

Vedānta overview
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Human beings are the only creatures that have goals to be attained. Two things make a human being unique: self-consciousness and the faculty of choice.

Self-consciousness, the knowledge 'I am', is only half-knowledge. It becomes complete when the human being understands what I am, or who I am. Other animals are deprived of this knowledge. All other animals remain steeped in the bliss of ignorance and are thus free from complexes, problems and goals.

The second thing that distinguishes a human being, the faculty of choice, free will, is the choice to do something, to not do it, or to do it differently.

Because of these two unique qualities and because of the human being's knowledge of values based on what he expects from others, the human being has goals: *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. Even though *śāstram*, scripture, speaks about four ends, four *puruṣārthas*, the end is one: *mokṣa*. Others are not really goals; they are means that one needs in order to live this life in order to accomplish this goal of discovering the fullness or happiness that is already there. It is important for our half-knowledge to become complete.

The word *puruṣārtha* can mean 'goal', it can also mean 'free will'. *Mokṣa* is the ultimate, choiceless human goal. The direct meaning of the word *mokṣa* is 'freedom'; the implied meaning is 'happiness' or 'fullness'. Freedom from the unwanted (unhappiness is unwanted) is happiness. Thus discovering who I am is equal to happiness. Happiness and Self are not two different things, like sun and light, or fire and heat. Happiness, fullness, is the very *svarūpam* of Self, one's intrinsic, inseparable nature. To discover what I am is to discover happiness.

There are two types of happiness: *viśaya ānanda* and *ātmā ānanda*. *Viśaya ānanda*, is called pleasure. *Ātmā ānanda* is happiness. Pleasure is a fraction of fullness; happiness is total fullness. Pleasure is derived through, and is dependent on, external objects, things, situations, people. Therefore it is always time-bound and incidental because that on which it depends is time-bound. Fullness is not derived from any external situations or sources: it is natural. Because pleasure is derived through other objects it is *a-nitya*, impermanent, time-bound. Happiness, however, is *nitya*, eternal, because it is not borrowed or derived: it is natural, one's own nature.

To gain pleasure one has to work hard, to preserve it one has to work hard and when we lose it, there is pain. Pleasure thus involves pain in gaining it, in preserving it and, obviously, in losing it. In this way pleasure is mixed with pain. *Ātmā ānanda* involves no pain because it is not something to be gained or attained. What is natural and already there does not need to be attained. Because it is natural you cannot lose it: you cannot lose yourself. Can the sun ever lose its light or heat or brilliance? Impossible. It is its very *svarūpam*, intrinsic nature. One Upanishad says that if one says, there is no *Bhagavān*, no Truth, it is like saying: 'I am not there'. When we say: 'I am', we are saying: '*Bhagavān* is'. One's intrinsic nature is *kevala ānanda*, pure happiness, unadulterated, unmixed with pain.

If *kevala ānanda* is our very nature, then why do we become unhappy? Why is there such a thing as unhappiness at all? The simple answer is that our true nature is not known. Somewhere the flow of happiness is blocked. It is like having a tank full of water but nothing flows. It's because the pipe is blocked. Similarly, *śāstram* says that, blocking the flow of *ānanda* are *pratibandhas*, obstacles. You have *ānanda*, but it does not flow because of the obstacles: the obstructions, hindrances, impediments.

Obstacles are threefold, *malam*, *vikṣepa* and *āvaraṇam*, which, if removed, will allow you to enjoy your own *svarūpam*.

Malam is equal to mental impurities. This is the gross block. If mental impurities are removed, one block is removed. The subtle block that remains is *vikṣepa*, mental restlessness, agitation, mental strain, stress, turbulence: attention cannot be in one place for a length of time. That's why from childhood we are trained to be in one place for a length of time: 15 minutes with coloured crayons, 15 minutes with coloured beads, 15 minutes in the playground to jump about. 15 minutes is the limit, after 15 minutes the child will lose attention.

Next we have a third obstacle called *āvaraṇam*, cover. What is the cover? Ignorance, *ajñānam*, is the cover: ignorance of what happiness is, of what my *svarūpam* is, of what fullness is. Happiness is veiled by ignorance. It has to be discovered. *Āvaraṇam* is the subtlest obstacle. You cannot remove it before you remove the gross and the subtle obstacles: *mala* and *vikṣepa*. Once the block from the pipe is removed, the flow of water cannot be stopped. Similarly, here, once these *pratibandhas* have been removed the flow of *ānanda* cannot be stopped as it were. Fullness will be there forever.

Malam, mental impurities can be reduced to *rāga* and *dveṣa*. These main impurities – attachment and aversion (to which we can add *kāma*, desire, and *krodha*, anger) – cause the other impurities: jealousy, hatred, etc. (*Vikṣepa* is also sometimes caused by *malam*.) We cannot remove attachment and aversion because we did not create them. They are two states of mind that are naturally there. If these two are taken care of then all the other impurities are taken care of.

In Bhagavad Gita there is a verse:

**Indriyasyendriyasyārthe rāgadveṣau vyavasthitau
tayorna vaśamāgacchetau hyasya paripanthinau**

There is attachment and aversion with reference to every sense object.

May one not come under the spell of these two because they are one's enemies.

BhG. 3.34

To get rid of the obstacle called *malam* in the form of *rāga* and *dveṣa* there is only one way: to live a life of *karma yoga*. To understand how to live a life of *karma yoga* we have the *karma khāṇḍa* of the Veda to help us ward off *mala*. *Karma yoga* is anything that we do, physically, mentally, orally with a proper attitude¹.

Vikṣepa, the obstacle of mental agitation or restlessness, can be removed only by the practice of *upāsanam*, meditation. *Upāsanam* in this context is purely a mental activity. This is prescribed in the second part of the Veda, the *upāsana khāṇḍa*. Now even though *pūja* (worship) involves physical and oral activity, it is as good as meditation because your focus is on *Bhagavān* alone. Therefore *pūja* is said to be *upāsanam*. *Japam* (mental repetition of a name that stands for the Lord) too comes in here to ward off the obstacle in the form of mental agitation, called *vikṣepa*. Meditation, focusing on *Bhagavān*'s name, is the best. If you can't do this, then performing *pūja* (*kāyikam karma*, action performed with the body) and singing *bhajans* (*vācīkam karma*, action performed with the voice) with attention, is preparation for meditation (*mānasa karma*, action performed with the mind). Better than *manasam japam* is an unbroken flow of thought resting on *Bhagavān*.

1 *Karma yoga* has three features that distinguish it from ordinary karma, action:

धर्म अविरोद्ध कर्म

Dharma aviruddha karma. Action unopposed to dharma

ईश्वर अर्पण बुद्धि

Īśvara arpaṇa buddhi. Attitude of offering (all actions to) *Īśvara*

ईश्वर प्रसाद बुद्धि

Īśvara prasāda buddhi, Regarding (fruits of action as) *Īśvara's* grace.

The third obstacle, *āvaraṇam*, ignorance, the cover that covers happiness, is removed only after you have dealt with the first two. Only then will Upanishad study work. Not knowing happiness is the cover. That's why ignorance is likened to darkness. In a darkened room, even though your eyes are perfectly okay, you will not see the chair because darkness covers objects. Darkness is the *āvaraṇam* of objects. That is the nature of darkness. Similarly ignorance covers. Not knowing what happiness is is as good as not having it. The obstacle of ignorance has to be removed. *Jñānam* alone can remove the cover of ignorance. Therefore *jñāna khāṇḍa* is there to bless you with the knowledge with which you can remove the obstacle of *āvaraṇam*.

One is not creating knowledge. One is only removing the obstacle, ignorance. We remove *malam* by *karma yoga*, we remove *vikṣepa* through *upāsanam*, and we remove *āvaraṇam* by *jñānam*. Therefore we need the *jñāna khāṇḍa*, the Upanishads. How do we remove the third obstacle?

Upaniṣads contain the wisdom but, even if I try to read them, I cannot understand. The butter that's already there in milk will not come to the surface on its own. You need to extract it. And extraction involves a process, a method of extraction. Similarly there is a method of extracting knowledge from the Upanishads. This method of extraction is very important. The one who has knowledge of the method is the *guru*. That is why the teacher is very important in the Tradition. The *guru* knows how to handle the words of the Upanishads: what's first, what's not first, what to say next, so that there is no ambiguity, no vagueness on the part of the student so that clearly one gets to the knowledge.

Jñāna khāṇḍa is called *veda-anta śāstram* (scripture at the end of the Veda). Why is it given at the end and not at the beginning? Without the removal of *mala* and *vikṣepa*, the removal of *āvaraṇam* is not possible. *Jñāna khāṇḍa*, which is the smallest section of the Veda, is said to be *veda śiras*, (the pinnacle of the Vedas): it will take care of the surgery needed to remove the cataract from the mind. The clue is in the word, Upanishad itself.

Upa, near, implies *guru upasādanam*, a student respectfully approaching the teacher is implied by this prefix. The obstacle of the cover of ignorance has to be dispelled for which you need the knowledge in the Upanishad, for which you need the method of extraction, for which you need a teacher who knows how to handle the words. Removal of ignorance is not possible without a teacher. One needs to listen with all humility for a long time without interference, or talking back. This is called *śravaṇam*.

Ni in the word Upanishad stands for *niścaya jñānam*, definite, doubt-free knowledge of what fullness, happiness, Reality is. These are not different things. Knowing the Self is knowing Reality, knowing Reality is knowing fullness, knowing fullness is knowing happiness. *Svarūpam* (the nature) of Truth is fullness, Self is Truth, so the *svārūpam* of the Self is fullness. Knowing the Self is discovering what fullness is. Two things prevent doubt-free knowledge: *saṁshaya*, doubt, and *viparyaya*, unhealthy emotional habits. Doubt has to be eliminated by *mananam*, reflection on what has been heard.

Viparyaya is unhealthy thinking, the helpless building up of thoughts; scheming and planning and going from one thought to another without even wanting to. It is natural for the mind to entertain such thoughts, unable to stay in one place. This always obstructs. *Nididhyāsanam* will help get rid of *viparyaya*. To do *nididhyāsanam* you should have got the knowledge of Reality without any doubt, for which you need to have done *śravaṇam* and *mananam*.

Upa and *ni* stand for *śravaṇam*, *mananam* and *nididhyāsanam*: approaching the teacher, having definite doubt-free knowledge. Constantly focusing the mind on the nature of the self doesn't allow the building up of doubt and unhelpful thoughts.

We now come to *sad*. It means *nāśanam*, putting an end to, destroying. It is the definite knowledge or wisdom that destroys ignorance and ignorance-born problems involved in *saṁsāra*.

Upanishad, therefore, means knowledge that removes ignorance and ignorance-born problems. Veda is likened to *mātā*, mother. Mother knows the need of the child very well, similarly Veda knows what your mind needs. Veda is always there to help you discover fullness, which is your own *svārūpam*. You already have it but still you are searching for it and suffering. You are like the richest person begging with a bowl in the road. You can easily go into your bank account and draw the money out and live like royalty, but don't know what the balance is. Veda knows and says: I have to help this person discover.

First is the removal of *mala* by *karma yoga*, then *vikṣepa* through *upāsana* and *japa* (the best of meditation techniques), and *āvaraṇam/ajñānam* through knowledge. And you have to go to the guru to help you know how to extract the wisdom. Listen to the teacher, *śravaṇam*. Repeated listening will result in *mananam* through which all your doubts should go. Even when the doubt goes you know that you may still have *viparyaya* because, even if you know Brahman,

you are still unhappy. *Jñānam* is there, but *niścaya jñānam* is not there: *viparyaya* has to go. That's why you need *nididhyāsanam*.

Commitment to the pursuit of knowledge must be such that one doesn't get distracted at all. This is what will make the study of Upanishad effective. To be more focused, more effective, to make you more inclined, more interested, to benefit more, you need to be 100% committed to the study of Upanishad. Know the value of it. To make you discover that commitment in yourself, Upanishad needs to make you know the limitation of *karma*.

Karma is very important, because it is only by doing *karma* you can convert the *karma* into *yoga*, which is the only way to rid of the problem of *mala*. Without the removal of *mala* there is no way of discovering fullness, but the removal of *mala* is not sufficient for fullness.

You are not gaining anything here. You are just removing the obstacles: first *mala*, then *vikṣepa* then *āvaraṇa*. When these three are removed you discover what is already there: you are not attaining anything.

Do you attain fullness? Do you gain fullness? No. You only attain *knowledge* of fullness. Fullness and pure consciousness are one and the same. When the three obstacles are removed, everything flows. You are a fountain of joy. From you fullness will be flowing everywhere: that unobstructed flow of fullness is an expression of love.

Upanishads make you realise the value of knowledge and the limitation of *karma*, *karma* merely performed without *puruṣārtha niścaya* will leave you bound forever; *karma* performed with knowledge of the limitation of *karma*, with *puruṣārtha niścaya*, will be a *yoga* that will remove impurities of the mind. But *karma* on its own is not enough, so in order to make one committed to the pursuit of knowledge the Upanishads talk about *karma* merely in order to point out its limitation.