

"THE POINT WITHIN THE CIRCLE" A VEDANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Paper read In The Lodge St Michael No 2933 E C

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Introduction

At the opening of every lodge of Master Masons, the following exchange takes place:

- WM: Bro JW, whence come you?
JW: The East
WM: Bro SW, whither directing your course?
SW: The West
WM (to JW): What inducement have you to leave the East and go to the West?
JW: To seek for that which was lost, which, by your instruction and our own industry we hope to find.
WM (to SW): What is it which was lost?
SW: The genuine secrets of a Master Mason
WM (to JW): How came they lost?
JW: By the untimely death of our Master Hiram Abiff.
WM (to SW): Where do you hope to find them?
SW: With the Centre.
WM (to JW): What is the Centre?
JW: A point within a circle, from which every part of the circumference is equidistant.
WM (to SW): Why with the Centre?
SW: That being a point from which a Master Mason cannot err.

Those who are Royal Arch Masons will be aware that in that degree the candidate is informed that the genuine secret of a Master Mason is the long lost word; which is the ineffable or inexpressible name of the Supreme Being. However, any discussion on the Royal Arch would be inappropriate in this paper, except to observe that the centre would appear to be equated with the Great Architect of the Universe.

The concept of the circle itself is interesting. It is generally equated with the Eternal. Having neither a beginning nor an end. Those who are familiar with the ceremonies of the Royal and Select Master, also known as Cryptic Masonry, would be aware of the symbolism of the circle. Unfortunately, once again any discussion on the other orders of Freemasonry would be incongruous.

The above exchange between the Worshipful Master and the Wardens at the opening of the Master Mason's Lodge is curious. This reference to the centre being the "point within the circle" is not explained in the ceremony of the Master Mason. Neither does there seem to be any direct reference to this in any of the other Masonic orders; at least to the best of the writer's limited knowledge. Yet we are repeatedly reminded that the centre is the "point from which a Master Mason cannot err".

This is of course not unusual in Freemasonry; which is a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. One of the strengths of Freemasonry is that each member is free to interpret the symbolisms embedded in the ceremonies based on his own religious beliefs or philosophies. There are no answers. Just food for thought. This is also probably what gives Freemasonry its universal appeal to men of all faiths.

Research into Masonic texts revealed differing explanations as to the centre being the "point within the circle". By way of illustration of the differing theories that have been expounded, two (2) views are set out below:

In "A Dictionary of Freemasonry" by Robert Macoy the "point within the circle" is explained with reference to a quotation from St. Augustin as follows:

"As in a circle, however large, there is one middle point, whither all converge, called by geometricians the centre; and although the parts of the whole circumference may be divided innumerably, yet is there no other point save the one from which all measure equally, and which, by a certain law of evenness, hath the sovereignty over all. But if you leave this one point, whatever point you take, the greater the number of lines you draw, the more everything is confused. So the soul is tossed to and fro by the very vastness of the things, and is crushed by a real destitution, in that its own nature compels it everywhere to seek one object, and the multiplicity suffers it not."

In "The Arcana of Freemasonry, A History of Masonic Signs and Symbols" by Albert Churchward, he gives the following, somewhat lengthy explanation:

"One of the most interesting symbols is that Circle with a point in the centre. For the original of this we must return to the old wise Brothers of Egypt; the Mystery Teachers of the Stellar Cult, although it was afterwards brought on in the Solar, who had worked out the whole of these Astronomical observations. It was previously stated that the Pole Star North was symbolised by the one All-seeing Eye, also called the Great Judge of All; also that the dot or Star at the summit of a cone or Triangle, was the Ideograph for Horus, the God of the Pole Star North. The point in the centre of a Circle is equal to the point at the tip of the Triangle, and this Glyph is equivalent to the Eye; the two are synonymous. In this circle of the Pole Star there were seven attributes, called the Seven Glorious Ones, grouped together in the constellation of the Lesser Bear, revolving around the Most High, the Great Judge, the "All Seeing Eye", symbolised by the Pole Star, which was the centre of the circumpolar enclosure of Heaven or Paradise situated at the North. The Eye, or this dot, or Pole Star, in the centre of the Circle, therefore became a Symbol or type of the eternal, because apparently, it never changed with time. It was the earliest type of Supreme Intelligence which gave the Law, which was unerring, just, and true, and it became a standpoint in the heavens for the mind of man to rest on at the centre, and radiate to the circumference- a point within a circle from which a Master Mason could not err. It was a type or Symbol of the Just One, or the Just God, who gave the Law, the Great Architect of the Universe, just and unerring. We have made a bad innovation in our Ritual, because this is not the place where one learnt the secrets of a Master Mason, and this has been done, apparently, because the true gnosis of the Ancient Ritual of Egypt was not known to those who compiled our Ritual in its present form."

As it can be seen, the centre as the "point within the circle" has been interpreted in these Masonic texts to mean the one point which is the convergence of souls "tossed to and fro by the very vastness of things" and/or, alternatively, as a symbol to mean the "All Seeing Eye" representing the eternal and unchanging supreme intelligence. There may well be other theories as well. Both the above theories have their appeal depending on one's perspective. In addition, they echo concepts which are found in Vedanta philosophy.

Vedanta

Before embarking on Vedanta and its thinking, it should be clarified that it is not the intention of this paper to either give a discourse or treatise on Vedanta philosophy or provide any definitive views. That would be too lofty an ambition. The only purpose

of this paper is to ignite thought and provoke ideas. The views expressed are entirely personal.

Vedanta is a school of philosophy within Hinduism dealing with the nature of the absolute or ultimate reality. The word *Vedanta* is a compound of *veda* meaning "knowledge" and *anta* signifying "end, conclusion". The word Vedanta thus translates to "the culmination of knowledge." There are several schools of Vedanta philosophy. A detailed analysis of each will take too long. The most influential school of Vedanta is Advaita Vedanta which was propounded by Adi Sankara, who was born in the 8th century CE. It is very closely identified, especially in the West, with Swami Vivekananda (who was a Freemason) the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission. Advaita literally means "not two". Advaita Vedanta is a strict non-dualistic philosophy.

All schools of Vedanta are derived from the Upanishads; which, strictly speaking, are not part of the ancient Hindu texts, the Vedas, but are rather affiliated to them. The Upanishads can best be described as commentary on the Vedas and contain the essence of the Vedas. Each of the 4 Vedas have Upanishads ascribed to them. The earliest of the Upanishads date back to the 6th to 8th century BCE i.e. nearly 3000 years ago.

Although the Bhagawad Gita is generally not considered a Vedantic text, nevertheless all major Vedantic philosophers and scholars have done extensive commentaries not only on the Upanishads but also the Gita. The Gita is generally accepted as being an important, if not integral, part of the development of Vedantic thought. In addition, to the Upanishads and the Gita, a third source of Vedantic thought is known as the Brahma Sutras which was written in about 200 BCE to systematically put Vedantic ideas into one treatise.

Vedanta in essence propounds the view that there is only One Absolute Reality or Truth known as Brahman; not to be confused by Brahma, the Creator, who forms part of the Hindu Trinity with Vishnu and Shiva. Brahman is described in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* as:

"Brahman is Truth, Consciousness, and the Infinite"

The same Upanishad expounds the nature of Brahman in the following words:

"From whom this manifested universe and beings are born, by whom, after being born, they subsist, and into whom they merge at the end, seek to know That Reality; that is Brahman."

The Mundaka Upanishad states:

"The whole of the manifested universe is the immortal Brahman".

In order to understand Vedantic philosophy, it is important to appreciate this principle of non-dualism which is at the very core of Vedanta in general and Advaita Vedanta in particular. Brahman is the only Absolute Reality/Truth. Timeless. Omnipresent. Indestructible. Changeless. Formless. Infinite.

It then follows from this strict non-dualistic philosophy that creation or the manifested universe is illusory or *Maya*. However, it must be clearly understood that illusory in the sense used here does not mean it does not exist. The manifested universe, including the Earth and its inhabitants, very much exists. Rather that the manifested universe does not have an existence which is independent of Brahman. Vedanta sees the manifested universe as part and parcel of Brahman. The illusion lies in the perception that the creator and creation are separate. They are not. There is no creation outside the creator. They are one and the same. An analogy is often drawn to the great Masonic "luminary of nature", the Sun. Whilst the rays of the Sun exist and give heat and light they have no independent existence without the Sun.

A further consequence of this strict non-dualistic view of Brahman is that Brahman pervades through all of creation and exists in each aspect of creation. This brings in a 3rd concept which is important to understanding the fundamentals of Vedanta, which is that of the *Atman* or Soul. To put it at its simplest, the Atman is that aspect of the Brahman which exists in each created being.

Vedantic philosophy therefore states that every person who is seeking to know the true nature of Brahman need only seek the answer in himself or herself. For there is nothing that exists without that does not also exist within.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, it says:

"Beginning with the Brahman that is immediate and direct, that which is Atman, that Truth which is the Atman, the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme from this Atman."

In the Svetasvatara Upanishad it further proclaims:

"When the yogi perceives, here in this very body, the Truth of Brahman, which is birth less, unchanging and free from all categories of nature through the Truth of Atman, which is comparable to light, then he or she becomes free from all fetters."

So much so that Advaita Vedanta sums up the whole philosophy in one phrase "*Tat Twam Asi*" (That thou art). This is based on the belief that in the final analysis, the ultimate, formless, inconceivable Brahman is the same as Atman, the soul. The Atman, when unshackled from the conditioning of the illusory world or Maya inhabited by the body and mind will reveal its true nature, which is immortal and infinite.

This concept of an immortal soul or Atman is also central to the teachings of the Gita. Again it is impossible to deal with all the salient aspects of the Gita in the context of this paper. In essence, in the Gita, Krishna reveals the true nature of the ultimate reality which is infinite, timeless, changeless and absolute. He also highlights that the physical body, which is Maya, may die but the Atman is eternal. The Atman is free from joy, sorrow, malice, envy, pride and fear. It is free from all attachments to this temporal world.

The concept of a timeless, formless, changeless, infinite and universal Absolute Reality/Truth which pervades through all of creation, including each one of us, which Advaita Vedanta espouses is a difficult one for many to comprehend much less apply. So much so, modern Vedanta, as popularised by Swami Vivekananda, states that whilst Brahman is the Absolute Reality, the manifested universe is a Relative Reality.

It cannot be ignored. This is particularly apposite in the context of Freemasonry which relies on symbols and allegories to illustrate concepts.

In his paper on Hinduism, presented to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 19 September 1893, Swami Vivekananda says that men may need to resort to Maya or the illusory world in their spiritual childhood. It may be a necessary stage in the progression and evolution of their spiritual growth. He goes on further to say that:

"If a man can realise his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call that a sin? Nor even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error. To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength, till it reaches the Glorious Sun."

The Point within the Circle

With this basic appreciation of Vedanta philosophy, it can be seen that the idea of the centre being "point within the circle" can be interpreted in several ways from a Vedantic perspective.

Firstly, for all intents and purposes, the centre is the only point within the circle which is unchanging and absolute. All other points, whether on the circumference or within the circle are relative in that if the circle is rotated they move with the rotation. In addition, if one imagines an infinite number of concentric circles radiating outwards each with a different circumference and radius, this does not in anyway affect the centre which is constant and unchanging. In this sense, the centre, from a Vedantic perspective, may be seen as a reference to the Brahman; the Ultimate Reality/Truth. Perhaps this is also reflected in that Truth is one of the 3 grand principles of Freemasonry. This view resonates with the view expressed by Churchward in the Arcana of Freemasonry that the centre refers the "eternal and unchanging supreme intelligence".

The circle, from this perspective, may be described as Maya. If the centre is a reference to the Absolute Reality, then the circumference may arguably be perceived to be a reference to the Relative Reality. Its dimensions can change. It can rotate in one or more axes. However, it can only have one centre which is absolute and unchanging. This also mirrors the non-dualistic view of Vedanta.

Secondly, the centre may also be interpreted to refer to the Atman or immortal soul. The philosophy of Vedanta states that at the core of each being is the Atman. The way to understand the Brahman is to look into oneself. This also accords with the ceremony of the Master Mason when the candidate is told to "guide your reflections to the most interesting of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself." It is only by understanding oneself does one understand Brahman.

The concept of the centre being the point within the circle which is *equidistant* from every part of the circumference also highlights the fact that the Atman is free from attachment. Again the circle would be Maya in the form of the illusory world which surrounds the Atman. The Atman needs to free itself from the illusory world which is the source of sorrow, malice, envy, anger and pride. This idea is not dissimilar from the idea expressed by St Augustin that the soul needs to find the centre as the one object which is the point of convergence in order to avoid "being tossed to and fro by the very vastness of the things".

The third and perhaps even more intriguing Vedantic perspective is that circle, which is often symbolically equated to the eternal, could be taken to refer to either the eternal Atman or the eternal Brahman. In the former instance, the centre would be Brahman which exists in all. In the latter case, the Atman, which is but a part of Brahman. This would reflect the view that they are interchangeable; one and the same. It should not be forgotten that the centre is strictly speaking without any dimensions whatsoever. Therefore the search for the centre is as unending as the search for the infinite.

It is also remarkable the words used in the ceremony of opening a Lodge of Master Masons defines the centre by reference to the circumference i.e. *"a point within a circle, from which every part of the circumference is equidistant"* rather than the other

way around. This definition of the absolute by reference to the relative would give credence to Swami Vivekananda's words that these are but attempts to realise the infinite and often one needs to start with concepts we can understand in order to try to attempt to understand the Infinite Absolute Reality or Truth.

As a final comment, if it is generally accepted that there cannot be a circle which does not have a centre, the real question we should ask is whether every point is therefore, of necessity, the centre of an infinitely large circle? Can one exist without the other? Just as the rays of the Sun do not have a separate existence without the Sun, by the same token, would the Sun be the Sun if it did not "diffuse light and heat to all within its circle"? Perhaps that is a different topic. Then again, perhaps not.

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