

What Is Jana?

By Satyanarayana Dasa

The word “*jnana*” is usually translated as “knowledge,” but, in fact, it is not that simple. In English, one says, “I know the name of a good restaurant,” or “I know Java,” and it is easily understood. But the simplicity of the word “know” or “knowledge” is not the same in Sanskrit.

Before beginning the explanation of *jnana*, let’s look at a hypothetical situation. A man is in a coma for 10 years and wakes up in his hospital bed. Sitting on the table next to him is an iPad, left there by a visitor. The man picks up the iPad and looks at it. Through his senses, he makes some observations about it, but he can’t really figure out what it is. Later the visitor explains it to him.

“It is a small computer and was invented about two years ago”

“You can read books, newspapers, and even magazines on it.”

“You can listen to music on it, play games on it, and watch movies on it.”

“You can use it almost anywhere, and it doesn’t require any wires”

“In some schools, these are being provided to children instead of giving them textbooks.”

Finally, the visitor turns on the iPad and gives the man a demo of it. The man now has some knowledge of an iPad.

In this example, there is a subject (the man), an object (the iPad), and there is knowledge. Initially the man has a few observation, which he makes on his own, then he is given some information (in this case, verbally), and finally he sees it being operated. Through the use of his senses and intellect, the man now has some, but not complete, knowledge of an iPad. Whatever knowledge he acquires in this way, creates a specific impression or modification in his mind, called *citta-vritti*.

Knowledge basically is the relation between a word and the object denoted by it. By this knowledge, the subject can deal with or think of the object. The knowledge can be of a substance, a quality, a class, a relation or an action. All the knowledge we possess can be subsumed in one of these categories.

In Sanskrit the word *jnana* is derived from the root *jna avabodhane* (to know) and has three etymological meanings:

1. As a verbal activity or state of being, *jnaptih jnanam* means understanding, awareness, experience, knowing, consciousness. *Jnana* in this sense is without any content. It does not reveal anything except the subject itself. It is the intransitive usage of the word *jnana*, for example, “to know”.

2. As an instrument (*jnayate anena iti jnanam*), it denotes that by which something is known, or that which reveals something (*artha-prakasakah*). *Jnana* in this sense has content. It has a subject to

which it reveals and an object which is revealed by it. In Vedantic terminology, it is called *vrtti-jnana*. In the example above, the information about the iPad, would be the “instrument” which allows someone to have knowledge of the iPad.

3. As a substratum (*jnanam asti asminiti*), it is that which knows or possesses knowledge. It is consciousness.

The second meaning is the most general meaning of the word *jnana*. The function of knowledge, taken in this sense, is to reveal an object. It reveals an object to a conscious self, *atma*. By revealing the object, it also reveals itself. This is described as *svayam-prakasa*, self-luminous. The self knows what is revealed to it by knowledge. Knowledge, however, cannot know the object it reveals. That which knows but does not reveal the objects outside it except itself is called *pratyak* or *svasmai svayam prakasa*, self-luminous and self conscious. This is the characteristic feature of the self.

Knowledge of The Self

The fundamental difference between knowledge (used in the second sense) and the self is that knowledge reveals an object for a knowing subject (*atma*) while the self, although it illuminates or makes the body conscious, cannot reveal the objects but knows what is revealed to it by knowledge. Knowledge thus belongs to a subject and has a content or reference to an object.

Atma, or self, is called *jnana-svarupa* to signify its conscious nature. Here, the word *jnana* is not used in the general sense, but to signify that it is conscious and not inert, and is the substratum of knowledge. But it does not mean that it is mere consciousness as contended by Advaitvadis. It is conscious and possesses consciousness.

It also does not mean that it possesses knowledge in the normal or popular sense of the word. Not knowing this distinction, some scholars misconstrue that *atma*, or the pure soul, is full of knowledge, omniscient. They propose that if the soul’s ignorance is removed, then the *atma* will be automatically situated in knowledge.

Five States of Existence in Three Bodies

A human being is made up of the *atma* and a material body. The material body is made from the products of *prakrti* (the causal state of matter), and it has three divisions:

- The gross body is the visible body consisting of hair, skin, blood, fat, veins, bones marrow etc.
- The subtle body is made of five *pranas*, five motor senses, five cognitive senses, mind, intellect, ego and *chitta*.
- The causal body consists of ignorance (*avidya* in the form of *svabhava* and *karma*).

Based upon these three bodies we experience five states of existence: wakefulness, dreams, deep sleep, unconscious, and *samadhi*.

Wakefulness is related to the gross body; dream state to the subtle body; and the remaining three to the causal body. The one who makes these bodies conscious and is beyond them is the *atma*. He is the only conscious being, *jnana-svarupa*, and has the potential to know. He exists in all five states of the three bodies, but is completely untouched or affected by them. He is unchanging, and everything else is mutable.

The word *jnana* is thus used both for *atma*, and the knowledge acquired as a *vrtti* through the senses. The confusion arises because of the use of a single word for both. This distinction must be understood clearly to know the nature of *atma*. The knowledge which arises through the senses, internal and external, is not inherent in the *atma*. *Atma*, by its proximity, infuses consciousness into the *chitta*, the mind, which comes in contact with sense organs, which in turn contact the sense objects (*Bhagavata Purana* 6.16.24).

Self-Luminous Knowledge from Sense Perception

The knowledge of an object thus arises when the *atma* comes into contact with the object through the inner and external senses. This knowledge is called *vrtti-jnana*, a form of mental modification. (See the second etymological meaning above.) It undergoes contraction and expansion, warranted by experience, while being conditioned by *avidya-karma*, ignorance of the self as distinct from the body. This knowledge is different from *jnatrtva* of the *atma* in the sense that the latter is *pratyak* or conscious of itself while the former is *parak* or reveals itself to the self. This knowledge is like the luminosity of a flame. Although a substance, it is considered as an attribute of *atma* because it is sheltered in *atma*. The knowledge appearing from the sense perception is self luminous but not self conscious. It is called *mano-vrtti*, a particular state of mind in relation to the object perceived.

Sri Krishna (*Bhagavad Gita* 13.6) refers to *mano-vrtti*, as *cetana*, or awareness, and counts it as part of the material body. This *cetana* should not be confused with the *cetana* of the *atma*. Although *cetana*, or consciousness, is the natural quality of the *atma*, it is counted as a mental characteristic, because, in the conditioned state, the consciousness of *atma* is manifest only through the material body, senses and mind. Hence, all knowledge, both valid and illusory, is a mental state.

Sri Kapila says that there are five types of *vrittis* (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.26.30):

“The characteristics of *buddhi* by its various functions, *vrittis*, are said to be doubt, illusion, valid knowledge, remembrance and sleep.”

All types of experiences, both external and internal, in different states of mind, such as wakeful, dream and deep sleep, fall within these five *vrittis*. There is no experience outside these *vrittis*. It may be noted here that even deep sleep is the experience of a type of *vrtti*. The *vrittis* are not within *atma*; therefore, all knowledge is outside *atma*.

No Knowledge of External Objects in The Self

Atma by itself is devoid of any knowledge of external objects, because there are no *vrittis* in it. This is experienced by everyone in the state of deep sleep, unconsciousness or *samadhi*. If there were any knowledge, as understood in the popular sense, then it should be experienced by a person in deep sleep. But it is everyone’s experience that in deep sleep, one forgets even oneself.

One experiences happiness in deep sleep, therefore, on awakening, one says, “I slept happily. I did not know anything.” One may argue that one does not experience anything in deep sleep because of the covering of ignorance. However, even in *nirvikalpaka samadhi*, which is realized when one is free of ignorance, there is only experience of bliss but not of knowledge of anything. Patanjali says that when a person becomes free of all *vrittis*, one is situated in one’s own self (*tada drastuh svarupe’vasthanam, Yoga-sutra* 1.3). There is no knowledge. Thus, when it is said that *atma* is *jnana-svarupa*, it does not mean that it is full of knowledge. It means that it is a conscious being and can

have *vritti-jnana*. The word *jnana in jnana-svarupa* is used in the sense of first and third derivative meaning, and not the second. Therefore it is understood that *atma* is conscious by nature, but does not possess any knowledge in it except the sense of "I".