

Words and what they reveal

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Question:

Swamiji, how can words, which are limited in nature and which refer to objects, reveal that which is limitless and cannot be objectified?

Answer:

The words do not directly reveal. In the statement, “Words reveal the limitless,” for example, the question becomes whether the words are known or unknown words. Do known words reveal the limitless that is Brahman, which is not known to us so far, or do unknown words reveal Brahman?

Known words cannot reveal Brahman because all known words are words that we have gathered to describe things that we already know, which are all limited in nature, like a pot, for example. All these known words are words which deal with genus or species, attributes, actions, and relationships. For example, when you say “cow,” the word reveals a generic object, meaning that there are many cows. The word “cow” refers to a particular animal and whichever animal has the meaning of the word “cow,” we call “cow.” Words, then, can reveal a generic object, a substantive. Once a generic object has been identified, words can further reveal certain attributes that apply to that particular substantive, like a white cow. Or they can reveal an action, a grazing cow. Words can also reveal a relationship or connection, like mother or friend.

Words, then, generally reveal actions, relationships, attributes, or particular substantives with a generic, individual status—all of which are finite. If Brahman is infinite or limitless, naturally, words cannot reveal it. Therefore, the known words that we have cannot reveal Brahman.

Perhaps, then, unknown words can reveal that which is unknown, Brahman. They cannot, because the words themselves are unknown. Unknown words cannot reveal another unknown thing. They can only join Brahman, both the words and Brahman being unknown.

If unknown words cannot reveal Brahman, we have to use known words. Certain known words are chosen and these have a particular connotation. Words can reveal an object directly or by implication. Here, they reveal what is implied (*lakṣya*) by implication (*lakṣanā*).

The words we use to reveal Brahman, then, are all *lakṣanās*, words revealing by implication—*satyam*, *jñānam*, *anantam*, and so on. *Satyam* means “is,” which is something we know. Generally, “is” means that something exists and this existence is always in terms of time. Therefore, we know *satyam* only as something that exists within time, theoretically speaking.

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“Is” means, then, that the thing is not yet gone. This is what we call time bound.

The concept of “is” is that whatever exists is always bound by time. But Brahman is said to be *satyam* and not bound by time (*anantam - satyam*). The word *anantam* releases the word *satyam* from the time-bound concept and allows it to retain its original meaning. The original meaning is “existence,” but the construed meaning, the commonly known meaning for this word, is “existence in time.” And that time is negated by the word *anantam*. This negation must be done in order to know Brahman.

In the expression of the Upanishad, *satyam-jñānam-anantam-brahma*, the root meaning of *satyam*, existence, is retained, while the time-bound existence we commonly understand, the time conditioning, is removed. This means that Brahman is timeless existence.

Then, again, it is said that Brahman is consciousness (*caitanyam*), which is knowledge (*jñānam*). Therefore, “*jñānam*” is also a *lakṣanā*. Knowledge can be of anything—the knowledge of a pot, the knowledge of a cloth, and so on. But, Brahman is both *anantam - jñānam* and *satyam-jñānam*, knowledge that does not change, that is invariable, always the same.

Brahman is not knowledge of this or that, but knowledge as such—it is limitless knowledge. Knowledge of any one thing cannot be limitless. Knowledge of any one thing means that it is not knowledge of anything else; therefore it is not limitless knowledge. Having negated the limited aspect of knowledge, knowledge is freed from all limitation. What remains is limitless knowledge—consciousness—that which is the invariable in all forms of knowledge. Therefore, consciousness is *satyam* and this consciousness-*satyam* is limitless Brahman.

This, then, is how Brahman is revealed by known words—by implication (*lakṣanā*) alone, not as the direct meaning of these words.