and the surface on which it takes place do not actually exist, but that both of them are one and the same chit. There is the world, which requires location for its existence and light to make it perceptible. Both rise simultaneously. Therefore physical existence and perception depend upon the light of the mind which is reflected from the Self. Just as cinema pictures can be made visible by a reflected light, and only in darkness, so also the world pictures are perceptible only by the light of the Self reflected in the darkness of avidya [ignorance]. The world can be seen neither in the utter darkness of ignorance, as in deep sleep, nor in the utter light of the Self, as in Self-realisation or samadhi.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{From:}\
\textit{The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi }\textsuperscript{(1985) Penguin Books}

\textbf{Hinduism}

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\textbf{CHAPTER 18}\
\textbf{Reincarnation}

Most religions have constructed elaborate theories which purport to explain what happens to the individual soul after the death of the body. Some claim that the soul goes to heaven or hell while others claim that it is reincarnated in a new body.

Sri Ramana taught that all such theories are based on the false assumption that the individual self or soul is real; once this illusion is seen through, the whole superstructure of after-life theories collapses. From the standpoint of the Self, there is no birth or death, no heaven or hell, and no reincarnation.

As a concession to those who were unable to assimilate the implications of this truth, Sri Ramana would sometimes admit that reincarnation existed. In replying to such people he would say that if one imagined that the individual self was real, then that imaginary self would persist after death and that eventually it would identify with a new body and a new life. The whole process, he said, is sustained by the tendency of the mind to identify itself with a body. Once the limiting illusion of mind is transcended, identification with the body ceases, and all theories about death and reincarnation are found to be inapplicable.

\textbf{Q: Is reincarnation true?}\
\textbf{A:} Reincarnation exists only so long as there is ignorance. There is really no reincarnation at all, either now or before. Nor will there be any hereafter. This is the truth.

\textbf{Q: Can a yogi know his past lives?}\
\textbf{A:} Do you know the present life that you wish to know the past? Find the present, then the rest will follow. Even with our present limited knowledge, you suffer so much. Why should you burden yourself with more knowledge? Is it to suffer more?\textsuperscript{17}

When seen through the sight of the supreme space of Self, the illusion of taking birth in this mirage-like false world is found to be nothing but the egotistical ignorance of identifying a body as
Q: What becomes of the jiva [individual] after death?
A: The question is not appropriate for a jiva now living. A dead jiva may ask me, if he wishes to. In the meantime let the embodied jiva solve its present problem and find who he is. Then there will be an end of such doubts.⁵

Q: Is the Buddhist view, that there is no continuous entity answering to the ideas of the individual soul, correct or not? Is this consistent with the Hindu notion of a reincarnating ego? Is the soul a continuous entity which reincarnates again and again, according to the Hindu doctrine, or is it a mere mass of mental tendencies — samskaras?
A: The real Self is continuous and unaffected. The reincarnating ego belongs to the lower plane, namely, thought. It is transcended by Self-realisation.

Reincarnations are due to a spurious offshoot. Therefore they are denied by the Buddhists. The present state of ignorance is due to the identification of consciousness [chit] with the insentient [jada] body.⁶

Q: Do not we go to heaven [svarga] as the result of our actions?
A: That is as true as the present existence. But if we enquire who we are and discover the Self, what need is there to think of heaven?

Q: Should I not try to escape rebirth?
A: Yes. Find out who is born and who now has the trouble of existence. When you are asleep do you think of rebirths or even the present existence? So find out from where the present problem arises and in that place you will find the solution. You will discover that there is no birth, no present trouble or unhappiness. The Self is all and all is bliss. Even now we are free from rebirth so why fret over the misery of it?⁸

Q: Is there rebirth?
A: Do you know what birth is?
Q: Oh yes, I know that I exist now, but I want to know if I’ll exist in the future.
A: Past!... Present!... Future!...
Q: Yes, today is the result of yesterday, the past, and tomorrow, the future, will be the result of today, the present. Am I right?
A: There is neither past nor future. There is only the present. Yesterday was the present to you when you experienced it, and
tomorrow will be also the present when you experience it. Therefore, experience takes place only in the present, and beyond experience nothing exists.

Q: Are then past and future mere imagination?
A: Yes, even the present is mere imagination, for the sense of time is purely mental. Space is similarly mental. Therefore birth and rebirth, which take place in time and space, cannot be other than imagination. 9

Q: What is the cause of tanha, the thirst for life and the thirst for rebirth?
A: Real rebirth is dying from the ego into the spirit. This is the significance of the crucifixion of Jesus. Whenever identification with the body exists, a body is always available, whether this or any other one, till the body-sense disappears by merging into the source – the spirit, or Self. The stone which is projected upwards remains in constant motion till it returns to its source, the earth, and rests. Headache continues to give trouble, till the pre-headache state is regained.

Thirst for life is inherent in the very nature of life, which is absolute existence – sat. Although indestructible by nature, by false identification with its destructible instrument, the body, consciousness imbibes a false apprehension of its destructibility. Because of that false identification it tries to perpetuate the body, and that results in a succession of births. But however long these bodies may last, they eventually come to an end and yield to the Self, which alone eternally exists.

Q: Yes, 'Give up thy life if thou wouldst live', says the Voice of the Silence of H.P. Blavatsky.
A: Give up the false identification and remember, the body cannot exist without the Self, whereas the Self can exist without the body. In fact it is always without it.

Q: A doubt has just now arisen in a friend of mine’s mind. She has just heard that a human being may take an animal birth in some other life, which is contrary to what Theosophy has taught her.
A: Let him who takes birth ask this question. Find out first who it is that is born, and whether there is actual birth and death. You will find that birth pertains to the ego, which is an illusion of the mind. 10

Q: Is it possible for a man to be reborn as a lower animal?
A: Yes. It is possible, as illustrated by Jada Bharata – the scriptural anecdote of a royal sage having been reborn as a deer.

Q: Is the individual capable of spiritual progress in an animal body?
A: Not impossible, though it is exceedingly rare. 11 It is not true that birth as a man is necessarily the highest, and that one must attain realisation only from being a man. Even an animal can attain Self-realisation. 12

Q: Theosophy speaks of fifty to 10,000 year intervals between death and rebirth. Why is this so?
A: There is no relation between the standard of measurements of one state of consciousness and another. All such measurements are hypothetical. It is true that some individuals take more time and some less. But it must be distinctly understood that it is no soul which comes and goes, but only the thinking mind of the individual, which makes it appear to do so. On whatever plane the mind happens to act, it creates a body for itself; in the physical world a physical body and in the dream world a dream body which becomes wet with dream rain and sick with dream disease. After the death of the physical body, the mind remains inactive for some time, as in dreamless sleep when it remains worldless and therefore bodiless. But soon it becomes active again in a new world and a new body – the astral – till it assumes another body in what is called a ‘rebirth’. But the jnani, the Self-realised man, whose mind has already ceased to act, remains unaffected by death. The mind of the jnani has ceased to exist; it has dropped never to rise again to cause births and deaths. The chain of illusions has snapped for ever for him.

It should now be clear that there is neither real birth, nor real death. It is the mind which creates and maintains the illusion of reality in this process, till it is destroyed by Self-realisation. 13

Q: Does not death dissolve the individuality of a person, so that there can be no rebirth, just as the rivers discharged into the ocean lose their individualities?
A: But when the waters evaporate and return as rain on the hills, they once more flow in the form of rivers and fall into the ocean. So also the individualities during sleep lose their separateness and yet return as individuals according to their samskarak past tendencies. It is the same after death – the individuality of the person with samskaras is not lost.

Q: How can that be?
A: See how a tree whose branches have been cut grows again.
So long as the roots of the tree remain unimpaired, the tree will continue to grow. Similarly, the *samskaras* which have merely sunk in the Heart on death, but have not perished for that reason, occasion rebirth at the right time. That is how *jivas* [individuals] are reborn.

Q: How could the innumerable jivas and the wide universe which they produce sprout up from such subtle samskaras sunk in the Heart?

A: Just as the big banyan tree sprouts from a tiny seed, so do the *jivas* and the whole universe with name and form sprout up from the subtle *samskaras.*

Q: How does the jiva transfer from one body to another?

A: When one begins to die, hard breathing sets in; that means that one has become unconscious of the dying body. The mind at once takes hold of another body, and it swings to and fro between the two, until attachment is fully transferred to the new body. Meanwhile there are occasional violent breaths, and that means that the mind swings back to the dying body. The transitional state of the mind is somewhat like a dream.

Q: How long is the interval between one’s death and reincarnation?

A: It may be long or short. But a *jnani* does not undergo any such changes; he merges into the universal being.

Some say that those who after death pass into the path of light are not reborn, whereas those who after death take the path of darkness are reborn after they have enjoyed the fruits of *karma* in their subtle bodies.

Some say that if one’s merits and demerits are equal, they are directly reborn here. Merits outweighing demerits, the subtle bodies go to heaven and are then reborn here; demerits outweighing merits, they go to hells and are afterwards reborn here.

A Yogabratsha [one who has slipped from the path of yoga] is said to fare in the same manner. All these are described in the *sastras.* But in fact, there is neither birth nor death. One remains only as what one really is. This is the only truth.

Q: I find this very confusing. Are both births and rebirths ultimately unreal?

A: If there is birth there must be not only one rebirth but a whole succession of births. Why and how did you get this birth? For the same reason and in the same manner you must have succeeding births. But if you ask who has the birth and whether birth and death are for you or for somebody distinct from you, then you realise the truth and the truth burns up all *karmas* and frees you from all births. The books graphically describe how all *sanchita karma* [*karma* accumulated from previous births], which would take countless lives to exhaust, is burnt up by one little spark of *jnana,* just as a mountain of gunpowder will be blown up by a single spark of fire. It is the ego that is the cause of all the world and of the countless sciences whose researches are so great as to baffle description, and if the ego is dissolved by enquiry all this immediately crumbles and the reality or Self alone remains.

Q: Do you mean to say that I was never even born?

A: Yes, you are now thinking that you are the body and therefore confuse yourself with its birth and death. But you are not the body and you have no birth and death.

Q: So you do not uphold the theory of rebirth?

A: No. On the other hand I want to remove your confusion that you will be reborn. It is you who think that you will be reborn.

See for whom the question arises. Unless the questioner is found, such questions can never finally be answered.
CHAPTER 19
The nature of God

Focus on this

At first sight, Sri Ramana’s statements on God appear to be riddled with contradictions: on one occasion he might say that God never does anything, on another that nothing happens except by his will. Sometimes he would say that God is just an idea in the mind, while at other times he would say that God is the only existing reality.

These contradictory statements are largely a reflection of the differing levels of understanding he encountered in his questioners. Those who worshipped personal Gods would often be given anthropomorphic explanations. They would be told that God created the world, that he sustains it by his divine power, that he looks after the needs of all its inhabitants and that nothing happens that is contrary to his will. On the other hand, those who were not attracted to such a theory would be told that all such ideas about God and his power were mental creations which only obscured the real experience of God which is inherent in everyone.

At the highest level of his teachings the terms ‘God’ and ‘Self’ are synonyms for the immanent reality which is discovered by Self-realisation. Thus realisation of the Self is realisation of God; it is not an experience of God, rather it is an understanding that one is God. Speaking from this ultimate level, Sri Ramana’s statements on God can be summarised in the following way:

1 He is immanent and formless; he is pure being and pure consciousness.
2 Manifestation appears in him and through his power, but he is not its creator. God never acts, he just is. He has neither will nor desire.
3 Individuality is the illusion that we are not identical with God; when the illusion is dispelled, what remains is God.

On a lower level he spoke about Iswara, the Hindu name for the supreme personal God. He said that Iswara exists as a real entity only so long as one imagines that one is an individual person. When individuality persists there is a God who supervises the activities of the universe; in the absence of individuality Iswara is non-existent.

Besides Iswara, Hinduism has many deities which resemble the gods and demons of Norse and Greek mythology. Such deities are a central feature of popular Hinduism and their reality is still widely accepted. Sri Ramana surprised many people by saying that such beings were as real as the people who believed in them. He admitted that after realisation they shared the same fate as Iswara, but prior to that, he seemed to regard them as senior officials in a cosmological hierarchy which looked after the affairs of the world.

Q: God is described as manifest and unmanifest. As the former he is said to include the world as a part of his being. If that is so, we as part of that world should have easily known him in the manifested form.
A: Know yourself before you seek to decide about the nature of God and the world.
Q: Does knowing myself imply knowing God?
A: Yes, God is within you.
Q: Then, what stands in the way of my knowing myself or God?
A: Your wandering mind and perverted ways.
Q: Is God personal?
A: Yes, he is always the first person, the I, ever standing before you. Because you give precedence to worldly things, God appears to have receded to the background. If you give up all else and seek him alone, he alone will remain as the ‘I’, the Self.  
Q: Is God apart from the Self?
A: The Self as God. ‘I am’ is God. This question arises because you are holding on to the ego self. It will not arise if you hold onto the true Self. For the real Self will not and cannot ask anything. If God be apart from the Self he must be a Self-less God, which is absurd. God, who seems to be non-existent, alone truly exists, whereas the individual, who seems to be existing, is ever non-existent. Sages say that the state in which one thus knows one’s own non-existence [sunya] alone is the glorious supreme knowledge.

You now think that you are an individual, that there is the
universe and that God is beyond the cosmos. So there is the idea of separateness. This idea must go. For God is not separate from you or the cosmos. The Gita also says:

The Self am I, O Lord of Sleep,
In every creature’s heart enshrined.
The rise and noon of every form,
I am its final doom as well (Bhagavad Gita, X.20).

Thus God is not only in the heart of all, he is the prop of all, he is the source of all, their abiding place and their end. All proceed from him, have their stay in him, and finally resolve into him. Therefore he is not separate.

Q: How are we to understand this passage in the Gita: ‘This whole cosmos forms a particle of me’?

A: It does not mean that a small particle of God separates from him and forms the universe. His sakti [power] is acting. As a result of one phase of such activity the cosmos has become manifest. Similarly, the statement in Purusha Sukta, ‘All the beings form his one foot’, does not mean that Brahman is in several parts.

Q: I understand that Brahman is certainly not divisible.

A: So the fact is that Brahman is all and remains indivisible. It is ever realised but man is not aware of this. He must come to know this. Knowledge means the overcoming of obstacles which obstruct the revelation of the eternal truth that the Self is the same as Brahman. The obstacles taken together form your idea of separateness as an individual.

Q: Is God the same as Self?

A: The Self is known to everyone, but not clearly. You always exist. The being is the Self. ‘I am’ is the name of God. Of all the definitions of God, none is indeed so well put as the Biblical statement ‘I am that I am’ in Exodus 3. There are other statements, such as Bhavatva [Brahman am I], aham Brahmasmi [I am Brahman], and soham [I am he]. But none is so direct as the name Jehovah which means ‘I am’. The absolute being is what is. It is the Self. It is God. Knowing the Self, God is known. In fact God is none other than the Self.

Q: God seems to be known by many different names. Are any of them justified?

A: Among the many thousands of names of God, no name suits God, who abides in the Heart, devoid of thought, so truly, aptly, and beautifully as the name ‘I’ or ‘I am’. Of all the known names of God, the name of God ‘I’ — ‘I’ alone will resound triumphantly when the ego is destroyed, rising as the silent supreme word [mouna para-vak] in the Heart-space of those whose attention is Selfward-facing. Even if one unceasingly meditates upon that name ‘I’-‘I’ with one’s attention on the feeling ‘I’, it will take one and plunge one into the source from which thought rises, destroying the ego, the embryo, which is joined to the body.6

Q: What is the relationship between God and the world? Is he the creator or sustainer of it?

A: Sentient and insentient beings of all kinds are performing actions only by the mere presence of the sun, which rises in the sky without any volition. Similarly all actions are done by the Lord without any volition or desire on his part. In the mere presence of the sun, the magnifying lens emits fire, the lotus-bud blossoms, the water-lily closes and all the countless creatures perform actions and rest.

The order of the great multitude of worlds is maintained by the mere presence of God in the same manner as the needle moves in front of a magnet, and as the moonstone emits water, the water-lily blossoms and the lotus closes in front of the moon.

In the mere presence of God, who does not have even the least volition, the living beings, who are engaged in innumerable activities, after embarking upon many paths to which they are drawn according to the course determined by their own karmas, finally realise the futility of action, turn back to Self and attain liberation.

The actions of living beings certainly do not go and affect God, who transcends the mind, in the same manner as the activities of the world do not affect that sun and as the qualities of the conspicuous four elements [earth, water, fire and air] do not affect the limitless space.

Q: Why is samsara — creation and manifestation as finitised — so full of sorrow and evil?

A: God’s will!

Q: Why does God will it so?

A: It is inscrutable. No motive can be attributed to that power — no desire, no end to achieve can be asserted of that one infinite, all-wise and all-powerful being. God is untouched by activities, which take place in his presence. Compare the sun and the world

NOT CONFUSE WITH "YOU"—THE LESSER SELF

SELF = GOD

NOT GOD (MY "PERSONALITY" NOT GOD)
activities. There is no meaning in attributing responsibility and motive to the one before it becomes many.

Q: Does everything happen by the will of God?
A: It is not possible for anyone to do anything opposed to the ordinance of God, who has the ability to do everything. Therefore to remain silent at the feet of God, having given up all the anxieties of the wicked, detective and delusive mind, is best.º

Q: Is there a separate being Ishwara [personal God] who is the rewarder of virtue and punisher of sins? Is there a God?
A: Yes.

Q: What is he like?
A: Ishwara has individuality in mind and body, which are perishable, but at the same time he has also the transcendental consciousness and liberation inwardly.

Ishwara, the personal God, the supreme creator of the universe really does exist. But this is true only from the relative standpoint of those who have not realised the truth, those people who believe in the reality of individual souls. From the absolute standpoint the sage cannot accept any other existence than the impersonal Self, one and formless.

Ishwara has a physical body, a form and a name, but it is not so gross as this material body. It can be seen in visions in the form created by the devotee. The forms and names of God are many and various and differ with each religion. His essence is the same as ours, the real Self being only one and without form. Hence forms he assumes are only creations or appearances.

Ishwara is immanent in every person and every object throughout the universe. The totality of all things and beings constitutes God. There is a power out of which a small fraction has become all this universe, and the remainder is in reserve. Both this reserve power plus the manifested power as material world together constitute Ishwara.

Q: So ultimately Ishwara is not real?
A: Existence of Ishwara follows from our conception of Ishwara. Let us first know whose concept he is. The concept will be only according to the one who conceives. Find out who you are and the other problems will solve themselves.

Ishwara, God, the creator, the personal God, is the last of the unreal forms to go. Only the absolute being is real. Hence, not only the world, not only the ego, but also the personal God are of unreality. We must find the absolute — nothing less.

Q: You say that even the highest God is still only an idea. Does that mean that there is no God?
A: No, there is an Ishwara.º

Q: Does he exist in any particular place or form?
A: If the individual is a form, even Self, the source, who is the Lord, will also appear to be a form. If one is not a form, since there then cannot be knowledge of other things, will that statement that God has a form be correct? God assumes any form imagined by the devotee through repeated thinking in prolonged meditation. Though he thus assumes endless names, the real formless consciousness alone is God.

With regard to his location, God does not reside in any place other than the Heart. It is due to illusion, caused by the ego, the ‘I am the body’ idea, that the kingdom of God is conceived to be elsewhere. Be sure that the Heart is the kingdom of God.

Know that you are the perfect, shining light which not only makes the existence of God’s kingdom possible, but also allows it to be seen as some wonderful heaven. To know this is alone jnana. Therefore, the kingdom of God is within you. The unlimited space of turīyātīta [beyond the four states, i.e. the Self], which shines suddenly, in all its fullness, within the Heart of a highly mature aspirant during the state of complete absorption of mind, as if a fresh and previously unknown experience, is the rarely-attained and true Śiva-loka [the kingdom of God], which shines by the light of Self.

Q: They say that the jīva [individual] is subject to the evil effects of illusion such as limited vision and knowledge, whereas Ishwara has all-pervading vision and knowledge. It is also said that jīva and Ishwara become identical if the individual discards his limited vision and knowledge. Should not Ishwara also discard his particular characteristics such as all-pervading vision and knowledge? They too are illusions, aren’t they?
A: Is that your doubt? First discard your own limited vision and then leave it to enough time to think of Ishwara’s all-pervading vision and knowledge. First get rid of your own limited knowledge. Why do you worry about Ishwara? He will look after himself. Has he not got as much capacity as we have? Why should we worry about whether he possesses all-pervading vision and knowledge or not? It is indeed a great thing if we can take care of ourselves.

Q: But does God know everything?
A: The Vedas declare God to be omniscient only to those who ignorantly think themselves to be people of little knowledge. But if one attains and knows him as he really is, it will be found that God does not know anything, because his nature is the ever-real whole, other than which nothing exists to be known.16

Q: Why do religions speak of gods, heaven, hell, etc.?
A: Only to make the people realise that they are on a par with this world and that the Self alone is real. The religions are according to the view-point of the seeker.17

Q: Do Vishnu, Siva, etc., exist?
A: Individual human souls are not the only beings known.18

Q: And their sacred regions Kailasa or Vaikuntha, are they real?
A: As real as you are in this body.

Q: Do they possess a phenomenal existence, like my body? Or are they fictions like the horn of a hare?
A: They do exist.
Q: If so, they must be somewhere. Where are they?
A: Persons who have seen them say that they exist somewhere.

So we must accept their statement.

Q: Where do they exist?
A: In you.

Q: Then it is only an idea which I can create and control?
A: Everything is like that.

Q: But I can create pure fictions, for example, a hare's horn, or only part truths, for example a mirage, while there are also facts irrespective of my imagination. Do the Gods Iswara or Vishnu exist like that?
A: Yes.

Q: Is God subject to pralaya [cosmic dissolution]?
A: Why? Man becoming aware of the Self transcends cosmic dissolution and becomes liberated. Why not Iswara who is infinitely wiser and abler?

Q: Do devas [angels] and pisachas [devils] exist similarly?
A: Yes.20

Q: These deities, what is their status relative to the Self?
A: Siva, Ganapati and other deities like Brahma, exist from a human standpoint; that is to say, if you consider your personal self as real, then they also exist. Just as a government has its high executive officers to carry on the government, so has the creator. But from the standpoint of the Self all these gods are illusory and must themselves merge into the one reality.21

Q: Whenever I worship God with name and form, I feel tempted to think whether I am not wrong in doing so, as that would be limiting the limitless, giving form to the formless. At the same time I feel I am not constant in my adherence to worship God without form.
A: As long as you respond to a name, what objection could there be to your worshipping a God with name or form? Worship God with or without form till you know who you are.22

Q: I find it difficult to believe in a personal God. In fact I find it impossible. But I can believe in an impersonal God, a divine force which rules and guides the world, and it would be a great help to me, even in my work of healing, if this faith were increased. May I know how to increase this faith?
A: Faith is in things unknown, but the Self is self-evident. Even the greatest egotist cannot deny his own existence, that is to say, cannot deny the Self. You can call the ultimate reality by whatever name you like and say that you have faith in it or love for it, but who is there who will not have faith in his own existence or love for himself? That is because faith and love are our real nature.23

Q: Should I not have any idea about God?
A: Only so long as there are other thoughts in the Heart can there be a thought of God conceived by one's mind. The destruction of even that thought of God due to the destruction of all other thoughts alone is the unthought thought, which is the true thought of God.24