

Definition of consciousness

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Question:

Swamiji, please give us simple definition for “consciousness”? Also, if the mind is an object, what is the subject? What is it that is conscious?

Answer:

To define consciousness, we can only use another word— awareness, for example. Consciousness means you are conscious of something; it is opposed to inertness or non consciousness. What is opposed to inertness is that which is not inert—consciousness.

Consciousness, therefore, can be defined as what is manifest in all forms of perception, in all forms of knowing. Consciousness is qualified by different objects. When I say “I am conscious of the pot,” for example, there is pot consciousness.

Similarly when I say “I am conscious of the cloth,” there is cloth consciousness. Whenever you are conscious of something, that something becomes the qualifying for consciousness. This consciousness can be defined in terms of knowledge as such. What is basic in all forms of knowledge is pure existence (*satyam*). Therefore, knowledge is defined as existence, and existence is defined as knowledge. One helps to define other. The basis for all forms of knowledge is what we mean by consciousness.

When you are listening to me, you are conscious of me and of these words. The fundamental principle in which these words are heard is consciousness. The words, “I do not hear you,” are also said within the same principle. The not-hearing also takes place in the same consciousness.

What is common in all forms of perception is consciousness: I hear that I don’t hear, I see that I don’t see, I think that I don’t think. All are nothing but consciousness.

If, as we say, the mind is an object, what is it that is conscious? The word “mind” means “thought.” What is it that is the conscious entity? You are conscious of thought. Opposed to the thought, therefore, there is subject—you.

In fact, both the subject and the object are consciousness. But, in the beginning, to help you find out what are you are, I generally say that a thought is an object and you are the subject. Then, when you ask “what is this I that is the subject?” I reply, “You, the subject, are a witness.” And what is the nature of the witness? Consciousness.

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The witness, then, is consciousness and the witnessed object cannot be away from consciousness. Therefore, the witness and witnessed are both consciousness. Even the witness is not there, consciousness remains. Similarly, thought is consciousness and the thinker, the knower of the thought, is also consciousness.

With reference to thought, however, consciousness assume two statuses, corresponding to two types of thought in mind—subject thought and object thought. These two types of thought can be seen in the dream, where you are both the subject and the object of the dream. You are the object in that you are the one who participates in the dream world. And you are the subject, the one whose dream it is. The subject and the object are therefore one and the same. Both types of thought—subject thought and object thought exist—in consciousness and are, in fact, nothing but consciousness.