

Vedanta and the Resolution of Human Ego

Contributed by Chitra Raman
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by

Chitra Raman

"Na
hi gyAnEna sadrsham pavitram iha vidyatE ...

"Nothing in existence is as purifying as Knowledge... "

So begins verse 38 in Chapter four of
the Bhagavad Gita , the chapter that reveals to Arjuna the path of JnAna Yoga,
the Way of Knowledge.

Indians have long regarded the
attainment of knowledge as a supreme human ideal. The Hindu's relationship with God is not
jeopardized by the pursuit of knowledge.
It is neither threatened by engaging in relentless inquiry nor by
challenging established thinking. The
Gita illuminates that spiritual evolution is in fact greatly enhanced by that
process.

But the Gita is not referring here to
any and every type of knowledge. Indeed,
if achieving that goal were simply a matter of accumulating information, humanity's fulfillment would be
assured. It would follow automatically
from technological mastery and innovation.
It would grow in proportion to the advances made in decoding
communication - not just between humans, but in other creatures; and even the
elemental genetic building blocks of life itself.

And yet, in these troubled times, the
exact opposite scenario prevails.

Humans are now able to split the atom,
manipulate a gene, capture and transmit thoughts electronically, and peer into
the oceanic abyss as well as the interstellar void. They can even tell a robot stationed in Mars

to pick up a rock sample.

But these very advances also make possible mutually assured nuclear annihilation, horrific biological warfare, globally coordinated acts of terrorism, and irreversible resource depletion. In every corner of the world today there are escalating cycles of retaliatory violence. There is tremendous and unconscionable economic disparity. The amazing communication tools now available to us do not produce a corresponding improvement in mutual understanding.

In short, we are frequently reminded that knowledge is not the same as wisdom.

The most brilliant minds -- scientists, thinkers, scholars with formidable breadth of erudition -- sometimes display a kind of behavioral immaturity that seems completely incongruous with their intellectual stature.

I'd like to share a story that was narrated to me by a firsthand observer, about the great scholar and second President of India, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

Dr. Radhakrishnan was on a tour of Orissa with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was traveling separately. As dictated by protocol, the President's vehicle proceeded before that of the Prime Minister. But wherever they stopped, the

waiting crowd peered into the car, garlands in hand, and waved them on after proclaiming "This is not Nehru." This annoyed Dr. Radhakrishnan so much that he ordered the driver to proceed without stopping.

That evening, at the function organized in their honor, Dr. Radhakrishnan was surrounded by a bevy of ingratiating guests - until Nehru walked in. Immediately, everyone left his side and surged towards Nehru, leaving him all by himself. Looking highly peeved, Dr. Radhakrishnan left the room and proceeded straight to dinner.

After dinner, while the audience waited for the cultural program to begin, a lady walked up to the front row and requested an autograph from Nehru, who swiftly obliged. When she asked Dr. Radhakrishnan, he reportedly dismissed her with a snarl and an insulting wave of his hand!

That renowned scholar, whose linguistic versatility and mastery of Western classics had enabled him to translate the most profound ideas of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads into English, evidently had not quite absorbed the teachings that he wrote about with such clarity.

The Gita
says:

na
prahrSyEt priyam prApya nOdvijEt
prApya cApriyam

sthirabuddhirasammUDho brahmavid brahmaNi
sthithaH
(Chapter 5, Verse 20)

which Dr. Radhakrishnan translates as follows:

"One should
not rejoice on obtaining what is pleasant nor sorrow on obtaining what is
unpleasant. He who is (thus) firm of
understanding and unbewildered, (such a) knower of God is established in God."

Clearly,
there is a faculty in humans that occludes the keenest intellect and prevents revelation from turning into realization.

That quality
is the human ego, or ahamkara, the
consciousness of oneself as an individual separate from the rest of creation
with unique advantages and shortcomings and uniquely justifiable desires and
hatreds (raga-dvEsha).

To better
introspect on how the human ego operates, I invite you to contemplate the
following set of slides.

[Powerpoint

1: Relative sizes of astronomical objects]

Although the majority of these slides are artist's representations created to scale, what you just viewed is not hypothesis but fact. When viewed on this scale, where are the film celebrities, the billionaires, the princes and potentates? Where are the politicians and the tycoons and their amassed hoards in Swiss Banks? What corner of reality is threatened by the nuclear arsenals that nations point menacingly at each other? Given that we humans inhabit an infinitesimal corner of the universe for a fraction of an infinitesimal unit of Celestial Time, can you and I be said to even exist?

Yes, you do exist, says the presence that rules our consciousness. When this presence rises to speak, it drowns out all other voices.

In terms of relative size, ahamkara is too big to be accommodated on this set of slides.

I do not mean to suggest that humans are all uniformly egotistical, but to point out that cognitive input filtered through ego or "I-consciousness" inevitably is skewed.

Ego mediates

our perceptions of ourselves, of each other, and our surroundings. The human intellect ruled by ahamkara must constantly compare itself with others in order to feel worthy. It prefers control over coexistence. It can only experience plenitude when others have far less. It requires external approval and praise. An un-evolved Ego's appetite for aggrandizement can cause everything from self-delusion to the physical and emotional destruction of others.

Before talking about how Vedanta approaches the problem of ahamkara, I will take you on another story detour.

The following events occurred in the 1960's during the years Indira Gandhi was in power. A PhD candidate from Pune shared his intended thesis submission with a middle-level officer of the Botanical Survey of India at Mumbai. Instead of providing helpful feedback as requested, this officer copied the entire paper and published it under his own name in a magazine of the Botanical Survey.

The matter came to the attention of my father's cousin, K.S. Srinivasan, who was then the Deputy Director of the organization and editor of the publication. He was contacted by the PhD student's advisor. The PhD student had subsequently submitted his thesis only to be accused of plagiarism by the reviewing committee. His advisor was shocked to see his student's work published verbatim under another name, and the student was understandably devastated.

Mr. Srinivasan took it upon himself to expose the real plagiarist. He reviewed the paper and conducted a detailed inquiry. His investigations showed that there was no record that the concerned officer had made field trips in connection with the observations recorded in the paper. There was no record of tour programs filed, log book entries, or signatures at the rest house where the officer claimed to have stayed. Furthermore, there were technical errors and misspellings in botanical terms which might be understandable coming from a

student, but not from an officer at his level.

When confronted in this manner, the officer had no option but to confess. Mr. Srinivasan filed a report strongly recommending that the officer be punished.

The result of all this due diligence was that the unscrupulous officer was promoted to a senior position by virtue of his connections and moved to Lucknow.

While there, he committed financial irregularities and once again, Mr. Srinivasan pursued the facts and documented a clear case of misappropriation of funds. This time, the officer was punished -- with a fresh promotion -- and sent on deputation to London!

And what do you think became of Mr. Srinivasan? He was blocked from further promotions, being seen as too much of a troublemaker.

This story is not particularly unusual. Most of us have either directly or indirectly experienced some version of it. Millions of similar events are likely playing out this very minute in the world.

The story is included here because it serves as a perfect instance of ego-driven self-delusion on the part of the plagiarist. It also illustrates how a more evolved ego might deal with disappointments great and small, whether inflicted by people or by circumstances.

In the VivEkaCUdAmaNi of Adi Sankara, we learn:

AgyAnayogAt paramAtmanastava /
hyAtma bandhastata eva
samsrtiH

tayOrvivEkOdita bodha vahniH
/ agyAnakAryam pradahEt
samUlam (verse 49)

"Only because of being chained to ignorance are you, the limitless self or Atma, bound to anAtma,(or non-Atma, which refers to the impression of oneself as limited to one's body, mind, and sensory feedback). The flow of birth and death results from that bondage alone. It takes the fire of knowledge born of discrimination to burn the manifest effects of ignorance along with its root cause."

To quote my respected Guru, Swami
Dayananda Saraswati:

"The ego 'I' who is insecure, who is inadequate, who has got hundreds of opinions about himself, who buys a lot of opinions of others about himself, is called ahamkara. Beginning from this ego up to the body, at every stage there is bondage...at every level, the attributes of the body are superimposed on the Atma....All these bondages are due to self-ignorance."

Happily, the large majority of us do not compensate for our Ego's perceived inadequacies by taking credit for the work of others. However, the hard fact is that to engage with today's world, we must descend into the Roman amphitheatre of gladiator Egos, where the perception is that one must either prevail over the other -- or become irrelevant.

Faced with this imagined choice, the individual Ego feels compelled to control more people, own more material assets, become more physically attractive.

Even the pursuit of knowledge is at its core less about self development and self-discovery as it is about wanting to be perceived as belonging to the elite: hence the privileging of graduates from certain institutes of learning, the higher respect given to certain fields of study, the conferring of awards and titles, and so

forth. The Ego is the engine that drives our never-ending quest for self-gratification -- when in fact perfect freedom is in the objective awareness of the essential Self, or Atma, as lacking nothing, as limitless.

This is the vision of Vedanta.

An average ego-driven individual -- such as I, who experience resentment when not acknowledged for my contributions, claim authorship over actions performed, and feel pride for heights scaled -- does not magically become capable of internalizing that vision, no matter how much she or he might believe it to be true. Life hurts.

Understand the source of that hurt, Vedanta says, in order that you may transcend it. Do not withdraw from the world or from performing actions, but remove your attachment to the results of those actions.

The most well-known verse of the Bhagavad Gita states:

KarmanyEv
AdhikArastE mAphalEshu kadAchana

mA
karmaphalahEturbhUr mA tE sangOstva
karmaNi (Chapter 2, Verse 47)

"You have the authority to perform action, but no control over its results; in performing action, you must neither be motivated by the expectation of a particular result, nor be attached to inaction."

In the instance I provided, Mr. Srinivasan did not obtain the results he wanted despite uncovering clear evidence of wrongdoing, because the offending officer was too well-connected.

When faced with such a result, the typical reaction is to avoid sticking one's neck out again, either because one feels it is futile, or because one fears personal consequences. But Mr. Srinivasan continued to attempt to hold the officer accountable. If not for people like Mr. Srinivasan, who do the right thing irrespective of the consequences, this world might slide into Pralaya at a much faster rate.

If the world is seized by unrelenting and escalating cycles of violence and destruction it is because of the absence of proper action and an excess of reaction. All human conflict, whether physical or intellectual, is essentially reactivity in perpetual motion. And reactivity comes from the immobility of being welded to one's personal perspective.

The following slides illustrate how personal perspective works.

[Powerpoint
2: Perspectives]

What you just viewed are all different perspectives of the same vase.

To know this fact, you would have to have observed it in person from all these angles. To believe that what I am saying is true, you would have to know about the refractive properties of glass, and the constituent colors of light. In the absence of these conditions, no immediate consensus is possible as to what is being observed.

In other words, even a work of art may create the perfect conditions for an argument of indefinite intensity and duration!

This is what the Gita says about

uncontrolled anger:

krOdhAt bhavati sammOhaH sammOhAt smrti vibhramaH

smrtibhramSAd buddhinASO
buddhinASAt praNaSyati (
Chapter 2, Verse 63)

"From anger rises bewilderment, from
bewilderment loss of memory; from loss of memory, the destruction of
intelligence (discrimination), and from destruction of intelligence, the
individual perishes."

Contrast this analysis with the
perception reinforced by popular culture that all strength and valor proceeds
from a pair of fists and a pointed gun!

I opened with the first line of a verse
from the Gita. Here now is the verse in
full:

Na hi gyAnEna
sadrsham pavitram iha vidyatE

Tat svayam
yogasamsiddhaH kAlEnAtmani vindati
(Chapter 4, Verse 38)

"Nothing in existence is as purifying as
knowledge; one who is perfected through
the practice of yoga discovers it in oneself over the course of time."

Wisdom is not attained by merely
comprehending the meaning of words, but discovered within oneself over time in
the individual who practices introspection, self-discipline, restraint, and
non-attachment. One can spend an
entire lifetime controlled by ahamkara, being
too preoccupied with responding to
the dictates of Ego to comprehend that the path to true elevation lies
elsewhere.

In writing this, it occurred to me that some of the finest scientific minds in the western world have applied themselves to uncovering a grand unified theory of everything. While western science travels inward from observable external phenomena, Vedanta begins by revealing the essential unity of creation and travels outward from it to explain observable phenomena as transient and incidental.

Vedanta's relevance is timeless; its insights speak to humanity as a whole, rather than to any exclusive group deemed to be the Chosen Ones. Being alive to its vision brings not only a deeper awareness of what it means to be Hindu, but also directs one to a more fulfilling way of being human.

Picture
credits:

Powerpoint 1 compiled from various sources on
the Web;

Powerpoint 2 photographed by the author: Four Color Wheel Solid Vase Form by Sidney Hutter (2008) at the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota, USA