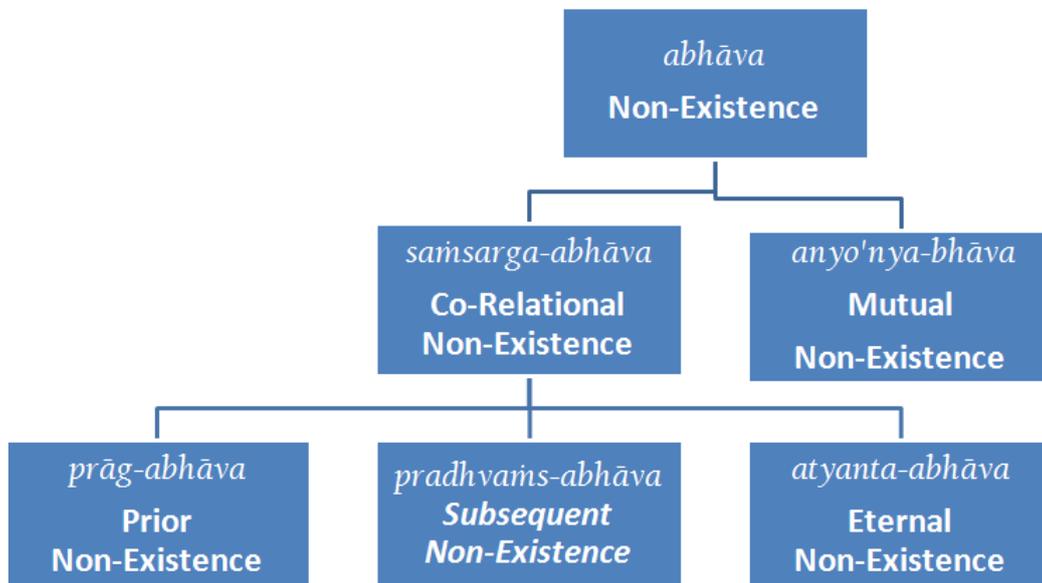


## The Meaning of Non-Existence and its Implications of the Self's Bondage

By Satyanarayana Dasa

In Indian Logic (Nyāya), non-existence is called *abhāva*. There are various divisions and subdivisions of non-existence.



### Mutual Non-Existence (*anyo'nya-abhāva*)

“Mutual non-existence” means non-existence due to being different. For instance, a table is different from a chair. In a table, a chair does not exist. This is true for all three phases of time: A chair never existed within a table, nor does it currently exist within a table, nor will it ever in the future exist within a table. The chair and the table mutually demonstrate the non-existence of the other, because they are eternally different from each other.

### Co-relational Non-Existence (*samsarga-abhāva*)

Another, more significant, type of non-existence is inherent within the object itself – not merely demonstrated by the object not existing within another object. There are three types of such “co-relational non-existence,” differentiated by the time at which the non-existence occurs.

### **Prior Non-Existence (*prāg-abhāva*)**

Before an object came into existence, it was non-existent. That is “prior non-existence.” It implies that a non-existent object could be created, produced or generated in future.

Indian Logic accepts eight general and three specific causes of any creation. The eight general causes are:

1. God
2. God’s knowledge
3. God’s will
4. God’s effort
5. Fate
6. *Prāg-abhāva*
7. Space
8. Time

*Prāg-abhāva* is particularly significant, because if an object is not initially non-existent, there is no question of “creating” it. If there is no non-existence, it means that the object already exists.

To give an example: Before a cake comes into existence, its non-existence was prevailing without any beginning. This non-existence is called *prāg-abhāva*. However, when the cake is produced, its non-existence terminates.

### **Subsequent Non-Existence (*pradhvarṁs-abhāva*)**

Continuing with the example of a cake, when it is entirely eaten the cake once again exists no more. This is “subsequent non-existence.” It implies that the object previously existed.

“Subsequent non-existence” has no end. Never again will that specific cake come back into existence. It will always remain non-existent. “Prior non-existence has an end, but no beginning; and “Subsequent non-existence” has a beginning but no end.

### **Eternal Non-Existence (*atyanta-abhāva*)**

“Eternal non-existence” refers to things that never existed in the past and will never exist in the future, like the horns of a rabbit.

### **Implications for the “Fall of the Soul”**

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī says the living entity suffers because of an ignorance that has no beginning (*prag-abhāva*). Ignorance is merely the non-existence of knowledge, in this case of the Supreme Lord. In other words, the living entity suffers because of “prior non-existence” of divine knowledge.

This ignorance cannot be “subsequent non-existence of divine knowledge.” Because if it were so, then divine knowledge would have existed before the ignorance. However, it is a dictum that one who has knowledge of the Supreme Lord can never be put into ignorance.

So Jīva Gosvāmī describes the soul’s ignorance as “beginningless” – the soul never possessed the divine knowledge to begin with. And this is why the *jīva* is called *nitya-baddha*, “ever-conditioned.”

When we apply this to the question of when, how or if the living entity fell from the spiritual world, we can conclude that he never fell, because his conditioned state has no beginning. This is the meaning of *nitya-baddha*. This also implies that it is possible to bring ignorance to an end. “Prior non-existence of knowledge” can be ended when one attains divine knowledge.

When divine knowledge comes into existence, it will never end. It puts ignorance into “subsequent non-existence” which is an endless condition. Therefore a person with divine knowledge is called *nitya-siddha*, “ever-liberated.” Such persons never fall down. This is the meaning of Lord Kṛṣṇa’s statement, *yad gatvā na nivartante tad dhāma paramaṁ mama*: “reaching which one never returns – this is my supreme abode” (BG 15.6).

This abode, the Lord’s planet (*dhāma*), is not physical. When we say, “after going there,” we think “going” means moving from one physical location to another, but this is not the case here. “Going” here refers to consciousness: When one’s consciousness “goes” transcendental, it cannot be lost, *na nivartante*.

Therefore, once a person becomes liberated, he cannot be bound again, and if someone is conditioned, there is no question that he or she was liberated prior to that.

That is the meaning of Jīva Gosvāmī’s statement in *Pṛiti Sandharbha (Anuccheda 1)*, *sarṁsargābhāva yuktatvena*: A person’s pre-non-existence of knowledge implies that there is a possibility of acquiring knowledge. Although the ignorance has no beginning, it has an end.

## “Eternal”

Anything which has no prior non-existence, is called “eternal.” Things which were never created cannot be destroyed, they are outside the influence of chronology. Kṛṣṇa, for example, has no prior non-existence, therefore the terms “creation”, “existence” or “destruction” do not apply to Kṛṣṇa. To say Kṛṣṇa has existence implies in terms of Logic that prior to existence He did not exist, the non-existence was destroyed and then He came into existence. Obviously, this is not applicable to eternal objects.

However, this is not the case when it comes to ignorance, because ignorance itself is not a substance, it is merely the non-existence of another substance: knowledge. Thus, although it is beginningless, it has an end. Owing to our material conditioning, we think that everything has a beginning, and sometimes *ācāryas* may explain philosophy in terms implying that ignorance has a beginning, to circumvent the material conditioning that often prevents us from understanding the concept of “beginningless.”

Eternal beings like Kṛṣṇa and everything directly related to Him (e.g., His associates, His planets and His pastimes) have no beginning. *Māyā* and material nature are also related to Kṛṣṇa, and thus also have no beginning. We are also related to Kṛṣṇa, therefore we ourselves have no beginning and we seem to accept it without much thought. However, when it comes to our conditioned state, we somehow seem to object that our ignorance is beginningless. Even though we may feel troubled by the thought that our ignorance has no beginning, we can rejoice to know that it can come to an end.