Isvara is Brahman with the upādhi or conditioning of māyā. The two powers of māyā are the āvarana and vikṣepa sakti. Āvarana sakti veils the Self and the vikṣepa sakti projects the world of names and forms. All these have been elaborated in earlier essays. In this essay let us see how Isvara is at once the efficient cause (nimitta kāraṇa) and material cause (upādāna kāraṇa) of the universe. In vedanta this concept is termed Isvara being the ‘abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa’. Let us now understand these two terms — nimitta kāraṇa and upādāna kāraṇa.

**Nimitta Kāraṇa and Upādāna Kāraṇa**

Creation necessitates two factors – the material substance from which a thing is created and an intelligent principle which fashions the creation. For example to create a pot you need the clay and the potter. The substance from which the kārya i.e., the effect is created is called the upādāna kāraṇa or the ‘material cause’. The intelligent principle that propels and fashions the creation, is called the nimitta kāraṇa or the ‘efficient cause’. These terms will become amply clear when we understand them with a few examples. In the creation of a pot, clay, the substance or material from which the pot is made is the upādāna kāraṇa or the material cause and the potter, the intelligent being who fashions the pot out of the clay is the nimitta kāraṇa or the efficient cause. In the creation of gold

---

1 For Isvara refer to August 2003 issue of Tapovan Prasad and for the two powers of māyā the September 2003 issue.

2 One more cause is sometimes pointed out – the sahakāri kāraṇa or the accessory cause. This consists of the potter-wheel and the stick that are the accessories in the creation of the pot. Even these ‘accessory causes’ are considered to be part and parcel of the efficient cause in many Vedantic texts.
ornaments, the goldsmith is the *nimitta kāraṇa* and gold is *upādāna kāraṇa*.

**Precise Definitions**

The above two terms have been analysed much in Vedānta and have been precisely defined.

1. The following is the definition of *upādāna kāraṇa*.

   \[
   \text{yat kāryasvarūpe praviśati, yadvā kāryasya sthitiḥ nāsti, tat upādānakāraṇam ucyate.} 
   \]

   *Upādāna kāraṇa* or the material cause is that which pervades the effect and without which the effect will not be there.

   Let us relate the definition to the example of clay and the pot. Clay is the *upādāna kāraṇa* or the material cause of the pot because:
   a. It pervades the pot and
   b. Without the clay there would be no pot

2. Now coming to the definition of *nimitta kāraṇa*.

   \[
   \text{yat kāryasvarūpe na praviśati, kintu kāryāt prthak sthitāṃ sat kāryam utpādayati, yasya nāśena kāryam na nāsyati tat nimittakāraṇam iti abhidhiyate.} 
   \]

   *Nimitta kāraṇa* or the efficient cause is that which does not pervade the effect, and standing distinct from the effect, creates the effect, and in the destruction of which the effect is not destroyed.

---

The famous Hindi Vedānta text *Vicāra Sāgara* of Śrī Śvāmi Niścaladāsa has been translated and brilliantly commented in Tamil by Śrī Sivarāya a century and a half ago. The noted scholar Śvāmi Vāṣudeva Brahmendra Sarasvatī has translated this Tamil work into Sanskrit. The above definitions are reproductions from his monumental translation.

Tapovan Prasad
When we relate the definition to the example we find that the potter is the nimitta kāraṇa or the efficient cause of the pot because
a. He does not pervade the pot like the clay.
b. He stands distinctly apart from the clay and the pot.
c. And even in his absence the pot continues to exist.

The Vedic Tangle

Is Īśvara the nimitta kāraṇa or the upādāna kāraṇa of the universe? If the Lord is the nimitta kāraṇa i.e., the efficient cause, then he has to be different from the world. But the Vedas declare that he pervades the creation — tatrṣrṣtvā tadevānuprāviśat — having created it. He pervaded it. As defined earlier, the efficient cause has to remain different from the creation, as seen in the case of the efficient cause of the pot, the potter being different from the pot.

If it is not possible to posit the Lord as the nimittakāraṇa why not consider the Lord as the upādāna kāraṇa, the material cause of the universe? This would not be logically tenable because the world is inert and if the Lord were the material cause of the universe then it would amount to the Lord being inert. To explain — the effect being the gold ornament helps us to infer the nature of the cause also as being that of gold. In the same way the material cause of the inert world has to be only inert and not otherwise. But the Upanisads emphatically declare the Lord to be the ‘very embodiment of Consciousness — prajñānaghana’. Also the Vedas declare that the Lord stands apart from the created universe — atyatiṣṭhat dasāṅgulam. Since the material cause cannot stand apart from the effect, we cannot posit the Lord to be the material cause. Thus both ways we have a problem — a seemingly insurmountable scriptural tangle.

Further, the contradictory nature of the statements within the Scriptures itself — some claiming that the Lord pervades the creation and others extolling him as distinctly apart from the creation — is disturbing. Is there any way out of it?

The Vedantic Solution

Vedānta says that all these seemingly unconquerable problems are surmounted effortlessly if one understands the true nature of Īśvara. Īśvara is Brahman with the upādhi or conditioning of Māyā.
i.e., Īśvara = Brahman + Māyā. The Brahman aspect of Īśvara is of the nature of Consciousness and the Māyā aspect of Īśvara is inert. The Māyā aspect of Īśvara is the cause of the universe. Thus the inert universe has the inert Māyā as the upādāna kāraṇa or the material cause. The Vedic statements that talk of the Lord pervading the creation is only with respect to His upādhi — māyā, which is the material cause. And as the material cause it is inert, needless to say He pervades the inert universe.

But as the Brahman aspect, Īśvara is jñāna-svarūpa, pure knowledge. In this aspect Īśvara becomes the nimitta kāraṇa or the efficient cause — the one who fashions this enormously wonderful and variegated creation. In this aspect He is at once distinct and unaffected by the inert world of names and forms. Thus, the Vedic statements that speak of the Lord as being distinctly apart from the creation is only with respect to Īśvara’s Brahman aspect and not the Īśvara’s māyā aspect. Note that by definition the nimitta kāraṇa has to remain apart from the effect. Thus Advaita Vedānta solves this seemingly convoluted problem quite effortlessly. We thus see that Īśvara is both the efficient cause and the material cause.

The Upaniṣadic example

One would say that the above answer is strikingly beautiful for its ingenuity. However, are there real life examples where we can see one and the same thing being the upādāna kāraṇa as well as the nimitta kāraṇa? Or is it just a philosophical hypothesis that has to be swallowed unquestioningly? Swami Sadananda in Vedānta-Sūra takes the example of the common spider and its web example provided in the Mundaka Upaniṣad and clarifies.

\[
\text{\textit{Saktidvayavad ajñānopahitam ca ity samvadyasvapipradhanatah nimitam svapādhhipradhanataya upādānam ca bhavati. Yatha luta tantukaryam prati svarupadhpitatah nimitam svarūpaśrīpradhanataya upādānam ca bhavati.}}
\]

\[1\] yathorjanānabhiḥ sṛṣṭi grhyate ca...... Mundaka Upaniṣad 1.1.7

Tapovan Prasad 29
Consciousness conditioned by ignorance, possessed of the two powers, when considered from its own standpoint is the efficient cause and when considered from the standpoint of its upādhi or conditioning is the material cause of the universe. Just as the spider, when considered from the standpoint of its own self, is the efficient cause of the web and when looked upon from the standpoint of its body, is also the material cause of the web.

This is a brilliant example to bring home the idea of one and the same thing being both the material as well as the efficient cause. The spider creates the web from its own glands. It does not use any material apart from itself to create the web. Thus its own body becomes the material cause, the upādāna kāraṇa. But as a conscious entity it conceives the web design. Then it becomes the efficient cause, the nimitta kāraṇa. In the same way the upādhi (conditioning or adjunct) of Īśvara, the inert māyā becomes the upādāna kāraṇa and the conscious aspect of Īśvara becomes the nimitta kāraṇa.

Another example that can be used to elucidate this point is the classic vedāntic example of a dream. The mind stuff becomes the upādāna kāraṇa and the mind-conditioned consciousness becomes the nimitta kāraṇa of the dream world.

**Conclusion**

We have thus elaborately seen how Īśvara is both the nimitta kāraṇa and upādāna kāraṇa. In Vedanta this is technically termed the Lord being the abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa — abhinna = same or non-different, nimitta kāraṇa = efficient cause and upādāna kāraṇa = the material cause. This is a very important concept in Vedanta and it is necessary to understand it thoroughly.

It would be ideal to summarize this whole discussion with the blessed words of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya — “As Īśvara is endowed with limitless power, the Lord projects, in conjunction with His upādhi, māyā, the whole universe comprising of both the sentient and the

---

**SWEET THOUGHT**

Man is never punished for his sins but by his sins.

Swami Chinmayananda
non-sentient. Let no one raise the question as to how the Lord, the one existent Reality, devoid of a second, and without anything external to Himself, creates all this by Himself. The Lord Himself is both the material and the efficient cause; and He creates, preserves and destroys the universe which consists of the moving and the unmoving alike. As pure Consciousness, where the characteristics of the Lord are predominant, He is the efficient cause of the universe. But when the adjunct of māyā is predominant, the Lord is regarded as the material cause of the universe. When the spider weaves its web, in as much as it is endowed with consciousness, it is the efficient cause of the web. But in as much as it draws the filament from its own body, it is also the material cause of it. The same law holds good in relation to the Lord and the universe!". May the grace of the Lord be with us in understanding and reveling in His true glory! May we by His grace become one with Him!!

1 Sarva-vedānta-sūrā-sangrahaḥ, verses 330-334

Meet life as it reaches us. With or without the things our minds demand, our life can be a glorious joy; a brilliant success. But for this we must discover something else to depend upon. That something Else is the Everything, the glorious Radhe-Shyam, seek Him in yourself. In the hushed silence of inspired joy, in the roaring laughter of silent meditation, in the motionless dance of ecstasy, in the freezing heat of tapas, He whispers His deafening message, "I am you – you are Me."

Swami Chinmayananda