

FROM: SWARAJYA Magazine (26 Sept 2015) Dr. Anantanand Rambachan is Professor of Religion at Saint Olaf College, Minnesota, USA. His books include, 'Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śaṅkara', 'The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Authority of the Vedas', 'The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity' and 'A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One'

## **Few teachers have fulfilled their obligations to their tradition as Swami Dayananda Saraswati did. He has left our world richer with teachers.**

In 1973, after graduating from the University of the West Indies, I made a long journey from my home in Trinidad to study at the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, the *aśrama* in Mumbai, India, founded by Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993). This was my first visit to India, the birthplace of my Hindu ancestors. It was a time when few from my country traveled to India.

I was a teenager when Swami Chinmayananda first visited Trinidad in 1965 and I avidly read his available writings. In 1969, I wrote to him for permission to join his *aśrama*. His sage advice, after rebuking me for my undated letter, was to complete my college education before coming to Sandeepany. In 1973, Sandeepany Sadhanalaya launched its first intensive multi-year course of study in Vedānta and Sanskrit. By then, I had fulfilled Swamiji's advice and I was accepted as his student.

Mumbai was drenched in monsoon rains when I made my way from the airport to Sandeepany. I was introduced to Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who I learned was the principal *ācārya* and the designer of the course of study that I came to pursue.

When I arrived at Sandeepany, I discovered that the course had already started. Swamiji, in fact, had completed his teaching of one of the foundational texts, Śaṅkara's *Tattvabodha*. *Tattvabodha* offers concise definitions of the major terms and concepts of Vedānta and is a necessary preliminary to further study. Realizing that I would be at a learning disadvantage for his Upaniṣad classes, Swamiji offered to teach the text again and did so in intimate sessions in his *kutir*. Though he had recently completed the text, his instruction was patient and thorough. These were features of his teaching that never wavered. There were never signs of impatience or haste.



This was my first and indelible experience of the one who would become the most influential teacher in my life. For the next three years, with rare breaks, I sat at his feet studying the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā with the commentaries of Śaṅkara.

When Swamiji was ready to begin the teaching of the Bhagavadgītā, he wanted a location where the ancient *ṛṣis* themselves taught and where their memories were still alive. He took us all to Purana Jhadi in Rishikesh. There was no accommodation at Purana Jhadi. Swamiji had a tiny one-room cottage, and so we stayed in the spartan rooms of Andhra Ashram. On early mornings and late afternoons, we sat in the open on the banks of the Ganga, breathing the cool air and listening to his meticulous verse by verse exposition of the Bhagavadgītā. The Ganga roared unceasingly in the background and Swamiji often spoke of it as symbolizing the *sampradāya* or flow of knowledge. Swamiji delighted in the simple and unencumbered ascetic setting of Purana Jhadi. It seemed a perfect setting, singing Ganga and silent Himalaya, for Swamiji to do what he loved beyond all else – teach. It does not surprise that Swamiji chose Rishikesh, a

sacred space where he lived as both student and teacher, to be the site of his *mahāsamādhi*.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati was an abundantly gifted human being and these gifts found fruitful expression in a variety of achievements and initiatives. A proper and detailed assessment of his legacy is a necessary task for scholars of religion in the future. For his students across the world, however, the heart of this legacy is not in dispute. They have discovered it in his extraordinary gifts as a teacher of Vedānta; this is the image that is lovingly and gratefully alive in their hearts.

At the heart of Swamiji's passion and creativity as a teacher was his foundational commitment to the Veda (*śruti*) as a source of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). The understanding of the Veda as a *pramāṇa*, though central to the methodology of the classical teacher, Śaṅkara, did not come easy to Swamiji. He spoke often to us of his early challenges as a student of Vedānta before he understood the Veda as a *pramāṇa*. His students, he would say, "do not know the magnitude of the discovery that the Veda is a *pramāṇa*. They did not suffer as I did." He attributed his transformative understanding to the teaching of a Telugu-speaking *saṃnyāsin*, Swami Pranavananda. Through the teaching of Swami Pranavananda, Swamiji came to see Vedānta as a direct means of knowledge for knowing the truth of oneself, even as the eyes serve as the instrument for the knowledge of forms and colors. "That was enough for me," said Swamiji. "I never looked back. I had already studied the *Upaniṣads – Vedāntaḥ*. So, what was needed was only to rearrange – to look at the *Upaniṣads*, the whole teaching in the light of *Pramāṇam*."

Any description of Swamiji's skillful teaching is incomplete without grasping this fact. This is where he always started his unfolding of the Vedānta vision. The human problem, as Swamiji tirelessly taught, is one of incorrect understanding of the nature of oneself that is full and whole, but erroneously taken to be incomplete and lacking. Ignorance is dispelled only by knowledge and knowledge must be derived from a valid source.

The Veda-*pramāṇa* consists of words. The potential of these words to dispel ignorance depends on their handling by a skillful teacher. Swamiji brought to his teaching a deep understanding of the possibilities and limits of language. He

exercised meticulous care in his choice of words and used these with marvelous dexterity and deftness to instruct about that, "from whom all words, along with the mind, turn back having failed to grasp." (Taittirīya Upaniṣad). He knew well the dangers of linguistic indiscipline and imprecision in speaking of *brahman* and sought always to use words with caution, and consistency. He was fresh and chaste in his teaching. Words can liberate and words can imprison; he tapped deftly into the liberating potential of the words of the Upaniṣads and taught his students to do the same.

As a teacher, Swamiji's attention was unwaveringly centered on the end-purpose of his teaching- the freedom of the student sitting at his feet. He made *mokṣa*, an end that is too-often clothed in mystery and made to seem remote and difficult, real and accessible. He universalized the human problem as a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness, making it one that is validated in the experience of every human being. He presented *mokṣa* as freedom from self-inadequacy that is attained through understanding a teaching that dispels ignorance. He enabled us to see that the full being we want to become is immediately and always available. The presentation of the human problem and its resolution in these terms means that the Vedānta *pramāṇa* deals with a recognizable human issue. As a teacher, Swamiji clearly wanted to present the Vedānta *pramāṇa* in a manner that overcomes cultural or religious alienation and to make it accessible and relevant to a recognizable problem. I recall that in every class, at some point or the other, he imparted the vision of Vedānta in its entirety. To transmit the vision of the whole in this manner is no small accomplishment for a teacher, and Swamiji always did it with an irresistible relevance, charm and intimacy.

One of the eloquent statements about Swamiji's impact and effectiveness as a teacher is his ability to nurture and produce capable teachers. He understood himself as belonging to an ancient lineage (*sampradāya*) of teachers and students. This lineage had both a teaching to transmit as well as a distinctive methodology to ensure proper transmission and continuity. He fulfilled his indebtedness to this tradition through his own earnest study, his commitment to teaching, and his founding of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam as a place of teaching and learning. Few teachers have fulfilled their obligations to their tradition as Swamiji did. He has left our world richer with teachers, monastic and lay, who will contribute to the vitality of this tradition and produce new teachers.

Swamiji's teaching was essentially an invitation to inquire. One cannot prove that the Vedānta, as a valid source of knowledge, works unless one is willing to give it a try by exposing oneself to a qualified teacher. As a teacher, he never demanded that his students assent to anything *apriori*. All he asked for was a willingness to try the teaching with an open mind. One must be willing to suspend judgments about the *pramāṇa* until it is given an opportunity to prove itself.

When I visited Swamiji for the last time in December 2014, forty-one years after we first met, his health was failing and he was frail in body. Each evening, however, a few of us sat around him in the lecture hall to listen to the transcript of his lectures on Taittīriya Upaniṣad. Between periods of listening, we would support him to exercise by walking around the room. He was attentive to each word, occasionally correcting the transcript, ensuring that his meaning was accurately communicated. His eyes and face lit up whenever a passage from the commentary of Śaṅkara was cited. He delighted in the clarity and logic of the argument. Commitment to the Veda-*pramāṇa* was the beginning and end of his self-understanding as a teacher.

One night, at the end of the session, he turned to me and spoke words that I will never forget, "Śastra *pramāṇa* does work."

*Jaya Gurudeva*