The Pioneer

The Teacher Who Admitted the Gap

A day at an offline session shows why a Vedanta teacher draws such different listeners, where his reasoning is formidable, and where it still owes answers.

Deepak Kumar Jha, Abhinav Kumar Jha · 12 November 2026

https://dailypioneer.com/india/the-teacher-who-admitted-the-gap

A national junior powerlifting champion asks whether her defiance of social convention is really freedom. A senior police officer struggles to reconcile institutional obligation with his own judgment. An animal-welfare advocate asks by what authority humans place themselves above other creatures. Their lives could hardly be more different. Yet on October 25 they sat in the same room, listening to one man speak about the self, the ego and the meaning of freedom.

The gathering was an offline session on Vedanta led by Acharya Prashant. People had travelled from Haryana, Odisha, Pune and Delhi. Some came from modest households, others from affluent ones. There were professionals, sportspersons, women managing domestic responsibilities and people who had followed him online for years before meeting him in person.

Outside the auditorium, another side of his following was visible. One member of his team had studied at IIT Bombay before completing a PhD at the University of California. Another had reconsidered his professional direction after finding little meaning in his work. Since Acharya does not have a lavish ashram, the organisation rents halls at colleges and institutions across the country to conduct sessions on the scriptures and spirituality.

What brings such different people to one teacher? The easy answers are scale and pedigree. His YouTube channel had 59.7 million subscribers and 5.3 billion views by January this year, and few spiritual teachers can cite IIT Delhi, IIM Ahmedabad and a cleared Civil Services Examination. Neither explains the room. Numbers measure reach and degrees measure aptitude; neither proves that a philosophy is true or a teacher good. Having spent a day watching him work, I came away with something more interesting than either admiration or suspicion: respect for a formidable mind and an unusually honest manner, along with several questions his teaching has not yet answered.

A question from a 14-year-old

The most telling moment did not belong to any of the distinguished guests. It came from the youngsters, who brought the day’s most uncomfortable questions. One asked whether his followers belong only to Tier-I cities. That query went without a clear answer, though the journeys people had made from Odisha and Haryana complicated its premise. Another, a girl of 14, pointed to contradictions in his books, particularly one on women.

Public figures with far smaller followings have turned such moments into performances of patience or wit. Acharya Prashant did neither. “Oh I missed to elaborate in the book. I should

have done that," he said, and told her that the book's sequel would explain the matter more fully.

There was not an iota of defensiveness in it. A teacher with tens of millions of subscribers conceded a shortcoming, in public, to a teenager, and the room understood the lesson without being told: learning begins at home, and it has to begin with the person at the front of the room. In a guru culture that too often treats a question as an impertinence, that small admission said more about his character than any citation could.

Fairness requires one further observation. The girl raised a contradiction, and he answered with an omission. Those are not the same thing. A gap can be filled by elaboration; a contradiction has to be resolved, which may mean giving something up. The sequel will be the real test of his reply. But the instinct was the right one, and it matches a standard he has set for himself. Discussing criticism of religion, he has argued that the authenticity of a religion depends on how far it permits questions, criticism and analysis. Few teachers invite that yardstick. Fewer stand still while a 14-year-old applies it.

The art of the distinction

For Sneha Sanjeev Kamaladinni, a national junior powerlifting champion and Asian Championships medallist, the journey began at home. Her mother had regularly attended his sessions. Sneha said her mother had struggled with pressures within the family but gradually became more independent and confident after engaging with his teachings. That change shaped the daughter. She rides a motorcycle, competes in a sport that challenges conventional ideas of femininity and makes choices others might find unconventional.

Meeting him for the first time, she did not simply express gratitude. She asked whether she was doing these things because she wanted to, or mainly to rebel against society.

His answer showed his intelligence at its best. Neither conformity nor opposition, he said, is inherently the problem. What matters is whether a person understands and owns the decision. A choice may coincide with social expectation or defy it; the question is whether it arises from considered conviction. Most of the rebellion-versus-tradition debate collapses under that single stroke. The rebel who needs society to oppose remains as dependent on it as the conformist who needs its approval. And the exchange held a fine tension of its own: a woman who associated the teachings with freedom was asking whether her pursuit of freedom might still be governed by the society she wanted to defy.

Then came the part that impressed me more. Sneha expressed interest in joining his organisation, the sort of offer that most movements would accept with delight: a young national champion, a family testimony, a ready-made story. He told her to examine the decision and establish her own reasons, and not to join merely because the teachings had helped her mother. A leader who slows down his own recruit is practising what he preaches. Whether that restraint holds throughout the organisation is a separate question, but in that exchange it was

unmistakable.

The philosophical gap is subtler. “Considered conviction” is an inward test, and inward tests are hard to audit. People are skilled at persuading themselves that a choice is deeply their own. How would Sneha, or anyone, know the difference? The teaching’s answer is continued self-inquiry, which is honest but open-ended, and it cannot supply an external check.

Clarity, and the convenient premise

For ACP Pardeep Kumar Khatri, a Haryana Police officer who has coached international wrestlers and won medals at the World Police and Fire Games, the attraction lies elsewhere. He has followed the online content for three to four years, and October was his first offline session. His work means weighing public concerns, the expectations of senior officers and his own sense of what should be done. These do not always point in the same direction, as anyone working through an established hierarchy will recognise, and he said the teachings have helped him think through such conflicts and decide how to act.

That is a meaningful thing for a serving officer to say, and it suggests how far the teaching travels beyond the meditation-cushion audience one might expect. It also has limits. Khatri offered no specific instance of a changed professional decision, so his testimony describes the value he finds rather than demonstrated improvements in policing. That defines what can responsibly be concluded; it does not diminish what he experienced.

Gauri Maulekhi, an animal-welfare advocate and trustee of People for Animals, was impressed above all by his clarity. In her work she constantly meets vagueness and contradiction about how society treats animals, and she felt his way of setting out an argument could help people grasp what is at stake. She asked how confidently humans can establish the limits of an animal’s sensitivity, since such judgments are routinely used to decide which creatures may be eaten or exploited.

He turned the question around. The issue, he said, is not only whether each animal’s sensitivity can be conclusively established, but whether human beings have any right to treat other creatures as inferior because they consider themselves superior. Even if animals were assumed to be insensitive, would that automatically justify killing them? For her, the appeal lay partly in how he challenged the premise of a question rather than answering it on its original terms.

This is his signature move, and it is powerful. He hears the premise inside a question and goes after it, exposing how often our ethical reasoning is self-interest wearing a lab coat. That consistency has earned recognition well beyond his own following, including PETA India’s 2022 Most Influential Vegan award.

But the move has a cost, and listeners should notice it. Redirecting a question is not the same as answering it. What animals can experience is a scientific question, and it matters; a charge of human ego cannot settle it. Nor does the rhetorical challenge finish the moral argument. If a

being truly felt nothing, what exactly would be wronged by harming it? There may be a good Vedantic reply, resting on non-violence as a discipline of the one who acts rather than a calculation about the one acted upon. It deserves to be spelled out, because the sharpness of the turn can feel like resolution before the resolution has arrived.

Who is using the mind?

These exchanges lead to the centre of his teaching: who is the person claiming ownership of thoughts, desires, memories and decisions? Education, he argues, sharpens the tools of the mind without examining the desires directing them. The question is not merely how capable the mind is, but who is using it.

It is one of the best critiques of Indian credentialism available today, and it carries the authority of someone who passed every examination the system could set and then walked away. Born Prashant Tripathi in 1978, he moved through IIT Delhi and IIM Ahmedabad and cleared the civil services examination before corporate work and, eventually, teaching. His published biography describes growing dissatisfaction with an education that trained skills without examining the person using them. He built programmes combining literature and philosophy, then public sessions, online discourses and textual study, later institutionalised through the PrashantAdvait Foundation, whose work extends to animal welfare, veganism and environmental responsibility.

Here also lies what separates him from the motivational mainstream. His remedy is not to swap negative thoughts for positive ones. It is to examine the assumptions behind them, which is harder and much less flattering. If professional success is the measure of worth, a setback becomes a crisis of identity; if approval is essential, disapproval becomes unbearable. Suffering, on this view, comes not only from circumstances but from the attachments and beliefs through which we read them. He motivates by refusing to console, and that so large an audience seeks out a teacher who offers so little comfort is perhaps the strongest compliment it can pay.

The articulation deserves its own credit. Reviewers have noted that his book Karma presents the cryptic teachings of the Upanishads in a contemporary and relatable manner, and that Sambandh speaks in everyday language. The same reviews record the limits: Vedantic terminology can defeat the lay reader, and his pace can be hard to follow. In the room, those limits largely disappear. He reasons aloud, takes an objection seriously and builds an answer in plain steps, and the listener can see where each step comes from. Digital platforms carry much of this: people may begin with a short video, move to longer discourses and eventually attend in person, as Khatri did. Audience figures show the scale of that distribution, though they cannot establish how deeply anyone engages or what changes follow.

The sharpest gap in this framework appears where the self meets society. Material deprivation, discrimination, institutional failure and unequal power shape lives whatever one’s self-knowledge. A framework centred on the self serves best when it illuminates individual responsibility without obscuring those external conditions. A foundation summary of one of his

discourses says human corruption, “such as the caste system or exploitation”, does not originate from scriptures but from innate animal tendencies and ignorance. That is a serious claim, and a contestable one. Ambedkar, whom he has publicly honoured, argued in Annihilation of Caste that belief in the sanctity of the shastras was itself the thing to be confronted. An account in which the root of caste is always inner risks leaving its institutions and texts too lightly examined.

His reading of scripture raises a related question. He is admirably willing to say that the oldest Upanishads carry the ritualism, superstition and social structures of their time. Yet this approach also leaves the teacher deciding what is timeless and what is sediment. A critique in The North East Times argued that his readings of rebirth, liberation and karma conflict sharply with those of respected ancient commentators. He has an answer of sorts in tradition itself, since Vedanta’s great commentators disagreed fiercely with one another. Independent scholars should still be testing his readings, and his followers should want them to.

The teacher and the teaching

The women I met from Haryana, Odisha and Delhi were among the day’s most striking presences. Across age groups, some attending offline for the first time, they spoke with confidence and ease about balancing household work with studies and personal interests, and about pursuing what they valued. Asked what had changed, one woman said she had begun to understand dharma, which she described in terms of freedom and following her own considered inclinations. For her, a word often associated with ritual and inherited duty had become a way of living with greater independence.

That is no small achievement for a teacher working within a tradition so frequently invoked to restrict women. It would still be premature to credit the teachings alone. These women have their own histories, relationships and ambitions, and a single day cannot chart a life before and after. A person in a wheelchair had travelled from Pune, a reminder of the effort people will make to attend, though without knowing that person’s reasons it would be wrong to infer what the journey meant.

Nor can a gathering of the committed measure his influence. A fuller assessment would need to examine the organisation’s institutional culture, speak to people who have moved away and engage independent scholars. Here too he has offered a principle worth holding him to. Answering a listener unnerved by scandals involving gurus, he said the relationship should be with the teaching, not the teacher’s personality. That is sound advice and a rare one for a guru to give. The same answer, however, suggests that the doubter may be looking for an excuse to avoid spirituality, and places the fault in followers who chose wrongly. Caution about gurus is not always evasion, particularly in a country with reason for it. And no teacher with this reach can be wholly separated from his personality; accountability has to include institutions as well as ideas.

Honesty also requires recording what independent thinking can cost. In April his foundation

reported a death threat made through a YouTube account after his remarks honouring Ambedkar, and it says such threats have recurred. Whatever one makes of his arguments, a teacher who keeps speaking on caste, religion and superstition in that climate is displaying a courage that his critics, too, should acknowledge.

The question that remains

What, then, should one conclude? His arguments have gaps: an inward test of freedom that cannot be audited, a redirection that sometimes stands in for an answer, a focus on the self that can underweight social structure, an interpretive authority that needs outside scrutiny. None of these is trivial. They are, however, the gaps of a serious thinker, the kind that appear only when someone has actually taken a position.

What he offers in return is rare. He reasons in public, and his reasoning can be followed and therefore challenged. He brings the concerns of a sportsperson, a police officer and an animal-welfare advocate into one conversation about how to live. He sends a would-be recruit away to think, and he tells a 14-year-old that he should have done better. Above all, he asks people not to take his word for anything, which is an unusual request from someone so many people are inclined to believe.

At the October session, that demand took different forms. Sneha wondered whether her rebellion was really her own. Khatri weighed competing obligations. Maulekhi questioned the assumptions that place humans above other animals. A girl of 14 questioned the book in front of her. None of them left with a slogan, and the most revealing moments of the day were not expressions of gratitude but the sight of people who feel helped by a teaching beginning to question their own understanding of it.

That is the highest compliment a teacher of self-inquiry can receive, and he has earned it. Whatever his arguments still owe, Acharya Prashant has given a great many Indians something they were seldom offered at school, at work or in the temple: permission to ask why they live as they do, and the tools to keep asking, even of him.