

SPIRITON

The Fundamental Particle of Life

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Vedantic Perspectives of Consciousness



Having discussed the limitations that exist in understanding consciousness via the modern scientific paradigm as presented in the previous issue, this issue focuses on the Vedantic perspective of consciousness. But for a scientist, trained in the rigors

of modern science, hearing a term like the 'Vedantic perspective of consciousness' may seem unscientific or even culturally indoctrinated as Vedanta comes from the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit. However, putting aside the cultural connotations, or whatever biases that may be present, we will comprehend that there is nothing unscientific about the term.

previously set down the fundamentals from which we attempt to pursue the field of study. It would be ludicrous for every scientist to reinvent or rediscover the findings of previous scientists!

How can we know if the knowledge received from the Vedantic literatures in the form of shabda, is right? This is where the rigors of the scientific method come in place. In scientific research, faith in the findings from previous scientists is maintained as long as the results are reproducible and follow a said pattern or

Quote



Niels Bohr
(1885-1962)

Vedanta comes from the root word, Veda, which refers to the entire ocean of knowledge, in every field. With the suffix -anta, Vedanta refers to the end of knowledge, or more appropriately, the conclusion of all knowledge. The teachings of the Vedanta do not disregard science or the scientific pursuit via the scientific method. Rather, it acknowledges the scientific method as a system to receive knowledge. However, it also cautions that knowledge gathering via sense perception and inference alone, as in the scientific method, is not sufficient to gather all types of knowledge.

As we have seen in the previous issue, though many renowned scientists, over the last few decades, have been in pursuit of understanding consciousness, they admittedly accept that they are unable to. The origin of life, the origin of the universe, death, etc, all seem beyond the realm of our sense perception and are thus inaccessible to us, if we were to understand them strictly via the scientific method. The Vedanta thus proposes that there is another system of knowledge gathering which complements the scientific method. Addressed as shabda in the Sanskrit language, this is based on the acceptance of knowledge from higher sources. This is akin to accepting knowledge from former scientists who had

"The teachings of the Vedanta do not disregard science or the scientific pursuit via the scientific method. Rather, it acknowledges the scientific method as a system to receive knowledge. However, it also cautions that knowledge gathering via sense perception and inference alone, as in the scientific method, is not sufficient to gather all types of knowledge."

mechanism. Previous experiments are not repeated before the knowledge is used or taken further. Similarly, one method to test the acceptability of Vedantic knowledge is to utilize it as a basis or a foundation to further derive knowledge. If it were accurate, depending on what is being studied, there should be reproducibility and/or the continuation of certain patterns. This will give us the faith that it is truly coming from a higher source and is something we can use to further scientific knowledge.

By Dr. V. Krishnan-Kutty

"We can admittedly find nothing in physics or chemistry that has even a remote bearing on consciousness. Yet all of us know that there is such a thing as consciousness, simply because we have it ourselves. Hence consciousness must be part of nature, or more generally, of reality, which means that, quite apart from the laws of physics and chemistry, as laid down in quantum theory, we must also consider laws of quite a different nature."





VEDANTIC MODEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS

By Dr. T.D. Singh

According to Vedanta, consciousness is the living energy and the fundamental quality of the life particle (spiriton), and it is purely spiritual. There are two categories of consciousness: universal and individual. The Supreme Being is conscious of everything in the universe whereas the living entities are conscious of only themselves. The ontological nature of consciousness is non-physical. The Sankhya Darshan portion of the Srimad Bhagavatam (Canto 3, Chapter 26) explains that jiva, life, is characterized by the presence of a quantum of consciousness (spiriton) and it remains in a separate domain. It is the source of all our knowledge and experience.

Furthermore, Vedanta describes matter as the field of activity and by its nature, matter is inert and has no con-

False consciousness is exhibited under the impression that 'I am a product of material nature'

sciousness. But there is interaction between the individual particle of consciousness and matter through universal consciousness. Moreover, the natural events that are taking place in the material world are maps of the events occurring in the spiritual plane (consciousness).

About four centuries ago, the famous French philosopher Rena Descartes concluded that he knew one thing for certain: "I think, therefore I am."ⁱ From the Vedantic point of view, the

expression, 'I am' is the conscious experience and inherent transcendental property of the self. Thousands of years before Descartes, the sages of the Vedic tradition realized the principle even a step further, aham brahmasmi, meaning, I am Brahman, I am spirit, conscious self. This is consciousness for which the Sanskrit word is cetana. The act of thinking by a human being is the symptom of consciousness and it belongs to life. False consciousness is exhibited under the impression that 'I am a product of material nature'.

Many brilliant scientists of the twentieth century also agreed that consciousness could not be explained in terms of the material paradigm. Niels Bohr expressed, "We can admittedly find nothing in physics or chemistry that has even a remote bearing on consciousness. Yet all of us know that there is such a thing as consciousness, simply because we have it ourselves. Hence consciousness must be part of nature, or more generally, of reality, which means that, quite apart from the laws of physics and chemistry, as laid down in quantum theory, we must also consider laws of quite a different nature."ⁱⁱ Similarly, the well known British scientist Michael Polanyi argued, "...once it is recognized, on other grounds, that life transcends physics and chemistry, there is no reason for suspending recognition of the obvious fact that consciousness is a principle that fundamentally transcends not only physics and chemistry but also the mechanistic principles of living beings."ⁱⁱⁱ

Vedanta describes that consciousness is beyond the mind and the brain and gives the following hierarchy (Figure 1) (Bhagavad Gita 3.42):

*indriyāṇi parāṇy āhur
indriyebhyaḥ paraṁ manaḥ
manasas tu parā buddhir
yo buddheḥ paratas tu saḥ*

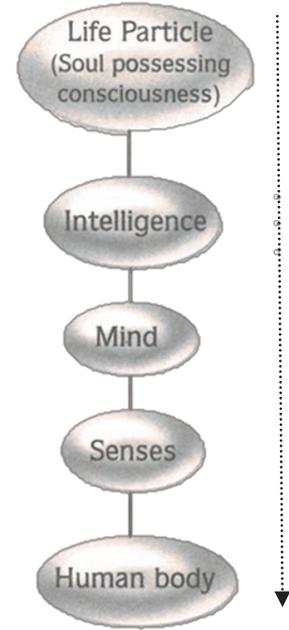


Figure 1: Vedantic Hierarchy of Human Body, Senses, Mind, Intelligence,

Translation: "The working senses are superior to dull matter, mind is higher than the senses, intelligence is still higher than the mind, and he [the soul or spiriton] is even higher than the intelligence."

The interaction of consciousness with intelligence, mind, and senses is described in the Katha Upanisad (1.3.3-4) as a chariot imagery as follows:

*ātmanāṁ rathināṁ viddhi
śarīraṁ ratham eva ca
buddhiṁ tu sārathīṁ viddhi
manaḥ pragrahaṁ eva ca*

*indriyāṇi hayān āhur
viśayāṁs teṣu gocarān
ātmendriya-mano-yuktān
bhoktety āhur manīṣiṇaḥ*

The individual is the passenger in the chariot of the material body, and intelligence is the driver.

Continued on page 3...

... Continued from page 2

Mind is the driving instrument and the senses are the horses. The self is thus the enjoyer or sufferer in the association of the mind and senses. So, it is understood by great thinkers.”

The chariot imagery is depicted in figure 2. The individual consciousness or the life particle is compared to the passenger because he is the chief occupant and thus enjoyer or sufferer of the journey. The horses indicate the senses that always drag the chariot of the human body to the objects of the senses. Intelligence is compared to the driver because the driver employs

necessary discrimination for a successful and comfortable journey. Reins are compared to the mind because they are directly connected to the horses (senses) and are guided by the driver (intelligence).

An able driver (intelligence) takes control of the reins (mind) connected to the horses (senses) to properly guide the chariot towards its destination by discrimination. In this way, the passenger or the soul can reach the desired destination by proper use of all the faculties. On the other hand, if any of the faculties are not controlled and coordinated properly in the hierarchy, sooner or later there may be an accident.

Adapted from - Consciousness: Scientific & Vedantic Perspectives. Chapter 4.^A

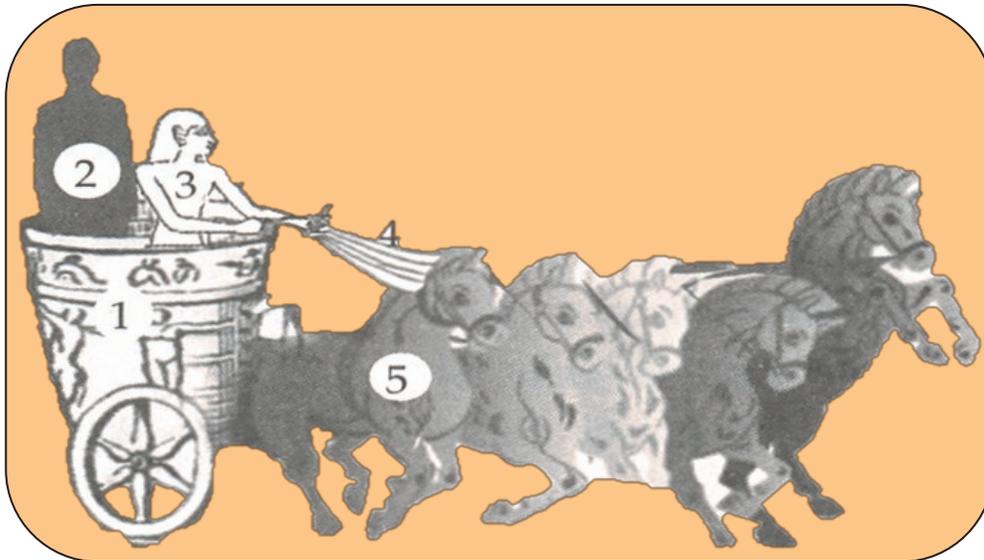
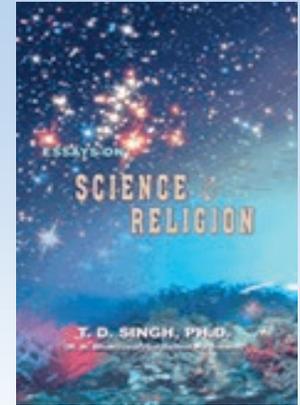


Figure 2: Chariot Model (from the Katha Upanisad) of the interaction of consciousness with the human body: Senses, Mind, and Intelligence.

1. Chariot \Leftrightarrow Human body
2. Passenger \Leftrightarrow Spiriton or Life Particle or Consciousness
3. Driver \Leftrightarrow Intelligence
4. Reins \Leftrightarrow Mind
5. Horses \Leftrightarrow Senses (Eyes, Ears, Nose, Tongue and Skin)

ESSAYS ON SCIENCE AND RELIGION



Science and religion are the two most dominant forces of humanity in the search for the ultimate meaning of life and the universe. Are these two forces reconcilable? If yes, what are the possible grounds for their synthesis? Could the recent developments in science and technology about human nature and the cosmos enable us to explore religious wisdom in new ways? In pivotal times like ours, what role could the science and religion dialogue play in restoring world peace? Moreover, what implications would this dialogue have on our future scientific researches? Reflecting on some of these profound issues, Dr. T. D. Singh (His Holiness Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami) presents in this volume four groundbreaking essays on science and religion, providing useful insights about the relationship between science and religion in our continuing quest for the deeper understanding of life and the universe.

next
issue...



FAITH

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE VEDANTIC MODEL AND PRESENT-DAY MODEL

Some of the salient features of the Vedantic model of consciousness and its comparison with the scientific model are given below:

⇒ Vedantic model considers consciousness to be non-material. However, modern science has been primarily trying to understand consciousness through the physical and the biological domain. Hence, according to the Vedantic paradigm, consciousness lies beyond the scope of modern science.

⇒ From the Vedantic perspective, life is everywhere and evolution is defined as the journey of the innumerable conscious particles of life (soul) in time and space as they travel from one form of body to another under the law of karma.^{iv} This is shown in Figure 2. Scientific studies on consciousness have thrown open the possibility for consciousness to be an intrinsic part of all the living beings including plants^v and animals^{vi}. This stands in good agreement with the Vedantic postulate that consciousness pervades in all the living beings although in different degrees.

⇒ Since the degree of consciousness varies as shown in Figure 3, individual experiences vary according to the type of body of a living being. This is in good agreement with Hagel^{vii} who concluded that subjective experiences are known only to the subject and not to others.

⇒ The Vedantic model of consciousness recognizes a strong link between the mind and the body. The strong link between the body and the mind has also been recognized by modern medicine wherein research efforts are being directed towards the treatment of psychosomatic disorders.^{viii} In an interesting study^{ix} done in 2010 on a vegetative state patient, it was shown that that a person was able to respond in Yes or No fashion for six questions posed on his/her autobiography. The fMRI scan for Yes/No perfectly matched with correct answers from parents and

⇒ As per the Vedantic paradigm, consciousness continues to evolve stepwise and in a linear way which is opposed to the Darwinian model of evolution wherein the species evolve continually based on the theory of natural selection.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of consciousness is the unsolved mystery of modern science and philosophy. There are many theories for consciousness and none of them can actually conceptualize all features of consciousness. Slowly, scientists are opening up to the fact that consciousness, which is the fundamental property of life, may be more than just mere computation happening in the brain and may well lie beyond the scope of space and time.

Consciousness study has long been a part of spiritual wisdom. In the ancient literatures of India such as Srimad Bhagavatam, the topic of consciousness has been treated as a central issue. Vedanta presents a transcendental origin of consciousness. Many postulates of Vedanta on consciousness have some kind of scientific agreement. Plants and animals also have some kind of intelligence. The scientific community therefore needs to broaden their understanding of consciousness. Also, in search for a deeper understanding of life and consciousness, the inclusion of spirituality within the scientific research works can become a significant factor.

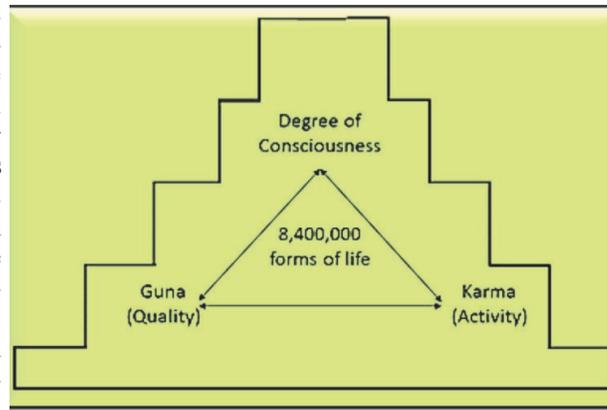


Figure 3: Each living entity's degree or level of consciousness, guna (quality) and karma (activity) will determine the direction of his evolutionary path.

relatives. This experiment can be considered as a scientific basis for the existence of internal senses such as the mind.

By Dr. Nikhil Bhat



References and Further Readings

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CONTACT US

For enquiries & monthly subscriptions

spiritonnews@gmail.com

