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Vijñānabhikṣu's Approach to the Īśvara Concept in Patañjali's Yogasūtras

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PATAÑJALI discusses Īśvara, the *parama-puruṣa*, as he calls Īśvara, in *sūtras* 23-29 of the first *pāda* (chapter) called the *samādhipāda* of the *Yogasūtras* (YS). The description of Īśvara in these *sūtras* makes it difficult to classify Īśvara in a purely theistic mode. In these seven *sūtras* one can see shades of theism as well as non-theistic ideas. Since I am dealing with Vijñānabhikṣu's take on Īśvara in Patañjali's YS I shall first concentrate on the first two *sūtras* i.e. I. 23 and 24 dealing with Īśvara before examining the others in the first and second *pādas* (chapters) where we get some more *sūtras* dealing with Īśvara.

In *sūtra* I.23 Patañjali mentions that *samādhi* can be attained by *praṇidhāna* on Īśvara. In this context we do not know whether Patañjali views Īśvara as of a theistic nature or just a concept. For that we need to study the word "Īśvara-*praṇidhāna*" closely, as the operative word in this *sūtra* is '*praṇidhāna*'.

Different commentators have understood the word '*praṇidhāna*' differently, and we will look at Vyāsa (ca 5th century CE), Vācaspati Mīśra (ca 9th century CE), Bhoja (ca 11th century CE) and Vijñānabhikṣu (16th century CE) to see how they interpret *praṇidhāna*. Vyāsa is important, as he is the first extant commentator on the YS who sets the trends for other commentators to follow. He defines *praṇidhāna* as '*bhakti-viśeṣa*' (a special kind of devotion). Special devotion stands for total devotion to the Īśvara concept used as a

support for meditation and can denote a kind of abstract concentration on a concept. One may wonder whether one can have "total devotion" to a concept. The history of development of the concept of a higher or absolute "Truth" starting with the Rgveda has accommodated an abstract notion of the absolute in such statements as "Truth is One, It can be described variously". We also find this "absolute" defined as devoid of any gender as early as the Upaniṣads. Thus the Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad says "This One is surely not a woman, nor is this one a man, and this one is certainly not a eunuch. It is protected by those very bodies whichever it takes up" (5.10). This is in keeping with the Vedic holistic idea of everything in the universe being a form of the ultimate Brahman. Even though this is difficult to comprehend in the Abrahamic religions it is possible to meditate or be devoted to a concept of the highest Truth or Īśvara in the Vedic tradition.

Vyāsa, while parsing the word '*bhakti-viśeṣa*', changes the discourse by inserting the two words 'favours' (*anugṛhṇāti*) and overcome (*āvarjitaḥ*) while commenting on this *sūtra*. These two words bring in an agency to Īśvara who exercises his desire to favour the devotee overcome by the yogis' total devotion. 'Favour' and 'being overcome' also introduce a sense of duality which does not seem to be Patañjali's idea. Vācaspati Mīśra, who comes after Vyāsa, takes the cue from Vyāsa and again mentions

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Īśvara's favour to the *yogin* by allowing him to have his desired goal (*idam asya abhimatam astu iti*) i.e. *samādhi* through *abhidhyāna*. But from Bhoja's Rājamārtāṇḍa commentary which is on Patañjali's YS themselves and does not depend on Vyāsa's commentary as such, we understand that *praṇidhāna* is dedicating all one's actions to Parameśvara with total detachment towards pleasure or pain which will then result in quick *samādhi*. This is the Gītā idea of *karma-yoga*, and there is no sense of any theistic God intervention to bestow *samādhi* on the *yogin*. Karma-yoga by itself will result in the desired effect, i.e. *samādhi*, according to Bhoja. But one senses that the whole trend in these commentaries seems to have changed Patañjali's approach to Īśvara. There is no indication of a theistic dimension in any of the places that Īśvara occurs, as far as Patañjali is concerned. I shall deal with Bhikṣu's interpretation of 'praṇidhāna' a little later, as this paper is specifically on Bhikṣu's understanding of Īśvara in the YS.

Having introduced Īśvara and *praṇidhāna* in *sūtra* I.23 the next *sūtra* I.24 defines the nature of Īśvara further. Herein the basic nature of Īśvara is mentioned as "not being subject to the bondages that *puruṣas* in bondage are subject to before they are liberated, i.e the bondage of ignorance". So the argument goes that Īśvara is always liberated and always free (*sadaiva muktaḥ sadaiva īśvara iti*).

Let us examine that argument closely. Īśvara is mentioned as untainted by *kleśas* or afflictions and as someone who has no karma (actions), *vipāka* (result of action) and *āśaya* (deposits of karma). But here there is a paradox. While Īśvara alone is mentioned as untainted by *kleśas* we must remember that, in truth, none of the individual *puruṣas* is tainted by *kleśas*. *Kleśas* are in the mind, and *puruṣa* is only an experiencer by proxy. And experience itself is only a reflection of *puruṣa* on to *buddhi* (*citta*) in Yoga; therefore one cannot attribute experience in truth to the individual *puruṣa*. So we find that none of the *puruṣas* is really tainted by the afflictions. Then how does Īśvara differ from the individual *puruṣas*? The answers provided by commentators do not satisfactorily explain this riddle.

Continuing with *sūtra* I.24, in answer to the question whether there is proof for Īśvara's eternal freedom and excellence (*aiśvarya*), Vyāsa introduces the idea that the excellence of Īśvara is due to pure *sattva* which has its basis in the *śāstra*. In other words *śāstra* declares that Īśvara has pure *sattva* (*śuddha-sattva*), and pure *sattva* has its basis in *śāstra*; rather a circular argument. But where did pure *sattva* suddenly crop up? Patañjali does not at any stage mention a category of 'pure *sattva*' in his *sūtras*. It thus seems that pure *sattva* has been introduced by Vyāsa in order to distinguish Īśvara from the *puruṣas* since, as pointed out above, the freedom from afflictions etc., to distinguish Īśvara from the *puruṣas* is rather a weak argument. To the credit of Vyāsa we have to add that after that description of Īśvara in I.24 Vyāsa let him be and does not in any way consider Īśvara as having a role in the manifestation of the universe etc., as would be done by Bhikṣu later. In that sense Vyāsa is truthful to the *sūtra* text and honours its metaphysics of *prakṛti* alone having a causal role in the manifestation of the world.

Now let us see how Bhikṣu approaches the 'praṇidhāna' question in I.23. Bhikṣu explains the word *praṇidhāna* as the '*samādhi* that causes '*asaṃprajñata samādhi*' and is a 'special kind of abstract thought' (*bhāvanāviśeṣa eva*). He also adds that the -abstract thought is on the *ātman* (*ātmapraṇidhānasya atra laksanīyatvāt*) which then rules out duality and an Īśvara which is outside of oneself. But that is not all. Continuing the discussion Bhikṣu seems to draw a distinction between the individual *puruṣa* and the *parama-puruṣa* and seems to suggest that practicing yoga in general will lead to *prajñā* or insight much slower than when practicing concentration on Īśvara which will achieve *asaṃprajñatasamādhi* faster. While so far there is no sense of an Īśvara outside of oneself, soon after, Bhikṣu introduces the idea that Īśvara favours the *yogin* by desiring his liberation to come soon (*yoginām āsannatamau samādhimokṣau bhavata ityarthah*). So we have no clear cut idea as to what Bhikṣu wants us to understand is his idea of Īśvara. For that we need to go to the other places in the YS where the Īśvara concept occurs and how Bhikṣu approaches the Īśvara concept.

Vijñānabhikṣu's Approach to the Īśvara Concept in Patañjali's Yogasūtras 13

Let us look at the other *sūtras* in the first *pāda* to see if there is any further guidance to understand Īśvara. Sutra I.25 just mentions that in Īśvara there is unexcelled Omniscience. Commenting on this Bhikṣu again mentions Īśvara blessing the devotees with the hope that “I shall uplift my devotees through teachings on knowledge and dharma” (*tasyeśvarasya svopakārahāve'pi bhaktān puruṣānuddharisyāmi ityāśayena jñānadharmayorupadeśato bhaktabhūtānugrahaḥ prayojanam*). This further leads to an opponent mentioning that Īśvara is partial to his devotees and is thus not impartial as Īśvara only uplifts his devotees. Using the example of fire, Bhikṣu denies that accusation and says that just as fire has the nature of heat so also the nature of ‘pure *sattva*’ is to come under the influence of one’s devotees. He further says that “partiality comes only through attachment and hatred and not by action alone” (*vaiśamyam ca rāgadveśābhyāmeva bhavati na tu pravṛttimātreṇa iti*). He also uses the karma theory like the Brahmasūtra to explain the good and the bad that occurs to humans and devas alike. And then says that the results are given because of Īśvara’s attachment to the devotee (*bhaktapāraśyanimittakam iti*). It seems that Bhikṣu wants to retain the idea of ‘attachment’ of Īśvara to his devotees and also depend on the actions of humans themselves for the results of ‘pleasure’ or ‘pain’. There is no clear cut statement as to the nature of Īśvara in this *sūtra* as well, and it is ‘pure *sattva*’ that is brought in to explain the attachment.

Sutra I.26 mentions Īśvara as being unconditioned by time and being the *guru* of all those who went before (*pūrveśām api*). Bhikṣu explains that Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and others (the functional deities) came into being because of Īśvara and also adds that Īśvara is the efficient cause of the world. In other words having brought in Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva in the context of the evolution of the universe Bhikṣu could not compromise the Yoga position of *prakṛti* being the material cause in the evolution of the cosmos. Since he also has to maintain the position of Īśvara as the *guru* of Brahmā and so on he assigns Īśvara the efficiency to bring the world into existence which has already been introduced in *sūtra* I.24. He also introduces the idea of the relationship

of the *jīvas* to Īśvara as that between the fire and its sparks i.e. a difference-nondifference relationship which Bhikṣu calls *avibhāga* (non-separate).

Sutras I.26 and 27 talk about the connection of Om denoting Īśvara and how through the repetition of Om the yogī’s mind can attain one-pointedness (*ekāgratā*). In his commentary Bhikṣu designates Om as the ‘*mantra*’ limb (*aṅga*) of *praṇidhāna* (*praṇidhānāṅgam mantram*) and also equates Īśvara with Brahman. Thus he says that “*Praṇidhāna* is meditating on Brahman along with repetition of the word ‘Om’ and that should be done knowing the relationship between the word and its meaning” (*praṇavajapena saha brahmadhyānam praṇidhānam, tacca vācyavācakabhāvam jñātvā kartavyam*). Bhikṣu thus lays down his philosophy of ‘*avibhāga*’ in this context which is his form of “*advaita-Vedānta*”. It is not an identity with Brahman as in Śaṅkara’s *advaita* but somewhat like Rāmānuja’s *Viśiṣṭādvaita* though explained differently by Bhikṣu. (For details Rukmani on Vijñānabhikṣu: The *Sāṃkhya-Yoga-Vedāntācārya*, 2010 ICPR Journal). So Bhikṣu’s Yoga Īśvara is the Vedānta Brahman as well as *ātman* in a relationship of *avibhāga*. But that is not what Patañjali and even Vyāsa believes to be the YS Īśvara.

There are at least four more *sūtras* where the Īśvara concept occurs, i.e. YS II. 1,32, 44 and 45. In II.1 Īśvara-*praṇidhāna* is mentioned as part of *niyama* the second of the eightfold means to Yoga. One needs to recall in this context that, according to Vyāsa and all later commentators, the first *pāda* (*Samādhipāda*) is meant for the *uttama-adhikārin* (best aspirant) whereas the second *pāda* (*Sādhanapāda*) is meant for the one who has started on the path of yoga i.e. a *madhyama-adhikārin* (middling aspirant). Thus Bhikṣu states that in the first *pāda* the person addressed was a *samāhitacittasya/yogārūdhacittasya* i.e. one whose mind has already climbed the path of yoga, the best aspirant) who needs only *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* (repeated practice of yoga and detachment) for attaining *asamprajñāta*. Therefore Īśvarapraṇidhāna was interpreted differently in the first *pāda* from how it needs

to be understood in the second *pāda*, which is meant for a middling aspirant.

In the second *pāda* Bhikṣu's understanding of Īśvara-praṇidhāna is similar to that of Bhoja, i.e. dedication of all one's deeds to Īśvara, which is the Gītā idea of *karma-yoga*. The logic for this, according to Bhikṣu, is that in the first *pāda* devotion is the form of *bhāvanā* (abstract thought) which is only knowledge (*jñānameva*) and has no residue of *karma* (deeds). Whereas he goes on to add that in the second *pāda*, there will be residue of deeds when done with a sense of agency, and so its dedication to Īśvara makes sense for the middling (*madhyama*) aspirant. In one place Bhikṣu calls Īśvara the 'inner self' (*antaryāmin*); thus he says "the offering of all worldly and sacrificial deeds to Parameśvara, i.e the inner self" (*laukikavidika asādhāraṇyena sarvakarmaṇām parameśvare antaryāminyarpaṇam ityarthah*). He goes on to say that "the thought that Īśvara is the enjoyer of the fruits is the renunciation of the fruits of deeds". The emphasis is on the abandonment of the sense of agency and not so much on the identity of who this Parameśvara is. As if to emphasize that idea he quotes from the Kūrma Purāṇa soon after and indicates that the Īśvara here is Brahman (*brahmaṇā dīyate deyam brahmaṇe saṃpradiyate, brahmaiva dīyate ceti brahmārpaṇamidam param; nāham kartā sarvametat brahmaiva kurute tathā, etad brahmārpaṇam proktam ṛṣibhistattvadarśibhiḥ*). He reinforces the idea of Brahman further, quoting from the Kūrma Purāṇa, that this dedication of the fruits of deeds to Parameśvara is the best offering to Brahman (*karmaṇāmetadapyāhur brahmārpaṇam anuttamam*). So here again there is no clear cut idea of Īśvara/Parameśvara being a theistic representation. It is the Upaniṣadic idea of a concept that is prominent here as well. It seems the purpose is to remove the sense of 'ego' or agency from the mind of the one who acts as that is the prime object of Yoga, and the person the deeds are dedicated to is of secondary significance.

The next *sūtra* in which Īśvara-praṇidhāna occurs is YS II.32 where Bhikṣu once again sticks to the meaning of dedicating all one's actions to the greatest *guru* (*paramagurau sarvakarmārpaṇam*). Patañjali has introduced

the term *guru* in place of Īśvara earlier in the first *pāda* (I.26), and both Vyāsa and Bhikṣu call Īśvara the 'greatest *guru*' in II.32. This substitution of *paramaguru* for Īśvara somehow conveys the sense that it is the dedication of fruits of deeds that is of importance and not whom it is dedicated to. Bhikṣu seems to support that when he says "Here the object of thought is, mainly, only the dedication of all action and not the essence of Īśvara" (*sarvakarmārpaṇam eva mukhyato dhyeyam na tvīśvaratattvam*). Bhikṣu adds significantly that "In general Īśvara is to be thought of (in this context) by attributing agency to it and as only being its attribute. Therefore its being an external limb of yoga is appropriate" (*»śvarastu sāmānyastadviśeṣaṇatāmātreṇa kartṛtvāropeṇa ca dhyeya ityato yuktā tasya yogabahirāgatā iti*). In other words for purposes of dedication of deeds Īśvara is just a concept having agency attributed to it (*kartṛtvāropeṇa*). This has support from Vyāsa as he also adds that from the dedication of deeds to Īśvara there arises realization of the inner self (not a theistic Īśvara) and absence of obstacles (*pratyakcetanādīgamah and antarāyābhāvaśca*).

As far as Bhikṣu is concerned everything falls into place if one is conscious that all along Bhikṣu is trying to promote his concept of Īśvara which is Brahman in his *avibhāga-advaita*. Though not a theistic Brahman, Bhikṣu's Īśvara is someone who can exercise his grace (*anugraha*) and bless his devotees due to the 'pure *sattva*' which is Īśvara's adjunct. As Bhikṣu is also a *yogī par excellence* he retains *asamprajñāta-yoga* as the means to the realization of Brahman/Īśvara and not *jñāna* (knowledge) or *bhakti* (devotion). All this is explained better in his *Vijñānāmṛtabhāṣya*, which is his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*.

As the main theme of this Journal is to compare the Yoga Īśvara with the Christian God, we need to further ask ourselves whether Patañjali's Īśvara has any role to play in the creation of the universe similar to God in Christianity. As far as Patañjali's YS is concerned Īśvara does not have any visible role in the evolution of the world. As I have written elsewhere it seems that *prakṛti* serves as both the material and efficient cause for the evolution of the world in Patañjali's YS (see

Vijñānabhikṣu's Approach to the Īśvara Concept in Patañjali's Yogasūtras 15

Rukmani in *Brahma-Vidya Adyar Library Bulletin*, Vol. 65, 2001, pp. 57-71). However, quoting from the Viṣṇu Purāṇa Bhikṣu says that "Hari by entering through his own desire both *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* at the time of evolution (*sarga*) disturbs both *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*". One needs to note that in Yoga only the equilibrium of *prakṛti* is disturbed and *puruṣa* is not subject to any change. Ignoring that part of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa's statement Bhikṣu maintains that Yoga distinction and makes Īśvara serve the purpose of bringing together the insentient *prakṛti* into contact with the sentient *puruṣa* for disturbing the equilibrium of the *guṇas* (*paramēśvaraprayatnenaiva guṇavaiśamyam śrūyate*).

The introduction of Īśvara by Bhikṣu for the purposes of evolution of the world smacks very much like Nyāya, which brings in its own Īśvara to connect *karma* with humans for future births. Nyāya's logic is that there needs to be a sentient Īśvara to connect the insentient *karma* with the appropriate body complex. Bhikṣu's reasons also share some of this logic. But he does not use the argument of *karma* being insentient, and therefore the necessity of a sentient *puruṣa* to accomplish the task of connecting an individual to his/her *karma* in a future birth. For Bhikṣu the desire of Hari/Īśvara is sufficient explanation for that to occur. Bhikṣu in the process has to go through a tortuous explanation of what happens to Īśvara and his desire/knowledge at the time of *pralaya* (dissolution of the world) in order to be consistent in his theory. Attributing desire and effort (*prayatna*) to Īśvara brings in a theistic dimension as well.

While in Sāṃkhya the absence of Īśvara necessitates the coming together of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* for evolution problematic due to both being permanent entities, Bhikṣu uses the presence of Īśvara in Yoga for bringing them together. However, in the process he goes against the grain of the YS themselves. In YS IV.2-3 Patañjali and Vyāsa both clarify that the evolution of the world including humans happens because of a filling in process (*āpūreṇa*) by *prakṛti* when obstacles in the form of *dharma* and *adharma* are removed. It is much like the removing of obstacles between fields to enable water to flow from one field to another. Īśvara

does not figure anywhere here and Bhikṣu violates that basic principle of Yoga philosophy.

One must add that, though Bhikṣu's Īśvara has this efficient role in the evolution of the world, he does not create anything *ex nihilo* including that of human beings. Their coming into being is determined by the momentum of their own *karma* which is present even at the time of *pralaya* in their respective subtle bodies. Even Bhikṣu cannot change that fundamental principle of Hindu philosophy.

Let us now ask the question of the role that Bhikṣu's Īśvara has in the granting of *mokṣa* through grace to his devotees, somewhat as in Christianity. Everything said and done Bhikṣu is first and foremost a *yogin* as mentioned earlier, and is not willing to go too far to accommodate his theistic leanings. Thus Bhikṣu cannot bring in Īśvara's grace for *kaivalya* purposes, as it will be in violation of the basic YS assumption. Even though Vyāsa introduced the word "*anugraha/anugṛhṇāti*" in his commentary on *sūtra* I.23 all commentators including Bhikṣu only concede that it can only speed up the process of *Samādhi* and nothing more. It has something to do with the *lambana*/support itself transforming the individual and has nothing to do with Īśvara's grace. The meditative process used here is *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* and not *anugraha* or *ānukūlya* etc. The most that even Bhikṣu can say about Īśvara in the context of the goal of Yoga is that meditation on Īśvara can achieve *samādhi* quicker. Moreover since *puruṣa-viśeṣa* (Īśvara) is also defined as being pure consciousness with pure *sattva* undiluted by *rajas* and *tamas* one cannot imagine any act of grace from pure consciousness as such. Liberation, the ultimate goal, is also not going to heaven or hell after waiting in limbo for some time. Bhikṣu tries to incorporate realization of Īśvara into his *mokṣa* concept as an extra goal apart from separation of one's own self from *prakṛti*, i.e. *kaivalya*, but he has not worked that out carefully. If Īśvara is only pure consciousness and *puruṣas* are also so many pure consciousnesses what is it that one is becoming other than a *śuddha-puruṣa*, which is only consciousness? So where does Īśvara fit into this scheme of liberation?

16 T. S. Rukmani

The introduction of Īśvara in Patañjali's YS is not very robust. It is only one of the alternative supports which can help in the progress to *samādhi* albeit more quickly than some of the other alternatives. There is no help as to why this should be quicker than the other supports.

The more I read Bhikṣu the more I feel that he has tried to fit in Brahman as Īśvara as interpreted in his *avibhāga-advaita* interpretation of the Brahmasūtras into the Yoga framework. He uses Īśvara to disturb the equilibrium of the *guṇas* in *prakṛti* and start the evolution process. His Īśvara is certainly not cast in a theistic frame. It can perhaps fit into a deistic frame of thinking. Īśvara again surfaces in the context of explaining *kaivalya* for Bhikṣu alone and not for the other commentators.

Bhikṣu lived in the period when *bhakti* and a theistic way of depicting the divine was at his height. Even an *advaita* scholar like Madhusūdana Sarasvatī who lived in the same period, accommodates a *bhakti* streak within his *advaita* leanings, pointing to the strong influence that theistic *bhakti* tendencies had in the milieu when Bhikṣu lived.

In the above study what one notices is that the continuing commentarial literature on philosophical texts (which is true of other genres as well) throws light on the way

commentators tend to interpret old texts in keeping with their own historical and sociological contexts. This is in keeping with the belief that commentators are hermeneuts in the Indian knowledge systems. Since this study is especially on the concept of Īśvara, in a global context, it also enables one to compare the same idea available in the other religious traditions as well.

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