Position Paper: Ajñāna as Jñāna-virodhi and the Nature of Ātmajñānam

Arsha Vidya Sampradaya

1. Introduction

Sometime in the 1990s Pujya Swami Dayananda ji became increasingly concerned that some of his disciples were not able to see that avidya was jnana-virodhi and were taken in by the arguments of Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati who believed that only Sri Sureshvaracharya had upheld Shankaracharya 's writings and not the subsequent Acharyas.

With a view to refute fallacies arising from this position Pujya Swamiji had expressly asked one of his senior disciples to undertake writing a thesis which she undertook at Harvard University in 1999 clearly establishing that Avidya was jnana-virodhi.

At the Arsha Vidya Meet of Acharyas in September 2025, this issue was discussed in detail and this is the stated position of Arsha Vidya Sampradaya.

This position paper addresses a fundamental interpretive issue in Advaita Vedānta regarding the nature of ajñāna (ignorance). The central question is whether avidyā should be understood as jñāna-abhāva (mere absence of knowledge) or as jñāna-virodhi (that which is opposed to or obstructs knowledge).

This paper establishes that the correct understanding, supported by Śaṅkarācārya's bhāṣyas and the Upaniṣads, is that ajñāna is jñāna-virodhi, a positive ‘as though’ entity, rather than a mere absence.

2. The Alternative View (Pūrvapakṣa)

The alternative interpretation holds that:

- Ajñāna is jñāna-abhāva (absence of knowledge) and avidyā is beginning-less, cause-less vyakta-adhyāsa (superimposition on the manifest)
- Mūlāvidyā as bhāvarūpa avidyā (ignorance as a positive entity) is an invention of later vyākhyānakāras (commentators)
- Avidyā is different from māyā, which is triguṇātmikā and anirvachanīyā
- Upon gaining jñāna, avidyā is completely destroyed and the jñānī is directly Brahman (brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati)
- Since vyakta-adhyāsa is destroyed with the destruction of avidyā, a jñānī should not perceive dvaita (duality)
- No one can claim to be a jñānī
- In sleep, one becomes one with Brahman, which is the same as mokṣa, but jñāna-abhāva is the bīja (seed)

3. The Established Position (Siddhānta)

3.1 The Meaning of the Privative Prefix 'nañ'

The *nañ* (negation) prefix in the word avidyā signifies vidyā-virodhi (that which opposes knowledge) and not vidyā-abhāva (mere absence of knowledge). This distinction is crucial, as it establishes avidyā as a positive entity rather than a simple absence.

3.2 Avidyā as Āvaraṇa (Covering)

Avidyā is repeatedly mentioned as a covering in both the Bhagavad Gītā and Śaṅkara's bhāṣyas. Bhāṣyakāra does not accept any viśeṣa abhāva (qualified absence) at all. As soon as an absence is associated with any quality or activity, it is to be taken as bhāva (positive entity) only.

3.3 Avidyā as Kāraṇa (Cause)

Avidyā is spoken of as bīja (seed) and kāraṇa/hetu (cause) in multiple places. A kāraṇa can never be an abhāva according to Bhāṣyakāra, Vārtikakāra, and common sense.

Bhāṣyakāra explicitly states in Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya and Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 3.2.9 that if the avidyā bīja (causal state) is not accepted in sleep and pralaya, then:

- Individual jīvas cannot re-emerge from sleep or pralaya
- Mukta-puruṣas (liberated beings) could have rebirth
- Jñāna would have nothing to burn and become useless

Sleep is only a dṛṣṭānta (example) for mokṣa as mentioned in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya 4.3.34, not identical to it.

3.4 Avidyā as Upādhi (Conditioning Factor)

Bhāṣyakāra refers to avidyā as an upādhi in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.8.12 Bhāṣya, Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 3.2.9, 4.1.3, and Bhagavad Gītā 14.3 Bhāṣya. This upādhi can never be an abhāva as it is accepted as asat/mithyā. Vārtikakāra also mentions avidyā as upādhi.

3.5 Avidyā as an Object of Experience

Bhāṣyakāra and Vārtikakāra say that avidyā/ignorance is experienced and has to be included amongst names and forms, and so it cannot be abhāva. Ajñāna has been mentioned as a śakti (power) in the Upaniṣads. A śakti or power cannot be an abhāva.

3.6 Mūlāvidyā in Scripture

Mūlāvidyā has been mentioned in the Upaniṣads and Purāṇas, so it is not something invented by later vyākhyānakāras. The scriptural foundation establishes its authenticity.

3.7 The Relationship Between Avidyā and Māyā

Avidyā and māyā need not be different entities. Avidyā is the avyakta or avyakṛta (unmanifest) state at the individual level (vyaṣṭi), while at the total level (samaṣṭi), the avyakta is called māyā. The two avyakṛtas cannot be different because in an undifferentiated state, what kind of difference can one see? This follows Occam's razor—what can be explained with one entity should be explained simply with that entity. Bhāṣyakāra himself gives this principle in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Bhāṣya, calling unnecessary assumptions 'kalpanā-ādhikyam' (excess imagination).

The objection that this makes Brahman itself have avidyā is addressed by Bhāṣyakāra in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Bhāṣya 1.4.10. Ajñāna can be present only for a conscious entity, and there is no other conscious entity besides Brahman. Therefore, Brahman alone, as though, has avidyā, and Brahman alone, as though, becomes a jñānī.

Another explanation: Īśvara possesses māyā śakti, and that same śakti is avidyā for the jīva. The magician performs the magic; from the magician's standpoint, there is no real magic. Only the onlookers have bhrama (delusion) that the magic is real. The magician knows the truth. Thus, the same thing that is māyā for Īśvara can be avidyā for the jīva.

4. The Nature of Knowledge and Its Uncovering

4.1 Knowledge as Removal of Covering

Pūjya Swami Dayananda Saraswati taught that the guru does not produce or give new knowledge but only removes ignorance. He used the analogy of a sculptor who, upon seeing a stone, already sees Krishna there; all the sculptor does is remove what is covering Krishna, and then Krishna manifests. This illustrates that knowledge is not produced but ajñāna alone is removed.

The fact that is already in the mind of the teacher is communicated to students who are covered by ignorance. All knowledge is already present in Īśvara, and the same consciousness manifests in all upādhis as the witness. All knowledge should be available to everybody, but it is not available because of the covering. Therefore, ignorance as a covering is essential to the teaching.

The very fact that we have to use our mind to know something points to the covering. The covering has to be removed. The mano-vṛtti (mental modification) brings an object to light by removing the cover of ajñāna.

4.2 Ātmajñāna as Mano-vṛtti

This understanding can be found in Bhāṣyakāra's writings. Advaita jñāna or ātmajñāna itself is a mano-vṛtti.

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad Sambandha Bhāṣya, Bhāṣyakāra clearly states that Advaita jñāna is mano-vṛtti-mātram (merely a mental modification). The Upaniṣads also say manasā eva āptavyam (to be attained through the mind) and manasā eva anudrāṣṭavyam (to be perceived through the mind).

Mano-vṛtti means it is mano-vikāra—a modification of the mind only. Any modification is a kārya (effect). If we consider the mind as a kāraṇa for mano-vṛtti, like clay is the kāraṇa for a pot, then each vṛtti can be considered as a mano-kārya.

Our siddhānta is satkāryavāda: all effects of a cause are already potentially present in the cause. The cause manifesting as one particular effect covers all other effects that remain unmanifest in the cause.

This means the mind already has the potential for every kind of vṛtti. The effort we take is to manifest a particular vṛtti that will give us Advaita jñāna. If the possibility of that vṛtti is not there, nobody would even pursue the knowledge.

Bhāṣyakāra gives this argument in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Ghaṭa Bhāṣya: if the pot is not already potentially present in the clay, nobody will even make an effort to make the pot. We know the pot is potentially present in the clay; that is why we make the effort to create the pot from the clay. Similarly, our mind already potentially has the akhaṇḍākāra vṛtti (non-dual

cognition). All we have to do is manifest it. Any other mano-vṛtti is a covering (āvaraṇa) for the viveka-jñāna known as akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti.

4.3 Ajñāna as Āvaraṇa in Bhagavad Gītā

Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa and Bhāṣyakāra speak of ajñāna as an āvaraṇa: *ajñānena āvṛtam jñānam* (knowledge is covered by ignorance). Bhāṣyakāra says in the Bhāṣya of Gītā verse 5.15 that viveka-jñāna is covered. This aligns with Pūjya Swamiji's teaching. Viveka-jñāna and ātma-jñāna are already present in Īśvara and other gurus in the paramparā. They are only covered for the ajñānīs. Due to the covering of viveka-jñāna, they are all deluded—*tena muhyanti jantavaḥ*.

The viveka-jñāna is uncovered for the guru, who is able to communicate it. In the next verse, Bhagavān says: *jñānena tu tad ajñānaṃ yeṣāṃ nāśitam ātmanaḥ, teṣām ādityavaj jñānaṃ prakāśayati tat param*. Here Bhāṣyakāra says that this ajñāna by which everybody is covered, when destroyed by viveka-jñāna, the paramārtha-tattva/svarūpa-jñāna shines on everything, just as the sun shines.

4.4 The Permanence of Mokṣa

If we say jñāna is newly created in a jñāna-abhāva state, there will be a problem because the vṛtti-jñāna itself is transient and will go away. If the vṛtti-jñāna has gone away, there is jñāna-abhāva again, and one becomes a saṃsārī once more. That is why Pūjya Swamiji used to say ajñāna is destroyed, because once it is destroyed, destruction is permanent. Therefore, mokṣa is nitya (eternal).

4.5 The Timira Dṛṣṭānta (Cataract Analogy)

In the Bhāṣya for Kaṭhopaniṣad, the statement *manasā eva āptavyam*, Bhāṣyakāra says: *prāg ekatva-vijñānāt ācārya-āgama-saṃskṛtena manasā eva idam brahma ekarasam āptavyam*—it has to be seen only by the mind that is matured and prepared by the teachings of the ācārya and āgama. Further: *yastu punar avidyā-timira-dṛṣṭiṃ na muñcati iha brahmaṇi nānā eva paśyati*—avidyā is compared to timira here. Timira is like a cataract. This avidyā-timira dṛṣṭānta clearly shows that it is not ātma-svarūpa but a doṣa (defect) in the karaṇa (instrument)—a covering that can be removed.

4.6 The Jñānī Can Claim Knowledge

The claim that nobody can say they are a jñānī is explicitly negated by the Kena Upaniṣad, where the śiṣya claims '*manye viditam*' (I think it is known). Bhāṣyakāra explains how the śiṣya arrived at that understanding: having analyzed what was said by the Veda and the teacher, assimilating it, ascertaining it with tarka, and making it his own anubhava, he says: '*manye aham atha idānīṃ viditam brahma iti*'—Brahman is known by me.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Vāmadeva claims he is a jñānī. Similarly, Triśaṅku in Taittirīya Upaniṣad. The jñānī can claim, 'I know Brahman and I am a jñānī'—there is nothing wrong in that. Otherwise, one cannot even teach properly. If it is not your jñāna, you will not be able to teach it.

Furthermore, in Kaṭhopaniṣad 1.2.8 Bhāṣya, Ācārya says: '*athavā procyamāna brahma-ātma-bhūtena ācāryeṇa ananyatayā prokte ātmani agatiḥ anavabodho'parijñānam atra nāsti*'—when taught by an ācārya who himself is non-different from Brahman, there cannot be non-understanding or imprecise knowledge. To this hearer, the knowledge about the Self comes as 'I am that Self,' just as it did in the case of the teacher.

Every śiṣya is really a jñānī, but whether one is able to own it or not is a different matter. That may take some time. As Vidyāraṇya says at the end of the Tṛptidīpa Prakaraṇam in his Pañcadaśī:

aho śāstram aho śāstram aho guruḥ aho guruḥ |

aho jñānam aho jñānam aho sukham aho sukham ||

Oh! Great are the scriptures! Oh! Great is the guru! Oh! Great is knowledge! Oh! Great is the Ananda.

5. Implications of Following the Alternative Prakriyā

The implications of accepting ajñāna as mere jñāna-abhāva rather than jñāna-virodhi are significant and problematic for spiritual practice and philosophical coherence.

5.1 Undermining the Role of Īśvara

If there is no avidyā but only adhyāsa as the problem, and adhyāsa belongs to the individual jīva, not Īśvara (who is nityamukta), then the jagat exists solely because of the individual's adhyāsa. This makes Īśvara a projection of the individual. If Īśvara is merely one's own projection, what kind of attitude can one have toward such an Īśvara? This has profound implications for spiritual practice, as it eliminates the need for Īśvara's grace in the pursuit of knowledge. Īśvara's grace, acquired through karma yoga, becomes unnecessary.

The correct prakriyā maintains that avidyā is vidyā-virodhi and that māyā exists. We recognize Īśvara's role, and Īśvara's grace becomes necessary for this pursuit. It is avidyā that is the cause for adhyāsa, not the reverse.

5.2 Collapse of the Māyā Framework

If avidyā is not acknowledged as a positive entity distinct from mere absence, then māyā śakti also loses its standing. Since māyā is the collective (samaṣṭi) aspect, if the individual (vyaṣṭi) aspect has no substance, the collective aspect cannot exist either. If vyaṣṭi is absent, samaṣṭi must be absent. This leads to the position that māyā-upādhika Brahman does not exist, and consequently Īśvara is not recognized in spiritual life.

Observations show that most, if not all, people who follow this alternative prakriyā do not account for Īśvara in their lives. Some who have followed this prakriyā for a lifetime have expressed complete regret at the end of their lives, questioning why they ever adopted it.

5.3 Contradiction of All Valid Means of Knowledge

The position that avidyā is mere absence contradicts all pramāṇas (valid means of knowledge):

- **Śāstra-viruddham:** It contradicts scriptural statements
- **Anumāna-viruddham:** One cannot have adhyāsa without avidyā as an entity—it violates inference
- **Pratyakṣa-viruddham:** Avidyā is an object of thought ('I don't know this'), so it contradicts direct perception (sākṣī pratyakṣa)

This alternative prakriyā is thus sarva-pramāṇa-viruddham—contradictory to all valid means of knowledge.

5.4 Inability to Explain Jagat Kāraṇatvam

A fundamental problem for sādhakas (spiritual aspirants) following this approach is explaining jagat kāraṇatvam (the causality of the world). Even if the jagat is mithyā (apparently real), it is still present as mithyā. Therefore, we must accept avidyā as kiñcit bhāvam-asti (having some degree of positive existence). We cannot say avidyā is completely bhāvarūpa because it is mithyā—that is why we say kiñcit bhāvam. The word anirvachanīya itself means kiñcit bhāvam-asti.

If we do not give that much validity to avidyā or māyā, then problems arise: jagadāndhyam (blindness to the world's existence) and anirmokṣam (impossibility of liberation). The śāstra itself will not exist—how will we explain śāstrayonitvat (scripture as the source)?

Where is the need for tattva-samanvaya (harmony of teachings)? Where is the need for janmādyasya yataḥ (inquiry into the source of creation)? If all this is absent, what is the need for athāto brahma-jijñāsā (the desire to know Brahman)? It finally reduces to the Cārvāka position of mere hedonism. The vyāvahārika (empirical level) will not exist, leading to complete absurdity.

5.5 Descent into Śūnyavāda

The alternative prakriyā is anti-bhāṣya in one critical aspect: it becomes śūnyavāda (doctrine of emptiness). If avidyā is vidyā-abhāva (absence of knowledge) and is somehow claimed to be a cause without proper justification, then śūnya (void/nothing) becomes the cause. When śūnya is accepted as kāraṇa, there is no opposition to Buddhist tattva (Buddhist philosophy).

Bhagavān Śaṅkarācārya is very clear that even the tārkikas' (logicians') concept of abhāva is acceptable because it is some kind of padārtha (category of reality), but śūnyavādīs are avaidika (non-Vedic) and nāstika (atheistic). They should be kept very far away. The alternative prakriyā inadvertently opens the door to positions explicitly rejected by Śaṅkara.

5.6 Confusion About Kāraṇa-Kārya Relationship

In the alternative view, it is claimed that avidyā as abhāva is not a kāraṇa at all—there is just a manifestation of adhyāsa. Adhyāsa exists, and adhyāsa is absent. Absence is the cause of adhyāsa. Thus, there is adhyāsa, viruddha-viparita-bhāvanā (contradictory, contrary cognition), and agrāhaṇa (non-perception, as in sleep). There is viruddha-viparita perception in dreams and waking. Without a proper kāraṇa-kārya relationship, the position reduces to: adhyāsa simply is or is not, with no explanatory power. This undermines the entire causal framework necessary for Vedāntic analysis.

5.7 Origin and Purpose of This Prakriyā

The need for this alternative prakriyā arose from the desire to present Vedānta as a philosophy. For Vedānta to qualify as philosophy in Western academic terms, śabda pramāṇa (verbal testimony from scripture) could not be primary.

To address this, proponents attempted to prove Vedānta without śabda pramāṇa has a fundamental problem and without foundation, the answers have no relevance.

5.8 The Place of Prakriyā

When asked whether this alternative prakriyā is completely wrong, Pūjya Swamiji had replied that such a conclusion cannot be made, but the problem is that if what is being said is not properly understood, confusions will be created. People will develop confusions, and irreparable damage can happen to seekers over time. One should be very careful about this.

Prakriyā is used to unfold vastu (reality). As long as there is a prakriyā one holds on to, one will never be able to find the vastu. As long as one holds on to a prakriyā, arguments will persist. As long as questions arise, answers can be given—one intellect answering another intellect. As long as there are answers, there are questions, because it remains in the realm of buddhi (intellect). Eventually, one must drop the prakriyā.

However, we must know the place of prakriyās. It is true that prakriyā is not for its own sake but for understanding the vastu. At the same time, if one is climbing a ladder, one must know clearly when to throw the ladder away. While climbing, one cannot throw the ladder away—the pursuit would be destroyed. One can throw the ladder away when one has climbed up. Until vastu-jñāna is gained, the prakriyā should be maintained. Understanding the prakriyā as prakriyā, one pursues the knowledge. Prakriyā is not the end; it is only a means. Knowing it is a means, one pursues the prakriyā and understands the vastu.

5.9 Suitability for Students

The alternative prakriyā is a dangerous prakriyā for students. Not all students can be expected to be uttamādhikārīs of śāstra like Satyakāma and Naciketas. We must presume that students pursuing knowledge are ignorant and need guidance. Therefore, we should give a prakriyā that will help them understand the vastu.

Dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi prakriyā (the view that perception creates the world) is not a prakriyā to be followed by students in initial stages. Sṛṣṭasya dṛṣṭiḥ (the view that an existing creation is perceived) is a proper prakriyā. Dṛṣṭi-sṛṣṭi is not a proper prakriyā for beginners—it is prakriyā-phalam (the fruit of the teaching method), appropriate only for advanced students.

Pūjya Swamiji accepted different prakriyās depending on the students who asked, but the general understanding about the alternative prakriyā, as elaborated in his teachings to various students on various occasions with written evidence, is that he recommended the sṛṣṭi-dṛṣṭi prakriyā, not the other. This must be very clear. We do not dismiss the alternative prakriyā as wrong, but we affirm that it is not a proper prakriyā for students in initial stages.

6. Conclusion

The position that ajñāna is jñāna-virodhi (opposed to knowledge) rather than jñāna-abhāva (mere absence of knowledge) is firmly established by:

- The correct interpretation of the negation prefix in avidyā
- Multiple references to avidyā as āvaraṇa (covering), kāraṇa (cause), and upādhi (conditioning factor) in Śaṅkara's bhāṣyas
- The necessity of a positive causal entity to explain the emergence of jīvas from sleep and pralaya
- The experiential nature of ignorance as recognized in scripture
- The unity of avidyā and māyā as the individual and collective aspects of the same reality
- The teaching methodology of knowledge as the removal of covering rather than creation of something new

The alternative view that treats ajñāna as mere absence creates serious problems: it undermines the role of Īśvara in spiritual practice, contradicts all valid means of knowledge, cannot explain the causality of the world, reduces to Buddhist emptiness doctrine, and confuses students in the initial stages of learning. While it may have some utility for advanced students, it is not suitable as a primary teaching methodology.

The proper understanding recognizes avidyā as a positive entity with causal efficacy, distinguishes it from mere absence while acknowledging its mithyā nature, maintains the essential role of Īśvara and māyā in the teaching, and provides a coherent framework for spiritual practice that leads to the destruction of ignorance and the permanent establishment of mokṣa.

This position is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for sādhana (spiritual practice). It preserves the integrity of the guru-śiṣya paramparā, maintains respect for śāstra as pramāṇa, supports the practice of karma yoga as a means of gaining Īśvara's grace, and provides a stable foundation for students to progress systematically toward self-knowledge.

In the final analysis, at the level of ultimate truth, all distinctions dissolve—there is no vyaṣṭi, no samaṣṭi, no ghaṭākāśa, no mahākāśa—only ākāśa. But until that realization is firmly established, the proper prakriyā serves as an essential means to unfold the vastu.

Om Tat Sat