

INTERPRETING VIVEKANANDA
A Citizenship Perspective



**THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING
IDEAS TO PRACTICE**

There are many things to be done, but means are wanting in this country. We have brains, but no hands. We have the doctrine of Vedanta, but we have not the power to reduce it into practice.

– Swami Vivekananda

CW: Vol.5, Epistles 1st Series, LXXIV

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In this quote, Swami Vivekananda points to the great challenge of translating ideas into practice in the Indian context.

Swami Vivekananda again and again points to the fact that India has some of the noblest ideas that have been conceived by the human brain – the doctrine of Vedanta being a good example – but has failed to transform this doctrine into “lived practice” in the country.

To understand this challenge, let us first distinguish among three scenarios –

One, ideas which need to be implemented or applied into the external world;

Two, ideas which need to be assimilated (i.e. translated into a way of living) by individuals; and

Three, ideas which need to be assimilated by communities or groups of people.

The nature of these challenges is quite different.

The challenge of implementing an idea in the world around us can often be a challenge of

- (i) thinking through and executing all aspects of the idea so that it becomes sustainable in its design and execution.
- (ii) convincing others of the validity and potential of an idea
- (iii) raising resources to implement the ideas
- (iv) convincing potential users or beneficiaries of the value and benefits of the idea

- (v) working together with others in a planned manner to rapidly implement the idea
- (vi) sustained willingness to overcome implementation challenges.

The challenge of assimilating an idea in one's own life means

- (i) firstly, convincing oneself that the idea is worth living
- (ii) committing oneself to the idea
- (iii) leaving other ideas alone
- (iv) overcoming the enemies of comparison, egotism, inertia and laziness, etc.
- (v) making the effort to translate the idea into specific behaviors, specific responses and specific choices so that the "idea does not become a "dead habit" but is a "living practice" in one's life, and
- (vi) developing the willingness to consciously improve oneself day to day, hour by hour, so that we realize the full potential of the idea in our own lives.

At a collective level, assimilating an idea can mean an altogether different process.

Firstly, it means *collective acceptance* of an idea as something meant for collective good.

Second, it means *collective commitment* to that idea, which means that we individually and collectively come together, for a shared purpose.

Third, it means *collective adoption* of common ways of working or at least shared norms which govern both individual and collective action.

Fourth, it means viewing success in terms of *collective outcomes*, beyond individual outcomes.

Each step of this process means crossing many barriers:

- Collective acceptance of an idea means collective discovery of the value and relevance of an idea, overcoming both (a) the cacophony of individual opinions (b) the 'blind dogmatic acceptance of an idea just because it came from a source of authority
- Collective commitment to an idea means a deep engagement with an idea by all members of the collective – irrespective of status and hierarchy.
- Collective adoption of an idea means being able to evolve, individually and collectively, from our current state of practice to a new way of living and working. This means being willing to improve one's own way of working, and enabling individuals to accept and submit to shared ways of working.
- Collective success means being able to identify ourselves at a wider level with the collective, rather than with our "little selves" alone. This means invoking a wider identity and shared vision of success in every individual in the collective.

Most important, it means a collective recognition that working in collective self-interest leads to far superior and more sustainable outcomes, for both individuals and the collective as a whole. This means moving beyond narrow self-interest to enlightened self-interest in all our actions.

Let us examine the Indian context and see which of these scenarios Swami Vivekananda was referring to.

Any thinking Indian with a little reflection, will point out that there are innumerable cases where we, as individuals, have learnt to practice great ideas in our individual lives; and there are many cases – though not as many as we would like – of great implementation of ideas provided a particular individual or team has driven it.

Where the gap is felt most, is in the assimilation of ideas in a collective context. It is here that there is need for fresh thinking and reflection among leaders and citizens.

When Swami Vivekananda says that *“we have not the power to reduce it (Vedanta) into practice”*, his emphasis is on the “we”.

We, as a collective of Indians, have the opportunity to assimilate the wonderful ideas of the Vedanta – the essence being divinity of each individual – into the living practices of

- (i) respect for every individual, transcending caste and class boundaries
- (ii) maintaining the self-esteem of every worker without regard to the nature of work
- (iii) providing every individual with the possibility of manifesting his or her potential, irrespective of birth or access to resources,
- (iv) learning to see ourselves as a “collective of individuals” working towards a shared future, that includes all Indians, all communities, all geographies, all economic groups, and all age groups.

But that is just the beginning...

It is only by assimilating ideas and reducing them into practice as a collective, that we will be able to translate, not just great ideas, but even basic ideas like Swachh Bharat, into a reality for our country.

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Illumine’s projects and interventions have reached more than 2 million users/beneficiaries in society.

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