

<https://ddmrmjournal.in>
Academic Journal 2025, 18, 110-114

Original Research
Article



Swami Vivekananda on practical Vedanta

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Abstract:

Swami Vivekananda, a prominent figure in Vedanta, believed that non-dualist Vedanta is the foundation of the Brahmanic element in Indian life. Advaita Vedanta, influenced by the spontaneity of human beings, is a powerful spiritual experience that transcends Vedantic boundaries. Vivekananda's practical Vedanta, particularly the concept of means and ends, emphasizes the significance of focusing on the techniques of execution as much as the objective. Neglecting the methods may result in failure. Mahatma Gandhi's political ethics are predicated on the principle that the means are equally significant as the ends. The doctrine of means and ends is relevant in today's world, as it emphasizes the need for meditation and practice to achieve peaceful and legitimate goals. It is also a significant aspect of Gandhi's political ethics and the importance of non-violence in achieving success.

Keywords:

Swami Vivekananda, practical Vedanta, Mahatma Gandhi, Non-violence, Metaphysics

Article History:

Received: 16 September 2025
Revised on: 3 December 2025
Accepted: 15 December 2025

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ISSN: 2331-315X
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Swami Vivekananda was the inaugural figure to disseminate non-dualist Vedanta, which he saw as the paramount aspect of Indian existence. He referred to it as both theoretical and practical Vedanta, serving as a source and guiding principle for individual and communal existence, as well as a determinant of civilization.

Advaita Vedanta, in all its theoretical and practical dimensions, is rooted in a profound and original spiritual experience that, owing to its profundity, manifests in various expressions of the Indian spirit. We believe it extends beyond the confines of Vedanta. Despite the distinct teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism, it may be permissible to interpret the experiences of this spirit via both, given their considerable similarities. The

Enneads of Plotinus and specific spiritual ideas of Meister Eckhart, among others, seem to align with the foundational mystical philosophy of India. An affiliation that emerges not from historical influences—whose impacts are frequently ambiguous—but from the intrinsic spontaneity of humanity, essentially connected amongst the diversity of time, place, and culture.

Considering India's significance for all of humanity, Swami Vivekananda has greatly contributed to the spiritual advancement of mankind by adeptly and thoughtfully advocating the esteemed values of Indian culture both domestically and globally. He thoroughly internalized his perspectives while articulating them to others.

For this type of spirituality, we may propose an interpretation that markedly diverges from those advocated by Swami Vivekananda and several prominent professors of Vedanta. For him, this non-dualist mystical philosophy represents the pinnacle to which all other forms of mystical thought aspire. This spiritual experience, termed *natural (sahaja)*, revolves around the recognition (*pratyabhijna*) of the Self by the Self, due to the inherent presence of the spirit inside itself. It is wholly genuine within its context; its inherent characteristics have been eloquently expressed by the revered religious leaders of India. As previously said, it possesses significance and value that surpass the boundaries of India. We do not regard mystical thinking based on divine transcendence and grace, emanating from the innermost nature of the Soul, as merely a facet of natural mystical thought. While we may certainly recognize similarities between these two forms of spirituality, they are overshadowed by the "super-essential" distinction that differentiates them. Phenomenology, philosophy, and Christianity collectively affirm that this is the correct conclusion.

Let us return to the pragmatic Vedanta advocated by Swami Vivekananda. His pedagogy is pertinent now in multiple ways. We shall demonstrate this by discussing the concept of means and ends that he addressed at the beginning of his lecture in Los Angeles on January 4, 1900. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, stated in an address to UNESCO in Paris on September 21, 1962, that this notion encapsulates the fundamental aspects of the political ethics imparted by Mahatma Gandhi to his nation.

Let us quote this noble passage of Swami Vivekananda: "One of the greatest lessons I have learned in my life is to pay as much attention to the means of work as to its end. He was a great man from whom I learned it, and his own life was a practical demonstration of this great principle. I have been always learning great lessons from that one principle, and it appears to me that all the secret of success is there: to pay as much attention to the means as to the end.

Our great defect in life is that we are so much drawn to the ideal, the goal is so much more enchanting, so much more alluring, so much bigger in our mental horizon, that we lose sight of the details altogether.

But whenever failure comes, if we analyse it critically, in ninety-nine per cent of cases we shall find that it was because we did not pay attention to the means. Proper attention to

the finishing, strengthening, of the means, is what we need. With the means all right, the end must come. We forget that it is the cause that produces the effect: the effect cannot come by itself and unless the causes are exact, proper and powerful, the effect will not be produced. Once the ideal is chosen and the means determined, we may almost let go the ideal, because we are sure it will be there, when the means are perfected. When the cause is there, there is no more difficulty about the effect, the effect is bound to come. If we take care of the cause, the effect will take care of itself. The realisation of the ideal is the effect. The means are the cause: attention to the means, therefore, is the great secret of life.”⁷

We seek to ascertain the name of the remarkable individual who imparted this ideology to Swami Vivekananda. We seek to ascertain whether Gandhi read the mentioned line or a similar one, and if he derived his ideas on this matter, which he intended to incorporate as a fundamental aspect of his deeds, directly or indirectly from it. We request an expert historian to elucidate these ambiguous aspects to enhance our understanding of the interconnections between karma yoga and the significance of means and nonviolence. Let us analyze two of Gandhi's essays in which he fervently articulates his virtuous convictions, irrespective of external circumstances.

“Means and ends are convertible in my philosophy of life”.⁸

“They say ‘means after all are means’. I would say ‘means are after all everything’. As the means so the end. Violent means will give violent *Swaraj*. That would be a menace to the world and to India herself. There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed, the creator has given us control (and that too very limited) over means, never over the end. Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception. Holding such a belief, I have been endeavouring to keep the country to means that are ‘purely peaceful and legitimate’.”⁹

Swami Vivekananda's discussions on the significance of means influenced Gandhi's contemplation on the purity of means. There are distinctions, the most significant of which is that Vivekananda's book does not directly reference non-violence. Nonetheless, we consistently return to the same paradox: the methods influence the result as significantly, if not more so, as the end dictates the means. This phrase should not be interpreted literally; it is intended to be contradictory. It remains replete with profound and universal truths that our era appears to require contemplation and implementation of. The pages of primary significance, devoted as early as 1933 by the eminent philosopher Jacques Maritain to “the purification of means”¹⁰ along with more recent writings by P. Regamey

⁷ Vivekananda, Swami, *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, Vol. II, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1998, p. 1.

⁸ Gandhi, Mahatma, *Young India*, S. Ganesan Publisher, Masras, Dec. 26, 1927. *Ibid.*, July 17.

¹⁰ Maritain, Jacques, *Du regime temporel et de la liberte*, Chapter III, Desclee de Brouwer, Paris, 1933.

on the mystical significance of means, attest, alongside numerous other documents that we shall not cite, to the same pressing necessity in the West. These two authors, indeed, contemplate the words of Mahatma Gandhi. Our objective was to highlight that the profound intellect of Swami Vivekananda foresaw one of the most significant issues of our era many decades prior.

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