

Chapter XIV. This and That

Universal “I”

Every living being refers to itself as “I”, “I am Rama”, “I am Krishna”, “I am Sita”, “I am Radha”. Each assumes the “I” as their own and uses it whenever they have to designate themselves. If birds, beasts, and other living things could speak, they would behave likewise and refer to themselves as “I”. Even mountain peaks, hills, and trees might announce themselves as “I am a hill”, “I am an anthill”, “I am a tree”, if they could speak.

When we spend some time thinking this over, it will be clear that some great mystery is embedded in the expression “I”. The illiterate boor uses it; the sage who has secured the divine vision uses it; even God, it is said, announces Himself as “I”. But who probes into this mystery? And among those who have dared probe, how many have succeeded in unraveling it? Even if a few have unraveled the mystery, how many among them have used the discovery to transform their lives? Have the celebrated intellectuals, the pundits, the realized sages (paramahansas) succeeded in delving into the meaning and significance of this “I”?

No. Let us see whether the exponents and commentators of the *Bhagavad Gita*, who can reel off the 18 chapters and the 700 verses in a continuous stream, have grasped the full implications and importance of the word “I”. In the *Gita*, in the following and similar declarations, Sri Krishna refers to “I”, doesn’t He?

I shall absolve you (*Aham mokshayishyaami*).

Come to me, the One, for refuge (*Maam ekam saranam vraja*).

Know Me, as the knower of the body (*Kshetrajnam cha api maam viddhi*).

So this expression “I” is clearly omnipresent; it is the sign and symbol of all individual souls (*jivatmas*); it has unlimited forms and appearances. Like the string that passes through the rosary beads, it interpenetrates and holds together all names and forms.

However transient names and forms might be, the “I” persists without being affected. Therefore, one has to know this omnipresent “I” so that one can understand all that has to be known. He who has known it is the world-teacher (*jagath-guru*), the teacher of all beings (*viswa-guru*), the teacher to be followed (*sadguru*).

The body is only the container, the sheath. Nevertheless, imposing differences and distinctions based on physical characteristics and material considerations, some are elevated as “touchable” and some condemned as “untouchable”; some are classified as “high” and others as “low”. Intellect cannot claim honour, and persons cannot claim to be pundits, if studies are directed to the amassing of money or earning the wherewithal for a comfortable living; nor can skill and excellence in argumentative scholarship be worthy of reverential mention. Really, when you dive into its significance, the word “I” leads you to the supreme Godhead. “That is you”, “That is I”, “I and that are One”, this what the great *Vedic* dictum “That thou art (*Thath thwam asi*)” declares. This is the very core of all teaching, the grandest of counsels.

This sacred principle embodied in the “I” is beyond the grasp of the most learned scholars by means of lone inquiry, without guides and helpers. However, the guides have to be aware of the truth and be earnest in living the truth. It is beyond the reach of scholarship, logic, and grammar. Note that these are warnings administered by the *Vedas* and law codes (*sruthis* and *smrithis*).

Well. Whoever intends to learn in a general way about this “I” and its implications can be told the secret in just three sentences:

I am active in the daytime, when I am awake. I sleep at night, and experience dreams.
Thus, acting and experiencing both day and night, I die.

Koham: Who am I?

When one considers these statements of the individual, one can conclude that they are based on the individual’s knowledge gained from this life. “The I begins, when I am born”, one believes. But, did this “I” exist before birth? If it did, how can an existing thing be said to be born? Even if this objection is ignored, how did it exist, and where? Was it disembodied apart from name and form? Was it beyond the pale of the senses? Doubts such as these pursue the seeker in waves. It has to be understood clearly that the “I” is not related or affixed to one object, thing, or being, to one name and form. Remember this: when you identify and recognize the “I” or arrive at the true answer to the question “Who am I?”, you have identified and recognized the entire cosmos and its mysteries.

It may be asked, what exactly the urgency is to understand the meaning of this “I”, when there is an infinite number of topics in the universe that call for study. One can well try to unravel the secrets of the cosmos. Or, attention may be paid to understand what is meant by the “individual soul (*jivi*)” or by “God (*Deva*)”. When such profound subjects as the universe, the individualized Divine, the Divine Itself—subjects that are incomparably important—are clamouring for attention, why give them up and investigate the meaning of expression used by common folk and children, this “I”? Of what benefit can it be, people may ask.

The expression is simple, of course, but its implications are infinite and fundamentally satisfying. This is why all great teachers exhort the seekers to “Know Thyself”, “Inquire into yourself, since that alone can give you release”. The scriptures also confirm this exhortation. “That, which when known, everything becomes known (*Yad vijnaanena sarvam vijnatham bhavathi*)”. The scriptures extol the importance and value of this inquiry and make it clear that inquiry into the *Atma* is essential. The assurance is given that the *Atma* is you, yourself, as in the sacred axiom “That thou art (*Thathwam asi*)”.

Therefore, to fulfil the yearning, you first have to inquire into this mystery of who you are. You can then realize that you are eternal (*nithya*), beyond the boundaries of time. The scriptures will help you cast away the ignorance (*a-jnana*), the dark clouds of ignorance that now hide this truth from your awareness. Then, you can delight at the experience of the awareness of your genuine nature. The awareness comes when the truth is revealed with the dawn of light. But the scriptures (*sastras*) that guide people into the knowledge of these great mysteries and into the region where such bliss can be secured are not studied now; instead, people pursue with blinkered eyes their own silly notions. How then can they attain the *Atmic* principle? How then can they reach the very embodiment of bliss (*ananda*)?

Grace of God: the only hope of humanity

Mere worldly scholarship cannot delve into the meaning of the *Vedas*. The grace of God has to be won by devotion and dedication, and that grace alone, the compassionate glance of the eye of God alone, can instil in one the real meaning of the *Vedas*. Only people who are embodiments of divine wisdom and compassion can decide

what exactly is helpful to the spiritual progress and well-being of humanity. Others only flounder and find it impossible to cope with the task.

For how can gurus who fail to save themselves help save others? The gurus of today endeavour to cleanse society while their own houses are unclean. The number of such gurus is increasing, so faults and failures are multiplying. Their haltings are justified and explained away, in various ways, so the confusion grows worse. As a consequence, endless argumentation ensues and reality is lost to view. These gurus interpret the scriptures to suit their prejudices and partialities, making them instruments for their aggrandizement.

Under these distressing conditions, the grace of God is the only hope of humanity. That is the beacon to illumine the path. That is the compassion that rewards one for one's spiritual struggle. That is the strong, steady ship that can take one safely across.

Unity of individual Self with Supreme Self

Many preceptors and teachers declare that the path of inquiry into oneself is the path of liberation. "Self-inquiry leads to liberation (*Swavimarso mokshah*)" is the assurance. "That is the *Atma*; that is myself." "I and the *Atma* are not different." "The *Atma* and the *Paramatma* are not separate."

The yarn "I" is both warp and woof of the cloth, the *Atma*. When the "I" yarn is found in different bodies and feels that in each body it is distinct from the rest, the *Atma* cloth can be said to disappear; but in both yarn and cloth, one substance persists forever, in spite of how each feels: that substance is "cotton". So too, the supreme Self (*Paramatma*) persists as the only truth in the "I", the *Atma*. Without the cotton, the supreme Self, there can be no "I" yarn; without the "I" yarn, there can be no *Atma* cloth. Those three —*Paramatma*, *Atma*, and I— are only names and forms for the ONE —the *Paramatma*, the ONE *Atma*, the DIVINE *Atma*, the Supreme Self.