

RESEARCH PAPERS

Spiritual Experiences in the Vedic Corpus and the Vedāntic Tradition – a Philosophical deliberation on Anubhava as a Court of Appeal

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I. *Spiritual Experiences in the Vedic Corpus*

I consider the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* to be a veritable treasure-house of spiritual experiences. It is true that they contain features other than being a mere record of such experiences; speculative philosophical reflections are not rare in the *Vedas* and the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* composed in praise of different Vedic Gods have their specific charm, of course. The *Atharva Veda* contains matters of scientific interest in germinal form and the *Upaniṣads* are well-known not only for their philosophical speculations and theories but also for the arguments and the counter-arguments put forth by great thinkers of the time in different conferences and seminars. But with all this, we cannot ignore the records of varieties of spiritual experiences found both in the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* and these Vedic as well as Upaniṣadic passages have not only been highlighted by the later day Vedāntic thinkers but they have also been referred to, analysed, and discussed by them in support of their specific doctrines. It is also true of the *Bhagavadgītā* which is supposed to be the quintessence of the *Upaniṣads*, as is evident from the well-known

verse, “Sarvopaniṣado gāvo dogdha Gopālanandanaḥ, Pārtho vatsā sudhīrbhoktā dugdham Gītāmṛtaṃ mahat”.

That the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* are the treasure house of varieties of spiritual experiences is not of course a discovery of mine, for they have been held in the highest esteem in our age-old tradition precisely because of this and they have been acknowledged to be so by a number of distinguished scholars and savants of Indian thought in the recent past also. Surendra Nath Dasgupta, for examples, whose mastery in the Indian philosophical tradition is undisputed, has very clearly pointed out that “philosophical speculations in India can be traced to the intuitive experiences of the *Upaniṣads* and some of the Vedic hymns”.¹ Sri Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan, in their own characteristic manner and style, have also emphasized the same point. Panikkar in recent times has very appropriately spoken of “the Vedic Experience” and “the Vedic Epiphany”,² emphasising the experiential aspect of the *Vedas*.

Here I will concentrate only on giving some examples from the Vedic and the Upaniṣadic context to show

that these spiritual experiences have influenced our philosophical tradition in general, and the Vedāntic tradition in particular. “Ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti”,* “the one Being sages call by many names, as they speak of Indra, Yama, Mātariśvān etc.”, this is the unique spiritual experience of the Ṛgvedic seer. It is the first of its kind in the entire history of humanity. “Tadevāgnistadāditya stadvāyustadu candramāḥ, Tadeva śukraṃ tad Brahma ta āpaḥ sa prajāpatiḥ”, says the *Yajurveda*,³ “Agni is That, Āditya is That, Vāyu is That, Candramas is that; the bright one is That, Brahman is That, Āpas are That, Prajāpati is That,” The idea expressed here in the *Yajurveda* has a distinct affinity with that expressed in the well-known Ṛgvedic passage mentioned earlier. What is important is that the *Vedas* identify all the Devas with one ultimate Essence, and so also they identify one Deva with another. I would consider this identification to have an experiential basis in the seers of the Vedic literature rather than having much to do with speculation or metaphysics. Metaphysics, if any, developed in the later stages, to certain extent in the Upaniṣadic age and in its full manifestation in the Advaita philosophy of Śaṅkara. Here in the

Vedas we come across this realization of oneness expressed in sublime words unparalleled in the history of humanity. The idea is not only found in the first book (maṇḍala) of the *Rgveda*, it is worth noting, but is a persistent feature throughout the *Vedas* including the *Atharva Veda* also. This is how we can make sense of the following stanza of the *Atharva Veda* – “Yasya trayastrimśad Devā aṅge gātra vibhejire, Tān vai trayastrimśad Devāneke Brahmavidō viduḥ”⁴ – “In his body existed the three and thirty Devas dividing themselves into its limbs; those alone who knew Brahman knew the three and thirty Devas”. This speaks of the greatness of the knower of Brahman, Brahmavit as he is called, who is evidently extolled here only because of his knowledge of Brahman. We find a similar emphasis in the *Yajurveda* also on the paramātman or Brahman by whom this entire universe is sustained and who is the primal cause of every thing. “Prajāpatiścarati garbho antarajāyamāno vahudhā vijayate, Tasya yonim paripaśyanti dhīrāstasmin ha tasthūrbhuvanāni viśvā”⁵. The words “Paripaśyanti dhīrā” highlighting direct experience need to be specially marked in this context.

As already stated, all this in the *Vedas* has a basis in the unique experience of the Vedic seer, and it cannot therefore be regarded as mere speculation. I have designated the experience in question as spiritual in the sense of ādhyātmika, because there is nothing exclusively religious about it (of course, there is no dearth of Vedic passages that are distinctly religious also) and yet it points to a Reality that is supramundane and extraordinary. Here I am not entering into the question of the objectivity or truth of the experience. I am only

referring to those “original experiences which were the pattern-setters,”⁶ in the words of William James. Their value, as James has pointed out in his monumental work. The Varieties of Religious Experience in the context of religious experiences, is to be ascertained more or less also by similar criteria, by “judgments based on our own immediate feeling” and “on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true”.⁷ Wherever, on the other hand, there is some speculation, there the Vedic language takes a different turn. For example, there is the questioning, an enquiry, about the nature of the support of the universe in the *Atharva Veda* as follows: “Yasmādṛco apātak-śan yajuryasmādapātaksan, Sāmāni yasya lomānyatharvāṅgirasō mukhaṃ skambhaṃ taṃ brūhi katamaḥ svideva saḥ”⁸ and also “Yatrādityaśca rudraśca vasavaśca samāhitaḥ, Bhūtaṃ ca yatra bhavyaṃ ca sarve lokāḥ pratiśṭhitāḥ skambhaṃ taṃ brūhi katamaḥ svideva saḥ”⁹ “Tell me the support of the universe: who, the one among many, is he from whom the Ric has been chiseled out, and Yajus clipped, whose hairs are Sāman songs, and whose mouth is Atharvāṅgirasas?” “Tell me of the support of the universe; who, the one among many, is he in whom ādityas and Rudras and Vasus are united, in whom exist the past and the future and all the worlds”. Here it is evident that speculative philosophical reflection is carried on by the Vedic seer consistently regarding the support of the universe (skambha), for example. But such speculative philosophical reflections, it needs to be highlighted, have a basis in direct experience in the *Vedas*, at some stage or the other.

The *Atharva Veda* points out “Yatra devā Brahmavidō Brahma jyeṣṭhamupāsate, Yo vai tān vidyāt pratyakṣaṃ sa Brahma veditā syāt” – “The devas with the sacred knowledge worship the highest Brahman; he who knows them face to face that sage has known the truth”¹⁰. Here there is a mention of the upāsana or worship of the highest Brahman, no doubt, but it is to be noted that this Vedic trend which has been highlighted later in the tradition of theistic Vedānta co-exists here along side “Tadeva Brahma tvaṃ viddhi, nedaṃ yadidamupāsate”, a tradition highlighted by the Advaita Vedānta. Along with their different conceptual frameworks, their experiences were diverse of course. “Ṛṣayaḥ mantra-draṣṭāraḥ”. This tradition of our seers is worth noting here. It is, however, significant that there is a reference to pratyakṣa of Brahman in the above passage of the *Atharva Veda*. The seer of the *Yajur Veda*, after having given the Puruṣa hymn dealing with Divine manifestation, declares firmly that he knows the puruṣa who is refulgent as the sun beyond darkness, by knowing whom alone one would transcend death. Here it is, as is evident, a case of direct experience, not based on any speculation or inference. “Vedāhametaṃ puruṣaṃ mahāntamādityavarṇaṃ tamasaḥ parastāt, Tameva viditvātīrtyumeti nānyaḥ panthāḥ vidyatēyanāya”¹¹. The conviction expressed in these lines cannot be obtained by mere inference or from speculation, for in the words of Ācārya Śaṅkara, “Puruṣotprekṣāmātranibandhanāḥ tarkāḥ apratiśṭhitā bhavanti”¹² “arguments based on mere human speculation do not have any firm basis.” The Vedic seer has a certainty of conviction simply because he has had the direct experience of that great

Puruṣa. "Vedāhametaṃ puruṣaṃ mahāntaṃ," I consider this to be one of the most significant statements of the *Vedas*: it records in unmistakable terms the unique spiritual experience of the Vedic seers. True, no arguments and counter-arguments are advanced in the Vedic literature for proving the nature and the status of this experience; it is a case of unique Divine revelation which is at the back of the unshakeable faith generated in the deepest recesses of the heart of the Vedic seer. The *Yajurveda* thus becomes a remarkable book of Divine revelation; a revelation that is unique and unparalleled in the history of human experience, for the Vedic seer is here assured of immortality because of such revelation. Moreover, the following lines of the *Yajurveda* are indeed remarkable, "Venastatpaśyan-nihitaṃ guhāsadyatra viśvaṃ bhavatyekaniḍaṃ, Tasminnidaṃ saṃ ca vi caiti sarvaṃ sa otaḥ protaśca vibhuḥ prājasu".¹³ "Vena beholds That Being, hidden in mystery, in whom all find one single home; in That all this unites; from that all issues forth; He, omnipresent, is warp and woof in created things." Here the uniqueness of experience becomes evident, because "That Being", as He is designated by the Vedic seer, is not open to every one but is said to be "hidden in the cave". Direct experience is clearly pointed out here in the lines "Venastat pasyan", and its uniqueness is emphasized also through the words "nihitaṃ guhāsad". In the *Kāthopaniṣad* that Divinity (Deva) is described in a similar language, "durdarśaṃ gūḍhamanupraviṣṭaṃ guhāhitaṃ gāhvareṣṭhaṃ purāṇaṃ".¹⁴ It is a unique revelation, for it is not available to any one and every one; though otherwise hidden, it is of utmost value for man because it is the source of unification of all

realities ("Yatra viśvaṃ bhavatyekaniḍaṃ"). This vision of unification of everything in one is as grand as it is unique, reminding us of the viśvarūpa darśana of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The same verse also occurs in the *Atharva Veda* with a slight change of 'ekaniḍaṃ' to 'ekarūpaṃ'¹⁵, the idea being that all become alike there.

The way the *Vedas*, specially the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharva Veda* have been neglected and undermined as merely ritualistic or being concerned with spells and charms alone is indeed deplorable, simply because scholars, in general, have failed to see the implications of certain unique expressions of the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. These passages of the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvaveda* remind us of the well-known passage of the *Bhagavadgītā*—"Mattaḥ parataraṃ nānyat kincidasti Dhananjaya, Mayi sarvamideṃ protaṃ sūtre maṇigaṇā iva". "All this is united in me just like the jewels in a thread", says Lord Kṛṣṇa. This unique tradition, it is obvious, simply does not start all of a sudden with the *Upaniṣads* or the *Bhagavad Gītā*; the tradition is undoubtedly a Vedic one, and it is to be found not only in the *Ṛgveda* but in the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvaveda* too. Vedic tradition needs to be viewed as a whole beginning from the *Ṛgveda* and continuing throughout the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. The great Ācāryas, as is well-known, have later on tried to elaborate upon the findings of this Vedic tradition, mostly based on typical spiritual experiences of the Ṛṣis, corroborated by their own experiences (*anubhava*) and through reasoning too.

Here it may not be out of place to discuss, in some detail, this entire

tradition as it culminates later in the Vedānta darśana with its emphasis on Prasthāna trayī. Some of the āstika darśanas like Vedānta not only believe in the authority of the Vedas but are also directly grounded in what is well-known as the Prasthāna trayī or three fold basic texts, viz, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Brahma Sūtras*. The *Upaniṣads* themselves are regarded as the concluding portion of the *Vedas*, as they are considered to be Vedānta proper (the end of the Vedas). It is thus that the authority of the Vedas gets further confirmed in the case of Vedānta philosophy because of its direct dependence on the Prasthāna trayī. Dayakrishna has some reservations regarding Prasthānatrayī itself because, according to him, "the general impression regarding the authoritative character of the so-called Prasthāna trayī for the Vedānta Ācāryas is not sustained by the evidence, as many of them have not written any commentaries on the *Upaniṣads* or the *Brahma-Sūtras*, but even on the *Gītā* which forms the third text of the triad".¹⁶ While generally agreeing with Dayakrishna in respect of his insightful observations, it is difficult to see why he is so incisive in his attack on Radhakrishnan in this regard, when he says, "One wonders how, in the light of this evidence, the myth of the *Prasthānatrayī* came to be accepted even by such scholars as Radhakrishnan who himself wrote commentaries on the first three (i.e. the *Brahma-Sūtras*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Gita*), falsely imagining that he was following in the footsteps of the great Ācāryas".¹⁷ Even in one of his recent articles also Dayakrishna refers to what he calls "the famous myth of the Prasthāna Trayī".¹⁸ Prasthānatrayī, however, is not merely a myth, because both the

Ācāryas, Śāṅkara and Madhva, have written their commentaries on the *Brahma-sūtras*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Gītā*, although Madhvācārya has also written an independent commentary on the *Bhāgavata* in addition. It is noteworthy that the *Bhāgavata* was considered to be a natural commentary (*akṛtrima bhāṣya*) on the *Brahma-Sūtras* by Śrī Caitanya, and it was accordingly given a special status by the Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas with Caitanya's leanings. Such differences in emphasis on the traditional literatures are quite expected and natural. But from this it does not follow that the concept of Prasthānatrayī is only a myth. The *Brahma-Sūtras*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Gītā* have a special status, so to say, in the Vedāntic tradition, and Radhakrishnan was obviously following in the foot-steps of Ācārya Śāṅkara when he thought it necessary to write independent commentaries on all the three basic texts, the *Brahma Sūtras*, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*. As far as the *Upaniṣads* are concerned, it is worth noting, Śāṅkara has written his commentary only on ten *Upaniṣads*; it is further noteworthy that Rāmānuja and Madhva have also written commentaries on these ten *Upaniṣads* only. This by itself should point to the pre-eminence of the ten *Upaniṣads*, *dāśopaniṣad* as they are called, in the tradition; they are *Īśa*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. It is true that many of the Ācāryas have not written independent commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, but from this it does not follow that the *Upaniṣads* do not form a triad (Prasthāna trayī) along with the *Brahma-Sūtras* and the *Gītā* for the Vedāntic Ācāryas; the fact is that both the *Brahma-Sūtras* and the *Gītā* are

supposed to contain the quintessence of the Upaniṣadic philosophy. Radhakrishnan's point was not entirely baseless when he said that "they (i.e. the *Brahma-Sūtra*, the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*) form together the absolute standard for the Hindu religion".¹⁹

The *Vedas* have the status of the revealed text and that is why they are regarded as *śruti*, while other literatures like the *Bhāgavadgītā*, Āpastaṁba's *Dharma Sūtra*, *Manu Smṛti*, *Kapila Smṛti* etc., although considered quite important in the tradition, have got a secondary status in comparison with *śruti* texts and are regarded as *smṛti* or tradition based on memory. *Smṛtis*, being the work of human authors and being dependent on human memory, cannot be regarded as infallible. Śāṅkarācārya is quite clear on this issue, as it is evident from his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, 2.1.1. "Smṛtyanavakāśa doṣa prasaṅga iti cet nānyasmṛtyanavakāśa doṣaprasaṅgāt". Here Śāṅkara explicitly points out that "the authoritativeness of the *Veda* with regard to the matters stated by it is independent and direct, just as the light of the sun is the direct means of our knowledge of form and colour", "Vedasya hi nirapekṣam svārtha prāmāṇyaṃ raveriva rūpaviṣaye". As far as *smṛtis* are concerned, only those *smṛtis* which follow *śruti* are to be considered as authoritative, while all others are to be disregarded, says Śāṅkara. "Śrutyanusarīṇyaḥ smṛtayaḥ pramāṇaṃ, anapekṣyā itarāḥ". This is very much in keeping with the tradition of Mīmāṃsā²⁰, where Mīmāṃsā Sūtra, 1.3.3. states, "Virodhe tvanapekṣam syādasti hyānumanaṃ, i.e. "where there is contradiction between *śruti* and *smṛti*, *smṛti* is to be

disregarded; where there is no contradiction *smṛti* is to be recognized, as there is inference in that case of *smṛti* being founded on *śruti*".

But why are the *Vedas* considered to be so very important, so very authoritative? Bhartṛhari point out that different branches of learning which educate mankind have originated from the *Vedas*; "Vidhātustasya lokānaṃ aṅgopāṅganibandhanāḥ, vidyābhedāḥ pratāyante jñāna saṁskārahetavaḥ"²¹. According to the great commentator Sāyaṇācārya, from the *Vedas* we come to know about the extraordinary way by which we can achieve our good and eradicate the evil: "Iṣṭaprāptiṇiṣṭaparihārayoral-aukikaṃ upāyaṃ yo vedayati sa Vedaḥ". That which cannot be known either through *pratyakṣa* (perception) or through *anumiti* (inference), that Reality can be known only through the *Vedas*, 'Pratyakṣeṇānumityā va yastūpāyo no budhyate, Eṇaṃ vidanti Vedena tasmād Vedasya vedatā' (As quoted by Sāyaṇa). According to Manu, the *Vedas* are like the eyes eternal through which everything can be seen or known, "Pitṛdevamanuṣyāṇaṃ Vedaścaḥṣuḥ sanātanaṃ, aśakyam cāprameyanca Vedaśāstramiti sthitiḥ".

"The real reason for calling the *Vedas* 'Śruti', according to Śrī Candrasekharendra Sarasvatī, the late Śāṅkarācārya of Kanchi Kāmakotiṇipīṭhaṃ, the 68th in the line of succession from Ādi Śāṅkara, "is that sounds that are inaudible to ordinary men were indeed heard by the Rishis, and these were then passed on by them to the disciples as they were heard by them. Thus, the Vedic sounds were revealed to the Rishis when they were properly attuned to receive them through their Tapas.

Hence the Vedas came to be known as 'Śruti' or that which was heard"²². Śrī Candra Śekharendra Saraswati's view evidently emphasizes the experiential aspect of the *Vedas*.

Although Naiyāyikas, Mīmāṃsakas and Vedāntins, all accept the *Veda* as authoritative, they of course advance various reasons for its authoritative character. In the contemporary framework, Halbfass has raised the question, "why did they rely on the *Veda*, and only on the *Veda*? Why not on any other kind of 'revelation'? Why did they not simply recognize the need for 'revelation', or 'objective epiphany', as such and in general?"²³ Buddhists at least did not subscribe to such a view. Halbfass seems to find an answer to the question in the "internal multiplicity and variety" of the Vedic literature. The *Veda*, according to Halbfass, "contains a great variety of forms of expression and instructions. It documents the thought of many centuries, and reflects fundamental changes in orientation. But in a sense, it is this internal multiplicity and variety itself, this challenging and suggestive chaos, that accounts for the significance of the *Veda* in Hindu philosophy. It provides an elusive and ambiguous guidance, an open, yet authoritative framework, with suggestive hermeneutic patterns and precedents and inherent appeals to human reflexivity"²⁴. I have little difficulty in agreeing more or less with what Halbfass has to say about the Vedic authority, but it is not clear to me why Halbfass talks of "chaos" and "elusive and ambiguous guidance" in the context of Vedic literature. The *Vedas* certainly do not deserve such downright condemnation, at least no more than any other revealed text or world literature for that matter. Such

derogatory terms could be applied as a matter of fact to any richly suggestive literature, provided our aim is to find fault with the same. The real cause of the attraction of the *Vedas*, according to me, lies in its antiquity along with its highly suggestive character; there is no question of its being chaotic or ambiguous. Yāska has talked of several interpretation of the *Vedas*. The different interpretations are possible because of this highly suggestive character of the Vedic literature which has come down to us in different phases from the most ancient times. We do not know about any author of this vast literature and it is also not possible on our part to assume that the *Veda* owes its origin to a particular sage or seer. The *Vedas* are rather the revelations manifesting themselves for the entire mankind from the earliest times, revelations that were received by the earliest receptive spirit of man. That is why the *Vedas* stand on a separate footing, so to say. It is undoubtedly most significant that when we begin to speculate about the origin of the *Veda*, we cannot ascribe its origin to any particular man, any particular Ṛṣi. The Ṛṣi only is the receptacle of the revelation. It is this, that endows the *Vedas* with a unique and a sort of primeval attraction in the mind of man. When we come to fix the date of the *Rgveda*, we find a great deal of controversy of course amongst the Eastern and the Western scholars. However, there is no doubt about its being "the oldest literary monument of the Indo-European languages"²⁵. This speaks of its antiquity. This antiquity along with its highly suggestive literature developing through different phases of Karmakāṇḍa, Jñānakāṇḍa etc. on which varieties of interpretation could

be put has made it permanently attractive to the human mind throughout the ages, and its unique position as a revealed text is also ensured by these very characteristics. It is the earliest record of the varieties of experiences of mankind including the spiritual experiences of course in all their depth and variety – this is a significant point which cannot be lost sight of.

II Tradition of the Ācāryas, with Special Reference to Spiritual Experiences in the Vedantic Tradition

It is significant that different parts of the *Vedas* are not equally authoritative for all the philosophers or Ācāryas. Because of Mīmāṃsā's emphasis on the Karmakāṇḍa, the whole of the Vedic corpus is given an action-orientated interpretation by the philosophers of the Mīmāṃsā school whereas the Vedāntins lay greater emphasis on the passages giving information about Brahman like 'Tattvamasi' (That Thou art) and 'Satyaṃ jñānaṃ anantaṃ Brahma' (Brahman is truth, knowledge and infinite) etc. than on any action-orientated passage. But although in matters of ultimate Reality or Brahman, the Vedic authority is regarded as supreme or infallible in Vedānta, if any passage of the *śruti* comes in conflict with empirical facts and with other means of valid knowledge in connection with mundane matters, such a passage cannot be taken as authoritative. Under such circumstances the *śruti* texts are given a figurative or allegorical interpretation. Thus we come across a very illuminating statement from Śaṅkara in this regard, "Na ca śruti śatamapi śītōgniraprakāśo veti brūvatprāmāṇyamupaiti"²⁶.

'Hundreds of śruti texts cannot be regarded as pramāṇa if they declare fire to be cold or devoid of light. "No one can accept something which is opposed to what is seen", says Śaṅkara in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Bhāṣya*, 1.4.10, "Na ca dr̥ṣṭavirodhaḥ kenacidabhyupagamyate".

It is not only that śruti cannot be valid if it comes in conflict with other means of valid knowledge, as already mentioned; the attitude towards śruti is, in any case, not a servile one, if the generic approach of the Ācāryas like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva to śruti texts are to be counted in this regard. Each one of these great Ācāryas gives novel interpretations of the śruti by emphasizing different śruti-statements or even by giving different interpretation of the same śruti-texts such as 'Tattvamasi' (That thou art). Even the text "Sa ātmā tattvamasi Śvetaketo" of the *Chāndogya* is construed as "Sa ātmā atattvamasi" in order to make room for the dualistic Vedānta of Madhva. Looking at the way these Ācāryas deal with the śruti-texts, one may wonder, at least in certain contexts, if they are only paying a lip loyalty to the śruti. Let us take the case of Śaṅkara in a somewhat greater detail. It is true that he refers to śruti passages from time to time in order to corroborate his advaita theory and explicitly points out that Brahman which is most abstruse is to be comprehended through revelation (śruti), not through mere reasoning (tarka).²⁷ Reasoning has a significant role to play in so far as it follows the śruti texts (Āgamānusari tarka). Brahman is said to be Śabdāmūla, Śabdapramāṇaka²⁸ by Śaṅkara, to show that without the help of the śruti texts Brahman cannot be comprehended in any case. Vākyārtha vicāraṇa (analysis of the

meaning the passages of the śruti) is a necessary prerequisite of the realization of Brahman or Brahmagati.²⁹ But which śruti texts are to be analysed and which particular texts should assume priority in this regard, whether all śruti texts are of equal authority or there are some texts which are of secondary importance, all this is decided by Śaṅkara himself in accordance with his Advaitic leanings. This is the most interesting feature of the attitude of our Ācāryas towards the śruti. Wherever śruti in the sense of authority, a group of texts coming down to us from time immemorial, comes to clash with other means of valid knowledge, it is suggested by Śaṅkara that such śruti passage be taken in a secondary sense.³⁰ This explicitness shows that the śruti in the sense of authority is merely subordinate to other means of valid knowledge according to Śaṅkara. Akhaṇḍārthaka vākyas like Tattvamasi are authoritative as distinguished from vidhivākyas and saṁsargāvagāhi vākyas in Śaṅkara Vedānta, vākyārtha ultimately comes to mahāvākyārtha and vicāraṇa is a critical analysis leading to the realisation of Advaita, where we consider not only the explicit meaning not merely vācyārtha but also the lakṣyārtha is taken into consideration.

All the statements of the *Upaniṣads* are obviously not of the same status, according to Śaṅkara. The Mahāvākyas, as they are called, have a privileged status, according to Śaṅkara, so far as Brahmānubhava (the experience of Brahman) is concerned which alone constitutes the paramapuruṣārtha, the highest end (niḥśreyasa). They are called akhaṇḍārthaka vākyas to be contrasted with saṁsargāvagāhi

vākyas; though relational in form, they simply point to an identity of meaning of the expressions (anyonyatādātmya). As Śaṅkara clearly points out in his *Vākyā Vṛtti*, "Saṁsargo vā viśiṣṭo vā vākyārtho nātra sammataḥ, akhaṇḍaikarasatvena vākyārtho vidusam mataḥ". The direct meanings of the words 'Thou' and 'That' for example in the statement 'Thou art That' being mutually incompatible, Śaṅkara suggests that bhāgalakṣaṇā should be adopted for the proper understanding of this statement. Rāmānuja and Madhva on the other hand have their own respective axes to grind in this regard. Although the authority of śruti texts is considered to be of supreme importance, we do not find any slavish imitation or following of the śruti by the Ācāryas in any context. Different interpretations of śruti texts are not only permitted; such interpretations are actually taken resort to by the different Ācāryas in order to establish their own theories, derived from their respective experiences (anubhava), conceptual framework, and philosophical reasoning.

It is further significant that certain specific texts other than the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* are also considered to be of paramount importance and authority in some of our philosophical traditions. Though not belonging to the Vedic corpus, they occupy a position of authority almost equal to that of the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* in certain schools of thought. A few important ones may be mentioned here in passing. The most important in this regard is *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* which was considered to be a natural commentary (akṛtrima Bhāṣya) on the *Brahma-Sūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa by no less a personality than Śrī Caitanya

who was the leader of the medieval Bhakti movement. It is said that Śrī Caitanya never felt the necessity of writing an independent commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtras* on account of this nor did his immediate disciples, following him, write any such commentary. The necessity was felt only later when Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa of Orissa had to take up the challenge at a philosophers' meet at Jaipur of proving that Caitanya's disciples belonged to an independent school of thought, and it was Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa who subsequently took on himself the task of writing an independent commentary from the Acintya bhedabheda point of view on the *Brahma Sūtras*, known as *Govinda Bhāṣya*. Such is the unique prestige and importance of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* in the Vaiṣṇavite school of thought. Corresponding to this we also have Śaiva-śākta Āgamas on which great Tāntiric scholars like Abhinavagupta rely heavily. Somānanda in his *Śivadṛṣṭi* refers to the school of Śāktas as allied to his own Śaiva school. *Pratyabbijñābhṛdaya* is referred to as *Śakti-sūtra* by Bhāskara.³¹ By the end of the eighth century Śaivism had spread throughout India and the Śaivas had their own corpus of scripture known as the Āgamas. The *Tiru Vācakam* of Manikka Vasagar (MānikyaVācaka in Sanskrit) along with the works of a series of saints devoted to Lord Śiva, known as the '*Tamilveda*' deserve a special mention in this context. Above all, there is the *Bhagavad Gītā*, of course, which although considered a smṛti text, is the most important and the most influential in our tradition, as is evident from the numerous commentaries written on it not only by the ancient Ācāryas but also by modern scholars like Balgangadhar

Tilak and Vinoba Bhave. Mahatma Gandhi had held the *Gītā* in the highest esteem. But once again, the interpretations are so very different from each other, whether it is in the case of a Śaṅkara, a Rāmānuja or a modern scholar like Tilak, that there is enough scope for independent thinking even within the frameworks of the *Gītā* itself. Such is the highly suggestive style of its writing that the ideology of a votary of ahimsā like Mahatma Gandhi, of a devotee like Rāmānuja, of an Advaitin like Śaṅkara, and of a Karmayogī like Tilak can all be accommodated easily within its framework. A purely rationalist interpretation of the *Gītā* has also been attempted in modern times by Bairagi Misra of Orissa.³²

All this is because the spiritual experiences recorded in the texts beginning from the *Vedas* to the *Tamil Veda* or *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* have been considered to be too precious to be ignored in our philosophical traditions. Anubhava or experience is of course the final deciding factor after all in supramundane or spiritual matters. But why all these differences in the emphasis in different schools? This, in my considered opinion, is because of the preference of the Ācāryas in favour of a typical anubhava as against another, and this preference in its turn is connected with different world-views and conceptual frameworks with which the Ācāryas approach the Ultimate Reality.

To Ācārya Śaṅkara for example, for whom sarvātmabhāvāpatti or Sarvabhāvāpatti (identity with all) is what constitutes the *Summum bonum*, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* passage, 1.IV.10 such as "Taddhaita paśyanṛṣiḥ Vāmadevaḥ pratipedehaṃ Manura-

bhavaṃ Sūryaśceti", undoubtedly an expression of the unique spiritual experience of Ṛṣi Vāmadeva, comes quite handy. Śaṅkara points out in his commentary that Ṛṣi Vāmadeva, while realizing his own self as identical with Brahman, knew from this realization of the identity of the self and Brahman, and the knowledge of which the śruti passages speak here, according to Śaṅkara, is nothing but the visualization of the mantras, "I was Manu, and the Sun" etc. (*Ṛgveda* IV, XXVI, 1). "Sa etasmin Brahmātma-darśanēvasthita etān mantrān dadarśa-'Ahaṃ Manurabhavaṃ Sūryaśca' ityādīn", says Śaṅkara. The word 'dadarśa' is quite significant in this context. What else does it point to except a typical spiritual experience which is congenial to Śaṅkara's Advaita framework? The epiphany, on the other hand, of Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Viśvarūpa darśana yoga described in a great detail in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is so very congenial to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita framework, and for Rāmānuja the final attainment, culmination, lies in the realization of God and God alone on the part of the devotee, nothing else. Rāmānuja, while commenting on the last sloka of the eleventh chapter, "Matkarmakṛmatparamo madbhaktaḥ sangavarjitaḥ, nirvairah sarvabhuteṣu yaḥ sa māmetya pāṇḍava" clearly points out that God-realisation alone is the *Summum Bonum*, the final goal of the devotee who has got rid of all deficiencies in the form of avidyā etc., "nirastāvidyādyāśeṣadoṣa-gandho madekānubhavo bhavati". In Śaṅkara it is "sarvātmabhāvāpatti" which is the goal, where as in the words of the Lord, as visualized by Rāmānuja, the goal lies in "madekānubhava". Both are typical spiritual experiences, being extraordinary and different from our

day-to-day mundane experiences—this needs to be highlighted in this context.

In this connection, it may be worthwhile to discuss the anubhava or the experience of Brahmānanda about which the *Upaniṣads* speak and which also has been highlighted by the Advaita thinkers like Swāmī Vidyāraṇya. In *Pancadaśī*, XI. 122-123, Vidyāraṇya points out that the bliss of Brahman is enjoyed by the wise one even while he is engaged in the worldly affairs like a woman devoted to a paramour enjoying in her mind the pleasures of her affairs with him even when she is engaged in her house-hold duties.³³ Examples of such typical spiritual experiences of bliss being compared to the experiences of pleasures in mundane affairs are not rare in the Vaiṣṇava tradition also. It is quite understandable in view of the fact that the pleasure derived from the worldly object is supposed to be only a fraction or an aspect of the bliss of Brahman, according to śruti passages³⁴ that are corroborated by our philosophers in various ways. “Athātra viśayānando Brahmānandānāsarūpabhāk”, says the *Pancadaśī* XV. 1. And yet at the same time the transcendental character of Brahmānanda or Ātmānanda, i.e., the experience of the bliss of Brahman or Ātman is no less emphasized by the Vedāntic thinkers. Vidyāraṇya clearly points out, “From the king to Brahmā each wants the joy of the one higher than himself; but the bliss of self which is beyond the grasp of the mind and the senses is superior to that of all others”.³⁵ Here we are confronted with a typical spiritual experience, which is extraordinary and supramundane. This parama ānanda, the bliss, of the self or Brahman, is nityānanda, eternal bliss as

distinguished from the pleasures of sense,³⁶ clarifies Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, 4.5.32. The experience of this bliss of Brahman or Ātman is thus unique. That the jīvanmukta realizes the self or Brahman not only through śāstra and reasoning, that experience or anubhuti has also a role to play here has been pointed out by Vidyāraṇya in his *Anubhūti prakāśa* IV. 84. “Jīvanmukta-stattva vidyāh śāstrayuktyanubhūtibhiḥ”. This is in keeping with the Vedāntic tradition, of course, in view of the fact that Śaṅkara in his *Brahmasūtra bhāṣya* has explicitly pointed out, “Srutyādayaḥ anubhavādayaśca yathāsaṁbhavamiha pramāṇaḥ”, and also “anubhavāvasānatvāt bhūtavastuviśayatvātca *Brahmajñānasya*”.³⁷ Anubhava or experience is thus an important means of valid knowledge (pramāṇa) in case of Brahmajñāna or Ātmajñāna. It is interesting to note that Śaṅkara even goes to the extent of calling it ‘sva hṛdaya pratyaya’ or heartfelt experience in his *commentary on the Brahma Sūtra*, 4.1.15, while referring to Jīvanmukti consisting of Brahmajñāna, even when one continues to have the body. “Kathaṁ hyekasya sva-hṛdaya pratyayaṁ Brahma-vedanaṁ dehadhāraṇaṁca apareṇa pratikṣeptum śakyate?”

The main difference, however, between the Vedāntic tradition of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja lies in the characterization of the anubhava or experience. For Śaṅkara, the model lies in the anubhava of nirguṇa or nirviśeṣa (unqualified) Brahman or Ātman where as for Rāmānuja it is the anubhava of saviśeṣa or saguna Brahman or Īśvara which alone is the goal of man. For, according to Rāmānuja, the highest Being whom we need to realize is a qualified Being

who is endowed with all the best qualities; He is ‘Asaṁkhyeyakalyāṇaguṇagaṇa Puruṣottama’, ‘Paramakāruṇika’, ‘Anālocitaviśeṣaśeṣaśaraṇya’ ‘Āśritavātsalyajaladhi’ etc. Moreover, in Rāmānuja’s conceptual framework, it is impossible to have the anubhava of anything nirviśeṣa or nirguṇa, devoid of all qualifications. In his *Srībhāṣya on Brahma Sūtra* 1.1.1., while discussing the ‘Mahā siddhānta’, Rāmānuja points out, “Yastu-‘svānubhavasiddham’ iti svagoṣṭhiniṣṭhaḥ samayaḥ sōpyātmasākṣika saviśeṣānubhavādeva nirastaḥ; idamahamadārśamiti kenacid viśeṣeṇa viśiṣṭaviśayatvāt sarveṣāmanubhavanām”. Different approaches to the spiritual experiences of these Ācāryas are thus inevitable even if their doctrines are supposed to be based on śruti texts, reasoning as well as anubhava; there are differences in their outlook and approach which cannot be undermined with any preconceived notion of unity (there is an over all unity, though) or harmony in the name of revelation, Vedāntic tradition, spiritualism and the like. This by itself points to the inexhaustive richness of human experience and of the varieties of interpretations that could be put on those very experiences. And this realization itself could be stepping stone in the direction of realising what the *Bhūmā* is like, about which the *Upaniṣads* speak, “Yo vai Bhūmā tat sukhaṁ, nālpe sukhamasti.”

One could look at this whole issue of experience and interpretation from a slightly different angle. “India”, it needs to be acknowledged, “has not simply been fascinated with experiences and visions. It has also produced much analytical thought about their veridical status, and about the nature of experiencing and the

immediacy of awareness as such.”³⁸ At the level, however, where “Ekaṁ sat” is realized in direct experience, there human intellect, with all its dissecting apparatus, is already transcended, to use a terminology of Prof. G.C. Pande, by “the emancipating vision of infinite reality.”³⁹ And then, from this point of view, one may come to see that “different philosophical schools are different traditions of learning, interpretation and criticism, they have no strict connection with spiritual or revealed truth; or, rather, that they represent different logically possible interpretations.”⁴⁰ In that case, the unifying and all-pervasive vision itself obtained through the unique experience alone is taken as providing the clue to the nature of the ultimate reality, as is the case with the Vedic sages (Rṣis) who prepare the ground, as it were, for the whole of the Vedāntic tradition that develops later in its full-fledged form.

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3. *Yajurveda* (Vājaseniya Samhitā), 32.1.
4. *Atharva Veda*, X. 7. 27.
5. *Yajurveda*, 31.19
6. Cf. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (A Mentor Book, 1958), P. 27.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
8. *Atharva Veda*, X, 7.20.
9. *Ibid.*, X.7.22.
10. *Atharva Veda*, X.7.24.
11. *Yajurveda*, (Mādhyandina) Vājase-niya Samhitā), 31.18.
12. Śāṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, 2.1.11.
13. *Yajurveda*, 31.8.
14. *Kāthopaniṣad*, 1.2.12
15. *Atharva Veda*, II.1.1.
16. Dayakrishna “The Vedic corpus; Some questions,” *JICPR*, Vol. III, No. 1, Autumn, 1985, p. 105.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Cf. Dayakrishna, “Vedānta in the First Millennium A.D.: The case study of Retrospective Illusion imposed by the Historiography of Indian Philosophy”, *JICPR*, June, 1996. “The *Brahma Sūtras* remained entirely unnoticed until the appearance of Śāṅkara who wrote his commentary on them along with the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* which resulted in the famous myth of the *Prasthāna Trayī*”.
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20. Cf. Smṛtiprāmānyādhikaraṇa, Śruti-prābalyādhikaraṇa etc. in the *Mīmamsā Sūtras*, for Jaimini’s approach to śmṛti.
21. *Vākyapadīya*, 1.10.
22. Śrī Candrasekharendra Saraśwatī, *The Vedas* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1988), p. 13.
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24. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
25. A.C. Macdonnel, *A Vedic Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1951), Introduction, p. xi.
26. Śāṅkara’s *Gītā Bhāṣya*, 18.67.
27. Cf. Śāṅkara’s *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, “Śrutyavagāhyamevedaṁ atigaṁbhīraṁ Brahma, na tarkāvagāhyaṁ”.
28. Cf. Śāṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, 2.1.27.
29. *Ibid.*, 1.1.2. “Vākyārtha vicāraṇā-dhyavasānaniṣṛvītā hi Brahmā-vagatiḥ”.
30. Cf. *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, 2.1.13, “Yadyapi śrutiḥ pramāṇaṁ svaviṣaye bhavati, tathāpi pramaṇāntareṇa viṣayāpahariṇyaparā bhavitumarhati, yathā mantrārthavādau”.
31. Cf. M.M. Gopinath Kaviraj, *Aspects of Indian Thought* (The University of Burdwan, 1984), pp. 179-180.
32. Cf. G.C. Nayak, *Philosophical Reflections* (Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2nd revised and enlarged edition, 2002), Chapter 10 on ‘Rationalism of the *Gīta*’.
33. Cf. “Paravyasanīnī nārī vyagrāpi gṛhakarmasu, tadevāsvādayatyantaḥ parasaṅga rasāyanaṁ. Evaṁ tattve pare śuddhe dhīro viśrāntimāgataḥ, T a d e v ā s v ā d a y a t y a n t a ḥ bahirvyavaharannapi”.
34. Cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* 4.3.32 ‘Eṣōsya paramānanda etasyaivānanda-syānyāni bhūtāni matrāmupajīvanti”
35. Cf. *Pancadaśī*, XIV, 33, “Sārva-bhaumādisūtrānta uttarottara kāmīnaḥ, Avāṁmanasa gamyō-yamātmānandastataḥ paraṁ”.
36. Cf. Śāṅkara’s Commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, 4.3.32, “Yānīanyāni viṣayendriyasāmbandhajanitāni ānanda-jātāni tānyapeksya eṣōsya-parama ānando nityatvāt. ‘Yo vai Bhūmā tat sukhaṁ’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.23.1) iti śrutyantarāt”.
37. Cf. Śāṅkara’s *Commentary on the Brahma Sūtra* 1.1.2.
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* For a detailed discussion on this, cf. G.C. Pande, *Ekaṁ Sad Vipra Babudha Vadanti* (Varanasi, 1997).

** For a detailed discussion on Baladeva, Cf. G.C. Nayak, *Philosophical Reflections* (2nd enlarged and revised edition, 2002 ICPR, New Delhi), Chapter 11.