

This is the third part of the serial article, continuation from July 2021 newsletter.

Self-knowledge destroys the bondage of ignorance

Self-knowledge initially loosens and then completely destroys the bondage created by ignorance. What is the nature of the bondage? It is, after all, nothing but a notion. That we are bound is a notion, which is the result of our false perceptions of ourselves. We are thus bound by our own conclusions, by our own opinions, by our own judgments, and by our own complexes. In reality, nothing binds us, other than our own complexes. On account of our ignorance, we look upon ourselves as limited. We find ourselves to merely be one among the many, one among the countless. We find ourselves separated from the rest of the world. We feel that we have to defend ourselves or protect ourselves because we are insecure or fearful. In this manner, various complexes, such as taking oneself to be limited, insecure, wanting, and lacking, bind us and come in the way of our freedom; they do not let us be what we want to be. There is always a fear that comes in the way of our free expressions of ourselves. While it is not true that expressing ourselves as we want is necessarily freedom, our complexes surely deny us the enjoyment of whatever it is that we understand freedom to be.

The constant need to cover or protect oneself, the constant need to present oneself as acceptable to the world, the constant need for the approval of the world, and the constant need to please other people comes in the way of our simply being as we are or what we are. If we examine the pattern of our thoughts, we would understand the nature of this bondage and the extent to which fear is inherent in everything we do. Occasionally, when we know that we are not being judged, we do experience moments of freedom; for instance, when we sing in the shower, the tune simply emerges and we enjoy ourselves. Truly, this is when we are not conscious of ourselves as limited beings. Yet the moment passes and all it takes is one thought of our perceived limitations to make us instantly unhappy. The very sense of being limited is binding.

All bondage is entirely notional

Vedānta says that it is not something real that binds. It is just the sense that one is a limited being that is binding, and, therefore, freedom is nothing but becoming free from the sense of being limited. Being limited is a notion that results from the ignorance of the true nature of the self, and that notion can be removed by the true knowledge of the self alone.

It is very comforting to listen to Vedānta, because this is one place where we are told that we are limitless, that we are beautiful, and that we are fine as we are. Nowhere else in the world are we told so; we are only used to being told that we are lacking in some way or the other. Vedānta tells us that we are harmony, we are love, and that we are limitless. This may not be seen to be flattery, because Vedānta also provides the supporting reasoning for this. The statements are to be understood, rather than simply accepted, because accepting doesn't do anything for us. The attitude that "Swami says I am limitless, so I must be limitless," does not help in any way. Therefore, the statements of the Upaniṣad are to be carefully analyzed and understood.

Understanding the meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads would amount to understanding the true nature of the self, because they reveal the true nature of the self. The revelation is presented in a very simple statement: *tat tvam asi*, 'that thou art,' which proclaims that we are limitless. Somebody once asked Pūjya Swamiji, "Swami, suppose somebody comes up tomorrow with a better knowledge, what would you do? What will happen to Vedānta?" Swamiji simply replied, "I am telling you that you are limitless. Can you improve upon that?" The limitless is not subject to improvement. That is the *tātparyā* or purport of all the Upaniṣads.

We already are that which we seek to be

To understand this statement of three words, *tat tvam asi*, which asserts that we are limitless or that we are *brahman*, we need to understand the meaning of each of the words: *tat* or 'that,' which indicates *brahman*, *tvam* or 'you,' which indicates each one of us, and *asi* or 'are,' which indicates the identity between the self and *brahman*. The entire study of Vedānta is nothing but an effort to understand this

simple statement.

Many years ago, I attended the course on Vedānta taught by Pūjya Swami Dayānandajī. On the third day, while unfolding the basics of Vedānta, he made it very clear that Vedānta teaches of *prāptasya prāptih*, the attainment of that which is already attained, in the sense that there is nothing new that one must attain, there is nothing that one must become; the teaching is simply of the recognition of what is. Pūjya Swamiji said, “Look, today I am telling you that you are *brahman*. At the end of the course also, I’ll tell you that you are *brahman*. Nothing new is to be told.” It was this one sentence alone that was being unfolded all along!

One may wonder how it is possible to listen to the same teaching day after day for years together. The fact of the matter is that we don’t seem to get tired of it at all. There is always freshness in it, always some new dimension or some new insight that dawns, because nobody ever gets tired of listening about themselves. It is like looking into a mirror at yourself. Perhaps looking at yourself first thing in the morning may be justified, if only to make sure nothing has happened during the long night! But why look again, after barely an hour, and why every time you enter the bathroom or leave it? It is because, no matter how we look, we love looking at ourselves. Particularly, therefore, when somebody says we are beautiful and wonderful, we never get tired of hearing that said of ourselves.

Vedānta says that we are limitless, we are beautiful, and there’s nothing lacking in us. We need not achieve anything; all that we need do is own up to what we are and just be what we are in the recognition of what we are. This is something we love to hear. We love being told this. Somebody once asked me, “Swamiji, did any miracle happen in your life?” I said, “Yes, a miracle happened on the third day of the course that I attended.” That is when I came to know that one already is what he or she is seeking to be. The idea that there is nothing to be done, because each one of us truly is what we are seeking to be, offered the greatest comfort. That was a great revelation.

To be continued...