

VEDĀNTA 20/20
INTRODUCTION TO VEDĀNTA
ŚĀSTRA

Today we will start a new topic as the *Vedānta 20/20* lecture series continues and the topic is *śāstra*, the vast body of scriptural literature. *Śāstra* literally means science and in the present context we call it spiritual science or Hindu philosophy. The word is derived from the root *śā*, that has two meanings. One meaning is to command and the other is to teach. So *śāstra* means a literature that commands the human beings in the initial stages and then teaches them in the later stages. By way of commanding and teaching, scripture saves a person from all human problems and because it commands, teaches and thus saves humanity, it is called *śāstra*. *Tra* means to save. *Śāsanāt trāyate iti śāstram*, first it commands and then enlightens in the later stages and so it is called *śāstram*. *Śaṅkarācārya* compares *śāstra* to a mother. A mother commands a child initially because the child is not mature enough to understand the significance of the commandments. So when someone is at a gross level, the language of commandment and threat is used. When one has matured sufficiently, commandment and threats are replaced by teaching, convincing, enlightening. The entire scripture does that job, it is called *śāstram*.

I will present this vast literature in six layers or six groups. First and foremost is the *vedic* literature. The *veda* itself is a vast literature consisting of about 20,000+ *mantra*-s. The entire *vedic* literature is divided into four books, *Ṛg*, *Yajur*, *Sāma* and *Atharvaṇa veda*-s. *Ṛg veda* consists of *Ṛg mantra*-s which are metrical compositions, poetic compositions called *padya*. *Yajur veda* consists of *Yajur mantra*-s which are in prose or in the form of *gadya*. *Sāma veda* consists of *Sāma mantra*-s which are in the form of music, *gītām* to be sung. It is said that the Indian music has its roots in *Sāma mantra*-s. That is why the chanting of *Sāma mantra*-s is called *Sāma gāna*. Then comes the fourth called

Atharvaṇa veda consisting of *mantra*-s given out by two well-known Ṛṣī-s, *Atharva Ṛṣī* and *Angirasa Ṛṣī*. More than 20,000 such *vedic mantra*-s are available and they are known as *mantra*-s because they are meant for inquiry, analysis and assimilation. *Mananāt trāyate iti mantraḥ*, they are meant for *mananam*. The reflection, analysis and there by the assimilation will protect us. Even the repetition of the *mantra*-s, meditation on the *mantra*-s also helps a person.

The very word *veda* means a source of knowledge. It is derived from the root *vid* which means to know. So *veda* means a treasure of knowledge. Now the next question is, who is the author or the authors of *veda*-s? In our tradition we look upon *veda*-s as revelations from the Lord himself. We do not look upon *veda*-s as human compositions. They are not products of human intellect. So if at all you want to talk about author, *Bhagavān* is the author. The Lord does not give out the *veda*-s directly to humanity, but he reveals them through Ṛṣī-s. Ṛṣī-s are the intermediaries, they are the pipeline or the conduit, through whom we receive the *veda mantra*-s. If you look at God as the broadcast station, Ṛṣī-s are the TVs. The word Ṛṣī is derived by the root *ṛṣ* which means to know. *Ṛṣati jñānāti iti Ṛṣiḥ*. For our understanding purpose Ṛṣī-s are the receivers. So many TV programs are out there that are broadcast and they are available in the airwaves. We cannot directly receive the waves and see the programs. We need an equipment in between. Similarly the Lord has already made the programs and broadcast them at the time of creation itself. Ṛṣī-s are extraordinary and because of their extreme *sattva*, because of their *viśeṣa upādhi*, they are able to receive the *veda mantra*-s that the Lord transmits.

There are many Ṛṣī-s who have received the *mantra*-s and that is why whenever we chant any *veda mantra*-s, we start by remembering the Ṛṣī, for example when you chant *Gāyatri mantra*, you touch your head and say *Viśvāmitra Ṛṣiḥ*, then you touch your mouth and say *Gāyatri chandaḥ* and

then you touch your heart and say *savitā devatā* so on. So *Ṛṣī, chando, devatā smaraṇam* should be done before you chant any *veda mantra*. This indicates that this *Ṛṣī* has received this particular *mantra*. That is why *Ṛṣī*-s are called *mantra drṣṭāḥ*-s, those who have seen the *mantra*-s or to whom the *mantra*-s have been revealed. They are not producers or creators or authors of the *mantra*-s.

These *mantra*-s were received and transmitted through *śabda rūpa* alone, in the form of sound and not written. For a very very long time, *veda*-s were only heard and not read in the form of script. The entire transmission and reception were through word of mouth. It was a *karṇa parampara*. Even now when they teach *veda*-s, the student is not supposed to keep any book in front of him. Since the *veda*-s came down in the form of *karṇa parampara*, it is known as *śruti*, that is which is taught and then received by hearing. Since it is not born out of human intellect, being of supra-human origin, it is known as *apauruṣeya pramāṇa*. *Apauruṣeya* means not born out of human intellect. Therefore these *apauruṣeya śabda*-s, *veda*-s, *śruti*-s, *mantra*-s form the first, foremost, primary scriptural literature. All other scriptural literature are based on this *vedic* foundation. That is why our culture is called *vedic* culture, *vaidika sampradāya*. We are all *vaidika*-s. Hindu was a name given by somebody else. This is layer #1.

Now we will go to the second layer which is known as *sūtra* literature, a literature that is in the form of *sūtra* or aphorisms. Aphorism means a cryptic statement that contains a lot of ideas in a capsule form. It is a statement in a nutshell. This *sūtra* literature consists of *vedic* teaching only in a codified form. So function of *sūtra* literature is codification and clarification of the basic teaching. By codification I mean classification and rearrangement based on topics. While *veda* is a vast literature covering many topics spread around all over in an unorganized manner, in *sūtra* literature, the ideas are culled from various places and arranged topic-wise. For example, all the topics

dealing with individual duties and responsibilities, we call them *dharma sūtrāṇi*. *Dharma sūtra*-s deal with individual values, individual roles. Then there is the *gṛhya sūtrāṇi* where family values, family responsibilities where there is a slight expansion from the individual to the family. Both are important. Then comes the literature known as *śrauta sūtrāṇi* where bigger activities meant for the welfare of the entire society are talked about.

So the smallest unit is individual, next bigger unit is the family and then even bigger is the society. I cannot isolate myself, I am an individual, but I am also the member of a family and then the society. I cannot ignore any of these three aspects. These ideas are classified in these three *sūtra*-s. Thus we have a very vast *sūtra* literature also. There is the *Gautama sūtrāṇi*, *āpastamba sūtrāṇi*, *parāśara sūtrāṇi* and so on. These compositions are not given by *Bhagavān*. So they are *pauruṣeya śāstra*. The words in the *sūtra*-s belong to the authors, but the content belong to *veda*-s. In addition to codification, there is also clarification in *sūtra*-s. If there are some vague statements in *veda*-s, *sūtra*-s will clarify what is said in the *veda*-s. Similarly if there are seemingly contradictory statements, then the *sūtra*-s will resolve the contradictions. *Sūtra* means a thread. Why is the literature called a thread? It threads the topics contained in *veda*-s, *veda vākya kusuma gratanāt tatvāt sūtrāṇām*, *vedic* topics are like flowers, spread all over, and the flowers are collected and strung together like a garland in a *sūtra*. This is the 2nd layer of spiritual literature.

Then comes the third layer of literature known as *smṛti*. *Smṛti*-s are generally in the form of poems. They are metrical compositions. As the very word *smṛti* shows, it is remembered wisdom. *Ṛṣi*-s studied the *veda*-s, they studied the *sūtra*-s, and having gathered all the teachings, they again present them in a very elaborate form. In *sūtra* literature, it is a cryptic presentation, whereas *smṛti*, the presentation is elaborate. The function of *smṛti* is also the same codification and clarification. Thousands and thousands of verses are written

by many *Ṛṣī*-s. You might have heard about *Manu Smṛti*, *Parāśra Smṛti*, and so on. If you take a *smṛti* book and see the topics, you will find that they are beautifully arranged. They may talk about the topic of cosmology, how the creation arose. A beautiful development is given. Thereafter you will find the duties, the goals of mankind, duties of a student, duties of a householder, duties of a ruler, duties of a citizen, duties of a male, duties of a female, all beautifully classified. The difference between *sūtra* and *smṛti* is that *sūtra* is very cryptic and so there can be vagueness whereas in *smṛti*, the explanation is detailed and therefore there is lot more clarity. In *sūtra*-s many ideas are implicit. *Smṛti* makes those ideas explicit, the hidden ideas are brought to light. This is *smṛti* literature which is again very vast.

The beauty is that generally our scriptural literature has three different forms. If it is prose form as in *vedic* prose literature, there is *svara* or intonations that is useful for chanting. If you are not able to chant, it will be in the form of cryptic statement or in the form of a verse. This is by design so that it can be learned by heart. You can easily memorize them. You can learn the entire *veda* by heart. It is possible. Once in a while they will conduct the entire *Yajur veda pāṛāyaṇa*. For days together they chant the *mantra*-s without a book in front of them. Short, cryptic statements are also easy to remember. They talk about these things in memory techniques. If it is not in the form of *vedic* chanting or *sūtra*, it was in the form of poem. The entire philosophy is presented in *Bhagavad Gītā*, song celestial! Philosophy is composed and presented in a poetic form. This is the third layer the *smṛti* literature. Once again, the composition is human, but the content is divine.

Then comes the fourth layer of teaching known as *purāṇa*-s. *Purāṇa*-s are again a literature which is in an expanded form. *Sūtra* is very very concise, *smṛti* is a more elaborate, when you come to *purāṇa*-s, it is still more magnified. The very word *purāṇa* means that though it is a very ancient literature, it is relevant even now. It is ancient, but not obsolete. *Purā api*

navah, *purā*, very ancient; *navah*, ever fresh and relevant even for the 21st century. You cannot ignore them or discard them. This *purāṇic* literature is also in the form of poems and they also codify, clarify and magnify. Codify means rearrange the topics. Wherever there is vagueness or controversy or seeming contradictions, they are all resolved by clarification. Another very important and unique feature of *purāṇa* is that the abstract ideas contained in the previous literature, they are all concretely presented in the form of stories. Stories painted on a vast canvas is the uniqueness of *purāṇic* literature. For example, one value given in the *veda*, will be presented as a story in over a thousand verses. Take *Hariścandra purāṇa*, story of *Hariścandra*. The story is written very very elaborately. What is the essence of the entire *Hariścandra purāṇa*? It can be put just two words, as said in *veda*, *satyam vada*, speak truth. Abstract ideas are made concrete. In *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, *kāma* becomes a *rākṣasa*, *krodha* becomes a *rākṣasa*, *ahaṅkāra* becomes a *rākṣasa*, this is the personification of ideas. Language of symbolism is used. All this is done in the *purāṇa*-s so that the impact of the teaching is intense. Most of the *purāṇa*-s were written by *Vyāsācārya*. That is why he is greatly revered. He wrote 18 *purāṇa*-s and also 18 *upapurāṇa*-s. It will be difficult for us to even remember the names of those *purāṇa*-s. The most popular is *Bhāgavata purāṇa*. This is the 4th layer of literature.

Then the next layer of literature is *itihāsaḥ*. *Itihāsaḥ* literally means history based literature. Therefore the contents of *itihāsa* is based on what really happened. *Iti* means thus, in this way; *ha* means definitely, doubtlessly; *āsa* means occurred, happened. Even in *purāṇa*-s, many events are recounts of actual events. *Itihāsa*-s are also in the form of poems. Many people study them by heart. *Rāmāyaṇa* originally written by *Vālmīki* and later by many others is one *itihāsa*. The other *itihāsa* is *Mahābhārata* written by *Vyāsācārya*. *Rāmāyaṇa* runs to about 24,000 verses and *Mahābhārata* has about 100,000 verses. The life led by *Rāma* is the *ayana*, goal of every human being and hence the epic is called *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Rāma* is the role model for *vedic* way of

living. *Rāmasya ayana, mārgaḥ*, the path led by *Rāma*, is *jīvasya rītiḥ*, is the guideline for every individual. Similarly is the story of *bharata vaṁśa*, the dynasty of *bharata* kings. As the word *mahā* indicates, it is a huge literature. As a story of a historical narrative the *vedic* teachings are presented again. We should remember that even though the literature is based on history, it should not be taken as pure history. It is not a documentary of history. Presenting history is not the primary purpose of this literature. Details are not exactly documented. History is taken as a drop and on that backdrop, *vedic* teaching is given. So fiction is also added in. Fact and fiction are mixed. You should not ask, did *Rāvaṇa* really have ten heads? A person *Rāvaṇa* existed, that is the fact. His having ten heads is fiction, thrown in as a symbolism to illustrate some important point such as the syndrome of multiple personalities. This is no different from current day movies made on historical events. While the underlying events are facts, the artist uses his creative genius as a license to mix in fiction. The creativity is what makes people to read, watch, listen to *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* even today. This is the fifth layer of scriptural literature known as *itihāsa*.

Then comes the sixth and final layer is *bhāṣya*. *Bhāṣya* is a commentary written in *saṁskṛta* on all the above five layers of the literature. Our great *ācārya*-s have studied all these literature and then spent time and effort to write commentaries on them. Other *ācārya*-s have commented on some commentaries. *Tīkā*-s or notes have been written on the commentaries. Commentaries are needed because our scriptural literature has to be unlocked in an appropriate manner. If you do not know how to extract the details, the meanings you will have grave misunderstanding. If the scriptural literature should benefit me, I should know how to unlock them. There is a tradition, *saṁpradāya*, a key to open the secrets. That is why we do not recommend translations written on these literature, especially by westerners or western educated Indians. Using *saṁpradāya*, the traditional way to analyze and interpret our scriptural literature, our *ācārya*-s have written *bhāṣya*-s. This is

the sixth layer. These *bhāṣya*-s are in the form of prose as well as verses. *San̐karācārya* has written a voluminous *bhāṣya* on *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. *Sureśvarācārya* writes 12,000 verses on one *upaniṣad*. Thus all these six layers of literature put together is our *śāstra* and the entire *śāstra* is meant only for one purpose and that is to help in the accomplishment of the *puruṣārtha* that we saw in the last class. May we all embark on this study and succeed and attain all the *puruṣārtha*-s and especially the highest among them, *mokṣa*!