

The Essentials of Vedanta



Satsang

with

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Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

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Contents

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Desire for Self-Knowledge	1
Importance of Devotion in the Pursuit of Self-Knowledge	14
Spiritual Practices Essential for Self-Knowledge	20
The Role and Importance of the Teacher	24
Establishing a Relationship with the Teacher	29
Qualifications of the Teacher	41
Ways of listening to Vedanta	46

Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati

Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati, a disciple of Pujyasri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, is an outstanding teacher of Vedanta. He expounds Vedanta with a simplicity and directness that make it easy to assimilate. Having studied and worked in the United States prior to becoming a *sannyāsi*, Swami Vidadatmananda is familiar with the lifestyles of India as well as the West. With this insight, he reaches out to students across both cultures, with equal ease.

Swamiji is traditional in his teaching and preserves the entirety of the age-old wisdom of the Upanishads. He takes a contemporary approach in his lectures, which enables the student to relate to his teaching and imbibe this knowledge without effort.

Swami Vidadatmananda is the resident teacher at *Tattoatirtha*, which is situated in the western outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. As the name suggests, it is a center for learning the *tattva*, or truth, as revealed in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Apart from English, Swamiji teaches and writes in Gujarati as well. He also conducts management seminars with a view to illustrate the relevance of Vedanta in modern management.

Swamiji visits the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam at Saylorsburg, PA, every year, to conduct Vedanta classes and camps from spring through summer. At this time, he also travels all over the US and Canada delivering lectures.

Desire for Self-Knowledge

*parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brāhmaṇo nirvedamāyānnāstyakṛtaḥ kṛtena,
tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchet samitpāṇiḥ śrotriyam brahmaṇiṣṭham.*

parīkṣya – having analyzed; *lokān* – the worldly experiences and achievements; *karmacitān* – acquired through *karma*; *brāhmaṇaḥ* – a mature person; *nirvedam āyāt* – gains dispassion; *akṛtaḥ* – uncreated (Limitless); *kṛtena* – produced by action; *na asti* – not; *saḥ* – He; *abhigacchet* – should go; *gurum eva* – only to a teacher; *tadvijñānārtham* – to know That (Limitless); *samitpāṇiḥ* – with twigs in his hand (servitude); *śrotriyam* – (who is) learned in the scriptures; *brahmaṇiṣṭham* – (who is) steadfast in the knowledge of *brahman*.

Having analyzed the worldly experiences and achievements acquired through *karma*, a mature person gains dispassion by discerning that the uncreated (Limitless) cannot be produced by action. To know That (Limitless), he should go, with twigs in his hand (servitude), to a teacher who is learned in the scriptures and who is steadfast in the knowledge of himself [Muṇḍakopaniṣad, 1-2-12].

Parīkṣya lokān means having scrutinized the worlds. By worlds, we mean the various ends that one can attain through performing *karma*. This refers to the desire-prompted worldly actions as well as rituals in which the intention is to achieve happiness in this world and to reach a *loka* where one will be happy. The futility of this quest is described here because *parīkṣya lokān*, having examined what I can achieve in my life through such actions and rituals, I begin to understand that no action can give me the eternal happiness that I am seeking. That is not to say that actions or rituals should not be performed, or should be condemned, but that the intentions with which the actions are performed must be examined.

The Limitless can never be gained through action

A close scrutiny will lead us to conclude that *nāsti akṛtaḥ kṛtena*, that which is not created, the limitless, can never be gained through *karma* or limited effort. Actions are a means to an end. Our actions are limited in time and place because we can perform an action only for a limited period of time and at a given place. Therefore, our effort is bound to be limited. An end is always in keeping with the means, and consequently, the result of all actions that are limited is also going to be limited and hence, impermanent. All actions, however noble, meritorious, or charitable, or even religious actions such as worship or

meditation can bring about happiness which is perhaps lasting, but not everlasting or eternal happiness. Having recognized that what I am seeking is everlasting or eternal happiness, I cannot accept anything less.

By nature, I am whole

I cannot be satisfied with anything less than absolute wholeness or completeness along with unconditional freedom and happiness. There are times when we do experience unconditional freedom, for example, in the state of deep sleep, but unfortunately, we have no awareness of ourselves in that state, and therefore, do not recognize that we are experiencing such happiness. Occasionally, there are such moments in the waking state as well, where my sense of individuality drops off momentarily and I experience unconditional freedom and happiness. However, in spite of the experience, I am none the wiser. I still do not discern that what I was enjoying was my true Self and instead, conclude that what gave me that happiness is something else. That to which I attribute my happiness, whether an object, person, or circumstance, merely serves to satisfy my likes and dislikes momentarily, thus bringing my true Self to manifestation. By nature I am whole; I am complete and totally free.

Ignorance covers my true nature

If wholeness or completeness is my very nature, how is it that I do not experience happiness all the time? The reason why I do not experience my true nature all the time is because of certain inhibiting factors, primarily ignorance. Ignorance creates a wrong perception of the Self and gives rise to attachments and aversions, which deprive me of the benefit of my true nature.

My mind is generally under the control of my attachments and aversions, or likes and dislikes. They are like a cloud which obscures the sun from my view. Even though the sun is shining behind the cloud I cannot see it. When the cloud is moved away by the wind I catch a glimpse of that sunlight. Soon another cloud comes along, and the sun is obscured again. Another breeze may come and I may again get a brief glimpse of sunshine, but sometimes, even that glimpse may not be very clear because the clouds can be very thick. Occasionally, however, all the clouds may clear away completely and I experience total sunshine. Similarly also, the objects of the world are a comfortable breeze. Just as the wind causes the clouds to move away, so also, some desirable experience momentarily removes the obstructive clouds of my likes and dislikes, and at that instant my Self shines through; I catch a glimpse of

the unconditional happiness, which is my true Self. Yet, I do not recognize at these times that I am experiencing my own Self!

Self is the true source of happiness

If I analyze my experiences, I will find that the only constant factor in all my experiences of happiness is my Self because that which makes me happy keeps on changing. Today a person makes me happy, tomorrow an object makes me happy, another day, a different object like ice cream or pizza makes me happy. Sometimes an experience such as a roller-coaster ride or going skiing makes me happy, and at other times, an event such as the winning of my favorite team or favorite player makes me happy. Or it could be that I may have won, and that makes me happy. Thus, what makes me happy keeps on changing. What or who, then, is the constant factor in all experiences of happiness? It is me; I am the constant factor. Which I is this? It is the I that emerges at the moment when it becomes free from all inhibitions. Thus, that person or object or external event that seems to give me happiness only causes my own Self, the true source of happiness to surface. It is this intermittent glimpse of our Self that is a common factor in all experiences of happiness. This is what a wise man or a mature person recognizes.

A contributor gains inner purification

A *brāhmaṇaḥ* is a contemplative, spiritual, or thinking person. One becomes a thinking person as a result of gaining a degree of maturity of the mind, which in turn is a result of living an intelligent life. What is intelligent living? Intelligent living is a way of life in which I am not directed by my likes and dislikes. It is living in a manner that helps me gradually reduce the intensity of my likes and dislikes until I overcome them entirely. In this, my likes and dislikes get attenuated or purged through a spirit of worship, or a spirit of offering. This is what the Vedas and the Bhagavadgītā teach us. For example [Bhagavadgītā, 3-9]:

yajñārthātkarmaṇo'nyatra loko'yam karmabandhanaḥ

This person who is enjoined (to do action) is bound by *karma* other than that performed for the sake of *yajñā*, (i.e., other than the action performed as an offering to *īśvara*).

When you perform any action in a spirit other than of worship, other than of offering, or other than of self-sacrifice, that action becomes a binding action. Therefore, only an action performed in the spirit of worship, offering, or self-

sacrifice becomes a liberating action. One who has lived a life by these principles gains a *sāttvik* mind. Slowly but surely, the *rajas* and *tamas*, the *rāga* and *dveṣas* (likes and dislikes) are purged and in course of time, you achieve an inner purification. You gain the inner purification that gives you the right perception of yourself and the right perception of life.

In living a life in accordance with the attitude of worship, one progressively discovers the satisfaction from one's own Self. A life of self-sacrifice or a life of offering also has its own rewards in that every time I perform a selfless action in the spirit of helping somebody, I gain an immediate sense of inner satisfaction. I feel good whenever I do something good for the sake of somebody else. Intelligent living is doing something with no other motive, than simply doing good for its own sake. I use the talents and abilities that I have been given, or those that I have acquired by my own effort for contributing rather than consuming.

Being a consumer is one way of life called *bhoga*, a life of sense-gratification. Intelligent living, on the hand hand, is called *yoga*, the life of a contributor. How do you perceive your role in the scheme of things? Do you always look upon yourself as a consumer and the world as a provider of the means for your consumption? Or do you look upon your role as being that of a contributor and the world as a place where you can contribute?

Desire for Self-knowledge arises from discernment

When I live as a contributor, my mind becomes contemplative. I am able to see that what I am seeking is lasting happiness, and neither a specific action or its result, nor a particular place or *loka* can give me that happiness. It is something that exists within my own Self and I have to discover that for myself. With this recognition, the desire for happiness is replaced by the desire for knowledge. The greatest emotional maturity is achieved when all my desires get converted into *jijñāsa*, the desire for knowledge. It is the result of right discernment, or *viveka*.

I understand that I can never gain the Limitless by performing *karma*, or limited effort, *nāsti akṛtaḥ kṛtena*. The Limitless is not something to be gained, or attained, or even achieved; it has to be discovered. It cannot be other than myself because in that case, it will always be limited without me. Therefore, the Limitless can not be distinct from me and therefore, has to include me. Maybe what I am seeking is my own Self. From this *viveka* or discernment, arises a

desire to know the Self. This desire for knowledge is very important. It is the primary qualification for learning Vedanta. Otherwise, we may well be studying Vedanta, but we would also still keep satisfying our desires. Some people study the Bhagavadgītā in order to satisfy some worldly desires. “Swamiji, will I get promotion by studying the Bhagavadgītā? Will it bring me material success? Can I get a better job?” The Bhagavadgītā may well do that, but the primary purpose of the Bhagavadgītā or Vedanta is to give us the lasting inner fulfillment that we are seeking in our lives.

The Limitless cannot be attained by limited effort

The *brāhmaṇaḥ* or contemplative person is clear in his mind that he is seeking the Limitless, which is his own Self. It is that which is to be known and not something to be achieved. Therefore, he discovers *vairāgya*, an indifference or dispassion towards all the limited ends. This person examines all the possible ends and reflects upon it. ‘What can I possibly achieve? If I were to perform the most exalted *karma* prescribed by the Vedas, I could perhaps gain prosperity in this world and perhaps even reach the heavens. I can even aspire to reach *brahmhaloka*, the world of Brahmā, the highest *loka* attainable. But to what avail?’ In this manner he engages in scrutiny and concludes that however great the achievement is, it would still fall short. It would be inadequate to fulfill his need because it is the result of action, *kṛtena*. What he is seeking is uncreated, is *nitya*, eternal or everlasting. Something can be eternal only if it does not perish. Something does not perish or die, only if it is not born; anything that is born will perish in course of time.

I want such happiness as will never diminish, and I do not want even an iota of unhappiness. That is what everybody wants. Unless this want is satisfied I cannot be satisfied in life. My past experiences show that all my achievements and accomplishments thus far have given me only temporary satisfaction, and have left me dissatisfied and seeking something else that is different or something that is better. This is because there is no degree of achievement that can satisfy the need of being limitless. Whatever comes, will go; whatever is created will perish. Everything in this universe is created, including *brahmhaloka*. In the Bhagavadgītā, Lord Krishna says that the study in all the realms is temporary, limited in time [8-16]:

ābrahmabhuvanālokāḥ punarāvartino’rjuna

O! Arjuna, all the worlds (where beings exist) up to the world of Brahmāji, are of the nature of those from, which one will return.

The whole universe is created, and therefore, all the accomplishments, all the powers, all the name, and fame, and whatever else one can have falls under the category of that which is created, and will therefore perish. That which is bound to perish cannot give me eternal or lasting happiness. Therefore none of this is adequate for the contemplative person who recognizes that there is nothing in the universe that is eternal.

In the Gītā, Arjuna says that even if he gets the unrivalled kingdom of the whole universe or the overlordship of gods, it cannot ease the pain caused by his grief [Bhagavadgītā, 2-8]:

*na hi prapaśyāmi mamāpanudyād yacchokamucchoṣaṇamindriyāṇām,
avāpya bhūmāvasapatnamṛddham rājyaṁ surāṇāmapi cādhipatyam.*

I do not see anything that will remove the sorrow that dries up my senses, even if I were to obtain an unrivalled and prosperous kingdom on earth and sovereignty over the denizens of heaven.

Arjuna could recognize this reality, and this is what every individual should learn to accept. We have to take stock of our own life and scrutinize what we have accomplished so far, what life has given us.

Dispassion arises out of a cognition of one's pursuit of the Limitless

I was born a wanting person. What I wanted kept changing as I grew in age, but that I wanted never changed. No amount of fulfillment of the wants could erase the want and the 'wanting I' always remained. Is there a possibility that there can be some achievements that can eliminate the wanting I? No, there are not. By their very nature, all achievements are limited in scope and time. What we derive from them is therefore, also limited and inadequate. Out of the recognition that what I am seeking is not any of this, but the limitless, arises *vairāgya* or dispassion towards everything that is limited.

Pursuit of limitlessness is natural

What is it that I am seeking in my life that is not my conscious choice? It is not that I have decided to become limitless or to become totally free, yet, I find myself having that desire.

asato mā sadgamaya, tamaso mā jyotirgamaya, mṛtyormā amṛtaṁ gamaya.

Lead me (by giving the knowledge) from the unreal (apparent) to the real; from the darkness (of ignorance) to light (of knowledge); (and)

from death (sense of limitation) to immortality (limitlessness, liberation) [Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 1-3-28].

This is a prayer which always comes straight from the heart. It is always there in our mind. It is not my deliberate intent to become happy or immortal, but I find myself desiring it. Pujya Swamiji Dayanandaji says that it is natural that there is always love for one's own Self or for one's own nature. One can be comfortable only when one is true to one's own nature. Fire is comfortable being hot, and sugar is comfortable being sweet, and so also, I am comfortable being happy.

I am not comfortable being unhappy because happiness is my nature. If I had a choice, I would want to have boundless happiness all the time, in all places, and under all conditions. I would not settle for anything less than that. I recognize that whatever I can achieve is always going to be limited and too inadequate to fulfil this need. The fact that I love happiness and desire happiness must mean that it is my nature, and therefore, this need can be fulfilled only from my own Self and nowhere else. I can also see that there are some inhibiting factors like ignorance that are denying me my nature, and have to be removed.

A mature person seeks an abiding mind

This kind of analysis helps one become indifferent to all possible achievements. It is an indifference in which the mind is no longer attracted to any achievements or distracted by any accomplishments. A Vedāntin wants to enjoy a frame of mind which is steady, and not disturbed or preoccupied. Then alone can the mind abide in *brahman* or in its own Self. What we are seeking is an abiding mind.

The mind is easily disturbed by various temptations. For instance, even as I study the Upanishad, I am distracted by the thought of a cup of coffee, a piece of candy, a TV show, or a friend. These are simple temptations, but as we are aware, there are many stronger temptations. For example, there is the lure of power, importance, recognition, fame, or wealth. Who doesn't want these things? Everybody considers these to be important.

The world is always chasing after things such as wealth and recognition, and their ability to tempt us strongly is understandable. My mind is naturally inclined toward these common temptations and I have to make an effort go against their appeal. That is why it is necessary to keep on examining their value time and again. We have to scrutinize them to recognize that their worth is

insufficient to satisfy our need. They are fine where they are, but I need not have them. When all the luxuries, pleasures, and power were offered to Nachiketā by Lord Yama, he rejected them saying that all his offerings were perishable [Kāṭhōpaniṣad, 1-1-26]:

*śvobhāvā martyasya yadantakaitat sarvendriyāṇāṁ jarayanti tejah,
api sarvaṁ jīvitamalpameva tavaiva vāhāstava nṛtyagīte.*

Oh Yama, the destroyer of life! All these ephemerals (things) weaken the power of all the sense organs of the mortal being. Moreover, any form of life is short only. Let all your vehicles, dance and music be yours only.

Nachiketā refused all of them because he wanted only one thing and that was Self-knowledge. He was very clear about what he wanted. If I have that kind of clarity nothing can shake or perturb my mind. It will not fall prey to temptation. However, if I do not deal with my desires effectively they will keep coming back to distract my mind. As long as the mind is vulnerable to temptations, I cannot enjoy an abiding mind. The mind is governed by likes and dislikes, attachments and aversions. When something is very important to me I have an attachment towards it, and also an aversion towards whatever I view as a threat to achieving it. Attachment is always accompanied by aversion; attachment for one would amount to aversion for something else. As long as the mind is riddled with attachments and aversions, it cannot enjoy peace, steadiness, or abidance.

What we are all seeking is an abiding mind. For pursuing any form of knowledge, whether it is physics, chemistry, mathematics, or Vedanta, we must be totally focused on what we wish to learn. However, the mind can be focused on something only if I consider it to be important. If I am convinced that nothing else is as important, the mind will remain purposeful and not be distracted by anything. For this reason, if I am convinced that I can accomplish my goal only through gaining Self-knowledge, acquiring this knowledge becomes the most important pursuit. Then alone can I become a *svāmi*, a master or owner of what I am.

Scrutiny dispels wrong notions of the Self

I recognize that the attraction I have for other things is based on the perception I have of myself. I think I am insecure, and therefore, something appears to promise me the security that I seek. I think that I am unhappy, and therefore, I think that somebody or something can make me happy. That is how

we become vulnerable, and are exploited only because of our own false estimate of ourselves. People can cause me unhappiness through their omissions and commissions only when I have this wrong perception of myself to begin with. Only when I think that I am no good, can somebody make me feel that I am no good. Therefore all sadness, and all hurt and guilt come from the wrong perception of myself as being inadequate or not all right. Self-ignorance keeps me from seeing the Self as fullness, completeness, and limitlessness, and makes me disown what I am. My looking upon myself as unhappy and insecure is the reason why I am constantly searching for happiness and security from the things and beings of the world, which however, do not have them to offer me. Therefore, my dissatisfaction with myself arising from the wrong perceptions caused by ignorance is the source of all unhappiness.

I have to acquire the right perception so that I can see that I am indeed what I am seeking to be; I am whole, I am a complete being. The right perception will displace the wrong notion and then the inhibitions will be no more. I will then become the owner of my true nature. If this is understood, knowledge becomes most important to me.

Through scrutiny it becomes clear that I have superimposed values on the objects of the world that are not intrinsic to them. I then become indifferent to them in that I recognize that I have no use for them other than to fulfill my basic needs. Yes, I have to fulfill my basic needs because I do get hungry and thirsty, and I do feel hot or cold. The world is created so that I may take care of these needs. The objects of the world are designed only to provide freedom from hunger, thirst, heat, and cold. They are not meant to make me happy or secure; happiness and security have to come from within me. If this is recognized, I can relate to the world appropriately.

Dispassion is relating to everything in a healthy way

Vairāgya or dispassion is being able to give the world the freedom to be what it is. A person who has *vairāgya* does not manipulate the world to suit his own need for control and ownership. He leaves things where they are and enjoys them as they are because he has no demands. It is not that a person with *vairāgya* does not enjoy the world. On the contrary, in his being non-demanding and happy with the way things are, only such a person really enjoys the world. *Vairāgya* does not mean turning away and not looking at things that I fear may tempt me. It is an attitude of detachment that enables me to relate to everything in a very healthy way. I enjoy things as they are without the compulsion to own,

manipulate, or control them. Only then am I truly free and able to discover the freedom that is in my nature. Therefore, the first level of freedom is *vairāgya*. The word used in this mantra is *nirodam*, which means indifference or dispassion. A contemplative person discovers this dispassion.

The Need for a teacher

Tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchet. When that desire for Self-knowledge arises, he should indeed go to a teacher. One discovers a value for knowledge upon recognizing that it is ignorance that is inhibiting, and therefore, knowledge alone is the solution.

Eva here, means indeed or definitely. It is emphasized that one must go to a teacher to gain this knowledge. Why is the need for a teacher stressed here? Is it to perpetuate the institution of the gurus? No. It is because this knowledge can only be gained from a teacher.

The famous story of The Tenth Man illustrates the importance of a guru. The man in this story is in search of the tenth man in his group of ten. He doesn't include himself in taking a head count and thinks that the tenth man is lost, while all along he is himself the tenth man. The ten men conclude that this tenth man is lost and begin to search for him. The very search of the tenth man for the missing tenth man arises from his false perception of himself because he thinks that the tenth man is somewhere else and has to be found. This act of searching presupposes a denial of his own self; unless he denies his own self as the tenth man he cannot be engaged in the search for the tenth man. He is unable to figure where the missing man is because he has already concluded that it is not him, and whatever he thinks and does is based on this erroneous conclusion. He is faced with the dilemma of when and where he will discover the tenth man, and how long he needs to continue searching. He does not arrive at the truth that he is the tenth man until somebody else points it out to him. Someone who happens to come there asks him why he is so sad and he relates his predicament to this person. Yet, in all this, he never once asks the question regarding how the tenth man looks. Like him, we have never asked, "What is meant by happiness? What is meant by security? What is meant by comfort? What is meant by fulfillment?"

This person who comes by, understands the situation and tells him, "I will tell you where the tenth man is. Start counting again." "Really? Okay. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine." The man counts with

complete *śraddhā*, faith in the person who promises to find the tenth man. He counts nine men and then looks at him and asks, “Where is the tenth man?” “See, you are the tenth man.” The man has to be told this. There is no way that he can ever arrive at this by himself. He cannot stumble upon the tenth man because he has already concluded that, “I am not the tenth man.”

It is remarkable that you have to go to somebody else for Self-knowledge. It is not as if I totally do not know myself. I do know myself, only, I know myself wrongly; I have a false perception of myself. I can perhaps learn something when an unknown thing is to be known, as in the objective sciences. However, in the case of Self-knowledge, it is not an unknown Self that is to be known, but a wrongly known Self that is to be rightly known. A teacher has to draw my attention to this fact. “Hey, what you are thinking about yourself is wrong. You are not what you take yourself to be.” Then what am I? It is the teacher who makes me see the nature of my Self as limitless, using various methods and models.

Establishing a relationship with the teacher

Gurumevābhigacchet, he should go to a teacher. One should go to a teacher *samitpāṇiḥ*, with *samit* in hand as an offering. *Samit* are the dry twigs or faggots of certain trees, which are offered as fuel in a fire ritual. In those days, the teachers used to live in a forest or other isolated places, and the student left all the comforts and security of his home behind, and went to live with the teacher in the *gurukulam*. This is possible only with *karma-sannyāsa*, the renunciation of all duties on the part of the student who is then free to go to the teacher to learn. It is also called *vividiṣā-sannyāsa*. *Vividiṣā* means the desire to know. This form of *sannyāsa* or lifestyle of a renunciate is undertaken expressly for the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, the student does not have any possessions and collects dry twigs as he walks along in the forest. He bundles these twigs and offers them at the feet of the teacher.

This is a symbolic offering made by the student in affirming his *śraddhā*, total trust or faith in the teacher. In the *Bhagavadgītā* [4-34] Lord Krishna talks about the proper way to approach the teacher:

*tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā,
upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninastattoadarśinaḥ.*

Understand that (which is to be known) by prostrating, by asking proper questions, (and) by service. Those who are wise, who have the vision of the truth, will teach you (this) knowledge.

The proper way is *praṇipātena*, through the offering of a long prostration to the teacher, *sevayā*, by serving the teacher and *paripraśnena*, by the asking of the right questions. Teachers, in those days, were like a well which contained water. The thirsty went to the well and had to draw the water to quench their thirst. In these times the teachers are like rivers. They come to where the thirsty are! And moreover, all kinds of facilities like air-conditioned cabins, swimming pools, and playgrounds are provided for the use of the students!

Lord Krishna advises that you should go to these wise and learned teachers and win them over through service, devotion, and sincerity. The students thus had a commitment to serve the teacher, develop a rapport with him, please him and win him over. You do not win them over with your gifts because they do not need any gifts. Actually, they do not need our service either. I serve the teacher for my sake, because that is what I want to do. When the teacher is pleased and sees that the student is sincere in his desire to learn, he teaches him. The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi [34] also talks about serving the teacher through *bhakti*, devotion:

*tamārādhyā gurum bhaktyā prahvapraśrayasevanaiḥ,
prasannam tamanuprāpya prcchejjñātavyamātmanah.*

Having worshipped with devotion that teacher¹, one must approach him who is pleased by the service (done to him) with a proper attitude and ask him as to what is to be known about oneself.

You must serve the teacher by your actions, by your words and by your thoughts, and you will find him pleased with you. It is then that you ask him to teach you. There is no guarantee that just because you go to a teacher, he will necessarily teach you. In those days the teacher would even test the student to see whether or not he really had the eligibility and sincerity to learn. Then alone would the knowledge be imparted.

There has to be a rapport between the student and teacher. This will create a conducive atmosphere in which the teacher is ready to teach and the

¹ The teacher is the one who has studied the *sāstras*, who does not have *pāpa*, who is not affected by desires, who is a knower of *brahman*, who is calm like the fire that does not have any more fuel, who is an ocean of compassion without any reason, who is a helpful friend to the seekers who salute him with appreciation.

student is in a frame of mind that is ready to learn. Only then will effective communication take place. All this emphasizes the importance of the teacher and calls attention to his role in our pursuit. Having acquired the discernment that all the achievements and rewards of the world are impermanent in nature and quite pointless in our quest, it is the teacher to whom we have to turn, and in all humility, ask to be taught. It is the teacher in whom we have to have *śraddhā*. Ultimately, it is only the teacher who can help us attain that which we seek, the knowledge of the Self².

² Based on Muṇḍakopaniṣad classes taught by Swamiji in a Summer Camp at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 2003. Transcribed and edited by Jaya Kannan, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

Importance of Devotion in the Pursuit of Self-Knowledge

*nāyamātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena,
yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām.*

ayam ātmā – This Self; *labhyaḥ* – can be attained; *na pravacanena* – neither through (mere) recitation (of the Vedas); *na medhayā* – nor through (mere) memory; *na bahunā śrutena* – nor through (mere) repeated listening; *labhyaḥ tena eva* – (It is) attained by him only; *yam* – whom; *esaḥ vṛṇute* – this (Self) chooses; *esaḥ ātmā* – This Self; *vivṛṇute* – reveals; *svām tanūm* – its nature; *tasya* – to him.

This Self cannot be attained through (mere) recitation (of the Vedas), (mere) memory, or (mere) repeated listening. It can be attained through the Self alone that the seeker prays to; this Self of that seeker reveals its nature to him [Kāṭhōpaniṣad, 1-2-23].

This verse talks about the importance of choosing to know the Self in the pursuit of realization of the Self, or *ātmā*. *Ātmā* cannot be attained merely *pravacanena*, through discourse or discussions about it. *Na medhayā*, neither can it be attained only through scholarship, memorizing and repeating the text, *na bahunā śrutena*, nor merely by listening to many texts. All of these are essential, but not sufficient to gain the knowledge of the Self. *Yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ*, it is only attained by the one who chooses *ātmā*.

Devotion is a deliberate decision to choose the Self

There are many choices in life, and they can be broadly classified as being either *śreyas*, the path of the good, or *preyas*, the path of the pleasant. *Ātmā* is attained by the one who chooses *śreyas*, the lasting good. He has the discrimination to understand that what he seeks is the Self and it can be attained only through knowledge.

Another interpretation of this statement is that the Self is attained by one who is constantly aware that *ātmā* or *brahman* is his own self. Even at the time of listening to the scriptures, he is conscious that *brahman* is his own self, and does not look upon *brahman* or God as separate from himself. What this highlights is that we must make a choice in our life and the choice must be very clear.

śraddhāvānllabhate jñānam tatparaḥ samyatendriyaḥ.

He who has faith in the *śāstra*, who is committed to that knowledge and who is a master of his senses gains the knowledge [BG 4-39].

When there is *śraddhā*, or trust and dedication that what I am seeking is nothing

but Self-knowledge, then there is also a commitment to that. Then one puts a stop to all other activities and applies oneself totally to achieving that objective. This is devotion.

The Upaniṣad explains devotion as being a deliberate decision to choose the Self. *Tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūṁ svām*, to him who chooses God, the Self reveals itself. The idea is that whatever choice we make in our life, will become real. God will bless me in the form in which I have chosen him. If I choose the form of Lord Krishna, he will bless me in that form. The Bhagavadgītā [4-11] says:

ye yathā mām prapadyante tāṁstathaiṣa bhajāmyaham.

In whatever way people worship Me, I bless them in the same way.

If we seek the Lord in a particular form, he will bless us with that form. Whether we worship him as *saguṇa brahma*, omniscient and omnipotent, or worship him as being our very Self, he will bless us accordingly. Our commitment and total dedication of ourselves to the Lord in an attitude of worship is called surrender. Surrender means offering our entire self to the Lord without any reservation, with no other priority. This is the meaning of *sa sarvabhāvena bhajati mām* [Bhagavadgītā, 15-19], he worships me with his whole being. There is nothing else we seek in life, but the Lord. That is called *bhakti*. Prompted by this desire for the Lord, whatever we do is *bhakti*.

Certain 'devotional' actions by themselves do not ensure devotion

Bhakti is usually associated with certain kinds of action. Performing *pūjā* or worship, reciting the glories of the Lord, chanting His name etc are called *bhakti*. However, all this is really *karma* or actions performed either at the physical, oral, or mental level. These actions can be performed even without any devotion. Therefore, it is not as if these actions by themselves ensure *bhakti*. There can be a professional priest who performs *pūjās* the whole day. He may be a *bhaktā*, or he may not be. Then there can be someone who gives discourses on the glories of the Lord. For someone, it could be a profession. Just because you perform a certain kind of act, does not necessarily mean that there is devotion behind it. It is also possible, that you may not perform a particular ritual or worship a particular deity, but still have devotion. Devotion is in our heart.

Devotion arising out of understanding is lasting devotion

Devotion arises out of an evolved understanding of God. Everybody is

born into a culture or an upbringing, and usually has some devotion for a certain form or a certain concept of God. To the extent that the devotion arises out of an understanding, it will be lasting or sustaining devotion. Otherwise, the devotion is conditional. A person is devoted to God or believes in God because God does this or that for him. Many people believe in God because God helps them and does whatever they want. But if God fails to do what they want, their trust in Him will be shaken.

It is good to have devotion, however it may be, but devotion accompanied by understanding is better. Then it is not just a given event, but whatever happens is seen as a blessing. If I have the understanding that everything is but the grace of God, my conviction will never be shaken. I see only a blessing even in what is considered an adverse situation. This calls for *śraddhā* or trust.

Recognizing God as kind and loving requires faith

To see that there is an order in everything is *śraddhā*. There is no way to prove that there is a God who is kind, loving and benevolent; it is for us to discover. One could say just as well that God is cruel because there is so much suffering and pain in the world. We could hold him responsible for all that. We could look upon it as punishment and say that he is a punishing God. However, our scriptures teach us that it is not so, and we have *śraddhā*, or faith in the words of the scriptures. Lord Krishna says [Bhagavadgītā, 5-29]:

suhṛdaṁ sarvabhūtānāṁ jñātvā māṁ śāntimṛcchati

Knowing Me as the friend of all beings, he (or she) gains peace (liberation).

Lord Krishna says, I am *suhṛd*, a well-wisher of everyone. I do not wish ill of anyone. Even though I appear to be punishing, it is not punishment and I have only their well-being in mind. Sometimes, in being kind, one may appear to be cruel. We have to have faith, a trust that that is what it is. The faith is based on some kind of reasoning, but it cannot be proven, and what we believe is up to us. We do not have adequate reasoning to say that God is punishing or conclude that God is cruel. There are also many acts of kindness in the world, so he must be rewarding as well. It is true that we see kindness as well as cruelty and punishment as well as reward, and this is where our faith in the scriptures helps us. We believe what our scriptures say, what the wise people say, and what the devotees say: *yamevaiṣa vṛṇute*, one who chooses the Self or the Lord attains the Lord. We thus choose to make the Lord the basis of our life.

It is by the grace of the Lord alone that I can even choose the Lord. Having faith is significant in itself. It is also a great wealth. If you do not have faith, you can always pray for it. Oh Lord, please give me that faith, that devotion. It is by the grace of God that we have devotion. Therefore, the Upaniṣad gives utmost importance to devotion, to *bhakti*, and to the one who chooses the Lord or is devoted to the Lord.

*yo māmevamasammūḍho jānāti puruṣottamam,
sa sarvaīdbhajati māṁ sarvaabhāvena bhārata.*

The one who is not deluded, who knows Me in this way, he, (becoming) the knower of (that which is) all, worshipping Me with whole of his being, O Arjuna [Bhagavadgītā, 15-19].

Lord Krishna says he who knows me as the one Self and worships me as the Self of all, gains me. Vedāntins maintain that you can offer worship to the Lord provided you have the right understanding. The mind may have the habit of being tempted, but the discriminating person monitors the mind and directs it to the worship of the Lord alone.

Karma-yoga is a way of worshipping the Lord

The expression of our worship of the Lord is in two stages. The first is through the various activities of life, *karma*, the duties or actions we have to perform. When there is devotion in my heart, I want to express that devotion in terms of *sevā* or serving the Lord. Performing action in such a spirit of worship is called *karma-yoga*. When *karma* or action is performed with *bhakti* or devotion, it becomes *karma-yoga*. Therefore, *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga* are not looked upon as being different from each other.

Certain specific acts such as offering *pūjā* or chanting the Lord's name, or reciting His glories are more conducive to devotion. In the course of our everyday activities, it may be difficult for us to maintain that sense of devotion because of the greater likelihood of distraction. When we interact with other people who have their particular likes and dislikes, our own likes and dislikes also get provoked and this makes it difficult to maintain a spirit of worship. Therefore, it is important that we assign time in our daily routine for special acts of worship or special acts of prayer in which the mind is withdrawn from all other distractions, and focused upon one thing. This will help us to gain the inner strength by which we can retain the spirit of devotion even in the midst of activities and distractions. Through this, whatever actions or duties we perform

become a form of offering to the Lord.

Where there is understanding, there is also a sense of gratitude, that we are truly blessed by the Lord. A human being is generally preoccupied with what he does not have, and therefore, does not have much appreciation of what he does have. It is when we pay attention to what we have, that we recognize that we have plenty, that we are enjoying the abundant grace of the Lord. The recognition of that grace in our life brings about a sense of reverence, a sense of devotion and gratitude, and the desire to return that favor. We recognize the Lord as being the unseen hand, guiding and helping us all the time, doing things for us even without our asking. Our actions are then performed in the spirit of returning that favor or offering. Therefore, the way to invoke devotion in our heart is by recognizing the presence of grace in our life.

In *karma-yoga*, there is a perceived duality between the devotee and the Lord, the worshipper and the worshipped. It is quite alright. I am often asked, “Swamiji, you say that *brahman* or God is my own self. Then who is worshipping whom?” If the teaching that *brahman* is my own self has become a reality, the worship has served its purpose. Until then, I accept the realities as they are; I find myself to be separate from God and therefore, God is to be worshipped. I make my experience of the seeming duality, the basis to worship the Lord. Thus, *karma-yoga* does involve the duality of the devotee and the Lord.

A *karma-yogī* is really a devotee and not merely a *karmathā*, a person merely performing *karma*. He performs his *karma* or action in the spirit of worship, in the spirit of offering. That brings about the maturity to see that the ultimate nature of God is one’s own Self, and therefore, the highest form of devotion is to worship the Lord who is the Self. The devotion then turns into the pursuit of knowledge in seeking to know the Lord. The first stage of worship in the form of an offering to the Lord is transformed into worship in the form of seeking to know the Lord; *karma-yoga* has served its purpose when *jijñāsa*, the intense desire to know has arisen.

Karma-yoga transforms into jñāna-yoga

Once I gain the desire to know, the whole of my being is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. This knowledge is acquired through *śravaṇam* or listening to the scriptures from the teacher, *mananam* or reflecting upon what I have understood through *śravaṇam*, and *nididhyāsanam* or assimilating, making this knowledge my own and living in accordance with what I know. This is called

jñāna-yoga. *Karma-yoga* and *jñāna-yoga* are two stages of *bhakti* or devotion. The Vedantin would say that a person seeking to know the Lord as his own self is more mature than a person seeking to worship the Lord as separate from himself. The first is a *jñāna-yogī*, and the other is a *karma-yogī*.

It is said that the lifestyle best suited to the pursuit of knowledge is that of a renunciate. Therefore, a life of *karma-yoga* is followed by *sāṅkhya* or renunciation. As a result of pursuit of knowledge under the guidance of a teacher, *tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām*, the *ātmā* or the Self reveals itself to him.

In the Bhagavadgītā [10-10], Lord Krishna says:

*teṣāṁ satatayuktānāṁ bhajatāṁ prītipūrvakam,
dadāmi buddhiyogaṁ taṁ yena māmupayānti te.*

For those who are always committed to me, seeking me with love, I give that vision whereby they reach me.

Lord Krishna says that when I find that my devotees are worshipping me out of love, I give them *buddhi-yoga*, that knowledge by which they know me as their own Self.

*teṣāmevānukampāpārthamahamajñānajarāṁ tamaḥ,
nāśayāmyātmabhāvastho jñānadīpena bhāsvatā.*

For them alone, out of compassion, I, obtaining in the thoughts of the mind destroy the delusion born of ignorance by the shining lamp of knowledge [Bhagavadgītā, 10-11].

Lord Krishna says that when I find my devotees totally dedicated to me and worshipping me solely for my sake and with no other objective, prompted by the compassion towards them I dispel the darkness of ignorance in their heart, by lighting the lamp of knowledge. That initiative to rid us of our ignorance by giving us knowledge is taken by the Lord, by the very Self. That is what the Upaniṣad also says: *tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām*, to him who is the devotee the *ātmā* reveals its true nature³.

³ Based on Kaṭhapaniṣad classes taught by Swamiji in a Summer Camp at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 2003. Transcribed and edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

Spiritual Practices Essential for Self-Knowledge

*nāvirato duṣcaritānnāśānto nāsamāhitaḥ,
nāśāntamānaso vā'pi prajñānenainamāpnuyāt.*

na avirataḥ – Neither the one who has not withdrawn; *duṣcaritāt* – from bad conduct; *na āśāntaḥ* – nor the one who lacks self-control; *na vā aśāntamānasaḥ* – nor the one who lacks mind-control; *na api asamāhitaḥ* – nor the one who lacks concentration; *āpnuyāt* – can attain; *enam* – this (Self); *prajñānena* – through knowledge.

The one who has not withdrawn from bad conduct, lacks sense-control, whose mind has no concentration, or is not integrated cannot attain this Self through knowledge [Kaṭhōpaniṣad 1-2-24].

This verse talks of the prerequisites to gaining knowledge of the Self. One has to attain successive degrees of devotion that will lead to discovering this knowledge. Here, we are told of how it is possible to acquire this devotion and thus gain the Self.

Refrain from evil conduct

Duṣcaritād na avirataḥ, this Self cannot be attained by one who has not refrained from wickedness. *Duṣcarita* is evil conduct, the violation of the basic values of life. *Sat-carita* is good conduct based on the values that are derived from what we expect of others. We expect others to be kind to us, to be loving to us, to be forgiving, compassionate, understanding, and accepting of us. We do not want other people to hurt, cheat, or lie to us. Others also have similar expectations of us and do not want us to hurt, cheat, or lie to them. They expect us to like, love, accept, be kind and compassionate to them. We know that what we expect of other people is what they expect of us as well.

Positive values such as kindness, compassion, non-violence and truthfulness are the universal expectations of all living beings. Everyone has love for these values because they are the very nature of the Self, and there is a natural love for the Self. Therefore, whenever I conduct myself in accordance with these values, I am conducting myself in harmony with my own Self. On the other hand, whenever I violate these values, I am in effect violating my own Self. This results in the squandering of my energy. I may not recognize it, but whenever I go against the values, I am hurting myself. There is a slight trauma every time I tell a lie. A little hurt, a little damage, so slight that I may not even

notice it. Yet, years of accumulated trauma add up to sadness and other kinds of problems.

It is easy and tempting to violate the values because more often than not, following values involves pain. But that is a self-hurting way of living. It is very convenient to take the easy way out, getting away with less effort, which results in violation of values. There is a tendency to get as much as I can with as little as I can put in. If I fall prey to that tendency, it will become stronger and stronger. It will take over and soon I will become a habitual liar or violator.

Refrain from the temptations of the sense pleasures

Na aśāntaḥ. Another impulse that we have is seeking sense gratification. We have a natural fascination for sense objects. Self-knowledge is not available to one who has not restrained the sense organs from indulging in the sense pleasures. Vedanta does not say that we should not enjoy the sense objects at all. It only cautions that there should be moderation in all activities involving the sense objects. In the Bhagavadgītā [6-17], Lord Krishna refers to one who has moderation and a sense of proportion in whatever he does: *yuktāhāravihārasya yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu.* He is described as one who is moderate in *āhāra*, eating, *vihāra*, moving about, and *karma*, other activities, and who is alert with reference to one's duties.

The one who wishes to gain self-knowledge must have the ability to refrain from the temptation to indulge in sense pleasures. The one who cannot do that will not gain the knowledge because his senses are outwardly directed. He is too extroverted and gross. There are those who are given to sensuous impulses, who indulge in the sensory pleasures not recognizing that they are on the path to self-ruin. The Upaniṣad says that neither the one who has not refrained from evil conduct, nor the one who has not restrained the sense organs from the temptation of the sense pleasures can attain the Self.

Cultivate steadiness of mind

Na asamāhitaḥ: Another necessity is *samādhānam*, steadiness of the mind. One whose mind is agitated or distracted cannot gain the knowledge of the Self. It is necessary to have a mind that has focus or steadiness. The Upaniṣad talks of the need for *śamadamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti*, the qualities of *śama*, *dama*, *uparati*, *titikṣā*, *śraddhā* and *samādhānam*⁴. We require the mind to focus upon the Self. This

⁴ Control or mastery over the mind is *śama*. Control of the external senses of perception and

happens only through deliberate practice and we have to make the effort. Just as a deliberate effort is required to see that we follow the values and restrain our senses from indulging in sense gratification, training the mind to retain focus also requires effort.

Japa or repeating the name of the lord is an excellent means of cultivating focus of the mind. The steps of *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* viz., *āsana* or correct body postures, *prāṇāyāma* or breath control, *dhāraṇā* or fixing the mind, and *dhyānam* or meditation, are also very helpful in developing concentration. In our daily activities, we have to set aside a certain time to practice the concentration of the mind. This should not become a mechanical exercise, but be a purposeful activity that is centered upon the Lord. Therefore, practice repeating the name of the Lord, as opposed to looking at a flame or something like that. A general level of alertness also helps because when we habitually do certain things for years, we begin to do them mechanically and without paying attention. We should watch for this and guard against becoming mechanical, or impulsive, and restrain the mind from meandering or wandering. The mind is susceptible to all this and we have to learn to deal with it and train it to develop focus. The sixth chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* deals with the practice of developing concentration of the mind.

Use concentration of the mind for the pursuit of Self-knowledge

When the mind acquires concentration or single-pointedness, one likes to enjoy the experience of peace or silence within oneself. Enjoying the pleasure of the concentration of the mind is *rasāsvāda*. However, this is seen as being an obstacle to gaining self-knowledge because one may stop at that point, or use concentration of mind to develop other powers. This verse says that one should become free from the desire to gain any other benefit of the concentration of the mind; one should only want knowledge and nothing else. This is called devotion, *yamevaiṣa vṛṇute* [Kāthopaniṣad 1-2-24], the one who chooses the Lord.

Summary: The four levels of devotion

The first level of devotion is the deliberate choice of making Lord our priority in life. What is meant by choosing God in our life? Choosing God means living in accordance with the nature of god. It is *sat-carita*, good conduct,

action is *dama*. Strict observance of one's own duty is *uparati*. The endurance of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, etc. is *titikṣā*. Faith in the words of the guru and the scriptures is *śraddhā*. Single-pointedness of the mind is *samādhānam*.

or refraining from violating the values. The second level of devotion lies in restraining the sense organs from sense indulgence. God is within, and therefore, to the extent that the sense organs and the mind are abiding, I am worshipful. The third level of devotion is developing concentration of mind, making it free from its habitual wandering or habitual distractions. When one reaches the fourth level of devotion to the Lord, one is able to refrain even from that pleasure which comes from concentration, and contain the temptation to use that concentration for acquiring some mundane powers. All these are distractions that come in the way of devotion to the Lord.

A person who has overcome all manner of distractions, who enjoys the purity and concentration of the mind and is totally dedicated only to the knowledge of the Self and nothing else, will definitely gain the knowledge. He is qualified to discover this knowledge and the proper means of knowledge, *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nididhyāsanam*, will thus become effective. *Yamevaiṣa vṛṇute*, he who chooses the Lord or *ātmā* or the Self and lives a way of life reflecting that choice gains the knowledge of *ātmā*⁵.

⁵ Based on Kaṭhapaniṣad classes taught by Swamiji in a Summer Camp at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 2003. Transcribed and edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

The Role and Importance of the Teacher

Question

What does *śabda pramāṇam* mean? Why is the teacher so important in the pursuit of Self-knowledge?

Answer

A *pramāṇam* is a means of knowledge. *Śabda pramāṇam* means that the words of the scriptures are a means of knowledge. A *śabda* becomes a *pramāṇam* if it comes to me through the teacher. Words are usually understood in our own personal context, and therefore, not just any words, but the scriptural words unfolded by the teacher are the *pramāṇam*. That is the reason why we don't approach the scriptures directly. We approach them through the teacher who unfolds the words for us in an appropriate way. It is a one-to-one communication.

In the beginning, there may be some resistance or even disagreement with the teaching. Continue with it, and it will become clearer and clearer. Cooperate with the teacher and the teaching. When you discover that a certain conclusion that you were entertaining is contradicted by the teaching, then you should be willing to let it go. Your conclusions were perhaps without a basis or based on wrong reasoning. Learning is a process of letting go of the false conclusions or false notions, and gaining new insights. So, as you let go of these false conclusions, your subjectivity is also let go. In due course, the words become more and more effective, as your mind is more and more open. In the beginning, there is a lot of subjectivity because there is something we still want to hold on to. Certain conclusions are very important to us. Certain beliefs are very important to us. We are seeking security from our own belief systems. To the extent that we let go of our conclusions and beliefs, to that extent the mind becomes more available to understand the teaching in its true sense.

The Upaniṣad is a means of knowledge not so much in revealing the Self, as in removing our false notions about the Self. The words remove our ignorance, if we are open to them and willing to create a space or distance with our own conclusions. When I see my own self from the point of view of the Upaniṣad, then I can see the fallacy of my assumptions. Therefore, identification with the teacher becomes important. I will identify with the teacher provided I trust that the teacher does not have an agenda of his own and my well-being is his only agenda. If such a trust is there, then there won't be any emotional

problems. Then I look at my own self from the standpoint of the Upaniṣads, being objective to my own self. Ego is nothing but a bunch of conclusions. What we call ego is a whole bunch of different conclusions. It is difficult for me to look at my complexes by myself. Therefore, I must examine myself from a perspective that is free from these complexes, and for that, we need to identify with the teacher. This identification with the teacher comes from having *śraddhā* and *bhakti*. The devotion and reverence for the teacher enable me to identify with the teacher gladly. Otherwise, nobody can de-identify with the ego. We are always going to hold on to the ego. We judge everything based on that. Here, the process is reversed; I am willing to judge my own ego because somebody is more trustworthy than my ego. If my trust and devotion is such that the teacher becomes the most important to me in my life, then, by identifying with the teacher, I will be able to examine my ego. If that identification doesn't happen, we have to wait until that happens.

Sometimes the identification with the teacher is an instant process; devotion and reverence happen at first sight. Some people take more time. Sometimes it does not happen even after a very long time. It is a matter of our *prārabdha*. When a *mahātma* becomes more important than my ego, it is a great fortune, a great blessing. All that blessing is God's grace. You cannot have *satsang* without God's *kṛpā*. We can always pray to the Lord for *śraddhā*. *Śraddhā* and *bhakti* can be acquired by the grace of the Lord.

Question

How do we find the right guru?

Answer

All we can say is that you do what you need to do and you will come across the right guru. You may perhaps find a series of gurus. You always get what you need at a given time. As long as you are sincere and do what you need to do, you will find the right guru because there is a provision for that in the scheme of things. When there is a sincere commitment to spiritual growth and a real commitment or a real desire for knowledge, then the guru has to come. The right guru just happens! It happens by the grace of God. Even the desire for knowledge arises because of the grace of God. It is all grace of God. If you feel that the right guru has not come along, pray to the Lord.

Question

How did great *bhaktās* like Meerabai and Kabir gain Self-knowledge

without receiving the Vedantic teachings formally from a guru?

Answer

The process of seeking self-knowledge or spiritual growth is not commenced in this lifetime only; it is an ongoing process. The fact that we are listening to Vedanta is a result of what we started in our earlier lives. You may perhaps say that you came to the *gurukulam* because someone invited you. Yes, that person who invited you should be given some credit, but there is something in you too, that has prompted you to come. That person has perhaps invited many others too, but they have not shown any interest in Vedanta. Even though we tell a number of people to attend Vedanta classes most of them do not bother to do so. If somebody comes here, it shows that there is some openness to this in that person. Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita [7-19]:

*bahūnāṁ janmanāmante jñānavān māṁ prapadyate,
vāsudevaḥ sarvaṁ itī sa mahātmā sudurlabhaḥ.*

At the end of many births, the one who has knowledge reaches Me by knowing Vāsudeva is everything. That wise man is rare.

Bahūnāṁ janmanāmante, at the end of many births, *jñānavān māṁ prapadyate*, one gains the knowledge that everything is Vāsudeva or *brahman*, *vāsudevaḥ sarvaṁ*. One gains that knowledge as a result of a pursuit that spans many lifetimes. *Sa mahātmā sudurlabhaḥ*, that great soul is very rare. Thus, the greatness of *bhaktās* like Meerabai is a result of the pursuit over many lifetimes.

If you examine the life of any great person even in other areas of knowledge, you will find that their greatness is not a result of the work of one lifetime. For example, Albert Einstein was just 25 years old when he first published his paper on the Theory of Relativity. If you think of his work and accomplishments you can appreciate that most people will require many lifetimes even to understand it. This cannot have been the result of the work in one lifetime. It is a result of the work done over many lifetimes. An ordinary person may take years to learn something, but some people get it in just a few minutes. It is very difficult to know what contributed to a particular accomplishment. We have brought these *samskāras* with us from our past lives.

Despite being with a guru for a long time, nothing happens to many people. How did Self-knowledge happen so easily for people like Meerabai? It happened because their mind was ready for it in this lifetime; it was being prepared in all their previous lifetimes. They were pursuing Self-knowledge,

came with the right *samskāras* in this lifetime, and these *samskāras* were aroused. Very often, people say that when they listen to Vedanta it is as though they already knew this, as though this is a reminder of what already they knew. This can only be explained as being a continuation of what is already there. Nobody attains this in one lifetime. Even if you gain the knowledge, it is possible that there is some obstacle, which comes in the way of your abidance in the knowledge. You may have to take another birth to remove that obstacle. These great souls may have needed this birth for removing some obstacle and therefore, you may not see them actually going to the teacher and studying the scriptures. They already have whatever one would get by studying the scriptures. Perhaps whatever else was needed came in the course of the *satsangs* that they had. You will notice that these great souls had an association with some *mahātmās* in their life.

Meerabai says, *mohe lagi lataka guru charana na ki*, there is this love, this craving for the lotus feet of my teacher. She says that people think that she is crazy, because she was always entertaining the company of the *sādhus*. A *sādhu* means a fellow who wanders about and these *sādhus* are not favorably viewed in the society. Meerabai says, “On account of being with these *sādhus* for so long, people think that I am also like that! Nowhere am I looked upon as a queen.” Even Kabir always talks about a guru. They always sing about a guru in their compositions. It shows that they have an idea of a guru and look upon somebody as a guru. Maybe they did not need all the elaborate teachings that other people require!

Therefore, it is better not to emulate the example of these great souls in this aspect. Let us not think that Self-knowledge will dawn upon us without studying with a guru. It is best that we take the well-trodden path of studying the scriptures with a teacher. If it happens without a guru, it is alright, but let us not make a deliberate choice to study the scriptures without a teacher.

What we observe in the lives of these great souls is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to how they came to be thus, that we do not see. There is a story to illustrate this idea. Apparently, many sages were once complaining, “Look at the luck of Dhruva! This five-year old devotee of the Lord performed a penance for six months in the forest, and Lord Nārāyaṇa appeared before him! We perform penance for years together and yet he does not appear before us! Where is the justice in this? Is this fair?” They were at an ocean front and a boatman who overheard these sages complaining, invited them for a ride

in his boat. They agreed, and the boatman took them far into the ocean. They came across an island, on which there appeared to be a mountain. The boatman addressed the sages, "Do you see that?" The sages said, "Yes. What mountain is it?" "It is not a mountain. It is a heap of the bones of the embodiments of Dhruva's previous lifetimes." He showed them several other islands, which were full of such big heaps. The boatman said, "All of these are the remains of Dhruva from his previous *janmas*!" Thus, what we see is a five year old boy, but then he has gone through all of those births.

There is fairness in the order. It requires all these *sādhana*s or pursuits for one to achieve Self-knowledge. It is best that we take the well-trodden path, which is prescribed in the scriptures and not assume that we are an exception to that. We must understand that the great souls have also gone through this spiritual path and were what they were because of what they must have done in their previous lives⁶.

⁶ Transcribed by Jaya Kannan and Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

Establishing a Relationship with the Teacher

*tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā
upadekṣyanti te jñānaṁ jñāninastattvadarśinaḥ*

praṇipātena – by prostrating; *paripraśnena* – by asking proper questions; *sevayā* – by service; *tat* – that; *viddhi* – understand; *jñāninaḥ* – the wise; *tattva-darśinaḥ* – those who have the vision of the truth; *te* – for you; *jñānam* – knowledge; *upadekṣyanti* – will teach.

Understand that (which is to be known) by prostrating, by asking proper questions (and) by service. Those who are wise, who have the vision of the truth, will teach you (this) knowledge [Bhagavadgītā, 4-34].

Deliberate upon the Self with the help of the teacher

Tadviddhi, may you know that. May you know the means of gaining that knowledge, and may you know the process through which you may gain the knowledge. Knowledge is gained as a result of teaching. It is a result of *vicāra*, an enquiry or deliberation upon the nature of the Self. Whenever we want to know something, we should enquire into its nature. We should deliberate upon what it is. That process of enquiring or deliberation is called *vicāra*. We want to know the Self, and therefore, have to deliberate upon or enquire into the nature of the Self.

How do we perform that enquiry? How do we deliberate upon the nature of the Self? We have to deliberate upon the meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads. The subject matter of the Upaniṣads is the Self, and therefore, the statements of the Upaniṣads reveal the true nature of the Self. Therefore, an enquiry into the nature of the Self amounts to understanding the meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads. To understand what the Upaniṣads reveal, we should understand the real meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads, determine the purport of the statements of the Upaniṣads, and for that, we need the help of a teacher.

The Upaniṣads say one simple thing, *tat tvam asi*, ‘that thou art’. What does this statement mean? What is the meaning of the word *tat*, or that? What is the meaning of *tvam*, or you? What is the meaning of the oneness or equivalence of these two words? This is what Vedānta is about. Vedānta is all about *tat tvam asi*, the subject matter of all the Upaniṣads. Therefore, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna,

may you approach a teacher.

We all seek the limitless

The Muṇḍakopaniṣad says:

*parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brahmaṇo nirvedamāyānnāstyakṛtaḥ kṛtena,
tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchet samitpāṇiḥ śrotriyam brahmaniṣṣham.*

Having analyzed the worldly experiences and achievements acquired through *karma*, a mature person gains dispassion and discerns that the uncreated (Limitless) cannot be produced by action. To know That (Limitless), he should go, with twigs in his hand (servitude), to a teacher who is learned in the scriptures and who is steadfast in the knowledge of *brahman* [Muṇḍakopaniṣad 1-2-12].

A thinking person, a deliberate or contemplative person, enquires into his own life, takes stock of his life. He deliberates upon his goals, accomplishments, upon what he is doing, and what he wants in his life. It is very important to determine what we want in our life. It is important to know that what we want in life is what every human being wants: unconditional freedom, happiness, and peace. I need to understand that what I am seeking is the Limitless, what I am seeking is wholeness or completeness, and that I cannot be satisfied with anything that is limited. When this is clear, the question is how is it to be achieved?

The Limitless is to be known

Parīkṣya lokān karmacitān or, karmacitān lokān parīkṣya, analyzing or deliberating upon accomplishments or achievements possible through the performance of various actions. In doing so, one determines that every achievement is limited. *Kṛtena*, by doing actions, you can achieve things but each one of them is going to be limited. Any effort is limited, and therefore, anything that is achieved as a result of a limited effort is also going to be limited. Thus, no amount of achievements or accomplishments is ever going to create in me a sense of completeness. Then how do we achieve completeness? We can achieve that when we understand that completeness is not something to be achieved. *Akṛtaḥ*, it is uncreated. If it is not limited in time or place, then it must be here and now, and therefore not created. Anything that is created is going to be perishable. In order that this freedom or happiness is not perishable, it should also not be created. What is not created must be here and now! What is now, is not something to be achieved, but something to be known.

This understanding is the result of *viveka* or discrimination. Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would call it emotional maturity. The mind becomes contemplative and sees the basic reality of life: I am seeking to be free from all limitations; I am seeking to be limitless. One realizes that this limitlessness is not something to be achieved, but something to be known.

The desire still remains, but the nature of desire has now changed. So far, it was a desire to become something, a desire to achieve something, a desire to accomplish something. Now it is transformed into a desire to know the Self. The means that we employ to fulfill a desire always depends upon the nature of the desire. If the desire now is for knowledge, then we should adopt an appropriate means to fulfill that desire. Therefore, Lord Krishna says, may you approach a wise and learned teacher.

The need for a teacher

Knowledge can be gained as a result of *upadeśa*, instructions or the teacher's unfolding of the words of Vedanta. They always seem to make a point that this knowledge should be gained from the teacher. For example, explaining this verse from the Muṇḍakopaniṣad, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya says, *śāstrajñopī svātantryena brahma-jñānānveṣaṇam na kuryāt*, even if one is very learned, one should not independently pursue the enquiry into the nature of the Self. That is, one should always gain this knowledge from the teacher. This sounds very convenient for the gurus or teachers; everybody is required to go to a guru!

What I want to know is my own Self. It is a very peculiar subject. I already know my self, but I know it wrongly. I entertain a number of false notions about myself, but do not know that the notions are wrong. I am quite convinced about the conclusions and opinions I have about my self: I am a human being; I am subject to birth and death; I am limited; I am a seeker; I am needy. The ego entertains all these false notions about itself. Therefore, what we now need to do is to inquire into the nature of the ego. Are these notions true or are they false? Is this the true nature of my self?

In order to determine the reality of something, we should become objective. We should be able to create an emotional distance, like a scientist who is objective with reference to the object that he is investigating. He has no pre-conceived notions or agenda about his object of inquiry. He is very objective and has an open mind to accept whatever the investigation reveals. The investigation into the nature of the Self would also require me to be objective with reference to

my own self, objective with reference to my own present notions and conclusions. Objectivity means detachment. That means I do not have any agenda with reference to what I should be. I should have an open mind. It is very difficult for the ego to inquire into its own nature. Therefore, it becomes necessary for me to stand on another platform from where I can look at the ego, enquire into the ego. That is the platform of the scriptures. The Upaniṣads are, in fact, an investigation into the nature of the Self. Therefore, I must identify with the Upaniṣads and look at my own self from the perspective of the Upaniṣads. Then alone can I recognize what is false as false. Then alone can I see that the various notions that I entertain are not correct, and then let them go. That is called an open mind, a learning mind, which is willing to let go of anything that is discovered to be false.

I cannot go to the Upaniṣads directly, however, because I will interpret the Upaniṣads in my own way. Therefore, we seek the help of a teacher. The teacher is one who has studied the Upaniṣads from his own teacher, and gained the vision of the Upaniṣads. He is as good as the Upaniṣads. Therefore, the importance of the teacher.

Importance of identifying with the teacher

It is not the person that the guru is with whom you want to identify, but the vision of the guru. It is what the person knows and what the person stands for that you want to identify with. Identification with the teacher will make me objective with reference to my own notions and my own conclusions. How can I identify with the teacher? What is required is *śraddhā* or trust, and *bhakti* or devotion. This will enable me to identify with the teacher and de-identify with the ego. It is very important to de-identify with the ego and for this, identification with the teacher becomes important. The devotion and the trust that the student has for the teacher will enable him to become detached from his own ego, his own conclusions, and his own opinions. It will let him deliberate upon those conclusions and investigate their reality from the standpoint of the teacher or the Upaniṣads.

We must understand what the roles of the guru and the *śiṣya* are, as far as Vedānta is concerned. Elsewhere, the relationship between the teacher and the student may be different, but as far as the study of Vedānta is concerned, the relationship between the teacher and the student is a very practical one. The teacher sees something, and I also want to see that. In the Kāthopaniṣad, Naciketā asks Lord Yamarāja for the truth, which is beyond *dharma* and *adharma*,

beyond the past, present and future, and beyond all cause and effect.

*anyatra dharmādanyatrādharmādanyatrāsmāt kṛtākṛtāt,
anyatra bhūtācca bhavyācca yat tat paśyasi tad vada.*

Please tell me of that which you see as different from *dharmā* and *adharmā*, different from this cause and effect, and different from the past and the future [Kaṭhopeniṣad, 1-2-14].

The teacher unfolds the Upaniṣad with reference to his own vision. The student wants to see what the teacher sees, hence, the identification with the teacher. Therefore, in the first line of this verse from the Bhagavadgītā [4-34], Lord Krishna teaches us how to develop identification with the teacher.

Developing śraddhā

Developing *śraddhā* is a process that begins when you are exposed to the teacher. *Śraddhā* may not develop right away. It is not that you identify with the teacher in one day, though you may be able to do so if you are lucky. If the teacher touches your heart, and is able to appeal to you, then that is the starting point; and from that you build up that *śraddhā* and *bhakti* in your heart. The identification with the teacher is complete when both *śraddhā* and *bhakti* have been discovered. That is when the student is attuned to the teacher. It is like tuning our transistor to the broadcasting station, which enables us to receive music. A teacher is like a broadcasting station, which simply broadcasts what is. He receives from the scriptures and broadcasts to the students. It is up to the student to ready the mind to receive his teaching. This process of tuning up amounts to developing *śraddhā* and *bhakti*. This is how Vedānta talks about *śraddhā*.

Śraddhā is generally translated as faith or trust, but the term should be understood as being an implicit trust or faith coupled with devotion and reverence. It is not merely trust. We have trust in our physicians too. We all require trust in our life; without trust, we cannot live our life. When somebody serves me food, I must have enough trust that it is alright for me to eat it. Even when someone tells us something, we have to have trust that what they are telling is what they mean. Life would be very difficult without trust. Very often, our trust is violated, but if I cannot trust anybody, it leads to my own destruction. Therefore, trust is required because if I am suspicious of everything, I cannot live. There has to be trust everywhere. But *śraddhā* involves devotion and reverence, over and above trust.

The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi defines *śraddhā* as follows:

*śāstrasya guruvākyasya satyabuddhyāvadhāraṇā,
sā śraddhā kathithā sadbhīryayā vastūpalabyate.*

Ascertainment of the scriptures and of the words of the guru with conviction about their truth is called *śraddhā* by the good and as that by which knowledge of Reality is obtained [Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 26].

Śraddhā is the conviction that arises in my mind that what the teacher says and what the scriptures say is right. This conviction has to happen; I cannot will *śraddhā*. A response arises in my heart when I listen to the words of the teacher, “This is right. This is right.” If my heart responds this way when listening to the Upaniṣads, then I am enjoying *śraddhā*. When that happens, we are favorably disposed to receive the teaching. *Śraddhā* opens a channel by which the knowledge from the teacher can flow to the heart of the student because the mind does not resist it.

Śraddhā implies an open and trusting mind

If my mind is resisting what I am told or questioning what I am told, it is not a learning mind. A questioning mind is not a learning mind. Asking a question is one thing and questioning somebody is a different thing. Asking a question is always encouraged in Vedānta. In fact, unless you ask a question, a Vedāntic teacher is not supposed to tell you anything:

*nāprṣṭaḥ kasyacid brūyānna cānyāyena pścchataḥ,
jānannapi hi medhāvī jaḍavalloka ācaret.*

Unless one be asked, one must not explain (anything) to anybody; nor (must one answer) a person who asks him improperly; let a wise man though he knows (the answer), behave among men as if he were an idiot [Manusmṛti, 2-110].

One should not communicate unless a question is asked. Even if somebody asks, you are not obliged to answer if you feel that the question is not fair. Sometimes people ask you a question not because they want to know, but because they want to test you. There can be different intentions in asking questions also. A question may even be asked in an improper manner. There is a way of doing things. We need not equate it to formality, but there is a way of doing things.

When we ask a question of a teacher, there must be reverence, and a desire to know. It should reveal the *jijñāsa* or the desire to know in my heart. It should also reveal a certain trust that I have in the one of whom I am asking the

question. Then alone is it called a question that is properly asked. Otherwise, says the Manusmṛti, even if somebody asks a question, you need not reply. Indeed, you should not reply to it. You must pose as though you do not know. The asking of a question is always encouraged as long as it is a genuine question. However, as we discussed before, this knowledge should not be imparted unless a question is asked. *Sraddhā* means maintaining an open mind. As far as Vedānta is concerned, what the teacher tells us can be verified. It may take a little while for us to verify it, we may have to wait until we gain a certain maturity of mind to verify the truth of what the teacher says, but we can verify it nevertheless. As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would say, *śraddhā* is faith or trust pending discovery. Until you discover the truth of the teaching for yourself, it is a matter of faith. It is not blind faith; it is faith, which is born of conviction.

The conviction in my heart that what the teacher says is right is called *śraddhā*. That frame of mind or disposition of mind is called *śraddhā*. It is a very important requirement in learning. Here, in the first line of this verse, Lord Krishna tells us how to establish a proper relationship with the teacher.

Establishing a proper relationship with the teacher

A proper relationship with the teacher encourages the teacher to impart the knowledge to you. When the right relationship is established, the knowledge will definitely take place. How can we make this happen? Lord Krishna says by *praṇipāta* or prostration, *paripraśna* or through questions, and through *sevā* or service. We have to change the order somewhat, to mean by prostration, through service and lastly, through asking questions.

Prostration at the feet of the teacher

Praṇipāta, prostration at the feet of the teacher. It is the *aṣṭāṅga-namaskāra*, with all eight limbs touching the ground. The eight limbs include the mind as well as speech, in addition to the forehead, shoulders, chest, hands, knees, and feet. I express my devotion through words, and with the right attitude of mind. This is the traditional *aṣṭāṅga-namaskāra*. It is in south India that you see people doing this *namaskāra*. It is not a common practice in north India. The body is on the ground like a *danda*, a stick or a staff, and hence, it is also called *dandavat namaskāra*. That is the *praṇipāta* talked of here.

Prostration helps cultivate devotion

Prostration is a form of paying obeisance. Every form has a spirit behind it. The

form is not as important as the spirit behind it, but it does serve to represent or reveal the spirit. “Swamiji, what is the big deal about how I prostrate? When I know I have devotion for my teacher, how does it matter?” Well, if you have the devotion, then why don’t you prostrate? When the spirit is there, there is no difficulty in adopting the form.

“But Swamiji I do not believe in doing things if there is no spirit inside”. Then also, I suggest you prostrate to the teacher. Prostrate, even if you don’t have that devotion. The form will create the spirit. Ideally, the spirit should inspire the form, but if the spirit is not there, the form will be able to invoke the spirit. That is why we ask the children to prostrate in temples and at the feet of the elders. This is so that they adopt the form. As a child, he or she does not know. For a child there is no form. He does not understand why he should do so. Perhaps, the child does not want to prostrate, but we still make him. That is the idea of form. Although the form is secondary to the spirit, we should not undermine the importance of the form.

The form is a ritual. A ritual implies the form and various forms are given to us in order to express our emotions, attitude, and spirit. Life is always full of rituals meaning that there is always a way of doing things. There is always a form for doing everything. For instance, clothes should be worn in a proper way. When you go out for dinner you dress in a certain way, when you go to work you dress in a different way, when you go to temple, you dress in another way, and when you are at home you dress in yet another way. You could put on any clothes anywhere, but you still follow a certain custom, and that is the way it should be. Thus, there is the way of doing everything. That is called ritual, a traditional form, which is prescribed and adopted.

The spirit and the form go together. The advantage of a form is that even if the spirit is not there, we can bring in the spirit. As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would say, you should ‘physicalize’ your worship. Suppose you don’t have devotion, but wish that there should be devotion in your heart, you have a value for having devotion. Then, do what you would do if you had devotion. It is said, ‘fake it till you make it’. In other words, if you don’t have devotion, pretend as though you have it and do the ritual as though you have it. In course of time, the devotion will come. Thus, the spirit brings about the form, but in turn, the form can also invoke the spirit. This is *pranipāta*.

Prostration indicates surrender

Tadviddhi pranipātena, may you offer a long prostration to the teacher. Touching the feet of the teacher with my head shows my humility, my spirit of surrender, and my spirit of offering myself as if saying, “I am at your disposal. I have full trust in you. I know that you will be able to teach me or give me what I need”. It is the trust or the *śraddhā* that is, in fact, indicated when this prostration is done. By prostrating, I also declare that I am only as good as your feet. Ultimately, I have to reach your head, or achieve your way of thinking, but at present, I am beginning at your feet. This is one formality, one form.

Service helps in becoming attuned to the teacher

After offering myself to the teacher, I commence *sevā*, service to the teacher. As you know, in the Vedic times, the student would live with the teacher during the period of study. That is why the place was called a *gurukulam* meaning the house or *kulam* of the teacher, guru. The student lived in the teacher’s home and became part of his family. He was looked upon as a son or daughter by the teacher and his wife. Thus, before the *upadeśa* or teaching actually takes place, it is necessary to do whatever is required to develop a familiarity with the teacher.

Sevā or service to the teacher is at a personal level, which is taking care of all his needs. Typically, the disciple would attend to all the needs of the teacher. He would be awake before the teacher woke up, warm the water for his bath, and make all other preparations as required. If the teacher performed *homa* every morning, the disciple would prepare for that. He would beg *bhikṣā* or food for the teacher, offer it to the teacher, and then partake of whatever remained. In the evening, he massaged the feet of the teacher if required. He waited until the teacher slept and then went to bed. Thus, the student awoke before the teacher, attended to all his needs and went to sleep after the teacher had gone to bed. This was the concept of serving the teacher.

This manner of service helps the student to be in tune with the teacher. You come to know the person and his preferences when you live with a person, serve him, and attend to him. What happens is that slowly, the student’s preferences are also in step with the teacher’s preferences. It is not easy to serve somebody. Service is a process of slowly letting go of the ego. This is where the identification between them takes place. In any good relationship, there is identification. When you observe the relationship between a husband and wife, you can see the devotion that exists between them.

When you admire somebody, you automatically imbibe those qualities. Here, as the student admires the teacher and serves him in the spirit of worship, he automatically imbibes many of the good qualities of the teacher, and his own likes and dislikes are offered up in the process. In order for him to serve the teacher, he must become agreeable, favorable, and compatible with the teacher and so his own preferences, likes and dislikes are let go in the process. This is how the services or *sevā* enables the student or disciple to grow to be in tune with the teacher.

As the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi says:

*tamārādhyā gururim bhaktyā prahvapraśrayasevanaiḥ
prasannam tamanuprāpya pṛcchejjñātaavyamātmanaḥ*

Having worshipped with devotion that teacher,⁷ one must approach him who is pleased by the service (done to him) with a proper attitude and ask him as to what is to be known about oneself [Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 34].

May you serve your teacher with your body, speech, and the mind. May you perform actions serving the teacher at the physical level, at the level of speech and that of the mind, worshipping the teacher. In the 13th chapter, Lord Krishna says, *ācāryopāsanam*, meditate upon the teacher, serve and worship the teacher through your acts, words and thoughts. *Prasannam tamanuprāpya*, the teacher becomes pleased with the student. When he is pleased, he is favorable; he has been won over by you. Therefore, win them over, make them happy, please them.

Surrender carefully

One important thing about surrendering to the teacher is that the teacher should be a person who has no need for your surrender. Ideally, serving the teacher would be most fruitful when the teacher has no need for service. He has no need for being served, he does not need any favors, and he has no agenda as far as the student is concerned. He does not want anything from the student. He has no agenda for the student as far as his own personal needs are concerned. It is the student who is offering himself. That is the best way of offering because there is

⁷ The teacher is the one who has studied the *śāstras*, who does not have *pāpa*, who is not affected by desires, who is a knower of *brahman*, who is calm like the fire that does not have any more fuel, who is an ocean of compassion without any reason, who is a helpful friend to the seekers who salute him with appreciation

no risk of being exploited. Otherwise, you can be exploited. Surrendering must be done very carefully. Feel your way through it. Slowly, learn about the person and let the teacher also learn about you. That is why we say it is a process. It is not something that happens overnight, although, if it happens overnight, it is fine. It may happen. All of this is ultimately also determined by your past *karma*; it is quite possible that you will meet a teacher and find that he is the right one for you. Normally, however, when an initial reverence is created in you, it will take some time before the *śraddhā* and *bhakti* are developed to the point that there is a tuning up with the teacher, and the teacher is pleased with you.

Asking the question

The third stage is *paripraśnena*, asking the question. When you find that the teacher is pleased with you, ask the question. The teacher is pleased, not as much with your service as with your sincerity and devotion. He finds in you, a worthy student who is sincere and desirous of knowledge. When you find them pleased with you, you should ask the question about what you want to know.

A teacher answers the student, not the question

A question shows that there is a desire to know, and that one has been deliberating. For a question to arise one must have been deliberating upon it, working at it. It shows the person's sincerity, the value the knowledge holds for him, and his desire to know. That is how the question becomes important. Otherwise, the teacher is going to say, *tat tvam asi*, 'that thou art', because that is the answer to all the questions. Very often, we find that the Upaniṣads open with questions; the Kenopaniṣad opens with a question, and the Mundakopaniṣad and the Kathopaniṣad are both based on questions asked by the students. We find that the truth is unfolded differently in different Upaniṣads, because each deals with a different question depending upon the background and orientation of the student. The questions are different according to what the student has been deliberating upon.

The question reveals the questioner. The teacher answers the questioner, rather than the question. Often, we may not necessarily be able to articulate what our feelings are, but still ask a question. The teacher who answers the question should know where the question is coming from. This is what we mean when we say that the question reveals the questioner. Then the ground is set for the *upadeśa* or teaching.

Qualifications of the teacher

The first line of this verse [Gita, 4-34] describes the qualifications of the student, and the second line describes the 'qualification' of the teacher. Lord Krishna says the wise and learned teachers will definitely impart knowledge to you. *Jñāni* means learned and *tattvadarśi* means wise. The teacher is referred to in the plural, out of reverence. If an earnest student comes to him, it almost becomes the duty of the teacher to impart knowledge to him. He is not obliged to do so, but he will because the teacher is always very compassionate. "The guru is an ocean of compassion for no reason, and a friend to the pure who perform obeisance to him [Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, 35]." Thus, the guru is the very friend and caretaker of those who approach him with sincerity.

This verse from the Bhagavadgītā describes the process of establishing a relationship with the teacher and creating favorable conditions so that he is enthused, motivated and inspired to teach. When the right combination is there, the knowledge will definitely take place⁸.

⁸ Based on weekend Bhagavad Gita classes taught by Swamiji at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, 2003. Transcribed by Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

Qualifications of the Teacher

Question

Can you please elaborate on the two qualifications of the teacher mentioned in the Gītā, namely '*jñāninaḥ tattvadarśinaḥ*' and in the Mundakopaniṣad, '*śrotriyam brahmaniṣṭham*'?

Answer

In the Bhagavadgītā [4-34], Lord Krishna says may you approach the teacher with long prostration (*praṇipātena*), serve the teacher (*sevayā*), and ask the appropriate questions (*paripraśnena*). Then in the second line he says *upadekṣyanti te jñānani*, the teacher will definitely impart knowledge to you, finding that you are a fit student, you have the right attitudes, and you have the right desire to gain the knowledge. Lord Krishna uses two adjectives for the teacher, *jñāninaḥ* and *tattvadarśinaḥ*. Both these words are used in the plural to show the respect for the teacher. It is like the usage of the royal 'we' in English.

Lord Krishna says that ideally, a teacher should be a *jñāni* as well as a *tattvadarśi*. A *jñāni* is one who has knowledge. A *tattva-darśi* is one who has the *darśanam*, the vision or immediate knowledge of *tattva* or the Truth. Actually, both these words mean the same. A *jñāni* is a wise person who has the knowledge of the Truth. Since Lord Krishna uses both these words together, they should convey somewhat different meaning. The word *jñāni* in this context means a person who has a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. *Tattvadarśi* indicates one who abides in the knowledge of the Truth. These are the two qualifications necessary in a teacher.

The teacher unfolds his own self

The teacher should have the vision of the Truth and be abiding in the Truth. What is meant by abiding in the Truth is that he lives the Truth. He is an embodiment of what the scriptures talk about because that Truth is a living reality for him. The teacher is also required to communicate well. What is to be communicated is what you should be. Unfolding the Self is the same as unfolding the meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads. Essentially, a teacher communicates his own self as the very self of the student. The Kaṭhōpaniṣad [1-2-9] says, *ananyaprokṭegatiratra nāsti*, when this knowledge is communicated by *ananya*, one who is identical or non-different from *brahman*, then *gatiratra nāsti*, the knowledge has but to take place. It will take place because the teacher is

unfolding his own self, and also unfolding the self of the student. This is the ideal way of communication and this becomes effective when it comes from the heart. The words have impact only when they come from the heart, when they are born of one's own experience. That is why the teacher should be a *tattvadarśi*, a knower of the Truth, and at the same time, have the facility to be able to communicate, to articulate his thoughts.

The subject matter of Vedanta or the Upaniṣads is the Self, and therefore the words or statements of the Upaniṣads reveal the nature of the Self. Therefore, to understand the Self we need to understand the meaning of the statements of the Upaniṣads, presented by the teacher. The teacher not only knows the Self, but at the same time, he has the facility to communicate this by way of analyzing the statements of the scriptures. That is where, as Pujya Swamiji would say, *sampradāya* or tradition comes in. The tradition of communicating this to the students has been enriched over hundreds of years. After all, what is being communicated cannot really be confined to the words, because the Self or *brahman* or God or the Truth cannot be the literal meaning of a word. Even the word *brahman* also does not literally convey what *brahman* is.

Words communicate brahman through their implied meaning, not literal meaning

Every word conveys a certain concept. A word is a sound symbol to communicate a concept. A concept is abstract and the abstract concept is communicated through the word. The Truth cannot be confined to a concept. By its very nature, a concept is limited. It excludes every other concept and therefore, there cannot be an all-encompassing concept. An all-encompassing concept will have no form, and therefore, no word can literally communicate the Truth. In Vedanta, the literal meaning is called *vācyārtha*.

What word can we use so that there is an appreciation of *brahman*? Any word such as 'limitless', is always in contrast to something else. Every word or every concept will exclude some other concept. When we say something is good, it indicates that it is not bad. Similarly, when we say it is great, we mean that it is not small. Anything that you say about it can only mean that it is only that and not something else whereas, the Truth is all-encompassing. Therefore, no word or combination of words can communicate the nature of Truth. How, then, will the knowledge take place?

Words are used or employed to communicate that which is beyond the

scope of words. The Taittirīyopaniṣad [2-4] says, *yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha*, Truth is that from where the words along with the thoughts return without having reached it. Neither the words nor the thoughts can adequately describe it. Thoughts always correspond to the concept behind the words; the words stand for *nāma* and thoughts stand for *rūpa*. Neither the name nor the form, neither the word nor the concept can ever reach the Truth. Thus, that which is beyond the scope of the words is nevertheless to be communicated by the words. The Upaniṣad says that this is beyond the word and the thought, but the Upaniṣad is itself nothing but a group of words. What, then, is the Upaniṣad doing? How does the Upaniṣad expect to communicate what it wants to communicate because the only medium available is that of words? This communication takes place not by *vācyārtha* or the literal meaning, but by what is called *lakṣyārtha*, the implied or the targeted meaning.

Words of the scripture communicate brahman only if our mind is prepared

When they are uttered, words have the capacity to communicate their meaning if our mind is prepared. We know what a flower is. We know what a pot is. When I utter the word ‘flower’, the meaning of the word will flash in your mind. There is no question of choice. It will automatically happen. If I use the word ‘mango’ and you have the right *saṁskāras*, then that word ‘mango’ will create the appreciation of that object, mango.

A word is like an arrow; the arrow is not the destination, but it shows what the destination is. Similarly, if there is adequate preparation in the mind, a word can communicate the meaning when the right *saṁskāra* or the right preparation is there. Thus, words such as *nitya*, *suddha*, *buddha*, or *mukta* that are used to communicate the nature of *brahman* will also communicate their meaning when the right preparation is there in the mind of the student. That is why so much emphasis is placed on *anthaḥkaraṇa suddhi*, the purification of the mind, to acquire a mind that is a learning mind free from any impulses, free from reactions, free from projections.

As a result of investigating the meaning of the words of the Upaniṣads, the mind in due course of time, does gain a disposition wherein these words can communicate their meaning. We can observe this with respect to the words denoting worldly objects; these words did not convey the same meaning to us when we were children. For example, a child does not understand what a cow is. In course of time, the child learns what a cow is. How does a child come to know that? In the presence of the child, someone says, “Hey Rama, bring the

cow.” The little child hears these words. He knows Rama, but he does not know what a cow is. He sees Rama going and bringing something. Then he recognizes that *this* is a cow. So the word ‘cow’ and the object, ‘cow’ are connected in the mind of the child. This is how the child picks up the meanings of the words. Thus, the association of the word and the meaning takes place. Later on when that word is used, the child knows what it means. It took some training on the part of the child in order to be able to connect the meaning and the word. So also, a lot of training is required in our mind before we can connect the word *brahman* with the meaning or the meaning with the word.

Preparation of the mind can take time

Communication has taken place when the listener understands words in the same sense in which the speaker has used them. It takes a long time for that to happen. How much time it takes is hard to say. It depends on the preparation of the student. They talk of *uttama-adhikāri*, the most qualified student. Vedanta talks about *sādhana-catusaṣṭaya-saṁpatti*⁹. If one has that level of maturity, words of Vedanta communicate very easily because there is the right *saṁskāra*, training, disposition, and preparation of the mind.

That is why the teacher has to be wise and well-versed in the scriptures

In order for effective communication to happen, the teacher must have the ability to use the right words and create the right frame of mind in the student so that the words that the teacher uses communicate the meaning to the student. All the student needs to do is to be available. The rest is to be done by the teacher. The student, of course, works with the teacher. When we say the student is available, it means that as the teacher is unfolding the teaching, the same process of thinking, investigation or deliberation takes place in the mind of the student. The teacher is silently operating in the mind of the student when the student is available and there is no resistance. As we saw earlier, there is *śraddhā* or trust, and *bhakti* or devotion, and therefore, the requisite conditions are present. The teacher must have the capability for inspiring this in the student. This capability comes when he has a thorough knowledge of the scriptures, and the tools such as grammar, reasoning, and the various other skills that he can use in order to communicate to his student what he has gained from his own teacher.

Therefore these two qualifications are said: *jñāninaḥ* and *tattvadarśinaḥ*.

⁹ Consists of *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (dispassion), *śamādi-ṣaṭka-saṁpatti* (six-fold discipline beginning with *śama*) and *mumukṣutvam* (intense desire for freedom).

The teacher is both wise as well as well-versed in the scriptures, both in his understanding as well in his ability to communicate. In the Muṇḍakopaniṣad [1-2-12], the same idea is said in different words: *śrotriyam brahmaniṣṭham*. *Śrotriyam* means one who is well-versed in the scriptures and *brahmaniṣṭham* is one who abides in *brahman*.

If such a teacher is there then *ananya prokte*, he only communicates the truth as his own self, and *gatirastra nāsti*, the knowledge has to take place. It is true that the student also should be prepared. If such a combination is there, then it is like dry gun powder coming into contact with a little flame. In the mind which is ready, these words do communicate their meaning and the knowledge takes place.

It is rare to have teachers like that. It is rare to have students also like that. We have to make do with what we have. It is a joint project on the part of the teacher and the student. Both of them grow in the process¹⁰.

¹⁰ Transcribed by Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.

Ways of listening to Vedanta

Question

What are the tricks and techniques of listening to Vedanta?

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.

The Vedāntasāra says, “*Vedānto nama upaniṣad pramāṇam*”, Vedanta means Upaniṣad, which is the *pramāṇam*. What is meant by *pramāṇam*? *Pramāṇam* means 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 *śamādi-ṣaṭka-saṁpattiḥ*, the group of six-fold accomplishments beginning with *śama*.

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 resolve them. This is extremely important 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 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 Vedanta 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 writing long hand notes was extremely helpful in gaining clarity in of the subject matter. Generally, when we write things down, it is necessary that we should 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 to share the teaching with somebody who is interested in learning. Teaching is an excellent way of learning. It is a refined way of learning. Every teacher knows that the one who benefits most in 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 very much require. We require the grace of god and 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 Vedanta.

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 cintanam tat kathanam anyonyam tat prabhodanam,
etat ekaparvam ca brahmābhyāsam vidurbudāḥ.*

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, *anyonyam tat prabhodanam*. This is the single-pointed dedication, *etat ekaparvam*. The wise call this *brahma-abhyāsa*. *Abhyāsam* means repeatedly doing something. Thus, repeatedly doing something is always emphasized.

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

sa tu dīrghakālanairantaryasatkārāsevito dṛḍhbhṛmiḥ

Practice becomes firmly grounded when it has been cultivated for a long time, uninterruptedly, with earnest devotion [Pātāñjali Yogaśāstra, 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 Vedanta as much as possible.

The Importance of repeatedly listening to Vedanta

Pounaḥ puṇyena śravaṇam kuryāt, may you subject yourself to *śravaṇam* or listening to the scriptures again and again. It is different everytime. Sometimes, we may have listened to a text such as the Bhagavadgītā, or 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, clarity comes and in course of time, those false perceptions start dropping off. That is how *antaḥkaraṇa-śuddhi* 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 Vedanta is said to be *śravaṇam*, listening to the scriptures from the lips of the teacher¹¹.

¹¹ Transcribed by Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.