

24. Don't mistake appearance for reality

Actually, people see the shadow and take it to be the substance. They see length, breadth, height, and thickness and jump to the conclusion that they have an object before them. They experience a series of sensations and memories and, adding them all up, infer that some objects produce them. This mistaking of appearance for reality is misnamed spiritual wisdom (*jnana*). How can it ever be spiritual wisdom? Can the image of a person ever be “he”? If the image is taken to be “he”, can we call it knowledge? Such is the nature of all knowledge now; what is cognised as an object is not real at all; its reality is not cognisable.

Nondualists (*a-dwaitins*) believe “I am *Brahman (Aham Brahmasmi)*”. How do they acquire that conviction? Ask one of them, and the reply is, “The scripture (*sruthi*) declares it so; the *guru* taught it like that.” But learning it from these sources does not entitle one to make that profound statement. Do people who are masters of these three words: “I am *Brahman (Aham Brahmasmi)*” attain unity with *Brahman*? No, ceaseless striving through countless births, loyal performance of scriptural duties —these purify the mind. In such a mind, seeds of devotion sprout and, when tended with care and knowledge, grow into blooming flowers; fruits appear and ripen and get filled with sweetness and fragrance. When the fruit is eaten, a person becomes one with the Supreme —the power that permeates all things and all regions and that is eternally present, conscious, and blissful.

People may enunciate the formula, “I am *Brahman (Aham Brahmasmi)*” correctly; their etymology may be perfect; but when they are ignorant of the “world”, unaware of “I”, and completely in the dark about “*Brahman*”, how can they ever taste the rare joy of the wise (*jnani*)? It is not mastery of words and their meanings that counts: it is awareness, experience —these are the fundamentals.