Brahmakaravṛtti – Part I

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

The Guru (teacher) builds the Vedāntic teaching using the adhyāropa-aparavāda-prakriyā, i.e., the methodology of deliberate superimposition and subsequent negation and then concludes his teaching with the Mahāvākyā upadeśa ‘Tat tvam asi – That thou art’. In a series of nine essays we have discussed the three-fold methodology of (1) sāmānādhikaranyasaṃbandhajñānam, (2) višeṣaṇa-višeṣyatā-sambandha-jñānam and (3) lakṣya-lakṣaṇatā-sambandha-jñānam – by which the student discovers the akhaṇḍārtha or unitary meaning envisaged by the Mahāvākyā. The process of determining the akhaṇḍārtha by falsifying the upādhis of tatpadārtha Īśvara and tvampadārtha ātma and uncovering their unitary core of Consciousness (using the above mentioned three-fold methodology) is termed ‘padārtha sōdhana’.2

Brahmākāravṛtti

The uttama-adhikārin3 (fit aspirant), through an enquiry into

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1 These series of nine essays on Tat Tvam Asi started from the August 2004 issue and concluded with the May 2005 issue of Tapovan Prasad.
2 In deriving the term ‘padārtha sōdhana’, both Īśvara and ātma are given a single appellation – ‘padārtha’. This is quite appropriate, for Īśvara is itatpadārtha and ātma is tvampadārtha. The term ‘sōdhana’ means ‘cleansing’, ‘purifying’ or ‘exact determination’. All the three meanings are applicable in this context.
3 The one endowed with the wealth of sādhana catuṣṭaya is termed ‘uttama-adhikārin’. For elaboration on sādhana catuṣṭaya, refer to the series of articles which appeared from the August to December 2002 issues of Tapovan Prasad.
the Mahāvākyā, comes to the firm knowledge of ‘aham brahma asmi – I am Brahmā’. All knowledge presupposes thought, for only a thought process is capable of generating knowledge. The knowledge of ‘aham brahma asmi – I am Brahmā’ is no exception to this general rule. Here too, a firm thought (vṛtti or jñāna) of ‘aham brahma asmi – I am Brahmā’ has to rise in the intellect, to put an end to ignorance; only then one can abide effortlessly in the ‘vijñāna’ of the Self. It is this firm thought of ‘aham brahma asmi – I am Brahmā’, which destroys ignorance, that is termed in the Vedānta śastras as ‘brahmākāravṛtti’. Even though brahmākāravṛtti is also a thought, akin to all other thoughts like pot-thought, rope-thought and so on, there are some major differences between brahmākāravṛtti and other object-thoughts (viśayākāravṛttis)⁴. These salient differences make brahmākāravṛtti an absolutely unique thought.

In order to understand the nature and function of brahmākāravṛtti, its basic difference from viśayākāravṛttis, and the role played by brahmākāravṛtti in attaining the knowledge of Brahmā, it is essential to grasp the following concepts:

- mūlāvidyā and tūlāvidyā
- vṛttiyāpīti and phalavāpīti

This essay will elaborate these concepts and thereby build a firm knowledge base, which will help us to understand brahmākāravṛtti.

**Mūlāvidyā and Tūlāvidyā**

Vedāntic texts speak of two kinds of ignorance - mūlāvidyā and tūlāvidyā.

1. **Mūlāvidyā (mūla-primary+avidyā-ignorance) – Mūlāvidyā**

   is popularly known as ‘māya’ and can be translated as ‘primary ignorance’. It is endowed with two powers - āvarāṇa

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⁴ Viśayākāravṛtti is the general term given to the thoughts of all objects of the world – pot, rope, desire, doubt etc.
śakti and vikṣepa śakti. Āvarana śakti throws an āvarana (veil) over Brahman and prevents the knowledge of Brahman. This veiling of Brahman by the āvarana śakti enables vikṣepa śakti to project the entire world of names and forms on Brahman. Thus mūlāvidyā and its powers of āvarana śakti and vikṣepa śakti operate by veiling Brahman and projecting the names and forms upon Brahman.

2. Tūlāvidyā (tula-secondary+avidyā-ignorance): Unlike mūlāvidyā which operates in the realm of Brahman, tūlāvidyā or ‘secondary ignorance’ operates in the sphere of the world of names and forms (that have been projected by the vikṣepa śakti of mūlāvidyā). Tūlāvidyā is also endowed with two powers - āvarana śakti and vikṣepa śakti. While the function of mūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti is to cast an āvarana (veil) and prevent the knowledge of Brahman, the function of tūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti is to cast an āvarana (veil) over the world of objects and prevent their knowledge. It is to be noted that each individual object (rope, pot, etc. – the list is endless) is veiled by a certain āvarana (veil) created by its own particular tūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti. Thus the pot is veiled by an āvarana (veil) created by its particular tūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti. So, too, a rope is veiled by an āvarana (veil) created by its particular tūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti. In this way, every object is veiled by an āvarana (veil) born of its own particular tūlāvidyā’s āvarana śakti.

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5 The concepts of āvarana-śakti and vikṣepa-śakti have been discussed in the essay ‘The Two Powers of Māyā’ which appeared in the September 2003 issue of Tapovan Prasad.
6 What is the substratum of tūlāvidyā? The substratum for mūlāvidyā, i.e. māya is Brahman, the Pure Consciousness. The substratum of tūlāvidyā is the Consciousness limited by the object, called technically as viṣaya-avacchinnā-caitanya.
7 If not for the āvarana of tūlāvidyā, the viṣaya would perennially appear as an object of our knowledge. Since this does not happen, a veil over the viṣayās has to be logically posited, and hence the concept of āvarana of tūlāvidyā.
8 Thus there are infinite tūlāvidyās since the number of objects in the world is infinite. Further, a certain object perceived at one instant is different from the same object perceived in the next instant. This leads to the logical assumption of infinite number of tūlāvidyās for each individual object.
As long as Brahman remains veiled by the āvarana caused by the āvarana śakti of mūlāvidyā, it will remain unknown. In exactly the same way, as long as the object, for example a rope, remains veiled by the āvarana caused by the āvarana śakti of its tūlāvidyā, the rope also remains unperceived.

This brings us to the question, 'How can the āvarana (veil) cast by the āvarana śakti be destroyed, be it that of mūlāvidyā or tūlāvidyā?' This question is very important, for only when the āvarana (veil) covering the object is removed, there is the possibility of knowledge. It is in this context of removal of the āvarana (veiling) that we find the pivotal role played by vṛtti.

For the sake of ease in analysis, let us first analyse how the āvarana (veil) cast by the āvarana śakti of tūlāvidyā is destroyed and the role played by vṛtti in the same.

Vṛtti

In the Vedāntic concept of knowledge, 'vṛtti' stands for a modification of the antahkarana – antahkarana-parināma-vṛtti.9 When the antahkarana takes the form of an object, whether internal or external, it is called vṛtti.10 A viśaya (object) – say ghāṭa (pot) – is known through an antahkarana mode which has assumed the form (ākāra) of the pot. This antahkarana mode which has taken the form of a ghāṭa (pot) is called 'ghaṭākāra-vṛtti' (ghaṭa+ākāra+vṛtti). A puṣpa (flower) is recognised through an antahkarana mode which has taken the form (ākāra) of the flower – 'puṣpākāra-vṛtti' (puṣpa+ākāra+vṛtti). In this way when the antahkarana assumes the form of a viśaya (object) it is called 'vṛtti'.

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9 In the context of sentence interpretation, vṛtti means 'connotation' (refer to Tāt Tevaṃ Asi – Part 5 in Tapovan Prasad, January 2005) and in the worldly transactional context, it signifies the means of livelihood. In the Vedāntic context, vṛtti means 'form of the object assumed by the mental mode.'

10 Vṛttis are of two kinds: internal (antah) and external (bahiḥ). This division is based on whether the objects, whose forms these vṛttis have taken, are internal or external: Suḥkāra-vṛtti (happiness), kāmārāvṛtti (desire) etc., belong to the first category, as their objects are internal. Ghaṭākāra-vṛtti (pot), pataḥkāra-vṛtti (cloth) etc., belong to the second category, as their objects are external.
Let us now briefly see how the knowledge of an object is attained by the dual processes of *vr̥tti-vyāpti* and *phala-vyāpti*.

**Vṛtti-vyāpti and Phala-vyāpti**

The concepts of *vr̥tti-vyāpti* and *phala-vyāpti* can be easily understood with an example. Suppose there is a pot covered with a blanket in a dark room. Here we have three things:

1. the pot,
2. the blanket covering the pot, and
3. the darkness pervading the room.

To get the knowledge of the pot, two steps are required —

1. removing the blanket and
2. illumining the pot with a source of light.

Here the pot represents the *viṣaya* i.e., an object, and the blanket is the *āvaraṇa* (veil) that covers the object. We shall briefly see the modus operandi that is involved in the actual generation of knowledge:

**Vṛtti-vyāpti – the first step**

- The light of Consciousness gets reflected in the *antahkaraṇa* and the *antahkaraṇa* is therefore endowed with the reflection of the *cit* (Consciousness). This reflected Consciousness is called *cidābhāsa* or *phala*.\(^{11}\)

- A ‘mode of the *antahkaraṇa*’ along with the *cidābhāsa* proceeds (through the senses) to envelop the object and takes a form exactly corresponding to that of the object. This mode of the *antahkaraṇa* which takes the form of the particular object by ‘enveloping’ the object is termed ‘*vr̥tti*’.

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\(^{11}\) The term *cidābhāsa*, *cit* (Consciousness) + *ābhāsa* (reflection), literally means the reflection of Consciousness. ‘*Phala*’ literally means ‘result’. Since the *cidābhāsa* is a direct result of the presence of *cit* (Consciousness), it is also termed ‘*phala*’. There are also other Sanskrit derivations justifying the term ‘*phala*’ as an equivalent for *cidābhāsa*. 
• The act of the vṛtti enveloping the object is termed ‘vṛtti-vyāpti’ (vyāpti means pervasion) and it is this ‘vṛtti-vyāpti’ that leads to destruction of the āvarana, created by the āvarana sakti of tulāvidyā, that is veiling the object.

Phala-vyāpti – the second step

• Once the āvarana, veiling the object, is destroyed, the cidābhāsa or phala illuminates the object. This illumination of the object by the phala is called ‘phala-vyāpti’ (phala = cidābhāsa or reflection of Consciousness; vyāpti = pervasion).
• At the very moment of ‘phala-vyāpti’ the pot is revealed to the subject as — ‘I know the pot’.

Let us now relate these two processes of vṛtti-vyāpti and phala-vyāpti to the example of the ‘pot in the dark room covered by a blanket’:

• The pot stands for the object and the blanket for the āvarana (veil) produced by the āvarana sakti of tulāvidyā.
• Removal of the blanket is similar to the destruction of the āvarana effected by the vṛtti-vyāpti.
• And finally, the function of throwing light on the pot using a light source, such as a torch, is similar to that of the phala or cidābhāsa illuminating the object, i.e. phala-vyāpti.
• This illumination leads to the direct knowledge — ‘I know the pot’.

In this way, the knowledge of an object arises by the dual process of vṛtti-vyāpti and phala-vyāpti.\(^\text{12}\)

Swami Vidyārāṇya summarises the role of vṛtti-vyāpti and phala-vyāpti in producing knowledge in his famous work Pañcadasī (7.91):

\(^{12}\) These two processes happen so fast that there is no time gap felt by us during the knowledge process.
In the perception of a pot, the intellect (vṛtti) and the cidābhāsa are both involved. There, the ignorance is removed by the intellect (vṛtti) and the pot is revealed by the cidābhāsa.

The above dual process is true of all viṣayākāra-vṛttis, i.e. vṛttis pertaining to objects – ghaṭākāra-vṛtti (vṛtti of the pot), puspākāra-vṛtti (vṛtti of the flower) and so on.

Conclusion

We have seen in detail the methodology of knowing a viṣaya (object), that it is perceived through the dual process of vṛtti-vyāpti and phala-vyāpti. But, what about the knowledge of Brahman? Can a vṛtti ever envelop Brahman? In other words, is vṛtti-vyāpti possible in the case of Brahman? If vṛtti-vyāpti is admissible, does the vṛtti-vyāpti in the case of Brahman differ from the vṛtti-vyāpti pertaining to a viṣaya (object) like pot? And what about phala-vyāpti in the case of Brahman? Is it there or not? A clear knowledge of the basic concepts discussed in this essay – mālāvidyā, tūlāvidyā, viṣayākāra-vṛtti, vṛttivyāpti and phalavyāpti – will give the knowledge base required for answering these tricky questions, which will be taken up in the next essay.

13 Consciousness conditioned by a viṣaya (object) is termed ‘viṣaya-acacchinna-caitanya’. The Consciousness conditioned by a vṛtti is termed ‘vṛtti-acacchinna-caitanya’. When vṛtti-vyāpti happens, the vṛtti destroys the ākara (created by the ākara-asakti of tūlāvidyā) which veils the viṣaya and the vṛtti-acacchinna-caitanya and viṣaya-acacchinna-caitanya become one. After this phala-vyāpti happens and the object becomes revealed as ‘I know the object’. The above technical details have been avoided for the sake of ease in grasping.