

Vedanta for Modern Youth

N V C SWAMY AND HEISNAM JINA DEVI

Science and technology are buzz-worlds for today's youth. Though most young people swear by science, not all know that Yoga and Vedanta are also scientific disciplines. But unlike physical sciences, Yoga and Vedanta deal with the science of inner man. Through centuries of honest experimentation, they have drawn certain definite conclusion about man, universe and the ultimate reality, which could be of great help for the modern youth. In the following article the authors discuss these accomplished facts, with youth as the focus. Prof. N.V.C.Swamy, a former Director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai, is currently the Dean of Academic Courses at the Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, a Deemed University in Bangalore. Kum.Heisnam Jina Devi is a lecturer in the Division of Yoga and Physical Sciences at the same University and is a holder of a Master's Degree in Hindu Religious Studies from the Hindu University of America, Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.

Introduction

During the early 1990's, Sri Ramakrishna Math at Chennai started a weekend programme for the college youth of Chennai. About 50 students, both boys and girls, registered for the programme. Every weekend there used to be lectures, Gita and Upanishad chanting, readings from the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, etc. Many of the students, who attended these sessions, used also to work as volunteers on special occasions in the Math and earned the admiration of the general public.

Great care was exercised to see that the activities of this programme did not affect in any way the studies of the students in their educational institutions. In spite of all precautions, there were occasions when some of the parents became anxious and expressed their concern to the authorities. The most common complaint was that these boys and girls were too young to study Vedanta. They should first complete their college studies, become graduates, get married and make a good

living. After they were well established in life, they could always take up the study of Vedanta, preferably after retirement. There was another anxiety, but as an undercurrent, that this kind of premature study of Vedanta may induce in them an aversion to the world, leading to their taking sannyas. Even though the parents were assured that nothing like this is likely to happen, some of them decided to withdraw their wards from the programme.

The same kind of attitude is exhibited whenever a young person is found studying a copy of the Gita. It causes consternation in the minds of parents and grandparents that the young person will be motivated to abandon the world and his responsibilities by a study of books of this type. They fear that the young people would neglect their collegiate studies, would not be able to get good jobs and make a good career and would prove a disappointment to the whole family. They also advice the younger generation that Vedanta is for old people who have retired from service and who

are now more concerned about their afterlife than the present life.

Problems of the Youth

This is nothing but an irrational behaviour of so-called rational people. Such people forget that a book like the Gita does not encourage escapism. The hero of this text is Arjuna, who wants to abandon the battlefield and live by begging. It is Sri Krishna who advises him to the contrary and exhorts him to fight the battle of life. How can such a text induce in the minds of the young a desire to escape from the world?

The reason for this fear-complex about the scriptures is lack of knowledge about their contents. A proper understanding and appreciation of their message will go a long way in dispelling these misapprehensions.

The young people of today inhabit a world which has undergone and is still undergoing rapid changes. People of a previous generation could not have imagined, even in their wildest dreams and fancies, how the world would change so rapidly even in their own lifetime. This is the age of cable TV, the Internet and the cell phone which have become an integral part of their life and they cannot imagine how the world had managed so far without them!

These innovations have been of great benefit to humanity. At the same time, they have brought in their wake certain disquieting features. Violence on the screen, internet pornography and misuse of cell phones for blackmail are some of the evils one has to contend with. Such an environment is not conducive to a peaceful, stress-free state of existence. These evils have a proliferating effect of feeding upon themselves. Many young people of school and college-going age have become their victims, leading to disastrous situations.

Any number of laws passed by the legislating bodies of the country will not be able to contain these evils, whose consequences are there to be seen all around us.

Possible solution

Is there any solution at all in sight? Many thinkers have thrown up their hands and conceded defeat. This is mainly because they are looking for solutions in the modern context through modern means. There is, however, an alternative. One can go back to the ancient cultures, their scriptures and their teachers for a solution. This is happening already in the field of ecology and there is no reason why these ancient solutions cannot be applied to the youth of the modern age.

Every religion has its own scriptures which have helped humanity in their moments of need. But most of them have been found wanting in the present context. That is why most major religions are in turmoil and their adherents, both young and old, are turning to 'New Age' philosophies, which is a euphemism for eastern cultures.

A prominent member of the so-called 'New Age' philosophies is India's ancient system of philosophy, Vedanta, which in itself is a vast subject encompassing a wide spectrum of spiritual texts. Of these, the most popular and easily accessible is the Bhagavad Gita. This book has brought solace to millions of souls in the past, which had been drifting in the ocean of this world, and is sure to help whoever comes to it with a feeling of reverence.

Unfortunately, successive commentaries on this text emphasizing renunciation have given rise to an apprehension that there is nothing in it which can help ordinary people to find solace. This is an erroneous impression. Noticing this, modern commentators like Sri Aurobindo, Lokamanya Tilak, Mahatma

Gandhi, Swami Rama, Swami Chinmayananda and Swami Ranganathananda have reinterpreted the text to suit the modern idiom. Of these, the last mentioned commentary, which is the latest in this series, has addressed many problems which are facing humanity today.

What is the message of the Gita for the young? First of all, it exhorts us to action. It derides inaction and encourages us to perform our duties with no hankering for the results. This is something which the modern youth may find difficult to swallow. If there is no interest in results, why should we perform actions at all? Gita answers by saying that action is inevitable and cannot be avoided. Therefore, why should we not make the best out of an unavoidable situation? Is this not what management schools also teach, that an effective manager is one who is able to get the best out of existing situations without waiting for the ideal conditions?

Success in any venture is not due to one's efforts alone. It involves the mutual cooperation of a vast number of people. Unless these people are prepared to pull along together, the venture is not likely to succeed. This is taught in our schools and colleges as part of the syllabus or as an ethical practice. This is precisely what Sri Krishna says in the third chapter when he introduces the concept of *yajna* (sacrifice). He goes on to elaborate this theme by raising issues about ecology and environment and draws our attention to the social and global responsibilities of human beings. These are ideas and concepts which are age-old, but are still important for society. The youth should be made aware of them, so that they may appreciate that scriptures talk about these issues also.

Nothing brings home the evils of modern society like the chapter of the Gita on the divine and the demoniacal qualities of human beings. Some of the statements of Sri Krishna about

demoniacal qualities sound as if he had the modern era in his mind. The greed and arrogance of human beings, which may benefit certain individuals in the short run, but may destroy society in the long run, have been described in an idiom which goes straight to one's heart.

Most of the problems the modern youth suffers from are due to lack of discrimination. They simply cannot distinguish between what is pleasurable and what is beneficial. This is the point made by Yama in the Kathopanishad, while praising Nachiketa for choosing the beneficial over the pleasurable. It was Swami Vivekananda's wish that our youth show the same courage and wisdom as Nachiketa, in choosing what is good for them instead of being glamorised by those things that satisfy one for a brief period while leaving behind a greater thirst. This is a lesson for all in a consumerist society, in which wisdom takes the back seat and indiscretion comes to the fore.

The Concept of Constituent Qualities

The Gita explains in its own characteristic way why this happens by introducing the three qualities of human beings, viz., *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Every human being is a mixture of these three qualities in different proportions. The quality of *sattva* is one of equilibrium. It is present predominantly in those who always keep their equipoise intact even under the most trying circumstances. The second quality, *rajas*, motivates one to action, without which human life itself is not possible. The last quality, *tamas*, induces laziness or sloth in us, leading to procrastination and poor efficiency. All of us have all these qualities.

When we are facing difficult circumstances or when we face challenging situations, we need *sattva*. When we have to swing into action to accomplish our goal, we need *rajas*.

When we are tired and want to rest in the night, we take recourse to *tamas*. But, when we mix them up and use them at the inappropriate times, we get into trouble. The whole of human life is nothing but a clash among these three qualities. A successful person is one who is able to use them judiciously, tempering *rajas* and *tamas* with *sattva* to achieve a balance.

Practically every aspect of human conduct is covered in this analysis, including such mundane things like the food we eat and gifts we give. Sri Krishna leaves nothing to one's imagination. If we apply these criteria to ourselves, we can easily see what kind of people we are and make suitable corrections. Rarely does one find in scriptural literature such an in-depth analysis of human nature. These ideas hold a mirror to us and dare us to look at ourselves boldly and honestly.

If a detailed study of the Gita becomes a daunting prospect, one can always take recourse to books which distil its essence and present it to us in easily digestible capsules. Two such books which come to our mind are *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Mahendra Nath Gupta, and *Karma Yoga* by Swami Vivekananda. These two books have inspired generations of readers. They are very simple to read and contain profound truths in a simple idiom. The first book, especially, is full of stories and parables, which illustrate these profound ideas so well that one rarely forgets them.

The second book by Swami Vivekananda, *Karma Yoga*, became the bread and butter for a large number of our freedom fighters during the independence movement. Even now, it is an inspiring book. It places one's duties and responsibilities in the proper perspective and teaches us how to become useful members of society, which no textbook on political science can accomplish. If India has to get rid of its poverty through civic action it has no other

option except to adopt the ideas propounded in that book. The youth of India do need an ideal to follow. But they have been let down by the so-called leaders of the society. There is so much hypocrisy all around that it is not a surprise that the youth has turned cynical, which is but the first step towards despair. What the leaders of society have not been able to accomplish can be achieved by a study of books like *Karma Yoga* and *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* by Swami Vivekananda.

A Case Study

We had an opportunity for testing out some of these ideas on a group of young and not-so-young students at our institution. These were students registered for the Master's and Doctoral programmes in Yogic Sciences, who had to take a good number of courses on scriptural texts. Almost all of them were graduates from the conventional university system, having studied in schools and colleges of the conventional type in big cities. In this sense, they represent a good sample of the Indian student community. Only a few of them had a background in yogic practices. Most of them learnt the techniques of Yoga only after they joined the University.

The mandatory theory courses for them consist not only of subjects dealing with Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga, but also subjects like the Upanishads, the Gita, the Life of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo and Vedantic texts. Some of these courses are given even at the undergraduate level.

The study we conducted was as follows. Every student had to submit two assignments and write one or two tests each trimester in every theory subject. This was followed by a final end-trimester examination. In every one of the subjects we taught, we asked the students

one question in the compulsory end-examination: 'What impact has this subject made on your personal life?' This has been done at least on twenty occasions and the responses have been quite revealing.

The most common response was that the students had developed a proper perspective of Life. They felt that life had far more to offer than what was apparent on the surface. Some of them felt that they had a better understanding of the concept of 'surrender', that this should be resorted to only as a last resort and not as a replacement to human effort. Students with a background of science responded by saying that ecology is not a new phenomenon, but had already been discussed in ancient scriptures.

Almost all of the students felt that they had been inspired by Swami Vivekananda's and look upon him as their ideal. Some of them got so fascinated that they attended the course of lectures twice or thrice. They had a sense of satisfaction that they have found an ideal which will guide them throughout their lives.

Perhaps the most revealing of these feedbacks was from a student who had been enticed by a lot of his friends into evil habits. Being of a timid nature, he had been tempted and had fallen a victim. Now, after the study of scriptures like the Gita and the Yoga Sutras, he felt that he had understood the importance of developing a strong will to resist evil.

These are only a few sample responses. Some of them are too personal for us to discuss here, but the impression we gathered was that these texts do address such common problems as faced by the youth and offer them practical and applicable solutions.

Experience of Scientists

It is not that Vedanta is capable of benefiting only the youth. It has attracted the

attention of many great scientists too. Perhaps the first scientist of modern times to appreciate the importance of Vedantic texts was Erwin Schrodinger, the founder of Wave Mechanics, an important component of Quantum Mechanics. He was a student of Vedanta and has openly acknowledged his debt to it in the shaping of his own ideas about the universe. He was also the first scientist to understand what Consciousness is really all about, a subject which has been discussed threadbare in the Upanishads. He is also, in a sense, the founder of Microbiology, through his epoch-making book, *Mind and Matter*, whose writing he owes to his Vedantic studies.

Another modern scientist highly influenced by one of our scriptures, the Gita, was Robert Oppenheimer. At the commencement of the Second World War, he was the President of Princeton University in the USA. It was he who was responsible for bringing Albert Einstein to the USA after he escaped from Nazi Germany. When Einstein received information that Hitler was planning to manufacture an atom bomb, he realized the peril the world was running and urged President Roosevelt to take action to pre-empt Hitler by developing the atom bomb earlier.

Thus was born the famous Manhattan Project in the deserts of Los Alamos in New Mexico. When the project led to the successful development of the bomb, it was tested in the desert. When Oppenheimer saw for the first time the famous mushroom cloud with its blinding light, he exclaimed: 'Were a thousand lights to arise in the firmament at the same time, that brightness would hardly match the brightness which Arjuna saw.' None of his colleagues could understand him. It was known only later that he was an avid student of the Gita and what he said was a quotation from the eleventh chapter on *vishwarupa darshana*.

Among the top-ranking scientists India has produced in modern times, the name of Prof. Subramanyam Chandrasekhar stands out prominently. A nephew of Sir C.V. Raman, he had his early education in Chennai and in the 1930's went to Cambridge University in England to pursue his studies in the field of Astrophysics. He was one of the earliest scientists to speak of the existence of Black Holes in the universe. The scientific community honoured him for this work not only with the Nobel Prize but also by naming the mathematical criterion for the formation of Black Holes as the Chandrasekhar Limit. Recently, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration named one of their space telescopes as *Chandra*.

From a young age Dr. Chandrasekhar had the reputation of being an agnostic. It was difficult for him to reconcile his knowledge of Astrophysics with the creation of the Universe at a point of time by an anthropomorphic God. Towards the end of his life he gave an interview to the *Span* magazine published by the United States Information Service from New Delhi. In this interview he revealed that of late he has

taken to the regular study of the Gita. He said that this is the only scriptural text in the world which talks of the cyclic nature of creation, which agrees with his understanding according to Astrophysics and so there must be more to the Gita than appears on the surface.

Conclusion

This should be an eye-opener to our younger generation. If great scientists like Schroedinger, Oppenheimer and Chandrasekhar could find inspiration from our ancient scriptures, they certainly cannot be a mass of superstitions, as many of our so-called 'educated' people believe. They do contain nuggets of Truth, which have helped millions of people down the ages. A devoted and continuous study of these books will reveal many secrets of human existence which will surely help us in leading a more meaningful life. The youth of this country are indeed fortunate that they are the inheritors of this kind of wisdom. It has been handed over to them as an 'unopened gift'. It only needs a little bit of effort to open this gift and benefit by it. But it needs wisdom to do so. ◊



Know Your Destination or Else...

One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree.

"Which road do I take?" she asked.

His response was a question: "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," Alice answered.

"Then," said the cat, "it doesn't matter."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*