
UNIT 3 THEORIES OF ERROR AND TRUTH: INDIAN

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit aims at illustrating the concept of truth as envisaged by Indian systems. Along with understanding the notion of truth and validity of knowledge, the Indian philosophers have given lots of attention to error in means of knowledge, especially the perceptual errors. Each school has refuted the claim of other schools and established their own position. The unit elaborates on these different theories of error.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of things or ordinary objects of the world is generally expressed in the form of judgements or propositions. Truth and error are characters of judgements or of propositions which are verbal expressions of judgements. If there be any knowledge of any thing, which is not or can not be expressed in the form of judgements, then that knowledge cannot be said to have the character of truth or falsity in it. In considering the problem of truth and error, we shall be concerned with empirical facts expressed in the form of judgements or expressed in words as propositions. A judgement is an assertion about something which claims to be true, but may be false. A judgement may be affirmative or negative. It may either affirm or deny that a thing is such-and-such. But in each case it claims to be true. It proceeds on the understanding

that what is affirmed or denied in the judgement is true, or that it is the real fact. Where in knowledge there is no such claim to be true, there is no occasion for truth and error. Doubt as a mental state is neither true nor false, because one who is in doubt does not claim that his doubt gives him the truth of the matter he doubts. Rather, he is in doubt as to what the truth of the matter may be. Now a judgement being a definite assertion that a thing is or is not such-and-such, no claims to be true; but it may be true as well as false. What makes one judgement true and another false? What do we mean by the truth and falsehood of judgements? How do we know that one judgement is true and another false or erroneous? With regard to truth and error there are two main questions, namely, how truth and error are constituted, and how they are known or tested. The first question relates to the nature of truth and error, and the second to the tests or criteria of truth and error.

3.2 INDIAN THEORIES OF TRUTH AND ERROR

In Indian philosophy the problem of knowledge is generally considered under *Pramanas*. There are different views about the number as well as the nature of these *Pramanas*. Some accept one, others two yet others three, a few others four and some even six. The *Pramanas* accepted in Indian philosophy are: *pratyaksha*, *anumana*, *upamana*, *sabda*, *arthapathi* and *anupaladbhi*. *Prama* is called right knowledge and that which produces right knowledge, *Prama*, is called *Pramana*. *Prema* is knowledge of an object as it is *yathavasthita* and as is conducive to life or in consonance with experience, *vyavahara-anuguna*. Unless and until knowledge is conducive to the furtherance of our material, moral or spiritual ends, there is no proof that knowledge has come into being. So knowledge must have a purpose. If knowledge of an object must be about the object as it is, it must be free from faults like doubt, *samsaya*, or error, *viparyaya*. Doubts arise when we see an object before us, but are not able to know decisively what it is since it appears to possess qualities that pertain to other objects and are therefore mutually contradictory. Since the conflicting cognitions proceeding from the *Pramanas*, belonging either to the same class or different classes, are equally poised, a person is not able to decide and he is in doubt. This stands in the way of right knowledge. Similarly *viparyaya* or error also is an impediment in the attainment of right knowledge. This error is of two kinds – wrong apprehension, *anyathajnana*, and misconception, *vipratijnana*. In wrong apprehension an object is cognized, but a quality that belongs to it is sublated or a quality that does not belong to it is attributed to it. In misconception, *vipratijnana*, the object itself is mistaken for another, for example, mistaking a shell for silver. The distinction between misconception and wrong apprehension lies in the fact that in the latter, i.e. wrong apprehension, the object with its attributes which defines its essential nature, *svarupa-nirupakadharma*, is rightly cognized, but there is error with reference to the qualities that belong to it, *nirupita-svarupa-visesana*. That is to say, this is a case of *dharmaviparyaya* – error regarding the quality or the attribute. In misconception, *vipratijnana*, the specific quality defining the essential nature of the object fails to be cognized and that of another is apprehended with the result that the object itself is mistaken for another, for instance, the shell-silver. Here the object which is the ‘shell’ is seen, but not known as such. It is cognized as a piece of shining

silver. So, this is a case of *dharmiviparyaya*, error regarding the substratum or *dharmi*. Therefore *Prama* is that kind of knowledge which steers clear of faults. That which is the producer of this knowledge is *Pramana* or instrument of knowledge.

3.3 PERCEPTION: NIRVIKALPAKA AND SAVIKALPAKA

In perception there is sense-object contact. When we look at an object for the first time, it is cognized by us as having some form, *rupa*, and some qualities, *guna*. This is called *nirvikalpaka pratyaksa* or indeterminate perception; because in this cognition our knowledge is restricted to that one object before us and to the qualities that inhere in it. At that moment there is no thought in our mind whether there are other objects similar to that and belonging to that species. That the qualities do appear along with the object even in this first cognition, *nirvikalpaka pratyaksha*, has to be accepted since, if it is knowledge it is always experienced in the following form – ‘this is thus’, *idam ittham*. The term ‘this’ refers to the object cognized, and ‘thus’ to the qualities and form that are inseparately connected with it. In *savikalpaka pratyaksha* or determinate perception the object is cognised along with its specific form and qualities. The difference between the two perception lies in the fact that in the former, *nirvikalpaka*, only that one object is cognized whereas in the latter, *savikalpaka*, the thought that the object is similar to the one that was seen already and therefore the object is one of the several objects belonging to that particular species. Thus whether the perception is determinate or indeterminate an object is cognized is being invariably qualified by some inseparable attributes, but never as a mere something devoid of form or qualities. The Nyaya classifies perception as *laukika*, ordinary, and *alaukika*, extra ordinary. We have *laukika* perception when there is the usual sense – contact with objects present to sense. In *alaukika* perception, however, the object is such as is not ordinarily present to sense, but is conveyed to sense through an unusual medium. Perception again is of two kinds, namely external, *bahya*, and internal, *manasa*. The former is due to the external senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. The latter is brought about by the mind’s contact with psychical states and processes.

3.4 CRITERIA OF TRUTH

In the western epistemology there are four main theories of truth and error. These are known as the intuitionist, the coherence, the pragmatist and the correspondence theory of truth and error. According to the intuitionist theory, while truth is intrinsic to one kind of knowledge, error or falsity is intrinsic to a different kind. This means that some cases of knowledge are intrinsically true, while others are intrinsically false, so much so that we immediately apprehend the truth of the one class and the falsity of the other. Among the Indian systems of philosophy, we find that the *Samkhya* system accepts the intuitionist theory in respect of both truth and error, while the *Mimamsa* and the *Advaita Vedanta* systems accept it in the case of truth, but reject it as regards error. According to the *Samkhya* both truth and falsity are internal characters of different cases of knowledge. If one knowledge is true and another false, that is so because of their own internal conditions and with

out reference to any external tests like correspondence, coherence etc. Truth is latent in some cognitions and errors in others, from the very first moment of their occurrence and these are immediately apprehended by us at that moment. A true cognition is true and known to be true by itself, and it can never be made false. Thus the Samkhya holds that both truth and falsehood are internally conditioned and immediately known. This is the theory of *svatahPramanya* and *aPramanya*, i.e. the intrinsic validity and invalidity of knowledge. The Mimamsa and the Advaita Vedanta, however, take truth as intrinsic to all knowledge, *svatahPramanya*, and error as an abnormal phenomenon due to certain external and vitiating factors in the conditions of some cognitions, *paratah a Pramanya*. While truth is intrinsic and organic to knowledge, falsity or error is accidental and externally conditioned. Any cognition is true so far as it reveals its object; and it is immediately known to be true so far as it is uncontradicted, *abadhita*.

The correspondence theory of truth and error holds that the truth consists in correspondence to fact and is indirectly verified by experience. But the Nyaya view of truth is logical and agrees with the correspondence theory. For Nyaya truth consists in correspondence, but the criterion is coherence in a broad sense, *samvada*. The Nyaya coherence is a practical test and means the harmony between cognitive and conative etc. The Nyaya coherence is a practical test and means the harmony between cognitive and conative existences, *pravrttisamarthyas*, or between different kinds of knowledge, *tajjatiyatva*. That there is truth in the sense of correspondence can not as a rule, be known directly by intuition. We know it indirectly from the fact that the knowledge in question coheres with other experiences of the same object as also with the general systems of our knowledge. Thus the perception of water is known to be valid when different ways of reaction or experiment give us the same experience of water. According to Nyaya the truth of knowledge consists in its correspondence with objective facts, while coherence and practical utility are the test of truth. It defines the truth of knowledge as a correspondence of relations, *tadvatitatprakarakam*. The Nyaya view is a kind of logical realism because it believes in an independent world of objects standing in certain relations to one another. Though Mimamsa uphold the realism of Nyaya-vaisheshika, it dispenses with the need for testing the truth. The Mimamsa believes in the authority of Vedas which are self-evident. The Vedas are the words of utterances and therefore eternal. The relation between the words of Vedas and their meanings are natural, necessary and eternal. We ought not to think that things were there already before they were named. The world and the thing it names go together and it is impossible to think of either as having had a beginning in time. But we must carefully note what in this view is meant by the terms 'word' and 'thing'. In order to know the character of the former, it is necessary to distinguish first between *varna* and *dhvani*. A *varna* is an articulate sound. It is conceived as integral, *niravayava*, and omnipresent, *sarva-gata*, and therefore also eternal, *nitya*. A word, *abda*, is two or more of these *varnas*, and is regarded as merely an aggregate, *samudaya*, and not as a whole, *avayavin*, distinguishable from each of its constituent parts and from all of them. The *dhvani* is a 'tone' or means of revealing *varnas*. As regards the 'things' signified by words, we are not to understand the particular facts of experience which come into being and disappear, but the corresponding universals which are eternal, and of which the passing individuals are nothing more than signs. That is, the significance

of the word is general though, when associated with other words to form a sentence, it may come to denote a particular. The word and the meaning being both eternal, the relation between them also is necessarily so. The Mimamsaka believes that only vedic texts are eternal and beginningless handed down from teacher to pupil with scrupulous care. Though Kumarila and Prabhakara accept the realistic theory of knowledge, they differ with regard to 'memory' in the validity of knowledge. According to the Bhattas, recollection is not valid for novelty is the necessary condition of validity. Truth should not only be not contradicted by subsequent knowledge, *abadhita*; it should also point to something not hitherto known, *anadhigata*. Prabhakara does not accept this condition, for all experience, *anubhuti* – whether the object be already known or not – is valid for him. Even the so called error satisfies this requirement. If all experience by its every nature is valid, it may be asked how error arises at all. Kumarila and Prabhakara differ considerably in their answers to this question and their explanations are known respectively as *vipartia-khyati* and *akhyati*.

Check Your Progress I

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1. What is the definition of truth in Indian philosophy?
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2. What is the correspondence theory of truth according to Nyaya school?
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3.5 KHYATI-VADAS

Khyati-vada, theory of apprehension: if all knowledge is said to be right knowledge and there-of valid, how are we to explain the occurrence of illusion in the world? *Prama* or *Pramiti*, right knowledge is the knowledge of reality as it is and that leads to successful activity. It is distinguished from erroneous cognition which does not end in such successful activity. It must be understood at the outset that in regards to the illumination of an object there is no difference between *Prama*, right knowledge and *aprama*, false knowledge. But right knowledge differs from erroneous knowledge in respect of the difference of the volitional and emotional aspects of the percipients's personality. Indian philosophers have critically discussed the nature of erroneous cognition and have proposed different theories of it. The term '*khyati*' is used to refer to erroneous cognition. Five theories have been mentioned as theories of error. In other words, they are five types of *khyativada* as Indian theories of error. They are. *atmakhyati*, *asatkhyati*, *akhyati*, *anyathakhyati* and *anirvacanityakhyati*.

3.6 ATMAKHYATI

According to the follower of *atmakhyati* human soul is of the nature of cognition. Hence it is known internally. Cognition and its object are not different. An imagined external object is also of the nature of cognition. The perception of a snake in a rope or the perception of silver in the shell is in fact nothing but cognition. Hence error is another form of cognition. The *vijñanavadi* Buddhist, a type of idealists, are the supporters of *atmakhyati*. The upholders of this view have not denied the fact that some of our experiences of external objects are correct and some of them are incorrect. In order to give an account of this phenomenon they have accepted the imposition of cognition on imagined external objects. According to them an imagined snake or a piece of silver is unreal, *asat*, if it is considered as different from cognition. In an erroneous cognition, a rope is cognized as a snake. It is due to error that a rope-cognition is revealed as a snake. It is to be noted that in an erroneous cognition, a rope is not cognized as a moving snake. What is cognized is a stationary snake. This type of error is an error of cognition. For this reason the *vijñanavadi*-Buddhist are called *atmakhyativadins*. According to the Vedantins the waking life is not the same as dream experience. Therefore they are critical of the *atmakhyativadin's* view on cognition. Moreover, perception of an external object like a pot can not be a property of cognition. We apprehend the largeness of a pot when our visual sense-organ is in contact with the object. If objects are momentary, as held by the Buddhist, then it is impossible to perceive the largeness of objects. This is due to the fact that the objects cease to exist when we perceive their largeness. For this reason the thesis of the Buddhists that everything is momentary cannot be established. According to the followers of the *vijñanavada* the snake which is of the nature of cognition is imposed on the external rope in an illusory cognition. It is the very nature of a cognition that it appears as another cognition. It is the very nature of a cognition that it appears as another cognition. The Jain philosophers are the upholders of seven forms of judgements, *syadvada*. They have accepted two types of cognition, viz., *pratyaksha*, direct and *paroksha*, indirect, which are not being contradicted. Their view is similar to that of *vijñanavada*.

3.7 ASATKHYATI

In an erroneous cognition an unreal object is imposed on another unreal object. This view is called, '*asatkhyati*.' The followers of this view accept the erroneous cognition of objects such as the sky-flower, the son of a barren woman etc. According to the Carvakas, everything is not unreal but objects or persons such as God which are not amenable to the senses, are unreal. Since the Carvaka philosophers have accepted the erroneous cognition of unreal objects, their view is also called *asatkhyativada*. Some of the followers of *astika* school also have accepted the cognition of unreal objects. When we cognize unreal objects we understand the meaning of expressions such as 'sky-flower.' But the followers of the Nyaya-vaisheshika do not accept the cognition of an unreal object, *asat*, when the meaning of a sentence or an expression is understood. The Samkhya does not accept *asatkhyati*. The Samkhya View is called *sadasatkhyati*. The Madhyamika school of Buddhism, *sunyavada*, accepts the view of *asatkhyativada*. According to Nagarjuna,

a Madhyamika Buddhist, everything is not unreal. According to him, *sunya*, (i) is not real, (ii) not unreal, (iii) not both real and unreal, and (iv) not different from both real and unreal. Since the followers of this type of *sunyavada* have accepted two types of truth, they are closer to Advaita Vedanta in some respects. According to Sankara, Brahman is a real entity. It is neither free from all the four alternatives of *sunyavada* nor is it a momentary entity. Though Sankara refutes *Sunyavada* he has been considered as a Buddhist in disguise. For Nagarjuna the existence of an object is imaginary. It is called *samvrta satta*. The word *samvrta* means imaginary. Hence the view of Madhyamika philosophers such as Nagarjuna can not be identified with *asatkhyativada*.

3.8 AKHYATI

The term '*akhyati*' means 'absence of error'. Prabhakara is the propounder of the theory of '*akhyati*.' He does not accept illusory cognition. In fact, there is no error. In the perception of a rope as a snake and the shell as silver, there are two cognitions. First we have perception, and then memory cognition. In other words, two types of cognition take place and both of them are true. There is no one unitary qualificative cognition; instead there are two cognitions, perceptual and memory; there is no need to accept erroneous cognition. This view of *akhyati* is criticised. It is asked why there is fear in the case of snake rope example if there is no erroneous cognition. In other words, if there is no qualificative cognition, then it is difficult to explain the psychological attitudes or the behaviour associated with erroneous cognitions. In reply, it is said that the cause of psychological attitudes such as fear is not one unitary qualitative cognition. According to the followers of *akhyati* non apprehension of the difference, *bheda-agraha* between two objects – the rope that is perceived and the snake that is recollected is the cause for the psychological attitude of fear. If there were two cognitions, there would have been mental perception of these cognitions. Since there is no mental perception of these two cognitions, an erroneous cognition can not be said to be two separate cognitions. This theory goes against empirical facts.

3.9 ANYATHAKHYATI

Anyathakhyati is also known as *viparitakhati*. The Nyaya-Vaisesika schools of Indian philosophy have accepted *anyathakhyati*. Jayanta Bhatta the author of *nyayamanjari*, and Gangesa Upadhyaya, a Navya-Nyaya philosopher, have established the theory of *anyathakhyati*. According to the Nyaya philosophers, in the case of an erroneous perception of silver in shell, both the silver and the shell are real. The shell is in front of the perceiver, but the silver is elsewhere. The silver which is elsewhere appears in the locus of the shell. Hence the shell, without appearing as shell appears as something else. In this case it appears as silver. For this reason the theory is called *anyathakhyati*, 'appeared in a different way.' The perception of silver in shell is as type of extra ordinary perception. With respect to shining there is similarity between shell and silver. The cognition of shining gives rise to the memory of cognition of silver. The relation of this type of perception is extra ordinary. It is called *jnanalaksana sannikarsa*, cognition as relation. Since there is no material cause for silvers, the Advaitins refute *anyathakhyati*. According to the Advaitins the shell appearing as silver is due to ignorance. But according to the Nyaya philosophers ignorance does not belong to the type of object to

which silver belongs. An object of a different type cannot be material cause. For example, an earthen jar can not be made out of gold. More over, the Nyaya philosophers claim that there is no evidence in favour of the Advaita conception of ignorance. Patanjali calls the modification of the mind, *citta vritti*, as *viparyaya*. He is in favour of the theory of *Anyathakhyati*. In his *igoga-vartika*, Vijñānabhikṣa has also developed this view. The cognition of the elsewhere snake in the rope is *anyathakhyati*. According to this view the cognition of the rope qualified by snakehood is true, but the cognition of the snake in the locus, which is a rope, is erroneous. This view has also been criticised. It is claimed that if the previously observed snake is perceived in the locus, which is in front of the perceiver, due to some defect in the visual sense organ or in the objective conditions such as darkness, then the place where the snake has been observed would also be cognised. If that were so, there would not be any error. It can be seen that *anyathakhyati* is the under lying principle in *asatkhyati* in the sense of the presentation of the *sat* for the *asat*; in *atmakhyati* in the sense of the presentation of the extra-mental objects instead of the ideas; in *akhyati* in the sense of the presentation of the attributes of something as those of some other; and lastly in *anirvacaniyakhyati* in the sense of the presentation of appearance instead of reality.

3.10 ANIRVACANIYAKHYATI

Sankara propounded the *Advaitavada*, the theory of non-dualism by establishing Brahman as the ultimate locus of cosmic illusion. The *Advaitavada* cannot be substantiated without establishing imposition, *adhyasa*. Everything is imposed on Brahman. The reality is Brahman. The world appearing as real is due to *maya*. Due to ignorance we consider the world to be real. This ignorance cannot be said to be real, *sat*. Nor can it be unreal, *asat*. But it can be dispelled by knowledge, *jñāna*. *Anirvacaniya* means that something can be described, indescribable. When we see rope as a snake the quality of a snake is imposed on the rope, *adhyasa*. As the snake is imposed upon rope, so the rope is imposed upon Brahman which is of the nature of consciousness. Hence ultimately, the locus of the snake which is indescribable, *anirvacaniya*, is the consciousness qualified by the rope. Here the word, *anirvacaniya*, indescribable, means '*mithya*,' false. If something is *anirvacaniya* or *mkthya*, then it can not be determined either as real, *sat* or as unreal, *asat*. If the snake imposed upon the consciousness qualified by the rope were real, *sat*, then the cognition of the snake would not have been contradicted by the true cognition of the rope. If the snake were unreal, *asat* like the sky-flower, then it would not have been cognized. Again the snake can not be said to be both real and unreal, because an object cannot have opposed properties at the same time. Therefore our cognition of the rope as snake is a kind of imposition, *adhyasa*. The snake is imposed on the rope. Therefore the locus of the snake is *anirvacaniya*, indescribable.

3.11 SATKHYATI

Ramanuja in his *Sribhasya* discusses about *satkhyati* or *yatharthakhyati*, true apprehension. Since his view is coupled with a non-apprehension, *akhyata*, of some aspect of the object perceived, his view is *akhyati-samvalita yatharthakhyati*. In *yatharthakhyati* there is the presentation of the

comparatively smaller elements of silver instead of the greater elements of the shell. At first sight when the smaller elements alone are perceived, it is taken for silver. In the subsequent cognition when the greater elements of the shell in the same object are grasped, the object is cognized as shell. The activity of the percipient to appropriate it to himself is arrested at first sight; for he realises the silver element that is in it is too small to be of any use. Visistadvaita propounds the theory of *satkhyati* or *yatharthakhyati* according to which all knowledge is real. The correctness of *satkahyati* is explained with regard to some of the experiences in the world which appear to be illusory. First let us take the shell-silver-illusion, *sukti rajata jnana*. Silver is classified under the element of fire or *tejas*, and shell under that of earth. As a part of *tejas* exists in *prithvi* after tripartition, silver has its existence in the shell, but comparatively in a small proportion. Under normal circumstances the preponderating part alone is grasped in an object by the sense-organ. So, the shell is cognized as such by the eye generally. Sometimes on account of some defect in the sense of sight, the shell-art fails to be cognized and the silver part alone of the shell is apprehended. Then a person in quest of silver goes to take it in obedience to the volition of the mind. When the defect disappears and the shell part thereby is cognized, he concludes it is not silver and his activity in regard to silver ceases. The perception of silver, however small it may be, in the shell in the first cognition is real since there is some silver part in the shell which was seen. Therefore this perception is called *satkhyati* or *atharhtakhyati*. But at that time, the shell part of it though comparatively greater, was not apprehended due to some defect. Therefore there is *akhyati* or non-apprehension as well. Thus when a person mistakes a shell for a silver, we have to grant the existence of two kinds of apprehension or *khatas*, namely, *satkhyati* and *akhyati*. Hence the correctness of the view of Ramanuja that it is the case of *satkhyati* qualified by *akhyati*, *akhyati-samvallita-satkhyati*).

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1. Explain *Atmakhyati*?

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2. Describe *Satkhyati* of Visistadvaita philosophy.

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3.12 LET US SUM UP

In India a similar approach to ‘truth’ can be discerned, as could be expected, in Carvaka, the Indian Empiricism par excellence. As we have seen, this school of Indian Philosophy – like its counterpart in any part of the world – accepts perception alone as source of knowledge. But we are not to suppose that the Carvaka philosopher was so stupid as to refrain from cooking his food because of his skeptic philosophical stance regarding the possibility of knowing for certain that whenever one puts his food on fire, the fire cooks it (something known by inference and not by perception). Any knowledge obtained in any other way except perception does have value – only practical (pragmatic) value. Thus Jayarasi who even denied the truth of perceptual knowledge (and the existence of the four physical elements generally accepted by the Indian Materialists) is not unaware that in spite of all denial of theoretical knowledge, practical life can and should go on.

When, however, modern commentators on Indian Philosophy speak of ‘pragmatism’ in Indian philosophy, they single out Samkhya as its best representative, or at least which attaches more importance to the practical value, or ‘workability’ (*arthakriyakaritva*) of true cognition. But isn’t there a big misunderstanding here? Samkhya, like for that matter all the schools of Indian Philosophy, (except, Carvaka of course) considers valid (*yathartha*) cognition as one which corresponds to the facts – and therefore these can all be grouped, in one way or another, under the “Correspondence Theory of Truth”. But when they – all of them – speak of the test of truth as ‘successful activity’ (*pravrttisamarthya*), do they mean this in an epistemological sense or in a religious (and in a way ontological) sense? It has to be constantly borne in mind that these schools of Indian Philosophy are chiefly interested in the attainment of ‘*Moksa*’. So the test of true (in the sense of ‘genuine’) cognition is whether such cognition is or is not conducive to the desired end. Its ‘pragmatic’ character has little to do with the Western meaning of the term.

3.13 KEY WORDS

Asatkhyati : A theory of error that holds that erroneous cognition happens when cognition takes place on unreal objects.

Anirvacaniya : Indescribable.

3.14 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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