

**Salient Features of Sankara's Vedanta
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Appendix

CARDINAL TENETS OF SANKARA'S VEDANTA

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Here is a brief summary of the salient features of Sankara's Vedanta as described in the previous pages of this booklet. Failure to appreciate the cardinal principles of this system has resulted in many glaring mis-conceptions, some of which are noted below. Those that seek to know more about this subject, should apply themselves to a serious study of Sankara's Bhashyas on the three branches of study, Prasthanas as they are collectively called—the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad gita* and the *Brahma-Sutras* with the aid of a competent teacher.

1. **Brahman** is the reality of the universe, which can be known only through the Upanishads. It is the Self-luminous **Witness** (*sakshin*), the very Self of us all. There is no *pramana* or means of right knowledge, which can reveal it; nor is any *pramana* needed to prove its existence either.

Persons unable to understand this truth have conceived the theory of *Atma-Sakshatkara* (Self-realization) for which they imagine that practices like the repetition of the *Mahavakyas* (texts like '*Tat-tvam-asi*'- That thou art), *laya-chintana* (merging the objective world in Brahman by means of meditation) or the practice of Patañjala yoga, are necessary,

2. **The Vedanta-Sastra** is not a *pramana* directly revealing the nature of Brahman. It is called '*pramana*' simply because it dispels *avidya* (ignorance) of Brahman. It is called the 'FINAL MEANS' (*antya pramana*) because it shows how the distinction of *pramana* and *prameya* (means and object of knowledge) accepted in common parlance, is really due to

avidya. That is to say, there cannot be any trace of *pramana* and *prameya* after the knowledge of Vedanta has dawned.

Some who have not understood this principle believe that the Non-duality taught in the Vedanta texts is a matter of faith, others resort to the strange course of interpreting Vedantic texts according to their own preconceived theory and asserting that their theory is correct because it is based upon those texts. A few more teach that there are both positive and negative texts revealing the nature of *Atman*, while there are others who hold that the positive (affirmative) texts are more authoritative than the negative ones,

3. *Avidya* is an innate, beginningless misconception due to a mental superimposition of the real and the un-real, the Self and the non-self as well as their properties on each other. This *avidya* is known through intuition, This superimposition is the primus of all notions of the distinctions of *pramatr*, *pramana* and *prameya* (knower, means of knowledge and the object of knowledge). *Vidya* or true knowledge consists in discriminating and determining the true nature of the self and the not-self with the aid of the *Sastra*,

It is evident that those who proceed to prove *avidya* by means of reason or *pramanas* (valid sources of knowledge) or the authority of the *Sastra* are resorting to an obviously erroneous procedure, since the very notion of 'knower' is due to *avidya*. *Avidya*, common life ignorance, doubt or misconception of objects, and *vidya* (true knowledge) that dispels it, are both in the sphere of *avidya* par excellence. Strictly speaking, *even the distinction of avidya and vidya relative to Atman is a hypothetical notion allowed by Vedantins as a concession to the popular mind, just as a device for explaining the highest truth*, The final position is that the Reality or *Atman* transcends both *vidya* and *avidya*.

Failure to realize this truth, has given rise to the impermissible demand for the cause of *avidya*, The topsyturvy process of

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offering perception, inference, presumption or the *Sruti* as pramanas in evidence of *avidya*, has been in vogue just because of this failure. Curious problems have cropped up regarding the locus of *avidya* as well as the number of *avidyas*, 'Does it reside in the individual soul or Brahman? Is there a single *avidya* or are there as many *avidyas* as there are individual souls? Would universal liberation ensue when the *avidya* of a single *Jiva* is destroyed?' And so on!

For a detailed discussion of this subject, readers are referred to my '*Vedanta-Prakriya - Pratyabhijna*', a Sanskrit work, where the only comprehensive method of Vedanta has been explained at length, The English Introduction to this book has been separately published by the Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya under the title '*How to Recognize the Method of Vedanta*'.

4. Vedantic texts purport to teach *Atman* alone as an entity; that is to say, they negate what are not really His properties, and culminate in revealing the self-established *Atman*, There would remain nothing more to be done after realizing the import of the texts.

Various strange beliefs prevail among those that are not aware of this open secret. Some imagine that the Vedantic text only yields an indirect knowledge of *Atman*, and that hence the repeated practice of the knowledge of the *Mahavakya*, or the merging of the world of multiplicity in *Atman* by means of meditation or the meditation on the qualityless Brahman or the practice of Patañjala Yoga, or else continued mental repetition of *Pranava* (the syllable Aum) etc. is required,

5. *Atman* is an ineffable entity. He cannot be expressed by words or sentences; for no genus, quality, action or any other specific feature pertains to Him, He is devoid of all distinctions and can never be objectified.

Some who cannot understand this, think that negative propositions are incapable of giving rise to the knowledge of the form 'I am Brahman' just because they end in merely negating

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the superimposed attributes, One cannot completely get rid of the ignorance of the rope merely by the knowledge that it is not a snake. Hence, they argue, negative texts can never remove *avidya* without a residuum, Some are even of the opinion that negative texts can only repeat what positive texts directly disclose and are hence no *pramanas* at all!

6. *Sravana* (study of sacred revelation), ***Manana*** (reflective thinking) and ***Nididhyasana*** (concentrated contemplation), are all means for realizing *Atman*. Highly developed souls, however, who can immediately grasp the true meaning of the Vedic teaching, do not stand in need of any additional effort.

Not taking this principle into account is responsible for the divergence of opinion among commentators of Sankara-Bhashya about the relation of *Sravana* and *Nididhyasana*, Of these, some aver that *Sravana* is the principal means and the other two are only ancillary to it; while others insist that *Nididhyasana* is the one means to direct realization and without it mere *Sravana* would be of no avail.

7. *Sravana* and the other means are enjoined only in so far as they turn the seeker inwards and direct him to stay his mind on *Atman*, but the resultant knowledge is no object of any injunction.

Those who cannot distinguish between the effort required for *Sravana* &c, and the resultant knowledge in each case, have made it a matter for controversy whether or not '*srotavyah*' and similar texts constitute true injunctions, Some of them maintain that these are all injunctions while others insist that they are seemingly injunctions in form but are really statements of fact, Some even think that they are merely eulogistic statements.

8. *Manana* refers to the type of reasoning suggested by the *Sruti* itself conducive to experience. Hence the term 'experience' here should be understood to mean the supersensuous intuition which results from our enquiry which takes in

one sweep the whole field possible of whatever is knowable.

From this the reader has to understand that use might be made of ordinary reasoning also in so far as it is conformable to the reasoning suggested by the *Sruti*. Advaitins do try to disclose the hollowness of other systems according to the course of reasoning accepted by themselves. But *Advaita* itself cannot be established by means of pure logical ratiocination, People who are not aware of this fact, often try to apply speculation or inferences based upon partial experiences to *Vedanta* also. Others condemn all reasoning and affirm that reasoning is of no use in matters taught by the *Sruti*. So they interpret *Sruti* according to their own predilection and place their own convictions before seekers as the final Vedantic truth,

9. Nididhyasana is that kind of spiritual discipline by means of which one concentrates one's mind on the subtle principle, *Atman*. At the end of this discipline, one becomes conscious of the fact that the mind itself is a superimposition on *Atman*. Then the mind becomes no mind, that is to say, it is realized essentially as *Atman* himself.

Many confound *Nididhyasana* with '*Upasana*' and believe it to be a sort of spiritual imagination. It is this confusion that prompts some to believe that *Nididhyasana* must end in 'trances', *Savikalpa* and *Nirvikalpa* (with and without consciousness of distinctions),

10. Examination of the three *avasthas*, is a special kind of reasoning suggested in the *Sruti* itself. It is the nature of *Atman* only that has to be taken into account in this method. The whole of the world has to be regarded as the conditioning associate (*upadhi*) of *Atman*. Each state is to be evaluated from its own standpoint. This mode of reasoning comprehends the whole of human experience, inasmuch as there is no knowable not included in the three states.

People who cannot rise to this way of thinking, mistakenly suppose that the method of states (*avasthas*) is an examination

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of the states rather than that of *Atman* to whom the states attach themselves, They argue that there is a fourth state called the *Turiya* which is often identified with the trance of *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*, They largely use the memory of dream and sound sleep for determining the nature of these two states,

11. Each of the three states is a full manifestation of Reality. Those who are capable of conceiving this fact, can attain the knowledge of *Atman* even through the determination of the true nature of the Self in any one individual state.

Sensuous perception, mental awareness and receding to the undifferentiated nature of the Self erasing any of these modes of consciousness, may respectively be equated to the three modes conditioning *Viswa*, *Tajjasa* and *Prajña*, This method has been pointed out in the first chapter of Gaudapada's Karikas, Thus looked at, the Witnessing Principle itself becomes the *Turiya* Self, Aspirants after truth sufficiently developed in reflection, can convince themselves that all objective not-self is really a superimposition on the Witness of the waking state. The entire objective not-Self in the state is pervaded by the Witnessing Consciousness and is ultimately identical with it, Similarly with the two other states,

12. Following in the wake of the method of *avasthas*, it is quite possible to look upon each of the **five sheaths** (the *Panca-kosas* of the *Taittiriya*) as comprehending the entire objective not-Self and merge the *kosas* successively each in the next interior pervading sheath until at last we come to the conclusion that all else is superimposed on the Witnessing Principle which is called *Ananda* (infinite bliss), the real ground of all the phenomenal world.

Failure to understand that the *avasthas* are independent expressions of the same Reality, has led some thinkers to imagine that there is a residue of positive ignorance in sleep, which serves as the seed of the waking world. Ignorance of this fact, has also induced some to assume that the *Anandamaya kosa*, the

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principle of enjoyment of fruits of actions which really can exist in waking only, continues to persist potentially in sleep,

13. *Atman* is eternally unborn and without a second. *Srutis* teach that the world has proceeded from *Atman*. It is only as a device for gradually leading seekers of intermediate and lowest grades of intellect to the realisation of this truth. The statement that the world is born of *Atman* simply means that it is a superimposition on *Atman*.

Those that cannot get mental hold of this secret, variously posit that *Atman* and positive *avidya* (or *maya*) are both the cause of the world or that *Atman* is the efficient cause while *avidya* (or *maya*) is the material cause of it.

14. While the duties devolving upon *Varnas* and *Ashramas* (castes and stations-of-life) do lead to knowledge, they are not universally indispensable. *Sama*, *dama* (Self-control and control of senses) and the like, however, are absolutely necessary as being intimate disciplinary acts enabling one to become introvert. Since knowledge has to end in a result to be experienced here and now, all those who are not expressly prohibited in the *Srutis*, may be assumed to be entitled to a study of the Vedantas. *Sudras* and others may enter upon the study of Vedanta through the *Itihasa* and *Puranas*.

Some ignorant people insist that women and *Sudras* are strictly outside the pale of Vedantic knowledge; and there are some who hold that knowledge is impossible for anyone in this age of Kali since all *karmas* enjoined in the *Sastras* have slackened off in practice!

15. *Karmas* performed in a previous birth may also serve as means to knowledge in the present life. The only duty for *Sannyasins* is unremitting devotion to knowledge, *Paramahansa Sannyasa* only means the renouncing of *eshana-traya* (the three kinds of desires pertaining to the

three worlds),

Those who are not in touch with this truth, argue that householders can never hope to get knowledge of *Atman*, since they are not entitled to *Sravana*. Others again insist that even *paramahamsas* have duties incumbent on their stage of life, over and above *Sravana* and the like *sadhanas* obligatory for them,

16. *Sravana* and other means may not give true knowledge invariably in this life. Knowledge may come in a subsequent life, if there be any obstacle for its immediate birth. Spiritual freedom, however, is the immediate consequence of the knowledge of *Atman*.

The mistaken notion that all who have studied Vedanta are *Atma-Jñanins* and the self-stultifying postulate of residual *avidya* even in a *Jñanin*, are both due to imperfect understanding of the above-mentioned doctrines, Whether one has or has not attained spiritual enlightenment, is a matter of personal intuition and not a subject to be settled by disputation,

17. The enlightened man becomes free simultaneously with his enlightenment. There is no further state called *Videhamukti* (disembodied freedom). An enlightened man has been ever free, eternally bodiless, from his own metaphysical standpoint.

Some who cannot rise to this level of thought consider that *jivanmukti* (liberation while alive) is only figurative or secondary while liberation after death, is the only liberation properly so called. Others believe that as soon as ignorance (*avidya*) is destroyed without any residue, the body of the enlightened one must drop down dead! Sankara in his *Bhashya*, has declared in unmistakable terms that when the *Sruti* says that a *Jñanin* is merged in Brahman (*Brahmapyeta*), it is only to intimate that he no more takes up a new body like the common run of mankind.

18. A *Jñanin* has completely broken the shackles of *karma*. That he is reaping the result of fructifying *karma*

(*prarabdha karma*) is only a statement from the empirical standpoint.

Knowledge of *Atman* is the knowledge that one has ever been the Supreme Self devoid of body and action, That an enlightened person is spoken of as experiencing the effects of fructifying *karma*, is based on the apparent continuance of the semblance of the (*badhitānuvṛtti* body) even after it has been sublated by knowledge of the truth, and it is only an accommodation to the empirical view. This may be compared to the expression 'The sky is blue' used even by persons who know that the sky has actually no colour whatever. An enlightened man would never look upon the possession of a body as a real fact. Some who are not aware of the meaning of what they are speaking, seriously insist that the fructifying *karmas* of an enlightened soul are of three kinds – voluntary, accidental, and due to the others wish – all of which have got to be exhausted by enjoyment before final liberation is reached!

19. There are no gradations in Self-knowledge. He who has realized that he is the secondless Brahman beyond all action, means of action and results thereof, is the only real *Jñānin*. Such an enlightened one has nothing more to accomplish.

Conceptions of gradations among *Jñānins* labelling them as *Brahmavids*, *Brahmavidvaras* and *Brahmavidvaristhas* (as having reached the high, higher and the highest stages of knowledge) and also of imagining certain disciplining acts as incumbent on the *Jñānin* for the so-called direct realization are due to lack of grasping the truth enunciated above.

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There is one thing which is most important to remember for the students of Sankara Vedanta, and that has been the basis on which all that has been presented in this booklet has been erected. It is common to all schools of philosophy other than that of Sankara to give prominence to sensuous percep-

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tion or mental cognition in their schemes of thought. Hence it is that most of these thinkers take *Atman* to be the object as well as the subject of the notion of 'I'. Sankara has repeatedly urged that the final aim of Vedanta is to point out that all talk of *Jiva* as the ego endowed with a body in which the senses and the mind inhere, presupposes a primary ignorance (*avidya*), and to draw our attention to the Witnessing Consciousness which is the real Self of us all, That, over and above the sensuous perception and mental activity, there is a source of universal experience to be recognized as the innermost intuition, is a fact which it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind before one can ever hope to resolve the knots of Sankara's dialectics. It is our hearty prayer to Srīman Narayana that by His grace the attention of all our readers who are real seekers of spiritual freedom, may be drawn to this central fact of the system.

Om Tat Sat



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