

An Advaitin's Self-cognition as an Ineffable Spiritual 'Experience'

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All experiences including spiritual experiences, whether enjoyable or disagreeable, are phenomenal and arise from a sense of subject-object duality — the experiencer is the subject and the experienced is the object. Brahman is non-dual. Everything other than Brahman, especially the world, is experienced with its plurality of names and forms in our waking, dream and dreamless sleep states, and is dual. All experiences take place in the mere presence of Brahman as Witness (*Sākṣin*) and not as a promoter or participant in any experience. This being so, what is this nature of oneself according to Advaita Vedānta? By saying 'I am Brahman,' (*ahaṁ brahmāsmi* – *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10), 'This self is Brahman' (*ayam ātmā brahma* – *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 1.2), 'You are That [Brahman]' (*tat tvam asi* – *Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7), and so on, the Upaniṣads indicate that Brahman is the essential nature of oneself.

Brahman is defined as Pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*) in the various Upaniṣads — 'Brahman is Consciousness' (*prajñānam brahma* – *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3.3), 'Brahman is Bliss' (*ānando brahmeti ...* – *Taittirīya Up.* 3.6) (*satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma* – *Up.*) and so on. A consolidated definition of Brahman as Pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*) is found in various instances in the *Nṛsimhottara* (or *Uttara Nṛsimha*) *Tāpanī Upaniṣad* (*U.Nr.*

T. Up.)— All this is Brahman; It is of the nature of True Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. (*U.Nr. T. Up. 7.5*). Further, the Upaniṣad says that the preceptor *Brahmā* (not to be confused with *Brahman*) explained what Existence, Consciousness and Bliss are “not in articulated speech but silently through actual realization of the Self (*ātman*)” (... *avacanenaivānubhavannuvāca – U.Nr. T. Up. 7.6-7*). And the preceptor adds: *Brahman is the name of the supreme being of transcendent bliss. (paramānandasya brahmaṇo nāma brahmeti ... – U.Nr. T. Up. 7.7)*

Swami Vidyāranya sums up these thoughts in his *Pañcadaśī* 13.63 as follows—

Brahman is of the nature of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss; the world is of the nature of names and forms. The definition of Brahman is heard in the [Uttara Nṛsimha] Tāpanī Upaniṣad as Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. (sac-cit-sukhātmakam brahma; nāma-rūpātmakam jagat|tāpanīye śrutam brahma; sac-cid-ānanda-lakṣaṇam)

Pañcadaśī 11.11 presents Bliss as of three kinds —

Bliss is of three kinds: Brahman-bliss, bliss arising out of knowledge and bliss produced by contact with other objects... (ānandaḥ trividho brahmānando vidyāsukham tathā|viśayānanda it[i] ...)

Bliss arising out of knowledge and bliss produced by contact with other objects are transitory. In this, all experiential pleasures, joy and happiness are reflections of Brahman-bliss in the mind when the sense organs come into contact with people or an object, all of which are external to the enjoyer. But Brahman being changeless and eternal, Brahman-bliss is non-experiential, changeless and eternal. Therefore, one who knows his essential nature to be Brahman, knows his essential nature to be Bliss from which all other pleasures and happiness derive their existence.

All that is in the realm of duality is fraught with the anxiety to acquire (*yoga*) and the anxiety to safeguard what is acquired (*kṣema*) arising out of the fear of losing what is acquired. *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.5 very clearly warns against succumbing to the transitory attractions offered by duality —

Assuredly, fear arises from duality (dvitīyād vai bhayaṁ bhavati).

Pañcadaśī 13.5 (Line 2) elaborates on what those fears are from which the knower of Brahman-bliss is free from —

This anxiety regarding [past] actions [good or bad] which consumes others like fire, does not scorch this [knower of Brahman-bliss]. (etameva tapennaiṣā cintā karmāgni-sambhṛtā)

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.2.8, echoed verbatim by *Pañcadaśī* 13.7, enumerates the freedom one enjoys from the fear of the ill-effects of past actions when Self-ignorance is sublated by Self-knowledge —

Upon his seeing the Supreme [that is Brahman], the knots of his heart are severed, all his doubts are quelled, and all his [past] actions are made to waste away. (bhidyate hṛdayagrantiḥ; chidyante sarvasaṁśayāḥ | kṣīyante cāśya karmāṇi; tasmīn drṣṭe parāvare ||)

Therefore, in his *Upadeśa Sāhasrī*, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya reiterates the importance of Self-knowledge also known as Brahman-knowledge

Assuredly, there is nothing greater to be attained in this world or other worlds [that is worlds of gods] than the 'attainment' of one's own nature [which is Self-knowledge]. (nahīha lābho 'bhyasti kaścana; svarūpalābhāt sa ito hi nānyataḥ) – 2.16. 74 (a,b)

On attaining this [Self-]knowledge which is very pure, one becomes liberated from everything. (idaṁ hi vijñānam atīva nirmalaṁ saṁprāpya mukto 'tha bhaveśca sarvataḥ) – 2.16. 73 – Line 2

It is non-dual Brahman alone which can provide security and happiness, since It is eternal. However, the difficulty of 'knowing' that Brahman is indicated by *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.25 —

That Supreme Self is the birthless, indestructible, ageless, fearless Brahman. It is indeed beyond description. It is beyond imagination. It is to be known thus. (sa vā eṣa mahān aja ātmā amaro ajaro abhayo brahma | abhayaṁ vai brahma | abhayaṁ hi vai brahma bhavati ya evaṁ veda).

The same difficulty of describing Brahman and the assurance of security is 'knowing' that Brahman is said by *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.9.1 —

The knower of Brahman-bliss from where words along with the mind recede without reaching [It] does not fear from anything. (yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha|ānandaṁ brahmaṇo vidvān na bibheti kutaścāneti)

This knowing Brahman is not an action of acquiring but realising that 'I am Brahman.' Philosophies like Kashmir Śaivism which are founded on Śaivite Advaita term this process of 'knowing' as *re-cognition* (*pratyabhijñā*). Thereafter, by the grace of Lord Śiva, the individual self (jīva) attains liberation. On the other hand, according to the Advaitins, realising that 'I am Brahman' sublates the jīva's ignorance which was the cause of bondage (saṁsāra or bondage). This sublation (*bādha*) of ignorance is akin to the dispelling of darkness with the appearance of

light. And the very sublation of Self-ignorance is liberation (mokṣa). According to a few other Advaitins, realising that ‘I am Brahman’ results in the jīva’s identifying itself as Brahman, and this identity (*aikya*) is liberation. In either case, the jīva is liberated here and now in this very life as soon as it has realised its real nature. It is no more an ignorant jīva, but a realised wise person (*jñāni*). It continues to live with that realisation until its *prārabdha karma* is exhausted. To an onlooker, a jñāni appears like any other person. Only the jñāni knows his internal transformation. Accepting the nature of the world as one of change, the jñāni is unperturbed or is not unduly perturbed by the changes of fortune brought to him by his *prārabdha*. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.9 exalts a Brahma-jñāni thus—

A knower of Brahman is Brahman Itself. (brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati.)

It was said at the outset that all experiences, including spiritual, are phenomenal in nature and that all experiences take place in the presence of Brahman. There are several spiritual experiences which are mystic in their contents. Since the duality of subject-object as experiencer-experienced persist in such experiences, they fall under the realm of phenomenal experiences. Not so with Self-realisation (*Ātmānubhava*) or Brahman-realisation (*Brahmānubhava*). It is not a phenomenal experience. It is one of Self-cognition as the ‘subject’ of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, that is Brahman.

The Cambridge dictionary defines the term ‘ineffable as ‘causing so much emotion, especially pleasure, that it cannot be described.’ *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* Mantra 6 speaks of Brahman or Self as one beyond perception, grasping, source, having no attributes, eyes or ears, having no hands or feet, is eternal, omnipresent, all-pervading, extremely subtle, undiminishing, and the source of everything. Similarly, in a long definition of Brahman, *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* Mantra 7 mentions It to be beyond thought (*acintya*) and beyond description (*avyapadeśya*). Extending the definition of Brahman to Brahman-cognition, a Brahma-jñāni’s spiritual ‘experience’ of Self-realisation or Brahman-realisation in the form of Brahman-cognition is ineffable as can be discerned from the various Upaniṣadic statements cited above.