

# Neo-Vedanta and the New World Order

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THE SIMPLE MESSAGE OF VEDANTA invites us to realize the divine inner essence, of all beings: the Atman, the *purāṇa*, the immortal, immutable, incorruptible, unchanging, undecaying, eternal Self. Vedanta has therefore been called *ātma-vidyā*, knowledge of the Atman. It is *adhyātma-vidyā*, spiritual knowledge, which alone is capable of liberating humans from sorrow: *Tarati śokam-ātmavit*.<sup>1</sup> Bhagavan avers thus in the Bhagavadgita: ‘Among all *vidyās*, I am *adhyātma-vidyā*.’<sup>2</sup> It is the unambiguous teaching of the Gita, the magnum opus of Vedanta, that *śoka* and *moha*, sorrow and delusion—which are the seeds of *samsara*, transmigratory existence—cannot be obliterated except through the realization of the Atman: *Ātmajñānāt na anyato nivṛttih*.<sup>3</sup>

## Vedanta: Ancient and Modern

In describing the nature of the Atman, the innermost and immortal spiritual core of every being, the Gita uses the word *purāṇa*.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on this word, Shankaracharya states in his famous *bhāṣya*, commentary, that although ancient, it is yet modern: *purā api nava*. This very phrase applies equally well to Vedanta, the ‘ancient-modern’ wisdom of the Upanishads.

That which is eternal is both ancient and modern, because it is timeless. Timelessness subsumes time and the Eternal is, therefore, the source of interplay between them: between the Absolute and the relative, the Divine and the human, the One and the many. Such a teaching is truly universal and beyond space-time boundaries—Vedanta is thus the phil-

osophy, religion, and way of life of all humankind. It does not belong to any particular country, religion, or time period; it appeals across the board—to everybody, everywhere, at all times. Being the interplay of the One and the many, it possesses infinite variety in and through the unity it embodies. The basic texts of Vedanta, the Upanishads and the Gita, have often been called ‘mother’, for they symbolize unity underlying the variety of life, binding great diversity in one strong bond of universality.<sup>5</sup> These Vedanta texts, the great mother of all, have been extensively read, studied, chanted, repeated, meditated, and commented upon; they have been interpreted in innumerable varieties of ways by numerous acharyas; they have been worshipped and lauded over the centuries by all members of Indian society: scholars and the so-called ignorant as well, saints and ordinary folk, monks and householders.

About the Gita, one great swami of the Ramakrishna Order<sup>6</sup> once told the author: ‘The Gita is like a piece of sugarcane. Everybody can get some juice out of it. Even a child without teeth can appreciate its taste. And a great acharya with powerful teeth can crush and squeeze plenty of juice out of it.’ The beauty and grandeur of the Gita lies in its being both, *brahma-vidyā*, the science of Brahman, and *yoga-śāstra*, the technology to realize this science. The colophon at the end of each chapter has four significant components, stating that the Gita is: (i) *brahma-vidyā*; (ii) *yoga-śāstra*; (iii) a dialogue between *nara*, the human, and *nara-sakhā*, the Divine as a friend of humans; and (iv) yoga throughout, starting from *viśāda-yoga* and ending with *mokṣa-yoga*. From despondency to liberation, the whole spectrum of human aspiration, endeavour, and enterprise in any situation—indeed the entire human life itself—is one continuous state of yoga.

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Human understanding is metamorphosed into divine wisdom by the knowledge that life itself is one unbroken continuum of yoga. And interestingly, the intuitive faculty that opens up the floodgates to this integral new vision of light and truth is also yoga—the Gita calls it *buddhi-yoga*.<sup>7</sup> This, in essence, is the core of the Vedantic teaching.

### Three Principles of Neo-Vedanta

One of the latest acharyas to have interpreted and infused new life into Vedanta texts was Swami Vivekananda—who was naught but ‘his Master’s voice’. His interpretation of Vedanta is in effect a rejuvenation of the ancient texts, and is often called the ‘Neo-Vedanta of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda’. We need to examine this phrase to find out what, if anything, is new in this ‘Neo-Vedanta’. In order to do this, we need to ask: What exactly did Swami Vivekananda teach? He himself said: ‘I have a message, and I will give it after my own fashion.’<sup>8</sup> What was the message he gave?

Any search for an answer to this question should be made not so much by way of an intellectual exercise as through a process of reverential meditation. At best, the intellect can analyse and synthesize. But analysis is paralysis. It is a mere verbal exercise that paralyzes the higher human intuitive faculties. A spiritual personality can never be understood through verbal means; spirituality transcends ‘verbality’ and intellection, and trying to catch it in the net of intellectualism is like ‘searching for the footprints of birds flying through the sky’, as Vedanta books would say. The Truth should be realized through enlightened awareness, *samyag-jñānena*<sup>9</sup>, by blending the faculties of head and heart, *hṛdā mañiṣā manasā bhiklypto*<sup>10</sup>, and by stilling the mind in the heart, *mano hṛdi niruddhya ca*.<sup>11</sup>

Swami Vivekananda’s message of Vedanta is based on the following foundational principles: (i) divinity of the human being; (ii) unity of all existence, solidarity of the universe; and as a corollary to these (iii) the essential spirituality of life.

In a remarkable spiritual experience that he had at Almora, in the lap of the Himalayas, Swamiji

realized the identity of the microcosm with the macrocosm—the two spheres in which Truth reveals itself.<sup>12</sup> According to Vedanta, there is but one unbroken, homogenous Existence, *sat*, which is of the nature of pure Awareness, *cit*. It is also described as *ānandaghana*, one unbroken mass of joy. Thus, the nearest verbal description of this Reality that Vedanta has come to is *sat-cit-ānanda*, Existence-Awareness-Bliss Absolute. Now, in trying to understand the principles enunciated above, we can see that Principle 1 describes the real nature of Existence in its microcosmic dimension and Principle 2 asserts the identity of the microcosm with the macrocosm. Taken together, these lead naturally to Principle 3, that all life, in its microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects, is divine. These principles form the core of Neo-Vedanta.

### What Is New in Neo-Vedanta?

Although the term ‘neo-Vedanta’ has gained currency, there are not scholars wanting who question the use of the prefix ‘neo-’ before Vedanta. Their point of view is that ‘neo-’ smacks of a departure from the Vedanta tradition *per se*, a tradition handed down over the millennia via an army of illumined acharyas. They argue that it is perhaps better to say that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda reinterpreted, rejuvenated, and revitalized the eternal message of Vedanta, making it a living force in the modern world. The adoption of the prefix ‘neo-’ is perhaps misleading, for it would mean that Ramakrishna-Vivekananda added something *new* to the eternal Vedanta. The question now is: Is it true that they did? And if so, can this claim be justified?

This question, if taken up in the plane of intellection and philosophy, could be endlessly debated—with thoughtful minds on either side holding forth and giving out powerful arguments in support of their points of view. Perhaps it would be wiser to go by what Swamiji himself has to say on the matter: ‘What Ramakrishna Paramahansa and I have added to this [traditional Hindu and Buddhist teachings] is, that the Many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at

different times and in different attitudes.’<sup>13</sup>

The whole problem of existence in philosophy concerns the One and the many. We do perceive the many—it is a fact of daily experience. But there is always the attempt by the human mind—in everyday life as well as in scientific discourse—to seek the One, of which the many could be considered the various manifestations. Although the many is experienced daily, it is an experience of the *senses*. Beyond the senses, when the senses are inoperative, the experience of the many ceases and is replaced by that of the One. In fact, the experience of the One is equally a fact of daily experience—in the state of deep, dreamless sleep.

On the question of the One and the many, Vedānta has two predominant views: (i) the One alone is real, and the many is only its apparent manifestation; and (ii) the One transforms into the many, without undergoing any change itself. These two schools of thought are the Advaita and the Bheda-bheda, of which the most prominent protagonists have been Shankara and Ramanuja respectively. These two philosophical views are related to the two major proclivities of the human mind: idealism and realism. The ultra-Advaitic view of *ajāta-vāda* is pure subjective idealism suggestive of solipsism, while the Vishishtadvaita view—one variety of *bhedābheda*, difference in non-difference—suits minds inclined to realism. It is when one asks which point of view is *the* correct one or, less aggressively, which is *more* correct, that we have the real problem! Sri Ramakrishna would simply tell us that this question cannot be asked with regard to Reality.

### **Neo-Vedānta and the Theory of Relativity**

Two great developments in physics which revolutionized not only our outlook on space-time-matter but also our world view, *Weltanschauung*, took place in the early years of the twentieth century: Einstein’s relativity theory and Planck’s quantum theory. A huge paradigm shift occurred in science thanks to these two discoveries, and that had a profound impact on our philosophical thinking. Interestingly, hardly a couple of decades before

these discoveries took place Sri Ramakrishna, in an unknown corner of Dakshineswar, near Calcutta, had been realizing these very paradigms in an entirely different sphere through his experiments in the inner world of spirit and consciousness. The saga of these parallel developments is a fascinating story that we will now attempt to narrate.

**From Absolutely Right to Relatively Right** · The essence of the relativity theory is that nature does not have any *preferred* frame of reference—all physical laws remain the same irrespective of the observational criteria. This has thrown up the new *Weltanschauung* that, philosophically speaking, nature is *impartial*—for it chooses to treat all frames of reference on an equal footing. This new world view, if applied to religion and philosophy, would set at rest, scientifically, the ‘*my* frame versus *your* frame’ quarrel that is at the root of all fanaticism and bigotry. That a moving rod contracts in the direction of its motion is the well-known phenomenon of FitzGerald-Lorentz contraction used in the special theory of relativity. If a six-footer appears to be three feet tall in one frame and five in another, it is meaningless to ask which of these frames gives the ‘right’ answer. As Eddington says in his famous book *The Nature of the Physical World*, we are all anxious to affix the label ‘right’ to a particular frame of reference to the exclusion of all others—but on careful scrutiny we find that what we are anxious to affix is after all a blank label!<sup>14</sup> It is a blank label, for the concept of ‘rightness’ in this context simply does not exist. Applied to religion and philosophy this notion would mean that the various frames of reference in human thought, in which Reality appears in various hues, are indistinguishable from one another; so much so that it is futile to ask which one of them is right. Each of them is as right as the others—that is, none of them could claim to be *the* right one, to the falsity of the others; none of them is absolutely right, but each of them is relatively right.

The simple Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant is a story that aptly illustrates this scientific truth. Several blind men wanted to get a feel of an elephant. One of them touched the trunk and

said that the elephant was like a stout rope. Another touched an ear and declared that the elephant was like a huge fan. Another who touched a leg asserted that the elephant was like a big pillar. Each of them claimed that his perception was the only right one and of course nobody's experience tallied with that of the others. A big quarrel ensued. Finally a person with full vision came upon the scene and asked the blind men what the matter was. He smilingly listened to each man's description of the elephant and told them that they were all right. 'But if one is right, how can the others also be right?' they argued. The man with vision laughed and said that while each of the blind men was right, none of them was *absolutely* right; each of them was only *relatively* right. The mistake they made was to affix the label of 'rightness' to their own frame of perception to the exclusion of all the others.

Sri Ramakrishna tells a similar parable about the colour of a chameleon in a tree. One person claimed it was yellow, another that it was red, a third that it was jet black, and so on. The person who habitually used to sit under the tree said: 'Look, I sit under this tree and I know the creature in and out. It is true that it is yellow, equally true that it is red, also that it is black and many other colours besides. What is more, sometimes it is colourless. It is called a chameleon and it can take different colours at different times. While each one of your perceptions is right, none of them is absolutely right—each is only relatively right.' Kamalakanta, the famous poet of Bengal, whose songs Sri Ramakrishna was so fond of singing, says:

Is my Mother Shyama [Kali] really black? ...  
At times she is white, at times yellow,  
at still other times blue or red. ...  
At times she is Purusha, at times Prakriti,  
and again at times the formless Void.  
Contemplating these forms of the Mother,  
Kamalakanta is easily left flabbergasted.

This means the 'logical' mind gets baffled and stilled, and thereupon catapulted to a supra-logical realm in which it realizes the impossibility of dis-

tinguishing between one type of vision stationed in one particular frame of reference and another vision seen from a different frame. To say which one is real is in fact as unscientific as it is illogical. When the so-called logical mind is forced into seeing and accepting the equal rightness of *all* frames, of *all* points of view, of *all* world views concerning Reality—which its pride masquerading as logicity initially refuses to see—then something spectacular happens: its pride of logicity crushed, it collapses through the realization of its own illogicality and dies a spontaneous death.

A remarkable illustration of this phenomenon is seen when Mahendranath Gupta, the author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, hears from Sri Ramakrishna at their very first meeting that God is both with form and without form. This phenomenon of 'mind collapse', the mind becoming mind-less or no-mind, is called *amanibhāva* in Vedanta and is the *sine qua non* of all spiritual realization. In the cremation ground where this logical mind is burnt to ashes is born 'no-mind'—a new mind that transcends logic without contradicting it. Being neither logical nor illogical, it is 'alogical' and therefore 'mystical', in the sense that it is realizable only through supersensory perception that is 'direct and immediate'—*sākṣāt aparokṣāt*.<sup>15</sup> Swami Tapasyananda once told the author that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is thus *alogical mysticism*.<sup>16</sup>

### Neo-Vedanta and the Quantum Theory

*From Either-or to Both-and* · When Max Planck discovered the quantum nature of radiation and found that the quanta were 'particles', nothing but bundles of energy—the energy of each quantum being proportional to the frequency of radiation—he would hardly have imagined that he was initiating a scientific revolution that would have far-reaching impact on the philosophical world view being forged in the fire of science-philosophy interaction. The fact of bundles of energy being proportional to their frequency of radiation presented a peculiar marriage of the particle concept with the wave concept. This immediately triggered another

line of thought: if radiation—which is familiarly conceived as waves—shared particle characteristics, why should not a particle possess wave characteristics? Considering on the one hand the basic philosophical premise that nature is ‘symmetric’ because it is ‘beautiful’, *sundara*, and on the other hand the fact that matter and radiation are nature’s twin children, it follows from both the aesthetic and scientific points of view that radiation having wave characteristics should naturally imply that particles also have wave characteristics. This led to de Broglie’s famous discovery of the wave nature of matter, which literally opened the floodgates; discovery after discovery followed—Schrödinger’s wave mechanics, Heisenberg’s quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle, relativistic quantum mechanics, quantum field theory, and so on. Perhaps the most outstanding discovery amidst all these was the ‘particle-wave’, whose philosophical principle was stated by Schrödinger himself in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: The ‘either-or’ paradigm of classical physics has been replaced by the ‘both-and’ paradigm.

A couple of decades prior to this, Sri Ramakrishna had made a similar discovery in the realm of religion and philosophy, stating in unambiguous terms that God is both *sākāra*, with form, and *nirākāra*, without form. He is both *saguṇa*, with qualities, and *nirguṇa*, without qualities. He is both *saviśeṣa*, with attributes, and *nirviśeṣa*, without attributes. He is not *either* this *or* that, but is *both* this *and* that. The ‘either-or’ paradigm of the older religions and philosophies was replaced by the ‘both-and’ paradigm in Neo-Vedanta.

### From Satya-mithyā to Nitya-līlā

Advaita Vedanta, as expounded by Shankaracharya, asserts that the pure Existence-Awareness, *saccinmātra-svarūpa*, called Brahman is the only Reality: the world of name and form, *nāma-rūpa-prapañca*, is but an ‘appearance’. When a rope is wrongly perceived as a snake in twilight, the snake is merely an appearance and the rope alone is the reality. Suppose you got frightened on ‘seeing’ the snake and suffered a heart attack. Realizing later

on that it was only a rope that ‘appeared’ as a snake, you try to sue it for causing you serious physical and mental discomfiture. If in court the judge were to ask the rope, ‘Why did you appear as a snake and cause this damage?’, the rope would reply with all innocence: ‘Sir, I *never* appeared as a snake!’ The judge would then ask the rope: ‘If you never appeared as a snake, why is it that this person *saw* you appear as a snake?’ The rope would obviously chuckle and say: ‘Well Sir, that this gentleman confused an “appearance” with “existence” is none of my business!’ If Brahman were to be hauled up in court and questioned, ‘Why do you appear as the world?’, it would smile—at our stupidity, *moha*—and reply: ‘I never appeared, never am appearing, never will appear as the world. That you see the world-appearance and imagine I am appearing as the world and ask this foolish question by mixing up an appearance with Existence or Reality—*satyānrte mithunīkrtya*<sup>17</sup>—is none of my business. Sorry for you, dear fellow. Wake up, wake up from your dream, from your delusion! Arise, awake—*uttiṣṭhata jāgrata!*’

Now comes the philosophical question: Is the appearance true? The immediate reply is: Of course, yes; don’t you perceive it vividly? How can you deny something that you clearly perceive? But again, you ask the deeper question: Is the appearance ‘really’ true? Which means: If there were no appearance at all, would there still be a reality, an existence apart from the appearance? In this case the appearance is not ‘really’ true after all, for there *is* an independent Existence apart from it. So what is the status of the appearance? It is both true and untrue; true because it is perceived, untrue because there is an Existence apart from and independent of it, and Existence *is* even when the appearance *is not*. We have thus caught ourselves in a curious kind of knot, as it were. It is a consciousness-and-matter knot, *cit-jada-granthi*. This peculiar nature of empirical knowledge—that it is both true and untrue—has been termed by Shankaracharya and other Vedantins as *mithyā*, *māyā*, or *avidyā*. The world-appearance is *mithyā*, false, in this sense; the only Reality, *satya*, is Brahman. The famous dictum attributed to Shankara-



PANCHAVATI AT DAKSHINESWAR, PLANTED BY SRI RAMAKRISHNA / ADVAITA ASHRAMA ARCHIVES

charya, '*Brahma satyam jaganmithyā jīva brahmaiva nāpara*; Brahman is true, the world false, and the individual self is none other than Brahman,' succinctly summarizes his position on Advaita Vedanta.

The following question arises next: Does not the world-appearance that is described as *mithyā* have Brahman as its substratum? When the water of the ocean breaks into waves, the wave name-form has water alone as its substratum. When clay is moulded into various types of dolls, the doll name-form has clay alone as its substratum. The doll 'as appearance through name and form' is *mithyā* in the sense described above; but doll 'as clay' is only the clay in itself, without its 'doll-ness'. Similarly, the world-appearance as name-form is *mithyā* in Shankara's parlance, but the world 'as Brahman'—not appearing as anything—is the Reality.

One may thus think of two aspects of Brahman: the 'appearing' Brahman and the 'non-appearing' Brahman. The non-appearing Brahman is transcendental, beyond all sense-perception—*aśabdām, asparśam, arūpam*. There is no question of 'perceiving' this Brahman, for all perception is of the

appearance only. This being so, Brahman would eternally remain unrealized and unrealizable. But then, when one penetrates beyond the realm of name and form through the extremely subtle power of *buddhi*, discriminative intellect, this same transcendent Brahman is realized through its world-appearance: *dṛśyate tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣma-darśibhiḥ*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when the world-appearance is perceived, it is actually Brahman that is intuited in and through the appearance. Brahman 'peeps' as it were through the appearance, which thus provides a 'window' through which Brahman can be perceived—that is, intuited by the refined and purified intellect, also called *prajñā, medhā, or dhī*. The appearance therefore need not be dismissed as *mithyā*, as it was by Shankaracharya, but can be regarded as that aspect of the supreme Truth through which one is enabled to catch a glimpse of its transcendental nature, otherwise unrealizable by the ordinary mind and the senses. Hence, the *mithyā* status of the appearance may be honourably replaced by something that connotes this aspect as the 'revealer' of Brahman. As the *Kena Upanishad*

states: 'Pratibodha-viditam matam; Brahman is realized in and through each and every experience'.<sup>19</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna introduced the word *lilā*, divine play, to denote the *mithyā* aspect of appearance. Correspondingly, the *satya* that is Brahman, Sri Ramakrishna called the *nitya*. Thus, Sri Ramakrishna replaced the *satya-mithyā* paradigm of traditional Vedanta by the *nitya-lilā* paradigm of Neo-Vedanta. The water in the ocean is the *nitya* aspect, and the waves the *lilā* aspect. It is the water alone that one intuits through the waves, and again the wave-appearance has water alone as its substratum. The *nitya* and the *lilā* are non-different in this sense. The clay doll that Shankaracharya would call *mithyā* is no longer *mithyā* when seen as non-different from the clay substratum: in the new paradigm of Neo-Vedanta its status would be *lilā*. Thus, the status of the clay substratum and that of the doll-appearance, *satya* and *mithyā* in the old paradigm, is now being redefined in the Neo-Vedanta paradigm as *nitya* and *lilā*. The transcendental supreme Brahman, formless and absolute—*nitya*—is capable of becoming relative, breaking forth into innumerable forms—*lilā*. The Transcendent appears as the Immanent. Truth is one as well as many—transcendentally it is one, as immanent it appears as many. We may recall the paradigm shift of quantum mechanics from 'either-or' to 'both-and'. Nothing is rejected. Everything is subsumed in the one supreme Unity, in the one infinite Reality which is Transcendent-Immanent, Impersonal-Personal—*nirākāra-sākāra, nirguṇa-gunamaya, nirañjananararūpadhara*—in one word, *nitya-lilā*. This is the new paradigm shift of Neo-Vedanta.

(To be concluded)

### Notes and References

1. 'A knower of Self goes beyond sorrow'; *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7.1.3.
2. Bhagavadgita, 10.32.
3. Shankaracharya's commentary on Gita, 2.11.
4. See Gita, 2.20.
5. See 'Gita Dhyana'; Shankaracharya's commentary on *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.14.
6. Swami Tapasyananda, who was the vice president

of the Ramakrishna Order and was venerated as a great scholar-saint.

7. Gita, 10.10; 18.57.
8. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.72.
9. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.1.5.
10. *Katha Upanishad*, 2.3.9.
11. Gita, 8.12.
12. See His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.250.
13. *Complete Works*, 8.261.
14. See Arthur S Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2005), 20.
15. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.4.1, 2; 3.5.1.
16. For a detailed discussion on Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy seen in the light of Einstein's relativity theory, see the author's article 'Ramakrishna and Relativity' included as an appendix in Swami Tapasyananda, *Bhakti Schools of Vedanta* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 342-58.
17. Shankaracharya's introduction to his commentary on *Brahma Sutra*.
18. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.12.
19. *Kena Upanishad*, 2.4.

**When I experienced that the world**, with all moving creatures, was entirely separate from me, like a ball, or like the planet Mars in the sky, I had no body consciousness, and I felt that I had no connection whatsoever with this world—neither had I any connection with it in the past, nor have I now, nor will I have in the future. And I found others also to be contained in the divine Atman, and thought: 'If only these people could know about it!' I found no desire in me—complete desirelessness. But still I had the idea of many Atmans. I didn't have that idea of Oneness, One in all.

Hari Maharaj [Swami Turiyananda] told me: 'First one has to know oneself; then one can know others to be the same.'

Illumination comes suddenly, quickly. How and when, it cannot be said. When I learned bicycling, at first I couldn't maintain my balance. The teacher told me: 'Don't look at the wheel; look straight ahead.' Then suddenly it was all right. So you see, a teacher is needed. The knack comes suddenly.

—Swami Atulananda, *Atman Alone Abides*, 27