

A Means of Self Knowledge

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There is a world of difference between beliefs, assumptions conclusions, evaluations, and judgments that arise from self ignorance and the discernment that arises from the faculty of discrimination. What we ***think and experience ourselves to be*** and what we ***think and experience objects to be*** arises from self ignorance. Discernment is the discrimination that arises when we realize the truth of who and what we really are. In light of this truth the nature of objects becomes evident. Discernment does not come from our beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, evaluations and judgments. It comes from clearly knowing the difference between what is unchanging and what is eternal, between what comes and goes and what is ever present—that in which life's comings and goings appear.

Because the discernment that Vedanta recommends as a means of enlightenment is articulated with words it is easy to conclude that Vedanta is merely an intellectual discipline and is therefore useless as a means of enlightenment. This confusion is based on the fact that language can express both ignorance of who we are and the truth of who we are. Language is generally used to express our uninformed experience of objects. But it will not express the reality of objects if the one using the words does not understand the insubstantiality and transparency of objects. However, someone who knows the truth can express in words the reality of objects and the nature of the awareness in which the experience of objects takes place.

Because language mainly serves ignorance is not a good reason to confuse ignorance with language and dismiss them both. Truth can take the form of words. It is true that what we normally think and say is not true to the nature of our experience, but because a hammer can be used to kill does not mean it has no other uses. Thinking and language need not be a problem on the way to enlightenment unless they are born of ignorance of the nature of reality. Thought and language that arise from knowledge of reality become a means of enlightenment.

Vedanta is unique in that Truth lives in words as the active understanding of the teacher. Its revelation can be discerned by anyone listening with an open mind, a mind devoid of personal beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, evaluations and judgments. When exposure to the Truth occurs, the understanding in the teacher simultaneously becomes active in the student. When this happens the student finds his or herself ***being*** the Truth. The student does

not do anything other than expose his or her mind to the living understanding of the teacher. If the teacher is transferring information, parroting doctrine or exhorting the seeker to engage in spiritual practice no transformation will take place.

The exposure to the Truth of what already is sets us free, not the teacher, the teaching or the student; they are simply the means. When the Truth becomes evident, it simultaneously becomes active in our daily living as a way of thinking, feeling and acting. It manifests as a way of being which is not of the world, but very much within it.

It is not that we have daily life on one hand and the Truth on the other. Notions of a spiritual freedom separate from daily life are delusional and based on self deception. Our daily life reveals clearly whether we are living from ignorance or whether we are living from the self. Living from the self is qualitatively different from living from ignorance. For one thing, it is not determined by fear, hatred and desire. On an honest examination of our daily life, it will be found that these three factors normally motivate us. They are not suitable motivators because they are caused by ignorance of our real nature. They are the dynamic force from which daily human life with all its stupidity, violence and delusions of goodness arise.

Our personal mind, which consists of all of our beliefs, assumptions, conclusions, evaluations and judgments, can never become a means of knowing the truth of what we really are. This kind of thinking is based on inadequate interpretation of experiences generated by ignorance of the self. The same goes for the senses. The senses only inform us of the appearance of things. Like the mind they are inadequate means of self knowledge.

Feelings or emotions can be helpful to inform us of how others are feeling and push us to do what is necessary when we are confronted with unpleasant existential situations. But when they are ignorance-based and personal and stand without reference to objective facts, they drive us to act in destructive ways and destroy the clarity of mind we need to live happily. They leave no place for dispassion, a necessary means for self inquiry. But whether they are helpful or unhelpful, they can never be an adequate means of self knowledge. The belief "if I can't feel it, it is not true" is not true because awareness, the self, is never an object of feeling.

Our psychological makeup stands without reference to self knowledge. Any actions originating from our thoughts, feelings or senses will not bring us to self knowledge. All such efforts are futile. Hence we have to expose ourselves to a means of knowledge which transcends our psychology and yet carries us to the realization of our identity as awareness.

What awareness? The ordinary awareness that is right here, right where we are. The simple awareness that registers all apparent sensory, emotional and mental activities. Vedanta as a means of self knowledge does not take us to some far away mystical knowledge; rather it brings us to the realization of the fact of what we really are. It is peculiar in that what we really are is not an object within awareness, but rather we are that in which all objects appear and disappear.

This knowledge is not the knowing of the words. It is the transforming understanding which obtains in the mind after hearing, reflecting and contemplating the meanings that come from the words of scripture. These meanings, which come alive and active through the teacher and the teaching, are the means to reveal who and what we really are. Vedanta does not sanction an understanding that does not transform our daily life to the point where it aligns with truth. We are not going to become a personal doer living a virtuous life as a result of our knowledge of who we are, although it may seem so. It is simpler than that: we cannot help but act out what we are. If I am angry, I have an angry life. I do not have to push myself to live this way; it lives itself out. Similarly, when I am being myself in the fullest sense of that word, I cannot help but live it out. No effort is involved.

Practically, this means that if I am confused, hostile, sad or worried and acting in destructive ways toward myself or others, I am ignorant that I am the self. But all these uncomfortable expressions of my self ignorance are useful if they motivate me to inquire into my nature *as they arise*. So I do not try to improve myself, or change myself because such efforts are based on the assumption I am the person I experience myself to be and not on who I am. Rather, I pause and begin to reflect on a meaning that comes from scripture that is relevant to my present suffering. How extraordinary that as the truth of that meaning becomes apparent and active in me, I find myself lifted beyond the present suffering! My external situation may remain the same, but the suffering it engendered dissolves and I find myself thinking and feeling and doing things in a non personal, dispassionate way. All my thinking, feeling and actions become a function of the understanding embracing me. It is extraordinarily ordinary.

If this existential shift does not occur, recollect an idea that has been elucidated by the teaching. Quietly ponder it. It is not your job to understand it, it is your job to expose your mind to it and let it do its work. The idea "I am awareness" is scripture's most fundamental meaning. If you do not expose your mind to it by reflecting on it and contemplating the reality of it as it exists in your life, no existential shift will happen. When you examine its meaning whole heartedly, the reality it points to will become as clear as the existential shift it causes.

Without the use of language these transformative meanings would not be available to us. We would have no way to expose our minds to the truth of what we really are. We would be left with minds filled with spiritual culture's accumulated junk.

When we are confronted with existential problems, the tendency to become anti-intellectual and 'spiritual' often causes us to believe that we can just feel our way to reality. But this is like trying to see with our ears. If we have no means of knowledge to arrive at the already existing truth that sets us free, we live in a spiritual wilderness. In service of self ignorance, the intellect can never know the self, but it becomes wise when it serves the teachings of a valid means of self knowledge like Vedanta. A tool used for the wrong purpose is not a defective tool. It comes into its own when it is used as it was intended to be used. The intellect is designed for self inquiry, not for making ignorance work.

The anti-intellectualism that sounds so loudly in the spiritual world is understandable because most spiritual teachers are self deluded and claim that the ignorance they speak is actually truth. This makes seekers turn to feelings or intuition or the laughable belief in ego loss or fantasy that some kind of incredible experience will set them free. This anti-intellectual stance imprisons them within the confines of their senses, emotions and thoughts and makes them unavailable for the transforming action of a legitimate means of knowledge.