

Svarajya Siddhih: Attaining Self-dominion

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(Continued from the previous issue)

THUS THE OBJECTION of the opposition against the Advaita Vedanta interpretation of the first aphorism of the *Brahma Sutra* has been shown to be flawed, and the stance of Advaita Vedanta has been established by defeating all the arguments of the opponents. In this process, while explaining the meaning of the word ‘That’, the non-dual Existence-Consciousness-Knowledge Absolute, Brahman, mentioned in the scriptures has been described as both the material and efficient cause of the universe. To show harmony in Vedanta and also to put in brief the import of the scriptures, the second, third, and fourth aphorisms of the *Brahma Sutra* are being discussed here.

यस्मादुत्पत्तिगुप्ती क्षतिरपि जगतां यच्च शास्त्रैकयोनिः
सर्वज्ञं मायया यत् सहजसुखसदद्वैतसंवित्स्वरूपम् ।
तत् ब्रह्म स्वप्रकाशं श्रुतिशिखरगिरां सैव तात्पर्यभूमिः
स्वात्माऽसौ यं विदित्वा जनिमृतिजलधिं निस्तरन्तीह सन्तः

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Out of the maya of which this universe is produced, maintained, and destroyed; that which can be known only through the scriptures; that which is omniscient, naturally blissful, eternal, free from dualities, of the nature of knowledge and self-revealing; that is Brahman. This Brahman alone is known as the individual Atman by each person. Having known one’s Atman to be Brahman, the saints cross the ocean of birth and death.

The universe is created from Brahman, which

is both the material and efficient cause and consists of Hiranyagarbha and of four elements—earth, water, fire, and air. Brahman causes the origin of this universe and living beings and also the actions that take place here. Brahman causes the manifestation or evolution, continuance, and destruction or involution of this universe. On involution, only the cause remains. The second aphorism of the *Brahma Sutra* says: ‘That from which (are derived) the birth and so on, of this (universe).’ Here the aphorism is both an indication and assertion of the birth, continuance, and dissolution of the universe. The words ‘birth and so on’ have to be construed to have the same meaning as mentioned in the Upanishads: ‘That from which all these beings take birth, that by which they live after being born, that towards which they move and into which they merge. That is Brahman.’⁷⁷ Here the words ‘birth and so on’ do not refer to the six modifications of a body as mentioned in Yaska’s *Nirukta*: ‘Origination, existence, growth, change, decay, and destruction.’ These modifications are possible only during the continuance of the universe, and hence the other phases of birth and dissolution of the universe would not have been covered had the definition of Yaska been applied in the present context. Further, these modifications are based on an intermediate cause, the universe, and not on the primal cause, Brahman. The second aphorism of the *Brahma Sutra* is: ‘*Janmādyasya*

yatabh.' Here the word *yatabh* signifies the material causality of the birth, continuance, and destruction of the universe on the basis of the aphorism of Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*: '*Janikartubh prakṛtibh*; the meaning of the word *prakṛti* is progenitor.'⁷⁸

The second aphorism of the *Brahma Sutra* is: '(Brahman is omniscient) because of (its) being the source of the scriptures.' Now it has been established that since Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of the universe, it has to be omniscient and capable of manifesting or revealing all knowledge. Such knowledge includes the Vedas, like the Rig Veda. Brahman is the source of all scriptures. Also it is only through the scriptures that Brahman can be known. Why so? Since the scriptures originate from Brahman, they talk of their origin by giving various indications to the indescribable Brahman. They are the only texts that talk of the means of knowing Brahman. There are no proofs of Brahman other than the scriptures. It is said in the Vedas: '*Na vedavinmanute tam br̥hantam*; one who is ignorant of Vedas cannot understand the Supreme.'⁷⁹ '*Tam tvaupaniṣadām puruṣam pṛcchāmi*; I ask you of that Being who is to be known only from the Upanishads.'⁸⁰

Objection: How can Brahman, which is spoken of in the scriptures, be the cause of this universe? The scriptures describe Brahman as independent of any principle: 'It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long' (3.8.8). 'He has neither a body nor any organ.'⁸¹ 'That Brahman is without prior or posterior, without interior or exterior.'⁸² Even if we were to hold that it is from Brahman that the universe originates as a modification, just as milk is modified into curd, then because of such modification Brahman will change completely and become the universe, which is altogether different, and so Brahman will cease to exist. There is contradiction in the scriptures in that they talk of Brahman being both the immediate and efficient cause of the universe in one

place and of it being without any attributes in another place—in any of these instances the impermanence of Brahman is hinted at.

Reply: No, this is not so. The Upanishads declare: 'One should know that Prakṛiti is surely *maya*, and the Supreme Lord is the ruler of *maya* to be sure. This whole universe is verily pervaded by what are his limbs.'⁸³ The scriptures portray *maya* as that which can make the impossible possible. If the universe were produced truly because Brahman was the cause, just like a pot is produced by clay as the cause, then there would have been a contradiction. But in this case that is not so. The rope appears as a snake due to ignorance. The rope does not change into a snake like the clay changes into a pot. However, if the rope were not there, there would have been no mistaking it as a snake. Without the rope there would be no snake. Though the knowledge of the universe is a false knowledge, it is based on Brahman.

This is a case of superimposition, and the superimposed does not affect the substratum. A snake has been superimposed on the rope, but it does not affect the rope. Still, Brahman is the cause of the universe, because Brahman is non-dual. There cannot be any entity other than Brahman; otherwise Brahman would become limited by that other entity. The snake is there because the rope is there. The perception of the snake is false, but the perception of the rope is real. There is only one Reality.

'Swami Turiyananda [a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna] passed away at 6.45 p.m. on 21 July 1922. The night before his death, he said to his attendants, "Tomorrow is the last day." Then he asked an attendant to help him sit up. With folded hands he saluted the Master, and then drank a little holy water. He then summed up his life's experience: "Everything is real. Brahman is real. The world is real. The world is Brahman. The life force is established in Truth. Hail

Ramakrishna! Hail Ramakrishna! Say that he is the embodiment of Truth, and embodiment of Knowledge.”⁸⁴ Brahman *perceived as the world* is unreal, but the world is essentially Brahman, which is the only Reality.

The superimposition of the universe on Brahman is due to maya, and just as maya is false, the universe is also false, and there is no question of any modification taking place in Brahman. In the wonderful introduction to his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, Acharya Shankara says: ‘Whenever there is a superimposition of one thing on another, the locus is not affected in any way either by the merits or demerits of the thing superimposed.’ Then, what is the nature of Brahman, knowing which one can conclude that it is the cause of the universe? The nature of Brahman is told in the Vedas: ‘(He) knew Bliss as Brahman.’⁸⁵ ‘Brahman is Truth, Knowledge, and Infinity’ (2.1.1). Brahman is of the nature of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. It is natural, real, and permanent. It exists as the supreme bliss when the universe, which is false, is removed by the knowledge of Brahman. Therefore, there is no duality, as its nature is non-dual. Since it is not covered and is self-revealing, Brahman is of the nature of Consciousness and Knowledge.

Swami Vivekananda gives a lucid explanation of the phenomenon of maya, which is by its nature inexplicable:

Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction, that wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, death must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice versa. Nor can this state of things be remedied. We may verily imagine that there will be a place where there will

be only good and no evil, where we shall only smile and never weep. This is impossible in the very nature of things; for the conditions will remain the same. Wherever there is the power of producing a smile in us, there lurks the power of producing tears. Wherever there is the power of producing happiness, there lurks somewhere the power of making us miserable.

Thus the Vedanta philosophy is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. It voices both these views and takes things as they are. It admits that this world is a mixture of good and evil, happiness and misery, and that to increase the one, one must of necessity increase the other. There will never be a perfectly good or bad world, because the very idea is a contradiction in terms. The great secret revealed by this analysis is that good and bad are not two cut-and-dried, separate existences. ...

The Vedanta says, there must come a time when we shall look back and laugh at the ideals which make us afraid of giving up our individuality. Each one of us wants to keep this body for an indefinite time, thinking we shall be very happy, but there will come a time when we shall laugh at this idea. Now, if such be the truth, we are in a state of hopeless contradiction—neither existence nor non-existence, neither misery nor happiness, but a mixture of them.⁸⁶

The objectification of the universe leads to the conclusion that it is false:

The world is false (*mithyā*) because it is presented as an object to our consciousness, just as the snake perceived in the place of a rope is presented as an object and is false. The argument seems to emphasize that the illusory snake is presented as an object and it is taken to be false. The world does not differ from the illusory snake in so far as it is an object of consciousness—we cannot distinguish between one object of consciousness and another object of consciousness in so far as they are objects. Therefore the world also is false like the discredited appearance of the snake in the place of the rope.⁸⁷

In the language of the *Drig-Drishya-Viveka*: ‘The form is perceived and the eye is its perceiver. It (eye) is perceived and the mind is its perceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the Witness (the Self) is verily the perceiver. But It (the Witness) is not perceived (by any other).’⁸⁸

Acharya Shankara also explains maya in his *Vivekachudamani*:

Avidya or maya, called also the Undifferentiated, is the power of God. She is without beginning, is made up of the three *gunas*, and is superior to the effects (as their cause). She is to be inferred by one of clear intellect only from the effects she produces. It is she who brings forth this whole universe. She is neither existent nor non-existent nor partaking of both characters; neither same nor different not both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. She is most wonderful and cannot be described in words. Maya can be destroyed by the realization of the pure Brahman, the one without a second, just as the mistaken idea of a snake is removed by the discernment of the rope. She has her *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—named after their respective functions.⁸⁹

Now the objection regarding the contradiction of Brahman being dependent on something is being countered. Brahman is self-illuminating. A lamp gives light but there is a space that it illuminates and thus is very much in the realm of duality. The knowledge of Brahman is not so, it does not illuminate anything, it is self-revealing. Such knowledge is the culmination of all the Vedas. The fourth aphorism of the *Brahma Sutra* says: ‘But that Brahman (is known from the Upanishads), (it) being the object of their fullest import.’ The Vedas have been compared to high mountains because they provide us with sublime thought for our emancipation.

Objection: Let it be that Brahman is such, but what does it matter to us?

Reply: The nature of Brahman does matter to us. The indication given by the scriptures is direct and not indirect. Here Brahman does not refer to something or someone other than us. Brahman is our true nature and the scriptures indicate its nature. There are three types of indications or attributes, also called *lakṣaṇas*: *vyāvartaka lakṣaṇa*, distinguishing attribute; *svārūpa lakṣaṇa*, essential attribute; and *taṭastha lakṣaṇa*, apparent attribute. That Brahman is not matter is a distinguishing attribute, and that it is the cause of this universe is an apparent attribute. However, the nature of Brahman being self-illuminating and blissful is its essential attribute. This attribute tries to explain our true nature and has been given in the scriptures to encourage the enquiry of Brahman.

Having known Brahman through the study of the scriptures and contemplating on them one crosses the beginningless and seemingly endless ocean of grief caused by repeated births and deaths. This is achieved in this very birth, just at the instant of attaining the knowledge of Brahman. The *jivanmukta* does not need to come to this world again.

(To be continued)

References

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78. Panini, *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, 1.4.30.
79. *Taittiriya Brahmana*, 3.12.9.
80. *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.9.26.
81. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 6.8.
82. *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.5.19.
83. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 4.9.
84. Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 392.
85. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 3.6.1.
86. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.97–8.
87. Madhusudana Sarasvati, *Advaita-Siddhih*, trans. Karuna Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1992), 9.
88. Acharya Shankara, *Drig-Drishya-Viveka*, 1.
89. Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 108–10.