

Vedanta for Life and Living

Swami Smaranananda

EVERY MEMBER OF SOCIETY needs to have a viable philosophy to serve as a guide in day-to-day life. The absence of such a philosophy has led humankind into countless conflicts. The human being is generally taken to be the highest product of evolution. But does evolution stop with humans, or are there further possibilities? There should certainly be further future possibilities, but future evolution is more likely to be on the mental, intellectual, and spiritual planes than physical.

Swami Vivekananda says: 'That society is the greatest, where the highest truths become practical.' How can this be done? The thoughts of Vedanta are thousands of years old, but they were organized into a philosophical system for the first time by Sri Shankaracharya in the eighth century. Since then various other systems of Vedanta were developed. Though Advaita became the most important system of philosophy in India, there were many dualistic systems, of which Sri Ramanuja's qualified monism, Vishishtadvaita, was the most prominent.

But all these philosophical systems remained confined to scholars. They were not in any way related to the life of common people. These philosophies could not show a path for everyday life. Vedanta epistemology and ontology have been discussed for centuries, but their practical application in day-to-day life was not seriously attempted.

It was Swami Vivekananda who first brought the message of Advaita Vedanta to the common people in modern times, presenting its essential features in a simple way and working out the means to apply these to daily life. He showed how Vedantic principles form the basis of genuine spiritual life and natural

morality and ethics. Its universal nature makes Vedanta eminently suitable to the modern world, and its great existential importance lies in releasing the individual from self-imposed bondages in society. Vedanta has great potential for restructuring society, a promise that is yet to be adequately tapped.

Vedanta is essentially a spiritual philosophy. The ancients tried to discover the Truth externally. Finding it impossible to do so, they turned their sight inward. As the *Katha Upanishad* says: 'The self-existent (God) has rendered the senses defective; and so they go outward, hence humans see the external world and not the internal Self. Perchance some wise person desirous of immortality turned his eyes inward and beheld the Atman.'

The seers also wanted to find answers to certain fundamental questions: 'What is the ultimate cause? Whence are we born? Why do we live? Where is our final rest? O knowers of Brahman, under whose orders are we subject to the laws of happiness and misery?' Practising the method of meditation, they realized that Being who is the God of religion, the Self of philosophy, and the Energy of science—who exists as the self-luminous power in everyone. Various schools of thought propounded their ideas about this Self, laying down Vedantic principles in the process. These ought to form the basis for practical life.

What are these principles? First is the necessity of a well-defined goal of life. No philosophy can be widely applicable unless it is based on universal principles. Vedanta fulfils this requirement. Its central quest relates to the human being per se. It draws attention to the fact that in the innermost core of the human personality is the Atman, the Self, which is the conscious principle behind all the variegated phenomena. The Atman is not confined to any particular race or religion. As the *Shvetashvatara*

The author is Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

Upanishad puts it: 'It is neither man, nor woman, nor a eunuch. It gets associated with whichever material body it takes up.' Brahman is both transcendent and immanent. Any person can get rid of fear by knowing that the Self, without birth or death, is one's innermost reality.

However much one may master external nature, till one realizes the Reality within, one remains within the field of relativity. According to Vedanta, the purpose of human life is to make it possible for everyone to realize this highest truth. That alone can make life purposeful. So, while retaining all the facilities that have been brought to our doors, the ordinary individual has to learn how to bring these to serve the highest purpose of human life: discovery of the Truth which underlies this phenomenal existence. That can be done only by turning our sight within. Today the world is struggling to discover peace in the midst of turbulence and chaos. We humans are responsible for this predicament. And it is we again who will have to find ways to attain peace. Vedanta shows us how this can be done through its positive message of inner strength.

Swami Vivekananda observed that Advaita, which was the crest-jewel of all philosophies in India, was alienated from the common people: 'But one defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on the spiritual plane only, and nowhere else; now the time has come when you have to make it practical. ... it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests, and in the Himalayas; it must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people.' He further says: 'The secret of Advaita is: Believe in yourselves first, and then believe in anything else. In the history of the world, you will find that only those nations that have believed in themselves have become great and strong.'

Vedanta fulfils the need for a universal philosophy. It is rational in its approach and embraces the whole of existence. It is not confined to any race, caste, creed, or community. Since it transcends all empirical knowledge, it is not restrained by time, space, or causality. It gives humans hope and strength, fearlessness and same-sightedness. It does not discriminate

on the basis of sex, colour, caste, or creed, since it does not make the body the most important entity in life. The Atman is the true basis of all existence.

While searching for Reality, we are to reject one by one all that we perceive and experience as limited: *neti, neti*. We want to find whether there is anything that is timeless and beyond destruction. Thus we are to transcend the senses and their objects. Then shall we find that what is transcendent is also immanent. This Reality pervades everything. At the back of everything dwells the Infinite. We shall also find that the microcosm and the macrocosm are the same Reality, perceived from different angles of vision.

Knowledge, as we understand it, is all objectification. It provides only a limited vision of Reality. In the contemporary world many educated people are trying to make life amoral. But without a moral or ethical base to guide individual and social behaviour, life can never be happy and peaceful. Therefore, we need a philosophy that bases itself on a moral ideal. As the saying goes:

*Ācāra-hīnam na punanti vedāḥ
yadyapy-adhitāḥ saha ṣaḍbhīr-aṅgaiḥ;
Chandāmsy-enaṁ mṛtyu-kāle tyajanti
nīdam śakuntā iva jāta-pakṣāḥ.*

One without proper conduct is not purified by the Vedas, even if they study them all, along with their six auxiliaries. All the Vedas leave them at the time of death, just as the Shakunta leave their nest once their wings have grown.

Vedantic morality is based on the unity and universality of the Atman. Instead of weakening people by frightening them into following a religious path, Vedanta tells that humans need not think themselves weak, for the Atman is an infinite source of strength. Moreover, as the *Mundaka Upanishad* says, '*Nāyamātmā balahīnena labhyaḥ*'; this Atman is not to be realized by the weak.' Vedanta, therefore, provides a philosophy and religion that brings out one's higher qualities and provides the wherewithal to face the realities of life with strength and hope, peace and tranquillity. A society peopled by authentic Vedantins would surely be a blessing unto itself. 