



# VICHAR— SPIRITUAL ENQUIRY

by Swami Jyotirmayananda

**I**n the great scripture of Yoga Vasistha, Sage Vasistha compares Liberation to a great palace with four gates, each with its own gatekeeper—*Shama* (serenity), *Santosh* (contentment), *Vichar* (enquiry) and *Satsanga* (good-association). Here, Sage Vasistha describes the glories of *Vichar*.

*Vichar* literally means enquiry. It refers to spiritual reflection, specifically, enquiry on the question, “Who am I?” However, in its broader implication, *vichar* includes promoting purity

of the intellect so that you are governed by your intellect and not your mind and senses.

## Free Intellect from the Domination of Ego

In the majority of people, the intellect is left unexercised and unused. God has given the best gift to every human being—a lamp much more powerful than Aladdin’s lamp. All too often, though, it lies in a corner, gathering dust, encrusted by dullness, delusion, anger and hate.

As long as the ego dominates one’s personality, the intellect is not properly used. All too often it whirls furiously only to serve the ego’s demand to eradicate anything and anyone who appears to cause the ego trouble. Intellect remains the servant of *ahamta* and *mamata* —“me” and “mine.”

A philosophical life begins when you free the intellect from ego’s domination. When you begin to enjoy possessing a serene intellect untainted by the ego’s anxieties, it is like having a head without headache.

Everyone’s intellect is tinged with ego, creating a chronic low-level headache. Therefore, this intellect wants only to apply balm and sit in darkness. At any prosperity or success, the first thing a person does is invite guests and have a drunken party. In adversity, the intellect becomes similarly obscured. In this way the ego insists on keeping the intellect in darkness. When the ego’s domination diminishes, however, the intellect begins to reflect “Who am I?” and guides you towards your essential nature.

## The Ego’s “I AM” or The Real “I AM”

You can be aware of your legal identity, your name, your nationality and the time of your birth, but this identity is based on lack of *vichar*. However, as your intellect becomes purified, you become deeply interested in discovering “Who am I?” and

experiencing “I am *Brahman*—I am the All-pervasive Reality.”

The “I am” in your daily life is like a wave; the real “I am” is like the ocean. When you lack purity of intellect, your mind builds up the erroneous notion of the little “I am” and the ego is fostered in you. As long as you cling to the little ego, life is miserable and you are always agitated.

However, when the intellect shines with the light of truth, your attention shifts from the little ego to the Absolute and this works miracles in your personality. This transformation does not happen all at once, but gradually. If you were insecure, you become secure. If you were weak, you become strong. All other weaknesses also gradually vanish.

All the troubles and turmoil of life arise because the mind clings to the little ego. The mind is never at rest as it strives to protect that ego. There is an instinctive urge to help the ego—to protect, sustain and make it eternal. Of course, all these efforts are in vain.

Think for a moment about the sun in the sky and the reflection of the same sun in a little jar of water. The reflected sun is not the abiding reality, even though it shines like the real sun. It is changing, trembling and shifting according to the nature of the water.

Similarly, *Brahman* is the Divine Self that shines like the sun. The ego is the reflected self, a reflection of the Divine within

the conditioned waters of your mind. That ego is erroneously considered to be the “I” in day-to-day life. The mind tries to protect and sustain it. As a result, desires build for wonderful property, lots of money in the bank and the admiration of those around you. Your mind tries hard to achieve all these, but to your great and shocking surprise, the ego is never pleased.

However hard you try to protect yourself from any future calamity, you realize that your ego is not yet safe or secure. There is always fear and insecurity, always inimical forces. From life to life, you are unable to satisfy the ego. In this vain process, karmas are created that keep you trapped in the world-process.

The ego rises in your mind like a fever. When you have a high ego, your whole personality suffers. If you are creative or artistic, every talent within you diminishes. When the ego relaxes, you become inspired.

When you are truly successful, you do not assert your ego, you become shy. When you are not successful, you look to others for recognition. When they do not recognize you, you build up anger, hate and animosity.

Just a little reflection allows a person to understand that the ego is not their real Self. Yet, the vast majority of people spend 99% of their life involved with that little ego. From morning to night, in our modern culture, you hear arguments and bitterness

towards others. However, when you go to sleep, the little ego fades away. The unchanging “I am” is the same when you sleep as when you are awake.

How can you hold on to that vision of the unalterable “I am” and turn away from the alterable, trembling “I am?” This shifting of the mind from the little ego to the universal is true religion and spirituality. *Vichar* enables you to make this shift.

### **The Glory of the Luminous Intellect**

The world is full to the brim with the Presence of God, but the mind cannot see this. The intellect is clouded. On one side is obstruction, on the other, distraction. Your mind has developed a fictitious notion of your identity, subject to pleasure and pain, gain and loss, sorrow and joy. The world of *Maya* cannot touch your inner core, yet you go on trembling, exulting and grieving.

Upon Enlightenment, you realize that there is nothing but *Brahman*. Past, present and future are all inundated by the presence of *Brahman*. Just as the sun cannot be drowned in darkness, the enquiring intellect cannot be drowned in the world of ignorance.

The luminous intellect lights your path at every step. You are aware that every situation has been promoted by the Divine Plan for your own good. There is a purpose behind all things.

## The Himalayan Majesty of Vichar

The Himalayas are often used as a symbol of *vichar* because they remind you of three things: invincibility, coolness and sublimity. You discover within yourself invincibility. Storms go on raging, but the Himalayas still stand. With *vichar*, you know that nothing can defeat you, for you are the Self. In adverse circumstances, in challenging situations, in provocative developments, you will remain unaffected.

You discover coolness, the eternal snows of the Himalayas settling within you, so that even in the most agitating circumstances, you do not become hot-headed. The coolness blows on internally. You also discover sublimity, unimaginable heights within yourself.

When you practice *vichar*, you realize that beyond your mind, intellect and wave-like existence, there surges the ocean of eternity. You are the ocean, not

the wave. You are the sky, not a patch of blue created by clouds. With that understanding of your majesty, there can be no tinge of ego. However, when you try to assert a majesty based on your ego, that assertion is fleeting.

## When Thunderbolts Proceed from the Moon

With its characteristic subtle, poetic magic, Yoga Vasistha reminds us that if thoughtlessness dominates your mind, then thunderbolts will proceed from the moon. Where there is no misery, misery will spring up.

The healthy mind is like the moon radiating coolness, peace and harmony. Without reflection, the very same mind that could have given you the peacefulness of moonlight now gives you the turmoil of a thunderstorm.

The same mind that could have thrilled you with ecstasy now gives rise to all disturbing and terrorizing thoughts and ideas. Your mind develops a

strange ability to create misery from nowhere. With *vichar*, on the other hand, even in a world of turmoil, you find yourself unaffected, like the sky beyond the clouds.

A thoughtless mind is a great storehouse of three miseries: miseries in the seed state, miseries that have sprouted and miseries that have become trees. All forms are packed into a mind that does not practice *vichar*. Karmas harmful to oneself and others arise from a mind not lit up by the light of enquiry. With reflection, you avoid doing negative things. You will not promote disharmony nor lose sight of God who abides in all conditions.

## Gaining An Aerial View of Your Problems

*Vichar* implies possessing the subtle vision that makes you realize the highest: “I am *Brahman*.” That vision is known as *divya chaksu*, the Divine vision, or *jnana chaksu*, the vision of wisdom. If you possess that vision, you will defeat adversities, for you are as if flying above the world, seeing an aerial view. Things that seemed so important for you when you were on the ground become little; roads become like little lines, cars look like little bugs.

The moment you have that aerial vision, you can see your problems with greater objectivity. You are not drowning; in fact, you realize there are no



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problems. What you considered a problem is actually prosperity in the making. As *vichar* allows your intellect to have a transcendental view of things, you are able to cross over adversities, face situations with boldness, remain unaffected by varying conditions of this world.

If you lack *vichar*, there is always agitation in this world. Your mind is dominated by the senses, and the senses always drown your mind with little things. The purified intellect, on the other hand, informs your mind of transcendental things. Such an intellect is singing a fine tune, but if your mind is not well disciplined, it vibrates to the rock and roll music of the senses.

Therefore, your mind has no objectivity. It just gets lost. Every situation invades the mind. But if your mind learned to listen to the purified intellect, even in agitating situations you would have an amazing ability to stay calm.

### **Contentment Born of Vichar**

A Sage neither desires objects not yet attained nor abandons objects already attained. Generally, the human mind is constantly busy trying to gain things it does not have and relinquish things it has. You become bored with things and want to replace them with new things. You are always trying to accept and reject. The mind, therefore, is never satisfied, never contented.

Something new must always be around the corner.

In the state of Enlightenment, you become detached from the world. You become happy with whatever things present themselves according to your karmic process. There is no accepting or rejecting. *Vichar* acts like fire that burns up the subtle seeds of impressions. You can then handle the world and live with all its practical realities, but it will not create karmas for you. Karmas will not force you to continue to reincarnate because the impressions you have gathered have become burnt up.

As you become increasingly aware that the real “I am” is universal, you feel an indescribable happiness and peace. When you look at the world and all it offers, you realize it can give you nothing worthwhile or abiding. Therefore, you are not drawn by the world. The world never surpasses what you already have within yourself, so you remain detached in all conditions.

You are neither interested in keeping yourself actively involved, nor in keeping yourself inactive. Action and inaction alternate in your life like day and night. You accept them both. However, if you are not enlightened, there is always a sense of contradiction. If your life is too busy, you ask, “When will I retire?” If you have no work at all, then you ask, “When will I find something interesting to do?” Inactivity brings boredom; too much activity brings stress. Take your pick, stress or boredom.

But with *vichar*, you enjoy both activity and inactivity. Inactivity lets you move closer to your deeper Self. You open the inner window to eternity and enjoy a glorious vision of universality. Activity gives you the thrill of dealing with God in so many names and forms. It is as if you are a skilled swimmer who enjoys both battling the waves at the surface of the ocean and diving deep where no waves exist. Both are exhilarating.

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## Never Stop Your Practice of Vichar

In the dark despair of adversity or the dazzling glory of prosperity, *vichar* should remain unflinching. One should not abandon *vichar* for a single moment.

The world has been well-planned by God to push your mind to Enlightenment. Prosperous conditions help you in one way, adverse conditions in another.

It is true that when you are in an adverse situation, you may not be able to do your *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) with the same intensity as before. Nevertheless, your effort must still continue according to your capacity.

Challenging conditions are your tests. When people around you say you are shining like *Brahman*, naturally it is easy to say, “I am *Brahman*.” However,

when people say you look like a donkey, asserting, “I am *Brahman*,” is a challenge.

Even in difficult times, you must be able to do *japa*, think of God, exercise your intellect and practice reflection. You should not let go of your *sadhana* even though it may not be to your satisfaction. By developing that habit you realize you are able to utilize adversity as well as prosperity in enriching your life, in allowing your mind to flow towards God. You do not waste any experience.

## Lift Yourself by Yourself

The Gita says, “Lift yourself by yourself.” By exercising the higher within you, you lift up the lower within you. By allowing the intellect to assert its purity and clarity, you allow yourself to be freed from the domination

of the mind and senses. Instead of sinking in the ocean of the world, you are drawn above and you begin to glide, to cross the ocean without any difficulty.

One should reflect upon “Who am I? Am I the body, the mind, the senses? What is the nature of this world? What is the underlying reality behind it?” Through *vichar*, you realize that the essential nature within you and within the world is the Divine Self, *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness.

That is the implication of the great instruction, “*Tat twam asi*” — “Thou art That,” given by a guru to his disciple. That Pure Consciousness is your very Self. You are not this passing personality. You are not this body of flesh, blood and bones. You are not these senses that are fickle and finite. You are not this mind that is changing and limited. You are not this intellect that gives value to things of the world. You are not this ego that asserts and arrogates. You are much beyond all finite media with which you are identified, and which you consider, in ignorance, to be your very Self.

When you think deeply, reflect profoundly and meditate seriously, you discover that That which shines in the sun, sheds lustre through the moon, surges in the ocean and races through the wind — That which is the Beauty of the beautiful, the Joy of the joyous, the Essence of all.....is your very Self!



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