

Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Atman

Question

Do all living beings have an Atman? Are all living things interconnected because of Atman?

Answer

Yes, all living beings have an Atman. Atman is the essence, the core, the very truth, and the very being of all living beings. Atman is *saccidānanda* and is present everywhere. It is not that everything has Atman. Rather, Atman is everything. Do not separate Atman from things. It is not that I have a self; rather, I am the Self. All that exists is but the manifestation of Atman and, therefore, everything is interconnected; everything is one. The many things that we see are the manifestation of the One. The one Atman manifests as all beings, sentient and insentient, and living and non-living. All are manifestations of this one Self just as all ornaments are manifestations of gold, or all waves are manifestations of water. Everything in creation is the manifestation of the one Self, Atman. Atman is present everywhere and is the connecting link. All beings spring from the Self, and that is why we have order or harmony that connects or sustains everything. This very order or harmony is Atman, which sustains everything.

Question

Do we have to accept on faith that Atman is real and that it lives on after our death?

Answer

As we have discussed earlier, Atman is different from the gross, subtle, and causal bodies. The Self, is identified with these three because of ignorance and is called *jīvātman*, the ego, and sometimes also called the soul. The Self or Atman, by itself, is ever free and unconnected, and sustains and illumines everything. However, because of ignorance, the self identifies with the body-mind complex and comes to be called the *jīva*, the ego or the individual self. Upon death, what transmigrates from one body to the other is the individual self that is identified with the subtle body.

Rather than accepting different embodiments in blind faith, we can understand that the continuity of life is a reasonable and logical proposition. In nature, nothing new is created or destroyed. Matter, for example, does not get created or destroyed; it just changes forms. Science has taught us that there is no creation or destruction; there is merely a change of form. Science does not accept life as separate from matter; life is viewed as a property of matter. However, we say that matter is the medium for the manifestation of life. Just as a bulb is the medium for the manifestation of electricity, so also, the subtle and gross bodies are the locus for manifestation of Consciousness. Just as there is continuity in matter, there is also continuity in life. And in the same manner as matter is not born and never dies, there is neither death, the destruction of life, nor birth. It is simply a change of form; a change of embodiment from one to the other. Even as we say that the body is dead, we know that it disintegrates into its components. So, if there is no birth or death of matter, it is reasonable to accept that there is no birth or death of life. Therefore, there is continuity in matter in as much as there is continuity in life also. This continuity is what we call rebirth or reincarnation from one embodiment to another.

To say that I did not have a previous birth, I am born from nowhere, and I disappear into nothing, makes no sense. That is to say that I came into existence from non-existence. No non-existent thing can give rise to an existent thing. Something cannot come out of nothing. If there is no reason why I am what I am, and you are what you are, there seems to be a lot of disparity and injustice. It would seem wrong if I were not accountable for my past actions and, again, if I do not bear the consequences of my present actions. If I do not accept the continuity of life, this life and its diversity are inexplicable. It would make sense only if I accept that I have had past embodiments when I performed a variety of actions that have given rise to my present. Again, I have to accept that I perform actions today, which will give rise to the future. Thus, there is a chain of cause and effect. If I were to be born without a history, I would be born without a cause and if I die without a living residue, a cause is destroyed without creating an effect. If birth were an effect without a cause, death would become a cause without an effect. That does not make sense.

Question

The Self is dear to me. Who is this 'me'?

Answer

The Upanishad states that anything that I hold dear, is dear to me because the Self is dear to me. Whatever is important to me in this life is because the Self is important. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad simply says everything is dear to me for my own sake. Another treatise, the Pañcadaśī, raises the question of this 'me'. It is explained that the 'me' can have three meanings: it could be *mukhya* or important, it could be *gauna* or secondary, or it could be *mithyā* or false.

For example, I may be so attached to my child that I am prepared to do anything for the sake of that child, even to the extent of giving up my life. Similarly, there are people who love their country so much that they are willing to give up their lives for their country. In these cases, there is a strong identification with something other than the Self. Therefore, even in the awareness that the child or the country is not the 'I', the identification with it is so complete that the child or the country becomes very 'I' to which I am strongly attached.

More often than not, the 'me' is my body, this *upādhi* or personality, which is not the real me. Out of ignorance, however, I identify completely with it, and it becomes me.

Finally, in the true sense, the 'me' is my Self. The Self is that which is separate from the three bodies, the gross, subtle, and causal bodies; it transcends the five *kośas*, notions, and is witness to the three states of awareness, the waking, dream, and deep sleep states. The nature of this Self is *saccidānanda*. Thus, the true 'me' or 'I', is *saccidānanda* or Brahman.

In the sense if it being *mithyā* or false, the 'me' is this body, and in the sense of it being *gauna* or secondary, it is yet another thing with which I identify, e.g., my child or my country.

Thus, the meaning of 'me' keeps changing in different situations. One thing, however, is certain: whatever I look upon or identify with as being 'me' or the essential 'I' is my primary equation and dearest to me. Every other association, everything else, becomes secondary.

Question

What is the difference between Atman and Brahman?

Answer

Atman is the individual Self and Brahman is the universal Self. Essentially, they are the same.

Question

How are Atman and *paramātmā* related?

Answer

Atman is the Self of the individual being and is usually understood to be the essential 'I'. 'Param' means that which is free from limitations. *Paramātmā* means the Self that is free from limitations. It is the limitless Self and, usually, we say that it is the Self of the universe. Thus, Atman is the individual Self and *paramātmā* is the universal Self. It looks like these are two different entities, but Vedanta teaches that both are one. Atman, the individual self, is the Self of all and *paramātmā*, the universal Self, is my own Self¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Chaya Rajaram, Malini, Jayshree Ramakrishnan, and Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey.