

THE PLACE OF SVADHYAYA—SCRIPTURAL STUDY—IN RELIGION

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MAN is placed in a peculiar situation. He has been endowed with instruments which draw him out of himself, which entice him and display before him the kaleidoscopic beauty of the world phenomena. He has five such instruments each of which individually is powerful enough to ruin him who gets attached to it. Sri Sankara in the *Vivekacūdāmani* brings to our notice how animals and insects in whom one such sense alone was strongly cultivated brought destruction on them, and he observes with great pathos, 'What then to speak of man who is assailed by all the five!'¹ But fortunately for man, he has been endowed also with an intellect, a discriminative faculty and therefore the onus of the good and evil that he does is thrown upon him. Further, he has been provided with guides, which he is expected to consult, study and remember in all his deeds. The scriptures perform the function of the guides and these were taught by teachers who had not only attained high proficiency in their lore, but who lived according to the injunctions laid down by them. These scriptures enjoined certain observances and prohibited others and what they wanted to impress most they placed in a negative prohibitive. In the *Taittiriya Upanisad*, for example, you have: 'Be not heedless about the solemn recitation of scriptures. . . . Be not negligent to speak the truth; never fail to pay heed to the performance of duty; do not be careless about what is proper and good; be not negligent of well-being, never be indifferent to the study and imparting of the Veda'.² So much depends upon the study of the Vedas and striving to put their injunctions into practice that the Upanisad in another passage, even at the risk of being termed redundant, repeats the formula again and again, and then says that Nāka of the lineage of Mudgala stressed the study and imparting of the Vedas as the Tapas.³ The *Taittirīyārānyaka* (II.12) also commands one to recite the Veda without fail, standing or walking or sitting or lying down, so that one may be pure.⁴ The reason is that without truthfulness and austerity the study of the Vedas cannot be properly undertaken, and constant remembrance is the only way to ward off other thoughts. The study of

¹ Vivekachudamani, 78.

² Tittiriyopanisad, I.11.

³ Ibid., I.9.

⁴ Taittiriya Aranyaka, II.12.

Veda also means the acquisition of other virtues.

All aspirants are not like Prahlāda, of the mythical fame, who having heard, while yet in the mother's womb, that Hari alone is real and all else is darkness of ignorance, like that of the dry wells, remembered it all through his life. That type of steadfastness comes perhaps only to one in a million among the aspirants. The character of Prahlāda and his one-pointed devotion to Narayana was so forceful that Sri Ramakrishna would go into ecstasy at the mention of Prahlāda's name. For such aspirants of course no study is needed. It is said that uttering the letter 'Ka' of the alphabet Prahlāda would go into ecstasy thinking of Krishna. But imitating him without the proper foundation of life was denounced by Swami Vivekananda, when he stressed the study of Vedas. Swamiji says, 'What I want therefore is to introduce the study of the Vedas by stimulating a greater regard for them in the minds of the people and to pass everywhere the injunctions of the Vedas'. This he said even regarding the reformation of the Hindu social fabric. Even on the last day of his earthly existence, it is said, Swamiji took a class on Sanskrit grammar to the novitiates of the Math, for a long time. As all know, it is well nigh impossible to understand the true purport of the Vedas without a proper grounding in grammar, etymology and other auxiliary limbs of the scripture. So intent was Swami Vivekananda that people should learn the Vedas thoroughly that till the very last breath, so to say, he impressed this on us.

This study of scriptures, in ancient times, was not done to conduct debating societies or prove the eminence of any scholar, though discussions and debates to arrive at the truth, were conducted, as could be seen, in the passages of the *Brhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upanisads*. Acquisition of knowledge, that freed one from the fetters of the world, was the purpose of this study. We have to remember here that the moulding of the life went along with this study. Life was moulded according to the injunctions of the Vedas, and this study was imperative. A brahmin boy who did not learn the Vedas was not called a brahmin but a friend of a brahmin. And friend of a brahmin was not a palatable epithet in those days. If the father neglected the son's education in this direction, for any reason whatsoever, he felt small. Usually the age when a brahmin boy was to be sent to the teacher to begin his education was eight. In the *Chāndogya Upanisad* Śvetaketu's father, who could not fulfil this stipulation, for some reason, addresses his son, 'My child, go and live the life of a brahmacharin; it is not good that a person born in our lineage should, without studying the Vedas, be addressed as a friend of a Brahmin'.

Why was so much importance given to the study of the Vedas? As we have already said, the way of life during such education equipped the student to face the future bravely. Secondly, by this study he came to know about the purpose of life. He had not to grope in darkness or feel at sea. Thus equipped he was left to choose his way of life, as a householder

or sannyasin. It depended upon the pupil's intensity of dispassion. But one thing that was not encouraged, nay positively discouraged, was pride which a student may develop during his study. It was the firm belief of the ancients that education should infuse humility; for from humility alone fitness for further progress was attained.

The study of Vedas, however, does not end with the knowledge about the methods of performing sacrifices and rituals. They form only the beginning. They are the kindergarten of religious life. Heaven, which is at best a place where an intensified form of sense enjoyment is possible, is not the ultimate aim of the Vedas. It is meant for those who have a great load of unfulfilled cravings in their minds. They have not as yet thought about the problems of life, being engrossed in sense enjoyment and thinking that alone to be the be-all and end-all of life. Though this attitude is tolerated in the beginning it is criticized later on. As Sri Krishna points out in the *Gītā*: 'People of little intellect who are enamoured of the flowery statements in the Vedas (which describe about heaven etc.), who are steeped in enjoyment, whose ultimate end in view is heaven, who maintain that there is nothing else, than heaven, to be attained, are attached to those passages of the Vedas which deal with the performance of various types of sacrifices that yield plentiful wealth and enjoyment. To them, who cling to enjoyment and wealth and as a consequence are engaged in sacrifices, do not come the intellect of firm determination which flows towards concentration (samādhī)'.⁵ Sri Krishna further instructs Arjuna: 'The Vedas deal with the subjects coming under the three *gunas* (hence of the nature of transmigration). O Arjuna, go beyond them. Being free from the pairs of opposites and being stationed in *sattva*, be established in the Self, giving up all thought of acquisition and care of worldly goods'.⁶ 'All the worlds beginning with that of Brahmā are those of return; only attaining Me there is no rebirth,'⁷ thus does Sri Krishna emphatically state about the pettiness of the fruits of sacrifices. It is not the opinion of the *Gitācharya* alone but the Śruti too supports this view. It gives only a secondary place for the sacrifices. 'That which is Great is alone blissful; there is no joy in the little; the Great alone is to be known',⁸ teaches the *Chāndogya Upanisad*. 'Everything else but Him is mortal',⁹ informs the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad*. In the *Kathopanisad* the god of Death says to Naciketa, 'The Hereafter never reveals itself to the ignorant who are devoid of discrimination and are deluded by the infatuation of wealth. Thinking that nothing else but this world alone exists they come under my sway again and again'.¹⁰ 'If one is able to know Brahman before the fall of the body then he is freed from the bondage to the life of transmigration; if not he will have to be born in the

⁵ Gita, II.42-44.

⁶ Gita, II.45.

⁷ Gita, VIII,16.

⁸ Chāndogya Up., VII.xxiii.1.

⁹ Br.Up. 3.7.23.

¹⁰ Kathopanisad, II.6.

different worlds.’¹¹ These boats,’ warns Yama, ‘of the form of sacrifice, conducted by eighteen people, without knowledge of the deities, are frail indeed. Therefore those foolish men who take delight in professing them as the highest fall victims to old age and death again and again’,¹² says the *Mundaka Upanisad*. Here the Upanisad brings out the inefficacy of sacrifices done without the knowledge of the deities or meditation on them. Lest people should misconstrue that sacrifices done with knowledge of the deities are the highest good, the Śruti immediately qualifies its statement thus: ‘Those ignorant fools, who consider performing of sacrifices enjoined in the Vedas and humanitarian works as the supreme, do not know that there is any higher good, they having enjoyed the results of their good actions in the heights of heaven again enter into this world or still lower one’.¹³ We can go on citing the evidence from different passages of the Upanisads where attachment to enjoyment has been repeatedly stressed as entailing return to this world. But we presume the instances given here are sufficient to dispel any doubt regarding this subject. Thus we see that the study of the Vedas does not stop with sacrifices. There are still higher things to be known, a higher Reality to be realized, that is what the Vedas convey.

Now this part of the Vedas wherein the philosophy of the Vedic religion is imbedded, being their end portion is called the Vedānta. They are also called the Upanisads; eleven of them are considered to be most important and have been commented upon by the great teachers of religion. Without a grasp of the truths of these philosophical portions of the Vedas their study remains incomplete. The Hindus consider these Vedas as revelations that came to the sages and who passed them on to their competent disciples as they were revealed. They did not find any necessity of imparting any reasoned cogency in their arrangement. The Upanisads are very difficult to understand unless they are taught by competent teachers, well read in the lore and were brought up in the tradition and who also had experienced the highest truth taught therein.

How profound and hence how difficult of comprehension the Reality is, has been expressed by the god of Death himself: ‘About Him it is not given to many even to hear; hearing about Him many do not comprehend. Marvellous is the expounder and competent indeed is the hearer; wonderful is the knower of Ātman taught by an able preceptor’.¹⁴ Others may teach and we may be able to intellectually grasp the meaning but the truth will not sink deep into our minds, nor leave any lasting impression. We may be able to repeat parrot-like what is taught therein but our life will not be able to assimilate the teachings. It is then, in the language of Sri Ramakrishna, that the *Granthas* (the scriptures) become *granthis* (bonds). Pride of knowledge will sprout there, but knowledge as

¹¹ Kathopanisad, VI.4.

¹² Mundaka Up., I, ii.7.

¹³ Ibid., I.ii.10.

¹⁴ Kathopanisad, II.7.

such will not be useful to the possessor thereof. It will be only one more bond, one more conditioning adjunct, in the armour of Māyā to bind man to the world.

The real assimilation of knowledge of the scriptures manifests itself in a different manner. It makes man look on this world with a new vision. He is called a man of wisdom, a Pandit, who sees with an equal eye on the brahmana endowed with knowledge and humility, the cow, the elephant, the dog and the dog-eater.¹⁵ The meaning is that man's vision becomes widened. He no more sees the individual but the Lord residing in everything. So he does not hate anybody, nor is he deluded any more. All other seeing is only ignorance. 'One who sees the Paramātmā residing equally in every being, the indestructible Principle among the destructible things, he only sees properly.'¹⁶ What happens to a man who has attained that state is that he reaches a state of non-return. Sri Krishna conveys the result in these words: 'Seeing thus with the eye of sameness the Lord resident equally everywhere he does not injure the Self by the self; therefore he attains the Supreme goal'.¹⁷

Unless this state is reached all study becomes useless. That is what Sri Śāṅkara says in the *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*. 'If the highest Truth is not known the study of scriptures is fruitless.' Again he remarks, 'when the highest is known the study of scriptures thereafter is purposeless'.¹⁸ What the Ācārya means to convey here is that mere study of the scriptures without practising the disciplines enjoined in them, has no meaning. It is only a waste of labour and life. A Sanskrit proverb puts it rather bluntly, 'The ass that carries the load of sandalwood knows only its weight but not the sweet smell that emits therefrom'.

In these days of hectic activity, speed and mechanized living, this *svādhyāya* is all the more important. Today man, engaged as he is in the pursuit of his immediate wants, which go on increasing everyday, is more likely than ever in the past, to forget what he really needs and what is ultimately good for him. Therefore it is good to be reminded once in a while that there is an inner being whom we are starving, while we are tending all the time with great care the pillow-case which but for the former's presence would be feared even by the most beloved. As we feed the body and attend to its needs so too have we to look after the inner being. First of all, we must know how the body gets so much importance, wherefrom it has arisen, in what it is sustained. That the body is not permanent is a fact known to everyone; for we see people dying, the old die, the young die. Death does not spare anyone. Then why is this creation? If it was only to die that we were created it seems to be meaningless. It seems like a child's play. The child builds houses, digs wells in the sands of the sea and then breaks them all. Is that all the

¹⁵ Gita, V.18.

¹⁶ Gita, XIII.27.

¹⁷ Gita, XIII.28.

¹⁸ Vivekachudamani, 61.

purpose of creation? In the child's play no one is involved, no injury is suffered by anyone; but not so in the case of creation. The whole world suffers misery, lives in tensions of various kinds. Is all this play? If so whose? Why should we be the sufferers in the sport of an unseen Power? Is there no way out of this labyrinth? These and other questions will come to him alone who has developed dispassion to the world, who has risen above the humdrum life. The answers to these and other questions are to be found in the Vedas. One who will search will find it. That is the reason that study of the scriptures was made imperative.