

Chinmaya Mission Washington Regional Center Annual Banquet
Rajiv Malhotra Keynote Speech on Hindu Identity
November 7, 2009

- Basis for having an identity (practical application in this world) while knowing the oneness of Vedanta – this is what Swami Chinmaya talked about and what the topic of the discussion is today
- Mr. Malhotra held a discussion with Indian youth (those who leave Bal Vihar and go to college) and there was one common issue raised by all of them which revolved around identity
 - What is our identity?
 - Why do we need an identity?
- There were three common arguments raised by the youth around why they didn't need to have a Hindu identity
 - 1) **We have to give up our identity – it is all nama rupa, maya, mithya, and isn't everyone the same, so why do we have an identity?**
 - 2) **Identity actually causes conflict, so if we don't have an identity (we are all the same anyway) then we don't have conflict**
 - 3) **We are American and isn't it un-American to be Hindu because we are all part of this big melting pot?**
- Answers to the question of “Why do we need an identity” using Vedanta:
 1. **We have to give up our identity – it is all nama rupa, maya, mithya, and isn't everyone the same, so why do we have an identity?**
 - One thing he learned from Swami Chinmayananda is the need to understand reality at both levels – the ultimate and the relative
 - While the ultimate is where we are heading and where the goal is but we are in a relative realm – the realm of dharma and karma where you have to discriminate between right and wrong, you must know the difference between dharma and adharma
 - If we didn't have to worry about the relative reality (if we could escape out of it) then there would be no Mahabharata or be conscientiousness or have karma;
 - all the things we perform and act are in the relative world, karma and dharma are in the relative world
 - We cannot mistake the end for the means, the means is through the relative world to reach the end
 - Pravithi – positive action from a sattvic point of view or detachment and aprivithi; the basic message is selfless action and not running away
 - Whole idea of the Gita is why you have to perform your dharma and not run away, escapist argument of Arjuna is no good, we cannot run away from karmic imprints and samskaras, we cannot be irresponsible and not take action, have to act in a detached way and not be attached to the fruits
 - This confusion has been a club with which many people argue against Hinduism as it is an escapist view from taking action so that they are not taking care of the poor and sick so have to send Westerners into India to go do this; It is an idealist view (or moral relativism) that there is no difference

between right and wrong because it is all one – this is the wrong understanding of Vedanta or Hinduism

- The role we have to play in the Lila (in the manifestation) is taught in the teachings by saying that you have to play your role the best way that you can (e.g. – if you are a doctor then you have to play your role as a doctor the best way that you can)
- When something selfish is at stake (e.g. - getting sued by malpractice) then we are able to discriminate and then we know we have to take action, we are very clear that these differences of right and wrong when personal interest is at stake
- When it is a matter of serving dharma or serving the cause of collective identity then it is a convenient excuse to make it an idealistic view
- 2 distinct views were outlined:
 - **Bipolar** – when the time has been split between the view of oneness and being in the practical world (turned off the oneness and in a materialistic life) – when you are not conscious of the oneness when dealing with the “real” world (when both are not there at the same time), alternating between the two states
 - **Bifocal** – I am in the world of competition (e.g. - I am maximizing my portfolio, being the best teacher or doctor, etc) while being conscious of the oneness; in carrying out my identity and performing my duties (as Arjuna has to do) it may also mean making tough decisions and taking tough actions and am also cognizant that we are all the same, but in the manifestation we are in different modes
 - Common mistake is not being able to reconcile the ideal oneness with the practical world in many people’s understanding – they fall into a bipolar mode instead of acting in a bifocal mode
- There is criticism in the academic world in the West that this philosophy of advaita has a pre-trance fallacy – (pre maturity is child state and transcending is when you are not limited by the intellectual mode (not limited by the mind) and have transcended it); allegation is that advaitas regresses us to childlike state instead of advancing into the transcendent state it
 - Argument vs this criticism says transcending doesn’t mean that your mind is no longer functional, it means that your mind is included, but is not a limiting factor; enlightened beings are not dysfunctional, they are very active and use the mental state when needed, they have not regressed to a childlike state
 - SO this is a confusion that Vedanta doesn’t tell you to take action or be smart and competitive, etc
 - The issue of ego is a very tricky one – we are to transcend the ego, but at the same time the starting point is one where the ego is very disturbed or distorted. You have to work first to purify the mind and live in a sattvic mode (where then you can transcend)
 - For example we often hear that if we stop thinking and just go with spontaneousness and go with your instincts (this is the transcendent state), but if you are an addict then your spontaneity is wrong, your

spontaneity has to be from a sattvic place, this spontaneity has to come from a clean/sattvic place to be right otherwise it could be a delusion (e.g. – needing a cigarette or getting angry)

- Purification of the person is not something that our tradition is avoiding
- Another issue that comes up is the question of whether there is a problem with this world or do we have to get out of this world? Did God make a mistake by creating a world and humans are supposed to fix this mistake because we are trapped in here? Or is our understanding of the problem a mistake and we have to fix our understanding to live in this world in a blissful way? Is it a cognitive shift that is needed?
 - Vedanta does not negate having a functioning identity in the world, the ultimate satchitananda and tat tvam asi – doesn't mean we don't perform our dharma and our role or have an identity in this relative world
- So now suppose having an identity is now proved to be ok, what is positive about our faith or Hinduism? What do we bring to interfaith discussions, which is distinct from the other religions? Not what is superior, but what is distinctive about it?
 - Pluralism that is built into Hinduism is distinct
 - Issue of history is distinct – (e.g. - God spoke only to a few prophets and then went away, this is a history dependent access to the truth as described in the Judeo Christian view of the world)
 - In Hinduism in each of us is the highest reality and it is dependent on each of us to access it, I don't have to access the truth through some historical experience of some other person. I can learn from it, but every one of us has the innate ability to get access to the highest truth without needing history (because of the idea of satchitananda). This works through yoga, etc. Many non-Indians have tried yoga.
 - Religious conflicts come into being because of competing and conflicting historical claims instead of enjoying and learning from the here and now.
 - Ishtadevata – deity, unlimited way of expressing
 - Tolerance – “I tolerate you” – this is heard very often, but this is an insult; when you ask some people from other religions what they think about other religions and other histories, they say I believe in religious tolerance and he says this is an insult
 - At an interfaith conference (Council of World Religions) he told them that they should change religious tolerance to mutual respect – other religions had a hard time accepting this because of the fact that Hindus believe in idolatry and believing in deities
 - He mentioned this to one of the swamis who was part of the Millennium Summit and he said he would push for this mutual

respect and not just religious tolerance and in the end it was passed with “mutual respect”

- Pluralism in Hinduism is very deep
- Sacredness of the Cosmos – the current environmental movement/sustainability is for a selfish reason (e.g. - we don't want Global Warming, species to die out, not to be able to use oil, etc) not because the earth is sacred, but because we don't want to not be able to use it; in Hinduism the cosmos is not separate from the Lord so when we are worshipping the Cosmos it is not from a pragmatic/selfish reason, but because it is one with all of us so we respect it
- The Divine as Feminine is very distinct
- Vegetarianism to end world hunger – you can feed 5 times as many people if they are vegetarian from a given piece of land than if they are meat eaters (e.g. – if used same land to raise cattle or just grow vegetarian food)
- Aging and Dying with dignity –the different stages of life, the ashrama model in Hinduism says that each age has dignity so don't have to keep trying to be young to be good – each stage is legitimate, youth culture because it doesn't have the ashrama model doesn't give you the dignified aging process
- Yoga, mind sciences, healing paradigms – its importance today and how it is being respected now, this is inseparable from Hindu Cosmology – connection of asanas to oneness (Hindu world view, nature of self, nature of prana, psychology of mind, Patanjali Yoga Sutra)
- Freedom from consumerism – many NGOs say consumerism is bad, but no underlying theological rationale to this, but just that the resources are starting to get limited. But Hindus are taught to be content on less, to not be dependent on desires to be happy, to have a state of anand which is not dependent on a lot of material things, so we have a philosophy of not be consumerist and yet being able to be blissful

2. Identity actually causes conflict, so if we don't have an identity (we are all the same anyway) then we don't have conflict

- “I am different from you” should not cause a state of anxiety – I should not feel superior or inferior just different. I am not claiming exclusivity from this or chauvinism (as this is what causes anxiety) – if you have difference with respect then you have difference without the tension, this tension exists when it is comes from a place of exclusivity
- Homogeneity is harmful, diversity is a principal of creation (e.g. – there are so many types of flowers, animals, etc) – just like we don't want genetics to create one ideal type of fruit or spice so homogenization is dangerous or harmful thing because diversity is part of creation and the whole manifestation is for the many-ness

- Also if we don't claim our own distinctiveness then we leave a vacuum for our youth because then they don't know who they are and can get into many bad things. When asked Indian college students at Rutgers University "What is your spiritual identity?" the most common answer was "South Asian." So there is a strange fear of claiming your heritage or identity as may not be able to explain it (e.g. – why have so many deities, etc) so then try to downplay their identity which can create an inferiority complex which leads to mimicking what is popular
- When say you are going to be same as somebody then it is a problem to have one way sameness – many other faiths are not open to having deities put up in their church to discuss Hinduism, but are willing to put their deity in our temple to discuss their religion – so this one way sameness is not right (e.g. – religions being similar to Christianity), one sided sameness is not acceptable – I will be the same as you, but you do not need to be the same as me.

2. We are American and isn't it un-American to be Hindu because we are all part of this big melting pot?

- It is very American to have hyphenated identities (e.g. – Italian Americans, Jewish Americans, Hispanic Americans, Black Americans) so there is not reason we cannot have Hindu Americans and it adds to the distinctiveness of the country and enriches American society
- Part of the open-mindedness of Americans is to be open to be explained about Hinduism, but nobody is going to do it for us we have to take responsibility and explain it to them; we become full Americans when we start contributing our distinctiveness to the table in a non chauvinistic or exclusive manner
- It is also very American to be critical of systemic biases so we as Hindus need to fight for our identity to have dignity or claim our space in a way that is based on mutual respect