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Dr. Govindaraja Setty AG

Swami Vivekananda Yoga

University (SVYASA) Eknath

Bhavan, Gavipuram Circle, K.G.

Nagar, Bangalore, Karnataka,

India

What is God? – An effort to know the knower

Dr. Govindaraja Setty AG

Abstract

Nothing is more fascinating to the human beings than *Brahman*, God, *Bhagavān*, Universe, Infinity and *ātman*. This is evident from various *darśanas* (*āstika*, *nāstika*) and philosophies (*dvaita*, *advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita*, *śuddhādvaita*). Being *jijñāsus* we are also not exception, we also question either ourselves or others, at one point of time or the other, WHAT IS GOD? Or the questions could be a derivative like, where is God? How is God? In fact, true seekers (जिज्ञासु) sought answer for this question from time immemorial. In his first meeting with *Rāmakṣṣṇa Paramahansa*, the very question asked by *Narendra* was 'Have you seen God?' In our *Upaniṣads*, *Purāṇas*, and history (*Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*), also the spiritual seekers sought answer for this question (*Kāthopaniṣat – Nachiketa*, *Yama*). The author also seeks the answer through Indian traditional texts, as they are considered to be repository of profound Philosophical knowledge.

The word used in our *Upaniṣads* for God is *Brahman*. *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* says, ब्रह्मविदानोति परम् i.e., one who knows *Brahman* attains the Supreme (ब्रह्मवित् = one who knows *Brahman*, आप्नोति = gets, परम् = The Supreme). One need not wait till the death to get the *Brahman* (Time dimension); and one need not go to different *lokas* like *Brahmaloka* or *Vaikuṇṭha* to get the Supreme (Space Dimension). The trajectory is neither in time dimension nor in space dimension, but it is just from ignorance to knowledge and the *Brahmavit* can get the Highest, right here, right now. If such is the benefit a *Brahmavit* gets, one should know *Brahman*, or, it is worth making efforts to know *Brahman*. But how do I know *Brahman*? Through work, wisdom, worship or will-power or a combination of two or more or all of these, says *Vivekānanda*. The methodology adopted in *Vedānta* is taking us from known to the unknown (*Arundhati Nyāya*).

Key words: *Brahman*, *ātman*, *Bhagavān*, God, Infinity, Consciousness

Indruction

Asat is that which did not exist in the past, will not exist in the future, but seems to exist at present [जायते गच्छति तिष्ठति इति जगत्]. *Sat* is that which existed in the past, will exist in the future, and exists at present also. If something is said to be moving, it is moving as against something which must be stationary. Similarly, if something is changing, it is said to be changing as against something which must be unchanging. We are aware that this phenomenal world is changing. This change is perceived because there must be some unchanging substratum in existence. In the *Upaniṣadic*¹ parlance, this unchanging substratum in existence is called *Brahman*. The imperishable *ātman* pervades the entire universe. Time can depreciate and destroy anything and everything in this universe as everything in this universe is subject to *śaḍvikāras* (six changes) viz., *Jāyate* (Birth – comes into being), *Asti* (Exist), *Vardhate* (Grow), *Vipariṇamate* (Change), *Apakṣyate* (Decay), *Vinaśyati* (Die – cease to exist). But the *ātman* is not subject to any of these changes. He is *anādi* (without a beginning), *ādyantarāhita* (without a beginning and an end), *aprameya* (abundant, immeasurable), *accyuta* (unchangeable), *avināśi* (indestructible), *avyaya* (imperishable). Further, He is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. He cannot be destroyed by anybody. Weapons cannot cleave Him, water cannot wet Him, wind cannot dry Him, and fire cannot burn Him. On similar lines, *Gītā* says,

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Govindaraja Setty AG

Swami Vivekananda Yoga

University (SVYASA) Eknath

Bhavan, Gavipuram Circle, K.G.

Nagar, Bangalore, Karnataka,

India

¹ This article uses 'Standard International Sanskrit Transliteration Codes' mentioned in '*Italics*'. For more details please see:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Alphabet_of_Sanskrit_Transliteration.

अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम्
विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति॥भगवद्गीता २.१७॥
avināśi tu tadviddhi yēna sarvamidaṁ tatam
vināśamavyayasyāsya na kaścitkartumarhati॥

That which pervades the entire universe, know that to be imperishable. No one can destroy that indestructible.

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः।

उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः॥भगवद् गीता २.१६॥
nāsato vidyatē bhāvō nābhāvō vidyatē sataḥ
ubhayōrapī dṛṣṭō'ntastvanayōstattvadarśibhiḥ॥

For the transient there is no existence absolute; and for the eternal there is no cessation absolute. This has been verily observed by the great seers after studying the true nature of both (transient and the eternal).

According to our *Purānas Bhagavān* is:

ऐश्वर्यस्य समग्रस्य वीर्यस्य यशसः श्रियः।
ज्ञानवैराग्ययोश्चैव षण्णां भग इतीरणा॥

The six qualities namely, Lordship over the infinite universe, strength, glory, fortune, wisdom and non-attachment in their absolute measure constitute *Bhagavān*.

The author tries to find a logical explanation to these exclamations of Indian traditional texts.

Nucleus

Taittirīya Upaniṣad gives an emphatic and unequivocal answer to the question, 'What is God?'

सत्यं ज्ञानम् अनन्तं ब्रह्म।

Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma.
Sat Cit Anantam is Brahman

That means, *Brahman* is:

1. अनन्तम् – Existence Absolute
2. सत्यम् – Truth Absolute
3. ज्ञानम् – Knowledge Absolute

1. अनन्तम् (*Brahman* is Unlimited Existence)

Let us start with one of the three dimensions – अनन्तम्. In *Sanskrit*, अन्तम् means that which has an end. न अन्तम् or अनन्तम् means that which has no end. If अन्तम् can bring us finite happiness, infinite bliss is always from अनन्तम्. Hence, अनन्तम् and आनन्दम् are very closely related. अनन्तम् or endless *Brahman*, capable of bringing infinite bliss, could involve following interesting dimensions according to *Upaniṣads*:

a. Time Dimension:

The interesting methodology adopted in scriptures to understand something is to take us from known to the unknown (*Arundhati Nyāya*). All objects we see around have a beginning and have an end also. If a man is born on a date, definitely there is an end date also. This could be extrapolated to any sentient or insentient entity around us. That means they are all limited in 'Time Dimension'. They existed only in a specific time frame.

On a tombstone, we could see something like this:

Dr. Edward

22nd Sept 1945 – 22nd Dec 2019

Dr. Edward was born on 22nd Sept 1945 and died on 22nd Dec 2019. Before 22nd Sept 1945 he did not exist and after 22nd Dec 2019, he is not existing. But '*Brahman*' is one who has no beginning or no end. He was there, He is there, and He will be there forever in the timeline. Thus He is अनादि, आद्यन्तरहित, अव्यय, सनातन.

b. Space Dimension:

All objects we see around are limited by space also. That means if I am here in this yoga hall, I am not outside the yoga hall. Even the vast Asia continent is limited by space. Asia has its geographical boundaries. Beyond these geographical boundaries, Asia is not there. Even this vast earth has space limits. Even the solar system has boundaries. Beyond a particular space, solar system is not there at all. Similarly, even our galaxy has space limits. He is here, He is there, and He is everywhere. There is no place where He is not there. He is omnipresent – सर्वान्तर्यामि. In fact, the word '*Brahman*' has been derived from a *sanskrit* root '*Bṛ*' meaning that which is infinitely vast.

c. Object Dimension:

All objects we see around are limited. For example my laptop on which I am working at present. This laptop is limited in the sense, laptop is not there in mobile set, laptop is not there in my desk, laptop is not there in that '*Dīpasthambha*', laptop is not there in that notice board. But looking from this angle, *Brahman* is again not limited at all. He is there in you, in me, in this laptop, in this mobile set, in this '*Dīpasthambha*', in that notice board, etc. He is present in everything, every object. There is nothing except *Brahman*. He is Non-dual. He is all-pervading. Another analogy could explain this phenomenon very sweetly. Take a glass of milk. Add a spoon of sugar and stir it well. The sugar completely dissolves in milk and its sweetness pervades the milk. Top portion of the milk is sweet, bottom portion is sweet, middle portion is sweet, yes, the milk is totally sweet, and thus, the sugar is all pervading in milk. Just because we cannot see sugar now, we cannot deny its existence in milk.

d. Quintessence Dimension

This is very interesting dimension. Being Self-luminous, *Brahman* is the 'Soul' of everything. The table is hard - the hardness is because of Him. The sponge is soft - the softness is because of Him. The sun is luminous - the luminosity is because of Him. Body of a snake is pliable - the pliability is because of Him. The fire burns - the burning capacity of fire is because of Him. The breeze is cool - the coolness is because of Him. The leaf is green - the green is because of Him. You are strong - the strength is because of Him. My ears hear because of Him - He is the ear of the ears. My eyes see because of Him - He is the eye of the eyes. My brain is thinking because of Him - He is brain of the brain. *Kēnōpaniṣad* beautifully puts:

श्रोत्रस्य श्रोत्रं मनसो मनो यद् वाचो ह वाचं स उ प्राणस्य प्राणः।

चक्षुषश्चक्षुरतिमुच्य धीराः प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृता भवन्ति॥केनोपनिषद् १.२
śrōtrasya śrōtram manasō manō yad vācō ha vācam sa u
prāṇasya prāṇaḥ.

cakṣuṣācākṣuratimucya dhīrāḥ prētyāsmāllōkādamiṭā bhavanti

Brahman is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, speech of the speech, the breath of the breath, and the eye of the eyes. Therefore, the wise, giving up the notion that they are associated with these organs, depart from this world [i.e., renounce this world] and become immortal.

अहं सर्वस्य प्रभवो मत्तः सर्वं प्रवर्तते।

इति मत्वा भजन्ते मां बुधा भावसमन्विताः ॥ भगवद्गीता १०.८

aham sarvasya prabhavō mattaḥ sarvaṁ pravartatē

iti matvā bhajantē mām budhā bhāvasamanvitāḥ

Meaning: I am the cause for everything and everything is into action because of Me. The wise men, knowing Me thus, adore Me emotionally.

2. सत्यम् (*Brahman is Truth Absolute*)

सत्यम् is 'pure existence'. *Brahman* truly exists, says the *Upaniṣad*. *Brahman's* existence is a 'REALITY', but not a mere '*Vitaṇḍa Vāda*' (Baseless argument). 'EXISTENCE' is 'IS-NESS'. He truly exists like water existing in every wave. Though the wave appears to exist in water, in fact, water exists in every wave. Because, truly speaking, water has taken the shape of wave, but not other way round. *Brahman* truly exists like water in every bubble. Though bubble appears to exist in water, in fact, water exists in every bubble. Water has taken the shape of bubble and not the other way round. Waves or the bubbles have no true existence in the absence of water. Similarly, *Brahman* is truly all-pervasive. His existence is indisputable. But His existence is in myriad forms. एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति। All that exists is only one; but It is called differently by the scholars (as It exists in different forms). To make it more understandable, let us say 'All that exists is only water but we call it by different names like wave, bubble, ice, mist, fog, smog, vapor, steam, because of their different forms, i.e., water has taken different forms and not the other way round'. Though wave, bubble, ice, mist, fog, smog, vapor, steam, exist, they do not have existence absolute, their existence is borrowed from the existence absolute, that is, water. The existence absolute in all these is water. On the same footing, though all objects seem to exist, they do not have existence absolute. Their existence is borrowed from the existence absolute that is *Brahman*. What is existence absolute in all the objects is *Brahman*. The *Brahman* is the changeless substratum that witnesses the changes (सर्वदृक्). Thus, it can be concluded, we perceive His true existence in different forms and thus, there is nothing but *Brahman*. This is 'Pure *Advaita* – Pure Monism' advocated by the *Upaniṣads*.

A corollary questions arises: Are *Brahman* and this Universe one and the same? Or are they different?

The said question is like asking, is wood and table one and the same? The answer is 'NO'; they are not one and the same. Why? The wood existed even when the table was not there. Wood existed in the form of tree; wood existed in the form a log; wood existed in the form of wooden pieces; now wood has taken the shape of table. Even if the table is broken into pieces, wood exists. Hence wood and the table are not one and the same. Then what is the relationship between wood and the table? Table has no existence without wood; but wood

has existence without table. That means, wood is the material cause and table is the effect. If wood is removed, there is no existence for the table. Similarly, if *Brahman* is removed (If I can), there is no existence for the universe. But *Brahman* exists even without Universe. Thus the *Brahman* is 'Material Cause' of this Universe; whereas Universe is the 'Material Effect' of *Brahman*.

So, can I conclude, *Brahman* and Universe are different? We need to wait, not jump to the conclusion. Think from the perspective of table. Yes, from the perspective of table, it is surely wood. There is nothing wrong if table says, 'I am wood'. But if the wood says, 'I am table', it is wrong. Similarly, from the perspective of Universe, it is truly *Brahman* and nothing but *Brahman*. Hence there is nothing wrong if Universe says, 'I am *Brahman*'. Going by the same footing, there is nothing wrong if I say, 'I am *Brahman*'.

3. ज्ञानम् (*Brahman is Unlimited Knowledge*)

We have various kinds of experiences filled with knowledge. Every experience brings us knowledge. In the wakeful state (*Jāgrtāvastha*) we have experiences and we get knowledge; in the dream state (*Svapnāvastha*) we have experiences and we get the knowledge. What about deep sleep state (*Suṣupti*)? Yes, even in deep sleep we have the 'Experiencer' experiencing nothingness of *Suṣupti*. That is the reason, after waking up from deep sleep the concerned person exclaims 'I had a wonderful sleep' (*Suṣupti* = Absence of Experience, *Turīya* = Experience of Absence). But are these experiences and knowledge eternal? Are these unlimited? Definitely not; they are all short lived. That means the experiences keep changing. But what is common, what is unchanging, what is genesis, what is absolute in all this experience is 'Consciousness', the 'Seer/Knower/Observer/Perceiver/*Dṛṣṭhā*'. Thus, this Pure Consciousness is the unchanging entity in all our experiences and all forms of knowledge, and that is *Brahman* say *Upaniṣads* ('*prajñānaṁ brahma*' – '*jñāna*' (Knowledge Absolute) is *Brahman*' -*Aitareya Upaniṣad*).

Can I Know Him (*Brahman*)?

Dṛśya Vs *Dṛṣṭha*: In a broader sense, *Dṛśya* is all that which I perceive through my *pañcendriyas* (sense organs). The tree I see through my eyes is an object and hence it is *Dṛśya*. The music I hear is an object for my ears. The sweetness I experience is an object for my tongue. The fragrance of jasmine is an object for my nose. The softness of a flower experienced by me is also an object for my skin. Hence, in the objective world, all that I see, hear, taste, smell, and touch is *Dṛśya* for ME, because they are all objects for my senses. Let us come one step closer - my body is perceived by me; hence my physical body (Gross/*Sthūla śarīra/Annamayakośa*) is also an object for me. Let us come little closer. What about my thoughts? I can watch my own thoughts in the mind. Hence my thoughts are also objects. Mind is, any way, conglomeration of thoughts and I can watch my mind itself. Hence, my mind (*Sūkṣma śarīra - Manomayakośa*) is also an object. My intellect (*Sūkṣma śarīra - jñānamayakośa*) is also known by me hence it is also an object. My bliss is also experienced by me and hence the bliss (Causal/*Kāraṇa śarīra - ānandamayakośa*) is also object. Thus, all the *pañcakośas* of my personality (described in *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*) are all objects and thus *Dṛśya* only.

If all that is perceived is *Dṛśya* (Seen/Observed), *Dṛṣṭha* (Seer/Observer) is the perceiver. There must be a perceiver (in all the three states namely *Jāgrta*, *Svapna*, *Suṣupti*) who

perceives the *Dr̥ṣya*. Because of the presence of this *Dr̥ṣṭha*, the *Dr̥ṣya* is perceived. Hence I conclude the perceiver is *Dr̥ṣṭha*.

Now answer to the question ‘Can I know Him?’ *Vedānta* says, ‘अम्’ (YES) and advocates that, ‘HE’ should be understood (or ‘He’ can be known) only as the *Dr̥ṣṭha*/Seer/Perceiver/Knower/ Observer/Subject; not as *Dr̥ṣya*/Seen/Perceived/Known/Observed/Object. The *Dr̥ṣṭha* is *Brahman*.

Conclusion

Brahman, *ātman*, God, *Bhagavān*, Universe are truly fascinating to the sentient human being in his quest to know the infinity. This is evident from various *darśanas* (*āstika*, *nāstika*) and philosophies (*dvaita*, *advaita*, *viśiṣṭādvaita*, *śuddhādvaita*) (Table 1) developed by different philosophers. Each *darśana*/philosophy has its own perception on *Brahman*. But the profoundest definition for *Brahman* is in *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* and the article has tried to discuss this definition logically. This knowledge surely broadens one’s outlook and that is spirituality. Continuing the logical proposition, *Swāmi Vivekānanda* concludes, “Existence absolute does not mean *Brahman* exists, but *Brahman* is Existence. Knowledge Absolute does not mean *Brahman* knows something, but *Brahman* is Knowledge. Consciousness absolute does not mean *Brahman* is having consciousness, but *Brahman* is consciousness”. सत्यं ज्ञानम् अनन्तं ब्रह्म।

Śrī Vidyāranya puts it meaningfully:

खवाप्यग्निजलोर्वीषू देवतीर्यङ्गरादिषु।

अभिन्नास्सच्चिदानन्दाः भिद्यते रूपनामनी॥दृग् दृश्य विवेक २१॥

khavāpyagnijalōrviṣū dēvatīryaṅgarādiṣu.

abhinnāśaccidānandāḥ bhidyatē rūpanāmanī॥21॥

Sat Cit ānanda is the same in all *pañcabhūtas* (space, air, fire, water, earth), deities, man and creatures (*tiryak* = horizontal), except the names and forms.

Upaniṣadic emphatic proclamation is:

Brahman is:

- Unchanging substratum of all that is constantly changing.
- Formless yet the cause for all forms.
- Unchanging yet the cause for all those changing.
- Eternal yet the cause for all that is transient.
- *Ādyantarāhita* (beginning-less and endless) yet the cause of all that has *ādi* and *anta*.
- Both within and without.
- Nearer than the nearest.
- Farther than the farthest.
- Immobile yet makes every thing move.
- Ever still yet moves faster than the fastest (mind).
- That power that animates everything.
- Beyond thought and speech.
- Nameless yet everything that is named.
- Without any attributes yet present in everything with attributes.
- *Ekam* (only one) but present in *anekam* (everything).
- Infinite, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient.
- To empty the mind yet one feels the fullness.
- All-pervading, all-pervasive.
- Not an object for senses but the subject for the senses.

- Not experienced yet it is the ‘Experience Absolute’.

Table 1:

<i>Āstika Darśanas</i>		<i>Nāstika Darśanas</i>	
Accept the Vedas		Don’t accept the Vedas	
<i>Darśanas</i>	<i>Pravartakas</i>	<i>Darśanas</i>	<i>Pravartakas</i>
1. <i>sāṅkhya</i>	<i>Kapila</i>	1. <i>Bauddha</i>	<i>Bhagavān</i>
2. <i>Yoga</i>	<i>Patañjali</i>	2. <i>Jaina</i>	<i>Buddha</i>
3. <i>Nyāya</i>	<i>Gautama</i>	3. <i>cārvāka</i>	<i>Arhat</i>
4. <i>Vaiśeṣika</i>	<i>Kaṇāda</i>		<i>Siddhapuruṣas</i>
5. <i>pūrvamīmāṃsa</i>	<i>Jaimini</i>		<i>Bṛhaspati</i>
6. <i>Uttaramīmāṃsa</i>	<i>Vedānta or Upaniṣads</i>		
<i>Philosophies</i>			
<i>Advaita</i>	<i>Dvaita</i>	<i>Viśiṣṭhādvaita</i>	<i>Śuddhādvaita</i>
<i>śaṅkarācārya</i>	<i>Madhvācārya</i>	<i>Rāmānujācārya</i>	<i>Vallabhācārya</i>

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