

# Self Inquiry

Swami Tattvaidananda Saraswati

Every human being is innately aware of life; life is with you, with me, with all of us. We are all familiar with the nature of life and have the capacity to assess our own understanding of life. The study of life is not like studying a subject like Calculus or Physics in which there is a teacher and a student, and which entails the separation of the subject from the student.

Self-inquiry is a study unlike any other. It is an examination that obviates any division of teacher and disciple; you are the inquirer and the subject of inquiry is also you.

Any attempt to know the Self will cause it to become the other.

In general, students of Vedanta are more concerned with Self-knowledge than Self-inquiry. I have even come across a monthly magazine named Self-Knowledge. Many teachers of Vedanta like to present themselves as teachers of Self-knowledge. The word Self-knowledge translates as *ātmajñānam* in Sanskrit. It is used quite often, and there is nothing wrong with it. Yet the expression can be misleading if used casually, so you should be cautious when you use it.

The knowledge of the Self is unlike any other knowledge. Suppose I say, "I know the pot." The pot is an object and so I know the pot. This is called pot-knowledge. "Here I am the knower and the pot is the known." Strictly speaking, this knowing is only cognizing. You can still call it knowing, but you should be aware that it is mere cognizing; therefore, "I know the pot" means "I cognize the pot." This cognition of the pot is a mechanical process in which the mind modifies as a thought. It is caused by an external stimulus. The external "object," which is merely an obstruction to light, reflects the light onto the retina. At once, electrical sensations are produced and conveyed to the brain. The brain integrates this enormous number of sensations and throws up an idea called pot. It is a very subtle yet mechanical process. This is how we cognize the world around us.

The knowledge of the Self is unlike every other knowledge because the Self happens to be you.

The Self is not known in the same way as you might know the pot. For instance, in meditation, the attempt is to remain inwardly silent by watching the mind. When you try to watch the mind, you will be surprised to see that the mind slows down and then becomes silent. Having entered the silence, just remain silent; do not try to understand the silence. The human mind is curious and wants to know anything and everything of any significance. That is simply how it functions. So, when the mind comes upon silence, it

seeks to know the silence. In the process, however, the silence is already disturbed. Any attempt to understand the silence becomes an obstacle to the silence. Also, when you merge in the silence, do not try to enjoy the silence. Silence can be very enjoyable, particularly when people are stressed out by the hyperactivity of the mind, and the mind does not know how to stop. Again, the moment you try to enjoy the silence, it is already broken. In meditation, therefore, you should neither try to understand the silence nor try to enjoy the silence. If you do that, it becomes the "other."

A similar situation prevails in the context of Self-knowledge. The moment you try to know the Self, you have already put the mechanical process of knowing into operation. The mechanical process of knowing is very similar to using a pair of tongs. You use a pair of tongs to try to catch or hold on to something with them. Similarly, when you operate the mechanical process of knowing, which is the process of intellection, it is akin to operating a pair of tongs; you are holding onto something. In the case of Self-knowledge, while you may call that thing *ātmā*, the Self, it becomes the non-self. Simply by virtue of your trying to know it, *ātmā* becomes the non-self. Therefore, the expression "Self-knowledge" has to be very cautiously appreciated. It is not knowledge in the normal sense of the term, where through the mechanical process of cognition you come to know something other than yourself. Any attempt to know the Self will cause it to become the other.

Seeking to know the Self poses another challenge. Anything that is known through the mechanical process of knowing is a time-bound event and thus short-lived. If the Self could indeed be known, the knowledge of the Self would also remain short-lived, like any other object-knowledge. The knowledge of the pot, which we have seen is same as the cognition of the pot, is a time bound event. The cognition of the pot happens, and after a while it is gone.

Similarly, if Self-knowledge happens as an event, it will soon also be gone. If you could know the Self, it necessarily also becomes a transient thing. These are some dangers associated with trying to know the Self.

There is another problem related to the expression Self-knowledge. When I come across the students of Vedānta, it

is my habit to point out the pitfalls associated with the study of Vedānta. Generally, the Self is described as something very mysterious and exotic and as something great that is separate and far away from us. The way it is presented makes it appear both distinct and remote, as though it is something to be reached and realized with great effort. Suppose I say that *ātmā* is the eternal, timeless, spaceless reality and none other than Brahman which is the origin of this entire universe. Even as you listen to it, such a description will make you feel as if you are trying to understand something that is exotic, unique, and esoteric, and quite inaccessible! In that sense, the expression “Self-knowledge” and the descriptions of the Self separate and keep the Self away. Somehow, a wedge is created between oneself and the Self.

The generally accepted connotation of Self-knowledge has yet another drawback. It is promised that upon knowing the Self you will become free from the cycle of birth and death. Every one of our usual prayers holds out a promise of the benefits that accrue to the devotee upon reciting the prayer. It is contained in the *phalaśruti* that is recited along with the prayer. The talk of *phalam* is always there. Some *phalaśrutis* can be as lengthy as the prayers themselves, and some may even sound like a commercial recommending that prayer. This tendency is visible even in the context of Self-knowledge when it is said that upon knowing the Self, one becomes free from the cycle of births and deaths. Such a benefit to be derived from Self-knowledge may not readily capture one’s imagination, however, because the cycle of births and deaths is indeed not a pressing issue. It is more of a long-range benefit and not an issue of present or immediate consequence. We may have to deal with it at some point, but the appeal is not as urgent as is the case with many prayers that people recite. It is Self-inquiry that is more relevant to us in order to address our problems and suffering in the here and now. That is why the *ṛṣis* in their wisdom preferred the expression Self-inquiry over Self-knowledge.

The importance of Self-inquiry must be appreciated. If we look at *sūtra* literature, we can see that the teaching of grammar is introduced with the phrase *atha śabdānuśāsanam*, now begins the teaching of the words, and the teaching of yoga begins with *atha yogānuśāsanam*, now begins the teaching of yoga. But when we come to Vedānta, the topic of Self-knowledge is not prefaced by *atha ātmajijñānam* or *atha brahmajijñānam*, as in “now begins the knowledge of Brahman.” It is not like that at all. The knowledge of Brahman or *ātmā* is not readily packaged and presented as something that maybe learned or taught. Instead, the Vedānta *sūtras* begin with *athāto brahmajijñāsā*, now begins the inquiry into the Self.

Indeed, it is not some knowledge of the Self as worked out in the scriptures that I offer to you. It is not as if I, as the Guru, the preceptor, have all of this knowledge with me while you don’t, and I now offer it to you, saying, “Come and take it and become blessed.” This kind of approach is more common in a religious situation; when it comes to the teaching of religious scriptures, this is actually how it works. As a matter of fact, this is how all conventional teaching and learning happens. However, this is not the method that applies when it comes to Self-knowledge.

The knowledge of the Self is unlike every other knowledge because the Self happens to be you. Therefore, you have to know yourself; you have no choice. You may well ask, “What is there to know? I know myself already. Who doesn’t know himself or herself?” This is the issue here. I have to tell you that you do not know yourself. I have to tell you to keep an open mind about it. Don’t rush into this thing. It is true that you have an idea of yourself. You take yourself to be a person. That is an image you have about yourself. However, what you know about yourself does not reflect

the real you. It is but an image you have of yourself. In other words, what you take yourself to be is a shadow Self, not the real Self. And you should understand that an image can never be real.

This sense of “me” and “mine” arises from one’s identification with the physical body and is almost entirely defined by desires and fears.

Let us suppose that a person is standing out in the sun and his body casts a shadow on the ground. What would you say if, instead of taking himself to be the standing physical entity, he takes himself to be the shadow? The shadow appears, but it is not real. It cannot be described in a manner that the person can be described. It has no weight or matter or discernible substance whatsoever. It is not a thing; it is merely an appearance. Now look at yourself. You take yourself to be a person and assume all the descriptions that apply to that person. However, none of the descriptions of oneself in terms of caste, creed, race, religion, region, or gender apply to the real Self. All of them put together also do not constitute the real Self. You assume that you know yourself, but I submit that you do not know yourself at all.

Self-knowledge is not another of the many branches of conventional knowledge that may be taught or learned. It is an inquiry into the Self. To appreciate the importance of Self-inquiry, we have to examine human existence. One of the noble truths of Bhagavan Buddha proclaims that everything in this universe is nothing but a cause for suffering. This teaching is generally considered to reflect a very pessimistic point of view. I do not say that the Buddha was optimistic, but I do maintain that the teaching does not warrant any such label. It is better to refrain from saying

that the Buddha was pessimistic. The teaching was simply his observation and one must try to look at it with an open mind.

There is indeed much pain in people's lives. We do somehow manage to mitigate physical pain with the use of medicine. Medical advances, pharmaceutical research, and the presence of skilled physicians allow us to alleviate all manner of physical ailments and pain with the use of the right kind of drugs. But how do we account for psychological pain and suffering? There is a related issue to ponder: Is physical security any different from psychological security? And are there two kinds of securities, one physical and another psychological?

The fact is that even with all the research work being conducted we have yet to entirely master physical pain. Is what you call physical pain different from psychological pain? This is a question to consider. More often than not, it may be possible to mitigate physical pain with a pill, but the dependence upon the pill for pain management may itself become a big problem. At the end of the day, we do need to develop an inner ability to manage pain. We must invoke that inner power even to manage physical pain. There are two issues in the case of a person with an untreatable terminal illness. He suffers both physical and psychological pain; there is the physical pain from being sick, and there is also psychological pain from the hopelessness of his condition. Can we suppose that Vedanta addresses the psychological pain and the medical advances address the physical pain? Is it that simple? I don't think so.

In spite of the wonderful advancements in the medical field, we cannot entirely hand pain management over to the remedial molecules. Pain cannot always be managed entirely by taking a pill; it is not that straightforward. In fact, you need to have some intimation of your real Self even to manage recurrent physical pain. Persistent physical pain must be understood, and you need to consult a doctor. Similarly, in life there are problems which are recurring and incessant that cause a lot of psychological pain. The reason is that in solving one problem we create a few other problems. We live our entire lives solving these problems. The person may be about to die, but there are still many problems waiting to be solved. So, when Self-inquiry has an important role to play in managing physical pain, what to speak of psychological pain?

Self-inquiry alone can solve the problem of psychological pain. It is time to look at this situation more closely. It is not an exaggeration to say that people live their entire lives

just trying to solve problems. It is like having a headache every day of your life and popping an aspirin for it every day. That is not a wise way to address that issue. Incessant psychological pain is the bane of human existence. Will Self-inquiry help with that? Will some intimation of the real Self through inquiry solve this problem of human existence? Absolutely, yes. This is why Self-inquiry is important and the need for it is urgent.

If we look at our lives, we find tremendous contradictions. We all want to be healthy, but we eat unhealthy food. Why this contradiction? It is a mental weakness that we do not eat healthily although we wish to remain healthy. We all want peace and love at home, in the office, and in our lives, but we work for conflict, hatred, confrontation, and ill-will. A man and woman meet, assume that they love each other, get married, live together and even have children. But from then on, their lives could be riddled with conflict. There is so much conflict in human interactions and relationships. There is conflict between parents and children. Until the children grow and become independent, the conflict is under wraps, but the moment they become teenagers the conflict between the son and father begins. Once the young man gets married, the conflict between the mother and son begins because of the classic conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Why is there so much conflict in our lives?

The presence of conflict implies that we want something but are unable to get it. There is always a goal to reach. If we fail to reach that goal, there is conflict within. There is conflict whenever we are not what we should be. So how or what should one be? It depends on one's own imagination. That we are not how we would rather be is the source of the conflict. When is anybody free from this inner conflict? It looks as if it is ubiquitous. Every human being lives with this conflict almost all his life. Sometimes, we wonder that people are constantly trying to escape from themselves. Suppose some distant relative is getting married in some corner of India, people fly to India all the way from here. Why? They are not needed there, but they rush there anyway. Of course, the airlines encourage it because it is good business. People spend money in a hurry because they have it. Why is there so much inner pressure to attend the social gatherings? It is because people are bored with themselves and cannot bear to be by themselves. This is an attempt to escape from oneself.

Every Friday afternoon there is a huge amount of traffic leaving New York. There is very little traffic going into New York at that time. Whereas, on Sunday nights or Monday

Pleasure is not happiness. Pleasure happens, comes, and goes; happiness is intrinsic, the very essence of the Self.

mornings, the traffic into New York is very heavy while the traffic leaving New York is very light. Clearly, when the weekend comes, people want to be away from their places of work and homes. They want to be somewhere else. This desire to go away amounts to running away from yourself. Holidays provide an opportunity to run away from ourselves. Sometimes, religion also seems to offer an avenue to run away from oneself. We practice religion, more often than not, as a means of escaping from oneself.

Then there is self-centered activity. Life is activity. As long as there is life in the body, there will be activity. We remain mostly active as long as we remain alive. Therefore, activity and existence are intricately connected. However, this activity is mostly self-centered. In other words, all activity originates from the ideas of “me” and “mine.” It is the “me-and-mine syndrome”; my house, my family, my children, my bank account, my career, my social status, my name and fame etc. In the case of some *sannyāsīs*, it could even be my *āśram*, my *śiṣyas*, my status as *guru*, etc. Therefore, the sense of “me” and “mine” is the main source of all activity. This sense of “me” and “mine” arises from one’s identification with the physical body and is almost entirely defined by desires and fears, sometimes also called *rāga* and *dveṣa*, as in things that one desires and things that cause us to feel afraid.

The primary source of all mental and physical activity is self-interest. In this, all mental activity, namely perception, inference or conception, mentation, intellection, etc., becomes subservient to our desires and fears. For instance, the faculty of cognition submits to one’s desires and fears. We cognize things only to either desire them or feel afraid of them. Otherwise, the faculties like cognition, inference, etc., are marvellous faculties. But now, these faculties serve only the “me” and the “mine.”

A lot of our activity also arises from self-concern. We are afraid of whether or not we will be able to hold on to things that we call “mine.” People are always afraid of the future. As a result, they lead a life of insecurity. They invest a lot of money in securities yet remain completely insecure all their lives. They buy all kinds of insurance yet remain unsure of anything in life. Sometimes I wonder why there is no insurance for marriages or careers! People live in fear all the time. I am not talking about the kind of fear that arises if you suddenly see a serpent or something. In that there is no problem at all; we can step back and take corrective steps. But there is no such solution for the fear of the future. The insecurity with which we live is not occasional; it is a constant in life. We are constantly insecure. Therefore,

it is our desires and fears or self-interest and self-concern that drive our lives. They are the essence of all self-centered activity.

Assume that you are standing at a line. On one side of the line are all the things which you have already acquired and accumulated. That is the side you are on. On the other side of the line are the things that you desire, the wealth that you covet, and all the things that you have yet to accomplish. Without them there is no happiness in life, and they are all on the other side of the line. The things on your side of the line were in fact on the other side of the line earlier. They were what you worked for with a covetous and a desiring attitude, and succeeded in pulling over to your side of the line. We spend our entire lives pushing our line of gains further and further out. The amazing thing is that even while we are pushing our side of the line ahead, we are already disenchanted by the things we have gained; they have all already become part and parcel of the monotony of our existence. Yet we continue looking at the things on the other side of the line, still trying to push the line a bit ahead. We live our entire lives this way.

An important aspect of Self-inquiry is to be clear what we are searching for and where we are searching for it.

In what way does the commonly practiced religion help in this scenario? Acquiring wealth and enjoying the pleasures do not solve the problems of human existence. In fact, they contribute to the human predicament. Religion is supposed to solve the problem of human existence.

But does it? You have to look into it, look into yourself. This is the Self-inquiry we are talking about. Did religion solve your fundamental problem of desire and fear? Did it help you to ignore all that there is on the other side of the line so that you can remain at peace and be happy with what you have?

Often, the social ethos doesn’t help this situation at all. In fact, the social ethos conditions our lives in such a way that we must necessarily be ambitious and greedy and seek to acquire more than we already have. It is called progress. You are pressured to believe that it is the only way to be happy. You have come to believe that what you already have cannot make you happy. You should seek more, have more. This is the social conditioning. This is how society describes a successful person. Such social conditioning makes us ambitious and competitive. It fosters a cutthroat attitude and makes us egoistic. Therefore, the social ethos does not help at all.

Coming to the religious ethos, if one’s religion is not understood and practiced properly and we go by the religion of the masses, the popular religion, it again only promotes

more covetousness in us. Religion seems to tell us not only to desire the things of this world, but also that there are a few things above and beyond which you must desire as well. Religion almost establishes a powerful conditioning in the mind that unless you go to a place called heaven you cannot be happy. Happiness in the here-and-now is ruled out even as a possibility. To be happy, you have to gate-crash into heaven one way or the other! Therefore, happiness is permanently mortgaged to the after-death situation. That is how the religion of the masses operates, at least partially. No doubt there is glory in certain aspects of religion, but these aspects of religion have to be recognized and cultivated. Religion also instils fear in the minds of the people. It makes them very insecure and outright afraid. The practitioners of popular religions are constantly afraid of the gods and goddesses that they worship.

Even in Judeo-Christian thought, God is waiting to punish. Everyone is waiting for Judgement Day. People are anxious, consciously or unconsciously. This is not a happy situation for anybody. You may ask if there is a way out at all for such endless psychological suffering. Yes, there is. What is it? It is Self-inquiry.

There is an anecdote in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad which illustrates the importance of Self-inquiry. It is an account of Sage Nārada, a great scholar and devotee, approaching Saint Sanatcumāra seeking spiritual instruction and solace. Sanatcumāra asks, “O Nārada, you are a very accomplished person. How is it that you have come here? What is it that you are looking for?” Nārada replies, “I am unhappy. I have learned that the one who knows the Self crosses this ocean of bondage and becomes free. I have come to you to be instructed about the Self.”

This anecdote illustrates two things. One is that even as great and accomplished a person as the divine sage Nārada could remain in bondage and suffering in the absence of Self-inquiry. The other is that Self-inquiry is the only viable means to cross this ocean of sorrow and bondage, *samsāra*. Wealth, name and fame, etc., which appear as options to an ignorant mind, are not true options. A mind that believes that more wealth can solve the problems of life is an ignorant mind. In fact, wealth is responsible for the misery to a large extent. Self-inquiry alone can help.

People often do not know the distinction between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is not happiness. Pleasure happens, comes, and goes; happiness is intrinsic, the very essence of the Self. Pleasure depends on the outer, on external circumstances; happiness, being the very essence of the

human being, does not depend on the outer. Without the outer you cannot have pleasure, but irrespective of the outer, you can be happy. Pleasure is timebound. It happens in time and it disappears in time. Happiness, on the other hand, is timeless and has nothing to do with the flow of time. There is a tremendous difference between happiness and pleasure. It is like the difference between the darkness of night and the light of day. In spite of their wealth and religious activities, people do not know this simple truth. They pursue wealth to gain the pleasures. They assume that accumulating wealth and seeking pleasures is happiness, which it is not. It is misery. It is no surprise that people live in misery and fear.

We must know some of the basic truths of human life. Pleasure and happiness are different, and it is not pleasure but happiness that we must seek. By all means be selfish. But be selfish for the right reasons and in the right way. Do not seek pleasure. It will push you into the quagmire of sorrow and insecurity. On the other hand, you have every right to seek happiness because happiness is intrinsic to you. Self-inquiry is a prerequisite to living a sane life.

Happiness is not outside of you. It is within you. You happen to be the very repository of infinite happiness. You need only own up to that happiness.

“Are we now not living a normal life?” I would say no. There is nothing normal about the types of desires that we have and the kinds of activities that we pursue to fulfill them. Self-forgetfulness or being unable to realize the nature of oneself and taking the

shadow-self as oneself is very painful. Self-forgetfulness is darkness. We get absorbed in gaining wealth and pleasures, and squander our entire lives away in the pursuit of a mirage. We must conduct Self-inquiry to perceive the distinction between pleasure and happiness so that life may become meaningful.

An important aspect of Self-inquiry is to be clear what we are searching for and where we are searching for it. I introduce the topic of searching because everyone is ever searching for something. A child two or three years of age has no sense of lack or want. The child is not in search of anything or waiting for anything to happen and is simply contented and fulfilled. It is the parents who are in a hurry to take away this state of self-contentment and self-fulfilment in their children and condition them such that they rush to join the race. Some children are put on an accelerated academic track and trained to be high achievers. We do not recognize that this may be destroying their childhoods and their very lives. So, the children are in search of something; the youth are in search of something; the middle-aged are in search of something, and the old and elderly are in search of something. Everybody is searching for something

or the other. What is it that they are searching for? They themselves don't know exactly, and what's more, they do not know that they don't know.

The life of searching leads the school student to look forward to college. As a college student, he looks forward to university. As a university scholar, he works towards getting the elusive PhD. As a successful PhD graduate, he looks for a suitable job. Having secured a job, he seeks a beautiful lady to marry. Having got married, he wishes to have children. All along, he has always had an agenda to fulfil in his life. Not satisfied with having had a child, he then wants to be a "proud" father. Who is a proud father? Typically, it is one whose child studies well and graduates from university to become a successful engineer or doctor! Therefore, when his young son quarrels with him, the would-be proud father's heart is broken. It is a very unfortunate life. Always looking for something, searching for something. The human condition can be compared to a person in a powerful new car with a tank full of gas and tearing down the freeway at eighty mph, but without a clue where he is headed. People can be utterly confused about where they are going or where they must attempt to go instead.

In the Rāmāyaṇa, Hanumān searches high and low for Mother Sītā in the city of Laṅka. The difference between our searching and Hanumān's searching is that Hanumān knows for certain what he is searching for, whereas we are not only unaware of what we are searching for but also deluded about what we hope to find. It is true that in looking for Sītā in the city and palaces of Laṅka, Hanumān was searching in all the wrong places. He could never have hoped to find her in the city of Laṅka. After spending the entire night searching, he gives up at daybreak feeling dejected and in great despair. It is when he turns his back on Laṅka and sees the woods in front of him that it suddenly occurs to him that he had been searching in the wrong place. It dawns on him at that time that Sītā would only be found in the woods; if Sītā could be found in the city of Laṅka, it would not be the real Sītā.

In fact, there is an instance in the course of his search when he thinks that he may have found Sītā. He then celebrates the discovery until he realizes his mistake and becomes very disheartened. Then, when he sees the woods, he understands that it was a mistake to have even looked for Sītā in Laṅka. The moment he decides to search in the woods, his heart becomes quiet and light as if a huge burden were removed. With renewed hope and a sprightly step, he enters the woods. It is early morning and there is cool breeze. Even the trees welcome him by showering him with their fragrant flowers. The breeze makes him feel comfortable and happy. He comes to a particularly big tree, called the *śimśupā*, with a small platform around it. At that moment, he instinctively knows that he has arrived. He climbs up the tree and sits there waiting quietly. He is totally relaxed, not anxious at

all, not unhappy at all. In the meanwhile, lo and behold, Mother Sītā arrives at the foot of the tree. He is fulfilled, his mission is accomplished. This is a very symbolic story.

In a way, the story of Hanumān's search signifies our lives. We are all searching for the wrong things and in the wrong places. If you are searching for wealth, you are searching for the wrong thing. You must search for happiness instead. Wealth will not make you happy; if anything, it will make you unhappy. The search for pleasures is also misguided. Pleasures will lead you to sickness, both physical and mental. Searching for pleasures is wrong, while searching for happiness is right. Always be mindful of the distinction between happiness and pleasure.

Having understood that much, know that you cannot find happiness in the world. You cannot find it in the other. Happiness is not outside of you. It is within you. You happen to be the very repository of infinite happiness. Just like a piece of sugar crystal is sweetness itself, you are indeed the embodiment of happiness. You need only own up to that happiness within you. Worshiping a God outside of you is worshiping unwittingly your own innate divinity on the outside. Strive to discover within yourself the divinity that you worship. You must conduct Self-inquiry to look within, search within, and discover the happiness that you are seeking.

"Suppose we embark upon Self-inquiry, what will happen to life as we know it?" Absolutely nothing untoward will happen. Life will go on smoothly. It will go on as it is going on and as it must go on. All your activities and chores will continue as usual. You can continue to be a family person. You can continue to pursue an honest profession. Nothing will be disturbed. Only, you must attempt to become free of the illusions which guide your life at the moment and undertake Self-inquiry with some vigour and enthusiasm to arrive at Self-realization. That is the true goal of Self-inquiry.

