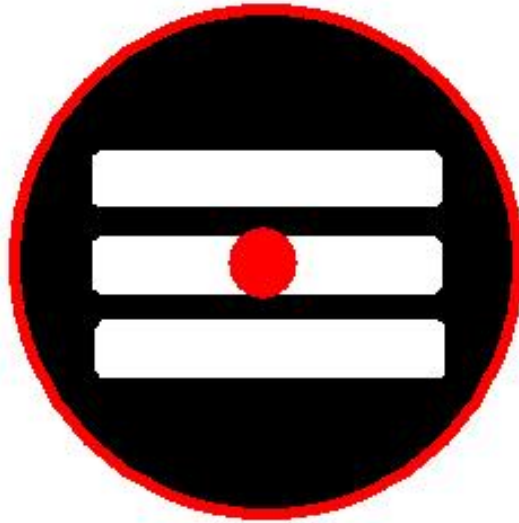


# **ABSOLUTE AWARENESS OR ABSOLUTE EGOITY**

**Comments on Mark Dyczkowski's essay  
'Self Awareness, Own Being and Egoity'**



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# On ‘Self Awareness, Own Being and Egoity’

**Peter Wilberg**

## **Abstract**

It is the purpose of this essay to point to a number of *linguistic ambiguities* in both the translation and interpretation of some of the most basic terms employed in the Kashmiri Shaivist *tantras* of the ninth to tenth centuries. In doing so I aim to help reveal and clarify some of the most enduring and fundamental philosophical questions of Indian religious thought as such - questions hitherto concealed by those linguistic ambiguities. I will seek to show that the latter are capable of clarification through a discourse whose own terms and principles both question and ultimately *transcend and supersede* the terms of the monistic Shaiva *tantras* themselves, whilst at the same time - and precisely by virtue of doing so - offering a far more solid and unambiguous framework for the affirmation and interpretation of their inner truth. A starting point in pursuing this purpose is provided by Mark Dyczkowski’s article entitled ‘Self Awareness, Own Being and Egoity’, arguing as it does that a concept of what he terms “absolute egoity” lies at the heart of the ‘monistic Shaivism’ of ninth to tenth century Kashmir.

‘Self Awareness’ - the first term employed in the title of Dyczkowski’s essay, is of course a commonly used one, and yet it also offers us an immediate starting point in exploring the philosophically critical linguistic ambiguities I wish to point to. The question is whether ‘self-awareness’ refers to an awareness owned by and belonging to a ‘self’ or to an awareness ‘of’ self of a quite different sort – an awareness or subjectivity that is not itself the property of the self or ‘subject’ of which it is aware, but rather transcends any and every such self or subject. The question is of crucial significance given that a historic presupposition of European philosophical thought and terminology lies in the unquestioned assumption that ‘consciousness’ or ‘awareness’ – *subjectivity* – is necessarily the private property of an egoic *subject* – whether human or divine. Western thought in general has no concept of *subjectivity without a subject* – and thus no place for the Indian religious experience of an absolute, universal and trans-egoic consciousness of which every individual self or subject is but an individualised portion and expression.

Herein lies the danger of ‘Eurocentric’ interpretations of Indian thought in general, one which comes to expression in some of the typical terms used to translate the Kashmiri Shaivist *tantras* in particular. For as with ‘self-awareness’, are we to understand the term ‘I-consciousness’ as referring to consciousness of an ‘I’ - or are we to take the little word ‘of’ as having a *genitive* character – thus understanding this ‘I-consciousness’ as a consciousness *owned by and belonging to* that ‘I’? The question of whether the little word ‘of’ is or is not taken in a *genitive* sense thus becomes crucial to the larger question of whether monistic Shaivism does or does not acknowledge the highest reality (*Anuttara*) as an ultimate dimension of subjectivity prior to and transcending any subject or self, ego or ‘I’ – rather than as the property of an absolute subject or “absolute ego”?

Dyczkowski acknowledges from early on in his essay that “... neither the *Spandakarikas* nor *vrtti* take the ego to be in any way absolute” and in this way “fall in line with all the other schools of thought that developed in India up to then which unanimously agree that the ego – the ‘I’ – is relative.” This is an important comment, given that fundamental philosophical question raised by the linguistic ambiguities I have pointed to are relevant to the entire tradition of Indian thought, having to do with the relative primordality of awareness (*chit*) on the one hand, and being (*sat*) on the other - including ‘self-being’ or ‘own-being’ in an egoic or proprietorial sense. This is no small question given (a) the central significance of the compound notion of *satchitananda* (‘being-awareness-bliss’) in the Indian tradition, and (b) the privileging of ‘existence’ or ‘being’ over awareness in European thought – which sees awareness or subjectivity solely as the product or property either of beings, whether in the form of empirical or transcendental ‘subjects’ of consciousness or, alternatively, of *objects* such as the body and brain. This is also where the recurrent use of the term ‘own nature’ (*svabhava*) which Dyczkowski usefully calls our attention to in the *vrtti* of the *Spandakarikas* becomes philosophically problematic. For if we speak of a primordial self-awareness or ‘I-consciousness’ as an awareness or consciousness ‘of’ a self or ‘I’ (in the *non-genitive* sense of this ‘of’) we imply that awareness *as such* is essentially more *primordial* than any being or entity (whether in the form of a thing or object, self or subject, ego or ‘I’) that there is an awareness of.

Paraphrasing Rajanaka Rama, Dyczkowski speaks of an “awareness of the egoity (*ahamkara*) which is that of one’s own essential nature (*svasvabhava*)”. The wording suggests that it is the ‘own nature’ of this ‘egoity’ - rather than the pure awareness of it - that constitutes that ‘essential nature’. Yet this leaves open the question of what constitutes the nature and source of the ‘awareness’ of egoity referred to. To this question there are only two answers. One answer is that awareness as such is understood - apodictically and in principle - as absolute and primordial – thereby also as an awareness that is not ‘yours’ or ‘mine’, or even the property of a God or gods, but one which constitutes the very essence of the *divine* - being identical with it. The other answer is that awareness is taken as the property or ‘own being’ of an egoic self or subject (whether human or divine).

The second answer brings with it the problem of infinite regress. For even if we grant that the essence of the ego or ‘I’ as subject lies in not being capable of reduction to an *object* for itself or others, this does not imply that there cannot be an immediate *subjective* awareness of it of the sort that does *not* reduce it to an object. In which case we are returned to the question of where this subjective *awareness* of egoity comes from – for even if it is seen as the property or product of some higher-level ‘transcendental’ or ‘absolute’ ego we are left with the question of where the awareness or knowledge of *that* ‘higher’ ego comes from. Given this infinite regress we can either (a) simply *postulate* an ‘absolute ego’ or (b) recognise instead a basic apodictic *principle*. This is the principle that the *awareness* of any self, ego or ‘I’ cannot - in principle - be seen as the *property* of that self, ego or ‘I’. Following this principle allows us to recognise awareness or subjectivity *as such* as the sole possible ‘absolute’ – in this way also avoiding the problem of infinite regress. This principle is affirmed if we read the opening words of the *Shivasutra* as saying that the self not a being ‘with’ consciousness, but rather that ‘the self *is* consciousness’. On the basis of this reading and transliteration, I would suggest that what constitutes the uniqueness of monistic Shaivism does not lie in the positing of an “absolute ego”, but rather in a recognition that *both* the individual self (*jiva*) and the divine (*Shiva*) are in essence *identical* with awareness as such - understood as the absolute or ‘non-higher’ reality that is *Anuttara*. Evidence for this interpretation can be

found in the oft-repeated identification of Shiva with ‘pure consciousness’ in the major treatises or *tantras* of “the monistic Shaivism of Kashmir” – not least the *Shivasutra* themselves.

This identity of both the self and the divine with pure awareness is reaffirmed by Dyczkowski at the very start of his essay when he defines the ‘monistic’ divinity of Kashmiri Shaivism as “the one absolute reality which is at once Shiva, the Self and pure consciousness...”. It is only his interpretation of this (notably non-capitalised) “pure consciousness” as “self-reflective pure egoity (*ahambhava*)” that the type of linguistic ambiguities I have pointed to again become problematic. Precisely for this reason however, Dyczkowski’s article is itself a highly pertinent one, alerting us as it does to a variety of possible or even *opposite* interpretations of Kashmir Shaivism, and providing ample evidence of these in the form of subtle but nevertheless deeply significant differences of linguistic formulation amongst its preceptors and interpreters.

A good example of these is Dyczkowski’s citation from Utpaladeva that reads “repose in one’s essential nature (*svasvarupa*) is the reflective awareness (*vimarsha*) that ‘I am’.” Here a threefold linguistic ambiguity and potentiality for interpretation reveals itself. For it is not clear from the statement whether “essential nature” refers to (a) ‘own-being’ in the specific form of the ‘I am’ (b) the reflection of awareness in *being* and the ‘I am’, or (c) a recognitive reflection of that very *awareness* in the mental or linguistic ego – in the word ‘I’. This new ambiguity is one concealed by and latent in the very terms ‘reflective awareness’ or ‘recognitive awareness’ themselves, these being the most common scholarly and philosophical translations of *vimarsha* and terms that are also fundamental to our understanding of the ‘doctrine of recognition’ (*Pratyabhijna*). So how exactly are we to understand them? One understanding is that that Self which *is* nothing but pure awareness (*chaitanyatman*) finds itself reflected in that ‘ego’ – signified by the word ‘I’ - which Abhinavagupta clearly describes as a product of the intellect, adding (as cited by Dyczkowski) that together with this ego goes the notion that it is itself the very *source* of the light of awareness ‘reflected in it’, whereas in reality it is the light of awareness as such that constitutes the “essential nature of the ego”. Similarly, when Utpaladeva is

cited by Abhinava as declaring that “egoity is said to be the repose the light of consciousness has within its own nature” the message seems clear that egoity itself is nothing absolute, a ‘thing in itself’, but rather an internal relation of the light of pure consciousness to itself. The character of this relation is its quiescent ‘repose’ or ‘coming to rest’ within itself - not its *reflection* in an intellectual or mental ego or its *reduction* to an ‘absolute ego’.

This does not mean that the mental or intellectual ego does not *partake* of the light of pure awareness – for it does so precisely by virtue of being its self-reflection and thereby also offering it a mode of *self-recognition*. Precisely since the ‘ego’ *is nothing but* this recognitive self-reflection of the light of awareness however, Dyzckowki’s phrase “self-reflective pure egoity” cited earlier is linguistically problematic. For it can be taken as implying an ego that in some way reflects *itself* rather than the light of pure awareness *of* which it is the reflection. Hence the importance of the further words of Abhinavagupta cited by Dyzckowski, in which the former declares that the essential ego or ‘I’ is itself nothing but “the luminosity of the light (of consciousness)”. Essential or ‘absolute’ egoity in this sense is egoity experienced as an emanation or *shining* of that light - and not as its *source* or *reflection*.

What Abhinavagupta refers to as “a secret” and “great mystery” is the repose of “I-feeling” in the “absolute aspect” of all things – the ultimate and unbounded awareness that is *Anuttara*. For as Abhinavagupta also quite explicitly states:

“The being of all things that are recognised in awareness in turn depends on awareness.”

This is perhaps the most explicit statement by the great preceptor of the *primordality* of awareness in relation to all beings or ‘selves’ – including, implicitly our ‘own being’ or ‘egoity’. It is a statement echoed also in the words of Kshemaraja:

“Nothing can have its *own being* [my stress] without the light of awareness.”

Such words, and with it *Trika Shaivism* itself, sits uneasily with the Western assumption that awareness, consciousness or subjectivity is necessarily the private property of a subject or self, ego or 'I', limited or absolute. For again, what is lacking here is any notion of *subjectivity without a subject*. It is this 'absolute subjectivity' that I understand as implied by the notion of the transcendent 'fourth' (*turya*) that embraces and transcends both knower, known and the process of knowing. And yet, understood from an Eastern *advaitic* perspective, the seemingly contrary notions of the divine as (a) "absolute subjectivity" (without a subject) and (b) an "absolute subject" or "absolute ego" could be satisfactorily understood as *non-dual* aspects of the same singular or absolute reality – that which Michael Kosok has called 'The Singularity of Awareness'. I believe the deeper "secret" and "great mystery" referred to by Abhinavagupta as precisely this recognition that there is no essential duality between recognising Shiva as an 'absolute subject' and recognising that any absolute subject or ego is ultimately identical with 'absolute subjectivity' - with subjectivity *as such*.

In order to grant full reverence to this "great mystery" however, we should not forget for a moment that in contrast to both Hinduism and Buddhism, what characterises the Abrahamic faiths is a much more *one-sided* and dualistic notion of the divine as simply an 'absolute subject' or 'absolute ego' – one which, moreover, is not conceived an immanent *part* of the manifest world but rather as something separate and *apart* from it. Given this contrast, Western scholars and philosophers must be alert to the very real danger of interpreting Indian religious thought in a way that simply puts a new gloss on deep-rooted Abrahamic god-concepts - reducing the world and human beings to the narcissistic image of an absolute ego-god. I see this danger exemplified in the Christianising tendency of David Peter Lawrence's exposition of monistic Shaivism, one which explicitly affirms the notion of a 'cosmic narcissism', and in which he states outright that "monistic Shaiva teachings...requires the de-individualisation of the ego in its identity with Shiva's higher, universal egoity". I would argue instead that 'identity' with Shiva lies precisely in the recognition of one's personal identity - and that of all beings - as a unique highly individualised *portion* of a divine-universal awareness transcending identity and egoity as such. Being an *inseparable* portion of the divine

awareness *as a whole* however, means we *are* each that whole – we are each ‘God’. As individualised portions or parts of that singular whole on the other hand, we are each *distinct* expressions of it - ‘gods’. ‘Non-duality’ or ‘identity’ with the divine (*a-dvaita*) is a relation neither of merger into a state of oneness lacking all internal *distinction*, nor a relation of *separation* into duality. On the contrary it is a relation of *inseparable distinction* – one in which individuality and egoity is not lost or surrendered but simultaneously *transcended and preserved* - embraced within the unbounded or ultimate awareness (*Anuttara*) that is its very source.

I would suggest that the Abrahamic concept of the divine as an ‘absolute ego’ is a projection of the finite and bounded human ego in both its personal and historical development. To begin with we have the infantile, aggressive and destructively egotistic god of the Old Testament - one jealously and zealously protective of its superiority to other gods (other egos). Later we see the emergence of a father god or ‘super-ego’ strong enough to allow the ego itself to show a more compassionate side – made flesh in the figure of Jesus. Islam, on the other hand, presents us with a divinised *abstraction* of egoity - one dissociated from the human bodily form and indeed from any form human of human representation or embodiment. Yet if the more primordial tradition of Indian religious thought and practice has, as so many have believed, a pivotal futural role to play in transforming today’s world, then surely this role lies in *transcending* all Abrahamic god-concepts which conceive the divine as an absolute ego or ‘subject’ standing separate and apart from the world of its creation. For paradoxically, such a ‘God’ ultimately takes on the nature not of an absolute subject or ego but of an absolute *object* in the literal German sense, a *Gegenstand* standing ‘over and against’ (*gegen*) the world, and only ‘under and against’ which human beings can come to know themselves. Yet as we are reminded by Utpaladeva:

“... things that have fallen to the level of objects of cognition are essentially awareness.”

In the historic development of human social and economic life, as Marx observed, diverse monotheisms have transformed themselves into a singular monotheism - “the



monotheism of money” – just as religion and ‘spirituality’ itself have increasingly become a money-making business. Only that more recent and radicalised form of Islam, rooted as it is in the suffering of the oppressed, has turned its own brand of Abrahamic monotheism into a weapon of resistance to Judaeo-Christian monotheism. It has been able to do so through a form of religiosity which works by transforming a *psychological* surrender of ego-hood of a sort imposed by social-economic and military-political oppression into a powerful source of inner *spiritual* strength, one as independent of the world as Allah.

Returning to Marx however, it was his understanding that humanity’s most historically primordial state of social-economic development was a culture of ‘primitive communism’ in which nature and its products were ‘owned’ by the human *senses* and by human *sensuous activity* - and not as a form of private property. I believe that ‘tantra’ too has its roots in such aboriginal cultures, and that these were characterised also by a wholly different type of human ‘consciousness’ - one in which human beings experienced all things as sentient or aware, and experienced human awareness as something capable of flowing into and merging with the awareness of a river, rock, animal or plant - and extending to the ultimate horizons of the earth, sky and cosmos. The primordial character of this mode of awareness was reaffirmed by Rudolf Steiner:

“The truth is that the human being is not by any means confined within his skin ...”

“One of the worst forms of *Maya* is the belief that man remains firmly within his skin... In reality you extend over the horizon you survey.”

Yet in a global culture which – setting aside a few still-surviving aboriginal cultures – has, as Marx observed, long since been ruled by private property and property relations, ego-identity reigns supreme. Thus it is that ten thousand times each day the ego or ‘I’ works its way unawares into the life of every human being. It does so by instantaneously *seizing on and appropriating* as its own property and ‘own being’ every element of human experience that emerges into awareness – whether a thought or emotion, sensation or perception, impulse or desire. Indeed one can understand the very essence of human

egoity as the very activity of appropriating or ‘enowning’ experience, and in this way binding and identifying individuals with what they think of as ‘their’ experience - rather than with the universal awareness out of which *all* elements of experiencing – including our experience of self - arise. Instead, through the egoic activity of owning or appropriating experience for itself (*anavamala*) awareness or subjectivity as such comes to be experienced as something which is ‘yours’ or ‘mine’ – the property of a finite subject - rather than as the very essence of the divine. Similarly ‘I-consciousness’ is *not* experienced as a (non-genitive) awareness of a self or ‘I’ but the other way round - as something egotistically owned or possessed by that ‘I’.

Finite, human ‘ego-identity’ then, is something retained solely by *owning or disowning* the elements of our everyday experiencing, by *possessing or being possessed* by them. The ultimate ‘mantra’ of the limited or finite ego is not the ultimate phoneme ‘A’ but the common pronoun ‘I’. For the ego it is not that there is *an awareness* of this or that perception, thought or feeling. Instead its mantra is that “ ‘I’ perceive this or that”, “ ‘I’ think this or that..”, “ ‘I’ feel this or that” - or “‘I’ *am* this or that. This is not ‘I-consciousness’ in the transcendent or absolute sense suggested by the *tantras* but a consciousness bound by and in bondage to the ego’s own innately *possessive* ‘identifications’. Freeing the “essential ego” or ‘I’ from these ‘I-identifications’ requires that we recognise any “essential” or “absolute” ego as identical with awareness as such (*Chit*) rather than with any thing, being or self we happen to experience or be aware of. This is the implicit principle of *Trika Shaivism* that I term ‘The Awareness Principle’ – in contrast to ‘The Being Principle’ or ‘The Ego Principle’. It was the latter principle I believe, that led both Vaishnavism and Christianity to an identification of the divine not just with an ‘absolute ego’ but with an ‘absolute person’ - Krishna or Christ. In contrast, I see the importance of ‘Kashmir Shaivism’ precisely in preserving and refining an understanding of the Hindu deities – not least Shiva – not as divine persons but as *personifications* of a divine universal awareness (*Anuttara*). For it is only in this way that the sublime Shaivist *monism* of pure awareness can be protected from distortion or substitution by both religious and secular, spiritual and scientific *monotheisms* – and can instead assume its vital role of challenging and subverting what is effectively a

destructively competitive global ‘polytheism of monotheisms’ – of commodities – united by a singular “monotheism of money”.

In his essay on ‘World Civilisation’, J.L. Mehta reminds us that “The Sanskrit word *chit* ... is translated as ‘consciousness’, which in Heidegger is a symbol of ‘modern [egoic] subjectivism’ and reminiscent of Western philosophical usage from Descartes on”. In reality “*chit* is to ‘consciousness’ ... as Being is to beings in the ontological language of the Western tradition.” He adds that “It is perhaps this linguistic problem” that “caused no end of trouble” to Hegel and Heidegger and led to the distorted interpretation of Indian philosophical ‘subjectivism’ in terms of a Western-style concept of the ‘I’ as an egoic ‘subject’ of consciousness. The danger of this “linguistic problem” is still with us, reminding us of Heidegger’s profound comprehension that unless we “step back” from and uncover the presuppositions still concealed within the very *language* of Western thought, there is not yet even the *possibility* of a true understanding or ‘dialogue’ with Indian or Asian thought - for all dialogue (*dia-logos*) is essentially a dialogue *of* languages and not of scholars, priests or even philosophers.

The aim of this essay will have been fulfilled if it serves to reveal and question a principal presupposition of Western thought and languages of the sort it is still all too easy to ignore and superimpose on the Sanskrit language of the *tantras* i.e., the presupposition that awareness (*chit*) is the private property of beings, bodies or egoic subjects. The presupposition reduces awareness in its divine-universal character to ‘consciousness’ in the ordinary Western sense of this term, a sense that corresponds more to *chitti* than to *chit* – and thus belongs more to the realm of the individual being or *jiva*, rather than to that ultimate or supreme awareness that is *Anuttara* or *Paramshiva*.

This awareness, according to Abhinavagupta, is “not grounded in anything, is not Energy, the Great Goddess; nor is it God, the power-holder ...” “It is not an object of meditation because...there is none who meditates ...”. Awareness *as such*, in other words, is neither a subject nor object of meditation, but the condition for an awareness of ourselves and others *as* subjects, as well as for a recognition of seemingly insentient ‘objects’ as diverse phenomenal forms of awareness or subjectivity. The *awareness* of a thing - or of any

apparent ‘object’ of consciousness - is not itself a thing but something innately thing-free and object-free. Similarly, *the awareness* of a thought is *not itself* a thought but something innately thought-free. So also is the awareness of an ego or ‘I’ something essentially ego-free or ‘egoless’. Yet this very awareness is also the source of all thoughts, all things - and of all individualised or ‘egoic’ consciousness, and immanent within them all. This is the as-yet unthought principle of monistic Shaivism I call ‘The Awareness Principle’ – the principle that ‘awareness is everything’ and that ‘everything is an awareness’.

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## Appendix:

From Marx's essay 'On the Jewish Question':

The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner ... because, through him and also apart from him, *money* has become a world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations. The Jews have emancipated themselves insofar as the Christians have become Jews.

Christianity sprang from Judaism. It has merged again in Judaism.

From the outset, the Christian was the theorizing Jew, the Jew is, therefore, the practical Christian, and the practical Christian has become a Jew again.

Christianity had only in semblance overcome real Judaism. It was too *noble-minded*, too spiritualistic to eliminate the crudity of practical need in any other way than by elevation to the skies.

Christianity is the sublime thought of Judaism, Judaism is the common practical application of Christianity, but this application could only become general after Christianity as a developed religion had completed *theoretically* the estrangement of man from himself and from nature. Only then could Judaism achieve universal dominance and make alienated man and alienated nature into *alienable*, vendible objects subjected to the slavery of egoistic need and to trading.

The monotheism of the Jew ... is in reality the polytheism of the many needs, a polytheism which makes even the lavatory an object of divine law. *Practical need, egoism*, is the principle of *civil society*, and as such appears in pure form as soon as civil society has fully given birth to the political state. The god of *practical need and self-interest* is *money*.

Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist. Money degrades all the gods of man – and turns them into commodities. Money is the universal self-established *value* of all things. It has, therefore, robbed the whole world – both the world of men and nature – of its specific value. Money is the estranged essence of man's work and man's existence, and this alien essence dominates him, and he worships it.

