

Medieval Philosophy

Notes on Ramanuja's Commentary on the Brahma Sutras

I. Knowledge of Brahman and Meditation

Knowledge of Brahman is realized through a single focus of the mind on Brahman (dhyana) and continuous focus of the mind on Brahman (upasana). Ramanuja conceives of this as rooted in bhakti (devotion), for only a person with intense devotion will give himself to single-minded continuous concentration on an object.

II. Object of Meditation

Ramanuja maintains that although the Upanishads specify that we should meditate on the self, he understands all such references to be to the Inner Self (Brahman), which is the essence of the individual, atomic self or soul. Hence, meditation should be directed to Brahman who is the essence of the individual self.

This is also why the object of meditation appears as many and diverse because Brahman manifests in an infinite number of forms, but the real object of meditation is the essence of these forms which is Brahman itself.

III. Other Features of Meditation

- A. Ramanuja accepts that there are differences in meditation, but this does not compromise the unity of meditation since it has one ultimate object, namely Brahman (satchitananda).
- B. Just as inquiry is into Brahman, so meditation must take Brahman as its object.
- C. Upanishads command udgitha meditation (the OM mantra) since it signifies Brahman in his energy forming, sustaining, and dissolving the universe. One can therefore meditate on Om in the sun, waters, trees, etc, for all these are manifestations of Brahman. One must simply experience them as the energy of Brahman.
- D. Bliss (not needing, satisfaction) is the object present in all meditation, and this includes Brahman's essential positive attributes (e.g., infinite power, knowledge, goodness) and all Brahman's negative attributes (e.g., Brahman as not changing, not material). Brahman's secondary attributes, which are anthropomorphic, are only brought in as an object of meditation when the scriptures call for it under particular circumstances.
- E. Ramanuja argues that, to the extent that the individual self should come into view in meditation, it should be only considered in its unconditioned or released state where it luminously reveals the essence of Brahman, not in its conditioned state with material contamination. The real self is smaller than a grain of rice but larger than the universe.
- F. Meditation should be repeated and does not come to an end.

IV. Vishnu and the Six Limbs of Yoga

- A. Ramanuja quotes the Vishnu-Purana (BS, p. 437) to support meditation on Vishnu's transcendental form as the highest form of meditation.
- B. Meditation is cultivated by means of the six limbs of yoga: moral duties, physical posture, breathing, control of thoughts by excluding sense objects and focusing on mental impressions, apprehension of the non-dual aspects of reality, and retention of the idea that has been brought to the center of the mind.
- C. The stages lead to the highest meditation. The sage begins with meditation on a gross form of Vishnu (Hari), evolves into meditation on imperceptible shapeless form of Brahman (as Sat), and then Brahman's universal form, which is Vishnu's transcendental body, out of which all universes and gods emerge.

V. Meditation and the Dissolution of Karma

Ramanuja holds that meditation and the attainment of Brahman destroys previous sins, but by this he means that the karma of the deeds that have not begun to yield fruits (accumulated) is destroyed, not the karma of the deeds that have already begun to bear fruit. Therefore, Brahman may be realized in this life, while living in a body. Eventually the latter karma is dissolved too and the jiva soul enters the released state, never to return to samsara.

VI. The Released State of the Jiva

- A. In the state of release, the jiva soul remains distinct from Brahman (or Vishnu), as parts are distinct from the whole.
- B. In release, the jiva soul is entirely consciousness and experiences omniscience and infinite bliss. The self is fully self luminous.
- C. The released self realizes all his wishes through mere will. The afterlife, thought under the absolute control of Vishnu, is a product of individual wish fulfillment.
- D. The released self may experience the state of release through a body, created by himself or Vishnu; otherwise the released-self experiences bliss through other instruments created by Vishnu, the supreme person.
- E. The released self is atomic in size, but is larger than the universe since it is all-pervasive, in much the same way light diffused from a single location pervades other places with its luminosity.
- F. The released-self has vast power but *not* over the cosmic process or cosmic activities of Vishnu, the Supreme Person to whom all things are subject. Hence, the released self does not have control over the formation, sustenance, and dissolution of the cosmic epochs.

- G. The released-self engages in continuous meditative worship of Vishnu in the spiritual realm of Vaikuntha, from which there is no return to samsara.