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Chapter 1

What Is Hindu Spirituality?

I

If we take our existential condition as our starting point, we are immediately confronted by a paradox. Our existential situation immediately discloses two facts which, on the face of it, stare unblinkingly at us in stark contradiction. On the one hand, we find ourselves facing a world of objects which are material in nature, like the desk I am writing on or the chair in which I am sitting. These objects possess length, breadth, height, and depth. That is to say, they possess size. They also possess weight or mass. Simultaneously, however, we find ourselves experiencing them with something which does not possess these properties of length, breadth, height, and solid depth; something which does not possess mass, something which, in one word, is not material. This is the immaterial consciousness with which, or some would even say within which, we perceive these objects.

Many systems of philosophy have their origin in the attempt to come to terms with this paradox.

II

Attempts to resolve this paradox to our philosophical satisfaction have usually employed three fundamental metaphysical strategies: to argue that only matter is ultimately real, to argue that both matter and spirit are ultimately real, and to argue that only spirit, or consciousness, is ultimately real.

The first approach is usually described by the word materialism, when the word is used in a philosophically descriptive rather than a morally evaluative manner. It should be carefully noted that material-

ism, at least the sophisticated version of it we are dealing with here, does not deny the existence of consciousness. How can it? It is, after all, the existence of this very consciousness which enables one to even speak about matter. What is denied is not the phenomenological existence of spirit or consciousness but its ultimate reality. According to this perspective, matter constitutes the ultimate reality about the universe, and consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter. Just as two gases—hydrogen and oxygen—generate water, which possesses a quality they don't, namely liquidity or wetness; similarly unconscious material elements give rise to consciousness. This scientific illustration has been provided intentionally because scientific materialism is the regnant philosophy of our times. The Hindu texts provide a more homespun example, that of chewing the betel. The betel nut is gray in color; it is usually placed on a green leaf with a slight touch of white lime and then consumed as a post-prandial refreshment. Once in the mouth, however, it turns into red saliva—a color which does not belong either to the nut, the leaf, the lime, or saliva.

The second approach is usually described by the word dualism, because, according to it, both matter and consciousness (or spirit) are equally real, and neither may be reduced to the other. This approach is not very popular these days but had many takers at one time, at least in ancient India. Thus Jainism accepts the ultimate reality of both matter and spirit, and so does the Hindu school of philosophy known as *Sāṅkhya*, which was quite influential at one time. This approach does not deny that there is something mysterious about the fact that such diametrically opposed entities as material objects and immaterial consciousness constitute the fundamental data of our empirical condition. It is, however, opposed to the arbitrary resolution of their binary opposition to one of them, as merely a form of monolatry. According to this view thought must follow and not preempt life. If two contradictory features characterize our life-experience, then we must hang on to both the poles.

The third approach, which emphasizes the ultimate reality of consciousness, is called spiritualism for the obvious reason that it resolves

the contradiction in favor of spirit or consciousness. Once again, this approach does not deny the existential reality of matter, whose existence is too obvious to be credibly denied at the experiential level; it, however, does deny the separate existence of matter at the ultimate level. Matter is here regarded as the by-product of spirit. Just as lifeless nails can grow out of fingers throbbing with life, pure immaterial consciousness might well account for the epiphenomenal emergence of matter.

Although Hindu thought as such allows room for all three approaches among its many mansions, it has come to accord the pride of place to spiritualism over the centuries. This is particularly true of the systems of thought within it which base themselves on the Hindu scriptures, called the *Vedas*. These systems, which more specifically formulate their conclusions on the bases of what is stated in the end-portions of these *Vedas*, are called schools of *Vedānta* (*Veda* + *anta* [= end]). According to these schools, ultimate reality, to denote which they use the word *Brahman*, is ultimately spiritual.

III

The cumulative insight of the Vedantic tradition leads it to describe *Brahman*, or the ultimate reality, as *saccidānanda*. This word is a compound of three words: *sat*, which means reality; *cit*, which means consciousness; and *ānanda*, which means bliss. Inherent in this description are profound claims about the nature of the ultimate reality, not apparent at first sight.

Imagine being involved in a philosophical discussion about the ultimate reality. One of the first questions which will arise in such a context would be: does it exist? It is all right for us to formulate it as an idea, even a religious idea, but does it exist? The first word in the compound *saccidānanda* provides an answer to the question. The word *sat* means real and it serves to answer the skeptical thrust of the question: is it real? by affirming that it is; that *Brahman* is for real (*sat*).

If then we accept, if only to investigate the claim more thoroughly in due course, that it is real, then the next question likely to arise is: is this reality material, or material-cum-spiritual, or spiritual in nature? This point dovetails with the three approaches: materialism, dualism, and spiritualism identified earlier. The second word in the compound *saccidānanda* answers this question: the word *cit* means consciousness, which is to say, that *Brahman*, as the ultimate reality, is spiritual in nature.

If now we accept, once again as a prelude to further investigation, the claim that the ultimate reality, *Brahman*, is real and is spiritual, yet another question might arise: Is there one such ultimate spiritual reality or are there many such ultimate spiritual realities? Is there even ultimately, only one spiritual reality or many spiritual realities?

The third word in the compound *saccidānanda*, namely, *ānanda*, provides the clue to the answer here. *Ānanda* means bliss and this is taken to indicate that there can be only one ultimate reality because if there were more than one the possibility or fact of conflict among them would falsify the application of the word *ānanda* to such a reality, as the possibility of conflict among them would compromise its description as bliss.

Thus the Hindu tradition of *Vedānta* not only resolves the existential paradox in favor of spiritualism—it goes further and claims that *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, is also the sole spiritual reality.

IV

The description of *Brahman* as *saccidānanda* represents a point of agreement among the various traditions constituting the *Vedānta;* the question, however, of whether this one reality is personal or impersonal in nature has been a point of dispute within *Vedānta* from the very beginning.

The manner in which this issue has come to be framed within the tradition of *Vedānta* is as follows: does the one ultimate reality possess distinguishing attributes (*saguṇa*) or is it without distinguishing attri-

butes (*nirguṇa*)? (One should not fall here into the error of imagining that an ultimate reality without distinguishing characteristics will be characterless.) In other words, is the ultimate reality personal or impersonal? Or, in the language of philosophy, do we at the end of the day conclude the discussion in terms of monotheism or the existence of one God; or monism, that is to say, the existence of one reality or Absolute? Is it more like ice, with tangible shape and size or more like the gases of which it is made, real but invisible?

This question, and the different answers given to it, have given rise to two traditions of spirituality within Hinduism, the theistic and the absolutistic. As this book is about the latter, I shall focus on it in the rest of the discussion.

V

The absolutistic spirituality of *nirguṇa Brahman* stakes the claim that the ultimate reality is without any differentiating attributes (*nir*: without; *guṇa*: differentiation) and it is this fact about it which in fact differentiates it from everything else!

According to this view three kinds of differences can exist among the objects encountered in the world. One can distinguish among different classes of objects. Thus trees are different from cars. These constitute differences of class (or *vijātīya-bheda* in Sanskrit). Then again, one tree may be distinguished from another, that is to say, one may distinguish among members of the same class (or *sajātīya-bheda* in Sanskrit). Finally, one might internally distinguish between say the trunk and the leaves of a tree. These are called internal differences (or *svagata-bheda* in Sanskrit).

According to absolutistic spirituality *Brahman* is devoid of all the three kinds of distinctions. As the word for distinction in Sanskrit is *bheda*, it is therefore described as *a-bheda* (without distinctions). This of course raises the obvious question: if the ultimate reality is without any distinctions within or without, how come we see all these objects and persons around us? Absolutistic spirituality explains such percep-

tion as ultimately erroneous, just as one might see a mirage without a drop of water being present in the desert. It also points out, however, that the explanation makes sense only after the mirage has disappeared and not before; the mystery of how that which is free from distinctions can serve as the ground for this world of name and form teeming with distinctions is best clarified once non-dual *Brahman* is realized, just as the true nature of a dream only becomes apparent after waking up.

This doctrine of non-dual *Brahman* may appear philosophically remote but it has a very personal implication for the spiritual seeker. If in the end there is only one undifferentiated reality, then, in the ultimate analysis, nothing can be apart from it, not even the seeker. The absolutistic spirituality of the school of *Advaita Vedānta* (as this school of *Vedānta* is technically known; please see appendix) embraces this startling conclusion enthusiastically and claims that the core of the spiritual pursuit consists of little else than the experiential (as opposed to a merely mental or intellectual) realization of this insight.

The formal way in which this doctrine is expressed in the school of *Advaita Vedānta* is in the form of the identity of *Brahman* and *Ātman* (*Brahman* ≡ *Ātman*). One part of the identity, *Brahman*, has already been alluded to so one may turn the spotlight now on *Ātman*.

One way of proceeding in the matter would be as follows. The sages of ancient India, in their search for the ultimate nature of reality, spontaneously adopted a two-track approach. One approach looked outward—at the universe, and sought to discover its ultimate ground.

The second approach looked inward—at the individual from the inside—and sought to discover the ultimate ground of one's personhood. Could we be our body? No, because the body changes but our sense of self remains the same. Could we be our emotions? No, they too change but our sense of self remains the same. Could we be our thoughts? Once again they change, but not our sense of self. Thus one was led to the "unseen self," the "unthought thinker" as the ultimate ground of oneself, the true self, which bears witness to all change but

is itself changeless. This the sages identified as the *Ātman*, the ultimate ground of our self.

Then they made the sensational discovery that the ultimate ground of the universe and the ultimate ground of the self are identical, that *Brahman* is *Ātman* and *Ātman* is *Brahman*. This would be one way of understanding the word *advaita*, which means non-dual (*a-dvaita*). That is to say, *Brahman* and *Ātman* are not two. They are undivided. The expression "not-two" is used instead of "one"—although it might seem clumsy to us—to emphasize that they are not two things which become one, but rather that they were never two to begin with—they are the self-same reality.

One can now see why the guiding principle of this form of spirituality is contained in the maxim: "that thou art." You are what you are seeking. When we have the car keys in our hands as we frantically search for them all around, then we have in our hand what we are looking for.

This does not mean that there is no search to be undertaken. For at the moment we don't think so or know so. But it does mean that the search must be oriented in a certain direction. Although we have car-keys in our hands we have to be told where to look for them in so far as we are looking for them elsewhere and don't realize that we have them in our hand.

How might our spiritual search be oriented in this way?

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