

THE ILLUSORINESS OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD:

A comparison with the waving of a fire-brand

The real form of all of us is existence. The reflections of the sun, caught in the millions of waves and bubbles, are nothing but the reflection of the self-same sun. Similarly, the *Sat* alone is perceived whether as objects of our walking state, or the ideas of dream or undifferentiated consciousness of dreamless sleep.

While dealing with the same topic in *māṇḍūkya kārīkā* by *gauḍapāda*, he explains the same above with an Illustration. In the fourth chapter of the *kārīkā* the *alātaśāntiprakaraṇa* (Quenching of Fire-brand) he illustrates this.

ऋजुवक्रादिकाभासमलातस्पन्दितं यथा ।

ग्रहणग्रहकाभासं विज्ञानस्पन्दितं तथा ॥ 47 ॥

rjuvagrādīkābhāsamalātaspaṇḍitaṃ yathā .
grahaṇagrahākābhāsaṃ vijñānaśpaṇḍitaṃ tathā

As a Fire-brand, when set in motion, appears as straight, crooked etc. So also, the Consciousness, when in set in motion, appears as the perceiver, the perceived etc.

Śrīśaṅkara explains this: - In common experience it is noticed that a fire-brand when moved appears straight, crooked etc. If a fire-brand be moved swiftly it makes a circle, a straight line, or a crooked line according to the movement. When the firebrand is moved, it does not really make any figure. In reality there is only a point which appears as various figures.

So does Consciousness appear as the perceiver, the perceived etc. It is Consciousness set in motion. Consciousness only exists. It is undifferentiated. Motion in consciousness makes it appear as the perceiver, the perceived etc. There is no motion, really speaking, in Consciousness. The ignorant only imagine illusory subjects and objects which are the basis of our sense-perception.

No motion is possible in Consciousness which is ever immovable. This appearance is due to Ignorance (*Avidyā*).

In the last blog the conclusion was, that no motion is possible in consciousness which is ever immovable. But we have to examine why the appearance is there and what is the reason behind it. The answer is, it is due to the projecting power of ignorance अविद्या (*Avidyā*). According to Advaita Vedanta, the ignorance has two powers आवरणशक्ति(*āvaraṇaśakti*) विकल्पशक्ति(*vikalpaśakti*). The appearance of forms is due to the power of ignorance अविद्या (*Avidyā*) by which the manifold experiences are projected.

By its nature the consciousness is immovable, this has been illustrated in the *māṇḍūkyakārīkā*

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अस्पन्दमानमलातभासमजं यथा । अस्पन्दमानं विज्ञानमनाभासमजं तथा ॥ 48 ॥

aspaṇḍamānamalātabhāsamaṃ yathā
aspaṇḍamānaṃ vijñānamanābhāsamaṃ tathā

The fire brand, when not in motion is free from all appearances and remains changeless, in the same way Consciousness when not in motion, is free from all appearances and remains changeless.

Śrīśaṅkara further explains it as , the fire-brand, when not in motion, does not take any form, straight or crooked etc. becomes free from all appearances and remains changeless, so also the Consciousness, which appears as moving through ignorance, when restrained from the idea of motion on the disappearance of ignorance, becomes free from all appearances, as those of birth and death etc. and remains unborn and motionless.

The consciousness is seen as it really is. The fire-brand when at rest has no figure, as it is a point only. Even when moved, the fire-brand is really nothing but a point. It only appears as a circle or straight line. Similarly, even during the state of ignorance, Consciousness always remains what it is i.e. changeless and motionless. It appears to be changing and possessing forms only on account of the ignorance of the perceiving mind.

How the appearances in fire-brand are not real or illusory. Śrīgauḍapāda explains it in this manner

अलाते स्पन्दमाने वा नाऽऽभासा अन्यतोभुवः । न ततोऽन्यत्र निस्पान्नालातं प्रविशन्ति ते ॥

न निर्गता अलातात् ते द्रव्यत्वाभावयोगतः । विज्ञानेऽपि तथैव स्युराभासस्याविशेषतः ॥

alāte spandamāne vā nā"bhāsā anyatobhuvaḥ na tato'nyatra nispānnālātaṃ praviśanti te

na nirgatā alātāt te dravyatvābhāvayogataḥ vijñāne'pi tathaiva syurābhāsasyāviśeṣataḥ

When the fire brand is in motion, the appearances that are seen in do not come from elsewhere. When the fire-brand is not moved, the appearances do not go elsewhere from the motionless fire-brand. Further, the appearances when the fire is not moved do not enter into the fire brand itself. The appearances do not emerge from the fire brand because they are not of the nature of substance. This also applies to Consciousness on account of the similarity of appearance.

What actually exists is a point, But the mind on account of its ignorance. Sees in its various forms. Those appearances do not emerge from the firebrand as something that comes out of a house. The reason is that appearance is not of the nature of substance. The appearances have no reality.

In both cases, appearances are due to the ignorance of the perceiver. Birth death etc. are really speaking, illusory. They have no real existence. Therefore, these are called mere appearances.

How are the two appearances similar?

Let us see how to they both are similar i.e the illustration and the subject of illustration or the illustrated (dṛṣṭānta-dārṣṭāntika) दृष्टान्तदार्ष्टान्तिक . The fire brand and consciousness are alike in all respects.

Both appearances does not have any reality this was explained briefly. The appearances that are seen in the dream state or in the waking state they do not come from elsewhere. Also, when consciousness is inactive i.e in the deep sleep (suṣupti) सुषुप्ति the appearances do not go elsewhere from the inactive consciousness. The appearances that are seen neither enter into it nor go out of it. The appearances do not emerge from consciousness because they are not of nature of a substance.

These are always incomprehensible¹ or unthinkable because they do not subject to the relation of cause and effect. Even though consciousness and fire brand are similar in all respects, the special future of consciousness is it always remains immutable (acalam) अचलम्. Then what is the cause of such appearances as birth etc. in the consciousness which is ever immutable? This was explained in the last blog. The reason is ignorance. In the absence of causality it is not reasonable to establish the relationship of producer and the produced i.e between consciousness and appearances.

When consciousness is said to be active as in the waking and the dream states, the forms of birth and death etc. that are cognized in those states do not come from elsewhere outside consciousness. For such forms are not seen to exist elsewhere outside one's own consciousness. Again, when in deep sleep, consciousness remains inactive, the forms of birth and death etc. do not go elsewhere from the Consciousness in which they were perceived during the waking and dream states. No one ever knows the existence of anything outside one's own consciousness. For consciousness which is non-dual and the beyond the ideas of time, space etc. cannot be the cause of multiple objects. The objects seen in the dream and waking states being ever unreal, cannot be said to emerge from or merge in consciousness.

The conclusion of the whole thing is, as the fire brand which is just a point is associated with various forms straight crooked etc. although in the reality no such forms exist. In the same way pure consciousness is associated with the ideas of birth etc. though such ideas do not have any existence. **Therefore, the ideas of birth and death etc. associated with consciousness are illusory.**

Reference :-

vijñāne spandamāne vā nā"bhāsā anyatobhavaḥ .
na tato'nyatra nispaṇḍāṇṇa vijñānaṃ viśanti te ..
na nirgatāste vijñānāt dravyatvābhāvayogataḥ .
kāryakāraṇatā'bhāvāt yato'cintyāḥ sadaiva te ..

विज्ञाने स्पन्दमाने वा नाऽऽभासा अन्यतोभुवः ।

न ततोऽन्यत्र निस्पन्दान्न विज्ञानं विशन्ति ते ॥

न निर्गतास्ते विज्ञानात् द्रव्यत्वाभावयोगतः ।

कार्यकारणताऽभावात् यतोऽचिन्त्याः सदैव ते ॥

¹ It is incomprehensible because the ideas seen in the dream and the waking states cannot be said to be non-existent because they are perceived nor can they be said to exist because they are not perceived in deep sleep. Therefore, it is impossible to determine their real nature. So, it is just a illusory as the snake seen in the rope.