

Advaita Vedānta

Baba Shri Mastramji was an embodiment of Advaita Vedānta. According to Advaita Vedānta, the Reality is one and everything else is just a phenomenon superimposed on It. The concept of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) requires some explanation in order to clearly comprehend the Non-dual nature of the Ultimate Reality (Brahman or Self). Let us first take the dream analogy. After performing day-to-day activities in the waking state when we go to sleep, we usually dream. In that state, our sense and motor organs, which were active during waking state, cease to function. We see another created world in that state. We see trees, buildings, oceans, elephants, lions, etc. and we interact with them and our reactions are more or less on a par with those in the waking state. In that state, the whole phenomenon is a projection of our mind (*manahspandana*), *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, 3.29. The mind along with its projections is superimposed on the Self.

The rope-snake illustration also helps understand the concept of *adhyāsa*. The rope lying in a place which is dimly lighted appears to be a snake. A person who happens to be there does not know that it is the rope lying there. Instead, due to his mental disposition, he mistakes the rope for a snake and, fearing it, runs away. The same person comes to know the real nature of the rope when the place is duly lighted. The illusory snake disappears due to the knowledge of the rope. In a similar manner, man due to the ignorance of the Ultimate Reality (Brahman) superimposes the illusory world on the latter. At the dawn of the knowledge of Brahman, the illusory world ceases to exist. Only Brahman, i.e. only the Self remains just as at the disappearance

of the snake, only the rope remains. The creation may be compared to the illusory snake and Brahman to the rope. Extending these analogies, we can further add that the seer, the act of seeing and the objects of the act of seeing are all created by the mind owing to the ignorance (*ajñāna*) of the nature of Self and are superimposed on the latter.

Let us return to the dream analogy. In our dream, the world created by the mind appears external to us due to sleep. In a similar manner, the phenomena in the waking state really exist within us but appear to be outside us because of the force of *ajñāna* (*Māyā*). In this illustration *ajñāna* has been compared with sleep. Just as sleep is responsible for the projections of the mind appearing to be external to us, in the same way the waking phenomena which really exist in us appear to be outside us due to *ajñāna*. When the removal of *ajñāna* takes place by virtue of the dawn of knowledge, the whole world ceases to exist outside the Self. The realised person sees himself everywhere. The following mantra endorses this fact convincingly:

यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतान्यात्मन्येवानुपश्यति ।
सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥ *Īśa Upaniṣad*, 6

He who sees all beings in the Self itself and the Self in all beings, ceases to hate anybody as a result of that.

Babashri's śloka in the *Ātmacintanam* also hints at that state of the realised person since it describes the state of a person before and after realisation:

अस्मिन् बृहति ब्रह्माण्डे लघुरूपोऽहमीदृशः ।
आत्मतत्त्वे तु विज्ञाते लघुरूपोऽयमीदृशः ॥२१॥

Not knowing the reality of the Self, one thinks, " In this vast universe I have such an insignificant form." When the

reality of the Self is known, then, "This vast universe has such an insignificant form." (That is to say, when the knowledge of the Self is gained, the universe, which is just a fabrication of the mind, appears as no larger than a small fruit placed in the palm of one's hand). In substance, this means that the universe is nothing but the Self just as the illusory snake is nothing but the rope.

It is the principle of *ajñāna* (*avidyā*) due to which *adhyāsa* comes into force and the series of false identifications begins. The ego, which is a constituent of *antaḥkāraṇa* (mind), is a product of *ajñāna* and its identification with the Self is the initial superimposition which is mutual in character. That is the superimposition of the ego on Consciousness and of the latter on the former. This gives rise to the series of superimpositions, that is to say, this becomes the cause of the superimposition of senses, body and others on the Self and of the Self on them.

To understand the concept of mutual superimposition, let us consider the popular expression 'The iron ball burns'. In this example, the superimposition of the identity of iron ball with fire is mutual. Due to this, the circularity of the iron ball is superimposed on the fire and as such the fire appears to be round. Fire's capacity to burn is superimposed on the iron ball because of which we use the expression 'the iron ball burns' although, in fact, the iron ball does not have the capacity to burn. In a similar way, the mind and the consciousness are mutually superimposed on each other. As a consequence, the mind appears to be conscious despite the fact that it is inert being a product of *ajñāna* and consciousness, even being devoid of any activity, appears to be assuming the agency of acts of seeing, touching, etc. The superimposition of consciousness percolates down to the body through mind and senses. Consequently

mind, sense organs, body, etc. appear to be conscious and conversely the consciousness appears to be thinking, perceiving and doing various activities.

All this means that before creation, the Self was devoid of the 'other', that is of non-self'. To explain, the condition of experiencership, the act of experiencing and the objects of experience are superimposed on Brahman after the latter is in association with Māyā (that is the qualified (*śabalita*) Brahman). To put it differently, the whole universe is like a sprout in a seed which gives rise to the tree along with its branches, leaves, fruits, etc. Just as the sprout in the seed manifests as the tree, in the same manner, the qualified Brahman created this variegated phenomena just by Its will like a magician. This answers the query: How does Brahman, the Supreme Reality, without taking the help of external paraphernalia create this world? Moreover, being a cause, It does not become subject to modification like any other cause. This is why the phenomenon that came into existence is compared with the illusory snake or the illusory silver in a conch-shell. Just as the ignorance of the real nature of the rope or the conch-shell makes the illusory snake or the silver appear before our eyes, in the same way, *ajñāna* is the cause of the appearance of this creation. Can we describe the illusory snake or the illusory silver as existent or non-existent? The answer is an emphatic "No". We cannot say that the snake or silver is existent since it disappears as soon as we have the knowledge of the true nature of the rope or conch-shell. Neither can we say that the snake or the silver does not exist as we see it, though erroneously, and fear it or are attracted to it. In this way, existence or non-existence cannot be their predicates. Hence, the phenomenon of silver or snake can at best be explained as indescribable (*anirvacanīya*).

Brahman or the Self is non-dual. This warrants the pre-supposition of the principle of *adhyāsa*. This is the precise reason why Bhagavatpāda Śrī Śaṅkarācārya prefaces his commentary on the Brahmasūtra with the discussion on *adhyāsa* which he simply defines as the cognition of that which is not there (*atasmimṅstadbuddhiḥ*). The cognition of the snake in the rope in which the snake does exist can be called *adhyāsa*.

The realisation of the nature of the Self ensues when *ajñāna* (*avidyā*) terminates. For this to happen, *śravaṇa manana* and *nididhyāsana* are to be essentially and intensely practised. By reading the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavadgītā*, etc. or listening to discourses by realised persons, preceptors, etc. one frees oneself from the doubt about the means of knowing the Self. Logical and methodical reasoning constitutes *manana*. With this method, one becomes duly convinced of the true nature of the Self. This conviction equips the seeker with the requisite perseverance to embark on the path of continued contemplation on the nature of Brahman or the Self. This helps the seeker realise his goal and he becomes firmly established in the Self.

Baba Shri Mastramjee was such a realized person. He used to wear one cotton chadar. He walked the length and breadth of India, except Jammu & Kashmir, barefooted. When told by an acquaintance of mine, I made up my mind to pay a visit to him since I was always in search of such spiritually enlightened persons. I first had his darshana in June, 1981. I was overwhelmed by his presence and felt that this was the end of my search. The impression was so profound that I could not resist my urge to visit him in the autumn break of the University of Delhi, although I had injured my foot very badly. I came to Rishikesh to bathe in his benign and spiritually overwhelming presence, crying on the way due to intense pain in my foot.

This was my first experience of seeing a person who was free from identification with the body, which is possible only when one has realized the nature of the Self. This is only when one has practised extreme renunciation. Such an experience confers on one the capability to transcend the bodily limits. Otherwise how could Babaji live in Badarinatha with a single cotton chadar on his body. All the characteristics of a *jīvanmukta* or *sthitaprajña* were discernible in him. I never saw him fear anything. It is said that fear arises from the cognition of duality (*dvitīyād vai bhayaṁ bhavati*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.2). Lack of fear shows that the Reality is one and Babaji was not separate from It. Equanimity never deserted him whether he was praised and garlanded or somebody spoke ill of him. He never hated anyone. I also heard about many extremely painful physical states which he underwent without seeking to be free from them. That is he never took recourse to any treatment. This is possible in the case of a person who is an embodiment of Advaita.