

ANUBHAVA¹

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The word '*anubhava*' is translated into English as 'experience' by a number of people writing on Vedanta. The English word leaves a lot to be desired. The word '*anubhava*' means direct knowledge in certain contexts. The word 'experience' does not convey the same sense. Any experience is inconclusive in terms of knowing. One may gain certitude of knowledge from experience but experience itself does not constitute knowledge.

A mental condition caused by a sense perception or memory can be called experience, but one need not have knowledge of what is experienced. Emotional pain is one's experience but the knowledge of it implies its origin also. Therefore, it needs a certain process of reasoning leading to understanding. I may see an object outside without knowing what it is. Seeing is no doubt an experience, but knowing is entirely different.

We often come across the expression *ātmānubhava* in Vedanta literature; the meaning of this expression is direct self-knowledge. *Ātman* is consciousness and its presence is never lost in any form of experience. In seeing, hearing, thinking, the presence of consciousness is never missed. The nature of *ātman* is consciousness, the content of every experience. Consciousness, the content of experience is recognised as Brahman, the limitless, a fact that *śāstra* reveals in sentences such as '*tattvamasi*, that you are'.

Now, the compound word, *ātmānubhava* is translated as self-experience. Does the translation convey self-knowledge? Certainly it does not. Many masters also say that the self is to be experienced. It implies that the self is not within the understanding of one's experience, that it has to be experienced by some special means. If the self is consciousness, can the experiencer be independent of consciousness? The experiencer is but the self, while the self is not the experiencer. Similarly, the experienced object is also consciousness as is the experience; it is not outside consciousness either. This ever-present consciousness, the self, is taken to be only the experiencer, different from the object of experience. This duality is certainly a superimposition upon the self, the consciousness. Vedanta negates this superimposition and makes one recognise the self as being free from this duality. This recognition is self-knowledge, *ātmānubhava* or *ātma-jñāna*. While the word 'experience' fails to convey the meaning of self-knowledge, it misguides one to a pursuit of gaining the experience of the self. When will this experience come? It can never come because consciousness is ever-present, in and through each and every experience.

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