

## On the Concept of 'Man' and 'Mind' in the Philosophy of Advaita Vedanta

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### Abstract

The philosophy of Advaita Vedanta concerns itself with the essential nature of man (*jiva*). Man is a composite of a higher self (*atman*) and a lower self (*anatman*). The concept of mind occupies an important place in the lower self of man. Mind is neither totally like the physical body nor totally unlike it. Being in close proximity with the self (*atman*), the mind appears to be sentient, shines and acts as an effective instrument of knowledge. While functioning to acquire knowledge, the mind undergoes four important modifications (*vrtti*) of forms, namely, *manas*, *buddhi*, *ahamkara* and *citta*.

**Keywords:** Advaita Vedanta, *Jiva*, *Atman*, *Antahkarana*

### Introduction

Advaita Vedanta is one of the most important systems of Indian Philosophy which is primarily concerned with the nature of man (*jiva*). Every other important tenet may be logically elucidated through a discussion on the nature of man. Placing man at the centre of its philosophy, Advaita Vedanta proceeds to discuss an understanding on the true/eternal nature of man.

### The Two-fold Self in Man

According to Advaita Vedanta, every man is a composite of a higher self (*atman*), which is eternal, and a lower self (*anatman*), which is relative by nature. In his *Drg-Drasya-Viveka* (Verse 41), Sri Sankara terms the higher self as the 'real self' (*paramarthika-jiva*) and the lower self as the 'empirical self' (*vyavaharika-jiva*). The eternal higher self is identified with Brahman and Brahman-*atman* is considered as the

highest and ultimate reality. The relative lower self is identified with the psycho-physical organism, created by *maya-avidya*.

In his *Aparokshanubhuti* (Verse 87), Sri Sankara states that the lower self (ie. *Atman* attached to psycho-physical organism) arises due to ignorance (*maya-avidya*) and again through self-realization, it disappears in the supreme *atman* (I e. Higher Self).

While the higher self refers to the spiritual dimension of man, the psycho-physical organism refers to the two dimensions of the lower self, namely, the psychological/mental dimension (I e.) the mind and the physical dimension-(I e.) the physical body. Thus, man possesses three dimensions, namely, the eternal and essential spiritual dimension, the psychological/mental dimension and the physical dimension.

With the above background, let us now proceed to discuss the concept of mind, which plays a vital role in the psychological/mental dimension of man, under the system of Advaita Vedanta.

### **The concept of Mind**

The concept of mind occupies an important place in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. Mind is a finer/subtle substance within and pervades the gross body of man. The mind is a subtle substance as its stuff consists of the subtlest part of the food part-taken by man. In his commentary on the *Chandogya Upanishad* (VI.5.1), Sri Sankara states that the food when part-taken is transformed into three parts. The grossest part turns into excrement, the medium constituent becomes the flesh and the subtlest part forms the mind.

Having known the constituent of the mind, let us now proceed to discuss the relationship of mind with the physical body and pure consciousness/self (*atman*), in the system of Advaita Vedanta. This will throw more light on the concept of mind.

### **Mind and the physical body:**

According to Advaita Vedanta, both mind and the physical body of man consist of matter. Both influence and affect one another as we may observe that physical illness often affects the mind and mental illness or tension/stress often affects the physical body. The big difference lies in the fact that while the physical body is made of gross matter and is known as external organ, the mind is made of subtle matter and is known as the internal instrumental organ (*Antahkarana*).

In his commentary on the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* (I.5.3), Sri Sankara clearly points out the fact that the mind is different from the external organs. In his commentary on the *Brahma-Sutra* (II.3.32), Sri Sankara states that if the *antahkarana* is not present, then there would be either perpetual perception or perpetual non-perception.

Thus, we are able to observe that the mind is neither totally like the physical body nor totally unlike it. The mind is qualitatively superior to the physical body.

### **Mind and Pure Consciousness/Self (*atman*):**

According to Advaita Vedanta, the *antahkarana* is the connecting link between the *atman* and the external organ. The *atman* is ever free, infinite and eternal spirit, while the mind is subtle and inner instrumental matter. Since the mind is closest to the self, it receives the radiance of consciousness from the self and illuminates everything. The *Katha Upanisad* (II.2.15) proclaims that it is only by the light of Brahman-*atman* does all others (I e. Sun, moon, stars, etc) shine.

Thus, shining as it does with the borrowed light of consciousness, the mind appears to be sentient and acts as an effective instrument of knowledge.

Quoting the *Katha Upanisad* (I.iii.10) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter II, Verses 18 & 24), Advaita Vedanta states that the mind (the psychological dimension) is superior to the body (the physical dimension) and the eternal/all pervasive self (*atman*)-the spiritual dimension is supreme to the mind.

### **The functions of the mind**

According to Advaita Vedanta, the mind (*antahkarana*) undergoes modifications (*vrtti*) of forms in the process of revealing the objects of knowledge. The modifications of the *antahkarana*, which may be referred to as the functions of the mind, are of four kinds and in each modification, the *antahkarana* has a distinct name. In his *Vedantaparibhasa* (*first pariccheda* 58), Sri Dharmarajadhvarindra points out that when the *antahkarana* has the mode of indetermination/doubt (*samsaya*), it is called *manas*, when it has the mode of determination (*niscaya*), it is called as *buddhi*, in the mode of self-consciousness (*garva*), it has the name *ahamkara* and in the mode of remembrance (*smarana*), it goes by the name of *citta*. It may be pointed out here that the mind, when not referred in terms of its functions, is denoted as *anathkarana*.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion on the two-fold self of man, we are able understand the concept of man in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. Further, from a discussion on mind's relationship with the physical body and pure consciousness as well as the functions of the mind enable us to understand the concept of mind in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta.

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