Four Sadhanas – Part III – Nididhyasana

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

We have already seen the nature, purpose and importance of sravana (listening) and manana (reflection), the first two sadhanas (means) for Realisation. In this essay we shall take up for study ‘nididhyasana’, the third sadhana.

- Through sravana one comes to ascertain that the essential knowledge (jñana) envisaged by the Upanishads is the identity of the inner-Self (pratyagātman) with Brahman.
- Various doubts about this knowledge are removed by manana, the second sadhana-step.

Thus at the end of sravana and manana, the seeker has come to the ‘doubtless Knowledge’ (saṃśayarahitajñāna) of the Self.

Jñāna and Vijñāna

Mere ‘intellectual Knowledge’ – even if it is doubtless – is not the ‘actual Experience’ (anubhūti). The Bhagavad Geeta uses two distinct words to differentiate them – the word ‘jñāna’ to indicate ‘doubtless intellectual Knowledge’ and ‘vijñāna’ to indicate ‘actual Experience’. That the intellectual Knowledge of the Self is different from the actual Experience of the Self is

1 For ‘sravana’ and ‘manana’ refer to September and October 2005 issues of Tapovan Prasad.
2 Vide Bhagavad Geeta (Verse 9.1) “...jñānaṁ vijñānasahitaṁ yajjñātava mokṣyase’subhāt.”
evident to all seekers. It is the universal experience of all seekers that they are still within the powerful grip of ‘ignorance-based thoughts’ such as notions of doership and enjoyership, likes, dislikes, desire, anger, greed, delusion, pride, jealousy, fear and so on, notwithstanding the clear intellectual Knowledge that the Self is the all-pervading Brahman, which they come to enjoy after the process of study and reflection. The presence of such strong notions and ways of thinking is a clear sign of the continued existence of ignorance. Seekers often wonder what they should do further in their sadhanā to get rid of these persistent disquieting notions and thoughts.

**Viparīta-bhāvanā**

The Vedāntic Knowledge of ‘I am the all-pervading Brahman’ is contrary to the notion of ‘I am the (limited) not-Self’. The notion of ‘I am the not-Self’ gives birth to the ideas of doership and enjoyership (kārtrtva and bhoktrtva), which further ramify into desire, anger, greed and so on. These thought ramifications, especially their root-thought – the identification with the not-Self and the notions of kārtrtva (doership) and bhoktrtva (enjoyership) – are termed ‘viparīta-bhāvanā’. The term ‘viparīta-bhāvanā’ literally means ‘contrary notions’ i.e., notions that are antithetical to the Knowledge ‘I am Brahman’.

Knowledge (jñāna) fructifies into Experience (viñāna) only when these ‘viparīta-bhāvanās’ are overcome. And as long as these ‘viparīta-bhāvanās’ are present, the thought of ‘I am the infinite Brahman’ gained through śravaṇa and manana remains rather shallow and superficial and does not become the potent and compelling ‘brahmākāravṛtti’ which destroys ignorance. An example will make this concept clear: In the game of chess, it is easy to attack the king when his supports — the queen, bishops, elephants, horses and soldiers — are defeated. As long as this army protects the king, it is difficult to attack him. In

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3 For ‘brahmākāravṛtti’ refer July and August 2005 issues of Tapovan Prasad.
the same way, it is possible to overcome ignorance, when its defence, constituted of the viparīta-bhāvanās (contrary notions) - identification with the not-Self, kārtṛtva and bhokṛtṛtva, ego, desire, anger, greed and so on - are weakened. The third and fourth sādhanās – nīdiddhyāsana and samādhi respectively - aim at destroying these viparīta-bhāvanās.

This prospect of viparīta-bhāvanās continuing to hold sway, in spite of the intellectual Knowledge of the Self and the absolute need to eliminate the viparīta-bhāvanās (contrary notions) for gaining the experience of the Self is emphasised in many Advaitic works. The following is a verse to this effect from Sri Sankaracharya’s Vivekacūḍāmaṇi (verse 267):

Even after the Self is known, these vāsanās (habitual tendencies) such as ‘I am the doer’, ‘I am the enjoyer’, which are the cause of bondage, are very strong. These have to be removed with effort by living in a state of ‘inward vision’: The sages call this ‘attenuation of vāsanās’ Liberation.

Anātmavāsanā

The viparīta-bhāvanās (contrary notions) are powerful, because we have been entertaining them for many lives. One has always considered oneself to be a limited individual – not in this life alone, but in innumerable past lives – and therefore these notions have become ‘dṛḍha-vāsanās’ i.e., ‘strong habitual tendencies’.

Habits are powerful and difficult to overcome; they are involuntary, persistent and resist subjugation. A person who is
habituated to sleeping late finds it impossible to sleep early. A person—even though a doctor—if he is habituated to smoking or drinking, finds it difficult to give up, notwithstanding his firm knowledge of its harmful effects. A person, who is used to dragging his feet while walking, will, without any volition on his part, automatically walk with a drag! Even if he makes a decision not to drag his feet, he soon forgets his decision and continues to walk with the same old drag. Such is the power of habits (vāsanās) — it seems to keep at bay both knowledge and resolve!

The basic habit, ‘the original sin’, is the ‘anātmavāsanā’, the habit of identifying with the not-Self. As individuals, we have entertained this habit (vāsanā) from time immemorial and it is extremely powerful. It is the underlying current in all one’s actions and thoughts, nay, it continues to exist even in deep-sleep, when all thoughts and actions have ceased, albeit in its causal form. Powered by this anātmavāsanā, despite his Vedāntic Knowledge, the learned seeker involuntarily identifies with the not-Self — the gross, subtle and causal bodies. Ere soon he is caught in the tentacles of kāma (desire), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), mohā (delusion), mada (pride) and mātsarya (jealousy). The fault lies not with the clarity of his knowledge but rather with the anātmavāsanā — the ‘habit of identifying with the not-Self’. As long as this chain of habit (vāsanā) remains unbroken, any amount of Knowledge and clarity will be of no avail and Liberation will continue to be elusive. It is this anātmavāsanā that is the power behind the viparīta-bhāvanās and obstructs the doubt-free Knowledge of the Self from eradicating ignorance.
Tackling Anātma-vāsanā

Habits are broken by consciously cultivating contrary habits. The secret of breaking a habit is to cultivate and empower a habit which is directly antithetical to the habit which one wants to overcome. Thus to overcome the habit of sleeping late, conscious and steady effort is to be made to cultivate its contrary habit of sleeping early. In the initial phases of cultivating this new habit of going to bed early, even though it may be impossible to get sleep despite one’s best efforts, one has to persist with diligence, and in the course of a few weeks, one does learn to sleep early. In order to cultivate this fresh habit, it is important to sleep early every day without any break, till the new habit becomes ingrained. This ‘sleeping early’ soon becomes a strong habit and the habit of sleeping late is overcome once and for all. Conscious, continuous effort alone ensures habit formation.

The ‘anātma-vāsanā’ of ‘I am the not-Self – the gross, subtle and causal bodies,’ is also to be broken by its contrary habit, the ‘ātma-vāsanā’ – ‘I am the infinite Brahman’. There has to be a conscious uninterrupted devoted reiteration of the thought ‘I am the pure Self, of the nature of Sat-Cit-Ananda,’ to break the habitual thought of ‘I am the not-Self – the gross, subtle and causal bodies’.

Nididhyāsaṇa

The term ‘nididhyāsaṇa’ – often translated as ‘contemplation’ – is formed from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘dhyai’ which means ‘to contemplate’ or ‘call to mind’. To this verbal root is added the prefix ‘ni’ (nitarām) which signifies ‘steadiness’ and ‘repetition’. Thus the term ‘nididhyāsaṇa’ literally means ‘steady contemplation’ or ‘repeated calling to mind’. The following definition of ‘nididhyāsaṇa’ is given by Sri Swami Sadananda in Vedānta-Sāra:

4 This ‘ātma-vāsanā’ is termed variously as ‘brahma-vāsanā’ and ‘brahmāsmittī vāsanā’.
Nididhyāsanam is a stream of the same kind of thoughts referring to Brahman, the One without a second, to the exclusion of thoughts referring to the body and so forth.

Nididhyāsana is the technique of creating ātmavāsanā. The power of the anātmavāsanās is broken by the strength of ātmavāsanās generated through the process of nididhyāsana – a conscious uninterrupted reiteration of the single thought ‘I am the non-dual Brahman’, to the exclusion of the thoughts of the not-Self, like ‘I am the body’, ‘I am the mind’ and so on.

Long periods are spent in silent devoted contemplation. The mind is held firmly with the thought ‘I am Brahman’ and all anātmacintana (thoughts pertaining to the not-Self) are kept at bay. Note that this thought ‘I am Brahman’ is not a mechanical self-hypnotising thought – rather it is the thought born of doubtless Knowledge, originating from manana (reflection). When the seeker spends his entire time and energy focussing on this single thought - ‘I am Brahman’ – he is practising nididhyāsana, the fourth sādhanā. This nididhyāsana is a full-time effort, not a part-time pursuit!

Dhāraṇa and Dhyāna

Nididhyāsana can be divided into two sub-stages:

1. The initial stage called ‘dhāraṇā’, wherein there is concentration occasioned with a lot of effort.

2. The later stage termed ‘dhyāna’, wherein the .concentration is sustained with minimal effort.

In this early stage of ‘dhāraṇā’ (literally ‘holding’ or ‘binding’), the seeker holds his mind with a lot of effort to the thought ‘I am Brahman’. As he continues to hold his mind
consciously to the thought 'I am Brahman', to the exclusion of all other thoughts, he proceeds to the second stage, wherein his concentration and focus become steady. At this later stage the effort is less — though not absent — and the seeker experiences the uninterrupted flow of the thought 'I am the non-dual Brahman'. This later stage is termed 'dhyāna'.

These two stages of nididhyāsana can be illustrated with an example. Left to itself, the cow will wander everywhere. The cow-herd first ties the cow to the pole. Now the cow tied to one place cannot wander — though its tendency to wander is not rooted out. The cow tries to escape, but the firm rope holds it back. ‘Dhārana’ or ‘holding’ is similar to restricting the cow’s freedom to wander. The mind is tied to the post of ‘I am Brahman’ with the firm cord of ‘effort’.

The cowherd then lays in front of the cow good fresh green fodder and the cow starts eating it. As it starts relishing the food, it slowly gets engrossed in the eating. It is not inclined to wander about any more. Not that there is any surety that it will not wander away if it is let loose! It still needs to be kept tied. This step is similar to ‘dhyāna’, wherein the mind which is kept focussed on the single thought ‘I am Brahman,’ becomes engrossed in contemplation and there is relative ease in keeping the mind focused.

‘Dhārana’ (concentration) and ‘dhyāna’ (contemplation) are thus the two progressive phases of nididhyāsana. Sage Patañjali defines these terms in his Yoga Sūtra: “Deśabandhaścittasya dhāranaḥ – Dhārana is the binding of the mind to one place, object or idea.” (Yoga Sūtra 3.1). “Tatra pratyayaikatāna dhyānam
- *Dhyāna* is the continuous flow of cognition towards that object or idea." (Yoga Sūtra 3.1).

**Rogān iva Rasāyanam**

Actions are at the body-level, thoughts at the mind-level and *vāsanās* at the causal-level. Actions are not directly opposed to thoughts, for actions are at the gross level and thoughts are at the subtle level. Thoughts alone can have opposition with thoughts. To explain, one may have an ignoble thought, but continue to put on display a noble act. But one cannot maintain two contradictory intentions at the same moment, about the same object, for the simple reason that intentions are at the same level of subtlety. Taking this reasoning to its logical conclusion, one may have a noble thought, yet the *vāsanās* at the unconscious level could be found wanting in nobility. This implies that superficial checking or rectifying of the thought will not significantly change the deep-seated *vāsanās*.

This is in essence the weakness of the postulation that mere intellectual conviction is sufficient for Liberation. Intellectually one is convinced that the ‘Self is Brahman’ but at the *vāsanā*-level there has been no significant change whatsoever; the *vāsanā* ‘I am the gross, subtle and causal body’ still continues to reign supreme. Therefore any amount of study and its resultant intellectual clarity do not by themselves guarantee Liberation. For understanding is at the thought level, while *anātma-vāsanās* are at the causal level. One has to move to *nididhyāsana* and generate the *ātma-vāsanās*. This alone will put an end to *anātma-vāsanā* — the causal force that keeps on throwing up *viparīta*—

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**DEPAK GOPALDAS JEWELLERS**

Learn to remain unaffected, not tossed about by the happenings at your bodily, mental or intellectual levels.

Swami Chinmayananda

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bhāvanās (like identification with the not-Self, notions of kārtṛtva and bhokṛtva etc.) and sabotages the rise of vijnāna. Once this ātma-vāsanā is generated by the practice of nididhyāsana, the ātma-vāsanā being at the causal level, it is capable of acting upon the anātma-vāsanā, which is also at the causal level, and putting an end to it.

When the doubtless Knowledge thought ‘I am the non-dual Brahman’ is sustained with fervour for an ample duration of time, it starts becoming stronger and deeper and gets assimilated by the innermost depths and becomes transformed into the ‘I-am-Brahman-vāsanā’. In Atma-bodha, Sri Sankaracharya compares this ‘Atman-Brahma-identity-vāsanā’ to the medicine (rasāyanam), which if taken regularly, percolates and penetrates into the body-system and puts an end to the disease (roga) – ‘rogān iva rasāyanam’:

एवं निरन्तराभ्यस्ताः ब्रह्मवास्मिति वासना ।
हरत्याविद्याभिधपम् रोगानिवि रसायनम् ॥
evān nirantarābhhyastā brahmaivāsmīti vāsanā,
haratyavidyāvikaṣepān rogānīva rasāyanam.

The vāsanā ‘I am Brahman’, thus created by constant practice, destroys ignorance and the agitations (notions of doership, enjoyership and so on) caused by it, just as medicine, when regularly taken, destroys disease.

Conclusion

Sustained nididhyāsana eventually deepens into samādhi (absorption or meditation). Nididhyāsana is the beginning stage of the attempt to create the ātma-vāsanā. The mind which has become single-pointed by the practice of nididhyāsana, gradually slips into depths of greater absorption in the thought ‘Aham brahmaasmi – I am Brahman’. This state is the fourth and final step of sādhanā – termed ‘samādhi’. It is in these moments of quiet meditation, when there is complete effortless focus on
the thought 'I am Brahman', that the powerful 'brahmaivāsmīti vāsanā' ('Atma-Brahma-identity-vāsanā) is created and then the anātma-vāsanās and its effects, the viparīta-bhāvanās are destroyed finally. When these obstacles (pratibandha) of viparīta-bhāvanās are brought to a termination, the pure Self shines of its own accord.

This is the exact role of nididhyāsana and samādhi in gaining Liberation; nididhyāsana and samādhi are not for gaining Knowledge. They are only for destroying the anātma-vāsanā and viparīta-bhāvanās. Knowledge has already been gained by śravaṇa and manana – by reflecting on the message of the Mahāvākyas – but then as long as there are the pratibandhas (obstacles) of anātma-vāsanā and viparīta-bhāvanās, establishment in Knowledge is impossible. Nididhyāsana and samādhi are meant for this specific purpose of removing the pratibandhas to gain establishment in Knowledge. To explain with a simile, even if the sun were to rise, if thick dark clouds are veiling it, we don’t see and experience the sun. In the same way, even when the sun of Self-Knowledge has risen by śravaṇa and manana, if the veiling clouds of anātma-vāsanā and viparīta-bhāvanās are not scattered by the wind of nididhyāsana and samādhi, Self-Knowledge does not shine forth. It is this clear unhindered establishment in Self-Knowledge that can grant Liberation and which is glorified as ‘vijñāna’ in the Sūtras. May the Lord’s grace and, the Guru’s blessings help us gain this vijñāna in this very birth.

The fourth and final sādhana of samādhi will be taken up for study in the next essay.