

Viveka-bhāva or Sarvātma-bhāva

–where do they stand in the life of a student of Vedānta

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At the outset, I would like to clarify that I am not against anybody or anything, 'avirodham nibodhata'. But I have to say what is to be said, and I am using this kind of language to express it.

Pūrva-mīmāṃsā is a 'Science of Action' that focuses so much on kriyā that they go to the extremities of holding that a statement which has no connection with action is worthless. One can say there is no bhāva in that śāstra. In uttara-mīmāṃsā also there is some kriyā, but the focus is not on it. Action is secondary and is relevant only until one knows one's svarūpa; action becomes inconsequential thereafter because in one's svarūpa there is no action.

Therefore, the entire focus in the Vedānta-śāstra is on bhāva. I am purposely using the word bhāva instead of jñāna, since even trivial cognitions such as seeing a pot is referred to by the word jñāna. The word bhāva means feeling. Bhāṣyakāra uses the word ātmā-bhāva in his commentary on 'apramattena veddhavyam'. Mokṣa is not sarvātma-jñāna, but sarvātma-bhāva.

We miss the life in our lives, maybe because we don't have any feeling left. Deep feeling is absent in most of us because we have become intellectuals. We want to be so clever with our words and things that the word is no more the thing. The word is never the thing, but it is what reveals the thing. We use the words of the śāstra as though we know the vastu, but it is all expressed in an ardent, scholarly and intellectual way, without any corresponding feeling to back up the terminology and verbiage.

So, in our hands, Vedānta becomes at best a system, a superficial structure, a methodology, a prakriyā, handling of which becomes an opportunity to exhibit our skills. When there is no bhāva, Vedānta gets reduced into just another religious sect. The only difference between us and a simple mundane person seems to lie in the level of sophistication of worship. While we worship Śāṅkara they worship a grāma-devatā, but they are not two different things. Scholarship without bhāva is like flower without fragrance.

It is to be understood that viveka-bhāva is sādhana-pakṣa while sarvātma-bhāva is siddha-pakṣa. Sarvātma-bhāva means "All is one, I am that one". The jijñāsā is always to know 'pratyagabhinna-brahma', and not for 'abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-jagat-kāraṇam brahma'. Teaching must start with the individual – not with jagataḥ-upādāna-kāraṇam, for, such an approach only makes the student an intellectual. What is important is here and now which is why jīvanmukti is the most important in Vedānta; one can say Vedānta is like cash while religion is like credit. As they say, 'You start near, you go far; you start far, you go nowhere'. But in our over-enthusiasm for sarvātma-bhāva, we neglect viveka-bhāva.

'Aham asmi' is the primordial dimension; every other dimension comes thereafter, be it the physical dimension in the form of body, or the psychological dimension in the form of mind etc. While a common man stops with these two dimensions, there is a deeper dimension called the spiritual dimension that is to be understood. This spiritual dimension can be understood through these simple words "I am the one who knows"; when one says that, one has viveka-bhāva, the feeling of discernment.

Every student of Vedānta should be able to feel that he or she is not the body. It is not sufficient that one intellectually arrives at the fact that one is not the body; fie upon those who stop there. One should be able to say, 'I was never born', with all the incumbent feeling that goes with such a statement. It is not difficult to achieve this; with a bit of abhyāsa, by avoiding going after the nāma-rūpa, one can easily achieve this feeling that he is not the body.

That I am not the mind and all emotions such as sukha and duḥkha contained therein is not me, is something that is achievable by constant study and reflection, śravaṇa, manana, nididhyāsana – that creates the inner space between the self and the mind. Thus, one can achieve the state of equanimity being alluded to by Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa in 'na prahr̥ṣyet priyam prāpya na udvijet prāpya cāpriyam'.

This viveka-bhāva is the most important. That I am a human is the physical form; that I am a Brāhmaṇa etc. are mental forms acquired from the society. The body and mind suggest many ideas – that I am fat, that I am fair, that I am the most abhāgya etc. But one should not buy into these ideas, through viveka. But we are sadly unable to give up this identification with body and mind; we continue to actively consider ourselves as Brāhmaṇa etc., despite boisterously declaring 'All is Brahman'. We are unable to give up anything; even sannyāsis who are supposed to be sarva-saṅkalpa-sannyāsi are unable to give up their identities. 'Idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya' represents the sum and substance of viveka-bhāva – 'I know anything and everything; the world is, because I know it'. Vedāntins do not accept existence outside knowledge. I am the one who knows the body and the mind, therefore, I am not the body or the mind; this is viveka-bhāva.

By neglecting the viveka-bhāva, and by harping upon the sarvātma-bhāva, we become people of contradictions if not outright hypocrites. While on the one hand we indulge in fragmentary thinking, in the sense that we continue to categorize people by varṇa, nationality, state, language etc., yet we say 'sarvaṁ khalvidaṁ brahma'. Even sampradāya and paramparā are identifications with a set of thoughts which have been handed over across generations. All these identifications prove that there is no psychological freedom to think.

Without viveka-bhāva, talking merely of sarvātma-bhāva is hypocrisy. The students of Vedānta should focus on sādhana-pakṣa which will lead to siddha-pakṣa, whenever it happens. Brahman is not something that is known through formulae or methodology. One should look at oneself and discover the "I-am-ness". It is the identification of this "I-am-ness" with body, deha-dharmādhyāsaḥ, that one gets spacially (space-wise limitation) limited. Identification with the mind makes one limited (time-wise limitation) by time and thus the 'I-am-ness' becomes deśa-kāla-paricchinna. On dis-identification with body-mind, the infinite gets as though liberated from the limitations of space and time. Brahman is nothing but the blossoming of the 'I-am-ness'. Brahman is that which includes all that exists, including the body-mind. It is attained by a process of negation and not rejection.

For a student who does not focus on viveka-bhāva, unfortunately, in addition to himself, the Guru and even Īśvara becomes another set of body-mind. Therefore, viveka-bhāva should be the primary focus of every student of Vedānta.