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Mahā-vākya Vicāra

The need for constant exposure to the knowledge

To create the right *saṁskāras* in the mind, the *śāstras* say, *paunaḥ punyena śravaṇam kuryāt*, listen to it again and again. There are actually two types of *saṁskāras*. *Saṁskāras* in terms of the mind becoming pure or free from the impulses of likes and dislikes are of one type, and *saṁskāras* in terms of the orientation of the mind toward nonduality are the other type. Since the mind is conditioned with the idea of duality, the idea of nonduality doesn't have much effect on it, and, therefore, we listen to the Upaniṣads or the teachings of Vedānta again and again. Day in and day out, we are told, 'You are *brahman*, you are nondual, duality is false, and the *jagat* is *mithyā*.' The *śāstra* conveys the same message in different ways, using different models, different arguments, and different methods. Then, even a relatively resistant mind starts absorbing it. However, all this works only when there is also *śraddhā*, *bhakti*, and *dhyāna*, which stand for purity of mind; as the Upaniṣadsaid in the beginning, may you have *śraddhā*, *bhakti* and *dhyāna*. One should keep on accumulating impressions or *saṁskāras* of nonduality with a mind that has *śraddhā*, *bhakti*, and *dhyāna*.

In the beginning, these impressions of nonduality don't last. It is like writing on water; even as you write it disappears. Slowly, however, it becomes more like writing on sand; it remains for a while, but when the wave comes in, the writing is swept away. However, a time comes when it becomes like writing on a rock; regardless of what storms come, the writing remains etched. That is what we call abiding knowledge. What in the beginning is easily forgotten, is, upon greater exposure, present for a longer while, but is still impacted by some strong forces, like identification with the body. Only when it becomes like writing on a rock does it

become permanent and abiding. Therefore, we have to keep on exposing ourselves to the teaching, meaning that a constant orientation towards nonduality is required, because of our deeply ingrained *samskāras* of duality.

As Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the 15th chapter of the Gita¹, like the deep-rooted *aśvattha* tree, the sense of duality is so deeply rooted that it takes time to uproot it. So we should have patience and perseverance, and put in constant effort with dedication. The words of the *śāstra* will then create the desired effect and the job will be done. Until then, we should remain devoted to listening and contemplating.

Repeating the name of the Lord is effective and works in two stages. First we choose the name, Om, Rāma, Hari, or some other name of the Lord, and repeat it with devotion. Here devotion becomes important. If someone asks about how to cultivate devotion, we say that if you want to discover devotion for any given deity, chant Lord Rāma's name, keep on reading the Rāmayaṇa, listen to the glories of Rāma, listen to his greatness. If Kṛṣṇa is your deity of choice, listen to the Bhāgavata, listen to his glories, his greatness. That's how one discovers reverence and devotion for the Lord. When repeated with an attitude of devotion, the name becomes more effective. Repeating the name first brings about purification of the mind, and then knowledge.

Having seen how a word and its meaning are connected, let us go back to the verse, which states, *praṇavam̐ ca uttarāraṇim*, let *praṇava* be the upper *araṇi*. *Praṇava* means *omkāra*. The sound *om* emerges from silence, it remains in silence, and merges back into silence. Silence is formless, free of attributes or qualifications; it is called *amātrā*. The transcendent, unqualified, unconditioned *brahman*, which is the truth, is represented by the *amātrā*, the silence obtaining between two utterances. As the mind becomes contemplative, the *omkāra* becomes the means of knowledge. So far one has been repeating "Om, Om" with devotion; now one begins to analyze the *omkāra*.

¹ BG 15.3

The *omkāra* is composed of an *akāra*, the syllable 'a,' an *ukāra* or 'u,' and a *makāra*, the final 'm.' The three syllables can be seen to represent the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep, the three acts of creation, sustenance, and dissolution, the three worlds of earth, the intermediate world, and heaven, the three deities of fire, the air, and the sun, or stand for the creator, the sustainer, and the destroyer. Amongst them, the three *mātrās* of the *omkāra* represent everything that is manifest, which ultimately resolves into the unmanifest or *amātrā*. The *akāra* resolves into the *ukāra*, which then resolves into the *makāra*, and finally, the *makāra* resolves into the *amātrā*. This is the method of representation that the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad employs, and the *omkāra* or *praṇava* thus becomes the means of knowledge.

At the first stage, the *omkāra* becomes the means to purify the mind. At the second stage, it becomes the means to selfknowledge. This is what is intended even here in the Kaivalya Upaniṣad, because it belongs to the Atharva Veda, as do the Māṇḍūkya and the Muṇḍaka. Therefore, we find a similarity of ideas in these three Upaniṣads. In the subsequent *mantras*, there is an analysis of the three states of consciousness, waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, which are also described in the Māṇḍūkya.

Jñānanirmathanābhyāsāt means repeatedly contemplating upon the nature of the self with the help of the *mahā-vākya* or great statement, such as *aham brahmāsmi*, 'I am brahman.' What is the nature of the individual self? What is the abiding reality of the self? Now one is a waker, then one is a dreamer, and, later, a deep sleeper. When the waker is, the other two are not. When the dreamer is, the other two are not. Each one excludes the other two. Is there something that these three do not exclude? For example, the form of a bangle excludes that of an earring, because the bangle is not an earring. Similarly, the form of the earring excludes the form of a chain, because the earring is not a chain. All three forms exclude one another. Yet is there something that they do not exclude? Yes, there is, and that is the element of gold.

While every name and form excludes every other name and form, the very es-

sence that is the underlying self is not excluded. What is it that is not excluded by the waker, dreamer, and deep-sleeper? That is the essence, the true nature of the self, which one arrives at by letting go of all the changing aspects and focusing on that alone which does not change. What is it that is changing? It is the waking experience, the dream experience and the sleep experience. Yet what is it that sustains these changes? What is it that connects the changes? What is the connecting thread? As Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the Bhagavad Gita², the essential underlying reality is like an invisible thread that holds a garland of flowers together. Each flower is different from the others, but the same *sūtra* or thread holds all the flowers together. What is the thread that connects all the changing states? That thread is the very essence, the self. *Jñānanirmathanābhāysāt*. In this repeated ‘churning,’ the intellect is the rod and the *aupaniṣad-mahāvākya*, *aham brahmāsmi*, I am *brahman*, is the rope, using which deliberation or *vicāra* is performed by the intellect. On the one hand, we have the *jīva-ātmā*, the individual self, and, on the other hand, we have *brahman*, the *parama-ātmā*. The Upaniṣad reveals that the *jīvātma* is none other than the *paramātma*. The *jīva* is none other than *brahman*, *tat tvam asi*. It reveals that the *aham* is none other than *brahman*; *aham brahma asmi*.

***Vicāra* ensures that we do not take our conclusions for granted**

‘I am *brahman*.’ This is the vision of the scriptures. One who takes himself to be a limited being is, in fact, *brahman*, the limitless. This is what the scriptures reveal. The deliberation is upon whether we are really what we take ourselves to be. Are we really the *ahaṅkāra* or ego that we take ourselves to be? Is one justified in taking himself or herself to be a small, limited being? We have taken for granted that we are small, limited, and insignificant without ever subjecting these conclusions to the scrutiny of inquiry. We have never really looked into the validity of such conclusions about ourselves. Has anybody seen the ‘I’ to claim that the ‘I’ is a

^२ मयि सर्वमिदं प्रोतं सूत्रे मणिगणा इव ।

mayi sarvamidam protam sūtre maṇigaṇā eva (BG 7.7)

All this is strung on me like pearls on a string.

limited being? No. What we see is the body, what we see is the mind, and what we see are our thoughts. Yet, looking at the limited personality of this body, mind, intellect, and so on, we draw conclusions about ourselves. Isn't that strange?

Drawing conclusions about the self based on the misconception that it is the body or the mind is like looking at our reflections in a distorted mirror and drawing conclusions about how we look. Just because the mirror distorts the reflection, can you conclude that your face is distorted? Or just because the reflection looks fat, conclude that you are fat? Yet we look at the body and conclude that we are human beings, that one is a man or woman, tall or short. We derive these conclusions merely by looking at the body. This means that one takes for granted that the body is oneself. We look at the mind; when the mind is happy, we conclude that we are happy, and, when the mind is unhappy, we conclude that we are unhappy. Thus, we keep on drawing a variety of conclusions about ourselves, not by looking at ourselves, but by looking at something other than ourselves. This is called *tādātmya*, identification.

We identify with something that we see, such as the body, even though we are only the witness of the body. We are quite clear that this table we are not, this flower we are not, or this book we are not. All of these things we are not. We know that they are all objects of our knowledge and we know that we are different from what we know. But somehow this *viveka* or discrimination seems to fail us when it comes to the body, even though the body also falls in the category of something external to us and known to us. Lord Kṛṣṇa says, *idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetram-ityabhidhīyate*, 'Hey Arjuna, this body, the *śarīra*, is called a *kṣetra* or field,¹ meaning that it falls in the category of that which is known to us.

In the same manner as *viveka* or discrimination leaves us when it comes to the body, it does not remain even when it comes to the mind. We become one with the mind; we identify with the mind and take ourselves to be only as good as the mind. It is like watching a movie and becoming so identified with it that we start crying because some character in the movie is crying or start laughing because

somebody there is laughing. This fellow in the movie wins a million-dollar lottery, and even if we haven't a single penny in our pockets, we still seem to experience the joy of winning a million dollars, however momentarily! This is called identification. There is self-forgetfulness on the one hand and becoming something that one is not, on the other. Something like that happens in identification with the body-mind-intellect complex. Even though we are not the personality, there is identification with it and, hence, the conscious person as though becomes as small as the personality.

The three-fold limitation of all things, including the personality

The personality is limited in every way. It is limited in time, because it has birth and death; it is limited in place, because, at any given time, it is in one place and not in any other; it is limited in attributes, because it possesses some attributes and not some others. Therefore, the person who identifies with the personality feels the same sense of limitation. He feels the sense of limitation and, at the same time, cannot accept it. Naturally, he struggles constantly to become free from that sense of limitation. This is *samsāra*. It is a struggle that can never end, because we can never get rid of the limitations as long as we identify with the personality. The way to become free from limitations is not to try to *become* limitless, but to *understand* that every limitation is but a notion. *Viveka* is required to discriminate between the self and the non-self. This is the *jñānanirmathana*, the 'churning' with the rod of knowledge or the rod of inquiry.

¹ BG 13.1

Pāśaṁ dahati paṇḍitaḥ, the wise burns all bondage. *Paṇḍā* is the knowledge that one is *brahman*, and the one who has gained that knowledge is called a *paṇḍita*, a wise person. Just as the fire generated from the friction between the two wooden blocks burns all the combustible wood, so also, this 'fire' of knowledge, which is generated by churning the rod of *viveka* or *vicāra*, inquiry or deliberation, burns all the *pāśas*, fetters or bondages.

In the next few *mantras*, there is an analysis of the three states of consciousness

and of that which is the substratum of all three. It is called the *avasthātraya-viveka* or discrimination based on the three states of experience, namely, *jāgrat*, *svapna*, and *suṣupti*, the states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. The question that may occur here is, “If you say that *ātmā* is the self of all and that I am *brahman* and non-dual, how did I become a *saṁsāri*?” The inquiry being performed in the subsequent *mantras* pertains to how the limitless self becomes a limited being, subject to birth and death and sorrow. How does it happen?

स एव मायापरिमोहितात्मा

शरीरमास्थाय करोति सर्वम् ।

स्त्रियन्नपानादिविचित्रभोगैः

स एव जाग्रत्परितृप्तिमेति ॥ १२ ॥

sa eva māyāparimohitātmā

śarīramāsthāya karoti sarvaṁ

striyannapānādivicitrabhogaiḥ

sa eva jāgratparitṛptimeti

सः - he एव - alone मायापरिमोहितात्मा - one who is very well deluded by *māyā* शरीरम् - body आस्थाय - identified with करोति - does सर्वम् - everything स्त्रियन्नपानादिविचित्रभोगैः - through varied objects of pleasure, such as woman, food, drink etc. सः एव - he alone जाग्रत् - waking state परितृप्तिम् - full gratification एति - obtains

The self alone, being very well deluded by *māyā*, is the one who, identified with the body, performs all the actions in the waking state and obtains full gratification through the varied objects of pleasure, such as woman, food, drink etc. (12)

To be continued...