

To Handle an Argument¹

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

WHY DO WE ARGUE?

Different people have different perceptions and these different perceptions are the main cause of an argument. Dissimilar likes and dislikes are inevitable because two minds never think alike. This is the reason we have different perceptions for any given situation. One may perceive a situation objectively while another may be very subjective about the same. However, the person who is subjective is totally unaware of his or her own subjectivity. In an argument it is very fundamental to know that any issue is relative. For instance, there are arguments over which party is good, the Republican or the Democratic party? On this issue you can argue on both sides and the one who can argue tactfully will always win!

DISCUSSIONS ARE BETTER THAN ARGUMENTS

On the other hand, in a discussion there is no winner because the discussion is meant for revealing the facts. Discussion is helpful and it is also healthy. Moreover, through discussion you can look at a situation little differently so your perception of the situation can be widened. In an argument you may not notice any particular facts, but, in a discussion you can see the other side properly. In a discussion there is no victory, there is only an understanding. In Sanskrit an argument is called "jalpa", where the attempt is only to win and never to accept the defeat. That is the reason arguments are

not healthy; discussions are healthy. An argument only creates problems, such as when you lose your temper and say undesirable things. When you are in a tight corner of an argument, it is easier to get angry and become defensive. Like they say, "The best defense is an offense". It is called a pre-emptive strike; before an argument begins you launch an offensive attack on a person. You punch the fellow before he punches you because, if he punches you first, he may not stick around when it is your turn to punch him. Accordingly, one may adopt the same policy in an argument where, there is no dialogue or real discussion.

TO AVOID THE EXPLOSIONS, SMALL ARGUMENTS ARE BETTER

However, avoiding an argument is not always possible. Like in an earthquake if there are not any small tremors there will be a huge eruption. So only to avoid big outbursts small arguments are healthy. They remove the tension and, if one avoids these small arguments constantly, they will eventually blow up. Whenever you are confronted with an argument and you choose not to argue, it will be bottled up inside. With such a bottled up anger sooner or later an explosion will take place. The explosion may be on a very petty topic such as one may say, "There is no salt in here!" and that is enough to have an outburst. Then, the rest will have nothing to do with the salt and, whatever is piled up inside

¹ From a talk given in Saylorsburg, PA. Edited by Lata Pimplaskar. Published in the ninth anniversary souvenir of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 1995. www.AVGsatsang.org

will come out. Thus, avoiding an argument is not advised in Vedanta. However, the very teaching of Vedanta is through discussions. A student raises an objection and an objection is clarified with an explanation. It is an excellent way of analyzing and understanding a piece of knowledge. This process of raising an objection and clarification leads to analysis of an issue. This analysis is through discussion, where you make sure all issues and questions are answered.

ARGUMENTS ARE INTRINSIC TO NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Let us look at another point which deals with the emotional predicament. In all arguments intense emotions are involved and emotional

www.AVGsatsang.org 2situations are mainly a personal attack. In these attacks the issue is gone and the person is attacked. When you cannot avoid an argument due to the differences in likes and dislikes you are setting yourself up for a no-win situation. For an example, when a couple goes for a shopping trip together, one does not like what the other one wants to buy. Soon it becomes a personal agenda. "You have this habit", one says; "not only you, you mother also has the same habit," he or she goes on. Thus the argument begins and, an issue is no longer an issue; it goes in the vacuum cleaner and it vanishes! Aside from the likes and dislikes, some situations are involved with differences in perceptions. It is impossible to make the other person see your point if there is no acceptance. All of this is due to the ignorance of our own emotions. We do not analyze our emotions properly which leads to confusion, and naturally the perceptions are all distorted. Each of us has loss of emotions making it difficult to have an objective mind.

THE FEELINGS BASED ON PERCEPTIONS ARE REAL

Perceptions may be wrong but the feelings are real. Perceptions are wrong because of our varied backgrounds. The background includes the parentage, your family, the culture you are born in, etc. You are the product of your background. You cannot be different from your background. Everyone should accept what his or her background is. This upbringing builds the core personality of a person, which may have lots of problems. From that alone you perceive all your emotions. So the perception comes from the background, and, no perception can be objective unless you analyze yourself and free yourself from the anger, anxieties, etc., which are part of your background. Very few people exist in the world who have achieved that perception. The people who have not analyzed themselves thoroughly are not going to have an objective perception. So accept what you are, accept your own subjectivity and when you can accept that, you are safe. You may succeed in turning an argument into a healthy discussion.

HOW TO SETTLE AN ARGUMENT BEFORE IT BEGINS

To settle an argument or even before you have an argument, don't say what you don't mean. It is important that you say only what you mean. Before you begin, you should say, "This is how I perceive, I may be right or wrong". First you learn to say this and, it will eliminate the defense in another person. Allow the other person to point out whether you are right or wrong. If he or she points out whether you are wrong, initially you may not accept it. If you didn't mean what you said, you can't say you meant it! Therefore, when you say, "This is how I perceive, I may be right or wrong," please, mean it and you will see it works, it will help you to avoid an argument!