

CHAPTER IV

What is God?

This, to some, appears a very childish question to ask, and they promptly retort, 'Is there any one who does not know about God?' But after apologising, if we are again to press them to answer the question, then they begin to flutter and flounder, and find that what first seemed easy is certainly not easy, but one of the hardest tasks. The truth is that the God idea is as widely prevalent as air is in the world. But, when one tries to grasp it, and set it forth, either in the mind or heart or in words, with some definiteness, the task proves impossible. The truth is that God is a peripheral idea and not a central idea. Things like charcoal, silver, food or pencil, represent material objects, which normally appear before our eyes and our minds. As Leibnitz has put it, perfect knowledge is possible about them and all the circumstances about place, time, size, colour, weight, etc., can all be given, and, therefore, when a statement expressing it in all these particulars is made, we say we have "perfect knowledge." But philosophy comes as a poser at the end of all that, and says that we have been describing only attributes, but that we do not know what is the substance behind these attributes. People are unable to answer what substance is behind the said attributes. Similarly about God, We find it quite easy to pray to God and ask some one to pray to God and attribute various things to God or God's activity with perfect clearness in our minds. But when all things stated about God are put together and analysed, then we

discover that God is a mere peripheral idea. We have a faint touch with that idea sufficient for working purposes. Our ideas have not the clearness which they have in dealing with solid objects like charcoal or gold. That is why, we call the latter the central idea and the former the peripheral idea, basing our expressions upon the analogy of the light thrown by a torch upon a field. Where there is a central strong light, on a focus, where everything seems to be clear, and again where that centre is surrounded by gradually lessening light in all directions, the circumference (the peripheral limit) seems to be nowhere. We see things about the circumference (e.g. the like appearance of the sky overhead) and feel sure that there is a circumference, but we cannot locate it with any definiteness. That is the nature of our ideas about God and about other kindred matters.

Therefore, when the question was pressed home about God, many a saint or teacher has given answers which have puzzled devotees who wanted something definite and central. In order to have a preliminary test some questioners come forward and ask a teacher or a saint "Have you seen God? As you are talking about God, this question is asked of you". The answer given is very often dependent upon the mood of the answerer. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, when first approached by Narendra (who later on became Swami Vivekananda), being anxious to grip the soul of his questioner and make him his agent for instructing the world about matters, moral and spiritual, had to answer, 'Yes, I have seen God'¹. He also promised to make him (Narendra) see God. In one sense, this is true. There are certain things seen which give one the impression that one has seen God. There are hundreds of persons who have this experience and to tell them that God cannot be seen is to horrify them and make them nullify themselves. But philosophers have a way of getting behind the experience of the God-seers, and telling them that what they see is not God but something else, and their net impression is that they see God. These philosophers have also been working in ancient times when Rishis were writing the Upanishads. Kenopanishad for instance goes on declaring line after line, verse after verse, that God cannot be sensed, that he is not seen or heard or felt or even thought of.

*Yat chakshusha na pascyati yena chakshumsi pascyati Tadeva
brahma tvam viddhi na idam yad idam upasate.*

YaT manasa na manute yena ahur manomatam.

Tadeva brahma tvam viddhi na idam yad idam upasate.

The first stanza means, 'What one does not see with the eye but that by which the eyes see. know That alone is Brahman - not this which people worship as God'. The second stanza means, 'What the mind cannot form a conception of, but what is said to be that by which the mind is conceived, that alone is Brahman, not what people here worship as God'. This forms the *Neri-Neti* portion, that is the negative, or rather the chiefly negative portion, of the description of Brahman or God. There is also a very a small panicle in the above two which sets forth the positive aspect of Brahman. But it is better to take it up after we come to explain the more popular conception of God. "God" and "Brahman", we shall use for the purpose of this Chapter as synonyms.

What is God? That which you appeal to when you are in trouble, and that which helps you when you cannot help yourself and when your friends on whom you depend cannot help you, something Superhuman, something kind, something all-powerful which comes to your rescue just at the moment when without it you are totally at a loss. Therefore, God is conceived of as a *power*. God is conceived of as something *kind*. God is conceived of as something *Superhuman*, and God is that which *we approach in times of trouble to obtain relief*, and *God is that which gives that relief*. This is a fairly correct analysis of the popular idea of God as it occurs in most cases.

Apart from giving relief, there is an idea of God also formed by people, When they approach what is vast, what is immense, and what is perfect, they express it thus: - This is God'. Everything in place and time is limited, changing; and everything dies, perishes, and is transformed, The human heart naturally longs to see something which is above all this, which is beyond place and time and the power of change and death, and which will give satisfaction to us by absorbing us and saving us from all this limitation, change and trouble. Therefore God is conceived of in this instance as something transcending the changing

manifested Universe, which has the power to absorb the soul unto itself and free it from the miseries of this changing Universe. This is the next higher idea of God which is popular and well understood.

Beyond this if we begin to analyse our notions of God, we get finer and finer and more conclusive ideas into metaphysics. The Taittiriya Upanishad sets forth that these difficulties occurred even to Superhuman beings. Indra, a God, and Virochana, an Asura were both puzzled by the question 'What Brahman is'. Brahman is felt or talked of by so many, and both these wished to understand definitely what Brahman is, and they approached the Universal father Prajapati, and asked him the question.

After making them duly observe the rules of preparation for realising such a highly important branch of knowledge, they were told what Brahman is. A similar passage occurs in the same Upanishad where Varuna, the father of Bhrigu, one of the earliest of the seven Rishis, is asked by the latter, 'What Brahman is'. Varuna, that is the Supreme, told Bhrigu, the enquirer, that he had understood clearly or felt that he understood clearly the Universe consisting of *Vak, Manas, Indriyas*, etc., and Brahman is that which is the universal origin of all this, that Brahman is the sustainer of the Universe which *he manifested from himself*. Finally that Brahman is the withdrawer into himself of all that is manifested as Universe. Bhrigu starts with a known Universe or what he considers to be a known Universe, wherein the law of cause and effect is bound to have full operation. Naturally he wishes to apply that law to the whole of the Universe and not to particular particles only. Varuna told him that the first cause, the original cause of the Universe, that which existed before the Universe, is that Brahman, the Primordial source of power and existence and that naturally it must be the same power that upholds the Universe and keeps it working in its present form. As everything we see before us changes and has an end, the whole Universe also will have its end, and the end of all that Universe is Brahman, It is the Changeless from which change *has come, by which it is maintained*, and in which it will finally merge. This is an idea that may take some time to be received and more time to be absorbed and realised, and its final realisation would result

in the individual soul giving up the false identification with the body and to consider itself as identical with that Primordial Brahman, as a result of which identification, it becomes the Brahman. This was Vamna's teaching to Bhrigu. Up-to-date, we have nothing better than this teaching.

Mostly it is understood to refer to the Impersonal Brahman, at least it is so understood by the Advaitins and the followers of Sri Sankaracharya. Visishtadvaitins and Madhvas would consider the Primordial Force to be a personality, and direct their disciples to retain their personality, and they themselves never wish to surrender their personality into the Supreme (with a view to losing their personality). Even in the final stage of life or merger, the latter two schools want the personality of the Jivas to be retained as separate entities from the personality of the Supreme and broken themselves in that state to the pomegranate seeds in the ripe fruit. This is a very rough but still fairly accurate summing up of Hindu philosophy on this subject of God. Personal and Impersonal. But a fuller statement is bound to be very long and very subtle, and cannot be put forward here. Suffice it to say that for actually knowing God, one must actually go through the process of knowing God and not merely read about it or talk about it. That process of state is called *Brahma Jnana* and it is a proverbial phrase that *Brahma Jnana* is the hardest thing for man to get. It is not everyone that can have it. Even for ordinary progress, a great deal of preparation is necessary, and the approaching Jiva must be pure, receptive, full of faith and perseverance - faith in an *Ishtmurthi* of God, and in equally powerful faith in a Guru. He must completely surrender all that he things is his, and all that he is, for the purpose of this Adhikari.

Amongst the thousands that approached Baba, just a few tried to get knowledge of this from Baba, and of them very few were real adhikaris. A great many were totally unfit and mostly were brushed aside by Baba. Occasionally Baba demonstrated their unfitness and revealed that fact to them. The Kopergaon Station Master, called Valambi Master, had no faith in Baba, and was still induced by Das Ganu to go to Baba to see what sort of person he was, and how much he could learn from him. When the Station Master with Das Ganu

reached Shirdi, and went near Baba's Mosque, Baba was taking up a number of pots, washing them, and placing them mouth downwards. The Station Master got impatient, and asked Das Ganu, 'What is all this?' At Das Ganu's instance, Baba gave the reply. Baba said, 'Every pot coming to me comes with mouth downwards'. That is, people came to Baba with their minds closed against all influence and unreceptive, that nothing could be poured into them by Baba. People who went to Baba were unreceptive. Others also who approached Baba wanted him to use all his siddhi powers for various temporal purposes.

Occasionally some turned up wanting *Brahma Jnana* from Baba to be handed over to them like a packet of sweets across the counter. One such person was a rich man who went to Baba, and expressly put the question to Baba, 'What is God like?' Baba did not address the visitor, but asked some devotee near him to go to Bagchand Marwadi and tell him that Baba wanted Rs.iOO, and then bring the money. That man returned in a minute and said, 'The Marwadi (Money lender) says that he has no money, and sends his namaskar'. Baba again sent this man to another moneylender to ask him for the loan of Rs.iOO. This time also the devotee returned saying that the moneylender said that he had no money. Baba next said, 'Fetch Nana Saheb Chandorkar'. Nana came. Then Baba told Nana that he wanted Rs.iOO. Nana at once wrote a chit to the same Bagchand Marwadi for a loan of Rs.iOO, and in a minute the money came from that Marwadi, and Nana placed that sum in Baba's hands. Baba then said, 'It is all like this in this world.' The impatient visitor could make out nothing at all and could not understand why, when he asked about God. Baba did not answer the question but went on sending people for loans, and asked Das Ganu why Baba did so. Das Ganu said that Baba had answered his question. The visitor wanted to know how. Das Ganu said, 'When others asked for money, it was not forthcoming, but when Nana Saheb asked for it, the money was at once forthcoming. So, the man who merely asks, "What is God like" does not get to know it. But the man who is qualified to know that and only the man who deserves to know that, gets that knowledge. Baba's answer, therefore is "Deserve before you desire Brahman".'

On another occasion, a very rich man came to Baba with a large amount of money in his pocket, and with great anxiety to avoid extra expenditure, as far as possible, he had engaged a cab for the journey from Kopergaon to Shirdi and back, promising to return in half an hour. So, the man came in a hurry to Baba and said, 'Baba, show me God, Brahman. It is for this I have come all this long way. People say that Shirdi Baba reveals Brahman very quickly.' Baba said, 'Do not fear. Immediately and clearly I will show you. This is not a matter that could be put off. It is hard to get questioners seeking illumination like you. (Here Baba's irony was hardly understood by the man). Most people seek wealth, cure of disease or trouble, honour, position, or perpetual pleasure and other earthly objects. None wants God. Oh, I long to see those who long to see God. Now, Brahman is the root cause of the Universe, That which accounts for Solar and Planetary motions, variations of seasons and division of all functions. One must know, i.e., realise Brahman before death. Else there will be an ever recurring cycle of births and deaths. Realisation gives '*Kevaia Advaita Sukham*'. A Guru gives it and only a Guru can'.

Baba then turned to some others and sent a boy out with these words: "Go, tell Nandalal Marwadi, Baba urgently wants a hand loan of Rs.5/- and bring the money". The boy went and found the marwadi absent. Baba sent more messages to absent men. The rich man was getting impatient at Baba's failure to give him *atmajnan* or sight of God, more especially because delay would mean extra payment to the tonga walla whom he had engaged for the return journey also. He saw, of course, that Baba wanted Rs.5 and he could stop the repeated requests of Baba for Rs.5 by paying it out of the Rs.250/-he had in his pocket. But he was oppressed with the fear that if he advanced the loan, it might prove irrecoverable. He asked Baba, 'Will you help me to grasp Brahman?' Baba replied, 'You see what I have been doing all this while is to enable you to see God even as you are now seated. Have you understood nothing? I want five. One must surrender the five to get at Brahman. One must surrender the five senses (*Indriyas*), the five *pranas* and *manas*, *Buddhi*, *Ahankar* (Mind, Intellect and Ego) (all of which involve *Vairagya* i.e., detachment). The road to *Brahma*

Jnana is hard to tread. All cannot tread it. When it dawns, there will be light. One who feels unattached to things terrestrial and celestial is alone competent to have *Brahmajnan*'.

The man found that Baba had read his strong attachment to the Rs.5/- which he considered more important than getting Brahmajnana Upadesa.

Baba taught the absolute importance of complete surrender of *Tan Man Dan*, that is, body, mind and possessions, as an essential preliminary to fitness to understand and be absorbed in God. This surrender is set out in Srimad Bhagavata and other works. One way of Baba's teaching people is to ask a person to go and attend the pothy reading of a particular passage. Once Baba asked Buty for Rs. 161/2 dakshina, when Buty had not that sum on hand. Buty replied that he had not the money just then. Then Baba asked him to go to H.S. Dixit, and not only ask him for this Rs.161/2 but also to be listening to the *pothy* which Dixit was reading. Accordingly Buty came to Dixit and asked for the money. Dixit had stopped his practice and had little cash on hand. So H.S. Dixit replied that he had only Re.1/- in his possession, and could not advance Rs.161/2. Buty said, "Baba asked me, however, to listen to your pothy'. Then Dixit read his Bhagavata, and the first stanza that he read was—

Kayenavacha manasendriyaira Buddhyatmanava prakrutes swabhavar

Karomi yatyat sakalam parasmai Srirnan narayanayeti samarpayami

This is with reference to the complete surrender of all acts to God. And Brahmins, after performing ceremonies, close all their ceremonies with *Iswararpanam* of the ceremonies gone through or mantras practised, by uttering this stanza. Now Baba had asked for Rs.161/2. What has Rs.161/2 to do with this stanza? Firstly there are seventeen phrases in this stanza. Next the objects for surrender mentioned are 16 in number, but Chittra has been omitted in the text. So says the Jnaneswari commentary. If that is added, it would make the objects to be surrendered 17. But Chittra is only half. So, the 16 1/2 objects mentioned there are directed to be surrendered to God. And Baba is God. So the direction of Baba was that Buty, Kaka, and all other devotees should in accordance with

this stanza give him Rs.16¹/₂ that is, *surrender their entire personality*, which are thus reckoned as 16¹/₂ in number.

As to further steps to know God, Baba gave full details to Radha Bai Deshmukhin. She was determined to get upadesa mantra out of Baba. On that occasion Baba showed that persons who came forward with questions 'Have you seen God', 'What is God', etc, were setting about in the wrong fashion, and would get little benefit. 'God' Baba said, is not something to be grasped in a psychology or philosophy class or something to be achieved with the utterance of Vedic mantras to be got by heart in a Vedic class.

*nyamatma pravachanena tabhyo no medhaya na bahuna scrutena
yamevaisha vrunute tena labhyah tasyaisha vntnute tanoom svam*

Seeing God is a realisation by the soul that surrenders itself entirely in a particular manner to one who is capable of imparting God-realisation, and therefore, the real truth, the most precious truth of God-realisation, was revealed by Baba to just one or two of his devotees who showed themselves to be in dead earnest and who had fitted themselves for at least putting their steps on the threshold of *Brahma Jnana* or God-realisation, These two were Radha Bai Deshmukhin and Anna Saheb Dabolkar. Though an account has been given of these earlier, still the previous secret given to them may be repeated here. The reader should read it scores of time.

Radha Bai Deshmukhin had come with the determination to make Baba her Guru and to get upadesa from him in order to attain all that Baba had achieved in the matter of God-realisation. So she went and asked Baba to give her upadesa. Baba did not respond. Then, she hit upon *satyagraha*. She retired to her quarters and resolved not to eat or drink anything at all till Baba gave her upadesa, and if death should follow, she was prepared for it. Noting this severe resolve of hers, practised for three days, Shama, who was living in that wada thought it wise to go to Baba and tell him, 'Here is this woman determined to kill herself unless you give upadesa. Why not utter some God's name and make her take it as upadesa?' Then Baba sent for her and told her, "Mother, I am your child. You are my mother. Why do you think of dying and torturing yourself? Take

pity on me, your child. I am a beggar. Look here, my Guru was a great saint and highly merciful. I fatigued myself in trying to serve him and yet he did not utter any mantra in my ear. Instead he first shaved me clean and then begged of me two pice. What he wanted was not metallic coin—he did not care even for gold, but only *Nishta* and *Saburi*, i.e. *faith* and *courageous patience*. I gave these to him and at once he was pleased.

"Mother, *Saburi* is courage, do not discard it. It ferries you across to the distant goal. It gives manliness to men, eradicates sin and dejection and overcomes all fears.

"For 12 years I waited on my Guru, who is peerless and loving. How can I describe his *love* to me? When he was Dhyanaasta (in love trance) I sat and gazed at him; and we were both filled with Bliss. I cared not to turn my eye upon anything else. Night and day I pored upon his face with an ardour of love that banished hunger and thirst. The Guru's absence, even for a second, made me restless. I meditated upon nothing but the Guru and had no goal or object other than the Guru. Unceasingly fixed upon him was my mind. Wonderful indeed the art of my Guru! I wanted nothing but the Guru and he wanted nothing but my love. Apparently actionless, he never neglected me, but always protected me by his glance.

"That Guru—I tell the truth, sitting as I do in this Masjid— never blew any mantra into my ear; nor do I blow any into yours. Go thou and do likewise.

"If you make me the sole object of your thoughts and aims, you will attain Paramartha, the supreme goal. Look at me with undivided attention; so will I look at you. This is the only truth my Guru taught me. The four sadhanas and the six sastras are not necessary. With entire confidence, trust your Guru. That is enough."

The lady bowed, accepted the advice and gave up her satyagraha.

This, as we find in so many puranas, was repeated by Shama to Dabolkar. Here is again the advice given by Sai Baba to Dabolkar with words apparently different but really conveying it, Baba said to Dabolkar once, 'Give me a dakshina of Rs.15'. As he had not the money; Baba sent him to Shama to ask him for

Rs.15, and also to stay with him for a while, have a chat, and then bring the Rs.15 as dakshina which Shama would give. When Dabolkar reported this to Shama, he was puzzled. He said, 'Look at this Baba. He is sending big pandits like you to fools like me. As for the dakshina of Rs.15, I have no money, and I can only offer my namaskars. As for talking, I do not know what to tell you'. After a time, Shama told Dabolkar of the story of Radha Bai Deshmukhin. Then Dabolkar returned to Baba and narrated to him his talk with Shama. Baba then said, 'Our art is unique. Remember this. To get *Atmajnan*, *Dhyana* is needed, i.e., the *Attna Anushtana* that pacifies and carries the mind into *Samadhi*. So *give up all desires* and *dwell in your mind upon God in all*. If the mind is thus concentrated, the Goal is achieved.

'For Dhyana, meditate on me either as with form or as formless, mere Ananda. If such formless contemplation is hard, then think of my form, just as you see it here. Think of it night and day. With such meditation, the mind dissolves into unity (i.e., *attains Laya*). The difference between subject and object (me and you) and the act of contemplation will be lost. This results in *Chaitanya Ghanata*, *Brahma Samarasata*. The Guru's glance is bread and milk to the pupil'. Baba gave sugarcandy prasad to Dabolkar and said, 'If you keep this instruction in mind, it will be as sweet as this sugarcandy'. Baba recommended the study of Sravana of the Katha followed by Manana, Nidhidhyasa, Smarana, and Dhyana, all of which will lead to realisation of Ananda Ghana. Baba said 'That which is seen is the manifestation of Brahman through Maya and will dissolve again into Brahman. Look into the six sastras to see if the Atman is one or as many as there are jivas. The crown of Jnana is the realisation of the one Atman, from which everything has issued.

'By Rinanubandha, you have come to me. Have regard to Rinanubandha. Whoever or whatever creature comes to you, do not drive them away but receive with due consideration. Give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and clothes to the naked. Then God will be pleased. Do not bark at people. Be not pugnacious. Bear with others' reproach. Speak only gentle words. This is the way to happiness. Let others and the world turn topsy-turvy, but do not mind that.

Keep on to your own course straight. The world maintains a wall—the wall of differentiation between oneself and other, between you and me. Destroy this wall. God is the supreme Lord. Allah Malik. Wondrous, precious, and long enduring are his works. Your object will be fulfilled in due course. We shall both attain bliss by mutual love.'

Thus Baba's answer to the question 'What is God' is that the question cannot be answered in words of course, as the real truth about God is one to be felt at heart. One should grow into God and then only he knows God. It is only by developing the little spark of Love that Baba will ignite in your heart, and blowing it into a flame, that you can be transformed into a mass of love. God is love, nothing but love. Everything it touches is turned into love. Even the basest creatures feel the power of the purely loving soul, and tigers and murderers give up their qualities in the presence of a fiercely loving soul. It is only when a soul gets to be so very powerful, magnetic, or dynamic with love, it understands and expresses God as love. No other answer to the question 'What is God' is worth having. So, this is Baba's answer to the question 'What is God?'