

How to Teach Vedanta

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Marian: Dear Ramji!, on Saturday I was hiking with a friend who is not into Buddhism or Vedanta or anything like that. It was a perfect day, and while we were climbing up the mountain she told me that she was feeling she was not centred. She said she was looking for a centre in her life, and that she was missing something that protected her. The first thought that came to my mind was, "You don't have a centre and you can't have a centre, because you are unlimited and you don't need protection, because nothing can ever happen to you." Of course I didn't say this, because if I had I would have been speaking from a different level of reality or better from a different view, and she wouldn't have understood me. But somehow I couldn't come "down" or cross over to her level either, because I was convinced that on that level of "Marga" (that's her name) nothing would really help anyway and if there was a way I didn't know it. So I didn't say anything and just listened, but I felt pretty helpless.

Ram: Dear Marian, here are Ramji's words of wisdom on the subject of teaching the self.

Yes, it is often difficult to come down and bridge the gap between a person's state of suffering and the vision of the self. It points up the need for a means of self-knowledge. In the first place one needs to determine if the statement the person is making is a sincere request for help. Usually people just like to complain and only want someone to hear them, to listen non-judgementally, pat them on the shoulder and say, "There, there, I know how you feel. Isn't life a real bitch!" Etc. They just want you to commiserate.

If this is not the case and the person really is looking for a way out, one might say, "I know how you feel. I felt that one once, but I discovered something that solved the problem."

If the person seems interested you then say something like, "It seems to me that the problem is that the way you see yourself needs a bit of work." Then you present the idea that the self, contrary to appearances, is not limited. You can describe how it feels to be "centered" (although we both know that you can't be "centered" because you are the center). At some point in your description you will notice that the person has also experienced centeredness. Once you have established this fact you now have something to work with. In fact they wouldn't be complaining that they were uncentered if they didn't know what being centered was. Then you help them look into the source of this feeling. There is no need to mention Vedanta at this point. It is best to keep it on the level of common-sense experience. Everyone has experienced the self because there is only the self and all experience is the self. But at this stage it is best to associate the self with the experience of "centeredness." Any teaching at this stage is going to involve half-truths. People are experience-oriented and they need to have the self presented to them in terms of experience. We know that this is ultimately a big problem, but if you hit them with the truth that enlightenment is simply the hard and fast understanding that "I am the limitless self" they will dismiss it as merely an "intellectual" approach.

You need to be sensitive to the person's thinking when you teach the self. When you feel resistance you need to have the teaching that refutes their idea. But you need to express it in a non-dogmatic way so the person does not get the idea that you are presenting a personal belief system or a religious conviction. Once you have established a communication about the experience of centeredness, you can present the idea of temporary centeredness (when one gets what one wants or doesn't want), which is again a common situation.

And from here you either talk *yoga* or Vedanta. By "*yoga*" I mean the *gunas*. You can then explain how the feeling of centeredness is dependent on one's state of mind, whether it is *sattvic*, *rajasic* or *tamasic*, and encourage them to cultivate a *sattvic* lifestyle. Or you can lead the conversation to a discussion of the nature of the self and how it is limitless. This will eventually lead to the idea of Vedanta as a means of knowledge and the need for a teacher.

Marian: Some doubts came up about whether my view was maybe just another way of thinking (which it actually is, isn't it?) and what it was worth if it was so far-out that I couldn't convey it to somebody who might need it. So what can one say in such a situation? Of course you can't save everybody or even anybody. I know that. Anyway, what do you think?

Ram: It is natural to lack self-confidence in teaching the self, but the only way you gain confidence is to try to teach. One thing you need understand is that although the ego (the person's ignorance) is expressing existential dissatisfaction, when you are dealing with anybody you are actually dealing with the self. We may have been conditioned by society to think of people as egos, but this is not actually how it is. In a non-dual reality there are not two selves, an ego and a limitless self, there is only the limitless self apparently suffering self-ignorance. So even though ignorance is speaking ("I am not centred"), the self is always present. In fact ironically the self is making this absurd statement. You need to know that in spite of what the mind/ego thinks, the self will always hear the truth. This knowledge will create a conflict in the ego for sure, but it will also be like a breath of fresh air. It is good at this point to acknowledge the conflict that teaching sets up. In this way you can present *sadhana* as inquiry. You can get the person to thinking about who they are.

Concerning the idea that Vedanta is just another way of thinking, the answer is yes. If a person does not know that he or she is the limitless self, he or she will think of himself or herself as limited. This mistake means that all of his or her thoughts are coming from the wrong place. So the whole egoic thought system needs to be destroyed. The Yoga crowd, the experience-oriented people, rarely gain enlightenment, because although they are right insofar as they understand that thinking is the problem, the solution they pursue does not work. They try to kill the mind by gaining some *yogic* state. But *samadhis* do not remove ignorance. So when the experience wears off the same old kind of limited thinking comes back and the person begins to suffer again. Vedanta is the only thing that works because there is a practical, common-sense teaching to negate any and every form of ignorant thinking. It is just as hard work as Yoga but it will lead to the permanent destruction of self-ignorance and the self-defeating thinking that comes from it.

You "kill the mind" by taking it seriously, not by trying to dismiss experientially. If you take it seriously you can patiently educate it. For every one of its ideas you come up with a better idea, one that points out the fallacy in its thinking and offers a

better way to think. You let it have its way and when the results are not happy you point out where it went wrong in the way it was conceiving the problem. You educate it.

The word “educate” comes from the Latin word *educare*, meaning “to lead out.” This leading out is a process. It will take a long time. It is not glamorous. Yoga, as it is sold, is glamorous. You do this technique, and ka-pow!, you get enlightened. It does not deal with the real problem, one’s thinking. Yoga, meditation, tells you that you can “transcend” thought. Well, you can’t. You are already beyond the mind, but you do not know it. If you knew it you would not try to transcend it. So the question is always, who am I? This is not a question for which there is an “experiential” answer. The experiential answer is always present, but it does you no good. It does you no good because you think that you lack it – which you don’t. So is the problem experience or is it your thinking?

But you need to know that Vedanta is not brainwashing in the sense of taking up a different set of beliefs. Yes, you need faith that the process will work, but you see results all along, you see a gradual clearing of the mind. Peace comes. Belief-oriented people may be happier than non-believing people, but they are always plagued with the doubt: Who is God? What is this thing that I believe in? So they never attain complete peace.

Marian: I’m enjoying my favourite time of the year here in England. It’s the month of my birthday (although I was never born, da, da, da...), full of sunshine, roses and strawberries, and I love it. I spend a lot of time just sitting at my window or outside on my little bench watching the flowers and listening to the birds. And then sooner or later I happily fall asleep in the middle of the day. I thought of calling you, but decided to write to you so you have time to think about it, and also a *satsang* after such a long time would be nice. I miss you.

~ Much love, Marian