

ADVAITA PRIMER

What is Advaita Vedanta?

Part One

M.GIRIDHAR

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 (*Nihshvaasa*) 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.

Śāṅkara 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 Śāṅkara 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* (अधिनाम्) 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*, Talkṣ 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 *jaḡrat*, *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 *Manīṣā 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 *śuddha 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 *śuddha 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-bhrānśhād 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 *nirvāna*, 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 *Brhadāranyaka 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 *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.6 and 4.3.7. *Brhadāranyaka 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 hr̥dayam 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 *hr̥dyantarjyotiḥ*, 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

BOOK REVIEW

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

MOUNTAIN PATH

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. ▲

BOOK REVIEW

Confusions in Advaita Vedanta

M. GIRIDHAR

The following article is a commentary of certain points raised in Confusions in Advaita Vedanta – Knowledge, Experience and Enlightenment by Dennis Waite. Published by Indica Books, Varanasi. 452 pp. Rs.995 (HB) 2022. ISBN: 9789381120293.

Introduction

Quite a few books on Advaita are available. Many conflicting explanations can be found in these books. Even revered teachers may appear to contradict each other and the scriptural texts. Many erroneous notions are widely circulated.¹ In this book, the author, Dennis Waite looks specifically at the topics of action, knowledge and experience and refers to Śāṅkara to counter these erroneous ideas.

The author clearly indicates that Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana and Nisargadatta were all great teachers in their own ways and should be revered but reading books of their talks and answers are not, however, a good way to learn the teaching of Advaita. The problem becomes more acute in case of modern (especially western) teachers who hold gatherings (*satsaṅgas*), de-emphasise the tradition and use a modern frame to present their teachings with no prominence on scriptures. Thus these teachers follow no systematic teaching and

¹ <https://www.exoticindiaart.com/book/details/confusions-in-advaita-vedanta-knowledge-experience-and-enlightenment-uaq613/> (<https://www.indicabooks.in/product/Confusions-in-Advaita-Vedanta-HB-7Mlo7>).

have an innate tendency to answer questions from seekers who have their own specific problems. Some of these teachers also respond from the *pāramārthika* view frequently.

Pāramārthika satyam states only Brahman is, while the *vyāvahārika satyam* constitutes the common world experience of *samsāra*. The latter gets corrected on realisation of knowledge. Confusing and intermingling these two states, especially while talking, can lead to major misunderstandings. That's why the scriptures² say "Where the Duality is present, there one can smell the fragrance, one can speak to others, one can listen to others, one will pay respect to others, and one can think and understand. But, where there is only *Ātman* everywhere, what will he smell? Whom will he ask? What will he listen to? Whom will he pay respect to? What will he think about and understand?" Therefore, switching from one *satyam* to the other *satyam* in conversations will lead to confusions.

While this may apply to *satsaṅg* based teachers, it does not really apply to Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi as he has written several books in various languages to explain the philosophy. Therefore, the best books to learn his teachings are original books such as *Upadeśa Sāram*, *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu* and *Collected Works* as discussed later. The wonderful books such as *Talks*, *Letters*, *Day by Day* etc. are actually meant to recreate a scene that occurred almost daily in the Old Hall. Though some talks may appear contradictory, they confirm the teachings in the *Collected Works*.

The key practice of advaita is *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. Thus, it is said, "The Self (*Ātman*) should first be heard of from a teacher and from the scriptures, then reflected on through reasoning, and then steadfastly meditated upon."³ *Śravaṇa* refers to receiving knowledge from the scriptures. *Manana* refers to the churning and reflection on the subject. *Nididhyāsana* is the transformation that follows both *śravaṇa* and *manana*. *Śravaṇa* is *śabda pramāṇa* while *nididhyāsana* is not a *pramāṇa* but meditation on the Self. The only part that action of any sort plays in bringing about enlightenment is in the mental preparation prior to *śravaṇa*. It is knowledge alone that

² *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.14. All translations of Upanishads are sourced from the publications of Advaita Ashrama.

³ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.5.

can eliminate ignorance (*avidyā*); nothing else. Anything contrary is not advaita. Only Brahman IS. Anything contrary is not advaita.

While the author agrees with the above, he points that the statements that *manonāśa* and *samādhi* are needed for enlightenment are incorrect. Further, he feels that the concept of *prārabdha* espoused by Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi is incorrect. Thus, we have to tackle three points (*prārabdha*, *samādhi* and *manonāśa*) one by one in the review. More points can be clarified but for want of space the review is restricted.

Prārabdha

Śāṅkara and *śruti* use the metaphor of an arrow shot from a bow to explain that *prārabdha karma* continues inexorably until the body drops. The note Ramana Maharshi wrote for his mother in December 1898 when she pleaded with him to return home with her to Madurai said, “According to the *prārabdha* of each person: What is never to happen will not happen whatever effort one makes [to make it happen]; what is to happen will not stop whatever obstruction one does [to prevent it happening]. This indeed is certain. Therefore being silent is good.”

This seems to be in contradiction with the statements of Sringeri Mahaswami, who says, “First of all, one should know what *prārabdha* (fate) is. This should be understood along with its mechanism of fruition. Those actions of the previous births that are yielding fruits now constitute the cause of this birth. It is this set of actions that we call *prārabdha*. It does not force one along a good or evil path. Karmas that have started yielding fruits gradually lead one by stimulating tendencies of likes and dislikes in the mind...One must not come under their sway. They are indeed one’s foes. Thus it is clear that if we conquer likes and dislikes, we will no longer be under their sway. So, we should shed likes and dislikes and then voluntarily function in keeping with the scriptural teachings. You asked whether *prārabdha* could be overcome. The reply is, ‘It can positively be overcome’. If it is that *prārabdha* cannot be overcome, man cannot be held responsible for his actions at all. He would not have any choice. I earlier said that the karma that is now fructifying is *prārabdha*. It is what we did in the previous births. Hence, *prārabdha* cannot be stronger than

effort. We can change the tendency created by our earlier actions by suitable exertion in this birth. However, if the tendency caused by the karma of our previous birth is very strong, we will have to put in a proportionally stronger effort to counter it. This is true in most of the cases. Of course, one's freedom is not absolute...similar to a cow tethered to the rope."⁴

The right way to state it is that both *jñāni* and *ajñāni* have free will from a *vyāvahārika* standpoint. Neither of them do from a *paramārthika satyam* view. If free will is not accepted in *vyāvahārika*, the entire *sanātana dharma* system of *karma*, *phala*, *karma yoga* and *chittaśuddhi* would be useless. The question, therefore, is whether *prārabdha* is applicable for a *jñāni*. The author of the book takes issue with the statement of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, who states in verse 33 of *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu Anubandham*: “The statement that the *jñāni* retains *prārabdha* while free from *sañcita* and *āgami* is only a formal answer to the questions of the ignorant. Of several wives none escapes widowhood when the husband dies; even so, when the doer goes, all three karmas vanish.” The author of this book takes issue with the statement saying that the sage has to undergo the *prārabdha karma* even after Self-realisation. Self-knowledge entails the knowledge that who I really am is not a person but this knowledge occurs in the mind. Only the person has a mind as Brahman cannot have a mind. Self-knowledge is not the death of the person. The physical body of such a person continues till the expiry of *prārabdha*.

Michael James states “In verse 33 he teaches us the truth that though some texts say that an *ātma-jñāni* (one who knows self) is free of *sañcita* (the store of one's past actions or karmas that are yet to give fruit) and *āgāmya* (the actions that one does in this life by one's own volition or free will) but that *prārabdha* (destiny or fate, which is the fruit of past actions that are destined to be experienced in this life) does remain to be experienced by him (or her); this is only a ‘reply that is said to the questions of others’ (that is, it is said as a concession to those who cannot understand the truth that the *jñāni* is not the mind or body that experiences *prārabdha*), and he illustrates this truth by saying that just as no wife will remain unwidowed if a

⁴ <https://vairaagya.wordpress.com/2013/11/20/35th-sringeri-acharya-on-fate-and-free-will/>

husband (with three wives) dies, so none of the three karmas (*āgāmi*, *sañcita* or *prārabdha*) will remain when the *kartā* (the ‘doer’ or agent who does karmas and experiences their fruit) is destroyed (by the clarity of true self-knowledge).⁵

Śaṅkara⁶ states that *prārabdha karma* cannot be attributed to a *jñāni* or to one who has realised the Self. For one who has realised that he is not the body, this classification ceases to exist in effect. Elsewhere, it is stated that scriptures expound the doctrine of *prārabdha* to satisfy the spiritually ignorant. Śaṅkara⁷ explains this more clearly by stating that this concept is discussed only for those who do not understand the highest truth. Since the sage has become free from the idea that he is the body, there is no ego left to claim doership of any sort. And when there is no ego, there is no karma left to work out. Śaṅkara also cites the Upanishads⁸ to support his contention.

Manonāśa

Next, the author takes issue with the use of the word and meaning of *manonasa* by Ramana Maharshi. Actually, in the complete book of *Talks*,⁹ covering several years, the word occurs only thrice. In Talk§275, he states, “When the man is ripe for receiving the instruction and his mind is about to sink into the Heart, the instruction imparted works in a flash and he realises the Self all right. Otherwise, there is always the struggle. *Manonāśa*, *jñāna*, and *citta ekāgratā* (annihilation of the mind, knowledge and one-pointedness) mean the same.” In Talk§439, he says, “*Vāsanākṣaya* (total end of all predispositions) – *Manonāśa* (annihilation of mind) – *Ātma-sakṣatkāra* (Realisation of the Self) are all the same.” Thus, the term *manonāśa* is not a frequent occurrence in his teachings. *Manonāśa* is equated with the ending of personality and realisation of Self.

This also means the individuality will be lost. In *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, Ramana Maharshi states “Do not doubt with fear what will

⁵ <https://happinessofbeing.blogspot.com/2009/06/ulladu-narpadu-anubandham-explanatory.html>

⁶ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, verses 455-464

⁷ *Aparokṣānubhūti*: Of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya; Swami Vimuktananda, Advaita Ashrama.

⁸ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, II.2.viii: When he that is both high and low is seen, the knot of the heart is untied; all doubts are solved; and all his karma is consumed.

⁹ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Munagala Venkataramiah, Sri Ramanasramam.

happen when you completely lose your individuality [*jīvabodha*]. Does one not survive the loss of individuality [in sleep] without being affected? Know the truth by abiding in the state of Wakeful Sleep [i.e. *turīya* or *jñāna*].”¹⁰

The next contention is that the word *manonāśa* does not appear in Advaita literature. Therefore, let me quote where *manonāśa* appears. Vidyaranya says: “We shall now address ourselves to the means which lead to *Jīvanmukti* (Liberation in this Life). These are *jñāna*, *manonāśa* and *vāsanā-kṣaya*. For *Jīvanmukti* the obliteration of latent impressions (*vāsanā-kṣaya*) and dissolution of the mind (*manonāśa*) are the principal means.”¹¹

Yoga Vāsiṣṭha says “Oh best of intellects, *vāsanā-kṣaya*, *jñāna* and *manonāśa*, must be attended to simultaneously for sufficient length of time, if not,...*Jīvanmukti* can never be realised, even at the end of a hundred years.”¹² The *Vāsiṣṭha Sāra* has a whole chapter on *manonāśa*.¹³ The *Ribhu Gītā* says, “Firm abidance in that thought-free state after *Manonāśa* constitutes *mokṣa*. This is the Truth.”¹⁴ Śaṅkara clarifies, “The Yogi’s mind dies, being constantly fixed on his own Self. This apparent universe has its root in the mind, and never persists after the mind is annihilated. Therefore dissolve the mind.”¹⁵ Finally, the *Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad* states, “The mind should be prevented from functioning, until it dissolves [*manonāśa*] itself in the heart. This is *jñāna*.”¹⁶

But how does a *jñāni* function after *manonāśa*? Thus it is said, “For us who have an ego that believes it is the one who thinks and acts, it is very difficult to imagine living without it. The ego thinks it is the centre of the person, but this centre is actually situated on the periphery; the true centre is the centre of everything that exists.”¹⁷

The ignorant wonders how can the *jñāni* still think, act, talk and remember as there is no mind left after *manonāśa*. When the disciple

¹⁰ From Michael James’ translation of verses 354 and 357.

¹¹ *Jīvan-Mukti-Viveka of Swami Vidyaranya*; Swami Moksadananda, Advaita Ashrama.

¹² *The Supreme Yoga: Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, Swami Venkatesananda, Motilal Banarsidass.

¹³ <https://sageramana.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Yoga-Vasishtha-Sara.pdf>

¹⁴ *The Ribhu Gita* by Anil Sharma; *The Essence of Ribhu Gita* by N.R. Krishnamoorthy Aiyer. Sri Ramanasramam.

¹⁵ *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*, verses 277-278.

¹⁶ *Amṛtabindu Upaniṣad*, verse 5.

¹⁷ *The Scientist and the Saint* by Avinash Chandra; p.361, Archetype, Bartlow.

asks, “How can the mind be extinguished?”, the master replies, “Do not think and it will not arise. When nothing arises in the mind, the mind itself is lost.”¹⁸ The same question is asked by Rama to Vasishtha. Rama asks “The result will be dullness like that of stones or wood [after *manonāśa*].” To this, Vasishtha replies, “Not so. All this is only illusion. Forgetting the illusion, you are freed from it. Though seeming dull, you will be the Bliss Itself. Your intellect will be altogether clear and sharp. Without getting entangled in worldly life, but appearing active to others remain as the very Bliss of Brahman and be happy. Unlike the blue colour of the sky, let not the illusion of the world revive in the pure Consciousness-Self. To forget this illusion is the sole means to kill the mind and remain as Bliss. Though Śiva, Viṣṇu, or Brahmā Himself should instruct you, realisation is not possible without this one means [*manonāśa*].”¹⁹

Mind is merely a reflection of Consciousness. When the reflection is destroyed, Consciousness shines through in all its glory through the *jñāni* when the mind is absent. However, to the ignorant who are unsatisfied with the answer that one can function without the mind, it is said that the *jñāni* works through his *sattvic* mind which he retains till the end. In Talk§68 Bhagavan says “It is also said that his mind is dead [after *manonāśa*]. 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.”

When the realisation dawns, the mind is effectively destroyed. What it means is that the *ahamkāra* and the notion “I am so and so” is destroyed. Then there is no attachment, no desire for the fruits of the action. This is what is actually meant by the term, *manonāśa*. In *Upadeśa Sāram*, Bhagavan puts it succinctly, meaning: “It is the destruction of the [notional] mind that looks at the objective world as real.²⁰ Thus the *nāśa* is the destruction of the *ahamkāra* and even this destruction is notional as it is only the removal of the mistaken identity. Nothing actually happens but, after realisation, the reality is perceived as Brahman and Brahman only.” The Vedas say “The Sun does never set nor rise. When people think the Sun is setting, it is not so.”²¹ Thus,

¹⁸ *Advaita Bodha Dīpikā*, Chapter 8, p.35-37.

¹⁹ *The Concise Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, Trans. by S.Venkatesananda, SUNY Press, 1984, p.51.

²⁰ *mānasaṃ tu kiṃ mārgaṇe kṛte naiva mānasaṃ mārga ārvavāt.*

²¹ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* of *Rig Veda*, 3.44.

we may use sentences such as “the sun has risen or set etc.” (or that the sky is blue), but we know that there is actually no such thing. With *manonāśa*, it is realised, we are already free though we thought we were bound.

Samādhi

While Swami Vivekananda extensively used the terms *samādhi* etc., Ramana Maharshi also used to talk about *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samādhi*. These terms are from the Yoga philosophy. The Yoga philosophy is fundamentally opposed to Advaita as they hold the world to be real, claim that the bondage of the *jīva* and its difference with *Īśvara* is absolutely real. Therefore, the author of this book claims that advaitic teachers should not talk about these terms as they are not ‘true’ Advaita. As explained earlier, only knowledge leads to Self-realisation. Nothing else does. While this is the correct position of Advaita, it does not mean that Yoga, *samādhi* etc. do not have any place in discussions.

Savikalpa and *nirvikalpa samādhi* are mentioned in the *Vyāsa Bhāṣya* of the verses 1.17 and 1.18 of the *Patañjali Yoga Sūtras*. Further, Śaṅkara’s Guru, Govindapada, is considered to be the incarnation of Maharshi Patanjali. Further, *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*²² presented Śaṅkara’s teachings as the pinnacle of all the *darśanas* with other *darśanas* being partial truths that converged to Śaṅkara’s teachings. This book “sketches sixteen systems of thought so as to exhibit a gradually ascending series, culminating in the Advaita Vedanta (or non-dualism).”²³ The book does not contain the 16th chapter, the absence of which is explained by a paragraph at the end of the 15th chapter (the *Patañjali-Darśana*)²⁴ saying, “The system of Śaṅkara, which comes next in succession, and which is the crest-gem of all systems, has been explained elsewhere and, therefore not discussed here.” By being the preceding system before Advaita, it is clear Yoga is considered to be the closest philosophy to Advaita.

²² *Sarva-darśana-samgraha* of Mādhavācārya, Madan Mohan Agrawal, Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan.

²³ Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, Vol 1, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1929.

²⁴ Cowell, E.B., *Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha* by Madhava Acharya. London: Trübner & Co. p. 273. 1882.

While Yoga is indeed a *dvaita śāstra*, Śaṅkara was gracious enough to accept some concepts from it.²⁵ The preliminary steps in yoga such as *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara* etc., are considered part of the advaitic *sādhanā*. While there may be a difference between *nididhyāsana* and *samādhi*, the utility of yoga cannot be denied. The *birūdāvali* of the Sringeri math has an epithet describing the *ācāryas* of the *piṭham* as practitioners of the Patañjali's eight-limbed yoga. Important saints of the tradition such as Swami Vidyaranya and Madhusudana Saraswati also considered *samādhi* as an important component of advaita *sādhanā*.

The Sringeri Acharya practiced yoga and attained *samādhi*, mentioning of clarity and certainty in *jñāna* after his *nirvikalpa samādhi*. In the book, the saint compares his experiencing *nirvikalpa samādhi*, followed by discerning *vicāra* etc.

“So clear was the realisation that I was of the very nature of absolute existence that I apprehended nothing whatsoever as existing apart from Me...*Samādhi* and distraction are conditions of the mind and not of the *Ātman*. The *Ātman* is ever changeless and of the nature of consciousness. I should... not become attached to *nirvikalpa-samādhi* under the delusion that for its duration I become one with Brahman. I entered *nirvikalpa-samādhi* exactly as on the previous night... falsity of names and forms was crystal clear and so was the certainty that there was nothing that was other than consciousness.”²⁶

Further, it is stated “The *Ātman* is denoted by the word *samādhi* as it can be realised only by the knowledge arising out of the deepest concentration or, the *Ātman* is denoted by *samādhi* because the *jīva* concentrates his mind on *Ātman*. It is immovable, i.e., beyond change.”²⁷ The *ṭikā* by Anandagiri for the same verse states “*Samādhi* is the state of complete identity with non-dual Brahman, arrived at as a result of discrimination and negation of phenomena.” He further clarifies, “When the mind brought under discipline by the above-mentioned methods... nor is distracted by external objects, that is to say, when the mind becomes quiescent... it verily becomes one

²⁵ *paramatam apratishiddham anumatam bhavet.*

²⁶ *Yoga, Enlightenment And Perfection: A Book Expounding Yoga, Bhakti & Vedanta*, Abhinava Vidyatheertha Mahaswamigal, Swami Vidyatheertha foundation.

²⁷ *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya* 3.37, Swami Nikhilananda, Advaita Ashrama.

with Brahman.”²⁸ This is exactly the state described by Sri Ramana as “When the mind does not wander in the least through any of the senses, which are the cause that throws one into misery, and when the mind remains subsided like a stormy ocean which has completely subsided and become calm, that is *jñāna*. Just as the sun cannot be seen in a densely clouded sky, so one’s own Self cannot be seen in a mind-sky which is darkened by a dense cloud of thoughts.”²⁹

Yoga aids in the attainment of advaitic knowledge of Brahman. Śaṅkara specifically points to the Upanishads,³⁰ which refer to the yogic-methods and essential components of *samādhi*, which is again referenced³¹ as ‘*tām yōgamiti manyantē sthirāmindriyadhāraṇām*’ widely recognised as the mantra that defines *samādhi* and that which Śaṅkara refers³² to as *samādhyabhāvācca*; he explains “The *Ātman* is to be realised.”³³ It will not be capable of activities like “hearing, reasoning, and meditation” that lead to *samādhi*, in which state perfect Knowledge dawns.” One can conclude that Śaṅkara considers *samādhi* as an extremely valuable aid to the final stages of *nididhyāsana*.³⁴

In his commentary to *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śaṅkara says: “When the mind is restrained by Yoga, he sees the Self and the *antaḥkaraṇa*, by the mind which has been purified by *samādhi* and attains satisfaction in the Self.”³⁵ Śaṅkara clarifies that “by convincing oneself of the illusoriness of sense-objects through an investigation into their real nature, and by cultivating indifference to worldly objects, the mind can be restrained from sense-objects and brought back to the Self wherein to abide firmly. This practice of Yoga results so that the Yogin rests in peace in the Self.”³⁶ In Bhamati, Vachaspati Mishra says that *samādhi* is a *upalakṣaṇa* and that the Upanishadic statements *śrotavyaḥ* and

²⁸ *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya* 3.46, *ītkā* by Anandagiri, Swami Nikhilananda,

²⁹ *Guru Vācaka Kōvai*, verses 916-917.

³⁰ *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 2.3.11 and 2.3.18.

³¹ *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 6.11.

³² *Brahma Sutra Bhashya* 2.3.39, trans. Swami Vireshwarananda, Advaita Ashrama.

³³ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2. 4. 5.

³⁴ *ātma vā arē draṣṭavyaḥ śrōtavyō mantavyō nididhyāsitavyah*.

³⁵ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 6.20, *samādhipariśuddhēna antaḥkaraṇēna*.

³⁶ *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 6.26.

mantavyaḥ refer to the *dhāranā* limb and *nididhyāsitavyaḥ* refers to *dhyāna* limb, with *draṣṭavyaḥ* referring to *samādhi* of the *Patañjali Yoga Sūtras*.³⁷

Śaṅkara differentiates between the quietude of the mind (*uparati*) that is attained through the practice of yoga, and the purification of the mind that is attained through *samādhi*. As emphasised earlier, yoga, despite being a dualistic philosophy, is an useful (and, possibly, an essential) aid to the practice of traditional Advaita Vedanta.

Summary

The author of this book can easily refute the above contentions by the reviewer because the author believes that *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, and *Aparokshanubhuti* are not written by Śaṅkara. But all Śaṅkara *maṭhas* consider *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, to be authored by Śaṅkara, which western scholars deny. For the author of the book, advaitic literature is only Śaṅkara's commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma Sūtras Bhāṣya* and *Śrī Bhagavad Gītā*. He attaches no importance to the other texts written by Śaṅkara and his followers. If you then take only these sources, the word 'māyā' does not appear in any of the ten principal *Upaniṣads*, but the whole school of Advaita depends on how it explains *māyā*. Even if these texts were not written physically by the 'historical' Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, they do belong to the tradition he founded, which is the important thing. For the author of this book, apparently it does not matter that a former Sringeri pontiff has written a detailed commentary on *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, and the current *maṭha* head often quotes from it.

It is also not necessary to support each contention with scriptural quotations or *śabda pramāṇa*. An example is the book *Who am I?* by Ramana Maharshi that was written without any quotations from scriptures. Śaṅkara's *Adhyāsa bhāṣya*, which the reviewer considers as the greatest text ever written, has no quotation from *śāstra* and is simply the outpouring of an enlightened brilliant sage who just appeals to our universal experience. He identifies the fundamental obstacle to knowledge and explains how this obstacle can be removed so that this knowledge can be obtained.

³⁷ *Bhamati and Vivarana Schools of Advaita Vedanta: A Critical Approach*, P.S. Roodurmun, Motilal Banarsidass.

Śaṅkara clarifies for us that the obstacle to enlightenment is a misconception on our part, which superimposes the real and non-real. The misconception is *adhyāsa* and is the *avidyā* mentioned in the *śruti*. Once this *avidyā* is removed, Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, shines of its own accord. Several hundred books have been written on the *Adhyāsa bhāṣya* alone, with the two sub-schools discussing this in detail.³⁸ Further, Śaṅkara gives an example of *rajata-vat*³⁹ and the suffix ‘vat’ added to ‘rajata’ in the *bhāṣya* indicates that the silver is *anirvacanīya*,⁴⁰ i.e. it cannot be categorised as either real or unreal. This suffix alone has been the subject of hundreds of books and indicates the depth of advaitic literature and debate. Thus post-Śaṅkara debate cannot be ignored or discarded.

The author is also completely aware that there are several sub-schools⁴¹ following Śaṅkara that differ from him on several minor points. The two sub-schools, namely Bhāmatī and Vivaraṇa, authored by Vachaspati Mishra and Prakashatman, respectively, in addition to the Vārtika school of Sureshwaracharya have different views on the concepts of *māyā*, *avidyā*, *adhyāsa*, *anirvacanīyatā*, *bimba-pratibimba-vāda*, *vivartavāda*, the locus of *avidyā*, *brahmāvagati* etc.

Further, the venomous attack some dualists mounted was different from what Śaṅkara encountered in his time and had defended. Therefore, new terms had to be introduced and explained for a defense of Advaita. These latter Advaita ācāryas had to thus use *navya-nyāya* rather than *pracheena nyāya* that was prevalent during Śaṅkara’s time. Diverse opinions are required at different times and Advaita is a system which encompasses all systems. We have to assume that these later Advaita ācāryas have explained the reality in different ways. Therefore, it cannot be said only the books of Śaṅkara should be taken as authority and credence has to be given to the many books and commentaries written by the followers and upholders of his tradition.

³⁸ *Shankaracharya’s Adhyasa Bhashya* (With Bhamati and Vivarana), Kapil Gautam, D. K. Printworld Pvt. Ltd.

³⁹ A piece of nacre appears like silver.

⁴⁰ *Adhyāsa bhāṣya*, Translation of the lectures of Dr. Mani Dravid Sastri, <https://sanskritdocuments.org/sites/snsastri/adhyasabhashya.pdf>

⁴¹ <http://jeevaaspevariousystems.blogspot.com/2006/09/different-sub-schools-of-advaita.html>

The author of the book is extremely well read, pedagogical and has a deep knowledge about Advaita Vedanta but does seem to have little knowledge about other holistic aspects of Hinduism or the Indian context. He treats his readers as *uttama adhikārīs*⁴² who are of course very rare. Further, one would guess these traditional Vedānta texts are read by less than 1% of the general population and this book caters to the top 1% of that 1%.

The author claims in one of the forums, “Many people today believe that the future can be foretold by looking at crystals (I think these have probably supplanted tea-leaves and the flight of birds). And many believe that they can communicate with angels. I know this because my publisher actually markets this stuff and prefers to publish it rather than my book on ‘Confusions in Advaita’!” That’s exactly the point. Most people are suffering and do not come to Advaita to learn about its philosophical concepts of Advaita, at least in India, but as a cure for suffering. They believe these ‘*jñānis*’ can solve their worldly problems, not impart Advaita.

His holiness of the Sringeri Math as well as the Paramacharya of the Kanchi Math have repeatedly said in their talks that more than 95% of the visitors come to them asking for marriage or job or health for either themselves or for their family. The Advaita position is : “You are Brahman, unaffected by all this. You have always been Brahman. Feeling depressed, lonely, sad or confused is not the primary reason we suffer. We suffer because we are identified with these passing feelings. We suffer because we believe they are a reflection of who we are. Stop identifying with your ego and remain as Brahman.” But this is not what most visitors want to hear or can even understand. What they want is a quick relief from suffering and not some truths from Upaniṣads. Further, many persons who come and meet these sages have misunderstood many concepts of *samādhi*, *dhyāna*, *yoga* and *manonāśa* etc., from different sources. The teacher necessarily has to explain many of these concepts at the level of the listener and the author of this book cannot assume that this reflects the teachings of the sage. For many people who are beginning on the spiritual path and even those who have been practising various aspects of yoga, the subtleties and complexities of Advaita Vedānta are akin to a foreign

⁴² Qualified aspirants of the highest level.

language. It requires years of learning, reading and listening to a fully qualified teacher or adept on Advaita Vedānta to fully appreciate the tradition. People may casually gush the highest teachings as if they fully understood their implication, but this does nothing but a disservice to the tradition and muddles the waters of a clear insight into this intricate system.

At the beginning of the commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras*, Śāṅkaracharya in interpreting the word ‘*atha*’ (then) has mentioned that a person becomes competent to enter upon the study of Vedānta only after he has secured the four means of practice (*sādhana catuṣṭaya*), which include six virtues (*śatsampat*), are cultivated on the path of Self-Realisation. The *sādhana catuṣṭaya sampatti* consists of *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (detachment), *samādhiṣatka* (six courses of training), and *mumukṣutva* (yearning for liberation). These allow a clear, steady foundation for the three stages of the practices of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*.

Brahmalīna Chandrashekhara Bharati said to a person who was reading Advaita literature, “The four qualifications are imperatively necessary for those who want to know Brahman. You do not want to know Brahman; you want only to know what the book says. It is only curiosity that impels you to look into it and not any other motive. Your reading will not lead to knowledge of Brahman. It may help you to understand a few of the thoughts; it may familiarise you with such terms as *māyā*, *ātmā* and so on which are met with frequently in such books. And the impressions so got may be somewhat useful when really you acquire the competency.”⁴³ The scripture says, “But he who has not turned away from bad conduct, whose senses are not subdued, whose mind is not concentrated, whose mind is not pacified, can never obtain this *Ātman* by knowledge.”⁴⁴ The mind has to be purified by *sādhana catuṣṭaya sampatti* before *śravaṇa* and *manana* can be undertaken. This has to be accompanied with extreme *mumukshutva* as “For that wise man who chooses to attain *Ātma*, *Ātma* reveals its own superior real nature, which is covered by ignorance...the *Ātma* becomes self-evident, as though it is revealing itself.”⁴⁵

⁴³ *The Saint of Sringeri: Life and Teachings of Jagadguru Sri Chandrashekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji*, Vidya Bharati Press, 2012.

⁴⁴ *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.24.

⁴⁵ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.2.3.

Conclusions

The basic premise of the book is absolutely correct: Advaita should be learned from a traditional teacher and not by reading satsaṅg based books. If some readers are confused with Advaita due to attending *satsaṅg* based (especially western) teachers, this book is appropriate for correcting those misunderstandings. However, if the readers want to understand Advaita, the reviewer feels one should listen to the talks by Swami Sarvapriyananda⁴⁶ on *Dṛṣṭ Dr̥śya Viveka*, *Maṇḍukya Kārikā*, *Vedānta Sāra* etc. or talks by Mani Dravid Sastrigal⁴⁷ on *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Sarva Vedānta Siddhānta Sāra Saṁgraha*, *Ātma Bodha* etc. Similarly, the reviewer feels the *Collected Works*,⁴⁸ *bhāṣyas* by Lakshmana Sarma⁴⁹ and the writings of Viswanatha Swami⁵⁰ accurately reflect Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi's teachings.

Sri Ramana Maharshi invariably spoke from the highest standpoint on the understanding that the insights he imparted were to be practised and not simply parroted and then forgotten as if it were an academic exercise. Advaita is a living tradition and all the efforts of any sincere seeker who listened and followed the advice of Sri Ramana were directed toward living the teaching in body, speech and mind. Many people used to have their questions 'disappear' in the presence (famously called *sannidhi*) of Bhagavan and soak in the silence. The problems of many people have been solved simply by sitting at the feet of Bhagavan. A *jñāni* has no will (*saṅkalpa*) but his *sannidhi* is the most powerful force. He need not have *saṅkalpa* but his presiding presence, the most powerful force, can do wonders: it quietens the mind, allows one to cultivate the four qualifications, aids *manana* and, possibly, even give liberation. That's why learning at the feet of the *jñāni* is much more powerful than learning from a scholar. The real knowers of what Advaita means are these sages, not scholars. ▲

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/@VedantaNY/playlists>

⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/@BalasubramaniyanBaali/playlists>

⁴⁸ *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, editor Arthur Osborne.

⁴⁹ *Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad; Maha Yoga; Revelation; Ramana Hridayam* etc.

⁵⁰ <https://archive.arunachala.org/ramana/devotees/sw-viswanatha> and his articles in *The Mountain Path*.

Advaita Primer

Part Seven

Equipoise

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*). We also explored the relationship between the triad, namely *jīva*, *nirguṇa* (without attributes) Brahman and *jagat*, and the relationship between each of the above entities with *saguṇa* Brahman (*īśvara*). In the previous article, we examined how Advaita and modern science view consciousness and how the former proposes a solution to the difficult and that of seemingly intractable issue called the hard problem of consciousness, of connecting consciousness with matter. However, the purpose of Advaita is *not only* to explain the nature of reality and of what really exists (ontology), the relationship between the knower and what is known (epistemology), and what we value (axiology), but inherently takes the seeker towards Self-realisation.

In Advaita, Self-realisation is already attained as the Self is ever-present. It is the knowledge (*jñāna*) that results in the destruction of ignorance (*avidyā*). This knowledge of one's true identity as Ātman-Brahman¹ and witness-consciousness² allows us to recognise the illusoriness of the phenomenal world and the notion of doership.

¹ *ayam ātmā brahma* (अयम् आत्मा ब्रह्म) — 'Ātman is Brahman', *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, 1.2.

² *Sākṣī*— The Awareful Witness; see Swami Tadatmananda, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5o_AJRxVp0.

The only purpose of Advaita is to make us realise that we are and always have been Brahman. The *nirguṇa* Brahman is consciousness (*prajñānam brahma*),³ which is pure awareness. Brahman is described as *sat* (Reality), *cit* (knowledge), *ananta* (infinity)⁴ and *ānanda* (bliss)⁵. The words ‘sin’ and ‘virtue’ are somewhat alien to the spirit of Vedanta philosophy, because they necessarily foster a sense of possessiveness with regard to thought and action. If we say, “I am good,” or “I am bad,” we are only talking in the language of *māyā*. “I am Brahman” is the only *true* statement any of us can or should make.

Bhagavan said, “That which is, is only *Sat*, Being or Reality. That is called Brahman or Pure Self. The lustre of *Sat*-Reality is *Cit*-Consciousness and its nature is *Ānanda*-Bliss. These are not different from *Sat*-Reality. All the three together are known as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*.”⁵ Bhagavan further clarifies, “*Satcidānanda* is said to indicate that the Supreme is not *asat* (unreal), not *acit* (insentient) and not *anānanda* (unhappiness). Because we are in the phenomenal world, we speak of the Self as *Satcidānanda*.”⁶ He continues, “There is no use seeking for a temporary state of affairs. The fact is that *Satcidānanda* is the state of effortless, ever alert peace. Effortlessness while remaining aware, is the state of Bliss. And that is Realisation.”⁷

We should differentiate between happiness, pleasure and bliss and the western view of meditative practices as a neurological process that only occurs at the physical level of the brain. Pleasure is derived from dopamines and happiness by serotonin. These are entirely two different neurotransmitters occurring in different areas of the brain with contrasting regulatory pathways. Dopamine is an excitatory neurotransmitter. Chronic stimulation of these neurons lead to neuronal cell death. As the receptors decrease, we need higher and higher stimulation to obtain pleasure at a continually decreasing rate, leading to tolerance and eventually resulting in addiction. Serotonin is an inhibitory neurotransmitter essentially slowing the neurons down and producing happiness. There is no overdosing of serotonin but dopamine down-regulates serotonin. Thus the more pleasure we

³ *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, 3.1.3.

⁴ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.1.3.

⁵ Nagamma, Suri, *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, Letter 117.

⁶ Venkataramiah, M. (ed.), *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk §433.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Talk §295.

seek, the more unhappy we get. However, this is not the happiness that is mentioned in *Advaita* or Vedanta literature, which actually refers to *ānanda*, that is rightly translated as bliss and is independent of chemicals in the brain or even the body, mind and world complex. The truth is that pleasure and joy actually come from the mind, not from external phenomena and bliss is inherent in all of us because that is our true nature.

How does one *obtain* this *ānanda*? We cannot obtain it. As Bhagavan Ramana says, “The wrong knowledge of ‘I am the body’ is the cause of all the mischief. This wrong knowledge must go. That is realisation. Realisation is not acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only removal of all camouflage [*avidyā*].” In the state of ignorance (*ajñāna*), consciousness (Brahman) reflected in the mind and identified with it constitutes the empirical self or transactional self, the *jīva*. Self-realisation is the recognition by the *jīva* that ‘I am the illuminating consciousness’, rather than the reflected qualified or attributive conscious entity ‘I am this [or that]’.⁸

Subbaramayya reports Bhagavan saying, “‘What is Self-Realisation?’ A mere phrase. People expect some miracle to happen, something to drop from Heaven in a flash. It is nothing of the sort. Only the notion that you are the body, that you are this or that, will go, and you remain as you are.”⁹

Arjuna asks Krishna, “O Keshava, what is the description of a person of steady wisdom who is established in equanimity?”¹⁰ Krishna gives a long reply in verses from 2.55 to 2.72 to describe the characteristics of the Self-realised person (*jñānī*). However, the answer is in the question itself, which is equanimity. It is here appropriate to recall an incident with Kanchi Mahaperiyava.¹¹

A family went to have the *darśan* of Mahaperiyava. Along with them, they took one of their family friends who had lived in the USA for some decades. The friend did not have any great faith in our religion, system and especially the monks wearing saffron clothes; he went along with him with utterly no interest to meet

⁸ Vidyananya, Swami, *Anubhutiprakāśa*, Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2009.

⁹ Subbaramayya, G.V., *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, p.138.

¹⁰ *sthitaprajñāsya kā bhāṣā samādhisthasya keśava. BG 2.54.*

¹¹ <https://truemasters.wordpress.com/27destroying-your-ego/>.

Mahaperiyava. He was under the impression that Mahaperiyava was a fundamentalist and an uneducated monk. This NRI had no great respect at all for Him. Not only that, he uttered such inauspicious things about Him, ‘What does He know? Does He know English?’.

There was a big throng of devotees at the Mutt and the family was standing at a decent distance from Him. As usual, Mahaperiyava looked at this family with His graceful eyes, and called all of them including the friend to come near Him. After all the usual courteous enquiry about the family, the Master looked at the NRI friend and asked about his details, including his name, whereabouts, his predecessors, where he was working etc. Then He asked, ‘You were born in India, and you know Tamil; your wife was also born in India and should know the mother tongue. When you two converse will it be in Tamil or English?’ The friend replied ‘We never use Tamil at home, we use only English. The same goes for the kids also.’ Then Mahaperiyava asked, ‘Before speaking, you may have to think and conceive the sentence. Is the thought process in Tamil or English?’ The friend [proudly] replied, ‘That too in English only’. Some minutes later, an old lady came to have Mahaperiyava’s *darśan*.

Mahaperiyava looked at the NRI person and said, ‘This old lady is now very poor, but once upon a time she was very rich. But even after she lost all the materialistic wealth, her devotion towards the Mutt, Acharya and me has never changed even a bit. Could you please tell me what is the English word which will describe this unflinching devotion, which can’t be changed by external situations? I would like to know [After all, I am an uneducated monk who does not know English].’¹²

The man was flummoxed. He thought and thought for a while but did not know that word. Mahaperiyava smiled and told him, ‘Please take your time and let me know’. Even after some time, he could not come up with the required word. Then Swamiji said, ‘Can I suggest one word? Could you please confirm

¹² He could converse in approximately 17 languages including English, French, Swedish and a dozen Indian languages.

whether the same can convey this meaning? EQUIPOISED’.

The man was spellbound and fell on Mahaperiyava’s feet to pardon him for his ego.

Equanimity refers to a state of calmness and composure, especially in difficult situations. It involves maintaining a sense of inner peace. Equipose refers to a state of balance or equilibrium. Both of these terms imply a calm state of mind irrespective of the external circumstances. Krishna defines Yoga as “Do your karma equiposed (*samaḥ*) in success or failure; such equanimity (*samatvam*) of mind is called Yoga.”¹³

The problem is we always try to seek happiness wrongly. The way we live, the way we think — everything is dedicated to material pleasures. We consider sense objects to be of utmost importance and materialistically devote ourselves to whatever makes us happy, rich, famous or popular. Even though all this comes from our mind, we are so totally preoccupied by external objects that we never look within or even enquire into the mind. We often feel miserable and our world seems upside-down because we believe that external things will work exactly as we plan and expect them to do so. We expect things that are changeable by nature not to change, impermanent things to last forever. Nothing material lasts; it is impossible. We make futile efforts to change outer circumstances, and search for happiness in the world, experiencing the inevitable duality of pleasure and pain. As pain is more intense than pleasure, we encounter suffering repeatedly. If we hear ten positive compliments and one negative criticism, the mind clings on to the criticism. Negativity is the innate nature of the mind. It leads you to a state where you get so disgusted with yourself and your own mind. The main problem is our uncontrolled, dissatisfied mind, whose nature is suffering. You feel like running away from your own mind. Running away is not going to help, because wherever you go, your mind will also go along with you. It is like trying to run away from your shadow. That’s why Bhagavan says, “Whether you continue in the household or renounce it and go to the forest, your mind haunts you. The ego is the source of thought. It creates the body and the world and it makes you think of being the *grhastha*. If you renounce, it will

¹³ *siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvam yoga uchyate. Bhagavad Gita, 2.48.*

only substitute the thought of *sannyāsa* for that of *grhastha* and the environment of the forest for that of the household. But the mental obstacles are always there for you. They even increase greatly in the new surroundings. It is no help to change the environment. The one obstacle is the mind and it must be overcome whether in the home or in the forest. If you can do it in the forest, why not in the home? Therefore, why change the environment? Your efforts can be made even now, whatever the environment.”¹⁴

We get hurt easily but it takes forever to get healed. Healing is always harder. If we could, we would forgive and forget but it is easier said than done and healing is much harder than feeling pain. When someone hurts you emotionally, they alter you. We are no longer the same old person. When healing occurs, we become a newer you. Just like new skin grows when a wound heals, a new person emerges when we heal. Every event in life changes you a little but some can completely break you. But we do not have the option to remain broken. We rebuild ourselves constantly and strive to get out of suffering. There will always be people around you who will have an opinion about you. They may say things to you that you may not like, they may take you or your offerings for granted or they may criticise you. It is unlikely that they will change but are we going to let them keep on hurting us? Because every time they do, we get hurt and a little bit of us is lost in trying to rebuild ourselves. As we repeatedly get hurt, life becomes a burden and we grieve. Sorrow destroys courage and the mind filled with hurt destroys knowledge.¹⁵ Eventually, we say enough is enough but it is usually after a bout of adverse circumstances when life becomes unbearable.

When a sad person approached a wise Buddhist teacher, he said, “The sky is cloudy. It will rain but the crop will grow and ripen. But finally all the clouds will disperse.” This means that the current cloudiness refers to the current gloom and suffering of the person. The rain is the hardship that the person will undergo but the person matures and Grace will ripen the seeds of spirituality. The dispersal of the clouds is the attainment of equanimity resulting in bliss. Clouds come and go, but the blue sky is always there; clouds do not alter the

¹⁴ Op. cit., Talk §54.

¹⁵ *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (Canto 2, Chapter 62, Verse 15).

fundamental nature of the sky.¹⁶ Similarly, Brahman is unaffected by our thoughts or the happenings of the world.

Sometimes the bad things that happen in our lives put us directly on the path to the best things that will ever happen to us because difficult roads usually lead to beautiful destinations. At this stage, the Guru, who is the embodiment of Grace, out of supreme compassion, explains that all the emotional hurt, healing and suffering has resulted from the apparent ego. The ego gives one a false sense of separation that expects one to gain lasting satisfaction, peace and happiness outside in the world. The Guru then points out that our innate nature is beyond the mind and we are [and have always been] Brahman. This knowledge gradually helps one to get rid of all the cravings and aversions of the mind. Then one understands that this pursuit and lasting contentment can never be found outside and, therefore, one begins to turn within oneself.

It is here appropriate to recall an incident with Bhagavan. When a cat ate the mother of some baby squirrels, Ramana took on the task of caring for the young. As he used often daily events to teach his devotees, he said to them, “These little ones do not know that wisdom lies in remaining in their nest. They keep attempting to come out. All trouble lies outside but they cannot remain within. Similarly if the mind is not externalised, but remains sunk in the Heart then there would only be happiness. But the mind keeps moving out.” When Rangaswami asked, “What is the path for keeping it inward?”, Bhagavan said, “It is exactly the same as what I am doing now. Each time a young squirrel comes out, I keep putting it back into its nest. When I go on doing it, it learns the happiness of staying in the nest.”¹⁷

Indrajāla is mentioned in the Vedas¹⁸ and is a subtle metaphor for the structure of reality. Imagine a vast *jāla* (net); at each crossing point there is a jewel; each jewel is perfectly clear and reflects all the other jewels in the net. The jewel in this metaphor stands for an individual being and is intimately connected with all other jewels in the universe, and a change in one jewel means a change, however slight, in every other jewel. The central premise to Vedic philosophy

¹⁶ Yeshe, Lama, *Becoming Your Own Therapist and Make Your Mind an Ocean*, Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive; Smashwords Edition, 2010.

¹⁷ Ebert, Gabriele, *Ramana Maharshi: His Life*, p.32.

¹⁸ *Atharva Veda*, 8.8.5-8.

is that the perceived separation between ourselves and the external world is an illusion. In truth, we are interconnected with all beings and the entire universe. As Rumi¹⁹ said, “You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.” But the illusion of separation is so strong that it feels real. Though we are interconnected, we see ourselves as separate individuals. But the sage established in the highest consciousness sees one undivided imperishable reality coursing through all living entities.²⁰ This reality is indivisible and yet appears to be divided amongst living beings.²¹

The concept of an embodied consciousness (Ātman) with respect to supreme consciousness (Brahman) can be described in three different ways. In one analogy, consciousness is compared to space, and consciousness in the embodiment is compared to the space inside a pot.²² When there is a pot, the all-pervading space appears to be confined to the pot though space is all-pervading. The second method of explaining this situation is through the example of a reflecting medium like a mirror. Consciousness is the source, and consciousness available in the embodiment is the reflected consciousness. The truth is the original. The original consciousness is called *bimba* and the reflected consciousness is called *pratibimba*. If we mistake the reflection for the original, it will appear to be limited to the embodiment.²³ The third method of explanation is that consciousness available in the embodiment is the semblance or *ābhāsa* of consciousness, i.e., *cidābhāsa*. The *ābhāsa* is what appears to be the original even when it is different from it. It is like the appearance of the sun appearing to be present in the surface of the water contained in a pot.²⁴ We can liken the sun to the Supreme Being, its several images to different living beings, and the water to the mind or intellect. In

¹⁹ 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic.

²⁰ *sarva-bhūteṣu yenaikaṁ bhāvam avyayam īkṣate*

avibhaktam vibhakteṣu taj jñānam viddhi sātṭvikam. Bhagavad Gītā, 18.20.

²¹ *avibhaktam ca bhūteṣu vibhaktam iva ca sthitam. Bhagavad Gītā, 13.17.*

²² This method of explaining is adopted by Vācaspati Misra in *Bhāmāti* and is called *avaccheda-vāda*.

²³ This explanation is called *pratibimba-vāda* given by Padmapāda, a direct disciple of Śaṅkarācārya.

²⁴ This intellection called *ābhāsa-vāda* is given by Sureshvara, a direct disciple of Śaṅkarācārya.

this analogy, the existence of the sun is entirely independent of the existence of any particular image or water. The various reflections may appear clean or murky, in motion or still, depending on the nature of their hosting water bodies. Nevertheless, these variations do not affect the sun itself.

Similarly, the consciousness available in the embodiment (*jīva*, body mind) does not affect the source (or original) consciousness (Brahman). The apparent delimitation of space by the pot does not affect the space; the image of the person appearing in the mirror does not affect the person; and the reflection of the illumination does not affect the source of illumination. In the limitation explanation, we recognise the original by knowing that the limitation is only apparent, like the limitless space appearing as limited inside the pot. In the reflection explanation, we recognise the source, through the knowledge that what is seen is only the reflection, and in the semblance explanation that it is only the semblance of the original.

Sureshvara, the direct disciple of Śaṅkarācārya and the author of one of the biggest books²⁵ in Advaita literature writes in his famous work²⁶ about how lack of knowledge (*ajñāna* or *avidyā*) leads to suffering in eight stages as follows. Because of ignorance (*advaita ajñāna*), there is perception of duality (*dvaita darśanam*). Because of this perception, there is *śobhana-aśbhana-adhyāsaḥ* i.e. division into favourable and unfavourable parts. This leads to *rāga-dveṣa* i.e., likes and dislikes of the favourable and unfavourable circumstances, respectively. This leads to *dharma* and *adharma karmāni* (right and wrong actions) that results in *puṇya* and *pāpa* (virtue and sin). These lead to superior and inferior physical bodies, *deha-prāptiḥ*, respectively. The embodiment itself leads to suffering and *samsāra*. Due to this 8-fold chain, it can be concluded that *samsara* is actually due to *ajñāna*. Duality or separation implies that you can lose something or someone. Painful emotions and feelings are generated and sustained by the sense of being a separate self. When the perceived

²⁵ *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad bhāṣyavārtikam*, encompassing 12,000 verses.

<https://archive.org/details/BrihadaranyakaBhashyaVartikam2/Brihadaranyaka%20Bhashya%20Vartikam%201/>

²⁶ Balasubramanian, R., *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi: An Elucidation of Advaita* by Suresvara, Chinmaya International Foundation, Kerala.

duality is seen as false by the removal of *ajñāna*, the mind will be completely absent from all emotions resulting from duality and will remain equipoised and rest in the inherent bliss of Self. When the mind becomes equipoised... it verily becomes one with Brahman.²⁷

In *Tattva Bodha*,²⁸ Śaṅkara defines उपरमः (*uparamah*) as mental equipoise during the observance of one's own *dharma*. As mentioned earlier, the state of performing actions with equanimity of the mind, abandoning attachment towards success and failure itself is a yoga¹¹. All actions become worship when the work is performed in an equipoised manner with a spirit of surrender to Bhagavan. The highest form of *uparama* is when one remains in the highest state of *satcitananda* (सत् चित् आनन्द) while discharging the *dharma* without brooding over a dead past or fancying about the unborn future. Ultimately, it is not possible to attain the perfect equipoise of the mind continuously unless one is established in the Self.²⁹

In the next verse, Śaṅkara explains another important characteristic of the mind i.e., तितिक्षा (*titikṣā*). This means forbearance, which is basically patient endurance of the opposites encountered in our life. Life is a continuous stream of experiences at the physical level (heat, cold), emotional level (joy, sorrow) and intellectual level (praise, censure) that may give us a feeling of being at the top of the world or at a bottomless pit. In such cases, since we are not able to take things in our stride, we blame outside agencies like the stars, society, and others. Some external thing changes, and we get completely upset. We all need control, be it psychologically, emotionally and financially as we are too attached to the external world. Swami Paramarthananda³⁰ compares an equanimous mind to a good set of shock absorbers on the vehicle. An equanimous person says, "This too shall pass" and counters all events with "Is that so?" An incident³¹ can be given to illustrate the above.

²⁷ *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya*, 3.46, *tika* by Anandagiri.

²⁸ Chaturvedi, Shraddhesh, *Tattva Bodha by Shankaracharya: Knowledge of Reality*, 2019, verse 8. Independently published.

²⁹ *yadā sthāsyati niścalā samādhāv... Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.53.

³⁰ Introduction to *Tattvabodha*, in https://www.vedanta.gr/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/SwParam_IntroVedanta-Tattvabodha_ENA4.pdf

³¹ <https://kannondo.org/is-that-so/>.

Hakuin³² was greatly respected and had many disciples. At one time in his life, he lived in a village hermitage, close to a food shop run by a couple and their beautiful young daughter. One day the parents discovered that their daughter was pregnant. Angry and distraught, they demanded to know the name of the father. At first, the girl would not confess but after much harassment, she named Hakuin. The furious parents confronted Hakuin, berating him in front of all of his students. He simply replied, “Is that so?”

When the baby was born, the family gave it to Hakuin. By this time, he had lost his reputation and his disciples. But Hakuin was not disturbed. He took delight in caring for the infant child. A year later, the young mother of the child was troubled by great remorse. She confessed the truth to her parents — the real father was not Hakuin but rather a young man who worked at the local fish market. The mortified parents went to Hakuin, apologising, asking forgiveness for the wrong they did to him. They asked Hakuin to return the baby. Although he loved the child as his own, Hakuin gave him up without complaint. All he said was: “Is that so?”

The acceptance depends on the degree our life is impacted. For example, we may not be unduly affected if our car is stuck in a traffic (a daily occurrence in Indian cities) but become more concerned if the computer fails to start. What if we have the unfortunate experience of being wrongly accused and being laid off from work? What if we get diagnosed with a terminal illness with a few days of excruciating pain left before dying? What if all the above events happen on the same day? Will we remain equipoised and say “Is that so?”.

An untrained mind suffers when it experiences unexpected, life-changing events, particularly if it is aimed at us personally. But the above incident indicates that the mind can be capable of equanimity in all situations. It is a story of acceptance without judgment. It shows that equanimity and wisdom are possible in the midst of the surprises and difficulties of ordinary life, possible because it is our inherent state: it already exists, we have no need to strive for it. Bhagavan says,

³² Zen Master Hakuin lived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He is said to have created the now-famous question: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

“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.”³³

The quest to find peace of mind is doomed because everybody, without exception, has a restless mind. Arjuna complains that the mind is restless, turbulent, obstinate and says it is more difficult to control than the wind.³⁴ Freedom has nothing to do with your thoughts and everything to do with whether you identify with them or not. When we begin to meditate,³⁵ we see there are two separate entities at play — the thoughts that come and go and the one who is aware of them — the witness. Clouds come and go, the sun remains unaffected. Just as the sun cannot be seen in a densely clouded sky, so one’s own Self cannot be seen in a mind-sky which is darkened by a dense cloud of thoughts.³⁶ Pleasant thoughts come and go, unpleasant thoughts come and go³⁷ but the silent witness, the one who is aware, never changes. Peace is its nature. Advaita asks us to be that witness, Brahman.

Brahman supports the entire creation as though it were a play, but is independent of it, as pointed out by Śaṅkarācārya in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*.³⁸ Though the world appears real to the *sadhaka*, it has no relationship with Brahman, just like a movie screen has no relationship to the happenings in the movie. A fire in the movie does not burn the screen, nor does a flood wet the screen. When the *jīva* recognises that he is the *sākṣī* (witness) and not associate himself with the conditioned (*upādhis*) reflected consciousness, he is self-realised.³⁹ Brahman is said to be *sākṣī*, the witness consciousness, but this is just to differentiate it from the witnessed world (that includes the body and mind). In reality, Brahman is infinite and is even beyond the duality of the witness and witnessed.

³³ Op.cit., Talk §4.

³⁴ *cañcalam hi manaḥ kṛṣṇa pramāthi balavad dṛḍham tasyāham nigrāham manye vāyor iva su-duṣkaram. Bhagavad Gita, 6.34.*

³⁵ Sarvapriyananda, Swami, *Dṛg Dṛśya Viveka*, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAF_c2xr3i8C6LjcbiQSZkp0EUfd2XX8t.

³⁶ Muruganar, Sri, *Guru Vācaka Kōvai*, verses 916-917.

³⁷ “Leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go. Just don’t serve them tea.” Quoted in *Crooked Cucumber*; a biography of Shunryu Suzuki.

³⁸ यद्यप्यस्माकमियं जगद्विम्बविरचना गुरुतरसंरम्भेवाभाति, तथापि परमेश्वरस्य लीलैव केवलेयम् ... *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, 2.1.33.

³⁹ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.1:1-3.

As spiritual unfoldment proceeds, one naturally cherishes solitude and silence. Solitude does not mean being isolated and neither does silence mean absence of sound. What is meant is a natural state of inner detachment as one realises the unreality of the world and the futility to gain any lasting satisfaction or happiness outwardly in the world. Bhagavan says, “Solitude is in the mind of man. One might be in the thick of the world and maintain serenity of mind; such a one is in solitude. Another may stay in a forest, but still be unable to control his mind. He cannot be said to be in solitude. Solitude is a function of the mind. A man attached to desire cannot get solitude wherever he may be; a detached man is always in solitude.”⁴⁰

Though Bhagavan’s teachings construe the direct path, it is not a shortcut to Self-realisation.⁴¹ Realisation is the opposite of ignorance. To consider the temporal and transient world to be real and the supreme Self as unreal is ignorance. This is the cause of sorrow and suffering. Awakening is when our mind chatter quiets and the supreme consciousness shines through the equipoised mind. However, this does not happen at once. Can we see our face with clarity in a dirty mirror? No. First we have to wipe it clean. The thought ‘I am’ and self-enquiry of tracing the ‘I’ thought to its source is the polishing cloth. The clearer the mirror, the clearer the perception of the face. The same happens with the mind and consciousness. The mind is like a mirror that reflects consciousness. The purer the mind, the more clearly it will reflect the peace and bliss of consciousness. But the dust does not disappear all at once. It happens gradually. Little by little.

The same is true for spiritual growth. We meditate, we let go, we do all kinds of things as part of our *sāadhanā*, over a period of several births. As we grow gradually, finally the dust is completely removed and the reflection is perfect. Advaita Vedanta emphasises three stages, spiritual practice (*sādhana catuṣṭaya*), realisation of the true nature as limitless consciousness (*ātma sāṅśātkāra*) followed by *nididhyāsana* which is to contemplate and reflect on our real nature for the sake of removing the habitual identification with our body and mind (*deha vāsanā*).

⁴⁰ Op cit., Talk §20 and Talk §54.

⁴¹ Tadatmananda, Swami, Shortcut to Enlightenment, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRg6AFx-6WQ>.

Yajnavalkya says, “The Self should be realised through hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*) and meditation (*nididhyāsana*).”⁴² Bhagavan says, “*Śravaṇa* is only *parokṣa jñāna*. By *manana* (reflection) it becomes *aparokṣa* spasmodically. The obstruction to its continuity is the *vasanas*: they rise up with reinforced vigour after *manana*. They must be held in check. Such vigilance consists in remembering — ‘I am not the body’ and adhering to the *aparokṣa anubhava* (direct experience) which has been had in course of *manana* (reflection). Such practice is called *nididhyāsana* and eradicates the *vāsanās*. Then dawns the *sahaja* state. That is *jñāna*.”⁴³ As said in *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, “Desires arising from latent tendencies (*vāsanās*) connected with external objects constitute bondage and ignorance. One who has got rid of his latent tendencies along with their root cause (of ego) and attained *equanimity*, O Raghava, know him to be a person liberated. The wise say that the best thing is to give up all affinities for objects which cause the mind to fluctuate, remain equipoised in opposite situations, namely, pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow, gain and loss, honour and dishonour, and that such abdication leads to *mokṣa*.”⁴⁴

In the state of realisation that shines as pure consciousness, where there is neither birth nor death, separation nor union, thinking nor forgetting, joy nor sorrow, all other associations become meaningless and disappear.⁴⁵ We become equipoised as we realise all happens only in the body-mind, not to the Self! Self is always blissful and eternal! When the recognition of what we are is seen, *nothing* happens. We simply find our Self as we already are. We are already the consciousness that we strive to attain. All we need is an equanimous mind and the knowledge of who we really are.

As we stand before the Samādhi of Bhagavan, uncontrollable tears start to roll down, an inexplicable bliss is felt and something paradoxical happens that cannot be described in words. Words fail but we know the quest is over and we definitely know we have reached home — the home of Arunachala Ramana where we feel safe, protected and enjoy an equanimous mind with complete freedom from the thoughts of the external world. ▲

⁴² *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.iv.5.

⁴³ Op cit., Talk §57.

⁴⁴ *Laghu Yoga Vāsiṣṭha, vairagya prakaraṇa*.

⁴⁵ Muruganar, *Sri Guru Ramana Prasadam*, verse 522, translated by Robert Butler.

BOOK REVIEW



MAHABHARATA: THE GREAT WAR OF THE BHARATA CLAN. Text, Drawings and Colour by Gol. Indica Books, Varanasi, 2023. HB Rs.2,450. pp.196.

ISBN-13 : 978-93-81120-37-8.

<https://www.indicabooks.in/product/the-mahabharata-in-comic>

email: indicabooks@gmail.com

The *Mahabharata* – the largest epic of India and the entire world — is a fascinating story brimming with action, drama, passion, and wisdom. It speaks to us about *dharma*, the correct way to live. Its 100,000 *ślokas* (or 200,000 single-line verses) contain the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of humanity’s greatest and most profound spiritual teachings. It is roughly ten times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined. The *Mahabharata* is believed to have been written between 400 BCE and 400 CE, although the events it describes are said to have taken place much earlier, around 3000 BC. The *Mahabharata* tells the story of a dynastic struggle between two branches of the same royal family for the throne of the ancient Indian kingdom of Hastinapur, involving the Pandavas and Kauravas.

Millennia have passed since the *dharma yuddha* of the cousins shook the land of Bharata. But this history of our ancestors continues to fascinate us. It is revered both as a text about *dharma* and a history (*itihāsa*, literally “that’s what happened”). The plot of this ancient Indian epic centers around corrupt politics, ill-behaved men and warfare. These events of the struggles of men over their own emotions continue to the present day.

The *Mahabharata* contains profound philosophical and spiritual teachings that reflect on the multitude of dilemmas and crises that beset any family. We realise that human psychology has not changed over several millennia. Innate desires, gratitude, jealousy, betrayal, and many other psychological attributes remain the same. Thus, through the characters, we see ourselves — our own strengths and failures. Irrespective of our faults, we strive to maintain our *dharma* because that brings us not joy or happiness, but peace. That is the essence of the *Mahabharata* — and of life.

It is often referred to as the ‘fifth Veda’ and is considered, along with the *Ramayana*, to be one of the most important works of Hinduism. It is important to realise that the events described are not completely mythological, as there is enough archaeological evidence to support many incidents described, such as the flood in Dwarka and the battle in Kurukshetra.

In India, it is said that whatever is found in the *Mahabharata* may be found in other texts, but whatever is not found in the *Mahabharata* cannot be found elsewhere. Whatever one needs to learn in life can be learned in the *Mahabharata*. Though the main theme is the war, many smaller stories, incidents within these stories, and even the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself are all interwoven together in an extraordinary chronicle by an exceptional narrator we come to know as Veda Vyasa. It is a great read for anyone who likes heroism, treachery, crime, suspense, humour, romance, politics, loyalty — you name it, and this book has it. All human emotions like love, joy, bravery, courage, and respect are expressed in the book.

However, the primary purpose of the epic is its emphasis on *dharma*. Vidura, in the *Mahabharata*, recommends the prioritisation of the greater good. ‘Sacrifice your son to protect the village and sacrifice the village to protect your nation. But to protect your own *ātma*, be ready to give up everything,’ he says. One’s conscience is supreme. A guiltless conscience is what brings peace within. Only upholding *dharma* can lead to a faultless conscience.

In the *Karna Parva* 69.46–53, Krishna explained to Arjuna the nuances of *dharma* and truth by reciting many stories, including that of Rishi Kaushika. He defines truth as *dharma* and *dharma* as truth. He made Arjuna see the context-sensitive nature of truth and the need for discretion in all decision-making and actions. ‘No doubt, truth is paramount. But understanding the nature of truth in practice, as lived by noblemen, is a difficult endeavour. An apparent lie that saves an innocent life is more virtuous than an apparent truth that harms those who deserve to be protected. One should know what matters and when.’ But why uphold *dharma*? Krishna says, ‘Because it upholds and protects, it is called *dharma*. *Dharma* sustains society. Hence, only that action which protects and upholds is said to be aligned with *dharma*.’

Vyasa says multiple times throughout the *Mahabharata*: “*dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*” — *Dharma* destroys those who destroy it and protects those who protect it. However, upholding *dharma* does not always bring joy or pleasure. Duryodhana had smirked just before dying, ‘I have lived a luxurious life; you can live and mourn over all that is lost.’ Yudhishtira was indeed going to be the monarch of a kingdom full of widows — most of the men had died in the war. Winning the war did not bring him joy. But he had upheld *dharma*, and that brought him peace. That’s why Yudhishtira repeatedly says, “Strive to understand the nuances of *dharma*. Strive to uphold *dharma*. Through *dharma*, uplift yourself and live peacefully.”

In *Vana Parva* 32, Draupadi says, “Every person must work hard. However, enterprise and hard work alone do not determine the outcome. That depends on two additional factors — fate and the grace of God. Hence,

one should strive to do his *dharma* but not become dejected if the outcome is not as per one's choice. What matters is the effort that was put in. Therefore, irrespective of the result, one must follow *dharma*."

It is exactly this concept that Krishna elaborates in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In 2.47, Krishna explains, "You have a right to perform your *dharma*, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction." This is precisely because the results of your actions are not in your hands — they are based on your past karma and the grace of Krishna.

Krishna is not saying here that the results should be ignored or that duties be carelessly performed without concern for the results. What He is saying is simply that we are not entitled to be the enjoyer of the fruits of our *dharma* because we cannot control them. If you are cultivating a garden, for example, you should make every effort to get the best yield; however, the actual yield of that garden is up to forces that are beyond our control. All we can do is to plant the seeds and be equanimous about the result — whether favorable or not.

Kunti says, "It is likely that the outcome may not always be as we desire. But that can be known only after the action is done. That is why, results notwithstanding, wise men continue to engage in their work. Success and failures are, in any case, ephemeral. Hence, believing firmly that success will come, one must engage in work. However, one should remain equipoised irrespective of the results."

Some time ago another comic version of the *Mahabharata* was published by Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories), an Indian comic book publisher, that has done tremendous service publishing some 350 different titles across a range of categories in various Indian languages. The comics released are on various aspects of Indian history, personalities, mythological stories of gods and goddesses, and folk tales. These comic books are well-known to many children who were fortunate that their parents bought them. Amar Chitra Katha published many stories from the *Mahabharata* as well as an abridged version but this is the first time that we know of a complete rendering that is now available in comic form in one volume. The first complete English prose translation of the *Mahabharata* was done directly from the original Sanskrit text by Kisari Mohan Ganguli. His translation was published as *The Mahabharata* of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa between 1883 and 1896. Each of the 12 volumes of the Victorian prose version is about 500 pages. For many years it was the only English translation available and the volumes were hard to get. Subsequently, the definitive Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata* was released by Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in 1966. Of the recent complete translations, the best is the one edited by Ramesh Menon in 12 volumes, published by Rupa Publications in 2017.

There are many compressed versions of the complete epic that have been published in English along with abridgments and novelistic prose retellings by authors such as R.K. Narayan, C. Rajagopalachari, and Kamala Subramaniam. However, unfortunately, recent books like *Mahabharata: Relevance and Application in Contemporary Thought* by Bharat Thakker propagate myths and falsehoods not present in the original version while books like *Mahabharata Unravalled: Lesser-Known Facets of a Well-Known History* by Ami Ganatra adhere to the original version and debunk false myths and offers insights not commonly known. The number of works on the *Mahabharata* and the adaptations that still get written is a testimony to its enduring relevance.

Indica Books presents a wonderful comic version of the *Mahabharata*, which retells the epic in a comprehensive and accessible way, maintaining the main plotline intact. With beautiful artwork and well-written dialogues, it is mainly directed towards young people and adults. Almost every child in India is taught about Indian heritage through the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* by their grandparents. However, with the growth of nuclear families, no one has the time to read and understand the morals and *dharma* in these books. This book covers that gap. This fine work could be considered by parents who feel that their children should understand, learn, and value the heritage of India. The narration is simple and descriptive. The language is easy to understand for children to follow smoothly and enjoy the storyline without being puzzled by difficult words. Due to the increasingly visual nature of acquiring knowledge by the young, this new 'complete' story fills a gap. It is not only entertaining but also informative and thought-provoking. The art and detailing are praiseworthy. The drawings have brought the story to life in our imagination much more than words alone would have done. It is also a great resource book for non-resident Indians.

The book is the creation of 'Gol' aka Miguel Gomez Andrea. The author of this comic has succeeded in recreating the environment and characters that lived in India five thousand years ago when gods walked on earth. He has authored over 40 historical comic titles including two on Indian themes: *Pilgrimage to Kashi* and *Taj Mahal. Love and Tragedy in the Mughal Emperor's Court*.

The book is available in Sanskrit (which can be very useful for Sanskrit students) and Hindi as well as English. Indica Books is to be commended for its courage to publish such a major project considering its artistic and financial challenges. The only drawback is the high cost of the book. But this is due to the excellent quality of the book. So, in short, yes, go ahead and buy this book, and enjoy hours of satisfying reading.

— Christopher Quilkey and M. Giridhar





Advaita Primer

Part Eight

Analogies - I

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined why we should study Advaita Vedanta. In the subsequent articles, we have examined the concepts of *jiva*, *nirguṇa* (without attributes) *Brahman*, *jagat* (world), and *saguṇa* Brahman (*ishvara*) and the relations between them. Various analogies are employed within Advaita Vedanta to elucidate these profound and complex metaphysical ideas.

One of the most prevalent analogies is the wave and ocean metaphor. Just as waves are transient and distinct forms that arise from the ocean, yet are fundamentally made of the same water, Advaita Vedanta suggests that individual entities (*jivas*) are like waves emerging from the infinite ocean of Brahman. This analogy helps illustrate the interconnectedness of all existence and the underlying unity in the apparent diversity.

Another analogy frequently used is the dream metaphor. In a dream, various characters and scenarios seem distinct and real while dreaming, but upon waking, they are recognised as mere illusions created by the dreamer's mind. Similarly, Advaita Vedanta asserts that the multiplicity of the waking world is an illusion, and the correct understanding involves recognising the underlying unity of Brahman.

The mirror analogy is employed to illustrate the relationship between Atman and Brahman. Just as a mirror reflects the image without being affected by it, the individual soul reflects the infinite consciousness without undergoing any change. The mirror represents the pure, unblemished nature of the Atman.

The clay and pot analogy is used to explain the relationship between the material world and the ultimate reality. Just as various pots are made

from the same clay, Advaita Vedanta suggests that the entire universe is a manifestation of Brahman. This analogy underscores the concept of non-duality and reinforces the idea that everything in existence is fundamentally grounded in the same divine reality.

The gold and ornaments metaphor is employed to elucidate the relationship between the ultimate reality (Brahman) and the diverse manifestations in the world. Just as various ornaments like rings, necklaces, and bracelets are made of gold, Advaita Vedanta posits that the entire universe is a manifestation of Brahman.

The rope and the snake (*rajju-sarpa-nyaya*) analogy is a classic metaphor used in Advaita Vedanta. Imagine someone walking in dim light and seeing a coiled object on the ground. Due to the low visibility, he mistakes the rope for a snake and experiences fear. However, when he brings a lamp and illuminates the object, he realises that there was never a snake; it was just a misperception caused due to ignorance (*avidya*).

The rope symbolizes the ultimate reality (Brahman), which is formless, eternal, and beyond attributes. The snake represents the world of appearances, characterized by diversity, change, and multiplicity. The dim light stands for ignorance (*avidya*), which veils the true nature of reality, leading to the misperception of the world as separate from Brahman.

The analogy serves to convey several key philosophical points. It explains *maya*. Just as the appearance of the snake was an illusion caused by insufficient light, the phenomenal world is considered an illusion created by ignorance. *Maya* is the power that veils the true nature of Brahman, leading individuals to perceive a world of multiplicity and diversity, which leads to ignorance. The dim light represents ignorance, which prevents individuals from recognising the underlying unity of all existence. Self-realization involves dispelling this ignorance to realize the oneness of the Self (Atman) with Brahman. The rope symbolizes the ultimate reality, Brahman, which is unchanging, eternal, and the source of all existence. Just as the rope is unaffected by the perception of the snake, Brahman remains untouched by the illusion of the phenomenal world. The analogy underscores the importance of discrimination (*viveka*). Just as the person needs a lamp to discriminate between the rope and the snake, individuals require spiritual insight and knowledge from a Guru to discern the true nature of reality and overcome ignorance.

The lack of awareness regarding the rope is timeless, as there was no prior knowledge of the rope before the perception of the snake and the snake did not exist before it was observed. If the ignorance of the rope had a beginning, there would have been a preceding awareness of the rope, which is not the case. The snake cannot be attributed to the rope, neither within it, nor upon it, nor as originating from it, since the rope itself remains unknown (yet encompasses all that truly exists). Ignorance is entirely unrelated to the rope, and it persists only as long as the lack of awareness endures. Sankara unequivocally states¹ “Ignorance belongs to the one who sees it,” highlighting that the absence of knowledge is contingent upon the observer. Thus, though the ignorance has no beginning, it can be ended by attaining knowledge.

All that is cognised is the snake (accompanied by fear) and the snake is erroneously projected or superimposed onto the situation (not onto the rope, which, until illuminated, remains concealed, essentially unmanifest, and is not the cause of fear). This misperception arises because whatever truly exists is not being perceived accurately and is seemingly displaced by the unreal entity—the *mithya* snake—and the subsequent unfounded fear. Awareness alone is the nature of reality. Just as the snake is a superimposition on the rope, so is the world merely a superimposition on attributeless awareness. Unaware of this, one mistakenly attributes absolute reality to things seen, heard, smelled, touched and tasted. In truth, they are merely modifications of awareness. Ramana Maharshi teaches that the Self is pure being, a subjective awareness of ‘I am’ that is completely devoid of the feeling ‘I’ with adjuncts. There are no subjects nor objects in the Self; there is only an awareness of being. The direct experience of this awareness has three aspects – being, consciousness and bliss – that are experienced as a unitary whole and not as separate attributes of the Self. They are inseparable just like wetness, transparency and liquidity are inseparable properties of water.

Shankara says², “That in which something is imagined to exist through error, is, when rightly discriminated, that thing itself, and not distinct from it. When the error is gone, the reality about the snake falsely perceived becomes the rope. Similarly the universe is in reality the Atman.” The snake-rope analogy is found in many *puranas* such

¹ *Upadesa Sahasri*, 17.20.

² *Vivekachudamani*, verse 387.

as the *Devi Bhagavatam* (11.18), *Vayu purana* (4.103), *Shiva purana* (7.13), and *Skanda purana* (2.2.27). In *Srimad Bhagavatam* (10.14), it is asked, “Can you realise the truth unless you negated the wrong superimposition of a serpent over that rope (through ignorance)?” The analogy is mentioned in Upanishads such as *Niralamba Upanishad* (14.25), *Tejobindu Upanishad* (5.76-98), *Atma Upanishad* (1.26-28), *Atmabodha Upanishad* (2.1.11-13).

Bhagavan mentions this analogy³, “The seer and the object seen are like the rope and the snake. Just as the knowledge of the rope which is the substrate will not arise unless the false knowledge of the illusory serpent goes, so the realization of the Self which is the substrate will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real is removed.” Realisation is the opposite of ignorance and the removal of *avidya* is the primary focus of the teaching. Self-Realisation is of the nature of direct experience transcending all perceptions and notions, and will not be gained unless the belief that the world is real ceases. There is complete absence of the delusion of duality, which manifests as the notions of an ego, a mind, a body and an objective world. As Bhagavan clarifies⁴, “There is no alternative for you but to accept the world as unreal, if you are seeking the Truth and the Truth alone... unless you give up the idea that the world is real, your mind will always be after it. If you take the appearance to be real you will never know the reality itself, although it is the reality alone that exists. This point is illustrated by the analogy of the ‘snake in the rope’. As long as you see the snake you cannot see the rope as such. The non-existent snake becomes real to you, while the real rope seems wholly non-existent as such.” In Talks,⁵ Bhagavan explains “When a rope is mistaken for a snake, it is enough to remove the erroneous perception of the snake for the truth to be revealed.” A detailed polemic discussion of the analogy is provided by Bhagavan.⁶

Just as the rope and the snake are not distinct objects, the Self and the ego are not two separate ‘I’s. The rope remains a rope, even when mistaken for a snake, and the snake is nothing more than the rope.

³ *Who Am I?*, Bhagavan’s reply to Q. 6, Sri Ramanasramam.

⁴ *Maharshi’s Gospel*, Book 2, Ch. 3, Maurice Frydman, Sri Ramanasramam.

⁵ *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 25, Munagala Venkataramiah, Sri Ramanasramam.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Talk 332.

Similarly, the Self always IS, even when mistaken as an ego, making the ego nothing other than the Self. The Self represents the singular and exclusive 'I', and during the practice of *atma-vicara* (Self-enquiry), where we investigate the 'I' by attempting to focus solely on its essence, the 'I' being scrutinized is only the Self. Though this practice gives the impression that we are investigating the ego, persistent enquiry reveals that only the Self is. In the rope-snake analogy, we examine the snake but in scrutinizing it closely, are we investigating the snake or the rope? One could argue for either. Initially, it may seem like we are observing a snake, but with careful scrutiny, we recognise that it is only a rope. Similarly, initially, it may appear as if we are investigating this limited entity called the ego, but with diligent examination, we realize it is, in truth, the one infinite reality — the Self. Only the rope exists, whereas the snake is a phenomenon that seems real but is not what it appears to be. Therefore, investigating the apparent snake reveals its non-existence because what seemed like a snake is, in fact, only a rope. Similarly, only our Self truly exists, whereas the ego is a phenomenon that seems real but is not what it seems.

Mind constantly swings like a pendulum between the reality and the appearance, i.e., between consciousness and inertness. When the mind contemplates the inert objects for a considerable time, it assumes the characteristic of such inertness. When the same mind is devoted to enquiry and investigates the 'I', it shakes off all conditioning and returns to its original nature as Self. Therefore, observing only the 'I', allows the observer to merge back into its source, recognising it as a false appearance, much like the illusory snake merging back into its source, the rope, upon careful observation.

In summary, the analogies such as the rope and the snake analogy serve as a powerful tool to elucidate the concepts of *maya*, *avidya*, Brahman, and the transformative process of Self-realization. Each analogy provides a unique perspective on the fundamental teachings of non-duality and aid in making abstract concepts more accessible, allowing us to understand and grasp the essence of Advaita Vedanta. In the next parts of the articles, we will discuss around 25 analogies taken from various books on Advaita literature, such as *Aparokshanubhuti*, *Sata Sloki* and *Dakshinamurthi stotra*.

Advaita Primer

Part Nine

Analogies - 2

M. GIRIDHAR

We have examined the concepts of *jiva*, *nirguna* (without attributes) *Brahman*, *jagat* (world), and *saguna* Brahman (*ishvara*) and the relations between them in Advaita Vedanta. The ultimate reality is one without a second — Brahman, which is infinite, formless, and beyond all distinctions. It is the substratum of the universe, the essence of all existence. The goal of Advaita Vedanta is to realize one's identity with Brahman, transcending the illusion of individuality (*jiva*) and recognizing the unity of all beings. Various analogies are employed within Advaita Vedanta to elucidate these profound and complex metaphysical ideas.

Similar to the intricate realms of quantum physics, the teachings of Advaita often delve into counter-intuitive concepts, relying heavily on analogies and metaphors to elucidate challenging ideas. However, there lies a peril in this reliance on metaphor, as it frequently leads readers to mistakenly believe they have grasped the essence of the profound notion of Oneness. This false sense of comprehension often tempts even adept learners to extrapolate beyond the intended scope of the analogies. This is due to the inherent laziness of both the human brain and those tasked with explaining complex concepts. There is a mutual desire to provide a semblance of comprehension without delving into the intricacies that demand rigorous intellectual effort. Analogies serve as a convenient tool to bridge the gap between the unfamiliar and the familiar, offering a mental shortcut to alleviate the discomfort of not fully grasping a concept. Physics, however, has an advantage in that mathematics can be used as a language to explain

but advaita has no such equivalence. Thus a reader has to be careful. Analogies are meant to explain but not to give a false understanding because the brain/mind wants to give feel comfortable and gives an illusion of understanding. While analogies are undeniably effective in organizing and manipulating ideas, they carry inherent dangers due to their inherent inaccuracies especially if interpolated. Among the several analogies, we started with the rope-snake analogy in the previous article. In this part, we will look at some other analogies.

The ocean wave analogy serves as a profound metaphor for understanding the relationship between the individual soul (*jiva*) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). **The Wave and the Ocean analogy is called *samudrataranga-nyaya*** and is nicely explained in a lecture by Swami Sarvapriyananda¹. Though there are countless waves rolling in the vast ocean, and each wave can be distinguished from the others and perceived separately — all are water only and are not separate from the great ocean. In reality, all are only one — the difference being only apparent. This analogy illustrates that all the innumerable apparent individuals (*jivas*) that appear in this universe — though perceived to be separate from one another — are in reality made of the same “substance” as that singular ocean of awareness whose nature is existence-consciousness-bliss (*satchidananda*) and are identical with it. The diversity or difference is only seeming, not actual. In the expansive ocean, an endless array of waves undulates. Each wave appears distinct, yet they are all merely manifestations of water, inseparable from the vast expanse of the ocean. Though they may seem separate, in truth, they are all unified as one as the basis is water. Similarly, in the universe, the multitude of beings, though seemingly distinct, are fundamentally unified in the boundless essence of existence. There lies no true diversity, only the illusion of differentiation.

The analogy unfolds with profound implications. It illustrates unity in diversity. Just as the ocean manifests as diverse waves, Brahman manifests as the multiplicity of beings and phenomena in the universe. Despite the apparent diversity, all individual entities are essentially expressions of the same underlying reality — Brahman. It entails

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THn5HwNHZ1o>

temporary manifestations. Waves, though distinct, are ephemeral — they arise, exist for a moment, and eventually dissolve back into the ocean. Similarly, individual souls emerge from Brahman, undergo experiences in the realm of relative reality (maya), and eventually merge back into the transcendental unity of Brahman. It emphasizes the illusory nature of individuality. Just as a wave is merely a temporary formation of water, the individual ego is a transient construct arising from ignorance (avidya). In reality, there is no separate self; there is only Brahman. Finally, it explains the non-dual Reality. Despite the apparent distinction between the ocean and its waves, they are fundamentally one and the same—water. Likewise, despite the multiplicity of beings and phenomena in the universe, there is only one ultimate reality—Brahman. The individual souls (jivas) are non-different from Brahman; they are Brahman itself, obscured by the veil of ignorance.

The Mandukya Upanishad compares the individual waves of water to the water in the ocean as being one and the same. The Upanishad describes the state of Prapancopasamam, where all creation subsides like waves sinking into the ocean. Verse १,१०,१ of the Chandogya Upanishad says, «Our Self is the Self of all. Imagine that the whole cosmos is a vast ocean, and in that ocean there are waves. Some of the waves are huge and some of them are very small, maybe only ripples. But it is the same water. Similarly, there is one Existence, but we see diversity. This diversity, however, is only in name and form. It is not real. Underlying the diversity is one Existence, and that Existence is our own Self». Verse 6.16.3 of the Chandogya Upanishad says, “As the waves are nothing but the ocean, similarly, we are nothing but Brahman”. In verse 72 of **Aparokshanubhuti**, **Shankara says “Just as gold is thought as ear-ring and water as waves, so the Atman etc.”** and in verse १११ of **Vivekachudamani**, **he says that** “the ocean of infinite bliss and the waves of the universe are created and destroyed by the playing of the wind of the maya.”

A similar analogy is given based on sea and rivers. In Mundaka Upanishad II-ii-8, it is stated, “As rivers, flowing down, become indistinguishable on reaching the sea by giving up their names and forms, so also the illumined soul, having become freed from name and form, reaches the self-effulgent Purusha.” This is echoed in the

Prasna Upanishad VI-5: “Just as these flowing rivers get absorbed after reaching the sea, and their names and forms are destroyed, and they are called merely the sea, so also these sixteen parts (i.e. constituents) of the all-seeing Purusha, that have Purusha as their goal, disappear on reaching Purusha, when their names and forms are destroyed and they are simply called Purusha.” In Chhandogya Upanishad VI-x-1-2: **“The rivers rise from the ocean and merge in the ocean, and become that ocean itself. And there as these rivers do not know themselves as “I am this river, I am that river”, even so, dear boy, all these creatures, having come from Being, do not know, “We have come from Being”.** “ and in VI-x-3: ‘That Being which is this subtle essence (cause), even That all this world has for its self. That is the true. That is the Atman. That thou art, O Svetaketu.’

The interpretation of the metaphor aligns with a common misconception prevalent among spiritual seekers, which revolves around the notion that enlightenment entails some form of merging with the Self. We are already the Self, rendering such expressions meaningless. The mahavakya *aham brahmasmi* from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad confirms this and thus equating the ocean with Brahman and the wave with individuality would contradict this profound declaration. The correct interpretation of this analogy is that Ishvara should be considered as the ocean, the jiva as the wave and the reality is that both the wave and the ocean are fundamentally water, just as both the jiva and Ishvara are ultimately Brahman alone.

Hence, in essence, both wave and ocean are one, as both are fundamentally water. Likewise, both jiva and Ishvara are *mithya*: *tat tvam asi*. It's noteworthy that this equality—→That thou art—exists between jiva and Ishvara, not between jiva and Brahman. The wave can not proclaim that “I am the ocean”, as a jiva can not become Ishvara. It can however, state that both wave and ocean are just water.

In conclusion, the ocean wave analogy in Advaita Vedanta serves as a powerful tool for comprehending the non-dual nature of reality and the ultimate identity of the individual soul with Brahman. By contemplating this analogy, aspirants can deepen their understanding of Advaitic principles, transcend the illusion of individuality, and realize the eternal truth of oneness. These analogies serve as powerful tools to elucidate the concepts of *maya*, *avidya*, Brahman, and the

transformative process of Self-realization. Each analogy provides a unique perspective on the fundamental teachings of non-duality and aid in making abstract concepts more accessible, allowing us to understand and grasp the essence of Advaita Vedanta. In the next parts of the articles, we will continue to discuss other analogies.

Maya

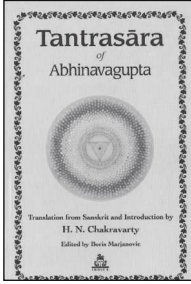
Suresh Kailash

Piercing darts, sharp arrows
Shot from the bow of the world,
Torment my mind and make me cry
In anguish and agony and hurt.

Tears that flow through the pain
Roll down the cheek at Thy lotus feet
Evaporate and dissolve in the Enquiry
Whence from these tears and pain.

The heart now placid and sublime
Washed aglow in the morning dawn
I offer at Thy lotus Feet.
The pain, the torment, peace and calm,
The ego and the Heart
Are all Thee and Thine,

BOOK REVIEW



MAHABHARATA UNRAVELLED-II: THE DHARMA DISCOURSES

Bloomsbury India (2024); 206 pages

PB; pp.206; Rs.249 (on sale).

ISBN: 978-93-56409-33-0.

<https://www.amazon.in/Mahabharata-Un unravelled-II-Dharma-Discourses/dp/9356409331>

In Advaita Vedanta, dharma occupies a nuanced yet significant position compared to other philosophical systems within Hinduism. While Advaita highlights the non-dual nature of reality, asserting that the ultimate reality, Brahman, transcends all multiplicity and distinctions, this perspective does not diminish the importance of dharma; rather, it reframes its significance within the context of spiritual realization.

Firstly, dharma is seen as a path to spiritual growth in Advaita Vedanta. It is regarded as a means to purify the mind and cultivate virtues necessary for realizing one's true nature (Atman). Following one's *svadharma*, or righteous path, is considered crucial for inner transformation and the removal of ignorance hindering self-realization. Secondly, dharma serves as a framework for ethical living. While Advaita Vedanta emphasizes the underlying unity of all existence, it acknowledges the practical necessity of dharma for maintaining societal harmony. Dharma provides a moral and ethical framework guiding individuals in their interactions, fostering social cohesion and order. Moreover, dharma is viewed through the lens of Karma Yoga in Advaita Vedanta, as expounded in the Bhagavad Gita. Karma Yoga is the path of selfless action performed in accordance with dharma. By dedicating actions to the divine and relinquishing attachment to their fruits, individuals can gradually purify their minds and realize their true nature. Furthermore, dharma is perceived as an expression of divine will within Advaita Vedanta. It aligns individuals' actions with the cosmic harmony, contributing to the unfolding of divine

order in the universe. Ultimately, dharma plays a crucial role in the pursuit of liberation in Advaita Vedanta. While facilitating ethical living and spiritual growth, dharma also serves as a stepping stone towards transcending the cycle of birth and death. It leads individuals towards the realization of their non-dual nature as Brahman, beyond all dualities including that of dharma and adharma.

In summary, while Advaita Vedanta emphasizes the ultimate reality of non-duality, dharma remains integral to spiritual practice and ethical living. It serves as a means for individuals to progress on the path towards self-realization and liberation, embodying the timeless wisdom of ancient teachings.

Dharmo rakshati rakshitah is a popular Sanskrit phrase that translates to “Dharma protects those who protect it”. It’s a summary of the importance of protecting dharma, which is the virtue of culture. The phrase means that if we protect dharma, then dharma in turn protects us. For example, the person who protects their dharma will be protected by those virtues. It also means that the one who destroys dharma, dharma destroys them, and so dharma should never be destroyed.

In the Mahabharata, dharma is a central and complex theme intricately woven throughout the epic narrative. It encompasses duty, righteousness, ethical conduct, and cosmic order, reflecting the diverse perspectives and dilemmas faced by its characters. Characters like Arjuna grapple with their obligations as warriors, sons, and princes, highlighting the importance of fulfilling one’s role in society despite personal qualms or moral dilemmas. Throughout the epic, characters must navigate conflicting duties and principles, presenting moral dilemmas such as Arjuna’s reluctance to fight in the Kurukshetra War. This raises questions about the righteousness of violence and the greater good versus personal attachment and aversion. Dharma is depicted as an inherent cosmic principle governing the universe, upheld by characters like Bhishma and Yudhishtira. They strive to maintain order and justice in society despite personal sacrifices. The consequences of adharma, or unrighteousness, are explored through characters like Duryodhana and Dushasana, whose disregard for dharma leads to their eventual downfall and the catastrophic consequences of the Kurukshetra War. Personal ethics and integrity

are central to dharma, with characters like Draupadi upholding their principles of righteousness and resilience despite facing immense adversity.

In summary, dharma in the Mahabharata encompasses duty, ethics, cosmic order, and moral teachings. It serves as a guiding principle for characters navigating the complexities of life, offering timeless lessons on righteousness, responsibility, and the pursuit of spiritual realization.

Ami Ganatra approaches timeless epics with a unique perspective. The initial volume of Mahabharata Unravelling delved into the ancient saga as narrated by Rishi Veda Vyasa, capturing the essence of our ancestral heritage. Yet, the Mahabharata transcends mere historical retelling; it encompasses profound discussions on ethics, interpersonal dynamics, governance, legal principles, and more, interwoven within its dialogues. Rather than altering or modernizing the narratives, she presents them as they are, contextualizing them for a contemporary audience without diluting their essence or characters. This commitment to authenticity is her forte. In her latest work, "Mahabharata Unravelling II," she offers more than a mere continuation of the first volume. Instead, she meticulously gathers and distills the scattered lessons scattered throughout the Mahabharata. Amidst the intricate web of its multi-layered narrative, these lessons often go unnoticed by readers engrossed in the sprawling saga.

Ganatra's contribution is invaluable as she skillfully organizes these teachings for easy comprehension by the lay reader. Within the book, Ganatra explores the profound discourses of revered figures such as Raja Dharma by Bhishma, Narada, Vidura Neeti by Vidura, and King Prahlad, along with the enlightening conversations like the Kaama Geeta, Vyadha Geeta, and the Yaksha Prashnas answered by Yudhishtira. She concludes with the compelling narrative of the Pandavas' ascent to Swarga, shedding light on why Yudhishtira was hailed as Dharmaraj despite his fallibilities. Additionally, the narrative unfolds intriguing tales imbued with moral teachings, such as Rishi Markandeya's poignant story of a meat-seller Dharmavyadha enlightening a Brahmin named Kaushika on righteous conduct. This consolidation represents the essence of the Mahabharata's wisdom, revealing the profound insights into statesmanship, ethics, and morality

MOUNTAIN PATH

embedded within its pages. To enhance the weight of the discourses by venerable figures like Bhishma and Vidura, she supplements them with similar teachings from other scriptures and tales. The author's elucidation of concepts like Aapada Dharma underscores the timelessness of Veda Vyasa's teachings, leaving readers awestruck by the relevance of ancient wisdom in today's world. Her skill lies in the thematic compilation of diverse discourses, presenting the meanings of various shlokas and stories in clear and accessible English without compromising their integrity. Ganatra refrains from modernizing or distorting meanings, instead simplifying them without sacrificing their essence. In her work, she meticulously extracts and elucidates the timeless wisdom embedded within these Dharma discourses. These lessons resonate profoundly even in contemporary society, perhaps now more than ever before.



U - ARUNACHALA RAMANA

M. Giridhar

Urgent is your mission, unenviable your task,
Unburdening useless urchins like me from *maya's* ugly grasp.
Universes shrink beneath your wide umbrella of compassion,
Unlimited love you give, your undeserving, untamed offspring.

Unprincipled vagabonds like me roam unchecked, uncouth,
Upon this planet, swayed by *maya's* sinfully sweet urging.
Unannounced, you pounced, undermining her strangle-hold on me,
Unbelievably unleashing my unrequited love for thee.

Unseen, you guide me through the labyrinth of illusions,
Unlocking doors to truth with a gentle, unseen touch.
Unwavering in your devotion, you stand as my eternal sentinel,
Under your watchful eye, this fool finds solace, strength, and grace.

Unfathomable is the depth of your boundless compassion,
Unmatched by the brightest stars in the vast cosmic sea.
Underneath your care, I rise above the worldly mire,
Unchained, I soar, my heart ablaze with love for thee.

Unending is your patience with my errant, wayward heart,
Understanding every folly, every stumble, every fall.
Untiringly you lift me, with a grace that's heaven-sent,
Untangling the web of doubt that keeps my spirit small.

Unbridled joy you bring to my once troubled mind,
Unfolding vistas of peace in your warm, loving embrace.
Unerring is your wisdom, guiding me to higher planes,
Under your tutelage, I find my rightful place.

Unseen forces once held me in a shadowed trance,
Undermined by your light, they scatter and disperse.
Unshackled now, I revel in the glory of your presence,
Unwavering in my devotion, my love an endless verse.

Undeniably, Ramana, you are the beacon in my darkest night,
Uplifting my spirit, igniting the flames of pure delight.
Unbroken is the bond that now connects our souls,
Unwavering and eternal, in Arunachala's light, I am made whole.

Advaita Primer

Part Ten

Analogies - III

M. GIRIDHAR

In the first article of this series, we examined why we should study Advaita Vedanta. In the subsequent articles, we have examined the concepts of *jīva*, nirguna (without attributes) Brahman, jagat (world), and *saguṇa* Brahman (*īśvara*). Advaita Vedanta is known for its emphasis on non-duality, asserting that the ultimate reality (Brahman) is devoid of distinctions and that the individual soul (Atman) is fundamentally one with it. Various analogies are employed within Advaita Vedanta to elucidate these profound metaphysical ideas.

We had initially examined the most-often quoted and cited analogy, which is the rope and the snake (*rajju-sarpa-nyaya*). The purpose of this analogy¹ is to explain the most important, yet most misunderstood, concept of superimposition (*adhyasa*), i.e., mistaking one thing for another due to ignorance (*avidyā*). Consciousness is the fundamental nature of reality. Just as a snake is mistakenly perceived as a rope, the world is a superimposition on attributeless consciousness. Without realizing this, one mistakenly attributes absolute reality to what is seen, heard, smelled, touched, and tasted, when in truth, they are merely perceptions and apparent modifications of consciousness.

A common illustration in Advaita Vedanta is the analogy of a person walking at night who mistakes a post (*stambha*) for a ghost (*nara*) due to darkness and imperfect eyesight. This analogy, called the Ghost in the Post (*stambha-nara-nyāya*), illustrates a key concept

¹ “When a rope is mistaken for a snake, the snake does not exist apart from the rope, yet the snake is superimposed on the rope due to ignorance.” *Vivekachudamani*, Verse 110

in Vedanta philosophy. When light arrives, the post is seen clearly, and the mistaken ghost disappears. Similarly, Brahman is the eternal, unchanging reality. Our ignorance (*avidyā*) overlays the changing world onto Brahman, akin to mistaking a ghost for a post. In doing so, we attribute more reality to the changing phenomena than to the changeless substratum, Brahman. This analogy illustrates the concept of superimposition (*adhyāsa*), where one thing is falsely perceived as another.²

The analogy of Silver and the Shell / The Silver and the Nacre (*śuktirajata-nyāya*) is a famous illustration of superimposition (*adhyāsa*). Just as we mistakenly perceive nacre as silver³, we mistakenly perceive the ever-changing world as our unchanging Self (Atman). This analogy encourages us to look beyond superficial appearances to discover the true reality. These analogies highlight the superimposition of the unreal (*mithyā*) on the real (Brahman). According to Advaita Vedanta, ignorance (*avidyā*) leads us to mistake our true Self for the body-mind-ego complex. Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) dispels this ignorance and reveals the true nature of reality.

The cause of this misperception is *avidyā*, or ignorance, arising in the mind. This is illustrated by the analogy of The Color in the Crystal (*sphatikavarna-nyāya*). Just as a clear crystal, which is pure and colorless, appears colored when placed next to a colored object, the attributeless Brahman seems to acquire the attributes of the limiting adjuncts (*upadhis*)⁴ such as the three bodies (gross, subtle, and causal) and the three states of experience (waking, dreaming, and deep sleep). This superimposition makes Brahman appear finite and limited. The ego, identifying with the finite body-mind complex, then seeks fulfillment through various worldly experiences, much like a

²“Avidya or nescience, consisting in the superimposition of the non-Self (*anātman*) on the Self (*ātman*) or of the attributes of the one on the other, is the root cause of all false notions.” *Brahma Sutra Bhasya*, 1.1.1

³“The mother-of-pearl appears as silver. Similarly, Brahman which is the Absolute and Blemishless Existence, Consciousness and Bliss being enveloped by ignorance, manifests itself as the creations in the world.” Adi Shankara in the debate between him and Mandana Misra.

⁴“Just as the scarlet color of the *japā* flower is falsely ascribed to the white crystal (*sphatika*) stone, so also this entering of the semblance of Life is falsely ascribed to Life.” *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Chapter 3.1.

clear crystal might mistakenly believe it is taking on the attributes of a wilting rose.

One of the essential qualities for spiritual progress is discrimination (*viveka*), which involves distinguishing between what is real (*sat*) and what is unreal (*asat*). The analogy of the Mirage and the Water (*mṛgatṛṣṇikā-nyāya*) is often used to illustrate this concept. This analogy highlights the illusory nature of the world and suggests that worldly pleasures are transient and ultimately lead to suffering.

Just as a mirage appears to be water but is merely an illusion caused by the sun's rays, the world appears to be a source of lasting happiness but is actually a projection of ignorance. When Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) reveals that the world is unreal and incapable of providing permanent peace and happiness, one ceases to fervently pursue its objects, thereby avoiding the inevitable pain and suffering that follows.

The mirage analogy⁵ serves to underscore the recognition that the sensual pleasures, name, and fame offered by the world are false promises. By understanding the transient nature of worldly desires, one is encouraged to seek lasting peace and liberation through Self-knowledge.

Just as the mirage illustrates the illusory nature of the material world, the Blue Sky Parable (*akashanilima-nyāya*) serves as another analogy used in Vedānta to convey how the reality can be misperceived. Just as the sky appears blue to the human eye, even though it lacks inherent color, our perception of the world around us is not always an accurate reflection of reality.⁶

In Vedānta, this analogy is frequently employed to underscore the illusory nature of the material world. While our senses and mental constructs shape how we perceive the world, its true essence is Brahman—the unchanging, eternal ultimate reality. Just as one comes to understand upon deeper reflection that the sky isn't truly

⁵ “These and Maya itself know thou to be the non-Self, and therefore unreal like the mirage in a desert.” *Vivekachudamani*, Verse 123.

⁶ “But for delusion there can be no connection of the Self – which is unattached, beyond activity and formless – with the objective world, as in the case of blueness etc., with reference to the sky. Therefore the universe does not exist apart from the Supreme Self; and the perception of its separateness is false like the qualities (of blueness etc., in the sky).” *Vivekachudamani*, v. 195, 235.

blue, a spiritual seeker, through profound contemplation and self-inquiry, realizes the true nature of the Self. This realization leads to the dissolution of false perceptions of separation and an appreciation of the non-dual nature of reality.

Another perspective on this parable compares Brahman to the clear, expansive sky. Like the sky, Brahman is infinite and omnipresent, stretching boundlessly in all directions. The sky remains unchanged and undivided, despite the varied shapes and objects—clouds, birds, planes—that appear within it. Similarly, Brahman remains undivided and unmodified, though the world of names and forms exists within it.

Just as the sky is pure and unaffected by whatever happens in it, Brahman is absolutely pure and untouched by the happenings of the world and all its activities. The sky cannot be tainted or polluted by anything; while smoke may temporarily cover a portion of it, the sky itself remains inherently pure. Similarly, sins and impurities may cloud our perception of Brahman, but they do not affect Brahman itself. Just as the sky serves as the unchanging backdrop for everything in space, Brahman serves as the pure, infinite, eternal backdrop of existence on which the entire phenomenal world operates.

Brahman is the underlying omnipresent reality that is non-dual. Brahman is present everywhere, even within the limitations of the body-mind complex. This is illustrated by the analogy of The Space and the Pot (*ghaṭākāśa-nyāya*).⁷ The same space that pervades the entire universe also exists inside a single pot. The space within the jar can seemingly be differentiated from the total space due to its being enclosed by the jar. However, the space is not affected by the partition created by the jar's shell. When the jar is broken, the space inside the jar merges with the total space, having undergone no change at any time. Just as space pervades both inside and outside a pot, Brahman is present everywhere, both within and outside the individual. This analogy emphasizes the omnipresence of Brahman.

The first step in recognizing Brahman that it is unattached to emotions and ego. The analogy of The Lotus-Leaf and the Water

⁷ “As, when a jar is broken, the space enclosed by it becomes palpably the limitless space, so when the apparent limitations are destroyed, the knower of Brahman verily becomes Brahman Itself.” *Vivekachudamani*, v. 565.

(*padmapatra-nyāya*) illustrates this concept effectively. Just as rainwater falls on a lotus leaf but rolls off without wetting or attaching to it, Brahman remains untainted by the countless worlds, experiences, phenomena, emotions, and thoughts that appear within its scope. Just as water does not wet the lotus leaf, so too do virtues and vices taint the Self. This highlights the unchanging and eternal nature of Brahman. The Air and the Scent (*vataḡandha-nyāya*) analogy also emphasizes the nature of Brahman as being unattached. Just as air carries scents without becoming scented itself, Brahman supports the universe without being affected by it.

The second step in understanding Brahman is that we recognize that duality is only seemingly real but is actually unreal. The underlying unity of reality is illustrated by the analogy of The Gold and the Ornaments (*kanakakundala-nyāya*). All things are ultimately made of consciousness. This analogy demonstrates that the various names and forms of this world are only seemingly different, for all are essentially nothing other than consciousness. Just as bracelets, bangles, and other items made of gold are not different from gold, so too the universe proceeding from the Imperishable (Brahman) is not different from it.⁸

Another illustrative analogy is that of the Clay and the Pot (*mṛttika-ghata-nyāya*). A potter takes a lump of clay (*mṛttika*) and molds it into a pot (*ghata*). Before it was shaped into a pot, it was clay. Even after assuming the form of a pot, its essence remains clay. The pot may change shape, break, or be reshaped, but fundamentally, it is always clay.⁹ Just as clay manifests as a pot, Brahman manifests as the universe and all its diverse forms, including the body-mind complex. Each form is inseparable from Brahman, just as the pot cannot exist apart from the clay. This analogy underscores the central teaching of Advaita Vedanta that Brahman alone is real, and the world of forms is perceived as real due to ignorance of Brahman, the ultimate reality from which all emerges. The universe is a manifestation of the

⁸ “That Reality which (though One) appears variously owing to delusion, taking on names and forms, attributes and changes, Itself always unchanged, like gold in its modifications - that Brahman art thou, meditate on this in thy mind.” *Vivekachudamani*, v. 262.

⁹ “All transformation has speech as its basis, and it is name only. Clay as such is real.” *Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.1.4.

unchanging Brahman, just as a pot is a form of clay. There is no true separation between them. Ignorance leads us to mistake the temporary forms (the pot) for ultimate reality (the clay).¹⁰

The analogy of The Wave and the Ocean (*samudrataranga-nyāya*) says that, although countless waves roll in the vast ocean, and each wave can be distinguished from the others and perceived separately, all are merely water and are not separate from the great ocean itself. In reality, all are one; the difference is only apparent. This analogy illustrates that all the innumerable apparent individuals (*jīvas*) in this universe, though perceived to be separate, are in reality made of the same substance as the singular ocean of consciousness, whose nature is existence-consciousness-fullness (*satchidananda*). In truth, their diversity or difference is only apparent, not actual.¹¹

The question of why the single Reality appears as duality is addressed by the analogy of The Sun and Its Reflections (*sūrya-bimba-nyāya*). This analogy demonstrates that non-duality is the one reality manifested through many forms. Just as there is only one sun illuminating all the worlds, yet it is reflected in various bodies of water such as ponds, tanks, and rivers, so too is there only one absolute existence, which is limitless consciousness (Brahman). The sun's reflections may vary, but the sun itself remains singular and unchanging. Similarly, Brahman, the absolute reality, is reflected through various limiting adjuncts (*upadhis*) as the myriad worlds and apparent individuals (*jīvas*). From this perspective, the universe is merely *pratibimba* (reflections) of the One Reality.¹²

¹⁰ “All modifications of clay, such as the jar, which are always accepted by the mind as real, are (in reality) nothing but clay. Similarly, this entire universe which is produced from the real Brahman, is Brahman Itself and nothing but That.” *Vivekachudamani*, v. 251.

¹¹ “Imagine that the whole cosmos is a vast ocean, and in that ocean there are waves. Some of the waves are huge and some of them are very small, maybe only ripples. But it is the same water. Similarly, there is one Existence, but we see diversity. This diversity, however, is only in name and form. It is not real. Underlying the diversity is one Existence, and that Existence is our own Self.” *Chandogya Upanishad*, Verse 7.25.1.

¹² “The wise man leaves aside the jar, the water and the reflection of the sun in it, and sees the self-luminous sun which illumines these three and is independent of them.” *Vivekachudamani*, v. 219.

The analogy of The Butter in the Milk further illustrates the omnipresence of Brahman. Just as butter or ghee is inherently present in every drop of milk, even though it is not immediately visible, Brahman pervades every aspect of existence, though it is imperceptible and attributeless. The potential for butter resides in the milk, and similarly, Brahman is the underlying reality of everything, concealed within worldly appearances and requiring the means of knowledge to be revealed. The focus on worldly pursuits often obscures the consciousness of Brahman, but it remains the essence of existence itself.¹³

The analogy of The Chandelier and the Electricity (*pradeepakshakti-nyāya*) illustrates Brahman as the basis of all existence. Just as a chandelier consists of bulbs of different colors and forms, but all the light originates from a single source of electricity, Brahman is the singular, non-dual reality that underlies the diversity of the universe. The light from the chandelier, though varied in hue, depends on the common source of electricity. Similarly, all forms and worlds, though diverse, depend on the limitless, non-dual consciousness (Brahman) for their existence.

The analogy of The Spider and the Web (*ūrnaṅābhi-nyāya*) illustrates Brahman as both the source of creation and the manifestation of the world.¹⁴ Just as a spider spins its web from its own silk and can retract it back into itself, the world is an extension of Brahman and is entirely one with it. The web, made from the spider's own substance, reflects the spider's essence. Similarly, the universe emerges from Brahman and is essentially Brahman manifesting in various forms. This analogy demonstrates that consciousness alone is real, and the world is a projection of this singular consciousness.¹⁵

Meditation on Brahman is central to Advaita Vedanta, as emphasized by the analogy of The Wasp and the Insects (*bhramara-kīta-nyāya*). The wasp, by stinging and thus poisoning the insects it brings to its hive, makes these insects continuously feel its presence. The insects, now

¹³ "Like the butter hidden in milk, the pure consciousness resides in every being that ought to be constantly churned out by the churning rod of the mind." *Amritabindu Upanishad*, v. 20.

¹⁴ *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad*, 6.1.

¹⁵ "Just as a spider projects its own web and then re-absorbs it into its own body, so also That One Reality projects this variegated universe and then absorbs it back into it." *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.1.7.

always aware of the wasp, eventually become one with it. This analogy illustrates that meditation on the oneness of reality, encapsulated in the statement *tat tvam asi* (You are That), leads to Self-realization. The *jīva* (individual self) ultimately recognizes that the perceived separation from the Whole is an illusion, and the true nature of reality is non-dual.¹⁶

Meditation is not about seeking to acquire anything new but about removing ignorance. The analogy of The Woman and the Necklace (*strī-mālā-nyāya*) is used here. A woman who forgets she is wearing her prized gold necklace around her neck searches frantically for it, only to be reminded by her husband that it is already with her. Similarly, the seeker searches for completeness, peace, and happiness through external pursuits and experiences, not realizing that these qualities are inherent within. Both gross experiences (such as pleasure or status) and subtle spiritual experiences are distinct from one's true self. The search for fulfillment in external objects is misguided, as one's true nature is already present, obscured only by ignorance.¹⁷

The analogy of The Seed and the Tree (*bīja-vṛkṣa-nyāya*) highlights the inter-connectedness and cyclical nature of existence. The seed is both the origin of the tree and the tree's source of future seeds, illustrating the interdependence between cause and effect. This cyclical relationship underscores that all phenomena are interconnected, with each form implying a corresponding source.

The futility of asking uninformed questions is exemplified by The Teeth of a Crow (*kākadanta-nyāya*). Searching for the teeth of a crow is pointless because crows do not have teeth. This analogy illustrates that questions such as "Why did a perfect God create an imperfect world?" are inherently flawed until one attains Self-knowledge and understands the true nature of God and existence. Such questions become irrelevant once the underlying reality of absolute consciousness is realized.

Maya, or illusion, obscures Brahman, as demonstrated by The Smoke and the Fire (*dhūma-agni-nyāya*). Just as smoke, though originating from fire, can obscure its light, maya veils the clear

¹⁶ "The meditator affirms his being Brahman and thus becomes Brahman actually." *Moksha Gita* 4.3.

¹⁷ "It is not new. It amounts to elimination of ignorance and nothing more." *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Talk 245.

recognition of Brahman and creates the illusion of diversity. Maya manifests within Brahman, presenting a world of apparent multiplicity, while Brahman remains the singular, unchanging reality. This analogy emphasizes that Brahman is the essence behind all forms and the foundation of the universe.

The Thread and the Necklace (*sūtra-mālā-nyāya*) analogy illustrates the unity underlying diversity. The beads of a necklace are strung together by a single, though invisible, thread. This thread, while not visible, binds and supports the beads. Similarly, Ishvara (God) is the unseen but essential reality that connects and sustains all forms and existence. This analogy emphasizes that Brahman is the fundamental reality that underpins the apparent diversity of the universe.

The *jīva*, or individual self, is contrasted with the body-mind complex through The Wearer and the Apparel (*vāsā-varaṇa-nyāya*) analogy. Just as a person changes their clothes while remaining unchanged, the *jīva* discards old bodies and assumes new ones, while remaining pure consciousness. This illustrates that the *jīva* remains unaffected by the changes and eventual death of the body.¹⁸

The Chameleon (*krkāḷasa-nyāya*) analogy underscores the non-dual nature of reality. A chameleon changes colors to blend with its environment, yet it remains the same chameleon. Those who only see the chameleon in one color may mistakenly believe it is only that color, while a broader observation reveals its true nature. This analogy illustrates that while the world presents various forms and dualities, the underlying reality (Brahman) remains singular and unchanging. The jnani perceives the oneness of Brahman despite the apparent diversity.

The Two Thorns (*dvāṅgulī-nyāya*) analogy is used to illustrate the removal of ignorance through knowledge. Just as one thorn can be used to remove another from the foot, ignorance and its negative effects are removed through the cultivation of wisdom. Dualities and misconceptions are transcended once Self-knowledge is attained.

The Two Birds (*dvau pakṣī*) analogy depicts the relationship between the *jīva* and Paramatman (Supreme Self). Two birds reside in the same tree; one indulges in the tree's fruits, while the other remains

¹⁸ “As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, similarly, the soul accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.” *Bhagavad Gita*, 2.22.

detached and content.¹⁹ This illustrates that while the individual self (*jīva*) is involved in worldly experiences, the true Self (Paramatman) remains detached and unaffected, observing the experiences from a state of completeness.²⁰

The Barber and His Son (*kṣaurika-putra-nyāya*) story highlights how attachment clouds judgment. It reflects a man's natural fondness for his own possessions, no matter how ugly or undesirable they may seem to others. The analogy originates from a story where a king asked his barber to find the most handsome boy in the kingdom. The barber, charmed by his own son's appearance — despite his deformities — presented him to the king. This illustrates how attachment to worldly things and experiences creates a distorted sense of self and reality, hindering one's ability to realize the true nature of Brahman.

The Stone and the Mud (*aśma-loṣṭa-nyāya*) analogy shows that value is subjective and dependent on context. Mud is soft compared to stone but hard compared to cotton, demonstrating that objects are value-neutral and their perceived worth is relative to what they are compared against. This emphasizes that value judgments are inherently subjective.

The Worms and the Poison (*viṣa-krīmi-nyāya*) analogy illustrates the relativity of value and happiness. Worms thriving in poisonous substances find contentment in their environment, which would be detrimental to others. This highlights that what is valued or desired is relative and influenced by one's ignorance of a higher truth.

The Crow and the Fruit (*kākātāla-nyāya*) analogy cautions against mistaking coincidental events for causation. The simultaneous occurrence of a crow landing on a branch and a fruit falling is merely coincidental, not causal. This reminds us to avoid jumping to conclusions based on observed correlations and to recognize the spontaneity and unpredictability of life.

The Star in the Sky (*arundhati-nyāya*) analogy demonstrates the gradual approach to Self-knowledge. A faint star is identified by first

¹⁹ “Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on without eating.” *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.1.

²⁰ “On the same tree man sits grieving, immersed, bewildered by his own impotence (*anīśā*). But when he sees the other lord (*īśā*) content and knows his glory, then his grief passes away.” *Svetāsvatara Upanishad*, 4.7.

pointing to a brighter one, symbolizing the step-by-step evolution from physical practices to the realization of Brahman. This analogy highlights the method of superimposition and negation (*adhyāropa-apavāda*) used in Vedānta to reveal the true nature of reality.

Just as the post is mistaken for a ghost, we often mistake our true self for the body-mind complex and the world due to ignorance (*avidyā*). We chase after sensory pleasures, similar to a person fleeing from an imagined ghost. With the dawn of Self-knowledge, the light reveals that the dualistic, ever-changing world exists inseparably from Consciousness. Consciousness has always been the singular, unchanging reality, just as the post remains a post. Our fears and efforts arise from ignorance, just as the person's fear of the ghost stems from misunderstanding.²¹ Thus, this analogy illustrates how ignorance creates illusions and obscures the true nature of the self. Removing ignorance dispels the error and unveils Brahman, much like light reveals the post. It underscores the central tenet of Advaita that Brahman alone is real, and the ever-changing world is a transient appearance born of *avidyā*. The essence is Brahman without a second.²² The illusion of being separate from Brahman leads to the common human pursuit of prominence, wealth, beauty, love, and recognition, as individuals attempt to quell the existential angst of feeling small and alone in the vast universe.

Vedānta teaches that our mind projects its own limitations onto the world, creating the illusion of separateness from Brahman. The need for Self-knowledge is emphasized. In our ignorance (*avidyā*), we often mistake the transient forms (*mithyā*) for reality (*satyam*), just as one might mistake the pot as something distinct from the clay and assume that the pot has an existence independent from the clay. When the light of Self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) dawns, we realize that our true nature is not the body-mind complex but Atman, the Self. Just as recognizing the pot as clay dispels the illusion of the pot's separateness, realizing our identity with Brahman dispels the notion of our separation from the ultimate reality. Consciousness, like clay, remains the singular,

²¹ "He who knows that this body is the city of Brahman, and that Brahman dwells in it, does not grieve." *Chandogya Upanishad*, 8.1.1.

²² "Brahman is the only reality, the world is illusory, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and the individual self." *Vivekachudamani*, v. 20.

unchanging reality, even as the forms it assumes, like the pot, appear and disappear. All our fears and desires stem from ignorance, mirroring the mistaken belief in the pot's separation from clay. This analogy vividly illustrates how ignorance creates illusion and conceals the true nature of the Self. Removing ignorance reveals Brahman, just as recognizing the pot as clay reveals the clay's inherent nature.

We summarize various analogies. When we lack correct knowledge, we might mistake a rope for a snake or a post for a ghost.²³ Similarly, the lack of knowledge of Brahman, which is pure consciousness, leads us to perceive consciousness as the universe. Just as all gold ornaments are essentially gold,²⁴ all objects born of Brahman are always Brahman. The deluded might mistake a rope for a snake, nacre for silver,²⁵ mud for a pot, thread for cloth, gold for an earring, water for a wave, a tree trunk for a person at night, a mirage for water, wood for a house, and iron for a sword. Similarly, the ignorant person mistakes the Atman for the body. Just as we falsely imagine a blue color in the formless void of the sky, we falsely imagine the entire universe in Brahman. Waves, foam and tides are expressions of water,²⁶ and different copper vessels are expressions of copper. Similarly, all appearances in the universe are expressions of Brahman. Clay, in a particular form, is named and perceived as a pot, and thread as cloth.²⁷ Brahman is understood as the universe similarly. Pot and cloth are just names given to clay and thread in specific forms. When these names and forms are dropped, only clay and thread remain. Likewise, Brahman is recognized by dropping the names and forms in the universe and seeing everyone as Self.²⁸ Sea

²³ "The real nature of the rope being known, the appearance of the snake no longer persists; so the substratum being known, the phenomenal world disappears completely." *Aparokshanubhuti*, v. 96.

²⁴ "Just as a thing made of gold ever has the nature of gold, so also a being born of Brahman has always the nature of Brahman." *Aparokshanubhuti*, v. 51.

²⁵ "Just as a rope is imagined to be a snake and a nacre to be a piece of silver, so is the Atman determined to be the body by an ignorant person." *Aparokshanubhuti*, v. 70.

²⁶ "What was denoted by the term 'water' alone before the manifestation of foam as such is denoted by the term 'foam' after its manifestation, though really foam is nothing but water." *Aitareya Upanishad Bhasya*, 1.1.

²⁷ "Just as earth is thought of as a jar (made of it) and threads as a cloth, so is Atman." *Aparokshanubhuti*, v. 71.

²⁸ "He sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings." *Isavasyopanishad*, 6.

water processed into salt solidifies, and when dissolved back into the sea, it loses its name and form. Similarly, a realized soul loses its name and form and dissolves into Brahman²⁹ and no more doubts remain.³⁰

Brahman appears limited just like space in a pot.³¹ The sun reflects in different waters and may appear stable or unstable, clean or unclean, depending on the water's nature. The sun itself remains unaffected, shining with its natural splendor. Similarly, Brahman, though appearing in different ways due to its association with different adjuncts, remains unaffected and shines forth in its true nature.³² It is the inherent quality of fire to be hot, give light etc., and similarly, existence, consciousness, bliss, permanence, and purity are the inherent properties of Atman/Brahman.

These analogies aid in making abstract concepts more accessible, allowing individuals to grasp the essence of Advaita Vedanta and its assertion of the ultimate unity underlying the apparent diversity of the world. The Silkworm and the Cocoon (*aṭavī-vṛkṣa-nyāya*) analogy represents the journey from entrapment to liberation. The silkworm's cocoon, created from its own threads, symbolizes the ego and ignorance that entraps us. Just as the silkworm can break free from the cocoon, we too can liberate ourselves by recognizing our true nature as Brahman. This analogy emphasizes the importance of overcoming ignorance and attachment to transcend the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*) and realize our true nature as pure consciousness.

²⁹ "A person who has realized that he is the Self (Brahman) becomes one with Brahman, just like salt dissolved in water." *Sata Sloki*, v.46.

³⁰ "When that Self, which is both high, as the cause and low as the effect, is realized as "I am this", then the knot of the heart is cut, all doubts are dispelled and all accumulated karma is destroyed." *Mundakopanishad*, 2.2.8.

³¹ "The *jīvas* appear as many, different from one another and limited beings, only because of the limiting adjunct, the intellect, just as the space inside a pot, though not different from the total infinite space, appears to be limited by the size of the pot." *Kathopanishad*, 5.9 and 5.10.

³² "Brahman is not at all affected by the nature of the reflecting medium, the mind, and ever remains the same and immutable. *Sata Sloki*, v. 51. "Just as the sun, the eye of the whole world, is not tainted by the defects of the creatures on earth or by the defects in the external world, so also, the one Self, the indweller of all beings, is not affected by the sorrows of the world, because the Self is transcendental." *Kathopanishad*, 2.2.11.

Analogies play a crucial role in Advaita Vedanta by simplifying complex metaphysical concepts, making them accessible to the seeker. Since Advaita's core teaching revolves around the non-dual nature of reality — the oneness of Brahman (the ultimate reality) and the Atman (the Self) — analogies help illustrate how this abstract truth can be understood by the human mind.

Analogies like these aid in dissolving intellectual doubts by bridging the gap between the tangible and intangible, leading to a clearer comprehension of the ultimate truth. They provide a concrete framework for contemplating the abstract nature of Advaita's teachings, such as the oneness of the self (Atman) and Brahman. By using familiar objects and experiences, analogies make these subtle, often paradoxical ideas more relatable and easier to grasp.

However, our aim in Advaita is not merely to understand the philosophy intellectually. The ultimate goal is liberation (*moksha*) — to escape *samsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, which is driven by ignorance (*avidya*) and attachment. In this journey, analogies serve as stepping stones, but they must lead beyond intellectual comprehension to direct experience.

True realization occurs when the seemingly separate self, which identifies with the ego and body-mind complex, recognizes itself as non-different from the limitless, eternal, and boundless Self (Brahman). This is not just an intellectual conclusion but a profound experiential shift. The analogies used in Advaita Vedanta, while helpful, must eventually be transcended, allowing the seeker to move from understanding to direct experience — the dissolution of the ego and the recognition of one's true nature as the infinite consciousness.

Grace is essential in understanding Advaita Vedanta because the realization of non-duality transcends intellectual effort. While study and contemplation are necessary, ultimate knowledge is revealed only when the mind is purified and the ego's hold is loosened. Grace opens the heart and mind to the truth that cannot be grasped through reasoning alone.

Thus, while understanding Advaita through analogies is possible and extremely valuable, true realization can only occur through the grace of our Guru, Arunachala Ramana. ▲

Advaita Primer

Importance of Dharma

Part Eleven

M. GIRIDHAR

Introduction

In the first article of this series, we explored the importance of studying *Advaita Vedanta*. In subsequent articles, we examined key concepts, including *jīva* (individual self), *nirguṇa Brahman* (Brahman without attributes), *jagat* (world), and *saguṇa Brahman* (īśvara or Brahman with attributes). *Advaita Vedanta* emphasizes non-duality, asserting that the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) is devoid of distinctions and that the individual soul (*Ātman*) is fundamentally one with it. To clarify these metaphysical ideas, the previous articles used various analogies within *Advaita Vedanta*. In this eleventh article, we delve into the concept of *dharma*, its scriptural roots, relevance in modern life, and role as a bridge between worldly engagement and spiritual transcendence.

In Advaita Vedanta, where the ultimate goal is realizing the Self as Brahman—an infinite, indivisible essence—one might question the significance of *dharma*, which belongs to the relative world of duality, a realm that Advaita seeks to transcend. However, for seekers on the path to self-realization, *dharma* serves as both a compass and a vehicle. It aligns personal conduct with universal order, purifies the mind, and cultivates virtues essential for liberation (*moksha*).

The word *dharma* carries profound connotations, evoking reverence, wonder, and even awe among those steeped in the Vedic tradition or influenced by its philosophy. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of *shruti*, *smṛti*, *purāṇa*, and *itihāsa*, *dharma* is more than just a concept; it is the cornerstone of life itself in the Vedic worldview.

The word *dharma* comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning “to hold” or “to sustain.” This etymology captures its essence: *dharma* sustains individuals, society, and the universe. It is often translated as “righteousness,” but this term scarcely conveys its complexity. *Dharma* encompasses duties, laws, ethics, and cosmic principles that govern existence. In its grandest interpretation, *dharma* is the law, the cosmic principle underlying our perception, experience, and response to the universe.

In the Vedic worldview, the universe operates on the principle of *ṛta* — a natural order that sustains harmony. *Dharma* manifests as *ṛta* in action, maintaining balance in the moral and physical realms. The *Ṛg Veda* extols *ṛta* as the foundation of truth and justice, indicating that *dharma* is not merely human-made but intrinsic to existence itself.

Types of Dharma

Dharma is contextual and varies based on age, role, and circumstances. The scriptures delineate four types of *dharma*:

- 1. Samanya Dharma (universal values):** Truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, and self-restraint.
- 2. Vishesa Dharma (specific duties):** Based on individual roles, such as those of a teacher, parent, or leader.
- 3. Ashrama Dharma:** Duties corresponding to life stages—student, householder, hermit, and renunciate.
- 4. Yuga Dharma:** Duties that adapt to the era or context.

The scriptures further elaborate on *dharma* through injunctions and prohibitions (*śāstra-vidhi* and *śāstra-pratiśedha*). The *Bhagavad Gita* provides a framework for understanding and practicing *dharma*, particularly emphasizing self-discipline, righteousness, and selfless action. The text famously states that even a little adherence to one’s *dharma* can protect one from great fear and suffering (*Bhagavad Gita* 2:40). In the *Karma Mimamsa Sutras*, Jaimini Rishi begins his inquiry into *dharma* with the proposition that it is the essence of scripturally prescribed actions. He underscores the need for meticulous study and understanding of the Vedic injunctions to determine what constitutes righteous action.

Dharma as a Universal Principle

The essential *dharma* of anything is that which makes it what it is, without which it ceases to exist. For humans, this essential *dharma* is the Self, the unchanging essence underlying physical, mental, and intellectual expressions. Swami Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati, the revered sage of Kanchi, described *dharma* as beneficent action. He viewed it as the guiding principle that redirects human pursuits from transient sensual pleasures toward eternal bliss and societal harmony. He likens *dharma* to a pole in pole-vaulting—an instrument that helps one transcend ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*), ultimately losing its utility once the goal is achieved but extremely important till the goal is attained.

Adi Shankaracharya, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, elucidates the twofold nature of *dharma* (धर्मः) as taught in the Vedas: *pravrtti* (प्रवृत्तिः) and *nivrtti* (निवृत्तिः). *pravrtti* refers to outward action, the dynamic engagement with the world, while *nivrtti* signifies inward contemplation, the pursuit of inner spiritual peace. Together, they form a balanced philosophy aimed at achieving both socio-economic welfare, *abhyudaya* (अभ्युदयः) and ultimate spiritual liberation, *nihsreyasa* (निःश्रेयसम्) for all beings.

Adi Shankaracharya emphasizes that both action and meditation are indispensable for holistic human well-being. When society leans excessively towards one — *pravrtti* or *nivrtti* — the balance is disrupted, leading to societal or individual ill-health. Through *pravrtti*, we build a welfare-oriented society by enhancing economic, political, and social systems. *nivrtti*, on the other hand, nurtures a life of values and inner fulfillment, deriving strength from humanity's spiritual dimension. Modern civilization, however, has overly prioritized *pravrtti*, neglecting the inward journey of *nivrtti*. This imbalance leads to stress, value erosion, and escalating violence.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer aptly observed: “When men achieve security and welfare, now that they have solved all other problems, they become a problem to themselves.” This insight resonates with Shankaracharya's teachings. The unending pursuit of wealth, power, and sensory pleasure creates societal unrest, underscoring the need for *nivrtti*. To counteract this, Shankaracharya underscores the importance of *prāṇinām sāksāt-abhyudaya-niḥśrē yasa-hē tu—a*

life philosophy that integrates social welfare with spiritual freedom, harmonizing *pravrtti* and *nivrtti*. This dual ideology is not restricted to any one group; its universality encompasses all human beings (*praninan*, प्राणिनां), making it relevant across cultures and societies.

By synthesizing *abhyudaya* (material well-being) and *nishshreyasa* (spiritual liberation), Shankaracharya proposes a model for total human development. While *pravrtti* ensures material well-being, *nivrtti* safeguards humanity from becoming mechanized and devoid of deeper purpose. He highlights the natural human inclination toward *pravrtti*, observable even in children who are instinctively active and curious. Therefore, *pravrtti* does not require formal instruction. However, *nivrtti*—the cultivation of inner peace, harmony, and the ability to love and coexist—requires conscious training and effort.

The *Bhagavad Gita* masterfully bridges these two dimensions, teaching how *nivrtti* can inspire and purify *pravrtti*. *nivrtti* helps stabilize and refine our thoughts, guiding action with wisdom and compassion. It enriches human life, ensuring that progress in the external world is matched by inner growth. This integration prevents humanity from losing its essence to materialism. The *Gita* reminds us that true well-being lies in the harmonious development of both the outer and inner dimensions of life. Thus, the *Gita* serves as a guide for achieving this balance, fostering a world where action is informed by contemplation, and progress is grounded in peace.

Advaita Vedanta and Karma

Advaita Vedanta, unique in its approach to karma, teaches that the purpose of human birth is not to chase worldly aspirations but to subtly renounce them. Shankaracharya advises performing karma (actions) selflessly, without attachment to their fruits, fostering introspection and spiritual growth. This perspective transforms one's understanding of *dharma*, encouraging a life enriched by virtues and higher purpose. *Dharma*, as envisioned in *Advaita*, adapts to circumstances while remaining anchored in universal principles.

In *Advaita*, the ultimate truth is *nirguna Brahman* (formless reality), beyond the distinctions of right and wrong. However, this realization requires *adhikaritva*—fitness or qualification—cultivated through a disciplined life grounded in *dharma*. The mind is the instrument

through which self-knowledge is attained. A mind clouded by desires, anger, or delusion cannot perceive the subtleties of *Advaita's* teachings. *Dharma* purifies the mind by fostering virtues like truthfulness, non-attachment, humility, and compassion.

It offers a succinct formula for practicing *dharma*: “Speak the truth in a pleasing manner. Do not speak unpleasant truths, nor pleasant falsehoods. This is eternal *dharma*.” Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna during the *Karna Parva* (69.46–53) of the *Mahabharata* expand on this theme, explaining the intricate relationship between truth and *dharma*. Krishna tells Arjuna that truth and *dharma* are often interwoven but context-sensitive. He narrates stories like that of Rishi Kaushika, who reveals the location of innocent travelers to dacoits, to illustrate that truth in practice can be complex. Absolute truth may not always align with the welfare of the world; sometimes, a lie that saves an innocent life is more virtuous than a truth that causes harm.

This teaching showcases the nuanced understanding of *dharma* needed in difficult situations. Krishna makes it clear that the preservation of life and justice is paramount, and actions must be weighed carefully in light of their consequences. *Dharma* is about protection and sustenance, and actions aligned with *dharma* uphold and support societal stability.

For instance, practicing *ahimsa* (non-violence) minimizes harm to others and reduces mental turbulence caused by hatred and aggression. However, *dharma* requires applying *ahimsa* judiciously, prioritizing societal welfare. For example, neutralizing a terrorist to protect society is considered *dharmic*. The *Karna Parva* of the *Mahabharata* states: “*Dharma* is that which upholds society and ensures its smooth functioning. Whatever sustains and fulfills these objectives is *dharma*.” Vyasa’s assertion, “*Dharma* destroys those who destroy it and protects those who protect it,” underscores its dual role as both guide and governing force.

Dharma and Inner Purity

The *Tirukkural* emphasizes inner purity as the essence of *dharma*, dismissing mere outward conformity. This perspective highlights *dharma's* adaptability to changing circumstances, ensuring it remains relevant while maintaining its eternal essence.

The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes *karma yoga*—selfless action performed without attachment to results. In this context, *dharma* becomes the guiding principle for action. By fulfilling one’s duties with equanimity, one transcends egoic tendencies and moves closer to self-realization.

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi in the first three verses of *Upadesa Saram* puts it succinctly as, “Karma must ever yield its proper fruit, For thus it is ordained by God, Himself, Supreme Creator. Then is Karma God? No, for it is itself insentient. Of Karma the results must pass away, Yet it leaves seeds which in their turn will sprout And throw the actor back into the flood Of Karma’s ocean. Karma cannot save. But acts performed without attachment’s urge And solely for the service of the Lord Will cleanse the mind and indicate the way Which leads at length unto the final goal.”

Dharma in Modern Life

In contemporary terms, *dharma* encompasses principles of sustainability, justice, and ethical responsibility. It serves as a guiding framework for addressing ecological crises, fostering social equity, and promoting spiritual well-being.

Modern innovations, from artificial intelligence to genetic engineering, raise complex ethical questions. *Dharma* provides a framework for evaluating these advancements. For instance, ensuring that AI systems promote inclusivity and fairness aligns with the *dharmic* principle of non-harming. Similarly, genetic modifications should be guided by compassion and benefit to humanity rather than profit motives.

Indian philosophy reveres nature as sacred, reflecting *dharma*’s ecological dimension. Practices like tree planting, reducing waste, and conserving water are expressions of *prakṛti-dharma* (duty toward nature). The modern environmental movement echoes this ancient wisdom, advocating for sustainable living as essential to planetary harmony.

Dharma teaches that no individual exists in isolation. Upholding justice and supporting the underprivileged are integral to *dharma*. Initiatives that promote education, healthcare, and social equality resonate with the principle of *loka sangraha*—working for the collective good.

Balancing Personal Aspirations and Collective Responsibilities

One of the most intricate aspects of *dharma* is balancing personal aspirations with collective responsibilities. Modern life often presents conflicting priorities. Should a corporate leader prioritize shareholder profits or environmental sustainability? Should a parent choose career advancement or time with their children? *Dharma* provides the discernment to navigate these dilemmas by emphasizing balance and contextual appropriateness.

For instance, the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*), a cornerstone of *dharma*, resonates deeply in today's movements for peace and animal rights. Similarly, the concept of selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) inspires modern leaders and change-makers to prioritize the collective good over personal gain.

Vidura, in the *Mahabharata*, stresses the importance of the greater good over individual desires. He advises that one should sacrifice personal interests, even loved ones, for the well-being of the community, and, in turn, sacrifice the community for the protection of the nation. At the highest level, one must always protect their ātma (innermost self), even if it means giving up everything else. This teaching highlights that conscience is the supreme guide, and preserving a guiltless, peaceful conscience is the ultimate goal. A pure conscience brings inner peace, achieved only by adhering to *dharma*—the moral law that guides action.

Dharma's Ultimate Goal: Moksha

The metaphysical aspect of *dharma* is explored in the *Upanishads*, which identify it with the ultimate truth and reality. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* declares: “*There is nothing higher than dharma.*” This profound statement underscores *dharma's* role as the ultimate regulator of life and the cosmos. The *Katha Upanishad* acknowledges the subtlety and depth of *dharma*, describing it as difficult to comprehend and accessible only to those who tread the path of wisdom and self-realization. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna proclaims: “Whenever there is a decline in dharma and a rise in adharma, I incarnate to restore balance.” This verse highlights the divine commitment to upholding *dharma* as a fundamental cosmic principle. It assures humanity of divine intervention when the balance of righteousness is disturbed.

Despite its profound significance, following *dharma* does not guarantee immediate happiness or material success. This truth is vividly illustrated by the contrasting fates of Duryodhana and Yudhishtira at the conclusion of the *Mahabharata* war. As Duryodhana lay dying, he mocked the Pandavas, asserting that despite being on the wrong side of *dharma*, he had lived a life of luxury and indulgence. Conversely, Yudhishtira, who upheld *dharma* unwaveringly, was burdened with the task of ruling a kingdom shattered by loss, filled with widows and orphans. Yudhishtira's adherence to *dharma* did not bring him instant joy or triumph, but it granted him solace. His peace stemmed from the knowledge that he had acted righteously, even at great personal cost. He repeatedly advised, "Strive to understand the nuances of dharma. Strive to uphold dharma. Through dharma, uplift yourself and live peacefully." This reflects the *Mahabharata*'s emphasis on the long-term rewards of *dharma*, even when immediate outcomes may be painful.

Detachment from the outcome, a principle deeply rooted in *Advaita*, serves as a guide for individuals seeking spiritual liberation and emotional equanimity. This idea emphasizes the importance of acting with sincerity and effort while simultaneously letting go of expectations regarding the results. The tradition offers profound insights into how detachment can lead to a life free from suffering, ego, and emotional instability. The idea of detachment from the outcome is predominantly framed through the concept of *nishkama karma*, or selfless action. This philosophy resonates deeply with Krishna's teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.47), where he counsels Arjuna: "You have a right to perform your dharma, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions."

This verse serves as a guiding principle for living a life of purpose without the bondage of expectation. Krishna highlights several key points. First is the right to action, wherein one must fulfill their responsibilities and duties. Though duties may be performed with utmost care and dedication, there should be no entitlement to the results, as the outcome is not under one's control and should not be the primary focus. Thus, there should be non-identification with the results; one should not see themselves as the sole cause of success or failure, recognizing that outcomes are influenced by multiple factors. Even when desired outcomes are not obtained, detachment does not

mean passivity or avoidance of responsibility; rather, it involves action without attachment to results.

Krishna emphasizes the importance of focused effort, free from attachment to results. He advises Arjuna not to perceive himself as the sole cause of the results, nor to avoid action due to fear of failure. Krishna's analogy of the gardener is particularly insightful: a gardener may plant seeds and nurture them, but the harvest ultimately depends on factors beyond their control, such as weather and divine will. This teaching highlights a critical balance: action rooted in responsibility, tempered by detachment from outcomes.

Draupadi's wisdom in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata* further reinforces the importance of perseverance amidst uncertainty. She emphasizes that while effort is indispensable, the results of any endeavor are influenced by two additional factors: fate and the grace of God. Draupadi teaches that individuals must diligently perform their *dharma*, regardless of the uncertainty surrounding the outcomes. Her perspective underscores that the essence of *dharma* lies in effort, not results. Success or failure, favorable or unfavorable outcomes, are ultimately governed by a combination of past karma and divine will. By remaining steadfast in their duties but detached from the outcomes, individuals align themselves with the principles of *dharma*.

Kunti adds depth to this concept by acknowledging the unpredictability of results. She observes that the consequences of actions become apparent only after the deeds are performed. Therefore, wise individuals engage in their duties with determination, understanding that success and failure are fleeting. Kunti encourages resilience, equanimity, and faith in eventual success, embodying the essence of *dharma* as a journey of consistent effort and inner balance.

Krishna's teaching of *nishkama karma* is central to the path of *karma yoga*, the yoga of action. It teaches that when actions are performed with complete dedication and sincerity, but without attachment to personal gain, the mind becomes free from the dualities of success and failure, pleasure and pain. This path not only purifies the individual but also aligns them with a higher cosmic order, where actions are seen as offerings to the divine.

Furthermore, *nishkama karma* challenges the ego. The ego thrives on the desire for recognition, success, and the fruits of one's labor.

MOUNTAIN PATH

By renouncing the outcome, one dissolves the ego and can act with humility and dedication to duty (*dharma*). This concept is also linked with *bhakti yoga* (the yoga of devotion), where actions are performed as a form of devotion to God, with no desire for personal rewards.

As Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi states in Talk 58 in the books, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*,

Even if interpreted as *varnasrama* dharma the significance is only this much. Such dharma bears fruit only when done selflessly. That is, one must realise that he is not the doer, but that he is only a tool of some Higher Power. Let the Higher Power do what is inevitable and let me act only according to its dictates. The actions are not mine. Therefore the result of the actions cannot be mine. If one thinks and acts so, where is the trouble? Be it *varnasrama* dharma or *loukika* dharma (worldly activities), it is immaterial. Finally, it amounts to this: *sva* = *atmanah* (of the Self); *para* = *anaatmanah* (of the non-self). Such doubts are natural. The orthodox interpretation cannot be reconciled with the life of a modern man obliged to work for his livelihood in different capacities.

A man from Pondy interposed: *sarva dharmaan parityajya maamekam saranam vraja* (leaving all duties, surrender to me only).

Sri Bhagavan: (All) *sarva* is only *anaatmanah* (of the non-Self); the emphasis is on *ekam* (only). To the man who has a strong hold of the *eka* (one), where are the dharmas? It means, “Be sunk in the Self.””

Dharma: A Path to Lasting Peace and Fulfillment

Dharma is a guiding force that may not always yield immediate happiness but offers lasting inner peace and sustains societal harmony. Whether through Krishna’s teachings, Yudhishtira’s reflections, or the wisdom of Draupadi and Kunti, all inspire individuals to act with integrity, perseverance, and detachment from results. This understanding of *dharma* leads to enduring fulfillment, even amidst life’s uncertainties.

Dharma is not merely a religious or philosophical concept; it is the very essence of existence. It integrates the individual, society, and the cosmos into a harmonious whole, offering a blueprint for living a life of meaning and purpose. Whether through the profound insights of the *Upanishads*, the ethical teachings of the *Mahabharata*, or the practical wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*, dharma continues to inspire and guide humanity toward its highest potential.

By understanding and practicing dharma, individuals can transcend the limitations of ignorance, align with the eternal truths of existence, and contribute to the flourishing of all life. In the words of the sages, “Dharma protects those who protect it.” Let us, therefore, honor and uphold this timeless principle, ensuring its legacy for generations to come.

Shankara places significant emphasis on non-attachment (*vairagya*) as a key aspect of the path to enlightenment. He often underscores that attachment is the root of suffering. The reality of suffering (*dukkha*) is inherent to life, and this suffering arises from attachment and craving—the desire for pleasure, the avoidance of pain, and the longing for permanence in an impermanent world. The cessation of this suffering can only be accomplished by eliminating attachment through the proper practice of dharma. The *Dhammapada* states, “From attachment springs grief, from attachment springs fear; for him who is wholly free from attachment there is no grief, whence then fear?”

This idea is echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.62-64): “While contemplating the objects of the senses, one develops attachment to them. Attachment leads to desire, and from desire arises anger. Anger leads to clouding of judgment, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed; and when the intellect is destroyed, one is ruined. But one who controls the mind, and is free from attachment and aversion, even while using the objects of the senses, attains the Grace of God.”

Similarly, the cultivation of equanimity (*upekkha* in Buddhism) balances detachment with compassion and wisdom. Equanimity is a central concept in both Advaita and Buddhism. These mental states are cultivated to create a balanced mind—one that responds to both joy and sorrow with calm and poise.

Equanimity goes beyond mere emotional neutrality; it involves a deep understanding that all beings are subject to the laws of impermanence and karma. With this wisdom, one can engage fully in life without becoming overwhelmed by the highs and lows of results or circumstances. Detachment, therefore, is not about disengaging from the world but about engaging without being ensnared by expectations.

The focus on duty (*dharma*) and selflessness (*nishkama karma*) encourages acting with devotion and responsibility while surrendering

the fruits of one's labor to a higher power. It emphasizes that every individual must act according to their role in life, but without selfish desires or expectations.

The emphasis on non-attachment stresses the elimination of craving and desire in all forms, teaching that freedom from attachment leads to the cessation of suffering and ultimately to enlightenment. This practice involves a constant awareness of the impermanence of life and disciplined mental training to cultivate equanimity and mindfulness.

Detachment is not the renunciation of action but the renunciation of the ego's attachment to the results of action. The individual learns to move through life with a sense of peace, acting out of duty or compassion, but free from the turmoil that arises when outcomes do not meet expectations.

In a practical sense, detachment from the outcome offers numerous benefits for modern life. By focusing on the process rather than the results, individuals become less susceptible to disappointment, frustration, and stress. Success and failure are seen as part of a larger journey, not as defining moments, fostering emotional resilience.

When attention shifts from the results to the task at hand, the mind becomes more present, allowing for greater efficiency and effectiveness in action. This enhanced focus leads to improved outcomes. By relinquishing the desire for personal gain or recognition, one's actions become more selfless and aligned with a higher purpose, whether that be spiritual growth or serving others.

The practice of detachment cultivates a sense of freedom—freedom from suffering, from the need for validation, and from the anxieties that stem from uncertainty. This detachment does not lead to indifference but rather to active engagement with life in a way that is harmonious, compassionate, and liberated from the binding force of expectation.

Conclusions

Dharma is the heartbeat of Indian philosophy, a living principle that adapts to the needs of time and context while remaining rooted in eternal truths. In Advaita Vedanta, dharma serves as the preparatory ground for the ultimate realization of oneness.

The concept of dharma, though ancient, holds timeless relevance. In a world marked by rapid technological advancement, social

inequities, and environmental degradation, dharma offers a moral compass. Living a dharmic life requires mindfulness, discernment, and a commitment to self-improvement. This includes mindful decision-making, reflecting on the broader implications of our actions, performing small acts of kindness, embracing interconnectedness, practicing gratitude, and cultivating contentment.

By harmonizing outer action with inner growth, dharma provides a framework for a prosperous, just, and spiritually fulfilling world. While dharma governs life within the realm of duality, it ultimately points beyond itself. By living a dharmic life, one transcends selfishness, cultivates wisdom, and prepares for the direct realization of Brahman. This progression is beautifully encapsulated in the Upanishadic verse: “Dharma leads to purity, purity to meditation, and meditation to liberation.” and “As the river flows to the ocean, surrendering its identity upon merging, so does the seeker practicing dharma transcend individuality, dissolving into the infinite.”

Let us live with integrity, selflessness, and a commitment to the greater good, allowing dharma to guide us toward the highest realization of our being. In embracing dharma, we cultivate harmony within ourselves and in the world around us. Whether navigating life’s challenges or seeking spiritual awakening, dharma lights the path, ensuring that every step we take aligns with the rhythm of the cosmos. The discrimination, dispassion and detachment that we learn from Bhagavan’s life can enable us to see that happiness does not come from outside and thus we learn to derive joy from the one thing nobody can ever take from us — our own Self.

PHOTO

Advaita Primer

Importance of Dharma - 2

Part Twelve

M. GIRIDHAR

Introduction

In the first article of this series, we explored the importance of studying *Advaita Vedanta*. In subsequent articles, we examined key concepts, including *jīva* (individual self), *nirguṇa Brahman* (Brahman without attributes), *jagat* (world), and *saguṇa Brahman* (*īśvara* or Brahman with attributes) and how the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) is devoid of distinctions and that the individual soul (*ātman*) is fundamentally one with it. In this article, we delve into the concept of *dharma* and its importance.

One of the most intricate aspects of dharma is balancing personal aspirations with collective responsibilities. Modern life often presents conflicting priorities. Should a corporate leader prioritize shareholder profits or environmental sustainability? Should a parent choose career advancement or time with their children? **Dharma** provides the discernment to navigate these dilemmas by emphasizing balance and contextual appropriateness.

For instance, the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*), a cornerstone of *dharma*, resonates deeply in today's movements for peace and animal rights. Similarly, the concept of selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) inspires modern leaders and change-makers to prioritize the collective good over personal gain.

Vidura, in the *Mahabharata*, stresses the importance of the greater good over individual desires. He advises that one should sacrifice personal interests, even loved ones, for the well-being of the community, and, in turn, sacrifice the community for the protection

of the nation. At the highest level, one must always protect their *ātma* (innermost self), even if it means giving up everything else. This teaching highlights that conscience is the supreme guide, and preserving a guiltless, peaceful conscience is the ultimate goal. A pure conscience brings inner peace, achieved only by adhering to *dharma*—the moral law that guides action.

Dharma's Ultimate Goal: Moksha

The metaphysical aspect of dharma is explored in the *Upanishads*, which identify it with the ultimate truth and reality. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* declares: “There is nothing higher than dharma.” This profound statement underscores dharma’s role as the ultimate regulator of life and the cosmos. The *Katha Upanishad* acknowledges the subtlety and depth of dharma, describing it as difficult to comprehend and accessible only to those who tread the path of wisdom and self-realization. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna proclaims: “Whenever there is a decline in dharma and a rise in adharma, I incarnate to restore balance.” This verse highlights the divine commitment to upholding dharma as a fundamental cosmic principle. It assures humanity of divine intervention when the balance of righteousness is disturbed.

Despite its profound significance, following dharma does not guarantee immediate happiness or material success. This truth is vividly illustrated by the contrasting fates of Duryodhana and Yudhishtira at the conclusion of the *Mahabharata* war. As Duryodhana lay dying, he mocked the Pandavas, asserting that despite being on the wrong side of *dharma*, he had lived a life of luxury and indulgence. Conversely, Yudhishtira, who upheld dharma unwaveringly, was burdened with the task of ruling a kingdom shattered by loss, filled with widows and orphans. Yudhishtira’s adherence to *dharma* did not bring him instant joy or triumph, but it granted him solace. His peace stemmed from the knowledge that he had acted righteously, even at great personal cost. He repeatedly advised, “Strive to understand the nuances of dharma. Strive to uphold dharma. Through dharma, uplift yourself and live peacefully.” This reflects the *Mahabharata*’s emphasis on the long-term rewards of dharma, even when immediate outcomes may be painful.

Detachment from the outcome, a principle deeply rooted in *Advaita*, serves as a guide for individuals seeking spiritual liberation and emotional equanimity. This idea emphasizes the importance of acting with sincerity and effort while simultaneously letting go of expectations regarding the results. The tradition offers profound insights into how detachment can lead to a life free from suffering, ego, and emotional instability. The idea of detachment from the outcome is predominantly framed through the concept of *nishkama karma*, or selfless action. This philosophy resonates deeply with Krishna's teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.47), where he counsels Arjuna: "You have a right to perform your *dharma*, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions."

This verse serves as a guiding principle for living a life of purpose without the bondage of expectation. Krishna highlights several key points. First is the right to action, wherein one must fulfill their responsibilities and duties. Though duties may be performed with utmost care and dedication, there should be no entitlement to the results, as the outcome is not under one's control and should not be the primary focus. Thus, there should be non-identification with the results; one should not see themselves as the sole cause of success or failure, recognizing that outcomes are influenced by multiple factors. Even when desired outcomes are not obtained, detachment does not mean passivity or avoidance of responsibility; rather, it involves action without attachment to results.

Krishna emphasizes the importance of focused effort, free from attachment to results. He advises Arjuna not to perceive himself as the sole cause of the results, nor to avoid action due to fear of failure. Krishna's analogy of the gardener is particularly insightful: a gardener may plant seeds and nurture them, but the harvest ultimately depends on factors beyond their control, such as weather and divine will. This teaching highlights a critical balance: action rooted in responsibility, tempered by detachment from outcomes.

Draupadi's wisdom in the *vana parva* of the *Mahabharata* further reinforces the importance of perseverance amidst uncertainty. She emphasizes that while effort is indispensable, the results of any endeavor are influenced by two additional factors: fate and the grace of God. Draupadi teaches that individuals must diligently perform

their *dharma*, regardless of the uncertainty surrounding the outcomes. Her perspective underscores that the essence of *dharma* lies in effort, not results. Success or failure, favorable or unfavorable outcomes, are ultimately governed by a combination of past karma and divine will. By remaining steadfast in their duties but detached from the outcomes, individuals align themselves with the principles of *dharma*.

Kunti adds depth to this concept by acknowledging the unpredictability of results. She observes that the consequences of actions become apparent only after the deeds are performed. Therefore, wise individuals engage in their duties with determination, understanding that success and failure are fleeting. Kunti encourages resilience, equanimity, and faith in eventual success, embodying the essence of *dharma* as a journey of consistent effort and inner balance.

Krishna's teaching of *nishkama karma* is central to the path of *karma yoga*, the yoga of action. It teaches that when actions are performed with complete dedication and sincerity, but without attachment to personal gain, the mind becomes free from the dualities of success and failure, pleasure and pain. This path not only purifies the individual but also aligns them with a higher cosmic order, where actions are seen as offerings to the divine.

Furthermore, *nishkama karma* challenges the ego. The ego thrives on the desire for recognition, success, and the fruits of one's labor. By renouncing the outcome, one dissolves the ego and can act with humility and dedication to duty (*dharma*). This concept is also linked with *bhakti yoga* (the yoga of devotion), where actions are performed as a form of devotion to God, with no desire for personal rewards.

As Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi states in Talk 58 in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*,

Even if interpreted as *varnasrama* dharma the significance is only this much. Such dharma bears fruit only when done selflessly. That is, one must realise that he is not the doer, but that he is only a tool of some Higher Power. Let the Higher Power do what is inevitable and let me act only according to its dictates. The actions are not mine. Therefore the result of the actions cannot be mine. If one thinks and acts so, where is the trouble? Be it *varnasrama* dharma or *loukika* dharma (worldly activities), it is immaterial. Finally, it amounts to this: *sva* =

atmanah (of the Self); para = *anaatmanah* (of the non-self). Such doubts are natural. The orthodox interpretation cannot be reconciled with the life of a modern man obliged to work for his livelihood in different capacities.

A man from Pondy interposed: *sarva dharmaan parityajya maamekam saranam vraja* (leaving all duties, surrender to me only).

Sri Bhagavan: (All) *sarva* is only *anaatmanah* (of the non-Self); the emphasis is on *ekam* (only). To the man who has a strong hold of the *eka* (one), where are the dharmas? It means, “Be sunk in the Self.”

Dharma: A Path to Lasting Peace and Fulfillment

Dharma is a guiding force that may not always yield immediate happiness but offers lasting inner peace and sustains societal harmony. Whether through Krishna’s teachings, Yudhishtira’s reflections, or the wisdom of Draupadi and Kunti, all inspire individuals to act with integrity, perseverance, and detachment from results. This understanding of dharma leads to enduring fulfillment, even amidst life’s uncertainties.

Dharma is not merely a religious or philosophical concept; it is the very essence of existence. It integrates the individual, society, and the cosmos into a harmonious whole, offering a blueprint for living a life of meaning and purpose. Whether through the profound insights of the *Upanishads*, the ethical teachings of the *Mahabharata*, or the practical wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*, dharma continues to inspire and guide humanity toward its highest potential.

By understanding and practicing dharma, individuals can transcend the limitations of ignorance, align with the eternal truths of existence, and contribute to the flourishing of all life. In the words of the sages, “Dharma protects those who protect it.” Let us, therefore, honor and uphold this timeless principle, ensuring its legacy for generations to come.

Shankara places significant emphasis on non-attachment (*vairagya*) as a key aspect of the path to enlightenment. He often underscores that attachment is the root of suffering. The reality of suffering (*dukkha*) is inherent to life, and this suffering arises from attachment and craving—the desire for pleasure, the avoidance of pain, and the

longing for permanence in an impermanent world. The cessation of this suffering can only be accomplished by eliminating attachment through the proper practice of dharma.

This idea is echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2.62-64) wherein it is shown that attachment leads to desire and the only way to be free from attachment is to control the mind. Similarly, the cultivation of equanimity balances detachment with compassion and wisdom. Equanimity goes beyond mere emotional neutrality; it involves a deep understanding that all beings are subject to the laws of impermanence and karma. With this wisdom, one can engage fully in life without becoming overwhelmed by the highs and lows of results or circumstances. Detachment, therefore, is not about disengaging from the world but about engaging without being ensnared by expectations.

The focus on duty (dharma) and selflessness (*nishkama karma*) encourages acting with devotion and responsibility while surrendering the fruits of one's labor to a higher power. It emphasizes that every individual must act according to their role in life, but without selfish desires or expectations.

The emphasis on non-attachment stresses the elimination of craving and desire in all forms, teaching that freedom from attachment leads to the cessation of suffering and ultimately to enlightenment. This practice involves a constant awareness of the impermanence of life and disciplined mental training to cultivate equanimity and mindfulness.

Detachment is not the renunciation of action but the renunciation of the ego's attachment to the results of action. The individual learns to move through life with a sense of peace, acting out of duty or compassion, but free from the turmoil that arises when outcomes do not meet expectations. This inner stability becomes a source of enduring strength and clarity.

In a practical sense, detachment from the outcome offers numerous benefits for modern life. By focusing on the process rather than the results, individuals become less susceptible to disappointment, frustration, and stress. Success and failure are seen as part of a larger journey, not as defining moments, fostering emotional resilience. Such a mind-set nurtures patience and allows one to persevere even when progress seems slow or setbacks arise.

When attention shifts from the results to the task at hand, the mind becomes more present, allowing for greater efficiency and effectiveness in action. This enhanced focus leads to improved outcomes. By relinquishing the desire for personal gain or recognition, one's actions become more selfless and aligned with a higher purpose, whether that be spiritual growth or serving others.

The practice of detachment cultivates a sense of freedom — freedom from suffering, from the need for validation, and from the anxieties that stem from uncertainty. This detachment does not lead to indifference but rather to active engagement with life in a way that is harmonious, compassionate, and liberated from the binding force of expectation. It empowers the individual to live with authenticity and inner contentment, irrespective of circumstances.

Conclusions

Dharma is the heartbeat of Indian philosophy, a living principle that adapts to the needs of time and context while remaining rooted in eternal truths. In *Advaita Vedanta*, dharma serves as the preparatory ground for the ultimate realization of oneness.

The concept of dharma, though ancient, holds timeless relevance. By harmonizing outer action with inner growth, dharma provides a framework for a prosperous, just, and spiritually fulfilling world. While dharma governs life within the realm of duality, it ultimately points beyond itself. This progression is beautifully encapsulated in the Upanishadic verse: “Dharma leads to purity, purity to meditation, and meditation to liberation. As the river flows to the ocean, surrendering its identity upon merging, so does the seeker practicing dharma transcend individuality, dissolving into the infinite.”

Let us live with integrity, selflessness, and a commitment to the greater good, allowing dharma to guide us toward the highest realization of our being. In embracing dharma, we cultivate harmony within ourselves and in the world around us. Whether navigating life's challenges or seeking spiritual awakening, dharma lights the path, ensuring that every step we take aligns with the rhythm of the cosmos. The discrimination, dispassion and detachment that we learn from Bhagavan's life can enable us to see that happiness does not come from outside, and thus we learn to derive joy from the one thing nobody can ever take from us — our own Self.