



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

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Big Questions #12

Who or What is God?

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Numinous — expansive, holy, sacred, all-knowing, filled with God. While walking on the moon in 1971, astronaut Edgar Mitchell had such an experience. Deeply affected by it, he established the Institute of Noetic Sciences to study noetics – the means of knowing. He wanted to know how the scientifically-oriented mind could understand what he knew while he was there. The Institute’s research explores the interplay between scientific knowledge and inner knowing.

Yoga says you don’t have to understand it with your mind. Simply surrender to it. This inner knowing is a mystical knowing, the purpose of being human. Your mind can report on it, though inadequately, for your mind can never encompass the whole of the Divine Reality. Bottom line: we’re talking about God.

While noetics explores the boundary between the mind and the inner reality, yoga says you must go beyond your mind. As much as your mind can know, the inner knowing is greater. Your own inner knowing is already full, whole and complete. It’s not you knowing God; it’s God knowing. Because you are that which you call God.

This is a radical statement, considered heretical by many religions. It took me almost 30 years to be able to say it out loud. As a teacher, I danced around it for decades, using synonyms like divine, holy, sacred, ever-existent, essence and beingness. The first time I said it directly while teaching, “You are God,” I paused and waited breathlessly for a few seconds. I half-expected lightning to strike me dead. Yet it is pure yoga, the teachings of the sages. And it is totally true.

A problem does arise here, but it is not with your own Divinity, your own God-ness. The problem is mere terminology. The One All-Pervasive Reality exists, being this universe as well as extending beyond it. But as soon as you put a name to it, you think it is separate from you. You think it is an “it.” But it is you, and is being everyone else and all that exists, as well as all that doesn’t exist.

I remember asking my mother, “Who is God?” It is one of my earliest memories, from when I was 3 or 4 years old. She described the Almighty Lord, Creator of the Universe, who watches over us whether we are doing right or wrong. She gestured up as she spoke, so I got a sense of a guy with a white beard who lives in the sky.

It was very confusing. It was hard for me to confine the feeling of all-pervasiveness that I’d lived with since birth and put it up in the sky. It was so fa-a-ar away. I felt that I’d lost something important, something that made me be me. Yoga gave it back to me. Specifically, my Guru gave me God, and in the giving, he gave me back to me.

Most people think the different names are naming different entities: God, Allah, Adonai, Jesus, Krishna, Shiva. However they are not different. Wars have been and unfortunately are still being fought over this. All these are different names for the One Reality, just as agua and воды (vody) both mean water.

This is why I use the Sanskrit names for God, because you don’t fall into the trap of pushing God out. When I talk use the name, “God,” your mind supplies a location outside of your own body. But when I talk about Brahman, the all-pervasive Reality, or Shiva, the One being you and being all – you cannot build a wall between you and God.

When that wall is intact, you look for experiences of God, whether in church, in nature or, like so many of us in the 1960s, in sex, drugs and rock and roll. These things and others can sometimes prompt numinous experiences. Each experience is temporary and you’re stuck with yourself again. Instead, yoga works on who you are, refining and redefining you while uncovering what is hidden inside.

Kle”sa-karma-vipaakaa”sayair-aparaam.r.s.ta.h
puru.sa-vi”se.sa ii”svara.h. — Yoga Sutras 1.24

God is the supreme Self (purusha), not limited
by kleshas, nor by karmic repercussions or tendencies.

The sage Patanjali is explaining who and what God is, using the name “purusha,” meaning “cosmic person.” God is the cosmic person without the limitations listed in the sutra, but you are the cosmic person with said limitations. He earlier used purusha as a name for you, now he is using purusha as a name for God. In other words, you are the cosmic person. You are God, though currently suffering from limitations that keep you from knowing your own Divine Essence.

The obvious next question is about the limitations: kleshas and karma. Instead of grappling with your limitations, tantra focuses on your inherent Divinity. Metaphorically, you're tied down, but you can find your inner light even when you're bound. Yoga's mystical methodology dissolves the ropes a little, every time you dive into the inner source. This is what Shaktipat gives you, access to your inherent Divinity. Once you've discovered your own Shiva-ness, you see Shiva being all.

Ram Dass was one of the first Westerners to bring these teachings back from India. After his first trip, he visited his brother who was confined in a posh mental institution. On a beautiful spring day, the attendants set up tea service outside under a tree. Ram Dass' brother came out in a three-piece suit complete with the pocket watch and chain, though Ram Dass was wearing his simple white cottons from India.

After chatting over tea for a while, his brother asked a question. "I don't get it. You write a book, run around the country in your pajamas, telling everyone that they're God. You've got fame, fans, followers and lots of money. I simply say, 'I am Jesus,' and they lock me up." Ram Dass replied, "Ah, I say that I am God and so are they. But you think you're the only one."

This means that to know your own Divinity is not enough. You must delve inward more deeply until you see the Divine in all. I describe it as "being Shiva and seeing Shiva." It must be done in this order: first you find your Shiva-ness, then you see Shiva in every one and every thing. This is summarized in the final two words of a key text of Kashmiri Shaivism:

...bhavatiiti "sivam. — Pratyabhij~nah.rdayam 20

You live in the knowingness that all is Shiva.

This is worlds away from where I began. I first became aware that I was on a spiritual quest in 1966. Time Magazine published an issue with a black cover, with words emblazoned in bright red, "Is God Dead?" It was riveting for me, thrusting me back into the dilemma first defined when I was 3 or 4. My first thought was, "How could God die? Do people really think that's possible?" Now I know that God didn't die, but is unpopular in the West. He's got a bad rep.

At the time, some of my friends were deeply involved in their church. Others denied God's existence, saying they didn't believe in anything unless they could pick it up and move it around. But when they were frustrated, they said, "Oh God" or "Jeez!" I wondered how they could deny God in one breath and call on him in the next.

What we all had in common is that we sought numinous experiences. Available technology was quite limited, so we rarely attained what we hoped for. Yet those rare moments were extremely precious: an Easter sunrise service at the ocean, sitting under a solitary tree in a desert canyon, chanting OM with a crowd of 500 people. Little did I know that OM came from a tradition with much more powerful technologies. Once I'd put my foot in that door, it opened wide and my Baba walked through. I've specialized in mystical technologies ever since.

Using these tools, it's easy to open you up to your own Divine Essence. But the experience is temporary unless you improve your equipment — it is your body, mind and heart that have the experience. The poses, yogic breathing, mantras, chanting and guruseva (volunteering) make changes for you, a spiritual upgrade. Thus your inner experiences become deeper and last longer. You reach the point that they don't end. You live in the knowing of your own Self, your own God-ness. And you see God in all.

Yoga calls this "freedom," liberation from the cycle of rebirth. You won't have to come back again. That was always very motivating to me. I had a deep sense that I didn't want to come back and do all this again. The yogic pathway to freedom is through your inner experience. What matters is your experience of God.

Though you are already God, you don't yet know. Thus you must use technologies to access the experience. Yoga's technologies are the best I've found. They turn your attention inward, directly to the source. The goal is for you to live in the knowing of who and what you already are. For you are already God, but you simply don't know. Not yet. That's why you have to do more yoga.

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