

## How do we arrive at the nature of Reality?

What are all the possible means of knowledge of objects? *Pramāṇam* is the Sanskrit word for ‘a valid means of knowledge’<sup>1</sup>. One who employs this valid means of knowledge is a *pramāta* – a knower, the subject of knowledge. *Prameyam* is the object of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for enumerating the various means of knowledge below is simply to point out that *ātmā* is not available for recognition through any of them. (We see in texts like the Bhagavad Gīta that one of the words revealing the nature of *ātmā* is ‘*a-prameya*’, not an object of knowledge). There are six *pramāṇas*:

*Pratyakṣa pramāṇam* is direct knowledge of a given thing through ‘perception’, through the use of the sense organs: ears are the means for knowledge of sound, eyes are the means for knowing light, tongue for taste, skin to detect warmth and cold, nose for odour. Using the senses one gets direct knowledge of objects. Senses can be used as a means of knowledge when what is to be known is an object of knowledge. *Ātmā* is not available through *pratyakṣa pramāṇam* because *ātmā* is not an object of knowledge.

*Anumāṇa pramāṇam* is another way we know things. It means inference and is based on perceptual knowledge: you perceive something and, based on that, you infer something else. For example, you see clouds directly and then you infer that it is going to rain. The traditional example given is: wherever there is smoke, there is fire<sup>3</sup>. You don’t see the fire but you infer its presence from seeing the smoke. *Ātmā* is not available through *anumāṇa pramāṇam*: you cannot infer the presence of *ātmā* based on anything you perceive.

*Arthāpattiḥ pramāṇam* is next. We do not have a close English word for ‘*arthāpatti*’. The best we have is the word ‘presumption’ – it is not expressive enough, but it comes close. When there are a few possible conclusions we select the most likely of them: we presume. Let’s take an example: this person did not come by bus and I know the underground trains are cancelled; I presume someone dropped him here because he does not drive and it is too far to walk. Presumption is another legitimate means of knowledge.

*Upamānam pramāṇam* is a fourth means of knowledge. This is ‘comparison’. To be able to compare, one needs knowledge of the thing one is citing for comparison. For example, to indicate what a wildebeest is to someone who has never seen one, we might say that it’s like a cross between an ox and a zebra. What can *ātmā*, which is described in *śāstras* as ‘the secondless one’, be compared to? Not only are two things needed for comparison, they also need to be similar.

*Anupalabdhi pramāṇam* comes next. *Upalabdhi* means availability. *Anupalabdhi* means non-availability, ‘absence’. You thought you had a pen, but when you check your pocket there is no pen. You have knowledge of the pen being not there: you have knowledge of the absence of something. *Ātmā* is never absent.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of *pramāṇam* is *phalavat anādhigata artha bodhakam*. *Bodhakam*, that which reveals, that which brings to light; *artha*, a given thing, a given object; *anādhigata*, that which has not been previously understood; *phalavat*, useful. That which brings to light something useful that has not been understood earlier. *Pramā janakam iti pramāṇam* is another definition – that through which knowledge takes place.

<sup>2</sup> Remove the ‘*pra*’ from these words and we have *māta* the measurer; *mānam*, measuring; *meyam*, that which can be measured. By adding ‘*pra*’ we bring in knowledge – the one who knows [*pramāta*], the means of knowing and that which can be known as an object [*pramāṇam*]. ‘*A-prameya*’ thus means ‘immeasurable’, ‘that which cannot be objectified, cannot be known as an object of knowledge’.

<sup>3</sup> ‘*Yatra yatra dhumah, tatra tatra agnih*’

*Śabda pramāṇam* is the sixth means of knowledge. *Śabda* means sound, it also means ‘word’, a meaningful sound. Through the word, you arrive at an object. In this way a word also serves as a means of knowledge. Here, for knowledge of Self, all the other *pramāṇas* have been ruled out and *śabda pramāṇa* alone remains as the means of self-knowledge.

Which words serve as means of self-knowledge? ‘Eternal’, ‘all-pervasive’, ‘indestructible’ – do any of these words reveal anything of *ātmā*? Even take the word ‘consciousness’ – does it take you directly to *ātmā* like the word ‘rose’ takes you directly to its object? For *śabda* to be a *pramāṇam*, one needs to understand that the words of Vedānta are what’s required. How? They reveal the intrinsic nature, *svarūpam*, of *ātmā*. Reality, being the subtlest, has to be understood only in terms of its intrinsic nature, *svarūpam*. This subtlest *vastu* [thing] also happens to be the subject of knowledge – not an object of knowledge.

No mind, however sharp, however intelligent, can stumble upon *ātmā* by itself – no matter how long one sits in meditation. If you think you can sit in meditation all the time or use your own intelligence to arrive at the meaning of the words of *śāstram*, you are mistaken. If one’s *buddhi* tries to understand *ātmā*, without using *śāstram* as the means of knowledge, it will be like one blind person being led by another blind person. As is said: *andhenaiva nīyamāṇā yathāṇḍhāḥ* (Katha I.ii.5) ...like the blind being led by the blind.

Reality, the very existence of the universe, is available for recognition only as the subject of knowledge, not as an object of knowledge. The *sampradāya* [tradition] helps us to understand that the other *pramāṇas* (those other than *śabda*) can be used only to know an object of knowledge, so are of no use here. This Reality, being the subtlest *vastu*, can only be known in terms of its *svarūpam*, nature. Therefore, since the words of *śāstram* alone reveal the *svarūpam* of Reality, these words have to be unfolded. You may think: English translations are available, let me go buy the book and start reading myself.

You will not be able to understand it by yourself.

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The words of Vedānta serve as *śabda pramāṇam*. But those words need to be unfolded, handled very carefully by a teacher who knows the *sampradāya*. The Tradition has its own way of starting teaching because it knows where the problem lies. When we say the reality of the universe is only available as the subject of knowledge, we mean that it’s available as the knower of objects. Every individual connects with the knower as ‘I’. With reference to every individual, the subject of knowledge is indicated by the first person, singular pronoun, ‘I’, and not by any other pronoun.

Vedānta knows that the individual is not just the knower, consciousness, not just the subtle body, not just the gross body, but is a combination of all these, put together intelligently. Vedānta knows that the underlying Reality of every being is pure Consciousness – something we do not know. Manifestations are many – gross and subtle, visible and invisible – and that goes for the individual too who is made up of many parts and functions. Vedānta needs to help us arrive at Reality in terms of its intrinsic nature, its *svarūpam*. Vedānta needs to tell us where Reality is available for recognition and how it is to be arrived at. Very cleverly it uses the methodology of subject-object analysis [*dr̥g dr̥śya viveka prakrīya*] to do this.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This methodology is employed to arrive at the ultimate knower. The sense objects are brought to light by the senses. The senses, in turn, are brought to light by the mind. The mind too is not the final knower: it is brought to light by the witness.

It starts in this way because no individual, even unknowingly, mistakes an object external to the body for the subject – that is how you know that the self is not outside the body. The whole body, in turn, is connected to the subtlest manifestation, the *antaḥkaraṇa* [mind], and that is how you know everything about the body, feel every pain. Because of the proximity you cannot say: I am not the body. There's nothing wrong in having identity with the body. Vedanta's job is to help you arrive at the understanding that the gross physical body, the sense powers, the physiological functions, the *antaḥkaraṇa*, are all objects of perception; finally to arrive at the question: 'What exactly is this knower?'

The knower of objects is the subject. The *svarūpam* of Reality is available only as the subject – the knower is not the Reality sitting there but it's *svarūpam*. When you arrive at it you realise there is no 'knower', there is only pure knowledge. Pure knowledge, pure consciousness, pure awareness is available for recognition as the 'knower'. The 'you', the knower, is pure consciousness, but consciousness is not the knower. Now you know the meaning of the word '*cit*'.

The first thing you thus arrive at through enquiry is *cit*, which implies the *svarūpam*, the nature of Reality. What is *cit*? Pure knowledge. To arrive at pure knowledge *śāstram* has used *dr̥g dr̥śya viveka prakrīya*.

One more *prakrīya* is also used to help you ascertain it: *avastha traiya prakrīya* – the analysis of the three states of experience. In this analysis you are not concerned with the body as an object of knowledge: you are very clear that the body is an object of knowledge, so you don't have to worry about it. And you are also clear that the sense powers, the powers of the organs of action, the physiological functions are all objects of knowledge – you have no doubt about this too.

Then you arrive at the *antaḥkaraṇa*: you know that all thoughts are objects of knowledge too, whether they come from *manas, buddhi, cittam, ahankāra*. These four constitute the *antaḥkaraṇa* when it is active. But there is a state when the *antaḥkaraṇa* is resolved for a length of time, when no thought arises. That is how mind rests. A lot of mental work – planning, scheming, etc – results in tiredness. When no thought rises, that is proper rest called sleep. You have no control over this; you can't decide that all thoughts should go.

'Minding', mentation, is a function. The different thoughts that arise are based on perception, on confusion and projections, right or wrong. This happens during the waking state, when the mind is fully active. Then again, depending on your waking experiences, you may also have some dreams. Here the mind is partially active. Then mind functions in such a way that during deep sleep all the thoughts resolve. Mind has to fall asleep, mind has to wake up, mind has to dream. This function of the mind has to take place constantly: we have no say over it. But the mind is known whether it is active during waking or partially active in dream or totally passive in deep sleep. The function of the mind, in its different states, is known. How is it known?

There is something, because of the presence of which, it becomes known. Without that, the mind cannot be known. Without being known, the mind will be as good as non-existent, because even though it is subtle, the mind is a material product. It is inert – it cannot come to light by itself. It needs light to come to light.

Pure Awareness or pure Consciousness or pure Knowledge is that, because of the presence of which, the various states of mind – waking, dream or sleep – are known. We say: 'The knower of each state of mind is one and the same – pure Consciousness. But Consciousness doesn't perform any act of knowing. Consciousness just is. Because of this, mind comes to light. Just as opaque objects come to light in the presence of light, so too every state of mind, every thought form, comes to light in the presence of Consciousness.'

Knowing is not an action. Knowing is the *svarūpam* of Reality. This is how it needs to be understood. If you do not know the meaning of *cit* like this, nothing will be understood. That is an incontestable fact. The whole *jagat* is a manifestation of knowledge. Now we understand how pure Knowledge is. In this way, using these two *prakrīyas*, the meaning of the word *cit* as the *svarūpam* of Reality is made clear.

Now we ask: Does this Consciousness have a beginning? We can only ask this now because we have arrived at an understanding of the word '*cit*', without which we cannot enquire into its beginninglessness or endlessness. This is unfoldment. *Śāstram* says: Consciousness does not have a beginning. There is no time when Consciousness begins because the coming into being of anything happens in Consciousness, in Awareness. Nothing can destroy Consciousness, bringing it to an end, because everything exists in Consciousness. How can any object, which is dependent on light to come to light, destroy the light? How can it contribute to the beginning of light? Similarly, mind, and everything dependent on mind for existence, has its existence in Consciousness. Therefore Consciousness has no beginning. It doesn't come to an end. Nor does it undergo any change.

First we understood what Consciousness means, now we can say that it is beginningless, endless, changeless: Reality is eternal, *anantam*. Now we also understand that the only *vastu* that can be eternal is Reality.

No object of knowledge is outside knowledge. Knowledge pervades the entire object. And, as knowledge is not outside Awareness, every object, including time and space, is pervaded by Awareness through and through. The subtlest *vastu* pervades everything and that is why it is called 'all-pervasive'.

Now we can say that anything that can be an object – including time and space – does not exist outside knowledge. No knowledge exists outside Consciousness. No thought, no mind exists outside Consciousness. Therefore we can say that no object of knowledge exists outside Consciousness. The object that comes to light in the presence of light, that has borrowed existence from light, is completely pervaded by light. The existence of light is the opaque object's existence. In this way we arrive at the understanding of Consciousness being available as *sat*, existence.