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ŚRADDHĀ, TRUST AND DEVOTION

गुरुपदिष्टवेदान्तवाक्येषु विश्वासः - श्रद्धा ॥

Gurūpadiṣṭavedāntavākyaṣu viśvāsaḥ - śraddhā [Vedāntasāra, 24].

Śraddhā is trust in the statements of Vedanta as taught by the teacher.

Śraddhā is generally translated as faith and also as trust, which may be a better word. A trust in Vedanta is called *śraddhā*. Since Vedanta is a *pramāṇam*, the trust is in the vision of Vedanta as revealed by the scriptures.

Vedanta is a means to the knowledge of the Self, not of worldly objects

The organs of perception are a valid means of knowledge for gaining knowledge of external objects. A listener does not question the data collected by his ears; he accepts it without questioning. Similarly, you accept your eyes as a means of knowledge with respect to color and form. All our organs are the *pramāṇam* for their corresponding objects and we have *śraddhā* or full trust in them. For example, if my tongue says a hot drink is coffee, I accept it; I do not question it. We accept the knowledge given by our organs of perception with trust because we accept them as the *pramāṇam* or *pramā kāraṇam*, valid means of knowledge for revealing the corresponding objects. We should have a similar trust in Vedanta because Vedanta is a *pramāṇam*. The first statement of this text is *vedānto nāmopaniṣatpramāṇam*, Vedanta is the Upaniṣad, which is a *pramāṇam* for the truth about the Self. The Self or God is not available for perception. It cannot be grasped by the organs of perception, the mind, or words. In short, the Self cannot be comprehended by any means of knowledge other than Vedanta.

The Upaniṣad may sometimes talk about things of the world and give various illustrations to explain certain points. Those illustrations may sometimes be questioned. Very often, an illustration is given of a worm that constantly thinks of a wasp and, ultimately, becomes a wasp. This example is given for meditation to illustrate the point that if we constantly dwell upon anything with a total faith and devotion, we become that. For example, if we constantly meditate upon a chosen deity, we become that. Regarding this example, somebody can say that a worm can never become a wasp. The illustration may be questioned from a scientific standpoint. We do not accept that a worm becomes a wasp just because the Upaniṣad says so, but we do accept the illustration in the spirit in which it is stated. If we maintain a certain flow of thought, we become that. This concrete or tangible form that we have now is nothing but the product of the thought-flow we entertained for a great length of time in the past. Vedanta is a *pramāṇam* for the nature of Reality and we don't necessarily look upon Vedanta as a means of knowledge to other worldly things. Vedanta also gives an illustration of a spider that creates a web out of itself to show how the spider is the efficient cause as well

as material cause. What should we do if we discover that the spider is not like that? Should we say that Vedanta is wrong? We don't accept Vedanta as a *pramāṇam* with reference to the spider, but definitely do so with reference to God, who is both the material and the efficient cause of this universe.

Trust is accepting Vedanta as a means to the knowledge of the Self

Truth alone is called God or the Self. Truth alone is called by different names and, therefore, Vedanta is accepted as a *pramāṇam*, valid means of knowledge with reference to revealing the reality of my self, of the world, of God, and the relationship that obtains among them. Here trust means accepting Vedanta as a *pramāṇam* and giving it the same benefit of the doubt that we would give any other *pramāṇam*. Before we dismiss the data given by our ears, for example, we first give it the benefit of the doubt. If there is a problem with the ears, they might misguide us; in that case, it is necessary to correct the *pramāṇam*. I start questioning my ears only when what they tell me does not make sense. Similarly, we must give Vedanta the benefit of the doubt before we question what it reveals.

Trust enables us to understand Vedanta correctly

The *śraddhā* or trust that we have in Vedanta enables us to maintain a certain frame of mind wherein we don't question what Vedanta says, but try to understand what it says. The Self is a unique subject. Typically, I don't have any preconceived notions or opinions about the objects of the world. A scientist can investigate an object without any kind of prejudice or preconceived notions. However, here we already have many firm ideas or conclusions about the Self, God, and the world. For example, when you say you don't believe in or accept God, you already have conclusions about the nature of God. Therefore, when Vedanta reveals a truth about the self or the world, which contradicts our present conclusions, we question Vedanta. When we do that, we cannot learn; once we question the means of knowledge, we cannot learn from it.

What do I do when there seems to be a contradiction or deviation between what Vedanta says and what I think is right? I give Vedanta the benefit of the doubt first and then proceed to see if my conclusion is valid or not. In doing so, we have an opportunity to review our own conclusions. Otherwise, how can we learn and grow? If we always hold on to our present conclusions, we will never learn anything. In order to learn, our scope of knowledge must grow and it is necessary to question our conclusions. Therefore, wherever there is a discrepancy between what Vedanta reveals and our own conclusions, we question our conclusions rather than question Vedanta. *Śraddhā* or trust does not mean that we have to blindly accept whatever the teacher tells us. It only means that we give it the benefit of the doubt and look upon it with a certain reverence.

Śraddhā is trust as well as a reverence for Vedanta and the teacher

Śraddhā is not merely trust, but trust along with reverence. This aspect of reverence is very important in India. There is a reverence for certain things, the scriptures, teachers, elders, and for people who follow a lifestyle that includes austerity and penance. Such a reverence opens up the channel for the teaching to flow from that source to us. The reverence that is *śraddhā* is nothing but being in tune with that source. Thus, if we have reverence for the scriptures, we necessarily have reverence for the teacher because the scriptures come to us through the teacher. Therefore, the text says that *śraddhā* is *gurūpadiṣṭa-vedāntavākyaṣu viśvāsaḥ*. It calls for a trust in the words of Vedanta that we receive from the teacher, not in what we learn by ourselves through reading. When we study on our own, our minds tend to fit what we study into the frame of knowledge that we already have. Whenever we read a book, we already have certain ideas about the subject and we try to understand it in the context of our existing frame of mind or conclusions. If the book confirms to our conclusion, it is deemed to be good and if it does not, we think there is something wrong with it.

Bondage is nothing but various conclusions and preconceived notions about ourselves. My first conclusion is that I am a limited being, followed by the conclusion that I am subject to birth and death, and happiness and unhappiness. These are my fundamental conclusions about myself. Vedanta says, *tat tvam asi*, that thou art. You are not a doer, enjoyer, or limited being. You are a complete being and free. However, I can't accept that. Should I dismiss what Vedanta says? Or should I ask who is right? I give Vedanta the benefit of the doubt: I must be free. I explore further. If I am free, how is it that I don't experience that freedom? I question my conclusion. Next, I look into the process by which I arrived at that conclusion and create the ground for discovering the fact that my conclusion is erroneous. This process of inquiry or *vicara* can begin only when I first permit Vedanta the benefit of the doubt. This is all that is asked of us: that we give Vedanta the benefit of the doubt and have trust and reverence primarily in Vedanta and secondarily in the teacher through whom we learn the Upaniṣad. The meaning of the word guru is explained as:

गुकारस्त्वन्धकारो वै रुकारस्तन्निवर्त्तकः। अन्धकारनिरोधित्वाद् गुरुरित्यभिधीयते॥

*gukārastvandhakāro vai rukārastannivarttakah,
andhakāranirodhitvād gururityabhidhīyate.*

The syllable 'gu' stands for darkness (of ignorance) and 'ru' represents its remover. A guru is so called because he removes the darkness (of ignorance).

Devotion is very important. As we saw earlier, the one who has supreme devotion for the Lord and the teacher has an equal devotion to the scriptures also. We cannot separate God from guru and the scriptures.

The revealed scriptures are looked upon as God

We accept that the scriptures are revealed by God. Vedanta can be accepted as valid only when we accept the fact that it is not composed by human beings. Anything composed by a human being will reflect the limitations of the human mind. The Vedas are looked upon as not having been composed by the ancient sages, but as having been revealed to them by God.

Our reverence for God automatically results in a reverence for the scriptures, which are looked upon as an *avatāra* or incarnation of God. Just as we look upon Lord Krishna as an incarnation, so also, we consider the scriptures to be an incarnation of God in the form of words. God incarnates in different ways, sometimes, even as an animal. The Puranas describe various incarnations, including one of the Lord incarnating as cloth, the *vastra avātara*. There was a great devotee of the Lord, Draupadi, who was about to be stripped of her clothes in the court of the Kauravas. At that time, she prayed to the Lord and her prayer was answered. It is said that the Lord presented himself in the form of cloth. There is a sect in India, the Sikhs, who believe God to be the Granth, their very text. They call it the Guru Granth Sahib, the composition of the guru, and the devotees carry it on their heads to indicate their highest reverence towards it.

One has to discover śraddhā

Let *śraddhā*, trust or faith, arise in its own way. Let it be discovered. It cannot be commanded. This reverence cannot be thrust upon anybody. We discover it as we get exposed to Vedanta, appreciate its profundity and clarity, and see how it releases us from different notions and complexes. Just as we cannot make ourselves love someone, we cannot make ourselves have *śraddhā*. Love has to manifest itself. Similarly, devotion and *śraddhā* are not things that we can command; they have to happen.

Śraddhā is the enlightened faith that we discover as a result of verification

Śraddhā, trust and reverence, is essential to learn and enjoy an open mind. An open mind is willing to shed its conclusions and prejudices and is ready to learn and change. In having *śraddhā*, there is trust, faith, reverence, devotion, openness, and freedom. In fact, this is the trust where there is freedom. Normally, the word faith scares us. Any intelligent person is sceptical when this question of trust and faith arises because faith is always understood to be blind faith. But here we are talking not about blind faith, but enlightened faith, a faith that we discover as a result of verification. As we listen and understand Vedanta and try to assimilate and implement it in our lives, we discover its validity and take the next step. We do not simply believe it, but proceed as we discover the validity of the truth.

Vedanta says that qualities such as humility, non-pretentiousness, and non-violence give peace of mind. This is a testable proposition. Vedanta says

that happiness is not to be found outside, but is to be discovered within ourselves as it is our own nature. Let me stop the external pursuit of happiness and focus my attention on myself and see whether I am able to discover inner peace or not. The reverence or trust will enable us to shed all the notions that we may be holding on to and thus free us from our shackles. Nobody else has created these shackles of our various conclusions, complexes and prejudices, but we ourselves. *Śraddhā* or reverential faith enables that learning frame of mind and, therefore, is freedom. Such a mind remains free from doubts and questions and open to the teacher and the teaching. In the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi [25], Śrī Śaṅkarācārya says:

शास्त्रस्य गुरुवाक्यस्य सत्यबुद्ध्यवधारणम्। सा श्रद्धा कथिता सद्भिर्यया वस्तूपलभ्यते॥

*śāstrasya guruvākyaṣya satyabuddhyavadhāraṇam,
sā śraddhā kathitā sadbhiryayā vastūpalabhyate.*

The conviction that the scriptures and the words of the teacher are true is said to be *śraddhā* by the wise by whom the Truth is known.

Lord Krishna also gives importance to *śraddhā* and says, *śraddhāvān labhate jñānam*, one who has *śraddhā* gains knowledge [Bhagavad Gita, 4-39]. We give our eyes and ears the status of a *pramāṇam* with reference to revealing their corresponding objects. Similarly, we need to accord Vedānta the same status with reference to revealing the nature of the Truth. Thus, *śraddhā*, which we discover in course of time, is an extremely important disposition of mind¹.

¹ Based on Vedāntasāra lectures. Transcribed and edited by Malini, KrishnaKumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.