



A Journey through Vedantic History - Advaita in the Pre-Sankara, Sankara and Post- Sankara Periods

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Lecture Two

These lectures were delivered in Michaelmas Term (Oct.-Dec. 2003). They are intended to introduce the basic tenets of Advaita tracing it from the period of Gaudapada through Sankara to the present day Advaitins. They examine the philosophical subtleties of Advaita, its enrichment through productive dialogue with other schools and also its impact on the society. These are designed for students in Indian Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies and do not require in-depth understanding of Indian scriptures. However, they could also be of particular interest to advanced students of Indology and Sanskrit studies.

Pre-Shankara Advaita:

Since the Advaita tradition has its roots in the Vedas, which have been expounded from times immemorial, it cannot be dated with great accuracy. However, the earliest formulation of the system can be traced back to the Mandukya-karikas of Gaudapada.¹ The predecessor and teacher of Gaudapada is said to be Suka the famous author of the Bhagavatapurana. To this day, however, there is no hard evidence to support this traditional belief. Prior to Suka seems to be the sage Vyasa whom Vacaspati identifies with the author of the Brahmasutras in the introductory verse of his commentary Bhamati: "brahmasutrakrte tasmai vedavyasaya dhimate." Further, because of some references concerning Vyasa in early Samkhya, Vaishesika and Buddhist texts, we may tentatively place him in the third century BCE. Previous teachers like Parasara may very well be mythological figures. Hence the Brahmasutras and the Mandukyakarikas are the sole reliable pre-Shankara Advaita works available to us. The line of preceptors ranging from Narayana to Suka is a familial one--the teachings were passed on from father to son. The Upanisads themselves tell us of celebrated teachers like Atharvan, Bharadvaja, Yajnavalkya, and Uddalaka, who engaged in "meaningful" discourses with their kith and kin. These

¹. Scholars like Max Walleser and Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya are of the opinion that Gaudapada may not be the author of the karikas but this is not sound since both Shankara and Sureshvara quote Gaudapada (evam gaudairavidairnah ayam arthah prabhasitah).

sages had ashramas in different parts of the country and Shankara must have followed their example in his decision to establish his Mathas.²

The Brahmasutras:

It is very likely that there were many works called Brahmasutras, which object were to give a concise summary of the Upanisadic teachings. Unfortunately, the Sarirakamimamsa of Badarayana is the sole to have survived. In his work, Badarayana refers to Badari, Jaimini, Kasakrtsnam, Karsnajini, Asmarathya and Atreya, suggesting that each of the latter had written his aphorisms on the Upanisads.³ The Bhakti-sutras of Sandilya⁴ and Kasyapa that were written before Shankara seem to teach theistic non-dualism and dualism, respectively. If different teachers wrote about the Upanisads highlighting different things, Badarayana, whom Vacaspati calls the universal teacher (sarvabhauma) seems to have been more thorough in his outlook, writing on karma, jnana, as well as yoga.

The well-known pre-Shankara teachers were Bhartrprapanca, Dravidacarya, Sundarapandya, Bhatrmitra, Brahmanandin and Upavarsha. They must have been Vedantins of great stature since they are named in the works of Shankara, Sureshvara and Vacaspati Mishra. Both Shankara and Sureshvara refer to Bhartrprapanca as Upanisadam-manyu, i.e., thinking that he knew the Upanisads. He was thoroughly criticized by Sureshvara. Brahmanandin wrote the Chandogya-vakya wherein he gives the summary of the Upanisadic teachings. Dravidacarya wrote a commentary on the Chandogyopanisad. The schools of Advaita and Vishistadvaita claim Dravidacarya as a traditional teacher. Both Shankara and Ramanuja refer to Dravida in their respective commentarial works. The Advaitin Polagam Rama Sastri gives us but a glimpse of Dravida's thinking in a text published under the auspices of the Kanci Shankara Matha. Many scholars like Hiriyanna and Sudarsanasuri have attempted to formulate the philosophy of Brahmadata and Sudarsanasuri, for instance, calls Brahmadata as an old mayavadin (jaramayavadin). Notwithstanding

². The Sringeri-matha is the place where Vibhandaka, and his son Rsyasrnga were staying and later in his name the place was called as Sringeri. He was given in marriage to Santa and later he went to Dvaraka for Vanaprastha. A tradition holds that later on, he went to the four places where Shankara had established his mathas.

³. I came across a commentary on Sribhasya of Ramanuja, in which there is reference to 96 bhasyas written before Shankara.

⁴. Kaviraja shows that Sandilya's Bhakti-sutra was pre-Shankara.

Shankara and Vacaspati's critiques of the views of Brahmadata, the latter still remained influential within the Advaita tradition.⁵

At the end of his commentary on the samanvayadhikarana, Shankara quotes three verses from a teacher who has been identified with Sundarapandya by later Advaitins. Since Kumarila also quotes him, it is very likely that Sundarapandya was the author of a commentary on the Sariraka-mimamsa-sutra as well as on the Mimamsa-sutras. This is what Vacaspati seems to be saying in his Bhamati: atraiva brahmaidam gatham udaharanti. Further, the Prabodha-parisuddhi, a commentary on Padmapada's Pancapadika refers to Sundarapandya directly, saying: "slokatrayam sundarapandyapranitam pramanayati iti aha."

A reference to the teacher Bhartrmitra is found in Kumarila and Mandana's writings. According to Shankara and Bhaskara, the teacher Brahmanandin (also known as Tanka) was holding the Vivartavada and parinamivada doctrines, respectively. However, Ramanuja's view is that Tanka supported Vishistadvaita doctrines. Upavarsa, another important early Advaitin, is reverentially addressed by Shankara as Bhagavan Upavarsa. Shankara appeals to his theory on varnas to oppose that of sphota. Sabarasvamin presents Upavarsa's views in his Mimamsa-sutra-bhasya. Ramanuja grounds his own Vedantic tradition in the pre-Shankara period through identifying Upavarsa with Bodhayana. The latter is said to have authored a vrtti which formed the basis for Ramanuja's bhasyas. Sadly, Bodhayana's vrtti has not survived to the present day.

In support of his own tradition, Ramanuja refers to Bodhayana, Tanka, Dramida, Guhadeva, Kapardin, Bharuci and other pre-Shankara commentators. The celebrated qualified non-dualist Yamuna refers to Bhartrhari as a pre-Shankara Advaitin. This seems to be a correct appraisal of Bhartrhari's views since at the beginning of his Vakyapadaya, he asserts that the whole universe is an appearance or *vivarta* of Sabdabrahman.

The Brahmasutras of Badarayana, the Mandukyakarikas of Gaudapada, along with the Vakyapadiaya and the Brahmasiddhi of Mandana as well as the prasthanagranthas, i.e., the Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad-gita,⁶ are the sole extant pre-Shankara Vedanta works. For centuries following the death of Shankara, numerous

⁵. He talks of kamapradvamsavada.

⁶. There are views that Gaudapada was influenced by Yogavasistha, Paramarthasara of Adisesa, and the Bhagavata purana which does not seem to be probable.

commentaries have been written on Badarayana's famous sutras. Although dozens of commentaries may have been written, we only know of those authored by Bhaskara, Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madva, Vallabha, and Baladeva. In previous lectures, I have shown the points of agreement and difference between the main commentarial schools. Gaudapada's Mandukyakarikas is a very important text since it provided the basic impetus for Shankara's writings. The latter actually refers to Gaudapada as a knower of the Vedanta tradition (sampradayavid). Regarding the teacher Bhartrhari, we find that his commentators Helaraja and Punyaraja portray him as an Advaitin who hold the view that the realization of the Absolute is possible through the knowledge of Sabda-brahman.⁷

Mandana:

It would be wrong not to refer to Mandana who seems to be a senior contemporary of Shankara and one of the best representatives of early Advaita. Mandana teaches jnanakarmasamuccayavada, a doctrine that advocates the necessity to associate actions with knowledge in order to attain liberation. Although Mandana is well known for his treatises on Advaita, he also dealt with non-advaita topics as is evident in his Vidhiviveka, Vibhramaviveka and Sphotasiddhi. Shankara criticizes his sphota theory, but modern scholars like TRV Murti have felt that the philosophy of the Sphotasiddhi can be adjusted to Shankara's system. The Advaita tradition identifies Mandana as Sureshvara, yet this is quite improbable. There is little doubt that it is Mandana who influenced the Bhamati school of Advaita (mandanaprstasevi). He distinctly articulated the doctrines of vivarta, anirvacaniya and mithyatva, which were to become the foundational tenets of Advaita philosophy during the post-Shankara period.

The pre-Shankara period can be seen as the common preamble to all schools of Vedanta. In that period, there were no clear demarcations between Vedantic schools of thought. Perhaps, there was only one school of Vedanta which, by its nature, tolerated certain dissensions within its midst.

⁷. sabda-brahmani nisnatah parm brahmadhigacchati Brahmbindu Upa. 17

Shankara:

From the amount of criticisms leveled against Shankara and his school, it becomes clear that Shankara was a person of great charisma and authority besides the fact that he taught at a turning point of Indian religio-philosophical history. As we know from his own writings, he embraced the Vedic tradition while being a constructive religious reformer. From his works transpires philosophical commitment and astuteness as well as ardent devotion.⁸ During his short life span (tradition holds that he lived for a mere 32 years), Shankara is said to have traveled the length and breadth of the country to give a new momentum to Vedantic orthodoxy (sanatana dharma) threatened, on the one hand, by the tradition of Buddhism, and by the Mimamsakas on the other.

During his travels, Shankara met with scholars from a variety of schools and debated with them on various philosophical issues. Tradition has it that he debated with a famous Mimamsa scholar called Mandana-mishra also known as Vishvarupa. Accepting defeat, Mandana is said to have given up his life as a householder to become one of Shankara's four disciples, namely Sureshvara, the other three being Padmapada, Totaka, and Hastamalaka. The monastic institutions that Shankara is said to have set up are the Jyotir Matha at Badarikasrama, the Kalika pitha at Dvaraka, the Govardhanapitha at Jagannatha ksetra, Puri, the Saradapitha at Sringeri, and the Kamakoti pitha at Kanci. The many still existent digvijayas depicts the life of Shankara in their own singular way. Some, for instance, say that he attained siddhi at Kanchi while others assert that it was at Kedara in the Himalayas.

Let me reiterate the fact that despite a great deal of historical research and archeological findings, we are still in the dark concerning Shankara's dates. Some scholars think that Shankara must be prior to Dharmakirti (600 AD). Yet, as I have shown in one of my recent writings, Shankara cannot precede Dharmakirti since we find the ideas of Dharmakirti in Shankara's writings and because Sureshvara cites Dharmakirti by name. Unlike scholars in the West, Indian scholars tend to place Shankara's dates as far back as possible. However, from a mere survey of the schools which Shankara criticizes, it is, I think, possible to place his dates at around 600-650 AD.

⁸ Shankara PHISCP vol. on Advaita Vedanta, p. 66.

Writings of Sankara:

The tradition of Advaita refers to Shankara as the Bhasyakara or commentator on the authoritative texts of the Vedanta. The latter stands on three canons (prasthanas), i.e., the Upanisads (Sruti-prasthanas), the Brahmasutras (Nyaya prasthanas), and the Bhagavad-gita (Smṛti prasthanas). The Brahmasutras summarize the teachings of the Upanisads in the form of aphorisms. The teachings of the Upanisads are lengthy and complex and this is one of the reasons why they are explained in the Brahmasutras in the form of 555 short aphorisms. Since the Brahmasutras' teachings are logically arranged, the work is also named Nyaya or Tarka-prasthanas. The Bhagavadgita is a Smṛti-prasthanas.⁹ For the sake of clarity, we may classify the works of Shankara into three groups.

1. Commentaries on the authoritative texts of the Upanisads, the Bhagavadgita and the Brahmasutras as well as the Laghubhasyasas, Visnu-sahasranama, Lalithatrisati, and other similar works.
2. Minor works expounding Advaita doctrines like the Upadesasahasri, Atmabodha, Vivekacudamani, Vakyavrtti, Aparoksanubhuti, etc.
3. Devotional works - the stotras or the hymnal literature. It may be said that Shankara was desirous of making the Advaita teachings available to the common man, and that it is for this very purpose that he would have written such literature, which is filled with non-dualistic themes. It must be kept in mind that Shankara did not solely give importance to gnosis (jnana) for he also recognized the important function of devotion on the path to moksha. For Shankara, knowledge was never antagonist to devotion.

Besides composing various hymns in praise of Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, it is believed that Shankara wrote treatises on the banks of holy rivers like Gangastaka and Yamunastaka, for the purpose of conveying the highest teaching of the Upanisads to the common people. It is generally thought that Advaita is anti-theistic. This, in my opinion, is quite untrue. Shankara's literary output reveals that he strongly believed in theism. Having said that, his philosophy places the ultimate principle (Brahman) beyond theism. In fact, Shankara's ultimate teachings do not fit any category and thus it is safe to say that his Advaita is neither atheistic, nor theistic.

⁹. Madhusudana Sarasvati writes: "smarati ca bhagavan vedavyasa gitayam bhagavad vacanam."

It is rather trans-theistic in nature. If theism has an important place in Shankara Vedanta, it is not final.

Shankara's philosophy:

Both the Brahmasutras and the Bhagavadgita contain the central philosophy of the Upanisads. For Shankara, the entire prasthanatraya is meant to teach the unity of the self. In his introduction to the Katha-Upanisad, Shankara says that the primary meaning of the word Upanisad is knowledge, while the secondary meaning is the text itself. Explaining how the knowledge of Brahman leads to liberation, Shankara says that the knowledge of Brahman is called Upanisad because it conforms to the idea of leading to Brahman, that is, insofar as it helps the seeker after liberation--who possesses the necessary qualifications--to attain the supreme Brahman. The same idea is repeated in Brhadaranyaka-Upanisad and is reiterated in the conclusion of the Adhyasa-bhasya. In the latter text, Shankara writes: with a view to get rid of this wrong notion, which is the cause of all evils, and for attaining the knowledge of the absolute oneness of the Self, the study of Vedanta texts is begun. That all the Vedanta texts have this purport will be shown in the Sariraka-mimamsa.

Shankara's main objective in commenting on the Bhagavad-gita, is a) to probe into the two types of dharma, i.e., pravrtti (pipilika marga) and nivrtti (vihangamamarga), and b) to explain the purpose of divine incarnation. Concerning the first objective, he wishes to draw a distinction between the path of karma and the path of jnana, the latter being the direct discipline leading to liberation. Shankara says that the man whose mind has been purified by works is competent to tread the path of knowledge and that to him alone comes knowledge. Thus, for Shankara, the dharma of works forms an indirect means to the attainment of the supreme bliss.

Shankara was the upholder of an already existent tradition (Evam sampradaya vido vadanti (Gitabhasya 13.2); asampradayavid sastrajnopi tnavad upeksaniyah). So it is without claiming any originality that Shankara presented himself as a spokesman for the Upanisadic tradition. However, Shankara certainly shows originality in his analysis and interpretations of certain ideas embedded in the prasthanatraya. His commentaries along with his minor works have seriously impacted other systems of thought (some even built themselves up through refuting his Vedantic interpretation) as well as the lives of ordinary people. In addition, to this very day, Shankara has

been a veritable authority for Advaitins, and a source of inspiration for Advaitins and non-Advaitins alike.

Adhyasa:

Shankara's formulation of the concept of Adhyasa as the presupposition of philosophical investigation is a milestone in the philosophy of Advaita. According to him, a philosopher must inquire into the nature of the processes of the mind with a view to discover the ultimate principle of life viz. the self or consciousness. Shankara's entire epistemology rests on the polarity of subject and object. Shankara refers to this polarity as the one between *asmat* and *yusmat* the "I" (*asmat*) and "you" (*yusmat*), the former being the self, the subject, and the latter being the not self, the object. The subject, he asserts, can never become an object. Similarly, the object can never become the subject; he compares this subject/object difference to that existing between light and darkness. In every case of Adhyasa (superimposition) Shankara says, there is coupling of the real with the unreal. The real, that is, the Self, is pure consciousness. It gets involved in the activity of knowing because of its association with the mind. In these instances, the mind, which is insentient, becomes a knower (*jnata*) because of its association with the self which is consciousness. According to Shankara, the relation between mind and self involves mutual superimposition (*itaretara-adhyasa*). This relation is false since there cannot be any real relation between the self and the non-self.

Wrong identification takes place at different levels and this adhyasa plays an important role in both secular and scriptural activities. Shankara tells us that it is because of wrongly identifying the self with the body that a person can claim himself to be a male, a Brahmana, etc. It is only when one identifies with the sense organs that one may think of oneself as deaf, blind, etc. Happiness and unhappiness are both states of being caused by wrong identification with the mind. Shankara says that this superimposition can be overcome when right knowledge of the self (*vidya*) arises.

According to Shankara, knowledge can be divided into two types empirical and trans-empirical (*Dve vidye veditavye*). His metaphysics start with empirical pluralism to terminate at Brahman. Shankara is clear that the difference between nirguna Brahman and saguna Brahman reflects the dissimilarity that exists between knowledge and ignorance. He presents this distinction in terms of two standpoints, the absolute and the relative--*Vidya* and *avidya* or the *paramarthika* and *vyavaharika*

perspectives, respectively. For Shankara, pluralism is only provisional and thus, it is not possible to say that Advaita is a philosophy centered on two real standpoints.

Shankara and Liberation:

According to Shankara, man does not know his true nature of being and is thus caught in empirical existence because of such ignorance (avidya). If ignorance is responsible for experiencing samsara, knowledge alone can remedy it. Knowledge in Shankara is the state of Brahma-prapti, or the attainment of Brahman. Yet since Brahman is ever existent and always attained, liberation can only mean the attainment of the already attained. This is solely possible through the removal of ignorance. In Shankara Vedanta, man's only predicament is that he is unaware that his own self is Brahman (svarupasthiti, that is, advaita-bhava).

It is important to note that if Shankara holds that the vyavaharika level is false (mithya), it is not as a final tenet. That which has a lower value points to that which has a higher one, and thus apara-vidya is thought to pave the way for a higher knowledge (para-vidya). To Shankara the absolute truth is of the highest value, it is the supreme reality.

To summarize, Shankara says that avidya is synonymous with false knowledge (mithyajnana), which is natural to all beings. For him, Avidya is more a psychic affliction (klesha) than a cosmic power. It is in this sense that Shankara uses the expression avidya-avastha in his Bhasyas. It corresponds to the sphere of daily life (vyavahara) and is completely opposed to paramartha-avastha. In Post-Shankara Advaita, avidya is understood as the material cause of the world. Even Sureshvara, the direct disciple of Shankara, uses the term upadana in order to express the relationship between avidya and its effects. In the Bhasyas, avidya is used interchangeably with pratyupasthapita, adhyasta, adhyaropita, and kalpita. Shankara does not characterize avidya as the positive indescribable entity (anirvacaniya) that we find in Mandana's Brahmasiddhi. The problems that concern most post-Shankara Advaitins, such as determining a locus for avidya, were no issues at all for the Bhasyakara. Shankara's teachings are often reduced to the theory of mayavada (the illusoriness of the universe), a tenet which is not prominent in his teachings. In fact, he considers that all the Vedantas teach Brahman alone. The terms encountered in his writings, which purport to describe his siddhanta, are Vedavada, Vedantavada, Brahmavada, but not mayavada. In addition, whenever the term maya is used in the Bhasyas, it is in the

sense of deception. Nowhere in his commentaries does Shankara use the well-known expression “vivartavada” that describes Shankara’s philosophy in the post-Shankara period. Vivartate and vivartamana are used in his bhasyas without purely suggesting illusion.

Post-Shankara Advaita:

Although the tradition of Advaita, from the Upanisadic times down to the present day, is a continuous one, still, we may speak of the tradition in terms of pre-Shankara and post-Shankara periods, making Shankara the dividing line between these two. Such formulation helps highlighting the philosophical reformulations and constructions that took place in the post-Shankara period. Although the Advaitic core of teachings remained the same throughout, significant peripheral expansions took place; new tenets were proposed and eventually accepted as original Advaitic doctrines. Traditionally, it is held that Shankara had four disciples: Padmapada, Sureshvara, Hastamalaka and Totaka. The literary output of the first two is very important from the standpoint of post-Shankara Advaita. As mentioned previously, tradition holds the view that Mandana and Sureshvara were one and the same individual. Mandana is the author of non-Advaita treatises (the Vidhiviveka and Bhavanaviveka) as well as Advaita treatises (the Brahmasiddhi). It may be difficult to accept the identity of these two figures on the ground that by writing the Brahmasiddhi, the author would have refuted his own Mimamsa views. Naturally, some scholars hold the view that the author of the Brahmasiddhi must be different from the author of the Naiskarmyasiddhi. Yet, from surveying the nature of the above-mentioned works, it is not possible to prove that a single individual did not author them. After all, the author of the Brahmasiddhi could have been an authority in both Advaita and Mimamsa. Although the debate continues on this difficult matter, the prevalent view is that Mandana and Sureshvara were different individuals. Totaka is credited with the work Totakastakam and Hastamalaka with Hastamalakiyam. Sureshvara is known as the Vartikakara for he wrote vartikas on Shankara’s commentaries on the Taittiriya and Brhadaranyaka Upanisads. He is also the author of the Naiskarmya-siddhi, in which he claims his allegiance to the tradition of Shankara and quotes profusely from the Upadeshasahasri. His vartikas deal with what is said,

not said, or otherwise said in the bhasyas.¹⁰ Sureshvara is said to have been the first preceptor of the Sringeri matha. Some say that he also presided the Kanchi matha.

In the post-Shankara period, two Advaita schools came into existence, i.e., the Vivarana and the Bhamati. The origin of the Vivarana school may be traced back to Padmapada's Pancapadika. This work is unfortunately not complete. The Pancapadika-vivarana is a commentary to this text. In the 14th century, Vidyaranya wrote his own commentary named the Vivaranaprimeya-sangraha. A large number of other commentaries were written on this important text in later times.

The origin of the Bhamati school can be traced to Vacaspati Mishra's commentary on the Brahmasutras called Bhamati. There is an additional commentary called the Kalpataru, written by Amalananda. The Kalpataru, in turn, has been commented upon by Parimala. These three form the basic texts of the Bhamati school. Vacaspati has written a commentary on the Brahmasiddhi, which has yet to be published. The basic doctrines of the Bhamati are derived from the Brahmasiddhi. As to the Vivarana tradition, we can relate it to the writings of Sureshvara. In the post-Shankara period, we find a group of texts under the name of siddhi literature, which comprises: a) the Naiskarmya-siddhi of Sureshvara, b) the Istasiddhi of Vimuktatman, c) the Advaitasiddhi of Madhusudana, and d) the Svarajyasiddhi of Gangadharendra Sarasvati. They are all complex logical texts resembling Sriharsa's Khandana-khandakhadya, which refutes other schools through logic, without ever putting forth the view that he considers right.

In the post Shankara period, many independent philosophical works were written in addition to the commentaries on the prasthanatraya and other prakarana-granthas. Vidyaranya wrote an important number of Advaitic treatises like the Pancadasi, the Anubhutiprakasa, the Vivarnaprimeya sangraha, etc. Appayya diksita, another great Advaita scholar, wrote many works among which the Siddhantalesa-sangraha stands highest. He also wrote a commentary on Yadavabhudaya of Vedantadesika, which shows his openness towards and respect for other interpretive schools. Dharmaraja wrote a full text on Advaita epistemology called Vedantaparibhasa. 20th century scholars like Ramaraya kavi, Anantakrishna Sastri, have also contributed to the development of the philosophy of Advaita. Vedanta is a living tradition that is being worked out by both modern and traditional scholars. Vedantic dialectic is another

¹⁰. ukat anukta durukta cintaman vartikam

field with extensive literature. Ramanuja's saptavidha-anupapatti and Vedantadesika's Satadusani find faults in the acceptance of the concept of maya. Anantakrishna Sastri's Satabhusani attempts to refute the views of Desika. In turn, the Paramarthaprakasika of Uttamur Viraraghava, (1985) seeks to refute Sastri, and so on and so forth. The nature of these few works quoted above shows that Vedanta is still a living tradition.

To conclude: Advaita system(s) can be divided on the basis of four doctrines 1. Nirguna-brahmavada, 2. brahma-vivartavada, 3. anirvacaniya-khyativada and 4. jivanmuktivada. In post-Shankara Advaita, these four doctrines go hand in hand. The first two doctrines have metaphysical implications, the third has both metaphysical and epistemological implications and the fourth has great soteriological significance. The works of Shankara and post-Shankara Advaitins are meaningful only when viewed against the metaphysical background of the nature of the self and the theory of the identity of self and Brahman.