



Ashtava - vactra.

Ashtavakra Gita

Chapter 1

Translation and Commentary by

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About the Translator



Rajiv Kapur, a householder, lives in Mumbai, India, with his lovely wife and two children.

Rajiv started his inner search for the *Self* by being initiated into *Kriya Yoga*, which he practiced for twelve years. After this time, however, he reached a point where he felt he could no longer make further progress. He saw that these preparatory practices, though very helpful in steadying the mind, were external to the 'I', whereas he was keen on knowing and realizing what that 'I' really was.

Along his journey, Rajiv met Masters and others who provided him with some wonderful insights and direction, and he began to effortlessly fall into a joyous state.

Rajiv was then drawn irresistibly to the teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi who is still his guiding light and now, that of his Sangha too. It was at this time that he embarked on the journey of *Self-Inquiry*. As he turned his gaze inwards, delving deep into the subject ‘I’, he began to spontaneously experience *samadhis* and an ever-expanding bliss. At first, the bliss lasted only for a few hours of the day, but later it became continuous and uninterrupted. He then realized that bliss is actually one’s natural state of being, once the ‘ego-I’ illusion is seen through.

Since then, Rajiv has become a teacher to many spiritual aspirants from around the world, guiding them personally in their quest for freedom. His simple, direct, yet profound *Implusive Self-Inquiry Protocol™* (ISIP) not only helps practitioners stay focused during their sitting meditation, but helps them to make The ISIP Technique a part of their daily lives through the practice of *The Waking State Meditation*.

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I also want to thank all my students, seekers and family members who have inspired me, supported me and loved me in such profound ways that it has encouraged me to share this beautiful text in the light of their remarkable love for Truth.

- Rajiv



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Introduction

The *Ashtavakra Gita*, one of the most ancient classical spiritual texts that has come down to us from the ancient sages, is a radical scripture of immense intensity, power and purity.

Every word of this spiritual document is capable of producing a deep and profound impact on the reader. The words are packed with so much power that the reader is automatically impelled to walk the path of *Self-Inquiry*.

The relentlessly one-pointed nature of this scripture makes it a unique text as it does not offer any props or footholds, emphasizing the essential need to rise above all dualities and go beyond all identifications and conditionings. The power of the words used, and the manner in which they are used, makes this text stand apart from all other ancient scriptures.

The text of the *Ashtavakra Gita* is so focused that it leaves little room to go beyond Ashtavakra's intended meaning. One is forced to interpret it the way Ashtavakra wanted it to be understood by his

readers. Not many ancient scriptures can make such a claim.

The Gita is presented in the form of a dialogue between Ashtavakra, the Guru, and his disciple, Janaka, King of Mithila. The legend of Ashtavakra, although not very clear and well-defined, has been assigned to a period after the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The story goes that Ashtavakra leaves his home in search of his father, Kahoda, who has been defeated in Janaka's court in an intellectual duel with Sri Vandin, the court-philosopher of Janaka. Kahoda is being held captive due to this defeat. Ashtavakra goes to Mithila, engages the philosopher, Sri Vandin, in an intellectual contest and defeats him, thereby liberating his father from the King's captivity. Subsequently, Ashtavakra wins Janaka's deep respect and the ensuing dialogue, between the Rishi and the King, takes this wonderfully poetic form, 'Gita-Song', known as the *Ashtavakra Gita*.

Ashtavakra is a man of truth and minces no words. He is outspoken to the extent of being blunt, speaking the truth 'as it is' without any artifice or coloring. He is predominantly concerned with his message, rather than its impact (positive or negative)

on the listener. Indeed, he was cursed for this very bluntness even before he was born.

There is a bit of history for this. The *Mahabharata Book 3: Vana Parva: Teerthayatra Parva* mentions a learned Rishi, named Uddalaka, who was famous for his knowledge of the *Vedas* and scriptures. Many students studied under him. One of his disciples was Kahoda, who greatly pleased his Guru with his devotion. So deeply impressed was Uddalaka that when Kahoda finished his studies, he gave him his only daughter Sujata in marriage. After their marriage, the couple continued to reside in the hermitage of Uddalaka where Kahoda assisted his father-in-law in teaching.

In due course of time, Sujata became pregnant. She was in the habit of sitting near her father and husband while they were studying the scriptures, and her unborn child attained mastery over the *Vedas* by listening to his grandfather expounding on them. Kahoda, who was not as skilled as his Guru, made a number of mistakes while reciting the scriptures. Unable to bear these errors, the child started correcting them from his mother's womb! Humiliated before his disciples, Kahoda cursed his

son saying, “*As you insulted your father, may you be born with eight bends in your body!*”

Accordingly, the child was born with his body bent in eight places and was named Ashtavakra (one with eight deformations in his body). His nature of being blunt, uncompromising, and upfront remained with him throughout his life, and is reflected in these dialogues with Janaka. One can witness during the course of these dialogues how adamant Ashtavakra gets in laying down his thoughts.

He entertains no concepts, rejecting them all. He rejects anything that is perceived through the body, mind and intellect. He stresses there is no such thing as existence or non-existence, right or wrong, thoughts or emotions, matter or non-matter, and moral or immoral value systems.

He outrightly rejects the theory of *Maya* (illusion), concepts like personal God (*Ishwara*), ego (*jiva*), and even the existence of a universe (*jagat*). For him, the *Self* (Beyond all Consciousness) is the only Reality and this alone is the Absolute Truth.

Ashtavakra may appear to come across as someone who rejects all forms of spiritual practice. He

completely discounts them as they point to the existence of the doer, the ego. He dares to reject even the most elevated yoga states of attainment such as the various *samadhis*. Absolutely nothing finds any favor with him. But trying to understand Ashtavakra through the medium of the mind is a very dangerous thing to do. Ignorance will continue to prevail as it is not backed by any *sadhana* (practice) or actual realization on the part of the *sadhaka* (spiritual aspirant).

So if you really want to understand Ashtavakra in his essence and purity, you will have to enter into the depths of meditation and make his insights your own personal experience, failing which you will only be deluding yourself and will fall prey to lofty, but empty words.

Large sections of Ashtavakra's dialogues are also symbolic representations of the various states of consciousness experienced during meditation. Taking them as literal interpretations will defeat the very purpose of these dialogues.

A Personal Note...

In the commentaries that follow, I have provided some brief, personal insights into these dialogues. My wish is that a seeker or aspirant realize these truths *within*, for it is only then that he or she¹ can truly understand the level that Ashtavakra speaks from. It is my deep wish that these dialogues inspire seekers to intensify their spiritual pursuits and purify their minds through meditation and deep introspection.

With deepest love, I offer this translation and commentary for the benefit of all readers,

Rajiv Kapur

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1. Since there are frequent references to ‘seekers’ requiring the use of gender third-person singular pronouns, and because it is awkward to repeatedly use phrases such as ‘him or her’ and ‘he or she’, I have resorted to the traditional ‘he’, ‘him’, and ‘his’ when referring to an abstract person. ‘He’ is not to be thought of as male or female. I hope that female readers will understand the use of conventional terms and will not be offended.

Translation

Translation of Chapter 1 Verses

For an in-depth explanation of a particular verse, please click on the number beside that verse.

- 1 *Janaka:* How is knowledge to be acquired? How is Liberation to be attained? And how is detachment to be reached? Tell me this, my Master.
- 2 *Ashtavakra:* If you are seeking Liberation, my son, look upon sense objects as poison. Practice tolerance, sincerity, compassion, contentment and truthfulness.
- 3 You do not consist of any of the elements – earth, water, fire, air, or even ether. To be liberated, know yourself as consisting of Consciousness, the Witness of these.
- 4 If only you can abide in Pure Consciousness (I AM), seeing yourself as detached from the body, even in this very moment you will become happy, peaceful and free from bondage.

- 5 You do not belong to the *Brahmana* or any other caste, you are not at any stage of life (*Ashrama*), nor are you anything that can be perceived through the senses. You are unattached and formless, the Witness of everything, so be happy.
- 6 Righteousness and unrighteousness, pleasure and pain, are purely of the mind and are no concern of yours. YOU are neither the doer nor the reaper of the consequences, so YOU are always free.
- 7 YOU are the one Witness of everything, and are always completely free. The cause of your bondage is that you see the Witness as something other than this.
- 8 You have been bitten by the black snake of egoism, “*I am the doer*”. Drink the nectar of faith, “*I am not the doer*”, and be happy.
- 9 Burn down the forest of ignorance with the fire of understanding that, “*I am the one pure Awareness*”, and be happy and free from distress.

- 10 That joy – in which all this appears and is imagined, like seeing a snake in a rope – that Supreme Joy and Awareness is what you are, so be happy.
- 11 If one thinks of oneself as free, one is free; and if one thinks of oneself as bound, one is bound. Here, the saying, “*Thinking makes it so*” is true.
- 12 The *Self* is the one perfect, free, and actionless Consciousness: the all-pervading Witness, unattached to anything, desireless and at peace. It is an illusion that you seem to be involved in the world.
- 13 Meditate upon the *Self* as motionless Awareness, free from any dualism, giving up the mistaken idea that you are a reflected self (ego), or anything external or internal.
- 14 You have long been trapped in the snare of identification with the body. Sever it with the knife of the knowledge that, “*I am Pure Consciousness*”, and be happy, my son.
- 15 You are really unattached and actionless, self-luminous and without any taints already. The

cause of your bondage is that you practice meditation.

- 16 You pervade this universe and this universe is superimposed on you. By nature you are Pure Consciousness. Do not give in to the pettiness of the mind.
- 17 You are unconditioned and changeless, dense, profound in intellect and unperturbed, so remain rooted in Pure Consciousness alone.
- 18 Know that which appears as a form to be false, and the formless to be changeless. Through this spiritual instruction you will cease to be born again.
- 19 Just as a mirror exists everywhere, both within and apart from its reflected images, so the *Supreme Self* exists everywhere, within and apart from this body.
- 20 Just as one and the same all-pervading space exists within and without a jar, so the immutable and all-encompassing *Self* exists in all beings and things.

Chapter 1 Verses in Sanskrit

- 1 जनक उवाच ॥
कथं ज्ञानमवाप्नोति कथं मुक्तिर्भविष्यति ।
वैराग्यं च कथं प्राप्तं एतद् ब्रूहि मम प्रभो ॥ १-१ ॥
- 2 अष्टावक्र उवाच ॥
मुक्तिं इच्छसि चेत्तात् विषयान् विषवत्त्यज ।
क्षमार्जवदयातोषसत्यं पीयूषवद् भज ॥ १-२ ॥
- 3 न पृथ्वी न जलं नागिनर्न वायुद्यौर्न वा भवान् ।
एषां साक्षिणमात्मानं चिह्नपं विद्धि मुक्तये ॥ १-३ ॥
- 4 यदि देहं पृथक् कृत्य चिति विश्राम्य तिष्ठसि ।
अधुनैव सुखी शान्तो बन्धमुक्तो भविष्यसि ॥ १-४ ॥
- 5 न त्वं विप्रादिको वर्णो नाश्रमी नाक्षगोचरः ।
असङ्गोऽसि निराकारो विश्वसाक्षी सुखी भव ॥ १-५ ॥
- 6 धर्माधर्मौ सुखं दुःखं मानसानि न ते विभो ।
न कर्तासि न भोक्तासि मुक्त एवासि सर्वदा ॥ १-६ ॥
- 7 एको द्रष्टासि सर्वस्य मुक्तप्रायोऽसि सर्वदा ।
अयमेव हि ते बन्धो द्रष्टारं पश्यसीतरम् ॥ १-७ ॥
- 8 अहं कर्तेत्यहंमानमहाकृष्णाहिदंशितः ।
नाहं कर्तेति विश्वासामृतं पीत्वा सुखी भव ॥ १-८ ॥
- १ एको विशुद्धबोधोऽहं इति निश्चयवह्निना ।
प्रज्वाल्याज्ञानगहनं वीतशोकः सुखी भव ॥ १-९ ॥

- 10 यत्र विश्वमिदं भाति कल्पितं रज्जुसर्पवत् ।
आनन्दपरमानन्दः स बोधस्त्वं सुखं भव ॥ १-१० ॥
- 11 मुक्ताभिमानी मुक्तो हि बद्धो बद्धाभिमान्यपि ।
किंवदन्तीह सत्येयं या मतिः सा गतिर्भवेत् ॥ १-११ ॥
- 12 आत्मा साक्षी विभुः पूर्ण एको मुक्तश्चिदक्रियः ।
असंगो निःस्पृहः शान्तो भ्रमात्संसारवानिव ॥ १-१२ ॥
- 13 कूटस्थं बोधमद्वैतमात्मानं परिभावय ।
आभासोऽहं भ्रमं मुक्त्वा भावं बाह्यमथान्तरम् ॥ १-१३ ॥
- 14 देहाभिमानपाशेन चिरं बद्धोऽसि पुत्रक ।
बोधोऽहं ज्ञानखंगेन तःनिकृत्य सुखी भव ॥ १-१४ ॥
- 15 निःसंगो निष्क्रियोऽसि त्वं स्वप्रकाशो निरंजनः ।
अयमेव हि ते बन्धः समाधिमनुतिष्ठति ॥ १-१५ ॥
- 16 त्वया व्याप्तमिदं विश्वं त्वयि प्रोतं यथार्थतः ।
शुद्धबुद्धस्वरूपस्त्वं मा गमः क्षुद्रचित्तताम् ॥ १-१६ ॥
- 17 निरपेक्षो निर्विकारो निर्भरः शीतलाशयः ।
अगाधबुद्धिरक्षुब्धो भव चिन्मात्रवासनः ॥ १-१७ ॥
- 18 साकारमनृतं विद्धि निराकारं तु निश्चलम् ।
एतत्तत्त्वोपदेशेन न पुनर्भवसंभवः ॥ १-१८ ॥
- 19 यथैवादर्शमध्यस्थे रूपेऽन्तः परितस्तु सः ।
तथैवाऽस्मिन् शरीरेऽन्तः परितः परमेश्वरः ॥ १-१९ ॥
- 20 एकं सर्वगतं व्योम बहिरन्तर्यथा घटे ।
नित्यं निरन्तरं ब्रह्म सर्वभूतगणे तथा ॥ १-२० ॥

Commentary

Verse 1

जनक उवाच ॥

कथं ज्ञानमवाप्नोति कथं मुक्तिर्भविष्यति ।
वैराग्यं च कथं प्राप्तं एतद् ब्रूहि मम प्रभो ॥ १-१ ॥

janaka uvāca:

*katham jñānamavāpnoti katham muktirbhaviṣyati
vairāgyam ca katham prāptam etad brūhi mama prabho*



Janaka: How is knowledge to be acquired? How is Liberation to be attained? And how is detachment to be reached? Tell me this, my Master.

Commentary: Our goal in life has always been to seek happiness. From time immemorial we have been trying to find happiness everywhere, except within one's own *Self*, and we have failed pathetically in finding it. True and lasting happiness has always eluded us. A seeker is witness to the fact that most of his own life (and the lives of those around him) has been wasted in accumulating wealth, position and the personal love of family and friends; yet he cannot find lasting happiness in any of these activities.

Just as water quickly slips away from one's palms, so also do the joy and contentment of these achievements slip away, leaving a seeker disillusioned, disheartened and craving for more. A seeker's thirst for permanent joy and happiness remains unquenched in spite of all material gains.

When the seeker further inquires as to why this is so, he finds that the very objects he thought would bring him joy and happiness are the cause of his unhappiness. Nothing of this world, or belonging to this world, can ever give permanent happiness!

To be really happy one not only needs freedom from one's dependence on sense objects, but also the

ability to remain in one's own sense of I AM. Then alone can one have everlasting joy and bliss. It is at this stage, when the futility of material gains is realized, that Janaka puts these three questions to his teacher.

Janaka symbolizes the state of mind of a *sadhaka* (spiritual aspirant) who is desperate to get these answers from his teacher. Answering such questions is not an easy task as the seeker is habituated to outwardly indulging in various sense objects.

Since these questions were actually posed by Janaka, it gives us reason to believe that he was not fully enlightened as yet, although he was a very advanced *sadhaka*.

Verse 2

अष्टावक्र उवाच ॥

मुक्तिं इच्छसि चेत्तात् विषयान् विषवत्यज ।
क्षमार्जवदयातोषसत्यं पीयूषवद् भज ॥ १-२ ॥

aṣṭāvakra uvāca:

*muktim icchasi cettāta viṣayān viṣavattyaja
kṣamārjavadayātoṣasatyam pīyūṣavad bhaja*



Ashtavakra: If you are seeking Liberation, my son, look upon sense objects as poison. Practice tolerance, sincerity, compassion, contentment and truthfulness.

Commentary: The Master's advice is one-pointed and very clear. Sense objects drive our minds outwards. They make us dependent on them. The objects lure the mind and intellect towards them and the fulfillment of the senses gives the seeker a false sense of satisfaction and joy, albeit of a temporary nature. But soon, he will come to know that the ugly fangs of *vasanas* (tendencies) will rise again to torment him. If he is able to quench his thirst, he will be happy for some time; but if he is not able to do so, then he will be sorrowful and miserable. That is why the Master advises the seeker to treat objects of the senses like poison.

This does not mean that a seeker cannot possess these objects for enjoyment. It is very commonly misunderstood that a spiritual aspirant has to literally renounce the world, and all worldly objects, if *Self-Realization* is to be attained. This is not a correct understanding.

Physical renunciation is very trivial and, in fact, not even desirable as it can increase the desire and frustration in an unprepared mind in which the seeds of *vasanas* remain. One fateful day, the seed will germinate and cause much mental anguish and disturbance in a *sadhaka's* life. Therefore it is

advisable to let the objects have their own place and let them remain where they are.

The only aim of a *sadhaka* should be to figure out whether these objects are real, or mere illusions. When a deep inquiry is made, through inner introspection and meditation, it will be known that these objects all disappear when the mind disappears. They have no independent existence of their own but were just projections of the mind. The strong message here is that a serious *sadhaka* must not pay attention to them and instead must focus and direct his attention within, to the Source from which everything manifests.

The virtues listed in this verse (practice tolerance, sincerity, compassion, contentment, truthfulness) are carefully chosen and are essential aids to *Self-Realization*. Ashtavakra believed that, in the contemporary context, it was necessary for him to talk on moral virtues. In fact, this is the only verse in the entire dialogue where Ashtavakra speaks on morality; later, he shuns this as a hindrance. However, in the context of the question, he feels that it is necessary to expound on this as well. There is a valid reason for him to do so. A good teacher, on occasion, has to descend to the level of the

student. Even an advanced *sadhaka* like Janaka operates from a plane of duality and is plagued by questions relating to human relationships and forms of mental reactions. Even in the most advanced state, problems related to personal and professional life and relationships emerge in the mind of a *sadhaka*.

There could be problems relating to one's job, family or friends, health or financial situation. For that reason, Ashtavakra provides moral injunctions for better outward behavior in order to help the *sadhaka* develop inner mental strength. He knows that to remove the thorns of sensuality and mental impurity he will have to use a third thorn, that of moral governance through self-discipline.

Once the goal is reached, Ashtavakra does not feel the need to impose any moral code on a *sadhaka* who has transcended the relative field of duality and follows the path of virtue spontaneously, through his inner promptings.

Verse 3

न पृथ्वी न जलं नागिनं वायुद्यौर्न वा भवान् ।
एषां साक्षिणमात्मानं चिद्रूपं विद्धि मुक्तये ॥ १-३ ॥

*na pr̥thvī na jalām nāgnirna vāyurdyaurna vā bhavān
eṣāṁ sākṣiṇamātmānam cidrūpam viddhi muktaye*



You do not consist of any of the elements – earth, water, fire, air, or even ether. To be liberated, know yourself as consisting of Consciousness, the Witness of these.

Commentary: The biggest cause of our suffering is the belief that we are this gross body. This gross body is nothing but the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether.

It is important to understand that the gross body does not belong to us, but to the five elements. On the predestined date, the five elements will take back what belongs to them and the body will turn to dust.

If we truly owned the body it would remain with us forever. Yet, most of us identify with our bodies and engage in various *vasanas* and pursuits of pleasure to make the body and senses happy, and no attention is paid to the real 'I', the one who is prior to these five elements.

It is possible, through inquiry and meditation, to have the knowledge that the one who is prior to these elements, the one who is 'witness' of these elements, is not the gross body. [*To 'witness' is to 'see, hear or know by presence and perception' what is happening.*]

Through perseverance and dedicated practice, it can be easily realized that Pure Being is the Witness of the gross body. The gross body, with all its activities,

can be watched from a distance and the seeker finds his true center, which is Pure Being, without identifying with this or that. Once this is established, not just as a mental knowing but through direct realization, the deep identification with the body of five elements is broken and the *sadhaka* remains in the blissful state of I AM.

Verse 4

यदि देहं पृथक् कृत्य चिति विश्राम्य तिष्ठसि ।
अधुनैव सुखी शान्तो बन्धमुक्तो भविष्यसि ॥ १-४ ॥

*yadi deham pṛthak kṛtya citi viśrāmya tiṣṭhasi
adhunaiva sukhi śānto bandhamukto bhaviṣyasi*



If only you can abide in Pure Consciousness (I AM), seeing yourself as detached from the body, even this very moment you will become happy, peaceful and free from bondage.

Commentary: Here, the sage declares that the moment you see that you are not this body of five elements, you will at once become happy and joyous. However, one has to actually ‘see’ that.

This means actual realization and not just knowing it as a mere mental concept. It means actual first-hand experience. It involves practicing the principles of *Self-Inquiry* which include sitting for formal meditation.

When you realize that your true center is that of a witness of this body, then the identification with the body drops and you at once experience joy and bliss. This joy or bliss is not the result of any effort, but the natural consequence of breaking the false illusion that, *I am this body*.

Joy or Bliss, our true, permanent nature, continuously flows through every part of our being. However, we fail to experience it because it remains hidden by the identification with the body, just as the Sun remains hidden by the clouds in the sky. Once the clouds pass, the Sun will be visible in all its glory.

The trouble with us is that we move with the clouds (body/mind/ego) and fail to focus our gaze steadily

on the Sun (the pure I AM). If we one-pointedly remain stabilized in our sense of pure I AM, then we can always see (and experience) ourselves as that Joy and Bliss.

For those wishing to learn how to develop an effective Self-Inquiry practice and make it an integral part of each day, please go to <http://www.rajivkapur.com> for information on the Implosive Self-Inquiry Protocol™.

Verse 5

न त्वं विप्रादिको वर्णो नाश्रमी नाक्षगोचरः ।
असङ्गोऽसि निराकारो विश्वसाक्षी सुखी भव ॥ १-५ ॥

*na tvam viprādiko varṇo nāśramī nākṣagocaraḥ
asaṅgo'si nirākāro viśvasākṣī sukhī bhava*



You do not belong to the *Brahmana* or any other caste, you are not at any stage of life (*Ashrama*), nor are you anything that can be perceived through the senses. You are unattached and formless, the Witness of everything, so be happy.

Commentary: In ancient India, the caste system and *Ashramas* pervaded several aspects of social life.

The caste system at that time dictated the type of occupation a person could pursue based on his individual personality and inclination. India's caste system had four main categories (also called '*Varnas*') based originally on personality, but later exploited by society (mostly by the upper caste) to meet its own selfish motives.

The four classes were: *Brahmana* (priests, teachers), *Kshatriya* (warriors, administrators), *Vaishya* (farmers, traders) and *Shudra* (artisans, workers).

The four *Ashramas*, namely, *Brahmacharya* (celibate student of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, etc.), *Grahastra* (householder), *Vanaprastha* (retired forest dweller) and *Sanyasa* (renunciate), are the four stages of an individual's journey on the way to Liberation. Depending on what stage of life an individual was at, and in which age bracket he fell, he was required to give preference and attention to the various duties relevant to that particular stage.

A deep practice of *Self-Inquiry* will, over time, reveal to us that the four *Varnas*, and the four *Ashramas*,

are symbolic stages of the spiritual evolution of a *sadhaka*.

The four *Varnas* represent the various states of *vasanas* (hidden or latent tendencies or habits) which a seeker comes face-to-face with during his spiritual journey inwards.

The *Shudra* state is where the seeker performs various rituals outwardly with no deeper desire to dive within. He does not perform his *sadhana* (practice) with great intensity. He just does it because he believes he needs to do it as a duty; there is no great earnestness or real thirst from within. He remains identified with his body/mind and quickly digresses from the path when the latent tendencies emerge.

The *Vaishya* state is one in which the aspirant performs spiritual rituals and *sadhana* in order to achieve or attain something in return. He is a trader whose only goal is to gain something from such actions. He holds on to the ignorant belief that he is the ‘doer’.

The *Kshatriya* state is one in which the real inner challenges emerge. This is the ‘cooking’ phase.

When the aspirant reaches this state, he finds that his *sadhana* is stirring up various unwanted and often negative emotions which come to the surface. He finds himself face-to-face with various inherent *vasanas* which were hidden beneath. He becomes increasingly aware of them and they shake his confidence slightly.

The seeker has to be careful here as he may get perplexed and confused. The presence of a spiritual teacher is most helpful during this state. A spiritual teacher often creates some situations to shake a student's confidence. Such 'cooking' lessons are not to harm him, but to make him stronger and to help him face his deepest fears. When the seeker transcends this state, he reaches the final one.

The *Brahmana* state is one in which the *sadhaka* is firmly established in Pure Being (I AM). Every mental tendency, *vasana*, thought and emotion is known to be unreal. The individual 'I-ness' too disappears. Nothing touches the *sadhaka* resting so deeply in Pure Beingness. Everything rises and falls on the state of Pure Beingness, but nothing affects his bliss, joy and happiness.

The four *Ashramas* represent the four states of Consciousness, often referred to as ‘bodies’.

The *Brahmacharya* state of Consciousness is the nascent state. Here the aspirant starts with great fervor and enthusiasm in his *sadhana*. He is encouraged by the early results he gets on this path and experiences great joy and peace, and a natural sense of bliss. However, this is not a permanent state as this bliss and joy disappears, leaving the aspirant disillusioned, unhappy and, in most cases, chasing the memory of such joy and bliss.

The aspirant does not understand that this is part of his *sadhana*, and only a step forward towards deep understanding. Typically, the *sadhaka* can experience oneness and get a few glimpses of bliss and silence, but they all emanate from the mind and only last for fleeting periods. All such experiences are pertaining to the waking state where the experiencer is still identified with the gross body. This represents the *Brahmacharya* state of Consciousness.

The *Grihasta* state is one in which the mind goes through a variety of great experiences. It is the state in which one day may bring some wonderful

phenomenon, while another may be completely dry. It is a challenging state for the *sadhaka* as he will oscillate between good days and bad days.

This state involves the subtle body. Amazing magical phenomena like out-of-body experiences and astral projections are experienced by the *sadhaka* in this state. At the same time, it is coupled with days where inner latent tendencies like past bad habits, fear, laziness and lack of faith in the teacher or teachings are also felt, confusing the seeker and challenging his faith.

The *Vanaprastha* state represents the causal state of nothingness. ‘*Van*’ means forest. This state is symbolized by the darkness and deep silence of a forest. Here there is only the experience of a void and emptiness. It is a state of utter darkness and many *sadhakas* feel fearful in this state and therefore have difficulty in transcending this stage. Hence, most remain stuck here. Just as one can get lost in a forest without help and direction from a guide, most *sadhakas* can get lost without the help of a spiritual teacher.

The *Sanyasa* state is the state of *Turiya*. Here, even nothingness is dropped. There is only Joy perceived,

and the *sadhaka* remains immersed in that ocean of pure, unblemished Bliss, the principle of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*.

Ashtavakra is actually trying to declare that YOU are beyond all these experiences of the mind and also beyond the four states of Consciousness (four bodies).

YOU are even beyond *Turiya*, as that too is an object. YOU are beyond every perception. YOU can never be the object and hence can never be perceived, just as the eye cannot see itself.

Having said that, I feel that it is very important for a seeker to not only experience these states or stages, but also to stabilize in them for some time. These are important sign posts along the way to the Absolute.

Verse 6

धर्माधर्मौ सुखं दुःखं मानसानि न ते विभो ।
न कर्तासि न भोक्तासि मुक्त एवासि सर्वदा ॥ १-६ ॥

*dharma-dharmau sukham duḥkham mānasāni na te vibho
na kartāsi na bhoktāsi mukta evāsi sarvadā*



Righteousness and unrighteousness, pleasure and pain, are purely of the mind and are no concern of yours. YOU are neither the doer nor the reaper of the consequences, so YOU are always free.

Commentary: In this relative world of duality, every individual goes through experiences like pleasure and pain, right and wrong, fear and courage and so on.

It is our basic nature to avoid suffering and pain and only accept happiness and joy. In this pursuit we indulge in various vices and sins. We fail to see what lies beyond the mind, and *that* is the cause of our suffering.

All of these experiences exist as long as the mind exists. Beyond the mind, none of these dualities remain.

Ashtavakra advises an aspirant to remain steadfast in his *sadhana*, irrespective of whether or not he experiences joy in his meditations, as these are all the workings of the mind.

Without a sense of ‘doership’, and without thinking whether or not he will get anything in return, the aspirant should simply devote whatever time he can in the worship of his sense of beingness.

The individual ego exists so long as the mind exists; the two are interdependent. When the mind is transcended, the ego is automatically dropped.

The Absolute Truth is that there is no such thing as ‘mind’ or ‘ego’. They are both false appearances. We are always free, but we imagine we are bound by the chains of the mind and ego.

Verse 7

एको द्रष्टासि सर्वस्य मुक्तप्रायोऽसि सर्वदा ।
अयमेव हि ते बन्धो द्रष्टारं पश्यसीतरम् ॥ १-७ ॥

*eko draṣṭāsi sarvasya muktaprāyo'si sarvadā
ayameva hi te bandho draṣṭāram paśyasītaram*



YOU are the one Witness of everything and are always completely free. The cause of your bondage is that you see the Witness as something other than this.

Commentary: The key word used here by the sage is ‘see’. It is common sense that we rightfully believe what we see. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, we should not have blind faith in anything. We should be able to see and experience things for ourselves and not simply hold on to what the scriptures or our teachers tell us. We must be ready to verify everything; and a spiritual teacher must be open to allowing a student to do so.

To properly ‘see’ we must first learn to actually observe things in-depth with a keen and attentive mind; because whatever we see, we become.

What do I mean when I say that what the ‘I’ sees, it becomes? What I mean to say is, you perceive reality on the basis of what you see. That becomes your reality. You do not need anybody to give you any proof of your reality – you *know* it. For example, you see gross matter around you, this gross body, and do you not say, “*I am the body*”?

Now, the same ‘you,’ when you go into your dreams at night, watches the dream state. ‘You’ see it, ‘you’ identify with that dream state, that dream character, and now ‘you’ become that astral or subtle body. During your sleep, that dream phase, you do not

remember your ‘waking state’ identity. You now identify with the dream character, whoever it is. Even if you retain your waking state identity in the dream, the character, the situation, everything has changed. The *reality* itself changes.

For example, sometimes in a dream you may feel you are falling down a hill. And sometimes, in another dream you may feel that you have taken an examination and that you have failed. New realities emerge in each dream, and those have nothing to do with your present situation. But each dream seems so real!

So, your ‘I’ has changed .

However, when a serious seeker first begins *Self-Inquiry*, or takes up a spiritual pursuit, he observes these two states very minutely, and comes to the conclusion – “*I am not the body, because I can watch it. I am not the thoughts, because I stand independent of them. I can watch them. I can watch the rising and falling of my emotions, thoughts and dreams and I stand aside of them. They do not touch me. They are there, but they come and they go.*”

On deeper inquiry within, the seeker encounters the void: the blank, empty space devoid of any emotions, thoughts, dreams or images. On seeing that void, he *becomes* the void – the nothingness (*causal body*).

On even deeper inquiry, he sees that he is apart from the void as well, and that he lies beyond that state of nothingness. He then discovers an ocean of joy arising and pervading the entire universe and then *becomes* that Joy (*Supra-causal state*). The three states – gross body, subtle body and causal body – arise and fall on this joyous state, which is the state of pure I AM.

All of the above have only happened because we have cared to look deeply within. Just looking has done it. We have not attained anything new. We have only seen what was hidden behind our thoughts, emotions, images, dreams, the void, etc. And when we see That, we become That.

Ashatvakra further states that the cause of our bondage is that we do not see ourselves as the Seer or the Witness.

This is perhaps the most important statement made by Ashtavakra in this entire dialogue. Here, he declares that the real ‘I’ cannot be the ‘object’. We are used to objectifying everything, seeing and experiencing objects, but the fact is that a ‘subject’ can never be an object.

As long as you are becoming something, as long as the observer is present, know that the ‘I’ still exists for you. This is a very important point.

Many seekers stop their spiritual journey at this stage. They have some experience of oneness, some experience of nothingness or emptiness, some experience of joy. They may even become nothingness or joy. They then feel there is nothing more to do, so they stop. But the fact is, as long as they are becoming ‘something’, there is an ‘I’.

As long as there is an ‘I’ who has observed this, the ‘I’ is still present. The journey, the inquiry has not come to an end.

Inquiry only comes to an end when there is neither the observer, the observed, nor the observation. No witness, no witnessing, no witnessed! Until such

time comes, *Self-Inquiry* is not complete. So we must not give up inquiry until the very end.

All ‘becoming’ – everything that we ‘become’ – is false. It is still an illusion. As long as we know that ‘I’ have become ‘something’, *Self-Inquiry* is not finished.

Self-Inquiry achieves its goal only when the ‘I’ becomes unknown, that is, non-existent.

Verse 8

अहं कर्तेत्यहंमानमहाकृष्णाहिदंशितः ।
नाहं कर्तेति विश्वासामृतं पीत्वा सुखी भव ॥ १-८ ॥

*aham kartetyaham mānamahākṛṣṇāhidamśitah
nāham karteti viśvāsāmṛtam pītvā sukhī bhava*



You have been bitten by the black snake of egoism, “*I am the doer*”. Drink the nectar of faith, “*I am not the doer*”, and be happy.

Commentary: One's sense of doership comes from the ignorance that "*I do this and I do that*", "*I want this and I want that*".

The black serpent is the ego. It unleashes its poison which is the sense of doership. When bitten and infected by that poison, the seeker becomes possessed and commits the gravest of all sins: identification with 'I' or ego-mind.

A human being is inherently sinless and no sin can touch him. It is the identification with the body/mind/ego which causes him, and those around him, much misery. The black serpent, the ego, casts a spell on him, and in that hypnotic trance he dances to the tune of that which has no independent existence.

Ashtavakra advises the seeker to 'drink the nectar of faith'. Faith is such a critical component, and an almost instant remedy, for de-hypnotizing himself. The *sadhaka* must consciously and continuously maintain, "*I am not the doer*" and surrender everything to Mother Consciousness, no matter what appears, whether good or bad.

It is true that faith cannot be cultivated, as it is a gift of Grace. Nevertheless, it is important to understand and *believe*, at least at the intellectual level, that one is not the ‘doer’. When such a mental assertion is made, then an aspirant, in due course, begins to experience a sweet nectar flowing in his spiritual Heart. This helps him to remain more firmly stabilized at the spiritual Heart where, through deeper meditations, he is able to witness the disappearance of mind, breath, and *prana* (life-force), and with them, the black serpent of the ego.

Verse 9

एको विशुद्धबोधोऽहं इति निश्चयवह्निना ।
प्रज्वाल्याज्ञानगहनं वीतशोकः सुखी भव ॥ १-९ ॥

*eko viśuddhabodho'ham iti niścayavahninā
prajvālyājñānagahanam vītaśokah sukhī bhava*



Burn down the forest of ignorance with the fire of understanding that “*I am the one Pure Awareness*”, and be happy and free from distress.

Commentary: The ‘forest’ of ignorance symbolizes the causal state of nothingness. This is purely an experiential state that an aspirant reaches in deep meditation.

Beyond the gross body and subtle body lies the causal state. It is a state of darkness and silence, yet it is also a state of ignorance because the ego is still intact. It is the most vulnerable of all states in meditation as a *sadhaka* can easily get lost here, within the void.

Most *sadhakas* remain stuck in the void. It is compared to a dark and silent forest where a seeker can easily lose his way. Confusion and fear plague his mind. This is why the presence of a Guru is essential at this stage.

The Guru’s guidance can help the seeker transcend this fearful and challenging state. Through proper instruction and Grace, Consciousness (the mind) drops into the navel effortlessly. The navel is symbolic of the fire element, *Agni*. Once Consciousness drops to the navel, the seeker will instantly become one with everything. The entire world will be no different from him. There will be no division between him and everything else in the

entire universe. The body disappears, all names and form disappear and, in total *samadhi*, he becomes one with the universe.

Later, even the universe becomes small in comparison with you and is seen as rising and falling at the spiritual Heart. You become far more expansive than the entire universe and have the feeling that you are its creator.

You hold the universe *within* you. There is no greater happiness for you to know, then, that this universe is born *out of you* and that YOU are the Source of all.

Verse 10

यत्र विश्वमिदं भाति कल्पितं रज्जुसर्पवत् ।
आनन्दपरमानन्दः स बोधस्त्वं सुखं भव ॥ १-१० ॥

*yatra viśvamidam bhāti kalpitam rajjusarpavat
ānandaparamānandaḥ sa bodhastvam sukham bhava*



That joy – in which all this appears and is imagined, like seeing a snake in a rope – that Supreme Joy and Awareness is what you are, so be happy.

Commentary: Ashtavakra declares that you are the Supreme Joy itself. Supreme Joy means all pleasures pale in comparison to what is experienced as your true sense of I AMness.

This is a state of tremendous joy which is inconceivable and unimaginable. This is referred to as *Sat-Chit-Ananda* because it is the state of complete *Jnana* (True Knowledge): a pure, unadulterated state of Consciousness and Supreme Joy.

It is here, in this state, that a *sadhaka* gets knowledge of the true source of I AMness. The seeker learns that it originates from the spiritual Heart from where waves of bliss rise and fall.

You explode with such intensity that there comes the feeling, '*I am the creator of this entire universe.*'

The Source, or substratum, is this Joy, and the universe is only a superimposition on that Joy. You exist beyond this entire universe, but in your ignorance you have completely failed to look at the Source.

You have mistakenly identified with the unreal. But once the substratum is apprehended, the illusory super-impositions will immediately disappear and the delusion of the 'snake' will end with the

awareness that it is, in truth, only a rope. Hence, Ashtavakra enjoins the seeker to arrive at such awareness and be supremely happy.

Verse 11

मुक्ताभिमानी मुक्तो हि बद्धो बद्धाभिमान्यपि ।
किंवदन्तीह सत्येयं या मतिः सा गतिर्भवेत् ॥ १-११ ॥

*muktābhimānī mukto hi baddho baddhābhimānyapi
kimvadantīha satyeyam yā matih sā gatirbhavet*



If one thinks of oneself as free one is free; and if one thinks of oneself as bound, one is bound. Here, the saying, “Thinking makes it so” is true.

Commentary: It is a well known saying that, “*as we think so we become*”. Thoughts dictate our lives. We experience everything through thought. Thought is the starting point for *everything* that manifests in our lives.

Our sense of being, and how we feel, is usually dictated by our thoughts. If we smell success in something, we feel good; and if we think we will fail, we do not feel good. If we anticipate future trouble, we will experience pain (mental or physical); and if we think everything will work out well, we will be happy or at peace.

It is thought that feeds what we actually feel. A good thought naturally helps us to feel good, to feel happy, and a bad thought creates a mental (or physical) disturbance. We must, therefore, try and think as positively as we can, and avoid negativity as much as we can. This effort will enrich our lives and the lives of those around us.

Thought is energy, and when it becomes forceful and strong enough (positively or negatively), it becomes matter and can help, or harm, the aspirant and others.

So the first step is to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. By thinking good thoughts and by being good, you will always feel good.

The second step is at a much deeper level. Here you trace back to the origin, the source, of thought itself. You take one step back from all thoughts and become a witness of them. You bring yourself to the center, prior to what rises and falls by way of thoughts, emotions and memories.

You will find that pleasant, or unpleasant, events/happenings/experiences will not touch your sense of being and that you will be happy all the time. You will no longer be affected by any thought, emotion, fear or memory. Like clouds, everything will pass by without remaining with YOU for long. There will be only one thought and that will be, "*I am Joy*".

"*I am ever new Joy*" is the only thought that you will know, and then you become that Supreme Joy. Then it becomes real meditation, where Consciousness becomes aware of only Itself and nothing else.

This is what Ashtavakra means when he says, "*As you think so you become*". It is about direct experience and not a mere mental affirmation.

This is in direct contrast to the neo-Advaita teaching which declares that you are free right at this very moment, and that there is nothing to do with respect to any *sadhana* except holding the highest truth. This is merely another mental concept.

The *Bhagavad Gita* sums this up perfectly.

Lord Krishna says, “*O son of Kunti, the fate of man after death is decided by the thought that predominates in the moment of death. That thought is the foundation on which the next birth is built.*”

[Chapter 8, verse 6.]

Note, that the Lord says it is that one predominant thought which determines the state of a seeker. So, if your most dominant thought is that of joy and bliss, then this will be your fate, free of all sufferings arising from identification with the ego.

However, it is important to realize that this final, dominant thought at death is hardly going to be one of joy and bliss if you are habituated to thinking negatively and have remained identified with your body/mind.

Verse 12

आत्मा साक्षी विभुः पूर्ण एको मुक्तश्चिदक्रियः ।
असंगो निःस्पृहः शान्तो भ्रमात्संसारवानिव ॥ १-१२ ॥

*ātmā sākṣī vibhuḥ pūrṇa eko muktaścidakriyāḥ
asamgo niḥsprahāḥ śānto bhramātsaṁsāravāniva*



The *Self* is the one perfect, free, and actionless Consciousness: the all-pervading Witness, unattached to anything, desireless and at peace. It is an illusion that you seem to be involved in the world.

Commentary: The *Self* is the Witness. It watches everything from a distance and is in no way affected by, or involved in, anything that appears or disappears. It is perfect and ever free, completely devoid of any sense of doership.

The cause of our suffering is the illusion that makes it appear as if “*I am the doer*”, or “*I am the enjoyer*” or “*I am the one suffering*”. The mind has created all of these false illusions; and we have identified with that falseness and gotten trapped in its workings.

Sri Ramana Maharshi illustrated this wonderfully. He asked us to notice what happens during a movie and how we get carried away with what is shown on screen. We look at the images that are being projected on the blank screen and believe them to be real. These images can make us laugh or cry, depending on what is being shown on the screen.

We do not see the light that projects the images, or the screen on which the images are being projected. We only look at the projected images, identify with them, and react and respond to them.

The images we see are completely false and cannot exist without the screen: the substratum for all that ‘appears’.

Only the screen is real, as it remains eternally unchanged, even when the images keep changing. The screen is not affected by anything that is superimposed on it. It is always the same. It accepts all types of images – bad and good.

The screen is eternally pure and pristine. Even if the projected images show blood stains and violence, the screen remains untainted. Even when the movie lights finally go off (physical death), the screen remains unchanged.

The screen is the *Self*, and the images are all the thought patterns, emotions, body forms and the individual ‘I-ness’ that are superimposed on the *Self*.

A *Jnani* knows that all such superimpositions are unreal and false appearances. He remains the background *Self*: blissful, desireless and actionless Consciousness.

Verse 13

कूटस्थं बोधमद्वैतमात्मानं परिभावय ।
आभासोऽहं भ्रमं मुक्त्वा भावं बाह्यमथान्तरम् ॥ १-१३ ॥

*kūṭasthaṁ bodhamadvaitamātmānam paribhāvaya
ābhāso'ham bhramam muktvā bhāvam bāhyamathāntaram*



Meditate upon the *Self* as motionless Awareness, free from any dualism, giving up the mistaken idea that you are a reflected self (ego), or anything external or internal.

Commentary: The word ‘*Kutastha*’ has great prominence in spiritual practice. It is even mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The term ‘*Kuta*’ has three meanings: ‘unchanging’, ‘mountain top’ and ‘mystery’. All three meanings are suggested in this term ‘*Kuta*’.

It is only the *Self* which remains unchanged while everything around it changes. The *Self* alone is the highest Reality, and it alone remains hidden behind the play of *Maya*. So *Kutastha* means the *Self* – the real ‘I’.

Most ancient Vedic scriptures advocate the need to meditate on the *Supreme Self (Atma)*, one-pointedly, without letting the mind wander into sense objects. By doing so, one can realize one’s true nature. Similarly, Ashtavakra recommends that the duty of a *sadhaka* must be to devote his full attention and devotion towards the *Self* alone, unaffected by whatever changes are happening within and outside of him.

This is the only time in the entire dialogue where Ashtavakra prescribes meditation for the *sadhaka*. He acknowledges the need for regular practice of

meditation so that the *sadhaka* remains stabilized at a particular point, and for a considerable duration.

Once complete stability is achieved, Ashtavakra advises the *sadhaka* to shun every form of meditation as he feels it is then unnecessary. As the *sadhaka* continues to hold this state, the time will eventually come when the *Self* holds the *sadhaka*. He does not need to do anything except rest in the *Self* – his True Nature.

Personal Note: During my own Kriya yoga practice, we often came across the word ‘*Kutastha*’. We were asked to ‘penetrate’ the *Kutastha*. For many years I looked inside the void and enthusiastically looked forward to entering the *Kutastha*. I kept searching, but I found everything else *except* the *Self*.

I experienced various lofty states such as seeing bright lights, dark tunnels, and various suns and moons, but I never could find the *Self*. This is because the *Self* can never be the *object* of one’s meditation.

The *Self* is always the *subject* and is the looker Itself. A *sadhaka*’s biggest mistake is trying to find the *Self*, when in fact the looker himself is the true *Self*. One

of my teachers guided me away from the void and helped me sink backwards into the *Self*, as the *Self*. This helped me realize the true meaning of '*Kutastha*'. I was very fortunate to be so guided, as otherwise I might have been struggling with the void and the third eye for many more years.

Verse 14

देहाभिमानपाशेन चिरं बद्धोऽसि पुत्रक ।
बोधोऽहं ज्ञानखंगेन तःनिकृत्य सुखी भव ॥ १-१४ ॥

*dehābhīmānapāśena ciram baddho'si putraka
bodho'ham jñānakhaṅgena taḥnikṛtya sukhī Bhava*



You have long been trapped in the snare of identification with the body. Sever it with the knife of the knowledge that, “*I am Pure Consciousness*”, and be happy, my son.

Commentary: Here it would be wise to bring up an ancient tale from India about a lion cub who was raised by a flock of sheep, instead of his own mother.

The sheep were very kind and raised the lion cub (we will call it the ‘sheep-lion’) as their own. The sheep-lion grew up among them, believing he too was a sheep. He slept with them, played with them, ate grass with them, and bleated when they did. He also became as fearful as they did at the appearance of a potential threat.

Years went by. One day an enormous lion leapt out from behind some trees and threatened the flock of sheep. They huddled together, terrified. That is when the lion noticed the sheep-lion shaking and hiding in the middle of the flock. The sheep-lion was bleating instead of roaring. The lion asked, “*Why are you bleating instead of roaring? Why are you living among sheep? You are a lion!*”

The sheep-lion simply did not believe this. He had lived like a sheep all his life. Frightened, he tried to run away. But the larger lion caught him and dragged him to a lake where he told him to look at his reflection in the water. The sheep-lion leaned

over and saw his own face for the first time. He saw that he was indeed a lion, not a sheep!

From that moment on, everything changed for the sheep-lion. Instead of bleating, he roared, and became who he was meant to be. He was not meant to live a fearful life, following the herd of sheep and doing what they did without question. He was a lion. He was powerful, noble, and strong.

This analogy provides us with a very deep insight into our own spiritual journey and puts a few misconceptions surrounding our spiritual life to rest.

First of all, bliss is not an attainment. It is our own reflection, our own inner nature. The lion was always a lion. He was never a sheep. The sheep-lion had wrongly identified himself as a sheep.

Similarly, we too have wrongly identified with the ‘herd’ mentality, which is, “*I am so and so*” – the body, the mind, the intellect, the energies. We have failed to look at ourselves in the lake of the Heart. Once we see our true *Self* clearly, the false identification drops completely. The memory of being a sheep in the flock is no longer predominant.

Bliss takes over completely. We have only to ‘look’ inwards deep enough, and then we will see the reflection clearly. This Bliss is what you have always been, so there is no question of it coming and going.

What comes and goes is only a state of mind. This Bliss is often referred to as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, which means that the Bliss stays forever, never to leave.

Sat-Chit-Ananda may merely seem like three separate words meaning Existence (Truth) - Consciousness - Bliss, but together they denote a very important deeper meaning, which is, ‘*The Consciousness which ever exists as Bliss.*’ Once you see it, you will know that you were always that Bliss. It stays forever. How can it ever leave you? You realize that it was always with you in the first place.

Personal Note: A few key components and features of the Bliss of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, and my own experience regarding it, are presented in the following points:

- ♦ Bliss is what you already are, so it is not a question of ‘attainment’ or of ‘becoming’ that Bliss.

- ◆ Bliss is continuous, ever-flowing and ever-new Joy.
- ◆ All it takes to realize Bliss is an intense looking inwards (towards the lake of our inner Heart) and away from outward sense gratifications (the herd mentality.) The sheep-lion's journey towards the lake represents the inward journey every *sadhaka* or spiritual practitioner has to undertake. It is not enough to merely assume that we are already that 'lion' and so nothing needs to be done, as neo-Advaita declares.
- ◆ Without looking at one's reflection in the 'lake' (Bliss flowing from the Heart) any knowledge is mere mental knowing. Wisdom lies in direct realization; otherwise doubts will always persist. The sheep-lion has to take the journey to the lake to see its true reflection. This is a must in one's spiritual quest. Only then it becomes *Jnana*.
- ◆ Without firm conviction derived through direct experience, no matter how hard the sheep-lion tries to roar he will only be bleating. Most seekers on their spiritual journey do not undertake the inner journey as a discipline (formal meditation), and many of them who do are easily distracted

midway along the journey, or drop the journey altogether. Many go ‘Guru shopping’ and read various books, trying to seek a technique or an insight which can reveal the ‘Truth’ to them in a very short period of time. They mentally grasp various concepts and try to find the Truth through these mental concepts. This is like trying to find fish in a pot-hole. Fish can only be found in a lake. Therefore, it is of vital importance to limit one’s reading and dive within, into the lake of one’s Heart. All doubt vanishes when the lake is reached (when the life-force is stabilized in the spiritual Heart.) Only then can the spiritual journey be called complete, not before.

- ♦ Two sure signs that one has reached the ‘lake’, which is the end of seeking, are:
 - ▶ First, there must be a moment when the ‘sheep’ memory (body/mind/ego) is completely annihilated and the lion consciousness (pure uninterrupted bliss) takes over. This means that the knowledge I EXIST cannot be of both the lion and the sheep (body/mind/ego). In that knowledge BOTH CANNOT CO-EXIST. There must be a time where one finds a new reality has emerged INDEPENDENT of the

body/mind/ego. This means the experiencer is not this body/mind/ego. Many talk about bliss rising and falling, oneness experiences, alertness and mindfulness experiences, or a background *Self* (often another mental concept); but none of these constitute real ‘awakening’ because they are experienced through the normal waking state, where the experiencer is still the body/mind/ego. This is another flaw of the neo-Advaitins, and of those who shy away from formal meditation. They have not gone deeper than the waking and dream states to see their true reflection.

- ▶ Second, seeking will automatically come to an end when there is no abidance *by* you. Rather, Bliss will abide *in* you, captivate you and possess you. It will hold you so close to Itself that the outer sense gratifications will lose their charm and effect on you. Nothing outer or inner will enchant you. All forms of practice and searching will drop automatically.
- ♦ The bliss which comes and goes (as a glimpse) is nothing but a state of mind. The temporary joy and bliss which appear take place when the mind gets purified through *sadhana* (formal meditation)

and inquiry). But, they disappear too, as they come *from the mind*.

Many aspirants chase this joy and bliss, and feel dejected and de-motivated to pursue their *sadhana* when the joy and bliss elude them, but this is a big mistake. It is here that a spiritual teacher advises the students not to worry whether bliss is manifesting or not. The student is asked to let go of whatever the mind brings in – sorrow or joy – and to identify with neither of them, simply to dive deeper without worrying about any results appearing in the form of joy and bliss.

However, there will be no question of letting go of the Bliss of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, because it will not allow you to let go. You will be powerless. Can a drunk let go of his intoxication merely by willing it? No! Obviously, this is not to imply that drunkenness is similar in any way to Divine intoxication: *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. Unlike drunkenness, the state of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* is a highly alert one, and its joy far exceeds that of drinking, or of any other pleasure of this world.

Verse 15

निःसंगो निष्क्रियोऽसि त्वं स्वप्रकाशो निरंजनः ।
अयमेव हि ते बन्धः समाधिमनुतिष्ठति ॥ १-१५ ॥

*niḥsamgo niṣkriyo'si tvam svaprakāśo niramjana
ayameva hi te bandhah samādhimanutiṣṭhati*



You are really unattached and actionless, self-luminous and without any taints already. The cause of your bondage is that you practice meditation.

Commentary: In this verse Ashtavakra speaks of meditation as the cause of bondage, while in Verse 13 of this chapter he advocated meditation.

This may seem like a contradiction, but it is not actually so. Ashtavakra is a complete Master. He understands that many *sadhakas* are far too anxious and eager to reach a meditative state. They want to reach the state through ‘effort’ and ‘seeking’.

However, both effort and seeking are of the mind; as long as the mind exists, there is effort and seeking.

The fact is, a meditative state cannot be ‘reached’. Meditation simply happens on its own.

Ashtavakra’s instruction is not to seek anything in your meditation, but to merely observe. What starts as a looking through the mind slowly transcends that very instrument and becomes looking through awareness. This happens through a one-pointed abidance in the sense of being, the I AM.

Further, the concept of looking through the mind gets dropped along the way, and the mind gets more and more purified and subtle. The looking has to be beyond the mind for it to be complete and total. Only then is it called ‘deep’.

A keen observation and kind, loving attention to our sense of being is all that is needed. Aspirants want to ‘reach’ a state, and that itself is the problem. The attempt to reach a particular state is always through the mind. In truth, there really is nothing to reach.

The first stage of *Self-Inquiry*: We have to learn to accept our sense of being no matter what it is. Only when you fully accept can you truly love. Can love be there without acceptance? Can you truly love without acceptance? If you have a child, you love and accept your child, howsoever he may be, howsoever he seems, or appears.

So ‘acceptance’ leads to love, and love is acceptance. That is the first stage of *Self-Inquiry*.

So you must treat your present state of beingness as if it were your own child. This is where you have to begin your relationship with your beingness: by truly and unconditionally accepting it.

You mentally affirm to yourself: ‘*This is my present state of beingness. I am going to completely accept it, sink into it, and love it.*’

The second stage of *Self-Inquiry*: Acceptance does not mean that we leave our present state unattended. Acceptance means that we watch over it, continuously, by being aware.

Do we not do the same thing with our child? We love our child, so we never leave him, howsoever he may be. We watch every movement!

And this is how the relationship with our beingness develops, how it flowers. How has it gotten to this stage? It is by watching and observing, daily and deeply, all its forms. So we must continuously watch over our state of beingness.

The third stage of *Self-Inquiry*: What happens when we are continuously ‘aware’, continuously observing our state of beingness? We will know that awareness – that continuous watching and observing – has resulted in our beingness changing form.

Our beingness has changed its nature. This happens automatically. We are not changing anything here. We have simply observed. We have simply been ‘aware’. We have kept a watch over our beingness. And that watching itself is within us. That watching, that acceptance, that loving, leads us to the point

where we see that the beingness is actually changing form – it has become something else.

And as the beingness changes form, the ‘I’, the individual entity, also changes form. The observer becomes the observed, because it is the nature of the observer to become the observed.

So, what have we done in these three stages of *Self-Inquiry*?

We have been continuously aware, and have observed our state of beingness. As our beingness changes form, the ‘I’ automatically changes form. The ‘I’ is completely dependent on that beingness. Absolutely.

There is no ‘practice’ involved in this. Calling it a practice implies ego and effort. We have only watched and observed, carefully and completely, at every given opportunity.

Practice may be restricted to a few hours in a day but this watching and observing is done all the time. When ‘looking’ matures and deepens, meditation happens automatically.

Another mistake made by aspirants is in paying too much attention to the techniques of meditation and taking them as the goal, rather than the means to achieve the goal. The goal is meditation, not mastering a technique used to reach that goal.

A *sadhaka* must be careful not to get too attached to the ‘practice’ of meditation (or other ‘dry’ techniques), and should, rather, sink effortlessly into the sense of being. In that effortless sinking, every technique, every mantra, every breath and *prana* disappear. And when that happens, the ego too disappears. And with the disappearance of the ego, meditation happens.

Finally, when even the thought that, “*I am meditating*” or “*I am doing this or that*” is gone, it means meditation has taken place. Meditation is the end of its own practice.

Sri Ramana sums up Ashtravakra’s instruction perfectly:

“*Do not meditate, BE*
“*Do not think that you are, BE*”

(Secret of Arunachala, p. 73)

Verse 16

त्वया व्याप्तमिदं विश्वं त्वयि प्रोतं यथार्थतः ।
शुद्धबुद्धस्वरूपस्त्वं मा गमः क्षुद्रचित्तताम् ॥ १-१६ ॥

*Tvayā vyāptamidam viśvam tvayi protam yathārthataḥ
śuddhabuddhasvariūpastvam mā gamah kṣudracittatām*



You pervade this universe and this universe is superimposed on you. By nature you are Pure Consciousness. Do not give in to the pettiness of the mind.

Commentary: YOU are prior to the existence of this universe. How can this ever be refuted?

Is it not true that the existence of this universe depends upon your existence? Could it be possible to have the knowledge of this universe without 'I' being there first?

In fact, the universe disappears in the deep sleep state, yet 'I', as the Pure Consciousness, remain. This proves that while the existence of the universe depends on your beingness, your beingness is not dependent on whether this universe exists or not. Therefore, Ashtavakra says that the *Self* from which this world is projected, must necessarily pervade the entire universe. You are the substratum on which this entire universe is superimposed.

Just as gold pervades the ornaments, or mud pervades the pot, similarly the *Self* pervades the entirety of everything known, seen and experienced in this universe.

When you are the substratum on which various types of conceptual knowledge, as well as all names and forms (which belong to this unreal world) are superimposed, it is so unfortunate that you have

allowed yourself to be identified with all these false projections.

YOU are the one who has given birth to this universe.

Do not behave like a beggar always looking for what the world can offer you. You must always hold your head high and walk in the knowledge that, as the substratum upon which all appears, you sustain the universe you have given birth to.

Verse 17

निरपेक्षो निर्विकारो निर्भरः शीतलाशयः ।
अगाधबुद्धिरक्षुब्धो भव चिन्मात्रवासनः ॥ १-१७ ॥

*nirapekṣo nirvikāro nirbharaḥ śītalāśayah
agādhabuddhirakṣubdho bhava cīnmātravāsanah*



You are unconditioned and changeless, dense, profound in intellect and unperturbed, so remain rooted in Pure Consciousness alone.

Commentary: Most seekers are conditioned by past habits, knowledge and structures. These give rise to various spiritual concepts which blind the clear vision of a *sadhaka*.

Concepts have their place in our spiritual journey so that the mind, which is turned outwards, is directed within. Eventually, however, a *sadhaka* should be ready to drop all concepts once their purpose is served. He must possess the courage and discrimination to do so. When he does this, he will discover the hidden *Self*.

Breath is not you. Mind and intellect are not you. *Prana* is not you. Chakras are not you. Light and sound and any other possible phenomenon are not you. Kundalini experiences are not you. None of the four bodies (gross, astral, causal, supra-causal) are you. The names and forms of individual ‘I-ness’ are not you.

Whatever you ‘think’ you are is not YOU. The real YOU is beyond all such concepts, conditionings and knowing. YOU are independent of everything perceived, known and experienced.

The *Self* is changeless. The joy which comes and goes is only of the mind. The Bliss and Joy of the *Self* never leave. The *Self* is the natural resting state of ever-flowing Joy and happiness.

The *Self* is already complete in and of Itself. The joy and happiness a *Jnani* experiences is hard to contain and impossible to put into words. In that Joy everything is included and provided, and there is nothing more to acquire or desire. It is in this sense that the word ‘dense’ is used by Ashtavakra.

The certitude that ‘I am the *Self*’ is definitely felt, although not as an experience. All experiences are of the mind and hence, fleeting in nature.

Knowing ‘I am the *Self*’ is more like being held, or embraced, by joy and bliss all the time. You get possessed by the natural joyous state and rest there, forever undisturbed by the happenings around you. Even the greatest of calamities cannot touch you.

Having given us such deep insights into the *Self*, Ashtavakra asks us to pursue our journey *within* with great fervor so that such direct apprehension becomes possible.

Verse 18

साकारमनृतं विद्धि निराकारं तु निश्चलम् ।
एतत्तत्त्वोपदेशेन न पुनर्भवसंभवः ॥ १-१८ ॥

*sākāramanṛtam viddhi nirākāram tu niścalam
etattattvopadeśena na punarbhavasambhavaḥ*



Know that which appears as a form, to be false, and the formless to be changeless. Through this spiritual instruction you will cease to be born again.

Commentary: Here, it may seem as if Ashtavakra were advocating the doctrine of reincarnation, but it is not so. How can a sage who has rejected everything believe in a specific belief-system or theory like reincarnation? For him everything is a concept and only the *Self* is real.

To really understand what Ashtavakra implies here would require us to first find out what it is that is born, and what is it that dies.

The gross body with its five elements is born and dies. Every thought and emotion has an origin and an end, and in that sense they too are born and die.

Our breaths in this world are all numbered and are born and die. *Prana* is born and dies too.

All the four states of Consciousness live and die. The universe comes and goes. I-ness appears and disappears.

Everything that appears also disappears, is born and dies. And as long as I feel that I am any of these, I will continue to be born again, and die again.

This is a fundamental aspect of the traditional Indian spiritual belief system. But then regardless of

any such beliefs, the moment I break identification with all of the above and become the Witness on whom all of these are superimposed, I will know that I was never born in the first place.

This will not be a matter of belief but an actual *realization*. It will be known that I have always stood independent of everything and that none of these had anything to do with me.

Verse 19

यथैवादर्शमध्यस्थे रूपेऽन्तः परितस्तु सः ।
तथैवाऽस्मिन् शरीरेऽन्तः परितः परमेश्वरः ॥ १-१९ ॥

*yathaivādarśamadhyasthe rūpe'ntaḥ paritastu saḥ
tathaivā'smin śarīre'ntaḥ paritah parameśvaraḥ*



Just as a mirror exists everywhere, both within and apart from its reflected images, so the Supreme SELF exists everywhere, within and apart from this body.

Commentary: The spiritual instruction given by a teacher to his student would be to focus or meditate upon a spiritual center as a point within himself.

This could be one of the charkras, like the third eye, or the Heart center, or simply the sense of being. It depends on what an aspirant requires at that particular stage of his *sadhana*. A uniform instruction cannot be given to everyone as each student is unique.

The purpose of bringing the mind inwards is to direct the mind away from outer sense objects which pull the *sadhaka's* attention outwards into sensory gratification.

After meeting persistent obstacles during his meditation, the *sadhaka's* mind will finally surrender, and even love to remain turned inwards. Slowly, through one-pointed and deep practice, the joy and bliss pull the mind even deeper within into the very core of his beingness and the *sadhaka* apprehends the seat of Consciousness within the *Self*.

The *sadhaka* awakens to realize the all-encompassing, all-pervasive, all-expansive state of the Infinite *Self*.

There is neither within nor without for the *Self*. It is everywhere.

The center which appeared to be initially within, disappears completely with the annihilation of the mind. The *Self* is so boundless and limitless that it defies all attempts at description or explanation.

The apt metaphor of the mirror and the images reflected within it is used by Ashtavakra to communicate this. The reflection is within the mirror, but the mirror pervades both within and without the reflection. The reflection has no existence without the mirror, but the mirror exists with or without the reflection.

Verse 20

एकं सर्वगतं व्योम बहिरन्तर्यथा घटे ।
नित्यं निरन्तरं ब्रह्म सर्वभूतगणे तथा ॥ १-२० ॥

*ekam sarvagatam vyoma bahirantaryathā ghate
nityam nirantaram brahma sarvabhūtagane tathā*



Just as one and the same all-pervading space exists within and without a jar, so the immutable and all-encompassing *Self* exists in all beings and things.

Commentary: While in the previous verse, with the metaphor of the mirror and the reflection in it, the all-pervasiveness and expansiveness of the *Self* was emphasized, in this verse the immanence and infinite nature of the *Self* is established with the metaphor of the space and the jar.

Just as the space, which is all-pervading and spread over an infinite expanse, is seen as existing within a jar or pot, the Infinite, changeless and boundless Consciousness is also present within all beings and things.

Both the all-pervasiveness and the immanence of the *Self* are established in the final verse of this chapter, though ultimately, as mentioned in the commentary on the previous verse, the *Self* is without any attributes such as within or without, immanent or transcendent.

With this we conclude Chapter 1.

ASHTAVAKRA GITA

Translation and Commentary

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*Based on the 2011 edition. This new edition includes
formatting and editing changes and the addition of the
Sanskrit text for each verse.*



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