

Advaita Vedanta – A Bird's Eye View

The Hindu Scripture

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We all ask questions regarding ourselves, the world that we experience and the Lord, such as –

- ***Who am I? Am I the body? Am I the mind?***
- ***What happens to us when we die?***
- ***What is the nature of the world that we experience? How did it come into existence? Will it have an end?***
- ***Is there a creator? Is there some one like a Supreme Lord? Are there more than one God?***
- ***What is our relationship to others, the perceived world and the Lord or the Gods?***
- ***What is the purpose of life?***

1. Like other philosophies, Advaita Vedanta deals with such questions. It is a unique philosophy. The uniqueness consists in (a) the assertion that the sole reality is a supreme principle of existence cum consciousness cum infinity, called brahma (spelt as Brahman in this paper) which is identical with the consciousness of individual living beings called aatma and (b) the relegation of the universe perceived universe (jagat) to a lower order of reality.
2. The original Hindu scripture called Veda (consisting of about 20,000, *mantras* (hymns) is divided into four compilations, called (a) Rig Veda, (b) Yajur Veda, (c) Sama Veda and (d) Atharva Veda. Respectively, the earlier portions of these Vedas consist of (a) hymns (*mantras*) in metrical or poetic form, (b) a manual of rituals including hymns in prose form (c) hymns in musical form and (d) miscellaneous matters. Together, these portions are called Karma Kanda. The latter portions of the Vedas, called Vedanta or Upanishads or Jnana Kanda are the philosophical portions. Karma Kanda deals with (a) rituals and sacrifices (b) worship of deities and prayers (c) duties, values of life, and conduct of life in harmony with the welfare of all living beings, with the requirements of society and with the structure of the universe (called karma) and (d) meditation (*upaasana*) on aspects of the

- cosmos in the form of deities (*devatas*) and on the Supreme Lord, the creator and ruler (Iswara). There is a lot of codified and clarificatory literature called *sutras* (aphorisms), and elaborating these, there are *smritis*. Whereas *Brahma Sutra* deals with the Upanishads, the other *sutras* deal with karma kanda. Related to karma kanda there are *dharma sastra sutras* dealing with the duties and responsibilities of and the values to be cultivated by individuals, *grhya sutras* dealing such matters in relation to the family, *srouta sutras* focusing on the welfare of the society, with a description of rituals and prayers for the well-being of the society, universal harmony and peace. There is also literature consisting of commentaries called *bhashyams*, and these, in turn, have a chain of sub-commentaries. Such of these that are in verse form are called *vartikas*. There are also interpretative works on various topics called *Prakarana granthas*. All these together are called *Saashtra*.
3. Pursuit of Karma Kaanda is the preparation for the pursuit of Jnana Kanda. Karma Kanda prescribes various kinds of karma and upasana and mentions the corresponding mundane benefits to be obtained, such as wealth, health, progeny, acquisition of superhuman powers (called *siddhis*), life in higher worlds, etc. When they are performed with the purpose of obtaining the material benefits, they are called *kaamya karmas*. In the initial stages one does *kaamya karmas*. But, in due course – it may be after many births (called *janmas*) – one finds out that whatever benefits *kaamya karmas* give are temporary. Even life in a higher world is, according to *Sashtra*, temporary. The foolish way of seeking happiness is to develop desire for objects. No pleasure is unmixed with pain. In fact most of the time, it is pain. Struggle and strain and anxiety in acquiring things, the worry of protecting what one has acquired and the sorrow when it is lost or ceases to be – all this is nothing but pain. Happiness is only there in a fleeting moment when one has got a thing one wanted and desire for another or a higher thing has not arisen. There is no end to desire. One desire arises after another. One is always hankering after something better. Satiation sets in. The law of diminishing returns operates. If going to a picture once a month is enough, to begin with, you reach a stage when

you want to go daily and even that is not enough later. Your sense faculties undergo wear and tear by the enjoyment and one becomes mentally a slave of the objects and physically a wreck. The wiser way of having happiness is to develop dispassion for objects (vairaagya). Vide Isavasya 1 – “Protect yourself by giving up desire.” Experiencing the problems of seeking happiness through contact with objects, one begins wondering whether it is possible to have permanent peace and happiness. Sastra comes and says, “Yes; it is possible. Leave the kaamya karmas and come to Jnana kanda.”

4. (a) Before taking to Jnana kanda, one has to prepare oneself for it. The subject is subtle and the study requires calmness and concentration of mind. Calmness or purity of mind and concentration are acquired, respectively, by the performance of karma and upasana without desire for mundane benefits and solely with a view to going to Jnana kanda. This is called *nishkaama karma*. This is a way of life where the attitude is significant. Whatever action one does, religious or secular, is done as an offering to Iswara (*iiswara arpana buddhi*) and acceptance of results, favorable or unfavorable with equanimity as the sacred gift of Iswara (*iiswara prasaada buddhi*) This is called karma yoga. Karmayoga engenders purity of mind (*citta suddhi*) and upasana calmness and concentration of mind (*citta aikagryam* and *citta naiscalyam*) and desire for *atma vicaara* (enquiry into the nature of self), which are required for the pursuit of jnana kanda.

(b) Sastra prescribes what is called varnaashrama dharma – four successive ways of life and four vocations. The four successive ways of life start with brahmacharya ashrama in which boys and girls chant the Veda mantras and, studying Sanskrit get a general idea of what the Veda says. They also study auxiliary subjects, called vedaangas (siksha, kalpa, vyaakarana, nirukta, and chandas, and jyotisha – pronunciation and intonation, methodology of rituals, grammar, and etymological explanation of difficult Vedic words, prosody and astronomy. Starting at the age of five, the study is to be done under a preceptor (guru), staying with him for a period of twelve years. (This is called

gurukulavaasa). This is followed by grahasthaasrama in which one, after marriage, functions as a priest, teacher, warrior, trader, or agriculturist (in one of the four varnas, called respectively, Braahmana, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra.) Women who have not chosen to pursue jnana kanda get married and look after the household, assisting the husband in his rituals and pursuing simple religious activities like prayer, worship in temples, pilgrimage, listening to discourses by scholars and acharyas on topics relating to puranas and vedanta. When one has had children, to the eldest of whom one could hand over the responsibilities of the joint family one adopts vaanaprastha asrama in which one retires with one's spouse to the forest for doing upaasana. The last is sanyaasa asrama during which one devotes time exclusively to a deep study of Vedanta (Jnana kanda). This is again done under a guru; this time the guru has to be one who is not only well versed in Vedanta but is himself one abiding in Brahman (srotريا brahmanishtah). This type of sanyasa, taken for devoting undivided attention to sravana, manana, nididhyasnam is called *vividisha sanyasa*. The other type of sanyasa, taken after completing sravanam and mananam successfully in grahasthasrama itself, is called vidwad-sanyasa. This is for pursuing nididhyasana undisturbed by other preoccupations.

(c) Going through grahastha asrama and vanaprastha asrama is not compulsory. Those who have obtained sufficient purity of mind (citta suddhi) and dispassion (vairaagyam) and concentration (citta aikaagryam) and have developed a keen desire for liberation (mumukshutvam) after the brahmacarya asrama itself can, be it boys or girls, straightway take to sanyasa asrama, or, without going through grahastha asrama, continue study of Vedanta. (They are called *naishtika brahmacaris* or *naishtika brhmacaarinis*). (Vide Brhadaranyaka IV.iv.20, where two types of sanyasa are mentioned, one after grahasthasrama and vanaprastha and the other straightway from brhamacarya). (In Jabala Upanishad also, it is said that one takes grahasthasrama after brahmacarya, vanaprastha asrama after grahasthasrama, sanyasrama after vanaprastha and as an alternative,

one can straightway take sanyasrama after brahmcarya. In today's economic and social milieu, it not possible to adhere to the ancient system of varnasrama dharma involving a regular succession of ways of life and a clear division of vocations. Gurukulavaasa has become obsolete and there is no time for a householder to perform the elaborate rituals prescribed in Sastra. However, even in modern society, even if there is no ceremonial assumption of asramas, the sequence of the main activity in life is not different – one engages in academic study first, then discharges one's duties in the chosen profession, not omitting prayer and worship and if one is intelligent, devote time also to sravanam, mananam and nididhyasanam under a srotriya-brahmanishta acharya. Sanyasa is not compulsory. Many married women also, nowadays, are not only working in offices or doing business and at the same time are pursuing vedantic study (sravana, manana, nididhyasanam) under a srotriya-brahmanishta acharya. Even in modern circumstances, though formal rites may not be possible, it is possible to devote some time to a limited regimen of worship, prayers and meditation, to the extent the preoccupation of earning a living will allow. One has also to perform one's duties to others, to society and to nature. Further, one should pursue one's profession as karma yoga and lead a life based on values, such as truthfulness, non-violence, austerity, charity etc. Above all, one reduces worldly pursuits to the minimum required for life and devotes time to spiritual pursuits. If one is talented, the talent should be put to use for the welfare the society, nation and the world, after providing for the requirements of one's own family. Whatever surplus wealth accumulates should be spent in charities.

5. Some part of the original Vedic literature has been lost by disuse and destruction during invasions. According to tradition, Vedanta literature originally consisted of 1180 Upanishads. What are extant are 220, of which 108 are with commentaries. Of these what are considered most important are twelve Upanishads. Of these, widely taught are ten, viz., Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitreya, Taittiriya, Chandogya and Brhadaranyaka, for which the great

preceptor, Sankaracarya has written invaluable commentaries. Two others that are popular are Kaivalya and Svetasvatara. (Some say that the extant commentary of Swesvatara is also Sankaracarya's.) Mandukya is the shortest Upanishad and Brhadaranyaka is the biggest. Mandukya is studied along with an explanatory treatise called "karika" written by Sankaracarya's teacher's teacher (paramaguru), Gaudapadacarya. Apart from the Upanishads, all students of Vedanta study the Bhagavadgita and Vyasacarya's "Brahma Sutra". As foundational texts, they are called, "Prasthaanatraya".

6. According to tradition, the literature of the Vedas including Vedanta is not works of human authorship. It is revelation from Iswara; vide Kaivalya Upanishad 22 – "I (Brahman) alone am the theme taught in the different Vedas. I am the revealer of the Vedanta and I alone am the real knower of the Vedas." Svetasvatara IV.9 – "Mayii (Brahman, through his power, called Maya, creates Veda" (The word, 'Mayii' should be interpreted, preferably as Iswara, since creation is mentioned). Revealed by Iswara, Veda exists in a subtle form, as a part of the creation. It has been grasped by sages (rishis), whose special mental equipment acquired by upasana has enabled them to find out what is there is subtle form. (The word, 'rishi' is derived from a root which means 'to see'; so rishi means one who sees). The Veda has been transmitted to successive generations in a teacher student tradition. This is called "guru sishya parampara". Vide Svetasvatara Upanishad V.6 – "The *brahmatvam*, the principle called Brahman) is hidden in the Upanishads which constitute the gist of the vedas. (- 'Hidden' means that it can be known only by those who do sravana manana in depth). Hiranyagarbha knows them (the Upanishads). Knowing them, Devas and rishis have become immortal". Since the teaching was oral, not written, the Veda is called *sruti*. Since it is not of human authorship it is called "*apaurusheya pramaana*". The rest of the sastra is of human authorship, the work of sages and saints, and it is called "*pourusheya pramaana*".

7. In its fundamental teaching, Vedanta deals with matters beyond creation. Human intellect itself is a part of creation. It cannot therefore

prove or disprove what is said in Vedanta. Cf. Kathopanishad I.ii.8 and I.ii.9 – “It (Brahman) is beyond argumentation.” “This wisdom.....is not to be attained through argumentation.” Kenopanishad I.3, I.4 and I.6 – “The eyes do not go there, nor speech nor mind. We do not know Brahman to be such and such.” “ That (Brahnan) is surely different from the known and again It is above the unknown.” “That which man does not comprehend with the mind”. Taittiriya Upanishad II.ix.1 – “That...Brahman, failing to reach which words turn back along with the mind”. Faith – i. e., the wholehearted trust in one’s chosen guru and the content of the Sastra that teaches us is essential. So a student of Vedanta goes primarily by what is said in the Upanishads as interpreted by preceptors (acaryas) whom he has chosen to follow. Logic is used to analyze topics based on data gathered from Sastra to arrive at a harmonious construction of the texts (called “samanvaya”) and to be convinced of the credibility of what is arrived at (sambhaavana yukti).