

NATURE OF THE SELF OR THE ATMAN

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It is the greatest tragedy of life that most of the people do not know themselves. This statement may appear as a fallacy. Who does not know himself? Ask anyone and he will reply who he is: son of so and so; a goldsmith, a soldier, an engineer, an administrator, a scholar, a merchant, a diplomat, a blacksmith, or a carpenter; blind or lame, fair or black, wealthy or poor; joyous or sorrowful. What more does he need to know? Is this not enough for his worldly purpose? No doubt a worldly man need know nothing more. But there come in the life of everyone moments when everything seems to go out of gear, symphony of life breaks down, jarring notes impinge on it and the world seems to be what it was not or what it is not to be. Then it is that man wonders whether all that he sees and senses is real. If these moments persist and man takes advantage of his experience to probe deep into the mystery of his own self, he is said to be a wise man. He only can know his true self. 'Having observed the worlds attainable by actions (to be transient) and that this Uncreated One cannot be obtained by karma a Brāhmaṇa should be dispassionate,' says also the *Mundakopanisad*.¹

Normally, we see that man identifies himself with the body when he says 'I am the son of such and such a person' or that he is black or fair, lame or blind and so on. A vast majority of the populace of the world cannot transcend this body idea. But there are times when man forgets his body also. What does he mean when he says that he is joyous or sorrowful? Is the body feeling that joy? Of course, the body may express it. But where actually is the joy or sorrow? It is in the mind. For the time being, therefore, that person transcends the body. But there is a third experience which cannot be said to be of either the body or the mind—the experience of deep sleep. After awakening from deep sleep the person says 'I slept well. I did not know anything.' Here are two statements — one is sleep and the other is not knowing. The first one shows that the body was restful and the second shows that the mind too was not functioning. But from the statement we come to understand that it is the same person who went to sleep, almost blanked out, that is making the statement and not any other. So we see

a third phenomenon: a principle that is active, which is beyond even the mind, and watches even when the mind is at rest. That one say our Rishis is the Ātman, the true Self and not this body or the mind. These are its outer coverings. And this Ātman is to be seen, to be heard, to be cogitated and meditated upon, say the Upanisads. So here is evidence enough to show that man is not all what he thinks himself to be — not a mere cage of bones and flesh.

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Having come to the conclusion that our true Self is not the body or the mind a natural desire awakens in man to know what it really is; what its nature is; where in the body it resides; how it can be perceived and so on. It is here that we receive immense help from our Rishis and sages, seers and saints, because they have seen the Reality, known it and out of compassion for us handed down their experiences in the form of their talks, and mantras to posterity.

In the *Kathopanishad*, Naciketa asks Yama a very pertinent question, 'There is this doubt among men: Some say that when this body dies there is something that remains, whereas others say this ceases to be. Taught by you I want to know about this knowledge.'² This inquiry is the foundation of knowledge. The generality of mankind is satisfied with the things of the world. For them all these inquiries are superfluous. To most of them religion consists in the fulfilment or observance of some dogmas, some rites and following some creeds. And those who are rich enough and have earned wealth by means fair and foul think that they can purchase their place in heaven by building houses of charity and the like. And they believe that is quite sufficient. But very rarely some see through it all and discard them as meaningless, worthless in a greater sense, in the sense of Reality. That is what Naciketa did. Yama offered him long life, chariots, beautiful damsels, heavenly music, immense wealth and vast land. Yet, though a boy, Naciketa replies wisely, 'All these, what you offer,' he says, 'sap the energy of all the senses and even the longest life is but like a dream, very short-lived. Let, therefore, all these be with you alone.'³ That is discrimination, penetration which helps man to uncover himself. Such a strong determination alone brings us nearer to our goal; makes us comprehend the Reality.

This Ātman is a wonderful thing as the Lord of Death himself testifies. It requires a brilliance of intellect that can illumine the remotest recesses of our heart. Yama in the *Kathopanishad* says, 'Wonderful is the preceptor of this knowledge and equally marvellous is the pupil who learns it.'⁴ For it is so subtle to grasp and we are so much

on the gross side of the world. How subtle it is, is described in another place in the same Upanisad thus: 'It is subtler than the subtlest and greater than the greatest and resides in the cavity of the hearts of beings.'⁵ It is incomprehensible, yet is the essence of our being. It has been spoken of in contradictory terms such as, 'Though sitting it travels far, though lying down it travels everywhere.'⁶ Language fails to describe it, mind fails to grasp it, what it is can be finally said only in negative ways as 'not this', 'not this': 'It is not gross nor subtle; it is neither short nor long; neither red colour nor oiliness; neither shadow nor darkness; neither air nor ether, unattached, neither savour nor odour, without eyes or ears, without the vocal organ or mind, non-luminous, without the vital force or mouth, not a measure, without interior or exterior.'⁷ The negative epithets are there to discourage us from imputing any materiality to the Ātman. By denying odour, taste etc. to it the Upanisad maintains its unapproachability through the limited senses. Man has but only his five senses to evaluate the things presented to him and when he has to deal with phenomena that transcend his senses he feels himself at sea. That is exactly what happens when man tries to know about the Ātman.

Further, by saying that it is non-luminous the Upanisad does not mean to convey to us that the Ātman is dull or dark. Luminosity of a material kind is denied to it. The Atman is of the nature of consciousness, how can it be dull! 'There the sun does not shine, nor the moon nor the stars, nor the lightning, what then to speak of this mortal fire. Everything else shines in its wake. In its light everything becomes luminous,' say the scriptures. That is what Swami Vivekananda also meant when he said that every soul is potentially divine.

The second conclusion that emerges out of Naciketa's inquiry is that this Ātman is deathless and birthless. By denying these two changes to Ātman, Yama denies to it all the other mutations like growth and decay also. Another Upanisad more explicitly puts it as 'It is free from decrepitude, death and fear, and is immortal.'⁸

This idea is well brought out in the Gita by Sri Krishna. When Arjuna out of infatuation for his kith and kin refused to fight them and put forward arguments to abandon his duty as a warrior, Sri Krishna smiles at his ignorance. He remarks, 'You are grieving for those who are not to be grieved for, yet speak like a wise man. But the wise ones grieve not for the living or the dead.' He continues, 'It is not true that you, I and these people were not there before and will cease to exist with the end of these outer frames. For the embodied being birth and death are only two other types of changes as childhood, growth, youth and old age. He, therefore, grievously errs who thinks that he is killing

or is being killed. This Ātman is unborn, ever existing, eternal, ancient, and is not killed when the body is killed. This Ātman has not only no death but being immaterial cannot be pierced by the sword, nor burnt by fire, nor drenched by water, nor dried by air. It is all-pervading. It is immovable like a pillar and primordial.’⁹ But what it really is can only be subjectively experienced when man transcends all limits, bodily and mental, and attains *nirvikalpasamadhi*.

Sri Ramakrishna many a time attempted to describe what he experienced during his *nirvikalpa samadhi*, — a state where all the accretions of the Ātman are shed away—but thinking about it he would again cross the barriers of this world of ideation and merge into it. At last he said to the devotees, ‘I want to communicate to you what my experiences in that state are but something as it were presses down my tongue.’ Another time he said it is like going into the inner apartments and shutting the door; anything that transpires inside remains a sealed book for the outside world.

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The question that next confronts us is that if the Ātman were so subtle as cannot be seen how can we believe in its existence at all. To this Sri Ramakrishna says, well, it may not be perceived by the senses but it can be perceived by the pure mind. Sri Krishna also remarks to Arjuna in the Gita, ‘You will not be able to see Me with these eyes of yours, I shall bestow on you ethereal eye-sight to see My divine glory.’¹⁰ The pure mind develops a special faculty to perceive the Divine that dwells in every being. Constant dwelling on the Self, on the Divine is the only way to purify the mind. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, ‘If you want to keep your pots and pans bright you have to rub them daily.’ This thinking of the Lord is rubbing the mind of all its impurities, making it pure.

Yājñavalkya exhorts Maitreyi in a similar way when he says that Ātman is to be heard, to be cogitated and meditated upon. For, ‘this Ātman is a rare thing to hear about in this frenzied world, many have not the opportunity and time to do so. And even among those who hear many do not understand it.’¹¹ Rare indeed is a person who really hankers after it. Sri Ramakrishna often remarked: ‘People shed jugful of tears for wealth, wife and children but where is he who cries for God! Who wants God?’ Man is too much absorbed by the world to think of God or Ātman. But for a person who desires God, wants Him, He comes. The lives of sages and saints are the best assurance about this fact, the greatest testimony.

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Though the Ātman is pervading the bodies of beings it is conspicuously present at the region of the heart. Sri Ramakrishna compared it to a rich man's drawing-room. 'Though the rich man can be anywhere in the house he is mostly present in his drawing-room. The devotee's heart is God's drawing-room,' said he. Though God is present in every being He manifests more in man and among men also His manifestation is profoundly felt among the pure-souled devotees. Yogis, therefore, think of a blooming lotus in the region of the heart where they meditate upon the resplendent Ātman. The Vedas also speak in a like manner. 'That which is in the lotus-like abode (of the heart) in the city of Brahman is a tiny little space. And that which is in that space is to be investigated, that is to be known.'¹² When this proposition was put forward a natural objection was raised as to what can be there in such a microscopic space. To this the sage answered: 'All that what you see without, the space, the air, the sun, the moon, and the stars and everything that is and that is not, is inside it,' meaning thereby that the very same Being which is the Creator, Maintainer and Destroyer of this cosmos resides or is reflected in the heart of a Yogi, just as even the vast sun is reflected in a tiny dew-drop. That this Ātman is none other than Brahman itself is reiterated in every scripture. Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, 'The Lord, O Arjuna, resides in the region of the heart of all beings. It is He who residing there moves them as if mounted on a machine.' That is why Yogis and other spiritual teachers tell us to visualize a lotus in the heart as the abode or the seat of the Lord, the Ātman. For rationally inclined people this may seem a little odd, but to them we refer to Swamiji's instruction. Alluding to the process of Dharana Swamiji remarks, 'Dharana is holding the mind to certain points. Forcing the mind to feel certain parts of the body. This Dharana is of various sorts, and along with it, it is better to have a little play of imagination. For instance, the mind should be made to think of one point in the heart. That is very difficult, an easier way is to imagine a lotus there. The lotus is full of light, effulgent light.' Imagination does play a great part in our life. We all know this. So instead of dreaming idle dreams is it not infinitely better to see a lotus in the heart and Ātman as manifest there? Therefore, this imagination is quite in keeping with even the most rational thinking. Sri Ramakrishna too recommends the heart as a splendid place for concentration.

Further, these words Ātman and Brahman are often used interchangeably in the Upanisads in order to impress that these two mean one and the same thing. Nay, there is the definite, positive and unambiguous declaration of the Upanisads to this effect: 'This Ātman is

Brahman who is the experiencer of all.' ¹³ Sri Ramakrishna too says, 'It is God Himself who plays about as human beings.' From the foregoing evidence both ancient and recent we should have no difficulty to understand the real nature of our true Self, the Ātman.

All that is required is to remember that we are That. Of course, it is not possible to grasp this idea immediately. Even a person like Swetaketu, brought up in the tradition of the ancient knowledge found it rather hard to understand. His father had to repeat it to him with elaborate explanation not less than nine times before he could comprehend the idea. Further, this knowledge need not necessarily upset the followers of the path of devotion. It is enough for them if they feel an affinity, a kinship to God whom they worship. They may establish any relation with Him — of a child, a servant or a friend whichever agrees with their sentiments. The main purpose of human life being to know one's true Self, to see God, it matters little what path one follows to attain the goal.

¹ Mundakopanisad. 1-2-13.

² Katha Upanishad, 1.20.

³ Ibid., 1.26.

⁴ Ibid., 2.7.

⁵ Ibid., 2.20.

⁶ Ibid., 2.21.

⁷ Br. Up., 3.8.8.

⁸ Br. Up., 4.4.25.

⁹ Gita II. 11 to 13, 19, 20, 24.

¹⁰ Gita, XI.8.

¹¹ Kathopanishad, 2.7.

¹² Ch. Up. 8.1.1.

¹³ Br. Up., 2.5.19.