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A Reply to Anantanand Rambachan

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I

In a recent response to my feature review of his book *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Veda as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śaṅkara* (see *Philosophy East and West* 43 [4] and 44 [4]), Professor Anantanand Rambachan has addressed my reservations regarding his thesis that the Vedas are the “only” (p. 67) valid means of knowledge of Brahman according to Śaṅkara, reservations that stemmed from a consideration of his thesis in the light of Śaṅkara’s gloss on *Brahmasūtra* I.3.38 and I.1.2. I appreciate his response for the opportunity it offers to test this very attractive thesis further in the light of his comments, and also to view it not only textually but also contextually, keeping in mind Śaṅkara’s “views on the nature of Brahman, the implications of describing the fundamental problem as one of *avidyā* and the adequacy of the word-generated knowledge of *śruti* to resolve this problem.”

II

In relation to Śaṅkara’s gloss on I.3.38, Professor Rambachan acknowledges my argument that therein “Śaṅkara grants that the *sūtras* are entitled to liberating knowledge through *smṛti* texts.” He then, however, employs my own suggestion to resolve this difficulty, that as “Śaṅkara subordinates the authority of the *smṛti* texts to that of *śruti* . . . salvific knowledge could still ultimately be traced back to *śruti* alone, although in an indirect way.” As my own argument has been employed by the author here to defend his thesis, perhaps it will not be out of place for me to draw attention to the difficulties involved in doing so.

(1) If this reconciliation is accepted, then *śruti* ceases to be the *sole* means of valid knowledge about Brahman, although it still remains the *ultimate* means. The difference between these two formulations is more significant than might be apparent at first sight. Now it becomes possible to secure knowledge of Brahman through a *proximate* means other than the Vedas, whereas, were the Vedas to remain the sole means, this would not have been possible. The point may be honed by asking the following question: is it possible to attain knowledge of Brahman through the *Bhagavadgītā*, according to Śaṅkara? If the Vedas are the only valid means of knowledge about Brahman, this should not be possible. In fact let us ask an even more piercing question: is it possible to attain knowledge of Brahman *only* through the *Bhagavadgītā* by itself, according to Śaṅkara?

The question can be answered with the help of the four categories employed in relation to a text: (1) *Viśaya* (subject matter), (2) *Adhikārī* (aspirant), (3) *Phala* (results), and (4) *Sambandha* (connection), as admirably demonstrated by the author in relation to Śaṅkara’s position

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apropos the Vedas (p. 65). Now Śaṅkara concludes his introduction to the commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* as follows:

The Gita-Sastra expounds this twofold Religion, whose aim is the Supreme Bliss. It expounds specially the nature of the Supreme Being and Reality known as Vasudeva, the Parabrahman, who forms the subject of the discourse. Thus the Gita-Sastra treats of a specific subject with a specific object and bears a specific relation (to the subject and object). A knowledge of its teaching leads to the realisation of all human aspirations. Hence my attempt to explain it.<sup>1</sup>

Unless I have misread the text, it seems abundantly clear that, according to Śaṅkara, the *Bhagavadgītā* by itself suffices as a valid means of knowledge about Brahman. The Vedas may still be regarded as the ultimate means, but they can no longer be considered the sole means.

(2) This point is perhaps even more significant than is apparent so far. The *śruti/smṛti* classification raises a fundamental issue regarding the sociology of knowledge in relation to Brahman, for the fact of the inaccessibility of the *sūdras* to the Vedas in classical Hinduism is a matter of far-reaching implications, not only for Advaita but also for Viśiṣṭādvaita<sup>2</sup> and even Nyāya.<sup>3</sup>

One is now compelled to ask the following question: is it Śaṅkara's position that the *dvijas* will attain liberation through *śruti* and the *sūdras* through *smṛti*? Is there a textual division implied in keeping with the social divide? Are the Vedas the *only* means of knowledge of Brahman *only* for the twice-borns? And if this is so, how is it to be reconciled with his comment on the "adequacy of the word-generated knowledge of *śruti*" to solve the problem of *avidyā*? Can 'word-generated knowledge from *smṛti*' also not resolve the problem? The emphasis on the Vedānta-vākyas almost seems to endow them with an acoustic in addition to a semantic power, if the point is pressed too far. But, as the example of the *Bhagavadgītā* suggests, this need not be the case. This point will become important later.

(3) In view of these difficulties, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that Professor Rambachan did not employ my other suggestion to support his thesis: that access to *śruti* may have been available to a person in a *previous* life, as a result of which one gains knowledge of Brahman in this life. In this way, the thesis that the Vedas are the *only* means of knowledge of Brahman could be preserved. This position was in fact advanced in later Advaita.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the two specific examples of *sūdras* who gained knowledge of Brahman without access to Vedas in this life, which Śaṅkara cites in his gloss, are those of Vidura and Dharmavyādha, and both, according to the Mahābhārata, were non-*sūdras* in their previous life.<sup>5</sup>

Philosophy East & West

Even this more persuasive resolution of the difficulty, however, runs

into the following difficulties: (a) The author's thesis can now be saved formally but at the price of yielding substance to such an extent as to become merely nominal. It can now be postulated of anyone who attains knowledge of Brahman without recourse to the Vedas that the person *retrospectively* must have had access to the Vedas in a past life. (b) If, however, one enlarges the context of the discussion, then even this improved option runs into a cul-de-sac, for according to one interpretation of *Brahmasūtra* I.1.3, (*śāstrayonitvāt*) *śāstra* or scripture is the source of the knowledge of Brahman. The key question that arises in this context is: what is meant by *śāstra* here, according to Śaṅkara? Śaṅkara glosses *śāstra* as *R̥gvedādeḥ śāstrasya anekavidyāsthānopabṛñhitasya*: the *R̥g Veda* and so forth, which are supplemented by other scriptures that are themselves sources of knowledge (*sarvārthāvyotyotinaḥ*). *It is not at all clear that the word śāstra here is a synonym for śruti.*

In fact, the evidence seems to point in the opposite direction. First, the word in the text is *śāstra* and not *śruti*. Second, Śaṅkara in his gloss includes the auxiliary sciences within the meaning of the term. And third, although he uses *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* III.1 as a Vedic proof-text (on the basis of the previous *sūtra*) when explicating this sense of the *sūtra*, he cites *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* II.4.10 when explaining the other sense of the *sūtra*, namely, that Brahman is the source of scripture. And the passage in question, which pertains directly to the content of scripture although it does not use the word *scripture*, includes, along with the four Vedas, "Legend (*itihāsa*), Ancient Lore (*purāṇa*), Science (*vidyā*), Mystic Doctrines (*Upaniṣad*), Verses (*śloka*), Aphorisms (*sūtra*), Explanations (*anuvyākhyāna*), and Commentaries (*vyākhyāna*)."<sup>6</sup> Despite all this evidence, let us make the assumption that, for Śaṅkara, *śāstra* = *śruti*, that all the genres of sacred lore just mentioned refer to texts found *in* the *śruti* and not outside it, and that therefore it must be conceded that the Vedas are the *only* valid means of knowledge of Brahman and that howsoever diluted that claim might have become in the course of this examination, it can still be literally, if not substantially, upheld.

But can it even be literally upheld? For if a *smṛti* text like the *Bhagavadgītā* by itself can lead to knowledge of Brahman, then it is no longer necessary to assume that even in a previous life a person must have had access to the Vedas. Acquaintance with a *smṛti* text itself could have set the process in motion. Thus the thesis under review, at this point, cannot be upheld either substantially or literally but only dogmatically. The word *dogma* is not being used in a pejorative but rather in a technical sense, for a position based on an a priori rather than a demonstrable principle.

This view, that the position has now become dogmatic in the technical sense, can curiously be supported by evidence provided by Śaṅkara himself. It will be recalled that one way I tried to support the

Arvind Sharma

author's thesis—that the Vedas are the sole means of knowledge of Brahman according to Śaṅkara—was to suggest that even when Śaṅkara admits that such knowledge can be gained from *smṛti*, his original position can be defended on the basis of the argument that the validity of *smṛti* is derivative of *śruti*. How tenuous, however, this defense can get may be judged from the following comment:

How should we view *smṛti* texts which do not contradict Vedic ones but for which we can find no corroboration in the *Vedas*? In such cases according to Śaṅkara we are to infer the existence of a *śruti* text upon which the *smṛti* is based.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of *smṛti* being *derived* from *śruti*, now the *śruti* is *projected* from a *smṛti*! In order for *smṛti* to agree with *śruti*, *śruti* is being made to agree with *smṛti*! This device no doubt once again secures the nominal priority of *śruti*, but Professor Rambachan's entire book, as I read it, is based on the assumption that the claim regarding Vedic authority is a substantive and not a nominal claim.

To sum up: it is not in dispute any more that in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.3.38, "Śaṅkara grants that śūdras are entitled to liberating knowledge through *smṛti* texts." It should not be forgotten that Śaṅkara flatly contradicts the author's thesis in his gloss by stating: *vedapūrvakastu nāsti*. He even adds: this is the settled conclusion (*iti sthitam*). How much more explicit a statement can one expect to find in Śaṅkara in denial of the thesis attributed to him?

Despite this fact, I would not like to rest the case here, because the author's thesis—which makes a global statement about Śaṅkara's position—is not without its attraction and even plausibility. Hence my quest for the ways in which the author's statement of Śaṅkara's position may be reconciled with what Śaṅkara says above, which is unambiguous. In that spirit I made two proposals: (1) as *smṛti* is said to derive its authority from *śruti* and (2) as access to *śruti* may have been gained in a previous birth, one could still maintain the author's thesis if one wanted to, though in a diluted form. It becomes at best a judgment call. But our analysis has brought us to a point where, to use Sāyaṇa's expression, the thesis may be accepted only as a matter of courtesy or formality (*upacāramātram*),<sup>8</sup> the way Sāyaṇa accepts the eternity of the Veda despite cyclical dissolution, namely as dogma, which may have its own religious uses.

### III

I now turn to the significance of Śaṅkara's gloss on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.2. Unlike the previous case, in which the author drew on my analysis to sustain the thesis, in this instance, he contradicts my position. In fact the bulk of his response is devoted to questioning my position on *anubhava* as a *pramāṇa*, and he concludes by saying that "the reviewer does not

convince us that Śaṅkara proposes *anubhava* as a valid alternative means of the knowledge of Brahman.”

I must begin by pointing out that it was not my purpose in the review to *establish* “*anubhava* as a valid alternative means of the knowledge of Brahman.” This issue has been dealt with by me separately in the pages of this very journal.<sup>9</sup> The question as it suggested itself, in the light of Professor Rambachan’s thesis about the Vedas as the *sole* valid means of knowledge about Brahman, was: does Śaṅkara *acknowledge anubhava* as a means of valid knowledge on a par with the Vedas, for if he does, then the claim of the Vedas being the *only* means of knowledge about Brahman would, to that extent, have to be qualified. It seems, and not just to us,<sup>10</sup> that such might be the case in Śaṅkara’s gloss on I.1.2. In this case, the author rejects or overlooks the reconciliation I proposed: that the Vedas may be construed as leading to the experiential knowledge of Brahman in the passage. Instead Professor Rambachan felt that I had not applied the principle of *saḍliṅga* or sixfold criteria for understanding the purport of the passage correctly. According to him, “*anubhava* ought to be understood here, like inference etc., as supplementary to *śruti*. Professor Sharma sees this as implying that *anubhava* is an alternative to *śruti*. Supplementary *pramāṇas* are employable in the inquiry into Brahman, according to Śaṅkara, since the latter, unlike *dharma*, is an already existing and available entity.”

Professor Rambachan maintains that in interpreting Śaṅkara’s gloss on I.1.2, one of the sixfold criteria, that of the unity of initial and concluding passages (*upakramopasamhāra*) should be employed. When this is done, one finds that the “objector [is] *again* [emphasis added] contending that since Brahman is an existing entity it must be the object of other means of right knowledge, and a discussion of Vedānta texts is, therefore, rendered purposeless. Śaṅkara finishes with an emphatic denial of this argument, refuting the independent applicability of all other sources of valid knowledge.”

One must begin with the initial observation that the presence of the word *anubhava* in this gloss is something of a puzzle, and the proposal of Professor Rambachan above is yet another attempt to tackle it. The previous efforts to explain it (pp. 114–115) have already been commented upon by me, and are, in my opinion, unconvincing. I see the following difficulties with this *new* attempt.

(1) When the word *anubhava* appears in the gloss for the first time, it appears as a statement per se and *not* in the remark of an objector, as the passage cited might misleadingly indicate. Moreover, it is mentioned along with *śruti* and in the same spirit. In fact, if anything, it is contrasted with *śruti* in a way that emphasizes *its* uniqueness and not that of *śruti*: “in the case of rites there is no dependence on *anubhava*, and *śruti* etc. alone are authoritative”; that is to say, while *śruti* is authority for both

Arvind Sharma

*dharma* and *brahma*, *anubhava* pertains uniquely to *brahma*. Hence, this reference cannot be brushed aside as pertaining to ordinary experience, for it is clearly contextualized in relation to Brahman. We know from other references that ‘Vedas can cease to be Vedas’ (by Śaṅkara’s use of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.3.22 in his gloss on *Brahmasūtra* IV.1.3), but the knowledge of Brahman, being identical with Brahman<sup>11</sup> can never cease to be so, for by definition reality must always be real, which means that reality must always be (*trikālābādhita*). This again suggests that there is something ‘unique’ about *anubhava*, if it be claimed that there is something ‘sole’ about the Vedas.

(2) What is common to both this early reference and to the objector’s position later is the expression *bhūtavastutva*; that is to say, Brahman is an existing entity. In the first reference to this fact about Brahman, the point is made that *śruti* alone need not be authoritative with respect to it for, unlike *dharma*, it represents an *isness* and not an *oughtness*; but the second time, a reference is made to this same fact in a different context and this time by the objector: “If it is an existent can it then not be known without having recourse to the Vedas?” This Śaṅkara denies by saying, *not that Brahman cannot be directly known* but that one must take recourse to the Vedas because Brahman cannot be directly *perceived through the senses*, as the senses only operate in the field of sense-perception and Brahman cannot be an object of sense-perception. It may also be noted that the word *anubhava* is not used here; *indriyas* are mentioned, hence *pratyakṣa* is clearly implied. In traditional idiom, one might add that among the sixfold criteria, *upapatti* (reasonableness, intelligibility) should also be accorded its proper place along with the others such as *upakramopasaṁhāra* in interpreting the passage.

(3) The distinction between two modes of knowing is crucial here. I know there is a desk in front of me because my eyes can see it (*pratyakṣa*), but I know that I have eyes immediately without the intervention of sense-perception (*aparokṣa*). The fact that Śaṅkara immediately refers to sense-perception when denying that Brahman can be known because it is an existent is therefore a crucial point, for he has already declared that Brahman is knowable in his gloss on I.1.1. (*jñānena hi pramaṇenā-vagantumiṣṭam brahma*). Hence he here must indicate the sense in which it is *not* knowable—although an existent. The further point, then, is that an appeal to the sixfold criteria cannot settle the issue by itself, as the same method can yield different conclusions—as has been the case in the debates between Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta and then the various schools of Vedānta.

(4) Professor Rambachan contends that Śaṅkara’s gloss on IV.1.15 does not shed any light on the issue at hand. I cite his translation of the relevant passage and then his comment. “‘For how can one man contest the fact of another possessing the knowledge of Brahman—vouched by



his heart's conviction—and at the same time continuing to enjoy bodily existence.' This text, contrary to the reviewer's suggestion, does not shed any light on the source of knowledge of brahman for such a liberated person. Its aim is to show that the knowledge of brahman is compatible with bodily existence." I would like to maintain that the passage is relevant to the issue at hand in the following way. The compatibility of knowledge of Brahman with bodily existence is otherwise known as the doctrine of *jīvanmukti*. Now I would like to pose the following question: what evidence does Śaṅkara adduce to establish the validity of *jīvanmukti*? Does he appeal to *śruti* or to *anubhava*? He could have cited *śruti* (see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.4.7 and *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* VI.14)<sup>12</sup> if *śruti* is the *only* valid means of knowledge about matters pertaining to Brahman. Why, then, the appeal to *anubhava* and not to *śruti*? One may note that Śaṅkara uses the expression *sva-hṛdaya-pratyayam* and not *śruti-pratyayam*. The role of *anubhava* is clearly acknowledged.

I therefore agree with Professor Rambachan that the "issue under discussion here is the possibility of the liberated person retaining the body." The question to be asked in the present context is: how is the issue decided? Is it decided by an appeal to *anubhava*, or to *śruti*? In this case, one could even argue that Śaṅkara accords priority to experience, for he *first* refers to direct experience and then says that passages from *śruti* and *smṛti* also say the same thing. This becomes evident when the larger passage, from which the line cited earlier has been extracted, is taken into account:

Moreover it is not a matter for dispute at all whether the body of him who knows brahman continues to exist for some time or not. For how can one man contest the fact of another possessing the knowledge of Brahman vouched for by his heart's conviction—and at the same time continuing to enjoy bodily existence? This same point is explained in scripture and Smṛti, where they describe him who stands firm in the highest knowledge.—The final decision therefore is that knowledge effects the destruction of those works only—whether good or evil—whose effects have not yet begun to operate.<sup>13</sup>

The matter is taken out of the realm of disputation by an appeal to experience—and personal experience at that—and *not* by an appeal to Vedic authority, which brings up the rear.

I would therefore like to revert to my original suggestion, proposed in the review, that for assessing the use of the word *pramāṇa* by Śaṅkara in relation to *anubhava*, we need to know more unambiguously the senses in which Śaṅkara uses the word *pramāṇa*. In the course of this discussion itself we have seen him use it in relation to *śruti* but, more surprisingly, in relation to *jñāna* and *anubhava* as well. Or, to quote myself: "Perhaps the concept of *pramāṇa* itself needs to be investigated [as employed by Śaṅkara]." <sup>14</sup> The fact that Professor Rambachan himself refers to Śaṅ-

Arvind Sharma



kara's position variously—according to him the Vedas are “the only *valid means*” (p. 43, emphasis added), “the only *vehicle*” (p. 67, emphasis added), “the only *source*” (p. 46, emphasis added)—lends some support to this suggestion.<sup>15</sup>

I hope this rejoinder has not tried the reader's patience. But given the calibre of Professor Rambachan's book and of his response, the least I can do is to try to give the points raised as thorough a consideration as possible within the limits of my knowledge. The point at issue is one of long standing,<sup>16</sup> and no one can now say that Professor Rambachan and I have not made our own contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding it.

## Notes

- 1 – Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, trans., *The Bhagavadgita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya* (Madras: Samata Books, 1985), p. 6. The following footnote is also not irrelevant: “It is considered incumbent on a commentator to state, before commenting on a work, the subject and the object, as well as the class of persons for whom it is intended, and the relation in which it stands to the three severally. Here the subject is the Para-Brahman; the object is Salvation, Moksha. It is intended for those who seek deliverance from the turmoil of *samsâra*. It is related to the subject as an exposition thereof, and to the object as a means of attaining it” (ibid.).
- 2 – M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932), p. 412.
- 3 – Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Pramāṇa as Evidence,” in *Philosophical Essays: Professor Anantalal Thakur Felicitation Volume* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1987), p. 196.
- 4 – K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), pp. 138–139.
- 5 – For ready reference see Vettam Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), pp. 232, 848.
- 6 – Robert Ernest Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 100–101.
- 7 – Anantanand Rambachan, *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śāṅkara* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), p. 50.
- 8 – Murty, *Revelation and Reason*, p. 44.
- 9 – Arvind Sharma, “Is Anubhava a Pramāṇa According to Śāṅkara?” *Philosophy East and West* 42 (1992): 517–526.

- 10 – Jonathan Bader, *Meditation in Śāṅkara's Vedānta* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1990), pp. 67–68.
- 11 – Anantanand Rambachan, *Accomplishing the Accomplished*, p. 83. Also see p. 151 n. 19.
- 12 – See Śāṅkara's gloss, especially on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.4.7: *asminneva śārīre vartamāne brahma samaśnute ... ato mokṣo na dehāntagamanādyapekṣate*.
- 13 – George Thibaut, trans., *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), pt. 2, p. 358, emphasis added. For another rendering, see Swami Gambhirananda, trans., *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977), pp. 840–841.
- 14 – Arvind Sharma, in *Philosophy East and West* 43 (1993): 742.
- 15 – On the various possible senses of *pramāṇa*, see M. Hiriyanna, *Indian Conception of Values* (Mysore: Kavyalaya Publishers, 1975), pp. 35–37.
- 16 – See “An Apology for the Pursuit of Final Beatitude, Independently of Brahmunical Observances” (Calcutta, 1820) by Rammohun Roy, in Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, eds., *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1951), pt. 2, pp. 123–125.

Arvind Sharma