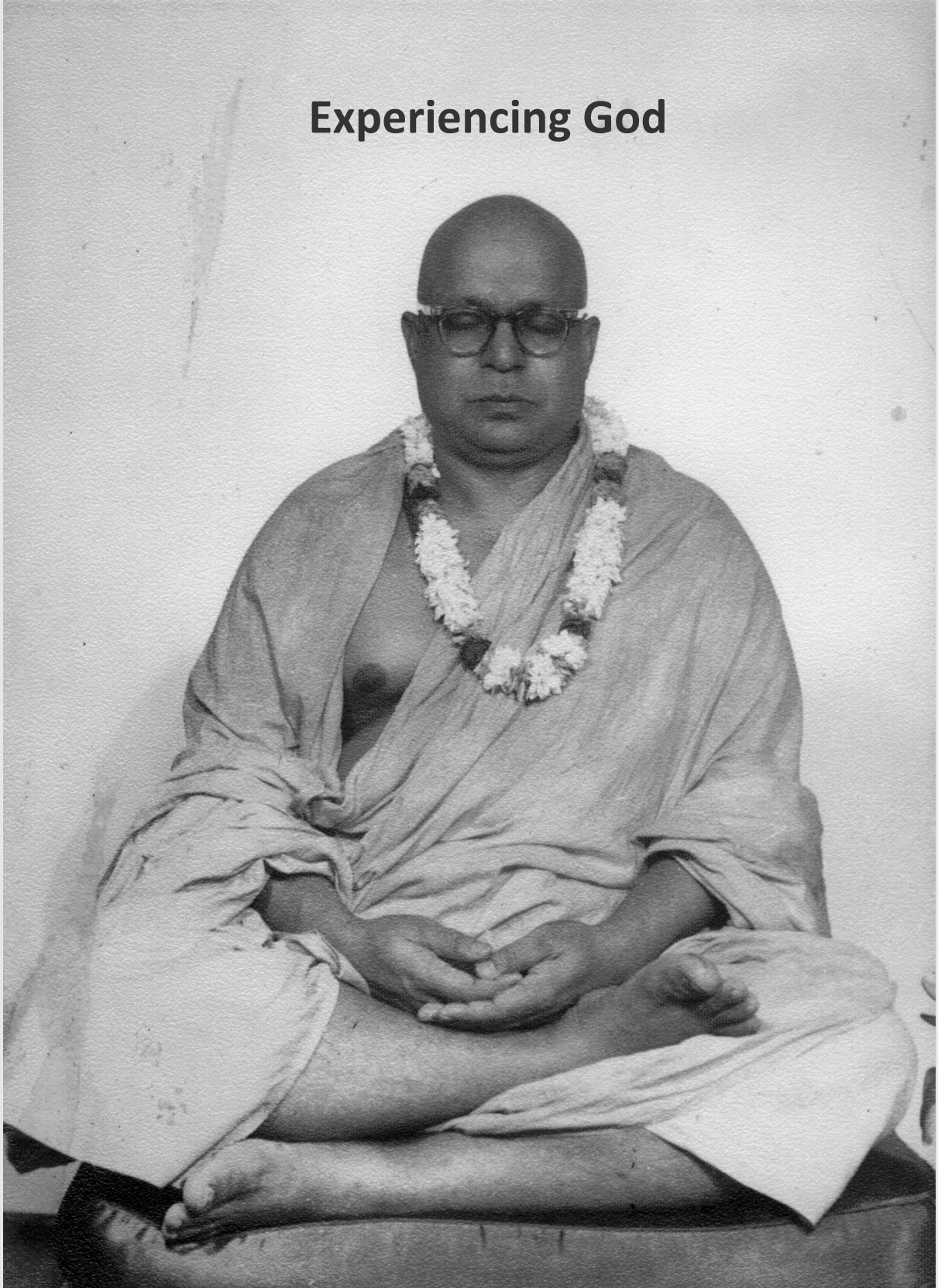


Maharajshri Swami Akhandananda Saraswati of Vrindavana

Experiencing God



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[Introductory note:

Swami Akhandananda Saraswati (1911-1987) was a venerated sage of Vrindavan. Known fondly as Maharajshri, he was a shrotriya-brahmanishtta¹, a sadguru, an Advaitin and a Krishna devotee non-pareil. While his own spiritual-realization and philosophy was anchored in Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, he was deeply knowledgeable and absolutely respectful of all other schools of philosophy, and was held in great respect by the Acharyas of different traditions. When Maharajshri spoke on the Upanishads and other topics of Vedanta, there was little or no religiosity in his expression; while his talks on Bhakti were completely soaked in the love of God. He was like the Sun in the sky as far as lighting up the world of Shastra is concerned. His discourses on Srimad Bhagavatam and other scriptures were heard with great love by some of the greatest Masters of the times, such as Swami Poornananda Teertha (Udiya Baba), Anandamayi Ma, Hari Babaji, Karpatriji Maharaj, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviyaji, Jagadguru Shankaracharya Swaroopananda Saraswati, Jagadguru Shankaracharya Shantananda, Jagadguru Shankaracharya Nishchalananda Saraswati etc., as also by millions of common people. His Hindi translation of Srimad Bhagavatam (written by him in his pre-sannyasa days) published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur, is a timeless classic that is read by sages, scholars, and lay people alike, to this day. He has written almost 200 books covering the Upanishads, Brahma-Sutra, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavatam, Ramayana, Kashmir Saivism etc. While his principal Guru was Udiya Baba (Swami Poornananda Teertha), he sought and received guidance from ever so many sages, right from his childhood days. He received his Sannyasa Deeksha from Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, the Jagadguru Shankaracharya of Jyotir Mutt, in holy Prayag, in 1942 CE.

In his firm adherence to Advaita and to Krishna-bhakti, Maharajshri was akin to the great sage Madhusudhana Saraswati (c.1540–1640), and would often quote his words - 'krishnAt param kimapi tattvam aham na jAnE' – 'I know not of any Truth beyond the Truth that is Krishna! I know no Supreme Reality other than Krishna!'

In the present article, we share information from various memoirs of Maharajshri, focusing on his first vision and profound experience of God, leading on to his abidance in that state of Jnana that Bhagavan Sri Krishna has spoken of in Gita as:

*bahUnA.m janmanAmantE j~nAnavAnmAM prapadyate |
vAsudevaH sarvamiti sa mahAtmA sudurlabhaH ||*

At the end of many births, one, endowed with Knowledge (Jnana), attains me with the realization that 'Vasudeva is all'. Such a one is a Mahatma, extremely rare.]

Maharajshri Swami Akhandananda Saraswati was born on the new moon day of the month of Shravana in Vikram Samvat 1968, under the asterism of Pushya, corresponding to the Western calendar date of July 25, 1911 CE. He was born into a Sarayupaareen Brahmana family residing near the banks of the Ganges River in the village of Mahraai, situated in the sacred region of Varanasi. His father and grandfather were Vedic scholars and spiritual guides to the people in numerous villages across the region.

Seeds of Vairagya – dispassion – sprouted early in Maharajshri's life. He lost his father at the tender age of seven. His grandfather, well-versed in astrology and acquainted with the leading astrologers of the day, cast Maharajshri's horoscope. In it, the dark shadow Markesh was prominently

¹ Shrotriya-brahmanishtta: A Self-realized sage, who is also a great scholar of traditional Shastra and Vedanta

seen, and the astrologers declared that he would live only for 19 years. Even as his young mind grappled with this prophecy, his grandfather too passed away a few years later. Thereafter, the thought of death arose repeatedly in his mind, and he was seized by the terrifying prospect of imminent death. He would often run away from home to visit holy places such as Rishikesh, Chitrakut, Ayodhya, and others. There, he would meet Mahatmas and seek their guidance on how to escape death. However, all the sages and saints he encountered told him that while they couldn't instruct him on escaping death, they could help him overcome the fear of it. It was during this period of his life that his spiritual journey took a significant leap forward.

Maharajshri was in his teens. Five miles from his village Mahraai, there lived a sage, Swami Yogananda Puri, who belonged to the spiritual lineage of Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Young Maharajshri visited Swamiji often and derived great happiness in listening to discourses on Srimad Bhagavatam from him. Maharajshri then expressed his desire to receive *deeksha* (formal initiation into a specific spiritual practice) from Swamiji. Having gauged the merit of the young seeker and knowing him to be fit to receive initiation into the knowledge of *Brahman* (the Absolute Non-dual Reality), Swami Yogananda advised him to take up Vedanta *shravana* and *manana*². However, Maharajshri was interested in first gaining a direct vision of God. And so, he replied, quoting a verse from Ramacharitamanas -

भरि लोचन बिलोकि अवधेसा। तब सुनिहउं निर्गुन उपदेसा।।

Bhari lochan biloki avadhesā. tab sunihaun nirgun upadesā..

Having first feasted my eyes on the King of Ayodhya, I will then listen to teachings about attributeless Brahman.

Swamiji replied – ‘Self-Realization alone is true knowledge. Self is the highest truth, the ultimate reality. Whereas, in the path of devotion, one’s contemplation of God, either formless or having form, is based on one’s faith in Guru and Shastra (i.e., it is indirect). Therefore, think again, and then come to a firm decision.’

To this, young Maharajshri reiterated his interest and faith in the realization of ‘God having form’.

Swami Yogananda was pleased with the young boy’s reply and asked him to first complete a *purashcharana*³ of Gayatri Mantra (a *Sadhana*⁴ that involves *japa* (repetition) of Gayatri Mantra 2.4 million times, along with associated vows and rituals), and taught him the method of *Sadhana*. He told him that this was a prerequisite for attaining fruition in any subsequent spiritual practice.

The young Maharajshri commenced the *purashcharana*. This involved living an ascetic life, with food restrictions and long hours of *japa*. At one point in time, he found the *japa* becoming monotonous and mentally numbing. When he told Swamiji that his *japa* was just going on mechanically and that his mind was not on it, Swamiji explained to him the importance of *mantra-japa* and how the *mantra* energized and divinized the whole subtle-body. He urged him to continue his *japa* and said - ‘*Mental-liking (of japa) does not make japa happen. Japa makes mental-liking (of japa) happen.*’

² Panchadasi (Sloka 1.53) reads as follows:- "The finding out or discovery of the true significance of the identity of the individual self and the supreme Universal Self with the great sayings is what is known as *shravana*; and to arrive at the possibility of its validity through logical reasoning is what is called *manana*." (Source: Wikipedia entry on *Manana* – reflection).

³ Traditionally, a full *purashcharana* for any *mantra* is 100,000 repetitions multiplied by the number of syllables in the *mantra*. The Gayatri *mantra* has 24 syllables, so a complete *purashcharana* would entail 2.4 million repetitions, allocated over as many years as you might need to complete the practice at a reasonable pace. (Source: <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/advanced-meditation-how-to-do-a-purashcharana/>)

⁴ *Sadhana*: Self-effort; spiritual practice.

After young Maharajshri completed the *purashcharana* of Gayatri *mantra*, Swami Yogananda initiated him into Krishna Mantra Upasana. Advised by Swamiji that it takes four times the effort to achieve results in Kali Yuga, Maharajshri applied himself totally to his Sadhana. He led a life of tremendous asceticism, spending long hours of day and night in *japa*. He finished one round of *purashcharana*, and then the second and third. Even so, his aim of God-realization was not achieved. Seeing him lose hope, Swamiji told him, quoting Krishna from Gita – “*klaibyam mA sma gamaH* – Yield not to unmanliness. What if you have not succeeded? Know that the dense-dark night of spiritual-practice is nearing its end. Be not under the impression that this darkness is indestructible. The night is more or less over. Just an hour or two remains. Sun will rise. The heart-lotus will blossom.”

And so, the young Maharajshri persisted with his intense Sadhana.

In his memoirs, Maharajshri writes⁵:

“One night, I was at home and was engaged in my spiritual practice... Suddenly, there was a distinct quivering in my body. I felt as if someone was pulling my *Prana* (life-force) up the body... Up from my feet, waist, navel, heart, arms, neck... And then the whole body became void. A radiant *chakra* started taking shape in my head and there was dazzling light everywhere! At first, I was seized by a fear of death. And then my body-sensation dropped away completely and I was lost in a world of light. After some time, life-force could be perceived once more in the body and the life-current started flowing as before. When I started to experience this state of ‘radiance’ repeatedly in Sadhana, my fear dropped away. I realized that this was a state of Sadhana. However, I did not feel a sense of fulfilment from these experiences as I had not got the vision of my *Ishtadeva* (chosen deity). On the contrary, I felt sad. At times, I felt miserable. I wept. I felt defeated by my inadequacy.

On the day that I completed the fourth *purashcharana* of the Krishna Mantra, I had gone to Ganga for my bath. When I left my clothes and *japa-mala* (rosary) by the riverside and entered the river for my bath, a crow flew away with my *japa-mala* and dropped it in the middle of the river. Now, even my *japamala* was gone.

Early next morning, consumed by a feeling of burning *vairagya* (dispassion), I renounced home and walked away. By afternoon, I had walked some twenty miles and I reached a place called Shivpur. There, an elderly relative of mine happened to spot me. Seeing me in this condition, he made me stay at his house and brought me back to my home the next day.

Back home, feeling totally dejected, I locked myself in a room and deliberated – “What am I to do now? *Japa*, fasts, spiritual practices have all been done to the maximum possible extent. My attempt at renunciation too has ended up in vain. It is indeed impossible for me to undertake more spiritual-effort. It appears that this body is not fit to experience God-realization. In which case, would it not be better to cast off the body? But no. Both. clinging to the body, or casting it off, are signs of attachment to the body as ‘mine’. So, what then is the means for me to attain God? Means! Wherefrom is any strength going to come to any ‘means’ that I pursue! Is it at all possible for me to realize God based on my own strength?”

“And then, in a flash, the means of spiritual effort, the methods of spiritual practice, and all the strength of reasoning associated with ‘I’ was shattered. My ‘I’ was not cognized anymore. Just as a person who claims that he has realized the Self or Brahman even as he keeps holding on to his ‘I’ notion is wrong in his belief and claim; in like manner, if a ‘part’ of a ‘whole’ keeps exercising its own strength, and then proudly claims that it has now attained realization of the ‘whole’, surely this is but a figment of imagination. Enough of my words, my efforts, my motives! Enough! Enough!! Now I can do no more!

⁵ Combines recollections of Maharajshri from ‘Paavan Prasang’, ‘Ishwar Darshan’, and ‘Anand Jayanti’ (all published by Sat-Sahitya Prakashan Trust, Vrindavan)

As soon as I achieved this state of no-effort, no-'I', then, spontaneously, in the dark house, a tremendous 'Radiance' manifested! In that 'Radiance', the earth, the house, the tiles, the cot, and my body – everything was destroyed. What was this 'Radiance' being experienced, without any material-substance, sans any spiritual effort, with no thought, without any cause? It was incredible, awesome, and I was mad with joy!

The room had no window and the door was closed. What was this radiance? I rubbed my eyes and what is this that I see! A foot above the ground, in front me, is a young boy, the most beautiful child in the three worlds – and he is smiling at me. Look! If you call this as my blind-faith or imagination, so be it. I have no way of giving a scientific explanation for this. I was seeing a boy, perhaps ten or twelve years of age, who had manifested in that great radiance. *His body is of fair colour; he has a divine adornment of flowers; a peacock feather on his crown; he is holding a flute to his lips and my ears are treated to a most melodious tune emanating from that flute!* I was astonished by this vision! In my mind, I said – 'Krishna is beautiful-black. How is it that this boy is beautiful-fair?' I longed to fall flat on the ground, prostrate to his feet, but my body was frozen. I could not even speak. Yes, my heart was in bliss; my body was filled with goosebumps; and my eyes had tears of joy. I was just gazing at him. With a smile on his face, playing the flute, he danced, anklets jingling on his feet; dancing in the air; now swaying left, now swerving right, and now suddenly freezing to a halt in front of me! I know not how much time elapsed in this manner.

And then the boy broke his silence. It was as if a stream of *amRita* (ambrosia) was flowing into my ears. He said –

*"I am both, fair skinned, as well as dark-skinned! For I am in constant contemplation of my beloved (Radha)! At this moment, you are yearning to touch me; you wish to touch this particular form of mine! Know that this whole world, wherein you exist and which you see – all this is my playground. Every atom of this cosmos is pervaded by my dance of divine love; and the whole of Creation is but the form of me and my beloved... All this, which the people of the world see...inside all this, in that most secret region where their eyes cannot reach; there, my beginningless, endless, delightful, nectarine, dance-filled rAsa-leelA (sport of divine love with Radha) is taking place, every single moment, eternally..."*⁶

'Bhagavan Sri Krishna, the child-divine, then became silent. Wherever my eyes turned to, I could see only the divine-duo, Radha-Krishna, with their *sakhee*-s (girl companions) dancing around them. My own body, the world, every single volition and thought was filled with the play of Radha-Krishna! I do not know how long I continued to watch this divine sport! At end, I saw the divine-duo standing in front of me and the *sakhee*-s were occupied with their service to the divine-pair.

When I bent down to touch their feet, they vanished and I could see them no more. I was back where I was sitting and the sound of 'Krishna-Krishna' was reverberating deeply from every pore of my body...Yes, I did get an inner prompting, a desire, for the realization of Advaita Siddhanta, the Absolute Non-dual Reality. And then, in fullness of bliss, I started dancing! My hair was standing on end! Completely filled with joy, I stepped out! When I came out of the room, the first person that I saw was my mother, and I could not keep this experience a secret from her! I exclaimed to her that I have found God!"

As the Veda says – '*vedAham Etam purusham mahAntam, aditya varnam tamasastu pAre*' – '*I know this Supreme Being, brilliant as the Sun, beyond the darkness (of ignorance)!*'

Summarizing this divine experience, Maharajshri wrote – "When the hold of 'I' and 'Mine' broke down, when all means had failed to deliver, then out of this 'Not'-ness, the Supreme-Truth emerged!"

⁶ 'Ishwar Darshan' (1st edition, 1978), book in Hindi published by Sat-Sahitya Prakashan Trust, Vrindavan. Pg 48-49

So that was Maharajshri's first vision of God, when he was yet a teenager.

Maharajshri, when speaking of his experience of Krishna, often mentioned that Bhagavan Sri Krishna Himself imparted the teaching of '*Mahavakya*' to him.⁷ Deathless Brahman revealed itself as the Self in the heart of Maharajshri and the dark shadow of death fled far away, for all time to come.

Maharajshri says – 'After this, whatever book of Vedanta I opened, it was as if the book revealed all its teachings to me on its own. Panchadashi, Ishavasyopanishad, Kenopanishad, Kathopanishad, Mundakopanishad, Mandukyopanishad, Brahmasutra etc.; all these and other books revealed their inner meanings and views to me, automatically.'⁸

His spiritual journey took him to many great Masters, including his principal Guru, Udiya Baba (Swami Poornananda Saraswati), by whose Grace Maharajshri attained perfection by the direct realization of Brahman, the ultimate non-dual Truth, and became firmly established in the steady poise of the Self, the Absolute Reality.

Maharajshri once said – 'I have no hesitation to disclose my miracle in this open assembly. My miracle is that I know that I am Brahman and that there is absolutely no second thing apart from me. There is no Brahman apart from me. There is no God apart from me. There is no world apart from me. The self-radiant all-illuminating *tattva* that is the basis and abode of crores and crores of universes – I am that. This I know as a direct experience. This is my sole miracle.'⁹

As a Vedantin, he regarded the Advaita of Shankara Bhagavatpada as the highest Truth. In his last years, when he was on a visit to Coimbatore (in Tamil Nadu) for a program of discourses, he conveyed to his attendant that he would like to go that evening, by road, to the border of Kerala, which was not far from Coimbatore. His disciple, Swami Govindananda Saraswati, who was with him during that journey, records¹⁰:

"Around 5 O'clock in the evening, 4 or 5 of us went along with Maharajshri in a vehicle, towards the state of Kerala. After we had crossed into Kerala and proceeded some 4-5 kms into the state, Maharajshri gestured to us to stop the vehicle. When the vehicle stopped, Maharajshri got down and bowed to this part of the earth that has given the universe the most invaluable jewel, Bhagavatpada Shankaracharya. After paying obeisance, we returned to our camp in Coimbatore."

Such was Maharajshri's reverence of Bhagavatpada Shankara.

And on that bedrock of Advaita in his heart, danced his beloved Sri Krishna, Bhagavan Sri Nritya-Gopala¹¹.

Of his constant Krishna-absorption, Swami Govindananda Saraswati narrates a divine incident. He writes:

'It was sometime around 1983-84. I was in the service of Maharajshri, attending to his personal needs. It was around 2 AM at night. In the room that Maharajshri was sleeping, I was alone with him. My sleep was broken by some soft droning sound. I looked around. Maharajshri was in deep sleep, lying on his cot. I looked here and there; there was no other person around. However, the sound of Krishna-mantra could be heard clearly. Then, in the dim light of the night-lamp, I looked at

⁷ 'Prerak Prasang' by Swami Govindananda Saraswati, (2nd edition, 2010), published by Sat-Sahitya Prakashan Trust, Vrindavan. Pg 47

⁸ 'Anand Jayanti' booklet (2nd edition, 2019), Pg 27

⁹ Anand Jayanti' booklet (2nd edition, 2019), page 14

¹⁰ Prerak Prasang' by Swami Govindananda Saraswati, (2nd edition, 2010), published by Sat-Sahitya Prakashan Trust, Vrindavan. Pg 55

¹¹ Maharajshri had a shrine for Nritya Gopala constructed in his Ashram, where the Sree-Vigraha of Bhagavan was sculpted in accordance with the divine vision of Maharajshri.

Maharajshri closely. And I was wonderstruck! Maharajshri was fast asleep, and with every inhalation and exhalation of his breath, the repetition of Krishna-mantra was going on, continuously.¹²

What indeed can we say about state of a Jnani such as he?

As declared by Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi in Sat-Darshanam:

kiñcid-vijānāti sa nātmano'nyat

tasya sthitiṃ bhāvayituṃ kṣamaḥ kaḥ || (verse 31)

He (the Jnani) knows not anything as being apart from the Self;

Who indeed can conceive of his real state?

[For more information related to Swami Akhandananda Saraswati resources, visit website of Ananda Vrindavan Ashram at <https://maharajshri.net/>, or email c.anandvrindavan@gmail.com]

¹² Prerak Prasang' by Swami Govindananda Saraswati, (2nd edition, 2010), published by Sat-Sahitya Prakashan Trust, Vrindavan. Pg 7