

Indian Spirituality I: The Vedāntic Viewpoint

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Human nature is such that we accept a concept only if it is presented within a framework we can relate to. All religions have started by catering to this human need – we build a temple, we establish a symbol, we do our consecration and our rituals, and we say God is there. This is to aid in communicating the notion of spirituality for a particular situation. But God is not a system or a theory or even a concept – at least, God is not amenable to the kind of methodology we use to understand most other concepts. God is freedom itself. So the sooner we understand the nature of God and reality free of religious symbols, the better it is for us and the better for the world. That is where spirituality starts.

The quest for spirituality has gone on in India for a long time. Among the many ancient Indian texts that talk about the ultimate nature of reality, *Brahma Sūtras* is especially important. *Brahmaṇ* is the Sānskrit word for spirituality and *sūtra* means “guiding principle.” The book has 555 concise statements (aphorisms) that give the essence of the arguments on *Brahmaṇ*. Of these, the first four are most significant. They are so concise that they cannot be understood without the aid of a lucid commentary; but once understood, they will be seen to contain all the main points of spirituality as envisaged by Sanātana Dharma.

अथातो ब्रह्मजिज्ञासा ।

athāto brahmajijñāsā

जन्माद्यस्य यतः ।

janmādyasya yataḥ

शास्त्रयोनित्वात् ।

śāstrayonitvāt

तत्तु समन्वयात् ।

tattu samanvayāt

1. Now, therefore, the enquiry into *Brahmaṇ*.
2. (*Brahmaṇ* is that) from which the origin, etc. (i.e. the origin, sustenance, and dissolution) of this (world proceed).
3. The source of right knowledge being *śāstra*.
4. But that (*Brahmaṇ* is to be known only) on the basis of agreement or harmony, because it is the main purpose.

Sūtra 1 makes it clear that the book will present spirituality in the framework of a system of enquiry (*jijñāsā*). The seeker has the freedom to constantly question and experiment, accepting or rejecting ideas on the basis of his own experience. There is also a hint that the book is meant for those who are endowed with a real desire for attaining the knowledge of *Brahmaṇ*. At first, one may spend one's time in various activities that are of value to society. But ultimately one has to spend time in enquiring into and understanding the nature of reality—God or *Brahmaṇ*.

Sūtra 2 defines *Brahmaṇ* as that whence the world originates, etc. Thus spirituality is the basis even for matter; this world with all its varied and changeable forms and relations has come from that Reality. But Reality is not bound by these manifestations. Śankara uses the term *māyā* to describe the power

of Brahman that gives rise to the world. Because people usually see only the varied forms, Sūtra 2 draws their attention to the source of all things, Brahman.

Sūtra 3 declares that the understanding of the basis of all things has to be attained via *śāstra*, i.e. in an orderly, systematic, logical way. In the Vedāntic tradition, this means that Brahman is to be known only by the study of the Vedas.

Sūtra 4 states that contradictions in the *śāstras* must be resolved in a harmonious way in order to understand Brahman. In the Vedāntic tradition, this means that we must make the effort to resolve apparent contradictions between different Vedānta texts, for Brahman is the uniform topic of all. The capacity to put oneself in another's place and understand that person's viewpoint is an important habit to develop. It develops harmonious understanding and avoids quarrels. Thus the pursuit of spirituality gives humanity a touch of openness or liberality. The spirit of toleration that Sūtra 4 advocates is one of the hallmarks of Hinduism.

Among the many philosophers and scholars who have written commentaries on *Brahma Sūtras* down the ages, some have confined themselves to just these 4 *sūtras*. This makes sense, for if we understand these four statements, we are already well advanced on the path of spirituality. *Brahma Sūtras*, like other religious texts, uses a vocabulary that is based on specific religious concepts, for without such a basis communication is impossible. But Śankara (who, as far as we know, was the first to have written a commentary on this book) struggled very hard to free the text from its theological and ritualistic underpinnings and bring out the intrinsic nature of Brahman. That is one of his great achievements.

A very good idea of the Hindu view of spirituality is conveyed by the following description, from the Guru Stotram, of the spiritual Guru.

यस्यान्तर्नादिमध्यं न हि करचरणं नामगोत्रं न सूत्रं
नो जातिर्नैव वर्णः भवति पुरुषो नो नपुंसो न च स्त्री ।
नाकारो निर्विकारो न हि जनिमरणं नास्ति पुण्यं न पापं
नो तत्त्वं तत्त्वमेकं सहजसमरसं सद्गुरुं तं नमामि ॥

*yasyāntar-nādimadhyam na hi karacaraṇam nāmagotram na sūtram
no jātirnaiva varṇaḥ na bhavati puruṣo no napumso na ca strī
nākāro nirvikāro na hi jani-maraṇam nāsti puṇyam na pāpam
no tattvam tattvamekam sahaja-samarasam sadgurum tam namāmi*

“I prostrate to that Sadguru for whom there is no beginning, no middle, no end, no hands, no feet, no name, no lineage, no guidelines (bounding rules), no category, no color, who is neither male nor female nor neuter, who has no form, no change, no birth, no death, no virtue, no sin, no elements of creation, who is the One Truth, who is the natural homogeneous Essence.” This verse denies all attributes to the spiritually realized person excepting two: *sahaja* or naturalness and *samarasam* or homogeneous essence. Wherever there is harmony, wherever there is spontaneity, that is where we find spirituality. All the attributes listed in this verse are necessary for social order. But they are all divisive and must be overcome in the quest for spirituality.