



## **ADVAITA EPISTEMOLOGY: Perception - Veridical and Erroneous**

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### ***Lecture Four***

*These lectures were delivered in Michaelmas Term (Oct.-Dec. 2003). They are intended to introduce the basic tenets of Advaita tracing it from the period of Gaudapada through Sankara to the present day Advaitins. They examine the philosophical subtleties of Advaita, its enrichment through productive dialogue with other schools and also its impact on the society. These are designed for students in Indian Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies and do not require in-depth understanding of Indian scriptures. However, they could also be of particular interest to advanced students of Indology and Sanskrit studies.*

### **The Mechanism of Perception:**

Cognition, whether veridical or illusory, has self-luminous (svaprakasa) consciousness as its substratum. It is verily through this consciousness that anything may be known. Advaita contends that empirical knowledge evidently involves the use of sense organs. Now, what is the nature and function of these sense organs (indriyas), which are involved in empirical knowledge?

According to Buddhists, the eye-sense is the most important sense organ and is understood as the external orb (the golaka). Mimamsakas think that the sense of sight refers to a peculiar power or potency connected with the golaka (the indriya-sakti), which is inherent in the orb. This potency is put forth on the basis that people with an apparently undamaged organ of sight may nevertheless be unable to perceive. There is yet another view that presents an indriya as a subtle substance that is located in the orb, while not being a power. Advaita seems to accept this view, for it asserts that indriyas are subtle (unperceivable) and known through inference alone.<sup>1</sup>

The question may arise as to why an indriya should be a subtle material substance. Advaita recognizes the existence of five material elements: ether, air, fire, water and

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<sup>1</sup>. The inference may be formed like this: Every action requires a karana - major premise. Perception is an action – minor premise, so perception requires an instrument and the indriya is that instrument involved in perception.

earth, said to have originated from five corresponding subtle material substances. Each element possesses a special quality (asadharana-dharma). That of ether is sound and that of air, fire, water, and earth are touch, colour, taste and smell, respectively. They are all insentient (jada) as well as effects (karya). Originating from the elements (bhutas), the sense organs restrict themselves to their asadharana-dharmas. In other words, the auditory sense functions only in the field of sounds just as the olfactory sense operates solely in the sphere of smells, etc. Hence, to each pramana corresponds a particular operating field. This is known as pramana-vyavastha. No one, indeed, can know everything with the help of a single indriya. Every indriya has the capacity to reach its own object<sup>2</sup> and it is thus technically referred to as prapyakari.

If indriyas do not need to establish a contact with the objects that are within their reach, then the perception of objects that are no longer present becomes logically possible. This, however, is contradicted by ordinary experiences wherein sense organs do establish a contact with their respective objects.

### **Mind or Antahkarana:**

There are three distinct views regarding the nature of the mind in Indian philosophical traditions. The Nyaya-Vaisheshika school views the mind as a material substance (dravya). The Samkhya school opines that it is a real entity, a true evolute of nature (prakrti).

For the Advaita school, mind is material but not real. It is not an independent reality. The only entity that exists independently is the Self or Brahman. The entire world is a product of maya, which does not enjoy any independence; it entirely depends on Brahman for its existence. Maya, along with its effects, are unreal in the sense that they are not independently real. Because maya depends on Brahman for its existence, so does the mind by extension. Any material object has to be of some dimension and may thus be classified according to its size. Three broad dimensional categories are recognized, the all-pervasive or infinite (vibhu), the infinitesimal or atomic (anu), and the intermediate (madhyama).

Antahkarana is a broad name that stands for the mind (manas), the intellect (buddhi), and the 'I' notion (ahamkara). In some treatises, the antahkarana is also inclusive of the faculty of remembering (citta).

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<sup>2</sup>. vastu prapyakaroti iti prapyakani

Since mind is middle dimensional, it changes (vrttis). Vrttis are modes or modifications of the mind.

1- The Katha Upanisad gives evidence for the existence of the mind:

Manasaivanudrastavyam indriyebhyah parahyarthah arthebhyasca param manah manasastu para buddhi buddheratma mahan parah

2- The Nyaya-Vaishesika infers that in the absence of mind, no knowledge is possible. Since there is knowledge there is mind.

3- The mind is directly known through experience (anubhava) and so its existence cannot be questioned (kevala-saksi-bhasya).

In his famous Pancadasi, Vidyananda says that there is pramana-vyavastha in the case of all indriyas. The Self is the ultimate pre-supposition for any cognition. It is necessary to but not directly involved in the process of cognition, for it effortlessly illumines everything. No specific knowledge can be obtained from the Self alone. Instead, knowledge necessitates an intricate coordination of Self, sense organs, and mind. The Self cannot know anything since particular knowledge involves the following three factors (triputi jnana): the knower (pramata), the object known (prameya), and the knowledge (pramiti). Void of the Self, which is pure consciousness, the mind and the sense organs cannot give rise to any particular knowledge since their nature is purely material (prakrti). The Self gets its knowership because of the sense organs and the mind which function as its adjuncts (upadhis). Singular knowledge is possible only by the Self with the appendages of mind and senses. It is when the antahkarana is in close proximity with the Self, i.e., when pure consciousness pervades it completely, making the differentiation between the mind and pure consciousness difficult, that the phenomenon of knowing occurs. The antahkarana is capable of reflecting consciousness as it is, being pervaded by it. Such reflection is termed cit-pratibhasa, pratibimba or citchaya. In this rather complicated happening, which Vidyananda calls a relation (sahaja), the Self is the bimba, that is, the original or prototype.

The relationship between consciousness and its appendages is false. The relation is caused by erroneously associating the antahkarana with the Self that is pure consciousness and vice versa. The association or identification between two entities with different natures is false and in fact, impossible in reality. In Advaita, this false relation is technically called tadatmya-sambhanda. As a result of this tadatmya relation, there is a climb down or fall of

consciousness, as it were. Thereafter, consciousness that is one, indivisible, and relationless, seems to be limited by the antahkarana. The Self is individuated as a result of this false relation with the antahkarana, and manifests in the form of "I," commonly called the ego.

Again, it is to be remembered that the blending of consciousness with the antahkarana cannot occur in truth since their natures are totally opposed.

Summarizing this part of the discussion, consciousness, of its own, cannot know anything, nor can the antahkarana. It is the ego alone, the product of their false union, which knows and is thus referred to as the knower (pramata). The perplexing relation between consciousness and the antahkarana is natural. We can never know the point at which consciousness begins its association with the antahkarana. For Advaitins, it is beginningless (anadi). However, this relation ceases simultaneously with liberation.

#### Sense organs as adjuncts to the Self:

There is also a false association or identification with the sense organs. From this relation arises the various concepts of "my ears," "my eyes," etc. Consequently, defects of the senses are equated with one's own. Hence, people say: "I am blind," "I am deaf," etc.

#### The body as an adjunct to the Self:

People identify with various features of the body and declare: "I am fat," "I am fair," "I am a male," etc. Vidyananda asserts that this type of association is caused by previous actions (karmajam) since the type of sense organs and body that one enjoys in this life time are brought about by prior acts.

#### External objects as adjuncts to the Self:

There is also association with individuals, objects, and concepts, i.e., one's children, wife, house, country, etc. These types of associations are, however, less pronounced than those that relate to the antahkarana, the senses and the body.

Associations or identifications of the above nature render empirical life possible. Strictly speaking, Advaitins believe that only pure consciousness exists. It is held that in the Self there is no trace of duality. The Self is free from attributes; it is devoid of characteristics (nirvisesa). Yet because of its false association with the antahkarana etc., it looks as if it has qualities. The erroneous associations described above represent, as Shankara states in his Brahmasutra-bhasyas, the source of all evils, since it affects individuals and impinges on all aspects of society. Liberation is the termination of such associations.

**Erroneous Perception (Khyativada):**

Since the identification of the soul with the adjuncts of antahkarana, etc., is of the nature of an erroneous identity, it becomes important to clearly understand what erroneous perception, in this context, means, and how it occurs.

We have already stated that there can be no content-free cognition since every cognition has a cognitum, whether true or not (nirvisayakam jnanam nasti). The absence of an entity, for instance, a pot, may be known through anupalabधि. In the case of knowing the absence of a pot at a given place and time, such absence is itself the cognitum for such knowledge.

In Sanskrit, the word "khyati" stands for cognition; in Advaita Vedanta it means perceptual error. In all cases of perceptions, i.e., erroneous as well as true, the perceived objects are directly manifest to the perceiver. Perceptual knowledge belongs to the directly manifest object(s). In the illustration of the rope-snake, where the initial cognition "This is a snake" is sublated by the second and true cognition "this is a rope," it is one and the same object that is directly manifested at all times. It is but the false conception of snakesness that is cancelled by the second cognition, but the true content of both cognitions is always the same and directly revealed. How real is a rope-snake? There are two broad theories on the matter; one is named satkhyati, the other asatkhyati. According to the first theory, the content of an erroneous perception (snake) is existent (sat). According to the second, it is completely non-existent (asat).

The Madhyamika school of Buddhism advocates the asatkhyati theory. According to this school, everything is non-existent and so cognition is always of something, which is non-existent. Advaitins are very critical of such view; they assert that it is simply not possible to perceive something non-existent, for it opposes experience and reason. The cognition of the absence of a red rose presupposes the affirmation of the existence of a red rose, which can be negated, thus every negation presupposes affirmation. (Prasaktasya eva pratishedhah).

The Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism is the most ardent exponent of this satkhyati theory, which they name atmakhyati. According to this theory, momentary cognition is the sole reality (ksanika-jnana-vada). This school holds that there is no external reality besides a subjective and continuous series of momentary cognitions. It is but these subjective cognitions which appear as the outside objects. The Vijñānavādins believe that cognition and cognitum are always perceived together (sahopalambha-nyaya). Advaitins are quick to show the shortcomings of such view on the basis of the experiences of dream experiences, erroneous perceptions, etc., where knowing and object(s) are not identical. In Advaita, epistemology is always pragmatic, cognition reveals external objects, they do not produce them (jnanam

visayikaroti na tu visayam utpadayati.) Further, Advaitins argue that if cognitions were truly momentary, there would be no possibility of distinguishing between various cognitions. One may name the referent of the word pot, a pot, only when the latter exists outside one's subjective sphere of knowledge, that is to say, when the pot, the cognitum, exists out there. Even in the case of an erroneous perception such as a rope-snake, the cognition of the form "This is a snake" corresponds to the false apprehension of some "thing" existing externally to one self. Finally, for Advaitins, the Vijñanavadins who champion this atmakhyati theory are incapable to explicate negation (badha) properly, since they claim that nothing external exists, everything being the subject itself.

Concerning the Akhyati theory, there is nothing that can be called erroneous cognition. Perceptual knowledge is divided into two, valid cognition and recollection. Each and every cognition is naturally valid. Erroneous cognitions are but a complex of truth and falsity.

Every object has characteristics that are general (samanyamsa) and specific (visesamsa). In the apprehension "This is a snake," "this" is a general characteristic. The special characteristic of snake is brought from memory and is predicated on the actual object. Thus, what is involved in this interpretation of the Asatkhyati theory is the non-apprehension of the difference between the perceived and the remembered. Advaitins criticize this view saying that if incompleteness in perception is acceptable, it is not so for memory.

There are other interpretations of the asatkhyati theory such as Anyatha-khyati or viparitakhyati (Cognizing differently) and Anirvacaniya khyati (indescribable cognition). We shall now focus our attention on the latter, which is adopted by Advaitins. In Advaita, the ontological status of the erroneous perception is conceived as neither existent (sat) nor non-existent (asat), but as indeterminable (anirvacaniya). For Advaitins, as already mentioned, it is that which is not subjected to sublation, which alone exists, and it is the Self, Brahman/Atman. Whatever is conceived to be different from the Self, has no reality at all, it is asat. There is no corresponding object to what is non-existent; it is like a square-circle or a sky-flower (atyanta-abhavavatvam asatvam). Such an entity can never be the object of a true perception (asat cet na pratiyate), and can only be perceived illusorily. However, such referent of perception cannot, at the same time, be totally non-existent since it appears. To remedy this ontological impasse, Advaitins introduce a third category apart from sat and asat with the purpose to account for appearances such as a rope-snake, etc. This third indeterminable category includes all pratibhasika and vyavaharika objects, false objects, which characteristics are neither sat nor asat (sadasad-vilaksana).

Among the factors that account for erroneous perception, the most important are as follow:

1. A defect in the means of knowledge (pramana)
2. A defect in the object of knowledge (prameya).
3. A defect in the knower ( pramata).
4. A knowledge of the object in a general way.
5. Ignorance about the nature of an object (avidya).
6. An impression of an object born out of its prior experience.