

View of Life and Death in Vedanta

Prof. Neeraj Shukla

A mature man who has lived his experiences intelligently and has maintained an alert, critical attention upon the incidents of life, will come to such an inner maturity that he will feel a certain unrest. He has the necessities of life, but is not completely satisfied. He sits back and listens to muffled questions from within, “Where did I come from?” “Where will I go? (as one day I must)?” “Is life an empty and meaningless accident? or “ Does life have a purpose?”

Religion is for this man; it provides him assurance and guidance in his endeavor to answer these inner questions and to live the gift of life in its true spirit. Religion is philosophy in action. From time to time, ancient philosophy needs intelligent re-interpretation in the context of new times, and new men of wisdom, prophets and seers guide common man on how to apply ancient law to the present context. Our mortal world has been visited by immortals such as Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Guru Nanak and many more to explain the meaning of Life and Death.

In their own way each of these stalwarts have tried to explain the meaning and purpose of life, which shoots from “the unknown and begins as a child, grows old and then dies and again goes to the unknown”. To explain this unknown or mystery each religion has spoken at length.

Here I would take up the **Vedantic** view of Life and Death.

I have divided my discussion into the following parts

An Analysis of Life

Man in his pilgrimage from the womb to the tomb, is always motivated and propelled by two inevitable impulses, repulsion from sorrow and a craving for joy. Thus man engages himself in an endless chase after happiness among objects and environment which in turn keeps on changing. The machine age is certainly making an honest effort to create a glorious world that can provide greater happiness for its generation. Indeed superficially viewed, the present age is spectacular in its arrangements. But

the world of object in itself does not insure happiness. As objects donot have any power within them to give us happiness or sorrow. For instance cigarette may fill one with joy and satisfaction, while it drives another mad with annoyance. We are all familiar with the striking contradiction in life between a millionaire sad in his loneliness in his palatial house and a peasant happily singing a song of joy beside his thatched hut.

The Vedic sages have declared that we can never find the peace and harmony of permanent happiness in the realm of changing world. Happiness is a mental condition and therefore enquiry into happiness can be conducted only by a person who has learned to observe and regulate the happenings in his own mental environment.

With the aim of discovering the art of this inner mastery, the sages of the Upanishads examined life. They observed that life is a series of experiences and any analysis of it should necessarily accept our moment- to- moment experiences as the basic units. The sages further analyzed that an experience is not possible without three fundamental factors- 1) The Experiencer 2) The object of experience and 3) the relationship between the two , the experiencing.

The experience is the subject who gains experiences of the world through the three instruments of experience; the body, the mind and the intellect. Everyone gains experiences of three different worlds through these instruments. Through the body, one experiences the world of objects, through the mind, the world of emotions, and through the intellect the world of ideas. All these put together constitute the total field of experience of the individual.

The Veil

Mind is man. As the mind, so is the individual. If the mind is disturbed, the individual is disturbed. If the mind is good, the individual is good. If we observe carefully, we may consider the mind as constituted of two distinct sides – One facing the world of stimuli that reach it from the world, and the other facing the ‘within’ which reacts to the stimuli received. The mind reacts as if it is made up of soft matter. So, as each thought passes through it, an impression is left on the mind, just like a scratch. Then when similar thoughts are repeated, the scratch deepens into a canal. Every subsequent

thought wave has a tendency to flow through this ready-made canal. So if the canal is made up of good thought waves, then a good character is formed and strengthened. This canal or tendency decides the behavior of the person outside. This explains why different people behave differently and react differently to the same situation they are faced. At each moment, a man meets with different patterns and responds as per the tendencies called 'vasanas' hoarded within.

Hence when we perceive an object or try to evaluate a situation the five sense organs of eyes, nose, tongue, or skin to bring in their reports to the mind, which compiles them and present the data to the intellect for the final evaluation. The very ability of the intellect to rationalize and judge is conditioned by these unmanifested tendencies called *vasanas*.

Suppose, one fine day, as I walk on Hill road, close to St Andrew's College, I observe a gentleman smartly dressed, accidentally dropping his wallet. Now my mind has taken in the situation and my reaction to the situation would be, "Oh! God thank you so much, I have been praying to you for help, and yes this is you who have put me in such situation and this is the way you help me." I would pick the wallet secretly, and make even God my partner in crime. Now my other reaction to the same situation can be, "Oh the fool has dropped his wallet, and when he realizes it he would be sad, as the whole month is still to go. I do not have much to give in charity, but God has given me an opportunity to do so, let me call him and give him what is rightly his". I get lost in the crowd and sing a silent song of happiness in my heart, for I did what was right.

Now both of the reaction above can come from any individual put into situation where he has to choose between right and wrong, and this decision is due to the tendencies inherent in the individual called 'vasanas'. And that is why each individual reacts to the world outside due to difference in *vasanas* or tendencies.

The Vedas proclaim that the conditions of body, mind and intellect must be transcended in order for us to regain our true nature, the divine self or some call it enlightenment or nirvana or spiritual realization. To achieve this spiritual realization the mind has to be purified of its desires and agitations, thus relieving it of its *vasanas*.

Only with great effort and intelligent self control can this purification be achieved. The fewer the agitations in the mind, the fewer the vasanas, and the fewer the vasanas, the quieter the mind. As the mind becomes quiet, it remains in a state of meditation.

Death

In Vedanta death is not the end but continuation of the journey. Before discussing death let us analyse Life. Now in our world we see so much of diversity in life, among human beings, some are born in the family of kings and some as beggars, some are healthy and some are lepers, some poor and some rich, and if this is due to some god sitting in the clouds, then he is biased, and I refuse to accept such a god who grants some with all the happiness and some with all the struggles in life by his own biased will. The explanation of such diversity of life could be either due to some biased god or just an accident.

The Vedanta explains this diversity, by the theory of reincarnation (Theory is to explain a phenomenon, it may not be correct, and same phenomenon can be explained by another theory as in Science or Maths). When an individual dies his grosser body is burned or buried, but his subtler aspects such as thoughts emotions remain as energy. So in the next birth he would get the body as per his strongest tendency (desire) entertained by him when he was alive. To enable him to fulfill the desire entertained by him in the next birth. Thus, if a person has desire to be rich, or to harm someone, he would get the same body (instrument) and environment to exhaust his tendencies (desire). This explains the diversity in the current world. Thus, it is said that "God or nature conspires to give you that if you truly have desire to achieve" and this is true not only when we are living but also during death. That is why many Hindus name their children after gods, so that at the time of their death, they may not remember god but would remember their children, and thus would get a passport to god.

That is why, after understanding death, Vedanta advises us to reduce the vasanas (impressions on our mind due to desire). It warns human beings, that thoughts of being rich or having all the pleasures of life, would no doubt be fulfilled if the desire is strong, but it will never give you true and permanent happiness, as they are subject

to change. So align yourself to one which is not under the law of change and that is GOD. But if you have any desire then definitely you would get the next life to exhaust that desire. But we keep on accumulating desire thus increasing the veil of *vasanas* over our true nature and thus are tossed in the wheel of the world. Thus our aim is to liberate ourselves, to be free and attain God-hood from Man-hood using religion as a guide.

Conclusion

The very goal of Vedanta is to attain God-hood, the true nature of a human being which is the divine self. The only method of regaining one's true nature is to vigilantly and ceaselessly divert one's mind and intellect away from the preoccupation with objects, emotions, and thoughts and direct it to an awareness of the divine Self. When this is consistently followed, an individual can successfully transcend his *vasanas*, to emerge as a divine being. Thus he can be truly free and happy in the everchanging world.