

"Who Am I?"

Rādhā (Carol Whitfield, Ph.D.)

The problem is that liberation (mokṣa) itself is looked upon as the gaining of an experience. It is looked upon as the gaining of a type of mind, the gaining of a type of thinking, the gaining of a type of thought, rather than the recognition of who I am—the one who wants this type of mind. Who is the one who wants this pure mind? Who is the one seeking this spiritual experience? Who is the one seeking liberation? Who is the one here, right now, asking the question, “Who am I?” We think, “I am a conscious being, an aware being.” My mind, thought after thought, is known: each vṛtti (thought modification) is known. Now, am I the subject, the Self, or is the thought modification, which is known, the Self? I cannot be the object known and yet the mind which is an object of knowledge identifies itself with the Self which illumines it, saying “I, the mind, am the Self.” This is the problem. The mind’s misidentification with the Self is called the ahaṅkāra, the I-notion. The ahaṅkāra is also called the “knot of the heart” because it binds the Self to what it is not, through ignorance. The mind, believing itself to be the Self, wants to have an experience of the “Big Self.” Because the mind has misappropriated the Self to itself, due to Self-ignorance, it then seeks an experience of something away and separate from itself. In reality, there is no such thing as a “little Self” and a “Big Self.” There is only one Self that has been misappropriated due to Self-ignorance. There aren’t two beings; there aren’t two ‘awarenesses.’

There is one awareness, you, that is illumining whatever thought happens to be present. The ignorance born superimposition (adhyāsa) that’s causing the mind to identify with the Self -- “I am the Self,” has to be negated through Self-knowledge (ātma-vidyā). Self knowledge does not involve the attainment of a “new experience.” You, the Self, are already fully present and your thoughts and perceptions are also present. The problem we are facing does not have to do with a lack of Self-experience. It has to do only with the lack of differentiation between the Self and the objects that I take my Self to be, such as the mind and body. The Self is already totally present, but Self-ignorance is also present and that ignorance needs to be removed by Self-knowledge. This problem is a problem for the mind; it is not a problem for the Self. If the Self were inherently bound, nothing could free it from its bondage—neither knowledge nor action. But if the Self is inherently free, then knowledge alone can solve the problem, as no amount of activity can give it what it already is. But for knowledge to take place, a means of knowledge (pramāṇa) is necessary. As an individual you have the means of knowledge to perceive the world; your sense organs do that for you. But the sense organs are not going to give you knowledge of your Self, as your Self is not an object of perception. It is not that you need experiential knowledge of your Self. You are here, a conscious being, self-shining, self-evident, already present. The problem is that your Self has been confused with the objects of your experience. The sense organs cannot solve this problem, but proper teaching can. Words (śabdās) that are handled properly through the teaching methodology of Vedānta remove the Self-ignorance that causes one to feel bound.