

Satsang with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
The Importance of a Guru

Question

What is the first thing that needs to be done to achieve self-knowledge?

Answer

What one needs in order to gain self-knowledge is a mind that enjoys purity, *citta śuddhi*, as well as steadiness, *citta naiścalyam*. *Citta śuddhi* is freedom from the impurities of likes and dislikes, and *citta naiścalyam* is the ability to focus the mind, single pointedness.

Citta śuddhi or purification of the mind is the first requirement to achieve self-knowledge. The main purpose of *gṛhastha-āśrama*, the life of a householder, is to provide means for the purification of the mind. The attitude of prayerfulness in living a life of *dharma* and worship is itself purifying.

Question

Do we need a *guru* for this process?

Answer

The Upaniṣad says, *tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchet*, to know Brahman, one should go to a teacher [Muṇḍakopaniṣad 1-2-12]. Even if the mind is prepared, one should not pursue the contemplation of the self on one's own. The study of the scriptures and the contemplation upon the scriptures should be done only under the guidance of a *guru*. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya says "*śāstrajñopi svātantryena brahma-jñānānveṣaṇam na kuryāt*", even if one is very learned, one should not pursue the enquiry into the nature of the Self independently.

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 this creation. 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]:

बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते ।

वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः ॥

bahūnāṅ janmanāmante jñānavān māṅ prapadyate,

vāsudevaḥ sarvamiti 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.

Bahūnāṅ janmanāmante, at the end of many births, *jñānavān māṅ prapadyate*, one gains the knowledge that everything is Vāsudeva or Brahman, *vāsudevaḥ sarvam*. 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 consider 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 *sarṁskāras* with us from our past lives.

Despite being with a *guru* for a long time, nothing happens to many people. How did this 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 taken many previous births for some obstacle to be removed 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 *mahātmas* in their life.

Meerabai says, *mohe lagi latak guru charan na ki*, there is this love, this craving for the lotus feet of my teacher. She says that people think that she is also a *sādhu*, 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 this 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 these births.

There is fairness in the order. It requires all these *sādhanas* 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 lives¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Chaya Raj, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.