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**MATERIALISM VERSUS SPIRITUALITY:
NEO-VEDANTA APPROACH OF SYNTHESIS**

Human beings are often described as having two opposing (and complementary) elements: Flesh and Soul. We all strive, to a certain extent and according to everybody's ability, to reach a level where we are satisfied with both elements. This satisfaction is actually an ideal, and seldom do we find people who have reached that level. This estrangement between the two spheres of life, the relationship between materialism and spirituality, is as central a divide as one can imagine. From the remains of our earliest writings, these concepts have been illuminated for us by religious figures, philosophers, novelists, and literary critics, amongst many others. Some have given predominance to matter, while others to spirituality. There have been, however, some philosophers in human history who have tried to strike a balance between the two. One of them is certainly Vivekananda, who stressed the need for perfect synthesis of materialism and spirituality in life.

The synthesis of materialism and spirituality has become inevitable to the modern man. The last quarter of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century have witnessed many transitional changes. Immense progress in science and technology, and in economy has brought about more comfortable living conditions for man. Globalization and liberalization of economies have played a crucial role in this regard. In the era of globalization, we are witnessing an attack of materialism. However, globalization has many good effects. In the words of Samuel P. Huntington:

Over thousands of years, globalization has contributed to the progress of the world through travel, trade, migration, spread of cultural influences and dissemination of knowledge and understanding ... yes, it leaves some people behind, but it helps

millions more to leap ahead. Yes, it has made us materialistic, but it has also brought western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights equality, liberty, the rule of law democracy, free market and separation of church and state. “West Vs. Rest”.

But, in addition to these positive effects of globalization, we should not forget ill effects of it. Human beings, at present, are blinded by the glamour of Materialism. We want to possess more and more, as if we have switched our ‘having mode’ on. Money has taken the place of God, whose values supersedes other values. Compassion has been drained from modern life. The owners of our society want more for themselves. The pursuit of material wealth requires that we act to increase our own gain. Consequently, we must act to increase our brother’s loss and sufferings. That is a choice of our time.

If those whose eyes have been blinded by the glamour of material things, whose whole dedication of life is eating and drinking and enjoying, whose ideal of possession is lands and gold, whose ideal of pleasure is that of senses, whose good is money and whose goal is life of ease, comfort in this world – (P. 156–C.W. IV).

The problem with globalization is not that this process has taken place but its incomplete journey. It is a product of misbalanced growth of the human being. The human being is not a product of material composition. Like other philosophies of his time, the picture of man that emerges in the philosophy of Vivekananda is an organized unit of the Physical and Spiritual. Vivekananda never undermines the importance of the physical nature of man. The very fact that man is always asked to awaken his spirituality presupposes that there is a side of man that is somewhat different from and yet akin to his spiritual nature. Body itself represents the physical aspects of man’s nature. But body is not all reality for man. Like a true Vedantin (The followers of Vedanta), Vivekananda describes the true nature of man as soul force or Atman. The physical aspect of man is inferior, though not to be neglected, to the spiritual aspect. None of these two aspects of man can be neglected. If body is a temple, soul is the God of that temple. If we neglect one aspect and give all emphasis to other one, the growth of the human being will be impeded.

West And East: Two Different Approaches

Like some other contemporary Indian philosophers, Vivekananda equates the problem of materialism and spirituality with the West and the East respectively. In his studies of the human cultural heritage, he saw two distinct approaches to

the problem of human development, one as cultivated by the East and the other by the West.

Western society has always been characterized by material growth of man from Greco-Roman times, the west has been specializing in the manipulation of the physical and social environments of man for ensuring his growth and fulfillment. The whole gamut of ideas and processes arising from his approach is conveyed to us by the rich modern words 'positivism' and 'humanism', which, in the wake of modern technological advances, are often qualified by the word 'scientific'. It is the conviction of positivism that human development is ensured by understanding, controlling and manipulating the environment, natural and social, in which man's life is cast. Through technological and socio-political processes, man suitably disciplines and manipulates his environment, which is sometimes tractable, often intractable, with a view to ensuring his own self expression. The product of such manipulation is civilization. There is in this a sense of a fight with an external enemy. Such a challenge calls forth from the spirit of man the qualities of courage, faith, and confidence in himself, and the capacity for co-operation and teamwork. It disciplines his senses and mind in precision of observation and communication. It helps to endow him with a zest for life and for action and achievement. All these constitute, for man, the school for the development of character and practical efficiency. Here is a distinct philosophy of man which Vivekananda called the philosophy of manliness and which he saw as the fundamental stimulus of the west from the Greco-Roman to modern times.

Those people who adore 'materialism' neglect the essential part of human beings, i.e. spirituality. All their energy is concentrated on material comforts. The result is great material prosperity and development. They have almost won all the world with their economic and military powers and in this regard science and technology have become their greatest help. But this material culture has also given birth to many ill effects. With the materialistic mindset, we can easily earn money and power but it cannot tell us 'how to handle it'. Consumerism is the direct result of this behavior.

Descartes, a western philosopher, proved thinking power to be the basis for the existence of human being, i.e. 'I think, therefore I exist'. But the same western society has changed the criteria of the essence of human being. Now, the consumption of material things has become the ground of human existence. 'I consume therefore I exist'. But consumerism has lowered the level of happiness. Compared with our grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and asserted social pathology.

Owing to the phenomenal discoveries in science and their practical applications, the people of the world have been brought together, the geographical and

physical oneness of the world has been brought home to us. But our differences and divergences have increased tremendously; strife and bitterness are rampant. War has become chronic and global in its proportions. The causes are not hidden. Western civilization, which has become the norm for all, has developed, since the Renaissance, along materialistic lines. “The contrast between the success of the modern European mind in controlling almost any situation in which the elements are physical bodies and the forces physical forces, and their inability to control situation in which the elements are human being and forces spiritual forces” is too evident to need elaboration. Man has conquered nature or is very near to doing that; but he has no rudimentary control over himself. We have gained the world; but have lost its soul.

The brilliant achievements of the modern world have told us very little about ourselves. We have climbed the stratosphere, landed on the moon, descended the depth of the sea and the earth, and scratched the surface of the enveloping nature. The recent exploits of our physics convey vague messages of a wonderful universe. Intellect has almost run its course. Knowledge and character have not yet even begun their adventures. In the midst of plenty, we are starved; in the midst of fullness, we are in want. We don't know yet what life essentially is!

This basic tragedy of western man has been noticed by western thinkers themselves. We have Schopenhauer telling us a hundred years ago, in what sounds as an apt critique of the modern welfare state, that ‘the end of a sense bound is boredom’ (*The world as will and idea*. Translated by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp. Vol. I, p. 404).

Almost all men who are secure from want and care, now that at last they have thrown off all other burdens, become a burden to themselves.

We have C.G. Jung discussing modern man in search of soul making a distinction between worldly achievement and inner culture, and showing the undesirability of the modern pursuit of the first alone throughout life, he says (*Modern man in Search of a Soul*, Routledge, 2001, PP. 118–26).

Achievement, usefulness, and so forth are the ideals which appear to guide us out of the confusion of crowding problems. They may be our lodestars in the adventure of extending and solidifying our psychic existences – they may help us in striking over roots in the world; but they cannot guide us in the development of that wider consciousness to which we give the name of culture...

This spiritual poverty is the direct result of western materialism. On account of this they have become masters of Science and so of the external world, but know very little about ‘Science of Soul’. Here my intention is to take a general picture of

western society, however, there are many exceptions to it and many philosophers of the western world have tried to spiritualize the society by their thoughts. But the overall picture of Western society is that of a materialistic world.

But, what the Greeks neglected has become the one ruling passion of the East and especially of India. This registers the other approach which neglects the external environment. It asks man to strengthen his within and bear with the environment and, if strong enough, even to ignore it. It instills the virtues of patience and endurance in place of struggle and advance in the external world, enhances the capacity for renunciation and suffering in place of action and enjoyment; and generally upholds the line of least resistance in the external world. There is in this also a sense of fight with an enemy, but that enemy is within man and not outside of him. This approach gives man 'intimations of immortality'; it brings him into communion with a timeless order of existence within himself and in the world outside. This is also a human fulfillment but of a transcendental order. Its specific expression is found in the monastic life, and the mystical heights of all higher religions are monastic in mood, temper and approach. Herein revealed another philosophy of man, the philosophy of godliness or saintliness, which Vivekananda recognized as the distinct message of the East. It uncovers a divine core in man, which makes him greater than all his external possessions and achievements; it reveals an inalienable spiritual focus within him, which proclaims his intrinsic value and dignity over and above his value for society. The dignity so revealed finds expression not only in the renunciation practiced by spiritual seers and seekers, but also in the incidents of ordinary life.

However, these 'spirit'-oriented people have neglected the material aspect of life and the result was eternal poverty of the common man. They have not been able to progress in science and technology and their living standards have remained poor. Here also, my intention is not to include exceptions but to show the general situation of the common man.

These two societies have developed in two different dimensions, unaware of each other's glory. They have not been able to see the need for other aspects and the result is one-sided growth of human being. They have not been able to excel even in their own fields – neither the western people have become purely materialistic nor Easterners purely spiritual. The reason is ignorance of the nature of human being. The human being is basically the 'divine encased within human mind-body'. If Eastern people have forgotten the external part, Westerners have missed the essential spiritual aspect. Their growth has been impeded because of this ignorance.

History reveals the insufficiency of each of these philosophies taken by themselves. The bitter lessons of the Eastern neglect of the environment are writ large in the arrested development of millions of its human beings. Vivekananda demon-

strated to the people of India the lesson of their history, that to neglect the body and to concentrate on the soul is to court disaster for both soul and body. On the other hand, he demonstrated to the people of the West the lesson of their own history in the reverse. Positivism and humanism, even scientific humanism, are perfectly valid, he said, if they do not reduce the human soul to a mere function of the environment, if they do not lead to swamping of the spirit of man by worldliness, by what one may call, over civilization.

Need of Synthesis

Thus, there is a need for the synthesis of these two. In his own life, Vivekananda had plumbed the depths of both these philosophies; he had assimilated in his own personality of the manliness of the west and the saintliness of the east. He saw clearly the excellences and limitations of each of these two human legacies which he embraced as two integral elements of a total human culture, and Proclaimed the modern age as the era of their synthesis.

...as a man is acting on two planes, the spiritual and material, waves of adjustment come on both planes, Europe has mainly been the basis during modern times; and of the adjustment on the other, the spiritual plane, Asia has been the basis throughout the history of the world. Today man requires one more adjustment on the spiritual plane; today when material ideas are at the height of their glory and power, today when man is likely to forget his divine nature, through his growing dependence on matter and is likely to be reduced to a mere money making machine, an adjustment is necessary... (CW, vol. 4, p. 154).

While welcoming the truly positive elements of western civilization, Vivekananda protested against its exaggerations, its negative features, in a pregnant utterance, when he said to sister Nivedita (The master as I saw him, 27th reprint, 2007, Udbodhan office, Kolkata, 9th edition pp. 215–16):

Remember! The message of India is always, not the soul for nature, but nature for the soul.

Vivekananda noticed the western tragedy referred to by Lowes Dickinson. Comparing it with Indian experience, he said (ibid, p. 114):

Social life in the west is like a peal of laughter, but underneath, it is a wail. It ends in a sob. The fun and frivolity are all on the surface; really it is full of tragic intensity. Now, here it is sad and gloomy on the outside but underneath are carelessness and merriment.

Thus, viewing man integrally in his physical social, and trans-social dimensions, and with a view to ensuring his total fulfillment, Vivekananda expounds a philosophy of man in which man, whether eastern or western, can feel at home and find inspiration to achieve total life fulfillment. Philosophy finds expression in a brief statement of his in which even positivism and secularism become integral elements of a comprehensive spirituality.

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal (of life) is to manifest this divine with by controlling nature, external (by science, technology, and socio-political processes) and internal (by ethics, art, and religion) (C.W.I. p. 124).

Those who see spiritualism and materialism as antagonistic to each other are ignorant about human nature. To the westerner the world of senses is real and to the oriental the world of spirit. "To the occidental oriental is a dreamer, playing with ephemeral toys. Each calls the other a dreamer. Materialist thinks spiritualist a hindrance in human progress. Every event of human life, they say, can be explained in a very mechanical way. Science & technology rationality become the tools for such man. This is the tragedy with modern man, who never pays any attention to his spiritual part. Our education system, too, is working for mental and material progress' 'How to get a job?' has become sole objective for today's colleges. No system cares for 'how to become a good human being?'"

At the same time somehow it is a general impression that a spiritual person should not be a materialistic one. If there is some truth in this, then we should try to be very clear in our minds as to what we mean by this. Do we mean that in order to be spiritual or to get closer to God a person should not own material things like a house, a car, a television, etc and should go into exile in some forest? If we think that this is so then we have to understand that the whole world is material. The fact that we are in human form means that we are material as far as the body part is concerned. Our bodies are material – so we need to maintain our bodies by keeping them well fed, well sheltered. Then, how can one become a spiritual person on earth without being a materialist one? This shows that even for spirituality, materialism is the need to some extent.

In a luminous passage in his lecture on 'My Master', delivered in New York, Vivekananda refers to the limitations of each of the cultural types, developed and conditioned by religion in the orient, and by the physical sciences and the positivistic outlook in the occident. He points out their complementarities and says that the modern age will witness the emergence of a culture, neither oriental, nor occidental, but human, through a healthy interaction and assimilation among cultures. In this context he says:

Each of these types has its grandeur, each has its glory. The present adjustment will be the harmonizing, the mingling of these few ideals (CW. IV, p. 155–56).

In this process of synthesis both systems should come together to learn from each other. We can compare materialism to sensation and spiritualism to concepts and can use I. Kant's words that "perception without concepts is blind and concepts without perception are empty". As for proper knowledge, cooperation of both sensation and concepts is a must, so the synthesis of materialism and spirituality becomes inevitable for proper development of human being. The habit of learning from each other will help immensely in this field. In the words of Vivekananda:

There the Orientals excel, just as the occidentals excel in the other. Therefore it is fitting that, whenever there is a spiritual adjustment, it should come from the orient. It is fitting that when the oriental wants to learn about machine making, he should sit at the feet of the occidental and learn from him. When the occident wants to learn about the spirit, about God, about the soul, about the meaning and the mystery of this universe, he must sit at the feet of the orient to learn (C.W. IV, p. 156).

Aldous Huxley calls the human products of the ancient civilization "wise-fools", and the modern civilization "intelligent fools", and urges the need to produce "intelligent wise men". Certainly, Vivekananda was in favor of such "intelligent wise men", which will be possible only when two civilizations come together. Matter and spirit will go together, enrich each other. Both are like two lines of a railway, they go miles together without creating a hurdle in each other's paths. One becomes the support of the other.

Globalization

In my view, the problems with globalization in the modern world are directly related to the separation of materialism and spirituality. Today globalization has become an all purpose catchword in public and scholarly debate. It is seen as a conscious and active process of expanding ideas in business, trade and cultures across the borders of all states. The objective of making the world a truly inter-related, interdependent, developed 'Global Village' governs the ongoing process of globalization. Vivekananda was aware of it even when it was yet to begin. He says:

The second great idea which the world is waiting to receive from our Upanishads is the solidarity of this universe. The old lines of demarcation and differentiation are vanishing rapidly. Electricity and stream-power are placing the different parts of the world in intercommunication with each other, and as a result, we Hindus no longer

say that every country beyond our land is peopled with demons and hobgoblins, nor do the people of Christian countries say that India is only people by cannibals and savages. When we go out of our country, we find the same brother-man, with the same strong hand to help, with the same lips to say God's Glory. As soon as we come to know each other, love comes, must come, for are we not one? Thus we find solidarity coming in spite of (C.W. III, p. 240).

However, at this juncture of time, it is a must to realize that globalization is not mere materialism and to see globalization a merely western imperialism of ideas and beliefs would be a serious and costly error. Materialism is merely half way completed for globalization. But, as half knowledge is dangerous, so the incomplete journey of globalization will always be harmful.

What is needed, therefore, is nothing but inner spiritualism along with external materialism. I am using here the words 'inner and external' wittingly. The problems with some people, who boast to follow a synthesis between worldly life and spirituality, is that they exchange these words (internal and external) with each other. 'Materialism' is nothing wrong if it is external part of life and spirituality is meaningful only when it is primarily 'inner'. We are primarily 'externally spiritual' but 'internally materialistic'. In the name of spirituality we follow nothing but certain rituals, different forms of worship and also some communal things. Rituals, religious books, traditions are meant to enkindle the inner fire of spirituality but for us they have become the end of religion. In the same way, 'matter' is something 'external' and there is nothing wrong in 'materialism' as far as it is followed externally. But when it enters our mind and soul, it becomes a disease. And we have infected ourselves with this disease knowingly.

Vivekananda prescribed a balanced synthesis between materialism and spirituality in his philosophy of practical Vedanta. His concepts of 'universal religion', 'practical or neo-vedanta' and 'divine humanism' are precious examples of such synthesis. By different Yogas (i.e. Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga Bhakti Yoga..... etc.), he showed that this synthesis is practically possible in life.

The philosophy and vision represented by Vivekananda is meant to produce such fully integrated men and women. He himself was a remarkable synthesis of diverse values – ancient and modern.

Summary

In this article I will try to expound and examine the debate of materialism and spiritualism in the context of two cultures: Western and Eastern respectively. It was Vivekananda, a neo or practical vedantin, who attached two isms with two cultures. Western society has excelled in the 'art of matter'

and focused all their attention on it. The opposite is true of the eastern world. Ignoring the material aspect of life, they have spent their energy on learning the 'art of soul'. These two societies have remained ignorant of other aspects of life. The result is a paralyzed growth of the human world. This is visible in the process of globalization as well. In the present world, we are following utter materialism in the name of globalization, which results in consumerism.

Here, I wish to mention the solution prescribed by Vivekananda. In his view, the remedy lies in the synthesis of 'spirit' and 'matter'. For both these cultures, oriental and occidental should come together and learn the missing part from each other. Westerners should learn from eastern people about spirituality, whereas the 'art of matter' should be learnt under the guidance of westerners. When 'matter' and 'spirit' go together, a new life will emerge on earth and only such world will be a real 'global village'.

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