

Pujya Swami Dayanada and The Teaching He Has Brought

Reflections of a student

When I think of Pujya Swami Dayananda, I can't help but be filled with wonder. I have never met this extraordinary man; however, his influence on my life in the form of the teaching he has brought, is felt by me every day. I am not expressing hero worship here. I don't like that sort of thing. Rather, it is a deep appreciation of the value and significance of the vision that is Vedanta and the form in which he unfolds it, so that people like me can see themselves, others and the world from this vision. To me, he is the vision of the Vedantic scriptures in living form. This vision enables me to see life in an entirely different light. It takes me beyond a subjectivity that I have unknowingly suffered from all my life.

I have lived out my whole life enclosed in a subjectivity that was experienced as completely objective. Everything was seen from my own personal standpoint and my desires and aversions completely determined how I lived my daily life, even though I had plenty of spiritual and philosophic notions to the contrary. I have been plagued by a sense of emptiness all my life and took it to be based on some ontological (pertaining to my reality) defect, some intrinsic badness or insufficiency that belonged to my nature. Efforts to try and

remedy this "assumed" defect became an all consuming endeavour that coloured every aspect of my life. I did not understand that my problem was ignorance, I thought my problem arose from what I was in reality.

I found myself experiencing myself as a specific kind of person; experiencing other people and the world in definite kind of ways. I did not know that my self notions and the notions I had of others and the world were being continually and unknowingly projected from myself, as the experience of how things seemed to be. So here I was struggling valiantly with my notions in their projected form, whilst taking them to be external realities. The meaning of the metaphor of the rope being mistaken for a snake was lost on me. My underlying conviction was that my experience of myself and the world were an expression of what was factual and real. Even when I added new notions about myself and life, acquired from experiences and books, all that happened was that I gained more material which was in turn projected as experience. However, no matter what new notions I entertained, I was thoroughly entrenched in a way of seeing which Pujya Swamiji encapsulates in the saying "because I see it, it is there". This is a saying which he uses to make clear what subjectivity is.

As a young man, I studied for the Catholic priesthood for a few years. When I left, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to 'know' God; I also realised that a 'belief' in a God did not cut it for me. In Catholicism knowledge of God was not an emphasis. It was belief in God that counted. He could not be known because He was somewhere else and we were in a world cut off from him. This is an impossible gap to bridge (not that I didn't try) and was the source of great frustration and despair for me. I felt the great need for answers and understandably I was looking for something in the world, other than myself, that would solve the problem. I thought in terms of finding a true philosophy, a spiritual practice that could free me from my difficulties which consisted of my imagined psychological make up. I wanted to find something that would resolve the painful experiences that I had undergone and the ongoing events which I found difficult to deal with. I had no idea that the emotional suffering that I was experiencing was based on my notion that I was a suffering person. As far as I was concerned, I was "a suffering person" who was having a hard time and if I could find the right remedy, things could get better. This was my hope.

I then formally studied Aristotelian philosophy and later completed a Masters of Applied Science and did formal training in Psychotherapy. All of this activity was done in the light of how I saw life, was used to immensely strengthen my hubris and when it boiled down to it, was all just a defence against this intrinsic insufficiency and badness which I was convinced I had. I wanted to add to myself because the self

I took myself to be was so insufficient and incomplete, it needed something external to add to its stature. No matter what I did in terms of adding to myself, this basic unhappiness was never addressed as such and anything that could be a distraction from it assumed inordinate importance in my life (women, booze, reading, entertainment, approval, status, excelling intellectually etc, etc.).

Just before I came across Vedanta, I had come to a point where I understood clearly that for all my efforts, I was a complete and utter psychological and spiritual failure. The basic unhappiness and sense of defect was still present and I knew I was incapable of doing anything about it. All my efforts had failed and I was helplessly stuck with what I took to be myself. This was very difficult because what I took to be myself was not a pleasant sight.

I then came across the ideas of Vedanta and that gave me hope but it was not until I met Swamini

Atmaprakasanda (disciple of Pujya Swamiji) with her emphasis on living a life of Dharma, did I gain any real direction. The idea that life needed to be responded to in terms of what was needed in a given situation, rather than in terms of what I liked or disliked, was a new thing for me. I discovered that under the sway of my likes and dislikes, I was continually omitting what I needed to do and was continually doing things I did not need to do. I had not previously seen that there was a direct relationship between the quality of my mind and how I lived, in terms of

doing the needful, moment by moment, with presence of mind. What was interesting was that this way of life which my teacher was suggesting, had nothing to do with trying to be a “nice guy”. It had nothing to do with my major preoccupation which was trying to look good in my own eyes and trying to look good in the eyes of others.

Swaminiji directed me to read “The Value of Values” written by Pujya Swamiji. For all my religious and spiritual notions (believe me I have had plenty of them), living a life of Dharma was entirely new to me. Pujya Swamiji’s idea of the necessity of the discovery of values and living in the light of them has been for me a great boon; especially the value of graceful acceptance and living non harmfully. The content of Value of Values has been the most important psychological work I have ever read. Through it, I saw clearly that without the discovery of values, desires and aversions reign supreme and govern entirely how my life is lived. This is because my mind always tends towards what it loves or values. This is an iron clad psychological law. It was Ignorance of the value of values that was the problem, not some imagined defect in myself . This ignorance prevented any real transformation of the quality of my mind and the way I lived. If there was no change in what I loved and valued, my mind would remain the same. This is an obvious fact but for all my study in psychological matters, I had never seen this before.

Swaminiji encouraged me to read all Pujya Swamiji’s books and always made herself

available to clarify my confusions as I went along, especially about God, prayer and living a life of Dharma. The confusions have been many and they are, by no means, all gone. Vedanta constantly challenges my experience of myself, others and the world. To a Christian Judaic mind, the idea that God is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the universe is at first a stunning proposition. I finally accepted that everything was given but it was a while before I could really see that the presence of the given, which is always here, is also the presence of the Giver. This knowledge, which is not a theological concept, has invited God into my life in a very tangible way. I now understand that God is always present in my life in the form of the given, no matter what that is. I no longer have to raise my eyes upwards, I just have to become aware of what is always in front of me.

When I first came to Swaminiji I had so many erroneous ideas about life, God and spirituality. I had no idea about what ‘a means of knowledge’ was. Thankfully it has been made clear to me that Vedanta is a vision of reality, not a set of philosophic notions *about* reality. I don’t study Vedanta as an external subject. I study my life and myself in the light of the Vedantic scriptures. This was a big thing for me to understand.

My whole life I have studied and became familiar with ontological notions about life. Ontology is the study of reality. Ontological notions are not just philosophical, they are any notions I have about the reality of myself, others and the world. I have many. They don’t just sit inside my head. They

are ways of seeing. Swamini Atmaprakashananda pointed out very early on that all notions about self, positive or negative, were erroneous. All my studies and all the books I have read consisted of ontological notions about life. All the ideas I picked up in my life about myself, other people and the world are ontological notions. When I looked at life, these notions determined what I was seeing. "Because I see it, it is there". As I previously stated Pujya Swamiji uses this phrase to make clear the meaning of subjectivity. No matter how brilliant the theory whether it be spiritual, psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical, they are only ontological notions *about* life.

What I find interesting about Vedanta and take it to be its defining characteristic, is that Vedanta is an epistemological (pertaining to knowing) method of enquiry, whose subject matter is myself. This epistemological process transforms the way we see ourselves, the world and God. It has nothing to do with acquiring new ontological notions. The word epistemology means the study of knowledge. Its subject matter is the act of knowing and it covers what the nature of knowing is and its range. As I engage in Vedantic enquiry, I make discoveries and I see what I did not see before. As my range of seeing broadens, I see more and more what has been here all along. "Because it is there, I see it" - this is a phrase that Pujya Swamiji uses to make clear what is meant by objectivity. The thing I find so profound is that Vedantic enquiry has nothing to do with the projection of ontological notions. It is not a theory about God, the self and the world; it is rather

freedom from our subjective notions about these things.

To me Pujya Swami Dayananda is the "Shankara" for the West. He has brought an epistemological method to the West, not a new set of spiritual notions. There is a marketplace full of these. When I expose my mind to this means of knowledge, it becomes very clear that I or others are never evil or bad, we just suffer from ignorance. Ignorance is the defect, not some kind of innate sinfulness. I don't need a saviour, I need knowledge.

I am just filled with gratitude to Pujya Swamiji for bringing this teaching to the West in a way that can be understood meaningfully by a western mind like mine. It has been and is such a blessing to have Swamiji's disciple, Swamini Atmaprakashananda as my teacher. She unfolds the vision of the teaching in a way that enables me to see myself and my life from that vision. She has such a wonderful pedagogical gift of making things very clear, as well as a rigour that makes the teaching very impactful. She is a traditional teacher who emphasises the necessity of living a life of karma yoga, in order to prepare the mind for the absolute knowledge. Frankly, I am a person who needs clear instructions about how to prepare myself for the knowledge. Swamini's insistence that I confront the way I live in this world and actively learn how to live rightly within it, is a wonderful thing because it makes the teaching so existentially relevant. I am now confronted daily with the choice between the usual resistance to facts and mindless emotional

reactions or graceful acceptance and beneficial responsiveness. Before meeting Swaminiji and through her, the Vedantic teaching, this choice was not available to me in any meaningful way.

Vedanta can be understood as an ontology (a philosophy of reality), a cosmology (study of the nature of the material universe), a psychology (theory of mind), a theology (theory about God), a system of ethics (our acts in relation to others). It is none of these, though it can easily be mistaken for such things because it sheds its light on all these subjects. It is ontological in the sense that we *see* what is reality in fact. It is cosmological in that we *see* the nature of the material universe as an “as though universe”, rather than substantial. It is psychological in that it transforms our emotional reactions and responses to life because we *see* ourselves and others differently. It is theological in the sense that we *see* what God is. It is ethical because once we *see* the value of values, we live peacefully and non harmfully in relation to others. It is also existential because the way we *see* determines how we exist in the world. If Vedanta is not understood as a

means of knowledge, a method of enquiry in which the subject matter is ourselves, the cognitive transformation it offers, that frees us from human suffering, won't be available to us.

Vedanta, as an epistemological methodology, does not fit into any of our usual Western theoretical categories because it is not theoretical. It is also not an Indian philosophy. Vedanta is rather a vision that transforms our lives because it transforms our way of *seeing*.

My thanks to my teacher Swaminiji Atmaprakashananda for making this means of knowledge available to me in such a useful form.

My immense gratitude goes to Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati for making the tradition of Vedanta available to people like me who live in the West and who are not part of the Indian culture. I bow to your feet in gratitude and love. May I be a worthy student of the teaching you have brought.

Bede Clifford

“Vedanta is not a topic in books. It is just you; it is your vision; it is your response to situations. Vedanta helps change your scales of vision. Your emphasis changes, and so small things remain small because you are concerned with something bigger. Thus Vedanta does bring about a cognitive change. Your cognition changes, thereby, a number of changes can take place.

Pujya Swamiji