

YOGAVAASISHTHA

SWAMI SHUDDHABODHANANDA SARASWATI

Continued from previous issue....

AVIDYA (self-ignorance) IS A POSTULATE

The following dialogue between Lord Rama and sage Vasishtha unfolds the exact role of avidya in Vedantic teaching (Yo.Va.Ni.Pu.49-10 to 17).

Rama: How can avidya exist in Brahman, which is non-dual, all-pervasive and ever-existent in nature?

(While replying, Vasishtha emphasizes that avidya does not exist from the standpoint of a jnani, but is postulated for the sake of teaching ignorant individuals at their present level of understanding).

Vasishtha: Earlier there was the changeless, causeless, endless, limitless Brahman. It is so even now, and it will remain so forever. Avidya does not exist even to the slightest extent. This is an ascertainment that cannot be shaken. You, I, jagat, quarters, heaven, earth, great elements (mahabhootas), avidya etc. do not exist at all. All that exists is the beginningless, endless Brahman. Jnanis know that avidya is only a delusion and non-existent in reality. That which has no existence cannot be real at all.

Rama: O revered sage, if avidya does not exist, how is it that you earlier established the existence of avidya in detail?

Vasishtha: O Rama, till now, you were ignorant of your true nature. It is not so any longer. Now you have become wise because of the imaginary means of imparting knowledge employed by me. Jivanmuktas who know the taatparya (ascertained purport) of the Vedas have coined by their imagination phrases such as 'This is avidya', 'this is jiva' etc. in order to teach ignorant mumukshus.

In short, avidya or maya are but postulates in this limitless, non-dual Brahman, an aropa (superimposition) on Brahman, meant only for apavada (negation) in order to gain Brahmasakshatkara. Avidya is taken as real in terms of vyavaharika (transactional) existence until Brahmasakshatkara is gained. Then it is discovered that it did not exist at all. To teach ignorant persons that avidya is non-existent is to put the cart before the horse. Postulations such as the existence of avidya facilitate the teaching, in spite of their limitations. This is true of all Vedantic prakriyas (modes of teaching)/vaadas. They are means to an end and not an end in themselves. The criterion of correctness of a Vedantic prakriya vests in its capacity to produce Brahmajnana, though all of them are invariably defective in their nature

THE SEVEN STAGES OF BRAHMAJNANA (SAPTA-JNANA-BHUMIKA)

Yogavaasishtha describes in detail the seven stages of Brahmajnana. Though Brahmajnana is one and the same, the varying degrees of steadfastness of abidance of the mind in jnana constitute the different stages of jnana. These stages are not concocted by sage Vasishtha. The Varaha, Maha, Annapurna and Akshi Upanishads describe them in detail. The Mundakopanishat describes the last four stages as atmakrida, atmarati, kriyaavaan and Brahmavidvarishtha. Lord Shiva himself describes the last three stages of jnana in his teaching to Vasishtha (Yo.Va.Ni.Pu. 34). Therefore, there is no room for any misgivings regarding the authenticity of these seven stages of Brahmajnana. We have to investigate scriptural lore thoroughly before arriving at hasty conclusions against any established tenets of Vedanta.

THE TEACHING OF THE YOGAVAASISHTHA IS FLAWLESS AND SUPREME

The teaching comes to an end. A roar of approbation issues forth from the siddhas (a group of certain rishis). A rainfall of small white flowers resembling fine snow-fall takes place. Kettle drums blare. There is great festivity as all worship guru Vasishtha. Siddhas say that they have heard of the mokshopaya (means of liberation) from others many times and have themselves taught it to others thousands of times through the end of Kalpa (Creation). But none are akin to the teachings of Vasishtha. King Dasharatha offers his kingdom to Vasishtha with apologies for its meagerness. Vasishtha replies: We Braahmanas (Brahmins) are satisfied with pranams (salutations) alone, which you have already offered. You go ahead and protect the kingdom. You are proficient at it and it befits you. Have you ever heard of any Braahmana ruling a kingdom? Lord Rama repeatedly offers pranams to Vasishtha and offers flowers with tears of joy in his eye. Others also bow to Vasishtha and offer flowers. (Yo.Va.Ni.U.200)

Vasishtha brushes aside the heap of flowers that cover his face. To demonstrate ideal conduct to the world, he requests the great sages in the audience to rectify any flaws that may have crept into his teaching due to buddhimaalinya (dullness of intellect). He addresses the sages present by name and says: O Vishwamitra, Vamadeva, Nimi, Krutu, Bharadvaj, Pulastya, Atri, Dhrishti, Narada, Shandili, Bhaasa, Bhrgu, Bhaaranda, Vatsavaatsyaayana (and the rest), please tell me of any anuditam (points I did not cover), durartham (issues I expounded wrongly), vigatartham (things I brought up meaninglessly) in my teaching. This humble request by Vasishtha is for vinaya-shikshanaartham (teaching the lesson of humility) and nirdoshataa (flawlessness) of the teaching, evident from the subsequent reply of all the sages gathered. All the sages unanimously praised the teachings as unparalleled and flawless. They offered pranams to Vasishtha again and there was a shower of flowers for the second time, with flowers heaped on Vasishtha. Thereafter, Rama elaborately expresses his gratitude to Guru. Then many pay homage to Vasishtha once again (Yo.Va.Ni.U.200).

Laxmana says: O guru, by your advice, I have obtained the cool moonlight of Paramatma-prakash (the light of Brahmajnana) which has dispelled the doubts born of many, many past sins and this is the fruition of enormous punya of the past. It is a great wonder indeed that in spite of the advice of great masters like you which can give limitless happiness through atmajnana, people still wander around day and night indulging in faulty conduct (Yo.Va.Ni.U.214-21).

Rama says: The culmination of flourishing riches is atma, because it is limitless ananda. The end of knowledge is atmajnana, because having known atma, everything else is known. The utmost outer limit of the scriptures is adhyatma-shastra (Vedanta), since it is the highest pramana (means of knowledge). The limit of calamities such as destruction of wealth, progeny and belongings is samsara-naasha (destruction of samsara), because there is no destruction thereafter. The boundary of speech full of poetry, sentiments (rasa), rhetoric etc. is the adhyatmic teaching of Vasishtha. The finale of places giving joy and peace such as palace, rest-house, river bank or island in a river, is the region of Paramatma, because it is the most exalted, timeless abode of rest, as Paramatma alone is the most exalted finale (Yo.Va.Ni.U.214-24).

Narada says: My ears have been sanctified today by receiving the highest knowledge, of a sort I could not obtain either in Brahmaloaka, in heaven or on earth. (Yo.Va.Ni.U.214-26).

concluding the text, Valmiki describes how mumukshus can benefit from the Yogavaasishtha. Thereafter, he enumerates the different results that can be reaped by acts such as parayana (reading this book without knowing its meaning), donating this text, arranging its reading with or without discourses on a paid basis etc. The question is: how did Valmiki know this? A statement by Valmiki itself explains. Once Lord Virinchi (Brahmaji) having himself examined the text Yogavaasishtha among the congregation of munis declared: whatever Vasishtha, Valmiki and I (Brahmaji) say is always true; it can never go wrong. So also, Brahmaji had given a boon to Valmiki, when the latter wrote the Poorva-Ramayana, that his words would never go wrong in this epic. This shows that Brahmaji himself has certified the authenticity of the Yogavaasishtha (Yo.Va.Ni.U.216-14). Is there need for any further proof of its authenticity?

EPILOGUE

Paramahansa Shrimad Anandabodhendra Saraswati has written an exhaustive gloss by the name Taatparya-prakaasha-vyakhya on the Yogavaasishtha in Samskrit. Its date is not known. It is the only commentary available on this text. The study of Yogavaasishtha without this gloss could have been very difficult. Study of the entire Yogavaasishtha with the help of this gloss is something highly commendable. But considering the voluminous size of the Yogavaasishtha and its language, Samskrit, it is quite natural to find its study formidable. Again, the factor of time constraints due to age may also be a hindrance.

That by itself cannot be demotivating. There is a solution. Even a hard nut can be cracked. We can omit a large number of the stories interspersed throughout the text and concentrate only on those verses that are rich in Vedantic principles in their content. We can select verses topic-wise. There is bound to be continuity of a given topic. I have done this in selecting about 4200 verses after a cursory glance at rejected verses. According to me, one need not be a great scholar of Samskrit to study Yogavaasishtha. Even those with a fair knowledge of Samskrit who have studied the Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads can study Yogavaasishtha on their own without much difficulty. But total commitment and perseverance is indispensable. All mumukshus, including beginners, can expose themselves to its teaching with the help of a competent teacher, to great benefit.

There is also an abridged version of the Yogavaasishtha culled by Sri Abhinanda Pandit called Laghu-Yogavaasishtha. It contains 6000 verses and has a gloss by the name Vaasishtha-chandrika. It maintains the stream of stories. But it completely leaves out the Nirvana-prakarana-uttaraardha (about 7000 verses), which contains Vedantic lessons of a very high calibre. It also excludes many important verses from the earlier prakaranas (sections).

Here a word of caution is in order. The Yogavaasishtha is a text basically centered on jivanmukti (liberation while living with the body). The topics of vaasanaakshaya and manonasha are also extensively discussed therein as needed, besides the main topic of tattvajnana (Brahmajnana). At some places, vaasanaakshaya and manonasha are praised (as arthavada) to highlight a point. To gain clarity on such sections, a thorough understanding of the role of vaasanaakshaya and manonasha is very essential. Nowadays, hardly anyone tries to understand the prakriya of vaasanaakshaya in its true nature. Even those who profess to know it have ill-understood this prakriya and what they teach is totally divergent from the shastra, whereas those who dismiss it have misunderstood the same.

Jivanmukti-viveka written by Vidyanaraya Muni deals with all these topics in detail without leaving any scope for doubt. It describes clearly the role of tattvajnana, vaasanaakshaya and manonasha as mokshopaya (means of liberation) in the context of both videha-mukti (bodiless liberation) and jivanmukti. This text Jivanmukti-viveka serves as a key for mining the many Vedantic insights that can be found in the Yogavaasishtha.

Yogavaasishtha has a unique status in the entire Vedantic lore. It is left to us to make the most of it.

Books on Yogavaasishtha:

i)Original verses with Taatparya Prakasha Vyakhya, Motilal Banarasidass, mlbd@mlbd.com

ii)Original verses with Hindi Translation and introduction to verses based on Taatparya Prakasha Vyakhya. The only book having the alphabetical index of all verses (2011). Chowkhambha Surabharati Prakashana, K-37/117, Gopal Mandir Lane, P. Box 1129, Varanasi 221001. Phone +91 (0542) 2335263. Email: csp-naveen@yahoo.co.in

iii)With English Translation by R. P. Arya, Piramil Publications, Delhi. Available at Chowkhambha or Motilal.

Pearls Of Wisdom

Growth is progress from being a part-time devotee to a full-time devotee of Iswara. To be able to appreciate Iswara as the creation and the laws that govern it is growing spiritually.'