

Our Two Fundamental Questions

Philosophers will tell us that the human being has only two fundamental philosophical questions. One is, Who am I? The other is, How should I live my life? Although the questions seem to be quite different, they are, of course, interconnected. Our life in this world is a reflection of who we think we are.

There is one way to look at these two questions that can be quite revealing. It pushes us to the edge that we need to be pushed to in the spiritual life, if we want to get to the bottom of things and find the actual truth. The two related words permanence and impermanence can point the way.

When we ask the question “Who am I?,” we feel that we will ultimately find That which is everlasting, permanent, and that we will know It. But the scriptures tell us that Brahman is not only unknowable, but unthinkable and unimaginable. Anything that we can think of or imagine cannot really be permanent because it is an object of our thought; it is not prior to our thought. But Brahman is prior to our thoughts. Our mind simply has to bow down before that ultimate mystery. When it does—when it recognizes that the reality is beyond knowing—then it discovers what permanence really means.

On the other hand, when we consider how we should live our life in this world, we all think that some things here are more or less permanent. We have a feeling of permanence about this world even though everything is changing. But when we really enquire as to how we should live our life in this world, we recognize that everything is changing—even values are not permanent. Therefore ultimately, just as when we were trying to enquire into who we are and we discovered that the answer was totally beyond our mind, so too, when wondering how we should live our life in this world, it becomes necessary to recognize that we can hold on to nothing. Nothing here is permanent, including our values, which is why Lord Kṛṣṇa finally told Arjuna to abandon all *dharmas* and take refuge in Him alone.

How then do we discover who we are, and how do we determine how to live in this world? This is where we come to the true meaning of faith. We rest in that Unknowable; we live with uncertainty. There we find

a peace that is beyond understanding. That peace, born of not knowing, is all the understanding that we require.

