

Vedânta Philosophy

Self - Knowledge

(Atma - Jnana)

by

Swami Abhedananda

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To The Lotus Feet Of
Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna

My Divine Guru

By whose grace The Bliss of Self-Knowledge Is Realized.

PREFACE

In this age of skepticism and materialism few people care to know their real Self, which is Divine and immortal. But the knowledge of the true Self has always been the principal theme of the philosophy and religion of Vedanta. Even in its most ancient writings, the Upanishads, which form portions of the Vedic Scriptures, we find how earnestly Self-knowledge or *Atma-Jnana* was sought after and extolled. The great inspired seers mentioned in these Upanishads discovered and taught that knowledge of the Self lies at the root of all knowledge, whether of science, philosophy or religion. Every sincere seeker after knowledge, therefore, who desires intellectual, moral or spiritual development, must first learn to discriminate between spirit and matter, soul and body, and then realize the all-knowing Divine Self who is the eternal foundation of the universe.

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“Matter or object is related to spirit or subject; and the subject or spirit is equally related to the object or matter. If there were no object, there would be no subject: and if there were no subject, there would be no object. For on either side alone nothing could be achieved.”

Kaushitaki Upanishad, III, 8

SPIRIT AND MATTER

Spirit and matter have always been subjects for discussion in science, philosophy and religion. The great thinkers of all countries have tried their best to understand the true meanings of these two terms and to establish their mutual relation. The two words have various synonyms, such as ego and non-ego, subject and object, mind and matter. Scientists and philosophers have advanced many theories from time to time to explain their ideas and conceptions about them and have arrived at different conclusions. Some say that spirit or mind or ego is the cause of matter, while others reverse the relation and believe that matter is the cause of spirit or mind or ego. These conclusions have given foundation to the various explanations of the universe, which can be classified under three heads, — the spiritualistic or idealistic, the materialistic, and the monistic theories. The spiritualistic or idealistic theory claims that spirit or mind is the creator of matter and energy, hence of all material objects; and it denies the existence of matter as distinct and separate from the mode or condition of spirit or mind. The materialistic theory, on the contrary, maintains that matter produces spirit, mind, ego or subject.

There have been many idealistic or spiritualistic philosophers in different countries at different times. In India, Greece, Germany, and England have arisen a number of idealists like Bishop Berkeley, who have denied the existence of the external world and also of matter as an entity separate from mental ideas. Modern Christian Science, which teaches that there is no such thing as matter but that everything is mind, has been built upon this idealistic doctrine of Bishop Berkeley and other philosophers of the same school. In America it is new, because the nation is new. America has not yet produced any great idealistic philosopher.

The materialistic theory of the universe, on the other hand, is maintained by a large majority of the scientists, physicists, chemists, medical practitioners and the evolutionists of the present time. They try to deduce everything from matter, and claim that it is the cause of mind, ego or spirit. Although there are thousands and millions of people all over the world who advocate this theory and call themselves materialists, still very few can define the term matter and give a clear idea of what they understand by it.

What is matter? Has anybody ever seen matter? This question can be asked of the materialists. Do we see matter? No. We see color. Is color the same as matter? No. It is a quality. Where does it exist? An uneducated man may think that the color of a flower, as perceived, exists in the flower. But the physiologists explain that the color which is perceived does not exist as such in the flower, but that it is a sensation caused by a certain order of vibrations coming in contact with our consciousness through the medium of the optic nerves. This may seem strange, but it is true. The perception of color is a compound effect produced by vibrations of ether, which, entering through the eyes, create another set of vibrations in the brain cells; and these vibrations, when translated by the conscious entity, are called sensations. Color, therefore, is the result of the blending of the objective and subjective elements. It is the product of the combination of that which comes from the outside world and that which is given by the subjective or mental activities. Thus we can understand that color does not rest in the flower; but it depends upon the retina, optic nerves and brain cells as well, so it cannot be the same as matter.

Similarly we may ask: Is sound which we hear the same as matter? No. It is the result of a certain kind of vibration plus the conscious activity of the mind. If you go to sleep, the vibration of sound will enter through your ears and be carried through the auditory nerves into the brain cells, but you will not hear it, because the percipient mind is not there to translate the vibration into the sensation of sound. Sound, therefore, is not the same as matter. In the same manner it can be shown that the other senses do not give us any information about that which we call matter. Then we ask: What is matter? John Stewart Mill defines matter as the "permanent possibility of sensation," and mind as the "permanent possibility of feeling." Are we better off after hearing this definition? On the contrary, it is more confusing. The whole difficulty lies in the word

"possibility." It means, matter is that which permanently makes sensation possible, and mind or spirit is that which permanently makes feeling possible; or, in other words matter is that which can be permanently felt or perceived, that which is the object of feeling; and spirit is that which can permanently feel or perceive, that which is the subject of feeling.

That which permanently makes sensation possible can never be revealed by the senses, for the senses are no more than open doors for our sensations. All that we can predicate of matter is that it causes sensations. When we try to know its nature per se, or any particulars concerning it, our senses do not help us. The eyes are only instrumental in perceiving the sensation of color, the ears of sound, nostrils of odor. Our perception of the external world is limited by these sense powers, and all sensations are either direct or indirect results of our sense activities. Although we know that matter is something which exists in space and time and causes various sensations, still we cannot see or touch it. That which corresponds to the name "matter" will always remain intangible. We may touch a chair, a piece of wood or gold, but we cannot touch matter by itself. This is very curious. Gold or stone is not matter, but it is that which is produced by matter. Matter appears as wood or stone.

It may be interesting to know the history of the term matter. This word is derived from the Latin *materies*, meaning "stuff," and it was originally used in the sense of the solid wood of a tree or a timber for building. Gradually a generalized concept was formed which meant anything substantial out of which some other thing was fashioned. When a wooden statue was made, the form was distinguished from the substance wood or *materies*. Here it was still wood. But when a statue was made of stone or metal it was still called *materies*. Thus the name *materies* signified the substance out of which something was shaped or fashioned. Gradually when the question arose, "What was the substance out of which this world was made?" the answer was *materies* or matter. So the word matter does not mean any definite thing. It is used for that unknown substance out of which the known objects of perception are formed. Here ends the literal and real meaning of the term. Matter can be used in the sense of any unknown substance which lies at the bottom or foundation of some form or object. For instance, in our ordinary conversation we use this word in such expressions as "What is the matter?" "It does not matter," "Important matter," "Decaying matter."

In science and philosophy, however, matter is that unknown substance out of which all phenomenal forms are fashioned. It is beyond sense perception, yet it underlies all the objects of the universe. It is not the same as space or time, but it fills space, manifests itself in time, and cannot be limited by the category of causality. All these ideas are included in the meaning of the term matter. When we think of that substance of which the universe is the appearance, we imagine that it is vast, immense, marvellous and possessed of wonderful powers, which are constantly changing. But what is matter? Is it one or many? It is one. We cannot say that it is many. Herbert Spencer says: "Our conception of matter, reduced to its simplest shape, is that of coexistent positions that offer resistance, as contrasted with our conception of space in which the coexistent positions offer no resistance." (First Principles, p. 140) Let us understand the difference between space and matter. Space is extension offering no resistance, but that which offers resistance and lies in space is matter. He also states: "Of these two inseparable elements, the resistance is primary and the extension is secondary." As, for example, when we touch something it resists, then we have an idea of resistance; but when we spread our hand that feeling of resistance extends also in space. Herbert Spencer says again: "Our experience of force is that out of which the idea of matter is build up.... That which opposes our muscular energy is immediately present to consciousness in the terms of force. Hence forces, form the whole content of matter." Furthermore, he adds: "Matter and motion, as we know them, are differently conditioned manifestations of force. They are concrete build up from the contents of various mental relations." In order to feel resistance there must be present one who feels; and then the force that is felt is the primary cause which gives rise to the conception of matter is built up.... That which opposes our

conch-shell or a pipe when blown cannot be differentiated without referring it to the shell or to the pipe, as the sounds of a lute when played can be known only by referring them to the lute; as these particular sounds are but various manifestations of one common sound, so the one common Self or *Atman*, which is the Reality of the universe, appears through the varieties of names and forms which we perceive with our senses." "As from the one source of fire, when kindled with damp fuel, gradually emanate clouds of smoke and flame which did not exist there before, so verily, O beloved, from the one great Being, the Self (Brahman), the common source of knowledge and intelligence has been spontaneously breathed forth all the knowledge that we possess, such as the four Vedas (Scriptures), the various branches of science and philosophy, and everything that exists in this world as well as in celestial realms."

Ordinarily we ascribe scientific knowledge to particular individuals, but in reality every kind of knowledge that we find in different people, — scientists, Yogis, and philosophers, — has proceeded from that one source, the Self. As from one fire proceed smoke, sparks and flames, so from this one Infinite Self have come out all the sciences, philosophies and spiritual truths described in the different Scriptures of the world, as also the truths of art and history. The knowledge which we possess and make use of in our daily life is the expression of that absolute knowledge which is eternal, one, indestructible and unchangeable, and which brings immortality to the knower, who realizes the Self.

At the beginning of the cosmic evolution all phenomena as well as all knowledge evolved from this one Infinite Self or Brahman. Just as a human being naturally breathes out the air that has entered his lungs, so the latent energy of the Brahman spontaneously breathed out knowledge and all phenomena which had potentially existed in it before the evolution of the universe. Again, at the time of dissolution these return to that Infinite Being and remain latent as the energy of the Brahman in the same manner as rivers, streamlets, brooks and all waters that exist anywhere will eventually flow into one ocean. The ocean of the Infinite Brahman is the final goal as well as the source of all knowledge and phenomena of the world. "As the source of all taste is in the tongue, of all touch in the skin, of all smells in the nose, of all colors in the eye, of all sounds in the ear, of all percepts in the mind, of all knowledge in the intelligence, so the source of all intelligence is the Self or *Atman* or Brahman."

Thus *Yajnyavalkya* explained to his wife how the Infinite Self is the Beginning and end, the Alpha and Omega of everything. At the time of evolution everything comes out of it and during involution or dissolution everything goes back to the same source of all. The Infinite Self, *Atman* or Brahman, is one mass of intelligence without a second; there is no duality or multiplicity in this one substance. "As a lump of salt has neither outside nor inside, but it is a mass of taste, so indeed the Absolute Self has neither outside nor inside, but it is altogether a mass of intelligence, unlimited, beginningless and endless."

This infinite Being appears in two aspects, the universal, which is called Brahman, and the individual, which is called the Self or *Atman*. As the source of individual consciousness, it manifests itself in various forms when it is connected with our body and senses; but when it leaves this material body, the senses cease to perceive their objects and the elements return to their causal states from which they arose. After death one cannot perceive the objects of senses. "O beloved! Verily I say unto thee, although the Self is a mass of intelligence having departed from the body, it possesses no particular consciousness of a mortal. "The expression of intelligence on the sense-plane stops after death.

On hearing this, *Maitreyi* replied: "O wise lord! Thou hast bewildered me by thy statement, 'This mass of intelligence possesses no particular consciousness after death.' How can it be?" *Yajnyavalkya* answered: "O beloved! I do not say anything bewildering; imperishable is the nature of the Self (*Atman*)." For thy enlightenment I will explain it to thee. "The Self is deathless and immortal by nature. So long as there is the duality of the perceiver and the object of perception, so long one sees, perceives the other, one smells the other, one tastes, touches, thinks, and knows the

other." The individual Self perceives sense-objects so long as it remains on the plane of duality or relativity. The perception of sight is possible only when the seer is related to an object of vision. If we are not related to that which we call odor how can we smell it? The ego can hear a sound or taste a savor by coming in direct relation with those objects of sensation. In this manner it can be shown that all perception and sensation require the relation between the subject and object; but when we go into deep sleep we do not see, hear, taste, smell or perceive anything. These objects exist on the sense-plane, but when we are above and beyond it and have gone to that plane where there is neither sight nor odor nor smell nor taste, how can we see, hear or perceive anything? All individual souls, who are in the state of dreamless sleep, become equal in their realization; we cannot distinguish the soul of a man from that of a woman so long as he or she is in sound sleep; then it is impossible to differentiate them. Similarly, in the state of Samadhi or super-consciousness, where there is neither duality nor multiplicity, but the infinite ocean of intelligence, what can be seen or heard or smelled or tasted? Where there is neither relativity nor any object of perception, how can one touch or know or think of anything? "How can one know that by which one knows all this?" Is there any power of knowledge, by which we can know the Self, who is the knower of all? No; because the true Self alone is the Knower of the universe.

If we seek to know the Self within us what will be the best method? By right discrimination and analysis we can differentiate the knower from the object of knowledge. In this process of discrimination we must mentally reject everything outside of the knower by saying "Not this, not this." Thus when all objects of knowledge, including all sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and other mental and intellectual functions are removed by right discrimination, the all-knowing Self is realized in Samadhi. The Self or knower cannot be comprehended by intellect; it is incomprehensible. The Self cannot perish; it is immortal. The Self cannot be destroyed by anything; it is unchangeable. The Self is unattached; it is not touched by any object. The Self is unfettered; it is free. It does not suffer; it is beyond all suffering. It does not fail, it is always the same. "How, O beloved, can such a Knower be known and by whom? Thus far, O *Maitreyi*, the true nature of the Self can be described; and beyond this is the realization in Samadhi (super-consciousness) which brings the attainment of immortality. He who has realized the Self, has become immortal. The knowledge of that Self, which is the source of all love, the source of intelligence, existence and all that is blissful, makes one attain to immortality." Thus saying, *Yajnyavalkya*, the great seer of Truth, retired into the forest, devoted his time to meditating upon that eternal. Self, and, ultimately realizing his true nature in Samadhi, he gained immortal life.

Self-knowledge being the goal of life, by that alone we can understand the universe, how it has come into existence, why it stands, and where it will go after dissolution. By knowing our true Self we can know what will become of all phenomena at the time of general involution, and if we wish to become immortal, we must know this Self or *Atman*; there is no other way to immortality.

"I know this great *Atman*, radiant like the self-effulgent sun and beyond the darkness of ignorance. By knowing Him alone one crosses the ocean of death; there is no other way; there is no other way."