

Svarajya Siddhih: Attaining Self-dominion

Gangadharendra Saraswati

Translated from Sanskrit and annotated by Swami Narasimhananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

ज्ञानं चाप्यद्वितीयस्वरससुखधनानन्तचिन्मात्ररूप-
ब्रह्मात्मैकत्वबोधः स भवति सुमतेस्तत्त्वमस्यादिवाक्यात् ।
देहाद्यध्यासदाढ्याच्छरुतमपि सहसा नैव संभावनीय
ब्रह्मत्वं स्वस्य तस्मान्नयगुरुवचनैः साधु मीमांसनीयम् ॥ ११ ॥

Knowledge is the understanding that the non-dual, self-contained, blissful, infinite, Brahman of the form of absolute consciousness, is one with the Atman. This understanding comes to a person of pure mind, on hearing Vedic statements like 'You are That'.⁶⁰ But this knowledge does not occur spontaneously even on hearing about one's Brahman-hood, because of the strong superimposition of body and the like. Therefore, one has to contemplate on the words of the guru who belongs to the tradition of teachers, till the knowledge of the unity of Brahman and Atman is attained.

BRAHMAN IS NON-DUAL and free from three kinds of *bhedas*, differences—*sajātīya*, intra-difference, *vijātīya*, inter-difference, and *svagata*, self-difference. *Sajātīya bheda* is the difference between two objects of the same class. For instance, an apple tree and a mango tree; both fall in the category of trees, but are different types within this category. *Vijātīya bheda* is the difference between two objects belonging to different classes, like the difference between a tree and a mountain. *Svagata bheda* is the difference between different parts or attributes of the same object, like the difference between the fruits and leaves of a tree. Brahman is

free from all such differences. It is also the essence of itself, it is self-contained. Brahman and Atman are identical. This identity is proclaimed by Upanishadic statements like 'You are That'. However, not all can understand this; only qualified aspirants with pure minds can. How does the mind become pure? By performing good actions for numerous births one attains good karmas, as a result of which good impressions are formed in the mind. Then, on hearing the Vedic statements the strongest superimposition of the body, mind, and so on is removed and the knowledge of the Atman is attained as palpably as a fruit in one's palm.

Thus, it is not the spiritual practice of one birth alone that counts. A parable of Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this point:

There is a story about a man who practised the sava-sadhana. He worshipped the Divine Mother in a deep forest. First he saw many terrible visions. Finally a tiger attacked and killed him. Another man, happening to pass and seeing the approach of the tiger, had climbed a tree. Afterwards he got down and found all the arrangements for worship at hand. He performed some purifying ceremonies and seated himself on the corpse. No sooner had he done a little japa than the Divine Mother appeared before him and said: 'My child, I am very much pleased with you. Accept a boon from Me.' He bowed low at the Lotus Feet of the Goddess and said: 'May I ask You one question, Mother? I am speechless with amazement at Your action.'

The other man worked so hard to get the ingredients for Your worship and tried to propitiate You for such a long time, but You didn't condescend to show him Your favour. And I, who don't know anything of worship, who have done nothing, who have neither devotion nor knowledge nor love, and who haven't practised any austerities, am receiving so much of Your grace.' The Divine Mother said with a laugh: 'My child, you don't remember your previous births. For many births you tried to propitiate Me through austerities. As a result of those austerities all these things have come to hand, and you have been blessed with My vision. Now ask Me your boon.'⁶¹

On hearing the Vedic dictum 'Tat tvam asi; You are That', one starts contemplating on its meaning. The word *tat* is analysed and this process is called *tat-pada shodhana*. Similarly, the word *tvam* is analysed and this process is called *tvam-pada shodhana*. After such analysis one arrives at the truth that both *tat* and *tvam* refer to Brahman alone. However, this can happen only if the aspirant is endowed with the qualifying attributes of dispassion, discernment, control of the mind and the senses, and desire for liberation. The aspirant should also possess a refined intellect, as said in the Upanishads: 'He [the Purusha] is hidden in all beings, and hence he does not appear as the Atman of all. But by the seers of subtle things, he is seen through a pointed and fine intellect.'⁶² Those of dull or mediocre intellect cannot fathom Brahman even after hearing the Vedic dicta, just like a person unfamiliar with a diamond considers it to be merely a piece of glass.

Objection: What is the need of having a fine intellect to understand the import of simple Vedic statements like 'You are That'? Do not people with ordinary intellects understand the meanings of sentences used in day-to-day affairs?

Reply: A fine intellect is indeed necessary. Those who have merely listened to Vedic dicta

without the realization of Brahman do indulge in worldly activities and are subject to the dualities of happiness and misery, and the like. Acharya Shankara says in his commentary on the fourth sutra of the *Brahma Sutra*: 'It is seen that even in the case of one who has heard of Brahman, such characteristics of a soul in bondage as happiness, sorrow, etc. persist just as before.'⁶³ Hence, a fine intellect is necessary for contemplation on the Vedic dicta taught by the guru.

There are three kinds of obstacles to the knowledge of the unity of Brahman and Atman. The first is *samśaya bhāvana*, doubt in general. The student who hears Vedic statements like 'You are That' doubts the scriptures, the guru, the spiritual disciplines taught, and so on. This is a general kind of doubt characteristic of scepticism. In modern times this doubt or suspicion was brought about into society at large mainly by three schools of thought: Marxism, Freudian psychology, and Nihilism. They embody all that has characterized suspicion regarding the higher nature of the human being. Paul Ricoeur famously called the exponents of these the 'school of suspicion'; he says: 'Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is easier to show their common opposition to a phenomenology of the sacred, understood as a propaedeutic to the "revelation" of meaning, than their interrelationship within a single method of demystification.'⁶⁴

This general suspicion or doubt can be removed only by faith in the scriptures and the guru, brought about by logical cogitation. This faith is called *shraddha* and it is one of the basic qualifications required of a spiritual aspirant. Swami Vivekananda extols *shraddha*:

What makes the difference between man and man is the difference in this Shraddha and nothing else. What makes one man great and another weak and low is this Shraddha. ... This Shraddha

must enter into you. ... This Shraddha is what I want, and what all of us here want, this faith in ourselves, and before you is the great task to get that faith. Give up the awful disease that is creeping into our national blood, that idea of ridiculing everything, that loss of seriousness. Give that up. Be strong and have this Shraddha, and everything else is bound to follow.⁶⁵

The second obstacle is *asambhavana*, the notion of impossibility. On hearing the Vedic dicta, it seems impossible that the Atman could be Brahman. It sounds more like a fantasy. Vedanta proclaims that one's true nature is Brahman, which is free from hunger and thirst, not limited by differences like caste, is self-evident, eternal, having the nature of absolute existence-knowledge-bliss. However, an ordinary person directly experiences feelings like hunger and thirst, is proud of special parentage, experiences the dualities of happiness and misery, and is bound by the fruits of actions. Under such circumstances one is unable to say that this manifested world is an illusion, because this world is the object of the experience of all people, and also this beginningless world does not seem to have any end. Further, all sense objects are perceived and evaluated through sense organs like the eye and so on. Since the world is perceived and evaluated, there seems to be no defect in it; it is difficult to accept its ephemeral nature. Even the rituals prescribed in the Vedas are performed with the help of the sense organs and are very much within the realm of this dualistic world. This obstacle of *asambhavana* is removed by *manana*, contemplation, on the Vedic dicta.

The third obstacle to the realization of the unity of Atman and Brahman is *viparīta-bhāvana*, the notion of contradiction. We always see this manifested world and the idea that the empirical world is the true reality is deep-rooted in our minds. How can we negate this universe all of a sudden? The impressions of many births are

very strong and exert their pull again and again upon us making us run after sense enjoyments. And so, the ephemeral world does not seem so ephemeral, rather it seems very permanent. Day after day we deal with sense objects; how can we negate their existence? This is *viparīta-bhāvana*. It is through *nidhidhyāsana*, constant meditation, that this obstacle can be removed.

It is not possible to comprehend Brahman through the senses, as it cannot be known by the ordinary methods of knowledge, but through the Upanishads. However, even the hearing of the teachings of the scriptures and the guru, who deny duality, does not lead to the knowledge of the non-dual Brahman because such knowledge goes beyond the very scriptures, which speak about it. If something that is dependent upon another thing is posited to go against the very entity it depends upon, it is called the error of *upajīvyā virodhaḥ*. The methods of knowledge, the scriptures including the Upanishads, and the guru are all within the realm of duality, but Brahman is non-dual. This would lead to the conclusion that the knowledge of Brahman suffers from the error of *upajīvyā virodhaḥ*. If the Vedas are held to be valid, even if they go against what is known by methods of knowledge like direct perception, then in statements like 'the sacrificial post is the sun', 'the person performing the sacrifice is a bundle of *durvha* grass', the implied meaning cannot be taken and the absurd verbatim meaning will have to be taken as the real meaning of the sentence. In practice, the implied meanings of these sentences are construed as their true import and they are held to mean 'the sacrificial post is as bright as the sun' and 'a bundle of *durvha* grass can represent the person performing the sacrifice'. If these implied meanings are not considered, these statements will be absurd. Also, all knowledge that cannot be obtained through methods like direct perception should be considered

invalid. This is not logical or proper. That is why Vedanta holds that the methods of knowledge used for satisfying one's desires do not lead to the knowledge of Brahman, and it is not possible to negate this manifested universe all of a sudden.

Thus, it has been established that due to this difficulty to know Brahman it cannot be known even if its knowledge is taught a hundred times. It can be known only after contemplation and meditation for a long time. Those who do not understand this and yet think they can understand Brahman are not only fools themselves but also delude others and uselessly talk about Vedanta. Their plight is as spoken of in the Upanishads: 'Living in the midst of ignorance and considering themselves intelligent and enlightened, the senseless people go round and round, following crooked courses, just like the blind led by the blind.'⁶⁶ Others who suffer from suspicion wander aimlessly like shipwrecked persons floating without direction in the sea. Thus, it has been spoken by the wise: 'The yoga that is familiarly referred to as *asparśa*, contactless, is difficult to be comprehended by anyone of the yogis. For those yogis, who apprehend fear where there is no fear, are afraid of it.'⁶⁷

Even persons who are desirous of liberation and have given up all actions are unable to attain to the knowledge of Brahman due to obstacles like *samsāya-bhāvāna*. It is for the help of such aspirants that the sage Badarayana has, out of his infinite mercy, written the analytic work *Brahma Sutra*. Using the logic depicted therein and also following the teachings of the scriptures and the guru, one has to constantly contemplate and cogitate on the Vedic dicta till one attains the knowledge of the unity of the Atman and Brahman. On such contemplation and meditation the knowledge of Brahman dawns either in this birth or in the next birth. The certainty of such knowledge is proclaimed: 'He understood

that from him. He understood that from him.'⁶⁸

The hearing of the Vedic dicta can lead to the realization of Brahman in the next birth, if not in the present birth. This knowledge can come at any stage of the transmigratory cycle of births and deaths. It can also occur while one is in the mother's womb, as evidenced in the case of Vamadeva: "Even while lying in the womb, I came to know of the birth of all the gods. A hundred iron citadels held me down. Then, like a hawk, I forced my way through by dint of the knowledge of the Self." Vamadeva said this while still lying in the mother's womb.'⁶⁹ One can attain the knowledge of Brahman even in this very life if one properly follows the path mentioned in the Upanishads and does diligent contemplation and meditation on the Vedic dicta. That is why it is taught in the *Brahma Sutra*: 'The generation of knowledge takes place even in this life if there is no obstruction to the means adopted. For this is what is revealed (by the Upanishads).'⁷⁰

(To be continued)

References

60. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.9.3.
61. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2010), 164.
62. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.12.
63. *Brahma Sūtra Bhaṣya of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 25.
64. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), 32.
65. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.319-20.
66. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.5.
67. Acharya Gaudapada, *Mandukya Upanishad Karika*, 3.39.
68. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.16.3.
69. *Aitareya Upanishad*, 2.1.5.
70. *Brahma Sutra*, 3.4.51.