

Chapter XVII. The Power of Ignorance

Devotee: I have been anxious for a long time to ask You some things and to learn the answers from You. Today, I have the chance. This mind (*manas*) and its principle are unknown categories. Their meanings don't get fixed and clear without actual experience. But Swami, this delusion of the objective world (*samsara*) overpowers us, thick and strong, like the darkness of clouds in the rainy season. What is this mighty force that drags us along? This is what has been bothering me. I feel that people like me should understand these things clearly in the very beginning. Will you kindly enlighten me?

Swami: Well, my boy. What am I to say? You are suffering from fright, imagining a tree stump seen in the park to be a person. That is, you are mistaking the non-dual (*a-dwaitha*), the full (*purna*), which is *Brahman* as a separate incomplete soul (*jiva*) and suffering from that error. That delusion is the cause of all your sufferings.

Devotee: How, then, did this delusion come about?

Swami: You slept, or you dreamed. You slept the sleep of ignorance (*a-jnana*) and delusion (*moha*). Therefore, you dreamed this objective world. Awake, and you will have no more dreams. When the dream is gone, the delusion also goes.

Devotee: Swami, what is this ignorance? What are its characteristics? How does it operate?

Swami: That, which is attached to the body and feels as "I" is the individual soul (*jiva*). The soul is outward-faced; it believes all this mutable creation (*jagath*) and objective world; it is immersed in both. When the soul ignores and forgets its non-dual embodiment (*a-dwaitha-swarupa*), we call it ignorance (*a-jnana*). Is that clear?

Devotee: But Swami, the spiritual texts, all of them, say that this objective world is caused by illusion (*maya*). You are now saying it is due to ignorance. What is the distinction between the two?

Swami: Ignorance (*a-jnana*) is known variously as illusion (*maya*), primordial matter (*pradhana*), nature (*prakriti*), unmanifest, ignorance (*a-vidya*), delusion (*thamas*), etc. Hence, understand this well: the objective world is the consequence of ignorance.

Devotee: How can ignorance produce this objective world; I want to know from you, *Guru-God* (*Guru-deva*).

Swami: Know that ignoranc has two powers: the veiling power (*avarana-sakthi*) and the projecting power (*vikshepa-sakthi*). It veils Reality and projects upon it the unreal. The veiling power acts in two different ways: veiling with untruth and veiling with appearance.

When a spiritually wise person (*jnani*) and ignorant people (*a-jnanis*) meet, even though the wise one teaches that the *Atma* is One and non-dual, the ignorant ones deny it, because they can't grasp the reality so easily. Even when they hear the truth, they don't have the faith and steadfastness to imbibe it, so they dismiss it with a shrug of indifference. This is the veiling with untruth.

Now about veiling with appearance. Even when someone believes by study of the scriptures (*sastras*) and by the grace of providence that there is non-dual *Atma*, one can be carried away by cursory and superficial arguments and dismiss it as non-existent. Though one has the consciousness (*chit*) that is aware of the very thing that one denies, the delusion (*moha*) makes one declare that it is non-existent. This is the sinister role of veiling with appearance.

Devotee: You also spoke of the projecting power. What is meant by that?

Swami: Though you are formless and changeless, and though your nature is bliss (*ananda*), you are deluded into believing, feeling, and acting as if you are the body, which has form, which changes, and which is the seat of pain and grief. You refer to your self as the doer and enjoyer; you speak of I, you, they, this, that, etc., deluded into believing variety and multiplicity where there is only One. This illusion of projecting many on the one is called *vikshepa-sakthi*, or superimposition.

Devotee: What is that?

Swami: When you superimpose the object “silver” on mother-of-pearl, when you see not the stump but the human form, you have superimposed on it. Or when instead of the stretch of desert you see a lake, you have superimposed the unreal on the real. This is superimposition.

Devotee: Well, Baba. What is the real, and what is the unreal? Please explain that too.

Swami: The one and only, non-dual, being-awareness-bliss (*satchidananda*) absolute *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*) is the Real. Just as the name and the form of the snake are superimposed on a rope, this cosmos (*jagath*)—inclusive of everything from *Brahman* to a blade of grass, all creatures, all inert objects like the earth— is super-imposed on that Absolute, Supreme Real. The cosmos is the unreal (*a-vastu*)—that is, the superimposed thing.

Devotee: This superimposition of the name-form cosmos on the non-dual Real, how is it caused?

Swami: By illusion (*maya*).

Devotee: Illusion means ...?

Swami: The power of ignorance (*a-jnana-sakthi*) of the above-said Universal Absolute *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*).

Devotee: Power of ignorance means ...?

Swami: I told you, didn't I? The incapacity to understand the Supreme Being (*Brahman*) even though you are fundamentally *Brahman*—that is ignorance (*a-jnana*).

Devotee: Well how does that ignorance produce all this cosmos (*jagath*)?

Swami: The power of ignorance doesn't allow you to see the rope; instead it imposes the snake upon it; it makes you see the cosmos where there is only *Brahman*.

Devotee: Swami, when there is only the non-dual One (*A-dwaita*), how did the creation of all these worlds happen?

Swami: You have come back again to where we started! Even if I tell you now, it is very hard to grasp. Still, since you have asked, I shall tell you. Listen. The power of ignorance exists in the latent form in the rope itself. That is to say, it is latent, unmanifested in the *Brahman*. This is also called ignorance (*a-vidya*). Its base is *Brahman*, which is awareness (*chit*) and bliss (*ananda*). Of the two powers that illusion (*maya*) has, veiling (*avarana*) and projection (*vikshepa*), the one veils the *Brahman* and the other makes it manifest as mind (*manas*). The mind creates all this panorama of name and form through the exuberance of impressions (*vasanas*).

Devotee: Wonderful, Swami. How wonderful is this nature (*prakriti*)! What is the distinction between the waking stage and the dream stage?

Swami: Both are of the nature of illusion. The impressions operate in both. The cosmos (*jagath*) is the stable illusion; the dream is the unstable illusion. This is the distinction, there is no other.

Devotee: Swami, how can it be said that this cosmos is unreal, when it is concrete and capable of being experienced in a variety of ways?

Swami: It is a delusion that hides the reality from the understanding, the cosmos is as much a superimposition on *Brahman* as a series of pictures on the wall.

Devotee: Ignorance (*a-vidya*) is said to be without beginning, isn't it? Then why is it blamed so much?

Swami: The beginningless ignorance is ended when spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) dawns. This is only logical. Darkness is destroyed by light. Every object has five parts: origin, nature, function, period, and result. But in the case of the Supreme *Atma* (*Param-atma*), these cannot be enunciated, though everything that has evolved as if from Him, has them. Only illusion (*maya*) has no explicable origin. It is its own proof. It is there in *Brahman*, with *Brahman*: it is without beginning. No cause can be given to explain how it manifested itself so luxuriously. Just as a bubble rises through the force of its own nature, up from the water, a force that takes the form of name-form emerges from the Limitless, the Full, the Supreme *Atma*. That is all. Only the ignorant will speak ill of ignorance. Really, there is no well or ill.

Devotee: How can it be said illusion has no origin or cause (*hetu*)? Just as the potter's handiwork is the cause for the clay to take the form of the pot, the will (*sankalpa*) of Iswara (a name for Siva) is essential for the force latent in *Brahman* to become patent.

Swami: In the final dissolution (*maha-pralaya*), Iswara will also become non-existent. *Brahman* alone will exist, right? Then, how can the will of Iswara be the origin? It can't be. While considering this subject, you should not take Brahma, Vishnu, and Iswara as three separate entities. These three are forms shaped by the three qualities (*gunas*). All three are One Supreme Self (*Param-atma*). But, since it is difficult to understand the working of the world, it is explained and grasped as three: three forms engaged in three types of actions, bearing three names. At the time of creation, dissolution is absent. Both can co-exist only beyond time. People, who exist in time, action, and cause, can never hope to grasp it. When you transcend the three qualities, you can also attain that, but not until then. So, without spending time in such un-understandable problems, engage yourself in the things you urgently need, traversing the path that will lead you to the Goal.