

An Introduction to the study of Sadananda's *Vedāntasāra*

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MOKSA OR LIBERATION from transmigratory existence is the final goal of human life. Hence it is also called *parama-puruṣārtha* ('the highest of the ends desired by human beings'). The mortal who attains to that state becomes immortal. He dives and swims in the ocean of bliss, he gets dissolved in it. Who would not wish to get such a beatific experience? However, none can get it without striving for it. There can be no *siddhi* (fulfilment) without *sādhana* (the means). That is why our philosophical treatises which keep before us the *parama-puruṣārtha*, give as much importance to *sādhana* as to intellectual speculations. In fact, this is the reason for calling them Darśanas. Darśana means seeing, direct experience. The Rsis (sages) 'saw' the Highest Truth, experienced not only the nature of that Truth but also the path that leads to It. That is why these treatises were christened Darśanas. This is the fundamental difference between our Darśanas and the philosophies of the West.

Among such Darśanas, the Āstika Darśanas — those which accept the supreme authority of the Vedas — are six in number: They are: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mimāṃsā and Vedānta.

Vedānta, the last of these, is the crowning glory of the Indian philosophical systems. It depends mainly on the Upaniṣads. There are three main branches in Vedānta, the result of three types of traditions: Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita. Among these, Advaita seems to have been more popular and gathered greater number of followers. Starting with Gaudapāda and Śaṅkara this tradition has flourished continuously for 1,400 years and has produced hundreds of works. Some of these works have been written as commentaries on the Prasthānatraya.¹ Others have come down as glosses and explanations of the main commentaries. When the arguments put forward in these works to defend their thought were criticized by other schools, newer works — mainly dialectical — to counter them, had to be written. Apart from these, which were meant exclusively for the intellectual élite, simpler works for the benefit of common people were also composed. Such works were called *prakaraṇas*. Sadānanda's *Vedāntasāra* has a special place among such *prakaraṇas*.

1. The three basic scriptures: the Upaniṣads, the *Brahmasūtras*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Not much is known about this Sadānanda. Scholars opine that he probably lived at the end of the 15th century or the beginning of the 16th. He was the *paramaguru* (Guru's Guru) of Nrsimha Sarasvatī, the author of *Subodhinī*, one of the well-known glosses on the *Vedāntasāra*. Two more Sadānandas are known to us: Sadānanda Kāśmīraka, the author of *Advaita-brahma-siddhi*; Sadānanda Vyāsa, the composer of the work *Advaita-siddhānta-sāra*. Scholars are undecided whether all these three are the same person or are different. However there are no two opinions about the beauty and the speciality of this work, *Vedāntasāra*, for the following reasons:

1. It pays greater attention to the *prameya* (the things to be known) which are more relevant to the spiritual aspirants, than the *pramāṇas* (methods of knowledge).

2. It refers briefly to the post-Śankara schools of Advaita.

3. It deals in great detail with the interpretation of the famous Vedantic dictum *tat tvam asi*.

4. It considers the Yoga of Patañjali as an integral part of *nididhyāsana* (meditation).

Though short, this work has been very popular among the students of Advaita Vedānta. The five commentaries that are available on it are proof of this. They are: (a) *Bālabodhinī* of Āpadeva; (b) *Subodhinī* of Nrsimha Sarasvatī; (c) *Vidvanmanorañjanī* of Rāmatīrtha; (d) *Vedāntasāra-tikā* by an unknown author; (e) *Vedāntasāra-vyākhyā* by Rāmacandrānanda Sarasvatī.

Among these, the first three have been printed. The other two are available in manuscript form in some Oriental libraries.

The contents of this work may now be summarized as follows:

The word 'Vedānta' indicates the Upanisads which contain the quintessence of the Vedas, the *Brahmasūtras* of Bādarāyana, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and all other works which follow the spirit of these. The Vedānta philosophy describes not only the nature of the Truth but also the path that leads to its experience. But one who desires to follow it should have first cleansed his mind by the proper study of the Vedas and by the performance of the various Karmas (rituals) and *Upāsana*s (meditations) prescribed in them. After thus attaining a certain degree of purity of mind, he should now take up the practice of *Sādhana-catustaya* or the fourfold spiritual practice. It consists of: *viveka* (discrimination), *vairāgya* (renunciation), *śamādiṣaṭka* (group of six virtues beginning with *śama* or peace of mind and ending with *śraddhā* or faith), and *mumukṣutva* (desire for emancipation).

Viveka is the knowledge that Brahman alone is real and eternal, and this world of attractive sense-pleasures is transient. This naturally produces *vairāgya* or spirit of renunciation towards the world. Then the aspirant tries to cultivate the six well-known virtues viz., *śama* (peace of mind), *dama* (self-control), *uparati* (withdrawal of the mind from the sense-objects), *titikṣā* (forbearance), *samādhāna* (concentration of mind) and *śraddhā* (faith). As a result of this, his *mumukṣutva* (desire for liberation) grows. Then he respectfully approaches a competent Guru for instructions. He listens (*śravaṇa*) to the Guru's teachings, reflects (*manana*) over them, and then meditates (*nididhyāsana*) on the Truth that emerges in his mind as a result. This ripens into realization of his Ātman or Self that has always been present in his

heart, through the destruction of *ajñāna* (ignorance). As long as the Prārabdha-karma (the Karma that is responsible for this birth) lasts, he continues to live in the body, but as a Jīvanmukta (one who is free even while living). Then when the body falls, he attains Videha-mukti (freedom from rebirth).

When the disciple, who is a *jijñāsu* (aspirant after Truth) and a *mumukṣu* (aspirant after liberation) approaches the Guru, the Guru teaches him the Truth by following the method of *adhyāropa* and *apavāda*. These are technical terms commonly used in Advaita literature. *Adhyāropa* is also called *adhyāsa*. In semi-darkness, we superimpose a snake on a rope due to the ignorance of the fact that it is a rope. Similarly, we superimpose this world on Brahman due to the ignorance of Its nature. This superimposition is *adhyāropa*.

This ignorance, technically called *ajñāna* or *avidyā*, is neither *sat* (real) nor *asat* (unreal) nor even *sat-asat* (real-unreal). It is impossible to define it, though it is a fact of experience. Hence it is termed *anirvacanīya* (indefinable). This *ajñāna* comprises three Guṇas (qualities) called Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Also, it is *jñānavirodhī* (opposed to knowledge) and *bhāvarūpa* (positive).

This *ajñāna* has two powers: *āvaraṇa* (of concealment) and *vikṣepa* (of projection). Semi-darkness conceals the real nature of the rope and makes it appear like a snake. Similarly, the *āvaraṇa-śakti* of *ajñāna* conceals the real nature of Brahman. Its *vikṣepa-śakti* projects the world appearance in the same.

The three aspects of the Jīvātman (individual self) viz., *viśva*, *taijasa* and

prājña; the three bodies — *sthūla*, *sūkṣma* and *kāraṇa*; the five Kośas (sheaths) — *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijñānamaya* and *ānandamaya*; the three forms of Paramātman, viz., *Īśvara*, and *Hiranyagarbha* and *Virāt*; the fourteen worlds beginning with *Bhū*; the bodies of the beings that inhabit them and the five elements that are their causes — all these are the products of *ajñāna*, the effect of its *vikṣepa-śakti*!

Through right perception, under the right circumstances, the snake is sublated and its substratum, the rope is seen as it is. Similarly, when through *pramāṇa* (right means of knowledge), *yukti* (logic) and *anubhava* (experience) the world which is being perceived in Brahman through *ajñāna* is sublated and its substratum Brahman is seen as It is, the method followed in doing so, is called *apavāda* or de-superimposition.

Brahman appears to evolve into this world, as described in the Upaniṣads, in particular order. In *nididhyāsana* one should meditate on this in the reverse direction and dissolve the world into Brahman. Then Brahman alone remains and the world totally disappears.

The most important fact that emerges out of this *apavāda* is that the Jīva and *Īśvara* are the same in essence. It is exactly this that the Mahāvākyas (Great Sentences) of the Upaniṣads declare. Among these, the sentences *tat tvam asi* ('That thou art') and *aham brahma asmi* (I am Brahman) have been described and commented upon in great detail in the Vedāntic works. Incidentally, the first sentence is called *upadeśa-vākya* ('the sentence of teaching'); and the latter, *anubhava-vākya* ('the sentence of experience'). In this work, *Vedāntasāra*,

the method by which *tat tvam asi* is to be interpreted has been depicted in great detail.

As already described, the literal meaning of the sentence: *tat tvam asi*, is 'That thou art'; i.e., Īśvara and Jīva are the same, or identical. Since Īśvara, the Lord, and Jīva, the individual soul, are poles apart, they can never be equal or identical in the literal sense. But the Vedāntic sentence is our supreme authority in all supramundane matters. Hence we have to interpret this sentence not directly or literally but indirectly or by implication. Among several such implications called *lakṣaṇās*, the particular one known as *bhāga-lakṣaṇā* (in which there is partial acceptance of the literal meaning, the rest being decided by implication) is adopted here for this purpose. *So'yam devadattaḥ*, 'He is that Devadatta' — this is the oft-quoted example to prove the point.

If the Devadatta whom we saw yesterday at the market in a Western dress comes to our house this morning in Indian dress, we immediately recognize him as 'This is that Devadatta'. The person 'Devadatta' is accepted, rejecting the two different times, places, dresses and other accidental characteristics which are not the real aspects of the person. Similarly, in the sentence *tat tvam asi*, we should reject the accidental characteristics of Īśvara and the Jīva (Īśvara is omnipotent and omniscient whereas the knowledge and powers of the Jīva are very limited) and accept only the fact that both are *caitanya*, or pure consciousness, which is the essential characteristic of both. It is only then that they can be termed 'identical'. The unity and identity of the two should be accepted only in this sense.

This identity has to be experienced and for this the aspirant has to perform *sādhana*. In this scheme of *sādhana*, *śravaṇa* comes first. *Śravaṇa* does not mean merely 'hearing'. It is listening attentively to the teachings of the Upaniṣads from the Guru, and determining their correct meaning as per the six *liṅgas* or rules of understanding, like *upakrama* (beginning), *upasamhāra* (conclusion) and so on. What has been understood thus should then be subjected to *manana*, intensive thinking, to dispel all possible doubts and to sustain it thoroughly through reason and logic. Once this *manana* becomes ripe it leads to *nididhyāsana* or meditation on the nature of the Ātman/Brahman principle which has been the ultimate conclusion of *śravaṇa* and *manana*. The mind assumes the form of Brahman and flows on continuously. This is called *brahmākāra-vṛtti*. When this *nididhyāsana* ripens, it results in *samādhi*, total absorption, giving superconscious experience.

Samādhi is of two types: *savikalpaka* (with modifications) and *nirvikalpaka* (without modifications). In the former, along with the perception of Brahman there is also an awareness of oneself and the awareness of the process of contemplation. It is similar to the dual consciousness involved in seeing a clay elephant wherein there is a simultaneous awareness of clay as well as the elephant. In the latter, there is the experience of Brahman only, the other two aspects of awareness (of oneself and of the process of contemplation) being transcended.

To attain such *nirvikalpaka* Samādhi, it is necessary to undergo the eight steps of Yoga viz., *yama* (general discipline), *niyama* (particular discipline), *āsana*

[continued on p. 77]