

Satsanga with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
VIVEKA, DISCRIMINATION

नित्यानित्यवस्तुविवेकस्तावद् ब्रह्मैव नित्यं वस्तु ततोऽन्यदखिलमनित्यमिति विवेचनम्॥

*nityānityavastuvivekastāvad brahmaiva nityam vastu
tato'nyadakhilamanityamiti vivecanam.*

Discrimination between things permanent and transient consists of the discrimination that 'brahman alone is the permanent substance and all things other than It are transient' [Vedāntasāra, 16].

Viveka requires subtle perception

Vivecanam means discrimination or separation and *viveka* means to separate. For example, separating grain from chaff or the relevant from the irrelevant is called *viveka*. Separation or discrimination is required when two things are mixed up with each other and, sometimes, they are mixed up in a way that it is not very easy to separate them. The kind of *viveka* that is being discussed is that which requires a certain subtle perception. It is easy to discriminate between day and night or white and black, but it becomes difficult to discriminate between one shade of white and another. For example, while picking small stones from rice, it is very easy to pick out the black stones, but not the occasional white stones, which look like rice. In such instances, the eyes are not very helpful, but the faculty of touch can be used because rice is soft while the stone is hard. Thus, discrimination requires an appropriate faculty. In life, the permanent and the impermanent are mixed up with each other in much the same way. It is not that the permanent is in one place and the impermanent in another, and they can be distinguished easily. The Kaṭhōpaniṣad [1-2-2] says:

श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतः तौ सम्परीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः।

śreyaśca preyaśca manuṣyametaḥ tau samparītya vivinakti dhīraḥ.

Śreyas and *preyas* approach the human being. Having very clearly considered them, the discriminative (person) distinguishes them.

In life, we constantly come across *śreyas* and *preyas*. *Śreyas* means that which is permanent and lasting and *preyas* is that which is impermanent and ephemeral. *Śreyas* is happiness of the Self or internal happiness, and *preyas* is happiness derived from sense objects or external happiness. It requires a certain sensitivity to appreciate lasting happiness as opposed to the impermanent, ephemeral happiness in the objects and achievements of the world. This *viveka* arises in a heart that has become relatively pure by the performance of *nitya-karma*, *naimittika-karma*, duty in the spirit of worship, meditations etc.

Every moment presents a choice between the permanent and the impermanent. The impermanent comes in the form of various situations, opportunities, and pleasures, while the permanent is ever there as the very

Self. As long as the mind is full of attractions and repulsions, the impermanent alone attracts the mind and we do not choose the permanent. There is an inner voice, which gets totally suppressed on account of the noise made by the demands of external things. The permanent or the Self has an opportunity to register only when the intensity of the chatter of likes and dislikes is subdued or lessened.

An inner feeling that there is something permanent arises as we listen to the scriptures

When we study the Vedas, whether directly or indirectly through *satsanga* or the company of good people, we become aware that life has an underlying permanence. Our perception is that everything in this universe is constantly changing, impermanent, and perishable. However, when we are exposed to the scriptures, we begin to see that there is something in life above and beyond that which is perceptible, visible, or experienced by us. We become aware that change, impermanence, or flux is not the ultimate truth of life and that there is a *nitya-vastu*, a permanent or lasting reality to life. Thus, the first thing that arises in a discriminating mind is the *nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka*. The study of the scriptures enables us to acquire the ability to reason. This important reasoning ability helps us to analyze and discriminate. We come across statements that appeal to us, invoke something in us, set us thinking, or initiate a certain train of thought within that prompt us to go over them again and again. For example, there is a statement in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* [4-6-16]:

यस्माद्वाक्संवत्सरोऽहोभिः परिवर्तते तद्देवा ज्योतिषां ज्योतिः।

yasmādarvāksamvatsaro'hobhiḥ parivartate taddevā jyotiṣāṁ jyotiḥ.

Below which the year with its days rotates, upon that immortal Light of all lights.

There is an absolute principle beyond time or perceptible change because of which the days and nights come about and because of which the years ensue and the very principle of time evolves. Even scientists such as Sir Albert Einstein have shown that there is a reality not subject to relative time and space. Our experience is confined to time and place, but time and place are relative. The world, which is within time and place, is a relative world and is but a projection.

The *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* [1-1-6] says that *brahman* is *nityam vibhum sarvagatam susūkṣmam*, permanent, all-pervasive, appearing in different forms, and subtler than the subtlest. It says that the nature of the Self is pervasive like space, unborn, and eternal. We find that happiness lies in permanence and not in impermanence. There is a permanent or changeless Reality, which is of the nature of happiness. We gain a general overview as a result of the study of the scriptures that there is something eternal, changeless, permanent, and beyond what we perceive or experience. These concepts may not be clear

initially, but we do become aware of them through the scriptures. The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad [4-4-20] says:

नेह नानाऽस्ति किञ्चन मृत्योः स मृत्युमाप्नोति य इह नानेव पश्यति ॥

neha nānā'sti kiñcana mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyumāpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati.

There is no difference whatsoever in It. He goes from death to death, who sees difference, as it were, in It.

In fact, there is no duality at all; the duality that we perceive is not the ultimate reality. The Chāndogyopaniṣad [7-24-1] says:

यत्र नान्यत्पश्यति नान्यच्छृणोति नान्यद्विजानाति स भूमा ॥

yatra nānyatpaśyati nānyacchṛṇoti nānyadvijānāti sa bhūmā.

The Infinite is that where one does not see anything else, does not hear anything else, and does not understand anything else.

In this, there is no duality of the subject and object. There is *bhūmā* or abundance, a limitlessness that lies beyond this world of duality. One gains an understanding or inkling that there is a permanent and lasting Reality; this is *viveka* or discrimination. This becomes a reality when we pursue the study of the scriptures and understand that Truth. But why would we be prompted to pursue the study? Why should we dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of the study? It is because of an inner feeling that there is something permanent in this life, a lasting peace or happiness, which arises on account of listening to or studying the scriptures. This kind of feeling or awareness is the beginning of *viveka*.

Brahmaiva-nityam-vastu tato'nyadakhilamanityamiti vivecanam.
Brahmaiva-nityam-vastu means *brahman* alone is the *nitya vastu*. *Tatahanya akhilam anityam*, everything other than *brahman* is *anityam*, impermanent; *iti vivecanam*, this discrimination is called *viveka*. The discrimination is the determination that *brahman* alone is eternal or permanent and everything else is changing or impermanent. This discrimination ultimately becomes a reality when we are exposed to the scriptures and go through the process of learning and seeing. In the beginning, however, this is a general understanding born on account of a certain purity of the heart and exposure to the scriptures.

Brahman alone can provide what we are seeking

The word *brahman* is derived from the root *bṛhat* in the sense of *vṛddhi*, growth and bigness without any qualifications. *Brahman* means God, that from which the whole creation arises, that by which the whole creation is sustained, and that into which the creation goes back. *Brahman* is the very Atman, the essence or the Self of everything. *Brahman* is that which is unqualified big, meaning limitless, and permanent, eternal, or changeless. That is what I seek. We hear about *brahman* through the scriptures and understand it as God. We begin to realize there must be a God in the course of our upbringing and education. We also begin to understand our own inner urges. What is it that we are seeking? We realize that what we are seeking in

life is the *nitya vastu*, something lasting or permanent, not just happiness and security. We are seeking lasting happiness and lasting security. Only God, the Self or *brahman*, which alone is the *nitya vastu*, can provide lasting happiness or lasting security.

Brahman is the very order around us

It stands to reason that there must be a *nitya vastu* or eternal principle. Often, people say they find it hard to believe in God. However, an analysis of life enables us to see that God must exist. Even though life appears to be lacking order or sometimes seems unjust, there has to be an underlying order because the whole universe is functioning in a very harmonious manner. Even though we may not see that harmony in our personal lives, we find that there is a certain harmony and order in all the change that is taking place around us; the changes are not random. Something that is as just and orderly must necessarily be complete. Scientists say that the nature of reality must be something simple and beautiful. Even though there are complications in life and even as scientists make more investigations and seem to come up with more interpretations of reality, there is an intuition that reality must be simple and that it must be beautiful. That simple and beautiful reality alone is called *brahman*.

An analysis of what we are seeking reveals it to be brahman

“I agree with you that there is a *brahman* that is creator, omniscient, omnipotent and limitless, but what do I have to do with that? Does God have any relevance in my life?” Vedanta says that what you are seeking every moment in your life is *brahman* alone. You are seeking joy and happiness, an *ānanda* that is free from all limitations. All of us want unqualified happiness; we don’t want a time-qualified happiness that is available at one time and not at another; we don’t want a place-qualified happiness in which we are happy only in a given place and not any other, and we don’t want happiness that obtains only in one situation and not in another. In fact, we don’t even want to make an effort to be happy. If we had our way, we would wish for a happiness that is effortless as well. And besides, not only do we want unqualified happiness, we also want to be aware of it. It is said that we are totally happy in deep sleep, but we not aware of it! Therefore, we want an effortless and unqualified happiness of which we are aware. An analysis of what we are seeking reveals it to be *brahman*. *Brahman* alone fits this bill. *Brahman* alone is unqualified with reference to time, place, or condition and, being the very Self, the attainment of *brahman* is effortless. *Brahman* is of the nature of Awareness and is, therefore, conscious Happiness. It is *sat*, Existence, and exists in all the periods of time. It is thus relevant to our lives.

Brahman is the only relevant thing in our lives

People sometimes ask, “Is Vedanta practical in present-day life? Is it relevant to our lives?” The answer is that Vedanta alone is relevant to our lives. I may have love for the whole world, but, ultimately, what I love is the Self, *brahman*. My real love is for *brahman* or the Self and that love alone gets

reflected towards various objects and beings. I love people, things, and situations, but not for their sakes; I love them only as long as they are conducive to my love for the Self. When they come in the way of my love for myself, those persons, objects, or situations are no more objects of my love. Thus, whatever love I have is entirely for the Self. It is important that we understand this love. This Self is not the individual self; *brahman* is the Self of all. It is that which I love. If I have a love for a person, I may think that I love his or her body, mind, emotions or intelligence. However, what I love is the Self reflected in that body, mind, emotions, and intelligence. We should understand that, ultimately, all love for the Self is love for *brahman*. That is what we are seeking every moment. Therefore, rather than saying that *brahman* is the most relevant thing, Vedanta says it is the *only* relevant thing. We should understand our own emotions. *Brahman* alone is called God, the Self, or Truth; it is because of this that I love and it is because of this that I seek. The fact that I am constantly seeking must mean that *brahman*, the limitless, must exist. Although at the moment I may not know what It is or where It is, It has to be there because not only am I searching, but everyone else is constantly seeking as well.

Viveka helps determine our priorities in life

The *vivecanam* or discrimination that *brahman* is the only *nitya-vastu* or permanent reality and that everything other than *brahman* is impermanent is called *viveka*. This *viveka* or discrimination is very important because it determines our priorities in life. Whatever we understand to be the most important is what we will want to have and our efforts will be directed towards that goal. If we understand *brahman* to be the most important, our efforts will naturally be directed towards knowing this Self. Therefore, this discrimination is extremely important. An interesting thing is that Vedanta begins with *viveka* and ends in *viveka*. It begins with discrimination, which is initially a vague idea, and culminates in the discrimination that becomes a reality. There must be discrimination in life. We must always be thinking people, reasoning people, and analyzing people. We should not take things for granted or simply do things because other people are doing them. This necessarily brings about *vairāgya*¹.

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