatic as in supermind-consciousness. *Mind* (intuitive mind) is a direct encounter with truth. It encounters truth only in moments of illumination rather than the consciousness of Supermind, which is definitive and immutable. Illumined Mind and Higher Mind are similar to one another. Whereas the Higher Mind is a tentative awareness of Unity in that it is still grounded in conceptual thought, Illumined Mind is more integrated, more visionary.

Normal waking consciousness is the level of mind which operates from the perspective of the single individual and assumes the multiplicity of things to be elemental. The multiplicity of things is real, but the level of mind is unable to see the essential connectedness of things. In fact, Mind does not know the Whole but mistakes its own individuality as being its defining characteristic in relation to everything else. *Psyche* is that which represents the presence of the Divine in all life-forms. It also creates desires in and for the individual, thus separating one from the Whole. Because Psyche is the Divine Spark, it facilitates the spiritual evolution of that individual. *Life* is the energy that animates every living thing, animal or plant. *Matter* is the material stuff of the universe.

The purpose of human life is to evolve spiritually upward toward Supramental consciousness, and human beings have the capacity to help or to hinder this process for the rest of the human community. In essence, when an individual attains to Overmental consciousness, then Overmind itself descends to the level of human consciousness in a way that goes well beyond the spiritual accomplishment of the individual. The way in which a person participates in this process of Divine self-manifestation is through the practice of *Integral Yoga* which is the integration of spiritual practice with regular activity in the world.

The stages from mind to matter belong to the empirical world. The stages from supermind are supernals and divine. The overmind is the mediator between mind and supermind through the veil of *maya* that separates the two. The overmind corresponds to the witness-consciousness of *Vedanta*. The first three levels beginning with existence constitute *Brahman* which is *sacchidananda*. *Maya* stays between the mind and the supermind, and *maya* and the overmind belong to each other.

The aim of human life is to follow the path of the ascent to the levels of the supernals one after another, from Overmind to the Supermind and so on. At the higher levels there is no possibility of falsity at all as ignorance and consciousness are inseparable there. The overmind now and then passes onto mind some great truth which cannot be accounted for by mind. When human rises to the levels of the overmind and becomes one with it, one becomes a superman. The superman of Aurobindo is a yogi who has surrendered oneself to God becoming one with him. It has nothing in common with the Superman of Nietzsche. There is no conflict or strife for those who have risen to higher levels. There is complete unity without difference. Such an experience is integral knowledge.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Differentiate between ‘Supermind’ and ‘Overmind.’

2) Explain Sri Aurobindo’s concept of ‘Superman.’

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Swami Vivekananda was known for his Practical Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda declared that he had come to prove the great Vedanta ideal in practical life and to herald it before the workaday world and society. He believed in the basic oneness of existence seen through different constitutions such as earth, heavens, gods, hell, ghosts, men, etc. and advocated strongly the eternal sameness or homogeneity beyond all differentiation, the unity of all personalities. Vedanta meant that all power, glory, divinity, and purity of the divine were already within the soul, within each creature in the universe.

The essential teaching of Sri Aurobindo is that humans are in a transition toward the final evolution. They would surpass their present conditions and rise to a newer life with abundant knowledge and consciousness. It would transform not only the personal self but also this cosmos. It would cause the dawn of a New Heaven and a New Earth, the Kingdom of Heaven upon the earth.

1.5 KEY WORDS

- Space

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Space is the boundless, three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction. Physical space is often conceived in three linear dimensions, although modern physicists usually consider it, with time, to be part of the boundless four-dimensional continuum known as space-time.
- Mind

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Mind is the subjective, comprehensive structure of a rational being. It is the aspect of intellect and consciousness experienced as combinations of thought, perception, memory, emotion, will and imagination, including all unconscious cognitive processes. Mind manifests itself subjectively as a stream of consciousness.

1.6 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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<<http://www.sriarobindosociety.org>> is the Official Website of Sri Aurobindo Society that provides the reader everything linked to Sri Aurobindo's life, teachings, and writings, including the details about Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville at Pondicherry.

<<http://www.sriarobindosociety.org.in/saspub/saspub.htm>> gives the Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo and of the Mother in Book, Video, Photograph, and in other formats.

<<http://www.miraura.org>>, the Integral Yoga Website provides the reader the compilation of writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) The real nature of human is freedom. It constitutes the very essence of the soul. It is not correct to say that freedom belongs to the soul since soul itself is freedom. Freedom does not mean absence of all kinds of determining factors. It does not mean 'no-determination' at all, but it means self-determination in which the free agent is not determined by anything else but by himself. In this way, freedom and karma no longer remain incompatible with each other. Karma determines human's nature, but it is human's karma. One's own actions create tendencies that bear fruit for the future. Secondly, karma does not contradict human's freedom. It is because final escape rests ultimately with one's own actions. By one's own good deeds, one can win over one's ignorance and suffering. That shows that human is basically free.
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Check Your Progress II

- 1) *Supermind* is direct-truth consciousness. It is the possession of truth, and not the construction of that truth. It is the consciousness by which the Divine knows its own essence and manifestations. It is consciousness that yields automatic action in harmony with the Divine essence. It is oblivious to the dichotomy of thing in the manifest universe even while it acts within that universe. An example could be someone's acting in the light of pure unselfish love where the distinctions between self, action, and the beloved are not made. *Overmind* is a kind of bridge between supermind and the lower levels of the human mind. Overmind-consciousness knows the unity of things. But its action is deliberate, not automatic as in supermind-consciousness.
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