

Tattva Bodha of Adi Sankaracharya – A Vedantic Primer : Part 1

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General Introduction

Adi Sankara's works can be broadly classified into three categories: 1) *Bhashya granthas* (commentaries); 2) *Prakarana granthas* (dealing with fundamental aspects of vedanta), and 3) *stotra granthas* (hymns or meditation verses).

Bhashya Granthas

The language of the Upanishads is "mystic" in style and as such cannot be understood by a mere translation of the verses or using a dictionary! For example, a literal translation of the following mantra:

पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदं पूर्णात् पूर्णमुदच्यते ।
पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ॥

*poorNamada: poorNamidam
poorNaat poorNamudacyate |
poorNasya poorNamaadaaya
poorNameva avaSishyate ||*

is, "That is whole; this is whole; from the whole the whole becomes manifest; from the whole when the whole is taken out, what remains is the whole". This literal translation alone will not make any sense to the common student, and thus it becomes evident why a great deal of explanation and commentaries are required for a proper understanding of the vedic scriptures!

Sri Sankara wrote commentaries on the three canonical works, known as *prasthanatrayee*, that form the basis of the entire *vaidika (sanatana) dharma*. These three are the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Sri Sankara wrote commentaries on 12 major *upanishads*, the *Gita* and *Brahma Sutras*, in addition to a few other commentaries on *sanat sujateeyam*, *vishnu*

sahasranamam etc. (a list of Sankara's works are provided at the end of this article).

Prakarana (or prakriya) Granthas

These are works which enable the student with the fundamental concepts and definitions of vedantic terms. A proper study of the scriptures like the *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, the *Brahma Sutras* etc., which deal with the study of the Self, require a thorough understanding of the fundamental elements of vedanta. *Tattva bodha*, *atma bodha*, *viveka choodamani* etc. are some of the *prakarana granthas* of Sri Sankara. (A list of such works are given at the end of this article.)

Stotra Granthas

The greatest appeal to the people at large are though *stotras*. Sri Sankara, in His infinite compassion, could appreciate the difficulty of the common people in comprehending the complex philosophical doctrines of *advaita*, and thus paved the way to reach the ultimate goal through *bhakti*. He composed several lucid devotional stotras on almost all deities, such as *soundarya lahari*, *kanakadhara stotram* etc.!

In addition to several devotional hymns, Sri Sankara composed several meditation verses (vedanta stotras), for regular recitation, reflection and meditation, such as *nirvana shatkam*, *sadhana pancakam* etc. (A list of all stotras attributed to Sri Sankara are included at the end of this article.)

The present series of articles will focus on *prakarana granthas*, especially *tattva bodha*, which is considered as a primer for any student desirous of pursuing vedantic studies. Unlike *viveka choodamani*, - one of Sankara's greatest

works in this subject- *tattva bodha* is brief and concise, and so is particularly suited for an initial study.

Introduction to *tattvabodha*

In the pursuit of life every being searches for happiness (*sukha praapti:*). Getting education, getting a job, acquiring wealth, becoming famous etc., are all some examples of the limitless desires of all humans in general. As one desires to obtain what one wants, one also desires not to get what one does not want! Not getting what is wanted, and/or getting what is not wanted, result (s) in sorrow and so, one likes to get rid of the resulting sorrow (*dukha nivrtti:*). Thus the happiness that one seeks should be unalloyed happiness (*dukham-free-sukham*), eternal happiness (*nitya sukham*), and infinite or limitless happiness (*niratiSaya sukham*). When one wonders as to how to acquire such a happiness, a question arises, is it at all possible to "acquire" such a happiness? !

When we analyse the nature of beings, we generally observe two types of properties. The properties/characteristics are explained by a popular example of the process of heating water. Water is kept on a vessel and heated with a flame. The nature of water is "cold" and the nature of flame is "heat". During the process of heating, the vessel acquires the heat of the flame first, and then the water in the vessel. Or, the heat of the hot-water is acquired from the flame. Hot water loses its heat once the flame is removed. Coldness of the water and the heat of the flame are natural or intrinsic to them respectively and are called as intrinsic properties (*svarupa lakshana*). The intrinsic property does not depend on external conditions and is eternal. The heat of the water is borrowed from the flame and is lost by change of external conditions, namely removal of the flame. Thus the heat of the water is an acquired or borrowed property, and is ephemeral.

Given the above analysis, the term "acquisition" of *nitya sukham* is a misnomer because it can not depend on any external conditions. This leads to the answer for the tempting question of why one should pursue to the learning of vedanta! Vedanta teaches that the true nature of beings is divine and eternal happiness. That means, true happiness is not something that needs to be "acquired" but is intrinsic to all beings.

The term "vedanta" literally means that which is (kept physically at) the end of vedas (*vedasya anta:*); logically also, it is the ultimate knowledge that one would seek! As mentioned earlier, *tattva Bodha* is a primer that helps us to understand the elements of Vedanta. Vedas have two logical sections - *Karma kanda* and *jnana kanda*. The *Karma kanda* sections contain *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas*. The *jnana kanda* sections deal with vedanta and contain the *upanishads* and *brahma sutras*. The terms used in these vedantic sections are not defined, but only statements are made. For example upanishadic statements such as, *prajnanam brahma* (Consciousness is Brahman); *tat-tvam-asi* (That Thou art); *aham- brahma-asmi* (I am brahman); *ayam atma brahma* (this Self within is brahman) are given in various upanishads. The words used in such statements like "*atma*", "*brahma*", "*tat*" etc. have packed in their mysterious depths endless suggestions and imports that an ordinary student, in spite of a complete study of the upanishads, may not be able to handle them properly! Exploration and understanding of the suggestiveness in these mystic words are not at all obvious to the unprepared student and so the student needs a special orientation. This is gained through the careful study of the *prakriya* (or *prakarana*) texts such as *Tattvabodha*!

Tattva Bodha deals with several queries in prose form. Scholars believe from the context

and contents that Adi Shankara had authored it, though the authorship is not explicit from the text itself. *Tattvabodha* is presented as a fictitious dialogue between the teacher and student. For the purpose of our understanding, the subject matter can be logically divided into five sections as follows:

1. Introduction (*Upodhgata*: उपोद्घातः)
2. Analysis of the individual (*Jiva* or *Atma vicAra*: जीव OR आत्म विचारः)
3. Analysis of creation (*Srushti vicAra*: श्रृष्टि विचारः)
4. Analysis of identity between *Jiva* and *Isvara* (*Jiva Isvara vicAra*: जीव ईश्वर विचारः) and the
5. Fruit of knowledge of *Atman* (*jnAnaphalam* ज्ञान फलम्).

Following sections will explore the text in some detail based on these five topics.

1: Introduction (*Upodhgata*: उपोद्घातः)

वासुदेवेन्द्रयोगीन्द्रं नत्वा ज्ञानप्रदं गुरुम् ।
मुमुक्षूणां हितार्थाय तत्त्वबोधोभिधीयते ॥

[नत्वा-Having saluted वासुदेवेन्द्रयोगीन्द्रं - Vasudeva, the king of Yogis, ज्ञानप्रदं गुरुम् - the Guru, who is the bestower of the Knowledge of the Truth); मुमुक्षूणां हितार्थाय - for the benefit of the seekers of liberation; तत्त्वबोध *tattva bodha* (the knowledge of the Truth) अभिधीयते is expounded.]

The text starts with a prayer or *Mangala slokam* (मङ्गलश्लोकः) followed by a (hypothetical) dialogue between student and teacher in prose format. There are two factors involved to accomplish an undertaking. The first one is our own effort to successfully execute the undertaking and the second is the *daivam* factor. *Daivam* refers to parameters that are beyond us. In our tradition, a prayer is made to *Ganesha* or any *Ishta Devata* to remove any obstacles (*vighna*

parihArArtham) during our efforts and beyond, to complete our undertaking. In the *Mangala sloka* here, Adi Shankara prostrates to his *kula devata* (family deity) *Govinda* (*vasudeva* - the *Adi Guru*) and his own guru *Govinda* *Bhagavadpada*. Also, by means of prostration to his Guru, the elements of the Guru's teaching are remembered and carried over to his own students. After salutation to the Lord and the Guru, the author says that the subject of *Tattva Bodha* - knowledge of Self or Knowledge of Truth - will be expounded for the seekers of liberation. This also indicates that the knowledge of the self or awareness that the student has at this stage is not correct and the author is going to further explain the correct knowledge of the Self.

It is customary in a publication to provide the following four-fold details at the beginning, called *anubandha catushtayam*. The *mangala sloka* of *Tattva Bodha* also indicates these four, which are,

1. the subject (*Vishaya*: विषयः); here, the subject matter is *tattva bodha* - the knowledge of Truth
2. the eligible (*Adhikari* अधिकारी) - the seeker after Liberation (मुमुक्षुः);
3. the benefit (*Prayojanam* प्रयोजनम्) is मुमुक्षूणां हित - fulfillment of the desire for Liberation, and,
4. the relationship (*Sambandha*: सम्बन्धः) between the thing to be known - i.e brahman, and that which tells of It - i.e *tattva bodha*.

(to be continued...)

References:

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3. Swami Paramarthananda's lectures - Audio Tapes, Madras 1996.