

Inquiry into Atman: The Foundation of Leadership

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***Abstract.** Knowledge consists of two parts. Studying the world as an object is the lower part called materialism. Delving into the human being as the subject—as the one who studies—is the higher part called spirituality. This requires seeing oneself and others as not just the body-mind complex, but as the Atman. The Upanishads are the fundamental texts that explain the Atman, the real self of all beings. An understanding of leadership is possible, only through an inquiry into the Atman. Treating others as objects—as the body-mind complex—is power and not leadership. Many leadership authors and practitioners across the world are groping in the dark because of their not inquiring into the Atman. A sense of solidarity or oneness with all beings is an immediate outcome of an inquiry into the Atman, which provides a basis for moral leadership. Taking followers closer to the state of oneness enables them to lift themselves into their better self. This is moral leadership and authentic transformational leadership.*

Two Types of Knowledge

Knowledge consists of two parts. Studying the world as an object is the first half of knowledge. We use the word 'thing' to refer to an object in this world. Chairs, tables, trees, plants, the sun, the moon, the stars, etc., are all things or physical objects. This is physical science or the knowledge of sensory data, objective data brought by the senses from the world outside. This is called materialism, or lower knowledge. However, this does not encompass the whole of experience (Ranganathananda, 2005: 12-13).

Materialists are glued only to those realities that the senses reveal. Materialism is where knowledge is confined only to the external world, and to whatever comes out of sensory observation alone. An attitude with which we study only things revealed by the senses without taking into view anything else is called a positivistic attitude. Science in general is wider in scope than science merely dealing with matter (Ranganathananda, 2005: 17).

To deal with the human being merely as a material object similar to a machine will not help us to understand the various phenomena coming out of that being. We cannot explain all behavior merely based on the physical body. Behind the brain that is visible and tangible, there is something intangible and subtle. That is called mind. Now mind is not a thing that can be observed by the physical senses. It is beyond sensory observation (Ranganathananda, 2005: 20).

Arthur Eddington (1949: 2), a professor of astronomy and experimental philosophy, provided an interesting example. Suppose a scientist casts a net into the ocean and brings up a fishy assortment. Surveying his catch, he generalizes that no sea-creature is less than two

inches long. This is true of his catch. But one may object that the generalization is wrong by claiming: “There are plenty of sea-creatures under two inches long, only your net is not adapted to catch them.” The scientist dismisses this objection saying: “What my net cannot catch is not fish.” The catch stands for the body of knowledge that constitutes physical science, and the net for the sensory and intellectual equipment used in obtaining it.

It is not wise to rush to the conclusion that there is nothing except what we see with our five senses. We only know the universe from the point of view of beings with five senses. Suppose we obtain another sense, the whole universe must change for us. Suppose we had a magnetic sense, it is quite possible that we might then find millions and millions of forces in existence which we do not now know, and for which we have no present sense or feeling. Our senses are limited, very limited indeed; and within these limitations exists what we call our universe (Swami Vivekananda, 1958, “*Realisation*,” page 156).

When we study objects in physical science, a question arises about the subject, the one that studies, the observer that observes. Turning our searchlight in that direction is the second half of knowledge. The idea is to ask what this human being is as the subject, as the knower. A new tool is needed to probe into this field, using subjective datum from subjective experience, since one cannot know the knower. This cannot be studied objectively like studying the world of objects. This is also a science, a study of that, which impinges upon us at the sensory level, coming from beyond that level. This is called self-inquiry, spirituality, or higher knowledge. Swami Ranganathananda (2005: 13-17) provides a compelling argument about how the latest scientific discoveries have made it grossly inadequate and unscientific to confine oneself to only the lower knowledge. Upanishads are the seminal texts for the higher knowledge.

Seer-seen discrimination is the most fundamental approach in the inquiry of the Atman, the real self, the subject. The subject has to be different from the object, for perception to take place. Tables, chairs, and our garments are objects perceived by us, the subject. Similarly, our physical body is also an object perceived by us, the subject. Hence we, the perceiver, cannot be the physical body, the perceived. Similarly, we are aware of our thoughts and feelings. Hence we are not the subtle body that includes the mind and intellect, but we are the one who is aware of them.

The body is not the real human being, neither is the mind, for the mind waxes and wanes. It is the spirit beyond, the Atman, which alone can live for ever. The body and mind are continually changing, and are, in fact, only names of series of changeful phenomena, like rivers whose waters are in a constant state of flux, yet presenting the appearance of unbroken streams. Every particle in this body is continually changing; no one has the same body for many minutes together, and yet we think of it as the same body. So with the mind; one moment it is happy, another moment unhappy; one moment strong, another weak; an ever-changing whirlpool. That cannot be the real human being, the Atman or the spirit, which is infinite (Swami Vivekananda, 1958, “*The real nature of man*,” page 79).

The Atman never comes nor goes, is never born nor dies. It is nature moving before the Atman, and the reflection of this motion is on the Atman; and the Atman ignorantly thinks it is moving, and not nature. When the Atman thinks that, it is in bondage; but when it comes to find it never moves, that it is omnipresent, then freedom comes (Swami Vivekananda, 1958, “*The Atman: Its bondage and freedom*,” pages 257-258).

An understanding of leadership is possible, only through an inquiry into the Atman. Treating others as objects— as the body-mind complex—is power and not leadership. An inquiry into the Atman provides a basis for moral leadership and authentic transformational

leadership. A sense of solidarity or oneness with all beings is an immediate outcome of an inquiry into the Atman, and taking followers closer to this state of oneness is moral leadership. Krishnan (2007) showed that transformational leadership enhanced oneness.

Understanding Leadership

“Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns, 1978: 2). The lack of understanding about leadership is possibly because of confusing it with power. Most people who claim to be leaders are actually power-holders only.

Power is a relationship that seeks to address the goals of only the power-wielder. On the other hand, leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers. “This is done in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and followers” (Burns, 1978: 18). Leaders lead other human beings, not things. “To control *things*—tools, mineral resources, money, energy—is an act of power, not leadership, for things have no motives. Power wielders may treat people as things. Leaders may not” (Burns, 1978: 18).

Those who have limited themselves only to materialism can only be power-holders and can never understand leadership. They see human beings as nothing more than the body-mind complex, and their dealings with human beings are no different from their dealings with non-human beings. They treat human beings as things, and as objects to be used. They refuse to give any importance to the fact that human beings think and question. The table, the chairs, and the sun do not question. This is power, or sometimes called management as contrasted with leadership. Managers manage *things*, but leaders lead *human beings*.

Spirituality or the second half of knowledge is a prerequisite for understanding leadership. Human beings are not just the physical and subtle bodies (body, mind, and intellect), which are objects that can be perceived or sensed. The real human being is the subject, the Atman. Seeing others as something more than the body-mind complex is the foundation of leadership. It is not possible to understand leadership without an inquiry into the Atman. Many leadership authors and practitioners across the world are groping in the dark because of their total ignorance about the very existence of the Atman.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978: 19) defined leadership as inducing followers to pursue common or at least joint purposes that represent the values and motivations of both leaders and followers. The problem of addressing the values of both leaders and followers could be handled in two ways. Burns termed the first one as transactional leadership and the second as transforming or transformational leadership. Transactional leadership, which involves an exchange of valued things, is based on current values and motivations of both leaders and followers. Transformational leadership on the other hand, does not take the current values and motivations to be fixed, but rather seeks to change them. According to Burns (1978: 20), transformational leadership “occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality,” and results in a transforming effect on both leaders and followers.

Transformational leadership can be illustrated using the sheep-lion story, related by Swami Vivekananda (1958, pages 86-87) in his lecture on ‘*The real nature of man*’:

“There is a story about a lioness, who was big with young, going about in search of prey; and seeing a flock of sheep, she jumped upon them. She died in the effort; and a little baby lion was born, motherless. It was taken care of by the sheep

and the sheep brought it up, and it grew up with them, ate grass, and bleated like the sheep. And although in time it became a big, full-grown lion, it thought it was a sheep. One day another lion came in search of prey and was astonished to find that in the midst of this flock of sheep was a lion, fleeing like the sheep at the approach of danger. He tried to get near the sheep-lion, to tell it that it was not a sheep but a lion; but the poor animal fled at his approach. However, he watched his opportunity and one day found the sheep-lion sleeping. He approached it and said, 'You are a lion.' 'I am a sheep,' cried the other lion and could not believe the contrary but bleated. The lion dragged him towards a lake and said, 'Look here, here is my reflection and yours.' Then came the comparison. It looked at the lion and then at its own reflection, and in a moment came the idea that it was a lion. The lion roared, the bleating was gone. You are lions, you are souls, pure, infinite, and perfect. The might of the universe is within you. 'Why weepest thou, my friend? There is neither birth nor death for thee. Why weepest thou? There is no disease nor misery for thee, but thou art like the infinite sky; clouds of various colours come over it, play for a moment, then vanish. But the sky is ever the same eternal blue'."

Identifying ourselves with the physical and subtle body is the sheep state. Inquiry into our real nature as the Atman is the lion state. Enabling others to realize that they are not just the body-mind complex, but that they are the Atman, is transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership requires taking followers to a higher level and not to a lower level. That people can be lifted into their better selves is the secret of transforming leadership (Burns, 1978: 462). Taking others to a lower level or a worse place is a form of manipulation or treating others as objects to be used. We could thus distinguish between two types of transformational leadership—authentic transformational leadership or moral leadership that takes followers upward, and pseudo-transformational leadership that takes followers downward. Pseudo-transformational leadership is in reality no leadership at all.

Self-inquiry or an attempt to realize the Atman, results immediately in solidarity with all beings. The Atman in one person is not different from the Atman in another person. The Atman is infinite and one. Just as gold appears as the various ornaments like bracelet and ring, just as mud appears as the various pots, the one Atman appears as the various beings in the world. In addition, all of us are like branches of the same tree. Those who have acquired the second half of knowledge, will see oneness among the diverse beings in this universe, just as intelligent people will first see gold in all the gold ornaments.

Conclusion

There is widespread ignorance about leadership because most people have confined their education to only the knowledge of the objective world of objects. They have not endeavored to delve into the second half of knowledge, about the subject or the Atman. So long as human beings are seen as the body-mind complex only, and are treated as objects, leadership is not possible. Most of those who claim to be leaders are only power-holders.

Transformational leadership involves enabling followers to lift themselves to a higher level. Traveling closer towards realizing the Atman and understanding one's oneness with all beings is going upward. Enabling followers to move closer towards understanding their oneness with all beings is transformational leadership.

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