

Learning, Memory and Vedanta

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

2016-04-25

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2681>

Mike: Hello! Thank you so much for your answer!

I can see that it all points to the same thing. It's just the same truth seen from different angles.

If you don't mind, could I just clarify what I meant by learning and explaining teachings to someone?

You say that self-knowledge is not a function of memory. But for assimilation and understanding to take place, there has to be a certain amount of remembering first, right? I have to remember the most important Sanskrit and English terms, what they imply and how it's all connected before I can go on to the next step of the logic.

If I say I understand a certain principle in physics there would be a lot of information and math I have to learn and remember first. I would say there would not be a complete understanding, and therefore I would not be able to use the principle to solve a problem unless I could do a summary of the principle from memory and that I could write down an explanation or explain it to someone else, hypothetically. I have always seen learning this way. Would this not be a first step before contemplation and assimilation make you master a *prakriya*?

I will probably never stop studying this, because, as you say, there is nothing more satisfying. I am just curious about the learning and what understanding means.

Thank you again for your love in the form of patience and wisdom.

~ Love

Sundari: Hello, Mike. Good to hear from you again.

Yes, it is true that memory plays an important function in the assimilation (learning) of knowledge, especially at the beginning of self-inquiry. It is recommended that the inquirer memorizes all the main terms and teachings, developing a thorough understanding of the terminology and how words are used, what they are meant to mean, not how one interprets them. This includes understanding some of the Sanskrit terms which do not have good English equivalents. For inquirers who have realised the self but not actualised self-knowledge yet, it is equally important to remember the teachings so that whatever appears in the mind can be dissolved in the knowledge.

However, it is important to understand that there is a fundamental difference in learning about objects and self-knowledge. Learning about objects requires repetition and memorizing. Self-knowledge cannot be studied, because the subject matter is you. The whole point of self inquiry is to understand the mind and the environment it is a part of in light of self-knowledge (not the other way around) and to negate the doer. So while the "learner" is useful at first to understand the language and terminology Vedanta uses, it is not by learning or memorizing that self-knowledge obtains in the mind. It is by negating the doer/learner that self-

knowledge obtains in a purified mind.

Let's take a closer look at how memory functions to lay a larger context for this *satsang*. Without memory, one would not be able to retain, interpret or evaluate any experience. It allows us to catalogue and categorize experience as it happens in the mind. Ever since humans became more self-reflective, we have tried to understand the mind and how it works. *Chitta* – the function of memory, how it works and why it goes wrong is one of the most elusive and misunderstood of human attributes. The ability to remember and memorize is an important part of what makes us truly human – and what helps us not only stay alive but to thrive.

Memory is related to but distinct from learning, which is the process by which we acquire knowledge of the world and modify or adapt ourselves to new behaviour. During learning, neurons that fire together to produce a particular experience are modified in such a way that they have a tendency to fire together again. Connections between cells change as you memorize/learn, which in turn reinforce synapses, which in turn reinforce cells to make more and stronger connections with each other. If two neurons repeatedly communicate at dedicated sites (known as synapses), this improves the efficacy of communication between them. This process is known as long-term potentiation, the mechanism by which memories get stored long-term, which is how we learn. It is also how new conditioning forms in the brain and how old conditioning (*vasanas*) is reinforced or rendered non-binding: by consistent deliberate (conscious) or automatic (unconscious) repetition of new thoughts, which then reinforce existing patterns or form new ones.

Neuroscientists can see how these patterns form neural networks – or “neural pathways.” Once formed they are very resistant to change – which is why the “work” of self-inquiry to free the mind from binding patterns is so difficult – as does remembering/learning new information to develop new skills or positive tendencies requires constant practice.

Encoding is the first step in creating a memory or learning something. It's a biological phenomenon, rooted in all the senses, beginning with perception. Even though the mind can only have one thought at a time, all the gross sense organs and subtle senses work independently of each other. All the senses work according to their natures in the waking state all the time but one is predominant (i.e. you are conscious of it) while the others are suppressed. The mind is the switch – the traffic cop – that switches attention from one sense to the other. For instance, if you are eating and enjoying the taste of the food and the doorbell rings, the mind highlights the ears, and at the moment when you hear the sound and interpret it, you don't taste the food. What brings them all together to form a cohesive experience is called *manas*, the integrating function. It is one of the three limbs of the subtle body. As such it is called *eka*, meaning “one.” It takes the five streams of sensory input and arranges them into one cogent experience. *Manas* also creates emotion, operates the active organs and acts like a traffic cop insofar as it keeps the mind orderly. It is the switch that allows only one thought at a time to dominate the mind. What is behind *mana*/memory of course is consciousness, the ever-present, unchanged substratum within which all experience takes place.

Learning and memory inextricably work together. For example, we learn a new language by studying it, but we then speak it by using our memory to retrieve the words that we have learned. Thus memory depends on learning because it lets us store and retrieve learned information. But learning also depends to some extent on memory in that the knowledge stored in our memory provides the framework to

which we link new knowledge by association and inference. Our ability as humans to call on memories to imagine and to plan future courses of action is given to us by *Isvara* as a vital function of the subtle body and is a hugely advantageous attribute in our survival and development as a species, not to mention self-inquiry.

Memories (experiences) are all thoughts which appear in the subtle body. If you take yourself to be the person, you identify with the thoughts/memories/experience, taking them to be real and to be “yours.” This tendency is called the hypnosis of duality and how most people experience life and the world. As you know we discussed in our last exchange, once self-knowledge removes ignorance from the mind, knowledge of who you are is not a function of memory, because as the self you do not need to remember who you are, because you are who you are. You are the knower of the mind and its memories.

As for studying Vedanta, the point to take home is stated in the first paragraph of my reply: the reason we say that you cannot study Vedanta is that the subject matter is you. All the same, when the inquirer is new to self-inquiry, and the language/terminology used by Vedanta is unfamiliar, self-inquiry does at first definitely rely on memory because the mind cannot retain anything without it. Knowledge of anything (other than the self) depends on four things: (1) the presence of an object, (2) functioning sense organs and the subtle senses, (3) a functioning mind behind the senses and (4) the subject – consciousness. If the mind is impaired by malfunctioning sense organs (blindness, muteness, deafness, etc.) mental or physical illness or injury, then knowledge of objects will most likely not be true to the object, making learning or understanding difficult or impossible.

However, even if one can memorize and learn Sanskrit and Vedanta verbatim by “studying” the terminology, without a qualified mind, self-knowledge will not obtain. Purely cognitive understanding is only a precondition for self-knowledge; it does not necessarily lead to *moksa*. We have seen some self-realised (but not self-actualised) people go down this rabbit hole – believing that by proxy, becoming proficient in the language and texts relating to Vedanta, makes them “enlightened” or, at the very least, gives them the right to feel superior to those who have not studied Vedanta. Unfortunately, it’s a fallacy the ego enjoys when the doer has “survived” *moksa*, or has not been negated by self-knowledge.

As for the language and terminology used, Vedanta is very explicit about the use of words. It certainly assists self-inquiry if you not only remember what they are but what they mean. Although James has developed a system of teaching which uses as little Sanskrit as possible, it’s hard to avoid using some Sanskrit terms, because so far our scientific and spiritual traditions have come up woefully short as far as self-knowledge and intelligent living are concerned. Vedanta offers direct knowledge using the implied meaning of words unfolded through a particular methodology, which is the tradition of Vedanta. This methodology provides a valid means of knowledge, a toolkit, as it were, with which to unpack one’s life in the light of self-knowledge, not in the light of one’s (or anyone else’s) opinions. Unfortunately, the way language is used is so open to interpretation, misinterpretation and the contamination of one’s own conditioning that it is very often the greatest source of misunderstandings. Vedanta is called a *sabda pramana*, the oral or spoken testimony of competent witnesses, meaning that the words are time-tested, impersonal and they work to remove ignorance IF the mind is qualified, has negated the doer and is ready to hear the truth. Vedanta is unlike any other knowledge, because it is the knowledge that underpins all knowledge.

Self-knowledge, unlike object knowledge, is always true because it is true to the self, meaning it cannot be dismissed or negated by any other knowledge. Self-knowledge is different from knowledge of objects, which is object-based, not subject-based. Even though I may have spent years learning something (physics, for instance), knowledge of objects is not knowledge unless it is true to the object. Many things we learn turn out to be untrue. If my mind is working properly and a dog appears in it, I will not see a cat. However, I may see the dog but, as I don't like dogs, register an aversion, whereas someone who loves dogs registers an attraction. If it is "my" knowledge, then it is my interpretation of an object (*pratibasika*), which is not necessarily knowledge. Ignorance (or my point of view) causes me to see or experience objects in a certain way because of "my" conditioning. People believe that ignorance is knowledge because they believe that what they experience is knowledge. It may be knowledge, but it may not be.

Self-knowledge depends on the nature of the self – which is always present and unchanging – and always truth with a capital "T." It does not depend on knowledge gained through personal experience, or object-knowledge – which is always changing and not necessarily true. Self-knowledge is irrefutable logic, which is why we call it the science of consciousness. On the basis of self-knowledge the individual can retain or reject the knowledge gained through his or her personal experience. However, from the microcosmic, or psychological, level self-knowledge is subject to interpretation, which is why we need a means of knowledge based on a teaching that is independent of interpretation or opinion, called scripture, Vedanta. We also need faith in the scripture for it to work to remove ignorance. This faith is not blind faith (such as is expected in most religions) but faith pending the outcome of one's investigation. Vedanta's states clearly that it is only self-knowledge and not experience that is capable of removing ignorance. And although self-knowledge is the result of self-inquiry, it is not a given, even to the dedicated inquirer. Self-knowledge is the result of grace, and grace is earned. It is a gift from *Isvara* and definitely not the result of learning, although it is assisted by learning.

Very importantly, sadly for those who believe they can think their way to enlightenment, self-knowledge is not something that requires mental activity. For that reason some people misunderstand, thinking that they must either improve their thinking or stop thinking to "get enlightened." While it is true that having a *sattvic* mind that can reason clearly is usually a great help to self-inquiry, it can sometimes be a hindrance when people get too attached to their ability to think well. Very intellectual people are prone to this egoic delusion. Neither is self-knowledge dependent on recirculating the thought "I am self-realised." Once that cognition takes place, self-knowledge has obtained, even if it is not yet firm. As James is fond of saying, once you are pregnant, do you need to keep thinking, "I am pregnant"? So while the initial modification of the mind does take place (*vritti jnana*) and is necessary (that is why we do need to be qualified for knowledge), it does not need to be willfully maintained. Pure awareness (*svarupa jnana*) is not opposed to ignorance. So, as the mind is made up of thoughts, preparation is required. There are eligibility requirements that reveal to us the areas that need improvement. But self-knowledge itself no longer requires thought.

Self-knowledge cannot be compared to any body of knowledge or any other known doctrinal or scriptural knowledge in that it is not the revealed "word" of an exalted deity as interpreted by man, nor the contention of any person or persons. Vedantic scriptures are called *sruti*, "that which is heard." *Sruti* is knowledge revealed to the human mind, not interpreted by it. For this reason, self-inquiry cannot be equated with learning – because it is not learning. While the mind needs a framework to help

it understand, which is why there is a means of knowledge with a methodology, ultimately it is not through any ability or function of the mind that ignorance gets removed from it. Self-knowledge removes ignorance, full stop.

So as to your question, “For assimilation and understanding to take place there has to be a certain amount of remembering first, right? I have to remember the most important Sanskrit and English terms, what they imply, and how it’s all connected before I can go on to the next step in the logic,” the answer is definitely yes – for self-inquiry – and no – for self-knowledge – to obtain. One has to establish a baseline of understanding for the mind to grasp this very counter-intuitive and radical teaching. One has to understand and remember the terminology that Vedanta employs with the implied meaning of words. Using the correct terminology for Vedanta is not about learning how to master a technique. It is about learning the language of self-knowledge – the language of identity: the ability to understand and speak the truth without interpreting it according to your conditioning. The language of experience is what most people are accustomed to speaking. The reason Vedanta is so insistent on the correct usage of words is to eliminate interpretation and misinterpretation.

We often say that the teaching is a set-up. But the teaching is only a set-up in that it uses a dualistic methodology to destroy duality; so it is not a set-up, because it is a means of knowledge revealing the self. But it is a set-up in that Vedanta operates in the apparent reality for people who think they are people. However, it offers a way out. Once duality is known to be no more than a superimposition onto non-duality and self-knowledge has removed personal ignorance (*avidya*), the *pramana* (means of knowledge) should become redundant, a throwaway, because you are no longer reliant on it.

If it is one’s *dharma* to become a qualified teacher of Vedanta, one has to have thoroughly assimilated the means of knowledge and at the very least realised (if not actualised) the self. One can develop the skill to wield the knowledge by teaching, but one must at the least understand the whole methodology of the teaching from beginning to end, as set out by James. If one merely wishes to develop the ability to enunciate clearly the fundamental message of Vedanta in an accessible way when asked to do so, the requirements are less exacting. One then has only to understand fully and be able to intelligently verbalize one of the many *prakriyas* in the teachings because all of them say the same thing: you are whole and complete, non-dual, actionless, unconcerned, ever-present, unlimited, ordinary awareness.

This *satsang* is a rather lengthy reply to your question, but as it is an important point, I took some time writing it. I hope it helps.

Much love and well done to you for your dedication to the teachings.

~ Sundari