

Tanmātra

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA



Introduction

We have discussed the following points in the previous essays

1. *Māyā* is of the nature of the three *guṇas* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*¹ and it has two powers – *āvaraṇa* and *vikṣepa*². *Āvaraṇa* veils *Brahman* and paves the way for *vikṣepa* to project the world of names and forms.
2. Consciousness with the *upādhi* of *māyā* is called *Īśvara*³ or the Lord and *Īśvara* is at once the efficient and material cause of the universe, i.e., the *abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa*⁴.

It is important that these concepts are understood thoroughly for these will form the basis of our future discussions. From this essay onwards we shall describe the process of creation according to the *vedantic adhyāropa*⁵. First comes the creation of subtle elements which are called *sūkṣma-bhūtas* or more commonly as *tanmātras*. It is these *tanmātras* that later on combine with themselves to create

¹Refer to July 2003 issue of *Tapovan Prasad*; ²Refer to September 2003 issue; ³Refer to August 2003; ⁴October 2003; ⁵June 2003.

SWEET THOUGHT



PONDY BAZAAR ADRYAR ANNA NAGAR
PH: 4312345

How much you have studied is not
the question; how much you have
moved towards It, is what matters.

Swami Chinmayananda

the gross elements which in turn form the gross universe that we perceive. In this essay we shall elaborate on the creation of the subtle elements, the *tanmātras*.

The Creation

In the enlivening presence of Consciousness, under the influence of the *vikṣepa śakti*, from *māyā* which has got a preponderance of *tamas* the creation starts. In *Vedānta Sāra*, Swami Sadananda elaborates on this:

तमःप्रधान-विक्षेपशक्तिमत्-अज्ञानोपहित-चैतन्याद् आकाशः ।
आकाशाद् वायुः । वायोः अग्निः । अग्नेः आपः । अद्भ्यः पृथिवी च उत्पद्यते ॥

*tamaḥpradhāna-vikṣepaśaktimat-ajñānopahita-caitanyād ākāśaḥ, ākāśād
vāyuh, vāyoḥ agniḥ, agneḥ āpaḥ, adbhyaḥ pṛthivī ca utpadyate*

From Consciousness associated with the projecting power of ignorance which has a preponderance of the quality of *tamas*, has evolved space which in its turn, has produced air, from air has come fire, from fire water and from water earth⁶.

It is to be noted that Swami Sadananda in the context of creation, which has been quoted above, makes three specific observations

1. Creation happens from *māyā* which has got a preponderance of *tamas*.
2. *Māyā* by itself does not create – it has to have the presence of Consciousness.
3. Creation happens only when *māyā* is associated with *vikṣepaśakti*.

⁶ These ideas of the *prakaraṇa granthas* are based on passages from the *Upaniṣads* like the *Taittirīya* 2.1.1 – *tasmād vā etasmād ātmanaḥ ākāśaḥ sambhūtaḥ ākāśadvāyuhḥ voyoragniḥ agnerāpaḥ adbhyaḥ pṛthivī* – from Brahman indeed which is this Self, was produced space. From space emerged air. From air was born fire. From fire was created water. From water sprang up earth. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.3,4 speaks only of three elements – fire, water and earth. But these three are considered as representative (*upalakṣaṇa*) of all the five elements and hence there is no contradiction between the *Upaniṣads*.

Why does he make these three observations? We shall take up each of them for further discussion:

1. The cause is inferred from the effect, for the principle is that the material cause must be essentially the same as its effect. Swami Sadananda rightly asserts that creation proceeds only from *māyā* which has a preponderance of *tamas*, because we see that the created world is predominantly inert. Inertness is an attribute of *tamas*. Thus this is a logical inference. Swami Sadananda himself clarifies this point—'*teṣu jādyādhikya-darśanāt tamahprādhānyam tatkāraṇasya* – on account of the preponderance of inertia observed in their effects, their cause must have an excess of *tamas*'. 'Preponderance' means that the *tamas* aspect is more than the other two aspects of *rajas* and *sattva*⁷.
2. The second observation is about the pivotal role of Consciousness in creation — *Māyā* by itself cannot create because it is inert and it has no existence apart from Consciousness which owns and possesses it. Just as the strength of a person cannot exist independent of the person to whom it belongs, so too *māyā* has no existence apart from the Consciousness which is its substratum and owner. Thus enlivened by the Consciousness aspect of *Īśvara*, *māyā* creates the world from itself⁸.
3. The third point makes clear the role of *vikṣepa śakti* in creation. When the *āvaraṇa śakti* has veiled *Brahman*, then the *vikṣepa śakti* gets into action and starts projection. Thus the *āvaraṇa śakti* is responsible for the veiling and *vikṣepa śakti* is responsible for the creation. Hence creation is rightly associated with *vikṣepa śakti* or the projecting power.

⁷This can be mathematically expressed as *tamas*>*rajas*>*sattva*.

⁸ *Sāṅkhya* and *Nyāya* are two important schools of ancient Indian Philosophy. The *sāṅkhyans* posit that the inert *pradhāna* (or *prakṛti*) can independently create without the need of any conscious factor. So too the *naiyāyikas* postulate that the inert *aṇu* (atom) can create by itself. *Vedānta* refutes both their arguments as fallacious. Matter, be it *pradhāna* of the *sāṅkhyans* or the *aṇu* of the *naiyāyikas*, is inert and without the presence and propelling power of a conscious factor they cannot act. We don't see inert substances like rice, *dal*, water and salt getting into the kitchen, entering the bowl, putting the gas on and getting themselves cooked! There is an intelligent factor which does or at least oversees these things, thus ensuring that all these happen rightly.

The Qualities Of The Tanmātras

The principle of creation and specifically *pariṇāma*⁹ (transformation or evolution) is that from the simple and the subtle the complex and gross would evolve and not vice versa. From space the subtlest of all the five elements arises air that is a little grosser compared to space. From air is born fire, the next grosser element and from fire, water and from water comes about the grossest, the earth. Fire is subtler than water and hence we have fire preceding water in the sequence of creation¹⁰. What is subtle and what is gross? Grossness is directly proportional to the number of qualities an element possesses. The fewer the qualities the subtler, and the more the number of qualities, the grosser it is. This principle makes space the subtlest and earth the grossest.

Let us analyse this in detail. Every element has its own special quality that is called *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa* (*sva*=one's own, *viśeṣa* = special, *guṇa* = quality). When it evolves from the previous element it carries with it the earlier cause-element's quality also, which is called *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa* (*sva* = one's own, *kāraṇa* = cause, *guṇa* = quality). Thus Space has one quality i.e., sound – but Air has the quality of sound, which is its *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa* as well as its own newly evolved quality, that is touch, which is its *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa*. When Fire evolves from Air – it carries the qualities of Space and Air i.e., sound and touch and comes to have its own special quality (*sva-viśeṣa-guṇa*) which is form. When Water next evolves from Fire it has the qualities belonging to its 'forefathers' and 'father' i.e., sound, touch, form and then its own quality which is taste. The last and the grossest element Earth evolves from Water and

⁹ Maya and the subtle elements are the *pariṇāma kāraṇa* and Consciousness is the *vivarta kāraṇa* of the created universe. That cause, which undergoes a modification during creation, is called as *pariṇāma kāraṇa* and that cause which does not undergo any modification (like the rope in the case of the apparent creation of the snake) during creation is called as *vivarta kāraṇa*. Please note that the consciousness aspect of *Īśvara* is not only the *nimitta-kāraṇa* but also is the *adhiṣṭhāna* or substratum of the whole creation. This point is not to be forgotten while studying about the creation.

¹⁰ Refer to Pujya Gurudev, Swami Chinmayanandaji's commentary on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣads* 2.1.1 for further explanation about the sequence of creation.

has totally five qualities – four qualities as *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa* from the earlier cause-elements, which will be sound, touch, form, taste and one more which is its own special quality (*sva-viśeṣa-guṇa*) that is smell.

Space, Air, Fire, Water and Earth are called *ākāśa*, *vāyu*, *agni*, *āpaḥ* and *pṛthivī* respectively in Sanskrit. Also in Sanskrit, sound is *śabda*, touch is *sparsā*, form is *rūpa*, taste is *rasa*, and smell is *gandha*. Please remember these Sanskrit words as you go through the tabular column which will give you a birds eye view of the various qualities of the elements:

Tanmātra	Sva-kāraṇa-guṇa	Sva-viśeṣa-guṇa	Total Number of qualities = (sva-kāraṇa-guṇa + sva-viśeṣa-guṇa)
<i>ākāśa</i> <i>vāyu</i> <i>agni</i> <i>āpaḥ</i>	<i>śabda</i> <i>śabda + sparsā</i> <i>śabda + sparsā + rūpa</i>	<i>śabda</i> <i>sparsā</i> <i>rūpa</i> <i>rasa</i>	<i>śabda</i> = 1 <i>śabda + sparsā</i> = 2 <i>śabda + sparsā + rūpa</i> = 3 <i>śabda + sparsā + rūpa + rasa</i> = 4
<i>pṛthivī</i>	<i>śabda + sparsā + rūpa + rasa</i>	<i>gandha</i>	<i>śabda + sparsā + rūpa + rasa + gandha</i> = 5

Please note that we are now only talking about the subtle elements. It is these subtle elements that later on combine through the process of *pañcīkaraṇa* (which will be elaborated in the later essays) to become the gross elements and by further combination become the gross world that we perceive.

Further Description of the Qualities

In certain texts we have elaborations of the inherent or *svābhāvika* qualities – the sound, touch, form, taste and smell of these five elements. They are enumerated below. Please note that for each *tanmātra* there will be *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa* and *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa* except for the first one space which has only its *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa*¹¹. Every

¹¹ Space does not have an element as its cause. It is directly born from *māyā-upahita-caitanya* – Consciousness conditioned by *māyā*.

tanmātra has only one *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa* but many *sva-kāraṇa-guṇas* proportional to the number of elements which precede it.

1. *Ākāśa* or Space:

śabda : the sound of *pratidhvani* (reverberation)

2. *Vāyu* or Air:

śabda : the sound of *sss sss*

sparśa : the feel which is different from that of heat,
cold and grossness

3. *Agni* or Fire:

śabda : the sound of *buk buk*

sparśa : the feel of heat

rūpa : the visual effulgence

4. *Āpaḥ* or Water

śabda : the sound of *sil sil*

sparśa : the feel of coolness

rūpa : the colour of white

rasa : the taste of sweetness.

Other tastes like bitterness, saltiness and sugariness are due the mixture of Earth element with Water.

5. *Prthivī* or Earth

śabda : the sound of *kata kata*

sparśa : the feel of grossness which is different from that of
heat, cold and so on

rūpa : the colours of white, black, yellow, red, green etc.

rasa : the taste of pungency, sourness, sweetness,
saltiness, bitterness and astringency¹²

gandha: both good and bad odour¹³

¹² *kaṭu*, *amla*, *mādhura*, *slavaṇa*, *tikta* and *kaṣāya* are the *ṣaṭrasas* or the six tastes.

¹³ There may be a doubt as to whether these descriptions are mere speculations or whether they have a Vedic basis. These descriptions are more like inferences based on the perceived world and their qualities. Though the perceived world is gross, made up of the gross elements, the nature of the subtle elements can be inferred from its effects.

The Various Names of the Subtle Elements

These subtle elements are called variously

1. *Tanmātra*: This word literally means 'that alone' – *Tat-mātra*. In the case of the subtle elements there is no mixture of the other elements. True it carries the quality of the element from which it is born (*sva-kāraṇa-guṇas*), but, it is not compounded with other elements unlike the gross elements which have within them after *pañcīkaraṇa*, a proportion of all the elements¹⁴.
2. *Apañcīkṛta-bhūta*: The subtle elements are also called *apañcīkṛta-bhūta* or the elements which have not undergone the process of *pañcīkaraṇa*.
3. *Triguṇa-bhūta*: Called so because they are made of the three *guṇas* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. As mentioned earlier the subtle elements arise from *māyā* which has a predominance of *tamas* and a lower proportion of *rajas* and *sattva* and thus all elements have aspects of all the three *guṇas* in them.
4. *sūkṣma-bhūta*: Subtle element as compared to the *sthūla-bhūtas* or gross elements which arise after the process of *pañcīkaraṇa*.

¹⁴ *Pañcīkaraṇa* will be discussed in the future essays.

Seek Him in the smile of your friends, in the glow of angry eyes, in the throb of love, in the storms of passion. Everywhere it is His glow that is gleaming through different emotions, thoughts and actions. Seek Him in the thrill of the dawn, in the sadness of the dusk, in the embrace of rains, in the hustling storms, in the murmuring breeze – in green pastures, in the blue lotus, in the *sangam* of the graceful Ganges and the restless Jamuna. He is everywhere – in everything – not with mortal legs and hands – but in His presence is the Divine Joy Infinite. You are in Him – you are but He alone.

– Swami Chinmayananda

Conclusion

Thus in this essay we have discussed the following points:

- *Tanmātras* evolve from *māyā* endowed with *vikṣepa śakti* which has a preponderance of *tamas*.
- From *māyā* is born the *tanmātra* space, from space arises air, from air is created fire, from fire is born water and from water arises earth.
- Each of the elements have their own *sva-viśeṣa-guṇa* in addition to their *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa*. *Sva-viśeṣa-guṇa* will always be one but *sva-kāraṇa-guṇa* will be proportionate to the number of elements which precede that particular element.
- These subtle elements are called variously as *tanmātra*, *pañcīkṛta-bhūta*, *triguṇa-bhūta* and *sūkṣma-bhūta*.
- It is these *tanmātras* which undergo the process of *pañcīkaraṇa* to become the gross elements.

In the next essay we shall elaborate on the subtle-body which is the creation of the *tanmātras*.

A student of Vedanta must be vigilant enough to detect his own intellectual doubts and he must be ever ready to enter into a sympathetic intellectual wrestling with his teacher, within the rings of devotion and respect, reverence and admiration. By raising doubts to the teacher we are opening up the cistern of knowledge locked up in the Master's bosom. A perfect Guru, from the questions, immediately detects the false line of thinking in the student and, while removing the very doubt, the teacher imperceptibly orders and re-organises the right way of thinking in the inner thought of the student. When this intellectual wrestling has been practised for a long time, the fragrance for perfection in the teacher as it were gets transferred to the student's life.

– Swami Chinmayananda