

How words work in Vedanta

(based on essays from Sw. Dayananda and Ramji)

Vedanta is a means of self knowledge through words called a *sabda pramana*.

It is able to give you direct knowledge of your eternal nature through words. In spiritual circles this will be generally criticized with the argumentation that the eternal self, enlightenment, the absolute, Brahman, the Tao or whatever you want to call is beyond words and indescribable. Therefore the conclusion is that it is impossible to get direct knowledge and know your “real” self through words.

Well Vedanta scripture (*sruti*) agrees on the fact that it is not describable by words, but not with the conclusion that it is impossible to get direct knowledge. Vedanta scripture says “Brahman is from where the words come back along with the mind” meaning it cannot be described by words. Nevertheless it gives you direct knowledge by the implied meaning of words when they are unfolded through a specific methodology called the *sampradaya*. In this example we will use “*satyam jnanam anantam Brahman*”. *Satyam* generally means truth or eternity meaning that which does not change, *jnanam* means knowledge and *anantam* means limitlessness. Here in this context we will already assume that we can take *Brahman* and the Self as interchangeable words,

Now if we tell you that this Brahman, yourself, is truth, knowledge, limitlessness without unfolding it properly then your mind will make a concept of that statement and as a spiritually experienced person you might say “Oh no these are only intellectual concepts in the mind, I want to experience enlightenment and the Brahman”. Well we will have not gained anything by that. You may gain many spiritual experiences, but they will all end, because an experience has a beginning, therefore exists in time and will therefore end at some time. And you remain ignorant and dependant on creating spiritual experiences all the time.

But let us refute the first objection that something that cannot be described cannot be known.

Sweetness cannot be described. It cannot be communicated by words. Therefore it is indescribable. If somebody does not know what sweetness is, no words will be able to describe it. But it is very easy to know sweetness because it can be objectified. If I give you a sugar cube and you eat it and I tell you that what you taste is sweetness, you will know sweetness.

Now the problem is that for self knowledge this will not work, because you are the ultimate subject and cannot be objectified.

Now scripture is very precise and uses all the words truth, knowledge and limitlessness combined. They are all needed to precisely imply and point to what it wants you to know.

Let us take the example of a white Indian elephant. I need all the three words together to correctly describe the animal. If I omit one of these you will not know what I wanted to point you to. "White elephant" is not enough and "Indian elephant" is not enough.

Let us further expand on that example. If you have never seen an elephant, then I can describe you the features like a large trunk, big two ears, long thin tail, two white tusks etc. but you will only be able to get indirect knowledge of an elephant. But if you have seen an elephant only once in your life, then you will get direct knowledge of the elephant when all the required words are used to describe it.

Since in Vedanta we are pointing to yourself and you actually already know yourself (but just have a superimposed notion about yourself as being a limited mind and person in a decaying body), scripture is able to give you direct knowledge of yourself by implication.

Now let us start by looking at the three words. Let us begin with limitlessness (*anantam*).

In general limitations of things are of three sorts.

- Object wise – something can be a flower but not an elephant
- Time wise – it is there at one point in time and is gone after some time
- Space wise – it exists here but not over there

Now if this Brahman is limitless regarding all the three aspects, it has to be all objects, exist always and has to be everywhere.

How can this be? How can something be everywhere, be everything and be always there?

This can only be if this thing is the source of time, space and objects.

Let us use the example of a wave as an object to illustrate this.

How can something represent all the waves that have ever existed in time in all parts and corners of all oceans, lakes and rivers?

It has to be water. It has to be the source of all waves. That is the implied meaning of limitlessness.

Now let us take the second word truth (*satyam*). This means that this thing has never changed throughout time. It has never been modified.

That means that this remains always unchanged regardless of the time, the objects and the space it represents. Whatever it is, in whatever time and in whatever location it is, it always remains the same and is never changed.

That can be better understood if we combine the word truth with the third word: Knowledge (*jnanam*)

Knowledge means there is a Knower, the act of knowing and the knowledge of the object.

So this Brahman has to be the knower, the knowing and the knowledge of all objects, everywhere in every time.

If Brahman (yourself) has to be the knower, the knowing and the knowledge at the same time, it cannot be any of these but has to be the source of the knower, the knowing and the knowledge.

Brahman has to be that which makes knowing possible, it has to be the knowing principle. In the scripture we call this the non-experiencing witness (*saksi*) which basically means your awareness.

Without awareness knower, knowing and knowledge would not be possible.

All words combined -truth, limitlessness and knowledge- point to your awareness. In your awareness all objects are known in any time and any space without ever changing your awareness. Objects appear in your awareness, are known and disappear. But your awareness never changes.

Your awareness is always with you, unchanged.

In fact Vedanta says that this is all that you are.

You are eternal truth, knowledge and limitlessness.

Meaning: You are awareness.