

Book Review

Brian Hodgkinson, *The Essence of Vedanta: The Ancient Wisdom of Indian Philosophy*, Boston: Eagle Editions Limited, 2006, pp.230. ISBN: 1841934453.

Brian Hodgkinson not only provides a thorough introduction of Vedanta, but also he expresses his skepticism about the western philosophy, and argues that Vedanta can serve as an anchor to the chaotic state of theories in the West.

Vedanta as a manual of wisdom is based on two notions: one introduced by Ramanuja and the other by Madhva. Ramanuja upheld the importance of devotion as “the chief means of liberation” (p. 7). He expostulates that man attains his absolute self by reaching a state where he permanently exists in the presence of God. Madhva however emphasized a dualism between God and man, and stressed that man can suffer “eternal damnation” in separation from God. Another aspect of Vedanta is its relation to OM, a sound, which is supposed to be the sound of Brahma, a sound that is the origin of this universe.

Vedanta originates from the Vedas, a collection of Sanskrit writings. The Veda is believed to be coeval with the creation of man. With the creation of humanity it was given the natural law in the form of the Veda; that is why Veda “is probably the most comprehensive exposition of philosophy found at any time in the world.”(p. 9)

There are four Vedas in total: the Rig Veda, Yagur Veda, Sama Veda and Athasua Veda. The author of these Vedas is unknown, however according to one opinion Vyasa — the legendary writer of the Mahabharata was the compiler of the Vedas.

In this book the concepts of ‘Knowledge and Ignorance’, ‘The self’, ‘Consciousness’, ‘Liberation’, ‘Nature’, ‘Time’, ‘Mind’, ‘Theism and Dualism,’ ‘Language’, ‘Law and Society’, have been explicated. In the Veda there is a complete treatise on knowledge and ignorance, called Upanishads. Upanishad means “sitting at the feet (of a master). Hence, Upanishads are the statements of truth that came into existence during the process of a discourse between a master and his student.

In addition to the Upanishads, two other works represent Vedanta: Brahma Sutras and the Bhagvad Gita. Sutras are pithy aphorisms while the Bhagvad Gita relates a conversation between Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, who in reality is the Lord of all, or the universal spirit. Krishna in this conversation convinces Arjuna that he has to fight as a member of the family of warriors regardless of the imagined consequences. Krishna impresses on Arjuna the fact that the Self is indestructible:

Who thinks the self may kill, who thinks the self

Itself be killed, has missed the mark of truth.

Self is not born, nor does it even die;

It does not come to life, not having been,
Nor, having been does it thereafter cease.
Eternal, ancient, ever present Self,
Though bodies are cut down, lives on intact.
(Bhagvad Gita, II, 19-20. p 47)

In the Bhagvad Gita great truths are revealed through the metaphor of war: the way to war is analogous to the way to action. Also the state of human mind is comparable to the state of a battlefield. Arjuna hence is more like an individual spirit that is constantly engaged in a struggle against its opponent spirits, and in the process grows itself into a perfect being.

The book in fact claims the attention and interest of a reader when the author juxtaposes Vedanta against the Western philosophical systems. He states, quite convincingly, that the Western philosophy has become dialectical after Descartes' division of body and mind. For the West this distinction between the subjective mind and the objective world is the starting point of philosophy. No western philosopher has been bold enough to deny this dichotomy of the self. Sankara, the great teacher of Advaita (non- duality) believed in a unified self that existed in this world as well as beyond it. For the west such belief is pantheism, but Sankara was not a pantheist. For a pantheist, the self is immanent, while for Sankara the self is immanent as well as transcendent. Ryle and Wittgenstein however lay to rest Descartes' dialecticism only in the 20th century.

Vedanta, like any modern philosophical system, analyses language in which it is inscribed. Using the traditional concepts of a 4th century BC grammarian, Vedanta investigates basic concepts of 'Sphota' ('a kind of exploration of consciousness associated with words'). Vedanta also studies the derivation of words from their verbal roots (dhatus). Unlike the western way of thinking that considers empiricism as the basis of all knowledge, Vedanta relies on "recorded teachings handed down from the time immemorial."(p. 15)

In Vedanta the ancient stories, as in the form of Puranas, are the repository of wisdom. Hodgkinson recounts an interesting story here. Once a student went to a guru and asked him for advice .The guru advised him to see Atman, one Lord, in every thing. The student followed the advice and once on his way saw an elephant heading towards him. Keeping strong faith in the presence of Atman in the elephant as well as in his own self he was not at all afraid of any harm from the elephant and confidently went closer to it paying no attention to the mahout's loud warnings. The beast picked the student with its trunk and threw him on one side of the path. Injured and enraged, he got up and approached the same guru with the complaint that he had been misled. He saw, he said, Atman in himself as well as in the beast, yet it had hurt him. The guru scolded him for his inability to see the same Atman in the mahout too, who did warn him to leave the path.

In Vedanta we find the teachings that expose the widest scope of knowledge. To Arjuna's question: "what is knowledge?" Krishna's answer was: "to know the field and the knower of the field, that is the real knowledge". Knowledge hence is divided into two levels: the lower order knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the field and the higher order knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the self. Vedanta's concept of knowledge is more comprehensive than the Western empirical approach towards cognition. May be, nothing can sum up the above stated Vedantic principle of knowledge more succinctly than an Upanishad, stated in the Kath:

God made sense turn outward, man therefore looks
outward, not into himself. Now and again a daring soul,
desiring immortality, has looked back found himself.

(The Ten Principal Upanishads, p. 33)

In spite of this sharp distinction between the lower order knowledge and the higher order knowledge, knowledge is unity in Vedanta. The traditional categories of knowledge: the knower, the act of knowing and the object known; are subsumed into each other for a Vedantist. It is just like listening to music: during the act of listening to music we sometimes become unconscious of all existence except the music itself. This way of knowing, of experiencing the object of knowing, is the Vedantic way of knowing.

'...or the music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts.'

(T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets", 'The Dry Sahages,' v)

Hence comes up the importance of Self- knowledge. From the Greek up to the contemporary, the West have been interested in the 'empiricism and interposition' for the sake of knowing what exists beyond the self. The Vedantic however insisted on the self, on the purification of mind through chants, meditation, rituals and sacrifices. It is the point that has mainly been un-understandable to the West; knowing the knower is the highest form of knowledge because it facilitates the act of knowing the truth. This realization did come to Erwin Schrodinger who says:

You may ask—you are bound to ask me now: what, then, is in your opinion the value of natural sciences? I answer: Its scope, aim and value is the same as that of any other branch of human knowledge. Nay, none of them alone, only the union of all of them, has any scope or value at all, and that is simply enough described: it is to obey the command of the Delphic deity...know thyself. (Erwin Schrodinger, 'Nature and the Greeks' and 'Science and Humanism', p.108)

No doubt the Bhagvad Gita or the Upanishads themselves are the source of Vedanta, but Hodgkinson's The Essence of Vedanta is unsurpassable in relating the Vedantic doctrines to the modern Western philosophy. As students of history, literature and philosophy, we are more exposed to the literature produced in the West, hence we have greater awareness of the terms used in the Western literature. This book provides a sort of initiation into the Indian wisdom explained in the terms of Western philosophy.

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