

Means of knowledge and action

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati | Version 1.01

A means of knowledge operates in a choiceless manner. If the eyes happen to fall upon an object, whether likeable or otherwise, it still produces the sight of the object. The data the eyes bring in, the everyday data, is most of the time ignored. Even if you choose, the means of knowledge still operates on its own. It will see what is there. This is knowledge; it is centered on the object (*vastu-tantra*), not the person's will (*puruṣa-tantra*). Knowledge is as true as the object of knowledge. In this, the person's choice is not involved. Seeing takes place regardless. There is no choice. The person does not come into the picture in knowing.

On the other hand, action (*karma*) is based upon one's will which means that one can choose to do something, or not to do it, or do it differently, as the situation permits. All forms of action are dependent on the person, the agent. The nature of knowledge is the opposite. Here there is no choice, except the choice of the person to know. One has to choose to know, especially here, where the topic is the self. Whether or not to know the self is purely based upon choice, but the knowledge itself has nothing to do with choice.

You may choose to see a place that is promoted by tourism. Having gone there, the picture you see has nothing in common with the one given to you by the promoters. Now, should you take what you wanted to see or what you see as knowledge? The latter of course, even though the desire is different. The eyes are unmindful of your desires, will, choices, and intentions. They have no regard for them. It is the same with ears, nose, and everything that falls within sensory perception.

A means of knowledge operates only in terms of what is there. A distorted version of what is there is only due to a defect in the means of knowledge, either for want of light or other factors. The eyes operate only in certain areas, where certain conditions are fulfilled, within the range of their operation. You have no choice in how and what they see. Knowledge presented in this manner, is opposed to karma.

Karma is presented as something one can do, need not do, or do differently. The choice is there. Whereas, in knowledge, you may only choose to know a subject matter; only up to that

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point is there choice. Choosing does not give the knowledge. What is to be known depends upon the nature of the object and the means of knowledge.

The object determines the type of knowledge. A pot, for instance, if the means of knowledge has no defect, gives pot knowledge. When the pot is there and there is no defect in the means of knowledge and it is said, “This is a pot,” you have no choice. The choice is not there to know it, or not know it, or know it differently. It is a pot, nothing else, and there is no choice.

You can make a choice to know the pot or not in that you can choose to operate the means of knowledge or not. Your eyes are open, you see; eyes closed, you don't. This is the choice you make—to see or not see. That is dependent on your will, not the means of knowledge. Once your eyes are open, the activity of the means of knowledge begins. When the object is within the range of sight, then sight takes place. This is a rule with reference to means of knowledge. When the means of knowledge is operating, is there a choice not to know? No.

Knowledge and action are opposed, in the sense of there being no choice and choice. Knowledge taking place is dependent on the object. When the means of knowledge is in the form of words and is independent, it can be glossed over. My knowledge of what the words has to say depends entirely on my capacity to look at the words, and see what the author wants to say. If what is said and what is understood concur, then there is understanding of what Vedanta says. If I have predetermined idea or philosophy and want Vedanta support for this reality, then that does not become a means of knowledge. There is no attitude of trust or openness in the capacity of Vedanta to be a means of knowledge.

For this attitude towards the means of knowledge to be complete, you have to be free from ideas of your own, which is difficult. The greatest blessing that the human being has, however, is this capacity to suspend all ideas and look at the situation afresh. I can be as innocent as a baby. Only because of this capacity to suspend all ideas is the pursuit of the means of knowledge possible. Even in simple sight, we are doing this every day.

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You thought something was one thing and it turned out to be different, like mistaking salt for sugar. Even though you thought it was sugar, the means of knowledge that is taste beats that conclusion. This capacity to suspend your notions can be done when a means of knowledge is operating. As long as it happens to be my eye, ear, sense of taste, touch and smell, I have this objectivity. One perception does not prejudice the other. Even if you have trust in my words, when I hold a flower and say, “This is a rabbit,” you will think seriously about that trust. This is so because the ‘whole’ of you is behind your eyes and my words. The words as means of knowledge do not have the backing of the means of knowledge that is the eyes. This is a contradiction to means of knowledge. Understanding it differently does not exist.

Subjective experiences do not have the status of a means of knowledge. It is important to understand that the Rishis or seers are not presented as mystic experiencers reporting their personal experiences. They are seers of mantras, not simple experiencers. They had no experience of rituals. They had a vision of means and ends, a revelation. When what they said is considered as a means of knowledge, then the whole approach is different. Our attitude becomes appropriate while operating the scriptures of Vedanta as a means of knowledge. This is the trust or the open attitude we are speaking about towards the means of knowledge that is Vedanta.