

# **The Rational Monistic School: The Vedaanta of Shankara**

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## **In defence of the subject**

The title of this lecture/note may sound strange to those for whom philosophy is a matter of belief or doctrine. But as I have stated in the opening talk of this series of lectures, *What is philosophy?*, philosophy as metaphysics is a scientific search into the nature of the 'subject' as against physics, a search into the nature of the 'object'. There is, therefore, nothing wrong in bringing together rationality and Vedaanta as I have done in the present title. And, indeed, the Vedaanta as enunciated in its ultimate source, the Upanishads, and expounded by Shankara in his commentatorial works on them, can certainly make a claim to the method that distinguishes all scientific thinking from will-oriented thought.

## **The rational approach of the Upanishads**

And, indeed, we do find in the Upanishads an approach characteristic of a scientific search. The soul is said to visit different states of consciousness, the deep sleep and the waking state, as a fish visits banks of a river alternately. This shows that the soul is as much different from the states as is a fish from the banks. (Brihad. 4-3-18) To explain this illustration: I take a tube at the West Hampstead station and leave it at the Finchley Road station to reach the place of Yoga classes; this proves my separate identity from the rail stations. An attempt to find a common denominator in apparently distinct objects is viewed in the dialogue of Shvetaketu and Aaruni where the latter explains the earth as the reality in all products made from it. This points in the direction of an all-pervading principle, the existence, as the reality of the world. (Chhaandogya. VI.1) To explain this illustration: we use fan, mixer, fridge, heater, light bulb/tube etc.; none of these utilities can be equated with electricity which runs, and is one despite the multiplicity of, these gadgets. This principle, though invisible, cannot be denied; for what is inaccessible for one means of knowledge can be accessible for another. Aaruni illustrates this to his son by pointing out that the salt dissolved in the water may not be visible in crystal form as before, but can be ascertained by taste.

## **Essentials of the Vedaanta**

These references chosen at random from the Upanishads show the method of search of Upanishadic seers: they are as rational as a physicist. Their findings, as elaborated by later voluminous commentatorial literature, are summed up in a traditional distich condensing Vedaantic view to three tenets: the Brahman is the reality, the world is unreal, and the soul is not distinct from the Brahman.

## **Identity of the soul with the Brahman**

Brahman is the most widely used term occurring in the Upanishads to refer to the all-pervading impersonal principle for which Aaruni uses the term *sat*, existence, which is also impersonal. There is no place in the main stream of thinking this literature represents either for an almighty, personal God as controller, nor for souls as miserable beings at the mercy of the almighty. In other words, the Upanishads are as atheistic as a scientist, for, once the conscious principle is identified *en bloc*, there can be no rational ground for identifying differences in it. Electricity in England is in no way different from that in India; it would be funny if one talks of English or Indian electricity or oxygen. Nationalities are part of convention, not reality; and conventions are a matter of *willed cognition*, to use a term I employed in the initial analysis. In the view of the Vedaanta, the soul suffers from a number of such superimposed identities resulting in the oblivion of his basic identity as pure conscious principle beyond worldly pleasures and pains. This is what the Vedaantins term *adhyaasa*, the result of nescience. Release from this is possible only by the knowledge of its real nature; and, according to Vedaanta, it is the highest goal of life as, once achieved, it is never lost. This is *moksha*, liberation, into which the soul awakens from the dream of worldly life.

## **Experience in deep sleep**

This basic nature of the soul is not a matter of belief, but is actually experienced by every one in deep sleep. Sleep, as commonly believed, is not an absence of knowledge, but the knowledge of absence of the objective world in the true nature of the soul when it is aware of nothing but itself. If there be total absence of knowledge in deep sleep, how can one account for the memory of the happy experience in deep sleep which we vouch for as we wake up? How can there be memory without experience? The experience in deep sleep incidentally attests two more aspects of the soul: consciousness and bliss. The Brahman is thus characterised by three aspects: *sat*, *chit* and *aananda*, -- existence, consciousness and bliss. This explains the third tenet in the condensed statement referred to above about essential Vedaanta.

## **The unreality of the phenomenal world**

Coming to the first two tenets in the essential Vedaanta, we find that much misunderstanding prevails about them at the popular level because of the influence of the usage of the words 'real' and 'unreal'. The scientific view differs from the popular one as they essentially differ in their aims. What is water for the practical, common man is a combination of oxygen and hydrogen for the scientist; for the first is concerned with life, and the second, with fundamentals. It

is this difference in views that justifies Aaruni's conclusion in the earlier reference that, in all earthen effects, earth is the essence, and, in all worldly objects, existence is the essence. To say that this essence is the reality is not denying the phenomenal world; it is assigning existence to the essential principle rather than to the appearance. Is it not true that the earthen products exist in as much as the earth exists? And do we not in reality view the earth when we observe its products? Certainly, the products do not get destroyed as a result of the view of the reality. The effect this view produces does not relate as much to the objects viewed as to the observer who, as a result of the awareness of the reality, is freed from mental bondage and suffering which the narrow view produces. Extend this freedom to its logical limit, and you arrive at the philosopher's concept of liberation.

It will thus be realised that Vedaantic view of reality is the result of a scientific search, as rational as recognised areas of science, and not a matter of belief.

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