

Saccidānanda: My Nature **Swami Veditatmananda¹**

Sat, Existence

Let us examine the various things a human seeks in life. His or her various pursuits in life can be classified in three categories. There is an innate desire in humans to perpetuate their existence. Life is the dearest thing to them. Everybody wants to protect themselves, to remain alive. Nobody wants to die. We make every effort to continue our existence. However miserable we may be, however old we may be, at whatever stage in life we may be, we still want to continue to live. Even at the age of ninety-one, an old lady has a desire to see the marriage of her great grandson! Even at that age, she has a long list of things to be accomplished! The whole pharmaceutical industry thrives on this desire. Why should we have hospitals otherwise? Emergency rooms, oxygen cylinders and all kinds of gadgets and equipments are there just to help humans continue living. However miserable that living may be, we still want to continue it. It represents an innate desire of humans. All the means of security that I surround myself with – shelter, comforts, etc, -- are also to stretch out life as much as possible.

But everybody knows that this body ultimately will come to an end, and that he or she has to part with it. It is because of this awareness that I want a son who would join my name after his and thereby continue my existence in some manner. That is the reason why we leave name plates. If the body does not remain, let my name remain. When we go to a cemetery,

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we find that the tomb-stones indicate the name of the person and the period he or she lived. Through memory in the minds of others, a person wants to continue to exist. He or she wants to live, which shows that there is a natural love for life. A number of our activities in life are prompted by this desire. So there is one class of activities or pursuits which is directed.

Cit, Knowledge

The second kind of desire, which leads to a different kind of pursuit, results from the love for knowledge. Nobody can stand ignorance. The newspaper, the magazine, and the printing industry thrive on this. I don't know why, but I am curious to know what is happening in Australia, what is happening in India, and what is happening in various places in the world. I want to know what there is on the Moon, what there is on the Sun, and what there is on different planets. I cannot tolerate ignorance. This love for knowledge is the reason why it is easy for salesmen in India to attract people on a foot-path just by firing a cracker, showing some kind of magic and then suddenly sell tooth-paste or some other thing! When a crowd gathers, others are also curious to see what's happening.

Knowledge is another thing humans are seeking. That is why I don't mind if I don't get breakfast, but I must have a newspaper every morning! So love for knowledge represents another set of pursuits that are common to everybody. The manner in which a child pursues knowledge is different from that in which an elder pursues it. A scientist pursues it one way, a housewife another. When a child looks through the key-hole to find out what's happening inside, that is also nothing but love for knowledge, and when I am keeping a watch over my neighbor, that is also out of my love for knowledge.

***Ānandā*, Fullness**

The pursuit in life is to gain happiness. Love for happiness makes humans maintain the various relationships that we have in the society. We want to love someone and be loved by someone. Seeking enjoyment through the means of films and dramas and picnics and other entertainment programs is nothing but an expression of this basic desire to be happy.

Humans seek to continue their existence because there is love of existence or immortality. They pursue knowledge in one form or the other, which shows love for knowledge. This is also a natural instinct, or a natural desire. And thirdly humans seek happiness – *ānandā* – which also is a natural desire. Therefore, in technical language, humans are seeking immortality, knowledge and happiness. We want to live for ever. This is the desire. We may not express it openly because we know that it is impossible, but if we had this way, he would continue to live forever. How much knowledge do we want? We want to know everything, all that exists at any place, at any time.

How long do I want to live? I want to live forever. I want to be immortal. How much knowledge do I want? I want to be omniscient. How much happiness do I want? I want absolute happiness, limitless happiness.

This is what is desired by everybody – a man or a woman, young or old. These natural desires in the hearts of human beings are classified as (1) desire for existence, *sat* (2) desire for knowledge, *cit* and (3) desire for happiness, *ānandā*. So *sat*, *cit* and *ānandā* – or Existence, Knowledge and Happiness – are what everyone loves the most. This is what everyone seeks and strives for.

Sat-cit-ānanda, My own nature

By saying that humans are searching for *sat*, *cit*, and *ānandā*, we mean that they are searching for absolute existence, absolute knowledge and absolute joy. This can also be expressed in another way: they are trying to get rid of the sense of mortality, the sense of ignorance and the sense of unhappiness. So my pursuit of *saccidānanda* also means that I am trying to get rid of its opposites, i.e. mortality, ignorance and unhappiness. These three things I cannot stand.

Let's examine the nature of things that we generally think of getting rid of. I don't think of getting rid of something unless it becomes a nuisance. Nobody thinks of getting rid of hands and legs. I don't wish to part with one of the eyes even though I have two of them. This means that nobody want to get rid of that which is natural to him. On the other hand, if a dust particle falls in my eye or a bug enters my ear, I will direct all my efforts to get rid of them. Even with the finest dust particle in the eye, I cannot be at peace. Therefore in our life, what is it that we want to get rid of? We always want to get rid of that which is unnatural, the thing that is foreign. I cannot stand a foreign element but I am comfortable, I am happy with what is natural to me.

When I say that I want to get rid of mortality, ignorance and unhappiness, what does it amount to? Nobody every goes to a doctor and complains, "Doctor! Please do something because my eyes see!" Or nobody complains to a doctor saying, "Doctor! There is something wrong with me. Even though I eat every four hours, I feel hungry again. So please help me!" That he sleeps at night is not a problem to man, because it is natural to him. Nobody is happy being unhappy. And so we know that happiness must be

the natural state. That is why we accept it. Nobody goes and consoles or sympathizes with a scholar for having stood first in the University! Because we accept happiness as a natural and a desirable thing.

This shows that ignorance, mortality and unhappiness are unnatural, whereas immortality, knowledge and happiness or in other words, *sat*, *cit* and *ānandā* are natural to me. Therefore I like them, I love them. This indicates the nature of a human being, and the nature of all living beings, because everyone loves *saccidānanda*. Existence, knowledge and happiness reside within the nature of every human being. It is my nature and that is what I am.

Another name for *saccidānanda* is *Brahman*. *Saccidānanda* means *Brahman* or *ātmā*. When we say *brahma satyam* it means that there is one real thing which is my own nature. That indeed is *saccidānanda* or absolute existence, knowledge, and happiness. This is the most natural state. This alone is the goal of life, and through all my actions I try to attain this state. Therefore we must adopt that mode of life which would enable us to attain this vision and achieve this state of absolute existence, knowledge and happiness. And this is what Vedanta is meant for.

Should we call Vedanta practical or not? If *saccidānanda* is what I want, if absolute existence, knowledge, and happiness is all that I want, then that which enables me to achieve it, has to be practical. Another name for *saccidānanda* is *amṛtam* or immortality. There is a very famous statement of the Upanishad which says:

Na karmanā na prajayā dhanena tyāgenaike amṛtatvamānaśuḥ

Not by work, nor by progeny, nor by wealth but by renunciation alone, some attained immortality (Kaivalyopaniṣad, 3)

Immortality, the state in which nothing remains to be attained, is the most natural state of the human being. The ocean is the most natural state of the river, because after reaching the ocean, the river has nowhere to go. All the struggle and conflict in her life have come to an end when a river has reached the ocean, and until then she has to strive and struggle.

In my life also I love this natural state because it brings an end to all the conflicts, all the struggles. That is the state that I desire. That is the reason why we love sleep so much. It is very close to the natural state, although not quite the natural state itself. No effort or exertion is involved in deep sleep. There I enjoy happiness without any effort. Even this experience of deep sleep shows that it is the only thing I love the most. That is called *amṛtatvam*.

Means for Attainment of *Saccidānanda*

Amṛtatvam is the most natural state, in which nothing remains to be attained, and no place remains to be reached. So the Upanishad says, not by *karma* or action can immortality be attained. This means that the achievement of external things cannot bring about immortality. Whatever action I perform would be limited. So the result that is gained by an action has also to be limited. So the result that is gained by an action has also to be limited. And the sum of any number of limited results of limited actions cannot add up to the limitless, the *amṛtatvam*.

What means do we employ to attain limitless happiness or immortality? *Karma-action, praja-progeny and dhanam-wealth*. These are also popularly known as *dharma, kāma* and *artha* respectively. These three *puruṣārthas* are the means that we employ for attaining immortality. Security and comfort, wealth and prosperity, name and fame, emotional

adjustments and scientific researches – such are the means that we are employing to seek immortality. We are constantly engaged in acquiring and arranging things.

The Upanishad urges us to stop and think. There is nothing wrong in action, in achievements, in wealth, or in progeny. But the manner in which they are employed is wrong. What am I seeking? I am seeking immortality. Can these things attain immortality for me? No. Because these are all small, limited things. Wealth is limited, progeny is limited, name and fame and power are limited, and therefore they can never add up to the limitless or the immortality. My desire is valid, what I want is genuine, but the method in which I am trying to fulfill this desire is not proper.

The desire to seek existence, knowledge, and happiness is genuine, but the means that I am employing – the body, the mind, and the intellect, the various objects in the world outside, various intellectual pursuits – all of these are so small, so insignificant, that in no way can they attain immortality for me.

And this is where Vedanta comes to our help. Vedanta questions the very pursuit of life. It does not take anything for granted – which, unfortunately, other sciences do. The psychologist takes the desire of man for granted. The scientist provides the man with whatever he wants, and there is no doubt that science has brought about spectacular achievements in scientific and technological fields. They should be there. And it is because of them that man is more comfortable today, and has much more flexibility in time and space. But can immortality be attained by these various pursuits? No. It cannot be attained. Hence we come to a basic contradiction in life. It seems as though the whole human life is full of

contradictions. The very basic contradiction is that there is a natural desire for seeking immortality but the means available at my disposal are limited, and therefore they cannot enable me to achieve what I am seeking in life. This is something to be understood. At some point in life man has to discover this. He is then called a mature man – a man awakened to the reality of life. If he does not understand it, he is called blind or a child:

“The unintelligent people entertain the desires for worldly objects”.

The *Kāthopaniṣad* calls them children, or the immature people. They have not understood that what they are seeking in life cannot be attained through the means they are employing. They continue to live the same extrovert life. So it requires a certain maturity to understand that whatever achievements have been made so far and whatever can possibly be made in future cannot attain for me what I am seeking in life. With this understanding the whole trend of life has to change. In order to attain immortality, the whole vision of life, the attitude towards life must change. And that is what Vedanta reveals, tells us or expects us to do.

Once these fundamentals of life have been understood, my attitude changes. No more do I depend upon little things to attain the goal of my life. I start looking elsewhere. If the immortality is not in wealth, if it is not in pleasure, if it is not in name and fame, if it is not anywhere else in the world, where is it? Since I am seeking, it must be there someplace. *Śruti* says: the immortality is hidden in a cave. That is why it is called a secret. It is hidden in the cave of my heart. The immortality is hidden in my very being. I myself am the immortal one and therefore if I am seeking it outside I can never find it. All our extroverted efforts to gain immortality are like

that of the old lady who was searching for a needle in the light of a street lamp, a needle which she had lost in her hut.

Immortality is what I am looking for, but the place where I am looking is a wrong place; hence at no time in my life will I ever find it. Just because I am working, just because I am searching, just because I am advancing does not mean I am really progressing in life. We must understand the difference between progress and advancement in life. We have wrong concepts about progress. Accomplishing more things, and getting more comforts is progress as we think it to be. A comfortable life is what we are seeking. And Vedanta is not opposed to a comfortable life. But Vedanta says that a comfortable life is not the solution. Man, in fact, is seeking a happy life. But instead of trying for that, he is spending all his time in bringing about a comfortable life. So when this question is raised, “Is Vedanta relevant to present day practical life?” I think what is meant by present day practical life is a comfortable life. Is Vedanta relevant in bringing about a comfortable life? By studying Vedanta can I get a promotion? By studying Vedanta can I earn more money? By studying Vedanta can I get more things? Well, we do not know. Vedanta does not address itself to comforts in life. Vedanta addresses itself to what I want fundamentally. Happiness is the only thing I want. We are confusing comfort with happiness and therefore success in life in terms of material gains is considered to be measure of progress in life.

When do we say that a particular person is a successful person? We say that when he or she has acquired a great number of things. If one has accomplished maximum material achievements we call one a successful person, which one may very well be. Again, understand that Vedanta is not

opposed to these things. But in Vedanta the success is measured on the basis of my closeness to the goal of immortality, the goal of lasting happiness. Not the number of things I have achieved. The immortality I am seeking is in my very heart. That is where I should have been seeking, not outside. Then what is the outside world for? Can all the things in the world attain immortality for me? No.

We shudder when we hear that the world is unreal. By stating that the world is unreal, is Vedanta asking us to reject the world, to reject the wealth, and to reject the family? Vedanta is not practical if it says so.

I should not throw away the things in the world just because they cannot appease my hunger. They are not meant for that. This flower cannot appease my hunger, for that is not the purpose the flower is meant to serve. Inasmuch as the world cannot appease my hunger for immortality, I can say that the objects, the things, and the beings in the world are *mithya*. But it does not mean that the things are non-existent or that they are not beautiful. A wooden apple may look more beautiful than a real one. So no doubt the world is a beautiful thing to enjoy, but the manner in which it should be enjoyed is different. That wooden apple cannot be enjoyed by eating it. It is to be enjoyed only by looking at it as a piece of art.

Thus we come to the most beautiful and the most fantastic way of relating ourselves to the world. Since this word *mithya* is not easy to understand, we require a teacher to make us understand it. That is why this knowledge is a secret. Words are floating around and often used wrongly. *Mithya* is one of those words. In our colloquial language we use the word *mithya* to mean imaginary or non-existent or wrong. Therefore people develop an aversion to the world. *Mithya* means that something does not

serve the purpose it promises to serve but serves some other purpose instead – like the wooden apple. It is solely an object of adoration. Once I understand this, my relationship with the apple changes. When I realize that it cannot appease my hunger, dispassion arises within me, a feeling quite different from the one I entertained so far. With reference to the apple which I now know to be *mithya*, I am called a *sannyāsī*. I become an apple-*sannyāsī*.

Understand the nature of *vairāgya* or *sannyāsa*. It is not that I have an aversion for the apple or I throw away the apple. I just understand the real nature of the apple and now I relate to it in a different way. That change in relationship alone is called *sannyāsa*. *Sannyāsa* is not something physical. It is the maturity or the understanding of the real nature of the thing. *Sannyāsa* is called *jñāna*.

By *sannyāsa*, by renunciation is meant the understanding of the real nature of the world. “Some attained immortality through renunciation,” says the *śruti*. They stopped searching for immortality where it is not and started searching where it is. Once I start searching for the needle where it has fallen, if not today, tomorrow if not tomorrow, the day after, the needle will be found because it is there. This is called understanding. The world is *mithya*. It is something beautiful, no doubt, but the way in which we enjoy it is altered.

This is *vairāgya*. *Vairāgya* does not have any hatred in it. It is that which should always create a joy in me. The joy of knowledge, the joy of maturity is called *vairāgya*. Not having understood this fact we think that the *sannyāsī* is the one who only emaciates his or her body and who does not know how to enjoy life. But this is a false notion. A *sannyāsī* is a mature

person. He or she understands the real nature of the world and relates to it appropriately.