

## On the Nature of Reality, the Self, Time, Space and Experience

Menas C. Kafatos<sup>1</sup> and Deepak Chopra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chapman University, Orange, CA

<sup>2</sup>Chopra Foundation, 2013 Costa Del Mar Road, Carlsbad, CA 92009

### Abstract:

In this article we address the nature of Reality, universal Consciousness and the subjective Self found in monistic systems of India, particularly in many *sūtras of Vedānta and Kashmir Śaivism*. These monistic systems do not consider time (or space) as primary but treat it as a derivative of consciousness. A brief summary of monism's process of manifestation of all objective existence, including time, greatly adds to the present special volume. Monism complements western science. Indian schools of monism complement Western science through intriguing parallels with modern quantum theory and the role of the observer. Moreover, qualia, the innumerable qualities of subjective experiences, play a fundamental role in both monistic and scientific descriptions of consciousness as it unfolds from its source. The conscious universe is an emerging view in science, in accord with ancient views about the primacy of consciousness at every level of reality.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Self, time, Reality, experience, quantum mechanics, qualia

---

### Introduction

Several of the topics explored in the special issue of *Cosmology* "The Time Machine of Consciousness" are at the very center of what constitutes subjective experience. However, the problems of experience, and, ultimately, of conscious self-awareness are not addressed by modern science as science deals with the nature of the objective world, with interactions between objects. Although attempts are made in a variety of fields, including psychology, neuroscience and even philosophy of science to address the issue of experience, the basic challenge remains that by its nature, science can only talk about objective reality, while self-awareness ultimately concerns itself with subjective experience and existence. Yet, Indian perennial philosophies have covered the issue of consciousness extensively and provide the means to merge intellectual understanding with personal experiences that begin with everyday perceptions but extend far into the possibility of mind as a force for altering reality "out there." Monistic systems attribute time (and space) as being derived from experience itself, Consciousness being fundamental. This view is profoundly different from the ontology of science, wherein consciousness is a derivative of physical processes.

This introductory article offers a summary of the nature of Reality, consisting of universal Consciousness, the Self of every being and at every level of existence. The monistic explanation of manifestation and for the emergence of time and space has sufficient rigor to complement Western science and provide insights into the particularly challenging issues of experience itself.

### Perennial Monistic Systems

Perennial philosophies concern themselves with the nature of Consciousness, the relationship of the individual to the universe and the relationship of the individual to Consciousness itself. Below we will illustrate with a few selected statements some of these eternal truths and examine how they relate to experience, including how space and time themselves arise.

The non-dualistic systems originating in India, specifically Advaita Vedānta and *Kashmir Śaivism*, give us a higher view of the individual, the universe and the nature of consciousness. The underlying premise, is that the human being is a reflection of fundamental Consciousness and that in fact there is *no difference* between the individual and universal Consciousness. Śaivism and Vedānta are complete systems of teachings on the nature of ultimate reality, or the Absolute. This underlying reality is called *Brahman* in *Vedānta* and *Paramaśiva* or Supreme Śiva in Kashmir

Śaivism. Both accept Absolute undifferentiated Consciousness as the ultimate Reality, as the underlying reality of all countless objects, subjects and the processes tying them together, such as observation, sentience, understanding, dynamics, cause and effect, etc. Although agreeing on the ultimate Reality, they do differ in emphasis: Vedanta emphasizes that Brahman is the only reality and the perception of the universe as something separate from that as an illusion; while Śaivism accepts the universe as real, being itself, as we will see below, part of universal Consciousness. The universe is part of the whole, albeit being the physical, mental, subtle and in fact all objective experience, of the great underlying sea of Consciousness.

### **Advaita Vedanta**

Vedanta accepts the authority of three sets of works, spanning several centuries: The *Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sūtras*, and, the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Kuiken, 2006). Its basic principles are summarized in the *Viveka Chudamani* (Crest-Jewel of Discrimination) by Adi Śankarā:

- a) “Brahman is Reality” b) “The world is an illusion” and, 3) “The individual Self is nothing but Brahman”. Śankarā’s “illusion” is taken to mean the misinterpretation of experience (and not “non-existent.”). To see the world as independent and separate from the Self, is an illusion. To know reality is to experience the diversity of the universe (Brahman) as identical to one’s Self (Ātman). Sūtra 4 of the Isha Upanishad asks: “How can the multiplicity of life delude the one who sees its unity?” And the Nrsimhottaratapaniya Upanishad states: “All this is Ātman, all this is Brahman, all this is consciousness”.

The *Viveka Chudamani* (Crest-Jewel of Discrimination) of Adi Śankarā states: “The Ātman is one, absolute, indivisible. It is pure consciousness. To imagine many forms within it is like imagining palaces in the air. Therefore, know that you are the Atman, ever-blissful, one without a second.” The *Aparokshānubhuti* (Self-Realization) of Adi Śankarā states in sūtra 45: “There exists no other material cause of this phenomenal universe except Brahman. Hence this whole universe is but Brahman and nothing else”. While sūtra 49 states “Inasmuch as all beings are born of Brahman, the supreme Ātman, they must be understood to be verily Brahman”. In short, Vedanta’s ultimate teaching is that Ātman (individual Self of any being) is identical to Brahman.

### **Kashmir Śaivism**

The ancient system, Śaivism and its more recent specific form as developed in Kashmir, (Dyczkowski, 1992, 1994; Singh, 1980, 2006), constitutes a body of philosophical teachings, with practical implications for everyday life. Kashmir Śaivism flourished in Kashmir between the 8th – 12th centuries CE, and was developed and built in the tradition of Vedanta. Kashmir Śaivism was developed in that brief but very active period by sages such as Vamana (779 – 813 CE), Vasugupta (875 – 925 CE), Utpaladeva (disciple of Vasugupta, 900 – 950 CE), Kallata (also disciple of Vasugupta), Bhaskara, Somananda, the great Śaivite master Abhinavagupta (950 – 1020 CE), and Kṣemarāja (a great disciple of Abhinavagupta). They have left us a rich, dynamic vision of the universe and our place in it.

Śaivism is a *Trika* (triadic) system, consisting of Paramaśiva or supreme Śiva, the Absolute, undifferentiated Being; Śakti (universal Energy), also known as Citi (universal Consciousness, as the creative power of the Absolute); and the individual soul. The triadic teaching holds that there is *no difference* between Śiva and Śakti/Citi, and in fact no difference between Consciousness which is the One Paramaśiva/Citi and the individual. The monism could be also viewed as a three-fold Reality, consisting of Consciousness, the universe, and the individual; or, alternatively, the object, the subject and the processes tying them together: Paramaśiva, the supreme Being is identical to supreme Consciousness, the Self of everything in the universe. The view of the underlying Reality in Śaivism is in harmony with Vedanta (Pandit, 1977). Paramaśiva is the Absolute, undifferentiated universal Being, and as Brahman in Vedanta, is the underlying substratum of all existence. As Citi unfolds the universe, She (the Creatrix of everything) is the ultimate source of all manifestations, all objective existence, all experiences of the subjective selves and as such, is also the source of the mind. In other words, the dynamical aspect of Consciousness gives rise to countless beings and countless worlds. Citi represents the immanent part of existence, while Paramaśiva the transcendent aspect of the same identical existence. Śaivism is perhaps unique of all monistic systems in assigning reality to everything that exists. It does not deny the existence of the universe, but instead it considers the universe as real as the infinite Self, because in fact the universe arises from the Self. Countless or infinite numbers of universes and countless beings and objects are all emanations of the creative power of Citi. The creative process itself manifests in

an infinite variety of vibrations (*Spanda*) of Ultimate Reality. Spanda derives from a term which means “subtle motion”, and ultimate Reality is called Spanda because it pulsates. As such, Śaivism is based on the doctrine of vibration (Dyczkowski, 1994). Here quantum field theory (QFT) and Śaivism agree on the importance of vibration in the creative process. Whereas QFT assigns objective existence to vibrations of the quantum field, Śaivism assigns reality of objects to vibrations of the infinite field of Citi.

As in Advaita Vedānta, Śaivism accepts a triadic Self, consisting of the static (Sat) aspect of the universal Being, the dynamic (Citi or Śakti) aspect of Consciousness, and Bliss (*Ānanda*). These Three-in-One aspects are not different from each other, they are integral aspects of the One, the undivided sea of Consciousness, which is a dynamic, creative and intelligent Reality.

The first sūtra of the Śiva Sūtras states: “Consciousness is the Self”. The actual Sanskrit term for Consciousness refers to luminous awareness, the Light of Consciousness. Moreover, Consciousness means more than just (conscious) awareness, it has the absolute freedom of will, knowledge and action. In other words, Reality, which is the universal Self, is identical to Consciousness.

How does the universe manifest? What is the source of the universe? The first sūtra of the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam*, “The Secret of Self Recognition”, authored by Kṣemarāja (Singh, 1980) states: “Citi, supremely independent universal Consciousness, is the cause of the manifestation, maintenance, and reabsorption of the Universe”. Alternatively, “The universe is the means to attain the realization of free universal Consciousness” (Swāmī Shāntānanda, 2003). The first aphorism gives the underlying cause of the changing universe, as universal Consciousness. Here the three cosmic actions which create, maintain and re-absorb all existence are attributed to Citi. In contrast to the way scientists view the universe as being caused and driven by the laws of Nature, the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam* states that the cause is Consciousness itself. How does universal Consciousness unfold the universe? Sūtra No. 2 of the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam* states: “By the power of her own will, she (Citi) unfolds the universe upon her own screen (i.e. in herself, as the basis of the universe)”. Here Kṣemarāja describes the universe as being nothing other than the projection by Consciousness onto Consciousness. What appear as differences in the objectified world, are projected differences in the universal screen of Consciousness.

But then the question would arise, what is the origin of the vast diversity of objectified existence? Sūtra No. 3 of the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam*, explains: “That becomes diverse because of the division of reciprocally adapted objects and subjects”. In other words, division in what appear as objects and subjects gives rise to all diversity. Moreover, in the *Paramārthasāra* Abhinavagupta states: “Just as in a mirror’s reflection a town or a village appears as an image that is not separate from them, yet it appears as separate, and each separate from the other as well as from the mirror, similarly the universe appears differentiated as one thing is from another, and as well is differentiated from the awakened consciousness of the Self, most pure, though that difference too is not real”. Śaivism emphatically holds that the individual is none other than the entire existence. Sūtra No. 4 of the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam* states: “Even the individual, whose nature is Consciousness in a contracted state, embodies the universe in a contracted form”. While sūtra No. 5 holds that “Consciousness herself, having descended from her expanded state, becomes the mind, contracted by the objects of perception”. In the *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Kārikā* (Pandit, 2004) Utpaladeva says: “The Great God is the real self of each and every being. He alone endures, through his undiversified Self—his awareness, I am all these”. This complementary relationship between undifferentiated Consciousness and the individual operating through the mind, which itself is nothing but Consciousness, is part and parcel of Śaivism.

Manifestation that gives rise to all objects in countless worlds is referred to in many texts of Śaivism, in the Śiva Sūtras, in the *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Kārikā*, in the *Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam*, in the *Paramārthasāra*, in the great culminating work *Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta, etc. (Singh, 1980; Chatterji, 1986; Kafatos and Kafatou, 1991; Dyczkowski, 1992; Swāmī Muktānanda, 1997; Pandit, 1997; 2004; SenSharma, 2007; Singh, 2006). The universe is projected out in thirty six levels of creation, or levels of manifestation, or planes of existence, called tattvas, from *Paraśiva*, to the Earth plane.

At the highest or “pure” five levels, the separation between subject and object has not occurred. It is in a potential or subtle form, the play between *Aham* (I am) and *Idam* (This). These levels are:

- 1) I: *Paraśiva*, absolute undifferentiated existence

- 2) **That**: Paraśakti, absolute undifferentiated Consciousness or Citi.

The first two tattvas can be counted as one and are implied at every level of existence, as they are not really different from each other. They constitute the perfect I-Consciousness.

The next three levels begin the potential process of *manifestation*:

- 3) **I (Am) That**: Here I is written in bold for emphasis. In this relationship, as the subjective part of the relationship I (Am) That is emphasized, it signifies the *Will* aspect of Consciousness. Before any knowledge (which is to follow) or subsequent to knowledge any action is undertaken, the subject has to be identifying itself with its own will.
- 4) **That (Am) I**: The emphasis is in That, i.e. the statement is written as **That (Am) I**. Here, as the objective part of the relationship, That is emphasized. As before any action is undertaken, the object has to be identified. Here, it signifies the *Knowledge* aspect of Consciousness. However, in both these cases, Will and Knowledge, there is no separation, only a (latent) potential of what eventually become a separation between Subject and Object.
- 5) **I (Am) That**: This statement shows balance between the I am and That, and it is recursive, i.e. repeated forever. The balance between Subject and Object signifies the (potential) for *Action*. But the Subject and Object even in this balanced state, are still One. In action, both the Subject and the Object are balanced, equally weighted.

As we move next to the level of breakdown of the above universal relationships, we have the operation of Māyā. This is the universal (and most often un-understood) freely-undertaken Power, which limits or hides the true nature of Paramaśiva/Paraśakti. Without it, no objectified experience could arise. It gives the *appearance* of separation, as Śaivism emphasizes. From this point on, the subject and the object seem to be separated: Māyā and the next five tattvas which accompany it give rise to, respectively: The experience of time; experience of space; (limited ability) of will (to know and act); (limited ability to) know (and then to act); (limited) ability to act.

The same universal statements operate but now in *limited form*. At that point, the Subject and Object appear separated and they become (many, essentially infinite in number) subjects and objects. The subjects interacting with other subjects and objects now *appear* as differentiated levels of existence, willing (in a limited way) to know (in a limited way) and act (in a limited way). This in brief, is how Śaivism accounts for time, space and limited abilities of individual beings in terms of the free Power of Māyā.

All 36 tattvas are levels of reality emphasized in different *levels of experiences*. They are the qualia of all experiences. As such, Śaivism accounts for all Absolute and relative levels of Reality, including *time and space*, which manifest in the universe. Beyond this commentary, we can also show how the three universal principles which apply to the quantum, life and all fields, namely complementarity, recursion and sentience, also apply and operate at all thirty six tattvas.

From this monism, the possibility of qualia science can emerge. In qualia science, as in Indian monism, experience comes first. After all, that's how reality actually comes to us, experientially, not in quanta or in differentiated data. At the moment qualia science remains in potentia, but the tradition of Indian monism has fleshed out the absolute state of consciousness, its emergence into manifestation, and every minute gradation of existence that the human mind can conceive. What remains is to build a bridge to the worldview of contemporary science through the development of the appropriate fundamental mathematics linking the two, constituting the first step in building that bridge.

## REFERENCES

- Chatterji, J.C. (1986). Kashmir Śaivism. SUNY Press, N.Y.
- Dyczkowski M.S.G. (1994). Spandakārikā (“The Stanzas of Vibration”). Dilip Kumar Publishers, Varanasi.
- Dyczkowski M.S.G. (1992). The Aphorisms of Śiva, SUNY Press, Albany.
- Kafatos M., Kafatou T. (1991). Looking in, Seeing out: Consciousness and Cosmos. Quest Books, Wheaton, IL.
- Kuiken, G.D.C. (2006). The Original Gita. OTAM Books, The Netherlands.
- Pandit B.N. (1997). Aspects of Kashmir Śaivism. Utpal Publications, Santarasa Books, Boulder.
- Pandit B.N. (2004). Īsvara Pratyabhijñā Kārikā (“Verses on the Recognition of the Lord”) of Utpaladeva (translation with commentary). Muktabodha Indological Research Institute, Delhi.
- SenSharma, D.B. (2007). Paramārthasāra (“The Essence of Supreme Truth”) of Abhinavagupta (with the commentary of Yogaraja, translation). Muktabodha Indological Research Institute, New Delhi.
- Swāmī Mukṭānanda (1997). Nothing Exists that is not Śiva. SYDA Foundation, South Fallsburg, NY.
- Swāmī Prabhavānanda, Isherwood, C. (1975). Viveka Chudamani (“Crest-Jewel of Discrimination”) of Adi Śankarā (translation). Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA.
- Swāmī Shāntānanda (2003). The Splendor of Recognition. Siddha Yoga, South Fallsburg.
- Swāmī Vimuktānanda (2005). Aparokṣhānubhūti (“Self-Realization”) of Adi Śankarā (translation). Advaita Ashrama, Delhi.
- Singh J. (1980). Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam (“The Secret of Self-recognition”). Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.
- Singh J. (2006). Śiva Sūtras (“The Yoga of Supreme Identity”). Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.