

Satsang with Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Living Intelligently

The fact that you all came to listen to this *satsang* on *Living Intelligently* suggests that it is possible to live unintelligently. Therefore, we should find out what that means, why we live that way, and what its consequences are. We should note that this does not apply to the animals. We cannot make a credible statement that 'my cat lives intelligently'. The cat lives instinctively as it is made by the creator. It is interesting that the animals eat or drink only to quench their hunger or thirst, and not a morsel more. They do not seem to follow choices. The horse does not say, "Today I will be a vegetarian; from tomorrow on I will be non-vegetarian". The carnivorous animals stay that way all their lives!

Can we say the same about us humans? We tend to eat whether we are hungry or not and sometime keep on eating long after our hunger is satisfied, because our sense organs are still thirsty. Often a single helping of dessert is not enough; we go way past it, just because of the transient joy of the sense of taste. This is despite the fact that the human mind is more developed than animals, and we are afforded choices at every step of the way in our lives - what and how much we should eat, whether we are vegetarians or not, where we live, whether we marry or not, and so on.

When you analyze human behavior, we find that our choices are mostly controlled by our individual likes and dislikes. If we like something, we tend to go for it. If we find a course of action distasteful, we avoid it and look for alternatives. It is much like the driver of a car that might come across numerous intersections as part of a journey, and every time takes a road that seems attractive - perhaps it is paved well, or is well-lighted - and avoids roads that maybe rough or dark. Imagine where such a driver will end up! It would be an aimless journey. Instead, is it not normal to start with a destination, and take the various roads laid out by a map, even if some are pleasant, and others are rough and uncomfortable?

Yet, this is how people seem to live. Everyone seems to take the roads dictated by their individual likes and dislikes. Thus we see that some choices are strongly influenced by the desire for making money; some other choices are driven by the desire

to acquire name and fame; yet others are driven by a craving for power, and so on. It is not clear to them (or to others observing them) when they reach their destinations. More often, we find that a person is unhappy even after he or she becomes powerful, and is still searching for something else. After a lifetime of searching, they themselves are not sure what they are after! Everyone seems to be after different destinations and all the destinations seems elusive, and their pursuits chaotic.

So the question is what is our destination? What map should we use to get there? Is the destination common to all human beings? Vedānta provides us with the destination as well as a map. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, at the end of each chapter there is a summarizing verse that contains the common words *brahmavidyāyām yogaśāstre*. Here *brahmavidyā* is the destination, *sādhyā* and *yogaśāstra* is the map, the *sādhana*. Our common destination is a sense of abiding Self, one which is free from all limitations, whether it is a limitation of time, space or other objects and situations. It is this Self that everyone is really seeking, even if it appears as though we are seeking other ends. In the *Brhadāryṅka Upaniṣad* (2-4-5), there is a verse which says *ātmanstu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati*, meaning that behind each of our likes and pursuits, the end is always 'a pleased self', in the words of Pujya Swami Dayananda. Thus a husband loves his wife, not for the sake of the wife, but for the sake of his own self. A mother loves her child, also for her sake alone. We see this all the time in our lives; I may love my job, but if conditions should change, I start disliking it. But no matter what, my orientation toward the love of the self never wavers. That self is actually also the self of Īśvara, our creator and Lord. Thus behind each like for outside objects is my abiding love of the Lord. It is just that I do not know that, until it is well explained by a *Vedāntic* teacher.

Now towards *sādhana*, or the map to the destination, we are equally confused. We live by what feels good to us, in the short term, not what is good for us, in the long term. The example of the motorist, given earlier, applies here. Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* says that human beings are faced with two paths; one is *preyas*, or one that is pleasant, and the other *śreyas*, or what is good. We tend to take the path that is pleasant, not the one that is good. The consequence is that at first it feels good, but over time it changes to end in bitterness and disappointment. This can be often seen in eating food that tastes good, but is bad for the health and well-being in the long-term. I go for

what makes me feel good, even though the long-term consequences are not so good. At first, I drink coffee to enjoy. Later, when I get addicted to coffee, it drinks me, it controls me. Without realizing, we become slaves to our minds, instead of being its master. In the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, this is explained very clearly in the form of a metaphor. It likens the five sense organs to the five horses pulling a chariot, our physical body. For instance when we see something, it 'pulls' our body to go in that direction. The mind is like the reins that are in the hands of our intellect, the charioteer. The five sense organs are held in check by our mind that chooses which direction to turn, how fast to go, etc. If our intellect is not educated, and cannot control the reins, the horses can all go in different directions, and may land the chariot in the ditch. In this example, the owner of the chariot is the Self, who himself performs no action.

Sreyas, on the other hand is the path of the good. This is one where the destination is clear and the path to it is consistently followed, even if there are temporary difficulties. This path consists of gaining independence from factors outside of me. Instead of living a life trying to string together a series of pleasant experiences, this requires controlling the mind to achieve the long-term goal, that of total independence. Vedānta says that such independence is already our true nature. A life of *sreyas*, then, consists of owning up to this independence.

How does one do it? By living a life of giving, rather than a life of taking. As one learns to give love, one discovers lasting love in the process. Our mothers are living examples of this. It is our common experience that mothers are happier feeding their children than in eating food themselves. It might give a mother momentary pleasure to alleviate her own hunger, but it gives her a more lasting satisfaction to extend her self and remove the hunger of her children. So also, as we become more charitable, it gives us more lasting satisfaction. We tap into our own adequacy and independence when we invoke our charitable nature and help others.

Another aspect of this is that a life of giving yields joys every step of the way; that is, the journey itself is joyful. Whereas in demanding joy from the world, one postpones joy until the final goal is reached. Goals in life are important, but not at the cost of inordinate emphasis on it, at the exclusion of the process to get there. Intelligent

living is to recognize that in the beginning, when my intellect is not educated, I am totally at the mercy of things outside of me. In effect, I am slave to the world, dependent on a confluence of fleeting factors beyond my control. So I am forced to resort to quick fixes to get some joy. As I learn from Vedānta that my own nature is joy, I change my pattern of living. I dependent less and less on others to obtain my sense of satisfaction, and rely more and more on my own innate nature of joy. At the end of this process, I become totally independent. Vedānta calls such a person *jīvanmuktah*, or free while living.¹

¹ Based on talk by Swamiji in California, Summer '03. Transcribed and edited by Vijay Kapoor.