

Relevancy of Vedic wisdom : Today's World is no Different than the World of Vedic Times

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Abstract

When we attempt to seek applicability of the Vedic thought in today's world, we inherently presume that today's world is different than the world when Vedic Ṛṣis contemplated and inferred the guiding principles. And, that presumption has a fundamental flaw! The world as we know today has been the world since humans began living on the land and in the communities. All that has changed is the enormity of the feeds to the senses, via technological advancements. Pervasiveness of communication and entertainment technologies still hinge upon the desires of fame and gain, which were also the grounds of action back in the Vedic times. Dopamine molecule still permeates the neurotransmitters, physiological mechanisms within the body are still the same, greed and fear still generates the unstable states of mind.

Full-Paper

At times, I wonder, if human intervention has instead influenced the interplay between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, which, we shall explore further, later, in the paper. Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad, verses 6.1 and 6.2, reminds us of the instruments defining our composition and nature, while citing irrelevance of any other factors, be it temporal or *Prakṛti*. Deluded thinkers speak of nature and time as the forces that revolves the wheel of Brahman, though it is the glory of the God expressed in the world. Let this be known that energy assumes various forms, constituting of earth, water, light, air, and ether (*Pañchamahābhūtas*), by His command, who steers three *guṇas*, is the maker of time, is omniscient, is pure consciousness, and by whom all this is ever enveloped.

Socio economic structure may have evolved to a certain extent, as we have attempted to move from monarchy to meritocracy or plutocracy, during recent times. Though experience sought in this newer framework still follows the stages of discovery and satiation as proposed by the Vedic Ṛṣis. The scope of content to be grasped by everyone, in a knowledge-based economy, does pose undue strain on certain minds, but here too Vedic wisdom comes to one's assistance, more so now than during Vedic times.

The applicability of the wisdom cited in Svetāśvatara, Kaṭha, Taitirīya and Aitareya Upaniṣads. The techniques recommended for us in the *Darśana Śāstras* to address day to day challenges, which one faced then and which one faces now. But, at the end, wisdom's goal is not how to address the unfortunate outcomes in one's life, but to help us follow a Way of Life, which better be uneventful but fulfilling, a life of meaningful *kārmic* activities, gaining wisdom, while living for hundred years.

Are We Any Different Now?

A recent study published in Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) demonstrated that to address anxiety, a mindfulness program works equally well as that of taking prescription anti-anxiety medication, such as Lexapro. This discovery brings mindfulness closer to clinical application of managing anxiety than to just utilize it to calm anxiety. Mindfulness based stress reduction or MSBR, an approved medical program, was developed based on the principles of meditation, and which is essentially a technique illustrated by the Patañjali-Sūtra, a *Darśana Śāstra* or implied in Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad or originated as *Sāṃkhya* philosophy.

It is because of our physiological, psychological, spiritual, and chemical composition has not changed since the Vedic times, and thus insights shared by Ṛṣis during Vedic times find relevance in the

contemporary times, as well. Anatomically, contemporary scientists describe three distinct sub-structures of our brain, brain stem, or lizard brain, which regulates breathing, heart rate, sleeping and waking. Sitting above the brain stem is the paleomammalian brain, which manages the fight or flight reflexes, emotions such as rage, fear, or pleasure emerge from this section of the brain. It converts short term memories into long term memories, or help route signals. The third anatomical structure of the brain is the cortex, responsible for speech, vision and memory. Knowing the anatomical structure of the brain- structurally, the brain has not changed since the Vedic times, and thus within us, three *guṇas* (*Sāttvika*, *Rājasika*, and *Tāmasika*) permeated then, and three *guṇas* permeates now!

Has Anything changed Around Us?

Since the Vedic times, we experienced the world around us, using our sense organs, eyes for vision, ears for hearing, skin for touch, tongue for taste and nose for smell. Such sensory inputs then evoke the perceptions within us, which may in turn set us on a path of delusion and speculations, a key feature of our highly developed brains. Since the Vedic times, *Ṛṣis* have chronicled the events, perceived the realities, conveyed to others of such perceptions, using poetry, narratives, stories and frameworks of philosophies. History and myths are replete with various actors and characters, who realized the awakened states, a state of equipoise, a *Sahaja Avasthā*, following pointers, methods (e.g., *Bhakti-Yoga*, *Gyāna-Yoga* and others) and processes as prescribed by the *Ṛṣis*.

Have Our Sense Organs evolved since the Vedic Times?

With the continuing advancement of the technology, whether in the sectors of agriculture, housing, communications, entertainment, health, travel, energy, and others, we primarily have scaled the level of experiences, which our senses have faithfully captured, and executive sections of our brains have successfully processed. For example, back in the Vedic times, we were aware of natural sounds or engaging conversations within our communities, and now with the advent of phone, such conversations cross the continental boundaries, but at the end we are still performing the function of hearing. Back in Vedic times, we will see the surroundings and people around us, and now with the advent of televisions and video calls and conferencing, we see what is beyond our surroundings, but at the end we are still performing the function of seeing. Back in the Vedic times, we tasted and smelled what was grown in our small communities, and now with the advent of travel and transportation, we smell, and taste produces from different continents, but at the end we are still performing the function of smell and taste. Back in the Vedic times, we touched natural products or people, and now with the advent of material sciences, we touch man-made material, derived from hydrocarbons, in addition to the natural products and other people, but at the end we are still performing the function of touch. We still have our body's defense mechanism, which are triggered instantly, in response to flight or fight processes, to address any imminent danger to our survival. What intrigues is that we no longer inhabit places which may pose existentialist threats by other animals, much more powerful than us, but our bodily defense mechanisms still responds with the same speed and accuracy. The fear of public speaking, fear of loss of employment, fear of losing social standing, fear of losing stability and coherence in the family, anxieties of future growth and several other factors, still trigger instant responses of flight or fight mechanisms within us, even though such events are not existential threats to our survival. In essence, we are still hard wired the same way, as we were back in the Vedic times, and delusions and speculations still evoke those intrinsic physiological deterrents, thus making Vedic *Ṛṣi*'s guidance equally applicable today.

***Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* Framework**

Prakṛti and *Puruṣa* framework, and its interplay, has been highlighted by majority, if not all, of our scriptures, which continuously unhinges us, deludes us, takes us away from here and now modus operandi, and invokes dependent origination. *Ṛṣi*'s guidance on progression path of perception helps us to

be situated in that *Yogasthā* state; *Ṛṣis* apprise us of our inner workings of consciousness, permanent or intermittent and our *Urdhva-mūlam* stature to be an integral part of the cosmic consciousness. Is *Prakṛti and Puruṣa* framework now outdated, and is no longer applicable in the contemporary times? Absolutely not, in fact its relevance has become more appealing now than it was back in the Vedic times. Intermingling of different cultures and races of varying ethnic backgrounds, globalization, frequent international travel, intercontinental commerce, always on world of internet and entertainment, *Prakṛti* has now found numerous channels of interactions with *Puruṣa*. The set of lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego is now on display in proportions unheard of during Vedic times and are instead promoted within certain economic frameworks. Unfortunately, the outcome of such is what *ṛṣis* projected, a continuing stream of attachment and detachment, an incessant interplay of *Amygdala* and Pre-Frontal cortex, a *Mānasika Avasthā* of unhappiness, dejection, and depression, prevalent especially, now, in the western hemisphere. Since time immemorial, ‘pursuit of happiness’ has been the goal of humanity and civilizations, either as its central thesis of the familial interactions, or that among community interactions or it being, formally, as an integral part of the national constitution for nations such as United States. Vedic *Ṛṣis* had alerted us of unconscious malfeasance when solely pursuing property, material, and other gains, which may steer us away from a path of equipoise and homeostasis, thus into an abyss of unhappy state of *chitta*.

Why Satsaṅga ?

One should always be intrigued by Vedic *Ṛṣi*’s promotion of the concept of community engagement, a *Satsaṅga*, a spiritual get together, to recite verses. Within our physiological composition, all organs which makes us physically alive, enabling healthy cellular mechanisms, have feedback loops with the commanding center, our brain. Any need of a cell is conveyed instantly, and is catered to by the brain, using chemical connectors, otherwise known as hormones, and that such feedback loop mechanism is in play continuously throughout the body, leading to homeostasis physiologically, for example maintaining needed body temperatures, maintaining visual acuity, alertness, and other needed functions. Where is the feedback loop mechanism for the brain then? Our perception of the surrounding, is continually framed within the brain, and thus *Prakṛti-Puruṣa* interaction constitutes the external loops. A *satsaṅga* of *Bhakti-Yoga* promotes the healthy feedback loops for our continuous attention seeking framework of *Manas, Buddhi, Ahāṅkāra, Chitta* and in turn, settles our hard wired *tāmasika* tendencies. Remember, Vedic times or contemporary times, our hard wired tendencies builds upon and caters to instincts such as “can I eat this” or “can this eat me” and “ can I mate this” or “can this mate me”, the connotations of such may have taken a different role, as we are no longer surrounded by dangerous animals, though instinct to control and dominate the surrounding natural environment is very alive and thriving, and thus Vedic *Ṛṣi*’s guidance becomes equally applicable in the contemporary times.

Are Vedic Gods Non-Existent Now?

Let me look around and observe what has and has not changed, when considering Vedic invisible hands, the unmanifested or that of manifested or expressed. Surya still illuminates our world, as it did during the Vedic times, Varuṇa still maintains natural law and order, Agni still transforms one form to another or sacrifice one form to create another, Vāyu still gives us the *Prāṇa*, intelligence and thoughts and Yama still punishes us or grant suffering and death to us. Seasons, vegetation, and food chain initiated by Surya and progressed by the photosynthesis on the leaves still follow the natural order as it was during the Vedic times. What has changed since Vedic times is how we channel gifts of the Vedic gods to other unmanifested or manifested forms, using developed analytical prowess and abilities. For example, first we illuminated or warmed our dwellings by excavated materials (coal and petroleum products) and later we transferred energy from one source (water, atomic) to another (electricity), and converted that energy to warm or illuminate our dwellings. Art to express our observations and *bhāva*, scientific pursuits to understand ourselves and seek longevity, and healthy social interactions to garner

harmonious living, all these aspects dominated then during Vedic times, as it continues to dominate today. Desire for longevity, procreation, and happiness within a habitable dwelling, intertwined with art and luxury, has progressed us from being cave and forest dwellers to those who now live in dwellings made of crushed stone or cut wood or excavated minerals. But, at the end, as in Vedic times, this was a dwelling then and this is a dwelling now, driven by the same desire, seeking longevity, procreation, and happiness.

Select Verses from Upaniṣads as Examples

Upaniṣads guide us towards attaining higher goal of *Mokṣa* or *Śāśvat Śāntī*, steers us away from mundane aspiration of objects, and discloses that by leading a prescribed ritualistic, ethical and *Dharmic* path of daily routine, an eternal peaceful and tranquil state is achieved, and in addition, one accomplishes cessation from *Samsāra* and consequently its *Dukha* or suffering. Let us review select verses of *Iśa*, *Taitirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara* Upaniṣads, and determine the applicability of these selective *Upaniṣadic* verses in the contemporary times. Reader is encouraged to explore other verses within these Upaniṣads, following a similar structure of thought stream, and reach to a conclusion by himself or herself, on its applicability during contemporary times.

Iśa Upaniṣad verse 2 emphasizes that once you are born, you are born to live hundred years, and while living, you cannot escape work, though you should ensure that work does not envelop you or defines you. Contemporary scientists affirm that our organs are engineered to function for one hundred plus years, for that matter insurance companies statistically project the age of a person as hundred years, and that achieving such longevity is in our hands. Stress, a state of mental or emotional strain, which results from very demanding circumstances, leads to undesirable actions and habits, leads to ill health or death in extreme conditions. In contemporary times, stress is one of the leading causes of early age mortality. Vedic *Ṛṣis* guidance has been succinct, do not associate yourself with the *Kārmic* activity, though you will have no other option but to perform work. Stay away from bad *Karma* and do more of good *Karma*, not only will you benefit physiologically in this life term, but this will, unconsciously, may bring you closer, or reach, to Vedic *Ṛṣis* goal post of *Mokṣa* or *Śāśvat Śāntī*.

Verse 6 of the *Iśa* Upaniṣad emphasizes a non-discriminating mind, wherein it states, one who sees himself in others and others in himself, has no aversion. One of the challenges of contemporary times is assimilation, separation due to color of skin, race, gender, caste etc. has led to centuries of suffering and death for humanity. To see divinity in all that surrounds you, is an experience and a transcending event, and an assured path of attaining *Mokṣa* or *Śāśvat Śāntī*. तत् त्वम् असि, ‘Thou art that!’

Chāndogya Upaniṣad guides us, settles us, and stops us from running around, seeking incessantly! This reminded of the analogy cited in our *Purāṇas*, of a deer, with scented cavity, running around, seeking source of that scent. One of the metrics with which contemporary society evaluates success is in terms of productivity, were you able to excel at school and college, how much value have you generated per hour during your life term? By seeing divinity in all, one is less concerned to compete with others, instead, having realized that oneness, with others, one lives in harmony, with others, and is focused on self, seeking value within, realizing one’s potential, and concentrating on work at hand; furthermore, following *Iśa* Upaniṣad’s guidance to not associate with that work, one is able to lead an inward life which is insightful, and an outward life which is productive. One often quotes the example of riding a bicycle, that such work is accomplished without any thought, calculation, or planning, since work becomes a part of you, and intellect is not intervening.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad (1/2/1-2) says:
अन्यच्छ्रेयोऽन्यदुतैव प्रेयस्ते उभे नानार्थे पुरुषं सिनीतः ।

तयोः श्रेय आददानस्य साधुर्भवति हीयतेऽर्थाद्य उ प्रेयो वृणीते ॥
श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतस्तौ संपरीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः।
श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभिप्रेयसो वृणीते प्रेयो मन्दो योगक्षेमाद्वृणीते ॥

During his or her life term, every person shall be presented with two choices, one which is sustainable and the other, which provides momentary pleasure, both shall bind the person, happiness shall come to the one who opts for what is sustainable. An awakened one shall examine the choices, and elect for what is sustainable, and the ignorant one shall select what is pleasurable to one's body and senses. Valuation and investment decisions require fundamental analysis, pattern matching and several such techniques. Even everyday decisions require intuitive wisdom, a peripheral vision, to elect the choice which is sustainable. This may entail certain sacrifices, and that's what our Vedic *R̥ṣi*s termed as *Tapas*, or austerities, and advised us that choices made with such insight shall lay the fruit for a long-term sustainability and *Ānanda*.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad (1/2/4-5) further says:

दूरमेते विपरीते विषूची अविद्या या च विद्येति ज्ञाता ।
विद्याभीप्सिनं नचिकेतसं मन्ये न त्वा कामा बहवोऽलोलुपन्त ॥
अविद्यायामन्तरे वर्तमानाः स्वयं धीराः पण्डितं मन्यमानाः।
दन्द्रम्यमाणाः परियन्ति मूढा अन्धेनैव नीयमाना यथाम्हाः ॥

There are two divergent paths, one of *Vidyā* and other of *Avidyā*, a seeker of knowledge is not shaken by what is desirable. Those who live in ignorance, think of themselves as intelligent, and deluded they are, as blind follows the blind. Though meant for a path of cessation of *Dukha*, this guidance by Yama to Naciketā is equally applicable in the contemporary world of organizational leadership and decision making. At this point, here death is associated with Yama, includes our momentary anxieties, a life moment lost, during which, one is not experiencing *Amṛtatva*. To manage an organizational entity, to grow it with diligence and with critical analysis, requires informed decisions, to have the knowledge of what do facts and figures tell us, to be alert and awakened, a blind leading a blind shall lead the organization to utter failure. Furthermore, such guidance by *R̥ṣi*s is equally applicable, when managing the wellbeing of family, community, and nation.

Taitirīya Upaniṣad (2/2) states that ' from food all creatures are born, by food they live, and to food they go at the end. Food is the medicine, beings feed on the food and food feeds on beings'.

अन्नद्वै प्रजाः प्रजायन्ते । याः काश्च पृथिवी श्रिताः।
अथो अन्नेनैव जीवन्ति । अथैनदपि यन्त्यन्ततः..... ॥

In contemporary times, now, finally, we understand the cellular mechanisms, how food is processed, how it is absorbed at the cellular membrane, and how it becomes part of the cell, after generating energy, stating in scientific language, by converting from ATP (Adenosine Tri Phosphate) to ADP (Adenosine Di Phosphate) food releases energy, for the functioning of the cell. During cell decay, or for conditions such as auto immune diseases, food, which is a part of the cell, then eats neighboring cells. *R̥ṣi*'s perceptions have provided us guidance on universal governing laws, at a macro level, which were applicable during Vedic times and are equally applicable during contemporary times.

Aitareya Upaniṣad (3/5/1-2) explains,

ॐ कोऽयमात्मेति वयमुपास्महे कतरः स आत्मा ।येन वा पश्यति येन वा शणोति येन वा
गंधानाजिघ्रति येन वा वाचं व्याकरोति येन वा स्वादु चास्वादु च विजानाति ॥ यदेतद्दृढदयं
मनश्चैतत् । संज्ञानमाज्ञानं विज्ञानं प्रज्ञानं मेधा दृष्टिर्धृतिमतिर्मनीषा जूतिः स्मृतिः संकल्पः
ऋतुरसुः कामो वश इति । सर्वाण्येवैतानि प्रज्ञानस्य नामधेयानि भवन्ति ॥

'who is he? Which one is the self? Is it through which one hears sound, through which one tastes the sweet and not sweet? Is it the intellect or the mind?' Vedic *R̥ṣi*s succinctly define what is

consciousness. Consciousness is the application (विज्ञानं), it is to be aware of what you need to know (प्रज्ञानं), it is the mental vigor (मेधा), it is the vision (दृष्टि), it is steadfastness (धृति), it is opinion (मति), it is wisdom (र्मनीषा), it is uninterrupted flow or motion (जूतिः), it is memory (स्मृतिः), it is mental resolve (संकल्पः), it is physical exertion (क्रतु), it is energy (रसुः) , it is desire(कामो), it is control (वश) and it is concept and the will (संज्ञानमाज्ञानं). Of significant interest to us is प्रज्ञानं, to be aware of what one needs to know, the third eye, the wisdom eye or one’s intuitive ability. Scientific inquiry, usually, relies upon repeatable steps and builds upon mathematical models. Natural sciences like Physics, Chemistry or Biology builds upon such premises, and applied sciences of Engineering and Medicine then put such knowhow in motion. Intuitive ability, in contrast to analytical abilities of *Buddhi*, is our intrinsic awareness, and that such ability is a gift granted to all of us. It was a gift granted to us back in Vedic times, and it continues to be the gift granted to us in the contemporary times.

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (2/8-13) says,

त्रिरुन्नतं स्थाप्य समं शरीरं हृदीन्द्रियाणि मनसा सन्निवेश्य।...

This means- ‘*Samādhi* posture, body with the chest, throat and head held straight, the senses together with the mind, breath in and out without being distracted, perform such at surfaces not uneven due to pebbles or infested with other natural distractions, such as dampness or insects, at a place where the scenery is pleasing to the eyes, forms may appear, when the fivefold perception of *yoga* arises from earth, water, light, air and ether and appears to *yogī*, he will not be touched by disease, old age or death. *Yogī*’s body becomes light, with clear complexion, will have scant secretions and excretions, and the body shall emanate a pleasant odor’. Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad provides the needed steps, to be in *Yogastha* state, identifies place where *Tapas* can be conducted, an act which does not seek any gain or fame, of this *yogic* practice, to rid oneself of disease, old age, and death, and states the observed changes to one’s physiological appearance. *Samādhi* practice has found significant acceptance among the practitioners worldwide, as everyone has discovered the visible and hidden advantages of such *Upaniṣadic* guidance. This technique developed during Vedic times, is still being adhered to, during contemporary times, as well, and is as effective now as it was back then; reason, our physiological, philosophical, spiritual, and mental framework has not changed, interplay of hunger, thirst, *Prāṇa*, *Apāṇa*, *Samāna*, *Udāna*, *Vyāna*, *Manas*, *Buddhi*, *Ahankāra*, and *Chitta* were active during Vedic times, and is equally active today.

Vedic Rituals and Recitations

The *Bhāva* that *Bhakti Sangīta* evokes within us, or of the cosmic vibrations that recitation of Vedic *mantras* with correct *Ucāraṇa* makes, which in turn makes the consciousness dance within, or the *Jāpa* of ॐ, which *Ṛṣis* point towards as a cosmic sound, to experience *Amṛtatva*. Invocation mantras such as this Ṛgveda 1.89.1 “आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतो...” invites noble thoughts to come from all directions. Vedic rituals, *mantras* recitation or conducting *yajña* using Agni as a medium to reach the unmanifested Vedic *Devas*, have significance in contemporary times.

One of the holy grails of sciences, especially life sciences, is to establish a correlation of molecules with the thoughts, with the challenge to scientifically define consciousness and its appearance at birth, and whether consciousness is permanent (in accordance with Vedic *Ṛṣis* guidance) or intermittent (in accordance with Buddhist philosophy). Several notable, prior noble laureates, biologist, physicist, chemists, mathematicians, have devoted, and are currently devoting their research efforts seeking clues, but it has stayed a mystery to many, and a general consensus is that searching for such is a professional suicide, as this is not a scientific exploration but a mystical art. Still, some work has been done, as a theoretical physicist does, when projecting theories for astronomical phenomenon, like black holes, or for existence of subatomic particles like Higgs Boson, and has been proposed by Oxford mathematician along with his Anesthesiologist colleague, and has generated some discussion.

The scientific efforts in correlation with cosmic vibrations of the R̥gveda's *mantras* because contemporary times are the times of sciences, discoveries, and inquiries. And inquiring minds need proofs, facts, and validation. Vedic *R̥sis*, who in fact may be considered as scientists of their times, provided us how they perceived (*Śrutis*) universal governing laws at the macro level, and we have been, since then, attempting to narrate such using poems, music, recitations, and philosophies (*Smritis*). *Bhakti-Yoga*, among its other peers, such as *Raja-Yoga*, *Gyāna-Yoga*, *Karma-Yoga*, and others, has been the path of many, has been identified as the easiest of all paths, and has given us several awakened ones, in the very recent past. And no, we have not yet attached wires to the head of a *Bhakta* to see if the inner workings of our brain now generate Theta waves, as we have already done so for the Zen monks and have identified their brains do switch to the Theta vibrations. But intuitively, we shall find similar outcomes from someone who is deep in *Bhakti Sangīta* recitation, say reciting *Shivohum*, a composition of Śankarācharya.

Vedic wisdom is as relevant today as it was back in the Vedic times, and that today's world is no different than the world of Vedic times and to comprehend such applicability, *Iśa Upaniṣad* (verse 6) demands us to see divinity in all, which then shall enable us to experience the divine within, and to experience such, we must go inwards, and to go inwards, we must be in the *Yogastha*, *Samatvam* or *Sahaj Avasthā*. Remember *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (2/4-5) which says that, '*Devas* reside within our sense organs, hungry and thirsty, eating and drinking from the *Indriyas*, and supreme Consciousness has entered via a cleft at the top of our skull, and resides near our heart, and is of the size of *Anguṣṭamātra*, and that the divinity surrounds us, awaiting invocation.'