

SEE HERE NOW: GAUḌAPĀDA'S EARLY ADVAITA

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Wake up! What we think of as life is a dream. Everything is one, and the rest is illusion. It is hard to express liberating insights without sounding banal.

Perhaps mindful of the limits of words, some of the earliest teachings on oneness say their message is conveyed by chanting Om̐. "This whole world is that syllable!" declares the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* (MU 1).¹ "The past, the present, and the future – all that is simply Om̐; and whatever else that is beyond the three times, that also is simply Om̐."

Although only 12 verses long, the *Māṇḍūkya* is said to teach the essence of all of the *Upaniṣads*. Its focus is the nature of consciousness, using Om̐ as a way to perceive the highest truth. This is supposed to be put into practice, not discussed, but the text is so brief that it is difficult to grasp without assistance. The *Māṇḍūkya* is explored in more depth in a commentary by Gauḍapāda, whose name means "sweet foot" and is cited by Śaṅkara, the preeminent interpreter of the *Upaniṣads*, as his teacher's teacher.

Both Śaṅkara's ideas and the texts that inspired them are known as Vedānta. This word, combining veda and anta, means "end of the Vedas," India's oldest surviving scriptures. The last of these were the *Upaniṣads*, mostly composed over 2,000 years ago. Gauḍapāda's *Kārikā* (meaning verses) on the *Māṇḍūkya* came a few centuries later. This work is not as widely read as the *Bhagavad Gītā* or *Yogasūtra* but, at the turn of the twentieth century, the German scholar Paul Deussen called it: "One of the most remarkable monuments of Indian philosophy."²

Gauḍapāda's text is the first systematic teaching of Advaita Vedānta. Developed further by Śaṅkara in the eighth century, it became the most influential form of Hinduism. Advaita means not having two parts,

or "non-duality." The *Upaniṣads* reveal this as the union of the innermost self (ātman) with universal consciousness (brahman). Although material things seem diverse, the *Upaniṣads* point beyond form to the source of all forms, which both contains them and is manifest in everything. What looks like many is actually one, which is divine. However, our ideas about ourselves and the world can stop us from seeing this.

The *Māṇḍūkya* states simply: "Brahman is this self," one of four Upaniṣadic "great sayings" (mahāvākya) about reality (MU 2). It expands on this with a metaphor based on Om̐, which is used as an aid to self-realisation. The syllable's sounds – a mix of "ah", "ooh" and "mmm" in a nasalised chant – are respectively compared to states of consciousness: perceiving objects while awake, inner visions in dreams, and the deepest sleep, in which thought disappears. Beyond the mind is a fourth state, likened to a subtle silent echo in Om̐, reflecting brahman in the self. "The very ātman is Om̐," the *Upaniṣad* says (MU 12). "Anyone who knows this enters ātman by himself."

This is described as "indescribable: as one whose essence is the perception of itself alone; as the cessation of the visible world; as tranquil; as auspicious; as without a second [advaita]. That is the ātman, and it is that which should be perceived." (MU 7).

Deciphering Advaita

Gauḍapāda starts by providing more details. Some editions of his commentary combine it with verses from the *Upaniṣad*, sometimes arguing that he wrote both, because the *Māṇḍūkya* uses technical terms from Advaita philosophy. Others regard



Gauḍapāda's text as less coherent, doubting if all four of its chapters – never mind the *Upaniṣad* – had the same author. There are many unanswered questions, from the date of composition to the source of inspiration. The distinguished Indologist Surendranath Dasgupta endorsed a controversial theory: "He was possibly himself a Buddhist, and considered that the teachings of the *Upaniṣads* tallied with those of Buddha."³

The philosophies share common roots, although Advaitins from Śaṅkara onwards have criticised Buddhism, and Gauḍapāda's *Kārikā* states conclusively: "This is not the view of the Buddha." (GK 4.99).⁴ Regardless, it borrows from Buddhism, whose popularity had spread since the time of the *Upaniṣads*. Gauḍapāda makes a rational case for Vedāntic knowledge, using some of the arguments developed by Buddhists of the Mādhyamaka ("middle way") and Yogācāra ("yoga practice") schools.

However, unlike Buddhists, who see an absence of self, he repeats the importance of realising ātman.

Echoing the *Māṇḍūkya*, he equates this to *turiya*, the "fourth" state of "birthless, sleepless, and dreamless non-duality." (GK 1.16). He also goes a step further, saying: "The universe of duality is mere illusion [māyā]. Non-duality alone is the supreme reality." (GK 1.17). Perceiving things as separate is a mental projection, sustained by a personal sense of "me," as opposed to "others." Dreamless sleep is at least devoid of misperception, but dreaming and everyday life are shaped by thought, reinforcing distinctions of subject and object. Behind this veil, a witnessing presence sees impersonally, unconstrained by space or time.

As a result, there is nothing to do but get out of the way: the goal of perceiving ātman is also the method of attaining it. This is rarely straightforward. "The ātman becomes easily hidden because of attachment to any single object, and it is revealed with great difficulty," Gauḍapāda warns (GK 4.82). Anything that changes is said to be unreal, so nothing "exists" except timeless consciousness, which is the witness to everything else that comes and goes. ▶

From the highest perspective, nothing is ever created but illusions. Consciousness itself has no beginning or end. Whatever arises in the field of perception can mislead us, though we might still notice it for everyday purposes, or else fail to distinguish ourselves from cars when crossing the road. But regarding them as objects distracts us from ātman. This is not the same as nihilism. Gauḍapāda says, because ideas that can never exist do not concern him. "It is not possible for the son of a barren woman to be born either really or through māyā," he observes (GK 2.28). This example, which is no more feasible than a square circle, becomes a stock reference in later Advaita.

Other common images are first used by Gauḍapāda, including this phrase about false perception: "As a rope lying in darkness, about whose nature one remains uncertain, is imagined to be a snake or a line of water, so ātman is imagined in various ways." (GK 2.17). He illustrates the unity of ātman and brahman by comparing the space inside a jar to its surroundings and his view of non-creation sounds poetic: "Neither the mind nor the objects perceived by the mind are ever born. To see their birth is like seeing the footprints [of birds] in the sky." (GK 4.28).

He also teaches techniques. The first is from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, which talks about the self by ruling out what it is not. "On account of the incomprehensible nature of ātman, the scriptural passage 'not this, not this' negates all [dualistic] ideas," Gauḍapāda says. "Therefore the birthless ātman alone exists." (GK 3.26). Self-enquiry is taught in a similar way today. Ramana Maharshi, a twentieth-century sage, suggested asking, "Who am I?" until verbal answers are exhausted, "then, there will arise self-realisation."⁵ Another modern teacher, Nisargadatta, put it this way: "In seeking you discover that you are neither the body nor the mind, and the love of the self in you is for the self in all."⁶

Non-contact yoga

Reflecting on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, Gauḍapāda recommends focusing on Om̐, the primordial vibration from which all else emerged. "Having understood Om̐ quarter by quarter, one should not think of anything else," he says (GK 1.24). Reciting it silences thought, and "duality is never perceived when the mind ceases to act." (GK 3.31).

Whatever the method, the aim is the same:

To experience the world in a non-dual way.

By definition, this precludes trying to get somewhere, like ascetics transcending their bodies with austerities, or Patañjali's quest to split spirit from matter. Gauḍapāda's yoga sounds gentler than "forceful" haṭha, or the "heated discipline" of tapas: "The mind is to be brought under control by undepressed effort: it is like emptying the ocean, drop by drop, with a blade of kuśa grass." (GK 3.41).

He calls this asparśa, or non-contact yoga. It stops the mind getting tangled in objects, instead simply watching until they dissolve in the vastness of consciousness. "This yoga, which is not in touch with anything, is hard for yogis in general to attain. They are afraid of it, because they see fear in that which is really fearlessness," he says (GK 3.39). What scares them is losing the "me" inside their heads. As Gauḍapāda notes, "subjective knowledge must have an object for its cause: otherwise variety becomes non-existent," and the persona about whom we tell stories disappears (GK 4.24).

This is not the end of a functional life, just of misunderstanding. "No living being ever comes into existence. There exists no cause that can produce it. The supreme truth is that nothing ever is born," Gauḍapāda says (GK 4.71). Imagining otherwise leads to unhappiness. "From the experience of pain, the existence of external objects, accepted by the dualistic scriptures, must be admitted." (GK 4.24). In other words, we suffer through attachment to objects, particularly those we picture as ourselves.

One solution is to stop seeking sensory gratification. "Turn back the mind from enjoyment of desires, remembering that they beget only misery," Gauḍapāda says (GK 3.43). Even non-dual bliss is risky. "The yogi must not taste the happiness: he should detach himself from it by the exercise of discrimination. If his mind, after attaining steadiness, again seeks external objects, he should make it one with ātman through great effort," neither grasping nor resisting, just letting go (GK 3.45).

The result can sound off-putting. "Having realised non-duality, behave in the world like an inert object," Gauḍapāda urges (GK 2.36). Critics scorn this as a

life-denying view. calling it misleading unless a yogi starves to death. "The greatest condemnation of such a theory is that we are obliged to occupy ourselves with objects. the existence and value of which we are continually denying in theory." scoffs the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. who was India's second president. "The fact of the world may be mysterious and inexplicable. It only shows that there is something else which includes and transcends the world: but it does not imply that the world is a dream."⁷

Gauḍapāda is less extreme than this implies. Like Mahāyāna Buddhists. and Śaṅkara later. he acknowledges relative truth. But he mainly looks deeper. teaching us to see ourselves in everything. and all of it in us. This helps to reinforce the "golden rule" of many religions: Treating others as we want to be treated. Gauḍapāda's version of yoga. communing with brahman. "promotes the happiness and well-being of all creatures and is free from strife and contradictions." he explains (*GK* 4.2). "Dualists. firmly clinging to their conclusions. contradict one another." but. "Advaitins find no conflict with them." (*GK* 3.17).

As if to underline the point. he concludes his text with a dualist statement: "Having realised the knowledge [of brahman]. we salute it as best we can." (*GK* 4.100). If the state beyond states is supreme. we are mostly the same thing but different. 🙏

¹ Olivelle. P. (1998). "The Early Upaniṣads." Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 473-477

² Deussen. P. (1997) [1897]. "Sixty Upaniṣads of the Veda. Volume II." Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p. 606.

³ Dasgupta. S. (1922). "A History of Indian Philosophy. Volume I." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 423.

⁴ Nikhilananda. (1952). "The Upanishads. Volume II." New York: Harper. p. 203-369.

⁵ Maharshi. R. (2014) [1948]. "Who am I?" Tiruvannamalai. p. 19.

⁶ Maharaj. N. (1973). "I Am That." Bombay: Chetana Pvt. p. 70.

⁷ Radhakrishnan. S. "Indian Philosophy. Vol. II." London: Allen and Unwin. p. 463.

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