

## Traditional and Direct Paths

*The following comes from Ananda Wood's collection of essays on the teaching of Atmananda Krishnamenon. Ananda Wood attended Atmananda Krishnamenon's satsangs as a young boy and continued to study and follow his teachings through his adult life. For those who are interested, further essays from this collection can be download from here:*

<http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/atmananda/atmananda.htm>

### *Universal and individual*

In the preface to *Atma Darshan*, Shri Atmananda points out that he takes an approach which brings 'the universal under the individual'. This is what he called the 'direct' approach; and he distinguished it from another approach that he called 'cosmological'.

#### *The Cosmological Approach*

In the 'cosmological' approach, an 'individual person' or 'jiva' is considered as an incomplete part of an encompassing universe. Hence that approach is described as one 'of bringing the individual under the universal'. It requires an expansion of consideration to a universal functioning – which is ruled by an all-powerful 'God' called 'Ishvara', or which expresses an all-comprehensive reality called 'brahman'.

Literally, 'brahman' means 'expanded' or 'great'. When what is considered gets expanded, beyond all limitations of our physical and mental seeing, then brahman is realized. Such expansion may be approached through various exercises that have been prescribed, to purify a sadhaka's<sup>1</sup> character from ego's partialities. In particular, there are ethical practices that weaken egocentricism; there are devotional practices that cultivate surrender to a worshipped deity; and there are meditative practices that throw the mind into special samadhi states where usual limitations are dissolved into an intensely comprehensive absorption.

Through such prescribed practices, a sadhaka may get to be far more impartial, and thus get a far broader and more comprehensive understanding of the world. A teacher may accordingly prepare a sadhaka, through a greatly broadened understanding of the world, before directing an enquiry that reflects back into non-dual truth. That cosmological path involves a characteristic attitude of faith and obedience's towards the tradition which has prescribed its mind-expanding and character-purifying practices. Accordingly, that path has been given public prominence in traditional societies which have been organized on the basis of obedient faith.

#### *The Direct Approach*

In the 'direct' approach, a teacher straightaway directs a reflective enquiry, from a disciple's current view of world and personality. On the disciple's part, the enquiry depends upon a genuine interest in truth, sufficient to go through with a deeply sceptical and unsettling questioning of habitual beliefs on which the disciple's sense of self and view of world depends. This calls for an independent attitude – not taking things on trust, but rather asking questions and finding things out for oneself.

For traditional societies, such an independent attitude has been publicly discouraged, for fear of destabilizing the obedient faith that has been needed to maintain their social order. Accordingly, there has been a tendency to keep the direct approach somewhat hidden, away from ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> *Sadhaka*: one who is engaged in spiritual work towards realisation of truth.

public notice. As for example, the sceptical questioning of the Upanishads was kept somewhat hidden until its publication in the last century or two.

In the modern world, we have developed a different kind of society – where education is far more widespread, and independent questioning is encouraged from a much earlier stage of education. So it is only natural that the ‘direct path’ or the ‘vichara marga’ should have been made more public, most famously through Ramana Maharshi.

In Shri Atmananda’s teachings, there is a continuation of this trend towards independent questioning, by the individual sadhaka. Here, each ‘individual person’ or ‘jiva’ is considered as a misleading appearance that confuses self and personality. The questioning is turned directly in, reflecting back from physical and mental appendages to an inmost truth of self or ‘atma’.

The questions turn upon their own assumed beliefs, which take for granted mind and body’s mediation showing us an outside world. Reflecting back from mind and body’s outward mediation, the questioning returns to direct self-knowledge at the inmost centre of experience, from where the enquiry has come.

As the enquiry turns in, all observation and interpretation of the universe is brought back in as well, to an inmost centre that is truly individual. All perceptions, thoughts and feelings must return back there, as they are interpreted and taken into lasting knowledge. Hence this approach is described as one ‘of bringing the universal under the individual’.

In short, Shri Atmananda’s teachings start out with a direct enquiry into the ‘atman’ side of the traditional equation ‘atman = brahman’. The enquiry is epistemological, examining the question of ‘What is?’ by asking: ‘How is it known?’ Examining each object from the inmost standpoint of knowing self, the complete reality of world is reduced to non-dual consciousness, where self and reality (atman and brahman) are found identical.

And the examination is carried out without need of recourse to traditional exercises of bhakti worship or yogic meditation. In fact Shri Atmananda often discouraged such exercises, for many of his disciples, particularly for those whose samskaras<sup>2</sup> were not already involved with them.

Clearly, this approach is not suited to everyone. For many in the modern world, traditional practices of religion and meditation are of much-needed value. ...

In fact, Shri Atmananda made it very clear that his teachings were living ones, meant specifically for his particular disciples. He was quite explicitly against the institutionalization of such teachings, saying that the only proper ‘institution’ of advaita must be the living teacher (if one insists on talking of an ‘institution’ at all).

### *The Role of Enquiry*

Vichara or enquiry is essential to the completion of knowledge in any path. When the traditional path is called ‘cosmological’, this does not imply a lack of vichara. It simply means that along with vichara there is also a considerable component of cosmology, which seeks to describe the world and to prescribe suitable actions for improving our personalities and the world around them.

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<sup>2</sup> *Samskara*: literally ‘with action’, and hence a term used for a tendency of character that an action leaves behind. [In the Direct Path many of these tendencies remain for a while after enlightenment. Rupert refers to the deeply ingrained ones as ‘the residues of the separate self’. In traditional paths, spiritual practices are prescribed to replace ‘bad’ samskaras with ‘good’ ones.]

Vichara must be there in both paths – ‘cosmological’ and ‘direct’:

- On the one hand, the ‘cosmological’ path gets its name from having a cosmological component that is lacking in the direct path.
- On the other hand, the ‘direct’ path is so called because it looks directly for underlying truth. However bad or good the world is seen to be, however badly or how well it is seen through personality, there is in the direct path no concern to improve that cosmic view. The only concern is to reflect directly back into underlying truth, from the superficial and misleading show of all outward viewing.

The direct path is thus no recent development. It was there from the start, before traditions and civilizations developed. And it has continued through the growth of tradition, along with the personal and environmental improvements that traditions have prescribed. For these improvements are inevitably partial and compromised; so that there are always people who aren’t satisfied with such improvement, but just long for plain truth that is not compromised with any falsity.

To find that truth, no cosmological improvement can itself be enough. At some stage, sooner or later, there has to be a jump entirely away from all improvement, into a truth where worse or better don’t apply. The only difference between the cosmological and direct paths is when the jump is made. In the direct path, the jump is soon or even now. In the cosmological approach, the jump is put off till later on, in order to give time for improving preparations to be made for it.

There are pros and cons on both sides, so that different paths suit different personalities. An early jump is harder to make, and it means that the sadhaka’s character is still impure; so even having jumped into the truth, she or he keeps falling back unsteadily, overwhelmed by egotistical samskaras. Then work remains, to keep returning back to truth, until the samskaras are eradicated and there is a final establishment in the sahaja<sup>3</sup> state.

A later jump can be easier, with a character so purified that little or no work remains to achieve establishment. But there are pitfalls of preparing personality for a late jump, because a sadhaka may get enamoured of the relative advances that have been achieved, like a prisoner who falls in love with golden chains and thus remains imprisoned.

So, what’s needed is to find the particular path that suits each particular sadhaka, instead of arguing for any path as best for everyone.

## Contemplation

*There are three essential steps in the spiritual path: the first is to notice that one is not a body or a mind, but rather the Awareness in which these appear, and with which they are known; the second is to explore the nature of Awareness and discover that it doesn’t share the destiny or the limits of the body and mind – that is, to discover its eternal, infinite nature; and the third is to live a life that is consistent with this understanding.* [Rupert Spira]

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<sup>3</sup> *Sahaja state*: the ‘natural state’, the state of a sage who is established in truth and whose actions thus express that truth, with a complete and utter spontaneity.