

Be as What You Are:

Empirical Vs Advaitic Perspectives

B Mahadevan¹

The title of the paper, “Be as *what you are*”, turns on a single question: what is meant by “What you are”? The question, essentially, is how one knows “Who one is”. If that is not known, one cannot “be” what one is. This essentially leads us to the central question of Advaita *Siddhānta*: “Who am I?” The great Advaita philosophers and other seers such as Ramana Maharshi have reflected deeply on this question.

The issue can be understood in two parts. If one is to “Be as what you are”, the first requirement is to know “What you are”; the second is to “be”, in that state, what one has come to know oneself to be. There are thus a knowing part and a being part.

The Empirical Understanding of “What You Are”

There are two ways of understanding what you are. At an empirical level, every person is part of the world, has things to do, rises in the morning, and has a hundred matters to attend to. What you are, at this level, has a relatively easier, verifiable, recognizable component. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Śrī Kṛṣṇa says that every person is nothing but a bundle of *śraddhā*²; it is the complexion of this *śraddhā* which manifests as what one is. This recognizable part of what you are, then, is somewhat easier to characterize, and it is made up of several elements.

Prakṛti is one's nature — inherent nature, to use the closest approximate English word — enabled by the three *guṇas* and *māyā*³. The three *guṇas* give a certain complexion, a certain shade of colour, to a person. A person also brings *vāsanās*, *avidyā*, and *māyā*: a bag of one's own experiences and impressions carried over the long sojourn of several *janmas* one has been passing through. The *vāsanās* and the *avidyā* together form the context. The *prakṛti* consisting of the three *guṇas* is the enabling mechanism through which one deals with and expresses oneself, and this expression takes the form of what may be called *svabhava*, *svadharma*, and *śraddhā*.

One brings the *vāsanās*, the *prakṛti* brings the three *guṇas*, and there is a certain level of ignorance; with these, one's *svabhava* — the way one deals and acts — one's *svadharma*, and one's *śraddhā* — the deep faith and belief system carried within — come to drive everything one does in life (see figure for an illustration of this).

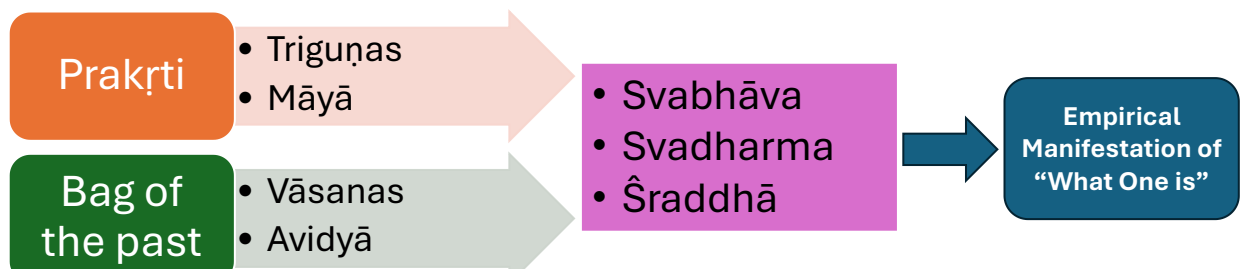
For many, the operative level of self-understanding is the empirical one, and modification is sought at that level — working on the *guṇas*, on *śraddhā*, changing the complexion of the *vāsanās* — so that what you are keeps changing, and a certain state is reached. This is one, albeit easier, way of defining who one is: an empirical sense, a sense of what one can verify and check for oneself, arriving at a conviction of what one is. But is that, in fact, what one is? While there is a partial truth in this, and it is not to be entirely

¹ This is based on a lecture delivered to the Advaita Meditation Centre, Boston, MA, USA on August 2, 2026.

² श्रद्धामयोऽयं पुरुषो यो यच्छ्रद्धः स एव सः ॥ Bhagavad Gītā, 17.03

³ दैवी ह्येषा गुणमयी मम माया दुरत्यया । Bhagavad Gītā, 7.14

negated, the further question remains: is that what one is, or is there something more? Here, Advaita plays a very important role.



Change is Observable only from a Fixed Platform

Advaita provides a deeper understanding of what one really is. The first observation to be made is that it is, in a way, easy to dismiss many of the empirical descriptions of “what you are” as belonging to the domain of the observable, that which can be observed: I am happy, I have a mind, I do this, I do that, and so on. Advaita *Siddhānta* says that anything which can be observed requires an observer. The very fact that something is observable points to something — a substratum, a platform from which one observes. Ramana Maharshi gives a beautiful example of this: “To see the beautiful movie that runs in a theatre, a white screen is needed.”

All that is observed will change and will have a beginning and an end. Bringing these parameters together, one can slowly come to understand that one cannot be that which changes by the moment. If one is something that can change by the hour, by the moment, by the day, then there is no “I” — there is only a transient thing.

More importantly, the very fact of having seen a change — of noticing that something is different tomorrow — means that one is standing on a fixed platform; otherwise a change could never be seen. Science indicates that to see a change, one needs to be anchored in a non-moving platform. This is why, when travelling in a train with all the shutters closed, one may not know whether the train is running at all, because there is no second reference other than a fixed platform. The moment the windows are opened, the trees are seen running at a certain speed, and one concludes that one is running at that speed oneself, because trees cannot run. The very fact that changes are seen in life clearly indicates that one is actually resting on a substratum which does not itself change. The focus, therefore, has to move a little beyond these moving things.

Identifying What You Are “Not”

According to the Advaita *Siddhānta*, “Who I am” is a non-changing, eternal entity that is pure, limitless, ever present, and the source of infinite joy and energy. One can use several parameters to clearly say, “I am not this, I cannot be this,” and each of these carries sound logic.

1. Anything gross cannot be the self, because anything gross is physical, undergoes a whole series of changes over time, and will perish one day or another.
2. Anything possessed — person, body, title, personality, wealth, relationships, health — cannot be the self, because that too will go away, and anything that goes away cannot be the self.

3. Anything that is an aggregate, made of parts, cannot be the self, because parts can disassociate and reassociate. It can also change, modify, and get destroyed over time. Therefore, the body, mind, buddhi, citta, ahaṁkāra, and prāṇa will not be an apt description of who I am.
4. Anything which is compacted of *guṇas* cannot be the self, because *guṇas* keep changing by the hour, and one cannot be something that is changing now and then.
5. Anything impure cannot be the self, because purity is the very definition of the self.
6. Anything that is produced cannot be the self, because it is, after all, an effect; what is produced has a beginning, and anything that has a beginning must have an end — and anything that has an end, perhaps, had a beginning a little earlier. So, all that is produced cannot be the self.
7. Anything that does not exist in all three periods of time — past, present, and future — cannot be the true self. One was not present a hundred years ago; in terms of the physical body, one will not be present twenty, thirty, or fifty years hence. Therefore, one probably cannot be this body.
8. Anything delimited by space, time, and object cannot be the self. The moment we create limitations, there is something bigger and beyond this.
9. Anything that is known cannot be the self, because the moment something is known, there is a knower; the moment there is an object, there is a subject, and the search must therefore go to the subject.
10. Anything that is ruled cannot be the self, for it implies a ruler.
11. And anything dependent is not the self, since the notion of “I” is that of an independent entity. Moreover, the description of “I” in this case becomes a function of something else.

In the empirical sense, therefore, one may use and understand oneself through *prakṛti*, *svadharma*, *svabhāva*, and try to characterize what one is. However, the Advaita *Siddhānta* has clearly demonstrated that one is beyond all these, as these will perish. They are in the habit of coming and going, and one cannot be a *padārtha* that comes and goes. One has to be something more, something other than all of these and substantive.

Peeling the Layers of Ignorance

The first step is to enquire deeply into “What you are”. Only then does the question of being like that arise. That kind of clarity of what you are needs to be developed. Within the Advaita *Siddhānta* tradition, within the *amṛta-vyatiṛeka* tradition, it is easier to say what you are not. *Neti* – “Not this” is a better way of understanding than wasting time articulating “What you are”. If one can disassociate and say, “this is not me, this is not me, this is not me,” clarity of what you are slowly manifests. Shri Kṛṣṇa brings this idea in the Bhagavad Gītā⁴: this pure “I” is coiled, bundled up with *ajñāna* — like being rolled up in a thick layer of cloth, wound around oneself, so that one really does not know “What one is”. Advaita conveys the idea that one must spend time peeling off this layer. As the layer is peeled, it is like the Sun

⁴ अज्ञानेनावृतं ज्ञानं तेन मुह्यन्ति जन्तवः ॥ Bhagavad Gītā 5.15

emerging from behind a cloud and radiating all by itself⁵. So “*Be as what you are*” appears, essentially, as a process of peeling this layer of ignorance.

From Knowing to Being

Knowing is one thing: it is possible to know very well what one is, to list it down, to reach a complete clarity in the mind, intellectually — to know what one is, to know what one is not, to know what one ought to be, and so on. Knowing is one step; being is another. In the title, “*Be as what you are*”, the word “be” is very powerful; being is the second step after knowing.

The knowing process may be illustrated by the example of sitting down and reading thoroughly about how to reach Mount Everest — understanding all the challenges, the base camps encountered during the journey, the kind of training needed, how much oxygen is required, what time one should set out, the two o'clock rule, and so on. That is different from actually going to Everest. Swami Vivekananda used to say that maps are not territories; one has to go to the place — that is the territory; maps are only indicators.

In the same way, the second step of “*Be as what you are*” is: how does one get there? The layers of ignorance need to be peeled; the real question is how this is to be achieved. That is the truly interesting part of the process.

Śaṅkarācārya's Sādhana Pañcakam

A process is needed — a means by which one is able to tune oneself, one step at a time, and is placed in a position to actually peel away those layers of ignorance, so that the “be” part of “*Be as what you are*” finally manifests. Bhagavatpāda Śaṅkarācārya, in his numerous works, has precisely laid out a process.

Among the many things Śaṅkarācārya has given, one that is eminently simple, a step-by-step approach, is the last of his teachings, called the *Sādhana Pañcakam*. In five verses, forty instructions are given, arranged logically into five stages of this process. At the fifth stage, the complete peeling away of ignorance takes place, and the real notion of “*Be as what you are*” shows up in its full strength.

Śaṅkarācārya's teachings on *Sādhana Catuṣṭaya* and *Ṣaṭ Sampat* are, likewise, mechanisms, practices, and modifications of life that help one move from the empirical understanding of what one is to the purity of what one is — which is *aham brahmāsmi*, the central theme of *Advaita Siddhānta*. Therefore, “*Be as what you are*” is a process upon which one can travel and arrive where one seeks to arrive.

⁵ ज्ञानेन तु तदज्ञानं येषां नाशितमात्मनः । तेषामादित्यवज्ज्ञानं प्रकाशयति तत्परम् ॥ Bhagavad Gītā 5.16