

॥निर्वाणषट्कम्॥

Nirvanashatkam of Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada

(English translation and notes by S.N.Sastri)

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Introduction

Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada has blessed posterity with a large number of invaluable compositions. These can be grouped under three broad categories. The first category, meant for the intellectually most advanced, comprises his commentaries (Bhashya) on the Upanishads, Brahmasutra and the Bhagavadgita. The second category consists of independent works, known as prakarana granthas, which expound the gist of the Upanishads in simple language. These vary in length from half a verse to one thousand verses. In the third category fall devotional hymns.

Nirvanashatkam is a prakarana grantha consisting of six verses. Prakarana has been defined in the Vishnu Dharmottara Purana thus: “Prakarana is a text which explains some particular aspects of the Sastra and deals with certain secondary questions arising out of the explanations given”.

The instruction emphatically conveyed by the six verses of Nirvanashatkam is that identification with the body, mind, and senses is the root cause of all sorrow and that it should be given up and one should realize one’s real nature as none other than the supreme Brahman. This realization is what is known as liberation.

मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कारचित्तानि नाहं
न च श्रोत्रजिह्वे न च घ्राणनेत्रे ।
न च व्योमभूमिर्न तेजो न वायुः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥१

1.I am not the mind, nor the intellect, nor the ego-sense, nor the store-house of memories. I am not the ear, nor the tongue, nor the nose, nor the eyes. Nor am I the sky (space), or the earth, or fire, or air. I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: In all these verses the term ‘I’ stands for the pure atma. The mind is defined thus in Brihadaranyaka upanishad, 1.5.3—“Desire, resolve, doubt, faith, lack of faith, steadiness, unsteadiness, shyness, intelligence, fear—all these are nothing but the mind”. The idea brought out here is that all emotions are in the mind and not in the atma. A person identifies himself with his mind when he says, “I desire this”, “I

have resolved to do this”, etc. This verse points out that this identification is wrong and is due to ignorance of the fact that every one is in reality the atma or self, which is identical with the supreme Brahman. The question arises, why have the intellect, ego-sense and the chittam been mentioned separately, when they are all included in the mind itself? The reason is that, though the mind is only one, it is given four different names in Vedanta according to the four different functions performed by it. This has been explained by Sri Sankara in Vivekachudamani in slokas 95 and 96 as below:

“The one antahkarana or inner organ is known by four different names, manas, buddhi, ahankara and chittam according to the different functions. When the mind cogitates it is called manas. When it comes to a decision it is called buddhi. When it stores memories it is called chittam. When it identifies itself with each of these functions it is known as ahankara. The manner in which these functions take place can be explained by taking an illustration. I am walking along the road and I see at a distance a person whose gait seems to resemble that of a certain friend of mine, named Raman. I begin to debate whether the person I see at a distance is Raman or not. This function of debating is what is called ‘manas’. When he comes nearer and I am able to see his face clearly, I compare it with the memory of the face of Raman stored in my mind. This memory is ‘chittam’. If I find that the two tally, I decide that he is Raman and I greet him. This function of deciding is called ‘buddhi’. The performer of all these three functions is ‘I’, which is known as ‘ahankara’. The term ‘manas’ is also generally used to denote all these four collectively, when these distinctions are not intended.

By the statement “I am not the mind, etc.”, we are asked not to identify ourselves with these activities of the mind and to look upon ourselves as the pure atma which is actionless and is a mere witness of the activities of the mind. In this way we will not be affected by the joys and sorrows that arise in the mind. In the Bhagavadgita, 3.27, the Lord says that all actions are performed by the body, mind and senses, but because of delusion every one thinks that he is the doer.

A person identifies himself with his body and his sense organs when he says, “I am stout, I am fair-complexioned, I hear, I taste, I smell, I see, etc”. The second line points out that this identification is also wrong and is due to delusion. The body is made up of the five elements, space, air, fire, water, and earth. By denying identification with these in the third line, identification with the physical body is denied.

The last line says that we are none other than the supreme Brahman which is existence-consciousness-bliss. The word Siva should not be mistaken to mean Lord Siva. Those who want to attack Advaita interpret this as meaning that Advaita asks the individual to arrogate to himself the status of God Himself. This is a wrong understanding. The term ‘Siva’ is used here in the same sense as in the Mandukya upanishad, 7, where it means ‘auspiciousness’ and denotes the supreme Brahman. The

identity declared by Advaita is not between the individual or jiva as such and God. What Advaita says is that the jiva as well as God are in reality none but the pure Brahman, with the vesture of the body, mind and senses in the case of the jiva and Maya in the case of God. These vestures are not real. When these unreal vestures are negated, what remains in both cases is only the pure Brahman.

The body and mind have only empirical reality, i.e. they appear to be real only until the dawn of self-knowledge. Atma, which is identical with Brahman, is alone the absolute reality which is eternal and changeless. Thus the very essence of Advaita Vedanta, namely, the identity of the jivatma and paramatma is brought out in this verse and in all the subsequent verses.

न च प्राणसंज्ञो न वै पञ्चवायुः ।
न वा सप्तधातुर्न वा पञ्चकोशः ।
न वाक् पाणिपादौ न चोपस्थपायू
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥२

2. I am not what is known as the life-breath, nor am I the five vital airs. I am not the seven 'dhatu's or constituents of the body. I am not the five sheaths. I am not speech, nor the hands, nor the feet. I am not the genital organ, nor the organ of excretion. I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: The praana or life breath is given five names in Vedanta according to the five functions performed by it. These are what are spoken of as the five vital airs in this sloka. The five vital airs are praana, vyaana, apaana, samaana, and udaana. These are described in Sri Sankara's Bhashya on Prasnopanishad. 3.5, thus:--- He (praana) places apaana, a division of himself, in the two lower apertures, as engaged in the work of ejecting the excreta. Praana himself, who occupies the position of the sovereign, resides in the eyes and the ears and issues out through the mouth and nostrils. In the navel is samaana, which is so called because it assimilates all that is eaten or drunk, distributes them equally in all parts of the body and effects digestion. Udaana, another division of praana, moves throughout the body and functions upwards. It leads the soul out of the body at the time of death and takes it to other worlds according to one's punya and paapa. Vyaana regulates praana and apaana and is the cause of actions requiring strength. All these are only air and are therefore insentient. Kathopanishad, 2.2.5 says, "Mortals do not live by praana or apaana, but by something else on which these two depend". They depend on the atma which is what gives

them sentiency. Here we are told not to identify ourselves with the life-breath.

The seven dhatus are the constituents of the body such as marrow, fat, flesh, blood, lymph, skin, and the cuticle.

The five sheaths- These are described in the Taittiriya upanishad. The physical body is the outermost sheath. It is called the annamayakosha or sheath of food because it is nourished by food. Within this is the praanamayakosha or sheath of vital air, which is made up of the vital air with its five divisions and the organs of action, namely, speech, hands, feet, the genitals and the organ of excretion. The next inner sheath is the manomayakosha or sheath of the mind, which is made up of the mind and the five organs of perception, namely, ear, eye, and the senses of smell, taste, and touch. The next sheath is vijnaanamayakosha or the sheath of the intellect. This consists of the intellect or buddhi and the five organs of perception. The innermost sheath is the anandamayakosha or sheath of bliss. This is the primal ignorance or avidya which is the cause of transmigratory existence. These five sheaths constitute the body-mind complex. The instruction is that we should not identify ourselves with these which are all ephemeral and always undergoing changes.

The third line says that we are not the five organs of action. The last line is the same as in the first sloka.

न मे द्वेषरागौ न मे लोभमोहौ
मदो नैव मे नैव मात्सर्यभावः ।
न धर्मो न चार्थो न कामो न मोक्षः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥३

3. I do not have any aversion or attachment, nor do I have greed, delusion, pride, or jealousy. I do not hanker after Dharma, wealth, pleasures, or liberation (the four purusharthas). I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: All the emotions such as likes, dislikes, greed, etc., belong to the mind and so the atma has no connection with them. The rules of Dharma apply only when there is identification with the body-mind complex. The atma has no desire for wealth or pleasures. The atma is ever liberated. It is only when the atma is identified with the body-mind complex that there is the notion of bondage and it is only then that liberation has to be sought. The pure atma is ever free. A person who has become totally free from identification with his body and mind is already liberated. As far as the atma itself is concerned, it has neither bondage nor liberation, just as there is neither day nor night in the sun itself.

न पुण्यं न पापं न सौख्यं न दुःखं
न मन्त्रो न तीर्थं न वेदा न यज्ञाः ।
अहं भोजनं नैव भोज्यं न भोक्ता
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥४

4. There is no such thing as merit or sin for me. Nor is there joy or sorrow. I have no need for mantras, or pilgrimage, or Vedas, or sacrifices. I am neither the enjoyed nor the enjoyer, nor enjoyment. I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: All these are only for the jiva who identifies himself with his body and mind. The atma is pure, untainted, and actionless. Once a person has realized that he is the pure atma, he has no need of mantras, pilgrimage, etc., because there is nothing more to be attained. The joy and sorrow referred to in this sloka are those which arise due to external circumstances. These have a beginning and an end and these pertain only to the mind and not the atma. The atma is of the very nature of supreme eternal bliss.

I am neither the enjoyed nor the enjoyer, nor enjoyment – What is enjoyed is an object. So this means that the atma is not an object. The enjoyer is one who performs an action, a doer. So this means that the atma is not a doer. Enjoyment is an act. The atma is not an act.

न मे मृत्युशङ्का न मे जातिभेदः
पिता नैव मे नैव माता न जन्म ।
न बन्धुर्न मित्रं गुरुर्नैव शिष्यः
चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥५

5. I have no possibility of death, nor distinction of caste. I have no father, nor mother. I have no birth. I have no relations, nor friend, nor guru, nor disciple. I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: All the relationships exist only as long as a person looks upon himself as the body-mind complex. The atma is eternal and so it has no birth and no death.

अहं निर्विकल्पो निराकाररूपो
विभुर्व्याप्य सर्वत्र सर्वेन्द्रियाणि ।

सदा मे समत्वं न मुक्तिर्न बन्धः

चिदानन्दरूपः शिवोऽहं शिवोऽहम् ॥६

6. I am unconditioned (and so free from all attributes). I am formless. I am all-pervading. I am beyond the organs. I am ever the same. There is neither bondage nor liberation for me. I am the supreme auspiciousness of the form of consciousness-bliss. I am the auspiciousness.

Note: The pure atma is not conditioned or limited by the body and mind. The atma, being identical with Brahman, is all-pervading and changeless. Bondage is nothing but identification with the body and mind. This is due to ignorance of our real nature. When this ignorance is destroyed by the knowledge of our real nature it will be realized that there never was any bondage at all. It is not as if every one is in bondage and becomes liberated on attaining self-knowledge. Every one is in reality none other than the supreme Brahman even before the dawn of self-knowledge. Liberation is not the production of a new state that did not exist earlier. Liberation is only the realization that one has always been Brahman but has been wrongly thinking of himself as a limited being. This can be understood by taking the classic example of the rope being mistaken for a snake. When a light is brought and it is found that there is only a rope, no one will say that there was previously a snake, but now there is only a rope. Similarly it is wrong to say that there was previously bondage and after the dawn of knowledge there is liberation. In reality there is neither bondage nor liberation, but both are attributed to the jiva due to ignorance.
