



## Unique Spiritual Identity and Indian Soteriology

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*As per ARANJANIYIL, G. (2002) Indian Soteriology is a process of self-realization and God realization, as it presupposes the fundamental innate divine nature of humans. Which remains unrealized due to some metaphysical error but nevertheless be brought to realization through strenuous self-efforts. In no way the futility of divine grace is presupposed but it said to be made active by attaining adequate level of ethical and spiritual perfection. This anticipated state of perfection can be considered as a unique spiritual identity. The essay attempts to succinctly highlight the Vedic and Yogic contemplative tradition which is said to be a process ad intra in order to realize the inner essence, the atman which needs to be complemented by another process of ad extra, leading the seeker to Brahman realization. The spiritual engineering embedded in Yoga tradition consisting of breathing exercises (pranayama) and energy centre (chakra) meditations are dealt with as an example of initial praxis.*

**Keywords: Spirituality, Contemplation, Upanishads, Yoga, Yogachakra.**

### **A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:**

As per Abril, University of Pune, Bangalore, pp 137-148. ARANYA, H.S. (1981) In Indian religious traditions, soteriology is invariably given a prime place with the exception of one materialistic tradition called Cārvāka System (Hiriyanna: 1979: p. 187). Even in the systems like Buddhism and Jainism which do not speak explicitly of Ultimate Divine Being, nevertheless, provide elaborate doctrines of soteriology, as authentic self-realization. We shall consider in this essay only orthodox systems of philosophy, where moksha (Hiriyanna: 1979, p. 71-81), translated as salvation, liberation, or

emancipation, is a common term for the goal of life<sup>1</sup>. The conception of moksha is connected with other two terms, karma and samsāra<sup>2</sup>, the former refers to human action in general, then particularly to cultic action and virtuous deeds which promote salvation or moksha. The samsāra is the term for cycle of births and deaths, called transmigration or metempsychosis, according to the merits accumulated through karma. If so, liberation or moksha can mean emancipation from transmigration, after which the soul becomes immortal. There are slightly different explanation for the condition of the liberated soul depending on the

three paths of salvation elaborated in the Bhagavadgita (Radhakrishnan, 1963), a very popular work of religious poetry, which constitutes a small section in the epic, Mahabharata (Frauwallner, 1984). The three paths (mārgas) proposed by it are the path of knowledge (Jnāna mārga or jnāna yoga), path of action (Karma mārga or Karma Yoga) and path of devotion (Bhakti mārga)<sup>3</sup>. The second and third conceive a theistic conception of the ultimate and hence more popular, liked and accepted by the hoi polloi, but the first conceives ultimate reality in monistic terms and has less followers who are mostly ascetics, mystics and yogis even though others are not left out. Thus karma, originally meant cultic act, can lead one to higher and higher stages of life, and finally to liberation from samsāra and union with the Divine. The Bhakti or devotion conceives Vishnu as the theistic ultimate to whom devotees through cultic songs, and mantras surrender themselves and attain salvation by dint of grace bestowed on the devotee by Vishnu. We are concerned in this essay only with the first one, the jnāna mārga, propagated by Upanishads and also by Yoga tradition; according to the former the individual soul (ātman or jiva) is actually and essentially identical with Brahman<sup>4</sup>, the divine ultimate, but in human existence one fails to recognise this fact due to metaphysical error or ignorance (avidyā). Nevertheless, by

dint of asceticism and constant contemplation one can intuitively realize the actual and real state of one's being, and get convinced that he is in essence, 'Brahman'. Therefore, the pithy and terse statement in the Upanishad: "being Brahman, he goes to Brahman" which explicates the gist of Indian Soteriology. The other two phrases of soteriological realization are: "I am Brahman" and "that thou art", the 'that' here means Brahman, hence 'Brahman thou art'. How to realise that "I am Brahman?" or "that thou art" is the prime question in the Upanishads. The answer is, through the discovery of atman, the innermost essence of a human being, and the method proposed for this is a process of 'interiorisation'.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

As per The Creative Period, New Delhi. BHARADWAJA, V.K. (2008) DEVELOPMENT Exteriorisation pilgrimage ad intra "Sitting in silence" characterises the entire oriental spirituality from the point of view of its praxis. In the Hindu Scriptures there is an entire section of literature that refers to "sitting"; the literature is called Upanishads<sup>5</sup>: upa- means 'near', ni- means 'attentively', shad- means 'sit', it is 'sitting near the guru attentively'. This is the posture demanded from a disciple or a seeker after Brahman, so that he could be led to an encounter with the Divine. Then there is the well-known spiritual tradition in India called

“Yoga”<sup>6</sup>, which also elaborates a very systematic and a very technical path towards one’s spiritual liberation. This tradition has given to the world the eight-fold path (Asthana mārṅa), the third limb of which is called “asana”, posture or seat – namely, a steady and comfortable posture for meditation (YS 2:46)<sup>7</sup>. As per BHARDWAJA, V.K. (1984) This is the prerequisite for a seeker, so that he can sit undisturbed for hours in deep concentration. It is evident that sitting in silence has a definite purpose. Namely, to create a disposition for contemplation. The whole of Upanishadic literature made up of around 108 books attempts to find out what is the inner essence of our being (Radhakrishnan: 1990, p.20-23). Actually, each one has to sit, meditate and discover and experience what is there at the centre. The task of the teacher (guru) is only to guide and facilitate the inner journey. The entire journey is a self- discovery, namely “discovering” or removing the cover in order to find out what is within. According to Upanishads, the innermost essence or atman is covered with five levels of sheaths (koshas) (Taittiriya Up.: II, 1ff). If we can draw five concentric circles, with central point representing the ātman, then the five circles are five sheaths, coverings or layers. The outermost circle represents the human body (called gross body), the word used is Anna (Taittiriya Up.: II, 2-5), which means food. This level

represents human life in constant encounter with the external world through the five sense organs. The external world provides “food” for these five sense organs of the body, and they continuously supply information to the mind. At this level the seeker should begin his inner journey by regulating his sense organs. Once he can regulate sense perceptions, he can commence his second stage of journey, where he has to face the challenge of his own breath – the prāna<sup>9</sup>. The principle of viveka the supreme guiding principle to choose among the multiple choices and make concrete options at a particular point is the principle of viveka (Abhishaktananda: 1975, p.3), which alone can make a seeker truly a mature spiritual personality. The Sanskrit word Viveka means the ability to discriminate between what is transitory and what is permanent. From intellect (vijnāna-maya) to sense data (anna-maya) , one is presented with choices at every instance. The seeker should always be aware of his goal in choosing the options available. The moral as well as spiritual growth primarily depends on this single important factor in the life of a seeker. External signs of integration and wholeness If the filtering process through discriminating principle ‘viveka’ is employed effectively, the integration bound to pave the way towards wholeness. At the personal level a seeker should manifest a picture of integrated personality resulting from

the unity of self with itself. He should reach the ground of being, become one with one who is one. Externally such a person should radiate joy and a sense of freedom; the gulf between deeds and words, decisions and implementation should lessen. He will be consistent by speaking a total language and by desisting from ambiguous communication. At the society level he should arrive at the maturity of accepting everyone as he is. A mind-set that affirms all people are in me and I am in all, together we are in God and God in all of us. Openness to social activities and programmes should become spontaneous. At the social level, a well-integrated religious personality expresses solidarity with the suffering, willingness to work for the welfare of all and a behaviour that transcends all prejudices and biases based on geography, creed, gender, social status and cultural backgrounds. Integration means a desire to see things through the eyes of the Divine, to see what others do not dare to look at.

**External Signs of Spiritual Maturity** A person who undergoes spiritual training through yoga and contemplation should manifest some basic signs of human and spiritual maturity. The first among these signs is a sense of self-awareness, mindfulness and recollection. Mindfulness is a direct product of effective training in interiorization as it is the consciousness of all enveloping presence of the Divine. It is the unifying

force of all aspects of our existence. "This awareness must grow up into full awakening (purnodaya), extend to all persons (vishvodaya) and to all creation (Sarvodaya)" (Amalorananda: 1990, p 6). The second sign of a mature spiritual yogi is peace (shān̄thi). It is the direct result of depth, fullness and wholeness. It is the calmness of the deep see even when there is turmoil at the surface. It is a certain degree of equanimity and calmness amidst emotional upheavals, ups and downs of life, opposition, criticism and even violence. At the same time, it should not be taken as passivity that denotes escapism from commitments to the world, and evasion of turbulent circumstances of existence. In India the perfect state of God experience is denoted by this word, which is repeated three times generally at the end of every cultic ceremony. (Om shān̄thi , shān̄thi, shān̄thi). (Taittiriya Up.: I:1) The very nature of ātman is described as ānanda, bliss or joy. This is the third sign of a mature committed spiritual person. A gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom. As water continuously gushes out from a spring, so joy should ooze out of the heart of a yogi to all others around him. Joy can truly create a happy neighbourhood.

**FUTURE PROSPECTIVE:**

One point that makes abundantly clear is that the Indian spirituality lays great emphasis on interiorization, a journey ad intra. We said that the

human being is considered to be a citizen of two worlds: a world within and a world without, which are two dimensions of human existence, the internal and the external. The life journey is an integration of both. But no authentic integration is possible without the discovery of a true self. Only an authentic person can relate with others sincerely. If the self does not exist as 'subject', no authentic interpersonal or intersubjective interactions are possible. True communication and communion can grow at the level of core-to-core relationship, the result of which will be vibrant societies. In the society the people express their identities in the way they live relationships. We are living in a broken world. But brokenness, and fragmentation can be overcome in wholeness. Actually, we all yearn for wholeness. Nevertheless, brokenness - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual - constitutes an integral part of our daily living. The Discovery of true self "atman", impels us to gather our scattered self in recollection, and silence (Amalorananda: 1990, p 9). The experience of wholeness is a basic prerequisite for our authentic social life. Integration Human beings are constitutionally religious, and both interiorization and integration open up the spiritual dimension of every seeker. In this section we would like to underscore the aspect of integration as an outcome of contemplation. Both are

complementary aspects of spiritual as well as human growth and through integration a seeker opens himself towards the world in myriad ways and chooses what is suitable to build up his own world-view. Once a person has some experience of the Divine by discovering the atman at the depth of his being, he has to integrate all other aspects of his life through personal choices. The Discovery of atman can only make integration more convincing, comprehensive and authentic. Integration through Brahman Experience The atman experience of a seeker gets amplified when he begins to interact with other seekers who had the same experience. The encounter with others develops a sense of common experience that can build up a conviction that atman is universally present in every human being. It becomes intersubjective, namely an integration of the interpersonal interactions. As he interacts with other realities of life, the basic Indian perception of the presence of the all-pervading Divine is personalised by the seeker and this strengthens his belief in the Universal Atman corresponding to individual ātman<sup>14</sup>. He learns that there is basic unity between the Divine, human and cosmic realities, all grounded in the one Ultimate Divine Reality, the Upanishadic Brahman. He is the really real from whom all reality emerges and in whom every reality is grounded.

**CONCLUSION:**

When the meditator completes his meditation, the unmanifest begins to manifest itself and the new creative activity of the seeker unfolds itself. All educational formation should lead one to this point of enlightenment – namely the atman experience, the point of the unmanifest state of all potentialities through exteriorization. The point of encounter with the atman in which the seeker personally experiences his authenticity at the depth level is also a point of commencement of creative intelligence becoming manifest in action. If this experience is lacking, all integration will be superficial and transitory. A seeker is like a seed replete with the potentiality to become a tree if proper ambience is provided. It is the duty of our schools and training centres to provide such ambience. Actually an air tight distinction between the two is not possible. Both are mutually complementary, and both need to overlap in the case of any holistic formation or education that manifests the unique spiritual identity. The education for integration can be further clarified through kosha theory of the Upanishads, by delineating the same process in the regressive order. The highest point of silence is the point of encounter with atman and an experience of bliss (Ananda); this is also the point where all life energies are in unmanifest state. The seeker needs to emerge from his atman experience into

the open to face the challenges of integration into his new world-view: the people of all hues, the realities of the society and all vicissitudes of life. The contemplative solitude makes it possible to encounter the self, and stimulates a capacity for critical reflection, a necessary condition for dialogue and communication with people in the society. The meditator should activate the intellect (vijnāna), wherein he can critically determine a definite value system for his life and then begin the expansion of the mind; the discipline of breath makes him physically fit to continue his life pursuits. The encounter with the external world and appropriation of manifold perceptions can enrich his world-view. This regressive process is again a theoretical paradigm to guide and direct his daily choices. Actual integration is a complex process of living life in concrete situations with definite objectives. The question remains why the particular soteriological doctrine delineated above, especially in part one, and is 'unique spiritual identity'? It can be characterised as 'unique' because it is most authentic and primordial in the Vedanta tradition. In the Vedas the concept of Brahman as Ultimate reality is absent as it holds on to polytheism. The concept of Brahman evolved in the Upanishads and proclaimed as the Ultimate Reality. The soteriological search for liberation from samsāra gave

rise to the discovery of atman as well as to its identity with Brahman. The lack of knowledge of this fundamental truth, is called 'ignorance' (avidyā) which is the basic reason for transmigration (samsāra). The realisation that individual atman is really Brahman, is the unique spiritual identity for a person undergoing limitless number of births and deaths. Rightly therefore the Upanishad affirms 'being Brahman he goes to Brahman'. To conclude, let me cite a mantra from the Upanishad dated sixth century before Common Era: From the unreal lead me to the real, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality.

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