

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

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Contents

Contents	i
Foreword	iii
Vedanta	1
Approach of Vedanta	3
Section 1.....	7
Who am I?	9
Dharmic Living.....	16
Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva	20
King Chitraketu and his Son.....	20
Effect of Naama	22
Sage Bharata and the Deer	24
Guru Nanak and the Miser	25
An Interesting Kingdom.....	26
Hand of Karma Phala	27
Where to Account This?	28
Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 1.....	30
Section 2.....	33
Who is God?	35
Meditation.....	39
Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of God	42

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Vyasaraya's Test.....	42
Namadeva and Panduranga.....	43
Ekanatha and the Donkey	46
Ganthakarana's Worship	46
Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 2	49
Section 3	51
Essence of Hinduism.....	53
Goals of Life	67
What is Worth Pursuing	73
Desire, Happiness, Sorrow.....	76
Deciding Between Right and Wrong.....	80
Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita	84
Ultimate Goal.....	96
Spiritual Journey	99
Break Free.....	101
All is One	104
Section 4	117
Shaanti Mantra	119
Essential Bhagavad Gita.....	122
A Selection of Quotations from Swami Vivekananda.....	129
Afterword.....	134
About the Author.....	135

Foreword

Swami Vivekananda wants the youth to be strong, determined and full of positive energy. He wants “muscles of iron and nerves of steel”. He wants everyone to be aware of his or her great potential as Atman and wants it to be manifested in every sphere of life.

He says, “Let every man and woman and child, without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind everyone, there is that Infinite Soul, assuring the infinite possibility and the infinite capacity of all to become great and good. Let us proclaim to every soul: उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत — Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached. Arise, awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him! Too much of inactivity, too much of weakness, too much of hypnotism has been and is upon our race. O ye modern Hindus, de-hypnotise yourselves. The way to do that is found in your own sacred books. Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.” (CW III-193)

This message will be useful to everyone. Swami Vivekananda says, “These conceptions of the Vedanta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman, and child whatever be their occupation,

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

wherever they may be. And what is there to fear! How can the fishermen and all these carry out the ideals of the Upanishads? The way has been shown. It is infinite; religion is infinite, none can go beyond it; and whatever you do sincerely is good for you. Even the least thing well done brings marvellous results; therefore, let everyone do what little he can. If the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better student. If the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on.” (CW III-245)

This collection of articles from my blog <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in> is an attempt to bring this message of Swami Vivekananda to the modern thinking people.

I thank the students of Vivekananda Study Circle at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, for their inquisitive nature, which helped shape the thoughts in these pages.

Gokulmuthu Narayanaswamy

7-Nov-2018

Deepavali Day.

Vedanta

The Hindu scriptures are divided into two groups. *Shrutis* talk about eternal spiritual principles that are independent of the cultural context, which comprises of place, eon and culture. *Smritis* play two roles. (1) They explain the spiritual ideas and practices mentioned in the *Shrutis* in a way that can be understood and practiced by people of a specific cultural context. This is done through logic, rituals, stories, etc. (2) They talk about social rules, regulations, customs and practices to help people of a specific cultural context to embody the principles mentioned in the *Shrutis* in their everyday lives. The *Smritis* of one cultural context, will not be suitable to those of a different cultural context. So, the wise people of every place, eon and culture should write the *Smritis* that are suitable to the people living in their cultural context.

The *Shrutis* are the *Vedas*. Everything else are *Smritis*. The initial portions of every section (*shaakha*) of the *Vedas* talk about various religious rituals and meditations. The end portions of every section of the *Vedas* talk about philosophical principles. These portions are called *Vedanta* (meaning, end or purport of the *Vedas*). They are also called *Upanishads*. This message of the *Upanishads* is what is presented by Sri Krishna in the *Gita*. It has been the core of Hinduism throughout the ages. A deep understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of *Vedanta* will help a person lead a noble and successful life. Modern expositions of *Vedanta* by contemporary saints and philosophers like Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda help us to understand them and apply them in today's cultural context.

Swami Vivekananda summarizes the whole of *Vedanta* and its practice in his popular aphoristic saying: "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

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

– 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.” (CW I-257)

Approach of Vedanta

The core approach of Vedanta is to seek the Truth. Along with that, it also strives for a foundation for morality. Satyam (truth), Shivam (goodness) and Sundaram (beauty) are the practical ideals.

In the words of the French Nobel Laureate, Romain Rolland, “The true Vedantic spirit does not start out with a system of preconceived ideas... each man has been entirely free to search wherever he pleased for the spiritual explanation of the spectacle of the universe.”

Mahatma Gandhi says, “If were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say: Search after Truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and still call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after Truth.”

There are some Truths within the scope of our senses and the instruments that help us to extend them. Science addresses them very well with the methodology and culture it has evolved. There are some Truths outside the scope of our senses. These cannot be proved or disproved by scientific methods. An example is, “If you do good, you will get good. If you do bad, you will get bad.” There is no way to conduct an experiment to prove or disprove this statement. The pursuit of these Truths is the domain of Vedanta. Sri Sankara says in his commentary to verse 18.66 of Bhagavad Gita, “The validity of the Vedas holds good only in matters concerning the relation between ends and means of Agnihotra, etc., that are not known through direct perception, etc.; the validity of the Vedas lies in revealing what is beyond direct perception.” Thus, the domain of Science and Vedanta are complementary.

Vedanta strives to answer questions like these:

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

1. What is the real nature of individual and the Universe? What is the relationship between them? Is there anything beyond matter?
2. Why is there sorrow? Is it possible to be free from sorrow? What is the way?
3. How can a person be inspired to follow the path of virtue in the face of extreme trials or temptations?
4. How can a person be inspired not to give up in life in the face of a series of failures, directionlessness and despair?
5. Is there a purpose to human life? Is there a purpose to mankind as a whole?
6. Why should a person lead a moral life? Is it only for the society or is there a personal benefit?

These kinds of questions do not come under the scope of Science. Philosophy provides various options and their relative merits.

Vedanta give some general suggestions and lets you work out the details as you see reasonable. Vedanta is very clear that the concepts are working hypotheses, many of which may have to be changed as you mature. What is reasonable to one person may not be reasonable to another. Depending on where you stand in your maturity, different concepts will sound reasonable to you. You need to pick the one which appeals to you and work based on that hypothesis. As you grow, you will find a different hypothesis more reasonable. It is a journey. Each person has a personal journey.

You get exposed to Vedanta in its entirety. Then identify the concepts that you are able to accept and those you are not able to accept. Design your philosophy of life and spiritual practices based on what you are able to accept. You can keep aside what you are not able to accept as something that is not suitable to you for now.

Approach of Vedanta

Everyone lives by certain assumptions. The priorities in life and decisions taken are based on those assumptions. Most of the people are not aware of those assumptions because they have not given much thought to them. Vedanta ensures that you are fully aware of your assumptions. By this, you can lead a more aware and deliberate life. This will make your personal development faster and smoother.

Thus, the whole journey is a search of Truth. You proceed from lower Truth to higher Truth. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “The soul passing through its different stages goes from truth to truth, and each stage is true; it goes from lower truth to higher truth. This point may be illustrated in the following way. A man is journeying towards the sun and takes a photograph at each step. How different would be the first photograph from the second and still more from the third or the last, when he reaches the real sun! But all these, though differing so widely from each other, are true, only they are made to appear different by the changing conditions of time and space.” (CW I-385)

The next two sections present the basic theory of Vedanta at the empirical level, which is most relevant to us. The third section is a collection of articles from my blog. Those articles will make you familiar with various theoretical and practical aspects of Vedanta. The last section has a Shaanti Mantra, some verses from the Bhagavad Gita and some quotations from Swami Vivekananda, which show how all these concepts and practices are rooted in tradition. These also can be good reminders to read every day.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Section 1

This section discusses the nature of the individual.
The main question being addressed is “Who am I?”

“You are the creator of your own destiny”

Swami Vivekananda
(Complete Works, II-225)

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Who am I?

Vedanta gives two sets of concepts about the individual and God. One is practical, and the other is Absolute. The practical concepts prepare the person to proceed further towards the Absolute concepts. Thus, the practical aspect is of immediate relevance. Most of the Bhagavad Gita deals with this. In this workshop also, we will focus more on this only.

If you think about who you are, you can clearly distinguish various layers of yourself. You have a body that can be seen by you and by others. The body has various organs and does various functions. This is called *sthoola sharira*. You have a mind that cannot be seen by others. You alone know your thoughts, memories, emotions and knowledge. Others can only infer it when you talk about them or act based on them. This is called *sookshma sharira*. There is one more layer which has the faculty of freewill. You use your freewill to decide what you want to do. You are responsible for your decisions. The result of your decision (called *karma phala*) and tendencies that can influence your future decisions (called *samskaara*) are stored here. This layer gives you your individuality. This is called *kaarana sharira*. Behind all these three is your fundamental Awareness (called *caitanya*). That is called *aatman*. The *aatman* when associated with one or more of the three bodies (*shariraas*) is called *Jivaatman*. The *Jivaatman* along with the *kaarana sharira* is called the being (*Jiva*).

During waking (*jaagrat*) state, you are aware of all the three bodies. During dreaming (*svapna*) state, you are not aware of this *sthoola sharira*. You are aware of a different virtual *sthoola sharira* in the mind. During sleeping (*sushupti*) state, you are not aware of anything. But when you wake up, you remember that you had a good enjoyable sleep.

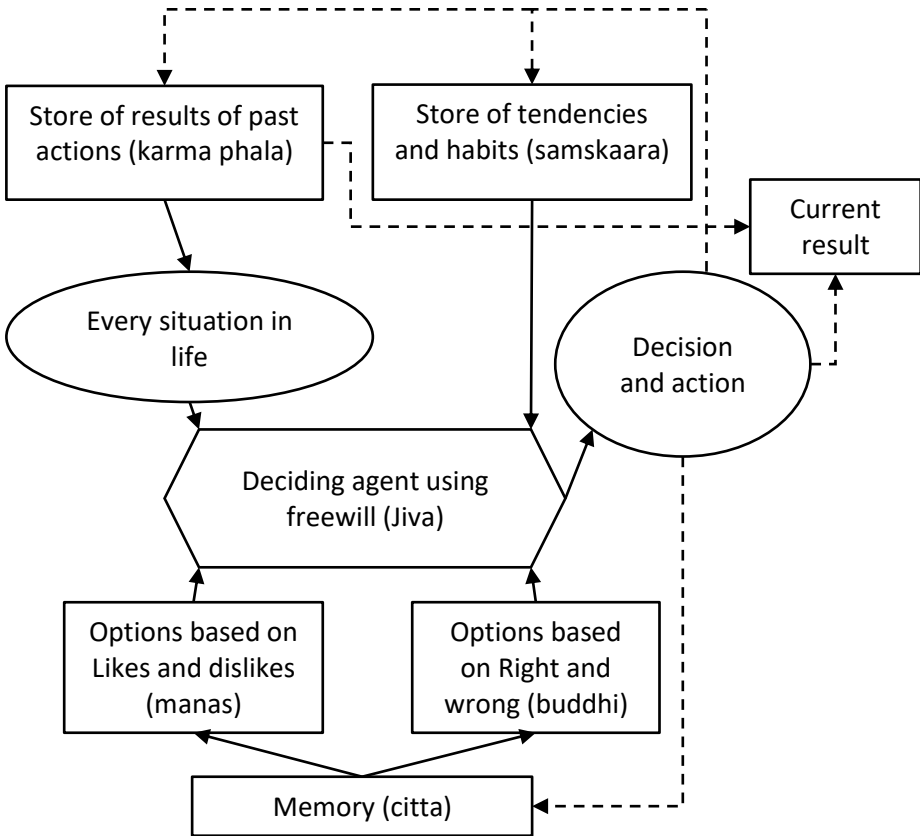
Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Freewill is a faculty that operates from the kaarana sharira level. You have choice over what you decide. You use your sense organs to know about a situation. You use your memory, emotions and knowledge to evaluate the situation, come up with various options, and evaluate the pros and cons of each of them. Finally, you decide what is to be done. You use your organs of action to perform the action. This freedom to choose is the core assumption of all human affairs. Along with the freedom comes the responsibility of the choice. There is a lot of research happening in neuroscience to decide if freewill exists or not. Without going into the details of that, we can say that, freewill is the foundation on which the entire human society is built. Concepts of right and wrong, crime and punishment, purpose of life, rights and duties are all based on the assumption that freewill exists. Without this assumption, the entire human existence and human endeavour will become meaningless. So, irrespective of the outcome of neuroscience, freewill is a necessary working assumption.

The individual (Jiva) is defined as the entity that wields the freewill and which is responsible for the decision. The concept that the Jiva has the freedom to decide, every decision gives an appropriate result and the Jiva is responsible for the result is called *Law of Karma*. Freewill and Law of Karma are two sides of the same coin. Without freewill, law of Karma does not have a locus to operate on. Without law of Karma, there is no basis to exercise the freewill. For example, if you eat when you are hungry, your hunger goes away. If this universal law is not there, when you are hungry, there is no basis for you to decide to eat. If there is no correlation between the action and the result, no action can be decided. So freewill and Law of Karma exist together. Another name of Law of Karma is Dharma.

Here is a picture to illustrate the Law of Karma. The description comes after the picture.

Who am I?



Every individual has a store of the accumulated results of the past actions. Some of them create a particular situation in life. The Jiva faces the situation. There are several similar situations in life that it can remember. Based on these, several options are presented to it. Some are based on likes and dislikes. Some are based on right and wrong. There is also the influence of habits and tendencies, which affect the decision in an unconscious manner. With all these inputs, the Jiva makes the decision of what to do using its freewill. The decision and action contribute to the following:

- Current result
- Future result

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

- Conscious memory
- Habits and tendencies

The current result not only depends on the current action. A part of the unused past results from the store also contributes to the current results.

This Jiva cannot be a part or product of the physical body. If it is a part or product of the physical body, it will be subject to the laws of physics and so it cannot be free. If the Jiva is not free from the laws of physics, freewill cannot exist. If the decision to do something is purely based on the chemical and electrical activity in the physical brain, then there cannot be freewill. So, the Jiva must be an entity totally independent of the physical body. The body and mind are only instruments to be used by the Jiva. The body and mind are like an FM radio, which is a gross instrument to manifest the music being broadcasted in a subtler form. The music played is what is broadcasted. The radio cannot create its own music. However, the quality of music depends on the quality of the radio. The radio cannot play better than what is broadcasted. It can be worse if the radio is not good. A healthy body and mind help the Jiva to express and experience fully.

The Jiva is your real identity in the practical world. Your body and mind are your instruments. You can experience the world through them. You can express yourself in the world through them. But your real identity is that of the person who holds the freewill and is responsible for the decisions. This is also evident from the way you call your body and mind as “my” body and “my” mind, like the way you use expressions like “my” house, “my” car, “my” clothes, etc.

You are responsible for the decisions you make. Everything that happens in your life is the result of the decisions that you have taken in the past. You cannot escape the results of any decision made by you.

Who am I?

Some children are born to poor parents. Some are born to rich parents. Some children are born healthy. Some are born unhealthy. Thus, the conditions at birth are not the same. The only logical conclusion that we can arrive at is that the Jiva's birth conditions depend on the decisions that it made in its past lives. Every situation in your life is affected not only by the decisions that you made in this life. It also depends on the decisions that you made in your past lives. What you ate last month is a part of your body now, even if you do not remember what you ate. Similarly, the results of your past decisions affect you, even if you do not remember them now. Similarly, people make decisions till the last moment of their lives. They must face the consequences in a future life. This is the only logical possibility. Thus, if you do not see the effect of your decisions in this life, it will manifest in a future life. You cannot escape the results of your decisions even by death.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

*dehinah asmin yathaa dehe kaumaaram yauvanam jaraa
tathaa dehaantara praaptih dheerah tatra na muhyati (2.13)*

“Just as how a person goes through childhood, youth and old age, the person gets another body after the end of the current body. Wise men are not worried about this.”

jaatasaya hi dhruvo mrtyuh druvam janma mrtasya ca (2.27)

“Death surely follows birth and birth surely follows death.”

*vaasaamsi jirnaani yathaa vihaaya
navaani grhnaati narah aparaani
tathaa sariiraani vihaaya jirnaani
anyaani samyaati navaani dehi (2.22)*

“Just as a person discards old clothes and wears new ones, the Jiva casts out one body and takes on a new one.”

mama eva amso jiivaloke jiiva bhuta sanaatanah

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

manahshashthaani indriyaani prakriti sthaani karshati (15.7)

shariiram yat avaapnoti yat ca api utkraamati ishvarah

grhiitvaa etaani samyaati vaayu gandha anivaasayaat (15.8)

“The Jiva, which is a part of Myself, is eternal. It has collected the mind and the faculty of senses around it from Nature. This collective resides in a body that is acquired from Nature. When the time of death arrives, the Jiva takes these (mind and faculties) and moved to another body, like how wind carries the fragrance of flowers.”

The development of the Jiva continues across life times. The wisdom and habits developed in one life continues in the next. No good deed done, or a good habit developed is lost by death. Sri Krishna says this very clearly in the Gita (6.40-44). A Jiva who did virtuous deeds will be born to pious and prosperous parents. It will be born with spiritual insight from its previous birth and will continue to gain wisdom from where it left.

Thus, you are the Jiva, which holds the faculty of freewill. The body and mind are your instruments. You are responsible for your decisions. You go from life to life carrying the results of all your decisions. Everything that happens in your life is because of your decisions in this or a past life. You must face the results of your decisions in this or a future life. Thus, by making the right decisions, you can achieve whatever you want in this life or the next. Your destiny is fully in your hands. If you are facing something that you do not prefer, it is fully because of your own decisions in the past and it is fully in your own hands to change your future.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

uddharet aatman aatmaanam na aatmaanam avasaadayet

aatma eva hi aatmanah bandhuh aatma eva ripuh aatmanah (6.5)

“Raise up your mind by your actions. Don’t lower down the quality of your mind. A mind under your control is your friend. A mind not under your control is your enemy.”

Who am I?

Swami Vivekananda says, “We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act.” (CW I-31) “Men in general lay all the blame of life on their fellowmen, or, failing that, on God, or they conjure up a ghost, and say it is fate. Where is fate, and who is fate? We reap what we sow. We are the makers of our own fate. None else has the blame, none has the praise. The wind is blowing; and those vessels whose sails are unfurled catch it, and go forward on their way, but those which have their sails furled do not catch the wind. Is the fault of the wind?” (CW II-224) “Say, ‘This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone.’ That which I created, I can demolish; that which is created by someone else, I shall never be able to destroy. Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succor you want is within yourselves. Therefore, make your own future. The infinite future is before you, and you must always remember that each word, thought, and deed, lays up a store for you and that as the bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that the good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and forever.” (CW II-225)

If you accept freewill, you must accept the Law of Karma and its corollaries like rebirth. If you don't accept freewill, there is no basis for most of the systems in a human society. Thus, Vedanta gives a very logical workable system. Any alternative will either be illogical or will not be workable. Vedanta's system answers almost all the questions that a person might have about life.

Dharmic Living

Based on the Law of Karma, there is a long-term causal relationship between what is done and what is experienced. If you want good things in life, you need to do the right things. Gita gives the guidance thus:

*aatmaa upamyena sarvatra samam pashyati yah arjuna
sukham vaa yadi vaa duhkham sah yogi paramah matah (6.32)*

“He who, comparing himself with others with respect to pleasure and pain, treats everyone as himself, is a great Yogi.”

This is exactly what the Golden Rule says, “Do unto others what you want others to do unto you.” Immanuel Kant puts this as a more generic formulation as, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Thus, it can be inferred that a person who wants good things in life, needs to follow certain do’s and don’ts in life. Instead of working out the do’s and don’ts in every situation, the Hindu culture has come up with a list of general rules, called saamanya dharma.

God is the personification of the Law of Karma. He is the Supreme Person, who knows the innermost thoughts and intentions of everyone. He oversees the operation of the Law of Karma. This much understanding about God is enough to imbibe the concepts in this chapter. There will be more detailed discussion about God in a later chapter.

Five Duties

You have been consuming goods and services from various entities right from birth. This puts you in a debt. The various entities are classified into five. The five debts need to be countered by doing five duties to get

Dharmic Living

back into balance. This list is from the Vedas. There is a reference to this in the Gita in 3.11 and 4.28.

1. deva yagna – Duty to environment – Take care of nature. Don't pollute. Plant trees. Conserve resources. Pray every day to God thanking for all the good things in your life. Visit temples regularly.

2. bhuta yagna – Duty to other creatures – Take care of animals. Treat them with dignity. Preserve them. Avoid harming them.

3. manushya yagna – Duty to society – Take care of people. Treat everyone with dignity. Donate to and involve in social service activities. Help people. Pay fairly for services availed from people.

4. pitru yagna – Duty to lineage – Take care of parents, grandparents, children, grand-children, etc. Respect old people. Help them. Pray for the wellbeing of departed ancestors. Be kind to young children. Donate to and involve in orphanages and old-age homes.

5. rishi yagna – Duty to culture – Take care of teachers. Acquire, develop and disseminate knowledge. Help education of children and adults. Donate to and involve in schooling of underprivileged children. Support the study and development of science, mathematics, literature, arts, music, dance, philosophy, religion, etc. Celebrate cultural and religious festivals.

Ten Virtues

Gita gives lists of do's and don'ts in several places like 13.7 to 13.11, 16.1 to 16.3, 17.14 to 17.16. Patanjali has formulated a concise list of ten virtues in his Yoga Sutras, which as below.

1. satya – Don't tell a lie. It is not necessary to speak all the truth that you know. But when you speak and act, there should be perfect alignment between your knowledge, intention, words and action.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

2. ahimsa – Don't take advantage of the weakness of others. It is not possible to live without hurting smaller life forms. You should try to be as harmless as possible. You should not wish harm to anyone. Follow non-violence in thought, word and deed. Also, positively help people.

3. brahmacharya – Don't have indecent and inappropriate attitude towards the other gender. The appropriate attitude towards everyone is to look upon people as thinking and feeling human beings, and not as physical entities. Also, this translates to chastity for householders and celibacy for all others.

4. asteya – Don't have any unfair possession.

5. aparigraha – Don't have possessions or consume things beyond what is reasonably necessary. Lead a simple life.

6. soucha – Maintain everything neat and tidy. This applies to environment, body and mind.

7. santosha – Always be cheerful and contented. Don't keep complaining about everything. Have positive attitude. Be pleasant in thought and word.

8. tapas – Maintain discipline in life. Wake up, eat, go to sleep, etc. at the right times. Have control on what you eat, read, see, hear, speak, think, etc. Practice meditation every day to better understand your mind and be able to regulate your thoughts.

9. swaadhyaya – Entertain healthy thoughts. Have a habit of reading good books, thinking deeply about them and discussing with like-minded people.

10. ishvara pranidhaana – Believe in the fairness of the world – “As you sow, so shall you reap.” Do everything as an offering (arpana) to God

Dharmic Living

and face everything as a gift (prasaada) from God. Face success with humility and failure with dignity.

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva

King Chitraketu and his Son

Here is the story of King Chitraketu from Srimad Bhagavatam. The land of Soorasena (near Mathura) was ruled by King Chitraketu. He had several queens, but no children. One day Rishi Angiras happened to arrive at the king's palace. The king told the sage, "Oh great Rishi, by the Lord's grace and by your blessings, my kingdom is prosperous and peaceful. People are all happy. But I have a great sorrow in my life. I do not have a child. Please bless me with a child." Under the direction of the sage, the king performed a puja and the sage asked the king to give the sacrificial remnant to his senior-most queen – Kritadyuti. The sage blessed the king, "Oh king, your queen will bear you a son who will bring you both joy and sorrow."

When the son was born, the king and the queen were very happy. The king did a lot of rituals and gave away a lot of wealth desiring the longevity of his son. Day by day, his attachment to his son grew. The mother Kritadyuti also got very attached to her son. However, the grief of her co-wives, who were childless, grew in equal proportion. Now the king no longer had the same love towards the other queens as he had before. These queens suffered intensely due to the combined effect of their envy towards Kritadyuti, inferiority complex due to childlessness and the king's neglect of them.

Overwhelmed by grief and envy, the queens secretly poisoned the infant. When Kritadyuti found her son dead, she fell unconscious with a great cry. The maids in the palace started to cry aloud. The queens also joined and acted as if crying. The king broke down in a flood of tears. They were both lamenting unstoppably for a long time.

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva

Taking pity on them, Rishi Angiras and Rishi Narada appeared. They told the king, “Oh king, birth is always followed by death in the cycle of creation. The duration of each life is decided by the karma for which that birth was given.” The king understood the nature of creation and thanked the sage Angiras. The sage said, “I had come earlier to impart knowledge to you. But you were longing for a child. So, I decided that you need more maturity. Now that you have understood the fleeting nature of the world, you should seek the knowledge that will free you from all sorrow forever.” Saying this, the sage taught the king the knowledge of the Self as pure Consciousness.

Sage Narada, using his Yogic powers, showed the subtle body of the dead child to the sorrowing relatives. The sage said, “O jiva, don’t you see that your father, mother and relatives are sorrowing for you? Assume your previous body, succeed the throne and enjoy the rest of your life surrounded by wealth and loving relatives.” The jiva said, “Which body are you talking about? Who are these parents? I have been going from birth to birth in a cycle among Devas, animals and humans according to my karma. In which birth of mine have these been my father and mother? In the succession of births, anyone might be anyone’s friend, relative, neighbour or stranger. Just as objects of sale like gold or land pass from one hand to another, the jiva passes from one womb to another. All relationships are temporary only. Even in the embodied state, the jiva is eternal and not attached to the body. He has continuous existence even after death, but has no continuous identification with the previous embodiments or the associations in them. Only as long as the jiva is embodied, the relationship pertaining to that body subsists. In reality, the jiva is free from all associations.” Saying so, the dead child departed. All the relatives became free from grief. The queens who poisoned the child became ashamed of their action. They abandoned all envy and performed expiatory rites on the bank of river Yamuna.

Effect of Naama

Once Rishi Narada asked Lord Shiva, “Oh Lord, everyone knows that you are always chanting the name of Rama in your mind. What is so great about the Rama mantra? Can you please enlighten me?”

Shiva showed Narada a worm living in a lump of cow dung and said, “Narada please go to the worm and chant the mantra ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ to it and tell me what happened.” Narada went to the worm and did so. Immediately the worm died. Narada became sad. He came back to Shiva and told, “Oh Lord, I must have chanted wrongly. The worm died immediately on hearing the chanting.” Shiva replied, “Narada, nothing was wrong in your chanting.”

Shiva showed Narada a newly born puppy and said, “Narada, can you see that lovely puppy that was born just a few moments ago? Go and chant the mantra ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the puppy.” Narada went to the puppy and chanted. Immediately the puppy also died. Narada came back to Shiva with a lot of sorrow. Narada told Shiva, “Oh Lord, I do not understand. The puppy also died. What should I do?”

Shiva showed Narada a newly born calf of a cow and said, “Narada, go and chant into the ears of the calf.” Narada went hesitatingly to the calf and chanted ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the calf that was born just a few moments back. As expected by Narada, the calf also died. Narada came back to Shiva and complained, “Oh Lord, you have made me the messenger of death. Why are you asking me to do this? Why is the mantra, which is supposed to be a saving mantra, killing every jiva that hears it? I am confused. Please tell me.”

Shiva replied, “Narada, do it just one more time. There is a noble king to whom a son is born a few moments ago. Go and chant the mantra into the ears of the little prince.” Narada was shocked. He replied, “Oh Lord. No, please do not make me the messenger of death again. My heart is already

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva

tormented by being the cause of death of three lives.” Shiva smiled and said, “Narada, do not worry. It will not happen this time. The baby will tell you the greatness of the mantra.”

With great hesitation, Narada went to the palace. The palace was fully decorated with flowers and arches. There were lamps lit all over the palace. The king was extremely happy to have the great Rishi Narada visit the palace on the occasion of the birth of his son. With great respect, the king took the sage to the cradle of the new born prince and asked the sage to bless the baby. Narada shivered with fear. He had no choice but to follow the instructions of Lord Shiva. With great reluctance, Narada chanted ‘Om Shri Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram’ into the ears of the baby. Narada closed his eyes tightly not wanting to see the tragedy that had happened on three previous occasions.

Narada felt the soft hands of the baby touch his cheeks and the baby told in a sweet voice, “Thank you, Oh great rishi, for taking me through three lowly births within a short time into this noble human birth. I was the one who was the worm in the cow dung. By the power of the mantra, I was immediately freed from that wretched body and was born as a puppy. You came and blessed me again with the mantra. By the power of the mantra, I was freed from all the suffering of that birth. I was born as a calf. You came and blessed me once again with the mantra. I got freed from that body and took birth as a prince in this noble and devoted family. How can I thank you enough for the great blessing that you have been giving birth after birth? Glory to you. Glory to the great Rama mantra. Glory to Lord Shiva, who always chants the Rama mantra in his mind.”

Narada was full of joy. He went back to Shiva and said, “Oh Lord, please forgive me for doubting the greatness of the mantra and doubting your words. Now I understand the glory of the mantra.”

Sage Bharata and the Deer

Here is a story from Srimad Bhagavatam. After ruling for several years, King Bharata went to Pulahashrama on the bank of river Gandaki to lead the rest of his life in austerity. Every morning he used to stand in the river facing the rising sun and worship the Lord as Suryanarayana. One day when he was worshipping thus, a solitary doe came to the river. She was in an advanced state of pregnancy. When she was drinking water, the terrifying roar of a lion was heard from nearby. She got frightened and tried to jump across the river. The strain was too much for the doe. She gave birth in the water and died. The new born deer calf was swept away in the current of the river.

The Rajarishi Bharata saw this whole episode and felt great pity for the young deer. He caught it and brought to his ashrama. He took great care of the small deer. He spent a large part of his time in procuring sustenance for the deer and in protecting it from other wild animals and forces of nature. The deer played with him all through the day and accompanied him everywhere that he went.

The mind of the sage was occupied only by the deer at all times. Thus, he strayed from the intention with which he left his great kingdom and came to the forest. As he was already old, soon the time of his death came. The deer was at his death bed. Looking at the deer with great attachment, he left his body and the deer.

As his mind was filled with attachment to the deer at the time of his death, he was born as a deer. However, because of his devotion to God and the austerities he had practiced before the deer came into his life, he retained the memory of his past life even when in the deer body. He felt great sorrow that he had missed a great opportunity in his past life. Even though everything was conducive for him to strive to attain spiritual fulfillment, he had got distracted and wasted his life. He decided to make

the best of the deer life. He went to stay near the ashramas of sages Pulastya and Pulaha. There he led as holy a life as possible in a deer body.

Guru Nanak and the Miser

Once there was a rich man in a village. He was a great miser. He loved his money a lot. He never spent the money, nor gave anything to anyone. Suddenly one day he realized that he will die eventually. He did not want to part with his money when he died.

He went to the priest of the temple and asked him, "Sir, when I die can I take my money with me?" The priest told him, "What a foolish man you are! Has anyone taken their wealth with him when he died? When a man dies, his children fight over his wealth. Strangers cheat the children and take a part of the wealth for themselves. A man spends all his life earning wealth only to find that either the wealth leaves him, or he has to leave the wealth at the time of his death." The miser cried out aloud and ran back to his money in his house. He could not bear the idea that he had to part away from his wealth.

Whenever any pundit visited the village, he went and asked him the same question. The pundits pitied him and explained to him that he cannot take even a broken needle with him. The miser spent sleepless nights in great agony.

One day, Guru Nanak came to the village during his travels. The miser asked the great saint, "Oh Holy Sir, I have spent all my life in earning wealth. I understand that I will die one day. I want to take my wealth with me when I die. Everyone says that I cannot do so. Is there any way by which I can take my wealth with me?" Guru Nanak looked at the miser with great love and replied, "Oh dear, you have worked hard all your life to earn this wealth. Surely it is yours. You can take it with you when you die." The miser jumped with joy. Finally, he had found a saint who had spoken words of nectar. He fell at the feet of the saint and asked, "Oh great Sir, your words have brought

me great joy. Please tell me how I can take my wealth with me when I die. No one whom I have met so far seems to know that it can be done.”

Guru Nanak asked the miser, “Have you travelled to foreign countries?” The miser said, “Oh yes, several times. I have travelled to several countries to do business. That is how I have earned all my wealth.” Nanak asked, “Is the local currency useful in the foreign countries?” The miser replied, “No. They all have different currencies. But I can buy gold and gems for the local currency here and take them with me. Gold and gems are valued in all countries.” Guru Nanak said, “Yes. So, you must do the same with your wealth. The local currency, and even gold and gems are not valued in the world after death. You need to convert all your wealth into a form that is valued across death.” The miser replied, “Yes. You are right. Please tell me into which form should I convert all my wealth into?”

Nanak replied, “Punya is the only one that is valued even after death. Spend your wealth for the good of the society by building schools, hospitals and temples. Help people in distress using your wealth. This way, you can convert your wealth into punya. Whatever you have converted into punya by such activities can be taken with you when you die. Whatever you have still left as currency, gold, gems, land, houses, etc. must be left back here. You cannot take them with you when you die.”

The rich man was very happy. He did not remain a miser any longer. He lived a simple life, and spent all his wealth for the good of the society.

An Interesting Kingdom

Once there was a kingdom, which had a very peculiar practice. Every five years they used to select the next king. The king would rule the country with all royal grandeur. When five years was over, the king was sent in exile into an island. The island had a thick jungle with a lot of wild animals. The animals used to kill and eat the exiled king. Every five years the people of the kingdom used to send the king into exile with a lot of grief. No one

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva

wanted to become the king. When the term of a king was over, the royal elephant used to be sent with a garland into the streets of the capital. Whomever the elephant garlands would be forced to become the king. So, everyone used to hide himself when the elephant was sent into the streets.

On one such occasion, a wise man from a distant kingdom entered the gates of the city. He did not know about the practice. The elephant found him and garlanded him. Everyone pitied the stranger. He was crowned as the king. Seeing the sadness on the face of the minister, the new king asked him why he was sad. The minister told the details. The new king asked the minister, "As I am the king, can't I put an end to the practice?" The minister replied, "You can do anything except changing this practice." The king replied, "If what has to happen cannot be changed, let me change what is to happen after that." The king called the royal architect and ordered for the jungle on the island to be converted into a forest retreat. Keeping all the trees intact, the entire area was converted into a botanical garden. All the wild animals which lived there were housed in a zoo on the island. A palace with a huge library and a great institution of higher learning was built on the island for the kings who would be sent into exile.

At the end of five years, when the king was sent to the island according to the practice, the people sent the king into the retreat island with a lot of joy and gratitude. The king also lived there for the rest of his life amidst learning and peace.

Hand of Karma Phala

Buddha was camping with his disciples on the outskirts of a town. As usual, his disciples went into the town begging for alms. There was a person in the town who disliked Buddha, his disciples and monks in general. A youthful and strong disciple was walking on the road. The person was so infuriated even at the sight of a young monk that he hurled abuses on him and Buddha and hit him. The disciple could not tolerate the unprovoked aggression. He hit back the person. As the disciple was strong, the person

got slightly injured. The person ran away to save himself from getting beaten further.

The news came to the Buddha even before the disciple returned from collecting alms.

When the disciple returned to the camp, Buddha called for him. Buddha asked him, “My son, why did you beat that person?” The disciple said, “He scolded me and you. He beat me first. I only hit him in return.” Buddha asked him, “Suppose you are walking on the road and a branch of a tree fell on you, what would you do? Will you hurt the tree in return?” The disciple said, “No. I will understand that it is the result of my past Karma.” Buddha asked, “Isn’t the beating that you got from the man also the result of your past Karma? The man is just a messenger of your own Karma phala. Why did you punish the messenger? By punishing the messenger, you are not only dishonoring the law of Karma, you are also creating a more severe bad Karma. You should rather introspect to see how you can get rid of such bad Karma phala.”

The disciple understood that everything that happens in life, through the agency of insentient things or sentient beings, are all his own Karma phala. The wise thing to do is not to react to the messenger, but look at things in a bigger perspective. One should think, “I wonder what I did in the past to deserve this. I wonder how many such bad Karma phala is waiting to pounce upon me. What can I do to nullify those? How can I become strong and be prepared to face them?”

Where to Account This?

There was a wealthy man named Ramu, who was very charitable. There was a famine in the area. Ramu opened a charity kitchen. Everyday in the afternoon, his kitchen served food free of cost to whoever came. A lot of people got benefitted. As the quantity being cooked was very large, the cooking was done in the open. One day, a kite was flying in the sky holding

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of Jiva

the dead poisonous snake in its leg. A drop of poison from the snake fell into the food being cooked. As the quantity of the food was large and because of the heat, the poison was weakened. However, whoever ate the food suffered from stomach pain, vomiting and diarrhea for a day. Ramu did not know the reason. He felt very sorry for the people. However, as he had been serving food for several days and there was a general scarcity of food, people continued to have food in his kitchen the next day also. Citragupta, the assistant to Yama, the Lord of Karma got confused as to, on whom should the fruits of the cause of suffering to so many people be accounted for. No one was responsible for the suffering of the people – the snake, the kite, Ramu and the cooks were all innocent. Citragupta asked Yama for clarification. Yama agreed that none of these people were responsible. But the demerit has to be put into someone's account. Yama asked Citragupta to wait for some time. The next day, a weary traveler, who was new to the place arrived in the city. He was wondering where he can find food in this time of famine. He saw an old woman sitting by the side of the road. He asked her. She was in the habit of gossiping, talking ill of people and spreading rumors. The woman replied, "Go wherever you want and get food. But don't go to Ramu's kitchen. Yesterday many people fell sick eating there. I think the wicked Ramu is trying to kill everyone." When she said this, Yama smiled at Citragupta. Citragupta understood. The sin of making so many people suffer was put into the old woman's account.

Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 1

Answer these questions in the light of what you have learnt so far. Discuss with your friends and your mentors, who are studying this with you.

- Why do bad things sometimes happen to people who do only good things?
- A person won a huge sum of money in a lottery. Where do you think he got that money from?
- A person works hard in his office. But somehow success eludes him. He feels that is not being paid enough for his work. What do you think is happening?
- Suppose a friend has been facing a lot of bad situations. He has lost a lot of money in poor business ventures. He is thinking of committing suicide. Why do you think committing suicide is not the right decision?
- Suppose you have a friend who is badly in need of money. The friend is a good person. His need is genuine. But the friend has no means to return the money in the near future. What should you do?
- A person works in a government office. He draws a decent salary and other benefits. To do his assigned duty in the office, he takes bribes from the citizens. He is clever and can manage without getting caught by the law. What do you think will happen to him in future?
- A person is born very brilliant. He can understand things very easily. But he is very lazy. He does not want to use or develop his talents. Why do you think he was born gifted? Why do you think he is not doing the right thing by not developing his innate talent?

Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 1

- When you are walking on a lonely road, you see a 500 rupees note falling off the pocket of the person walking in front of you, when that person takes out his phone from his pocket. What should you do? Why? What will happen if you take and keep the money for yourself?
- When you are walking on a lonely road, you see a 500 rupees note lying on the road. What should you do?
- When you are walking on a lonely road, you find a cover lying on the road with an address and phone number written on it. The cover has a lot of money in it. What should you do?

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Section 2

This section discusses the nature of the Whole.

The main question being addressed is “Who is God?”

“I see Rama in all things. You are all sitting here, but I see only Rama in every one of you. ... I see that it is God Himself who has become everything — the universe and its living beings.”

Sri Ramakrishna
(Gospel, 643)

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Who is God?

The sum total of all existence is called God (*Isvara*). Isvara is that Being to whom the whole physical Universe is a part of His physical body, all the minds of all the beings put together is a part of His mind, all the karma phala of all the Jivaatmaas put together is a part of His karma phala. He has Absolute knowledge, Absolute power and identifies Himself with all beings. There is nothing apart from Him. He is formless, not limited by space or time and not limited by any individuality. He includes everything that exists, but He is not limited by anything. He knows all the past and all the present. He knows the innermost thoughts of every being in the past and present. He has absolute control over all physical nature. However, He does not interfere in the way each individual Jiva exercises his freewill. Jiva has that freedom, which even Isvara does not interfere with.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

*mattah parataram na anyat kincid asti dhananjaya
mayi sarvam idam proktam sootre mani ganaa iva (7.7)*

“There is nothing apart or beyond Me. Everything here is connected to Me, like beads strung on a thread.”

*aham aatma gudaakesa sarva bhuta aashaya sthitah
aham aadis ca madhyam ca bhutaanaam anta eva ca (10.20)*

“I am the Consciousness residing in the heart of every living being. I am the beginning, middle and end of the living beings.”

Swami Vivekananda says, “After so much austerity, I have understood this as the real truth — God is present in every Jiva; there is no other God besides that. 'Who serves Jiva, serves God indeed'.” (CW VII-247)

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Isvara is the “whole” in every “individual” context of the Jiva. If the Jiva considers himself as the doer of actions, Isvara oversees the disposal of the results of the action. If the Jiva considers himself as an earthling, Isvara assumes the form of Mother Earth. If the Jiva goes to take bath in river Ganga, Isvara assumes the form of the Goddess Ganga. If the Jiva starts an endeavour, Isvara assumes the form of Ganesha, the Lord of obstacles and passage. If the Jiva seeks knowledge, Isvara assumes the form of Sarasvati, the Goddess of Knowledge. If the Jiva identifies himself as an Indian, Isvara assumes the form of Bhaarat Maata, Mother India. If the Jiva considers himself as a worshipper of Vishnu, Isvara assumes the form of Vishnu. If the Jiva considers himself as a worshipper of Shiva, Isvara assumes the form of Shiva. If the Jiva considers himself as a worshipper of Hanumaan, Isvara assumes the form of Hanumaan. There is only one Isvara who is omniscient, omnipotent and compassionate. So, anytime anyone worships anything considering the object of worship as omniscient, omnipotent and compassionate, he is worshipping the same Isvara through that action. This includes worship of nature, natural forces, ancestors, divine beings, saints, words, sounds, abstract diagrams, etc. All the names and forms, and also the nameless and formless are ways to worship the same Isvara.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

*ye yathaa maam prapadyante taan tathaa eva bhajaamyi aham
mama vartma anuvartante manushyaah paratha sarvasah (4.11)*

“Howsoever people seek the Infinite, I respond to them. People seek Me only through all those different ways.”

*yo yo yaam yaam tanum bhaktah shraddhaya arcitum icchati
tasya tasya achalaam shraddhaam taam eva vidadhaami aham (7.21)*

“In whichever form, through whichever ritual a devotee worships with faith and sincerity, I respond through that same form to strengthen the faith of that devotee.”

Who is God?

*tapaami aham aham varsham nigruhnaami utshrujaami ca
amrutam ca eva mrutyus ca sat asat ca aham arjuna (9.19)*

“I am the dispenser of the fruits of all actions – mundane (like heat or rain) and spiritual (mortality and immortality). I am the manifest Universe (which is an object of all perception) and also the unmanifest Consciousness (which is the subject of all perception).”

Isvara creates, sustains and recycles the whole Universe to match the karma phala of the Jivas. Isvara is not a person. He is a principle. Jiva is also not a person. He is also a principle. Isvara, Jiva and Dharma (law of Karma) are eternal. They are all principles. They are non-physical, formless and free from any idea of gender or species. You must drop your temporary role as a human being and identify yourself as Jiva, the spiritual principle governed by Dharma and having an eternal relationship with Isvara.

As Jivas go through the cycles of birth and death, they accumulate more karma phala than that can fructify in any birth. So, the time lapse between the action and the result becomes large. This makes people lose their faith in the law of Karma. This results in dominance of evil over good. To bring back balance and faith, Isvara manifests in the world as an individual while retaining the full knowledge His true nature. Such a manifestation is called Incarnation (*avataara*). There is no limit to the number of avataaras. Different avataaras manifest the power of Isvara to different extents based on the necessity. Some of the avataaras are popular for worship.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

*yada yada hi dharmasya glaanih bhavati bhaarata
abhyutthaanam adharmasya tadaa atmaanam srjaami aham
paritraanaaya saadhunaam vinaashaaya ca dushkrtaam
dharma samsthaapana arthaaya sambhavaami yuge yuge (4.7-8)*

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

“Whenever there is a decline in Dharma and dominance of Adharma, I manifest Myself in the world. In every eon, I manifest Myself to protect the good, to destroy the evil and to establish the faith in goodness.”

Thus, there is nothing other than God. God has manifested as the world outside us, including all the living beings. God is the pure Consciousness, which reflects in the kaarana sharira to give you your individuality.

Meditation

Meditation is important to assimilate the concepts that you have intellectually understood. It helps you to develop a personal relationship with God.

Gita gives detailed instructions for meditation. (6.11 to 6.14) Here is a simple procedure of meditation in the form of worship of God, that you can practice.

Choose a form of God that you like. If you do not want to choose a particular form, you can use the form of the golden luminous flame of a lamp.

Choose a name of God or a mantra that you like or got from your Guru. You can use the Gaayathri Mantra if you know it. There are several popular ones like these:

- Om Namah Shivaaya
- Om Namo Naaraayanaaya
- Om Namo Bhagavate Vaasudevaaya
- Om Shri Raam Jai Raam Jai Jai Raam
- Hare Raama Hare Raama, Raama Raama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare

Once you have chosen, you should not change your choice often.

Reserve a small room or a cupboard to keep the items of worship. Place the pictures or images of the deities which are the favourite of the people in your family. Place them neatly and artistically.

Fix a time for worship. It can be in the morning or evening or both. You should reserve at least fifteen minutes for worship. It is better to always

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

do your worship at the same time every day. It will be preferable to avoid other sounds from outside during this time.

You can sit on the floor or on a chair. Keep a small mat made of cloth to place on the floor or chair when you sit to worship. (6.11) Do not use this cloth for anything else. When you sit, your body, neck and head should be in a straight line. (6.13) Your whole body must be relaxed.

Follow this procedure everyday:

1. Keep a lamp lit during the worship.
2. For a few minutes, sing or chant a stotra or devotional song. Remembering the meaning when you chant will give additional benefit.
3. Gently close your eyes.
4. Pray for the welfare of everyone in the world.
5. Pray to your parents, teachers, saints and others to bless you with mental strength, moral life and peace of mind.
6. Thank God for all the good things in your life.
7. Visualize a fully bloomed lotus at the center of your chest.
8. Visualize a part of the all-pervading God condensing into a golden yellow flame of light in the center of the lotus.
9. Visualize the formless light taking the form of your favourite form of God. The form should face the same direction as you are facing.
10. You can mentally worship God through the form by offering whatever you like to offer. You can give a ritual bath, decoration with clothes and jewels, sandal paste, flowers, incense, light, fruits, sweets, water, etc.
11. Chant the name or mantra that you have chosen 108 times. It is better to chant in the mind without any movement of the lips or tongue. If it is not possible, you can chant in as low voice as possible.
12. Sit silently for a few minutes enjoying the presence of God. You may continue to mentally chant the name or mantra.

Meditation

13. Let the form turn into golden yellow light and dissolve into the Universe. The same God whom you worshipped with closed eyes is now available for you to see with open eyes as the world and its living beings.
14. Slowly open your eyes.
15. Read a few pages from any book on devotion or spiritual life. Various books which give stories of devotees of God, stories illustrating the teachings of Vedanta, incidents in the lives of saints, conversations with saints, lectures and letters of spiritual advice are all available for this. You can even read this book every day for this purpose. You can also listen to a devotional or spiritual lecture.
16. Bow down before God. Thank God for all the good things that you have got in life. Pray for the knowledge and strength to lead a virtuous and compassionate life that is useful to others and peaceful to yourself.
17. Apply basma or kumkum or something similar on your forehead as the sign of your prayer and surrender to God.

You can also write the name of God 108 times in a notebook reserved for this purpose. When the notebook is full, cut the pages into small pieces, make paper flowers out of them and make a garland out of those flowers and give in the nearby temple.

By keeping God as the goal in life, living a righteous life, offering all that you do as a gift to God, accepting all that you face as a gift from God and worshipping God every day, you will develop devotion to God. (9.34)

This devotion will help you to face the ups and downs of life with a calm mind. You will develop all virtuous qualities. You will get purity and peace of mind. Such a devotee is a favourite of God. (12.13 to 12.19)

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of God

Vyasaraya's Test

Vyasaraya had several young disciples. Kanakadasa was his favourite. The other disciples were wondering why he was the favourite of the Guru. Sensing this, one day Vyasaraya decided to have a test. He called all his disciples together. He gave a fruit to each disciple and said, "Here is a task for each of you. Take a fruit each and eat it without anyone knowing." All the disciples picked one fruit each and ran to different hideouts. One boy ate his fruit under a cot. Another boy climbed into an open well and ate his fruit. Yet another boy covered himself with a sheet of cloth while eating his fruit. Soon all the disciples were back swelling with pride at the successful accomplishment of the task. Except one.

Kanakadasa was still holding the fruit in his hand. The other disciples were surprised that Vyasaraya's favourite disciple had not been able to complete such a simple task. Vyasaraya asked Kanakadasa, "Looks like you are the only one who has not completed the task. Why have you not eaten your fruit?" Kanakadasa replied, "Master, yesterday you taught us that God is everywhere and within the heart of everyone. You told us that God knows every thought and action of everyone. How can I eat the fruit without anyone knowing? Wherever I go, God is there. I cannot hide from God. So, I am sorry that I have not been able to complete the task that you gave." When the other disciples heard this reply, they realized why Kanakadasa was the Guru's favourite disciples. Kanakadasa immediately put into action everything that he learnt. He adjusted his life and conduct based on everything that he was taught. To the other disciples, they were mere

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of God

concepts at the intellectual level. Vyasraya hugged Kanakadasa with joy and told him that he was the one who had done the task right.

Namadeva and Panduranga

Five-year-old Namadeva used to help his father in doing the daily puja of Panduranga, a form of Vishnu. Little Namadeva watched his father giving the image of the deity the daily ritual bath, dressing in beautiful clothes, offering sandal paste, and decking with flowers and jewels. As is the custom, after this, his father used to offer food to the Lord behind a closed curtain.

One day, his father had to travel to another town. He asked little Namadeva to do the puja to the Lord in his absence. Namadeva did the puja exactly as his father used to do. When the time came to offer food, he closed the curtain behind him. He offered food to the Lord and waited for the Lord to eat it. Namadeva had never seen his father offering food. He assumed that the Lord will eat some of the food that is offered. The Lord was not eating the food. Namadeva thought that he had made some mistake in the puja and that is why the Lord was not eating. He started crying and pleaded to the Lord to forgive of his mistakes and eat the food. The Lord could not hold any longer from the innocent cry of the child. He appeared in the same form as the deity being worshipped and ate the food. He fed some of the food into the mouth of the child too. The food got over and the plate became empty. The Lord disappeared.

Namadeva opened the curtain and completed the rest of the Puja. When he went back to the family members, they asked for prasada, the consecrated food. Namadeva said that the Lord had eaten the food and gave him also some. The food was over. They did not believe the child. His mother was the only one who believed Namadeva and was very happy. When Namadeva's father came back, his mother told the happy news to him. He was also very happy. All three of them again prayed to the Lord in gratitude and requested the Lord to have food at their house every day. The Lord

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

agreed and started appearing to them every day, eat at their house and play with Namadeva. Lord Panduranga became a living member of the family, though He would appear and disappear at His will. He was the playmate for Namadeva. Thus, Namadeva grew up. He composed several songs in Marathi on Lord Panduranga describing how the Lord lived and played with him. His beautiful poetic songs full of devotion became very popular and he became very famous.

Saint Jnaneswar and his siblings were contemporaries of Namadeva. The holy children were well known and greatly respected among the devotees of Panduranga. Muktabai was Jnaneswar's five-year old little sister. Gora Kumbhar, another famous saint and devotee of Panduranga held a spiritual get-together (satsangh) in his house. Several devotees including Namadeva and Muktabai attended it.

Gora was a potter by profession. There was a stick lying in his house. Child Muktabai asked, "Revered Sir, what is this stick?" Gora replied, "Child, it is used to tap the earthen pots to check if they are baked properly or not. A sharp metallic sound indicates that it is baked properly." Muktabai picked up the stick and told the people assembled there, "I am going to check if all of your heads are baked properly with this stick." She asked each person to bend down and tapped their head with the stick. She was a mere child and she was a great saint from birth. Everyone took this play sportively and offered their heads. She tapped each head and said, "This head is properly baked." Namadeva was proud of his relationship with Panduranga. He did not like being tapped on the head and tested by a five-year-old child. When his turn came, he protested that it was audacious for a child to judge people's heads using a potter's stick. Muktabai smiled and declared, "This head is not properly baked." She carried on with the other heads. Namadeva felt insulted. He left the place and went home.

Lord Panduranga asked him, "What happened? Why are you upset?" Namadeva described what happened at Gora's house. The Lord replied, "If

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of God

Muktabai said so, it should be true.” Namadeva started crying. He said, “You are my friend. I am the only one with whom you have been playing with every day. How can I be the only one who is not mature? If what you say is true, please make me perfect.” Panduranga asked Namadeva to go to Mallikarjuna Shiva temple in a nearby town and learn from Saint Vitthobha.

Namadeva went to the temple. He went straight to the shrine of Shiva to pay his respects. The scene that he saw shocked him. There was an old man lying on the floor of the temple, eyes closed, with his legs on the Shivalinga. Namadeva shouted, “Old man, why are you sleeping here? That too, with your legs on the holy Shivalinga?” The old man replied, “It is so hot outside. This is the only place where it is cool. So, I am sleeping here. I am too old and tired to move my leg freely. If you are so concerned, you may lift my leg and put it anywhere you please.” Namadeva grumbled, “What an arrogant fellow? He has no respect for God. Let me first push his leg away and then teach him a lesson.” He caught hold of the leg and pushed it hard a couple of feet away from the Shivalinga. To his surprise, another Shivalinga cropped up below his leg and his leg was on the new Shivalinga. Namadeva lifted his leg and placed it at another place. A new Shivalinga cropped up there too. Namadeva looked at the old man’s face. He was smiling. He said, “Have you not heard that God is everywhere? That is the lesson that Panduranga wanted you to learn from me.” Namadeva realized his mistake. He prostrated at the feet of Saint Vitthobha. He said, “Revered Sir, please forgive me for my arrogance. Please accept me as your disciple.” Namadeva stayed with the saint. He learnt that God is everywhere and in every living being. He learnt to live with this understanding.

Several days passed. Namadeva did not return to Pandharpur. Namadeva’s wife complained to Panduranga. Panduranga was also feeling lonely without his playmate. He appeared to Namadeva and told him, “Namadeva, have you forgotten me?” Namadeva replied, “You cannot cheat me anymore. Now I know that you are everywhere. What difference does it

make if I am here or at Pandharpur? You are the Panduranga of Pandharpur and you are the Mallikarjuna Shiva also.” Panduranga replied, “That is true. But your family is missing you. I also want to play with you like in the olden days. Please come back to Pandharpur.” Namadeva returned back to Pandharpur.

Ekanatha and the Donkey

Saint Ekanath was well known even during his time for his scholarship, devotion and wisdom. He went on a pilgrimage with some of his friends and followers. They went to Kashi, the holy place of Shiva on the banks of river Ganga. It is a custom to bring water from the holy river to offer and bathe the deity in other temples. Each pilgrim carried some water back to Pandharpur, the abode of Vishnu in the form of Panduranga, from where they started the pilgrimage. When they were a few miles before Pandharpur, they were crossing a parched area. Beside the road, they saw a thirsty donkey almost on the verge of death. Ekanath stopped and sat beside the donkey with its head on his lap. He gave all the Ganga water that he had carried for hundreds of miles to the donkey to drink. The donkey had a peaceful death. When his followers asked him the reason, Ekanath said, “God will be happier by using the water to quench the thirst of the poor donkey than by offering it at His temple. God is the life in all living beings. By serving living beings, we serve God.”

Ganthakarana's Worship

There was a devotee of Shiva. He was a fanatic devotee. He would not even listen to the other names of God. He wore bells on his ears, because of which, people called him Ganthakarana. If anyone chants the names of God like Vishnu or Durga, he would shake his head vigorously. Because of the sound of the bells, the sound of the other names will not reach his ears.

Everyday, he woke up early, did puja to the image of Shiva and only after that he would take any food. Following the tradition, he used to

Stories and Anecdotes on Nature of God

worship Shiva through the image by offering ritualistic bath, light and incense among other things.

One day he had to travel urgently to a nearby town. He could not carry his image of Shiva with him. In the morning, he searched for a Shiva temple to offer worship. He could not find any. There were only temples of Vishnu, Durga, Rama, Krishna, etc. Finally, he found a temple of Sankaranarayana, where the image was Shiva on the left half and Vishnu on the right half. As he had no other choice, he decided to worship God through this image.

When he gave the ritualistic bath, he ensured that the water flowed only on the Shiva half on the left. He decorated only the Shiva half with flowers and sandalwood paste. Then came the step in the worship where he had to offer light. He closed the eyes of the Vishnu half and offered light. When he had to offer incense, he closed the right nostril of the image before he offered it.

When he did this, God appeared in the form of Lord Vishnu. Ganthakarana was shocked. He closed his eyes and shouted, "Go away. Go away. I did not worship you. I worshipped only Shiva. I want to see only the form of Shiva. I don't want to see your form. Why did you come?" Vishnu replied in a deep loving voice, "Ganthakarana, I appear to the devotees as the form in which they have faith. I am pleased with your strong faith that the worship offered through the image will reach Me. In fact, your faith in the worship reaching Vishnu is stronger than your faith in the worship reaching Shiva. That is why you meticulously avoided your worship to the Vishnu half of the image. Pleased with your faith, I am appearing in the form in which you have strong faith. I am One. It is I alone who appear in the form of Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Hanuman, Rama, Krishna, etc. to please the devotees in whichever way they want to worship Me. Open your eyes. I am Shiva. I am Vishnu. I am every form of God that everyone worships."

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Ganthakarana opened his eyes and saw the form of Vishnu dissolving into formless light and the form of Shiva arising out of it. The form of Shiva again dissolved into formless light and the form of Vishnu arose out of it. He realized that there is one God, who answers the prayers of all devotees through their respective favourite names and forms. Also, he understood that God appears for the inner faith of the devotee, and not for the external worship. He was no longer bigoted and fanatical.

Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 2

As God is everything that exists, anything that you do is an interaction with God. It is God alone who plays the role of everyone you meet in life. It is God alone who decides everything that happens in your life, for your spiritual development.

You are also a part of the whole existence, which is God. Thus, various living beings in the world are various parts of the same system, like your hands, legs, eyes, ears, mouth, etc. Thus, no one is a stranger or an isolated entity. Everyone is your own kith and kin.

This gives a new basis for morality, and concepts of right and wrong.

Based on these new concepts and understanding, answer the same questions in the previous section titled “Questions for Discussion and Deep Thinking 1”. Discuss with your friends and your mentors, who are studying this with you.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Section 3

This section has some miscellaneous articles that can give you a more comprehensive picture of Vedanta.

It also discusses Advaita Vedanta.

“There exists only One, and not two. It is Satchidananda alone that has taken all these various forms; He alone has become the world and its living beings.”

Sri Ramakrishna
(Gospel, 746)

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Essence of Hinduism

The Purpose of Religion

Every human being pursues various goals in life. Though the goals are innumerable, the Vedas classify them into four categories called **purusharthas**.

1. **artha** – Security. Every living being has an instinct to preserve its own life. Many of human activities and pursuits are also merely to ensure the survival of self and one's near-and-dear ones.
2. **kaama** – Pleasure. Beyond the bare survival, every living being seeks pleasurable experiences and avoids painful experiences. This forms the next motivator in human beings also.

These two are common to animals and to human beings. A human being is no better than an animal if he stops with these two only. To qualify as a human being, he must pursue two more goals.

3. **dharma** – Virtue. Human beings alone have the concept of virtues like satya (truthfulness), ahimsa (love), brahmacharya (sense-control), asteya (fairness in possession) and aparigraha (voluntary frugality). It is man alone, who can take these virtues to their fullest bloom, where a person can be willing to sacrifice his life to uphold truth or to help a fellow human being. No animal fasts on certain days or follows the voluntary restraints of celibacy. These are what make human beings stand apart from animals.
4. **moksha** – Freedom. Life throws its mixture of ups and downs at every one. It is only a human being who can put up a brave smile and face life head-on. No power on earth has the capability to make a human being sad, if he has decided to be cheerful. True understanding of the nature of the individual and the world will enable the person to brave all

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

circumstances in life without being overwhelmed by them. This freedom is always there in every human being. Manifesting this freedom is called **jivanmukti** (free when living) (Gita 2.11, 2.55, 2.56, 2.57, 2.71).

Thus, the Vedas put forth a very simple, logical, down-to-earth list of human pursuits. The first two are pursuits are common to animals and humans. The last two make man into a divine being. Thus, Hinduism caters to two basic questions which is very relevant to every human individual and society:

- Inspired by what, would a human being be truthful, kind and self-controlled, even unto great inconveniences, including death?
- Inspired by what, would a human being be undaunted in spirit even at the face of extreme ups and downs in life?

These two are the main pursuits of every religion. They are universal and undeniable.

In trying to come up with a model to cater to these two pursuits, Hinduism builds up a rational philosophical system that explains reality in a most logical and practical manner. To drive them into the hearts of the people who belong to the Hindu culture, Hinduism has organically developed stories and legends. To help this process, Hinduism has evolved various traditions and customs that reflect the philosophy and the legends.

Principles of Hinduism

Hinduism is perhaps the least propagated among its own followers. When there is a fairly common opinion among Hindus about who their saints and leaders are, and which their scriptures are, there is very less understanding of the formal definitions and concepts that they teach. Almost every Hindu would agree more or less on many of the names of their saints and leaders - Rama, Krishna, Vyasa, Suka, Sankara, Alwars, Nayanmars, Ramanuja, Madhva, Caitanya, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Maratha

Essence of Hinduism

and Kannada saints like Jnaneswar, Tukaram, Purandaradasa, North Indian saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meerabai, modern saints and leaders like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana, Gandhi, Tilak, Tagore, Aurobindo, Bharati, etc. However, if we ask the person, "What was the leader's understanding of Hinduism?", "What did the leader teach about Hinduism?", he will not know. The kind of answers we might get are like "Hinduism cannot be defined.", "Hinduism is merely a way of life.", "There is no common concept of Hinduism.", etc. Much of these statements are unfounded. We can easily find that more than 99% of the Hindu saints and leaders in the past thousand and more years share a set of basic principles (called **Vedanta**) that are common. Almost every Hindu knows that the Vedas, Gita, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, various stotras and scriptures are the ones that define the concepts of Hinduism. Still, if you ask him what they say about Hinduism, he will not be able to list even a few concepts. Even though the common Hindu might not know or might not have thought about a structured presentation of concepts, there exists a structure. If the salient points of the structure are listed and told to the common Hindu, he will surely be able to relate his beliefs, practices and "way of life" to be in consonance with the list of concepts.

Some of the high level common salient concepts are listed here. References to the relevant verses from the Bhagavad Gita are given in brackets.

1. All creatures, including human beings seek happiness. If questioned under what conditions we want happiness, the answer is always, everywhere and unconditional. If unconditional happiness is possible, it should be here and now. The only reason we are not happy is because we are not availing the intrinsic happiness and fulfilment. Problems will be there in life. Even in the worst of situations, we always have the freedom to put up a brave, cheerful face and handle the problems head on. This emotional

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

independence by which we can assert our happiness that is independent of people, objects and situations is the goal. This is called **Moksha**. (2.11, 2.55-2.57, 2.71)

2. We are not able to avail the happiness because of wrong assumption about our identity. If we know and assert our real identity, we will be happy naturally, because that is our true nature. We need to go step by step from where we are. First, we need to get out of lethargy into activity. Second, we must turn selfish activity into selfless activity. Third, we need to develop the capacity to be introvert. Finally, we need to find deep within ourselves our real nature. (5.7, 6.3, 6.10, 6.27, 4.33, 4.34, 18.20)
3. Hinduism gives a philosophy, and a way of life based on the philosophy. Most of modern Hinduism is based on the Vedanta philosophy. Almost all of the saints and leaders of Hinduism in the past 5000 years agree upon some basic tenets of Vedanta. They are presented here. On this foundation, Hinduism allows people to have variations in the details and encourages diverse practices to suit different temperaments of people. Hinduism believes in the principle of **Unity in Diversity**. (4.1-4.3, 4.11, 7.21, 9.14, 9.15, 12.8-12.11)
4. The individual, called **jiva** is the possessor of freewill. As freewill is “free” from matter, memories and emotions, the jiva is not a part or product or property of the body or mind. The jiva is an independent entity, who expresses and experiences through the body and mind. (15.7, 15.8, 15.9, 15.16, 2.12, 2.13, 2.22)
5. The jiva is wholly responsible for all the situations faced in life. (6.5)
The present situation faced by the jiva is the result of the past actions (physical, verbal and mental) of the jiva. The future situations that will be presented to the jiva will be the result of the past and present actions of the jiva. The jiva cannot escape the good and bad

Essence of Hinduism

consequences of its actions, even by death. (6.41, 6.42, 16.18, 16.19, 16.20, 9.3, 13.22) This is called the **Law of Karma**.

6. **Isvara** is the sum total of all that exists. (7.4, 7.5, 11.7, 11.13, 11.38) Isvara is that Supreme Being, to whom, the entire material Universe is the body, the sum total of the minds of all jivas is the mind and identifies with the whole of existence. So, Isvara is everywhere as everything. (11.5, 9.4, 13.14, 13.15, 13.16, 13.17)
7. **Devataas** are the cosmic equivalents of the various faculties of an individual. For example, the sum total of the seeing faculty of all the jivas put together forms the seeing faculty of the Isvara, and is represented by the Surya devataa. Worship with a desire for specific worldly security and prosperity is done to the corresponding devataa. This kind of worship is inferior to worshipping the Isvara. (7.22, 7.23, 9.25)
8. Isvara has created, or rather has become or appears as, the **jagat** (Universe) for the benefit of the jivas to express and experience, by which they will mature in wisdom, which is the purpose of the existence of the Universe. For this, Isvara creates, sustains and recycles the Universe. (9.17, 10.20, 13.17) The jivas continue to exist with all their past effects and impressions intact even on recycling of the Universe. (8.19)
9. Isvara knows the innermost thoughts and intentions of every jiva. (10.20, 18.63) Isvara oversees the reward of every physical, verbal and mental action of every jiva in a fair and appropriate manner. (4.11, 9.19, 7.21, 7.22) This does not make Isvara judgmental because, Isvara is not different from the whole of existence. It is Isvara, as it were, that enjoys or suffers as the jiva itself. (13.15, 13.23, 9.24) Isvara is compassionate to every jiva. In fact, the jiva is not apart from Isvara. (7.7) It is just the Law of Nature that results in the reward, under the supervision of Isvara. Isvara wants every jiva to learn from the good and bad experiences encountered in life and

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

grow in wisdom. (4.33) Even if the jiva has done a lot of bad deeds before, making a resolution to change for good and trying to be good henceforth is the most valuable decision, because the current intention is more important. (9.30,31)

10. Isvara's teachings are available in the form of the **Vedas**, which was revealed to rishis in the distant past. (4.1) Isvara teaches the jivas through various saints in all places and in all ages. (4.2, 4.3, 4.34) Isvara is accessible to any sincere jiva in any place in any age. (7.21, 4.10) Occasionally, Isvara comes in the midst of the jivas in the garb of another jiva (incarnation) to help and teach the jivas. Isvara has come innumerable times in the past and will come innumerable times in the future. (4.6, 4.7, 4.8) Any teaching of anyone in any age is acceptable as authentic if it does not contradict the Vedas. (13.25, 16.23, 16.24)
11. By having a relationship with Isvara, which is based on faith, gratitude and love, the jivas can face the ups and downs of life with poise. The relationship will help them to be honest, compassionate, disciplined, unselfish, peaceful and happy even under extreme situations in life. With this equanimity and poise, the jivas will be able to learn from the various experiences, grow in wisdom and understand that they are not apart from Isvara. (12.13-12.20, 9.34, 12.6, 12.7) This relationship is called **Bhakti**.
12. To develop the relationship with Isvara, **puja** (worship) is a very effective exercise. Isvara can be worshiped as without form or through any form. It depends on the temperament of the worshiper. (12.2, 12.3, 12.4) The worship can be physical, verbal or mental. As Isvara is everywhere, knows the innermost thoughts and is compassionate, all that is needed is love and sincerity. (9.26) Isvara will know even if the jiva calls by any name. Isvara can be worshiped as male or female or neither or beyond. Isvara can be worshiped through any aspect of Nature, any of the devataas or any form. (11.5)

Essence of Hinduism

Different forms of mental worship are called **upaasana** (meditation). Hinduism has developed a detailed system of preparations and procedures of meditation that is suitable to people of different temperaments. (6.10-6.28) Usage of images and other representations of Isvara helps to concentrate the mind and form a personal emotional relationship with Isvara. Stories of incarnations, saints and devotees, stories of divine personalities which incorporate various aspects of Isvara, allegories that help meditation on various qualities of Isvara and various legends help forming a personal relationship with Isvara. Any form of worship invoking an all-pervading, all-knowing, all-powerful and compassionate entity is accepted as worship of Isvara. (7.21, 7.22)

13. As Isvara is the whole of existence, anything that the jiva does is an offering to Isvara and any situation that the jiva faces in life is from Isvara only. Thus, every moment of life is an interaction with Isvara only. So, doing full justice to the current situation in which the jiva is placed by doing its duty as an offering to Isvara, is itself a form of worship of Isvara. (18.46, 9.27, 11.55) This is called **Karma Yoga**.
14. At every level – physical, physiological, emotional, intellectual, subconscious and pure Consciousness – the individual (jiva) is not separate from the whole (Isvara). The individuality of the jiva is only an appearance and it is only for the sake of convenience of transaction. The individuality is not real. When the jiva understands fully and deeply that it is not apart from Isvara, the goal is reached. Freed from the cycle of desire, action and result, the jiva merges with Isvara and attains real peace. This goal is called **moksha** – freedom. (13.31, 13.32, 6.29, 6.30, 6.31, 2.71, 2.72)
15. The Hindu way of life is harmonious living with the world, people and other living beings in it, knowing the interconnectedness of everything, considering **everything as divine**. Hinduism encourages and celebrates diversity. All daily rituals, traditional customs,

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

festivals, stories, legends, pilgrimages and art forms of Hindus are designed to imbibe these principles. Engaging with them knowing how they are connected to the principles given here will lead to a rich cultural, emotional, intellectual and fulfilling life. This is the Hindu **Way of Life**.

With these as the common salient points, the details and practices vary from sect to sect and even person to person. Hinduism gives that freedom to the individual.

Hinduism welcomes the forming, merging and dissolution of any number of sects to cater to the different needs of people of various temperaments, provided the basic principles of honesty, love, discipline and unselfishness are upheld. Hinduism is open to various teachers, saints, mystics and cult-leaders. It acknowledges all of them of the past, present and future, as long as the basic principles are honoured by them.

Hinduism also encompasses various non-Vedanta viewpoints, which differ from the above listed points to various degrees. However, as mentioned earlier, almost all of the today's practicing Hindus would agree with the above-mentioned points.

Hindus consider a person belonging to another religion as people who worship the same Isvara in a different way. It is the people of the other religion who protest this and claim that they worship a “different” “God”. To a Hindu, there is only one Isvara, who can be worshiped in different ways. This makes the Hindu tolerant and in fact “accepting” and “respecting” of people, beliefs and practices of all religions.

A Hindu does not condemn the other points of view as wrong. He only says that these are what are most logical and practical to himself. If another person has a different set of points, he does not interfere or does not try to convert or convince that person. However, if that person challenges these points, the Hindu tradition has a very systematic and

comprehensive structured refutation that can stand any logical challenge. If a Hindu is not able to hold his ground it only means that he does not know enough of Hinduism. A systematic study of scriptures like Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads is needed to understand and defend Hinduism.

Hindu Stories and Legends

Hinduism has one of the richest collections of stories, legends, anecdotes and parables in the world. These reflect the principles of Hinduism in a colourful manner, which is easy to understand and assimilate.

The Vedas have several stories of devataas, rishis, teachers and students. Sage Vyaasa collected most of the stories prevailing at that time into a set of books called puraanas. They contain stories of teachers, students, kings, devataas, asuraas, saints and devotees. Several stories are also present in the two great epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These cannot be called mythology. Most of the stories would have originated based on some real event involving real persons. Because of the long passage of time and because of the Hindu tradition of extrapolation and exaggeration, they have attained the current form.

To these are added the books with the stories of various saints like the Aalwaars and Naayanmars of South India, the Bhakta Vijayam depicting the stories of various devotees of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, etc. There are a lot of stories of devotion and valour, with innumerable local variations, which form the rich tapestry of the Hindu heritage.

Every saint or teacher uses several stories and parables to convey the religious and spiritual ideas. All these drive the principles of Hinduism into the heart of the Hindus.

Every Hindu should know the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to a reasonable depth. Also, he should know some of the important stories in the Hindu tradition. As many of them are allegories, it is important that the

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

interpretation of the allegories is known too. Here are listed some of the important stories.

- Ramayana
- Mahabharata
- Sri Krishna
- DashaAvatara
- Ganga Avatarana
- Daksha Yagna
- Jada Bharata
- Vritrasura Vada
- Chitraketu
- Tripura Dahana
- Gajendra Moksha
- Chyavana
- Ambarisha
- Yayati
- Sakuntala
- Markandeya
- Viswamitra
- Harischandra
- Ganesha
- Kumarasambhava
- Savitri
- Satyakama
- Naciketa
- Nala Damayanti
- Lingodbhava
- Anasuya
- Basmasura
- Narada

Every Hindu should know the stories of some the saints. It is more important to know the important anecdotes in their lives than to know the biographical details. Here are listed some of the important saints, the incidents in whose lives are great lessons on Hinduism.

- Adi Sankara
- Ramanuja
- Madhva
- Purandaradasa
- Kanakadasa
- Namadeva
- Tyagaraja
- Bhadracalam Ramdas
- Samartha Ramdas
- Jnaneswar
- Meera Bai
- Tulsidas
- Kabirdas
- Surdas
- Chaitanya Mahaprabhu
- Narsi Mehta
- Chakkubai
- Thondaradipodi Alwar

Essence of Hinduism

- Thirumangai Alwar
- Thirunavukkarasar
- Sundarar
- Manikkavasakar
- Jnana Sambandar
- Kannappar
- Basavanna
- Ramprasad
- Sri Ramakrishna
- Swami Vivekananda
- Sri Sarada Devi
- Ramana Maharishi
- Swami Sivananda
- Swami Chinmayananda

Apart from these, there are a lot of traditional stories that highlight various aspects of spiritual life.

The following books can help in getting to know some of the stories and anecdotes.

- Ramayana – C. Rajagopalachari
- Mahabharata – C. Rajagopalachari
- Cradle Tales of Hinduism – Sister Nivedita
- Srimad Bhagavata – Translation by Swami Tapasyananda
- The Divine World of the Alvars – Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata
- Indian Saints and Mystics – Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata
- Ancient Sages – Swami Satyamayananda
- Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna
- Vedanta Through Stories – Swami Sambuddhananda

Hindu Way of Life

To be able to imbibe the principles of religion, it must be a way of life. Religion lives in the day-to-day life of its practitioners. Hinduism has inseparably integrated into the daily life, festivals, art forms and places in India.

Almost all the traditional forms of music, dance, drama and painting are based on the stories of Hinduism. Many of the commonly used proverbs,

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

idioms, illustrations and verbal expressions are based on these stories. All these are reminders of the principles that they depict.

There are several places of pilgrimage in India, which are associated with the stories, legends and anecdotes of Hinduism. The walls of Hindu temples are adorned by paintings and sculptures depicting various incidents in these stories. Thus, pilgrimage and visiting temples is a popular way to remind oneself of these stories and get their message into one's life.

Hinduism has a rich array of interesting and colourful festivals. Most of the festivals are days commemorating the important events in these stories. Thus, celebrating the festivals is also a way to remember these stories and the messages that they convey.

Hinduism has a rich set of rituals for everyday life associated with key moments in the day like waking up, taking bath, eating, travelling and going to sleep. It also has traditional ceremonies to mark various important events in life like conception, birth, naming, start of solid food, start of schooling, marriage, house-warming, 60th anniversary and death. All these rituals and ceremonies reflect and remind the principles of Hinduism in different ways.

Both in the stories and in the customs, Hinduism allows a huge scope for local and personal variations. There are innumerable thriving sub-cultures with their own variations. All this diversity is celebrated as the sign of life by Hinduism.

Here are some basic religious customs every Hindu is advised to practice.

- Greet others by the gesture Namaste, which means, "I salute the divinity in you".
- Wear sacred marks on the forehead in the morning after bath, which indicates respect to God.

Essence of Hinduism

- Start the day with prayer to God, pray to God before every meal and end the day with prayer. Prayer is a gesture of gratitude to God.
- Maintain an altar at home with the pictures and/or murthys of favourite forms of God and saints.
- Spend some time every day in the morning or evening or both in prayer. During this time, offer flowers, light a lamp, light some incense and chant some prayers, hymns, slokas from sacred texts or mantras in any Indian language. After chanting, spend a few minutes of silent awareness of the presence of God in your heart.
- Read a few pages of a religious or spiritual book every day. It can be Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata, Gita, stories of saints, etc.
- Wear traditional dress during formal prayer, visit to temples and on festival days.
- Visit a nearby temple at least once a week.
- Go on a pilgrimage to a holy place at least once a year.
- Visit a nearby temple on festival days and personally significant days like birthday, anniversary, first day of school, work, exam, etc.
- Learn some form of classical music, bhajans or chanting.
- Celebrate and support all the important festivals with both devotion and social involvement.

It goes without saying that the basic principles of good living are taken care of. Here are some of them.

- Lead a legal and ethical life.
- Spend time and effort constructively.
- Take good care of family members, especially old people and children. Spend enough quality time with them.
- Help near and dear people in their needs as much as possible.
- Be sensitive to social and environmental issues. Ensure that you contribute to the well-being of the society and environment.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

- Involve in some social service in the form of donation of time, effort, money or materials.

Is Hinduism a “way of life”? Yes, it is. However, the “way of life” is founded upon and is a tool to imbibe a set of well-structured principles, which are agreed upon by almost all Hindu teachers, saints, mystics and leaders.

Please feel free to contact us if you need guidance to start a Hinduism/Vedanta study group for children, youth or adults in your neighbourhood, temple or organization.

Goals of Life

Ask the people this question: “If I give you 10 lakh rupees to spend, how will you spend it?” We will get several interesting answers: “Invest in stocks”, “Go on a vacation”, “Start a business”, “Give in charity”, “Start an orphanage”, “Buy property”, etc. Some people will even say, “I don’t want it. Why should I take it? I will refuse it.” Some people will say that they would join a college to study or do research. When probed further, asking why they want to do that, the answer will be to create wealth or do social service. We can easily group all these answers into four:

1. Security and wealth creation
2. Enjoyment and luxuries
3. Social service and charity
4. Renunciation, spiritual knowledge and freedom

There is no 5th way to spend the money. These four are called *Chaturvida Purushaarthaah* – four-fold human pursuits. They are, respectively, artha, kaama, dharma and moksha.

Man seeks happiness. Initially, he seeks to attain happiness through the avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure. These are called *artha* and *kaama* respectively. As he becomes aware of his social obligation towards peace, he realizes that he should regulate his pursuit of happiness so that it does not disturb others’ pursuit of the same. This is called *dharma*. As he matures still further, he realizes that eternal, absolute, unconditional happiness cannot be got from people, objects and situations. He stops looking for it outside and starts searching within. By diligent search with the guidance of teachers and scriptures, he finds it within and realizes his eternal freedom from sorrow. This is called *moksha*.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

This concept of four pursuits is at the core of Indian Culture. Here are a few sources and expressions:

The popular shaanti mantra talks about these.

saha naavavatu – May the Lord protect us

saha nau bhunaktu – May the Lord give us the fruits of action

saha viiryam karavaavahai – May we work with energy

tejasvi naavadhiitamastu – May we be enlightened by studying

maa vidvishaavahai – May we not be hostile to each other

The first four sentences are about the four pursuits.

When giving parting instructions to a group of graduating students, among several do's and don'ts, Taittiriya Upanishad (1.11.1) says:

dharmaanna pramaditavyam – Do not ignore doing good (charitable) activities

kushalaanna pramaditavyam – Do not ignore activities that give prosperity

bhootyayi na pramaditavyam – Do not ignore activities that give pleasure

swaadhyaaya pravacanaabhyaam na pramaditavyam – Do not ignore study and teaching of the spiritual texts

When Sri Krishna gives reasons to Arjuna, to do his duty as a soldier to establish righteousness, he addresses from the point of view of each of the four pursuits in sequence.

Goals of Life

“The Dharma (duty) of a Kshatriya is to fight for a righteous cause. You are lucky to be called in for such a duty. It is not right to shrink away from duty.” (2.31-33)

“If you refuse to fight, people will hold you as a coward, which is worse than death to a Kshatriya.” (2.34-36)

“If you lose and die, you will gain heaven, and enjoy there. If you win, you will enjoy the kingdom here.” (2.37)

“Having an equal eye to pain and pleasure, gain and loss, victory and defeat, engage in battle. You will be free from the results of such action.” (2.38)

When the great ancient Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar wrote his magnum opus on life, he composed his book Thirukkural, with three sections – aram (dharma – virtue), porul (artha – wealth) and inbam (kaama – pleasure). He included topics related to renunciation, spiritual knowledge and God in the section on dharma itself.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently warns spiritual aspirants against being carried away by kaama (pleasure) and kaancana (wealth). To further it, Swami Vivekananda made the motto of Ramakrishna Math and Mission as “*aatmano mokshaartham jagat hitaaya ca*” (for the liberation of the self and welfare of the world). A spiritual aspirant should not be lured by artha and kaama. He should pursue dharma and moksha. Thus together, they cover the four pursuits.

These four goals are depicted in the forms of the Hindu deities. For example, Kali is depicted with four hands. One hand shows abhaya mudra indicating freedom from fear (artha). Another hand shows varada mudra indicating fulfilment of desires (kaama). Another hand holds a sword indicating sacrifice (dharma). Another hand holds a bodiless head indicating freedom body identity (moksha). Similarly, Ganesha is depicted with four

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

hands carrying rope (artha), sweets (kaama), axe (dharma) and scriptures (moksha). You can do the interpretation.

When a person pursues these four goals having God as the means and the end, they become the four stages of a devotee as presented in the Gita verse 7.16, though the exact words used are different. The suffering person who seeks security (artha) is called aartah. The person who seeks fulfilment of desires (kaama) is called artharthi. The person who is established in righteousness (dharma) and is seeking spiritual knowledge is called jijnaasu. The person who has attained liberation (moksha) through spiritual knowledge is called jnaani.

These four goals are natural outcomes of neurobiology. The human brain has three main regions. Each has a specific function. The area called reptilian brain is responsible for all involuntary functions of the body that are necessary for its survival like the heartbeat, breathing, digestion, etc. This area is also responsible for reflex actions that protect the body from danger. This is called *praanamaya kosha* in the Vedantic terminology. The area called limbic brain is responsible for emotions. It evaluates situations into likes and dislikes. The responses like anger, desire, greed, jealousy, etc arise here. This is called *manomaya kosha* in Vedanta. The area called neocortex is responsible for logical thinking, thinking from other person's point of view and decision making. It evaluates potential responses to situations into right and wrong. This is called *vijnaanamaya kosha* or *buddhimaya kosha* in Vedanta. These three parts of the brain are the seats of artha, kaama and dharma respectively.

By evolution, primitive life forms have only security as their driving force. Preservation of the individual and propagation of the species are the only goals of life. The reptilian brain takes care of this. As life forms evolved, they developed the concept of pleasure and pain to let the organism manage security more proactively. Thus, the limbic system came in. As life forms evolved still further, the neocortex came in, which can simulate

Goals of Life

situations using mirror neurons. The mirror neurons can voluntarily create the same chemical and electrical activity in the brain as sense organs do. Using this, we are able to imagine, run simulations of situations in the brain and decide what is right and what is wrong. Highly developed neocortex is what distinguishes humans from animals. This is indicated by the Sanskrit saying:

aahaara nidraa bhayam maitunam ca saamanyam etat pashubhir naraanaam

buddhirhi teshaam adhiko visheshaha buddhir vihiinaam pashubhir samaanah

Eating, sleeping, feeling afraid and procreating are common to animals and humans.

Buddhi is the special extra faculty of humans. If they do not use it, they are not different from animals.

As we have seen, Buddhi is the neocortex, which evaluates responses to situations as right and wrong by simulating future possibilities. Using this faculty, humans can break free from narrow selfish thinking and expand their thinking to consider the welfare of all living beings in the long term. When a person is able to completely break his thinking pattern from the constraints of individuality, it is called Moksha. This is the evolutionary plan of nature.

Interestingly, the Indian flag has been designed to highlight the four pursuits and their hierarchy. The green at the bottom indicates prosperity, which is artha (wealth) and kaama (luxuries). Higher than this is dharma (righteousness) which is indicated by white and the Buddhist dharma cakra (wheel). Higher than this is vairagya (renunciation) and moksha (spiritual liberation) which are indicated by saffron at the top. Thus, the Indian flag conveys the message that pursuit of prosperity should be under the

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

regulations of righteousness, and righteousness reaches its consummation by renunciation and spiritual freedom.

What is Worth Pursuing

We pursue so many things in life – money, entertainment, health, job, house, car, companion, children, pets, education, skills, knowledge, etc. We pursue all these with the hope that they will make us happy. We somehow seem to have an idea that happiness is the goal of life and these are all the means. With this wrong assumption, seeing poverty, disease, failure, quarrels, war and suffering in the world, we ask the question, “why is there so much sorrow in the world?” We even declare that if there is a God, He/She must be a very cruel person.

Vedanta declares that happiness is not the goal of life. Wisdom is the goal of life. Swami Vivekananda says, “Sense-happiness is not the goal of humanity. Wisdom (Jnâna) is the goal of all life. We find that man enjoys his intellect more than an animal enjoys its senses; and we see that man enjoys his spiritual nature even more than his rational nature. So, the highest wisdom must be this spiritual knowledge. With this knowledge will come bliss. All these things of this world are but the shadows, the manifestations in the third or fourth degree of the real Knowledge and Bliss.” (CW III-4) If we understand this, then everything in the world and our own life starts making sense. The dualities like success/failure, fame/disgrace, wealth/poverty, health/disease, pleasure/pain, etc. keep alternating. This whole scheme, when understood correctly, makes us wiser. Through this wisdom, we go beyond the dualities. The dualities no longer affect us. We are ever peaceful and blissful. This is the goal.

However, the maturity to learn the lessons in life to become wiser does not come in the beginning. So, there are two other pursuits which form the steps. The first thing worth pursuing is “good action”. Vedanta declares that good action produces good karma phala, called “punya”. This punya gives better opportunities in life and a better understanding of values. That

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

leads to the second thing worth pursuing. It is “good character”. The character, habits and tendencies of a person is called “samskaara”. This gives us peace of mind, which gives the balance and freedom from bias, which helps us to see the truth, which gives wisdom. This wisdom is the third thing worth pursuing, called “jnaana”.

Thus, these three things, “punya”, “samskaara” and “jnaana”, are the only things worth pursuing. Vedanta says that a person carries these three from one lifetime to another. Everything else that we acquire in life is left back at the time of death. These three things come with us even after death.

When we have gained sufficient punya, our thinking opens up. It gets refined. We start valuing character. Absence of psychological defects like anger, jealousy, arrogance, lust, greed, etc. are valued by us and we start pursuing values. To whatever extent we are free from these defects, that is our permanent gain. We carry our character across births. So even if we manage to free ourselves from short temper to a small extent, that improvement is a real gain for us.

When we are sufficiently free from the psychological defects, we can see that real happiness does not come from people (Gita 6.9), objects (Gita 6.8) and situations (Gita 6.7). We have the peace and tranquility of mind to become introvert and think deeply on the truths of life. We are able to meditate. We are able to inquire and understand about our own true nature, the nature of the whole existence and our relationship to the whole. This understanding, called “jnaana”, frees us from all anxiety and sorrow. This is called “moksha”, which is the ultimate goal, according to Vedanta.

Everyone has to start with the pursuit of “punya”, then proceed to the pursuit of “samskaara” and then further to the pursuit of “jnaana”. We need not wait. We can start pursuing all the three to the best of our ability,

What is Worth Pursuing

understanding and conviction. Depending on our maturity, that pursuit will make sense to us, bear fruit and take us further.

Desire, Happiness, Sorrow

There was a village. Like in any village, everyone knew everyone else in this village. There was a young couple, who were in love with each other. They wanted to meet privately. They decided to meet at ten in the night under a banyan tree at the outskirts of the village. The boy went there at the planned time. He saw the silhouette of his beloved. He went quietly and hugged her. He was in great joy. He loved the feeling of the absence of the painful physical distance from his beloved. After a minute, he wondered, why he was not getting the usual response from her. It was then that he saw her face. He was hugging a bear !!! He ran towards the village for dear life.

This story was told today at Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor, Bangalore, by Swami Dayatmanandaji. He told this story to point out that happiness comes from within. Not from outside. As long as the boy thought that he was hugging his beloved, he experienced great happiness. This is true of all desire, happiness and sorrow. These feelings come not from the object, but our imagination and interpretation of the object.

I have read a similar story in the book “Buddhist Tales” in the Amar Chitra Katha series. There was an only son of a rich couple. He was in the prime of his youth. He was rich, handsome, healthy, educated, cultured, artistic and sportive. He saw that life had so much to offer – so much to know, so many places to see, so much art to indulge in, so much to play. He did not want to get into marriage and spoil his life. His parents were worried and kept nudging him everyday. To avoid their pressure, he hit upon an idea. He made a beautiful golden statue of a girl. He made it extremely beautiful. He showed the statue to his parents and said that he would marry a girl who was as beautiful as that. He was sure that there can be no girl who is as beautiful as the statue. His parents were hopeful. This was the last hope for them. They got pictures of the statue made and sent it with messengers to

Desire, Happiness, Sorrow

various parts of the world. Nowhere could the messengers find a girl as beautiful as that. The boy was happy. His parents were worried. After several months, a message came that they had found a girl in a distant city. She was as beautiful as the statue and her parents had agreed to the proposal. The parents were overjoyed. They sent a caravan of gifts for the parents of the girl and arranged for them to come for the marriage. They told the boy. The boy was puzzled. Everyday, he watched the statue and was wondering how someone can be as beautiful as that. Slowly he started liking the girl who was on her way. He was looking forward to meet her and marry her. A few weeks passed. The caravan had not come yet. He asked his parents. They said that he had to wait longer as the city was far away. The boy asked his parents every few days and got the same reply. A few months passed. Still the caravan had not come. Finally, his parents broke the sad news to him that the girl had fallen ill on the way and died a few months back. The caravan had gone back. The boy was struck with great agony. He cried and cried for several days. He did not eat properly. He did not sleep properly. He spent all the time near the statue. Buddha was visiting his city. His parents took him to Buddha. Buddha showed him that desire, happiness and sorrow were all based on imagination. The boy understood and became free from sorrow.

There is another similar story which is popular among traditional pravacakas (people who give spiritual discourses). There were two neighbors in a village, which was on a busy road connecting several important cities. Both the families were very close to each other. They had a son each, almost of the same age. Let us call them Devadutta and Somadutta. Both the boys grew up together. After completing their education, both the boys wanted to go to various cities to see and also do business. As this was good for them and for the families, their parents reluctantly agreed. The boys took a small amount as capital and left the village. Together, they setup a good business and were very successful. They kept sending messages to their parents through other travelers from the

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

village. They often sent money also through some of them. Both the families were very happy, though they were missing their sons. After a couple of years, a traveler brought a bad news. Devadutta had contracted a fatal illness and died in spite of the best medical treatment given to him. Somadutta was taking care of the partnership and had sent money to both the parents. The traveler also gave the information that Somadutta will be coming to visit the village in a few days. The parents of Devadutta were crestfallen. Though the parents of Somadutta also were sad, they were not as broken as the neighboring family. After a few days, Devadutta came to the village. The traveler had conveyed a wrong information. He had got confused with the names. Now it was Somadutta's parents who became shattered. Devadutta's parents were very happy to see their son back, alive. The story illustrates that our joys and sorrows are based on the limited information and our imagination.

These stories show very clearly that our desire, happiness and sorrow are all based on various factors which are far from the truth. There is a nice saying: The beauty of a girl is an optical illusion created by the chemicals in the blood of the boy who sees her. This is very true and has been proven by biology. As the hormones get released in the blood when an animal grows into adulthood, it starts getting attracted to the opposite sex. This is a game played by nature. It is an illusion created by nature. This is true with all the experiences that we have through all the senses and the mind too. Just like any optical illusion, a wise person should recognize the illusion, appreciate nature for it and not fall for it. We should clearly understand which is reality and which is our unintentional imagination.

Bhagavad Gita says that by repeatedly thinking about sense objects, we develop attachment to them, which results in desire and anger. (2.62) We should avoid this by identifying the fleeting nature of experiences and developing forbearance towards the pairs of opposites like pleasure/pain, gain/loss, fame/censure, success/failure, etc. (2.14,15) We should do

Desire, Happiness, Sorrow

whatever is needed to address the situations in life, without any attachment to pleasure and pain resulting from the action. (2.47, 6.1) We should understand that happiness and sorrow are attitudes that are totally our choice. A wise person moves in the world, free from desire, without getting attached to anything. (2.71) So, a wise person does not have any sorrow. (2.11)

Deciding Between Right and Wrong

We have two faculties which influence our decisions. In any given situation, we will have various options for action. We will have to choose one. One faculty, called manas, evaluates the various options based on likes and dislikes. Another faculty, called buddhi (intellect), evaluates the options based on right and wrong. Animals also make decisions. However, they always make decisions based on likes and dislikes. Only humans have the buddhi, which works through the mirror neurons in the pre-frontal cortex. Using this faculty, we are able to mentally run various simulations of what will be the consequence of the action to us and others, in the near-term and long-term. By this, we can make better decisions. This buddhi is the one that distinguishes between animals and human beings.

Katha Upanishad calls decision based on manas as preyas, and decision based on buddhi as shreyas. It says that following shreyas will lead us towards becoming better people. Following preyas will lead to downfall. A noble human being is one who ignores preyas and acts based on shreyas. (Katha Upanishad, 1.2.1,2) The person would do what is right, even if it is inconvenient or gives pain, and would avoid doing what is wrong, even if it is convenient or gives pleasure. This faculty or capacity is called will power. Exercising the will power is the only way to increase it.

What is right and what is wrong? How do we decide in confusing situations? Can we depend on our gut-feel or conscience? Is there guidance from our scriptures on this? This is a question that is asked very often.

In most of the situations in our life, what is right and what is wrong is quite unambiguous. Only in some situations, things are gray. In the

Deciding Between Right and Wrong

situations where it is clear, if we do not do what is right and refrain from what is wrong, we will be violating our own judgement. The intellect is uncomfortable with this. The intellect starts looking for a justification for the wrong action. This results in indecisiveness in a similar future situation. Over a period of time, this becomes a habit. So, every time we violate our intellectual conviction, we are pushing more situations into gray areas, thus weakening our intellect. We are also weakening our will power. So, where we know what is right and what is wrong, following our intellectual conviction is very important. Without this, mere knowing is of no use.

Now, the next question is, how to strengthen our buddhi to be able to make better decisions and how to reduce the gray areas. Here the Hindu scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita give a lot of guidelines.

One guideline that Gita gives is to depend on the scriptures regarding what is to be done and what is not to be done. (16.24) There are several series of verses like prerequisites for knowledge (13.7-11), divine treasures (16.1,2,3) and three types of tapas (17.14,15,16), which enumerate right action and attitude. In general, the lists include truthfulness, non-violence, self-control, absence of arrogance, forbearance, cheerfulness, cleanliness, silence, respect to elders, helping others, etc.

Another guideline that Gita gives is to depend on the words of people of good character. (13.25) The conduct of wise people can be referred to as the standard of righteousness. In fact, Gita says that it is the duty of leaders to set an example to others by their actions. (3.21,25,26) It is helpful to be familiar with the life of saints. Then, when we need to decide something, we can think, "What would the saintly person do in this situation?" Taittiriya Upanishad also mentions this in verse 1.11.4. Gita has several lists of the qualities that saintly people possess like qualities of a wise person (2.55-71), qualities of a transcendent person (14.22-25) and qualities of a devotee (12.13-20).

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Gita mentions the Golden Rule: “Do to others what you would like others to do to you.” Gita says, “Keeping yourself as the yardstick, seeing others as equal to you, consider what is pleasurable and painful to them.” (6.32) This is often a great way to discern right from wrong.

Another hint that Gita gives is this. After doing the action, would you be comfortable in the presence of God or would you avoid Him? The Lord is the giver of the fruits of all action. He is impartial. So, if you do the right thing, you will not fear His presence. You will feel protected. When Arjuna saw the Lord in the form of Time, he saw that good people were bowing to Him and bad people were trying to run away from Him. (11.36) So this is one means to decide. A variation of this is to think if you can tell, with dignity, to your mother (or anyone whom you revere) about what you did. If you can, then it is right. Otherwise, it is wrong.

The merit of an action can be evaluated from the attitude of mind (to you and to others) that it would create or enable. If the action would pull down the mind to make the person identify with the body, it is bad. If it would make the person identify with the mind, it is better. If it would make the person identify with pure Consciousness, it is best. (18.20,21,22) For example, hunger and disease pulls down the mind to the body. So, alleviating these of people is a noble activity. Giving secular education pulls towards identifying with the mind. Giving spiritual knowledge pulls towards identifying with the Self. These define the relative merits of these activities.

Another way is to seek the “greatest welfare to most number of people”. Gita says, an action that is done as a duty (for the welfare of others) without seeking personal benefit is greatest. An action done for only personal benefit is not so good. Action that brings loss to oneself and others is bad. (18.23,24,25)

Every person does any action only if it gives benefit in the short-term or in the long-term. Gita says, an action that gives benefit in the short-term

Deciding Between Right and Wrong

but harms in the long-term is wrong. An action which appears inconvenient in the short-term but gives benefit in the long-term is right. (18.37,38) This analysis can be used in many situations to decide.

Thus, Bhagavad Gita gives several ideas to decide between right and wrong. One or more of these can be used in any situation. When we have decided, it is important that we follow what is right and refrain from what is wrong. Even after all these, we are not able to decide, we can discuss with people. If there is no opportunity for that, or we are not able to decide even after that, we can do whatever we think is the best out of the various options and pray to God to show more light next time. Following our intellectual conviction will strengthen our intellect and increase our will power.

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

(An edited version of this article was published in December 2015 issue of Vedanta Kesari, a monthly magazine of Sri Ramakrishna Math, published from Chennai.)

The message of the Bhagavad Gita is the message of the Vedas, which is the message of Hinduism. Thus, though Bhagavad Gita is taken here as the primary source, all Hindu scriptures convey the same idea and message.

The Goal

All creatures, including men, seek happiness. If asked when we want to be happy – morning, evening, Sunday, Monday, etc. – we would say “always”. If asked where we want to be happy – office, home, road, etc. – we would say “everywhere”. If asked under what conditions we want to be happy – success, failure, favourable, unfavourable, etc. – we would say “unconditional”. Thus, everyone wants to be unconditionally happy everywhere always.

Now, the question is, “Is such happiness possible?” The Hindu scriptures say, “Yes.” We can also observe in our life that there is no circumstance, however bad, where we cannot put up a brave smile and say “OK, what next?” We will have to face problems in life. No one can be free from problems. We have to try to solve the problems. But, there is no problem that can overwhelm us completely. We always have the freedom to say, “OK, what next?” and face the problem. Happiness and sorrow are in our hands. We are really free to be happy or sad. We just need the strength to face life as it comes.

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

The full realization and manifestation of this complete freedom from sorrow is called moksha. The Gita teaching starts with the verse 2.11, which says “na anu socanti panditaah” – “wise men do not have sorrow”. The entire description of “sthitaprajna lakshana” – “marks of a wise man” in the verses 2.55, 2.56, 2.57, 2.58, 2.61, 2.64, 2.65, 2.70 and 2.71 is a detailed description of the everyday life – thoughts, actions, attitudes and feelings – of the person who has attained this freedom. This is the goal to which Hinduism wants to lead us to. This is beautifully summarized in verse 2.71:

*vihaaya kaamaanyah sarvaanpumaanshcharati nihsprihah |
nirmamo nirahankarah sa shaantimadhigachchhati || (2.71)*

Free from all desires, the wise man moves freely among people, objects and situations in life without getting affected by them. He is free from the sense of “mine” and “I” regarding everything in this world, including his own body and mind. He attains to real peace.

We are already free. But we are under a delusion that we are dependent on people, objects and situations for our happiness. This is the cause of our sorrow.

If we analyze where does sorrow come from, we can find that sorrow always come from an unfulfilled desire. Desire is another name for sorrow and sorrow is another name for desire. Desire arises out of a sense of incompleteness. We feel that we need some people, objects or situations, without which we are not fulfilled. This sense of incompleteness comes from our identity as a limited individual, identified with this body and mind. As we are in reality free from sorrow, we are in reality not this limited body and mind. And, only freedom from this false notion can free us completely from all sorrow. Thus, moksha is possible only by dropping the identity with this particular body and mind. In fact, dropping this false identity is called moksha.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

The identification with the limited individuality, represented as the body and mind, is very very strong. The entire spiritual life is a struggle to gradually weaken and finally drop this false identity. Bhagavad Gita gives a beautiful graded approach towards this by making small corrections at each step in the perspective of ourselves and the world around us. Bhakti – love towards ishvara takes us through this process in a smooth manner.

Bhakti Stage 1 – Sakaama Bhakti

We all have the idea that we are individuals. We experience the world using our sense organs and mind. We express ourselves in the world, using our decision-making capability, as words and action. Thus, bhoktaa (experiencer) and kartaa (doer) are the two roles of our identity.

Bhagavad Gita first introduces “ishvara” as the Supreme Being, who

(1) knows the inner-most intentions and thoughts of all of us

(2) is the principle that awards experiences in our life as the result of the decisions that we make, in an absolutely fair and impartial manner

(3) is the creator, sustainer and recycler of this material universe to aid the individuals to “do” and “experience”

(4) is the “whole” as compared to individuals who are “parts”. Every cell in our bodies is a living entity. But we identify ourselves as individuals, who express and experience through the body and mind. Similarly, ishvara is that “person”, to whom the whole physical universe is the body and all the minds of all the beings put together is the mind.

Thus, there are three entities – jiva (individual), jagat (material universe) and ishvara. Jivas do action in the jagat and experience the results of their actions in the jagat, as ordained by ishvara.

To experience favourable situations in life in the long term, jivas should do good actions, called dharma. Dharma is

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

(1) yagna – paying back the five debts (panca runa) that we owe – to nature, other animals, other human beings, our ancestors and our teachers

(2) daana – giving donation as a duty with respect and humility to needy people at the right time and place, without expecting anything in return (verse 17.20)

(3) tapas – living a disciplined life of values like respect to elders, worship, cleanliness, truth, purity, non-violence, cheerfulness, serenity, compassion, study, etc. (verses 17.14, 17.15, 17.16)

As ishvara is fair and impartial, a person following dharma will feel secure because of ishvara. An honest citizen will feel secure in the presence of a policeman, whereas a thief will feel afraid. So, adherence to dharma is important to be able to love ishvara. Knowing that ishvara is the ordainer of the results, the person will be grateful to ishvara. This will develop into love for ishvara.

In reality, we merely want to be happy. We love only people and objects, which (we think) give us happiness. Thus, for someone or something to be lovable, it should give us happiness (like a sweet) or should be a means for our happiness (like money, which can buy a sweet). The former is called “saadhyam” and the latter is called “saadhanam”. However, essentially, all love is self-centered. Even a mother shows that special love towards her “own” child only. A person’s unconditional absolute love is only towards himself. This self is called “siddham”.

Love for ishvara also starts first as a means (saadhanam) to favourable situations in the world. World is the end (saadhyam) and ishvara is the means (saadhanam). We do work in the world aiming for some results. When we get a favourable result, we thank ishvara. As a token of our gratitude, we offer a part of the result to ishvara with love.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

This is not wrong to start with. Ishvara welcomes this. In the verses 7.16 and 7.18, Gita appreciates the people who worship Ishvara to remove problems and to get desired situations in life. This is the way the person can start interacting with ishvara. In verse 7.21, Gita says that ishvara answers the prayers of the person to strengthen his faith.

Gita says that such an offering can be made with simple things. Ishvara does not look at the grandeur of the offering. He looks only at the loving gratitude. Verse 9.26 presents this beautifully as

*patram pushpam phalam toyam yo me bhaktyaa prayachchhati |
tadaham bhaktyupahrutamashnaami prayataatmanah || (9.26)*

I accept the devoted offering of a leaf, flower, fruit or water offered by a righteous (honest, disciplined, compassionate, etc.) person.

To deepen the love towards ishvara, various forms and methods of worship are presented. Human beings need forms and rituals as psychological tools. To show our respect and to deepen our positive emotions to the country, we need to use a flag and salute it. The flag is a symbol of the country and the act of saluting is a ritual. When we meet people, we shake hands, which is a ritual. Saying “hello”, “good bye”, “thank you”, “you are welcome”, “sorry”, “it is OK”, etc. are all rituals. Even when we really mean them, they are needed to express our feelings. To show our love towards another person, we give a flower. That is a ritual. Rituals are needed to express our emotions and to deepen them.

Ishvara can be worshiped through any of the various forms. The person can choose the form to his liking. As ishvara knows the innermost thoughts, what we need is sincerity. The external form does not matter. Ishvara can be worshiped as Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Krishna, Hanuman, Ganesha, Parvati, etc. Any form like Linga, Salagrama, Rudraksha, flower, fire, etc. can be used.

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

Also, depending on the context, ishvara can be worshiped in a relevant form. For example, while starting a financial endeavour, ishvara is worshiped as Laxmi. While starting a work, ishvara is worshiped as Ganesha. Before taking bath in Ganga, ishvara is worshiped as Ganga Mata. When considering ourselves as citizens of India, ishvara is worshiped as Bharat Mata. When considering ourselves as Earthlings, ishvara is worshiped as Bhumi Mata. When showing gratitude for the light and energy given by the Sun, ishvara is worshiped as Surya Devata.

Gita says in verse 7.21:

*yo yo yaam yaam tanum bhaktah shraddhayaarchitum ichchhati |
tasya tasyaachalaam shraddhaam taameva vidadhaamyaham || (7.21)*

Whoever in whichever form or method wishes to worship Me with devotion, I accept the worship through those forms and methods, and strengthen the faith of the worshiper.

The various methods of worship like rituals, pilgrimage, singing, dancing, chanting, meditation, japa, etc. help to develop a personal relationship with ishvara and deepens the emotions of the person. In chapter 6 verses 6.5 to 6.36, Gita gives detailed instructions on meditation, including leading a meditation-conducive lifestyle, the way to make the seat, way to sit, bring back the wandering mind, etc. In verses 17.4, 17.5, 17.6, 17.11, 17.12 and 17.13 Gita advises to avoid worshiping negative forces with ill-will towards others and worship positive forces without any specific selfish material agenda.

Bhakti Stage 2 – Ananya Bhakti or Nishkaama Bhakti

Love exists in our lives in various forms. Love of money is called lobha – greed. Love of sense pleasure is called kaama – lust. Love towards a friend is called sakhya. Love of a mother towards her child is called vaatsalya. Love of ishvara is called bhakti.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Bhakti is different from other forms of love because of various factors like the following:

(1) ishvara is a conscious being, unlike money or pleasures

(2) ishvara knows our innermost thoughts, unlike other humans

(3) ishvara is not dependent on us, unlike other humans

(4) ishvara is infallible, unlike other humans

(5) ishvara is infinite and can accommodate everyone, unlike humans or objects, which are limited

Because of these, bhakti makes a person honest, selfless, humble, forbearing, loving and dispassionate. These characters are the means and the result of bhakti. Also, because ishvara is impartial and infinite, He is always available. The love of the person gets truly and fully reciprocated. It is like the light of the Sun always being available to everyone. Whoever uses it gets benefited. The amount of benefit derived depends only on the user. Thus, to develop bhakti, Gita proposes an interesting method. It advises the person to follow a lifestyle such that he will become dear to ishvara. This is presented in verses 12.13 and 12.14, and the few verses following them.

*adveshtaa sarvabhootaanaam maitrah karuna eva ca |
nirmamo nirahankarah samadukhasukhah kshamii || (12.13)
santushtah satatam yogii yataatmaa drudhanishchayah |
mayyarpitamanobuddhir yo madbhaktah sa me priyah || (12.14)*

That person, who is without hatred towards any living being, being friendly and compassionate, free from greed, free from self-centeredness, having equanimity towards favourable and unfavourable situations, forbearing, being always contented, being self-controlled, having firm faith, and having offered his mind and intellect to Me, is dear to Me.

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

When a person follows this form of bhakti, slowly instead of doing actions for himself and offering the results to ishvara, he will start doing actions for the pleasure of ishvara. To reinforce this attitude, Gita says “aham hi sarvayagnaanaam bhoktaa ca prabhureva ca” (9.24) – “I am the recipient of all actions and offerings.” and “bhoktaaram yagnatapasaam” (5.29) – “I am the recipient of all actions and austerities.” The person develops the attitude, “Whatever I do, I do it for You.” Verse 9.27 captures this beautifully.

*yatkaroshi yadashnaasi yajjuhoshi dadaasi yat |
yattapasyasi kaunteya tatkurushva madarpanam || (9.27)*

Whatever you contribute, whatever you consume, whatever action you do, whatever donation or alms you give, whatever austerities and disciplines you follow, do them as an offering to Me.

When this attitude sets in, ishvara is no longer the means (saadhanam) for happiness. Ishvara becomes the primarily loved entity (saadhyam). Everything in the world become only means to please ishvara.

Thus, out of the two roles – bhoktaa (experiencer) and kartaa (doer) – the former is given up. The person no longer considers himself as the bhoktaa. His desires for worldly objects and pleasures fade away naturally. His identity as bhoktaa becomes very weak.

As such a person does not care much about his worldly needs, ishvara Himself ensures that his needs are met. Verse 9.22 gives this assurance.

*ananyaashchintayanto maam ye janaah paryupaasate |
teshaam nityaabhiyuktaanaam yogakahemam vahaamyaham || (9.22)*

To the people, who worship Me without caring about the world, I carry whatever is needed by them to live in the world and take care of their well being.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Even if the person who reaches this stage had done several bad deeds in his life, he can be considered as a saint.

*api chetsuduraachaaro bhajate maamananyabhaak |
saadhureva sa mantavyah samyagvyavasito hi sah || (9.30)
kshipram bhavati dharmaatmaa shashvachchhaantim nigachchhati |
kaunteya pratijaaniihi na me bhaktah pranashyati || (9.31)*

If an unrighteous person worships Me without caring for worldly things, he should be considered as a saint because he has taken the right resolution. Soon he will become righteous and attain peace. Arjuna, I promise, My devotee will not be destroyed.

Bhakti Stage 3 – Vishvarupa Ishvara Bhakti

At this stage, Gita presents two aspects of ishvara.

Ishvara is the material cause of the world. Everything in the world is nothing but manifestations of ishvara only. The material universe is not different from ishvara. Though the world does not limit ishvara, the world is not outside ishvara. Ishvara is the essence of everything in the world. He is the life of the living beings, the strength of the strong, courage of the brave, austerity of the ascetics, smell of the earth, sapidity of water, light of fire, etc. Ishvara is also the law that governs the world – the physical laws and moral laws – called ritam or dharma. These are presented in verses 7.4, 7.8, 7.9, 7.10 and 7.11, and almost the whole of 10th and 11th chapters.

Also, ishvara is the single Consciousness principle that drives the entire world. Ishvara is the principle that powers our existence, intellect, mind and senses. This is presented in verse 7.5.

*apareyamitastvanyaam prakruitim viddhi me paraam |
jivabhootaam mahaabaaho yayedam dhaaryate jagat || (7.5)*

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

Know that apart from My material nature is My higher nature. It is this higher nature in the form of the Consciousness principle that sustains the world.

Just like electricity powers various appliances connected to the circuit, ishvara powers all of jagat (material world) and the jivas (living beings). Just as various appliances behave differently based on their nature to give light, wind, heat, cold, etc., various aspects of the world and the living beings exhibit various characteristics based on their nature. Verse 7.7 gives a beautiful illustration:

*mattah parataram naanyatkinchidasti dhananjaya |
mayi sarvamidam protam sootre maniganaa iva || (7.7)*

There is nothing outside or beyond Me. Everything in the world is strung on to Me like beads on a string.

These two aspects of ishvara are called aparaa prakruti (ingredient of matter and mind) and paraa prakruti (Consciousness). These two together constitute the entire existence. The individual person exists as a superimposition on ishvara.

When this is understood, there exist only two entities – the person and ishvara. Every moment of life is a play between the person and ishvara. There is no third entity. Everything other than the person is merged into a single entity, which is ishvara. This attitude is called visvarupa ishvara darshana.

Bhakti Stage 4 – Advaita Bhakti or Jnanam

At this stage, Gita presents the real identity of the person as pure Consciousness. With this, the individual identity of the person is given up in the ishvara. The person surrenders himself completely to ishvara. From the standpoint of Consciousness, there is no difference between ishvara and the person, because both identify themselves as the same Consciousness.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

As one's unconditional love is only towards oneself, this identity results in the true love for ishvara. Ishvara is elevated from the earlier statuses of saadhanam and saadhyam to siddham.

Thus, the role of the person as kartaa (doer) is also given up. With the limited identity been thus erased, there is no locus for the effects of karma. There is only peace and bliss. There is absolutely no sorrow at all. This is highlighted in the famous verse 18.66.

*sarvadharmaanparityajya maamekam sharanam vraja |
aham tva sarvapaapebhyo mokshayishyaami maa shuchah || (18.66)*

Giving up all concepts of doership, surrender your limited individual identity into Me as the one single existing entity. By this, I will free you from the favourable and unfavourable effects of all actions. Do not grieve.

Conclusion

It will take several lifetimes to gradually develop step by step to reach this stage. Verse 7.19 says:

*bahoonam janmanaamante jnanavaan maam prapadyate |
vaasudevah sarvamiti sa mahaatmaa sudurlabhah || (7.19)*

At the end of several lives, the wise man knows Me as the material cause and the Conscious principle in everything. Such a person is a great one and is very rare.

This development continues across lifetimes, picking up from where it was left. This assurance is given in the Gita in verses 6.40 to 6.44. Thus, even death cannot deprive even the smallest progress made in this path.

Thus, Gita leads us step by step from wherever we are to moksha through the path of bhakti.

When the person has dropped the bhoktaa (experiencership) and kartaa (doership), then the limited individuality of identification with the

Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

body and mind drops. The person leads a life of righteousness, purity, compassion and dispassion, full of peace and joy for the rest of his life. He is called a jivanmukta – one who is free even when living. This is the goal of Gita, Veda and Hinduism. Bhakti is a smooth path towards the goal.

Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal of life is not pleasure or possessions. The ultimate goal of life is wisdom. All pleasure is momentary. All possessions gained in life are left back at death. Only wisdom gained is carried forth. Isvara creates the situations in the life of the Jiva (in the form of dualities like pain and pleasure) according to his karma phala, to enable the Jiva to gain the wisdom that everything is Isvara only. Such a wise person sees the hand of Isvara in every situation in life. He sees Isvara in everything that he sees. Everything that he does becomes an offering (*arpana*) to Isvara. He accepts everything that happens as gift (*prasaada*) from Isvara. When the Jiva gains this wisdom, he is not carried away by the dualities of life like pain and pleasure, loss and gain, failure and success, infamy and fame, etc. In every situation, he does what is appropriate without any attachment to the results. Firmer the conviction of this wisdom, freer is the Jiva from the psychological problems of lust, greed, anger, jealousy, arrogance and delusion. This freedom and its effects of equanimity and peace of mind are built up life after life.

Swami Vivekananda says, "Sense-happiness is not the goal of humanity. Wisdom (Jnâna) is the goal of all life. We find that man enjoys his intellect more than an animal enjoys its senses; and we see that man enjoys his spiritual nature even more than his rational nature. So, the highest wisdom must be this spiritual knowledge. With this knowledge will come bliss. All these things of this world are but the shadows, the manifestations in the third or fourth degree of the real Knowledge and Bliss." (CW III-4)

When this peace is gained to a certain degree, the Jiva can move to the Absolute point of view. The Jiva can look deeper within and realize that the innermost core of his own being is not different from that of Isvara. This is beautifully and poetically expressed in the Mundaka Upanishad in the

Ultimate Goal

allegory of the two golden birds. The translation of the mantras is given in Swami Vivekananda's words.

*dvaa suparnaa sayujaa sakhaayaa samaanam vriksham parishasvajaate |
tayoranyah pippalam svaadvattyanashnannanyo abhichaakasheeti ||
samaane vriksho purusho nimagno.anishayaa shochati muhyamaanah |
jushtam yadaa pashyatyanyameeshamasya mahimaanamiti veetashokah
||
yadaa pashyah pashyate rukmavarnam kartaarameesham purusham
brahmayonim |
tadaa vidvaanah punyapaape vidhooya niranjanah paramam saamyam
upaiti ||*

“The whole of the Vedanta Philosophy is in this story: Two birds of golden plumage sat on the same tree. The one above, serene, majestic, immersed in his own glory; the one below restless and eating the fruits of the tree, now sweet, now bitter. Once he ate an exceptionally bitter fruit, then he paused and looked up at the majestic bird above; but he soon forgot about the other bird and went on eating the fruits of the tree as before. Again, he ate a bitter fruit, and this time he hopped up a few boughs nearer to the bird at the top. This happened many times until at last the lower bird came to the place of the upper bird and lost himself. He found all at once that there had never been two birds, but that he was all the time that upper bird, serene, majestic, and immersed in his own glory.” (CW VII-80)

The lower bird is the Jiva, the wielder of the freewill. The upper bird is the Atman (identical to Brahman), of the nature of pure Consciousness. The first step is to drop our identity with the body and mind, and start identifying ourselves as the Jiva, that goes through the karmic cycle of birth and death. The second step is to drop that individuality also, and identify ourselves as the pure Consciousness.

We should start with the first step. If we take care of the first step, Isvara will take care of the second step for us.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Sri Krishna says in the Gita,

*ye tu sarvaani karmaani mayi sannyasya mat paraah
ananyena eva yogena maam dhyayanta upaasate
tesham aham samuddhartha mrtyu samsaara saagaraat
bhavaami na chiraat paaratha mayi aaveshita cetasaam (12.5-6)*

“Whoever, having Me as the Goal, offers all actions to Me, meditates on Me with concentration, I will save the person from the whirlpool of karmic cycle (samsaara).”

Knowing oneself as the pure Universal Consciousness, instead of an individual is Moksha. This knowledge will be given to you by Isvara through a Guru when you are ready for it. Preparing yourself for it is the first step. This first step is called Dharma. Most of this workshop is on the first step only.

Spiritual Journey

Initially, you see the world as an insentient object. You see the other living beings as competitors in your pursuit of happiness in life, which you wrongly believe to come from objects and situations. You blame other people and situations for your shortcomings. You question the merit of leading a life of integrity and compassion. You keep asking, “What is in it for me?” You want all the best in the world with as minimal contribution from you.

In the second level, you understand that everything that happens in your life is the result of what you have done in the past. You don't see anyone as a competitor or as the cause of your happiness or sorrow. You understand that your destiny is in your own hands only. No one can change what you deserve. You compete with yourself. This enables you to lead a life of integrity, compassion and utility to the world. You have a “Give and take” relationship with the world and other living beings.

In the third level of understanding, you accept that it is God who has become the world and all its living beings. You see the hand of God in every situation in life. There are only two entities in existence – you and God. Whole life is a beautiful play between you and God. You collaborate with God. This gives you a new reason to lead a life of integrity, compassion and utility. You keep asking, “How can I contribute to the world and the living beings?” You don't expect anything in return.

In the fourth level of understanding, you realize that it is God who plays your role too. You are a mere witness to everything that happens. The

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

whole world, including your own life, is a grand show put up by God for you to see, enjoy, learn, develop detachment and realize your eternal intrinsic freedom.

In the final level, you realize that you are pure Consciousness. Everything arises in you, exists in you and resolves back into you. God and jivas are your own manifestations in the world.

Thus, in your path to freedom, God is your eternal companion. In the Gita, Krishna gives an assurance that if you strive and attain till the fourth level, He will take care of the fifth level for you.

Break Free

(An edited version of this article was published in the June 2018 issue of Vedanta Kesari, the monthly magazine published from Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.)

The whole development of humanity and of individual human beings is a journey of breaking free.

Matter is governed by the laws of physics. The movement of matter can be determined by the physical laws within certain limits, which are also physical laws. However, no law of physics can predict the trajectory of a house fly or even a simple bacteria. Life starts when it breaks free from the laws of physics.

Nature puts a number of physical restrictions and mankind overcomes each of them. Man beats the cold by clothing and heating. Man beats the heat by air conditioning. Man beats other predators by weapons. Man beats distances by transportation. Man stops hunting for food by growing his own. Man fights disease by advances in medicine. All the technological development of man is breaking free from external nature.

Animal life is governed by survival and competition. Human life is governed by sacrifice and cooperation. Strong bullies the weak in animal kingdom. The strong protects the weak in human kingdom. Darwin's laws don't apply to real human societies.

Inner life is also governed by the laws of biology – the instinct to eat, survive, sleep and procreate. Man is different from animals when he extends or defies these. It is man alone who decides when to wake up, when to sleep, when to eat, what to eat, whom to live with, how to live, how many children to have, etc. Every biological necessity is refined or broken. From food, we

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

have created elaborate cuisine. From sound, we have created music. From vision, we have created beautiful art. From smell, we have created fragrance. From forests, we have created gardens. From movement, we have created dance, tourism and pilgrimage. From partnership, we have created family. From herds, we have created societies. We defy nature too. Nature says, "You are hungry, eat." Man says, "Today is Ekadasi. I am fasting." Nature says, "Don't do that. You will die." Man says, "I will die for my love and my ideal." Nature says, "You are sleepy. Sleep." Man says, "Tonight is Shivaratri. I am on vigil." Nature says, "Procreate." Man says, "I am a monk." It is by breaking the rules of biology that we become human beings. All cultural development of man is refining or breaking free from internal biological nature.

Nature gives me success and says, "Rejoice." I say, "Many people helped me." I kneel down with gratitude and share my success. Nature gives me failure and says, "Kneel down and cry." I stand up and say, "I gave my best. I will try again." Nature takes away what I deserve and says, "Shout in anger." I say, "No problem. You have the right to be stupid." Nature takes away a dear one and says, "Weep." I say, "Everyone dies one day. I served him well. I wish him well in the hereafter too." Nature gives bounty to my neighbour and says, "Be jealous." I say, "He deserves it. Good for him." All spiritual progress is breaking free from psychological defects like anger, jealousy, greed, arrogance, fear, sorrow, etc.

The progress does not stop there.

The most fundamental rules of individuality, time, space and causation are also to be broken. Nature says, "You are finite." I say, "I am not an individual. I am pure Consciousness. The whole Universe exists in Me. I am infinite. It is you, Oh Nature, which is finite. I am not limited by you. You exist in me as a small fragment of My Existence." Nature says, "You will die." I say, "I am unchangeable. Oh Nature, it is you that changes with Me as the background. I don't die. It is you that is dying and is reborn every moment. I

Break Free

am beyond time. Time exists in Me.” Nature says, “You are governed by cause and effect.” I say, “When I am the unchangeable, which is the cause and which is the effect? Oh Nature, it is you who is governed by the law of cause and effect. Not Me.” This ultimate breaking free from Nature is Moksha or Nirvana.

The whole of progress from matter to life, to mind, to humanity, culminating in divinity is a series of breaking free from Nature.

Swami Vivekananda says, “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.” (Complete Works, Vol I, page 257)

Read the lecture by Swami Vivekananda titled “What is Religion” (Complete Works, Vol I, page 333-343), which covers almost all the discussion above in his words.

All is One

(An edited version of this article was published in the March 2017 issue of Vedanta Kesari, the monthly magazine published from Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.)

“There exists only One, and not two. It is Satchidananda alone that has taken all these various forms; He alone has become the world and its living beings.” (Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p746) This idea occurs repeatedly in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. This idea occurs again and again in the Upanishads, Gita, other Hindu Scriptures and in the teachings of various Hindu saints.

This statement can be understood from two different stand points – from the Relative (vyaavahaarika, saguna) point of view and from the Absolute (paarmaarthika, nirguna) point of view.

Oneness of Saguna Brahman

Taittiriya Upanishad verses 2.1 to 2.5, Gita 18.14-15 and Gita 15.13-16 give details of five aspects of the individual (vyashti) and the whole (samashti). These are popularly called the five sheaths (panca koshaah).

It should also be noted that, at every level, the individual is not independent or apart from the whole. The individual and the whole are inseparable. The very concept of individuality is only a convention. When we give too much importance to the individuality, it is Ignorance (avidya) and it is the cause of bondage (samsaara). When we realize that the Whole alone is real and individuality is unreal, it leads to liberation (mukti).

Physical Sheath

All is One

The physical body is made of physical matter. The physical body is an integral part of the physical Universe. Every moment millions of molecules from the rest of the physical Universe become a part of the body and millions are shed away from the body. The physical body has no independent existence apart from the physical Universe.

Physiological Sheath

The human being is considered to be “alive”. By the same perspective, every cell in the human being is also an independent living being. What we call as the living human being is a collection of millions of living human cells and also millions of bacteria and other living beings that have permanent and temporary home in the human body (without which, the human body cannot be alive). When a cell which is a living being divides, it becomes two living beings. One living being arises out of another living being. When the live seed or stick of a plant is buried in the soil, it becomes another plant. Looking at all these, we can see clearly that the concept of an “individual” living being is very vague. Every living being is an inseparable part of the whole living Universe. There is only One life in the whole of existence, which manifests through the lives of the millions of living things. This is beautifully presented in the Gita 15.13-14. Krishna, representing the living Universe, says, “I manifest as food in the outside world and also I am the digestive force eating the food from within the living beings.” This is mentioned in the Purusha Suktam, Naaraayana Suktam, Gita 11.23, Gita 13.14 and so many other verses in the various Hindu scriptures as the Universal being with thousands of eyes, ears, hands and feet in all directions.

Mental Sheath

The same concept can be extended to emotions also. We use expressions like “India condemns the acts of terrorism in Europe”, “India grieves with the near and dear ones of the children killed in the school shootout in US”, etc. The emotions of the country is usually considered as

the collective emotions of the people of the country. Looking at how in the case of the physical and physiological levels, the individuality was only a reflection of the whole, here also, we can consider the individual emotions as reflection of the collective emotion. The whole Universe is not only “living”, it is also “feeling”. The Universe feels through the minds of the individuals. The feelings of the Universal reflects in the minds of the individuals. This is mentioned in Gita 15.7.

Intellectual Sheath

The same concept can be extended to intellect also. The whole Universe is one learning entity. As time proceeds, the Universe experiments and learns through the activities of all human beings and other living things. What is seen as the intellect of people is only a reflection of the Universal intellect. This is beautifully given in the Gita 15.15, “I am seated in the hearts of all beings and manifest as memory, knowledge and forgetfulness. I am all that has to be known. I am the knowledge and I am the knower too.”

Causal Sheath

The same concept can be extended to free-will and the fruits of action also. The storage of tendencies (samskaara) and fruits of action (karma) is called the causal body (kaarana sharira) or sheath of bliss (ananda maya kosha). The individual tendencies and fruits of action are integral parts of the Universal collection of tendencies and fruits of action. Thus, the whole Universe has its dynamics and evolution. This Universal being is referred to in the Gita 15.16 and 8.18-20. This Being is eternal. Even when the whole physical Universe gets destroyed and recycled, the collective tendencies and fruits of action cannot be destroyed. They remain in dormant form to be the cause of the next manifestation of the Universe.

Universal Being

All is One

Thus, Vedanta presents the whole Universe as one living Being who feels, thinks and wills. Every individual is an inseparable part of the whole. The materiality, life, feeling, thought and will of the Universal Being reflects in the individual. Every thought and action of every individual is a contribution to the Universal Being.

This concept of the Universal Being is the basis of all morality and religion. In his 1930 Hibbert Lectures at Oxford titled "The Religion of Man", Rabindranath Tagore calls this Universal being as "Man" (with an upper-case M). He says, "The individual man must exist for Man the great, and must express him in disinterested works, in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship. This is his religion, which is working in the heart of all his religions in various names and forms. (p. 4,5) ... Creation has been made possible through the continual self-surrender of the unit to the universe. And the spiritual universe of Man is also ever claiming self-renunciation from the individual unit. (p. 11)"

It is this Universal Being that the Hindus worship through various names, forms, incarnations and saints. It is this Being that the Hindus serve by morality, kindness, self-control, social service, charity, etc.

According to Hindus, it is this same Universal Being that the Jews call Jehova, Christians call Father and Muslims call Allah.

Oneness of Nirguna Brahman

All the four cardinal statements (mahavaakyaas) taken from the four different Vedas indicate the Oneness of Nirguna Brahman. In fact, there are innumerable such statements. The four taken are only representative. For analysis here, we take the statement "Satyam Jnaanam Anantam Brahma" from the Taittiriya Upanishad (verse 2.1.1).

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

The statement says that reality (Brahman) is pure Existence (Sat or Satyam), Consciousness (Cit or Jnaanam) and Infinite (Aananda or Anantam). Here is a way to understand this.

Satyam

What we see as the world is based on the sense organs and the instruments that extend the sense organs. The human eye can see only a limited range of frequencies. Similarly, the ears can hear only a limited range. There are other animals which have a different range of vision and sound. Also, they have much more powerful sense of smell than us. So their world is an entirely different one. For example, when a cat enters a room, it knows who was sitting in the sofa an hour back based on the smell. It also knows if you have gone to the park or not based on the smell of the flowers on you. Sharks can detect the electrical current in the bodies of animals swimming in the water a few meters away. Even with all the modern technology to extend our access to the various physical phenomenon in the world, there is no reason to assume that what we detect in the world is all that actually exists. There can be entirely new kinds of matter and energy that so far, we do not have senses or instruments to detect.

What we see and interpret depend on the state of our mind. If we like someone, we see them as beautiful. The chemicals and hormones in our blood affect the way we think and judge. Also, all our past experience affects our interpretation of the people, objects and situations in the world. Thus, though the world seems to appear outside us objectively, what we know of the world is only what our instruments (senses and mind) show us. We have no access to the bare naked reality that exists. This fundamental reality is referred to as Existence.

What is the nature of Existence which is beyond these apparent properties like color, sound, smell, mass, temperature, charge, momentum, etc.? We know that properties like color, sound, texture, etc. are all

All is One

emergent phenomenon. When we look at things at their minutest constituents known today like quarks and leptons, these properties do not exist. There are a different set of fundamental properties, which give rise to the perceivable properties at various composite grosser levels.

Vedanta extends this concept and says, “As long as properties are experienced, you have not reached the most fundamental level.” So, every property is only an emergent phenomenon. At the ultimate fundamental level, Existence would necessarily be free from any properties. Vedanta gives an example to understand this: pot-ness does not exist in the clay out of which pot is made.

This fundamental entity, of which the whole universe is made of, is called Sat or Satyam. It cannot have any properties (nirguna). Any two objects are distinguished only based on properties. As Sat does not have any properties, it has to be only one (ekam eva adviteeyam). Any change is only change of properties. So Sat has to be changeless (nirvikaara). Changeless with respect to space and time. So, Sat is all-pervading (sarvagata) and eternal (nityam). Parts of an entity are based on properties of constituents. So, Sat is partless (akhanda). So, Sat is One, Infinite, All-pervading, Eternal, Changeless, Partless, Property-less, Absolute Existence.

Jnaanam

Let us analyze the subject-object relationship in perception. When I see a flower, I (subject) am the body, including the eye. The flower is the object. Form and color of the flower are properties. When I want to judge the properties of the eye like myopia or color-blindness, I put one step back. The eye is the object. “I”, including the mind, is the subject. Extending this further, the real “I” is the ultimate subject, which can never become an object of perception by the senses or conception by the mind. (Drg Drsya Viveka – 1-5) This ultimate subject is called Cit or Jnaanam.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

In any subject-object relationship, properties always belong to the object. To judge the property of anything, it has to be given the status of an object. I need to extend myself to the edge of the instrument that is in contact with the object (internal or external) to experience and evaluate the properties of the object. Thus, I, the Cit, being the ultimate subject, cannot have any properties.

Applying the same logic that we applied to Sat, Cit also is One, Infinite, All-pervading, Eternal, Changeless, Partless, Property-less, Absolute Existence. So, Sat and Cit are not different. They are the same entity.

Thus, real I, the Consciousness is the fundamental entity from which the whole universe has emerged. This is what is conveyed in innumerable mahaavaakyaa statements in the various Upanishads belonging to various Vedas.

Anantam

To understand the relationship between the infinite (Anantam) Sat-Cit and the finite world, let us take an example.

We have the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, ... The existence of these finite numbers indicate that we can go on counting forever. So we have the concept of "infinity" in mathematics. From the point of view of infinity, we cannot distinguish finite numbers like 1, 2, 3, etc. This can be seen from the equations below:

$$(1) \quad \text{inf} - 1 = \text{inf}$$

$$(2) \quad \text{inf} - 2 = \text{inf}$$

From the above statements,

$$\text{inf} - 1 = \text{inf} - 2$$

All is One

Thus, from the point of view of infinity, 1, 2, 3, etc. do not exist as discrete numbers. As the number line is homogeneous, any point on it is only imaginary. There is really no difference between one point and another point.

Thus, from the point of view of the infinite, finite does not exist. But from the point of view of finite, the infinite exists.

Now, we can apply the same logic to the whole of existence. We have seen that Sat-Cit is the Infinite. The world that we see is finite. From the point of view of infinite Sat-Cit, the finite world does not exist. From the point of view of the finite world, the existence of infinite Sat-Cit cannot be denied. So, Sat-Cit has absolute existence and the empirical world has only relative existence.

This relationship between the infinite and finite is called Maaya.

Sankara's Summary

The three points we have seen here has been summarized as the three famous statements by the great teacher Sankara:

- **Brahma satyam** – Infinite Consciousness is the fundamental reality.
- **Jagat mityaa** – The finite universe is a relative appearance.
- **Jivah brahma eva na aparah** – The real 'I' is not different from Infinite Consciousness.

Oneness of Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman

The Absolute Consciousness is called Nirguna Brahman. The Universal Being is called Saguna Brahman. The relationship between them is Maaya. Thus, Nirguna Brahman with Maaya is called Saguna Brahman. Maaya is called the Sakti of Nirguna Brahman. They are inseparable.

Superficially and logically, the Absolute and Relative seem to be totally unrelated. Swami Vivekananda was asked repeatedly by different

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

people in India and abroad about the relationship between the Absolute and the Relative in different words. This cannot be answered based on logic. His answer was always to the same effect. Here is a sample of his answer. “The question — what is the cause of Mâyâ (illusion)? — has been asked for the last three thousand years; and the only answer is: when the world is able to formulate a logical question, we shall answer it. The question is contradictory. Our position is that the Absolute has become this relative only apparently, that the Unconditioned has become the conditioned only in Maya. By the very admission of the Unconditioned, we admit that the Absolute cannot be acted upon by anything else. It is uncaused, which means that nothing outside Itself can act upon It. First of all, if It is unconditioned, It cannot have been acted upon by anything else. In the Unconditioned there cannot be time, space, or causation. That granted your question will be: “What caused that which cannot be caused by anything to be changed into this?” Your question is only possible in the conditioned. But you take it out of the conditioned, and want to ask it in the Unconditioned. Only when the Unconditioned becomes conditioned, and space, time, and causation come in, can the question be asked. We can only say ignorance makes the illusion. The question is impossible. Nothing can have worked on the Absolute. There was no cause. Not that we do not know, or that we are ignorant; but It is above knowledge, and cannot be brought down to the plane of knowledge.” (Complete Works, Vol 5 p 276) The Absolute and Relative are inseparable. So, there cannot be a causal relationship between them.

Sri Ramakrishna says, “That which is Brahman is also Kali, the Mother, the Primal Energy. When inactive It is called Brahman. Again, when creating, preserving, and destroying, It is called Sakti. Still water is an illustration of Brahman. The same water, moving in waves, may be compared to Sakti, Kali.” (Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 634) This idea is found repeatedly in the Gospel at several places.

All is One

Sri Ramakrishna elaborates this beautifully in his own characteristic manner in his conversation with Keshab Chandra Sen:

“The jnanis, who adhere to the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta, say that the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestations of Sakti, the Divine Power. (Known as maya in the Vedanta philosophy.) If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. Brahman alone is the Reality, and all else is unreal. Even this very Sakti is unsubstantial, like a dream.

“But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in samadhi, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Sakti. Even when you say, ‘I am meditating’, or ‘I am contemplating’, still you are moving in the realm of Sakti, within Its power.

“Thus Brahman and Sakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire. You cannot conceive of the sun’s rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without its rays.

“What is milk like? Oh, you say, it is something white. You cannot think of the milk without the whiteness, and again, you cannot think of the whiteness without the milk.

“Thus one cannot think of Brahman without Sakti, or of Sakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or of the Relative without the Absolute.

“The Primordial Power is ever at play. (This idea introduces the elements of spontaneity and freedom in the creation.) She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This Power is called Kali. Kali

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kali. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call It Kali or Sakti. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form.

“It is like water, called in different languages by different names, such as ‘jal’, ‘pani’, and so forth. There are three or four ghats on a lake. The Hindus, who drink water at one place, call it ‘jal’. The Mussalmans at another place call it ‘pani’. And the English at a third place call it ‘water’. All three denote one and the same thing, the difference being in the name only. In the same way, some address the Reality as ‘Allah’, some as ‘God’, some as ‘Brahman’, some as ‘Kali’, and others by such names as ‘Rama’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Durga’, ‘Hari’.” (Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 134-135)

Thus, the whole finite universe of name (conception by mind) and form (perception by senses) exists as an apparent emergent phenomenon in the pure infinite Consciousness. The Consciousness reflected on a particular body-mind complex is called Jeevaatmaa. The Consciousness reflected on the whole universe is called Paramaatmaa or Ishvara. (Tattvabodha, 4.3-4)

As long as the person considers himself as the limited individual, the Universal Being (Ishvara) has to be accepted. He should also accept that the individuality is only a notion and he is inseparable from the Universal Being. When the person understands and identifies himself as the real ‘I’, which is pure Consciousness, he understands that the real Ishvara and the real Substratum of the world are also the same pure Consciousness.

Thus, the Absolute Reality is not in conflict with the Relative Reality. They are complementary to each other. From both viewpoints, God alone is real. It is God alone who has become this world and its living beings. This allows us to deal with the everyday life in the world.

Freedom

Liberation (mukti) is freedom from the psychological defects like insecurity, anxiety, sorrow, fear and desire and complete dissolution of identity.

From the Absolute point of view, the whole universe exists in Me, the pure Consciousness, as a relative appearance. My existence is of a higher order of reality compared to the world. Vedanta gives an example to understand this: When a rope is mistakenly perceived as a snake in dim light, the rope is not affected by the perceived snake. The world and its problems cannot affect me, just like the water in the movie does not wet the screen on which it is projected. The world is just a relative emergent superimposition which exists using me, the Sat-Cit-Ananda – Infinite Conscious Existence, as the support. This understanding frees me from all psychological defects.

From the Relative point of view, my individuality is only a notion. It is only the Universal Being that exists. My body, life, mind, intellect and will are reflections of the Universal Being only. These are neither me nor mine. My duty is to surrender completely to the Lord and do justice to every situation in life as much as possible as an offering to the Universal Being. It is the Lord Himself who experiences the world through me and expresses through me. This understanding also frees me from all psychological defects.

In both cases, the individual identity is dissolved. Thus, “All is One” at both Absolute and Relative levels. Realizing them is freedom.

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Section 4

This section has some excerpts from scriptures and from the works of Swami Vivekananda for daily chanting and reading.

*“aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah
Let noble thoughts come to me from all directions”*

Rig Veda

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Shaanti Mantra

Shaanti Mantras are loudly chanted usually at the beginning and end of any lecture, study or meditation session. Loud chanting helps us to switch the context of our mind from whatever we were doing earlier to the current activity. Chanting with our attention on the meaning puts us in the right attitude to think deeply. Here is a popular Shaanti Mantra.

ॐ सह नाववतु ।

सह नौ भुनक्तु ।

सह वीर्यं करवावहै ।

तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु ।

मा विद्विषावहै ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Om – The Lord is the personification of all that exists

saha naavavatu – May the Lord protect us

saha nau bhunaktu – May the Lord give us the fruits of action

saha viiryam karavaavahai – May we work with energy

tejasvi naavadhiitamastu – May we be enlightened by studying

maa vidvishaavahai – May we not be hostile to each other

Om shaantih – May we be free from self-created obstacles

shaantih – May we be free from obstacles put by other people

shaantih – May we be free from obstacles put by Nature

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

The word “Om” is the most popular and de facto sound representation of God in all sects of Hinduism. It is the most popular sound symbol even in other religions of Indian origin like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. It is a combination of three sounds – “a” (as in roman), “u” (as in uber) and “m” (as in mother). “a” is the most basic sound. It starts from the innermost part of our vocal system. “u” starts from the middle part. “m” starts from the lips, which is the outermost part of the vocal system. Thus, “Om” represents all the sounds that a human being can make. This is the sound symbol of God, because God is the sum total of everything that exists.

The next four phrases mention the four pursuits of man – security/wealth, comfort/entertainment, virtue/contribution and knowledge/freedom. The fifth phrase seeks cooperation and not confrontation. Thus, through the mantra we seek the whole Universe to cooperate with us in all our virtuous pursuits. The prayer uses “we” and “us” in the plural form. Thus, you do not seek these for only yourself. You seek it as a group or you seek it for everyone whom you represent. You seek for the whole of humanity or all living beings.

The last phrase identifies, acknowledges and seeks freedom from three areas from which we can have obstacles to our virtuous pursuits. The first is from ourselves in the form of laziness, carelessness, arrogance, forgetfulness, etc. The second is from other living beings in the form of competition and misunderstanding. The third is from Nature in the form of unforeseen natural circumstances, accidents, natural calamities, etc. For example, suppose you want to go from one place to another place in a car. If I get delayed because your fuel tank got empty, it is a self-created obstacle because of carelessness. If you get delayed because of heavy traffic, it is created by other human beings because of competition. If you get delayed because you had to replace a flat tire with a spare one, it is because of unforeseen natural circumstances. We need to overcome self-created obstacles by correcting ourselves. We need to overcome obstacles created

Shaanti Mantra

by others by cooperation, coordination, social service, charity and better communication with others. We need to overcome obstacles created by Nature by being prepared for them and having the right attitude.

Essential Bhagavad Gita

(An edited version of this article was published in the November 2018 issue of Vedanta Kesari, the monthly magazine published from Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.)

Bhagavad Gita provides a philosophy and a way of life based on the philosophy. It summarizes the wisdom of the Vedas. Here are four essential verses from the Bhagavad Gita, that covers the basic topics. The verse 10.20 tells the nature of God, living beings and the world, and their relationship. The verse 6.5 tells the nature of the individual. The verses 12.13 and 12.14 give four practical principles to live by, based on the theory mentioned in the verses 10.20 and 6.5. It will be beneficial to memorize these four verses, know the word-by-word meaning, detailed explanation and chant them every day while remembering their meaning.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।

अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ॥ १०-२० ॥

उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् ।

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥ ६-५ ॥

अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च ।

निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥ १२-१३ ॥

सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः ।

मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥ १२-१४ ॥

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

ahamātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitaḥ ।

ahamādiśca madhyaṃ ca bhūtānāmanta eva ca ॥ 10-20 ॥

uddharedātmanātmānaṃ nātmānamavasādayet ।

ātmaiva hyātmano bandhurātmaiva ripurātmanaḥ ॥ 6-5 ॥

adveṣṭā sarvabhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa eva ca ।

nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ samaduḥkhasukhaḥ kṣamī ॥ 12-13 ॥

santuṣṭaḥ satataṃ yogī yatātmā dṛḍhaniścayaḥ ।

mayyarpitamanobuddhiryo madbhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ ॥ 12-14 ॥

श्रीभगवानुवाच śrībhagavānuvāca – God said:

Bhagavad Gita is God's message to you. Here is what God says to you.

God is the Consciousness residing in the heart of all beings

अहम् aham – I (God)

आत्मा ātmā – (am/is the) Consciousness

गुडाका-ईश guḍākā-īśa – Arjuna

सर्व-भूत sarva-bhūta – (of) all beings

आशय āśaya – in the heart

स्थितः sthitaḥ – residing

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

God is the Consciousness (Life) principle in all living beings. It is because of the Consciousness that living beings are self-aware. It is because of this awareness that living beings experience the world and express in the world. Just as one Sun illumines the various objects in the world, the One Consciousness shines through all the self-conscious living beings in the Universe. Thus, all Conscious living beings are manifestations of God only.

God is the Cause of everything

अहम् aham – I (God)

आदिः च ādiḥ ca – (am/is) the beginning

मध्यम् च madhyam ca – the middle

भूतानाम् bhūtānām – of all beings

अन्तः एव च antaḥ eva ca – and end

God is the material (sat), instrumental (cit) and final (ananda) cause of the world. Just as various ornaments are made of gold, everything that exists is made of God only. Just as ornaments arise out of gold, exist in gold and dissolve into gold, all things arise, exist and dissolve in God only. Also, God is the intelligent principle because of which everything arises, exists and dissolves. So, everything belongs to God only. God is also the ultimate purpose of the whole of existence. Thus, the whole Universe is a manifestation of God only. There is nothing that exists other than God. Knowing this leads to fulfilment of human life.

You are the maker of your destiny

उद्धरेत् uddharet – raise up

आत्मना ātmanā – by your will

आत्मानम् ātmānam – the mind;

न na – don't

आत्मानम् ātmānam – the mind

अवसादयेत् avasādayet – lower down

You are the one who decides your actions – mental, verbal and physical. You are fully responsible for your actions. Right actions will result in peace and progress. Wrong actions will cause future regrets. The quality of your life depends on the quality of your mind. Raise up your mind by your actions. Don't lower down the quality of your mind.

The mind and senses are your instruments

आत्मा ātmā – mind

एव हि eva hi – itself is

आत्मनः बन्धुः ātmanaḥ bandhuḥ – one's friend

आत्मा ātmā – mind

एव eva – itself is

रिपुः आत्मनः ripuḥ ātmanaḥ – one's enemy

You are different from your mind, senses and body. They are all your instruments. Just like any instrument, if they are under your control, they are your friends, and they will help you to achieve your goals. If they are not under your control, they are your enemies, and they will lead you astray.

Seek the welfare of all living beings

अद्वेष्टा adveṣṭā – non-hater

सर्व-भूतानां sarva-bhūtānāṃ – (of) all living beings

मैत्रः maitraḥ – friend

करुणः एव च karuṇaḥ eva ca – compassionate person

There will be three types of living beings with whom you will interact. Have the right attitude towards each of them. Do not hate those who

consider you as a competitor or enemy. Defend yourself, but do not have any hatred. Wish good for them. Be friendly with the successful, without any feeling of jealousy. Be compassionate towards the suffering and try to help them as much as you can. In short, genuinely wish the welfare of all living beings. This can be easily done by seeing God as the ultimate inner recipient of the service done to every living being.

Face all situations with equanimity

निर्ममः nirmamaḥ – free from possessiveness

निरहङ्कारः nirahāṅkāraḥ – free from self-centeredness

सम-दुःख-सुखः sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ – treating pleasure and pain equally

क्षमी kṣamī – forbearing person

Do not be possessive of anything. Everything belongs to God. Do not be self-centered. The world is a fair place. Do your duties. You need not be anxious about the results. You will get what you deserve. Be ready to face the dualities of life like pleasure and pain, success and failure, fame and censure, gain and loss, etc. Bear all situations in life with patience, without complaining. This can be easily done by doing all actions as offerings to God and accepting all results as gifts from God.

Lead a self-controlled life

सन्तुष्टः santuṣṭaḥ – content

सततम् satatam – always

योगी yogī – calm

यत-आत्मा yata-ātmā – self-controlled

दृढ-निश्चयः dṛḍha-niścayaḥ – determined

Essential Bhagavad Gita

Be contented with the fair rewards of your work, without feeling greedy or jealous. Be calm always without any regrets of the past or anxiety about the future. Be the master of your mind and the senses. You should be the one who decides when to sleep, when to wake up, when to eat, what to eat, how much to eat, how much entertainment to indulge in, etc. Lead a moderated and regulated life. Be self-disciplined in all activities in your life. This can be easily done by having a daily routine that involves spiritual activities like reading, prayer, singing, etc. at fixed times. Reading the lives of saints and great people will show us how to lead our own lives.

Offer everything to God

मयि mayi – To Me (God)

अर्पित arpita – offered

मनः manaḥ – experiencing faculty

बुद्धिः buddhiḥ – expressing faculty

यः yaḥ – who

मत्-भक्तः – is devoted to Me (God)

सः saḥ – he

मे प्रियः me priyaḥ – is dear to Me (God).

As everything in the Universe is God only, there is none other than God. Knowing this inseparable relationship with God, always remember God. Whatever you do, offer it as a gift to God. Whatever you experience, accept it as a gift from God. Such a person is dear to God. This does not mean God is partial. The knowledge and grace of God is available to everyone like the light of the Sun. The wise person uses the grace by following the instructions given here by God.

By knowing and following these, a person can develop the maturity to understand that the individual is not separate from the Universal. The

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

limited individual identity is a wrong assumption. When this wrong assumption is given up, that is freedom (Moksha).

A Selection of Quotations from Swami Vivekananda

(This selection is a part of an article that was published in the Oct-Dec 2015 issue (number 17.2) of "Dialogue", the quarterly magazine of [Astha Bharati](#), Delhi, an organization to promote National Unity and Integrity.)

Strength

We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act. (CW I 31)

Men in general lay all the blame of life on their fellowmen, or, failing that, on God, or they conjure up a ghost, and say it is fate. Where is fate, and who is fate? We reap what we sow. We are the makers of our own fate. None else has the blame, none has the praise. The wind is blowing; and those vessels whose sails are unfurled catch it, and go forward on their way, but those which have their sails furled do not catch the wind. Is the fault of the wind? (CW II 224)

Say, 'This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone.' That which I created, I can demolish; that which is created by someone else, I shall never be able to destroy. Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succor you want is within yourselves. (CW II 225)

Theory and Practice of Vedanta

Whatever you think that you will be. If you think yourself weak, weak you will be; if you think yourself strong, you will be. (CW III 130)

Anything that brings spiritual, mental, or physical weakness, touch it not with the toes of your feet. Religion is the manifestation of the natural strength that is in man. A spring of infinite power is coiled up and is inside this little body, and that spring is spreading itself. ... This is the history of man, of religion, civilisation, or progress. CW VIII 185

Work

Even the least work done for others awakens the power within; even thinking the least good of others gradually instils into the heart the strength of a lion. I love you all ever so much, but I wish you all to die working for others — I should rather be glad to see you do that! ... Get up, and put your shoulders to the wheel — how long is this life for? As you have come into this world, leave some mark behind. Otherwise, where is the difference between you and the trees and stones? (CW V 382-383)

Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life – think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea alone. This is the way to success. (CW I 177)

Isn't it man that makes money? Where did you ever hear of money making man? If you can make your thoughts and words perfectly at one, if you can, I say, make yourself one in speech and action, money will pour in at your feet of itself, like water. (CW VI 455)

Three things are necessary to make ever man great, every nation great.

- (1) Conviction of the powers of goodness.
- (2) Absence of jealousy and suspicion.
- (3) Helping all who are trying to be and do good.

A Selection of Quotations from Swami Vivekananda

(CW VII 29)

Serve People

The watchword of all well-being, of all moral good is not “I” but “thou”. Who cares whether there is a heaven or a hell, who cares if there is a soul or not, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world, and it is full of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt. Forget yourselves; this is the first lesson to be learnt, whether you are a theist or an atheist, whether you are an agnostic or a Vedantist, a Christian or a Mohammedan. (CW II 353)

You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of His children, blessed you are; do not think too much of yourselves. Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you when others had it not. Do it only as a worship. (CW III 246)

After so much austerity, I have understood this as the real truth — God is present in every Jiva; there is no other God besides that. ‘Who serves Jiva, serves God indeed’. (CW VII 247)

This is the gist of all worship — to be pure and to do good to others. He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary. He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples. (CW III 141-142)

In one word, the ideal of Vedanta is to know man as he really is, and this is its message, that if you cannot worship your brother man, the manifested God, how can you worship a God who is unmanifested? (CW II 325-326)

Serve India

This national ship of ours, ye children of the Immortals, my countrymen, has been plying for ages, carrying civilisation and enriching the whole world with its inestimable treasures. For scores of shining centuries this national ship of ours has been ferrying across the ocean of life, and has taken millions of souls to the other shore, beyond all misery. But today it may have sprung a leak and got damaged, through your own fault or whatever cause it matters not. What would you, who have placed yourselves in it, do now? Would you go about cursing it and quarrelling among yourselves! Would you not all unite together and put your best efforts to stop the holes? Let us all gladly give our hearts' blood to do this; and if we fail in the attempt, let us all sink and die together, with blessings and not curses on our lips. (CW III 461)

I too believe that India will awake again if anyone could love with all his heart the people of the country — bereft of the grace of affluence, of blasted fortune, their discretion totally lost, downtrodden, ever-starved, quarrelsome, and envious. Then only will India awake, when hundreds of large-hearted men and women, giving up all desires of enjoying the luxuries of life, will long and exert themselves to their utmost for the well-being of the millions of their countrymen who are gradually sinking lower and lower in the vortex of destitution and ignorance. I have experienced even in my insignificant life that good motives, sincerity, and infinite love can conquer the world. (CW V 126-127)

India will be raised, not with the power of the flesh, but with the power of the spirit; not with the flag of destruction, but with the flag of peace and love ... One vision I see clear as life before me: that the ancient Mother has awakened once more, sitting on Her throne rejuvenated, more glorious than ever. Proclaim Her to all the world with the voice of peace and benediction. (CW IV 352-353)

A Selection of Quotations from Swami Vivekananda

My hope and faith rest in men like you. Understand my words in their true spirit, and apply yourselves to work in their light. ... I have given you advice enough; now put at least something in practice. Let the world see that your reading of the scriptures and listening to me has been a success. (CW VII 175)

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed reading the articles in this book. For more such articles, please visit <http://www.practicalphilosophy.in>

Please feel free to contact the author with your questions. You can get in touch with the author if you want to meet and discuss.

Here is a list of reference books to probe further:

- The Holy Geeta – Swami Chinmayananda
- The Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita (3 Vols) - Swami Ranganathananda
- Lectures from Colombo to Almora – Swami Vivekananda
- The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (9 Vols)
- The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna
- Ramayana – C. Rajagopalachari
- Mahabharata – C. Rajagopalachari
- Cradle Tales of Hinduism – Sister Nivedita
- Srimad Bhagavata – Translation by Swami Tapasyananda
- The Divine World of the Alvars – Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata
- Indian Saints and Mystics – Pravrajika Shuddhatmamata
- Ancient Sages – Swami Satyamayananda
- Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna
- Vedanta Through Stories – Swami Sambuddhananda

About the Author

Gokulmuthu Narayanaswamy has been seeking answers to fundamental questions of life through the pursuit of science, religion, philosophy and psychology. He has been associated with Ramakrishna Math and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda for more than 25 years. He was instrumental in starting the Vivekananda Study Circle at IIT Madras and IISc Bangalore. He is a mentor of the Vivekananda Yuvak Sangha at Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor. He regularly conducts classes and workshops on the teachings of Vivekananda, Leadership Development, Hinduism, Vedanta, etc. for children and youth. He is a Trustee and trainer of Vivekananda Janoththana Trust, which conducts Lifeskill Development Workshops in schools and colleges.

He is a regular contributor of articles and reviews to Vedanta Kesari, the monthly magazine of Ramakrishna Math, published from Chennai. He has authored a few books like Tenets of Hinduism, Message of Swami Vivekananda for Youth, Essence of Gita, Death – What to do about it, Message of Gita, etc

He is a Software Engineer by profession. He holds B.Tech from IIT Madras and M.S from IISc Bangalore. He also holds M.A in Philosophy, Religion and Culture.

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