

An
Adventure
of
Ideas

QUEST

Editors: Abu Sayeed Ayyub & Amlan Datta

DAYA KRISHNA

Reflections on an Anecdote

ABU SAYEED AYYUB

Jawaharlal Nehru on Religion

M. K. HALDAR

Nehru's Foreign Policy

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Sleep Teaching

KA NAA SUBRAMANYAM

Jothi Ramalingam

DISCUSSION ON CULTURAL UNITY

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Reviews Editor : NISSIM EZEKIEL
Astt. Reviews Editor : MRS. LAEEQ FUTEHALLY
Business Manager : MISS SHEELA SINGH

All contributions, which must be type-written, and correspondence regarding contributions should be addressed to THE EDITORS, QUEST, 5 Pearl Road, Calcutta 17. For book-reviews, subscriptions and other matters please write: THE BUSINESS MANAGER, QUEST, 148, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bombay 1.

Reflections on an Alleged Anecdote in Samkara's Life

DAYA KRISHNA

SAMKARA is perhaps the greatest name in Vedanta that the world has known. At least, there can be little doubt that his name and his works are associated with this philosophy in a pre-eminent manner. Equally, the philosophical school with which his name is associated has been considered by many to be the most distinctive contribution that India has made to the world of philosophic thought. In the considered opinion of many historians of Indian Philosophy, Vedanta is not merely the culmination of Indian thought but, in fact, of all philosophical thought whatsoever.

Vedanta, on the other hand, is not merely a school of Philosophy. It is regarded, at least by its followers, as the distilled essence of all spirituality, as the truth behind all religions, as the last seeking of the soul to be lost in All and to become All, to dissolve all duality, the source of all the problems of man and the universe. Samkara, in this context, is not a mere philosopher, a person who only ratiocinates and splits hairs about unnecessary and irrelevant problems. He is primarily a person who does not merely talk and verbalize and move his lips, as the Great Buddha would have said, but also lives and realizes the great truth he preaches. In other words, he is not merely the embodiment of Vedantic thought but also of Vedantic realization. The truth which the thought articulates is lived and illustrated in the life of its great teacher.

The presupposition that the life of a real founder or master is a living illustration and embodiment of his thought is intrinsic to the Indian mind. The essen-

tial hiatus between thought and life is not ultimately accepted by the Indian psyche. One may not believe in Samkara as the ideal of Vedantic realization or one may not accept his version of Vedantic thought as the genuine or the real one. But, then, whomsoever one will regard as articulating the genuine thought, one would also regard as genuinely embodying, illustrating and realizing it in his own life.

And, in India, this is not confined to Vedanta alone. Whatever be the Truth claimed, it is supposed to be lived, embodied and realized by at least one person in the universe. The Indian mind would be completely nonplussed at the idea that there can be a Truth which is intrinsically unrealizable by anybody anywhere in the world. Not only this, the person or persons who have realized the truth completely must already be there either in the past or the present or both. That alone would ensure the *actual* possibility of the realization of that Truth. The abstract possibility of someone realizing it in the future will hardly ever satisfy him and only appear as Pickwickian in character.

It is in this context and this context alone that the biography of a thinker in India assumes the form of a living commentary on the truth he verbalised and preached in his works. It is as if one were to understand the truth of the Gospels from the Life of Christ or of the Koran from the life of Mohammad. There just can be no discrepancy between the two, as the dichotomy between thought and action in the case of such perfect beings will shake the very foundation on which such a way

of looking at life and things ultimately rests.

The least little anecdote, therefore, is as important as any other. One may deny its veracity or its interpretation, but one cannot, within the limits of the perspective, be indifferent to its implications for the truth of that which is articulated only in the verbalized form. The context of the life that was lived by the presumed perfect being is, so to say, overridingly imperative for the understanding of the text that he wrote. The two cannot be dissociated and if there is a seeming conflict between the two, it can only be apparent and not really so. And if it ever seem that the two are irreconcilable, the primacy, as always, has to be given to the life and not to the text which is always, in this perspective, only a partial commentary on it.

The life of Samkara assumes, in this context, an overwhelming importance whose significance for Vedanta has not been seen in this way, so far as I am aware. One always goes to the texts for an elucidation of the views that he held and not to the alleged anecdotes of his life for an insight into the truth that he preached. There is, of course, a problem about the historicity of the events alleged but then that is a problem which plagues us about everything that is past. This much, however, may always be said that none who *accepts* the veracity of the anecdote may truthfully *reject* the implications it entails, unless he is prepared to deny the truth of the entailment itself. And this is all that we wish to urge here. Our plea is only that one who accepts the following anecdote to be true of Samkara's life cannot truthfully reject its implications for the Vedantic knowledge and realization, in case he also accepts Samkara to be the perfect embodiment of it.

The anecdote we are referring to is well known, at least amongst those who have not been completely cut off from their tradition by the alienating system of education in this country. It concerns the famous debate of Samkara with Mandana

Misra and may briefly be recapitulated as follows:—

Samkara engaged in a debate with Misra, the condition of the debate being that whoever was defeated would adopt the ashrama of the other. In other words, if Samkara were to be defeated he would become a householder and if he were to win, Mandan Misra would become a Sanyasin. Mandan's wife was agreed to be the judge of the debate by both of them. After a long debate, when the judgement was given in favour of Samkara and he asked Mandan to fulfil the terms of the debate and become a sanyasin, his wife interposed and said that he had defeated only the half of Mandan, as, according to the scriptures, husband and wife together made one single unit while singly, they were only incomplete halves of each other. Unless, therefore, he defeated her in the debate also, his victory would not be complete and he could not legitimately ask for the fulfilment of the condition of the debate.

Samkara agreed to the objection and started the debate with Mandan's wife who adroitly took the discussion to realms of love and sex *about which Samkara, being a celibate from birth, knew nothing at all*. He begged for a time-interval of six months during which he entered into the body of a king who had just died and through that body acquired the knowledge he did not have before. After mastering fully a knowledge he did not know before, he returned back to his body which had been carefully preserved and safeguarded by his disciples and defeated Mandan's wife finally in the debate.

This is only a brief outline, but it suffices for the purpose I have in view. If we critically reflect on the anecdote, assuming it to be correct, it would reveal features which have implications which are radically at variance with beliefs held to be axiomatically true by most Vedantic and non-Vedantic seekers of the spirit in this country. Take, for example, the astounding fact that Samkara did not know about love and sex even though he

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was supposed to be a person who had completely realised Brahman, i.e., the ultimate truth and reality. The implication is obvious and inescapable that knowledge of ultimate reality does not necessarily give you a knowledge of other things as well.

Not only this, the anecdote has deeper implications still. It is not merely that Samkara did not know about the questions raised by Mandan's wife but that he could not know even if he wished except by the usual processes through which such things are known. To put it in another way, there was *no* transcendental or yogic method available to Samkara for knowing such an empirical matter of fact as love or sex. He could not, for example, just concentrate on it and know about it all that he wanted to know. Yet, surprisingly, this is what almost every Indian believes. There are no limits to what a realized soul may know, if it wants to. And this 'knowing' is not to be supposed to be achieved by such pedestrian methods as the ordinary student of the subject is perforce obligated to follow. The realized person has merely to concentrate to get at the knowledge he wants or rather just to attend and bring it into the focus of his consciousness, for he is already supposed to have it.

Whenever, of course, a challenge is presented to such a belief to substantiate itself, the defence usually takes the form of pointing out that the Yogi or the realised person does not wish this at all. Fortunately, in this case, such a line of defence cannot be undertaken for Samkara obviously very much wished to know what he needed to know. In fact, his need was so great that he was prepared to undergo all that trouble for the sake of acquiring that knowledge.

There is a deeper problem still. What exactly was the knowledge that Samkara thought could be got only by actually living the life of love and sex and which could be acquired in no other way? For example, why could not Samkara study the Kāmasūtra of Vatsyayana or any other such treatise on the subject and acquire the

knowledge he so badly wanted to defeat Mandan's wife in argument? Was he distinguishing between knowledge by experiencing, or what some modern philosophers have called 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description'? Was, for him, only that knowledge which could be directly and immediately experienced? But if so, what could 'all the discussion have been about since the essential core of any experience is as much indescribable as, say, the experience of Brahman?

In fact, the alleged anecdote does not help us in this matter. It does not tell us the exact specific questions which Samkara was asked and which he felt he could not answer without direct experience of the things or events to which the questions referred. But, though deficient in this respect, the anecdote does unquestionably establish that there undoubtedly are *some* questions whose answers, according to Samkara, cannot be known by any other means except sense-experience itself. Neither Sruti, i.e., the revealed texts, nor authority of any other kind nor yogic meditation nor the realization of Brahman is competent either singly or collectively to answer such questions. This, basically, is the minimum empirical position with respect to the issue of knowledge and if the alleged anecdote about Samkara's life be held to be true then the great Vedantin should be supposed to have held some such position.

It should be clearly understood in this connection that what we are urging is different from the oft-quoted verse of Samkara wherein he is supposed to have said that if any statement of the Sruti concerning empirical matters of fact conflicts with direct sense-experience, then the latter alone should be considered as true. This does not entail at all that there are such statements in the Sruti which actually do conflict nor that there are types of knowledge which just are not found there. The anecdote certainly is equally silent about the first, but it does positively imply the second.

The points, then, that the anecdote actually implies for the issue of knowledge may minimally be stated to be the following:—

1) The Revealed Texts do not contain all the knowledge that a person needs or requires in his life, even if one believes in them as revealed.

2) The realization of Brahman does not give all the knowledge that one may require or need in one's life, even when one has realized it absolutely and completely in this life.

3) The practice of Yogic concentration and meditation cannot give all the knowledge one wants or needs, even when one has gained complete facility and mastery in it.

4) Sense-experience is the *only* way of getting at certain types of knowledge which can be had in *no other way*.

These four points, as almost everybody in India would know, are the exact opposites of what most persons born and brought up in the Hindu tradition believe axiomatically. To question those beliefs seems a sacrilege to most Hindus. Yet, if the considerations given above are even approximately correct, the beliefs seem unfounded in the light of any reflection on the tradition itself.

The obvious and the most convenient way out of the difficulty is to deny either the truth of the anecdote or the truth of the statement that Samkara was a realized soul. But the problem, as anybody can see, is not of Samkara or the alleged anecdote we have been talking about. If one does not believe in Samkara, then, well, there is Buddha or Rāmānuja or Rāmkrishna or Aurobindo or Chaitanya or anyone else whom some individual or individuals consider as occupying that status or position. Also, the issue is not confined to Hinduism alone. Christ and Mohammed are in the same position and, thus, the Christians and the Muslims have a similar situation to face.

The problem, then, may be reformulated at a more general level in the following way:

1. Do we or do we not regard any historical individual as having completely realized in his actual person the perfection which that tradition envisages for the human individual?

2. Do we or do we not grant authenticity to any events, incidents or anecdotes about the actual lives of such persons in case we do choose to regard them as perfect?

3. In case there is any fundamental and irresolvable conflict between the incidents of the life held to be indubitably veridical and the conception of perfection as it is usually envisaged in that tradition, what do we do?

There is scarcely a single religion or even a religious sect, which does not hold at least one individual to be completely perfect. Equally, there is hardly any religion or religious sect which does not hold to the absolute veracity of at least some incidents in the lives of these persons. What has escaped attention, however, is the simple fact that the two are in essential conflict with each other at some points at least in their formulation. Either the conception of perfection that we have and which we so confidently ascribe to these persons is mistaken or the incidents which we narrate and believe in are false. But there is hardly a version of the life as it was actually lived which does not flatly contradict the notions of perfection ascribed to such persons. Whether it be the *Gospels* or the *Koran* or the *Srimad Bhāgavata* or the *Tales of the Buddha* or *The Gospel of Sri Ramkrishna* or *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and the Mother* or *The Master as I saw Him*, the discerning reader can always find plenty to contradict in what is so absolutely believed by the believer.

The usual way to resolve the contradiction is to resort to Dialectics which seems the only way to escape out of a desperate situation. But it is not seen by those who resort to it that it makes nonsense of every assertion, the true as well as the false. The presumed perfection is no more illustrated by the life, for that which illustrates and

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Intuition and Fact

that which contradicts become equally
unreal.

It may, I suggest, be infinitely better to
revise the concept of perfection, to admit
that there are no perfect beings, that there
are only persons infinitely better than our-
selves and better only in certain respects.
Even if we are convinced that there is such
a thing as spiritual perfection and that
there are beings who are spiritually per-
fect, it does not follow that they know all
that man needs to know or that even all
that they say, specially about empirical
matters of fact, is objectively true. Nor
does it follow that their conduct is always
right or that their judgement about aesthe-
tic matters is unimpeachable. How can a
saint, even if he be a perfect saint, pro-
nounce relevantly on the truth of the theory
of relativity or the correctness of a fiscal
policy or the morality of birth control or
the comparative aesthetic excellence of the
famous Khajuraho Kiss and The Kiss of
Rodin?

The saint, of course, may have an answer
for all of these but then they would hardly
follow from his being a saint. A saint, like
any other person, may be other things as
well. But what is even more important is
the fact that if the saint, however perfect
he may be regarded, chooses to make pro-
nouncements on such subjects he will be

judged in the same way as anybody else
making these statements. If a Buddha, for
example, were to say 'there is an elephant
in the quarter No. C-6 of the University
quarters in Jaipur on the 15th of April 1964
at 10.00 A.M.' and if no one who is there
at that time and is not blind sees it, then
the statement is false even if it be made
by a Buddha.

This seems trivial when stated this way
Yet it has far-reaching implications. I
suggests that there is no other way of find-
ing the truth or falsity of statements con-
cerning sensory matters of fact than by a
appeal to the senses themselves. It shows
the crucial and inalienable role of the
senses in validating statements claimin-
g knowledge about certain fields of phenom-
ena.

This, if reflected upon, would put in
question the axiomatic Indian belief shared
from the peasant to the President that the
realization of Brahman is sufficient for
everything including the validation of su-
mundane beliefs on the veracity of which
most of the success of our empirical acti-
vity depends. This is the minimum that has
to be accepted. But if we reflect upon the
lives of any of the so-called perfect beings,
we would come to the even more radical
conclusion that there is no other way of
knowing the truth of the senses except the senses
themselves.