

ADVAITA PRIMER

What is Advaita Vedanta?

Part One

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Introduction

This is the first of a series of articles designed as a primer to Advaita Vedanta. The series aims to address the epistemology, ontology and other aspects of this philosophy but in this first article, we try to answer the question ‘What is Advaita Vedanta?’ and why we should study it. In this process, we will mainly use the teachings of Adi Sankaracharya and Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, in addition to parables.

The *Vedas*,¹ the fundamental texts of *Sanatana Dharma*,² grouped the *Samhitas*³ and the *Brahmanas*⁴ as the *karma kanda* and the *Aranyakas*⁵ and *Upanishads*⁶ as the *jnana kanda* of the *Vedas*. While western philosophy represents the intellectual quest for truth, Indian

¹ Vedas are not the creation of any human being, and only visualized by the ancient seers, and thus called *Apaurusheya* (unauthored). The Rigveda describes the Veda as eternal and *Apaurusheya*– ‘*Vachaa virupa nityataa*’ – *Rigveda* 8. 76. 6. The Vedas are just like expiration (*Nishvaha*) of the great ‘Brahman’. The *ṛṣi*-s of the Vedas are not the authors, but only the ‘seers’ of the Mantras (*rsayo mantra-drastarah*). Consists of the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.

² Eternal Dharma, the more correct name for Hinduism.

³ *Samhita* literally means a ‘collection’. They consist of mantras, hymns, and prayers. Each Veda has a *samhita*; *Rig* means a verse, *Sama* refers to mantras that are sung, while *Yajur* refers to mantras that are pertaining to sacrificial rites.

⁴ The *Brahmanas* are works attached to the *Samhitas*. They deal with the rules and regulations laid down for the performance of the rites and the sacrifices.

philosophy is concerned with the practical realisation of the truth. There are mainly six schools of thought and are called *Darshanas*.⁷ The pursuit of happiness is fundamental to these philosophies. The whole point of learning about Dharma from the *karma kanda* is to achieve *aihikam* and *amushmikam*, happiness in this life and heaven, respectively. But learning about Brahman from the Vedanta is very different – it is to achieve *nissreyasam*, the *paramananda* (supreme bliss) of *moksha* (liberation).

‘Vedanta’ means ‘the end of knowledge’ or ‘the knowledge of the ultimate’. Among the several schools of Vedanta, Advaita (Non-duality) differs from the others. Most other philosophies require belief in some external ‘object’ such as a God, rituals or ideas. Whereas Advaita is concerned only with the subject, the Self. The Self (that may be called Consciousness, Atman, Brahman, etc.) is the only truth and there is nothing else.

Advaita starts with the simplest question. Who are you? Certainly, you cannot define yourself with something external to you like your position or career or relationships. Neither can you be defined by your body nor the mind, as they are ever-changing and disappear in deep sleep. Yet, you exist. Vedanta asserts you are the Reality. Advaita goes a step further and says that you are not just that consciousness but it is the same universal consciousness that exists everywhere and in everyone. In fact, there is nothing else.

Ramana Maharshi says:

The ‘I’ is always there – in deep sleep, in dream and in wakefulness. The one in sleep is the same as that who now speaks. There is always the feeling of ‘I’.⁸

⁵The appendages to these *Brahmanas* are called *Aranyakas* mainly because they were composed in the calmness of the forests and mark the transition from the ritualistic to the philosophic thought. They present a mystic interpretation of the Vedic sacrifices.

⁶The concluding portions are called the *Upaniṣad-s*. These are intensely philosophical and spiritual and may be regarded as the cream of the Vedic philosophy.

⁷*Darshana* (*darśan*) means to see or have a vision. It refers to how each school ‘sees’ or receives a vision of the Reality. *Ātmā va are drastavyah* (the self alone, dear one, is to be seen) is the cornerstone of these philosophies. These six *darshanas* are Vaiseshika, Nyaya, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Vedanta has several sub-schools.

⁸Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§198.

He continues:

A man can realise the Self, because that is here and now. If it were not so, but attainable by some efforts at some other time, and if it were new and something to be acquired, it would not be worthy of pursuit. Because what is not natural cannot be permanent either. But what I say is that the Self is here and now and alone.⁹

Thus, Advaita Vedanta is the process of finding out who you really are. The only faith that is required is trust – as in trusting a respected friend. For example, if that friend gives the directions for travelling from Tiruvannamalai to Mumbai, one implicitly follows these directions to arrive at one’s destination. Similarly, the authority for the journey is the *Upaniṣad*-s. They have been validated by sages such as as Ādi Śaṅkara, Ramana Maharshi and others time and time again over several centuries. In this case, the journey is even simpler. It is as if, in our confusion and ignorance, we start at Ramana Ashram in Tiruvannamalai but think that we are elsewhere and therefore ask for directions to the Ashram. Finally, after much effort, we realise that we were there already. As Bhagavan said, “There is no greater mystery than this, that we keep seeking Reality though in fact we are Reality.”¹⁰ “Holding a begging bowl, a man with amnesia knocks on his own door,” says Kabir.¹¹

Thus, it is realising the Reality in ourselves. The whole teaching of Advaita is this knowledge that removes ignorance. We are ignorant of our Reality and think we are bound and helpless. “Realisation is not the acquisition of anything new or a new faculty,” says Ramana Maharshi. “It is only the removal of all camouflage.”¹²

This is illustrated by a parable.¹³ In Indian villages, a *dhobi* (washerman) collects dirty clothes, loads them on a donkey and takes them to the river. On reaching the river, he ties the donkey to a tree with a rope and washes the clothes in the river. The washerman then

⁹ Ibid., Talk§17.

¹⁰ Ibid., Talk§146.

¹¹ Ladinsky, Daniel, *Love Poems from God. Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West. Kabir’s Life and Poems.* 2002. p.216.

¹² Op. cit., Talk§96.

¹³ Adapted from the talk, Vedanta in five parables by Swami Sarvapriyananda, <https://youtu.be/BMRbh3M4AGw>

loads the clean clothes on the donkey, unties the donkey and comes back to town. One day, the washerman forgot to bring the rope with him. A wise man suggested a solution, "Pretend to tie a rope around the donkey's neck to the tree." When the washerman did that, the donkey did not move, thinking that it was bound. As dusk approached, the washerman loaded the clean clothes on the back of his donkey and asked it to move. But, alas, the donkey still thought it was bound to the tree. Therefore, the washerman had to pretend to untie the (non-existent) rope. Then the donkey came with him. This is similar to our condition as we think we are ignorant. This ignorance itself is non-existent but we are bound by it until a sage comes along and shows us our fallacy.

Due to our ignorance, we are unable to realise the Reality that always exists, independent of time, and blissful.

A person¹⁴ was searching for a key in the street. He said though he had lost the key inside the house, he was searching for it outside because there was more light on the street. Most of us search for the key (happiness) outside of us either from other people, or through the accumulation of material goods or the development of our personality. *Happiness cannot be obtained from anything outside us, but only from understanding who we really are.*

Unfortunately, we are habituated to looking for happiness in the outside world, even though our everyday experience tells us otherwise. Bhagavan says:

If a man thinks that his happiness is due to external causes and his possessions, it is reasonable to conclude that his happiness must increase with the increase of possessions and diminish in proportion to their diminution. Therefore, if he is devoid of possessions, his happiness should be nil. What is the real experience of man? Does it conform to this view? In deep sleep the man is devoid of possessions, including his own body. Instead of being unhappy he is quite happy. Everyone desires to sleep soundly. The conclusion is that happiness is inherent in man and is not due to external causes. One must realise his Self in order to open the store of unalloyed happiness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Adapted from <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/the-lost-key-a-mulla-nasrudin-story>.

¹⁵ Op. cit., Talk§3.

This unalloyed happiness is something that does not fade with time. To understand and ultimately free ourselves from all suffering, we must therefore develop minds that are impervious to the transitory nature of the outside world. We need to recognize what is ephemeral versus what is eternal and cultivate the dispassion necessary to be able to reject that which is ephemeral, in our pursuit of the eternal. *This means that if our goal is to live a truly happy life, we must stop seeking happiness in what is transitory.*

What is worth seeking and discovering is the truth of Self. Such knowledge comes only to the still, clear intellect not muddled by strenuous search [outside] but questing for the Truth [inside] in silence. Thus Bhagavan continues,

An examination of the ephemeral nature of external phenomena leads to *vairagya*. Hence enquiry (*vichara*) is the first and foremost step to be taken. When *vichara* continues automatically, it results in a contempt for wealth, fame, ease, pleasure, etc.¹⁶

The problem is that the mind/ego thinks that it can satisfy itself by the acquisition of different objects external to itself. However, there are simply too many factors involved in life's unfolding on the material plane though most of them are well beyond our control. Genetics itself controls most of our physical characteristics and the diseases we are likely to have. The family we are born into controls our socioeconomic status. Further, these acquisitions are not attached to us, as we think. This is illustrated by a parable.¹⁷ A cowherd was leading a cow with a rope. The sage pointed and asked his disciples, "Who is the master?" The disciples said, "It is, of course, the cowherd. He is leading the cow with a rope." The sage cut the rope. The cow ran away and the cowherd ran behind the cow, wailing. The sage then said, "The cow had no interest in the cowherd. The cowherd is bound to the cow and not the other way around. Similarly, we are bound to the objects we own, though we think we control these objects. It is only we who run after them, but when the time comes, they will leave us."

Irrespective of our acquisitions, no bolstering can reassure the ego/mind, as it knows it is only a construct and not real by itself. It

¹⁶ Op. cit., Talk§27.

¹⁷ Adapted from the Sufi parable, Who is the master? Identification is misery. <https://solancha.com/sufi-stories-15-ancient-wisdom-tales-from-sufi-dervishes/>

is only a collection of thoughts, memories and feelings without any real existence. Thus, Bhagavan says the ego is just a “shadow cast on the ground” by a person and does not really exist by itself.

For the ego, ignorance of the Self really is bliss. Because, realising the Self actually means the death of the ego. Therefore, for its own survival, it keeps us away from the search of the Self by keeping us busy with the world and ensures our suffering. Thus, Bhagavan’s teaching is entirely focused on self-enquiry (or self-surrender) and thus on the renunciation of and the destruction of the ego-mind. Our ignorance is merely a projection of our mind into the world, which is strengthened by our clinging to the objects in our projection, though the objects are not attached to us. *We are attached to them.*

The point of spiritual awakening is not to maximize your assets and minimize your losses, but *to be free of attachment to either gain or loss and to be peaceful and blissful amidst the vicissitudes of life.* The Advaita teachings are therefore best viewed as laboratory manuals detailing the nature of consciousness and the human mind. This method can be practised and the changes that result from this practice can be experienced. Though the primary aim of Advaita is to teach us the ways to remove our ignorance, give up all the anxieties of the mind¹⁸ and abide in the Self, as a philosophy it has a metaphysics, an epistemology and ontological perspectives. These will be discussed in future articles.

Śaṅkara says that to be born as a human being is rare indeed, when there are millions of life forms available for birth.¹⁹ Having been born as a human being, to also have the desire for liberation is even rarer, as emphasized by Krishna’s teaching in the *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*.²⁰ Finally, getting the opportunity to learn Advaita Vedanta, as taught by great masters like Bhagavan, is extremely rare indeed. Dattatreya says that it is only by the grace of *Īśvara* that one has the inclination to study Advaita Vedanta.²¹ We are therefore greatly blessed to have this rare opportunity to study and practise Advaita Vedanta. As Śaṅkara says in the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, there is no beginning to this path; one picks up from where one left off in their previous life and continues the journey. This should encourage us: *we have already started on our journey.* ▲

¹⁸ *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, v.1191 ¹⁹ *Prabodhasudhakara*, v 1.17: The Nectar-Ocean of Enlightenment, Samata books, 2002. ²⁰ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.3. ²¹ *Avadhūta Gītā* 1.1. *Īśvarānugrahādeva puṁsām advaita vāsanā.*

Is the World Unreal?

Part Two

M. GIRIDHAR

In the previous article of this series, we examined what is Advaita Vedanta and why we should study it. One of the most confusing and misunderstood aspects of Advaita is the oft-quoted statement, ‘The *jagat* (world) is unreal.’ Among all the six *darśanas* mentioned in the previous article, including the various sub-schools of Vedanta, Advaita is the only school of thought that asserts the ‘illusion’ of the world.

However, the word ‘unreal’ has to be understood properly. Ādi Śaṅkara says ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः.¹ This means Brahman alone is real; the world is *mithyā*; *jīva* is non-different from Brahman. What is *mithyā*? To understand this, we need to define real and unreal. The *Bhagavad Gītā*² states:

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।
उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥

This means “Of the temporary, there is no permanent existence, while of the eternal, there is no destruction. Those who know the Truth have reached this conclusion by deliberating on what is temporary and

¹ 20th verse of *Brahmajñānavali Māla*. *Brahma satyam jagat mithyā jivo brahmaiva na aparah*.

² Chapter 2, verse 16.

what is eternal.” Thus, what we consider real in common parlance is not actually real. For example, we consider the bracelets, necklaces and rings to be real but according to Vedanta, only gold is real and these forms are unreal as they can undergo change from one form to the another. Thus, in Vedanta, the following is defined:

sat (Reality) is defined as that which is *trikalābādhyami*³. Only Brahman is *sat*.

asat is *tuccham*⁴. An example of *asat* would be the horns of a hare or, in traditional literature, *vandhyāputra*⁵.

mithyā, refers to something that is neither *sat* nor *asat*. The world, *jagat*, is not *sat* like Brahman, because it is subject to time and space and is absent during our deep sleep but it is also not *asat* like *vandhyāputra* because we directly perceive it in the waking state. For the Brahman, *jagat* is non-existent while for *jīvas*, *jagat* is existent in two forms: appearing as real for the *ajñāni* and understood as false for the *jñāni*. It is this unique combination of non-existence and existence that is called *mithyā*.

This is explained lucidly by Bhagavan⁶:

The *tantriks* and others of the kind condemn Śri Śaṅkara’s philosophy as *māyā vāda* without understanding him aright. What does he say? He says: (1) Brahman is real; (2) the universe is a myth; (3) Brahman is the universe. He does not stop at the second statement but continues to supplement it with the third. What does it signify? The Universe is conceived to be apart from Brahman and that perception is wrong. The antagonists point to his illustration of *rajju sarpa* (rope snake). This is unconditioned superimposition. After the truth of the rope is known, the illusion of snake is removed once for all. But they should take the conditioned superimposition also into consideration, e.g., *marumarichika* or *mrigatrishna* (water of mirage). The mirage does not disappear even after knowing it to be a mirage. The

³ Available during three states: waking, dreaming and deep sleep.

⁴ Unfitness to appear as existent on any locus.

⁵ Son of a barren woman.

⁶ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§315.

vision is there but the man does not run to it for water. Śrī Śaṅkara must be understood in the light of both the illustrations. The world is a myth. Even after knowing it, it continues to appear. It must be known to be Brahman and not apart. If the world appears, yet to whom does it appear, he asks. What is your reply? You must say the Self. If not, will the world appear in the absence of the cognising Self? Therefore the Self is the reality. That is his conclusion. . . . Similarly the universe cannot be real of itself – that is to say, apart from the underlying Reality.

Thus according to Advaita, the *jagat* is *mithyā*, it has not been created. It has dependent reality, being simply the *namā-rupā* (name-form) of the nondual Brahman. Thus it depends on Brahman and not the perceiver, who is part of the *jagat*. So long as the substratum of all, the nondual Brahman is not seen, the world seems real, like illusory silver in a piece of mother-of-pearl.⁷

Seeing something as other than Brahman is the mistake of *adhyasa* (mixing up real and unreal). The *jīvas* attribute reality to the world due to *avidya* (ignorance) and delusorily think he is himself the seer, the doer and the knower.⁸ This *avidya* is negated when they realise the Self to be Brahman but this *avidya* cannot affect Brahman just like a wrong perception of the snake in the rope does not affect the rope.

This snake-universe is a superimposition upon the rope-Brahman. There is no more causal relationship between this world-appearance and Brahman than there is between the snake and the rope. Thus, the universe has no existence apart from Brahman, just as the snake has no existence apart from the rope.

Now, the question arises that if Brahman is always pure, how did the world arise? Why are so many creation theories mentioned in the Upanishads? To understand these concepts, we need to understand the three levels employed to describe Truth (or Reality).

The first is, *pāramārthika satya*, which is the absolute Truth. It means that which remains the truth in all states at all times, present everywhere, without beginning or end. This only refers

⁷ Swami Nikhilananda, *Self-Knowledge (Atma Bodha)*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2002, v.7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, v.26.

to Brahman. In this view, there is no creation, no dissolution, no individual soul, no *Īśvara* and no liberation. There is only Brahman.

The second is the *vyāvahārika* point of view, which is the practical reality and is what is perceived in day-to-day affairs. *Saguna* Brahman (*Īśvara*) is regarded as the cause of this *jagat*'s origin, existence, and dissolution, because this world indeed has an empirical reality. As *Īśvara* is *sarvajna* (all-knower), *sarvasaktimān* (all-powerful), etc., and is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of *jagat*, *Īśvara* is worthy of worship. But *Īśvara*'s reality is restricted to *vyāvahārika*.

The *prātibhāshika satya* represents subjective or relative truth. For example, the appearance of the snake on the rope, or the objects seen in the dream-state belong to subjective reality. What appears to be real at one stage is termed to become unreal at some other time. For example, the snake appears to be real in semi-darkness but is seen to be a rope under clear light. Thus, the snake is not real as it is sublated when a light is shown.

Though *pāramārthika satya* is the ultimate truth with only Brahman and no world, at the *vyāvahārika* level, the Brahman, *jīva* and *jagat* appear as “independent” realities. The *prātibhāshika* view indicates the relative truth. The dream that appears real to the dreamer is rejected by the waker. The needs in the dream cannot be satisfied by the materials in the waking state.

This is illustrated by a famous story titled, *Is This True or is That True?*⁹. The mighty emperor Janaka was asleep in his palace, and he was suddenly jerked awake. The army general told him that the kingdom was being invaded. Janaka slipped on his armour, led his army, and fought the battle. Unfortunately, he lost and the new emperor banished him from the kingdom. Janaka wandered around in his old kingdom with his clothes in tatters and his body was covered with filth and dust. No one dared to even offer him food or water because they did not want to upset the new king. Janaka crossed over to the next kingdom. He saw poor people being offered food in an ashram.

⁹ Adapted from the talk: Vedanta in five parables, by Swami Sarvapriyananda, <https://youtu.be/BMRbh3M4AGw>.

He stands in line for the food, and receives the last morsel. However, by the time he reaches the bowl to his lips, a crow knocks it out of his hands. Janaka collapses on the floor with a scream asking the Lord to end his life.

Janaka, the emperor, wakes up on his bed with his heart pounding and his body drenched in sweat. His wife and guards run in upon hearing his scream and enquire about his well-being. Janaka starts mumbling, “Is this true, or is that true?” His queen, his ministers and the finest doctors, are unable to diagnose the problem. Hearing about the state of the king, the sage Ashtavakra comes to meet him. He asks who was the common entity between the person begging for food and the current king. Janaka replies ‘I’. Ashtavakra emphatically says “Neither this is true nor that is true. You are the truth, and the worlds appearing both in waking and dream are *mithyā*.” A similar story can be found in the Buddhist literature.¹⁰

The fundamental nature of consciousness and how it exists in all the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep has been deeply explored in Advaita, starting from the Gaudapāda’s *kārikā* on *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*¹¹. For example, the 19th century Tamil text, *Ellam Ondre*¹², suggests that three states (waking, dream and deep sleep) should be taken to form one long dream and the fourth state (*turiya*) i.e., the consciousness witnesses all these three states and this consciousness is the Truth and the Ultimate Reality.

Though the fundamental question about consciousness and its nature has been discussed in philosophy for several centuries, it has recently intrigued the scientific community. How is consciousness connected to matter? Though many scientists still believe that consciousness is generated by the brain, it is often asked “how can a physical system such as the brain and nervous system generate first-

¹⁰ Chuang Tzu was a sage in ancient China, who, one night went to sleep and dreamed that he was a butterfly. On waking up, Chuang Tzu asked himself the following question: “Was I Chuang Tzu dreaming I was a butterfly or am I now really a butterfly dreaming that I am Chuang Tzu?”

¹¹ Swami Nikhilananda, *Mandukya Upanishad with Gaudapada’s Karika and Shankara’s Commentary*, Advaita Ashrama, 2006, Chapter Two: Unreality (*Vaitathya*).

¹² Vaiyai R. Subramaniam, *All is One*, (translated from *Ellam Ondre*), Sri Ramanasramam, 2007, II.7.

person experience referred to as *qualia*.¹³ This has been termed as the hard problem of consciousness.

What is the relationship between the consciousness and matter? There are only four possible options. The *Charavākā*¹⁴ (and most scientists) view is that matter is primary and the consciousness is a by-product of matter (brain). The second approach is based on almost all theological schools including the *Dvaita Vedanta* school that Consciousness is primary with matter (and everything else) being a product of it.

The third option, expounded recently,¹⁵ is that consciousness cannot be reduced to the brain and it is fundamentally irreducible in principle. Thus both matter and consciousness are fundamental independent realities that interact with each other. This is *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* in the *Sankhya/Yoga* philosophy.¹⁶ At least a few scientists have come around to the view that consciousness is not confined to biological entities but is a fundamental feature of all physical matter — from subatomic particles to the human brain.¹⁷

The fourth approach is the Advaita Vedanta view¹⁸ that neither does matter produce consciousness nor does consciousness produce objects but there is only one nondual reality that is the Consciousness. It is nondual because it appears to be two such as consciousness and the world but in reality, Consciousness alone exists. Advaita Vedanta further claims that every individual can “experience” this Consciousness right here and now. In fact, these viewpoints have been extensively discussed in the work *Sarva darśana saṅgraha* written by Madhavacharya Vidyananya¹⁹, which is a compendium of

¹³ David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹⁴ *Charavākā*, aka *Lokāyata*, is a philosophical Indian atheistic school of materialists.

¹⁵ Annaka Harris, *Conscious: A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the Mind*, Harper Publications, 2019.

¹⁶ For a detailed exposition on *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*, refer to the ongoing series in *The Mountain Path*.

¹⁷ Philip Goff, *Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*, Pantheon Publishers, 2019.

¹⁸ William M. Indich, *Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000.

¹⁹ He should not to be confused with the Dvaita teacher Madhavacharya. This person was the brother of Sayana, the commentator of all Vedas. He is often identified as

all schools of philosophies existing at the end of the 14th century. Radhakrishnan²⁰ says the *Sarva darśana saṅgraha* “sketches sixteen systems of thought so as to exhibit a gradually ascending series, culminating in the Advaita Vedanta.”

As Advaita considers the world as *mithyā*, it does not give too much importance to the happenings in the *jagat*. Bhagavan used to give a story to highlight this concept.²¹ Let us suppose one person is sleeping while the other person is awake in the same room. The sleeping person is dreaming that all his belongings have been stolen and that he is running behind the thief shouting that someone should help him catch the thief. If the other person in this room hears this shout, should he run to catch the thief or just wake the dreaming person up? On waking up, will he not know that there was neither a thief nor a theft, but instead know that he alone exists?

Likewise, if one gets to know the eternal, fundamental, and supreme truth, one will obtain clarity that all the worldly problems are only a dream and that one has never really got entangled in the misery/sad affairs.

However, it is easy to get upset by the world and also perturb the world by our actions. That’s why Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*²² says:

यस्मान्नोद्विजते लोको लोकान्नोद्विजते च यः |
हर्षामर्षभयोद्वेगैर्मुक्तो यः स च मे प्रियः ||

This has been translated into Tamil as:²³

எவன்பால் உலகுபயம் ஏதும் உறாதோ

எவன்உலகுக்கு அஞ்சானோ ஏதும் – எவன்தான்

the same as Swami Vidyaranya, the author of *Pañcadaśī* and *Madhavia Shankara Vijaya* and also the spiritual head of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham during 1377 to 1386 AD. However, according to the records of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham, Vidyaranya was a different person, and Sayana and Madhava were actually his disciples.

²⁰ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Volume 1. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1929.

²¹ Adapted from the website: If this life itself is a dream then does Ramana Maharshi exist only in that dream? <http://prashantaboutindiaa.blogspot.com/2010/02/if-this-life-itself-is-dream-then-does.html>

²² *Bhagavad Gita*, XII.15.

²³ *Bhagavad Gita Sara* by Sri Ramana Maharshi, verse 36.

MOUNTAIN PATH

உவப்புஉவர்ப்பு பீதி உளக்கலக்கம் அற்றோன்
அவள்ளனக்கு மீப்பிரிய னாம்தேர்.

This means “He, owing to whom the world is not disturbed, and who is not disturbed by the world, who is free from joy, impatience, fear and anxiety, know that he is very dear to Me.”

Once Indra and his friends were travelling in the sky. They looked down and they saw pigs living in a terrible condition. Indra told his friends : “My God! Look at those pigs, why are they living so horribly? I will go and teach them how to live nicely.” In order for Indra to come and teach these pigs, he became a pig to teach them. After some time, Indra’s friends said: “Let us go and see what progress Indra is making.” They were horrified with what they saw! They came and said to Indra: “Why are you in this condition? We thought you came to reform these pigs!” On hearing this, Indra got upset and said “What are you talking about? I am a pig living happily with my wife and children. We have good food here and having a wonderful time. Go away.”

The story²⁴ goes on that the friends of Indra went and complained to Lord Vishnu about this state of affairs. Vishnu then heaped suffering on the pig till Indra realised who he was actually. Life after life we have been conditioned to feel that we are this body, this mind, this ego, this individual and believe that the world is real in itself. Like Indra we have forgotten our true nature, which is existence, knowledge and absolute bliss. Subsequently, it seems we need to undergo some sort of suffering to get out of the notion that the world is real in itself and then realise the *sat*. Bhagavan explains:²⁵

M.: If there were no suffering how could the desire to be happy arise? If that desire did not arise how would the Quest of the Self be successful?

D.: Then is all suffering good?

M.: Quite so. What is happiness? Is it a healthy and handsome body, timely meals, and the like? Even an emperor has troubles without end though he may be healthy. So all suffering is due to the false notion ‘I am the body’. Getting rid of it is *jnanam*.

²⁴ Adapted from the book: Swami Prabhavananda, *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008, p.87.

²⁵ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§633.

However, until all the *vishya vasanas*²⁶ subside in the Heart through self-enquiry²⁷, a person with just an intellectual understanding that the world is *mithyā* will still hanker after external objects just like a parched man who sees a mirage in a desert may still get attracted by it. An illustration given is based on the Tamil saying: நாயைக் கண்டால் கல்லைக் காணோம், கல்லைக் கண்டால் நாயைக் காணோம்.²⁸

This sentence is assumed to mean that no stones are seen when you want to chase away a stray dog while you see plenty of stones when you see no dogs around. But this saying has a much deeper philosophical meaning.²⁹

There used to be two dogs carved out of stone, one on either side of the gate in a house. A boy used to pass by this house daily and used to mistake them to be real dogs. This caused an undue fear in him whenever he passed by the house. An onlooker told him that these were just sculptures of dogs and there is nothing to fear.

However, despite this assurance and some understanding, the boy was still quite afraid to walk near the house. A saint passing along that way noticed this and said, “Dear child, there is no need to be afraid.” He took the boy near the gate, stood nearby and told the boy to touch and feel the dog sculptures. The boy realised the dogs are indeed made of stone and no longer saw the (false living) dogs.

Similarly, on the realisation of the Self, one will realise the world is not something to be worried about as it is merely *mithyā* because it is impermanent, an abode of sorrows and will never give true happiness. We should take refuge at the lotus feet of Arunachala Ramana, who like the sage in the above story, will make us realise that the world is *mithyā*. ▲

²⁶ Subtle tendencies of the mind in relation to objects of sense gratification.

²⁷ Ramana Maharshi’s *Who am I?* – Paragraph 11.

²⁸ Literally means ‘When you see a dog, there is no stone. When you see a stone, there is no dog.’ Colloquially it means when you have the proper tool to solve a problem, you don’t have the problem, but when the problem reappears you no longer have the right tools on hand to fix it.

²⁹ Adapted from the book: Suri Nagamma, *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 2006, Letter 141.

Mistaking the Unreal to be Real

Part Three

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined what is Advaita Vedanta and why we should study it. In the second article, we learned that the *jāgrat* (world) is classified as *mithyā*, which is neither real nor unreal. As defined in *Panchadasi*¹, *mithyā* is merely the appearance of an object that is non-existent, just as an elephant seen in a dream. It is neither *sat* (सत्) nor *asat* (असत्) but *Anirvacanīya* (अनिर्वचनीय) i.e., indescribable.

The illusory appearance is a product of ignorance (*avidyā*) about the substratum and the error is caused due to *maya* which is also indescribable. The root of *avidyā* lies in *adhyāsi*², which consists of mistaking and superimposing the unreal on the real. This line of argument is called *Anirvacanīya-khyātivāda*, one of the five schools of Indian theories of perceptual error.³

¹ *Panchadasi* 2.70. yat asat bhāsamānam tat mithyā svapna-gajādi-vat.

² *Adhyasa Bhasya* is the masterly introduction of Adi Shankara to the *Brahma sutra bhashya*: <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/brama-sutras/d/doc62758.html>

³ *Khyātivāda*-s are the arguments for perceptual error used in Hinduism and Buddhist philosophies. *Khyātivāda* claims that wrong perception is not simply the human failure to perceive correctly but depends upon the cognising activity of the mind.

The *Thirukkural*⁴ also states that is the reason for births:

பொருளல்ல வற்றைப் பொருளென்று உணரும்

மருளானாம் மாணாப் பிறப்பு.

Adhyāsa, according to Ādi Śaṅkara, is not an intellectual construct (*kalpanā viśaya*) but a matter of experience (*anubhava*). For instance, we measure the duration of the day with reference to sunrise and reckon our existence in terms of years. This duration, however, does not exist from the viewpoint of the sun. Though both these positions are real in their own sphere but one is a *relative reality* while the other is the *Absolute reality*. Unfortunately, due to ignorance, we confuse the relative reality with the Absolute reality and accept the relative as the Real.

Adhyāsa has two components. That which is superimposed is termed *adhīnam* (अधिन्म्) while the substratum is called *adhiṣṭhāna* (अधिष्ठान). For example, the snake is the former while the rope is the latter. In this case, *jagat* i.e., the world is the *adhīnam* while Brahman is the *adhiṣṭhāna*. The latter is undeluded and unaffected by the illusory nature of the former. The *adhiṣṭhāna* remains non-dual although the *adhīnam* is in duality. The independence of the *adhiṣṭhāna* is not traded off by the relationship. The *adhīnam* may be inferred to be different each time but the *adhiṣṭhāna* always remains the same. In the above example, one may see a venomous snake or a non-venomous snake or a two-hooded snake depending on the memory of the person who sees it but the rope is unaffected by all these illusory visions.

It is only due to *avidyā* that the individual fails to see the nexus between the *jāgrat* and Brahman. Take the case of a pond that is clear and undisturbed. When the water is clear, it reflects the sun clearly and one can also see the bottom of the pond. However, when a stone is thrown in the pond, the ripples in the water make it look as if the sun is trembling and moving while the bottom of the pond is obscured. Even so, as a thought occurs, the person becomes the subject and recognises the thought (object) resulting in a subject-object relationship. The sun does not undergo any modification and is unaffected by the ripples though the reflection may appear disturbed. The water in the pond is

⁴ *Thirukkural*, 351. Inglorious births are produced by the confusion (of the mind) that considers those things to be real which are not real [i.e., attributes reality to the unreal].

the transactional world while the bottom of the pond (and the sun) is the transcendental reality. The disturbance created by the ripples is *avidyā*.

The Self in the *vyavahārika* context is *śarīrika* (embodied self) as it encounters the world. However, the Self in reality is not *saririka*; it is absolute, *nitya* (eternal), *nirguna* (without form), *asaririka* (without embodiment), *ananta* (infinite) and *ānanda* (bliss). The infinite Self, perceived as the limited self (*jīva*) is *adhyāsa* and the purpose of Advaita is to remove this *adhyāsa*. Once removed, Brahman will shine of its own accord, for it is the only reality.

Bhagavan explains⁵:

The Realisation is now obscured by the present world-idea. The world is now seen outside you and the idea associated with it obscures your real nature. All that is needed is to overcome this ignorance and then the Self stands revealed. No special effort is necessary to realise the Self. All efforts are for eliminating the present obscuration [concealment] of the Truth.

Ādi Śaṅkara defines *adhyāsa* as *smritirūpah paratra pūrvadrishta avabhāsaḥ* i.e., it is like memory wherein the appearance is of some thing seen previously. These are two components of an error. One is the erroneous cognition that occurs in the mind, which is called *jñāna-adhyāsa*. The second component is the object of error that exists outside of the mind called *artha-adhyāsa*. In *anirvacanīya-khyāti*, a snake is not merely imagined in the mind but the *avidyā* about the rope outside manifests as a snake on the rope. This can only occur to a person who has seen a snake before and recalls from memory about the venomous nature of the snake. This is why a person runs away from the rope when he sees a snake on it.

Similarly, this is why the negation of the error occurs in the form of ‘it is a rope, not a snake’. This *adhyāsa* does not necessarily occur due to *pramāṇa dosa* (defect in the means of knowledge). For example, the mistake of a snake in a rope can occur due to poor dimmed light or bad eyesight. However, *adhyāsa* occurs even in cases where a person mistakes the sky to be blue or a mirage to have water due to the inherent properties of light that deceive the senses.

Thus it is held that what is seen in the illusion, or imagined to exist, is not merely the attributes of the object, but the object itself.

⁵ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§ 490.

For example, in the case of a mirage, it is held that water is not just cognised but it is seen to exist there. The reason for this conclusion is that, when there is cognition of water, the object (water) must be considered to exist there, because there can be no cognition without an object. Of course, subsequently, it is found that there is no water, but as long as the delusion lasts, water is considered to be present. It should be pointed out that unless the person believed that water was actually there, he would not make an effort to grasp it.

In the same way, we believe that the world actually exists and is real until the dawn of Self-knowledge. Thus the theory of *artha adhyāsa* is intended to explain why we not only see the world, but accept it as real. This is illustrated by a story.

A man was walking home along a polluted and smelly river. He saw a shimmering sparkle in the river and when he looked closely, he saw a diamond necklace. To reach that necklace in the river, he put his hands into that filthy river and tried to grab that necklace but could not catch it. Being frustrated, he walked into the river and his trousers were sullied. Surprisingly, he still could not get the necklace. Frustrated at these failed attempts, he thought to give up and walked away feeling unhappy about it. But as he saw the necklace again, he was once again overcome by desire and decided to get it by any means. So he decided to get completely into the river even though it was a very disgusting thing to do. He searched everywhere for the necklace but still failed. He came out of the river even more forlorn and depressed.

A saint, who was passing by, saw him and inquired about the matter. While he was unwilling to share the information, he also had a conviction that the saint will not steal the necklace from him. Therefore, he told him about the problem that while he sees the necklace in the river, he is unable to retrieve it. The saint, smilingly, told him to look upward towards the branches of the tree that was overhanging the river. The man looked up and was surprised to see that the necklace was dangling on the branch of the tree. For the whole time, he had been trying to catch a mere reflection of the real necklace.

Similarly, we try to grasp the reflection thinking it is real because we actually think that the pleasure can be derived by acquiring the object. However, the *ananda* one gets from worldly objects is only *pratibhāsika ananda*. The Brahman's *ananda* is reflected on the

world and appears as if it is the real *ananda*. That is the reason why beings get attracted by this *prātibhāsika ananda* and desire it. This *prātibhāsika ānanda* is not permanent, *ādyantavantaḥ* — it has a beginning and an end. Thus it is said,

ये हि संस्पर्शजा भोगा दुःखयोनय एव ते ।
आद्यन्तवन्तः कौन्तेय न तेषु रमते बुधः ॥⁶

The meaning of this verse is that “Though the pleasures arising from the contact of sense objects appear to be pleasurable, they invariably result in misery. O son of Kuntī, such pleasures have a beginning and an end, and so the wise man does not delight in them.”

A person who wishes to enjoy the Real *ānanda* should develop *vairāgya*, dispassion towards the enjoyment of the world. Unless *vairāgya* on the *prātibhāsika ānanda* gets fully developed, the Real *ānanda* cannot be enjoyed even though it is always present. One should get out of this illusion completely to enjoy the Real *ānanda*, which is Eternal as it does not have either a beginning or an end.

We think of destruction as the future non-existence of a previously existent thing. However, no error ever has any real existence and the destruction of an error cannot be the future non-existence of a previously existent error. When a person knows the rope, his understanding is not that the snake *no longer* exists, but it never existed in the first place. The existence of the snake was always due to the existence of the rope. Therefore the destruction of the snake is only the *understanding* of the *eternal non-existence* of the snake. In the same way, the existence that a *jīva* currently attributes to the *jāgrat* is really the existence of Brahman. He mistakes the existence of Brahman as the existence of *jāgrat*. Therefore, when the *adhyāsa* of *jāgrat* is destroyed, that which has existed will continue to exist, and that which never existed will remain non-existent.

Adhyāsa can also be of two types: One is to impute wrongly and seeing as existing what is not there, for example, the snake on a rope and water in a mirage etc. There is also a negative superimposition wherein one takes it as not there what is already there, such as the missing necklace, as illustrated by Bhagavan.⁷

⁶ *Bhagavad Gita* 5.22. ye hi sansparśha-jā bhogā duḥkha-yonaya eva te
ādyantavantaḥ kaunteya na teṣhu ramate budhaḥ

⁷ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk# 490.

MOUNTAIN PATH

A lady is wearing a necklace round her neck. She forgets it, imagines it to be lost and impulsively looks for it here, there and everywhere. Not finding it, she asks her friends if they have found it anywhere, until one kind friend points to her neck and tells her to feel the necklace round the neck. The seeker does so and feels happy that the necklace is found. Again, when she meets her other friends, they ask her if her lost necklace was found. She says 'yes' to them, as if it were lost and later recovered. Her happiness on re-discovering it round her neck is the same as if some lost property was recovered. In fact she never lost it nor recovered it. And yet she was once miserable and now she is happy.

So also with the realisation of the Self. The Self is always realised. The Realisation is now obscured. When the veil is removed the person feels happy at rediscovering the ever-realised Self. The ever-present Realisation appears to be a new Realisation. Now, what should one do to overcome the present ignorance. Be eager to have the true knowledge. As this eagerness grows, the wrong knowledge diminishes in strength until it finally disappears.

Adhyāsa is thus the *apparent* transformation of Brahman into the objects of the world and Self into 'I am the body' consciousness. *Jnana* removes false attribution and allows the real to be seen as it really is. Once the false appearances are removed, no special effort is required as the Self shines by itself. Bhagavan blames superimposition for the prevalent mistaken notion that the Self is bound, and thus in need of being liberated, like the woman who needs to find her lost necklace though it was never lost.

In the rope-snake analogy, when a light is turned on, it is not the fear of seeing the snake that goes away (in fact, the fear will linger for some time due to the body chemicals in force) but there is the realisation that there never was a snake and thus the snake is *dissolved*. Similarly, when *avidyā* is destroyed, the problems in the world are not destroyed but the world is no longer seen as just a world of duality. The purpose of *advaita* is not to solve the problem but to show that the problem did not exist at all. This is illustrated by a famous story titled, 'The Princess of Kashi'⁸.

⁸ Adapted from the talk: Vedanta in five parables, by Swami Sarvapriyananda, <https://youtu.be/BMRbh3M4AGw>

In the great city of Kashi (Varanasi), the king organised a play called the princess of Kashi. The queen came up with the idea of dressing up her five year old son (the prince) as a young girl so that he can play the role of the princess. The queen's maids dressed him so nicely that the prince looked like a cute beautiful girl. Everyone was impressed with the child and the court painter made a portrait of the child and dated it. This portrait was stored in the basement. Fifteen years passed, the prince had now become a handsome youth, trained in all skills and fit to become a king. One day while exploring the basement of the palace, he accidentally discovered that painting. He was so mesmerised, hypnotised and enthralled by the beautiful princess in that painting that he wanted to get married to her.

He expressed this wish to the minister and took the minister down to the basement and showed him the well-kept and preserved painting, inscribed 'Princess of Kashi'. The moment the minister saw that painting, he instantly realised the problem and then explained the incident behind that painting. He told the prince was indeed the 'Princess of Kashi' himself. The girl in the picture and he himself are one and the same. The moment the prince heard of the truth, the desire for the princess in his heart disappeared. The desire was not fulfilled in the conventional way of getting married to her but the problem itself was dissolved.

In this story, the prince realised that the duality of him and the princess, was only ignorance and not reality. There are no two different individuals, two different beings. The illusion caused by his not knowing, was because of the darkness of ignorance. Once the ignorance is removed, the *mahavakya* of *tat tvam asi* (तत् त्वम् असि) i.e., Thou art That applies and thus *Atman = Brahman*. The desires within his mind were thus dissolved because he realised that duality is false and there is no such girl apart from him.

Thus, *advaita* does not solve the problem but dissolves the problem as the problem itself no longer exists! We should take refuge at the lotus feet of Arunachala Ramana, who will remove the *adhyāsa*, and leads us from the unreal to the real⁹, and to dissolve all our problems. ▲

⁹ *Brihadaranyaka Upansiad* 1.3.28.

ADVAITA PRIMER

The Triad

Part Four

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined what is Advaita Vedanta and why we should study it. In the second article, we learned that the *jagat* (world) is classified as *mithyā*, which is neither *sat* (सत्) nor *asat* (असत्) but *Anirvacanīya* (अनिर्वचनीयम्) i.e., indescribable. The illusory appearance of the world is due to ignorance (*avidyā*), whose root lies in *adhyāsa*, which is the mistaking and superimposing the unreal for the real. Thus, the third article indicated that this illusion is really a delusion. Bhagavan says every religion and sect has to deal with the triad (a group or set of three different entities)¹ namely, *jīva*, *Brahman* and *jagat*. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss the relationship between each entity i.e., *jīva* and *jagat*; *jagat* and *Brahman*; *jīva* and *Brahman*.

It is important to note that at the highest level, only Brahman exists and thus there is no relationship between these as everything is subsumed in Brahman. Bhagavan explains:²

As was already said, the purpose of the whole philosophy is to indicate the underlying Reality whether of the *jagrat*, *svapna* and *sushupti* states, or the individual souls, the world and God. There are three outlooks possible:

¹ *Ulladu Narpadu*, verse 3.

² Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§399.

- i. The *Vyavaharika*: The man sees the world in all its variety, surmises the creator and believes in himself as the subject. All these are thus reduced to the three fundamentals, *jagat*, *jīva* and *Īsvara*. He learns the existence of the creator and tries to reach him in order to gain immortality. If one is thus released from bondage, there are all other individuals existing as before who should work out their own salvation. He more or less admits the One Reality underlying all these phenomena. The phenomena are due to the play of *maya*. *Maya* is the *shakti* of *Īsvara* or the activity of Reality. Thus, existence of different souls, objects, etc., do not clash with the advaitic point of view.
- ii. The *Pratibhasika*: The *jagat*, *jīva* and *Īsvara* are all cognised by the seer only. They do not have any existence independent of him. So there is only one *jīva*, be it the individual or God. All else is simply a myth.
- iii. The *Paramarthika*: i.e., *ajata vada* (no-creation doctrine) which admits of no second. There is no reality or absence of it, no seeking or gaining, no bondage or liberation and so on.

Thus, only the *paramarthika* view that everything is One at all times is ultimately correct. Though all religions teach only the Oneness of the supreme Truth, they have to start their teachings only by conceding that these prime entities are real. This is because the mind, tossed by objective knowledge [and subjective experience] would not concede that only One exists.³

First, we explore the relationship between the *jīva* and *jagat*. The *srishti-drishti vada* is the view that the world is primary and gives rise to consciousness. This is the common western view and is known as the Realist view of reality. The *drishti-srishti vada* is the view that consciousness is primary and gives rise to the world appearance. In western philosophy, this is known as the idealist view of reality and is also the view of some Buddhist schools. However, the advaitic view is that the world and individual are both projected illusions that simultaneously ‘appear’ and disappear (as in sleep).

Take a dream, all objects and people appear to be real as long as we are in the dream and share the same world. While dreaming, the

³ *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 115.

world within the dream seems real and separate from you the dreamer causing a duality. However, on waking up, you realise that the world in the dream was just a projection of your mind and it existed because of you (the dreamer). The *ajata vada* is the knowledge that nothing – neither the world, soul nor God – ever comes into existence, and ‘That Which Is’ ever exists as IT is.

This is the final truth and is the *paramarthika satya*. It never accepts even the appearance of any trinity but proclaims that the Brahman alone exists eternally and without modification. However, from the *vyavaharika* point, the *vivartha vada* is recommended to explain how the *jagat* came into existence simultaneously with the consciousness. Since this accepts the appearance of the *jīva* and *jagat* as ‘real’, it is only a working hypothesis to help aspirants.

Bhagavan explains:⁴

I do not teach only the *ajata* doctrine. I approve of all schools. The same truth has to be expressed in different ways to suit the capacity of the hearer. The *ajata* doctrine says, “Nothing exists except the one reality. There is no birth or death, no projection or drawing in [of the world], no *sadhaka* [no seeker], no *mumukshu* [no one seeking liberation], no *mukta* [no liberated person], no bondage, no liberation. The one unity alone exists ever.”

‘To such as find it difficult to grasp this truth and who ask, “How can we ignore this solid world we see all around us?” The dream experience is pointed out and they are told, “All that you see depends on the seer. Apart from the seer, there is no seen.”

‘This is called the *drishti-srishti vada*, or the argument that one first creates out of his mind and then sees what his mind itself has created.

‘To such as cannot grasp even this and who further argue, “The dream experience is so short, while the world always exists. The dream experience was limited to me. But the world is felt and seen not only by me, but by so many, and we cannot call such a world non-existent,” the argument called *srishti-drishti vada* is addressed and they are told, “God first created such and such a thing, out of such and such an element and then something else, and so forth.” That alone will satisfy this class.

⁴ Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 15th March, 1946.

Their mind is otherwise not satisfied and they ask themselves, “How can all geography, all maps, all sciences, stars, planets and the rules governing or relating to them and all knowledge be totally untrue?” To such it is best to say, “Yes. God created all this and so you see it.”..... ‘All these are only to suit the capacity of the learner. The absolute can only be one.’

However, Bhagavan warns against the misinterpretation of the *ajata* in practical life.

Ajata advaita is not meant to be used in conjunction with other philosophies. Your thinking is as follows: ‘If everything is a dream, why should I make any effort to do anything? Once I wake up, nothing of all my effort will remain; so why should I do any work? Since everything is an illusion, why should I do anything at all?’ This is flagrant misuse of *ajata* advaita. *Ajata* advaita does not recommend, suggest or put up with inactivity, slovenliness, indolence, voluptuousness or sybaritism. The dreamer is part of his dream. An illusory being works inside an illusory world so that his illusory needs may be satisfied: of course there is nothing wrong in it.

Ajata advaita does not condemn work, labour or effort at all. It is identification with the doer that is condemned. Knowing that everything is illusion, still one so destined has to perform work in the world, for if his *prārabdha* be that way, it cannot be avoided. It is not that only work is illusory and therefore subject to total futility; the same applies to the worker also. So, an illusory worker performs illusory work in an illusory world: how could there be anything inappropriate about this?

An illusory ego can have illusory duties. In a dream you might be an emperor running a vast kingdom; you would have many responsibilities, duties and functions to discharge. After you wake up in your little hut, you merrily laugh at it all; but while the dream lasted the world you experienced then was quite real to you, and thus you had to act accordingly.

Do not mistake the theoretical knowledge that the cosmos is unreal to be a license to do whatever you want. The emperor inside the dream would be committing a grave moral error if he were to be slipping from his duties as head-of-state, considering

the cosmos around him to be unreal. Yet in actual fact there never was any emperor nor any kingdom: only an impoverished rag-picker dreaming inside his little hut.

Second, we now explore the relationship between the *jagat* and *Brahman*. If only Brahman exists, how did it transform into the world? The *pariṇāma vāda* involves complete transformation of one thing into another, like milk becoming yogurt. Thus one gives the product the same degree of reality as the material cause. Hence *jīva* and *jagat* become as real as Brahman from which they are formed. Vishishtadvaita, Samkhya and Kashmir Shaivism follow this model.

However, Advaita does not agree with this argument as any change means that it is not real. Thus, it proposes the *vivarta vada*, which involves a transformation of the cause into products without the cause getting destroyed during the transformation. Hence, it is called an apparent transformation. The scriptures give three examples to illustrate this transformation:⁵

By knowing a single lump of earth you know all objects made of earth. All changes are mere words, in name only. But earth is the reality.

By knowing a single lump of gold you know all objects made of gold. All changes are mere words, in name only. But gold is the reality.

By knowing a single nail-cutter you know all objects made of iron. All changes are mere words, in name only. But iron is the reality.

Śaṅkara comments on verse 6.1.4 as follows: “If you know a single thing made of clay – for instance, a pot – then you know all things made of clay. How? The word ‘pot’ is merely a name; the real object is clay, which may assume different names and forms, but it remains the same clay.” The pot, jug, vessel etc. cannot exist without clay but clay exists without these names and forms.

Another example is the rope that appears as a snake. There is no snake and disappears on the removal of *avidyā*. There are two more examples that are given: the mirage in the desert and silver in nacre.

⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.1.4-6.1.6.

In both of these cases, the idea is to show that one gets attracted to the unreal (such as the water in a mirage) and even after the ignorance is removed, the water still appears but one does not get attracted to it. In all cases, the key is that the substratum is unaffected.

The statement *sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*⁶ means all is Brahman, which is echoed in the Gita as *brahmārpaṇam brahma haviḥ*⁷ and the Brahman remains as Brahman.

Brahman expresses as existence in everything, and as consciousness and bliss. Sometimes, this description is confusing because we refer to Brahman as *nirguṇa* (without any attributes) but also as *satchitananda*. For example, ‘Brahman is Existence, Consciousness, Infinite.’⁸ ‘Brahman is Consciousness, Bliss’⁹ and also is termed as indescribable. For this, we need to understand the *lakṣaṇa* (attribute).

The characteristics are pointed out by three methods:

vyavartaka lakṣaṇa (by distinguishing it from others; the house is the second building from the grocery shop),

tatastha lakṣaṇa (by pointing out its apparent attributes; it is the house that has a red gate),

svarupa lakṣaṇa (by describing its inherent nature; the house is made of bricks and mortar).

The last example is the case of Brahman being *satchitananda*. It is an inherent and essential feature just like heat in fire.

Third, we examine the relationship between the *jīva* and *Brahman*. Advaita teaches Atman and Brahman are one. There is nothing other than Brahman. This is echoed in the four *mahāvākyas* (one from each veda): *ayamātmā brahma* (*muṇḍaka*); *tattvamasi* (*chāndogya*); *aham brahmāsmi* (*brhadāraṇyaka*); *prajñānam brahma* (*aitareya*). If so, what is the relation metaphorically between Brahman and *jīva*?

There are *three* sub-schools in advaita and they put forth different metaphors to express the relation between Brahman and *jīva*, as explained below.¹¹

⁶ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3.14.1.

⁷ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*, 4.24.

⁸ *Taiṭtṛaya Upaniṣad*, II. 1.

⁹ *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, III. 9. 28.

¹⁰ *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad Karika*, 7.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRp1mkuRBYU>. Adapted from the talk of Swami Sarvapriyananda.

i. The *vivarāṇa* school is based on the commentary of Prakasatman's *ṭīkā* (sub-commentary) on Padmapada's *Pancapadika*, which itself is a *vārttika* (detailed commentary) on *Brahmasūtra bhāṣya* of Śaṅkara (BSBS). This school proposes *pratibimbavāda*, which is the theory of reflection.

Take several pots containing water. When kept in sunlight, the water in each pot reflects the sun and also emits some light due to this reflection. *jīva* is a reflection (*pratibimba*) of its prototype (*bimba*) i.e. of Brahman, and therefore, identical with its essence, Brahman. Thus, millions of *jīva* may seem to appear but they are mere reflections of Brahman and the reflection (*jīva*) is not *mithyā* but real.

Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra* verse II.iii.50 states that the *jīva* is but a reflection, an image, of the Brahman in its *upādi* (adjunct), the *antaḥkaraṇa*-s (inner organ). Thus the reflections of Brahman in different *antaḥkaraṇa*-s are different, even as the reflections of the sun in different sheets of water are different. Just as the trembling of a particular reflection of the sun does not cause the other reflections to tremble so also the experiencing of happiness and misery by a particular *jīva* is not shared by others.

ii. The *vārttika* school is based on Sureśvarācārya's interpretation of the same verse and is called the *ābhāsavāda* (appearance) theory. The *jīva* is merely an illusory appearance of Brahman. This appearance or semblance is *mithyā*. The *jīva* is an *ābhāsa* or semblance of the supreme Self, like the semblance of the face in a mirror.

While the mirror reflects the object, it is not a true reflection, as the characteristics of the original are not transferred in the reflection. In *pratibimbavāda* of *vivarāṇa* school, the reflected consciousness is also considered real.

In *ābhāsavāda*, the reflected consciousness is considered unreal as it is only an appearance.

iii. The *bhāmatī* school is based on the commentary of Vacaspati Misra on BSBS. As reflection requires an object but Brahman is formless, it proposes the *avacchedavāda* (limitation) theory.

Consider the space in different pots. Brahman is subtle, partless and like space. *jīva*-s are existent like space in pots.

Space appears limited by the pots but all that actually is there is only space (Brahman) but is seemingly limited by the pot (*jīva*). *jīva* is a delimitation of consciousness by the *antaḥkaraṇa*-s in the *jīva*. Śaṅkara briefly talks about this concept in *Māṇḍūkya Karika* 3.3.

Though these sub-schools evolved post-Śaṅkara, one should not assume that Śaṅkara does not discuss these analogies. The origins of these *vādas* can be found in Śaṅkara's own writing. He discusses *avacchedavāda* in the first chapter, *pratibimbavāda* in the third chapter and the *ābhāsavāda* in the fifth chapter of *Upadesasahasri*. Some of these analogies are also discussed by him simultaneously in *Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram* and *Manisha Panchakam*.

For example, Śaṅkara asks¹² “Is there any difference between the reflection of the sun in Ganga water and ditch water? Is there any difference between the space between a mud pot and gold pot?”

Thus, the analogies of both reflection and space are included in a single verse. In *Who Am I?* Bhagavan said, “*Atman* alone exists and is real. The threefold reality of world, individual soul and God is like the illusory appearance of silver in the mother of pearl, an imaginary creation in the *Atman*. They appear and disappear simultaneously. All that exists is the Self.”

Let us end with the practical advice given by Bhagavan in *Ulladu Narpadu* (verse 2)¹³

மும்முதலை யெம்முதமு முற்கொள்ளு மோர்முதலே
மும்முதலாய் நிற்குமென்று மும்முதலு – மும்முதலே
யென்னலகங் கார மிருக்குமட்டே யான்கெட்டுத்
தன்னிலையி னிற்ற றலை.

These statements clearly indicate that while the theoretical knowledge is useful and can be gained, it is important to practise the teachings and not misuse it. Thus the purpose of the teaching is to present a logical system convincing the aspirant to practise for the removal of *avidyā*. He shall not dwell too much on the triad but instead take refuge at the lotus feet of Arunachala Ramana. ▲

¹² *Maniṣā Pañcakam*, 2.2

¹³ Each philosophy accepts three fundamentals. The contentions such as ‘Only one fundamental stands as three fundamentals’ or ‘Three fundamentals are always actually three fundamentals’, last only so long as ego exists. The Supreme state is to lose the ‘I’, the ego, and stay in the Self.

ADVAITA PRIMER

Īśvara

Part Five

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined why we should study Advaita Vedanta. In the second article, it was explained that the *jagat* (world) is classified as *mithyā* and this illusory appearance of the world is due to ignorance (*avidyā*). The third article explained that this ignorance stemmed from wrong superimposition (*adhyāsa*). The fourth article dealt with the relationship between the triad namely *jīva*, *Brahman* and *jagat*. In this article, we examine the concept of *īśvara*. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss the relationship between each of the above entity with *īśvara*.

It is important to define *īśvara* and examine the relation of *īśvara* and its relationship with *jīva*, *jagat* and Brahman. Brahman is normally considered as *nirguṇa* (without attributes) but Brahman associated with auspicious attributes is called *sagūṇa* Brahman and this is referred as *īśvara*. Advaita considers all forms of *īśvara* as equal. Though, in essence, everything is Brahman, it is important to differentiate between *īśvara* and *jīva*. The *jīva* and *īśvara* share the same substratum of Brahman but have significantly different attributes (*upādhi*). *Īśvara* is *sagūṇa* Brahman and is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of *jagat* with the help of *māya* but is unaffected by *māya*.

Jīva, on the other hand, has very limited powers and is bound by *avidyā*. On the removal of *avidyā*, the *jīva* can realise its unity with Brahman but can never become *īśvara*. Shankara considers *īśvara* or Brahman with attributes as ultimately unreal, as he explains in his *bhashya* on *Brahma Sutra* (BSSB) on III.II.18,

Brahman is by nature Consciousness Itself, distinctionless, beyond speech and mind, and can be taught by way of negating other things, hence in the scriptures dealing with liberation an illustration is cited by saying that it is “like the sun reflected in water”. Here the aspect kept in view is the one with attributes, which is not real and which is created by limiting adjuncts, as it is done in such texts. “As this luminous sun, though one in itself, becomes multifarious owing to its entry into water divided by different pots, similarly this Deity, the birthless, self-effulgent Self, though one, seems to be diversified owing to its entry into the different bodies, constituting its limiting adjuncts.”

In the *shata sloki*, verses 26 and 27, Shankaracharya explains this.

Māya has two powers, the veiling power (*avarana śakti*) and the projecting power (*vikshepa śakti*). *māya* veils Brahman and projects the universe. *Brahman reflected in pure (sattvic) māya is īśvara. jīva* is Brahman reflected in *avidyā*, which is impure *māya* because of the mixture of all *guṇas*. It is, therefore, stated that both *īśvara* and *jīva* dwell in *māya* but with a difference: *īśvara* controls *māya*, while the *jīva* is under the control of *avidyā* and *māya*. *īśvara* is totally unattached while the *jīva* under the influence of *avidyā*, forgets his nature as Brahman and sees the world as dualistic with multifarious names and forms as real, though they are only appearances and have no reality apart from Brahman.

In the *māya panchakam*, verse 5, Shankaracharya explains this further:

māya makes the impossible happen. It imposes on Brahman, which is eternal and devoid of parts and pure Consciousness, the false distinctions as the *jīva*, *īśvara* and *jagat*. It makes the *jīva* (who is Brahman which is infinite bliss, pure consciousness and non-dual) struggle in the ocean of *samsāra* by associating it with the body made up of the five elements. It imposes on the *jīva* (who is Brahman which is devoid of qualities, and distinctions of colour, caste, etc.) have attachment to wife, son, possessions

and the like. It creates even in non-dual Brahman distinctions such as Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and deludes even the learned into thinking that they are different from one another.

These concepts are explained in detail below.¹

Consider a sheet of paper and it is uniformly of a single white color and has no other distinction. In that white paper, suppose we draw a big circle which splits the area of the paper into two and then several small circles outside this large circle. Separate areas *appear* as if some were inside the big circle and some inside the small circles. Let us assume that we tell a person to write something within the biggest circle and he fills it up with some words and sentences. After seeing his work, now we demand that he should write the exact same thing that he has written within the bigger circle within the smallest circle also. He is sure to respond with his incapability that it is not possible to do so, as the smallest circle is much smaller than the big circle. The point to note is that though all of the circles lie within the same paper, how come the same text cannot be written in the different small circles? Why should it be that ‘more’ can be written on the outer circle, while ‘less’ only in the inner circle when it is the same paper? The person says ‘That is because the outer circle is bigger than the inner circle’. But then does it mean that there are multiple sheets of paper, as the writing capability in the areas inscribed by the circle are different? These circles with respect to which apparent split in the writing space arises, is an analogy for *upādhi* (apparent limiting adjunct).

Just as the sheet of white paper exists without any divisions or differences, the only existence is Brahman, which is described as *nitya shuddha buddha mukta svarupa* (eternal, pure, free from forms) and also as *ashabdham arupam asparsham avyayam* (wordless, formless, unexperienceable, unchanging) and is *nirguna*. In Brahman, there is an *upādhi* called *māya*. Analogous to the various circles that we drew on the single sheet, in the

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nKTT06agD4>. Adapted from the talk of Sri Sri Vidhushekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji of Sringeri Math

same way this *māya* is also modified into various objects, with different names and forms. The Brahman apparently limited by *māya* is *īśvara*, like the large circle which limits (apparently) the white sheet into a big enclosed area. Similarly, analogous to the smaller areas arising (apparently) from the smaller circles, the *upādhis* such as *avidyā* apparently limit the Brahman to create the *jīva*.

Thus *īśvara* and *jīva* are not independently two but indeed arise out of Brahman. *īśvara* is Brahman endowed with all the auspicious qualities i.e., the *Saguna-Brahman* and can be considered as the *māya* limited Brahman. *īśvara* has infinite powers, capable of manifesting the *jagat* and is worshipped in different names and forms, as Shiva, Viṣṇu etc. However, the *jīva* is limited by the *avidyā* and hence cannot display those powers. This is equivalent to the situation where one can write a lot more in the bigger circle (*īśvara*) than the smaller one (*jīva*) though they are both within the same sheet of paper. As there is a difference in the *upādhis* just like the differences in the size of the circles, differences exist in the capabilities of *jīva* and *īśvara*.

Thus three-fold consciousness are available – *jīva chaitanya* and *īśvara chaitanya*, which are consciousness limited by *avidyā* and *māya*, respectively but rest on *shuddha chaitanya*, which is pure consciousness that is not limited by any adjunct. The underlying reality of the first two is the third. However, seen from the standpoint of the *upādhis*, they are indeed different but this is only apparent and false in the absolute sense. In the context of this difference, that is, as long as the *upādhi* of *avidyā* has not been removed, the *jīva* needs to worship *īśvara*. But from the *pāramārthika* view, *jīva* and *īśvara* are only Brahman. As in the analogy, in the case of the sheet of paper, as long as the different circles remain, there is also a difference in the writing space available within these circles. But if we erase the circles, then these differences vanish and only a sheet of white paper remains.

In simple words, *īśvara* is simply Brahman in *suddha māya* while *jīva* is brahman associated with *avidyā māya*. *īśvara* is not deluded

by his own *māya* while the *jīva* is deluded by *avidyā*. Both *śuddha māya* and *avidyā māya* are *upādhi*. If we remove *śuddha māya* from *īśvara*, what remains is *nirguṇa* Brahman. In the same way, if we remove *avidyā māya* from the *jīva*, what remains is *nirguṇa* Brahman.

īśvara has created this world with different *padārtha* (objects) and this creation is called *īśvara sṛṣṭi*. These objects have no intrinsic meaning. However, the *jīva* (due to *avidyā*) adds attachment to this object. He may like or dislike or remain neutral to this object or have any other *bhava* (attachment). For example, *īśvara* created gold. A person values its possession and is happy about it, while another person is unhappy because he is unable to possess the same. A third person who has never seen or heard about gold may think it some useless metal and does not worry about its possession. This *bhava* of possession is *jīva sṛṣṭi*. Similarly, a woman may be viewed as a wife, daughter, sister, colleague and the relationship and attributes of this person is entirely dependent on the intellect of the *jīva* and thus *jīva sṛṣṭi*. This is the cause of bondage as the feeling of I and mine arises due to these possessions and relationships. This creates *rāga* and *dveṣa* i.e., likes and dislikes. When we fail to procure what we like or when we obtain what we dislike, it gives rise to *krodha* (anger), which eventually results in ruin.² Thus the fault entirely lies with *jīva sṛṣṭi* and not with *īśvara sṛṣṭi*. This can be attributed to the underlying *avidyā* associated with the *jīva* and the entire journey to Self-realisation is based on the removal of this *avidya*.

We have to end with a cautionary note: *īśvara* is sometimes referred as *nirguṇa* Brahman as well as *saguṇa* Brahman and we have to be careful in its distinction. For example, the first verse of *Īśā upanishad* states “*īśā vāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yat kiñca jagatyāṃ jagat*”. This means all that whatsoever that moves in the world is due to the *īśvara*, who is the ruler of all, being the Self of all beings. Shankara in the commentary of this verse emphasises that there is nothing other than Brahman, pure consciousness. He does not use the concept of *saguṇa* Brahman as *īśvara* here but implies *nirguṇa*

² *krodhād bhavati sammohah sammohāt smṛiti-vibhramah smṛiti-bhranśhād buddhi-nāśho buddhi-nāśhāt pranaśhyati* (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.63)

Anger leads to clouding of judgment resulting in delusion, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed and intelligence is lost leading to ruin.

Brahman. Similarly, in Bhagavad Gita verses 15.17³ and 18.61⁴, *śvara* refers to *nirguṇa* Brahman. The terms *Nārāyaṇa* and *Shiva* can also refer to either to *sagūṇa* or *nirguṇa* brahman depending on the context. For example, the verse ‘नारायणोऽहं नरकान्तकोऽहम्’ where the *jnani* proclaims that he is *Nārāyaṇa*, the destroyer of *Naraka*. What it means really is that he is none other than the pure consciousness, the realization of which destroys the *Naraka*, which is bondage (*samsara*). Similarly, in *dashashloki* written by Shankara, the verses end with the refrain ‘शिवः केवलोऽहम्’ meaning I am Shiva but actually refers to pure consciousness. Therefore, translations wherein statements such I am God should be interpreted very carefully. As the *jīva* can never become *śvara*, the statement I am God does not mean one becomes Krishna, Rama or Shiva etc., and reproduce their supernatural abilities. Further, the I does not represent the ego or body or even the mind and represents consciousness or awareness. All it means, the consciousness that “appears” in the *jīva* is the same consciousness that “appears” in *śvara* and both are the pure consciousness (Brahman).

Thus we can conclude that *śvara* is an integral part of advaita philosophy but should be interpreted in context and carefully. The *jīva* has necessarily needs to go through the ritual of devotion and worship to *śvara* as a purificatory discipline and then only gradually acquire knowledge of Brahman through Self-enquiry. Bhagavan says:⁵

The *Saguna* merges into the *nirguna* in the long run. The *saguna* purifies the mind and takes one to the final goal. The afflicted one, the seeker of knowledge, and the seeker of gains are all dear to God.

And then again emphasises this elsewhere:

We pray to God for Bliss and receive it by Grace. The bestower of bliss must be Bliss itself and also Infinite. Therefore, *Śvara* is the Personal God of infinite power and bliss. Brahman is Bliss, impersonal and absolute. The finite egos, deriving their

³ *uttamah purushas tvanyah paramatmetyudahrtah*
yo loka trayam avishya bibharti avyaya ishvarah (Bhagavad Gita 15.17)

The Supreme Divine Personality is the indestructible Supreme Soul. He enters the three worlds as the unchanging Controller and supports all living beings.

⁴ *ishvarah sarva-bhutanam hrid-deshe arjuna tishthati* (Bhagavad Gita 18.61)
The Supreme Lord dwells in the hearts of all living beings, O Arjuna.

⁵ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§ 619.

source from Brahman and then *Īśvara*, are in their spiritual nature bliss only.⁶

To summarize, in advaita vedanta, *Īśvara* ultimately is the One, non-dual entity. From a *jīva*'s viewpoint, this has to be understood from two levels. The first level is that he is like Bhagavan, the Lord and Master of all beings. As long as the Ego or I-sense is functional, it has to relate to the infinite as a finite, to the Creator as the created, to the bestower of fruits as the recipient or as the doer. In fact, this level of understanding is common to all dualistic philosophies and is extremely important for the growth of the individual spiritually and erasing the ego. Once the ego is sublated, the I-sense has been understood to be an illusion, the sense of separateness vanishes. What remains is just Consciousness, the timeless eternal truth. Thus the higher level of understanding is that *Īśvara* is as the substratum or truth about Everything and Everyone are all Brahman.

The specialty of Advaita Vedanta is it does not make any distinction between gods of one religion or another or between gods within *sanātana dharma*. From the *paramarthika* standpoint, both *jīva* and *īśvara* are Brahman, but on the *vyavaharika* level, their relation is akin to that of the deity and devotee. *īśvara* knows his oneness with Brahman and therefore enjoys eternal bliss whereas *jīva* is ignorant of his divinity and is therefore subject to the self-deceptive trials and tribulations of a mundane existence. Only with the help of *īśvara* can the *jīva* realise Brahman. Thus Shankara says, *īśvara*, out of compassion, takes on, by His *māya*, a form to grace the spiritual aspirant⁷ and is discussed in the *Bhagavad Gīta*.⁸ Further, this is obvious from the writings of Shankara himself, who expounded hundreds of *stotras* in praise of various deities. The purpose of this article was to point out the great importance of *īśvara* within the context of advaita vedanta and encourage us to take refuge at the lotus feet of Arunachala Ramana. ▲

⁶ Ibid, Talk§28.

⁷ BSSB 1.1.20

⁸ *yo yo yām yām tanum bhaktah shraddhaya arcitum icchati tasya tasya achalām shraddhām tām eva vidadhāmi aham* (*Bhagavad Gīta* 7.21)

In whichever form, through whichever ritual a devotee worships with faith and sincerity, I respond through that same form to strengthen the faith of that devotee.

ADVAITA PRIMER

Consciousness

Part Six

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined why we should study Advaita Vedanta. In the subsequent articles, we examined the concept of *jagat* (world) as *mithyā* arising due to ignorance (*avidyā*) resulting in wrong superimposition (*adhyāsa*) with Brahman. We also explored the relationship between the triad namely *jīva*, *Brahman* and *jagat*, and the relationship between each of the above entities with *īśvara*. Brahman is *nirguṇa* (without attributes) but when it is associated with auspicious attributes, it is called *saguṇa* Brahman (*īśvara*). In this article, we will examine how Advaita and modern science view consciousness and how the former proposes a solution to the difficult seemingly intractable problem of connecting consciousness with matter.

The fundamental question of consciousness has been examined for several millennia in Indian philosophical literature, but has significantly attracted the attention of scientists only in the last few decades. The question that needs to be grappled with is how can a physical system such as the brain and nervous system generate first person experience and feelings? The materialist view is that the matter is primary with the consciousness being generated by the brain. The consensus among dualistic theological schools of thought is that

Consciousness in the form of God created matter and thus matter is a product of consciousness. The Sankhya school emphasises that consciousness cannot be reduced to the brain and states that both matter and consciousness are fundamental independent realities that interact with each other.

The fourth approach is the Advaita Vedanta view that neither does matter produce consciousness nor does consciousness produce objects but there is only one non-dual reality, which is the Consciousness. According to Advaita Vedanta, consciousness is classified as absolute consciousness (*brahma-caitanya*), cosmic or God consciousness (*īśvara-caitanya*), individual consciousness (*jīva-caitanya*), and indwelling consciousness (*sākṣī-caitanya*). However, all these distinctions are due to limiting adjuncts (*upādhis*) and are not intrinsic to the true nature of consciousness, which is absolute consciousness and by itself one and non-dual. We will examine this carefully in this article.

The *brahma-caitanya* is the substratum of this universe, also called the *nirguṇa* Brahman, and is consciousness (*prajñānam brahma*),¹ which is pure awareness. The very nature of Brahman is described as *sat* (Reality), *chit* (knowledge), *anantha* (infinity)² and *ānanda* (bliss).³

The *īśvara-caitanya*, is Brahman united with *māyā* and is the creator, preserver, and also responsible for the dissolution of this universe. Several sentences in the *upanishads*⁴ and *purāṇas*⁵ emphasise that the ruler of the *prakṛti* (world) is *īśvara*. This has been discussed in the previous article on *īśvara*.

The next type of consciousness is *jīva-caitanya*, which is the individual or empirical consciousness. The superimposition of the ego-idea upon consciousness is the plunge of the individual into *māyā*. The feeling of separateness produces the chain reaction of further superimposition and entanglement. Considering ourselves as separate individuals inexorably superimposes a world of multiplicity upon the one, undivided reality of absolute consciousness (*brahma-caitanya*, Brahman).

¹ *Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.1.3. ² *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.1.3. ³ *Taittiriya Upanishad* 3.6.1. ⁴ *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.10, *Svetasvatara Upanishad with the commentary of Shankara*, Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama. ⁵ *Vishnu Purana* V.27.15.

Just as *jīva* is the limiting consciousness identified with the limiting adjunct of *upādhi*, *īśvara* is defined as limiting consciousness identified with the limiting adjunct of *māyā*. Thus, with the qualifying attribute of *māyā* it is *īśvara* and, without the qualifying attribute but just with the limiting adjunct of *upādhi*, it is *jīva*. The other difference is that while *īśvara* is the controller of *māyā*, the *jīva* is under the control of *māyā*.

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*⁶ describes the relationship of the absolute consciousness with the empirical self (*jīva-caitanya*) as “Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the same tree. The former tastes the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.”

This indwelling observing consciousness (*sākṣī-caitanya*) transcends the changing states of the mind, neither suffering nor enjoying the mental and physical conditions of human existence and is a witness. This witness-self is described as the Self-luminous consciousness⁷ and is the inner controller (*antaryāmin*), as described⁸ as the rider within a chariot-body. The charioteer is the intellect (*buddhi*), the reins are the mind, the senses are the horses and the roads they travel are the mazes of desire.

Having defined the various classifications of consciousness in Advaita Vedānta, we now turn to look at the scientific viewpoints of consciousness. There are a few things in life that we cannot speak about because we do not know enough about it. Some examples are quantum physics or rocket science that require at least graduate level knowledge of physics and mathematics. However, there are a few things that we feel we are very familiar with but when asked, we are entirely stumped to answer. These include time, matter, love and, more importantly, consciousness. One probable reason why we find it difficult to define them is that we cannot formally define them with concepts that are fundamental.

⁶ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.1.1–2, in *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, Swami Prabhavananda.⁷ *Kena Upaniṣad*, 1.2., *Kena Upaniṣad with Shankara Bhashya and Anandagiri Tika*, Publisher. Ananda Ashrama. ⁸ *Katha Upaniṣad*, 1.3.4, *The Upanishads — A New Translation* by Swami Nikhilananda, Advaita Ashrama.

The very difficulty in defining the field has inhibited the scientific study of consciousness till recent times. The interest in consciousness studies has picked up considerable pace in the last few decades. The field is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary wherein neurologists, computer scientists come together with Buddhist meditating monks to explore what is most fascinating – the quest for ourselves.

Most of the schools developed in India as part of Sanātana Dharma and Buddhism had only one goal – the release of the individual from worldly suffering termed as *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*, depending on the school or philosophy. As the individual is associated with consciousness, the understanding of consciousness is fundamental to all schools of philosophy as it is an indisputable part in any soteriology. In no other philosophy other than Advaita Vedanta has consciousness been examined in such great detail. Advaita categorically states that Only Consciousness IS. That is, there is nothing else other than consciousness. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that it is the ground of all knowledge and source of everything in the world.

To understand this issue, we need to examine the scientific view of consciousness. Chalmers⁹ coined the term *hard problem* of consciousness wherein one needs to explain the relationship between the objective world with our subjective experience. For example, brain scans can reveal our emotions. However, measurements of the firing of neurons in the brain does not translate into the subject having that experience. There is something ineffable about the subjective nature of conscious experience. Why does pain, pleasure or love feel like something? Even seeing a colour may produce different feelings in various people. How does one explain this feeling by instruments? This indicates and argues against a strictly objective view of consciousness.

The science postulates that consciousness can be reductively explained as a product of matter and expect advances in brain science to ultimately explain how the brain can produce consciousness. The problem is the inability to explain subjective experiences. The dualistic approach states that the consciousness is something special that cannot be reduced to the brain. However, they are unable to explain how this irreducible

⁹ Chalmers, D.J. 1996. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press.

consciousness can interact with matter. Thus they are stuck with the same question of the consciousness and the mind-body interaction.

Advaita solves this question in its own inimitable manner. Śaṅkara addresses this question in numerous texts. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*¹⁰ we find a dialogue between Janaka, King of Videha, and the sage, Yajnavalkya, on consciousness and the Self.

katama ātmeti; yo 'yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu hr̥dyantarjyotiḥ puruṣaḥ; sa samānaḥ sannubhau lokāvanusaṃcarati, dhyāyatīva lelāyatīva; sa hi svapno bhūtvemaṃ lokamatikrāmati mṛtyo rūpāṇi

When Janaka asks, ‘Which is the Self?’, Yajnavalkya answers “This infinite entity (Puruṣa) that is identified with the intellect and is in the midst of the organs, the (self-effulgent) light within the heart (intellect). Assuming the likeness (of the intellect), it moves between the two worlds; it thinks, as it were, and shakes, as it were. Being identified with dreams, it transcends this world — the forms of death (ignorance etc.).”

Sri Ramana Maharshi explains about the *hr̥dyantarjyoti* in *Ramana Gita* 11

*hr̥dayakuhara madhye kevalaṃ brahmamātram |
hyahamahamiti sāksād-ātmarupeṇa bhāti ||
hr̥di viśa manasāsvaṃ cinvatā majjatā vā |
pavana calana rodhād ātmaniṣṭho bhava tvam ||*

In the interior of the Heart-cave, Brahman alone shines in the form of the Ātman with direct immediacy as I, I. Enter into the Heart with a questing mind or by diving deep within through control of breath, and abide in the Ātman.

Later, in the fifth chapter, Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi says:¹²

*nirgacchanti yataḥ sarvā vṛttayo dehadhāriṇām |
hr̥dayaṃ tatsamākhyātaṃ bhāvanā "kṛtivarṇanam || 2*

That, from where all the activities of the embodied beings emerge, is mentioned as the Heart. All descriptions of its form are conceptual.

¹⁰ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.6 and 4.3.7. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by Swami Madhavananda, Advaita Ashrama.¹¹ *Ramana Gita*, Chapter 2, verse 2, translated by S. Sankaranarayanan.

¹² *Ibid.*, *Ramana Gita*, Chapter 5, verses 2 and 3 clarifies what is the heart.

*ahaṁvṛttiḥ samastānām vṛttīnām mūlamucyate |
nirgacchati yato 'haṁdhīr hrdayam tatsamāsataḥ || 3*

It is said that the I-activity is the root of all activities. The source, from where the I-thought emerges, is the Heart.

How and where does pure consciousness dwell within the body? The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*¹³ discloses, “There is the heart, and within the heart, there is a little house. This house has the shape of a lotus, and within it dwells that which is to be sought after, inquired about, and realised. ... Though old age comes to the body, the lotus of the heart does not grow old. At the death of the body, it does not die. The lotus of the heart, where Brahman exists in all his glory — that, and not the body, is the true city of Brahman.”

Janaka’s query on *hrdyantarjyotiḥ*, the (self-effulgent) light within the Heart (intellect), is an attempt to locate the Self and asks whether the body, sense organs, organs of action, mind and intellect are the Self. Yagnavalkya clarifies that this *jyoti* is different from the objects it helps reveal. While the objects are insentient, the *jyoti* is not, it is pure consciousness. This pure consciousness, which is the Self, is reflected in *buddhi*. What we experience as consciousness in daily life is this empirical consciousness. This empirical consciousness (*jīva-caitanya*) is technically called *chidābhāsa*, and is identified with the *buddhi*. This is the *jīvātman*, the individual who designates himself as ‘I’. This ‘I’ then identifies himself with the rest of the body-organ-mind complex. Consciousness is separate from the body and senses and illumines them but it is self-illuminated.

Śaṅkara explains the whole process in his commentary of this verse. The intellect catches the reflection of the *jyoti*. Next comes the *manas*, which catches the reflection of the Self through the intellect; then the organs, through contact with the *manas*; and lastly the body, through the organs. Thus the Self successively illumines with its own light the entire aggregate of body and organs. It is therefore that all people identify themselves with the body and organs.

Being thus identified with the body-organ-mind complex, the empirical consciousness carries on all activities in the waking and dream states. Incidentally, this explains why empirical consciousness

¹³ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.1, 8.1.5, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama.

is not found in deep sleep. Since the intellect, the reflecting medium, is not found manifest in deep sleep, the reflection too, is not found in that state. But Advaita holds that *brahma-caitanya* persists in deep sleep, is unchanging, eternal, different from the body-organ-mind (and by extension the entire external universe) while being unlimited by time and space. *jīva-caitanya* is changing, transient, identified with body-organ-mind complex and located (and limited) in time and space.

Empirical knowledge and action cannot be ultimately predicated to the pure consciousness (*brahma-caitanya*), but only to the empirical consciousness (*jīva-caitanya*). Consciousness transcends the physical body, and it is the light that illumines dreams, and transcends the mind too. It gets identified with the body and mind and thereby, acts as if it is a knower and doer, and suffers too.

Pure consciousness is ever effulgent and never changing. But our knowledge is limited. Śaṅkara explains this concept using *vṛtti*. A *vṛtti* is a modification of the *antaḥkaraṇa*, and the *antaḥkaraṇa* is simply the *upādhi* or limiting adjunct of the Atman. The *vṛttis* have specific contents which constitute the contents of our various knowledge episodes. The *vṛtti* is illumined by the light of the *chidābhāsa*, the empirical consciousness which pervades the *antaḥkaraṇa* (and which in turn is a reflection of pure consciousness in the *antaḥkaraṇa*), and this illumination of the *vṛtti* constitutes empirical knowledge (*vṛtti jñāna*).

Pure consciousness itself is called *svarūpa jñāna* to distinguish it from *vṛtti jñāna*. The Self which is pure consciousness, gets reflected in the mind and illumines the modifications of the mind and this is what constitutes empirical knowledge. The *vṛttis*, modifications of the mind, rise and subside but consciousness shines eternally. As Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi says,¹⁴

“*Vṛtti* is often mistaken for consciousness. It is only a phenomenon and operates in the region of *ābhāsa* (reflected consciousness). The knowledge lies beyond relative knowledge and ignorance. It is not in the shape of *vṛtti*. There are no subject and object in it. *Vṛtti* belongs to the *rajasic* (active) mind. The *sattvic* mind (mind in repose) is free from it. The *sattvic* is the witness of the *rajasic*. It is no doubt true consciousness. Still it is called *sattvic* mind because the knowledge

³ Munagala S. Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§68.

of being witness is the function of *ābhāsa* (reflected consciousness) only. Mind is the *ābhāsa*. Such knowledge implies mind. But the mind is by itself inoperative. Therefore it is called *sattvic* mind. Such is the *jīvanmukta*'s state. It is also said that his mind is dead. Is it not a paradox that a *jīvanmukta* has a mind and that it is dead? This has to be conceded in argument with ignorant folk.

It is also said that Brahman is only the *jīvanmukta*'s mind. How can one speak of him as *Brahmavid* (knower of Brahman)? Brahman can never be an object to be known. This is, however, in accordance with common parlance. *Sāttvic* mind is surmised of the *jīvanmukta* and of *Īśvara*. "Otherwise," they argue, "how does the *jīvanmukta* live and act?" The *sattvic* mind has to be admitted as a concession to the argument. The *sattvic* mind is in fact the Absolute consciousness. The object to be witnessed and the witness finally merge together and Absolute consciousness alone reigns supreme. It is not a state of *śūnya* (blank) or ignorance. It is the *swarūpa* (Real Self). Some say that mind arises from consciousness followed by reflection (*ābhāsa*); others say that the *ābhāsa* (reflection) arises first followed by the mind. In fact both are simultaneous."

This theory of consciousness circumvents the mind-body interaction problem as the mind is only a form of matter and can influence the body just like the body can influence the mind. Swami Satprakashananda summarises, "In the Vedantic view the mind is not a process nor is it a function, or a state, or an attribute of something else. It is a positive substance, though not ultimately real. It has definite functions and states. It is one of the products of primordial nature, the potential cause of the universe, called *prakṛti* or *māyā*, which has no consciousness inherent in it." Thus both the mind and body are inert and *jaḍa*.¹⁵

The *antaḥkaraṇa* is matter but how does it interact with consciousness. Atman is the true subject, *chit*, eternal, unchanging and all-pervasive, while the *antaḥkaraṇa* is objective, *jaḍa*, ever changing and limited in space and time. How could two such diametrically opposite entities interact? Thus, the mind-body interaction problem morphs into the consciousness-matter interaction problem. We now

¹⁵ Swami Satprakashananda, *The Goal and the Way*, St. Louis: Vedanta Society, 1977.

have to explain how consciousness, which has been shown to be separate from mental phenomena, can interact with mind (which is now regarded as matter)! This problem arose in the *Sāṃkhya* and Yoga philosophies too. The split between consciousness and matter (*Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* in *Sāṃkhya*) cannot be reconciled in these philosophies because these philosophies are unwilling to deny ontological reality to either of them and thus they give individual ultimate reality to both of them.

Śaṅkara brings up this important question in the *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*, which is just a 50 line comprehensive introduction to the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*.¹⁶ He says the subject (consciousness) and the object (matter) are as contradictory as light and darkness. Thus the coexistence of matter with consciousness should be impossible just like darkness cannot exist in the presence of light. However, it is a common everyday experience that they seem to interact all the time. Thus the concept of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) is introduced. Thus the body (and more crucially, the mind) is superimposed on consciousness and the world on Brahman. Such superimposition is a consequence of ignorance (*avidyā*) of the nature of Self and it can be sublated by true knowledge of the Self. This sublation is *mokṣa*, which is the goal of Advaita Vedanta.

That which is superimposed must be false but the ground of superimposition must be real. We see a snake on the road at night, but as we approach the snake and flash a torch on it, we realise that it is actually a rope. This snake-universe is a superimposition upon the rope-Brahman. There is no more causal relationship between this world-appearance and Brahman than there is between the snake and the rope. Thus the universe has no existence apart from Brahman, just as the snake has no existence apart from the rope. Like a snake on a rope, the non-existent world is superimposed on the Self-existing Reality. As a clear crystal appears red against a red surface so also, by veiling and conjunction of impurities, Consciousness, though persistently perfect, appears limited due to ignorance (*avidyā*).

Body-mind and the whole external world are *mithyā* while Brahman alone is real – *Brahma satyam jagat mithya*.¹⁷ The term

¹⁶ *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śaṅkarācārya*, translation of first sentences adapted from Swami Gambhirananda translation. Advaita Ashrama. ¹⁷ *Brahmajanavalimala*, verse 20.

Advaita, non-dualism, is now justified since there is no second reality besides consciousness. Thus the two — the world (*jagat*) and the individual (*jiva*) have no existence apart from Consciousness — hence Advaita, ‘not-two-ism’. The true nature of the *jiva* and *jagat* is Brahman. We are that Brahman, each one of us. This is expressed by the famous Vedantic *mahāvākya tat tvam asi* (That Thou Art).¹⁸

Thus, consciousness is the sole reality and matter is merely a superimposition. That which is superimposed is false. Hence the whole panoply of matter is false – it has no reality apart from the ground of superimposition, which is consciousness itself. Now we see how this world view can lead to a way out of the consciousness-matter deadlock. Consciousness itself projects matter, matter evolves into worlds, bodies and finally, minds which can reflect consciousness (which is then experienced as empirical consciousness. These minds (and organs, bodies and the external universe) are superimposed upon consciousness. The empirical consciousness with its superimposed adjuncts (mind, sense organs) gets empirical knowledge of the world and feels itself to be a knower (*jnātā*), an agent (*kartā*) and enjoyer (*bhoktā*).

As Swami Sarvapriyananda states,¹⁹ the problem of consciousness studies at the present juncture is that it does not seem to recognise the possibility of pure consciousness. Science is only interested in the consciousness manifestation in daily transactions – empirical consciousness. Since this empirical consciousness is a reflection of pure consciousness in the Advaitic parlance, we cannot formulate a satisfactory theory of consciousness if we limit ourselves to empirical consciousness and discount the very possibility of pure consciousness. Unless scientific studies account for the various types of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta discussed earlier, a solution to the intractable hard problem of consciousness may not be found by science.

But Advaita Vedanta’s goal is not just to solve the intractable problem or to speculate or develop theories. It has direct experience as its basis as well as ultimate proof. However, the teaching is not trying to have an experience or gain unknown knowledge. The *Mandukya*

¹⁸ *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7. ¹⁹ *Ancient Wisdom, Modern Questions: Vedāntic Perspectives in Consciousness Studies*.

*Upanishad*²⁰ states that the waking, dream and deep sleep are not three states or levels of consciousness. Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi clarifies,²¹

“There is only one consciousness, which subsists in the waking, dream and sleep states. In sleep there is no ‘I’. The ‘I-thought’ arises on waking and then the world appears. Where was this ‘I’ in sleep? Was it there or was it not? It must have been there also, but not in the way that you feel now. The present is only the ‘I-thought’, whereas the sleeping ‘I’ is the real ‘I’. It subsists all through. It is consciousness. If it is known you will see that it is beyond thoughts.”

The empirical consciousness and the deepest *samādhi*, no matter how long they appear to last, always end, leaving you as you are now. There is only ever you, as pure consciousness, appearing as the many. Thus we are the answer to the question that we are trying to solve. We are the shadow trying to seek the sun not realising that we are the shadow and sun at the same time. The shadow that seeks the sun is a metaphor for the ego (false self) looking for the light (Self). No new knowledge is required or acquired. No transcendental experience or higher consciousness needs to be achieved. When the recognition of what we are is seen, nothing happens. We simply find our Self as we already are.

In the manuscript, *Ozhivil Odukkam*²² exhorts the disciple, “The Reality is the unbroken current of Knowledge by whose light we know all else. As you grow aware of these, they disappear before you. As they do so, do not look for them but lie immersed in the Self like a pot lying sunk in the sea, with water in and out. Once taught that the world is an illusion and the body false, one should know them as a mirage. To escape the blazing fire surrounding you in a dream, you do not put out the fire but simply wake up; so also here.”

Suffering is the belief that we are a personal entity trapped in a body and in a world. When you see that this is false, nothing merges, or surrenders, or comes home. The personal entity trying to find peace and happiness and to end suffering is only an appearance, a show. In actual experience, trying to get rid of a separate self is like a knife trying to cut itself. You, as awareness, know this show as yourself.

²⁰ *The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad with Gaudapada’s Karika and Sankara’s Commentary*, Swami Nikhilananda, Advaita Ashrama. ²¹ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk§43.

²² Translated by Munagala Venkataramiah, Sri Ramanasramam Archives.

MOUNTAIN PATH

You are complete. Nothing is missing. Nothing was ever missing. You are the particular knowledge, always was and IS.

Thus, Advaita inspires the spiritual seeker to take the testimony of the scriptures, use hearing, reason, reflection, meditation, and realise ourselves as Brahman. These are the compasses and maps, who along with a Guru such as Arunachala Ramana will guide us to realise who we are. He is the eternal all-sufficient Guru, the Self leading to the Self. Those who turn to Him and follow His teaching by the enquiry 'Who am I?' or surrender or by any other path indicated by Him according to the aptitude of the seeker, will find Him ever-present, ever-watchful, ever-helpful. ▲

I'm Caught

Kevan Myers

I'm caught between times of stress
when I fight my apparent age
to find I am still strangely young
and other times when helped by friends
I glide through tasks
which ask for nothing much from me
except to safely crawl through unfulfilling days
which easily may be the final stretch
of this way through the maze that ends in death
and yet the whole idea that I have lived
some kind of life that got me here
is nothing but a thought
and I can say in honesty that all this history,
that seems to be the way,
that has developed me to what I am today
is no more real than the scene
which caught my eye
enough just now to shake me half-awake
from thoughts going through the brain,
that flashed a picture of a being who has no clue
if any of this stuff is true.

Introduction to the Middle Way

M. GIRIDHAR

Chandrakīrti was a seventh-century Indian Buddhist philosopher, revered for his interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s teachings on the Middle Way. Chandrakīrti’s *Madhyamakavatara*¹ is one of the Dalai Lama’s favourite books and the interpretation by Tsongkhapa is the basis of his Gelug tradition. This book includes a verse translation of the *Madhyamakavatara* followed by an exhaustive logical explanation of its meaning by the modern Tibetan master Jamgön Mipham. Chandrakīrti’s work is an introduction to the *Mādhyamika* teachings of Nāgārjuna, which are themselves a systematisation of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, or “Perfection of Wisdom”. Chandrakīrti’s work has been accepted throughout Tibetan Buddhism as the highest expression of the Buddhist view and forms the fundamental basis of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Rightly called the Middle Path, the *sūtras* steers a middle course avoiding the snares of eternalism or the abyss of nihilism and carefully explain emptiness.

The theory of Dependent Origination, *pratityasamutpāda*, is presented by all the Buddhist Schools but it is Nāgārjuna who

¹ *Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakīrti’s Madhyamakavatara with Commentary* by Ju Mipham; Shambhala Publications; 432 pages; 978-1590300091

interpreted it more emphatically and authentically than anyone else. Nāgārjuna emphasises “When the mind realises emptiness, it overcomes the subject-object dichotomy. It does not just break through the appearances that conceal the ultimate status of phenomena, it also penetrates the veils of mental construction that had concealed its own true nature and had made the misperception of phenomena possible. When the true nature of phenomena is discovered, the mind’s nature also stands revealed, for the realisation of emptiness is the experience of nondual wisdom.” Chandrakirti further developed the philosophy into a dialectic that stresses on *svabhāva śūnyatā*. His argument was, if something has an essential nature it could exist independently in its own right. All things originate only in dependence upon other things. Things have no essential nature (*nisvabhāvata*) and everything is empty of an essential nature (*svabhāva śūnyatā*). Therefore everything is empty (*śūnya*). Emptiness is the equivalent of *nisvabhāvata* which is the outcome of the understanding of dependent origination. It is the emptiness of the phenomena. This is the correct understanding of the Middle Way, because it avoids the two extremes of performance and annihilation.

As emphasised so often by Nāgārjuna, absolute identity involves permanence and absolute difference implies annihilation. Dependent arising is the middle way adopted by Buddha and Nāgārjuna in elucidating change and causation. The Dependent Origination or *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the central philosophy of Buddhist teaching. But it is by no means easy to grasp its full implication. Dependent co-arising contains many feedback loops and it is a self-sustaining process with the potential to maintain itself indefinitely until something is actively done to cut the feedback loops that keep the process going. Dependent co-arising operates on many scales — from the micro level of events in the mind, to the macro level of lifetimes across time in the cosmos — it shows how micro events can lead to rebirth on the macro scale, and, conversely, how the practice of training the mind can put an end to all forms of suffering at every level. What this means in practice is that no matter how much you observe the events of dependent co-arising in the present moment, if you do not appreciate their potential to sustain one another indefinitely, you do not fully comprehend them. If you don’t fully comprehend them, you

cannot gain full release from them. This the ultimate truth but requires deep understanding and practise.

Nāgārjuna made this philosophy of voidness comprehensive and systematic. He made the world as only an appearance, which is the empirical truth. Everything that belongs to the world is only empirical truth (*vyavahārika*). The Buddhist concept of aggregates (*skandhās*), the elements, bases and *dharma* are also empirical. This empirical world and its phenomena are only an appearance according to both Nāgārjuna and Śāṅkara. Nāgārjuna demonstrates the flux itself could not be held to be real, nor could the consciousness perceiving it, as it itself is a part of the flux. Nāgārjuna explains *Śūnyatā* is not nihilism but relativity and conditionedness, (i.e.) is not a rejection of the world of becoming and the meaningfulness of life but the very mundane existence is appreciated as a course of conditioned becoming. The objects of his critique are not the empirical facts of existence that inescapably appear to us but the erroneous assumptions that we make about these facts of existence.

Nāgārjuna distinguished two truths, *paramārtha satya* and *saṃvṛti satya*, through rigorous logical argumentation. It is impossible, he says, to grasp the teaching of the Buddha without a correct understanding of the way the two truths are differentiated. There is no liberation without the realisation of emptiness and there is no approach to the ultimate without correctly relying on the conventional. The doctrine of emptiness, however, is a double-edged sword, and has to be understood correctly. Understood correctly, it leads to liberation; understood wrongly, it can be a source of spiritual and moral degeneration — as dangerous as holding a poisonous snake at the wrong end. The concepts of *paramārtha satya* and *saṃvṛti satya* appear similar to the *paramārthika satya* and *vyavahārika satya* of *advaita*, respectively. To draw a one-to-one correspondence between the two would be what philosophers would call a category mistake. *Advaita* follows an ontological approach and tries to prove that existence alone is, which is pristine consciousness. However, Nāgārjuna employs an epistemological scheme to arrive at its two levels. *Advaita* uses one truth of Brahman and that alone exists in the *paramārthika* and the relative world is *mithyā*. However, the concept by Nāgārjuna is that the relative world is false and thus

reach the *paramārtha satya*. An *advaitin* is encouraged to abide in the substratum that underlines the *mithyā* world to get established in the *paramārthika satya* while the *Mādhyamika* buddhist asserts the untruth of *saṃvṛti satya* to get established in *paramārtha satya*.

In any case, the theory of *ajātivāda* that existence alone is was a landmark in the Nāgārjuna's Philosophy. It was taken and interpreted in the later Advaita literature, especially by Gauḍapāda's philosophy, logically. Both *Mādhyamika* and *Advaita* deny that the ultimate reality can be understood in a dualistic manner. In the *Mādhyamika*, this amounts to a subversion of separate self-sufficiency (*nisvabhāvata*), while in *advaita*, non-difference is a proclamation of the reality of the nondual substratum underlying all experiences. Both philosophies would conclude "Ultimate reality, which is the essence of everything, can be neither being nor non-being. It cannot be both because they are contradictions. It cannot be neither also, as we have only the two alternatives and there is no third. All that we can say is that we cannot characterise it in any way. It is, therefore, that which is devoid of all characterisations, all determinations." This ultimate does not lie within the realm of intellect but it is not remote from the phenomena. The ultimate is said to be beyond the world only because it is veiled by the appearances of the world but for ordinary beings, appearances are the world. Thus the ultimate is not separate from phenomena; it is the very nature of phenomena. The ultimate is what the conventional really is; the conventional is the way the ultimate appears. The two truths are never separate; they merge and coincide in phenomena. The difference is not ontological but epistemic.

Nāgārjuna re-defines the nondual truth, *advaya*, which is similar to Advaitin's Brahman. But only in a negative sense. The final truth is negative conventionality. It is self-realizable, quiescent, above speech and mind, *Sūnyata* itself. *Sūnyata* means void or contentless. Voidness is not nothingness or vacuity of thought. It is the truth of perfection of wisdom, *Prajñāpāramitā*. Of course, fundamentally, neither does the world nor does the ignorance that is said to have caused it exist. What exists is one without a second (*advaya*), changeless (*avyaya*), and never born (*aja*). All the explanations about the cause of the world are given only to point to this one truth.

They are all ultimately negated by the ‘*neti neti*’ (‘not so’) *vākyas* (sentences). This is the method of the Vedānta — *adhyāropa apavādābhyām niṣprapañcam prapañcyate* — stating that the Reality is untouched by the world and is revealed through false superimposition followed by negation. The ignorance is falsely superimposed on the truth to seemingly give an explanation for the cause of the world to the beginner student, only to later negate the existence of the world and its cause.

The necessary first step towards a complete comprehension of the ultimate reality is the realisation of, not only the real root i.e., the universal ground of all, but as the real nature of everything. One should first of all cultivate the comprehension of the mundane nature of things, viz. they are possible source of suffering, impermanency and is devoid of substantiality. If *samsara* were truly existent, then liberation would also exist. But *samsara* is empty of real existence, and liberation is likewise empty of real and substantial existence as a thing. Emptiness is not a thing, it means that there is nothing that has a ‘distinct and independent existence’. All phenomena are free of distinctions and they only appear to have distinctions because of the interdependence on other phenomena. Thus, it would not be nothing but not a thing i.e., no-thing. Thus emptiness is not a thing; rather, it is no-thingness (not nothingness).

Consciousness (*vijñāna*) is nondual, unborn, motionless and is not an object. It has the appearance (*ābhāsa*) of birth, the appearance of moving and the appearance of being an object. Thus, both philosophies seem to indicate existence as “no-thing”. The firebrand analogy and snake-rope analogy are akin to the imaginary appearances of object to the perception. The analogy of a firebrand was originally used by Buddhists to distinguish the real from the unreal. When firebrand is moved in a circular motion there appears to be a wheel of fire hovering in the air. The illusion of performance is created by the firebrand’s swift movements. Nāgārjuna also uses the famous rope-snake analogy to show the projection and illusion appearance of objects to the mind. Both of these analogies are extensively used later by Gaudapāda. However, Chandrakīrti, further argues that the view of consciousness and object is similar to two haystacks standing dependent on each other; as one falls, the other automatically falls. If experience can be

thought of as an object arising in consciousness, he argues that both arise simultaneously and there cannot be a single permanent witness consciousness.

Back to the book, the introduction is around 50 pages and gives an excellent background on this topic. One could even say that the introduction itself is worth the price of the book. The introduction is followed by the translation of the actual text of Chandrakīrti's commentary in verse form and lasts about 50 pages. Following this, we have Jamgon Mipham's commentary for over 200 pages. Obviously this is a work of profound depth and requires rereading and study to begin to appreciate the teachings. Mipham's text itself is both profound and charming, and he takes great pains to make something clear, repeating himself from different angles until he drives the point home. These texts are like good friends, their value develops in relationship over time as new facets are revealed in every encounter. These texts are read not as a duty in fulfilment of a study or a degree to be obtained but as an inspiration, as the very embodiment of the principle of the guru.

The Buddha said, "Of all footprints, that of the elephant is the deepest and most supreme. Of all contemplations, that of impermanence is the deepest and most supreme." This one word, impermanence, captures the full range of *samsaric* dissatisfaction. To understand impermanence, you need to understand dependent origination. To comprehend dependent origination, one has to understand the teachings of Nāgārjuna. To interpret his teachings thoroughly, there is nothing better than the commentary of Chandrakīrti. For that purpose, there is no better book than this. ▲