

VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY

SWĀMI ABHEDĀNANDA

ON

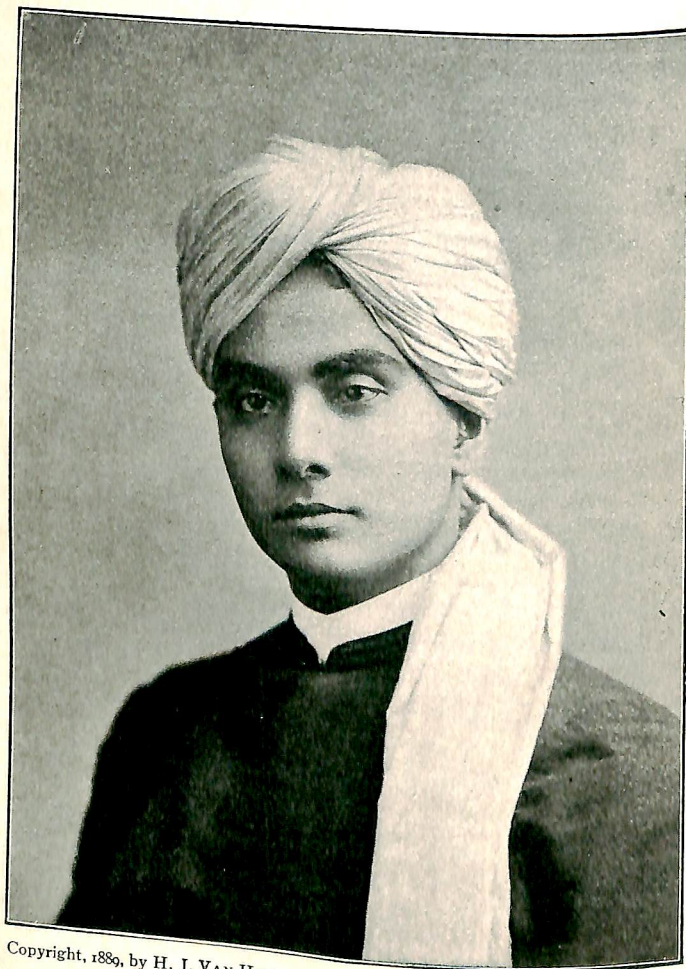
The Relation of Soul to God

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"The soul enchained is 'man,' and free from chain is God."
—*Life and Sayings of Ramakrishna*, by F. Max Müller, p. 145.

THE RELATION OF SOUL TO GOD.

A clear understanding of man's relation to God is a matter of momentous importance to students of philosophy and religion and to all seekers of Truth. From very ancient times all the best thinkers, prophets and the great religious leaders of the world, whether of the East or of the West, have endeavored to explain our relation to God and to the universe. Out of those explanations arose various schools of philosophy and different systems of religious beliefs amongst the different nations of the world. Every philosophy and every religion, ancient or modern, has arrived at certain conclusions in its attempt to describe the relation which each individual bears to God. All such conclusions, of course, pre-suppose the existence of God, and depend upon the nature of our conception of God as well as of the human soul. Those who deny the existence of God and hold that we are but mere accidental appearances in the mechanical process of the blind forces of nature which are acting aimlessly upon dead matter, think that it is loss of time and energy to discuss such useless and absurd topics. They would rather devote their energy to obtain the best things of the Godless world for the comforts of

the soulless body. They do not believe in the existence of any such thing as soul, mind or spirit apart from body. When the body dies everything comes to an end. As with the body, so it is with the material universe. Such thinkers are not the products of the nineteenth century alone, but they are as old as the appearance of man upon earth. In ancient India this class of thinkers existed side by side with the believers in the individual soul of man and in God, as numerous as we find them to-day amongst the most cultivated minds of the West. Those ancient materialists, agnostics and atheists, making sense perception the standard of their knowledge of things, denied the existence of everything that they could not perceive by their senses. But the other class of thinkers, who went below the surface of the sense perceptions into the realm of the invisible, weighed their materialistic arguments, pointed out their fallacies, and ultimately established through logic and science, the existence of the individual soul of man as well as of the soul of the universe, or God, and described their mutual relation. These thinkers can be divided into three classes: First, the dualists; secondly, the qualified non-dualists, and thirdly, the non-dualists, or monists. The dualists believe in an extra-cosmic personal God, who creates the universe out of nothing, fashions it, gives names to the phenomena, and afterwards governs it. According to them, God, the creator and governor of the universe, is eternally separate from the universe and from all living creatures, just as a potter is separate from the pot he makes or as a carpenter who stands always outside

of the table or chair which he makes. The dualists believe in a God who has human attributes infinitely magnified. He is all-wise, merciful, just and all-powerful. Some of the dualists go so far as to give human form to God, as we find in the conception of Jehovah amongst the Hebrews and the orthodox Christians. In the Old Testament, Jehovah is described as walking with Adam in the Garden of Eden. It is said: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden" (Genesis, iii, 8). Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel saw Him. The nobles not only saw but they did eat and drink. (Exodus, xxiv, 9, 11.) Moses saw Jehovah's back. Jehovah ate with Abraham under the oaks at Mamre. (Genesis xviii, 1, 8.) God was pleased with the sweet savor of Noah's sacrifice. He possessed human appetites. He walked with Noah, etc. The same Jehovah with a human form and human qualities and with a human personality is the ideal God of the orthodox Christian monotheists of to-day. They believe in Jehovah as sitting on a throne somewhere in the heavens with a right and a left hand, with eyes red with anger and revenge, and holding a rod, ever ready to punish the wicked with eternal fire. From many of the orthodox pulpits the same God is preached to-day, as He was in the days of the past. The relation of man to such a personal, or rather human God, with human attributes, is like that of a

subject to his king, or of a servant to his master. As the duty of a subject is to obey implicitly the commands of his king, or governor, or ruler, so every man's duty is to obey the commands of the Governor of the universe, otherwise he will be punished. Similar relation of man to the extra-cosmic personal Ruler of the universe is to be found in most of the monotheistic or dualistic religions of the world. All the religions of Europe and Asia which are dualistic or monotheistic teach that our relation to God is that of a creature to his creator, or of the governed to the governor.

Although man is said to be created in God's image in Genesis, yet it is generally understood that he cannot have any other relation higher than that of a creature to his creator. It simply means that man, being the image of God, possessed at first some of the divine qualities before he was tempted by Satan. Although the Christians believe that Jesus the Christ was the son of God, and God is the father of the universe, yet according to them, an ordinary mortal cannot be called the son of God in the same sense as Jesus of Nazareth was, because he was an exception to the general rule. Whether Jesus ever meant that he was the only begotten son of God exclusive of any other mortal, is a question yet to be solved. But the question is, if every individual be a true image or the son of God, why should God punish his own son so mercilessly with eternal fire as is described in the parable of the marriage of the king's son: "Then said the king to the servants, bind him hand and foot and take him away and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be

weeping and gnashing of teeth; for many are called but few are chosen." (Matth., xxii, 13, 14.) Again, in the saying: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matth., xxiii, 33.) Thus, according to popular Christianity, as it is understood and preached in the orthodox churches, man's relation to God is not that of His image or of a son to his loving Father, but of a subject to his despotic monarch, Christ being the only begotten son of God. As long as there is preached the idea of the creation of the universe and of man out of nothing by an extra-cosmic personal God with human attributes, so long will our relation to God remain like that of a creature to his creator or of the governed to his governor.

In India there are dualists, too. They believe in an extra-cosmic personal God who is the repository of all the blessed qualities, who is omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving; who creates the universe, not out of nothing, but out of the material of nature, which is eternal. God is the efficient cause of the universe and nature is the material cause. They do not believe that the human soul comes into existence all of a sudden and has a beginning, but that it existed in the past and will exist in future from eternity to eternity. They say that as nature is eternal so are individual souls. Each soul after remaining potentially in nature for some time, comes out of the causal state at the beginning of a new cycle of creation or evolution, and manifests in gross forms, one after another, according to its desires and tendencies, until it reaches perfection. After read-

ing the New Testament one cannot get any definite conception of the nature of the human soul, nor of its destiny, but in the dualistic system of India one learns that the human soul is like an infinitesimal particle of nature containing the divine light of intelligence and divine power in an infinitely small degree, whose duty is to serve God through prayers, good deeds, good thoughts and love. God loves all, and He can be loved in return. Those who worship Him through unswerving devotion and unselfish love obtain freedom from the dark side of nature; that is, from the bondages of ignorance, selfishness, suffering, misery and all other imperfections; and after death they live a life of perfection and bliss forever in the presence of the eternal personal God. This is salvation according to the dualists in India. They do not mean by salvation going to heaven, but on the contrary, hold that heaven is a place where one goes to enjoy the rewards of one's good deeds, and at the end of such a period of celestial enjoyment one comes back to earth and is born again. Each soul is bound to attain this salvation, sooner or later. Those who do wicked deeds reap the results of their actions and thoughts, not by going to any place of eternal fire and punishment, but by being born again and again until they reach the state of spirituality, devotion and righteousness. The monotheists in India do not believe that God punishes anybody, as He is the embodiment of divine love. Nor do they believe in eternal suffering, nor in any Satan or creator of evil. But they do believe in a temporary suffering of the wicked, which is the reaction of their own wicked acts.

They do not blame God nor charge Him with partiality, but they take upon their own shoulders the whole burden of responsibility. These dualists believe that wherever there is life there is the manifestation of the divine light of intelligence, however small it may be, however imperfect the expression of intelligence may be. From the minutest insect up to the highest gods, or angels, or bright spirits, each individual life is filled with a ray of that Divine Sun. They sometimes compare God with a gigantic magnet and the individual soul with the point of a needle, and say as a magnet attracts a needle so the great God attracts the individual souls toward Him through love, and magnetizes them by His divine power and love. Although they believe that each soul is separate from God and from other souls, yet its relation to God is like that of a ray to the sun or of a spark to fire. Their conception of the human soul is with attributes, with qualities and character, with mind, intellect, sense-powers, and the finer particles of ethereal matter which give foundation to grosser physical forms. In short, it is the same as the individual ego, as we call it, or the spiritual body as it is called in the New Testament. According to these dualists, God can be worshiped by man through various relations, such as by calling Him master, or father, or brother, or friend, or son, or husband. These relations depend upon the nature and characteristics of the worshiper. Some like to think themselves as servants of God, others as friends, or brothers, or sons. They say, as the same man in a household can be the master in relation to his servants, the father in relation

to his sons, a friend, a brother, or a husband in relation to his wife, so the same God can appear in all those various relations to different individuals according to their nature. Such is man's relation to God according to the dualistic thinkers of India.

Next to the dualistic conception of God comes that of the qualified non-dualists. These thinkers go a little deeper than the dualists. Starting from the dualistic standpoint they go a step further toward the realization of Truth and of man's relation to God. According to them, God is no longer extra-cosmic, no more outside of and separate from the universe, but He is intra-cosmic. He is no longer governor from the outside, but *Antaryamin*, inter-ruler. He is immanent and resident in nature. He inter-penetrates every particle of the universe. The physical universe is His gross physical body. He has infinite eyes, infinite ears, and infinite organs of other senses. He sees through the eyes of all the living creatures of the universe. He hears through all the ears that exist in the universe. He has infinite heads. The wind is His breath. His mind is the sum total of individual minds, or in other words, the Cosmic Mind. His intellect is the Cosmic intellect. His soul is the Cosmic Ego, or the soul of the universe. He is no longer the creator of the universe, or one who fashions the materials of nature and gives names and forms to the phenomena from outside like a carpenter or potter. He is not the efficient cause alone, as the dualists maintain, but He is both efficient and material cause of the universe. He creates, that is, He projects into the physical space

the phenomenal forms out of nature or divine energy which is in His body. He is the one living Being in the universe. He is the one stupendous Whole, and we are but parts. In that process of projection or evolution of nature, infinite numbers of individual souls which existed in His body from the beginningless past, come out on the physical plane, play their parts according to their desires, and fulfill their purpose through the process of evolution. Each individual soul is like a spark which emanates from the huge bonfire of God, and lives in and through God, but it cannot be called God. God dwells everywhere. He pervades the universe and nature, and yet He transcends them both. He is infinite but personal, without any human form. The qualified non-dualists say that God cannot be confined to any form, because every form is a limitation in space by time, while God is unlimited by space or time. He is beyond space and time. Our body is a part of God's body, our mind is a part of the divine or universal mind, our will is a part of the universal or cosmic will. This is called qualified non-dualistic conception of God, because it teaches unity qualified by variety. That is, God is one, the universe and human souls are one in God, yet each retains its own separate individuality. God is like a tree and we are like branches thereof. It reminds me of the simile of the vine and its branches which Jesus the Christ used to show man's relation to God. The same idea underlies His saying, "My Father is greater than I." According to this class of thinkers the individual soul possesses all the qualities of the human ego. As our ego

has mind, intellect, sense-power, memory, and is limited by other egos, so is the soul. After death the soul contracts its qualities within itself, and at the time of its birth it expands those latent powers. Our ego or soul is a part of the cosmic ego, or the soul of the universe, or God.

Next to these comes the class of monistic or non-dualistic thinkers. They do not stop where the qualified non-dualists have stopped, but they push their investigations still further, and analyze the nature of the individual soul or ego, and ultimately discover the unchangeable essence of the ego. They are the seekers of the unchangeable reality of the universe. In their search they will not stop until they reach that Truth which is immutable, eternal and one. They adopt the scientific methods of analysis, observation and experiment, and apply them to the subtlest and most abstract problems. Analyzing the nature of the ego, they find that it cannot be the unchangeable reality or immutable Truth, because the mind, with its various modifications, such as intellect, memory, etc., is constantly changing. After patient research and continuous struggle to know the ultimate Truth, these great monistic sages realized that the ego, or the individual soul, is nothing but a changeable receptacle of a still subtler substance, which is unchangeable and eternal. They called it the Atman in Sanskrit. There is no word in the English language which conveys the meaning of this Atman. It is much finer than ego or the living soul of the individual. Atman is the unconditioned reality in man; and

the living soul or the individual ego is the subtle covering of the Atman, like the globe that covers the light of a lamp. That Atman is not a part of the universal ego, but it is one with the unconditioned Reality of the universe, which is called in Sanskrit Brahman, or the All-pervading Spirit or the Absolute. Sometimes it is called Paramâtman, which was translated by Ralph Waldo Emerson as Over-Soul. It is finer than the Cosmic Ego or God. It is sexless, neither masculine nor feminine. It is sometimes translated by the Oriental scholars as the SELF. But Self is a confusing word. Some people mistake it for the Anglo-Saxon self, which acts and progresses, and which is another name for the ego. According to the non-dualistic conception of the true nature of man, the Atman or the Self, or the spiritual essence of man, is the same as the Brahman, the spiritual or divine essence of the universe. The relation of the true nature of man to God is no longer like that of a creature to the Creator, nor like that of a son to his father, nor like that of a part to the whole, but it is absolute oneness on the highest spiritual plane. The Atman, or the divine nature of man, is the same as the absolute divinity of the Cosmos. On that highest spiritual plane there is no distinction, no idea of separation, no idea of creation. All ideas of separateness, all differentiations of phenomenal names and forms, merge into the absolute ocean of reality which is unchangeable, eternal and one. The essence of the Creator is infinite, and it interpenetrates the phenomenal forms as the external space pervades every particle of atoms of the phenomenal world. That

essence is like the all-pervading background of the phenomenal appearances. Phenomena are like the waves in the ocean of Infinite Reality. Individual souls are like so many bubbles in that ocean of Absolute Existence. As a bubble rises on the surface of the ocean, takes a form, lives there, comes near other bubbles, lives in a group for some time, moves in the company of others, changes its size, perhaps, and goes down again; so the individual soul rises in that ocean of infinite existence, appears in various forms, passes through the different stages of evolution, and lives there for ever and ever, sometimes as manifested and at other times as unmanifested. The light of intelligence in the soul or ego is due to the reflection of the Atman or Divine Spirit on the mirror of the heart of the ego or soul. Therefore the soul is called the image or reflection of the Atman or Divine Spirit. This idea is beautifully expressed in one of the Upanishads: "In the cave of our heart have entered the two—the Atman or the Divine Spirit, and the individual ego or soul. Dwelling on the highest summit, or the ether of the heart, the one witnesses the other, while the soul drinks the rewards of its own works. The wise men and sages describe the one as the light, and the other as the reflection, image or shadow." (Katha Upanishad, ch. III, verse 1.) You will notice here what a deep meaning lies at the back of the expression, "Man is the image of God." The ancient Vedic sages used the same expression in a sense which many of the best philosophers of the Western world have failed to grasp or comprehend. Thus the most ancient Monistic

sages explained the highest relation of the individual soul to Atman or Divine Spirit, by calling it the reflection or image of the Self-effulgent Light of God. But as a reflection cannot exist independent of the light whose reflection it is, so the soul of man cannot exist independent of Atman. Therefore the true nature of the soul is Atman, the divine and real Spirit which cannot be divided into parts and is One Being of existence, intelligence and bliss. Such is the monistic or non-dualistic explanation of the relation of the soul to God.

Vedanta philosophy recognizes these three explanations. It says that the relation of the soul to God varies as the conception of the individual soul and God becomes higher and finer. Starting from the gross form of body, when a real and earnest seeker after Truth marches onward toward the Absolute, he passes through all the intermediate stages until he reaches that state of divine communion where he realizes the oneness of the Atman, or the true nature of man with Brahman, the cosmic Divine essence, or the Absolute Reality of the universe. Then, he says, I am Brahman, I am He, I am in the sun, in the moon, in stars; I am one with the All-pervading Reality; or as Jesus the Christ said, "I and my Father are one." He does not use the word "I" in its ordinary sense of ego or human personality, but in the sense of Atman, or Divine essence. Jesus was a dualist when He prayed to His Father in heaven, and he was a monist when He said, "I and my Father are one," "The kingdom of heaven is within you." A Vedanta philosopher or sage after

realizing that absolute oneness on the highest spiritual plane of the Atman, says, when he returns to the plane of relativity and phenomena:

"O Lord, when I think of my body, I am Thy servant and Thou art my Master; when I look at my soul, I am Thy part and Thou art the one stupendous Whole; but when I realize my true nature, I am divine and one with Thee, the Absolute Spirit. Such is my conception of my relation to Thee."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS AFTER THE LECTURE.

Does the soul exist after death?

Yes.

What is the difference between soul and spirit?

According to the Vedanta Philosophy, soul, or individual soul, or living soul means the ego. When spiritualists use the word spirit they mean the living soul or the ego. But this word is also used in a higher sense, and by spirit we mean the Atman, that is, the unchangeable basis of consciousness and intelligence. Consciousness or intelligence is the light which illumines our inner nature, and spirit or Atman is the source from which proceeds that light or consciousness. Soul or ego is the receptacle, as it were, of the spirit. It is the spirit plus mind with its various modifications. Mind includes all the mental activities, such as intellect, understanding, memory, emotion, power of perception, etc.

Does the Vedanta Philosophy teach Nirvana, or the annihilation of the soul?

No. On the contrary it teaches that the true nature of man is beginningless and endless.

What do you mean by Nirvana?

The cessation of all imperfections, and the attainment of perfection and freedom from the bondages of ignorance, selfishness, sorrow, suffering and misery.

Shall we lose our individuality after death?

No, we can never lose our individuality. We retain it through all eternity. As the Atman or our divine nature is eternal, so is our individuality.

Has the soul any form?

No. But it can take any form. The soul or ego is the invisible germ of life which contains within it mind, sense-powers, vital energy and the finer particles of ethereal matter. It is called subtle body, or spiritual body, as in the New Testament, when it appears in a certain finer form.

What is our divine nature?

The Atman or spirit. It is one with the Universal Spirit or the absolute reality of the universe. It is pure, sinless, immortal and perfect.

Does Vedanta teach that this world is an illusion?

No. It teaches that this phenomenal world is the objectified thought of God; that the universe is the result of the evolution of the one eternal energy which is called in Sanskrit Prakriti, the Latin Procreatrix, or Maya, meaning the Creative Energy or Divine Will. Some translate Maya to mean illusion, not knowing its proper meaning. Maya never means il-

lusion. When a Vedanta philosopher says the phenomena are Maya he means that they are relative, conditional, and not absolute.

Was Jesus a dualist or a monist?

Jesus the Christ was a dualist when He said, "Our Father which art in Heaven." He was a qualified non-dualist when He said, "My Father is greater than I," and when He used the illustration of the vine and its branches. He was a monist when He said, "I and my Father are one," and "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you." He recognized these three stages and explained them in these ways so that His disciples might comprehend.

What is the practical use of the Vedanta Philosophy?

The practical use of this philosophy consists in the knowledge of our true nature. It teaches us what we are, why we have come into this world, the purpose of life and how to fulfil that purpose, and how we can live as masters and not as slaves. Now we are living as slaves of our desires, slaves of our senses, attached to the transitory objects of this world. We are denying the real being of our soul and spirit, which are our true nature. By the help of the teachings of Vedanta we can become free from all these bondages, gain spiritual enlightenment and attain perfection in this life. Understanding these teachings helps us to manifest divinity through all the works of our everyday life and to love our neighbors as our true Self, which is divine and one.

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