

SATYA, INDIC VISION OF TRUTH AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN LIFE

Dr. Jagadeeswaraiyah Murala, SJ

Abstract: Indian philosophy, in general, is called *Darśana* (vision). The vision is of the Ultimate Reality (*tattva*). The aim of doing philosophy or in having the vision of the ultimate reality, is salvation (*mokṣa*). Different Schools have proposed different ways to achieve this goal and explained the nature of salvation. In this paper an attempt is made to explore the nature of the Ultimate Reality as *satya* giving emphasis on the Advaita Vedānta as proposed by Śaṅkara.

The term *Satya* has its origin in *sat* (existence). Hence, the nature of the truth is existence or the being that exists necessarily (being which 'is' existence and not which 'has' existence). This is foundational across Indian philosophy.

The journey is taken by the philosopher to explore the nature of *sat* (truth) with the invocation, 'lead us from untruth to truth' (*asato mā sadgamaya*). The process is epistemological through *Pramāṇa* system (source of valid knowledge). The nature of Eternal Truth is given in the *Rgveda mantra* called *Nāsadīya-sūkta*.

Śaṅkara further explores into the nature of the ultimate reality. He engages the study with the principle called 'sublation' (*bādha*); it is defined as the negation or correction of a previously held cognition by a later, more valid cognition. Accordingly, the Transcendental Reality (*pāramārhtika satya*) is that which cannot be sublated by any other. Taking this as the reference point there are two more realities; one is that which can be sublated by the Transcendental Reality (*vyāvahārika satya* – empirical reality) and the second is that which is sublated by both of the above called *prātibhāsika satya* (illusory reality).

The above mentioned three levels of truth/reality can be experienced in one's life. It is explained in the *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣat* as three states of life, namely, *jāgrāvasthā* (wakeful state), *svapnāvasthā* (dream state) and *susupti* (deep sleep state). These three states are for the diligent one to understand the empirical life as relatively real and not get attached to it. Even the third state *susupti* is not salvation as it is attached to the body which is the source of *duḥkha* (suffering). The 'fourth' (*caturthī*) state is experienced by the diligent one after the death.

In conclusion the 'Indic vision of life' aims at how a person can lead the life on earth without attaching oneself to the worldly things and persons and ultimately attain the salvation.

Introduction

There's a story by Anthony De Mello's collection I read somewhere: the disciple asks the Master as to how to attain truth. The Master replies, 'through silenc.' As an afterthought he said, 'or by a story.' The movie called *PK* has a dialogue which the hero says that words are needed to lie; the truth cannot be conveyed by words; Indian philosophy/theology/spirituality is full of stories in order to convey the truth. Indian thought cannot be divided as philosophy or theology or spirituality. That's way all the three terms are used.

There's a saying attributed to Lao Tzu, "Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know" (*Tao Te Ching*, 1996. Ch. 56). When asked to explain the saying he seemed to have asked the disciples describe the smell of a rose. Of course, everyone of them knows how a rose smells but it is impossible to describe it. This is the case with the experience of the truth too. The one who knows the truth cannot articulate it. It has to be experienced by each individual.

Another story of Anthony De Mello is as follows: The new visitor said that the Master is talking nonsense. The disciple said, 'my friend you would also talk nonsense if you try to express the inexpressible.' Truth is something

which cannot be expressed (*anirvachanīya*). In this essay an attempt is made to express the inexpressible through reviewing Indic vision of truth by various thinkers.

1. Clarification of the term *Satya*

Sat means ‘the’ existence. It is not the existence of individual beings, but that exists eternally and necessarily (the existence itself). This necessary existence is what is meant by *sat*. The existence of individual beings is not necessary. They can or need not exist. Incidentally, one of the existential philosophers, Jean Paul Sartre says that our existence is not necessary. We are “thrown into the existence” (Sartre, 1943). It makes no difference to the existence if an individual being exists or not. Therefore, all the individual beings’ existence is ‘contingent’ existence and not necessary existence. In the Bible Exodus 3.14. Moses asks the name of God. God replies saying ‘I am who Am (existence).’ Some translations say ‘I am who I am’ the meaning changes by ‘I’ in the second part of the sentence.

Aristotle has 14 books which were written later in his life and do not go along with his earlier writings which were on the natural sciences. The librarian who was arranging them in the library gave them the title ‘Meta (after) Physics (physical/natural sciences).’ Aristotle himself gave four names to these books as, ‘first philosophy’, ‘first science’, ‘wisdom’, and ‘theology’. The subject matter of these 14 books is science of ‘the being’ or science of ‘the common being’ (not the individual beings). One needs to understand that when *satya* is talked about in Indian thought it refers to this Ultimate Reality.

2. Philosophical Foundations of *Satya*

The truth or the attainment or realization of *Satya* is central to Indian thought, be it Orthodox or Heterodox Schools of Thought. There is a difference between ‘attainment’ and ‘realization’. Attainment means that one has to put in effort to ‘reach out’ to the truth. This implies that the object one is seeking for is ‘out there’ and one has to make sufficient efforts to reach it. On the other hand, ‘realization’ means that ‘one is already’ that object one is seeking for. But it is hidden because of various factors like beliefs, thoughts, attachments, concerns etc. One needs to remove these false things (‘debris’ as it were) in order to find one’s true self. Some Schools refer to ‘attainment’ and others to ‘realization.’

Ontological Dimension: the term ‘ontology’ comes from Greek words ‘*ontos*’ (genitive form of *on*, pronounced as ‘own’) which means ‘being’ and ‘*logia*’ which means ‘study of’. The complete meaning of the term, therefore, is ‘science of the being.’ (Betro and Plebani, 2015, p. 1.) Meaning of ‘ontology’ goes along with the meaning of ‘*sat*’ the knowledge of the existence.

The question is asked, what is the goal of the knowledge of *satya*? The answer the Indian thought gives is ‘liberation.’ Which means the mere knowledge of *satya* liberates the one who attains/realizes such knowledge (Murala, J. (2020). *Advaita and St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Comparative Metaphysics* [Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis]. It is strikingly similar to the saying of Jesus in the Bible, ‘the Truth liberates you.’ (John 8.32). In this regard one asks the question, ‘what is bondage (from which one is to be liberated)?’ Bondage, according to the Indic vision (especially Advaita) is the experience of ‘duality.’ (Śaṅkara. (n.d.). *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* [verse 429-430]. The mind always understands, thinks in duality only. Without duality the mind cannot function. Aristotelean way of defining anything is through this duality or differentiation. If one wants to have knowledge of anything one has to differentiate that thing from the others (definition by genus and differentia). Like in the example of cat different from dog etc. (Aristotle. (1984). *Categories*. Vol. 1, pp. 3-24). Mind always differentiates; emotions like *sukha-duḥkha* (happiness-sadness), *raga-dveṣa* (love and hatred) etc. come from mind. In one phrase, mind means differentiation. Therefore, bondage is because of duality. Because of duality the mind gets attached to one of the two mentioned above. And that attachment is bondage.

To come out of this duality which leads one to bondage one needs to go beyond the duality. Truth is beyond the duality, that which considers both in an attitude of neutrality. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣat* (1.3.28) has a prayer to

lead us from untruth to truth (*asato mā sadgamaya*). The prayer is an indication that we need to go beyond the duality of good and bad, happiness and sadness etc. in order to experience the truth as neutral.

3. Epistemological Theories of Truth

Indian thought is philosophical in the sense of ‘searching for truth’ is considered as the primary object of philosophizing. The Indian Philosophical Schools, both orthodox and heterodox, have ways to reach the truth called *pramāṇas* (sources of valid knowledge). Mīmāṃsā has the greatest number of *pramāṇas* (six in all) and Chārvākas, the smallest, only one, namely, perception (*pratyakṣa*). All these sources of valid knowledge are to lead the seeker to the truth. And ultimately that realization/attaining of the truth liberates the person.

According to Buddhism there is no such thing as absolute truth. Buddhism proposes something called *ālambana* (support) in the place of or against the absolute truth. A person experiences only the momentary existence, the passing things. These passing things/objects are not permanent but only the consciousness that is aware of the objects. This is called ‘dependent origination’ (*pratyakṣa samutpāda*). It is an unending chain of mental activities because of which one is in bondage. One needs to break this chain in order to attain liberation (Bodhi, 2000, SN 12).

Nyāya has something called ‘universal veridical theory’ which is a realist epistemological theory. According to this theory ‘universals’ are objectively real, eternal and knowable. They exist in particulars, independently of the mind. By perception and inference these are cognized. When a person perceives cow-ness in multiple cows, that cognition is reliable and veridical. According to Nyāya the ordinary way (of perceiving) is truth. If somebody says something is untruth, s/he has to prove it. Whereas the truth is universal; there is no need to prove the truth. Our immediate experience in the world is the truth (Dravid, 1972, p. 85). Incidentally, St. Thomas Aquinas says that what our intellect beholds is the being (Aquinas, 1997, p. 54). When one sees an individual being s/he does not see that individual being but the ‘universal’ in it. For example, when we see a horse, it is not the individual horse with the attributes like white, black, fat, lean, young, old etc. that we see but the ‘universal horse’ or ‘horse-ness’ as St Thomas Aquinas puts it. This is what we call the epistemological way to the truth, the ultimate reality.

4. Theological Vision of Truth

The seer of the *Rgveda* tries to understand the truth from which the creation came out. It is put in a *mantra* titled *Nāsadiya-sūkta* (*Rigveda* 10.129). The title itself is very revealing because it is a play with the words *sat*, *asat* and *na*. *Sat* means existence/being, *asat* means non-existence/non-being and *na* governs both, meaning ‘neither.’ The underlying question that the seer asks is ‘what was in the beginning of creation? Was it being (whether it has existence) or was it non-being? The questioning goes on like whether it was life or was non-life, breathing or non-breathing etc. And the answer to all of them is ‘it was neither.’ It is the first glimpse of the profundity of truth as inexplicable/indefinable (*anirvacanīya*).

5. Manifestations of the Truth

Truth cannot be talked about as an abstract. It needs to be tangible and experienced by people. This is possible only if the truth manifests itself in the world. The absolute truth manifests itself in the world so that people experience it in ‘little’ ways and come to the realization of the absolute. This is the basis on which Indian philosophy especially the Vedānta works. It sounds almost like St. Thomas Aquinas who said from the sense experience to the ultimate. He uses a method called ‘abstraction.’ (Aquinas, 1997, p. 38). The being is divided, as it were, into different parts depending on our experience. The abstraction works in the intellect by separating form from matter and ultimately comes to the universals.

Śāṅkara uses a theory called ‘Sublation’ to divide the existence and through the experience of this existence to realize the ultimate reality. Theory of sublation is defined as “According to Śāṅkara, sublation occurs when a higher-order cognition invalidates a prior one, revealing its illusory nature” (Śāṅkara, 1973, p. 45). The aim of

the theory of sublation is to know the ultimate reality and that knowledge liberates the person. The truth is divided, as it were, in a hierarchical method.

5.1. *Pāramārthika Satya* (the transcendental/ultimate truth)

Sublation means that some time back one thought s/he had the correct cognition and after sometime another experience contradicts the previous one. Whatever is thus subject to correction is not the truth. Ultimately there is something which cannot be sublated and that is the ultimate truth. (Śaṅkara, 1973, p. 45).

5.2. *Vyāvahārika satya* (empirical truth)

The transcendental truth is the ultimate reality which is not realized at first. What is available immediately in the world is the empirical truth/reality. This is physical world, science and social life are under this purview. It is a shared worldly truth. (Śaṅkara, 1973, p. 52). This also is true but only on the level of worldly reality. It changes and not permanent. We are not satisfied with this truth. The realization does not happen during this state of life. The real satisfaction comes only when one realizes oneself. It is called *ātmānubhava*. This dissatisfaction with the worldly things/persons and the satisfaction with the experience of one's own self is illustrated in the *Advaita Vedānta* which is retold by Om Iyer.

Princess of Kāśī

Once there was a king in Kāśī who had only one boy. During that time there was a drama taking place. The prince is decorated as a girl for the drama. The royal painter painted the prince in the girl's attire and named it as the princess of Kāśī. After a few years this little prince has grown up and was looking at the portraits. He chanced upon the painting 'princess of Kāśī' and immediately fell in love with that girl looking at the date of the painting. 'This girl must be of my age' he thought. He became love-sick! The cause was known by the minister and the truth was told to the prince that the painting was of himself. This story tells us the truth that the longing is there within each one to realize oneself (Iyer, 2023). And one is satisfied only one realizes himself (comes to the true knowledge of oneself).

Vyāvahārika satya becomes a means to the knowledge of the ultimate truth. The world is not taken an illusion but only a step to realize the ultimate. Śaṅkara says, "*brahma satyam jaganmithyā, jīvo brahmeti nāparaḥ*" (Brahman is real and the world is illusion, the soul is Brahman and not the other). (Śaṅkara, 1973, p. 45). The self/soul (*jīva*) refers to the empirical reality which is nothing but the ultimate Brahman. Thus, when one realizes one's self s/he realizes Brahman.

5.3. *Prātibhāsika Satya* (apparent/illusory reality)

What we experience in dream is *prātibhāsika satya*. It is like a mirror image. Usually what we experience in day-to-day life are portrayed in a subtle way in the dream. It is also true as far the dreamer is concerned. But when one wakes up it is only a dream. Not real. The same is applicable to the *vyāvahārika satya* also. Because it is no more real when a person is dreaming. Therefore, these two realities are relatively true and not absolutely. (Chandran, n.d.).

6. Application to Life (*Māṇḍūkya-upaniṣat*)

Truth is considered as 'consciousness' in this *Upaniṣat*. There are two 'meditations' (*vicāras*) in this *Upaniṣat*. The first is '*Ātma-vicāra*' (meditation on the self/soul) and the second, '*Omkāra-vicāra*' (meditation on the letter *Om*). In *ātma-vicāra* four states of consciousness are taken for meditation (Nikhilananda, 1992, p. 48). They are:

6.1. *Jāgrḍāvastha* (wakeful state): in this state there is difference between subject and object, the experience and the experienced. This is duality. Duality means differentiation and differentiation means 'mind.' This cannot be the ultimate consciousness and the truth obtained from this consciousness cannot be the ultimate truth. Because

once there is differentiation and mind is involved it is subject to change and anything that changes (*bādhā*) is sublatale and not the ultimate which is unsublatable.

6.2. Svapnāvastha (dream state): in the dream state too, there is subject-object duality. It is like mirror image of the wakeful state. This can be called as *prātibhāsika satya* (truth as if in the mirror reflection). The only difference is that it is experienced only by one person. It is not empirical where several people can experience the same. But it is true to the person who experiences it. During the dream no one can say that ‘I am only dreaming; this is not true.’ It is as real as the wakeful state. The person experiences exactly the same when s/he experiences while awake.

6.3. Susupti (deep/dreamless sleep state): it is a phase during the sleep where we are not aware of anything. Only when a person enters into this state s/he can say, ‘I had sound sleep.’ Otherwise, the person gets up tired. What happens during this period of time? There is no duality (*Advaita*) of subject and object. The consciousness is with itself (consciousness being conscious of itself). This is called ‘pure consciousness.’ There is a glimpse of the Ultimate Truth in this state. Aristotle uses this state to describe God as ‘thought thinking itself’ (Aristotle, 1984, *Metaphysics*, Book XII, 1074b).

6.4. Caturthī (the fourth state): the above mentioned third state of consciousness, though described as the pure consciousness, is not the ultimate. Because the body is still there. Body means imperfection. There cannot be any imperfections in the state of *Mokṣa*, the liberation. Bodiless pure consciousness is the ‘fourth state.’

In the sense of the ultimate both wakeful state and dream state of consciousness have the equal footing, meaning that they are only ‘relatively real’ and not ultimately. There is a story explained about this equal status to both wakeful and dream state. There was a king philosopher called Janaka. He had a dream that he was in a war. He was defeated, wounded and his horse was taking him away from the war field. The horse stumble upon something and he falls down and he wakes up from the dream. Now he asks his courtiers whether ‘that was real or this is real.’ The answer is that ‘that was real at that time and this is real at this time.’ (Reflect and Respond, n.d. – paraphrased and retold by me, author). This is to signify that the truth experienced in wakeful state and dream state (duality) is relatively true. But once one gets awakened into the non-dual state, both the realities seem illusory (*mithyā/māyā*).

Conclusion

From the above explanation one can come to the conclusion regarding the truth. When Indian thought speaks about truth it refers to Necessary Truth. It is experienced but cannot be expressed. The experienced truth has different levels which can be called as hierarchical based on the theory of sublation proposed by Śaṅkara. The experience of the duality is because of the mind and it is called *māyā* from the root word ‘*māne*’ to think. All the differentiations are because of the mind. Because of the differentiations misery in life is experienced. People get identified with the differences, and then there are dualities like ‘love-hatred’ resulting in happiness and sadness.

Once the ‘beyond mind’ (pure consciousness) is experienced, like in the deep sleep, the duality becomes unreal as in the dream after waking up. Such person who experienced the pure consciousness is called *jīvanmukta* (released while alive). Such person lives a life of ‘indifference’ not attaching her/himself to the dual experience of mind. And such person gets liberated after death which is called *Videha mukti* (liberation without body). For realizing oneself as this pure consciousness one needs to undergo *sadhana* (effort, practice).

Bibliography

1. Aquinas, T. (1997). *On being and essence* (R. McInerny, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work written ca. 1252).

2. Aristotle. (1984). *Categories* (J. L. Ackrill, Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The complete works of Aristotle* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–24). Princeton University Press.
3. Aristotle. (1984). *Metaphysics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (Vol. 2, pp. 1552–1728). Princeton University Press. (Original work ca. 4th century BCE).
4. Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Vol. 1, SN 12.1). Wisdom Publications.
5. Berto, Francesco; Plebani, Matteo (2015). *Ontology and Metaontology: A Contemporary Guide*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
6. Chandran, R. (n.d.). *Paramārtha–Vyavahāra–Pratibhāsa: Definitions in Advaita Vedānta*. Advaita Academy. Retrieved November 8, 2025, from Chandran, R. (n.d.). Paramārtha–Vyavahāra–Pratibhāsa: Definitions in Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Academy. Retrieved November 8, 2025, from <http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/definitions/paramartha2.htm>
7. Draid, R. R. (1972). *The problem of universals in Indian philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass.
8. Iyer, A. O. (2023, November 4). *The Princess of Kashi: A Tale of Desires and Realization*. GuruPaduka. Iyer, A. O. (2023, November 4). The Princess of Kashi: A Tale of Desires and Realization. GuruPaduka. <<https://gurupaduka.in/advaita/2023/11/04/the-princess-of-kashi>>
9. Murala, J. (2020). *Advaita and St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Comparative Metaphysics* [Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis]. Ramakrishna Math Vivekananda College, Chennai.
10. Nikhilananda, S. (Trans.). (1992). *The Mandukya Upanishad with Gaudapada's Karika and Shankara's Commentary*. Advaita Ashrama. (Original work ca. 8th century CE).
11. Śaṅkara. (1973). *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* (Swami Gambhirananda, Trans.). Advaita Ashrama. (Original work ca. 8th century CE).
12. Śaṅkara. (n.d.). *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* [Verse 429–430]. In Advaita Vedānta scriptures.
13. Sartre, J. (1943). *Being and nothingness: An Essay on phenomenological ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Washington Square Press.
14. Tzu, Lao. (1996). *Tao Te Ching* (Arthur Waley, Trans.). Wordsworth Editions.
15. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/metaphysics/>>