

The Nature of Brahman

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The fundamental tenet of Advaita Vedānta is that the Brahman is the only Reality and that the world is an illusion.¹ The entire world appears in Brahman like the silver in a piece of shell. This Brahman is the Efficient and Material cause of the world. According to Advaita Vedānta Brahman is the pure being, subtle, indefinable, all-pervading one, stainless, indivisible and purely conscious. If Brahman is subtle, indefinable and beyond the mind and words, how can we understand the Brahman? Answering to this question Advaita Vedānta gives two kinds of definition on Brahman - the first being svarūpalakṣaṇa² or essential definition and the second being taṣṭhalakṣaṇa³ or accidental definition. Normally, the definition of a thing should serve, by pointing to its differentia, to mark it off from all others. But in svarūpalakṣaṇa, the very essence of Brahman and not its specific attribute is chosen as the content of definition. There are affirmations like सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म⁴, आनन्दो ब्रह्म⁵, विज्ञानमानन्दं ब्रह्म⁶, etc; which constitute the essential definition of Brahman. It may be asked whether all these are taken together to form a single definition of Brahman? or whether each one of these forms a separate definition of Brahman?

Preceptors of Advaita Vedānta have different opinions. According to Amaranda Yogīśvara, the author of Svātmayogapradīpaprabodhini, each one of these properties is independent definition of Brahman, such as सत्यं ब्रह्म, ज्ञानं ब्रह्म आनन्दं ब्रह्म. He considers the word ananta (infinite) of सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म, as

ānanda (bliss). Later authors like Brahmānanda Sarasvatī, the author of Ratnāvalī, an authoritative commentary on the Siddhāntabindu of Madhusūdana, are of the view that the three expressions सत्यं, ज्ञानं and अनन्तं together constitute a single essential definition of Brahman.⁷ According to him, to take each of them singly is to suggest falsely that there are three Realities.

Dharmarājādhvarīndra, the author of Vedānta paribhāṣā maintains that the expressions satyam, jñānam and anantam may be treated as three separate definitions of the one and the same Brahman. The author of Vedāntakaumudī also holds the same view. According to him, each of the above said properties, being exclusively applicable to Brahman, can form independent definitions of the Brahman. Appayya Dīkṣita accepts each property as a defining attribute of Brahman.⁸ Thus in effect, there are three affirmations, सत्यं ब्रह्म, ज्ञानं ब्रह्म and अनन्तं ब्रह्म.

Sat as the Brahman

According to Advaita Vedānta Brahman is fundamentally indicated by the term sat. It is referred to in the well known formula एकं सद्दिवा बहुधा वदन्ति⁹ that which exists is alone, sages call it by different names. The non-dual sat is referred to in two hymns of Ṛgveda known as the Puruṣasūkta¹⁰ and Nāsadīyasūkta¹¹. The Nāsadīyasūkta explains the entire act of creation in the self-sacrifice of the supreme Sat, Puruṣa. It clearly affirms one sat while it is impossible to say whether this world was or was not in the beginning, there is no doubt that there was and always has been the one ultimate Sat in which we have our being. Sages have designated Sat by different names. This is the substratum of the whole universe.

Body is not the Ātman

Body is with limbs (sāvayava), but it is gross and has length etc; and is susceptible to transformation, with the senses of perception which possess the power of knowing qualities like form, smell, taste, etc. It is mere matter like an earthen pot, possessing six-fold modifications¹² such as birth, existence, growth, change, decline and dissolution and is conceived as instrument (jaḍa), perceivable (dr̥śya) and unconscious (acetana). It is conceived as my body which is different from the Ātman-I. Hence the body does not shine in both the states of dream and deep sleep. It is like a chariot that subjects to one's own action. So it is not the Ātman.

Senses and the Vital Air are Not the Ātman

The group of organs such as eye etc. are with parts (sāvayava) and material. Hence they are not the Ātman. If the eye is the Ātman, the recollection (pratyabhijñāna) and remembrance (smaraṇam) of the pot one has seen and the pot one has touched may not be mutually agreeable. Similarly the vital air, etc. which are the causes of bodily action, and subject to the actions of ones own behest, do not become the witnessing Ātman.

Internal Instrument is not the Ātman

It is evident that the internal instrument (antaḥkaraṇa) is also not the Ātman, even if it is capable of remembering everything. Though it manifests itself in actions like the rejecting or accepting of objects, emancipating, feeling like my mind is turning round and has the varients, citta, manas, ahaṅkāra, buddhi, etc. it is not Ātman. Since egoism or self-conceit has the nine-fold qualities like intelligence, comfort, sorrow, desire, repulsion, effort, virtue, vices and imagination, it is not the witnessing consciousness

(Ātman). It is in the form of cidacit and does not illumine in deep sleep. According to Viṣṇupurana, the Ātman is pure, imperishable, quiet, devoid of attributes and beyond the nature. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says that the Ātman is self-luminous and it is difficult to be understood. The Ātman has no attributes hence the egoism is not the Ātman.

The Ātman is, hence, established as different from the body and the senses etc; and it is the seer of the states like waking, dreaming and deep sleep. This is the witness of the dance of māyā, the root cause of all the three states.

The three-fold Existence of the Ātman

Though the independent Ātman is one and the same, there occur different states in the gross body, childhood, boyhood, youth, etc. Even then there is the memory that I am being the same I. So, it is implicit that the Ātman is remained in Oneness, through past, present and future births.

Time is not the Ātman

It is time that creates and destroys all. The Kūrmapurāṇa etc. proclaim that all are subject to time¹³ and that Time is Ātman. It is known that in a waterwheel (ghaṭīyantra) all pots are tied by a thread. As pots are being filled full and emptied so all objects in this universe are born, exist and dissolve. All these are tied by the thread of time. Since this is the nature of the Jagat, one does not know either his whereabouts or those of others. All these things are subservient to time. This time is manifested in different forms, such as mānuṣam (mortal) pitṛvyam (ancestral), daivam (divine) and brāhman. These different forms of time are the mere play of

the power of Cit called pratyakcaitanya or the apparent changes of that power of cit. So time is not Ātman.

Ātman is one and the same in all bodies

The ether is one and the same. Being such an element, the ether, having the limiting adjuncts like pot, house, etc. shines in different forms like the one and the same sun, reflecting in ponds, wells, oceans, etc., appears to be various and many. It is exactly the same with the indivisible Ātman which reflects through the adjuncts of egoism, etc. and shines as many. The sun is not affected by any dirt in the water. It is the reflections of the sun that are affected by the malice of limiting adjuncts. Similarly, defects in ahamkāra affect only the reflection. They do not affect the Ātman.

The Ātman exists in all objects as their material cause

Since all objects appear to be shining, it is presumed that they exist. It is also because the sattvadharmā impells all. Whatever shines is Sat. As it is said that the pot is non-different from the earth, the jagat is non-different from the Sat as it shines like jagat. Thus there is the Ātman in all objects as their material cause.¹⁴ The Brahman is the entire cause of everything and it is endless, eternal and in the form of Sat.

The Ātman, the ultimate cause of everything, is in the form of sat and it is existing till the end of the absolute effect (paramakārya)-megacosm. Originating from subtle forms like the intellect (mahat), egoism, etc. the megacosm which is formed as causes and effects, is nothing but the indivisible sat. All these are but waves in the nectar ocean of sat.

Cit as Brahman

The Brahman is sat and it is different from the body as well as the senses of perception etc. The Ātman is the witness of the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. It is unlimited by entities like space, time, etc. The same Ātman is pure consciousness itself.

In the essential definition of Brahman offered in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, the term jñānam refers, of course, to consciousness. The view of the Chāndogya declaration that sat is one and the non-dual, and the illustration offered there¹⁵ assert that the earth is true. This view is further detailed by defining Brahman as Jñānam or cit, i.e. consciousness. Brahman is not the agent of the act of knowing that would necessarily entail alteration or vikara on the part of the agent. Rather, the Brahman is knowledge or consciousness itself.

Ātman is the light of lights

The most impressive passage, perhaps, in which the Brahman is set forth as consciousness, occurs as an answer to the question of King Janaka, 'kim jyotirayam puruṣaḥ iti'¹⁶. After recounting the eternal aids by which man sees such as the sun, the moon, etc., Yājñavalkya mentions the Ātman as the light of all that man sees.¹⁷ This supreme light is distinguished from the rest as it needs no other light to function. It shines in the Antaḥkaraṇa. Being immaterial, it is beyond the reach of all sense organs.¹⁸

The inner organs such as egoism, mind, intellect and citta, the five organs of action, the five organs of perception, the sun, the moon and the lightning, etc. are illumined by the consciousness. These luminaries-the Sun, the moon, etc. illumine the world of their ob-

jects. With what power do these luminaries shine and by the lack of whose power of luminosity they do not illumine that power is the deity that is eternal and is Existence, Consciousness and Bliss.

Consciousness is the material cause and the efficient cause

According to *dr̥ṣṭisr̥ṣṭinaya* the cause of the entire world is Pratyak Caitanya. The origin, existence and dissolution of the universe rely on this consciousness. This consciousness is immutable. The Ātman, by creating the megacosm, enters into it and illumines by itself, by pursuing it with its light. In deep sleep, both the other two worlds- *jāgrat* and *svapna*- are annihilated. Then the Ātman exists unpolluted and blissful. The Ātman sparkles as the sole source of everything in the three states-origin, existence and dissolution. Nevertheless, the Ātman is Cit or Consciousness itself which remains changeless and immutable.

The Cit is eternal and the three states are transmutable

In the waking state there is neither dreaming nor deep sleep. Similarly in dream, there is neither waking nor deep sleep. In deep sleep there is neither waking nor dreaming. The cit that illumines all the three states without touching them, is nothing but *turīya*. That remains as the eternal splendour. *Gauḍapāda* says that the first two (*Viśva* and *Tajjasa*) are associated with the conditions of dream and sleep. *Prājñā* is associated with the state of sleep without dream. Those who have known the truth see neither sleep nor dream in *Turīya*.¹⁹ *Svapna* or dream is the wrong cognition of Reality. *Nidra* or sleep is the state in which one does not know what Reality is. When the erroneous knowledge in these two states disappears, *Turīya* is realised.²⁰

Cit is the one and Non-dual

It has been seen that there is difference in the knowledge of the pot and in the knowledge of the cloth; then how can it be said that the consciousness is one and the same? Cit is not affected by the differences mentioned in the knowledge of the pot and of the cloth. The difference between these two forms of knowledge belongs to another class. It is due to the difference in the objects that the difference in the knowledge occurs. It is not real. It is like the reflection of the moon in water which is the creation of adjuncts. Hence, the Ātman is knowledge and the difference in knowledge is due to the superimposition of imagination. In Reality, the Ātman is one and Non-dual.

Ānanda as Brahman

The Brahman is not only sat and cit but Ānanda or bliss also. In the essential definition of Brahman, the term ananta should be read as ānanda as suggested by Deussen.²¹ Brahman may be understood as bliss in the light of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad teaching.²² The sense of this teaching is that Brahman, which is existence and consciousness, is, at the same time, infinite joy also.

This noble idea is clearly suggested in Kumāra's teaching²³ imparted to Nārada. Name, space, mind, conception, etc. which end in pleasure (sukham) come closer and closer approximations to Brahman. Climatically, the teacher declares, 'yo vai bhūmā tat sukham, nālpe sukhamasti'.²⁴ Verily, a plenum (infinite) is pleasure, there is no pleasure in the small. 'Brahman is bliss' may be further expounded in the light of Yājñavalkya's discourse addresses to Maitreyī.²⁵ He is of the view that objects dear to the human heart, husband, wife, children, wealth, etc. are dear,

not for what they are in themselves, but for the sake of the self-
'ātmanastu kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati'.²⁶

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad explains Brahman, in another significant way as Bliss, 'Raso vai saḥ'.²⁷ Brahman is the essence, the same is bliss. It is no more an abstract universal, but is the universal essence in all forms of joyous feelings. As identical with Brahman, Rasa is the most concrete of realities, and the empirical joy. The intensity and supremacy of the bliss that is Brahman is conveyed in the section named 'Ānanda mīmāṃsā' or enquiry into bliss. There the pleasures of different grades of living beings (above the human level) are arranged with all purity and intensity in an order of hierarchy.

The unsurpassed bliss (niratiśaya) itself, by virtue of the gradation of the good actions such as sacrifice (yajña), charity (dāna), penance (tapaḥ), etc. and the knowledge in the form of contemplation of deity, shine in relative brilliance. That unsurpassed bliss is experienced a hundred times by beings from man to Lord Brahmā. The one itself, because of the gradation of adjuncts, shines in relative brilliance.

According to the great Vedic dicta,²⁸ when there occurs the identity of the individual self and the supreme self, there remains the bliss of Ātman in the form of Brahman. In suṣupti there is the union of Jīvātman and paramātman, when the āvaraṇa, the nature of egoism, is destroyed. Consequently, passing the limit of difference, that knowledge which is one's own nature unifies all jagat in the bliss, which is Ātman itself.

References

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3. यावल्लक्ष्यकालमनवस्थितत्वे सति यद्व्यावर्तकम् । Vedānta Paribhāṣā, यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते — तद्ब्रह्म । Taittirīya Upaniṣad, III.1.
4. Ibid, II.1.
5. Ibid, III.6.
6. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, III, IX, 28.
7. Quoted by Krishna Warriar, A.G., God in Advaita, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1977, p. 27.
8. AppayyaĪkṣita, Siddhāntaleśasaṅgraha, Sastri. P.P.S., Ed., Srirangam, 1935, p. 9.
9. Ṛgveda, I, 164, 46.
10. Ibid, X.90.
11. Ibid, 129.
12. जायते अस्ति वर्धते विपरिणमते अपक्षीयते विनश्यति । Nirukta, I.1.
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14. प्रकृतिश्च प्रतिज्ञादृष्टान्तानुपरोधात् । Brahmasūtra, I, IV, 23.
15. मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम् । Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.14.
16. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, IV, III, 2.
17. अत्रायं पुरुषः स्वयं ज्योतिर्भवति । Ibid, IV, VI.76.
18. Kena Upaniṣad, I, II, 5.

19. स्वप्ननिद्रायुतावाद्यौ प्राज्ञस्त्वस्वप्ननिद्रया ।
न निद्रां नैव च स्वप्नं तुर्यं पश्यन्ति निश्चिताः ॥ Māṇḍūkya Kārikā, I. 14.
20. अन्यथा गृह्णतः स्वप्ने निद्रातत्त्वमजानतः ।
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21. Krishna Warriar, A.G., God in Advaita, p. 34.
22. प्राणो ब्रह्म, कं ब्रह्म, खं ब्रह्म । Chāndogya Upaniṣad, IV, X, 5.
23. Ibid, VII.1.24.
24. Ibid, VII.13.1.
25. न वा अरे सर्वस्य कामाय प्रियं भवति । Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, XI.4.5.
26. Ibid, II.4.5.
27. Taittirīya Upaniṣad, II.7.
28. तत्त्वमसि, अहं ब्रह्मास्मि, प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म, अयमात्मा ब्रह्म ।