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Harnessing The Mind For Spiritual Enlightenment: Yogi Vemana's Timeless Teachings

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ABSTRACT - Yogi Vemana, an eminent Telugu poet of the middle ages, explores the deep connection between mental discipline and spiritual growth in his poetry. He highlights the transformative power of focusing the mind on divine awareness and self-realisation, which bridge the physical realm and higher spiritual truths. Vemana's wisdom emphasises the importance of unwavering mental focus and inner vision in achieving spiritual enlightenment and inner harmony. He asserts that mastering and aligning the mind with spiritual goals can transcend worldly illusions and attain a heightened state of consciousness. Vemana advocates for the purification of the mind, concentration on divine truths, and the abandonment of distractions. His teachings offer a profound guide for individuals seeking to navigate the path toward spiritual fulfilment, enlightenment, and ultimate transcendence.

KEYWORDS: mental discipline, mind, inner vision, self-realisation, spiritual enlightenment

The 17th-century Telugu poet-saint Vemana explores the relationship between the mind and spiritual growth. His teachings emphasise the transformative power of mental discipline and inner vision in attaining spiritual enlightenment. By advocating for a focused and unwavering mind, Vemana guides seekers on a path of self-realisation and divine awareness, highlighting the mind's role as a bridge between the physical world and higher spiritual truths. This exploration of Vemana's wisdom offers timeless guidance on the journey toward inner harmony and ultimate transcendence.

Vemana offers a profound perspective on the nature of the mind and its relationship to spirituality. By urging the firm fixation of divinity within the mind, he implies that the mind can shape one's perception of reality and connect them to higher spiritual truths. Vemana suggests that one can attain a sense of stability and grounding in the physical world by establishing oneself in the temple of the body or cultivating a deep awareness and reverence for one's own being. Moreover, he implies that through this inner alignment and spiritual practice, one can achieve a heightened consciousness and gain insight into the more profound mysteries of existence. Vemana underscores the transformative potential of the mind, emphasising its role in attaining spiritual enlightenment and inner vision. "If thou firmly fix the idea of the divinity in the mind, and establish thyself in the temple of the body, thou shalt be firm in the earth and attain the inner vision." (Brown 1644)

Vemana delves into the essence of existence and the significance of focusing the mind on the ultimate reality, which he describes as the "prime existent." By recognising this singular and immutable truth and steadfastly fixing one's attention upon it, individuals can transcend the cycle of birth and death, attaining a state akin to the unborn. Vemana likens those who deviate from this primal truth to the blind, emphasising the importance of unwavering dedication to the supreme reality. He advocates for a profound spiritual alignment with the fundamental nature of existence, suggesting that by anchoring the mind in this prime reality, one can attain a transcendent state beyond worldly limitations and achieve profound enlightenment. "If thou know that the prime

existent is single and fix thy mind on that prime, never quitting the prime thou shalt become the unborn. He that hath quitted the prime is like to the blind.” (Brown 147)

Vemana further emphasises the paramount importance of concentration of mind in the pursuit of divine truth. He asserts that the profound secrets of the divine are attainable with a complete understanding of the inner workings of existence and the unwavering focus of the mind towards a singular goal. Vemana suggests that scattered thoughts and lack of concentration are barriers preventing one from accessing the depths of spiritual wisdom. By advocating for the binding of the mind to a singular aim, Vemana encourages seekers to channel their mental energies towards a unified purpose, thereby creating the necessary conditions for the revelation of divine truths. In essence, Vemana’s views underscore the significance of disciplined concentration as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment and unlock the mysteries of the universe. “If you comprehend not the entire secret and if thy mind be not bound up to one aim, the divine secret shall not be revealed to thee.” (Brown 66)

Likewise, Vemana extols the virtue of concentrated focus in unravelling the mysteries of spirituality. He advocates for abandoning distractions and redirecting the mind towards understanding the secrets concealed within the heart. According to Vemana, this act of casting away the wandering tendencies of the mind and anchoring it to a profound understanding of the inner self represents the pinnacle of religious practice. Vemana underscores the transformative power of concentrated thought in pursuing spiritual enlightenment by emphasising the significance of fixing the mind on this sacred endeavour. Through these words, he urges individuals to prioritise the cultivation of inner awareness and concentration as essential elements on the path to spiritual fulfilment. “Casting away the mind and turning it back knowing the secret of the heart and if thou fix thy mind, this is the greatest task of religion,” (Brown 64)

Vemana advocates for fixing the mind steadfastly on the divine presence, implying that such relentless focus and perpetual contemplation are essential for attaining beatitude or spiritual bliss. He asserts that true beatitude is not easily achieved; it requires consistent and dedicated effort to keep the divine firmly anchored in one’s consciousness. This teaching underscores Vemana’s view that the mind becomes the conduit for profound inner peace and enlightenment when disciplined and directed towards higher spiritual realities. “He who will remain in contemplation with quivering eyelids and fail not to fix the being in his mind, but perpetually view himself is not anywhere for beatitude to be duly placed in him.” (Brown 99)

Similarly, Vemana posits that the true path to beholding God lies in the steadfastness of the mind. He emphasises that the mind should not be allowed to wander; instead, it should remain continuously directed towards the divine. One can attain the ultimate spiritual vision by maintaining such unwavering mental focus. This teaching underscores Vemana’s belief that the mind’s disciplined focus is paramount in the spiritual journey. It surpasses even the most rigorous external practices in its importance and effectiveness in realising God. “To what end do the men of the earth practice austerity and meditation? There but one mode to behold God. Let not thy mind wander and thou shalt know him.” (Brown 679)

Vemana further highlights the transformative power of the mind in the journey towards enlightenment. The path to overcoming ignorance involves self-forgetfulness and the careful fixation of the mind on the supreme or the divine. Vemana suggests that true sages who achieve this profound state of mental focus and self-transcendence are exceedingly rare. This emphasis on self-forgetfulness and dedicated mental focus underscores Vemana’s view that when properly directed, the mind is a powerful tool for spiritual awakening and liberation from ignorance. His teaching elevates the disciplined and contemplative mind as the key to achieving the highest spiritual state, distinguishing such noble sages as extraordinary and almost unparalleled. “Quitting this thick darkness of ignorance he who in due time forgetteth himself, and who fixeth his mind with care on the supreme, this great noble sage nowhere is to be found.” (Brown 54)

Vemana underscores the significance of the mind and its alignment with the soul. He suggests that despite external circumstances, one can ascend to greatness by anchoring the mind firmly to the soul’s essence. By doing so, individuals can transcend societal prejudices and limitations, rising to fulfil their highest potential. Vemana implies that the mind holds the key to this transformation; when focused and steadfast, it enables one to overcome obstacles and play a significant role in life. Conversely, wavering from this path is deemed the epitome of lowliness, emphasising the importance of mental discipline and spiritual alignment in achieving true elevation.

An outcast by birth, ill-treated as small,
 Rises high to play the loftiest role,
 When firmly he rivets his mind on his soul.
 He who wavers is the lowest of all. (Ali Khan 41)

Vemana further advocates the critical importance of mastering one's mind for spiritual growth and salvation. He warns that failure to control the mind leads to a fate worse than societal outcasts, suggesting a descent into spiritual damnation. Vemana portrays the mind as the battleground for the soul's destiny, where unchecked desires and impulses can lead to suffering in the afterlife. By urging individuals to restrain their minds within the bounds of moral and spiritual righteousness, Vemana emphasises the necessity of self-discipline and mindfulness. In doing so, he advocates for the cultivation of inner harmony and virtuous living as pathways to spiritual liberation and transcendence. "He that cannot restrain his mind in his soul even lower than a pariah, after death hell shall be his fate. O men!" (Brown 1158)

Vemana encapsulates the purpose of intellectual pursuits and the cultivation of the mind. By questioning the purpose of extensive reading and endless debates, he implies that the true essence of wisdom lies not in the accumulation of knowledge or in engaging in intellectual arguments but in achieving inner harmony and focus. Vemana suggests that to attain enlightenment and become a sage truly, one must transcend the distractions of external learning and instead turn inward, concentrating the mind on self-discovery and spiritual growth. He emphasises the transformative power of concentration, asserting that one can truly understand the universe and its place by attaining absorptions or deep states of focus. Vemana's reflects on the importance of mindfulness and inner contemplation as essential tools for achieving wisdom and enlightenment. "To what end is all this reading, to what end are all these disputations? If though wouldst remain of one mind, though shouldst become an accomplished sage and attaining absorptions become thyself, the universe." (Brown 1080)

Vemana underscores the profound significance of the mind in the realisation of the Atman, or the true self. By emphasising the continuous contemplation of Shiva, a symbol of divine consciousness, within the mind, Vemana suggests that accurate perception of the Atman is attained through unwavering focus and devotion. Here, the mind serves as the conduit for spiritual illumination, acting as a lens through which the light of the Atman can be perceived. Vemana's message resonates with the idea that the state of one's mind profoundly influences one's journey towards self-realisation, highlighting the importance of cultivating a conscious and reverent inner landscape.

When one always thinks of Shiva
 And concentrates one's mind steadily on Him
 One can genuinely perceive the light of Atman

Pratyakshamagunu Shiva yani
 Nityamu madilona dalachi nilichinayapude
 Satyamuga Jyothi kanapadu
 Nityamu trupthi chendi nerayumu Vema! (my trans; Subrahmanyam 29)

Vemana offers a profound insight into internalising one's focus and energy as a means of spiritual elevation. He advises closing the external sensory channels, symbolised by the nine holes, and directing one's attention inward. Individuals can unlock a deeper connection with the divine by harmonising the internal five airs, or vital energies, with the mind. Vemana suggests that understanding and implementing this esoteric knowledge in the worship of the Divine, represented by the Atmalingam, leads to true beatitude or supreme bliss. He advocates for a transformative approach to spirituality, wherein the control and alignment of internal energies with the mind facilitate a profound communion with the sacred. "Closing the external nine and mingling the internal airs with your mind, if, understanding this secret you perform the worship of the (atmalingam) Divinity, this is the beatitude." (Brown 102)

Vemana offers profound insights into the elusive nature of the mind and suggests that the knowledge and ignorance that reside within the mind are intangible and beyond the realm of direct perception, sight, or hearing. However, when one endeavours to grasp and control the mind, attempting to tether its wandering tendencies, one will come to a stark realisation. Vemana vividly portrays the body as a vessel filled with delusion, a mere illusion obscuring existence's true essence. Through these words, Vemana underscores the futility of attempting to control the mind through external means and highlights the importance of transcending the illusions of the material world to attain deeper wisdom and understanding.

Knowledge and ignorance of the mind

Can be neither perceived nor seen, nor heard.

If one seizes the mind with effort,

The illusion of the world is revealed.

Manasuna nerukanu marapunu

Kanivini choodangaleru kadisina pidapam

Penagoni pattedamannanu

Manachota mayamaaye mahilo Vema! (my trans; Sastry 3653)

Vemana imparts a timeless wisdom regarding the sanctity of the mind and its pivotal role in spiritual realisation. He admonishes against the corruption of the mind, underscoring the importance of maintaining its purity and integrity. Vemana suggests that by safeguarding the mind from impurities and negative influences, individuals can attain a glorious vision of the divine. This admonition reflects Vemana's belief in the mind's inherent potential as a conduit for experiencing the divine presence. By preserving the sanctity of the mind, one can cultivate a heightened awareness and perception of the sacred, leading to a deeper connection with the divine essence. "I will fitly teach all that dwell in the earth, that they may know the city (i.e. body) that beholds God is but one. Let not thy mind be corrupt and in it shall thou gloriously behold Him." (Brown 524)

Vemana further suggests that by understanding the inherent strength of the divine essence residing within oneself, one can assert control over the wayward tendencies of the mind. Individuals can achieve inner peace and stillness by seizing the evil inclinations of the mind and subduing them. Furthermore, Vemana emphasises the significance of maintaining control over one's physical body as a mark of true devotion. According to him, those who can retain mastery over both their mind and body stand as the highest exemplars of devotion, embodying the union of spiritual awareness and disciplined living. "He who knowing all the powers of Him who dwelleth in the dwelling shall seize his evil mind and seat it. He who can retain his body is the greatest of devotees." (Brown 86)

Vemana, in his insightful poem, "Let us seize the four robbers (four lusts and smite them on the head, cama, crodha, lobha, and moha) but spare one (the mind) to the men of the mind that they may attain the fruits of wisdom," (Brown 219) presents a profound perspective on the mind and its relation to human desires. He identifies four primary passions—lust, anger, greed, and delusion—as destructive forces that rob individuals of their peace and wisdom. Vemana advocates for the decisive elimination of these passions, symbolically smiting them on the head to signify their complete eradication. However, he underscores the importance of preserving the mind, viewing it as vital for those seeking true wisdom. Individuals can cultivate clarity and enlightenment by freeing the mind from these detrimental influences. Vemana's teaching highlights the delicate balance between controlling one's base impulses and nurturing the mind's potential for higher understanding and spiritual growth.

Vemana offers a metaphorical perspective on the mind, likening it to a sacred sanctuary that can be adorned and cultivated for spiritual enlightenment. By urging individuals to transform their minds into exquisite chambers within summer mansions, complete with refreshing baths and flourishing gardens, Vemana presents a vision of inner refinement and tranquillity. He encourages the preparation of the mind for encounters with the "maid of wisdom," symbolising the pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment. Vemana suggests that by nurturing the mind

and fostering a conducive environment for introspection and learning, one can experience the blissful serenity of inner growth and understanding. Thus, he advocates for the cultivation of a harmonious and enriching inner life, where moments unfold with sweetness and grace. “Convert thy mind into a fair chamber built in a summer mansion (pleasure house) with a bath well and garden. Prepare it for meeting the maid of wisdom in secret and enjoying her charms. Thus let thy hours sweetly glide away.” (Brown 43)

Vemana’s poem reflects his deep understanding of the mind as the foundation of all existence and experience. In the verse, “Know that the mind is the universal cause. By viewing and meditating on this, a man shall himself become spirit wherever he dwelleth all his days- know well the truth of this Vema!” (Brown 6), Vemana emphasises the power of the mind as the origin of all thoughts, actions, and realities. By contemplating and meditating on this truth, he suggests that an individual can transcend ordinary existence and become one with the spirit, attaining a higher consciousness. Vemana’s wisdom encourages self-awareness and introspection, guiding individuals to recognise the profound impact of the mind on their life and spiritual journey. His teachings underscore the importance of inner contemplation in achieving a deeper understanding of the self and the universe.

Vemana further articulates a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between the individual and the cosmos, emphasising the unity of the self with the universe. He suggests that true enlightenment arises from recognising one’s integral role within the fabric of existence, both internally and externally. Those who deeply comprehend this truth, according to Vemana, attain a state of beatitude or supreme bliss in this earthly realm. His perspective highlights the significance of self-awareness and cosmic consciousness in achieving spiritual fulfilment. By acknowledging the inherent connection between oneself and the greater whole, individuals can transcend limitations and experience profound harmony with the universe, ultimately leading to a state of profound contentment and enlightenment. “He who knows clearly in his own mind that he is a part of the universe, internally and externally, the man who hath brightly learned this shall in this world attain beatitude.” (Brown 119).

Vemana’s teachings highlight the profound importance of the mind in pursuing spiritual enlightenment. He emphasises the need for unwavering mental focus, the alignment of inner energies, and the cultivation of self-awareness to transcend worldly illusions and attain higher truths. Vemana’s wisdom underscores the transformative potential of a disciplined mind, portraying it as a crucial conduit for divine realisation and inner peace. By advocating for the purification and steadfast direction of the mind towards the divine, Vemana offers a timeless guide for achieving profound spiritual growth and enlightenment.

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