

# Self-Inquiry and the Pursuit of Happiness : A Study in Advaita Vedānta and its Relevance in Modern Times

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## Abstract

The goal of every human being in this world is to be happy or joyful. Though we seek this happiness in ephemeral objects out there in the world, Advaita considers it purely subjective and also the true nature of the Self. Swami Vidyāraṇya has firmly argued that the Self is not just the witness-consciousness or the constant immovable seer of all times but also the locus of supreme joy and love. It is not just a passing mental state but the ultimate nature of existence. Certainly, this radical claim of Advaita challenges all modern theories and concepts of Self that identify the Self with the psycho-physical body or different external entities. This paper aims to investigate the multiple techniques Advaitins have employed to reveal the nature of Self and how do they endorse the bliss-nature of the Self with reference to some of the major texts of Advaita traditions. Precisely, the goal of this paper is to show the profound practical implication of Advaita philosophy in understanding the goal and supreme value of human life in the present world.

## Full paper

The philosophy of Vedānta is the study and understanding of the nature of the Self or subjectivity. It is the central concept in Upaniṣads and has been discussed and explored by all great scholars and schools of Vedānta. It is important to note that the reason that makes this concept very significant in the entire philosophy of Vedānta is not just the transcendental and spiritual essence of this subjectivity rather the essential blissful existence of the Self. The Self is not a mere doer or knower but the source of pure joy, awareness and Self-contentment. The goal of every human being in this world is to be happy or joyful. Though we seek this happiness in the ephemeral objects out there in the world, it is neither everlasting nor adequate. Happiness, for Advaita, is purely subjective and also the true nature of the Self. The Self, according to Advaitins, is the locus of the highest and supreme Bliss. Because it is loved only for itself and not for any other object. Though our love and desire for other objects are conditional and relative. They are loved as long as they please the Self but not the other way around. Hence, love for the Self is intrinsic, pure and unconditional.

Swami Vidyāraṇya, the well-known post-Śaṅkara Advaitin, in his remarkable text *Pañcadaśī*, has firmly argued that the Self is not just the witness-consciousness or the constant immovable seer of all times but also the locus of supreme joy and love. Self alone is the Supreme Bliss or *Ānanda* and that alone is truly loved and desired in all actions and all beings. Out of the fifteen chapters of *Pañcadaśī*, he devoted five major chapters to describe the essential blissful nature of the Self. He argues that the happiness or pleasure one strives to achieve throughout her life from the external world is the essential nature of the subject that the mind fails to identify and remains absorbed in the transactional level of the world. It is not just a passing mental state or any object of acquisition but the ultimate unconditional nature of existence or subjectivity. It is herein, according to Swami Vidyāraṇya, an inquiry into the nature of subjectivity or the Self seems imperative. Even if the blissful nature of the Self is evident and obvious to everyone, it is not known to us explicitly. The bliss of the Self cannot be denied because it is always loved in all acts and through all desires. Nor it can be affirmed in a true sense because the mind is still engrossed in worldly pleasure. Henceforth, Swami Vidyāraṇya writes, “this bliss nature of the Self, though revealed, is not (strictly speaking) revealed” (PD I-11).

Advaita challenges all modern theories and concepts of Self that identify the Self with the psycho-physical body or different external entities. Similarly, Advaita denies the materialistic and reductionists’ understanding of happiness too. In all ordinary cases, we differentiate the object of

pleasure from the subject and assume that some sort of struggle is a pre-requisite to achieve that object. Even if we gain the object of our desire that does not confirm any permanent happiness or pleasure, as our desire and its object keep changing all the time. In short, the kind of pleasure or happiness we seek to achieve in this world all the time is objective, derivative, transient, external and also inadequate.

In contrast, Advaita profoundly affirms that the nature of pure joy or happiness is essentially subjective, pure, inward, everlasting, ample and immediately realized. Swami Vidyāraṇya going further argues that ‘Non-duality itself is Bliss’ (441). Happiness is not an object that can be owned and obtained from the external world. It is essentially a subjective non-dual experience that one identifies when goes beyond all duality or multiplicity. In other words, it is apparent when the Self is Self-aware and also free from ignorance and all limiting adjuncts. It is the state of pure existence where the Self is not associated with the five-sheaths or *pañca koṣa*.

However, the limitation of the intellect does not allow us to know such a state of Self. Intellect can grasp an object that fits within the category of the intellect only. Hence, to make us understand the nature of bliss, Swami Vidyāraṇya brings the reference of *susupti* or deep sleep when the Self is temporarily free from all objects of the two worlds – the phenomenal and the dream. He indeed follows a very rational and systematic technique to reveal the bliss aspect of the Self. First, he tries to give us an impression of bliss through a detailed analysis of the deep sleep state. Secondly, he argues that the nature of bliss is not external but our essential nature, the intrinsic essence of the Self. Thirdly, he establishes the bliss of Non-dual Brahman is nothing but the bliss of the Self. And finally, he tries to show how this pure bliss can be differentiated from the momentary pleasure of the objective world.

### **An Analysis of the State of Deep Sleep**

There are three kinds of bliss, says Vidyāraṇya. First, the bliss of the Self or Brahman. Second, the bliss that derives through knowledge and third, the bliss that is achieved from external things. Out of these three, the highest bliss is when the true nature of the Self or the Brahman is revealed. According to *Pañcadaśī*, the bliss of the Self is known when the triad of knowledge (the knower, the known and the means of knowing) disappears and that occurs in the states of *samādhi*, deep sleep and also in a swoon.

Following Upaniṣads, the author again declares that an analysis of the three states of experience is, therefore, required to appreciate the nature of deep sleep and the bliss of that state. The distinctiveness of the sleep experience is that the sleeper is free from the sense of personhood or agency. There is no knower or doer, nor any object or the world. The reason is that the sense of agency or subjectivity is truly constructed and fictitious, it appears as long as the subtle body and gross body are active. To say it more emphatically it is the mind that generates this personal identity and its relationship with the surrounding world. It enjoys all names, fame, social status, achievements, property, and bonding in the world. And also it suffers all losses, pain, failures, diseases, fear, conflicts, fights etc. along with the body. While we assume both pleasure and pain as real in the waking experience, we encounter a distinct world in the dream state and also enjoy its happiness and suffering as long as the dream persists. The difference between the waking and the dream states is that while in the case of the former, the mind acts along with the body; in the case of the latter, the mind becomes more independent and dynamic as the body goes into rest. Dream experience is proof that the mind may appear both as the subject and the object of experience. In a dream, mind alone produces all objects and also enjoys and suffers the results of all its actions.

However, in the state of deep sleep or *susupti*, one becomes temporarily free from both the gross and the subtle bodies. The interplay between the mind, body and objects pauses in sleep, no object of the phenomenal world or dream world is known. One even forgets all her identity, relations, and attachment to loved ones. As stated in *Pañcadaśī*, ‘In sleep even a father is no father’ (PD XI). The individual Self or *jīva* experiences neither pleasure nor pain as the individuality of the Self or the *cidābhāsa* or ego-consciousness is lost. But, it is not a state of void or any unconscious existence

rather a state when consciousness alone prevails and reveals its bliss. The recollection of the state, ‘I had a sound sleep’ and ‘I was aware of nothing’ is proof of the existence of the conscious Self that is illuminating its bliss and ignorance in deep sleep. The nature of consciousness is to reveal itself and its objects, it keeps doing it in all other two states through the frames of the subtle and the gross bodies. In contrast, the state of deep sleep is precisely a window-less state where the *jīva* is not aware either of the external world or the inner world but it experiences the bliss of the Self or consciousness. It is not the undifferentiated pure consciousness but the consciousness that simultaneously reveals its blissful nature along with ignorance (*ajñāna*). As the activity of the mind stops, the individual realizes neither the pleasure nor the pain of the world but there is a direct experience of the bliss-nature of the Self. This happiness is not the product of the mind and the objects as the former withdraws all its actions and remains dormant. Here, the paradox is that in waking states what gives an individual both pleasure and pain, in deep sleep the absence of the same manifests the bliss that is unparalleled and unconditional. The reason that makes sleep vital and worthwhile for everyone is the realization of the bliss of that state. If there is no experience of happiness and peace in the third state, why should one desire sleep at all? Moreover, sleeping being a state free from the gross and subtle bodies allows one to transcend all distresses and limitations of the phenomenal life. It is also an evidence that bliss can be achieved even when one considers going beyond this phenomenal and dream worlds.

Here, the objection may arise – how can there be any knowledge of bliss and ignorance in sleep in the absence of the mind? In response to this, Swami Vidyāraṇya argues (453) – though the function of the mind ceases and it remains concealed in its cause *ajñāna*, it resumes its work immediately after waking and reports of its witlessness in the third state. Explaining the nature of *suṣupti* he states that the knowledge of the sleep state is possible through presumption and recollection. We remember the pleasant experience of sleep and the unawareness of the world. And presume the non-existence of pain and cognition at that state. If the ego or the mind prevails in sleep like the dream state, it would not have been possible to experience the bliss or the dream would have continued even in the third state.

Moreover, Swami Vidyāraṇya states that the state of sleep is proof that all our suffering, diseases and limitations are generated by the mind and that can also be thrown away. Here, it must be stated clearly that even if Advaitins deny the existence of the ego or the mind in *suṣupti*, they never deny the existence of Self or consciousness that is the ground of all the three states. According to Prof. Balasubramanian, sleep is the proof of the existence of one non-intentional, Self-revealing and blissful consciousness. There is neither any knower nor any doer nor any object nor any act. While in the waking and dream states, consciousness is associated and directed towards its object and becomes intentional in all our experiences. In sleep, there is neither the object nor the mind yet consciousness continues to reveal its blissful nature, and the general non-particularized ignorance but not its other modifications (*Viveranaprāmeyasamgraha*). To quote Prof. Balasubramanian,

“If consciousness were also absent at that time, recollection to the effect, ‘I was not conscious of anything then’ would be impossible. The point is that consciousness reveals objects if they are present; and when there are no objects to be revealed, consciousness remains alone.”

Here, it is imperative to note the role of modifications and the internal organ or mind in cognitions. All our perceptual experiences or cognitions depend on the internal organ that goes out through the doors of the sense organs and embraces the object. The internal organ being watery can flow through the channels of the senses and gets transformed as per the nature and form of the object. This transformation or modification is known as *vṛtti* that enables the revelation of the objects. In all cases of our external perceptions, this *vṛtti* must be enclosed both with the ego-consciousness (*cidābhāsa*) and objects whereas the objects of the internal cognitions are directly revealed by the witness alone. Hence, the bliss of the sleep state is directly enjoyed by the sheath of the bliss and not through the sheaths of mind and intellect. Explaining the same Swami Vidyāraṇya writes, in sleep,

“It is the sheath of bliss which is the enjoyer, and it is the bliss of Brahman which is enjoyed” (PD XI – 67). It is not derived from the wandering mind and its objects but is the immediate revelation of the Brahman—‘an impression of the bliss of Brahman’ or the *Vāsanānanda* (PD X-85).

This is a quite higher and brighter account of happiness that one does not achieve through the enjoyment of desired objects, which is known as *Viṣayānanda* (PD XI-90). The joy one derives through possession or achievement of a desired object is also bound to fade away. Neither the object nor the love for the object persists for a long time. Although the peace and joy one realizes during sleep is more valuable and desirable than any other desired object of the world. Yet again, more than these two, claims Swami Vidyāranya, is the joy of *Brahmānanda* that reflects through all kinds of happiness—all achievements, love and rewards manifest the glimpse of the bliss of the Brahman. It is the foundational joy behind all fleeting and transitory experiences of happiness; it is one, invariable, constant and unconditional bliss. Even the love for our dearest ones like husband, wife, and parents' love for children is truly not the love for them but because of the love for Self. Self alone is the locus of all love and bliss and it is alone loved in all cases. In the waking and dreaming states, the Self gets transformed and extended; it enjoys all happiness through the objects and its mental modifications but in the third state, it is largely free from both the gross and the subtle objects of awareness. 'In *suṣupti* there is no duality; there is only oneness' (Māṇḍūkya Up. 5). The bliss of the *suṣupti* is, therefore, more evident and distinct. It is not qualified by the activities of the mind and the body but it is still limited and accompanied by general nescience. And therefore, disappears soon after waking up. However, the role of *suṣupti* is remarkable in making us aware of the intrinsic, subjective, Self-evident and non-derivative nature of the bliss of the Self. Just the way, one can feel the coolness of water touching the cold pot and infer the presence of water inside the pot. In the same manner, the individual gets the sign of bliss in deep sleep and can assume the presence of Absolute bliss.

Nevertheless, the state of deep sleep is attached to the *vṛtti* of general nescience (*Mūlāvidyā*) which prevents the identification of the individual Self with the Universal Self. And thus, provides an inexplicit and dim experience of bliss. *Suṣupti* does not enable one to have the ultimate bliss or *ātyantika ānanda* - as it is just the glimpse of the Pure Bliss. Due to its limitations, the individual Self fails to comprehend Absolute bliss even in the third state. The bliss one experiences in the third state is not identical to the bliss of the fourth state. As affirmed in Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, the knower of the third state or *suṣupti* is still not aware of the difference between real and unreal. It gets involved in this phenomenal world and is attached to all its objects. On the other hand, the fourth state makes the *jīva* completely free from both general and particularized ignorance. Here, the Self becomes Non-dual losing all identities and associations. It is the Bliss of Brahman that one experiences in *Turiya*. Showing the difference between relative and absolute bliss, Swami Vidyāranya writes, "The bliss in which there is no experience of duality and which is not sleep either, is the bliss of Brahman" (PD. XI-100).

### **Means to Realize the Absolute Bliss**

It follows from the above discussion that Advaitins have done a systematic analysis to ground their fundamental thesis. The technical method they followed is – *śrvaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. Since they don't rely on Śruti alone but also apply reason to uphold the truth. Through a rigorous analysis (*manana*) they intend to unfold the nature of the Self and to show its essential distinctions from the not-Self. They didn't rely on any single method, say, testimony or scripture to prove their position rather following the Upaniṣads they employed multiple rational techniques in different contexts. Drawing the distinction between the seer and seen (*Dṛg- Dṛśya- Viveka*) and also through a logical analysis of *Pañca-koṣa* – five sheaths of the *jīva*, Advaitins have shown how the nature of Self is different from the subtle body, gross body and causal body. Again, through a phenomenological study of our three states of experience – *avasthā-traya*, it has been argued that Self-luminous consciousness is essentially non-intentional, and it persists in the absence of both the objects and the ego-consciousness. They constantly employed the method of *Adhyāropa* and *Apavāda*—the method of superimposition and denial to reveal the true essence of the Self or the Brahman. The Truth is one. From the objective standpoint, it is called Brahman and from the subjective perspective, it is the Self. Once, this knowledge is derived through rigorous logical examination, one moves towards the last step of contemplation – *nididhyāsana*.

The Self is evident and cannot be disproved. But what is more significant and essential is to appreciate that this Self alone is the source of happiness or bliss. The pleasure for which we chase worldly things every time and also regret their losses is our true essence. The text *Pañcadaśī* re-establishes this profound claim of Advaitins substantially and shows us the ways to ascertain this truth through a rational process. The paper argues that a Self-inquiry following the technique of Advaita is imperative even today to understand the blissful nature of the Self that the modern materialistic mind has failed to realize.

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