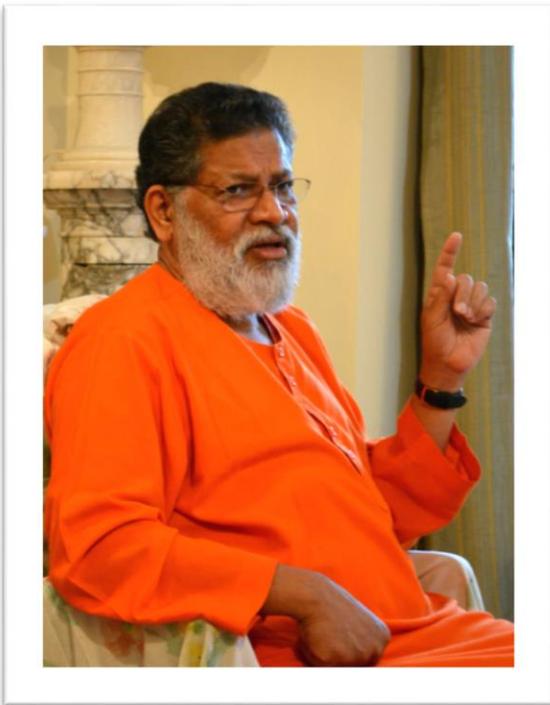


- The Quintessential Vedantin

MEET SWAMI BODHANANDA SARASWATI, RENOWNED
TEACHER OF VEDANTA AND FOUNDER OF 11
ORGANISATIONS AND NOTED SPEAKER AT THE LP EXPO
2011 IN MARCH THIS YEAR...

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Swami Bodhananda has often been described him as a cool, 'cutting-edge' swami. It was no surprise therefore that when I called him for an interview and wound up with a respectful "Pranam Swamiji", he responded with a "See ya, bye"! The vibrant voice reminded me of a CEO of a corporate firm. That is not far from the truth because management is one of Swamiji's abiding passions, albeit through the eternal values of Vedanta. A renowned teacher of Vedanta and meditation, he is the founder and director of 11 organisations and ashrams operating under the Sambodh Foundation in New Delhi. They include the Bodhananda Research Foundation for Management and Leadership Studies, Trivandrum, and The Sambodh Society in the United States.

He advocates employing the principles of Advaita Vedanta in modern management and has written several books on the subject such as Indian Management and Leadership, Management & Mahabharata, among others.

I met Swami Bodhananda at his ashram in Kaladi, Trivandrum, on a quiet Sunday evening.

Many people have the perception that Vedanta is highbrow philosophy and beyond their understanding. What is the essence of the Vedantic philosophy?

Vedanta is the final flowering of Indian spiritual thought. It is a very simple philosophy. Man is essentially spirit and the spirit is blissful. This awareness can be realised by selfless work and meditation. This understanding helps you to live in this world as a creative individual, invoking the spirit through your work. It is a matter of shifting your perspective from 'I am the body' to 'I am the Spirit'. A simple leap from limited awareness to limitless awareness.

All of us seek to be happy, content, creative, loving – this becomes your natural state of being when you realise that you are the blissful awareness in the presence of which everything happens.

So what is the difference between a Vedantin and a karma yogi?

There is no difference. We all seek happiness by having children, accumulating wealth, name, fame, even getting into heaven. But when you search for happiness, you forget that happiness is your real nature! Vedanta says that instead of seeking happiness in the outside world, realise the happiness inside you and then happily live in the world.

Working with happiness, you become a karma yogi. Working for happiness, one remains a samsari, a person of the world.

You are an advocate of employing Indian thought and philosophy in management. Could you please explain the core of the Indian style of management?

I wandered into this area when I observed that most of the people whom I addressed were professionals like doctors, engineers and lawyers whose biggest problem was management. Managing people, taking decisions, managing conflict, learning how to delegate, how to become productive and how to motivate people.

The Vedantic philosophy is very useful here. The individual is the ultimate resource. This Vedantic ideal can be used to shift your perception about yourself. Tapping into the resource that is your self, you will be able to become a productive worker, a competent team player and naturally motivated to work for higher goals.

Vedanta is about going beyond the conscious and subconscious mind, into the limitless consciousness of the self, where the individual is able to flourish and perform his duty at his highest potential. When an individual becomes aware of the true nature of his self, he goes beyond the aberrations of the mind that cause depression, delusions, boredom and laziness.

How effective would an Indian approach to management be, in today's cross-cultural work environment where one works with people from different corners of the world?

Today the world has become not just a global village but a single family. Both families and workplaces have a mix of individuals from around the world. Multicultural teams bring a varied mix of perspectives that promote creativity in work."

As advantageous as this diversity is, it still needs to be managed. And managing diversity comes naturally to India where several languages, races, religions and cultures have co-existed successfully in harmony for thousands of years. We have lived by the Vedic dictum Ekam sat vipraha bahuta vadanti, the truth is one, but people have different perspectives about it and all perspectives are equally valid, like a diamond with many facets. Indian thought has evolved out of this unity in diversity, by accepting differences and making diverse entities function together as an integrated whole. The Vedas called this 'ritam' – the harmonious balancing of diversity which is backed up by the invisible balancing power of dharma that does not come from a single religious or political authority.

Your books contain several case studies connecting mythology and management. How relevant are the

references to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in today's Kali Yug, where society and people are in a constant state of change, leaning towards a materialistic way of life?

Human nature has more or less remained the same over the ages. The same jealousy, greed, insecurity, anger, ego and fear continue to prevail among people in the relentless everyday struggle for survival. Earlier we used to fight striped animals in the jungle, now we fight striped animals in the corporate boardrooms of the concrete jungle. We are unable to express our divine nature due to the insecurity and fear within us. From Ravana to the terrorists of the present day, all people are essentially good but unaware of their goodness and their spiritual dimensions. Duryodhana's greed is not very different from the greed that we see among the developed countries and the politicians of the present day. All our issues over the ages deal with human frailties and the strategies that people employ in the struggle for survival and these remain the same.

The messages of the scriptures are extremely relevant in the present age for they are based on an understanding of the human spirit. For example, the Vedas say that by chanting mantras, you are able to control the world and create desirable outcomes. Chanting mantras help to organise your energy fields and develop your powers that help you accomplish your goals. Mantras help to motivate people and energise them. 'Workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose except your chains' is also a mantra. Entire countries were built on that mantra. In the present day, companies have mission statements as their mantras, which guide their activities.

Again, scriptures like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita deal with human conflict, both inside and outside. The context around which these epics were written was a battle. The battle goes on even today. One of the major challenges in corporate, political or social life is conflict management. And these are living epics which are still quoted by people from all walks of life in the present day. People often refer to situations being 'their Kurukshetra', of wanting to see a 'Rama Rajya' in society and so on. These scriptures are all the more relevant in the present day.

What is your advice to the managers of today?

All of us are managers. We have to manage not only our work but our homes, communities, societies and above all, our own selves. Management is the art of using limited resources to create optimal results. As resources become more and more scarce, we require more management.

Management is managing complexity while leadership is managing change. For example, a war is a war

whether it is fought with bows and arrows or intercontinental ballistic missiles. The technology has changed over the years, but what we really need to change is the mindset of the people. As Gandhiji said, 'the heart of change is the change of heart'. We need to make the transition from managers to leaders who can bring about this change."

How can one maintain balance between work, relationships and the self? We see glorious examples like King Janaka in the scriptures but in real life, many of us go crazy trying to maintain this balance.

Time management is the key here. Every individual has to consider all four aspects – work, family, the community and the self. Depending on your objectives, your goals and your nature, you have to give adequate time to each of these areas. You have to constantly update your skills to keep up your performance in the workplace, you have to spend quality time with your family, you have to give back to the community in which you live and also find time to nourish your body, mind and spirit.

How relevant is spirituality in these times where people are becoming homogenous in terms of lifestyle and culture and the motto of everyone's life seems to be work hard and party harder?

It is true that the world is becoming homogenised at one level. But at the same time, people are also becoming more and more individualistic. For example, the demand for custom-made products is growing like never before. This maintains the balance in society. Our scriptures have always promoted a healthy balance between the world and the spirit. Just like a computer needs a certain environment to function properly, the human brain also requires a certain level of comfort and convenience to work to its highest potential.

People are becoming more spiritual than ever before in the present day. They express their spirituality in many ways; there is the whole gamut of New Age movement. Spirituality is not sitting around meditating, doing nothing.

One must live and work in the material world, with the proper balance between artha (material security) and kama (worldly comforts) which leads to dharma (right living) that eventually leads to moksha, the final state of enlightenment, which is nothing but unfolding your complete potential in the world.

There are many theories these days on free will and destiny. The Gita talks about karma that manifests as one's destiny. Books like The Secret talk about the law of attraction, manifesting one's destiny through free will. Can you please share your thoughts on these contradicting theories?

Indian thought has always been about balancing different ideas. I believe that your destiny is determined both by your prarabdha, actions that you have done in the past and your purushartha, your efforts. Based on your past actions, you can make the choice using your free will to shape your destiny. Again, you cannot completely predict your future for that would take out all joy of living. A human being is not like a coconut tree that once fully grown, continues to produce coconuts and nothing else. Your life is ever dynamic, ever changing and what you have is the ability to control this change by tapping into the consciousness of your self.

What is the goal of human life?

To expand your awareness, to move into that level of awareness where you see and feel the presence of the spirit everywhere.

What is your message for Life Positive readers?

Be responsible. Responsibility is the ability to choose your responses to the ever-changing challenges of the world. You have that ability to choose your responses not from the memory alone but deep from the spirit in a spiritual, creative, healthy way. And of course, be happy.

Swami Bodhananda chuckled as he concluded the interview, handing out some very cool prasad of ladybird-shaped chocolates.

Source: Life Positive Magazine, February 2011
http://www.lifepositive.com/Lifemag/full_story.asp

Another version from the author
<http://awriterfromindia.blogspot.in/2011/02/applying-vedanta-in-management.html>

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