

*Chandogya Upanishad*¹ 8.7-12

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7. “The self (*atman*)² that is without moral flaw, beyond old age, beyond death, beyond sorrow, free from desire to eat or drink, that has true desires and true intentions—that is the self that one should look for, that is the self that one should get to know. The person who gets to know this self, having looked for it, obtains all the worlds and attains all his or her desires.” So said Prajapati.³

Both the gods and the demons⁴ have learned this. They said: “Let us go and look for this self, by discovering which one obtains all the worlds and attains all his or her desires!” So Indra⁵ set out from among the gods and Virochana from among the demons. Without being aware of each other’s actions, both arrived in the presence of Prajapati carrying firewood⁶ in their hands.

They lived the life of celibate religious students for thirty two years. Then Prajapati told them: “With what intent have you lived here?” They replied: “People report your lordship’s words: ‘The self that is without moral flaw, beyond old age, beyond death, beyond sorrow, free from desire to eat or drink, that has true desires and true intentions—that is the self that one should look for, that is the self that one should get to know. The person who gets to know this self, having looked for it, obtains all the worlds and attains all his or her desires.’” “So you have lived here wishing to find that self?”

Prajapati then told them: “This person (*purusha*)⁷ that is perceived in the eye—that is the self.” And he added: “That is Brahman,⁸ immortal and fearless.” “But then, sir,” they said, “who is the one that is perceived in the water or in a mirror?” Prajapati said: “It is the same one who is perceived in all these surfaces.”

¹ The *Chandogya Upanishad* is a Hindu religious text that dates back to the eighth century BC and is written in Sanskrit. The word *upanishad* or *upanishada* in Sanskrit means “instruction” or “teaching.”

² The word *atman* in Sanskrit has a wide range of meanings, from “self” (sometimes translated as “soul”) to the whole person including the body to the reflective pronoun “self,” as in “himself” or “themselves.” The play on all these meanings in Sanskrit that confuses the gods and demons is impossible to replicate in English.

³ The name Prajapati (*pra-jan-pati*) means “lord progenitor” or “lord of creatures.” Prajapati is the supreme being and father of the gods.

⁴ The ancient Hindu system is polytheistic, with gods and demons having roughly the same powers and the ability to convert into one another.

⁵ In the Hindu system, Indra originally held the highest rank. He is the god of thunder and lightning and the equivalent of Zeus. By the time the *Upanishads* was written his position is reduced to one of the lesser gods.

⁶ For a fire sacrifice. Fire (*Agni*) was an important deity in the ancient Hindu pantheon.

⁷ *Purusha* also has many meanings, which makes it difficult to express all plays on these meanings in English. Primarily it means “man,” “a male human being,” or “person.” However, it also means the pupil of the eye (cf. the English “pupil,” from the Latin, which means both “a young person” and “the pupil of the eye”). *Purusha* can also mean “soul” or even the primeval person who is the soul of the universe.

⁸ The word *brahman* has a wide range of meanings but here means what we might call the “ultimate reality”: the divine source from which all created things emanate, with which they identify and to which they return.

8. “While looking at yourselves (*atman*) in a pan of water, tell me if there is anything you do not perceive about yourselves.” So they both looked into a pan of water. Prajapati then asked them: “What do you see?” They said: “The two of us here, sir, see our entire selves, our likenesses down to the very hair and nails.”

Prajapati then told them: “Now the two of you adorn yourselves beautifully, dress well, groom yourselves, and look into a pan of water.” They adorned themselves beautifully, dressed well, groomed themselves, and looked into a pan of water. Prajapati then asked them: “What do you see?”

They replied: “Just as the two of us here, sir, are beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed, in exactly the same way are these two⁹ beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed.” “That is the self,” Prajapati said, and he added: “That is Brahman, immortal and fearless.” And the two of them set out content in their hearts.

Watching the two walk away, Prajapati said: “They walk away without having perceived or understood the self. Those who will abide by this teaching (*upanishadas*), be it the gods or the demons, will perish.” Now Virochana, content in his heart, went to the demons and announced to them this teaching: “It is in this world that the self (*atman*) should be pleased and taken care of.¹⁰ It is the person who in this world pleases and takes care of his or her self that obtains both this world and the other.”

This is why even today people here say about someone who gives no alms, has no faith, and performs no sacrifices: “What a demon!” For this is truly the teaching of the demons. They prepare the body of a dead person¹¹ with food offerings, rich ornaments, and fine garments, thinking that by this they will conquer the other world.

9. Now Indra had not yet reached the gods when he saw this danger: “Verily, just as the person who is in a body that is beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed, becomes beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed, in the same way the person who is in a body that is blind, sick, or crippled, becomes blind, sick, or crippled. Surely, the person who seeks the destruction of this body is lost.¹² I see no joy in this.”

He went back carrying firewood in his hands. Prajapati said to him: “O Generous One,¹³ since you set out content in your heart together with Virochana, with what intent have you returned?” Indra replied: “Verily, just as the person who is in a body that is beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed, becomes beautifully adorned, well dressed, and groomed, in the same way the person who is in a body that is blind, sick, or crippled, becomes blind, sick, or crippled. Surely, the person who seeks the destruction of this body is lost. I see no joy in this.”

⁹ Their reflections in the water.

¹⁰ Virochana means the worldly self that includes the body, and therefore speaks of worldly pleasures.

¹¹ For a funeral.

¹² The self is lost with the loss of the body.

¹³ A standard epithet of Indra.

“It is exactly so, O Generous One,” Prajapati told Indra, “But I will explain it to you further, in more depth. Live here for another thirty two years.” So Indra lived there for another thirty two years. Prajapati then said to him:

10. “The one who wanders happily in a dream—that is the self.” And he added: “That is Brahman, immortal and fearless.” Indra then set out content in his heart. But he had not yet reached the gods when he saw this danger: “Even if this body is blind, one is not blind;¹⁴ if it is sick, one is not sick. Clearly, one is not crippled by the defects of the body.”

“One is not killed if the body is killed nor sickened by the sickness of the body. However, in a way people do chase you down and kill you,¹⁵ and in a way one experiences discomfort and even cries. I see no joy in this.”

He went back carrying firewood in his hands. Prajapati said to him: “O Generous One, since you set out content in your heart, with what intent have you returned?” Indra replied: “Sir, even if this body is blind, one is not blind; if it is sick, one is not sick. Clearly, one is not crippled by the defects of the body.”

“One is not killed if the body is killed nor sickened by the sickness of the body. However, in a way people do chase you down and kill you, and in a way one experiences discomfort and even cries. I see no joy in this.” “It is exactly so, O Generous One,” Prajapati told Indra, “But I will explain it to you further, in more depth. Live here for another thirty two years.” So Indra lived there for another thirty two years. Prajapati then said to him:

11. “That in which the sleeper remains completely calm, seeing no dreams—that is the self.” And he added: “That is Brahman, immortal and fearless.” Indra then set out content in his heart. But he had not yet reached the gods when he saw this danger: “But surely at this moment one is not even aware of him- or herself to be able to say ‘I am that person’? Nor does one know these things here. In fact, one becomes totally destroyed! I see no joy in this.”

He went back carrying firewood in his hands. Prajapati said to him: “O Generous One, since you set out content in your heart, with what intent have you returned?” Indra replied: “Sir, but surely at this moment one is not even aware of him- or herself to be able to say ‘I am that person’? Nor does one know these things here. In fact, one becomes totally destroyed! I see no joy in this.”

“It is exactly so, O Generous One,” Prajapati told Indra, “Now I will explain it to you further, in more depth, but only on the following condition: live here for another five years.” So he lived there for another five years. Altogether, they add up to one hundred and one years. This is what people mean when they say: “The Generous One lived with

¹⁴ In a dream.

¹⁵ In a dream.

Prajapati for one hundred and one years as a celibate religious student.” Prajapati then spoke to him:

12. “O Generous One, this body is mortal. It is in the grip of death. But it is the abode of the immortal and disembodied self. While in the body, it is affected by pleasure and pain. There is no release from pleasure and pain for an embodied being. However, pleasure and pain do not affect one who has no body.”

“The wind has no body, nor do clouds, lightning, and thunder. Now as they rise up from the open space of the sky and reach the highest light, they put on their true form.”

“In the very same way, the one who is completely settled down and calm rises up from this body, reaches the highest light, and puts on one’s true form. This is the ultimate person (*purusha*). This person wanders around there, laughing, playing, and being content, surrounded by women, chariots, and relatives, without remembering the appendage that is this body. For just as a draft animal is tied to a cart, so the soul¹⁶ is tied to this body.”

“Now when the eye looks into open space, that is the sighted person (*purusha*);¹⁷ the eye is for the purpose of seeing. And the one who thinks this: ‘Let me smell!’—that is the self (*atman*); the organ of smell is for the purpose of smelling. And the one who thinks this: ‘Let me speak!’—that is the self; the organ of speech is for the purpose of speaking. And the one who thinks this: ‘Let me listen!’—that is the self; the organ of hearing is for the purpose of hearing.”

“And the one who thinks this: ‘Let me think!’—that is the self; the mind is the self’s divine eye. This self rejoices seeing the objects of desire with that divine eye of the mind.”

“It is this self that the gods venerate in the region of Brahman; this is why they have obtained all the worlds and attained all their desires. The person who gets to know this self, having looked for it, obtains all the worlds and attains all his or her desires.” So in truth said Prajapati.

¹⁶ The Sanskrit for the “soul” here is *prana*, whose primary meaning is “breath” or “life.”

¹⁷ The “ultimate person” mentioned in the previous paragraph.