

Moments with Oneself Series: 1

# FREEDOM FROM HELPLESSNESS

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**KEY TO TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION OF**

**SANSKRIT LETTERS**

Sanskrit is a highly phonetic language and hence accuracy in articulation of the letters is important. For those unfamiliar with the *Devanāgarī* script, the international transliteration is a guide to the proper pronunciation of Sanskrit letters.

|   |            |                        |   |            |                       |
|---|------------|------------------------|---|------------|-----------------------|
| अ | <i>a</i>   | ( <i>but</i> )         | ट | <i>ṭa</i>  | ( <i>true</i> )*3     |
| आ | <i>ā</i>   | ( <i>father</i> )      | ठ | <i>ṭha</i> | ( <i>anthill</i> )*3  |
| इ | <i>i</i>   | ( <i>it</i> )          | ड | <i>ḍa</i>  | ( <i>drum</i> )*3     |
| ई | <i>ī</i>   | ( <i>beat</i> )        | ढ | <i>ḍha</i> | ( <i>godhead</i> )*3  |
| उ | <i>u</i>   | ( <i>full</i> )        | ण | <i>ṇa</i>  | ( <i>under</i> )*3    |
| ऊ | <i>ū</i>   | ( <i>pool</i> )        | त | <i>ta</i>  | ( <i>path</i> )*4     |
| ऋ | <i>r̄</i>  | ( <i>rhythm</i> )      | थ | <i>tha</i> | ( <i>thunder</i> )*4  |
| ॠ | <i>r̄̄</i> | ( <i>marine</i> )      | द | <i>da</i>  | ( <i>that</i> )*4     |
| ऌ | <i>l̄</i>  | ( <i>revelry</i> )     | ध | <i>dha</i> | ( <i>breathe</i> )*4  |
| ॡ | <i>e</i>   | ( <i>play</i> )        | न | <i>na</i>  | ( <i>nut</i> )*4      |
| ऐ | <i>ai</i>  | ( <i>aisle</i> )       | प | <i>pa</i>  | ( <i>put</i> ) 5      |
| ओ | <i>o</i>   | ( <i>go</i> )          | फ | <i>pha</i> | ( <i>loophole</i> )*5 |
| औ | <i>au</i>  | ( <i>laud</i> )        | ब | <i>ba</i>  | ( <i>bin</i> ) 5      |
| क | <i>ka</i>  | ( <i>seek</i> ) 1      | भ | <i>bha</i> | ( <i>abhor</i> )*5    |
| ख | <i>kha</i> | ( <i>blockhead</i> )*1 | म | <i>ma</i>  | ( <i>much</i> ) 5     |
| ग | <i>ga</i>  | ( <i>get</i> ) 1       | य | <i>ya</i>  | ( <i>loyal</i> )      |
| घ | <i>gha</i> | ( <i>log hut</i> )*1   | र | <i>ra</i>  | ( <i>red</i> )        |
| ङ | <i>ṅa</i>  | ( <i>sing</i> ) 1      | ल | <i>la</i>  | ( <i>luck</i> )       |
| च | <i>ca</i>  | ( <i>chunk</i> ) 2     | व | <i>va</i>  | ( <i>vase</i> )       |
| छ | <i>cha</i> | ( <i>catch him</i> )*2 | श | <i>śa</i>  | ( <i>sure</i> )       |
| ज | <i>ja</i>  | ( <i>jump</i> ) 2      | ष | <i>ṣa</i>  | ( <i>shun</i> )       |
| झ | <i>jha</i> | ( <i>hedghog</i> )*2   | स | <i>sa</i>  | ( <i>so</i> )         |
| ञ | <i>ña</i>  | ( <i>bunch</i> ) 2     | ह | <i>ha</i>  | ( <i>hum</i> )        |

•            *m̄*            *anusvāra*            (nasalisation of preceding vowel)

∴            *h̄*                *visarga*                (aspiration of preceding vowel)

\*                No exact English equivalents for these letters

- |    |          |   |                          |
|----|----------|---|--------------------------|
| 1. | Guttural | – | Pronounced from throat   |
| 2. | Palatal  | – | Pronounced from palate   |
| 3. | Lingual  | – | Pronounced from cerebrum |
| 4. | Dental   | – | Pronounced from teeth    |
| 5. | Labial   | – | Pronounced from lips     |

The 5<sup>th</sup> letter of each of the above class – called nasals – are also pronounced nasally.

## TALK - 1

### HELPLESSNESS ARISES FROM BEING JUDGEMENTAL

There is a definite line that separates modern society from the ancient. In general, I find, life is always modern. Patañjali, who wrote the *Mahābhāṣya*,<sup>1</sup> states, in his introduction,<sup>2</sup> about how the modernists do not follow the old style of learning the phonetics. When I read that, I felt that an era we consider as ancient, was modern for Patañjali. It is no different today. When an old person talks to you, he or she always says, “In my days it was wonderful.” When I was in school, the older people in the village used to say, “Our school days were definitely better, not like it is now.” Today, I see people of my age telling the modern students, “Oh! Everything has degenerated. Today’s students have lost their way.” I think the generation gap is not a new discovery. It was always there because a mother is usually 25 or 26 when the first child was born. There would be no generation gap if the child were born the same age as the mother, which is never going to be.

However, one thing is certain. When we say modern, what we really mean is that, unlike our forefathers, we

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<sup>1</sup> A commentary on Sanskrit grammar *sūtras* of Pāṇini.

<sup>2</sup> *Purā kalpe etadāsīt saṁskārottarakālam brāhmaṇāḥ vyākaraṇam smādhiyate tebhyastattat-sthāna-karaṇa-nādānupradānajñebhyo vaidikāḥ śabdā upadiśyante. Adyatve na tathā. Vedamadhiya tvaritā-vaktāro bhavanti.*

(*mahābhāṣya – prayojana-granthopapatti prakaraṇam*)

have to respond to a wide variety of events everyday. Definitely our forefathers, a few centuries ago, were better off in one way because they only had a few events to respond to. To the contemporary way of thinking such a situation would be impossible. This is also not true.

You live one day at a time. The 'one-day' is always a today. You reach 16 or 61 living one day at a time. In the past also it was a new day when a person got up from sleep; it was always a good morning. It is amazing. It is again one day at a time when you sign off for the day, when you go to sleep. Sleep is a great leveller. Your experiences, your problems, your notions of individuality, your identity with religion, the concept of modern and ancient, even your understanding of Vedanta all these are levelled into one blanket experience of 'not knowing anything'. The world including the concept of time and space dissolves in sleep.

When you get up in the morning to a new day, it is like a new creation. It can be new or it can be a continuation of the old problems. You can live the day as a continuation of what happened before, the previous day, because the memories are there. The memories, perhaps, are meant to give certain continuity. You carry forward what was experienced earlier and look at the day from the previous day's memory. I believe that a modern person looks at the day differently. His or her day needs to be packed to have a sense of achievement.

A day packed with events need not move faster. In fact, with fewer events it is amazing how a day speeds by. You find you have no time for anything, even though the day is filled with events that are predictable. There are no surprises. One's routine is predictable, the food and the eating time is predictable. Everything is well ordered; the whole day is predictable. In spite of the predictability you find a month just flits past.

Our forefathers also lived a predictable life but with fewer events. They did not have a television to watch, a newspaper to read or a radio to listen to. Such facilities were not available then. If there was an event of importance, such as a calamity in the nearby village, the news could not reach the person in the neighbouring village instantly. Probably, he would hear of it ten days later when it was no longer a current event. It would be an old event, an already wept over event, or an event to which people have already responded adequately. Sometimes, the news would not trickle at all. Whereas, these days, in the crowded front page of a newspaper, you find there are so many events and to each one of them you have to respond: something happens somewhere in the world, Prince Charles has fever, President Bush sneezes, somewhere an earthquake claims thousands of lives; somewhere a revolt and many die; somewhere an act of terrorism, many are taken hostages; every day you have to respond to the many varied events.

The world is the same size as it was then, although if one views it from one of the satellites, one would see the poor earth as a small ball spinning on its own axis. In this small globe we find ourselves beset with so many problems. It looks as though the world has shrunk. Once, I flew from London at 11 A.M. by the British Airways Concorde flight and reached New York at 8 A.M. The people who were waiting at the New York airport asked me, “Swamiji, when did you leave?” I told them, “I have not yet left for my flight leaves at 11 A.M.” I cannot use the past tense here; even grammar becomes a problem. One does not know which tense to use, and one gets tensed up in the process. Modern technology turns the rules of grammar.

Today, events crowd the entire twenty-four hour period. Unrelated to the events, no doubt, my life is very simple. However, I cannot remain a mute witness to what is happening around me, whether I am a simple individual or a Swami. I cannot but be alive to the events. By the phrase ‘around me’ I do not mean the mountain or the river or the stars above. It is not the few trees and birds. The sky is the limit for the phrase ‘around me.’ Even the black hole, whose gravitational influence is so strong that not even light can escape, is all ‘around me.’ What is around me is what I know and what I know is enough to trouble me.

One either has to respond to every event or live one’s life, holed up in a cave somewhere. I do not think that is

a life worth living. Even if I live a simple life, it is better lived amidst the world. When I hear the news that two meteorites in the orbit collided, it creates a small fear in me; the debris may fall upon me. So, I find myself in a position where I have to respond to situations which are too many and varied. How should I respond to them?

More often than not you find yourself helpless. You read the morning newspaper in the bathroom and you are fuming. You cannot do anything for you are helpless. This helplessness is the modern problem. Not that this is the only problem. Many problems may be there, but this one leads to varieties of other problems. You may have an answer for everything but nobody cares to consult you. That is another problem. You find yourself helpless, for no fault of yours. You can live a very simple, clean life, where you care for people, without trampling upon others' toes, but at the same time you see yourself helpless. You are helpless because you have to respond to every situation that you come to know. Further, as a member of contemporary society, you cannot avoid knowing.

How can we handle this helplessness? If it can be handled, it is no longer a helpless situation. How does one look at situations and yet feel one is not helpless? Before we deal with that, let us see how each one lives his or her life.

We live in our own world. Even though there is a world available for public appreciation, public gaze, still each one lives a subjective life. When you see me,

the Swami, I am the only world for you at that time; there is no other world. In fact, what you confront is the world. As I talk to you, if you think of something else then that something else becomes your world.

When you see me, how do you see me? Do you see me as I am? Physically if you are not colour blind and your eyes and ears can function well, then you can have some objective idea about the Swami. However, the Swami is not just the physical body, much less the dress that he has; he is more than that. There is someone in this body who is now talking to you and responding to you. How do you know this person? How do you respond to this person? It is always with your scales of judgement.

In today's competitive society, each member seems to be out to get the other. That is how it looks, if the behaviour of the people is an indication. You are therefore always wary. You are always ready to defend yourself. You are always ready to fight. You pick up this attitude, right from your childhood.

We start our life as a helpless but totally trusting baby. We do not know whether we are with the mother or with someone else; we are helpless. We are helpless when we face certain psychological situations that disturb us, that undermine our trust. The distrust later becomes the core of the child's personality. The distrust is confirmed when we go to school because there are a lot of bullies around who are out to get us. All these influence our response as an adult. When we see people in the society, everybody

seems to be out for the kill. Survival itself becomes a challenge. It is not very different in an affluent society. When there is competition, we are braced for any onslaught. We may be taken advantage of, exploited, taken for a ride, and we do not want to be taken for a ride. Therefore, we are wary all the time. It is this cautious person who deals with everybody else, deals with the Swami also. Our distrust and disbelief towards others puts us in a vulnerable situation.

Everyone has a need for someone who is not judgemental, with whom one can relax. It is very difficult to meet such a person in the world. This also makes you vulnerable. It makes you ripe for exploitation. With all your fears, your needs, distrust and disbelief, when you see the Swami, well, he is not going to be the Swami that he is. He is the Swami that you think he is.

This is true of everything else. It is one of the main reasons why the human mind loves nature. The ocean and the mountains, the sky and the stars become so important to us because these are the only ones we can approach without our prejudices. I ask you, "Are these alone considered nature? Is the human being outside nature? Who said that a human being is not nature?" If animals, trees and mountains are part of nature, how is it that such an eloquent species as a human being is not part of nature? My nose, my breathing, my hunger, are they not nature? My thinking, my anger, my love, are these not nature? They are all *prakṛti*, nature. Who says they

are outside nature? When human beings also form nature, why do I run away from them to see a mountain? Why should I be under such pressure, that I should seek mountains, valleys, trees and flowers? It is because, other members of my species have hurt me and I can no longer trust them or relax in their presence. It is because mountains and forests are the only ones left for us, which we can look at without prejudice. There again, if you are an environmentalist you have a problem. You would see the mountains and say, "My God! What have they done to this mountain? This is outrageous. They have made it completely bald." Destruction of nature is another problem because of a lack of environmental awareness in people. Thus, even the mountains can drive you crazy these days. Then, you have to choose some special mountains. You can see how the safe world is getting smaller and smaller for oneself. However, just as we see nature without prejudices, we can also see the world that is available for public perception without subjectivity.

When you look at a mountain, it does not demand or threaten you. You can be as you are, at home with yourself. You accept yourself in the appreciation of the beauty of the mountain. You do not want the mountain to be different, the animals to be different, the location to be different, or the mountain peak to be different. You take the mountain as it is. It seems to resolve all the demands of the demanding person in you for the time

being. You come to appreciate yourself, which you had not done earlier. You say that the mountain is beautiful and visit the mountain again and again. However, it is not the mountain that you love as much as you love yourself when you see the mountain. In the experience of the mountain you see yourself, relatively at least, a pleased person whose demands are silenced and whose self-judgement is resolved for the time being. The beauty is so captivating that there is no time for you to be judgemental; the mountain does not let you have your smallness for the time being. It is able to capture your imagination and you find yourself letting go of all your notions; you see yourself as beautiful.

When you see yourself beautiful, you say the mountain is beautiful. When you say the mountain is beautiful it is non-Vedanta. Vedanta says, "When you say that the mountain is beautiful, it means that you are beautiful." That is Vedanta. When you express that the mountain is beautiful then you become a poet. You can write a poem about the mountain. Vedanta is not poetry. In poetry there are some facts, but you need Vedanta to understand those facts.

In any captivating situation you see yourself as a non-judgemental person. It means that you are capable of being non-judgemental. You neither judge the object of captivation nor yourself. If you judge the object, you also judge yourself. Every judgement leads to self-judgement.

When you are not judging the mountain, when you let the mountain be as it is, then you are not judging yourself also, at least for the moment.

When you see yourself as a non-judgemental person, you are in harmony with what you face. It is something that is experientially known to you, but not recognized immediately. When you can relate to the mountain, you can also relate to any other person or situation. If it is possible in one situation, it is also possible in any other situation. We have a basis now to understand ourselves.

When you see yourself as a non-demanding person in spite of yourself, in spite of your prejudices, your likes and dislikes, your demands, then you have made it. This is what you seek in life after all. What else are you trying to accomplish in life? If you do not need to prove yourself to be somebody, if you do not need to be always cautious and wary in different situations, then you have grown. As long as you have distrust and demands, you are yet to grow. People say 'I walk on eggshells.' You are not walking on eggshells, you are in an eggshell, and you have to come out of the eggshell. So your own prejudices confine you, imprison you and they are the fetters.

Your life should be such that you understand facts and see what is in front of you as it is. You need not know the person but you need not look at the person with your prejudices. Even if you come to know something

about the person, why should you interpret anything? A person is because of his or her background. Understanding and accepting a person as he or she is, helps you get out of the shell of your private world into the public world. The public world is very bright and beautiful; it is what is, whereas the private world is not. Our struggles in life are mainly to get out of our own private world and its prejudices.

We think like Indians, we think like Americans, Europeans, but we do not think like thinkers. This is our problem. One can dress like *sādhus*, like Indians. It is welcome; it is cultural. Every culture should be preserved as it is; we need not disturb it at all. Missionary work leads to cultural destruction. Each culture has its own beauty, language, dialect, music and it should be preserved; it is the wealth of humanity. You may not understand it, but it does not matter; it must be preserved as it is. Culture implies language, dress, food, the way of eating food, the way of cooking, the manner of talking, the way of greeting, the way of living in a family and so on. Even ornaments and hairstyle are culture, so they can be as they are. Therefore, everything is cultural. However, there is no Indian thinking, unless there is an Indian truth. There is no American thinking unless there is an American truth. If we are dealing with public truth, then, we should think like thinkers.

We need an insight to understand our own prejudices, to know which are prejudices and which are not.

To have that insight one needs to objectively look at oneself and the world. Having looked at yourself, look at the world and bring that knowledge to deal with situations that call for responses from you. There can be million of situations. They need not make you feel helpless. What is required is understanding and knowledge that is distinct from any kind of action.

## TALK - 2

### DISTINCTION BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

There is a clear distinction between knowledge and action. Action refers to a certain motion and change. It includes the involuntary actions such as breathing. No one can live without doing something, without action. Lord Kṛṣṇa says,<sup>3</sup> “A person cannot live without action, not even for a second.” Talking is an action, eating is an action; thinking also is an action because there is a motion; you move from one thought to another. Even sleeping is an action. In fact, there is a lot of action, which is why despite a six-course meal the previous evening you get up in the morning, ravenous. A lot of activity takes place in sleep such as digestion, blood circulation and so on. Complete cessation of activity is impossible if one is alive.

If this is understood then what is the difference between knowledge and action? Here is a rose. Suppose I ask, “Please take this rose,” some of you may get up and some may not. It only proves that you have choice. You can choose to get up and take the flower or you can choose not to get up. This is what we call freewill, choice. As a human being you are endowed with this freewill. Therefore, you can do, you need not do, and you

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<sup>3</sup> *nahi kaścit kṣaṇamāpi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt*  
(*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.5)

can do it differently also. Later, at the end of the talk you can come up and ask, “Swamiji, can you give me the flower?” You have the freedom of choice with reference to action: *kartum*, to do an action; *akartum*, not to do an action; *anyathā vā kartum*, to do it differently. Therefore, action comes from your will. Even involuntary actions, they come from someone else’s will. It may be the will of the lord or the will of the law. Your breathing is not voluntary but it takes place. There is some intelligence; there is a will involved in it. Here we are dealing with voluntary actions and these are definitely born of your choice. You can understand now that action implies freedom, the use of your freewill.

Knowing is little different. Knowledge takes place when certain conditions are fulfilled. First, there must be a *jñeya*, an object to know. Then there must be *jñāna*, the means of knowledge to know. There must be, definitely, a *jñātṛ*, the knower. Between you, the knower and the object that is known the connection is established by the means of knowledge.

Let us take simple perception, which is a means of knowledge. I ask you, “Please open your eyes, look at me but do not see me.” You do not have any choice. You will see me. Therefore, knowledge is something that defeats your will. If, for instance, you pass by a fish market, but you do not want to pick up the smell, your nose will not oblige you. It will pick up the smell. Often, you see things that you wish you had never seen

because the eyes see. Your wish or will has no control over them. You can definitely close your eyes; that is an action, not knowledge. You can also plug your ears; it is an action, not knowledge. However, once the eyes are open and an object is in front, you do not have a choice but to see.

In knowledge, there is no choice such as ‘I can know this, I need not know this or I can know the object differently.’ There is no choice once the means of knowledge and the object of knowledge are aligned. Knowledge takes place whether you like it or not. Suppose the means of knowledge is inadequate, the knowledge may not take place. If a person who barely knows arithmetic is exposed to calculus, he cannot understand the subject. He is not qualified; he lacks the necessary preparation to study calculus. From this we can understand that for knowledge to take place, we require not merely the five senses, we also need a prepared mind.

Further, any knowledge is as true as its object. There is no question of *anyathā vā jñāturñ śakyam*, that you can know it differently. If I have a rose in my hand and say, “Please look at the white rabbit in my hand,” can you accept my statement? However much you may wish to believe the Swami, want him to be right, you will question my sanity. You will wonder, “What has happened to the Swami? He was all right until now.” It is clear then that knowledge has to be as true as the object.

Moreover, you cannot replace a means of knowledge. If you have to see a form or colour, you have no choice but to use your eyes. If you wish to know the smell, nose is the only means available to you. It is the same with the other three, taste, sound and touch. If you cannot see forms or colours, you need to check your eyes. You cannot replace the eyes with your ears or nose as a means of knowledge.

When you need to know something more than the information gathered by the five senses, you require other means of knowledge such as inference. It is the only means available to you if you wish to infer something. If you can see me, you cannot say, “I infer the Swami is sitting”. However, if you cannot see me, but you hear my voice, you can definitely say, “Swami is talking to someone.” Presumption is also an inference. Where the means of knowledge required is inference, only that means will work, not the others such as perception. It is important to understand that the means of knowledge cannot be interchanged or replaced and you cannot know an object differently.

We have seen that action, *karma*, is based on your will; you can choose. On the other hand, knowledge, *jñāna*, is centred on the object; you do not have a choice. In Sanskrit action is said to be *puruṣa-tantra*, depends on the choice of the person while knowledge is *vastu-tantra*, depends on the object. Since knowledge is *vastu-tantra*, there is always a doubt in your conclusion about yourself.

However, one is never certain of his or her opinion. The doubt arises because sometimes you see yourself differently in different circumstances. Since you cannot trust your opinion of yourself, you are assailed by self-doubts. Your chance of happiness frizzles out. You find yourself guilty of a few actions, lacking a lot of things, falling short in every way. Your long face gives you away. If your opinions of yourself are true, you have absolutely no chance of happiness. In fact, you may even consider suicide; most people would.

Fortunately for us, such extreme steps are not necessary; we do find moments of happiness and laughter despite our notions of ourselves. Each day brings us moments when we smile, laugh or enjoy. In those moments, our notions are suspended and we see ourselves as pleased persons. A joke, a child's innocence, a breathtaking scenery, they invoke the pleased person in us. We may conclude that perhaps there are two different persons in our body. One is the inadequate, unacceptable I, and the other is the happy, pleased I. Which is the real I?

If I should ask who you are, you can give me details of your name, age, qualification, nationality and so on. These attributes are incidental, acquired. In time, they could also change. Your age definitely changes with time. You could change your profession and nationality. The question is who are you as a person? Who is the basic person? Can you say that you are a happy person?

Unhappy person? What would be your answer? You have your doubts as to who you are. It often surprises me when there is a public announcement of my talks, “Swami Dayananda talks on self-knowledge” and I find a hundred people waiting for me. Why do they want to know about themselves from me? They ought to tell me who they are. They come because they have a doubt; they doubt their notions of themselves. It is similar to consulting a therapist to sort things out, to find out the ways of our mind, our emotions and so on. It arises out of confusion about ourselves. The self-doubt persists because it is innate to us and because we see ourselves changing with our moods.

Dissatisfied with who we are, we constantly seek to change ourselves, to be different from what we are. It is painful being who we are and to avoid the pain, we try to become something else or we try to achieve success in a chosen field so that we become acceptable to ourselves.

If we look into what makes us acceptable, we find that it is what makes us acceptable to others. We accept ourselves when others accept us. There are always a few people who are close to us, dear to us. It is in their eyes that we have to become acceptable, be appreciated. It could be our family, friends and the significant others. When we receive our doctorate degrees, there is a celebration in our close circle. In their appreciation, we accept ourselves. If you get your PhD your mother will

celebrate, your father will be happy, all your friends will be happy except one person who may be jealous of you. You serve the society or you try to oblige the society so that you can be accepted by the society, the society consisting of people whom you consider very important in your life. Thus, your acceptance of yourself depends upon the others accepting you. You think that your self-image improves with their acceptance. However, mere achievement does not improve one's self-image. For instance, there are PhDs, who despite their degrees are economically insecure, while those with barely a high school certificate are financially sound. Thus, the struggle to improve one's self-image continues, as do our attempts in becoming a different person. The fact, that we accept ourselves only if the others do, indicates our non-self-acceptance.

The unfortunate situation is that despite your achievements, you continue to struggle to be different. If you learn from others' experiences, you will realise that self-acceptance does not depend on longevity or achievements. You need not repeat others' mistakes; you can learn from them. Similarly, you realise that the struggle for self-acceptance is endless, when you see others around you. The struggle is to prove yourself in others' eyes and therefore you set goals. In achieving those goals, you come under pressure, stress and anxiety. Even if you achieve the goals you have set for yourself, you are still unable to accept yourself.

This is where Vedanta helps us. It says, “You are acceptable as you are. You need not struggle.” Yet, when I look at my height, colour, hair, position, and much more, I am unable to accept Vedanta’s statements. From this it is very clear that my concept of ‘I’, my perception of ‘I’ is different from that of Vedanta. Our concept has many inadequacies while that of Vedanta is totally acceptable.

In the vision of Vedanta, all that you seek in life is essentially yourself. ‘You’ refers to all conscious beings. Since you are self-conscious, you are bound to have opinions about yourself. Naturally you will find yourself wanting and therefore non-acceptable. All human struggles stem from this fundamental problem. Vedanta points out that your opinion of yourself is wrong; it is a mistake, an error.

How will you change your mistaken notions about yourself? Performing an action will definitely not help. Where there is a wrong notion, you require knowledge, not an action, to remove that mistake. You require knowledge to know who you are; what the ‘you’ is.

## TALK - 3

### VEDANTA TEACHES 'YOU ARE FREE'

In life, there are basically three universal pursuits that every person seeks. One is that we cannot accept death. Everyone wants to live; no one wants to die. Every living creature struggles to live. The survival instinct is inborn, innate to all living beings. We don't want to die now, because 'now I am alive.' The next moment it is the same, 'now I am alive.' It is 'now' all the way. Everybody wants to buy one more day from time. We cannot accept self-decimation, because as living beings, we want to be. Even though we are mortals, we want to live that one day more. The love for life is universal, in all life forms, be it mosquitoes, cockroaches, animals and so on. Observe a mosquito and you will realise how it struggles to live. It has enough intelligence to survive. It is amazing how every creature struggles to live.

The flip side of this love for life is the fear that we may die any moment. We anticipate death in every corner, in every situation. The fear of death is implied in the survival instinct. It is called survival because it involves fear.

The second equally powerful desire you will understand if you analyse a few cases of suicide. Despite the love for life, a person has committed suicide. The reason is sorrow. Sorrow can be personal tragedies, financial losses, loss of reputation, in short anything that causes pain.

A person wanted to commit suicide. I asked the reason. He said, "Swamiji I have lost a million dollar and I am bankrupt.. "Is your life worth just a million dollars?" "Everything has gone Swamiji, my life is not worth living." "Okay, I will arrange an interest free loan. You can repay it when you can". Disbelief is written all over his face. "Really, Swamiji? Really?" "Yes." "Oh, thank you, Swamiji. Thank you." He folded his hands to say namaste and the pills dropped out of his hands. The man wanted to live. Yet, he contemplated suicide. The reason is that for him a life without money is unbearable. It is unfortunate that he thought so. A therapist could have helped him. Earlier he had money, but he was not happy even then. His thinking was that money did not make him happy, but the absence of money will definitely make him unhappy. From this we understand that the love to live and to live happily is universal.

The third universal urge, as a human being, is the incapacity to accept ignorance. You cannot tolerate ignorance. It is not a problem, however, as long as you do not know that you do not know. If you know that you do not know, you will want to know. That is why you read every kind of magazine, from Discover to the local gossip issues; you need to know what is happening around you. A person tells another, "I have an important secret to tell you. You must not tell anybody."

"Okay, sure. I won't. What is it?"

"It's already late now. I will tell you in the morning."

The other friend pestered him, cajoled him but he said, "Look, it is a long story. If I begin, it will go on for some time. It is already late. I will tell you tomorrow."

The curiosity of the other person is aroused, and probably the whole night the person would keep awake figuring out what the secret might be. It is because if you know that you do not know, you will make all efforts to know. You cannot stand ignorance.

When you analyse your day-to-day activities, you find that all your pursuits are based on these three. It is common to all human beings. You want to live, live happily and healthily and live being more informed. Your activities are aimed at keeping you alive, comfortable and happy and keeping you informed. There is no fourth pursuit. Every pursuit can be included under these three. The conclusion behind the pursuits are that you are mortal, unhappy, ignorant, therefore an individual with all the inadequacies.

Vedanta now enters and negates your conclusions. It says that your notions of yourself are wrong. It also says that you have to correct the error centred on the self, the 'you', because the 'you' has no problem. It is immortal, happiness and knowledge. Changing this 'you' is meaningless.

If you are basically a mortal, how can you free yourself from mortality? In the process of freeing yourself from mortality, you will prove your mortality, no matter which

branch of medicine you patronise, be it allopathic, homeopathy or naturopathy. You have my sympathy. There is no question of getting rid of your mortality. If you are truly a mortal, you cannot change it.

If you feel that you are unhappy and inadequate, it is understandable because it is born of your own notion about yourself. If you identify yourself with the physical body, definitely you are inadequate. Similarly, if it is the mind, it has its limitations. Your perceptive powers, intelligence, memory, they are all limited. Your emotions are always limited. You cannot be cheerful with all these limitations.

If you identify yourself with your body-mind-sense complex, you will see yourself only as a limited person. An addition to or a removal from this complex is not going to make you complete and acceptable. A broomstick remains a broomstick even if you decorate it with ornaments. Mathematically speaking, a finite number despite any addition will not become infinity. If you add one plus a billion, zillion or trillion, it will remain a finite number. If you are a limited being, you will remain so, no matter what you do to yourself. You are a limited being plus a house; a limited being plus a swimming pool attached to the house; a limited being plus a boat attached to your car; a limited being plus a family and so on.

A life of constant becoming is not going to help me. If the problem is real, then becoming someone else cannot help because basically I am a mortal, unhappy,

inadequate, and ignorant and the situation is not going to improve, no matter what I do. The more knowledge I gather, the more I realise how much remains to be known. More knowledge reveals newer areas of ignorance. It is a humbling experience. Thus, I always find I am limited in knowledge. My ignorance remains. Consequently, so does my insecurity.

One day, a person thought he would become a Buddha. He decided to renounce everything. First he gave up the boat, next his family. His house and half his wealth went to his wife. The other half he gave away to charity. The car he donated to the monastery. Then, he joined the monastery as a novice. He had given away everything, although he was not yet a monk. Previously, he was a limited being with a lot of property. Now he was a limited being without the property. Earlier, he had not begged for his food, he was begging for happiness. Now he is begging for both happiness and food. It is obvious that acquiring things or giving them away does not improve one's self-image. The basic helplessness continues. Without resolving the original problem centred on oneself, things do not change for the better. No matter what a person does or does not, his or her helplessness remains. To be permanently free from the sense of lack, to understand that one is essentially complete and whole in terms of knowledge, time, fullness, is to realise that one's self-image is due to a mistaken notion of oneself. It requires Vedanta.

To correct the mistaken notion of oneself is the only way to resolve the problem of lack. If the problem is centred on the 'being', then the person has to realise that his or her notions are born of error. Vedanta helps one to realise literally 'the error of one's ways of thinking. If the problem rises due to an error, then the solution lies in correcting that error. There is no other solution. Vedanta says that due to error you think you are limited; that you are mortal, unhappy and ignorant. Vedanta also provides the solution; it says that you have to know who you are, who the basic 'self' is.

Vedanta addresses this self, this being. When you are happy, at that moment the 'being' that is available is you. This has to be understood well. This means we have to pursue knowledge. The knowledge makes you see that whatever you have, including the body-mind-sense complex as a luxury. Modern civilisation is all about converting more luxuries into necessities, starting from a simple pair of shoes on to fancy cars and yachts. It would mean that the more civilised you are, more necessities you have. I am not judging or denigrating a lifestyle. I am merely analysing, inquiring into the problem of a human being today.

If the vision of Vedanta helps me understand that I am essentially free from being a mortal, unhappy and ignorant, it means that basically I am a free person with reference to the original problem. Once I see myself as a free person, my whole life transforms into a joyous

adventure. I enjoy the limited mind, the limited body and the limited senses including the time bound world that I face. When I see myself as free, the power to desire, to know, to explore, and discover, I can luxuriate in these powers granted to me, the basic free being. The understanding releases my powers, enabling me to reach out to a continually widening circle. I can work towards any goal that I set for myself without pressure, without anxiety. If, however, I am basically a wanting person, these same powers become necessities and however many I may have or acquire, I will not be content. Every person, without this knowledge, therefore becomes a grabber. With this knowledge, I find that I am free, free to reach out and give of my time, effort, of myself. This freedom is *mokṣa*.

There are certain possibilities for Vedanta to be the solution to the fundamental problem. The struggle to be different is not cultivated or deliberate; it is natural. If it is natural, it presupposes a solution. Another basis for Vedanta being the solution is that occasionally, I find I am acceptable to myself, when I am able to smile or laugh. I laugh not because I have achieved or fulfilled some long drawn desire, but because something captured my imagination. Whenever I laugh I am free from the notions of myself. It is possible that my notions could be wrong. It is this possibility that provides the basis for the discussion on the fundamental human problem. Vedanta corroborates this possibility.

I am born free from notions because I am born ignorant. I am unaware of my gender, parents, and situation, of everything. I am ignorant of what I am and what I am not, a two-fold ignorance. What I am not is the world and what I am is myself. Later, using my mind and senses I came to know about the world. I built upon this knowledge, thereby knowing more and more about the world, but I did not think to know about myself. To me, I was only this body and mind and I did not care to inquire further. I continued with my self-ignorance; it did not interfere with my various other pursuits, education, profession, and so on. It means that I could be self-ignorant and yet be a very well informed person.

If you analyse your pursuit of knowledge, you will find that it is knowledge of what you are not. What you are, you do not care to look into. You think you know who you are until you discover pain. You do not know the reason and you are perplexed. In a similar situation, you find someone else not reacting in the same manner. You decide then that yours is an over reaction. The fact is that there is no over reaction; there is only reaction. It is due to your background.

Pain induces me to take a closer look at myself. Is this who I am? Is there something wrong with me? What is wrong with me? My next step is to seek help from a therapist, to know about myself. It is knowledge of myself, my psychological self. The therapist, at best, validates my feelings. Psychology has no total solution.

It can give me an insight about the emotional self because of the pain that I experience. It relieves my pain for the time being by shifting my problem from myself to a cause outside me. However, I still have to live with my limitations and myself. Psychology cannot solve the basic problem of inadequacy.

If I choose to turn to religion to solve my problem, a theologian will tell me that I have a fundamental guilt since I am born of original sin. Earlier, I thought I was guilty of something I had done or did not do, but now I am branded for something I never knew existed. The religious priest does not eliminate my guilt; instead he creates another for no fault of mine. It is a problem to discuss or argue with theologians because every argument leads to another belief. It borders on fundamentalism. Their arguments would run along similar lines.

“These are the words of truth.”

“How do you say these are true?”

“Because the book says so.”

“Whose book is that?”

“Oh! This is the book of God.”

“How do you know that it is the book of God?”

“This is what we are told.”

I am not criticising them. I want you to understand the concept behind the original sin. Once you accept the concept, it follows that you are a mortal. There is no

getting away from mortality. If you want to be other than mortal, you have to have an immaculate birth. There is a fundamental problem in the theologies. They cannot help me resolve the problems of my self-image. Neither therapists nor theologians can help me solve my sense of inadequacy.

Alternatively, why can we not assume that perhaps Vedanta may be right? Besides, there is no other solution available to me. People may think that Vedanta is yet another philosophy, a school of thought. It is not and the reason is that Vedanta is not a speculation. It is a means of knowledge. You have to understand this very clearly.

The problem of our sense of inadequacy is epistemological. We have a wrong notion of our self, which is not available for observation and correction, since I am the one who observes. How am I to objectify myself unless I ride on my own shoulders? I cannot turn myself into both subject and object at the same time. Epistemologically, it is not possible. I need a means of knowledge that is external to me. Vedanta is such a means available to me. It is not a means because I believe it to be one. Vedanta declares itself to be a means of knowledge. Its subject matter is not a non-verifiable belief. Its subject matter is myself. I can therefore study and verify if its statements are true or not. A means of knowledge plays this role. Its validity is the very means itself. For example, how do you know that your eyes see without your using your eyes? My eyes are their own proof.

There was a man who was born blind. He never had a hope that he would have sight until someone saw this new procedure that will help him give his sight. Some good samaritans put him in touch with a renowned surgeon who operated on him. A few days later the surgeon asked him to open his eyes and see. The patient refused. "Doctor, promise me that I can see. Only then will I open my eyes. I cannot bear to be disappointed." What can the surgeon do? At best he can pin the man down and force his eyes open. The patient's exclamations reveal that he has sight. It is obvious that the means of knowledge is a proof in itself.

Vedanta, as I said earlier, is a means of knowledge. It is not taught to the general public because it is not philosophy. It is also not another academic subject. In our tradition, what we study is a value; it is life. Vedanta is not a speculative concept because it addresses me. Just as a psychologist addresses me, my mind, Vedanta goes one step further and addresses the basic person that I am. Although there is speculation in psychology, a psychologist is not a speculative person. So too in Vedanta, the Vedantin does not consider himself to be a philosopher. Vedanta deals with reality, with truth. Since it discusses the question of reality, it is taken to be philosophy. Vedanta, however, is much more than philosophy; it goes one step further.

What is the teaching of Vedanta? It says that broadly, there are only two categories in the world. It is only a

starting point; later, we will see, that Vedanta swallows the second, leaving behind just one. We can argue that there are a million varieties of objects in this world. How can we state that there are only two? Vedanta stands firm in its statements. There are only two, one is 'you' and the other is 'everything else.' The 'you' is the meaning of the word 'I' the first person singular and everything else is 'not-I'. In Sanskrit the 'I' is *aham*, the *ātman*, and the 'not-I' is *idam*, the *anātman*. Can you state this fact in any other way? You cannot improve upon this statement.

The 'I' is the one who confronts and the 'not-I' is what I confront. The 'not-I' includes heaven, if there is one. Therefore, everything else known and unknown to me is 'not-I'. If God is another person sitting in heaven, then God also becomes 'not-I'. Thus there are two things, 'I' and 'not-I'. This is a fact, which means it cannot be disproved.

Let us inquire into the 'I' and the 'not-I'. Where do we draw a line between the two? The line cannot be drawn outside your body. If that be so, then any thing or person, however close or dear to you they may be, cannot be taken as yourself. You can say, 'This is mine'. You can also say, 'This is something without which I cannot live.' However, you cannot take them as yourself.

Let us call 'not-I' as 'this'. 'This' cannot be 'I', certainly, and 'I' cannot be 'this' either, because I can look, observe 'this'. The stars, the sun, the moon, the earth, other planets, all of them are objects of my knowledge.

My house, my parents and other people are objects of my knowledge. All of them come under 'this'. They are not objects of the 'I' sense; they are objects of 'my' sense. Vedanta says that the world that you see is a *kṣetra*, a field of experience; it is 'this', 'not-I'. Your body also is 'this'.

It looks as though the 'I' sense abides in the physical body. The 'I' is identified with the body, which means the body's attributes are the person. I am tall, fat, dark or fair. If the body is wanting in certain aspects, we try to compensate the lack. In fact, we do this everyday. Just as we put in a lot of effort to maintain our car, we spend a lot of time, money and effort in keeping ourselves in shape, physically and mentally. Once we take the body to be us, we suffer its limitations; and they are endless.

Vedanta, however, considers the body as a part of the world. This is not difficult to understand because what you see is different from you. You see a tree; it is different from you. It is the same with your physical body. If you do not see your body, if you do not know it, it will not be an object of your knowledge. Further, you cannot use your body. The fact that you use your body proves that you know it. You are painfully aware of your various ailments. No one else can know your pain, not even your doctor.

If you can know your physical body and its conditions, who are you? You cannot point to your body as you, since you are looking at the body. Moreover, you are not only

looking at your body; you look at other bodies also. If you are able look at my body, from my point of view, I can look at your body. Your world includes my body and mine includes yours. Yet, both of us exclude our respective bodies from the world. This is something only a human being can accomplish. Every one of us looks at our body as an object. Despite that we continue to say, 'This is I'. It is truly a great wonder, the mystery of humankind.

You are intimately connected to your body. It is similar to your identifying your house or family as yours. You have many houses and you point to one particular house as, "This is my house." There are many people and you point to one as, "This is my father." There are many bodies and you point to one as, "This is my body." You have a special relationship with your body. Vedanta enquires into the truth regarding this relationship.

Vedanta asks you to take a step further into your enquiry. It is true that you have a special relationship with your body. However, when you point to a person as 'my father', he is not you. Similarly, when you point to your body as 'my body', it does not become you. You can extend the logic to your mind and senses. You cannot say, 'I am the sense,' or 'I am the mind.' Even when you say, 'I am blind,' you are not blind to your blindness.

Moving to the mind, it is also subject to my objectification. If a given thought is 'I', I must be vanishing every moment since that is the nature of thought. As thoughts go, so must I. The truth is, however, I am

someone who is aware of my mind. I can observe my mind. It is this awareness that makes me turn to a therapist to help me analyse and understand my thinking, my problems. When I am agitated, I cannot think clearly. I consult a therapist who is supposed to know. Since I am aware of the state of my mind and another person can understand how my mind works from my behaviour and so on, the mind is an object. I cannot say that I am the mind.

I am neither the body nor the mind. It means that I am not the memory either. My self-image, self-judgement is memory based, which means that I existed before the memory. Memory is something that I cannot deliberately erase; it is indelible. It is a faculty, a software, that helps me transact life, at the same time, it is also the basis for my self-judgement. I cannot say that I am sad or I am hurt or I am guilty without memory. In fact, I remember every hurt and pain very clearly unless it is buried in my unconscious. Often, it looks as though, these are very dear to me and I loath to give them up. The persistence of memory is fuelled by pain more than any other emotion. All of this proves that memory is gathered in time and that I am conscious of memory. I can recall memory, which means that I can observe my memory. However, I am not memory.

In terms of knowledge, I cannot say that I am knowledge or I am ignorance. I am very well aware of

what I know or do not know or know vaguely. I am not my emotion either. The question now is, “Who am I?” It is not speculation; it is an enquiry. If I am neither body nor mind nor senses nor emotions nor memory, who am I? The answer to this question implies something that is unlike anything else.

Everything I know or do not know is an object of knowledge, of awareness. Space is an object of awareness, as are time, body, eyes, the fact that the eyes can see, emotions, heaven if there is one and so on. When I see, hear or touch you, you are an object of awareness. When I touch my body, it is an object of awareness. When I see my mind, the emotions, the thoughts—all of them are objects of awareness. It is through the mind that I confront the world. I am aware of only those things that occur in my mind. The world has to go through my mind.

If we take awareness, is there anything like awareness in the world? No. Awareness is only one. Just as the sky is like the sky, space is like space, time is like time, awareness is like awareness. Everything else is an object of awareness.

In every perception, awareness is involved, as are objects and the relevant thought. Now where will you place the ‘I’? It cannot be the thought or the object of the thought. Neither the thought that objectifies nor the senses that help me objectify nor the mind are ‘I’. Only one thing is left that can be taken as ‘I’ and that is awareness.

Awareness is unlike anything else, while everything else is 'not-I'. We can see this clearly in language. If we take pronouns, we have he, she, it, you and I. The pronoun 'you' can be used in many places. In fact, the world is 'you'. Similarly, you can use 'it' to any number of things. When it comes to 'I' where can we use this pronoun 'I'? It can be used only in one place and that is 'I'. What is that 'I'? It is awareness. Awareness can be the only meaning of 'I'.

Once we say that awareness is 'I' no longer can I be ignorant. My previous conclusion that I am ignorant is wrong. I am awareness because of which I am aware of knowledge and ignorance. I am no longer a mortal for I am awareness because of which I am aware of time. I can resolve time into myself. The nature of awareness seems to be the very content of time. The content of time is 'now'. In other words, the past was present when it unfolded. The present is of course the present. The future will be present when it unfolds. What is the length of the present block of time? Any length of time is subject to further divisions. If you say one year is present, it has twelve months. Each month has many days. Each day has twenty-four hours. Each hour has sixty minutes and each minute has sixty seconds. With further divisions, microseconds, pico seconds and more, the present resolves into awareness. Then, what is the present? Present is without a length of time. If the word eternal has to have a meaning, it is only the present, since eternal has no

length of time. The concept of time is an object of awareness. Even mathematical length of time is an object. The present is not an object of awareness; it is awareness.

Since 'I' is awareness, time is awareness, then does 'I' have a location? Your body is located in space on this planet. Where is awareness located? It is in awareness that both time and space are located. The solar system exists in space. Our planet is within the solar system. Our continent, country, state, city, street, house, floor, room and our body is in space. This space is located in your awareness. Neither is awareness in space nor does it transcend space. In fact, nothing is away from awareness; awareness transcends everything.

Awareness is neither spatially limited nor temporally limited. It is limitless. In other words, it is whole; it is fullness. You experience this fullness whenever you are happy. We could also say that you are happy whenever you experience this fullness. It does not imply elimination of the world, of action, of thought and so on. It means you can do everything happily, speaking, eating, and even marrying. You can be happy parents, happy teacher, happy anybody.

Since I am awareness, the whole, everything is within the scope of this awareness. It means that I am limitless; I am free. Where is the question of helplessness? This, then, is Vedanta. Whether ancient, modern or post-modern, Vedanta's relevance is unquestioned. With the

understanding of the 'I', I can look at situations as they are. I can enjoy that inner leisure to be objective. The world becomes a luxury and I can relax in its experiences. I am no longer helpless, because I am already full and complete.

Alternatively, if this is not understood thoroughly, Vedanta helps you at a relative level. What is that relative attitude? If I am awareness, the whole, then I see that there is nothing away from this awareness, including the world. When I look at the same awareness with reference to the creation, I call it God. God is not someone located in heaven. He cannot be in heaven and create this world. This concept of 'God in heaven' is childish, an extension of a child's concept of infallible parents. We have to understand these concepts well, if not it creates more problems than it solves.

Let us look at the concept of God in heaven. With reference to the creation, he is the creator, all-knowledge and almighty. How did almighty God create this world, with what? The material could not have existed prior to the creation; that is absurd. Here Vedanta provides an answer that is both intelligible and rational. God is both the maker and the material. Consequently, creation and everything in it, time, space and so on, is not separate from God. Further, the creation cannot be separate from the material, although the material can be without the creation.

At the relative level, the awareness of God as both the maker and the material of the creation is the same

awareness that is 'I'. In other words, with reference to the body-mind-sense complex I am an individual with a distinct body and mind. When it comes to the total, the entire creation is the body of the Lord. At the level of awareness, there is no difference. If I do not understand that awareness as 'I' at the relative level, I am helpless as an individual.

In the face of helplessness, my best recourse is prayer. It can be a mental or an oral prayer. Prayer, being an action, provides me strength to handle difficult situations. Prayer also creates forces that can counter some of the unseen, negative factors in our life. However, if we are looking for a permanent solution to our many problems, Vedanta is the answer. Everything else is at best a palliative.

Vedanta helps us view the world and ourselves in the proper perspective. Today's life is fraught with competition and stress. Such a competitive lifestyle brings destruction, emotional, ecological and so on. Consequently, the attitude is reflected in popular catch phrases such as 'each man for himself' or 'winning is everything' or 'go for the kill'. To give one's best, without stress and anxiety, requires a change of attitude and values. Prayer helps at one level but Vedanta provides the total solution, the inner space where you can relax. You are safe, secure and not bound by time. Even a small insight releases you from stress.

Vedanta is you. When you understand, you are Vedanta. It is just one simple sentence, '*tat tvam asi*, you are that'. It is not monism; it is not one. One is a finite number that can be divided or added. Further one has no definite value because one is a member of a set. For example, it is one universe but many galaxies. It is one galaxy but many systems. One system has many planets. One body has many cells. One hand has five fingers. What is one? It is a member of a set. If it is a set, you cannot say that you are the limitless awareness. Vedanta does not say *ātman*, 'I' is one; it says *ātman* is the only one. It means that it is non-dual; it is one not followed by two. If I say that it is not two, you may say it is three; therefore we say that it is one. We need to get round the limitations of words and make them work to communicate the vision. This is the beauty of Vedanta.

Vedanta is you only when it is communicated well, otherwise it becomes a philosophy, a speculation. It becomes mere verbiage. If I say that the self is eternal, immortal, supreme, bliss and so on, it is a string of meaningless words. It does not make the listener any wiser. Vedanta has to be handled by a master, a *guru*. There is a traditional method of unfolding the vision. Without this methodology, Vedanta disappears into Devanta, empty words. Modern teaching talks of experiences, while Vedanta unfolds the truth of all experiences, the reality of experience. Truth is not an experience; it is understanding the experience.

At the relative level, to understand the truth, let us understand the reality of a shirt, ontologically. How real is a shirt? You can call it a shirt; I say that it is fabric, cotton or silk or any other. Let us go one step further. We have a shirt made of some fabric. Where is the shirt? It is not outside the fabric or inside. The shirt is also not on the fabric. The shirt is only fabric. What is the reality of the shirt? The poor shirt has no reality of its own. It depends on a fabric. The fabric, however, depends upon the yarn. The yarn depends on the fibres, the fibres on molecules and the molecules on particles. Once you reach the level of particles, there is no dividing line between the observer and the particle. The particles depend upon your understanding and understanding depends on consciousness, awareness.

Therefore, what is shirt? Shirt is awareness. What is true of the shirt is true with reference to everything. It is purely an understanding. Reality is understanding. There is no reality beyond understanding. When we understand the reality, there is freedom from helplessness.

Om tat sat

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