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Science and Sanatana Dharma—Accessing the Truth of Reality

Growing up in a Western society, I am very familiar with conflicts between organized religion and science. In school I learned about the struggles of Galileo and the Enlightenment, and when I started actively keeping up with news media I became aware of religious conservatism in contemporary American politics. As I learned of these antagonisms, I began to appreciate the consonance between my personal spiritual beliefs and the scientific knowledge I accrued. Learning about evolution, atomic theory, and relativity actually added new dimensions to my spiritual understanding instead of competing for my belief. Science has an outward focus—discovering the mystery of the universe, how it is born, sustained and destroyed whereas Sanatana Dharma has an inward focus—who we are, where we came from and how we are related to the creation. These two types of inquiry approach the ‘verifiable truth’ of reality from two different perspectives, and in doing so, they converge in ways that profoundly illuminate the unity of our inner consciousness and the world around us.

When Swami Vivekananda returned from his voyage to America in the late 19th century, he wrote extensively about the effects the ascent of Newtonian science and industrialism were having on Western intellectualism. As physics gained more and more prominence, the religious institutions of Western society crumbled—their dominion over the ‘true’ nature of reality was deferred to science. While this switch of authority represents a major intellectual evolution in the history of the West, the metaphysical considerations of religion, such as the nature of consciousness and the relationship between reality and ourselves, were swept under the rug as unnecessary mysticism. Vivekananda predicted that this abandonment of the *idea* of religion for a purely materialist engagement with the world would have severe implications for Western society, both ethically and intellectually. Needless to say, he was totally right—two world wars, the detonation of a nuclear bomb, and rampant structural violence within Western society itself left much of the Western intellectual community aghast by the middle of the 20th century. The

need for an intellectual paradigm shift was clear—when it became apparent that a world which idolized technology and materialism was rapidly spiraling out of control, intellectuals began to look for new perspectives and epistemological frameworks. Furthermore, developments in quantum physics and astronomy completely disproved the rational, objective, and orderly model of the universe that science had preached for the last several centuries. To understand their groundbreaking discoveries, many of these scientists turned to Vedanta, notably: Carl Sagan, Erwin Schrodinger, Robert Oppenheimer, Nikola Tesla, and David Bohm. In fact, Schrodinger's famous thought experiment about the half dead/half alive cat comes from a parable in the Chandogya Upanishad. Fritjof Capra best explains the relationship between Vedanta and modern science in the following statement:

"Modern physics has thus revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also IS an energy dance; a pulsating process of creation and destruction. The dance of Shiva is the dancing universe, the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another. For the modern physicists, then Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is a continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomenon. Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our times, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance."

Now this progression doesn't necessarily invalidate all science for the last 200 years. The rational, hypothesis testing method of inquiry has yielded many benefits for humanity, and in fact the tone of most of Hindu scripture more closely resembles scientific scholarship than religious works of other types. However, prior to the relatively recent quantum revolution in science, the general theme of science has been less metaphysical and more concerned with reality as an object of rational understanding. Vedanta discusses the fundamental limitation of this idea—while empiricism and logical inference produce meaningful knowledge, *Pratyaksha*, or sensory knowledge, is useless when approaching truths that are transcendent and spiritual in nature. This is why physicists such as John Wheeler noticed that the language of empirical science became increasingly complex and bizarre when attempting to explain the nature of the universe at extremely small and large scales, producing confusion and paradox instead of

understanding. To understand the fundamental nature of matter, energy, and consciousness, the ontological dichotomy between the scientist and the object of inquiry must be dissolved. This is a truth that implicates the totality of existence, and can only be understood through *Shabda*, or the knowledge that is at once the knower, the medium, and the object of knowing. The word “Vedanta” itself refers to a knowledge which, once understood, nothing else needs to be known—the conclusion of all experience.

This truth isn't just something you can read on Wikipedia and magically attain *moksha*—it must be embodied, lived, and understood as something integral to human existence. This is precisely the reason Sanatana Dharma exists. Many Vedic scholars such as Bhaskaracharya and Kanad made pivotal discoveries in astronomy, mathematics, and more “traditional” science, but what drew these scholars to the truth was the understanding that the knowledge they obtained must be unified within the context of existence and consciousness. What can we know about the universe, and ultimately how is this knowledge of ourselves? What types of ethical obligations does this knowledge reveal? The willingness of contemporary scientists to move towards this ontological unity proves that science can be more than a bunch of facts; it allows an engagement with the verifiable Truth of reality. The ultimate knowledge of reality is the ultimate knowledge of our Self. To phrase this in the words of one of the greatest pronouncements of Sanatana Dharma, *Tat TvamAsi*.

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