

# The Psychology In Vedanta

“An Interview with Swami Dayananda” 1

*Note : This is the first part of the article which was supposed to have been published in April 2015 issue, but missed out. The second part of the article appeared in May 2015 issue. Now in this issue the first part is produced. Regret for the mistake. ....Editor*

## Q. What do you see as the relationship between Psychology and Vedanta?

**Swamiji:** In psychology, the therapist doesn't condemn a person. It is a very beautiful thing. He never condemns a person as evil. He tries to find out why a person is given to offenses, such as violence and crime. Without condemning the person, he tries to find in the person's background why there is such a pleasure in becoming a habitual offender. This is a benign approach because there is a total absence of condemnation. I was appalled at what I read in a book by Scott Peck, who wrote, "The Road less Traveled". His book called "People of the Lie" is a book about people who lie. He calls them "evil people", and sets out to prove that there is evil. He is a born-again Christian who believes in evil and that there are people given to evil. He was a psychiatrist.

In psychology, there is total absence of condemnation; there is acknowledgement of habitual offence or crime, and then the effort to find the background. There is a similar approach in *Vedanta*. In the vision of *Vedanta*, a person, by virtue of his own essential nature is totally, absolutely, pure and free. Compassion, love, giving and sharing are all dynamic forms of this absolute happiness (*ānanda*). You are limitless fullness, complete, lacking nothing.

So too, in the vision of *Vedanta*, the person is never condemned. These are two different levels of approach. But the approach itself is very similar.

Suppose you want to help a person. What do you do? In therapy, you try to make the person understand that there is an order. When you say that in a given background, this behavior is expected, it means that you are accepting an order. *Vedanta* will go one step further by saying that the order is the Lord or God (*īśvara*). First you validate the person. Then the therapy becomes a process of helping the person see that he or she is all right. Being in order means that it was appropriate for him or her to have acted that way due to the background and circumstances. Relatively, the therapist will say that in the overall scheme of things, there is an order for the sadness, an order for the anger, etc. One has got a right for every emotion. The person is validated, including his background, emotions, etc.

*Vedanta* does the same thing. It points out that you are already free. That *you are already free* is not only a fact, it is a method of teaching. Just like in therapy, there is a method. In therapy, you make the person see. In *Vedanta* also, we try to help the person see. In therapy, you create situations to help the person see and let things out. You are allowing the person to talk the anguish out and talk the anger out. Thus things are appropriately ventilated.

In *Vedanta*, all these are considered to be a means of assimilating the knowledge of oneself or (*sādhana*). Finally, *Vedanta*, by constant exposure, helps to make the person

see. It's a process whereby, over a period of time, the clarity grows. In spite of situations, you come to find that you are okay with yourself. And we know that it is necessary to see that I am okay in spite of other situations, whatever the human situations are—emotions, needs, and so on. In spite of that, there is a possibility of seeing yourself free—I am free enough to have emotions. So in psychology, you validate emotions and in Vedanta, also, we do the same. We validate everything, including the basic person.

I find that there is a certain similarity between psychology and Vedanta at different levels. One is the emotional level. The other is the basic level. In psychology, when you try to point out the background, which one is not totally aware of, there is transference. The person in the therapy transfers the blame to the therapist. The therapist asks a question like, "At any time did you have this kind of experience when you were a child?" So it's very clear that one is unconscious; and until the discovery of the reality, the therapist will become the mother or father, etc. The therapist is blamed for no fault of his own. At this particular time, the therapist is able to point out things because he is informed. He is trained in how to handle that situation.

In therapy, two things are clear. There is a veil of ignorance. Something is as though covered in the unconscious. Then there is a projection onto a person, place, or thing born out of that ignorance. In Vedanta, the veil of ignorance is called (*āvaraṇa*). The projection is called (*vikṣepa*). There is a veil of ignorance in the sense of not knowing who I am. One does not question whether I am, but who I am and what I am. The vision of *Vedanta*: what I am is Brahman, that I am absolutely free is not known. In that place or locus of self-ignorance, there is a projection. Thus I feel that I am a limited being, a wanting person (*samsārin*).

Therefore, there is *vikṣepa* and *āvaraṇa* in *Vedanta*, and also, in psychology at a relative level. It is the same power that covers and projects in both psychology and *Vedanta*. It's like in the dream; there is a cover. At the time of the dream, whatever you are in waking life is covered over completely. Then something different is projected. This power of veiling and projection is there in everybody. I think it is necessary in the case of the child, to save the child from pain. Here, I think that the unconscious is a must. Therefore, *āvaraṇa* and *vikṣepa* are there at the psychological level. At the basic level, spoken of in *Vedanta*, they are there also. In this way, they are similar.

In Vedanta, there are places where there cannot be more emphasis regarding the psychological-emotional well being. It is talked about and elaborated so much—things like compassion, accommodation, values, and attitudes. Attitudes are all psychological. Values we can say are ethical, but attitudes are psychological. Erosion of the common ethical value structure is due to psychological pressure. Since it is so well recognized, the neutralizing of this kind of pressure is available in the society. In therapy, it is handled in a different way. It is said that in life one has to grow into that person who can handle all the psychological pressures of parenthood or whatever comes along in living one's life. That person becomes a candidate for *Vedanta*. That's why there are two things that we talk about. One level is the person's eligibility (*adhikāritvam*) which includes emotional stability and a general sense of security. In this way, Vedanta addresses the reality of the person's emotional life. How it helps solve the problem is by cognitive changes and a way of life.

Cumulative change works with the cognitive person because the value

structures must necessarily undergo change. Thereafter, the pressures become less. When one has a bigger picture, then what were once big things become small things. Suppose I have a big goal. I know that I am limitless, that I am infinite. That is very big. Then, all other things become relatively small. The various forms of lack, which create all those pressures, become less. That is what we call emotional well-being in Vedanta.

**Q. Can you describe the relationship between the self and the mind and define these terms as they are understood in Vedanta?**

**Swamiji:** In Vedanta, we have words like *indriyāṇi*, *manaḥ*, *buddhiḥ*, *cittam*, and *ahaṅkāraḥ*. We have to understand it that way. From there, we come to what we mean by mind, etc. The five senses of perception (*indriyaḥ* or *indriyāṇi*) are hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and the sense of touch all over the body. Then, we have the faculty of thinking behind these five senses. This faculty is in the form of thought modifications. It is what we call *vṛtti*. *Vṛtti* means a thought, thoughts or thought-forms. We further define *vṛtti* by three main types, although there are so many of them. One type is *mana*, another is *buddhi*, and the third type is *citta*.

Thus, we are defining the *vṛtti*'s as a three-fold manifestation. *Mana* is generally referred to as the mind. Emotions, desires, doubt, and vacillations are all *mana*. Then we have another type of thinking where there is deliberate enquiry. When there is resolution, decision and will, we call it *buddhi*. The process of reasoning and inference, etc. all comes under that. Then recollection and memory, we call *citta*. So these three – *mana*, *buddhi*, and *citta* we call *antaḥkaraṇa* or, in general, mind. The one who owns the mind is the ego (*aham*). This is the individual—the 'I' thought or the one

who employs the mind. Therefore, the ego (*ahaṅkāra*) is the sense of "I-ness". Any ownership, knowership, enjoyership, doership—all "ships" belong to (*aham*).

We always look at the ego through the mind, the *buddhi*, the *citta* and the body, or the senses. Even with reference to the external world, you look at yourself as "I am a son; I am a daughter; I am a husband or I am a wife". When you look at yourself from an external standpoint, it is the ego. We are just giving a definition of this ego from different standpoints. The ego (*ahaṅkāra*) is the self for the time being. Vedanta questions whether this ego can really be the self, since in deep sleep you do not have the ego. But then, you find that you are there. It means you are able to relate to that sleep as 'my sleep' when you say, "I slept like a log", etc. You were there in sleep, correct? So, I was there before sleep, I am here after sleep and in sleep, also, I was there. This is one way of saying it. In a certain way, you can also say, "I was aware of my sleep." "I slept" is an experience. "I slept well" is an experience. That "I didn't see anything in particular" is also an experience. So, in deep sleep, I was there. In a moment of joy, I am there. The ego that I know—the individual 'I', the self that I am familiar with—is not there. Therefore, from various standpoints, when you look at what the self is, Vedanta says, "The ego is the self: the self is not the ego". The self is the invariable in all situations. Whether you have doubt or emotion, whether you are exploring or have deliberate thinking or decision making, whether you recollect or remember, it is the self that is invariable in all your experiences. In all situations, one thing is present, and that one thing is what you want to be present. "I am" is present because all these experiences are strung in the self. The self that is present in all these experiences is the eternal, timeless self.

Vedanta says that the self is simple consciousness as such. While the ego is consciousness, consciousness appears as though variable in the ego. What the ego is, and what the ego is aware of are both the same self. So the mind is the self. The mind is consciousness. Every thought is consciousness. The "I"-thought or ego-thought also is consciousness. The thought of any object is consciousness; when the mind thinks of a tree, the tree thought is consciousness. So consciousness is invariable and it is the self. Is that consciousness which is the very self alone, related to the mind? In what way is it related to the mind? Really speaking, it is not related to the mind. The mind is related to the self in the sense that the mind *is* the self, having no independent existence separate from the self. But the self is not the mind. Just like this table is purely wood and never apart from wood, while the wood itself is not merely the table. The wood will continue to be even when the table ceases to be. This is the relationship, the relationship between what is and what appears to be.

**Q. How does Vedanta define 'ego', and how is the individual ego created or developed according to Vedanta?**

**Swamiji:** Vedanta doesn't look at the ego as an independent entity devoid of identification with other relational things like the physical body, the breath (*prāṇa*) the five sense organs, the mind, the intellect (*buddhi*), and memory (*citta*). Without identifying with any of these, where is the ego? The ego has to lean on something or the other. The ego itself consists of the sum of past memories or experiences (*samskāras*), our own dispositions and predilections, etc. which, taken together, makes a person

different from all others. It is variable also; so it never stays the same. Now it's a happy ego, now it's a confused ego, now it has got some clarity. With reference to certain facts, the ego is clear. With certain other things, it is not very clear. And it is sometimes conditioned by one's own unconscious (*kaṣāya*). One's emotional life especially, and sometimes the ego's response to the world is dependent upon its' own *kaṣāya*. This includes its' own knowledge, past memories; its' own upbringing and also the culture, society, and so on. This ego includes all of these.

The response of the ego to an external situation or an internal situation depends upon a number of factors. Therefore, there is no big discussion in Vedanta about its development. Vedanta doesn't talk about psychology so much. It only deals with psychology to the extent that it has to for a sane, objective, and dispassionate life. It doesn't deal with it as a subject matter, but there is adequate discussion about the emotional life and how one can be more objective. There are complete discussions dealing with neutralizing likes and dislikes by understanding the values which help to promote healthy attitudes, and thus, emotional maturity. For all these, there is discussion. But there is not a very big discussion on the development of the ego. There is considerable discussion on how one obtains language skills and how a child picks up a language. There is a lot of linguistic or language based discussion in Vedanta because Vedanta is using the medium of language for unfolding the truth of the self, the world and God.

1 - Interview conducted by Payton Tontz at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, September 15, 2005, transcribed and edited by John Lehosky.