

Satyam and mithya

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati | Version 1.01

Understanding of the reality of an object

We understand the word *mithyā* as a word referring to our understanding of the reality of an object, like a pot. *Mithyā* is not an object. Similarly, *satyam* is also a word revealing our understanding of reality. *Mithyā* is understood as the reality of an object which has no being on its own. The pot doesn't have a being without clay. Pot is not an independent object; it is just a word, a name (*nāma*) revealing a form and a function. The weight of the pot is the weight of clay. The touch of the pot is the touch of clay. The pot is not upon the clay, nor does it come out of the clay. We cannot even imagine a clay pot without thinking of clay. From this we understand that while the pot is clay, clay is not the pot. The word *satyam* is therefore used for clay, in terms of its reality, and the word *mithyā* is used to refer to the reality of pot. This has to be understood— *mithyā* is nothing but our understanding of reality. How do we understand it? That which has no being of its own, which has its being or basis in something else, and is not separate from the place where it has its being is *mithyā*. In other words, every product is *mithyā*. It is not separate from the material of which it is made. And *satyam* is the reality in which all things have their being, otherwise called Brahman.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniśad*, the word that is used for this reality or Brahman, is *sat*. That reality, is real (*satyam*) and the world is a product not separate from that reality, like a clay pot is not separate from the clay. As the pot is nothing but a name and form depending on the clay for its existence, the world is nothing but names and forms depending for their existence upon Brahman. Therefore this *sat* alone is real (*sadeva satyam*) like the clay alone is real (*mṛdeva satyam*) for the clay pot. The word *satyam* we can finally use only for Brahman, and everything else, including space, air, fire, etc., in our elemental model of the world, is *mithyā*. Therefore we say, "All this is Brahman," *idam sarvam brahma*. The cause of this entire world is Brahman, and all that is here, which in reality is *mithyā*, is not separate from that cause.

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Two Types of *mithyā*

Now our understanding of this word *mithyā* has to be extended. If *mithyā* is anything that exists depending upon something, as an individual, in my experience, I find not one type of *mithyā*, but two. One is the tree that is there and that I see. Whether I see the tree or not, the tree exists. That is why when I walk with my eyes closed and don't see the tree, I bump into it. My not seeing the tree does not dismiss the tree. My not seeing a mountain does not dismiss the mountain. My not seeing the wall does not dismiss the wall. This happens all the time when we drive. When there is a pot-hole or a speed breaker and you don't see it, it doesn't cease to be. You get the jolt. There are many accidents because we don't see what is there. Thus, my not seeing an object does not dismiss the existence of the object. Therefore I can say the object is, and therefore I can see it. This is what we call objective. It is there, therefore I see it. And whenever I see the object, of course the presence of consciousness is there. Without the presence of consciousness I cannot see any object, even though I may call it *mithyā*. From the standpoint of *Īśvara*, the Lord, everything is *mithyā*. In my experience also, I find that the object is seen by me because it is there. Even if it is not seen by me, it is there. The pot-hole proves that. And we must understand that this is *mithyā*, because whenever I see the object it is not separate from consciousness. It is, therefore I see it.

There is another type of *mithyā*—I see it, therefore it is. This is what we call subjective. What is objective is also *mithyā*. With reference to my understanding I find that there is an object, therefore I see it; then the other situation is, I see it, therefore it is. The dream world is this second type of reality. I see the mountain, therefore the mountain is in the dream. I may be dreaming in the midst of the Pacific ocean. There are no mountains around, but I see a mountain. While I am in the dream, I don't take it as unreal or subjective. I take it objectively—that there is an object. But waking up, I say it is subjective. The mountain is because I see it. Anything in the dream is because I see it. This is true in dream.

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In the waking state also, this problem exists. We are not totally objective. Because of one's own underlying pressure—you may call it unconscious, subconscious, fear and so on—one tends to interpret. This interpretation is the worst thing that a human being is subject to. If you don't interpret, especially with reference to others' attitudes and values, you are safe. But we all interpret, and we cannot but interpret. Therefore, the problem is only oneself. Really speaking, one is driven to interpret, that is, one has the pressure to do so—pressure caused by fear and so many other things. So when you interpret it is subjective; every interpretation is subjective. It may be true, it may not be true. More often than not, it is untrue. If it is an interpretation that affects you, then generally it is not true. We read body language and all sorts of things, so that we tend to interpret in a way that may not have anything to do with the truth. Thus, when you are living in this world you are not always in the world of *Īśvara*. You are in the world of *Īśvara* plus your own personal projected world.

When you project a snake upon a rope, you project something that is not there at all. This is one kind of superimposition (*adhyāsa*), a projection of something unpleasant or offensive (*aśobhana-adhyāsa*). There is a second type of superimposition called *śobhana-adhyāsa*. If you take money as money, there is no mistake. But giving greater value to money than it has, is called *śobhana-adhyāsa* superimposition.

With reference to the object, money, you don't commit a mistake. You don't take Somadatta for Devadatta, or John for Tom. You take John as John. But at the same time, there is *aśobhana-adhyāsa* if you take John to be hostile to you when he really is not. He has his own problems. His behavior is inhibited by the problems he is dealing with. It has nothing to do with you. But related to you his behavior has changed. And therefore, you project a person who has nothing to do with John. Many a good relationship is destroyed because of this kind of projection. There is a need to project, and to project something that is not good.

These *aśobhana-adhyāsa* and *śobhana-adhyāsa* are purely subjective. For you it is very real. Why? Because you see it, you feel it. Because your feeling is real, the cause is also presumed to be real. It looks as though it is coming from the other person. But no other person

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can cause such a feeling. It comes from inside. We refuse to accept that. We always say that the other person is the cause, but there may or may not be any truth to it. When this is the case, the benefit of doubt is to be given only to the other person, not to ourselves. But we refuse to give that. In this situation, where your subjectivity creates a reality and this reality has nothing to do with *Īśvara*, you can't blame him at all.

Īśvara is what is. Even the world which is *mithyā* is *Īśvara*. And there is a reality about it. That reality is what we call objective. This does not mean that there is a real object there; every object is nothing but *mithyā* with its form and name depending upon the reality. It is non-separate from its cause. The reduction of subjectivity alone is a project in one's life. One need not know Brahman or the meaning of "You are that," *tat tvam asi*. If one can reduce subjectivity, that itself is a great blessing. But you cannot completely reduce subjectivity unless you know you are the whole. This is another problem. There is a mutual dependence here. But still, to a great extent I can be objective in looking into myself. That objectivity is the qualification to understand the sentence "You are that," *tat tvam asi*. It is not an ordinary sentence. To understand it, the rope-snake subjectivity, John the bad man subjectivity, etc., has to be understood as subjective, a projection which is *mithyā*. That John is a person is objective, but that he is a bad man is subjective. I am conscious of John, and without my consciousness there is no John. So John the person is also *mithyā*. And John the person that I interpret him to be is my own creation. That part of it is there is because I see it that way, and it is also *mithyā*. Now we have two types of *mithyā*. It is therefore I see, and I see therefore it is.

Becoming more objective

That I am a *saṃsāri*, subject to birth, death, etc. is purely subjective. It is a conclusion. That the body is subject to birth and death is objective. It is *Īśvara*. But that I am a *saṃsāri* — tall, fat, small, insignificant, impure, because guilty and hurt — is purely subjective. This has no objectivity whatsoever. And what is subjective goes away in the wake of knowledge, like the dream, like the snake and like John the bad man. The snake goes away when the rope is

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understood; John is understood and the mistaken person you saw goes away; you wake up and the dream goes away. Therefore, what is subjective is meant to go away in the wake of knowledge, of gaining clarity of what is. Even one's own past one also has to understand. How can the past really bother you? It is already gone. Only what is current can bother you, if at all. But the past continues to bother us. It controls a person, controls his or her behavior. There is a certain reality about it, but it is subjective.

What is subjective always goes away in the wake of clarity and understanding. This is what we are striving for here. But in understanding the sentence *tat tvam asi*, you are that, which is understanding *satyam* and *mithyā*, one *mithyā* is *Īśvara*'s expression, the second *mithyā* is my own. Therefore, if you are enlightened your body will not go away; your mind will not go away—nothing will go away. Nothing needs to go away. If I am free, if I am the whole, why should anything go away?

Brahman is *sat*, *satyam*. *Satyam* means your understanding of *sat*. Brahman is *sat*, and it is *satyam* meaning that it is the cause of everything, and everything else is *mithyā* which includes my body, mind, sense complex. And that *satyam brahma* is consciousness; it is *satyam jñānam*. It is consciousness that is timeless, the truth of everything, the cause of everything. Brahman gives being to everything, and therefore is *anantam*, limitless in terms of place, time and object. There is no object that is other than Brahman. Anything that you think of, known and not known, is Brahman. If that is so, the *satyam, jñānam, anantam* is *Ātmā – sat cit ānanda*. The *satyam jñānam anantam brahma* creates this world, or manifests in the form of the world, and I as an individual also create my own subjectivity. Because I am self-conscious, in my innocence and ignorance I have gathered a lot. Therefore the capacity to be more subjective than objective is always a potential in every individual. If, as an individual, you have the freedom to be more subjective, then you also have the freedom to be less subjective. Being more subjective means having more suffering, less subjective means less suffering. No subjectivity

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means no suffering; only *Īsvara* is there. Therefore, you can understand where exactly you have to pay attention—in the reduction of subjectivity.

To reduce subjectivity, there are some guidelines we can follow. When you make an interpretation, make sure you give the benefit of doubt to the other person. This a rule that we can follow. And having given the benefit of doubt to the other person, also give him time to prove himself. Understand that your feeling is a feeling; it comes from inside. What does it mean when I say, “That is what I feel”? It is not that every feeling has to be right, that every thought should become a reality. Even though I have a right to my feeling, it need not be caused from outside. I have to accept the reality that it might have been caused by my own subjectivity. There is nothing wrong in that, but acknowledging it makes you a person who is real. Then you become more objective. When you say, “It may be my subjectivity,” then you are objective. This is how we grow in objectivity. And the more objective you are, the less of a problem you have.