

VIVEKANANDA



1900 portrait of Swami Vivekananda.
Source: *amerian vedantist* web page at <http://tinyurl.com/ok8dccc>.

and

OKAKURA



Okakura Tenshin in 1898. Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/pltuso9>.

on What East Offers West

By David B. Gordon

*When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East?*¹—Okakura Tenshin, *The Book of Tea*

As the turn of the twentieth century approached, Western nations had come to control much of the globe. These powerful nations regarded themselves as comprehensively superior to the non-Western peoples over whom they ruled. Such a dual reality—Western control plus the swaggering confidence that accompanied it—created an excruciating challenge for those on the receiving end: should they embrace the West as a model or resist it as a threat? By definition, Westernizers in non-Western countries took the former path while nativists adopted the latter one. Increasingly, however, a third alternative emerged. This consisted of turning the tables by asserting that non-Western traditions could teach spiritual lessons to a West that was increasingly unbalanced by its own successes. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) of British colonial India and Okakura Tenshin (1862–1913) of Meiji Era Japan were two thinkers who enthusiastically promoted this approach. Writing in eloquent English, they declared that at least some Asian traditions contained wisdom that the West sorely needed. Penetrating but one-sided, their pronouncements have possessed a long afterlife.

Vivekananda and Okakura developed their ideas in a plethora of speeches and essays. Here we will focus on the statements they made that received the most publicity outside of Asia. In the case of Vivekananda, this consists of a series of six addresses he made to the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in which he alternately cajoled and admonished his audience to adopt a Hinduism-flavored, India-centered religion of universal love. Thirteen years later, author and art curator Okakura published *The Book of Tea*, a short book that introduced “Teism”—the philosophy behind the Japanese tea ceremony—to generations of Westerners eager to learn about minimalist aesthetics as a centerpiece of Japanese life.² With Vivekananda’s addresses and Okakura’s treatise, we hear a first generation of Asians “speaking back” to the condescension with which many nineteenth-century Westerners had portrayed their beliefs and practices.

Both of our figures knew the West inside and out. Vivekananda was born to an attorney in Calcutta, then the capital of British India. Attending a prestigious Christian college then called General Assembly’s Institution, he studied European philosophy and even corresponded with the classical liberal philosopher and Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer. Indeed, it was his college’s Scottish principal who recommended that he meet Ramakrishna, a mystic whom he subsequently embraced as his guru (spiritual teacher) and under whom he entered a Hindu monastic order.

Meanwhile, another prodigy, Okakura Tenshin, was raised by an ex-samurai who had gone into business in Yokohama, Japan, after it had become that nation’s main treaty port. Like Vivekananda, Okakura received a substantial part of his education from Christian missionaries. And for Okakura, too, college was decisive. At Kaisei Gakkō—today’s Tokyo University—he met Ernest Fenollosa, the American philosopher and art critic with whom he would later conduct systematic explorations of Japanese Buddhist art. In short, Okakura, like Vivekananda, came from the most Westernized segment of his society.

It is therefore fitting that each figure would seek to showcase his culture to a skeptical Western audience. Indeed, the Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, provided each of them with this opportunity. While Vivekananda’s lectures at the Parliament of World Religions, held in tandem with the Exposition, became legendary, Okakura was involved in the Exposition as well as in his capacity as the director of the Tokyo Fine Arts Academy. Artworks by the Academy’s students were on display

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at the large *Hōōden* (Phoenix Hall), Japan's main contribution to the Exposition, and Okakura wrote the English explanatory pamphlet that presented the *Hōōden* as the quintessence of Japanese elegance and sophistication.³ So far as we are aware, Vivekananda's and Okakura's paths did not cross directly at the Exposition. Nevertheless, they would meet in India within a decade.

In 1901, Okakura became acquainted with Josephine MacLeod, an American follower of the increasingly famous Swami Vivekananda, in Japan. As a result, Okakura formed an idea of holding an Asian equivalent of the Parliament of World Religions in his country and invited Vivekananda (via MacLeod) to come to Japan for this purpose. Although Vivekananda was too ill to travel abroad, Okakura himself arrived in India the following year, visiting sites associated with the life of the Buddha together with Vivekananda. He also seems to have developed romantic feelings toward a particularly famous disciple of Vivekananda, the Irish Sister Nivedita, who wrote an enthusiastic introduction for his *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (1903).⁴ After several months in India, Okakura returned to Japan, only to move to the United States soon thereafter for a new career as adviser and, eventually, curator for the Chinese and Japanese Collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Vivekananda, meanwhile, had died from his illnesses. Okakura's Asian edition of the world religions conference never took place.

Despite the brevity of their friendship, there is a clear intellectual and emotional affinity between the two figures. We see this in their most famous works: Vivekananda's speeches before the Parliament of World Religions contain holistic, vitalist, and nationalist themes that parallel those of Okakura's *The Book of Tea*. Let us examine how these themes unfold.

Holism

Both figures advocate *Advaita*, a Sanskrit term meaning "nonduality." Vivekananda was especially inspired by the *Vedānta* (end of the *Vedas*), a group of texts, many from the first millennium CE, that hold that what is real in the world is its spiritual essence rather than its material appearance. This focus on essence provides Vivekananda with his central theme of unity: unity of the world, and especially its human inhabitants, as God, and unity among the world's religions in pointing the way toward self-realization as God. In his first and most famous speech at the Parliament, he quotes a Hindu hymn: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take . . . all lead to Thee." He enlists science, too, in his integrative project, maintaining that it is at heart "nothing but the finding of unity."⁵ From this standpoint, the world's religions and cultures are merely alternative starting points for a shared spiritual journey.

Okakura displays the same eagerness as Vivekananda does for unity in a turbulent world. While he does not use the term *Advaita* in *The Book of Tea*, in his *The Ideals of the East*, he approvingly writes of Japan's "spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old." And as Vivekananda speaks of "unity in variety" as the "plan of nature," so Okakura refers in *Ideals* to "unity-in-complexity" as something that Japanese culture has managed to express. Turning to *The Book of Tea*, Okakura alleges that "[t]he eternal is to be found only in the spirit" toward which art points. Similarly, Zen Buddhist practice is "aimed at direct communion with the inner nature of things," a process that an art form like the tea ceremony does much to foster. Indeed, the entire ceremony for Okakura is "essentially a worship of the Imperfect." The Imperfect? This is not as strange as it sounds. Later in *The Book of Tea*, Okakura equates "Zennism" with Daoism, or reverence for the Dao. Regarding this Dao, he states that "[i]ts Absolute is the Relative"—which is to say the "Imperfect" referred to above. Thus, much as Vivekananda's Hindu uses his/her individuality as a stepping-stone toward something more universal, so the strikingly imperfect implements



Vivekananda in Chicago for the 1893 Parliament of World Religions. Source: *The Hindu* at <http://tinyurl.com/nkxtend>.



Japanese *Hōōden* at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/kdw8v99>.

of Okakura's tea ceremony serve as mere stepping-stones toward an experience of something absolute. Indeed, as far back as China's Song dynasty (960–1279), the consumption of tea was viewed as a method of "self-realisation"—a goal on which Okakura and Vivekananda could agree.⁶

Vitalism

Closely allied to the theme of holism—seeming chaos expressing underlying unity—is that of vitalism. Vitalism holds that the processes of life are not merely physical but possess something extra that drives them along. Vivekananda expresses this when he states that "God is the ever active providence, by whose power systems after systems are being evolved out of chaos." Although these systems—including our physical environment and even our own bodies—will be destroyed, others will replace them, thereby sustaining the process. According to Vivekananda, all of this tumult is beneficent. Even the world's religions, "from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism," display not a movement "from error to truth, but from

They wrote for open-minded skeptics, which describes a large swath of Western readers both then and now.

truth to truth, from lower to higher truth.” Indeed, “every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher,” as if driven to do so by its final identity with God’s perfection.⁷ Accordingly, not only does each person’s experience express a unity, but this unity is dynamic and ever-changing.

The Book of Tea shares this emphasis on movement. Okakura’s tone is calmer, however, as when he defines the Dao as “the eternal growth which returns upon itself to produce new forms.” In a similar vein, he maintains that “[t]he virility of art and life lay in its possibilities for growth. In the tearoom it is left for each guest in imagination to complete the total effect in relation to himself.” This “value of suggestion” gives the participant a “glimpse of Infinity,” which he holds to be art’s real point. If such patter sounds feeble compared to Vivekananda, Okakura counters the effect by ending his volume with a description of the ritual suicide of tea master Sen no Rikyū on the order of warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1591. Critic Christopher Benfey argues that this ending shows that for Okakura “one could be an aesthete and a soldier, Oscar Wilde and Teddy Roosevelt, that the way of tea and the way of the samurai were one.”⁸ Assuming this is true, Okakura would be returning to the holism—the Advaitism—that inspired both Vivekananda and himself.

Nationalism

Alongside the spiritual themes that inspired Vivekananda and Okakura, there is a deep undercurrent of one-upmanship vis-à-vis the West in their respective depictions of Hinduism and Teism. Let us turn first to Vivekananda. Commenting on his speeches at the Parliament, scholar Ronald Neufeldt maintains that his vision of religious traditions is “a hierarchical one with Hinduism sitting on top of the heap.” Hinduism is at the top because, in Vivekananda’s words, it is “the mother of religions,” which has taught the world “both tolerance and universal acceptance” by “accept[ing] all religions as true.” Moreover, in contrast to Christianity, which commits “a standing libel on human nature” through its concept of original sin, the *Vedas* generously regard their audience as “children of immortal bliss.” Vivekananda discounts the various objections to Hinduism such as caste (“simply a social institution”) and idolatry (merely “the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths”). In their place, he paints a picture of Hinduism as wisely valuing “being and becoming” over “struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma.” In this way, Hinduism offers a vital message—tolerance done right—to the contemporary world.

Okakura is much more blunt about the insults Asians were facing. In chapter one of *The Book of Tea*, he states, “Indian spirituality has been derided as ignorance, Chinese sobriety as stupidity, Japanese patriotism as the result of fatalism.” Part of the problem is that “the Western attitude is unfavorable to the understanding of the East. The Christian missionary goes to impart, but not to receive.” As a result, Westerners are apt to “see in the tea ceremony but another instance of the thousand and one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him.” Nevertheless, Westerners, too, drink tea: “in this single instance the Oriental Spirit reigns supreme.”¹⁰ This provides Okakura with his opening wedge.

According to *The Book of Tea*, Japan followed China in its three stages of tea drinking development, which he labels “the Classic, the Romantic, and the Naturalistic.” When China’s further evolution was “disastrously” thwarted by the Mongol invasion, Japan brought these tea ideals to their culmination in the tea ceremony that forms the subject of his book.

A similar logic appears elsewhere in Okakura’s writings. For example, in *The Ideals of the East*, he treats Japanese tradition as a confluence of Indian individualism and Chinese communalism, and thus as a mirror for “the whole of Asiatic consciousness.” If “Asia is one,” as he declared in that book’s opening line, Japan is its spiritual-artistic zenith, now as in former ages. The modern world, with its “Cyclopean struggle for wealth and power,” should sit up and take notice.¹¹

Rhetorical Strategies

Clearly, Vivekananda and Okakura were intensely self-conscious in their presentations to Western audiences. Their holism and vitalism create a reassuring, upbeat impression, while their nationalism puts the audiences on notice by overturning the prevailing Eurocentric standpoint. The two figures used other strategies as well, including the two that follow.

Flattery: Each figure flattered his audience. Vivekananda concluded his “Paper on Hinduism”—his third and lengthiest address—by proclaiming:

*Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbor’s blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one’s neighbors . . . to march at the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony.*¹²

Coming at the end of a century of American despoliation of Native American communities, this statement is jarring. Whether it was made from ignorance or obsequiousness, it shows how eager Vivekananda was to make his sale.

Okakura’s flattery appears more in his willingness to give the West an honored seat at the (low-lying tea) table. He describes Teism as “the noble secret of laughing at yourself, calmly yet thoroughly . . . All genuine humorists may in this sense be called tea philosophers—Thackeray, for instance, and, of course, Shakespeare.”¹³ In fact, by the end of the chapter he has invited his reader to a cup of tea! The description of tea philosophy as an “-ism,” the invocation of famous British writers, and the invitation to tea all amount to an effort to break down the unfamiliarity of what many Westerners doubtless saw as an exotic pastime.

Surprise: In his “Paper on Hinduism,” Vivekananda builds up tension regarding the question of how the human soul, essentially “holy, pure, and perfect,” could find itself in a flawed, material body. He then informs his listeners that the Hindu “does not want to take shelter under sophistry. He is brave enough to face the question in a manly fashion; and his answer is: ‘I do not know.’”¹⁴ This is one example among many of Vivekananda’s astute use of surprise.

Meanwhile, Okakura’s *The Book of Tea* revels in paradoxical formulations. We have already seen how the Dao’s “Absolute” is precisely whatever is relative—that is, what is seemingly *not* absolute. Elsewhere in the book, Okakura maintains that modern artists “may be nearer science, but are further from humanity.” What they need is to be more aware of “the subtle use of the useless.” Summing up this outlook, he recounts that ancient Eastern sages “spoke in paradoxes, for they were afraid of uttering half-truths.”¹⁵ Ironically, this reliance on paradox would have been familiar and therefore reassuring to readers schooled in Christian teachings.

Cultural Nationalism as Touchstone

Although our figures died more than a century ago, their ideas have shown impressive staying power. Firstly, Vivekananda’s famous addresses in Chicago heralded a major revival of Hindu pride in British India. In the mid-twentieth century, the foremost advocate of violent resistance to British rule was Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945). Bose took the controversial step of soliciting Axis and particularly Japanese support during World War II to organize the Indian National Army (INA), which invaded colonial India on its eastern flank and scored several military successes. Today, Bose is revered among conservative Indian nationalists. And he was decisively influenced by Vivekananda’s example from age fifteen, stating later in his life that he could not write about him “without going into raptures.”¹⁶

Much more recently, Narendra Modi, a rightist politician and current prime minister of India, repeatedly extolled Vivekananda's Hinduism-centered nationalism during his 2014 election campaign. Even as many of Modi's followers regard him as the political fulfillment of Vivekananda's dreams, however, they neglect the holism and inclusivity Vivekananda stressed.

Okakura is less celebrated in Japan than Vivekananda is in India. Still, he too has experienced a lengthy afterlife. For example, his famous line, "Asia is one" became a watchword for Japanese ultra-nationalists who, during World War II, gave his concept of Asian spiritual leadership a crudely military gloss. Outside of Japan, the hundreds of editions of *The Book of Tea* in Western languages testify to the enduring desire to treat a single composite art—the tea ceremony—as expressive of what is best about Japan and, by extension, the continent of Asia as a whole. As Asia, in turn, commands an increasing share of the world's wealth and attention in the twenty-first century, the temptation among Asians to adopt figures like Vivekananda and Okakura as spiritual forebears has proven strong indeed.

Vivekananda and Okakura in the Classroom

Attractions: Our authors have obviously provided very positive images of Asian traditions in their works. They wrote for open-minded skeptics, which describes a large swath of Western readers both then and now. They knew how to engage their audiences, in part by marrying novel subject matter with a familiar (if today somewhat dated) cadence.

For less advanced readers, the straightforward meaning of their works will provide plenty of food for thought, compelling them to reconsider how they view their own religious and cultural traditions. For more advanced readers, the strategies the authors employ will highlight the challenges that turn-of-the-twentieth-century Asians faced as they sought to "write back" at Western condescension. Moreover, the history of readers' responses to the works will underscore the continuing relevance of the issues they raise.

Drawbacks: The authors cut numerous corners in their descriptions of the traditions they celebrate. For example, Vivekananda uses the Advaita strain of thought within the Vedanta segment of Hindu tradition to represent Hinduism (and, by extension, India) as a whole. This is a perilous venture. Moreover, he probably overgeneralizes about Advaita itself by treating it as a call to religious ecumenism rather than simply as an approach to reality that breaks down the common-sense division of human experience into perceiving subject and perceived object.

Likewise, Okakura treats Daoism and Zen Buddhism as virtually identical rather than recognizing differences between them. Still less does he treat either of these traditions as internally complex. In addition, his descriptions of these traditions seem to draw at least as much on nineteenth-century Romanticism—with its emphases on such concepts as soul and freedom—as on the original traditions themselves.

Conclusion

If an instructor chooses to employ these works in the classroom, he or she should do so with the same care they would use in assigning such early twentieth-century books as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) or Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931). They are best for inspiring interest and discussion, not for serving as the last word on the topics they address. ■

NOTES

1. Kakuzō Okakura, *The Book of Tea* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1956), 7. "Tenshin" is the pen name by which Okakura is often known.
2. *Book of Tea*, 3.
3. A discussion of the Hōōden appears in Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 29–41.
4. Kakuzō Okakura, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1970), xi–xxiv.

5. "Response to Welcome," accessed July 8, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/nmvrnws>; "Paper on Hinduism," accessed July 8, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/59wgq4>.
6. *Ideals of the East*, 8. "Unity in variety" and "plan of nature" appear in Vivekananda's "Paper on Hinduism," accessed July 8, 2014; *Ideals of the East*, 5; *Book of Tea*, 67, 51, 4, 35, 38, 29.
7. All quotes in this paragraph appear in Vivekananda's "Paper on Hinduism," accessed July 8, 2014.
8. *Book of Tea*, 38, 70, 80, 81. Benfey is quoted in Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi, Oxford UP, 2006), 77.
9. Ronald Neufeldt, "Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Speeches at the World Parliament of Religions, 1893," *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 6 (1993): 3. The Vivekananda quotes appear in his "Response to Welcome," "Paper on Hinduism," *ibid.*, *ibid.*, "Buddhism, the Fulfillment of Hinduism," accessed July 8, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/lxnsrda>, "Paper on Hinduism," *ibid.*, and *ibid.*, respectively.
10. *Book of Tea*, 7, 9, 6, 11.
11. *Book of Tea*, 21, 33; *Ideals of the East*, 5, 1; *Book of Tea*, 16.
12. "Paper on Hinduism."
13. *Book of Tea*, 15.
14. "Paper on Hinduism."
15. *Book of Tea*, 81, 90, 36-7
16. Shridhar Charan Sahoo, *Subhas Chandra Bose: Political Philosophy* (New Delhi, Aph Publishing Co., 1997), 87.


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