

Fundamental Principles of Vedanta

By Swami Tathagatananda

“Consciousness of the Beyond is the raw material of all religion.” Religion is singular in essence and diverse in manifestation. Every religion may be likened to one pearl strung with others on a necklace whose common cord is the universal soul of each of those religions. Vedanta is concerned with timeless truth and upholds the view that no religion has a monopoly on truth or revelation. Its fundamental teachings include: (1) the impersonality and universality of Supreme Truth; (2) the divinity of the soul; (3) the unity of existence, or the oneness of matter and energy, or the ultimate oneness of God, man and nature; (4) the harmony of religions; (5) the immanence and transcendence of God who is both the material and the efficient cause of the universe; and (6) Mukti or total freedom from bondage, i.e., spiritual union with the divine during one’s lifetime. Because these are the eternal teachings of Vedanta, Vedanta is also referred to as the “Eternal Religion” or Sanatana Dharma.

(1) IMPERSONALITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF SUPREME TRUTH

BRAHMAN

The Reality in Hindu tradition is known as Brahman, an entity whose greatness, power and expansion none can measure. Shankara says:

That omniscient and omnipotent source must be Brahman from which occur the birth, continuance and dissolution of this universe that is manifested through name and form, that is associated with diverse agents and experiences, that provides the support for actions and results, having well-regulated space, time and causation, and that deifies all thoughts about the real nature of its creation. (*Brahma Sutra*, I. 1 2)

Brahman is characterized by *Satchidananda*—*sat*, *chit*, and *ananda*, self-Existence, self-Awareness, and intrinsic Bliss. In the world we find these three properties of existence (*asti*), visibility (*bhati*) and joy (*priyam*):

The Vedantic formulation of the ultimate Reality as *Satchidananda* satisfies both the philosophic (or intellectual) and religious (or emotional) instincts in man. Our intellect requires that the ultimately Real, the Absolute, must be the permanent among changes (*sat*), and self-luminous and spiritual among the material objects (*chit*)—otherwise the intellect refuses to recognize it as the ultimately Real. On the other hand, our heart

demands that ultimate Reality must be a God of Love, of *ananda*, and not a cold and callous being. And, all these diverse demands—philosophic and religious—are admirably met with in the single designation of the ultimately Real as *Satchidananda*, in which the voices of both reason and heart find satisfaction. Herein lies the greatness of the ancient seers and prophets of old, as well as the great utility of the study of the Vedanta as a key to the nature of the ultimately Real, to grasp which, in the best possible way, has been the aim of mankind all along, generation after generation. (Dr. Roma Chaudhuri, “The Vedantic Conception of Brahman,” *The Bases of Indian Culture: Commemoration Volume of Swami Abhedananda*, p. 176)

Brahman is undifferentiated: Brahman is neither self-conscious nor self-thinking, nor conscious of any objects. That is, there is no distinction between Brahman and its states—Brahman is undistinguishable from its attributes. Brahman is Supreme Consciousness itself:

. . . the fact is that Brahman is consciousness, and not that it has consciousness. It is pure, undifferentiated consciousness or mere awareness, the supreme principle in which there is no differentiation of knower, knowledge, and known. It is absolute intelligence whose essential nature is self-luminosity. As Shankara says, “The Atman is throughout nothing but intelligence. Intelligence is its essential nature, as the salt-taste is of the lump of salt.” (Ibid, p. 166)

Nirguna Brahman is experienced in deep Samadhi, when subject and object coalesce. The same non-dual Brahman, projecting the cosmos through maya-shakti, is known as Saguna Brahman. The Absolute appears as the Personal God, as souls, and as the world. The individual soul (jiva), the world of experience (jagat), and their Supreme Ruler (Isvara) are the three main categories of the universe. Hinduism recognizes the simultaneous existence of God, the universe and creatures. Not one of these can exist without the other two. This is a most valuable understanding.

From the Vedic period, shakti has been regarded as the Divine Mother, as all creation owes its existence to a mother. Shri Ramakrishna worshipped maya as the Divine Mother with deep reverence. He also exhorted his devotees to regard the inscrutable manifesting power of maya as the Divine Mother. This universe has emerged from and is sustained by shakti. Shakti was contemplated as Divine Mother by Shri Ramakrishna. He saw the Mother in every woman. Swami Vivekanda says:

Shri Ramakrishna meant by worshipping woman, that to him every woman’s face was that of the Blissful Mother, and nothing but that. I myself have seen this man standing before those women whom society would not touch, and falling at their feet bathed in tears, saying, “Mother in one form Thou art in the street, and in another form Thou art the universe. I salute Thee, Mother, I salute Thee.” Think of the blessedness of that life from which all carnality has vanished, which can look upon every woman with that love and reverence when every woman’s face becomes transfigured, and only the face of the Divine Mother, the Blissful One, the Protectress of the human race, shines upon it! That is what we want. Do you mean to say that the divinity back of a woman can ever be

cheated? It never was and never will be. It always asserts itself. Unfailingly it detects fraud, it detects hypocrisy, unerringly it feels the warmth of truth, the light of spirituality, the holiness of purity. Such purity is absolutely necessary if real spirituality is to be attained. (C. W., IV: 176)

MAYA, LIMITING ADJUNCT OF BRAHMAN

No one can ever understand *maya*, the inscrutable creative power of Brahman. *Maya* is part of the essence of Brahman—Brahman and Its creative power are one. Brahman without Its power of *maya* is static; Brahman with Its power of *maya* is dynamic. Both aspects constitute the totality of Brahman. Brahman as pure intelligence is the efficient cause of the universe; Its *maya* is the material cause. Brahman alone is real; the world is empirical. Professor M. Hiriyanna expresses it beautifully:

. . . the unity of the Absolute of Brahman may be compared to the unity of a painting, say, of a landscape. Looked at as a landscape, it is a plurality: hill, valley, lake and streams. But its ground, the substance of which it is constituted is one, viz., the canvas. It is rarely that analogies in philosophy admit of extension, but this one does, in one particular. The canvas appears not only as hill, a valley and a stream but also as the garment of the shepherd that may be figured upon it. Similarly, the Absolute which is of the essence of sentience, manifests itself not only as insentient objects but also as sentient subjects. (Quote from Intro. to Vedanta, p. 129)

The Absolute appears as the relative through its inherent power of *maya* (*devatma-shakti*). The *devatma-shakti* of Brahman is the cause of the universe and is not independent of Brahman—it is of the divine nature of Brahman.

Even Western scholars are extremely puzzled by this mysterious element of life. Alfred North Whitehead observed, “All effort of human thought only dimly perceives, misdescribes [sic] and wrongly associates things.” Bertrand Russell concluded his book, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Its Limits* with a similar idea: “All human knowledge is uncertain, inexact and partial. To this doctrine we have not found any limitation whatever. It is only an examined life that leaves no wonder to us. A completely rational explanation of the world is not within the scope of man’s intellect.” Whitehead additionally observed, “It is no doubt true that curiosity is the craving of reason that the facts discriminated in experience be understood. It means the refusal to be satisfied with the bare welter of facts.”

We are all bound by *maya*. This is due to ignorance: the inability to see the One behind the many (*avidya-maya*). Through the power of *maya*, the phenomenal universe is made up of the three *gunas*: *sattva* (wisdom), *rajas* (restless activity), and *tamas* (inertia). These in turn give rise to likes and dislikes. Confused by our unsteady involvement in the three *gunas*, we are deluded into thinking that the apparent world is real and desirable and that it will bring us happiness. We cannot perceive the substratum behind the three *gunas*, behind the illusion, behind the many names and forms. That substratum is Brahman or God. One who sincerely remembers and worships God with a pure heart and mind—in

thought, word and deed in the past, present and future, one who constantly practices seeing God everywhere (*vidya-maya*), one who meditates upon God—that person finally escapes from the clutches of *maya* by His Grace. Knowledge of God is rooted in self-knowledge. “Verily this divine illusion of Mine, made up of the *gunas*, is hard to surmount; but those who take refuge in Me alone, they cross over this illusion” (B. Gita, VI: 14). This way of life of constant remembrance of the Lord is called (*dhruvanusmriti*). This is the meaning of Christ’s teaching on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Formless Brahman conditioned by *maya* assumes various forms. These forms are like different garments under which Brahman, commonly called God, is always the same. Ramakrishna says, “All these forms are of one God, for God is multiform. He is formless and with form and many are His forms which no one knows” (The Sayings of Ramakrishna, Edited and Compiled by Swami Abhedananda, p. 18). Though the Hindu pantheon teems with millions of deities, God is One without a second. One God is adored in many gods. God and His glories are Infinite; therefore, innumerable approaches to Him exist.

AVATARA, THE DIVINE INCARNATION

Through *maya*, God is born on earth as the *Avatara* to fulfill a cosmic need. Whenever unrighteousness prevails over righteousness, God out of His mercy and love appears as the *Avatara* solely to redeem mankind and to re-establish spiritual order in the world and thus preserves and ensures the continuance of life in the universe.

The *Avatara* or incarnation of God is a unique manifestation of the conditioned Brahman. The *Avatara* is the living tangible form of universal Supreme Truth—God in human form. Although Christianity and Hinduism both recognize the *Avatara*, in Christianity the *Avatara* is limited to the historical Christ. In Hinduism, the incarnation appears whenever a cosmic need requires its redeeming appearance in the world. Lord Krishna says:

Though I am unborn and eternal by nature, and though I am the Lord of all beings, yet, subjugating My Prakriti, I accept birth through my own *Maya*. Wherever there is a decline of dharma, O Bharata, and a rise of adharma, I incarnate Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma, I am born in every age. (B. Gita (IV: 6-8))

Although God is immortal, infinite, immutable, nameless and formless, still, out of love for suffering humanity, the Infinite and Absolute Being is born as a human being and accepts suffering in order to establish religion among the masses. Shri Ramakrishna says:

It is God alone who incarnates Himself as man to teach people the ways of love and knowledge. (Gospel, p. 359)

And we see God Himself if we but see His Incarnation. . . . If you seek God, then seek Him in man; He manifests Himself more in man than in any other thing. If you see a man endowed with ecstatic love, overflowing with prema, mad after God, intoxicated with His love, then know for certain that God has incarnated Himself through that man.

There is no doubt that God exists in all things; but the manifestations of His power are different in different beings. The greatest manifestation of His Power is through an Incarnation . . . It is the Sakti, the Power of God, that is born as an Incarnation. (*Gospel*, p. 726)

(2) DIVINITY OF THE SOUL

The four great Vedic utterances or *Mahavakyas* express the oneness of Brahman and the Atman as declared in the *Rg-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda* and the *Atharva-Veda* respectively: *Prajnanam Brahma*, “Brahman is Pure Consciousness” (*Ai. Up.*, III. 3), *Aham Brahma asmi*, “I am Brahman” (*Br. Up.*, I: 4. 10), *Tat tvam asi*, “That thou art” (*Ch. Up.*, VI: 8. 7), and *Ayam Atma Brahma*, “This Atman is Brahman” (*Mand. Up.*, II). This Atman and Brahman, the Universal Self, are one in reality. This may be realized through experience, according to the sages of India.

In his lecture, “True Immortality,” Müller developed the theme, which is found in the Upanishads, of the identity of the Soul with *Brahman*:

Brahman [is] neuter, the essence of all things; and the soul, knowing that it is no longer separated from that essence, learns the highest lesson of the whole Vedanta doctrine, *Tat Twam Asi*, “Thou art That,” that is to say, “Thou, who for a time didst seem to be something by thyself, art that, art really nothing apart from the divine essence.” (*Müller, C. W.*, IV, p. 279)

Secondly, as Brahman has to be conceived as perfect, and therefore as unchangeable, the soul cannot be conceived as a real modification or deterioration of Brahman. (*Ibid*, p. 280)

Thirdly, as Brahman has neither beginning nor end, neither can it have any parts; therefore, the soul cannot be a part of Brahman, but the whole of Brahman must be present in every individual soul. (*Ibid*, p. 280)

From a purely logical point of view, Shankara’s position seems to me impregnable, and when so rigorous a logician as Schopenhauer declares his complete submission to Shankara’s arguments, there is no fear of their being upset by other logicians. (*Ibid*, p. 281)

Müller completely understood the identity of Brahman and the Atman and appreciated the fact that the supreme knowledge is inseparable from the everyday affairs of men and women:

And this is the feeling which I cannot resist in examining the ancient Vedanta. Other philosophers have denied the reality of the world as perceived by us, but no one has ventured to deny at the same time the reality of what we call the Ego, the senses and the mind, and their inherent forms. And yet after lifting the Self above body and soul, after uniting heaven and earth, God and man, Brahman and Atman, these Vedanta philosophers have destroyed nothing in the life of the phenomenal beings who have to act and to fulfill their duties in this phenomenal world. On the contrary, they have shown that there can be nothing phenomenal without something that is real, and that goodness and virtue, faith and works, are necessary as a preparation, nay as a *sine qua non*, for the attainment of that highest knowledge which brings the soul back to its source and to its home, and restores it to its true nature, to its true Selfhood in Brahman. (Müller, C. W., XIX, p. 183)

Paul Deussen wrote about the momentous vision of unity in Vedanta:

This identity of the Brahman and the atman, of God and the soul, is the fundamental thought of the entire doctrine of the Upanishads . . . in the compound word *brahma-atma-aikyam*, “unity of the Brahman and the atman,” is described the fundamental dogma of the Vedanta system [Here the Professor has used the word “dogma” certainly not in the popular sense, because it is contrary to the spirit of Vedanta.]

If we strip this thought of the various forms, figurative to the highest degree and not seldom extravagant, under which it appears in the Vedanta texts, and fix our attention upon it solely in its philosophical simplicity as the identity of God and the soul, the Brahman and the atman, it will be found to possess a significance reaching far beyond the Upanishads, their time and country; nay, we claim for it an inestimable value for the whole race of mankind. We are unable to look into the future; we do not know what revelations and discoveries are in store for the restlessly inquiring human spirit, but one thing we may assert with confidence—whatever new and unwonted paths the philosophy of the future may strike out, this principle will remain permanently unshaken, and from it no deviation can possibly take place. If ever a general solution is reached of the great riddle, which presents itself to the philosopher in the nature of things, all the more clearly the further our knowledge extends, the key can only be found where alone the secret of nature lies open to us from within, that is to say, in our innermost self. *It was here that for the first time the original thinkers of the Upanishads, to their immortal honor, found it when they recognized our atman, our innermost individual being, as the Brahman, the inmost being of universal nature and of all her phenomena.* (Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, pp. 39-40).

Man is divine. Again, the difference between man and God is like the difference between the ocean and its waves—the wave being of the substance of water, is identical to the ocean.

PREDESTINATION AND FATALISM ARE SUBORDINATE TO
FAITH, EXPERIENCE AND THE GRACE OF GOD

Vedanta does not accept the two doctrines of predestination and fatalism. Swami Vivekananda says:

Every theory of the creation of the soul from nothing inevitably leads to fatalism and preordination, and instead of a Merciful Father, places before us a hideous, cruel, and an ever-angry God to worship. And so far as the power of religion for good or evil is concerned, this theory of a created soul leading to its corollaries of fatalism and predestination, is responsible for the horrible idea prevailing among some Christians and Mohammedans that the heathens are the lawful victims of their swords and all the horrors that have followed and are following it still. (*C. W.*, IV: 270)

The foulest water can be purified by removing its impurities through distillation or filtering—the innate purity of the water is always there. The most immoral individual gradually becomes moral through spiritual living. When impurity is removed, the bliss of the immortal Self is spontaneously, intuitively experienced. “If the doors of perception are cleansed,” Blake wrote, “everything will appear as it, infinite.” Vedanta alone developed this doctrine of the eternal, pure, self-luminous, infinite Self. God grants redemptive grace to those who surrender to Him; devotees throughout the world look upon God to redress their grievances. We are quoting only one verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* (XVIII: 66):

Renounce all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone.
I shall liberate you from all sins; grieve not.

The special characteristic of Hinduism is its rational attitude based on monism, India’s philosophical system that explains all reality in terms of one central unifying principle. Deeply convinced of the existence of the Supreme Reality, the Hindu mind allows the widest freedom in matters of faith and worship. In fact, the Hindu’s absolute faith in the Self or Oversoul has preserved Hinduism, which continues to flourish. In *The Religious Consciousness*, Dr. James B. Pratt emphasizes this conviction of Hindus:

But there is, I believe, one further reason for the greater strength of the Hindu faith over the Christian, and that is to be found in the contrast between the two conceptions of immortality. In the Christian view, the soul’s survival of death is essentially miraculous. The soul is conceived as coming into existence with the birth of the body, and the thing to be expected is that it should perish when the body perishes. This is prevented through the intervention, so to speak, of God, who steps in and rescues the soul and confers upon it an immortality which, left to itself, it could never attain. Thus it comes about that when the idea of supernatural intervention has been generally discarded, and even the belief in God as an active force outside of nature has been weakened—as is the case all over western Christendom—there is little left to support the belief in the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body. In India all this is changed. The soul’s immortality has there never been thought [to be] dependent upon any supernatural interference or miraculous event, nor even upon God Himself. There are atheistic philosophers in India, but they are as thoroughly convinced of the eternal life of the soul as are the monist and the theist. For in India the soul is essentially immortal. Its eternity grows out of its very

nature. It did not begin to be when the body was born, and hence there is no reason to expect that it will cease to be when the body dies. Existence is part of its nature. If you admit a beginning for it, you put it at once out of the class of the eternal things, and are forced to hang its future existence upon a miracle. But for the Hindu “the knowing self is not born; it dies not [at any time]. It sprang from nothing; nothing sprang from it. It is not slain though the body be slain” (Katha Up., I. 2.18). (Dr. James B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness*, p. 250)

This brief review of western and eastern concepts of the soul and its divinity highlights an important distinction between Hinduism and all other religions. According to S. Radhakrishnan:

The Hindu attitude to religion is interesting. While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, outer expression to inward realization. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstractions or the celebration of ceremonies, but a kind of life or experience. It is insight into the nature of reality (*darshana*) or experience of reality (*anubhava*). This experience is not an emotional thrill, or a subjective fancy, but is the response of the whole personality, the integrated self to the central reality. Religion is a specific attitude of the self, itself and no other, though it is mixed up generally with intellectual views, æsthetic forms, and moral valuations. (*Hindu View of Life*, p. 15)

Every great religion has cured its followers of the swell of passion, the thrust of desire and the blindness of temper . . . Growing insistence on mysticism is tending to a subordination of dogma. (Ibid, p. 60)

The authority of dogma is inferior to the spiritual power of experience; true mystical experience is superior and subordinates dogma. Dean Inge writes, “The center of gravity in religion has shifted from authority to experience. . . . The fundamental principles of mystical religion are now very widely accepted, and are, especially with educated people, avowedly the main ground of ‘belief’.” (Dean Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*, pp. 113-15).

(3) UNITY OF EXISTENCE

The principle of unity in diversity has been the keynote of Hindu thought and life. The Godhead is non-dual but in the relative world the divine expresses itself through different names and forms and may be approached by various paths. As such, all religions are accepted and respected as valid approaches to the same God. Neither a dull uniformity nor a religious Esperanto is wanted, but rather a sympathetic understanding of the rich diversity of the human mind and human culture. “As many minds, so many paths to the ultimate Truth.”

In the Oxford History of India Vincent Smith observed:

India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, color, language, dress, manners, and sect. (Vincent Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, p. x)

This unity is not to be confused with uniformity. Awareness of fundamental unity in the Indian mind allows Hindus to understand every being and material object in the universe in terms of its rightful spiritual value in life.

Nature in Vedanta is given a spiritual interpretation, not a mechanistic or materialistic one; nature is not self-evolving, self-preserving, self-destroying. God as the invisible support and essence of all that exists is involved in every aspect of existence. To the spiritually sensitive Vedic sages, Mother Nature was a living presence revealing the majesty of God. The deification of nature gave them a wealth of ideas through which to worship God and to pray to Him for His beneficial and bounteous mercy. We read in the Upanishads: “From Him come all the oceans and the mountains; from Him flow rivers in every kind; from Him have come as well, all plants and all flavors.” In the Upanishads we find created objects being compared to sparks of blazing fire, to ocean waves, etc.—all being of the same nature and stuff as their origin. We find God pervading nature “as fragrance pervades the flowers,” as luster the precious gem, as wetness the water. We find God being likened to the spider that spins its web from its own silk, moves upon it, and finally withdraws it to itself.

The freedom of thought in matters of religion as it is found in Vedanta profoundly influenced Max Müller. In the Preface of his *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, he acknowledged:

The One Real Being is there, the Brahman, only it is not visible, nor perceptible in its true character by any of the senses; but without it, nothing that exists in our knowledge could exist, neither our Self nor what in our knowledge is not our Self. (*Six Systems*, p. xvi)

All argument and debate disappear in this supreme knowledge of the Self and Brahman, Müller observed:

How much useless controversy would have been avoided, particularly among Jewish, Mohammedan, and Christian philosophers, if a proper place had been assigned *in limine* to the question of what constitutes our legitimate or our only possible channels of knowledge, whether perception, inference, revelation, or anything else! (*Six Systems*, p. xiv)

(4) HARMONY OF RELIGIONS

Truth in Vedanta is the fruit of discovery in the universal laboratory of the soul. Genuine revelations express the highest spiritual experiences. Swami Vivekananda says:

To learn this central secret that the truth may be one and yet many at the same time, that we may have different visions of the same truth from different standpoints, is exactly what must be done. Then, instead of antagonism to anyone, we shall have infinite sympathy with all. Knowing that as long as there are different natures born in this world, the same religious truth will require different adaptations, we shall understand that we are bound to have forbearance with each other. (*C. W.*, IV: 181)

The genuine spiritual experience that is had by some people will be essentially the same. In *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, S. Radhakrishnan quotes L. P. Jacks, who wrote: “The spiritual men of India, a great and watchful multitude whose spiritual status is unattainable, are many of them Catholics in a deeper sense than we of the West have yet given to the word” (S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, p. 342). The great strength of India is its acceptance of the validity of other religions, its “plural religious set-up.”

Hinduism—non-theistic and non-dogmatic—has always merged harmoniously with theistic religions which, except for recent Judaism, are historically characterized by inter-religious conflict and aggressive missionary zeal. The labels, “heathen,” “un-Hindu,” “uncivilized,” and “inferior religion” have never been broadcast by Hinduism. Though Hindu masses traditionally honor and cling to the provincial religious customs learned while growing up in their respective tiny hamlets, villages and cities, they have never gone to war to convert others to Hinduism.

Its acceptance of diversity prevents Hinduism from becoming oppressive, monotonous, static and insipid. It does not pigeonhole truth into a single creed, recommending instead various helpful disciplines suitable for growth in different individuals. Vedanta grants wide latitude for personal choice in religion. That is why within Hinduism, we find religious expression in a bewildering variety of sects, rituals, beliefs and forms of worship. We worship according to our individual spiritual development and knowledge. A Sanskrit text draws attention to this fact of life: “The higher castes worship God in the fire, the advanced seekers meditate on Him in their own hearts, the ignorant think of Him in the image, and those who have attained to the Infinite realize His presence everywhere.”

Swami Vivekananda says:

Mark, the same earnest man who is kneeling before the idol tells you, “Him the sun cannot express, nor the moon, nor the star; the lightning cannot express Him, nor what we speak of as fire; through Him they shine.” But he does not abuse anyone’s idol or call its worship sin. He recognizes in it a necessary stage of life. “The child is father of the man.” Would it be right for an old man to say that childhood is a sin or youth a sin?

If a man can realize his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call that a sin? Nor even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error? To the Hindu, man is not traveling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him, all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest

absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength, till it reaches the Glorious Sun. (C. W., I: 15)

Shri Ramakrishna experimented with the various methods of Hinduism and followed the paths prescribed by the scriptures; he followed also the scriptural paths of Christianity and Islam and realized their essences to be one essence—he saw God in everything. This is the opinion of one venerable monk about Ramakrishna:

In his life one finds an unsurpassed record of God-intoxication, spotless purity and suing [wooing] love for humanity. And then with his mind broad as the sky, strong as adamant and pure as crystal, he plumbed the depths of spirituality, collected the treasures of the entire wisdom of the past, tested their worth and reinvested them with a fresh hallmark of truth. From his lips the world hears the voice of the ancient prophets; in his life it discovers the meaning of the scriptures. Through his life and teachings man has got an opportunity of learning the old lessons afresh.

By his deep and extensive spiritual experience of the entire range of Upanishadic truths, Ramakrishna surely heralded an epoch-making Hindu renaissance, which is expected to bring in its train a general spiritual upheaval all over the world. He discovered the wonderful spirit of Catholicism within the sealed bosom of Hinduism and released it through his own realizations to spread all over the globe and liberalize all communal and sectarian views. His advent marks a new era in the evolution of religion, when all sects and all communities, keeping intact the individual characteristics of their faiths, will transcend the limitation of a narrow and sectarian outlook and thus pave the path for a universal Brotherhood. (Swami Nirvedananda, Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance, pp. 169-70)

After submitting himself to intense austerities and spiritual practices according to Hinduism and other religions with fervor to realize God, Shri Ramakrishna became a harmonious blend of all religions. The Master's thesis, "As many faiths, so many paths," is likely to be misunderstood, unless we accept one God as the sole support and substratum of the manifold universe. Therefore, Swamiji says:

We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing. Take for instance the sun. Suppose a man standing on the earth looks at the sun when it rises in the morning; he sees a big ball. Suppose he starts on a journey towards the sun and takes a camera with him, taking photographs at every stage of his journey, until he reaches the sun. The photographs of each stage will be seen to be different from those of the other stages; in fact, when he gets back, he brings with him so many photographs of so many different suns, as it would appear; and yet we know that the same sun was photographed by the man at the different stages of his progress. Even so it is with the Lord. Through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the grossest, through the most

refined ritualism or arrant fetishism, every sect, every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God; every vision of truth that man has is a vision of Him and none else. Suppose we all go with vessels in our hands to fetch water from a lake. One has a cup, another a jar, another a bucket, and so forth, and we all fill our vessels. The water in each case naturally takes the form of the vessel carried by each of us. He who brought the cup has the water in the form of a cup; he who brought the jar—his water is in the shape of a jar, and so forth; but, in every case, water, and nothing but water, is in the vessel. So it is in the case of religion; our minds are like these vessels, and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realization of God. God is like that water filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. Yet He is One. He is God in every case. This is the only recognition of universality that we can get. (C. W., II: 383)

We are all at different stages of evolution; our minds and emotions vary. Swamiji accepted this variation: “You cannot make all conform to the same ideas: that is a fact, and I thank God that it is so. . . . Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies. . . . Variation is the sign of life and it must be there” (C. W., II: 363-4). “Just as we have recognized unity by our very nature, so we must also recognize variation” (C. W., II: 382-3).

(5) IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

Brahman is the perennial source of dynamic spirit, the Reality manifesting in infinite varied forms. Max Müller’s study of the Upanishads helped him to recognize one of Vedanta’s sublime truths:

That divine essence, that which is alone true and real in this unreal or phenomenal world, is present likewise, though invisible, as the germ of life in the smallest seed, and without it there would be no seed, no fruit, no tree, as without God there would be no world. (*Six Systems*, p. 183)

Hinduism is more a religion of experience than of doctrine. The dominant feature of Hinduism is its emphasis on the development of spiritual life, which finds fulfillment in seeking God within and without. Hence, Hinduism as a religion urges union with divinity, for this is the “soul of Truth, the delight of life, the bliss of mind, and the fullness of peace and eternity” (satyatma pranaramam mana anandam santi samriddham amritam) (Taitt. Up., I. 6. 2).

HOW THE MANY PROCEED FROM THE ONE: UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS AND THEIR CAUSE

“The universe arises from the Word” (sabdat prabhavati jagat) has been declared by the Vedas from the earliest days (Brahma Sutra I. 3. 28, Shankara’s commentary). “The Word precedes creation (sabdapurvika srstih)” (Ibid). “Vak (the Word) is coextensive with Brahman” (Yavat Brahma tishthati tavati vak) (Rg-Veda, V, X. 114. 8). According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is the material as well as the efficient cause of the

universe. As subsidiary to the efficient cause the Word is included in the material or instrumental cause. As the immediate source of creation Vak is called Sabda-Brahman or Nada-Brahman, “Sound-Brahman,” an epithet of the Vedas (B. Gita, VI: 44).

The secret of evolution lies within the organism itself. According to Patanjali, the “urge to evolve” or the desire to be free is the cause of evolution (Yoga Sutras, IV. 2. 3). Therefore, evolution is not caused by blind chance—it is purposeful and has a directing, ruling consciousness. The cause of evolution is the innermost urge of the living organism for the realization of the true nature of the self, which is intrinsically pure, free, and perfect. Involution precedes evolution. Hinduism gave this wonderful exposition of the evolution as early as 700 B. C.

Vedanta agrees with Darwin that heredity and environment can modify a species, but it holds neither of the two to be the basic cause of the evolution of a living organism. Creation is the development of the latent into the actual. Shankara points out, “A non-existent effect is not produced, nor an existent effect lost” (*Br. Up.*, I. 4. 7, Shankara’s commentary).

Vedanta is a religion of optimism. It constantly assures us of final redemption through successive births. Divinity being our real nature, no one is forever condemned. From this we get the idea that the goal of life is to attain perfection through the fullest manifestation of innate divinity so deeply embedded within us. Through spiritual practices, faith and devotion, we develop our character, experience spiritual transformation, and cultivate our divine consciousness. Every aspect of life is given full scope for development in Vedanta; however, the highest attainable goal is spiritual consummation. Vedanta’s entire concept of evolution supports this goal.

RTA, CONCEPT OF LAW

The entire Vedic period can be summed up in the one concept behind all the thoughts and activities of that period, the concept of *Rta*. In India, this was never a concept of ordination or fate; it has always been a concept of the supreme moral order: Eternal Law and Eternal Justice signifying the universal order or unity of the prevailing apparent multifarious diversity. *Rta* is the principle of rightness and justice. The concept of law or *Rta* is defined in the *Rg-Veda* (I. 1. 8) as, “The fixed way or course” and “The settled order of things,” making it the law of causation. *Rta* has many facets—ethical, moral, religious, and eternal principles.

God being intra-cosmic not extra-cosmic, rules the entire cosmic process. He is the soul behind man and the universe, whose subtle presence illuminates our understanding and enables us to unravel the secrets of nature. God is the Supreme Self that brings forth all existence, conscious and unconscious, animate and inanimate, with the help of His *maya*, which belongs to Him. The unalterable laws of the cosmos are but the expression of the divine energy. As the greatest Lawgiver, God is the source of rule and order. According to the *Rg-Veda* (10. 190. 1), God is the custodian of *Rta*, the binding soul of the universe, the Unity-in-difference of the cosmic and moral order. God is spoken of as *dradhavrita*

(holding the law), *Ritasyagopa* (Jealous Guardian of the Law), *Rita-jna* (Knower of Law) and so on. Therefore, as the sole source of all laws, physical, biological, psychical, moral and spiritual, God gives Himself entirely in and through His law.

God is *Sarvantlyami* (“universal Inner Ruler”) dwelling in all objects both sentient and insentient, and animating all nature’s forces. Every object, every being is aglow with God’s pulling power and vitalizing presence. His laws reveal His immanent, eternal presence. This sublime truth of which we get faint glimpse in the Bible (St. John, 1: 5): “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” was long before expressed variously by the sage of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (III. 7. 3): “He who dwells in the world, and is within it, whom the world does not know, whose body is the world, and who controls the world from within, is the self, the inner ruler, the immortal.”

This particular passage in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* was the source of Ramanuja’s philosophy of Qualified Non-dualism (*Outlines of Hinduism*, p. 153). The eternal attributes of the Reality are truth, goodness, beauty, and bliss. God as the one and only changeless cause of the world is not at all affected by the changes in the world. Impersonal God is the inspiring principle of all beings but though immanent in the world, God is transcendent of it. The sublime truth of this passage in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* inspired the outpouring of devotional hymns by many of India’s poet-saints.

We can infer the reality of a transcendent, intelligent, ruling entity behind all things by simply observing the natural order of things in the entire phenomenal world. We are told by the sages of the Upanishads:

By the command of that *Akshara*, the imperishable, O Gargi, heaven and earth stand apart. By the command of that *Akshara*, O Gargi, what are called moments (*nimesha*), hours (*muhurta*), days and nights, half months, months, seasons, years, all stand apart. By the command of that *Akshara*, O Gargi, some rivers flow to the East from the White Mountains, others to the West or to any other quarter. (*Br. Up.*, III. 8. 9)

For fear of Him the fire burns; for fear of Him shines the sun; for fear of Him do Indra, Vayu, Death, the fifth, proceed with their respective functions. (*Ka. Up.*, II. 6. 3)

“This universal intelligence,” says Swami Vivekananda “is what we call God” (*C. W.*, II: 210). God, who is intra-cosmic, is the only source of all laws, physical, biological, psychical, moral and spiritual. These laws are only an expression of particular modes of God’s manifestation. It is the eternal law that keeps all things within their limits, so that harmony and rhythm and order are always maintained and chaos eliminated. The objects in nature which are constructed and regulated in their functions and movement according to definite and immutable laws work not only for particular ends, but work together in perfect harmony for the preservation and welfare of the whole universe. Einstein wrote, “The great scientists of all centuries of our civilization have paid tribute in some measure to the power or principle at the back of the universe—the titanic First Cause which still mothers creation” (Quote from Swami Tathagatananda, *Albert Einstein, His Human Side*,

p. 102). Recent science is accepting a holistic view of the universe. Physics has entered into the realm of mysticism and is looking forward to a higher kind of determinism or “superdeterminism” which controls, transforms, shapes, sustains and determines the universe at a deeper level.

God is ever watchful to maintain His creation. *Rta* represents the immutable eternal law by which the cosmic order of the universe is maintained as systematized and integrated, harmonious and rhythmical, to eliminate chaos and confusion (*Br. Up.*, IV. 4. 22). In summary, through *Rta*, nature’s objects are constructed and regulated in their functions and movement according to definite and immutable laws whose operation is purposeful and predictable. The laws governed by the many-faceted Hindu concept of *Rta* work for particular ends and are also united in perfect harmony for the preservation and welfare of the whole universe.

LAW OF KARMA AND REINCARNATION

As the direct corollary of *Rta*, the doctrine of Karma and reincarnation is the counterpart of the law of causation and, more precisely, extends the physical law of causation to the moral realm. In Hinduism, the way of life is more important than the way of social culture; conduct is more important than creed. “The destiny of a nation as of an individual,” S. Radhakrishnan writes, “depends upon the direction of its life forces, the light that guides it, and the laws that mold it.” Morality, understood in this sense as the summation of all three, alone helps individuals and nations to develop right attitudes.

The individual self or soul is under the influence of the law of Karma: “That self is indeed Brahman . . . According as one acts, according as one behaves, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good; the doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action” (*Br. Up.* (IV. 4. 5). Though the self is in essence Brahman, everything that it is as well as what it becomes in any specific circumstance is the result of the individual’s past action.

All schools of Vedanta accept the premise that ignorance is the true source of bondage and suffering, and uphold that the law of Karma emphasizes the supreme importance of conduct. Each thought and action has its own impact in the formation of human character. This law is the guiding factor that makes man “the architect of his own fortune.”

The original concept of the law of Karma produced by the Indian mind is one of India’s most important contributions to world religious thought. Its tremendous practical bearing on the destiny of individuals and nations makes it the structural pivot of Hindu philosophy and culture; for this reason India has been called *Karma Bhumi* (“the Land of Karma”) since ancient times.

Thanks to the law of Karma, Hinduism exhorts every Hindu to assume sole responsibility for his or her actions and their consequence. Under this inexorable law, no external force can condemn or acquit an individual. The law of Karma effectively protects

individualism in India; in this regard it is the most powerful constructive element in society. Max Müller thoroughly appreciated the doctrine and discussed the law of Karma as the basis of ethics and moral law:

It has often been said that a philosophical religion like the Vedanta is deficient, because it cannot supply a solid foundation for morality. . . . I hope to be able to show that the Vedanta philosophy, so far from merely supplying a metaphysical explanation of the world, aims at establishing its ethics on the most solid philosophical and religious foundations. . . . The answer of the Vedanta philosophers (to the wrongs with which the world abounds) is well known [referring here to the law of Karma], and has become the keynote not only of the Brahmanic, but likewise of Buddhist morality, over the greater part of the world. (F. Max Müller, *Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy*, pp. 162-4 passim. Hereafter *Three Lectures*)

However skeptical we may be on the power of any ethical teaching, and its influence on the practical conduct of men and women, there can be no doubt that this doctrine of Karman [sic] (karman means simply act or deed) has met with the widest acceptance, and has helped to soften the sufferings of millions, and to encourage them not only in their endurance of present evils, but likewise in their efforts to improve their future condition. (*Three Lectures*, pp. 166-7)

The term Karma means “action.” It also refers to the effects or consequences of action. In the doctrine of Karma, law governs all action. Vedanta’s principle of Rta proclaims in laymen’s terms, “As we sow, so we reap.” According to the Upanishads, “A man becomes good by a good action and bad by bad actions” (Br. Up., III. 2. 13). This is a very logical and scientific theory, like Newton’s third law of motion which states, “To every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” The truth behind this physical law applies equally to spiritual life. The theory of karma does not espouse fatalism; it represents our freedom of will. We are the architects of our fate. Morally good actions have a spiritual impact on our mind. Morally degraded thoughts and actions have a weakening effect on our mind. These effects are not guided by any external, irrational agent; it is the effect of karma that visits us. “All that we are is the result of what we have thought,” says Swami Vivekananda. It is not a retributive or inexorable law. Divine grace does intervene and the effect of Karma can be partially or wholly mitigated. Paul Deussen’s appreciation of the law of Karma took away the bitterness from life. When he was in Bombay in 1893, Deussen came upon a blind man. When, out of his deep sympathy, Deussen spoke to him about his miserable condition, the latter promptly told him, “This is my karma.” His calm acceptance made a deep impact in Deussen’s thoughtful mind and made him understand how the harsh experiences of life can be mitigated by accepting the law of karma.

Karma affords us freedom and the opportunity to come out of the vicious cycle of birth and death. Swami Vivekananda says, “The only way to come out of bondage is to go beyond the limitations of the law, to go beyond causation” (C. W., I: 98). Though karma binds, unselfish karma liberates—this is Karma yoga.

Each is great in his own way; each dutiful action has its inherent value and goodness; each duty successfully fulfilled in a detached way gives us strength towards the goal of spiritual enlightenment. At the same time, when righteous duty is guided and sweetened by love, we feel joy in our actions. Swami Vivekananda gives the charming instructive narrative of the young Sannyasin, the ordinary woman and the *Vyadha*, a member of India's lowest caste (*C. W.*, I: 68-71 passim). The story highlights the humbling of the inflated ego of a young Sannyasin proud of his yogic powers by a woman whose lifelong dedication to her family duties has made her illumined and by a butcher (the *Vyadha*) to whom she mysteriously sends the Sannyasin for valuable spiritual instruction. The encounter between the arrogant Sannyasin and the butcher occasions a lecture from the butcher that forms the *Vyadha-Gita* in the *Mahabharata*. The butcher's illumination has also come from his acceptance of his own dharma or righteous duty, which he performs in an unattached way as a householder. "In the story," Swami Vivekananda says, "the *Vyadha* and the woman did their duty with cheerfulness and whole-heartedness; and the result was that they became illuminated, clearly showing that the right performance of the duties of any station in life without attachment to results, leads us to the highest realization of the perfection of the soul" (*C. W.*, I: 71).

From the time of the Byzantine emperor Justinian the Great (483-565 A. D.), Christianity has been promoting the doctrine of a single birth and death. However, the doctrine of karma and reincarnation is slowly finding a place in the minds of many people in the West, where several scholarly books on reincarnation have been published. The view of Nobel Laureate (1911) Maeterlinck (1862-1949) on reincarnation reflects the strong emotional response that is shared by other western thinkers on this subject:

Let us return to reincarnation . . . for there never was a more beautiful, a juster, a purer, a more moral, fruitful and consoling, nor to a certain point, a more probable creed than reincarnation. It alone, with its doctrine of successive expiations and purifications, accounts for all the physical and intellectual inequalities, all the social iniquities, all the hideous injustices of fate. (Quote from *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*, Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston, comp. and eds., p. 200)

Pondering human suffering, Max Müller wrote:

[If suffering] is a result for us, it can only be the result of acts done in a former life. You see that the previous, nay, the eternal existence of individual souls is taken for granted [in the Vedanta system], as it seems to be likewise in certain passages of the New Testament (St. John, ix). But whatever we may think of the premises on which this theory rests, its influence on human character has been marvelous. If a man feels that what, without any fault of his own, he suffers in this life can only be the result of some of his former acts, he will bear his sufferings with more resignation, like a debtor who is paying off an old debt. And if he knows besides that in this lie he may by suffering not only pay off his old debts, but actually lay by moral capital for the future, he has a motive for goodness, which is not more selfish than it ought to be. The belief that no act, whether good or bad, can be lost, is only the same belief in the moral world which our belief in the preservation

of force is in the physical world. Nothing can be lost. (Max Müller in *Three Lectures*. Quote from *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*, p. 161)

Interested readers will find the personal testimony and remarks about reincarnation of more than 400 distinguished thinkers over the centuries in the book, *Reincarnation, an East-West Anthology*.

(6) MUKTI, SPIRITUAL UNION WITH THE DIVINE

Vedanta tells us repeatedly that experience is vital to spiritual development. “Religion is realization,” says Swami Vivekananda. Religious truth has to be experienced through inner development. It is to be noted that purification of the mind and intense longing for God are essential. The purpose of religion is not achieved by “hugging” mere dogma or creed, or by maintaining a mechanical faith in socio-religious traditions or external forms of religion. Neither is God a “wet nurse” nor religion a “narcotic.” The divine essence is our inherent property; an inner urge compels us to seek divine fulfillment by developing moral and spiritual excellence. In Vedanta the world is viewed as the battlefield of our struggle for freedom from bondage. Evolution is the story of the manifestation of this inherent perfection through suitable environmental changes and mutations within the organism. The glorious struggle culminates in our attainment of perfection. Religion at this stage becomes a spiritual adventure as the seeker of truth enters into the higher realms of spiritual life, loses all human weaknesses and enjoys the divine bliss. This is the acme of spiritual life.