

**Analysis Paper on the Second Valli, First Chapter, First Verse of the  
*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*: Defining *Brahman* — By Charissa Jaeger-Sanders**

Many times, Brahman is described as *nirguṇa* Brahman or Brahman without attributes, yet can this *nirguṇa* Brahman be defined in any way? Using grammatical analysis, logic, a close reading of the text and its explication, Śaṅkarācārya (renowned Advaita Vedāntic philosopher of the late eight century CE), in his *bhāṣya* commentary, on the Second Valli, First Chapter, First Half of the First Verse of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* endeavors to answer the question of who Brahman is; how Brahman is defined according to this *śāstra*, this sacred text; the role of knowledge; and how Brahman relates to the Self.

Let us start by examining the *śāstra*, itself. We find ourselves in the Second Valli of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which evokes the richness that one is accustomed to encountering in the corpus of the Upaniṣads. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda translates our primary text, the first half of Verse One in the Second Valli of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* this way:

Om! The knower of Brahman attains the highest. Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinite. He who knows that Brahman as existing in the intellect, which is lodged in the supreme space in the heart, [experiences], in identification with the all-knowing Brahman, all desirable things simultaneously (Swāmī Gambhīrānanda 2018, 304).

As we will see further explicated by Śaṅkarācārya, the one who knows Brahman, realizes one's highest Self. This Brahman, who is the foundation for all, exists as limitless consciousness dwelling in the heart's cavity, in the lotus of the heart. Knowing the *aikyam*, the oneness, between the Self and Brahman is *mokṣa*, liberation.

The verse states, “The knower of Brahman attains the highest” (ibid., 304); the one who understands who Brahman is realizes the true nature of the Self, which leads to *mokṣa*. Śaṅkarācārya regularly employs the corpus of the sacred texts in his various *bhāṣya*-s to undergird his arguments and interpretations. In this case, Śaṅkarācārya quotes from the Third Valli, Second Chapter, Verse Nine of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* : “Anyone who knows that Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman indeed.” Śaṅkarācārya, then adds his own interpretive element indicating that this verse plainly demonstrates that by being the knower of Brahman, cognitively, one can at-

tain Brahman (ibid., 304). For Śaṅkarācārya, the nature of one's self does not change, which is already one with Brahman; rather, through knowledge, one becomes aware of one's true nature.

Early on, we encounter Śaṅkarācārya's first *pūrvapakṣa* counterargument from an objector, in his *bhāṣya* for this verse. Śaṅkarācārya lays out the first *pūrvapakṣa* by addressing those perspectives that believe external action is necessary for the attainment of Brahman. Much of Śaṅkarācārya's premise is that knowledge alone is enough for attaining Brahman, knowledge is sufficient for understanding the true nature of the Self. We see this emphasis elsewhere for Śaṅkarācārya, for example in his *bhāṣya* on the Brahma Sūtras. Based on the Upaniṣads, Śaṅkarācārya is firm that there is no need for any other Vedic action or *upāsanā*, meditation. These actions, at best, are only accessories for the preparation of the mind.

The first *pūrvapakṣa* argues that because Brahman permeates everything and is the Self of all, then Brahman cannot be attained by mere knowledge. Furthermore, because Brahman is without limits and the Self is seen as limited, how can one that is limited realize that which is unlimited? We are limited; therefore, how can we possibly know the Limitless One. For the objector, all we can do is praise the Total; we can never know It. Śaṅkarācārya argues against this objector's perspective that views defining the relationship between Brahman and the knower of Brahman as unsuited and incongruous because Brahman is limitless; whereas, the knower is finite.

Śaṅkarācārya continues the dialogue with this objector by stating that what seems to be discordant is not actually problematic. The objector then seeks additional clarity. Śaṅkarācārya obliges with a lengthy explanatory *siddhānta*. In Śaṅkarācārya's response, he first points out that even though the Self, the "jīva, the individual," is inherently "none other than Brahman," this *jīva* is easily distracted and erroneously identifies itself with the five *kośa*-s, the five sheaths and, therefore, misses that one's essence is intrinsically Brahman. In other words, the *jīva*'s understanding becomes obscured because of strong identification with these multi-layered intricacies called *kośa*-s termed as:

*annamaya kośa* - the physical/food sheath, i.e., the outer sheath, which is considered the physical body layer;

*prāṇamaya kośa* - the vital air sheath;

*manōmaya kośa* - the mind sheath; and

*viññanamaya kośa* - the wisdom or intellect sheath, together make up the subtle body layer; and finally the fifth *kośa*,

*anandamaya kośa* makes up the causal body layer and represents the deepest *kośa*.

Similar to the presence of the prickly petals that act as sheaths on the outside of an artichoke causing one to miss its true essence, according to Śaṅkarācārya, our complexity made up of these five *kośa*-s causes us to miss out initially knowing the core, the nature of our true Self.

Śaṅkarācārya uses a well-known story often referred to as the Tenth Man Story to further explain his point about how the true nature of the Self is easily missed. Picture this tale retold in modern times. A scout leader decides to take his troop out on a trek. While hiking, the ten-person party encounters a wide river that is so deep and broad that they need to swim across it. When they come out on the other side, the responsible pack leader decides to do a headcount to make sure that everyone made it safely across the waterway. The scout leader begins to count his troop. Much to his dismay, he only counts nine people. He begins to panic. He counts again. Still nine. He counts once more, and yet, the number remains at nine. As his anxiety rises and grief begins to overwhelm, an older woman who is also hiking in the woods happens upon the distraught group. When she asks what is wrong, the troop leader says that they started this hike with ten people, but seemed to have lost a person in the river. So, the woman calmly counts the people. As a smile surfaces on her face, she says to the scout leader, “In your pre-occupation with anxiety and the counting, you missed counting yourself. YOU ARE THE TENTH MAN!”

In Śaṅkarācārya’s various *bhāṣya*-s, he often makes use of this Tenth Man Story. Here, in this part of his commentary, he uses this well-known story to relay to his objector that similarly, it is because the individual is “under a spell of ignorance” that one does not perceive “one’s own true nature as Brahman” (ibid., 305). For Śaṅkarācārya, the wise sage in the story, who informs the person that he is the tenth man, represents the role of the Upaniṣads, the role of the sacred texts themselves. These *śāstra*-s, act as the *pramāṇa*, as the epistemological means of knowledge that unfold and point to the true Self. Therefore, like the discovery that occurs with the removal of ignorance in the Story of the Tenth Man, by means of “a realization that comes through enlightenment consequent on the instruction of the scriptures,” it is quite possible to recognize the “omnipresent Brahman to be none other than one’s own Self” (ibid., 306). In other words, the *śruti*, the mere sacred words, when heard by a prepared student, called *adhikārī*, a *Jñānī Guru* (wise sage) reveals the identifi-

cation, the *aikyam*, the oneness of the *adhikārī* and Brahman. Therefore, the realization of Brahman is possible through knowledge. External action is not required.

In relation to finite things, knowledge is not always sufficient. For example, you can know how to build something and have all the parts and tools to do so, but if that knowledge is not applied, then your goal has not been achieved. However, when it comes to Brahman, the knowledge of one's true Self produces the result of *mokṣa*. Therefore, knowledge, alone, is efficacious. Understanding the true nature of the Self is enough. Śaṅkarācārya then spends the bulk of his explanation on the next four essential words of this verse: *satyam jñānam anantam brahma*, which are the key to understanding this Second Valli of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*.

As we saw earlier, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda translates these words as: “Brahman is truth, knowledge, and infinite [*anantam*]” (ibid., 304). Now, let us see how Śaṅkarācārya interprets and expounds an understanding of these first three words: *satyam jñānam anantam* in their clarifying relationship to Brahman.

Śaṅkarācārya will repeatedly have to remind his various objectors that these three words, *satyam jñānam anantam*, act to clarify an understanding of Brahman. In this part of his *bhāṣya*, Śaṅkarācārya uses grammatical analysis to defend his interpretation of the text and his understanding of these three words in their relationship to Brahman. Brahman is “intended to be spoken of as the thing to be known” (ibid., 307). As such, in this sentence, Brahman is the substantive – the chief object of knowledge, pure consciousness. Because Brahman is in the nominative case, the word *brahma* acts as the main word of the sentence and is therefore, given primacy. Here, though, Brahman is not an agent of action, but rather an agent of apposition, which means the words *satyam jñānam anantam* are meant to be interpreted as clarifying, *lakṣaṇa*, through implication, the understanding of Brahman. Unlike typical adjectives, these words are not modifying or qualifying Brahman. Why is that important? Adjectives set limits, and Brahman is the Limitless One (*anantam*). Rather, these three descriptors are meant to be applied to the substantive Brahman only, and each word clarifies the understanding of Brahman independently. Brahman is *satyam*, Brahman is *jñānam*, and Brahman is *anantam*.

As we see in the *pūrvapakṣa*, the objectors take up the argument of viewing the use of adjectives as flawed when discussing Brahman because adjectives can only be used to describe nouns, to describe objects that are in the same class with one another, i.e., a blue or red lotus. The objectors use the analogy of a single sun to point

to the fact that there is only one Brahman. Therefore, from their perspective, adjectives are not helpful when talking about Brahman (Ibid., 308).

Śaṅkarācārya reiterates his earlier *siddhānta* that these words are not modifying or qualifying Brahman. Rather, these three words are being used to clarify the understanding of Brahman. The objectors are still confused by the difference between these three words functioning in an adjectival role to Brahman versus a clarifying role. So, Śaṅkarācārya explains: “An adjective distinguishes a noun from things in its *own class*; whereas, *a definition marks it out from everything else . . .*” (ibid., 308; italics indicates my emphasis). In other words, these three words are not being used in a way to distinguish Brahman from other Brahman as one would use adjectives to distinguish one cow from another, as in one cow was brown, and the other cow was black and white. Rather, these three words give defining characteristics and clarity to Brahman, the One without a second. The three words, *satyam jñānam anantam*, are meant to be applied to the substantive only, applied to the One Brahman only. Accordingly, each of the attributive words is related with Brahman, independently of the others thus: *satyam brahma, jñānam brahma, anantam brahma*

So, let us start to examine each word, in turn, and see how it relates to clarifying the understanding of Brahman. The word *satyam* can be translated various ways. By Swāmī Gambhīrānanda, it has been translated “truth,” which is one of the possible translations. The word *satyam* is also commonly translated “existence.” In this case, Brahman is truth, in that Brahman is that which cannot be negated, as in that which is fundamentally true and immutable, hence why the translation “truth” works.

The word *jñānam* is best translated as “knowledge” or “consciousness.” For Śaṅkarācārya, it is crucial to indicate that Brahman is *not* the agent of knowing. If Brahman is seen as “the agent of knowing, [then, Brahman] becomes delimited by the knowable and the knowledge, and hence cannot be infinitude” (ibid., 309). In other words, agency is limiting by what can be known. Therefore, Brahman is not the agent of knowing.

In his discussion on agency, Śaṅkarācārya quotes the First Verse, of the Twenty-Fourth Chapter of the Seventh Valli of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* : The Infinite is that where one does not understand anything else. Hence the finite is where one understands something else” (ibid., 309). The objector goes on to misconstrue the topic and Śaṅkarācārya’s use of the *śāstra* protesting how can it follow that “one *knows* the Self” when one does not understand anything else.

Śaṅkarācārya reminds the objectors that the purview of the conversation is a definition of the Infinite. Essentially, the part about “where one does not understand anything else” is “devoted wholly to the presentation of the distinguishing characteristics of Brahman” (ibid., 310). In other words, because Brahman is limitless, Brahman is beyond comparison. Furthermore, these clarifying words can only be understood in how they relate to Brahman and not finite things.

Śaṅkarācārya’s *siddhānta* argues against the objectors’ next *pūrvapakṣa* that “the same self *can exist both* as knower and the known” (ibid., 310). Śaṅkarācārya’s *siddhānta* against this particular *pūrvapakṣa* is critical because of his non-dual understanding of the Self and Brahman. Śaṅkarācārya states that the Self does not have parts. Because the Self is not able to be divided, It cannot be both the knower and the known, concurrently. Moreover, if the Self is the knower, It cannot be infinite. As such, “Brahman is indicated [by the word knowledge] but not denoted by the word knowledge,” In other words, Brahman is pure knowledge, not the one who knows. Therefore, in this case, the *śāstra* is using *jñānam brahma* to state that Brahman is knowledge, that Brahman is pure consciousness. Brahman is omniscient in the sense of being all-pervasive.

Because human knowledge is seen to be finite, the last word *anantam* is used as the final clarification of Brahman in this part of the text to explicitly define and distinguish Brahman. The *śāstra* wants to be clear that just because knowledge is seen as limited from a human perspective, this perspective does not apply to Brahman. Therefore, *anantam brahma* means that Brahman is the Limitless One. The word *anantam* can be translated as limitless, consciousness without limitations, or objectless consciousness. Therefore, according to this verse in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, Brahman is unable to be negated, is pure consciousness, and is limitless.

The next part of Śaṅkarācārya’s *bhāṣya* addresses the next part of the verse, which Swāmī Gambhīrānanda translates: “He who knows that Brahman as existing in the intellect, which is lodged in the supreme space in the heart, enjoys, in identification with the all-knowing Brahman, all desirable things simultaneously” (ibid., 304). In other words, the one who knows the Brahman who is unable to be negated, is pure consciousness, and is limitless, the one who knows this Brahman that is considered to dwell in the intellect, in the space within the heart, and the one that understands the *aikyam*, the oneness between the *Ātma*, the Self, and Brahman, experiences all one’s desires concurrently because one’s ultimate desire is fulfilled, which is to

know Brahman. Therefore, the one who understands the *aikyam* between the Self and the Brahman and understands that Brahman is unable to be negated, is pure consciousness, and is limitless. This knowledge, in and of itself, is sufficient and efficacious and leads to the goal of *mokṣa*. *Om Tat Sat*.

### **Bibliography**

Swāmī Gambhīrānanda, trans. “Chapter 4: *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*,” pp. 301-417 (with particular attention given to pp. 303-315) in *Eight Upaniṣads: Volume One with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. 2nd ed. Hollywood: Vedanta Press & Bookshop, 1957. Fourteenth Reprint, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018.

### **About the author of this article:**

Dear Editor:

Pranams!

Attached is a submission for the AVG Newsletter. It was written by a doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She is an exemplary student.

I met Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1971 in Rishikesh and studied with him at Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in Mumbai from 1972-75. At the end of the course, he encouraged me to become an academic. Consequently, I was a member of the Philosophy Department at California State University, Fresno, for more than 30 years. Last Spring I taught a seminar at the Graduate Theological Union. Pujya Swamiji took great interest in developing a program for the study of Hinduism at this institution. I would hope that he might have found it rewarding that an American student with no previous exposure to Advaita Vedanta could produce a well-honed analysis paper on a passage from the Shastra.

It would be meaningful to her and to the program at GTU if her paper were published. Hopefully, it would be valued by all those who read it.

Thank you for your consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,

Ann

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