



**E - V E D A N T A**  
**Advanced Course**  
CHINMAYA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION  
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**LESSON 1**

***The Nine Blessings***

**T**O AWAKEN TO a spiritual life is a rare blessing accorded to the most evolved and accomplished among humans. Śaṅkarācārya delineates at the very outset of his composition, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, a list of nine rare blessings. In this first lesson, we shall study in detail what these nine blessings are and, in doing so, discover our personal road map to God-Realisation.

***Enumeration of the Nine Blessings***

The following verse from *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (verse 2) enumerates the nine blessings:

जन्तूनां नरजन्म दुर्लभमतः पुंस्त्वं ततो विप्रता  
तस्माद्द्वैदिकधर्ममार्गपरता विद्वत्त्वमस्मात्परम् ।  
आत्मानात्मविवेचनं स्वनुभवो ब्रह्मात्मना संस्थितिः  
मुक्तिर्नो शतजन्मकोटिसुकृतैः पुण्यैर्विना लभ्यते ॥

*jantūnāṃ nara janma dur labhamataḥ puṃstvaṃ tato vipratā  
tasmādvaidikadharmamārgaparatā vidvattvamasmatparam,  
ātmanātma vivecanam svanubhavo brahmātmanā samsthitiḥ  
muktirno śatajanmakoti sukṛtaiḥ puṇyairvinā labhyate.*

For all living creatures, a human birth is indeed rare; rarer still to attain full manhood; rarer than these is the sāttvic attitude in life. Steadfastness on the path of the dharma prescribed in the Vedas is yet rarer; much more so a correct knowledge of the deep significances of the Vedas. Differentiation between the Self and the not-Self, a personal experience and, ultimately, to become fully established in the Knowledge that the Ātman is Brahman – these come later on and culminate in Liberation, which cannot be had without

the earned merits of a hundred crores of lives lived intelligently.

The following is a list of the nine blessings:

- (1) Human birth (*nara-janma*)
- (2) Manhood (*pumstvam*)
- (3) Sāttvic attitude in life (*vipratā*)
- (4) Steadfastness on the path of righteousness, as prescribed in the Vedas (*vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā*)
- (5) Correct knowledge of the deep significances of the Vedas (*vidvattvam*)
- (6) Differentiation between the Self and the not-Self (*ātma-anātma-vivecanam*)
- (7) Direct experience (*svanubhava*)
- (8) To be established in the awareness of the identity of Brahman and Ātman (*brahmātmanā samsthiti*)
- (9) Liberation (*mukti*)

### ***1. Human Birth (nara-janma)***

Of the various kinds of births, human birth is indeed rare. There are so many species of living beings – unicellular amoebae, algae, plants, insects, fishes, animals, birds and so on. Among all, human birth alone is considered rare and noble. Why? Is it because of man's physical prowess? After all, the physical capabilities of most animals far exceed that of humans. The blue whale holds the world record for size; the cheetah holds the record for speed; dogs can hear a wider range of sounds than we can and even snakes can see a more diverse range of colours than their human counterparts!

Why then is human birth considered rare and noble? One reason why the modern scientific age, in ignorance, considers humans to be supreme is that scientists have deconstructed many natural phenomena and used that knowledge to create new sciences and technologies. But, even while science and technology has been harnessed to produce comforts and conveniences, it has also been misused to build weapons of mass destruction.

Human birth is noble, not because man has conquered nature by erecting

tall skyscrapers that embrace the clouds or massive dams that forestall the powerful flow of gushing rivers. Vedānta points out that human birth is exalted because:

- (1) Human beings alone are endowed with the faculty of self-awareness (i.e. the ability to be objectively aware of one's actions, words, thoughts and habitual tendencies) that is capable of effecting a quantum change in their thinking.
- (2) All creatures in this world lead 'programmed' lives, largely guided by their instincts. They do not have the ability to choose their response and re-program themselves. Human beings alone have this rare capacity.
- (3) Above all, human beings alone are capable of noble and divine pursuits. Man alone can ponder over questions of vital importance: Who am I? Is there a purpose to life? Is there a creator of the world? What is the nature of the world? What is my relationship with God? and so on.



**Exercise**

*Write down in clear and precise points how you think man is similar to and different from an animal. Now look at each point in which you have said that man is superior to animals.*

*For instance:*

- *Man can go beyond his instincts and climb the ladder of evolution.*
- *Man alone thinks of the higher non-material aspects of life, such as religion and spirituality.*

*Study each point and compare it against your life. Where do you stand in relation to it? Have you applied it in your life as much as you really can? Think!*



The Vedas talk of births higher than that of a human, such as that of a yakṣa, kinnara, devatā and so on. By puṇya, or the merits earned through good deeds, one attains the state of a god (a deva); by pāpa, or the sins accrued by doing unrighteous and prohibited actions, one goes to naraka (hell). And by an even combination of puṇya and pāpa, one gains the birth of a human being. However, then too we cannot consider birth as a deva to be superior to birth as a human

because:

- (1) Births such as that of a deva, kinnara, yakṣa and so on are only 'bhoga-kṣaya-artham', that is for the sake of enjoyment. One goes to the heavens, enjoys the exalted pleasures therein for a finite period of time and then is born again on earth. Going to heaven does not solve the problem of suffering. It is only a temporary relief. It is as if a person, having earned a good amount of wealth, went on a holiday to an exotic place and spent hard-earned money on pleasures – but then had to return when the money was exhausted. So too a person earns the wealth of puṇya (merit), goes to svarga (heaven), enjoys the pleasures there and, when his puṇya is exhausted, ultimately returns to earth – back to square one!
- (2) Also, in heaven, there is no progress in one's spiritual life. Only in human birth (nara-janma) is there a chance to put an end to the cycle of birth and death. It is only as a human that one gets the right mixture of joy and sorrow, which can generate dispassion for all finite pleasures and help one turn towards the Higher. It is then that an individual becomes qualified for scriptural study, reaches a Guru, learns the way pointed out by Vedānta<sup>1</sup> and finally becomes liberated.

## 2. Manhood (*puṁstvam*)

Having got a human birth, to have a 'masculine' temperament is even more rare. Hasty readers have concluded from such statements that women are prohibited from Vedāntic studies and that this is a condemnation of women. These conclusions are erroneous. The Hindu Scriptures are full of references to women being both students as well as teachers. Sage Yājñavalkya taught his wife Maitreyī; Kapila Muni taught his mother Devahūtī; Gārgī questioned the

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1. The term 'Vedānta' literally means 'end of Vedas'. The *Upaniṣads* that pertain to knowledge usually form the end portion of the Vedas, and hence it is the *Upaniṣads* that are basically termed 'Vedānta'. The term Vedānta can also mean the 'final essence' of the Vedas. Since the *Upaniṣads* deliberate on this topic, they have come to be called Vedānta. Texts such as *Bhagavad-gītā*, *Brahma-sūtra*, *Ātma-bodha*, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, *Pañcadaśi* and others also explain the Upaniṣadic thoughts and concepts; therefore, they too have come to deserve the appellation 'Vedānta'.

wisdom of Yājñavalkya in a learned assembly of scholars; Cūḍālā taught the king – her husband ... the examples are too many to enumerate here. Agreed that women are not as physically strong as men; but then we are talking of scriptural studies, which have to be undertaken with the brain – and in which brawn has no significance!

Why then is ‘manhood’ (puṁstvam) considered rare? Swami Chinmayananda explains this beautifully: “By ‘puṁstvam’ is meant the manly qualities of the head and the heart. A woman is a symbol of softness, attachment, sentiments and anxieties; she is essentially a mother. Wherever these qualities predominate, there we have a ‘woman’. In this sense, there are many women among the bearded ones, and if firmness of determination, detachment, intellectual hardiness and steadiness of composure are signs of a better evolution, these masculine tendencies of head and heart are amply seen in many women.” Thus manhood is not a reference to the body but to an intellect that is free of the attachments and sentiments that blunt its sharpness and make the power of reasoning twisted, shallow and defective.

Manhood in the spiritual context essentially means courage, strength, a constancy to pursue with steadfastness and the will to achieve in the spiritual path. This is indeed rare.



*Manhood in its higher and universal sense is expressed in a unique and telling manner in the poem ‘IF’ by Rudyard Kipling. It is interesting to note that this poem holds the world record for being the poem published the maximum number of times in anthologies of poems across the globe.*

### **If**

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,*

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*Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;*

*If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two imposters just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run –  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!*



### **3. Sāttvic Attitude in Life (vipratā)**

'Vipratā' literally means 'brāhminhood'. By this is meant once again a certain psychological nature characterised by 'sattva'. The *Bhagavad-gītā* enumerates the brāhmaṇical sāttvic qualities as serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, uprightness, knowledge and belief in God. Thus when Vedānta

declares that to be a 'brāhmin' is rare, what is meant is that to be endowed with these sāt̥tvic and divine qualities is rare. These qualities raise one from 'manhood' to 'mature manhood'.

#### ***4. Steadfastness on the Path of the Dharma Prescribed in the Vedas (vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā)***

Many consider mistakenly that it is enough to be a good person. But that is not so. 'Goodness' is a path to 'Godhood'. We have to build up sufficient purity of mind (citta-śuddhi) and single-pointedness of the intellect (citta-ekāgratā) in order to walk on the path to God-Realisation.

Śaṅkarācārya says that even among those who are endowed with sāt̥tvic qualities, there will be only a few who are steadfast and apply themselves faithfully to the techniques of spiritual progress, such as the daily study of the Scriptures, eschewing prohibited and desire-prompted actions, offering one's duties as worship unto the Lord, practising japa (repetition of the Lord's name), pūjā (worship) and so on. Not all take up these sādhanas (spiritual practices) even when advised. And after starting them, fewer still have the mental stamina to continue.

Spiritual practices, such as the study of the Scriptures, are sure methods to develop citta-śuddhi (purity of mind) and citta-ekāgratā (single-pointedness of the intellect) and move forward in our evolution. Thus, those who have moved to the next step of steadily living a life based on scriptural injunctions are more rare than those who are just merely good and mature humans.

#### ***5. Knowledge of the Deep Significances of the Vedas (vidvattoam)***

The *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* asserts: "Whatever is done with the knowledge of the meaning of the Vedic verses, and with an earnestness born of insight and faith, is more efficacious than what is done without knowing their inner meaning." Śaṅkarācārya explains this statement of the *Upaniṣad* with an example: "It is a matter of common knowledge that when a gemmologist and a fisherman each comes across a diamond, the former gains a huge profit by

his knowledge of the nature of the diamond, whereas the latter, because of his ignorance, fails to do so.” The example is self-explanatory – both the gemmologist and the fisherman get the diamond, but only the former benefits from it because he knows its worth. Thus, it is one thing to be able to chant the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, but quite another to understand, through the guidance of a Guru, its inner significances, deeper meanings and subtle suggestions. In contrast with ‘steadfastness in the Vedic path’, which means regular and dedicated religious practices, such as japa (repetition of the Lord’s name), chanting of the Vedas, performing selfless actions and so on, ‘vidvattvam’ refers to an understanding of the scriptural meaning in all its depth and expanse.

Vedānta is deep and subtle and cannot be grasped by the gross intellect. One needs a special faculty of perception – an intuitive capacity to go beyond superficial meanings – and a mature intellect to understand its uncommon and deep logic. Only by the dedicated practice of spiritual disciplines, that is *vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā*, does one gain the purity of mind (*citta-śuddhi*) and single-pointedness of the intellect (*citta-ekāgratā*) that, in turn, lead to an understanding of the subtler implications of the Vedas. Thus, *vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā* endows an individual with the capacity to proceed to *vidvattvam* – the right understanding of the Vedas. The former is action based merely on belief; the latter is action based on belief fortified with understanding. Hence, those who come to the level of *vidvattvam* are regarded as even more blessed than those who stagnate at the level of *vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā*, that is mere practice of spiritual disciplines without understanding their logic and purpose.

**6. Differentiation between the Self and the not-Self (*ātma-anātma-vivecanam*)**

The ‘Self’ is the pure Consciousness and the ‘not-Self’ is the inert matter vestures – the body, the mind and the intellect. A right understanding of the Vedas (*vidvattvam*) gives one the ability to differentiate the pure Consciousness from the matter vestures and, thus, one comes to be intellectually convinced that

one is not the body, mind and intellect. Those who can intellectually differentiate between the two – the Self and the not-Self, the Real and the unreal – have progressed to a more advanced state of spirituality. The later lessons will detail the methods of ‘ātma-anātma-vivecanam’. (See Lessons 15 and 16.)



**Exercise**

*Sit down in an erect and yet relaxed posture at a quiet time and in a place where you can be by yourself for a few minutes. Close your eyes, still your body and calm your mind. Quietly watch your body and mind. As you do so, you will get a clear sense of being apart from your body and mind. You are a powerful living presence who is a witness to your body and mind and yet quite apart from them. This quiet State of Being is the real You. This is referred to by Vedānta as the Self (Ātman). All else – be it the world and all its objects, people and situations and even your own body and mind – are different from the Self and are hence bundled together under a single term – the not-Self (Anātman).*



**7. Direct Experience (svanubhava)**

The previous qualification – ātma-anātma-vivecanam or differentiation between the Self and not-Self – is of the nature of intellectual knowledge. But ‘svanubhava’ is higher than mere intellectual conviction, for it is of the nature of direct experience. By the steady process of meditation (samādhi), one transcends the conditioning of body, mind and intellect and merges with the pure Consciousness within. Very few people can come to this sanctum sanctorum of the Lord in one’s heart. This is rare...very rare.

**8. To Be Established in the Awareness of the Identity of Brahman and Ātman (brahmātmanā samsthiti)**

A person may have had a momentary experience, a flash of awareness of the Self in an inspired moment of contemplation, but that is not sufficient. There is the lurking possibility of fall. One must be continuously aware of one’s true nature and abide in the understanding that the Self in me - the Ātman - is the Self - the Brahman - everywhere. This firm abidance has been described herein

as 'brahma-ātmanā-saṁsthiti'. This is the summum bonum of our existence in this world, the very purpose of birth. This is the accomplishment that fills the abysmal vacuum of one's heart with overflowing beatitude.

A person who has come to this state is truly a perfect person, a man of God-Realisation who has climbed to the very zenith of his spiritual evolution. Such a person has been glorified in the *Upaniṣads* as a Jīvan-mukta (liberated while living), Sthita-prajña (man of firm wisdom), Guṇātīta (one who transcended the three guṇas of sattva, rajas and tamas) and a Paramahansa (great saint). Even his mere presence is a benediction on this world.

### **9. Liberation (mukti)**

A person who has thus reached the very pinnacle of spiritual life is liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Once his body drops after the exhaustion of its destiny (prārabdha), he no more takes a new embodiment. This final Liberation from the body is called 'videha-mukti'. Those who are ignorant of their true nature, bound by the fetters of desire and cocooned in their own selfishness, they alone have to be reborn. A person free of all desires and selfishness has no rebirth. To fulfil which desire will he have to be born again? Śaṅkarācārya declares that this kind of perfect Liberation cannot be had without the earned merits of a hundred crores of lives lived intelligently.

Our salutations to such spiritual stalwarts!

### ***Milestones on the Road to Perfection***

On the basis of the discussion so far, we can chalk out our road map to perfection (arrow indicates the direction of progress):

**HUMAN BIRTH** → manhood → noble attitude in life → steadfastness on the path of dharma as prescribed in the Vedas → knowledge of the deep significances of the Vedas → differentiation between the Self and the not-Self → direct Experience → establishment in the awareness of the identity of Brahman and Ātman → **LIBERATION**.

By the Lord's grace and the result of our past deeds, we have attained

human birth and have also stepped into the spiritual path. We have come a long way. There is yet more distance to be covered. It is now incumbent on us to march forward and claim our birthright, Self-Knowledge, which alone can free us from all bondage and liberate us from the thrall of samsāra (cycle of birth and death).



### *Verses for Reflection*

दुर्लभं त्रयमेवैतद् देवानुग्रहहेतुकम् ।

मनुष्यत्वं मुमुक्षुत्वं महापुरुषसंश्रयः ॥

*durlabham trayamevaitad devānugrahaHetukam,*

*manuṣyatvaṁ mumukṣutvaṁ mahāpuruṣasaṁśrayaḥ.*

Manhood, burning desire for Liberation, the capacity to surrender completely to a Man of Wisdom – these three things are rare indeed, and wherever they are found, they are due to the Lord's own Grace. (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* of Śaṅkarācārya, verse 3).

तज्ज्ञानं प्रशमकरं यदिन्द्रियाणां तज्ज्ञेयं यदुपनिषत्सु निश्चितार्थम् ।

ते धन्या भुवि परमार्थनिश्चितेहाः शेषास्तु भ्रमनिलये परिभ्रमन्तः ॥

*tajjñānaṁ praśamakaraṁ yadindriyāṇāṁ tajjñeyaṁ yadupaniṣatsu niścītārtham,*

*te dhanyā bhuvī paramārthaniścītehāḥ śeṣāstu bhramanilaye paribhramantaḥ.*

Knowledge is that which quietens the senses. That Knowledge alone is worthy of knowing which is the ascertained theme of the *Upaniṣads*. They alone are blessed persons who strive to realise the Supreme Truth, whereas all others are wandering in the quagmire of delusion. (*Dhanyāṣṭakam* of Śaṅkarācārya, verse 1)



## *Questions*

### *I. Answer in brief*

1. What are the 'nine blessings'?
2. Why is 'human birth' considered rare?
3. What is the meaning of 'purnstvam' (manhood)? Are women debarred from Vedāntic study?
4. What is vipratā? What is its role in the spiritual pursuit?
5. In what way is 'vidvattvam' superior to 'vaidika-dharma-mārga-paratā'?

### *II. Answer in detail*

1. What are the milestones on the 'Road to Perfection'? Briefly explain each of them.

