

**Satsang with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati**  
**Arsha Vidya Gurukulam**  
**Karma and Knowledge**

*Question*

In the Atma Bodha, the author says that *karma* cannot remove or illuminate darkness. Can you please explain?

*Answer*

The Atma Bodha [3] says, *avirodhitayā karma nāvidyām vinivartayet*, action cannot destroy ignorance for it is not in conflict with ignorance. Since *karma* or action is not opposed to ignorance, it cannot remove ignorance. A thing can be removed only by that which is opposed to it. For example, darkness can be removed by light which is opposed to that. Similarly, ignorance can be removed only by that which is opposed to ignorance. Should we understand the statement to mean that *karma* by itself cannot remove the darkness of ignorance, but that it can be removed in some other way? Can a desire to illuminate itself be construed to be an action?

Desire is not really an action. Action is that which follows a desire. No action is involved in desiring because desire arises by itself. It is interesting to note that I do not desire to desire. Desire simply arises in my mind. I cannot really say what desire will arise in my mind next. Desire arises depending upon the disposition of my mind or state of my mind; if my mind is under the influence of *tamas*, a desire of perhaps hurting somebody may arise; if my mind is under the influence of *rajas*, a desire for achievement or enjoyment will arise automatically, and if my mind is *sāttvik*, a desire to do good or a desire to know may arise. Thus, the desire that arises in my mind is determined by the state of my mind. There are many kinds of *saṁskāras* or desires latent in us. Therefore, a certain condition or situation invokes a certain *saṁskāra* that is already present in the latent state. Thus, the external world of objects gives rise to different kinds of desires in me at different times and under different circumstances. We do know that the same thing can evoke different kinds of responses in different people: one may want to enjoy it; another may want to leave it alone, and somebody may hate it, while somebody else may simply not care for it.

Desire is not an action. It is something that arises when one is in a given frame of mind. When the external world is the same for everyone, what kind of particular desire will any event arouse in me? If my mind is *sāttvik*, a desire for

knowledge arises. For example, when a scientist looks at any phenomenon, he begins to enquire into it. When an apple falls, different people respond differently to it. A *tāmasik* person does not bother about it and dismisses it as a routine phenomenon. A *rājasik* person wants to enjoy a ripe apple. We know that a scientist like Newton was inspired by a similar event and enquired into it. Therefore, while the event may be the same, what it inspires in different people depends upon their state of mind and disposition.

The desire to know automatically arises when we are in a *sāttvik* state of mind. It is not a desire to know what happened in a cricket match or some other information like that. That is a different kind of impulse. The desire to know is not a desire for information. It is a desire that arises in an inquiring mind to understand the true nature of a thing. A *sāttvik* mind is an inquiring mind. Therefore, the arising of desire itself is not an action. For instance, a desire arises in my mind to remove my ignorance; I want knowledge. It is what I do in response to this desire that can be considered an action. Yes, it is true that studying the scriptures is an action. Listening to a teacher or reflecting upon the teaching are also actions. These actions are conducive in preparing us for Self-knowledge.

Action is called *vicāra*, an inquiry or investigation, or a deliberation upon something. When you want to know something, you deliberate upon that phenomenon. You try to find out the cause of that phenomenon. Thus, *vicāra* is a means of knowledge. However, it is not that any kind of *vicāra* produces knowledge. When you want to inquire into a certain thing, only a certain process of thinking will lead to its knowledge. It is that thinking process, which is called *vicāra*. Therefore, this investigation is also an action. But we do not call it an action because it is not prompted by a desire to achieve something. It is an action prompted by a desire to know. Thus, this *vicāra* leads to Self-knowledge. As the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi [11] says, *vastusiddhirvicareṇa na kimcit karmakoṭibih*, knowledge can be obtained only by reflection; not even a little bit of it can be known by performing even a crore of *karmas*.

Self-knowledge is attained through *vicāra*. It is the inquiry into the meaning of the statements of the Veda, which, in fact, gives us the knowledge. Therefore, the fact that action does not produce knowledge implies that ultimately, the tendency of the mind to do something has to drop.

When there is a flower in front of me, my eyes are the means of knowledge to know or cognize that flower. Therefore, when there is contact

between an object of knowledge (e.g., the flower) and a means of knowledge (e.g., my eyes), the knowledge automatically takes place. No action is involved in this process. No action is involved in cognizing an object because the knowledge simply takes place when the right conditions are established. Knowledge takes place when what I want to know is present and the appropriate faculty of knowledge is also in the right condition. If there is a defect in my eyes, the cognition may perhaps not take place. In that case, it is necessary to remove the defect in my eyes. However, if the eyes are free from any defect and the object of knowledge is in the vicinity of the eyes, cognition takes place automatically. There is no deliberate choice in this. The same applies to all the other sense organs, which are means of knowledge. For example, while driving on the highway, we sometimes encounter a foul smell, perhaps that of a skunk. The cognition of the smell simply takes place when it connects with the faculty of smell. You cannot avoid it unless you choose to pinch your nose to block the faculty of smell. Similarly, hearing simply takes place. Sometimes, you even wish that you had not heard certain things, but you have no choice. When there is contact between sound and the faculty of hearing, hearing will take place. In the same way, when the taste buds come into contact with an object of taste, the cognition of taste will take place. The idea is that cognition takes place under the right conditions.

What we want to know is the Self. A pure mind that can perform *vicāra* or inquiry into the statements of the scriptures is the means of knowledge. When this happens, knowledge takes place. When knowledge takes place, no action is involved because knowledge does not depend upon one's will. I cannot will that a particular cognition should not take place. Knowledge is determined by the object of knowledge and not by knower. However, action is determined by the person who performs the action. As far as action is concerned, we have a choice whether or not to perform it. There is no choice as far as cognition is concerned. It takes place when the right conditions are established. Therefore, what we need to do for Self-knowledge is to establish the right condition. Action is involved only up to that point. For example, I have to open my eyes to see the flower; that involves action. I have to turn my eyes in the direction of flower; that also involves action. But when my eyes are open and directed at the flower, the cognition takes place; no action or effort is involved. If I continue to perform action by opening and closing my eyes, action, in fact, becomes an obstacle to cognition. Therefore, we should drop deliberate action for any kind of knowledge or cognition to take place. Similarly, for the cognition of the Self to

take place, our mind should drop any action. Our mind should be in a mode to receive the knowledge rather than in a mode to do something. Therefore is it said that action should stop; we don't have anything against performing action.

This is the nature of the cognition. When cognition takes place, there is no action. The tendency of the mind is always to do something. We have to quieten and relax the mind and be ready to understand or cognize. That is what is meant by saying that action does not produce knowledge, or that action cannot remove ignorance. It is knowledge that removes ignorance<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcribed by Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.