

Vedanta

419 MAY - JUNE 2021

The Mystery of Human Vibrations - 2

Swami Ashokananda

**Sri Ramakrishna—the Modern Spiritual
Educator of Mankind**

Swami Muktidananda



Divine Wisdom

Illustrated Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna - 16



FOR MAN PROPOSES AND GOD DISPOSES

THE Master (to Pratab Chandra Mazumdar): "You are an educated and intelligent man, and you are a deep thinker too. Keshab and yourself were like the two brothers, Gour and Nitai. You have had enough of this world—enough of lectures, controversies, schisms, and the rest. Do you still care for them? Now it is high time for you to collect your scattered mind and turn it towards God. Plunge into the ocean of Divinity."

Mazumdar: "Yes, revered sir, that I ought to do; there is no doubt about it. But all this I do simply to preserve Keshab's name and reputation."

Sri Ramakrishna (smiling): "Let me tell you a story. A man built a house on a hill. It was only a mud hut, but he had built it with great labour. A few days after, there came a violent storm and the hut began

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Mantra Japa or Repetition of the Holy Name - 5

In our previous editorial, we saw that *Dhvani* (sound or voice) is the external manifestation of *Shabda* that had risen in the heart prior to its manifestation as speech. The Causal Vibration, 'The Will' to manifest as the universe, the *Nada* (imperceptible pulsation), is in the spaceless timeless Existence. It is the wave/vibration that is continuing as universe-music and appearing as objects. Each object, gross or subtle, though looking motionless to our naked eyes, is in an intense state of vibration and activity, and is singing its own individual song of existence. That is the *Anahata Dhvani* (the inaudible sound). The sound produced by striking or blowing is called *Ahata Dhvani*, and it is audible to all beings. The sound that is going on in every object by the virtue of its very existence is unheard and inaudible to normal humans, and is called *Anahata Dhvani*. It is the basis of Relative Existence.

At the atomic level, electrons are moving at a great speed around a proton; the movement causes sound and is the music of that atom; it is absolute perfection of movement and its music has been going on for millions of years! This primal vibration that decides the state, quality and property of that particular object and its self-expression, so that it is perceivable by living beings, is called the seed-sound or *Bijakshara*, or *Bija in Mantra Shastra* (the Science of Mantras).

The Absolute Itself, as well as the *Nada* that appears in It, is represented by the primal sound *Om*. That is why *Om* is also known as *Nada Brahman*. The Absolute is *Parabrahman* and the *Nada* is the first manifestation of Its *Shakti* (Power) that is not different from It. It may also be denoted as *Shiva* and *Shakti*. There is both the *Shiva*-principle (The Consciousness) and the *Shakti*-principle (The Power of Consciousness) in it. The *Shiva* principle is also

called the *Apara-bindu* and the *Shakti*-principle is called the *Bija*. The *Shiva*-principle, that is, the Consciousness-aspect, dissolves and becomes one with the *Shakti*-principle, the *Bija*. *Bija* literally means seed; here it means Power that has taken a seed form with Consciousness embodied. The *Bija* is now power packed with Consciousness and takes a variety of forms and acquires numerous qualities and properties to form the evolutes and the multifarious objects in multiple dimensions. Being backed and packed with Consciousness, the whole Creation moves according to a perfect Law called the *Rtam*, which works through various power heads (like fire that gives heat and light or water or air that sustains life) called the *Devatas* (Deities). *Devatas* are but Consciousness that is packed within a Power that works in Nature. It is a power of Nature functioning with absolute strictness according to the laws of Nature or the Cosmic Laws. Nothing can exist within Nature without being backed by and packed with Consciousness; this Consciousness packed in a power-head is called the *Devata*. During *Srishti* (creation), the Consciousness (*Apara Bindu* or the *Shiva* principle) merges in the Power of Consciousness (the *Shakti* principle, the *Bija*) to form the universe; and during *Pralaya* (dissolution) the universe retracts to *Bija* and merges in *Apara Bindu* or the *Shiva* principle to become the Absolute, Pure Consciousness again.

Thus, each *Devata* has a *Bija*—the *Shakti*-principle which has manifested in that particular *Devata* form, and a Consciousness as its inseparable counterpart. The individual *Devata Bija* is a part of the cosmic primordial *Bija* associated with the *Shabda-brahman* (the Causal Material Sound Energy that grossifies itself to form matter) and is therefore represented by certain sound syllables or words or letters, which are called *Bija Mantras*.

(To be concluded)

The Mystery of Human Vibrations - 2

Swami Ashokananda

Here I would draw your attention to a strange phenomenon: the more ignorant a man is, the more he thinks he knows and the greater is his egotism. Conversely, the more a man really knows, the less he thinks he knows and the less is his self-satisfaction. The wise man is always willing to listen, but if you try to tell an ignorant person anything, he smiles indulgently and to all practical purposes ignores you. Such behaviour is characteristic of the state of *tamas*. It will be remembered that Christ said: "Unto everyone that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." These words have much significance in regard to the stubborn resistance of *tamasika* persons in contrast to the attitude of persons in higher states. It is universally recognized that if one has spiritual inclinations, he grows more spiritual very easily, and other people heap his spiritual measure to overflowing. But if one has a predominance of *tamas*, he blocks every upward tendency in himself and resists all who would help him: he actually becomes belligerent in his resistance. He wants a dark hole into which to crawl, and if he cannot obtain it actually, he creates it mentally. By interpreting everything in his own way, he builds a little cell around himself, wherein to hide. Whatever good he may have had in the beginning, he very soon loses. Thus, he sinks deeper and deeper into *tamas*.

What is the remedy for *tamas*? Since the usual *tamasika* individual will neither exert himself nor accept help, his cure is largely in the hands of nature. Yes, nature thrashes him severely and mercilessly—the suffering becomes so unbearable that in spite of himself his mind eventually starts to wake up. He feels

increasing desire to improve his lot and to allow others to assist him. Learning that tamas can be conquered by certain specific means, he commences to employ them. These means consist in a definite way of eating, sleeping, dressing, thinking, feeling, enjoying, acting; and that definite way is the way in which the healthy normal worldly desires are fulfilled most ostentatiously and most satisfactorily, in a word, in the rajasika way.

In considering the rajasika state, we must keep in mind its intermediate position in the vibrational range. Though in relation to the highest state of sattva it is to be viewed critically, in relation to the lower state of tamas it should be commended. To those who are under the sway of tamas, it represents the immediate ideal to be attained. If rajas is predominant in an individual, he is restless and ambitious. His energy is always trying to express itself outwardly. This does not prove profitable to him in the long run, for more often than not the rajasika man expends his energy unintelligently. What he wants is to flex his muscles, inflate his chest, take a deep breath, look the world in the face and if possible, give it a blow. He likes to bore deep holes into the bowels of the earth, climb the loftiest mountain, fly in the stratosphere, and dive to the bottom of the sea. There is no rest for him: he goes on and on ceaselessly. It is certainly better to be restless, constantly moving, than to be dull and lazy. Even violent activity is better than torpor. Hence it is considered desirable for those with tamasika tendencies to become ambitious, to strive to make the right business connections and the right marriage, to climb socially and economically. Inertia must somehow be overcome. When an extremely tamasika man once approached Swami Vivekananda, the Swami said, "Can you steal? Go and steal something." He may not have meant that this advice should be taken literally, but he

did mean that the man was so full of *tamas* that getting into difficulties would help him by forcing him to activity.

Though *tamas* is equivalent to death, and activity must be initiated, the state of *rajas* is neither truly desirable nor dependable. True achievement, true gain, true rest, are not in *rajas*: we cannot begin to find them until we reach the *sattvika* state. Sometimes people ask, "Is it possible to go directly from *tamas* to *sattva*?" To do so is usually held to be impossible: all men must pass through *rajas* to attain *sattva*. Man's present state is in general characterized by the ascendancy of *rajas*. This means a great deal of restlessness, ambition, and vigorous activity. It means wide accomplishment, implying acquisition of worldly wealth and power. Many people, noting the civilization that has resulted from man's tremendous, ceaseless activity, consider this civilization superlative. They do not realize that they think so only because they are unconsciously comparing the civilized state (which is *rajasika*) with the state of darkness and stagnation. They fail to recognize that no accomplishment on the plane of *rajas* is lasting. Civilizations appear and disappear. It is only the expressions of *sattva* that are rarely destroyed, that are relatively permanent; the expressions of *tamas* and *rajas* always perish.

Rajas, for its own sake, then, is unprofitable; but it can be made a means to lasting gain. If a person dominated by *rajas* reaches a state in which *sattva* is beginning to manifest itself, even his *rajas* yields results. That is to say, activity pursued under the guidance of moral or spiritual principles bears enduring fruits. But if activity is not dominated by *sattva*, it often grows self-destructive. Have not numerous civilizations become over-ambitious and thereby destroyed themselves? Studying the history of nations and of individuals, we frequently wonder at their stupid mistakes. It seems that they could easily have avoided those errors and thus

have forestalled the ruin that overtook them. Our present times offer signal examples of such errors. If the nations that went down in this last war had been only a bit careful in their judgements and decisions, they could probably have averted their terrible fate. The fact is that rajasika people tend to make unbelievably stupid mistakes. Many conquerors, kings, statesmen and other notable people who work in the rajasika field lack true judgment. Also, common people in both private and public life lack it, for rajas by its very nature is undependable. With conquerors and the like it is easy to see the disastrous effect of rajas uncontrolled by sattva. In other cases, the evil effects may not be so evident, but they are there, nevertheless. A rajasika man, unless his rajas is governed by sattva, is harmful in any field of life. Wherever he goes, he creates restlessness in others. If he enters a religious group, he soon begins to advertise and organize all kinds of activity for external ostentation. That is, he becomes a promoter. To sattvika interests he is a dangerous man.

Once a certain king retired from active rule, entered a forest retreat and dwelt with the recluses. He was spiritually minded, but there was a good deal of rajas left in him. After a time, he announced that he would return to his kingdom. The monks, who had learned to like him, urged that he remain with them. But the king replied, "Do not ask me to stay. If I do, a city will gradually grow up around me." He knew that the rajasika tendencies left in him would begin to seek and find expression. Being a king, he would build a palace, then a park, and very soon a small city would arise.

Many religions have been ruined because they accepted rajasika men as patrons. Religions are at first contemptuous of wealth, but after a time they begin to consider the benefits of converting the worldly great. So they flatter the rulers and the rich, who very

soon have a voice in their affairs. If these patrons do good works, they also become dictatorial. In the beginning, religions yield to them in small details, but before long the rajasika men are at the head of everything, laying down the law—and out go the principles. Many fine religions, becoming too highly organized, grow worldly and cease to be spiritually effective.

If a man is predominantly rajasika, what should he do? It is evident that he should try to subordinate the energies of his body and mind to a higher principle. As the tamasika man must seek to become rajasika, so the rajasika man must seek to become sattvika. In accordance with this necessity, the rajasika man should eat, sleep, dress, act and live in such a manner that he is not self-indulgent but self-sacrificing for the well-being of others. It is natural for a rajasika man to seek to enjoy things, but enjoyment is various. A rich man may enjoy his wealth by spending thousands of dollars in a night club, but might he not choose to use it in a different way—to benefit his fellow man? His desire to possess wealth would thus be satisfied according to the principles of sattva, not of rajas, and he would derive pure joy from the unselfish use of wealth. Slowly his mind would acquire more taste for this pure joy, pure peace, and rest. By becoming increasingly sattvika he would overcome rajas.

The energies of the body and mind can be gradually channelled into the realm of sattva by many means. But the basic formula for overcoming rajas is enjoyment tempered by detachment and renunciation. I have given the case of the rich man applying this formula to the enjoyment of his wealth, and his case can be considered representative. Any rajasika individual, whatever his particular circumstances and preferences, can apply this method for injecting sattvika tendencies into his present life. Since the majority of people are in the middle state of rajas, this formula is

the best general means of approaching the sattvika state. If even a worldly person is made to do good works, to live for others rather than for himself, he gradually goes beyond rajas. If he can change to the less selfish, better way of life consciously and deliberately, he is able to advance more quickly. And he is more apt to try consciously and deliberately to change himself if he understands why, in each individual, some one guna tends to be ascendant. A guna is predominant for this reason: that to which we are accustomed clings to us; it constitutes a habit. Let us suppose you are lazy. Because this habit has a hold on you, you have no morale, no sense of propriety and duty. So, you are tamasika, and it is habit which binds you to tamas. It is also habit which binds you to rajas. The whole process of overcoming tamas and rajas, and of passing from sattva to the transcendental state, can thus be interpreted as one of continually breaking lower habits to form increasingly superior habits.

Accordingly, if one finds that one is lazy, one must, as I said, become active. Even though it means some repetition, let me stress this point. In spiritual training, the principle of activity—and I do not mean merely physical activity—is generally given much emphasis. In such training you are not allowed a single moment's laziness. From one action to another you continually go: you work, you study, you meditate: until the time comes for sleep you are kept intelligently and usefully engaged. Some may say that you should be allowed an occasional breathing spell. No, you are not allowed a breathing spell, for you should not have it. You must be always active. Why? Because there is no other means of overcoming tamas. The only way in which tamas can be brought under control is by never-ceasing external activity, and the only way in which rajas can be brought under control is for it to be put under rigid discipline. When rightly disciplined, the nature of rajas

is transformed into sattva. Those who are unable to endure rigid disciplines are not yet ready to enter the state of sattva. But those who can stand it gradually rise to the higher state. Remember this: if anyone shows sattvika quality, it is because he has conquered tamas and disciplined rajas until the loftier ideal has become manifest in him.

III

When a person has become sufficiently established in sattva, which, as we observed, means that he has already overcome tamas and rajas to a great extent, there begin to appear in him many beneficent qualities such as charity, modesty, gentleness, devotion, non-injuriousness, compassion, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, fearlessness, fortitude, steadfastness, endurance, austerity, renunciation, self-control, dispassion, tranquillity, truthfulness, and purity. It is these and similar qualities that have distinguished saints in all ages.

A whole community may become sattvika, if a large number of sattvika people live in it. In that case there is a general repudiation of worldly pursuits, and men aspire to moral living; the life of the community becomes refulgent with many blessed qualities. Intent on finding the truth that will solve the problems of inner life, the people make every effort to realize God. In the wonderful calmness and purity of such a community, everyone thrives. There is so much joy, peace, and harmony that the mental conflicts of those who become a part of it are often resolved without any conscious effort. "The sattva-abiding go upward." Thus speaks the Lord in the Gita. That is to say, they make rapid progress toward self-knowledge. It is true that everyone, not merely the sattvika man, is going upward. But until you have reached the condition of sattva you may often retrogress, after making some progress you may again be overcome by tamas or rajas, and then your upward

climb is temporarily arrested. Though a river eventually reaches the sea, it does so by a winding course. Our life is like a river, but we should strive to reach the goal directly, without retrogressions, and avoiding obstacles to our progress. One in whom sattva is dominant is secure. He is not likely to make grievous mistakes; and thus, he goes steadily forward. Having gained a predominance of sattva, he has entered the world of light; and his effort is then to gain more and more light. Such a person wants only that which he will never lose, that which will never change, since it will be eternally true and valid. Some of you may say, "Why want something eternal if perhaps it is worthless or of little value?" Those who speak so have not felt the subtle, luminous, blissful presence of the eternal. Though it is indescribable and beyond our present perception, the soul feels it instinctively and knows without the slightest doubt that having found the eternal it will have found everything.

It should not be thought that the sattvika man, in aspiring to that which is beyond all activity, necessarily ceases to be active. He may sometimes be very active, but it will be found that amid intense activity he maintains extraordinary calm and detachment and that his motive is always pure and selfless, unlike the motives of the tamasika and the rajasika. And because he is calm and detached, even while active he is inactive. It is the inner condition of the doer of an action that determines the nature of his action. If, as I mentioned, the actions of the tamasika or the rajasika are performed in accordance with moral and spiritual principles, even those actions have a sattvika effect. As sattva becomes predominant in a man's nature, he gains a truer knowledge of everything he perceives. Being rid of tamas and rajas, which dull and agitate the mind and cause faulty perception, such a man begins to perceive correctly. This true perception, of course, is

always the perception of everything as spirit, because spirit is the real nature of everything, living or non-living. Such knowledge is of the character of wisdom.

When with the ascendancy of sattva, a person gains correct knowledge and awareness of his real nature, he knows that he is separate and distinct from the gunas. How does he feel at that time? He feels that he is not an agent, because there is nothing to do: there is just pure being. Action proceeds from the impulsion of the gunas. It does not proceed from the Self, for the Self is perfect and infinite; it contains everything; there is nothing outside it to be gained. Our present feeling that the Self is the agent is due to our ignorance of our spiritual nature and our identification of ourselves with the gunas. When much sattva is developed this ignorance and false identification disperse and the actionless, unchanging Self shines forth in all its splendour. There is a legend that if milk mixed with water is placed before a swan, the swan can drink the milk, leaving the pure water. It is in this way that, in the highest sattvika state, discrimination grows so keen that one perceives the spirit as separate from the attributes—the mind, body, senses, which are all relative things. Only the Self, God, is perceived to be real.

Tremendous power flows from a man who has reached this state; the range of his influence becomes more and more expanded. He is no longer limited as he once was. He finds that he is dwelling in eternity more than in time. Years may go by, but to him it seems that little time has passed. Though various things happen, no event appears to touch him. Even as time ceases to limit him, so does space. To an ordinary mortal the space surrounding him seems infinite, compared to his own trivial, insignificant existence. His consciousness seems limited to his physical being. But when sattva gains ascendancy in him he becomes comparatively free; his body

no longer influences him because the body cannot exert influence unless there is a predominance of tamas and rajas. Neither can the mind limit him because only in rajas and tamas is the action of the mind restricted. In sattva, consciousness becomes unlimited, infinitely expanded.

No one knows the range of influence of the sattvika person, the person who lives in the consciousness of God. Though he may remain all his life in one locality, the whole universe benefits from him, and his influence will continue through the centuries. The followers of Buddha gave great emphasis to the immeasurable influence of the Enlightened One. Buddhist books often declare that he benefited not only mankind but all the gods in the heavens and the unimaginable beings who live in the worlds of darkness below the range of our comprehension. Even when the sattvika man has left the body, he is still a source of infinite good to others. He comes very close to the illimitable Divine nature. If he wishes, he can break the vibratory moulds in which common people are held prisoner. He understands intuitively what is wrong with them and what to do to correct it, for sattva is like a mirror or a crystal that reflects the truth about everything. How does he help? By infusing sattva into minds dominated by rajas and tamas. This has been called "the grace of the Great Ones" or "the grace of God". We are all recipients of such grace. We do not know many beneficial thoughts we are every moment receiving from sattvika minds. But whether we know it or not, we do receive such thoughts. Of course, the mind and thoughts of the sattvika man have power; but so does his body, which is not ordinary. It does not function like the bodies of people in general. Even the movements of a holy man's body are said to have spiritual significance. The body of a holy man has become so transformed that by touching it others derive great benefit. No doubt you recall

the Biblical incident in which a woman was cured of a disease of long standing by touching the hem of Christ's garment. So great was the power of the Master of Galilee that even his robe had become saturated with it.

In the realm of *sattva*, a man lives in such freedom, becomes capable of doing such infinite good to others, that we call him a moving "tirtha", a moving holy place, where there is a special manifestation of God. Old countries have innumerable tirthas where devotees have had Divine visions or realizations of God, where men have gone through the centuries to adore God. Such places have become charged with spiritual vibrations that are powerful to lift the minds and hearts of those who visit them. A *sattvika* man can indeed be spoken of as a tirtha. Wherever he goes, he carries his inspiring spiritual influence into countless lives. And the light of *sattva* shines through every part of his being. *Sattva* is virtually immortality, eternal life; in it is assuredly enshrined all goodness and holiness. To gain a state of such beneficent wisdom and power should be the immediate objective of men in general. No matter what religion a man follows, he should aspire to become *sattvika*. He should gain the state in which *tamas* and *rajas*, if they vibrate in him on rare occasions, somehow become blended into *sattva*. Even if he does not know the philosophy concerning *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, he should try so to live that every inch of him from head to foot becomes filled with the consciousness of Divinity. He should seek to become all light—physically, mentally, and spiritually. He should strive to become an embodiment of illumination. That is the only real way of living; to fall short of that is a matter of regret.

We know it is not easy to live such a life, but let us refuse to compromise. That we are not living truly that kind of life is less regrettable than that we say, "Oh, it is not for me", or, because of

a belief in reincarnation, "Someday, but not now." What is most to be regretted is that we start with a denial, declaring we shall not be able to live the sattvika life. If we say that, how can we expect to gain anything better than what we have already? If we discourage the mind to begin with, will it struggle for any higher attainment?

Yes, we may be tamasika or rajasika, but we should remember that from God's viewpoint *tamas* and *rajas* are not binding and harmful: to Him they are only certain aspects of manifestation. Let us be like Him. I told you in the beginning that so long as we feel related to the dynamic aspect of God, that is to say, so long as we consider ourselves to be parts of His creation, we are bound to the three *gunas*. But we do not have to feel that we are parts of the creation, even as God does not feel it. There is nothing, except our own thought, to prevent us from considering ourselves, not parts of God's creation, but parts of God Himself. It is our present thought that maintains our present state of existence: it is our thought that supports our *tamasika* and *rajasika* conditions. We have the idea of gross existence. Let us refuse to harbour this idea any longer. In whatever state we may be, let us affirm the truth of our Divine nature; let us never forget that Divinity is unaffected by any conditions of manifestation.

I have said that the lower states can be remedied by changing our way of eating, dressing, living and so on. But it is most important of all that we change our thought—about ourselves and about truth. In the Gita the Lord says, "There is nothing in this world so holy as *jnana* (knowledge, truth)." The Christ said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." When we know the truth about ourselves, we shall be free. What is the truth about us? Whether the body and mind are free or bound, the Self is glorious, pure, free, infinite, and Divine. That indeed is the truth.

As is apparent from what I said previously, the higher state of sattva must likewise give way to that truth. Sattva also is a chain, though a golden one. Some people, dazzled by the excellences of sattva, cannot understand why it, at least, should not be coveted as the highest ideal by everyone; and hearing that it must be discarded, they protest. But it must be remembered that all the wonderful sattvika qualities originate in something beyond sattva, the transcendental, by gaining which nothing is lost—and perfect fulfilment is attained. Moreover, sattva never exists alone: with it some rajas and tamas are always mixed, however small in quantity they may be. Therefore, to transcend tamas and rajas completely one must also transcend sattva. When a high degree of sattva is gained, we do not identify ourselves with sattva, and have no hesitancy in repudiating it. At that time, we are entirely ready to dispense with even the best of relative existence and to claim our Divine heritage. In sattva one is close to the Divine, but having gone beyond sattva one is identified with It. Our objective therefore is to turn wholly from the vast cosmic dance-drama of the gunas.

In order to reach our goal directly, let us at all times affirm the truth about the glorious, pure, free, infinite Divine Self, and try under all circumstances to live up to it. Let us affirm that God is not far off. Because He is the very Soul of our soul, it is natural that we should perceive Him. How can we consider that that which is the very texture of our being is not immediately available? No. God is not far off. Everything is God. Try therefore with all your might to perceive everything as Divine. Especially, start looking upon people as Divine, and gradually your way of thinking will change. There is verily nothing like knowledge, nothing like right thought. Knowledge has been compared to lire. The Gita says that jnana-agni, the fire of knowledge, can burn every

bondage to ashes. Do not say, "I must first untie all the knots in my nature: then I shall light the fire and destroy them." The fire will burn the knots even if they be tied fast. However innumerable the bondages in the mind, they will be consumed by the fire of knowledge. Let us therefore at once light jnana-agni, the fire of knowledge, in our hearts.

We have the strength and the willpower to light jnana-agni, but unfortunately we have never been encouraged to exercise this strength and willpower. From the moment of birth, we have been conditioned to think that God is in a distant heaven: that we are miserable sinners who must grovel and plead for help. Let us forget this and train ourselves differently. In the Gita the Lord says, "O Arjuna, transcend the three gunas." This should be our highest ideal. If the sattvika person, the rajasika person, or even the tamasika person, ever becomes truly, entirely convinced that the body and mind have nothing whatever to do with him, he can cast off tamas, rajas and sattva instantly. This moment, therefore, let us say, "I am beyond the three gunas: I am free." This moment let us affirm our true nature and obtain liberation. Then we shall vibrate even as God vibrates—and of that vibration no one in a state of bondage can have any true conception.

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Sri Ramakrishna—the Modern Spiritual Educator of Mankind

Swami Muktidananda

(Edited version of the talk delivered on 15th March 2021 at Belur Math during Sri Ramakrishna Jayanthi celebrations)

We have assembled today here at the Belur Math premises, at this sacred site on the banks of Ganga. This beautiful place, overlooking Holy Ganga and the samadhi mandirs of Raja Maharaj, Mother and Swamiji, and this serene atmosphere are indeed spiritually invigorating. We are all just sitting beside Sri Ramakrishna Temple. I am aware that a large number of devotees are watching this program online. Our hearty Ramakrishna Jayanthi greetings to you all. Due to corona restrictions, large gatherings are not permitted, so today's celebration has assumed this simple form. Usually every year, Ramakrishna Jayanthi is celebrated at Belur Math with much grandeur, and lakhs of people gather here. But today's Jayanthi celebration, without any crowd, has its own uniqueness and tranquil, peaceful atmosphere. From the early morning onwards, we have been taking part in the mangalarati and pooja, offering pranams to sadhus and pranams to various temples. We have all had a spiritually elevating time today remembering Sri Ramakrishna and endeavouring to adore him in our heart and mind.

Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings are unique in many ways. The Supreme Lord descended to the earth as Sri Ramakrishna to bring about the spiritual transformation of humankind and restore the Sanatana Dharma, the Rishi Dharma, and to strengthen the faith of the people in God. Sri Ramakrishna was unique in his practise of various important sadhanas. He also chalked out an easier path based on the essentials of religion for present-day times that we just

need to understand and practise ourselves. He has simplified the complexities of religion by separating the grain from the chaff, and he conspicuously upheld the central crux of religion—namely, spirituality. His life was like a spiritual research laboratory. He wanted to find out and see for himself whether the various practices of religion are true and real, and whether they lead us to the experience of God.

Religion, like science, is based on observation, experiment, analysis and inference. Sri Ramakrishna did not leave any path untested and wanted to know whether every religious path leads to God, so he went on practising the popular paths in quick succession one after the another—which is unheard of in the annals of religious history. Initially, he simply took the path of traditional worship as a priest in the Kali temple, practising purity, austerity, concentration and intense prayers, and had the vision of Divine Mother. Then he practised Nava *Vidya* bhakti—nine-fold path of Bhakti—and Tantric sadhana, and finally attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the pinnacle of spiritual experience. However, his spiritually curious mind, which had an insatiable urge to practise and know the truth of the other major religions outside Hinduism, made him continue to seek God through other religious paths. He practised the Sufi teachings of Islam and attained spiritual realization; and, finally, he captured the spirit of Buddhism and Christianity and had the vision of these prophets.

So, Sri Ramakrishna, compelled by his insatiable and intense spiritual aspiration, practised various religious paths and had the direct experience of God in various forms. He thus validated other religious paths too and demonstrated to the people of the world the essential spiritual gist of all religions. He thereby dispelled religious confusion and made the people of the world understand that if they practise any particular path with sincerity, concentration, purity and intense aspiration, they will be able to transform their consciousness

and realize God. As Sri Aurobindo says, “*In a recent unique example, in the life of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, we see a colossal spiritual capacity first driving straight to the divine realisation, taking, as it were, the kingdom of heaven by violence, and then seizing upon one Yogic method after another and extracting the substance out of it with an incredible rapidity, always to return to the heart of the whole matter, the realisation and possession of God by the power of love, by the extension of inborn spirituality into various experience and by the spontaneous play of an intuitive knowledge. Such an example cannot be generalised.*” That is why, perhaps, Swami Vivekananda calls Sri Ramakrishna the *Avatara Varishta*. But unlike Lord Rama and Sri Krishna, he did not have a powerful bow and arrow or Chakra, respectively. He was without weapons, had no external physical grandeur or any visible rajasic features. He was as simple as a common villager yet he manifested very powerful divine dispositions. He was always suffused with God consciousness, a state called ‘*samadhi*’, and carried with him the inner core of the vitally important experiential part of religion. Consequently, Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual greatness and glory are slowly unfurling and spreading far and wide. It has been just over a century since he descended, yet spiritually sensitive people all over the world have gradually begun to recognize, understand, and adore him as a spiritual educator of all peoples. If anybody has a real question on religion, God, or spiritual experience, they have to come to Sri Ramakrishna to get an authentic answer.

Another special feature of Sri Ramakrishna is the historicity of his advent. He is *purana purusha*, a historical divine incarnation. About 140 years ago he lived on the other bank of Ganga, at Dakshineswar, doing his sadhana and achieving samadhi—Dakshineswar is a structure that lies on the Cossipore bank of Ganga and can be seen from Belur Math. The role of Master Mahashaya in recording the exact Divine words of the latest *Avatar*, with all the circumstantial evidence of date and time, and in publishing a huge

book of perennial importance—*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*—was his divinely ordained mission in life and has made the advent of Sri Ramakrishna an historical fact and his life thus very authentic. So, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is in fact a new modern scripture, a recent shastra and a Divine gift to mankind. It is relevant for all time and is a great source of inspiration and guidance to seekers of God all over the world. It is an authentic word of God like the Bhagavad Gita and also reveals the *Avatar* hood of Sri Ramakrishna in his own words. These divine words were able to be recorded by Master Mahashaya accurately and in a systematic way given the availability of more modern resources, unlike in the days of the Bhagavad Gita. The words of Sri Ramakrishna recorded in the *Gospel* are a clear proof that God exists and that He can be seen. Sri Ramakrishna's God experience also laterally and indirectly authenticates and protects all the religions of the world from the doubting disbelievers in God. Moreover, it establishes that the spiritual aspect of religion is neither poetry nor a figment of imagination, nor a fancy of the few faithful, but something vibrant beyond the purview of sense experience. It enables true seekers to experience God if they only follow the true path of any religion with all sincerity.

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is therefore revealed to be a significant religious phenomenon and an invaluable spiritual aid. The reading of the *Gospel* enables us to practise sadhana and elevate our mind Godward. If you have visited Dakshineswar and entered Sri Ramakrishna's room (which is more or less preserved as it was) and now think of Sri Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar sitting in your own home while reading the narratives given in the *Gospel*, then you will be able to feel and imagine vividly the divine presence of Sri Ramakrishna squatting on his cot in that room at Dakshineswar, or moving in the Panchavati, or going to Kolkata to visit a devotee's house, and so on. Actually, we can go back in time and recapitulate those divine events, thereby practising the presence of Sri

Ramakrishna, and we can receive direct guidance from Him in our spiritual practise on a day-to-day basis. This kind of mental replay enables seekers to practise more easily Sri Ramakrishna's *sannidhya sadhana*.

We can see in the *Gospel* how householders, youngsters, women and seekers from different backgrounds received Sri Ramakrishna's guidance to lead a God-centred life. His emphasis is on leading a God-centred life rather than an ego-centred or world-centred life. Sri Ramakrishna used to say repeatedly that God alone is real. Further, he used to say that God alone is *vastu* (real divine substance) and everything else is *avastu*, impermanent and unsubstantial. Thus, a Reality-tuned life is the true spiritual life and is not an artificial one or mere imagination.

Thus, even to householders Sri Ramakrishna gives hope. Grihastas can also spiritualize their lives. They can do sadhana following the path of Bhakti. They can also attain God provided they train their mind to lead a God-centred life, doing the duties of the household and their respective professions with a spirit of detachment and attachment to God, knowing fully well that God alone is the ultimate and He alone is permanent and real. Likewise, Sri Ramakrishna says that God is as real to householders as He is to sannyasins. God is the same to all. God is our *Antaryamin*, the indwelling divine spirit in all of us. It is the birth right of everyone to experience God. Sri Ramakrishna especially sanctified family life by willingly marrying Sarada Devi, his divine consort, so that householders can have greater identity with Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi and their divine life, and derive inspiration to spiritualize their own family life. This is very necessary because householders constitute 99% of the population and spirituality must be allowed to reach them so that their lives too should be transformed. A good number of householders did visit Sri Ramakrishna during his lifetime and derived inspiration from him.

Many among his householder disciples struggled and ascended to a higher spiritual state and experienced God. Sri Ramakrishna understands the spiritual needs of one and all and transforms them.

Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings effectively answer religious doubts and fulfil the spiritual aspiration of all sections of society, all types of religious groups as well as seekers in different stages of development. He has the answer to the questioning mind of modern-day youth; he has the spiritual solution to a householder reeling under family problems and yet wanting to perform spiritual sadhana. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna, together with Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, are our authentic perennial guides, friends and philosophers of global dimension catering to different shades of people of different disposition and faith structures. Our Holy Trio is the source of inspiration for the true understanding of the practical spiritual ideal hidden in different religions to bring about self-transformation. They awaken our mind and enable us to be real seekers of the God of our faith.

Such is the broad-based spiritual scope and power of Sri Ramakrishna that it spread across the world in such a short span of time. That is why Swami Vivekananda regards Sri Ramakrishna as *Avatara Varishta*. In his main aratrika composition, he describes Sri Ramakrishna as one who is the breaker of the bondage to the world (*Khandana Bhava Bhandhana*) and also adores Sri Ramakrishna as *Yoga-Sahay*, helper in the path of yoga. He is a great spiritual facilitator and the help and lift that he provides us on the path of Yoga is very tangible and positive if we can really understand his great life and teachings. Swamiji also says that if we truly believe in Sri Ramakrishna and take him up as our spiritual ideal, he will take us across this world of samsara like one crossing over easily the small puddle of water formed by the stamping of the cow's hoof on soft mud: "*Sampada, tava Shripada, bhava goshpada wari yatay*". Hence, Sri Ramakrishna makes religion and spirituality easier so that even

a villager can understand the essentials and practise them. He has explained spiritual life in his own simple native language and style. Sri Ramakrishna is a unique modern spiritual educator of mankind.

He is not an academician having scholarship (panditya) in the scriptures, nor did he go to school beyond the primary level, but he is rich in direct spiritual experience. He is in fact a divinely ordained modern spiritual awakener of mankind. His words have a powerful impact on the human mind and heart because they are backed by the light of his spiritual experience.

Our scriptures say that verbal expression actually emerges from our inner divine consciousness called परा (*para*), which is the source of all verbal expression. It later modifies itself as inner subtler intermediate forms like पश्यन्ती and मध्यमा, and finally as verbal expression called वैखरी. But Sri Ramakrishna's words carry the power of the परा (divine source) which is fully transmitted to वैखरी, the verbal expression undiminished in the intermediate stages because of the absolute purity of mind and the radiating power of his frequent experience of divine consciousness called samadhi. When we read the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we are able to feel the power of the great Master's spiritual experiences flowing through his words. When we receive, understand, and tune our mind to his words through our conscious mind, the streaming of divine power into our subconscious takes place. It further descends down to our heart and consequently activates our spiritual samskaras and attenuates the worldly samskaras, thus lifting our mind and filling it with higher spiritual fervour. The spiritual experiences that Sri Ramakrishna narrates in the *Gospel* in his own words make us feel that God is very much real and that we, too, can experience God.

As a result, even now all those who come to Sri Ramakrishna and read about his life and teachings sincerely emulate them in their own life and instantly derive spiritual benefit from the direct source

of God. We see today that thousands of seekers all over the world are inspired by Sri Ramakrishna. Practising the presence of Sri Ramakrishna—“*Sri Ramakrishna Sannidhya Sadhana*”—by reading His *Gospel* is a new spiritual sadhana for all seekers. All those who are confined to their homes now during this corona pandemic can benefit by utilizing this valuable time to read the *Gospel* and practise Sri Ramakrishna’s *sannidhya sadhana*. The word 'corona' therefore can be interpreted in the Bengali language as “*Koro Ghare boshe-boshe Ramakrishna nam*” (sitting at your home repeat Ramakrishna’s name) and reading the *Gospel* is the easiest way to tune our mind to God. Thus, Sri Ramakrishna symbolizes the triple ideal: as God (*Sadhya*), as the path (*Sadhana*), and as the ideal seeker (*Sadhaka*). According to Sri Ramakrishna, whatever be the spiritual path that we follow, what is more important is sincere longing for God (*Vyakulatha*), and concentration of mind and purity (*Ekagratha*). If we are able to achieve these and develop detachment to the world and attachment to God, we will be fulfilling the necessary conditions for the descent of His grace, and that alone can give us spiritual experience.

Accordingly, people from remote places, from all strata of society from different countries belonging to different cultural and religious backgrounds at different points of time have been moving towards this modern divine dispensation, an authentic spiritual phenomenon called Sri Ramakrishna. On this auspicious day of his 186th birthday celebrations, sitting on the bank of the sacred “Ganga”, in this holy atmosphere of Belur Math, let us all pray to Sri Ramakrishna. May His grace descend on all of us, may we all be spiritually awakened, and may we attain true devotion to His lotus feet. May He guide us and lead us to that spiritual realm.

The Journey to Universalism - 1

Srinivas Venkatram

Part I: The need for shared universal ideals

What does the term ‘universalism’ mean?

Universalism may be understood as seeking commonality with all human beings everywhere, irrespective of class, color, religion, gender, nation, or any other classification that we may use to divide and separate human beings.

Thus, terms such as freedom, equality, self-respect, and evolution, when applied to all human beings everywhere, can be seen as universal, while the terms Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Black, White, Woman and Man, American, British, Indian, are not applicable to all human beings everywhere, and therefore are not universal, whatever their claim to the contrary may be.

The challenge that we face is that the first set of terms are often inspiring but do not always move people and shape human society as do the second set of terms. It is the second set of terms—classifications that divide us—that shape our identities, our thinking process, our emotional reactions, our social bonds, our prejudices, and so on.

Thus, society seems to suffer from a profound division between what most of us espouse as essentially valuable, which is our essential humanity, and what we actually practice as individuals and as collectives, which is the application of different ‘labels’ such as colour, creed, caste, and nationality.

Why is it so important that we learn to go beyond our narrow divisive identities and embrace wider, more universal identities?

There seem to be four reasons why it is critical for the future of humanity as a whole that we, as individual humans, are able to find

a shared basis of cooperation and collaboration with other human beings beyond the boundaries set by our own self-created identifications with various groups and labels.

Firstly, it seems like the “right” thing to do. It seems to be a moral certitude that those who are more inclusive are in a fundamental way “better human beings” than those who are trapped in more divisive modes of thought. This moral certitude stems from the recognition that inclusiveness leads to positive character and moral qualities like unselfishness, compassion, and the willingness to keep our interests subordinate to the larger interests of society.

Secondly, it is in society’s larger interests that this happens. Around us we see that problems involving individual action are solved through incentives and punishments. But problems involving collective action, that require people to cut across organizational or national boundaries, like climate change, remain largely unsolved because the self-interest of individual groups almost always undoes any progress made by the collective in the direction of shared solutions to common challenges facing humankind.

Thirdly, all forms of tribalism lead to institutionalized conflict. These include conflict sponsored by and supported in the name of religion, conflict in the form of organized racism or bloodshed of whole groups of human beings by aggressors who believed, not as individuals alone, but as a nation that they were significantly superior to other human beings—the Holocaust being a recent example of the horrifying impact of institutionalized conflict.

Fourth, and most important, tribalism has led society to focus on dominance by small groups of people over others, through systems of thought, control over resources, and numerous forms of disempowerment in the name of race, gender, beliefs, and so forth. This has taken away human thought and energy from improving the human condition and directed it instead at stripping other human beings of their progress and prosperity.

In a larger sense, universalism really means a journey of individuals and society in three dimensions:

(i) from narrow, exclusive identities, to wider, inclusive identities

(ii) from economic and social models built around narrow self-interest, competition and win-lose thinking, to new models that are built on the axioms of enlightened self-interest, collaboration, and win-win thinking.

(iii) from models of human fulfillment which are based on acquisition of wealth, power, and opportunity, to new models of human fulfillment which are based on making one's life valuable not just to oneself but to the larger human collective.

Seen this way, universalism represents a journey from a narrow, conflicted way of human life, to a wider, collaborative and cooperative, enlightened way of human life.

In the long run, universalism will lead to profound changes in the way human beings think of themselves and interact with each other. They will include:

(i) the steady *expansion of the individual's identity* and identification from the narrow tribal identity to a more universal citizenship identity

(ii) the *development of human interaction* from a transaction and quid-pro-quo centric vision of human society, to a vision of human society built around enlightened self-interest and win-win thinking.

(iii) the *creation of new models of decision making and solution development* that involve multiple stakeholders and multiple voices in our search for equitable answers.

This implies a gradual increase in our zone of identification from self (individualism), family/community, state and society, and the world at large.

This expansion of identification does not mean ‘token members’ but a deep and abiding identification with the larger, more inclusive collective.

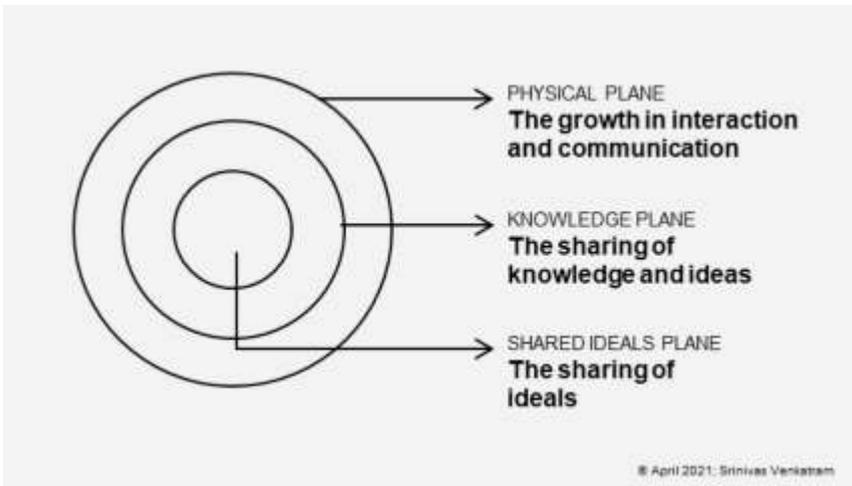
(iv) *developing a new basis of self-development and self-actualization.*

If society must be universal, then it needs to provide people with means of meaning and fulfillment that go beyond individual acquisition of wealth and power, and the development of one’s family or narrow group of beneficiaries. People need to be able to find meaning and fulfillment in something which leads to universal welfare. A good example of this is aid and philanthropy—where individuals can find fulfillment in service and giving, and not just in acquisition of wealth and power.

Where do we begin?

How do we enable individuals and communities to begin on a journey of self-expansion that enables them to let go of narrow, parochial concerns and learn to connect with other communities and countries on the grounds of universalism?

The journey seems at first to be extremely difficult, if not near impossible. However, the journey to universalism can take place on three planes:



At the physical plane, the drivers of universalism have in the past been trade and conquest. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this movement has been accelerated, not just through ease of travel, but also through the development of multinational organizations, global outsourcing of manufacturing and services, and the creation of global supply chains wherein different components are produced in different countries, assembled in other countries, and sold elsewhere.

All three drivers have led to greater interaction and intermingling of cultures, norms, and values. This in turn has led to a largely common language of trade, business, and finance emerging across the globe.

At the knowledge online communication plane, the biggest driver of universalism has been the growth of the internet leading to a free sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experiences across the globe. Individuals in most countries can, if they so choose, access cultures, traditions, and ideas from anywhere in the world. However, this trend towards universalism in this plane has been counteracted by another trend, particularly seen after the growth of social media—the growth of echo chambers. Echo chamber effects are seen when individuals and groups flock to global/social media sources, which strengthen a narrow parochial point of view, rather than widen and open their minds to alternative perspectives. Echo chamber effects have led in a strange way to greater fanaticism, greater tribalism, and increasingly narrow ways of thinking through their reinforcement effects.

This leads us to the most important challenge in the journey towards universalism: it is individuals who finally have to make the choice to access media that widen the mind, consider alternative perspectives, and forgo personal goals in favor of collective or community welfare.

If individuals are committed to narrow ideals that consciously block out any opportunity to become more inclusive, then mere availability or access to new or evolved modes of thought, and exposure to alternative cultures will not have the desired impact in universalizing the individual consciousness.

To take it further, even business, and global cultural products like movies etc. have not overcome the limited impact of narrow value systems and ideals in people.

Therefore, the answer to the challenge of universalism necessarily lies in going one step deeper beyond the physical and knowledge planes, and work towards universalism on the *plane of shared ideals and values*.

There is a need for universal ideals and values to be articulated and shared, which will enable people everywhere to become universal. This is not just externally (in their travels, interactions, consumption of movies, etc.), but internally (in their beliefs, value systems, respect for other human beings, a sense of equality with other races and colors, and so on).

Unless the ideals we live by are universal ideals, we will tend to fall back upon our narrow sectarian and parochial ideals as the basis of human thought, emotion, and action. Even our religious beliefs—when approached superficially at the level of external forms and rituals—can tend to generate a sense of difference rather than awaken the universal, spiritual impulse present in us as individuals.

It is here that Swami Vivekananda's broad-based and compassionate vision of universalism proposed at the turn of the 20th century, and the application of this version in the form of articulated and shared ideals in the 21st century, can make a profound difference to the destiny of the human race.

Shankaracharya and the Main Principles of His Religious Philosophy: Advaita Vedanta

Dr. Vayu Naidu

The architecture of London's Shard (2012) is derived from a fusion of images for the architect Renzo Piano—the painting of Canaletto's Venice, the steeple of a church against a river amidst the trading hub hosting shops, restaurants, a hotel, and offices—and yet it is about the expansiveness of 'incompletion'. He speaks of this concept design of 'incompletion' in an interview about the Shard. This is a salient feature of London's mythic skyline between cloud, hail, sun and rain as a tale of incompleteness—to be extended and completed to a point of infinity.

This concept of 'incompleteness to a point of infinity' about the Shard is not too distant an analogy reflecting the main principles of religious philosophy of Advaita Vedanta expounded by Shankaracharya (c.700CE). Shankaracharya's time-tested principles could be brought into the arena of the profound and sacred, the contemporary and seemingly secular analogy of modern architecture. This essay is an endeavour to encompass Shankaracharya's exegesis of the Mahavakya 'Aham Brahmasmi' from the Upanishadic texts as the outlining thread of his architecture of Advaita and establishing a concrete base for aspirants and ongoing debates.

The Advaitin is reliant on Brahman; Infinity that is all pervading and self-manifesting. This is the foundational principle by which Shankaracharya makes his religious teaching of Advaita Vedanta a school of philosophy. His *pranama* methodology stands the test of the contemporary and is endorsed by the classical idea of revelation of *Shruti* or Vedas. The architectural blueprint of his

teachings was built from earlier acharyas, particularly from Gaudapada. Shankaracharya is rigorous as an exegete in his adherence to the Upanishads—in text and confirmed by sadhana.

Within the complex of the history of ideas and teachings, his critics rate his work as incomplete, only clarified by later teachers such as Vijnana Mishra, Sriharsha and Chitsukh. This essay argues that the main principles of Shankaracharya's Advaita with its 'incompleteness' is an invitation for future thinkers and practitioners to test the principles and complete the architecture sustainably across time through sadhana and direct experience of moksha in attaining Brahman.

The essay will draw on diverse illustrations, modern and from the Upanishads, to demonstrate the stages of enhanced spiritual development undertaken by the Advaitan sadhaka even today, based on Shankaracharya's teachings of religious philosophy.

* * *

Before a discussion of the main principles of Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, establishing the date of his birth at 700CE gives us a compass to the philosophies circulating within Hindu thought and practice. In doing so, it also establishes the distinctiveness of his teachings, enhancing ideas from the past pushing through to the next frontier of religious thinking during his own time. In saying this, Sengaku Mayeda's observation of Shankaracharya's role as a person is more fitting—"he was really not so much a philosopher as pre-eminent religious leader and a most successful religious teacher". (Nick Sutton, *Teachings*, p.33)

In establishing the methodology of Knowledge to ascertain what is Truth as a 'constant', Shankaracharya's epistemology begins with the traditional *pramana* which has the three tools of investigation. *Pratyaksha* or perception as the foundation of his premise; the structure is developed through *anumana* or inference,

and just as an architect and engineer have to confer on the resilience and sustainability of a building to suit various *sadaka* or aspirants, the sole verifying pramana is revelation or *Shruti*. Here the building materials, as it were, are the Upanishads. The Upanishads signify both—revelation as 'experience', and endorsement as scripture. The premise asserts that Brahman is the absolute Truth, constant or unchanging reality. In spite of being part of this infinity Brahman that inhabits us and we inhabit, the spiritual aspirants are ignorant of this consciousness. Our ignorance can be unveiled by a combination of self-effort and a Guru, who through Jyana awakens us in realising the Upanishadic Mahavakya 'Tat Tvam Asi'; or to put it in another way, the extra-daily in the daily. It can also be attained as 'Aham Brahmasmi'. 'That thou Art' as the Guru reveals to the sadhaka, or the sadhakha arriving at a state of consciousness discovering Brahman is neither a place nor a possession but more a revelation of a consciousness within peeling away the ignorance of not being able to see the unity in all things; it is of an Isness.

Shankaracharya distinguishes his religious teaching of Advaita Vedanta as derived from but different to *Parinamavada* of the Samkhya philosophy that advocates the world is identical in a latent form to its cause. He also denies the *Arambhavada* teaching that advocates the world is atomised without a pre-existing cause, which is the inclination of Vaiseshika or Nyaya schools. Shankaracharya's trope is **Vivartavada**, which is the theory that the sadhaka seeker voyages from the state of seeing the same world which seems real to being not-real, and understands or experiences the underlying power that is Brahman. The world as seeming real is the power of Maya, not an attribute, but tangible power of Brahman. The mythology of the anthropomorphised Shiva with the sound of the drum evoking creation, and the ring

of fire He dances in as the dissolution of the veil of creation; the dance is the endless cycle of it. To go into detail may detract from the discussion.

Here Shankara borrows from Gaudapada in arguing that even if the idea of the world being not-real is not stated explicitly in the Upanishad, it is arrived at through reasoning that 'something is real until shown to be unreal'. The states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep show the thread of consciousness that is Brahman throughout, although we are not aware of this as That. What the Shankaracharya advocates is that these states are linked by the Atman within all sentient beings and are identified with supreme Brahman on realization; the flash of illumination.

According to Shankaracharya, as he urges in *Bhaja Govindam*, the spiritual evolution of rebirth, and goal of human life, aided by the discriminative capability of the human buddhi, is *Moksha* or liberation. This is no place to arrive at physically, but by the removal of *avidya*, ignorance of the Absolute Truth or Brahman, the aspirant is able to discern how mesmerising Maya is through a process of 'not this, not this'.

The sadhaka may well ask why Moksha from our material existence is an aspiration? It is for the seeker who has heard of or tasted the bliss and identified it as Brahman and wants to learn how to. While the world seems a pleasant enough place (with Maya), why would some seek Moksha? Liberation from what? Suffering is one reason—to overcome it by understanding its features with the possibility of controlling it, rather than the nature of Suffering controlling or overcoming the individual. Suffering seems to be an effect or consequence of the cause of desire, which comes in myriad form seeking worldly gain.

Shankaracharya seems to place Jnana as the efficient weapon that dissolves the ignorance that causes the diversity of existence

resulting in a feeling of disconnectedness causing suffering. It is here that Shankaracharya emphasises the accurate understanding of the Upanishad. If Brahman is One, meditation or *nididhyasana*, coming as the subsequent stage from hearing the truth, reflecting on it in relation to the small self and then meditating on the great self, is the practice of Yoga that is endorsed by Shankaracharya, even if he otherwise condemns yoga teachings. But in the *nididhyasana* phase, Shankaracharya traces the yoga of meditation in Chapter Six of the Bhagavad Gita.

In the deepest form of meditation the individual self or Atman is merged into Brahman. While this is a discourse on Hindu thinking, the arati at Chidambaram has a moment when the curtain of the inner sanctum is unveiled for a fraction of a moment to reveal nothing but a mirror, as a reflection of the self. This motif comes through in the description of how knowledge dawns in the Shankaracharya *Dakshinamurthy stotram*, verse 1, where the world is as if revealed in a mirror.

This is an interesting analogy in Sylvia Plath's poem:

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

While these illustrations may not have a direct connection and were born out of very different contexts, it is interesting to see that

expansiveness of a metaphor across cultures while revealing at least an ache that comes for that which is eternal.

Even in meditation *nididhyasana*, it is the light of *jnana* that dispels the darkness of ignorance which is the illusion that everything is diverse and atomised as mentioned in Shankaracharya's *Upadesa Sahasri* – a Thousand Teachings, (verse 16):

The innate assumption of common people is that the Atman is not distinct from the body, mind and senses. This view arises from *Adviya*, ignorance.

Through a process of *neti, neti*—not this, not this—that action and notions of duality, as separating action from the performer, the spiritual seeker's inner space is transcended and illumination or *samadhi* occurs. It is this illumination that is a revelation that all existence and life is lit by the *savitur*, the light of consciousness that is Brahman which is alight through everything.

It seems like a moment when JMW Turner was studying light and how he perceived it to recreate it. In the painting of Moses, he enables the dark arc of light around the canvas, and then like a meditation takes the viewer's eye to the centre of the canvas and moves through a circularity of strokes of yellow which blend to a vertical line of white at the centre. It sets the canvas alight. Light cast on objects reveals its identity. It is a Vedantic illustration of the light of Brahman as it flows through the senses and projects through the organs of sight and sense. Through the individual perception the body mind is lit and the ego utters "I see", "I taste". But in fact it is Brahman that is taste and that which touches it. The Higher mind, or *Buddhi*, enables us to clear the lower and reactive mind to dominate in such a way that we make ourselves more miserable. Thus it is with the offering of food and food that is consumed.

This is an understanding of the main principles of Shankaracharya's precept that Brahman alone is real. There are levels of arriving at this, and a prerequisite is a pure heart and mind. There are no 'locations of departure and arrival'; it is all within the self of the seeker who needs a Guru who can point the student to the aphorism 'Tat Tvam Asi'. In Shankaracharya's *Atma Bodha*, he describes a Jivan Mukta as a realised soul from whom all action drops away and is ever in the consciousness of Brahman.

While covering the main principles of Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta with 'universal' examples across Art, one can conclude that his is not a dry philosophical treatise. It is an urgent 'wake up' call as in *Bhaja Govindam* to shake people out of their complacency and belief that the world of transitoriness is the 'real' life. In this investigation and delineation of the Absolute and the layers of partial reality, Shankaracharya leaves the incompleteness of his philosophy to be completed by practice and experience by others. Possibly Renzo Piano is not a Vedantist, but the concept of creating architecture that is to be realised in the future for diverse functions and possibilities left 'incomplete' working toward an infinity has a reflective meaning.

Whatever the criticisms are about Shankaracharya's method, he is clear about teaching, and a systematic approach of clarifying the stages with a Guru, yes, but also the testimony of the scriptures.

The Humanistic Approach of Swami Vivekananda

Dr Shikha Sarkar

It has been rightly said that the next evolutionary step for mankind is to move from 'man' to 'kind'. Glimpses of this truth are partially evident as various nations now come forward to help each other, temporarily putting their political boundaries aside. As the second wave of the pandemic hits India hard, causing unprecedented devastation, the only panacea seems to be a touch of humanity, love, and benevolence. The surging sorrows and suffering can only be soothed by compassion and sympathy—as in the true essence of the Dalai Lama's words: "Love and compassion are the necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive."

This reminds us of the broadest view of religion by Swami Vivekananda, which has put mankind at the center of everything. According to him, though the whole universe is the manifestation of God, yet the greatest manifestation is found in man. Man is the living God, and this is not a religion that is not helpful to a man to wipe out his miseries. He says, "I do not believe in a religion or God which cannot wipe a widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to an orphan's mouth."¹ The highest God on earth is the human being and to serve this humanity is the principal religion.

One thing to be kept in mind in this context is that service to mankind needs to be understood in its true essence. The word 'service' does not refer to any kind of help or charity. Swamiji says, "Cut out this word 'help' from your mind. You cannot help; it is blaspheming."² The implication is that Nature does not stand in need of our help. It works according to its own rhythm. It is our privilege that we get the opportunity to serve others and we must perform this service as worship.

In this way, Swamiji rejects any sets of doctrines or dogmas as religion that have been confined to books and scriptures alone. He says, "However sublime be the theories, however well spun may be the philosophy, I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas."³

Religion is being and becoming, rather than believing. It is the inherent spirituality of a human being, or deification of man. It is evolving a God out of a material man. Anything short of this is not religion.

But this seems to be a very abstract idea. How can God be evolved out of a man? How can a material man have the perfection of God? To this Swamiji answers that this perfection is already in him, albeit potentially. Religion consists in recognizing this perfection. Man should realize his real self, which is eternally free in nature.

This concept of 'real man' propounded by Swamiji is derived from Upanishadic thought. Therefore some mention should be made of the Upanishadic view of Self, if only of an overall nature.

According to the Upanishads, the ultimate reality out of which everything has emerged is Brahman. It is the Supreme Reality that transcends all worldly existences and yet underlies them as their background. It pervades all worldly existences and also controls them from within. It is the first cause from which everything originates, which preserves everything and to which everything returns.

Again, this Brahman is also the underlying principle or the basic truth in man. It is the eternal subject which persists throughout the changes, the common factor in the states of waking, dream, sleep, death, rebirth, and final deliverance. It is different from the intellect, mind, body and organs, yet it is that self-effulgent light through which the mind, body, organs, and so forth are illumined.

It is unborn, eternal, indestructible, subtler than the subtlest, greater than the greatest. It is nothing but Brahman itself.

Thus, the great cosmic power and the inner immortal self are one and the same. The same reality is known from the objective side as Brahman and from the subjective side as Atman. This is echoed in several Upanishads. The Mandukya Upanishad says, "ayam atma brahman" (Mandukya 2). Brahman is the Atman, and the Atman is the Brahman. And the Chandogya Upanishad contains the famous utterance, "Tatvamasi" (You are That).

Now, if a man is potentially divine in nature, why is he not aware of it? Swamiji explains this by saying that the Self is the real nature of man. He is not to become pure or perfect. He is that already. But the modern state of man is that he has forgotten his divine nature because of his growing dependence on matter. Sometimes he is reduced to a mere money-making machine. The 'real man' who is infinite, the beginningless, the ever-blessed, the ever free, has been caught in the meshes of time, space and causation. It is Nature itself that acts like a screen and hides the reality beyond. Man has narrowed his vision of himself and the universe by remaining on a peripheral level of existence, completely forgetting that he is sat-chit-ananda (pure being, pure consciousness, pure bliss).

The individuality of man cannot be in the body, for individuality would be lost if the body were to change. It cannot be in the memory, for again there would be no individuality if the memory were to be lost. This is a narrow idea of individuality. According to Swami Vivekananda, there is no individuality except in the infinite. That is the only condition which does not change. The implication is that he alone lives whose life is in the whole universe. The more we concentrate our lives on limited things, the faster we veer towards death. As long as the 'I' identifies itself with the undisciplined body-mind complex, human life is dictated by

events and circumstances of the world; we become happy with the pleasurable event, and miserable with adverse circumstances. The more the mind gets refined and disciplined, the more we get to know the real source of 'I' consciousness. As a result, a person becomes more balanced and equipoised in his daily life. Such a person is no longer swayed by any event or circumstances of life. Swamiji says, "Man alone becomes God."⁴

But how could a man regain his lost state? In answer to this question, it can be said that man is already moving towards his original state, albeit unconsciously. The human soul never forgets its freedom and is ever seeking it. It is this quest for freedom that leads him to search for anyone who can subdue the laws of nature. Even the lowest man, the most ignorant, seeks for something that has power over natural laws, be it a demon or a ghost or a superhuman being. It is a man's inherent nature to enquire beyond his present state, and this makes the difference between a man and an animal. Swamiji states: "If you put a simple molecule of air in the bottom of a glass of water, it at once begins a struggle to join the infinite atmosphere above. So it is with the soul. It is struggling to regain its pure nature and to free itself from this material body. It wants to regain its own infinite expansion."⁵

However, if this unconscious search could be deliberately performed, then a man's spiritual path could have been easier.

According to Swami Vivekananda, a man first has to acknowledge the power of his own mind, for it is the source of his strength. If we think ourselves to be weak, we become weak in our practical life. If we think ourselves to be strong, we gain strength in our day-to-day life. Thus, the best thing is to believe in our glorious soul, for this will empower and reinforce us. Let the mind be free of any restrictions and constrictions, so that immense power will emanate from it. The world is not the place of the weak to live in. We need strength of every sort, and specially strength in the

mental plane. It is mental strength which is at the foundation of a great deed. But true mental strength can be acknowledged only by a realized soul.

Swami Vivekananda wanted to base religion on science. As science is based on observation, religion can also be based on observation. If there is anything beyond the ordinary sensuous existence, one must come face to face with it. If there is a soul beyond matter, one must be able to see it. That alone can destroy all doubts.

Here 'seeing' of course does not mean seeing of any gross object. The Self, which is the eternal knower, cannot be known as an object. Religion belongs to the super-sensuous realm. The Self can be realized through reflection alone. Realization of this Self consists in true religion. The perfect man, in realizing the Self, not only knows the Self but also, in the process, becomes the Self.

Swami Vivekananda's great contribution was to bring down the concept of the lofty thought of 'Advaita' so that it could be practiced in ordinary day-to-day life. Keeping in mind the capacity of the 'common man', he says that rigorous asceticism is not necessary to make a person holy. As the goal of man is true spirituality, self-control is required to be practiced in every field of life, be it physical or mental. Exercise, food and sleep should be taken in such a quantity so as to be conducive to spiritual health.

Self-control, however, is a function of the higher faculty of mind. It can be exercised only when man has some control of his lower faculties or he can understand the futilities of the lower faculties of mind. Man has to evolve by negating his lower self in order to attain the higher self. In this context, some light can be thrown on the three gunas, viz., sattva, rajas and tamas.

In Indian philosophy, it is believed that everything in the universe is composed of three 'gunas'. The word 'guna' can be

rendered as attributes, properties or qualities present in everything. The interplay of these gunas or attributes makes up a person's character. Every human being has the three qualities of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas in varying proportions, and different ones predominate at different times. Sattva stands for truth, goodness, harmony, balance, light or spiritual essence. Rajas stands for activity, energy, passion, desire and attachment. Tamas stands for inactivity, delusion, ignorance, darkness, lethargy, and the kind. A mind steeped in Tamas may be indifferent, lethargic and inactive, whereas a mind showing the predominance of Rajas is full of activity, enjoyment and passion. The mind with the predominance of Sattva is a balanced mind, full of purity, calmness and contentment. In the hierarchy of the gunas, it is Sattva that plays the vital role in spiritual elevation.

Swamiji explains that, at first, we must strive to overcome Tamas with Rajas and then to submerge both Rajas and Tamas in Sattva. Inactivity, idleness, has to be encountered with activity first. If a man has a strong desire for enjoyment of worldly things, how can he attain renunciation? First of all, these desires have to be satiated by some means of enjoyment, then only true dispassion will emerge in him. A wall does not tell a lie but it does not evolve either. It is only when a person understands the futility of other things that he can head for a better state.

From the above discussion, it is evident that Swami Vivekananda's approach is the man-centred approach, for he prioritizes the discussion of man. Man is the center of everything. All the feelings—good, bad, misery and happiness—all are running towards him. All the actions that we see in the world, all the movements in human society, all the works that we have around us, are simply the manifestations of the will of man. The test of true civilization is not the census, not the size of cities, nor the crops, but the kind of man the country can produce.

Modern civilization sometimes tends to reduce man to an automaton. Sometimes he is looked upon as a biological organism seeking material gains. Against these disparaging conceptions of man, Swami Vivekananda delineates the Upanishadic philosophy which regards man to be essentially divine. According to him, man is not like "a tiny boat in a tempest, raised one moment on the foamy crest of a billow and dashed down into a yawning chasm the next, rolling to and fro at the mercy of good and bad actions".⁶ On the contrary, he has glorified human nature in the Upanishadic line. He says, "Never forget the glory of human nature! We are the greatest God that ever was or ever will be. Christs and Buddhas are but waves on the boundless ocean which I am."⁷

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1. Vivekananda - The World Teacher, His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind. Edited and with an introduction by Swami Adiswarananda, p.226.
2. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. V, p. 246.
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4. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. V, p. 94.
5. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. VII, p. 428.
6. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I, p. 10.
7. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. VII, p. 78.

Book review

Swami Vireswarananda - A Divine Life (Part II)

This smaller volume is dedicated to the memories of senior and junior nuns from the Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, as well as writings by senior medical and academic professionals, affiliated administrators, lay devotees, and householders.

'... The living embodiment of karma, bhakti, jnana and yoga ...'

Swami Vireswaranandaji had always had a close association with the Sri Sarada Math, both when it was under the administration of Belur Math and later when it acquired independent status. As a direct disciple of Holy Mother and having known many of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, he was able to lay the foundations for a proficient administration for the Math and became one of its greatest sponsors, thus championing the dream of Swami Vivekananda for a women's monastery.

Throughout his 19-year tenure as president, Prabu Maharaj would always be available for advice, help, spiritual guidance and counselling to all, whether they were presidents, vice-presidents, pavrajikas or novices. Many received diksha with strict guidance on how to adjust to community life. He also became a Mother/Father figure and friend; in fact he considered many of the younger brahmacharis to be like his daughters. He encouraged regular visits to Belur Math when he was resident there, and many remained in close contact with him when they were eventually sent elsewhere, and even for the remainder of their lives of service. Prabhu Maharaj had an excellent memory and would rarely forget a face or name. He often provided them with food and clothing, particularly warm articles of clothing, when needed, although he did not care at all for his own comforts and gave everything away. He also frequently 'entertained' groups of nuns with his stories and sharp wit—in fact, this set of reminiscences contains many humorous anecdotes about Prabhu Maharaj and stories of his practical jokes, thus giving the reader a delightful glimpse into this joyful side of his personality.

'...His life was a synthesis of religion and action....'

Many of the reminiscences show the much more personal aspect of Swami Vireswaranandaji, and they are written by people he met in the many places he visited throughout India as the head of the Ramakrishna Order and spiritual guide to thousands. Often, he would need to visit the same places again and again, so many individuals had a long and close association with him. There are stories from academic professionals and administrators, from the physicians and their teams who attended him throughout his illnesses, and memories from a diverse selection of initiates, devotees, laymen, and householders. There were those, for example, whose families had always had a long association with the Ramakrishna Order, whose parents, and grandparents had taken initiation, and it was a standing family tradition to follow in their footsteps. Children who met him when they were very young were always remembered by him when they returned to visit him as adults. In some of these writings are descriptions of those who took darshan from him on his very last day as he insisted that it was 'business as usual'. His advice was always clear and precise, and carrying in his pocket a small silver box containing the dust of the Holy Mother's feet, he would strive to give darshan to all without exception.

'Like a huge banyan tree, he gave shelter and succour to thousands of householder devotees by his love and affection.' ⁶

Collection of Sayings, Questions and Answers, and Compilation of Essays

"Whatever problems we have in the modern world; Sri Ramakrishna has given us the means of solving them all." ⁷

The collection of sayings are Prabhu Maharaji's thoughts on the Holy Trinity—Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Beautiful group pictures of Revered Maharaj with other swamis and devotees adorn the chapter on Sayings—again, conveying by image a lifetime's work achievements. He also addresses spiritual life and practice in general. The Question-and-Answer section gives clear and practical advice and guidance on religion, karma yoga, spirituality, and miscellaneous issues; insightful answers to reflect upon, to contemplate

before spiritual practice. Last but not least, the Compilation of Essays, of around 90 pages, is a book in itself, and essentially a record of Prabhu Maharaji's teachings and first-hand experience and knowledge. They are compiled from published material and lectures, and the reader should be encouraged to sit somewhere quietly and read this chapter in full. He believes in experience. "What is the proof of Religion? Proof is in direct experience," he writes, and gives an account of his initiation with Holy Mother, and his 'experience' when he sat for a few moments in Her presence of the awakening of the soul and the call of the Infinite. He touches upon such subjects as India's ancient education system and its stress on character building, as well as the importance of India's ancient culture to 'explore which ideals made India great in ancient times', and to resurrect those ideals. The Treatise on Spirituality deals with all those subjects we are constantly striving to 'know', such as our real nature, soul and mind, four main methods, Japa and meditation, dispassion, how does Grace come, and surrender. Prabhu Maharaj concludes: "Everyone is trying in his own way to realise God. Our spiritual practices depend only on us. This has to be remembered." The heading in the photograph collection reads, 'Vibrant moments of Revered Maharaj's divine smile'..... By the time we reach the end of both volumes, we feel we *have* met him in person.

"Once a disciple asked him with a little hesitation if he would kindly narrate any of his spiritual experiences or visions he had had. For a few seconds he was quiet. He then said: 'I have realised one Truth, and Sri Ramakrishna is the Truth, and I have all along been living with that Truth.'" ⁵

References:

⁵ Swami Vireswarananda – A Divine Life, Reminiscences, Volume II

⁶ Swami Vireswarananda – A Divine Life, Second Part: Reminiscences, Volume II

⁷ Swami Vireswarananda – A Divine Life, Collection of Sayings, Volume II

to rock. The man became very anxious to save it and prayed to the god of winds: 'O god of the winds, please don't wreck the house! But the god of the winds paid no heed to his prayers. The house was about to crash. Then he thought of a trick. He remembered that Hanuman was the son of the god of the winds. At once he cried out with great earnestness: 'O revered sir, please don't pull down the house. It belongs to Hanuman. I beseech you to protect it.' But still the house continued to shake violently. Nobody seemed to listen to his prayer. He repeated many times, 'Oh, this house belongs to Hanuman!' But the fury of the winds did not abate. Then he remembered that Hanuman was the devoted servant of Rama, whose younger brother was Lakshmana. Desperately the man cried, saying aloud, 'Oh, this house belongs to Lakshmana!' But that also failed to help matters. So, the man cried out as a last resort: 'This is Rama's house. Don't break it down, O god of winds! I beseech you most humbly.' But this proved futile, and the house began to crash down. Whereupon the man who had to save his own life, rushed out of it with a curse: 'Let it go! This is devil's own house!'"

You may now be anxious to preserve Keshab's name: but console yourself with the thought, it was after all owing to God's Will that the religious movement connected with his name was set on foot, and that if the movement has had its day, it is also due to that same Divine Will. Therefore, dive deep into the sea of Immortality."

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Japa is repeating the Holy Name; through this the devotee rises to the Infinite. This boat of sacrifice and ceremonies is very frail, we need more than that to know Brahman, which alone is freedom. Liberty is nothing more than destruction of ignorance, and that can only go when we know Brahman. It is not necessary to go through all these ceremonials to reach the meaning of the Vedanta. Repeating Om is enough.... Ishvara is the Atman as seen or grasped by mind. His highest name is Om; so, repeat it, meditate on it, and think of all its wonderful nature and attributes. Repeating the Om continually is the only true worship. It is not a word, it is God Himself....Practice Pranayama or the suspending, restraining, and controlling of the breath, mentally repeating the word Om as you inhale and exhale the breath. Words charged with spirit have wonderful power.... Repeating the names of God has wonderful power.

-Swami Vivekananda

