

The Path to Liberation?

It, therefore, is the task of the Vedānta-texts to set forth Brahman's nature, and they perform that task by teaching us that Brahman is eternal, all-knowing, absolutely self-sufficient, ever pure, intelligent and free, pure knowledge, absolute bliss. From the devout meditation on this Brahman there results as its fruit, final release, which although not to be discerned in the ordinary way, is discerned by means of the śāstra. If, on the other hand, the Vedānta-texts were considered to have no reference to injunctions of actions, but to contain statements about mere (accomplished) things, just as if one were saying 'the earth comprises seven [continents],' 'that king is marching on,' they would be purportless, because then they could not possibly be connected with something to be shunned or endeavoured after.

— Śrī Śankarācārya Bhāṣya on Brahmasūtra 1.1.4

OM NAMO BHAGAVATE VASUDEVĀYA!

~ Reverence to the August Teacher ~

For the glory and greatness of our Sadguru Śankarācārya and the refutation of all false teachings, this *bhāṣya* is undertaken. It is clear that the passage quoted above consists of a summary (by our Master) of the position of the Mīmāṃsākas and other karmavādins as regards the nature of Brahman and the means of attainment of final release (*mokṣa*), which is realisation of one's identity with That. We know it is the position of the karmavādins because of the emphasis on injunctions to action in the Vedānta-texts; the implication that final release is the result of a course of action, viz., devout meditation; and the claim that if this is not the case, the śāstra are rendered purposeless.

It will be shown that, in opposition to the above position, Brahman neither possesses characteristics nor is realised through actions, but only through cognition. We will state our first argument formally:

PRATIJÑĀ: Brahman (*pakṣa*) (is) nirguna (*sādhya*)

HETU: (Because) Brahman (is) unlimited (*hetu*)

DRṢṬĀNTA: (Like) space (*sapakṣa*)
 (unlike) a god (*vipakṣa*)

The opponent has stated that Brahman is ‘eternal, all-knowing, absolutely self-sufficient, ever pure, intelligent and free, pure knowledge, absolute bliss’. However, the śāstra states ‘That from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live; and into which they pass upon death . . . That is Brahman!’ (Taitt. Up. 3.1) and ‘Brahman is that from which the origin, subsistence, and dissolution of this world proceed’ (Br. Sū. 1.1.2). Knowing this, how can ‘ever pure’ (for example) be a characteristic of Brahman, which gives rise to beings both pure and impure? It is well known that something which proceeds from something else will be not different from it. Mango seeds produce only mango trees, never lemon. Therefore, if ‘ever pure’ were a characteristic of Brahman, all things (which arise from Brahman) would be ever pure. But this is not the case: a woman’s blood flows with the moon, and men become lepers.

Similarly, if ‘all-knowing’ was a characteristic of Brahman, then all things would be omniscient. But this is clearly not the case: the knowledge of most men is markedly finite. So for the rest of the terms used above: Brahman cannot be ‘intelligent’ because It gives rise to beings both sentient and insentient, &c. In fact, Brahman transcends all these terms. Scripture describes Brahman as ‘immeasurable’ (Br. Up. 4.4.20), and ‘infinite’ (Taitt. Up. 2.1), thus unlimited. Any characteristic used to describe Brahman would limit it, because word-concepts only have meaning relative to other word-concepts; i.e. if something is *a*, then it is so because it is not *b*. Because words are exclusive and negating in this way, Brahman cannot be described in words, unless it be the word All (*sarva*, the only non-delimiting word). Therefore the opponent’s position has been refuted: Brahman is without qualities, because Brahman is unlimited, like space and unlike a god.

How might the pūrvapakṣin have come to this erroneous conclusion? Space, although free of qualities (except the quality of being infinite), appears to take on the qualities of the air and other elements within it. In the same way, the sage who has *realised* Brahman often possesses the qualities listed above (self-sufficient, pure, intelligent, free, blissful), which are thus falsely superimposed (*adhyāsa*) onto Brahman. But the sage has these qualities not because they are of Brahman *per se*, but because they

are the qualities of a consciousness which has realised Brahman. Brahman is not like a sage or a god, because Brahman is the source of all sages and gods.

The opponent might here object that ātman and Brahman are identical, so how is Brahman not like a Self-realised sage? From one perspective (that of *neti, neti*), Brahman is only identical with the ātman of the sage, not his other finite qualities; a is not equal to $a+b+c\dots$, so Brahman is not like the sage. From the other perspective (that of *sarva brahma*) Brahman is the All, and the sage a portion of that all, so the totality of Brahman is not like the sage either. The ātman is a microcosm of the All; intervening layers appear conditioned and finite.

This said, the purport of the Vedānta-texts (said to be non-existent by the opponent if it be not action) must be twofold: to communicate Brahman's transcendent *nirguṇa* nature primarily by indicating what It is not (Ś32); and to reveal that knowledge which when cognised causes final release (see below).

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The opponent also claims that action is necessary to attain the fruit of final release. His naïve argument goes as follows. 'The purpose of the Veda is seen to be the injunction of actions' (Bhāṣya on Jaim. Sū. 1.1.1); 'As action is the purport of the Veda, whatever does not refer to action is purportless' (Jaim. Sū. 1.2.1). Change can only be affected by action, according to the law of cause and effect (a force must be exerted to

cause an effect). Because a person does not possess final release, he must effect it through an effort or endeavour. The Vedānta-texts tell us how to attain mokṣa (realisation of Brahman), therefore they must be prescribing the effort or method by which to attain it. This method (described in the texts, such as Śve. Up. 2.8-15) is devout meditation. If the texts did not prescribe a method, they could not be connected with something to be endeavoured after, therefore they could not tell us the means to liberation, therefore they must be purportless. As we know the śāstra cannot be purportless, our argument must be correct.

This karmavādin argument is simple-minded and misguided. Our *uttarapakṣa* is as follows:

PRATIJÑĀ: Realisation of Brahman (*pakṣa*) (is) not attained through action (*sādhya*)

HETU: (Because) Realisation of Brahman (is) permanent and unaffected by pleasure and pain (*hetu*)

DĪKṢĀNTA: (Like) True knowledge (*sapakṣa*)
(unlike) Material objects (*vipakṣa*)

The pūrvapakṣin's reasoning is flawed and ours is correct (as our Master has declared), '[because] of the different nature of the fruits of actions on the one side, and of the knowledge of Brahman on the other side' (Ś26). Firstly, action is not necessary to attain Brahman, because Brahman is already attained. Scripture tells us *ātma brahma* (Br.

Up. 2.5.19), and ‘as Brahman constitutes a person’s Self it is not something to be attained by that person’ (Ś32-33). Therefore no change needs to be effected, save a perceptual one only possible through knowledge. All religious actions are not for attainment of the Self, but only for the purification of the mind and body. Such actions might prepare the aspirant for Self-realisation, but they are not causally linked to it (Ś33).

How can this claim be demonstrated? It is a matter not requiring any proof that pleasure and pain are the result of meritorious and demeritorious action respectively (Ś26). According to the doctrine of karma, the degree of pleasure and pain are proportional to the degree of merit and demerit. When that merit or demerit is exhausted, the pleasure or pain necessarily ceases. This is the eternal law of action. Therefore, anything which is the fruit of action must be impermanent and affected by pleasure and pain (Ś27). It is agreed that *mokṣa* is eternal; therefore it cannot be the result of any action (Ś29). The śāstra says ‘there is no freedom from joy and sorrow for one who has a body’ (Ch. Up. 8.12.1). It is known from Scripture that those who have realised *mokṣa* have transcended the body and gone beyond sorrow and joy (Ka. Up. 2.12 & 22). Therefore, again, release cannot be the fruition of any action (*karman*), which always results in one of those two opposites. Release is the result of the full cognition of Absolute Brahman (‘When a man comes to know that highest Brahman, he himself

becomes that very Brahman.’ Mu. Up. 3.2.9). This is not a process, but comes ‘in a single stroke’ (*sakṛt-pravṛtya*), dependent only on the aspirant’s *adhikāra*.

The objection is now raised that many men have heard stated the true nature of Brahman but continue to be affected by pleasure, pain, &c. (Ś26); so how can mokṣa be attainable through *jñānamātra*? This objection is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the knowledge that catalyses realisation. It is not merely hearing the Truth, but a full *cognition* or consciousness of it that causes release (Ś31). The knowledge must be fully imbibed and understood. Until such time as the aspirant is capable of this full cognition, the only thing to be ‘done’ is to continue to listen to the truth enunciated by the Guru, and cultivate patience.

But here it will be said that knowledge is itself an action. However, an action is that which is dependent on the active physical or mental energy of an individual (Ś34). Knowledge is dependent on the object of knowledge only (Ś31), and its acquisition is dependent on the different means of right knowledge. Knowledge is not *created* through an activity, but only uncovered. If right means of knowledge are applied, the uncovering will not modify the knowledge, and therefore it is still independent of the knower and thus not an action (Ś35).

It has been clearly demonstrated that realisation of Brahman cannot be attained through action, due to the fact that said realisation is permanent, and unaffected by pleasure and pain. Only true knowledge (knowledge independent of the mental activity of the observer) shares these characteristics. They are not shared by material objects, which will all age and pass away, and are modified positively or negatively by their environment. Thus our *Siddhānta* has been ably demonstrated:

‘It is impossible that Release (*mokṣa*) should stand in any, even the slightest, relation to any action, excepting knowledge.’ (Ś34)



*Bhāṣya of Śrī Harīśa
on the above topic of Jñānamātra*

Śankara’s esteemed student has proposed a cogent argument for knowledge as the only ‘path’ to liberation. However, his argument has several flaws which I will now proceed to elucidate. We are told 1) that action cannot lead to liberation, on the basis that the results of all actions are impermanent (&c.) and 2) knowledge is the only possible cause for release. Yet we are never informed as to the precise mechanism by which knowledge effects this release. We are informed of a difference between merely hearing the truth and fully cognizing it, but as to what causes this difference, we remain ignorant. We are in the dark as to why some aspirants ‘get it’ and others don’t. We are told it is a

function of their adhikāra, but if this is so, it logically implies that certain actions which increase adhikāra lead at least indirectly to liberation – a point Śankara does not want to concede.

Based on logical analysis and empirical evidence, I believe that Śankara's assertion that action cannot move one closer to liberation is false. My solution to the problems he proposes is the idea of a *causal chain*: while actions may not be able to trigger liberation, they may, through a connected series of causal events, create a state of mind in which liberation can occur. Such a conclusion is necessitated by the simple fact that sādhanā works: that people unable to grasp and hold the ultimate truth initially are able to do so after a period of spiritual practice.¹ I would propose that spiritual practices have the effect of cleansing and purifying the discriminative faculty of the buddhi, enabling one to grasp the truth in the same way as one sees clearly only after cleaning the dirt off one's glasses. (The Self is the seer, the buddhi is the glasses.) Thus action does lead one closer to liberation, in a causal chain simplistically describable as: Purification of Buddhi -> Capacity of Consciousness to grasp Truth -> Realisation of Truth.

An objection Śankara might raise to this theory is the idea that any action undertaken is motivated by desire, and that desire-motivated action bears fruit in impermanent merits and demerits, and therefore cannot contribute towards liberation.

¹ Cf. Play of Consciousness, Autobiography of a Yogi, and countless others.

His view is that liberation is unconditional, so how can the conditioned (including action) lead to the unconditioned? It may be possible that the only answer to this is a theological one. Highly conscious of these issues, Rāmānuja writes:

“Such knowledge is to be attained only through the due daily performance of religious duties... such performance being sanctified by the accompanying thought of the true nature of the Self, and having the character of propitiation of the highest Person. Now...mere works produce limited and non-permanent results only...on the other hand works not aiming at an immediate result but meant to please the highest Person bring about...the unlimited and permanent result of the intuition of Brahman being the Self of all...” (Śrībhāṣya 1.1.1, R147).

Thus action which is an offering to God is no longer bound and conditioned like desire-motivated action. The sādḥaka whose every act is an offering renounces even the desire for liberation, and performs his spiritual practice without expectation, but faithfully and with a certainty (rather than a desire) that it will work. He does it because it is the right thing to do – simply because the divine invites us to experience That through its very possibility.

We read in the Bhagavad Gītā that one who acts while remaining detached from the fruits of the acts (*karmaphala*) ‘relinquishes here both good and evil karman’. (2.50) Therefore acts which are performed as ‘propitiation of the highest Person’ are *not* conditioned by karmic merit or demerit, thus eliminating the grounds for Śāṅkara’s objection. In 5.10 the Lord says: ‘If one places all karman on brahman and acts disinterestedly, he is no more stained by evil than a lotus petal by muddy water.’

In Chapter 2, Kṛṣṇa clearly prescribes *buddhiyoga* as a means to liberation, and in 2.60-65 the details of a yogic practice are given. In countless places, Kṛṣṇa clearly assumes that certain acts, when performed in the proper way, are part of a causal chain leading to liberation. Thus Scripture refutes the pūrvapakṣin's view that mokṣa stands in no relation whatever to action.