

The vision of oneness

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In general, developing a sense of oneness is considered to be the hallmark of high thinking. *Vasudaiva kuṭumbakam* is the maxim for our living as laid out by our ancestors. While we were all young and growing our elders did talk about this idea of oneness. They taught us how to share what we have with others around and help others when they were in difficulty. This was an idea which made one feel good but it was not clear what exactly this oneness meant. Over time as we grew older this faded into the background only to be replaced by new values to face the fierce competition. For many of us, especially in big cities, the “dog-eat-the dog” culture seems to govern our daily living.

What then is this ado about oneness? This question is especially important since our entire *vedantic* discussion promotes the concept of oneness. In fact the *advaita* philosophy proclaims that *Jiva* (An individual), *Jagat* (The Universe) and *Ísvara* (The God) are nothing but one and the same.

Variety is the essence of Divinity

The wonderful aspect of the Divine creation is that there is a huge variety in the flora and the fauna. According to a 2011 census, eight million, seven hundred and four thousand species share this planet, give or take 1.3 million. However, bacteria and other simple organisms were excluded from the count. The study also reported that eighty-six percent of all land-dwelling species and 91 percent in the water have yet to be discovered and catalogued by science. Therefore the variety that we know of, see and experience in our daily life is nothing but the tip of the ice-berg. Even if we take one species called mankind, we find there are about 7 billion people in the world and each one of them is different from the other. They speak different languages, share different cultural practices and live in different ways. Even within a family, we find siblings are different from one another in terms of physical appearance, psychological make-up and priorities and preferences in life.

Given such a vast variety in living species, what do we understand by the term oneness? We shall first look at one *śloka* in Chapter 5 of *Bhagavad Gītā*, where Shri Krishna has introduced the idea of oneness and then try to understand the practical implications of this idea.

The perspective of oneness

Lord Krishna explains that the learned and the men of wisdom (*paṇḍitāḥ*) view many different variations that they see around them with the vision of oneness (*sama-darśinaḥ*). Since it is difficult to enumerate the entire list He suggests a few examples. For instance, Lord Krishna says that men of wisdom see in persons with humility endowed on them on account of the knowledge that they have received (*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne*), in a Brahmana

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(*brahmaṇe*), in a cow (*gavi*), in an elephant (*hastini*), in a dog (*śuni*) as well as in a dog eater (*śvapāke*) the same thing.

विद्याविनयसंपन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥ 5.18

*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brahmaṇe gavi hastini
śuni caiva śvapāke ca paṇḍitāḥ sama-darśinaḥ*

The examples quoted appear sporadic and they span across fellow human beings ranging from the most knowledgeable to the simple primitive person (symbolically indicated by the term dog eater) as well as animals (small to big in terms of physical appearance). In other words, even when they are different in terms of appearance and other aspects, for the men of wisdom they all appear one and the same.

Practicing the idea of oneness

Let us first clarify certain aspects about this idea oneness. We should first know where this concept will apply and where it will not. For example, we cannot apply the vision of oneness to a kilogram of rice and a kilogram of stone and decide to cook one kilogram of stone for lunch. Similarly, we cannot come to the conclusion that the lowest employee in an organization such as a dispatch clerk and a senior executive such as the Vice President are one. Armed with this understanding we cannot reverse their roles, entitlements or privileges. In both these cases it is not practical and at best confusing, meaningless or chaotic.

We all operate in two worlds; one is a world of *vyavahārā* or thick of activities and the other the world of *āśraya* or deep contemplation and reflection. The above examples show that the notion of oneness does not apply to the world of *vyavahārā*. Here the governing principles come from a set of *dharmas*, which are nothing but a codified set of do's and don'ts, developed over time in order to sustainably and ethically manage the activities in the world.

On the other hand, the notion of oneness is very much the subject of interest and relevance in the world of *āśraya*. Let us take the example of the dispatch clerk. Assume that he approached the Senior Manager and asked for an "out of the turn" increase in compensation or a special waiver or some financial assistance in order to face a difficult situation at the domestic front. The set of *dharmas* governing this world of *vyavahārā* may prevent the Senior Manager from sanctioning the request for financial help because it may point to a number of such requests immediately and therefore the unsustainability of this way of addressing the problem. The manager may have to turn down the request.

However, at the end of the day when he steps out of the office, he may encounter the same person with the same request at a personal level. Now, the senior officer is perfectly allowed to bring in the vision of oneness, partake his suffering, and choose to help him with a personal loan. This is a choice that will come only out of the vision of oneness. This

example suggests that the vision of oneness enables a person to identify with the life situations and issues that others go through and mentally respond to it in the most appropriate manner.

Viewed in this manner, the vision of oneness has some practical implications to every one of us in our life. A person endowed with oneness will develop “empathy” as opposed to “sympathy” towards others and their life situations. Even viewed from a management perspective, an empathetic person has greater propensity to be a good manager as his/her inter-personal relationships are likely to be much superior, genuine and even gentle. More importantly, the vision of oneness is a very important tool for self-management. For a person with a good internal vision of oneness, life cannot throw defeats and sorrows. At most it can be of surprises, learning and reflection. The possibility of defeat exists only when a person sees somebody other than himself/herself. The joy and goodness emanating from such a person can become contagious.

The vision of oneness may, at the outset, look like an idea to be practiced with fellow human beings. For a mature person, even with a little bit of personal experience of this idea, it will extend to fellow living beings (animal and plant kingdom) and later to the non-living aspects of the eco system. For such persons values such as *ahimsa* will be a natural and instinctive response to unfolding life situations.

Aggression, exploitation of natural resources, marginalization of underprivileged and disadvantaged classes of the society, unleashing terror and cruelty to animals and plants are all because of lack of oneness in the perspective. Therefore, vision of oneness will be a great catalyst to develop a sustainable society and promote ecological sustenance. There will be greater understanding of the complex inter-relationships and mutual dependence between man and animals, living beings and non-living entities and man and the eco-system at large.