

G.C. Nayak
ICPR, New Delhi

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN VEDANTA – A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

That Ethics and morals have no place in Indian thought, particularly in Vedānta, is a hackneyed criticism against Indian thought. In spite of the fact that there is ample evidence of emphasis on moral discipline in the Upaniṣadic writings and writings of Śaṅkarā himself, the charge of Indian thought being unethical continues to be there due to a lack of proper understanding of the Indian Philosophical tradition. Such an approach to Indian thought in general and Vedānta in particular is unscientific to the extent to which it is not only based on adequate evidence but is also based largely on inveterate dogma and prejudice against Eastern, particularly, Indian thought and culture as such.

The discussion about the place of Ethics in Advaita Vedānta is done, if at all, by these scholars only at best as an apology. Let us examine without any dogma or prejudice how far Vedāntic thinkers can be said to have been preoccupied with ethical considerations. This I would consider to be a scientific approach to the problem at hand. A scientific temper, the temper that promotes objective evaluation and assessment without any bias or prejudice is what is required here. Let us see where the objective facts, the relevant texts in this context, would lead us. If, as Ācārya Śaṅkara himself has pointed out in the context of *Brahmajñāna jñāna*, or knowledge is *vastutantra* i.e. objective, not *puruṣavyāpāratantra* (subjective), here also I would plead for an objective assessment which would constitute a scientific approach in the present context. Kaṭhopaniṣad clearly and emphatically declares that one cannot realise the Ātman simply by means of knowledge (*prajñāna*) unless one desists from sinful activities, his sense-organs are passified, and his mind has become tranquil.¹ Śaṅkarācārya, the great Advaitin, in his commentary on this Upaniṣadic passage

1. Cf. *Kaṭhopaniṣad* 1.2.24, "Nāvīrato duṣcaritānnaśānto nāsamāhitah, Nāśānta-mānaso Vāpi prajñānenainamāpnuyāt"

clearly endorses it in no uncertain terms.² Highlighting the difference between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. W.C. Smith points out that "for Śaṅkara, the pearl of great price is knowledge (*jñāna*—"awareness", one might render it). For him, *māyā* results from ignorance; to rise to true discernment, to attain *jñāna*, is to attain Reality, *Brahman*, God. For Rāmānuja, on the other hand, knowledge is preceded by works: morality is the condition that makes true understanding possible. More dynamically, the process of knowing interweaves with the process of living morally".³

While this is true so far as it goes, it should not be forgotten that Śaṅkara prescribes *Sādhana catuṣṭaya* as the necessary pre-requisite of *Brahma-jijnāsā* and *śama, dama*, etc. which are nothing but moral virtues are included in *sādhana catuṣṭaya*. It is thus clear that moral discipline is a necessary pre-requisite for the study of Vedānta and also for the realisation of Ātman. In *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, Indra is said to have practised *brahmacharya* for one hundred years at Prajāpati's place and in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. It has been explicitly pointed out that the most abstruse Vedāntic teaching is not meant for one whose mind is enveloped by attachment, hatred, etc. and is consequently disturbed (*aprasānta*).

Now coming to the final goal of Vedāntic realisation, viz., *mukti* or *mokṣa*, it is sometimes held, due to misunderstanding of course, that since *jīvanmukta* is beyond good and evil, his life of freedom can be a life of unbridled license or that of complete abstention from the day-to-day problems of the society, a life lost in meditation, so to say. That this is mistaken will be clear if one goes through the writings of great Vedāntic teachers like Vidyāraṇya who have taken enough care to elucidate the characteristics of the life of a *jīvanmukta* vis-a-vis that of a layman. Vidyāraṇya in his immortal treatise *pancadaśī* clearly points out that the enlightened person could engage himself in doing good to the world following the *śāstras* although he might have obtained all that was to be obtained by him.⁴ The fact

2. Cf. Śaṅkara's commentary on above, "Yastu duṣcaritād virata indriyalaulyātca samāhitacittah samādhānaphadāpyu-paśāntamānasaścācāryavān prjananena yathoktam ātmānam prāpnontityarthah".

3. William Cantwell Smith, 'Vedānta and the Modern Age'. David W. Atkinson (ed.), *Religious studies and theology*, (University of Saskatchewan, Canada, Vols. 13-14, No. 1, April 1995), p. 17.

4. Cf. Vidyāraṇya, *Pancadaśī*, VII, 268, "Athava krtakṛtyōpi lokānugrahakāmyayā, Sastriyenaiva margena Varteham Ke mama kṣatih".

that *Yājñalkya* and other sages delivered the teachings of Vedānta to their disciples, thus doing immense good to the society at large, could not have been possible if enlightenment would consist of simple evaporation of duality.⁵

The *jivanmukta* or the free man as he is conceived in Advaita Vedānta is certainly not a recluse or a hermit flying away from or shunning the worldly life. That the enlightened is not forgetful about the world, that illumination does not destroy duality, that it makes one realise the reality of the self and the unreality of the world only in a specific sense is clear from the following passage of *Pancadaśī*, "Ātmadhireva Vidyeti vācyaṃ na dvaitavismruth".⁶

Vidyaraṇya caricatures the idea that illumination consists in forgetfulness of the world of duality by pointing out that inanimate objects, like pots, should in that case be half enlightened in as much as they do not have any knowledge of duality.⁷

Pancadaśī is rather emphatic on the point that the knower of truth fulfills his worldly duties well, as they do not conflict with his knowledge. For the performance of the worldly activities, according to *Pancadaśī*, it is not essential that the world should be taken as ultimately real. It is as if someone has mastery over two different languages; as there is no incongruity here, similar is the case with one having illumination continuing to be conversant with the worldly affairs.⁸

This dispels once and for all the deep-rooted misconception that in *mukti* one is transferred as it were from the mundane existence to a superhuman plane of reality where the worldly awareness is lost forever. What is important to note in this connection is that the enlightened person is not affected or disturbed by pleasure or pain caused by *prārabdha*; thus and only in this sense he is free. The difference between the enlightened and the unenlightened who is in bondage is that the former remains undis-

5. Cf. *Ibid.*, VIII, 184, "Anyathā Yajnanvalkyaderacaryatvam Sambhavet.

6. *Ibid.*, VII, 186

7. *Ibid.*, VII, 18, "Ubhayam millitam Vidya yadi tarhi ghatadayah, Ardhevidyabhajinah syuh sakala dvaita vismrteh".

8. *Ibid.*, XI, 130 "Bhunjano visayanandam Brahmanandam ca tartvavit, Dvibhasabhijñāvad Vidyad ubhau laukika vaidikau".

turbed and patient through all his afflictions due to *prārabdha* whereas the latter is impatient and suffers on account of this.⁹

Though undergoing similar experiences or engaged in similar activities, it is freedom from misery that characterises the enlightened whereas the unenlightened continues to be subjected to misery (*semepi bhoge vyaśanaṃ, bhrānto qatchenna buddhavān*).

The enlightened one is thus in an advantageous position to do good to the society without any attachment whatsoever, and the life of *jīvanmukta*, although in itself beyond good and evil, can thus be conducive to social welfare. In any case, there can be no question here of his life being one of unbridled licentiousness like that of a debauchee. His life is a life of detachment alright, but at the same time, the world can benefit immensely by his teachings. As an Ācārya he can be a source of unfailing inspiration to the erring humanity; such an enlightened person is described by Śāṅkarācārya as both "*Vimuktasanga*" and "*Sadāpāradayāmbudhāman*".¹⁰

Ācārya Śāṅkara in *Viveka Cūḍamaṇi* elaborately describes the characteristics of the life and conduct of such men of wisdom, the enlightened ones. "There are calm and magnanimous souls", says Śāṅkara, "who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed this deadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any selfish motive whatsoever".¹¹ Here the words, "*Vasantavallokahitaṃ, caranteḥ*", "doing good to the world like spring", refers to the spontaneous goodness of the enlightened.

William James speaks of "the man who lives in his religious centre of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms" differing "from his previous carnal self in perfectly definite ways. The new ardor which burns in his breast consumes in its glow the lower 'noes' which formerly beset him, and keeps him immune against infection from the entire groveling portion of his nature.

9. *Ibid.*, VII, 133 "*Jnaninōjaninaścātra same prarabdha karmaṇi, na kleśo jnanino dhairyan mudhah kliśyatyadhairyatah*".

10. Śāṅkara, *Viveka Cūḍamaṇi*, 486, "*Namo namaste Gurave mahatmane Vimuktasāngaya saduttamaya Nityadvayanandarasa svarupine bhumne sadaparadayanibudhāmanne*".

11. *Ibid.*, 37, "*Śanta mahanto nivasanti santo Vasantavallokahitam carantah, Tirnah svayam bhīma bhavarhavam jananahtunanyanapi tarayantah*".

Magnanimities once impossible are now easy: paltry conventionalism and mean incentives once tyrannical hold no sway. The stone wall inside him has fallen, the hardness in his heart has broken down".¹² Such a life certainly cannot be regarded unethical by any stretch of imagination. True, there is a sort of "supermoralism, the state of being beyond good and bad"¹³ set up as a model here where the life and conduct of the enlightened person are supposed not to be subject to normal ethical considerations, but from this it does not follow that the enlightened person could be immoral. Wherever it is stated that evil actions do not affect him, i.e. the enlightened person, it is to be construed as a praise of the state of enlightenment, *Brahmaṇo jñāna mahātmya*, as Śaṅkara would call it.¹⁴ This does not and cannot mean that the enlightened person as a matter of fact could indulge in evil actions, because there would be an obvious anomaly to speak of an immoral *Jivanmukta*. As a matter of fact, the *jivanmukta* is beyond the polarities and is at the same time, and precisely because of his transcendence, immensely helpful as a guide and is a man of unparalleled benevolence doing good to mankind with a rare spontaneity. A unique status is assigned to *Jivanmukta* in the Indian cultural milieu; here is a model of spontaneous goodness flowing from the intrinsic nature of one who is not entangled in polarities.

But what is this spontaneous goodness supposed to be? If it is spontaneous, can it be good in the ordinary sense? In the ordinary parlance we speak of goodness only when there is a moral choice and when the choice is genuine. If there is no genuine choice left for the *jivanmukta*, can he be regarded as good in any sense whatsoever? Rather it would seem as if *jivanmukta's* activities could be only mechanical and automatic, and, therefore, not good in any sense when there is no possibility of his becoming evil under any circumstance. The vital question at issue here is whether the situation envisaged in this context

12. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Collier Books, New York, 1961)

13. R.D. Renade, *A constructive Survey of Upanishadic Philosophy* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1968) p. 224

14. Cf. *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, IV 14. 3, "Yatha puṣkarapatāṣa apo na ślisyaṅta evamevam vidi papam karma na śliṣyate iti".

Cf. Śaṅkara's commentary on the above, "Śruṇu tasya mayocyamanasya Brahmaṇo jñāna mahātmyam - yatha puṣkarapatāṣe padmapatra apo na ślisyaṅta evam yatha vaksyami Brahmaivamvidipapam karma na śliṣyate na sambadhyaṅta iti".

where the *jivanmukta* chooses the good over evil because of his natural inclination for the good reduces the *jivanmukta* to the status of an automation. I do not think so. Goodness is spontaneous in the *jivanmukta* only in the sense that it becomes his second nature,¹⁵ so to say, to do good, to choose good over evil. Although, the theoretical possibility of a *jivanmukta* choosing evil over good under any circumstance cannot be ruled out altogether, such a possibility is never actualised in his case simply because the choice of good over evil becomes natural to him or in other words, it becomes his *svabhāva*. I do not think that there should be any inconsistency in visualising some such situation in the case of a *jivanmukta* and his spontaneous goodness.

Actual choice of good as a matter of practice is what is meant by spontaneous goodness in this context and it is, therefore, neither an impossibility nor is it a sort of automatic or mechanical conduct where the words like 'good' and 'evil' would be inapplicable. The *jivanmukta* is himself not touched or affected by the consideration of 'good' or 'bad' but his choice is always in favour of the good over evil and his activities are always conducive to the good of the mankind.

15. Cf. Sureśvare, *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*, IV. 69, "Utpanratma prabodhasya tvadveṣṭr-tvadaya gunah, Ayatnato bhavanhyasya na tu sadhamrupinal."