

**ACTION, RENUNCIATION AND THE WORLD
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ADVAITA VEDANTA)**

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to assess the significance of the world within the Advaita context of renunciation and to explore the phenomenon of renunciation in Advaita Vedanta. An emphasis has been attached to the practical aspect of it. Justification has been provided in support of the assumption that the world and the phenomenon of renunciation are radically contradictory and rests on a misunderstanding of Advaitic stand. It has been pointed out that in Indian social structure, the phenomenon of renunciation plays a vital role in the reformation of the society and the spiritual leaders are very often found as social reformers. Renunciation is pursued not by abnegating the world and the society, but by establishing them in the structure of the whole reality.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta , Brahman, World, Knowledge, Renunciation

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Introduction

The concept of renunciation is neither region-specific nor religion-specific. Still, its articulation, projection, and the philosophical basis are influenced by the ideas and problems that prevailed in that country. In the Indian philosophical context irrespective of a system being metaphysical or anti-metaphysical, theological or anti-theological; the phenomenon of renunciation is pursued for achieving *moksha* or its synonym. In other words, from a philosophical perspective renunciation is essentially connected with the idea of *moksha*. On the basis of this stand, it is generally assumed that the world and the phenomenon of renunciation are radically opposed to each other. According to this assumption, renunciation is another worldly phenomenon and a renunciate, therefore, has no obligations or responsibilities for the society. In this paper, we would try to justify that the world is neither a problem for a renunciate nor does it get canceled for him. The obligations and the responsibilities follow from a renunciate's perspective of the world.

Let us, therefore, go deep into the dimensions of renunciation in Advaita Vedanta. Adi Shankaracharya is the main exponent of Advaita Vedanta. His non-dualistic philosophy revitalizes the Indian philosophical spirit. He is not only a philosopher, but also a poet, a saint, and also a social reformer. Apart from his own work, he has given profound and luminous commentaries on *Vedanta Sutra* of Badarayana, on the eleven *Upanisads* and the *Bhagavad Geeta*.¹ His philosophy is based on the ideas inherent in the *Upanisads*. Acharya Shankara has logically proved that *Advaita* is the central teaching of the *Upanisads*.²

The Advaita Vedanta advocates *sannyasa* in the strict sense of the term following the footsteps of Shankara. The theological tradition of Advaita Vedanta makes renunciation central for the attainment of liberation. According to Shankara, *sannyasa* means *tyaga* (giving away), not *nikshepa* (throwing away) - *tyagaarthah no nikshepaarthah*. One gives away not by coercion or under compulsion, but by conviction, by option. In Advaita tradition, renunciation is grounded on its metaphysics and linked with knowledge. According to it, *Brahman* is the ultimate reality and the whole world is an appearance. The individual self is identical to *Brahman*. *Brahman* manifests itself in different forms. In itself, it is indeterminate (*nirguna*), transcendent (*nisrapancha*), indefinite (*anirvachaniya*), and unqualified (*nirvishesa*). Being associated with the power of *maayaa*, it appears as determinate (*saguna*), immanent (*saprapancha*) qualified. (*savishesa*) and is called Lord of the world (*Ishvara*). *Brahman* and *Ishvara* are not two distinct realities, but are same conceived from different standpoints. The former is the a-cosmic and the latter is the cosmic view of the reality. The a-cosmic view neither denies nor opposes the cosmic view, but it includes

and transcends it. The same pure consciousness appearing as limited by the internal organs (*antahkarana*) is called the individual self (*jeeva*). The *jeeva* is physical and objective and is a product of *avidyaa*. It is a subject-object complex. Its subject element is pure consciousness and the object element is the internal organs. So *jeeva* is identical with the *Brahman* from the ultimate point of view. *Jeeva* and the world (*Jagat*) are appearances of *Brahman*. They appear when *avidyaa* arises and they vanish when *avidyaa* is dispelled.

In Advaita philosophy, knowledge is conceived as the foundation of renunciation. It is an application of knowledge into the sphere of practical living. *Sannyasa* is the practical side of the philosophical aspect of Advaita Vedaanta. One gets liberation only by knowledge. The *Shevetaasvatara Upanisad* states, "There is no way to liberation except through knowledge."²³ Knowledge is linked with renunciation in the *Bruhadaaranyaka Upanisad*. Knowledge (*jñāna*) is followed by the removal of ignorance which results in renunciation. Knowledge gives freedom. It destroys bondage, which results from the self's association with body, mind, and intellect. Right knowledge is the knowledge of the self (*ātmajñāna*). It is to realize one's true nature as indifferent from *Brahman*. *Jñāna* means pure immediate experience (*aparokshaanubhuti*), which is beyond subject-object complex. This self-knowledge is cultivated in renunciation. It is only through renunciation that one can attain *Brahman*. "Renunciation acts as the only means to the realization of what has been given through theoretical foreknowledge."²⁴ For Shankara, only a *jñāni* is a *sannyasin*. Renunciation is a state of desirelessness that is possible due to the dawn of knowledge. "When all desires occupying heart falls off entirely, then indeed, does the mortal becomes immortal."²⁵

In Advaita philosophy, *sannyasa* is employed in the sense of a life to be lived and as a means to realize the ultimate identity between *Brahman* and the individual self. The illusoriness of the world is realized by a *jñāni*. He can realize that behind this worldly appearance, there is one reality, i.e., *Brahman*. Renunciation being the life comprehended by knowledge, a renunciate interprets the world differently. He visualizes the world from a different angle. Renunciation in Advaita philosophy means renunciation of all attachments, desires, and ignorance. It also means a state of attaining the highest state of spiritual progress. It is necessary to realize the positive nature of the Ultimate Reality. It is a state where one's spiritual progress culminates. This gives the individual the ultimate happiness.

Advaita Vedanta develops its view of renunciation on the line of *Brahmanical* ethos and tradition. Though in later time the *ashrama* discipline was relaxed, it could not belittle the importance of *brahmacharya* (life of a disciple). Early renunciation

without going through the other two stages of *gaarhasthya* and *vaanaprastha* is an exception in the Advaita Vedaanta. Here one may proceed from the state of *brahmacharin* to that of the *sannyasin*. The decision to renounce is dependent not on external conditions like old age or passing other three *ashramas*, but on one's internal disposition and aspiration. A right mental makeup, *i.e.*, indifference to the world, detachment (*vairaagya*) is an indispensable condition for renunciation. Shankara himself adopted *sannyasa* at a very tender age. In Advaita Vedaanta, the state of *brahmacharya* cannot be dispensed because it provides both physical control and mental purity. It is essential for the cultivation of virtues, the discipline of the mind, and getting metaphysical knowledge. It is a state of self-discipline and self-culture. The principle of austerity is always inculcated in a *brahmacharin* life. It is because moral discipline is necessary to prepare oneself to be a *sannyasin*.

Detachment (*vairaagya*) is the necessary condition for renunciation in Advaita Vedanta. A detached person is bound to renounce the world because he finds no happiness in the objects of the world. He renounces immediately. The *Bruhadaaranyaka Upanisad* asserts, "Having become calm, subdued, quiet, patiently enduring and collected one should see the self in his own self, see all in the self."⁶ According to Advaita Vedanta, the renunciation of rites is a necessary precondition of acquisition of the liberating knowledge. The ritual activities are performed to enjoin worldly pleasure. These are the driving forces in the universe to get entangled. For Shankara, all injunctions regarding the performance of rites are intended for people who are under the power of ignorance. He says,

Once a person has perfected himself, he becomes his own light and transcends all the injunctions of the scripture (*avidvayaa divisayaanyera pratyakshaadini pramaanaani shaastraani cheti*).⁷

Shankara repeatedly asserts that the *Brahman* can be realized through knowledge and knowledge alone. Action and mediation are subsidiaries. It does not depend on the performance of any act. In this context, C.D. Sharma's distinction between *jñāna* and *karma* is notable. He asserts,

Action results in its performance (*kaaraka*), while knowledge merely instructs (*jñāpaka*). The object of action is merit or demerit which is to be acquired in the future (*bhava*) through the performance of that action, while the object of knowledge is already an established fact (*bhuta-Vastu*). Again, action is subjective and depends on the sweet will of the agent (*purusha tantra*) and it may be done, left undone or differently done (*kartum akartum anyathaakartum sakyam*), while knowledge is objective (*vastutantra*) and depends on the object itself; it is not given to us to know a thing or to know it otherwise or not to know it at our sweet will, if the conditions

generating valid knowledge are there. Again, action binds a person in the cycle of birth and death, while knowledge enlightens and frees him from this cycle. Further, the fruit of moral action is happiness or prosperity (*abhyudaya*) here and hereafter, which is perishable (*anitya*), because it is produced by the efficacy and lasts as long as that efficacy lasts, while the consequence of the knowledge of *Brahma* is absolute freedom which is eternal (*nitya*); Bliss (*moksha or nihshreyas*).⁸

Shankara while commenting on the *Geeta* calls the *mukta* as satiated by knowledge and wisdom.⁹ But, it is to be noted that though the renouncer abandons all rites and rituals, still he continues to perform some actions. He is subject to rules and regulations of their tradition, for example, he must wear a particular type of cloth or have a triple staff or single staff, etc. One can assume this non-ritual state only by going through the rites of initiation. So, it is clear that a renunciate performs no actions in the world. But, it is seen that Shankara himself is engaged in revamping the cultural centers in India. He has worked hard in the cultural, religious, and philosophical fields of Indian life. Swami Ranganathananda observes,

And a sustained struggle of a lifetime brings to India a measure of unity, harmony, and order in religion, thought and culture, which is a record unparalleled in the history of man.¹⁰

So, it is clear that when Shankara denies action, he denies actions that are backed by self-interest and egoism. He admits that a *jñāni* may engage in action for the purpose of teaching others having no purpose for himself (*swaaprayojanaabhaavat lokasamgraharthaan purbabat karmaani prabruttopi*).¹¹ According to K.N. Tiwari,

Since the *jñāna* transforms the whole perspective of man, reality, and the universe, the *karmas* should not be excluded from this enormous transformation. At the stage of enlightenment, everything remains as they are except the attitude of man which constitutes his philosophy, or broadly speaking his way of life.¹²

The phenomenon of renunciation is institutionalized by Advaita tradition by establishing several religious centers known as *mathas* or monasteries. This is done by Adi Shankaracharya for the purpose of revitalizing *Vedic* thoughts. He has established four *mathas* in four zones of India. These are *Jyotipitha* at Badri in the North, *Dwarakapitha* in the West, *Govardhanapeetha* at Puri in the East and *Saradapitha* in the South. He has founded the monastic order which is known as the order of ten names (*dasnaamis*).¹³ The *sannyasin* initiated in the Advaita tradition are known as *dasnaami sanyaasins*, because they are known under one of the ten following names. These are (i) *Bhaarati* (learning), (ii) *Giri* (hill), (iii) *Puri* (city), (iv) *Saraswati* (wisdom),

(v) *Tirtha* (temple), (vi) *Aaranya* (forest), (vii) *Aashrama* (hermitage), (viii) *Parvata* (mountain), (ix) *Saagara* (ocean), and (x) *Vana* (forest). A *sannyasin* is initiated to a new name when he would completely forget his previous life. The classification is done on the basis of knowledge acquired by the renunciates. Such names are assigned to keep distinct things distinct. Any mystical explanation attributed to this is out of point. According to Shankara,

the qualifications which are necessary for taking *sannyasa* are (i) discriminating between the Eternal *Brahman* and the temporal world, (ii) non-attachment for the things of the world, (iii) possessing six qualities like the tranquillity of mind, control of senses, cessation of all activities, faith in Vedanta, enduring the opposite like heat and cold, pain and pleasure, love and hatred and unwarranted concentration.

Shankara distinguishes between classes of renunciators. According to him, the highest type of renunciators does not require a triple staff or sacrificial cord.¹⁴ These are attributed to the lower classes of renouncer like *Kutichaka* and *Bahudaka*. The highest class of renouncer is known as *Paramahansa* and they carry a single staff. Shankara speaks mostly about the state of *paramahansa*. A *Paramahansa* is one who knows the essence of truth in the world.

As per the structure of renunciation in Advaita Vedanta is concerned it is of two types. (i) Renunciation of the seeker (*vividisa sannyasa*). When one renounces in order to realize the supreme truth it is called *vividisa sannyasa*. This desire for self-realization arises in a person due to the study of the *Vedas*, the performance of rites enjoined in the *Vedas*. In other words, *vividisa sannyasa* is a means to get the knowledge of *Brahman*. A *vividisa sannyasin* gets liberation after his death. This is known as *videha mukti*. (ii) Renunciation of the knower (*vidwat sannyasa*). Here one renounces after realizing the supreme truth. This is the cause of liberation when one is alive. This is known as *jivan mukti*. Both *vividisha* and *vidwat sannyasa* fall under the category of *Paramahansa*. But, their characteristic features are different. A *vidwat sannyasin* is free from all rules regarding external symbols, social norms, and conventions. But, a *vividisha sannyasin* is entitled to acceptance of staff, bathing three times a day, a meditation on the self, and the study of the *Upanisads*. A *vidwat sannyasin* is one who ever remains established in the realization that he is *Brahman*. Whereas, the *vividisha sannyasa* represents the cosmic ideal of renunciation, the *vidwat sannyasa* represents the a-cosmic ideal of renunciation which is a life of complete and absolute freedom. It is clear that the Advaita Vedanta admits both *jeevan mukti* and *videha mukti*. While moving in the world a renunciate remains untouched by it.

In Advaita Vedanta, *sannyasa* cannot be pursued without abandoning the worldly life. The worldly life does not mean life in the world. It means a life with worldly desires. One must have to leave the family and society and resort to monastic life in order to be a *sannyāsin*. For a renouncer, the world is not canceled but is transformed and transcended. It is because, behind the multiplicity, the renouncer realizes the unifying *Brahman*. Behind the Spatio-temporal plane, which is an appearance the renunciate perceives one *Brahman* who is the ground of this world. Rabindranath Tagore has the appropriate words when he says, “Superiority consists not in the power of possession but in the power of union.”¹⁵ The *Chhandogya Upanisad* asserts, “Verily, this whole world is *Brahman*....this my *atman* in my inmost heart is this *Brahman*.”¹⁶ So, the physical plane is transcended by the absolute *Brahman*.

A renunciate in Advaita Philosophy has no specific duty towards the society. He does an action that is generated from his knowledge for the well-being of the society. Traditionally a renunciate does not do any social service. He can only do the actions which are contemplative in nature like preaching philosophy and religion. Shankara says that when the knower of *Brahman* realizes that he is *Brahman* which is neither an agent nor an enjoyer, all actions and sins are simply annihilated, and thus liberation becomes intelligible.¹⁷ In Advaita tradition, renunciation is possible only on the guidance and blessings of one’s spiritual teacher (*guru*). It is because we have knowledge due to the insight of the thinkers over the ages. One cannot participate in the storehouse of knowledge without the guidance of the *guru*.

The later Advaitic renouncers follow the philosophy of Shankara with some modifications. Let us take the views of recent day Advaitic renouncer like Swami Vivekananda and Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa to see the transformation that occurs in their perception of the phenomena of renunciation.

Vedantic thinkers like Swami Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda combine contemplation and social service in the activity of a renunciate. Both of them harness the traditional idea of renunciation to the requirement of modern society. According to Swami Ramakrishna, every *jeeva* or soul is *Shiva*, service to *jeeva* is, therefore, the worship of *Shiva*. According to Swami Vivekananda, religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man. He says, a saint’s God-ward passion is expressed in terms of man-ward love and concern. When the divinity in man manifests even a little, his concern for other individuals will come automatically. According to him, through the service of God in man, one can realize God that is ever within us. Although a renunciate has no desire, he stays here to teach and serve others. Social service is

the natural outflow of the compassionate love of a *sannyaasin*. These thinkers give a socio-religious interpretation of *sannyaasa* keeping in view of the changes in cultural, social, and religious levels.

From this, it is clear that there is an increasing tendency in the later advaitins to view the Vedanta philosophy as world-affirming. They utilized the traditional ideal of renunciation to the requirement of modern society. Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rama Tirtha are such successful inventors, who tried to accomplish social issues in the sphere of Indian Values. They proved that renunciation is not isolated individualism. They took renunciation as a guiding principle and thereby opposed the misconstrued notion of it. It must be said that their ascetic ideals were the basis that put gear to the environment and generates hopefulness and strength for the revival of Indian culture.

It can be said that the phenomenon of renunciation spring up from understanding of the world and its source. Renunciation is pursued not by abnegating the world and the society, but by establishing them in the structure of whole reality. It generates a sense of sacred sanction for the discharge of one's obligation and responsibilities in all spheres of life provided they are not oppugning to the ultimate spiritual fulfillment. What remains at the back of obligation and responsibility is not only a disregard of the fruits and consequences of action but also the conception of being an agent and enjoyer. This is pure karma.

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