

Language and science – Bhartrhari's questioning¹

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From where expressed?

In the classical Sanskrit tradition, Bhartrhari is called a 'grammarian'. This can be a little confusing. For Bhartrhari is not the kind of grammarian who formulates rules or builds theories of language. Instead, he opens up an analytic investigation into our living use of meaningful expression. In this sense, he is a linguistic philosopher.

His treatise, the *Vākyapadīya*, is an advanced text in the traditional study of Sanskrit linguistics. But, in this treatise, the essential aim is not the building up of linguistic theories and descriptions. In fact, it is just the opposite. The aim is a reflective enquiry. It asks how descriptions have been built and from what basis they arise. Accordingly, there is a reversal of direction, from building up to asking down. The asking is directed back, towards an underlying source from which our constructed speaking is expressed.

That source is called 'śabda-tattva' or the 'essence of the word'. It is described in the opening stanza of the *Vākyapadīya*:

Stanza 1.1

an-ādi-nidhanam brahma
śabda-tattvaṃ yad akṣaram .

The changeless essence of the word
is all there is. It has no start;
nor does it stop or come to end.

vivartate 'rtha-bhāvena
prakriyā jagato yataḥ .

It manifests transformed: through
aims and objects, as they come to be.
From it proceeds the changing world.

Here, Bhartrhari sets the terms of a traditional enquiry. He tells us what the enquiry is looking for. It is looking for a common source of speech, from where expression comes. And speech is here interpreted in the most general sense – to include not only the limited speaking of human persons, but also all appearances that nature manifests throughout the universe. All appearances that nature shows are here considered as expressions of an underlying principle, which this enquiry sets out to investigate. The *Vākyapadīya* thus starts out with a basic question. From where do all these expressions come: not just our personal expressions of human speech, but all nature's phenomena as well?

From a modern scientific point of view, this kind of question is often dismissed as ‘metaphysical’. It asks for a very general principle, which underlies each particular thing that we observe through our limited faculties of body and mind. That principle cannot be narrowed down by any of our physical or mental faculties, and so it seems impossible to know. It seems that such a principle is far too broad for us to talk about it sensibly, unless it is further specified.

It’s all very well to talk of ‘brahman’ as the most general principle of ‘all reality’. But such talk is meaningless without some further way of asking what it is, more specifically. In the *Vākyapadīya*, this way of asking is reflective and philosophical. It reflects from the outside universe in general, to an inner principle of knowing that must be investigated by each individual in particular.

Stanza 1.9

satyā viśuddhis tatro ’ktā
vidyai ’vai ’ka-padā-’gamā .
yuktā praṇava-rūpeṇa
sarva-vādā ’virodhinā ..

Where unmixed truth is spoken of,
it is there knowledge in itself.
The one-word mantra ‘om’ joins there,
back into its own origin –
not contradicting any way
in which its truth may be explained.

This stanza turns attention back to a subjective principle of consciousness, which is called ‘vidyā eva’ or ‘knowledge in itself’. That is the inner source of speech, within each individual. It is here described as an unaffected truth, associated with the mantra ‘om’. And it is said to be explained in many different ways.

At this point, a modern reader may get the impression that reasoned questioning is now being abandoned, in favour of a mystical approach. But this is not the case. There is no abandonment of reason here. There is only an acknowledgement that what is sought may be approached in many ways, including those of reasoned questioning and mystic exercise. Having made this acknowledgement, the text goes on to describe its chosen approach, which is the analysis of speech.

Linguistic analysis

Stanza 1.11

āsannaṁ brahmaṇas tasya
tapasām uttamaṁ tapaḥ .
prathamam chandasām aṅgam
āhur vyākaraṇam budhāḥ ..

For those who are intelligent,
the foremost of the sciences
and also the best discipline –
established in reality –
is the analysis of speech.

This stanza says that ‘vyākaraṇa’ or ‘grammar’ is the foremost of all sciences. Again, this may be confusing to a modern reader, whose notion of science is centred on the calculating technology of modern physics. So a little explanation is needed about the traditional notion of science, as described by the words ‘śāstra’ and ‘vidyā’. As these words imply, the traditional notion was not centred upon mechanical calculation, but instead on the education of living faculties.

Where modern physics is applied predominantly through calculations and machines, the traditional sciences work more through the cultivated discipline of śāstra and the clarifying enquiry of vidyā. This requires a broader and a deeper notion of

science than the currently restricted one that has come to be modelled on the calculations and machines of modern physics. The broadening has to progress beyond objective calculation, so as to allow a central place for subjective education in the working and the application of scientific reasoning. In the end, science is far more essentially applied by living beings than by technical constructions and machines. So education has to play the central role that has been long acknowledged in the old sciences.

In traditional times, before the rise of modern physics, classical systems of education were centred on the learning of a classic language – like Arabic or Latin or Greek or Hebrew or Mandarin Chinese or Persian or Sanskrit. Accordingly, a student was initiated into higher learning by the formal systems of a classical language – in particular the systems of pronunciation, semantics, inflexion and syntax, which were analysed and cultivated through the science of linguistics. In this practical way, linguistics was the initiating science of a classical education. It was the first science that was used to train a student’s mind; and other sciences were subsequently learned, through that initial training.

It was then only natural that linguistics should serve as a model for the other sciences. The *Vākyapadīya* thus describes it as a foremost model of scientific discipline, which serves to educate and clarify. It provides a direct way of approaching clarity, as the next stanza goes on to say.

Stanza 1.12

prāpta-rūpa-vibhāgāyā
yo vācaḥ paramo rasaḥ .
yat tat puṇyatamaṁ jyotis
tasya mārgo ’yam āñjasaḥ ..

This is a direct path to that same light which is at once the purest virtue and the final essence of all speech. This path proceeds by trying to achieve correct distinctions in the forms of speech.

The light that’s here described is of course the subjective illumination of consciousness. It is approached directly when linguistic analysis stops going out to objects, but instead turns inward to correct the distinctions that are used in speech. The next stanza explains why the correction is needed.

Stanza 1.13

artha-pravṛtti-tattvānām
śabdā eva nibandhanam .

All tying down of truths perceived, in objects and their functioning, consists of words expressed in speech.

tattvā ’vabodhaḥ
śabdānām nā ’sti
vyākaraṇād ṛte ..

But we don’t clearly recognize the truth of words, without recourse to the analysis of speech.

Here, there occurs an interesting concept, called ‘nibandhana’. Literally, it means ‘tying down’ or ‘tying back’²; and hence it generally refers to the grounding of words in their underlying source, from which they are expressed. But it is also used more specifically, to describe the recording of knowledge in verbal or written expression.

² The word ‘bandhana’ means ‘tying’, and the prefix ‘ni-’ means ‘down’ or ‘back’.

When the concept of 'nibandhana' is used in this specific way, to mean 'recording', it may seem to describe a tying down of knowledge to objective and material expressions, like spoken words or written documents. But in a more essential sense, what's described is just the opposite. The word 'nibandhana' describes a tying down of all objective expressions to a subjective source of pure consciousness, which each individual may find directly at the underlying background of experience.

A similar reversal may be seen in the English word 'record'. In a superficial sense, it is often taken to describe an objective expression, like a spoken or a written message, which supports some knowledge that has been attached to it. However, the word itself shows a deeper meaning that is quite the reverse. The prefix 're-' means 'back'; and 'cord' comes from the Latin 'cor', which means 'heart'. Thus, the word 'record' implies a return to heart, and hence a recalling or a fresh visiting of knowledge that continues in the heart.

In this deeper sense, it is knowledge that continues underneath, as the supporting background of our changing and differing experiences. Objective expressions are what change and differ, while knowledge carries on in the background, as their continuing support. As knowledge is recorded through objective expressions, they are no more than passing means of refreshing it. Their meaning is inherently tied back to the living presence of knowledge, which continues independently of them. All expressions are tied back to knowledge, but it is never tied to them.

What then is the function of linguistic analysis? It is a means to the essential freedom of knowledge, as the next stanza says.

Stanza 1.14

tad dvāram apavargasya
vān-malānām cikitsitam .
pavitraṁ sarva-vidyānām
adhividyāṁ prakāśate ..

Linguistics is a passageway
to freedom in all disciplines.
Wherever learning is concerned,
linguistics there appears: as that
investigative therapy
which may be used to clear away
the taints of speech in what is said.

Here, we have a summary of how linguistics works. It is called a 'cikitsa' or an 'investigative therapy'. It is a therapy that works by asking what is meant in the expressions that we use. The asking reasons in reverse, through meaning that has been expressed. When reason turns back like this, it is inherently therapeutic. It uncovers mistakes and confusions in what we mean to say; and then the uncovering leads naturally towards correcting the mistakes and clearing the confusions away.

This corrective enquiry is central to all sciences and disciplines. In every branch of learning, it leads back to a central core of educating discipline, where meaning is clarified. From there, a practitioner develops capability. Returning there, through a corrective questioning, the aim of linguistics is to educate. It's meant to clarify our knowledge and thereby to liberate our use of living capabilities.

The living use of speech

By looking at our reasoning as a corrective therapy, the *Vākyapadīya* opens up a reflective analysis of living usage, in the process of our lives.

Stanza 1.137

śabdānām eva sā śaktis
tarko yaḥ puruṣā-śrayaḥ .

All arguments and inference
depend upon intelligence.
They're nothing but the power of words.

śabdā-nugato nyāyo
'nāgameṣv a-nibandhanaḥ ..

Where formal logic blindly follows
words expressed in outward speech,
it's just a verbal mimicking
that ties no concrete meaning down.
It cannot record anything.
Such logic is not found in texts
of genuine authority.

Here, there is an analysis of how our reasoning is carried out, in actual practice. It's carried out through 'śabdānām ... śaktis' or the 'power of words'. This is a living power that expresses consciousness, through feelings, thoughts and actions. The expression appears to us in words and in other objects that we find meaningful. Through their meaning, the expression is reflected back into underlying consciousness, where understanding is assimilated in the course of time.

Thus, in our use of words and meaning, there is a repeated cycle of expression and reflection, driven by the power of a living energy. In Sanskrit, that living energy is called 'prāṇa'. In some ways, it is similar to the energy that is conceived in modern physics. It is analytically conceived, as forming complex patterns of vibration and radiation in an underlying field conditioning of space and time. And material objects are conceived as crude appearances of its more subtle patterns of activity.

But there is also an essential difference. Modern physics thinks of energy as acting from one object to another. The living energy of prāṇa is not thus conceived. It acts essentially from underlying consciousness. In everyone's experience, it is an energy of inspiration, motivated from within. It rises of its own accord, from underneath all surface show of feelings, thoughts and actions that it motivates into objective form. Its observation and its use require thus a reflection back to underlying consciousness, beneath all objective rules and formulations.

All genuine reasoning requires that reflection, and a living use of speech that is inspired from beneath what's formally derived. No mere formality can rightly amount to the inspired flow of intelligence in actual reasoning. Where texts are used to educate, a living process of enquiry and learning must be found beneath their formal arguments.

The *Vākyapadīya* thus introduces the idea of a living tradition, in which the texts are handed down and interpreted. In some subsequent stanzas, this idea is a little further described.

Stanza 1.140

sarvo 'drṣṭa phalān arthān
āgamāt pratipadyate .

It's commonly acknowledged that
unseen effects may be achieved

³ See Appendix, figure 1, for a schematic diagram that illustrates this cycle of expression and reflection.

viparītaṁ ca sarvatra
śakyate vaktum āgame ..

by chanting from the sacred texts.
But it is always possible
to say conflicting things about
what's in the texts and what they mean.

Stanza 1.141

sādhitva-jñāna-viṣayā
sai 'śā vyākaraṇa-smṛtiḥ .

Linguistics is a discipline
whose aim is knowledge, clarified
from errors of mistaken use.

avicchedena śiṣṭānām
idaṁ smṛti-nibandhanam ..

It is recorded through an
uncut continuity – of learning
that is called to mind, by those
who've learned it well and hand it down.

From 1.141 vṛtti (last sentence)

smṛto hy arthaḥ
parampariyād avicchedena
punaḥ punar nibandhyate ,

Passed down through a succession that
remains unbroken, the intent
remembered is reconstituted,
over and over again.

prasidha-samācārāyām
smṛtāv anibandhana-śabdāyām

Where a tradition of established
common practice carries on
without recording it in words,

śiṣṭa-samācārā-'vicchedenai
'va smaryate .

what gets to be remembered is
no more than the unbroken practice
of successful practitioners.

In this account of living usage, the *Vākyapadīya* is quite clear about its aim. The aim is knowledge, through enquiry. Accordingly, the next stanza goes on to a reflective analysis, which distinguishes three levels of expression. The analysis is meant to provide a way of investigating back, into the consciousness from which our living usage is expressed.

Levels of expression

Stanza 1.142

vaikharyā madhyamāyāś ca
paśyantyaś cai 'tad adbhutam .
aneka-tīrtha-bhedāyās
trayyā vācaḥ param padam ..

The word that's spoken is threefold.
It consists of 'vaikharī',
of 'madhyamā' and 'paśyantī'.
And it has many different ways
of crossing over differences.
But where it ultimately stands
must be confounding to the mind.

Behind the Sanskrit terminology, this threefold distinction is quite simple. It is, essentially, a distinction of body, mind and consciousness.⁴

- ‘Vaikharī’ means ‘elaborated’. It refers to the elaborated articulation of objective expression, through our outward bodies. Here, meaning is expressed in structure, which is made up from different parts.

The parts of structure coexist at different points of space. A structured world is thus described, relating different things that coexist and act upon each other.

- ‘Madhyamā’ means ‘in between’ or ‘mediating’. The mediation is through mind, in the process of experience. Here, we experience a succession of replacing states in time.

Unlike the points of space, moments do not coexist. When any state of time occurs, no other state is present then, along with it. The changing states of time can’t ever be experienced side by side, so as to relate them directly together. They can only be related indirectly, through an underlying consciousness that carries on beneath.

Each state expresses consciousness, in some object that appears perceived. And the perception is reflected back into consciousness, as its meaning is interpreted. There is no structure here, but only passing change. There’s only a transforming process, driven by the living energy called ‘prāna’.

- ‘Paśyantī’ means ‘seeing’. It is the silent seeing of pure consciousness, at the background of experience. There, consciousness continues by itself, quite unaffected by conflicting differences or by disturbing change.

At that unaffected background, each perception of an object is absorbed and every state of changing mind is taken in. Thus, different things and changing states are all assimilated there, into a quiet background where no change or difference appears.

Beneath all change and difference, what happens is assimilated into quiet potency, which carries on unmanifest. There, potency continues on through time and hence gives rise to consequences later on. It’s only thus that any cause, seen previously, gives rise to subsequent effect.

These three levels are concisely described in some stanzas that are quoted in the *vṛtti* commentary. The stanzas are treated as ‘āgama’ or ‘authoritative’, in a living tradition from which the *Vākyapadīya* comes down to us.

From 1.142 *vṛtti*, about ‘vaikharī’

sthāneṣu vidhṛte vāyau
kṛta-varṇa-parigrahā .

Arranged in their respective places,
different elements of speech
are carried, spoken, in the air.

vaikharī vāk prayoktṛṇām
prāṇa-vṛtti-nibandhanā ..

That forms *elaborated* speech.
It’s a recording, carried out
through acts of living energy
that functions forth from those who speak.

⁴ See Appendix, figure 2, for a schematic summary of the analysis that follows, describing the three levels and an underlying ground.

From 1.142 vṛtti, about 'madhyamā'

kevalam buddhy upādānā
krama-rūpā-'nupātinī .

Mind in itself is made of forms
that follow on successively,
replacing what has gone before.

prāṇā-'vṛttim atikramya
madhyamā vāk pravartate ..

The functioning of living energy
is thereby left behind,
as *mediating* speech goes on
with its continued functioning.

From 1.142 vṛtti, about 'paśyantī'

avibhāgā tu paśyantī
sarvataḥ saṁhṛta-kramā .

But *seeing* is that partless essence
always present, everywhere.
In it, succession is absorbed.

svarūpa-jyotir evā 'ntaḥ
sūkṣmā vāg anapāyinī ..

There's only light in its true nature,
as it is itself, within.
That is a subtle speaking where
no disappearance can be found.

Soon after, a further stanza is quoted, describing what came to be called 'parā' or 'beyond'. This denotes the final ground, beneath all levels of expression.

From 1.142 vṛtti, about 'parā'

prāpto-'parāga-rūpā sā
viplavair anuṣaṅgibhiḥ .

It reaches its conditioned form
by mixing it, with a variety
of differing disturbances
that seem to float on it.

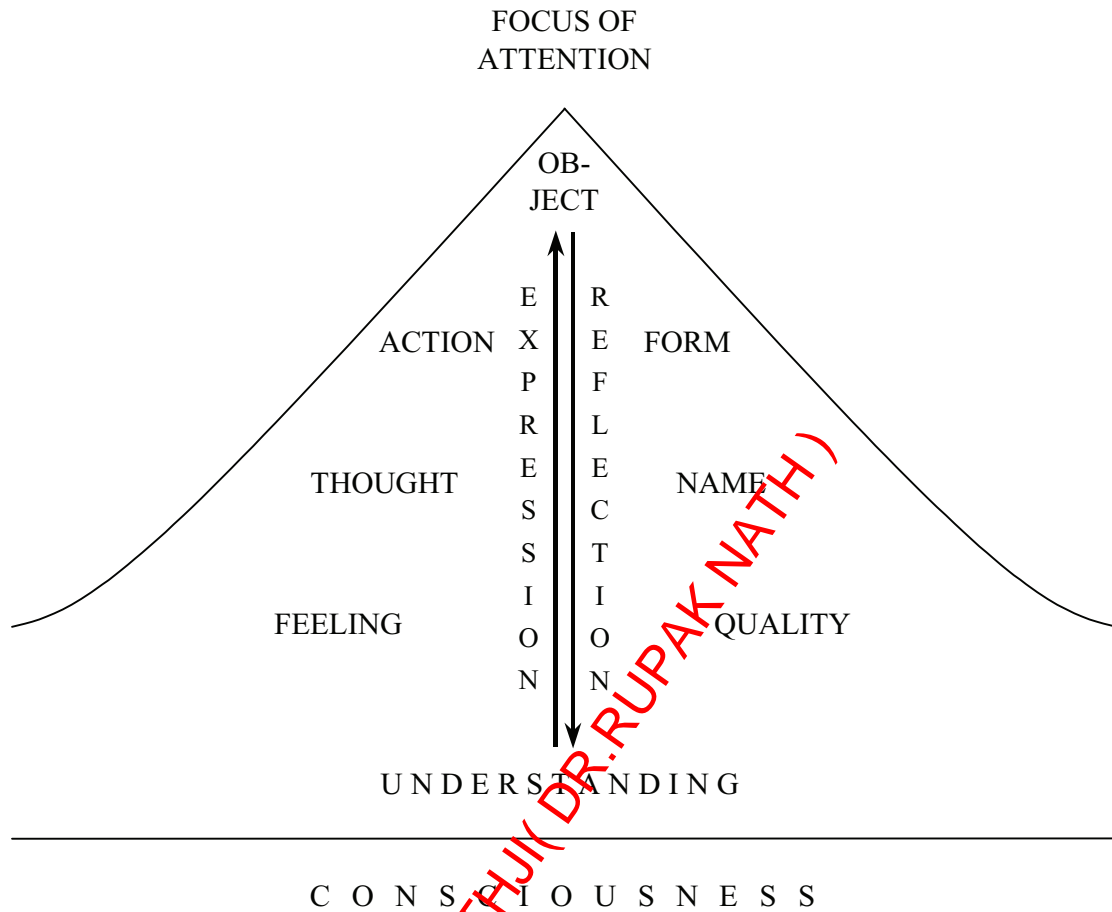
vaikharī sattva-mātre 'va
guṇair na vyavakīryate ..

But that, which seems elaborated,
is pure being in itself.
It is untouched, quite unaffected
by its show of qualities.

Here, the pure seeing of paśyantī is further identified as 'sattva-mātra' or 'pure being'. In the end, the enquiry thus points to a non-dual knowing in identity, where that which knows is realized to be identical with the reality that's known.

Appendix – 2 figures

Figure 1



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Figure 2

<i>Body</i>	Space	Co-existing points	World of objects	Elaborated structure, perceived by body
<i>Mind</i>	Time	Replacing moments	Succession of states	Mediating process, conceived by mind
	Causality	Continued consequence	Assimilating capability	Silent seeing, at the depth of insight
<i>Consciousness</i>	Knowing in identity			