

Atman and Brahman

Ted Schmidt

2016-03-06

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2566>

Edson: Ted-ji, a quick question: What distinguishes *atman*/self from *brahman*/awareness?

In the Vedanta equation: awareness plus *maya* = *Isvara*.

And on the other side: *atman* plus ignorance = *jiva*, or individual soul.

~ Best wishes, Edson

Ted: Hi, Edson. I hope you're doing well.

Atman and *brahman* are essentially the same limitless conscious existence. When we speak of limitless conscious existence in its association with the body-mind/sense complex, we refer to it as *sat-chit-ananda atman*. When we speak of it in terms of its absolute "un-seemingly-bound" nature, we refer to it as *satyam-jnanam-anantam brahman*.

The meaning of the compounds *sat-chit-ananda* and *satyam-jnanam-anantam* is essentially the same. *Sat* and *satyam* both refer to "being" or "existence." *Chit* and *jnanam* both refer to "consciousness," or "awareness." The literal meaning of *jnanam* is "knowledge," but in reference to the nature of *brahman* it indicates the knowledge-principle, or intelligence-as-such that manifests as the "intelligent design" of the universe and lends sentiency to the mind. There is a slight difference in the meaning of the terms *ananda* and *anantam*, but again, both indicate essentially the same principle.

Ananda is often mistranslated as "bliss" and consequently misunderstood to indicate that the nature of the self is experiential bliss or the mundane happiness we associate with getting what we want or simply being in a good mood. The literal meaning of the word *ananda* is "bliss" and it does indicate experiential bliss in other contexts. With regard to the self, however, *ananda* cannot refer to experiential bliss, because the experience of bliss is known to the mind and thus is an object in awareness. Hence bliss cannot be the non-objectifiable witnessing awareness in the scope of which it appears. Awareness is non-objectifiable because it is without defining or distinguishing boundaries itself, for anything with such is by definition an object appearing with its scope of being, and though it is often referred to as the Witness, it is more appropriately understood as the "illuminating" factor that lends the mind sentiency and enables it to perform the functions we think of as knowing rather than the knowing subject of known objects, for it is not a personal entity equipped with a mind of its own for the seen/object can never be the seer/subject. In Vedanta, *ananda* is a technical term that indicates "fullness." It is an appropriate indicator of the nature of awareness because *atma* is that portion of all-pervasive awareness that "fills" the body-mind/sense complex.

Anta means "end," and placing the prefix *a* or *an* in front of a word in Sanskrit negates the meaning of the word. Thus *anantam* literally means "without end." In terms of *brahman*, it indicates the limitless nature of awareness. Awareness is limitless because everything – including even abstract thoughts and emotions, which have their own unique character that

makes them distinguishable from other thoughts and emotions – limited by the parameters of time and space, which are themselves only known objective phenomena, is an object appearing within the scope of awareness, and therefore awareness itself must be limitless.

Thus *brahman* and *atman* are essentially the same limitless conscious existence, and in fact is often referred to as *brahman-atma*.

Your equation of *brahman* conditioned by its own inherent power of *maya* with *Isvara* and *atma* conditioned by the same with *jiva* is basically correct. It is important to note, however, that the mind-body/sense complex of the *jiva* is a form projected by *maya/Isvara*, whereas *avidya*, the self-ignorance which afflicts the *jiva*, is a psychological condition that is the microcosmic consequence of *maya's* conditioning influence on *brahman*. While *avidya* can be eradicated through *atmajnanam*, self-knowledge, *maya* is an inherent aspect of *brahman* and thus can never be fully eradicated. This is why the body-mind/sense complex doesn't suddenly dissolve upon the *jiva's* realization of its true nature and, moreover, why *jivas* will endlessly arise and subside within the scope of *brahman's* being.

~ All the best, Ted