

# A Commentary on the “Prashna Upanishad”.

By Swami Nirmalananda Giri

## The Right Beginning

This upanishad, the Prashna Upanishad, is called The Question (Prashna) Upanishad because of its format of question and answer throughout. But the first two verses set the stage for the reader, and also indicate what is needed for a successful quest after the knowledge of Brahman—at least that which can be taught and comprehended intellectually.

## The seekers

“Suksha, Satyakama, Gargya, Kousalya, Bhargava, and Kabandhi, devotees and seekers after the truth of the supreme Brahman, with faith and humility approached the sage Pippalada.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:1)

Because it would have no meaning for Western readers, Swami Prabhavananda has omitted the parentage and family ties of these six seekers. Nevertheless, their listing is significant, for a yogi must have psychological “ancestors” in the form of inner spiritual qualities that will help him to persevere in yoga practice. Besides a good inner background, the upanishad cites four good traits needed by every aspirant to higher evolution: devotion in the sense of dedication, desire to know God, faith, and humility.

Dedication is needful, for it keeps us steady when we encounter snags and obstacles in our path, and it keeps us plodding along in times of dryness and uncertainty. It ensures that we will persevere in our efforts to attain spiritual heights. It is easy to forget why we originally took up spiritual life and wander into byways of lesser endeavor. This is why many become tangled up in externalities of religion, wrangling over philosophical concepts, and even becoming enamored of control over others under the pretence of religious discipline. As Jesus told Martha: “Thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful.” (Luke 10:41, 42) Because of this the upanishad tells us that these wise seekers were intent on a single thing: the truth of the Supreme Brahman. We should aspire to—and settle for—nothing less.

Faith in the form of conviction of the reality of spiritual matters is also a necessity, for who can persevere in search of something about which they have no inner assurance? We need the conviction-faith that God is real and can be known. Saint Paul encapsulated the whole matter when he wrote: “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) An interior knowing that God is real and can be experienced will give us the strength we need to keep on to the Goal.

Humility in the sense of a willingness to listen and learn, aware of all we do not know, is essential. Respect is also implied here. In the East they overdo it to the point of grovelling and mindless acceptance, while in the West the casual, one-on-one attitude is exaggerated into overfamiliarity and virtual disrespect. It is amazing how very wise Western ignoramuses consider themselves. As someone once wrote: “The trouble with ignorance is that it gains confidence as it goes along.”

The seeker must be keenly aware that he lacks something—a great deal, in fact— with emphasis on *need*. He must not forget that seeking implies needing and asking. Those who strut up to a teacher as though they are visiting the zoo will—and should— receive nothing. On the other hand, the seeker should not grovel or be unthinkingly accepting. The student should carefully examine the prospective teacher to see if he is qualified and worth listening to. The worthy teacher will equally carefully examine the prospective student to see if he has the right attitude and is capable of learning and applying what is learned. A dud on either end ruins the equation.

## The requisites

“Said the sage: ‘Practice austerity, continence, faith for a year; then ask what questions you wish. If I can, I will answer.’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:2) Now this is the way of a real teacher of Brahmajñana. He tells what they must do and what he will then do.

There is a story told in India of a young man who came to a guru and asked to learn from him. The guru told him what he would have to do to qualify himself. Not very happy with the list, he asked what the guru would do in all that time. When told that the guru would teach him occasionally, as he would deem appropriate, the would be disciple remarked: "Why don't you make me a guru, instead; that sounds a lot easier." Yes, indeed.

Many approach a teacher while living in a fantasy world projected by their overconfident ego. If the teacher is as false as they and conforms to the fantasy, they are happy. But if the teacher is real, and dares to speak to them realistically about the means and the goal, they are most displeased. We are not of this type, hopefully, so let us look at the requirements Pippalada sets forth.

- (1) Spiritual discipline (tapasya), most particularly the practice of meditation.
- (2) Control of the senses (brahmacharya), especially continence.
- (3) Faith in the teaching of the upanishadic sages regarding the Supreme Goal, the possibility of attaining it and their assertions as to the means of attainment.

These are absolute necessities—and they must be unwaveringly practiced and held to for a significant length of time before the seeker can possibly be mentally and spiritually capable of comprehending the wisdom of the sages. First the students must be qualified otherwise a qualified teacher will be of no use to them at all.

### The teacher

"Then ask what questions you wish. If I can, I will answer." This promise contains two major qualities of an authentic spiritual teacher. First, the teacher will accept and consider whatever the student asks. He will not shrug off even the silliest inquiry, nor will he reject the student's questioning of the veracity or value of what he believes or teaches. This is one of the most glorious characteristics of Sanatana Dharma—it has no fear of honest inquiry and honest doubt. Not being insecure, the teacher of Dharma is not disturbed by questioning or statements of disbelief.

A friend of mine told me that she quit being a Christian when, as a teenager, she dared to express doubts to her parish priest. He raved at her and threatened hell, 184 saying that to even ask for explanation of "the mysteries" was a sin and an insult to God. So she walked away and never went back. Over sixty years (!) later she came into the orbit of Sanatana Dharma, asked all her questions, and received answers that restored her faith in Jesus—but not in Churchianity. In true Dharma we find the key to understanding the teachings of all the Masters of all the ages. I have found throughout nearly fifty years that Sanatana Dharma illumines their words to a degree that their professed followers and "isms" cannot even dream of.

Those who would follow Jesus, and Buddha, need to seek out the same source from which they drew their teachings: Sanatana Dharma. Then, like them, they can become Sanatana Dharmis and thereby become their true disciples. Sanatana Dharma expands their horizons to embrace all truth wherever it may be found. It is true that of late there have arisen bigots in India who speak as hatefully and ignorantly about other religions as those religions speak of others. But they are not Sanatana Dharmis, for the Dharma has no place for hate, ignorance, and sectarianism. As Jesus said: "The truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

Second, a worthy teacher will acknowledge that he cannot answer some questions. This is because some things are simply beyond verbal expression. Further, no true teacher is egotistical, therefore he will readily admit it if he feels it is beyond his capacity to explain something—just as we find that sometimes we cannot find a word to express what we know well inwardly. And most of all, a good teacher is willing to admit when he just does not know the answer to something. Only a fool thinks he is omniscient, and only a fake wants others to think he is.

In my encounters with teachers, the person nearest to being all-knowing was Swami Sivananda, and he was known to reply: "I really don't know" to certain questions. But he certainly knew the way to God, as the lives of his disciples attest. (Sometimes a Master does not know the answer to a question because it is trivial and foolish, and his mind is free from triviality and foolishness.) So we have seen the two elements needed for a meaningful exchange of questions and answers: worthy questioners and worthy answerers.

## The Father and Mother of All

“After a year Kabandhi approached the teacher and asked: ‘Sir, how did the creatures come into being?’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:3) This is the question of any reflective person. There are many answers to it, but this upanishad goes to the root of relative existence as Pippalada replies:

“‘The Lord of beings,’ replied the sage, ‘meditated and produced Prana, the primal energy, and Rayi, the giver of form, desiring that they, male and female, should in manifold ways produce creatures for him.’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:4)

Prajapati–Brahma “The Lord of Creation”–did not create the world in the manner understood in the West, rather, he manifested it from the primal energy known as Prakriti by the power of his meditation. This was no new occurrence, for the projection and withdrawal of the cosmos in precise cycles has been going on from eternity. Just as wind moving over water causes it to take on a multitude of wave-forms, so does the creative thought of Brahma. In Genesis we are told: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And...darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1, 2) The Breath (Ruach) of God, the creative thought of God, moved on the causal “waters” and the cosmos began to manifest.

Creation begins and moves on in an exact order, so the first thing that occurred was the manifestation of Prana and Rayi–internal Life and the outer Energy that manifests as form. There are many levels of manifestation, and Pippalada is only speaking of the lower worlds which are manifested by Brahma. The lower worlds mirror the higher ones, and in Christian terminology this coming forth of Prana and Rayi are equivalent to the coming forth of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Transcendent Absolute–the Father–at the very highest level of manifestation. Prana and Rayi are the two poles of manifesting energy–positive and negative, male and female. This duality is at the heart of all that presently exists, and without it everything dissolves. Prana and Rayi are the “parents” of all things. Creation is their perpetual interaction. As Yogananda wrote in one of his chants: “Spirit and Nature dancing together!” All “creatures”–all that exist in relativity–have sprung from Prana and Rayi. This is why all religions have intuited the existence of a primeval Father and Mother of All.

## Sun and Moon

Even more, nearly all religions have had some idea about the original Father and Mother being the sun and moon respectively. “Prana, the primal energy, is the sun; and Rayi, the form-giving substance, is the moon. Be it known that all this universe, that which is gross and that which is subtle, is one with Rayi. Therefore is Rayi omnipresent. In like manner is the universe one with Prana.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:5) Nothing can exist without duality–Prana and Rayi–at the root of their manifestation, and they are still being maintained by them. In India they knew from the beginning that the sun and moon were essential even for plant life. In the West, also, people have known for hundreds, if not thousands, of years that although the light and heat of the sun causes the germination of seeds, it is the moon that guides their growth, and wise gardeners plant according to the lunar cycles. We even have the term “planting moon.” Even more, all “things” are the embodiment of Prana and Rayi. The universe *is* Prana and Rayi. Spirit–Paramatman and Atman–alone is independent of these two, and untouched by them. “The rising sun pervades the east, and fills with energy all beings that there inhabit; and likewise when his rays fall on the south, the west, the north, the zenith, the nadir, and the intermediate regions, to all beings that there inhabit he gives life.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:6) Just as the one sun can be reflected in numberless ways, so Prana enlivens all things and moves within them. The life in even an atom is Cosmic Life.

“Prana is the soul of the universe, assuming all forms; he is the light that animates and illumines all: even as it is written: ‘The wise know him who assumes all forms, who is radiant, who is all-knowing, who is the one light that gives light to all. He rises as the sun of a thousand rays, and abides in infinite places.’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:7, 8) Prana is Parabrahman Itself! Not only is Brahman/Prana “the soul of the universe,” Brahman is also the forms assumed, “He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15; Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.10) Every single sentient being is a ray of that divine Sun who abides in all their inmost essence.

## The two paths

“Prana and Rayi, uniting, divide the year. Two are the paths of the sun—two are the paths that men travel after death. These are the southern and the northern. Those who desire offspring and are devoted to almsgiving and rituals, considering these the highest accomplishment, attain the world of the moon and are born again on earth. They travel by the southern path, which is the path of the fathers, and is indeed Rayi, the maker of forms.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:9) There are two paths that can be taken after death: the path that leads to expanding life in higher realms of existence and the path that leads back to the world of material embodiment—the paths of Prana and Rayi.

The “year” spoken here is not the earthly measure of time based on the movement of the earth around the sun, although it is believed to be so in the degeneracy of contemporary Hinduism. Rather, it is the cyclic manifestation of prana within the subtle, mental bodies of each one of us. The “southern” path is the part of the cycle in which the prana becomes more embedded or “grounded” in the consciousness of form—the body. On the other hand, the “northern” path is the part of the cycle in which the prana becomes increasingly active in the spiritual levels of our being, causing the consciousness to rise to higher degrees. The supposed south and north movement of the sun has nothing whatsoever to do with this, even though it is commonly thought so at this time.

The “moon” is a symbol of the material creation which is but a reflection of higher regions of consciousness, just as the moon has no light of its own, but only reflects the light of the sun.

## The path of rebirth

“Those who desire offspring and are devoted to alms giving and rituals, considering these the highest accomplishment, attain the world of the moon and are born again on earth. They travel by the southern path, which is the path of the fathers, and is indeed Rayi, the maker of forms.”

This is quite clear: those who are addicted to family life and external religion are impelled by their own earthly desires to be reborn on earth. For such desires are rooted in earthly experience and perpetuate it.

## The path of liberation

“But those who are devoted to the worship of the Self, by means of austerity, continence, faith, and knowledge, go by the northern path and attain the world of the sun. The sun, the light, is indeed the source of all energy. It is immortal, beyond fear; it is the supreme goal. For him who goes to the sun there is no more birth nor death. The sun ends birth and death.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:10) Later in the fifth section of this upanishad it will be explained that by meditation on Om a yogi will be united with the solar light and ascend to the realization of Brahman. But right now the necessary adjuncts to such a meditation are enumerated: austerity [tapasya], continence [brahmacharya], faith [shraddha], and knowledge [vidya]. Those who prepare themselves by these practices—in conjunction with meditation on Om—will ascend to the solar world and, freed from the compulsion to rebirth, will pass onward to the transcendental realm of Brahman. In the mechanism of the universe there are many wheels within wheels as in clockwork. So the upanishad then speaks of the month as reflection of Prana and Rayi just like the year: “Prana and Rayi, uniting, form the month. Its dark fortnight is Rayi, and its bright fortnight is Prana. Sages perform their devotional rites in the light, with knowledge; fools, in the dark, with ignorance.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:12. Prabhavananda omits the eleventh verse because of its obscure language and symbolism.)

Here, too, the material lunar phases are not being spoken of, but rather the inner cycles of spiritual awareness and spiritual ignorance. The wise do not act blindly, even in spiritual practice, but with understanding of how and why they should engage in meditation and worship. Because they lack the requisite insight, the ignorant engage in superstition, even if externally they seem to be doing the same as the wise. Without inner awakening all is hopeless, and awakening is a matter of evolution. It cannot come from an external source. This is why ordinary propagandizing religion plunges people deeper into ignorance and folly.

Until the inner consciousness begins to manifest only error can be the fruition of any religion. This is why Sanatana Dharma never engages in any form of missionary persuasion or coercion. Adherents of the

Eternal Religion know that until a person ripens spiritually even Sanatana Dharma is meaningless and pointless—inevitably confusing and potentially harmful. That this is true is being proven every moment in the West by those who are deforming Dharma into an ego-driven diversion and often a tool for the same negative domination and opportunism that has made Western religion and philosophy into the absurd and destructive force it has been for centuries. And the “advaitins” are the worst.

## Food

Now a very interesting symbol is introduced: “Food is Prana and Rayi. From food is produced seed, and from seed, in turn, are born all creatures.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:14. Prabhavananda omits the twelfth verse because of its obscure language and symbolism.) Nikhilananda translates this verse: “Food, verily, is Prajapati [the Creator]. From that comes semen [retas]; from semen are all these creatures born.”

The idea here is that Prana and Form, the two aspects of Prajapati, are manifesting as food—not just food that is eaten and digested, but rather all things that “enter” the sentient being’s life and mind and shape him. The body is formed of nothing but food, and the same is true of the four subtler bodies as well. The mind and the senses “eat” also. So we can realize that God is not only the source of all, but the manifest, sustainer, and evolver of all. There is nothing around us that is not divine manifestation. This is the vision the yogi strives for. “At the end of his many births the wise man takes refuge in Me. He knows: ‘All is Vasudeva.’ How very rare is that great soul!” (Bhagavad Gita 7:19)

Sri Ramakrishna once said: “The Divine Mother showed me that there are not two, but one existence only. It is Satchidananda alone that has taken many forms. It is He alone who has become the living beings, the universe and everything. It is He who has become food.” What the rishis perceived so many thousands of years ago can be known even today by the fervent yogi.

## Home truths

Now it is time to get down to the solid facts, to the only sensible conclusions that can be drawn if we accept all the upanishad has been saying to us: “Those who worship the world of creation produce children; but those alone attain the world of Brahman who are steadfast in continence, meditation, and truthfulness.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:15)

Guilty, insecure people are always demanding assurance and approval from others. They usually get it from those equally guilty (or equally foolish), and evade facing the truth about themselves. In the long run such avoidance does absolutely no good, but being people who live in the moment they are satisfied with the deception. This especially manifests in “those who worship the world of creation” and materiality by their insisting on being assured that ascetic life is not necessary or superior to their maya-mired mode of existence. They bullishly demand this assurance from supposed spiritual teachers (and especially monastics) employing a variety of ways to get what they want. But the upanishadic sages are long departed from this world, and their words have been preserved for thousands of years. What they say can be ignored, but it cannot be denied.

World worshippers become gears in “society” and immerse themselves in material involvement with “the world’s goods,” living as they please in egocentric, self-pleasing modes of life. They may not engender actual children now they have learned to frustrate the natural consequences of sex, but the resulting consciousness will be the same. Living as they “please” they are bound by the hopes and “joys” of earthly life, creating for themselves a guaranteed return to the realm of death that is this world. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: “There is no substance at all in worldly life.” And there is no substance in those that expend themselves in and on the world.

The rare few who have seen through the sham of the world and understood the reality of the Self, live in a very different manner. If their karma is very good, they take up the ascetic life early on, otherwise they wake up somewhere along their path in life, turn from the common folly, and become disciplined and purified in their mode of life. Whichever it may be, the life of all the wise is centered in “continence, meditation, and truthfulness.” There is no need for a comment on that, or on the final statement: “The pure world of Brahman is attainable by those only who are neither deceitful, nor wicked, nor false.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:16)

## The Powers That Make Us “Be”

Each of us is both Who and What. The Who is simple to define: Individualized Consciousness or jivatman—Individualized Self. The What, on the other hand is quite complex, which is why we have gotten lost in it and confused for lifetimes beyond number. The first step in learning how to undo this dilemma is learning what is keeping it going. For that reason: “Then Bhargava approached the teacher and asked: ‘Holy sir, how many several powers hold together this body?’” The word Swami Prabhavananda translates “power” is deva—god. He chose this interpretive translation so we could better understand the meaning of the sage’s words. “Which of them are most manifest in it? And which is the greatest?” (Prashna Upanishad 2:1) We need to know who our jailers are and especially who the governor of the jail may be. So:

### Our makeup

“‘The powers,’ replied the sage, ‘are ether, air, fire, water, earth—these being the five elements which compose the body; and, besides these, speech, mind, eye, ear, and the rest of the sense organs. Once these powers made the boastful assertion: “We hold the body together and support it.”’” (Prashna Upanishad 2:2)

The five elements (panchabhuta) are forms of cosmic energy which make up the various bodies of the human being, including the five senses. They are not passive, but are living and moving powers. However, Bhargava has asked which powers hold together the body, which itself is formed of the elemental forces. Only one of them is the cohesive force which keeps the others in its magnetic field and enables them to assume form and function within that form. To illustrate this, Pippalada gave him a parable, saying that once all the elements claimed to be the dominant force in the body.

### Prana

“Whereupon Prana, the primal energy, supreme over them all, said to them: ‘Do not deceive yourselves. It is I alone, dividing myself fivefold, who hold together this body and support it.’ But they would not believe him.” (Prashna Upanishad 2:3) We see from this that the five elements are modifications of the cosmic life, the Prana (Vishwaprana), that although the body seems to be formed only of the five elements, the Prana itself is the underlying substratum as the ocean is to the waves. The body, then, is really nothing but Prana, as is anything else in the realm of relative existence. Even the smallest particle of the cosmos is the Universal Life in manifestation.

Another point is the supposed conversation between the elements. This is not just a device in a fable, but is an indication that since all things are manifestations of Cosmic Life they can take on a seemingly independent life (and even consciousness) of their own. This is a fundamental trait of Maya, the Cosmic Illusion, one which lies at the root of most confusion and ignorance.

### The proof

“Prana, to justify himself, made as if he intended to leave the body. But as he rose and appeared to be going, all the rest realized that if he went they also would have to depart with him; and as Prana again seated himself, the rest found their respective places. As bees go out when their queen goes out, and return when she returns, so was it with speech, mind, vision, hearing, and the rest. Convinced of their error, the powers now praised Prana, saying:” (Prashna Upanishad 2:4) All the elements of the cosmos are rooted in Prana. It is the same with the elements and the senses in the individual’s body complex (for the human being has five bodies corresponding to the five elements). Just as the waves are in total dependence upon the ocean for their very being, so everything cosmic and microcosmic depend upon Prana. This is why Om is called the Pranava: It is the sound-form of Prana, the mantric syllable by which the Prana is contacted and controlled. Furthermore, the breath (also called prana) is the outermost, physical manifestation of prana. Because of this the yogi joins his inner intonations of Om to his breath in the highest form of pranayama.

“That which causes all the pranas to prostrate themselves before and get merged in the Paramatman [the Supreme Soul: God], so as to attain identity with Him, is for that reason known as the Pranava.”

(Atharvashikha Upanishad 1:10) "With Om alone he should breathe." (Amritabindu Upanishad 20)  
"Pranayama is accomplished through concentrating the mind on Om." (Saubhagyalakshmi Upanishad)  
"The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama." (Sandilya Upanishad 6:2 ) "Pranayama is composed of the Pranava, Om. [Therefore] he should repeat the Pranava mentally. This only will be pranayama." (Darshan Upanishad 6:2, 5, 6) "Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om." (Yoga Vashishtha 5:78)

## The powers of Prana

He who controls Prana controls all since Prana *is* all. Therefore the elements praised Prana, saying:  
"As fire, Prana burns; as the sun, he shines; as cloud, he rains; as Indra, he rules the gods; as wind, he blows; as the moon, he nourishes all. He is that which is visible and also that which is invisible. He is immortal life. "As spokes in the hub of a wheel, so is everything made fast in Prana—the Rik, the Yajur, the Sama, all sacrifices, the Kshatriyas, and the Brahmins. "O Prana, lord of creation, thou movest in the womb, and art born again. To thee who, as breath, dwellest in the body, all creatures bring offerings. "Thou, as fire, dost carry oblations to the gods; and through thee the fathers receive their offerings. To every organ of sense thou givest its function. "Prana, thou art the creator; thou art the destroyer by thy prowess; and thou art the protector. Thou movest in the sky as the sun, and lord of lights art thou. "Prana, when thou showerest down rain, thy creatures rejoice, hoping that they will find food, as much as they desire. "Thou art purity itself, thou art the master of all that exists, thou art fire, the eater of offerings. We, the organs of sense, offer to thee thy food—to thee, the father of all. "That power of thine which dwells in speech, in the ear, and in the eye, and which pervades the heart—make that propitious, and forsake us not. "Whatsoever exists in the universe is dependent on thee, O Prana. Protect us as a mother protects her children. Grant us prosperity and grant us wisdom." (Prashna Upanishad 2:5-13)

Obviously, then, the yogi cannot neglect the cultivation of Prana and Pranava together. Prana: Its History and Nature Sanatana Dharma is not a "shut up and believe and obey" religion. Those who follow the Eternal Dharma must gain the fullest knowledge of how things work, for without that knowledge mastery will be impossible. And mastery is the result of evolution. Prana, the universal life force, must be known about and mastered. So:

## Conscious being

"When it was the turn of Kousalya, he put this question: "Master, of what is Prana born; how does he enter the body; how does he live there after dividing himself; how does he go out; how does he experience what is outside; and how does he hold together the body, the senses, and the mind?" (Prashna Upanishad 3:1) All these questions are going to be answered subsequently, so the only important point is the referring to prana as a conscious being—which it is because it is the life of Brahman and therefore *is* Brahman. The fact that everything is conscious is unique to the teachings of Sanatana Dharma. Science considers itself extremely bold in cautiously approaching this concept and tentatively postulating it. Those in the West who bravely make the statement as evident fact are those whose thinking has—at least in its ancestry—been derived from the wisdom of India.

## The worthy questioner

"To which the sage replied: Kousalya, you ask very difficult questions; but since you are a sincere seeker after the truth of Brahman, I must answer." (Prashna Upanishad 3:2) This I have seen for myself in India. The great saints just will not bother with the idly curious and the hopelessly shallow. But they will gladly speak with those who are seeking the knowledge of Reality. Once I made the mistake of taking a Western spiritual wanderer to meet Maitri Devi, a beloved saint in New Delhi. When he told her he wanted to ask a question she replied in Hindi: "I do not speak English." When he asked if someone could translate his questions she again responded: "I do not speak English." So I said to him quietly: "Tell me your question and I will ask it." For quite some time he would softly tell me his questions and I would ask them—in English!—and she would readily answer through a translator. I appreciated her kindness to me, but I also decided to never again bother her with roamabouts. Other saints I met would do the same—some diplomatically, others not so tactfully.

We should learn from this and question ourselves as to why we “seek” and even why we study: To eventually reach the knowledge of God, or just to cram more ideas in our head to show how “wise” we are? Yogananda often spoke of those who had “spiritual indigestion” from cramming useless philosophy into their minds. But Kousalya is a worthy questioner, so the sage replies:

## Prana in us

“Prana is born of the Self. Like a man and his shadow, the Self and Prana are inseparable. Prana enters the body at birth, that the desires of the mind, continuing from past lives, may be fulfilled.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:3)

Just as the cosmos is an extension of the Consciousness that is Brahman, in the same way our individual prana is an extension of our Self (atman). It is inseparable from the Self because it *is* the Self. This is the authentic non-duality (advaita) of the upanishads, not a negation or denial of either Prakriti or prana. Seeing them as separate from Spirit, and therefore dual, is the error—not acknowledging their intimate reality.

Prana provides the continuity between our present and past lives—both minds and bodies. It is also the force that enables the continuation of our evolution from past lives, carries us through this present life and through future ones as well. Prana truly is Life itself.

This verse also tells us that karma is a matter of the mind, and not some external force. Change the mind and you change the karma—or even dissolve it. It need never extend into our external existence. “Working out karma” is not a compelling necessity. We are never slaves to karma. We are its creators and its masters, at least potentially. But we have forgotten that fact and lost control of our karma. It must be regained if we would be free.

## Its “associates”

“As a king employs officials to rule over different portions of his kingdom, so Prana associates with himself four other Pranas, each a portion of himself and each assigned a separate function.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:4) We usually speak of “five pranas,” but there is really only pure Prana and its four modalities. Their functions will be outlined, but first here is the definition of Prana found in our *Brief Sanskrit Glossary*:

## Prana:

Vital energy; life-breath; life-force. In the human body the prana is divided into five forms: 1) *Prana*: the prana that moves upward; 2) *Apana*: The prana that moves downward, producing the excretory functions in general. 3) *Vyana*: The prana that holds prana and apana together and produces circulation in the body. 4) *Samana*: The prana that carries the grosser material of food to the apana and brings the subtler material to each limb; the general force of digestion. 4) *Udana*: The prana which brings up or carries down what has been drunk or eaten; the general force of assimilation. If this is kept in mind the following will be more comprehensible and meaningful.

“The *Prana* himself dwells in eye, ear, mouth, and nose; the *Apana*, which is the second Prana, rules the organs of excretion and generation; the *Samana*, which is the third Prana, inhabits the navel and governs digestion and assimilation. “The Self dwells in the lotus of the heart, whence radiate a hundred and one nerves [nadis]. From each of these proceed one hundred others, which are smaller, and from each of these, again, seventy-two thousand others, which are smaller still. In all these moves the *Vyana*, which is the fourth Prana. “And then at the moment of death, through the nerve in the center of the spine, the *Udana*, which is the fifth Prana, leads the virtuous man upward to higher birth, the sinful man downward to lower birth, and the man who is both virtuous and sinful to rebirth in the world of men.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:5-7)

This final verse is an interpretive translation saying more than is really there. Swami Nikhilananda translates it literally: “And then udana, ascending upward through one of them, conducts the departing soul to the virtuous world, for its virtuous deeds; to the sinful world, for its sinful deeds; and to the world of men, for both.” As you see, there is no mention of a “nerve in the center of the spine,” the sushumna. The nadi of

ascending consciousness is spoken of at the end of the Katha Upanishad thusly: “Radiating from the lotus of the heart there are a hundred and one nerves. One of these ascends toward the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. If, when a man comes to die, his vital force passes upward and out through this nerve, he attains immortality; but if his vital force passes out through another nerve, he goes to one or another plane of mortal existence and remains subject to birth and death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:16)

Here is what I wrote in comment on this verse:

“By ‘heart’ is meant the hub—located in the midst of the upper trunk of the body—of subtle passages known as nadis (here translated ‘nerves’) through which the life force (prana) circulates throughout the gross and subtle bodies, just as the blood circulates from the heart through the veins of the physical body. One hundred of these nadis direct the life force to the life processes of the bodies and are the forces of embodiment. One, unique, nadi, however, rises directly upward from the heart-hub into the head. (This nadi rises from the heart directly into the head—it is *not* the passage in the midst of the spine.) If at the time of death the departing spirit leaves through that channel, he gains immortality. But if his consciousness attaches itself to any of the hundred other nadis he will be impelled into the subtle worlds that lead inexorably back to incarnation in relativity.

“In every meditation, by intoning Om in time with the breath we activate this channel, causing the life force to spontaneously and effortlessly, flow upward into the thousand-petaled lotus in the head toward the divine radiance that shines above and upon the upper levels of the brain-lotus. That Divine Light is the essence of Om, the Life-Giving Word, the Pranava. Then at the end of life, having prepared himself by this practice, sitting in meditation the yogi ascends upward from the body into the realm of immortality.”

## **Cosmic prana**

Since each of us is a reflection of the universe, there is a cosmic pranic arrangement also, so the sage continues: “The sun is the Prana of the universe. It rises to help the Prana in the eye of man to see. The power of earth maintains the Apana in man. The ether between the sun and the earth is the Samana, and the all-pervading air is the Vyana. “The Udana is fire, and therefore he whose bodily heat has gone out dies, after which his senses are absorbed in the mind, and he is born again. Whatever his thought at the moment of death, this it is that unites a man with Prana, who in turn, uniting himself with Udana and with the Self, leads the man to be reborn in the world he merits.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:8-10)

This final principle is the most important. It is expanded in the Gita in this way: “At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in me. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life. Therefore you must remember me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon me constantly, you will come to me. Never doubt this. Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:5-8)

This is why the japa and meditation of Om is “The Way,” as Patanjali states in the Yoga Sutras (1:28)

## **The knowing of Prana: immortality**

The importance of knowing the functions of Prana by direct experience—through yoga practice—is summed up by the sage, saying: “The progeny of him who knows Prana as I have revealed him to you is never cut off; and he himself becomes immortal. “It was said of old: *One who knows the Prana—whence he has his source, how he enters the body, how he lives there after dividing himself five-fold, what are his inner workings— such an one attains to immortality, yea, even to immortality.*” (Prashna Upanishad 3:11,12)

For, as the other upanishads declare: Prana is Brahman.

## The Witnessing Self

### The one in the three

“Gargya then asked: ‘Master, when a man’s body sleeps, who is it within that sleeps, and who is awake, and who is dreaming? Who then experiences happiness, and with whom are all the sense organs united?’” (Prashna Upanishad 4:1)

Anyone who ponders the nature of consciousness comes to realize that there are three modes of experience: waking, dream, and dreamless sleep. All three of these states are experienced by a single witness who says: “I slept without dream,” “I slept and dreamed,” and “I am now awake.” Who is that witness? This is Gargya’s inquiry. Who is the unchanging witness of change? Who is the unseen seer? For no intelligent person of unclouded intellect can doubt the existence of such a one.

## Sleep

“As the rays of the sun, O Gargya, when he sets,’ replied the sage, ‘gather themselves up in his disk of light, to come out again when he rises, so the senses gather themselves up in the mind, the highest of them all. Therefore when a man does not hear, see, smell, taste, touch, speak, grasp, enjoy, we say that he sleeps. Only the Pranas are then awake in the body, and the mind is led nearer to the Self.’” (Prashna Upanishad 4:2-4)

Prana is the primal life-force or vital energy. The prana that manifests in the evolving universe also manifests in the evolving body of each human being. In the body there are five basic forms of prana:

- (1) **Prana**, the prana that moves upward;
- (2) **Apana**: The prana that moves downward, producing the excretory functions in general.
- (3) **Vyana**: The prana that holds prana and apana together and produces circulation in the body.
- (4) **Samana**: The prana that carries the grosser material of food to the apana and brings the subtler material to each limb; the general force of digestion.
- (5) **Udana**: The prana which brings up or carries down what has been drunk or eaten; the general force of assimilation.

The pranas also correspond to the five elements:

earth (prithvi),

water (apa),

fire (tejas),

air (vayu), and

ether (akasha).

One of these five elements is the foundation for one of the five senses:

Earth =smell,

Water =taste,

Fire =sight,

Air =touch, and

Ether =hearing/speech.

In the waking state all the pranas are quite active and fundamentally outflowing, even those that maintain the internal functions of the body being externalized through being expended in the fulfillment of their tasks. But in sleep they withdraw into the inner reservoirs of the body and the state of sleep occurs. On the subtlest energy level they withdraw into the manas, the energy field we call the mind. For the mind is the highest “sense,” being the sum and goal of them all. It is not amiss to say that the senses serve the mind—at least when the right order prevails. Otherwise they drag the mind helplessly along addicting and enslaving it. Breaking the web of this addiction-slavery is then impossible without the practice of pranayama—control and refinement of the pranas. For this reason all viable spiritual traditions have methods that involve breath—the most objective manifestation of prana—to some degree. (See Chapter Four ☺).

### **Breath and Sound in Meditation in *Om Yoga—Its Theory and Practice.*)**

When the pranas withdraw into the mind, their distracting activities lessen—unless they occupy and overwhelm the mind with constant and vivid dreaming. When/If the mind is thus granted a reprieve from their clamor, it begins to sense what is behind it, just as it is behind the senses. The mind is the witness of the senses, but it is also witnessed. That ultimate witness is the Self. Therefore the upanishad says that in sleep “the mind is led nearer to the Self.”

### **Dreams and dreamlessness**

Where do dreams come from? Gargya has not asked, but Pippalada tells him: “While in dream, the mind revives its past impressions. Whatever it has seen, it sees again; whatever it has heard, it hears again; whatever it has enjoyed in various countries and in various quarters of the earth, it enjoys again. What has been seen and not seen, heard and not heard, enjoyed and not enjoyed, both the real and the unreal, it sees; yea, it sees all.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:5) Everyone is creative in the dream state, though some are definitely better writer/directors of their inner movies than others. He continues: “When the mind is overpowered by deep slumber, it dreams no more. It rests happily in the body.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:6)

From the very first yogis have spoken of the importance of the dreamless, deep sleep state they call sushupti. This is because in dreamless sleep we are aware of awareness itself with no interference from the senses. We are aware deep within ourselves, aware of our nature as simple, pure consciousness. Dreamless sleep is also proof that the Self exists. For although no objects are presented to the mind, there is a witness of that non-experiencing. Otherwise we would not awaken and say: “I slept but had no dreams at all.” Instead we would not know any time had passed, would not know that we had been asleep. That witness which cognizes the waking, dream, and dreamless states is the Atman itself.

There is a higher form “when sushupti [the dreamless sleep state] is rightly cognized [experienced] while conscious,” says the Shandilya Upanishad. In that state we are “asleep while awake” and are fully conscious of the fact. This is very near the actual experience of the Self and partakes of that experience to some degree, the happiness and ease we feel being a touch of the joy (ananda) that is the nature of the Self. It is extremely valuable because it shows us that when all sensory experience is gone beyond there yet remains the truth of ourselves in the form of pure, unconditioned consciousness that is the Self. In deep meditation we enter this state intentionally and begin working our inner transformation from this center by the subtle intonations of Om. (See *Om Yoga: Its Theory and Practice* for more on this.)

### **To the Self**

“As birds, my friend, fly to a tree for rest, even so do all these things fly to the Self: Earth and its peculiar essence, water and its peculiar essence, fire and its peculiar essence, air and its peculiar essence, ether and its peculiar essence, the eye and what it sees, the ear and what it hears, the nose and what it smells, the tongue and what it tastes, the skin and what it touches, the voice and what it speaks, the hands and what they grasp, the feet and what they walk on, the mind and what it perceives, the intellect and what it understands, the ego and what it appropriates, the heart and what it loves, light and what it illumines, energy and what it binds together.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:7, 8)

They “fly to the Self” because the Self is their origin. They are returning to their source after ages upon ages of separation in relative existence/experience. “For verily it is the Self that sees, hears, smells, tastes, thinks, knows, acts. He is Brahman, whose essence is knowledge. He is the immutable Self, the Supreme.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:9) The Self is the Experiencer in all beings, the knower of all things, and the doer of all acts. This points out the fact that Maya—illusion—is the misperception of things, not perception itself. Also, sense experience, thought, and actions are NOT illusions. It is our misunderstanding of them that is illusion. The Self is real and its experiences are real. It is true that they are purely mental in nature, but is the mind not real? Again, it is a matter how we perceive. The Self is a wave of the ocean of Brahman, the Absolute, whose nature is Consciousness. The Self is immutable, and beyond it there is nothing else, for in essence it is one with Brahman, the ultimate Being. Yet, the Self needs to attain itself, needs to attain the consciousness of its Being which is Brahman. Therefore the sage says further:

## The end result

“He who knows the immutable, the pure, the shadowless, the bodiless, the colorless, attains to Brahman, O my friend. Such an one becomes all-knowing, and he dwells in all beings. Of him it is written: ‘He who knows that immutable Self, wherein live the mind, the senses, the pranas, the elements—verily such an one knows all things, and realizes the Self in all.’” (Prashna Upanishad 4:10, 11)

This is most important, for it indicates that first we know the Self—the individual Self, the jivatman—and then we are enabled to know the Supreme Self, the Paramatman: Brahman. And the Self we will know is itself: *Immutable*. Eternally changeless, incapable of being either diminished or increased, for it is one with the Infinite. *Pure*. Ever only itself, never really being influenced or changed by any thing whatsoever. Untainted by any contact, for it is untouchable. *Shadowless*. The Self is Pure Light within which there is no shadow of darkness or differentiation. It is always exactly what it is. *Bodiless*. It is perfectly non-dual. It is neither inside or outside of any thing. It cannot be contained. It is absolutely one, having nothing appended to it or necessary to it.

*Colorless*. It has no “qualities” or “characteristics” but is always I AM. The three gunas are not present in it, nor are any gradations of any kind. It is indescribable. All we can really say about it is what it is not. All of these terms indicate that the Self is the same as Brahman. And the Self that knows its Self—Brahman, “wherein live the mind, the senses, the pranas, the elements”—does in truth come to know all things and the Self in all things. Omniscience and omnipresence are experienced by that liberated spirit who knows its oneness with The All.

## Meditation on Om

So far the questions put to Pippalada have been about the components of the human organism which both empower and limit it. In the last section the subject of the Self was considered—specifically the nature of the Self and the results of knowing the Self. Now we approach the subject of the way in which the Self is known. Without knowing this, all the foregoing teaching is pointless.

## Life and death

“Whereupon Satyakama, coming near to the master, said: Venerable sir, if a man meditate upon the syllable OM all his life, what shall be his reward after death?” (Prashna Upanishad 5:1) Satyakama understood that what really mattered was not short-term gain in this life, but the state of consciousness that would determine where the individual would go after death when stripped of body, possessions, relationships, and all that is “of the earth, earthly”—when he has nothing but his degree of evolution to determine his future.

So he wants to know what will be the result of meditating on Om throughout one’s life. Literally, the Sanskrit texts asks what will be the result of *intense* meditation (abhidhyana) on Om, and what world (loka) will be won (jayati) by means of that meditation. For the world in which we find ourselves after death reveals our fundamental state of consciousness.

## The supreme attainment

“And the master answered him thus: Satyakama, OM is Brahman—both the conditioned and the unconditioned, the personal and the impersonal. By meditating upon it the wise man may attain either the one or the other.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:2)

Brahman is absolutely one, but from our present perspective seems to be of a dual character. In this verse the expression “higher” (para) and “lower” (apara) are used, though Prabhavananda has used the explanatory translations “conditioned and the unconditioned” and “the personal and the impersonal.” It is more usual to use the terms nirguna (without attributes or qualities—guna) and saguna (with attributes or qualities) in relation to Brahman. In *A Brief Sanskrit Glossary* Nirguna Brahman is defined as: “The impersonal, attributeless Absolute beyond all description or designation.” Saguna Brahman is defined as: “The supreme Absolute conceived of as endowed with qualities like mercy, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc., as distinguished from the undifferentiated Absolute—Nirguna Brahman.” Nirgunam Brahman is the “higher” Brahman and Saguna Brahman is the “lower” or lesser. Again, this distinction is just a means of expression adopted for the limitations of our human intellects.

Presently it is commonly assumed—erroneously—that there is one way to meditate on Nirguna Brahman and another way to meditate on Saguna Brahman. But this was not so in the upanishadic era, as can be seen from the texts cited in both *Om Yoga* and *The Word That Is God*. It was understood that Om is all-inclusive, since It is Brahman Itself. Consequently, meditation on Om is meditation on both Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. Our perceptions will be according to whichever aspect we wish to contact.

## According to our knowing

It also depends on our experience-knowledge of Om, not mere intellectual ideas. For Pippalada then says: “If he meditate upon OM with but little knowledge of its meaning, but nevertheless is enlightened thereby, upon his death he will be immediately born again on this earth, and during his new life he will be devoted to austerity, continence, and faith, and will attain to spiritual greatness.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:3)

That is, if for whatever reasons the yogi gains but little experience-knowledge of Om, still he will be enlightened by it to some degree. This being so, he will not spend a long period in the astral world, but will quickly be reborn so he can take up yoga again and make better progress than he did before. To ensure this, in his new life “he will be devoted to austerity, continence, and faith, and will attain to spiritual greatness.” “If, again, he meditate upon OM with a greater knowledge of its meaning, upon his death he will ascend to the lunar heaven, and after he has partaken of its pleasures will return again to earth.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:4)

“The lunar heaven” is the astral world in which the yogi experiences great happiness and even power according to the immense strength of positive karma which is engendered by the practice of yoga. Yet he will in time take birth again on the earth. “But if he meditate upon OM in the full consciousness that it is one with God, upon his death he will be united with the light that is in the sun, he will be freed from evil, even as a snake is freed from its slough, and he will ascend to God’s dwelling place. There he will realize Brahman, who evermore abides in the heart of all beings— Brahman Supreme!” (Prashna Upanishad 5:5)

Those who experience in meditation that Om truly is Divinity Itself—is their own Divine Self—will be freed from the compulsion to earthly rebirth as well as all that has bound them to lower things and, united with the Light of Spirit that invisibly shines upon us through the intermediary of the sun, will ascend to the heights of existence and beyond into the transcendent Being of Nirguna Brahman.

Then Pippalada cites two verses even older than the upanishads that encapsulate all this: “Concerning the sacred syllable OM it is written: “The syllable OM, when it is not fully understood, does not lead beyond mortality. When it is fully understood, and meditation is therefore rightly directed, a man is freed from fear, whether he be awake, dreaming, or sleeping the dreamless sleep, and attains to Brahman. “By virtue of a little understanding of OM a man returns to earth after death. By virtue of a greater understanding he attains to the celestial sphere. By virtue of a complete understanding he learns what is known only to the seers. The sage, with the help of OM, reaches Brahman, the fearless, the undecaying, the immortal!” Prashna Upanishad 5:6, 7)

As Sri Ramana Maharshi said: Om ever shines within us as the Self. May we all realize this. Where is the Self? “Lastly, Sukesha approached the sage and said: ‘Holy sir, Hiranyanabha, prince of Kosala, once asked me this question: “‘Sukesha, do you know the Self and his sixteen parts?’” I replied, “‘I do not. Surely, if I had known them, I should have taught them to you. I will not lie, for he who lies perishes, root and all.’” The prince silently mounted his chariot and went away. So now I ask of thee, Where is the Self?’” (Prashna Upanishad 6:1)

This is an introduction to the actual teachings of this section, but it contains a couple of interesting points.

## Sixteen parts

The Self is said in this verse to have sixteen “parts.” Yet the Self is one, so how can this be? The upanishad is referring to the “extensions” or instruments of the Self by means of which it manifests within relative existence. They will be enumerated shortly.

## Spiritual honesty

It is impressive when a spiritual teacher honestly admits to not knowing something. In a filmed interview, Carl Jung was asked what he thought some dream symbol meant. He laughed and said: “I haven’t the faintest idea!” End of question! Here we see the integrity of Sukesha who readily admitted not knowing the answer to a question. And his reason he gives, saying: “I will not lie, for he who lies perishes, root and all.” Satya—truthfulness—is one of the essential observances of Yoga according to Patanjali, and here we see why. This should be taken to heart by us throughout our life. Sri Ramakrishna said that a person can realize God by scrupulously adhering to truth.

## Abode of the Self

Where is the Self? “The sage replied: “My child, within this body dwells the Self, from whom sprang the sixteen parts of the universe; and in this manner they came into being.” (Prashna Upanishad 6:2) How precious, then, is the human body! And how foolish it is to think that spiritual experience will involve “escaping” from the body and flying off to some “spiritual world” to hobnob with angels and masters! Now he will describe the sequence of cosmic manifestation.

## Stabilizing Itself within creation

“If, creating, I enter my creation, the Self reflected, what is there to bind me to it; what is there to go out from it when I go out, to stay within it when I stay?” (Prashna Upanishad 6:3) This is a problem for both the infinite and the finite Selves.

“Pondering thus, and in answer to his thought, he made Prana; and from Prana he made desire; and from desire he made ether, air, fire, water, earth, the senses, the mind, and food; and from food he made vigor, penance, the Vedas, the sacrificial rites, and all the worlds. Thereafter, in the worlds, he created names. And the number of the elements he thus created was sixteen.” (Prashna Upanishad 6:4) We need to take this part by part.

*Pondering thus, and in answer to his thought, he made....* The world was made by the mere thought of God. As said before, this is the “dream” of God; it is all creative thought. Merely thinking of something gets us human beings nowhere—we have to bring it into manifestation by action and materials. This is not the case with God. He thought—and so it was. Consequently, in the following list of cosmic ingredients, we must not think of them as “stuff” but as cosmic thoughts.

**Prana.** First the Universal Life Force (vishwaprana) was manifested. This was the formless, basic “substance” of relative existence.

**Desire.** Next came the power of intention or aspiration. For unless we are motivated with the idea that something can be attained, we will not act. So the power to desire or will—and thereby to shape and work with the cosmic prana—is absolutely necessary for anything to “happen.”

“Desire” is the explanatory translation of Prabhavananda, and I think it is the best one. But the actual word in the Sanskrit is *shraddha*—faith. This was used, Shankara says, to mean a stimulus to the individual spirits (jivas). That is, subliminally all of us know that we have come from God and are intended to return to God. With this aspiration as the deepest impulse of our being, we are moving up the evolutionary path, ever onward, however many delays our ignorance and laziness may bring about.

**Ether, air, fire, water, earth** – the great primal elements and all their variations down to their material manifestations.

**The senses.** Actually, the word is *indriyam*, which means “organs” and often does mean only the five organs of perception (jnanendriyas): ear, skin, eye, tongue, and nose, but Shankara feels (and so do I) that it no doubt includes the five organs of action (karmendriyas): voice, hand, foot, organ of excretion, and the organ of generation. The indriyas are here being thought of as “wrappings” of the individual consciousness as well as being instruments of bodily function. *Mind.* The indriyas are unconscious. That which activates them is the mind which both perceives and acts through them.

**Food.** By this term is meant all that goes to affect the evolving consciousness, from physical food to psychological and intellectual impressions that shape and move our development either forward or backward, according to their character. That this is so is demonstrated by those things that are said to be “made” from food:

**Vigor.** Virya is the strength and energy that manifests in body, mind, and intellect— especially as will power in the yogi.

**Penance.** Tapasya is practical spiritual disciplines, such as moral observances, selfpurification, and the practice of meditation.

**Vedas.** The word is not Veda, but *mantra*—words of power which produce changes spiritually, mentally and physically by their repetition. From vigor comes the capacity for spiritual discipline, which is manifested in the form of the repetition (japa) and meditation (dhyana) centered on mantras, especially the Supreme Mantra: Om.

**Sacrificial rites.** This is not only an interpretive translation, it is a very narrowing one. The actual word is *karma*—a very wide and far-reaching matter, indeed. Here it means the law of action/reaction which fuels the very existence of the world and our bodies within it. Karma causes the manifestation of the cosmos and impels all sentient beings to take incarnation within it in forms appropriate to their level of consciousness and the nature of their past deeds, both physical and mental. Certainly merit-producing actions are part of karma, but karma is much more.

**All the worlds.** The many worlds (lokas) are produced in response to the varying degrees of evolution and past karma of the sentient beings within them.

**Names.** The prime factor in relative existence is *nama*: name. This seems very peculiar to those whose philosophy does not postulate that everything is ideation— thought. But the primeval sages of India perceived through their meditation that the thoughtform, the *idea* that is the matrix around which the body-vehicle of any manifested entity forms itself is that entity’s “name.” In the depths of their meditation the sages perceived the primal thought of each “thing.” Since everything is formed of vibration, they translated that into spoken forms. In all other languages a word is just an agreed-upon symbol of an object, but in Sanskrit each word is a sound-form of the basic energy pattern of the designated object. Sanskrit is a kind of sonic physics— creative speech. For that reason Sanskrit script is call Devanagari—The City of the Gods—meaning that the divine powers manifesting as all objects “dwell” in the Sanskrit words. In the subtle levels of being the Sanskrit word IS the thing designated by the word. That is why it is stated that the Name of God IS God! Om is Divinity Itself. (See the section entitled The Glories and Powers of Om in *Om Yoga* and

## ***The Word That Is God.)***

These are the sixteen parts of the cosmic and the individual Selves.

### **The Great Return**

“As the flowing rivers, whose destination is the sea, having reached it disappear in it, losing their names and forms, and men speak only of the sea; so these sixteen parts created from out his own being by the Self, the Eternal Seer, having returned to him from whom they came, disappear in him, their destination, losing their names and forms, and people speak only of the Self. Then for man the sixteen parts are no more, and he attains to immortality. Thus was it said of old: ‘The sixteen parts are spokes projecting from the Self, who is the hub of the wheel. The Self is the goal of knowledge. Know him and go beyond death.’” (Prashna Upanishad 6:5, 6)

There is an important principle here: All that exists has emanated from the Cosmic Self and is withdrawn into It—and the same is true of our many levels: they have come from the true “us” and will remerge in us. The idea that “the world” is to be discarded—escaped from—so we can be free is as illusory as the world from which we wish to rid ourselves. It is ignorance alone that we need to banish. We need to refine all our bodies through the practice of tapasya so they will be seen as nothing more than the projections of our mind—projections that can be reabsorbed in the state of perfect knowing. The macrocosm and the microcosm are both “proper” to Spirit and spirit. They are not impositions or prisons (though we make them so), but rays of the Self. They exist because we exist. The only path to the Self is that of knowledge. Once that arises within us, death dissolves and immortality alone remains.

### **The right ending**

“The sage concluded, saying: What I have told you is all that can be said about the Self, the Supreme Brahman. Beyond this there is naught.” (Prashna Upanishad 6:7) So anything more we may say, that has not already been said in the upanishads (and the Gita), will really be nothing—worthless and pointless, if not outright self-deception. This merits being taken to heart. We should toss away our books of idle philosophy and speculation and become genuine yogis. Then we will truly know That Which Is To Be Known. So: “The disciples worshiped the sage, and said: You are indeed our father. You have led us beyond the sea of ignorance. We bow down to all the great seers!

### **Obeisance to the great seers!”**

Those who teach us the truth of the Self—and more: the way to realize the Self—they are our true fathers, begetting us in Knowledge. They are worthy of worship (archanam) and all honor. They are the gods that lead us to God. *Namah Paramarishibhyah*—Salutations to the Great Rishis!