

# Vedanta as a Religion

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Let us go back to a question which was posed by Sri Shankaracharya himself in his memorable work titled *Ātmapujā* or *Parāpujā*. He starts his book with the question: Why and how should an Advaitin worship, since worship presupposes a worshipper, the worshipped, the mode of worship, the mantra for worship, etc.? Shankaracharya points out that Brahman is one without a second. It is indeterminate, has no form and is of the nature of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. So how can an Advaitin worship?

Shankara strengthens his arguments with the help of some *shlokas*. He says that it is nonsense to invoke Brahman, because It is all-pervasive—‘*purnasyāvāhanam kutra*’—‘Where can the Infinite be invoked?’ Again, Brahman is the receptacle of everything and how can you offer an *āsana*, a seat, a mat or a chair, to this Brahman?—‘*sarvādhārasya ca āsanam*’. Brahman is immaculate. It has no spot. Then why should we offer water for washing Its feet? And why should there be the offering or *arghya*—‘*svacchasya pādyam argham ca*’. Brahman is pure to the marrow. Where is the necessity of offering It water for washing Its face and mouth—‘*shuddhasyācamanam kutah*’. In this way he goes on. He says: ‘*nirmalasya kutah snānam*’—‘How can the stainless and ever pure be given a bath?’

## The solution

In *shloka* 8 Shankara himself proposes something for the Advaitins. He says: O, Advaitin! Do you require any temple? Yes,

your body is there, that is the temple—‘*dehodevālaya*’. Do you require a deity to worship? ‘*Jivodeva sadāshiva*’—this individual self, *jiva*, is the deity, is everpleasing (*sadāshiva*). What is the utility of flowers? He says, as a person throws the withered flowers or the garlands after the *pujā* into a nearby pond, so should an Advaitin throw away *ajnāna* (ignorance). He says—‘*tyajed ajnāna nirmālyam*’. What would then be the mode of worship? ‘*Sohambhāvena pujayet*’—the mode of worship will be—‘I am That.’ This individual self is non-different from that Supreme Self. This was the eight *shloka* of the work *Ātmapujā*. But the final solution is given in the last *shloka*—‘*Ātmā tvam girijā matih saharah prānāh shariram griham / pujā te vishayopabhogaracanā nidrā samādhisthitih / sancārah padayoh pradakshinavidhih stotrāni sarvā giro / yat yat karma karomi tattadakhilam shambho tavārāadhanam*.’ The meaning is—O, Advaitin, you should remember that you require no Shiva. You are Shiva. Why are you in search of Pārvasī? Your intellect, *mati*, is Pārvasī—‘*girijā matih*’. Should you worry about the attendants of Shiva? There is also no need of them. Your vitals, ‘*pancaprānah*’—are the attendants of Shiva—‘*sahacraprāna*’. The temple? Yes; this body is the temple—‘*shariram griham*’. Articles for worship? The articles which you have collected for enjoyment, for the senses, will be articles of worship for Shiva because these are that Shiva. Meditation also is

unnecessary. Your sleep is the meditation—‘*nidrā samādhisthitih*’. No need of circumambulation or ‘*pradakshina*’. ‘*Sancārah padoyoh pradakshinavidhih*.’ Wherever you go, there is the Supreme Self. And the prayers? No need: ‘*stotrāni sarvā giroh*’—whatever you speak, that will be the *stotra* of Shiva, of the Supreme Self who is inside. Then, ‘*yat yat karma karomi tat tat akhilam shambho tavārādhanam*’—whatever you do is not different from your worship. So this is the proper form of worship for an Advaitin to perform.

### Some problems

Now, there are also problems because all followers of Advaitism are not accomplished scholars. They have not yet realized that their self is the Supreme Self. There are new entrants too. Then again, there are people who have faith in *Advaitavāda*, without having the revelation. What will they do? Shankaracharya is a genius, one in a million in a millennium. This particular *shloka* which I have just explained is the answer to this question too. Had I been endowed with revelation I would have thought, well I have no need of that Supreme Self as I am the Supreme Self. Since I am a new entrant, I shall think, I shall contemplate that this self is That Self. I shall have to struggle to reach that position. This is Shankaracharya’s *Ātmapujā* or *Parāpujā*.

The *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* starts with the discussion on *Ashvamedha* or horse sacrifice. If a person performs this sacrifice, he attains *akshaya svarga*, that is, a very long stay in heaven. This *Upanishad* says that if you want to perform the horse sacrifice more fruitfully, you should think that the horse of the sacrifice is Prajāpati himself. Not only that, you consider each and every limb of the horse as the integral part of Prajāpati, that is, *kāla*, *loka* and

*devatā*. *Kāla* is time, that is eternal; *loka*, space, that is eternal. *Devatā* ordinarily means a deity; but here *devatā* is derived from the root *div*—to shine. So *devatā* means effulgence. There is the eternal effulgence and radiance in this universe. So, all these three are eternal—time, space and effulgence. The *Upanishad* instructs:

*Om! ushā vā ashvasya medhyasya shirah / suryashcakshurvātah prānah vyāttamagnirvaishvānarah samvatsara ātmā’shvasya medhyasya / dyouh prishtham antarikshamudaram...* (1.1.1)

The *Upanishad* says that the right hand fingers represent various limbs of the *ashva* or the horse of the horse sacrifice. The five fingers of the left hand are to be considered as one integral part of Prajāpati. The head of the horse, *shirah*, is to be contemplated as *ushā* or *ushākāla* i.e., dawn. This is *kāla*. Now, *suryashcakshuh*—the eye of the horse is to be considered as *surya*, the sun. This is the deity. First, it was *kāla*, now it is *devatā*. *Vatāhprānah*: the vital of the horse, *prānah*, is to be considered as the wind. Then *vyāttamagnirvaishvānarah*—the open mouth cavity of the horse is *vaishvānarah*, i.e. the fire. First, it was *kāla*, then the next three are *devatā*. *Samvatsara atmā ashvasya medhyasya*—Ātman is the body and the body of the horse is to be treated as one complete year or *samvat*. This is also *kāla*. *Dyoush prishtham*—the back of the horse is to be considered as the heaven. This is *loka*, region or space. *Antarisksham udaram*—the belly of the horse is to be considered as the atmospheric region. This is also *loka*.

The contention of the *Upanishad* is that a person who performs the *Ashvamedha* sacrifice should think that the sacrificial horse is a symbol of Prajāpati or the universe and the various limbs of the horse are to be understood as the integral parts of Prajāpati.

If a person can do this, he will be transformed into Prajāpati, the creator of the universe. If a person cannot perform a horse sacrifice owing to his incapacity for not being a Kshatriya or his inability to gather men, army and money, the person, the Upanishad tells us, should not be disappointed. The Upanishad says, if you contemplate in this manner you will be successful in gaining the result which is achieved by the performance of the *Ashvamedha*. This is known as *ahamgrahopāsana* or the symbolic self-worship.

### Upāsana

What is the meaning of the word *upāsana*? The word has two components—*upa* and *āsana*. *Upa* means near, and *āsana* means staying. So *upāsana* means remaining in close vicinity. When a person meditates upon something, he remains mentally in close proximity to the object meditated upon. What is meant is not physical proximity, of course, because when I meditate upon the sun I cannot physically remain in proximity to the sun. So *upāsana* is remaining mentally in close vicinity of the object meditated upon, by thinking continuously of the object of meditation. As a result, there are changes in the mental modes and propensities of the person who is meditating.

But this is not all. *If you believe me, there happens a physical change too*. Let me cite an illustration from the world of insects. When a cockroach comes in close proximity to a *bhramara* or the black bee, the cockroach is so terrified that it cannot move at all. It thinks continuously of how horrible, how dangerous it is and in this way after some days the cockroach turns into a *bhramara*. This is mentioned by Rabindranath Tagore in his *Sahityer Svarup* and this is also corroborated in many of our Shāstric texts. Thus, not out of fear, but out of love and

devotion, by meditating intently on *Paramātman*, does a yogi get transformed into *Paramātman*. Similarly in *upāsana*, when a person thinks that he is that Supreme Self, he may initially wonder, how can he be equal to that Supreme Self? But if the person is endowed with the right qualities and if he is capable of understanding and comprehending the formless nature of Brahman, (*nirguna, nirākāra svarupa*) and goes on thinking in this manner, he, in course of time, gets transformed, as it were, into Brahman. The *Mundaka Upanishad* declares ‘*brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati*’ (iii.ii.9). In other words, this person becomes identical with Brahman.

Even if a person cannot rise to this highest level, he need not be disheartened, because, he may meditate on Brahman with attributes or Brahman with forms. If a person is sincere and has devotion, then that attributeless Brahman out of kindness creates, by virtue of Its inconceivable power (*acintyashakti* or *māyā*), unreal forms, so that by meditating on those unreal forms the person can later on understand the attributeless and formless Brahman and become identified with *Nirguna Brahma*. Brahman is Consciousness *per se*. He is one without a second, *advitiam*. He has no parts, no limbs (*nishkala*). He has no form, no body (*ashariri*). But this Brahman, who is *cinmaya nishkala advityashariri*, is so kind that He creates unreal forms for the benefit of the *upāsakas*, the meditators.

In the *Kenopaniṣad* a teacher teaches a batch of students, out of whom only one has the mental capacity to grasp the attributeless and formless nature of Brahman. The teacher continues his instructions through two *khandas*—the first part and the second part but notices that many of his statements are falling flat on most of the students. So in the third and fourth *khandas* we find the explanation of

*Saguna* Brahman. When *Saguna* Brahman appeared before the gods in the form of *Yaksha*, or an adorable effulgence, Agni failed to ascertain what form it was. Vāyu too failed. Indra was also not able to comprehend, but he decided he should not give up, but try to understand what this adorable effulgence is. Finally, when his pride was shattered, he could understand and see in the open sky the radiant form of Umā Haimavati. Umā Haimavati instructed him in the concept of attributeless Brahman, and, for those who were not able to comprehend this exalted notion, suggested the method of meditation.

### Methods of meditation

There are so many methods of meditation and *upāsana*. The symbolic worship is depicted in the *Chhāndogyopanishad*, chapter three. There *Āditya* is described as Brahman. Then again, the mind is depicted as Brahman. Later, the *sādhakas* are advised to contemplate *Gāyatri* and treat it as Brahman. Then they are instructed to contemplate Brahman as ‘*tajjalāniti*’. Most of you know at least one Upanishadic sentence—‘*sarvam khalvidam brahma*’—This entire universe is essentially Brahman. But immediately after that, this Upanishad says ‘*tajjalāniti shānta upāsita*’. *Tajjalān* refers, pithily, to Brahman from whom this universe emerges at the time of creation, on whom it thrives and into whom it dissolves in the in-between states.

There are also other *upāsana*s such as *pancāgnividyā* where it is said that you may think of the heaven as fire (no. 1). You may think of the *antariksha* (space) as fire (no. 2), you may consider this earth as fire (no. 3), finally, you may think that man and woman are fire no. 4 and 5 respectively. By contemplating this *pancāgnividyā* a person can attain the position of *Hiranyagarbha*, *kārya Brahman*. He should follow the

*devayāna mārga*, the bright path. There is also the dark path or *krishnamārga*. Through either of these *mārgas* or paths, one has to go after death according to the merits and demerits that he has acquired.

### *Omkāra upāsana*

However, of all the *upāsana*s, *upāsana* of *omkāra* mentioned in the *Brihadāranayakopaniṣad* (5.1.1) is the best. In the chanting of the *Gāyatri mantra*, there must be an *omkāra* at the beginning and at the end, because the quintessence of the *Gāyatri mantra* is *omkāra*, which we should contemplate in our hearts.

In chapter eight, *khanda* 1, of the *Chhāndogyopanishad* the small space, *ākāsha*, is said to be the lotus heart. The *Kathopanishad* (II.iii.17) says: ‘*Angushthamātrah purushah antarātma sadā janānām hridaye sannivishtah*’—Purusha, the indwelling Self, of the size of a thumb, is ever seated in the hearts of men. So, that is the place where one must concentrate one’s mind. All the *dhyāna mantras* say only one thing, that you must think of the lotus inside that holds the deity—*hridayapundarika* or *hridpadma*. If we forget this lotus heart, the most essential point of our existence, then all our spiritual endeavour is futile. In *Chhāndogya Upanishad*, it is said:

*Om. Atha yadidamasmin brahmapure daharam pundarikam veshma daharo’sminnantarākāshastasmin yadantastadanveshtavyam tadvāva vijjñāsitavyam. (8.1.1)*

### The other tradition

There is the other tradition—that of the *Tantras*. There are certain branches of *Tantra* which do not follow the Vedic tradition directly. There are five types of *Tantras*.

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