

**Four Commentaries on Gītā 2.16**  
(Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Tapsyananda)

**Course: “Bhagavad Gītā in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna”**  
Swami Medhananda

**1. Śaṅkara:**

*Jagat mithyā*                      *Brahma satyam*

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ  
ubhayor api dṛṣṭo ’ntas tvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ.*

Rough translation:

The changeful [*asaṭ*] has no ultimate existence, and the Unchanging [*saṭ*] can never cease to exist. But the nature of both these [*saṭ* and *asaṭ*], indeed, has been realized by the seers of Truth.

*asaṭ* = changeful  
*saṭ* = Unchanging

*antaḥ* = ascertainment or conclusion (*nirṇayaḥ*)

- **Śaṅkara’s Argument for *Jagat mithyā***  
[i.e. The changeful [*asaṭ*] has no ultimate existence]:

“Heat, cold, etc., together with their causes, are not substantially real [*vastu*] when examined by means of the *pramāṇas* [means of knowledge like perception, etc.]”  
[*na hi śītoṣṇādi sakāraṇaṃ pramāṇaiḥ nirūpyamāṇaṃ vastu sambhavati.*]

- (1) All names and forms are changeful.
- (2) All changeful things are nothing over and above their material cause.
- (3) Names and forms are not perceived before their origination and after their destruction.

- Example:  
A clay pot is a name and form that is changeful.  
The clay pot has no existence apart from the clay.  
Try to perceive a clay pot without perceiving clay; you can’t!  
Therefore, the clay pot ultimately does not exist.

The same is true for all names and forms. Since all names and forms are impermanent and changeful, they do not exist ultimately.

- **Śaṅkara’s Argument for *Brahma satyam***  
[i.e. Eternal, nondual Pure Consciousness alone exists from the ultimate standpoint]

In all perceptions, there are two awarenesses:

- (i) *asad-buddhi*: awareness of the changeful name and form
- (ii) *sad-buddhi*: awareness of unchanging Existence or is-ness

“That in relation to which the awareness does not change is *sat*; that in relation to which the awareness changes is *asat*.”

- Example: The perception of a clay pot
  - The perception of a clay pot changes; therefore, the clay pot is *asat*.
  - The perception of *existence* does not change; therefore, existence alone is *sat*.
- But what is the precise nature of this *sat* (existence)?
- The Upaniṣads alone tell us that this *sat* is nondual, attributeless Pure Consciousness

- Cf. Śaṅkara’s commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1:

“The existence of Brahman is well known from the fact of Its being the Self of all; for everyone feels that he exists, and he never feels, ‘I do not exist.’ Had there been no general recognition of the existence of the Self, everyone would have felt, ‘I do not exist.’ And that Self is Brahman.

*Opponent*: If Brahman be well known in the world as the Self, then It being already known, there arises the difficulty again that It is not to be deliberated on.

*Advaita Vedāntin*: No, for there is disagreement about Its precise nature. Ordinary people as well as the Cārvāka materialists think the body alone is the self. Others hold that the mind is the self. Some say that it is merely momentary consciousness. Others say that it is empty or void [*sūnya*]. Still others believe that there is a soul, separate from the body, which transmigrates and is the agent [of work] and the experiencer [of results]....Some say that there is a God who is different from this soul and is all-knowing and all-powerful....Thus there are many who follow opposite views by depending on logic, texts and their semblances. If one uncritically accepts any of these views, one is liable to be deflected from liberation and come to grief. Therefore, starting with the presentation of a deliberation on Brahman, here is commenced an ascertainment of the meaning of the texts of the Upaniṣads with the help of reasoning not opposed to the Upaniṣads themselves, for the purpose of leading to liberation [through knowledge].”

- **Rāmānuja:**

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ  
ubhayor api dr̥ṣṭo ’ntas tvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ.*

*asat* = physical body

*sat* = eternal individual soul (*jīvātman*)

*antaḥ* = ascertainment (*nirṇayaḥ*) (agrees with Śaṅkara)

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo:*

The *asat*—that is, the physical body—can never be eternal [*sadbhāvaḥ na vidyate*].

*nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ:*

The *sat*—that is the *jīvātman*—can never cease to exist [*na asadbhāvaḥ*].

“Being *asat* means having a perishable, impermanent nature, while being *sat* means having an imperishable, eternal nature.”

[*vināśasvabhāvo hi asattvam, avināśasvabhāvaś ca sattvam.*]

According to Rāmānuja, 2.16 is “meant to dispel Arjuna’s delusion that the self is the physical body by teaching how to discriminate between the perishable body and the eternal, imperishable soul.”

- **Sri Aurobindo:**

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ  
ubhayor api dṛṣṭo ’ntas tvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ.*

“There is no such thing as death, for it is the body that dies and the body is not the man. That which really is, cannot go out of existence, though it may change the forms through which it appears, just as that which is non-existent cannot come into being. The soul is and cannot cease to be. This opposition of is and is not, this balance of being and becoming which is the mind’s view of existence, finds its end [*antaḥ*] in the realisation of the soul as the one imperishable self by whom all this universe has been extended.”

*sat* = eternal soul

*asat* = that which is non-existent

*ubhayor api antaḥ* = the end of the “opposition” between “is” and “is not”

*nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ:*

“That which really is [*sat*], cannot go out of existence, though it may change the forms through which it appears...”

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo:*

“...just as that which is non-existent [*asat*] cannot come into being.”

\*\*\* Combines second line of 2.16 and first line of 2.17:

“This opposition of is and is not, this balance of being and becoming which is the mind’s view of existence, finds its end [*ubhayor api dṛṣṭo ’ntas tvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ*] in the realisation of the soul as the one imperishable self by whom all this universe has been extended [*avināśi tu tad viddhi yena sarvam idaṃ tatam*].”

- Sri Aurobindo on the “real Advaita” of the *Gītā* (*Essays on the Gita*, p. 448):

“And is that not too after all the real Advaita which makes no least scission in the one eternal Existence? This utmost undividing Monism sees the one as the one even in the multiplicities of Nature, in all aspects, as much in the reality of self and of cosmos as in that greatest reality of the supracosmic which is the source of self and the truth of the cosmos and is not bound either by any affirmation of universal becoming or by any universal or absolute negation. That at least is the Advaita of the Gita.”

- Sri Aurobindo on “the mind’s habit of oppositions, of thinking by distinctions and pairs of contraries” (*The Life Divine*, p. 391)
- Sri Aurobindo’s critique of Śaṅkara’s classical Advaitic opposition between the absolute truth of nondual Brahman and the absolute nonexistence of everything else (*The Life Divine*, p. 392):

“It looks as if, by attempting to arrive at an explanation by means of intellectual reasoning, we have only befogged ourselves by the delusion of our own uncompromising logic: we have imposed on the Absolute the imposition which our too presumptuous reasoning has practised on our own intelligence; we have transformed our mental difficulty in understanding the world-manifestation into an original impossibility for the Absolute to manifest itself in world at all. But the Absolute, obviously, finds no difficulty in world-manifestation and no difficulty either in a simultaneous transcendence of world-manifestation; the difficulty exists only for our mental limitations which prevent us from grasping the supramental rationality of the coexistence of the infinite and the finite or seizing the nodus of the unconditioned with the conditioned. For our intellectual rationality these are opposites; for the absolute reason they are interrelated and not essentially conflicting expressions of one and the same reality.”

- **Swami Tapasyananda:**

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ:*

“The unreal can never come into existence, and the real can never cease to be.”

*sat* = “the changeless Awareness or Witness,” i.e., the eternal Ātman

*asat* = “the changeful body which the Ātman assumes when He is embodied”

(but also “the body-mind”: *asat* encompasses both gross body [*sthūlaśarīra*] and subtle body [*sūkṣmaśarīra*])

Why does Swami Tapasyananda include subtle body in *asat*?

“So in respect of Sūkṣma-śarīra there is continuity from birth to birth. But when the enlightenment comes and the Jīva realizes his real identity as the Ātman, the Sūkṣma-śarīra also perishes.”

*ubhayor api dṛṣṭo ’ntas tvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ:*

“The wise philosophers have known the truth about these categories (of the real and the unreal).”