



Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śāṅkara by
Anantanand Rambachan

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FEATURE REVIEWS

Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śaṅkara. By Anantanand Rambachan. Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, Monograph No. 10. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991. Pp. xv + 179.

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I

The role of Vedic authority in the thought of Śaṅkara is a familiar topic but not necessarily a well-researched one. This excellent monograph advances two distinct, though interrelated, claims about that topic: (1) that modern scholarship around Śaṅkara's Advaita, as represented by scholars such as S. Radhakrishnan, S. Dasgupta, T.M.P. Mahadevan, M. Hiriyanna, R. V. de Smet, Ninian Smart, Karl Potter, Eliot Deutsch, S. Mayeda, K. Satchidananda Murty,¹ K. N. Devaraj, and others, offers, with only a difference of degree, "a certain consensus ... about the respective roles of *śruti* and *anubhava* in Śaṅkara" (p. 13), namely, that he accords primacy of *anubhava* over *śruti*,² and (2) that such an understanding of Śaṅkara's position is erroneous, for, according to Śaṅkara, *śruti* is the *sole pramāṇa* for *brahmajñāna* or the knowledge of Brahman.

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II

The author documents quite convincingly how modern writings about Śaṅkara place an emphasis on experience, which is not present in Śaṅkara himself. This has resulted in the unfortunate equation of *nirvikalpa samādhi* with the ultimate realization of Advaita, when the fact of the matter is that Śaṅkara seems to be quite critical of that system of Yoga in which that experience is regarded as the crowning achievement. What is perhaps of even greater significance is the thrust of these modern writings: that the truth claims of Advaita Vedānta are based on experience rather than on revelation. This emphasis on experience³ has resulted in downgrading the acceptance of the Vedic revelation qua revelation on the one hand and a disregard of the logic of language on which that claim is based on the other. It has also generated the misunderstanding that the triple discipline of (1) *śravaṇa*, (2) *manana*, and (3) *nididhyāsana* in Advaita represents three distinct stages in the progress toward Brahman realization. According to the author's interpretation of Śaṅkara, ideally *śravaṇa* should suffice by itself to confer realization. The other two steps only remove obstacles which obstruct the salvific operation of immediate audition. The point at issue may be illustrated as follows: if I am told a joke now but get its import after ten minutes and break out in a laugh then, *when* did I 'hear' the joke—when I first heard it, or when I understood it? The author argues that, according to Śaṅkara, the transforming

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moment is the audition—the *śruti*; when you get it is in a sense your problem.

In terms of the tradition of Advaita Vedānta, the author's accomplishment consists in presenting the interpretation of Śaṅkara's thought in the light of the Vivaraṇa School successfully and, as modern presentations of Advaita seem to be more in accord with the Bhāmatī School,⁴ in redressing the balance in this respect. The monograph thus represents a welcome and valuable addition to the current writings on Śaṅkara's Advaita.

Its very success, however, highlights certain issues which have rendered a single coherent exposition of Śaṅkara's thought problematical on account of its complexity and richness. This problem is illustrated by an investigation of the second claim of the author: that according to Śaṅkara, *śruti* is the sole *pramāṇa* of *brahmajñāna*.

III

This second claim of the author needs to be examined in some detail, namely, that according to Śaṅkara *śruti* is the sole *pramāṇa* in the matter of *brahmajñāna*. It seems that the author may have overstated the position of Śaṅkara in this respect. The author clearly establishes the *primary* authority of *śruti* as a *pramāṇa* for Śaṅkara quite successfully; the claim that it represents the *sole* authority in this respect poses some problems.

Some of these problems are illustrated by Śaṅkara's gloss on Brahmasūtra I.3.38. As P. V. Kane notes here, Śaṅkara is "careful to point out on Vedāntasūtra I.3.38 that śūdras have no *adhikāra* for *brahmavidyā* based on the study of the Veda. But he does not deny to the śūdras that knowledge of the Self altogether. He refers to the instances of Vidura and Dharmavyādha that were possessed of the knowledge of *brahma* due to the effects of their former lives, states that they would secure the result of *brahmajñāna* (viz. *mokṣa*, final liberation from *saṃsāra*), that śūdras have the right to learn from the Mahābhārata and Purāṇas as stated in 'he should read to the four varṇas' and that in that way they might secure knowledge of *brahma* and *mokṣa*."⁵ This gloss of Śaṅkara on Brahmasūtra I.3.38 is extremely significant from the point of view of the central thesis of this book and needs to be examined in some detail.

(1) In his commentary on Brahmasūtra I.3.34–38, Śaṅkara discusses the eligibility of the Śūdras to Vedic knowledge and concludes that Śūdras are not eligible for such knowledge. This would seem to confirm the view of the author. However, in his commentary on I.3.38, Śaṅkara mentions Vidura and Dharmavyādha, who were Śūdras, as having obtained liberation, and tries to reconcile this apparent conflict between the indispensability of Vedic revelation for achieving salvation and their having attained salvation despite the inaccessibility of Vedic revelation to

Śūdras by suggesting that such knowledge was *due to the effect of previous lives*.

By using the previous-life argument, Śaṅkara has saved the situation here. However, thereby prior knowledge of Vedic revelation for securing liberation has now been reduced to a formality. Should such liberation be achieved by anybody, it is to be inferred retrospectively that the person concerned must have had access to Vedic knowledge in a previous existence. What seemed like an a priori requirement has been reduced to a post facto rationalization. Nevertheless, it could still be argued that, as a *formal* requirement, Vedic revelation still remains indispensable for salvation, according to Śaṅkara.

(2) Śaṅkara's gloss on the same sūtra, however, offers a second argument on the basis of which the invariable association of Vedic revelation and liberation becomes questionable. For Śaṅkara goes on to say that liberation is not denied to the Śūdras; it is only *liberation through* Vedic revelation which is denied. It is clear, therefore, that according to Śaṅkara liberation *is* possible through *smṛti*, as illustrated by the example of Vidura, for instance. Thus the indispensability of *śruti* even as a formal condition is hereby abandoned.

Thus the claim that *śruti* is the sole *pramāṇa* in relation to *brahmajñāna* cannot survive the challenge of the passage above in its strong version. It can still be sustained in its weak version, however, if reformulated to read that *śruti* is *ultimately* the sole *pramāṇa* in relation to *brahmajñāna*. Then it could be argued that although in the passage above there is no mention *directly* of studying *śruti*, it could still be maintained that liberation in the case of Śūdras is still to be *derivatively* connected to *śruti*. For the *smṛti* texts, which the Śūdras can study, derive their authority from conformity to *śruti*. Hence, it is still possible to maintain the author's proposition, though in a weak version. It is also possible to maintain that a person, who is now a Śūdra, may have belonged to a *varṇa* entitled to study the *śruti* in a previous life, and his or her liberation in the present life can be traced back to the acquisition of such redeeming knowledge in a previous life. In these two ways salvific knowledge could still ultimately be traced back to *śruti* alone, although in an indirect way.

IV

A more direct challenge to the author's claim comes from Śaṅkara's gloss on Brahmasūtra I.1.2, as the author himself realizes (p. 113). In this gloss Śaṅkara specifically refers to *anubhava* as a *pramāṇa*. In his commentary on Brahmasūtra I.1.2, Śaṅkara seems to concede that direct experience may be a means of attaining liberation. I cite the passage in two parts, as the first part seems to uphold the position that, although inference may be used as a *pramāṇa*, it must conform to *śruti*; hence it

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upholds the supremacy of *śruti*. But the second part seems to call into question the claim that, according to Śaṅkara, *anubhava* cannot be a *pramāṇa*. The first part is now cited in Thibaut's translation:

... inference also, being an instrument of right knowledge in so far as it does not contradict the Vedānta-texts, is not to be excluded as a means of confirming the meaning ascertained. Scripture itself, moreover, allows argumentation; for the passages, *Bri Up.* II,4,5 ('the Self is to be heard, to be considered'), and *Ch. Up.* VI,14,2 ('as the man, &c., having been informed, and being able to judge for himself, would arrive at Gandhāra, in the same way a man who meets with a teacher obtains knowledge'), declare that human understanding assists Scripture.⁶

But then Śaṅkara goes on to say:

Scriptural text, &c, are not, in the enquiry into Brahman, the only means of knowledge, as they are in the enquiry into active duty (i.e. in the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā), but scriptural texts on the one hand, and intuition, &c., on the other hand, are to be had recourse to according to the occasion: firstly, because intuition is the final result of the enquiry into Brahman; secondly, because the object of the enquiry is an existing (accomplished) substance. If the object of the knowledge of Brahman were something to be accomplished, there would be no reference to intuition, and text, &c., would be the only means of knowledge.⁷

The following arguments are offered by Rambachan in favor of the view that, appearances notwithstanding, *anubhava* is *not* being proposed here as a separate *pramāṇa* by Śaṅkara: (1) "It is in the immediate context of suggesting a supplementary role for all other *pramāṇas* that Śaṅkara mentions *anubhava* as a means of knowledge. It is also significant that he adds 'etc.' after *anubhava* (*anubhavādayaś ca*). This would suggest that no special significance is being attached to *anubhava*. The inevitable conclusion here is that *anubhava* is grouped along with all other *pramāṇas* whose roles are conceived by Śaṅkara as only subordinate and supplementary to *śruti*. There seems no justification from this discussion for the deliberate singling out of *anubhava* and the claim that it is the ultimate *pramāṇa* of *brahman*. The context and the development of the argument here does not vindicate such an interpretation."⁸ (2) "Besides, *anubhava* here seems to be used in a very wide sense. It can include any experience which can be analyzed to support and reinforce the revelations of *śruti*. The analysis of the three states of experience and the demonstration of a persisting and unchanging awareness are good examples of the supportive use of everyday experience."⁹ (3) "The issue is put even further beyond doubt when Śaṅkara says that the next sūtra (I.1.3), 'Since the scriptures are its valid means' (*śāstrayonitvāt*), is meant for establishing *śruti* as the only *pramāṇa* of *brahman*."¹⁰

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These arguments do not seem to bear scrutiny. The force of the first argument is reduced if not removed by the fact that Śaṅkara in the *same line* also uses the expression *śrutyādayaḥ* (*śruti* and so forth), just as he uses the expression *anubhavādayaś ca* (*anubhava* and so forth). Hence the text will not allow *anubhava* to be made subservient to *śruti*. The force of the second argument is also compromised by the fact that, in that passage, Śaṅkara later uses the word *anubhava* clearly in the sense of *brahmajñāna*, for he states that the desire to know Brahman culminates in the experience of Brahman (*anubhavāvasānatvāt*). Similarly, the force of the third argument is limited by the fact that *śāstrayonitvāt* can mean not only “since the scriptures are its valid means” but also “from its being the source of the Scripture”—and both meanings are accepted by Śaṅkara.¹¹

The author further contends: “It is difficult to accept that if Śaṅkara wished to establish *anubhava* as the definitive *pramāṇa* of *brahman*, he would have chosen to do so through this single reference” (p. 115). The argument, by rarity of reference to *anubhava*, is really an argument by silence with all its well-known pitfalls. But is it true that the reference to *anubhava* in Brahmasūtra I.1.2 constitutes a “single reference” to *anubhava* as *pramāṇa*, as claimed by the author? (1) Śaṅkara’s commentary on Brahmasūtra II.1.4 not only employs the word in the clear context of *pramāṇas*, it even echoes the argument of I.1.2 cited earlier in translation.¹² (2) Śaṅkara’s gloss on Brahmasūtra IV.1.15 has also been cited as possibly a direct reference to the experience of *jīvanmukti*.¹³ (3) Independent references to *anubhava* or *anubhūti* appear in texts ascribed to Śaṅkara.¹⁴ Even if these texts were not composed by Śaṅkara, it remains significant that the Advaita tradition itself—as distinguished from modern scholars—ascribes such a position to Śaṅkara. (4) It must not be overlooked that the rarity of reference to *anubhava* goes hand in hand with the rarity of such direct experience of Brahman, in contrast to the ready availability of Vedic texts. (5) Finally, *anubhava*, although a *pramāṇa*, is not only a rare but also an exceptional *pramāṇa* in the sense that *anubhava* implies Self-knowledge, and “if ‘truth’ implies what is provided by the instruments of valid knowing (*pramāṇa*), Self-knowledge is not ultimately true or false—it just *is*.”¹⁵ In other words if *pramāṇas* → truth → realization in the normal course, and here *śruti* enjoys pride of place, *anubhava* → reality = realization.¹⁶

The most promising way of reconciling this passage with the author’s insistence on the *sole* authority of *śruti* in the matter of *brahmajñāna* seems to be to suggest that *anubhava* results from *śruti*. This is a very plausible position,¹⁷ but one is still left with the problem that, in this passage, *anubhava* has been explicitly called a *pramāṇa*.

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V

Perhaps the concept of *pramāṇa* itself needs to be investigated. Unfortunately, “Śaṅkara, in his commentaries, does not undertake any independent systematic analysis of the sources of knowledge. He treats them throughout as being well known” (p. 15).¹⁸ M. Hiriyanna has carefully shown that the *pramāṇas* can be understood in at least three distinct senses: “They signify first, a source of knowledge, without reference to its being either true or false; secondly, a source of valid knowledge; and lastly, a means of scrutiny,”¹⁹ with the emphasis resting, in the second sense, on the cognitive side and, in the third, on the probative side.²⁰ An illustration may help clarify the point. Let’s say the water is drawn from a well with the help of a bucket. In this case *pramāṇa* as a source of knowledge would mean the well; the bucket is a means of acquiring valid knowledge; and the test of valid knowledge would be analogous to the test of the potability or otherwise of the water drawn. The question now arises: In which of these three senses has Śaṅkara used the word *anubhava* here: (1) as a source of knowledge about *brahman*; (2) as a means of valid knowledge about *brahman*; (3) as a criterion of valid knowledge about *brahman*—or in all these senses.²¹ From the fact that *anubhava* is used in the same breath as *śruti*—and he uses the latter most often in the sense of a means of valid knowledge—it follows that, in all probability, this is how *anubhava* should also be understood here, namely, as a means of valid knowledge.

VI

Thus the view that, according to Śaṅkara, *mukti* is possible only through *śruti* is not quite correct, as it admits of at least two exceptions, one indirect and the other direct, which seem to bypass it. The indirect exception is that *mukti* is possible either through knowledge of *smṛti* or through knowledge of *śruti* obtained in a past life. The direct exception is that *mukti* is possible through direct intuition or *anubhava*. After all, Śaṅkara’s basic position is aphoristically stated to be that liberation can’t be attained without *jñāna*, not that it *cannot* be attained without *śruti*.

To conclude: the author’s thesis that modern scholars of Advaita have *directly* placed an emphasis on experience not found in the same measure in Śaṅkara seems valid. His further thesis that Śaṅkara himself does not place any reliance on experience as a *pramāṇa* requires further corroboration and cannot be sustained on the basis of the evidence presented.

Notes

- 1 – The inclusion of Murty in this list is surprising (see p. 119 and p. 129 n. 67), for he seems to side with the position taken by the author; see

Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974 [reprint]), pp. 118, 272.

- 2 – This point is indeed a matter of current controversy; see *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 2 (1991): 230–232.
- 3 – For possible reasons for this shift in emphasis on experience see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).
- 4 – See K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason*, p. 42, on a different understanding of Vedic revelation according to Vācaspati Miśra, and p. 109 for a different view of the mode of Brahman realization.
- 5 – P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1977), vol. 5, pt. 2, p. 921n. 1468(9). The proof-text runs as follows: *yeṣāṃ punaḥ pūrvakṛtasaṃskāraśād viduradhar-mavyādhaprabhṛtīnāṃ jñānotpattis teṣāṃ na śakyate phalaprapṛtiḥ pratiṣeddhūṃ jñānasyaikāntika-phalatvāt. 'śravayeccaturo varṇān' iti cetihāsapurāṇādhiḡame cāturvarṇyasyādhikārasmaraṇāt. Veda-pūrvakastu nādhikārah sūdrāṇāmiti sthitam.*
- 6 – George Thibaut, trans., *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary of Śaṅkara* (1890; New York: Dover Publications, 1962) pt. 1, p. 17.
- 7 – Ibid., pp. 17–18.
- 8 – Ibid., p. 114.
- 9 – Ibid., pp. 114–115.
- 10 – Ibid., p. 115.
- 11 – S. Radhakrishnan, trans., *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of the Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), p. 240.
- 12 – Also see Karl H. Potter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981) vol. 1, p. 123.
- 13 – M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932) p. 381 n. 2; T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Limited, 1971), p. 143.
- 14 – See *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*, 474–477; *Aparokṣānubhūti*, 2; *Daśaśloki*, 4.
- 15 – Karl H. Potter, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, p. 96.
- 16 – The expression *yathāsambhavam* (as far as possible), used by Śaṅkara while speaking of *śruti* and *anubhava* in his gloss on *Brahmasūtra* I.1.2, is of key significance here, as it suggests the limitation of the operation of both. It seems to me that this limitation applies to both

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śruti and *anubhava* for opposite reasons. In the case of *śruti*, the limitation is imposed by the discourse taking place about *vidyā* in *avidyā*; in the case of *anubhava*, on account of the nondiscursive nature of the experience, the limitation is imposed by the need for discursive descent into *avidyā* from *vidyā*!

- 17 – K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason*, chap. 8.
- 18 – Also see N. K. Devaraja, *An Introduction to Śaṅkara's Theory of Knowledge* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), p. 36; Sengaku Mayeda, trans., *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasī of Śaṅkara* (University of Tokyo Press, 1979), pp. 46–49.
- 19 – M. Hiriyanna, *Indian Philosophical Studies* (Mysore: Kavyalaya Publishers, 1957), p. 69.
- 20 – Ibid.
- 21 – Śaṅkara uses *pramāṇa* in all these three senses in his writings: in the sense of source in this gloss on *Brahmasūtra* I.1.3; in the sense of means of valid knowledge in his gloss on *Brahmasūtra* II.1.6; and in the sense of criterion in his gloss on *Brahmasūtra* I.1.5.