
Understanding the Self

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Realising the Self

At some point during the journey of life, any of the following questions might have crossed your mind:

Who am I? What am I? What is my true identity?

How do thoughts come and go? How can I control them?

How do my thoughts and feelings interact with the body?

How do I make my mind powerful?

Why do we experience emotions, feelings, tension and stress?

How does one develop behavioural patterns, traits etc., and how to change them?

How do I lead a life of peace and bliss?

The first lesson is about understanding the self.

Soul and Body

The human body is a complex pattern of physical energies. Atomic particles bind together to form the organic structures and inorganic minerals which interact chemically to carry out the hormonal and nervous processes that run the body. What we see as old or young, ugly or

beautiful, male or female are differing levels of physical energies. However marvellous a machine the body may be, it is the presence of the non-physical sentient energy, the soul, which makes it function.

What am I?

I am a living entity separate from the body. Just as a man speaking on a telephone has an identity separate from that of the instrument – he being a living person who has the faculties of feeling, thinking, willing and making effort – the conscious entity in the body which uses the word “I” is different from the body, which has eyes, ears, limbs etc. as its components. I am not the eyes, ears or the mouth, but I see with my eyes, speak through my mouth, hear with my ears and am their master. I am a soul, eternal and immortal. The body is mortal; I act through it and experience the results of my actions.

The soul is the driver of the body, which serves as its vehicle. When the soul leaves the body, the body is declared dead.

Faculties of the Soul

The soul is a living or a sentient being. It is said to be sentient or living because it can think and reflect; it can experience pleasure and pain as also bliss and peace; it can bestir itself and make efforts and actions, whether good or bad. The soul has three faculties – mind, intellect and predispositions.

The mind is the thinking faculty of the soul. It is the mind that imagines, thinks and forms ideas. The thought process is the basis of all emotions, desires and sensations. It is through this faculty that thoughts can be projected to a distant place, past experiences and emotions can be relived and the future can be anticipated. It is the mind that experiences variations of mood. The mind is a faculty of the metaphysical soul, not to be confused with the brain.

The intellect is used to assess thoughts. It is the faculty of understanding and decision-making and stands out as the most crucial faculty of the three. With the broadening of the intellect, clear understanding and realization of knowledge becomes natural, and the power to decide and reason increases. It is the intellect that discriminates, judges and exercises its power in the form of will.

Predispositions (called *sanskars* in Hindi) are the impressions or sub-consciousness which is a record of the soul's past experiences and actions. *Sanskars* can take the form of habits, talents, emotional state, personality traits, beliefs, values or instincts. Every action either creates a *sanskar* (this is how a habit begins) or reinforces an old one. Whichever impression is

etched on the soul remains there, forming a record of the experiences the soul has had. When we speak of someone's defects, specialties or virtues, we are referring to *sanskars*, which are the basis of a person's individuality.

Seat of the Soul

The soul is located in the part of the brain called the hypothalamus. Sitting on this seat it controls the nervous system and, through it, various organs in the body. Just as a driver controls a car through its control mechanisms while sitting in the driver's seat, the soul uses the brain to control the body. The brain is the machine by means of which the soul thinks, remembers and receives and sends messages to physical organs through the nerves. Apart from physical sensations, the soul experiences pleasure, pain, happiness and sorrow through the brain.

Nature of the Soul

A soul is a tiny, metaphysical, sentient point of spiritual light. The number of souls is finite and all souls are unique and eternal: they were never created and will never be destroyed. As such, souls are invisible to the naked eye but one can experience their presence. The soul has no gender.

The intrinsic nature of the soul is that of love, peace, happiness, truth, bliss and purity. Therefore, souls always desire an experience of these qualities.

Body-consciousness – Root of All Evil

A person is body-conscious when he/she identifies himself or herself with the physical body, i.e. when thinking, feelings, actions and behaviour are based on the awareness that one is a body. Body-consciousness is the root of all evil in the world because it gives rise to vices like lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego, under whose influence people perform wrong actions.

Soul-consciousness – Key to Bliss

When a person has the awareness that "I am a soul, and not this physical body", then he/she is said to be soul-conscious. In other words, the person thinks, feels, acts and behaves with the awareness that he or she is a soul, the master of the body. In the state of soul-consciousness, the original qualities of the soul, such as love, peace, purity and truth, emerge naturally. Then it becomes possible to experience lasting peace and bliss.

Karma Philosophy

At times, questions that seem to have no answers arise in our minds and leave us angry, distressed, frustrated or depressed. Here are some typical examples – Why are we here? Why was I born here and he there? Why is she beautiful and I am ugly? Why is so and so crippled for no apparent fault of his? Why does the egotistical bully who browbeats his business partners, fiddles his income tax returns and beats his wife attain outstanding success? Why did the quiet little widow who never said a harsh word to anyone live in appalling conditions and die unwanted and uncared for? Why is there so much suffering?

The answer – based on the law of karma or the karma philosophy – is that no one can escape the results of their actions. Depending on the kind of actions we perform, we suffer or enjoy the results, either in this life or later. The law of karma is inviolable, so everyone must act responsibly, keeping in mind that ignorance of the law will not save anyone.

Actions performed in body-consciousness, under the slightest influence of vices such as hatred, anger, greed, ego, lust, jealousy etc. ultimately bring sorrow and suffering.

On the other hand, if a person is soul-conscious and has a balanced judgment, a peaceful mind and a clean heart, he would act with love, compassion and humility. This would bring benefit to him as well as others.

The Power of Thoughts

Man's most powerful resource is thoughts. Thoughts build our consciousness and shape our attitude. Every human creation in the world is the product of thoughts. Thoughts are fertilized by knowledge. A person with a certain kind of knowledge usually creates thoughts related to that field of knowledge.

Thoughts determine the quality of our actions, which in turn have a good or bad effect on us. This again influences our thinking. So right thinking based on the right knowledge is essential for leading a happy life. Rajyoga meditation helps us create thoughts that lead to righteous actions, and to remain mentally strong in difficult situations.

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Shantivan Complex, Post box No-1,
Abu Road (Raj.) 307510.

 1860 233 1035

 info@brahmakumaris.com

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