

Beyond Distinctions

Swami Narasimhananda

I HAVE a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.¹ When Martin Luther King uttered these historic words on 28 August 1963 at Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC, he probably did not know about the shooting away of a man by a prophet who established the loftiest philosophy on earth some twelve hundred years ago. Is it not striking that Shankaracharya, the propounder of Advaita Vedanta, asked a person considered an outcaste by society to move away from his path? Is it not equally singular that the outcaste challenged the acharya asking him to explain the difference between the two of them? On realizing his mistake, Shankaracharya bowed to the outcaste and gave vent to his thoughts in a verse pentad called *Manisha Panchakam*. This incident shows that even the most advanced acharya did have strong notions of social difference and privilege ingrained in him, thanks to social prejudices. More than a dozen centuries away, we are still living these distinctions. Why can we not go beyond them? What is stopping us?

We see differences in the life around us. Nature has a wide spectrum of shapes, sizes, and colours. Human beings have created, and continue to create, a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional world of their own. When out on a morning walk through the neighbourhood park, coursing our way past dew-covered flowers, stopping awhile to listen to the chirping of the bird flying past, patting the neck of our pet dog, glancing at other neighbours of all ages and contours also on their morning walk, do we not feel blessed to be in this world, to be able to enjoy these varieties of life? Yes, we all love these variations—different dresses, different cuisine, different places; we do love to be different ourselves!

The flip side of differentiation is that some people are denied something only because they are different in some way from others.

Patterns of Segregation

This exclusion based on difference is the cause of much suffering and ignorance in this world. Differences originate due to the sense of duality. Duality causes fear², and it is this fear that provokes discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and countless other vices perpetrated by one being on another.

How are living beings different from each other? Biology tells us that all living organisms are made up of the same basic unit—the cell. The *Vivekachudamani* reminds us that ‘all human bodies are made of skin, flesh, blood, arteries and veins, fat, marrow, and bones.’³ Moreover, they are made up of the essence of food⁴ and are subject to the six modifications of genesis, existence, alteration, growth, decay, and destruction.⁵ Therefore, these differences of human bodies are only skin-deep, external differences.

Over time human beings have stratified society, based on different criteria, with the purpose of establishing a harmonious and functional social system. To facilitate easy communication and cooperation among fellow beings, several distinct categories—intellectuals, administrators, businessmen, workers, and so on—were recognized. Ironically, these very divisions have led to mutual strife and disconcertion over and over again. Even now nothing much has changed in this respect, in spite of the trend towards globalization. If anything, new excuses for divisions and consequent discrimination have been emerging. Of all these divisions the one most widely discussed in the Indian context is the division of caste.

Originally the caste system was meant to be a logical division of social responsibilities based on

the traits and occupation of individuals.⁶ In course of time, persons taking birth in families with a specific occupation found it easier to take up the same activity due to their upbringing in the given atmosphere. This led to caste being determined on the basis of birth. The ruling class and the priest class, however, created laws to ensure that they had an upper hand in all matters regarding society. This led to many inhuman practices, one such being the creation of a class of outcastes who were ostracized and humiliated. As a reaction, a considerable awakening took place among the oppressed classes of India in the last century. They have secured places for themselves in all-important spheres of society. Sadly though, the problem of discrimination has not been solved yet, though the odds are now shifting towards the hitherto upper castes. Discrimination, and to a lesser extent exploitation, continues, with caste demographics playing a pivotal role in society and politics.

Conflicts in the name of religion are witnessed across the world. Disputes caused by disparities of wealth are also very common and have led to many social upheavals. Modern times have brought discrimination on the basis of one's profession to the fore, though not in the sense of the caste system of the Indian subcontinent. Persons engaged in fields like software or technology are enjoying a social advantage the world over. The arrogance of lawyers, doctors, professional accountants, and people in power is an irritating issue for many common citizens. The tendency to distinguish, discriminate, and sometimes even eliminate seems to have been so deeply entrenched in human beings that even persons suffering from such highly debilitating diseases as leprosy, and in our times Aids, have been isolated and gifted a more painful death than what their illnesses would have brought them. Diseases like Alzheimer's, which require a deep understanding and constant care of the patient, have not been given proper attention. The human being likes to constantly seek polarities and tussle with them. Often, an attempt to provide a solution to one such polarity leads to the creation of further

divisions. This has become a pattern in the history of humankind.

The Solution: Addressing the Divinity in All

Swami Vivekananda gave a solution to the problem of distinctions when he said, 'Each soul is potentially divine.'⁷ It is noteworthy that he talked about all souls and not human beings alone. The inherent divinity of all living beings is brought home through this utterance. Imagine the world of difference it would make if we could only remember this truth in our daily life. Would we be arrogant in our disposition towards those socially or economically in a lower stratum? Not mere tact or public relation techniques, but awareness of the same divine essence dwelling in all beings should be our guiding factor while dealing with everybody. An excerpt from the life of Swami Ashokananda suggests the feasibility of such awareness:

Swami: Infinite care, infinite pains—that is the only way, Marie Louise. Work for the Lord as though He were your father, your mother, your friend. He is all-pervasive Spirit, infinitely good. He is so subtle that the slightest tinge of grossness gives Him pain. That is why we must take care in His work.

(The phone rang and Swami talked with Mr. Guterson, the architect, about the new temple.)

Me [Marie Louise Burke]: That was magnificent! You were so tactful.

Swami: No, not tactful. I have deep respect for man. Man is divine.⁸

More often than not, we mask our true feelings in our interpersonal relations. A clear understanding of the true divine nature of all beings will enable us to shed this mask and embrace everybody with equal love. If we remember this divinity, will we be afraid of anyone? Will anyone be afraid of us? The mere awareness of this immanent divinity will lead us to radiate a joyful acceptance of our fellow beings.

Many distinctions among people are due to differences in upbringing. It is not proper to despise a

All the religions and revelatory books that man has produced on our planet, one and all, do not contain a consistent universal truth. This is so because in every such book are to be seen passages interpolated into those texts by certain groups of individuals, as the situation in their view warranted and as their dogmatism and mulishness dictated. Consequently those religions or faiths did not in the final analysis work towards the good of all. This in turn resulted in sects and sectarianism. Small wonder that these sects hated and turned against each other.

Secondly the Creator of this universe is also the Creator of human beings. It would not be surprising if He, because He is merciful, would want all human beings to enjoy all human privileges and rights. In reality, however, this does not happen and human beings suffer unbearable miseries of various kinds.

In sum, this solar system and naturally the planet earth which we inhabit are created by one Creator. Why is it then that the human beings living in different states and nations hate each other? How and why are the foolish passions of religion and national hatreds generated?

—Jyotirao Phule, *The Book of the True Faith* (1891)

person because he or she had not the opportunity to grow under better circumstances. On the contrary, such persons require more support and consideration. In the words of Swami Vivekananda:

If there is inequality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all—or if greater for some and for some less—the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, a Brahmin is not so much in need of education as a Chandala. If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten. For, greater help must be given to him whom nature has not endowed with an acute intellect from birth.⁹

A person who commits an error should not be condemned for life, for it is from mistakes that we learn: ‘Man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth’ (1.17). Moreover, it is often the daring that com-

mit mistakes. People should not be discriminated against because they make different choices in life, even if a choice is not in keeping with the general ethos of the society. Wrongdoers are able to correct themselves faster and more easily if they are not victims of prejudice. In one of his letters, Swami Vivekananda wrote:

Those who, even in a chapel, would think this is a public woman, that man is of a low caste, a third is poor, and yet another belongs to the masses—the less be the number of such people (that is, whom you call gentlemen), the better. Will they who look to the caste, sex, or profession of Bhaktas appreciate our Lord? I pray to the Lord that hundreds of public women may come and bow their heads at His feet; it does not matter if not one gentleman comes. Come public women, come drunkards, come thieves and all—His Gate is open to all (6.369–70).

When Swami Vivekananda proclaimed a new gospel that emphasizes the innate divinity of all beings, the focus of religion was shifted from some unknown God residing in a celestial world to the God present in our fellow beings, the countless beautiful godheads we are fortunate to live amongst. Upon the realization of the potential divinity of beings, our daily lives become a continuous communion with the Divine; we go beyond our and other’s minor shortcomings with the conviction that these are caused by an incomplete manifestation of that inner Divinity and not limitations of our real nature per se. Elaborating this point, Swami Ashokananda opines:

I have always felt that there are infinite differences because self-manifestation depends on difference, but that, however different in form, all beings are equally valuable as manifestations of the Spirit. Each species, as it were, represents a different kind of self-manifestation of the Divine, in no way inferior or superior to any other kind. We human beings, for example, interpret the rest of the known universe or even the imagined universe, in terms of human consciousness. So if we see in trees, say, very little of human consciousness or behavior according to human conscious-

ness, then we think that trees are vastly inferior to human beings in the scale of things. But that is a mistake. Why should you think that all manifestations are in terms of human consciousness and human behavior? To think so means that you are equating humanity with Divinity; but humanity is not Divinity. A human being, when he realizes God, transcends the limitations and peculiarities of human nature.¹⁰

Generally, our perceptions of people are coloured by our notions of moral and cultural evolution. This is the reason why we feel uncomfortable while dealing with new people or cultures. The way out is to focus on the divine essence of all living beings and think beyond our rigid mental prejudices.

Structured or patterned societal behaviour is a great stumbling block to transcending prejudice. It is precisely this behaviour and way of thinking that we have to break free from. To do this, we need to understand that aesthetics, ethics, and other values of life may not actually be as structured as we think they are. For instance, to Mother Nature a maggot may be as beautiful as a peacock, and bacteria that kill us are as much a part of her economy as we are. In this vast universe, our dimension is infinitesimally small. Creating a structured world and trying to make all beings conform to such structures is the most absurd and outrageous thing humans have attempted and are still attempting.

Segregation of all kinds is caused by lack of inclination to perceive the underlying unity of the universe. Differences may bring comfort to the privileged, who bask in the illusory sunshine of superiority. When the outcaste challenged Shankaracharya upon being driven away, he just reaffirmed the essential non-difference between them. Sometimes we even create further divisions in our attempt to correct the causes of existing differences. The celebrated thinker Michel Foucault has constantly stood against discrimination of all kinds, especially discrimination against criminals, the mentally ill, and other marginal people. His radical view on the class divide that is created in the process of meting

out justice is worth a mention: 'In the courts society as a whole does not judge one of its members but ... a social category with an interest in order judges another that is dedicated to disorder.'¹¹

Since we have such seemingly logical patterns in our mind and since due to these patterns various notions of difference arise, we can safely infer that all distinctions are creations of our mind. The promising side of this human propensity is that if we can be vigilant and alter the patterns in our mind, we may well achieve a different perspective on the manifested world—with the vivid stamp of divinity all over.

An incident in the life of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi is an example of this realization of the same divinity in all beings. One day a monastic attendant treated a pet cat roughly for stealing food and dashed it against the earth. Mother felt very sad. She said to the monk: 'Scold the cat, but do not beat it. Please feed it regularly and see that it does not go to any other house to steal food. ... Do not beat the cat. I dwell inside the cat too.'¹² It is the same consciousness that pervades all beings.¹³ Keeping in mind this essential sameness would help in transcending distinctions of all kinds. With the conviction that the entire world is our family, we can overcome many differences amongst us.¹⁴


Vedanta offers a unique solution to the problem of difference. Through a systematic process, it helps us to see through the veil of external appearances, transcend the limitations of the body-mind complex, and perceive the real nature of beings—the Atman. It is due to delusion that we see differences of bodies and mental states in the homogenous manifestation of the same consciousness.¹⁵ Either by eliminating the temporal appearances or by constantly affirming the true Reality unaffected by external conditions, one gets the knowledge of the absolute Reality immanent in all beings. Upon the dawn of such knowledge, all differences—including that of social positions—vanish and only the all-pervading Consciousness is perceived.¹⁶ Such a person automatically goes beyond all distinctions and perceives the innate divinity of all beings.

Hope: Even for the Atheist

For one with religious leanings, the concept of immanent divinity comes as a great help in the effort to transcend distinctions. But what about the atheist? Is there any way for the atheist to go beyond the apparent distinctions of the world? Irrespective of our religious beliefs, we do see certain characteristics common to all beings. One such characteristic is life. Another is the idea of propriety, called conscience in common parlance. When a person meets another, there is an unseen inclination to develop a relationship—paradoxical though it may appear, given the tendency to discriminate that we have been highlighting. In today's context, with the aid of technology, national boundaries are constantly being blurred and new cross-cultural ties are developing. Even such avowed atheists as Richard Dawkins seem to believe that ethical behaviour is practised not only due to fear of chastisement or fear of misery in another life but also, or more likely due to, the general good sense inherent in human beings, for normally, a being does not like to come in conflict with another being. Dawkins writes:

We do not—even the religious among us—ground our morality in holy books, no matter what we may fondly imagine. How, then, do we decide what is right and what is wrong? No matter how we answer that question, there is a consensus about what we do as a matter of fact consider right and wrong: a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely. The consensus has no obvious connection with religion. It extends, however, to most religious people, whether or not they *think* their morals come from scripture. ... The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don't cheat, don't kill, don't commit incest, don't do things to others that we would not wish done to us.¹⁷

Extending the same reasoning a little further, even if one does not swear allegiance to any concept of God or Divinity, it is possible for one to deal with others shedding all inhibitions born out of seeming distinctions and be aware of the underlying common factor of life in all beings.

In sum, mitigating all differences on the path to the realization of the immanent divinity will help us overcome the limitations caused by differentiation. We need to see through the exterior into the true nature of ourselves as well as that of our fellow beings. We need to venture in this bold pursuit to discover that divinity or the underlying common factor of life which blends all beings into one reality. Then physical, intellectual, and spiritual differences will not stand in the way of harmonious human relationships. Then, and then only, will we be able to live in a global, rather universal, village. That will no more be a life of isolated beings trying to interact with each other, but the life of all beings living as one unit. Mutual understanding will be natural and exploitation and oppression will be neutralized. We will indeed be blessed on the awakening of this consciousness! 

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