

YOGAVAASISHTHA

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[Swami Shuddhabodhananda Saraswati (Mumbai) has taught about 4,200 selected verses from the Yogavaasishtha (compiled in PDF form) during the period from 2006 to 2016. The teaching was spread out across regular classes and yearly spiritual retreats. These verses were selected after a thorough scrutiny of the entire text and contain about 85% of its highest teaching, except for Yoga taught in Bhushunda Upakhyana (Ni.Pu.Ch. 14 to 27). The selected verses show topic-wise continuity. Many of these topics with their in-depth insights are unique to Yogavaasishtha alone. The following are some excerpts from Sri Swamiji's teachings which establish the unique status of Yogavaasishtha in all of Vedantic lore]

THE TITLE YOGAVAASISHTHA

The means (*yukti, upaaya*) by which one can cross over the sorrowful limited existence called samsara is known as yoga. The means are two-fold, namely (i) *atmajnana* (ii) *pranasamrodha* (i.e. *ashtangayoga*). Though the word 'yoga' signifies both, its denotation in popular usage is in the sense of *pranasamrodha* (Yo.Va.Ni.Pu. 13- 3, 4 and 6). *Vaasishtha* here means that which is taught by the Sage *Vasishtha*. In this text, the word yoga primarily means *atmajnana* (self-knowledge), the knowledge of *jiva-Brahma-aikya* (identity between the *jiva*, the individual self and Brahman, the ultimate reality). Thus Yogavaasishtha is a text on *atmajnana/brahmajnana*. It is a magnum opus (*brihad-grantha*) of adhyatma shastra (Vedantic lore) and falls under the category of *prakarana grantha* (topic-wise treatise).

The different names attributed to Yogavaasishtha are: Uttara-ramayana, Vasishtha-maharamayana, Mokshopaya-samhita, Aarsha-ramayana, Vasishtha-ramayana, Jnanavasishtha, Vaasishtha, Brihad-yogavasishtha.

VALMIKI THE AUTHOR

After composing the *Purva-ramayana* (the earlier portion of the Ramayana) describing the biography of Lord Rama, Sage Valmiki narrates the same to his humble disciple Bharadvaja at the latter's request. Thereafter, on some other occasion, Bharadvaja recites it before Brahmaji (one of the Trinity). The extremely pleased Brahmaji offers a boon to Bharadvaja, who in turn enquires about the means through which individuals can get totally freed forever from the sorrowful existence called *samsara*. Brahmaji replies: Go to your guru (Valmiki) and request him to explain this, and hear from him the most exalted (*Uttara*) *Ramayana* in the form of dialogues between Lord Rama and Sage Vasishtha. As if on second thought, knowing fully well the importance of this teaching for the good of humanity in posterity, Brahmaji himself accompanies Bharadvaja to Valmiki's hermitage. The overjoyed Valmiki worships him. Brahmaji exhorts and inspires Valmiki to complete the text describing how Lord Rama got *atmajnana*, without harbouring any misgivings regarding his ability to complete the difficult work.

Brahmaji also makes it clear that he has come specifically to impress upon the sage (Valmiki) the necessity of this text, which is indispensable for the good of humanity. Thereafter, Brahmaji disappears like a wave that arises on the surface of the ocean and vanishes in a trice. Valmiki was so overwhelmed by Brahmaji's visit to his hermitage that he failed to fully grasp what was stated to him. He asks Bharadvaja what Brahmaji said. Bharadvaja repeats Brahmaji's words and also requests the sage to teach him how Lord Rama and others got *atmajnana* and became *jivan-muktas*, so that he can follow suit (Yo.Va.Vai. Ch 2,3). This latter part of the Ramayana (*Uttar-Ramayana*), written by Valmiki at the behest of Brahmaji for the good of humanity, is known as Yogavaasishtha. It is supposed to have 32,000 verses. However, only around 28,231 verses are presently available in actuality.

YOGAVAASISHTHA CONFORMS TO THE VEDANTIC SAMPRADAYA

Now the scene shifts to the royal court of King Dasharatha. Sage Vishwamitra seeks the help of Rama to kill certain demons to complete his *yaaga* (sacrifice) for the welfare of humanity. On discerning Rama's total indifference, he exhorts Rama to openly discuss any problems he may be facing. Hearing Rama's account, Vishwamitra considers it wondrous and exclaims that it is nothing short of very intense *vairagya* (dispassion), of the order achieved by Sage Shuka (the son of Vyasa). Knowing fully well that *atmajnana* alone can be the remedy for such an indifference, he (Vishwamitra) requests Vasishtha to impart to Rama the teaching received by both sages from Brahmaji on the Nishadha mountain, when the two sages competed with each other. All the assembled sages applaud this suggestion and voice their approval. Vasishtha agrees to teach, declaring that none can refuse the request of good people despite being in a position to do so (Yo.Va.Mu.Vya.Ch. 2).

To start with, Vasishtha introduces his teachings by stating that these are the same teachings he received from Padmajanma (Brahmaji) as a means to end all the sorrows of *samsara* forever (Yo.Va.Mu.Vya.Ch. 3). He thereby makes it very clear that what is being taught in the Yogavaasishtha is strictly in accordance with the *sampradaya* (traditional knowledge) of Vedanta as passed down in the teacher-taught lineage. According to one of the guru *paramparas* (succession of gurus) known to us, Vasishtha is third in the line after Lord Narayana (Vishnu) and Padmajanma (Brahmaji).

There is no room for misgivings if Vasishtha at times speaks of something outside the purview of main Vedantic texts. Let us bear in mind that Yogavaasishtha is a *Prakarana-grantha* (topicwise treatise) focussing on *jivanmukti*. "Learned people describe treatises belonging to the class called *prakarana granthas* as being those that are related to a particular aspect of the shastra (main treatise – scripture) but devoted to a purpose other than that of the shastra". The shastras have no leisure to find out whether the *mumukshu*, the one who strives for freedom from sorrowful existence, has understood the doctrine. *Mumukshus* may encounter some difficulty in understanding the doctrine, but the *shastras* are restricted in the subject matter that they can establish. On the contrary, *prakarana* treatises do cater to needs that the *shastras* do not meet. While the subject matter of these treatises is based on the main Vedantic texts, they strive in particular to make the *mumukshu* grasp the content more clearly by taking their difficulties into

account. They also develop the subject matter unfolded by the *shastras* with the help of reasoning and the author's intimate direct discovery of *atma*, called *aparokshanubhava*. Here, authors have sufficient elbow room which the *shastras* cannot afford. To be sure, a number of the in-depth Vedantic insights at different levels of self-inquiry found in the *Yogavaasishtha* are not seen in many other Vedantic texts except those such as *Ribhugita*, which reveal the ultimate bare truth without much teaching. If the Vedantic teaching of sage Vasishtha, who has played the role of one of the gurus of an incarnation, and whose feet Lord Rama adores, is not Vedanta, then one can only wonder what else in the three worlds (*lokas*) could be Vedanta!

THE MODUS OPERANDI OF THE TEACHING

The modus operandi for revealing Brahman adopted by *jivanmuktas* involves three levels of vision (*drishti*).

i) *Paamara-drishti* – The vision of a lay person who considers the *jagat* to be true and Brahman or *Ishwara* to be non-existent, or even if existent, different from 'I'.

ii) *Youktik-drishti* – A concept of *jagat* etc. arrived at through a logical approach based on reasoning by those skillful in inquiring into the truth and adept in ascertaining a *prameya* (thing to be known) through the operation of a *pramana*.

iii) *Tattva-drishti* – The vision accomplished through a steadfast *akhandakara vritti* as a fructification of thorough *sravana*, *manana*, *nididhyasana*, wherein there is *aparoksha-jnana* of Brahman. This *drishti* is found in *jivan-muktas*.

Vedanta dismisses the first *drishti* by the second and third taken in combination, while the second is refuted by the third – *tattva-drishti*. Sage Vasishtha asserts that, in the *Yogavaasishtha*, he has followed this method of teaching to the point of direct discovery of the non-dual Brahman, where the *drishti*, *jiva* and *jagat* do not exist now or ever (Yo.Va.Ni.U. 190-89).

THE YOGAVAASISHTHA HAS AN EDGE OVER THE UPANISHADS

A pertinent question arises if it is said that the *Yogavaasishtha* should be studied very seriously. When we have so many Upanishads from the various sections of the Vedas, why the insistence that the *Yogavaasishtha* be given top priority, even though it is a product of human effort? It is true that the Upanishads are greatly revered and are the highest means of knowledge in gaining self-knowledge. Even so, they are implicational in nature, having a secret import. Only highly eligible seekers (*Uttama-adhikaris*) can be benefited by them. They are not adequately comprehensible by dull (*manda*) and mediocre (*madhyama*) seekers. By contrast, *Yogavaasishtha* consists of teachings that are extensively amplified and simplified based on reasoning in accordance with the *shruti* and a personal discovery of the ultimate truth contained therein (Yo.Va.Mu.Vya. 18-2). That is why this text has to be taken to repeatedly by dull and mediocre seekers until direct *atmajnana* is gained. This dialogue between Rama and Vasishtha, which promises *moksha* (liberation) as the result, should be studied, explained and adored daily like the Vedas.

One who having glanced through this text once discards it with the satisfaction that he has learnt it does not gain even ashes from it. What is stated in the *karmakanda* and *jnanakanda* of the Vedas gets sanctified and becomes more fruitful on knowing what is taught in this text. Through the study of the *Yogavaasishtha*, one can certainly come to understand the doctrines established in Vedanta by sages such as Baadaraayana (Vyasa). Vasishtha implores us out of compassion, and not to mislead, that we can certainly , to discover first-hand that the *jagat (srushti)* is *mithya* (false) in nature by taking to repeated inquiry along the guidelines of the *Yogavaasishtha* (Yo.Va.Ni.U. 163-48 to 54).

ALLEGIANCE TO ANCESTRAL WELL (TAATASYA KOOPA)

A saying by the wise goes - *Advaita-darshanam-jnanam* (the direct knowledge of non-dual Brahman alone is true knowledge). It is called *paraa vidya* - the most exalted knowledge. All other types of knowledge are categorized as *aparaa vidya* – inferior knowledge. Notwithstanding this truth, there are many who maintain that they do not need *adhyatma shastra* (Vedanta) because their ancestors were experts in other branches of knowledge or other pursuits. They declare with pride that their forefathers were adept in fields such as *upasanas, karma-mimansa, tarka* (logic), Sankhya-philosophy, tantra, mantra, ashtangayoga, medicine and alchemy. We too will pursue the path of our ancestors and not Vedanta, they say. Because of such sentimental attachment, they consider that which they are accustomed to to be the best. Vasishtha comes down heavily on such a mindset and ridicules these contemptible individuals. He says that they are no better than those who drink saline water from a well only because it is an ancestral well (*taatasya koopa*), even though the pure Ganga river flows nearby (Yo.Va.Ni.U. 163-56). There are many followers of Vedanta too who harbor such a mentality and feel contented with whatever little information on Vedanta they gather, refusing to inquire further or verify the correctness of the information. Vasishtha advises people not to be foolish like them and remain subjected to repeated cycles of birth and death by not taking to Vedanta to the point of fruition.

..... to be continued

Pearls Of Wisdom

One need not always fulfill a desire in order to be happy. But happily he can go about fulfilling one after the other.