

Beyond Heaven and Hell

The English word heaven comes from the same root as the word harmony. So heaven is a place of harmony. The word hell comes from a word that means to be walled off from, separated from. It is the state of feeling isolated, separated. Almost all religions say that there are actual regions called heaven where we are at harmony and hell where we suffer greatly, but many teachers say that heaven and hell are within our present consciousness.

If we are going to continuously affirm our individuality, our separateness, if we're going to be continuously thinking about ourselves and what we want, we will go deeper and deeper into separation, into hell. On the other hand, it is through treating others the way we would like to be treated, choosing the good over the pleasant, meditating and finding that realm within ourselves that is greater than the body and mind—as well as continuously thinking of God, worshipping God, recognizing our oneness with God—that will enable us to experience heaven right here on earth.

Thus Lord Yama told Naciketas the fundamental practice and the results of it. He said that man chooses between the good and the pleasant. The good leads to his highest welfare, the pleasant to his destruction. The world of the senses is continuously tempting us to our destruction. The world of the spirit is calling us to our highest welfare, and if we consistently follow the call of the spirit, gradually our inner situation begins to change. We may hardly notice it, but others can see it, and we find ourselves having less stress and being more at peace.

The more we realize this expanded self we are, the more the prayer that Gurudev gave us, “Fill our hearts with divine virtues,” can come about. Many people think that is the goal, and it is certainly true, as Lord Yama says that practicing the good leads to our highest welfare—a sense of harmony, of oneness—oneness with God and all creation. But while Jesus said the Father and I are one, He also said that the Father is greater than I am. And Lord Kṛṣṇa referred to His highest state as Puruṣottam, something beyond Puruṣa, beyond the harmony, peace and the power of Puruṣa.

Thus in our spiritual life, finally we must recognize that there is something within that knows both heaven and hell. That is the Father, that is Puruṣottama. Our late revered Vedānta teacher Swāmī Brahmānandajī

Maharāj, used to simply say, “It is ‘I’”. It is totally unknowable, but we know it by inference. We know it exists because we know all things including both heaven and hell. This is what we are meant to recognize, and it is our abode, even now.