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**SANSKRIT LITERATURE – CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADVAITA VENDANTA**


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**DR. PALETI NAGESWARA RAO**

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**Abstract:** We observe many things in this universe, the reality of which impinges on us. We see many material objects composed of different elements. We see many living entities throbbing with life and activity. We encounter different forms of energy such as light, heat etc. We observe different kinds of objects on the basis of which we distinguish them, categorize them, classify them and so on. Not satisfied with merely observing them with our naked eyes, we invented highly sophisticated instruments like the electron microscope with the help of which we unearthed the vast realm of the micro-world. By scientific reasoning and mathematical inference, we have discovered the subatomic particles which are the basic components of the material world. We have also invented telescopes to go beyond the horizon of our visible universe and discovered the fantastic world of stars, galaxies, nebulae, quasars, black-holes etc., the vastness of which goes beyond the ken of our imagination.

**Introduction:** We also observe the different events taking place all around us, the sequence of which we call time. There is also the infinite space in which matter exists. There is the inner world of thought which we can experience as the object of knowledge. Then there is the world of emotion which we can only experience, but cannot visualize. There is a sense of ego which every one of us feels, but which eludes our understanding.

Thus with our ordinary reasoning we can understand the universe as being composed of matter, energy, time, space, life, thought, emotion, ego, intellect etc. Is there anything beyond?

All these come under the objective side of our experience. There is the other side of our experience which we rarely take cognizance of, and that is the inner .subject or the witnessing agent, without which all this vast knowledge of the objective world could not have been there at all. When we turn back and focus our attention towards the inner subjective side of experience, we enter the realm of Consciousness.

Shankaracharya says:

“Asti kaschit swayam nityamaha pratyaya lamvanah  
Avaradhatraya sakshi san panchkosha vilakshanah:  
"There is one who is self-established, eternal, locus of I-consciousness, witness of three states of waking, dreaming and deep-sleep, and who is different from the five sheaths such as physical, vital, mental, intellectual and blissful."As Swami Vivekananda puts it: "He (the Divine Consciousness) is the-Eternal Subject of everything.I am subject of this chair; I see the chair; so God is the Eternal Subject of my soul." (Complete Works, II, 134).

**The meaning of the word consciousness:** The word consciousness has got different shades of meaning. Sometimes we use this word in the sense. of seeing or observing an object, as for instance, we say, "I am conscious of the book on the table." Sometimes we say that someone has lost consciousness, only to mean that he has swooned. In

psychology, this word is used to indicate different mental states, such as the conscious mind, unconscious mind, etc. The mental state that comes to our awareness is called the conscious mind. All the mental activities of thinking, imagination, feeling, etc., which come within the purview of our awareness are called conscious states of mind. There is a vast region of the mind called the unconscious which is the repository of impressions of past experiences of life that are unknown to us, but influencing our conscious life.

In philosophy, it is mainly used in two senses. When I say that I am conscious of an object or a thought, three things are involved: the subject, consciousness and the object. It is consciousness that links the subject and the object. Here consciousness is called **Jnana**, the subject and the object are respectively called **Jnatru** and **Jneya**. Consciousness is often compared to the lamp which reveals the object to the subject, which is considered to be unconscious by some philosophers (**vaisesikas**). The word consciousness is also used to mean the subject itself, and here we are primarily concerned with this meaning of the term.

In Sanskrit, the word **chit** means consciousness. There is a similar and more commonly used word **china** which means mind or mind stuff. So, it is important to note the difference between these two terms.

**Perception is a conscious process:** Now the question is, is it necessary to regard consciousness as an entity separate from the subject? If it is separate from the subject it also becomes an object of knowledge. Then we have to assume another consciousness to reveal it. And again to reveal this consciousness we have to posit one more consciousness and this goes on ad infinitum. So to be consistent with reason, we shall rather consider the subject itself as a conscious entity which does not require any other consciousness to reveal the objects.

Now we are left with only two entities: the subject which is consciousness and the object which is unconscious. It is only the consciousness (subject) that sees, observes or rather becomes aware of other objects, and not the unconscious object. A chair cannot perceive or become aware of the table. It is only the conscious being that sees, observes and becomes aware of other objects.

One may object to this, saying, why do you speak of consciousness, rather say that the eyes are observing the object or say that the brain centre, corresponding to the eyes, is observing the object. The same thing can be told of other sense organs too. Behaviorists' do not believe in the existence of the mind or consciousness, and for them everything is physiological. Even thinking and emotions are also mere physical reactions to certain stimuli. Their view is that the reflected light of the object falls on the retina of the eye and this stimulus is carried to the brain centre through nerve channels. Then perception takes place.

But perception is not so simple as this. Hundreds and thousands of stimuli are carried to the brain centre. But we perceive only a few objects—those that we want to perceive. Sometimes even when the stimulus is carried to the brain, the perception does not take place. This indicates that the perceiving agent is different from all these processes. The external senses and their corresponding brain centers are only instruments through which the perceiving agent or the subject sees or recognizes the objects. So this process is not merely mechanical reactions to certain stimuli, but a conscious process involving selections, rejections, recognitions, etc. This applies to all physical and mental activities of the individual. Will Durant says, "...we are not helpless recipients and victims of whatever stimuli may chance to impinge upon our flesh; we are agents of selection." (*The Pleasures of Philosophy*, p. 64).

The world that we observe is a creation of the mind. Now we shall consider what these sense qualities such as colour, sound etc., are. The colour that we see in the object is actually not there in the object; it belongs to light. When light falls on the object, it absorbs certain colours of light and reflects a particular colour which falls on the eye. This we recognize as the colour of the object. Now what are, after all, the colours of light? They are only certain frequencies in the vibrations of light. Change in frequency leads to change in colour. So colour is nothing but the mode of vibrations of light, and these vibrations are converted into colours. Where do these vibrations get converted into colours? Is it in the eyes of the brain centre? No, because at these stages also they remain as vibrations only. It is the mind that recognizes these vibrations as different colours.

The same is the case with sound. It is not the object that produces the sound, it is not the musical instruments that produce music. They only vibrate and the vibration is carried through some medium to the ears. And in the ears also some vibrations are produced, which are recognized as sound later. This explanation applies to other sense qualities also.

So strictly speaking, it is the mind which creates the sense 'qualities. Apart from the sense qualities we have no knowledge of the external world. So the world that we observe is a creation of the mind.

**Individual consciousness as different from the body and mind:** Now we see so many activities going on in ourselves. There are mental activities of creation out of sense qualities, there are emotional activities of loving, hating, enjoying, etc., there are activities of the senses and activities of different parts of the body. There must be a coordinating factor behind all these activities. Otherwise, there cannot be self identity in us. There is a single agent, a centre of personality in every one of us who owns all these activities, whom we call '*kartru, bhokt*' etc. We call this centre of personality as ego, or individual consciousness or the subject as told earlier. Kenopanishad says, 'It is ear of the ear, mind of the mind, eye of the eye, and life of life'.

"Srotasya srotram manaso manoyadh vaacho ha  
vaacham sa u pranasya praanah]

Chakshushashechakshuratimucya dhiraah  
pretyaas maallokadamrutaa bavanti"(kena 1-2)

We have seen that there is a conscious subject which perceives the object. As we all know, this body also is perceived as an object which indicates that the subject is different from the body. We have also seen that the objects that we observe are only mental constructions. So we observe the objects only as mental abstractions, and that which observes, the conscious subject, must be different from them. So we come to the conclusion that the subject or individual consciousness is different from the body and the mind. The very first verse of

*Drg-drsya-viveka* says:

"Rupam drushayam druk taddrushayam druktu  
maanasam

drushayaa dheevruttayassaakshi drugeva na to  
drushayate

"The form is perceived and the eye is its perceiver. It (eye) is perceived and the mind is its perceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the Witness (the Self) is verily the perceiver. It (the Witness) is not perceived (by any other.)"

"We shall consider this from another standpoint. Every one of us wants freedom, even though the conception of freedom may differ from person to person. What do we actually mean by freedom? Freedom is a state in which a person is not under

pressure or control of any other person or object or force outside himself. What is meant by "outside himself? We generally mean outside the body. When I say "outside me". I generally mean "outside the body". But when I reflect on my self, "I" find that my body is outside myself, because I can control my body at will. That which is controlled must be different from the controller. If I go still deeper, I find that the mental processes and emotions are also outside myself. However much I may be controlled by them, I know that I can definitely exercise control over them. Even if it is admitted that I am controlled by them, I must be different from them. So this "I", the subject is different from body-mind complex.

**Consciousness is Universal:** Now we shall consider one more point. This subject or the individual consciousness cannot really be individual; for if it is individual it is finite or limited. If it is limited, it is as good as any other object of knowledge. But we have seen that the consciousness is the eternal subject, it can never be an object of knowledge. We cannot imagine consciousness as broken spatially or temporally— there are no bits of consciousness. If there are several consciousnesses, one consciousness would become the object of knowledge to the other consciousness.

But consciousness can never be the object of knowledge. "How can Knower be known?" (*Bṛhadaranyaka*,4.5.15). So consciousness must be universal.

Let us consider this from yet another standpoint. Subtler the object, greater is its pervasion. A gross material object is less pervasive. A solid object cannot pervade outside its limit. A liquid can be more pervasive unless it is limited by vessels etc. A gaseous object is still more pervasive than other objects. If we proceed like this, we find that electro-magnetic energies have got greater pervasiveness than all other energies and objects, by virtue of their capacity to penetrate even solid objects. If we apply this logic to consciousness, we find that it is all pervasive since it is the subtlest of all objects and energies. So we have to consider consciousness as universal and infinite, ruling out the possibility of positing any other ultimate reality apart from consciousness, since there cannot be more than one infinite.

**Sat-Cit-Ananda:** Just as consciousness is the source of all knowledge, it is also the source of all existence in this universe. As it is water that gives reality to the waves and ocean, so also it is consciousness that gives reality to the external world, that is to say it is the basis of all existence, nay it is existence itself. This aspect of consciousness indicates existence and is termed as Sat in Sanskrit.

Consciousness is also said to be the source of all the joys that we experience in the world. Mere a question

may arise as to how ordinary joys are derived from consciousness? Happiness as we know is a state of mind. It springs from within as a reaction to the things or events outside, that is to say that happiness is not in the objects themselves. So, external objects only stimulate the inner joy. Now let us examine what is it that makes the mind within us happy? It is the reflection of inner consciousness that is perceived as happiness (*Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*,4,332). Swami Vivekananda says: "No happiness was ever found in the senses. There never was a person who found happiness in the senses or in enjoyment of the senses. Happiness is only found in the Spirit." (CW.11,83) This source of happiness is a subtler, higher and purer form of happiness namely bliss or Ananda which is not conditioned by external-objects. It is inseparably associated with consciousness and existence discussed earlier. Therefore the state beyond happiness is objectless enjoyment, unconditioned by any reflector. Hence the ultimate reality is described as Sat-Cit-Ananda, that is, existence-consciousness and bliss.

**Consciousness and the Phenomena! World:** There is one universal Consciousness at the back of every mental and physical phenomenon. It can be compared to the infinite ocean with innumerable waves. All phenomena of this universe—man, animal, material objects, mental and physical energies—are like different waves in the ocean. They are all different kinds of manifestations of one universal consciousness. The *Chandogya Upanishad* says, "In words or speech alone the modification originates and exists. In reality there is no such thing as modification. It is merely a name and the clay alone is real."

"Vaacharambhanam vikaaroo naamadheyam mṛttiketyeva satyam" (*Chandogya Upanishad*,6.1.4) Clay can be moulded into different objects having different forms and names. Apart from this clay these forms and names have no existence. Whatever may be the variations in shape, there is nothing else but clay. When different objects are made out of clay, clay does not lose its essential nature, its clayness; it does not transform itself. When water rises in the form of waves it remains as water itself. Similarly universal Consciousness remains as such in spite of being manifested as the visible universe.

In the ocean there are huge waves, small ones and bubbles too. But all are forms of water only. Similarly, in this ocean of consciousness there are huge and powerful waves such as Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammed the prophet and other great divine personalities. By worshipping them and following their ideal life we try to realize our own divine nature. Worship, prayer, Japa and meditation etc., are the means to this realization.

Thus consciousness is at the back of every phenomenon whether physical, mental or spiritual. It is appearing as gross material objects to the physical senses; it is seen as different forms of energies through sophisticated instruments; it is perceived as mental modifications through introspection; it is experienced as divine manifestation through spiritual insight, and when all seeing and perceiving stops, it remains by itself. "Consciousness is the totality beyond space-time what may in essence be the real I. We have come to know that consciousness and energy are one; that all space-time is constructed by consciousness; that our normal perception of reality is a composite of an indefinite number of universes in which we coexist; and that what we perceive as ourselves is only the localized projection of the totality of our true selves." (Bob Tofen, from the foreword of *Space-Time and Beyond*.)

Swami Vivekananda does not use the word consciousness in the sense in which it is used in this paper. He normally uses this word as a mental factor or product of prakriti, not in the sense of any spiritual element. His word for consciousness, as used in this paper, is the Self or Divinity. He gave great emphasis on the potential divinity of man, and said that the goal of life is to manifest this Divinity. And according to him all the noble qualities, extraordinary strength and geniuses are different manifestations of the Divinity. He says: "Teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity." (Complete Works, III, 193). He further says: "Manifest the Divinity within you, and everything will be harmoniously arranged around it." (C.W. IV, 351). He even attributes material progress to the manifestation of Divine Consciousness: "This infinite power of the Spirit, brought to bear upon matter evolves material development, made to act upon thought evolves intellectuality and

made to act upon itself makes of man a God." (C.W. IV, 351). According to him, "From the ant to the perfect man there is the same Atman in all, the difference being only in manifestation." (C.W.IV, 484).

According to Swamiji, when the Absolute (Universal Divine Consciousness) is seen through space, time and causation, it appears as the universe. He says: "Time, space and causation are like the glass through which the Absolute is seen, and when It is seen on the lower side, it appears as the universe." (C.W.II, 130). He calls this glass or veil Maya, which binds man with its various manifestations. Man covered with this veil, sees himself as so and so, and sees the phenomenal world as different from him. As the veil becomes thinner and thinner, he identifies himself with the Divine more and more and sees the external world also as Divine. Swamiji says: "Every human personality may be compared to a glass globe. There is the same pure white light—an emission of Divine Being—in the centre of each, but the glass being of different colours and thickness, the rays assume diverse aspects in the transmission. The equality and beauty of each central flame is the same, and the apparent inequality only in the imperfection of the temporal instrument of its expression. As we rise higher and higher in the scale of being the medium becomes more and more translucent." (C.W.IV, 191).

Actually, is there a veil, is there a glass globe which separates us from Reality? Are there different worlds of manifestation? Swamiji says: "There are no such realities as a physical world, a mental world, a spiritual world. Whatever is, is one. Let us say, it is a sort of tapering existence; the thickest part is here, it tapers and becomes finer and finer. The finest is what we call Spirit; the grossest, the body. And just as it is here in microcosm, it is exactly the same in the macrocosm. The universe of ours is exactly like that; it is the gross external thickness, and it tapers into something finer and finer until it becomes God." (C.W.II, 16).

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Dr. Paleti Nageswara rao/Dept.of Sahitya/  
Rastriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetam/Tirupati/ Tirupati/nagu25101982@gmail.com