

An interview with Swamy Dayananda Saraswathi

by Andrew Cohen.

The interview that follows was excerpted from over 80 pages of transcripts documenting a series of dialogues between Swamy Dayananda and Andrew Cohen in February 1998.

What is advaita?

Andrew Cohen: In the last twenty years or so there has been great interest in Advaita in the West, as you know, and it's my impression that there has also been a lot of confusion about this teaching, that it has been very misunderstood and even abused in some cases. We wanted to speak with you so that we could present authoritative traditional view. So, to begin, could you please explain what the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta is?

Swami Dayananda: The word "advaita" is a very important word. It's a word that negates *dvaita*, which means "two." The "a" is a negative particle, so the meaning would be "that which is nondual." And it reveals the philosophy that all that is here is one, which means that there is nothing other than that one, nor is it made up of any parts. It's a whole without parts, and That they Call "Brahman" [the Absolute], and That you are – because the nondual cannot be different from you, the inquirer. If it is the object. So it has got to be you. And therefore, if you don't recognize that, you'll miss out on being the Whole.

AC: Can you please explain the historical background?

SD: The Vedas [sacred Hindu scriptures] are the most ancient body knowledge we Have in humanity. And the tradition looks upon the Vedas as not having been authored by any given person, but given to the ancient *rishis* [seers] as revealed knowledge. It is considered that the Vedas are traced ultimately to the Lord as the source of all knowledge, and *it is this body of knowledge that is the source of Advaita*. The Upanishads [the concluding portion of Vedas] talk about God realization – and they not talk about it, they methodically teach it. What I am doing today is what is taught in the Upanishads. The Upanishads themselves are a *teaching and also a teaching tradition*. And it's a communicable tradition – there's nothing mystical about it.

But I don't think asvaita is only in the Vedas; I think it's everywhere there is the idea, "You are the Whole." That is advaita, whether it is in Sanskrit, Latin or Hebrew. But the advantage in Vedanta is that it can be taught and it is taught. We have created a teaching tradition, and it has grown. Whereas in America, when suddenly people turn vegetarian, for example, all that they have is tofu and alfalfa and a few other things, because there's no tradition of vegetarian cooking. It takes time. You can't create a tradition overnight!

AC: Who are considered to be foremost exponents of Advaita teaching?

SD: There have been a lot of teachers who have maintained this tradition whose names we don't know. But from the Upanishads down we can say: Vyasa, Gaudapada, Shankara, Suresvara – these are the names we repeat every day. But Shankara occupies a central position because of his written commentary. It is the written commentary that gives you the tradition of teaching and method of teaching, and the method is very important in this tradition: How do you teach? There are a lot of pitfalls in this process, and one of them is the limitation of the language – the linguistic limitation. But the teaching has to be conveyed through words, which means that you must have a method – a method by which you can be sure that the student understands, because the enlightenment takes place as the teaching takes place and not afterwards. That's the tradition. So Shankara occupies an important place because of his commentaries, because he left written commentaries, because he left written commentaries on palm leaves for us. But I wouldn't say that the other teachers were any less important.

AC: Before Shankara there were no written commentaries?

SD: There were some. In fact, what I'm teaching every morning now is a commentary on one of the Upanishads, by Shankara's own teacher's teacher, Gaudapada. There are a few others also – Vyasa's sutras. These sutras are analytical work in a style of literature that has very brief statements, one after the other, so that you can memorize them. But these, again, are part of the tradition of teaching, so they are always backed up. You write the sutra and then you teach it to a group of people, and these together are what is handed down. Then, when you recite the sutra, you remember what we call "the Tradition." In fact, the whole of Advaita Vedanta is analyzed in the sutras.

The self is already present in all experience

AC: Why is it that you feel the study of the scriptures, rather than spiritual experience, is the most direct means to Self-realization?

SD: Self-realization, as I said is the discovery that "the Self is the whole" – that you are the Lord; in fact, you are God, the cause of everything.

Now nobody lacks the experience of Advaita, of that which is nondual-there's always Advaita. But any experience is only as good as one's ability to interpret it. A doctor examining you interprets your condition in one way, a layperson in another. Therefore, you need interpretation, and your knowledge is only as valid as the means of knowledge you are using for that purpose.

As the small self, we have no means of knowledge for the direct understanding of self-realization, and therefore Vedanta is the means of knowledge that has to be employed for that purpose. No other means of knowledge will work because, for this kind of knowledge, our powers of perception and inference alone are not sufficient.

So I find that by itself there is nothing more dumb than experience in this world. In fact, it is experience that has destroyed us.

AC: It has been my experience as a teacher that for most human beings, generally speaking, simply hearing the teaching is not enough. Usually they do need to have some kind of experience that makes the meaning of the words obvious in a very direct, experiential way. And then the person says, “oh, my goodness, now I understand I’ve heard this for so many years, but now I recognize the truth of it.”

SD: Yes, but even that experience is useless without the correct interpretation. Suppose your sense of being a separate individual falls away for a moment or ten minutes or even an hour, and then suddenly that apparent duality seems to come back again. Does that mean the one true Self gets displaced? Of course not! Then why should enlightenment require an experience? Enlightenment doesn’t depend upon experiences; it depends upon my shedding my error and ignorance – that is what it depends upon, and nothing else.

People say that advaita is eternal, that it is timeless, and at the same time they say that they are going through an experience of it at a particular time and under certain conditions. That’s not traditional! But that is what we hear everywhere. The tradition says: “What you see right now is advaita.”

Suppose a fellow has an experience and then he comes out and says, “I was one hour eternal, that it is timeless means eternity. Whether it is one hour eternal or one moment eternal, it is always the same. So confidence in truth cannot depend upon a state of experience. Confidence in truth is in your clarity of what is. Otherwise what will happen is, “I was non dual Brahman for one hour and then I came back and now it’s gone.” Then every thought becomes a nightmare because when I am not in *nirvikalpa Samadhi* [ecstatic absorption in nondual consciousness], then I cannot even relate to the world; I have to be stoned forever, you know? Whereas enlightenment is just knowing what is. That is called *sahaja*, which means “natural”; it means just seeing clearly. If people insist on having a particular experience, that simply means that they have not understood the teaching. Even right now, for example, you are experience me right now.

AC: True.

SD: And your experience seem to reveal two things: one is the subject, the other is the object. But let us suppose that both of them happen to be one reality.

AC: All right.

SD: Then you don't have any lack of raw material here. The experience of seeing me or seeing anybody, seeing anything or hearing anything, thinking about anything – inside, outside, whatever – that experience is advaita. And if that is so, then we are not lacking experience, and therefore we need not wait for any experience to come. Whatever experience you encounter within yourself, that experience reveals nonduality. And if your interpretation itself that is duality. Therefore, it's a problem of cognition, and that problem of cognition is to be solved.

AC: Cognition of?

SD: Of this non-dual! Am I talking about something that is absolutely unknown to me? No. Unknown to anyone? Not at all. Right now, for instance, you see me and you say, "Swami is sitting here." How do you know? You say, "Because I see you, I hear you; therefore you are here." Therefore I am evident to you because you have a means of hearing; therefore Swami is. Swami is because he's evident to you. Sun is, moon is, star is, space is, time is – all these are evident to you.

The same is true of your experience of yourself. Suppose I ask you, "Do you have any memory of being in such-and-such a place?" "Yes," you'll say – because it's evident to you. To whom are all these evident? To you! To yourself. That means you are self-evident.

When are you not self-evident? Tell me – when? It is because you are self-evident that you don't need to become self-evident at any any time. All my experiences are because of my self-evidence. Therefore, the Self is already experienced – that's what I say. Self is experienced as the ultimate content of every experience. I say, in fact, that our very experience is the Self.

In all experiences, therefore, what is invariably present is consciousness, and no object is independent of that. and consciousness is not dependent on and has none of the attributes of any particular object. Consciousness is consciousness and while it is in everything, it transcends everything. That's why I say: this is advaita, this is nondual, this is Brahman, this limitless; timewise it is limitless, spacewise it is limitless. And therefore it is Brahman, and therefore you are everything already. This is the teaching, and what it means is that I need not wait for any experience because every experience is Brahman, every experience is limitless.

AC: But this is a subtle point that is not necessarily easy to grasp without some previous direct experience of the nondual.

SD: If the person doesn't see, then that means I have to teach further; or maybe they do see but in spite of that they say, "I still have got some cobwebs here or there" But that is not a problem; they just need to be cleared away.

First, you have an insight that is knowing, and then, as difficulties arise, we take care of them. I don't say it is not a matter of experience, but I say that experience is always the very nature of yourself. Consciousness is experience reveals that fact of your being Self-evident. And what is Self-evident is, by definition, nondual. So subject and object are already the same.

Here is a wave, for instance, that has a human mind. It thinks, “I am a small wave.” Then it becomes a big wave, swallowing in the process many other waves, and begins boasting, “I am a big wave.” Then it loses its form, and again becomes small-files a “Chapter thirteen, “ as you say in America, you know, bankruptcy – and now it wants to somehow get to the shore. But from the shore, other waves are pushing into the ocean, and from the ocean, waves are pushing to the shore, this poor little wave is caught in between, sandwiched, and begins crying, “ What shall I do?” there is another wave around, a wave that seems to be very happy, and so the first wave asks him, “How come you are so happy?” You are smaller than me! How come you are so happy?” Then another wave says, “He’s an enlightened wave.” Now the first wave wants to know, “What is enlightenment? What is this enlightenment?” The happy wave says, “Hey, come on! You should know who you are!” “All right. Who am I?” And the enlightened wave says, “You are the ocean.” “What?! Ocean? Did you say that I am the ocean, because of all the water by which I am sustained and to which I will go back? That ocean I am?” “Yes , you are the ocean.” And he laughs. “How can I be the ocean? That’s like saying I am God. The ocean is almighty, it’s all-pervasive, it’s everything. How can I be the ocean?”

So we can dismiss Vedanta’s statement of the non dual reality, or we can ask, “How come? How come I am That?” The nondual teaching is not necessary if our identity is obvious, if what is apparent to us is not a difference but an essential nondifference. Here, there is nondifference. There is no wave without water. Every other wave, and the whole ocean too, is one water alone.

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