

Meditation on the Atman

WE are all aware of the law of the inner life: 'When the disciple is ready the Master is ready also.'

The Christ referred to this in a different way yet with similar meaning: 'Seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given unto you, knock and it shall be opened.'

How do we seek? How do we ask? Few seek earnestly with their whole being; few seek in depth. Such paucity of true seekers and true finders tends to make many sceptical about the search for the *atman*, about the possibility of becoming, in full consciousness, one with the source of our life and the goal of our endeavours. Even members of this Society claim that atmic consciousness is impossible for us in this fifth root-race, on this fourth globe of our fourth round. Such a denial is not justifiable in a Society which was founded to guide intellectual evolution along spiritual channels and so to promote the spiritual regeneration of man, not his intellectual curiosity.

Have we really understood that to show the way spiritually, to be lamps to the world, we must first of all know something of the spiritual path, not in theory through books but by treading it?

By at least trying to achieve a certain degree of spiritual integration we are attempting to make ourselves worthy of the wisdom entrusted to us. None who really does this can deny the possibility of atmic realization here and now; that would be to sap the very foundation of our inner being and extinguish the beacon of hope given to us through our teachings and by our Masters. No defeatist can be a lightbringer or a spiritual guide. Nor does guiding spiritually mean mere preaching; it means, rather, to fathom the truth of the teachings in life, to find out for ourselves the essence of their meaning—in other words, to live the life. We cannot hope to open out men's minds to wisdom unless we have first found it within our own hearts, unless we are grounded, not in mere theory (as too often is the case) but in truth and in the fire of actual experience.

We may be able to expound the doctrine of rounds and races, globes and chains, but we should beware lest we get bogged down by them. They are, indeed, part of the magnificent panorama of the cosmos, the magic of *mahat* or the Universal Mind, the field of experience which gives

Meditation on the Atman

each particle of life the means of developing, and it is proper that we understand how it works. But let us not lose sight of the great truth that there is a door close at hand which leads out of the three worlds' evolution if we choose to find it; that man has within himself a spark of Deity in which, through which, and by which all things evolve to their appointed perfection; because of this he can cut across the rounds and races and globes by finding his inmost core, an achievement which is greater because there he touches that ultimate glowing flame which set all these chains and globes going on their everlasting pilgrimage, and now liberates him from their thralldom.

Seek within

Sri Krishna Prem in his commentary on the *Stanzas of Dzyan* make this very plain. He writes: 'The inner teaching has frequently . . . been taken literally [in its symbols] and the inner life of the spirit, the treading of the Path to Freedom, has been cramped and weighed down by vast and elaborate mental constructions which, taken in and for themselves, press down upon the heart and check the spirit's soaring flight. Ground between cycles of an endless past and of an endless future, entangled in a maze of "Rounds" and "Races" rooted on "Planes" and "Paths", too often the heart of the disciple is crushed and he forgets that the Eternal Peace is round him and within him here and now. If he but use the "Wisdom Eye within his soul, even now the whirling cycles shrink to a point and cease; Time and Levels vanish and only the bliss of Unity remains, for Now, not in some dim past

or dimmer future, "all is One Number, issued from No-Number".¹ (It is therefore within ourselves that we must seek the Truth. Withdrawing our consciousness from the outer crust of material forms, we must attend to the living Truths of which those forms are but the crystallized pattern. Nor, though difficult because of our inveterate outward-looking habit, is this in any way impossible for us here and now. ... It cannot be too strongly emphasized that now, at this very moment and for our very selves, the Divine Wisdom is available. Within us, yes us, the Sons of Fire are now sounding forth their wisdom, born of the parent Flame. Not in remote Himalayan caverns and to exceptional souls alone, but here in the caves of our own hearts the truth is *being taught*: it is we who do not listen, and then fill earth and sky with clamour, wailing like peevish children for our supposedly forlorn state. . . . "Listen, ye Sons of the Earth, to your instructors the Sons of the Fire " who are within and around you everywhere."²

The subject of the *atman* is a sacred and, at times, stern one. So we turn away, clinging to the comforts of the senses, to what we know, to the little self, while the mind invents all sorts of reasons to prevent us from embarking upon the only goal set for man. True, such a quest is full of pitfalls, but so is life, and the quest is life!

The question is: Do we want God or the world, the *atman* or phenomenon? The choice is ours. To seek the *atman* means to cease grasping, holding, clinging. It means to turn our back on our comfortable knowledge, including perhaps all the magnificent doctrines of the cosmos

which we glimpse under the label of the ancient wisdom but which, on realizing the *atman*, may appear quite different. It does not mean to withdraw from the world but rather to face it in a different way. It means to surrender the mind—that treasure that man has built up for countless ages. And the more developed and well furnished the mind is, the more difficult the sacrifice. But if we are to be pioneers we must be ready for sacrifice. Those who have found the *atman*, even if only for a moment, know that through that mere flash the world has been transformed, that understanding has deepened to an infinite degree, that the veil, however beautiful, has been hiding the even more beautiful face of the One, the Beloved—God, within and without. In turning from the night of our pigmy self (to use Kahlil Gibran's expression) to the day of our God-self, we find that we have lost nothing. The pigmy in us is searching for his own awakening for he also is part of the vast One. Let us help him.

We must be brave. This is one of the most important prerequisites because we do not know exactly what is awaiting us, except that the *atman* brooks not the impure, the selfish, the proud and the egoistic. All these will be scorched, burnt, pulverized at its touch, and in the process we may be broken.

The conquest of the self

When Columbus set out on his voyage of exploration to what he presumed would be India, he did not really know what would become of him and what he would find in the end; and for weeks and months there was nothing in sight but water.

This graphic image of nothingness—the moving waters and the serene or stormy skies—applies to our own quest of the *atman*. Columbus had the courage and the capacity to sacrifice his small comforts for an achievement he deemed greater than the sum of these comforts; so the *atman* demands the sacrifice of many things we may hold dear but which are not really important. 'Verily,' says Gibran, 'the lust for comfort murders the passion of the soul, and then walks grinning in the funeral.'

We need courage, faith, trust, hope, purity, self-sacrifice. At this stage of our evolution these are not too much to expect. But it is a question of directing them into the one channel—the path to the *atman*. For man is meant to conquer himself: the conquest of the moon or of the other planets is but a reflection of that inner victory which shall make man not just the potential but the living link between heaven and earth.

If we in the Society do not show the way by being ourselves expressions of this quest and pioneers in this endeavour, if we do not at least make the effort or, worst of all, if we deny the possibility in this age, how can we be guides to others?

What is the *atman*? Looking at the word itself, we find that its derivations are many, but two are noteworthy: *an*, to breathe and *tman*, self. So at the root of the word is the original idea of *breath* and *self*. The most intimate bodily process on which life depends is breath. Throughout antiquity, the close connection between breath, wind and spirit (evidenced in the Greek *pneuma* and the Latin *anima*) is remarkable. In the *Rig Veda* the wind is identified with the

Meditation on the Atraan

spirit of the god Varuna: ' the wind, thy *atma*, has sounded through the region.'³ ' The wind, *atma* of the world! This god fares according to his will. His sounds are heard, his form is not seen.'⁴

Compare this with the Gospel of St. John : ' The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the spirit.'⁵

The wind is similar to the breath but the breath is not the vital energy or *prana* which underlies it; rather, it is the outer or grosser manifestation of *prana*. Again, *prana* is not the *atman* but one of its outer manifestations although one of utmost importance for without it there is no life. *Prana* may be thought of as the breath of the *atman* and therefore the link between the inner and the outer being. Hence the ancients' identification of wind, breath and spirit. The yogis of India realized that the breath could be used as an instrument to gain control over the *prana* by means of which they could open up the *chakras* or centres of energy and thereby gain access to the inner planes of consciousness.

Is the *atman* the Higher Self? The Buddhists deny any permanent Self and they are right. For the *atman*, in its ultimate meaning, is that universal life-flame or spark lit from the primeval source of which each one of us partakes, in which alone we find our common equality, our oneness, our being, our ■ Father in heaven '. H. P. Blavatsky referred to it as our plank of salvation, the Universal Self. It is the ultimate to which human beings can reach.

H.P.B. says:

'... *Atma* alone is the one real and

eternal substratum of all, the Essence and Absolute Knowledge...'⁶

The *atman* cannot be defined, grasped, imagined or made exclusively our own. H.P.B. says: '... *Atma* is no individual " principle," but a radiation *from* and *one with* the Unmanifested Logos...'⁷

We can realize it only by living, by meditation, by surrendering ourselves. We must live in the deepest sense of the word—intensely, wisely, altruistically, surrendering ourselves in perfect self-forgetfulness to that which we conceive as highest. The whole being must be harmonized, uplifted, integrated, made whole and therefore holy.

Love-desire

We must live in love. There are those who claim that H.P.B. never mentions love in *The Secret Doctrine*. This is incorrect. The wisdom-knowledge which she gave out, she asserted to be that ancient wisdom found in all the sacred scriptures of the world and her reverence for these, especially the Vedas of India, is evident. Thus, when she quotes she does so with approval and with the purpose of showing the truth.

In Book III she shows the importance of love: '... Kama ... is in the *Rig Veda* the personification of that feeling which leads and propels to creation.'⁸

In Book I we find the meaning of *kama*: 'In the "Beginning," that which is called in mystic phraseology " Cosmic Desire " evolves into "Absolute Light." '³ And in Book III: 'He [*kama*] was the *First Movement* that stirred the ONE after its manifestation from the purely Abstract Principles to create.'

And she goes on to quote from the

famous Rigvedichymn of creation: 'Desire first arose in IT, which was the Primal Germ of mind. . .'

Perhaps H.P.B. avoided the use of the word 'love' because of certain connotations and used 'desire' instead.

A hymn from the *Atharva Veda* exalts *kama* into the supreme God and Creator:

'Kama was born the first. Him, neither Gods nor Fathers [*pitris*] nor Men have equalled.'

The *Atharva Veda* identifies him with *Agni*, but makes him superior to that God.¹⁰

Agni is thus an aspect of that, cosmic desire or love which is the foundation of the cosmos and the root of our being.

We cannot get away from love. Admiration for the great and the beautiful, the desire to create a work of art, silent self-offerings, courageous vindication of truth, longing for the eternal — these are expressions of love. There is only one power, one law which manifests along two poles in this world of opposites: attraction and repulsion, cohesion and separation, harmony and strife; what are these in human terms but love and hatred? Just as behind joy and sorrow abides bliss, and joy is expressive of bliss, so behind love and hatred there is Divine Love which is spiritual will made manifest, the very expression of Deity in creation and the supreme affirmation. Hatred is the positive negation of love. The Buddha, affirming the supreme law of the universe, said: 'Hatred is not killed by hatred; hatred is killed by love.' In denying love we show utter ignorance and foolishness for we deny the very source of our being, the power that holds us and all things together,

and by means of which we return *to* the One. Love is the quickest, surest and simplest way to the *atman*. If we turn our back on love we face separation and may slowly slide unto the path of disintegration.

Next, we can meditate on the *atman*. It is in the deep silence within that is found the source of the mainspring of our greater actions—those altruistic deeds of charity which may find expression merely through living or through social involvement. The more we harmonize ourselves with our inner being, the more we find our true strength and become a power for good in the world.

Reach beyond form

But let us remember: whatever we may think or say about the *atman* is not the *atman*, but a mental concept and therefore a prison-house in which we entomb the reflection of a glowing flame that nothing on this earth can grasp. Reading, thinking and studying are processes of the mind. The *atman* is beyond the mind; if we use words—the mind's language—we are only drawing down that which is boundless to a dimension which cannot, by its very nature, compass it. We image it automatically according to our present conditioning; we give it form and boundary and therefore dwarf and distort it. The *atman* is formless, beyond time, distance or name, but each one clothes the divine in the form most familiar to himself. Thus it is that when there occurs a manifestation of the divine, the devout Hindu thinks he beholds Krishna or Vishnu, the devout Christian claims to have seen Christ or Mary. It often happens, too (so great is the power of the

mind, the slayer of the real), that he who has had a genuine vision ensouled by the divine light cannot accept the no less genuine vision of someone else, if it does not conform to his own particular pattern. Realizing these things, let us perseveringly reach out beyond form. As Plotinus said: 'We think too meanly of it. We cannot detach the Supreme to state it; if we have seen something thus detached, we have failed of the Supreme which is to be known only as one with ourselves.'

For the sake of communication, however, there must be speech. But in speaking and in listening with our whole being, with feelings and thoughts raised to the subtlest point of poised awareness, we know that all we can hope for now is a faint idea of something quite beyond us; in speaking, in listening and in meditation we may yet be fired to a deeper endeavour to plunge into that profounder absorption which the Lord Krishna summed up thus: 'I am the silent meditation.'

'Silence is the *atman*,' replied the sage Bhava. And Proclus described the Supreme as 'The Unity of unities. . . more ineffable than all silence, and more occult than all essence.'¹¹

Entering into the silence—the perfect stillness of body, feeling and mind—is first of all discovering our inner nature; for then all our hidden tendencies, emotions, thoughts (repressed or otherwise) rise to the surface. Let us observe them for what they are, and drop them. We may take years to get rid of them, or just a few seconds. We may, perhaps, never even become aware of them.

Once they have subsided, a great silence prevails. It may last a second or it may last a very long time. During it, there becomes perceptible a certain rhythm of the whole person which yogis ascribe to the pranic currents. During the waking state, these currents flow outwards according to their own specific rhythm, peculiar to each individual. This now slows down until it is brought to a standstill. Then occurs a complete reversal of the rhythm; from outward going the current becomes inward going, and we feel ourselves carried on a vast, all-supporting tidal wave of pranic current as the great breath which flows through all now flows back to its veiy source. In deep meditation the living entity withdraws with the life-breath to an inmost point of darkness, the dark void of nothingness. Here it is that, if we take fright and cling for reassurance to the senses, all is lost. For we fear the unknown, the unchartered sea, the void.

But if we believe divine love to be the foundation of the world, not just in theory but as a truth experienced in the depths of our being, is it not the most natural and magnificent of soul-adventures to set out upon the quest of the *atman* and to brave everything?

Poised and aware, surrendered and stilled, let us pause awhile for it is in one of those moments of perfect quietness that there flash forth upon the mirror of the mind illuminating insights, deeper understanding, true knowledge. It is in one of those moments that we know what *dhyana* means, the perfect openness, the equipoise of dynamic silence, dynamic power, dynamic peace; peace that transmutes the whole being into

a force for good, power that no obstacle can daunt, silence pregnant with action. Out of this *dhyana* emerge all the main-springs of action.

The tomb of initiation

Into the darkness, into the tomb of nothingness, have descended all the candidates for initiation, all the great illumined ones. Each had to face the guardian dark void and overcome it. These experiences of the soul give rise to many a myth. So in the *Katha Upanishad* we find the story of Nachiketas, the boy who was sent by his father to the kingdom of the dead. He waited at the gates of death plunged into perfect silence, perfect darkness, perfect patience, perfect obeisance. Only at the end of three days did Yama, the Lord of Death, manifest himself.

The name Yama means controller, measurer. He has nothing to do with Mara of later legend, he who personifies our past evils and is thus also called Death. Yama is Death in the supreme, most spiritual sense of the word; he is the son of Vivasvat, the Shining One, the Sun, the *atman*, for the *atman* in the Vedas is the sun. Now the son of the *atman* is our Higher Self and that Higher Self measures out each life and watches over its personality.

After three days of meditation Nachiketas comes face to face with his Higher Self and the latter allows him to ask two questions; he answers them and gives Nachiketas the secret of the fire of eternal life and then grants him a third boon.

And now comes the question of questions which Yama at first declines to

answer, offering instead all kinds of earthly riches and promises and thereby putting the sincerity of his pupil on trial. But Nachiketas will not be turned away from his purpose; he seeks the ultimate of ultimates, the secret of secrets: 'In the final liberation, does man still exist, or does he exist no more.'¹² None may fully understand this until he has merged with the *atman*. On this level, however, the answer is given in a paradox: man is and he is not. The all-creative, all-preserving?, all-consuming fire, the freedom-giver which shall make us more than man, is hidden in the deepest core of our being; that which stands guard over it—Yama—knows it as the God within. Sri Krishna Prem remarks: 'None can know the *atman* who has not conquered death.'

Death and soul-absorbing contemplation are one, for death is but the leaving behind of the senses, the emotions, and, finally, the lower mind, and the coming face to face with the Higher Self or that part of our inner consciousness which has rayed forth from the *atman*. Deliberately, in full consciousness, the candidate of old turned his back on the three worlds of ordinary evolution and entered into the reflection of the *atman*—Yama, the Lord of Death, the Higher Self. Then, indeed, is death transcended. That which at first seems to us unconsciousness, the dark void, the nothing, is seen as the most dynamic power of our being, the power that moves the universes, without which nothing that is could be, the divine Will that makes of us, in truth, walkers of stellar galaxies.

' Whose majesty carries away priests

and warriors and death itself is carried away.¹³ ' Desireless, wise, immortal, self-existent, contented with the essence, lacking nothing is He. One fears not death who has known him, the *atman*, serene, ageless, youthful.¹⁴

And so the Vedic seers could sing: 'I have known this mighty Heavenly Man refulgent as the sun beyond darkness. Only by knowing him do we overcome death. No other way is there to go.'¹⁵

And the soul in its longing sinks into deeper silence, into more awed expectation, into profounder absorption. The human being has now reached the deepest point of self-offering which is supreme prayer, that everlasting self-oblation of Deity now being repeated in the soul-spark, now being shared, now lived through in the depths of our being. Poised in utter stillness, awaiting unconcerned one knows not what. 'Not this, not this,' the Upanishads said long ago. 'Hold fast to that which has neither substance nor existence. Look

only on that which is invisible alike to the inner and the outer sense.'¹⁶

Invisible, intangible, inconceivable, yet real, here and now, our very life! The mind reels arid falls shattered. It knows the divine will as the abyss of flame-love quivering as the fountain-source, the nourisher of all life, the freedom-giver. We are free! We are invincible; we are one!

Deeper and deeper, let us listen with our hearts to the universal heartbeat—the *atman*, the hope of glory, the splendour within.

¹ *Man, the Measure of all Things*, Sri Krishna Prem and Madhava Ashish; p. 201.

² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

³ *Rig Veda*, VII. 87. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, X. 168. 4.

⁵ *St. John*, III, 8.

⁶ *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 294.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 426.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol III, p. 183.

⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 250

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. III. P. 183.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 144.

¹² *Katha Upanishad*, I. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II. 26.

¹⁴ *Atharva Veda*, X. 8. 44.

¹⁵ *Tajur Veda*, 31. 18.

¹⁶ *Light on the Path*.

Love is movement in a new dimension, which transports us out of the stifling prison of I-ness, the gloom of its separateness.

Thoughts for Aspirants N. Sri Ram.