

The Self and Free Will in the Caitanya Sampradāya

By Satyanarayana Dasa

Different schools of Indian philosophy and theology present different doctrines regarding the agency, enjoyership and knowership of *ātmā*, the individual self. Among them, the Vedānta schools accept the authority of *śabda*, the revealed scriptures, and therefore base their exposition on the teachings of the Upaniṣads, *Vedānta Sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā* — traditionally known as “The Three Foundations” (*prasthāna-trayī*) — with the *Purānas* and *Āgamas* serving as secondary sources of scriptural evidence.

Views of Different Schools

There are two types of Vedānta schools: monistic and dualistic (Advaita and Dvaita respectively). Both Monistic- and Dualistic-Vedānta accept the Absolute Reality as a non-dual entity, but the Monistic school posits that this entity is without qualities, forms or varieties and that there is no true difference between non-dualistic reality and the individual living being, while the Dualistic school posits that the Absolute Reality possesses qualities, form and variety which are non-different from it and that the individual living beings are not absolutely one with Absolute Reality, yet have no independent existence and in that sense *are* one with it.

The Caitanya school belongs to the Dualistic School, but is unique in that it regards the *Bhāgavata Purāna* as the main source of its doctrines, trusting it to be an exposition of *Vedānta Sūtra* by the author himself (Vyāsa). This trust is based upon statements of Śrī Caitanya, the founder of the school, found in Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja’s Sixteenth Century biography, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. It also finds support in a verse from *Garuḍa Purāna*¹:

“The treatise called *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* is the most complete *Purāna*. It embodies the essential meaning of the *Vedānta Sūtra*, establishes the meaning of the *Mahābhārata*, is a commentary on Gāyatrī, explains and expands the meaning of the Vedas, is the *Sāma Veda* of the *Purānas*, and is the direct utterance of the Supreme Absolute, Śrī Bhagavān. It has twelve cantos, hundreds of chapters, and eighteen thousand verses.”

This is why the immediate followers of Caitanya did not comment upon the principle *Upaniṣads*, *Vedānta Sūtra* or *Bhagavad Gītā* —which is the usual practice for any authentic Vedānta school. Instead, they wrote commentaries, essays and independent works based upon the *Bhāgavata Purāna*.²

Of these, the seminal work defining the essential doctrines of the school is Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī’s *Bhāgavata Sandarbha*, more commonly known as *Sat Sandarbha*. This is a set of six books: the

¹ Cited in *Bhāgavata-tātparya* (1.1.1) by Śrī Madhvācārya.

² Later a controversy arose about the authenticity of the Caitanya school since it did not have its *bhasya* (commentary) on the *Prasthāna-trayī*, which is considered as a prerequisite for a Vedānta school to be authentic. Śrī Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (eighteenth) fulfilled this lacuna by commenting on the principal Upaniṣads, *Vedānta Sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Tattva-, *Bhagavat-*, *Paramātmā-*, *Kṛṣṇa-*, *Bhakti-* and *Prīti-Sandarbhā*s. Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī's unique contribution to the Vedānta school is his codifying the Caitanya School's opinion that *mokṣa* (liberation — the fourth human pursuit) is *not* the supreme objective; love (*prema*) for God, Bhagavān, is the supreme goal, the fifth and ultimate human pursuit.

The other Vedānta schools consider *bhakti* only a means to *mokṣa*. In *Bhakti Sandarbha*, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī very forcefully establishes *bhakti* as an independent spiritual process, not merely a means to some other goal. In fact he goes further and establishes that neither *karma-yoga* nor *jñāna-yoga* are efficacious without the grace of *bhakti*. He demonstrates that *bhakti* is the essential message of the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Purānas* and *Itihāsas*. The Caitanya school places unique emphasis on celebrating the names and exploits (*līla*) of the most intimate form of God (“*Kṛṣṇa*”), through *smaraṇa* (contemplation), *japa* (personal recitation), and, especially, *kīrtana* (singing with musical instruments).

The practice of *bhakti* involves knowledge of Bhagavān, of the individual living being and of *bhakti* itself. To delineate this knowledge, Jīva Gosvāmī wrote *Bhagavat Sandarbha*, *Paramātmā Sandarbha* and *Bhakti Sandarbha*.

In this article we study the characteristics of the individual living being (*ātmā*), based on the elaborate analysis he has given in *Paramātmā Sandarbha*.³

Basic Characteristics of *Ātmā*

Sri Jīva Gosvāmī describes the individual living being (*ātmā*) as an eternal, distinct part of Paramātmā's intermediary potency (*taṭastha-śakti*). Ever subservient to and under the control of Paramātmā, the individual living being can never be absolutely equal to Him, for although it is, like Paramātmā, conscious by nature, it is infinitesimally small. Like Paramātmā, the individual living being has inherent potential to be a doer, knower and enjoyer — but these potentials cannot be realized without the aid of a body, either material or spiritual. Otherwise these remain inherent in the *ātmā* only in their potential state.

While enumerating the characteristics of *ātmā*, Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī refers to the following verses of Jāmātṛ Muni, a follower of Śrī Rāmānujācārya:

1. The *ātmā* is neither a god, nor a human, nor a subhuman, nor an immovable being; nor is it the body, the senses, or the mind, nor is it the life air, or the intelligence.
2. It is not inert. It is not mutable. It is not merely consciousness, it is conscious of *itself*, self-luminous. It exists within its own unchanging nature.
3. Its consciousness pervades the body. Its nature is sentience and bliss. It is the direct meaning of “I.” It is unique in each body, atomic, eternal, pure.
4. It is naturally always the part of Paramātmā. It has the characteristics of knowership, agency and enjoyership.

³ The terms *ātmā* and *jīva* are here used interchangeably.

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī comments upon each of the characteristics listed here while citing references from scriptures, chiefly from *Bhāgavata Purāna*, in support thereof.

The first verse in this quotation describes what *ātmā* is *not*: It is not the physical body, mind, intelligence, life air or ego, because it is the witness of all these - and the witness is distinct from the witnessed. The essence of this verse is that *ātmā* is not a material object and is therefore immutable and indestructible.

The second verse begins with a positive description of what *ātmā* is. Let us consider this in greater detail.

a) *Ātmā* Is Conscious

It is not inert. It is conscious, and infuses consciousness into the subtle and gross bodies by its mere presence. The subtle as well as gross body cannot function without being illuminated by *ātmā*. *Ātmā*, however, requires no illumination from elsewhere, it is self-luminous by its very nature.

A human being experiences three states of life: (1) *wakefulness*, in which one is conscious of one's gross body as well as the mind; (2) *the dream state*, in which one is not aware of the gross body but experiences dreams in the mind; (3) *the dreamless sleep*, in which one is not aware of the body or mind. *Ātmā* is witness to all three states. An insentient, inert entity cannot witness anything, therefore *ātmā* must be conscious.

b.) *Ātmā* Possesses Consciousness and Is Self-aware

Ātmā is not mere consciousness. It is an entity that *possesses* consciousness. It is consciousness itself, *and* it possesses consciousness. Therefore it is described as “self-luminous” (*svayam-prakāśa*).

Objects like a table or a book, for example, are not self-illuminating. They need to be illuminated by a light source before they can be seen. A light bulb, however, is self-illuminating, it illuminates itself as well as objects in its vicinity. But a light bulb is not *aware* of what it illuminates, because it is insentient, inert. *Ātmā* is not only self-illuminating but also self-aware. *Ātmā* illuminates itself and the body, and is conscious of the things it illuminates, including itself. For this reason, *ātmā* is called *cid-rūpa*, “sentient by nature.” Although self-luminous like a bulb, however, *ātmā* does not reveal the body to others, but only to itself.

This concept of *ātmā* is in contrast to the notion of Advaita Vedānta, where *ātmā* is proclaimed to be mere consciousness, rather than possessing consciousness. In that school consciousness is only seen as the nature of *ātmā*, but not as its attribute.

c.) *Ātmā* is Immutable

Ātmā undergoes no modifications. Only the body undergoes various changes. If *ātmā* were subject to changes, it would not be a witness to the changes in the body. To witness a change, the witness must persist through the changes.

d.) *Ātmā* Pervades the Body and is Blissful

Ātmā pervades the whole body by its consciousness, just as a light bulb situated in one part of a room fills it with light. It is *cid-ānandātmaka*: it has sentience and bliss as its very nature. Thus it is neither inert, nor is there any tinge of misery in its *svarūpa*. No misery can ever contact the *ātmā*.

This blissful nature of the self, *ānandatvam*, can be verified on the basis that it is spontaneously the object of everyone's love; one's own self is automatically the most important, dearest entity in one's existence. Nobody loves something miserable, everybody loves joyful things. Since the self is automatically so powerfully attractive, it follows that it must naturally be completely free of any tinge of misery, and blissful.

Everything we love, we love because of its relationship to our self. We love our body as long as we occupy it. We love others as long as *ātmā* occupies their bodies. Once the *ātmā* leaves a body, it becomes unattractive and unlovable. We love persons and objects we identify as belonging to us. Sage Yājñavalkya told his wife Maitreyī that the wife does not love her husband for the sake of the husband but for the sake of the self (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5). This further demonstrates that *ātmā* is blissful, and therefore inherently attractive. However, the *ānanda* of the *jīva* is not the same as that of Bhagavān, whose bliss is that of the internal potency, *antaraṅga-śakti*. The *ānanda* of the individual *ātmā* only means freedom from misery, which can also be considered a type of bliss.

e.) *Ātmā* is the meaning of "I"

Ātmā is the meaning of the word, "I" (*ahamārtha*). *Atma* is the *self*, so it is the object of the pronoun, "I." In other words, it is the feeling of "I." The core of the feeling of "I" is self-awareness, sentience, consciousness. Since *ātmā* is this core feeling of "I," *ātmā* is self-awareness. Without self-awareness it is not possible to identify with anything else such as a material body. Because we know that *ātmā* indeed does become absorbed in bodily identity, we know *ātmā* must have its own sense of "I." One without a sense of self ("I," *aham*) cannot identify with anything else.

Therefore it is certain that *ātmā* itself possesses identity, a sense of individual self. This inherent individuality and self-awareness ("I") of *ātmā* is *not* a cause of material bondage when it is grounded in the pure nature of the *ātmā*. It is a cause of material bondage only when it is projected towards a material body. The *ātmā* can project the feeling of "I" into a mass of matter (*prakṛti*) called a body. By so doing, *ātmā* identifies itself with *prakṛti*, thinks it is a parcel of *prakṛti*, and believes that it is the agent of deeds which in fact are performed by *prakṛti*.

The *ātmā*'s self-concept is called *ahaṅkāra*. *Ātmā* can invest its *ahaṅkāra* within itself, or can project it towards something else, an alternate identity composed of an external substance: *prakṛti*. The *ahaṅkāra* projected into the body is inactive in deep sleep. On awakening one deliberates about it with statements like, "I slept happily and wasn't aware of anything." The recognition that "I wasn't aware of anything" shows that the *ahaṅkāra* related to the body is not eternal and can become inactive. It also shows that there is another *ahaṅkāra*, witnessing that lack of awareness of the conventional self. This is the *ahaṅkāra* in relation to *ātmā*. Forgetting oneself in deep sleep implies ignorance about material ego, and it implies a witness of this ignorance who recollects on waking up. Thus there is a real-I inherent in the *ātma*, which is the ultimate basis for the word "I," and there is also a material I, projected into material organisms. These are the two *ahaṅkāras*. Without the real I of the *ātmā*, there would be no basis upon which the material I of identification

with a particular mind-body-complex could exist. This refutes the Advaita-vāda theory that there is no real “I” in the *ātmā*.

f.) *Ātmās* are Many and Infinitesimal

By proving that “I-consciousness” is in the nature of the self, it naturally follows, as Jāmātr Muni says next, that there is a different *ātmā* in each body. He also gives another reason why the *ātmā* must be different in each body: It is *anu* (infinitesimally small) although it diffuses its consciousness throughout the entire body. Since it is infinitesimally small it is indivisible. Since *ātmā* cannot divide its sense of self into many different bodies, there must be a separate self in each body.

The infinitesimal smallness and indivisibility of *ātmā* is stated many times in the scripture. In *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (11.16.11), Kṛṣṇa tells Uddhava that the *ātmā* is the most minute of minute things, “Of enormous things I am the *totality (mahat-tattva)*. Of minute things I am the *ātmā (jīva)*.”

The Śruti statements also support this:

“This self is minute and to be known by the intellect...” (Muṇḍaka U. 3.1.9);

“The size of the *ātmā* is like one ten-thousandth of the tip of a hair” (Śvet. U. 5.9);

“The *jīva* seems to be a pinpoint” (Śvet. U. 5.8).

This refutes the Advaita-vāda conception that one *ātmā* is spread throughout all bodies. When scriptures make statements to this effect — such as “One divinity is hidden in all beings” (*eko devaḥ sarva-bhūteṣu gūḍhaḥ*, Śvet. U. 6.11) — they describe not the *ātmā* but the Paramātmā.

g.) *Ātmā* is Part of Paramātmā

The self is eternally a part of Paramātmā, even in the liberated stage. Kṛṣṇa confirms this in the Gītā (15.7): “The eternal living being is verily a part of Myself.” This is the very *nature* of *ātmā*. *Ātmā* is not an outcome of some covering or limitation imposed on Brahman, as proposed by Advaita-vāda.

In *Bhāgavat Sandarbha* (section 15), Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī establishes that Paramātmā naturally has translogical potency. *Ātmā* is a particle of a ray of the translogical potency of Paramātmā, but can exist in a conditioned state, under the influence of matter. Being a ray of Paramātmā, *ātmā* is eternally under His shelter and cannot exist without Him.

According to *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the *ātmā* is one of the three energies of the Lord. The three energies are “*para*” (superior — conscious, spiritual energy), “*apara*” (inferior — insentient material energy), and “*kṣetrajña*” (the knower of the body — the *ātmā*). *Ātmā* is a third category of energy because it cannot be wholly subsumed in either of the other two categories. It is superior to the insentient material energy, but inferior to sentient spiritual energy because, unlike the *para* energy, it can come under the influence of the *apara* energy.

Paramātmā is an eternal being, thus His energies are eternal, as is the relationship between Him and His energies. Therefore *ātmā* is *eternally* a part of Paramātmā, even in the liberated stage. Scriptural statements that seem to indicate a loss of this distinct relationship by the *ātmā* merging into the Absolute at liberation are not confusing when we understand that they describe the *ātmā*

attaining identical qualities as the Absolute. Here are examples of scriptural statements which make this clear:

“A *jīva*, getting free from the conditioned state, attains an equal status to the Paramātmā.” (Muṇḍaka U. 3.1.3)

“Those who have attained qualities like Me by resorting to this knowledge, are not born again at the time of creation, nor are they distressed at the time of dissolution.” (Gītā 14.2).

“The knower of Brahman indeed becomes Brahman.” (Muṇḍaka U 3.2.9). This means that the liberated *ātmā* acquires qualities like Brahman.

“One attains the nature of the Supreme.” *Vedānta-sūtra* (3.1.23).

In *Paramātmā Sandarbha* (section 37) Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī states that *ātmā* is not a part of Bhagavān, but of Paramātmā who is in charge of the *jīva-śakti* and *māyā-śakti*. He also clarifies the meaning of the term “part.” It is not a literal part, like a drop is part of ocean. It is “part” because it belongs to one of the energies of Paramātmā and is subservient to Him.

One may raise a doubt here: If *jīva* is an eternal part of Paramātmā, how can it exist in Vaikuṅṭha which is outside the realm of Paramātmā? Here it should be understood that Paramātmā and Bhagavān (the presiding personality of Vaikuṅṭha) are not two absolutely distinct personalities. Paramātmā is an expansion of Bhagavān. Thus Bhagavān Himself takes the role of Paramātmā for the liberated *jīva*. In the material world, Bhagavān does not directly deal with the conditioned *jīvas*. It is Paramātmā who controls the *jīva* and *māyā*. Once the *jīva* is imbued with the *parā-śakti*, Bhagavān deal directly with him.

h.) *Ātmā* is Ever Pure and Possesses Knowership, Doership and Enjoyership

Ātmā is *nitya-nirmala*, ever pure. This means it never *mixes* with the qualities (*guṇas*) of matter (*prakṛti*), it is always distinct from matter, factually untouched by it. This is evident from a statement in *Bhāgavata Purāna* (5.11.12): “The pure self witnesses the activities of the impure mind.”

The same verse states that *ātmā* has the ability to know (*jñāṭṛtva*), without any assistance from or connection to matter. This term, (*jñāṭṛ*) means “knower,” “possessor of knowledge.” The suffix (-*tva*) is much like the English suffixes *-ness* or *-ship*, because it indicates an *essential characteristic*. Thus the whole word, *jñāṭṛtva*, means “knowership” — having the essential attribute of a knower.

The sage Jāmāṭṛ says that *ātmā* has the qualities of knowership, doership, and enjoyership (“*jñāṭṛtva-karṭṛtva-bhokṭṛtva-nija-dharmakah*”). The body is insentient. It becomes sentient only due to connection with *ātmā*. Although it is an inert and insentient object, it inherits knowership, doership, and enjoyership because it is related to *ātmā*. *Bhāgavata Purāna* (6.16.24) expresses this: “The body, senses, life air, mind and intelligence – all these can perform work because they are infused by its [*ātmā*’s] potency. Agency (knowership, doership and enjoyership) is not a natural attribute of the body.”

According to Śrī Kṛṣṇa action depends upon five causes:

“O mighty-armed, know from Me the five causes necessary for the accomplishment of all works. They are described in the Vedānta scriptures which explain how to destroy *karma*. These five are the seat of action (the body), the agent (the living entity who identifies with the body), the various senses, the different and various types of efforts and *daiva*. Whatever action, whether righteous or illegal, a person performs by means of body, speech or mind, is the result of these five causes which is the fifth cause” (Gītā 18.13-15)

Śrī Viśvanātha comments that:

- The “location” is the body.
- The “doer” is *ahaṅkara*, which forms a knot between the *ātmā* and the inert matter of the body.
- The “instruments” are the sense organs.
- The “endeavors” are the bodily movements, which are actuated by “airs” such as *prāṇa* and *apāna*.
- “Providence” is the immanent being, the inner impeller of all.

When Viśvanātha says that the doer is *ahaṅkara*, he means *ahaṅkara* which has been energized by the *ātmā*, because the material body cannot function by itself. Thus the *source* of doership originates from *ātmā* and not from material *ahaṅkara*. To make this more clear, Śrī Baladeva has explicitly commented that the “doer” is the conditioned *ātmā*.

Action happens by the cooperation of these five factors, but because action happens in matter and via a body made of matter, matter (*prakṛti*) is often described as the cause of agency. This is simply because so many of the factors of action are aspects of matter. As the popular adage states, “A thing becomes known by its most prominent components” (*ādhikeyena vyapdeśā bhavanti*). This is why Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (3.26.8) states, “Matter (which composes the body, senses and providence) is known as the cause of deeds. Spirit, which is superior to matter, is known as the enjoyer of the happiness and misery the deeds produce.”

i.) *Ātmā* Has the Potential to Act, Know and Enjoy

The fact remains that the *original* source of doership is the *ātmā*. Enjoyership cannot be rooted in matter, because matter is insentient. Only a conscious being can enjoy or suffer. Enjoyership is a form of awareness, and so must be rooted in the *ātmā*.

The *jīva* has doership and enjoyership as his essential nature, yet in his conditioned state these characteristics manifest only through the material body, mind and sense organs. Therefore, sometimes *jīva* is called the non-doer and *prakṛti* the doer, as in the following verses of *Bhāgavata Purāna* (3.26.6-7):

“Because of absorption in the other (*prakṛti*), the *jīva* considers himself the doer of actions which are performed by the *guṇas*. That misconception results in bondage, birth and death, and dependence on *prakṛti*, of the *jīva*, who is actually not the doer but only the witness, who has a form of bliss and is superior to *prakṛti*.”

Here it is clear that bondage is a result of considering oneself the only doer. Bondage is not part of the *svarūpa* of *jīva*. Saying that the *jīva* is not the only doer (*akartuh*) does not deny that he is the source of doership. The phrase, ‘by absorption in the other [*prakṛti*]’ (*parābhidyānena*), signifies that *ātmā* has doership as its inherent characteristic, by which it performs the act of absorbing itself in *prakṛti*. *Jīva* is called “non-doer” only in relation to the physical actions which happen through the body and senses. “Of the master” (*iśasya*) means that *jīva* is a master, and not *really* under the control of *prakṛti*’s *karma*. That he is the “witness” (*sākṣinaḥ*) indicates that he is conscious (*jñāna-svarūpa*) and possesses consciousness (*jñāna-guṇaka*). That he is “blissful by nature” (*nirvṛtātmāna*) means that *jīva* is not touched by any suffering; all experiences of pain and pleasure are external to the *svarūpa* of *jīva*.

Vedānta Sūtra (2.3.31) says that *jīva*, not *prakṛti*, is the doer, because if this was not accepted, the instructions of the scriptures would be futile (“*kartā śāstrārthavattvāt*”). The injunctions of the scriptures such as: “Let the person who desire heaven perform sacrifice” are meaningless if the person performing the action is not the same person enjoying result. All injunctions of scriptures would be meaningless if their enactor was insentient (*prakṛti*).

Because *ātmā* is the doer of actions (*kartā*), it is naturally the enjoyer of the result of those actions (*bhoktā*). “*Bhoga*” is the experience of pleasure or pain, which is simply a state of acquired knowledge (*mano-vṛtti jñāna*). Pleasure is a favorable state of the mind and pain is an unfavorable state. Since *jīva* is the sentient substratum which experiences these states of mind, he is regarded as the *bhoktā* or enjoyer, although the experience itself happens only in the mind. Thus although *ātmā* is the doer and enjoyer, action and enjoyment do not affect the *ātmā*. This is the meaning to the above-cited statement of *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.15): “The *puruṣa* is untouched.”

Thus we understand that *ātmā* has the potential to know, act, and enjoy. In the conditioned state these abilities manifest only through a material body. The body, being material, is inert and insentient, and thus cannot have its own potential to know, act, or enjoy, so it cannot be the root source of those powers.

The Conception of Advaita-vāda

Advaita-vādīs offer authoritative quotations:

yo vijñane tiṣṭhan — “It is that which is situated within consciousness.” (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 5.7.22)

vijñānam yajnam tanute — “Consciousness performs sacrifice.” (*Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, 2.5.1)

jñāna-svarūpa — “Its intrinsic form is consciousness.” (*Viṣṇu Purāna*, 1.2.6)

Referring to these statements, they claim that *ātmā* is the intrinsic form of consciousness (*jñāna-svarūpa*), *not* a distinct entity possessing consciousness (*jñāta*). In other words, it is consciousness, but somehow does not inherently possess consciousness. They propose that *ātmā* can possess consciousness only when it acquires the aid of a psychic apparatus (*antaḥkarana*). They therefore conclude that knowership (*jñātṛtva*) is merely a superimposition on *ātmā*.

When confronted with scriptural statements that present a different view, like, “*ātmā* is self-luminous,” they define “self-luminous” with only its secondary meaning (“that *ātmā* can illuminate for itself, not for others), and exclude the primary meaning (“that *ātmā* illuminates itself), saying, “If consciousness is an object of cognition, it is no better than any other object of cognition, which renders it inert.”

Refutation by Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī rejects these arguments on the basis of scriptural statements which describe the *ātmā* as an entity both composed of consciousness *and* possessing self-knowledge. In his *Sarva-samvādīni* commentary on *Paramātmā Sandarbha* he cites:

vijñātāram are kena vijāniyāt — “By what can the knower be known?” (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.14)

na hi vijñāturvijñāterviparilopo vidyate vināsitvāt — “The knowledge of the knower is never lost.” (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.3.30)

Other scriptural statements describing *ātmā* as *vijñāna*, as quoted above in the Advaita-vāda argument, specify that *ātmā* is composed of sentience, and do not contradict the logic that a thing which is sentience is sentient.

Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī refers to an argument presented by Śrī Rāmānujācārya in his commentary of *Vedānta Sūtra*, “*Śrī-bhasya*.” He quotes *jānātyeva ayam puruṣaḥ*, (“this *puruṣa* [*ātmā*] certainly knows”) to affirm that *ātmā* is composed of sentience (*jñāna svarūpa*) and therefore is intrinsically sentient (*jñāṭṛtva*).

Objection by Vaiśeṣika

The Vaiśeṣikas — followers of the Indian school of logic — contend that *ātmā* cannot have consciousness as its inherent characteristic (*jñāna-svarūpa*) because this would mean it must be omniscient. They come to this dilemma only because they consider the individual *ātmā* to be omnipresent. Their logic is, “A substance composed of consciousness, and present everywhere, must have knowledge of everything.” However, the idea that the *ātmā* is *individually* omnipresent is not in conformity with scriptures, which describe *ātmā* as *collectively* omnipresent but *individually* minute and localized.

“The *ātmā* is atomically minute...” states *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (2.1.9)

Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad (4.4.2) describes that the *ātmā* exits in the body after death and moves to the higher planets. Similarly, *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* states, “They leave this planet and go to the moon planet and from there they return again.” Movement is impossible for an entity that is present everywhere. Therefore, descriptions of the *ātmā*’s movement verify scriptural descriptions of it as minute and localized.

Jñāna* as Substance and Attribute of *Ātmā

Since the word *jñāna* is so often used to describe *ātmā*, it would not be good to conclude a discussion of *ātmā* without discussing the meaning of this word. In this article we tended to translate *jñāna* as consciousness. The various meaning of the word *jñāna* can be found in a previous article on this topic (<http://jiva.org/what-is-jñāna>).

The characteristic of *jñāna* — *artha-prakāśaka*: to illuminate things — is found in both the substrate of *jñāna* (the *ātmā*) and *jñāna* itself (the characteristic of *ātmā*). The former reveals itself and the latter reveals objects. One may ask, “How can *ātmā* both be the source of *jñāna* and *jñāna* itself?” A flame provides a ready analogy. The flame and its luminosity are both luminous, yet the flame is the source of illumination and luminosity is its quality. The flame illuminates itself, and its luminosity illumines itself as well as other objects. Thus *ātmā* is often compared to a flame, because it is the source of consciousness and possesses the quality of knowledge. Knowledge cannot know itself, despite being able to illuminate itself and other things. *Ātmā*, however, exists by itself, for itself (*pratyak*), and the knowledge it possess as a quality also exists for *ātmā*'s sake (*parāk*). *Ātmā* is conscious and has consciousness, but *jñāna* is inert, yet not exactly like material objects such as a book — it is illuminated by the consciousness of the *ātmā*.

Knowledge is relational, implying a subject to which it belongs and an object to which it refers. It can be noted here that the subject experiencing and generating knowledge is not exactly the *ātmā*, but a conditional projection of it, a “conditional self.” Knowledge of external objects arises when the consciousness of *ātmā* reflects from the mind (the seat of the “conditional consciousness”), shines through the senses, and comes in contact with external objects.

***Ātmā*'s Self-luminous Nature**

Because the nature of *ātmā* is *jñāna*, it is self-luminous. The *ātmā*'s intrinsic “I” is called *ahamartha* and is not the same as the conditional “I” called *ahaṅkāra*, which is projected through the mind to form a knot between *ātmā* and a material body. *Ahaṅkāra* is tangible as the delusion that a material body is the true self.

The self-luminous *ātmā* can also be indirectly known by another individual *ātmā*. It is “I” when revealing itself to itself. It is “you” or “he, she, or it” when revealed by another *ātmā*. The fact that *ātmā* is a subject, but can also be an object to other subjects does not make it a dull material object. It remains a self-luminous subject, even when also an object illuminated by another *ātmā*.

The Vaiśeṣika school objects: “If *ātmā* is eternally self-luminous, it should always be self-aware, but in deep sleep we become oblivious of everything, including ourselves.” Our reply is that even in deep sleep *ātmā* retains a sense of “I.” When awake or dreaming, *ātmā* reveals an “I” as the witness of external objects beginning with one's own physical body and mind. In deep sleep, the “I” connected to the body and external objects ceases to function, but the “I” remains a self-aware entity. This is described by Lord Kapila:

“The *ātmā* remains awake and egoless when by sleep its sense objects, senses, mind and intelligence are merged in *prakṛti*. Although indestructible itself, with the loss of ego, it falsely thinks itself to be lost and becomes distressed like a person who has lost his wealth.

However, with proper deliberation, it comes to know about the existence of *ātmā*, who is the shelter of the material ego and body, and the object of grace [of the Lord].” (SB 3.27.14-16).

As stated here, the self is indestructible but falsely considers itself to be lost or destroyed. The phrase, “Thinks itself to be lost,” implies that one exists as a conscious being aware of having lost his normal sense of self.

Ahamartha in Deep Sleep

A further objection is raised: “In deep sleep there is no experience. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.11.1) states, ‘In deep sleep one does not know oneself as ‘this is me.’” Therefore, *ātmā* does *not* retain self-awareness and thus must not be individually conscious by nature and there is no “I” consciousness inherent in it.”

It is true that self-awareness in deep sleep is quite different than it is when awake or dreaming, but it is not true that self-awareness ceases altogether in deep sleep. In deep sleep there is no experience of physical objects or mental constructs. The *ātmā* remains as an unbroken sense of “I” distinct from any material identification such as male or female, young or old, Indian or American. The sense of “I” cannot be projected towards anything extrinsic and is not aware of any objects outside its own existence — it only retains awareness of its own existence, *ahamartha*. It is only the subject without any object of experience. Thus its experience is inexpressible.

This is inferred from the experience on awakening when one recollects, “I slept happily. I was not aware of anything. I did not know even myself.” Such a recollection is not possible if there were no self-awareness at all in deep sleep. The statement, “I slept happily” implies that there is the witness, “I,” of happiness.

Furthermore, this self-awareness cannot be the product of a body or mind, because both body and mind are inactive in deep sleep. Therefore *ātmā* must intrinsically possess the quality of self-awareness.

The statement, “I did not know even myself” indicates ignorance of the self’s material identity in relation to a physical body. It does not deny the existence of “I” altogether. In this statement, “I” refers to *ātmā*’s inherent sense of self, and “myself” refers to the material identity, the empirical self. Therefore we conclude that there is continuous presence of “I” even in the state of deep sleep.

Active awareness of “I” occurs only when it is related with *ahaṅkāra*, the material ego, and thus tied to a mental and physical apparatus. In deep sleep this relation is broken and thus one does not have active awareness of the presence of “I”. But this does not mean that “I” ceases to exist. It remains in an unrevealed state and becomes revealed retroactively when again related through *ahaṅkāra* to a mental and physical apparatus. The mental apparatus, “mind” (*buddhi*), is the tool through which awareness (even self-awareness) acts. Even the bliss of *samādhi* and knowledge of *ātmā* are experienced through the mind. But awareness and self awareness exist beyond these, in the state of *mokṣa* — liberation. This proves that consciousness (*jñātvā*) is the eternal nature of the *ātmā*. Therefore statements in scripture, like. *Praśna Upaniṣad* (4.9), explicitly describe *ātmā* as “the knower” (*boddha*). *Vedānta Sutra* (3.3.19) also affirms that *ātmā* is the knower (“*jño’ ta eva*”).

Attributive Knowledge Is not Inherent in *Ātmā*

The above also demonstrates that knowledge which arises through the internal and external senses is not inherent in the *ātmā* as claimed by Vaiśeṣikas. The sentience of *ātmā*, by its proximity, infuses sentience into the mental apparatus (*citta*, also called *antaḥkaraṇa*), which connects through sense organs to sense objects (see SB 6.16.24). This knowledge is not intrinsic to *ātmā*, it is *vṛtti-jñāna*, acquired knowledge, acquired through an external apparatus.

Acquired knowledge undergoes contraction and expansion. Although *ātmā* is atomically minute, it can expand its consciousness throughout the body due to having the expansive quality of knowership (*jñātvā*). In the liberated or unconditioned state, this quality is unbounded and thus *ātmā* is sometimes called *vibhu* or *ananta*, unlimited. Acquired knowledge is different from the inherent knowership of the *ātmā* — the former affords knowledge to the self while the latter is the sentient entity itself, revealing itself to the self.

Acquired knowledge is like the luminosity of a flame. Although a substance in its own right, it is more properly considered an attribute of a flame. Similarly, knowledge is a substance in its own right, but is more properly considered an attribute of *ātmā*. Thus *ātmā* is truly known as self-illuminating (*svasmai svayam-prakāśa* or *svasmai bhāsa-māna*). Knowledge acquired by sense perception is luminous and even self-luminous, but not conscious of itself. It delivers perception to the conscious self. It is not “*cetanā*” (conscious like the *ātmā*) because it does not have the power of knowing itself. Yet, it is not “*jaḍa*” (inert, like a piece of stone) because it has the power to reveal objects. It is “*mano-vṛtti*,” a mental formation in relation to an object of perception.

In *Bhagavad Gītā* (13.6)⁴, Śrī Kṛṣṇa does refer to it as *cetanā*, but counts it as part of the material body. Thus this particular use of the word *cetanā* should not be confused with the *cetanā* of the *ātmā*. In this *Gītā* verse it refers to the sentience of the *ātmā* infused into the mind of the material body, producing knowledge which reflects *ātmā*'s sentient quality.

Different Types of *Vṛttis*

All acquired knowledge, valid and invalid, is a product of the mind (*mano-vṛtti*). Śrī Kāpila says that there are five types of *vṛttis* (SB 3.26.30):

*saṁśayo 'tha viparyāso
niścayaḥ smṛtir eva ca
svāpa ity ucyate buddher
lakṣaṇaṁ vṛttitaḥ pṛthak*

“The characteristics of *buddhi* by its various functions, *vṛttis*, are said to be doubt, illusion, valid knowledge, remembrance and sleep.”

⁴ *icchā dveṣaḥ sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ saṅghātas cetanā dhṛtiḥ etat kṣetraṁ samāsena sa-vikāram udāhṛtam:* Desire, hatred, happiness, misery, the conglomeration [of the elements, called the body], awareness, and fortitude – these are described in brief as the *kṣetra* along with its modifications.

All experience (external or internal), in all different states of mind (wakeful, dreaming or deeply sleeping) are within these five, there is no experience outside them. [It may be noted here that even deep sleep is a type of experience. This proves that *ahamārtha* and *jñātṛtva* are inherent in *ātmā*, existing even during deep sleep state. They are not adventitious qualities acquired only when in contact with *antaḥkaraṇa*, i.e. in dream and wakeful states.]

Although all our experiences are within the mind, which is external to *ātmā*, it is *ātmā* which is considered the true experiencer (*jñānīn* or *jñātā*) because it is the source of sentience (*jñātṛtva*).

Although *vṛtti-jñāna* has been translated as acquired knowledge, and attributed to the *ātmā*, it is not exactly an attribute of *ātmā* in the normal sense of the term. Normally, an attribute is inherent within the substance that is its substratum. However, *vṛtti-jñāna* is itself a substance (a mental substance, a condition of the mind), and it is *not* inherent within its substratum, *ātmā*. The relation between *ātmā* and *jñāna* cannot be explained by any accepted philosophical concept. As will be explained below, it is an effect of *māyā* which is “trans-logical” — it can act contrary to logic. The reason it is useful to describe *vṛtti-jñāna* as attribute rooted in *ātmā* is that *ātmā* is the substratum of consciousness, which is the enabler of all experience.

***Ātmā* Is Karta and Bhokta**

There is an interrelation between knowership (*jñātṛtva*), will (*icchatva*) and doership (*kartṛtva*) and all inherently exist *ātmā*. We accept *ātmā* as the doer of deeds (*kartā*) because it is the substratum of effort (*kṛti*). Effort is caused by the will (*icchā*) to act, and is a state of consciousness (*mano-vṛtti jñāna*). Will and effort create endeavor (*ceṣṭā*), which results in action (*kriyā*).

Though *ātmā* is the primary agent for action, it can act only when associated with a body, mind and sense organs. It is like a person traveling in a car: The car travels, yet it is the person who is called the traveler — because he is the cause of the traveling. The car will not travel without him, and it travels not for its own sake. Similarly, the *ātmā* is the root cause of actions, therefore it is called the doer of the action. Even though it is actually material energy (*prakṛti*) which acts, that energy would not act without the will of the *ātmā*, and its actions are for the *ātmā*'s sake. Therefore *ātmā* is also known as the “enjoyer” of actions (*bhoktā*).

Agency (*kartṛtva*) and enjoyership (*bhokṛtva*) must coexist in the same substratum (subject), otherwise there would be two defects: The first would be that one does not get the result of the action done by oneself. The second would be that one gets results executed by another agent.

Objection from Sāṅkhya

Members of the Sāṅkhya school object: "*Ātmā* is not really the doer. The true action is the physical body made of *prakṛti*'s three *guṇas*. *Ātmā* is only the enjoyer, *bhoktā*."

They quote *Bhagavad Gītā*:

“*Prakṛti* is said to be the cause of body and sense organs which are the basis of all actions. *Puruṣa* is said to be the source of experience of happiness and suffering” (13.20)⁵.

“In all circumstances actions are performed by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* but the *ātmā* deluded by the *ahankāra* thinks, ‘I am the doer’” (3.27)⁶.

Bhagavad Gītā itself (18.13-15)⁷ reconciles the issue raised by these references by explicitly stating that *ātmā* is counted among the doers. *Prakṛti* is called the doer because in the conditioned state *ātmā* functions under the influence of the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* and cannot act independently. The *Gītā* verses quoted in the Sāṅkhyā objection highlight the predominant role played by *prakṛti* in the execution of an action. They make the point that *ātmā* is not the *only* doer. But the body also cannot act without the presence of the *ātmā*. The body is inert and does not have independent agency of its own. The real agent is *ahankāra*. *Ātmā* identifies with the *ahankāra* and thus considers itself as the doer. Because of this self-concept, “I am the doer”, the *jīva* also becomes the *bhoktā* or enjoyer although the act of enjoyment happens in the body only. The body is also stated as the doer to create a sense of detachment which is needed for self-realization.

Therefore Śrī Kṛṣṇa says, “A person who does not have the notion of being the doer, and whose intellect is therefore not tainted, does not really kill nor is bound even after slaughtering all these people” (Gītā 18.17). The intention of this statement is that bondage is caused by attachment to the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. One should consider oneself aloof from the *guṇas* and their action. Then one will not be bound by them (Gītā 3.28). The intention is not to deny that *ātmā* is a doer. This is clear from the previous verse (Gītā 18.16), “Such being the case [that there are five causes behind every action, listed in verse 18.14] one who regards himself as the *only* doer is foolish. His clouded intelligence does not see things properly.” By saying, ‘the *only* doer’ Kṛṣṇa accepts that *ātmā* is one among five doers.

In verse 3.27, cited above, the activity of thinking, “I am the doer” is relegated to the deluded *ātmā* and not to the *guṇas*. That means that *ātmā* is not devoid of *kartṛtva*. In other words, the verse shows *ātmā* performing the mental activity of thinking “I am the doer”, and therefore demonstrates that doership, the ability to act, is part of the *ātmā*’s nature.

Incompatibility between *Ātmā* and *Prakṛti*

One of the knotty problems in Vedānta is the relation of *ātmā* with the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. *Ātmā*, although conditioned by the material *guṇas*, never contacts them. The *guṇas* of *prakṛti* are not inherent in the *ātmā* and have no direct contact with it. The self does not have any type of

⁵ *kārya-kāraṇa-kartṛtve hetuḥ prakṛtir ucyate | puruṣaḥ sukha-duḥkhānām bhoktṛtve hetur ucyate ||*

⁶ *prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ | ahankāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate ||*

⁷ See also Part 1: “O mighty-armed, know from Me the five causes necessary for the accomplishment of all works. They are described in the Vedānta scriptures which explain how to destroy *karma*. These five are the seat of action (the body), the agent (the living entity who identifies with the body), the various senses, the different and various types of efforts and *daiva*. Whatever action, whether righteous or illegal, a person performs by means of body, speech or mind, is the result of these five causes which is the fifth cause” (Gītā 18.13-15)

relation with the *guṇas*, such as contact (*saṁyoga*), because *ātmā* is not corporeal. Nor is the relation one of inherence (*samavāya*) because objects are external to *ātmā* and contrary to its nature. Nor is the relation one of oneness (*svarūpa*) or identification (*tādātmya*) because *ātmā* and the *guṇas* are opposed to each other and identity between them is inconceivable. It is understood here that *ātmā* is not inert, while the *guṇas* are. *Ātmā* does not undergo transformation while the *guṇas* do, giving rise to subtle and gross elements. *Ātmā* does not give rise to any products which can be experienced through the senses.

Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad (4.3.15) expresses that *ātmā* is not contaminated by contact with the *guṇas*: “The *puruṣa* is untouched.” Yet, by the inconceivable power of the Lord’s *māyā* potency, *ātmā* comes under the influence of *prakṛti*. V

Bhāgavata Purāna (3.7.9) says: “This *māyā* of the Lord which cannot be understood by logic is the cause of the *jīva*’s bondage and ignorance although by nature the *jīva* is superior to matter and liberated.”⁸

Bondage Is Caused by *Māyā*

Jīva (*ātmā*) is superior to *prakṛtic māyā* because the former is sentient and the later is inert. *Ātmā* has the capacity to realize its own transcendental state, free from any misery. It is beyond any taint of *guṇas*, yet it is bound by them. This becomes possible because of ignorance (*avidyā*), a feature of *māyā*. *Māyā* is a potency of the Lord with the power to act in inconceivable ways.

Bhāgavata Purāna repeatedly points to *māyā* as the cause of the bondage of a *jīva*. Śrī Kṛṣṇa says this to Uddhava (SB 11.11.1-2):

“The state of *the jīva* as bound or liberated is said to be because of its being influenced or uninfluenced by the *guṇas* of *prakṛiti* controlled by Me. These states are not related to the essential nature of the *jīva*. Because the relation with the *guṇas* happens by *māyā*, there is no real bondage or liberation. That is My opinion. Just as a dream is an illusory manifestation of *buddhi*, similarly grief, infatuation, joy and distress and acceptance of another body happen by *māyā* and are falsely attributed to the self.”

This conditioning arises from the *ātmā*’s identification with a subtle body. Because of this identification one accepts the qualities of the subtle body as one’s own.

In the next verse (11.11.3), Śrī Kṛṣṇa states that this identification has no beginning. The ignorance of the *jīva* about himself is not a positive entity but “pre-nonexistence” (*prāg-abhāva*) of knowledge. Being pre-nonexistent, it has no beginning. It is a beginningless *lack* of the positive entity known as accurate knowledge. Due to this beginningless ignorance, the *jīva* is oblivious of

⁸ *seyam bhagavato māyā
yan nayena virudhyate
īśvarasya vimuktasya
kārpaṇyam uta bandhanam*

his true nature as a conscious being devoid of misery; he identifies instead with the body, its qualities, actions and modifications. This is called “misfortune.”

Will of *Ātmā* Dependent on *Īsvara*

According to Śrī Jīva Gosvāmī, the luminosity of *ātmā* is dependent upon the power of the Lord. *Ātmā* is not completely independent. *Īsvara* is the primary knower, actor and enjoyer (*jnāta*, *kartā* and *bhoktā*). The *jñātr̥tva*, *kartr̥tva* and *bhoktr̥tva* of *ātmā* are dependent upon *Īsvara*. In *Bhagavad Gītā* (15.15), Lord Kṛṣṇa says that memory, knowledge and forgetfulness of an individual being come from Him. He is the source of everything (10.8), the controller of all beings (BG 18.61) and He is the *bhokta* (BG 13.22). This obviously raises the question if the *jīva* has any true freedom to act at all. If *jīva* has no freedom to act, then the scriptural injunctions for *jīva* would become meaningless. Yet we can understand from our own experience that *jīva* is not completely free to act. *Jīva* has some freedom of choice.

According to grammar rules, a *doer* can be “one who inspires another to act” (*prayojaka*), or “one who acts under another’s inspiration or supervision” (*prayojya*). The *jīva* is the latter type of doer (*prayojya kartā*). He is free to initiate an action, but cannot be effective without approval of *Īsvara*. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Īsvara* is called the overseer and permitter (BG 13.22). *Īsvara* is the *prayojaka kartā* because He gives the approval to the *jīva*’s will. This does not make Him the initiator or doer of the action, the *jīva* is the initiator, and thus the primary doer, and therefore the result accrues not to *Īsvara*, but to the *jīva*. This is rooted in the basic Vedānta concept that there is one independent Absolute Reality and everything emanates and is dependent upon it (BG 7.6, 9.10, *Katha Upaniṣad* 5.12, *Brahmā Saṁhita* 5.1).

Another reason, the will of *jīva* is not entirely free is that he is conditioned by his past *karma*. One becomes restricted in one’s freedom to act, proportionate to the intensity of one’s ignorance and slavery to sensual habit. But freedom is never completely lost. The conditioning and limitation of the *jīva*’s will is just like a citizen of a state who has some fundamental rights and freedom to function in the society, but if he commits a crime he is prosecuted by the state and put in prison. There his freedom is restricted, but not absolutely.

Conclusion

According to the Caitanya school, there is one Absolute Reality called Bhagavān which has variegated potencies divided into three categories, namely internal (*antaraṅga*), intermediary (*taṭastḥa*) and external (*bahiraṅga*). Bhagavān’s body, dress, attributes, abode and associates are all manifestations of the *antaraṅga* potency. The material creation is a manifestation of *bahiraṅga* potency. The individual living beings are part of His *taṭastḥa* potency.

Living beings are of two types: beginninglessly liberated (*nitya mukta*) or beginninglessly bound (*nitya baddha*). The first type has always been devoted to Bhagavān, and lives with Him in His abode. The second type has always been under the sway of the *bahiraṅga* potency (*māyā*) but can become free from it by becoming favorable to Bhagavān.

The *jīvas* are *anu* in size and unlimited in number. They are conscious by nature and have the potential to know, will and act. But in the conditioned state, this potential can manifest only through a material body consisting of subtle and gross divisions. All the functions of cognition,

willing, acting and enjoying happen within the material body but are attributed to *ātmā* because it is the direct cause behind them.

The *ātmā* remains unaffected by all the actions it performs and enjoyments it experiences within the realm of *prakṛti*. This is inexplicable by logic and understood as the function of ignorance working as an energy of the All-powerful. It can be only understood on the authority of scriptures and the writings of the enlightened persons, and realized by following the prescribed process given in the scriptures.

© *Jiva Institute of Vaishnava Studies*

www.jiva.org