

Monistic Concepts in the Viṣṇu-Purāṇa

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Monistic concept is one of the vital topics, dealt in the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**. The contents of the text shows that it has devoted at least seven chapters, to discuss this theme¹. But as because **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** is a text of Vaiṣṇava school, obviously Vedantic theories dealt herein, represents Vaiṣṇava school.

From the legends of Jaḍabharata and Ṛbhu-Nidāgha, we find that *jīva*'s Self-Realisation in the form of '*aham̐brahmāsmi*', is the subject-matter of this section and its purpose is removal of nescience and attainment of Bliss (nothing other than Self-identification). In order to do so, it has discussed all the salient features of Vedānta including *avidyā*, the root-cause of worldly appearance and its creation and ultimately it has focussed on *brahman*, the essence of Vedānta.

According to the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**², entire cosmos, including all the moving and stationary beings, is originally a form of Viṣṇu, the Supreme Soul. All the created beings are endowed with but a small portion of His individuality³. But because of enormous notion of *jīva*, this world seems to be different from Him.

Regarding birth and death of *jīva*, the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁴ says it is for the sake of fruition only. Just as a mansion of clay is plastered by clay and water, similarly, the body consisting of five elements is nourished by the same⁵. The individual performs all acts for the corporeal enjoyment and its result is confinement to the bodily existence only. While imparting lesson to Khāṇḍikya Janaka, Keśidhvaja explained, under the influence of *avidyā*, *jīva* suffers all the pains of earthly existence.

The root-cause of this worldly existence is Nescience⁶. In the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**, it has been called by various names, i.e., *avidyā*, *ajñāna*, *bhrānti*, *tamas*, etc. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁷ has defined it almost in Śaṅkara's⁸ language: "to conceive the non-soul as soul, and wrong application of the term '*aham*' goes by the name *ajñāna/avidyā*. It manifests itself in two ways, by power of concealing (*āvaraṇa śakti*) and power of projection (*vikṣepa śakti*). King Keśidhvaja, while explaining the function of *avidyā* told, it is by the power of *avidyā* that the bewildered people confined within this elementary body superimposes the *aham* on this body and asserts confirmly this is mine⁹. In continuation of his ignorance, sometimes he identifies the progeny with the soul and sometimes with his possession. But all these are earthly productions.

Man performs all acts for the purpose of corporeal fruition and consequently these acts become the root-cause of his confinement to the bodily existence¹⁰. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**¹¹ says, addiction to this world and worldly objects brings disaster in life. Even it can degrade the aspirant from his high status. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**¹² has exemplified this truth through the narrative of Jaḍabharata, who inspite of

renouncing his kingdom and family, was deviated from his meditation just for the sake of his excessive addiction to his pet fawn. As an invariable consequence, he had to take another birth as a deer with the faculty of remembering his previous birth. Having discarded his life by yoga, he took another birth in a Brahmin family and regained his Self. In order to destroy the impious effects of past deeds, he became agreed to bear king's palanquin.

When Sauvīrarāja rebuked him for his lethargic movement, Bharata gave him lessons on True Knowledge. With reference to this context, his attitude towards the world and *jīva* has come out. In true sense, all the things except that Highest Soul, are intransient material beings. In his opinion, all the worldly things (including physical things and human beings) whether originated from wood, tree, clothes, mountain or earth, on account of their being reverse to Soul, are similar¹³. Because they have been made with same inert material. Human beings also are no exception to this rule. In fact, all the created beings are borne by elements and qualities. The qualities are bound by past deeds, which are acquired by *avidyā* in all beings¹⁴. In that respect, the words like you, I, he, she are names only. Man, woman, cow, horse, tree, elephant, everything should be known as worldly denominations to denote bodies, fixed due to the effect of their past deeds¹⁵. Every being reaches a place to enjoy pleasure/pain, arising from their past pious or impious deeds¹⁶. Otherwise, there is no basic difference between human body and material objects. Even all the relationships are relative.

Thus, under the influence of *avidyā*, *jīva* having travelled thousands of birth, attains bewilderment and is smeared with dust of imagination¹⁷. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**¹⁸ describes it as utter darkness. So long as there is *avidyā* and bondage of *karman*, *jīva*'s discriminative notion continues¹⁹. In order to remove this utter darkness, the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**²⁰ suggests to take the refuge of knowledge, which shines like the Sun. Even when man gets tired and puzzled in the cycle of birth and death, the knowledge serves the purpose of soothing hot water, which removes away all the weariness of life²¹. Keśidhvaja told Khāṇḍikya, with the dawn of Pure Knowledge, darkness of ignorance gets evaporated and all the false notions are shattered²².

Śreyas and Paramārtha:

Sauvīra king was astonished to see Jaḍabharata's clear conception about world, individuals (*jīva*), and their proper attitude to the world. He apologized to him for his misbehaviour and asked about *śreyas*. It is interesting to note here that the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** uses the term *śreyas* to mean pleasurable, i.e., *preyas*. Bharata remarked that king is confined within the limit of *preyas* and he didn't want to know *paramārtha*²³ (Supreme Goal of life). He then explained insubstantiality of *śreyas* and wider prospect of *paramārtha*.

The preferable objects are numerous in number but fragile by nature²⁴. People worship deities with a desire to attain progeny, wealth, kingdom, and they consider these as *śreyas*²⁵. The performance of rituals, conducive to heaven also, is *śreyas*²⁶. But

the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**²⁷ suggests not to solicit any reward of ritual, etc., because actual *śreyas* lies within the union of individual and Supreme Soul²⁸. Hence, *śreyas* are many but they are not Ultimate Truth²⁹.

Then he showed the instability of mundane pleasure and prosperity. The wealth cannot be Ultimate Truth, because it may be relinquished for the sake of virtue and its characteristic property is expenditure for the gratification of desire³⁰. If the son were *paramārtha*, that would be equally applicable to a different source, therefore, *paramārtha* would not exist in this world and a state of infinity will be there³¹. The acquisition of sovereignty also cannot be designated as Ultimate Goal on account of its transitory nature³². The sacrifices to be effected by Vedic lore cannot be Ultimate End, because effect partakes the character of origin, therefore, rituals accomplished by perishable ingredients would be invariably of temporary efficacy. But Ultimate End of life is always Eternal³³. Even desire-less *karman*, on account of being of means of liberation cannot stand as *paramārtha*; because *paramārtha* cannot be a means³⁴. Meditation on Self cannot be called so, because it differentiates Soul from non-soul; and the Supreme Goal is without any differentiation³⁵. Even union of individual self with Supreme Spirit cannot be regarded as *paramārtha*, because such union is not possible³⁶. Śrīdharasvāmin, while commenting on the same, states: if they are different they cannot combine and if they are already one and same, it is nonsense to talk of accomplishing their union³⁷.

Thus, by way of elimination, Jaḍabharata explained the concept of Supreme Truth, i.e., Soul— to realise this Soul is *paramārtha*³⁸. Just as tunes of the same flute becomes different on account of its different holes, similarly, same Spirit appears to be different on account of different, limiting adjuncts³⁹. So, in fact Soul is single, its manifold appearances are mere consequences of external facts⁴⁰.

Brahman:

Now, let's examine the highest concept of Vedantic Philosophy, i.e., Absolute Reality, attainment of which is considered as *sumumbonum* of human life⁴¹. It is the only concept, knowing which all discriminations are removed, fetters are destroyed and one can be identified with It⁴². The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** has discussed on this concept of *Brahman*, through the legends of Jaḍabharata, Ṛbhu-Nidāgha and Keśidhvaja-Khāṇḍikya. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁴³ describes: It is the last resort of the aspirant. This Soul is Pure, Perpetual knowledge and Bliss. Pleasure, pain or impurity, all these are properties of *Prakṛti* and not of the Soul⁴⁴. King Keśidhvaja told, just as water cannot be united with fire, this union is possible only by the intervening vessel; similarly, pain and illusion do not belong to the Soul, still the Soul united with *Prakṛti* is endowed with the feeling of Self, which seems to enjoy all the bodily attributes⁴⁵. Keśidhvaja told: It is the perfect asylum of mind⁴⁶.

The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁴⁷ has called It by different names; *brahman*, *ātman*, *jñāna*, *vidyā*, etc. Even in some places, the same principle has been designated as *Bhagavān*,

*Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva*⁴⁸, etc. Jaḍabharata also, in course of imparting lessons to Sauvīrarāja, described this *brahman* as Supreme Soul, which is one, even, pure, without characteristics, all-pervading, beyond birth and death, above accumulation and diminution, omnipresent and un-decaying. It is knowledge as such, unconnected with any unrealities and destitute of all the limitations. It is immanent as well as transcendent⁴⁹.

When king rebuked for Bharata's lethargic movement and commented on his robust figure, he told: "It is not 'I' who am robust, nor it is by me that your palanquin is being carried"⁵⁰. The king repeated his statement, because it was visibly perceived. Bharata told him that this visible world is nothing but an illusion, therefore, whatever the king told about that Brahmin, everything is false. When king asked who are you? Bharata answered outright, it is not possible to tell who am 'I'⁵¹. Bharata continued that this 'I' is tranquil, beyond any qualities, even above *Prakṛti*, without any increase or decrease. Therefore, it is wrong to say 'you are robust'. To your second query, the answer is, arrival at any place is for the sake of fruition⁵². Enjoyment of pleasure or endurance of pain is cause of birth of every being. Each and every being assumes a corporeal form to enjoy pleasure or pain, determined as the result of his own virtue or vice⁵³.

Still then, king was confused on the point that it is not wrong to say, I am the person, who am here, because it is conventional to do so⁵⁴. Bharata admitted that there can be no detriment to one's own Self in applying the word 'I' to it. But the term itself is an error and it is fallacious to think a thing is Self, which is not that⁵⁵. *Ātman*/Self is different from this body, sense organs, mind, etc. But people due to erroneous conception, sometimes denominate this body, sometimes organs as 'I'⁵⁶. In fact, the word 'you' and 'I', etc. are mere convention to denote bodies (fixed according to the effect of past deeds). Because when a single Soul is enshrined all the bodies, it is meaningless to ask who are you and who am I⁵⁷. In real sense, 'I' cannot be restricted within you or me. These so called you, I and other beings have come from the same origin, difference in body is only the consequent result of past deeds and the Soul is different from all these things⁵⁸. In order to illustrate the matter, Bharata narrated the story of a teacher and disciple named Ṛbhu and Nidāgha, in which the teacher taught his disciple almost same lesson⁵⁹. From this lesson, Nidāgha's ignorance was shattered and he felt each and every being is *acyuta Viṣṇu*, there is nothing else other than Him. He is I, He is thou, is all, this Universe is nothing other than His form⁶⁰.

Now arises a question, how to attain It? The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁶¹ answers: there are two ways of attaining Almighty, viz., knowledge and work. But it is to be remembered, by the term *karma*, the Purāṇakāra wanted to mean here the practice of Yoga. As because addiction to the senses and their objects are root-cause of bondage, therefore, controlling over the senses and practice of Yoga have been prescribed by

Viṣṇu-Purāṇa⁶² as a first step to uproot it. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁶³ defines it as union of contemplative mind with *brahman*. Two types of *yogī* have been mentioned here; novice (*yogayuj/yuñjāna*) and adept (*vinīṣpanna samādhi*, whose meditations are accomplished). While showing⁶⁴ means of attaining *brahman*, king Keśidhvaja described to Khāṇḍikya Janaka *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* in details (VI.7.28-106).

As a preliminary step, Keśidhvaja advised Khāṇḍikya to practice five-fold self-restraint (*yama*) and five-fold obligation (*niyama*), which are helpful to control one's own mind⁶⁵. As the next step, the aspirant has to try *āsana* (proper mode of sitting), *prāṇāyāma* (regulation of breath) and *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of senses). In this way, having regulated his vital airs by *prāṇāyāma* and controlled over his senses by *pratyāhāra*, he should concentrate his mind in its perfect asylum, i.e., *brahman*⁶⁶. The *yogī* may classify this *brahman* in two aspects: *mūrta* and *amūrta* or *para* and *apara*⁶⁷.

In course of explaining the theme, Keśidhvaja told about three types of *bhāvanā* (apprehension of Spirit) and three types of *śakti* (energy/power)⁶⁸. Entire cosmos beginning with Hiraṇyagarbha up to the blade of grass is gross form of Brahman⁶⁹ and the Pure Knowledge, devoid of all types of limitation and differentiation, has been called His abstract form⁷⁰. Though this Pure Knowledge has been mentioned as Supreme Goal, still at the initial stage, novice aspirant cannot concentrate his mind on this Abstract Form. Therefore, this gross form has been prescribed as the first point of concentration⁷¹. In this way, to concentrate the mind only in Viṣṇu, is called *dhāraṇā*⁷² (the retention of mind) and the process of forming a steady and lively image of Almighty within his mind is defined as *dhyāna*⁷³ (the meditation).

Keśidhvaja advised Khāṇḍikya to meditate on this *brahman* stage by stage (i) at first, to concentrate the mind on His *mūrta-rūpa* (i.e., this world), (ii) then on the beautiful countenance of Viṣṇu, with all the ornaments and attributes. Having advanced his mind in this form, he is instructed to meditate on (iii) His *sānta-rūpa*, gradually, then proceed (iv) towards His image without any ornament, (v) having but a single limb and (vi) finally, to concentrate only on the concept of Viṣṇu (beyond all forms)⁷⁴. Thus, when accurate knowledge of the Self (*jñāna*, *jñeya* and *jñātā*) is attained, that is the stage of *samādhi*⁷⁵ (the absorption). Gradually, all his ignorances, the root-cause of bondage, ceases and he attains the Supreme Reality⁷⁶.

The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁷⁷ has classified this Reality under two heads, *aparabrahma* and *parabrahma*, on account of its being derived from two-fold knowledge *āgamokta* (explained in the scriptures) and *vivekaja* (discerned through knowledge). According to this text, *apara/śabda brahma* is referred to as speech comprised of Vedas; i.e., learning of Vedas may be defined as *śabdabrahma*, while *parabrahma* the Imperishable one, is to be realized through discriminative knowledge. The **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁷⁸ describes this Supreme Spirit as imperceptible, undecaying, inconceivable, unborn, inexhaustible, indescribable and bereft of any form. It is Almighty,

Omnipresent, Eternal, cause of all things but Itself, without any cause and unpenetrated.

It is very much interesting that the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** has used the term *bhagavān*, *Viṣṇu* and sometimes *Vāsudeva* to mean this *parabrahma*. According to the analysis of the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa**⁷⁹, He is the Creator, Protector, Sustainer, Leader, Conveyor and Hoarder. The term *bhaga* indicates entire wealth, valour, fame, fortune, knowledge and detachment. All these qualities exist in *Viṣṇu*⁸⁰. This Supreme Spirit knows creation, destruction, coming and going of beings, true knowledge and nescience⁸¹. This word connotes knowledge, power, supreme opulence and splendour, and it is bereft of any inferior quality⁸². This Supreme Spirit is spoken of as *Viṣṇu*, the infinitely subtle. Then the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** has equated this *bhagavān Viṣṇu* with *Vāsudeva*. The word *Vāsudeva* means all beings abide in that Supreme Being and He abides in all beings⁸³. Entire world has been originated from Him, and at the end of cycle, again everything gets dissolved in Him.

Conclusion:

Thus, the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** has discussed all the basic tenets of Vedānta philosophy in a nutshell and very easy language. But the difficulty is, it has not followed a particular system/school. In some places, it has blended the theories of dualistic and non-dualistic schools; especially in the discussions of (I) this world and (II) Supreme Reality, it has mixed up Vaiṣṇava concepts with Śāṅkara's monistic theories, e.g.,

- (i) Bharata and R̥bhu's indifferent attitude towards this world and their realization of Self in every being reminds us essence of Advaita Vedānta, i.e., *brahmasatyam̐ jagan mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*. On the contrary, Keśidhvaja, while teaching Khāṇḍikya about his journey towards *brahman*, instructed him to start his meditation from this world, which is nothing other than the gross form of Hari.
- (ii) Moreover, all we know that in Śāṅkara School, theory of Supreme Reality has been conceived from two standpoints, lower and higher. From the lower standpoint, He is conceived as *saguṇa brahman*, associated with *māyā*, which is inseparable from Him. Being associated with it, He creates, sustains and destroys this world. This stage may be described as *bhagavān* or *īśvara*. He assumes different names and forms according to the taste of His devotee. He is described as *antaryāmin*, *parameśvara*, etc. possessing all the excellent qualities. But when conceived from higher standpoint, It is Indeterminate Brahman without any form, characteristics, limitations or attributes. It is to be realized within one's own Self, and in this state, no name or form is applicable.

Now, what the **Viṣṇu-Purāṇa** has done, it has dealt with *parabrahma* in details, but all of a sudden calls it *bhagavān Viṣṇu* and then equates Him with *Vāsudeva*. It says *brahman* has no form or attributes. Next moment it describes Him as Creator, Leader, Sustainer, etc.

(iii) Regarding liberation, Ṛbhu advised his disciple to realize Self in every being and this is Emancipation, and following accordingly, Nidāgha was liberated. But while describing *paramārtha*, Bharata says union of *jīva* and *Brahman* is impossible.

Now the only solution is, the text has handled Vedantic theme through different legends. Therefore, Jaḍabharata and Keśidhvaja, whatever they told, they felt these things from different angles; and their difference in standpoint made them feel and express same thing differently.

References:

1. Viṣṇu-Purāṇa 2.13-16; 6.5-7
2. VP 6.7.55-59
3. *Ibid.* 6.5.84
4. *Ibid.* 2.13.80
5. *Ibid.* 6.7.17-18
6. *saṁsārataru sambhūtibijam etad dvidhā sthitam/* VP 6.7.11ab
7. (i) *anātmanyātma vijñānam śabdō vā bhrānti lakṣaṇaḥ/* VP 2.13.86cd
(ii) *anātmanyātmabuddhīyā cāsve svamiti yā matiḥ/* VP 6.7.11cd
8. *mīthyā'jñāna nimittaḥ satyānṛte mithunīkṛtya ahamidam mamedam iti naisargiko'yam*
lōkavyavahāraḥ Ś on BS 1.1.1 (Intro.), p.9
9. VP 6.7.12-15; cf. Pañcapādikā, p.3
10. *Ibid.* 6.7.16
11. *mana eva manuṣyāṇām kāraṇam bandhamokṣayoḥ/*
bandhāya viṣayāsaṅgi ... VP 6.7.28
12. VP 2.13-14
13. *yaddrayā śivikāceyaṁ taddrayo bhūtasamgrahaḥ/* VP 2.13.76
14. *Ibid.* 2.13.69-70
15. *Ibid.* 2.13.97
16. *Ibid.* 2.13.80-81
17. *Ibid.* 6.7.19
18. *andhamāta ivājñānam ...* VP 6.5.62
19. *akṣiṇeṣu samasteṣu viśeṣajñānakarmasul*
viśvam etad param cānyad bhedabhinnadrśām naraḥ/ VP 6.7.52
20. *yathā sūryas tathā jñānam yadviprarṣe vivekajam/* VP 6.5.62
21. VP 6.7.19
22. *Ibid.* 6.7.53
23. *Ibid.* 2.14.12ab
24. *Ibid.* 2.14.12cd
25. *Ibid.* 2.14.13
26. *Ibid.* 2.14.14ab
27. *śreyah pradhānam ca phale tadevānabhisamhite/* *Ibid.* 2.14.14cd
28. *śreyas tasyaivasamyogaḥ śreyo yaḥ paramātmanaḥ/* VP 2.14.15cd
29. *Ibid.* 2.14.16
30. VP 2.14.17
31. *Ibid.* 2.14.18
32. *Ibid.* 2.14.20
33. *Ibid.* 2.14.21-24
34. *Ibid.* 2.14.25
35. *Ibid.* 2.14.26
36. *Ibid.* 2.14.27

37. *jīva paramātmanor aikyopāsanayā tādātmyalakṣaṇo yogaḥ paramārtha ityetaḥ api mataṁ mithyaiva/ tathā hi tayor bhinnayor abhinnayor vā yogaḥ syāt, bhinnatve gavāśvayor iva naikya sambhaḥ/ abhinnatve ca himba pratibimbayor iva upādhi vyudāsa mātraṁ vinā yogaśabdārtho nāstītyarthaḥ/ Śrīdhara on VP 2.14.27*
38. *vijñānaṁ paramārtho'sau dvaitino'tathyadarśinaḥ// VP 2.14.31cd*
39. *Ibid. 2.14.32*
40. *Ibid. 2.14.33*
41. *Ibid. 6.5.68*
42. *Ibid. 6.7.53 cf. Muṇḍ Up*
43. *āśrayas cetasa brahma... VP 6.7.47*
44. *Ibid. 6.7.21-22*
45. *Ibid. 6.7.23-24*
46. *śubhāśrayaḥ sa cittasya sarvagatasyācalātmanaḥ/ VP 6.7.76*
47. *VP 6.5.61-65*
48. *Ibid. 6.5.68-82*
49. *Ibid. 2.13.71-72ab; 2.14.29-30*
50. *Ibid. 2.13.62; 2.13.65*
51. *śrūyatām so'ham ityetaḥ vaktum bhūpa na śakyate/ VP 2.13.80ab*
52. *VP 2.13.80cd*
53. *Ibid. 2.13.81-82*
54. *Ibid. 2.13.84-85*
55. *Ibid. 2.13.86*
56. *Ibid. 2.13.87-90*
57. *yadā samastadeheṣu pumān ekovyavasthitāḥ/ tadā hi ko bhavān ko'hamityetaḥ viphalam vacaḥ// VP 2.13.91*
58. *VP 2.13.98; 2.13.102-104*
59. *Ibid. 2.13.15-16*
60. *VP 2.15-2.16*
61. *tat prāpti heturjñānaṁ karma coktaṁ mahāmune/ VP 6.5.60cd*
62. *kleśānāṁ ca kṣayakaraṁ yogādanyatra novidyate/ Ibid. 6.7.25*
63. *VP 6.7.31*
64. *Ibid. 6.7.33-35*
65. *Ibid. 6.7.36-38*
66. *Ibid. 6.7.39-43*
67. *Ibid. 6.7.47*
68. *Ibid. 6.7.48-49*
69. *Ibid. 6.7.56-60*
70. *Ibid. 6.7.54; 6.7.69*
71. *Ibid. 6.7.54-55*
72. *Ibid. 6.7.78*
73. *Ibid. 6.7.91*
74. *Ibid. 6.7.79-91*
75. *Ibid. 6.7.92-94*
76. *Ibid. 6.7.95-96*
77. *Ibid. 6.5.64-65*
78. *Ibid. 6.5.66*
79. *Ibid. 6.5.72-75*
80. *aiśvaryasya samagrasya dharmasya yaśasaḥ śriyaḥ/ jñāna vairāgyayoścaiva ṣaṅṅāṁ bhaga itīraṇā// VP 6.5.74*
81. *VP 6.5.78*
82. *Ibid. 6.5.79*
83. *Ibid. 6.5.81-82*

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