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

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PATAÑJALI discusses Iśvara, 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 Iśvara 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 Iśvara 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 sutra is 'praṇidhāna'.

Different commentators have understood the word 'praṇidhāna' differently, and we will look at Vyāsa (ca 5th century CE), Vācaspati Miśra (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 Upanisads. Thus the Svetāśvatara Upanișad 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' (anugṛḥṇāti) 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 Miśra, who comes after Vyāsa, takes the cue from Vyāsa and again mentions

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Īśvara's favour to the vogin by allowing him to have his desired goal (idam asya abhimatam astu iti) i.e. samādhi through abhidhyāna. But from Bhoja's Rājamārtānda commentary which is on Patañjali's YS themselves and does not depend on Vyāsa's commentary as such, we understand that pranidhāna 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 voain. 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 Bhiksu's interpretation of 'pranidhāna' a little later, as this paper is specifically on Bhiksu's understanding of Iśvara 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 muktah 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 Iśvara alone is mentioned as untainted by kleśas we must remember that, in truth, none of the individual purusas is tainted by kleśas. Kleśas are in the mind, and purusa is only an experiencer by proxy. And experience itself is only a reflection of purusa on to buddhi (citta) in Yoga; therefore one cannot attribute experience in truth to the individual purusa. So we find that none of the purusas is really tainted by the afflictions. Then how does Isvara differ from the individual purusas? 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 Iśvara's eternal freedom and excellence (aiśvarya), Vyāsa introduces the idea that the excellence of Isvara is due to pure sattva which has its basis in the śāstra. In other words śāstra declares that Īśvara has pure sattva (śuddhasattva), 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 satttva has been introduced by Vyāsa in order to distinguish Iśvara from the puruṣas since, as pointed out above, the freedom from afflictions etc., to distinguish Isvara from the purusas 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 Iśvara as having a role in the manifestation of the universe etc., as would be done by Bhiksu later. In that sense Vyāsa is truthful to the sūtra text and honours its metaphysics of prakrti alone having a causal role in the manifestation of the world.

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

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 Iśvara there is unexcelled Omniscience. Commenting on this Bhiksu again mentions Isvara blessing the devotees with the hope that "I shall uplift my devotees through teachings on knowledge and dharma" (tasyeśvarasya svopakārābhāve'pi bhaktān purusānuddharisyāmi itvāśavena jñānadharmayorupadeśato bhaktabhūtānugrahah prayojanam). This further leads to an opponent mentioning that Iśvara is partial to his devotees and is thus not impartial as Īśvara only uplifts his devotees. Using the example of fire, Bhiksu 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" (vaiṣamyam ca rāgadveṣābhyāmeva bhavati na tu pravṛttimātrena 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 Iśvara's attachment to the devotee (bhaktapāravaśyanimittakam iti). It seems that Bhiksu wants to retain the idea of 'attachment' of Isvara 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 Isvara in this sūtra as well, and it is 'pure sattva' that is brought in to explain the attachment.

Sutra I.26 mentions Isvara as being unconditioned by time and being the guru of all those who went before (pūrveśām api). Bhiksu explains that Brahmā, Visnu, 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 Bhikşu could not compromise the Yoga position of prakrti being the material cause in the evolution of the cosmos. Since he also has to maintain the position of Isvara 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 Isvara and how through the repetition of Om the yogī's mind can attain one-pointedness (ekāgratā). In his commentary Bhiksu designates Om as the 'mantra' limb (aṅga) of praṇidhāna (pranidhānāṅgam mantram) and also equates Iśvara with Brahman. Thus he says that "Pranidhāna 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" (pranavajapena saha brahmadhyānam pranidhānam, 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 Śańkara's advaita but somewhat like Rāmānuja's Viśistādvaita though explained differently by Bhiksu. (For details Rukmani on Vijñānabhiksu: The Sāmkhya-Yoga-Vedāntācārya, 2010 Journal)'. So Bhiksu'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 İśvara concept occurs, i.e YS II. 1,32, 44 and 45. In II.1 Īśvara-pranidhāna is mentioned as part of nivama 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 Bhiksu states that in the first pāda the person addressed was 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 Īśvarapranidhāna 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-pranidhāna 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 Bhiksu, 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 Iśvara makes sense for the middling (madhyama) aspirant. In one place Bhiksu calls Isvara the 'inner self' (antaryāmin); thus he says "the offering of all worldly and sacrificial deeds to Parameśvara, i.e the inner self" (laukikavaidika asādhāraņyena sarvakarmanām parameśvare antarvāminyarpanam ityarthah). He goes on to say that "the thought that Isvara 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 Purāna soon after and indicates that the Isvara here is Brahman (brahmanā dīyate deyam brahmane brahmaiva sampradīyate, dīvate ceti brahmārpanamidam param; nāham kartā sarvametat brahmaiva kurute tathā, etad brahmārpaṇam proktam rsibhistattvadarsibhih). He reinforces the idea of Brahman further, quoting from the Kūrma Purāna, that this dedication of the fruits of deeds to Parameśvara the best offering to Brahman (karmanāmetadapyāhur brahmārpaṇam anuttamam). So here again there is no clear cut idea of Īśvara/Parameśvara being a theistic representation. It is the Upanisadic 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 Isvara earlier in the first pāda (I.26), and both Vyāsa and Bhikṣu call Isvara the 'greatest quru' in II.32. 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. Bhiksu 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 Iśvara" (sarvakarmārpanam eva mukhyato dhyeyam na tvīśvaratattvam). Bhiksu adds significantly that "In general Isvara 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 voga is appropriate" (»śvarastu sāmānyastadviśeṣaṇatāmātreṇa kartṛtvāropeṇa ca dhyeya ityato yuktā tasya yogabahirangatā iti). In other words for purposes of dedication of deeds Iśvara is just a concept having agency attributed to it (kartrtvāropeṇa). support from Vyāsa as he also adds that from the dedication of deeds to Isvara there arises realization of the inner self (not a theistic Iśvara) and absence of obstacles (pratyakcetanādigamaḥ and antarāyābhāvaśca).

As far as Bhiksu is concerned everything falls into place if one is conscious that all along Bhiksu is trying to promote his concept of Īśvara which is Brahman in his avibhāgaadvaita. Though not a theistic Brahman, Bhiksu'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 Bhiksu 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 Vijñānāmṛtabhāsya, 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

Rukmani in Brahma-Vidya Advar Library Bulletin, Vol. 65, 2001, pp. 57-71). However, quoting from the Visnu Purāna Bhiksu says that "Hari by entering through his own desire both prakrti and purusa at the time of evolution (sarga) disturbs both prakṛti and purusa". One needs to note that in Yoga only the equilibrium of prakrti is disturbed and purusa is not subject to any change. Ignoring that part of the Visnu Purāna's statement Bhiksu maintains that Yoga distinction and makes Isvara serve the purpose of bringing together the insentient prakrti into contact with the sentient purusa for disturbing the equilibrium of the gunas (parameśvaraprayatnenaiva gunavaiśamyam śrūvate).

The introduction of Isvara by Bhiksu for the purposes of evolution of the world smacks very much like Nyāya, which brings in its own Iśvara 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. Bhiksu'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 purusa to accomplish the task of connecting an individual to his/her karma in a future birth. For Bhiksu the desire of Hari/Īśvara is sufficient explanation for that to occur. Bhiksu 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 Iśvara 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 Bhiksu'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 Bhiksu is first and foremost a yogin as mentioned earlier, and is not willing to go too far to accommodate his theistic leanings. Thus Bhiksu cannot bring in Iśvara's grace for kaivalya purposes, as it will be in violation of the basic YS assumption. Even though Vvāsa introduced the word "anugraha/anugrhnāti' in his commentary on sūtra I.23 all commentators including Bhiksu 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 Isvara's grace. meditative process used Īśvarapranidhāna and not anugraha or ānukūlya etc. The most that even Bhiksu can say about Īśvara in the context of the goal of Yoga is that meditation on Īśvara can achieve samādhi quicker. Moreover since purusa-viśesa (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. Bhiksu tries to incorporate realization of Iśvara into his moksa 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 Isvara is only pure consciousness and purusas are also so many pure consciousnesses what is it that one is becoming other than a śuddha- purusa, which is only consciousness? So where does Isvara fit into this scheme of liberation?

16 T. S. Rukmani

The introduction of Īśvara in Patajñjali'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 Bhiksu 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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