

Chapter XXIV

The basis and the based; the subtlety of *Atma* –It is everywhere but nowhere visible;
the banyan tree.

The awareness of being only the witness of everything is the secret of self-realization. Self-realization is either the knowledge that “I am the truth of Me” or “I have known Myself” or “All are one *Atma*” or “I have experienced that the individual and the universal are not distinct”. This is what every person has to discover for themselves; mere asceticism without this is sheer waste of time and energy. People are not mere animals. They have the spark of the Divine in them, and they should not allow it to be quenched dead.

Why, even when the senses operate, they are prompted by the presence of *Atma*. When the sun rises, birds take wing, flowers bloom, the human community starts its varied activities. The sun does not directly engage in any of these; it is the prompter, that is all. The sun is not the cause; He is just the activator, the witness, the on-looker. He is above and beyond all this. He is not bound or based on man or beast or bird or flower.

Birds fly in the sky, but they do not leave any trace behind of their path of flight. So too, however many sensory impressions fly through the inner sky of the heart, no impression should be left thereon. The heart is not affected by their flying through.

But people see only the superstructure, not the basis. In the garland, no one observes the string that keeps the flowers together; the existence of the string can be known only by investigation and inquiry. The basis is the string; the flowers depend upon it and hang together as a garland on account of it.

To understand this better, take another example. Pots, pans, plates, and pails are all made of clay; but though there is clay in them, clay is only clay. It is not pot, pan, plate, or pail. So too, the *Atma*, which is the basis, has no characteristics (*gunas*) like pot, pan, plate or pail; but the *Atma* exists in the characteristics as the embodiment of the characteristics. The *Atma* is mistaken for the characteristics, because it is conceived as limited and as with name and form. The *Atma* is the only reality that persists through all names and forms, like the clay, which is the only substance in all the pots and pans. By this kind of inquiry, the conviction that the basis and the substance of everything is the *Atma* (*kshetra-jna*) or *Parabrahman*) gets strengthened.

Then Arjuna asked Krishna thus: “It is indeed very difficult to know that basic *Atma*, that inner reality of all things. He is everywhere but is nowhere visible! He is the inner core of all but cannot be contacted at all! What is the cause of this mystery?”

Krishna replied: “Arjuna! You have not understood yet. The *Atma* is subtler than the subtlest, so it is difficult to cognize it. You know the five elements, don’t you? Earth, water, fire, wind, and sky. Of these, each subsequent element is subtler than the previous one. Earth has five qualities: sound, touch, form, taste and smell. Water has all these, except smell; fire has only three, sound, touch and form. Wind has only two qualities, sound and touch; and the last one, sky, has only sound. That is why each of these is subtler than the previous one and also more widely spread. The sky is everywhere, penetrating in and through all, because it has only one characteristic. How much more subtle must be the *Atma*, which has no qualities or characteristics! Imagine how much more immanent and universal it must be! Those who are objective minded cannot grasp this phenomenon; only the subjective minded can have the solution.

“This faith can come only to those who can reason things out. It is a fatal thrust on those who bark, in and out of season, that God cannot be immanent in everything because He is not to be perceived at all. They do not believe that God is above and beyond the trivial qualities with which they seek to measure Him. It is a pity, indeed. They tend to be as low as their thoughts. That is the inexorable law. God is as near to you as you are to Him; if you keep afar, He also remains afar.”

There are some fine examples of this truth in epics (*Puranas*). Hiranyakasipu sought God in all things and came to the conclusion that He is nowhere. Prahlada, on the other hand, believed that He can be found wherever He is sought, so He appeared from out of the impenetrably hard iron pillar itself! Prahlada was close to God, so God was close to him.

The cow carries sacred sustaining milk in its own udder: but, unaware of this, it runs after the water in which rice has been washed! So too, people are unaware of Madhava (a name for God), who is in them as their own *Atma*, and make no effort to discover Him, who is their own reality. They run after the much inferior joy obtainable from the fleeting objects, through their defective and deceptive senses. What colossal ignorance!

To revel in multiplicity is ignorance; to visualize Unity is the sign of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*). “Only those who are dead to reality (the *savam*)” see this as “many”. Only the Divine (*Sivam*) sees the seemingly many as “One”. What is called “that which is known (*jneya*)”, *Atma*, the knower of the field (*kshetra-jna*), and the Universal Absolute (*Parabrahman*) is that “One” only. This was taught to Arjuna so that he might experience the bliss thereof.

Readers! Just as the rivers have the sea as their goal, souls (*jivas*) have *Brahman* as their goal. Permanent joy can never be received by the “conscious” soul from “material” objects. *Moksha* is the acquisition of permanent joy; it is also called the attainment of *Brahman*. Fixed, exclusive devotion to Godhead can come only to those who have no attachment to the wild phantasmagoria of name and form that is called the “world”. Only such devotion can win self-knowledge (*Atma-jnana*). The world is the instrument for the attainment of renunciation; that is why it is so tempting and so treacherous. He is the real knower of the *Vedas* who sees the world as an instrument for escape from its coils.

Usually, the word *oordhwa* is taken to mean “above”, “high”, etc. But if you consider the world to be a tree, then it has its roots in *Brahman*; that is, the roots are above and the branches are below! This was taught to Arjuna by Krishna thus: “The tree of life (*samsara*) is a very peculiar one. It is quite distinct from the trees of the world. The trees that you see in the world have their branches above and roots below. The tree of life (*ashvattha*), however, has roots above and branches below. It is a topsy-turvy tree.”

Arjuna intercepted with a question. “How did it get the name *ashvattha*? It means a banyan tree, doesn’t it? Why was the tree of life called so? Why wasn’t it called by some other name?”

A strange name for a strange tree! “Listen. *Ashvattha* means impermanent, transient; it also means the ‘banyan tree. Its flowers and fruits are good neither for smelling nor for eating. However, its leaves quiver ceaselessly in the wind, so it is also called ‘quivering leaves’. Worldly objects are also ever wavering, ever unsteady, ever changing positions. In order to make people understand this truth and strive to overcome it, it is called *ashvattha*.

“This disquisition is to make one develop the higher vision and yearn for steady faith in *Brahman*. The objective world can be truly understood only by two types of examination: the outer and the inner. There is a reasoning that binds and a reasoning that liberates. He who sees the world as world sees wrong; he who sees it as the highest

Atma (*Paramatma*) sees right. The world is the effect; it has a cause; it cannot be different from the cause. It is just a mutation of *Brahman*, which constitutes it. The millions of beings are the branches, twigs and leaves; the seed is *Brahman*, in which all the tree is subsumed and summarized. He who knows this knows the *Vedas*.”