

The Importance of Brahman and Atman

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Philosophy of Eastern Religions

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A group of scriptures known as the Upanishads, written as dialogues between a student and a teacher by many different people starting in the seventh century before the common era, are the last portion of the Vedas. Sometimes the Upanishads are referred to as the Vedanta, meaning "the summing up of the Veda," however, the word "Upanishads" itself means "to sit close to." Two fundamental concepts are established in the Upanishads, Atman (the personal soul) and Brahman (the great soul).

Brahman can best be described as a universal force. It is all and it created all. It cannot be seen but yet makes up everything that is seen. Likewise, Brahman is not physical, however, it makes up everything that is physical.

The idea of Brahman is similar to God of monotheistic religions, however, Indians do not personify Brahman, rather it is accepted as a natural force. Unlike the monotheistic view that the world was created by "the conscious willed act of God," Indians hold the belief that creation was spontaneous.

Perhaps Brahman is best described by what it is not, like in the Upanishads. The Mundaka Upanishad (I, 1.6) describes what Brahman is not: "What cannot be seen, what cannot be grasped / Without color, without sight or hearing / Without hands or feet." The reason Brahman is best described by what it is not may be because Indians hold the belief that Brahman transcends human language and understanding, making it virtually indescribable.

Atman is part of Brahman. Brahman is the larger whole and Atman is divided into smaller, individual souls. Using the analogy of an atom, Brahman is the atom and Atman is the electrons and protons.

Every human has an Atman and it transcends physical being. It is immortal and places a piece of "God" in everyone. The interrelationship between Atman and Brahman allows the

human soul to be identified with "God." The belief in Atman is similar to the belief in the soul in western society, however, unlike the soul Atman is not affected by emotions or physical needs of the body. Because of this, Indians search for their Atman, which will lead them to Brahman. The difference between Atman and Brahman over the years has become more and more obscure, making them virtually the same, but they remain physically separate.

If one comes to understand the nature and interrelationship between Atman and Brahman, then moksha may be obtained. Moksha is the liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. However, there is the lingering idea that maya, illusion that Atman and Brahman is completely different, prevents an individual from knowing their Atman. Maya leads to ignorance, or avidya, of what Atman and Brahman really are and thus keeps the individual in the cycle of death and rebirth, called Samsara. The doctrine of Samsara is what establishes that everything in existence is the same and that every soul is a part of Brahman. This is important because Indian philosophy is built around the idea that all things are connected and the world is an endless cycle.

The belief of Brahman and Atman is important because it establishes a basis of Indian philosophy, that all things are interconnected and a higher state of being may be achieved. The Upanishads inspired very important schools of thought such as sankhya and yoga schools. The search for Atman to obtain moksha is not all that different from achieving enlightenment: infinite being, infinite knowledge, and infinite bliss. The belief in Brahman acknowledges that there is a force higher than our everyday understanding but there is a way to understand it through ourselves, Atman. Achieving moksha, therefore, is a goal in Hinduism, like to obtaining salvation in Christianity. Believing that everything is interconnected introduces the idea that there is stability in the world, no matter how much it changes, it will be reborn and die again.

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