Chapter 13

Ramana Maharshi and Self-enquiry

In the landscape of twentieth century Indian philosophy, Ramana Maharshi is often viewed as the spiritual counterpart of Mahatma Gandhi. People spoke about 'the Maharshi and the Mahatma' as the two forces behind the spiritual upliftment of the nation. The term "Maharshi" means "Great Sage" and indeed he was. Speaking little, Ramana Maharshi radiated a spiritual calmness which seemed to exend far and wide. He made no speeches, wrote no books, nor was he in any way a "guru" or spiritual teacher. But by his life, he seemed to demonstrate the reality of what we may call spiritual enlightenment, whatever that may be.

The existential question "who am I?" (in Tamil, *nān yār*) embodies the essential teaching of Sri Ramana Maharshi. As with all existential questions, there is of course, no simple answer. The question is the door towards a higher level of understanding. In the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, the method of *vichara* or inquiry has often been delineated as the foundational method of discovery. Ramana Maharshi taught that our misery and suffering is due to the fact that we do not know who we are. We have identified ourselves with this physical body and psycho-physical mind embodied by the ego personality. If we can transcend this limited self, we arrive at the Universal Self and thus perceive the unity of all existence.

Venkataraman Aiyar (the original name of Ramana Maharshi) was born on December 30, 1879 in Madurai located in the province of Tamil Nadu, India into what we may call a middle class Brahmin family. His long first name was shortened and people called him 'Ramana' or simply 'Raman'. As was common with all children born into such families, he read the mystical and devotional literature of the Shaivite tradition. This tradition identifies that the universe and all manifestation is the "cosmic dance" of Shiva and Shakti, or consciousness and energy. As explained earlier by Vivekananda, the tradition clothes deep philosophical ideas by colorful mythology, and so one has a tendency to anthropomorphise Shiva as a male deity and Shakti as a female deity. A long succession of saints and sages throughout the centuries added to these mythologies and the traditional lore consists of spiritual biographies of many of these saints.

One such legend centered around Mount Arunachala which was viewed as the spiritual axis of the cosmos when Shiva created the world. Though Ramana Maharshi followed the path of Advaita Vedānta, he also seemed to have a devotional temperament that took these mythologies literally. Throughout his life, he seemed to venerate the mountain. He composed several poems extolling its spiritual power. Thus, his life was a strange combination of both dualism and non-dualism.

When Raman was thirteen, his father died and this may have been the catalyst of what we may call the "death experience" that proved significant a few years later. While in high school, he learned a modest amount of English and became acquainted with Christianity, since the school was an English medium school. As was common with all children of that period, he was trying to fulfil the wishes of his parents by going to school so that he would eventually get a job in the British government adminstration. However, it was at that time he came across a Tamil spiritual classic called the *Periyapuranam*. This book was an anthology of 63 spiritual personalities called Nayanars and described their spiritual struggle to realise the Divine. Later in life, Ramana Maharshi told how the book made a deep impression on his life and that spiritual realization is open to all. He would often tell those stories to illustrate a subtle point of Vedānta. When telling these stories, he used to dramatize the characters in voice and gesture and seemed to identify himself fully with them. Both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda exhibited a similar talent for dramatization.

While visiting the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, he experienced a new blissful consciousness "transcending both the physical and mental plane and yet compatible with full use of the physical and mental faculties." (Osborne, 6)

At the age of seventeen, he seemed to have had a spiritual experience which can be identified as a turning point in his life. One day, he suddenly felt a great fear of death. Later in life, he used the word *avesam* or "force" to describe this feeling. He called his experience *akrama mukti* or "sudden liberation" as opposed to *krama mukti* or "gradual liberation" which most spiritual aspirants experience in the course of their life. His philosophic mind wanted to understand where this feeling was coming from and why such a feeling made its entry into his mind. Lying very still, and outwardly showing all signs of physical death, he became stiff. In this state, he was aware of the movement of his mind. Thus emerged in his mind the existential question 'Who am I?' He seemed transcend layer upon layer of his own ego personality. He experienced the the truth of the Advaita teaching that he was not the body, because the body is changing. Nor can he be the waves of the mind, thoughts and emotions, because they too are constantly changing. Nor was he the ego personality that seems to latch onto these changes and identify with them. The ego too is temporal.

He later described this experience. "Enquiring within Who is the seer? I saw the seer disappear leaving That alone which stands forever. No thought arose to say I saw. How then could the thought arise to say I did not see."

What was this experience? He himself did not know and conjectured that "after reading the language of the sacred books, I see it may be termed *suddha manas* (pure mind), *akhandakara vritti* (unbroken experience), *prajna* (true knowledge) etc.; that is, the state of mind of Iswara or the jnani" as described in the Bhagavad Gita or Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

This process of physical and mental stillness, combined with the method of inquiry or *vichāra* brought him into what is traditionally described in the yoga texts as a state of pure delight, or *ānanda* or *samādhi*. How long this process lasted we do not know. But after this experience, his life changed. He renounced everything, shaved his head, and fled his village, magnetically attracted to Mount Arunachala where he became a recluse. He stayed there for the rest of his life until his death on April 14, 1950. He was seventy years old. In time, people heard about a great sage living on the mountain and slowly devout spiritual seekers gathered around him and an *ashram*, now called*Ramanāshramam*, was formed.

His attraction to Arunachala, and his ecstatic pining for spiritual enlightenment seem to be similar to the experience of Sri Ramakrishna, the teacher of Vivekananda. Ramakrishna too rejected what he called a "bread-winning education" and searched for spiritual enlightenment as a priest of the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar, Bengal. But there was a gap of forty years between these two personalities. Ramakrishna died in 1886. Ramana Maharshi fled to Arunachalam on September 1, 1896.

The mountain was located near the town of Tiruvannamalai and on reaching the town, Raman went to the Arunachalam temple, and stayed in the thousand-pillared hall. He looked for a more secluded place in which to meditate and so moved to a section of the temple called the *patāla lingam* vault. The place was damp and infested with insects both harmful and harmless. Yet there he stayed in deep meditation, oblivious of the outer world. A local saint, Seshadri Swamigal, found Ramana absorbed in deep meditation in the underground vault and recognizing this as a yogic trance, tried to protect him. After six weeks in the Patala-lingam, he was physically carried out and cleaned. He was unaware of his body and surroundings that food had to be placed in his mouth or he would have starved. A similar experience is related in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.

A monastic named Palaniswami realizing that Ramana was in a high state of consciousness, took it upon himself to protect him and feed him. In spite of his ardent desire for privacy, a group of devotees brought him food offerings and sang hymns of praise. News travelled to his family members as they were wondering where Ramana was. His uncle came to plead with him to return home and assured him that he can continue his meditation practice at home and no one will disturb him. Ramana sat motionless. The uncle had to return in frustration. A year later, his mother came to plead with him to return home. Ramana sat motionless and she too had to return home without him. At least, she thought, there were people looking after his food and shelter.

To avoid further disturbances, Ramana moved to the mountain itself and took up residence in the Virupaksha Cave where he stayed for 17 years. In 1902, Sivaprakasam Pillai, a government official and spiritual seeker felt that Ramana had discovered some spiritual truths that needed to be recorded. With a slate in hand, he climbed up to the Virupaksha Cave and asked him what are now referred to as the "fourteen questions" to which Ramana replied. These replies are now recorded under the title 'Nān Yār' or "Who am I?" This is often referred to as Ramana Maharshi's first book, but the Maharshi never wrote anything. His verbal responses to questions posed by "disciples" were collected together and published for the benefit of other seekers.

In English translation, here is a summary of this text. The method of self-enquiry seeks for the source of the 'I' thought that seems to underly **all** of our thoughts and emotions. What is this 'I'? The enquiry begins with the physical body, which is constantly changing. As a child, I identified with the baby body, as a teenager, with the teenage body and now as an adult, I identify with adult body, so I am not this body. Nor am I the five organs of sensory perception, nor the five organs of external action, nor the five vital forces (*pancha prānas*). Nor am I the mind with its incessant thoughts and emotions. Nor am I the unconscious mind, with its layers of *vasanas* or psychological tendencies. Reasoning thus, we arrive at Pure Awareness which by its very nature is the 'I am'.

Expanding on this experience, he said, "If the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases. Unless the illusory perception of the serpent in the rope ceases, the rope on which the illusion is formed is not perceived as such. Similarly, unless the illusory nature of the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases, the Vision of the true nature of the Self, on which the illusion is formed, is not obtained." (CW, 40) The 'snake and the rope' image is an allusion to the classical example of Shankara in his writings of Advaita Vedānta.

Amplifying further regarding the 'I' thought that underlies all of our experience, he said, "The first and foremost of all the thoughts that arise in the mind is the primal 'I' thought. It is only after the rise or origin of the 'I'-thought that innumerable other thoughts arise. In other words, only after the personal pronoun, 'I', has arisen, do the second and third personal pronouns ('you', 'he', etc.) occur to the mind; and they cannot subsist without the former." (CW, 41)

Through such an enquiry, the mind learns the process of introversion and gains strength. "It is only when the subtle mind is externalized throught the activity of the intellect and the sense organs [that] name and form constituting the world appear." (CW, 41) Commenting on the innumerable religious practices, he commented that "like breath-control (prānayama), meditation on form, incantations, invocations and regulation of diet are only aids to control the mind." That is, they are not the determinants of any higher spiritual consciousness. Explaining further, he said, "Through the practice of meditation or invocation the mind becomes one-pointed. Just as the elephant's trunk, which is otherwise restless, will become steady if it is made to hold an iron chain, so that the elephant goes its way without reaching out for any other object, so also the ever-restless mind, which is trained and accustomed to a name or form through meditation or invocation, will steadily hold on to that alone." (CW, 43)

When many try to practice this method of self-enquiry, they often leave it due to frustration because of an underlying tendency of wanting to 'get something' or the habit of possession. This has been the nature of the mind from childhood. We try to grasp things and put them in our mouths, either literally or figuratively. This underlying tendency is one of the most formidable obstacles in the method of meditation. Amplifying this obstruction, Ramana Maharshi said, "Countless *vishaya vāsanas* (subtle tendencies of the mind in relation to objects of sense-gratification), coming one after the other in quick succession like the waves of the ocean, agitate the mind. Nevertheless, they too subside and finally get destroyed with progressive practice of *Atma dhyāna* or meditation on the Self. " (CW, 44)

Each person is searching for happiness. The mistake we make is that we think that happiness resides in a particular person, or a place, or some possession. In fact, all such desires are waves of the mind. When we gratify a desire, we falsely superimpose the idea of 'bliss' on the gratification and this in turn, creates a *vāsana* or psychological tendency that moves the mind again automatically in a cycle of recurrence. The truth of the matter is that the joy that we feel when the desire is gratified is because for that split second, the waves of the mind subside at the moment of gratification and our underlying blissful nature, *ananda*, or Pure Self, is experienced. If happiness resided in the gratification, then endless gratification should lead to eternal happiness, but it does not.

Ramana Maharshi explains this phenomenon as follows. "That which is Bliss is also the Self. ... In no single one of the countless objects of the mundane world is there anything that can be called happiness. It is through sheer ignorance and unwisdom that we fancy that happiness is obtained from them. On the contrary, when the mind is externalized, it suffers pain and anguish. The truth is that every time our desires get fulfilled, the mind, turning to its source, experiences only that happiness which is natural to the Self." (CW, 45)

Chapter 14
Retrospective

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of world history are classified as the eras of colonial expansion. This colonialism first began as trade. In India, the East India Trading Company quickly usurped the seat of power in the middle of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain became the most powerful imperial power in the world and Queen Victoria was declared the "Empress of India." India had become the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire.

For the most part, this imperial rule did not affect the common man, until 1835, when Macaulay introduced his famous "Minute on Education". Its goal was to introduce the use of the English language in all the universities and "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." Macaulay had such disgust for Indian culture that he seemed to have remarked that all of Indian knowledge can fit on a single bookshelf.

By a strange twist of historical irony, the following year saw the birth of Sri Ramakrishna whose life by any account was the synthesis of the Indian spiritual tradition going back several millenia to the Upanishadic age. He was certainly no product of Macaulay's system of education. Rather, he was taught by numerous saints and sages, men and women, who were largely anonymous but were part of the rich and colourful tapestry of India's spiritual heritage. It was essentially the advent of Sri Ramakrishna that deflected the deleterious effects of Macaulay's educational system. Sri Ramakrishna was no freedom fighter. He may have been dimly aware that the British were ruling India. But his life and teaching stand at the crossroads of colonial India and her ancient past. For Ramakrishna was more of a prophet, a sage, an "avatar" or incarnation of God, and was viewed in his own lifetime as being on par with the Buddha and Christ.

Paradoxically, English educated youngsters thronged to meet with Ramakrishna and learn from him. Foremost among these was Narendranath Dutta who later became Vivekananda and who was well versed with Western philosophy but found it lacking as a comprehensive philosophy of life. With his masterly command of ancient Indian thought, he made a grand synthesis and formulated his four yogas: *karma yoga* (the yoga of work), *jnāna yoga* (the yoga of knowledge), *bhakti yoga* (the yoga of devotion) and *rāja yoga* (the yoga of psychic control). These four yogas, he taught, are the means to harness the energies of the human mind: willing, thinking, feeling and restraining. Though he had written separately about the philosophy embodied in each of the yogas, he was always quick to stress that they are not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent. The human being must practice all four, though one or more of the yogas may have special emphasis for the individual based on psychological temperament. This is the quintessence of the Vedānta philosophy.

In Vivekananda's exegesis, we see the emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the human being. Yoga is the means by which the individual harnesses his raw animal energies and takes them higher, first to the human level and then to the level of the divine. All of the yogas have this one end in view: so that human beings can realise their own divinity. Vivekananda summarised his entire philosophy thus. "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship, or psychic control or philosophy - by one or more or all of these - and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books or temples or forms, are but secondary details." (Vivekananda, Vol. 1, 124)

The characteristic feature of Indian philosophy is the notion of freedom, or *moksha*. Man is a prisoner of his thoughts, of his emotions, of his society, of his past conditioning. This struggle for independence at the individual level had its political and sociological counterparts in the larger drama of India's struggle for independence from British rule. Philosophers such as Aurobindo, Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi were all keenly aware of this correspondence. In their own way, they used this connection to mobilise the energies of the collective psyche in the freedom struggle. This is the crucible in which Indian philosophy of the twentieth century emerged. Because it arose with the universal goal of freedom, both at the individual and collective level, its message has wider applicability and adds to the collective human understanding and becomes an important and significant chapter in the annals of global philosophy.

In the study of Indian philosophy, it is important to understand its distinctive features from Western philosophy. These differences, at least seven in number, have been delineated by Radhakrishnan and Moore as follows.

(1) Philosophy and spirituality are intimately connected;
(2) Philosophy must solve the problems of life both inner and outer;
(3) The method of solution requires introspection and reflective consciousness;
(4) The theme of monistic idealism runs through essentially all of Indian philosophy;

(5) Reason must develop into intuition leading to knowledge by identity;
(6) A humble reverence for the past thinkers and their legacy;
(7) A synthetic outlook towards all human knowledge and philosophy.

First, philosophy and spirituality are intimately connected. “Practically all of Indian philosophy, from its beginning in the Vedas to the present day, has striven to bring about socio-spiritual reform in the country, and philosophical literature has taken many forms, mythological, popular, or technical, as the circumstances required, in order to promote such spiritual life. The problems of religion have always given depth and power and purpose to the Indian philosophical mind and spirit.” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, xxiii)

A second feature of Indian philosophy is its intimate relationship to life and the notion of realisation. Philosophy must enable us to live a richer life, make it more dynamic and enable the individual to connect with the rest of humanity in a positive way. It cannot be a mere matter of academic discourse and disconnected with the life of the human being. “This attitude of the practical application of philosophy to life is found in every school of Indian philosophy. ... Every major system of Indian philosophy takes its beginning from the practical and tragic problems of life and searches for the truth in order to solve the problem of man’s distress in the world in which he finds himself. ... In India, philosophy is for life; it is to be lived. The goal of the Indian is not to know the ultimate truth but to realize it, to become one with it.” (Ibid., xxiii)

A third feature of Indian philosophy is its emphasis on introspection. This is rooted in the development of reflective consciousness. Aurobindo had emphasized that man is a transitional being and that his mind is still in evolution. He identified higher levels of the mind and underlined that to rise above the “habit mind” one must cultivate reflection. We must not react, but rather reflect and thus develop what he termed as intuition. Instinct and intuition are different. Instinct is reactionary. Intuition is reflective. One must learn to distinguish between the two. Learning to distinguish between the two is part of the evolutionary process. Thus , the introspective attitude is an essential feature of Indian philosophy. “The subjective, then, rather than the objective, becomes the focus of interest in Indian philosophy, and, therefore, psychology and ethics are considered more important as aspects or branches of philosophy than the sciences which study physical nature. ... India’s achievements in the realm of positive science were at one time truly outstanding, especially in the mathematical sciences such as algebra, astronomy, and geometry, and in the application of these basic sciences to numerous phases of human activity.... Be that as it may, the Indian, from time immemorial, has felt that the inner spirit of man is the most significant clue to his reality and to that of the universe, more significant by far than the physical or the external.” (Ibid., xxv)

The philosophies of Aurobindo and Tagore are rooted in this view. Aurobindo’s integral yoga takes the four yogas of Vivekananda and underscores the creative spirit of the human mind. Both Aurobindo and Tagore emphasize the power of the word and its creative energy. Consequently, they emphasize the importance of poetry and literary activity as a means to awaken this creative energy of the mind. Intuition and introspection can be developed through artistic creativity just as logical thinking and reason are strengthened by mathematics and scientific thought.

Introspective thought leads to monistic idealism. This is the fourth difference between Western philosophy and Indian philosophy. "Almost all of Indian philosophy believes that reality is *ultimately* one and *ultimately* spiritual. Some systems have seemed to espouse dualism or pluralism, but even these have been deeply permeated by a strong monistic character." (Ibid., xxv) Indian philosophy rejects materialism and a materialistic view of the world. This is important in the modern age with the growth of science and its consequent materialistic world view. The crisis of modern man is that he is feeling insignificant in the vast cosmos because science tells him that he is just a random combination of atoms and molecules, that life is a random process without any meaning. This is buttressed by the thermodynamical law of entropy.

With a tinge of sarcasm, Radhakrishnan wrote that according to science, "all that remains for man to do is to be born, to grow up, to earn and to spend, to mate, to produce offspring, to grow old, and at last to sleep forever, safe in the belief that there is no purpose to be served in life except the fulfilment of the needs of man set in a vast and impersonal framework of mechanical processes. The earth turns, the stars blaze and die, and man need not waste his thought on seeking a different destiny." (Schlipp, 17) This summarises the spiritual crisis of man. He has been reduced to an insignificant speck in the vast cosmos. The threat of artificial intellgence underlines that we cannot accept this as the role of man. The idealist view of life is the only solution.

Both Gandhi and Radhakrishnan addressed this problem, the growing insignificance of the human being in a world that is increasingly becoming automated. The problem of man versus machine emerged in the middle of the industral revolution and now in the information age (or should we say disinformation age?) the problem has become only titanic. Gandhi offered the path of self-reliance by emphasizing the need for the growth of cottage industries and importance of handicrafts. His symbolic use of the spinning wheel mobilised the nation and instilled in them a renewed faith in themselves. But no spinning wheel can turn the tide of technology that is imposing upon us every day. A more pragmatic approach is needed.

Radhakrishnan emphasised the necessity of ethics. As Bertrand Russell echoed, "an increase of knowledge without a corresponding increase of wisdom, is an increase of sorrow and suffering." As new energies are being discovered and released by science, we need to have training in the proper use of these energies. This is embodied in ethics and idealism.

A fifth difference between Indian philosophy and Western philosophy is the emphasis on reason developing into intuition culminating in "knowledge by identity." Radhakrishnan and Moore amplify this. "To know reality one must have an actual experience of it. One does not merely *know* the truth in Indian philosophy; one *realizes* it. ... No complete knowledge is possible as long as there is the relationship of the subject on one hand and the object on the other." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, xxvi)

In his semi-autobiographical work, Fragments of a Confession, Radhakrishnan points out that this had been identified by several Western philosophers and thinkers as well. But because their words were somewhat ambiguous, the meaning was not clear. "When Kierkegaard tells us that truth is identical with subjectivity, he means that if it is objectified, it becomes relative. He does not mean that the truth is peculiar to and private to the individual. He makes out that we must go deep down into the subject to attain the experience of the Universal Spirit." (Schlipp, 70)

This "knowledge by identity" can only come about in solitary reflection. This is part of the Indian philosophical tradition. Again citing Western philosophers, Radhakrishnan wrote, "Professor A. N. Whitehead says that "religion is what the individual does with his solitariness." Each individual must unfold his own awareness of life, witness his own relation to the source or sources of his being and, in the light of his experience, resolve the tragedies and contradictions of his inward life." (Schlipp, 70)

The life and philosophy of Krishnamurti is a perfect example of this process. Rejecting his religious indoctrination of his teenage years at the hands of the theosophists, Krishnamurti learned to think for himself and formulated a practical philosophy. He underscored the human tendency to see the world in terms of categories and fostered a spirit of self-inquiry.

A sixth feature of Indian philosophy is something shared by the scientific tradition. It is a humble acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the seers of the past and is infused with a sense of devotional scepticism, if that is the word for it. It is the scientific attitude that "we stand on the shoulders of giants." This is from a famous quotation of Sir Isaac Newton who when asked how he was able to make his remarkable discoveries said, "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." (Bronowski, 150)

Speaking about this characteristic, Radhakrishnan wrote that "it does lend a unity of spirit by providing a continuity of thought which has rendered philosophy especially significant in Indian life and solidly unified against any philosophical attitude contradicting its basic characteristics of spirituality, inwardness, intuition, and the strong belief that the truth is to be lived, not merely known." (Schlipp, xxvi)

"Finally, there is the overall synthetic tradition which is essential to the spirit and method of Indian philosophy," write Radhakrishnan and Moore. All of human creativity and knowledge is seen from this perspective of a synthetic outlook. "Religion and philosophy, knowledge and conduct, intuition and reason, man and nature, God and man, noumenon and phenomena, are all brought into harmony by the synthesizing tendency of the Indian mind." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, xxvii) Each philosopher, from age to age feels that they are commenting on a past text, or explaining it for the society of the time, when in fact, they are adding to the tradition and giving it a new direction, very much like the scientific tradition. It is perhaps because of this feature, some philosophers use the term "Neo-Vedānta" to characterize the contributions of philosophers like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Radhakrishnan. On the one hand, one could say that the message of Vedānta has always been eternal and that there is nothing new to say. From one perspective, this is true. Gandhi wrote that "I have nothing to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills." On the other hand, the eternal truths have to be applied and brought into the practical field. The process of interpreting these truths for the modern society must by its very definition be new. For Truth cannot be encompassed in a single defintion. Its infinite nature has manifold expressions and reveals to us worlds within worlds.

In this pantheon of the great Indian philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mahatma Gandhi stands out as a towering figure for a variety of reasons. On a global scale, he challenged the might of imperialism by holding onto Truth at the cost of his own life. Much of his thinking resonates with the second quality of Indian philosophy, namely that it should solve the problems of life. His philosophy of *satyagraha* was a practical one that he demonstrated can work in the political field and by extension, in every field. It is for this reason that Radhakrishnan and Moore write "The study of Indian philosophy is important historically, philosophically, and even politically." (Ibid., xxx)

As the world has been brought together by science and technology, one needs a deep philosophical understanding as the foundation for a political unity. "Polticial unity is impossible without philosophical understanding." (Ibid, xxxi) Gandhi showed us how we can begin. Other great leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. have shown us how to take it further and now in the twenty-first century, we can see the need for such methods to deal with the crisis we are in right now. The future of human civilization will depend on bringing about spiritual awareness in every individual. In this context, Vivekananda defined civilization as the "manifestation of the divinity of man." (Vivekananda, Vol. 5, 308)

14.1 Further topics

This short narrative of essentially nineteenth and twentieth century Indian philosophy is incomplete in several important respects. Part of this revolves around the personality of Mahatma Gandhi. Three other personalities and their philosophical thought connected with Gandhi played a vital role not only in the Indian independence movement, but also in formulating India's world vision and both its domestic policy and foreign policy.

These three are Vinoba Bhave, Baba Amte and Jawaharlal Nehru. The first two became ardent social workers and essentially devoted their lives to the improvement of the lives of the common peasant. Both were highly educated but later resolved to use their education for the service of the poor. Vinoba Bhave was a great Sanskrit and Marathi scholar and as part of the Gandhian movement, was frequently arrested. But no prison walls could imprison his mind. Every imprisonment became for him the occasion for higher studies and he would often conduct classes in the prison. His "Talks on the Gita" written while he was in prison, is in my view, an inspired work, something that Aurobindo would call as being a creation of the Overmind. After India's independence, Bhave created the Bhoodan movement to preserve the environment and to promote the growth of cottage industries. His writings embody both a higher philosophy, imbued with *bhakti* as well as an environmental consciousness relevant to the modern world that now faces the catastrophes of climate change caused by industrial pollution.

Baba Amte, by contrast, was born in an extremely wealthy family. His early life was essentially that of a playboy but all of that seemed to change one day, when he saw a leper in pain on the streets of Bombay. It seems to be a case of suddent transformation. Then and there, he abandoned his lavish lifestyle and put on the khadi, joined the Gandhian movement. He too was frequently arrested during the independence struggle. After 1947, he and his wife devoted their life to the service of the poor. Both Amte and Bhave can be said to have developed the Gandhian vision of an agrarian society exemplified by a simple rural life. Both of these men along with their philosophies underline the need to study their life and thought in the context of global environmental problems. To them, Mother Earth was the living goddess to be worshipped, but not in a formal sense, but rather through our actions and way of life. For Baba Amte, the planet is not for the taking.

By contrast, Jawaharlal Nehru, when he became the first prime minister of India, felt the need for heavy industrialisation and technological transformation of the nation. He saw this as the only antidote for the massive poverty that gripped and continues to grip the nation. As is well-known, Nehru used every occasion of his imprisonment to write his books, each one a massive tome, full of historical reflections and contemplative analysis. He would humorously say later, "All my books were written in prison. For anyone who wants to write a book, I recommend prison." Through these solitary reflections came his global outlook and understanding. His passionate commitment to democracy and secularism fashioned the modern India. Later, as Prime Minister and representative of the Indian nation, he promoted the "non-aligned movement" where no nation would align itself with any particular "superpower" but rather grow in its own way as part of a global community of nations. His philosophy of internationalism which would transcend the parochial ideas of nationalisms seems highly relevant now in the twenty-first century.

Ananda Coomaraswamy was born of mixed parentage of a Sri Lankan father and an English mother. For most of his life, he lived in Boston and was curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. From this vantage point, he explored his cultural roots and became a consummate art historian, specialising in Indian art. His critical essays on Indian culture and aesthetics contributed to what Tagore would call aesthetic humanism. His life shows that Indian philosophy need not be developed on the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps it is a grander idea encompassing the whole globe and its core message essential for the preservation of the human race.

So far, we have discussed thinkers who primarily wrote in English. Thus, we could formulate an understanding of Indian philosophy without the distortion of translations. However, there is one serious omission in this narrative. This is the philosophy of Ramana Maharshi. To this day, he is considered as the embodiment of Advaita philosophy and is revered as someone on par with Sri Ramakrishna, as an avatar, an incarnation of God. His very presence seemed to radiate spirituality and he literally taught through silence.

So what exactly was the language he communicated in? Was it silence, or was it Tamil? In his early life, he spoke hundreds of inspired verses in Tamil and these have been recorded by some faithful disciples. So, there are some writings in Tamil that have now been translated into English. They embody a philosophy that can only be described as Advaita Vedānta but seems to be interspersed with Dvaita philosophy. It is a strange combination of non-dualism and dualism.

Born on December 30, 1879 as Venkataraman Iyer in Tiruchuli, Tamil Nadu, he had a transformative experience when he was a teenager at the age of sixteen. Some call it a near-death experience but it was not a traumatic event. Rather, he describes that at that time, he inquired into the meaning of 'I' and as he probed further in his mental consciousness, he transcended the ego and realised his identity with the universal 'I', which he called Ishvara or Shiva, names found in Indian mythology. Far from the influence of any English education, he had the traditional village education in his native Tamil language. He did not participate in the independence movement. He just was.

His very presence created a vast following and an ashram grew around him. During the freedom struggle, people spoke about the Mahatma and Maharshi as the iconic peaks on the Indian landscape of spirituality. Some called him an avatar and others referred to him as Bhagavan. He was indifferent to all of this. He never moved from his beloved Arunachala Mountain where he seems to have gained enlightenment. He died on 14 April, 1950.

His realisation was not a product of book-learning but rather a culmination of inner experience. He said later, "I have read no books except the *Periapuranam*, the Bible, and bits of *Tayumanavar* or *Tevaram*. My conception of Ishvara was similar to that found in the Puranas; I had never heard of Brahman, *samsara* and so forth. I did not yet know that there was an Essence or impersonal Real underlying everything and that Ishvara and I were both identical with it. Later, at Tiruvannamalai, as I listened to the *Ribhu Gita* and other sacred books, I learnt all this and found that the books were analysing and naming what I had felt inuitively without analysis or name." (Osborne, 11)

Ramana Maharshi was the living example of the truth of Advaita Vedānta. He literally embodies the "*advaita* joke" that "I was an atheist until I realised I was God." Seemingly funny, this joke is very profound and deep. The three uses of 'I' correspond to three stages of consciousness. The first use of 'I' refers to the 'unripe ego' or the self-centered individual and the second use to the 'ripe ego', to the identity of a sincere seeker ot Truth. Finally, the third use of 'I' refers to the identity with Brahman. Ramana Maharshi's few utterances are profound and radiate a celestial divinity similar to the aphorisms of the Upanishads. His face literally shines "like a knower of Brahman."

His essential teaching is Self-enquiry. Every moment of our waking life is infused with the sense of 'I'. If you trace the source of this 'I' you will realise the infinity within, the Light of Pure Consciousness. For him, this was not a matter of academic discourse but one of an incessant experience.

His life was a strange mixture of Advaita and Dvaita. He would say that the Arunachala Mountain is Shiva himself and claimed it had some spiritual magnetism. Referring to this claim, an Englishman, Major Alan Chadwick, recalled a conversation with Ramana Maharshi referring to the Arunachala Mountain. "He used to say that it was the top of the spiritual axis of the earth; there must, he said, be another mountain corresponding to Arunachala at exactly the opposite side of the globe, the corresponding pole of the axis. So certain was he of this that one evening he made me fetch an atlas and see if this was not correct. I found, according to the atlas, the exact opposite point came in the sea about a hundred miles off the coast of Peru. He seemed doubtful about this. I pointed out that there might be some island at this spot or a mountain under the sea. It was not until some years after Bhagavan's passing that a visiting Englishman had a tale of a spot, supposed to be a great secret power centre, in the Andes somewhere in this latitude." (Chadwick, 24) This spot in the Andes later turned out to be Machu Picchu.

The Arunachala Mountain has a mythological history. In the Shiva Purana, Brahma and Vishnu were instructed to find the beginning and the ending of the Shiva lingam. It is said that Vishnu turned into a boar to fathom its depth and Brahma into a swan to determine its height. The mythology says that Vishnu returned and confessed that he couldn't find its beginning. Brahma returned and lied that he could find the end and so Shiva severed his fifth head, the head that spoke the lie, so the story goes. Mythology seems to be philosophy in symbolic form.

The life of Ramana Maharshi shows that philosophy is everywhere and everything seems to be infused with meaning, including these mythological stories. They may look like childhood fables. But then, what are they? Perhaps the ancients knew something that we do not know with our inflated egos and modern technology. The philosophical mind will admit other avenues of knowing.

Looking back at the drama of twentieth century Indian philosophy, I am reminded of an episode in the life of Vivekananda. As is well-known, Vivekananda was often brusque especially when it came to the British rule of India. In a lecture delivered in Los Angeles on January 8, 1900 titled “The Powers of the Mind”, near the end of his talk with an obvious reference to colonial rule of India, he said “You know what the Hindus would often say when they have to fight their enemies - “Oh, one of our Yogis will come and drive the whole lot out!” ” (Vivekananda, Vol. 2, 21)

He was right. But it was not one yogi, but an army of yogis!

Vivekananda would add, “What power is there in the hand or the sword? The power is all in the spirit.” (Ibid., 21) That sums up all of Indian philosophy.

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