

Explaining Appearances

Vedāntic Maxims taken from the अपरोक्षानुभूति (Aparokṣānubhūti)

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ABSTRACT

According to Advaita Vedānta, there is only one non-dual reality, changeless, immortal. It is the highest truth, the noblest goal, but at the same time, it appears as the greatest puzzle. How is it possible to recognize a sole existence among all external and subjective differences we all universally perceive? Advaita Vedānta often uses maxims [nyāyas] or teaching devices [upāyas] to help those who sincerely seek to understand higher revelations, finally to recognize their essential nature which is inseparable from highest reality or Brahman. A selection taken from a text called Aparokṣānubhūti, attributed to Adi Shankaracharya should give a little insight.

Key Terms: Ātman, Adi Shankaracharya, Nyāya, Aparokṣānubhūti, Avidyā, Avidyākalpita, Māyā, Nāmarūpe, Anirvacanīyakhyātivada, Upādhi, Bhagavad Gita Bhāṣya, Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Bhāṣya, Adhyāropa Apavāda, Swami Dayananda, Sri Sri Satchidānandendra Saraswati

I. Introduction

In Advaita Vedānta, particularly in the Upaniṣads (śruti) it happens quite often to read conflicting statements which appear absurd at first sight, for example, “What speech cannot reveal, but what reveals speech” (yadvācānabhyuditaṃ yena vāgabhyudyate Kenopaniṣat 1.5). Hence for the sake of indicating the highest reality, the ancient lore of seers (ṛṣis) used the traditional methodology of superimposition and negation (adhyāropa apavāda).

Later teachers like Gauḍapadācārya and especially Adi Shankaracharya in his commentaries (bhāṣya) distinguished between two standpoints, the empirical or mundane viewpoint (vyayahārika dṛṣṭi) and the view of the absolute reality (pāramārthika dṛṣṭi). It is essential to mention that these two perspectives do not touch the non-dual reality. They both belong to the sphere of avidyā, as a dialectal need until self-ignorance (avidyā) is dispelled by self-knowledge (Ātma-vidyā). As Sri Sri Satchidānandendra Saraswati explained: “*This distinction of absolute Reality and Vyavahara from the standpoint of empirical life, should be unfailingly borne in mind in order to reconcile the several seeming self-contradictory statements in Shankara-Bhashya.*”

II. Text

सर्पत्वेन यथा रज्जू रजतत्वेन शुक्तिका ।

विनिर्णीता विमूढेन देहत्वेन तथात्मता ॥ ७० ॥

sarpa-tvena yathā rajjuḥ rajata-tvena śuktikā ।

vinirṇītāḥ vimūḍhena deha-tvena tathā-atma-tā

70. Just as a rope is imagined to be a snake and a nacre to be a piece of silver, so too the ignorant (or deluded) wrongly understand the Ātman as the body.

Reflection: Two classic and popular Vedantic maxims to explain the falsity of a world [Rajjusarpa Nyāya and Shuktirajata Nyāya].

These illustrations are sufficient to clarify the whole spectrum of appearances starting from notions about God or Gods to subatomic particles, etc. They are basically all names and forms, including colors (evolved and unevolved i.e. vyakrte / avyakrte nāmarūpe).

The falsity of a world is never to be understood as non-existent, totally illusory, or empty [śūnya]. Because that would contradict daily experiences.

The “falsity” is the wrong understanding of the sole reality i.e., Atman/Brahman as “incorrectly viewed” [**avidyākalpita**], thereby interpreted as an infinitude of notions which are superimposed upon Atman/Brahman due to ignorance [avidyā or mithyajnana]. **Because of incorrect knowledge, all kinds of erroneous conclusions are possible, like a rope is mistakenly viewed as a snake, and a nacre to be a piece of silver.**

Furthermore, the Anirvacanīyakhyātivada [objects are neither truly existent nor non-existent, indeterminable] is accepted in Advaita Vedanta. But in Adi Shankara’s terminology anirvacanīya is not a characteristic of a power called “Māyā,” as usually taught by later Advaitins but applied to names and forms (**vyakrte / avyakrte nāmarūpe**) as formulated in **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 2.1.27:**

avidyākalpitena ca nāmarūpalakṣaṇena rūpabhedena vyākṛtāvyaḥkr̥tātmakena tattvānyatvābhyāmanirvacanīyena brahma pariṇāmādisarvavyavahārāspadatvaṃ pratipadyate pāramārthikena ca rūpeṇa sarvavyavahārātītama pariṇatamavatiṣṭhate “Brahman becomes subject to all kinds of (phenomenal) actions like transformation, on account of the differences of aspects, constituted by name and form, which remain either differentiated or non-differentiated, which cannot be determined either as real or unreal, and which are imagined through ignorance. In Its real aspect Brahman remains unchanged and beyond all phenomenal actions.”

According to Adi Shankara, the concept of Māyā clearly relates to names and forms [nāmarūpe] conjured up by ignorance, mentioned in **Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 2.1.14:**

sarvajñasyeśvarasyātmabhūte ivāvidyākalpīte nāmarūpe
tattvānyatvābhyāmanirvacanīye saṃsārapapañcabījabhūte sarvajñasyeśvarasya
māyāśaktiḥ prakṛtiriti ca śrūtismṛtyorabhilapyete

“Name and form which constitute the seeds of the entire expanse of phenomenal existence, and which are conjured up by nescience, are, as it were, non-different from the omniscient God, and they are nondeterminable either as real or unreal, and are mentioned in the Vedas and the Smritis as the power, called Maya, of omniscient God, or as prakṛti (primordial Nature).”

घटत्वेन यथा पृथ्वी पटत्वेनैव तन्तवः ।

विनिर्णीता विमूढेन देहत्वेन तथात्मता ॥ ७१ ॥

ghaṭa-tvena yathā pṛthvī paṭatvena-eva tantavaḥ ।

vinirṇītāḥ vimūḍhena deha-tvena tathā-atma-tā ॥ 71 ॥

71. Just as earth is thought of as a pot and threads are mistaken for cloth, so too the ignorant (or deluded) wrongly understand the Ātman as the body.

कनकं कुण्डलत्वेन तरङ्गत्वेन वै जलम् ।

विनिर्णीता विमूढेन देहत्वेन तथात्मता ॥ ७२ ॥

kanakam kuṇḍala-tvena taraṅga-tvena vai jalam ।

vinirṇītāḥ vimūḍhena deha-tvena tathā-atma-tā ॥ 72 ॥

72. Just as gold is thought of as gold-ring and water (itself) is mistaken for waves, so too the ignorant (or deluded) wrongly understand the Ātman as the body.

Reflection: Two other popular illustrations in Vedantic parlance, Kanakakundala Nyāya and Samudrataranga Nyāya. As the rope-snake-illustration [Rajjusarpa Nyāya] is universally applicable, the maxims of gold and gold-rings (or gold-ornaments) and water-waves is especially helpful in explaining a lot of topics like creation/ maintenance/dissolution [utpatti-sthiti-vilaya], cause-effect-relation [kārya-kāraṇa-vada], concept of birth/death/transmigration [saṃsāravada], doctrine of being an individual [jīvatva], doctrine of the five ‘sheaths’ [pañcakośa-viveka], doctrine of the three states [avasthātraya-viveka], the apparent difference between an individual and the Lord [jīva-īśvara-bheda] including all kinds of imagined differences e.g. jīva-jīva-bheda, jīva-jaḍa-bheda, jīva-jaḍa-bheda, jaḍa-jaḍa-bheda, as well as **threefold distinctions** of jñātā [knower-notion] -jñāna [knowledge] -jñeya [objects of knowledge], bhokṛtva [enjoyer-notion] -bhoga [enjoyment] -bhogyā [object of enjoying], kartṛtva [doer-notion] -kāraṇa-[instrument] -kriyā [action], dr̥k [seer] -dr̥ṣṭi [seeing] -dr̥śya [seen]. Finally, the **concepts of bandha [bondage] and mokṣa/mukti [liberation] are figuratively** explainable.

Not to ignore, to indicate the essential unity [aikātmya] amidst “apparent differences.”

To summarize:

All these mentioned concepts are nothing but names and forms, upādhis [limited adjuncts, nāmarūpopādhy] superimposed upon Ātman/Brahman due to ignorance.

As Adi Shankara explained:

upādḥinām ca avidyāpratyupasthāpitatvāt [Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya 3.2.15]

“the adjuncts themselves are conjured up by ignorance.”

पुरुषत्वेन वै स्थाणुर्जलत्वेन मरीचिका ।

विनिर्णीता विमूढेन देहत्वेन तथात्मता ॥ ७३ ॥

puruṣa-tvena vai sthāṇuḥ-jala-tvena marīcikā ।

vinirṇītāḥ vimūḍhena deha-tvena tathā-atma-tā ॥ ७३ ॥

73. Just as the stump of a tree is mistaken for an individual person, and sand of the desert is considered to be a mirage of water, so too the ignorant (or deluded) wrongly understand the Ātman as the body.

गृहत्वेनैव काष्ठानि खड्गत्वेनैव लोहता ।

विनिर्णीता विमूढेन देहत्वेन तथात्मता ॥ ७४ ॥

gṛhatvena-eva kāṣṭhāni khaḍga-tvena-eva loha-tā ।

vinirṇītāḥ vimūḍhena deha-tvena tathā-atma-tā ॥ ७४ ॥

74. Just as a mass of wood is thought of as a house and iron as a sword, so too the ignorant (or deluded) wrongly understand the Ātman as the body.

Note: ‘As a mass of wood or iron’, similarly to a mass of clay Swami Dayananda said:

“When you say, ‘Clay is,’ the clay, depends upon another sat-buddhi, atoms. When you say, ‘The atom is,’ the atom depends upon particles, which depend upon a concept. When you say, ‘A concept is,’ the concept depends upon the witness of the concept, sākṣī which is consciousness. And when you say, ‘Consciousness is,’ what does it depend upon? It does not depend upon another consciousness because it is svataḥsiddha, self-existent.”

यथा वृक्षविपर्यासो जलाद्भवति कस्यचित् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ७५ ॥

yathā vṛkṣa-viparyāsaḥ jalāt-bhavati kasyacid ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ ७५ ॥

75. Just as one sees the illusion of a tree on account of water, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

पोतेन गच्छतः पुंसः सर्वं भातीव चञ्चलम् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ७६ ॥

potena gacchataḥ puṁsaḥ sarvam bhāti-iva cañcalam ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ ७६ ॥

76. Just as to a person going in a boat everything appears to be in motion, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

Note: Adi Shankara taught in **Bhagavad Gita Bhāṣya 4.18:**

na, akarma eva paramārthataḥ sat karmavat avabhāsate mūḍhadṛṣṭeḥ lokasya, tathā karmaiva akarmavat

“Is it not that to an ordinary ignorant [foolish] observer, that which in reality is inaction appears as action, and similarly, action itself as inaction?”

पीतत्वं हि यथा शुभ्रे दोषाद्भवति कस्यचित् ।

तद्ब्रह्मात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ७७ ॥

pīta-tvam hi yathā śubhre doṣāt-bhavati kasyacid ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 77 ॥

77. Just as to a person suffering from a defect (jaundice) white objects appear as yellow, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

चक्षुर्भ्यां भ्रमशीलाभ्यां सर्वं भाति भ्रमात्मकम् ।

तद्ब्रह्मात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ७८ ॥

caḥsurbhyām bhrama-śīlābhyām sarvam bhāti bhrama-ātmakam ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 78 ॥

78. Just as to a person with defective eyes everything appears to be defective, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

Reflection: To whom does this Avidyā or ignorance belong?

That seems to be a colossal quarrel among Advaitins. The Vivaraṇa sub-school of Advaita claims “ignorance” rests in and covers Ātman/Brahman, and the Bhāmatī sub-school thinks “ignorance” rests in the Jiva. Both are wrong, Ātman/Brahman is **ekamevadvitiya**, non-dual, without any second, and the “Jiva-notion” is itself imagined due to ignorance (**āvidyākālpaṭam**). Furthermore, ignorance is neither an effect of Māyā because Māyā itself being conjured up by ignorance, according to Adi Shankara [see Reflection, śloka 70]. Again, ignorance has neither its own nature [bhāvarūpa], nor are there different forms like a plurality of ignorance, neither an individual [Tula-avidyā] nor a total ignorance [Mula-avidyā].

Adi Shankara commented in Brahma Sutra Bhasya 4.1.3:

kasya punarayam aprabodha iti cet, yastvaṃ pṛcchasi tasya te — iti vadāmaḥ

“To whom is this Ajnana (ignorance)?

In answer, ‘To you who is asking the question’, we say.”

To summarize: From the Absolute point of view [pāramārthika dr̥ṣṭi], as it were, **there was, is, never will be any ignorance!** Only from the empirical [vyayahārika/laukika dr̥ṣṭi] viewpoint, as long as one “assumes” to be bound, that “ignorant-view” persist until self-knowledge (Ātma-vidyā) dispels it.

अलातं भ्रमणेनैव वर्तुलं भाति सूर्यवत् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ७९ ॥

alātam bhramaṇena-eva vartulam bhāti sūrya-vat ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 79 ॥

79. Just as a firebrand, through mere rotation, appears circular like the sun, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

Note: Similar to Gaudapada’s Karika on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad IV. 49-50:

alāte spandamāne vai nābhāsā anyatobhavaḥ |
na tato'nyatra niḥspandānnālātaṃ praviśanti te ||
na nirgatā alātāte dravyatvābhāvayogataḥ |
vijñāne'pi tathaiva syurābhāsasyāviśeṣataḥ ||

“When the firebrand is in motion, the appearances (that are seen in it) do not come from elsewhere. When, the firebrand is not moved, the appearances do not go elsewhere from the motionless firebrand. Further, the appearances, when the firebrand is not moved, do not enter into the firebrand itself. The appearances do not emerge from the firebrand because they are not of the nature of a substance. This also applies to Consciousness on account of the similarity of appearances (in both cases).”

महत्त्वे सर्ववस्तूनामणुत्वं ह्यतिदूरतः ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८० ॥

mahat-tve sarva-vastūnām-aṇu-tvam hi-ati-dūrataḥ ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 80 ॥

80. Just as all things that are large appear to be exceedingly small owing to great distance, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

सूक्ष्मत्वे सर्ववस्तूनां स्थूलत्वं चोपनेत्रतः ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८१ ॥

sūkṣma-tve sarva-vastūnām sthūla-tvam ca-upanetrataḥ ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 81 ॥

81. Just as all objects that are exceedingly small (or subtle) appear to be large when viewed through lenses, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

काचभूमौ जलत्वं वा जलभूमौ हि काचता ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८२ ॥

kāca-bhūmau jala-tvam vā jala-bhūmau hi kācatā ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 82 ॥

82. Just as a surface of glass is mistaken for water, and often a spread of water is mistaken for a sheet of glass, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

यद्वदग्नौ मणित्वं हि मणौ वा वह्निता पुमान् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८३ ॥

yadvat-agnau maṇi-tvam hi maṇau vā vahni-tā pumān ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 83 ॥

83. Just as a person imagines a jewel in fire and a bright jewel as a glowing cinder so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

अभ्रेषु सत्सु धावत्सु धावन्निव यथा शशी ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८४ ॥

abhreṣu satsu dhāvatsu dhāvan-iva yathā śaśī ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 84 ॥

84. Just as when clouds move, the moon appears to be in motion, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

यथैव दिग्विपर्यासो मोहाद्भवति कस्यचित् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८५ ॥

yathā-eva diś-viparyāsaḥ mohāt-bhavati kasyacid ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 85 ॥

85. Just as a person through confusion loses all distinction between the different points of the compass, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

Note: Therefore, the best medicine to cure a 'confused mind' is the correct knowledge/understanding. **As Adi Shankara taught:**

parasyāduḥkhitve 'nyasya ca duḥkhino 'bhāve duḥkhopaśamanāya
śāstrārambhānarthakyamiti cet? na, avidyādhyāropitaduḥkhitvabhramāpohārthatvāt,
ātmani prakṛtasaṅkhyāpūraṇabhramāpohavat kalpitaduḥkhyātmābhyupagamācca

Objection: *If the Supreme Self has no misery, and there is no other entity to be miserable, then it is useless for the scriptures to try to remove misery.*

Reply: *Not so, for they are meant to remove the false notion of misery superimposed by ignorance. And the Self being admitted imagining Itself as miserable, the scriptures help to remove that error, as in the case of the failure to count the tenth man, although he was there.*

[Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Bhāṣya 1.4.7]

यथा शशी जले भाति चञ्चलत्वेन कस्यचित् ।

तद्वदात्मनि देहत्वं पश्यत्यज्ञानयोगतः ॥ ८६॥

yathā śaśī jale bhāti cañcala-tvena kasyacid ।

tadvat-ātmani deha-tvam paśyati-ajñāna-yogataḥ ॥ 86 ॥

86. Just as the moon (when reflected) in water appears to one as unsteady, so does a person due to ignorance wrongly interprets Ātman as the body.

एवमात्मन्यविद्यातो देहाध्यासो हि जायते ।

स एवात्मपरिज्ञानाल्लीयते च परात्मनि ॥ ८७॥

evam-ātmani-avidyātaḥ deha-adhyāsaḥ hi jāyate ।

saḥ eva-ātma-parijñānāt-līyate ca para-ātmani ॥ 87 ॥

87. Thus when the Self is wrongly recognized, the idea of having a body (e.g. being a doer, enjoyer etc.) persist, when the Self is truly recognized, everything dissolves into the Highest (i.e. being recognized as the Parātman/Brahman without a second).

Note: sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma. “All this is Ātman/Brahman” [Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1]

III. Conclusion

One might ask why appearances exist? They do not really exist or, from the empirical viewpoint, only appear to exist. Another beautiful statement:

“One might define human consciousness as the possibility of attending/intending and describe specific experiences and their interpretations as possibilities for consciousness as attentions and intentions. Experiencing is a synthesis of an “of” and “for” - Alternatively, from the position of Shankara and Advaita-Vedanta: the possibility of superimposing and the possibilities for superimposition.”

(Consciousness and Science: an Advaita-Vedantic Perspective on the Theology – Science Dialogue, Bharath Sriraman, Walter Benesch)

(Conscious) possibilities seem to be natural, hence according to Advaita Siddhānta, pure or unconditional consciousness, i.e., Ātman/Brahman as the only limitless existence neither set a limit nor is tainted by apparent possibilities.

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