

Satsanga with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Brahman, *Īśvara*, and Other Gods in Hinduism

Question

Would you please talk about the relationship between Brahman and *īśvara*?

Answer

The relationship between Brahman and *īśvara* is similar to the relationship that exists between an actor and the role he plays. Imagine an actor playing the role of king. What is the relationship between the actor and the king? A relationship requires two entities; it can only be played out between two separate entities. Can there be a relationship between the actor and the king? No, there cannot be because they are the same entity. Then why do you use two names? Why do you say 'actor' and 'king' if, in fact, there is only one entity? This is because the actor is a king from the standpoint of his costume and the function that he performs. So also, Brahman alone is *īśvara*. When Brahman wears the costume of '*māyā*', He becomes creator, sustainer, and dissolver. Therefore, from the standpoint of being in the costume of *māyā*, Brahman is called *īśvara*. Just as from the standpoint of the costume we call the actor a king or a beggar, so also, Brahman alone is *īśvara*. Brahman and *īśvara* are not different from each other in the same way as an ornament and the gold of which it is made are not different. The gold alone is called the ornament. Similarly, Brahman alone is called *īśvara*. From the standpoint of the creation, Brahman is creator, sustainer, and dissolver. It is in these roles that Brahman is *īśvara*.

Question

We say there is only one Almighty God. However, Hinduism has so many Gods – Lord Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Goddess Lakshmi, Saraswati etc. How can we reconcile this?

Answer

The idea of the many gods or *devatās* in Hinduism is not opposed to there being only one God. There is only one God, but we can worship the same God in different ways. It is just like you are related to different individuals in different ways: to one you are a mother or a father; to another you are a daughter or a son; then you are a sister or brother, an uncle or an aunt, and so on. In each case, you

are available to each person differently and each relates to you in a different way. You take on different roles in each relationship. You get a different name in each role and you may even dress differently depending on the role. For instance, as a shopper you may wear one kind of clothes and as a sales person you may wear another. How many are you then? Are you many or are you one? So also, we relate to God in different ways.

It is possible for the one God to take on many roles and be many. One person relates to God as a father, some other person relates to God as a mother, yet another relates to God as the master, and so on. This is how you have all the different names. For example, as a mother the divinity is Durga, as a father He may be Shiva, and as the master He may be Rama. These different names, forms, and functions do not necessarily mean that there are many entities. They are all merely functional names of the same entity, just as 'mother' or 'daughter' are functional names. As the Creator, He is called Brahma, as the Sustainer He is called Vishnu, and, as the destroyer of Evil, He is called Shiva. It is the same God who, under different names, performs infinite roles. Take the example of Lord Krishna himself: to the Gopis he was the beloved, to Yasoda he was a child and, to Arjuna, he was a friend. Therefore, the diversity does not necessarily contradict the Oneness of God. There is unity underlying the apparent diversity.

Question

Isn't the concept of the devil not in keeping with Hindu Dharma?

Answer

There is cruelty, violence, etc. in the world, all of which we call evil. When you say that the 'devil' sitting on someone's shoulder is controlling him, it is his impulse that is controlling him. Therefore, by devil all we mean is one's negative tendencies. We have to accept that these demoniac tendencies are a product of ignorance. However, they are not part of human nature or something inherent in us. They are present incidentally and we have to bear with that. Nobody is evil by nature. Just as there can be spots on a clean shirt, such tendencies can occur in our minds and we have to cleanse the mind of them¹.

¹ Arsha Vidya Gurukulam Memorial Day 2006 Camp *satsanga*. Transcribed and edited by Jaya Kannan, Chaya Rajaram, and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.