

Transcript ~ The Highest Form of Spiritual Knowledge

Answers to Questions by Sri Raghavan Iyer

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Atma-Vidya represents the transcendence of the very distinction between the knower, the known, and the modes of knowing. If this is so at the highest level, if this is the root of all reality, cosmic and human, why then at the lower levels is there a separation between the knower and the known, between the process of knowing, the knower, and the known? And what is it must we understand about this process? In other words, if there is a One, a One Without a Second, an Attributeless Absolute Reality, the Divine Ground, then what meaning should we assign to this world—a world of flux, a world of change, a world of fleeting and finite forms in ceaseless interaction, which is deceptive, which is illusory and gives rise to delusion? Why the world? Or to put it at the individual level, it corresponds to the question that Wittgenstein raised, “If we are immortal, what meaning could we give to mortality?”

So either we could assume the standpoint initially of simply being an object in a world of objects and then we have mindless, compulsive reactions which come and go with memory traces. In other words, what we have really done is to have created the lunar equivalent, a shadowy equivalent to the Atmic sun. We have created a kind of cohesiveness in the realm of behavioral dispositions, traits, habits around memory. Memory, desire, and form, they come together.

So at that lowest level, of course, one is part of the differentiated world of objects—of many objects, many selves, separate objects, separate selves. And yet even at that level, if we really think about it, because of the process of change, we recognize that it is only because we have arbitrary scales and means of measurement that we can discern and separate. Because in the process, it is very difficult to mark off and separate stages as we witness them, as we experience them. It would be like the difference between seeing directly an object, and then when you make a photograph from that object and then you separate it into a series of stages—negative, and then you can use different degrees of light and shade and you can, you know, you see a series of these—it is very interesting because you’re really seeing the same thing, but you’re seeing it at different levels.

Now, is this then a function of instrumentality? Is this because of the mind that is capable of division, that is capable of classification? Yes, it is.

Is that mind a tool of knowing? Yes, it is. But though it is a tool of knowing, that mind typically becomes immersed in the object of its own concentration, of its own involvement. So this is why broadly the whole world is regarded as a world of *samsara* in which our involvement is involuntary. This is what is meant by the *prakriti marga*, outgoing. As human beings in the mass grow up and go out into the world, they become involuntarily involved through desire, through mental conception, through memory, through like and dislike, through fear and hate and love; they become involved in a world. And then, of course, once consciousness is differentiated, it is fragmented, there is a gap. There is a gap between the world of what exists and unitive consciousness, which may be experienced every day, every night in deep sleep. So therefore, it becomes a problem of waking up and not knowing what happened. Sometimes one feels good, sometimes one feels rested, sometimes one is actually more tired, but one has no sense of continuity through the night.

And similarly, by analogy and correspondence, one has no sense of continuity between two lives. Death closes the door to one series of experiences, and after a mysterious interregnum, mythified in religions in terms of hell and heaven, we come back into the world with a new body, a new brain, with no seeming memory or reminiscence of what happened before. So as long as human beings through their differentiated instruments—including the mind, which itself is a means of differentiation, of identification of objects—become part of the process, the process of fragmentation, human beings are immersed in this process, they cannot stand apart from it. Which means the only time that human beings really stand apart from it is when they get a shock, when something happens which they don't like, when they are paralyzed by fear and then are driven to think and to rethink, or to flee if they are not ready to think, flee from the scene in which they are involved.

So typically, it is said, the great teacher for human beings at that level is suffering. Suffering comes like a sage. It comes to force the human being to wake up, to cut through involuntary habitual responses to the world, and it's only out of pain that there is growth.

Now if this is true of all human beings at the level of participation in differentiated existence, is it possible to have degrees of knowing where gradually the separation can be softened? It is. And for that it is important to chasten and strengthen the mind, which otherwise is volatile and fickle, by philosophical conceptions.

So the central philosophical conception of *Atma-Vidya* is there is no difference in the end between subject and object, between spirit and matter. Regard spirit, if you like, as the most ethereal, most refined degree of matter. Regard matter, if you like, as the most dense, the most

condensed form of spirit, and therefore regard the differences between the two extremes at the poles as differences which, though they look like a difference of kind, still only emerge out of differences of degree. In other words, you can see the whole world in terms of substance, you can reduce all substances into one substance, and when you can imagine the most homogeneous, undifferentiated, primeval substance, and the more you etherealize it, the more homogeneous, the more primeval, the more removed it is from a world of multiplicity. And that is like a veil upon Brahman.

Imagine a world also in terms of selves, of subjects, all beings who can say “I,” “I,” “I think,” “I witness,” “I see.” And this not only includes self-conscious beings for whom the sense of “I” is mobile but also illusive. It is also true of all sentient beings where there is a latent sense of “I” —in the animal, even in the ant, some sense of seeing which involves a minimum sense of selfhood. Now see all selves merely as rays, as modifications, as aspects of One Supreme, Unbounded, Unconditional, Boundless Selfhood. Then the question is, what’s the relation between this Primordial Substratum and this Boundless Selfhood? There is no difference. This is the main teaching of *Atma-Vidya* in Shankara. Brahman is Atman, Atman is Brahman.

But we cannot realize this merely through the affirmation of it. So we have to begin by recognizing that we are very much a part of the world of subjects and objects, and most of the time, almost all the time, we function as one subject among many, and we see human beings as objects and very rarely as subjects. So we have to recognize that most of our seeing and most of our thinking is false, indeed is a lie. We have to see that merely because we see another human being as an object, that human being doesn’t become an object, doesn’t cease to be a subject. And merely because we see ourselves as an object acted upon by the environment, that doesn’t take away from us our own pain, our own sense of omission and of commission, our own latent sense of responsibility. In other words, we cannot abdicate from the kingdom of selfhood, which is a kingdom of ends, which is a kingdom in which every choice has moral significance and has continuity with past and future choices, with past and future acts.

So if this is the case, initially it is helpful, having grasped the metaphysical idea that at the root matter and spirit are convertible, we are both subject and object, but instead of merely seeing this in terms of two nouns, in terms of two substantives—between a subject, that’s a noun, and an object, that’s a noun—why not see it in terms of verbs? Things are happening to me and I am making things happen. And I’m making things happen, first of all, in the mind. By the way I view things, I’m making things happen to me. My reactions are capable of being scrutinized. They contain errors, but they can be subject to a process of self-correction. So I can, if the world looks gloomy, I can make it very different if I recognize that I have this power of creation, of

determination. And if, when things happen to me, I can recognize no distinction between myself and other beings, then I can see that it is very arbitrary to say this is happening to me and not to someone else. It is purely an artificial assumption. I have a cold, he doesn't have a cold. I don't have a cold, I'm in good health, he is in good health.

But those mystics in training, like Shantideva the monk, who having taken the Pledge of Selfless Altruism, the *Bodhisattva* Vow, actually discovered very soon in their training that it was much easier to bear one's own pain than to bear the pain of another. That when you really become attentive to the pain of others, you find that at least in reference to your own pain, because you can shift your attention, you can change your perspective, you can give it meaning, you could withdraw significance, your pain becomes bearable. And indeed, the very fact that you live means, by definition, you can bear the burden of your pain.

But on the other hand, once you start experiencing the pain of other human beings, in the very thought of that pain, a tremendous love, compassion grows out of you, and you would hope it gives strength, you would hope it relieves pain, and yet you realize, however great your compassion, it lags behind the totality of human pain. You also recognize that human beings cannot really alter their suffering without doing something about it, without inserting subjectivity, selfhood, without choosing, valuing, reappraising. And though by the power of thought you may send thoughts to help another human being to see things differently, but still beyond a point you cannot make another human being change perspective if that human being is too conditioned in that perspective, or that human being simply cannot summon up the courage.

So therefore, it is much more painful. But indeed, this kind of recognition only comes at a point where, if you are really doing this all the time, the very calculation of mine and thine with reference to human pain, after a point, begins to become irrelevant. So it is possible to train oneself to drop the sense of mine and thine in regard to sensation, in regard to pain, but also in regard to joy, in regard to human suffering. Who is to say that the birth of a child must necessarily give more joy to the parents than to some other human being at a distance who is watching and is aware of that birth? In other words, all notions of appropriation are arbitrary, they are misleading, they are inadequate.

And therefore, one begins to see that on both fronts, whether in regard to substance or in regard to selfhood, you have to keep overcoming self-created limitations. You have to negate and negate and negate. But lest this negation become a form of escape, as you negate, you also ought to affirm, because you are not really negating your own sense of self, you have to put

yourself in the position of another. Before you can do this for all human beings, you have got to start with one, two, three persons.

You have got to see the world through the eyes of a child, see the world through the eyes of an old man, see the world through the eyes of someone you dislike or who dislikes you, see the world through someone who is at a distance to you, who is inscrutable to you, who is mysterious. And the more you begin to do this, you really find that there is no end to this process. This process becomes coeval with human evolution.

And then, of course, in the very activity, you find you are being changed, you are being transformed. Because you have become more unconditional in reference to objects and subjects. Because you seize upon the boundlessness of that which is hidden by the screen of objects, by the separation of selves, you begin to experience That for which you have no words, That which goes beyond all images, That which you can experience as a sound, but if it is a sound, it is a kind of inaudible hum in the heart, a soundless sound, like the great tone of the Chinese, the F-note of Nature. You can experience it as the *AUM*, in which you experience creation, preservation, destruction, and regeneration as processes that go on simultaneously with reference to all atoms and all objects and all subjects that may be reduced to atoms.

So when you start to see the world in this way, then of course you have really universalized your consciousness, or to put it differently, you have awakened what you already have, "protention." Because if you yourself are only a kind of window for the Cosmic Monad or only a ray of the universal sun, then you have Universal Consciousness. But to be able to release that Universal Consciousness, you have to break down barriers, you have to remove the blinders, you have to transcend conditions, and this in words may be said, but in life it is difficult because it involves pain. Sometimes it may come easy and then you may really experience a kind of euphoric state, but then you will suddenly find that karma brings you something which is very hard to take.

So this is a philosophy which has to work at many levels over and over again. Which means the very entry into this path of recovery of unconditional selfhood, unconditional universal objectivity, the very desire to enter it must be unconditional. You must say, "I don't expect any results. I'm quite through with the idea of success and failure. I'm doing this because there is nothing else to do. I'm doing this because this is what I will be doing at the moment of death. This is what I, like every other being, began with at the moment of birth."

So I'm merely doing that which is the only thing to do once I have recognized it. And when one has this severe sense of necessity in regard to stripping away, stripping away, stripping

away, stripping away illusions, one is actually grateful for karma, because karma comes then as a friend who cooperates with the process of taking away, stripping away. And then, of course, a point comes where instead of being concerned at all with your well-being, you find yourself more habituated to noticing the well-being of others, and because you can't do this in detail, therefore you become truly concerned to live a life of contemplation, of meditation. You meditate upon the Spiritual Sun, upon Universal Good. You meditate upon the very source of all knowers, of all knowing, and of all that is known. And there they all come together.

But to meditate upon It is to become That, is to recover a sense of who one truly is, and the deeper that meditation, the stronger that meditation, the more one comes to notice what is not obvious, the more one comes to see behind the veil of the manifest what is hidden. You come to see what people mean to say, not what they say. Behind even the meanest thoughts you see a heart hungry to give love and receive it. You always see beyond, because you recognize that all evil is ignorance, and it's a veil. And therefore, you begin to feel the pulse of what keeps beings alive. Because what keeps beings alive is the breathing of the One. The Atman is the Eternal Breath of Absoluteness, and That breathes in and breathes out.

At our level we think in terms of breathing in and breathing out in terms of countable breaths. Well, that is on the physical plane. When it comes to mental breathing that is harder. When it comes to the rhythms of the body, including the systole and diastole of the heart, it is harder to make those separations. But when it comes to the Cosmic Heart, the beating of the Cosmic Heart, when it comes to the rhythm of Cosmic Consciousness, you find you simply cannot put it into any scale or into the spectrum of seven colors. So you think of the One White Light which is beyond the spectrum. You think of the Sound which cannot be sounded, because it cannot be broken into the seven notes. And in this way, you keep going beyond and beyond all differentiation, and you experience it. And you experience it most of the time in silence, but silence yoked to heightened awareness.

It is an awareness in which the boundaries of being between yourself and others begins to loosen up. You do not really feel your body is yours, other bodies belong to others. You only see spheres of light. And you see ceaseless interaction. Interaction at the atomic level. Interaction even deeper in that inaudible hum of the heart, and you experience it. And therefore, like the mystics, you become very short of words and even metaphors with which to express what you experience. And that experience is exhilarating. And that experience cannot be communicated by words or concepts, but it may be transmitted through the eyes. It may be transmitted through grace, through love, because it is like using one candle to light up other candles. It is a light of

awareness, a light of pure awareness rooted in a realm which is beyond being, which is like non-being but even beyond it.

And this is the same in all that lives, and this is in germ in every human being. That which is The Infinite is the Omniscience of Ishvara. And when you think in this way, then the scale of comparison and contrast becomes unimportant. You become attentive to the germ, and you are absorbed with the Infinite, and you are constantly therefore wanting to be in tune with the process of expansion and contraction which you see in the tides of the ocean, which you see in all the elements of Nature, but which you also hear in the breathing of all human beings, of all that lives. And when you begin to participate in that breath, the very notion of knowing, of being the knower, or of being a part of the known collapses and falls away.

Or to put it in that magnificent simple metaphor of Gandhi, when you reduce yourself to a zero, to a zero, you can swim on the ocean of truth. Because you have no sense of adherence, of involvement, of expectation, of regret, because you have dissolved it—maybe not completely, but maybe again and again, intermittently. But because you have experienced the thrill of that dissolution, and yet you remain aware and conscious, because you may do it unconsciously or unselfconsciously in deep sleep. But now you are doing it with awareness in waking life. And when you have experienced It, then you can feel the joy of the Ocean of Truth: Its immense amplitude, Its depth, Its strength, Its calmness, Its peacefulness, Its rhythmic movements moving out in ripples, returns to their points of origination—all of this is seen as merely an appearance upon That which is indescribable.

So when you experience It in this way, you might call it Pure Love, you might call it Pure Understanding, you might call it Pure Truth, you might call it Pure Being. But these are only different ways of characterizing That which has no beginning, which has no end. If experienced, It cannot be dated, It cannot be limited, and though you may only have It at a particular time, It can be recaptured at any time if you truly experienced It. It is there always, but not only there; It was there millions of years ago. It was there at the moment of birth. It is felt every night. It will be there at the moment of death. And if so, you can also begin to dissolve the very distinctions of time that apply in the large to creation and manifestation.

What a tremendous, tremendous prospect for the human being who, through the light of awareness, can dissolve distinctions, heighten wakefulness, and then in the unexpressed experience one might call “Bliss Consciousness,” because he is ready to enter into what Shankara calls the *anandamaya kosha*—taking the phrase from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*—the “bliss body.” That vesture which is Pure Light, Pure Ideation, Pure Bliss.

And when one has entered that vesture, still one has further ways to go because one has to overcome, overcome even that. But long before, of course, people can reach that stage, they have to free themselves from the pairs of opposites. They have to free themselves from all the dependence upon the physical body, the *annamaya kosha*. They have to free themselves from the *pranamaya kosha*, the currents of energy that are impossible to take, which is why, of course, sleep is unavoidable, because of the exhaustion with the waves of energy beating upon the frail system. And the *manomaya kosha*, which out of its capacity to fantasize and conceive and visualize is constantly imposing a kind of screen, a kind of curtain, limiting the power of pure creativity. Whereas in that bliss body one cooperates with Universal Creation. One's joy is a joy of participation in creation without a sense of authorship as a creator, without a sense of being an agent, though one is fully conscious and fully responsible in cooperating in every thought, in every feeling, while one is in that bliss body with the process of creation.

So it is a tremendous prospect, and we have to start by asking the question: How do I distinguish in my life as it is between the real and the unreal? Not between what I know and what I do not know, but between what is real in what I know and what is unreal in what I do not know? Even more, what is unreal in what I know, but in myself? And only by asking that question can one give integrity to the quest; can one's soul be secure before one begins the ascent.