

CHAPTER-4

Self : Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja

Vedānta is one of the six orthodox (*āstika*) systems of Indian philosophy. The word *Vedānta* is a *tatpuruṣa* compound of *Veda* (knowledge) and *anta* (end or conclusion). Thus the term *Vedānta* means 'the end of the *vedas*' or the doctrines set forth in the closing chapters of the *Vedas*, which are the *Upaniṣads*. It is the basis of Hinduism. *Vedāntic* thought drew on *Vedic* cosmology, hymns and philosophy. The *Vedānta* theory is written by *Vedavyāsa* in the *sūtra* form and it is called *Brahma-Sūtra*. The commentary written by Śaṅkarācārya on *Brahma-Sūtra*, is called *Śārīraka-Bhāṣya*, because it deals with the embodiment of the unconditioned self. The *Vedānta-Sūtra* has four chapters. The first chapter deals with the theory of *Brahman* and its relation to the world. The second chapter discusses the objections raised by other systems against this view. The third chapter discusses the methods by which *Brahma-vidyā* can be attained. The fourth chapter deals with the results of *Brahma-vidyā*. *Bādarāyaṇa* wrote the *Brahma-Sūtras* to systematise the teachings of the *Upaniṣads* into a coherent philosophy. The cryptic way in which the aphorisms of the *Vedānta-Sūtras* are presented leaves the door wide open for a multitude of interpretations and this has led to a proliferation of *Vedānta* sub-schools. Though the *Vedānta* is mentioned as the one school, there are four sub-schools of the *Vedānta*, viz., the

Kevalādvaita or the *Advaita* of Śaṅkarācārya, the *Śuddhādvaita* of Vallabhacārya, the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānujācārya and the *Dvaita* of Mādhvacārya. Among these four, the three schools believe in God, the *Paramapurusa*, who creates the world, sustains it and destroys it. The *Dvaita* school describes the individual souls (*jīvas*) as the reflections or ‘*pratibimbās*’ of God, controlled by Him and depending on Him.

Vedānta is based on the three works; the *Brahma-Sūtra*, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The concept of *Brahman*— the supreme spirit or the eternal, self existent, eminent, transcendent and ultimate reality which is the divine ground of all being is central to *Vedānta*. The concept of God or *Īśvara* is also advocated by the *Vedāntins*. The main difference among these different sub-schools lies in their portrayal of the intense relationship among the three concepts of *jīva* (individual soul), *jagat* (the world or the universe) and *Īśvara* or *Brahman* (God).

In this Chapter only the Śaṅkara’s and Rāmānuja’s concept of self will be discussed and the discussion is started with the concept of self in Śaṅkara’s *Advaita Vedānta*.

The greatest and the best known system of *Vedānta* is *Advaita*. *Advaita* is a Sanskrit word that literally means (*a*=not, *dvaita*=two) not two or non-dual and *Vedānta* means ‘the end of knowledge’ (*Veda*=knowledge, *anta*=end). ‘Not-

two' does not mean that there is therefore 'one'. It means that there are not two. It is an attempt of a harmonious interpretation of the *Upaniṣadic* text. *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad-Gītā* and *Brahma-Sūtras* are the triple basis of *Advaita* philosophy. The *Upaniṣad* contains the wisdom of *Vedānta*, *Gītā* gives its cream and the *Sūtras* expound its philosophical values. *Advaita* is a monistic and non dualistic system which essentially refers to the indivisibility of the self (*ātman*) from the whole (*Brahman*). The doctrine of *Advaita* as expounded by *Śaṅkara* can be summed up in half a verse:

‘*Brahma satya jagat mithyā*

Jīvo Brahmaiva nāparaḥ’

Brahman (the Absolute) alone is real; this world is unreal; and the *jīva* or the individual soul is non-different from *Brahman*. This is the quintessence of his philosophy.

The first person to explicitly consolidate the principles of *Advaita Vedānta* was *Adi Śaṅkara* while the first historical proponent was *Gauḍapāda*, the *guru* of *Śaṅkara*'s *guru Gobinda Bhagavatpāda*. The school of *Advaita* is described by some as theology and by others as a philosophy. And so, it seems to have elements of both. There are some commentators who see *Advaita* as the culmination not only of Hindu thought, but also of all religious thought. For

example, *Satprakāśānda*, a follower of *Vivekānanda* says— strictly speaking *Vedānta* is not a particular religion but the common basis of all religion.

Satyam-Jñānam-Anantam-Ānandam are not separate attributes. They form the very essence of *Brahman*. According to *Śaṅkara*, *Brahman* is the only, the supreme and the most perfect reality. “Just as by the knowledge of a lump of earth, everything that is made of earth comes to be known, all this being merely a word, a modification and a name, the ultimate substratum of it all being the earth; that just as by the knowledge of a piece of iron everything made of iron becomes known..... similarly by the knowledge of *Brahman* everything is known, because *Brahman* is the ultimate substratum of all.”¹

According to *Advaita Vedānta*, *Brahman* is the ultimate reality. In ultimate sense *Brahman* is devoid of all qualities. It is indeterminate and non dual. *Brahman* cannot be described, because description implies distinction. *Brahman* cannot be distinguished from any other than Him. It is declared in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* that the *Brahman* is the form where all speech with the mind is unable to reach. *Śaṅkara's* supreme *Brahman* is *nirguṇa* (without the *guṇas*), *nirākāra* (formless), *nirviśeṣa* (without attributes) and *niṣkriya* (without activity). If *Brahman* which is the only reality, is one and without a second, then the world of multiplicity becomes difficult to explain for the philosophers like Spinoza, Bradley and others who advocate absolute monism. To solve this anomaly *Śaṅkara* borrows the word ‘*māyā*’ from the *Upaniṣads* and explains the world.

The ignorance (*avidyā*) which is the cause of error or illusion is called *māyā*. Error consists in perceiving one thing in place of another thing. Likewise, we see the world of multiplicity where there is only *Brahman*, which is the only reality. This perceptual error or illusion is due to ignorance (*avidyā*). For *Brahman*, *māyā* is the power to create appearances. This power does neither affect *Brahman* nor deceive Him. Like, when a magician makes one coin appear as many, it is an illusion for us, the ignorant spectators, and not for the magician, who knows that he has no magical power. Similarly, *Brahman* creates the world-appearance through *māyā*, but remains Himself unaffected.

Brahman is pure consciousness. *Brahman* associated with *māyā* appears as qualified or *Saguṇa Brahman* or *Īśvara*, who is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of the universe. *Brahman* is the ground of the world which appears through *māyā*. According to *Śaṅkara*, description of *Brahman* as the Creator of the world is true only from the empirical point of view, so long as the world-appearance is regarded as real. From the transcendental standpoint, there is neither any real world nor any Creator.

The swan has a special association with *Advaita Vedānta*. The swan is called *hamsa* in Sanskrit. The greatest masters in the *Advaita* tradition are called *parama hamsas*— the great swans. The word *hamsa* is a variation of *soham* meaning ‘I am that’, which constitutes the highest realisation. There are other equivalences between the swan and the *Advaitin* that make the swan particularly

apt symbol for *Advaita Vedānta*. Just as a swan lives in water but its feathers are not soiled by water, similarly a liberated *Advaitin* lives in the world full of *māyā* but is untouched by its illusion. In India, the swan is also mythically credited with the ability to separate milk from water. Similarly, the *Advaitin* discriminate the eternal *ātman* from the non-eternal world. The *ātman* that is *Brahman* is imminent in the world, just as the milk is seemingly inseparably mixed with water, but it can never be truly realised without the *nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka*—right discrimination between the eternal and ephemeral—that is essential for the *Advaitin*. The swan is thus a symbol for the *jīvanmukta*, who is liberated while still alive in this world, by virtue of having realised *Brahman*.

This system pursues relentlessly the logic of monism in the *Upaniṣads* and maintains the non-dual nature of the ultimate truth called *Brahman*, which is identified with *ātman* (individual self) and is the only reality; all others including the world are superimposition on *Brahman* due to ignorance. The self is absolute, all-pervasive, universal and unique.

Advaitins try to explain this reality or self with reference to the not self. They have maintained that neither the body, nor the senses, nor even the mind can really be the self. This process of successive denial of attributes brings us to the famous formula, negatively descriptive of *Brahman* or *ātman*, ‘*neti neti*’—‘not this’, ‘not this’. The self is not this, not this. This negative method of procedure is found in the *Upaniṣads* which serve as the basis of *Śaṅkara*’s *Advaitism*.

The self is not the body, because the body undergoes changes along with the progress of time. But the 'I' will remain the same; the identical consciousness will accompany this change of body. Had the self been identical with body, it would have altered with the aging of the body. That it does not. Therefore, the self is not the body.

Self is also not the sense-organ. Though the sense-organs are different, yet there is only one 'I'. If the self were identical with the sense-organs, there would have been different 'I's or selves corresponding to the different sense-organs.

The self is not again the mind or intellect. The mind or intellect represents the different functions of the internal organ or *antahkarana*, which receives and arranges what is conveyed to it through the senses and is thus an agent of knowledge. But the self cannot be the agent of knowledge as the *antahkarana*. If the self becomes an agent of knowledge it will be liable to change, therefore, will cease to be real, since what is real never changes.

“The self, in *Vedānta*, is defined as being-consciousness-bliss.”² In the *Vedānta* philosophy, being, consciousness and bliss are used as adjectives of the self. But these adjectives do not limit the self but, on the contrary, indicate its very nature. We should not think that the *Advaita Vedānta* regards the self as a substance qualified by the attributes of being, consciousness and bliss. These terms only point to the identity of the self; they are not its attributes. The self is different

from all objects in the world. It is not an object which possesses attributes. It is 'being'. It is the *Brahman* and is not predicative. Being, consciousness and bliss are not related to each other. They directly refer to the self. They express the full nature of self independently. Though these adjectives are not equivalent in sense and usage, still they have some identity of meaning.

The being is not distinct from consciousness. If it is so then it would become an object of knowledge and all objects of knowledge are false according to *Advaita Vedānta*. Likewise, consciousness cannot be distinct from being. If it becomes distinct from being it will become untrue. Similarly, bliss cannot be distinct from being and consciousness.

Reality is one. It cannot be more than one. Being, consciousness and bliss refer to the reality, not to the objects which are excluded from reality. So it can be said that the objects of the world are many.

The self is existent, being or *sat*. According to *Śaṅkara*, the self undoubtedly exists, since, the immediate awareness of self sets a limit to our skepticism that may brush away all other objects as illusory. The self exists as we are immediately and indubitably aware of its existence. *Śaṅkara* in his commentary to the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* offers us an elaborate explanation of the exact connotation of being. "The *Advaitin* defines 'being' as 'absence of negation'."³ Being cannot be negated. That, which can be negated has some determination—

spatial, temporal or in content. Anything bounded by space is obviously negated by things outside. Similarly, with things temporarily limited. They are limited by the past and the future time. Determination in content again, is the limitation of one object by another. This means its distinction from similars, distinction from dissimilars and distinction within itself. A flower is distinguished from its similar, i.e. from other flowers, and from its dissimilar e.g., stones etc.; it also contains distinctions within itself, for its parts are distinguished from one another. This implies that a thing cannot enter into the 'being' of another. Rather one thing sets a limit to the other. Such a limit is seen only among distinct objects. But being has no such distinction. Therefore being is infinite or limitless. The self or being is not bounded in space, because it extends beyond space, nor limited in time, for even that which surpasses the temporal limit has 'being'. Nor it is determined by other things, since the determinants themselves possess 'being'. 'Being' is ubiquitous and eternal. It is also the life and soul of everything else.

The self is also consciousness as such. *Śāṅkara* repudiates the views of the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* doctrines of self as a substance with consciousness as its attributes. Self and consciousness are not related as substance and attribute. *Śāṅkara* argues that the relation between the substance and its attributes must either be one of identity, or difference, or identity and difference. If consciousness is different from the self by its nature then it cannot

be an attribute of the substance self. And again, if they are identical it is meaningless to say that one is an attribute of the other. Nor can the same thing be at once identical with, and different from another. Therefore the self is identical with consciousness. Consciousness is self-revealing. There is no other consciousness to reveal itself. This self-revealing consciousness is not an adventitious quality of the self. It is the very 'being' of the self.

"Consciousness is one, but the objects or the superimposed determinants of consciousness are distinct. And this consciousness is no other than the permanent self."⁴ Consciousness by itself is unitary. Mental modes i.e. *antahkarana vṛttis* which precede knowledge are distinct with every distinction of object.

The soul is self-revealing. It is proved by the absence of doubt, error or contrary knowledge in respect of it. Nobody entertains any doubt as to the existence of the self. Nor does anyone err that one's self is not 'I', but something different from the 'I'. Nor is there any contrary or negative knowledge of the self that 'I am not'. Everyone unfalteringly asserts 'I am'. Such a declaration is never possible unless the soul is self-revealing.

Consciousness remains as it is in all the three states- waking state, dream state and deep sleep state. In the waking state, the self is confronted with the objects of the world and consciousness is always wide awake. In the case of dream state,

the self sports with images and it is proved thereby that consciousness is a persistent factor. Consciousness persists not only in the waking and the dream state; it persists in deep sleep also. Apparently the self-manifestation is absent in deep sleep. When a man returns to the waking state after deep sleep, he says that he did not know anything in that state. This statement seems to show that self-manifestation ceased for some time. But really, the self-revelation persists even in deep sleep. It can be understood by the declaration of a person after awaking from a deep sleep—‘I had a blissful sleep’. Thus, it is unveiled that the self-revelation never disappears in any of the states and this constant consciousness will be inexplicable unless we assume that the cause of self-revelation is its own nature. Thus the self is regarded by *Śaṅkara* as identical with an eternal, infinite, unchanging, real and self-luminous consciousness.

The self is also bliss as such. But in the waking state and in dream, we do not realise that the self is bliss. There it enjoys both pleasure and pain. The self derives pleasure when an object appears to be favourable to it and it feels pain when an object affects it adversely. Question may arise; can it be said that the nature of the self is bliss? In reply, it has been pointed out that in the waking state and in the dream state the self does not appear in its purity and appears sense-bound and image-tied respectively. As a result of false identification with the *antaḥkaraṇa*, the self appropriates the properties of the *antaḥkaraṇa*. The modification of *antaḥkaraṇa* in the form of pleasure and pain is due to objects

and it affects the self to a great extent. That is why the self feels pleasure at one time and pain at another. But in dreamless sleep the self is divested of its objective attachments and consequently free from its bondage to images. The self, at this stage, appears with its inherent freedom and enjoys intrinsic bliss. This bliss should be recognised as natural to the self, since the self then is detached from non-sentient objects. The experience of bliss in that state is proved by later memory when one remarks after rising from a deep dreamless sleep, 'so long I slept happily and did not know anything'. Waking state also points to the character of bliss pertaining to self. Even in the waking state it can be shown that the self is bliss. When a man suffers from excruciating pain, he wants relief from his pain but not from his existence. The desire for the continuance of the self persists. But since nothing is really desired except happiness, the self whose continued being is desired is nothing but happiness. The fact of self-love is thus an unerring pointer to the fact that the self is happiness or bliss in itself.

“During the course of a piece of conversation, *Yājñavalkya* says to *Maitreyī* that the proof that the self is the source of all joy is that it is the dearest thing to man.”⁵ Man loves his wife, children, money etc. not for their own sake but for the sake of his own self. They are ancillary accessories which serve the purpose of self-pleasure. Thus it is proved beyond doubt that the nature of the self is

bliss. The self realises its nature as bliss when it attains liberation from bondage because of the realisation of its identity with *Brahman*.

Śaṅkara has maintained that the self cannot be known by means of the thought or intellect. We have the limitations of our intellect. We cannot describe the ultimate reality through this intellect. Our thought cannot go beyond this reality. This reality is *Brahman* and also known as *ātman*. It is inexplicable because it is beyond human intellect. From this point of view this reality is unconditioned.

Śaṅkara draws a distinction between the *ātman* and the *jīva*. The latter is the *ātman* in association with the body and the multiplicity of conscious phenomena. When the reflection of *ātman* falls on *avidyā* (ignorance), *ātman* becomes *jīva*—a living being with a body and senses. Each *jīva* feels as if he has his own, unique and distinct *ātman* called *jīvātman*. The concept of *jīva* is true only in the pragmatic level. In the transcendental level, only one *ātman*, equal to the *Brahman*, is true.

Jīva is the *jñātā* or knower, *kartā* or doer and *bhoktā* or enjoyer. It acquires merits and demerits according to its good and bad deeds, and experiences their fruits. Accordingly, it is subject to transmigration and bondage. Such a bound self attains liberation through the acquisition of real knowledge.

Ātman being self-proved cannot be denied. It is eternal and universal consciousness. There is no duality of subject and object in the *ātman*. It is the

absolute truth. The *ātman* is not an enjoyer or a doer. It is beyond merit and demerit. It is inactive and immutable. Birth and death cannot affect it. It has no limitation. It cannot be extended and divided by anything else. It permeates all space. It manifests itself in all things.

Ātman is called *Paramātman*. It is the highest soul. The word *Paramātman* is used to specify the soul of the universe. It is the ultimate reality, the highest and greatest vital principle which is the Supreme Spirit.

The individual self lies within the five sheaths or *koṣas*. The body and the sense-organs constitute the *annamaya-koṣa* or the bodily sheath. Within the bodily sheath there is the *prāṇamaya-koṣa* or the vital sheath which consists of the vital forces. Within the vital sheath there exists the *manomaya-koṣa* or the mental sheath which has the mind as its central principle. Within the mental sheath, there lies the *vijñānamaya-koṣa* or the intellect sheath which has the intellect as the fundamental principle. Within the intellect-sheath there is the *ānandamaya-koṣa* or the blissful sheath which consists of pure consciousness and bliss. The five sheaths are the objective element. When we dismiss the objective element, what remains is the witness of the sheaths. That witness is the real nature of the self which is pure consciousness. It cannot be attributed by non-existence. The individual soul should transcend all its sheaths through meditation and become one with the Supreme Soul which is beyond the five *koṣas*. Then only it will attain liberation or freedom.

The *jīva* is said to have three bodies or *śarīra*: causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*), subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*) and gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*). The causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*) of *jīva* is *avidyā* or *ajñāna*. The subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra* or *liṅga śarīra*) is made of seventeen elements, viz., five organs of perception, five organs of action, five vital forms, mind and intellect. The gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*) of the *jīva* is its particular physical frame which is a composite of the *pañcīkaraṇa* (five material elements). In the waking stage, the self is endowed with the gross and the subtle bodies and is called *viśva*. In the dream-stage, it is endowed with the subtle body and is called *taijasa*, and in the stage of deep sleep, it is endowed with the casual body and is called *prajñā*.

The mind as the instrument of knowledge cannot know the self as an object. All knowable things are known by the self. But there is no one to know the self. Being consciousness or knowledge itself, it cannot be made an object of knowledge. The self cannot be described as material object being this or that. It is pure spirit. So the spirit cannot be described like an object. That is why the self is indescribable.

The self is the subject. It cannot be an object of the senses. It is the self of everyone and is not beyond the ken of perception. The presence of the self is felt in every perception. So it cannot be said that the self is beyond the ken of perception. The self cannot be made an object of knowledge because it is very directly felt. It is of the nature of self-revealing. Nothing is required to reveal the

self. The indications which are used for *Brahman* are existence, consciousness and infinity. These indications are also present in the self. So, it is said that the self is *Brahman*.

Existence cannot be negated. The world is perishable. The self is the witness of the perishable world. It is the spirit which ever exists. The self remains when all forms are destroyed. The self or *Brahman* is imperishable. When all perishable things, names and forms are destroyed what remains is the *Brahman* or self which is imperishable. As for example, when a pot is broken what remains is only the clay, similarly, when a thing is destroyed the *Brahman* remains ultimately.

The self is eternal and exists in all the three points of time — past, present and future. It is *kūṭastha* or unchangeable and exists in the same nature forever. In its essence, it is not subjected to bondage and sufferings, because it is of the nature of pure knowledge and bliss. The self is *vibhu* or all-pervasive; it is not conditioned by time and space. It is neither atomic nor intermediary in size. If the self were atomic, it could not pervade all the parts of the body, and the quality of consciousness could not be perceived in the whole body. However, consciousness is perceived in the whole body. The self is, therefore not atomic. Neither can it be regarded as of intermediary size. If it were so, it would be subject to destruction, while all the scriptures declare it to be eternal.

It is a false concept that there are several *ātman*s. *Ātman* is only one and unique. One self appears as many and so the plurality of self is not ultimately real. The self appears as many because of the differences of the bodies, the internal organs etc. This is explained on the analogy of the reflection of the single moon in the waves. Just as the single moon appears as many moons in its reflections on the surface of water covered with bubbles, likewise the self appears as many after being reflected in the numerous internal organs. The *Vedānta* philosophy has maintained that the self or *ātman* is one but *jīvas* or individual souls are many.

The essential identity of the *ātman* and *Brahman* is the most important doctrine of *Advaita Vedānta*. The *Upaniṣadic* passage ‘*that thou art*’ declares that there is an unqualified identity between the self and the *Brahman*. According to *Śaṅkara*, the *jīva* or the individual soul is only relatively real. Its individuality lasts only so long as it is subject to unreal *upādhis* or limiting condition due to *avidyā*. The *jīva* identifies itself with the body, mind and the senses, when it is deluded by *avidyā* or ignorance. It thinks, acts and enjoys on account of *avidyā*. In reality, it is not different from *Brahman* or the Absolute. Just as the bubbles become one with the ocean when it bursts, or just as the pot-ether becomes one with the universal ether when the pot is broken, so also the *jīva* or the empirical self becomes one with *Brahman* when it gets knowledge of *Brahman*. When knowledge dawns in it through annihilation of *avidyā*, it is freed from its individuality and finitude and realises its essential *sacchidānanda* nature. It

merges itself in the ocean of bliss. The river of life joins the ocean of existence. This is the truth.

It has been already stated that *ātman* is pure and is extremely subtle. The *ātman* shines by the light of its own consciousness. In as much as the intellect is extremely pure and transparent, it is akin to the *ātman*. By virtue of its proximity to the innermost *ātman*, it catches the light of the *ātman*. Similarly again, the mind catches the light of the intellect and the senses in their turn catch the light of the mind. Finally the physical body comes to feel what is comprehended by the sense organs. That is why one comes to think that the *ātman* is constituted out of a combination of the body and the sense organs, although in reality such is not the case.

That is why ignorant people mistake the intellect for the *ātman*. They superimpose the reflection and the reflector upon the object which is reflected. The moment, something which is other than the *ātman* is mistaken for the *ātman*, a chain reaction takes place. Every act of superimposition becomes in turn the cause of the next superimposition in the series.

The release from *samsāra* means, according to Śaṅkara, the absolute merging of the individual soul in *Brahman* due to dismissal of the erroneous notion that the soul is distinct from the *Brahman*. According to Śaṅkara, *karma* and *bhakti* are means to *jñāna* which is *mokṣa*.

According to Śaṅkara, the world is only relatively real (*vyāvahārika sattā*). He advocated *Vivarta-vāda* or the theory of appearance or superimposition (*adhyāsa*). Just as snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight, this world and body are superimposed on *Brahman* or the Supreme Self. If anyone gets knowledge of the rope, the illusion of snake in the rope will vanish. Likewise, if anyone gets knowledge of *Brahman* or the imperishable, the illusion of the body and the world would disappear. In *Vivarta-vāda*, the cause produces the effect without undergoing any change in itself. Snake is only an appearance on the rope. The rope has not transformed itself into a snake, like milk into curd. Similarly, *Brahman* also does not undergo real modification into the world and the individual selves. *Brahman* is immutable and eternal. *Brahman* becomes the cause of the world through *māyā*, which is its mysterious power or *śakti* and it is indistinguishable from Him, as the burning power of fire is indistinguishable from fire itself.

When anyone comes to know that it is only a rope his fear disappears. He does not run away from it. Similarly, when a person realises the eternal or immutable *Brahman*, he is not affected by the phenomena or the names and forms of this world. When *avidyā* or the veil of ignorance is destroyed through real knowledge of the eternal, imperishable or the ultimate reality, the *ātman* resumes its true nature and there exists ultimately no difference between the *jīvātman* and *Brahman*. Śaṅkara describes this state as liberation (*mokṣa*). So *mokṣa* is not

something to be reached in an imagined future and in a world after death. It is like finding out the forgotten ornament which is all the time in our possession. As release is the essential nature of the self, one need not wait till death overtakes the physical body.

Śaṅkara believes that liberation can be attained even here in this life. This is known as *jīvanmukti* (the liberation of one while one is alive). The man who raises above all dualities, distinctions and desires but continues to live and work in this world is called '*jīvanmukta*'. The *jīvanmukta* though possessing a body does never again identify himself with the body. The perfect knowledge of *Brahman* leads to embodied release. But it does not destroy the body immediately. The perfect knowledge of *Brahman* burns up only those unseen potencies of *karma* which lie accumulated and were gathered in this life. When he casts away his gross body and he has no more possibility of rebirth due to extinction of all *karmas* he attains '*videhamukti*' or body-less liberation which is the summum bonum of human life. The liberated soul becomes universalised and feels no distinctions within itself. It attains perfect peace and joy and is free from *karma* and the cycle of birth and death. It accumulates no new *karma* and that already accumulated is burnt.

The forces of deep-rooted beliefs in this worldly life do not disappear as soon as the truth of the *Vedānta* is learned. Only repeated meditation on the truth and life led accordingly can gradually root them out. When wrong beliefs thus disappear

and belief in the truths of the *Vedānta* becomes permanent, the seeker after liberation is told by the preceptor (who himself has realised *Brahman* or, in other words, who acquired *Brahma-jñāna*) — ‘*Thou art Brahman*’. He begins then to contemplate truth steadfastly till at last he has an immediate realisation of the truth in the form ‘*Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi*’ or ‘I am the *Brahman*’. Thus the self realises its oneness with *Brahman*.

Now, the scholar would like to discuss the concept of self in *Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, which is much different from the concept of self in *Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta*.

The philosophy of *Rāmānuja* is known as *Viśiṣṭādvaita* or ‘qualified monism’. *Viśiṣṭādvaita* (*Viśiṣṭa*=qualified + *Advaita*=nonduality) literally meaning ‘*Advaita* with uniqueness’ is a non dualistic school of *Vedānta* philosophy. It is non dualism of the qualified whole, in which *Brahman* alone exists, but is characterised by multiplicity. It can be described as qualified monism or attributive monism.

According to *Rāmānuja*, “*Aśeṣa-cit-acit prakāram brahmaikameva tatvam*”—*Brahman*, qualified by the sentient and insentient modes (aspects or attributes) is the only reality. It is a school of *Vedānta* philosophy which believes in all diversity subsuming to an underlying unity. *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, like other schools of *Vedānta* philosophy, is based on the triad body of texts (*Prasthāna*

trayī) consisting the principle of *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahma-sūtras* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

According to *Rāmānuja*, the self is a spiritual principle informing the body and controlling it from within. The individual self though a mode of the Supreme is real, unique, eternal, endowed with intelligence and self-consciousness, without parts, unchanging, imperceptible and atomic. It is different from the body, the senses, vital breath and even *buddhi*. It is attached, on the human plane, to the gross body, the vital breath, which is an instrument as much as the sense organs, the five organs of action and *manas*. *Manas* reveals to the self the inner states and with the aid of the senses conveys a knowledge of the outer states. Action and enjoyment are regarded as merely different states of knowledge which is said to be the essence of the soul.

The self is self-luminous substance as well as a self-conscious subject. It manifests itself without the aid of knowledge and it is also self-conscious. It is the substance of its *dharmabhūtajñāna* which is capable of contraction and expansion. It knows the objects through its knowledge which reveals itself as well as the objects to be known by the self. Knowledge exists for the self and though knowledge shows itself and the object, it can know neither. The self alone can know itself as well as its object, though it can reveal only itself and not its object which is revealed for it by knowledge.

Self-distinction constitutes the very being of the self. Were it not so, there would be no point in striving for liberation. In the states of bondage and release the soul retains its character of a knowing subject (*jñātā*). The self is also *kartā* or active agent. It is because actions belong to the soul; it suffers the consequences of its acts. Simply because it has the power to act it does not, however, follow that it always acts. So long as the souls are attached to bodies due to *karma*, their acts are largely determined, but when freed from the bodies, they realise their wishes by their mere will (*samkalpād eva*).

Knowledge or consciousness is not an accidental property of the self. It is its very essence. The self is of the nature of knowledge. It is the substance of knowledge which is its essential and inseparable attribute. Knowledge always belongs to the self and persists even in deep sleep and in liberation. Knowledge does not manifest itself in deep sleep for there is then no object to be revealed. Knowledge is essentially infinite and all-pervasive. While the self is in bondage, its knowledge is obscured by its *karmas* and therefore functions in a restricted manner. When the self obtains liberation, all the *karmas* are destroyed and there remains no impediment in the way of knowledge, with the result that it becomes all-comprehensive. The liberated soul becomes omniscient because its *dharmabhūtajñāna* is restored to its original status and in the absence of *kārmic* obstructions comprehends all objects. Thus, the soul though atomic in size, is infinite in knowledge.

The self is an eternal substance devoid of birth and death. The essence of the soul never changes; changes that seem to pertain to the self are nothing but the contraction and expansion of its consciousness. The soul remains unchanged in its essential nature through all the processes of birth and death. It is born many times into the sensible world and departs from it again; but throughout it maintains its identity. At each *pralaya* or destruction of the world, the particular forms of the soul are destroyed, though the souls themselves are indestructible. They cannot escape the consequences of their past lives, and they are again thrust into the world as the new creation with appropriate endowments. Association with or dissociation from bodies, resulting in the contraction or expansion of intelligence, is what is meant by birth and death, and until release, the souls are attached by necessity to bodies, though in *pralaya* they are connected with subtle stuff which does not admit of differentiation by name and form. The self cannot bear witness to its own past, since memory does not reach beyond the present embodiment.

According to *Rāmānuja*, the self is of the nature of bliss also. In its essence, it is *ānandarūpa* or ever blissful. “He says that peace and bliss experienced during dreamless sleep, must be regarded as originating from the essence of the self itself, because no other source is there at that time.”⁶

When the self gets associated with a psycho-physical organism, it performs some actions relating to the worldly life and enjoys pleasure and pain accruing from

them. Thus the self is the *draṣṭā* or seer, *kartā* or doer and *bhoktā* or enjoyer. But *kartrtva* or the power of agency and *bhoktrtva* or the power of enjoyment are not natural to the real self, they are generated only in its empirical state. In its real, eternal and transcendental nature, the self is neither an agent nor an enjoyer. “The self is called *avyakta* also, since it cannot be apprehended by the sense-organs. It is further described as *acintya* or unthinkable, as it cannot be circumscribed by the discursive mind, though it can be grasped by the mind purified by *śravaṇa manana* and *nididhyāsana*.”⁷

According to *Rāmānuja*, the individual self is all-pervasive in the sense that it is so subtle as to be able to penetrate into every unconscious and material substance. It is not infinite since it is a part of *Brahman* who alone possesses infinity. Since it is not infinite, it is regarded by *Rāmānuja* as atomic or infinitely small. For, if the soul has neither of these two extreme dimensions it must have the medium one which is possessed by physical objects composed of parts, and then, like such objects it will be liable to destruction. Moreover, if it were not atomic, it could not get out of the body in death and enter into the womb of another being for the next birth. Hence, the soul is atomic. Though atomic, the self can pervade the whole body through its *dharmabhūtajñāna* or attributive knowledge, just as a drop of sandalwood-paste perfumes the whole body. This is why the self can experience the pleasure and pain arising in any part of the body.

The existence of a distinct self is felt by every person through the apprehension of 'I'. The self, therefore, cannot be regarded as false. Even in liberation, this entity denoted by the term 'I' prevails. If there be none to feel or realise in the state of release, it will be meaningless to strive for liberation. The self, being distinct in every organism, is many; it is not one, as held by Śaṅkara. "The plurality of souls is evident from the distribution of pleasures and pains."⁸

Rāmānuja speaks of three classes of souls. The first class consists of eternal souls (*nitya mukta*) which are never bound. They are totally free from all *karmas* and live in *vaikuṅṭha* (heaven) in the constant presence of God. Śeṣa and *Garuḍa* are examples of such eternal souls. The second category consists of released or liberated souls (*mukta*) who are once in bondage, but obtained release through knowledge, action and devotion. The third class consists of bound souls (*baddha*) who are wandering in the world and moving round the cycle of birth and death. The souls wandering in *samsāra* are again distinguished into four classes: superhuman, human, animal and stationary or immobile.

Though the individual soul is absolutely real, yet it is not independent. It is utterly dependent on God. It is supported by God, controlled by God and utilised by God. It is the supported (*dhārya*) and God is its support (*dhartā*). It is the controlled (*niyāmya*) and God is its controller (*niyantā*). It is the means (*śeṣa*) and God is its end (*śeṣī*). It is a mode (*prakāra*) and God is its substance (*prakāri*). It is a part (*aṁśa*) and God is the whole (*aṁśī*). It is the body (*śarīra*)

and God is its soul (*śarīrī*). Its defects and imperfections and miseries do not affect God and yet it is a real agent and performs and reaps the fruits of its actions.

The question of human freedom and divine sovereignty assume great importance in *Rāmānuja's* philosophy, since he is anxious to emphasise both. The individual souls depend entirely on God for their activity, God declares what is good and what is bad, supplies souls with bodies, gives them power to employ them, and is also the cause in an ultimate sense of the freedom and bondage of the souls. Yet, if the world has in it so much suffering and misery, it is not God that is responsible for it, but man, who has the power to work for good or evil. The will of man seems to constitute a limitation of the absoluteness of God. The souls, which have freedom of choice, may act so as to interfere with the will of God. If the absolute God is obliged to take note of and act according to the law of *karma*, he is not absolute. *Rāmānuja* escapes from this difficulty by urging that God is ultimately the cause of the actions of all men. But this is not Calvinism, for God acts according to certain laws which are the expression of his nature. God does not make the soul do good or evil acts according to his caprice, but shows his constancy of nature by acting according to the law of *karma*. If the law of *karma* is independent of God, then God's absoluteness is compromised. The critic who declares that we cannot save the independence of God without sacrificing the doctrine of *karma* has not the right conception of the Hindu idea

of God. The law of *karma* expresses the will of God. The order of *karma* is set up by God, who is the ruler of *karma* (*karmādhyakṣaḥ*). Since the law is dependent on God's nature, God himself may be regarded as rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. To show that the law of *karma* is not independent of God, it is sometimes said that, though God can suspend the law of *karma*, still He does not will to do so. Pledged to execute the moral law which is the eternal expression of His righteous will, He permits evil which he might otherwise arrest. The inner ruler has regard in all cases to the volitional effort which prompts a man's action. He does not care to upset His own laws and interfere with the world-scheme. God, though immanent in the world does not wish to be intrusive. Of course, the attainments by the individual self are conditioned by *adr̥ṣṭa* i.e. merits and demerits arising from the past actions of the self. But *adr̥ṣṭa* being an unconscious principle cannot work by itself; it requires to be guided by a conscious agent i.e. the God. *Īśvara* or God, being the Lord of all, is an object of worship, while the self is the worshipper. In liberation, the self attains *sāyujya* or eternal communion with God and remains in His eternal service.

In the view of *Rāmānuja*, the *Brahman* and the self cannot be identical as *Śaṅkara* holds, because they differ in their essential characteristics. *Rāmānuja* advances his qualified non dualistic philosophy (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) which holds that the Universal Soul (*Viṣṇu*) and the individual soul (human soul) are identical

but not equal. The self is finite, atomic and imperfect, while *Brahman* is infinite, all-pervasive and perfect. In the *Upaniṣad*, the self and *Brahman* are said to be identical, only in the sense that *Īśvara* pervades the selves and controls them from within. *Rāmānuja* says that “identity cannot exist between two altogether different things, nor between two exactly identical things; it can exist only between two forms of the same entity.”⁹ When we say ‘this is that *Devadatta*’, the judgement asserts the identity of two complexes — the ‘this’, i.e., *Devadatta* seen at present and the ‘that’, i.e., *Devadatta* seen in the past. The person seen at present and the person seen at past differ in their meanings because the person occupies different positions at different times, yet both refer to the same person, *Devadatta*. Similarly, the *Upaniṣadic* saying ‘*tat tvam asi*’— ‘that thou art’— means the two complexes ‘that’ and ‘thou’ are identical, that though they have distinct meanings yet they refer to the same substance. ‘That’ signifies God in the form of the omniscient and omnipotent Creator of the world, and ‘thou’ signifies God as the inner self of the *jīva*. The identity spoken of here is, therefore, between God endowed with certain qualification and God endowed with some other qualifications i.e. between two states of the same reality of *Brahman*. In other words, this identity is one of two qualified states of the same entity— *viśiṣṭasya aikyam*. Though co-eternal with *Brahman*, the self is devoid of any separate existence; they are related to *Brahman* in both

the causal state and the effect state as its inner body, while the world forming the outer body.

“The *jīva* is not one with God, since it differs in essential character from Him. It is said to be a part (*aṁśa*) of *Brahman*. Though it cannot be a part cut out of the whole, since *Brahman* admits of no divisions, yet it is comprised within the universal self.”¹⁰ *Rāmānuja* says that the souls are parts in the sense of *viśeṣaṇas*, qualified forms or modes of *Brahman*. Just as light and colour are regarded as parts of fire and jar, respectively, in which they inhere as attributes, so the self is regarded as a part of *Brahman* to which it is related as a quality or mode. Again, just as a substance and its attributes are different in their essential nature, though they are inseparably related as whole-and-part, so *Brahman* and *jīva* are different in their essential nature, though they are inseparable or non-different from each other. The selves are also regarded as the effects of *Brahman*, since they cannot exist apart from Him, and yet they are not produced effects, as ether, and the like.

The relation between *Brahman* and the self, as accepted by *Rāmānuja*, is neither one of identity nor of difference nor of identity-in-difference. According to him, the self and *Brahman* are different in essence, because the self is finite and imperfect, while *Brahman* is infinite and perfect. On the other hand, the self being inseparable from *Brahman*, the substratum or *ātman*, there is *abheda* or *tādātmya* i.e. identity between the two. *Rāmānuja* reconciles both these concepts

of difference and identity by regarding the self as a part or qualification of *Brahman*. That means, there being both difference and identity between the whole, and its part, the relation between *Brahman*, the whole, and the self, the part, is also one of difference and identity. But yet the philosophy of *Rāmānuja* is called *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, since the selves and matter are consumed within the being of *Brahman*.

Just as an attribute has no existence apart from the substance, so the self has no existence apart from *Brahman*. At the time of dissolution, the self merges into *Brahman* in its subtle and unmanifested form. This state is called *kāraṇāvasthā* or the causal state. At the time of creation, it becomes manifest. This state is called *kāryāvasthā* or the effect-state. In both these states, the self and *Brahman* are inseparable from each other, the former forming the body or qualification of the latter.

Every soul is endowed with a material body in accordance with its *karma*. Bondage of the soul means its confinement to this body. Liberation is the complete dissociation of the soul from the body. The cause of bondage is *karma* which springs from ignorance; due to its *karmas*, the soul becomes associated with particular body, senses, mind and life. Thus the soul becomes attached to the world and the force of this attainment causes its repeated birth. For obtaining release from *samsāra*, the soul has to remove its *kārmic* obstacles; it has to purify itself from the dross and dust of *karma* that has somehow surrounded it.

And this can be achieved by a harmonious combination of action and knowledge (*jñānakarmasamuccaya*).

Rāmānuja admits that knowledge is the immediate cause for liberation, but this knowledge is real knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) and not the ordinary verbal knowledge. Otherwise all those who studied *Vedānta* would obtain liberation. The real knowledge is identified by *Rāmānuja* with the highest *bhakti* or devotion which is obtained by *prapatti* or self-surrender and by constant remembrance of God as the only object of devotion (*dhruvā smṛtiḥ*), which is also called pure meditation (*upāsanā*) or *dhyāna* or *nididhyāsana* (concentrated contemplation). It is very important to note that constant meditation itself is not the highest *bhakti* (which is the same thing as real *jñāna*), but only a means to realise it. Enjoined actions (*karma*) and ordinary knowledge (*jñāna*) are means to realise ordinary *bhakti* which may be identified with *prapatti* or flinging oneself on the absolute mercy of God and with constant remembrance and contemplation of God called *smṛti*, *upāsanā* or *nididhyāsana*. This ordinary *bhakti* which means *prapatti* and *upāsanā* is itself a means to realise the highest *bhakti* which is pure *jñāna* or immediate intuitive knowledge of God which is the direct cause of liberation and which dawns only by the grace (*prasāda*) of God.

According to *Rāmānuja*, liberation is not the merging of the individual soul into the Absolute, but only the direct intuitive realisation by the individual soul of its

own essential nature as a mode of God. This realisation presupposes two things — firstly, the utter destruction of *karmas* by which the soul acquires its innate purity, and secondly, the dawning of the divine graces which transforms constant meditation into the immediate intuition of God. Hence, for *Rāmānuja* there is no *jīvanmukti* for as long as the soul remains associated with the body, the *karmas* persist and as long as the *karmas* persist, the soul cannot acquire its innate purity. And liberation is not possible without God's grace for unless the divine grace dawns, the constant meditation cannot mature into real *bhakti* or *jñāna* which means the immediate intuitive knowledge of God and unless this real knowledge dawns, liberation cannot take place. When liberated, the soul is similar to God but not identical, since that which is finite cannot become the infinite, but it still shares the same essential nature. In the state of liberation, the soul realises itself as the body of *Brahman* and ever dwells in direct communion with God, enjoying like God, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. But it retains its individuality for otherwise enjoyment of bliss in communion with God is not possible.

According to *Rāmānuja*, God is the only Reality and there being nothing exists outside God since both souls and matter are within God. The world and its creatures are as real as God, and hence this system is called monism of the One qualified by the presence of the many parts (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*). God is the infinite ocean; we are the creatures that live in the ocean.

Viśiṣṭādvaita is based on the concept of a loving personal God with perfect attributes. The human spirit is separate and different from the Supreme Spirit, because love requires a relationship between the lover and the loved.

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