

# Atmabodha : Its Relevance to Modern Times

Dr. S. SRINIVASAN

*Realising the Atman within is a secular exercise  
needed to save the human race. It transcends  
all boundaries of geography and culture.*

Can a piece of literature written more than a thousand years ago on a seemingly esoteric subject like knowledge of the Self be of relevance to us as we are on the threshold of the supercomputer age of the 21st century? Even the majority of today's intellectuals, let alone the common man, would tend to answer this question in the negative. But a closer scrutiny of the subject will soon reveal that not only is it as relevant today as it was at the time of writing, but even the contents and style of approach of this historic landmark in Adi Sankara's metaphysical expositions are eternally applicable, perhaps even more so in times to come.

## **The Light Within**

To assess the relevance of *Atmabodha* in today's and tomorrow's context, one must first look into what it stands for, so that one can consider how it can be adapted in a fast changing milieu. *Atmabodha* tells how to realise the Light within ourselves whatever be the forces operating from the external environment.

Starting with an invocation to the Self as the "fourth state" of "satchit-sukham" in the cave of the heart; the text describes the attributes of the ideal student who seeks the Truth, and then goes on to chart out the course with the help of a series of exquisite similies.

Ignorance is removed not by action, exemplified by today's 'ratrace' in pursuit of one thing or another, but by knowledge of Self alone as simply as darkness is removed by light alone. Once the cloud of ignorance is out of the way, the *Atman* shines brilliantly like the sun.

Material things or *upadhis*, together with the mind and intellect, superimpose themselves on the ultimate Self and give the illusory dreamlike state to the world. Like colourless water taking on different hues when various colours are dissolved in it, the *Atman* gives the appearance of taking on various attributes but is without attributes by itself. The five great elements or *mahabhutas* of space, air, fire, water and earth in various combinations and permutations give rise to the gross body and experiences, pleasurable and unpleasurable.

## **Discriminative Analysis**

By developing the faculty of discriminative analysis, the Self is to be realised as separate from the sheaths that obscure it, just like the rice grain from husk. Indeed, the Self is beyond the senses, body, mind, intellect and *vasanas*, but supervises them like a king. By itself it is static but appears to the average perceiver as being moved by the

superficial attributes. Sankara, with a typically brilliant metaphor, shows us how to shift our focus from the clouds of sensory perceptions to the moon of the Atman, if we have to realise that it is the clouds that move and not the moon.

In another example of extraordinary scientific perception. Sankara draws a parallel with the blue colour of the sky visible to the naked eye. The sky is indeed colourless, like the *sat-chit-atma*, but the blue colour equivalent of the qualities of mind and the senses looks so real that it takes a keen discriminating ability to realise that it is only apparent, not real.

Through ignorance, the mind believes that it is the doer of things (*kartritva bhavana*) and enjoyer of benefits of action (*bhoktritva bhavana*). But the Atman is neither the doer nor the enjoyer. It is totally unmoved, eternal and pure, although as the gross body, it shows existence (*sat*), as the subtle body, intelligence (*chit*) and as the causal body, bliss (ananda).

### **Fear Due to Ignorance**

By wrongly identifying the worldly-wise intellect with Atman, the phenomenon of *Aviveka* or nondiscrimination results, leading to the "I know" problem. This is a common stumbling block on the path to *Atmabodha*. Another similar pitfall to guard against is misinterpreting the Self as the living being, like the rope as serpent (*'rajjusarpavat'*). Such ignorance causes fear. Knowledge of the real Self eliminates this fear.

The Self cannot be realised without negating the *upadhis* or material things one by one (*'na iti , na iti'*) and asserting the real. This comes out beautifully in verse no. 30 where an exalted reference to the Vedic declaration of the *mahavakyas* is made. The *lakshana vakya* of *Aitareya upanishad* in the *Rig veda* (*Prajnanam brahma*), the *upadesa vakya* of *Chandogya upanishad* in *Sama Veda* (*Tat twam asi*), the *abhyasa vakya* of *Mandukya upanishad* in *Atharvana veda* (*Ayam atma brahma*) and the *anubhava vakya* of *Brihadaranyaka upanishad* in *Yajur veda* (*Aham brahma asmi*) distil the essence of realising the oneness of *jivatma* and *paramatma*. Whether deep within one's own self or in the universe at large, it is the same indivisible Self that prevails.

While the visible elements like the body are shortlived like bubbles on water and only attract *avidya* or ignorance, the real Brahman is for ever and can be described as *satya-jnana-ananta* or eternal truth-absolute knowledge infinity. Once identified and realised by the individual as "I am indeed the *Brahman*", its therapeutic effect in destroying mental agitations can only be paralleled by an effective medicine destroying a disease process in the body.

### **Turn Inward**

Sankara gives sensible practical instructions to the seeker through meditation on the *Atman*. Such a relentless effort ultimately pays off, often to the sudden wonderment of the seeker like- one who keeps looking for an ornament all around him, only to realise suddenly that it is around one's own neck (*'swakanthambharanam yatha'*).

Such an achievement promptly endows the seeker with an eye of wisdom (*jnanachakshu*) with the help of which the path to merger with the *Brahman* becomes visible clearly. This ultimate state is one of 'jeevanmukta', liberated though living.

The crux of this phenomenon is turning inward. Sankara uses the simile of a lamp inside a pot (*'ghatasthadeepavat'*) to describe it. It need not illuminate external objects

simply because they do not matter any more. The light within, namely *Atman*, illuminates literally the cave of the heart, where it matters most.

Sankara describes the nature of *Brahman* in vivid terms. It is the greatest in attainment and knowledge and results in and is itself in his the ultimate bliss. It is wholesome and continuous and is reached by a step by step negation of the peripheral things of life, just as ghee is obtained by a stepwise processing of milk, though it was an integral part of milk throughout, but not grossly visible.

### **The Vital Need of Today**

What is the relevance of such realisation and enlightenment in the present times and in future, when life around is undergoing such a drastic acceleration in all dimensions and the value systems keep changing with mind-boggling frequency? Does *Atmabodha* tell us to throw in the towel and run away from it all? The answer is an unequivocal no. Indeed, just in order to stay on in this fast movement and still keep one's sanity one needs the quintessence of *Atmabodha*.

Those who get carried away by the rapid transformation of the *upadhis* would end up only in confusion and anxiety. Alvin Toffler refers to this phenomenon of "future shock" as an inevitability, unless it is balanced by the realisation of certain everlasting principles. The need to practise *Atmabodha* can only become more compelling as the whirlpool of *upadhis* churns more violently. The wise ones should learn to separate the inner self from the push and pull of environmental factors, without which the end result will only be anxiety neurosis and other psychosomatic disorders.

Sankara was indeed as futuristic in his times as one can ever be. While professing an eternal philosophy, he never deviated from his ordained duties nor did he tell people to become dropouts. The charm of *Atmabodha* lies in renouncing the anxiety generating attachments to actions and other material equipment, while still being with them physically.

The recognition of the *Atman* within is an exercise which is not only possible and feasible but indispensable if we have to adapt successfully to changes in social systems. It is of the utmost secular character and transcends all boundaries of geography, culture, religion and time periods. Indeed, unless such an approach is practised by individuals in the decades to come, the human race will plunge into inexorable moral bankruptcy with disastrous consequences, the price which we can ill-afford.