

Aham Brahmâsmi – I am that Brahman, and the birth of Vedânta schools.

- Dr. M.M. Alwar, Mysore, India.

Introduction

Indian systems of philosophy can be basically divided into three schools:

1. The school advocating that the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are one and the same.
2. The school advocating that the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are totally different from each other, and
3. The school advocating that the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are both identical as well as different.
4. The school advocating that there is a unique relationship between the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul)

While the first one is known as the *advaita* school, which accepts the theory of Monism, the second one is known as the *dvaita* school which accepts dualism. The third school bridging the gap between the non-dualism as well as dualism is known as *dvaita-advaita* school or the *bheda-abheda* school of philosophy. The fourth school, called *Vishishta advaita*, tends to resolve the controversy between the Advaita and Dvaita schools. It expounds that there is a unique relationship between the *Jîvâthma* and the *Paramâthma*, which makes us experience both their being different as well identical

The Three schools

The rise of these three schools of thought has its origins in the Vedic passages. There are many Vedic passages like

“*Tat Tvam Asi*” (Thou art that Brahman)

“*Aham Brahma Asmi*” (I am that Brahman)

“*Ayam Atma Brahma*” (This soul is verily that Brahman)

and so on that propound the theory that both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are one and the same.

Also, there are other Vedic passages like

“*Dwa Suparanau syujaou sakhayau...*” (There are two souls...)

“*Yah Atmani Tisthan...*” (The Supreme Brahman situated in the soul.),

and so on that propound the theory that both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are totally different.

Thus, there are many Vedic passages which are mutually contradictory. Over the ages, Indian philosophers have tried and have been trying to know the exact intention of the Vedas; whether both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are one and the same, or are they different? Even if they are different, what is the nature of the difference?

The Advaita School

Advaita school advocated by Sri Shankaracharya argues that both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are one and the same, on the basis of the Vedic passages like:

“*Tat Tvam Asi*” (Thou art that Brahman)

“*Aham Brahma Asmi*” (I am that Brahman)

“*Ayam Atma Brahma*” (This soul is verily that Brahman).

Then what about the vedic passages that that both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are totally different? He answered that in reality, there is only *Atman* (soul) and it is an illusion that both the *Jîvâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are totally different. Vedic passages advocating their being non-identical are only describing this illusory state, which in turn, is due to certain factors.

The Dvaita School

The Dvaita school propounded by Sri Madhvâcharya argues that both the *Jivâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are totally different, on the basis of the Vedic passages like

“Dwa Suparanau syujaou sakhayau...” (There are two souls...)

“Yah Atmani Tisthan....”) (The Supreme Brahman situated in the soul.),

Then what about the vedic passages where both the *Jivâthma* (individual soul) and the *Paramâthma* (Supreme Soul) are considered as one and the same? He answered that in reality, the intention of these passages is to convey that the *Jivâthma* is very much similar to *Paramâthma*. Many a times, to convey extreme similarity, we say that they are one like the saying “This minister has verily become the King” to convey the meaning that “The minister has become as powerful as the king”. Hence those passages that propound the difference between the *Jivâthma* and *Paramâthma* are not entirely correct.

The Third School

Sri Bhaskara and others, advocated that there is both identity as well as difference between the *Jivâthma* and *Paramâthma*. Even though it may sound contradictory, one has to accept in totality what the Vedic passages say. Hence this conclusion.

The School of Visistadwaita – The Reconciliatory School

Sri Râmanujâchârya stepped in to resolve the controversy between the Advaita and Dvaita schools, but in a different manner than the Bhaskara school of thought which accepts an obvious contradiction to be correct. Sri Râmânuja opined that all the Vedic passages have to be given equal importance and their views are to be taken in totality. He first questioned the theories of the Advaitins and the Dvaitins as to how they accept the authenticity of the Vedic passages in parts only? He also strongly advocated that, the Vedas, having been given to us fully by the Almighty Lord Himself, cannot contain mutually contradictory statements. The contradictions, if any were only superficial and not factual. So there had to be some resolving factor within the Vedic passages themselves that could reconcile these seeming differences between these Vedic passages. Sri Râmânuja argued that there were certain Vedic Passages reconciliatory Vedic passages (“Ghataka-Sruti-s”) that reconciled both the dualistic and non-dualistic thoughts. Based on these reconciliatory passages, he propounded a school of thought

differing from all the three schools of thought mentioned above that would give total and impartial importance to all the Vedic passages.

On the basis of these Vedic page, Sir Râmânuja proposed that there is a unique relationship between the *Jivâthma* and the *Paramâthma*, which makes us experience both their being different as well identical. That relationship is known as the “Sharîra-Shâriri-Bhâva” or the “Body-Soul relationship.” This relationship is so peculiar that we experience both difference as well as identity between the body and the soul.

It is well accepted that the word ‘I’ refers to the soul of the person who speaks. When a person says ‘I know’ it does not mean that the body of the person knows, but the soul of the person possesses the knowledge of something. When the person says that “This is my body”, or “This is my hand”, “This is my leg” and so on it means that the hand, leg etc. belong to that particular soul. All these usages presuppose the fact that there is difference between the body and soul.

Similarly there are other usages such as “I am stout”, “I am thin” and so on. Here the stoutness and thinness referred to are with regard to the body being thin or stout, since the soul cannot be thin or stout or anything of that sort. These usages suggest that it is our experience that the body and soul are identical.

Both of the above experiences are true and correct and are not illusions. If it were an illusion, later, it should have been contradicted. Since none of the above experiences are contradicted, they can be taken at face value and we can rely on them to deduce certain facts.

Thus we see that we ourselves experience both identicalness and difference in our own body and soul. Similar is the situation between the *Jivâthma* and *Paramâthma*. While the *Paramâthma* is in the place of the soul, the *Jivâthma* is in the place of the body. Just as our own experience of both identicalness as well as difference between own body and soul is true, correct and non-contradictory, so too, both the identicalness as well as difference with our own body and soul do not contradict each other when seen in this light. Thus using the model of “Sharîra-Shâriri-Bhâva” or the “Body-Soul relationship”, Sri Râmânuja demonstrates that (on the basis of the reconciliatory Vedic passages) all the Vedic Passages can be interpreted in a precise and honest manner.

“Aham Brahma Asmi”

Sri Râmânuja interprets the experience of “*Aham Brahma Asmi*” (I am that Brahman) based on the above argument.

The basic problem is that ‘how can a *Jivâthma*, who is different from the *Paramâthma*, as such, have the experience that he is that Supreme Brahman or *Paramâthman*?’

This is very well explained by Sri Râmânuja: When a person has the pure experience of his own self (viz. 'Aham' or 'I') his body is not the subject of that experience. The body is excluded in that experience. In other words, the experience is exclusive of his own body. This is when the person experiences his own individual self. Similarly, at the next stage, the *Jivâthma* (individual self) takes the place of the body and the *Paramâthma* or Brahman (Supreme Self) takes the place of the Soul. At the time when the person has the experience of the self (viz. 'Aham' or 'I') his own soul, which is in the place of the body is not the subject of that experience. The body, the individual self in this case, is excluded in that experience. In other words, the experience is exclusive of his own body, the individual self in this case. Thus a person, in the most exalted state is able to have this experience "Aham Brahma Asmi" (I am that Brahman).

Having said this, it is also explained that only if we accept the model of "Sharîra-Shârîri-Bhâva" or the "Body-Soul-relationship" between the *Jivâthma* and the *Paramâthma*, can the above experience be explained satisfactorily. In no other manner can we satisfactorily do so. This is well explained and documented by Sri Râmânuja, who goes on to show the defects and inconsistencies in the theories propounded by other philosophers' schools of thought.

Conclusion

Thus we see that Sri Râmânuja provides a precise and logical view of the above-mentioned Vedic passage. Further, it is to be studied in detail to know more about the nuances and intricacies that are involved in interpreting tricky Vedic Passages such as these.