

20. Atma Jnana

EMBODIMENTS of the Divine *Atma!* Of all categories of knowledge, the highest is *Atma Jnana* (the knowledge of the Self). You may acquire knowledge of the natural sciences, of all arts and crafts, of literature and music, dance and painting and every conceivable type of worldly knowledge but all of it will not give you peace or bliss if you do not have knowledge of the Self. Worldly knowledge may bring you fame and prosperity. But only *Atma Jnana* can confer the peace that passeth understanding.

Atma Jnana is that which reveals the unity in multiplicity, the eternal in the perishable. One who has attained *Atma Jnana* is all-knowing. "*Tarati sokam Atmavith*" ("the knower of the Self overcomes sorrow"), says the Upanishad. All worldly knowledge is concerned with sustaining life. When knowledge of the Spirit which is the basis of all other knowledge of the sciences and the arts is acquired, it is easy to get any kind of knowledge. When communion with the Divine, who is the source of all knowledge, power and wisdom, is established, one has access to every kind of knowledge. Hence each one should strive to attain Self-realisation through purity of mind and heart.

***Atma Jnana* can be got only by faith and love**

Yajnas and *yagas*, acts of charity and virtue, penances and ceremonial rituals are all designed to promote purity of heart. Purity of mind promotes purity of heart. Purity of mind is achieved by association with noble personages and studying the writings of saintly persons. "*Chittasya suddhaye karmah*"--the purpose of doing *karmas* (the duly ordained duties) is to purify the consciousness. Purity of consciousness leads to realisation of the Self. *Atma Jnana* can be got only by faith. Develop faith in yourself and faith in God. This is the secret of greatness.

Self-confidence today is manifest only in matters relating to worldly achievements and self-centered pursuits. Faith and confidence are not in evidence in the spiritual field. Without unwavering faith, the Divine cannot be experienced. Because of the absence of firm faith, the formal observance of spiritual practices yields no results.

The primary requisite is unqualified and unshakable faith in God. One-pointed devotion promotes spiritual *Sraddha* (earnestness). The earnest seeker gets knowledge of the Self. The earnest devotee needs no other qualification except deep faith. He needs no other knowledge, no title to lineage or wealth. He may belong to any caste or community. He may be a child or even an animal like Gajendra (the Lord of the elephants). Valimiki, Nanda, Kuchela, Dhruva, Gajendra, Sabari, Vidura and Hanuman are examples of devotees who got God's grace through their deep devotion, without any other special qualification.

To realise God it is not necessary to have wealth, gold or other emblems of affluence. Nor is great scholarship necessary. All that is needed is pure, selfless devotion. Today men with selfish and impure minds attempt to worship God. Without purity of thought, speech and action, it is impossible to experience the Divine. God cannot be realised through ostentation and self-conceit. The basic-requisite is the shedding of selfishness and possessiveness so that one can engage oneself in actions in a disinterested spirit. Any person is entitled to embark on this quest without regard to sex, age, caste or community.

Spiritual do's and dont's

The spiritual quest is open to everyone according to his or her capacity and aspirations. However, certain rules and obligations have been laid down for observance by everyone. These are of four kinds: 1) *Naimithika Karmas*; 2) *Kaamyas Karmas*; 3) *Nishiddha Karmas* and 4) *Praayaschitta Karmas*. All the four are obligatory for all persons.

Naimithika Karmas: These are duties to be discharged as *nimithas* or instruments. These relate to the performance of certain vows or special ceremonies during certain periods or on special occasions. The ceremonies done for the manes fall in this category.

Propitiatory ceremonies done during eclipses are also included in this. These are obligatory for those leading a family life.

Kaamyas Karmas: These relate to *karmas* (rituals) performed for the achievement of specific objectives like seasonal rains, growth of crops, relief from famine, domestic happiness, peace in society, or attaining heaven. All *karmas* done for the sake of securing happiness here and hereafter are *Kaamyas Karmas*. All the prayers that are offered for the good of one's family or the world are in this category. When the prayers are offered with a pure heart, Divine Grace manifests itself.

Acts and food which are to be eschewed

Nishiddha Karmas: These relate to acts which are to be eschewed. For instance, the spiritual aspirant has to observe certain regulations regarding food. He must totally eschew *rajasic* food like alcoholic drinks and meat. The nature of the food determines the nature of one's thoughts, feelings and actions. If one's conduct is to be right and proper, one should carefully observe the disciplines regarding diet. To have pure thoughts one should be moderate and wholesome. Eschewing unwholesome and impure food is like clearing a field of weeds so that the crop can grow well. The taboos regarding food have to be observed strictly so that one's life may be cleansed of all impurities.

Praayaschitha Karmas: These *karmas* have to be done purely by way of expiation for offences committed knowingly or unwittingly. The ancient sages prescribed these practices as a result of their experiences and

the benefits and solace they derived therefrom. Experimenting with different practices they indicated those which were most efficacious and necessary. These include pilgrimages to holy shrines and bathing in sacred rivers. "*Darsanam paapanaasanam; Sambhaashanam sankata naasanam*" (Seeing sacred places destroys sin; conversing with the holy wipes out worries). Men should undertake pilgrimages to holy places from time to time to get mental peace and to purify the heart. Such journeys should be made with pure minds and genuine devotion without seeking any rewards. Some persons enter into curious bargains with the Lord. To make trivial offerings to the Divine to secure large benefits is a caricature of devotion. There is one very precious thing in every person. It is his heart. It is this which should be offered to the Lord.

Realisation of the unity constitutes *Atma Jnana*

Standing in the midst of the Ganga, the Krishna or Godavari, people make offerings of the water to Kesava, Krishna or Narayana as if they are offering something of their own to the Lord! The very idea that they are offering something is itself misconceived. When they cultivate purity of heart, the Lord will take care of everything like a mother who attends to every need of the infant.

It is the realisation of the unity that underlies the diversity which constitutes *Atma Jnana* (Knowledge of the Self). This is the import of the well-known Upanishadic pronouncements: "*Isaavasyam Idam sarvam*" (All this is permeated by the Divine); "*Iswaras-sarvabhoothaanam*" (The Lord dwells in all beings).

Many verbally accept these statements and even preach them. But in practice they promote divisions and differences. Some go to the extent of betraying the Divine. But it is not in fact the Divine that is betrayed. They are only betraying themselves and proving false to their real selves.

Yajnas and yagas are performed to invoke the blessings of the Divine for the peace and well-being of the universe. When the Divine responds with grace, the well-being of all is ensured. The *yajnas* have yet another significance. Offering to the Lord what He has given to man is a basic duty of the spiritual seeker. The offering is to be regarded not as sacrificing something but as an act of love and gratitude in which one rejoices.

The individual should cultivate broad mindedness and serve society regarding it as a manifestation of the Divine. Peace in the world depends upon peace among individuals. The individual, the community and the world are intimately interrelated. The individual has to discover within himself the secret of peace and joy. This joy must be extended to the community in which he lives. From the community, it should spread to the world.

"*Adveshtaa sarvabhoothaanaam*," declares the Gita. (Bear no ill-will towards any living thing). This should be the guiding principle for everyone. It is to promote this universal fellow-feeling that the sages of yore devised *yagas and yajnas*.

Discourse in the Poornachandra Auditorium on 6-10-1986.