

Satsang with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
How to listen to Vedānta

Question

What are the tricks and techniques of listening to Vedānta?

Answer

In addition to having *śraddhā* and *bhakti*, we have to work at two levels, the level of our emotional faculty and the level of our intellectual faculty, to gain greater clarity of what the scriptures teach.

Śri Sureśvarācārya, who was a direct disciple of Śri Śaṅkarācārya and a teacher who is the most revered after Śri Śaṅkārācārya, says, “*Vedānto nama upaniṣad pramāṇam*”, Vedānta means Upaniṣad, which is the *pramāṇam*. What is meant by *pramāṇam*? A *pramāṇam* is a valid means of knowledge. For example, the eyes are the means of knowledge that reveals the colors and forms. Your ears constitute the faculty of hearing, which is a *pramāṇam* for you to cognize these words. You do not need to do anything when the words are spoken. You have the faculty of hearing, and thus, cognition simply takes place. Similarly, when your eyes are open and a form is in front of you, perception takes place. Therefore, when we say that the Upaniṣad is a *pramāṇam*, what we mean is that the words of the Upaniṣad should be able to reveal the knowledge of the Truth.

The eyes are the means of knowledge for knowing color and form, provided they are free of any defect. The capacity of the eyes to reveal the color and form may be inhibited by some defect, such as cataracts. Any defect should thus be removed. Similarly, our mind has the capacity to gain the knowledge but this capacity may be inhibited by certain impurities of the

mind. To remove the impurities of the mind, we should cultivate a value for *samādi-ṣaṭka-saṃpattiḥ*, the group of six-fold accomplishments beginning with *sama*¹.

Śama is the tranquility of the mind in which the mind is free from any impulses and reactions. To achieve this we keep watching our mind constantly and keep resolving our impulses with alertness. *Dama* is the discipline or self-control that one exercises over the organs of perception and organs of action. We should constantly attempt to gain a mastery over our mind and sense organs to create a mind or personality that is held together, free from conflicts, free from impulses, and available to us for spiritual pursuits. Our mind should become our friend; we should obtain its grace and its favor. Therefore, we need to work constantly in this direction. Our mind may have hurtful emotions, and likes and dislikes. We must persistently make efforts to be able to resolve them. This is an extremely important thing to do. To work effectively with our emotional faculty, we should be continuously aware of the thoughts and emotions in our mind.

At the level of the intellect, we should acquire at least a working knowledge of Sanskrit so that the words don't sound unfamiliar, like Greek or Latin. In as much as the scriptures are in Sanskrit, it would definitely be a good idea to learn the language. Ultimately, these words have to communicate to us. The orthodox teachers would say that only the Sanskrit words are *pramāṇam*. As you are gradually exposed to the teaching, you gain the capacity to grasp progressively more and more subtle ideas, and

¹ *sama* (mastery over the mind), *dama* (control of the sense organs), *uparama* (withdrawal), *titikṣā* (forebearance), *śraddhā* (faith in the scriptures and the *guru*), and *samādhānam* (concentration)

your understanding becomes increasingly refined. Towards this end, we need some reasoning skills, which modern education helps us to develop.

There are some other suggestions, which you may find helpful as well. As students, while attending Vedānta classes, we used to have a notebook and pen to jot down the main points. At the end of the class, we would go back to our rooms, recollect the teaching in our minds, and write it down in long hand. We found that note taking was extremely helpful in terms of gaining clarity in this exercise. Generally, when we write things down, we must be clear about what we are writing. When we listen to a lecture, we think that we have understood everything. However, it is only when we start writing that we find that things are not quite clear, and then have to deliberate upon those points. Thus, writing gives you clarity of thought and the ability to express the main ideas.

Another useful thing that you could do is share the teaching with somebody who is interested in the learning. Teaching is an excellent way of learning. It is a more refined way of learning. Every teacher knows that the one who benefits most in the teaching is the teacher himself; it gives you greater clarity.

Transcribing and editing lectures and *satsangs* is also extremely helpful. It is like writing notes. When we listen, however attentive we are, we may not necessarily grasp every word. When you transcribe a recorded talk or lecture, and then edit it, you find that your focus is greater and you enhance your understanding substantially.

All of these tricks and techniques would amount to ‘*mananam*’, or reflection to gain further clarity. This has to be done continuously at the intellectual level.

Finally, it is the grace of god, which we require. We require the grace of god and the grace of the teacher. The grace of god manifests in the form of the grace of the teacher. We require grace in this whole effort, and therefore, prayer and worship should become a part of our daily routine. The prayer need not be elaborate. It can be as simple as ‘*om namo bhagavate dakṣiṇāmūrthaye mahyaṁ medhāṁ prajñāṁ prayacca svāhā*’. Oh, Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrthi! Please bless me with *medhā*, memory and the capacity to think properly, and *prajñā*, clarity and wisdom. You can also say any other prayer that you like. Seeking the grace of the lord is very important in this, as in any other pursuit. These are some of the techniques that can support your efforts, along with *śravaṇam* or listening to Vedānta.

Question

In this context, isn't there a verse that says something about one quarter of our learning occurring through listening to the teacher, etc.?

Answer

*tat cintanaṁ tat kathanam anyaḥ anyāṁ tat prabhodanam
etat ekaparatvaṁ brahmābhyāsaṁ viduḥ bhudāḥ*

The practice of meditation on *brahman*, the wise consider, means reflection on It, talking about It, mutually producing logical arguments about It – thus to be fully occupied by It alone (Pañcadaśī 7-106).

This verse, quoted in the Pañcadaśī, comes originally from the Vāsiṣṭha Rāmāyaṇa. When you are all by yourself, reflect upon what it is that you have listened to from the teacher, *tat cintanam*. When a person desirous of understanding comes to you, share your understanding with him, *tat kathanam*. When you are with other students, people like yourself, discuss

with one another to gain clarity, *anyaḥ anyam tat prabhodanam*. This is the single-pointed dedication, *etat ekaparatvam*. The wise call this *brahma-abhyāsa*. *Abhyāsam* means repeatedly doing something. Thus, repeatedly doing something is always emphasized.

Yogaśāstra also tells us that to accomplish anything, three things are required.

sa tu dīrghakālanairantaryasatkārāsevito dṛḍhbhūmiḥ

Practice becomes firmly grounded when it has been cultivated for a long time, uninterruptedly, with earnest devotion [Pātāñjali Yogaśūtra, 14].

Practice should be done for a long time, *dīrghakāla*, it must be done constantly, *nairantaryam* and it must be done with commitment or with devotion. We should be prepared to apply ourselves for a long time. We should neither be impatient nor complacent. We should have the patience, the perseverance, and the commitment. This is what yields the result. In your case, along with your other activities and commitments, you have to make time for this and try to listen actively to Vedānta as much as possible.

The Importance of repeatedly listening to Vedānta

Pounaḥ puṇyena śravaṇam kuryāt, may you subject yourself to *śravaṇam* or listening to the scriptures again and again. It is never the same. Sometimes, we may have listened to a text such as the Bhagavadgītā, or the the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi before, and hence we feel that it is a repetition when listening to it again. However, it is never a repetition. Even though the teacher may be using the same words, those words have a different impact in as much as the student has changed over time; as the student gains maturity,

the same words have a different impact. It is not uncommon to hear from the students, “Swamiji, you have improved a lot!” That may very well be true also, but at the same time, the fact is that the student also has changed.

As we expose ourselves to the teaching, our own clarity and capacity to grasp also grows, and therefore, the same words have a different impact upon us. Ideally, all that you need is just listen to the scriptures. That is all one needs. This very listening and deliberating upon the scriptures is capable of removing all the impurities. It is capable of doing everything. After all what we call impurities is nothing but false perceptions. All that the scripture does is give us the right perception about the realities of life. As we expose ourselves to the scriptures, the clarity comes and in course of time, those false perceptions start dropping off. That is how *antaḥkaraṇa suddhi* also can take place. The purification of the mind also takes place in the process of exposing ourselves to the teaching. That is why the most important means of gaining knowledge in Vedānta is said to be *śravaṇam*, listening to the scriptures from the lips of the teacher².

² Transcribed and edited by Chaya Raj, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.