

## Series on Advaita for the Novice

### “I am neither the Doer nor the Experiencer”

[A reference, say, to Ch.2, Shloka 7 of the Bhagavad-Gita would simply be given as “(2 – 7)” without mentioning the Bhagavad-Gita. You may want to keep a copy ready on hand.]

#### 1. Posing the Problem

“Arjuna, if through your egoism you think you will not fight, this resolution of yours will be thwarted. Your nature will make you fight. Never be carried away by the transient ups and downs of everyday life. Who are you? You are not the author of any action. God in the heart of man is running this world as if mounted on a machine. These warriors have died long ago, they will die even if unslain by you. You are just an instrument in the unseen hands of God. You have right only to action, do not hanker for the fruit of it. Do not become inactive leaving your work.

“Ego is the enemy at the root of all our actions and thoughts. The thought that ‘I am the doer’ is the Ego. The wise man knows he is not the doer. Nor is he the experiencer. Perform your actions with detachment, by transferring your doership to the divine. Perform actions only to purify your mind. Perfection and purification of mind is a subjective action. Subjective results are not taboo; only objective results are. It is not the experience of events that gives us joy or sorrow; the joys and sorrows are already determined by us by the attitude we keep in doing the action.

“The so-called Renunciation (*sannyasa*) is not renunciation of work. Action in yoga is renunciation. Therefore poised in yoga, renouncing any addiction to whatever that pertains to your body or mind, making failure and success as one, fight without attachment. Surrender your will to me, become my devotee, you are dear to me. Avowing the truth, I tell you, you will reach me. Leaving all the doership of dharmas take refuge in me. I shall release you from all sins and bondage; do not grieve”.

This is the bottomline message of Krishna in his teaching of the Gita to Arjuna. In all this the most difficult to understand and to abide by is the statement “You are not the doer, nor are you the experiencer”. This happens to be the main concept in the practical operation of Vedanta of non-duality. So we shall go about elaborating it from scratch.

The philosophy of non-duality uses several concepts of Vedanta. In order to understand its full import, one has certainly to get a deep

comprehension of many basic technical concepts like *Atman* (the Self as an immanent principle), *Brahman* (the Self as a transcendent principle), *mAyA* (the confounding factor of all Life), *PrakRti* (the Nature of everything), *NirguNa* (that which carries no attributes), *adhyAsa* (superimposition), etc. While the significance of these concepts is profound, the ordinary words like Karma (meaning ‘action’) and Bhakti (meaning ‘devotion’) are more fundamental not only in Vedanta but in the general understanding of spiritual behaviour that goes with what is known as Hinduism. The fundamental import of these two ordinary words get added significance – nay, added complication – in the theory of advaita. Because Karma and Bhakti impinge on the daily living routine of individuals and because of the fact they both involve the concept of action itself, the questions implicit in the title become indispensable in any explanation of advaita. The purpose of this project is to discuss these questions from the point of view of advaita and attempt to go through the complications that may naturally arise.

Torn of all jargon, the question raised is the following. If the innermost reality of each individual is the supreme spiritual reality – which is what is claimed by advaita – then what prompts us to think and what motivates us to act must be this spiritual reality, namely, the Self. If that is so, then all our bad thoughts and actions have to be traced to this source. And there arises what seems to be a contradiction. How can the Self, which is equated to Godhead, be attributed with anything that is bad or imperfect? On the other hand, if the Self is not the motivator of our bad thoughts and actions then who is responsible for them?

So, who is the doer (*kartA*)? The characteristic statement that occurs very early (3 – 27) in the Gita says: It is (only) the person deluded by his ego, who thinks he is the ‘doer’. So to think that oneself is the doer of one’s actions (or for that matter, the thinker of one’s thoughts) is wrong according to the Gita.

But this raises a contradiction in another way. If oneself is not the doer of one’s actions, and not the thinker of one’s thoughts, then why should one be ‘punished’, or considered responsible, for one’s actions or thoughts – which is what is purported to be the central thread in all concepts of merit and demerit, religious or otherwise?

Normally, in world parlance, in our everyday life we do many things and also experience much more, physically as well as mentally. When we say “I do it” or “I did it” or when we say “I have had such and such an experience” we have no doubt at all about whom we are referring to. It is the personality which we claim by the pronoun ‘I’. But Vedanta comes in and interjects to tell us to inquire into whom this “I” refers to. From

Yajnavalkya, the Sage of the Upanishads, through Shankara, the Guru of yore, down to Ramana, the Master, of modern times, all of them make a distinction between the personality claimed by the use of the pronoun “I” and what they designate as “the real I” .

It does not require great wisdom to accept that the entity claimed by the common use of the pronoun “I” is a temporary one; for, one day, that entity is bound to disappear. The question then is: Is there any remnant of that “I” except the ashes? Religions generally talk of the soul as the remnant of that personality of “I”. Advaita philosophy refines that and provides a unique answer to the question.

Advaita says the answer can be obtained by Guru’s Grace if one starts enquiring into common statements about one’s own behaviour, some of which are :

1. Somebody pinched me and I felt the pain.
2. I had a sumptuous meal and I am happy now.
3. I dreamt I was in a palace, enjoying all the luxuries of life.
4. I was angry then, but I controlled my anger.
5. My mind is restless because of a sad occurrence.
6. I was thinking of something else; I was not aware of your presence.

In #1, the ‘I’ refers to the body, though we don’t specifically say so.

In #2, the first ‘I’ refers to the body and the second ‘I’ refers to the mind.

In #3, the first ‘I’ refers to the mind and the second ‘I’ is a fictitious ‘I’ – we know it is so, but we don’t specifically say it is fictitious. But we do recognise this fact, because very often when one describes a dream one uses words like “I dreamt as if I was in a palace, ...”. The words ‘as if’ mean that the subject of experience in the dream is fictitious.

In #4, the first ‘I’ refers to the mind and the second ‘I’ refers to the intellect.

In #5, it is the mind that is specifically referred; the point to note here is that the mind has been influenced by a totally external factor, namely, the sad occurrence.

In #6, the first ‘I’ refers to the mind and the second ‘I’ refers to the conglomeration of the mind and the senses.

The reader can himself think of many more examples. Thus all the time, without our knowing it, we are identifying ‘I’ with our body, mind, senses or the intellect. (We shall use hereafter the now-standard abbreviation ‘BMI’ for the conglomeration of body, mind, senses and intellect). Advaita Vedanta asks us to ponder over certain questions in respect of this identification of ourselves :

What do we mean by ‘We are identifying ourselves with ....’?

What would it mean not to so identify?

What would be the consequence if we do not identify ourselves with BMI?

Who is the 'We' here in these questions? Who is supposed not to identify?

We shall take these up in the next section. We shall see therein how to distinguish between what witnesses all our thoughts and actions and what actually thinks and acts and there we shall tie all this up with the concept of '*adhyAsa*' (superimposition) with which our education in advaita for the novice rightly began.

## **2. Two 'Selves'**

According to Vedanta, the doer/experiencer is the one who has identified with one's body, mind, intellect (BMI). If you don't identify yourself with your BMI, you are not the doer/experiencer. But who is this 'you' that is being talked about? That is the clinching issue.

There is a triple personality that we should know of in order to know ourselves. (Note that I am following here the last five shlokas of the fifteenth chapter of the Gita and the explanations given in Panchadashi. I should also acknowledge the influence of Aurobindo's Essays on the Gita and of my father's lectures and writings in what I write below).

The first is the outer personality, by which I mean, not the external personality that others see in us, but the personality that we claim in our heart of hearts as "I". This outer personality of mine includes my BMI, along with all the innermost thoughts that I know are mine, and therefore my ego also.

[Important note to scholars. By the 'outer personality' I am linking together the 'concrete body' (*sthula-sharIra*) and the 'subtle body' (*sUkShma-sharIra*) – purely for the purpose of clarity of this series of articles.]

But behind the body-mind-intellect (BMI) there exists something which gives it life. Without this, the BMI cannot express itself. We call this the '*Jiva*'. The corresponding English word 'soul' may be used most often though it may not have all the connotations that '*Jiva*' has. "What dies when separated from the soul is the body; the soul does not die" (Ch. U. VI – 11 -3). This soul is nothing but the spark of the Absolute Consciousness (7-5; 15-7) and therefore it is sentient. The Lord of the Gita introduces this in the seventh chapter and says: His own divine Energy – called Cosmic Nature (Sanskrit: PrakRti) – is two-fold. One is

superior and the other is not so superior. This latter is the source of all matter. It manifests actually as eight-fold matter, namely, the five elements, plus mind, plus intellect, plus ego.

In its manifestation as the five elements PrakRti constitutes all of what science has unfolded about the universe and all of what it continues to unfold. In the manifestation in each individual as one's mind-intellect-ego, PrakRti constitutes all "the actions of one's past lives individualised and earmarked for this life together with the accumulated tendencies from all one's past lives" (Shankara's Commentary on (3 – 33)).

The Superior prakRti (Sanskrit: *parA-prakRti*) is what becomes all the souls. Each soul takes several bodies (physical appearances) one after the other just as the same individual dons different clothes. ( 2 – 22).

In all these different appearances of the same soul, though it takes different bodies, the same mind sticks on to it. (15 – 7, 8). But the memories of the mind do not go with it since they stay in the brain and perish along with it. However, in each such life of the particular soul, the mind accumulates tendencies (*vAsanAs*) that go on with it into succeeding lives where it gets other bodies. It is these tendencies that give a character to the mind. This character is a mixture of the three basic strands of *prakRti* – *the divine (satva)*, *the dynamic (rajas)* and *the dull (tamas)*.

Without BMI the soul cannot express itself as an individual. Without the sentient soul, mind is just inert matter. But when it sticks on to the soul in the latter's physical expression through BMI, it gets (a borrowed) sentience. Now the soul interacts with the universe of matter as well as with the other living beings. But even this interaction has to take place only through the medium of the BMI.

There is therefore a seemingly endless play of the sentient Consciousness within and the insentient universe of matter outside through the medium of the BMI. In this play, the sentient Consciousness within, which is nothing but the spark of the Absolute, is called 'PuruSha' or Self.

[Important note: I plan to use 'PuruSha' in this context systematically, though its English equivalent 'Self' is available. The 'Self' is already the English equivalent of 'Atman'. 'Atman' and 'PuruSha' will turn out to be the same at the end of all this discussion, but at this point of the discussion where we are dwelling on the 'triple personality', it is better to keep the word 'PuruSha' for purposes of technical clarity of communication as we go along. And the word

'PuruSha' has the inbuilt meaning 'the resident in the body' which aptly describes what we are talking about in this discussion.]

[Optional note: 'The resident in the body' – this meaning comes from the derivation of the word 'puruSha' from its etymological roots. 'puri shete iti puruShaH' – He who resides in the body-city is puruSha. Recall (5 – 13) 'navadvAre pure dehl'.]

Everything else, including the interaction with other beings, is of course *prakRti*. This interplay of puruSha and *prakRti* is what constitutes our passage through life.

Now the Lord says: There are two puruShas. (15 – 16).

They are: the perishable puruSha (also called 'empirical self') and the imperishable puruSha. The perishable one expresses itself through the BMI. When the BMI vanishes in the cycle of time, it can no more express itself. So this personality is termed "Perishable" (Sanskrit: 'kShara'). The full Sanskrit term is "kShara-puruSha".

It is this Perishable PuruSha – whom we shall hereafter denote by 'PP' for convenience of brevity in writing – who does all the work in the external world and thinks all the thoughts.

[A note for the novice: In my style of a mathematics teacher who uses a lot of symbols for communication, may I suggest that as you read these posts, do not keep reading 'PP' as 'PP' but keep reading it as 'Perishable puruSha'. That will protect you against possible confusions that might arise when I introduce other notations like 'IP' – imperishable puruSha ! Also by reading it for what it means, the sentences will not tend to become unintelligible mechanical mantras!]

It is he, the PP, who is the "I" of ordinary conversation. Vedanta says it is not 'the real I' because of the perishability of PP. He is the mutable, thinking, acting personality, subjected by Ignorance to the outward workings of PrakRti.

We said the soul expresses itself through the BMI. But in so expressing itself, it invariably makes the mistake of thinking it is just the PP and nothing more. In other words, the soul commits the colossal error of identifying itself with the BMI. This colossal error is the beginningless ignorance. And here starts all the problems of life. All the pleasure and pain, ups and downs, light and darkness, good and bad, that the BMI suffers through, are mistakenly assumed by the soul as its own experiences. Not only this. All the actions of the BMI are also appropriated by the soul. Thus arises the common expression: 'I am the doer', 'I am the experiencer'.

Just to quote from one of the hundreds of places where Shankara emphasizes this process as a superimposition, here is one from his Commentary on Brahma-SUtra II-3-29: 'Though the Self is not an agent and experiencer, and though it has no transmigratoriness and is ever free, still it comes to have the states of being an Agent and an experiencer, this being caused by the superimposition of the modes of intellect acting as a limiting adjunct.' ("*buddhy-upAdhi-dharmAdhyAsa..... nityamuktasya sata AtmanaH*").

The PP (or the soul in its present state of oneness with the PP) is involved in the actions of Nature. He reflects the different workings of the modes of Nature. He associates himself with the doings of *prakRti* and thinks he is the doer. He identifies himself with the play of personality and clouds his self-knowledge with the ego-sense in *PrakRti* so that he thinks himself as the ego-doer of works. (3 - 27).

The second of the triple personality is 'the Imperishable PuruSha' – which we shall denote hereafter by 'IP' for convenience of communication. It is a higher, deeper, reality -- some exponents call it 'inner reality' – than the PP. It is the eternal impersonal self within. It is the '*sat-chid-Ananda*' (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss) of Vedanta. The full Sanskrit term is "*akShara-puruSha*" -- '*akShara*' meaning 'imperishable'. It has no share in the action and movement of the PP except to support it by its presence and be a non-participating witness.

Some one pinches my body. It hurts. Who feels this hurt? I feel the hurt. Who is this I that is speaking? It is the PP. Why does the PP feel the hurt? Because it has identified itself with the BMI. Therefore it becomes the experiencer (*bhoktA*). Recall that the soul has already fallen into the colossal error of thinking that it is the PP and nothing more.

Not only do I feel the hurt, but I flare up at the other person. Who is this I that is flaring up now? It is again the PP. Why does the PP flare up? Because it has identified itself with the BMI. As a consequence of this identification, it not only experiences the hurt, but falls into the trap of the gang of peace-breakers like anger and ego and flares back. So it becomes the '*kartA*' (doer).

What does the Lord say on this now? He says there are two *puruShas* – perishable and imperishable. The imperishable is never hurt and can never be hurt, says He. "This cannot be cut into pieces; this cannot be burnt; this cannot be tainted; this cannot be dried". (2 – 24)

So He says: “My dear Arjuna, You (the PP / soul) are wrongly identifying yourself with this BMI. Don’t do this. Identify yourself with the IP within you. Then there will be no hurt. Only Happiness”

This is the bottom line. This is the essential philosophical content of the entire teaching of the Gita. This is the message of all spiritual teaching. This is the grand recipe for Happiness.

Vedanta comes to our help in analysing this message for us. Vedanta reduces everything to five fundamentals.

'sat' (Existence) -- revealed by the fact that it 'exists' (\*asti\*)

'chit' (Consciousness) -- revealed by the fact of 'knowing' (\*bhAti\*)

'Ananda' (Bliss) -- revealed by the fact of 'happiness' (\*priyam\*)

'nAma' (Name) -- everything has a name

'rUpaM' (Form) -- every visible thing has a form.

The first three are permanent, eternal. Each one of them constitutes what we called the IP. The last two are ephemeral, transient. Our BMI belongs to the last two above. Anything in our experience belongs to this 'Name' and 'Form'.

When somebody pinches me I feel the pain. It is really the BMI that senses the pain and reacts to it. But the BMI would not have done it if 'I' were not there. (for example, a dead body) – that is, if the sentience, borrowed from the IP within, were not there. It is the association of 'I' with the BMI that makes 'me' feel and react. The 'superimposition' of BMI and its experiences on the 'I' is the problem. When I, the one whose outer personality is called Krishnamurthy, ceases to associate the 'I' with the BMI and remains what it should be, namely, the IP, there should be no feeling of pain and no provocation for a reaction or action. This is what Krishna says to Arjuna.

Thus all action happens only when the association of the permanent facet of man namely the 'sat-chit-Ananda' facet of man is associated with the 'nAma-rUpa' facet of the same man. Or, it may also be said the other way. The 'nAma-rUpa' facet and its goings-on are superimposed on the 'sat-chit-Ananda' facet. It is this association/superimposition that is the actor and the reactor. It is this association/superimposition that is the feeler, the thinker. Who makes this association/superimposition? It is the empirical Self, the Jiva. All that Vedanta says is this: Get over this mixing up of the 'sat-chit-Ananda' with the 'nAma-rUpa'.

To sum up, we ended up the previous post with the question “ Who is the 'We' in the statement 'We are identifying ourselves with the BMI'?”



It can be answered now. ‘We’, the agent or subject who does the identification is the PP/soul/ ‘empirical self’ who expresses himself through the BMI. If we do not so identify then the hurt or pain which affects the body, mind, intellect will not be ‘felt’. (Easy to say this! But at this point it has to be granted at least as an academic truism). At least this is what Krishna says. It is at this point of the discussion we have to spend considerable thought on the key-words “non-participating witness” in the paragraph above that introduced the IP. It is in fact the punchline of Vedanta, particularly of advaita.

We shall take this and the allied concept of ‘the empirical self’ in the next two sections. They are likely to be dense in content. Be prepared to proceed slowly and steadily!

### 3. Jiva, the Empirical Self

[**Caution:** Read carefully and proceed slowly.

There are many hair-pin bends.

Alternatively, by-pass the speed-breakers, go forward,  
but come back to re-traverse the path several times.]

The punchline of the operating part of advaita, is, as we said at the end of the previous section, that the IP (Imperishable puruSha) is a non-participating witness. He is the real I within us, and he does not do any action, he does not think any thoughts, he does not feel any emotions. He is unaffected, unperturbed, uncontaminated, unsullied by any of the happenings to the PP (Perishable puruSha). He is the One introduced by Krishna very early in the Gita in verses 23, 24, 25 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter and later, in many other contexts. He, being the real ‘I’, can therefore very well say: “I am not the doer or the experiencer”. Like the street light that witnesses everything that happens under the light but is itself neither the doer nor the experiencer of the happenings, He is the non-participating witness to everything that happens to the PP. We shall now try to comprehend some of the nuances of the concepts of non-participating Witness and the superimposition that we do on this.

At the final end of the theory of non-duality one is told that the knower, the known and the knowledge are all one. But, ordinarily, the knower is the subject and the known is the object. The subject which knows the object is the centre of consciousness. It exists, and it knows. The object only exists.

The Jiva (the soul) is the subject of all experience. It is a complex of Consciousness (Sanskrit: ChaitanyaM) and Matter. When objects are in

relation to the subject we have the stream of presentations called Vrittis. When there are no objects there will be no presentations but the consciousness that lights up the presentations will remain. That consciousness is the Witness, the non-participating Witness. Objects are not presented to Consciousness as such. They are directly presented to the JIva (the soul) and only indirectly to the Witness. There can be no relationship between Consciousness and objects, because they belong to different orders of reality, like the rope and the snake. The subject, the centre of consciousness, is experienced directly in an intuition, like an 'I-feeling' (Sanskrit: *aham-pratyaya*), but the object is known only from the outside like 'this-feeling' (Sanskrit: *idam-pratyaya*).

Then how did this Pure Consciousness become the JIva or the empirical self and how was the JIva made the subject of all experience? Strictly speaking, there is no 'becoming, no making, no transition, no transformation'. Pure Consciousness (= Atman, Brahman) does not undergo any change of form or character. JIva is only Brahman in an empirical dress of BMI in which the sprouting of the thought of distinctness from Brahman has occurred. This thought of individuality is the Ego, the starting point of the JIva. JIva is therefore Consciousness conditioned by Ignorance in the form of an ego of individuality. The Self can have no direct knowledge of the world except through the apparatus of the BMI. This apparatus as well as the small world which becomes the object of its knowledge is spoken of as the adjunct (Sanskrit: *upAdhi*) of Consciousness. All this adjunct is matter. Consciousness ('*Chaitanyam*') which has this limited portion of matter for its adjunct is the JIva. Each JIva has its own knowing apparatus and moves in a small world of its own, with its own joys and sorrows and thus has its own individual existence. Though the Self is one, the JIvas are many.

Acharya Shankara draws attention to this fact of one Self and several JIvas, for instance, in his commentary on (2-12) where the Lord says "There was never a time when I was not there nor you were not there, nor these leaders of men nor that we, all of us, will come to be hereafter". He comments: "The plural number (in we) is used following the diversity of the bodies, but not in the sense of the multiplicity of the Self". Generally in his commentaries, Shankara uses two illustrations to bring home this point. One is the sun appearing as many reflected images in different pools of water. If the waters are dried up the several images get back to the original sun. The other illustration is the infinite space being delimited by artificial barriers. If these barriers are knocked down there will be no occasion to speak of the different spaces. These two illustrations of the exact mode of conceiving the relation between the Self and the Soul gave rise to two schools of argument in later advaita, namely, the argument of original and its reflection ('*bimba-pratibimba-vAda*'), and the the argument of delimitation ('*avaccheda-vAda*'). The

former is the Vivarana school and the latter is the Bhamati school. (See Dennis-ji's definition of the JIva for a full explanation of these names).

Thus when Consciousness is conditioned by its association with Ignorance or Matter it is no longer Pure Consciousness but a complex of both, called JIva, the soul. This does not mean however that Matter or Ignorance is outside of the Reality of Consciousness, because that would contradict non-duality. The relation between Self and Soul has therefore to be conceived in the following way.

The addition of the adjunct is only a difference in the standpoint that we adopt. There are two standpoints – the intuitive and the intellectual. The intuitive is that of immediate and direct realisation. It is the method of the mystics. There is no dualism of subject and object there, nor that of doer and the deed, nor that of agent and enjoyer. These distinctions of duality arise only in the intellectual method of looking at reality. That is why the Gita says that it is “beyond the intellect” (III – 43). It is the nature of the intellect to break up the original unity and revel in these distinctions. At this intellectual level what we are doing is actually a come-down in the level of perception. The JIva is now perceived in relation to its own small world, the subject in relation to the object and the doer in relation to the deed. The Self thus reflected in the medium of the intellect becomes the JIva. As per the Vivarana school, the Atman or the Self is the original, the intellect is the reflecting medium and the JIva is the reflected image. In the case of the Bhamati school, the Atman is the infinite space, the adjuncts (*upAdhis*) are the limiting barriers and the JIvas are the small spaces.

The reflection idea is used skilfully by Kapila Maharishi in his exposition of Vedanta in Bhagavatam (III-27: 12, 13): “The presence of the Supreme Lord can be realized just as the sun is realized first as a reflection on water, and again as a second reflection on the wall of a room, although the sun itself is situated in the sky. The self-realized soul is thus reflected first in the threefold ego and then in the body, senses and mind”.

An explanation is necessary for this analogy. The topic is how one recognises that the Supreme Consciousness is the One Power behind every action and every presence in the universe. Imagine a room in which there is a large vessel of water that receives direct sunlight and reflects it onto the opposite wall in the room. What is the source of this light on the wall? It is the reflected Sun in the water (contained in the vessel). And what is the source of that reflected Sun? The actual Sun in the blazing sky. So also we individuals seem to be having awareness of the outside world. The source of our awareness is our consciousness within. But

this consciousness itself is a reflection of the real supreme Consciousness, the reflection being in our own ego-mind.

The JIva is thus a complex of Consciousness (Chaitanyam) and matter. It is Pure Consciousness with a limited adjunct of matter, namely, the BMI. This limited adjunct is spoken of as the Ignorance (Sanskrit: avidyA) of the JIva. Stripped of its adjunct the JIva loses its individuality and is then nothing but Pure ChaitanyaM. The analysis of the three states of waking, dreaming and sleeping is intended to show that Consciousness is the only constant factor running through them all. Even in the sleeping state, this Consciousness is there. “That the soul does not see in that state is because, although seeing then, it does not see; for the vision of the Witness can never be lost, because it is imperishable. But then no second thing exists there separate from it which it can see.” (Br. U. IV – 3-23). Shankara quotes this passage in his commentary to Brahma Sutra II-3-18 and adds his own explanation: “This appearance of absence of awareness is owing to the absence of objects of knowledge, but not owing to the absence of consciousness. It is like the non-manifestation of light, spread over space, owing to the absence of things on which it can be reflected, but not owing to its own absence.”

It is in the fourth state called ‘*turIya*’, that transcends the three states of waking, dream and dreamless sleep, all traces of Ignorance disappear. When the JIva is thus disassociated from Ignorance and therefore from all material vesture, the spiritual core of the JIva comes into its own.

Shankara sets forth (in his commentary on Br.S. I-3-19) the nature of this transcendence of all adjuncts in the following way. A white crystal placed by the side of something red or blue appears red or blue on account of the adjunct. But in reality the crystal is only white. It does not ‘acquire’ its white colour but only shines in its own natural colour. (Recall the story of the ‘tenth man’).

[Optional note that may be skipped: The above is known as the ‘argument of appearance’ (*AbhAsa-vAda*). (*AbhAsa* also means ‘shadow’ or ‘semblance’). It is akin to the argument of ‘reflection’ that we saw earlier. There the reflection was taken to be an ‘empirical’ (Sanskrit: *vyAvahArika*) reality. The argument was then called ‘*bimba-pratibimba-vAda*’. But now the reflection is taken as a ‘phenomenal’ (Sanskrit: *prAtibhAsika*) reality. For an explanation of ‘phenomenal’, ‘empirical’ and ‘absolute’ realities, see the definition of ‘*adhyAsa*’ in the files section].

Before the onset of true enlightenment the Spirit (Consciousness) on account of its association with the BMI appears as the JIva. But the rise of true knowledge does make a real difference. All false notions disappear

and Spirit rises to its true stature. The self-hood of the empirical self falls to the ground and the Self shines forth in its original splendour. To know the highest truth is only to know the self in its true nature. The moment true enlightenment dawns on man he realises that he is no other than the non-dual self, that very moment he sheds his finitude and rises to his full stature. There is no question of the JIva merging in anything other than itself. It simply comes to its own.

In truth there is no entity as the JIva at all. It is not among the things created. It is a false creation due entirely to adventitious (Sanskrit: 'Agantuka') or incidental circumstance, that is, coming from without and not pertaining to the fundamental nature. "The idea of embodiedness is a result of nescience. Unless it be through the false ignorance of identifying the Self with the body, there can be no embodiedness for the Self" ( '*sa-sharIratvasya mithyA-jnAna-niimittatvAt .... kalpayituM* : Shankara's Commentary on Br. Su. I-1-4 ). JIva has always remained Brahman. Only the adjuncts have to be removed for this truth to stand out. Once this realisation is there, the finitude of the JIva will disappear, as also its misery and its supposed agency and enjoyership. "When that Brahman, the basis of all causes and effects, becomes known, all the results of the seeker's actions become exhausted" (Mundaka U. II - 2 -8). The transmigration of the JIva which is due to its false association with the adjuncts, will also come to a close. That is when the ego-thought of separateness from the Supreme Self, with an 'I' of its own, will get destroyed. That is what we mean by saying 'Jiva attains mokSha'. The two things are simultaneous, like the simultaneity of disappearance of darkness with the lighting of a match. But that does not mean that Jiva 'reaches some destination' or 'obtains something'. 'Jiva sees the Truth' simply means that it sees that it is itself Brahman. In other words, it wakes up to the Truth that was always there. Not waking up to the Truth was the Ignorance. Ignorance is not in Brahman, which is pure and self-illuminated, but in the JIva. So long however as the latter does not realize his identity with Brahman, ignorance is said, rather loosely, to envelop Brahman.

All the injunctions that are given by the Vedas to man are given to him in his state of ignorance because activity is natural to man in that state. The Self is never the doer. The injunction is only a restatement following what is given in experience. All the ritual purifications through chanting of mantras and the results of such actions are enjoined on, and enjoyed by, that entity which has the idea "I am the doer", as stated in the Mundaka Upanishad mantra "One of the two enjoys the fruits having various tastes, while the other looks on without enjoying" (Mu. U. III-1-1). The misery that falls to the lot of the JIva, the empirical self, is entirely due to its fancied association with its adjuncts. This association imagines such 'realities' as 'I am a brahmin', 'I am a renunciate', 'I am a

JIva' and the like. When the JIva sheds these imagined realities and all adventitious adjuncts and realises its true nature by a discrimination between the permanent and the ephemeral, then there is an end of all its misery. Except by such knowledge of the Ultimate Self, misery and finitude cannot be overcome.

Question: So then we come back to the oft-mentioned idea, 'Self-Knowledge'. But who is the knower of this knowledge here? Is it the Self, who is always illumined, or the JIva in his unillumined state?

We shall take this up in the next section.

### **Who is the Knower?**

[Recall the caution given at the beginning of the previous section]

Man is not only conscious of the world around him but is also self-conscious. This self-consciousness is not self-knowledge. The JIva is a complex of spirit and matter. It is therefore made up of the knower and the known, the subject and the object. The latter is presented to the former and the resulting cognition is self-knowledge. This self is the empirical self and not the Absolute Self. There can be knowledge of the empirical self ('empirical' means 'arising from observation, experiment and experience'); there can be no such 'knowledge' of the Absolute Self. The latter is the Inmost Self, the Witness. It is Pure Consciousness. Both subject and object are presented to it, whereas itself is not presented to anything. It cannot be an object in relation to itself as subject nor can it be presented to some other subject since there is no other. It is the 'non-witnessed Witness'. Two names of God bear testimony in this connection: 'Devoid of witness' ("*sAkShi-varjitA*" in Lalita-sahasranama), and 'Witness' ("*sAkShI*" in Vishnu-sahasranAma).

What hears sound is the ear. What tastes an edible is the tongue. But both sensations are received by the brain, registered by the mind and the awareness of both sensations are due to the life-force, the Consciousness within. When we switch on a light in a dark room we see many objects. The same light lights them all. But when the room is empty of objects, the emptiness itself is indicated by the same light. In the same way, when the room is dark, the darkness is registered in our awareness by the Light within us. Consciousness, or the Self, is that Light. It is the same Consciousness that showed the light to us when the room was lighted.

Of course if we are blind this Consciousness would not tell us whether the room is lighted or not. But it (the Consciousness) would know that it (this BMI) does not know whether the room is lighted or not. A dead body in the room would not know whether the room is lighted or not and would not also know that it does not know. Because the dead body is just inert matter (*PrakRti*) without the presence of the *purushha* (Consciousness) in it.

But one may ask very legitimately: “The dead body also should be Consciousness, because Consciousness as the Absolute Reality is everywhere. Then why is it not knowledgeable about the lighting of the room?” The subtle explanation is that although the Ultimate Self is there at all times and in all things, yet it cannot shine in everything. Just as a reflection appears only in polished surfaces, so also the Self shines as Consciousness only in the intellect (Shankara’s Atma-bodha, verse 17). But the intellect (and the mind) has left the body in the case of the dead body!

This Absolute Self is unseen, beyond empirical dealings, beyond the grasp (of the organs of action) , undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable (as this or that), and whose valid proof consists in the single belief in the Self, in which all phenomena cease and which is unchanging, auspicious and non-dual. (Mandukya U. 7). As the all-pervading space is not tainted because of its subtlety, so also the Self permeating the entire body, is not tainted by anything that the body, mind or intellect does (13 – 32). The *Atman/Brahman/The Self* is like the Sun which illuminates the whole world but is at the same time uncontaminated by anything of the world. Every action of the world as well as of the body, mind and intellect is dominated by *prakRti*.

However this does not mean that the Absolute Self has to be unknown. It is known intuitively as the very self in us. It is self-luminous. A burning lamp does not require another light to reveal it. Consciousness does not need to be revealed by another consciousness. The Self is not unknown to anyone for it is the inmost self in us. “The Self to which all mental states become objects of knowledge, is known through every one of these states. The witness of all mental operations, whose essence is mere sentiency, is implied by those operations themselves as being the common element in them all. There is no other means of knowing the inner Self” (Shankara Bhashya of Kenopanishad. II – 4). “Through what should one know that owing to which all that is known? Through what should one know the knower?” (Br. U. II-4-14). “As fire does not burn itself, so the self does not know itself and the knower can have no knowledge of a thing that is not an object” (Shankara Bhashya to Br.U.II – 4 -14)

The empirical self (The soul, JIva) is the knower of whatever can be known. But his knowing is all vitiated by the tendencies sticking to the mind. This is particularly emphasized by Shankara's interpretation of the name "*avijnAtA*" (= non-knower), one of the names in Vishnu Sahasranama. Shankara says "The soul is the knower, namely the one for whom the knowledge that the doership and experiencership are only imagined as belonging to the Atman is vitiated by the age-long tendencies of the mind and known in the opposite way; the Ultimate is the non-knower". In other words, JIva 'knows' things the wrong way! That it is the 'wrong' way dawns on him when true enlightenment illumines him. How long has he been knowing it the 'wrong' way? Ever since he became the JIva. When did he become the JIva? When ignorance descended on him. Whose ignorance? JIva's ignorance. Thus Ignorance and JIva are coeval. You cannot say which was first. Vedanta says this is undecidable (*\*anirvacanIyaM\**).

But when finally Enlightenment comes to the JIva, there is no more JIva thereafter; only Brahman. Thus what was a beginningless Ignorance comes to an end. But the end of ignorance comes in such a way that the very 'fact' (!) of a stated ignorance is no more even a past fact; because Brahman has always been Brahman; there 'was' no JIva at all!

This is a little difficult to digest – isn't it? Why 'little'? It is the most difficult advaitic teaching to accept. Because we still continue to think as an 'empirical self' in an 'empirical' way! When we mistook the rope for the snake, and better lighting showed there was no snake but only the rope, the rope-knowledge eradicated the 'appearance' of the snake thoroughly. The empirical reality of the knowledge here was of a higher order of reality than the phenomenal reality of the delusion of the snake-phenomenon. But when we are told that "JIva is only Brahman, the phenomenon of JIva is only an appearance, and the real thing is the IP", we, BEING THE EMPIRICAL SELF, receive the knowledge in an empirical way and this empirical knowledge has no strength to destroy the identity with the BMI, which is also at the SAME EMPIRICAL LEVEL of understanding.

Thus there can be no 'knowledge' of the Absolute Self, the non-participating Witness, in the ordinary sense of the term. There can be only an intuitive experience of it. "A man, who is in the presence of an object to be known, has only to be drawn attention to the object of knowledge. When that is done, the knowledge arises naturally in conformity with the the object and the means of knowledge." (*jnAna-viShaya eva darshyitavyaH ..... jnAnam-utpadyate*): Shankara, Commentary on Br.S. III – 2 -21). Mark the word 'arises' (Sanskrit:



*'utpadyate'*). Knowing and Being are welded into a unity here. Since this state is also free from all desires, it is further characterised by Bliss. Hence its 'own state' (*'sva-rUpa'*) is *sat-chid-Ananda*.

Shankara's emphatic insistence on the point that, The Self is not something that is 'attained' can be seen throughout his writing. Two instances may be quoted here from his commentaries in this connection, though the context is slightly different from ours.

In the first he emphasizes the need to distinguish between '*para-brahman*' and '*apara-brahman*' (meaning 'superior brahman' and 'not-so-superior brahman': See the Weekly definition files on Brahman). Only the '*apara-brahman*' is attainable. The '*para-brahman*' cannot be 'attained' nor can it be 'known', for it is the Self of every one. Attainment is possible only when there is difference, where the attainer is different from the attained. Commenting on Brahma Sutra IV – 3 – 14 he says: "Therein by the fact of not clearly distinguishing between '*para-brahman*' and '*apara-brahman*', the scriptural statements of movement etc. attributed to '*apara-brahman*' are superimposed on the '*para-brahman*'. Does it mean then that there are two brahmans, namely 'para' and 'apara'? Certainly, yes. There are two. Because, 'He Satyakama! What is known as Omkara is itself both '*para-brahman*' and '*apara-brahman*' says Prashna Upanishad (5 -2). If it is questioned 'What exactly is '*para-brahman*' and what is '*apara-brahman*'?', here is the answer. Wherever brahman is taught by words such as 'not material, not concrete' in order to negate the attributes like name and form created by Ignorance, that is '*para-brahman*'. And wherever that same brahman is taught, for the purpose of worship, as if it has name and form, by the words such as 'He consists of mind, His body is life, His form is light' ' (Chandogya U. 3-14-2), that is '*apara-brahman*'.

"OBJECTION: If that is so, then all the shruti that proclaims non-duality, will be contradicted.

"ANSWER: No. That fault is nullified by the fact that the name and form are only adjuncts created by Ignorance".

(*"tatra para-apara-brahma-viveka-anavadhAraNena ... nAma-rUpo-pAdhikatayA parihRtatvAt"*)

The second instance is from his commentary on the Gita verse (18-50): "Therefore the effort should only be to discard the superimposition of Ignorance on the Self; no effort is necessary to 'obtain' the enlightenment of brahman – because it is self-evident. Though thus quite self-evident, easily affirmable, quite near and forming the very self, Brahman appears to the unenlightened, to those whose understanding is carried away by the differentiated phenomena of names and forms created by ignorance, as unknown, unaffirmable, very remote, as though

he were a separate thing”. (“*avidyA-kalpita-nAma-rUpa- ....yatnaH kartavyaH*”).

So when we ask “Who is the knower?”, the answer has to make a distinction between the knower of all that goes by the name of knowledge—which is the same JIva, as before -- and the knower of Brahman, which, as we have seen, is not an object of knowledge. The knower of brahman becomes brahman, says the Upanishad (Mundaka U. III – 2 -9).

Look at the grand truth of what is illumined, what illumines and the Illumination, by the concluding paragraph on ‘de-superimposition’ from Vedantra SAra of Sadananda (of the 15<sup>th</sup> century,), translated by Swami Nikhilananda:

“As the light of a lamp cannot illumine the lustre of the sun but is overpowered by it, so Consciousness reflected in that state of the mind is unable to illumine the supreme Brahman, self-effulgent and identical with the individual self, and is overpowered by it. And on the destruction of this state of Absolute Oneness with which that Consciousness is associated, there remains only the Supreme Brahman, identical with the individual self, the JIva, just as the image of a face in a looking-glass is resolved into the face itself when the looking-glass is removed. Such being the case, there is no contradiction between the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad statement “By the mind alone it is to be perceived” (Br. U. IV -4-19), and the Kenopanishad statement “That which cannot be thought of by the mind” (Kena U: I – 5). We are to suppose that the unknown Brahman is brought into contact only with the mental state, - which simply destroys the JIva’s ignorance concerning Brahman, but does not help to reveal it -- but not with the underlying Consciousness, because Brahman is self-luminous and it does not require the help of another Consciousness to reveal itself.”

Thus it is that what is illumined, what illumines and the Illumination are all Brahman – recalling to us the immortal verse (4 – 24) from the Gita.

## **5. Doer-Experiencer**

To the questions: “Who is the doer?, “Who is the experiencer?”, the common answer turns out to be neither the Self, nor the non-Self. Either way advaita is contradicted. Pure Consciousness can neither act nor experience. Matter is inert. What acts or experiences is a complex of the Self and non-Self. It is Jiva, a complex of Consciousness and matter. “The discriminating people call that Self the enjoyer when it is associated with body, organs and mind” (Katha U. 1-3-4). This ‘association’ itself is because of one’s own nature (variously designated as ‘*prakRti*’ or ‘*sva-*

*bhAva*). Even when the Upanishad says “The Self is to be seen” (Br. U. II-4-5; ‘*AtmA draShTavyaH*’), it is not an injunction for us to ‘do’ something in the form of ‘knowing’, because the Self is beyond ‘knowability’ as an object; ‘it is meant mainly for attracting one’s (Jiva’s) mind towards Reality’ (“*para-vidyAdhikAra-paTithAH*” : Shankara in Br. S. Commentary of III-2-21) – that is, turning one’s mind towards one’s own natural state (*sva-rUpa*). One’s own ‘nature’ (*sva-bhAva*) has to be contended with in order to gain one’s own ‘natural state’ (*sva-rUpa*).

The empirical Self, that is, the PP, that is, the soul who has identified with the BMI, is therefore the doer and the experiencer. It is he who enjoys and suffers. It is he who is subject to pleasure and pain. And it is he who thinks of himself as the doer and experiencer.

[Note by VK: When I was a teen-ager, I remember to have asked this question “Who is then the doer?” to my father, once after his Gita-class to his contemporaries, which I had the good fortune to attend. The cryptic answer he gave is still fresh in my memory: “The doer is he who thinks he is the doer”. Does it make sense now? I leave the answer to the reader].

Advaita is clear however that this doership/experiencership is not natural for the soul. For if it were so, then there would be no liberation for the soul. ‘If agentship be its very nature, there can be no freedom from it, as fire can have no freedom from heat’ ( “*kartRtva-svabhAvatve hyAtmanaH .... auShNyAt*” : Shankara, Commentary on Br. S. II-3-40). The states of being an agent and an experiencer are conjured by ignorance and so devolve on the soul only in its state of ignorance, that is, only when it is wrongly identifying with the BMI.

Shankara further elaborates it in his commentary on Br.S. II – 3 – 41: “During the state of ignorance, when the individual soul is blinded by the darkness of ignorance and cannot understand itself to be different from the assemblage of body and organs, it derives its transmigratory state, consisting in its becoming an agent and experiencer, from the behest of the Supreme Self who presides over all activities and resides in all beings, and who is the witness (of all) , imparts intelligence (to all) and is the Supreme Lord”. (*avidyA-vasthAyAM ... kartRtva-bhoktRtva-lakShaNasya samsArasya siddhiH*).

The non-participating, ‘un-knowable’, ‘non-knowing’ Witness is deep within as the IP, the Atman, the unchanging Self. He is the silent, immutable, all-pervading, motionless, self-existent Consciousness. He is impersonal. He is disassociated from the doings of the GuNas. He is the inactive non-doeer and Witness. He is like the Sun who is said to

illuminate the whole world while he actually does nothing to illuminate. Just he is – and the illumination takes place!

The concept of the two Selves -- or two poises or roles of the one Self -- and a consequent grand design of a triple Self, is an essential contribution of the *Gita* to the understanding of the eternal Upanishads. In order to explain this grand design to ordinary people different masters give different illustrations. Vidyaranya's Panchadasi gives a beautiful analogy in its sixth chapter. The analogy that Vidyaranya gives and sustains throughout his work is so graphic that no presentation of the Self as adumbrated in Advaita Vedanta can be complete without mentioning Vidyaranya's analogy. Incidentally this analogy exploits both the ideas – that of 'reflection' and that of 'limitation'.

Imagine an empty pot. Even though empty, it encloses space (*AkASHa*). We may call this enclosed space, the pot-space. This is not different from the universal space which is outside the pot -- except that the pot-space is space enclosed or conditioned by the material of the pot, whereas the universal space is unconditioned. Now fill up the pot to the brim with water. The pot-space has vanished. We only see water now but in the water we see the universal space reflected. This reflection shows the sky, the stars or whatever there is in the sky or the space, like buildings, trees, clouds, etc. with all their different shades of colour. This reflected presentation of the outside space shall now be called 'water-space'.

Important remark: Water-space shall not mean 'the space occupied by water' but shall mean the reflection, in the water, of the universal space, which is everywhere.

Now the water-space hides the real space, namely the pot-space within and projects a falsity of an outer space, inside. This is the grand delusion in which we are all in.

The water-space corresponds to the *Jlva* (the individual soul) or the PP. It hides the presence of the pot-space within. The pot-space is the IP. Without the substratum of the pot-space there cannot be any water-space. We in our delusion think that the water-space is all there is. We forget there is a pot-space within. It is the real space. The water-space is only a false projection of the reality. Without the substratum of the IP within, the *jIva* or the PP or what we think as our personality has no existence. Recall Shankara's commentary on Br.S. I-4-22: "There is the vedic text (Ch.U.VI-3-2) 'Let Me manifest name and form by Myself entering in the form of this individual soul' which reveals the existence of the Supreme as the individual soul. And also there is the Taittiriya text (Aranyaka. III-12-7) 'The Supreme, having created all the forms, and

then given them names, and having entered into them He exists there by doing all kinds of actions' [*sarvANi rUpANi vicinitya dhIrah; nAmAni kRtvA'bhivadan yadAste*]. While speaking of the creation of light etc. the Upanishad does not make any separate mention of the creation of the individual soul, in which case alone the soul could have been different from the supreme Self and a product of the Self. [*na ca tejaH prabhRtInAM ... anyaH tadvikAro jIvaH*].

The IP is also called (15-16) *kUTastha*, the immovable, or the immutable, that which remains like the unchanging iron-piece (anvil) on which the blacksmith does all his hammering.

[Optional Note: *kUTastha* also means the top of a mountain which remains unchanged and undisturbed. *kUTa* also means the changeable universe amidst which the unchangeable remains fixed and is therefore called *kUTastha*]

The water in the pot is the mind or intellect. It is the reflection in our intellect of the Absolute Consciousness that generates the Jiva-feeling, an individualised feeling, in us, of 'I' and 'mine'.

On one side there is the IP or *kUTastha* and his immutability. On the other there is the action of the PP or *Jiva* and its mutability in *prakRti*. Both these coexist. 'They coexist as two contrary sides, aspects or facets of a supreme reality which is limited by neither of them'. But the existence of the PP is a reflected existence in our intellect and is therefore also called '*chidAbhAsa*' (meaning: Shadow or reflection of Consciousness), whereas the existence of the IP is original existence. There is a mutual superimposition of attributes. The existence, consciousness and bliss of the IP is superimposed on the JIva which reflects all this to us as if they are its own. On the other side, the pain and pleasure that the JIva appropriates from the BMI are superimposed on the IP and we say 'I am sorrowful' or 'I am happy'. It is because of this mutual superimposition, the PP itself, that is the JIva, is said to be a creation of illusion, as is asserted in verse VIII-52 of Panchadashi: "*ChidAbhAsa*, the reflected consciousness, partakes of the characteristics of both, the superposing intellect, such as doership, enjoyership etc. and the superposed Atman, which is consciousness. So the whole *ChidAbhAsa* is a creation of illusion."

The Ultimate Reality, however, is the Supreme Self (the *purushottama*), declared by the Lord to be 'different from the other two'. (15 - 17). This is the third of the triple personality. That is His supreme nature of existence. People foolishly think that the visual manifestation is all there is (9 - 11). They allow the water-space to hide the real pot-space within and revel in the virtual glory of the water-space. But deep

within us, by clearing our minds of all its 'contents', -- by clearing the pot of all its water -- we must get to the pot-space, that is the IP. It is the substratum which makes way for all the actions of the individual Self. The actions themselves are because of the *prakRti* -- its three strands -- which in the analogy is the reflecting capability of the water-mind. BETWEEN THE IP AND THE SUPREME SELF THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE. The former, stripped of the imagined adjunct of the body, is nothing but the Supreme Self.

Question: Does all this simply mean then that we have to identify ourselves with the IP all the time and keep thinking that we are neither the doer nor the experiencer? Is it not then a self-mesmerisation and nothing more?

Maybe. But it is not so easy. One has to prepare oneself probably for a long time before one is tuned into that kind of attitude. It is a long SadhanA that is involved. In fact the whole of the Gita is to prepare Arjuna for this ideal attitude. Our next post shall dwell on this part of the practicality of the whole process, as elucidated by the Lord in the Gita.

## **6. Perfection of Actionlessness**

From our point of view of a daily life, the maxim "I am not the doer or the experiencer" seems to be not only impossible to practice, but impossible to accept even as an ideal possibility. This is probably one of the reasons why Krishna takes several hundreds of verses to elaborate his theory. We shall also take more or less the same route as Krishna in the Gita to arrive at this. And in this process we shall see how all the theory explained in the previous posts gets applied in practice in our journey through life.

Right in the beginning Krishna tells Arjuna that the Atman never dies and so one is not supposed to grieve over whatever that dies. And then in 2 – 19 and 2- 21 He enunciates the theory :

'Whoever thinks of this (the *Atman*) as the slayer and whoever considers this as slain, both of them do not know; neither does this slay nor is slain'. 'Whereas this eternal Atman is never born and is never destroyable, how can any one talk of it as being slayed and how can any one slay it?'

Having got the definition of the Atman now in our very first lesson (Shri Ananda Wood's Weekly Definition), as 'the utmost inner knowing within us', we understand the above statement of Krishna without any

further elaboration. The inner knowing is ‘not to be confused with any outward actions’ and so the slaying or being slain are all outward actions connected with the BMI. We understand it, however, only as a theoretical statement about the eternal Atman.

But Krishna is aiming at a Plan of Action for Arjuna. So, He goes along several chapters and finally makes a startling statement in (18 – 17) where he says: “Whoever does not have the ‘I-am-the-doer’ attitude and whose intellect is not sullied, he, having slain this whole world, has neither slain nor is bound” !

This statement is certainly difficult to swallow. The concept built into 18 – 17 is called ‘Actionlessness’. It is a concept deeply ingrained in any elaboration of advaita. Krishna names it as such only in two places in the Gita, but emphasizes it throughout his discourse. And he goes about it in a spiral fashion – that is, makes a mention, gives a little explanation, leaves it there and comes back to it progressively again in greater depth and again, in further depth. The deepest of this spiralling explanation is 18 – 17. Let us take the concept in the order in which he himself unfolds it.

The only change between 2-19 and 18-17 is that the latter talks of the person (who has the ‘I-am-not-the-doer’ feeling) and not of The *Atman*! But our human weakness is such that we are able to intellectually understand 2-19 since it is a statement about the Atman, whereas when it comes to 18-17, we seem to have reservations, because it talks about what we ourselves ‘do’. The whole purpose of the Gita is to bring home the point that the person who has no ‘I-am-the-doer’ feeling is none but one who has identified with the IP or the *Atman*.

In other words, it is actually the passage from the actionlessness of the Atman (2-19) to the enlightened attitude of actionlessness of the individual (18 – 17). It is this change in attitude that restores to the individual his own nature of Happiness and Peace within. Throughout his talk Krishna is never tired of repeating this in so many different ways. This is the central thread of the teaching in the Gita. Without a proper understanding of this, one cannot hope to have a full comprehension of the message of the Gita.

To begin with, actionlessness is not non-action. Krishna specifically warns us against this. (3-4) Actionlessness is not achieved by not entering into action. In fact this is the first time the word is used by Krishna. And He cites his own example for this: (3-22). “I have nothing to get done in all the three worlds, nor anything to achieve that has not been achieved. Still I am involved in action”. To a beginning reader it may not be very clear how actionlessness is relevant here.

It is when He later talks of the creation of the *varNa* system, that He first mentions His own actionlessness (4-13): By Me was created the four *varNas*, in accordance with their *GuNas* and karma. Know Me as its doer and know Me also as the imperishable non-doer. He repeats this again in respect of His works of Creation and Dissolution, in the ninth chapter. (9-9) Those works do not bind Me. I sit, indifferent as it were, unattached to those actions.

So after the first mention of His actionlessness in the fourth chapter, he recommends it to Arjuna also. It is at this point that He begins the topic of Action and Inaction. And He begins it with a bang by making a really puzzling but profound statement that must be imprinted in gold ( 4 – 18):

“Whoever sees inaction in action and action in inaction, he is the wisest among men for he is the one in proper Yoga and is the proper doer of all actions”.

*Inaction in action:* When a train moves the landscape appears to move in the opposite direction. But really there is no movement of the landscape. Only children delude themselves into believing that the landscape is moving. We would be only children if we believe the movement of the landscape. So also the imperishable Self or the *Atman* has no action. The limiting adjuncts of the *Atman* have such properties of action and these are wrongly superimposed on the *Atman* as if they were its actions. That is why the Upanishad uses the characteristic statement “it thinks, as it were; it shakes, as it were” (Br.U.IV – 3 – 7). In other words, the real ‘I’ is not the doer. When I do things I must know that the real ‘I’ is not doing anything. This is the seeing of inaction in action. *karmaNi (In action) akarma (inaction)*. Action is only apparent. Inaction is real. The wise man knows that the world which one sees to be full of action is actually nothing but *Brahman*, and as the all-pervading entity it cannot have motion, because there is no leeway for movement!. So he sees non-action in all the turmoil around him.

*Action in inaction:* When the train moves, the landscape moves in the opposite direction. The child thinks that it is the landscape that is moving and the train is stationary. Even we adults get this mistaken feeling when two trains are in adjacent platforms ready to move in opposite directions. Suddenly we feel that the other train has already moved, but on examination of the changing landscape between the two trains we understand that it is our train that has started moving and not the other train. This is the understanding of action (*karma*) in apparent inaction (*akarmaNi*). We are not talking of relative motion here. The concept of relative motion is resorted to here only to bring out the



possibility of 'action in inaction'. To attribute non-action to the Self which stands still as it were is only to comprehend it relatively. It is the Self which permeates everywhere, it is the substratum of everything and it is the prime mover *par excellence*. "It shining, everything else shines" says Katha Upanishad 5-15. The Self is therefore the chief agent of action, as it were, though it appears to be only a silent witness. Thus the wise man sees action in non-action.

It will be very educative to read extracts from Shankara's Commentary (Swami Gambhirananda's translation) on this verse (and this will give the reader a small sample of the expository capabilities, though not the dialectics, of Shankara's pen in his voluminous commentaries). "The absence of action in the Self, well-known from the Vedas, Smritis and logic, as stated in, '(It is said that) This is unmanifest; This is inconceivable' (2.25), 'Never is this One born, and never does It die' (2.20; Ka. 1.2.18), etc.-has been and will be spoken of. The contrary perception of action in that actionless Self, i.e. in inaction, is very deep-rooted, owing to which (4-16) 'even the intelligent are confounded as to what is action and what is inaction.' And as a consequence of the superimposition of action pertaining to the body etc. on the Self, there arises such ideas as, 'I am an agent; this is my action; its result is to be enjoyed by me.' Similarly, with the idea, 'I shall remain quiet, whereby I shall be free from exertion, free from activity, and happy', and superimposing on the Self the cessation of activities pertaining to the body and organs and the resulting happiness, a man imagines, 'I shall not do anything; I shall sit quietly and happily.' That being so, the Lord says, 'he who finds inaction in action,' etc. with a view to removing this contrary understanding of man. And here in this world, though action belonging to the body and organs continues to be action, still it is superimposed by everyone on the actionless, unchanging Self, as a result of which even a learned person thinks, 'I act.' Therefore, in action (karmani), which is universally considered by all people to be inherent in the Self, like the perception of motion in the (stationary) trees on the bank of a river-(in that action) he who contrariwise finds the fact of inaction, like perceiving absence of motion in those trees-. And, in inaction (akarmani) in the cessation of the activities pertaining to the body and organs and ascribed to the Self in the same way that actions are ascribed-, in that action, he who sees action because of egoism being implicit in the idea, 'I am happily seated quietly, without doing anything'-; he who knows thus the distinction between action and inaction, is wise, is learned among men; he is engaged in yoga, he is a yogi, and a performer of all actions".

And Krishna continues: (4 - 19) "The wise consider him as the learned one, who has all his actions extinguished by the fire of Knowledge and all whose endeavours are devoid of desire or will". The

fire of Knowledge is the attitude of Actionlessness. So there is no desire to obtain anything nor there is a will (ego) to claim the action as one's doing. (4 – 20) “Having abandoned the attachment to the fruits of actions ever content and not having any ephemeral prop, even though one is involved in activities, one is actually not doing anything”. (4 -21) “One who has no desires to be fulfilled, who has controlled his BMI, who has abandoned all possessive ideas and does work only by one's body, incurs no sin”. So this is the final directive from the Lord for us to act.

This recipe for ‘How to act’ is explained further in the next verse 4-22: “Just content with what one gets in the normal course of things, transcending all pairs of opposites, without envy and with an equanimous view of both success and failure, though acting, one is not bound”.

All actions of all kinds culminate in Knowledge, says Krishna (4 – 33 – second line). Because, Knowledge implies actionlessness. And for the same reason, the following verses also make sense: Even if you are the most sinful of all sinners, you will cross sin by the raft of Knowledge (through the attitude of actionlessness). (4 – 36) As the blazing fire reduces fuel to ashes so does the fire of Knowledge reduce all actions to ashes. (4 – 37)

Then in the fifth chapter He makes a general statement of the whole concept before going to details of the explanation. He who is yoked to the path of Yoga, whose mind is quite pure, who has controlled his outer self and his senses and who realises his own self as the self in all beings – such a one, though acting, is not tainted (by the action) (5 – 7).

How such a one would act is described dramatically in slow motion in the next four verses (5– 8 to 5 – 11):

“I do nothing at all” – thus would the enlightened *yogi* think – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, sleeping, breathing, speaking, answering nature's calls, grabbing, opening the eyes and closing the eyes; all the time convinced that it is the senses that move amidst the sense-objects.”

“He who does actions, offering them to *Brahman*, abandoning all attachment, is not tainted by sin, as a lotus leaf is untainted by water on it.”

“Abandoning all attachment, the *yogi* performs actions only with the body mind intellect and even by the senses -- all this for the purification of his BMI”

“*Atma-shuddhaye*” – for the purification of the self – are the words used in Verse 11 above. Here the self is the outer self, the BMI. The real Self, the *Atman*, needs no purification because it is ever pure. So when Krishna says “*Atma-shuddhaye*” he means the purification of the BMI which results naturally in the perishable Self shedding off its wrong identification. In this sense one can say we are purifying the perishable Self itself by such actionless action!

Actionless Action! This is the key for identification with the IP and disassociation from the PP. At the beginning of this series we raised the question: “What does it mean to identify ourselves with IP?” Well, here is the answer. Every action that we perform, has to be performed only by the BMI accompanied by a mental renunciation that ‘I am not the doer, nor am I the experiencer’. Since the mind is involved, it satisfies the worldly requirement that it has to be done sincerely, and since the mental renunciation of agency is also there it satisfies the spiritual requirement of the Gita for self-purification.

Krishna continues: (5– 13) : Mentally renouncing all actions and remaining self-controlled, the embodied one rests happily in the negated city, neither acting nor causing action. And again, (13 – 31) : Being without beginning and devoid of all attributes, the Supreme Self, the Imperishable, though dwelling in the body, neither acts, nor is tainted.

And now we come to the eighteenth chapter, where, in the beginning, ‘Action’ per se, is analysed: (18 – 14, 15). Whatever action a man performs with his body, speech and mind, whether right or otherwise, there are five causes, namely, the base (body), the doer, the various senses, the different functions of various sorts, and the presiding deity as the fifth. Note that the doer (*karta*) here is the PP (that is, the *jIva* who has identified with the BMI). And that is why Krishna continues (18 – 16): Such being the case, he who, by mistaken understanding, looks upon his Self, which is isolated, as the doer, sees not; he is of perverted intelligence.

In fact this is the core of our Ignorance. Shankara in the prose part of UpadeshasAhasrI, raises through the disciple the question of “What is Ignorance?” and answers it in unmistakable terms: “ You are wrongly thinking of Yourself, who are the self-existent non-transmigratory Absolute Self, as one who transmigrates; the one who is the non-doing self as the doer; the one who is the non-experiencing self as experiencer; the one who is existent as non-existing. This is Ignorance”. (UpadeshasAhasrI #50, Prose section).

And therefore comes the crucial verse 18-17. So when the “I-am-not-the-doer” feeling is there, the action touches only the doer, who is now the BMI only; because the “I-am-not-the-doer” attitude is equivalent to an identification with the IP, so that there is only the BMI who is doing everything, (cf.5-11). Or one can say that *PrakRti* is doing everything (3-27 and (13-29). Note that all the five causes listed above for any action are all related to BMI only. In any case the doer is not the “I”.

In the final section now we shall have a do-it-yourself summary of all that we have seen, in the form of “Five tenets of practical advaita”.

### **7. Five Tenets of Practical advaita**

The five tenets of practical advaita are:

- ‘I am not this BMI’ – attitude.
- ‘I am not the doer’ – attitude.
- ‘I am not the experiencer’—attitude
- Efficiency in Action.
- Equanimous view.

Krishna emphasizes these throughout the Gita and cites himself as model for every one of these. He mentions how He is Himself a practitioner of these.

1. ‘I am not this BMI’ – attitude.

All the troubles for the soul are because of its identification with the BMI. The Lord has no such identification. A classical statement of His in this connection is (9-11). “Fools understand me as one in this human body. They do not comprehend my Absolute Form as the Lord of all the living”.

In His teaching to us, right in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter He begins to wean us away from this BMI, which seems to possess us instead of our possessing them. (2-14): “What gives us happiness and misery, cold and heat, are just those that touch us on the surface; they come and go, they are impermanent. Just bear with them”. (2-58): “When one withdraws all the sense-organs from the sense-objects, just like a tortoise withdraws all of its own limbs, such a one is declared to be a man of stabilized intellect.” (12 – 15): “ He by whom the world is not agitated and who cannot be agitated by the world, and who is free from joy, anger, fear and anxiety – he is dear to Me”. (14 – 23): “ (The one who has

transcended the three strands of qualities is) the one sitting like one indifferent, undistracted by the three qualities and who knows the qualities alone act and remains firm and surely does not waver.”

And in the very last words spoken by Him the Lord brings His parting message and incorporates the idea “eradication of ‘I am this body’ – attitude” in the carama-shloka of the Gita, namely 18-66. And this pleads for our renunciation of all the dharmas that accrue as a consequence of ‘I-am-this-body’-attitude. He makes this as the climax teaching of the Gita.

## 2. ‘I am not the doer’ – attitude.

Krishna tells us that none of his actions touch him. (9-9). “Know Me as the doer of it as well as the non-doeer of it” (4-13). “Even though He is resident in the body, He is not doing anything” (13-31/32). And He exhorts us to have the same ‘I-am-not-the-doeer’-attitude.

(3-17): “There is nothing to be done by such a person”.

(3-27) “He whose mind is deluded by egoism thinks ‘I am the doer’”.

(4-20) “Even though he is engaged in action he is not doing anything”.

(4-22): “Having done, even then, he is not bound”.

(5-8): “That I am not doing anything ...”

(14-19): “When the seer beholds no doer other than the GuNas”.

(18-17): “ He who has the I-am-not-the-doeer attitude, whose intelligence is not tainted, though he slays these people he slays not nor is he bound by any action”.

## 3. I am not the experiencer’ – attitude.

The Lord hints of this attitude of his in (4-14): “There is no desire of mine for the fruits of actions”; also in (4-14): “Actions do not contaminate Me”. (13-31/32): “Even though He is resident in the body he is not experiencing anything”; (13-32/33): “The self seated everywhere in the body is not tainted”.

The following are some of the places where it is enjoined on us:

(2-47): “never in the fruits (of action)”

(3-19): “By performing action without attachment Man reaches the Supreme”.

(4-21): “Rid of all desires, having controlled mind and the associated outer self, having thrown off all thought of possession, by doing only bodily actions, one does not acquire any fault”

(4-41): “Him who has renounced actions by yoga, whose doubts are rent asunder by knowledge and who is self-possessed – him the actions do not bind.”

(5-7): “Even by doing, he is not contaminated”.

(5-10): “He is not touched by sin, just as the lotus leaf is untouched by water”.

(5-12): “having abandoned the fruit of action”

(18-11): “he who relinquishes the rewards of actions”.

#### 4. Efficiency in action.

Just because one is not the doer, nor the experiencer, it does not mean action can be messed up nor can it be avoided nor can one be indifferent to it. “I have nothing yet to accomplish” says the Lord, in (3-22): “There is nothing in the three worlds, that should be done by Me, nor is there anything unattained that should be attained. Still I engage in action”. (3-23): “If I do not engage myself in action, unwearied men would in every way follow my path”. Thus, showing Himself as the model, He urges humanity to action, the right action:

(2-47): “Your obligation is only to do your action”

(3-20): “Verily, Janaka and others attained perfection only by action. Even with the purpose of world-welfare, you should perform action”

Not only that. The action has to be efficient:

(2-48): “Established in Yoga, do your actions, leaving off all attachment”.

(2-50): “Yoga means efficiency in action.”

(3-25): “As the ignorant man does action out of attachment, so should the wise act without attachment, wishing the welfare of the world.”

(18-48): “The action born of your nature shall not be renounced, even if it is faulty”.

(18-56): “Resorting to Me, doing all your actions always”

#### 5. Equanimous view

The Lord mentions His own equanimous attitude in (9-29): “The same am I to all beings”. He declares this, in several places, as a must for all spiritual seekers :

(5-18): “Sages view with the same light a brahmin endowed with learning and humility, a cow, an elephant, and even a dog and a dog-eater.”

(11-55): “He who bears enmity towards no creature”.

(12-18): “ He who is the same to foe and friend”.

(13-27/28): “He sees, who sees the Supreme Lord existing equally in all beings, the unperishing within the perishing.”

(13-28/29): “He is seeing the same Lord equally dwelling everywhere”.

(14-25): “the same to friend and foe”.

(18-20): “That by which one sees the one indestructible reality in all beings, not separate in all the separate beings, know thou that knowledge to be sAtvika (divine)”.

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In fact (9-27) focusses on the same five tenets through the medium of Devotion and Dedication. “Whatever you do, whatever you consume or experience, whatever you offer to deities (through Fire or otherwise), whatever you give away or renounce, whatever you perform (with or without an end in view) -- do all this in dedication to Me” – says the Lord.

WHATEVER YOU DO, - ‘*yat karoShi*’ - DO IT IN DEDICATION TO HIM. In other words all your engagement in actions must be in dedication to Him. This is karma yoga, the most-often-talked-about part of the Gita. This is Efficiency in action. In the crucial verse (11-55) which Acharya Shankara marks as the whole Gita in a single capsule, this corresponds to the words \*matkarma-kRt\* (Doing all actions only for Me)

WHATEVER YOU CONSUME OR EXPERIENCE, - ‘*yad-ashnAsi*’ - DEDICATE IT TO HIM. In other words there is nothing that you experience for yourself. Whether it is joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, it is all His. It is not only His will but also His experience, not yours, because He is in you and there is nothing else in you. This is the “Being my devotee” (\*mad-bhaktaH\*) in (11-55). This is the meaning of being devoted wholly to Him and still living a life. This is the life of bhakti. This is bhakti yoga; and more, it is advaita-bhakti. This is what leads us on to the ideal ‘I am not the experiencer’-attitude. When pleasant things happen to us we would not like to say ‘I am not the enjoyer’. When unpleasant things happen to us, we would very much like to say ‘I am not the enjoyer’, but our body-mind-intellect does not allow us to say so. In one case we like to say so and in the other case we do not like to say so. Gita says in both cases we should be able to say so and feel that way. This is the meaning of the Gita’s insistence on discarding both likes and dislikes. Here the first step is to start with the pleasant happenings. With a little will power and effort, at least in small things, we should be able to try it. That is the starting point. And in due course of this practice, one should be able to carry the attitude of ‘I-am-not-the-enjoyer’ to even unpleasant experiences.

Whatever you offer to deities – ‘*yaj-juhoShi*’ - through Fire or otherwise, dedicate it to Him. This implies, there is no other object for your worship, reverence or care. He is the goal; He is the refuge. “Keeping me as your only destination” (\*mat-paramaH\*) says the Lord in (11-55). It is for Him you do everything; more, You are not the doer. You have renounced all ‘doership’ in His favour! When we do something blameworthy, it is convenient to say ‘I am not the doer’. But that is not to be the starting

point here. What we should start with is the situation when we do something which is creditworthy. We should not take the credit ourselves. This is the rock bottom first step. Even when others give us the credit, we should be able to tune our mind to say (and also feel so!) that it is due to somebody else; if we cannot find an acceptable 'somebody else' we should be able to say (and feel) that it is the will and work of God. To follow Krishna according to the path of His Gita-teaching, this is the step next to the rock bottom first step. The entire concept of yajna (dedicated selfless action) is for training us along this path. This is the one that ultimately leads us to the state of complete surrender envisaged in 18 – 66.

WHATEVER YOU PERFORM - '*yat tapasyasi*' - WITH OR WITHOUT AN END IN VIEW, DEDICATE IT TO HIM. This performance is tapas; meaning, enduring the 'shrama' (effort or 'pain') while performing and having no attachment to anything (cf. \*sanga-varjitaH\* in 11-55 and several other places in the Gita). Doing something for the sake of some noble cause or someone whom you revere, is tapas. Even ordinary acts of a difficult daily commuting is also a tapas, if you adopt the attitude of dedication to the cause that motivates you to undertake the journey. All this has to be dedicated to Him, because if you have no end in view, that is already a dedication, and if you have an end in view, dedication to Him means you are not attached to that end in view. Thus the whole process is a sAdhanA (practice) for detachment, culminating in the ideal 'I am not the BMI'.

WHATEVER YOU GIVE AWAY OR RENOUNCE, - '*yad-dadAsi*' - DEDICATE IT AS WELL AS THE ACTION, TO HIM. Because nothing belongs to you, really. Everything belongs to Him. Even when you are giving or renouncing, you are renouncing what you think you have, but in reality you do not have. Nothing belongs to you or to anybody. This is the combination of the fundamental idea of equanimity and also of the idea that everything is transient, i.e., mAyA. Therefore there is no reason to bear even an iota of ill-will to anybody, even when you feel, in the worldly sense, that the other person is possessing what you think must be, or should have been, in your possession. Love every one; and more importantly, "hate no being" -- \*nirvairaH sarva-bhUteShu\* in (11-55). This is the attitude of equanimity - '*samadR^iShTi*' - that is the hallmark-teaching of the Gita.

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A few words about the non-accumulation of 'VAsanAs' and exhaustion of 'karma'. There are three kinds of karma. First, the one that has already begun to sprout its effects from the beginning of this life. These have only to be exhausted by experiencing them. In experiencing them it is



the attitude of 'I am not the experiencer' that saves us from building into our system any reactionary tendencies.

The second kind of karma is the one that we do in this life and a consequent build-up of future consequences. The 'I am not the doer'-attitude, saves us, according to the theory of karma yoga of the Gita, from binding us to any future consequences.

The third kind is what is in storage, for possible exhaustion in future lives. This can be erased only by God's Grace and that is why the verse 9-27 which focusses everything through devotion and dedication is important.

The VAsanAs (tendencies) on the other hand do not split themselves into three kinds like those of 'karma'. All our vAsanAs keep on influencing our minds in all our lives, because we are only hugging a shadow, namely, the PP, which is made up of our entire past aggregate of tendencies and attitudes. They can be erased only by replacing the vAsanAs by good vAsanAs. So again 9-27 is the only remedy. But as we journey through our present life, we keep on accumulating further vAsanAs; to avoid these, the proper attitude to life's journey is the two attitudes of 'I am not the doer' and 'I am not the experiencer'.

Thus the five tenets of practical advaita are:

1. Attitude of 'I am not the body, mind or intellect' (*na-aham deho nendriyANy-antarango na-ahamkAraH prANavargo na buddhiH*)
2. Attitude of 'I am not the doer' (*na-ahaM kartA*)
3. Attitude of 'I am not the experiencer' (*na aham bhoktA*)
4. Efficiency in action (*karmasu kaushalaM*)
5. Equanimous view (*sama-buddhiH*)

No.1 is fundamental. No.2 rids you of further accumulation of *vasanAs* (tendencies) through present action. No.3 takes care of the exhaustion of consequences of past action, without leaving any trace for future tendencies to sprout. No.4 is action, even though in the *mAyic* world! But one has to live in that world. It has inbuilt into it the concept of dedication of all actions to the Supreme and therefore the Devotion that forms the basis of that dedication. It is this Devotion to the Supreme that finally disposes off all the accumulated 'karmas' and '*vAsanAs*' of past lives so that the sprouting of further births to exhaust the consequences of those 'karmas' does not happen. Thus #s1, 2, 3 and 4 release you from bondage and seal all future births.

The fifth is what becomes the Ultimate Stage of Oneness in Brahman. What then is 'Jivan-mukti' if not the ideal state of #5? Together all the five constitute advaita in practice. And it is (9-27) that marks for us the highway – the only highway – to follow advaita in practice.

*Om ShAntiH ShAntiH ShAntiH.*

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