

5. *Sādhana and Mukti*

Almost all schools of Indian philosophy aim to realise the transcendental state, dissociate from the sufferings of the material world, and accordingly outline the means of attaining this realisation. *Swaminarayan-Siddhānta-Sudhā* defines such means, referred to as the “sādhana,” as the soteriological endeavours practised for earning divine approval and attaining such divine approval is described as the “phala” or the result of those endeavours. This “phala” in the form of the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is the attainment of the transcendental state or liberation (*mukti*). The *Sudhā*, in the chapters “Sāadhanadhārā” and “Phaladhārā,” systematises the soteriological endeavours and expounds upon the nature of *mukti* as upheld in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta.

The *jīvas* and *īśvaras*, due to the influence of *māyā*, are firmly attached to material desires and accordingly remain bound in the cycles of birth and death. Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are the only two entities that are eternally liberated (*nityamukta*) and, out of compassion, guide the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* towards liberation. This chapter throws light on the nature and significance of soteriological endeavours mastering which the *ātman* can perform supreme devotion to and experience the supreme bliss of Parabrahman. Such supreme devotion and bliss is nothing but the state of liberation and thus a release from the cycles of transmigration.

This chapter begins with the importance of grace and divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman in soteriological endeavours. It then examines the great endeavour of *brahmabhāva*, which encompasses all other endeavours. *Brahmabhāva* is shown to be realised through the practice of *Ekāntika Dharma*. The chapter then elaborates on each component of *Ekāntika Dharma*, namely, *dharma*, *jñāna*, *vairāgya* and *bhakti*. It also highlights the importance of practising *Ekāntika Dharma* even after the realisation of *brahmabhāva*.

The section on *mukti* begins with an elucidation of the nature of *mukti* in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. The chapter then examines the nature of *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*. This is followed by a discussion on the qualities and form of the released *ātman* and its eternal distinction and subordination to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Through the elucidation of the various soteriological endeavours and the state of liberation achieved upon the realisation of those endeavours, the chapter focuses on the *Upaniṣadic* exegesis offered in the *Sūdhā* and seeks to understand the position of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama in various pertinent philosophical discussions.

5.1. Grace and Divine Approval

Sadhu Bhadreshdas begins the chapter “Sādhanaadhārā” by describing Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, that are to be realised and are the ultimate goal of all endeavours, as “krupāsādhya,” attainable (*sādhya*) through grace (*krupā*). The *ātman* can realise Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman that are immensely great and ever beyond the influence of *māyā* only through the grace of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Such importance of grace is validated through the *Upaniṣadic* aphorism, “yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhya.”⁷²⁹ In the second *valli* of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Yamarāja describes the form of Parabrahman and then showcases the medium of realising this form. Before enumerating the various endeavours, Yamarāja states the above-mentioned aphorism and thereby asserts the importance of grace in overcoming all misery and experiencing the bliss of Parabrahman. In his commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains that Parabrahman cannot be realised merely on the strength of endeavours (*na kevalsādhanabalaṃ paryāptam*) but invariably requires the grace of Parabrahman.⁷³⁰ Thus, while he does not deny the necessity of performing various endeavours for attaining Parabrahman, he specifies their inadequacy (*na paryāptam*).

Divine grace does not substitute or reduce the relevance of endeavours. This is made clear in the mantra 2.24 of the same *Upaniṣad*, which lists the endeavours that one must perform. Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that this verse removes all doubts on the necessity of striving for the ultimate goal. In fact, it is only through the practice of soteriological endeavours can this grace be earned.⁷³¹ The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, which also shows the importance of divine grace, warns against lethargy in performance of endeavours, “nāyamātmā balahīnena labhyo na ca pramādāttapasō vāpyalingāt.”⁷³² One must maintain physical and mental resilience and

⁷²⁹ “Only one whom he chooses can realise.” (Ka. Up. 2.23) (Mu. Up. 3.2.3)

⁷³⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 119)

⁷³¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 120)

⁷³² “Paramātmā cannot be attained in the absence of strength or by indolence or through practice of austerities which are not in accordance with the śāstras.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.4)

patiently endeavour for realisation.⁷³³ Such resilience makes one worthy of divine grace and, consequently, of ultimate liberation.

The *Sudhā* specifies that the grace of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman can be secured through earning their divine approval (*prasannatā*). Thereby, earning the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is denoted as the “sādhana-rāja,”⁷³⁴ that which rules or governs the effective performance of all soteriological endeavours. Every such endeavour must be governed by and directed towards earning the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. In fact, an effort that is neither governed nor directed towards earning such divine approval ceases to be a soteriological endeavour (*tad rahitasya sādhanatvameva na*).⁷³⁵ Thus, every effort towards liberation must be guided by and reinforced with the purpose of gaining divine approval.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta upholds the continued presence of Parabrahman through the lineage of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus. Accordingly, Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that compassionate Parabrahman has made the path of earning his divine approval accessible and attainable through the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru, who ever upholds Parabrahman in entirety.⁷³⁶ The divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is secured through the association and attachment with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Perfecting or mastering this attachment is characteristic of attaining *brahmabhāva*,⁷³⁷ which thus forms the fundamental endeavour for earning the approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

5.2. *Brahmabhāva*—The Great Endeavour

Cultivation of “brahmabhāva” is the fundamental endeavour that encompasses all other endeavours to earn the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. *Brahmabhāva* is explained as the association and cultivation of qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. As upholding the form of Parabrahman and being in his constant service, the Akṣarabrahman Guru is recognised as the ideal of devotion worthy of emulation. Qualitative oneness with this Akṣarabrahman Guru is a profound association and identifying oneself with him by acquiring his auspicious virtues and qualities.

⁷³³ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 294)

⁷³⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 307)

⁷³⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 307)

⁷³⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 119)

⁷³⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 307)

The *Sudhā* describes *brahmabhāva* as the “sādhana-guru,” the great endeavour, and “sarva sādhana rāśi,” the aggregate of all endeavours as it encompasses the performance of *bhakti* that is supplemented with righteousness, detachment and self-knowledge, discrimination of the body and *ātman*, sense-control and other such endeavours. *Sudhā*, thereby, does not deny the necessity of other endeavours such as sense-control (*śama*), performing austerities (*tapa*) listed in the *Upaniṣads*, instead warns about their individual significance.⁷³⁸ Performing any of these would be insufficient and will require other supporting endeavours. *Brahmabhāva*, as the *sādhana-guru*, is adequate to attain the ultimate goal. This is explained through the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, “yo vā etadakṣaram gārgryaviditvā smālokatpraiti sa kṛpanah.”⁷³⁹ This verse explains that all sacrifices or austerities performed over a hundred years will not earn fruits without the knowledge of Akṣarabrahman. Unlike other commentators, like Shankar and Ramanuja, Sadhu Bhadresdhas identifies the term ‘Akṣara’ as the ontological entity Akṣarabrahman and not as the Supreme Being, Parabrahman. Accordingly, without the realisation of Akṣarabrahman attained through cultivating *brahmabhāva*, one will not acquire the fruit of endeavour and will remain in the cycle of birth and death. Being in this state of constant transmigration is compared to an impoverished state of a destitute (*kṛpanah*). Sadhu Bhadresdhas reads this verse as an urgent message to associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru with firm conviction and faith and imbibe his teachings.⁷⁴⁰ Thus, attaining *brahmabhāva* is considered to be crucial and indispensable.

The requisite of identifying with Akṣarabrahman is stated in several *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms of apposition (*sāmānādhikaraṇa*), such as “brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati,”⁷⁴¹ “aham brahmāsmi,”⁷⁴² and “ayamātmā brahman.”⁷⁴³ Sadhu Bhadresdhas explains each of these cases in terms of qualitative oneness with Akṣarabrahman and strongly argues against an ontological non-duality advocated by the Advaitins. Responding to pure ontological oneness, Sadhu Bhadresdhas offers various instances of “oneness” that are not ontological, such as the oneness of sharing the same ideology or oneness in terms of being in the same state, class, time, or location.⁷⁴⁴ In none of these cases are the subject and predicate demonstrating an ontological identity. Likewise, the aphorisms of apposition are explained as depicting an

⁷³⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 329)

⁷³⁹ “One who departs from this world without the knowing Akṣara is poor.” (Br. Up. 3.8.10)

⁷⁴⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopiṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 197)

⁷⁴¹ “One who knows Brahman verily realises Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.9)

⁷⁴² “I am that Brahman.” (Br. Up. 1.4.10)

⁷⁴³ “This ātman is Brahman.” (Ma. Up. 1.2)

⁷⁴⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 310)

attributive similarity (*sādharmya*) between two distinct entities. Such attributive similarity is often expressed by placing the objects or beings of comparison in the same grammatical case. This is illustrated through “*simho mānavakaḥ*” (the lion child).⁷⁴⁵ Here, both terms ‘*simhaḥ*’ and ‘*mānavakaḥ*’ are in the nominative case. Despite such grammatical congruency, the illustration does not depict an ontological oneness between the lion and the child but the child having similar attributes to the lion. In the same way, the *ātman* cultivates similar attributes like the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The opponent may argue that in aphorisms like the “*brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati*,”⁷⁴⁶ the term ‘*bhavati*’ (becoming) shows the *ātman* forgoing its ignorance and becoming Brahman. Thereby, such verbs that suggest “becoming” imply an ontological oneness. In response to this argument, Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that not all cases that use the verb ‘*bhu*’ (to become or becoming) express an ontological oneness. He offers the example of the famous precept “*pitari devabhāvaṁ karoti*,” which instructs one to believe one’s father as the deity.⁷⁴⁷ In such cases, the implication is to revere the father as he possesses qualities or virtues similar to a deity but not of an ontological oneness between the father and deity. Likewise, the verb “becoming” suggests possessing qualities or virtues similar to the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The Ramanuja tradition also explains aphorisms of apposition as denoting an attributive oneness (*tādātmya*) instead of an ontological oneness. In the case of the above-mentioned aphorism, “*brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati*,”

Ramanuja explains the knower of Brahman, or the one who after the practice of unceasing meditation on Brahman has obtained clearer vision of Brahman, becomes Brahman in the sense that he attains a status equal to that of Brahman in respect to the eight inherent qualities of *apahatapāpmatva*, *satyakāmatva*, *satyasamkalpatva*, etc.⁷⁴⁸

This explanation brings forth the fundamental differences between the understanding of the Viśiṣṭādvaita and the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana. While the former admits an attributive oneness, this oneness is between the *jīvātman* and the Supreme Being, Brahman. Moreover, such oneness is possible only after one sheds the mortal body and attains the abode of

⁷⁴⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 311)

⁷⁴⁶ “One who knows Brahman verily realises Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.9)

⁷⁴⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 312)

⁷⁴⁸ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 128)

Brahman, for the Viśiṣṭādvaita Darśana accepts only *Videha- mukti*. The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, on the other hand, advocates the attributive oneness between the *jīvātman/ īśvarātman* and the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This oneness or *brahmabhāva* is a fundamental endeavour that is to be practised and mastered by the *ātman* in this life, which leads to the experience of liberation on earth (*jīvanamuktianubhāvanam*).⁷⁴⁹

Sudhā instructs that *brahmabhāva* or oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru implies identifying oneself with the Akṣarabrahman Guru in thought and virtuous deeds:

Gurorjñānamiva jñānam vartanamapi tatsamam |
*Dehārpaṇam tathā bhaktau brahmātmaukyam taducyate ||*⁷⁵⁰

Like the Akṣarabrahman Guru, one must harbour spiritual understanding, virtuous disposition, and selflessly engage in the devotion and worship of Parabrahman.

The *Upaniṣads* are also stated to affirm *brahmabhāva* as a fundamental endeavour for *brahmavidyā*, that is, the realisation of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. For instance, in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Yamarāja begins unfolding the essence of the highest spiritual knowledge by stating that it can be attained through “*adhyātmayoga*.”⁷⁵¹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in his commentary, understands the term ‘*adhyātmayoga*’ not merely as contemplation (like Shankaracharya⁷⁵²) or self-knowledge (as the Ramanuja tradition⁷⁵³) but specifies that it is the purification of oneself through the association of the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman.⁷⁵⁴ In other words, a profound attachment or identification (*yoga*) with the realised Akṣarabrahman Guru (*adhyātma*). Likewise, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* also insists on the eradication of ignorance through “*dhyāyathā’tmānam*,”⁷⁵⁵ which is interpreted in the general sense of meditating on the *ātman*.⁷⁵⁶ Here, Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies the term ‘*ātman*’ with Akṣarabrahman. He notes that one must meditate upon the form and nature of

⁷⁴⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 307)

⁷⁵⁰ “Having one’s spiritual understanding like Guru’s understanding; virtuous behaviour also like his behaviour. Like him is one’s physical being dedicated in worship. Such is the oneness with Akṣarabrahman.” (*Kārikā* 369)

⁷⁵¹ (Ka. Up. 2.12)

⁷⁵² (S. Shastri, *The Katha and Prasna Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 35)

⁷⁵³ (H. Apte 55)

⁷⁵⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 96)

⁷⁵⁵ (Mu. Up. 2.2.6)

⁷⁵⁶ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 144; H. Apte 174)

Akṣarabrahman, who constantly beholds Parabrahman.⁷⁵⁷ Such meditation results in the transcendence from *māyā* and the attainment of Parabrahman.

In the section titled “Brahmamananam,” the *Sudhā* demonstrates a meditation on the Akṣarabrahman, where Sadhu Bhadreshdas evokes his Guru and contemplates on his various virtues based on the teachings of his *īṣṭadeva* Swaminarayan. Swaminarayan encourages constant association and contemplation (*manana*) on Brahman (Akṣarabrahman) for attaining *brahmabhāva*:

If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner,
the *jīva* acquires the virtues of that Brahman.⁷⁵⁸

Accordingly, this section “Brahmamananam” begins with contemplation on the *svarūpa* of the Guru as Brahman, as *satyam-jñānam-anantam, sat-cit-ānanda*. After meditating on his greatness as a distinct ontological entity that is eternally pure and divine despite his human-shaped form, Sadhu Bhadreshdas meditates upon the Guru’s auspicious virtues (*guṇa*) that ever encompass the Guru’s elevated spiritual state. In this way, the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman that was expounded on in the earlier chapters is placed in a practical framework. Thus, a thorough understanding of the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman upon the grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and constantly reflecting on the same culminates in the realisation of *brahmabhāva*.

5.3. *Ātman* and Akṣarabrahman

The *Sudhā* explains that *brahmabhāva*, cultivated through the meditation on the Guru, requires identifying one’s *ātman* with the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru. The process of such identification enables one to distance oneself from one’s vices or adverse qualities arising due to the influence of *māyā*. In order to purify oneself from these vices, one must reflect on the auspicious qualities of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. *Sudhā* notes that such reflection for the purification of one’s *ātman* must be done with a firm conviction in the Guru’s essential purity (*nirdoṣa*) and divinity (*divya*).⁷⁵⁹ As the Akṣarabrahman Guru manifests through a human-

⁷⁵⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 275)

⁷⁵⁸ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.31)

⁷⁵⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 321)

like form, *Sudhā* warns against assuming human vices or faults in the Guru. The Guru, whilst in human-shape, is understood to ever remain beyond the influence of *māyā*.

In this way, with constant mediation on the various qualities of Akṣarabrahman, one's *ātman*, through the grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and Parabrahman, also cultivates those qualities, releasing one from the material vices and faults. *Sudhā* describes the basis of the *ātman*'s identification with the Akṣarabrahman Guru as intense adoration (*param anurāga*). Just as one identifies with and has thoughts centred on the body or any material object one greatly desires, likewise, one must develop intense attachment and adoration with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such adoration enables one to perceive every action and quality of Akṣarabrahman as pure and divine. One loses identity with oneself and joins with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This aspect is encapsulated in the terms “akṣara aham” that are part of the sampradāya's *sāadhanā mantra* “akṣaram aham puruṣottama dāśosmi.”⁷⁶⁰

This need for intense adoration and constant contemplation is elucidated through the *Upaniṣadic* analogy of the bow and arrow, “praṇavo dhanuḥ śaro hyātmā brahma tallakṣyamucyate.”⁷⁶¹ Here, the term ‘praṇava,’ also known as the sacred sound “Om,” is identified as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The arrow, that is, the *ātman* has to be drawn by this bow. This stringing of the arrow is explained as a profound attachment with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Through such attachment and adoration with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and imbibing his teachings, the *ātman* hits the target of realising *brahmabhāva*.⁷⁶² The term ‘brahman’ here is understood as Akṣarabrahman. The *ātman*, through the association and teaching of the Guru, realises one's *ātman* as Akṣarabrahman. In other words, it acquires the auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The Akṣarabrahman Guru, thus, is the medium as his association and grace facilitates the cultivation of *brahmabhāva* and is also the result as the endeavour is directed towards realising his form.

The other commentators interpret the target as the Supreme Being Paramātmā. Sadhu Bhadrashdas does not deny this explanation but notes that the attainment of Parabrahman is invariably implied with the realisation of Akṣarabrahman. This implication is likened to the invariability of reaching the desired person upon reaching the village that the person lives in

⁷⁶⁰ “I am Akṣara, in service of Puruṣottama.”

⁷⁶¹ “Praṇava is the bow, ātman is the arrow and the Brahman is the target.” (Mu. Up. 2.2.4)

⁷⁶² (Bhadrashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 327)

or of acquiring precious materials upon attaining the casket that contains those materials.⁷⁶³ Thereby, realising Akṣarabrahman is like reaching the village or acquiring the casket. Upon realising Akṣarabrahman, one is bound to attain Parabrahman, who is ever manifest in the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru is stated to serve a dual purpose of realising *brahmabhāva* and attaining Parabrahman in this state of *brahmabhāva*.

Sudhā also specifies that cultivation of *brahmabhāva* or qualitative identification of the *ātman* with Akṣarabrahman was not already latent within the *ātman* but is a new attainment.⁷⁶⁴ The auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru are not part of the essential nature of the *ātman*. This is explained through the analogy of truth—if a person, who is earlier falsely informed and now had to be told of the truth, an act (*vidhi*) is specially carried out of telling the truth. This would be otherwise not be required if he were aware of the truth. Likewise, the scriptures instruct on the cultivation of *brahmabhāva* through the association of and constant contemplation on the Akṣarabrahman. If those virtues were already present, then these instructions would lose relevance.

Moreover, in acquiring the virtues of Akṣarabrahman, one acquires only those virtues necessary for one's liberation.⁷⁶⁵ Through this specification, *Sudhā* underlines that even in the state of *brahmabhāva*, the *jīvātman* or *īśvarātman* does not become Akṣarabrahman. The oneness is only in terms of certain qualities, but the essential nature and form of the *jīvātman*, *īśvarātman*, and Akṣarabrahman remain eternally separate. The ontologically distinct entity Akṣarabrahman, unlike the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*, is eternally all-pervasive, upholds and serves Parabrahman in his divine abode and engages in the creation of the universe.

Thus, *brahmabhāva* is the fundamental endeavour for gaining the divine approval of Parabrahman. *Brahmabhāva* means cultivating qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The state of *brahmabhāva*, thereby, can be cultivated by the association with and grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, constant contemplation of his form and virtues. Such contemplation entails identifying the *ātman* with Akṣarabrahman, which eliminates the material vices and harbours the auspicious qualities of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

⁷⁶³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 327)

⁷⁶⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 324)

⁷⁶⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 322)

5.4. *Sādhana and Sādhya*

The *Sudhā* describes the realisation of *brahmabhāva* as “parabhaktyadhikāritva,”⁷⁶⁶ meaning that which makes one entitled to the worship of Parabrahman. This description, however, is not to be understood as limiting the worship of Parabrahman only after the realisation of *brahmabhāva*. It does not mean that the worship of Parabrahman cannot be performed before or during the process of acquiring *brahmabhāva*. *Sudhā* specifies that such an understanding would nullify the scriptures that instruct the worship of Parabrahman. The correct intent of the description is that the state of *brahmabhāva* eliminates all material vices that would otherwise hinder or distract one from the worship of Parabrahman. Consequently, only in the state of *brahmabhāva* can one worship Parabrahman incessantly and seamlessly.⁷⁶⁷ Having acquired the auspicious virtues of Akṣarabrahman Guru, one now, like the Guru, ever remains immersed in the worship and service of Parabrahman. Such seamless worship of Parabrahman upon the attainment of *brahmabhāva* is referred to as “sādhya bhakti,” while worship and other devotional activities performed before attaining *brahmabhāva* is referred to as “sādhana bhakti.”

In this way, one always engages in devotion and worship to Parabrahman. As an endeavour, it is consciously performed while taking the Akṣarabrahman Guru as the ideal. Once this endeavour is fulfilled, it is continued to be practised, not as an endeavour but as an effortless experience. The manner of such devotion, performed as *sādhana* and *sādhya*, is discussed in the following sections.

5.5. *Ekāntika Dharma*

The practice of *Ekāntika Dharma* is shown to be fundamental in attaining *brahmabhāva*. Since its practice enables one to profoundly associate with Parabrahman, it is also referred to as *Bhāgavat Dharma*. On several occasions, Swaminarayan stated that the purpose of God’s manifestation on earth is to establish the *Ekāntika Dharma*.⁷⁶⁸ Swaminarayan was referred to by many as “ekāntika dharma pravartaka” (the torchbearer of *Ekāntika Dharma*). For

⁷⁶⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 307)

⁷⁶⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 329)

⁷⁶⁸ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.46, III.21)

instance, his contemporary devotee, Niṣkulānanda Svāmī, closes every chapter of his *magnum opus Bhaktacintāmaṇī* with veneration of his *īṣṭadeva* Swaminarayan as the “ekāntika dharma pravartaka.” Swaminarayan expounded upon the nature and content of *Ekāntika Dharma* in his philosophical teachings.

Ekāntika Dharma is a comprehensive four-fold method that encompasses four interdependent components, *dharma* (observance of injunctions), *jñāna* (self-knowledge), *vairāgya* (detachment) and *bhakti* (devotion accompanied with the understanding of God’s greatness). Swaminarayan underlining the necessity of each component remarks:

In this satsang fellowship, those devotees seeking their own ultimate liberation cannot fulfil that aim by ātman-realisation alone; nor can they fulfil that aim by loving offering the nine types of *bhakti* alone; nor can they fulfil that aim by *svadharma* alone. Thus, all four virtues, that is, ātman-realisation, *bhakti*, *vairāgya* and *svadharma* should be perfected since all are dependent upon each other.⁷⁶⁹

While each component of *Ekāntika Dharma* mutually fulfils each other, *bhakti* is deemed the most significant component amongst the four. The *Sudhā* presents *bhakti*’s importance in:

Bhaktere vaha prādhānyaṁ dharmārdikacatuṣṭaye |
*Bhakteraṅgatayaiva iṣāṁ sādhanatvaprabodhināt ||*⁷⁷⁰

The three components, *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya* are referred to as the “aṅgatā,” literally meaning dependent or secondary, to *bhakti*. These three components serve as spiritual endeavours only when they supplement the performance of *bhakti*. *Sudhā* notes that failure to perform *dharma*, *jñāna* or *vairāgya*, can be amended, but failure to *bhakti* leads to one to fall from liberation. Thus, *Ekāntika Dharma* can be explained as the performance of *bhakti* with the understanding of God’s greatness, supplemented with *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*.

⁷⁶⁹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.19)

⁷⁷⁰ “Here amongst the four, *bhakti* verily is the predominant. [*Dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*] are worthy to be endeavours only when supplementary to *bhakti*.” (*Kārikā* 390)

5.5.1. *Dharma*

Several Vedānta schools accept the concepts of *dharma* and *adharma* as actions prescribed and prohibited by the scriptures, respectively. Accordingly, the former generates Paramātman’s *anugraha* (grace), while the latter generates *nigraha* (disapproval). Moral standards are thus understood to be framed consciously by the divine, as Vedānta Deśika remarks:

[r]ight and wrong embody the conscious purpose and intelligence of God i.e., they are not arbitrary prescriptions of the Divine Will but represent God’s rationale and end in this world.⁷⁷¹

Sadhu Bhadreshdas reinforces this framework by defining *dharma* in terms of “*ājñanā*” or divine commands of not just Paramātman but also those assigned by the Akṣarabrahman Guru.⁷⁷² Observance of the commands or ordinances earns the divine approval of the Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The scriptures, undoubtedly, set moral standards, but they need to be appropriately comprehended based on the Guru’s teachings. The Guru bestows the various moral and spiritual codes through the correct understanding and contextual relevance of the authoritative scriptures. Matilal, through various illustrations from the Epics, points out that “dharma does not have a definite form. It has an ever-elusive nature.”⁷⁷³ Such elusiveness is evaded through the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru. He is deemed the moral guide who is ever-present to resolve the agent’s moral predicaments, such as moral dilemmas or weakness of the will.

The current Akṣarabrahman Guru and the spiritual head of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sampradāya, Mahant Swami Maharaj, recently composed a *Dharmaśāstra* titled *Satsang Dikṣā* that prescribes the moral and spiritual codes based on the teachings of Parabrahman Swaminarayan. It offers a contextually relevant framework of various dos and don’ts for inspiring the soteriological endeavours of all aspirants.

The *Sudhā* also defines *dharma* as “dhāraṇā.” This definition is based on the etymology of the term ‘dharma,’ derived from the verbal root ‘dhṛ,’ to support and uphold. The definition

⁷⁷¹ (Maitra 326)

⁷⁷² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 333)

⁷⁷³ (Ganeri, ‘Dharma and Rationality’ 69)

of *dharma* in such terms is understood by some to be “too vague to be useful.”⁷⁷⁴ The *Sudhā*, however, explains “to uphold” as upholding the divine commands and virtuous actions (*sadācāra*) prescribed by Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru that supplement the *bhakti* of Parabrahman.⁷⁷⁵ Righteous actions are thereby defined as injunctions or commands consciously prescribed by both, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, which enable the moral aspirant to progress on the path of liberation. All those actions performed otherwise are categorised as *adharma*, which encompasses unrighteous actions and those actions performed in a wilful manner.

Dharma is generally classified in terms of duties relative to one’s social status in society, namely *varṇāśramadharmā*, and duties that are universal to all, irrespective of one’s place in society, namely *sāmānyadharmā*. The *Sudhā* notes that these duties, designed for bringing about social order in the form of division of labour and self-reliance, do not restrict or limit one’s spiritual upliftment. The *Sudhā*, thus, rejects any kind of gradation in the social system.⁷⁷⁶ This stems from Swaminarayan’s insistence:

[Affection in God’s form is possible] when, discarding all vanity of gender, *varṇa* and *āśrama*, he beholds God’s form within it.⁷⁷⁷

Such insistence yet again emphasises that all individuals, irrespective of their gender or social status, are eligible for embarking on the path of liberation.

In response to those aphorisms that venerate the Brahmin *varṇa*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies such veneration as essentially directed towards the authoritative scriptures that the Brahmins studied. Moreover, he (re)defines the term ‘brahmin’ to denote anyone who has realised the knowledge of Akṣara and Puruṣottama. Further, one who is “viśuddha,” who lives by righteous actions, is also entitled as a Brahmin. This definition implies that virtues entitle one to a particular *varṇa* and not the opposite. The *varṇa* does not dictate or limit one from being virtuous. As expressed in:

Sadācārādiniṣṭho yo kvāpi varṇasthito bhavet |
*Sa eva sādhumantavyaḥ śreṣṭhaśca dhārmiko budhaiḥ ||*⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁴ (Ganeri, ‘Exclusiveness and Ambiguity in Dharma-Ethics’ 37)

⁷⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 333)

⁷⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 335)

⁷⁷⁷ (Vac. Gaḍhāḍā II.32)

Noble virtues and righteousness can be cultivated irrespective of one's social and economic status. Swaminarayan has been lauded for inculcating such moral and spiritual values amongst the marginalised sections of society.

Kishore Mashruwala, for instance, observed:

It was not [Swaminarayan's] method to mix the upper and lower castes together and bring about a lowering of the cultural levels among the upper castes. It was, on the other hand, his method to uplift the lower castes to the level of upper castes. In this way, he taught the Dhedhs, Mochis, Kanbis and Muslims to live like Brahmins.⁷⁷⁹

Even recently, Vibhuti Parikh (2016) and Sadhu Mangalnidhidas (2016), in their respective articles, have shown Swaminarayan's efforts to eliminate the caste prejudices.

Thus, the *Sudhā*, while respecting the systemisation offered through the *varnāśramadharma*, rejects the various negative allegations of gradation within. It argues that any kind of systemisation is guided by certain rules. It goes to the extent of locating the root of the demerits within than without. The absence of understanding one's true self as *ātman*, as Akṣara, results in the rise of demerits such as envy, partiality, pride, greed, and the like.⁷⁸⁰ These demerits eventually lead one to perceive others as lower or insignificant, and thereby negativity in any system. Only the attainment of *brahmabhāva* can uproot such a perception. For this reason, emphasis is laid on shedding the vanity of one's status.

The various *sāmānyadharmas* enumerated in the *Sudhā* are non-violence, truth, non-stealing, non-attachment, non-avarice etc. The virtue of non-violence (*ahimsā*) has been given special attention due to the *sampradāyic* history that stressed both moral and ritualistic non-violence. Swaminarayan is believed to have brought about a major turn in the performance of rituals prevalent in his time:

Sahajanand attempted to change the character of the sacrificial rituals which, during his time, involved animal sacrifices, which many Hindus considered an

⁷⁷⁸ "One who lives by moral conduct, regardless of which varṇa he belongs, is acclaimed by the wise as indeed noble, eminent and righteous." (*Kārikā* 395)

⁷⁷⁹ (Mashruwala 63–64)

⁷⁸⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 337)

essential part of Vedic religion. Sahajanand condemned animal sacrifices, taught they were not part of the true Vedic tradition, and performed public rituals of bloodless sacrifice in their place.⁷⁸¹

Swaminarayan strictly advocated non-violence in thought, word, and deed. Scholars have compared Swaminarayan's steadfast insistence on non-violence to that of the Jains. Williams, for instance, accounts Swaminarayan's non-violence as "an emphasis that he shared with the large Jain community in Gujarat."⁷⁸² However, unlike the heterodox Jain school, Swaminarayan was faced with a greater problem of responding to the widespread misreading of the *dharmaśāstras*. For instance, violence was encouraged on the grounds of excerpts like:

A twice-born man, who, knowing the true meaning of the Veda, slays an animal for these purposes, causes both himself and the animal to enter a more blessed state.⁷⁸³

The *Sudhā* reads such statements as "āpatkālikam vidhānāmidam," as an attempt to limit violence.⁷⁸⁴ Due to the prevalence of arbitrary violence, such statements limited violence only to certain rituals. Statements on consuming meat are also to be understood on these lines. Further, *Sudhā* explains that the import of the *dharmaśāstra* and other scriptures should be understood only through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The words and commands of the Guru ultimately take precedence over the *dharmaśāstras*.

Sudhā concludes by reminding that observance of non-violence and other prescribed injunctions alone cannot grant one liberation. Only when *dharma* is observed along with *bhakti* and other components of the *Ekāntika Dharma* can it release one from the cycles of birth and death and lead to the eternal bliss of Parabrahman. The recent *dharmaśāstra* text of the *sampradāya*, *Satsang Dikṣā*, thereby not only prescribes injunctions on non-violence and other virtues actions but also instructs on meditating upon the true nature of the *ātman*,⁷⁸⁵ attaching only with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman⁷⁸⁶ and selflessly worshipping

⁷⁸¹ (Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* 24)

⁷⁸² (Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* 24)

⁷⁸³ (Manusmṛiti 5.42)

⁷⁸⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 338)

⁷⁸⁵ (Satsang Dikṣā 116,105)

⁷⁸⁶ (Satsang Dikṣā 120)

Parabrahman.⁷⁸⁷ Thus, one must engage in devotion while observing the various divine commands of Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

5.5.2. *Jñāna*

Jñāna or spiritual knowledge, in the context of *Ekāntika Dharma*, is explained as “*ātmaniṣṭhā*,” literally meaning *firm conviction of oneself as ātman*. Such conviction forms an important aspect in almost all schools of the Vedāntic tradition. The Advaitin tradition, for instance, explains *ātmajñāna* as the realisation of the *ātman* as ontologically identical to the ultimate reality Brahman. The *ātman* alone is the unchanging reality as opposed to the unreal ever-changing material world. This understanding is often termed as *viveka* or discrimination.⁷⁸⁸ On the other hand, certain other schools of the Vedānta tradition generally understand *ātmajñāna* as a necessary spiritual endeavour of grasping oneself to be distinct from the embodied self, which ultimately through devotion shifts “the centre of reference from the *ātman* to the Paramātmā.”⁷⁸⁹ The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, however, defines *ātmajñāna* or *ātmaniṣṭhā* as:

Brahmavibhāvanā'dhikyāt parabrahmasuyogataḥ |
*Viśiṣṭā hyātmaniṣṭheyam hariṇā pratipāditā ||*⁷⁹⁰

The *ātman* is focused on Paramātmā after developing oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Accordingly, one must realise one's *ātman* as distinct from the three bodies of *sthūla*, *sūkṣma* and *kāraṇa*, and identify oneself with the virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, which will enable one to steadfastly focus on the form of Parabrahman. *Ātmaniṣṭhā* is, thus, focus on or a conjunction (*sansparśa*) with both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

The *Sudhā* maps out this focusing or identifying with Akṣarabrahman as a two-fold process.⁷⁹¹ The first step involves approaching and associating with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such personal association shows that the process of *ātmaniṣṭhā* is not merely a mental activity entailing the withdrawal of the mind and complete absorption. Without the

⁷⁸⁷ (Satsang Dikṣā 116,146)

⁷⁸⁸ (Swami Vimuktananda 5)

⁷⁸⁹ (Srinivasachari 349)

⁷⁹⁰ “Association with Parabrahman along with identification with Akṣarabrahman. Such is the unique understanding of *ātmaniṣṭhā* advocated by Hari.” (*Kārikā* 401)

⁷⁹¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 340)

association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, such withdrawal is deemed insufficient in the pursuit of liberation. After attaining profound association, the second step is to reflect and contemplate the auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru that one experienced through Guru's association.

This contemplation of Akṣarabrahman Guru is also described as a two-step process. The first is a contemplation on the divine and pure virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, and secondly, to identify these virtues with one's *ātman*. Such contemplation, thus, eventually leads to the realisation of *brahmabhāva*. In this state of *brahmabhāva*, one then experiences the presence of Parabrahman within one's *ātman*.

It is important to note here that reflection on the virtues is not possible without reflecting on the substratum of those virtues, that is, the personal form of the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru. Accordingly, the absorption of the mind is on a particular form (*sākāra*) and not on any abstract or indeterminate notion (*nirākāra*). *Ātmajñāna* is, thus, unattainable without the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

Responding to those aphorisms that mention meditation on the *ātman* as the source of liberation, *Sudhā* remarks that these aphorisms should be understood through the supplementing aphorisms of other scriptures (*sarvaśākhānyāya*) that explain the need of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman for attaining liberation. Moreover, the *ātman* is influenced by *māyā*, thus cannot free itself from *māyā* on its own accord. If this were possible, the *ātman* would not suffer in the innumerable cycles of birth and death.⁷⁹² Any attempt to release oneself from *māyā* without the aid of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is compared to a futile exercise of “tying gourds to oneself and trying to cross the ocean.”⁷⁹³

Sudhā clarifies that all scriptural aphorisms that assert the distinction between the material body and the *ātman* should be understood to imply the meditation of the *ātman* on Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Meditation on the *ātman* alone is viewed as the “upajīvaka,” (the dependent) which depends on the Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the “upajīvyā.”⁷⁹⁴ Thus, the liberation of the *ātman* is possible only through the Akṣarabrahman

⁷⁹² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 344)

⁷⁹³ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.35)

⁷⁹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 341)

and Parabrahman. Such understanding and exercise of self-knowledge shapes one's spiritual identity with which one engages in the worship of Parabrahman.

5.5.3. *Vairāgya*

This spiritual identity of being distinct from all corporeal objects and identifying with the virtues of Akṣarabrahman is supplemented with the component *vairāgya*. *Vairāgya* is often defined in terms of non-attachment and dispassion towards the ephemeral world. Shankar, for instance, explains *vairāgya* as:

The indifference with which one treats the excreta of the crow—such an indifference to all objects of enjoyment from the realm of Brahmā to this world (in view of their perishable nature) is verily called pure *Vairāgya*.⁷⁹⁵

Vairāgya is explained as “indifference,” that is, cultivating disinterest towards all temporal pleasures. It is admitted as an essential component in the path of enlightenment in not just Vedānta but also other schools of Indian philosophy. In the Yoga school, *vairāgya* is one of the factors to restrain the *citta*, “*abhayāsavairāgyābhyāṁ tannirodhaḥ*”⁷⁹⁶:

Thus, in *vairāgya* the *citta* will be unmoved (*anābhogātmikā*) by contacts with objects seen and unseen...this indifference to objects results from *prasamkhyāna*, the constant contemplation of the inadequacy of all objects followed by a lively sense of their innate worthlessness.⁷⁹⁷

In this way, the schools of Indian philosophy emphasise developing indifference towards all worldly objects by contemplating their inadequacy in bestowing lasting happiness.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta enjoins a positive train of thought within this contemplation. The *Sudhā* insists on contemplating upon the temporality of the phenomenal world along with the contemplation on one's attainment of the Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. On this ground, *Sudhā* defines *vairāgya* as detachment from everything else except Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman (*akṣarapuruṣottametaṛeṣu rāgā'bhāvo*

⁷⁹⁵ (Swami Vimuktananda 3)

⁷⁹⁶ “They are restrained with practice and non-attachment.” (*Yoga Sūtra* 12)

⁷⁹⁷ (Mookerji 306)

vairāgyam).⁷⁹⁸ Such detachment is developed through the knowledge and profound attachment with the forms of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. For this reason, *Sudhā* insists on practising *vairāgya* that is grounded in knowledge. This insistence stems from the teaching of Swaminarayan:

[v]*airāgya* without *jñāna* does not last when it encounters the sense-objects. On the other hand, *vairāgya* produced from *jñāna* does not diminish despite encountering sense-objects; it continues to burn like *vadvānala agni*.⁷⁹⁹

The strength and endurance of *vairāgya* grounded in knowledge is compared to “*vadvānala agni*” or submarine fire that remains unextinguished while immersed in water. Thus, *Sudhā* explains that *vairāgya*, when grounded in knowledge, can supplement the practice of *bhakti*.⁸⁰⁰

Sudhā demonstrates the way for cultivating *vairāgya*: One must rejoice in the attainment of Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru who have bestowed a human body through which one can perform spiritual endeavours for overcoming the material world that is replete with pain and misery. Everything in the world is perishable and will never bring about fulfilment. One must reflect on one’s insignificance before such a Guru’s greatness and feel blessed that his communion will enable one to overcome the desires for all sense-objects.⁸⁰¹ Thus, the contemplation on the world’s perishability must always be coupled with the sense of attainment and attachment to the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

Such a sense of *vairāgya* is also affirmed through the *Upaniṣads*. For instance, the *Īśa Upaniṣad* is cited, “*idaṁ bhasmāntaṁ śarīraṁ*.”⁸⁰² This verse of the *Upaniṣad* is centred on the discrimination between the mortal body and the immortal *ātman*. It asserts the temporality of the body; it will soon be burnt to ashes. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in his commentary, explains that being mindful of the temporality of the body, one prays to Paramātmā for making the *ātman brahmarūpa* in this lifetime such that one can experience Paramātmā’s bliss till the

⁷⁹⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 344)

⁷⁹⁹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā III.24)

⁸⁰⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 346)

⁸⁰¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 346–47)

⁸⁰² “This body will perish to ashes.” (Īśa Up. 17)

body remains.⁸⁰³ This prayer showcases the positive attainment of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, along with the mortality of the material world.

This attachment towards Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman in *vairāgya* also showcases the interrelatedness with the *dharma* component of *Ekāntika Dharma* for one must continue following the commands prescribed by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman even while harbouring *vairāgya*. This suggests that *vairāgya* does not necessarily mean complete renunciation and adoption of the *nivṛtti mārg*, but of maintaining *pravṛtti* in *nivṛtti* and vice-versa. Elucidating Swaminarayan's insistence on maintaining *nivṛtti* in *pravṛtti* and *pravṛtti* in *nivṛtti*, Dr Sadhu Aksharananddas remarks:

Swaminarayan reveals the superiority of one who engages in action or *pravṛtti* that is intentioned to please God over those who withhold from such action...whereas those who withhold from such *pravṛtti* and adhere to the path of inaction or *nivṛtti* are known to be drowned in karmas...the cycle of births and deaths.⁸⁰⁴

Thus, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta does not encourage the path of inaction that involves abstaining from all activities for and in society. Such inaction, without carrying out the prescribed duties, will ultimately result in being overcome by the sense-objects and falling from the path of liberation. Even when one becomes a *tyāgi* or *sādhu*, one must continue the path of *pravṛtti* in the form of following the commands of God and the Guru. Thus, *vairāgya*, when coupled with knowledge and action in the form of *dharma* and *bhakti*, earns the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

5.5.4. *Bhakti*

Bhakti is a significant component of *Ekāntika Dharma*, the practice of which is strengthened with the observance of *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*.

Bhakti forms a fundamental endeavour in many schools of the Vedānta tradition. *Bhakti* towards a personal God (*saguṇa bhakti*) as a way to ultimate freedom is a crucial factor of distinction from the Advaitin tradition that gives prominence to knowledge (*jñāna mārg*).

⁸⁰³ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 25)

⁸⁰⁴ (Aksharananddas 191)

Though attempts were made by certain later Advaitins, such as Madhusudan Saraswati, to align *bhakti* within the principles of Advaita philosophy, these attempts were unable to bring *bhakti* to the same pedestal as that of *jñāna*. Lance E. Nelson, while examining the role of *bhakti* in the works of Madhusudan Saraswati, observes:

In the *Gudhārthadīpikā*...though *bhakti* has a prominent place, it is ultimately made subordinate to the path of knowledge and, in deference to orthodoxy, forced to accommodate itself to traditional Vedāntic discipline and pass through the final bottleneck of the *mahāvākyas*.⁸⁰⁵

On the other hand, the other schools of Vedānta do not compromise the importance of *bhakti* in the light of knowledge.

The term ‘*bhakti*’ is derived from the verbal root ‘*bhaj*,’ which means *to serve*. Accordingly, ‘*bhakti*’ means service or reverence towards any object or person. Thus, though ‘*bhakti*’ can have both secular and sacred connotations, it is generally used to refer to service, reverence or adoration of a personal God. *Sudhā* defines *bhakti* as a single-minded (*ananya*) paramount (*parama*) love for Parabrahman Sahajanand upon attaining the oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This definition is of “*sādhya*” *bhakti* as the term ‘*parama*’ is specified to mean “being embellished with the virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru” (*brahmātmaguṇasādharmyavibhūṣitatvam*).⁸⁰⁶ So only upon attaining *brahmabhāva* can one develop this supreme love for Parabrahman. Such love is further described as accompanied by the knowledge of Parabrahman’s greatness (*mahātmya*) and a divine perception (*divyabhāva*) and, consequently, free from perceiving any worldly qualities (*laukikabhāva*).

Along with this definition, *Sudhā* specifies that *bhakti* is also profound love in the Akṣarabrahman Guru through whom Parabrahman is ever manifest. Therefore, *bhakti* must be accompanied with the understanding of the glory of both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This definition of *bhakti* is succinctly presented as:

Bhaktistu sahaajānande mātmyajñānabhūṣitā |

⁸⁰⁵ (Nelson 65)

⁸⁰⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 348)

This *kārikā* clarifies that *bhakti* is directed only towards Parabrahman Sahajanand. Since Parabrahman is ever manifest through the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the *bhakti* for Parabrahman can only be fulfilled through profound love and attachment of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

One of the most important aspects of *bhakti* is the “knowledge of the greatness” (*māhātmyajñāna*) of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The absence of such knowledge leading to the deterioration of one’s *bhakti*. Swaminarayan explains:

[I]f only the knowledge of God’s glory is extremely powerful and the other three—*śraddhā*, faith and affection are weak, then they will also become powerful. On the other hand, although one may appear to have intense *bhakti*, if it is not coupled with the knowledge of God’s glory, it will ultimately be destroyed.⁸⁰⁸

On this ground, *Sudhā* notes the significance of the knowledge of Akṣarabrahman’s and Parabrahman’s greatness in generating and fostering profound love and affection. This significance is explained through the analogy of a medicine,⁸⁰⁹—just as learning the benefits of a particular medicine instantly generates one’s conviction and inclination towards the medicine, likewise, learning the greatness of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman generates and strengthens one’s conviction and attachment.

The scope of “mahātmya” emerges clearly under the topic of *upāsanā*. *Upāsanā* is also a form of *bhakti*; in fact, the term ‘*upāsanā*’ is often used synonymously with ‘*bhakti*.’ However, the concept of *upāsanā* stresses more on the understanding and contemplating on the form of Parabrahman (*paramātmā'nucintanaviśeṣarupam*).⁸¹⁰ *Upāsanā* encompasses contemplating on Parabrahman as eternally *sākāra* (ever possessing a divine human-shaped form), *sarvakartā* (all-doer), *samutkṛṣṭa* (supreme and the cause of all causes) and most importantly, *pragaṭa* (ever manifest through the Akṣarabrahman Guru).

⁸⁰⁷ “Bhakti is divine, unwavering and supreme love in Sahajanand that is supported with knowledge of his greatness and devoid of worldliness.” (*Kārikā* 409)

⁸⁰⁸ (Vac. Sārangapura 5)

⁸⁰⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 348)

⁸¹⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 351)

The *upāsyadeva* in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is believed to be Parabrahman Sahajanand Swami. He alone is worthy of being contemplated and devotedly worshipped. One may respect and worship other *avatāras*, but Sahajanand Swami alone is worshipped as Parabrahman, the bestower of liberation.⁸¹¹ Such absolute faithfulness is compared to the fidelity of a faithful wife who dutifully serves and respects others, but her attachment is only towards her beloved husband. Allusive to this illustration, single-minded devotion to only one Supreme Being is referred to as “pativratā bhakti.”

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, thereby, does not practice *yugala upāsanā*, the worship of a pair, instead it advocates the *upāsanā* of Parabrahman after cultivating oneness with Akṣarabrahman. The *Sudhā* specifies that the Akṣarabrahman Guru is not the *upāsyadeva* but is worshipped as Parabrahman manifests through him. Moreover, the Akṣarabrahman Guru remains immersed in the devotion of Parabrahman and guides others towards the worship and realisation of the form of Parabrahman. Thus, one attains liberation only through the worship of the *upāsyadeva* Parabrahman Swaminarayan in the state of *brahmabhāva*.

Another important form of *bhakti* is “āśraya,” taking the refuge of Parabrahman as the sole bestower of liberation. Such refuge, *Sudhā* explains, must be firm (*dr̥ḍha*) and undivided (*ananya*).⁸¹² One must remain firm in all circumstances and always perceive the actions of the manifest Parabrahman as pure and divine. Additionally, one must perceive Parabrahman as the sole redeemer, who alone can release the insignificant *ātman* from the cycles of birth and death. Such refuge will enable one to remain unperturbed and experience the bliss of Parabrahman in all states and circumstances.

Engaging in various spiritual or devotional activities that enhance one’s attachment with Parabrahman is also a form of *bhakti*. *Bhakti*, thus, is not merely an intellectual exercise but also an active participatory exercise. As discussed earlier, Swaminarayan advocated *pravṛtti* in *nivṛtti* and encouraged various spiritual, moral and welfare activities for which the *sampradāya* continues to build several mandirs and community centres. *Bhakti* in the form of devotional activities could be in any of the nine forms of *bhakti*, such as listening to discourses, singing devotional songs, and offering food to Parabrahman, which are

⁸¹¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 352)

⁸¹² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 354)

enumerated in the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* (7.5.23-24). Devotees may engage in any of these nine forms as per one's inclination and interest.

The *Sudhā*, however, notes that these devotional activities should not be aimed for liberation, nor should they be practised aimlessly purely for its own sake. They should instead be practised with the sole purpose of earning the divine approval of Parabrahman. *Bhakti* practised in this manner is known as *niṣkāma bhakti*.⁸¹³ In fact, any activity carried out with this purpose takes the form of *niṣkāma bhakti*:

So, if one abandons the desire for the fruits related to *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and if one performs pious karmas only to please God, then those pious karmas become a form of *bhakti* and aid in the attainment of liberation.⁸¹⁴

Accordingly, *sakāma bhakti* that is performed with the desire for other fruits does not lead to liberation.

The *Sudhā*, thus, notes that *upāsana*, *āśraya* and devotional activities are various forms or dimensions of *bhakti*. These forms are thereby also termed as “ananyaniṣṭhārūpa bhakti” which encompasses conviction in the divine form and nature of Parabrahman, “āśreyarūpa bhakti” which encompasses of taking firm refuge of Parabrahman Swaminarayan as the sole bestower of liberation, and “karmayogātmikā bhakti” which encompasses the practice of various devotional activities. As “sādhana bhakti,” these various forms cultivate one's attachment and allegiance to Parabrahman, while as “sādhya bhakti,” they are spontaneously practised as in the state of *brahmabhāva*, profound devotion to Parabrahman becomes part of one's innate nature.

Bhakti, as *sādhana* and *sādhya*, in the form of firm conviction, refuge and worship is to be directed towards the manifest form of Parabrahman. The *Sudhā*, whilst defining *bhakti*, explains *bhakti* as profound love, accompanied with the glory of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, towards the manifest form of Parabrahman. Such *bhakti* is termed as “pratyakṣa bhakti,” which is believed to earn the greatest fruits. *Pratyakṣa bhakti* can be fulfilled by worshipping the Akṣarabrahman Guru as upholding the manifest form of Parabrahman. Since Parabrahman Swaminarayan's personal form is not present before all

⁸¹³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 350)

⁸¹⁴ (Vac. Gadhada II.11)

devotees at all times, his presence continues through the lineage of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus. The Akṣarabrahman Guru is, thus, upheld as the “visible object of devotion.”⁸¹⁵

The fruit of worshipping Akṣarabrahman is the same as that of worshipping Parabrahman. This is affirmed through the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, which describes the sacred sound “Om” to entail both Akṣarabrahman (*apara*) and Parabrahman (*para*). Hereafter, the *Upaniṣad* states, “tasmād vidvān etenaivāyatanen aikātaramanveti.”⁸¹⁶ Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains that the mediation on “Om,” that is, the realisation of Akṣarabrahman or Parabrahman, leads to liberation.⁸¹⁷ Thus, cultivating profound love for the Akṣarabrahman Guru by listening to his discourses, taking his firm refuge, and other such forms of *bhakti* is equal to cultivating profound love for Parabrahman. Consequently, earning the divine approval of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is equivalent to earning the divine approval of Parabrahman.

5.5.4.1. Auxiliary Forms of *Bhakti*

Certain auxiliary forms of *bhakti*, when practised regularly, can further one’s perfection of *bhakti*. They include maintaining constant enthusiasm (*utsāha*), patience (*dhairya*), habitual recollection (*abhyāsa*), forbearance (*saha*), subserviency (*dāsatva*), restrain (*saṁyama*).

Along with these, faith (*viśvāsa*) is shown as an essential factor that enables one to remain firm in one’s endeavour for liberation. *Sudhā* specifies that one must maintain faith in every aspect of one spiritual journey, in the foundational ontological entities (*siddhānta śraddhā*), in the endeavour shown for realising the Siddhānta (*sādhana śraddhā*) and in the various day-to-day activities for strengthening one’s endeavour (*ācāra śraddhā*). Unwavering faith in each of these aspects will eventually lead one towards realisation.

Though insisting on maintaining faith, *Sudhā* does not obscure the relevance of reasoning. This is clarified by showcasing a distinction between *sattarka* (pure or valid reasoning) and *dustarka* (impure or invalid reasoning).⁸¹⁸ *Sattarka* is defined as reasoning that reinforces the principles advocated by the Akṣarabrahman Guru. In other words, it supports the existing *pramāṇa* in terms of comprehending the words of the Guru and his teachings of the scriptures

⁸¹⁵ (Williams, ‘The Holy Man as the Abode of God in Swaminarayan Religion’ 152)

⁸¹⁶ “From this the knower reaches either one of them.” (Pr. Up. 5.2)

⁸¹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 215–16)

⁸¹⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 362)

but is not accepted as an autonomous means of knowledge. Independent reasoning or reasoning for its own sake (referred to as *dustarka*) can always be defeated by another reasoning. Moreover, reasoning is a product of *buddhi* and thus is greatly inferior to the eternally pure entities of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. For this reason, the *Sudhā* recalls the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* that denies the dependence on reasoning alone for realising spiritual knowledge, “*naiṣā tarkeṇa matirāpaneyā*.”⁸¹⁹ Thus, one must use one’s reasoning to reinforce one’s faith in the Siddhānta and its realisation.

Further, *bhakti* is outlined as not merely cultivating a personal relationship with the Akṣarabrahman Guru but also those associated with him, that is, the other members of the *sampradāya*. One’s spiritual practice, that is, engaging in the service and devotion to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, while being a personal enterprise often involves practices that are performed “within the living community of practitioners.”⁸²⁰ The personal enterprise thereby also encompasses one’s understanding of others. For unhindered progress, the members of the *sampradāya* are encouraged to cultivate affection (*suhṛdayabhāva*) and a sense of unity (*ekya*). Such cultivation becomes effortless by observing the good in all (*guṇa grahaṇa*). Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains ‘sadguṇa,’ which is generally understood to refer to good qualities, on the basis of the philosophical principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. The term ‘sat,’ as discussed in the earlier chapters, is explained as entailing the two eternally pure entities, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. In this vein, the true sense of observing the “good” in all is fulfilled only by understanding their fortune of being blessed with a relationship with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Such observance would uproot the otherwise easily arising human response of jealousy, anguish, and the like.

Additionally, the devotee must maintain a disposition of a servant (*dāsa*). Many schools centred around *bhakti* assert this recognition of oneself as “dāsoham” instead of “soham.” This analogy of the servant and master is often used along with the analogy of the beloved and the lover. Carman, while analysing the philosophy of Ramanuja, remarks:

This [*dāsyabhakti*] did not, however, necessarily exclude the important Vaiṣṇava idea of devotion of the human beloved to the Divine lover, an analogy that was so

⁸¹⁹ “This cannot be reached through reasoning.” (Ka. Up. 2.9)

⁸²⁰ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 61)

important for the South Indian Ālvārs, which was differently developed centuries later in North India by various Vaiṣṇava sects.⁸²¹

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta limits the analogy of the beloved and the lover only as an illustration of loyalty towards the supreme Godhead, Parabrahman Swaminarayan. With respect to identification, the devotee must identify himself solely as a servant and engage in service and worship like the ideal servant Akṣarabrahman. The notion of subserviency is extended even to other members of the *sampradāya*. The phrase common to the *sampradāya* is “becoming the servant (*dāsa*) of a servant (*dāsa*).”⁸²² One is the servant not just of Parabrahman but also of those associated with him. In the *mahāpūjā* ritual, also composed by Sadhu Bhadresdhas, the prayer by the devotee performing the *pūjā* ends with the shloka:

Tvaddāsadāsadāsānām dāsānām dāsakīṅkaraḥ |
*Evam vilasatām nityam dāsatvavaibhavo mayi ||*⁸²³

This prayer for becoming a servant, almost six times removed from the *upāsyadeva* Parabrahman, presents the extent of humility one must cultivate. In fact, one’s spiritual height is understood to be directly proportional to one’s humility and subservience towards Parabrahman, the Akṣarabrahman Guru and the other devotees.

Progress in one’s spiritual endeavour requires constant reflection on one’s flaws and faults. This constant reflection is known as “*antardṛṣṭi*,” literally meaning *looking within*. One must look within the self and contemplate upon the essential purity of the *ātman*. The *Sudhā* adds that such reflection not only involves looking to the *ātman* but also that which resides within the *ātman*, that is, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.⁸²⁴ Moreover, *darśana* of the external forms of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and perceiving every being as pervaded by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is also a form of *antardṛṣṭi*. In fact, even steadfastly obeying the commands imparted by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is also recognised as a form of *antardṛṣṭi*. In this way, any action that involves reflecting upon the forms of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is deemed as a form of *antardṛṣṭi*. Thus, *Sudhā* does not limit the endeavour of constant reflection only to the *ātman* but extends it also to

⁸²¹ (Carman 221)

⁸²² (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.69)

⁸²³ “I am your servant of your servant, five times over. I ever rejoice fostering the thoughts of servitude within.”

⁸²⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāmīnārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 367)

Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman that prevail within the *ātman* as reflection on Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and not merely the *ātman*, leads one towards liberation.

Sudhā mentions certain devotional practices that are to be performed on a daily basis to ensure steady growth and reinforcement of one's spiritual endeavour. These include performing *pūjā* (personal worship and prayer), *ārti* (offering prayer with the light of a flame), reading the *Vacanāmṛta* and the works that document the life-incidents of the various Akṣarabrahman Gurus. Along with these, one engages in *mānasī-pūjā* five times a day.⁸²⁵ It is a process of visualising God's form and vividly imagining him before oneself as involved in various routine events of the day such as bathing, eating, napping etc. Such prayer through visualisation is viewed as an integral part of Hinduism for maintaining one's connection with the Divine as it:

[r]ests on the attentive mode of awareness, as the visualisation demands a conscious flow of consciousness towards the same object (i.e., mental focus)...What is unique here is the meticulous effort to create "reality" through imagination."⁸²⁶

Swaminarayan, however, insists on visualising not only the form of God but also of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the ideal devotee:

Just as one performs the *mānasī-pūjā* of the God, if one performs the *mānasī-pūjā* of the ideal *bhakta* along with God...one becomes a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are fruits of similar service of God and God's *bhakta*.⁸²⁷

Such *bhakti* of God and the Guru is also affirmed through the *Upaniṣadic* aphorism, "yasya deve parā bhaktiryathādeve tathā gurao."⁸²⁸ The *Upaniṣad* instructs in worshipping the Akṣarabrahman Guru in the same manner as one worships the supreme Parabrahman. Through such *mānasī-pūjā*, every individual, irrespective of class, caste, gender, can creatively serve the Guru at any time and space.

⁸²⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 369)

⁸²⁶ (Timalsima 56)

⁸²⁷ (Vac. Varatāla 5)

⁸²⁸ "Who has supreme love for Paramātman, of the Guru like that of the Paramātman." (Sve. Up. 6.23)

Apart from *mānasī-pūjā*, certain other mental activities are to be practised at regular intervals. These involve six thought processes aimed at training the mind and overcoming the day-to-day difficulties that hamper one's path of *bhakti*.⁸²⁹ They are namely, *Prāptyanusandhānam*—thinking on one's fortune of attaining the Supreme Parabrahman, *Ātmānusandhānam*—thinking on the essential distinction between oneself and the material body, *Kartṛtvānusandhānam*—thinking on Parabrahman's all-doership, *Sambandhamāhātmya*—reflecting only on the good in others, *Naṣvaratānusandhānam*—thinking on the temporality of the phenomenal world and *Prasannatānucintanam*—thinking of the divine approval. Amongst these, *Prasannatānucintanam* seems to be the most crucial as the *Sudhā* notes that this thought must prevail in every act and is claimed to be “mahopkāri,” greatly beneficial, for pleasing the Guru which is the ultimate fulfilment of *bhakti*.

Thus, one who masters all these various components of *Ekāntika Dharma* attains *brahmabhāva*, which marks the attainment of liberation. However, even in this state of liberation, *Ekāntika Dharma* is to be practised, that is, one continues to perform *bhakti* while observing *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*. In the state of *brahmabhāva*, following *dharma*, *vairāgya*, *jñāna* and *bhakti* become spontaneous (*sahaja*) and seamless (*sukara*).

5.6. Nature of *Mukti*

Attaining divine approval (*prasannatā*) is regarded as the ultimate fruit of one's endeavours. It is the final attainment beyond which nothing is left to be attained, a state in which one has attained freedom from all *māyika* (this-worldly) attachments. It is freedom (*mukti*) from the bondage that had eternally tied one in the cycles of birth and death.

The *Sudhā* asserts this bondage as real and eternal (*anādi*, without a beginning) and not a mere appearance or illusion, as the Advaitins would claim. The reality of bondage is affirmed through the *Upaniṣadic* statement, “hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitam mukham.”⁸³⁰ This *Upaniṣadic* prayer is for the realisation of the true form of Parabrahman. It begins with the predicament of the *ātman* of being unable to realise the true form of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. The reason for its ignorance is the covering of the “golden vessel” (*hiraṇmaya*

⁸²⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 367–68)

⁸³⁰ “By the golden vessel is covered the form of truth.” (Īśa Up. 15)

pātra). This golden vessel is explained as the “deluding desires for material objects” that are eternally attached to the *ātman*.⁸³¹ Thus, *māyā* in the form of the material world that causes bondage of the *ātman* is real and eternal.

Though this bondage is *anādi*, without a beginning, it terminates in the state of *mukti*. *Mukti*, thus, whilst having a starting point, remains perpetual or *ananta*, without an ending point.

Mukti as the ultimate goal of humanity is admitted by almost all schools of Indian philosophy. Each school, however, offers a different narrative of the nature of *mukti*. *Sudhā* begins by enumerating various narratives offered by the different schools and rejects them for being inadequate. For instance, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Sāṅkhya schools explain *mukti* only as an absence of pain and suffering. In contrast, certain schools of Vedānta explain *mukti* as enjoying the inherent bliss of oneself (Madhvacharya) or attaining the *sāyujya* of Paramātmā (Nimbarkacharya).

The *Sudhā* presents *mukti* as a release from all material attachments and positively, as attaining the virtues of Akṣarabrahman and performing *bhakti* to Parabrahman in that state with deep humility.⁸³² Thus, though like other Bhakti schools, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta offers a positive aspect of *mukti* in the form of an unique attainment, this aspect is not defined as acquiring physical proximity in the abode (*sālokya*), acquiring a similar form (*sārūpya*) and qualities (*sāyujya*) of Paramātmā after death. Instead, it is defined by realising the Akṣarabrahman Guru and attaining the bliss of Paramātmā. On this ground, two forms of *mukti* are affirmed: *jīvana-mukti*, state of freedom attained in one’s lifetime, and *videha-mukti*, freedom attained after shedding one’s mortal body.

5.6.1. *Jīvana-Mukti*

Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is one of the few Vedānta schools that accepts the concept of *jīvana-mukti*. Madhvacharya seems to admit it, which he refers to as “Aparoksajñāna.” However, this state is not synonymous with *mukti* but is “the penultimate state of final release”⁸³³—a step towards *mukti*, which is ultimately achieved only after the destruction of the mortal body. The *Sudhā*, however, refers to *jīvana-mukti* as being equivalent to *videha-*

⁸³¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 22)

⁸³² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 374)

⁸³³ (Sharma 316)

mukti. The state of *jīvana-mukti* is defined as enjoying the supreme bliss of Paramātmā whilst alive, such a released *ātman* (*jīvana-mukta*) has attained *brahmabhāva*, perceives Parabrahman in everything and being, and remains immersed in the *bhakti* of Parabrahman that is embellished with *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*.⁸³⁴

Sadhu Bhadresdhas offers many *Upaniṣadic* references that affirm the concept of *jīvana-mukti*. Many use the term ‘*iha*’ or ‘*atra*’ (here or now) while stating the realisation of Brahman. For instance, towards the end of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Yamarāja states, “*yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye'sya hṛdi śritāḥ atha martyo'mṛto bhavati atra brahma samaśnute*.”⁸³⁵ This verse explains the experience or realisation of Akṣarabrahman upon the termination of all desires. The term ‘*atra*’ denotes a particular place or time. Ramanuja tradition, which does not admit *jīvana-mukti*, explains ‘*atra*’ as “during the time of meditation.”⁸³⁶ Sadhu Bhadresdhas, on the other hand, understands ‘*atra*’ as “in this body, in the lifetime.”⁸³⁷ Thus, upon the termination of all desires, one attains the realisation of Akṣarabrahman and thereby also of Parabrahman in this lifetime.

Moreover, the *Īśa Upaniṣad* is shown to elucidate the state of a *jīvana-mukta*. The *Upaniṣad* describes the nature of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as manifesting in the world in a human form and immanent in the world by being all-pervasive. Moving this forward, Sadhu Bhadresdhas interprets the following two mantras as describing one who has associated with that Akṣarabrahman Guru and attained *brahmabhāva*, “*yastu sarvāṇi bhūtānyātmanyevānupaśyati sarvabhūteṣu cātmānaṁ tato na vijugupsate yasmīnsarvāṇi bhūtānyātmaivābhūdviḥvijānataḥ tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvam anupaśyataḥ*.”⁸³⁸ The Ramanuja tradition explains this mantra as showcasing Paramātmā as the *ātman* of all beings. Accordingly, the term ‘*anupaśyati*’ is explained as “*dhyāyati*” (“meditating”).⁸³⁹ While Sadhu Bhadresdhas also understands the mantra as depicting Paramātmā as the *ātman* of all, he notes that this can be experienced eternally only in the state of liberation. Thereby,

⁸³⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 376)

⁸³⁵ “When all the desires of his heart get uprooted, he becomes immortal here and realises Brahman.” (Ka. Up. 6.14)

⁸³⁶ (H. Apte 97)

⁸³⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 166)

⁸³⁸ “He verily sees all various creation in Paramātmā and the Paramātmā in the various creation. Thus, does not offend or insult. When realising the creation as Paramātmā, there is no experience of delusion or misery.” (Īśa Up. 6,7)

⁸³⁹ (H. Apte 6)

he understands ‘anupaśyati’ as “sakṣātkāra” (“realising”).⁸⁴⁰ Accordingly, these mantras are explained to describe a *jīvana-mukta* who sees Parabrahman in everything and thus does not experience hostility with anyone or grief in any adverse circumstance. The *jīvana-mukta* eternally remains immersed in the bliss of Paramātmān.

The opponents of *jīvana-mukti* offer a well-known counter *Upaniṣadic* statement which insists that freedom from pleasure and pain is not possible till the dissociation with the body, “aśarīraṁ vāva santaṁ na priyāpriye sprśataḥ.”⁸⁴¹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas responds by showing this statement to highlight the distinction between the material body, attachment to which results in pain and pleasure, and the immortal *ātman*.⁸⁴² Thus, he concludes that this statement does not in any way deny the notion of *jīvana-mukti*, but only offers rightful discrimination (*viveka*) between the body and the *ātman*.

Many Vedānta schools deny the notion of *jīvana-mukti*. Vedānta Deśika, for instance, claims that statements that affirm *jīvana-mukti* should not be interpreted literally but only figuratively as a state similar to *mukti*.⁸⁴³ Ramanuja in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sūtra*, “itarasyāpyevamasanśleṣaḥ pāte tu,”⁸⁴⁴ remarks:

Good works which produce results favourable to knowledge and meditation perish only on the death of the body (not during the lifetime of the devotee).⁸⁴⁵

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, undoubtedly, admits the destruction of favourable (*punya*) and unfavourable (*pāpa*) results of actions. He compares favourable results to a pair of golden handcuffs (*suvarṇaśṛṅkhalā*), which though made of valuable material, tie one to this world. However, he asserts that such destruction is possible in one’s lifetime in the state of *jīvana-mukti*. This destruction marks the destruction of the causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*), while the physical body continues. The reason for the continuance of the physical body is attributed to the will of Paramātmān (*paramātmecchāmātrahetunā*).⁸⁴⁶ This explanation eliminates the various oppositions that were faced by Shankaracharya.

⁸⁴⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 379–80)

⁸⁴¹ “When one disassociates with the body nothing good or bad can touch him.” (Ch. Up. 8.12.1)

⁸⁴² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 378)

⁸⁴³ (S. Chari 315)

⁸⁴⁴ “There is no clinging to the other upon the destruction (of the body).” (BS 4.1.13)

⁸⁴⁵ (Thibaut 724)

⁸⁴⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 382)

Shankaracharya advocates *jīvana-mukti*, and therefore also has to address the question of embodiment. He explains the continuity of the body due to the presence of *prārabdha karma*, which are not destroyed after attaining knowledge. This is illustrated through the potter's wheel, which after acquiring momentum, continues to spin and only gradually comes to a standstill.⁸⁴⁷ Moreover, a certain kind of *avidyā* is said to persist due to past impressions, just as one continues to perceive a double moon despite knowing that there is only one moon. Such persistence of *avidyā* is criticised by scholars, such as Vedānta Deśika, as “logically unsound.”⁸⁴⁸ Moreover, the illustration of the potter's wheel is also deemed untenable as the body with the *prārabdha karma* is part of ignorance while the wheel is real and thereby “unreal imaginings are not analogous to real things.”⁸⁴⁹ In Shankaracharya's view of liberation, *karma* seems to have more force over *jñāna*.

The *Sudhā*, on the other hand, notes that the state before *jīvana-mukti* entails two kinds of *karma*, namely, the sum total of all our karmas performed in past lives (*sancita karma*) and the other comprise of the commenced fruits of some these accumulated *karmas* (*prārabdha karma*). Both these *karmas* are destroyed on the attainment of *jīvana-mukti*. The body yet continues to prevail after *mukti* but not due to the force of the *prārabdha karma* since the root of all *karma* is destroyed. The body prevails only due to the will of Paramātmā. The power of Paramātmā greatly outweighs that of *karma*.

Moreover, the aphorism on the basis of which Shankaracharya admits the presence of *prārabdha karma* even upon the attainment of *jñāna* is “*tasya tāvadeva ciraṁ yāvanna vimokṣye'tha sampatsya iti*.”⁸⁵⁰ It describes the reason for the delay in attaining liberation. Shankar understands the concept of release here in “*na vimokṣye*” as a release from the body. He, thus, explains this aphorism as “He lingers so long only as he is not freed from the body; then he becomes free.”⁸⁵¹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, understands “*na vimokṣye*” in terms of ultimate release, encompassing both *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*. The delay in attaining this ultimate release is explained as the influence of *māyā* and the absence of the realisation of *brahmavidyā*.⁸⁵² Once the influence of *māyā* is uprooted through the profound attachment with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and imbibing his teachings, one experiences the

⁸⁴⁷ (Swami Gambhirananda 840)

⁸⁴⁸ (S. M. S. Chari, *Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita: A Study Based on Vedānta Deśika's Śatadūṣaṇi*. 169)

⁸⁴⁹ (Fort 39)

⁸⁵⁰ “His delay is as long as he is not free; then he experiences bliss.” (Ch. Up.6.14.2)

⁸⁵¹ (Swami Gambhirananda 840)

⁸⁵² (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 293)

state of liberation in one's lifetime. Thus, the continuation of the physical body does not delay one's experience of the supreme bliss of Parabrahman.

Further, becoming *jīvana-mukta* does not exempt one from *pravṛtti*. In fact, it is a state in which one can perform ceaseless devotion, as one is no longer disturbed by material aversions. Such devotion is referred to as “sādhya bhakti,” as discussed in the earlier section. Moreover, one becomes a model for others; others can learn and emulate the practices of the *jīvana-mukta*. This practical aspect of guiding others in *jīvana-mukti* is also highlighted in the Advaitin tradition.⁸⁵³ However, it is important to note that the ultimate model for all aspirants in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is the Akṣarabrahman Guru, who is essentially different from the *jīvana-mukta*. The Akṣarabrahman Guru alone has the power to grant liberation to aspirants; the *jīvana-mukta*, thus, can encourage one to associate with the Guru, and the Guru alone can lead one to realisation.

Videha-mukti is a state achieved when one sheds the mortal body, with the will of Paramātmān, and attains his divine abode, Akṣaradhāman. The only difference between *jīvana* and *videha-mukti* is that of place and body; while the former is attained in the material world with the material body, the latter marks the attainment of the Akṣaradhāman and a divine body.⁸⁵⁴ However, the bliss of the Paramātmān is equal in both these forms of liberation. Thus, the locative difference does not lead to any distinction in terms of degree, of one being higher or lower than the other. This is explicitly stated as:

Sthānadehādibhedāddhi muktyoretad dvayorapi |
*Bhede'pi na phale bhedo na nyunā'dhikatā'pi ca ||*⁸⁵⁵

Accordingly, there is no essential difference between *jīvana-mukti* and *videha-mukti*. The former is not a gradual or penultimate form of the latter.

5.6.2. *Videha-Mukti*

On attaining *videha-mukti*, the *ātman* leaves the body through the *suṣumnā nādi* or the *brahma nādi* and travels through the path of *arci* that leads to the final destination,

⁸⁵³ (Fort 41)

⁸⁵⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 384)

⁸⁵⁵ “Difference in the two states of liberation is of location and body. Despite these differences, there is no difference in the result, neither is superior to the other.” (*Kārikā* 442)

Akṣaradhāman. The released *ātman* attains a special divine body that transcends all distinction of gender, name etc. In this divine body, one does not experience hunger or thirst, pleasure, or pain but only engage in the supreme bliss of Paramātmā.⁸⁵⁶ Here, the *Sudhā* seems to be alluding to the descriptions of other abodes that mention the released as roaming in beautiful gardens etc. For instance, Vaikuṇṭha is described as:

There are streams of living waters, trees laden with delicious fruits, gentle breezes and golden sunshine to cheer them [redeemed *ātmā*]. Amid these delights they sing and feast, listen to the music of heavenly choirs, and enjoy at times philosophic converse with one another.⁸⁵⁷

Radhakrishnan claims such an abode as unsatisfactory to the mystic self who yearns for becoming one with the supreme reality. Though the *Sudhā* maintains the individuality of the *ātman*, it emphasises on the concentrated *darśana* of Paramātmā that would satisfy the devout *ātman*. The *ātman* neither aspires to roam around nor change its form to be an object like a flower and the like, adorned by Paramātmā.⁸⁵⁸ The released *ātman* remains solely engrossed in the bliss of Paramātmā's divine human-shaped form.

The presence of a place of destination implies a specific route leading to that destination. This route that leads to Akṣaradhāman is known as the “arcirādi mārg” as it begins with the realm of light. The route is outlined in the *Upaniṣads*, such as *Chāndogya* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, as encompassing the realm of light (*arci*), day (*ahas*), the bright fortnight (*śuklapakṣa*), the six months when the Sun travels northward (*uttarāyaṇa*), year (*samvatsara*), sun (*āditya*), moon (*candra*) and lightening (*vidyut*). The *Sudhā* conforms to the order asserted in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. The presiding deities of these realms are referred to as the “ātivāhika” or guides that lead the released *ātman*. However, the *Sudhā* submits Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as the “pramukha ātivāhika” or the chief guides till the final destination, Akṣaradhāman. This is established through the aphorism of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* that narrates the divine path and states “tatpuruṣo'mānavaḥ sa enān brahma gamayati.”⁸⁵⁹ The term ‘sa’ (he) is often interpreted as the presiding deity of the realm of lighting:

⁸⁵⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 383–84)

⁸⁵⁷ (Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 711)

⁸⁵⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 385)

⁸⁵⁹ “The puruṣa, not of material form, he guides them to Brahmaloḥa.” (Ch. Up. 4.15.5-6)

The presiding deity of the *vidyut* or lightening is known as *amānava* or divine person who in the final stage leads the soul to *brahmaloka* (*sa enān brahma gamayati*).⁸⁶⁰

Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies the term ‘sa’ as Parabrahman, possessing a divine body and thus is “amānava” (“not a material human body”). The *Sudhā* also quotes *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, “sa etena prajñenātmanā’smālokād utkrāmya amuṣmin svarge loke sarvān kāmān āptvā amṛtaḥ samabhavatsamabhavat.”⁸⁶¹ Here, the term ‘prajñenātmanā’ is explained as a reference to Akṣarabrahman. *Aitareya Upaniṣad* comprises one of the four *mahāvākyas* of Shankaracharya, “prajñānam brahma.”⁸⁶² Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains the term ‘prajñānam’ as “exceptional knowledge” (“*prakṛṣṭam jñānam*”). He notes that knowledge is an essential form of all *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*. Exceptional knowledge is thereby attributed to Akṣarabrahman, who is superior to all these sentient beings.⁸⁶³ In this vein, ‘prajñenātmanā’ is also understood as ‘Akṣarabrahman’ with whom the released *ātman* moves upward to Akṣaradhāman and experiences various divine virtues. Moreover, an alternative explanation is also offered where ‘prajñenātmanā’ is broken down as Akṣarabrahman (*prajñā*) and Parabrahman (*ātmā*). Hence, both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman guide the released *ātman*.

In his *Brahma-Sūtra* commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains ‘sa’ of Ch. Up. 4.15.6 to implicitly include the presiding deities of the various realms like Arci, Ahas and so on.⁸⁶⁴ They are understood as forming entourage of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and thereby have an implied recognition. The movement of these deities is limited—from the end of the former realm to the end of its own realm. Thus, only Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman guide the released *ātman* till the final destination, Akṣaradhāman. The *Sudhā* further specifies that this divine route, also referred to as “devapatha” and “brahmapatha,” encompassing these various realms is revealed by Parabrahman himself. Parabrahman, as per his own will, may guide the released *ātman* through each of these realms or may guide the *ātman* directly to

⁸⁶⁰ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 300)

⁸⁶¹ “He through the wise *ātman* comes out of this world and reached the heavenly abode, all desires are fulfilled and attains immortality.” (Ai. Up. 3.4)

⁸⁶² “Wisdom is Brahman.” (Ai. Up. 3.3)

⁸⁶³ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 442)

⁸⁶⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Brahmasūtrasvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 410)

Akṣaradhāman.⁸⁶⁵ The will of Parabrahman is, therefore, not bound by the order of these realms.

The *ātman* that traverses the *arcirādi* path never returns to the material world as it effectively traverses the cycles of birth and death.⁸⁶⁶ This marks this path as the most superior and thus navigable only for those who have attained *brahmabhāva*. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is cited, “tadya ittham viduḥ ye ceme'raṇye śraddhā tapa ityupāsate te'rciṣamabhisambhavanti yarciṣo'harahna.”⁸⁶⁷ Here, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands the term ‘viduḥ’ as knowing and associating with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Only those aspirants who associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and attain *brahmabhāva* travel on the path of light. The term ‘araṇye’ is not identified in the literal sense as a forest but as a place like a forest where one can engage in contemplation without any distractions.⁸⁶⁸ Such an explanation does not limit the path of light only to renunciants but to anyone, irrespective of class or occupation, who associates with the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The following verse of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is about the path of smoke, “atha ya ime grāma iṣṭāpūrte dattamityupāsate te dhūmamabhisambhavanti.”⁸⁶⁹ Those who are otherwise philanthropic but lack the spiritual inclination and are bereft of the knowledge of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman earn an inferior path known as “dhūma mārg” or the dark path that leads one to *pitṛloka* or *svargaloka*. Here again, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands the term ‘grāma’ not literally as the village but as “a lack of knowledge as Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.”⁸⁷⁰ Such *ātmā* return to earth and are born in a body that is determined by their past actions.

Further, those who have engaged in bad deeds in their lifetime attain the lowest path, known as “sanyamāna mārg,” which leads one to *Yamaloka*. This way, Paramātmā grants the respective path to the *ātman* in accordance with their past deeds.

⁸⁶⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 396–97)

⁸⁶⁶ The released *ātman* may, if Parabrahman so wills, return on earth to fulfil certain tasks. However, even upon return the released *ātman* remains in the liberated state.

⁸⁶⁷ “Those who know this, through which in the forest practice austerities go on the path of light.” (Ch. Up. 5.10.1)

⁸⁶⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 220)

⁸⁶⁹ “Those who in villages practice public services like charity go to the path of smoke.” (Ch. Up. 5.10.3)

⁸⁷⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 395)

5.6.3. Nature and Form of Released *Ātman*

The released *ātman* attains a divine body known as the “brāhmī-tanu,” a body made of Brahman. The *ātman* essentially retains its essential ontological nature of being *jīva* or *īśvara* but acquires a body that is made of Brahman. This body possesses a divine human-shaped form. The ontological distinction between the released *ātman*, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman eternally remains. The attainment of a new body is expressed through the *Upaniṣadic* analogy of the goldsmith⁸⁷¹— just as the goldsmith moulds gold into different forms, Paramātmā grants the *ātman* different bodies. It then offers a list of forms that Paramātmā grants, which ends with the term ‘brāhmam.’ Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not explain this term as Brahmā or *Hiraṇyagarbha*, but as the body attained by the released *ātmā* for experiencing the supreme bliss in Akṣaradhāman,⁸⁷² that is, the body of Brahman.

This body of the released *ātman* is also discussed in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. In the aphorism, “evamevaiṣa samprasādo'smāccharīrātsamutthāya param jyotirupasampadya svena rūpeṇābhiniṣpadyate,”⁸⁷³ the released *ātman*, referred to with the term ‘samprasadaḥ,’ on shedding the mortal body travels through the path of light and attains Paramātmā *through its own form (svena rupeṇa)*. Other commentators, such as Ramanuja, also interpret this aphorism in terms of *videha-mukti*, but there are significant differences. While analysing this aphorism, Chari notes:

For Ramanuja, the individual soul, whose nature was eclipsed due to karma or the deeds of the past lives, reveals itself in its true nature with all the inherent qualities such as *apahata-pāpamatva* etc. in the state of *mukti*.⁸⁷⁴

This implies that though Ramanuja understands the term ‘samprasadaḥ’ as the *jīvātman*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands it as the “muktātman,”⁸⁷⁵ that is, *jīvātman* or *īśvarātman* who is serene on having acquired the virtues of Akṣarabrahman. Further, Ramanuja interprets ‘svena rupeṇa’ in terms of “true nature,” while Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains it in terms of a physical form, the divine body of Brahman, as the qualities of the *ātman* are already entailed in the term ‘samprasadaḥ.’

⁸⁷¹ (Br. Up. 4.4.4)

⁸⁷² (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopīṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 268)

⁸⁷³ “In this way, the serene being comes out of the body and attains light (the divine Paramātmā) in his own form.” (Ch. Up. 8.12.2)

⁸⁷⁴ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 94)

⁸⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 386)

The *Sudhā*, further, emphasises that unlike the bound *ātman* in the mortal body, the released *ātman* in the *brāhmī-tanu* is not dependent or limited by it for acquiring knowledge (*indriyanirpekṣamiti tu tattvam*).⁸⁷⁶ By the will of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, the released *ātman* is omniscient and knows the past, present and future at all times without being dependent upon any sense-organ. The liberated *ātman*'s omniscience is asserted in the *Upaniṣadic* revelation: “vedayate yastu somya sa sarvajñaḥ sarvo bhavati.”⁸⁷⁷ Here, Sadhu Bhadreshdas indicates ‘sa’ as the released *ātman*, who becomes “sarvajña” or omniscient and “sarvo bhavati” or fulfils all its desires. The *ātman* is stated to acquire this state through “vedayate,” which literally means *one who knows*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains ‘vedayate’ as not simply knowing but as realisation attained through the association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru.⁸⁷⁸ Thus, the released *ātman*, through the grace of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, comes to know all effortlessly. Elsewhere in the *Sudhā*, in the chapter “Pramāṇadhārā,” the released *ātman* along with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, is described as transcending the limitations of *pramāṇa*.⁸⁷⁹ The senses only extend to objects within their reach. However, the released *ātman* is all-knowing and thereby acquires knowledge of objects beyond the senses.

Apart from being omniscient, the released *ātman* realises various divine virtues that are enumerated in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.7.1 as free from the aversions of *māyā* (*apatahapāpma*), beyond old age (*viḥara*), beyond the cycle of birth and death (*vimṛtyu*), ever devoid of pain (*viṣoka*), beyond hunger (*vijighatsa*), without thirst (*apipāsa*), with the ability to spontaneously manifest all desires (*satyakāma*) and will (*satyasamkalpa*). These virtues are also attributed to Akṣarabrahman in 8.1.5 of the same *Upaniṣad*. These virtues thus are realised by the released *ātman* on attaining liberation. Shankar and Madhva, in both these sections of the *Upaniṣad*, attribute the virtues to Brahman. While Ramanuja, like Sadhu Bhadreshdas, admits 8.7.1 as showcasing the attributes of the released *ātman*. However, there are certain palpable differences. Firstly, Ramanuja affirms all these eight virtues to be inherent to the individual *ātman*:

⁸⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 402)

⁸⁷⁷ “Who knows that, O Somya, is all-knowing and becomes fulfilled.” (Pr. Up. 4.10)

⁸⁷⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 212)

⁸⁷⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 146)

When therefore at the moment of Release those essential qualities assert themselves, the case is of manifestation, not one of origination.⁸⁸⁰

Thus, all these qualities, which were latently present in the individual *ātman*, manifest in the state of liberation. The *Sudhā*, however, differs by specifying that the first six qualities are no doubt essentially part of the *jīva* at all times; the last two qualities, *satyakāma* and *satyasamkalpa*, are acquired only with the attainment of liberation.⁸⁸¹ Thus, while the first six qualities manifest, the latter two originate.

The second aspect of difference concerns the force behind the manifestation (and origination) of the qualities. Ramanuja ascribes it to the disassociation with karma:

Intelligence, therefore, bliss and other essential qualities of the soul which were obscured and contracted by Karman, expand and thus manifest themselves when the bondage due to Karman passes away and the soul approaches the highest light.⁸⁸²

The *Sudhā*, on the other hand, ascribes it to the association with the manifest form of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The Akṣarabrahman Guru, in whom these qualities are ever manifest, inspires those qualities in the individual *ātman* and enables the origination of *satyakāma* and *satyasamkalpa*.⁸⁸³ Moreover, unlike the released *ātman* of Ramanuja, these qualities manifest and originate before shedding the material body in the state of *jīvana-mukti*.

Interestingly, the *Sudhā*, while elucidating the quality of *satyasamkalpa*, proclaims it to be only a “sāmarthyamātrasūcana,”⁸⁸⁴ only an indication of power. Though the released *ātman* gains these extraordinary qualities that would instantly fulfil any wish, it never feels the need to utilise such qualities. For the bliss that one would experience on the fulfilment of any wish is much inferior to the bliss of Parabrahman. Thus, despite having acquired divine virtues, the released *ātman* remains immersed solely in the ocean of Parabrahman’s infinite bliss.

⁸⁸⁰ (Thibaut 758)

⁸⁸¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 401)

⁸⁸² (Thibaut 758)

⁸⁸³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 407)

⁸⁸⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 408)

The released *ātman* engages only in devout worship which is established through certain *Upaniṣadic* references, such as “yadvai tanna paśyati paśyanvai tanna paśyati.”⁸⁸⁵ The released *ātman* does not perceive (*na paśyati*) anything apart from Paramātmā (*paśyan*). The following statements (Br. Up. 4.3.24-31) describe the released *ātman* as one that does not smell, hear, touch etc., anything apart from Paramātmā. It is worth noting that while Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands these statements in terms of the released *ātman*, other commentators like Shankar and even Ramanuja explain it in terms of the *ātman* in the state of deep sleep.⁸⁸⁶ Sadhu Bhadreshdas’ explanation, however, seems to fit the trajectory of the *Upaniṣad* as 4.3.32 goes on to discuss *Brahmaloka*, the ultimate residence of the released *ātman*.

Despite being empowered with various divine virtues, the released *ātman* cannot be proclaimed as the cause or controller of the universe. However, the cosmic process of creation does include the released *ātman* as *mūla-puruṣa* who, along with *mūla-prakṛti*, enables the unfolding of various elements of the universe.⁸⁸⁷ The *Sudhā* compares such involvement of the released *ātman* with the minister of a kingdom who has been given certain duties on the will of the sovereign king.⁸⁸⁸ Thus, the released *ātman*, like the minister, is ever subordinate to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and never becomes an independent cause and controller of the universe. So, when the *Upaniṣads* describe the released *ātman* as “svarāt” (self-ruler)⁸⁸⁹, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains it as “not being governed by māyā” (*māyābandhanarahita*)⁸⁹⁰, but never beyond the governance of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Though the released *ātman* realises the divine virtues of Akṣarabrahman, it does not share all the qualities that eternally encompass Akṣarabrahman. On attaining *brahmabhāva*, the released *ātman* is stated to share the same blissful experience of Parabrahman as Akṣarabrahman. The *Sudhā* cites *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, “so’āsnute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaściteti.”⁸⁹¹ The released *ātman* (*sa*) in the divine abode attains the bliss of

⁸⁸⁵ “It does not see in that, while seeing that not seeing anything else.” (Br. Up. 4.3.23)

⁸⁸⁶ (Swami Madhavananda 673; Thibaut 384)

⁸⁸⁷ (See Chapter 3 section on Process of Cosmic Creation)

⁸⁸⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 411)

⁸⁸⁹ (Ch. Up. 7.24.2)

⁸⁹⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Chāndogyaopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 337)

⁸⁹¹ “He perceives the divine Paramātmā and experiences the bliss with brahman.” (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

Paramātman with Akṣarabrahman (*brahmaṇā saha*).⁸⁹² Accordingly, qualities that enable one to experience the bliss of Parabrahman and worship him devoutly are realised, but other qualities such as being the cause of the universe, beholding the Supreme Being as the divine abode, granting liberation to aspirants, remain exclusive to Akṣarabrahman. Such exclusiveness is affirmed by *Brahma-Sūtra* “bhogamātrasāmyalingācca.”⁸⁹³ Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that the *sūtra* asserts the similarity in the form of the bliss of Parabrahman as the sole (*mātra*) common ground between the released *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman, and then by ending with the letter ‘ca,’ the *sūtrakāra* implies qualities that are particular only to Akṣarabrahman and thus not shared with the released *ātman*. Hence, despite attaining qualitative oneness with Akṣarabrahman, the released *ātman* ever remains subordinate to both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

5.6.4. Absence of Metaphysical Mergence

Mukti in the Advaita tradition is described as absolutely merging with the singular ontological reality, Brahman. One of the most well-known illustrations offered to explain the same is of the drop merging with water or the rivers merging with the ocean. These illustrations are affirmed through the interpretation of the *Upaniṣads*, such as that of the *Praśna* and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads* which explain the rivers losing their name and form on disappearing into the ocean (*astam gacchanti*). The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, rejecting this understanding of a metaphysical mergence of the *ātman* with Parabrahman, offers a different understanding of the illustration.

The *Praśna Upaniṣad*, in 6.4, states the sixteen elements (*ṣoḍaśakalā*) that belong to the individual *ātman* with the will Paramātman. Accordingly, the analogy of the river merging into the ocean in 6.5 is compared to the individual *ātman* whose individuality in terms of its respective sixteen elements is eclipsed (*abhibhāva*) due to the profound splendour of Parabrahman.⁸⁹⁴ Moreover, the *ātman* is referred to as the “puruṣa” as its individuality is not lost but only overshadowed.

A similar explanation is offered of the same analogy stated in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.8. Here too, the released *ātman* is affirmed to discard its material name and form and attain the

⁸⁹² (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 363)

⁸⁹³ “And upon the indication of the equality of only enjoyment.” (BS 4.4.21)

⁸⁹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 403)

Supreme, just as the rivers attain oneness with the ocean.⁸⁹⁵ While interpreting this statement, Ramanuja highlights the oneness with the Supreme as:

There is no identity (*tādātmya*) between the rivers and sea water, but there is only disappearance of the distinguishing features (*bhedakākāra*). In the same way the individual selves do not become identical with Brahman but on the other hand, they attain equality in respect of their nature.⁸⁹⁶

Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not accept any such equality with the nature of Parabrahman. Instead, he understands mergence as being completely immersed in the devotional ocean of Parabrahman's infinite bliss. Thus, merging or disappearing (*astam gacchati*) is understood in terms of constant mental connection. Sadhu Bhadreshdas concludes by offering a supplementary example that would enable a clear understanding of the words 'astam gacchati.' These words, he suggests, should be read along the lines of the Sun setting in the West—the Sun's disappearance into the West does not mean that it no longer exists or has lost its individuality. If it were so, the Sun would not rise again every morning.⁸⁹⁷ In this way, though the *Upaniṣads* assert mergence with the Supreme, it is not a metaphysical mergence but a mental state and an affirmation of the supreme greatness of Parabrahman before whom everything loses significance. More so, the released *ātman*, even in its individuality, never attains equality with Parabrahman in any manner but continues to worship him with deep humility. Stressing on such subordination and essential distinction between the released *ātman* and Parabrahman, the *Sudhā* submits:

Paramopāsanam mokṣe muktasya vartate sadā |
Mokṣe sādhanamātram na mokṣarūpamupāsanam||⁸⁹⁸

The worship of Parabrahman is explained not only as a spiritual endeavour but as the essential form or *sarūpa* of *mukti*. The state of *mukti* is nothing but worship of Parabrahman in this lifetime and then in the divine abode Akṣaradhāman.

⁸⁹⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 404)

⁸⁹⁶ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 127)

⁸⁹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 404)

⁸⁹⁸ "The released *ātman* ever remains engaged in the upāsanā of Parabrahman in the state of liberation. Upāsanā is not only a medium but also the very form of liberation." (*Kārikā* 453)

5.7. Summary

All *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* are entitled to attain the ultimate goal of liberation through the practice of the spiritual endeavour. The only way to reach this highest goal is to earn the divine approval of the eternally pure Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Thus, any effort undertaken towards liberation must be directed towards earning such divine approval. In fact, the effort becomes a spiritual endeavour only when it aims to earn divine approval.

Such divine approval can be earned through the attainment of *brahmabhāva*. Thereby, *brahmabhāva* is deemed the great endeavour or the *sādhana-guru* and is an aggregate of various spiritual endeavours. *Brahmabhāva* means acquiring qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such oneness is asserted in various *Upaniṣadic* aphorisms of grammatical congruence, such as "brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati," "aham brahmāsmi," and "āyamātmā brahman." The term 'brahman' in all these aphorisms is identified as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The grammatical congruence is to be understood as attributive similarity, like in the case of "simho mānavakaḥ" or the lion-child.

Brahmabhāva or qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru can be cultivated through the profound attachment in thought, virtuous actions and engaging in selfless devotion of Parabrahman. Such profound attachment is maintained through constant contemplation on the form and auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

For acquiring the auspicious qualities of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, one must identify one's *ātman* with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such identification enables one to perceive every action of the Akṣarabrahman as pure and divine and reflect on one's material vices and faults. One must develop intense adoration with the Akṣarabrahman Guru, making one's thoughts always centred on his form and actions. Intense adoration and imbibing the teachings of the Akṣarabrahman eventually leads one to acquire his auspicious virtues and realise *brahmabhāva*. Furthermore, in this state of *brahmabhāva*, one must worship Parabrahman with deep humility.

Thus, the realisation of *brahmabhāva* is not simply a discovery of one's latent qualities but is also characterised by the attainment of the auspicious virtues of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This attainment earns the divine approval of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, ultimately leading one to the goal of liberation.

An essential endeavour that encompasses *brahmabhāva* and leads to its realisation is *Ekāntika Dharma*. *Ekāntika Dharma* is the four-fold system entailing four independent components, namely, *dharma* (observance of injunctions), *jñāna* (self-knowledge), *vairāgya* (detachment) and *bhakti* (devotion accompanied with the understanding of God's greatness). However, amongst these, *bhakti* is the fundamental component. The remaining three components, *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya*, should be observed to support or supplement the practice of *bhakti*.

Dharma is observing the divine commands or ordinances of Parabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru. It also includes performing various codes of conduct as per the *varnāśramadharma* and the *sāmānyadharma*. These moral codes do not restrict one from cultivating noble and auspicious virtues necessary for progressing on the path of liberation. These virtues can be cultivated through association with Akṣarabrahman Guru and living according to his divine commands. *Dharma* must be observed along with the practice of *bhakti*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya* for the realisation of *brahmabhāva*.

Jñāna in the context of *Ekāntika Dharma* is the *ātmaniṣṭhā*, that is, knowledge of the *ātman*, cultivating the virtues of the Akṣarabrahman and focusing on Parabrahman. In other words, it is the knowledge of the *ātman* along with the focus on Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. It is not merely an intellectual process but requires constant association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Upon such association, one must contemplate on his auspicious virtues and identify one's *ātman* with Akṣarabrahman (*akṣaram aham*). Such a process ultimately leads one to have the experience of Parabrahman.

Vairāgya is detachment from all material objects and desires while cultivating attachment with only Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This attachment with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman must be cultivated by knowing the true form and nature of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Further, *vairāgya* can fulfil one's goal of divine approval when supplemented with the performance of righteous actions and *bhakti*. Thus, *vairāgya* does not mean inaction or adopting a path of solitariness.

Bhakti is the profound love for Parabrahman upon the realisation of the *brahmabhāva*. Such love or worship is accompanied by the knowledge of Parabrahman's greatness. Parabrahman's greatness is essential to *bhakti* as, without it, one cannot develop and maintain a profound love for Parabrahman. The knowledge of Parabrahman's greatness is explained

through “upāsana,” which primarily is meditating on the form of Parabrahman as the supreme God-head, the all-doer, who eternally possesses a divine human-shaped form and remains present on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, the *upāsyadeva* of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana is Parabrahman Swaminarayan.

Taking firm refuge (*āśraya*) of Parabrahman Swaminarayan as the sole bestower of liberation and engaging in various devotional activities are also forms of *bhakti*. All these forms of *bhakti* should be directed towards the Akṣarabrahman Guru, who alone ever upholds Parabrahman in entirety. Such “pratyakṣa bhakti” alone can lead one towards liberation.

Some other forms of *bhakti* should be practised for reinforcing one’s profound love for Parabrahman. These forms not only include enthusiasm (*utsāha*), patience (*dhairya*), habitual recollection (*abhyāsa*), faith (*viśvāsa*) for strengthening one’s relationship with the Akṣarabrahman Guru, but also affection (*suhṛdayabhāva*) and sense of unity (*ekya*) for strengthening one’s relationship with fellow devotees. Further, one must daily engage in worship of Parabrahman through devotional practices like *pūjā*, *ārti*, scriptural reading, *mānasī-pūjā* and various spiritual thought schemes to direct one’s thoughts on Parabrahman.

Thus, such *bhakti* supplemented with *dharma*, *jñāna* and *vairāgya* is to be practised not only as a spiritual endeavour but also after one realises *brahmabhāva*. *Bhakti* towards Parabrahman is a medium (*sādhana*) as well as the final attainment (*sādhya*) in the form of liberation.

Mukti or liberation, in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, is thereby defined as worshipping Parabrahman with deep humility upon realising qualitative oneness with the Akṣarabrahman Guru. This state of *mukti* can be attained in one’s lifetime (*jīvana-mukti*) and after shedding one’s mortal body (*videha-mukti*). In both these states, the released *ātman* remains eternally immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman.

In the state of *jīvana-mukti*, while one’s desires in the form of the causal body get destroyed, the material body continues till death as per the will of Parabrahman. Upon death, the *ātman* moves out from the *suṣumnā nādi* and embarks upon the *arci mārḡ* towards Akṣaradhāman. The released *ātman* is guided upon this path by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

The released *ātman* upon death attains a divine body made of Brahman known as the “brāhmī-tanu.” It joins the countless other released *ātman* in Akṣaradhāman and eternally enjoys the bliss and service of Parabrahman.

In the state of *mukti*, the *ātman* attains the qualities of omniscience, spontaneous manifestation of desire and will. However, the *ātman* does not desire or will anything apart from the bliss of Parabrahman.

Despite attaining liberation, the *ātman* remains essentially distinct and subordinate to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Though the *ātman* acquires certain auspicious virtues of Akṣarabrahman, various other functions, such as that of creation and granting liberation, remain exclusive to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

	Nature	<i>Upaniṣadic References</i>
<i>Sādhana</i>	Grace	"yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhya" (Ka. Up. 2.23) (Mu. Up. 3.2.3)
	Realising <i>brahmabhāva</i>	"brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati" (Mu. Up. 3.2.9) "aham brahmāsmi" (Br. Up. 1.4.10)
	Association with Akṣarabrahman Guru as an endeavour for <i>brahmavidyā</i>	"adhyātmayoga" (Ka. Up. 2.12), "dhyāyathā'tmānam" (Mu. Up.2.2.6) -
	Constant contemplation on the Akṣarabrahman Guru	"praṇavo dhanuḥ śaro hyātmā brahma tallakṣyamucyate" (Mu. Up. 2.2.4)
	Worship of Akṣarabrahman Guru in the same manner as	"yasya deve parā bhaktiryathādeva tathā gurao"

	Parabrahman	(Sve. Up. 6.23)
	Worship of Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman bears same result	"tasmād vidvān etenaivāyatanen aikātaramanveti" (Pr. Up. 5.2)
<i>Mukti</i>	Bondage is real	"hiraṇmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitam mukham"(Īśa Up. 15)
	<i>Jīvana-mukti</i>	"yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye'sya hr̥di śritāḥ atha martyo'mṛto bhavatyatra brahma samaśnute" (Ka. Up. 2.3.14)
	Parabrahman as guide to Akṣaradhāman	"tatpuruṣo'mānavaḥ sa enān brahma gamayati" (Ch. Up. 4.15.5-6)
	Akṣarabrahman as guide to Akṣaradhāman	"sa etena prajñenātmanā'smāllokād utkrāmya amuṣmin svarge loka sarvān kāmān āptvā amṛtaḥ samabhavatsamabhavat" (Ai. Up. 3.4)
	Omniscience of released <i>ātman</i>	"sa sarvajñaḥ sarvo bhavati" (Pr. Up. 4.10)
	Enjoying Parabrahman's bliss like Akṣarabrahman	"so'aśnute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaściteti" (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

Table 5.7-1 *Sādhana* and *Mukti*: *Upaniṣadic* References