

Interview with Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Conducted by Neil Dalal and Jillian Elizabeth, 2014 At Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Coimbatore INDIA

Pujya Swamiji: Vedanta is a pramāṇa. It is a means for this knowledge, the knowledge of Īśvara, the cause of this entire jagat, which happens to be the very self, the observer's, the knower's self, the truth. So, there is no means of knowledge available for this. Perception or inference presupposes a knower. This is the truth of the knower and the known. And this knower and the known themselves form the truth of Īśvara. That also is unknown. Therefore, what is known as Vedanta, the upaniṣads and the books that support upaniṣads, unfold upaniṣads, is a means of knowledge.

A means of knowledge, like eyes for seeing, doesn't let anything else interfere for knowledge to take place. So if you want to see me, you need to open your eyes. And if the eyes are not defective, knowledge of sight takes place. Sight takes place. Sight includes color, form, and that takes place. Human will is not involved in this. A puruṣa is not there. Puruṣa means a person with will. A person with will is not there. Knowledge takes place, as true as the object seen. All means of knowledge work the same way, including inference, and so on. If all the criteria for inference are fulfilled, inference is a natural outcome. One doesn't require anything else. So, that is the nature of pramāṇa. If all the criteria are fulfilled, knowledge takes place, whether one likes it.

If Vedanta is a means of knowledge as the tradition holds it, then when Vedanta is taught, knowledge should take place. It doesn't take place. If it doesn't take place, either the vision of Vedanta itself is wrong and it is not a means of knowledge because there is no object for it, or if there is an object for it, which is not available for other means of knowledge, then Vedanta has a subject matter, so why doesn't knowledge take place? Handling of those words is required. Because what is to be known is not the śabda vācya, the immediate meaning of the word, it is the śabda lakṣya, the implied meaning of the word. So you have to handle those words. We use paradoxes. We knock off categories. Handling the words implies handling paradoxes. Our orientation is that a paradox is an illogical proposition. But paradoxes here work. Therefore, you have to handle paradoxes so that they are meaningful, in that they convey the message.

Neil Dalal: Swamiji, are you concerned about the tradition, the teaching for the next generation?

Pujya Swamiji: I have been teaching for a long time, so I have created some teachers. They all know that it's not just a verbal thing. They are very careful, they unfold the knowledge. So I hope this continues. It will continue, because it is a teaching tradition. It will survive always. Rightly or wrongly, it will survive, because they have been teaching. There is something people always get as long as the tradition is respected. Because it is a teaching tradition it will be handed over, so it will survive. But if it has to survive as it should, the right way, then you are required to make sure that your students also teach the same way. I am quite aware of the limitations in making the methodology fool proof, you know, because people are exposed to a lot of things. So, everybody has to be aware of each word, what one speaks, what word one uses, and what kind of response you elicit by using a word from the listeners point of view.

So I have been very carefully watching the response from the listeners. And then, I have been eliminating words that are vague, that are subjective, so that there is no block in communication. That takes a lot of alertness. I know that this is not going to be understood. I know. But still for those people who would understand, who have done a lot of work in this area, I would create a sentence that may not be understood thoroughly by the beginner, but that cannot be misunderstood by them also. I make sure that it doesn't convey anything wrong. And so those who are scholars, who are sitting there and who have really put in some work, for them it's revealing.

Today I said, ajñānam is jñāna virodhi [ignorance is opposite to knowledge]. Almost ninety percent of this audience, maybe more than ninety percent of the audience, won't understand the significance of that statement. It would go unnoticed. But, that small percent of people, a few people, for them it is an awakening thing. It validates their thinking. It makes them think. It has to be taken note of. Why the importance of that? It is not that absence of ignorance is knowledge. Jñāna virodhi means that ignorance is the opposite of jñānam. That is why it does havoc. Those who are exposed to this enquiry in the tradition itself understand that. So they are kept alive. For others, it is a thing to be looked into later when they are ready for it. But it doesn't do any harm. It's a topic by itself. Like this, I use expressions, certain ideas I say, and those things are relevant to people. Then there are business people, there are working people, and there are struggling couples, so for all of them I have hats. I throw them and the hats fit, for different people, different things. So, I keep them all alive. In between the whole understanding they may have small islands of not understanding. Not understanding is not a problem. Misunderstanding is the problem.

ON UNDERSTANDING VERSES BELIEF

If the subject matter I teach is a thing to be understood, only then there is teaching. Otherwise, there is only preaching, to be believed. Speaking in the Indian context, suppose there is a promise that there is an after-death loka called Vaikunṭha where you will have this and you will have that..., then it's a belief. There is no teaching involved. Even though they will say it is teaching, there is no teaching involved. It's a belief system. For spreading a belief you preach; you say what that belief is, because it is not verifiable. Whether there is Vaikunṭha is not verifiable.

Therefore, even though you have a pramāṇa buddhi in the Veda that is also belief. The subject matter of going to Vaikunṭha after death is non-verifiable belief. If you say, "The Veda tells and therefore that is true", then you are making the Veda a pramāṇa for it. We accept it. But it is a non-verifiable belief. That Veda is a pramāṇa also is a belief, as non-verifiable as what is believed. Therefore, that aspect of it doesn't require teaching. Teaching is only when the subject matter is not subject to negation, not subject to belief, and it doesn't need verifiability. That is only one thing possible; that is self-evident you. It needs a pramāṇa. The self-evident you is assumed to be a limited human being in time and place. That's not true.

Neil Dalal: Swamiji, can you tell us how long you've been teaching?

Pujya Swamiji: I have been learning and sharing, I won't say 'teaching', learning and sharing for a number of years. Even before sannyāsa in 1962, I was learning and sharing. Then afterwards also I studied for some time. And then I have been teaching. It is nearly fifty years now. At least forty years I can say that I am engaged in teaching, so many times the same thing. But I don't feel it is the same thing, nothing stale. Because you are talking of an immediate presence. An immediate presence is never stale. You are talking of now here. That's always there, you know. No matter what I do, that is now here. So it doesn't become old and stale so that I have to look for something else. In fact, the whole topic is to look at now.

Neil Dalal: What inspires you to teach? And if you teach so much, how do you ...

Pujya Swamiji: It's only students. The people who want to know inspire me. I have no reason to teach. I can relate to persons who have no interest in this, and still I can relate to them for years and I will never talk about this. They are not interested and I don't talk. Unless I understand that these people want to know, I don't talk Vedanta. That is why when I announce some classes that I am going to teach at some time, then the people who come are the people who want to know.

I know that I have been teaching so many times in a day, even if there is one more class I will teach, because I enjoy what I do. That's the trick. I enjoy what I do and I enjoy people who are interested to know. And so, it is only the joy you get out of it. Even if I don't teach, I will be happy. This is not an addiction. But it is something that you share. Sometimes, you know, I like the kick of discovering something. There is a certain joy of discovery. I keep discovering methods of conveying an idea, methods to communicate. So I keep finding ways. That keeps me going. Afterwards, I forget those ways. And I may not again get them in my whole lifetime. They come and go, but when they come like that, then I enjoy that. I don't note it and keep it with me; I don't maintain a diary. I don't do anything like that. More often than not, it is coming to the spot and talking. It is spontaneous. That is why I can do two or three classes, four classes, because I don't prepare. I have a grammar class and teach Sanskrit grammar to all these pundits. They will ask a hundred questions. So after the grammar class, for which I will look into books and then take the class, then after that class I come there (lecture hall) and talk. There is not one minute in between.

Jillian Elizabeth: Swamiji, when you were a boy could you ever imagine becoming a guru? Or did you ever want to be a guru?

Pujya Swamiji: No, not at all. In fact, I don't take that I am a guru also seriously. It's only that people say that I am a guru and all that. I am just a normal human being. In fact, too normal. That's what the teaching is also. I teach the same thing, what I am, I teach. That's the teaching.

Neil Dalal: The tradition is very orthodox, generally, but Swamiji has opened it up. Teaching to other people, other countries, in English. Why did Swamiji change this?

Pujya Swamiji: That credit goes to my guru, Swami Chinmayananda. He was the one who opened it. He went to Rishikesh, then he went to mahatmas; he understood certain things well. Then he shared with people. He came to the cities and then he used to talk in the cities. He opened it and he used to talk upaniṣads, not even Gītā. In the beginning, he only talked on upaniṣads, for a number of years. Then he brought Gītā into his discussion. He opened it very enthusiastically. He talked on one Muṇḍakopaniṣad. I didn't know there were upaniṣads or Muṇḍakopaniṣad. Then afterwards we looked in to all that, myself and my people who were there with me, friends. And so he was responsible.

Before that, Swami Vivekananda was the first one to talk about Vedanta itself. Brilliant. Then, after Vivekananda, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, he wrote books, some small popular books. But still they gave a lot of Vedanta truths. He wrote in English. Then, Swami Chinmayananda, who was Swami Sivananda's disciple as well as Swami Tapovanam's, he really brought it to people. What is upaniṣad, what is Gītā, he popularized. Then I came under his influence and afterwards I got into it.

Afterwards I found my way to the traditional teaching. For me it has been always a journey of discovery. Discovering one after the other, the beauty of the tradition, the profundity of it. Then, I've been doing it, enjoying it and doing it these forty years. Now I have to calculate how many years. I don't even know. You see me every day, it is one day at a time. I don't have a rule, but that's what's happening. Now. What is time now?

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[The GURUKULAM film DVD, ©2015 Advaita Films, Inc., has been shown in theaters throughout the United States and Canada and is sold in Arsha Vidya Gurukulam bookstores in India and USA. This interview is a Special Feature on the DVD and is not part of the film.]

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