Vidya & Avidya in Advaita Vedanta

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‘Vedanta’ literally means end of the Vedas (Vedasya antah). The term ‘End’ signifies that Vedanta is the concluding portion of the Vedas or ‘purpose’, signifying the quintessence of the Vedic thought which appears in the form of Upanisadic reflections. ‘Advaita’ means one or non-dual (one without a second). Advaita Vedanta refers to the corpus of philosophical literature which offers monistic interpretation of the Upanishadic concept of reality, expounded by Acharya Shankar. In Advaita Vedanta the world of phenomenal diversities is traced to the desire of Brahman to become many. Unlike deistic metaphysics or ontology where the Creator remains outside the creation, in the Upanishadic framework, the Creator himself became the creation and having created it, He entered into every created thing and being as its presiding essence. Brahman is of the nature of Truth (sat). Consciousness (chit), Infinite (anantam). Though the world is a phenomenal expression of Brahman which is infinite, it’s infinity is not exhausted by its manifestations which are infinite. The transcendence of Brahman is brought out in the invocation of Isopanisad. When Brahman the formless, appears as many, it takes the forms (rupa) and names (nama) by which it is identified. ‘Truth’ is that which is non-sublatable (satyam abadhitam), The expression ‘Brahman satyam jagatmitya’, means that the ultimate reality is non-sublatable in principle and the phenomenal reality is illusory or relative in so far as the sense of plurality or diversity disappears when one attains knowledge of the ultimate substance. Just as ‘dream-experience’ turns out to be illusory as it is sublated by waking experience, the world of names and forms is realized to be unreal when one attains the knowledge of the non-dual substance. ‘Consciousness’ is not a property of Brahman but is constitutive of Brahman. Anandam refers to the affective description of Brahman because on attaining it one experiences bliss. The world (jagat) has its origin in bliss (anandam), and eventually finds its fruition by entering into the state of Bliss (anandam). Bliss is different from ‘Pleasure’. Pleasure is that which is transient because the genesis of pleasure in the objects is relative and impermanent. Bliss is nothing but the unpunctuated eternal pleasure which doesn’t suffer from any increase or decrease. ‘Infinity’ (anantam) is not a negation of the finite but it refers to a state of existence whereof one becomes Infinite.

The relationship between Brahman and the world (jagat) is elucidated by the notion of ‘Maya’ and ‘Avidya’. Maya refers to the potency of Brahman to appear as many. It is elucidated by the analogy of rope and snake, wherein a rope is mistaken to be snake. Anything and everything cannot produce the illusion of a snake. It is only ‘rope’ which by virtue of possessing snake-like properties can give rise to the illusion of ‘snake’. Similarly, Brahman, on account of its inherent potency, can only appear as the world of many. Given the substance ‘rope’, everyone does not have the illusion of snake. It is either because of inadequacy of light or a person who has the fear psychosis about snake, tends to fall into snake- illusion. So, the nature of the object ‘rope’ as well as the limitations of the observer, do contribute to the genesis of illusion. Similarly, those who are under the spell of Avidya (ignorance), mistake the names and forms to be real (sat). When the limitations of the observer are removed the real nature of the given reality i.e, rope is revealed. Similarly, when avidya is overcome by cultivation of right knowledge (vidya) Brahman, ultimate reality is revealed in its true nature. One who knows that the names and forms are nothing but varied ways in which Brahman appears, does not fall into

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illusions. _Vidya_ is that which liberates one from the bondage of names and forms. So long as one perceives the diversities or manyness one remains subjected to bondage.

In _Advaita Vedanta_ the phenomenon of ‘illusion’ is elucidated by the notion of _Adhyasas_. _Adhyasas_ refers to the act of superimposition on account of which a given object or reality is perceived as something else (_atasmin tadbudhi_). In case of snake-robe illusion, what is out there is ‘robe’ but the snake cognition is superimposed on the ‘given’ by the observer. As a result, the robe is wrongly perceived as a snake. To know the reality in its native stance amounts to real knowledge. ‘Knowledge’ presupposes the duality between the Subject (_jnata_) and ‘object’ (_jneya_). It is noteworthy that self (_atman_) which is the subject of all cognitions is non-different from _Brahman_ which is the object of highest knowledge. So, _Brahman_ is both the subject and object of highest knowledge. Thus, there is the oddity of knowing _Brahman_ as the object of knowledge. How can _Brahman_ which is infinite be the object of knowledge who is finite? Instead of making room for agnosticism _Advaitins_ moot an ulterior mode of knowing whereof the subject knows the object by becoming the object in transcending the dichotomy between the subject and object. Finite can know the infinite only by becoming the ‘infinite’. The knower of _Brahman_ becomes _Brahman_. _Atman_ is nothing other than _Brahman_, quiescent in every particular. This finds its graphic expression in the _Bhagavad Gita_ in the notions of _ksetra_ and _ksetrajna_. _Ksetra_ is the psycho-physical base constituted by the _gunas_ of _Prakriti_ and _ksetrajna_ is the presiding consciousness (_atman_) which resides in the _ksetrajna_ (self) in residing in different _ksetras_ are non-different from one another and are non-different from _Purusottama_ (transcendent self).

As sensory competence is insisted upon in case of empirical knowledge, ethical competence is insisted upon in respect of highest knowledge. One has to have control over lower propensities so that one remains immune to the influence of _avidya_. In case of empirical knowledge (_aparavidya_), the knower and known are independent. Knowledge is discovery. But in case of _Brahman_ knowledge, the subject undergoes transformation progressively so that the finiteness of the ‘finite’ is transcended and it gets perfected on attaining the state of Infinity. In other words, the Self which is potentially infinite becomes actually infinite when it shakes off the cover of _avidya_. In _vedantic_ epistemology _Maya_ refers to the cosmic potency of _Brahman_. _Maya_ is macrocosmic whereas _avidya_ is connotative of the native limitations of the knower or the individual and it is microcosmic. _Advaitins_ underline the role of self-effort to overcome the spell of _Avidya_. As by knowing substance all the modifications of the substance is known _Brahman_ is conceived as that by knowing which everything is known. _Sravana_ (hearing), _manana_ (reflection) and _nidadhyasana_ (meditation) have been outlined as threefold ways by which one can shake off the _avidya_ and have the vision of oneness beneath apparent diversity. When one knows it for certain that the differences are apparent and deep within there is a reality which is not subject to change or mutation, one gets liberated from the bondage of plurality. Thus, in _Vedantic_ epistemology ‘knowledge’ makes a difference to the ‘knower’. The subject-object duality is transcended in the holistic awareness when the unit consciousness (anu-chaitanya) gets transmuted into cosmic consciousness (bhuma chaitanya).

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*Corresponding Author: Dr Alakananda Parida 26 | Page*