



26. TERRY COE

Terry Coe has been a student of Pujya Swami Dayananda since 1989, attending courses in Saylorsburg, Rishikesh, and Coimbatore. He studied Sanskrit at Harvard University, and is a professional German-to-English translator. Terry has led Gita Vichara groups, taught classes on the Upanishads and other texts to local students at AVG, and conducts Vedic heritage classes for children during the summer camps, as well as introductory Sanskrit during the 6-week fall course. He is currently based in Stamford, CT, and is available for workshops or ongoing classes in New England on basic Sanskrit, meditation, Bhagavad Gita, and other Vedanta topics.

INTERVIEW

Q: How does charging for teachings work in the Advaita Vedanta tradition?

Terry Coe: As far as charging for the teachings is concerned, that's a pretty easy one to answer, at least in our parampara. This teaching is a sharing of knowledge that has been freely given, and so must be freely passed on. We certainly give gifts (dakshina) to our teachers as a sign of respect and gratitude, but such things are not asked for or required. Since the traditional teachers are mostly sannyasis who have no belongings anyway, and who live by bhiksha, they don't need money for themselves. Any money that is given to a teacher is passed on to the gurukulam to support its operations.

Our gurukulam operates in this way, i.e. based upon donations. It charges nominal registration and lodging fees if one wishes to stay there for an entire camp. As far as the Vedanta classes themselves are concerned, however, anyone can drop in and attend any time they wish, and there is never a charge for that. Pujya Swamiji's ashrams in India also operate on a pure donation basis, and I have been told that this is the general custom for traditional ashrams there.

Pujya Swamiji has always been very clear on this matter. The logic is that the subject matter of this teaching is the truth of your own nature, so how can you be asked to pay someone in order to hear the truth about yourself? Teachers from outside also use the gurukulam facilities at times to teach workshops on jyotish, yoga, etc., and may charge for class attendance. Such knowledge being in topics other than Vedanta, there is no problem with charging for that. I assume the gurukulam also derives some additional income from such uses of the facility. But Vedanta classes by our teachers are always free, either here in the ashram or at outside venues.

In Mundakopanishad, there is a famous mantra (1.2.12) which states:

“Examining the experiences gained by doing actions and meditation, may the discriminative person discover dispassion. Moksha, which is not created, cannot be gained through action. Therefore, to gain the knowledge

of Brahman, he must go with sacrificial twigs in hand to a teacher who is well-versed in scriptures and who has clear knowledge about Brahman.”
(translation by Swami Dayananda)

“Sacrificial twigs” refers to twigs from a particular tree that the teacher would use in traditional fire ceremonies. Bringing them to the teacher symbolizes a willingness to serve and to listen. So there are things that the student needs to give to the teacher, namely his/her service (in the form of helping the teacher as needed), attention, commitment, devotion, and trust. This is not for the teacher’s sake, though. It is for the student, to strengthen their dedication and focus their attention on learning.

Q: Does this same rule apply to lay teachers or non monks? For example, if a lay teacher has to travel to teach somewhere and needs to rent out a space, or pay for a hotel room, is this reason enough to ask others to pay for the teachings?

Terry Coe: If a student, or group of students, invites a teacher to come somewhere and teach, then they should make the arrangements and bear the costs for travel, providing a space, finding accommodations for the teacher, etc. But this is not the teacher’s doing. The rule is that a Vedanta teacher does not teach unless asked to teach, so they don’t “market” themselves. In fact, traditionally the student would have to go and find the teacher (not always easy in those days) and then live with him for some time, doing service (cf. Mundakopanishad verse) before the teacher would even start to teach. This process is described in several upanishads (e.g. Chandogya, Ch. 8). Nowadays, of course, our teachers save us the time and the travel, coming to us to teach when we invite them. That’s no small blessing!!

In any case, it is the responsibility of those who invite a teacher to create the physical conditions required. And if those students then invite others to come and hear the teaching as well, I see no problem in making an appeal for donations to help defray the costs. But it should not be required. And the teaching should be free and open to all who wish to listen. This applies regardless of whether the teacher is a lay person or a sannyasi. Vedanta is not a career path or a business model, and is certainly not a for-profit activity. It's not like teaching yoga asanas or a language or a science or business class, or even doing psychotherapy. Anyone who is teaching Vedanta as a business does not understand what it is all about and therefore will obviously be unable to teach it properly.

As to your second question, I found the advertisement very funny! I have no idea what someone would expect to get out of such a "satsang appointment", or what the person offering it has in mind. It sounds more like therapy/counseling to me - which is fine, but it shouldn't be confused with studying Vedanta. Learning Vedanta requires a consistent and systematic study of shaastra (scripture) for a length of time under the guidance of a qualified teacher. Every word in the previous sentence is important! Vedanta is not just the message, it is the method. That is why we have a teaching lineage. Teacher and shaastra are both necessary in order for the understanding to take place.

Also, Vedanta is not meant for solving one's situational emotional problems. It is about solving the fundamental problem. If one has serious emotional problems in life, these should really be addressed before studying Vedanta. Pujya Swamiji encourages students to seek counseling if necessary. We all have some emotional baggage, of course, but one has to be relatively well-balanced to even embark successfully on this study. That said, many people still rely on their gurus for emotional support and counseling. Nothing wrong with it, our teachers have infinite compassion and patience, but in my opinion, the teacher's time could be better spent in

other ways, i.e. teaching shaastra. The student would be better off finding a good psychologist instead, and then coming to Vedanta later.

I strongly suspect that a lot of this “modern Vedanta teaching” consists of simply creating a peaceful atmosphere where people can relax. That’s helpful, of course, because many people don’t normally make space in their lives for quietly sitting and doing some peaceful reflection. But such feel-good sessions don’t solve the fundamental problem; they only obscure it for a short time. Healthier than hanging out in bars for relaxation, I suppose, but it gets one no closer to the solution. You always end up eventually needing another “workshop” - which is how Neo-Advaita became an industry, I guess!

Q: What are your thoughts on the way contemporary Advaita is taught in the West, please see advertisement here.

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A Vedic pundit from India told me that it's OK to charge for the teachings in the western culture as long as it's only to sustain oneself and as long as one is not "hoarding wealth". He mentioned the book of Manu.

Q: Do you know if the Upanishads mention charging for the teachings anywhere else? Or if Shankara or anyone else made any commentaries about non monastics teaching or charging for advaita?

Terry Coe: Thanks for the link to Manu Smriti. That is a very big text, so there may be some information in there. But since the idea of teaching as a "profession" as we know it today simply didn't exist in those times, there will be no direct statements on it. Simply put, in those times, the Brahmins were responsible as a group for maintaining and passing on the knowledge, and did so within the context of guru-shishya relationship, in which the guru, if a sannyasi, was given what he needed to live on and maintain himself in order to teach. Otherwise, as a householder, his job was to be a priest and to educate people, in return for which gifts were given within the context of rituals, etc. and students would give gifts to their teachers, but it wasn't a business relationship, simply because there was no such business. It was a simple matter of supporting those who taught and had no means of support of their own. But it wasn't a commercial relationship, i.e. "I'll give you this only if you pay me." Both sides simply did their duty – one side to teach, the other side to support. The only people involved in commercial dealings

were the vaishyas, the merchant class. And they didn't teach, they just did their business.

As far as I am aware, the Upanishads don't say anything about teaching for money. In fact, they say that one shouldn't even talk about this knowledge at all to anyone who has not done the requisite spiritual preparation.

Thanks for the story of Pravahana. Anyway, the story is the one of Indra and Virochana, the kings of the Devas and the Asuras, respectively, who go to Prajapati to learn about the Self. Prajapati asks them to live in the ashram for 32 years. Ultimately, Indra ends up there for 101 years before he finally "gets" the teaching! So that is to show the commitment. It's a very beautiful story, highly recommended because it shows the method of the teaching very nicely.

I suppose the idea of teaching only to sustain oneself is based upon the idea of a sannyasi, who doesn't need much but food and a few clothes, and those are more readily given by people if he teaches and becomes a respected figure who others see as worthy of support by the community. "Hoarding wealth", i.e. the idea of greed, can get one into a confusing discussion of what then constitutes "greed", i.e. how much is just enough and how much is excess? The answer is, if one is insecure, there is never enough. If one is secure, then what one already has is enough, so why ask for more?

END OF INTERVIEW