

Swami Sarvapriyanandaji Maharaj, one of the leading lights and more visible representatives of Vedanta on the world stage today, visited the United Kingdom and I had the privilege of interviewing him. For someone whose name has its root in what stands for 'beloved of all', Swami Sarvapriyananda (Minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Centre, New York) does a fair bit of justice to the same. It was a pleasure conducting a session on Ashtavakra Gita, an ancient Indian text by the Vedic saint Ashtavakra, and host an interview on formulations of Vedanta, religious pluralism and cosmopolitanism, Swami Vivekananda and a rational understanding of Vedantic ideas. He was also a speaker at the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions. Swami Vivekananda represented the order in the first such Parliament in 1893.

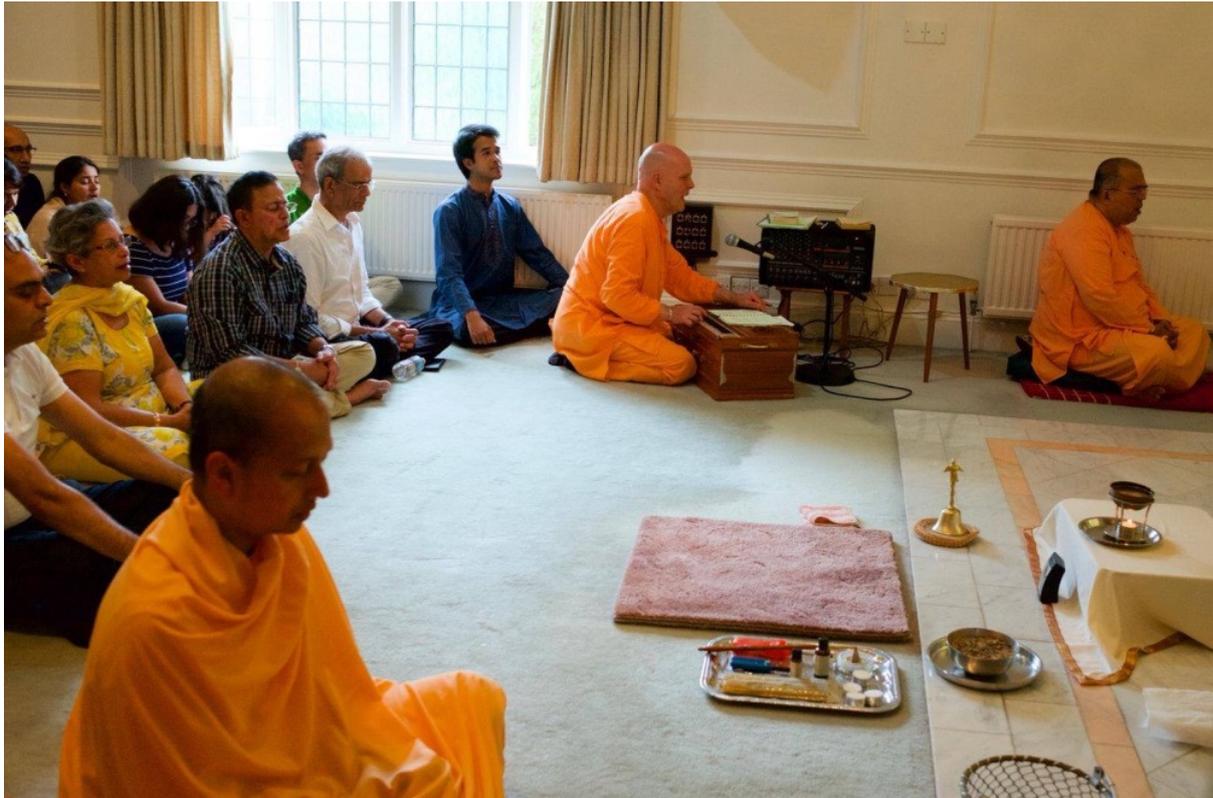


An enthralling weekend, full of discussions on philosophy, reasoning and faith!

**Mrittunjoy:** Thank you, Swamiji, for giving me this opportunity to interview you. I have been following your work and your thoughts on myriad topics, and in this interview I would like to delve into some of these further. These questions have arisen as part of my meditation and spiritual reflections, and I shall be happy to know about your views on the same. I have not prepared any questions beforehand and so we shall move along the interview spontaneously, together.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Yes please, thank you, Mrittunjoy!

**Mrittunjoy:** I will start with a broad based and yet fairly important question. Unity consciousness and the sense of oneness in the Universe, in essence, is a profound element of experience and realisation. I feel it forms the crux of Vedanta, qualified only by the form and nature of the unity and the multiplicity within the cosmos arising, in its manifestation, be it as Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, Advaita or Vijnana. What *is* Vedanta, according to you?



**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** I recently delivered an exposition on this in the Vedanta Centre of St. Louis. Swami Vivekananda famously opened his address on Vedanta at Harvard University by highlighting that Vedanta is the underlying philosophy of all of Hinduism. Vedanta comes from the words 'Veda' and 'anta', which is not quite 'ending' but the highest principles of the Vedas. The surmising of sorts, of the Vedas. Vedanta is the source of the spiritual knowledge in the Upanishads. It is a *Darshana*, a school of philosophy of Hinduism.

**Swami Sarvasthananda:** The formulation of Vedanta is done well in the Brahmasutras.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Indeed! Vedanta is the matrix that generated all the sects and schools of philosophies. What we know as ISKCON today

has its roots in Vedanta since Gaudiya Math, from which ISKCON arose, follows the principle of *Achintya Bheda Abheda*, which is a form of Vedanta. The central idea of Vedanta can be understood from certain mahakavyas such as *Tat Tvam Asi* and *Aham Brahmasmi*. As per Vedanta, only Brahmin is truly real. Sri Ramakrishna formulated the important concept of Vijnana Vedanta and Swami Vivekananda took that further into the realm of Practical Vedanta as well.

**Mrittunjoy:** It is interesting that you touch upon the ideas of *Vijnana Vedanta* and *Practical Vedanta*. Before touching on the latter, I would like to express my admiration and interest in the realisation of Vijnana Vedanta. An idea that though Brahman alone is real, it is Brahman itself that manifests in all that is there in the Universe, in essence. While the unity of creation in pure consciousness is important, so is the multiplicity within creation and the Brahman therein. The nirguna and the saguna, the form-based and the formless. All is Brahman. In a way it was closer to the original Vedanta of the Gita and the Upanishads than Sankara's Advaita Vedanta even. What do you have to say on that?

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Good question! There are different strands of Vedanta. What Sri Ramakrishna gave was something greater to encompass them all. It was indeed closer to the Gita and the Upanishads. When it comes to philosophies, one could go with the existing framework of Vedanta, with Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita and Advaita. One could also go with no philosophy or one could opt for Vijnana Vedanta that is a superset of all of these. It is a natural coming-together of these different and distinct philosophies and belief-systems.

**Mrittunjoy:** Thank you, Swamiji. You speak of Vijnana Vedanta bringing together multiple strands of Vedanta. But as you would appreciate, Sri Ramakrishna went one step further, and spoke of religious pluralism. There is a beautiful paper on the epistemological fallacy of religious pluralism, which was published recently, and which speaks of how intellectual discussions cannot be enough for making people see the truths in each religion. Experiences, and spiritual experiences at that, are only what truly convince people to see the other's truth. Ayon Maharaj in his book '*Infinite Paths to Infinite Truths*' speaks about the manner in which pluralism can be achieved if one were to focus on the salvific efficacy of the religions and not their doctrinal aspects that may differ. Sri Ramakrishna mentioned about how Brahman, for instance, is present in the form-based and formless conceptions of the godhead. A modern thinker like John Hicks on the other hand speaks of the godhead being neither form-based nor formless but beyond. All these disparate strands of thought on religious pluralism

present an interesting background for looking at Sri Ramakrishna's thoughts of religious pluralism. What do you have to say about this?

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Interesting question! What Hicks said is encapsulated in the words of Gaudapada, who highlighted that Brahman is neither form-based nor formless but beyond. Even the Upanishads speak at length about this. This is however not in contradiction to what Ramakrishna highlights, as seen in *Kathamrita* and *Lila Prasang*. Though Sri Ramakrishna says that Brahman is formless for the *Jnani Vedantin* and form-based for the bhakta, he also acknowledges that Brahman is beyond just that. Ramakrishna's conception is very close to the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads where they talk of God taking the form of everything in the Universe and yet being beyond, beyond even the formless conception.



**Mrittunjoy:** Like when in the Nasadiya Sukta of the Rig Veda, they talk of there being no form or formless at the very beginning.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Yes! There is a certain internal consistence of the forms of Vedanta on this. I feel religious pluralism comes directly from the acknowledgement of the different forms of God. If many Abrahamic and Bhakti traditions rely on form-based Gods, there are others like Jnana

Yogis and the Arya Samaj that conceive of a formless God. There is this perception that there is an attack on this approach of ours to religious pluralism. I do not think so. Practices can be different. Doctrinal aspects can be different, as you say. But if they point to the same unity consciousness and conception of Brahman, that is the truth that matters. I feel that any signs of resistance or criticism is just pushback from the exclusivist traditions against pluralism that is slowly spreading. I am reminded of the story of the mountains: a Jain mountain, a Muslim mountain, a Christian mountain, a Hindu mountain and so on, and how one can only climb one. We do not believe in this. I do see how this analogy of different mountains or ultimate truths can be pitched against the idea of the One, of Brahman.

**Mrittunjoy:** But shouldn't they be looked at as subsections of a larger mountain. Small bumps towards a grater summit, of unity consciousness.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Quite! This way of parochial perception. Looking at us vs.them is quite against western values of tolerance and liberalism, and yet we see them everywhere.

**Mrittunjoy:** The question then, Swamiji, is how does one stand against the exclusivists in their narrow perceptions of the Truth? For it is due to their narrow mindedness and dogged pursuit of certain doctrinal aspects of faith that we face so much of disturbances in the world today.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Do not go at them directly but chip away at the sides. Today's world is very different even from that of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 where Swami Vivekananda spoke, where different religious leaders spoke of their religion's truths. It is becoming increasingly clear that Vedantists are winning the battle of perception. It is only through the pressure of public and academics that the tide can change decisively. I, however, instead of liking the term pluralism like what Janardan Ganery called '*cosmopolitanism*'. Pluralism means one tolerates other beliefs and philosophies while within cosmopolitanism, these different traditions actively learn from each other. That is what Sri Ramakrishna wanted us to do. For instance, he said '*tan tuku nao*' or take the intensity of and from the Vaishnavites. He went so far as to learn from various other religions such as the Abrahamic religions like Islam and Christianity too.

**Mrittunjoy:** Yes he truly laid the foundation for meaningful cosmopolitanism through his actions and sayings. Moving from the Abrahamic religions back to Dharmic traditions. Particularly to Buddhism. There has been a long standing debate between Vedantins and Buddhists on the substantive vs non-substantive natures of the ultimate reality, since

the times of Sankara and even earlier. I feel that Buddha did not as much deny the substantive approach of Vedanta as much as he was not concerned with that question. What do you have to say on that?

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Buddhism indeed talks about concept of *Anatman* while Vedanta has a substantive conception. When one looks at Vijnana Dhyana and Yoga Vashishta or the debates between Sankara and Buddhist scholars, interesting interactions are seen. I believe that there is more proximity between the two traditions than is perceived to be the case. Nagarjuna uses the word 'Advayam' in his formulation of his philosophy for non-duality instead of Advaita. Going beyond just words, I feel the Sunyata principle of Nagarjuna and Buddhism is nothing but the concept of Poornam in Vedanta. One can refer to Madhyamakarikā of Nagarjuna in this regard. However, having said this, one must not rush to integrate both these traditions since both have had a long history of evolution and a lot of associated heritage. One has to appreciate the differences as well. Buddhism and Vedanta differ on the conception of the Atman and presence of God. These differences were openly debated in by the Nyayikas, Vaisheshikas, Sankhya scholars and Purva Mimamsakas against the Buddhists, primarily on the *dravya* (substance) of the *Atman*. Advaita Vedanta was a late player in this and according to them Atman was not made of any *dravya* but was a manifestation of the eternal, transcendent Brahman. A good book to read in this regard is the *The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha* by J. G. Jennings. It goes to show that Buddha and Vedanta were not so far apart. I would like to add that this was also the case with later (more recent) Buddhists and Vedantins. It is interesting to note that Sam Harris once mentioned in his book 'Waking Up' that even though he is openly critical of most religions, it is only Dzogchen Buddhism and Vedanta, which he says were the final developments within Buddhism and Hinduism respectively, that hold a central truth that they share. Miri Albahari also says that Buddhism and Vedanta speak about the same truth. She recently presented a paper on hard consciousness in New York University. It is interesting to note that the contribution of Vedanta to this, along with that of Buddhism, has been lately shared in various papers and conferences.

**Mrittunjoy:** It is interesting you raise the problem of consciousness here, since I would like to ask you about your thoughts on consciousness, science and spirituality. But before doing so, let us look at something we touched upon previously. Vedanta as we know it, has gone through multiple evolutions and manifestations. Sri Ramakrishna put forth the formulation of *Vijnana Vedanta*. His disciple Swami Vivekananda gave *Practical Vedanta* which has been the centre of attention in the modern age. What are your thoughts on the same?

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** The idea of Practical Vedanta was given by Swami Vivekananda in his lectures. Before focusing on the nuances of that, I would like to push back against that question briefly. I think we must first teach the doctrine of the *Atman* first and foremost and not use Vedanta in practical life before that. One must first get the critical and key insights into this world before beginning to apply them. For instance, when one says that one has realised Brahman and is still concerned about parking or your son not listening to you, there is something still missing. Upon truly appreciating the nuances of Vedanta itself and getting the insight into this realm, one can look at what Swamiji said. I will give you three points about *Practical Vedanta* that I feel are most important. Firstly, it is the basis of service for all of us, particularly those in the Ramakrishna Mission. Hundred years ago, sadhus and seers was primarily and often only in the spiritual realm. Swami Vivekananda's thoughts and views changed that. It brought a change of culture. Today people often ask about the services and social work carried out by the clergy, the saints and seers. *Practical Vedanta* has introduced a philosophy of service. Secondly, it is a personal philosophy for the world at large. It has helped in formulating the concept of divinising lives and that everyone should try to realise the principles of Vedanta in action, in deeds and their work. Thirdly and lastly, it forms the basis for the only form of religion for a rational man. Even though today scientists are mostly atheists, with 80% Nobel laureates being atheists, it is Vedanta that can appeal to them. Tesla's interactions with Swami Vivekananda are world-famous. One can synthesise Vedanta with one or more world religions but what is important is to make it rational and experiential. This is one of Ken Wilbur's three points – reason and religion must reconcile with the aim being the pursuit of Truth. The other two points are that religions must stop fighting and religions must accept liberal values.

**Mrittunjy:** I am happy that you have brought the conversation around to reasoning, rational thought and religion, for my next question has to do with the same. Having interacted with Nobel Laureate Prof. Brian Josephson on some aspects of this, as an interest besides my postdoctoral project in Physics with him at Cambridge University, I would like to posit consciousness as the key and possible primary element in bringing together these disparate strands of thought and conceptions of reality. The Vedantic and other Dharmic traditions conceive of consciousness as beyond just the human mind, while the western, scientific community largely looks at consciousness as a product of the human mind and brain. The latter is still an open ended question and pursuit in many ways. There is, however, an increased dialog and discussion among scientists, philosophers and theologians, on what truly is consciousness. What do you have to say on that?

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** I agree! There have been a lot of studies on this lately including using fMRIs. David Chalmers' work on hard consciousness comes to mind too. Materialists are grappling with this problem and the point of how the subjective could arise out of what is inherently and apparently objective. How consciousness could arise purely out of matter, if it does. The work of Ned Block called 'Why is the question of consciousness so important?' is quite illuminating in this regard. However, I must highlight that this discussion is not the same as solving any problem. Consciousness is something that is accessible to all, unlike the resolution of aspects of string theory that would require specialists. It is a primary and fundamental question and point. Thinkers like Galen Strawson have turned the question from the issue of understanding consciousness recently to one of understanding matter. What *is* matter, besides what they do or how they relate to other elements? He calls this the hard problem of matter. The very first sentence of *Adhyasa Bhashya* talks about the interaction of matter and consciousness. J. N. Mohanty's papers on eastern and western philosophy also touch upon this subject and go on to say that he has not come across a more profound statement than the first sentence of Shankar's *Adhyasa Bhashya*. The subject-object superposition, in a process or situation, is the point of interest here and deliberated on at great length. I do not think there is any scientific theory that can give rise to such a formulation.

**Mrittunjoy:** There has been work on the role of consciousness and the observer in Physics, particularly in the quantum realm. One can see systems wherein complexity dynamics can give interesting patterns and I am currently looking at how information could underly matter but there is still some way from formulating anything on consciousness or even bridging information and consciousness.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Alright! Scientific world views can be plugged into the Vedantic framework and it won't affect the latter and yet it is not true the other way around necessarily. For that matter, science still is grappling with the question of what truly is consciousness. Hence, in this respect, I feel Vedanta is superior. I remember having a discussion with a friend who asked me to imagine a room with a camera that takes pictures of the room. Without us seeing this, there is a certain reality and the pictures shall be taken of and in that. So, where is consciousness coming into this? I told him that in the viewing of the pictures, in the perception of the reality, awareness is still important. Today companies such as IBM are trying to create awareness in robots.

**Mrittunjoy:** Like in Artificial Intelligence systems! Without talking of superiority of Vedanta over science or vice versa, I see the points you are making here.

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Self awareness is a key aspect that is still not there in such systems. There have been some philosophers who have tried to speak about panpsychism and been criticised. Panpsychism is about the presence of consciousness throughout the universe, even in inanimate objects. Much like what we say in Vedanta. Having said that, in our quest to realise and share the views of Vedanta, I feel the world and science as we know it need not be overturned. Both are pursuits of truth in their own ways, just to varying degrees.

**Mrittunjoy:** I agree with this statement, which is why I see my research pursuits as an act of devotion in themselves. Pursuit of Truth is a pursuit of divinity and Brahman, in a certain physical way. It has been such an enlightening and interesting conversation, Swamiji!

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Have we solved all the world's profound problems then? (*Chuckles*)

**Mrittunjoy:** Made some progress on some, I would say, haha! Thank you for your time Swamiji and I look forward to interacting with you further in the near future!

**Swami Sarvapriyananda:** Thank you, Mrittunjoy!