

# BRAHMA - SUTRAS

• WITH TEXT, WORD-FOR-WORD TRANSLATION,  
ENGLISH RENDERING, COMMENTS  
AND INDEX

*By*

SWAMI VIRESWARANANDA



ADVAITA ASHRAMA  
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## ADHYĀSA OR SUPERIMPOSITION

The whole of Sankara's philosophy may be summed up as follows : ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन्मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः । — The Brahman of the Uparishads is the only Reality, and everything else—this world of manifoldness—is unreal, is a mere appearance; the individual soul (Jiva) is identical with Brahman, the One without a second, which the scriptures define as Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. "Brahman is Existence, Knowledge, Infinity" (Taitt. 2.1); "Brahman is Knowledge, Bliss" (Brih. 3.9.28). This identity of the Jiva and Brahman is clearly stated by the scriptures in texts like : "Thou art That, O Svetaketu" (Chh. 6.8.7), "I am Brahman" (Brih. 1-4-10), and "The Self alone is to be meditated upon" (Brih. 1.4.7).

The question then naturally arises : If Truth is one, whence arises this many which we experience through the senses? Truth cannot contradict experience. So Sankara had to explain this apparent contradiction between Truth and our everyday experience. He says that this plurality is an illusion (Mâyâ). It has no reality, for it disappears when the knowledge of the true nature of Brahman is realized. It is just like seeing a snake in a rope in the dark. This wrong perception is brought about by ignorance (Avidyâ), which is beginningless. It is this ignorance which is the cause of all this duality,

Brahman being mistaken for the world. On account of this ignorance the individual soul identifies itself with its adjuncts (Upâdhis) viz. the body, senses, etc., which are only superimposed on it. This identification makes the soul think that it is the doer, enjoyer, etc.—though the truth is that it is none of these—and thereby it comes under the sway of birth, death, happiness, misery, etc., in short, becomes bound down to this world (Samsâra).

When Sankara says that the world is false, he does not mean that it is absolutely nothing, but that our experience is liable to be stultified by means of knowledge of things as they are. The world has a relative existence; it is true for the time being, but disappears when true knowledge dawns. It is not real for all times, in other words, it is not real from the absolute standpoint. Mâyâ or ignorance is not a real entity. We can neither say that it exists nor that it does not exist. It is a mystery which is beyond our understanding; it is unspeakable (Anirvachaniya). As Mâyâ is not real, it cannot be related to Brahman, the Reality, in any way whatsoever; for any relation between truth and falsehood is impossible. The relation is only apparent, and therefore Brahman is in no way affected by this illusion which is superimposed upon It, even as the rope is not affected by the snake that is assumed to exist in it.

Therefore the only way to liberation from this worldly existence (Samsâra) is to get rid of this:

wrong notion through the real knowledge of Brahman. Just as in the case of the rope and the snake, it is the knowledge of the rope *alone* that removes the illusion of the snake and nothing else, so also it is the knowledge of Brahman alone that brings about the cessation of this relative existence (Samsâra). "A man who knows It alone truly, passes beyond death; there is no o'her path to go by" (Svet. 3.8); "He comes not to death who sees that One." Pilgrimages, austerities, worship and charity—these by themselves, without Knowledge, cannot help us to attain Liberation. Their utility lies only in purifying our mind (Chittasuddhi), cleansing it of all worldliness, and thus making it fit to comprehend the Truth. When Brahman is realized this phenomenal world disappears automatically, without any further effort on the part of the individual. Knowledge of Brahman being thus the only way to Liberation, an inquiry into Brahman through the study of the Brahma-Sutras is absolutely necessary.

Sankara's explanation of the world as an illusion has given his philosophy the name of Mâyâvâda or Anirvachaniya Khyâtivâda. It is also known as Vivartavâda, the doctrine of the apparent modification of Brahman into this phenomenal world, as opposed to Parinâmavâda or the doctrine of the actual modification of Brahman into this phenomenal world, as held by some other schools of Vedânta like the Visishtâdvaitavâda of Râmânûja.

Sankara anticipated that this method of explain-

ing the phenomenal world would raise a protest from the various other schools of his time. So at the beginning of his commentary on the Brahma-Sutras, he writes a masterly introduction, which is well known as the Adhyâsa Bhâshya or the section dealing with superimposition, wherein he establishes superimposition as a statement of fact and not a mere hypothesis. He starts with the objections that can possibly be raised against his theory of superimposition and then refutes them. He says : It is well known that the subject and the object, which have for their spheres or contents the notions of 'I' and 'Thou' respectively, and which are opposed to each other as darkness and light, cannot be identified. Hence their attributes also cannot be identified. Consequently the superimposition of the object and its attributes on the subject, whose essence is pure intelligence, and *vice versa*, ought to be a logical impossibility.

If the world phenomena are a case of superimposition, like the snake in the rope, then which is superimposed on which? Is the world superimposed on Brahman, or is it the reverse? In the latter case, the world, which is the substratum, like the rope in the example, would be a reality. If it is the other way—the world on Brahman—it is not possible, for Brahman is not an object which can be perceived by the senses like the rope. A thing becomes an object when it is limited by time, space, and causation. Since Brahman is unlimited, It is

beyond these, and so cannot be an object of perception; as such It cannot be the substratum of a superimposition. Brahman is also the inner Self of everyone and therefore can never be separate and in front of a person like a rope, when alone the world can be surimposed on It.

Neither can Brahman be both subject and object of the thinking process, for one and the same being cannot both be the agent and the object of its activity at the same time. An object is that on which is concentrated the activity of the agent, and hence it must be different from the agent. If, again, Brahman is manifested by some other knowledge and thus becomes an object, It ceases to be self-luminous and becomes limited, and this the scriptures do not accept. Further, in all cases of superimposition there is an antecedent real knowledge of the object which is superimposed, as of the snake in the example. So to superimpose the world on Brahman a *real knowledge* of the world is necessary, and this would make the world a reality, with the result that the cessation of the world phenomena would be an impossibility and Liberation would be impossible. Thus in whatever way we may try to establish the theory of superimposition, we are not able to do so.

Yet, says Sankara, it is natural (a self-evident fact) on the part of man, because of ignorance, not to distinguish between the two entities (the subject and the object), which are quite contradictory, and to superimpose the one on the other, and their

attributes as well, and thus mixing up the real and the unreal to use such phrases as "That is I", or "This is mine". The Self again is not altogether a non-object, for it is the object of the notion of the Ego. The Self does not entirely elude our grasp. Though the inner Self is not an object and is also without parts, yet owing to ignorance, which is unspeakable and without a beginning, attributes like mind, body, senses, etc., which are products of ignorance, are superimposed on the Self, and it behaves as if it were an agent, enjoyer, possessed of parts, and many—although in truth it is none of these—and thus becomes an object. The real Self can never be an object of knowledge. Self-consciousness is possible only with respect to a Self already qualified by these adjuncts (Upâdhis). This sounds like an argument in a circle; for to establish superimposition we have to accept the Self to be an object, and the Self can be an object only through the superimposition of adjuncts (Upâdhis); it is actually not so. It is a case like the seed and the tree. The seed gives rise to the tree, which again produces the seed, the cause of the future tree, and so on. So in this series of illusions without a beginning, the Self, which is the substratum of the present superimposition, is an object on account of a past superimposition, and that one had for its substratum the Self, which had become an object of a still earlier superimposition, and so on *ad infinitum*. The pure Self without the limiting

adjuncts is never the substratum of a superimposition. It is the difference in the limiting adjuncts, as shown above, that makes it possible for the Self to be at the same time an agent and the object of action.

Superimposition, again, is due to ignorance and hence it is not necessary that the knowledge of the object superimposed must be a real knowledge. It is enough if we have a knowledge; it need not necessarily be real; it can itself be another illusory knowledge. That the Self exists is proved by the intuitive knowledge we have of it. This is well known and but for it nothing would have been cognized in this world. "He shining, everything else shines" (Kath. 2.2.15). We know things in and through it; no consciousness or experience is possible independently of it. Everyone is conscious of his own Self, for no one thinks, "I am not". Nor, again, is it necessary that the object to be a substratum of a superimposition should be before us, for we see that Âkâsa (sky), which is not visible to the senses, becomes a substratum for superimpositions by the ignorant, who impute blueness, spherical shape, etc., to it in such expressions as, "The sky is blue", and "It is spherical". Thus superimposition is an established fact.

But then direct perception, which is the best of all proofs—since it is the basis of all other means of knowledge like inference etc.—affirms this world of manifoldness. How can the scriptures that deny it



carry conviction as against direct experience? They cannot. Hence scriptural texts that deny the many and uphold unity will have to be interpreted in a manner so as not to contradict our experience. This view cannot stand. For the scriptures (Srutis) are impersonal, eternal, self-luminous, and so on. Their validity is direct and self-evident and therefore infallible. They constitute by themselves an independent source of knowledge. Hence they too are to be accepted as authoritative. The fact is that each evidence of knowledge has its own sphere wherein it is absolutely authoritative. Perception has its supreme validity in knowledge through the senses. There a hundred texts cannot prevail against it. The scriptures (Srutis) on the other hand have their absolute authority in a province where perception cannot be of any avail. Their province is transcendental knowledge, which cannot be attained in any other way. Here revelation, which does not depend on other sources of knowledge, is the final authority, and not perception or even reason. The scriptures do not deny the empirical validity of perception; they deny only its absolute or transcendental validity.

#### SUPERIMPOSITION DEFINED

Superimposition, says Sankara, is the apparent presentation to consciousness, by way of remembrance, of something previously observed in some other thing. It is an *apparent presentation*, that is

knowledge which is subsequently falsified; in other words, it is illusory knowledge. According to Vâchaspati Misra this is the fundamental characteristic of superimposition, and the rest of the definition only differentiates it from those given by other schools of philosophy. But the author of the commentary *Ratnaprabhâ* takes *apparent presentation in some other thing* as the characteristic mark of superimposition, and this seems to be more in keeping with Sankara, who says in his commentary: "But all these definitions agree in so far as they represent superimposition as the apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing."

As it is impossible to have illusory knowledge without the mixing up of two things, we find the words *something previously observed* in the definition. These words, together with the words *apparent presentation*, make it clear that the thing superimposed is not the real object seen some time before, but something like it. A mere experience, and not the reality, is what is necessary; hence the word *observed*. The experience should not be a present one, but a past one, and that is the significance of the word *previously*. So the thing superimposed is a false or unreal thing. But the thing on which it is superimposed is a real thing. The words *by way of remembrance* excludes all cases of recognition where the object previously observed again presents itself to our senses, as when a person seen at a particular place is again seen at another place. In

remembrance the object previously observed is not in renewed contact with the senses. It is mere remembrance that operates in the case of superimposition.

This definition of superimposition meets an objection of the Mimâmsakas, who say that an unreal thing cannot be an object of experience. According to them all knowledge is real; there can be nothing like false knowledge. They uphold the intrinsic validity of all knowledge, for every knowledge produces a sense of certainty in us and we have no doubt about it at the time. If it were otherwise, then we should always be in doubt and never arrive at any certainty. So every knowledge is true for the time being, though subsequent experience may prove that it was wrong, as in the case of an illusion. But from the definition of superimposition given by Sankara we find that because a particular thing is experienced it does not for that very reason become real. A thing may be unreal and at the same time may be experienced. Otherwise the water in a mirage would be a reality, which in fact we know it is not.

The Prâbhâkara school of Mimâmsakas raise a fresh objection. How can the world be unreal or non-existent? Non-existence is not a category by itself; it can be conceived only in relation to a real object. We speak of non-existence when one *real* object is predicated in terms of another real object. When we think of a pot in terms of a cloth, we say

*the negation of the cloth* is the pot. That is all that is meant by non-existence; apart from this, it has no reality. An unreal object can never be the object of our experience. So this world, if it were unreal, could never be the object of our experience.

Applying this argument in the case of a mirage, we find that the reality, the sun's rays refracted by layers of air, is, according to the Mimâmsakas, nothing but *the negation of water*, and it is therefore self-evident that the phenomenon we experience cannot be water. Neither can they say that the water in the mirage is not real, since it is experienced. So the water in the mirage is neither real nor unreal, nor can it be both at the same time. Therefore we have to accept the phenomenon as something beyond our comprehension (Anirvachaniya), which is exactly the view of Sankara.

Sankara says that the nature of objects is two-fold, real and unreal. The first manifests by its very nature, depending on the object itself; the second, the unreal appearance, depends on some other thing for its manifestation. In a mirage the rays of the sun are a reality, but their appearance as water is unreal and depends on something else, the impressions (Samskâras) produced by seeing water elsewhere before. That which is real always continues to be so, but the unreal is ever changing. Brahman, the Reality, remains unchanged; but Mâyâ and its products, which are assumed to exist in Brahman, are unreal and therefore everchanging, yet

experienced by us. The world phenomena are neither real nor unreal, nor both; they are unspeakable (Anirvachaniya).

#### DEFINITION OF SUPERIMPOSITION ACCORDING TO OTHER SCHOOLS

The four schools of philosophy in Buddhism define superimposition as “the superimposition of the attributes of one thing on another”. They maintain that in superimposition forms of cognition, or modes of the internal organ in the form of the object, are superimposed on an external object which itself may be real or illusory. The Prâbhâkaras refute this definition, for according to the Buddhists there is no separate entity called the Self apart from consciousness (Vijnâna). The Self is but a form of consciousness. If in an illusion, where a rope is taken for a snake, the snake also be a form of cognition, then our experience ought to be of the kind, “I am a snake” or “My snake”, and not as “This is a snake”. Therefore Prâbhâkaras define superimposition as “an error arising from the non-perception of the difference of that which is superimposed from that on which it is superimposed”. There is no positive wrong or illusory knowledge, but a mere non-perception of the difference between two real experiences, one of which is a past experience. Where a mother-of-pearl is taken for silver, the difference between the mother-of-pearl seen at the moment and the silver remembered is not

perceived. Naiyâyikas refute this definition on the ground that mere non-perception of the difference cannot induce us to action. But as a matter of fact we are tempted to possess the silver seen in a mother-of-pearl. Where there is no positive knowledge, as, for example, in profound sleep (Sushupti), there is no activity. It is positive knowledge that is responsible for our activity, as we find from our experience in the dream and waking states. Nor can a mere remembrance induce us to action. So in illusion we are conscious of silver as a reality present before us, and not as a mere remembrance.

The Naiyâyikas therefore define superimposition as "the fictitious assumption of attributes (like those of silver) contrary to the nature of the thing (*e.g.* the mother-of-pearl) on which something else (silver) is superimposed". An identity is established between the object present before us (the mother-of-pearl) and the silver remembered, which is not here and now, but imagined, and which *exists as a reality somewhere else*. The person is not conscious that it is only a memory of silver, and not an actuality. This identity between the silver seen elsewhere and the mother-of-pearl is what gives rise to the illusion. There is thus a positive factor in this experience, which is not the case in the Prâbhâkaras' definition. Yet it may be questioned how the silver which exists elsewhere can be in contact with the senses, which is essential if the silver is to be experienced as an actuality in front of us and not a mere memory.

If it be said that there is transcendental contact (Alaukika Jnânalakshana Sannikarsha) of the senses with it, then where fire is inferred from smoke we can say it is also a case of transcendental contact, and inference as a means to knowledge becomes unnecessary. Therefore we have to accept that in illusion an indescribable (Anirvachaniya) silver is produced, which is a reality for the time being. It is this silver which is directly perceived by the senses and gives rise to the knowledge, "This is silver". The silver that is seen in the mother-of-pearl is not present somewhere else, for in that case it could not have been experienced as here and now; nor is it in the mind. Neither is it a mere nonentity, for then it could not have been an object of perception; nor can it be inherent in the mother-of-pearl, for in that case it could not have been sublated afterwards. So we are forced to say that the silver has no real existence anywhere, but has only an apparent reality for the time being which is unspeakable.

This superimposition is called ignorance (Avidyâ), metaphorically, the effect being put for the cause. Ignorance does not mean want of knowledge, but that kind of knowledge which is stultified later on by the knowledge of things as they are. Its counterpart is called knowledge (Vidyâ). When the Self is discriminated from its limiting adjuncts through vedântic discipline and practice (Sâdhanâ), viz. hearing of scriptural texts, reflection, and meditation

on them, then knowledge dawns, which destroys this superimposition. A mere intellectual knowledge is however not meant here, but actual realization. Since through this superimposition the two objects are not in the least affected by the good or bad qualities of each other, once true knowledge dawns, it roots out ignorance with all its effects, leaving no chance of its cropping up again. The recrudescence would have been possible if owing to the superimposition the Self was in any way contaminated by the non-Self and its properties.

This superimposition (Adhyâsa) due to ignorance is the presumption on which are based the distinctions among the means of knowledge, objects of knowledge, and knowing persons, in our career of daily activity, and so are also based all scriptural texts, whether they refer to rituals (Karma) or knowledge (Jnâna). All our experience starts in this error which identifies the Self with the body, senses, etc. All cognitive acts presuppose this kind of false identification, for without it the pure Self can never be a knower, and without a knowing personality, the means of right knowledge cannot operate. Therefore the means of right knowledge and the scriptural texts belong to the sphere of ignorance (Avidyâ). They are meant only for one who is still under ignorance and has not realized the Self. They are valid only so long as the ultimate Truth is not realized; they have just a relative value. But from the standpoint of the ultimate Truth, our so-called knowledge



is all Avidyâ or no knowledge at all. In the phenomenal world, however, they are quite valid and are capable of producing empirical knowledge.

That our knowledge (empirical) is no knowledge at all is further proved by the fact that we do not differ from animals in the matter of cognition. Just as a cow runs away when she sees a man with a raised stick in his hand, while she approaches one with a handful of green grass, so also do men, who possess higher intelligence, walk away from wicked persons shouting with drawn swords, while they approach those of an opposite nature. The behaviour of animals in cognition etc., is well known to be based on ignorance. Therefore it can be inferred that man's conduct in the matter of cognition etc., so long as they are under delusion, is also similarly based.

It may seem rather strange to say that even the scriptures belong to the field of ignorance (Avidyâ); for though in ordinary matters of cognition etc. we may resemble animals and act through ignorance, yet in matters religious, such as the performance of sacrifices, the person who engages himself in them has the knowledge that the self is separate from the body, since otherwise he cannot expect to enjoy the fruits of his ritualistic acts in heaven, the body being destroyed at death. But we forget that though a person who engages himself in ritualistic acts may have a knowledge of the Self as distinct from the body, yet it is not necessary that he should

have a knowledge of the real nature of the Self as given by the Vedânta texts; rather such knowledge is destructive to him. For how can a person who knows the Self to be not an enjoyer, agent, and so forth undertake any sacrifice enjoined by the scriptures? Scriptural texts like, "A Brâhmana should perform a sacrifice," are operative only on the supposition that attributes such as caste, stage of life, age, and circumstances are superimposed on the Self, which is none of these. Not only is ritualism (Karmakânda) meant for persons under ignorance (Avidyâ), but even so is the Vedânta; for without the distinction of the means of knowledge, objects of knowledge, and knower it is not possible to comprehend the meaning of the Vedânta texts. A person who is conscious of these distinctions is under the sway of ignorance (Avidyâ), being in the world of duality. But there is a difference between Vedânta and ritualism. While the latter has for its goal that which is within the sphere of ignorance, like enjoyment in heaven etc., the former helps one to realize his true nature, which destroys all ignorance.

How can ignorance lead to knowledge? Empirical knowledge can produce transcendental knowledge through its empirical validity. To put it in Sri Ramakrishna's beautiful language, "When we run a thorn in our hand we take it out by means of another thorn and throw out both. So relative knowledge alone can remove that relative ignorance which blinds the eye of the Self. But such

knowledge and such ignorance are both alike included in Avidyâ; hence the man who attains to the highest Knowledge (Jnâna), the knowledge of the Absolute, does away in the end with both knowledge and ignorance, being free himself from all duality." But before the dawning of real knowledge the authority of the Vedas stands unquestioned, for a knowledge that has not been realized cannot prevent a person from entering on ritualistic activities. It is only after realization that scriptural texts cease to be operative. But before that, "Let the scriptures be thy authority in ascertaining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. Having known what is said in the ordinance of the scriptures thou shouldst act here" (Gita 16.24). But when realization dawns, then, "To the sage who has known the Self, all the Vedas are of so much use as a reservoir is when there is flood everywhere" (Gita 2. 46). It is only for the knower of Brahman that they have no value, and not for others.