

*atasminstadbuddhiḥ prabhavati vimūḍhasya tamasā
vivekābhāvādvai sphurati bhujage rajjudhiṣaṇā,
tato'narthavrāto nipatati samādāturadhikaḥ
tato yo'sadgrāhaḥ sa hi bhavati bandhaḥ śṛṇu sakhe. (138)*

138. When one is overcome by ignorance, one mistakes a thing for what it is not. In the absence of discrimination, the snake is mistaken for a rope and great danger befalls him who seizes it through this false notion. So listen, my friend, it is mistaking the not-Self for the Self (the unreal for the Real), that creates bondage.

Now (ataḥ) meaning, having forgotten one's real nature, projecting oneself into the not-Self (anātman), considering oneself to be the BMI, tending the body in many different ways, and getting self bound like a silkworm in its cocoon, what happens after this is described in this verse.

In This the idea of That (atasmin-tat-buddhi)¹ – In this body to maintain the feeling that this is the Reality, is 'in This the understanding of That'. Such a wrong idea can come only to a supremely foolish man. This foolishness is the result of tamas – the non-apprehension of Reality – which overwhelms an individual when the potential discriminative power of his intellect is not available to him under the blinding effect of tamas. Such a thing generally happens in the dream condition. The intellect is slowly overcome by sleep. The hundred percent discriminative power available during the waking condition slowly gets clouded and about ninety percent of it gets veiled by sleep. With ten percent discrimination when I look at my own thoughts, I start living in the dreamworld projected by my mind. When I wake up from my dream, the full power of discrimination is available to me and my dream rolls away. The dream cannot exist in the light of full discrimination.

Much the same thing happens when a respectable man's decency has been swallowed up by half a bottle of whisky or by

¹ this is an idiom in Vedānta

a couple of LSD pills or by a few puffs of opium. When ninety-five percent of the discrimination hitherto available for him gets clouded by the unconsciousness in him then, with the remaining five percent when he moves about, he feels 'funny' and starts seeing things which are not there. A stranger who is walking peacefully on the road mistakes a lamp post for his brother and feels like embracing him. Another man who is standing on the footpath appears to be a lamp post and he feels like leaning on it. Even the gutter looks inviting enough for a nap. If such a drunken fool is given two or three blows on his head, his discrimination suddenly increases and he starts behaving more decently.

Similarly, what we think is one hundred percent discrimination in our waking condition, is in fact, only five percent of the total possibility of discrimination lying dormant in us. If this total potential discriminative power becomes available, meaning, if *tamas* has been completely eliminated and the intellect has become pure, then by such *sāttvika* intellect one comes to comprehend the Truth all by oneself. To a *sāttvika* intellect, Truth is self-evident. A foolish man's intellect gets veiled by *tamas* and he suffers from lack of discrimination. In that tragic condition he comes to understand the *anātman* as the *Ātman*. This misapprehension is explained by Śaṅkara with an illustration.

In the snake the understanding of a rope (*bhujage rajju dhiṣaṇā*)¹

– By a simple twist of the snake in the rope example, the great artist in Śaṅkara has brought home a wealth of understanding necessary to the students of Vedānta. If a snake is believed to be an innocent rope when some use is found for the rope and if a person runs to catch hold of it, imagine the unnecessary agony which the fool is bargaining for! What would be the condition of such a mad one who drags the snake thinking it to be a useful rope!

¹ Note: - This is the opposite of the usual example in Vedānta which is 'rope misunderstood as a snake'.