

A Tribute to Puja Swami Dayananda Saraswati

– By Swami Svatmananda

Puja Swami Dayananda Saraswati was a great visionary and global leader who transcended the confines of a sect, religion, or a nation. His many contributions in various arenas will be analyzed and appreciated as time goes on. Swamiji (as we affectionately call him) will be remembered for his bequests to India and the world during the last 15 years of his life: he founded the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha — a platform uniting all Hindu sampradayas (traditions) so that they can speak with one voice; he started the Aim-for-Seva movement — a unique social enterprise bringing free education and healthcare to the children living in rural and tribal areas of India; he challenged proselytizing institutions by rendering that ‘religious conversion is violence’ — which resulted in a United Nations resolution that called upon all religious organizations to mutually respect each other and to cease proselytization practices. Puja Swamiji also initiated the Hindu-Jewish and the Hindu-Buddhist Summits — both transformative theological dialogues; he steered the rescue of Rama-Sethu bridge from certain desecration; and he was a tireless champion of Hindu and Vaidika Dharma through countless other initiatives and projects.

However, above and beyond all of these contributions, Swamiji was an outstanding teacher. He loved to teach. For more than 50 years, those who have listened to Swamiji’s discourses and those who have been his students and disciples, knew Swamiji at his best — when he was teaching. His profound lectures and eminent writings have been published in more than 60 titles in English, and some of them have been translated to other languages of the world.

Those who studied and grasped his teachings will recognize that Swamiji’s unfoldment of Vedanta as the most profound and irrevocable gift to mankind in centuries. His emphatic exposition that Vedanta is a pramāṇa — “a means of knowledge,” provided the pivotal shift needed to inquire into and understand the nature of the Self through the mirror of Vedanta. It became the crux of his teaching. It changed everything both for him and his students. It fundamentally transformed the study of Vedanta, and changed the spiritual landscape for all sincere seekers of the truth.

Until Swamiji brought this brilliant teaching to the forefront, Vedanta, and Veda for that matter, remained comfortably misunderstood and camouflaged in the dense forest of mysticism and magical fancies. For too long, spiritual teachers and their acolytes have been entranced with, and falsely profited by vague, unverifiable claims, and have transfixed themselves and others with attestations and seeming manifestations of a separate reality. In the extreme, many of the inhuman atrocities of wars, terror, famine, slavery of all forms, and colonization were perpetrated under the guise of belief systems or in the name of a fraudulent spiritual teacher or a personified god. Instead of such religious institutions emancipating humanity, they inadvertently became instrumental in perpetrating untold human suffering throughout millennia. Given this plight and the history of religious violence, many a modern existential thinker, armed with scientific reasoning, view religion and other forms of belief systems with forlorn skepticism and relegated them to the realms of superstition and meaningless ritualism. Science became the de facto standard with which everything had to be empirically substantiated or logically explained. Humanity meanwhile, remained caught in a seemingly irreconcilable schism between Science and Religion.

Instead of cursorily dismissing the demand for “scientific verification” Swamiji rationally demonstrated the limits of Science. Any scientific proof remained limited to the realms of the five senses and thus limited in scope and domain, thereby ostracizing science as an ill-suited means of verification. Moreover, by the mere fact that there exists a valid means of knowledge for understanding the spiritual realm, the basis of blind-belief which many religious institutions depend upon, became inconsequential. Unfolding Vedanta as a pramāṇa, that is, a means of knowledge, was Swamiji’s ingenious stroke that made both the demand of empirical scientific verification, as well as the demand for implicit and unquestioning belief, superfluous and inconsequential.

This method of teaching Vedanta has far-reaching and astonishing implications. It goes beyond presenting Vedanta as the testimony of realized beings of the past, whose realization has to be verified by one’s own experience of enlightenment here and now. It repositions Vedanta as a self-sufficient means of knowledge that neither requires scientific or empirical verification nor implicit and blind belief.

Vedanta’s objective or Swamiji’s for that matter, was not to shatter scientific inquiry or to repudiate belief systems, but essentially to enable bona-fide spiritual seekers to legitimately embark upon the pursuit of mokṣa — freedom from self-inadequacy by knowing the nature of reality. Vedanta unequivocally mandates that the ultimate goal for any human being is the pursuit of mokṣa. By introducing this pivotal-shift in looking at Vedanta as a pramāṇa, Swamiji made a process of guided self-inquiry accessible to thousands around the world, regardless of religious or cultural background. Thousands have been enthralled by Swamiji’s enlightening lectures interspersed with humorous story-telling and hilarious anecdotes. Hundreds of his students became teachers in their own right, some of whom continue to teach what he taught. Rather than build a hierarchical organization of teachers, he created a movement, by producing hundreds of independent teachers around the world, who in turn, continue to teach and change the thinking paradigm of future generations around the world.

Furthermore, looking at Vedanta in the light of pramāṇa equips those embroiled in existential, epistemological, or ontological inquiry, with a valid tool for their investigation. Establishing Vedanta as a pramāṇa made such investigations plausible and in fact verifiable. Swamiji, in his understated manner, would say, “you have to give a chance for pramāṇa to work.” “It ‘works’ when the student sees what the teacher sees,” he would add. A student had to employ pramāṇa, to see what Swamiji saw. Then and only then, the vision of Vedanta became real. The teaching became real: it came alive, validating not only the pramāṇa and the methodology that pramāṇa would rope in along with it, but also the teaching tradition (sampradāya), and ultimately, the Guru.

Swamiji was that extraordinary quintessential Guru as described by the Veda, who said with unpretentious humility that he was a traditional teacher. Endowed with rare insight, Swamiji made Vedanta accessible to the wider world, by seamlessly integrating contemporary English and ancient Sanskrit - which is a highly complex and refined language. Demonstrating great wizardry with words, Swamiji’s synthesized the two mismatched languages with such versatile dexterity without tampering or dumbing down the meaning of Sanskrit terms. He remained true to the teaching and to the teaching methodology, without compromising the tradition. He found it unnecessary to use any kind of props — no bombastic verbiage, no acronyms, no boards - black or white, no charts, no power-point presentations and no gimmicks. Just an earnest unadulterated dialogue between a Guru and Shishya (disciple), and in that dialogue Swamiji relied entirely upon the Śāstra pramāṇa to work. If the pramāṇa is skillfully handled by a traditionally trained teacher, there is no need to resort to auxiliary tools or techniques for the student to see what the teacher sees. Simply ingenious!

Swamiji's teachings and the magnitude of this particular contribution will continue to reverberate across the globe, and across generations, transcending cultures and civilizations, to profoundly transform mankind for the better. He shall therefore, I believe, be better known as the Swami who changed the world.

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Swami Svatananda Saraswati is a disciple of Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati since 2003, and completed an intense study of Vedanta in a traditional three-year course in 2007. Swami Svatananda has devoted his life to Vedic knowledge. He studied Vedic disciplines in India and the U.S. and traveled great distances in order to learn from the foremost experts in each of the following specialties. He counsels individually and lectures to groups worldwide on Hatha yoga, Meditation, Jyotisha (Vedic astrology), Ayurveda (Vedic medicine), Vaastu (Vedic architecture), Sanskrit language and Vedanta. Swami Svatananda's experiences of living and working in four different continents gives him an exceptional ability to connect with people from varied backgrounds during his lectures. His rare combination of innate skills, broad life experiences and dedicated study translates into a uniquely comprehensive approach to counseling, teaching and applying Vedic wisdom in modern times.

Sanyasa Dheeksha on Sivaratri - 2016



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