

VEDĀNTA IN DAILY TASKS

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There is growing catholicity of outlook in the field of philosophical thought today. So the principles of truth, knowledge etc. of philosophy had to be reviewed now and then; otherwise they tend to lose connectivity and become and remain as just dogmas. Let us see 'what the core of Vedānta is'. The aim of Vedānta is to establish non-difference of the individual from the Supreme Spirit. For this, it puts forth two standpoints - the empirical and the transcendental.

This two - level approach in Vedānta is the main reason for its being closest to the thinking public. First Bādarāyaṇa discussed in his Vedāntasūtras the four points viz. harmony (samanvaya), non-conflict (avirodha), means (sādhana) and fruit (phala). Then with Śankara, Vedānta put on a new mantle. In keeping with the times, Śankara reverted back to the half-poetical and half-philosophical style visible in the Upaniṣads. (Tradition & history tell us that the need of the hour was so compulsive that what he did was just what was evidently necessary). He had to resurrect the Sanātana Dharma, against the onslaught of Buddhism. Again, in the twentieth century the Western philosophy and its richness and depth had made the Indian thinking a bit more theoretical and abstruse. But things have changed since then.

In India, philosophy and dharma were never separate; dharma and education were never separate. The wholeness of a human personality was ever protected. There was no bifurcation into compartments. Vedānta has brought it back.

Pragmatic approach to life

Tsunami has come and gone. But the scars left behind will take some time to disappear, if ever. But life has to go on. The daily tasks have to be done. An English proverb says: 'Time and tide wait for no man'. The fishermen, the shanty-dwellers, who lost everything, know this and start again, even though they know that disaster can strike again. A poet, Charles Kingsley in his little poem- 'The three Fishermen', says this, about the life of the fishermen. "For men must work and women must weep, for there is little to earn and many to keep. Though the harbor - bar be moaning". There was a Malayalam film called 'Chemmeen'. That film also spoke of the inevitability of our daily tasks. Love, romance, birth, death - nothing stops for Death.

Daily tasks:

Our life is set on all sides in a framework of tasks. Most of these tasks give us little inspiration. There is a quality in our daily tasks, of crushing out the spirit of expansiveness, which seems natural to us. Our lives are organised in such a way, that these tasks are first interesting, so long as they are fresh. Whatever is the work which you are called upon to do, in the beginning there is a attractiveness because of novelty, but after a while when it is the same piece of work, time after time, day after day, something mechanical enters into the work and then afterwards, something oppressive. But there is no way out.

Man is gregarious. He lives in a community. We give our best to the community, and the community gives us all that we need. But as life becomes more modern and more global, we are assigned special tasks. The holistic result, the satisfaction of seeing the fruit of our effort is not possible. Suppose I teach my students one part of Brahmasūtra, which is only one part of a paper. So the marks will not tell me anything. The

feedback is minimal or sometimes nil. The age of specialisation! We cannot get away from it. Work is a must. We cannot be without action. Gita says - 'Na Kaścit Kṣaṇmāpi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt'. All that we can do is to try to make the best of it. For that we make a framework to fit our tasks, and work according to that. This can be done in two ways.

- One - with just this life in mind; the Second-with a religious standpoint, with the heaven or eternity in mind.

First type - This has again three types.

- a. Those who, within this limited life, strive to gain, out of the tasks of daily life, a sense of contentment inspite of so much that is opposing the realization of one's desires. One is reminded of the call of the 'Cārvākas'. 'Yāvad jīvet sukṣham jīvet, ṛṇam kṛtvā ghṛtam pibet. Bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punargamanam kutah?'
- b. Some others, strive to give meaning to life, make it useful, to add something of a creative quality, something of a creative quality, something that shall delight the hearts and minds of others. e.g. a shopman who after a hectic schedule in the shop, arranges for a 'langar', an 'annadānam' for the poor.
- c. Still others, inspite of the difficulties of the environment, purposely plan to express their character through work, leave a stamp of their effort. e.g. clerks, gardeners etc. The Clerk makes his accounts, balance sheets and reports tidy and correct and feels satisfied. The Gardener strives his utmost to make the plants grow well and the flowers to bloom fully.

Second type

He who believes in the life beyond the grave. Their religious inclination makes them see the tasks as the burden of this life. They feel that the daily tasks are to be done with a view to escape from the limitations of today. Many find their daily tasks possible only because there is a vision of eternity. They may have dreams of heaven and a condition of happiness which has nothing to do with such tasks as you have here everyday. You do pooja, recite stotras and derive moral strength. This Sanskrit verse tells you what all we may expect. 'Mahāgaṇeśa pañcaratnamodareṇa yonvahaṃ prajāpati prabhātaka hṛdi smaraṇ gaṇeśvaram, arogatāmadōṣatām susāhitīm suputrātām, Samāhitāyuraṣṭamūrtimabhyupaiti socirāt'. Why does one want to go to heaven? Because it promises what one misses here on earth. It is said that in heaven one will have an adult but youthful body; all the objects of pleasure will be freely available. So it is a way of escape.

Vedānta view

But the Vedānta approach is different. It believes that the individual is living in the midst of an opportunity he is always creating. The individual is then a centre of creative force, creating even now by his attitudes, his vision, not only a liberation from this life, but something that is eternity now. As a creative force, he is not seen as separate from the great Author of the Universe - The Author being the great Flame and we the tiny sparks (sphullingāḥ) - an integral part of it. Within man is perfection, within him divinity, but both perfection and divinity are to be realised as one (yath pinde tath brahmnde). This conception of man is different from another, in which "Man is the sinner, bound to the wheel of birth and death, from which he has to escape". The 'Sin' and the 'escapism' is not there in Vedānta.

God's Universe is not as yet, perfect. This Saguna Brahman has a plan, not crystallized in the beginning of creation, but to be realised by Him through man whose latent divinity is to be released, like the perfection of the rough diamond. A rough diamond is a genuine crystal when dug from the earth, but rather yellowish and not very attractive. But place it under the diamond cutter's stone using powered diamond with which to cut it, and finally you have the perfect stone. That divinity in every human being is called forth by God as each individual releases the perfection of the Universe in Himself, in his co-operative participation. Man then has a role in eternity, not of salvation, not of escape, but rather of qualifying himself, of equipping himself, to work with the great one. Our goal is to release the perfection which has been innate, hidden, because it comes from Him, who is perfection. So we have to perform our daily tasks with a view to perfection. We can say that the first two types of approach to the daily tasks is that of the Pūrva Mimāṃsā or the Karmakāṇḍa Section of the Veda. Here too knowledge is there, Knowledge of, 'which actions to perform when and for what'. But this has necessarily to be followed by effort, which results in action.

But the Jñānakāṇḍa or the Uttara Mimāṃsā is different. There, knowledge is an end in itself. This knowledge does not have to be put into practice. e.g. I am hungry, I know that bread will satiate my hunger. But I have to get the dough, prepare the bread (or buy it) and then eat it, to appease my hunger. This is 'aprāptasya prāptih' (achievement of the not-yet-achieved). But the knowledge in the Vedānta is already there. So realising this is 'Prāptasya-prāpti' (accomplishment of the already achieved). How do these fit in with the daily tasks of ours? Of the four puruṣārthas dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa, the first three can be included in the 'aprāptasya prāptih'. The relevance of this Mokṣa in the Vedānta

can be made clear if this term 'Mokṣa' is taken in its right sense. Mokṣa is of course FREEDOM, but it is freedom from inadequacy. The person who desires this freedom is called mumukṣu. But mumukṣu can be of two types. A seeker is observant enough to see that his usual pursuits do not produce adequacy. But he does not see that inadequacy cannot be removed by efforts of an external nature. So he resorts to harsh austerities: severe, painful and sometimes strange practices. But the real solution lies in the removal of the self-ignorance, and in the realisation that the adequacy is already innate in you. Vedānta helps to get us to self-inquiry, tma vicā ra.

For this, one life-time may not be enough. Man comes back to the world, life after life, and acquires a sense of loyalty to the work. 'Kurvanneveha Karmāṇi jijīviṣet śatam samāh. Evam tvayi nā nyathetostī, na karma lipyate nare'. This loyalty comes, surprisingly, through dissatisfaction, which makes us restless. What is that which makes us restless? This body of ours is composed of such elements as vital breath, deeds, thought, and the senses - all of them deriving their being from the Self. They have come out of the Self. So the restlessness to get back should be there. A poet, George Herbert, poetically imagines that this restlessness, this dissatisfaction, keeps us on our toes. His poem is rightly called 'The Pulley'. 'When God at first made man, Having a glass of blessing standing by, Let us (said he) pour on him all we can; Let the world's riches which dispersed lie, contract into a span. So strength first made a way; Then beauty flowed, then Wisdom, honour, pleasure; When almost all was out, God made a stay; Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure, REST in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)

Bestow this jewel also on my creature,

He would adore my gift instead of me,

And rest in Nature, not the God of nature;
So both should losers be.
You let him keep the rest.
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that, at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast'.

This Rajoguṇa keeps us restless. But the daily task of each one is different. That is why each one of us needs a philosophy which suits him or her best. If we accept Vedānta as that philosophy, our vision is turned inwards, there is no futile search outside. We are responsible for our own actions.

The 'pūrvapakṣa' will naturally put up the point that "It is yoga which is relevant in the present times. Proof of the pudding is in the eating. Look, the whole world is hooked on to yoga". Agreed. The speciality of yoga is the practical aspect of the methods of mental control. But yoga is Sādhana, is preparatory discipline and means, accepted by all. What more, with the help of Science, today, it has grown in strength and has gained a world-wide vogue as Yogaśāstra. The speciality of Nyāya lies in its treatment of logic and the Science of debate. Its Science of precise thinking made it known as Pramāṇa śāstra. Similarly Mimāṃsā, which was connected with Karma and Dharma, made a valuable contribution to the Science of interpreting texts, and was accepted as Vākyaśāstra. So their philosophical facet receded and sūtra survived. But Vedāntaśāstra, due to its relevance, grew as Vedānta - darśana and became Indian Philosophy par excellence. Why? What is it which makes it so relevant? It is the source material on which it is based - the Upanisads.

To quote the great philosopher Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan - "If we have to check the tendency towards national non-being which has been at work for some decades, we can do so only if we discover our traditional pattern of life as it is found in the ancient classics like the Upaniṣads" The Upaniṣads contain the essential ideas, the governing principles of our cultural life. They do not speak to us of limited dogmas or of ethical and theological rigidities. They deal with man's search for the eternal which is the source of truth and joy. The aspiration to see God is itself derived from God. Upaniṣad-study is not for after - retirement. It starts with our 'Akṣarābhyāsam'. Body, life and mind are not to be despised; they are the instruments of the spirit in man, the means by which, spirit gives itself existence. The men of Spirit devote their energies to raising the world to higher levels. Of course Upaniṣads were written at a time when people had become skeptical about the preponderance of rituals and sacrifices. And the style of their writing does not give us a worked-out philosophical system. But it did provide Vedānta with the necessary mystic experiences, deep perceptions and experiences, on the basis of which were formulated the philosophical principles that we call Vedānta. So the relevance of Vedānta is established by the relevance of the Upaniṣads. Then why not be satisfied with Upaniṣads themselves. Because Upaniṣads are like the Ocean, extensive & deep. We need someone to go deep into it and get us the precious pearls. As stories and dialogues and debates and teachings, they are with us to help understand the Vedāntic principles better.

With the idea of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' coming back in a big way, through the concept and process of globalisation, one may rightly wonder how Vedānta written in Sanskrit, the archaic lingua, can compete for relevancy with the philosophies from the world over. To answer this I first would like to record that philosophers like Schopenhauer, critics like Deussen, scholars like Macdonald, orientalist like Prof. Max Muller all have written exhaustively and appreciatively of the most ancient philosophic heritage of humanity - the Upaniṣads.

And now let us see what the Western Philosophy is and what those philosophers say. If they say what the Vedānta says and help the present world; all we say is - 'So may it be' (Tathāstu). Because that will only reiterate the contemporary relevance of the philosophy of Vedānta. I quote from a book 'Vedāntic way of living', "Vedānta helps us to understand life fully and work our way to perfection, harmony and fulfillment. It is not reserved for sanyāsins and scholars only, and certainly not a mere pastime for the old. A right understanding of Vedānta will make a man excel in whatever field he is. The earlier one takes to this path, the better". (Nārāyaṇāṣrama Tapovanam - Swāmi Bhoomānanda Tīrtha).

In a book called 'Sophie's World' by Jostein Gaarder, I read an interesting remark. "The difference between school teachers and philosophers is that the former think they know a lot of stuff. Whereas philosophers try and figure things out with the pupils".

But in the West, Philosophy is more theoretical because of being separated from religion. One philosopher, David Hume says "Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man'. Swāmi Bhoomānanda makes a difference between speculation and action. He says "Unlike Vedānta - a subject of study for those with a philosophical inclination, the Vedāntic way of living, distinctly becomes a direct personal pursuit for a genuine seeker ... The Character and quality which the Vedāntic way of living preserves, though ancient, are immensely relevant to the modern age and civilisation".

Voltaire appeals to many of us. He impels us to action in a unique way. He says 'Work keeps us from three great evils; boredom, vice and poverty'.

And for those who think philosophy takes us away from the mainstream of life : it makes you forgetful etc., I quote Francis Bacon :

“A little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism. But depth in Philosophy bringeth men’s minds about, to Religion. As Aristotle says “All men by nature desire to know”. Two quotes from Plato make me feel that Vedānta is not only relevant but also a must. Plato says ‘Philosophy begins in Wonder’, and he has a word for the educationists too. “The direction in which education starts a man, will determine his future life”. Going still further into the past, Socrates too spoke of Globalisation or ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’, when he said - “I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the World”. His teachings too can be called ‘ŚRUTI’ because he never wrote a single line. He too proclaimed Ahimsā - “One ought not to return a wrong nor an injury to any person, however strong the provocation”, because he and you are one, and “Ignorance is the only Evil”.

I conclude with an appeal to bring back philosophy into the main stream, made by the author Jostein Gaarder through his character Sophie - ‘Personally I think philosophy is a more important subject than English Grammar. It would therefore be a sensible priority of values to have philosophy on the timetable and cut down a bit on English Lessons’.

So let us remember the childing of Goethe ‘He who cannot draw on three thousand years, is living from hand to mouth’, and assure him that such a situation has been firmly avoided. Look around - Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Mission, Bhāratiya Vidyā Bhavan, Aurobindo āsram, Sivānanda, Chinmayānanda, Dayānanda Saraswati, Sai Samājam, Amirtamayī Mā , and it goes on ad infinitum.

Vedānta is indeed a way of daily life, not just a theoretical philosophy.