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THE HUMAN PERSON : A SHORT NOTE ON THE VEDANTIC PERSPECTIVES

The Vedantic conception of the human person is embedded in the general Indian conception of man and his world. Right from the beginning, Indians have distinguished between the apparent nature and the real nature of man. On this point there is no divergence among the Indian schools of philosophy in general and the Vedantic schools in particular.

One feature in which the Indian schools in general disagree with the Western view is that the former does not regard the condition in which man is naturally found to be his real condition. If we should be using Kantian terminology, man has a phenomenal nature as well as a noumenal nature. Man's physical body, mind and all attendant phenomena like old age, disease and death are parts of his phenomenal nature and his noumenal nature has nothing to do with these attendant phenomena. According to most schools of Indian thought, and particularly the schools of Vedanta, man is an eternal Self but is invariably subjected to a real or imaginary transmigratory process and therefore he has to essentially overcome this process or realise that he is not really subject to such a process.

Another feature in which the Indian schools differ from the Western ones is the concept of the human ego and the centrality given to it in the whole thought system. All travails and the transmigration that the human person undergoes is due to the functioning of the ego. Subjugation or elimination of the ego is the central key to the liberation of man. The differences in the conception of the human person among the two types of Vedanta – the theistic and the absolutistic – are quite radical in nature although the schools are all based on a common set of scriptural texts.

The human person under the control and influence of the ego is said to behave ignorantly and it is ignorance which is the root cause of all evil that the individual encounters throughout his

transmigratory existences. This ignorance is not just the absence of right knowledge but a sort of positive force that motivates all human activity. All processes of sadhana advocated by the Vedantic schools are therefore aimed at the removal of this primordial ignorance.

The differences between the human person who is under the spell of ignorance and the one who has finally overcome ignorance are clearly expounded by the Vedantic schools. There is not a great deal of difference among the schools of Vedanta in the matter of what the human person is when he is under the spell of ignorance. Their positions can safely be generalized in this way: the individual does not know the true nature of himself and the rest of existence surrounding him. But, the point concerning what the individual really becomes when he attains correct knowledge of himself and the world around him, is not one of similar general agreement among the Vedantic schools. The differences among them are the sharpest on this issue.

The phrase used above, "does not know the true nature of himself and the rest of existence surrounding him," ceases to have a common general meaning the moment the ideas concerning the true nature of the individual and the world are spelt out according to each school of Vedanta. Still, one point can be said to be common to all the schools of Vedanta: Under the spell of ignorance, the individual perceives himself as a distinct, independent entity different from the things and other persons surrounding him. But, again, while this perception of difference is considered erroneous by Advaita Vedanta, the theistic schools like Visistadvaita and Dvaita do not choose to do so. According to Advaita, non-difference between the individual and the rest of existence surrounding him is the ultimate truth. According to Dvaita, this difference is real and ultimate. Visistadvaita, which chooses to regard everything in the world including the individual selves as the "body" of God, ends up admitting some kind of an identity-in-difference. Because of these differences, the state of liberation in which one has true knowledge also turns out to be different among the schools of Vedanta.

The human person continues to exist until the moment of his actual physical death even when he has reached the end of the series of his transmigratory cycle. The main difference between

Advaita and the two other rival schools of theistic Vedanta is that according to the former the human person can be in the state of liberation *while still alive* whereas according to the theistic schools such a thing is impossible. In view of this, differences must also exist in the conception of the human person between these two types of Vedanta. The purpose of this short paper is to explore the difference in these conceptions in some detail.

I would like to highlight this difference by taking the nature of the ego as the focal point of exposition. The ego is what makes an individual an individual by imparting to him a sense of separation of himself from others and the world. Obviously, in Advaita, this ego cannot be said to be still existing and operating when the human person is liberated. When the true identity of the Self is realized, the sense of self-identity is totally eliminated. It falls off naturally and does not return. The person continues to look and act like a person, but this is not because he *is* a person in the conventional sense. He is not at all aware of the distinctive features on account of which he is considered a person. For example, identifying oneself by a certain proper name is natural to any human person. Identifying oneself as being related in certain ways to other persons is also natural to such persons. All such identifications are rooted in the sense of self-identity, which, in turn, is rooted in the ego. Therefore, if the ego were to become non-functional, the sense of self-identity should also fall off.

One may wonder how there could be a human person, except perhaps a total lunatic, who is without the sense of self-identity. This is because we tend to identify human persons via their sense of self-identities. Because of this, it becomes quite difficult to accord credibility to the possibility required to be admitted in Advaita, viz., of a person without a sense of self-identity and an ego. When we talk of someone as "ego-less" what we mean is that he does not assert himself at the cost of others and not that he is really without an ego. Since we cannot imagine ourselves without an ego, we cannot naturally imagine another also without an ego. But, the existence of human person who is without an abiding or enduring sense of self-identity is quite possible and I believe that such an existence, though rare, is exemplified in the person of Sri Ramana Maharshi whom I shall hereafter refer to merely as "Ramana".

If one wades through the pages of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruannamalai, 1968), Ramana can be seen talking on many a topic, but without using the personal pronoun "I." He is the master of the art of talking without any reference to himself. On some very rare occasions, when the flow of thought compels a reference to himself, he manages by using the term which others use to refer to him: "the Maharshi." There are two or three incidents in the life of Ramana which clearly establish that he lived without a sense of self-identity.

The first incident relates to some litigation which arose in connection with the Ramanashramam. Some devotees took a certain issue to the court and as there was a reference to Ramana in the petition, the recording of a statement by Ramana became necessary. No attempt was made to get Ramana to the court hall as it was well known that he had never left the hill on which he had been living for decades. Instead, a court official himself came down to the Ashram. In characteristic legal fashion, the official asked for Ramana's name and was told in reply: "They all call me Ramana." In another instance, a little girl called Lalitha confronts Ramana with a straight question: "What is your name?" Ramana shoots back with a counter question: "What is your name?" to which the little girl instantly replies: "My name is Lalitha." After this, the little girl repeats her question. Then, Ramana asks her earnestly: "You know me. Don't you?" to which she replies in the affirmative. She does not ask the question once again.

The most revealing incident concerns a biography of Ramana which was written by someone who was not exactly his devotee. Several devotees had seen him come and talk to Ramana on a few occasions and when this man came out with a biography of the Maharshi they were all very delighted and curious. But, when they read it, they were all in for a shock. It was well known among all the devotees that Ramana had left his house as a boy of thirteen, had come to Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai, had been in a state of deep meditation for several years and had settled down on the hill. But, the biographer had written that Ramana was married and had some children whom he had left behind when he took to sanyas. The devotees became very angry and confronted the biographer about the patent lie concerning Ramana's marriage and fatherhood,

whereupon he announced, to their consternation, that whatever he had written had been authenticated by the Maharshi himself. Not believing even a word of this biographer, they came to Ramana for confirmation. Yes, Ramana confirmed every word of their report: the man had come to him, had read out the biography to him and that he also remembered about the wife and children of Ramana the man had written about. The devotees grew desperate and protested: "But all that is not at all true." Ramana's reply was a simple question: "Then, what *is* the truth?"

To Ramana, any biographical information about himself was without meaning. Since Ramana perceived himself as the Self, he had no biography precisely because the self has no biography. In one of his conversations he makes an interesting remark to the effect that it is only the not-Self that can be talked about and not the Self. Since the true "I" is always the Self, it is naturally impossible to use that expression to refer to the bodymind complex associated with an ego which is normally understood to be the human person. Ramana used to receive a number of letters from all over the country from his devotees and replies to these letters were promptly written by his devotees in the Ashram. But all these replies used to be in the third person as coming from "the Maharshi." Several devotees had composed poems in praise of Ramana and often these poems were being sung in the Ashram. On many an occasion Ramana could be seen joining in the singing of his own praise without being conscious in the least that it was all about himself. These facts further confirm that Ramana lived without any sense of self-identity.

Sri Ramakrishna who was also a great Advaitin did use the personal pronoun "I" almost as frequently as any of us would, but if he were to be cornered with the question as to who really this "I" he was talking about was, I am sure that he would not have identified it with himself, the human person in the normal sense. While conversing with people using the term "I" he often makes it very clear that it is "the Mother" who is talking through him and that he is merely an instrument in the hands of the Mother. This points to his not having any sense of self-identity in the way we all normally have.

Therefore, in the Advaitic tradition, the nature of the human person in the liberated state is that he is completely without the ego. One cannot doubt as to how anyone can function without

the ego because, even while the ego is functioning, it is rooted in the Self alone. The ego can never function without being rooted in the Self. While the ego needs the Self for its being and sustenance, the Self does not need the ego in the same way. The ego is never really a distinct entity by itself, it being the Self itself appearing as a delimited, distinct entity. Its features and functions are not those of the Self. Therefore, while the ego can never be around without a name, the Self is always without a name. The entity that answers the question "Who am I?" with the reply "I am...." is always the ego. When there is no answer, it is the Self.

In sharp contrast to this, Visishtadvaita and Dvaita the human person has a distinct self-identity permanently associated with him in both the embodied and the liberated states. The individuality associated with the human person is not eliminated in the state of liberation. Only the autonomy of the ego, and not the ego itself, is completely eliminated. The ego of the individual is completely subordinated to the will of the Lord who is the sole master of everything. Thus, according to these schools, the state in which the ego is autonomous is the state of ignorance and bondage. The state in which this autonomy is lost or completely surrendered to the will of the Lord, is the state of liberation. In order to completely and fully surrender to the Lord, one must first reach Him and this is not possible while one is embodied. Therefore, liberation in its true and complete sense is not possible for the human person while he is still alive and tethered to the body. Attempts to completely surrender oneself to the Lord gradually transform the individual and weaken his egoistic impulses. The human person goes on getting transformed until he reaches so perfect a stage that he can no longer hold on to a body-mind complex. Though such a transformation is not accomplished by the human person unless there are conscious efforts on his part, still, the success of such efforts does not depend upon him. One must have the grace of the Lord to succeed in such efforts. Such divine grace is totally unconditional. It is entirely within one's hands to earnestly try for salvation, but its attainment depends entirely on the Lord Himself.

This kind of an outlook brings about deep transformations in the human person. The first and foremost effect is genuine humility,

An individual can never think of himself as a privileged person just because he is totally and sincerely devoted to the Lord. He cannot in any way think of himself as being superior to any other individual on account of his devotion because it is not known how the Lord Himself chooses to treat different devotees. This makes the individual look upon every element in creation as equal to every other element since the Lord is equally the indweller or controller of them all. The individual is no more able to differentiate among his fellowmen or other creatures. Thus, he is in a state that is essentially non-different from the state of the jivanmukta of Advaita.

When one's ego is surrendered, it is not possible to look upon anything including one's own body as one's own and this results in true detachment. Since the Lord is perceived as the indweller in everything, the love of the human person for the Lord manifests itself in love for all the things in which the Lord dwells. Whether it is seeing the same Self in everything or the same Lord in everything, the consequences of such seeing are not vastly different. Only the conceptual structures associated with such seeing are fundamentally different. The elimination of the ego is not the same as its total control or subjugation, but they both seem to result in very similar effects on the human person.