

## Chapter 2

# Vivekananda and the Vedanta Philosophy

The Sanskrit word *Vedanta* can be split into two words: *veda* and *anta* so that a literal translation is that it is the “end of the Vedas”. This is often taken to mean a synthesis of the philosophy in the Vedas and the Upanishads. However, Vivekananda viewed the word in a larger context. Just as the word science does not refer to a specific subject but rather to a method of understanding the physical world, he defined *vedanta* as a method to understand both the internal world of the mind and consciousness and the external world of matter. In his view then, Vedanta includes science and in fact, all forms of human creative endeavour that represent attempts to comprehend infinity in its manifold forms.

Traditionally, there are recognized six systems of Indian philosophy: *nyaya*, *vaishesika*, *samkhya*, *yoga*, *purva mimamsa* and *vedanta*. These translate to logical realism, realistic pluralism, evolutionary dualism, disciplined meditation, preliminary interpretation of the Vedas, and synthesis of the Vedas, respectively. The systems correspond to the sutra period which is roughly marked as being between 200 CE to 600 CE. As all of these ancient systems were described in the Sanskrit language, early European indologists such as Max Muller, attempted to create encyclopedias of translations. Sadly, these translations were seen through the European lens and often had a Judaeo-Christian coloring.

Vedanta itself is often subdivided into three schools, *dvaita*, *visistadvaita*, and *advaita* corresponding to dualism, qualified dualism and non-dualism. The expansion of these schools belongs to the Scholarly period alluded to earlier and corresponds to 600 CE to 1700 CE. The principal exponents of these schools were Shankara (advaita), Ramanuja (visistadvaita) and Madhva (dvaita).

The modern period begins with Ramakrishna, who of course, did not know English. He was in many ways the embodiment of the ancient Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition. Volumes can be written on him and his message. The British author, Christopher Isherwood has written a book in which the opening lines are as follows. “This is the story of a phenomenon.

I will begin by calling him simply that, rather than 'holy man', 'mystic', 'saint', or 'avatar'; all emotive words with mixed associations which may attract some readers, repel others. A phenomenon is often something extraordinary and mysterious. Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him. A phenomenon is always a fact; an object of experience." (Isherwood, 1)

The university educated Vivekananda became Ramakrishna's disciple. Looking back later at this phenomenon, Vivekananda wrote, "The time was ripe, it was necessary that such a man should be born, and he came; and the most wonderful part of it was, that his life's work was just near a city which was full of Western thought - a city which had run mad after these occidental ideas, a city which had become more European than any other city in India. There he lived, without any book-learning whatsoever, this great intellect never learnt even to write his own name, but the most brilliant graduates of our university found in him an intellectual giant. He was a strange man, this Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa." (Vivekananda, 3.267)

Learning from Ramakrishna, who in many ways was the embodiment of the philosophy of ancient India, Vivekananda could distill and present to the entire world, the quintessence of Vedic thought not as a catalogue of ideas, but rather as a practical system which each individual can apply in one's own life. As noted earlier, in his letter to Alasinga in 1896, he wrote, "to put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds - is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living - poetic - in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology - and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work." (Vivekananda, 5.104)

Vivekananda's contribution to Indian philosophy are his four yogas: *jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga* and *raja yoga* corresponding to the yoga of knowledge, the yoga of work, the yoga of love and the yoga of psychic control. These yogas are not independent of each other. They are interdependent. The word *yoga* is ubiquitous in Indian philosophy and it is essential to understand its meaning. The meaning of *yoga* has been mutilated by popular culture and the common man thinks it refers to stretching exercises for the physical body. But this is what is called *hatha yoga* in the Indian tradition and not *yoga* as it is used in the Vedanta philosophy. One could say that Vedanta proposes stretching exercises for the mind!

The word *yoga*, in its narrow sense, can refer to one of the six systems of philosophy and often to Patanjali's sutras expounding *raja yoga*. Among Indian philosophers, it is used in its wider sense, as Vivekananda does, and refers to the four yogas. The word *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit word *yuj* which means "to yoke". Often, it is understood to mean "to join" or "to

unify". The problem of every human being is the mind. How does it work? Are we in control of its energies? Vivekananda identifies four faculties of the mind: thinking, feeling, willing and restraining. We think in one way, we feel in another, we act in a third and we hardly practice any form of restraint of mental impulses. There is total discord corresponding to the energies of the mind. Yoga refers to the method of unifying these energies for a creative and constructive purpose. Thus, *jnana yoga* harnesses intellectual energy as embodied in our reasoning faculty. *Bhakti yoga* tames the emotional energy, *karma yoga* tames our physical energy and *raja yoga* harnesses our psychic energy. This total unification of the mental faculties is what is referred to as yoga in the Vedanta philosophy as expounded by Vivekananda.

These four yogas were already existing in the Vedantic literature of antiquity, including the Upanishads and most notably, the Bhagavad Gita which goes on to say that these four are only general divisions that facilitate understanding and that there are many more yogas. Each of the eighteen chapters of the Gita is referred to as a yoga. However, because these ancient writings were in Sanskrit, they were not accessible to all, including people living in India who did not know it.

Sanskrit, like Latin, is not a spoken language any longer but essentially a language known only to the scholars. The unique contribution of Vivekananda was that he distilled all of it and gave expression to it in the English language, and as he says, "so that a child may grasp it."

To understand the context in which Vivekananda expounded the Vedanta philosophy in the English language, it is instructive to examine the discovery of Sanskrit by some notable European scholars and the work of translation they were engaged in before the advent of Vivekananda in the context of British colonial rule.

## 2.1 Sanskrit

Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages of the human race. Its relation to the Indian subcontinent is somewhat similar to the relation of Latin to the languages of continental Europe. At one time, Sanskrit was the language of the scholars and was spoken only in academic circles. Its "discovery" by European scholars can be traced back to the writings of William Jones, who in 1783, was appointed as a judge in the Bengal Supreme Court. Jones had an interest in languages and was keen to learn about Indian jurisprudence, its ancient tradition recorded in Sanskrit texts. With the help of Indian scholars, he began a systematic study and to his surprise, discovered that many of the European languages had words that had roots in Sanskrit syllables. He formulated a theory of language families and this is seen as the beginning of philology. In 1784, he wrote, "The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek; more co-

pious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident, so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." (Cannon, 245)

This language that Jones alluded to has been labelled as "Proto-Indo-European" (PIE, for short) by modern linguists (McFetridge, 29). His discovery of Sanskrit and its relation to European languages led to a frenetic period of scholarly activity both in Europe and India during which time, English, French and German linguists translated, with the help of Indian scholars, many of the ancient texts. These translations reached even the attention of many writers and philosophers such as Goethe and Arthur Schopenhauer who predicted that there will be a new renaissance through the study of Sanskrit just as the classical renaissance was born out of Europe's discovery of ancient Greek literature and science.

This global renaissance that Schopenhauer predicted never materialised for a variety of reasons. Firstly, its discovery was in the context of colonialism. With Macaulay's policies firmly in place, the last thing the British in India would want to do is support the study of Sanskrit. Secondly, the independence struggle was against the backdrop of two world wars and thus Sanskrit studies fell into neglect. But these historical events do not mitigate the influence of Sanskrit culture and its contribution to a global civilization.

We are actually not aware that Sanskrit pervades our daily conversations. There are many words in the English language that have Sanskrit roots. For instance, we can compare the word 'mother' with the Sanskrit *mātar*, and the Latin *māter* and Greek *meter* (McFetridge, 31).

In the nineteenth century, the German mathematician, Hermann Grassman, who discovered linear and multilinear algebra was fascinated by Sanskrit that he compiled the first translation of the Rig Veda into German. He coined the word "matrix" and was aware of its connection to the Sanskrit *māta* which means both 'mother' and sometimes 'womb' from which everything emerges. For those who know mathematics, the theory of matrices is definitely the womb of mathematics from which everything emerges. In spite of his extensive contributions to both philology and mathematics, Grassman never obtained a university professorship. He was quite content being a high school teacher all his life. Perhaps his joy of learning and his positive philosophy energized him throughout his life.

This episode shows that there was a great enthusiasm for the discovery of Sanskrit and the wealth of knowledge this opens up, especially amongst German scholars. But it clearly evaporated at the onset of the two world wars and aftermath.

## 2.2 The yoga of knowledge

Jnana yoga is the yoga of knowledge. The word *jnana* means knowledge and one can notice that the Sanskrit word *jna* which means 'to know' and the Greek word *gnōsis* (from which the English word 'knowledge' is derived), have the same root. This archaeology of daily language reveals how pervasive Sanskrit is in the English language and how many of ancient languages have mingled into our daily conversation.

Jnana yoga in particular and Vedanta philosophy in general, draw heavily from verses recorded in the Upanishads. The word *upanishad* is a combination of three Sanskrit syllables: *upa*, *ni* and *shad* which can be approximately translated as "near", "below" and "sit" respectively (Radhakrishnan, *Upanishads*, 19). These writings represent the notes taken by students of antiquity who were sitting "below" or "near" an illumined sage. The verses were in essence aphorisms, abbreviations suggestive of a cosmos of meaning. There are two ideas here. Knowledge in its essence is not contained in books. Books contain only information. The ideas contained therein must be reflected upon further, meditated upon so that the fuller meaning unfolds. And this every student must do for himself or herself. Secondly, knowledge is transmitted through example, by life's experience. Otherwise, whatever is learned, is only academic and not related to daily living. It must mean something for our everyday life. It must make our daily living that much richer.

Vivekananda begins his exposition of the yoga of knowledge by stating that the fundamental question that arises in every inquiring mind is "what is real?" What is the meaning of "reality"? In his essay, "The Real Nature of Man" he dismisses the position of the nihilists as mere childish prattle, and asks "In this body which is an aggregate of molecules of matter, is there anything real?" (BG, 272)<sup>1</sup> Tracing the question back to the Kathopanisad, as well as several passages in the Rig Veda, he writes that this is the underlying question of all religions. And in this inquiry, all religions, without exception, "hold that man is a degeneration of what he was, whether they clothe this in mythological words, or in the clear language of philosophy, or in the beautiful expressions of poetry." Comparing the story of the deluge in the Bible with the story of Manu in Indian mythology, as well as other stories of the Babylonians, Egyptians and the Chinese, he emphasises that "what you call the most correct, systematic, mathematical language of the present time, and the hazy, mystical, mythological languages of the ancients, differ only in clarity. Both of them have a grand idea behind." (BG, 273)

Guarding the reader against both religious superstition and scientific superstition, he points out that the idea of man being a degeneration of what he was does not tally with the evolutionists. Man evolved from the mollusc, they say. But Indian mythology presents a theory of cycles and every

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, the Bhushan-Garfield anthology will be abbreviated to BG.

evolution implies an involution. Referring to the scientific principle of the conservation of energy, he says "The modern scientific man will tell you that you can only get the amount of energy out of a machine which you have previously put into it. Something cannot be produced out of nothing. If a man is an evolution of the mollusc, then the perfect man - the Buddha - man, the Christ - man - was involved in the mollusc. If it is not so, whence come these gigantic personalities? Something cannot come out of nothing." (BG, 274)

Behind the body-mind complex, Vedanta says is the *Ātman* often translated as 'Self' with a capital 'S'. Usually, it is translated as "Pure Consciousness" as an abstract and impersonal concept. By its presence, all things are. A recurrent analogy in the Upanishads and in the Bhagavad Gita is its comparison to the sun. By its presence, the sun animates all life on the planet. Similarly, by the presence of Pure Consciousness, we are able to perceive our thoughts and feelings. But note that there is no implied agency in the good and bad. These are mental concepts and cannot be said to have an independent existence. They reside only in the realm of the mind. The *Ātman* is beyond mind.

It is instructive to examine the Sanskrit word *ātman* a bit more closely. There is a linguistic relation to the Greek word *atmos* which means vapor or air. The German word *atmen* which means 'to breathe' conveys the same idea. Our English word "atmosphere" is derived from *atmos*. This does not mean that *ātman* means vapor or air but is meant to signify something without which we cannot be alive. It is beyond the realm of the mind but animates the energies of the mind, just as the sun animates all life on our planet.

Vivekananda amplifies this idea as follows. "The different philosophies seem to agree that this *Ātman*, whatever it be, has neither form nor shape, and that which has neither form nor shape must be omnipresent. Time begins with mind, space also is in the mind. Causation cannot stand without time. Without the idea of succession there cannot be any idea of causation. Time, space and causation, therefore, are in the mind, and as this *Ātman* is beyond the mind and formless, it must be beyond time, beyond space, and beyond causation. Now, if it is beyond time, space and causation, it must be infinite." (BG, 276)

The 'Self' should not be confused with the ego. The 'Self' is consciousness bereft of any idea of 'I' or anything else. That is why one usually qualifies it as 'Pure Consciousness'. In English expositions of the Vedanta philosophy, we find that the mind-ego complex is often referred to as 'personality' and the word 'individuality' is understood from the standpoint of its root meaning and not as it is often used connoting uniqueness of the individual. In common parlance, these are used interchangeably. Hegel uses these words in exactly the opposite sense of Vedanta's usage. So this causes a great deal of confusion for the aspiring student of Vedanta.

The English word 'individuality' literally means 'that which is indivisible', or 'that which cannot be divided'. We cannot divide consciousness. It

is indivisible. By contrast, the word 'personality' is derived from the Latin *persona* which means a 'mask.' Thus, the ego-mind complex consisting of our multifarious identifications such as our race, our nationality, our gender and so forth, are mere masks covering the indivisible, the individual, what Vivekananda describes as 'the Real Man'. Words become a problem as we try to describe that which is beyond words, beyond mind. But since our understanding is only through the medium of the mind, we have no choice.

As this Pure Consciousness is infinite, there cannot be two. "The Real Man, therefore, is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man. In that sense the mythologies are true that the apparent man, however great he may be, is only a dim reflection of the Real Man who is beyond." (BG, 276)

We must again observe caution in the use of the words. By the term 'Real Man' no gender is implied. This struggle for proper vocabulary is part of the difficulty in expositions of Indian philosophy expressed in the English language.

Vivekananda continues his explanation as follows. "The Real Man, the Spirit, being beyond cause and effect, not bound by time and space, must therefore, be free. He was never bound and could not be bound. The apparent man, the reflection, is limited by time, space and causation, and is, therefore, bound. Or in the language of some of our philosophers, he appears to be bound, but really is not. This is the reality of our souls, this omnipresence, this spiritual nature, this infinity. Every soul is infinite, therefore there is no question of birth and death." (BG, 276)

Thus, by this inner reflective process, we arrive at our infinite dimension. This should not be confused with the ego. In Vedanta, the word 'self' with a small 's' usually refers to the ego and 'Self' with a capital 'S' refers to the *Ātman*. Vivekananda amplifies this thus. "This idea of "me and mine" - *ahamkāra* and *mamat* - is the result of past superstition, and the more this present self passes away, the more the real Self becomes manifest. This is true self-abnegation, the centre, the basis, the gist of all moral teaching, and whether man knows it or not, the whole world is slowly going towards it, practicing it more or less." (BG, 280)

After expounding the fundamental principle of Vedanta, Vivekananda responds to the question of utility. Surveying the destructive trajectory of technology, he writes "Without the knowledge of the Spirit, all material knowledge is only adding fuel to fire, only giving into the hands of the selfish man one more instrument to take what belongs to others, to live upon the life of others, instead of giving up his life for them." (BG, 280) Then turning to the question of practicality, he asks "Can it be practiced in modern society? Truth does not pay homage to any society, ancient or modern. Society has to pay homage to truth or die." (BG, 280)

He then cites various examples of how this has been made practical. There is the story of Alexander and the sage. Then there is the story of the swami during the Sepoy rebellion. These examples show that it can be

practiced. "This Atman is first to be heard, then thought about, and then meditated upon." This is a quote from Shankara. Vivekananda explains, "There is a great tendency in modern times to talk too much of work and decay thought. Doing is very good but that comes from thinking.... Fill the brain, therefore, with the highest thoughts, highest ideals, place them day and night before you, and out of that will come great work." (BG, 281) In this, we see the interdependence of jnana yoga and karma yoga.

Finally, he tells the remarkable story of the lion that grew among the sheep. In many ways, we have been hypnotised into our limitations. Vedanta is a method of de-hypnosis. This is the spiritual adventure that Vivekananda puts forward for everyone.

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