

THE ATMAN OF ADVAITA VEDANTA OF SANKARA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The knowledge of Brahman cannot be expressed precisely because it is beyond description; it is what may be said as an intuitive experience. The Metaphysical implication of this experience is that the Absolute Reality is non-different. This is the highest Reality of Advaita Vedanta, that to recognise that the Absolute Reality and that Atman are identical, in order to say that there is no essential difference between Atman and Brahman. They are one and same at all times. By the nature, Atman is Consciousness and Distinctionless, as well it is beyond mind and speech. The Atman is the Universal Soul, which is presented in all beings; it is one but seen as many, like the moon in water.

Sankara's understanding of Reality is Non-dualistic or Advaita that is Brahman or Atman; it is Brahman when objectively considered, and Atman when subjectively thought of speak of this Non-dual Reality. Atman is Brahman. There is only an abheda relationship between Brahman and Atman. The Ultimate Reality Brahman cannot be spoken in literal terms, only it can be described symbolically.

Key-Words: Ultimate reality, Self realization, Antahkarana, Liberation, Vaisvanara, Taijasa, Prajna, Pure Consciousness, Abheda.

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Introduction:

Atman is the same as Brahman. It is Pure Consciousness. It is the self-luminous and which transcends the subject-object duality and the trinity of Knower, Known and Knowledge, and all the categories of the intellect. It is the Unqualified Absolute. It is the only Reality

In the Vedic, as well in the Vedantic literatures Atman is used in three senses. In the first sense, Atman means the self of a person and it can be true, significant of a person only. In the second sense, it means the essence of a thing or a phenomenon; and thirdly it means the Ultimate Reality, in this sense, Atman is same as Brahman. The concept of Atman is central to the Upanishads.

The Atman is said to be Pure Conscious, when the Atman is associated with the Antahkarana, it is known as Saksin. The Atman and the Saksin are inseparable from each other. The Atman as Saksin cannot be said to be identical with Brahman, because the Saksin is always associated with the Antahkarana.

When Atman comes into the world, then the Atman is entirely determined by its past karma. In the same way, present activity of a person will be responsible for determining the future course of the Atman. For Sankara, the highest knowledge of Brahman is nothing but one who knows Brahman obtains the Brahman.

When there is realisation of the fact that I am not different from Brahman then knowledge dawns, and this knowledge itself is liberation (Moksa) from the process of karama saksara. Knowledge means to realise the essential nature of one's own Atman. We are not aware of the essential nature of the Atman because avidya obscures it. Once avidya has been removed, moksa has been accomplished.

Therefore, this Atman – Brahman is all intellect, all mind, all life, all eyes, all ears, all earth, all water, all wind, all ether, all light, all darkness, all desires, all peacefulness, all anger, all quiet, all religious merit, all religious demerit; It is the all, It is this, It is that.

1. Atman:

“Atman Ca Brahman. The proof of the reality of Brahman is that it is the ground of the self of everyone.”¹ The Atman is Intelligence and Intelligence is its exclusive nature, therefore, there is no essential difference between Atman and Brahman. Atman and Brahman both are same, one. The Atman has always consciousness; even there is no object at all. It is Pure Light, clear Radiance etc. without Intelligence there is no existence of Atman. The Atman exists only because of Intelligence. It is also of the nature of Bliss (Ananda). Sankara regards the Atman as One, Universal and Infinite. The Atman of Sankara is neither the individual self nor a collection of such selves; but it is the Universal Self. ‘Brahman is everything and everything is Brahman. There is no duality, no diversity at all.’²

This Brahman is causeless, without a second, having no within and without; this Self is Brahman, the Consciousness of all.³ The view of Atman according to Advaita Vedanta is distinct and unique. Each Atman refers to himself as the ‘I’. “Atman is Immortal; it is Brahman and it is all. Atman is Brahman, Atman is Prajapati, the source of all living beings, and Atman is all the deities, all the beings and everything.”⁴

According to Sankara, the atman is Universal Self., the Absolute, and the Supreme Reality and, limited by the body, the sense organs, manas, buddhi, and the like, which are its limiting adjuncts (Upadhis).as well Atman is the Transcendental, Non-empirical, Metaphysical Self. We can find the Atman in jiva that is the reality; we cannot be denied the existence of Atman. Atman is always present there; by the means of valid knowledge that we cannot probe it. “The Atman is One, Pure, Eternal in its essential nature. The Atman is Non-dual and beyond subject and object. The very nature of Atman is Pure Existence, Pure Consciousness, and Pure Bliss. The Atman is same as Brahman, it is the Universal Self. The Atman is Brahman. The Transcendental Self is the Reality. It is the Absolute. The Supreme, Infinite Brahman is the essence of the Atman.”⁵

Therefore, we can say that, Atman is the only Reality, and the Atman is Brahman. “Self, below, above, behind, right and left Self is all this. He who dwells in all beings, and within all beings whom all beings do not know, whose body all beings are, and who rules all beings within; he is thy self, the ruler within, the immortal.”⁶

Thus, there is no essential difference between Brahman and Atman. Atman is the same as Brahman. There is neither duality nor diversity. The Atman is the reality in the jiva. As well the existence of Atman, we can not deny at all. Thus, Sankara starts the existence of the Atman, the universal self, that is the ontological reality of the individual self.

2. The Four Quarters (Pada) of Atman:

The most difficult point, which is discussed by philosophers down through the ages is that Being and Non-being. Pure Being what it is, it is neither what was nor what will be. Sankara's indication of the metaphysical, it is the pathway leading to the realization of the unqualified Absolute Being. All this is surely Brahman. This Atman is Brahman.

There is Brahman and nothing else, and to this Brahman as the subject, nothing must be ascribed that is peculiar to the individual living soul.⁷ No doubt that the individual soul is Brahman, because there is nothing but Brahman alone. The highest Brahman is that it is One, Never Changing, and Pure Eternal, Intelligent and Free. Let's see in details about the quarters of atman and their different functions in various stages. That will help more to know about the Atman.

2.1. Atman – Vaisvanara/Jagrat (Waking State) -

It is the ordinary Waking State of a man when he is conscious of his own body as well his environment including the all ideas of the things and events that he has experienced and stored in his memory. However, in the Vedantic language, "it is known as Vaisvarana or physical condition in which one is conscious of the world and its contents."⁸ In this stage one is always aware of all things, he knows what is happening all around him. Each moment he is conscious of everything.

In the Waking State of man's awareness extends outside. Therefore, he is said to be Bahirprajna operating through his five organs of understanding (Jnanendriyas), the five organs of actions (Karmendriyas), and the five aspects of the vital airs, the four aspects of the cognition ego or manas. It is by all these that a person goes through the processes of experience, receiving stimuli from the external world and reacting to them in diverse ways.

According to the Upanishad, it refers to our bodily state, our gross state, which corresponds to the gross universal plane of Being (Virat). This Virat is the universal entity, but Visva is the individual entity.⁹ The sphere of action, of manifestation of the Jiva-Visva is that which man usually calls Walking State. This state is characterized by Ahamkara, by Manas, by Kama etc.

This stage as we know by name that, it is the jagrat state, in this state we all being are conscious each moment of everything, what is happening to us and around us. This kind of experiences, we all being have in this present life. This is the stage of all ordinary being. All ordinary conscious body can easily experience it. Therefore, we can deny the very existence of Atman in our body. Thus, we are all aware each time, what is taking place around us.

2.2. Atman – Taijasa/Swapna (Dreaming State) -

After the Vaisvarana, the Taijasa State comes, when a person is asleep. It is not an unconscious state. During a dream, one can said to be antahprajna. He is inwardly cognitive. This stage is known as Taijasa. “In the Dream State, world is as real to the dreamer as the outside world is to the man who is awake. In fact, even to the dreamer, the dreams appear to be outside his mind.”¹⁰

In this State, the Atman joined to the manas, moves by the veins of the body and sees dreams made out of the remnants of former impression.¹¹ In these state manas always remains active but the indriyas cease to act. In this Dream State, everything comes to us. However, in dreams we are not in need of anything. Only we have to project all what we desire within our particular sphere of existence. The Atman is inwardly cognitive. Here the objective consciousness refers to the subtle essence of our wakeful experience.

As Sankara says that, when a person is asleep, then only he dreams. In this stage of swapana, dreamer finds everything in dream as real as what we see in the first stage of Atman. Why does it happen to us? Therefore, he maintains to say that in the dream stage also the Atman is active and joins to manas. Then in dream stage also dreamer sees everything as real, but that is not in reality. Thus, it can be said that Atman is always active, eternal light of consciousness and so on. Finally, this stage is said to be antahprajna, where a person is asleep and he is not fully unconscious but person's Atman remains an active always.

2.3. Atman – Prajna/Susupti (Deep Sleep State) -

It is the State of Deep Sleep or Dreamless Sleep state. In this State, a person is like one dead to the world. Metaphysically, it is known as daily death.¹² In this State, the sleeper has neither external awareness nor internal awareness. Therefore, he has become one with himself (Ekibhuta). Sleep comes from the Sanskrit word “Svapiti”. In this stage, the sleeper has attained or is immersed in one’s own life. Such a person’s consciousness is not diversified as in waking or dream, but it is Unified Consciousness. Such a State is called as Prajna.

This stage is said to be the Noumenon, Germinal, Causal state. From this State onwards the determinations of manifestation arises. ‘Prajna is assimilated to Deep Dreamless Sleep, because in Prajna everything goes back to silence, to non-becoming, to non-motion’.¹³ It is the Unified Mass of cognition and Blissful in nature. In this State Atman returns to the creative absolute and plurality is still there but in the subtle form. In the Deep Sleep Consciousness, there is neither desire for enjoyment nor any activity with an awareness of subject-object distinction.

Thus, this stage of dreamless sleep, one is not conscious at all; because he is in deep sleep state. He knows nothing about anything. As it is mentioned above that he seems to be as a deadly dead. This stage is said to be the complete silence state. Thus, in this stage also we can see the major function of Atman. Atman is presented in all the stage.

2.4. Atman – Turiya (Liberation State) -

Turiya is the realization of Absolute Consciousness. Turiya is Non-dual, Non-sublatable, Autonomous and certain Awareness. It is Freedom or Liberation (Moksa), the spiritual goal to which the Advaita system points.¹⁴ Turiya is not activity but is the Eternal and all-pervading ground from which activity appears to emerge. Turiya is neither an object of knowledge nor a knowing subject but it is Transcendental, Undifferentiated knowledge. The Mandukya Upanisad reports:

Turiya is not that which is Conscious of the internal world, nor that which is Conscious of the external world...essentially of the nature of Consciousness constituting the Self alone, negation

of all phenomena, the Peaceful, all Bliss and the Non-dual. This is the Atman and it has to be realized.¹⁵

It is the Bliss of Samadhi. It is not a State at all, but it is the Spiritual Reality in the unqualified wholeness. According to Advaita Vedanta, there is a root identity between Atman and Upanisadic spirit; it is the same present in all. Therefore, the main aim of Atman is to attain liberation by breaking the bondage in order to reach liberation by his own effort.

Turiya – in this State Paramatman is fully realized and ultimately known, as the Pure Being. This is the Transcendental State where the Soul is said to be in its own Pure Self. No perception in whatever in Waking, Dream or Deep Sleep belongs to me but it is due to delusion. For these States have neither independent existence nor an existence depending on the self. “I am, therefore, the forth which is the seer of all three states and without a second.”¹⁶

Thus, this is the highest stage of self realization with Brahman. This Turiya stage is not a stage of ordinary conscious body, where one can easily experience the Pure Being. It is beyond and above of all the stages. Then, one can raise the question like, who is able to attain this stage? According to Sankara only those who are seers and longing for it, can get this stage of Turiya through their great effort and tapasya. For the ordinary conscious body, it is not possible at all to get it. It is said that when one experience this stage of Turiya, he becomes one with the Supreme Being or Brahman. Therefore, Sankara says that jivatmukta is possible in our present life. When you realize Brahman, then you are Brahman or it can be said that “I am Brahman.” As well this stage is said to be indefinable through mere words, but only it can be experienced by oneself.

Conclusion:

At the end, we can say that there is no difference between Atman and Brahman. Atman is same as Brahman. Atman or the Individual Self is the same as the Brahman. Where one realises one's nature as Brahman, (Ayamatma Brahma or Tattvamasi or So'ham or Aham Brahmasmi) Jivas are not real. Because the Jivas are the Consciousness conditioned by the avidya. As Sankara says that, Atman is Brahman conditioned by the adjuncts due to avidya. The Atman thus is limited, though Vibhu. The limitation, the finitude are all the products of “besmearing avidya”. Thus,

Atman is empirical self. It is atman that suffers, that undergoes birth and death, which is all due to avidya. they, are upadhi-kalpita.

For Sankara Atman is neither as amsa of Brahman, nor a modification of Brahman. The Atman cannot subsist apart from Brahman. Brahman is that one who permeates Atman as Antaratman. This is the light that shines in each Atman, in which each Atman with all its adjuncts subsists. The Atman is completely different from one another and from Isvara, even though they depend on Isvara.

For Sankara Atman is not substantial as well having no reality of their own. They are Creation of Vikalpa. The appearance thus has no substantiality of their own. Once the saving knowledge dawns on them and the identity is realised, the adjuncts with the avidya disappear and the knower is Brahman. In the highest Unitive Experience that is Brahman, one realises "Tattvamasi", for such a one there are neither adjuncts nor affections. Thus, For the Advaitin the Atman or the Individual Self is Brahman itself and none else, - appears to be outrageous and incredible. We cannot distinguish the difference between Atman and Brahman, because Atman is nothing other than Brahman itself. Atman Ca Brahman.

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