

SETU-SĀMA

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[Puja Sri Swamiji used to sing often a part of setushāma in his public talks. Mahā Perivār of Kānchi was in the habit of listening to this Sāma everyday.]

The Obstruction that denies us our true nature

All Upanishads unequivocally declare that everything including our true nature is Brahman. They also emphasize there is nothing other than Brahman. This is in direct contradiction with the universal experience of the world of multiplicity. The root of this malady called samsāra is the self-ignorance that denies us the direct cognition of our true nature ātmā/Brahman.

Desire, anger, greed

Though self-ignorance is the main cause, at practical level it manifests as 'I' notion (ahamkāra), the mind, kāma (desire), krodha (anger) and lobha (greed) etc. The Vedāntic masters describe these as the obstructions in gaining self-knowledge. They provide us the means to overcome them. Bhagavatpujyapāda Ādi Sankaracharya in his text 'Shataślokī' (verse 18) describes these kāma, krodha and lobha as the cause of samsāra which is the store house of all sorrows. In the case of an individual, first of all, a desire surfaces in the intellect prompting the mind to procure the desired sense objects. They are enjoyed through the means of senses. Unfulfilled desires result into krodha (anger). Fulfilled desires give rise to lobha (greed). Sankaracharya describes lobha as the care, concern and the anguish to protect the obtained sense objects. All these three have to be overcome by adhyātmayoga – by making the mind get absorbed in our true nature after withdrawing it from sense objects (Katha, Bhāshya, 1-2-12). Lord Krishna describes kāma, krodha and lobha as the self-ruinous gate to hell (B.G. 16-21). Anger is born from desire (B.G. 2-62). In the third chapter of Bhagavadgīta, Lord Krishna exhorts the mumukṣu to destroy desires by all means (B.G. 3-41, 3-43) by labelling it as gluttonous (mahāshana), very wicked (mahāpāpmā) (B.G. 3-37), always an enemy of jnānīs (B.G. 3-39), a destroyer of scriptural knowledge (jṣāna) and direct cognition (viṣāna) of ātmā (B.G. 3-41), and an unassailable (durāsada) enemy (B.G. 3-43).

Here a doubt may crop up. Kāma, the fulfillment of desires is one of the four purushārthas (human accomplishments) sanctioned by the Vedas. How can the same be denounced as an enemy? There is no contradiction. The persons to whom these two are addressed are different. The common man who is riddled with hankering for sense-objects is provided with purushārtha of kāma with dhārmic means as a stopgap arrangement. When the individuals by dhārmic conduct develop maturity in terms of viveka and discover themselves the futility of even the best of sense-pleasure here and hereafter, scriptures point out to them how kāma denies the disposition indispensable to directly cognize our true nature that is limitless happiness free from transmigration. That is the reason why the Vedas have two different sections called karmakānda and jnanakānda addressed for two distinct adhikārīs (eligible persons).

The gist of Setushāma

The text 'Shataślokī' (verse 19) further corroborates the above fact by citing the gist of Setushāma. It re-defines the obstructions that stop us from gaining ātmajñāna as (i) adānam –absence of charity with both special and general meanings (ii) krodha (anger) (iii) aśraddhā (lack of trust/śraddhā) (iv) asatyam (that which is false – anrutam).

The corresponding remedial measure as per Setushāma are:

(i) Dāna (charity) is whatever that is offered to Brahman (Iśwara) and not just giving money etc. in charity or any expenditure.

(ii) Akrodha, the absence of anger, is kshamā (forebearance, forgiveness).

(iii) Śraddhā is the attitude of trust that the scriptures and Iśwara are very useful to us.

(iiii) Satyam, the ultimate truth called sat – Brahman.

These four serve as the means to liberation by overcoming the four obstructions mentioned earlier. They are called setu (bund).

Setushāma

A mantra from the Sāma Veda is also called a sāmā. Setu is the name of the specific mantra and so it is called Setu-sāmā which by grammatical conjunction becomes Setushāma. The word setu is used here in the sense of a bund that stops the flow of water and not as a bridge. Adāna (absence of charity), krodha (anger), aśraddhā (lack of trust) and anruta (false Creation) obstruct and stop us from gaining the direct knowledge of our true nature ātmā/Brahman. This sāmā provides us the remedial means to overcome them. It is also called Kalmāshasāmā. Sāmas are sung in their specific tunes.

The Setushāma

““ हाउ ३, सेतूस्तर ३, दुस्तरान् ३, दानेनादानं ३, हाउ ३, अहमस्मि प्रथमजा ऋतास्या ;
हाउ ३, सेतूस्तर ३, दुस्तरान् ३, अक्रोधेन क्रोधं ३, हाउ ३, पूर्वं देवेभ्यो अमृतस्य नाम ;
हाउ ३, सेतूस्तर ३, दुस्तरान् ३, श्रद्धया अश्रद्धां ३, हाउ ३, यो मा ददाति स इदेवमावात् ;
हाउ ३, सेतूस्तर ३, दुस्तरान् ३, सत्येनानृतं ३, हाउ ३, अहन्नमन्नमदन्त्माद्भिः
हाउ ३ वा, एषा गतिः ३, एतदमृतं ३, स्वर्गच्छ ३, ज्योतिर्गच्छ ३, सेतूस्तीर्त्वा चतुराः “ ॥

(i) हाउ ३ — This is a particle (nipāta) used in the singing of sāmā to introduce or to end a mantra. It can be also in the sense of wonder, variety, alternative, distinction etc. The number 'three' indicates the repetition of that word or phrase thrice. सेतून् तर – do cross over the (four) bunds, दुस्तरान् - not possible to cross over by any other means (than those specified here), दानेनादानं - (cross over the first bund of) adānam by dāna. अहम् – I, ऋतास्या (i.e. ऋतस्य(- of the ultimate truth Brahman, प्रथमजः - the first born entity अस्मि - (I) am;

(ii) अक्रोधेन – by the absence of anger in the form of forgiveness (kshamā) क्रोधं – (cross over the second bund of) anger, देवेभ्यः पूर्वं - even before the entities revealing knowledge such as mind, sense organs came into existence, ऋतस्य नाम - I exist called (नाम) indestructible Brahman (ऋतम्).

(iii) श्रद्धया – by the attitude of trust in the scriptures and Iswara अश्रद्धां - (cross over the third bund of) lack of śraddhā, यः - the one who, मा - me the Brahman in the form of food, ददाति - offers to guests and the needy etc., सः - he, इत् - only (एव), एवं - in this obvious manner, आवात् - protects all beings.

(iiii) सत्येन - by the means of ever-existent Brahman, अनृतं - (cross over the fourth bund of) falsely projected Creation, अहम् - I, अन्नं अद्मि - eat the food as an individual jiva, अन्नमदन्तम् (अद्मि) - (during dissolution – pralaya – I devour/destroy) the Vaishvānara fire etc. who actually consume the food. (The one who remains after dissolution is me the reality, Brahman).

चतुराः - the four सेतून् - bunds, तीर्त्वा - having crossed over, एषा - what is told so far, गतिः - is the mode of uplifting oneself एतद् - this (is), अमृतं - liberation, स्वर्गच्छ -(by this teaching) attain heaven, ज्योतिर्गच्छ - attain Brahman (liberation)

Translation

i) Hāvu is a particle (nipāta) used in the singing of sāmā to introduce or to end a mantra. It can be also in the sense of wonder, variety, alternative, distinction etc. The number 'three' indicates the repetition of that word or phrase thrice. Do cross over the (four) bunds which are not possible to cross over by any other means than those specified here. Cross over the first bund of non-charity by charity. I am the first born entity, (viz. Hiranyagarbha) from the ultimate truth Brahman.

ii) Cross over the second bund of anger by the means of absence of anger in the form of forgiveness. 'I' who is called the indestructible Brahman exist even before the entities revealing knowledge such as mind, intellect, sense organs etc. came into existence.

iii) Cross over the third bund of non-śraddhā by the attitude of trust in the scriptures, and Iswara. He who offers me, the Brahman in the form of food, to guests and the needy etc., only protects all beings in this obvious manner.

iv) Cross over the bund of falsely projected world by the means of ever-existent Brahman. In the normal course, I (Brahman) eat the food as an individual jīva (whereas during) pralaya (dissolution) I (Brahman) devour/destroy (all including) the Vaishvānara fire etc. who actually consume the food. (The one who remains after dissolution, is me the reality, Brahman). Having crossed over the four bunds, this is going to be the mode of uplifting of oneself. What is told so far is the means of liberation. (By this teaching, depending on the intensity and perfection of its practice) attain heaven (or) attain liberation (as the case may be).

Crossing over adānam by dānam

The word dānam in the context of this sāmā means whatever that is offered to Brahman/ Iśwara. The expenditure incurred to sustain oneself and the family etc. is adānam (not dānam). Even that can be transformed into dānam with the firm conviction of offering everything to Brahman. Lord Krishna recommends it. He says: "Whatever you do, eat, do sacrifices, give in charity, perform as ascetic practices, offer all these unto me (B.G. 9-27). He has also exhorted to have the vision that all that you do or are going to do is ātmā itself (Yogavasishtha.Ni.Pu. 54-22). This shows that true offering to Iśwara is to have the steady knowledge that everything is Brahman. This sāmā gives the rationale of this vision in its statement, 'I am the first born from Brahman, viz. Hiranyagarbha' who comprises all that is there in Creation. Thereby whatever spent for oneself and others becomes dānam as an offering to Brahman which is everything provided such an outlook is maintained.

Otherwise adānam can be taken as the lack or absence of charity. It is an attitude of self-appealing and self-aggrandizing without any care and concern for others. Money is like the blood. If blood does not circulate it putrefies into pus. So is the aggrandized wealth not shared with the needy, harmful in one way or the other. It is said, 'properties are not proper ties'. Sage Nārada says elsewhere that the person who draws from the society the means of sustenance more than one's requirement is a thief. Share and care or dānam (charity) is the best remedy for the malady of selfishness. Dānam is sharing/distributing the food etc. according to one's capacity (B.G. Bh. 16-1). Thus the bund of adānam should be overcome by dānam.

Cross over krodha by akrodha

The bund of anger (krodha) has to be crossed over by forbearance (kshamā) mentioned here as akrodha (the absence of anger). In the face of injustice done to oneself by others, not reacting or getting disturbed in the mind is kshamā (B.G.Bh.16-2). This has to be accomplished by the knowledge that I am Brahman (amruta) ever-existent in nature. The mind, intellect, senses etc. (called devas) are born later. They are transitory. Desire, anger, greed etc. are the functions of the mind (manovyāpāra). I am Brahman free from them. "Paramātmā / Brahman is beyond the realm of intellect (B.G. 3-42). Such a contemplation serves as the means to cross over the second bund of anger.

Cross over aśraddhā by śraddhā

To begin with śraddhā is the attitude of trust in the teaching of Guru and the scriptures. Finally it is the total trust in Iśwara who is most beneficial in the pursuit of gaining Brahmajñāna. The one who gives me, the Brahman in the form of food, to the guests and the needy etc. obviously protects all beings. In course of time he attains me (Brahman). By such staunch attitude of trust (śraddhā), the lack of it (aśraddhā) has to be crossed over.

Cross over anruta by Satya

This evanescent jagat is truly not there. It is false (anruta). The jagat is falsely superimposed on its basis Brahman like an erroneous snake on a piece of rope. By directly knowing the satyam Brahman, the bund of anruta (false) jagat has to be crossed over. That is the highest accomplishment of life called moksha. Brahman alone is the ultimate reality. It continues to exist even after the total dissolution of Creation. This sama demonstrates this. In the normal course I (Brahman) eat the food as an individual jīva. In the pralaya (dissolution), Brahman destroys all including the Vaishvānara fire etc. abiding in the jiva who actually consume the eaten food. What remains finally is Brahman and Brahman alone. That is the ever-existent reality whereas Creations come and go.

The result

Depending on the intensity and perfection in the practice of this teaching, the following results are gained according to one's eligibility. They are :

- i) The earning of specific punya
- ii) Attaining the status of deity
- iii) Heavenly abode
- iiii) Liberation.