

Similarly, in the halls of Vedānta, the seeker is laughed at because of the time-worn techniques of self-development to which he has become habituated, but that does not mean that Śaṅkara or the Vedāntins are against them. The paths of karma, bhakti and so on, have certainly a place in the scheme of self-development and they are unavoidable in hauling up an animal-man through the various stages of self-development to the pinnacle of perfection.

Here Śaṅkara points out that karma when undertaken with a pure niṣkāma bhāva purifies the inner instruments of feeling and understanding. The word ‘śuddhi’ used in connection with the mind is to be understood as a greater degree of integration. The purer mind has a greater capacity to concentrate. When an action is undertaken with a motive, the individual must necessarily be shattered and fatigued under its persecution. On the other hand, when an act of charity or kindness is done in a spirit of dedication and love, with no ulterior motive, the mind cosily settles down and peace that rises within the sādhaka increases automatically and his personality becomes more and more integrated.

Selfless actions do not help a seeker directly in his flights of self-discovery. But they certainly have a place in one’s sādhanā inasmuch as they prepare the individual to transcend the ego and give him the wings for the last flight to the beyond.

Śaṅkara is uncompromisingly severe when he declares in his irrevocable statements that the Self is neither produced nor knowledge created as a result of finite actions, however noble, divine and great they may be.



सम्यग्विचारतः सिद्धा रज्जुतत्त्वावधारणा ।  
भ्रान्त्योदितमहासर्पभयदुःखविनाशिनी ॥ १२ ॥

*samyagvicārataḥ siddhā rājjutattvāvadhāraṇā,  
bhrāntyoditamahāsarpanbhayaduḥkhavināśinī. (12)*

12. *The fear and sorrow created by the delusory serpent on the rope can be ended only after fully ascertaining the truth of the rope which is available for recognition only through steady and balanced thinking.*

Why the discovery of the Self is not possible through karma and how this is possible by means of right thinking is being explained here by the famous analogy of the serpent and the rope. In Vedānta, this example is often quoted to make the student understand how the names and forms created through the ignorance of Reality can end with the rediscovery of the Truth underlying them. It is never possible that one who has seen the rope as a rope will ever have the fear and sorrow of a snakebite. But in the gathering darkness of dusk, a traveller mistakes an innocent rope to be a snake. The serpent delusion is created in the mind of the traveller because of his ignorance of the rope-reality.

Having thus been bitten by a delusory serpent, the individual, so long as he is under the delusion, suffers the agony of a snakebite and, if left alone, will exhibit symptoms of blood poisoning too, but the traveller is advised to make an enquiry into his delusion. Faithful friends or near and dear ones will approach the deluded one and exclaim, 'Oh, it is only a length of rope!' He will accept this statement as a possibility because of his faith in his friends.

But however much he may try, he will not enjoy complete peace of mind unless he himself sees the rope as a rope. The moment he is led to the place of the incident and in a clear light, he discovers the rope for himself, the fear, the anxiety, the delusory snake and its bite, all end. No amount of beating the rope in the darkness can kill the snake or finally bring peace, happiness and cheer to the individual. Even if the rope is burnt, he cannot find his balance again and take his mind away from the thoughts of fear and pain caused by the snakebite, for he may still believe that he was bitten by a snake and it was the snake which was burnt to ashes.

So through karmas performed even for thousands of years, one cannot come to that joy of self-discovery, the only method for