



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

January 2021 Teachings Article:

Big Questions #1

Who Am I?

By Gurudevi Nirmalananda

I tried. I really did. I even proved that I could do all the things that “they” wanted me to do. I succeeded at becoming who they wanted me to be, but somehow I didn’t feel like me. Then I tried out an alternative lifestyle, several of them actually, looking for shoes that fit my wandering feet. But I still didn’t feel like me. I didn’t know who that was, but I could tell when it wasn’t. I kept searching.

I was asking the Big Questions, the ones posed by the ancient Greeks and yogic sages. These questions are road signs on the spiritual journey. This quest to know is a mystical inquiry into the nature of reality, fueled by a profound inner yearning that is beyond your mind’s understanding.

I felt the yearning. I was moved by it. I was propelled by this delicious and compelling inner urge, like an itch you can’t scratch. It took me to my Guru. He opened up the mystical dimensions within me in an instant, through an energy blast called Shaktipat. Then he explained it all so my mind could understand, laying out the answers as clearly as a breadcrumb trail leading me to my Self.

Over the months and years that I sat at his feet, I was amazed to find that all the Big Questions actually have answers. The yogic sages answered these important questions in their ancient texts, hymns and poetry and continue to do so in their modern-day discourses and writings. The mystery is revealed for anyone who wants to know. You simply have to ask one who knows the answer. The pivotal question is the one I was asking, “Who am I?”

Chaitanyam-aatmaa. — Shiva Sutras 1.1

Your own Self is Consciousness Itself.

It takes only two Sanskrit words to describe the truth of who you are, chaitanyam and aatmaa. These words point to vast and profound levels of reality within. It’s like the word “ocean” points to a huge body of water, something you cannot see the whole of in one glance.

Aatmaan is your own Self, yet is the Self of all, the One Self that is being all while being you.

Chaitanyam is the One Ultimate Reality, in the knowing of his/her/its own existence.

Simply stated, your own essence is divine. Without knowing your own Divine Essence, you will always feel incomplete, like you’re missing something. You are. You’ve lost you.

This sutra is the first one given in the very first book of the non-dualistic Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, the tantric system I teach. Yoga’s ancient texts give the most important teaching first. If you get it, you don’t need to read the rest of the book because you are instantly enlightened. But if that didn’t happen to you just now, you will benefit from both the teachings and practices this text and tradition offers.

Unfortunately, it’s easy to misunderstand these profound truths. They point you inward to find your own Self, which can make you think that you have an “inner Self” that must be found. But your Self is your whole Self, whether you’re looking inward or outward. When you feel, “I am a great cook,” the “I am” is the Self, though unfortunately entangled in what you are doing. You are always the same Self, whether you are doing something or not. The Self is the one who is seeing through your eyes. Thus, while everything you do is important (or you wouldn’t be doing it), the one who is doing the doing is you. My Guru described it this way,

You yourself are what you seek.¹

You are everything that you think you are. You are everything you have ever been and that you hope to be. You are all that you love as well as all that you hate. You are your memories and your desires as well as your ambitions and fears. All this is part of who you are, but when you add it up together, you are more than the sum. You are the Self, who is being you while you are doing all that you do. The doing is like the waves on the surface of the ocean, but they are made of the same water of which the whole ocean is made. You are not what you do; you are the being who is doing it.

¹ Swami Muktananda, Mukteshwari (South Fallsburg NY: SYDA Foundation), page 14

The goal is the knowing (chaitanyam) of your own Self (aatmaa). When you feel the yearning, it's because you don't know. This is called the "human condition" or "spiritual ignorance" (avidya). You are already the Self and always have been, even when you don't know, Yet the theory is not enough. Even knowing the Sanskrit words isn't enough, for it is the experience of Self that you yearn for. It's not the mind that must know the Self. The Self knows its own Self. Your own Self (aatmaa) is the One Self-Knowing Reality (chaitanyam), so it knows its own Self. This is an inner knowing, an undeniable certainty that makes sense out of everything and gives you a compass to live by.

This means you don't have to leave your life in order to know who you really are. The inner exploration of your own multi-dimensional existence can be done anywhere, as long as you don't have too many external distractions impeding your spiritual progress. You do have to focus on your practices, just like with anything else you want to accomplish. Yoga's practices provide consistent and reliable results which pay off over time. Similar to learning the piano, after one lesson you don't expect to play a concerto. So if you don't experience your inherent Divinity in your first meditation, you can understand that it will take a while. The classical system promises that you'll get there within 12-20 years.

Shaktipat changes that all. This mystical initiation opens up the hidden dimensions within, giving you easy, even instant, access to your own Self. I know from my own experience and from watching thousands of people get Shaktipat — they're instantly and irrevocably changed. The light of Consciousness shines through them in a whole new way. Shaktipat initiates a whole new level of spiritual quest, one that awakens you to the deeper dimension within, faster and easier than any other way.

Your inner experience is summarized in the provocative sayings of the ancient Upanishads. The Maha Vakyas, the Great Sayings, echo through the millennia, summarizing Ultimate Truth in a few words.

Ayam Aatmaa Brahma — My own Self is Brahman.

Aham Brahmaasmi — I am Brahman.

Praj~naanam Brahma — Brahman is Inner Knowing.

Tat Tvam Asi — I am That.

What does this mean? Your own Self is the Ultimate Reality (Brahman), that which pervades all, the source of life itself. You are that life-giving essence that can only be known by a deep inner knowing. This knowing of your own Self is the inner experience, "I am That." What is "That?" That which is beyond all names and forms, beyond space and time, beyond religion and tradition, beyond theory or belief, beyond anything you can conceive of or describe, That One Reality is your own Self.

You are more than you think you are. You label yourself by the place you were born or raised, the language you speak, the color of your skin, your gender and the work you do or your greatest pleasures. All of this is true, and there is more to you. You can cite your talents and skills, your education and experience. You can even put it all on a resume but it's not a full picture of who you are. Add in the people with whom you share your life and even what they call you (Mom, Son, Sis or Bro...), but the whole of you is not yet named. You are more. You are so much more, but you only find it when you look inward.

Your body is an essential piece of equipment, but you are not your body. Your mind is an even more important tool, empowering you to accomplish whatever you choose. Yet you are not your mind, nor are you your accomplishments. When you discover your own Self, you see that your body, your mind and heart make you able to shine the light of Consciousness into the world. Then your life is a symphony of praise, a hymn of glory and gratitude, a painting or play honoring the One who gives life to all, being all, while being you. There is only One here. And you are That.

We'll be exploring the Big Questions this year, month by month in this series of Teachings Articles. This first one is the most important one, of course. You have my permission to get enlightened after reading it. Or if you need additional help, more teachings are coming soon.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "BIG QUESTIONS"

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