

World Order and Vedanta

by

Dr. A. V. (Sheenu) Srinivasan*

On January 14, 2017, when the sun rises on the banks of the Hoogly River in Kolkata, it will be *Makara Sankranti* in India. Special worships will be offered to the river *Ganga* by millions of devotees. This is the day when the gods awake after a night of sleep as the Sun God seems to change a generally southern direction and charts a course for a generally northern direction. Hindus consider this change in the Sun's direction of travel which ends *dakshinayana* and heralds the beginning of *uttarayana* as an auspicious occasion. This is also the day that the old wounded warrior of the *Mahabharata*, *Bhishmacharya*, was waiting for so that he could relinquish his body and pass on during *uttarayana*. Another reason why *Makara Sankranti* is so special to Hindus is that it was on this day January 12, 1863 just a few minutes after sunrise, that great rejuvenator of my faith, my spiritual hero, (and of millions around the world) the future Vivekananda first drew breath when "the air above the sacred river not far from the house was reverberating with the prayers, worship and religious music of thousands of Hindu men and women." (See *Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works* by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, New York, 1953).

Why bring up all this now? The obvious reason is we will be celebrating the birth day of this great saint of India but also because he is truly the need of the hour! Let me explain:

Kaliyuga seems to be in full swing. The media brings us breaking news from a broken world. These have been too frequent in recent days. Pictures of young men determined to injure and kill people they do not know, in countries that gave them shelter when they fled their own, are shown hundreds of times on TV each time such tragedy occurs. It boggles our mind. More often than not these are the youth that at one time may have looked for hope, inspiration, guidance and leadership. When they cannot find these in their midst, they look elsewhere and fall into wrong hands and commit to do unimaginable acts of violence causing large scale destruction and mayhem. Who has the message of hope that stirs the youth to be inspired, to love life and be solid citizens contributing to the welfare of their communities and practicing their own faith? **We do, but it is the best kept secret now!**

It was not a secret when on September 19, 1893 Swami Vivekananda read a paper in the Parliament of Religions that met in Chicago at the end of which is a message that we should carve in the recesses of our heart. After sketching the religious ideas of the Hindus he summed up as follows: "... if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners, alike; which will not be Brahminical or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being, from the lowest groveling savage, not far removed from the brute, to the highest man, towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature."

It electrified the assembly and changed America. He influenced the subsequent course of events through his dynamic leadership, sacrifice, persuasion, writing and teaching. His uplifting messages transcend all religions and beliefs. He was eloquent when he urged us to believe in the dynamics of our faith. He was convincing when he urged us to believe that Vedanta has the potential to lift our spirits. He helped us to lift our heads high, to be proud of our heritage, to live with joy, to celebrate the basic Hindu belief that in each human being there is a spark of divinity. The need of the hour therefore is, for the Vivekanandas of today, to call on the youth everywhere and re-broadcast the powerful messages of Vivekananda relentlessly and vigorously through every conceivable technological medium.

So my earnest appeal to the swamis, gurus, monks and religious orders is this: Please redirect your resources, your wisdom, your beliefs and your disciples to where the cries are. Young men and women around the world need to hear the positive messages of Vedanta so they may find hope, promise and a future they can be proud of. I beg Hindu religious leaders to resist temptations to build more real estate and infrastructure and instead embrace the youth in distress, adopt prisons and pockets of misery in your region. Teach the poor souls principles of life, yoga, hygiene and diet, breathing and chanting, worshipping any godhead they believe in and offer hope. That is what our spiritual hero Swami Vivekananda would have prescribed.

Our ancestors said *kṛnavānto viśhvamāryam* (we shall civilize the world). I beg all religious leaders to lead us in that direction. That is our *dharma*. Vyasa expressed his frustration in the *swargarohana parva* of the Mahabharata when he said:

*urdhvabahur viromyeshā na cha kaschit shrnoti me
dharmad arthashcha kamascha sa kimartham na sevayate*

“I raise my arms and I shout but no one listens! From *Dharma* comes success and pleasure; Why is *Dharma* not practiced?”

Help us shout back to Vyasa that we have learned to listen and on the auspicious occasion of celebrating the life of Swami Vivekananda let us vow to listen to Vyasa and Vivekananda and practice *Dharma*.

Who else can re-tell them these truths such as for example:

The Upanishads call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the downtrodden of all races, all creeds, and all sects, to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads.

All power is within you. You can do anything and everything. Believe in that. You can do anything and everything without even the guidance of any one. All power is there. Stand up and express the divinity in you.

Vedanta recognizes no sin, it only recognizes error; and the greatest error, says the Vedanta, is to say that you are weak, that you are a sinner, a miserable creature, and that you have no power and that you cannot do this and that.

Know that all sins and all evils can be summed up in that one word- weakness, It is weakness that is the motive power in all evil-doing. It is weakness that is the source of all selfishness. It is weakness that makes people injure people. It is weakness that makes them manifest what they are not in reality.

Let the Vivekanandas of today broadcast Vivekananda's messages in millions of communities. We cannot afford to lose any more time. 150 years is long enough. **The world needs a thousand Vivekanandas now!**

Let us pray that these Vivekanandas penetrate societies everywhere and shout these gems of wisdom until their voice is hoarse and until they have a energetic following transcending geography, race, color, gender and faith.

* * Dr. Srinivasan's recent books include: *The Bhagavad Gita: A Thread through the Eighteen Gems*", *Yaksha Prashna, Hinduism for Dummies and Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice.*

Mutual Acceptance – not Tolerance, is my New Mantra

Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan*

For centuries the word tolerance has been interpreted as a virtuous quality. The dictionary definition of tolerance is one's "ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with." Is it a good quality? Of course it is! Does it work? It has generally not; in the context of enhancing mutual understanding among people and making the world a better place. It probably brings some satisfaction to the one who is tolerating but it does precious little to the other. Let us examine the concept, especially in the context of our theme of connecting with the community. To me it means that I have no objection to your way of life, your beliefs, your choice of god and your mode of worship. My question is: who am I to judge you or your views? Tolerating puts us on two different planes – not on the same plane and that is a problem.

Tolerating you is simply to let you be. My wise friend, the late Dr. Frank Lockard, in trying to teach me to be careful with what I touch in the woods taught me what you all know: "Leaves three, leave be", i.e. do not touch but simply leave them alone as it pertained to poison ivy! But people are neither poison nor ivy!

The attitude of tolerance towards another person is an easy one if one wants to practice it. Easier, by far, than acceptance. Acceptance requires understanding. Understanding requires study, capacity to: listen, analyze, discuss, compare and contrast – clearly a harder approach. However that effort on your part to understand, for example, me, may allow a chance for me do the same about you and may possibly lead to a change in my views and my preferences to be more like yours. Or - it may not. But the effort alone brings us together and closer as it demonstrates a clear genuine interest on one's part in regard to the other person's. If instead, you tolerate the other person it then becomes a one way street! Mutual acceptance through understanding however brings us on the same plane and enhances our relationship and now it is a two way street – an equation.

Most of us have learned to be tolerant and that is admirable. It is necessary but not sufficient. It is a first step and may be used to climb higher to the harder acceptance concept. I know it is an additional burden and will require investment of time and thought.

Religious leaders in the past have talked about the concept of a universal religion. The most eloquent expression of that came on September 19, 1893 from Swami Vivekananda in his Chicago address who said that such a religion "must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the god it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners, alike; which will not be Brahminical or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being."

We all know that this great concept has not come about in practice. It is clearly an ideal and remains so. It is not practical but I think it is not even necessary as a formal structured organization. What we do here in Glastonbury each year comes close to this concept as we listen to other views from other faiths and enjoy them. Perhaps we need to do this more frequently not just at Thanksgiving and perhaps less formally. As I said before it demands the precious resource of time but it is worth it. I see no better alternative as we deliberate and pray tonight for a caring community and a peaceful world.

Dialog, not monolog is the key. Look around any conflict around the world. If you trace back any of them it likely leads to a world unresponsive to a simple, normal, natural desire i.e. the cry **Talk To Me!** People want to be heard, respected, understood, accepted, appreciated and even admired if we can. But a dialog is essential for that to happen. What is the first sign of trouble in a relationship? The dreaded phrase: We Need to Talk!!

So let us continue the dialog. We may even form a group among ourselves, travel together and attend a service in a church or a mosque or a puja ceremony in a temple. For example you will learn if you were to visit a Hindu temple, there is no such thing as a sermon! If you probe deeper into their other rituals such as for example a wedding you will be surprised to find parallels between traditions! I have. The emphasis then becomes learning when we explore that way.

We may even be able to exploit modern technology to skype so we can view and listen by signing on to a service in a church different from our own and observe, learn and appreciate without compromising our own belief system. We may thus skype together! This would enhance our understanding of the other, appreciate their approach even as we adhere to our own approaches. **Mutual acceptance, appreciation and adherence.**

A few years ago I wrote a visitors manual called *Pada Yatra* (Prayer Walk) for those who visit the Hindu temple in Middletown. I was inspired by the Christian tradition of the stations of cross. Each "station" in this manual became a sanctum for a deity representing the One in that form. At the end of that book on page 51, I said "We sincerely hope and pray that as you complete the tour, you will go home with the faith in your own faith reinforced".

So the concept of mutually accepting and appreciating need not be feared. In the process we will discover how connected we truly are. We are a large family in this home called earth. We just saw the interest around the world in distant countries about our election, not only among leaders but also among people. Why should they care? There are, of course, selfish interests but by and large it is that powerful, unrecognized element called connectivity that is playing its part. Let us acknowledge it, nourish it and spread it. And unleash that power of connectivity.

It should work because the holiest of holy scriptures of the Hindus – the Vedas - declared over 5000 years ago: *ekam sat vipraa: bahudaa vadanti*: Truth is one but the wise express that truth in different ways. Truth is indeed one! That shall serve as the basis for mutual acceptance, appreciation even as we adhere to our own beliefs.

* Dr. Srinivasan's recent books include: *The Bhagavad Gita: A Thread through the Eighteen Gems*, *Yaksha Prashna, Hinduism for Dummies and Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice*. These remarks were made at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service held at the First Church of Christ, Glastonbury, CT, November 22, 2016, 7 PM

Unleash the forces of Connectivity

by

Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan

November 24, 2015
South Congregational Church
South Glastonbury, CT

I am here tonight because I know the leaders of this church. I have known Rev. Allen for over two decades now. I have good connections! What you may not know is that I know you too: each and every one of you in this sanctuary. In fact I do know everyone else who is not here. I feel I know everyone everywhere.

I am happy about this sense of connection, I am thankful for this sense of connection. I am joyful for this connectivity. In fact I am ecstatic about this sense of unity.

Of course when a Hindu says “I” he does not mean what you are seeing now i.e. my body, but what you don’t: the infinitely more important, eternal, imperishable, neither born nor dead, genderless and pure, the eternal soul in me - and in you.

The Hindu chants about the soul:

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः

Bhagavad Gita (II-23)

*nainam chindanti śastrāṇi nainam dahati pāvakaḥ
na cainam kledayntyāpo na śośayati mārutaḥ*

Weapons cannot harm it, fire cannot burn it,
water cannot wet it and wind cannot dry it.

That soul, according to the Hindu, is a part of that central depository of all souls which the Hindu defines as “The One” i.e. *ekameva advitiyam*, the one without a second. We can call it the Almighty.

That is the connection we should be and indeed are thankful for. That is the connection we should be grateful for. That’s the only connection that is real. That is the connection we need to emphasize. But, inevitably, it is also that connectivity that makes us grieve and suffer with people in Paris and Beirut and Mali and everywhere else when the cruel hand of man injures and kills the innocent: the cruel hand that fails to recognize the inherent oneness. Therefore the meaning, power and joy of connection needs to be learned, taught and practiced so that we can all live joyfully in accordance with that Hindu belief *vasudaiva kutumbakan* which means the world is one family.

This connection is the cause for celebration, for thanks giving. This connection needs to be taught and learned and nurtured at every church, every synagogue, every temple, every mosque and monastery so

that our children, grandchildren and their children can live in a world filled with purpose, love and joy they so richly deserve. This is my appeal to our religious leaders tonight.

Let me share with you the power and influence of this connectivity. In 1893, a Hindu monk with no connections to anyone in the United States came to attend the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He nearly starved on the streets of Chicago. A noble lady, a Mrs. George W. Hale saw him on the street outside her home and took him in, fed him and treated him with respect. It changed the world!

And he was one of the speakers at a large gathering of that parliament. He began his speech with a noble phrase: Sisters and Brothers of America: A pleasant shock to the audience which immediately responded with a thunderous applause. That single act of kindness and connectivity on the part of Mrs. George W. Hale was the seed that introduced the concept of Vedanta to the western world. The rest is history and you can read all about it if you like. The monasteries, ashrams, yoga centers, Hindu temples and a wide variety of very positive developments in America are the result of that one kind, sensitive act of connectivity.

That monk, my spiritual hero, Swami Vivekananda, on September 19, 1893 read a paper in the Parliament of Religions at the end of which is a message that we should carve in the recesses of our heart. After sketching the religious ideas of the Hindus he summed up as follows: "... if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners, alike; which will not be Brahminical or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature."

I shall conclude by a chant for peace and harmony.

May the creator protect us
may we partake food together
May we work together with great energy
let us be illumined together
let us live in harmony
peace, peace, peace!

*Om sahanaa vavatu
sahanau bhunaktu
sahaveeryam karavaavahai
tejasvinaa vadheetamastu
maa vid vishaa vahai
Om shaanti: shaanti: shaantihi*