

# Omniscience According to Somānanda

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Omniscience is one of the fascinating ideals prevalent in every culture. It is often understood to mean the sum total of all instances of knowledge. Therefore a person seems to get closer to this ideal the more facts he or she has learned. It is, however, evident from experience in practical life that even if one studies hard for a long time, one may know as a result a great deal, but one never knows everything. Knowledge acquired through perception, analysis, and memorization does not cover a given subject in all its depth and certainly does not cover all subjects. Should the ideal of omniscience therefore be reduced to wishful thinking? Would a rational person still consider its possibility? What is Somānanda's statement on omniscience?

## 1 Somānanda's Position

### 1.1 Thesis

Somānanda (ca. 875-925 A.D.), the founder of the Pratyabhijñā branch of non-dualistic śaivism in Kashmir, takes the most provoking view that each and every entity is endowed with knowledge of each and every thing. In his *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* (ŚD)<sup>1</sup> he declares his standpoint as follows:

सर्व एव हि सर्वज्ञाः

“All indeed are omniscient” (ŚD V.101c).

Somānanda emphasizes that knowledge pertains to all “without remainder” (सर्वज्ञत्वाद् अशेषस्य ŚD V.99a). This expression can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it may point to the objects of knowledge and refer to “the knowledge of all knowables”; on the other hand, it may describe the knowing subjects and thus denote “all beings without exception”. Somānanda relates it to both, holding that the knowledge of all knowables belongs to everybody.

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1. Srīsomānandanātha. The *Śivadr̥ṣṭi*. With the *Vritti* by Utpaladeva. Edited with Preface and Introduction by Pandit Madhusudan Kaul Shāstri. *Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies* (KSTS) No. 54. 1934. Srinagar: Research Department.

## 1.2 Explanation

According to Somānanda, knowledge is naturally available to all. In order to give evidence of this he offers the following examples: “the new-born baby who sucks milk without being taught at that time; the embryo who takes food inside its mother’s womb; the animals who cross through deep water though untaught” (ŚD V.99b-100d).<sup>2</sup> These examples, however, neither assert knowledge of all objects nor of all subjects. They merely illustrate particular instances of knowledge of living beings who have not been instructed. Usually these innate impulses are termed instincts. Though instinctive knowledge may rightly be understood as natural knowledge, it is limited in character and available only to specific subjects. It is therefore unsuited as evidence for omniscience.

Somānanda holds that the power of knowledge is natural not only to all living beings as the knowing subjects, but also that it is present in the material things which are commonly referred to as the objects of knowledge, e.g., a jar. In the course of an extensive epistemological discussion he pronounces: “Therefore the jar exists knowing its nature” (ŚD V.34cd).<sup>3</sup>

He further argues that no incident of knowledge is possible if the power of knowledge is not present in the object of knowledge itself. According to him, knowledge of oneself is a precondition to being known by others. He says: “If these [things] were not known to themselves, they would not indeed be perceived with the eye” (ŚD V.40cd).<sup>4</sup>

Somānanda is well known for the fact that he not only puts forward certain doctrines, as some teachers have done before him, but that he enters into an argumentative confrontation with other schools of his time and tries to rationally prove his

2. (...) तदहर्जातदारके ।  
क्षीरादिके निगलनात्तदा काले ऽप्यशिक्षिते ॥१९॥  
उदरस्थस्य च घ्रासग्रहणात्मातुरन्तरे ।  
अशिक्षितानां तरणात् प्राणिना निम्नगाजलात् ॥१००॥
3. तस्माद्घटः स्वमात्मानमवगच्छन्नवस्थितः ॥३४॥
4. यदि ते न स्वयंग्राह्या गृह्यन्ते नैव चक्षुषा ॥४०॥

positions.<sup>5</sup> his detailed refutation of numerous competing epistemologies-too long to be presented here-one of Somānanda's main arguments is that if one assumed an essential separateness between the various links in the chain of the epistemological process, i.e., subject, mind, sense organ and object, the connection and hence the transmission and the rise of knowledge was impossible.<sup>6</sup> According to him, it depends on the basic unity of all things. Thus subject, object, and the act of knowledge are always connected by their essential oneness despite their apparent differences.<sup>7</sup> Consequently Somānanda puts forward the occurrence of knowledge as evidence of the essential unity and sameness of all manifestations.

Though Somānanda holds that knowledge is naturally available to all living beings and rests immanently even in material things, he does not hide from the fact that knowledge is not always accessible. Usually a person has a command of only limited knowledge of a few things, while some objects remain unknown altogether. In conformity with the doctrine of the unconditional independence of the Supreme Lord, Somānanda says that, depending on the will of Śiva, an object may remain hidden or unknown.<sup>8</sup>

not

5. Thus Jayaratha in his commentary on the *Tantrāloka* calls him "the agent of reasoning" (*tarkasya kartā*): '.....तर्का योगाद्भूतमम् ।' इत्याद्युक्त्या परमोपादेयस्वप्रकाशस्वात्मेश्वरप्रत्यभिज्ञापनपरस्य तर्कस्य कर्तारो व्याख्यातारश्च परं नमस्कृतव्याः इति (.....) आह ।।  
श्रीसोमानन्दबोधश्रीमदुत्पलविनिःसृताः ।  
जयन्ति संविदामोदसन्दर्भा दिक्प्रसर्पिणः ।। (TĀV followed by TĀ 1.10).  
Abhinavagupta. *Tantrāloka*. With the Commentary *Viveka* of Jayaratha. New edition by R.C. Dwivedi and Navjivan Rastogi. 8 Vols. (First edition in KSTS, 1918-1938). 1987. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
6. न चापि भेदे भावानां ग्रहणं ज्ञानमेव वा । (.....) ।।१०२ ।।  
"Nor is perception or knowledge of things [possible] if separateness [of the subject, mind and object is assumed]" ŚD IV.102ab. (It is to be noted that in the edition of KSTS this verse is counted as No. 101 due to double application of No. 70, a practice which is not followed here).
7. He says: प्रेर्यप्रेरणतत्कर्तृद्वयैक्यादुपपद्यते ।।११८ ।।  
"[The stimulation of the mind] is possible on account of the unity of the twofold nature of that which is to be stimulated, the stimulation, and its agent" (ŚD IV.118cd). (For the verse number see previous note.)
8. शिवत्वस्य तथा व्यक्तेर्घटस्येच्छा तथास्ति वा ।।३६ ।।  
"As the manifested [world] is in conformity with the condition (/nature) of Śiva, the will of the jar is accordingly, too" (ŚD V.36cd). The idea is that in conformity with the Supreme Will the jar sometimes wants to

With respect to the subjects, who experience knowledge only in limited form, there are methods for them to shake off the fetters of limitation and experience the higher states of consciousness, i.e., the divine power in its unrestricted form. Somānanda mentions various means by which the omniscience may become evident, foremost the mental imagination (*manahsamkalpanā*).<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the Buddhist position, here thought is described as real and effective in producing certain results. Therefore the practise of mentally imagining the identity with Śiva can be conducive to the realization of the full power of the supreme state.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 The Doctrinal Basis

Through the analysis of Somānanda's position certain tenets may be distinguished, which are all based on the particular non-dualistic śaiva cosmology.

### 2.1 Omnipresence is the Basis of Omniscience

According to the cosmology provided by the tantric authorities and explained by the monistic branch of śaivism, Śiva is the sole reality. He is one with His divine power (*śakti*), as fire is undivided from heat. As He emanates the world through contraction of His power into many limited forms, He remains the immanent reality in all His manifestations. This means that He is omnipresent. Knowledge being one of the aspects of His divine power, it follows that wherever His divine power is, there is also knowledge. Thus the knowledge of all manifestation is joined with the divine omnipresence.<sup>11</sup>

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be known, but at other times does not.

9. सर्व एव हि सर्वज्ञा मनःसंकल्पनावशात् ।।१०१।।  
संकल्पकेन चित्तेन तत्तज्ज्ञानमसंशयम् ।

“All indeed are omniscient on account of the imagination of the mind. With an imaginative mind (/determining heart) [one attains] any knowledge without doubt” ŚD V.101c-102b).

10. Many examples of the effect of thought are given in ŚD, chapter VII. they are also elucidated in the *Vijñāna Bhairava* (KSTS No. 8., 1918) and in Abhinavagupta's *Tantrasāra*, chapter IV (KSTS No. 17, 1918).

11. (....) तथा ज्ञानस्वभावता ।।७६।।  
व्यापकत्वाच्छिवत्वस्य सर्वज्ञत्वाद्भवेद् अथ ।

“Thus the natural state of knowledge may be due to the pervasion of the nature of Śiva and moreover due to the nature of knowledge of all” (ŚD V.76d-77b).

## 2.2 Knowing the Essence implies Knowing All

### 2.2.1 “All”

“To know all” means “to know the whole”. Therefore the concepts of omniscience vary in accordance with the concepts of the whole. For those who accept the existence of a plurality of things, the whole may mean the sum total of the parts or something new and different from the sum total, though in some way based on the parts. For example, the forest may be understood to mean the sum total of the trees or something more than that. This topic has been discussed in depth by the Buddhists and the Naiyāyikas.

Somānanda’s theory of the whole differs from both of these ideas. His approach is purely monistic. He holds that the whole is nothing other than the one essence and basis of all the manifold manifestations, the sole existent principle, i.e., Śiva. In order to illustrate the relation between the whole and the parts, Somānanda presents the analogy of a person and the various parts of its body on the one hand and Śiva and the world on the other.<sup>12</sup> He points out that we recognize the same person through any of its parts. For example, whether we take the hand or the head or any other part, we unisonously say “this is X.” Whereas the parts of the body display diversity, the person, to which they belong, is one and the same; it exists undivided from its parts. Notwithstanding that a person is more than all the parts of its body together, here it is referred to as the whole in the sense that there is nothing beyond it. Similarly, due to the divine immanence, all manifestations of the world are regarded as the parts, and the whole is described as Śiva.

12. (—) अवयवेभ्यो न कुत्रचित् ।।६०।।  
व्यतिरेको ऽवयविनस्तदेवेदं विचार्यताम् ।  
भिन्नेष्वैक्यमभेदश्च यथा तत्र व्यवस्थितम् ।।६१।।

(—)  
क्व पाणिपादं क्व शिरो यथैक्यं भिन्नदेशगम् ।।६३।।  
तद्वत् सर्वपदार्थानां जगत्सक्ये स्थितः शिवः ।

“Nowhere does there exist a separation of the whole from its parts. It indeed should be considered that Oneness, the absence of difference, exists there, [i.e. in the parts], which are different [from each other]. (...) How [different] are hand, foot, and head! [And yet they give rise to the notion of one person.] As the oneness permeates different places [in the case of a person’s body], likewise Śiva exists in the oneness in the world of all things” (ŚD IV.60d-61d, 63c-64b).

### 2.2.2 “Essence”

Śiva is not only regarded as the whole of all manifestations, but even more so as their very essence. On account of His omnipresence He resides as the true self, the real nature, in any living being and any material object. Therefore the true nature of anybody and anything is one and the same. All entities being basically of the same nature, it follows that the essence of one thing is also the essence of all other things. Somānanda says:<sup>13</sup> “All things have the essence of all, because the true nature of everything [is shared by] all [things]. Here all partake in everything, due to the likeness of the essence of the manifold things” (ŚD V.107b-108b). He gives an example: “[Thus] a jar shares my nature and I share the nature of a jar” (ŚD V.108cd).

As all things share the same one essence, it follows that through knowledge of the essence of one thing, the essence of anything else is known, too. Thus it is necessary to achieve knowledge of the essence of one thing, e.g., one’s self. This is the key to knowing the essence of any other object, or rather to recognizing this same essence through another object. Somānanda says:<sup>14</sup>

“All things exist knowing their essence on account of everything (/entirely, everywhere) : the jar knows through my essence and I know through the essence of the jar;.....” (ŚD V.105a-107b).

As all things are of the same essence or nature or self, it is declared that any entity that is self-aware can gain knowledge through the essence of anything. This points to knowledge as instances of self-experience, any object representing a further

13. सर्वे सर्वात्मका भावाः सर्वसर्वस्वरूपतः ॥१०७॥  
सर्वस्य सर्वमस्तीह नानाभावात्मरूपके ।  
मद्द्रूपत्वं घटस्यास्ति ममास्ति घटरूपता ॥१०८॥

14. सर्वे भावाः स्वमात्मानं जानन्तः सर्वतः स्थिताः ।  
मदात्मना घटो वेत्ति वेद्यहं वा घटात्मना ॥१०५॥  
सदाशिवात्मना वेत्ति स वा वेत्ति मदात्मना ।  
शिवात्मना यज्ञदत्तो यज्ञदत्तात्मना शिवः ॥१०६॥  
सदाशिवात्मना वेत्ति घटः स च घटात्मना ।

Also: (.) सर्वज्ञत्वप्रवर्तनात् ।

सर्वे सर्वात्मभावेन सर्वज्ञा वा व्यवस्थिताः ॥१०४॥

“As the nature of knowledge pertains to all (/everything), all exist knowing all indeed through an entity whose essence is [the same in] all” (ŚD V.104b-d).

manifestation of this same essence: the subject looks at an object, and the object stimulates the subject to a new instance of self-experience.

Thus the omnipresence of the divine power, including the power of knowledge, is seen as resulting in the omniscience of all beings, which is explained as repeated self-recognition through the essence of anything encountered.

### 2.3 Śiva experience<sup>s</sup> Śiva

On account of the divine immanence in all manifestations, it has been declared that the essence of all things, of all objects, is Śiva. Above all else, however, Śiva is the subject, the one subject of all subjects, the supreme experiencer. Whereas the bound soul (*paśu*) has the experience of duality caused by the restriction of consciousness, with the expansion of consciousness this duality is removed. Therefore it has been said that in the supreme consciousness of Śiva, all subjects and objects are dissolved into oneness. From this point of view Śiva experiences Himself through His manifold manifestations again and again. Somānanda says:<sup>15</sup>

“Śiva alone exists knowing through the manifold things His essence in the form of manifested consciousness, diversified into various parts, without end” (ŚD V.109a-d).

### 3 Conclusion

Omniscience as the complete quantity of all instances of knowledge gained by sensual perception and the other means of acquiring knowledge (*pramāṇa*) remains unattainable. This is not questioned here. Somānanda's concept of omniscience points to a different quality of knowledge, i.e., to the insights of the higher levels of consciousness (*turiyā* and *turyātītā avasthā*). According to the non-dualistic śaiva tradition, a yogin who has realized the essential oneness of all appearances may gain unlimited instances of experience of this essence through any of its manifestations. Here it is not accumulation that provides the key to the ideal, but the rise of consciousness from the mental to the supramental level.

15. नानाभावेः स्वमात्मानं जानन्नास्ते स्वयं शिवः ।  
चिद्व्यक्तिरूपकं नानाभेदाभिन्नमनन्तकम् ।। १०९ ।।

# ŚRĪJÑĀNĀMṚTAM

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