

The mind, according to advaita Vedanta

The conception of the mind (also known as *antaHkaraNam*) varies in the different systems of Indian philosophy, as stated below.

The *nyAya-vaiSheShika* system considers the mind to be an eternal substance, atomic in size. The *prAbhAkara* school of *pUrva mImAmsA* holds the same view. The *bhATTa* school of *pUrva mImAmsA* maintains that the mind is all-pervasive and is in eternal contact with the all-pervasive *Atman*; that *Atman* and mind, in contact with each other, function only within the sphere of the body with which they happen to be associated; and the possibility of several cognitions arising at the same time cannot be ruled out. The *sAnkhyA* and *yoga* systems consider the mind to be of the size of the body.

According to *advaita vedanta* the mind is a subtle substance (*dravya*). It is neither atomic nor infinite in size, but it is said to be of *madhyama pariNAma*, medium size, which may be taken to mean that it pervades the body of the particular *jIva* to which it belongs. The mind of each *jIva* is different. It has a beginning, as is proved by such *shruti* statements as, “It (*Brahman*) projected the mind” (*br. up. 1.2.1*). (*VedAnta paribhASha*).

The mind, which is called ‘internal organ’ (*antaHkaraNam*), is produced from the *sattva* part of all the five subtle elements together. It is known by four different names according to the function. The four names are *manas*, *buddhi*, *chittam* and *ahamkAra*. (Sometimes only two names, *manas* and *buddhi*, are mentioned, as in *Panchadashi.1.20*, the other two being included in them). The function of cogitation is known as the *manas* or mind. When a determination is made, it is known as *buddhi* or intellect. The function of storing experiences in memory is called *chittam*. Egoism is *ahamkAra*. The word ‘mind’ is also used to denote the *antaHkaraNam* as a whole when these distinctions are not intended.

Chandogya upanishad, 6. 5. 1 says: “The food that is eaten becomes divided into three parts. The grossest part becomes excreta. The medium constituent becomes flesh. The subtlest part becomes mind (*antaHkaraNam*)”.

In his *bhAshya* on this mantra *Shri Shankara* says: “Getting transformed into the mind-stuff, the subtlest part of the food nourishes the mind. Since the mind is nourished by food, it is certainly made of matter. But it is not considered to be eternal and partless as held by the *vaiSheShikas*”.

There is difference of opinion among advaitins on the question whether the mind is an *indriya*, organ, or not. VAchaspati Mishra, the author of *bhAmatI*, considers the mind to be an *indriya*. PrakAshAtma muni, the author of *vivaraNa*, takes the view that the mind is not an *indriya*. The author of *VedAnta paribhAShA* also takes the same view. This difference is reflected in the different theories held by these two on the question of how Self-knowledge arises from the mahAvAkyAs like ‘tat tvam asi’, as explained below.

According to one theory, known as the *prasankhyAna* theory, attributed to MaNDana Mishra, the knowledge which arises from the mahAvAkyA is relational and mediate, like any other knowledge arising from a sentence. Such a knowledge cannot apprehend brahman which is non-relational and immediate (*aparoksha*). Meditation (*prasankhyAna*) gives rise to another knowledge which is non-relational and immediate. It is this knowledge that destroys nescience. In this view the mind plays an important role in the production of Self-knowledge.

The view of Sureshvara is the opposite of the above. Knowledge of brahman arises directly from the mahAvAkyas. Whether the knowledge given by a sentence is mediate or immediate depends on whether the subject-matter of the sentence is mediate or immediate. Since Brahman is immediate, the sentence which gives knowledge about it does produce immediate knowledge. The difference between the two theories is that, while, according to Sureshvara, the knowledge of the Self arises from the mahAvAkyA itself, according to BhAmati the knowledge of the Self arises from the mahAvAkyA only with the help of the mind.

Following the view of MaNDana, VAchaspati Mishra holds that the mind is the instrument for the attainment of Self-knowledge. Following the other view stated above, PrakAshAtman, the author of *VivaraNa* says that the mahAvAkyA itself is the instrument, though the knowledge no doubt arises in the mind.

The mahAvAkyA gives rise to Self-knowledge by making the mind take the ‘form’ of brahman. This is known as *akhaNDaAkAra vRitti*. The question arises-- since brahman has no form, what is meant by saying that the mind takes the form of brahman? This is explained by SvAmi VidyAraNya in *Jivanmuktiviveka*, chapter 3 by taking an example. (In the first place, the word ‘AkAra’ in these contexts should be taken as meaning ‘nature’. Otherwise the terms ‘the form of pleasure, pain’, etc., will also be illogical). A pot made of clay is full of the all-pervading space as soon as it is made. Filling it afterwards with water, rice or any other substance is due to human effort. Though the water, etc, in the pot can be removed, the space inside can never be removed. It continues to be

there even if the mouth of the pot is hermetically sealed. In the same manner, the mind, in the act of being born, comes into existence full of the consciousness of the Self. It takes on, after its birth, due to the influence of virtue and vice, the form of pots, cloths, colour, taste, pleasure, pain, and other transformations, just like melted copper cast into moulds. Of these, the transformations such as colour, taste and the like, which are not-Self, can be removed from the mind, but the form of the Self, which does not depend on any external cause, cannot be removed at all. Thus, when all other ideas are removed from the mind, the Self is realized without any impediment. It has been said—"One should cause the mind which, by its very nature, is ever prone to assume either of the two forms of the Self and the not-Self, to throw into the background the perception of the not-Self, by taking on the form of the Self alone". And also—"The mind takes on the form of pleasure, pain and the like, because of the influence of virtue and vice, whereas the form of the mind, in its native aspect, is not conditioned by any extraneous cause. To the mind devoid of all transformations is revealed the supreme Bliss". Thus, when the mind is emptied of all other thoughts Self-knowledge arises.

In mANdUkya kArika, III. 35 it is said:--

The mind loses itself in sleep, but does not lose itself when under control. That very mind becomes the fearless brahman, possessed of the light of consciousness all around.

In his bhAshya on mANDUkya kArika, III. 46 Sri Sankara says:--

When the mind becomes motionless, like a lamp in a windless place, it does not appear in the form of any object imagined outside; when the mind assumes such characteristics, then it becomes brahman; or in other words, the mind then becomes identified with brahman.

In his bhAshya on gItA, 6.19, Shri Shankara says: A lamp does not flicker when it is in a windless place. Such a lamp is compared to the mind of a yogi whose mind is under control when he is engaged in concentration on the Self.

From the above three quotations it is seen that the mind remains dormant in deep sleep, but in concentration on the Self the mind becomes identified with brahman.

The mind, being made of extremely subtle and transparent substance, receives the reflection of the consciousness of the Self. Because of this, it appears to be sentient, though it is really inert. All knowledge arises only through an appropriate modification of the mind, corresponding to the object of knowledge.

Panchadashi, 2.13 says that it is the mind that examines the merits and defects of the objects perceived through the senses. The conclusion

which the mind comes to will depend on the proportion of the three *guNas* in it at the time.

Mind is the cause of bondage, as well as of liberation.

AmRitabindu upanishad, mantra 2, says that the mind is, verily, the cause of bondage as well as of liberation; engrossed in objects of sense, it leads to bondage; free from attachment to objects, the same mind leads to liberation.

bRihadAraNyaka upanishad, 1.5.3 says: “Desire, resolution, doubt, faith, lack of faith, steadiness, unsteadiness, modesty, knowledge, fear—all these are only (forms of) the mind. The meaning of this statement is that all these arise in the mind. The mind takes an appropriate *vRitti* when any of these arises. These are known by the witness-consciousness as soon as they arise, without the help of the external sense-organs. They are therefore called ‘*sAkShi pratyakSha*’ or perceived by the witness-consciousness directly.

The mind is the cause of happiness and unhappiness.

A person is happy when other living beings or inanimate objects are favourable to him, and unhappy when they are unfavourable. A thing or person is considered favourable when that thing or person responds in the way desired. If a son obeys his father, the father is happy; if he does not, the father is unhappy. A person is happy with his car or any other object as long as it functions well; if it does not, he is unhappy and wants to get rid of it. It is thus clear that happiness and unhappiness are only states of the mind, but are wrongly thought to be caused by external objects. Happiness is the result of the mind becoming calm. The mind becomes calm temporarily when a particular desire is fulfilled, and then happiness is experienced. But soon another desire crops up and agitates the mind, causing unhappiness. Thus it is clear that lasting happiness cannot be attained by the fulfillment of desires. The *br. up.* says “*etasyaiva Anandasya anyAni bhUtAni mAtrAm upajIvanti*”—All creatures enjoy only a particle of this bliss (the Bliss that is the very nature of brahman). We wrongly think that happiness comes from external objects. All the happiness that we enjoy is only a reflection of brahmAnanda in the mind when the mind is calm.

Detachment is the key to lasting happiness.

True and lasting happiness can result only if the mind is permanently kept calm. This can be achieved only if desires, which are the cause of mental agitation, are completely eliminated. We are therefore led to the

conclusion that total detachment towards all worldly pleasures (Vairagya) is the only means for the attainment of true and lasting happiness, which is brahmAnanda.

Vairagya is the most essential requisite for a person who wishes to attain Self-knowledge, which alone will lead to eternal bliss. It is said in vivekachUDamaNi that one who attempts to attain Self-knowledge without cultivating dispassion is like a person trying to cross a river on the back of a crocodile, mistaking it for a floating log of wood. He is sure to be eaten up by the crocodile midway.

The essential requisite for a spiritual aspirant is purity of mind. There are six enemies of the spiritual aspirant and all these arise in the mind. These are desire, anger, greed, infatuation, pride, and jealousy. Of these, the first, desire, is the cause of all the other five. That is why so much stress is laid on the rooting out of desire from the mind. The chandogya upanishad explains how the mind can be made pure.

ch. up. 7.26.2 says: AhArashuddhau sattvashuddhiH----

“From purity of food follows purity of the internal organ (mind). From the purification of the internal organ unfailing memory results. When memory is attained, all the knots of the heart are cut asunder”.

Shri Shankara explains this passage thus in his bhAshya: By food is meant all that is enjoyed through the senses. What is meant is that all enjoyments should be free of all defects such as attachment, repulsion or delusion. When all enjoyments are pure, the internal organ becomes pure. From the purification of the internal organ there arises continuous memory of the Infinite Self. Then follows the destruction of all the bonds born of nescience which had become hardened by the vAsanas accumulated over innumerable lives. Therefore one should ensure that everything that one enjoys is pure.
