

## The Concept Of Soul Or Self In Vedanta

By Swami Tathagatananda

No books, no scriptures, no science, can ever imagine the glory of the Self that appears as man, the most glorious God that ever was, the only God that ever existed, exists, or ever will exist.

—Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works

Right understanding about our life is the most valuable wisdom for the right way of living. This was hinted at by Jesus Christ who said, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The soul is the datum of all experience and wisdom. The proper understanding of the nature of the soul will make our life better, clearer, wider, and deeper. Modern mind craves to know about the Self. (Atman, Brahman, Absolute, Self, Soul, Impersonal God, and Spirit, are names of the same Being.) "Being" should be understood, when used as a general noun, to mean potentia, the source of potentiality; "being" is the potentiality by which the acorn becomes the oak or each of us becomes what he truly is. Being is the foundation of all existence. Being posits everything but Itself is not posited. There can be only one such Being and that is God.

The innate divinity, infinitude, luminosity and blissfulness of the soul was experienced by the sages of the Upanishads. Max Müller, in his Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy, gives his opinion as to why this supreme wisdom about healthy human living was not available to the Greeks, or to the Medieval or modern philosophers: "But if it seem strange to you that the old Indian philosophers should have known more about the soul than the Greek or Medieval or modern philosophers, let us remember that however much the telescopes for observing the stars of heaven have been improved, the observatories of the soul have remained much the same . . . the rest and peace which are required for deep thought or for accurate observation of the movements of the soul, were more easily found in the silent forests of India than in the noisy streets of our so-called centres of civilization" (Max Müller, Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy [London: Longmans, Green, and Co.: 1894], 7-8).

All-pervading Supreme Consciousness underlying every form of existence, animate and inanimate, is manifest within every living being as the Self. God or Supreme Being is the Soul of all souls. He is the sum total of all souls and is their inner controller. Both the soul and God belong to the same category of Self—the former is the individual self (Jivatman), whereas the latter is the Supreme Self (Paramatman). The individual self or embodied soul is regarded as a manifestation of the other. The one has a body and is

subject to many limitations; the other is free from all limitations. The distinction between the soul and the body or the mind is fundamental in Vedanta.

The word used in Indian scriptures for Self is Atman. The Atman in Vedanta is Self-existent as well as Self-luminous. Divine power is not a mere formless, impersonal material principle. It is a living dynamic conscious force that can assume a concrete personal form. It is the source of all Existence, Knowledge and Bliss. These are not qualities of the Soul, but Its essence. It is identical with Pure Consciousness or Intelligence. It is the sole support and substance of the manifold. The Reality or Self understood intuitively is the Supreme Spirit, and understood outwardly, is the physical world. It precedes everything, for everything is manifested or projected by the Self. "This Brahman is without a prior or a posterior, without interior or exterior, this Atman is Brahman, the experiencer of everything" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 11.5.19). The changeless Reality (Brahman) that upholds the manifold is identical with the same changeless Reality (Atman) that indwells in the human being.

The entire universe originates from, is manifested, and is sustained by It. The self-luminous Atman (Self) is the sole spiritual entity; all else belongs to the realm of matter, gross or fine, being devoid of intrinsic Consciousness. Therefore, primordial nature and all its modifications constituting the world, physical and psychical, come under the category of matter. None of them have self-intelligence and self-consciousness as their essence. Vedanta does not accept the idea of secular scholarship that the universe, life and consciousness come out of dull, insentient matter. Physical processes can produce physical light but not the light of spirit marked by self-awareness. This alone distinguishes spirit from matter. No human ingenuity can create life out of lifeless matter.

Each of us has two consciousnesses, as it were, individual and universal, or lower self and higher Self. It is not the case that there are two selves in a man, one empirical and the other noumenal. Rather, the same self has different characters. The term "Self" includes both the Atman and its reflection or shadow, the ego. The Atman or God is the same in everybody; it is our diehard inveterate attachment for an egocentric life or psychophysical organism or simply the ego that differs from individual to individual. It is the ego that separates us from our higher Self, from other beings and ultimately, from God, and thereby produces insecurity, fear and dread in us. The higher Self of the individual is called the Atman. Atman is defined in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.3.7: "That which manifests Consciousness in the organs." Sankara says, "It is so called because it pervades, it receives, and it experiences objects in the world, and because from it the world derives its existence." We see, hear, smell, speak and taste through Consciousness or Atman. The common man calls it life; the mystic calls it Atman.

This Atman (Self within) is Brahman. The individual self is only an "abridged edition," as it were, of Brahman. The Supreme Self, chained to a body-mind consciousness, appears to be limited, weak and finite. Although the individual is one with the Divine, each person is a partial manifestation of the Divine.

The Self is revealed in every state of consciousness. Every thought, every physical act, produces a flash of Self-revelation in us. The ego is transcended only when the luminous Atman manifests in our conscious mind in the wake of strenuous spiritual struggle. The supreme object, according to Vedanta, is to know the Reality through direct intuitive knowledge, which is superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.

The essence of knowledge is self-shining consciousness. Vedanta denotes Supreme Reality as sat-chit-ananda (being-consciousness-bliss absolute). Through consciousness (chit) we are aware of our existence (sat) and happiness or bliss (ananda). The whole universe is a projection of consciousness. The luminous Self requires no proof. An individual's self-awareness is immediate and direct. Here is the foundation of human knowledge. From here the entire cognitive process starts. It is the luminosity of Consciousness that manifests all objects, physical and psychical. Each and every act of cognition is but an expression of Pure Consciousness through mental modes.

Consciousness or Intelligence is at the root of life, which is ever associated with sentiency, purposiveness, and the power of cognition. Life presupposes sentience. Purposiveness is implicit in livingness because we notice an innate plan of self-preservation and self-development in all living beings. Unconscious things like the three forms of energy of nature, which are themselves mechanical, cannot organize themselves and work purposively unless there is a conscious principle to furnish the goal and purpose. Consciousness is intrinsic in the cognizer, while the object cognized is devoid of it. The cognizer and the cognized cannot be identical. The knower per se and the objects known are of contrary nature, like light and darkness. The Self illuminates everything and is not illuminated by anything else. The Real Self is the single constant factor in human personality. This Self is the changeless immortal in a changeful psychological garb. The Atman as the immutable and eternal Consciousness is the witness of the changing states. This knowing Self integrates all physical and psychical factors into a coherent whole, and coordinates the diverse functions of the mind, the organs, and the body. In fact, the organs, the mind and the prana (vital force) are like so many attendants of the Self (Atman) to carry out specific functions. The Self maintains the identity of the man in spite of all changes within and without. Our ideas of the Self are that (1) It is Consciousness, (2) There is continuity in Consciousness, and (3) It is associated with all activities as the knower and experiencer. The existence of the Self (Atman) is Self-evident. Though the Self permeates every pore of our being, the real nature of the Self is not self-evident to us. The famous argument of Descartes, "I think; therefore, I exist," can be remembered. Nothing is indubitable in this universe, except the fact of Self-existence. Vedanta reverses this statement: "I exist; therefore, I think." Descartes also says, "Mind is a self-knowing principle," which is also not accepted by Vedanta. S. Radhakrishnan observes, "There is a tendency especially in the West, to overestimate the place of the human self. Descartes attempts to derive everything from the certainty of his own isolated selfhood. It is not realized that the thought of the self which wants to explain everything, the will of the self which wants to subjugate everything, are themselves the expression of a deeper whole, which includes the self and its object. If the self is not widened into the universal spirit, the values themselves

become merely subjective and the self itself will collapse into nothing" (S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life, Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1929*, 2nd ed. [London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1937], 274).

Existence precedes thinking or doubting. One can never doubt the existence of one's Self. The body is compared to a cart and the soul to its driver. Coordination between the body, the mind, the organs, and prana, is possible due to conscious spirit, the knowing Self. All living bodies possess a tripartite personality with soul, mind and body. There cannot be a living organism without the coordination of these three.

The individual self represents finite, small consciousness. Every human being is individualized Universal Consciousness, the Self of the universe. All individual minds are parts of a Cosmic mind. Just as the microcosm is held, sustained, and controlled by the individual self, so is the macrocosm by the Universal Self. One Supreme Self is individualized or particularized by each finite mind, just as one sun reflected in the ocean appears as millions of suns. When the transcendental entity appears through the screen of matter in a particular way, we call it the individualized expression of the Infinite Being. It is something like a solar light or the sky. The light or the sky is infinite in its own being, but when we open the door of a room and look at the infinite sky or the light beyond through the door, they appear in the shape of the door. Various golden ornaments such as bangles, rings, and so on, though outwardly different, partake in essence of the same substance; that is, gold. We may number the various waves in the sea as separate lines of force, but they all actually represent unfoldings of the same tidal wave. Maya or ignorance obliges us to see things as separate rather than as unified in a single field. The individual is a creature, not a creator. The soul is being and God is the Supreme Being.

Vedanta holds that Self is beyond the intellect, mind, and ego. Life and nature are very limited expressions of Self and dependent on it. From the aforesaid study it can be concluded that (1) The Self is eternal, immortal, infinite Consciousness, one and non-dual. It is transcendental as well as immanent Entity; (2) It is Self-evident. Its existence and its unchanging continuity are fact; (3) It is identical with the Absolute Reality; (4) Pure Consciousness is ever the subject and hence the Absolute Reality is never objective; (5) The objective world is a projection of the Self and hence is only apparently real; (6) It is the datum of all experience and knowledge; and (7) It is Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss Absolute.

The Greek religion was, essentially, worldly and pragmatic. Though Socrates raised the religious attitude above the positivistic level, it was never pursued by the Greeks beyond the social level. Protagoras, most famous among the Sophists, formulated the dictum, "Man is the measure of all things." The well-known historian Stace, explains: "By man he did not mean mankind at large. He meant the individual man . . . Each individual man is the standard of what is true to himself" (Stace, *Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, 113). Protagoras lived nearly five centuries before Christ. Socrates, who is known by the scholars as the finest flower of Sophistic culture, gave the world a new dictum—"Know Thyself." In that statement, "Know Thyself," he gave special emphasis to the first word, "Know," and dedicated his entire life in the dissemination of knowledge. To him,

"knowledge is virtue." He thought that right knowledge will easily help people to get an insight about right conduct. Western scholars never bothered about the real concept of the Self.

Plato only said that there were three kinds of Soul, the plant, the animal and the rational, without making the attempt Aristotle made to explain that this difference ultimately referred to a difference in the degree of consciousness. But he too finally upheld the contradictory notion that these different degrees of consciousness constituted the different kinds of Souls.

A vast body of scholarship has been produced through the untiring efforts of many Western scholars during the last two and a half millennia. But the result is disappointing. In his lecture, "Origin of the Vedanta," Max Müller quotes the remarks of the German philosopher, Frederick Schlegel: ". . . 'It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God; all their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear, and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God. Even the loftiest philosophy of the Europeans, the idealism of reason, as it is set forth by the Greek philosophers, appears, in comparison with the abundant light and vigour of Oriental idealism, like a feeble Promethean spark in the full flood of heavenly glory of the noonday sun—faltering and feeble, and ever ready to be extinguished.' And with regard more especially to the Vedanta Philosophy, he says: 'The divine origin of man is continually inculcated to stimulate his efforts to return, to animate him in the struggle, and incite him to consider a reunion and reincorporation with divinity as the one primary object of every action and exertion.' . . ." (Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy, 10-11).

Western thought cannot give us a concept like the Vedantic Self, which is self-luminous Atman, the sole spiritual entity. Change cannot be cognized unless there is an unchanging observer to relate the succeeding with the preceding condition. According to Vedanta, the mind is subtle matter, the finest of all material substances, and it is basically pure. It is distinct from the physical body and the knowing Self as well. It is intermediate between the two. It has been the prevailing tendency in the West to identify mind either with the soul or with the body. There is a good deal of vagueness in the writings of Western philosophers and psychologists. From Plato onward, philosophers in the West have held that the mind has three faculties—the cognitive (knowing), the conative (willing), and the affective (feeling). Will being only a special function of the mind and the mind itself being influenced by thoughts and desires—how can the will ever be free? The sense of freedom in our life is due to the presence of the higher Self in us. (Western scholars, denying the existence of Soul, consider human personality to be an offshoot of matter. The concept of Soul in the West is something like the concept of the subtle body in Vedanta.) Swami Vivekananda says, "The West never had the idea of soul until they got it through Sanskrit philosophy, some twenty years ago" (C. W., III, 126).

Any age or country that produces a Plato, Aristotle, Kant or Hegel may be justified in its pride of their exceptional perception and scholarship. Despite their deep erudition, however, their view of life was not a universal view. Though they were notable

philosophers, they never achieved a universal philosophy of life that can be accepted by all. European philosophers, in general, excepting a few, take an objective attitude to comprehend the Self. They labor hard to explain the subjective in terms of the object, the inner in terms of the outer. This inherent and predominant bias for objectivity is at the root of all the failures that spoil the Western theories of Self. Yet despite their objectivism, they naturally recognize, almost invariably, that the Self is unique—that the Self cannot be interpreted or understood through objectivity, regardless of their desire to do so. This objective attitude of the West fails to explain the important problem of human experience—the relation of the one and the many, changelessness and change, unity and plurality. The objective attitude of the western philosophers failed to give a satisfactory solution to the perennial problem of Self.

The tragedy of human life stems squarely from our metaphysical ignorance about —our divinity. "A more serious source of resistance," says Rollo May, "is one that runs through the whole of modern western society—namely, the psychological need to avoid and, in some ways, repress, the whole concern with 'being'." In contrast to other cultures, which may be very concerned with being—particularly the Indian and Oriental—the characteristic of our period in the West, as Marcel rightly phrases it, is precisely that awareness of "the sense of the ontological—the sense of being—is lacking. Generally speaking, modern man is in this condition; if ontological demands worry him at all, it is only dully, as an obscure impulse" (Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence* [1949], 1).

In the Western view, man consists of body and soul. Here soul is synonymous with mind, ego, and consciousness. In the West, generally, no distinction is made between mind and soul. Soul refers only to the different forms of experience of a normal human being. This is the general idea in all non-Hindu spiritual traditions. The Self as a real entity distinct from body, mind, and ego has never been satisfactorily established. In Vedanta, Atman or Self is beyond body and mind, ego, intellect, and all physical appearances. It transcends everything. The Self is Self-existent, pure and immortal. In the West, each soul is created by God individually. In Vedanta, the human being consists of Atman, mind, and body; in the West the human being consists of body and mind which are created by God. Western scholars study only what the Vedantins call attribute consciousness, not existential consciousness.

According to Vedanta, the human being is divine, as the Pure Self is the inmost essence of man. God is not extra-cosmic or distant, He is immediate, direct and the nearest. Two concepts—the non-divine nature of man and the distance of God—are not accepted in Vedanta. In the Western view, God being the Creator, is therefore the subject, while the created soul is the object; the two can never be the same. God is not only ultimate but also intimate, according to Vedanta. God is nearer than our arteries, our inmost being. God, in Vedanta, is not only the Creator but also the created.

In summing up, the transcendent character of the ever-pure and immortal Self is never tainted by the impurities of mind, nor is it saved by the grace of a savior. When impurity is removed, the bliss of the Self is spontaneously experienced. In the West, soul is not a

transcendent entity, it is created. Hence the impurities of the mind taint the soul, which is mind, and hence it requires the grace of a savior. The Self of Vedanta is not a created entity; soul in the West is created. The doctrine of the eternal, pure, self-luminous and infinite Self was developed in Vedanta alone. Dr. James B. Pratt writes in *The Religious Consciousness* that:

In the Christian view, the soul's survival of death is essentially miraculous. The soul is conceived as coming into existence with the birth of the body, and the thing to be expected is that it should perish when the body perishes. This is prevented through the intervention of God who steps in to receive the soul and confer upon it an immortality which, left to itself, it could never attain. In India all this is changed. The soul's immortality has never been thought there to be dependent upon any supernatural interference or miraculous event, nor even upon God. There are atheistic philosophers in India, but they are as thoroughly convinced of the eternal life of the soul as are the monists or theists. For in India the soul is essentially immortal. Eternity is in its very nature (Swami Yatiswarananda, "Through Death to Immortality," *PB* March 1981, 99).

### **Practical Relevance**

The pressing need for the real conception of human life is the main key not only to right living but also to right knowledge of the universe. Practical points are that (1) The microcosm and macrocosm (the individual and universal) are built on exactly the same plan. The infinite is the support of the finite. Behind the world of multiplicity there is essential unity and interconnectedness; (2) The wisdom of the unity of existence provides a holistic view of life and the universe. This insight can make our life contemplative, spiritual, and dynamic; (3) The infinite glory of the human personality can be experienced by those who are really convinced of the divinity within. "Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man." This idea of Swami Vivekananda will be more appealing to humanity in the future. It is the expression of divine qualities in our life and not the subscription to a creed or a dogma. Religion essentially unites us with God; and (4) Swami Vivekananda's idea that in the future the thought of immanent God—God manifest in human beings, will impel us to serve them as God. This future vision of Vivekananda will be immensely fulfilled.