



Devadatta Kīrtideva Aśvāmītra



2. THE COMMON INTUITION OR EXPERIENCE OF EXISTING AND BEING CONSCIOUS

(*SARVA LOKA PRASIDDHA ANUBHAVA*)

The subject of this second chapter takes up some concepts previously presented in some contributions already published in this site¹. It is simply the order of the arguments that has been changed with the aim of explaining in detail the doctrine of the primordial intuition of existing as it is experienced by all living things, especially human beings. The aim is also to explain how such intuition does not “automatically”² lead to the Liberation from ignorance despite being a universally shared intuition.

By saying “I exist”, one expresses the only absolute certainty that everyone experiences. In fact, the intuitive experience of existing, that is to say the consciousness of being existing, transcends and precedes any other knowledge³. For this reason, Śaṅkara strongly asserts that no one can deny to exist. Even if someone wishes to affirm his non-existence⁴, the very existence-consciousness would be necessary in order to make such assumption. Obviously, the intuition of existing is based on the recognition that existence is factual, real and absolute. The existence of each being is the very Existence. For this reason, a *śruti* states that:

*Ātman is stranger to no one, because it is self evident.*⁵

At the same time another *śruti* declares that:

*Brahman is known directly because It is the inner Self.*⁶

In this second quotation there are two important intuitive assertions based on vedāntic logic and on the experience common to all conscious beings. The first one asserts that Brahman - which is Consciousness, Existence and Absolute Reality - is known directly, without any mediation or cognitive action. The second one ratifies that the direct intuition reveals the identity between Brahman and *Ātman*. However, the *Upaniṣads* do not provide such intuitive knowledge. In fact, to the objector asking:

Is Ātman not revealed by the agama (the śruti) and, before that, by the perception of the senses (pratyākṣa) and by the other valid means of knowledge (pramāṇa)?

Śaṅkara firmly replies:

*No, because Ātman is self evident!*⁷

This śaṅkarian clarification is extremely important and opportune because it denies that the intuition or the experience of existence depends on a means of contingent investigation such as the *pramāṇas*⁸. The *prasiddha anubhava* is in fact self-subsistent. Therefore,

¹ Cf. Svāmī Satcidānandendra Sarasvatī, *Le cinque gemme dell'Advaita*; Maitreyī, *Conoscenza vedāntica e conoscenze empiriche*; Gian Giuseppe Filippi, *Il Serpente e la Corda*, in <https://www.vedavyasamandala.com>.

² We would like to clarify that “automatic”, term that in modern times has assumed a mechanistic inflection in line with modern mentality, in reality means “what is effect of itself”. Which is as good as affirming that the effect and the cause are one thing only.

³ Since you exist you can know. This reverses the silly Cartesian postulate *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). A stone, although really existing, cannot know: this demonstrates the priority of existing on knowing.

⁴ As it was affirmed by the *anātmakavādin* Buddhists.

⁵ *Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya (BSŚBh)*, II.3.7.

⁶ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU)*, III.4.1

⁷ *Bhagavad Gītā Śaṅkara Bhāṣya (BhGŚBh)*, II.18

⁸ The *śruti* as well is an empirical *pramāṇa*, in this case called *śabda*, the “word”. However, even if it must be considered as the highest *pramāṇa* (*antya pramāṇa*), the *śruti* cannot teach the absolute. It only focuses it as the supreme goal.





One must accept that the Self is its own means of knowledge (svāpramāṇa¹), which is directly knowable by itself (svayamvedyatva).²

This means that intuition (*anubhava*) is of the same nature of the *Ātman*, that is to say it is the very *Ātman*³. While on one hand everyone is absolutely aware of his own existence, known “automatically”, “automatically”, on the other hand no one can know with absolute certainty the existence of the others. In fact, since the *sarvaloka prasiddhānubhava* is non-dual by nature, the knowledge of things or of other persons necessarily entails the duality⁴ of the knowing subject (*jñātr*) and the known object (*jñeya*). To perform a cognitive action towards a particular person as an object of knowledge, first we must forcibly see him, listen to him, touch him. Then, we mentally (*manodatta*) gather and elaborate all the data proceeding from the five senses and finally form an idea of him at the intellectual level⁵. Such intellectual knowledge is the result of the mediation of individual faculties, therefore it is an empirical knowledge⁶. Ultimately, the existence of the others is not the direct (*anubhava*) experience of the *jñātr*. This argument is applicable to every *anātman*, that is to say to all that is not the Self. In fact, even the components of one’s individuality, senses, *prāṇas*, mind and intellect are objects of Consciousness, as well as any object or person of the external world.

Let’s see now why all actions, including the cognitive ones, should be considered erroneous. In fact, the cognitive investigation (*jñāpti*) does not proceed from the *Ātman*, completely free from any action, but from the *ego* (*aham* or *jīvātman*). Since *jñāpti* is an action like any other, it has the *aham*, the producer of desires (*kāma*), as its starting point. The intellect reflects the desires of the *ego* like a mirror, transforming them into volitions (*saṃkalpa*). Subsequently, the mind plans these volitions and, through the *prāṇas*, puts the *karmendriyas* into action. Finally, these last faculties project the actions into the external world. This sequence of cause-effect relationships (*kāraṇa-kārya saṃbandha*), which is concatenated at the individual level, represents the process of expansion of the *aham* towards the *mama*, i.e. from *ego* to “mine”. Any action, whatever its nature may be, is aimed at extending the sphere of individuality, at taking possession of “this” (*idam*) to expand the dominion of *mama*⁷. So great is the illusion that *mama* is one with the *aham* that one enjoys or suffers by reason of “mine”. A householder despairs when his house burns down or when a financial downturn decreases the value of his property.

¹ “Which is self knowable”; sometimes it can be freely translated as the “supreme *pramāṇa*”. In fact, the term *pramāṇa* is used here in a transposed sense, as in this case it cannot be an instrument of empirical knowledge.

² Śaṅkara, *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (US) XVIII.203.

³ Therefore, one shall never confuse the intuition with what is intuited. The latter, being an object of knowledge, is only a reflection of the true intuition, a modification of the mind (*mānasa vṛtti*). Especially in the *pātāñjala yoga*, those modifications that are only ideas or thoughts and not intuitions are often mistaken with the *anubhava*.

⁴ It goes without saying that duality is the source of multiplicity. Thus, the subject-object relationship is the origin of the whole manifold world (*vaiśvarūpya prapañca*).

⁵ To carry out such a cognitive action it is necessary to use the valid means of knowledge available by nature to all individuals. For this reason, the *jñātr* is also a *pramātr*.

⁶ Vedānta teaches that the five sense faculties, directly taking the form of external objects, experience a sensory intuition called *pratyakṣānubhava*. Similarly, the instinctive sympathy or dislike arising in the mind from a sensorial information, is considered a mental intuition or *mānasa pratyakṣa* (or *vedanānubhava*). Finally, even the sudden idea that an object elaborated by the mind can be useful or harmful is considered to be an intuition of the *buddhi*, known as *pratyaya anubhava*. Evidently, these intuitions or immediate experiences are only partial and temporary *anubhavas* (*aṃśānubhava*, *anityānubhava*), reflections of the authentic metaphysical intuition or illumination (*prakāśi anubhava*). We would like to underline here that it is wrong to overestimate the scope of intellectual intuition (*pratyaya anubhava*) and to confuse it with the intuition of the reality of the *Ātman*, the *anuśatyānubodha*.

⁷ This happens to the single individuality (social or economic affirmation, honours, public recognitions, etc.), as well as, to the collective one (social, scientific achievements, territorial and space conquests, etc.).





So, why is the *ego* the producer of desire? The answer is that, in reality, the *aham* has the presentiment of not being perfect, autonomous, complete and free. Therefore, it burns with all sorts of desires in the attempt to make up these limitations (*bandha*). By producing desires (*kāmakāra*) it becomes an agent (*kartr*) that seeks to extend its individuality (*mamakāra*) to the external objects by expanding the range of its own limitations to the multiple results of action (*karmaphala*). In spite of its partial and temporary satisfaction, the *ego* will soon realize that it has only moved the boundaries of its limitation a little further. It will then become again dissatisfied and desire to plunge even further into the empirical world. Death itself is not able to extinguish this thirst, and the *ego* will thus be forced to seek other bodies in order to satisfy new desires with renewed *karma*, remaining in this way perpetually prisoner of *saṃsāra*.

So far, we have noted that the primordial intuition of existing as consciousness is the universally shared experience of being the *Ātman*, i.e. Brahman. This direct experience is indisputable because it does not rely on any contingent “proof”:

It cannot be said that Brahman does not exist, nor can it be realised even though it is known from the śruti as the all-pervasive entity beyond worldly qualities, as different from all things belonging to these four classes, viz. those that can be produced, and as occurring in its own context and hence not forming a part of anything else because that Brahman is called the Self in the text: “This is the Ātman which has been described as neti neti”¹ and because the Self cannot be denied in as much as it is the Self even of one who would deny it.”²

However, only few reflect on the primordial experience expressed by the statement: “I am”. Had everyone or many done so, the *jīvan muktas* would be very frequent. On the contrary, most people complete this statement by saying, “I am so and so”. This “I” is only apparently equal to that of the previous statement, because with “so and so” one describes it as an object. The *Ātman* exists and is conscious, but can never become object of anything. To be a describable object (*padārtha*), is required a subject that describes it; therefore the “I” of the second statement cannot be the *Ātman*. Therefore, this “I” is the *aham* thought by the individual mind (*antaḥkāraṇa*) as an object of cogitation and described through some limitative attributes: that is to say the “so and so”. Why does the mind create this idea of *aham*? Because the mind by its nature does not accept to be incapable of conceiving the *Ātman* as the object of a cognitive action. Hence, it imagines a pseudo-*ātman* projected onto the Self as an appearance devoid of reality, with the purpose of considering *Ātman* as one of its objects. In reality, this is only a pale reflection of the *Ātman*, devoid of true existence.

Hence, being constantly in contact with the conscious self, the ego appears to be conscious, like a transparent crystal that appears red when leaning against a red flower. Therefore, two words (pada) are attributed to the Self: the feeling of “I” and that of “mine”, as appearances of the Self and of the things referred to its appearance.³

This explains why, even if everyone experiences the intuition of existing and of being conscious, only very few adopt the renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) to “be so and so”.

As already explained, the *jīvatman*, or *aham*, has the presentiment of not being the *Ātman*. The daily experience of the suffering, to which it is constantly subjected, provides such evidence. For this reason, the *aham* is mistakenly lead to flee from suffering by making up its limited nature. To achieve this, it extends its selfish possession to the farthest reaches of the manifested world. At this point, it would be

¹ BU III.9.26.

² BSŚBh I.1.4.

³ US XVIII.27.





necessary to understand whether there is any relationship between *Ātman* and *jīvātman* in order to proceed in our argument.

We must, therefore, base our reasoning on a statement of Śaṅkara that sets the question in correct terms:

*The jīva [the ego] is only an appearance of the real sun, like the reflection (ābhāsa) of the sun in the water. Once the water is removed, this reflection returns to the sun, which is its origin and to which it remains identical.*¹

This synthetic statement demonstrates that the *aham*-reflection is only an appearance, while the *Ātman*-sun is the only reality². This is sufficient to establish that no relationship exists between the two. Even if an hypothetical relationship were possible, both the *jīvātman* and the *Ātman* would have to be mutually relative and, therefore, dependent. However, the *Ātman* is the absolute. Consequently, such relativity must be excluded.

The second part of the śaṅkarian statement must be considered as the expression of two different points of view. According to the first, when the water, the reflection plane, disappears, the reflection returns to the source that had projected it onto the water surface. Here, the apparent phenomenon is described as if the reflection had been produced by the sun, beamed through space as solar ray reaching eventually the surface of the water. Once the water dried up, the reflection under the form of another ray would then make the trip back to the sun and reintegrate into it. This is an empirical point of view (*vyāvahārika dr̥ṣṭi*); because, in order to illustrate it, one has to resort to mutual causal relations and to the time and space conditions. Following this illusory explanation, we create a temporary spatial separation between the ray and the sun, an apparent interval of separate existence of the reflection. Sun, ray, and reflection enter each other in the same causal relationship attributed to the triad of cognitive action: knower, knowledge, and known³. This first perspective is certainly wrong, although it may be useful within the limits of an analytic investigation. The second perspective, which corresponds to the conclusion of the aforementioned statement of Śaṅkara, represents the correct point of view, that of the absolute where the reflection “remains identical” to the sun. In other words, it remains as it had always been. This statement liberates from any erroneous idea about a temporarily separated existence of the ray and the reflection from the sun. Therefore, following the vedāntic logic, the *jīvātman* is never other than the *Ātman*, being the *Ātman* itself. On the contrary, from an empirical standpoint, if we consider the *jīvātman* as an independent entity, we inevitably affirm its absolute unreality. For this reason, the *ego* can be considered *satasat*, existing and non-existing, depending on the point of view that is assumed.

Since Vedānta, as a way of knowledge (*jñāna mārga*), is taught to those who are still ignorant, it is useful to initially set up the teaching (*upadeśa*) from a point of view that, although erroneous, the disciple is more inclined to accept and understand. Therefore, the *guru* initially bases his *upadeśa* on the *vyāvahārika* point of view. Following the practice of the *neti neti* this empirical view will then be denied and corrected. The metaphysical point of view (*pāramārthika dr̥ṣṭi*) would eventually prevail of

¹ *BhGŚBh* XV. 7. This means that the reflection has no real existence; once the real existence of the rope is ascertained, it becomes evident that the snake never existed.

² The reader will recall that, in an individual, the plan of reflection is represented by his intellect (*buddhi*). This doctrine of the reflection (*ābhāsavāda*) has an equivalent also in the universal domain (*adhidaiva*). In this case the reflection is represented by Hiraṇyagarbha, the plan of reflection is represented by the universal *Buddhi*, and the source of the reflection by the very Brahman. However, in Vedānta the distinction between microcosm and macrocosm still belongs to the domain of illusion.

³ See Maitreyī, *Conoscenze empiriche e Conoscenza vedāntica*, <https://www.vedavyasamandala.com/conoscenza-vedantica-e-conoscenze-e>. G.G. Filippi, *Il Serpente e la Corda*, <https://www.vedavyasamandala.com/23-commento-al-tattvamasi-di-sa-kar>.





the empirical one. In this fashion, the empirical vision and the absolute one are both employed in the *Vedānta vicāra* method, respectively as *adhyāropa* and *apavāda*. Indeed, the empirical view is an erroneous knowledge (*mithyā* or *avidyā*) and not an absolute ignorance, as some proponents of the doctrine of the *mūla avidyā* maintain. Only the *Brahmātman* is absolute. Therefore, even in *avidyā* there must be a glimpse of truth, however distorted this may be. Otherwise, anyone who is immersed in *avidyā* would not have the opportunity to acquire any knowledge. Therefore, false knowledge can be used initially as an instrument of real knowledge, only to be permanently abandoned by the Consciousness-Knowledge afterwards.

At this point, in the direct method (*sākṣāt sādhana*) this argumentation can be presented from yet another slightly different angle. This is a difficult point to grasp, which requires a deep *manana*. The qualified disciple must be capable of the greatest intellectual flexibility in order to integrate the following citation into the arguments so far exposed:

When the guru explains to the disciple the mahāvākya "you are That", does such "you" refer to the Ātman or to the anātman? To answer the question, some preliminary considerations must be added. As already said, the existence of the ego finds its basis on the real Ātman, as its reflected image. One can describe the own "self" as follows: "I am so and so". In this statement, "I" concerns the real "I", namely the Self, since it simply affirms its existence. Instead, "so and so" are the attributes, the functions and the activities overlapping with the individual "I" and determining its apparent existence. As already anticipated, when the disciple receives a mahāvākya from a guru of Vedānta, he has not yet used the neti neti discrimination, and, therefore, is unable to discern which "I" refers to the "you" (tva). Therefore, for the disciple, that "I" appears as both the nature of the Self and the non-Self (Ātmanātman bhava). In other words, he still confuses the real with the apparent and vice versa",¹

until the dazzling *Ātman anubhava* emerges.

¹ G.G. Filippi, *Il Serpente e la Corda*, <https://www.vedavyasamandala.com/18-commento-al-tattvamasi-di-sa-kar>.

