

Max Müller on the Self



From *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, p. 317, fn. Quoting Friedrich Max Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop*, (1867–75, 5-vols.), Vol. I, pp. 69-70. Frontispiece by Naoto Hattori.

This “Self,” which the Greek philosophers called *Augoeides*, the “Shining One,” is impressively and beautifully described in Max Müller’s “Veda.” Showing the *Veda* to be the first book of the Āryan nations, the professor adds that:

. . . we have in it . . . a period of the intellectual life of man to which there is no parallel in any other part of the world. In the hymns of the *Veda* we see man left to himself to solve the riddle of this world. . . He invokes [the gods around him], he praises them, he worships them. But still with all these gods . . . beneath him, and above him, the early poet seems ill at rest within himself. There, too, in his own breast, he has discovered a power . . . that is never mute when he prays, never absent when he fears and trembles. It seems to inspire his prayers, and yet to listen to them; it seems to live in him, and yet to support him and all around him. The only name he can find for this mysterious power is “Brāhman”; for *brāhman* meant originally force, will, wish, and the propulsive power of creation. But this impersonal Brāhman, too, as soon as it is named, grows into something strange and divine. It ends by being one of many gods, one of the great triad, worshipped to the present day. And still the thought within him has no real name; that power which is nothing but itself, which supports the gods, the heavens, and every living being, floats before his mind, conceived but not expressed. At last he calls it “Ātman,” for *ātman*, originally breath or spirit, comes to mean Self, and Self alone; *Self* whether Divine or human; Self whether creating or suffering; Self whether one or all; but always Self, independent and free. Says the poet:

Who has seen the first-born, when he who had no bones (*i.e.*, form) bore him that had bones? Where was the life, the blood, the Self of the world? Who went to ask this from any [one] that knew it?¹

This idea of a divine Self, once expressed, everything else must acknowledge its supremacy;

Self is the Lord of all things, Self is the King of all things. As all the spokes of a wheel are contained in the nave and the circumference, all things are contained in this Self; all Selves are contained in this Self;²

Brāhman itself is but Self.³

¹ *Rig-Veda*, I, 164, 4

² *Brihad-āraṇyaka*, IV, 5, 15; ed. Roer, p. 487

³ (*ibid.*, p. 478; *Chhāndogya-Upanishad*, VIII, 3, 3-4)

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