

## Theme 2A Religious concepts: Brahman and atman

### Key concepts

- Brahman is the universal (macrocosmic) spirit and atman the personal (microcosmic spirit).
- It is a basic understanding in Hinduism that all reality is saturated with the divine. Hindus believe that Brahman may be experienced in many different forms. Brahman is considered to be eternal, genderless, omnipotent, without form and indescribable. Brahman is the origin of all things and each thing is a part of Brahman. Each god is considered an aspect of Brahman or Brahman itself.
- Brahman is described as being composed of three qualities: sat, chit and ananda. Sat is pure being, chit is pure consciousness or awareness and ananda is pure bliss. The best way of realising Brahman has always been a source of controversy: Saguna Brahman (God with attributes) and Nirguna Brahman (God without attributes). The atman can be thought of as the spirit within every living thing which provides its 'life force' and also its consciousness or awareness of the world around it. It is ultimately associated with Brahman. The atman is impersonal and has no characteristics of the life form it inhabits.
- Hinduism differentiates between matter and spirit. Spirit is divided into two main categories: the individual self or soul – jiva-atman; and the Supreme Self or God – paramatman.
- The relationship between Brahman and atman is raised throughout the Upanishads and is described and understood in a number of ways. Some Hindus hold a monotheistic view of this relationship believing that atman is only a part of Brahman and not wholly identifiable with it. Others take a monistic view believing that everything is made up of one essential essence and that Brahman and atman are one.
- Shankara was a vigorous proponent of Advaita Vedanta which maintains that Brahman is identical with the inner self (the atman) of each person. Shankara also maintains that there are three levels of reality: illusory, mundane and ultimate or absolute.
- Madhva was an exponent of Dvaita Vedanta which is often called 'dual' Vedanta. This is the belief that two things exist, separate and distinct from one another, one is the atman (usually referred to as jiva), which exists independently within all living things and one is Brahman Saguna the personal god underlying reality (usually referred to as ishvara).

### Key quotes

*'He (Brahman) is the swan (sun), dwelling in the bright heaven; he is the vasu (air), dwelling in the sky; he is the sacrificer (fire), dwelling on the hearth; he is the guest (soma), dwelling in the sacrificial jar; he dwells in men, in gods (vara), in the sacrifice (rita), in heaven; he is born in the water, on earth, in the sacrifice (rita), on the mountains; he is the True and the Great.'* (Katha Upanishad 5:2)

*"This Absolute is called Brahman and everything in life, whether living or not comes from Brahman."* (Jeaneane Fowler)

*"A helpful analogy might be that of an Arctic ice-cap. At the North pole there is no land, merely a thick cap of ice resting upon the sea. If you were to stand there and look around, everything you could see would be composed of frozen water, supported by more water, going down to unknowable depths. Brahman is like this, mysterious and profound. It not only supports the physical universe, but penetrates it, running throughout everything that is."* (Ian Jamieson)

*'He is perhaps most famous for his idiosyncratic rendering of the Chandogya Upanisad's statement tat tvam asi or "you (the atman) are that (Brahman)."'By carrying over the 'a' from the preceding word, Madhva rendered the phrase atat tvam asi or "you are not that."* (Valerie Stoker)

### Key words

Brahman	macrocosmic	atman	microcosmic
Saguna	sat	chit	ananda
Nirguna	ishvara	jiva-atman	Advaita Vedanta
Dvaita Vedanta	Madhva	Shankara	paramatman

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that it is impossible to worship an impersonal God. Others would argue that knowing God in an impersonal form is a higher level of truth than knowing him in a personal form. Some would argue that Brahman can be understood as personal and impersonal.

#### Key questions

Is the relationship between Brahman and atman monist or monotheistic?  
Is it possible to worship an impersonal God?  
Is the relationship between Brahman and atman the most important concept in Hinduism?