

*Qualifications of the aspirant**

«Think of Accord, speak about partaking, give comprehension, move with the rhythm of Beauty, live the tone of Love-Truth: the disciple of the “Pathway of Fire” proceeds with Dignity, with Composure, with Gentleness»¹

Raphael

10. *The learned ascetic (paṇḍita saṁnyasya) who wants to realize ātman must transcend all actions (sarvakarmāṇi) and break the chains of births and deaths (bhavabandha-vimuktaye)*

11. *The function of meritorious actions is to purify the mind (cittasya), not to comprehend reality (vastu). The realization of ātman is always the fruit of discerning investigation (vicāreṇa) and not of meritorious actions, however numerous*

12. *Only with the correct investigation (samyagvicārataḥ) one will come to comprehend that the rope has been mistaken for the illusory snake, and thus put an end to all fear and suffering (duḥkha)*

In *Vedānta* meritorious deeds are not what provides liberation; they are useful, if at all, as the preliminary path to purification. They constitute, however, a powerful means of elevation. To comprehend this concept better, we need analyze two points of *Advaita* metaphysics:

1. The goal of the path of *Vedānta*
2. Its view of the empirical world

With regard to the first point it must be clarified that *Advaita Vedānta* does not intend, through worthy acts, to conquer the “heavenly beatitudes” or a better rebirth in a more qualified body or in some higher sphere. It does not aim at ingratiating some divine Entity or some hierarchy of Beings, however lofty. The aim is “abstraction from

* Excerpt from, Śaṅkara *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Translation from the Sanskrit, and Commentary, by Raphael. Aurea Vidyā, 2006

¹ Raphael, *The Threefold Pathway of Fire*, Ch. “All-pervading Fire” *sūtra* 18. Aurea Vidyā. New York, 2000

the manifest”, overcoming of all dualities, whatever order they may belong to, and reintegration in the Non-Manifest, in the Non-born, in which precisely all *qualities* of the three *guṇa* vanish. This total renunciation of the phenomenal complex, which extends from the lowest stage to the highest, is not a question of “actions”, because these belong to the manifest. And so, if the vedāntic *Yogi* undertakes actions, and in fact there is no *Yogi* that does not, this constitutes a pure act of love towards all beings, without any attachment or personal interest. It is an innocent movement of love-charity which the Realized undertakes without being accountable to others and at the same time without opposing anyone else.

With reference to the second point, which completes the first, it is necessary to synthesize the metaphysical vision of the *Advaita Vedānta* of Śaṅkara.

Sūtra 246 says:

«Neither this [*parajīva*] nor this [*jīva*] are real (*satyam*), for they are only imagined, as the snake is imagined in the rope or as a dream [is imagined]...»

... What is the Real? It is that which is permanent, constant, that which knows neither birth nor death, that which does not undergo any change, that which is beyond time-space, and without cause; that which is self-generated. If something is real-absolute it must have a life that is totally free, on to itself, an inherent existence, beyond anything else. Whether other things exist or not, for that which we are considering is of no importance, precisely because it exists as independent, unalterable and, let us say, absolute reality. If instead what we are considering has no autonomous, independent, intrinsic possibility of its own, it means that its existence depends on something else and is subordinated to it, and that it receives its life from it ...

Reality is such if not subordinated to other realities. The element water, which we see in such abundance on our sphere of existence: is it real or not real? If it is real, it must have a life of its own, unconditioned, autonomous, without any dependence whatsoever; it must exist beyond time and space as well as within time and space, always and everywhere.

On the other hand if it is not real, obviously its appearance, its emergence into the formal field is due to another factor which remains hidden and invisible to our eyes, but which must necessarily be. Science maintains that water is a simple compound of hydrogen and oxygen, and that if we separate these two elements the water vanishes as a dream when we awake up. Thus if the element water is there and is not there, appears or disappears, it is nothing but a phenomenon, a mirage of the two elements hydrogen and oxygen projected by the potentialities of *māyā*. If these two elements remain in their essence even when the water disappears, we must conclude that for the water, phenomenal appearance, the absolute consists of these two elements. Furthermore, we

can state that the two elements appear to our sight for a moment as the compound of water, as the rope can appear to us for a moment as a snake.

In the same way, our gross physical body cannot be considered to be real, because it does not have a life that is autonomous and absolute. Being relative, it must necessarily depend on something else which, though veiled from our eyes, persists beyond corporeal birth and death. But, if the unlimited objects-forms are nothing but continuous-discontinuous phenomena, vanishing soon after they have appeared, what, we can ask ourselves, then remains? Is it nothingness, annihilation, a total void? Not at all. Śaṅkara's answer is that Reality remains: unique, alone, indefectible, everywhere present, never born, always the same, eternally true and uncaused: *Brahman*, One-without-a-second.

...

«On the way (odós) only a discourse remains, that: it “is”. On this way there are numerous signs: Being is ungenerated and imperishable ... motionless and endless. It was not at one time, nor will it be, since it is now altogether everything, one, continuous. In fact, where will you search for its origin? How and whence would it have grown? From non-being? I don't allow you even to say or think that... For It all of those things which the mortals have established, convinced that they are true, will be names...»²

...

The problem being put in this way, it becomes obvious that in order to comprehend ourselves as “unqualified Essence” an act of truly intellectual-intuitive discernment is necessary. Because in fact no action, whether it be good or bad, will ever be able to tear us away from this metaphysical ignorance (*avidyā*) into which we have fallen.

«... It is necessary to detach ourselves from these things and to stop looking and, instead, by changing the corporeal view with another kind of view, to reawaken that faculty we all possess but few employ»³

What condemns the individual to *samsāra*, and hence to identification with the veiling aggregates, is ignorance, and ignorance can be eliminated not by actions but by knowledge⁴.

...

We mistake the rope for the snake, the gross body for the unconditioned *ātman*, the

² Parmenides, *On nature*, Frg.8: 1-8, 38-39. Bompiani, Milano. (Italian Edition).

³ Plotinus, *Enneads*: I, 6, 8, 24-25, Bompiani, Milano. (Italian Edition)

⁴ «Since it is not in opposition to it, action cannot destroy ignorance; only knowledge destroys ignorance...» Śaṅkara *ātmabodha sūtra* 3. Aurea Vidya. New York, 2003

relative for the absolute as a consequence of a wrong sensory-mental perception which in its turn is caused by *māyā*: phenomenal appearance and disappearance. If for some religions it is sin, disobedience to the Deity, and so on, that has made a slave of the individual; for *Vedānta* metaphysics it is metaphysical ignorance-*avidyā*-nescience that has done this. The very moment we dispel this ignorance, which is not absolute, within ourselves, Reality appears to us in its authentic and uncontaminated splendor because it has never, in fact, abandoned us. Thus the discernment between real and non-real is *conditio sine qua non* which must pervade the consciousness of the person aspiring to liberation, and no one but himself can pull away that obscuring and deforming phenomenal veil which causes him to mistake the rope for the snake. Teachers and all liberated souls cannot replace us in this work of catharsis and of ascetic discipline. They can merely indicate the way to right knowing.

«And yet we speak and write to guide others towards Him, to arouse them from the sleep of words to the wakefulness of vision, like those who show the way to someone who wants to see something... but the seeing is entirely the personal work of those who had the will to contemplate»⁵

The ethical imperative of *Vedānta* places on the individual the sense of personal responsibility to find his own authentic nature and his own essence. It is an active and realizative metaphysics, not quiescent or quietistic.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads*: VI, 9, 4, 10-15. Op. cit.