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Brahman in the Upanishads

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Abstract

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The word “brahman” is derived from the root brh or brahm together with the suffix “man”. Both the roots brh and brmh mean to grow, to be great to increase, to expand etc. The suffix “man” denotes unlimitedness. Hence the derivative meaning of the word “brahman” is that which is the greatest of all, or which has grown unlimitedly. If the meaning of the word is analysed then it becomes clear that brahman is nitya – suddha – buddha – mukta – svabhava (i.e. eternal, pure, conscious and free). Hence Brahman is the ultimate Reality the Absolute.

Keywords: Brahman, man, Upanishads

Introduction

The word “brahman” is derived from the root brh or brahm together with the suffix “man”. Both the roots brh and brmh mean to grow, to be great to increase, to expand etc. The suffix “man” denotes unlimitedness. Hence the derivative meaning of the word “brahman” is that which is the greatest of all, or which has grown unlimitedly. If the meaning of the word is analysed then it becomes clear that brahman is nitya – suddha – buddha – mukta – svabhava (i.e. eternal, pure, conscious and free). Hence Brahman is the ultimate Reality the Absolute. The Upanisads describe Brahman as ekamevaditiam^[1] (one without a second). It is the nature of saccidananda, i.e. existence, consciousness and bliss. The upanisadic statements like “satyam jnanam anantam brahma^[2], (Brahman is truth, knowledge and infinity), vijnanam anandam brahma^[3], (Brahman is knowledge and bliss), anando brahmeti vyajanat^[4], (he knew bliss as Brahman) etc., clearly denote Brahman as of the nature of sat, cit, ananda and ananta. The Advaita vedantins offer two types of definitions of Brahman, viz, svarupalaksana or essential definition and tatastha laksana or accidental definition of these, the very essence of a thing constitutes its essential definition^[6], Sat, cit, ananda, anants etc, are the essential definitions or Brahman. The terms sat, cit, etc are explained by sankaracarya in his commentary on Taittiriya Upanisad. According to Sankaracarya ‘sat’ means truth, since he does not make any distinction between existence (sat) and reality (satya). In his view truth is that the nature of which never changes while anrta or faise is that which undergoes changes. Hence the term ‘Sat’ or Satya’ distinguishes Brahman from the entire sphere of anrta or the Changeable. In Advaita Vedanta Brahman is trikala satya (real in all periods of time- past, Present and future), Trikalabadhita (not subleted in any period of time) There is nothing real which is not existent. Brahman is the essence of existence – satyasya satyam^[7] However, existence is Brahman. The term sat further indicates that Brahman is the cause of the world, because the world being an effect must be produced from same existent entity, which is Brahman”^[8]. The Upanisads describes Brahman as devoid of quality action and difference (nirguna, niskriya, akhanda). The passages like saksi cita kevalo nirgunasca^[9], (he is the witness, the animator, the Asolute and free from qualities), asthulam ananu^[10] (It is neither subtle nor ‘gross) “Yasyamatam tasya matam matam yasya na veda sah”^[11]. (He by whom it is not known, knows it, he by whom it is known, knows it not), “niskalam niskriyam santan niravadyam niranjanam”^[12], (That which is without parts without actions, tranquil, blameless, unattached), “sa esa neti neti atma^[13] (That which is described as “not this, not this) and others establish brahman as devoid of quality action and difference.

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Sankara has accepted this Nirguna Brahman as the ultimate reality. Actually Brahman is described in two ways – saguna and nirguna. However Saguna Brahman is not other than Nirguna. Brahman being conceived with the adjunct of maya is Isvara or Saguna Brahman which is the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman. The svarupalaksana refers to the Nirguna Brahman whereas the tatasthalaksana is applicable to the Saguna Brahman. Saguna Brahman is endowed with all auspicious qualities. He is omnipotent, omniscient, the cause of the origin, subsistence and dissolution of the world. He is satyasankalpa, sarvajna, sarvasakti, the supreme spirit. He is antaryami, pervading the subjective and the adjective world. In Brhadaranyaka upanisad we have found that Brahman is the controller of all, he Lord of all, he ruler of all.....He is the ruler of all Beings^[14] the protector of all beings. Moreover, in the Mandukya Upanisad We found Brahman as the Lord of all, the knower of all, the inner controller and the source of all, for from him all beings originate and in him they finally return^[15]. In Chandogya Upanisad (his or Brahman's desires and his thoughts Come true). tamisvaranam paramam mahesvaram^[16] (who is the supreme Lord of Lords), yato va imani bhutani jayante yena jatani jivanti yat pratyantayabhisamvisanti^[17], (from where this world is originated by which it is sustained and in which It returns in dissolution and such others. Thus we have found about the definition of Brahman in the Upanisads.

References

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3. Taittiriya Upanishad, 2.1
4. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, 3.9.28
5. T. U 3.6
6. Vedanta Paribhasa,P.228
7. B.U 2.3.6
8. T.U 2.1
9. Svetasvatara Upanisad, 6.11
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11. Kena Upanisad, 2.3
12. Svetasvatara Upanisad, 6.19
13. B. U 3.9.26
14. B.U 4.4.22
15. Mandukya Upanisad, 6
16. Svetasvatara Upanisad, 6.7
17. Taittiriya Upanisad, 3.1