

Swami Yogatmananda

(Revered Swami Yogatmananda is the Spiritual Head of the Vedanta Society of Providence, Rhode Island. As a part of the celebration of the completion of 40 years of Vivekananda Vidyapith, Swami Yogatmananda was invited to visit the Vidyapith and give a talk on "Vedanta and Sports," on Saturday, May 6, 2017. The following lecture has been prepared for publication from a video recording.)

Vedanta and Sports

My dear Uncle and Aunty, all other office bearers, workers, volunteers, teachers and most importantly, the present and past students of Vivekananda Vidyapith and others who have assembled here! I am always very happy to come here. It is here that I am very enthused to think of the presence of Swami Vivekananda in the hearts of so many people.

Swami Vivekananda had mentioned, almost at the end of his life that in times to come thousands of Vivekanandas will arise. Its preceding sentence was that only another Vivekananda can understand what this Vivekananda has done. In time, thousands of Vivekanandas will come because Vivekananda is not just a person or a body. Bodies come and go, but Vivekananda was a spiritual force that would enliven people. It will energize them to express their inner divinity. Through this spiritual force, Vedanta spread all over the globe whether in India or Japan, or United States or Africa or Canada. You may be in any part of the world, but these thoughts are so powerful that every one of us will be able to feel the very special type of power. These thoughts will make that positive force, the positive tendencies lying in us, to get energized and enlivened. These tendencies will become dynamic and thus make us feel what our life is for, what is the goal of our life and we will be able to march towards that. As you all know Swami Vivekananda has mentioned several times in his writings, in the footsteps of his teacher Bhgavan Sri Ramakrishna that the goal is to realize our divine nature. He says that each soul is potentially divine, and the goal is to manifest that divinity.

When I was reading the topics for talk, I saw this topic, “Vedanta and Sports”. This topic is a little different from the normal topics that are taken up for discussion in Vedanta Societies, but it wasn’t really new for me. I had spoken on this topic a few times before. I knew that Uncle will not object to the selection of this topic and he has no reason to object as I have selected it from his list. Even before giving a lecture on this, I had thought about this topic for a long time. Everybody loves sports and the love for sports is universal. You won’t find people who do not love sports at all, other than one or two exceptions here and there. As a rule, you will find that **people love sports**. You can see that from how much time, energy and money is invested in sports. I don’t think there is another endeavor that takes as much of human resources as sports activities. It is, therefore, very interesting to see what makes people love sports and why.

We all know, as students of Vedanta and students of Swami Vivekananda’s thought that “Self” alone is real, and “Self” alone exists. All that we see is the manifestation of that “Self”. It is that one “Self” that appears as so many without losing its oneness. When you go near the ocean and look at the waves, they are many and constantly rising and falling in infinitely many ways. But ocean is one. All these waves are changing, temporary, and are illusory manifestation of the one ocean. So, every wave can lead you to the ocean. If you look for the source of the wave, it leads us to the ocean. Why are we prompted to look for the source of the wave? That is because it rises. It was not there before and suddenly it appears. So, we look for the sources of things that come and go. Where do those waves merge?

In fact, in Taittiriya Upanishad you will find that God has been defined by the teacher for the benefit of the student. The student, Bhrigu, came to the teacher, Varuna (who is the father of Bhrigu) and asked him, “O father, worthy of my worship, please teach me about Brahman”. Then the father said, “All these beings that you see and think of, ‘where do they rise from?’. I had this question when I was young. Many children have this question when they are young and later on they forget about it. Two weeks ago, when I was in Toronto this question came up. After my lecture there was a question answer session. One gentleman asked me this question. He said that he did not have this question, but his little granddaughter had asked him this question which he could not answer. The question was, ‘where was I before I was born?’ Parents try to explain that “you did not exist then. You were yet to exist etc.” Children keep

thinking about it and they feel that 'I was somehow somewhere in some form.' This is the question we all have to think about. We find that when children grow older and when they do not get a convincing answer, then instead of pursuing it further to find the answer themselves or asking to a knowledgeable person, they feel that this question does not have an answer. By that time seemingly more important questions take over their lives, like, 'How to earn a lot of money?', 'How do I get good grades at school?' etc. Then, the original question goes to the back burner and it stays there.

But, after some time this question starts making rounds again in another form, "what is the meaning of all this? The answer to this question was given in the Taittiriya Upanishad, "Look at the root of everything, where everything comes from, where it is sustained and where it goes back". A perfect analogy is the ocean. Waves come from the ocean, are sustained by the ocean, and go back into the ocean. This is the way we can learn about the "unknown" from what is "known". A skilled teacher always starts from what the student already knows and then gradually leads the student to that which student does not know. We know the things in the world. We know our names and forms, our parents, friends, schools, Vidyapith, and all the things around us. How do I learn about God or Brahman from all these things? Well, think deep and explore 'where from all these came.' When you see a tree, ask yourself where did it come from? You will find that a tree comes from a seed. So you know that it came from something. Then think of what it is sustained by, and where it goes back. That is what needs to be known. That is to be realized. This is how the process has been told. Don't think that I forgot the topic of my talk, 'Vedanta and Sports'. This happens many times with the religious preachers. They go into some other topic, spend half an hour, and forget what they started with. At least today I am not doing that. Coming back to sports - it is an important manifestation in human society. It is such a strong tendency in human beings that we love sports so much and have so many, various historical examples of them.

About 15 years ago I had gone to Indianapolis to give a lecture. I was staying there with one nice family. Their friend called them and asked them to turn on the TV and watch their team, Indianapolis Colts, as they were winning the game. They said that they must support their team. It was a rare event. They turned on the TV and started watching the game. I was also

watching although I was not well versed with this game. It was amazing to see a player carrying the ball gets trampled by so many hefty players and still he comes out of the pile, gets up, and starts playing again. While this game was going on, a tornado warning came on TV. In the mid-west they are always prepared for the tornados. They immediately decided to go to the basement and they were not going to miss the game as they had a TV in the basement also. But due to some technical glitch, the TV in the basement refused to start. The couple decided that they must watch the game even if the tornado comes. Their intense desire was to support their team that was playing 1,000 miles away!

Modern Physicists debate about the topic of 'the action at a distance'. These people are sitting in front of a TV in life-threatening conditions to support their team that is 1000 miles away! It is so captivating to see their commitment to sports.

Just a few years after that, our New England Patriots team was playing in that Gillette stadium in Foxboro. People said that it was a very important game. Fans were not playing it, but they used to say that 'we have to win this game.' It was terribly cold. The temperatures were single digits and it snowed for few days. Due to security reasons, even umbrellas were not permitted in the stadium. The parking was very difficult due to the unplowed snow. I watched on TV the reporters interviewing the fans and asking people, 'this is the worst situation weather-wise and parking-wise, are you still going to go to the game?' The fans were so committed to go to the game. They said, "yes, we are going to the game no matter what difficulties are there.' I am just illustrating how much people love sports. In these conditions the stadium was packed. There was no room left. This shows, **when we want to do something, in spite of many difficulties we just do it.** We don't care for all the obstacles.

On the other hand, if we don't want to do something, even if the task is very easy, we will find hundred excuses for not doing it. I ask people, "Why don't you come for meditation when you say that you like meditation?" and I will hear several excuses. But if you love something you don't give any excuses. So why do we love sports? **It is connected with our inner divinity and that same divinity being in everyone.** One reason for our love for sports is that it presents a funny combination of being at war and being with friends. You are fighting in a way with your opponents because you want to win, you want to defeat them, and you want

to vanquish them. You want to excel in your game by defeating the opponents, but simultaneously you think your opponents as your friends and that is why at the end of the game you shake hands with the opponent players. Is any game possible without an opposition? Of course, games like Solitaire are played by people just by themselves and some of them cheat themselves in solitaire. Think of a school for thieves. Although this is a joke, it will convey deeper message if we follow along. It seems they teach in that school on how to 'steal' from left hand with right hand without left hand knowing about it. In sports since you have opponents and competition and friends, you want to do your best.

Similar principle is present in Vedanta also, which is that the "self" in all of us is the one and the same. Although bodies are different, the 'self' is not different from body to body. This principle is responsible for our desire to get unified and become one, to connect to others through love. All these are dependent on our inherent oneness. For one person to love another person there must be something common in them. The "self" is that thing common in them. In love, therefore, I and my beloved at some level are one.

Once I asked a child where he lives. He pointed to a house and said, "That is my house." I asked the child if that house is his or his dad's and he responded by saying 'it belongs to us.' It shows there is togetherness, and whatever belongs to them also belongs to me. That happens because of love. The oneness forms a strong connection among sports athletes and brings them together. Thus, **oneness comes out in the sports**. You will also see that playing sports is a good way of reducing the ego. Our main problem is in believing that our true nature is 'our ego' that is 'our little self'. Ultimately everything is one, but ego makes separations. Because of ego we think "I and the world," "I and the others," and "mine and yours." Therefore, Sages say that ego is the obstacle in realizing the Truth.

There are various kinds of spiritual practices like meditation, selfless service, singing bhajans, and others. All such practices are meant to reduce or subdue our ego, and connect with the divine source. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'when the ego is gone, then all the problems are solved'. We have so many problems. The question is how to solve all problems. The trick of solving all problems is to remove the source of all problems which is ego. **Sports are a very good vehicle for getting a jolt to the ego** because sports constantly keep reminding us

that although I feel that I am great, somebody is better than me. Someone comes and defeats you and shows you that you are not always good. Thus, it is important to reduce ego, try to see the same Self in all, and connect with others. You can see that idea with more clearly in team sports.

A team forms a united ego. In a team you feel that you are not a separate individual, but you are a part of the team. The team has combined “I-ness” and the players are all parts of that combined ego. The body-minded ego has scope to expand in team sports and that is why you see more joy also. Another great thing about sports is that you want to excel beyond just winning. You want to achieve perfection. That is one way of expressing the goal in life, which is to achieve ‘perfection.’ Sports can give us an idea of making efforts **to achieve perfection in life**. There is no purpose for sports other than the joy of it. We play because we want to derive joy from it. Of course, there is commercial side of sports, but there are so many other ways of achieving commercial goals. People are attracted to sports for the joy of it. In fact, you spend money to play sports, not to get money.

There is this ancient question, “Why did God make this world?” or “What was God’s purpose in creating this world?” We, human beings, give various purposes for the creation of the universe. But, we are not always satisfied with the answers. If there is really a purpose to create this universe, then it makes God imperfect. Just follow the logic behind this if God has a purpose to create this universe, then it means that God needs something to be happy or to be complete. If God needs something to make Him complete, then He is not perfect. Thus, there is no purpose for a complete and perfect God to create this universe. Perfect and complete God does not want anything. Since we don’t see any purpose for this world, scriptures say that ‘the creation of the universe is a sport of God’. Just as we play to enjoy, **God has His way to play to create this universe**. Upanishads say that God thought “Ekoham Bahushyamah”, meaning ‘I am One, I want to be many.’ The play of God is to ‘manifest as many’.

Brihadaranyaka Unpanishad gives more elaborate description of this. It says that God was bored of being alone and hence created Universe. The teaching should be given to the person at his/her level. When we are alone, we get bored after some time. We feel we are not being connected. So, we understand this idea of ‘God being bored’. Upanishad says that God

thought 'Ekaki Na Ramate', meaning "I am not happy being alone'. We also inherited this idea of getting bored when we are alone for a while. It is true that after some time we get bored with the company of people, but it is also true that after being alone for a while we get bored.

A student in a summer camp was playing with friends. But, after a while she went away, sat in a quiet place, and started crying. When people asked her for the reason, she said that 'she wants to be alone'. Then, after 10 minutes she came looking for her friends. Similarly, God also wanted company and created all of us from Himself. God does not have any gender although we refer to God as He. Sometimes people quarrel whether God is a man or a woman. In the Bible it was not mentioned that God was a man or a woman. But, Bible says that God created Adam first and then used his (Adam's) rib to make Eve. Our Swami Sarvagathananda used to joke that 'it was in fact Adam's spine, not the rib, which was used to make Eve. That is why men are spineless.' There is another amusing story that God made Eve first. Then, Eve was feeling lonely. Then she requested God, "Can you make a man for me?" God told her, "Do not ask for such thing. He will create a problem for you. Later he will start claiming that he was the first and you came later. Anyway, I will fulfill your wish. Just keep this between us." Remember here that God was a woman. The point is that God got bored being alone and as His/Her play God created the universe. Thus, One became many. Sport helps us connect with other people and make us feel the same reality in every one of us.

Sport also helps us to learn **detachment**. It is an important necessary virtue we should have. In sports you have assumed identity as a member of a team. It is a temporary identity. After the game, suppose the opposite team hires you, then you become a member of that team. This assumed identity is a very important and penetrative principle because our scriptures tell that "I am so and so' is an **assumed identity**". After spiritual practices a seeker realizes that "I have this body which is 5' and 6" tall or other such ideas which form my personality is an assumed identity. My true nature is divine which is beyond body and mind." In sports we clearly separate the assumed identity and we do not carry that identity elsewhere. We have many examples of players who had switched their teams to their rival teams for more money or other benefits. Players had no problem, but the fans attached to the players get upset. Thus, players show us that they had assumed identity to play and that identity is

different than their true identity. Same thing happens in a drama. Different people assume different roles. Then, they perform a drama and then they forget their assumed identities as characters. Similarly we should learn that being a son or daughter or father or a mother etc. is our assumed identity in a play. It is an assumed identity for the play of life while our true identity is divine. As Shakespeare has said that the world is a stage and all men and women are playing their roles. Thus, we assume an identity to play our role in the world, but it is not our true identity. Our true identity is divine.

Many things we can learn from sports. In sports, when players lose a game they say they will do better next time and will win. **There is always a next time** in sports. This is very important for a spiritual practitioner because if you fail to achieve the results you were looking for, don't get disheartened. There is always a next time. Try it again. As Swami Vivekananda says, "Tell yourself, 'I am divine, I am Brahman.' Even if you fall a thousand times, still stand up and say, I am divine' 'I am Brahman'.

Sport also teaches us that there is **a level of uncertainty** in sports as to which team will win. It is a reflection of the world too. In life also, we make plans, and we calculate about the result, but we have no clue what will happen at the end. Just as in sports, uncertainty makes the sport interesting, uncertainty in life make life interesting. If we know in the beginning which team is going to win, then there is no point in playing the game. Recently, the best tennis player Djokovic lost against an unknown player. We can predict using the statistics, but it will not be better than the weather predictions. A recent example is in the Super Bowl game this year. New England Patriots came back from a half-time deficit of 28-3 to win the game beating Atlanta Falcons. It looked like the Patriots had no chance to win, but they did. That is the nature of uncertainty in sports that should remind us of uncertainty in real life also. Jesus said, "Do not think of laying wealth for tomorrow who knows what tomorrow will bring." We buy 'security' which is totally 'insecure'. I read somewhere a definition of 'dividend'. It is 'certain per annum, per centum perhaps'. We bank a lot on this. But, **there is nothing certain in this world except God**. Therefore, hold on to the permanent reality that is God. You don't have to go somewhere far away to find God. God is in every one of us. Each one of us is 'proof' that God 'is'. Sri Ramakrishna has two beautiful words, "Ishwar alone is '*vastu*', and everything else is '*avastu*,'"

which means that God alone is 'existence' all else is just names and forms. God is the only secure thing and everything is insecure. I remember in Nagpur in one of our celebrations we had a tent erected and devotees were assembled and a swami was giving a discourse. Right at that time a big violent storm started and the tent started shaking. People were scared and they ran inside the building. But swami sat there on the stage when the entire tent was emptied. After few minutes when the storm subsided everyone got back outside and into the tent. Before the discourse could start someone asked swami, 'were you not scared?' Swami said, 'I too was scared. I did exactly the same thing you all did. You went to the place that you thought was the safest. I exactly did the same thing. I started thinking more intently about God. I thought God is the safest place.'

In sports we see the **mixture of freedom and bondage**. In life we feel that we are free but then again we realize that we are bound by and bound to so many things. Even our own body does not obey us. We are slaves of our body. We are slaves to the mind. We are slaves to so many desires that keep rising in us. We are slaves to so many roles we play. As a child we feel that we are under the dictates of our parents. Parents bring so many restrictions. So, the child wants to grow and be free from the parents dictates. But, many grow up and they write poems on how nice the childhood was. All such poems are written by the grownups. No child writes poems like that. In sports there is freedom, but you have to play by the rules. You cannot question the rule. For example, in the basketball game you cannot score points by kicking the ball in the basket. On the contrary, you cannot score points by throwing a soccer ball by hand into the net. You are bound by the rules of the game. You have the freedom within the rules. Rules are changeable and you are expected to follow the current rules of the game. If you want to change the rules, then you can, but then it becomes another game. Even in science, where rules are called laws, not all events follow the laws all the time. When an event does not follow the law, then the law has to be changed. That is how our Newtonian theory of Mechanics evolved to a Quantum theory of Mechanics. It is an important thing to learn in sports as well as in life. In mathematics you make certain basic rules as axioms, which are absolute and unquestioned truths, and then you formulate mathematical theorems using those axioms. Not anything can be an axiom. For example one axiom cannot be proven by the other axioms

because they become redundant then. Also, one axiom cannot contradict another axiom. These are the rules and mathematics developed on these axioms. Thus, if we accept certain rules, then we have to follow those rules and play the game. The only thing is that the rules apply to both the teams. Otherwise it will be an unfair game. The Universe is just like that. We try to bind the Universe to various sets of rules, but the reality keeps showing that it cannot be bound by rules. Universe tells us that it is free and we cannot bind it by our rules. That is the aspiration of freedom we all have. If we are bound by rules then we are not free. If you bind reality to rules then reality is not free. So **the Reality that is God cannot be bound by any laws**. Bondage is manifested in this multiplicity we experience. Once we have bondage, then there are rules to follow. Sport is a wonderful illustration of bondage and freedom. Our aspiration is freedom and we achieve that by realizing our true nature which is ever free and perfect. This is a very important idea we can learn from sports. **God also plays sport and it is called 'God's leela.'** We are indeed part of that *leela* of God.

I thank you all for hearing to me patiently for more than an hour. I do not stop my talk quickly because if someone wants to sleep, I let him/her have at least one hour of good sleep. I am thankful to Uncle and Aunty and all wonderful volunteers of this wonderful Vivekananda Vidyapith. As I mentioned this is a unique institution in all of America.

Thank you.