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Vedanta Today

by

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Vedanta Today *

At the outset I must pay my personal tribute to Prof. M.G.K. Menon, Goku as we used to call him, who was a dear friend and colleague for several decades. I first met him when I was in Mrs. Indira Gandhi's cabinet and he attended a cabinet meeting as scientific adviser to the government of India. We were both very young men at that time. And after that of course, thanks to India International Centre, we became very close. We had so many meetings, so many conversations in this unique institution, India International Centre.

Today, I will briefly present before you what I consider to be the contemporary relevance of the Vedanta. To my mind, a philosophy is only relevant if it helps us today. What it was thousands of years ago is very interesting for research scholars, and for people who are doing research, like the book on Sankaracharya, but unless those teachings are of use to us today, they are not really relevant. So what I believe is that the Vedanta is relevant, and I will explain why.

We live in an age of great turmoil, tension and transition. The old is collapsing, and the new is struggling to be born, and we find ourselves precariously poised between a disappearing past and an uncertain future. All the so-called clear landmarks that we thought existed have disappeared one by one, and we often find ourselves afloat on an intellectual and political sea with no clear guidelines. It is at a time like this that we look into our scriptures for light and guidance. Not in order to go back in time, let us be very clear. Any idea that you can go back to some kind of mythical golden age is absurd, because time goes in only one direction, *Charaiveti Charaiveti*. But we look into our scriptures in order to get the clarity, courage and the confidence to move into the future.

*The Second M.G.K. Menon Lecture, 2018, titled 'Vedanta Today', delivered at the IIC by Dr. Karan Singh on 28 August 2018.

Hinduism is particularly rich in scriptures. We have a whole range of scriptures, from the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads down to the Shrutis, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas. I don't think any other culture in the world has such a huge corpus of literature. Among all of these, the Upanishads stand out. The Vedas could be looked upon as the Himalayas, because it is from there that all the life-giving waters come.

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Kalidasa has described the Himalayas very beautifully:

*Astyutarsyam Dwishi Devatma Himalayo nam Nagadhirajah,
Poorvaparoutonidhi vigahaya, sthitaha prithvyva eva maandandah*

It is not simply a mountain, it is a *devatatma*, it is a spiritual presence. So if the Vedas can be likened to the Himalayas, then the Upanishads are like those great peaks that stand out, always illuminated with wisdom and clarity. The sunlight of wisdom is always on them. If you fly parallel to the Himalayas, you will see these great peaks. And the Upanishads are like that, because they are known as the Vedanta, first because they come at the end of the Vedas, and secondly, because they represent the high watermark, not only of Hindu philosophy but of world philosophy. These Upanishads, taken together, represent the basis of our culture and of our religion. They are the *shruti*, they are the ones that are directly heard. All the rest, including the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, Puranas, and so on are all *smriti*, they are remembered. These *shruti* are the sayings of these great sages in moments of spiritual exaltation, and they are therefore extremely important.

There are 11 principal Upanishads, but I will not go into the details. The word Upanishad has two meanings: it can mean a secret teaching, not a secret teaching for mystical reasons, but because not everybody could understand them. They had to be learnt in a certain atmosphere, in a

certain ambience. And also Upanishad means sitting nearby; the guru used to sit, and one or more pupils used to sit around them, and there used to be a question and answer session. It is important to note that the Indic religions are all dialogic religions. The Upanishads consist of questions and answers. The Gita too. Buddha answered questions all his life, as he was walking up and down the plains of north India. Mahavira did the same. Unlike the revealed religions, which have a text, the Indic religions are based on a dialogic format, a little like the Socratic tradition in Greece.

So the Upanishads are a series of very sharp questions put by students, and answers to them. There are great students like Nachiketa, and great teachers like Yajnavalkya or Janaka. They are so full of content, so vast and so varied, that it is very difficult to condense them for a short lecture. What I will try and do is to place before you five key concepts that I consider to be essential, and of considerable importance to us now. It seems to me, as we move onwards in time, many of these concepts become more relevant, not less. That I think is the great secret of the Upanishads.

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The first concept is the unity of all existence: *Ishavasyamidam sarvam Yatkincha jagatyam*. Whatever exists, has existed, or will exist, is all permeated by, inhabited by the same divine light, what the Upanishads called the Brahman:

*brahmaivedamamṛtaṁ purastād brahma paścād brahma dakṣiṇataścottareṇa |
adhaścordhvaṁ ca prasṛtaṁ brahmaivedaṁ viśvamidam variṣṭham ||*

For this magnificent universe, we had the concept, *Ananta koti brahmand*, or infinite numbers of universes, and vast eons of time through which the universe passes. In some other philosophies, however, there were discussions as to whether the earth was created in 5000 BC or 10000 BC.

But our seers realised that it was *Anadi Ananth*; it was without beginning and without end. This concept of the infinite number of galaxies has only now come within our ken. Before that, people didn't even know that there were other universes. And yet this *ananthkoti brahmand*, and the long period of time through which the universe passes, and also the concept of a *swayambhu*, a self-created universe—which is another interesting concept because some scientists say there is no necessity for a creator, the universe has created itself.

So, these concepts of cosmic time and cosmic space are to be found in the context of the Brahman, which would be the philosophical correlate of the unified field theory that the scientists are seeking to explain different phenomena. So, the first concept to understand is the unity of all existence. Quantum physics and contemporary science seem in fact to be moving towards that sort of a realisation.

The second key concept is that the divine which permeates the universe; a spark of that divine exists in every human being. *Isvaraḥ sarva-bhutanam hr̥d-dese tiṣṭhati*, the Lord resides in the heart of all beings. It is an extraordinary idea. All religions talk of the 'inner light'. The Bible calls it 'the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. The gurus call it the *Ek Onkara*. The Sufis call it the *Noor-e-Ilahi*. That inner light we believe is a spark of the Divine. Once you realise that, once you realise the inherent divinity in all beings, particularly in human beings, then you realise that we have, sooner or later, to live in some kind of a harmonious global society otherwise we are going to destroy ourselves.

Joining these two, the all-pervasive Brahman and the Atman within, is what is known as Yoga. The word Yoga comes from the root *Yuj*, the same root as the word *Yoke*, which means to join. Yoga is the methodology and the philosophy of joining the Atman and the Brahman, of joining God immanent and God transcendent, of joining the human and the Divine.

There are four main paths to this Yoga. The first is Gyan Yoga, the way of the mind. This is intellectual cogitation, so that your mind gets clarified to such an extent that you begin to see the reality behind outer forms.

Plato said that we are in a cave, and all we see are shadows thrown on the wall of the cave. We see neither the actual objects, nor the light behind them. So Gyan Yoga is the way of clarifying the mind. It is a way of meditating on the truths. It would be the way of Wisdom. The way, perhaps, of Plato and of Socrates and other *gyanis* who realise the Divinity in the mind itself.

The second methodology is Bhakti Yoga, the way of devotion. The way of devotion involves adoration of a certain form of the Divine. Gyan Yoga does not require a form, you can meditate on a light, or you can meditate on the formless if you like. On the other hand, in Bhakti Yoga there is a focus, whether it is Shiva, whether it is Vishnu, or Rama or Krishna or whether it is Shakta, the many focus of the goddess. There are three main streams of Hinduism: the Shaiva stream is the Ganga; the Vaishnava stream is the Yamuna; and the adrishya (invisible) Saraswati is the Shakta stream. That is why people are bemused by the multiplicity of gods in Hinduism. How can you have so many divinities, they ask. The answer is because they are all manifestations of the same Divine. It is very important to understand that. There is a difference between the Greek gods and Indian Hindu gods. The Greek gods were always fighting against each other; they were different entities. Here, if Shiva is sitting in meditation, we believe he is meditating on Vishnu, and if Vishnu is praying, we believe he is praying to Shiva. So there is a complementarity between all these divine figures. Bhakti Yoga means falling in love with the Divine. It is as simple as that. Like Meera fell in love with Krishna, or the great Nayanmars of south India, the great Saiva saints, each one of them was in love with Shiva. In Christianity, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint John on the cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, are saints who are in love with Jesus. This is Bhakti Yoga.

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So Gyana Yoga is the way of the mind, Bhakti Yoga is the way of the heart. We have a strong Bhakti movement which started in south India with the Nayanars and the Alvars, the Saiva and the Vaishnava saints, which then came all the way up. Saints like Tulsidas and Kabirdas and Meeraben, are *bhaktas*, or devotees, and they are all on the path of Bhakti Yoga. These are paths to unite the Atman and the Brahman.

The third path then is the way of the hands; that is, the way of work. This is mentioned in the Upanishads also. It is particularly stressed in the Gita. In the Upanishads also it is very clear that all work is not Karma Yoga. If you go around chopping off people's heads, or throwing bombs, that is not Karma Yoga. Karma Yoga is work which you have dedicated to the Divine. Dedicated works, in other words, can also be a powerful methodology for spiritual growth. This is a very important point, because many people feel that Vedanta is only for people who go off into the mountains, who go to live in an ashram, never to be seen again. That is not true. We are in the middle of a battle here. Like in the Gita, Kurukshetra is here, now our lives are Kurukshetras. The battle is here upon us, we are in it. The flight of missiles has begun. The conch shells have been sounded. In the midst of this, how do we work? We work by dedicating our work to the Divine.

There is a beautiful shloka in the Bhagavad Gita when Krishna tells Arjuna, *yatah pravrttir bhutanam yena sarvam idam tatam sva-karmana tam abhyarcya siddhim vindati manavah.*

That great Divinity that pervades the universe, the Brahman, *svakarmana*; if you worship it through your karma, *Siddhim vindaqti manavah*, man moves towards perfection. Dedication and dedicated work is very difficult because in the rush of work nobody remembers what is dedicated. But if you have an inner dedication, if you are working in devotion, if you are working with commitment, whether you are a *mantri* or a *santri*, does not matter, as long as you are doing your work in the proper spirit.

When the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur, the greatest temple in India, was being built, King Rajarajachola went out to inspect the work.

He came across one man who was cutting stone. He asked him, what are you doing? He said, Sir, I am cutting stone. He went a little further, and there was another man doing exactly the same thing. He said, what are you doing? He said, Sir, I am earning a living. The first one was just *tamsik*, he was doing it mechanically. The second one was *rajsik*, at least knew that he was earning something for his family. He went to a third man, doing exactly the same thing. He said, what are you doing? He said, Sir, I am building a great temple. So it depends on how you are doing your work. If you are doing it with dedication to build a great temple, whether it is the temple of new India, or the temple of a new humanity, that work becomes very powerful. That is the way, for example, of Swami Vivekanand, and that is the way of Mother Theresa, the way of Martha, as it were, as against the way of Mary in Christianity. So Karma Yoga is the third way, the third main path to join the Atman and the Brahman. I am talking about the all-pervasive Brahman, the Atman within us, and the methodologies to join them.

The fourth is known as Raja Yoga, the royal path. That is the way of the breath, the way of arousing the potentialities which are within each human being. That is where breath control comes in. That is where the theory of the Kundalini comes in: a power coiled three and a half times around the base of the spine which can apparently be made to rise; and as it does, it energises certain *chakras* in the body until it flows into the *sahasradhara*. All these practices, and Hatha Yoga, that we see today, is one part of Raja Yoga. Yoga is much more than simply the capacity to do *asanas*. Let me put it another way: the capability to stand on your head is not a necessary requisite for enlightenment.

So here we have these four yogas—Gyana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and the Raja Yoga. Let me add that these are by no means mutually exclusive. You can partake of one or more. In fact, my view is that in this *ghor kalyuga* in which we are living, in this very difficult situation, we need to be able to access all of these yogas. Each one of us should be a bit of a *gyani*, we should do some reading; each one has to be a bit of a *bhakti*, some meditation if we have a being to whom we can surrender;

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After the Brahman, the Atman and the four-fold Yoga, I come to another very important concept—the concept of the world as a family: *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*. This is very popular, everybody quotes it now: *Vasudha-eva-Kutumbakam*, the world itself is a family .

each one of us must do dedicated works; and each one of us should do a little inner work. These four address the intellectual, the emotional, the physical and the psychic elements of the human being, and are ways of joining the Atman and the Brahman. The exact relationship between the Atman and the Brahman has several approaches: Sankara who was an Advaitist, Vallabhacharya who was a Vishishtadvaitist, and Madhvacharya, who was a Dvaitist had their own powerful philosophies. There are different interpretations of the relationship between the Atman and the Brahman, but they all agree that joining them is the ultimate goal.

After the Brahman, the Atman and the four-fold Yoga, I come to another very important concept—the concept of the world as a family: *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*. This is very popular, everybody quotes it now: *Vasudha-eva-Kutumbakam*, the world itself is a family . Consider this, thousands of years ago, long before science and technology gave us the opportunity to be one world, to pick up a small machine where you can talk, your voice bounces off a satellite and goes down almost immediately to the other end of the world, the Upanishadic seers believed in the concept that unless we look upon the human race as a family, we are ultimately going to destroy ourselves.

The word for the human race in the Upanishads is *Amritasya Putraha*, children of immortality, a beautiful phrase. Children of immortality because we have the Atman within us, we have the capacity to be immortal, but in order to survive we have got to live as a family. So whatever our race or religion or caste or creed or language or nationality

or sex or sexual preference, it makes no difference because ultimately we are all members of the human family. Ultimately, if we do not live upto that, as we now seem to be doing, we will end up destroying ourselves. There are two scenarios for the future of the human race. Arthur Koestler, the European philosopher, held that the human race was a race programmed for self-destruction because of an engineering defect in the human cortex, whereby the thinking and feeling elements are inadequately joined. So though we *know* what is right, we don't do it. As Duryodhana said, *janami dharmam na cha me pravrutthih janamyadharmam na cha me nivrutthih*, I know what is right, but I am not attracted to it. I know what is wrong, but I am attracted to it. What to do? Koestler says, sooner or later we will destroy ourselves. And that is what seems to be happening. Towards the end of the last century it appeared as if we were moving towards a global society. However, for various reasons into which I need not go, there has been a backlash. Each bomb today on planet earth can eradicate the human race many times over. There are thousands and thousands of nuclear warheads on planet earth. So the concept of *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* is a very important one.

The United Nations was an attempt, but unfortunately not a very successful one, to build a world of harmony. Nationalism is fine, but ultimately, we have to transcend nationalism. Let me recall that even an ardent nationalist like Sri Aurobindo said in the end that nationalism will have fulfilled its function and ultimately will give way to human unity.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had strong views about nationalism. He said nationalism is all very fine, but unless we look upon ourselves as a global society, we will destroy ourselves.

Many of the great thinkers have realised that nationalism is important, but it is not enough. Ultimately, it has to be transcended. How it is transcended, what the methodologies are, I cannot go into that; that would be a political science lecture rather than one on philosophy. However, the point needs to be made that *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* is a very important element in our thinking.

The next point which is very important is the essential unity of all religions. One line in the Vedas says, *Ekam Satt Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti*, the truth is one, the wise call it by many names. What an extraordinary insight. How many philosophies in the world have accepted the fact that there are multiple paths to the Divine?

The next point which is very important is the essential unity of all religions. One line in the Vedas says, *Ekam Satt Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti*, the truth is one, the wise call it by many names. What an extraordinary insight. How many philosophies in the world have accepted the fact that there are multiple paths to the Divine? They say mine is the only correct path, and if you don't follow that path, you can be blown up, or decapitated, or tortured. Not so the Vedanta. The Vedanta realised right from

the beginning that *Ekam satt*, the truth is one, the wise call it by many different names. The Divine has appeared in many different forms. How do we know, how can we claim that ours is the only way to go? In history there have been so many different religions. In the immutable universe around us there are billions and billions of galaxies, how do we know if where and in what form the Divine may have appeared? It is absurd for us to claim this is the only way; that the Divine can appear only at this time, in this place and in this form. It is unacceptable. Therefore look at this marvellous concept, deeply embedded in our cultural heritage, *Ekam Satt Vipraha Bahudh*. the truth is one, the wise call it by many names.

If *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* has to be the keynote of the global society, then *Ekam Satt Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti* is the keynote of the Interfaith movement. The Interfaith movement began in 1893, with the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda made such a dramatic impact. From then on, we have had a large number of Interfaith meetings around the world. The idea behind these meetings is to bring together people of different religions in a harmonious dialogue. Not a *Shastrarth*; which was to prove your superiority, but rather to get an understanding of each other's religions. Unfortunately, there is no such concept in our educational system. We are so terrified of communalism, and rightly so, that we have thrown the baby out along with the bath water. You can go from kindergarten beyond a PhD without once ever being informed that the Upanishads exist. Or the Quran or the Bible. We have totally moved away from it.

I know this is a very sensitive matter. But the fact remains that the concept of *Sarvadharmasamabhava* is our concept of secularism. Not an anti-religious, Marxism-Leninist approach which is hostile to religion. On the contrary, we should respect all religions. That is why if they are all different paths to the Divine, to the truth, then we must respect all other religions. Not only tolerate them, but respect them. If you are a Muslim, go through the path of Islam. If you are a Christian, go through Jesus. Every path is going to lead there, provided you go with dedication, devotion and clarity of mind and of heart. This is the essential unity of all religions.

I have spoken of the Brahman, of the Atman, the four-fold Yoga, of *Vasudaiva Kutubakam* and *Ekam Satt Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti*. The last concept that I discuss is the welfare of all beings, *Bahujan Sukhaya, Bahujan Hitaya cha* the welfare of the many, the happiness of the many. What better definition of socialism can there be? *Sarvepi Sukhinah Santu, Sarve Santu Niraymaya, Sarve Bhadrani Pashyant, ma Kashchid Dukha bhagbhaveta*. May all beings be happy, may all beings see beautiful sights, may all beings hear lovely sounds, May no one have to undergo suffering. So Vedanta is not, as some people think, a selfish philosophy. You do not just sit and look inwards, meditate on your navel. It is deeply involved in the welfare of humanity. Not only of human beings. Let us take the environmental movement. The *Bhoomi Suktam*, in the *Atharva Veda*; 63 verses in the hymn to the earth have the most integrated and holistic statement of environmental values to be found anywhere. Very clearly it says that whatever you dig from the earth, you have got to put back. That is why there were prayers, not only for the human beings, but for the rivers and the forests and the mountains and animals. Why were there sacred forests? This is a sacred forest, sacred to the goddess. Why are the rivers sacred? Because we live

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on those rivers. Look what we have done to our rivers. Look where we are today, we can't breathe in Delhi when the pollution is bad. That is what we have achieved because we have lost any feel for nature. We have lost any understanding that we are part of nature. We should not look upon ourselves as designed to dominate nature. We *are* part of nature. We have come up for billions of years from the slime of the primeval ocean to where we are today.

Therefore, this concept of the welfare of all beings brings in health and education. The fact that even today in India millions of children go to bed without a full meal is a shame and a disgrace. Millions of families shiver in the winter, get drenched in the monsoon, suffer in the summer without adequate shelter. What sort of a society are we building? I am not going into that, it is a political question. But the fact of the matter is that while we have theoretically a view of development, we do not have a feeling for the deprived. It doesn't touch our hearts. We have a number of schemes and *yojanas*, which is fine, but *Bahujana Sukhaya*, *Bahujana Hitaya* is a much deeper concept. It involves the welfare of all humanity and of nature, because nature is now getting its revenge. Global warming is no longer a theory, it is upon us. Look at the erratic weather conditions. Previously villages used to sink, then whole cities began to sink, now whole states are beginning to sink. Entire weather patterns have become totally erratic. The arctic ices are melting, the oceans are rising, many countries will just disappear from the face of the earth.

Therefore these concepts, the concept of the welfare of all beings, the concept of the unity of all religions, the concept of the Divinity inherent in each human being, are concepts that we have inherited from our past. Unfortunately, we look upon our past in a very narrow manner. These are the real achievements, the achievements of the mind, the achievements of the heart, the achievements of the intellect. That is what India really needs, and that is what Vedanta is all about.

I will close with a beautiful verse from the *Kathopanishad*, because mind you, this is not an easy path. We have got to do something, we have got to move. *Charaiveti*, as the Veda says. And this great verse exhorts us to awake and walk across the razor edge towards our goal. What is our goal? Our goal is a new India, a new humanity, a new consciousness, a new awareness of the unity of all existence. This is the verse from the *Kathopanishad*:

*Uttisthata Jagrata Prapya Varannibodhata Kshurasanna Dhara Nishita
Dustayadurgama Pathah tat kavayo Vadanti.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Karan Singh is a politician, philanthropist and poet. He began his political career in 1949, first as Regent of the state of J&K, Sadar-i-Riyasat and later as Governor. In 1967, he resigned as Governor and became the youngest-ever member of the Union Cabinet. He held the portfolios of Tourism and Civil Aviation; Health and Family Planning; and Education and Culture. He was Chancellor of the top universities in the country; President of the ICCR; Authors Guild; India International Centre, among several others. He is Chairman of the Auroville Foundation with the rank of Central Cabinet Minister, of the Temple of Understanding, a major global inter-faith movement. He is an author of distinction, having written books on political science, philosophical essays, travelogues and poems. He was, till very recently, a Member of the Rajya Sabha.