



DEVADATTA KĪRTIDEVA AŚVAMIṬRA



3 – The *adhyāropāpavāda* application on knowledge and ignorance:

vidyāvīdyā vicāra

The present chapter is essentially based on the teachings of *Svāmī* Satcidānandendra Sarasvatī *Mahārājajī* and their explanations by *Śrī Śrī* Prakāśānandendra Sarasvatī *Svāmījī*. It will be useful for the reader to keep in his mind the article “The *adhyāropāpavāda* method of *Advaita Vedānta*” by *Svāmī* Satcidānandendra *Mahārājajī*, already published in this Site, from which our discussion begins.

The secret underlying the *adhyāropāpavāda* method has been expressly disclosed in this way by Gauḍapādācārya himself on the authority of the tradition and of his own intuition:

Since, when the incomprehensibility [of Brahman] is understood as a fact, all that was expounded earlier [in order of explaining the nature of Brahman] is negated by the text: “This Self which has been described as neti neti”. Therefore the birthless Self becomes self-revealed. (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, Gauḍapāda Kārikā - MUGK-, III. 26)

Since the self-established *Ātman* is not objectifiable, it is impossible to know it directly. So at first the *śruti* employs a number of superimpositions¹, secondly negates the device employed in the superimposition and thereby only suggests that *Ātman* is ungraspable.

It will be seen that superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of the non-self upon the Self is of two different varieties; one due to innate *avidyā* of the ordinary man, and the second a deliberate device employed by the *Śāstras*. Of these two, the ordinary human procedure due to *avidyā* is the source of all misery in life, while deliberate superimposition employed by the *Śāstras* for the purpose of teaching is purely a conventional device aiming at enlightening the intellect of the *jijñāsu*. *Śrī* Gauḍapāda declare:

Everything is born from the saṃvṛti² point of view and so there is nothing eternal. As a matter of fact, however, everything is unborn (aja) and so there is no destruction whatever. (MUGK IV.57)

Samvṛti means concealing, superimposed, overlapping, that is the common sense-view of ordinary men under the influence of *avidyā*. The meaning of the *śloka* is this: from the empirical standpoint all this is certainly born; so in the domain of *avidyā* there is nothing which can be considered to be eternal. But from the point of view of things as they are, that is viewed from the Reality standpoint, everything is the only one Principle, the unborn Self, thus there is nothing destructible (*avināśī*).

He who exists from the point of view of the imagined opinion (kalpita saṃvṛti) does not exist from the Reality point of view. He is only a theoretical hypothesis (paratantrābhi saṃvṛti) of other schools, but not as a matter of fact. (MUGK IV.73)

Here *kalpita saṃvṛti* (lit. imaginary overlap) only means the procedure adopted by the *Śāstra* or by the *guru* as a means for teaching the *pramāṇas* used to know the truth: as for instance, in passages such as the following: *He is unborn (aja) both within and without (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, -MuU-, II.1.2)*, where “interior” and “exterior” are only assumed to be applicable to what in reality is devoid of any “within” or “without”. This superimposition (*paratantrābhi saṃvṛti*) applied only to a certain extent, is used as a tool for argumentation in the demonstrations made by the *sāṃkhyas*, *vaiśeṣikas* and others who postulate the distinction between *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. *Satkāryavāda*, the theory of the pre-existence of the effect in the cause and the *paramāṇukāraṇavāda*, the theory of the atoms as the cause of the Universe, are only to be taken as allowed tools for the sole purpose of teaching the truth.

¹ The superimposition (*adhyāsa*) consists in attributing some qualities (*guṇas*) to the unqualified (*nirguṇa*) Principle, in order to limit it, thus making it definable (*padārtha*) and imaginable (*vikalpita*).

² Here *saṃvṛti* replaces the term *vyavahāra*.





It will thus be seen that while worldly and the Vedic *karma khaṇḍa* procedure are both in the sphere of *avidyā* only, the superimposition incorporated in the vedāntic method known as *adhyāropāpavāda* by no means invalidates the authority of the *Śāstra*. For example, whoever believes that the *Upaniṣads* teach that Brahman is knowable through its attributes is just a literalist *ajñāni*. The *Upaniṣads* teach that Brahman is qualified by attributes only for *adhyāropa*, being *apavāda* their true goal. Indeed it has to be remembered that this superimposition is only an initial concession for those who aspire to be *jñāni* (*jijñāsu*), as Śrī Gauḍapāda has clearly shown, and Śaṅkara is only following in the footsteps of his *guru*.

The implementations of the *adhyāropāpavāda* method are innumerable, and now in the present pages and next chapters we are going to consider some of them as samples only.

Although Brahman is devoid of all specific features and although it is ever attained because of its all-pervading nature and because of its being the very Self of every one, some “attainability” is imputed to it in certain *śrutis*, such as:

The knower of Brahman attains the Highest. (Taittirīya Upaniṣad -TU-, II.1)

This is only to negate that it is attainable by some means other than knowledge. It also implies that Brahman should not be regarded as something to be reached after travelling towards it, as in the case with regard to non-Supreme Brahman (or rather Hiraṇyagarbha) whose attainability is taught in *śrutis* like:

He attains Svārājyam [Hiraṇyagarbha’s kingdom, the Brahma loka]. (TU I. 6)

Sometimes knowability is attributed to Brahman by superimposition, as for instance in the following *śrutis*:

It is to be known, for it is always in the form of one’s own Ātman. (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad -ŚU-, I. 12); Nārāyaṇa, the great knowable. (TU, Nārāyaṇa vallī, XIII.29); [The teaching] by which even that which is not heard becomes heard, that which is not thought over becomes thought over, and that which is not understood becomes understood. (Chāndogya Upaniṣad -ChU-, VI.1.3)

And this superimposition is to reveal that ignorance is utterly destroyed by knowledge and that there remains nothing else to be known henceforth. And in certain cases knowership is superimposed to negate knowability, as for instance in the *śruti*:

By what means, my dear, can the knower be known? (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad -BU-, II.4.12)

And by certain *śrutis* again the nature of being the Witness (*Sākṣin*) is imputed to *Ātman* to deny even knowership to *Ātman* as in the text:

He is the Witness, conscious and devoid of all attributes. (ŚU VI.11)

And by some other texts the very essential nature of *Ātman* is pointed out like he is *neti neti* (*BU* II.3.6) in order to negate all specific attributes including the nature of being a Witness. Similarly knowability by vedāntic texts only is superimposed sometimes to teach that *Ātman* is not knowable by perception and other empirical means, as may be seen from texts like:

Those who have quite correctly ascertained the truth by means of intuition arising from Vedāntas [viz. Upaniṣads]. (MuU III.2.6)

Ascertainability by the mind is sometimes taught to indicate that it is not known through sensuous knowledge, as is done in texts like:



By mind alone is this [Brahman] to be seen, there is no multiplicity whatever here. (BU IV. 4.19)

And in other instances it is taught that Brahman is beyond both the mind and speech in order to reveal that *Ātman* is known exclusively through intuition distinct from both. As for instance, in the case of texts like this:

From which words fall back, along with the mind failing to reach it, one who has intuited that bliss of Brahman is not afraid of anything. (TU II.9)

Similarly, the discriminating (*vivekin*) *sādhakas* may interpret for themselves other instances of deliberate superimposition.

Nor is it a rule that each superimposition aims at removing only one particular thought-construction. To illustrate by an example: superimposition of knowability of *Ātman* not merely wards off the supposition that some other thing deserves to be known, but also suggests that one becomes omniscient by the knowledge of Brahman and that all his ignorance of *Ātman* alone is responsible for the appearance of all duality, and that subsequent of the dawn of Self-knowledge there would no longer continue the distinction of knower, means of knowledge and the object of knowledge; and so on. It will thus be seen that the one superimposition of knowability on Brahman implies the dispersal of all constructs of imagination such as (1) the supposition of the actual existence of something other than *Ātman*, (2) the presumption that assumption of duality is the only imagination-construct to be removed by its knowledge, (3) the imagination that ignorance might recur at some future time, even after the knowledge of Brahman, (4) the supposition that actual existence of duality is responsible for its appearance, (5) the unfounded lease of continuance for knowership even after the knowledge of *Ātman* has dawned, and so on.

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Now, as a first example, we will examine the method of *adhyāropāpavāda* applied to the distinction between knowledge and ignorance. The following texts declare that by knowledge of Brahman alone one can attain the highest goal of human life, the state of Brahman:

The knower of Brahman attains the Highest. (TU II.1) Whoever comes to know that Supreme Brahman, becomes that very Brahman. (MuU III.2.9) Indeed this one is the all-pervading, unborn Ātman, undecaying, deathless, immortal, fearless Brahman. Brahman as is well known is fearless. Whosoever knows thus becomes indeed that very fearless¹ Brahman. (BU IV.4.25)

Hence we conclude that Liberation (*mokṣa* or *mukti*) is intercepted by the ignorance (*avidyā*) alone. Therefore the method of distinguishing *vidyā* and *avidyā*, that is to say right and mistaken knowledge, has got to be considered first and foremost. The following extracts from the Śaṅkara's commentaries may well be pondered over in this connection:

*In the same way as in the case of a piece of nacre appearing like silver, not grasping it consists only in the interception of wrong knowledge, so also grasping it means right knowledge only; for knowledge aims at removing the interception of wrong knowledge only. So also, in the present case, not attaining Ātman means only the interception of *avidyā*. So attainment means only its removal, and never can there be any other way of attaining it. (BU Śaṅkara Bhāṣya -BUŚBh-, I.4.7) For Brahman alone is the state of Freedom. (Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya -BSŚBh-, III.4.52)*

¹ “«What should I fear, if there is nothing else but me?» Then the fear disappeared. In fact, what could he be afraid of? One may feel fear only in the presence of a second entity.” (BU I. 4. 2)



Here we are told that the identity with Brahman, which is ever-existing, seems to be unattained due to *avidyā* while it appears to be attainable through *vidyā*.

It is evident that the subject and the object, opposite by nature and corresponding respectively to the ideas of “I” and “you”, can never be mutually interchangeable into the nature of one another¹. Therefore it is but proper to disclaim any superimposition of the object corresponding to the “you” and its properties² upon the subject corresponding to the *aham* and its *mamakās*, in as much as the subject is of the nature of consciousness. Neither, conversely, there can be any superimposition of the subject and its properties on the object. Nevertheless, it is natural to confuse the real and the unreal due to the wrong knowledge resulting from the lack of discrimination of what the two absolutely distinct properties are and to whom they belong to. Ordinary people are superimposing subject and object and their related properties without any distinction, thinking that “I am so and so”, and that “This is mine”. Now the wise consider this thus defined superimposition to be *avidyā*, and the ascertainment of the essential nature of subject-object after discrimination they call *vidyā*. In this way it is disclosed the nature of *avidyā* which screens our real nature as Brahman. Mutual superimposition of the Self and the non-self and the mistaken exchange of their properties due to non-discrimination is *avidyā*. Therefore, in this way it is also declared that the ascertainment of the true nature of Reality by means of discrimination is *vidyā*. Thus by means of deliberate superimposition of *vidyā* and *avidyā*, the reality of bondage and the adventitiousness of release have been denied. Here we mention few excerpts from the Śaṅkara commentaries suggesting that knowledge, no less than ignorance, is a deliberate superimposition and not the inherent nature of *Ātman*:

In the same way as Ātman is presumed to be the knower (vidvān³) of the objects like sound etc., which are conveyed by intellect etc., because of avidyā, or mental modifications⁴ of the nature of non-discriminating knowledge, Ātman himself who is really changeless is called the vidvān because of the mind modification, which is unreal likewise, viz., knowledge discriminating the Self and the non-self. (Bhagavad Gītā Śaṅkara Bhāṣya –BhGŚBh-, II.21)

Both viveka and aviveka are directly intuited to inhere in the antaḥkāraṇa⁵. It is common knowledge that colour which is perceived is no property of the perceiver [but of the perceived object]. And avidyā is objectified by one’s own intuition as when one thinks “I am ignorant”, “My knowledge is not distinct”. The discrimination due to vidyā is likewise intuited. Wise ones impart their knowledge to others and these others grasp it. Vidyā and avidyā, therefore, have to be classed with name and form alone; and name and form are admittedly no properties of Ātman⁶. (TU Śaṅkara Bhāṣya –TUŚBh-, II.8)

Objection: But will be there some difference in the Self due to its being or not being the cause of ignorance, as in the case of a man affected or not affected with the eye-disease called cataract!

Reply: No, because the śruti denies that Ātman by itself is the cause of ignorance, as in the passage: “it thinks, as it were and moves, as it were⁷”» (BUŚBh IV.4.6)

¹ When the subject, instead of paying attention to the multiple objects that make up the world, contemplates the world as a single object, it accomplishes what the Vedānta calls *dr̥g dr̥śya viveka*, discrimination between contemplator and contemplated.

² *Tvādīya*, “your” things, belonging to “you” (*tva*), as *mamaka* are “my” things, belonging to the “I” (*aham*).

³ In the *Bhagavad Gītā* the term *vidvān* (wise) is often used to define *jñāṭr*, the one who performs the cognitive inquiry at the individual level.

⁴ With mental modifications (*mānasa vṛtti*) Vedānta means the ideas or thoughts produced by the mind for its own modification.

⁵ The internal organ, viz. the mind as a whole.

⁶ “The *akṣara e avyakta Māyā* is a kind of power that has the same origin of name and form.” *BSŚBh* I.2.22.

⁷ That is to say: “he thinks and moves only in appearance”.



It is stated here that *vidyā* and *avidyā* both belong to the not-self since they can be objectified, and that the fact of *Ātman* appearing to possess them as properties is only a false appearance. It will thus be seen that the *vidyā* and *avidyā viveka* is employed only by superimposition of knowership on *Ātman* in accordance with others' views, but in reality *Ātman* is not even a knower. This is in consonance with the upaniṣadic statement above mentioned:

He who exists from the point of view of the imagined opinion (kalpita saṃvṛti) does not exist from the Reality point of view. He is only a theoretical hypothesis (paratantrābhi saṃvṛti) of other schools, but not as a matter of fact. (MUGK IV.73)

A particular aspect of *vidyāvīdyā vicāra* is represented by *śāstra prāmāṇya viveka*, the discrimination based on the authority of the scriptures. When it is maintained that *Ātman* is known only through the *Upaniṣads*, on the strength of texts like:

I ask thee of the Puruṣa known in the Upaniṣad (BU III.9.26); That goal of which all the Vedas sing. (Kaṭha Upaniṣad –KU-, I.2.15)

It is only for the purpose of intimating that he is not knowable by perception and other empirical means of knowledge and not to convey the idea that he is actually known through the upaniṣadic texts (*śābda pramāṇa*)¹. So Śaṅkara says:

The intuition of Brahman is indeed achieved through the ascertainment of the import of Vedic texts and not by other empirical means of knowledge like inference. (BSŚBh I.1.2); For this Principle is no object of perception because it has no colour and other properties. Nor it is the object of inference and other means for it has no indicative mark [necessary for those means to function] etc. This Principle can be known through the agama alone like Dharma. (BSŚBh II.1.6)

It is for the purpose of teaching that Brahman is known only through the *Veda* that the revered Bādarāyaṇa has written the aphorism “*Because it has the Śāstra for its means*”. Śaṅkara has explained it thus:

The meaning is that Brahman, the cause of the Universe manifestation, is knowable through the Śāstra pramāṇa. (BSŚBh I.1.3)

But because of this, one should not delude oneself into the belief that the distinction of means and object of knowledge (*pramāṇa* and *prameya*) sanctioned by common usage is really real, and that *Śāstra* is also a means of knowledge just like perception etc. enabling one to know Brahman which is not known through other means². Because the *śruti* says:

That which is not expressible by speech, but by which speech itself is expressed, that alone is Brahman. (Kena Upaniṣad –KeU-, 1.5)

And there is a further reason for this warning, because all *pramāṇas* and *Śāstras* function under the presupposition of *avidyā* for their basis. This is stated by Śaṅkara:

As for Śāstras, it is the final (antya) pramāṇa; it derives its validity only pointing out and removing what is not the property of Ātman, but not by directly making known what is not known through other means. (BhGŚBh II.18)

¹ See the discussion on *antya pramāṇa* in this Website: Maitreyī, *Conoscenza vedāntica e conoscenza empiriche*.

² This is the mistake of those who have a devotional attitude towards sacred texts. In this case they falsely suppose that the text contains the knowledge of the Supreme (that is to say the Supreme itself) and therefore they consider the book to be “eternal”.



The antya pramāṇa removes the knowership itself and while so removing it loses its own validity, just as the means of knowlwdge in a dream, is invalidated on waking. (BhGŚBh II.69)

The idea is that *śruti* also is spoken of as a means of knowledge only in a secondary sense, from the stand-point of *avidyā*, since all talk of *pramāṇas* depends on the presupposition of a knower, who is himself really a product of *avidyā*.

All usage of the means and objects of knowledge, whether worldly or vedic ones, proceeds on the presupposition of the mutual superimposition of the Self and not-self known by the name of avidyā; so also do the Śāstras seem to lay down injunctions or to prohibit certain acts to teach the Liberation. (BSŚBh, Upodghāta)

The word “all” being a general term, the talk of one who desires to be released is also to be understood as the outcome of *avidyā*. Since there are texts mentioning people who teach the Liberation (*mokṣa parāṇi*), these people along with the *Śāstras* arguing about *Ātman* are to be considered within the ambit of the usage of *pramāṇas* based on *avidyā*. Thus it is evident that for the *Vedāntins* the convention of the means and objects of knowledge as also that of *Śāstra* etc. is only a device subsumed under the comprehensive method of *adhyāropāpavāda* contrived for the purpose of teaching.

With this it is also demonstrated that:

There can be no talks of the science of Vedānta, or relation of a master and the pupil aspiring for a course of instruction in that Science without the concept of Avidyā as a prius. (Svāmī Satcidānandendra Sarasvatī, Śaṅkara’s Clarification of certain Vedāntic Concepts, Holenasipur, Adhyātma Prakāsha Kāryālaya, 1996, p. 89)