

The world is anitya, but is it mithya?

श्रीगुरुभ्यो नमः

If nitya is satya, anitya is asatya

(If 'Eternal' means 'Real', 'Ephemeral' means ' Unreal')

In Vedanta 'Truth' is called Satya. In His commentary to the Taittiriya Upanishad, Acharya Shankara gives a comprehensive definition of 'Satyam' while commenting on this term occurring in the Upanishad in the definition of Brahman: 'Satyam JnAnam Anantam Brahma.'

यद्रूपेण यन्निश्चितं तद्रूपं न व्यभिचरति, तत् सत्यम् । यद्रूपेण यन्निश्चितं तत् तद्रूपं व्यभिचरति, तदनृतमित्युच्यते । अतो विकारोऽनृतम्, 'वाचारंभणं विकारो नामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम्', एवं सदेव सत्यम् इत्यवधारणात् ।

//As for satyam, a thing is said to be satyam, true, when it does not change the nature that is ascertained to be its own; and a thing is said to be unreal when it changes the nature that is ascertained to be its own. Hence a mutable thing is unreal, for in the text, 'All transformation has speech as its basis, and it is name only. Clay as such is the reality.' (Chandogya Up. 6.1.4), it has been emphasized that, that alone is true that Exists (Ch.Up. 6.2.1)

Also in the commentary to the Gita verse 2.16, the Acharya says:

यद्विषया बुद्धिर्न व्यभिचरति तत्सत्, यद्विषया व्यभिचरति तदसत् ...।

[That is said to be Real, of which our consciousness never fails; and that Unreal, of which our consciousness fails.]

A study of these crucial concepts 'Satyam' and 'asatyam' or 'anRtam' is taken up with a view to ascertain their status in Vedanta.

The concept of 'nitya' is also inescapable in this study. Nitya or eternal is not divorced from satya for that which is nitya alone is satya as we saw in the

Acharya's definition above. What is nitya? Strictly, as per the above definition, nitya is that which does not undergo the six-fold transformations. This is called 'ShaD-bhAva-vikArAH'. This comprises of potential existence, birth, growth, transformation, decay and destruction or death. Anything in the world and the world itself is subject to these transformations and therefore does not come under the category *nitya* and therefore is *anitya*. As per the reasoning in the definition of the Acharya, that which is anitya, i.e that which is endowed with transformation, has to be termed 'anRtam' or 'asatyam', unreal.

In the Bhagavadgita 2.14 we have a very interesting definition of anitya, impermanence:

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्ण-सुख-दुःखदाः ।

आगमापायिनोऽनित्याः तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ (२.१४)

[The sense-contacts it is, O son of Kunti, which cause heat and cold, pleasure and pain; *they come and go; they are impermanent*. Endure them bravely, O descendent of Bharata.] 2.14

Immediately after this, in 2.16 the Lord says:

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।

उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तः तु अनयोः तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ (२.१६)

[Of the unreal no being there is; there is no non-being of the real. Of both these the truth is seen by the seers of the Essence.]

In 2.17 the Lord uses the term 'avinAshI', imperishable, to denote the Atman. In the 2.18 He says the bodies are 'antavantaH', that-which-have-an-end. Here again He says the shareerI, the embodied Atman, is nitya, eternal and anaashI, indestructible. In 9.33 the Lord says about the world: anityam asukham imam prApya bhajasva mAm'. 'Having reached this transient joyless world, do thou worship Me.'

Thus, in the sample from the Gita we find that the body and the world are anitya, perishable, non-eternal. The Atman is nitya, anAshI, eternal, imperishable. Also we saw that there is no being for the unreal and no non-being for the real. This translates into:

That which is Sat is nitya; it never goes out of existence. That which is asat, anitya, has no existence. The Lord does not give anitya the status of sat, reality. How do we know? Anitya, the impermanent, does go out of existence and hence does not come under the category of 'Sat'. What is not Sat is asat. In the end, only these two categories are there; there is no intermediate entity that is countable.

We get a definition of 'anitya': That which has no existence in the beginning and no existence in the end, Agama-apAyI; that which comes and goes out of existence. Closely related to this definition, we have another verse in the Gita:

अव्यक्तादीनि भूतानि व्यक्तमध्यानि भारत ।

अव्यक्तनिधानान्येव तत्र का परिदेवना ॥ २.२८

[Beings have their beginning unseen, their middle seen, and their end unseen again. Why any lamentation regarding them?] 2. 28

The Acharya comments, quoting a very similar sounding/meaning verse from the Mahabharatha, authored by Bhagavan Veda Vyasa, of which the Bhagavadgita itself is a content:

अव्यक्तम् – अदर्शनम् अनुपलब्धिः ...तत्र का परिदेवना = को वा प्रलापः अदृष्ट-दृष्ट-
प्रनष्टभ्रान्तिभूतेषु भूतेषु इत्यर्थः । तथा चोक्तम् – अदर्शनादापतितः पुनश्चादर्शनं गतः । नासौ
तव न तस्य त्वं वृथा का परिदेना ॥ [महाभारत स्त्रीपर्व २.१३]

Note: The word 'adarshanam' of the commentary is found in the Mahabharata verse also.

All the embodied beings, have an apparent existence only during the period of their stay; before birth and after their death they are not there at all. The Imperishable Atman, however, is always existent. Nitya is Satya. As for the conclusion that *anitya is asatya*, even though this verse itself is the scriptural authority, we have a verse from the Gaudapada kArika (2.6) that explains this maxim: anitya is asatya:

आदावन्ते च यन्नास्ति, वर्तमानेऽपि तत्तथा ।

वितथैः सदृशाः सन्तोऽवितथा इव लक्षिताः ॥ (२.६)

[That which does not exist in the beginning and in the end is equally so in the present (i.e. in the middle). Though they are on the same footing with the unreal, yet they are seen as though real.]

This verse closely runs with the Gita verse and the Mahabharatha verse we saw above. The Lord asks Arjuna: Why do you lament for the (potential) loss of your near and dear ones who, as bodies, were not perceived before their birth and who will not be perceived after their death but are only appearing to exist in the intermediary period? In other words, the Lord is asking Arjuna to examine whether he is justified in grieving for something/someone that does not exist at all. We may recall the definition of what is satya, real, as provided by the Acharya in the Taittiriya Upanishad commentary (quoted at the beginning of this article) and by the Lord in the ‘nAsato vidyate bhAvo’ verse of the Gita, also quoted in the foregoing.

We find that the Lord is merging the meaning of ‘anitya’ of the verse 2.14 into the word ‘asat’ of the verse 2.16. The Acharya concludes the commentary for this latter verse by giving the Lord’s advice to Arjuna in a nutshell:

//You too, Arjuna, adhering to the vision of the Jnanis, shake off grief and delusion, and, being assured that all phenomena (vikaras) are really non-existent and are, like the mirage, mere false appearances, calmly bear heat and cold and other pairs of opposites, of which some are constant and others inconstant in their nature as productive of pleasure or pain.//

After determining the status of the beings, jiva-s, the Lord teaches us the nature of the world in the sequel:

The Lord says in the 15th chapter of the Bhagavad Gita:

na rUpamasyeha tathopalabhyate

nAnto na chAdirna cha sampratishThA |

ashvatthamenam suvirUDhamUlaM

asa~Nga-shastreNa dRRiDhena cChitvA || (15.3)

The bhashyam: //...The world’s (samsara’s) form as such is perceived by nobody here; for it is very much like a dream, a mirage, a gandharva-nagara (an imaginary city in the sky) produced by a juggler’s art; indeed, it appears and disappears. It has therefore no finality, no end. [In the absence of knowledge,

samsara has no end...like the wrong notion of the illusory snake ends only when the knowledge of the substratum rope arises and not otherwise]. Neither has it any beginning; nobody knows 'It proceeded from this point'. Its existence, i.e. its nature between the origin and the end, is perceived by none.//

Since the Lord exhorts the mumukshu to develop strong detachment and cut asunder this (tree of) samsara, world, it follows that an end will be there for the samsara due to knowledge. It follows from this that the beginning of samsara/world is only the ignorance pertaining to one's own true nature. Thus, the world/samsara is sustained only by ignorance, avidya. Apart from avidya as its support the world has no existence really. Of course, this avidya, being itself a superimposition on the Chit, Atma, Brahman, has no existence of its own. Knowledge will dispell it.

Again, in the case of the world too, we can apply the rule stated by Gaudapadacharya in the Kaarika quoted in the foregoing. That which has no real existence in the beginning and end, has no real being in the middle too.

Thus, the world, even though agreed upon by us as anitya, ephemeral, an enquiry into the concept of 'anityatva', ephemerality, leads us to the conclusion that anitya is only asatya. The logic is: that which is dispelled by knowledge has to be asatya/mithya. The examples: a dream, a rope-snake, etc. The experience: Every Jnani, Tattvadarshi, will no longer see a world, being himself free from samsara, but will experience Brahman, Vasudeva, in the place of the world. The Gita itself has several verses to substantiate this.

We conclude this study by noting the following points:

- Nitya is synonymous with Satya. Truth/Real is that which never changes and is eternal.
- Anitya is synonymous with asatya. That which is impermanent is essentially fraught with changes, vikaras, and is therefore asatya. Impermanence is marked by its not being present before its appearance and going out of existence after its destruction. Its seeming existence is only in the intermediary period. It does not enter the category of Satya.
- This is mistaken for real existence and as pointed out by the Lord in 2.28 leads to grief and other pairs of opposites.

- Satya, Truth, Nitya, will never come into existence or go out of existence. It has no non-existence at any period of time.
- Asatya, unreal, anitya, will never have true existence at any point of time.
- The Chandogya Upanishad passages: ‘mRttiketyeva satyam’ (6.1.4) of the example is the yukti pramaNam and ‘sadeva... (satyam)’ (6.2.1) of the dArShTantika is the Shruti pramaaNam for the One-only-without-a-second-of-any-kind nature of Sat(yam). The Gita verse 2.16 is the smriti pramanam in this conclusion. Every true Jnani’s experience itself is the anubhava pramaaNam.
- Since ultimately there is Only one, Satyam (nityam), the asatyam (anityam) is written off as non-existent.
- Anityam/asatyam has only a vyavaharika/paratantra existence.
- That which has only a dependent (paratantra) reality, like a rope-snake, has no independent (swatantra) reality of its own.
- Nityam/Satyam is the Sole Paramarthika/Swatantra Reality.
- He who gains a firm conviction of the nature of these two is the Tattvadarshi according to the Lord (Gita 2.16)
- The sole Reality, Sat, is the subject matter of the Chandogya Upanishad 6th chapter, called ‘SadvidyA’.

Om Tat Sat