

THE APPLICATION OF YOGA AND VEDANTIC NON-DUAL PHILOSOPHY TO INTER-CULTURAL INTERACTION

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I analyze the Indian non-dual philosophical perspective and discuss its ramifications for inter-cultural dynamics. On the basis of the yogic framework as presented in the text *Yoga Sūtra* and the works of Śaṅkara, who has been a key figure of the school of Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta, I derive implications that bear upon the self-other relationship in the contexts of both a tourist and an academic scholar interacting with another culture. I show that the yogic and the Vedantic ideas would serve to enhance the sensitivity of a tourist towards that culture, and at the academic level would allow for a study free of epistemic violence and for a nuanced apprehension of a culture or a particular facet of the culture.

The non-dual philosophy emphasizes a participatory relationship between the subject and object or the self and the other (Alston, 2004, vol.1). The participatory mode can be understood as the attunement of self-awareness with the subjective space of the other or with the essential character of the object. Participatory interaction is of critical importance in a fruitful inter-cultural dialogue. When the subject remains enclosed within his own ego space, he will either falsely appropriate the other or fail to constructively connect with the other. Hans Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons speaks of the importance of self-understanding in the self-other dialogue (2004). A profound dialogue happens in a sphere of enlarged self-awareness that transcends the strict subject-object duality between oneself and the other.

The feasibility of enacting participatory knowing to a high degree of attunement with the known emerges from the Vedantic analysis of subjectivity. Vedanta recognizes a particularized consciousness as the ego self, but also locates a level of undifferentiated or formless consciousness that is common to all. The undifferentiated consciousness is expressed, though not completely exhausted, in the indubitable and immediate awareness – “I am” awareness – that

I have about the reality of my own existence.¹ The level of undifferentiated consciousness actualizes the possibility of achieving non-dual relations with different sets of object and of assimilating modes of understanding beyond what one currently possesses. Thus the Vedantic framework presents self-consciousness as highly fluid with multiple possibilities of being, and envisions the relationship between persons in terms of identity and difference.

I argue that the notion of self limited to ego subjectivity is susceptible to generating misunderstandings and power dynamics in inter-cultural relations. As Martin Heidegger's analysis of modernity indicates, when the ego subjectivity is elevated to the state of highest being, the self comes to prioritize its own outlook (Levin, 1987, p. 21-67). A tourist functioning with ego mentality will interpret his interactions with a different culture largely on the basis of his own particular structure of thinking and being, or will be struck by what appears as “exotic,” or simply acknowledge the fact of difference in behavior but without any real appreciation of the viewpoint of the other. Moreover, the ego view of the self is directly tied to the discursive mode of knowing which is dominantly employed in the mainstream academia. In the discursive mode, the knower is existentially removed from the object of study. A researcher, by withholding entering the participatory non-dual space, misses comprehending the full character of the outlook presented by the other. When the analysis is circumscribed to the discursive constructions of the researcher, this not only gives a distorted view of a culture but places the other in a subordinate position. In contrast, since the participatory knowing entails conscious unity with the interiority of the other, the comportment of receptivity is built into it (Mehta, 2012).

¹ The purpose of the meditational practices of the *Yoga Sūtra* is to lead to the realization of the undifferentiated consciousness in its full scope. See Raphael, 2012.

Next I show that the two principles – that of non-attachment and being a witness – which are of great importance in the yogic practice play a vital role in fostering openness and objectivity in one’s interaction with the other. Non-attachment implies seeing beyond one’s ego enclosed horizon; it means refraining from regarding one’s own preferences and views with finality. It frees oneself from interpreting the other through the lens of one’s own mental disposition and outlook. The philosopher Ernst Schumacher in the context of inter-personal encounters makes a penetrating remark. He points that we have a tendency to “see ourselves primarily in the light of our intentions, which are invisible to others, while we see others mainly in the light of their actions, which are visible to us” (1977, p. 82-5). Being a witness allows us to realize the manner in which misunderstandings are generated due to our assessment of others based on external behavior. The misconceptions become even more acute when interacting with a culture that shares a different worldview from that of the subject. The principle of witness forewarns a person to suspend drawing conclusions without a careful engagement with the interior space of the other.

The Vedantic philosophy recognizes that human self could oscillate at many different levels of being. Such a view makes the subject aware that even within a particular culture a diverse range of existential approaches could be enacted by its people. The Vedantic understanding helps to forestall the error of overgeneralization. Amongst tourists there is often a tendency to extrapolate what one has perceived in one’s limited exposure to a culture to the entire culture. The anthropological studies could be affected by a similar problem if a researcher is focused on a particular aspect of a culture and does not possess sufficient familiarity with that culture to see how that aspect relates to the whole of the culture.

Lastly, I explore the consequences of the perspective of identity and difference that emerges from the Vedantic view of self. At the backdrop of this perspective, one would come to regard different cultures as different manifestations of being. This would facilitate an inclusive outlook and open-minded appreciation of the positive contributions of different cultures. Even in the face of the presence of truly unwholesome state of affairs in another culture, the consciousness of identity and difference would not only evoke feelings of compassion but would also give patience to a person to discover something of positive worth in that culture and dissuade him to view the culture in stark negative terms. The sense of relatedness brought about by the perspective of identity and difference would attenuate competition and conflict, and generate the spirit of sympathy and cooperation towards other cultures.

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