

Sankara and Yoga

Sankara's Vivarana throws light on two kinds of yogic meditation-with bhakti to the Lord and pure concentration on the Self.

In his commentaries, Sankara refers to the Yoga sastra as an authority for practices other than meditation, for instance, for *sannyasa* (*Gita Bh. VI*) and diet (VI-16). But it is most often cited as authoritative for meditation. In his *Brahma Sutra* commentary he cites yoga for the ability of Vyasa and other sages to converse with the gods face to face (I.3.33), yoga as a means to vision of truth (*tattva darsana upaya*: II.1.3), on the mental processes (II.4.12), on meditation practice (II.1.3), on multiplication of bodies and other powers of those in *Brahmatoka* (IV.4.15), on posture in meditation (IV.1.10).

Yoga sastra at the time of Sankara is generally assumed to refer to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* glossed by Vyasa, but there are references in Sankara to yoga texts that cannot be identified with the *Yoga Sutras* as we

now have them. For instance, commenting on *Taitt. Up.* I.6.2 he refers to the channel called *sushumna*, but this is not mentioned by Patanjali nor by Vyasa. Neither does it conic in the present *Vivarana*, as a matter of fact; but other commentators on Vyasa are mentioned, and presumably those texts would have been part of the Yoga sastra as recognised by the *Vivarana*.

There is a direction on diet, glossing *Gita* VI.16, to fill half the stomach with food, a quarter with water, and the remaining quarter to be left empty. This is said by Sankara to be given "in the Yoga sastra", but it is not to be found in Patanjali or Vyasa. It must be from some text no longer extant.

And Bhaskara knew of it, for he refers to it in another place in his own *Gita* comment (*Gita* IV.30), though not in the same words.

Extraordinary Powers

Sankara makes a few references to *yama-niyama* as listed by Patanjali. Commenting on *Prasna Upanishad* V.1 he has mentioned the following as necessary auxiliaries to *Om* meditation *satya, brahmacharya, ahimsa, aparigraha, tyaga, sannyasa, saucha, amayavittva*. This is very close to the first seven of the *yama-niyama* set in the *Yoga Sutra* (II.30-32). Again, *yama-niyama* are cited as auxiliaries to an aspirant's partial *sannyasa* in the introductory comments on *Gita VI*.

Yogins' Powers

Sankara often speaks of the yogins in passing, and especially in connection with unusual powers, which he sometimes cites as examples. In the commentary to *Gandapada Karika* IV.9, for example, to gloss the word "success" he instances successful yogins who have acquired the powers of becoming very small and so on.

As an example of one and the same effect being produced by different causes, he says (*Brihadaranyaka Bhashya* I.4.2.): "In the case of animals that see in the dark, the connection of eye with the object alone suffices, even without

the help of light, to cause the perception. In the case of yogins, the mind alone is the cause of it. While with us there is a combination of causes such as connection of the eye with the object, and light, which again may vary, in quality or strength." And on I.2.1, "Another reason for supposing the pre-existence of the effect is the fact that the knowledge of the yogins concerning the past and future of a jar is infallible. Were the future jar non-existent, that perception of it would prove false. Nor is this perception a mere figure of speech."

His remark that their precognition is an actual fact is repeated in the strong assertion (to *Brahma Sutra* I.3.33) that yoga does lead to acquirement of extraordinary powers, "a fact which cannot be set aside by mere emphatic denial." This is, however, what his pupil Padmapada does in *Panchapadika* II.4 when he says that it is not found that meditation leads to perception of anything. There is a contradiction between his pupil and Sankara, who here is apparently speaking from experience, for he cites in these

places no other authority for his positive asseveration.

It may be remarked however that according to the *Yoga Sūtras* themselves, yogins who exercise such powers are creating obstacles in the way to release. Omniscience is a natural concomitant of the highest states of training, but *Sūtra* III.37 says that the other powers are perfections to an extroverted mind but are obstacles to *samadhi*; the *Vivaraṇa* comments briefly on this, that they do not arise in a concentrated mind which is detached. They are limited and mostly have to be acquired by special meditations. They are possessed by an individual, and as such are quite different from the Omniscience and godly power referred to in *Brahma Sūtra* III.1.7 which become manifest when the self becomes free from the illusion of being connected with the body-mind aggregate, and realises its identity with the Lord. Skill in *Samadhi*

Sankara presupposes skill in *samadhi* for his own spiritual practice: it is one of the qualifications (*Upadesa Sahasri* I.17.23, *Bṛihadaranyaka Bhashya* IV.4.23). In

Gīta Bhashya to II.39, *samadhi* is one of the elements of *karma yoga*, essential to purify the mind to receive knowledge; sometimes Sankara singles out *samadhi yoga* as the means to this end (to *Gīta* IV.38). In this commentary, Sankara more than 40 times follows Vyasa's gloss "yoga is *samadhi*" by himself glossing yoga and its derivatives with *samadhi* and its derivatives. This is not dictated by the nature of the *Gīta* text, for Bhaskara commenting on the same text avoids the word.

This applies not only to the *karma yoga* passages, but to the *jñānanishṭha* passages such as *Gīta* V.8-9: here the truth-knower (*tattvavid*), who in the introduction is called *atmavid* and *samyagdarsin*, is now directed solely to meditate with concentrated mind (*samāhita cetas*) on "I do nothing at all", even during apparent actions like speaking and moving. This meditation is in fact natural to a truth-knower, Sankara explains repeatedly: the practice is simply not to disturb it. It leads to release, after which knowledge does not remain a second longer; if it did, duality would not have ceased (*Mandukya Bhashya* VII). This is exactly the point in the *Yoga Sūtra*

doctrine that even discriminative knowledge (*vivekajnana*), though the means to release, is itself a creature of the *gunas* and does not exist for purusa-in-its-own-nature.

Means to Release

Sankara makes *samadhi* one of the necessary means to release. In the philosophical texts he does not go into it in any detail: he simply assumes it. In *Brahma Sutra Bhashya* II.3.39 and 40, *samadhi* is recognised by him as taught in the Vedanta texts for Self-realisation represented by the *Upanishads*: “The Self indeed is to be seen, heard of, thought on, and deeply meditated on”, “The Self we must seek, must try to realise,” and “meditate on the self as *Orn*”. “For the scripture does enjoin it (*samadhi-vidhanat*).”

In his free-style composition, *A Thousand Teachings*, he says (I.17.22):

22. When the mind becomes pure like a mirror, knowledge shines forth; (the mind should be purified) by abstention (*yama*), permanent rites, sacrifices and *tapas* (austerities).

23. The best *tapas* of the body, etc., should be performed to purify the mind. The concentration of the mind, etc. (*sarnadhana*) and emacia-tion of the body in this and

that (season) (should be performed).

In similar terms he speaks of the means to knowledge: *sannyasa, sama, dama, uparama, titiksha* and *samadhana* (*Brahma Sutra Bhashya* IV.4.21). There are many such examples.

In the *Brahma Sutra* commentary to III.2.24 he confirms that the yogins see the Self referred to in the *Upanishads* in their profound meditation. He cites moreover *Mahabharata* XII.4.55 that such yogins are sleepless, with breathing conquered (*jitavasah*), senses sub-dued (*samyatendriya*). (XII.46.55 begins with a description of Krishna sitting like a statue, senses inoperative, and becoming aware in *samadhi* of the condition of the dying Bhishma.) Sankara had no need to describe such details in his commentary, and it is a clearly approving reference to Patanjali-style trance meditation, applied to Brahman realisation. Similarly in his introduction to the *Gita*, he describes release in terms of an unmoving yogin: “He is without merit, without sin, and without good or evil—who is sitting in one posture, absorbed, silent, and thinking nothing (*kinchid acintayan*)” (*Anugita*). This last phrase is an echo of *Gita*

VI.25: “Settling the mind on Self, let him not think of anything (*na kinchidapi chintayet*).” Sankara cites this with approval as the highest yoga. It is the *chitta vritti nirodha* of the *Yoga Sutras*, where mind is directed to *purusa* and then dissolved.

The same phrase *na kinchidapi chintayet* comes in the Gaudapada *Karika* I.24, and in 25 Sankara glosses *yunjita* as *samadadhyad*. There are many references to *samadhi* practice in the commentary to the *Mundaka Upanishad*. *Niruddharn manas* comes also in the *Karika* comment on III.33.

Dwelling on Self

Occasionally Sankara sums up the Upanishadic doctrine by a single phrase. Four times in his *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* commentary he cites “one should meditate on it as the Self alone” as giving the whole *Upanishad* in a nutshell, or as a *Sutra*. And in his *Gita* commentary on XIII.4 he selects this same phrase as the example of a *Brahma Sutra* “well-reasoned and definite.”

Commenting on *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* I.4.7, Sankara denies that *chitta vritti nirodha* alone is a means to *moksha* apart from the

Brahman-Self identity known from Vedanta. But he adds:

Na hi atma-vajnana-tatsmrtisan-tana vyatirekena chittavrttinirodhasya sadhanam asti. Abhyupagamyedamuk-tam., na tu brabrnnavijnana vyatirekena. anya-moksa-sadhanam avagamyate. (For inhibition of the mental processes is not a means apart from Self-realisation and the continuous remembrance of that. Admittedly it is mentioned, but it is not recognised as a means to release apart from Brahman-realisation.)

In the same way, in the *Brahma Sutra* commentary to II.1.3., “By that, the *Yoga* system is refuted”, he points out that though it is authoritative on such things as meditation and renunciation, it is unacceptable on the two points already established against Sankhya: the plurality of separate *purusas* and the unconscious *pradhana* as source of the world. It is these two points in the *Yoga* system which the present *Vivarana* apparently seeks to replace with Vedantic views, in most places by hints and implications, but in *sutra* I.25, for instance, with lengthy and unconcealed arguments on the inevitability of a creator-Lord.

Elsewhere, by hints such as calling the successful yogin *paramesthin*' (to I.28) or even *pararnesvara* (to III.45), he briefly indicates that the inner self is realised as the all-creator and the Self of all (as in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.4.13.)

Clear Division

The *Brahma Sutra Bhashya* sums up Sankara's standpoint on Yoga practice. There is a clear distinction between the Yoga school, and those practising the yoga meditation methods on the basis of Upanishadic truths: either meditation with (*bhakti*) devotion to the Lord as such, namely with divine attributes, or meditations on the highest Self alone.

Sutra II.1.3 rejects the philosophy of the Yoga school on the two grounds previously put forward against the *Sankhya*:

pradhana, and plurality of Selves. The Yoga texts are, however, authoritative on meditation; yoga practice is mentioned in the *Upanishads*, even as to details. For example, *Svetasvatara Upanishad* II.8 describes meditation posture.

Bhaskara on the same *Sutra* takes a similar line also quoting the verse of *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, though strangely altered.

Under *Sutra* II.1.3 Sankara adds that the yoga taught in the *Upanishads* means meditation on Upanishadic truth, thus distinguishing it from many practices of the yoga school. Finally, under *Sutra* III.2.5 he says that those who strenuously meditate on the Lord begin to acquire divine powers, but concludes that all such are dependent on the Lord (IV.4.18).

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