



All that Exists is Pervaded by (Īśvara) God *Towards Understanding of the Vedic Tradition*

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The Vedic tradition is the indigenous tradition of India. It is non-proselytizing in nature, and offers a vision that one is whole and free. One achieves this vision through self-knowledge that cannot happen without committing to a life of values, including truth, purity of speech, compassion and self discipline. The vision and the way of life are often known as “Hinduism,” or the “Hindu Tradition.”

Hinduism is also known as the Vedic tradition, because it relies on the Vedas, the sacred texts revealed to men and women sages in meditation. The Vedic tradition is not an organized religion. Instead, the collective wisdom of the tradition is carried by the scholars and elders within families and inherited by children by way of osmosis and example. The Vedas are four in number, divided for

ease of preservation and oral transmission from generation to generation. Although the Vedas are recorded in writing, the tradition continues to be handed down orally. The Vedas are divided into two parts. The first part is the karma portion, and the second part is the knowledge portion. The first part deals with karma, action, and addresses universal means and ends. These include

human pursuits for security, fame, pleasure and other forms of fulfilment. The first portion of the Vedas instill the correct methods of fulfilling desires so that one leads a life committed to spiritual and emotional maturity. In addition to rituals and sophisticated methods of relating to various forces of nature, and propitiating Īśvara, God, the purpose of the first portion of the Vedas is to instill values and attitudes that facilitate harmonious living and emotional maturity. Only when one leads a life of values can one grow emotionally to understand that all is pervaded by God, Īśvara. Īśvara is Sanskrit, meaning *the one who is always the Supreme, not overlorded by anything*. This is the vision of the Vedas, enshrined in the second portion, also known as *Vedānta* occurring at the end of the Vedas.

Vedānta reveals the truth of oneself as non-separate from Īśvara, or Brahman, the source of the universe. If there is such a reality as limitlessness, which is behind

every desire, then it cannot be outside of oneself, and still be limitless. After leading a life committed to emotional maturity by conforming to the attitudes and values prescribed in the first portion of the Vedas, one becomes qualified to study Vedānta and approaches a Guru for guidance.

Contrary to popular belief, Hinduism is neither polytheistic (the belief in many forces as the cause of the universe) nor pantheistic (the belief in natural forces as the

ultimate cause of the creation). The Vedas, or sacred texts, unfold the existence of a conscious being as the cause of the manifest universe (the jagat), who pervades all that is known and unknown—including the body-mind-sense complex—a being both immanent and transcendental. The creation—more appropriately termed as a manifestation—is non-separate from its cause, Īśvara. Although Īśvara manifests in many names and forms, Īśvara—being limitless is also free of all names and forms.

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We say that there is only God. The light of the sun, the air we breathe, the stars, the solar system, Mother Earth, and our own bodies and minds are Īśvara, God.

Just as a shirt cannot exist without fabric, the manifest universe cannot exist without the presence of Īśvara. Although Īśvara can be understood as transcending form, at the same time, anything that has form also has the presence of Īśvara. Thus we consider all things, sentient and insentient, sacred.

If everything contains Īśvara, it follows that Īśvara can be invoked in any form. We can invoke Īśvara in a concrete form, such as a statue carved of stone, as an abstraction such as time or space, or as an order, such as the law of karma. The various laws in the jagat—biological, physical, astronomical, or karmic—are not mandates of Īśvara, but manifestations of Īśvara. Īśvara is non-separate from the jagat, and non-separate from the jīva, the individual. Vāyu, the air element, for example, is

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worshipped as Īśvara. The same air, when taken into the body as breath, is known as prāna and is worshipped as Īśvara. Finally, the law that connects air and breath is the manifestation of Īśvara. This vision is foundational for understanding the worship of forms.

The worship of forms is not idolatry. Those who follow the Vedic tradition use forms to invoke God based on the understanding that Īśvara is all pervasive. This view underlies all the lineages in the Hindu tradition.

The Vedic tradition is not a congregational religion. Our temples are not locales for theologically mandated assemblies where tenets of faith are collectively proclaimed and affirmed. Instead, our temples are altars for personal devotion and surrender where that which is infallible is

recognized and assimilated as Īśvara. In the Vedic tradition, prayer and worship express the relationship between the individual conscious being and the total, Īśvara. A child raised in the Vedic tradition is first taught by its elders to worship Īśvara through specific names and forms, which ultimately paves the way for understanding Īśvara as transcending all names and forms.

Derived through different interpretations of the same Vedas, the Vedic tradition allows a hermeneutic freedom to relate to Īśvara in any form or manner. As a devotee one can know oneself as born of Īśvara yet different from Īśvara. One can also say that all that exists is Īśvara, and that humans are attributes to that Īśvara. If Īśvara is the whole—infinite and indivisible—one can never be separate from that

SPIRITUAL GROWTH MEANS COMING TO TERMS WITH ONE'S GIFTS AND LIMITATIONS, AND LEARNING TO DO EVERYTHING WITH JOY AND EQUANIMITY. WE ACHIEVE THIS BY PRACTICING KARMA-YOGA, BY CONSCIOUSLY REGARDING ALL ACTIONS PERFORMED AS WORSHIP OF ĪŚVARA, AND RECEIVING THE FRUITS WITH A SPIRIT OF DEVOTION

whole. In fact, one is the whole; the seeker is the sought. This can be taught through a highly developed pedagogy where one sees oneself as Īśvara, provided one is ready for this knowledge. It can be restated in a thousand ways, but can never be improved upon or contested.

The human pursuit is fourfold—dharma (conscious and righteous living), artha (security), kāma (pleasure), and moksa (freedom from the notion of being bound by any pursuit whatsoever). No matter what one seeks—security, pleasure, or righteous living—one ultimately seeks moksa, to be infinite, to be limitless. In and through our various pursuits shines the desire for self-acceptance and wholeness. This desire is assuaged only by understanding that one is non-dually whole, non-sepa-

rate from Īśvara. Assimilating this knowledge requires emotional maturity.

Of the four pursuits, dharma or conscious living, is central to emotional maturity. Dharma refers to the universal matrix of norms by which we live. No one wants to be cheated, lied to, deceived, or stolen from. The best way to ensure this is to treat others as one wants to be treated. In Vedānta, we regard dharma not as a mandate of God, but a manifestation of Īśvara. Dharma is the cosmic flow of what is right, just, and ethical. When one is in harmony with this flow, the heart is free of conflict, and one is at peace. One discovers the connection to Īśvara within oneself, thereby releasing anxiety and alienation.

The natural tendency for humans is to follow dharma, but this tendency is

usurped by strong likes and dislikes. When one desires something at any cost, the ends often justify the means, and one feels pressured to ignore core and cultivated values. Adhering to dharma in the face of the pressures created by likes and dislikes is a prerequisite to gaining the knowledge of oneself as free of guilt and sorrow.

A salient aspect of dharma is ahimsa or non-injury. Some examples of this are vegetarianism and vāktapas (discipline with regard to one's speech). The Vedas enjoin one to speak the truth, to speak truth lovingly and gently, and to refrain from speaking at all, if the truth might be hurtful to hear. For example, if one encounters a person who has a pattern of making choices that are not in the highest interest of their potential or growth, and if one senses that the person is not in a position to acknowledge and to learn from this fact, it might be kinder to allow the person the space to understand these truths on their own, without projecting onto them an "I-

told-you-so” attitude. Vāktapas also implies honoring commitments even in the presence of great hardships. Keeping the given word encourages one to practice mindful speech and remain alert. Practicing vāktapas aligns thought, word and deed and engenders integrity and wholeness. When one keeps the given word, both keeper and recipient are benefited, fostering interpersonal harmony.

In addition to universal values such as speaking the truth, the Vedic tradition also emphasizes the cultivation of svadharma, one’s duties in life. The best way to understand svadharma is by examining the saying, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Our entire lives revolve around the performance of one’s duties to the best of one’s ability, despite odds. One is born to certain parents, into a particular background and with certain abilities and talents. One does have free-will, but this will functions within the larger context of Īśvara’s laws of karma. The laws

of karma are one’s actions that have not conformed to dharma in this or previous lives. All obstacles to one’s goals in life must be examined in this light. When one is able to perceive karma in this way, one can be at peace. One stops blaming one’s circumstances, oneself, or others, and in-

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stead looks upon difficulties as friends and teachers along one’s path in life. Spiritual growth therefore lies in coming to terms with one’s gifts and limitations, and learning how to do everything with joy and equanimity. This is achieved through the practice of karma-yoga, by consciously regarding all actions performed as worship of Īśvara, and receiving the fruits thereof with a spirit of devotion and acceptance as prasāda, a gift from Īśvara. Since one cannot always do as one likes, through

the practice of karma-yoga, one gradually learns to like whatever one has to do.

To facilitate this growth, one leads a life that is committed to discovering the devotee within. Through the various roles one assumes in the course of life, there is an unchanging witness, the one who moves seamlessly from one role to another with-

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out being afflicted by the problems of the roles. This witness is first recognized within oneself as a devotee, the one connected to the whole. The purpose of daily prayer is to practice invoking the devotee within, and to become secure in one's connection to the whole. One develops a relationship of acceptance and surrender to Īśvara, the infallible altar with the power to change the misperception that one is alone or alienated.

The Sanskrit word for surrender is *namah*. Surrender is the knowledge of one's helplessness, the first step to discovering Īśvara. What is this surrender? *Namah* is the surrender of the individual, of the one who feels small and helpless to the one who is free of smallness. When the limited individual surrenders to the limitless, all that remains is the limitless. Since the limited is not reality, through surrender one feels complete, and gains inner space. Gaining inner space is known as *antahkaranaśuddhi*, a loosening of the foot-

hold of fancies and fears within the heart. The inner space is a buffer in daily life and the stepping stone to the emotional maturity pivotal to understanding that one is Īśvara, the whole.

According to the Vedic tradition, the purpose of humans is to understand the nature of the self as free of sorrow. One achieves this understanding in the present, not in an afterlife. Until one assimilates this truth, one keeps striving life after life (reincarnation), for self-approval and acceptance. The cause of birth in any dimension is ignorance of oneself. When one is unaware of oneness, one separates from the whole and this ignorance causes one to continue seeking.

Based on their aspirations and actions in past lives, living beings, or *jīva*, continually take on various bodies. Consequently, *jīva* undergo a variety of comfortable and uncomfortable experiences in each life. The path to transcend this is through the knowledge that all is Īśvara. Assimi-

lating this knowledge, one is secure in oneself and free of sorrow. While living, one is venerated as Īśvara, and after one leaves the body, one is still Īśvara. This knowledge is the ultimate goal of human life, which, when achieved frees one from a life of constant becoming, characterized by repeated cycles of birth, aging, infirmity and death.

In the words of the *Kenopanishad*, "The loss of the infinite is an infinite loss." It is better to seek the infinite than to be an infinite seeker.

Om tat sat.