

Shrimad Rajchandra's Reply to Gandhiji's Questions

Courtesy: Shrimad Rajchandra Ashram, Agas

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Foreward

Gandhiji had a long association with Shrimad Rajchandra, starting from his arrival in India as a barrister from England until the last day of Shrimad Rajchandra.

This association with Shrimadji, both in person and by correspondence, had been very useful and beneficial to Gandhiji in the religious and spiritual matters, particularly during the time of his stay in South Africa when he was in great religious ferment & terpitude.

From Durban in S. Africa, Gandhiji sent a long religious questionnaire (as many as twenty seven questions) to Shrimad Rajchandra to obtain guidance from him, which he readily obliged with a prompt and detailed reply.

This letter by Shrimadji is very useful to all of us—mumukshus & novice—even today.

This booklet is a reproduction of that important letter, written by Shrimad Rajchandra in reply to Gandhiji's questions regarding soul, moksha & other crucial religious matters. Shrimadji's letter in original in Gujarati and its English version are given questionwise, in this booklet. The English translation has been made available to us from Mani Bhuvan, Bombay and the authorities have given us their kind consent to publish it, for which we are thankful to them.

- Bhulabhai V.Patel

Shrimad Rajchandra's Reply to Gandhiji's Questions¹

1. Q. (1) What is the Soul? (2) Does it perform actions? (3) Do past actions impede its progress or not?

A. (1) As there are physical objects like a pot, a piece of cloth, etc., so there is an entity called the *atman* whose essence is knowledge. The former are impermanent. They cannot exist through all time in the same form. The *atman* is an imperishable entity which exists eternally' in the same form. Anything which is not the product of a combination of other elements is imperishable. We cannot think of the *atman* as being such a product, for, no matter in how many thousand different ways we combine material substances, such combinations cannot possibly produce life and consciousness. Every one of us can know from experience that by combining several elements we cannot produce in the compound a property which is not present in any of those elements. We do not find knowledge to be the essence of physical substances. If we change the forms of such substances and combine them, or if they change and combine by chance, the products will be of the same kind as they are; that is, they will be of a material nature and will not have knowledge as their essence. It is not possible, then, that the *atman*, which the seers describe as having knowledge as its essential character, can be produced by any combination of the elements (earth, water, air, space) of which physical substances like a pot, a piece of cloth, etc., are composed. The *atman* has knowledge as its essential character, whereas material substances are characterized by its absence. These are the eternal natures of the two.

This and a thousand other reasons prove the *atman* to be imperishable. Further reflection on the subject enables us to realize that the *atman* from its nature is imperishable. There is, therefore, no error or logical difficulty in believing that the *atman*, the existence of which is the cause of our experiencing happiness and suffering which also withdraws itself from either, and which is conscious of something which thinks and impels, is characterized by awareness as its essential

nature and that, in virtue of this nature, it is an imperishable entity which exists eternally; on the contrary, belief in the *atman* has this merit of accepting truth.

(2) When the *atman* has attained a state of knowledge, the state resulting from a true understanding of its essence, it is the *karta* of that state, the state of illumination (determination of what it truly is) and of the resulting state of pure awareness, which is its true nature. In a state of ignorance, it is the *karta* of the emotions of anger, love of honour, attachment, greed, etc., and, when enjoying the fruits of these emotions, becomes, as the occasion may require, the *karta* of physical objects like a pot, a piece of cloth, etc., that is, he is not the creator of the original substance of those objects, but is only the *karta* of the action of imposing some form on it. This latter state is described in Jainism as *karma*, and in Vedanta as illusion or in other similar terms. If we reflect carefully on the matter, we shall clearly see that the *atman* cannot be the *karta* of physical objects or emotions like anger, that it is *karta* only of the state of self-realization.

(3) The *karmas* performed while in the state of ignorance are like seed in the beginning and grow into a tree in course of time; in other words, the *atman* has to suffer the consequences of those *karmas*. Just as contact with fire produces the experience of heat, the natural end of which is pain, so the *atman*, being the *karta* of emotions of anger, etc., has to suffer, as consequence, pain in the form of birth, old age and death. You should carefully reflect over this idea and ask me any question which may arise in your mind about it, for an understanding of the state from which the soul must withdraw itself and the effort to withdraw will bring deliverance to it.

2. Q. What is God? Is He the creator of the universe?

A. (1) You, I and others are souls suffering the bondage of *karma*. The soul's existence in its natural state, that is, in freedom from *karma* and purely as the *atman* that it is, is the state of being *Ishvar**. That which has the *aishvarya*² of knowledge, etc., may be described as *Ishvar*. This *Ishvar*hood is the natural state of the *atman*, which is not revealed when it is engaged in *karmas*. When the

atman, however, realizes that being engaged in *karma* is not its real nature and fixes its attention on itself, then alone do omniscience, power, etc., manifest themselves in it and we can see nothing among all the objects in the universe with greater power than the *atman*'s. It is, therefore, my positive belief that *Ishvar* is another name for *atman* and does not signify a different Being of greater power.

(2) *Ishvar* is not the creator of the universe, that is, atoms, space, etc., can be conceived only as imperishable entities and not as created from some other substance. If it is stated that they came into being from *Ishvar*, that, too, does not seem likely; for, if we believe that *Ishvar* is a spirit, how can atoms, space, etc., come into being from Him? For it is impossible that matter can come into existence from that which is spirit. If *Ishvar* is regarded as material, He will then lose His *Ishvar*hood; also, a spiritual entity like the soul cannot come into being from such an *Ishvar*. If we regard Him as being both matter and spirit, that only means that we are pleased to call the world, which is both matter and spirit, by another name, *Ishvar*. Instead of doing that, it is better to call the world the world; if we hold that atoms, space, etc., are imperishable entities and that *Ishvar* only awards the fruits of *karma*, this, too, cannot be proved. Convincing reasons have been given in support of this view in *Shatdarshan Samuchchaya*.¹

3. Q. What is *moksha*?

A. While the *atman* is in the state of ignorance, characterized by anger, etc., it is under the bondage of the body, and complete cessation of such a state, deliverance from it, is described by seers as *moksha*. A little reflection shows this to be logical and convincing.

4. Q. Is it possible for a person to know for certain, while he is still living, whether or not he will attain *moksha*.

A. If our arms are tied with a rope wound several times round them and if the twists of the rope are loosened one after another, we feel the loosening of each

twist and in the end become conscious of the rope having been removed. In like manner as the innumerable bonds, the products of ignorance, which bind the *atman* loosen one by one, the latter becomes conscious of progressing towards *moksha*, and when the bonds are about to fall off, the *atman* shines forth with the light of its essence and knows beyond doubt that it is about to be delivered from the bonds of ignorance. While still dwelling in this body, it comes out of the state of ignorance, etc., and becomes conscious of its pure essence and of its absolute otherness and freedom from all relations. In other words, it is possible to experience the state of *moksha* even while living.

5. Q. It is said that after his death, a man may, according to his actions, be reborn as an animal, a tree or even a stone. Is this a fact?

A. After the soul has left the body, it attains a state according to the merit it has earned through its actions; hence, it may be born even as a lower creature, or may have even to assume a body of earth¹ and, devoid of the other four senses, suffer the fruits of its karma [through the sense of touch alone.] This does not mean, however, that it becomes pure stone or earth. The soul assumes a body of stone, but, even then, it exists as soul, though its existence is not manifest to us. Since, in that condition, the other four senses are unmanifest, the soul may be described as having an earth-body. In the course of time, the soul leaves such a body after it has enjoyed the fruits of its karmas and then the stone material exists merely as atoms and, because the soul has left it, does not possess the instinct of food, etc. In other words, the idea is not that stone itself, which is pure matter, becomes a soul. It is in order to enjoy the fruits of those karmas which, because of their hard nature, compels the soul to take on a body possessing only one sense, the sense of touch, the other senses remaining unmanifest, that it is born in an earth-body; it does not, however, become pure earth or stone. The body is like a garment to the soul, and is not its essence.

[6 & 7] The answer to Q.6 is contained in the reply given above as also the answer to Q.7 which is that earth or stone as such cannot be the *kartas* of any karma. It is the soul which has entered them and lives in them that is the *karta* of karmas, and even so, the relation between the two is like milk and water. Just as, even when they are mixed, milk is milk and water is water, so also the soul, through the binding effect of its karmas which confines it to the possession of one sense only, seems to have become stone or mere matter, but in its essential nature, it is a soul and even in that state it possesses the instincts of hunger, fear, etc., though they remain unmanifest.

8. Q. (1) What is *Arya Dharma*? (2) Do all Indian religions originate from the *Vedas*?

A. (1) In defining *Arya Dharma*, everyone has his own religion in view. Commonly a Jain describes Jainism, a Buddhist describes Buddhism and a Vedantin describes Vedanta as *Arya Dharma*. But seers describes only that *Arya*—noble—path as *Arya Dharma* which enables the soul to realize its true nature, and rightly so.

(2) It is impossible that all religions had their origin in the *Vedas*. I know from experience that great souls like the [Jain] *Thirthankars*¹ have revealed knowledge of a thousand times deeper import than what the *Vedas* contain. I, therefore, believe that, since something imperfect cannot be the origin of a perfect thing, we are not justified in asserting that all religions had originated from the *Vedas*. We may believe that Vaishnavism and other sects had their origin in the *Vedas*. It seems that the latter existed before the time of the Buddha and Mahavira, the last teacher of Jainism; it also seems likely that they are really ancient works. But we cannot say that only that which is ancient is true or perfect, nor that what came later is necessarily untrue or imperfect. Apart from this, the ideas propounded in the *Vedas* and in Jain doctrines have existed from the beginning of time; only the outward forms changed. There is no totally new creation or absolute destruction. Since we may believe that the ideas propounded by the *Vedas* and in the doctrines of Jainism and other religions have existed from the beginning of time, where is the room for controversy? All the

same, it is only right that you and I and others should reflect and consider which of these systems of ideas has more power—truth—in them.

9. Q. (1) Who composed the Vedas? Are they *anadi*? (2) If so, what does *anadi* mean?

A. (1) The Vedas were probably composed a long time ago.

(2) No scripture, considered as a book, is *anadi*; but with respect to the ideas propounded in them, all scriptures are *anadi*, for there have been souls at all times who taught them in one form or another. It cannot be otherwise. The emotions of anger, etc., are *anadi* and so are those of forgiveness, etc. The way of violence, too, is *anadi*, as is the path of non-violence. What we should consider is which of these conduce to the welfare of the soul? Both classes of things are *anadi*, though sometimes the one and sometimes the other may be predominant.

10. Q. Who is the author of the *Gita*? Is God its author? Is there any evidence that He is?

A. (1) The replies given above partly answer this question; if by God we mean a person who has attained illumination—perfect illumination—then we can say that the *Gita* was composed by God. If, however, we accept God as being all-pervading, like the sky, eternally existing and passive, the *Gita* or any other book cannot have been composed by Him. For, writing a book is an ordinary activity undertaken at a particular point in time and is not *anadi*.

(2) The *Gita* is believed to be the work of Veda Vyasa and since Lord Krishna had propounded this teaching to Arjuna, He is said to be its real author, This may be true. The work is indeed great. The ideas it propounds have been taught from the time immemorial, but it is not possible that these same verses have existed from the beginning of time. Nor is it likely that they were composed by God who does nothing. They can have been composed only by an embodied soul, who acts. There is no harm, therefore, in saying that a perfectly illuminated person is God, and that a *Shashtra* taught by him is one revealed by God.

11. Q. Does any merit accrue from the sacrifice of animals or other things?

A. It is always sinful to kill an animal to give it as an offering in sacrifice or injure it in any way, even if this is done for the purpose of a sacrifice or living in the very abode of God. The practice of giving gifts at the time of a sacrifice does earn some merit, but since this is accompanied with violence, it, too, deserves no commendation.

12. Q. If a claim is put forward that a particular religion is the best, may we not ask the claimant for proof?

A. If no proof is required and if any such claim is made without proof in its support, reason and unreason, *dharma* and *adharma*, everything will have to be accepted as "the best". Only the test of proof can show what is the best and what is not. That religion alone is the best and is truly strong, which is most helpful in destroying the bondage of worldly life and can establish us in the state which is our essence.

13. Q. Do you know anything about Christianity? If so, what do you think of it?

A. I know something in general about Christianity. Even a little study of the subject will show that no other country has gone so deep as India and discovered a religious path which can rival the one discovered by the great seers of India. Among the other religions, Christianity asserts the eternal subjection of the soul, even in the state of *moksha*. It does not give a true description of the *anadi* state of the soul, of the law of karma or of the cessation of karma, and I am not likely, therefore, to accept the view that it is the best religion. It does not seem to offer a satisfactory solution of the problems which I have mentioned. I am not making this statement in a sectarian spirit. If you wish to ask more questions on this, you may, and then it will be possible for me to resolve your doubts still further.

14. Q. The Christians hold that the Bible is divinely inspired and that Christ was an incarnation of God, being his son. Was He?

A. This is a matter of faith and cannot be proved rationally. What I said above concerning the claim that the *Gita* and the Vedas are divinely inspired may be applied to the Bible too. It is impossible that God, who is free from birth and death, will incarnate Himself as a human being; for it is the changes of attachment, aversion, etc. which are the cause of birth and it does not appeal to reason that God, who has no attachment and aversion, will take birth as a human being. The idea that Jesus is, and was, the son of God may perhaps be acceptable if we interpret the belief as an allegory; otherwise, tested by the canons of reason, it is difficult to accept. How can we say that God, Who is free, has or had a son? If we assert that He has or had one, what was the manner of the son's birth? If we believe that both God and His son are *anadi*, how can we explain their being father and son? These and other objections deserve examination. If we reflect over them, I think the belief will not be found acceptable.

15. Q. Were all the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Christ?

A. Even if they were, that should only make us think about the two scriptures. Nor is the act of the prophecies having been fulfilled a sufficiently strong reason to justify us in asserting that Jesus was an incarnation of God, for the birth of a great soul can also be predicted with the help of astrology. Even if, however, someone foretold the event by virtue of his knowledge, unless it is established that person had perfect knowledge of the path to *moksha*, the fact of his having predicted a future event appeals only to faith as proof of a thing and we cannot believe that no reasoning on the opposite side can diminish its force.

16. A. In this question you ask about the miracles attributed to Jesus Christ.

If it is said that he put a soul back into the body which it had left, or that he put another soul in its place, this could not possibly have been done. If it could be done, the law of karma would lose its meaning. Apart from this, mastery of yoga techniques enables a person to perform certain miracles, and if it is claimed that Jesus had such powers, we cannot assert that the claim is false or impossible. Such yogic powers are of no consequence compared to the power of the *atman*; the latter is infinitely greater than the powers attained by yoga. You may ask more questions on this subject when we meet.

17. Q. Can anyone remember his past lives or have an idea of his future lives?

A. This is quite possible. One whose knowledge has become pure may be able to do so. We can infer the possibility of rain from certain signs in the clouds; similarly, from the actions of a soul in this life, we can understand, perhaps partially, their causes in its previous existence. We can also judge from the nature of the actions what results they are likely to have. On further reflection, we can also know what kind of a future existence the soul is likely to have or what kind of a past existence it had.

18. Q. If yes, who can?

A. The answer to this is contained in the reply above.

19. Q. You have given the names of some who have attained *moksha*. What is the authority for this statement?

A. If you have addressed this question personally to me, I may say in reply that one can to some extent infer from one's own experience how a person whose involvement in earthly existence is about to end is likely to speak or act, and on the basis of this one can assert whether or not such a person attained *moksha*. In most cases, we can also get from Shastras reasons in support of our conclusion.

20. Q. What makes you say that even Buddha did not attain *moksha*?

A. On the basis of the teachings of Buddhist scriptures. If his views were the same as these, then they seem to have been inconsistent with one another, and that is not a mark of perfect illumination. If a person has not attained perfect illumination his attachments and aversions are not likely to disappear so long as he is in such a state; earthly existence is a necessary consequence. One cannot, therefore, claim such a person to have attained absolute *moksha*. Moreover, it is impossible for you and me to know from independent sources that the Buddha's views were different than those contained in the teachings attributed to him. Even so, if it is asserted that his views were in fact different and proof given in support of the assertion, there is no reason why we should not accept that as possible.

21. Q. What will finally happen to this world?

A. It does not seem rationally possible to me that all souls will attain absolute *moksha* or that the world will perish completely. It is likely to continue to exist for ever in the same state as at present. Some aspect of it may undergo transformation and almost disappear, and another may grow; such is the nature of the world that, if there is growth in one sphere, there is decline in another. Having regard to this fact, and after deep reflection, it seems impossible to me that this world will perish completely. By "world" we do not mean this earth only.

22. Q. Will the world be morally better off in the future?

A. It would not be proper to encourage any soul which loves immorality to take wrong advantage of the answer to this question. All modes in this world, including morality and immorality, have existed from the beginning of time. But it is possible for you and me to eschew immorality and accept morality, and it is the duty of the *atman* to do that. It is not possible to assert that immorality will be

given up by all and morality will prevail, for such an extreme state cannot come about.

23. Q. Is there anything like total destruction of the world?

A. If by *pralaya* is meant total destruction, that is not possible, for complete destruction of all that exists is impossible. If by *pralaya* is meant the merging of everything in God, the belief is accepted in some doctrines but that does not seem possible to me. For, how can all objects and all souls arrive in an identical state so that such a thing may happen? If they ever do, then diversity cannot develop again. If we accept the possibility of *pralaya* on the supposition of unmanifest diversity in the souls and manifest sameness, how can diversity exist except through connection with a body? If we believe that such connection exists [in the state of *pralaya*, we shall have to believe further that all souls will have one sense only and in doing so we shall reject, without reason, the possibility of other modes of existence. In other words, we shall have to suppose that a soul which had attained a higher state and was about to be free for ever from the contingency of existence with one sense only, had none the less to be in such a state. This and many similar doubts arise. A *pralaya* involving all souls is impossible.

24. Q. Can an illiterate person attain *moksha* through *bhakti* alone?

A. *Bhakti* is a cause of knowledge and knowledge of *moksha*. If by an illiterate person we mean one without knowledge of letters, it is not impossible that he may cultivate *bhakti*. Every soul has knowledge as its essence. The power of *bhakti* purifies knowledge, and pure knowledge becomes the cause of *moksha*. I do not believe that, without the manifestation of perfect knowledge, absolute *moksha* is possible. Nor need I point out that knowledge of letters is contained in perfect [spiritual] knowledge. It cannot be true that knowledge of letters is a cause of *moksha* and that, without it, self- realization is not possible.

25. Q. (1) Rama and Krishna are described as incarnations of God. What does that mean? Were they God Himself or only a part of Him? (2) Can we attain salvation through faith in them?

A. (1) I, too, am convinced that both were souls of great holiness. Each of them, being an *atman*, was God. If it is a fact that all the coverings over their *atman* had fallen off, there need be no dispute about their having attained absolute *moksha*. I do not think that any soul can be a portion of God, for I can think of a thousand reasons against such a belief. If we believe a soul to be a portion of God, the belief in bondage and *moksha* will have no meaning. For then God Himself will be the cause of ignorance, etc., and, if that is true, He ceases to be God. In other words, in being regarded as Lord of the soul God actually loses something from His status. Moreover, if we believe that the soul is a portion of God, what motive will a person have to strive for anything? For in that case the soul cannot be regarded as the *karta* of anything. In view of this and other objections, I am not prepared to believe any soul to be a portion of God; how, then, can I believe that such was the case with great and holy souls like Rama and Krishna? There is no error in believing that these two were unmanifest God, but it is doubtful whether perfect Godhood had become manifest in them.

(2) The question whether we can attain *moksha* through faith in them can be easily answered. *Moksha* means absence of or deliverance from all forms of attachment, ignorance, etc. It can be attained when we cultivate faith in a person whose teaching will enable us to win such freedom from attachment and ignorance, and, reflecting on our true essence, come to have the same faith in our *atman* that we have in the teacher and identify ourselves with his personality. Worship of any kind other than this cannot win absolute *moksha*. It may help one to win the means of *moksha*, but even that cannot be asserted with certainty.

26. Q. Who were Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?

A. If people believed in three *gunas*¹ as the cause of creation and personified them [as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva], this or similar explanations may make the belief plausible. But I am not particularly disposed to believe that they are what the *Puranas* describe them to be, for some of the descriptions appear to be allegories intended for religious instruction. Even so, I think it would be better that we, too, try to profit from the instruction they contain rather than attempt in vain to ascertain the principles embodied in the personification of Brahma, and so on.

27. Q. If a snake is about to bite me, should I allow myself to be bitten or should I kill it, supposing that, that is the only way in which I can save myself?

A. One hesitates to advise you that you should let the snake bite you. Nevertheless, how can it be right for you, if you have realized that the body is perishable, to kill, for protecting a body which has no real value to you, a creature which clings to it with love ? For anyone who desires his spiritual welfare, the best course is to let his body perish in such circumstances. But how should a person who does not desire spiritual welfare behave? My only reply to such a question is, how can I advise such a person that he should pass through hell and similar worlds, that is, that he should kill the snake? If the person lacks the culture of Aryan character, one may advise him to kill the snake, but we should wish that neither you nor I will even dream of being such a person.