

The Psychology In Vedanta

“An Interview with Swami Dayananda” 1

(The first part of this article appeared in April 2015 issue. This is its continuation.)

Q. (a) What is meant by bondage or self-ignorance and what is the root cause for this? (Include an explanation of *anyonyādhyāsa* or mutual super imposition)

Q. (b) Can you explain why the condition of living in the state of bondage leads to causing emotional pain and suffering?

Swamiji: Whatever I don't want to have, but I can't get rid of is bondage. In Sanskrit, it is called *bandha* or *bandhana*. It is derived from the Sanskrit root word, *bandh*, to bind. The bondage itself is *bandha*. It means you are bound. One cannot extricate oneself from certain things, which he or she wants to get rid of. What is it that one does not want? Pain and sorrow, limitation, fear, old age and being subject to disease and mortality are just a few things that most of us do not want.

When one doesn't love certain things or doesn't like certain things, but cannot get rid of them, they become bondage for the person. It is that wanting to get out of something and not being able to. I want to get out of this struggle to become happy but I cannot rid myself of the struggle. I want to be free from insecurity, but I find myself helplessly insecure. That's bondage. Being insecure is bondage. Being bound by time is bondage. Being bound by various limitations is bondage. Who is it that feels

this bondage? Vedanta discusses it this way. The physical body does not feel the bondage. Neither does the mind. The mind is a *kāraṇa*; it is simply a means or instrument.

The person or the ego feels the bondage. No matter who the person is, wherever there is “I” sense, there is a sense of bondage also. That I want to be different from being what I am is bondage. In Vedanta, we say that a life of becoming is a life of bondage. In one word, we call it *saṁsāra*. “I am a *saṁsārin*” means *I am not acceptable to myself as I am now*. That is *saṁsāra*. A *saṁsārin* is the one who has *saṁsāra*. This is the one who appears to become a *saṁsārin* because—*he or she wants to become*.

I cannot but struggle to become because I am not acceptable to myself as I am. I struggle to become that person in whom I can be free, meaning in whom I find total acceptance, complete acceptability. Suppose I become that person in terms of wealth, in terms of health or in terms of any accomplishment that I gain. Then afterwards, once again, I want to become. Thus, I am always in the process of becoming. That is *saṁsāra*.

This ongoing act of becoming itself reveals that there is no way of becoming free. You don't *become* free, because the very fact that you want to become reveals that you are

not free. The attempt to become free is a denial of freedom, according to Vedanta, because it betrays a self non-acceptance. We can say that this is the *original sin* or the original problem. That constant wanting to become or needing to become somebody else is the original problem. And in that somebody else, I expect to see myself as a free person, free from want, who won't need to become any more. Suppose one has pursued a life of becoming for forty years. The remaining 40 or 50 years I may have is not going to be any different. The recognition of this is what is sometimes called the *middle age crisis*.

So freedom from this constant attempt to become; from becoming itself, is called *mokṣa*. One eventually comes to recognize that freedom from becoming cannot come by becoming. How can I become free from being a limited person when I am limited as far as I can see? All the features about myself are found wanting. If I look at myself, an individual ego, it is like a compartment. It is an advocate of a lot of things. The ego itself doesn't exist. When you look at yourself from one standpoint or the other, you become wanting. From the physical body standpoint in terms of health, in terms of strength, in terms of height, I am found wanting. In terms of pervasiveness, time or mortality (being subject to old age and death), I am wanting.

Then in terms of mind, if I look at myself emotion-wise, I cannot always command a cheerful mind; thus wanting. In terms of knowledge, I am always wanting. In terms of my capacity to remember, I'm again wanting. What I want to recollect doesn't come. The moment the situation is not there and I need not recollect anymore, or the person is gone and I don't need to remember his name, then it comes, thus

wanting. And the storing capacity also is wanting. Everything is wanting. Certain memories that I don't want to have keep appearing. So what I don't want to have also is there, thus, *I am wanting* in terms of the need to remove it.

So it appears that any way I look at myself, I am found wanting. In terms of my own partial viewpoint, I see myself as wanting. I always wish that I had not done a few things because I feel guilty of commission. Perhaps I had hurt someone. Then I wish I had done a few things I had omitted, that could have made the situation better. Vedanta talks about that. *kimahamsadhunākaravoamkim ahampāpamakaravamiti*. Why didn't I do the right thing? Why did I do the wrong thing? This is there in everybody. There is guilt. Also, there are so many hurts. Why did others not do the right thing? Why did that person do this to me? Why did this person not do this for me? So, in terms of hurt, I am wanting.

In terms of guilt, I am wanting—wanting in the sense that I wish I had no guilt. I wish I had no hurt. So this wanting all the way is what the ego is. Looking at oneself as a daughter, son, mother, father, again I am found wanting. I wish my mother was a little different, my father was a little different, and so here I'm wanting. Money-wise and relationship-wise, I see myself wanting, always wanting. But this wanting person doesn't like to be wanting. It is not natural. Why? Because I cannot have a sense of want centered on my self and totally accept myself at the same time. It is not possible.

In the reality of being a *wanting* person, there is a denial of self-acceptance. Therefore, I feel I have to fix up this

situation of being a wanting person by fixing up so many things. I have to fix up my mother. I have to fix up my father. I have to fix up the world. How? This is what we are doing. We try to fix up the world, fix up countries, fix up people. Can we finally fix all these things up? No doubt, we have to do certain things, but nothing seems to really stay fixed up. What we do leads to another situation, which again continues to need fixing and so on.

So it's a continuous process going on and it's never-ending. Individually speaking, I see myself in a non-winning situation. Struggle alone is necessary, but without an end to the struggle, it's not a struggle worth making. When I am very sure that there is no end to the struggle, then why should I struggle? But can I give up this struggle? No, because I cannot accept myself, so I cannot but struggle, and I begin to see the uselessness of the struggle. So one is just getting on with one's life and not really living life fully. When one just gets on with one's life, it's kind of a half-life in the sense that people become emotionally numb. Why? Because the human freedom of expression, the freedom to grow, the freedom to express one's fullness seems thwarted. There is a kind of dumbness (something hidden, not known) and thus an emotional numbness to the situations.

So there is a struggle without meaning. This is the bondage. Afterwards, there are the hopes, the occasional happiness—the paperback promise. The paperback books you read talk about the human potential and all of that. These are written by the self-made people who offer you some hope. Then afterwards you discover the new-age promises. Yoga, alfalfa and so many things, all promise something different. We want to start somewhere again anew. So we

begin to notice and look into the self-help groups and various kinds of alternative type things, etc.

Vedanta recognizes the struggle here as meaningful. It is not a meaningless struggle. It has a meaning. What is the meaning? That *the struggle is meaningless* is the meaning. That is the meaning of the struggle. Now, please look into the other option open to you. Either you struggle, which is meaningless, or without struggle, you should solve the problem. If without struggle, you have to solve the problem, it can only be a problem of ignorance, self-ignorance.

Therefore, one has got to look into and understand what the self is. Maybe the self is not the one that you think you are. The self that you know is just a composite. In terms of seeing, in terms of hearing, it is a seer, a hearer. Minus or stripped of all that please see the self. Without being a seer, without being a hearer, without being a son, without being a daughter, is there a self? A basic self must necessarily be there. Perhaps that is the self that you come across when you are happy. Otherwise, in spite of all this struggling life, one cannot find oneself happy, even occasionally. The fact that one is happy occasionally itself proves that in order to be happy I need not struggle. Maybe that self that obtains when I am happy is the truth of the self, the self of which I have experience but no knowledge. So maybe there is a cognitive pursuit open to me, a pursuit of recognizing what I am.

Vedanta offers a solution to the problem, saying that there is *no absolutely real* problem. In terms of relations, or relatively, we address problems of maturity. But one assumes there is a problem of essential self-

limitation, and then goes about trying to solve it. That assumption is wrong. If the assumption is wrong, then you have to re-shuffle your thinking and re-examine yourself. You have to inquire into what is the very core of yourself. Is it possible that I am always a changing self or can my self be unchanging at all times?

Therefore, this “Who am I” question, becomes very, very significant. How am I going to look at myself? What is the means of looking at myself? In this process, the whole Vedanta teaching becomes a means of knowledge. In the vision of Vedanta, *you are the whole*. In that you have the big picture—the vision of a free, stable and unchanging self. That I am the whole is the solution. If I am the problem, the problem is one of being confused about myself. If I feel split into so many parts, then seeing the fact that ‘I am whole’ should necessarily be the solution. All the parts should fall in place by recognizing one homogeneous whole. If I am not acceptable to myself, and the self is by nature acceptable, then I have to discover that I am acceptable to myself. The self that is not different than the whole is acceptable because it cannot be better than it is.

Nobody really needs to fix up the self. Though one has been trying to fix up the self all along, it is already free. If this is true, it means I have to completely relook at myself. In this process, there is necessarily a complete shift of emphasis. When such a shift takes place, with reference to the entire unconscious also, there is more trust in oneself. There is more trust in the bigger picture. You relax, and when you relax, the unconscious can release all the unresolved problems. If there are problems, the person can go on to understand and resolve things that help

him or her mature emotionally. Therefore, support systems, prayer, and therapy all become useful for further clarity. In this way, even therapy becomes a means or *sādhana* for gaining self-knowledge. A relative degree of emotional maturity and stability should be there for gaining more clarity in self-knowledge. In fact, when you have the bigger picture, it’s not only much easier, but essential for the growth of the person.

Once there is such a thing as self-ignorance, there will be self-confusion also. The self is self-evident. Therefore, “I am” is self-evident. That *I am wanting* is a conclusion, a wrong conclusion in fact. But I have no other way of taking myself. What else will I take myself for? I can’t take myself to be anything else other than my body, which I am intimately connected to. So, my body-mind-sense complex becomes me. And that is limited. This is what we call superimposition. Here, the self is “mistaken” for the body-mind-sense complex. That the body-mind-sense complex is myself is okay. You can say that from a standpoint. Suppose you say, “I am forty years old, fifty years old”. Then you are referring to yourself from a standpoint, which is fine. If somebody says “I am an engineer, I am a doctor”, that’s fine from that standpoint.

But then, what is I? That’s the problem. Here we have a mutual superimposition. In Sanskrit, it is called (*anyonya-adhyāsa*). The self (*ātman*) is taken to be the body-mind-sense complex. The body-mind-sense complex is taken to be the *ātman*. When two things are mixed up, and each is taken to be the other, this is recognized as a mutual super-imposition or *anyonya-adhyāsa*.

B is A. A is not B. That is Vedanta. The seer is “I”, but I am not the seer. If I am the seer,

I will be seeing all the time. I am the hearer, with reference to hearing, seer with reference to seeing, knower with reference to knowing. But I, myself, am just a being, a simple conscious being. Then what is that being? Here is where Vedanta becomes a means of knowledge. If the true nature of the "I", the person, or the being is not known, I will be wanting. I will be subject to all the pains and changes of mortality, etc. Then the unconscious will remain with all the unresolved emotions. Even for a normal unconscious, (not highly loaded), assuming the child grew up in a functional home and the childhood evolved normally without any serious problems, still there are unconscious needs. Then the conscious waking life is full of failures, disappointments, regrets, guilt, and hurt. So many things are involved, and therefore, emotional problems are unavoidable in human life.

In fact, this emotional life is the price you pay for freedom from the problem of emotion. If one has a certain emotional pain, one should learn from it. The learning should be uplifting. If I learn something from it, that's the price I pay for what I have learned. Otherwise, I am stuck with only pain now, pain from the past, fear of pain in the future, and I do not learn anything from it. Emotional pain leads you to something. It takes you somewhere. Therefore, we don't want to bypass emotions or the emotional life.

At a time when emotions have a secret to give, we should take them very seriously, but not give them more reality than they deserve. We don't dismiss them as nothing, nor do we take them as everything. They lead you to something, something more

profound. So emotional pain is there and, even physical pain is there drawing your attention. Suppose physically some part of the body is giving you pain, it demands your attention. So too, emotional pain draws your attention and you have to learn from it. What does it convey to me? It all leads you to *mokṣa*, really speaking, or to freedom.

Any enquiring person comes with a background in terms of a culture and education. That background seems to be a very important factor because it helps to give the person a direction and makes him or her available for a given enquiry. If what one seeks is available in the culture itself, then that is very good.

One knows exactly what to seek. Like here, in the American culture, therapy is well known. Therapy is available, and it doesn't carry much stigma. Once you know there is such help available, then you seek help. If somebody is suffering from alcoholism, and there is such a thing as AA support groups available, one can seek help right there. So if, in a culture, this kind of spiritual truth or pursuit is available, people will be naturally given to that pursuit. Emotional problems can lead to that. In American culture, during the 1960's and 70's, there was a kind of discovery or enquiry with respect to a more meaningful spiritual pursuit. Many people wrote off the hippies as idiots or radicals, but it was not an ordinary thing. There was an awareness of something more fundamental, more basic. Whenever such a thing happens, it looks very drastic, but it brought about a certain change in the awareness of the society.