

## CHAPTER 2 ATMAN – THE HIGHER SELF



### Words to Know

**ātman** – means “self.” In Theosophical literature, the word is used in a more restricted way to refer to the highest Principle in human beings; as well as everywhere in the cosmos, because it is a “universally diffused divine Principle.”

**Absolute** – eternal ultimate reality; neither subject nor object ...

**puruṣa** – the spiritual principle in the cosmos, as opposed to the material (*prakṛti*).

**anātman** – literally “not-self.”

**Individuality** – The permanent reincarnating Principle in humans—the higher ego. It reflects the dual monad *ātma-buddhi* to a greater or lesser extent according to its evolution.

**skandha** – In Buddhism, the five components of a human being, namely: material form, sensation, conceptual perception, mental habits, and awareness. In Theosophical literature, this term normally refers to the mental habits and tendencies.

**Space** – is not only the boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events have relative position and direction, but the container of a number of unperceived dimensions or “planes” constituted by different kinds of matter. All these planes have place within the cosmic space, which is a temporal manifestation of the eternal pre-cosmic absolute abstract space. (Theosophy Wiki)

**consciousness** – The ability to be aware.

“Consciousness implies limitations and qualifications; something [the object] to be conscious of, and someone [the subject] to be conscious of it. But absolute consciousness contains the cognizer [knower], the thing cognized and the cognition, all three in itself and all three *one*.” (*SD*, vol. 1, p. 56)

**I-ness** – The sense of being a particular someone, the sense of “I.”

### Name Game

**Ātman** ... universal spirit ... indivisible all ... higher self ... divine Principle ... very essence of everything ... universal self ... ray of the absolute ... conscious non-consciousness ... No Thing ... unconscious absolute consciousness ... be-ness ... eternal non-being ...

**Space** ... absolute reality ... One All ... Absolute Abstract Space ... the one element ...

### Points to Ponder

As you ponder over these points, what insights do you come up with that help you hold the understanding of this chapter?

“The process of evolution generates many Individualities within the unity.” (p. 17)

“*Ātman* is simply that in which we are—though not only *we* live and breathe and have our being, but so does the whole universe.” (p. 18)

“Since *ātman* ‘cannot be absent from even the tiniest geometrical or mathematical point of the universe,’ it is not really possible for it to be ‘outside’ of us, any more than inside. ... We have to remember that any description is only symbolic, and this is especially true in the case of ultimate

principles. If we are not aware of this fact and take things too literally we will be easily misled.” (p. 20)

“*Ātman* in its universality is this ‘ocean of spirit.’ But when talking about it as a particular person’s seventh Principle, the Mahatma defines it as the *space* this person occupies within the universally diffused divine Principle.” (p. 23)

“The important point to keep in mind is that consciousness as we know it is not the highest possible state in the universe. The individual consciousness is possible only as the result of a limitation or fragmentation within the one absolute consciousness. Only something that is a part can be conscious of other parts.” (p. 25)

“The Absolute embraces and transcends any relative qualities such as conscious or unconscious, full or empty, material or spiritual, being or non-being, mutable or immutable, etc. Probably the safest attitude is to say that the ultimate reality is neither this nor that.” (p. 29) This is similar to the *neti-neti* of Vedanta and *via negativa* of Christian Mysticism.

“*Ātman* acts as the ‘higher self’ of an Individual when the higher ego becomes aware in it. ... When our spiritual consciousness is illumined by *ātman*, the sense of *I-ness* assumes the highest form we can experience in a human body—a conscious feeling of being one with the whole.” (p. 30)

## Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss how our mind tends to project our personal and separated self on to spiritual concepts whose essence is always eternal and whole (for example, the idea of God, the enjoyments in heaven, the consciousness of Angels, etc.) If you watch, can you see how your mind does this? (p. 16)
2. Why did Blavatsky say that we do not have an *ātman*? (p. 18)
3. Pablo uses many analogies in this chapter to describe *ātman* as a universal Principle ... the sunbeam and sunlight (p. 16), air outside and inside the lungs (p. 19), personal consciousness and the universal self separated as the illusion of the snake and a rope (p. 20), white light – though the parts are contained in the whole, the whole transcends any of the separate parts (p. 21), space within and outside the jar – representing the illusion of separation (p. 23), and gold – which can be created into an infinite array of forms, and yet, itself remains unaffected (p. 24). Discuss how the use of analogies helps us dimly perceive the unperceivable.  
Can you think of other analogies and metaphors to describe *ātman* and the Absolute?
4. What are the two, “higher eternal Principles present in human beings”? (p.19)
5. What is the aim of our spiritual work? (p. 21)
6. How does this concept of *ātman* as being cosmic space apply at the microcosmic level—that of an individual? (p. 23)
7. What does Blavatsky mean by “absolute consciousness”? And why cannot *ātman* be conscious? (p. 25)
8. What reasons does Pablo give as to why is *be-ness* a good term to use? (p. 29)

## Exercises to Explore

Mme. Blavatsky recommended to the students of her Inner Group:

“Try to imagine something which transcends your power of thought; say, the nature of ... [*ātman*]. Then make the brain passive and pass beyond.”

To help in this endeavor, let us look at an excerpt from this chapter on *ātman* and the Absolute—where Pablo discusses some aspects of their nature.

“In the Theosophical view *ātman* is the universal spirit in which ‘we live, move, and have our being.’ (Acts, 17:28) Every person and every thing, participates in it. It is the ‘radiation’ of the absolute reality (which Blavatsky calls ‘meta-spirit’) and penetrates the whole of the cosmos. In fact, we will find that in the Theosophical literature *ātman* and the Absolute are frequently indistinguishable, because they are inseparable.” (p. 16)

Spend some time reading the text and reflecting on it. Do it with the specific purpose of grasping something that is beyond thought. Instead of thinking, as we sometimes do, “about the *ātman* of a particular person ...” make an effort to perceive that “there is only one universal Principle, which is reflected in each separate being.” For this, read slowly, ponder over the words, visualize them and then stay in silence with a subtle effort to “feel” what the text is describing.

## More Seeds for Meditation

“Space is the most abstract thing, and space containing all is just the unknown deity which is invisible and which we cannot understand, which we can but intellectually sense.” (SD, vol. 1, p. 8)

One could say that the actual treading of the spiritual path involves the ability to let go of the conditioned—to die to the known. What does this look like to you? (p. 28)

## Further Reading

Theosophy Wiki – Space - <https://theosophy.wiki/en/Space>

## Resources for Research

Theosophical Web Search - <http://www.theosophicalsearch.org>

Theosophy Wiki - <https://theosophy.wiki>