

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE MEANING OF *UPARATI*

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Introduction:

Uparati, at its deepest level, means a state where the mind does not depend on outside things for happiness. Śaṅkarācārya describes this state as turning away from all sensory objects. This process is not just about rejecting things; it is about a genuine sense of dispassion. The mind recognizes that the world is temporary, thereby reducing its desire for worldly things. Unlike *Dama*, which is an active effort to control the senses, *Uparati* represents a natural cessation of cravings for external stimuli. This dispassion helps to create inner peace and calmness, making mental space for deeper thought and reflection, known as *Nididhyāsana*. In this state of quietness, a person can focus on self-realisation and understand the true nature of the *Ātman*, or the Self.

In the *Sarva Vedānta Sāra*, Śaṅkarācārya connects *Uparati* with living a monastic life, or *Sannyāsa Āśrama*. This suggests that choosing a life of renunciation can help to practice *Uparati*. It allows people to avoid worldly distractions and deepen their commitment to spiritual practices and the search for enlightenment. Linking *Uparati* with monasticism shows how important a disciplined life is, where letting go of worldly attachments leads to a better understanding of existence and the Self. *Uparati* refers to quieting the mind's focus on external distractions to achieve inner calm and spiritual growth. It involves prioritizing one's responsibilities and exploring deeper self-understanding, particularly the concept of *Brahman*. Unlike *Dama*, which focuses on controlling the senses, *Uparati* promotes peace despite external disturbances. In Advaita Vedānta, it is one of the six essential virtues, or *ṣaṭ-sampat*, for spiritual seekers, enhancing self-awareness and connection to the universe.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to determine the exact meaning of the term „*uparati*“ and we can find that there is a diversity of opinion among the Vedāntins to elucidate the accurate meaning of the same. Some claim that it may be used in the sense of „*sannyāsa*“, while others try to explain it as the „absence of

mental distractions' (*cittavikṣepābhāva*'). In this discussion the latter view has been substantiated and the earlier one has been refuted on the ground of several arguments.

The Basic Features of *Uparati*:

Śaṅkarācārya in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (Verse-23) defines *Uparati* as a deep mental state where the mind stops focusing on external objects. This state is called the —highest” form of self-withdrawal. Here, the mind frees itself from constant distractions from the senses. When someone reaches this state, they no longer depend on outside things to find inner peace, leading to a calm and balanced feeling within themselves.

Uparati means stopping the mind's activities that depend on external objects. In this state, the mind does not think about sensory experiences, achieving true inner stillness. This state requires a conscious choice to stop activities that distract from one's duty or *Dharma*. *Uparati* involves turning away from objects that usually trigger emotional or cognitive responses, helping one focus more on spiritual growth. *Uparati* represents a mind focused on its higher purpose, especially the search for the Self or the ultimate reality, Brahman. By letting go of worldly distractions, the mind stabilizes and nurtures spiritual goals, leading to a better understanding of one's true nature. *Uparati* is different from *Dama*, which means self-control or restraining the senses from outside influences. While *Dama* is about suppressing sensory urges, *Uparati* focuses on an inner state where the mind remains calm despite external disturbances, showing a deeper level of mental peace. Thus we can say that in Advaita Vedānta, *Uparati* is seen as the third part of the *ṣaṭ-sampat*, which includes six virtues important for spiritual seekers. This state is essential for building the mental discipline needed for self-realization and enlightenment. By practicing *Uparati*, individuals can deepen their journey toward understanding themselves and the universe, realizing how everything is connected. The *Brahmasūtra* says: "शमदमाद्युपेतः स्यात्तथापि तु तद्विधेस्तदङ्गतया तेषामवश्यानुष्ठेयत्वात्।"¹⁷

Some scholars are of the opinion that action is worthless to a truth seeker. Because it is ultimately *jñāna* or Knowledge proper, which leads one to *mokṣa*, but never *karma*. But Bādrāyaṇa states that, even if he accepts this point, then too, a truth

seeker must sincerely practice the following disciplines- *śama*, *dama*, *uparati* etc. Because, the *Śruti* itself suggests us to do so. One peculiarity of these activities is that, unlike desire-full actions (*kāmyakarma*), the culture of these trainings helps us to attain *Brahmavidyā* and in turn loosens the shackles of our past *karma*. They purify our mind (*buddhiśuddhiḥ*) and sharpen our concentration (*cittaikāgryam*). Thereby, they lead us in the path of Brahman-realisation. Bādrāyaṇa did not give a detailed definition of *uparati* in his *Brahmasūtra*. We come across its definitions in later commentaries and a number of *prakaraṇagrantha* which says: “वाह्यानालम्बनं वृत्तेरेषोपरतिरुत्तमा ॥”¹⁷ According to Śāṅkarācārya, the state of mental equilibrium or inner poise, which can no longer be disturbed by outer objects, is called *uparati*. He asserts:

“उपरतिर्नाम विहितानां कर्मणां विधिना त्यागः।
श्रवणादुषुवर्तमानस्य मनसः श्रवणादिष्वेववर्तनं वोपरतिः।”¹⁷

Rammohan Roy has described *uparati* in two ways. *Uparati* is withdrawal of all activities suggested by our *śāstras*. I think, by *‘karma’*, here Rammohan intends to say either *upāsana karma* or *nitya-naimittika karma*, or both of them. Because after the culture of such actions like *upāsana* (practicing sacrificial rites) etc. for a period of time, the mind reaches to an inner poise. There is no more activity required. Mind is ready to be concentrated here. Therefore, the first definition says, *uparati* is the state of *karma sannyāsa* or *karma tyāga*. Or it may mean *‘kāmyakarma’*. Because, unless and until we shake off all our desire-tainted actions, we can never fix our mind at one point for long time.

The second definition says, *uparati* is withdrawing one’s mind from the objects other than the *ātman*, and fixing it in the practice of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* of *ātman*. Sadānanda Yogīndra, in his *Vedāntasāra*, also gives two definitions of *uparati* which are as follows. The first is: “निवर्तितानाम् एतेषां तद्व्यतिरिक्तविषयेभ्यउपरमणम् उपरतिः।”¹⁷ Withdrawal (*nivṛtti*) of one’s mind from the objects other than the *ātman*, is called *śama*. Withdrawal of one’s senses (*jñānendriya* and *karmendriya*) from the objects other than the *ātman*, is called *dama*. Next being consistent with *śama* and *dama* is very important. Our mind by nature is very restless. If it finds a minute scope even then it will again jump into the mundane world. Due to

our past impressions (*pūrvā saṃskāra janya*) there remains a chance of losing the grasp of our mind and senses at any time, in case we lose self-alertness. Therefore, Sadānanda Yogīndra says, the withdrawn mind and senses through *śama* and *dama*, if they try to engage with the objects other than the *ātman* again due to past impressions, then the seeker must try to disengage them again. This process of inner disengagement is called *uparati*.

The second definition given by Sadānanda Yogīndra is similar with the first definition of *uparati* given by Rammohan Roy. He says: “अथवा विहितानां कर्मणां विधिना परित्यागः।”¹⁷ Dharmarājādharīndra in his *Īvedāntaparibhāṣā*” gives the *lakṣaṇa* of *uparati* as “विक्षेपाभाव उपरतिः”¹⁷ *Uparati* is the absence of all sorts of mental disturbances (*vikṣepābhāvaḥ*). The undisturbed inner poise is called *uparati* by Dharmarājādharīndra.

In this connection, Dharmarājādharīndra shows an interesting dilemma, which any careful reader must have understood within this time. The very definition of *uparati* contains a big confusion. He says:

“अत्र ‘उपरम’ शब्देन सन्न्यासोऽभिधीयते; तथाच सन्न्यासिनामेव श्रवणादौ अधिकारः, इति केचित्। अपरे तु ‘उपरम’-शब्दस्य सन्न्यासवाचकत्वाभावात्, विक्षेपाभावमात्रस्य गृहस्थेष्वपि सम्भवात्, जनकादेरपि ब्रह्मविचारस्य श्रूयमाणत्वात्, सर्वाश्रमसाधारणं श्रवणादि विधानम् इति आहुः।”¹⁷

Some Vedāntins are of the opinion that, the term *uparama*” stands for *sannyāsa*. Therefore, according to this view, only *sannyāsins* or those who have undertaken the *sannyāsa āśrama*, are alone eligible to attain *Brahmavidyā* through the practice of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*. On the other hand, another group of Vedāntins, claim that, the word *uparama*” does not mean *sannyāsa āśrama*, rather it intends to mean *cittavikṣepābhāva*”; i.e. absence of any mental distraction. In this sense not only a *sannyāsin*, but also a sincere *gṛhastha* or *brahmacārīn* can achieve such mental poise with their efforts. Therefore, not only a *sannyāsin*, but also all *āśrama* dwellers who are honest and sincere with their duties, are capable of attaining *Brahmavidyā* through the practice of *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*

("सर्वाश्रमसाधारणं श्रवणादि विधानम् इति आहुः"). In this debate, I agree with the second group of Vedāntins. The reasons why I think so are as follows:

Argument-1

If the term *uparama* stands for *sannyāsa*, as the first group of Vedāntins claims, then only sannyāsins will be the *adhikārī* of *Brahmavidyā*, not ordinary people. But in the criteria of *adhikārī*, as has been explained by the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* of Śaṅkarācārya, *Vedāntasāra* of Sadānanda Yogīndra, *Vedāntaparibhāṣā* by Dharmarājādharīndra, etc. there is no mention of it. If only sannyāsins were capable of the attainment of *Brahmavidyā*, then it would have been mentioned in the paragraph of *adhikārī*. But the criteria mentioned in those texts, imply something different.

“मेधावी पुरुषो विद्वानूहापोहविचक्षणाः।
अधिकार्यात्मविद्यायामुक्तलक्षणलक्षितः॥”¹⁷
“विवेकिनो विरक्तस्य शमादिगुणशालिनः।
मुमुक्षोरेव हि ब्रह्मजिज्ञासायोग्यता मता॥”¹⁷

“अधिकारी तु विधिवत् अधीतवेदवेदाङ्गत्वेन आपाततोऽधिगताखिलवेदार्थोऽस्मिन् जन्मनि
जन्मान्तरे वा काम्यनिषिद्धवर्जनपुरः सरं नित्यनैमित्तिकप्रायश्चित्तोपासनानुष्ठानेन
निर्गतनिखिलकल्मषतयां नितान्तनिर्मलस्वान्तः साधनचतुष्टयसम्पन्नः प्रमाता।”¹⁷

“श्रवणादिषु च मुमुक्षणाम् अधिकारः।”¹⁷

Śaṅkarācārya says a person who is intelligent and trained enough to substantiate *Śruti* and refute the arguments against *Śruti* logically, is regarded as fit for *Brahmavidyā*. Sadānanda Yogīndra holds that an *adhikārī* must fulfill three criteria. —The competent student is an aspirant who, by studying in accordance with the prescribed method the Vedas and the Vedāngas..., has obtained a general comprehension of the entire Vedas; who, being absolved from all sins in this or in a previous life by the avoidance of the actions known as Kāmya (rites performed with a view to attaining a desired object) and Niṣiddha (those forbidden in the scriptures) and by the performance of actions called Nitya (daily obligatory rites) and Naimittika (obligatory on special occasions) as well as by penance and devotion, has become entirely pure in mind, and who has adopted the four Sādhanās or means to the attainment of spiritual knowledge.”¹⁷ According to Dharmarājādharīndra, a person desirous of *mokṣa* (*mumuṣu*) alone is fit for *Brahmavidyā*. But none of these mentions that in order to be an *adhikārī* of *Brahmavidyā*, one has to be a sannyāsīn.

This proves that becoming a sannyāsin is not the strict pre-requisite to attain Brahman.

Argument-2

If the term *uparama* were intended to mean *sannyāsa* alone, then there would not have been any exception. Only Sannyāsins would have been *Brahmajñānī* in that case. But history says something different. It records the history of Kings like Janaka, who became a *Brahmajñānī* while dwelling in the *grhastha āśrama*. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansadeva, the spiritual guide of Swami Vivekananda, is another burning example of exception. He was a *grhastha* and at the same time he was a *Brahmajñānī*. There is a beautiful saying of this benevolent teacher. He said his students to become like a *pākāl māch*, that is a fish which lives inside mud, but mud cannot touch it. The *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā* also says the same thing,

“ब्रह्मण्याधाय कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः।
लिप्यते न स पापेन पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा॥”¹⁷

One who performs all his duties without any attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is never tainted by sinful acts, just like a lotus leaf is never touched by water. Another important exception we find in the *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā*. Arjuna, a devoted *kṣatriya*, attains the knowledge of *Brahman* in the battlefield. He was a *grhastha* and an indomitable *kṣatriya*. In order to realize *Brahman* Arjuna did not have to leave the battlefield. But in the very field of tremendous action, he realized the *Brahman*, the Supreme Lord. This clearly states that one can be a *Brahmajñānī* in any field, at any *āśrama*, depending on one's sincerity towards his duty and purity of heart. The *Gītā* claims:

“मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः।
स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति परां गतिम्॥”¹⁷

Argument-3

According to the the *Brahmasūtra*, not only the sannyāsins, but also those who do not belong in any *āśrama*, or who belong between two *āśramas* can also attain *Brahmajñāna*. It says: “अन्तरा चापि तु तद् दृष्टः ।”¹⁷

Argument 4:

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* presents near us a proper example of an *adhikārī*. That is Naciketā. Naciketā within his tender age has left such a deep mark on *ātma-anātma-vivekajñāna*, and *vairāgya*, that even today whenever we talk about *adhikārī*, the first image comes in our mind, is of him. In between all sorts of giant allurements given by Yamarāja, young Naciketā remained disinterested. He kept on refusing all of them one after another with proper argumentation until Yamarāja had nothing more to offer. This is the highest example of *uparati* given by the *Śruti* itself. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* Yamarāja declared that “त्वाहं नो भूयान्नचिकेतः प्रष्टुः”¹⁷ This firmly substantiates the view of the second group of Vedāntins, who claim that the term *uparama* stands for *cittavikṣepābhāva*, not *sannyāsa*. Which means each of us dwelling in different *āśramas* can become an *adhikārī* of *Brahmavidyā* with our sincere effort and purity of heart. One may ask, then what about the definition given by the Ācāryas which clearly contains the idea of *karma-sannyāsa* as *uparati*? “उपरतिर्नाम विहितानां कर्मणां विधिना त्यागः।”¹⁷ “अथवा विहितानां कर्मणां विधिना परित्यागः।”¹⁷

According to Bipadbhanjan Pal, Sadānanda Yogīndra in his *Vedāntasāra*, while defining *uparati* actually intends to mean *sarvakarmasannyāsa*¹⁷. But it is not accepted because of the followings:

- First, the *Śruti* would not accept that *sarvakarmasannyāsa* is possible for a living being. “एवम् त्वयि नान्यथेतोऽस्ति”¹⁷ Man cannot survive if they abandon all activities. Because breathing is also one sort of action. Action is must. But it has to be free from all mundane desires and greed, says the *Śruti*. By performing detached actions alone one will avoid *karmavandhana* at one side, and will enjoy bliss in his lifetime. The *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā* also says: “न हि कश्चित् क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठति अकर्मकृत् ।”¹⁷
- Second, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, one of the most prominent Vedāntins, had undertaken a mission of rejuvenating the spirit of Indian philosophy and culture throughout India. He organized a group named, *daśanāmī sannyāsī sampradāya* in order to keep on his mission going. This proves that how

Vedāntins adored action (*lokasaṅgrahārtha*), over *ḥkarmasannyāsa*‘. The life of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya is a living example of that.

- Third, *Uparati* itself is a mental phenomenon. It is a pure inner activity of disengagement and holding inner poise. What do we understand by this definition? Or should it be discarded? We shall try to understand what is meant by the term *ḥkarma*‘ here following the *Brahmasūtra* and *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*. Then our confusion will dissolve.

According to Śaṅkarācārya, “अमृतत्वस्य नाशास्ति वित्तेनेत्येव हि श्रुतिः।”¹⁷ Śaṅkarācārya through this *kārikā* states that, there is no hope to achieve *mokṣa* with riches. Because the *Vedas* state the same as:

“न वित्तेन तर्पणियो मनुष्यः”¹⁷
“अमृतत्वस्य तु न आशा अस्ति वेत्तेन इति”¹⁷
“अतो विमुक्त्यै प्रयतेत विद्वान् संन्यस्तवाह्यार्थसुखस्पृहः सन्।
सन्तं महान्तं समुपेत्य देशिकं तेनोपदिष्टार्थसमाहितात्मा॥”¹⁷

Therefore, leaving the allurements of phenomenal world, an aspirant should go near a good-hearted teacher, and should try to attain *mokṣa* by fixing his mind in the prescribed Truth. “अतोऽन्यापि ह्येकेषामुभयोः।”¹⁷ Except *nitya karma* (daily obligatory rites), there are different *kāmyakarma* (rites performed with a view to attaining a desired object) too. Both Jaimini and Bādrāyaṇa are of the view that, *kāmya karma* does not help to reach *Brahmajñāna*. Rather it is the main obstacle in this journey towards Brahman.¹⁷

From this above elucidation, it is clear that, in the definition of *uparati*“ the term „*vihita karma*“ or *ḥkarma*“ stands for *ḥkāmya karma*“ only. All our desire-filled actions, greedy actions are to be discarded thoroughly. Because, it is the desires which make our mind restless and disturb our inner poise. Therefore, a *Brahmajijñāsu* is advised again and again by our *śāstras* to shake off all his desires and fix his mind in the *Brahman*, the *One* eternal. In this sense, we can justify the definition of *Uparati*. Since in this sense of *ḥdiscarding all kāmyakarma*“ there arises no conflict with the *Śruti*. Rather, *Śruti* also advises us to do the same in order to reach the *Brahman*.

The Significance of *Uparati*

Uparati means intentionally reducing distractions to focus more on the ultimate goal of human life, *moksha*. Even for those not seeking spiritual enlightenment, reducing external distractions can improve personal development and help achieve goals. In today's fast-paced world, many people feel overwhelmed by the many distractions, especially those from technology. The rise of artificial intelligence has increased these distractions, as it learns our preferences and feeds us information that keeps us from reflecting or engaging thoughtfully. Śaṅkarācārya encouraged stopping *karma* activities, shifting away from traditional rituals to allow for deeper thought and reflection. However, in modern life, this advice feels less relevant since few people engage in Vedic rituals today. Instead, it may be more helpful to foster inner contentment and renunciation without practicing formal asceticism.

Svāmi Paramārthānanda warns against merely pretending to renounce things without true belief. He explains that this can lead to disappointment for both individuals and society. This idea echoes the teachings of Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In verse 3.6, Krishna criticises those who hold back their actions while still thinking about sensory pleasures. He calls them hypocrites, stating: “Those who restrain the external organs of action while continuing to dwell on sense objects in the mind certainly delude themselves and are to be called hypocrites.” Thus, practicing *Uparati* encourages a deeper connection between our actions and intentions, leading to a more meaningful and grounded life amid today's distractions. By being disciplined in how we engage with the world, we can better pursue personal growth and, possibly, spiritual.

Conclusive Remarks:

Shankaracharya explains the idea of *Uparati* in *Tattvabodha*. He defines *Uparati* as “सर्वधर्मानुष्ठानमेव,” which means strictly following one's own *Dharma* or moral duties. This idea highlights the importance of sticking to one's ethical responsibilities as a key part of spiritual practice and self-realization. In Vedic literature, there are five types of *karma* or ethical responsibilities that serve different purposes in one's spiritual journey which are mentioned in the following manner:

- *Nitya Karma* consists of daily rituals that must be performed regularly. These include practices like prayer, bathing, honoring ancestors, studying sacred texts, and helping others in the community. Regularly practicing *Nitya Karma* is believed to purify the mind and strengthen a person's connection to the divine.
- *Naimittika Karma* involves rituals for specific occasions, such as birth, marriage, and death. These rituals help celebrate important life events and offer support to individuals and the community during these times.
- *Kāmya Karma* refers to rituals performed with the intent to gain specific worldly benefits like wealth or fame. While these may seem helpful, they often tie people to desires, which can slow down spiritual progress.
- *Prāyaścitta Karma* consists of corrective rituals meant to lessen the negative effects of past actions. These rituals allow individuals to seek forgiveness and make amends for their wrongdoings, showing a desire for self-improvement and reconciliation.
- *Niṣiddha Karma* covers actions that harm oneself and others, such as stealing or killing. Engaging in *Niṣiddha Karma* creates obstacles on the spiritual path.

Among these five types of ethical responsibilities or *karma*, the first two, *Nitya Karma* and *Naimittika Karma*, are seen as beneficial for spiritual growth. The last three, *Kāmya*, *Prāyaścitta*, and *Niṣiddha Karma*, are viewed as hindrances that can cause spiritual stagnation. Therefore, earnest students are encouraged to focus on the first two types of *karma* to promote spiritual growth while reducing involvement in the latter three. In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Shankaracharya further develops *Uparati*, describing it as a deep state of withdrawal where the mind detaches from outside distractions. He believes that the highest form of *Uparati* happens when mental activity stops engaging with external objects. This self-withdrawal is crucial for achieving inner peace and seeks the ultimate truth, helping practitioners move beyond material distractions and understand themselves better.

Endnotes:

1. *Brahmasūtra*, 3.4.27

2. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 23
3. Rammohan Roy, *Vedāntasar o Ātma Anātma Viveka*, p.75
4. *Vedāntasāra*, 12
5. *Vedāntasāra*, 12
6. Mādhavānanda, Swami. *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā of Dharmarāa Adhvarīndra*. The Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha, Belur Math.p.226
7. Mādhavānanda, Swami. *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā of Dharmarāa Adhvarīndra*. The Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha, Belur Math. p.227
8. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 16
9. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 17
10. *Vedāntasāra*, 6
11. Mādhavānanda, Swami. *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā of Dharmarāa Adhvarīndra*. The Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Pitha, Belur Math. p.226
12. Swami Nikhilananda, *Vedāntasāra*, p. 16
13. *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā*, 5.10
14. *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā*, 9.32
15. *Brahmasūtra*, 3.4.36
16. *Kaṭha paṇiṣad*, 1.2.9
17. Rammohan Roy, *Vedāntasar o Ātma Anātma Viveka*, p. 75
18. *Vedāntasāra*, 12
19. Bipadbhanjan Pal, *Vedāntasāra*, p.49
20. *Īśa Upaniṣad*, 2
21. *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā*, 3.5
22. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 7
23. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.1.27
24. *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.2
25. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 8
26. *Brahmasūtra*, 4.1.17
27. Swami Viresvarananda, *Brahmasūtra*, p.405

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