

'Akaash', Bharatanatyam dancer Leela Samson's choreography, includes a verse from the Chandogya Upanishad, during which the dancers sit on a dimly lit stage, with their legs crossed, in a posture of meditation, eyes nearly closed. The large circular movements of the arms first show the expansiveness of the universe, then return to the torso to express inclusion. And yet, the deliberate impulse for the movement of the arms seems to come from a contraction within the core, the abdomen of the dancers; not just the extension of the external limbs.

'Akaash' is a beautiful reminder that all that happens within us impacts the entire external world as well. The verse from the Chandogya Upanishad reads, "A person who knows that the space outside is the same as that within, and that the space within is the same as that within the heart -- he who understands this, attains."

The Advaita principle expressed in both the verse and the choreography that it inspired, addresses the concerns of this age. It is an age prominently characterized by international media, transnational capital flows, and cultural convergence. Events of remote places impact each other in ways that cannot always be predicted. Whether at the level of the individual or the nation-state, it is difficult to distinguish between separate entities. Who, for example, should be given credit – or, perhaps more crucially, the patent – for a scientific discovery? Which countries are to blame for a political conflict? These questions become increasingly complex as there are a greater numbers of actors, direct and indirect, in every context.

Globalization transforms our understanding of space so that distances and separation become marked by something other than borders. Instead, distance is defined by our willingness or unwillingness to traverse separations that are already bridged to a large extent by economic alliances and global technology. Similarly, the import of the above verse and the choreography lies in bringing together the space within and the space outside; allowing oneself to be permeated by the outside, and realizing that what is

inside is not contained in isolation.

This verse also exemplifies the spirit of Vedanta, which seems to offer the appropriate spirituality in a rapidly globalizing world. Vedanta provides valuable guidance on our responsibilities as members of an interconnected, tightly integrated world. It reflects the structure of globalized society, reminds us of the processes that keep our world harmonious, and urges us towards action that would help to strengthen the solidarity of a closely interlinked society. It is no wonder that there seems a renewed interest in Vedanta now, more than a hundred years after Vivekananda took his teachings to Chicago, and thousands of years after the legendary teacher Shankaracharya.

Literally translating to 'end of the Vedas', Vedanta is the essence or culmination of the entire wealth of Vedic and Puranic knowledge. Advaita, or the philosophy of non-duality, its most important element, is particularly well-suited to the globalized world, with its emphasis on democracy and unity. According to Advaita, the aim is not to worship the divine in a hierarchical relationship, but to become one with the divine, Brahman. Through meditation, we realize that Brahman is within us and around us. There remains no distinction between the self and the other.

Compared to Vedanta, globalization is relatively recent. It gained momentum with the ocean expeditions of the 16th century, continued with the expansion of empires, became problematic with colonialism, took the form of world wars, and continues vigorously today, as we read about civilians killed in the middle-east, while we sip Colombian coffee out of mugs made in China. Though these processes have been in swing for years, the intensity and speed of transport and communication alone make it a far more interconnected world than ever before.

There are common themes of integration and convergence in both globalization and Vedanta, so our renewed interest in this sort of spiritualism no longer seems coincidental. As Emile Durkheim wrote, in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, god is

a symbol of society, and praying to the divine is a way of recognizing the forces that surround us, sustain us, and vex us as well. It is an appealing theory, for it rationalizes our beliefs and rituals. For those of us who grudgingly go to the temple or mosque, and feel infuriated jostling through crowded Durga puja pandals, it seems worthwhile if we consider these religious experiences as a small, but crucial contribution towards the strength of our society, whatever our religion.

Perhaps we do indeed worship society through god, and this partly explains the surge in interest in Vedanta today. Vedanta emphasizes the ideals to which we aspire as a global society. Just as through meditation a person can attain unity with Brahman, each community can, through an introspective reassessment, embrace global interconnections across boundaries, beyond artificial constructions of what is 'ours' and what is 'theirs'.

Vedanta recognizes that the path to attaining oneness with the divine is not unproblematic. Neither is the path to a perfectly balanced and equitable global world order. There are frequent protests from those who do not get a fair share of the benefits. However, Vedanta, especially Advaita philosophy, holds the simple key to sustaining stability both inside and around us: we must see others as ourselves. Perhaps provisions for the poor would improve if we could think of the beggar child on the street as a part of ourselves. The war in Iraq might never have happened had those who committed the violence thought of the repercussions of their actions on themselves. It is the simple golden rule that we were taught in kindergarten, 'do unto others as you want done unto yourself', which in Vedanta, reads as 'tat-tvam-asi' (I am that). We are all Brahman, a unitary divine flow of energy.

Indeed, as the verse from the Upanishad says, the space within is inextricably connected with the space outside. The idea that god is a symbol of society, and that religion is a way of worshipping society, seems plausible when considering the excellent match between Vedanta and global society. If while worshipping, we could remind ourselves that we

pray to those very people and situations that seem to be hindering our achievement, then every mundane action and conversation could become sacred. The man who blocks my view of the idol at the temple no longer seems an obstruction, but a vital part of the idea that I worship: society.

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