



The Teaching Tradition of Advaita Vedanta

by Swami Dayananda



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I call myself a traditional teacher of Vedanta. Teacher of Vedanta should be enough; why this adjective "traditional?" I am constrained to use this word for a number of reasons. Advaita Vedanta is presented by many modern academicians as well as several Hindu Swamis as a school of thought, promising an experience of oneness of the individual soul (jīva) with the Lord (Īśvara). For this promised experience, it is contended that certain practices are required which vary according to the person prescribing them. In this article I attempt to analyze some of these contentions, more to help you see what is traditional Vedanta than to criticise any given person.

Advaita Vedanta

The subject matter of Vedanta is what is most desirable (hita) for the individual. Analyzing the various ends in life (puruṣārthas): security (artha); pleasure (kāma); and dharma (puṇya) for the hereafter; Vedanta presents mokṣa (freedom from limitation) as the most desirable.

Analyzing these puruṣārthas, the Muṇḍakopaniṣad says, "nāsti akṛtaḥ kṛtena, the uncreated is not created by an action." Kṛta means what is made or created. Akṛta means what is not created, something real (vastu) that exists without being created. The same vastu is presented in other Upaniṣads as satyam. The Chāndogyopaniṣad says, "Before (creation) this (world) existed only as sat."¹ Since sat existed before the creation of this world, which includes time, it is outside the scope of time and therefore timeless, eternal. Being already existent, sat is not produced by any action performed.² The self, ātmā, is equated to this satyam and therefore, you are satyam.

Knowledge of this satyam as oneself is the most desirable puruṣārtha and therefore the only real end in life (paramapuruṣārtha). In the Chāndogyopaniṣad, this same knowledge is presented as freedom from sorrow now, and from the cycle of saṃsāra (a life of becoming) forever. Self-knowledge being the solution to the problem of sorrow, the subject matter unfolded by the Upaniṣads naturally becomes the most desirable end for the human being. Therefore, the Muṇḍakopaniṣad advises a seeker to go to a teacher who is well-versed in the śāstra in order to gain knowledge.³

Is Vedanta A School of Thought?

A school of thought is always the contention of a given person or persons. Being what it is, a contention is subject to dispute. The contender's means of knowledge, such as perception and inference, should find access to the object of any contention. The contender's self, which is the subject matter of Vedanta, is not available for the contender's means of knowledge. If it is, then who is the subject who employs the means of knowledge? Suppose I am the subject. How can I be the object about which I have a contention? So the subject matter of Vedanta, which is ātmā, can never be a school of thought.

Any thought regarding the ātmā is a speculation. The Upaniṣads themselves make this clear, "Understand that to be Brahman (ātmā) which is not objectified by the mind and because of which the mind knows everything."⁴ Analyzing the subject matter of Vedanta in the light of various schools of thought prevalent in his time, Vyāsa presents Vedanta as a means of knowledge (pramāṇa) for knowing Brahmātmā (the self being Brahman).⁵ Therefore, to consider Vedanta as another school of thought along with Sāṅkhya, Vaiśeṣika, etc., is not reasonable. There are many books in circulation that discuss the six schools of Indian philosophy; Vedanta is included in these books as one of the schools. This inclusion is not justified because, unlike a school of thought, Vedanta is not within the realm of speculation. The subject matter of the entire Veda is pramāṇāntara-anadhigatam, one that various means of knowledge such as perception and inference have no access to. There is no way to prove or disprove the existence of puṇya and pāpa. So, too, one has no epistemological access to areas such as heaven, rebirth, and the structure of a ritual and its connection to an end. These areas fall outside the usual means of knowledge and therefore are not subject to any contentions.

From the nature of its subject matter, the Veda has to be looked upon as an independent means of knowledge (svataḥ-pramāṇam). The Upaniṣads, forming the last portion of the Veda, also have a subject matter which is not available for sensory perception and inference. Therefore, to label Vedanta as a school of thought only reveals a lack of understanding about the nature of its subject matter.

There are teachers (ācāryas) who interpret the sentences of Vedanta (Vedanta-vākyas) differently; but all these ācāryas look upon Vedanta as a pramāṇa. How valid are their interpretations? The answer to this question will lead to an analysis (mīmāṃsā) of the sentences of the various Upaniṣads. In this analysis, we employ reasoning (yukti), grammar (vyākaraṇa), and other factors that constitute hermeneutics.

By such inquiry (vicāra) the vision (tātparyā) of Vedānta will become clear. Therefore, the interpretations of Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Vallabha and others who accept Vedānta as a means of knowledge cannot be considered schools of thought, but only as interpretations of Vedānta.

If Vedānta is a pramāṇa, then viewing it as such is what is called śraddhā (trust in the validity of Vedānta pending knowledge). To verify a means of knowledge, you do not require another means of knowledge. The validity of a pramāṇa rests in itself. To know that my eyes see, I have to use my eyes and see. To know that Vedānta is a means of knowledge I have to expose myself dispassionately to Vedānta, with śraddhā, and see whether what it unfolds is true. If what Vedānta says is contradicted by any other means of knowledge, then the whole subject matter of Vedānta has to be dismissed as not valid or it has to be looked into again. One cannot say, "Because I see this man, he does not talk." Seeing does not contradict hearing. Similarly, my perception or inference about various things in the world does not in any way contradict the vision unfolded by Vedānta.

The Vision of Vedānta

The vision of Advaita Vedānta is an equation of the identity between the jīva (individual) and Īśvara (the Lord). This vision of oneness (aikya) is not available for perception or inference. Nor is the oneness that is unfolded by Vedānta contradicted by perception or inference. Therefore, oneness is purely in terms of understanding the equation. Vedānta does not promise a salvation to the soul. In its vision, the soul is already free from any limitation. Freedom from limitation (mokṣa) is a fact and the release of the individual from this sense of limitation is the outcome of understanding the equation. Therefore, the entire teaching of Vedānta can be expressed in one sentence: tat tvam asi (that thou art). All other sentences in the Upaniṣads are only meant to prove this equation.

The proofs consist of a number of methods (prakriyās) adopted by the Upaniṣads, and by the teachers in the tradition, to communicate the vision of the mahāvākya (the sentence revealing the oneness of the individual and the Lord): tat tvam asi. To unfold this identity between the jīva and Īśvara, Vedānta employs these prakriyās. If a system of philosophy is formulated based on these prakriyās, the whole purpose of Vedānta, which is to reveal the reality (vastu), is defeated. Therefore, Vedānta is a pramāṇa only to reveal the oneness of ātmā, the self, with Īśvara.

Vedanta is not a pramāṇa to prove the existence of ātmā, for the only self-existent, self-evident thing in this world is oneself, ātmā. The whole world (kṣetra), including my physical body, mind, and senses becomes evident to me, the knower (kṣetrajña). The kṣetrajña, ātmā, is self-revealing and therefore self-evident, while everything else becomes evident to the self. Any evidence is in terms of knowledge. Any knowledge implies the presence of consciousness or awareness. The invariable factor in all forms of knowledge is but this awareness.

Kāraṇa-kārya-prakriyā

One of the main prakriyās is kāraṇa-kārya-vāda. Brahman is presented in the Upaniṣads as the cause of everything: "From which all these elements have come, by which all these are sustained and unto which all these go back, understand that to be Brahman".⁶ Further, Brahman, the cause of the world, is satyam. The world (jagat), presented in the śruti in the form of the five basic subtle and gross elements, is the effect (kārya) of satyam (kāraṇa). Jagat, being a kārya, is mithyā as revealed by the famous vācārambhaṇa-śruti.⁷ The śruti presents the kārya as neither satyam, that which exists; nor tuccham, that which does not exist; but as mithyā, that which has a dependent existence. The jīva's physical body, mind and senses are all within the kārya and are, therefore, mithyā; but the jīva is not created and its nature (svarūpa) is satyam, jñānam, anantam, the limitless awareness that is the reality of everything.

If a product (kārya) is non-separate from the kāraṇa, the material cause, then the cause and effect are not two separate things. The effect is not separate from the cause and the cause, being what it is, is independent of the effect. The Chāndogyopaniṣad, therefore, makes an opening statement (pratijñā) that knowing one thing everything would as well be known. This pratijñā is established by proving that the kārya is non-separate from the kāraṇa. Therefore, the kārya is essentially the kāraṇa. One or more clay pots is but clay. While there can be plurality for the kārya, there is only one clay from the standpoint of the cause. If the elemental jagat which includes my physical body, prāṇa, senses and mind is from one nondual Brahman, then that jagat, being an effect, is non-separate from the cause, Brahman. Brahman is the uncreated "tvam" (you, the self) which is satyam, jñānam, anantam. The recognition of this fact that I am that satyam brahma and that this jagat is non-separate from me, while I am independent of the jagat, is the result of the teaching of Vedanta. That recognition of oneself as sarvātmā (as the whole) is, in other words, the removal of ignorance, which is the ultimate end called mokṣa. The Upaniṣads, praising the one who has the knowledge of oneself as everything, say "that one crosses

sorrow."⁸ The Upaniṣads rightly say that there is no saṃsāra for that person because he or she is free from all sense of limitation.

Avasthā-traya-prakriyā

Another important prakriyā employed in the Upaniṣads is an analysis of the three states of experience: waking, dream and sleep. In this analysis, the śāstra employs anvaya-vyatireka reasoning⁹ to arrive at the true nature of oneself. The waker and waking world are absent in both dream and sleep. The dreamer and the dream world are absent in both waking and sleep. In sleep the status of the dreamer and the waker is absent.

If the status of the subject is real, one cannot give up this status at any time. What is intrinsic to an object should be present in the object as long as the object exists. If it is not present, then it is an incidental attribute.

An example often cited in this context is the crystal assuming a color in the presence of a colored object. If the color is intrinsic to the crystal, it will be present therein as long as the crystal exists. But when the colored object is taken away, the color which was seen in the crystal disappears. Therefore, the color assumed by the crystal is incidental (upādhi-kṛta). In the sleep experience, and also in the waking state where there is absence of subject-object relationship, there is no status for oneself as the subject. Hence, the subject-object status must be assumed to be incidental. Analyzing these experiences, the śāstra presents the ātmā as free from all attributes imputed to it. Any attributes are purely incidental, and not intrinsic. If ātmā is attribute-free, is it non-existent (śūnya)? It cannot be śūnya because the concept of śūnya itself is a piece of knowledge implying a subject, a knower. The śāstra describes the ātmā as jyotiḥ, jñānam, sākṣī, cetā and so on. All these words mean the content of the subject, the knower, which we may call awareness.

Awareness is invariable in all the states of experience while awareness itself is free from any attribute. Therefore, when the śāstra uses the word attribute-free ātmā (nirviśeṣa-ātmā) it means the svarūpa of ātmā as pure awareness. All attributes such as doership and enjoyership are purely incidental. Ācārya Gauḍapāda and others who came later deftly handle this prakriyā presented in Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad to unfold the fact that the self is Brahman, and the world, implying the subject-object relationship, is purely an incidental attribute of Brahman and is, therefore, mithyā.

Pañca-kośa-prakriyā

Another well-known prakriyā is the analysis of the pañca kośas. In Taittirīyopaniṣad we see this prakriyā. Kośa means a cover, a sheath. Five kośas are presented as the covers for ātmā. If ātmā is invariable in all situations, there cannot be any cover for the ātmā. So how do the kośas cover? We have to understand that they are seeming covers (kośavat ācchādakatvāt kośaḥ). In the error born of self-ignorance, there are five universal erroneous notions. The cause (nimitta) for each notion is said to be a kośa. The physical body (anna-maya) is one kośa inasmuch as it is taken to be oneself. I am mortal, I am tall, I am male, I am female—all these notions are imputed to ātmā, with reference to the physical body. This being universal, the physical body becomes a kośa. So too, when one says I am hungry, I am thirsty, ātmā is taken to be subject to hunger and thirst and prāṇa-maya becomes a kośa. The notions that I am sad, I am happy, I am agitated, are due to mano-maya. The vijñāna-maya is also a kośa because the sense of doership, which is its attribute, is taken to belong to ātmā and the notion, "I am the doer" is the outcome. Ānanda-maya is a kośa with reference to enjoyership. While the presence of ātmā is there in all five kośas, ātmā itself is free from all of them.

A teacher has to show that while the kośas are ātmā, ātmā is always free of the kośas, being unconnected (asaṅga). Ātmā is to be unfolded following the sthūlārundhatī-nyāya.¹⁰ The Taittirīyopaniṣad presents this method by first introducing anna-maya which is sthūla-deha, the gross physical body, as ātmā.¹¹ Then, by saying that there is another ātmā, it negates the previous notion. The process continues until the real ātmā as Brahman is pointed out as the basis of ānanda-maya. Here the ātmā is not to be taken as something hidden, as it is frequently interpreted in modern Vedānta, where the kośas are considered to cover the ātmā. Modern Vedānta talks about some kind of transcendental experience obtaining beyond all these kośas. This is a typical example of how a prakriyā is taken as a system and the subsequent inconsistencies are left unexplained.

Sarvātma-bhāva

As I have briefly shown, the prakriyās adopted by the Upaniṣads are meant to reveal the truth of oneself being the attribute-free, limitless Brahman. Since Brahma-ātmā does not undergo any change, whatsoever, the kāraṇa-kārya prakriyā is only meant to unfold the fact that the self is limitless and the world is non-separate from it. The vision of Vedānta is not so much in presenting a cause-effect relationship between Brahman and the jagat as it is in unfolding the jagat as non-separate

from Brahman. This sarvātma-bhāva, recognition of oneself as the whole, is the vision (tātparya).

The avasthā-traya-prakriyā is not for presenting a fourth state of experience, but only to point out that the invariable awareness in all three states is Brahman, the adhiṣṭhāna (substratum) of the entire world. The pañca-kośa-prakriyā does not present a hidden ātmā but only points out a universal mistake committed at each of the five levels of experience. The attributes of kāraṇa, avasthā, kośa, and others initially mentioned for Brahman are later negated in the prakriyās. By this negation (apavāda) the attributes are seen as only a super-imposition (adhyāropa) on Brahman. This method is called adhyāropa-apavāda-nyāya. The way in which the prakriyās are handled, utilizing this method of adhyāropa-apavāda, is important to understand. If Vedānta is presented as a system of philosophy, there is no handling involved; what counts is only a clear presentation of the system. If the vision of sarvātma-bhāva is to be unfolded, it is altogether different.

Role of Guru

A guru becomes an important factor in gaining self-knowledge because the handling of prakriyās is involved in unfolding the truth. If one cannot handle the prakriyās, one can only call oneself a guru and tell one's disciples that Vedānta is a theory and that practice gives the experience of the self. But when Vedānta is a means of knowledge, it is neither a practice which will bring an experience of the self nor a theory. The self, which is the content of all experiences, is awareness by nature (anubhūti-svarūpa) and it does not become an object of experience implying another hypothetical subject besides the self.

The failure to understand the subject matter and the nature of the prakriyās adopted by the śāstra have given rise to a number of confusions in the minds of both seekers and masters. Let us analyse some of the areas of confusion here:

Ātmā-Bliss Confusion

Brahma-ātmā is presented in the śāstra as ānanda. This one experiential word ānanda is frequently a cause for confusion. The Taittirīyopaniṣad presents Brahman as satyam, jñānam, anantam. These three words are equivalent to sat, cit and ānanda. The meaning of the word ānanda is ananta (limitlessness). The word satyam, which is generally an attribute to a thing existent in time, is in apposition with the word anantam. Because of the qualifying word anantam, satyam is released from the

three-fold limitations of space, time and object-status.¹² At the same time, being the cause of everything, that satyam is the truth of everything which is dependent upon it. And satyam is also jñānam, which as a word can mean knower or knowledge or even known. But with the word anantam, the limited meaning of jñānam is removed and jñānam, the invariable conscious presence in all these three, becomes its meaning. The invariable content of knower and known and knowledge is awareness which is satyam. This satyam, jñānam, anantam, the awareness which is ātmā, is predicated to Brahman, which is the cause of the entire jagat. Later in the Taittirīyopaniṣad and elsewhere in the Upaniṣads, the word ānanda is used in the place of ananta which is the svarūpa of ātmā.

Here the word ānanda can be translated as bliss if ānanda is experiential. But when it is a word unfolding the svarūpa of ātmā, its translation can never be bliss. A special bliss experienced is not going to announce, "I am ātmā Bliss" so that it can be recognized as unlike any other bliss experienced before. Even if there is an experience of bliss, as modern Vedanta promises, the experience is only as good as one interprets it. And the interpretation is again only as good as one's knowledge. Self-knowledge requires a means of knowledge for which we have no refuge except the śruti. If the śruti is presented as theory, the seeker's initial confusion gets confounded.

Then what is the necessity for using the experiential word ānanda? The word serves two purposes:

1. It shows that the knowledge of ātmā is desirable because ātmā is ānanda-svarūpa.
2. It shows that the source of all forms of ānanda is nothing but the limitlessness of ātmā.

If ānanda is translated as bliss instead of limitlessness or fullness, the seeker is led to believe that there is a special bliss hitherto not experienced. In fact, the śāstra says that any form of ānanda, whether it is born of sensory experience (viṣayānanda) or in the wake of some discovery (vidyānanda) or by disciplines of yoga (yogānanda) is nothing but svarūpānanda. The word ānanda, therefore, is meant to draw the attention of the seeker to oneself as the source of all ānanda. That means the seeker is limitlessness, fullness, which is experienced as happiness in a conducive state of mind. The recognition of this fact removes the error of seeing myself as unhappy, ignorant and mortal. So the meaning of the words sat, cit and ānanda is important in helping the seeker recognize the self as free from all attributes.

Knowledge and Realization Confusion

Another confusing word used in modern Vedānta is realization, often replacing the word knowledge. What is the difference between self-knowledge and self-realization? According to modern Vedānta, self-knowledge is intellectual while self-realization is experiential, and because of this difference the study of the śāstra is meant for self-knowledge while something else will become the means for self-realization. When the śruti is the means of knowledge to recognize the self which is always present (nitya-aparokṣa), how can there be an indirect knowledge of ātmā which has to be converted into direct realization by some unique method? Śravaṇam, mananam, and nididhyāsanam are prescribed in the śruti only for self-knowledge. The confusion of making a distinction between knowledge and realization is caused by not recognizing the invariable presence (aparokṣatvam) of ātmā in all situations and by not understanding the śruti as the means of knowledge to recognize the svarūpa of ātmā. That is the reason why we often hear that what we gather from the śruti is only intellectual knowledge. The adjective "intellectual" describing knowledge will be a necessity only when there is a nasal or dental knowledge. All forms of knowledge happen in the intellect. There is no such thing as intellectual knowledge. There can be two types of knowledge; one is direct and the other indirect. When the ātmā is invariably present, the knowledge of ātmā can only be direct.¹³

Mutli-path Confusion

Another popular modern prakriyā is that self-knowledge, which is mokṣa, can be gained in four different ways. Each way is called a yoga, different from the other three. One is jñāna-yoga, the second karma-yoga, the third bhakti-yoga and the fourth is haṭha-yoga. We are told that each yoga is meant for a different type of person. Obviously jñāna-yoga is meant for the intellectual, while karma-yoga is for the extrovert; bhakti-yoga is for the emotional; and haṭha-yoga is for the one who is not any of these three. The absurdity of this prakriyā becomes obvious when we inquire into the nature of self-knowledge. When modern Vedānta talks about mokṣa, it is thought that mokṣa can be gained by doing karma (action). What is not seen is that knowledge does not take place without an appropriate means of knowledge and that knowledge is not the result of action.

The śāstra presents two committed life-styles (niṣṭās) for mokṣa. One is a life of sannyāsa, a commitment to the pursuit of self-knowledge to the exclusion of any other puruṣārtha. This is jñāna-yoga. A sannyāsī does not have obligatory duties. The very Veda which enjoins obligatory

duties releases a sannyāsī from those duties and lets him pursue knowledge. The other life-style also involves a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, but along with karma as yoga. A karma-yogī is equally a mumukṣu (one who seeks freedom); but he pursues knowledge along with his obligatory duties. Therefore, a karma-yogī has obligatory duties, whereas a sannyāsī does not.

If there is a third person called a bhakti-yogī, does he have obligatory duties or not? If so, he is a karma-yogī. Is there a karma-yogī without bhakti? Is there even a sannyāsī without bhakti? And what does a bhakti-yogī do? If he does daily pūjās, it is kāyikaṃ karma; if he does kīrtana, that is vācikaṃ karma; if he does meditation invoking the grace of the Lord, then it is mānasaṃ karma. In fact, he is only a karma-yogī. Similarly, haṭha-yoga may be pursued as a discipline by a sannyāsī as well as by a karma-yogī, or even by one who is not a mumukṣu. That is why Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the third chapter of the Bhagavadgītā "lokesmin dvidvidhā niṣṭhā, there are only two committed life-styles for mokṣa." One is jñāna-yoga, a life of sannyāsa and the other is karma-yoga. Both the sannyāsī and the karma-yogī pursue knowledge.

One may argue that in the Gītā there is a separate chapter entitled, "Bhakti-Yoga." How then can there be only a two-fold yoga? Each chapter of the Gītā is given a title based on the predominant topic therein. And each one is called a yoga with an adjective to distinguish a given chapter from the others. Again by a wrong translation, we have eighteen yogas starting with the "Yoga of Arjuna's Sorrow." This is due to lack of knowledge of the Sanskrit word yoga which has different meanings. The word yoga is used here in the sense of topic. Anyone who looks into the Sanskrit thesaurus (amara-kośa) will find the word saṅgati (connection or in connection with, meaning topic) as a synonym for yoga. The predominant topic of the first chapter is Arjuna's sorrow; of the second chapter, knowledge; of the third, karma; of the fourth, renunciation of action by knowledge; the fifth, renunciation; the sixth, meditation; and so on. The topic of the twelfth chapter is bhakti. It is not bhakti-yoga. Even if there is a mention of the compound bhakti-yoga, it means only karma-yoga or jñāna-yoga according to the context.

Therefore, Lord Kṛṣṇa's statement that there are only two niṣṭhās is nowhere contradicted in the Gītā. That is why Śaṅkara, introducing the Gītā, mentions two life-styles (mārgas), pravṛtti and nivṛtti. Whether one takes to a life of sannyāsa or leads a life of karma-yoga, one has to have the required inner maturity in order to gain clarity in this knowledge. Because sannyāsa without inner maturity is not advised in the Gītā,¹⁴ a life of karma-yoga becomes a necessity for gaining that

maturity. The problem being ignorance and error, the solution is knowledge alone; in this, there is no choice. If at all there is a choice, it is only in terms of the appropriate life-style. The contention that there are many paths to gain mokṣa is false. An integral approach involving all four ways is also meaningless because there are not four in the first place to be integrated.

When the śāstra says that knowledge alone is mokṣa, it does not amount to fanaticism. If I say that the eyes alone see colors, I am not a fanatic. There is fanaticism only when I propogate a belief, which is subject to negation, as the only truth; or hold on to one means as true while there are many equally valid options.

When the self is mistaken for a limited being (saṃsārī), nothing other than knowledge can save the person. There can be different forms of prayer because prayer is an action (karma), and action is always open to choice. There can also be a choice between a life of sannyāsa and that of karma-yoga. But there is only one way of correcting the saṃsāritva (the life of becoming) of ātmā and that is by self-knowledge, for which we require a means of knowledge. That is why the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad states that ātmā has to be known, for which one has to do śāstra-vicāra.¹⁵

Mokṣa by Thought-free-mind Confusion

Confusion also exists in the thinking that self-realization is the elimination of all thoughts in the mind. The confusion comes from the statement that the ātmā is undivided (nirvikalpa). If absence of thought is self-knowledge, everyone is already enlightened, because who has not slept? Even between two thoughts there is absence of thought. If absence of thought for one split-second is not enlightenment, absence of thought for an hour is not going to make one wiser. It is obvious that absence of thought is not enlightenment. If a thinking person does not know, how will a non-thinking person know? If there is enlightenment in the absence of thought, it will be lost no sooner than a thought occurs; therefore, an enlightened person should be permanently without thoughts in order to remain enlightened. That means there will be no enlightened person at all.

The śāstra presents the ātmā as nirvikalpa. The vision of the śāstra is that while the knower, known, and knowledge are not separate from ātmā, ātmā is independent of all of them. In the Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad, as well as in the kārikā (an explanation in verse), the dreamer is cited as proof that there is no real division (vikalpa) such as dreamer, dream and dreamt, even though during the dream the division was taken to be real.

The purpose of the dream example is to make us see that the waker's experience of duality is not any different. While the difference between the waker and the dreamer is accepted in terms of qualities (viśeṣas), the basic nondifference is shown in detail in the kārīkā. In the Jyotir-Brāhmaṇa of the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, the invariable ātmā in dream and waking is presented as the light of awareness (jyotis-svarūpaḥ). The svarūpa of the ātmā is not the dreamer, dream, or dreamt; nor the waker, waking experience, or waker's objects. But the knower, known, and knowledge vikalpa is also non-separate from the ātmā and therefore the division is mithyā. It is obvious that ātmā is always nirvikalpa, in spite of the apparent division. That is what is said in the Kenopaniṣad, "in every form of knowledge, ātmā is understood by the discriminative as the invariable."¹⁶ Therefore, the knowledge, that I am thoughtfree (nirvikalpa) is in spite of the experience of vikalpa. This is entirely different from a state wherein there is absence of thoughts.

In aṣṭāṅga-yoga, the aṅgī, the main thing to be achieved, is nirvikalpa-samādhi, a state wherein there is the absence of subject-object relationship. Even though it is a desirable accomplishment, the state itself is jaḍa (inert) inasmuch as there is no thought (vṛtti) that can destroy ignorance. In samādhi (a mental state of absorption) and also when there are thoughts, what obtains as invariable is the svarūpa of ātmā which is nirvikalpa. Again, the notion that when there is no more thought then there is enlightenment implies a duality such as ātmā and thought. When thought is, ātmā is not. When ātmā is, thought is not. Both become equally real because one exists in the absence of the other. But that is not true. If one exists whether or not the other exists, both the objects enjoy the same order of reality, like the table and chair. If one exists only in the absence of the other, they also belong to the same order of reality, like illness and health. Both are equally real. Does thought deny ātmā? Is there a thinker without ātmā? Is there a thought without ātmā? In fact, thought is ātmā. But ātmā is not just a thought. Ātmā is satyam, being present in all situations, while situations are mithyā, dependent as they are for their existence upon ātmā. There is no mithyā without adhiṣṭhāna. The definition of mithyā is adhiṣṭhāna-ananyatvam, that which is non-separate from its cause.

The wave being not independent of water, you don't have to remove the wave in order to see the water. So too, if the thinker, the thought, and what is thought of are dependent upon the ātmā, which is satyam, you don't have to remove any of them to recognize the ātmā. The recognition is that all three are ātmā while ātmā is not any of them.

Vāsanā-kṣaya Confusion

There is a new and popular concept that the ātmā has become the jīva due to vāsanās (past impressions). The vāsanās, often equated to karma-phala (the results of action), like puṇya and pāpa, are assumed to have been gathered by the jīva who has no beginning. The exhaustion of vāsanās through any of the four yogas amounts to self-realization. The self-realized person who has no more vāsanās to perpetuate his life may continue to exist as a free person (jīvanmukta) due to others' vāsanās! The problems caused by this modern prakriyā are numerous.

If vāsanās cause the ātmā to become a jīva, vāsanās become a parallel reality to ātmā. Then ātmā ceases to be non-dual, and anyone who takes it as non-dual will suffer from an error. If vāsanās are not an independent reality, then they are mithyā, depending as they do for their existence upon ātmā. What is mithyā has to be understood as mithyā. Mithyā does not pose any problem if it is understood as such and therefore exhaustion of vāsanās is not necessary. Nor is it possible for anyone in a given incarnation to exhaust the vāsanās collected in an infinite number of births. In fact, they can be exhausted only in an infinite number of incarnations. So vāsanā-exhaustion itself is a dream. Even if the impossible vāsanā-exhaustion were achieved, the possibility of a jīvanmukta is nil. When all the vāsanās are exhausted the jīva ceases to be. What is left out is ātmā who is asaṅgaḥ, who is unaffected by and unconnected to anything. There is no way the asaṅga-ātmā will attract anything from samaṣṭi-prārabdha. If a nucleus (jīva) exists, then there are vāsanās to exhaust.

The śāstra mentions vāsanā-exhaustion, but it is purely with reference to the preparedness of the mind (antaḥkaraṇa-śuddhi). The vāsanās that the later ācāryas talk about are viśaya-vāsanā, deha-vāsanā, and śāstra-vāsanā. The fascination for an object (viśaya), thinking that it can give me security and happiness, is a super-imposition called śobhana-adhyāsa. By vicāra one has to remove this super-imposition to become the adhikārī for self-knowledge. So too, the "I am this body-vāsanā" has to be removed by inquiry and contemplation. A craving for the study of śāstras other than Vedānta (śāstra-vāsanā) can destroy a person in the pursuit. One has to tackle this craving by commitment to Vedānta-vicāra. This three-fold vāsanā is not presented by ācāryas as a cause for the ātmā to become a jīva. The truth to be emphasized here is that ātmā has never become a jīva. Jīvatva (the notion of individuality) is a superimposition upon ātmā due to ignorance. The pursuit is therefore to understand that the svarūpa of ātmā is free from jīvatva.

Confusion Regarding Karma-Yoga

There is a great deal of confusion about karma-yoga. One definition of karma-yoga says that it is performing action without expecting results. Another says karma-yoga is doing selfless service. Another definition of karma-yoga is skill in action. In fact, one of the most misunderstood topics is karma-yoga. The whole life of a Hindu is supposed to be one of karma-yoga. The varṇāśrama-dharma is nothing but karma-yoga. When one performs nitya-naimittika-karma for the sake of antaḥkaraṇa-suddhi, it is considered karma-yoga. That person is a mumukṣu, whereas the person who is interested in artha and kāma and for that purpose performs the same prayers or rituals is not a karma-yogī.

No one can perform action without expecting a result, nor can a person skillful in action necessarily be considered a karma-yogī. There are many criminals who are skillful. The notion that serving a cause is karma-yoga is also not totally true, because the cause may be nothing but an expression of a group ego which is as false as one's own small ego. When one's likes and dislikes (rāga-dveṣas) subserve dharma, one performs one's duties. That person is not carried away by likes and dislikes, going against dharma. Fulfilling one's rāga-dveṣas at the cost of dharma is called attachment to the fruits of action (phalāsakti). As long as one performs an action in keeping with dharma, whether one likes the action or not, one is a karma-yogī.¹⁷

Karma-yoga is clearly unfolded throughout the Bhagavadgītā. Even if one performs action for the sake of fulfilling one's own rāga-dveṣas, as long as it is not against the sāmānya-dharma (universal values) one can still be a karma-yogī if one takes the result of action as prasāda (coming from the Lord). This attitude is present in the lives of Hindus even today. Building a house is fulfilling a rāga. One can build a house without going against any dharma. But still, the house (karma-phala) can be offered to the Lord at the time of gṛha-praveśa, and then it can be taken as prasāda. If that attitude is genuine and is maintained throughout one's life with reference to all achievements, one is a karma-yogī. A life of karma-yoga, which is a yoga of attitude with reference to action and its results, will free one from the hold of rāga-dveṣas. One thus becomes ready for self-knowledge as well as niṣṭhā therein.

Value-preaching

While no one is ignorant of values, values are seldom properly understood. By common sense every human being knows what is universally right and wrong. The problem is in one's understanding of

the value of values. If one has understood the value of any value, one will not compromise it for anything, money, power, and so on because one knows the enormity of the loss. In fact, for such a person any compromise is a bad bargain. Therefore, a teacher need not preach values but should help the student discover the value of values. Here again there is a process of unfolding involved.

Too Many Words

When as a student I go to a teacher to know about the ātmā, I am told ātmā is eternal (nitya). Here is a typical problem in communication. A teacher can communicate only by words which are known to him as well as to the student. The word eternal sounds like a known word and therefore the student thinks that he knows the ātmā but has no experience of the eternal! In fact, the student does not know. All the student knows is that which is non-eternal. Eternal is unlike anything one knows. All that is there with the student is a new word whose meaning has not been unfolded. The whole teaching is to make the student understand what is eternity. In fact, the word eternal only means that ātmā is not non-eternal; ātmā is timelessness.

By inquiry, the one who is aware of time is revealed to be that very awareness, wherein the concept of time resolves. This awareness which is the svarūpa of time, is, in terms of time, called eternity. Similarly, every word which talks about the ātmā is to be unfolded by the teacher without leaving any misconception in the student's mind. Even the meaning of awareness has to be unfolded. When one hears the word apple one is aware of the meaning of the word apple. When one hears the word awareness, the meaning of the word awareness does not become an object of awareness. That awareness is oneself. The teacher must be conscious of all this while unfolding these words. A proper teacher knows how to handle these words because of his or her clarity of the vision of Vedanta.

The popular modern teachers of Vedanta fail to understand that:

1. Vedanta is an independent means of knowledge.
2. The prakriyās must be handled as they are—only as prakriyās.
3. Self-knowledge is not another state of experience; it is the correction of an error about oneself, and the recognition of the invariable self as the truth and basis of all experiences.

If these are not understood by the modern teachers of Vedanta, then I wonder what is left of Vedanta! When I am their contemporary, I have to call myself a "traditional" teacher.

Footnotes

1. सदेव सोम्य इदमग्र आसीत् (छा ६.२.१)
2. नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।
3. तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत् समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥ (मु १.२.१२)
4. यन्मनसा न मनुते येनाहुर्मनो मतम् । तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि (केन १.६)
5. शास्त्रयोनित्वात् । (ब्र. सूत्राणि १.१.३)
6. यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते । येन जातानि जीवन्ति । यत्प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्ति । तद् विजिज्ञासस्व । तद् ब्रह्मेति । (तै ३.१.१)
7. वाचारम्भणं विकारो नामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम् । (छा ६.१.४)
8. तरति शोकमात्मवित् । (छा ७.१.३)
9. To arrive at the nature of the relationship and the degree of reality enjoyed by different objects, this reasoning is employed. One is, the other is: this is anvaya. One is not, the other is not: this is vyatireka. The existence of a table does not imply the existence of a chair. If it does, then where the table is, the chair is; where table is not, the chair is not, which is not true. But if the table is wooden, where the table is, wood is. Even if the table is broken, still the wood is. By this reasoning, we understand that while the existence of the table is dependent upon the wood, the wood can exist without being the table. Hence we see the wood has a greater degree of reality than the table. This method is employed in cause-effect analysis which we saw before.
10. Arundhatī is a star which is close to Vasiṣṭha in the Sapta-ṛṣi configuration of stars and is very small to the naked eye. After the marriage ceremony, a Hindu couple is supposed to see both Vasiṣṭha and Arundhatī, the ṛṣi-couple who, according to the Purāṇas, have immortalized themselves in the form of stars. Having spotted the Sapta-ṛṣi group one can identify the Vasiṣṭha and with some keen observation can eventually see Arundhatī. To lead a person to the sight of Vasiṣṭha and Arundhatī in the open sky at night, an adept will use an easily spottable heavenly body as a starting point and lead the person through a visual path to Sapta-ṛṣi and then to Vasiṣṭha. Once Vasiṣṭha, which itself is small but visible, is recognized, then Arundhatī can be seen. Other than Arundhatī, everything that has been pointed out in the process of recognition is negated. This is sthūlārundhatī-nyāya.

[Modern astronomy says that both Vasiṣṭha and Arundhatī are one star, which appears as two; our forefathers also said they are one even though they appear to be different.]
11. स वा एष पुरुषोऽन्नसमयः । (तै २.१.१)
12. देशकालवस्तु-अपरिच्छिन्नम् अनन्तम् ।
13. नित्य-अपरोक्षस्य आत्मनः ज्ञानम् अपरोक्षमेव न तु परोक्षम् ।
14. संन्यासस्तु महाबाहो दुःखमाप्तुमयोगतः । (गी ५.६)
15. आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः । (बृ २.४.५)
16. प्रतिबोधविदितं मतम् । [बोधं बोधं प्रति विदितम्] (केन २.४)
17. धर्म्याद्धि युद्धात् श्रेयोऽन्यत् क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ॥ (गी २.३१)

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