

# Vedanta-- The Science Of Consciousness: Sree Narayana Guru's Epistemological Perspective

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## Abstract

Sree Narayana Guru re-presents Vedanta as a Science of Consciousness or Pure Epistemology in his work *Arivu*, conceiving Consciousness as the one all underlying Reality that assumes the form of all the worlds both as mental and physical. The Guru has proved that the essence of individual and external world is Consciousness. Consciousness shines forth inwardly as the subjective experience and outwardly as the objective experience. The one consciousness and its manifest forms do not exist one without the other, this oneness of oneself, the world and the Consciousness cannot be intellectually conceived but to be intuitively experienced. Guru's epistemology provides ample scope for the problems of Consciousness such as the relation between subject and object, mind and matter, the origin of life from matter or Consciousness etc., Awareness of Guru's unitive vision helps one to solve the problems of life and ensures enduring peace in life.

**Keywords:** *Consciousness, Subject, Object, Manifestation, Interiorized Perception*

## 1. Introduction

Sree Narayana Guru re-presents Vedanta as a Science of Consciousness or Pure Epistemology in terms easily understandable to the mindset of a modern man, in one of his works in Malayalam entitled *Arivu* or *Epistemology of Gnosis*, conceiving Consciousness as the one all underlying reality that assumes the form of all the worlds both as mental and physical. This analysis of Consciousness provides an answer to the challenging problems of consciousness posed by the modern cognitive scientists and philosophers investigating the philosophy of mind as well as all other problems of philosophy and life. Hence the Guru's epistemology has ample relevance which this study intends to bring out.

Sree Narayana Guru is one of the greatest mystical philosophers of the modern world, who lived in India from 1856 to 1928 AD. Basically the Guru was an Advaita Vedantin, a follower of Sree Sankara. Re-introducing the same wisdom in the modern Age of Science, giving full recognition to the scientific mindset of the days in which he lived, was what Narayana Guru did.

Narayana Guru's philosophy includes Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic, Ethics, Religion, Social speculations etc., and therefore it is all comprehensive; but first and foremost the Guru is an epistemologist. In his philosophical works the Guru always uses the terms *Atma*, *Arivu*, *Cit* and Consciousness rather than Brahman to denote the Ultimate Reality. This peculiarity itself shows that the primary concern of the Guru is epistemic.

The Guru in his Philosophical works gives us an overall epistemology, and a unifying scheme of correlation by which all schools of thought, both Eastern and Western, can be assigned their legitimate place in the general scheme of human understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Epistemology is the philosophical study that investigates the origin, structure, methods and validity of knowledge. Each school of thought has its own epistemological doctrine.

Knowledge or consciousness alone is the theme Vedanta deals with. Vedanta is itself thus epistemology in its broadest sense. Hence there is no relevance of a separate section for it in Vedanta.

The revision of the Guru on Vedanta and his neutrality between skepticism and belief or as between a posteriori and apriori gives to it a normative scientific status. It at once puts his metaphysical speculations on par with that of

<sup>1</sup> Nataraja Guru, *The philosophy of a Guru*, Narayana gurukula, 35, (1986).

physics. A careful scrutiny of his epistemology will reveal the neutral – normative nature of the position that the Guru maintains in his attitude which is intended to be fully universal and scientific, neither taking the side of the believer nor of the skeptic, the orthodox or the heterodox of any traditional context of any time or any part of the world. It is here the Guru's epistemology excels in being scientific.

Guru's work 'Arivu' is an in-depth philosophical examination of consciousness which seems to have not been undertaken till now either in the East or West except for the few studies of the Western psychologists and a few studies on the philosophy of mind by Western thinkers.

In his work *Arivu* the Guru says there is only one *Arivu* or knowledge and there is nothing to fall outside its periphery. Knowledge is the only copying stone of existence. All realistic and finite knowledge is within the ambit of the one and infinite knowledge. Here arise questions like: What is the essential content of this Consciousness which is always one and changeless and appears to be constantly changing? How does the same knowledge function as the subject, object and knowledge? All these problems are examined by the Guru in an original way.

The questions are answered in a dialectically conceived way rather than resorting to logical reasoning. That means the basic stand that *Atma* or *Brahman*, which is unconditioned Consciousness in essence, is the one all underlying Reality and is made a firm basis for solution to all problems. If the one Reality forms one pole of the dialectical situation, at the other pole is placed each of the problem and solution to them as arrived at by relating each to the one Reality as its manifestation.

The essential oneness of consciousness could be seen emphasised in the Upanishads. Narayana Guru, in his *Vedanta Sutrās (Sutra 3)* defines consciousness as *tat Jyotih:--* that effulgence.<sup>1</sup>

In verse 27 of his *Atmopadesa Satakam*, Guru gives a precise and scientific definition of *Atma* or Consciousness, "Sitting in the dark, that which knows itself is *Atma*" (Nitya, *Neither This Nor That But Aum.*).

In verse 99 of Guru's *Atmopadesa Satakam*, Guru says: knowledge and I (consciousness) -- both are one to him for whom the veil is removed; to another there is doubt.

<sup>1</sup> Muni Narayana Prasad, Guru, *Commentary on Vedanta Sutrās*, D.K.Print World, 35, (1997).

In verse 59 of the same work the Guru says:

without knowledge I do not exist;

without me there is no knowledge; light alone is.

thus, both knowledge and knower, when contemplated,

are of one substance; there can be no doubt.

In Verse 50 of the *Ātmopadesa Satakam* the Guru reveals that all is not other than *cit*, pure Unconditioned Consciousness.

In Verse 20 of the same work, the Guru says the world has no other reality.

Guru, in verses 10 and 11 of *Ātmopadesa Satakam*, presents an experimental situation, before us which in precise, is as follows:

Two men are sitting in the dark. One asks, "who is there?" to which he receives the reply, "It is I, who are you?" He too answers "It is I".<sup>2</sup>

The question then is to know the real nature and substance of the 'I' common to both – In the dark, unaware of anything external each is aware of his own self-existence, his 'I'.

Narayana Guru proves also how it is one Consciousness alone that unfolds itself as everything, particularly in his *Advaita Dīpikā*.

The Guru adapts the analytical method of science in the present verse.

Someone, intending to know the real content in a piece of cloth, an object that forms a part of the world, subjects it to analysis. The piece of cloth, in the first step, gets transformed into yarn, the former disappearing in the latter. Analysed further, the yarn turns out to be cotton fibres, in content; again the former disappears in the latter. Fibres are further analysed. They, according to the modern scientific view, become transformed into molecules containing atoms of elements like carbon and oxygen. These atoms, analysed further, are found to be different energy particles in essence, all of them being various forms in which one energy-reality appears. Its existence is undeniable because we know that it exists. That means, what is undeniably real is knowledge or consciousness alone. It is Consciousness, in its functional states, that assumes the form of energy, atoms, molecules, fibre, yarn, cloth and even the visible world of which the cloth is a part, all disappearing in the reality of Consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Muni Narayana Prasad, Guru, *The Philosophy of Narayana Guru*, D.K.Print World, 31,(2003).

<sup>3</sup> Muni Narayana Prasad, *The Shorter Philosophical poems of Narayana Guru*, D. K. Print World, 82, (2010).

*Cit* was thus ascertained as the all underlying *sat*. The Guru states in *Darsanamala* Chapter II verse 8 that this *Cit* itself is what manifests phenomenally as everything, and it does not remain without manifesting.

This idea is given in *Bhagavad Gita* chapter II.6

Resorting to the logical and traditional methods Guru has proved that the reality of individual and external world is Consciousness.

Narayana Guru has tackled all the epistemological problems.

## 2. Origin of knowledge

Everything originates from the one *cit* or Consciousness and hence the origin of any specific knowledge also has to be the same *Cit*.

According to the Guru, in every event of knowing, there is the coming together of two sides; the subject and the object. The subject *Cit* becomes manifested in a subtle form. In the case of an object, the same *cit* becomes manifest with a gross form. The subject and object thus are nothing but one *cit* shining forth in two different forms.

*Cit* never remains functionless because of the Karma inherent in it. This Karma – urge is there in every apparent form that emerges in the *Cit* as well; both subject and object have it. This urge impels these two to get into contact with each other in order that they could forgo their apparent differences and realize their essential oneness. This realization of the essential oneness of subject and object is what we usually experience as specific knowledge. But we remain ignorant of it, just because of *avidya*.

## 3. The structure of knowledge

Consciousness manifests itself as the knowing function and the known – the objective world. The structural pattern in which Consciousness manifests itself as its knowing function is examined by the Guru in verses 36 to 42 of his *Atmopadesa Satakam*.

Infinite is the way in which the knowing function becomes unfolded from the one Consciousness. They can be classified into two '*sama*' and '*anya*'. The knowing function in which one perceives many realities is called *anya*. The knowing function in which Reality is perceived as one is called *sama* (the same).

After indicating the two kinds of knowledge, the Guru says that the goal of the contemplative is not to give primacy to one or the other of the two rival aspects but to transcend them

both through the neutral point of which he names as *anya-sama*.

The *sama* and *anya* kinds of knowledge also, each has a *samanya* side and a *visesha* side.

How Consciousness manifests itself as 'the known' – the objective world is examined by the Guru in detail in chapter V entitled *Bhava Darsanam* of his *Darsanamāla*.

Consciousness is effulgence in essence. It shines forth. Any specifiable aspect of the shining processes incessantly happening in *cit* is known as *bhāna*. On the one side it shines forth inwardly as the subjective experience that we have examined in detail, on the other hand it shines forth outwardly as the objective experience - the world of the known.

The *bhāna* of *cit* has two facets *samanyabhāna* (generic shining forth) and *Visesha-bhāna* (specific shining forth). A forest seen as a whole is generic or universal, whereas each tree in it, seen separately is specific or particular. Also, every *bhāna* depends on something, yet another manifest form of the same *cit*. This factor is called *bhānasraya* (that on which *bhāna* depends).

Four kinds of *bhāna* are differentiated.

1. Sthula - bhāna, shining forth of *cit* as gross objective experience.
2. Sukshma bhāna – shining forth of *cit* as subtle objective experience.
3. Karana bhāna – shining forth of *cit* as causal objective experience.
4. Turiya-bhāna - shining forth of *cit* as the fourth state of mystical experience

The Guru in his *Darsanamāla* chapter VI entitled *Jnāna Darsanam* almost a similar division of knowledge is made as *nirupādhika jnāna* (the unconditioned knowledge) and *sōpādhika jnāna* (the conditioned knowledge). Knowledge not conditioned- by subject and object is *nirupādhika jnāna* (unconditioned knowledge). Knowledge so conditioned is *sōpādhika jnāna* (conditioned knowledge). The Guru states *parajñāna* (transcendental knowledge) which is the direct experience of one's self identity with Brahman, the ultimate Reality.

Another scheme of manifestation of Consciousness into objective and subjective worlds is given by the Guru himself in the last four verses of his work '*Arivu*'.

Consciousness itself, as it functions assumes the form- of the known (objective world) and subjective world. 'The known', thus emerged is of two kinds; the knowable and the unknowable. The knowable becomes Sub-divided into five sense-objects, again because *Arivu* is functional. The unknowable is not classified for the simple reason that it is not knowable.

The five kinds of knowable knowns, the one unknowable known, known hood and knowledge knowing these eight together constitute the known-world.

The same one *Arivu* on the subjective side becomes transformed as five-fold sense knowledge's, the knowledge that there is unknowable, the knowledge I am the knower and knowledge of the event of knowing. These too are eight and they comprise the subjective world.

In the final verse, the Guru reminds us, such constituent factors become meaningful only as you subject the function of *arivu* to analysis, otherwise it remains one undivided whole.

Though all these analytical studies help us to have a clear understanding, really the one *arivu* and its manifest forms do not exist one without the other. This is yet another new idea contributed by the Guru to Vedanta.

#### 4. Validity of knowledge

According to Narayana Guru, a certain and clear vision of *ātma* or Consciousness is not the outcome of any logically tenable means of knowledge (*pramānās*) but is an experiential illumination.

The validity of the *pramānās – pratyaksha* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *arthāpatti* (presumption), *anupalabdhi* (non-apprehension) and *upamāna* (analogy) – is only in respect of the externally oriented knowledge, where someone sees something else. They never help us to attain self-knowledge. The only indirectly helpful *pramāna* is *sruti* (verbal testimony), for it is the words of instruction the seeker hears or reads from the authority of a realized person. But words do not make the seeker enlightened straight away; he will have to ponder over them meditatively to get the hidden meanings of the words revealed.

Hence in the context of the knower knowing himself, one's attention becomes interiorized towards oneself. The effective use of the method results in the effacement of the seeker who becomes merged in what is sought. Intuitively perceiving the unitive Reality by making use of its own two

manifest aspects of an opposite nature is the only method helpful in seeking *Brahman* and it is called *yōga-buddhi* in *Bhagavad Gīta* and dialectics in the Western philosophy.

Narayana Guru recommends the seeker of knowledge to perform certain *Sadhanas* in order to attain the final goal. One has to perform *Tapas*. Finally the seeker merges in the ultimate Truth. Then, no more duality will be there. Upanishadic saying is that one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.

#### 5. Conclusion

From the above understanding of Guru's epistemology it is clear that he provides ample scope for the problem of consciousness such as the relation between subject and object, mind and matter, the origin of life from matter or Consciousness etc.

In the West Descartes, Kant, Sartre, Husserl, Thomas Nagel, David Chalmers and others tried to solve the problem in their own way. But they could not succeed in solving the problem because they were not ready to consider man as a pure being and the essence of the world as Consciousness.

According to the Guru, both subject and object are nothing but the one *Arivu* or Consciousness become manifest in two different modes; hence the two are really one in essence.

It is here that the Guru's epistemological vision finds relevance. Having this holistic vision enables us to perceive all the trials and tribulations of life as well as the happiness we feel merely as part of the sport of but one Consciousness. This awareness alone ensures enduring peace in life.

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