

The Unknowable “I”

Our late revered Vedānta teacher, Swāmī Brahmānandajī, used to say that the Upaniṣads outlined two principal *sādhana*-s. One is meditation on Om. The other is the analysis of our three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. It was obvious that the latter had been his *sādhana*. He continuously wanted his students to examine their own experience. He said that it is the easiest way. Just examine your waking, dream, and deep sleep states.

Primarily he wanted us to recognize that all of us have deep sleep, but that no one is conscious of it at the time. How then do we know that we have deep sleep? There must be something present in deep sleep that is also present now that knows we had it. But what is that? His answer was, you were present: “I was present in deep sleep, and I know now I had deep sleep even though I was not conscious of it at the time.” This “I” is what we are, he would say.

Another pointer to this eternal “I” is when we think back to when we were young. We recognize that we have completely changed since then, both physically and mentally, and yet we feel that we are exactly the same person. No change whatsoever. Our I, which we can’t grasp, hasn’t changed at all. It is the same I that is also present in deep sleep, and we can’t imagine anyone else’s I being different from our own.

But what about who I think I am—male, female, Indian, British, Chinese? Those are all the false ideas of who we are, sometimes called ego. Therefore, we have to recognize that we are That which is eternal, but unknowable, and we have to gradually rid ourselves of all the false ideas of who we are. That is what *sādhana* is all about.

Is there any other way to recognize this unknowable I? Any *sādhana* can lead us to it, because ultimately it is the grace of God that imprints that knowledge on our mind. But another method that is available to us all is through the repetition of God’s name. As we concentrate on the Name and it fills our consciousness, we can ask ourselves the question, What is it that is aware of the repetition of the Name going on in my mind? We will recognize that something unknowable knows that repetition. And what is it? It is I.

Swāmī Brahmānanadajī frequently ended up a teaching with the words: It is I. He wanted us to discover that unknowable I and then to see It in all these names and forms.