

## A discourse on the religious interpretations of Sankaracharya and Vivekananda regarding the concept of 'Jiva' in the Philosophy of Vedanta

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### Abstract

As a practical Vedantist, Vivekananda identifies the true nature of Atman with Brahman itself. In accordance with him, we must say that the soul is immortal, pure, omnipresent and omniscient. Like the Advaita, Vivekananda too maintains that the self, the Atman is in everybody among us, and so it is omnipresent. The Atman in bondage is called jiva. Vivekananda puts that the real nature of man is freedom. He also says that freedom means self-determination. More or less in a Vedantic style, Vivekananda describes that the apparent incompatibility of Karma and freedom is merely apparent. According to the Advaita, when the soul becomes perfect, it must become, one with Brahman, the Absolute.

Sankara, on the other hand, affirms that though non-difference of the finite selves from Brahman is the ultimate truth (Jiva-brahmaiva naparah), the jiva being under the sway of avidya or maya, fails to realize this truth. Only when right knowledge dawns dispelling ignorance that the jiva recognizes Brahman in him. But this knowledge is not an end to itself, rather it may be said that knowledge serves the purpose of a means for the highest realization, the realization of identity between the seeker and the sought, the jiva and Brahman. To become identified with Brahman is the aim of the finite being, to achieve accurate knowledge about the world and the multiplicity around him is the way for attaining that goal. Sankara expects that the practical earthly life too, can be transcended. From such a transcended point of view, everything connected with the world turns out to be false and unreal.

**Key Words :** Atman, Absolute, Bondage, Freedom, Jiva, Karma.

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### Introduction :

Vivekananda clearly says that the world possesses its reality, i.e., it is real so long as we, the finite selves, are dwelling. Each and every finite being, puts Vivekananda, can realize the latent infiniteness within him to make journey from jivana-mukti to Videha-mukti. He, unlike Sankara, accords to the world reality instead of saying Jagat-mithya. For Vivekananda, merely 'Brahma satyam' concept cannot serve the required purpose of the true identification of the finite self with the Infinite Self, the Brahman. Vivekananda does not support Sankara's view regarding the relative existence of the created world. According to Sankara, the world exists only in relation to Pure Consciousness. Pure Consciousness is the base on which the world-appearance is superimposed. Abstracted from that relation of dependence on Brahman, the world is non-entity, just as the rainbow is a non-entity if viewed in abstraction from the raindrops. Vivekananda puts that the world can never just be a

relatively true entity, it possesses both empirical and transcendental reality, i.e., it is the reality where man can realize the true nature and character of his own self, i.e., the non-difference between the finite self and the Infinite Self.

### **A Discourse on the Religious Interpretations of Sankaracharya and Vivekananda Regarding the Concept of**

#### **'Jiva' in the Philosophy of Vedanta:**

To Sankara, the individual self or jiva is of the nature of pure consciousness and bliss, and is realized in deep sleep. It is unborn and eternal Brahman. It is the object of spiritual quest. It is the non-dual peace (santam advayam), the same throughout (samatam gatam), the self-established (svastha), tranquil and pure (visarada). It is sleepless, dreamless, luminous (sakrd vibhata), all knowledge (sarvajna), shining by itself, and needing no other light. The self or jiva is of the nature of supreme happiness (sukham anuttamam) and release (sanirvanam). It is, in fact, indescribable, because it possesses no name and form (anamakam arupakam).

Sankara says that the Self is experienced as the Absolute Reality in the state of turiya, the pure consciousness. It is raised above the differences of subject and object. All unreal things will disappear, but the self, the ever present reality, remains unchanged. "Turiya is only another name for the self. Nevertheless, the self is here and now, it is the only reality. There is nothing else. So long as identification with the body lasts, the world seems to lie outside us. Only realize the self, and they are not".<sup>1</sup>

We, therefore, must recognize the existence of the Self. Those who are not accepting the existence of the self, they are denying their own existence. Hence, truly speaking, the Self cannot be turned down by anybody. The self cannot be an object of knowledge. Everyone is conscious of the existence of his own self. The self, the base of all knowledge, cannot be known like ordinary objects. Yet, it cannot be rejected.

The jiva or the individual soul or the self may, therefore, be named as a fundamental principle and self-proved. The self is the basis of all proofs and also prior to all proofs. It is to be noted that the proof of the self or Atman refers to the proof of an eternal Brahman. Atman, therefore, is called Brahman.

Sankara puts that the self is both known and unknown. The 'I' must be distinguished from the not 'I' which includes not only the outer world, the body and its organs but also the whole area of understanding. The 'I'-thought presents the concept that I am the agent, the perceiver or the enjoyer. But when I realize the non-dual self, the duality between the subject and the object will vanish and so egoism becomes an empty form.

From the epistemological attitude, the Atman is known as individual self while from the ontological point of view, it is known as Atman, the highest self. The Atman as individual self is our own self. The individual soul is believed to be located in the innermost part of the individual. Man is the result of the creativity of the Atman.

The Atman is the core of human personality, the truth of truths (satyasya satyam), the centre of centres (Kendrasya Kendram) in man. The Atman or the jiva may be regarded as our true being. The whole formation of the self or the Atman is the universal consciousness. This Atman, the highest spirit is the ground of all beings. Purusha is sometimes used for the Atman which the subjective light of consciousness that is reflected in all beings.

Atman is said to be the all-pervading principle. It is smaller than the smallest and greater than the greatest. It is immanent in all the universal entities whether big or small. Being immanent, it still transcends them all. It is bodiless though dwelling in the body; it is not changing though associated with changing things. Really analyzing, the individual consciousness is nothing but the all-pervasive

principle. The individualization is owing to one's ignorance of one's true nature which may be called a shadow of the Supreme Being.

Though the individual soul is basically the Supreme Being, it is not aware of this fact. The reason is that man is mostly extrovert owing to the outgoing tendencies. Whenever one controls the outgoing tendencies of the senses and looks inward, one will realize one's true nature. The jivas, who are ignorant of their true self, who have not realized the Reality by being introvert through yogic practices and meditation, see plurality here. They consider the diversity as real because of their wrong knowledge. They are continuously governed by desire. Such ignorant jivas, after death, take up another body as their knowledge and karma. In such context, the Upanisads put that to realize Atman, the control of mind and senses are effective ways. One realizes the true nature of Reality after attaining true knowledge.

Sankara draws a difference between the supreme soul and the individual souls. The former is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and is free from the very beginning. But the individual souls are limited in wisdom and are entangled in the eternal round of samsara. The individual souls are not separate from the supreme soul though the former are different from supreme soul from the empirical point of view. The fact is that the true nature of the Supreme Atman has been concealed by the upadhis. Ignorance imposes the upadhis on the Supreme Atman for which it is treated as an individual atman. The oldest Upanishads recognize merely one soul. The atman who alone exists and creates the universe; who as jiva enters into this universe. Ultimately, existence, consciousness and bliss are one. Brahman is Pure Existence from the metaphysical point of view. Epistemologically, It is Pure Consciousness and ethically, It is Pure Bliss. It is the Absolute. The Self appears finite owing to our ignorance. The infinite Self stands revealed by wisdom. The Advaita Vedanta of Sankara asserts that the Divine is called svaprakasa-caitanya, the self-luminous consciousness.

For great Plato, the soul-substance is immortal. He puts in the Republic, 'soul is substance and substance is indestructible'. Sankara comments that the individual self, with its capability, consciously realizes its unity with the eternal Self. The universal Spirit is the ideal for the individual self for which he strives. To Sankara, the highest aim of life is to realize Brahman. As the Absolute is indescribable, the union with the Absolute is too indescribable.

On the other hand, Vivekananda deeply emphasizes on the potentialities of human individuals. He says that every human individual is an organized unity of the three elements—the body, the mind and the self or Atman. The body is the outward layer of the Self. The mind is the internal layer of the Self. The Self is the kernel of man. It is the Prime Mover of the body and the mind. It is immaterial in comparison with the body and the mind. The body, the mind and the Self are the three various states of existence of the one whole—Brahman. Sometimes, Vivekananda put comment that the body and the mind are nothing but only appearances. The Self is all that exists in the universe. Due to the imposition of name and form, Brahman appears as different. Vivekananda, very frequently, asserts that the world and its individuals are as much real as Brahman. The individual with the body, the mind and the self is real. Brahman reveals Itself into different levels of existence. But, it does not express equally at all the levels of existence. There is a hierarchy of beings. Man is the supreme form of revelation of Brahman in the universe.

Vivekananda, in this respect, has drawn a distinction between the apparent man and the real man. The apparent man is constituted by the superstructure of the body-mind organism. The Self is the real man, the reality. Vivekananda says that the Real Man is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. The apparent man is only a limit of that Real Man. So, the mythologies are true that the apparent man is merely a dim reflection of the Real Man. The Real Man, the Spirit, is not bound by time and space and must, therefore, be free.

Like Sankara, Vivekananda also identifies the real nature of Atman with Brahman itself. Atman is basically identical with Brahman, the Absolute. "Atma ca Brahma"<sup>2</sup>. The real man is the soul, Self,

Atman that is nothing but Brahman. Essentially, there is no difference between man and man. Man is divine. The elaborate Vedanta philosophy was reduced by Vivekananda into two basic principles:

1. The divinity of man
2. The essential spirituality of life.

Behind all diversity, the Self is the only Reality. To Vivekananda, the apparent diversity does not affect the real nature of man. The Self, by nature, is pure. It reflects Itself from the lowest worm to the highest and most perfect being. It is beyond all thought. It is beginningless and endless. It is immovable, intangible, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent Being. The Self is formless, all-comprehending and all-pervading in nature. Since it is formless, it cannot be confined in space. It acts through the mind and the body. Therefore, action can be seen in and through them.

According to Vivekananda, each work we do, each thought we think, produces an impression on the mind. This impression is called Samskara. As the samskara acts on mind, Atman imagines Itself to be taken from place to place. But, Atman possesses nothing to do with the mind and samskara. The bondage is owing to the identification of the Atman with the moving nature and its products. The nature moves prior to the Atman. The Atman comprises of the representation of this movement. The Atman thinks ignorantly that It is moving. Then, the Atman is in bondage. But, when It finds that It never moves, then It achieves freedom. The jiva is the Atman in bondage. The jiva gets revelation in higher or lower forms as per the law of reincarnation. The individual self travels through higher and lower forms, migrating from one to another as per the samskaras. It receives freedom only in the highest form. Man is the highest of all forms.

The universe is said to be a projection of Brahman. The very being of the universe is found in Brahman. It moves on to go back to the source. The case is similar with the soul. The universe being projected from Brahman passes through all sorts of life, lower and higher. And ultimately it is in mankind. Man is the nearest approach to Brahman. The soul realizes its oneness with Brahman in man. The soul returns to its source—Brahman. The movement towards Brahman is the great struggle of life. In nature and in every form of life, the struggle is the movement to go back to the centre and be at rest. In this respect, Vivekananda asserts that there must be something permanent behind the functions of the mind, body and sense-organs to unify all the various impressions. That is called the soul of man. There is a soul behind the universal mind in the universe called God. It is the soul of man to the individual. This soul of man remains the same amidst all changes. The universe witnesses both change and changelessness. The soul, the mind and the body are not three separate existences. The organism made of these three is really one. It is the same thing which appears as the body, as the mind and as the thing beyond mind and body. But, simultaneously, it is not all these. One sees the body, is unaware of the mind and does not see the soul. For one, who sees the soul, the body and the mind disappear. One who is engaged in motion and change never sees the unchanging Absolute. In the similar way, one who sees the unchanging Absolute, motion and change disappear to him. So, there is one existence appears as many and pervades the entire universe. The Reality is of the Self, Soul and Atman. Since the Self is a perfect unity, it is not subject to evolution and change. The Self is good essentially. It is invisible and infinite. Man is essentially the Self. Man is infinite. He struggles forward through the limitations until he reaches the infinite nature of him.

Vivekananda says that the real nature of man is freedom. "The realization of the real nature of man is the ultimate human destiny. The ultimate goal is the re-union with God-with the divinity which is the real nature of man"<sup>3</sup>. Man is essentially free. But, he must discover his freedom. Vivekananda calls upon to realize the innermost being. He says that all of us, consciously or unconsciously, are marching towards the goal-the realization of the Self-towards freedom. Here, Vivekananda gets similarity with Sankara. Vivekananda's concept of the soul is very near to man.

Man, in Vivekananda's philosophy, has a prominent role to play with as Vivekananda declares that his philosophy requires man to highlight as centre of religious as well as social reformations.

Vivekananda enquires into the reality in his own way. To him, the real in man is a sort of a 'concentration of spiritual energy'. For him, man is a spirit. The word 'spirit' has a negative and a positive import. Generally speaking, the negative import is given more importance, as it is believed; spiritual thinking is not an ordinary one. Vivekananda does not reject these implications of the word 'spiritual'. He stresses that man is spiritual in positive terms. He has spent much time and energy in his life tenure with a view to determining the spiritual characters of man; Vivekananda's emphasis on that concept, i.e., spirituality, is so large that even the bodily aspects of man get spiritualized.

The picture of man, thus, in Vivekananda's philosophy may be said to be an united one of both physical and spiritual. He never neglected the importance of the physical nature of man. Vivekananda's asking about man to awaken own spirituality presupposes that there is a side of man which is somewhat different from and yet akin to his spiritual nature. That may be named as his physical nature

The human nature includes the bodily, the biological and the psychological aspects. The fact is that the body itself represents the physical nature of man. Vivekananda believes that man is superior to other beings due to the physical abilities. The brain-system yields man a distinction from every other species and with a unique status in the world. Again, for Vivekananda, this unique character in man is owing to the presence of spirituality in him. Though Vivekananda does not pose against the physical side of reality in respect of man, he believes that this expresses only his inferior nature. His real nature consists in his capacity of going beyond his own physical nature. Vivekananda explains the true nature of man as Soul-Force of Atman. Explaining Atman, Vivekananda has freely used even additional expressions. Referring to Bhagavat Gita, Vivekananda explains the Atman thus, "It is the self, beyond all thought, one without birth or death, whom the sword cannot pierce or fire burn, whom air cannot dry or water melt, the beginningless and endless, the unmovable, the intangible, the omniscient, the omnipotent Being, that it is neither the body nor the mind, but beyond them all"<sup>4</sup>. Through such description of the true nature of man, Vivekananda brings to light at least two unavoidable characteristics of the Atman. Firstly, he puts that this character of man possesses similarity with that of Divine nature; and secondly, it is clear that it is not an easy task to yield an exact analysis of this aspect of human being—especially in a language that we, as ordinary finite individuals, are capable of using as well as understanding.

As a Vedantist, in true sense of the term, Vivekananda has expressly put forward the similar voice in identifying the real nature of Atman with Brahman itself. The reasons behind Vivekananda's identification of the two are said to be similar to the reasons put forward by Vedanta. The important point is that unless these two are identified, the strict monistic character of reality cannot be maintained. Soul, as for example, can't be part of the One, because in that case the One will become union with parts within itself. Individual souls can't be treated also as manifestations of the Absolute as even in that case they would become separate realities over and above the Brahman. Hence, their difference is only apparent though they are basically identical.

Vivekananda endeavours to make a difference between the real and the apparent nature of souls in various manners. He reiterates that apparent nature does not affect the true nature of man. The self or soul is, in fact, one all-comprehending existence, and it merely appears to be manifold. In accordance with Vivekananda, we can be aware of this 'identity through certain experiences and realizations' as pointers towards this. The very realization that nature provides is almost a challenge to human being, and that human beings can unveil the mysteries of the nature, is itself an evidence of this Divine Nature. In addition to this, man possesses intrinsic ability to go 'beyond' may be said to be another evidence of this fact. If we go deep into human life either collectively or individually, we shall find that there is no upper limit—no boundaries which can be put around him and beyond which he

cannot proceed. Man's quest for what is truth knows no bounds. He looks for acquiring knowledge, for strengthening his personality by doing something good and noble, and yet he can still go ahead. This capability of self-transcendence is itself an important proof of the basic oneness of the Atman and Brahman.

Yet, Vivekananda uses to think that to understand the real nature of man, our capacity of understanding, realizing and mind-body mechanism together with our embodied existence are not adequate. Men have only glimpses of their power of their superhuman capabilities. Man's various spiritual pursuits can assist to make them realize this essential aspect of their nature.

Here, a question may be raised, if the soul is identical with the Brahman, why do we, then, have the experience of the plurality of soul? If the identity is a fact, then monism is also a fact, and a strict monistic system cannot have a place for many souls. This problem begets related many other problems—the problems about the plurality of souls, the problem regarding the relation between mind and body etc.

Vivekananda takes recourse to Vedanta for solution of these problems, but with a difference. In accordance with Vivekananda, the one Atman neither comes nor goes, it is neither born, nor does it die. Hence, the question of its re-incarnation does not arise. Following Vedanta especially that of Sankara, Vivekananda too believes that the Atman is, as a matter of fact, never deluded. The same Atman distinctly becomes aware in the state of realization about the dilution of selves and this illusion itself is a sporting play of the Atman.

In spite of such a description of the Atman appears to be exactly same to that of Vedanta. Vivekananda affirms unlike Vedanta, that the finite aspects of human beings should not be treated as completely untrue. So far as finite human beings ignorantly believe in the reality of the embodied state and in the plurality of selves, this aspect has a reality for him. The improvement, therefore, of mankind consists not in a complete negation of this aspect, but in its being raised and perfected. An ascetic who denounces and freely suppresses his material needs and demands may be a great man, but he is also great who is able to raise his bodily aspects to perfection.

Hence, it follows that freedom is the real nature of man. Freedom cannot be said to be a character or a quality belonging to the soul; it forms the very essence of the soul. A quality or a character and to which it belongs are different things, but freedom never belongs to soul, the soul is freedom. According to Vivekananda, freedom reflects the very essence of the soul, and in this way, soul is not really in bondage. Like Sankara and the ancient thinkers, Vivekananda too keeps faith that soul survives death of the body and that this survival supposes firstly the form of rebirth and finally the realization of immortality, of complete freedom. In this way, rebirth, in Vivekananda's thought is an aspect of immortality and the ultimate realization of immortality would mean finally getting out not only of this world but also of the cycle of births and rebirths. Vivekananda suggests that the ultimate destiny of man must consist in freedom from the state of bondage; true immortality can be achieved only when this 'cycle' from the birth to rebirth is finally stopped.

Vivekananda sustains that the jiva is an individual and the sum-total of all jivas is the Isvara. In the jiva, avidya or nescience is predominant but Isvara (God) controls Maya and independently project this world of moving and immovable things out of Himself. He said that Brahman transcends both the individual and collective aspects, the jiva and Isvara. In Brahman, there is no part. Brahman is not a distinct and separate substance from the jivas and universe. The qualified monists hold that it is Brahman that has transformed itself into jivas and the universe. The Advaitins, on the contrary, maintain that jiva and the universe have been only superimposed on Brahman. But in reality, there has been no modification in Brahman. The Advaitin says that the universe consists merely in name and form. When through meditation and other practices, we realize that names and forms are only appearances then only the transcendent Brahman remains.

Vivekananda, a true Vedantist, identifies the true nature of Atman with Brahman itself. He puts that all attempts at understanding the nature of the Infinite through external nature are a failure. It is merely the study of the internal nature, namely the analysis of the human soul that can help us to understand God. According to him, we must say that the soul is immortal, pure, omnipotent and omniscient. Like Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda, too, sustains that the self, the Atman is in everybody amongst us, and so it is omnipresent. He says that the Atman never comes nor goes, is never born nor dies. It is a nature moving before the Atman, and the reflection of this motion is on the Atman, and Atman ignorantly thinks, it is moving, and not nature. When the Atman thinks that it is in bondage, but when it comes to find it never moves, that it is omnipresent, then freedom comes. The Atman in bondage is called jiva.

Naturally, a relevant question rises—if the soul is identical with the Brahman, why do we have experience of the plurality of souls? Vivekananda, in reply, says quite in a different way from that of Vedanta that the plurality of selves and the experiences of births and deaths are only apparent. Like the Vedantist, he also believes that the Atman is never deluded, in the state of realization; the Atman clearly becomes aware that plurality of selves is an illusion which is a sporting play of the Atman. But unlike Vedanta, he asserts that the finite aspect of man should not be regarded as completely false. To him, as long as man ignorantly believes in the reality of the bodied state, this aspect bears reality for him.

#### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, we have found that Sankara's way emphasized more through intellectual pursuit—the study of the Upanisads, the Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita than in introspection and meditation. He succeeded through the realization identity of individual self-consciousness with the universal soul-consciousness, Atmajnanas-Brahmajnana. 'Thou art that', 'Tat Tvam asi' was Sankara's greatest revelation of the Upanisadic truth. The ultimate aim of life for Sankara, is not to find God but to attain Moksa. He identifies self or jiva with Brahman and as he asserts, the realization of the true nature of self is the realization of Brahman, the only Reality. Sankara has described the nature of the Self as follows-

“Svaym brahma svaym visnu

svaymindrah svaym sivah

svaym visvamidam sarvam

svasmadanyanna Kincana”<sup>5</sup>. The Self is Brahman, the Self is Visnu, the Self is Indra, the Self is Shiva; the Self is all this universe. Nothing exists except the Self.

Sankara, no doubt, laid more emphasis on one ultimate Reality, i.e. Brahman. But the mundane world of existence was not repudiated by him from the vyavaharika standpoint. He, however, attached relative value to the material world. Vivekananda, like Sankara, emphasized on Atmajnana, on our acquiring the habit of Atma-vidya, of seeing all beings as one Self. Being taught from the Upanisads, Vivekananda took the identity of all jivas as they were aspects of the Paramatma. Vivekananda, basically an advaitin, differs at several points from Sankara. Unlike Vivekananda, Sankara believes in the ultimate Reality of Indeterminate Brahman and ultimate falsity of the Determinate Brahman. To Sankara, Brahman is ultimate Reality, the world is an illusion and the jiva is essentially identical with Brahman. According to him, Brahman alone shines in Its purity, and everything else is totally rejected in the ultimate stage of spiritual realization. But Vivekananda differs from Sankara on this fundamental issue. To him, nothing is rejected at the ultimate stage; everything shall be viewed in its proper perspective. He did not accept Sankara's Advaita Vedanta blindly. Vivekananda re-oriented and expanded Sankara's Vedanta having borrowed some new lights from Buddhism and having received the eternal truth of religion from his spiritual Guru Sri Ramakrishna.

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