

11. Brahman as Cosmic Breath or Life

Pranas-thathaa-anugamaath

The vital breath or air (*prana*) refers not to the ordinary sense of the word but to *Brahman* only. That word is also often taken to mean the deities presiding over the breath and vital airs, like Rudra or Vayu, but even that meaning is inapplicable.

Subtle meaning of vital air is Brahman only

Once, a seeker named Pratardana approached Indra, the Lord of the abode of Gods, and prayed to be instructed about how he could be endowed with that which is most beneficial to him. Indra directed him to know Him as Life and meditate on Him as “vital air”.

Defining vital air (*prana*) and elaborating on its glory, Indra told him, “This vital air is identified with consciousness (*Sa esha prana-prajnaatma*).” It is “bliss, ageless, deathless”. That is to say, vital air is the very embodiment of bliss. It has no decline or diminution; it is immortal. That is the teaching. These characteristics belong to *Brahman* alone, not to vital air as commonly understood. Vital air is only a symbol to bring *Brahman* to mind and not any other entity.

Pratardana’s question was about the most beneficial, the most essential entity that one has to know and possess. *Brahman* alone is the source, substance, and sustenance, so “vital air”, the word used by Indra, can mean only *Brahman* and nothing else. The gross meaning of the word has to be discarded and the subtle meaning accepted. Generally, people consider wealth, power, and fame as most essential and pursue them through every possible means. In this struggle, people waste invaluable human qualities with which they are endowed. Besides this waste of allotted years of life, they plunge deeper and deeper into the darkness of ignorance (*a-jnana*). They ignore and lose awareness of their real nature (*swa-rupa*).

On another occasion, Indra instructed, “Know Me alone (*Maam eva vijaaneehi*).” That is to say, “Understand Me well; be aware of Me in full.” The Indra referred to here cannot be a particular deity, with a body and limbs. We cannot infer that the word “vital air (*prana*)” indicated the speaker Indra himself. One may argue that the entity who has to be meditated upon is either “vital air” or Indra, for Indra is vital air and vital air is Indra: it cannot be *Brahman*. This inference is not correct. Vital air means *Brahman* and nothing else. Some interpret the statement “Know Me alone” as a direction to the listener to “Know the *Brahman* that is My reality, My truth, My core”, so *Brahman* alone is denoted by the word used by Indra while instructing Pratardana.

Meditate on Brahman alone

In common usage, in worldly parlance, vital air and Indra are associated with each other. In the vocabulary of spiritual inquiry, the vast (*bhuma*) is descriptive of *Brahman*, which also means “the limitless, beyond even the cosmos”. Commentators have investigated the superficial and deeper meanings of these expressions and at-

tempted to reconcile them as denoting one principle. Vital air (*prana*) and *Brahman*, they laid down, are two faces of one coin; they are inextricably interpenetrative (*avinaa bhaava sambandha*). Therefore, *Brahman* and nothing else has to be meditated upon.

The instruction is in consonance with the point of view of the scripture, as in the case of Vamadeva: *Sastra drishtyaa thu upadheeha Vaamadheva thu*.

The four great declarations

The sage Vamadeva adhered to the teachings of the scriptures,

I am *Brahman* (*Aham Brahmasmi*);

That thou art (*Thathwamasi*);

Brahman is Constant Integrated Awareness (*Prajnaa-nam Brahma*);

This Self is *Brahman* (*Ayam Atmaa Brahma*).

He listened and thereby attained direct awareness of *Brahman*. He meditated on the truth “I am *Brahman*.” So, when Indra instructs, “Know Me alone” —the real Me— *Brahman* is meant, not the vital force (*prana*). Before the awareness dawned on him, Vamadeva could also well have understood by vital air the deity Indra. His announcement after realisation was, “I was Manu (*Aham Manurabhavam*)”; “I am All (*Sarvaatmaa*)”. In the same manner, since the deity Indra possessed total wisdom, he could declare *Brahman* as equivalent to the vital force in all. There is no inconsistency in this.

All entities are only Brahman

In fact, *Brahman* can be indicated as any entity. All is *Brahman* (*Sarvam Brahman*). Supreme Truth, Total Wisdom, Vast Eternity is *Brahman* (*Sathyam Jnanam Anantham Brahma*). In accordance with these expressions of intuitional experience, each and every thing can symbolize and denote *Brahman*. All things have emanated from *Brahman*, all things are projections of *Brahman*. Gold does not lose its nature, however many names and forms it may assume as jewelry. No one should be misled by the multiplicity of names and forms in the objective world, the variety of sights and sounds. When the truth behind the diverse is identified, one is aware of *Brahman* as the Prime Cause, the Basis, the Goal. Indra the deity is none of these.

The aphorism with which the inquiry started —“That from which the birth of the universe is derived (*Janmaadi yasya yathaha*)”— laid down that *Brahman* is the cause of the entire cosmos, space, and all the vital forces. So the word vital air (*prana*) applies to *Brahman* Itself.