

Srigurubhyo namaH

An essay on the expression 'Tad VishnoH paramam padam' occurring in the Shankara Bhashya

In the Kathopanishat 1.3.9 bhashya Shankara says:

विज्ञानसारथिर्यस्तु मनःप्रग्रहवान्नरः ।
सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्नोति तद्विष्णोः परमं पदम् ॥ ९ ॥

किं तत्पदमित्याह — विज्ञानसारथिः यस्तु यो विवेकबुद्धिसारथिः पूर्वोक्तः मनःप्रग्रहवान् प्रगृहीतमनाः समाहितचित्तः सन् शुचिर्नरो विद्वान्, सः अध्वनः संसारगतेः पारं परमेव, अधिगन्तव्यमित्येतत्, आप्नोति, मुच्यते सर्वसंसारबन्धनैः । तत् विष्णोः व्यापनशीलस्य ब्रह्मणः परमात्मनो वासुदेवाख्यस्य परमं प्रकृष्टं पदं स्थानम्, सत्त्वमित्येतत्, यत् असावाप्नोति विद्वान् ॥

The knower attains That (state of) Vishnu's who is all-pervading Brahman, the paramatman, known by the name Vasudeva, exalted state, as it is.

The names 'Vishnu and Vasudeva' here have led to some people claiming that this bhashya is about saguna mukti/krama mukti/brahma loka/saguna brahma loka, etc. and not the Advaitic realization. The reason for them is: the names Vishnu and Vasudeva refer to a deity and hence this cannot be the Nirguna Brahman realization, the ultimate mukti of Advaita.

In the sequel are many statements from Shankara himself, clarifying what the 'VishnoH paramam padam' really means are given:

1. In Bramha Sutra Bhashya (BSB) 1.2.12 Shankara says:

‘सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्नोति तद्विष्णोः परमं पदम्’ (क. उ. १।३।९) इति च परमात्मानं गन्तव्यं कल्पयति ।

If it is saguna brahman, Shankara should not have said that it is Paramatman that is the one to be realized here. Because upasana prakarana (Agni vidya taught to Nachiketas) is different and this statement in the Upanishad is in the Jnana prakarana. Only then Paramatman will be the goal to be attained. If it is upasana it would be a-para/saguna/kaarya brahman.

And decidedly Shankara says, citing the other earlier Kathopanishad passage:

तथा 'तं दुर्दर्शं गूढमनुप्रविष्टं गुहाहितं गह्वरेष्ठं पुराणम् । अध्यात्मयोगाधिगमेन देवं मत्वा धीरो हर्षशोकौ जहाति' (क. उ. १ । २ । १२) इति पूर्वस्मिन्नपि ग्रन्थे मन्तृमन्तव्यत्वेनैतावेव विशेषितौ । **प्रकरणं चेदं परमात्मनः ।**

This mantra passage says: By realizing this entity that is extremely difficult to comprehend, seated in the innermost self of the jiva, the ancient one, through Adhyatma yoga, one transcends pleasure and pain. And Shankara says: this is in the section dealing with Paramatman. In the case of a-para Brahman, the fruit of knowing cannot be transcending samsara and also no adhyatma yoga is prescribed to know it.

2. In BSB 1.4.1 Shankara confirms by decidedly saying: tad vishnoh paramam padam is Nirguna Brahman by raising a question what is **vishnu's paramam padam**?: Adhyatma yoga is taught to reach NB and not SB:

तैश्चेन्द्रियादिभिरसंयतैः संसारमधिगच्छति, संयतैस्त्वध्वनः पारं तद्विष्णोः परमं पदमाप्नोति इति दर्शयित्वा, **किं तदध्वनः पारं विष्णोः परमं पदमित्यस्यामाकाङ्क्षायाम्**, तेभ्य एव प्रकृतेभ्यः इन्द्रियादिभ्यः परत्वेन परमात्मानमध्वनः पारं विष्णोः परमं पदं दर्शयति — 'इन्द्रियेभ्यः परा ह्यर्था अर्थेभ्यश्च परं मनः । मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्बुद्धेरात्मा महान्परः ॥' (क. उ. १ । ३ । १०) 'महतः परमव्यक्तमव्यक्तात्पुरुषः परः । पुरुषान्न परं किञ्चित्सा काष्ठा सा परा गतिः' (क. उ. १ । ३ । ११) इति; तत्र य एवेन्द्रियादयः पूर्वस्यां रथरूपककल्पनायामश्वादिभावेन प्रकृताः, त एवेह परिगृह्यन्ते

Shankara answers the question **Who is the one referred to in the Upanishad as 'the supreme state of Vishnu'?**

The Upanishad is teaching that the Supreme Self is beyond the body mind complex and the objects lying outside the body. By specifying a sequence of hierarchical positions, the Upanishad leads one to the Highest Self that is the one to be realized.

3. In BSB 1.4.3: Again it is NB, Parabrahman:

किं तद्विष्णोः परमं पदमितीदमिह विवक्ष्यते । तथाहीदमस्मात्परमिदमस्मात्परमित्युक्त्वा, 'पुरुषान्न परं किञ्चित्' इत्याह ।

What is meant by the Upanishad by the term 'Vishnu's Supreme state?' Having led the aspirant in a hierarchical order inwards, the Upanishad concludes: There is none beyond/higher than the Purusha. By saying that Shankara concludes that it is Para Brahman, Nirguna Brahman in Advaita that is referred to by the expression 'Vishnu's Supreme state'. If it were saguna brahman, there is the Nirguna/Para brahman beyond it.

4. In BSB 3.3.16 - here too the entire Kathopanishat Adhyatmayoga is analysed and the vishnoh paramam padam is once again reiterated to be PB/NB only:

आत्मशब्दाच्च ॥ १५ ॥

इतश्च पुरुषप्रतिपत्त्यर्थैव इयमिन्द्रियादिप्रवाहोक्तिः, यत्कारणम् 'एष सर्वेषु भूतेषु गूढोत्मा न प्रकाशते । दृश्यते त्वग्रया बुद्ध्या सूक्ष्मया सूक्ष्मदर्शिभिः' (क. उ. १ । ३ । १२) इति प्रकृतं पुरुषम् आत्मेत्याह । अतश्च अनात्मत्वमितरेषां विवक्षितमिति गम्यते । तस्यैव च दुर्विज्ञानतां संस्कृतमतिगम्यतां च दर्शयति ।

तद्विज्ञानायैव च — ‘यच्छेद्वाङ्मनसी प्राज्ञः’ (क. उ. १।३।१३) इति आधानं विदधाति । तत् व्याख्यातम् ‘आनुमानिकमप्येषाम्’ (ब्र. सू. १।४।१) इत्यत्र । एवम् अनेकप्रकार आशयातिशयः श्रुतेः पुरुषे लक्ष्यते, नेतरेषु । अपि च ‘सोऽध्वनः पारमाप्रोति तद्विष्णोः परमं पदम्’ (क. उ. १।३।९) इत्युक्ते, किं तत् अध्वनः पारं विष्णोः परमं पदमित्यस्यामाकाङ्क्षायाम् इन्द्रियाद्यनुक्रमणात् परमपदप्रतिपत्त्यर्थ एवायम् आयास इत्यवसीयते ॥ १५ ॥

The culmination, by the sequential inward journey, is in the Supreme Brahman, that is called Parama padam in the Upanishad. This is certainly not any deity/loka.

5. In Kathopanishad bhashya; 2.3.1:

ऊर्ध्वमूलोऽवाक्शाख एषोऽश्वत्थः सनातनः ।
तदेव शुक्रं तद्ब्रह्म तदेवामृतमुच्यते ।
तस्मिंल्लोकाः श्रिताः सर्वे तदु नात्येति कश्चन । एतद्वै तत् ॥ १ ॥

ऊर्ध्वमूलः ऊर्ध्वं मूलं यत् तद्विष्णोः परमं पदमस्येति सोऽयमव्यक्तादिस्थावरान्तः संसारवृक्षः ऊर्ध्वमूलः ।

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पदस्य संसारवृक्षस्य मूलं तदेव शुक्रं शुभ्रं शुद्धं ज्योतिष्मत् चैतन्यात्मज्योतिःस्वभावं तदेव ब्रह्म सर्वमहत्त्वात् । तदेव अमृतम् अविनाशस्वभावम् उच्यते कथ्यते सत्यत्वात् । वाचारम्भणं विकारो नामधेयमनृतमन्यदतो मर्त्यम् । तस्मिन् परमार्थसत्ये ब्रह्मणि लोकाः गन्धर्वनगरमरीच्युदकमायासमाः परमार्थदर्शनाभावावगमनाः श्रिताः आश्रिताः सर्वे समस्ताः उत्पत्तिस्थितिलयेषु । तदु तद्ब्रह्म नात्येति नातिवर्तते मृदादिकमिव घटादिकार्यं कश्चन कश्चिदपि विकारः । एतद्वै तत् ॥

Here Shankara says: It is in this Paramartha satya Brahman that the worlds reside in all three periods of srishiti, sthiti and pralaya. Shankara has used the expression, तद्विष्णोः परमं पदमस्येति based on the Kathopanishad 1.3.9, to show that the Brahman taught here in 2.3.1 as the substratum of the samsara/world. Since he has held, in the Bhashyam, that the samsara tree (world) is akin to Gandharva loka, mirage water, magical show, etc. which will be realized to be non-existent upon the dawn of Right knowledge, his specifying NB as the one on which the world rests in quite in order.

Thus, based on the above several unambiguous pramanas from Shankara himself, the BSB 4.3.10 also is about NB only:

कार्यब्रह्मलोकप्रलयप्रत्युपस्थाने सति तत्रैव उत्पन्नसम्यग्दर्शनाः सन्तः, तदध्यक्षेण हिरण्यगर्भेण सह अतः परं परिशुद्धं विष्णोः परमं पदं प्रतिपद्यन्ते — इति, इत्थं क्रममुक्तिः
अनावृत्त्यादिश्रुत्यभिधानेभ्योऽभ्युपगन्तव्या.....

The expression here परिशुद्धं विष्णोः परमं पदं also has led some to think that the karma mukti ends here by the Hiranyagarbha and the others in that loka entering a Saguna Brahma loka. That such is not the case can be seen by the various statements in the foregoing from Shankara’s own Bhashya that the Tad vishnoh paramam padam is Nirguna/Para Brahman alone and not any other:

In the Bhagavadgita bhashya we have:

तानि सर्वाणि संयम्य युक्त आसीत् मत्परः ।
वशे हि यस्येन्द्रियाणि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ ६१ ॥

The aspirant sits in meditation with the firm conviction that Brahman alone is the supreme (and nothing in the world). In the Bhashya Shankara articulates the aspirant's conviction as articulated by Bhagavan:

तानि सर्वाणि संयम्य संयमनं वशीकरणं कृत्वा युक्तः समाहितः सन् आसीत् मत्परः
अहं वासुदेवः सर्वप्रत्यगात्मा परो यस्य सः मत्परः, न अन्योऽहं तस्मात् इति आसीत् इत्यर्थः ।
एवमासीनस्य यतेः वशे हि यस्य इन्द्रियाणि वर्तन्ते अभ्यासबलात् तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ ६१ ॥

The aspirant's conviction is: I am not other than That Brahman, Vasudeva, who is the innermost self of all.

In Advaita, the innermost self is Atman, which is non-different from Brahman. Only that entity can be claimed to be oneself and not any other. Since there is the word Vasudeva here, the doubt may arise as to whether this is saguna Brahman. But that is settled since the conviction is 'I am non-different from That.' In Advaita the identity is not with the deity but the Nirguna Brahman that the deity is in truth.

We can recall the Kathopanishat 1.39 Bhashya where too Shankara has said 'the Supreme Brahman is known by the name Vasudeva.' Since it is concluded decidedly that Tad Vishnoh paramam padam and Vasudeva mean nirguna brahman alone, here in the Gita bhashya too this Vasudeva, it is nirguna Brahman alone.

There are some other instances, outside the prasthanas traya bhashya, where Shankara has identified the Supreme Nirguna Brahman with names such as Vishnu, Vasudeva, Narayana, Tripurari:

यस्य प्रसादादहमेव विष्णुर्मध्येव सर्वं परिकल्पितं च ।
इत्थं विजानामि सदात्मरूपं तस्यांघ्रिपदं प्रणतोऽस्मि नित्यम् ॥ २ ॥ [Vākyavṛtti]

(I alone am Vishnu by my Guru's grace)

अहमेव परं ब्रह्म वासुदेवाख्यमव्ययम् ।
इति स्यान्निश्चितो मुक्तो बद्ध एवान्यथा भवेत् ॥ १ [Brahmanuchintanam]

(I alone am Para Brahman, known by the name Vasudeva)

नारायणोऽहं नरकान्तोऽहं पुरान्तकोऽहं पुरूषोऽमीशः ।
अखण्डबोधोऽहमशेषसाक्षी निरीश्वरोऽहं निरहं च निर्ममः ॥494॥ [Vivekachudaman]

(I am Narayana, the slayer of Narakasura. I am Shiva, the slayer of the Tripura asuras)

In all the three verses, the names 'vishnu, vāsudeva and narayana' are used in the expression of realization of one's true self, nirguna Brahman.

'Vākyavṛtti' is cited by Swami Vidyanaraya in the Panchadashi as that of Acharya. Sri Vishveshvara Sraswati (Guru of Sri Madhusudana Saraswati), in the Yatidharma sangraha, has cited verses from the Vakyavritti and the Brahmanuchintanam as those of Shankara.

Someone outside the Advaita sampradaya would quickly conclude this as blasphemy: claiming oneself to be God. Only those in the sampradaya, who have exposure to the Bhashya and their explanation, would know that these names of God are actually used in the sense of Nirguna Brahman. In fact all these names have etymological meanings which will clarify that it is not about the deity/person but the substratum Nirguna Brahman. Taking the popular meaning of these names alone creates problems.

Om Tat Sat