

The Principles of Vedanta

Swami Yuktatmananda

Vedanta consists of two words, namely Veda and anta. Veda means knowledge and anta means end or culmination. So Vedanta means the end of all knowledge or the essence of all knowledge. We have knowledge of two kinds. The Mundaka Upanishad classifies knowledge into two types—aparà vidyà and parà vidyà. Aparà vidyà is empirical knowledge—knowledge of the sciences, knowledge of the arts, or whatever knowledge we gain from this world. In other words, this knowledge is subject-object related knowledge. And what is parà vidyà? The Mundaka Upanishad says, ‘atha parà—yayà tadaksharam adhigamyate’ (1.1.5). Parà vidyà, the superior knowledge or the supreme knowledge, is that by which everything else becomes known. So parà vidyà is the knowledge of the âtman, knowledge of our true nature. So that is the essence of all knowledge. It is knowledge with capital ‘K’. Empirical knowledge is knowledge with a small ‘k’. Knowledge of the âtman or knowledge of God is ‘The Knowledge’, knowing which everything becomes known. Therefore Vedanta means the essence of all knowledge, the culmination of all knowledge.

By ‘Vedanta’ is meant primarily the Upanishads that form the end portion or the knowledge portion of the Vedas. We know that the Vedas are divided into two sections—the ritualistic part called the ‘Karma-Kànda’ and the knowledge part called the ‘Jnàna-Kànda’. The knowledge part refers to the Upanishads because it deals with the nature of our real Self, the nature of God, the nature of the Reality behind this manifest universe. So that kind of knowledge is referred to as Vedanta, ie the end of all knowledge.

Now, when we study Vedanta we need to study in depth four important principles which are universally applicable. These principles can be practised by anyone irrespective of the differences in caste, gender, nationality, or any other man-made differences. The first principle is non-duality of the ultimate Reality. The ultimate or the supreme Reality is but one—advitiya. It is non-dual. Vedanta calls this supreme Reality Brahman. Brahman means the Infinite. Vedanta does not refer to any particular god or goddess. It only refers to Brahman. This Brahman is said to be Sat-Chit-ânanda. Sat is eternal Being; Chit is eternal Consciousness or Knowledge; and ânanda is eternal Bliss. In other words, Brahman is eternal Existence, eternal Knowledge and eternal Bliss.

The Upanishads tell us that a knower of Brahman becomes one with Brahman—‘Brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati’. That is what we find in the Mundaka Upanishad (3.2.9). However, the person who knows Brahman does not know Brahman just as we know an external object. When we know something, when we see something, hear something, touch something, taste or smell something, our sense organs are involved. And we get knowledge of objects in the external world. Thus this empirical knowledge is characterized by the knower, the known and the process of knowing. This threefold characteristics are common to all empirical knowledge. The knower is jnàtā, the known is jneya and the process of knowing is jnàna. This threefold distinction marks all empirical knowledge, but this distinction is not present in the knowledge of Brahman. So when a person knows Brahman, he or she becomes one with Brahman.

Brahman is the name Vedanta gives to the spiritual Reality behind the universe of names and forms. But then, each one of us is also essentially divine and this divinity that is lurking behind the physical body and the mind is called the âtman. Vedanta says this spiritual Reality behind this human frame and the spiritual Reality behind the universe of names and forms is one and the same. This truth is suggested by the famous Vedantic equation or mahāvākya—ayam âtmā brahma, ie this âtman is Brahman.

So this âtman is non-dual. Only âtman is the term used for the spiritual Reality behind the human personality and Brahman is the name used for the spiritual Reality behind the whole universe of names and forms. But essentially, from the spiritual point of view, from the point of view of the divinity present in all of us, âtman equals Brahman. That is the famous Vedantic equation. Though Brahman is without form and infinite, It can assume divine forms, forms of gods and goddesses to suit the spiritual temperaments of spiritual aspirants. And when the formless Brahman appears to us as gods with form, we call It Saguna Brahma, God with attributes. God can be with form, with attributes, or without form and without attributes. If It is without form and without attributes, It is Nirguna Brahma. But if It is God with form or with attributes, we call It conditioned Brahman or Saguna Brahma. It is this Saguna Brahma which is worshipped in all religions as the Personal God, ie God as a person.

Why should we worship God as a person? There are people who raise this question, the question of image-worship. You see, Advaita as philosophy is very stimulating. It is very rational. It is intellectually very fulfilling. But study of Advaita is one thing, practice of religion is another. Therefore we need to begin from where we are and then try to make progress gradually. It is not just enough to think 'I am the âtman' and be attached to body, mind and ego at the same time. That does not lead us anywhere. In other words, when we are identified with our body and mind we look upon ourselves as limited individuals. When we do so we are constitutionally required to worship God with form. Swami Vivekananda illustrates this truth beautifully. He says, if cats have an assembly and have a philosopher-cat among them and someone asks the philosopher-cat 'What is God?', the latter would say that God is a supercat dwelling beyond the clouds with abhayahasta (a gesture of blessing with upraised right hand) protecting us when we lead a good moral life and punishing us with a rod when we go astray. Similarly, if cows have a philosopher, the philosopher-cow would give the same reply and say that God is a supercow.

So this conception of God as a super human being is inevitable as long as we are identified with our body and mind, or, in short, with our limited personalities. So our conception of God depends upon our conception of ourselves. This is an important spiritual law. As we look upon ourselves, so we look upon God. If we are deeply attached to our family—husband, wife, children and so on—it is quite logical for us to think of God with wife and children and be devoted to them. It is perfectly alright. Thus, as our conception of our own self changes, our conception of God also keeps on evolving.

Sri Ramakrishna has this to say about the identity of conditioned Brahman and Brahman without attributes. He says that God, the Absolute, and God, the Personal, are one and the same. A belief in the one implies a belief in the other. Fire cannot be thought of apart from the burning power, nor can its burning power be thought of apart from it. Again, the sun's rays cannot be thought of apart from the sun, nor the sun apart from its rays. You cannot think of the whiteness of milk apart from milk or milk apart from its milky whiteness. Thus, God the Absolute cannot be thought of apart from the ideas of God with attributes. So this God with attributes, ie conditioned Brahman, and God without attributes are one and the same. The same spiritual Reality that is attributeless and formless appears as God with form.

Swami Vivekananda gives an example by which we can understand this concept of a Personal God. First of all, he defines Personal God. He says, Personal God is 'the highest reading of the Absolute' by the finite human mind. So, as is our mind, so is our reading of the Absolute and that explains the worship of many gods and goddesses in Hinduism. It is not a weakness of Hinduism. On the contrary, it is a strength of Hinduism that it is able to cater to the various needs of the aspirants of diverse temperaments. It is a spiritual democracy that Hinduism offers so that everyone can have his or her

own Ishta-devatà or chosen ideal depending upon his or her temperament. Suppose we look at the sun through a black sunglass, it appears black to us. It may also appear to be green, blue or grey depending upon the colour of our glasses. So, if people start fighting and claim that the grey sun is the only sun and that is the truth or the green sun is the only sun and that is the truth—everything else is false—that is silly and ridiculous. Similarly, it would be farcial if I say only my god is great, my god is supreme, worship my god and then only you will have salvation; if you worship any other god, you have to go to hell and stay there forever! Such concept of eternal hell or eternal damnation is something alien to Vedanta.

That is why Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘As many faiths, so many paths.’ Sri Ramakrishna’s life is a glaring testimony to this principle. He did not teach orally. His life teaches us. He practised spiritual disciplines not only according to the different paths of Hinduism, but also according to Christianity and Islam and his firsthand experience was that all these diverse ways lead one to the same spiritual goal. So, that is all about the first cardinal principle—the non-duality of the Godhead. The ultimate Reality is non-dual; call it by any name. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that a Hindu takes water from a reservoir and he calls it ‘jal’. A Christian calls it ‘water’. A Muslim calls it ‘paani’. But all three different names refer to the same substance—water. Similarly, there are so many names of God and so many forms, but the essence behind all these names and forms is the same, the same ultimate Reality, the formless Reality that is eternal Existence, eternal Consciousness and eternal Bliss.

Divinity of the soul

This leads us to the second principle, which is Divinity of the soul. That is, every one of us, all beings, are divine. We are not just the body-mind complex. We appear differently from outside—man, woman, fair, black, young, old and so on. But these differences are only physical. Behind this body, behind these physical appearances, we have a mind. Again, behind this mind we have an eternal dimension and that is called âtman. Swami Vivekananda says, ‘Each soul is potentially divine.’ We are all divine. Only we are not conscious of it all the time. That is why only the differences that appear to us seem to be very real. When we interact with people their physical appearances play a significant role. So the mind and the body appear so real to us. But essentially, Vedanta says, we are not just a body-mind complex. We are the âtman. We are divinities. Swamiji in his wonderful lecture at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago said: ‘Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature.’ So we are the divinities on earth—blessed, eternal and pure. That is the important teaching of Vedanta. You find this robust message on every page of Swamiji’s Complete Works. In his own words, he says, ‘My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.’

That is Swamiji’s expression—‘to preach unto mankind their divinity’, the divinity inherent in everyone and how to manifest that in their every-day life, in their day-to-day activities. That is the one single theme Swamiji harps on all the time in his Complete Works. That is the truth. He would say: We had superstitions enough. Do not teach your children superstitions. Do not believe that you are these limited bodies, limited minds. You are the âtman. Someone asked him in the West: Does not this repeated assertion that ‘I am the âtman’, ‘I am the Spirit’ amounts to some kind of hypnotism?’

Swamiji said that we are already hypnotized because we believe that we are these little bodies. Therefore when we say we are the âtman, we are not hypnotizing ourselves but really de-hypnotizing ourselves. Saying repeatedly that ‘I am the âtman’ leads us to the truth. Swamiji said, telling ourselves time and again ‘I am weak’, ‘I am bad’ does not take us anywhere. Shouting ‘darkness!’ ‘darkness!’ in a dark room does not help us, does not solve the problem. But bring in light, darkness vanishes

automatically. He said, weakness is not the remedy for weakness; strength is the remedy. Weakness is death. Strength is life. So every devotee of Swamiji, every devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother cannot just afford to think in a negative manner. That is the fundamental lesson. We need to be positive and should think ‘I am the child of God’, ‘I am âtman’, ‘I am not the body’, ‘I am not the mind.’ So, have faith in yourself first. Swamiji says, ‘If you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty million of your mythological gods. . . and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you.’ That is because if we have faith in God and do not have faith in ourselves, we would not be able to put that in God. Putting faith in God calls for intense struggle with our mind, struggle with our samskâras or tendencies and past impressions. It needs heroic efforts. So we need to have intense faith in ourselves—a conviction that ‘I can do it.’ That is not egotism. It is faith in our higher Self that is different from the mind, different from the body. This faith is indispensable. So have faith in yourself first, then have faith in God. That is the important teaching—we are divine. This is a great mantra. Whenever we have problems, confusion, tension and anxiety, Swami Vivekananda says: Remind yourself again and again that you are the âtman; you are infinite; you are not this body; you are not this bundle of confusion and anxiety.

So, that tells us about our divinity. Though we are divine, this divinity is now in potential form. As of now, we are not conscious of our divinity. As a result we identify ourselves with our body, mind and the external objects of the world. The world becomes our sole reality. We begin to seek fulfilment in finite objects of the world. We seek to draw eternal bliss from finite things which is just not possible. The Chândogya Upanishad says ‘yo vai bhumā tat sukham nâlpe sukham asti’ (7.24.1). That is, real happiness, lasting Bliss, is possible only in the infinite. Bhumā means Infinite. There cannot be Bliss in finite things. Eternal Bliss can be attained only from our infinite dimension, ie our âtman. However, the irony is that, because of our ignorance of our true nature we seek happiness in the external world and gain various kinds of experiences in the process. Naturally there comes a time when we wonder and ask ourselves, ‘Is this material world everything? Is there really any higher dimension of life? Am I just a body-mind complex being tossed about by circumstances? Or, does God exist?’ All these questions then begin to haunt us and when we take these questions seriously, real religion begins, true spiritual quest starts. Until such queries spur our mind we go on gaining experiences.

Swami Vivekananda would say that we need to remember that we are the Self, we are the âtman, and go about doing our activities. That is a great help. So, according to Vedanta, we keep gathering experiences and impressions until we realize our oneness with our divine nature. Our journey continues even after the fall of the physical body. The âtman identified with the mind continues its odyssey and assumes another body. We do fresh karma. We gain new experiences. We grow in discrimination. We grow in wisdom. We try to discipline our thoughts and actions. We try to be moral, we try to move forward towards the Divinity. That is a great teaching of the Upanishad. We do not need to seek God somewhere beyond the clouds. God is right in our hearts. And Sri Ramakrishna assures us that God listens to our earnest prayer. The Infinite Knowledge, the Infinite Bliss that we mistakenly seek outside is right within us in our heart and we do not need a mediator or a priest to be a go-between, between us and God as the ‘Uncle Moon’ is everyone’s uncle. So that is Sri Ramakrishna’s special teaching. Talk to God, pray to God right in your heart. Sri Krishna also says in the Gitâ, ‘Ishvara sarva bhūtânām hriddeshe arjuna tishthati’, ‘O Arjuna, God dwells in the hearts of all beings.’ So that should be our focus. Pray to God, think of God and when that happens in our lives, true religion begins.

We have been discussing about Personal God or conditioned Brahman. Vedanta has a technical name for that—Ishvara. Ishvara means Personal God. Brahman associated with Its power called mâyâ is Ishvara and âtman (the same Reality as Brahman) behind this human frame associated with mâyâ is jiva that we are at present. Therefore, we are divinities conditioned by mâyâ. Mâyâ can be translated as

ignorance that distinguishes Ishvara from the jivas. That is an important point to remember. Ishvara or Personal God has *màya* under His control. An *avatàra* like Sri Ramakrishna has *màya* under his control whereas jivas are under the control of *màya*. There is a beautiful example to illustrate this point. A child, while strolling with his mother on the street saw someone being escorted by policemen. The child asked his mother, 'Who is the man, mother?' She replied, 'He is a thief and being escorted by policemen.' The child understood. But after some days he was on an outing with his mother. This time again the child saw someone escorted by policemen. The child asked the mother, 'Mom, who is that thief?' Mother silenced the child and whispered into his ears, 'Don't be silly, he is not a thief. He is the Governor of the state. That's why he is being escorted by policemen.' So you see, in the first case, the thief was under the control of the policemen, while in the second case, policemen were at the beck and call of the Governor. That is exactly the difference between the jiva and Ishvara. Jiva is under the sway of *màya*. We are being tossed about by our *samskàras* (inherent tendencies), by our ignorance. But an *avatàra* like Sri Ramakrishna is always conscious of his true nature. Such Incarnations assume human body out of infinite compassion for the suffering humanity. *Avatàra* is one who comes down from the supreme consciousness to the relative plane of embodied consciousness. Indeed, God becomes man so that man learns how to become God, become one with God.

Secondly, Ishvara is responsible for creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe, while jiva is caught in the meshes of *màya*. Jiva forgets its true nature and undergoes pleasure and pain in this world.

The third difference between Ishvara and jiva is that Ishvara moves about freely throughout His creation like a spider in its web, never getting caught in the web. But like any other insect jiva is caught in the web.

These differences between Ishvara and Jiva persist as long as the latter is identified with the body and the mind. When name and form or body and mind cease to have significance for us, we are one with Divinity or Ishvara. There is a famous example of a clay elephant and a clay mouse. So far as the names and forms are concerned, a clay mouse and a clay elephant are entirely different. But as clay they are one. However, Sri Ramakrishna would say that it will be disastrous for people who are attached to body and mind to say 'Aham brahmàsmi', ('I am Brahman'). There were some such characters at Dakshineswar who called themselves Vedantins but lacked the strength and integrity of character. One day Sri Ramakrishna pointed out this defect in the character of a person who used to tell lies, yet exhibited his unassimilated knowledge of Vedanta. According to Vedanta, everything in the past, present, and future is unreal. Everything in the waking state, dream state and deep-sleep state is unreal. Referring to that scriptural dictum, the said pseudo-Vedantin tried to defend his aberration by saying, 'How can you attribute reality to my falsehood when everything is untrue?' Having heard his lame excuse, Sri Ramakrishna said, 'I spit on your Vedanta!' Thus, so long as the attachment to body and mind persists, devotion to Personal God is logical. That will help us to grow in devotion and manifest our divine nature progressively. That leads us to the third principle, that is, oneness of existence.

Oneness of existence

According to Vedanta, whatever exists is one. It does not posit two realities—one Brahman, another *màya* or God and Satan. No. There is only One. What exists is One, call it Spirit or matter. Swami Vivekananda would say: Sit with your eyes closed and think for a moment that you are the Spirit. When you think you are the Spirit, can you at the same time think that you are the body? No. When you think you are the body, you cannot think you are the Spirit. So what exists is One. What exists is

the Spirit. It appears to us as the world. Brahman appears to us as the world of diversity of names and forms because of ignorance of our true nature. We know the celebrated example of Advaita, the example of the snake and the rope. When we see a rope in twilight it appears to us as a snake and we experience all fear and trepidation associated with a snake. But when you bring a flashlight and focus it on the rope, the rope stands revealed. Neither does the snake appear nor does it disappear. There was no snake at all, only rope! Similarly, Vedanta says, what exists is only Brahman—ekam eva advitiam.

But why does Brahman appear to us as this world of names and forms? Because of the darkness of ignorance of our real nature. Vedanta assures us that this world of multiplicity will vanish when Self-realization dawns on us.

What is the consequence of looking ourselves as Spirit and considering Spirit as the only existence? When I am established in the idea that I am the Spirit or âtman, I learn to look upon others in the same way. This attitude will gradually purify us. We will then try to judge ourselves and not others. This attitude will nourish our spirit of service to others. When we serve others we would not think highly of ourselves and we will root out our tendency to expect things from others. Our loving selfless service will then turn out to be a true worship of the Spirit that dwells in all. We will feel blessed that God has given us the opportunity to serve Him in others.

Swami Vivekananda would therefore say, first banish the word 'help' from your dictionary. You cannot help, you can only serve. Serve God Himself if you have the privilege and that attitude is the result of looking at ourselves as Spirit that is omnipresent. That will also help us to grow in unselfishness which is synonymous with divinity. Swamiji says: There are two things—the world and God. Everything you find in this world is based on selfishness and God is nothing but unselfishness. So this knowledge of the oneness of existence is a great motive power for manifesting our unselfishness—looking upon ourselves and also others as the Spirit.

This oneness of existence is also the basis of universal love that we study in the Upanishads. The Brihadâranyaka Upanishad teaches this principle and says that it is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is loved, but for the sake of the âtman; it is not for the sake of the wife that the wife is loved, but for the sake of the âtman and so on. This list continues and ends with the declaration that it is not for the sake of anything that anything or anyone is loved, but for the sake of the âtman. Therefore this universal love is based on the concept of oneness of existence. And, finally, this oneness of existence lends meaning to this oft-quoted teaching—love thy neighbour as thyself. It is because your neighbour is yourself. So, when we hurt others we really hurt ourselves. If we are immoral with someone that forges one more link in the chain that binds us to the world. Thus Vedanta says—be moral because you are the âtman. If you are immoral, that immorality strengthens your bad tendencies and binds you all the more to the world. So that is the third principle of Vedanta—the oneness of existence.

Harmony of religions

The first three principles, namely non-duality of the ultimate Reality, Divinity of the soul, and oneness of existence—these three logically lead us to the fourth principle. What is that fourth principle? That is the harmony of religions. This is an important teaching of Sri Ramakrishna who says that every religion is a valid pathway to the same ultimate Reality. Therefore, there is no need to fight in the name of religion. What we really need is sincerity, earnestness and yearning. Be true to yourself and be earnest to know the Truth. If you have these two, Sri Ramakrishna assures us, God Himself will put you on the right track even if you temporarily lose your way. That is a great assurance from Sri

Ramakrishna.

Swami Vivekananda says, there are three aspects in every religion—philosophy, mythology and rituals. Philosophy presents the whole scope of the religion setting forth its basic principles, the goal, and the means of reaching that goal. The second part is mythology which is philosophy made concrete. It consists of legends related to the lives of men and women or of supernatural beings and so forth. The third part is the ritual. This is still more concrete and is made of forms and ceremonies. There is a physical attitude in them—flowers and incense and many other things that appeal to the senses. We need all the three. However, problem starts when the adherents of these religions begin to believe that their own philosophy, mythology, and rituals are the only philosophy, only mythology and only valid rituals. Then comes bloodshed, then comes discord.

Swami Vivekananda tells us that we can never achieve unity or universality in matters of these three aspects. Universality is possible only in respect of the spiritual Truth which is the goal of every religion. If every religion is sincerely practised, it could be a valid pathway to attain the same ultimate Truth. He gives us an example and says: Imagine a circle with infinite circumference. We are all on the periphery of the circumference of the circle. There are infinite number of points on the circumference. Now, as long as we stand on the periphery—you at the top of the periphery and I am at a dramatically opposite point—and we begin to debate which locus is the better one. As it happens, my point is always right! Naturally, your views have to be wrong! As long as we keep on staying on the periphery and think ours is the only right locus there is no end to discord and disharmony. But once we choose to move towards the centre following any of the radii, differences keep diminishing. Then we dwell more on concord, more on unity and we begin to be spiritual, we begin to live religion and ultimately when we reach the centre we know all the radii lead to the same centre.

Sri Ramakrishna therefore said, 'Jata mat, tata path'. He says, cling to your faith, but do not think that other paths are wrong and useless. You need to have your devotion to your chosen ideal or Ishta. But then, that is the way for 'you', not for the entire humanity. This is the fourth important principle of Vedanta. Any person who sincerely cares for religion, who seriously cares to live religion, these principles provide him with a wonderful framework for the manifestation of the divinity that is already in man.

* This article is based on the Bhupendra Nath Ghose Memorial Lecture Swami Yuktatmananda, Minister-in-Charge, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, New York, delivered at the Institute on 7 July 2008.