

2017 Bhāṣya Retreat at AVG, Saylorsburg¹

Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati taught the Śāṅkara bhāṣya of the Ajātaśatru Brāhmaṇa of Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (Chapter II, section 1) during a weeklong retreat from July 9-15, 2017 at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA. Swamiji unfolded the intricate aspects of this Brāhmaṇa with lucidity and brilliance, two prominent hallmarks of his teaching style. The grandeur of Śāṅkara's commentary was brought out with an admirable felicity that additionally highlighted Swamiji's deep reverence for Śāṅkara and the teaching tradition. The Ajātaśatru Brāhmaṇa is essentially a delineation of the correct and incorrect understanding of the absolute reality, Brahman, which is in fact, oneself. This *ātma-anātma viveka* is presented in the form of a story, *ākhyāyikā*. This is so because of the *durvijñeyatvam*, the difficulty of understanding the truth due to its abstruseness. The *ākhyāyikā* also served other purposes such as highlighting the traits of the teacher, that of the student and *śraddhā*, the trust, one should have in the teaching. The background of the *ākhyāyikā* is a dialog between Gārgya and Ajātaśatru. Gārgya, a *brāhmaṇa* belonging to the Garga family was the son of Balāki. He was proud because of his ignorance of the real Brahman (असम्यग्ब्रह्मवित्वात्). Ajātaśatru, a *kṣatriya*, was the king of Benares and like King Janaka, was benevolent and liked to hear about Brahman. In the beginning Gārgya had the role of the teacher and Ajātaśatru was the student. The roles reversed as the dialog progressed. A transformative change occurred in Gārgya - he became a *jijñāsu*, abandoning his wrong notions and sincerely wanting to know the real Brahman. Ajātaśatru was an exemplar of humility (सम्यग्ब्रह्मवित्वात्) not only when he had the role of a student but also even after his role was switched to that of a teacher.

Following the *sambandha* bhāṣya at the beginning of Chapter 2, Swamiji summarized with succinctness and clarity the topics covered in Chapter 1, particularly the *avidyā sūtra* (the subject matter of ignorance) and *vidyā sūtra* (the subject matter of knowledge), and introduced the subject of the Ajātaśatru Brāhmaṇa. The subject matter of ignorance was explained as of two kinds - the internal vital force and the external covering of it. These two are likened to the internal hidden pillars of a house and the external ingredients of the house such as straw, grass and mud etc. that covered the internal support structure. The vital force has various manifestations according to the different external media. Gārgya took the internal vital force, conditioned by the media, as his self and came to the court of Ajātaśatru with the intention to teach the latter about this conditioned Brahman. Although the king knew the unconditioned Brahman, nevertheless was desirous of listening to Gārgya who then went on to describe the various manifestations of the conditioned Brahman. Gārgya started with sun as

Brahman, “That being who is in the sun, I meditate upon as Brahman.” (य एवासावादित्ये पुरुष एतमेवाहं ब्रह्मोपास इति) *Ajātaśatru* stopped *Gārgya* from proceeding further and told him that he knew of this meditation and also of the results of such a meditation. *Gārgya* perhaps was not prepared for such a response from *Ajātaśatru* and therefore proceeded to describe the moon as Brahman, “That being who is in the moon, I meditate upon as Brahman.” (य एवासौ चन्द्रे पुरुष एतमेवाहं ब्रह्मोपास इति) Again, *Ajātaśatru* protested and told *Gārgya* that he knew of the meditation of the moon as Brahman and also of its results. In this manner the dialog continued with *Gārgya* narrating 12 things to meditate as Brahman and they included the sun, moon, lightening, space, air, agni, waters, looking glass, sound, quarters, shadow and *Hiranyagarbha*. *Ajātaśatru* rejected every one of these contentions of *Gārgya* as Brahman. *Gārgya* became silent as he did not know to continue any further.

Gārgya was a *saguṇa Brahma upāsaka* and naturally did not know the *nirguṇa* Brahman. When his notions were challenged a transformative change occurred in *Gārgya*. He wanted to know the real Brahman and asked *Ajātaśatru* to teach him ignoring even the propriety of the custom that a *kṣatriya* cannot teach a *brāhmaṇa*. *Ajātaśatru*, without necessarily assuming the role of a teacher, proceeded to share with *Gārgya* the knowledge of Brahman. However, first he has to refute *Gārgya*’s wrong understanding. Here, the Upaniṣad employs the *anvaya-vyatireka* method of demonstrating that the vital force, *prāṇa*, is not the *mukhya ātmā* as thought by *Gārgya*. The *ākhyāyikā* describes an experiment that *Ajātaśatru* performed which subsequently is unfolded through a *pūrvapakṣa - siddhānta* technique to prove that *prāṇa* is *anātmā*.

The king, taking *Gārgya* by hand, approached a sleeping man and tried to wake him up by addressing him with the names of *prāṇa* as *bṛhan*, *pāṇḍaravāsaḥ*, *soma*, and *rājan*. When the sleeping man did not wake up, the king shook him up till he got up. From this simple demonstration the king conveyed to *Gārgya* that *prāṇa* was not the agent or *bhoktā* in the body. At this point in the Upaniṣad the *bhāṣya* reveals the inimitable style of Śaṅkara who walks us through the *pūrvapakṣa - siddhānta* reasoning process to arrive at the inevitable conclusion that *prāṇa*, is not the *mukhya ātmā*. The following facts are established by Śaṅkara: 1) If *prāṇa* were to be the agent or *bhoktā*, it would have heard its names. But it did not and hence not the *bhoktā* like a stone etc. 2) The argument that sense organs such as hearing are quietened in sleep and hence the sleeping man did not hear when he was called by several names is not tenable. If *prāṇa* would have had the *pradhānatā* in sleep, the sense organs would be active just as when the master was awake, his servants would also be awake. Thus, the sleeping man would have heard his names when called. However, this was not the case. 3) The names of the moon deity were used to address the sleeping man. His non-response showed the *abhokṛtvam* of the *candra devatā* and by extension that of all other *devatās*. 4) If *prāṇa* were to be the *bhoktā*, by its very nature, it should have perceived objects whenever it came in contact with them. A thing cannot change that which is ascertained to be its nature - *na hi yasya yaḥ svabhāvo niścitaḥ sa taṃ vyabharati kadācidapi*

(न हि यस्य यः स्वभावो निश्चितः स तं व्यभिचरति कदाचिदपि).

While *prāṇa* is shown to be not the agent or *bhoktā* by the experiment with the sleeping man, a question arose as to why this could not have been proven in the waking state. Bhāṣyakāra responds by saying that in the waking state the seer or subject (specifically, the *viññānamaya ātmā*) and the seen or the object (*prāṇa*) are mixed up while in sleep the *viññānamaya ātmā* is asleep and yet the *prāṇa* is present. Therefore, the discrimination between the seer and seen is possible in sleep.²

The retreat concluded with the 15th *kaṇḍikā* and Swami Vidadatmanandaji will continue with the remaining five *kaṇḍikās* of the Brāhmaṇa in the 2018 retreat. Swamiji's consistent eloquence and methodical treatment of the text and the *bhāṣya* were astounding, to say the least. He was an exemplar of the characteristics of an *ācārya* that were portrayed through Ajātaśatru in the *ākhyāyikā*. The following famous verse describes the qualities of an *ācārya*:

आचिनोति च शास्त्रार्थान् आचारे स्थापयत्यपि । स्वयं आचरते यस्मात् तस्मादाचार्य उच्यते ॥

ācinoti ca śāstrārthān ācāre sthāpayatyapi | svayaṃ ācarate yasmāt tasmādācārya ucyate ||

An *ācārya* is one who teaches the meanings of the *śāstras*, adopts them in his own practice, and establishes others in those *ācāras*. All these are splendidly apt descriptions of Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati.

In a retreat like this the attendees have varied backgrounds and hence the teacher has the difficult job of communicating the subject matter at a level that appeals equally to all students. For this, a teacher has to have not only great felicity but also enormous compassion. Swamiji shines in both these respects. Swamiji looked at the twelve *upāsanās* highlighted by Gārgya as nothing but ways to see the *vibhūtis* of the Lord. These meditations can in fact bring sensitivity to one's life in appreciating the whole cosmos as nothing but the manifestation of *Īśvara*. This is sensitive living to effortlessly bring *Īśvara* into one's life as Pūjya Swami Dayananda Saraswati taught.³ A sensitive *bhakta* seeing *Īśvara* in everything in the creation soon discovers that one's reality is essentially no different from that of *Īśvara*.

¹ This article is penned by Dr. V. Swaminathan of New Jersey, an attendee at the camp. It is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject matter. Any error in the summary is that of the author only.

² *anubhūtiprakāśaḥ, bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad vivaraṇam, ajātaśatru vidyā prakāśam: 14.7-8*

³ *Īśvara in One's Life, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, ISBN: 9789380049731, Arsha Vidya Research and Publication*