

Principal Tenets of Advaita Vedanta–II

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Self and consciousness

According to the Advaitin self is consciousness. But this thought is not acceptable to the Nyāya-Vaisheshika school. According to this school the self is a substance in which consciousness or knowledge inheres as a quality. A substance and a quality are two distinct reals. Hence self and consciousness are different. The self can be there without consciousness inherent in it. The self is said to be the inherent cause of consciousness. The conjunction between self and *manas* (*ātmamanasamyogah*) is the other cause of consciousness inhering accidentally in the self. It is a firm conviction of the school that in deep dreamless sleep (*sushupti*) consciousness does not occur at all in the self since there is absence of another efficient cause of consciousness, namely, contact between *manas* and the sense of touch. But the self is necessarily there in deep sleep. Self is an eternal substance according to Nyāya-Vaisheshika thinkers.

The above thought of the school does not satisfy the Advaitin. His basic argument in this regard is that absence of consciousness necessarily presupposes consciousness. Thus there can never be the absence of consciousness in deep dreamless sleep. After having a deep dreamless sleep one says, 'I slept well.' This proves beyond doubt that the presence of consciousness in deep dreamless sleep is undeniable. Moreover, the Nyāya-Vaisheshika account

of origin of consciousness is not also tenable. When self, *manas* and the sense of touch are all devoid of consciousness, it is hard to understand how their conjunction can give rise to consciousness. So the Advaitin tells us very convincingly that the self is consciousness, or in other words, self is of the nature of consciousness (*Chit*).

That the self is of the nature of consciousness is undeniable, as the Advaitin asserts. But the nature of consciousness has to be discussed in this context. Consciousness which is the self is pure, otherwise it cannot be the reality. Consciousness is pure in the sense that it is not intentional. The point needs a brief explanation.

The Nyāya-Vaisheshika school holds that consciousness is necessarily intentional or in other words, consciousness is always that of some object such as a jar or a pot. It argues that in all cases of knowing, we know some object. This becomes evident from the fact that whenever one says that one knows, the obvious question raised is: What do you know? Thus this is a firm conviction of the Naiyāyika that knowledge or consciousness is necessarily intentional. The naiyāyikas, by and large, do not, therefore, accept the idea of pure consciousness.

The Advaitin offers a good solution to the problem by drawing a distinction between Pure Knowledge or Consciousness and ordinary knowledge or consciousness. He points out that the above-mentioned idea

of intentionality holds good with regard to ordinary knowledge, but ordinary knowledge or consciousness presupposes pure consciousness or consciousness as such. Since self is consciousness in its very essence, there can be ordinary knowledge or consciousness. There can be water without waves but waves cannot be there where there is no water. Pure consciousness thus, being reality, is one without a second but ordinary knowledge of things is of various kinds. A lamp for example reveals various things. Cognitions of various things are different resulting in different activities, but the lamp revealing things is always the same. Pure consciousness may be compared to the lamp, it is but one though there are different cognitions. For the *naiyāyika* there are only different cognitions and those are all cognitions of different objects. But there is no idea of Pure Consciousness in the system.

One point should also be stated in this context. Epistemology is a very important branch of philosophy. It deals with cognition, its origin and other relevant questions. Pure Consciousness falls obviously outside the scope of Epistemology that actually takes into account various problems as regards ordinary cognitions. Advaita Epistemology for example is a study of six *pramānas* and the *pramās* derived from them. But Advaita Epistemology has got nothing to do with Pure Consciousness that being the reality is eternal. Eternity is the other name of reality.

Ordinary knowledge or cognitions belong to the individuals. A person for example knows a jar, another person at the same time knows a pot and so on. But Pure Consciousness is not at all ascribable to an individual. Pure Consciousness is one without a second, it is indivisible by any means. It is therefore Pure in its being. It is

beyond all limits. Pure Consciousness is pure in the sense that it is not at all a state of consciousness.

We have so far discussed the Advaita thought that the reality is Pure Consciousness. Here we may use the term *Sat* to mean reality and the term *Chit* to mean Pure Consciousness. The point to be considered is that according to the Advaitin *Sat* is *Chit*, *Chit* is *Sat*. That is to say, Pure Consciousness is Pure Existence, Pure Existence is Pure Consciousness. That is to say, Pure Consciousness is existence itself and it is not existent. The point needs a brief explanation. An ordinary cognition is existent just as a jar is existent. What is meant here is that existence is not the essence of an ordinary cognition, the ordinary cognition is actually brought into existence through some *pramāna*. Existence is not the essence of the jar, it is likewise brought into existence by the potter by using his tools. But this does not hold good with regard to Pure Consciousness. Existence is its essence. It is necessarily there. It can never be brought into existence. It is eternally there and whatever is there presupposes it. Hence we are told that Pure Consciousness or *Chit* is Existence—*Sat* and *vice versa*. Pure Existence is Pure Consciousness. Ordinary cognition occurs at times or it happens to be there under suitable occasions. Its existence is therefore contingent being occasional. Thus ordinary cognitions may or may not be there. But Pure Consciousness never ceases to be there. To say that Pure Consciousness does not exist is to presuppose it.

In this context one point has to be mentioned. The *naiyāyika* argues that absence of knowledge is proved by the mundane statements ‘I do not know’, ‘I am ignorant’, etc. These statements mean simply the absence of knowledge. But this

argument falls flat upon the Advaitin. He points out that absolute absence of knowledge is not proved here at all. The naiyāyika himself admits that knowledge of absence presupposes knowledge of what is absent and also knowledge of where there is absence (*pratiyogin* and *anuyogin*). Knowledge of absence of knowledge thus presupposes knowledge (*pratiyogin*) and also self (*anuyogin*). Hence absolute absence of knowledge or consciousness is not a fact at all. Thus the Advaitin tells us very convincingly that Pure Consciousness (*Chit*) is Pure Existence or Existence absolute. Pure Consciousness is Self. Self is therefore the Reality beyond all questions.

Can the self be denied at all? No, this denial is untenable. According to the Nihilist (Mādhyamika) School in Buddhism, nothing is real or in other words, everything is devoid of essence—*sarvam shunyam shunyam*. But even the other three major schools of Buddhism discard Nihilism. The Advaitin finds Nihilism unsound altogether. As we have already said, while denying the self we do presuppose the self. Self can by no means be denied at all without getting involved into self-contradiction. To say my mother is a barren woman is obviously a self-contradiction. Similarly, to say ‘there is no self’ is absolutely self-contradictory. Here we are again reminded of Descartes. We can doubt everything but we contradict ourselves when we doubt whether we are there at all. This self is Pure Consciousness. This self is Pure Existence. Existence constitutes the essence of self. The very idea of a barren mother ensures her absolute non-existence. The very idea of self as Pure Consciousness, on the other hand, guarantees its Pure Existence.

After having said that the self being Pure Consciousness is the reality, the Advaita is now in a position to discard the rival

theories of self. The No-self theory of the Nihilist Buddhist has already been discarded. The materialist theory that the physical body is the self is much criticized. The most vital ground is that the body is subject to change and if thus the self is constantly changing, memory will not be possible. But for admission of a permanent self, we can hardly offer a good explanation how memory takes place at all. Another materialist theory that the senses are the self is also rejected. If the senses be the self then there will be many selves in one body and this is not at all admissible. Moreover the senses being material are also changing and then again memory remains inexplicable. The vital forces being material cannot also be the self because a yogin can have control over the vital forces. Moreover the vital forces being material cannot be self.

Manas or *antahkarana* is said to be the empirical self in Advaita Vedanta. As we have already seen, the Self being Pure Consciousness is transcendental in nature. Hence no attribute or feature is ascribable to the self. According to the Advaitin, all the features including doership and enjoyership are ascribable to *manas* or *antahkarana*, as we shall see later on.

The Nyāya-Vaisheshika school believes in an eternal self over and above the body, the senses, etc. The worst difficulty in Nyāya-Vaisheshika thought regarding self is that consciousness is said to be an accidental quality of self. According to the system consciousness occurs in self under suitable occasions. But we have already shown that self can never be imagined as devoid of consciousness. Consciousness is the essence of self, as we have already said.

Moreover the naiyāyika regards the self as knower, doer and enjoyer. This contradicts the transcendental nature of self. Self is beyond all changes and modifications,

hence none of these features should be ascribed to self. Self having these features undergoes changes and modifications and therefore it ceases to be eternal. *Manas* or *antahkarana* being non-self can be knower, doer and enjoyer. How? We shall see later on. Naiyāyika believes in plurality of self for reasons based on the false ideas of its doership, enjoyership, etc. Hence the Nyāya thought in this regard also is not appreciated by the Advaitin.

The Sāmkhya-yoga system believes in the transcendental nature (*aparināmi*) of self. Yet enjoyership is ascribed to self. Moreover Sāmkhya believes in plurality of self for certain defective reasons that are at variance with the whole system. Sāmkhya admits that the self (*Purusha*) is eternal. Yet on the ground of birth, death, etc. Sāmkhya infers plurality of self. Thus its position does not stand to reason and does also involve self-contradiction. The Advaita position in this regard is of course free from contradiction. The Self is transcendental in its nature and the Self is not therefore knower of any object, Self is Pure Consciousness itself. Self is not a doer of any deed, right or wrong. Self is not enjoyer of the fruit of actions, as the Sāmkhya thinker wrongly holds.

Pure Bliss

As we have already discussed, Self is *Sat-Chit*—Pure Existence-Pure Consciousness. Now the Advaitin says, Self is *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*, i.e., Pure Existence-Pure Consciousness-Pure Bliss. Here we have to say a few words about nature of Self as Pure Bliss. What is very important to note is that the reality according to Advaita Vedanta is devoid of all the three differences mentioned earlier. Self does not admit of *svagata bheda* or internal distinction. Hence it is meaningless to make any distinction:

Pure Existence is Pure Consciousness, Pure Consciousness is Pure Bliss and *vice versa*. Pure Bliss should not be confused with pleasure ascribable to *manas* or *antahkarana* which is the empirical self, as we have already said. Bliss is pure in the sense that unlike pleasure it is absolutely free from suffering of any kind. Bliss being reality is eternal, awaiting no source for its origin. All pleasures, on the contrary, are non-eternal, dependent upon objects for their origin and are never benign. All pleasures are enjoyed by the empirical self or *manas*. The Advaitin says that the Self is Pure Bliss, and therefore self-preservation is the most fundamental instinct in beings. Once upon a time the most primitive theory of self was its identification with one's child—*Putrātmavāda*. When the hut for example caught fire, a father first tried to save his child but at last saved himself from being burnt having left his child in the burning hut. This fact proves beyond doubt that self-preservation is the basic instinct and this indicates the truth that the self is Pure Bliss. Then comes the point of race-preservation. Since one loves oneself, one therefore loves to multiply oneself through the offspring. The Advaitin tells us that during deep sleep one has some enjoyment of Pure Bliss which is one's Self. In order to justify his position in this regard the Advaitin refers to the following Vedic statement—*Ānando Brahmeti vyajānāt*.

As we have mentioned several times, Self, according to Advaita Vedanta, is Pure Existence-Pure Consciousness-Pure Bliss. The other name of Self (*Ātman*) is Brahman. Knowledge of absolute oneness of Self and Brahman is wisdom, wisdom ensures absolute freedom called *moksha*. Self or Brahman is of the nature of absolute freedom. The point is to realize this truth.

With reference to the above, one point needs clarification. Nyāya-Vaisheshika system accepts Theism or it believes in the existence of God or the Supreme Self. The system draws a distinction between the individual self and the Supreme Self. As the Yoga system is theistic, it believes in God and regards Him as the Special Self (*Purushavisheshā*) as distinguished from the countless ordinary selves. But the Advaitin demolishes such distinction, as the famous Vedic statement declares absolute oneness between self and Brahman—*Ayamātmā Brahma*. If there be Brahman over and above self, Brahman will be limited and this is an impossibility. The Advaitin therefore concludes that there is absolute non-difference (*abheda*) between Self and Brahman.

One major theistic argument advanced by the naiyāyika is the creatorship of the world. God or the Supreme Self is inferred as the creator of the world since God alone is capable of creating by virtue of His omniscience and all power, etc. But the Advaitin does not accept this theistic argument. As we shall see very soon, the world as non-self is falsely projected on Brahman and therefore creatorship of God is obviously false. One major argument for the existence of God put forward by the Yoga system is that One, who alone is capable of making union between Purusha and Prakriti possible, is God or the Special Self. But this argument of the yoga thinker is rejected. The basic difficulty in the dualistic thought still persists, the Advaitin feels. Obviously objections are raised against the Advaita idea of absolute oneness of Brahman and self. Limitations of self in different ways are quite apprehensible. In that case it is not at all wise to abolish the difference between self and Brahman. The Advaita solution in this regard is quite significant, as we shall see very soon. The basic point to be noted

here is that the Reality is Self or Brahman and that all kinds of distinctions mentioned already are inadmissible. The Reality is Pure in all possible senses.

Real or unreal

We now propose to discuss a question of profound philosophical significance. Well, the Advaitin has left no stone unturned to establish the truth that Self or Brahman happens to be the only Reality. But the world of diversity, doership and enjoyership of self—all these are objects of our mundane experience. How can the Advaitin explain away all these truths? His answer in this regard is urgently called for and cannot be postponed. The Advaitin advances his famous theory of falsity in this connection. It is a firm conviction of the Advaita thinkers that the material world of diversity being non-self cannot be real in the sense already discussed. The world is non-eternal and changing. Eternity, on the other hand, is the other name of reality. Hence the changing and non-eternal world cannot be real in the long run. The world unlike Self is not the reality. Can the world then be an absolute naught (*Asat*) like the barren mother? No, this is an impossibility. A barren mother can never be there and will never be there. The very idea involving self-contradiction thus convinces us that this is absolutely unreal. But the Advaitin is not a nihilist. He does not hold at all that the world is unreal. To think that the world is both real and unreal (*sadasat*) cannot also be admitted. It is obvious that the very idea is self-contradictory. What is this world then?

The Advaitin tells us that the material world of diversity is only a false appearance superimposed on Self or Brahman. For the reasons just stated, the world is neither real nor unreal, nor is it both real and unreal. The world is false like the illusory snake that is

projected upon a rope. That the world is presented to the senses of individuals—man, animal, insect, etc. is undeniable. It cannot therefore be unreal. But the world is not real either. The world is not both real and unreal. Hence it is false or in other words, it is a presented unreality (*mithyā*). Falsity of the world is often explained with the example of an illusory snake. A rope is erroneously perceived as a snake. The rope cannot get transformed (*parināma*) into the snake that is being seen. The rope only appears (*vivarta*) as a snake. Or in other words, the rope falsely appears as a snake. Now the snake perceived cannot be real as it disappears immediately. The snake is not also unreal like the barren mother as it appears at least for a moment. It is meaningless to suppose that the snake is both real and unreal. Hence the snake is a presented unreality or a mere false appearance (*mithyā*). The rope is the *adhishthāna* upon which the snake is superimposed (*adhyasta*).

The rope-snake illusion highlights the Advaita explanation of world at large. Self or Brahman as Pure Existence-Pure Consciousness-Pure Bliss cannot get transformed at all in any way. Self only appears as non-self, that is, the world of diversity. World is not real since it is changing. The world is not unreal since it appears. The world cannot be both real and unreal. The world is thus a false appearance superimposed upon Self or Brahman.

It is, however, a firm conviction of the Advaitin that man is in the dark about the real nature of self or about the oneness of self and Brahman. Nescience or *ajnāna* is the basic cause of superimposition (*adhyāsa*). Nescience projects the false appearance. But a question has to be answered in this context. According to the Naiyāyika, nescience (*ajnāna*) is a mere

negation of knowledge, hence it is not capable of any kind of projection. How is *ajnāna* proved? One is directly aware of one's ignorance—'I am ignorant' or 'I know nothing'. These prove beyond doubt the absence of knowledge. Hence nescience is an absence of knowledge.

The Advaitin refutes the above-mentioned Nyāya position. He argues that *ajnāna* cannot be a mere absence of knowledge. The naiyāyika himself admits that the cognition of absence of knowledge is there and such a cognition presupposes cognition which is its counter-entity (*pratiyogin*). Cognition of absence of cognition does also presuppose the self. Thus it is proved beyond doubt that nescience is positive (*bhāvarupam*) in nature. This does not, of course, mean that nescience is eternal. Nescience is beginningless (*anādi*) but it has an end (*sānta*). We are told that non-eternity of nescience ensures its removal; through its removal one can realize one's absolute identity with Brahman and that leads to liberation. As has already been indicated, liberation is the very nature of Self or Brahman. There is thus no question of attainment of something that has not already been there. Liberation is attainment of something that is already there.

Nescience is, however, positive in nature and it has got two functions, namely, concealment (*āvarana*) and projection (*vikshepa*). Nescience prevents one from knowing the truth and also projects what is false or a presented unreality. A person, for example, is not only in the dark about the rope but he is also aware of the illusory snake which is a presented unreality. Similarly, beginningless nescience prevents beings from knowing the Self or Brahman and also projects the world which is a presented unreality.

Liberation

One point should be made clear here. According to Advaita Metaphysics, Self or Brahman is the ultimate reality, the world superimposed on it is empirically real (*vyāvahārika sat*) and the illusory snake is only a phenomenal reality (*prātibhāsika sat*). Advaitin does not talk here in terms of hallucination; he, on the contrary, talks about an illusion. The world which is non-self (*anātmā*) is projected upon Self or Brahman because of nescience. Nescience ceases to be there when there is Self-realization or realization of identity between Self and Brahman. Self-realization is the path for liberation which is the very essence of self. According to the Advaitin, *artha*, *kāma* and even *dharma*—the three needs of life—have at best the empirical value. Liberation is the highest good. Of course liberation is not attained but it is realized.

Finally, wealth and physical pleasure have relative value (*preya*). *Dharma* or ritualistic sacrifice leading to heavenly pleasure does also have relative value (*preya*). Those can at best yield pleasure mixed with pain. But liberation alone is the highest or absolute good (*shreya*). Attainment of liberation is the attainment of what is always there as nature of self. Advaitin prescribes the path of wisdom for liberation. Wisdom consists in realization of absolute oneness of self with Brahman. Brahman is essentially free from all attributes. But since the world is a false appearance, its creatorship is also false and it is ascribed to Brahman by the ignorant person. For a realized self Brahman or Self is not at all the creator of world. A realized self looks upon the world as a mere false appearance superimposed on Brahman. A realized self is indeed the salt of the earth whose path should be followed by the aspirant. Without self-realization, liberation is an impossibility. ■

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little glimpse of it. All our disciplines, spiritual practices and selfless work are meant for purifying our mind and heart so that the inner light gets revealed.

One of the great disciples of Sri Chaitanya Dev said: In the firmament of my heart the eternal sun is always shining, there is no morning, no evening, no noon. That is the experience of a man of the highest realization. The sun may appear to be clouded and when it so appears, we must do something so that we may pierce through the cloud and see the sun. All spiritual practices are meant for that.

Swami Turiyananda used to say: *Bhagavat sharanam, Bhagavat sharanam, Bhagavat sharanam*—remember the Lord, remember the Lord, think of the Lord, think of the Lord. Instead of allowing the mind to wander from one useless thing to another, let us fill up all those vacant moments of our life with the thought of God. An hour or two of spiritual practice will not do much good. We must maintain a little of that mood throughout the day, or at least as much as we can. Physical breakfast may nourish us for some time, but the spiritual breakfast of daily meditation will nourish us for ever. ■

* This is a slightly edited version of Swami Yatiswarananda's talk before the monastics at the Hollywood Vedanta Society. Swami Yatiswarananda, who received initiation from Swami Brahmananda, was Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission till his demise in 1966.