

Chapter 10. Women and Knowledge of Brahman

Q. You were talking of strict regimen. Men should also follow a strict regimen, right?

A. Of course! They are also flesh and blood, bone and marrow; they are also afflicted with illness. Each and every person who is afflicted with birth and death and suffering from this cycle is in need of this medicine. And whoever helps himself to this treatment has to follow the regimen. Man or woman, whoever neglects the regimen cannot get rid of the illness. People cannot afford to say that they are free from it; they have to stick to it closely and observe it strictly. Even if they have had initiation into the spiritual path of Brahma-realisation, if they are devoid of virtues like equanimity (*sama*) and control of the outer senses (*dama*), they cannot save themselves, whether they are men or women.

Q. But Swami, why do many scholars who are learned in the scriptures (*sastras*) declare that women have no right to acquire knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*)? What is the reason?

A. There is no reason at all to declare that women are not entitled to knowledge of *Brahman*. Vishnu taught his wife, Bhudevi, the glory of the *Gita*, and the Supreme Lord (*Parameswara*) taught Parvathi the *Brahman* principle (*Brahma-thathwa*) through the *Guru-gita*. That is what the *Guru-gita* means when it says, “Parvathi spoke.” What do these words mean? Besides, the Lord (*Iswara*) initiated Parvathi into *yogic* and mantra scriptures. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* mentions that Yajnavalkya taught Maitreyi this very same knowledge of *Brahman*. This is a well-known fact. Now, you can yourself judge and draw your own conclusion whether women are entitled to knowledge of *Brahman*.

Q. Swami, others declare that women are not entitled to spiritual studentship (*brahma-charya*) and renunciation (*sanyasa*). Is it true? Do the *Vedas* prohibit it?

A. The *Vedas* have two sections: Actions (*Karma-kanda*) and wisdom (*Jnana-kanda*). The section on actions is for beginners, for the undeveloped; the section on wisdom is for the more advanced, the developed intelligences. There is no reference to men or women in connection with these. The beginners are worldly, so how can they understand the immortal message of the wisdom section about the *Atma*? In the *Brihadaranyaka*, we have mention of Gargi and Maitreyi shining in the spiritual splendour of spiritual studentship (*brahma-charya*) and renunciation (*sanyasa*). In the *Mahabharatha* also, we have Subha Yogini and other women who are ideal women, full of virtue.

Q. Can a woman win knowledge of *Brahman* even while leading a householder’s life?

A. Why not? Madalasa and others got knowledge of *Brahman* while in the householder stage of life. You must have heard in the *Yoga-vasishta* and the *Puranas* how they attained the height of auspiciousness, *Brahmic* wisdom itself. Then again, don’t the *Upanishads* declare that Katyayani, Sulabha, Sarangi, Viswavara and others were adepts in *Brahmic* wisdom (*Brahma-jnana*)?

Q. Swami, have any women attained knowledge of *Brahman* while in the householder stage? And who attained it while in the renunciate stage? And who realised it while in the forest-dweller stage? Did any women get it in the spiritual student stage of life?

A. Don’t think that no women realised knowledge of *Brahman* in any of these stages. Chudala attained it while a householder; Sulabha Yogini, as a renunciant; Maitreyi, in the forest-dweller stage; and Gargi, in the student stage. Other great women of *Bharath* (India) also achieved this height. Why, even today, many are in this great

category. I simply mentioned four names because you came up with that question. So don't in the least lose enthusiasm. There is no need for loss of heart.

Q. When we have so many examples of women who have attained knowledge of *Brahman*, why do so many argue against it? Why do they impose limitations on women?

A. It is sheer absurdity to deny women the right to earn knowledge of *Brahman*. But in worldly matters, it is necessary that some limitations be respected by them. They are laid down only in the interests of *dharma* and for worldly prosperity. For the sake of the upkeep of morals and the social health in the world, women have to be bound by them. They are too weak to maintain certain standards of life and disciplines. They have some natural handicaps; that is the reason for these limitations.

This does not mean any fundamental inferiority. Why, even pundits and people learned in the scriptures (*sastras*) acquire their spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) through the reverential homage they pay to the feminine deity Saraswathi. The patron deities of education (*vidya*), wealth, and spiritual wisdom are all feminine—Saraswathi, Lakshmi, and Parvathi. Even in customary correspondence, when women are addressed, they are referred to as, “To ..., who is equal to Lakshmi”, etc.

You always speak of mother-father, Gauri-Sankara, Lakshmi-Narayana, Sita-Rama, Radha-Krishna, etc. The feminine name comes first, then the masculine. From this itself, you can gather how much reverence is paid to women here.

Q. The distinction between man and woman—do you condemn it as false knowledge, or do you value it as *Atmic* knowledge?

A. My dear fellow! The *Atma* (the divine Self) has no such distinction; it is eternally conscious, pure, self-effulgent. So it can only be ignorance; it can never be *Atmic* wisdom. It is a distinction based on the body mask, the limitation. The *Atma* is neither masculine, feminine, nor neuter; it is the form that limits and deludes and wears these names.