



Vedic Heritage and Global Culture

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I consider it a special privilege to be invited to address the delegates of World Congress of Vedic Studies. I wish to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation and thanks to professor Vasu and the members of the Organizing Committee of this Congress for the opportunity to share some of my ideas with you.

In my brief presentation this morning, let me share with you the profound significance of Vedic heritage in Indian culture as well as the importance of this heritage for the emerging global culture. Specially, I wish to bring the following points to your consideration: i. that the Vedic heritage is an essential part of human spiritual and cultural heritage; ii. that this heritage views self-realization as the birth right of all humans; iii. that it emphasizes enquiry into Truth as the foundation of spiritual life; iv. that it deals with the problems and potentialities of human life, mind and nature; and v. that this heritage seeks transformation and fulfillment of life through appropriate disciplines of knowledge, action, devotion, and raja yoga.

Some decades ago, people in the West knew practically nothing about yoga; today yoga has become a commonly used English word, and has found a place in the Webster's Dictionary. We see an increasing trend in North America to practice yogic postures and breathing exercises for holistic health and happiness. From coast to coast, from North to South, in cities and towns, yoga classes are conducted regularly. Millions of people practice yoga for and fitness of body and mind. Similarly, many considered the idea of reincarnation as ridiculous some time ago. Now, it is accepted by a good number of Americans and Europeans as a reasonable explanation of many facts and happenings; in their lives. In those days, practically nobody spoke about or practiced meditation. Now millions of Americans practice some type of meditation regularly. Rarely had any American heard about Ayurveda then, but today, it has become an alternative system of medicine that blends physical well-being with moral and spiritual values. Many see in it: herbal remedies for sicknesses, without side effects.

Vedic tradition is sanatana dharma; it is to be clearly understood that it is not a founded or exclusive religion. There is no single person, whose life and ministry started it; there are many seers and sages who have contributed to the tradition, but none of them is regarded as its founder. It has no beginning in history; no single historical event marks its birth. Actually, Truth has no beginning and no end; that is why it is called *sanatana dharma*, eternal religion. Vedic tradition is not creedal; there is no creed, to which all the Hindus have to subscribe. It is a tradition that emphasizes experience and realization. Nor is not a missionary religion; it has no missionary movement or history. It is not a dogmatic tradition; its spirit of enquiry and its cherished ideal of freedom are opposed to dogmatism. It is not an ecclesiastical religion either. There is no organized church body connected with it. Although there is a place in the tradition for congregational



worship practices, the Hindu community, as a whole, does not belong to any church nor does it accept any ecclesiastical head as the sole spokes-person for the whole community.

Essentially, Vedic heritage is a way of life geared to the search for Truth; it not founded on beliefs. It is based on the knowledge of the underlying truths of the universe. The tradition focuses on the conditions and goals of life. To know how to live one's life is the real knowledge. There are many paths, philosophies and spiritual practices, which can lead one to the highest human goal. The law of life and development is called dharma. Sources of dharma lie in the Vedas. Vedic knowledge gives guidance in the art of life.

Traditionally called *sanatana dharma* or *eternal religion*, it is as ancient as human civilization itself; but it is also very contemporary. Neither the term Hinduism nor the word religion can adequately communicate the connotation of *dharma*. However, since nearly a billion people call themselves Hindus, and another two billion refer to them as Hindus, there is no point in arguing over terminology. We use the term any way, but give it our own meaning. In other words, Hinduism for Hindus means Vedic heritage or *sanatana dharma*.

The questions that the Vedic heritage has raised about life and living, in a genuine spirit of enquiry, and the answers it has offered, are assuming a universal and practical significance: What is the nature of the highest reality? Whence are all these things, animate and inanimate, born? How are all beings supported and preserved? What is the meaning of death? What is the state of being after death? What are the chief causes of happiness and misery? Hindu sages thought deeply on these matters and gave their profound insights to humanity. They are relevant to our lives and thinking even today. The desire to know, to love, to be happy, and to avoid misery as well as the desire to seek spiritual fulfillment, are human concerns. One does not have to change one's religious label to derive benefit from these insights. Freedom to benefit from whatever is true and beautiful and good, wherever it is found, is great. Very happily, that is the Vedic approach, and it points to the future trend. This long, rich and uninterrupted living Vedic tradition is dynamic and flexible; it adjusts to the needs of time and circumstances, and yet the basic principles have been the same, since time immemorial. Whatever sphere of the human mind and spirit one selects for study, one has to look to this tradition, because some of the most insightful materials in the history of the human kind are preserved in this heritage. In ancient times, Hindus bestowed many practical gifts on the world, including rice, cotton, sugarcane, many spices, the game of chess, and not least Hindu numerals and the decimal system. But the Vedic tradition's greatest influence on the world is in the area of spirituality. The insights and values of this heritage in the fields of yoga, meditation, reincarnation, astronomy, astrology, and spiritual disciplines have all been and are being sought by people across national and religious borders; they have contributed to human fulfillment and enrichment of culture and civilization.

Since times immemorial, Western thinkers, have been interested in India's material, cultural and spiritual riches. Early Greek philosophers started it. Modern British, French and German thinkers have continued it. Five hun-

dred years ago, Columbus went in search of India. He missed it. He landed in America. Now America has expanded this interest. The Theosophical society started in New York by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott have brought many Hindu books to the English reading public.

A significant spiritual movement that cuts across the boundaries of established religions has started since the late nineteenth century. Vedic tradition has been a major influence in this promising development. Emerson who helped greatly, in the development of the American outlook, has drawn attention to the significance of Hindu thought, and recommended the youth of that country to read "Hindu books" Other influential leaders, who have derived inspiration from the "Hindu books" have been Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, etc.

There are a number of themes which are extraordinarily contemporary, but were explored by Vedic sages thousands of years ago. Because of shortness of time this morning, I shall just touch upon a few themes that are profoundly significant, meaningful and relevant to the twenty-first century: i) the need to study the inner world as much as the external world; ii) the need to recognize the great world religions as valid paths to Truth, as per the Vedic teaching: "Truth is one and paths are many"; iii) to appreciate the feminine and masculine principles and symbols as complementary in the understanding of the human society as well as in the worship of the Divine; iv) to note that yoga and meditation are cardinal spiritual disciplines, and v) the meaningfulness of the theory of reincarnation in providing answers to many questions of life.

1. Truth is sought in two ways: by studying the facts of the external world and by seeking to understand the deeper truths of the inner world. The scientific outlook is also needed in this inner study of the nature of life, its meaning and purpose. Science is derived from the Latin word *Scientia*, which means "to know", and *Veda*, from the Sanskrit root *Vid* (to know), means knowledge. Science relates to empirical knowledge alone. But experience is not limited to sense knowledge. Veda relates to both empirical and transcendent knowledge. Empirical sciences are quantitative; they do not speak to our inner experiences of love and suffering. They do not teach us how to live and what to live for. Empirical sciences cannot make us virtuous. They do not deal with life and death, sin and evil.

These sciences do not have much to say about music, faith, devotion and God, which are all dimensions of Truth. Progress in sciences in the nineteenth century yielded vast power and higher standards of material life for some countries. Those scientists thought that science had answers to everything. But the present day seers realize the limitations of science. They see that we live in a "universe", and knowledge about it must be unified. Facts of inner life have to be explored with a scientific outlook and with appropriate methodology. Actually, a scientist cannot be a true saint, if he is not saint, i.e. if he does not use his knowledge and technology for the good of humankind. A saint cannot be a true saint, if he is not a scientist i.e. if he has not given up all prejudices and partialities in the service of all peoples. In Hinduism, both these have been combined in the life of a



rishi, who not only extends the horizon of knowledge, but also uses such knowledge for the good of human kind.

In recent years, more and more scientists are discovering striking similarities between Hindu thought and modern scientific thinking. It is fascinating that affirmations of Vedic texts find conformity with modern science in matters of cosmology, astronomy, causality, conception of time, structure of the universe, the theory of evolution, the doctrine of karma, and the medical science of Ayurveda. Some scientists are turning towards the East, especially to Hindu treatises, to adequately describe many macroscopic and microscopic phenomena. Dr. Carl Segan has said: "the Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the cosmos itself undergoes all immense number of births and rebirths. It is the only religion in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology".

Vedic tradition duly acknowledges the importance of the physical and material world, but recognizes that physical sciences are not the only means of knowledge. Psychic and spiritual planes of life reveal phenomena such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, telepathy, mind reading and other Para-psychological matters. Scientific and technological development should not make us blind to the realities of the mind and spirit. Life's highest aim can be realized only when it is understood in its totality, not only in its external aspects but also in its inner spiritual life. Both are necessary and complementary, and they must be harmonized for a life of fulfillment.

2. The aim of Vedic sages has been to illumine faith in its various forms, and consolidate values, and not to condemn or destroy any particular form of faith or worship. Hinduism has practiced an approach of harmony (*samanvaya*) and reconciliation (*samadhana*) towards different sects within and outside the tradition. Truth is one, and paths are many.

Great religions of the world, each in its own sphere, have sustained the arts and minds of millions of people down the ages. Each of them has a message and individuality; each has also presented solutions to life's problems in its own way. But all the prophets of great religions teach adherence to certain human and spiritual values. The different religious traditions emphasize different facets of infinite Truth, according to the needs and genius of the respective peoples and the requirements of society. One may have a preference for a certain framework within which one chooses to live and act. But truthfulness is the most important corner stone of the edifice of a religious life. Truth is Supreme Reality, Supreme Value. The way to Truth is through love or non-violence. Non-violence is not only a means to Truth, but it is also a part of Truth.

History demonstrates that religious and sectarian rivalry overpowers the concern for Truth, and finds satisfaction in fighting to establish dogmas. Multiplication of sects is fine, but sectarianism is wrong. It leads to one-sidedness, defensive distortions, and hatred of others. The world has suffered and is suffering too much, because of the wars fought in the name of religion. An attitude of intolerance cannot bring peace and happiness to the individual or society at large. Exclusivism locks out the peoples of other faiths. Further, partiality to particular dogmas and creeds becomes a hindrance

in the search for Truth and spiritual freedom. Never has the Vedic tradition claimed to be the sole repository of Truth in the world. It values other traditions. As an open religion, it has assimilated insights from other faiths. Nowhere in the vast literature of Hinduism is it written that only Hindus are eligible for salvation. Its vision reveals one world, one humanity, but many households of faith. Religious pluralism is held to be not only valid, but also necessary. Vedic tradition invokes the blessings of life on all, not on Hindus only. The term "all" includes human and sub-human worlds as well as the world of Nature. "Let all be happy; healthy and blessed" is part of the daily prayer of Hindus. Indeed, Hinduism encourages all peoples to celebrate each other's ways of God-realization.

Each religion is unique to its followers, as each mother is unique to her children. One does not have to deny or ignore one's neighbor's mother, in order to maintain loyalty to one's own. Theologies of the twentieth century will have to wrestle with the issue of expansion of ecumenism to include all world religions. Vedic heritage has much to contribute to the healing of our religiously divided world, and to the emerging global culture.

3. Hindu worship God both in masculine and feminine images and symbols. This practice is not peripheral, but is in the main stream of Hinduism. It points to the importance of the role of the feminine in the biological, psychological and cosmic levels. Woman is the custodian of humankind. She nourishes and cherishes life. Mother is a visible form of God. She is the manifestation of the Divine. Without her, man is helpless. Even religious rites cannot be performed without her. The wealth and welfare of the home and of society are in the keeping of woman. So woman must be well protected and respected.

Men and women are not adversaries, much less enemies. Husband and wife are compared to the two wheels of a cart. Masculinity and femininity are integral in each person. Even genetically, every person receives equal contributions both from the mother as well as the father. The attitude of confrontation and one-sided self-assertion to the neglect of the interdependent nature of human sexuality has been responsible, to a great extent, for the disruption of the human family and for the exploitation of women in society. Frequently, undue emphasis is given in certain traditions to masculine symbolism and male religious experience. But strong movements are underway now to look upon God as woman or at least to use gender-free language in theology. In the Hindu perspective, male and female, or Siva and Sakti principles, are two aspects of infinite consciousness. Their union leads to transcendent consciousness. We may expect that in the 21st century, these movements to become even stronger and to show increasing interest in the Hindu Devi. Fulfillment of human sexuality requires us to go beyond the physical dimension, though it is a necessary aspect. Ethics and spirituality are human goals, and so are economic security and aesthetic enjoyment. Human sexuality cannot find fulfillment in isolation from these other goals. Vedic insights, values and practices can help in the rehabilitation of the institution of marriage and family. In *Devi Sukta*, Sakti, the feminine principle, is recognized as the embodiment of the dynamic energy underlying the entire universe. She is the sym-



bol of power and auspiciousness. *Parasakti* is equated with Brahman, the ultimate reality. She performs cosmic functions of creation, preservation and dissolution. The concept of *ardhanarisvara*, God as half male and half female, is one of the grandest expressions of the equality of the sexes. Here also, Hindu contributions might bring a degree of balance and harmony in the field of gender relations.

4. Veda, Vedanta and Yoga lay emphasis on practice. It is not enough to know theoretical answers to questions or to believe in those answers. The adoption of experimental procedures in the exploration of the truths of life is most important. Actions make truths *come alive*. For example, the study of books on swimming will *not* make us excellent swimmers. Knowledge has to be put into action; one has to walk a path and practice the precepts. Only then does life become disciplined, resulting in the transformation of one's personality. Yoga and meditation (*dhyana*) are completely experimental in character. They do *not* ask us to believe in this or that statement; nor do they prevent us from raising questions. In fact, they encourage the questioning attitude. But when the experiments begin to yield results, conviction spontaneously follows. It is this experimental dimension that brings authenticity to the affirmations in the tradition. In the area of the integration of knowledge and experience or technology of consciousness, Hindu heritage has much to contribute in the new millennium.

Yoga is a spiritual science; it is an important part of the Vedic heritage. It has developed methods for the objective exploration of inner life. It has arrived at results capable of verification, modification repetition and expansion. Yoga has tilled the 'soil of psychology' and yielded a wealth of psychological and spiritual knowledge. But there is no end to experimentation. Yoga is *not* a closed book. There is no last word. The yogis are adding to the knowledge by their experiments even in our times. They demonstrate that a certain practice leads to a certain result. Hindu tradition is a process of yogic development that demonstrates that spirituality is scientific. It is progressive. It is a matter of knowledge, *not* an attitude. The higher and higher one ascends, in yoga, the newer and newer peaks of knowledge become visible in experience. In our own age, the yogic science has to incorporate new results in the accumulated knowledge and relate them to new conditions of society. Yogic practices are psychophysical in nature; they can be practiced by the follower of any religious tradition or by one who does not follow any established religion. Yogic techniques have helped spiritual aspirants across religious barriers. Many Americans have testified that their own dormant faith has come alive as a consequence of yogic practices.

5 Reincarnation is one of the fundamental Vedic insights of life relating to the deeper dimensions of human personality. Hindu understanding of the structures and functions of the inner world is the result of prolonged inner investigation, experimentation and intuitive realization of many sages and seekers over thousands of years. A human being is essentially a spiritual being, a soul and not a material accident. A soul is not created; it is eternal. The physical body of a person degenerates and dies, but the soul is imperishable. At death, a soul is disassociated from the gross body. Death closes one chapter in the book of one's life, and birth opens a

new one. Each human soul goes through a series of reincarnations reaping the fruits of thoughts, words and actions done in the present and past lives. The mind and its faculties constitute the subtle body, the essence of individuality. Mind is the carrier of the soul from one body into another. It continues to accompany the soul, until it is released from bondage. In other words, survival and reincarnation are not the goals of life; they are the facts of inner life. Spiritual freedom (moksha) is the goal.

The Theory of reincarnation is closely related to the law of cause and effect, karma; it emphasizes the principle of moral causality. Not only does a person reap what he or she sows, but what one is reaping is the result of what one has already sown. The human person is the maker of his or her destiny. Actions in the present determine the future. Every thought, every act produces its effect on the outer world, but it also affects the performer's inner character. All actions bring results. If the results are not enjoyed or suffered in this life, they have to be gone through in the next. God in his mercy gives us opportunities to fulfill our various desires in various lives, until we understand the futility of all selfish and material desires and concentrate on the one goal of union with God. Bad karma regresses one into lower forms of life. The cause and effect relationship of a person's actions in life carry over from one birth to the next, until one obtains liberation, which is absolute freedom from Karmic bondage and sorrow. Each reincarnation is an opportunity to make a little more spiritual progress. By exercising one's freedom properly, one is able to gradually diminish and finally eliminate the bondage of Karma, and attain liberation. The present day interest in the subject in philosophical, religious and popular circles in the West points to its cross cultural relevance and importance.

In recent years, many persons in North America and Europe have come to accept reincarnation as a valid and meaningful phenomenon. God is love. He wishes that no one should be lost. An errant child is given enough opportunities to correct his mistakes. As per Vedic heritage, spiritual liberation is obtained through many lifetimes. Each lifetime is a God-given opportunity for further spiritual progress. According to a recent Gallup poll, 25% of North Americans and Europeans accept reincarnation as a tenable explanation of many things in life, and their number is increasing.

Hinduism gives a great deal of attention to the present life. It answers the frequently asked question: what should I do now? No matter where one is, or what his spiritual or religious background is, certain duties must be performed. As the *Bhagavadgita* says, attempts towards self-control (*tapas*), sacrifice (*yajna*), giving (*dana*) and union with God (*yoga*) should never be given up; their performance is obligatory. The discipline of self-control (*tapas*) requires that the health of the body should be maintained; each person must, therefore, satisfy his basic physical needs such as hunger and thirst to sustain life. Bodily health is the first requirement for observing *dharma*. A weakling cannot realize the highest Truth. The physical body has to be kept in a fit condition to serve others and oneself. Therefore, eating right and exercising regularly are duties; they are necessary activities to maintain one's health.



The duty of sacrifice (*yajna*) preserves the natural world and its resources; it promises all forms of life. Each person lives in a physical environment, and uses the life sustaining elements such as air, water, earth, fire, etc. They must not be polluted. They must be cared for: river waters and lakes are to be cleaned, air is to be purified, forests and mountains are to be protected, and erosion of land is to be arrested. This effort to clean the environment is called *yajna*, by which life-sustaining elements are protected and promoted.

The duty of giving (*dana*) creates and preserves the interconnected web of relationships. Society contributes to the richness of economic, social, political, educational and cultural life. We are indebted to our parents, teachers, and to schools and libraries, builders of buildings and bridges, etc. We can never fully discharge our debt to society. So as a token of appreciation for the many blessings received, we must give something back to the society, and that is called *dana*, giving; and it is a duty.

And the duty of the individual spirit is to join the universal spirit (*Yoga*). Each person is a fragment of Truth, and he or she must find fulfillment in the infinite truth. Yoking the individual spirit to the universal spirit is *yoga*. One must open one's mind and heart to the currents of the infinite truth. A Closed mind is the cause of bondage, but through an open mind, Truth is realized. Forgetfulness of Truth or God is a misfortune in life, and remembrance of God is fortune. The realization of infinite Truth releases the purest form of love and fellow feeling; the realized person loves all creatures.

Before I close, I must make an important observation. In the course of its long history, some questionable practices and some historical accretions have crept into the tradition. They exist side by side with profound creative ideas, values and practices. Separating the chaff from the wheat is a big task. The elements that have lost value in the context of new times must be discarded. Distortions have to be set right. Bridges are to be built between nations, races and religions. Humanity is to be reconciled. A new world is to be fashioned. These challenges are to be met. Valuable things in our tradition and culture are to be retained and cultivated and negative accretions are to be rejected. The need is to do the right thing in the right way.

History poses challenges, and if we state our old principles in new ways, it is not because we will do so, but because we must. Such a restatement of truths of eternity in the accents of our times is the most viable way in which a great tradition can be of living value to humanity. If the world is to be turned into a human, harmonious, and happy place to live, Vedic insights and values have a substantial role to play in the emerging global culture in the third millennium.