

1. Thereafter, the inquiry into Brahman

Athaatho Brahma jijnaasa

An aphorism (*sutra*) enshrines, in a few words, vast expanses of meaning, vast depths of fundamental significance. The *Brahma Sutras* build up the science of *Vedanta*. They gather multicoloured flowers from all the *Upanishads* and string them together to form an enchanting garland. Each aphorism can be elaborated and explained in a number of learned ways, according to one's understanding, faith, preference, experience, and pleasure.

Yearning to know

The first aphorism is *atha-athah-Brahma-jijnaasa*. The initial *atha* has many literal meanings, but in this aphorism, the most appropriate sense is: "Thereafter". So, the question "after what?" arises. It is obvious that it refers to "the yearning to understand the nature of *Brahman* (*Brahma jijnaasa*)". The meaning is: "After such a yearning has dawned". How can this yearning emerge? It can come into the mind only after one acquires proper qualifications. "Thereafter" means, "after equipping oneself with these qualifications".

Qualifications for inquiring into Brahman

For understanding *Brahman*, *Vedanta* has to be studied. But yearning to know (*jijnaasa*) cannot yield fruit if the *Vedas* are merely studied.

Among the preliminary qualifications for yearning to know *Brahman*, the first is discrimination (*viveka*) between the transitory and the eternal—in other words, the discovery that the *Atma* (divine Self) alone is beyond time and that all objects perceivable by the senses of sight, etc., are only transitory. The *Atma* alone suffers no change. It alone is timeless truth (*nithya sathya*). As a result of prolonged investigation, one has to gain this unshakable conviction and be established in it.

The second qualification is: renunciation of the desire to enjoy, here and hereafter, the fruits of one's actions. This is also known as nonattachment (*vairagya*). One must reason and realise the transitoriness of joy and grief, which are pollutions that affect the mind. One will be convinced, then, that all things are caught in a flux; they are all momentary, they yield only grief. Next, the feeling of nonattachment will dawn in the mind. Nonattachment does not involve giving up hearth and home, wife and children, and taking refuge in forests. It involves only the awareness of the world as transitory and, as a consequence of this awareness, discarding the feelings "I" and "mine".

The third qualification consists of the six virtues: mind control, body and sense control, withdrawal from sensory objects, forbearance, unwavering faith, and equanimity (*sama, dama, uparathi, thithiksha, sraddha, and sama-dhana*).

Six primary virtues

Mind control (*sama*): Mind control is very hard to attain. The mind can cause bondage, but it can also confer liberation. It is an amalgam of the passionate (*rajasic*) and ignorant (*thamasic*) attitudes. It is easily polluted. It relishes in hiding the real nature of things and casting on them the forms and values that it desires. So the activities of the mind have to be regulated.

The mind has two characteristics. First, it runs helplessly after the senses. Whichever sense the mind follows, it is inviting disaster. When a pot of water becomes empty, we need not infer that it has leaked away through ten holes; one hole is enough to empty it. So too, even if one sense is not under control, one will be thrown into bondage. Therefore, every sense has to be mastered.

Second, the potency of the mind can be promoted by good practices like meditation, repetition of the name, devotional singing, and worship. With the strength and skill thus reinforced, the mind can help the world or harm it. So, the mental power gained by such spiritual practice has to be turned away from wrong paths and controlled by mind control. The senses have to be directed by the principle of intelligence (*buddhi*). They must be released from the hold that the mind has on them. Then, spiritual progress can be attained.

The mind (*manas*) is but a bundle of thoughts, a complex of wants and wishes. As soon as a thought, desire, or wish raises its head from the mind, the intellect (*buddhi*) must probe its value and validity —is it good or bad, will it help or hinder, where will it lead or end. If the mind does not submit to this probe, it will land itself on the path of ruin. If it does and obeys the intelligence, it can move along the right path.

People have three chief instruments for uplifting themselves: intelligence, mind, and senses. When the mind gets enslaved by the senses, one gets entangled and bound. The same mind, when it is regulated by the intellect, can make one aware of one's reality, the *Atma*. This is why the mind is reputed to cause either bondage or liberation.

Body and sense control (*dama*): Now for the second of the six virtues. Control of the body and senses can be achieved only by spiritual exercise and not by any other means. One has to avoid spending precious time in useless pursuits. One has to be ever vigilant. One has to engage the senses of perception and of action and the body in congenial but noble tasks to keep them busy. There should be no chance for sloth (*thamas*) to creep in. And, every act must promote the good of others. While confining oneself to activities that reflect one's natural duties (*swa-dharma*), it is possible to sublimate them into spiritual practices for the body and the senses.

Withdrawal from sensory objects (*uparathi*): The third virtue is withdrawal from sensory objects. This implies a state of mind that is above and beyond all dualities that agitate and affect common people, such as joy and grief, liking and disliking, good and bad, praise and blame. But these universal experiences can be overcome or negated by means of spiritual exercises or intellectual inquiry. People can escape from these opposites and dualities and attain balance and stability.

Withdrawal from sensory objects can be achieved while engaged in day-to-day living by avoiding entanglement with and bondage to differences and distinctions. One should free oneself from identification with castes like priest (*brahmin*), protector (*kshatriya*), businessman (*vaisya*), and labourer (*sudra*); or with family clans; or with conditions like boyhood, youth, adult, and old age; or with genders like masculine and feminine. When one succeeds in discarding these and is firmly established in the *Atmic* Reality alone, one has really achieved withdrawal

from sensory objects.

Do not look at the world with a worldly eye. Look upon it with the eye of *Atma*, as the projection of the Supreme Self (*Paramatma*). That can make one cross the horizon of dualities into the region of the One. The One is experienced as many, because of the forms and names people have imposed on it. That is the result of the mind playing its game. Withdrawal from sensory objects promotes inner exploration (*nivritti*), not outer inquiry and activity (*pravritti*). Along inner exploration lies the path of intellectual inquiry (*jnana*); along outer exploration lies the path of *karma*.

The sacred activities like rituals and sacrifices that are laid down in the *Vedas* cannot confer liberation (*moksha*) from bondage to birth and death. They help only to cleanse the consciousness. It is said that they raise people to heaven, but heaven is also only a bond. It does not promise eternal freedom.

The freedom that makes one aware of the truth, of one's own truth, can be gained only through listening to the *guru*, ruminating over what has been listened to, and meditating on its validity and significance. Only those who have detached their minds from desire can benefit from the *guru*. Others cannot profit from guidance. Those who expect and look forward to the fruits of their actions can engage in them until their consciousness is cleansed. After that, their actions are of no value. So, one must be ever conscious of the *Atma* as pervading and penetrating everything, so that attraction and repulsion, the duality complex, have no effect.

Forbearance (*thithiksha*): The fourth virtue, the attitude of forbearance, refuses to be affected or pained when afflicted with sorrow, loss, and the ingratitude and wickedness of others. In fact, one is happy and calm, for one knows that these are the results of one's own actions now recoiling on one, and one views those who caused the misery as friends and well wishers. One does not retaliate or wish them ill. One bears all blows patiently and gladly.

The natural reactions of people, whoever they may be, when someone injures them is to injure in return; when someone causes harm, to do harm; and when someone insults them, to insult back by some means or other. But this is the characteristic of the worldly path (*pravritti*) —the path of objective involvement. Those who seek the inner path of sublimation and purification (*nivritti*) have to avoid such reaction.

Returning injury for injury, harm for harm, or insult for insult only adds to the *karmic* burden, which has to be endured and eliminated in future lives. This burden is termed “impending (*aagaami*)”. One can't escape the task of undergoing the consequences of one's thought, word, and deed in due course. Paying evil for evil can never lighten the weight of *karma*; it will only become heavier. It might confer immediate relief and contentment, but it can only make the person suffer later. Forbearance, therefore, instructs people to do good to those who injure them.

Unshakable faith (*sraddha*). The fifth among the virtues to be cultivated is unshakable, unwavering faith —faith in the sacred scriptures (*sastras*) and the moral codes they contain, as well as in the *Atma* and the *guru*. Faith is the sign of *sraddha*.

The scriptures are designed to ensure the peace and prosperity of the world and the spiritual perfection of humanity. They have before them this great aim; they show the way to its realisation. So, one must place faith in such holy scriptures, *gurus*, and elders.

Gurus are indeed worth worshiping, for they show us the path of ultimate fulfillment. The *gurus*, on their

part, must instruct people only in “the knowledge of the one *Atma* that is immanent in all beings (*sarva jivaatmaikyajnana*)”. The one who has unwavering faith will achieve this wisdom. The *gurus* themselves must have full faith in it and live according to that faith without the slightest deviation.

Equanimity (*sama-dhana*): Equanimity is the sixth virtue. One has to be irrefutably convinced that what the scriptures (*sastras*) make known and what the *guru* teaches are one and the same. One’s intellect must rest upon and draw inspiration from the *Atma*, at all times and under all circumstances. The aspirant for spiritual progress must be attached only to the unchanging universal Consciousness. All actions should have the joy of God as their goal. One must place implicit faith in the scriptural dictum: All living beings are facets and fractions of God. To confirm this faith and strengthen it, one must look upon all beings as equal. The above sixth virtue is the treasure of spiritual struggle.

In summary, the third qualification consists of the six virtues: mind control, body-sense control, withdrawal from sensory objects, forbearance, unwavering faith, and equanimity.

Longing for liberation

The next qualification for inquiry into *Brahman* to consider is the longing for liberation (*moksha*). This longing cannot arise from riches or the scholarship that may be won at great expense of money. Nor can it emerge from wealth, progeny, rites, and rituals recommended in the scriptures, or acts of charity. *Moksha* (liberation from grief and acquisition of spiritual bliss) can come only from the conquest of ignorance (*a-jnana*).

A person might master all the scriptures (*sastras*) along with all the learned commentaries written on them by experts; they might propitiate all the gods by performing the prescribed modes of worship and ceremonies; but this cannot grant the boon of liberation. These acts are all performed to earn benefits and boons other than the supreme knowledge (*jnana*). Only success in the path of knowledge can confer salvation.

A person might have every article needed for cooking a meal, but if fire is not available, how can the meal be prepared? So too, if awareness of *Atma* (*Atma-jnana*) as the only reality is not won but liberation (*mukthi*) can still be attained by bathing in the waters of sacred rivers, what shall we say of the fish and other aquatic species that spend their lives in the rivers! If spending years in mountain caves will lead to liberation, what do mice and wild beasts attain? If liberation can be attained by ascetic practices like eating roots and tubers and chewing leaves for sustenance of the body, must goats who feed on leaves and pigs that dig out tubers also attain liberation? If plastering the entire body with ash is hailed as asceticism, can dogs and donkeys that roll on ash heaps claim liberation? These beliefs and practices are signs of poor understanding. One must concentrate on achieving awareness of the eternal universal *Atmic* reality (*Atma-jnana*).

The word *atha* with which the very first aphorism begins means “thereafter”. After inquiry into its implications, it has been found that it involves the acquisition of these four attainments: discrimination (*viveka*), renunciation (*vairagya*), the six virtues, and the yearning for liberation.

The reason for inquiry: futility of reason

The next word is *athah* (the *tha* being soft instead of stressed, as in the first word). *Athah* means “for this reason”. The inquiry has therefore to be made for which reason?

For the reason that awareness of the Supreme, the *Brahman*, can be secured neither by the examination of

the texts of the scriptures nor by the performance of rites and rituals nor through the study of material objects nor by the process of learning from the examples of other people.

Because objects and individuals, rites and activities are transitory, they suffer from decay and destruction. They can at best help the cleansing of the mind, that is all. Activity (*karma*) cannot liberate one from the basic ignorance or award the awareness of the reality as *Brahman*. One has to be conscious of this limitation in order to win the right of inquiry into the mystery of the *Brahman*, the source and core of the cosmos.

This very first aphorism stresses one lesson: The one who devotes life to earn the knowledge of the *Atma* that is their Self must possess holy virtues and must mould their conduct and contacts sacrosanct. For no knowledge can be higher than virtuous character. Character is power, really speaking. For the person who has dedicated their years to the acquisition of higher learning, ever good character is an indispensable qualification. Every religion emphasizes the same need, not as a special credal condition but as the basis of spiritual life and conduct itself. Those who lead lives on these lines can never come to harm. They will be endowed with sacred merit.

The primacy of moral character

Virtues are the most effective means for purifying the inner consciousness, at all levels, for they prompt the person to discover what to do and how to do it. Only those who have earned good destiny can claim their excellence in discrimination. And, adherence to this determination is the raft that can take one across this ocean of flux and fear (*bhava sagara*). The person of virtues has a place in the region of the liberated. Whatever the residual activity a person has performed to engage themselves in, the impact of that activity will not impinge if the person is one of virtue. The person can merge in *Brahman*, the embodiment of Supreme Bliss.

People may have performed a variety of *Vedic* rites and sacrifices; they might even be expounding the contents of a variety of sacred scriptures that they have mastered; they might be endowed with prosperity, owning vast wealth and heaps of grain; they might teach the *Vedas* and their complementary disciplines with due exposition of meanings. But without moral character, they have no place where *Brahman* is taught or learned. This is the lesson conveyed by this aphorism.

The stage of equanimity so essential for spiritual progress can be gained only when the intellect (*buddhi*) is cleansed of the blot of deluding attachments and involvements. Without that serenity, the intellect cannot proceed on the trail of *Brahman*. Why? “Virtue” is only another name for the “intelligence” that follows the promptings of the *Atma*, the Self that is Reality. Only one who has such virtue can win awareness of *Atma*, the truth. And, once awareness is gained, one can no longer be caught in delusion or desire: one will no longer be touched them.

Renouncing “me” and “mine” attachments

Desire and bondage to the objects desired and the plans to secure them are attributes of the individualized selves, not of the Self or *Atma* resident in the body. The sense of me and mine and the emotions of lust and anger originate in the body-mind complex. Only when this complex is conquered and outgrown can true virtue emanate and manifest.

The sense of “doer” and “enjoyer”, of “agentship”, might appear to affect the *Atma*, but they are not part of the genuine nature of the *Atma*. Things get mirrored and produce images, but the mirror is not tarnished or even affected thereby. It remains as clear as it was. So, too, the person of virtue might be subjected to some contaminat-

ing activities due to a backlog of acts in previous lives, but they cannot mar or obstruct the person's present nature or activities. The individual (*jivi*) has these as genuine, basic attributes: purity, serenity, and joy. The individual is ebullient with these qualities.

A bird in flight in the sky needs two wings; a person moving on the earth below needs two legs to carry the person forward; an aspirant eager to attain the mansion of liberation (*moksha*), the abode of freedom, needs renunciation and wisdom—renunciation of worldly desires and wisdom to become aware of the *Atma*. When a bird has only one wing, it can't rise up into the sky, can it? In the same manner, if one has only renunciation or only wisdom, one cannot attain the supreme Self, *Brahman*. The sense of "mine" is the bond of deluding attachment. How long can one cling to what one fondles as mine? Some day, one has to give up everything and leave, alone and empty handed. This is the inescapable destiny.

One has to give up such assumed relationships and artificial attachments through rigorous analysis of their nature and—give them up as quickly as possible. This is what the world teaches as the lesson of renunciation. Attachment breeds fear and egotism; only the unwise would yield to such worldly fancies. The wise can never bow to the blandishments of objective desire. All is momentary, only momentary. All is transient, very transient. So, the wise seek to identify the everlasting truth and adhere to the immortal virtues that the *Atma* represents. These are the real people of virtue, the candidates worthy of attaining *Brahman*.