

Svarajya Siddhih: Attaining Self-dominion

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TILL NOW it has been established that the contemplation on Vedic dicta like ‘Thou art That’ leads to the knowledge of Brahman. There are many arguments of many schools of thought against this position, which will now be taken up one by one. Presently, the arguments against the purported analysis of the term ‘Thou’ are being enumerated in the next two verses, which are in the *sārdūla-vikrīḍita* metre.

देहं केऽपि वदन्ति खानि तु परे प्राणान्मनश्चापरे
बुद्धिं च क्षणिकां स्थिरामथ परे केचिच्चितं निस्सुखाम् ।
आत्मानं जडचित्स्वभावमपरे चिद्बुद्धिं चेतरे
सत्यज्ञानसुखाद्वितीयमपरे तत्राऽस्य को निश्चयः ॥ १२ ॥

Some (Charvakas) say that the body is the Atman, some other (schools of Charvaka) hold that the sense organs constitute the Atman, and some others (among the Charvakas) say that the vital breath is the Atman. Some others (among the schools of Charvaka) hold that the mind is the Atman. Some others (like the Vainashika Buddhists) consider the transient intellect as the Atman. Others (like Bhaskara) hold that the *vijñānamaya koṣa*, the sheath of the intellect, is the Atman. Others (like the followers of Sankhya and Yoga) hold that consciousness free from happiness and misery is the Atman. Others (belonging to the Kumarila Bhatta school of Mimamsa) believe that the Atman is a combination of matter and consciousness. Some others (belonging to the Prabhakara school of Mimamsa and the Naiyayikas) hold that the Atman is

matter appearing as consciousness. Others (the Advaita Vedantins) hold that the Atman is unaffected by time, self-revealing, and non-dual. What is the certainty (about the nature of the Atman) there (in the midst of such conflicting opinions)?

There are conflicting theories about the Atman. Charvakas—*cārvāka* means one having sweet speech—generally hold that the individual is not immortal. Even within this school there are varying opinions. Some Charvakas, who think like idiots, hold that the body, made up of flesh and bones, is the Atman. When one makes statements like ‘I am fair-complexioned’, ‘I am fat’, it is the body that is referred to as the substratum of fair-complexion-ness and fatness. Knowledge, happiness, and the sense of ego are only known from inference and are against direct perception. This is so because inference is a different means of knowledge and also because it gives an opposite meaning not in accordance with direct perception. Therefore, the gross body seen by the eyes and having the characteristics of growth and decay is the Atman. This is the opinion of a school of Charvakas.

Another school of Charvakas says that in statements like ‘I am one-eyed’, ‘I am deaf’, ‘I am unable to see’, ‘I am unable to hear’, the nature of the sense organs are taken to be the nature of the Atman, and so the sense organs constitute the Atman. This is the most logical conclusion

according to them. They hold that this is more valid a conclusion than that of the first group of Charvakas because it goes deeper than the idea of the gross body being the Atman.

There is another school of Charvakas who do not agree with the two schools mentioned above. They say that the gross body cannot be the Atman, because if it were so then even a dead body should be considered alive, which is absurd. The gross body, which is loved and respected, is feared after the death of the individual. As Acharya Shankara eloquently puts it: 'After the vital breath leaves the body, even the wife is afraid of it.'⁷¹ Therefore, it is definitely not the body that is the Atman. The sense organs too cannot be said to be the Atman, because when in sleep or deep sleep the sense organs do not work; the individual is yet alive due to the presence of the vital breath. Further, when the vital breath becomes weak, the individual faints and loses consciousness and life is put in danger. This school of Charvakas concludes, therefore, that it is the vital breath that is the Atman.

Another school of the Charvakas counters this position. They hold that though the gross body, the sense organs, and the vital breath are needed for an individual to function, it is the mind that controls all these. It is by the application and withdrawal of the mind that knowledge, happiness, misery, and the like arise, as is seen in daily experience. The scriptures too declare: '(They say), "I was absent-minded, I did not see it", "I was absent-minded, I did not hear it." It is through the mind that one sees and hears.'⁷² Swami Vivekananda describes the role of the mind in the process of sense perception:

I am looking at you. How many things are necessary for this vision? First, the eyes. For if I am perfect in every other way, and yet have no eyes, I shall not be able to see you. Secondly,

the real organ of vision. For the eyes are not the organs. They are but the instruments of vision, and behind them is the real organ, the nerve centre in the brain. If that centre be injured, a man may have the clearest pair of eyes, yet he will not be able to see anything. So, it is necessary that this centre, or the real organ, be there. Thus, with all our senses. The external ear is but the instrument for carrying the vibration of sound inward to the centre. Yet, that is not sufficient. Suppose in your library you are intently reading a book, and the clock strikes, yet you do not hear it. The sound is there, the pulsations in the air are there, the ear and the centre are also there, and these vibrations have been carried through the ear to the centre, and yet you do not hear it. What is wanting? The mind is not there. Thus we see that the third thing necessary is, that the mind must be there. First the external instruments, then the organ to which this external instrument will carry the sensation, and lastly the organ itself must be joined to the mind. When the mind is not joined to the organ, the organ and the ear may take the impression, and yet we shall not be conscious of it.⁷³

Thus this school of Charvakas holds that the mind is the Atman. Now let us look at the differing standpoint of the Vainashika Buddhists, also called Sarva-Vainashika or Shunyavadins. Who are Vainashika Buddhists or Shunyavadins? They form a school of Buddhism that does not categorize or ascribe a nature to the ultimate Reality or the final Truth. It is probably the most misunderstood philosophy. Vedantins call this school Vainashika Buddhism, the Buddhism of destruction. This school is labelled as a form of nihilism. The followers of this school, which dates even before Ashvagoshha and had Nagarjuna as one of its principal exponents, call themselves Madhyamikas, the followers of the middle-path of Buddha. A scholar clarifies the standpoint of this school of Buddhism:

Unfortunately the word 'Shūnya' has been gravely misunderstood. The literal meaning of the word which is negation or void has been the cause of much misunderstanding. The word is used by the Mādhyamikas in a different philosophical sense. Ignoring the real philosophical meaning of the word 'Shūnya' and taking it only in its literal sense, many thinkers, eastern and western, ancient, medieval and modern have unfortunately committed that horrible blunder which has led them to thoroughly misunderstand Shūnyavada and to condemn it as a hopeless scepticism and a self-condemned nihilism. Shūnya, according to the Mādhyamika, we emphatically maintain, does not mean a 'nothing' or an 'empty void' or a 'negative abyss'. Shūnya essentially means Indescribable (avāchya or anabhilāpya) as it is beyond the four categories of intellect (chatuskoṭi-vinirmukta). It is Reality which ultimately transcends existence, non-existence, both and neither. It is neither affirmation nor negation nor both nor neither.⁷⁴

Thus these Vainashika Buddhists or Shunyavadins hold that the transient intellect, *kṣāṇikām buddhī*, is the Atman. Though the mind gets dissolved in the state of deep sleep and there is no existence of the mind in that state, still the individual is alive. The true nature of the Atman is externally perceptible and imperceptible, knowable and unknowable, and its appearance changes; therefore, the intellect, which is transient, alone is the Atman. It is the continuous flow of the stream of consciousness. This is the view of the Shunyavadi Buddhists.

Bhaskara and others have a different view. They say that the Atman cannot be the transient intellect as it goes against experience. If this point of view is upheld, Bhaskara's school says that it will be impossible to explain the phenomena of bondage and liberation and also it will make the scriptures useless. Further, there is no way to establish the constant flow of the

stream of consciousness, and so the eternal *vijñānamaya koṣa*, sheath of intellect, characterized by the sense of doer-ship and the relation with the mind, is the Atman.

The followers of Sankhya and Patanjali's Yoga have a different opinion on the nature of the Atman. They say that if it were held that the Atman has the characteristics of happiness and misery, then it will have modifications, will not be able to attain liberation, and will become transient. Thus happiness and misery are modifications of only the external attributes ascribed to the Atman. The Atman is unattached, indifferent, and of the nature of pure Consciousness. Due to the ignorance of getting identified with the qualities of Prakriti, the Atman is caught into the bondage of the sense of doer-ship and on attaining knowledge is liberated from this bondage. Thus Sankhya and Patanjali's Yoga hold that the nature of the Atman is free from happiness, ego, and the like and is just pure Consciousness.

The followers of Kumarila Bhatta believe that the Atman is a combination of consciousness and matter. Different persons experience different results according to their actions. This is the system or law of nature. Both good and bad actions bear fruit. The material part of the Atman undergoes changes in the form of happiness and misery. The other part of the Atman is Consciousness. Just like a firefly, which is partly luminous and partly dark, the Atman is partly conscious and partly material. This is the viewpoint of the Mimamsa school of Kumarila Bhatta. The followers of the Prabhakara school of Mimamsa and the followers of Nyaya hold that though there is something material in the Atman, Consciousness pervades it just like space pervades a pot. Knowledge is the understanding that matter has the semblance of Consciousness because Consciousness pervades it. These are

the opinions of various schools regarding the nature of the Atman.

The Advaita Vedantins believe that the Atman is unaffected by or beyond the three phases of time—past, present, and future. The wandering mendicants who follow Advaita Vedanta opine that the bliss arising out of self-revealing knowledge, which is not dependent on anything, is indicative of the destruction of the false knowledge of duality and the realization of the non-dual Atman. With so many conflicting opinions regarding the true nature of the Atman, what will be the plight of the seekers of Self-realization? What is the certainty of our attaining the goal? Without realizing one's true nature, we cannot have any certainty—this is the idea.

आहुःकेचिदगुं शरीरसदृशं केचिद्विभुं ते परे
ते तं मानसगोचरं तदपरे नित्याऽनुमेयं जगुः ।
अन्ये चिद्विषयं परेतु परमस्वज्योतिराभ्यान्तरं
सत्येवं श्रुतियुक्तिभिर्विदिषोर्युक्तो विचारो मुहुः ॥ १३ ॥

Some (the followers of the Pashupata and Pancharatra Agamas) say that the Atman is atomic in size. Some (the Jainas) say that the Atman is of the size of the gross body and some (the followers of Nyaya) hold that the Atman is infinite and all-pervading. (All these schools believe that) the Atman can be known through the mind. (The followers of Sankhya hold that) the Atman can be known only through inference. (The Vainashika Buddhists, the Shunyavadins, opine that) the Atman can be known only through a mental impression. (The Advaita Vedantins declare that) the Atman is self-revealing and luminous. Since there are so many contradictory opinions, the aspirants to the knowledge of Brahman should contemplate (on the Atman) again and again with the help of the scriptures and reasoning.

The true nature of the Atman is self-revealing, like the sun. It does not need any external

help. This Atman reveals itself even though covered by the five sheaths—from the sheath of food, *annamaya koṣa*, to the sheath of bliss, *ānandamaya koṣa*. But this realization of the Atman does not come at once—there are conflicting theories about it. Therefore, one needs to go through a systematic process of studying the scriptures and reasoning out their meaning. Various branches of the Upanishads have to be studied, and one needs to be first intellectually convinced about the true nature of the Atman. This has to be done following the time-honoured tradition of the teacher and the taught, *guru-śiṣya-parampara*. After listening to the instruction 'Thou are That', the disciple needs to constantly contemplate on it till the knowledge of Brahman is attained. The scriptures describe this succinctly: 'Om is the bow, the soul is the arrow, and Brahman is called its target. It is to be hit by an unerring man. One should become one with it just like an arrow.'⁷⁵ Acharya Shankara comments on this statement: 'Just as the success of the arrow consists in its becoming one with the target, similarly one should bring about the result, consisting in becoming one with the Imperishable, by eliminating the ideas of the body etc. being the Self.'⁷⁶

(To be continued)

References

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74. Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003), 86.
75. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 2.2.4.
76. *Mundaka Upanishad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 56-7.