

**IDENTIFYING AND LOCATING HINDU THEOLOGY
IN THE SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA VEDĀNTA TRADITION**

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**Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies &
Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda**

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Originally
HINDU THEOLOGY:
A STUDY OF THE FIVE METAPHYSICAL ENTITIES
IN THE SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA VEDĀNTA TRADITION

by
Sadhu Paramtattvadas

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

The work was conducted under the guidance of Professor Gavin Flood at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, a recognised centre of the University of Oxford and an affiliate of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

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In my capacity as academic supervisor of the candidate's thesis, I certify that the above statements are true to the best of my knowledge.

Prof. Gavin Flood, Oxford

Dr Nitin Vyas, Baroda

ABSTRACT

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In his chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Francis X. Clooney, SJ of Harvard Divinity School presents his case for “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’ as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse”¹. Over the course of his reasoning, Clooney presents several ‘clues’ to determine whether or not a Hindu system could be regarded as ‘theological’. These clues include certain themes, modes of reasoning, styles, audience expectations, and judgements to be made by theologians. He concludes with a call to action, for those “who are willing to identify themselves as both ‘Hindus’ and ‘theologians’” to “test” his ideas.

This thesis is a direct response to this calling, to apply Clooney’s “clues” to the specific case of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and ascertain, in particular, its position as a theological system, and thus affirm the possibility and validity of “Hindu theology” in general.

Framed another way, our inquiry can be distilled to one clear-cut question – simple, powerful, and perhaps a little provocative: **What is Hindu theology?** This thesis is an attempt to answer this question analogously, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

¹ Edited by Gavin Flood, (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2003), pp. 447-77

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Framed another way, our inquiry can be distilled to one clear-cut question: **What is Hindu theology?** This thesis is an attempt to answer this question analogously, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

I rely upon two sets of textual sources for this project. The primary sources from the Svāminārāyaṇa corpus primarily include the Vacanāmṛt and the Svāmīnī Vāto, both of which are in Gujarati. These will be closely substantiated with the three Sanskrit texts which comprise the Prasthānatrayī – the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-Gītā – and their respective commentaries, as well as other treatises from the rich commentarial tradition of the Vedānta system. I also draw upon existing scholarship from within and on the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition (mainly found in Gujarati, with some works in Hindi and English), with other secondary sources including writings in English from the academic discipline of theology in general.

The thesis is sectioned into four broad parts, each being divided more finely into discrete chapters and sub-chapters.

² Edited by Gavin Flood, (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2003), pp. 447-77.

This first, introductory part serves to explain the rationale and scheme of the thesis, including a detailed summary of Clooney's chapter and how it functions as the springboard for the exposition ahead and discussion thereafter.

Importantly, this thesis is as much about *doing* Hindu theology as it is about discussing or defining it. But before embarking upon any theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa theology will need to be delineated. This is covered in Part 2.

With theology so rooted in revelation – indeed, it is what distinguishes it from philosophy and perhaps all other intellectual disciplines – the crux of this section will deal with the revelatory sources of theology within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. It will begin with an understanding of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and how this relates to Parabrahman, the Guru, the soul, and 'Scripture', by which I refer to the Vacanāmṛut and Svāmīnī Vāto, the principal theological texts of the tradition. I shall examine their determinant features as revelatory sources, including, importantly, how they must be read and interpreted. Additionally, I hope to touch upon the position and role of other tools of theology – reason, tradition, and praxis – especially in relation to the primacy of Scripture.

With tools in hand, the discussion will then be able to proceed to the heart of the thesis in the form of Part 3. After introducing the five eternal metaphysical entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta – Parabrahman, (Akṣara)Brahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – each entity will be systematically expounded within its own chapter. This exposition will include, wherever relevant, the nature of each entity, its relationship with other entities, and important clarifications and related discussions – all along, keeping in mind (but not being bound by) Clooney's clues to Hindu theology.

In a discipline where deviation from sacred revelation renders any theologising unauthentic, all doctrines must conform to a valid interpretation of the canonical texts. Hence, it is both natural and necessary that this section be firmly grounded in the Vacanāmṛut and the Svāmīnī Vāto as well as the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā with their respective commentaries. But while being a deep textual study, it shall operate at multiple levels, freely oscillating between philology, exegesis, and theology.

At a relevant juncture, I also engage with other Vedantic schools – Śāṅkara's Kevalādvaita, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madhva's Dvaita, Nimbārka's Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda and Vallabha's Śuddhādvaita – though, to be clear, this project is neither intended to be polemical in style nor apologetic in genre.

Finally, in Part 4, I revert to the clues Clooney indicated in his chapter and relate them to the theological discussions from Parts 2 and 3. This will provide a measure of the relative success of this endeavour in testing his ideas. I then expand upon this test by engaging with a broader, more 'Christian' definition of

theology set by St Anselm of Canterbury, and read it alongside a Hindu verse from the Bhagavad-Gītā, seeing how it is demonstrated by the example of Arjuna, thereby suggesting a *Hindu* formulation of Hindu theology (and maybe even of theology).

But why or how is all this significant and to whom? This I will address in relation to practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa community, scholars within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, scholars studying the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and community from other disciplines (both from within and outside of the Svāminārāyaṇa community), theologians (both Hindu and non-Hindu) of other Hindu traditions, and theologians of other religious faiths.

Since this thesis is envisioned as creating an entry-point for further theological reflection and critical analysis, both within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and beyond, the final portion of this Part will consider possible ways forward, or as Clooney puts it, to “chart the course of the future of Hindu theology.”³ A part of that future course will expectedly trace secular concerns and concerns of modernity – such as science, law, politics, art, etc. – where theology meets, intersects, collides and coalesces with other fields of study and interest. The hope would be that (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theologians and theologians interested in (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theology will be better placed to embark upon this journey – or journeys, rather – now that this vital theology of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition is in place. Characteristically, Clooney rests this responsibility squarely on the “intellectuals writing today who are willing to be called ‘Hindu theologians’”.⁴

Of course, one need not be humble to acknowledge here that there have already been great works of theological significance based on Hindu thought, though admittedly, virtually all have been produced by Western, non-Hindu theologians. Furthermore, new and credible, albeit only a few, Hindu scholars are beginning to engage in the theology of their own traditions. So what makes this a unique project is not that it is about Hindu theology or by a Hindu theologian, but that 1) it is self-consciously dealing with theology in a Hindu context *qua* ‘Hindu theology’; and 2) it is aiming to systematically affirm ‘Hindu theology’ as a category in Indian intellectual discourse by theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition, for which no such comprehensive theological study exists.

To summarise, this thesis is an attempt by a practitioner-theologian to explain the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition in theological terms according to recognised scholarly standards and conventions. This will provide an entry-point into a wider theological study of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, and also, hopefully, access to more nuanced understandings of the tradition for scholars of religion,

³ Clooney, “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

⁴ *ibid.*

South Asian studies, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines. More broadly, the thesis aims not just at describing or justifying Hindu theology; it involves constructively and systematically *doing* theology as well. It is a serious attempt to engage with Western theology from a Hindu standpoint using a Hindu example and working from within that tradition. This will inevitably take Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders; the fact that this is in English and uses terms previously reserved solely for Christian theology makes it immediately comparative and relevant. Yet it will also be an opportunity to compare ancient Hindu theology with contemporary Western understandings of theology – how and where they overlap and differ, and how this can enrich both – opening up, as Clooney too hopes, “more fruitful ways of understanding traditional Hindu thinking, and stimulate an exchange of ideas between India... and the contemporary scholarly world.”⁵

⁵ Clooney, “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.

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Ancient authors began their works with benedictory verses invoking God, gurus and sages. Less eloquently, but no less sincerely, I wish to follow in this auspicious tradition by beginning with a heartfelt expression of my gratitude to those who have helped me in this work.

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My first chapter will make clear my indebtedness to Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, Harvard Divinity School; and Director, Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School), for writing the chapter from which this thesis is launched. Beyond that, his warm support of this project when I first presented it to him and

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Leftow, and Mark Chapman, under whom I studied for my Master of Studies in the Study of Religion and for a subsequent year of pre-doctoral studies. Prior to this, my tutors and mentors at Śrī-Yajñapurūṣa-Sanskṛta-Vidyālaya in Sarangpur, India provided the essential and substantial grounding in Nyāya, Vyākaraṇa, Vedānta and Sanskrit Literature without which this further study would simply not have been possible. I therefore wish to offer my special thanks to Sadhu Bhadreshdas, Sadhu Bhaktisagardas, Sadhu Aksharcharandas and Sadhu Brahmadarshandas, as well my former classmates with whom I spent over twelve happy years of learning there, and in particular Sadhu Atmatruptdas for his patient listening and insightful thoughts when I shared my ideas for this thesis with him over the phone and in person.

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Yad atra sauṣṭavaṃ kiñcit tad guroreva me na hi |
Yad atrāsauṣṭavaṃ kiñcit tan mamaiva gurorna hi ||

Whatever is good in this work is attributable only to my teachers,
not me.
Whatever is bad in this work is attributable only to me, not my
teachers.

STYLE GUIDE

Referencing

For referencing and other standard academic conventions, I have mostly followed the UK's *Modern Humanities Research Association Style Guide*, version 2.3, as advised by the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford. However, I have not italicised Sanskrit and Gujarati words or titles of primary sources (i.e. those abbreviated below); the sheer number of their occurrence would have made for cumbersome reading.

Quotations from primary sources, of whatever length, have been indented and formatted with single spacing to highlight their primacy. Excerpts from secondary sources are incorporated into the running text within quotation marks.

Translations

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Sanskrit, Gujarati and Hindi works are my own. For the *Vacanāmrut*, I used the latest Gujarati edition, published in 2010 with extensive footnotes and appendices (696 pages), but also consulted the revised English version, for which I was a part of the team of translators and a member of the editorial committee. Where I have deviated from this translation, with minor modifications only, it is primarily to suit this more academically-oriented project. For all other works, I have used the original text only.

Transliteration

For the Romanisation of Sanskrit text from the Devanagari script, I have used the standard scheme established by the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration.

On the whole, I have followed the same rules when transliterating Gujarati. However, it should be noted that there is a loss in phonemic length of vowels, especially the 'a' when conjoined with the final consonant of a morpheme. Thus, in practice, although one might write 'પ્રગટ', for example, it is usually pronounced in Gujarati as 'pragaṭ' (as opposed to 'pragaṭa' in Sanskrit). Also, the 'ઋ' is more commonly pronounced as 'ru', so 'Vacanāmṛta', 'Prakṛti' and 'kṛpā', for example, are pronounced in Gujarati as 'Vacanāmṛut', 'Prakṛuti' and 'krupā'. This may cause some confusion for words which are written identically in both Sanskrit and Gujarati, but are pronounced differently, such as these last three words and many others. As a rule, I have kept the Sanskrit as the default pronunciation, except when citing words explicitly from Gujarati sources. For accuracy, I have transliterated these words as they are commonly pronounced in Gujarati. With the absence of the retroflexive 'ૠ' in Sanskrit, but which is common in Gujarati, I have denoted it with 'ṛ', which should not be confused with the rare Sanskrit vocalic 'ṛ'.

Sanskrit and Gujarati passages of special interest or importance are provided, in transliteration, alongside their English translation, so Sanskrit and Gujarati

readers can see how the translation was rendered and to appreciate key terms that may not be immediately apparent in translation. Within the text, I have sometimes placed Sanskrit or Gujarati words in parentheses after my English translations when useful and relevant.

As is becoming common innovation, I have sometimes applied English suffixes to Sanskrit and Gujarati words to form such modifiers as *māyic*, *śāstric*, *sampradāyic*, *brahmic*, etc. Their spellings thus follow English conventions rather than the Sanskrit or Gujarati, as in ‘Vedic’, ‘yogic’ and ‘Upaniṣadic’, etc., rather than ‘Vaidika’, ‘yauḡika’ and ‘Aupaniṣadika’, as it would be otherwise. I have generally not ventured much beyond adjectives, though this rule could easily be extended to adverbs as well, to form such useful terms as ‘yogically’, ‘sampradāyically’, and others.

Finally, for the names of Indian authors and editors, I have followed their own choice of English spelling, except when the name appears on the Sanskrit title page of a work, in which case it is spelled according to international scholarly usage.

Abbreviations

Titles of texts and, in the case of the *Vacanāmṛut*, its major sections, have been abbreviated when used in citations. For the *Vacanāmṛut*, I follow the system used in the English version, itself partly adopted from the common Gujarati system, and for the *Upaniṣads*, I have adopted the abbreviations used by Olivelle in his

Oxford World's Classics translation. Within the text, I have preferred to use the full names of sources wherever appropriate.

The list of abbreviations is as follows:

AU	Aitareya Upaniṣad
BG	Bhagavad-Gītā
BP	Bhāgavata-Purāṇa
BS	Brahmasūtras
BU	Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
IU	Īśā Upaniṣad
KaU	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
KeU	Kena Upaniṣad
MuU	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
MāU	Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
PU	Praśna Upaniṣad
SU	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
SB	Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya
SV	Svāmīnī Vāto
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad
Vac. Amd.	Vacanāmrut Amdāvād

Vac. Gaḍh. I	Vacanāmrut Gaḍhaḍā I
Vac. Gaḍh. II	Vacanāmrut Gaḍhaḍā II
Vac. Gaḍh. III	Vacanāmrut Gaḍhaḍā III
Vac. Jet.	Vacanāmrut Jetalpur
Vac. Kār.	Vacanāmrut Kāriyāṇī
Vac. Loyā	Vacanāmrut Loyā
Vac. Pan.	Vacanāmrut Pancālā
Vac. Sār.	Vacanāmrut Sāraṅgpur
Vac. Var.	Vacanāmrut Vartāl
VR	Vedarasa

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1) Setting the Scene

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1) Setting the Scene

1.1) Theme and Scheme

In his chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Francis X. Clooney, SJ of Harvard Divinity School presents his case for ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology” as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse’¹. Over the course of his reasoning, Clooney presents several “clues” to determine whether or not a Hindu system could be regarded as ‘theological’. These clues include certain themes, modes of reasoning, style, audience expectations, and judgements to be made by theologians. He concludes with a call to action, for those “who are willing to identify themselves as both ‘Hindus’ and ‘theologians’” to “test” his ideas.

This thesis is a direct response to this calling, to apply Clooney’s “clues” to the specific case of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and ascertain, in particular, its position as a theological system, and thus affirm the possibility and validity of “Hindu theology” in general.

¹ Edited by Gavin Flood, (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell; 2003), pp. 447-77.

It is important to acknowledge that Clooney is not the first to propose or advocate the case for ‘Hindu theology’. Julius Lipner wrote in 1986: “The time has come, I believe, to rehabilitate ‘theology’ as an apt description for a substantial part of the intellectual tradition of the Hindus.” *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. ix. More than a decade before him, John Carman had already written *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974). And while not explicitly a work of reflection and analysis, *Hindu Theology: Themes, Texts & Structures*, edited with an introduction and notes by José Pereira (Garden City: Image Books, 1976), provides an overview of Hindu theology and twenty six chapters summarising major and minor schools of Hindu thought. Most recently, Graham Schweig provides some historical background to the use of ‘theology’ in a non-Christian and Hindu context, in particular, and in a Vaiṣṇava context, most specifically, in *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* by Tamal Krishna Goswami, edited with an introduction and conclusion by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 205-07.

Framed another way, our inquiry can be distilled to one clear-cut question – simple, powerful, and perhaps a little provocative: **What is Hindu theology?**

This thesis is an attempt to answer this question analogously, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

To understand how this will be possible, I begin with an overview of Clooney’s chapter, before going on to explain the scope and rationale of this project, as well as its sources, structure, and the methodology I adopt.

1.1.1) A Summary of Clooney’s Chapter

In setting the framework for his argument, Clooney guides his chapter with two fundamental questions: 1) Can we identify a mode of discourse which can justly be called ‘Hindu theology’? And 2) if we can, is it worthwhile to do so?

He opens by discussing the relationship and differences between philosophy and theology. After drawing upon the history of the heated debate between these two disciplines in Europe, and how this was carried over to the context of Indian thought, Clooney asserts that ‘philosophy’ alone seems “inadequate to the spiritual and religious values at stake” – no matter how deeply intertwined the latter may be with rigorous reasoning. Thus, “‘theology’ remains a most viable and useful term” *sui generis*.

But why is it important to defend reference to ‘theology’ in the Hindu context?

Framed another way, why is ‘theology’ more useful than ‘philosophy’ in

identifying key aspects of Hindu thought? Clooney tackles his second question by firstly distinguishing two types of reasoning – ‘philosophical reasoning’, which disregards authoritative religious sources, and ‘theological reasoning’, which is marked by attention to scripture and other religious authorities. It is the latter, Clooney argues, which “most accurately describes some of the major trajectories of Hindu thought.” This makes ‘theology’ not a pejorative category or term, as was the case in Enlightenment Europe, but a positively profitable one for describing and understanding Hindu thought, alongside or opposed to ‘religion’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘indology’.

Having thus proposed “an initial case” for why it is both possible and worthwhile to interpret some strands of Hindu thought as ‘theology’, Clooney moves on to the heart of the chapter, to present a number of considerations to help identify what can justly be called ‘theological’ in the Hindu context.

Of course, Hindu texts which focus primarily on “a supreme, personal intelligent being who is the world source and guarantor of the significance of human life” is a legitimate starting point for identifying ‘theology’. However, Clooney goes further by presenting seven specific themes to help define Hindu theology more widely and thoroughly. These are:

1. The nature of a sufficient world cause, world-maker
2. Whether God is one or many
3. Divine embodiment
4. The problem of evil

-
5. The nature and time of liberation
 6. The appeal to revelation
 7. 'Ignorance' as a theological category

While all these topics are *religiously* significant, having a basis in scriptural texts, they are also *practically* significant, being arguable even if rooted in faith.

It is this reasoned argumentation to which Clooney next turns. The “key” to theology, he maintains, “is the convergence of belief and reason”, where reason is “focused – and constricted – by religious concerns.” Citing the case of Vedānta, among other examples, he notes how ‘manana’ is proper theological reasoning because it is positioned between scripture (‘śravaṇa’) and religious practice (‘nididhyāsana’). Crucially, he adds, only those systems of thought which demonstrate such argumentative possibility can be justifiably theological and complete, for “even theological positions are arguable positions.”

The final set of clues Clooney delineates relate to issues of style, context, and community, what he calls “contextual factors”. For example, commentary upon a text is an important clue to the presence of theological discourse within it, because it indicates that the text’s ideas are worthy of further reflection, expansion and articulation, of intellectual respect.

He further proposes that Hindu theology is ordinarily – though not invariably – Sanskrit-language discourse, either composed in the Sanskrit language or in

languages deeply influenced by Sanskrit reasoning (such as Hindi and Gujarati). He of course acknowledges that “while in theory this need not be the case, it seems in fact to be so”, citing the Tamil Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva texts as exceptions perhaps proving the rule.

Clooney also observes that since theology does not occur in isolation, but within a community of those who write it and those who read it, there are bilateral expectations that must also be considered. Only if a community accepts a text as explicating its beliefs or defending them against competing religious systems will the text be properly recognised as theological and its author as a theologian. Similarly, authors, in order to be recognised as theologians and their works as theological, must aim to intelligibly communicate or defend deeper matters of faith to a practicing religious community. Both – communities expecting theology and authors seeking a theological audience – find one another within larger faith communities. Here, Clooney iterates: “Of course, since theology has communal roots, it must be the theologians of the Hindu tradition who must take the lead in maintaining and fostering Hindu theology.”

Clooney then goes on to share his thoughts on theology as a complex discourse, and suggests a few examples of theological and non-theological texts, mainly from the Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta systems.

In his final reflections, Clooney suggests that, while it is not the remit of this chapter to explain the word “Hindu”, there is the possibility of appreciating it

anew in the light of theology, “as a plausible, arguable, and useful theological category with which one can usefully begin to understand the predominate Indian religious ways of believing and practising.”

He then closes with a reiteration of his earlier concessions: “I admit that since we are speaking of *Hindu* theology and not just *theology*, the final test must occur in a communal context, among thinkers who are willing to identify themselves as both ‘Hindus’ and ‘theologians.’”²

1.2) Scope and Rationale

From Clooney’s insightful and cogent chapter, we are able to distil at least the following four broad topics:

- Themes of Hindu theology
- Mode of Hindu theology
- Sources of Hindu theology
- Contexts of Hindu theology

Clearly, these are the topics that need to be addressed within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition if we are to use it as a case study to test Clooney’s ideas. However, this thesis is as much about *doing* Hindu theology as it is about determining or

² Clooney reiterates his argument and hope for Hindu theology in his latest, seminal work on comparative theology, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). He writes: “Since we are speaking of *Hindu* theology and not a *theology of Hinduism*, the final test must occur in the Hindu context, if and when there are thinkers willing to identify themselves as both ‘Hindus’ and ‘theologians.’ They must decide whether to agree that there is Hindu theology; I hope they do.” p. 79 (emphasis original).

discussing its traits. Indeed, what better proof could there be of the possibility of Hindu theology than actually theologising within a Hindu tradition using its own theological tools and parameters. The above topics thus become a framework or pointers for theologising rather than just distinguishing features of Hindu theology. That is, they tell us:

- WHAT to theologise
- HOW to theologise
- WITH WHAT to theologise
- WHERE to theologise

The aim, then, is to use the considerations outlined by Clooney – themes (WHAT), reasoned argumentation (HOW), sources (WITH WHAT), and contexts (WHERE) – to identify the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as a Hindu theological system, thus providing an *a posteriori* affirmation of Hindu theology in general.

This still leaves the important question of ‘WHY theologise?’.

Of course, it is certainly not the case that the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition has hitherto not communicated its beliefs or provided any defence of it. This has been recurring since its origin in the early 1800s. How else would the tradition have survived and flourished for so long. This communication, however, has happened in traditional ways, using traditional vocabulary and traditional tools and apparatus. The ‘tradition’ now inhabits a world far different from the one in which it was established, spreading outside of its native Gujarat and surviving

long since its inception over two hundred years ago. Today, ‘Swaminarayan Hinduism’, as it has been called, is considered one of the most transnationally diverse forms of Hinduism in the world, with large, active congregations growing in the United Kingdom, parts of mainland Europe, North America, and several nations of Africa as well as Asia-Pacific, not to mention all over India.³ In all of these regions, practitioners face the inescapable reality of a religiously diverse social matrix. In fact, outside of India, the Svāminārāyaṇa community lives as a minority Hindu faith in a setting which is essentially Judeo-Christian in culture if not avowedly also in faith.⁴

Moreover, even within India, the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community finds itself confessing a faith articulated in nineteenth-century texts (whose roots are traced to far more ancient Hindu scriptures), yet living out those beliefs in the post-modern world. Now, a new, *theological* framework or vocabulary is needed to make this faith and practice intelligible to our religious and non-religious others. Indeed, it is in this nexus of inter-religious, cross-cultural encounters – Hindu and Christian, Indian and Western, traditional and post-modern – that this project finds its impetus.

³ See Raymond Brady Williams, *Swaminarayan Hinduism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴ For example, speaking at Oxford University’s Christ Church college at an event commemorating the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, British Prime Minister David Cameron stated on 16 December 2011: “We are a Christian country. And we should not be afraid to say so.” He immediately added: “Let me be clear: I am not in any way saying that to have another faith – or no faith – is somehow wrong. I know and fully respect that many people in this country do not have a religion. And I am also incredibly proud that Britain is home to many different faith communities, who do so much to make our country stronger. But what I am saying is that the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today.” Online Source: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible> [accessed 27 November 2012].

1.3) Methodology

Alister McGrath writes in his popular introduction to Christian theology that “questions of method have dominated modern theology, not least on account of the challenge of the Enlightenment to establish reliable foundations of knowledge.”⁵ However, he quotes Jeffery Stout of Princeton University as he observes: “Preoccupation with methodology is like clearing your throat; it can go on for only so long before you lose your audience.”⁶ David Kelsey, in prefacing his stupendous two-volume *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, too bemoans “today’s methodologically hyper-self-conscious world of technical academic theology”.⁷ He therefore confesses that identifying any methodological commitments to a complex theological project can be “largely retrospective”, warning that “we should probably be sceptical of efforts to formulate the correct theological method in the abstract, prior to any effort to formulate and commend particular material theological proposals, as though a theological method should serve as an instructions booklet about how to assemble your very own Christian theological conceptual structure.” Theology, he believes, “is too much of an art form to be regulated in that way.” Besides, “the intellectual and imaginative challenges peculiar to different theological topics are so diverse that any set of methodological rules purporting to cover them all would have to be so general as

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th edn (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 112.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), I, p. 12.

to be useless.”⁸ Daniel Migliore similarly cites the “growing danger” that “the work of theology is being replaced by the work of *preparing* to do theology.”⁹

This project is squarely committed to the *work* of theology. However, without indulging too far in any methodological technicalities, some basic notes on how I intend to go about this theological project are nonetheless necessary.

In attempting to identify and locate theology within a Hindu context, the task, as Clooney observes, “involves a reflection on Hindu intellectual discourses and an intelligent re-use of ideas rooted in Christian and Western intellectual sensitivities.”¹⁰ Specifically, I am adopting the style of ‘Systematic Theology’, to formulate a clear, orderly and coherent overview of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition’s key doctrinal themes which can then be held up for testing against Clooney’s clues.

I am aware that systematic theology has come some under suspicion in the postmodern era, specifically for its attempts to offer neat, doctrinal packages, often dismissed or derided as ‘mere dogmatics’. The shift of authority from the theologian to the individual has especially raised questions about whether any useful, meaningful understanding of God can be systematised, that is, according

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p. xiii. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 449.

to the critiques, boxed into categories with an arrogant sense of finality. After all, the Bible is not itself systematically structured. It is a diverse collection of writings and, even while believed to be God's inerrant Word, is not a mere handbook of doctrine and morals. As Princeton theologian Charles Hodge wrote, "The Bible is no more a system of theology than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics".¹¹ Like the Bible, neither the Vacanāmrut nor the Upaniṣads or Bhagavad-Gītā are organised according to doctrinal loci.

Nevertheless, as Migliore defends, "the effort of theology to be 'systematic' should be affirmed insofar as it expresses trust in the unity and faithfulness of God in all God's works. Because God is faithful, there are patterns and continuities in the acts of God attested in Scripture that give shape and coherence to theological reflection."¹² He goes on to engage David Tracy who argues that "fragments" rather than "totalities" best describe the form of our knowledge of God. Even so, a provisional "gathering of fragments" is still possible and necessary.¹³ The corraling, organising and contextualising of key passages and discussions into as coherent an account as possible is the task of the systematic theologian.¹⁴ Hodge explains: "This is not an easy task, or one of slight importance."¹⁵

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1940), I, p. 1.

¹² Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 12.

¹³ David Tracy, 'Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God', *Reflections: Centre of Theological Inquiry*, 3 (Autumn 2000), 62-88 cited in Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 12.

¹⁴ It shall become apparent that I do not see theology as an exclusive enterprise performed by a cadre of professional theologians in the academy or ministers in 'Church' (or pundits and

Many of my decisions in undertaking this important task have been guided by the appreciation that this is the very first such systematic theological account of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and perhaps one of very few of a living Hindu tradition. By design, I have therefore kept the scope of the project broad so as to provide a thorough – though by no means exhaustive – overview of the Svāminārāyaṇa system as a useful example of Hindu theology at work. This has necessitated an exposition of all its main themes, as is the nature and demand of systematic theology, which has sometimes precluded an in-depth exploration of each of them in a single-volume work¹⁶. Nevertheless, I have attempted to demonstrate the possibility of deep theological reflection and analysis at various junctures, for example, in the technical, hermeneutical study of certain Upaniṣadic and Bhagavad-Gītā statements in relation to the ontological distinction of Akṣarabrahman from Parabrahman (see chapter 7.1). To employ a photographic analogy, I have used both a wide-angle lens to set the scene of the landscape and then also, at useful and interesting points in the expanse, shifted to a telephoto lens to zoom in on the finer details. This should provide an

priests in a temple) – although as a both a scholar and ordained monk I see the great worth of both these roles – but an *active* exercise for every member of a religious community in which they participate by reflecting upon and practicing their faith in search of greater understanding. Indeed, as we shall see in the very conclusion, from the example of Arjuna, this forms the defining characterisation of theology and thus Hindu theology. See also Nicholas M. Healy, ‘What is Systematic Theology?’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 11 (2009), 24-39 on his three types of ‘systematic theology’: 1) ‘official’, produced by the institutional church; 2) ‘ordinary’ theological reflection, engaged in by virtually all believers; and 3) ‘professional’, performed by academics.

¹⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 2.

¹⁶ I am, of course, thinking of the multi-volume works of Systematic Theology by Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Charles Hodgson, Robert Jenson, etc.

adequate ‘lay of the land’ while also demonstrating the scope of depth possible.

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The expansive nature of this project has also led it to be largely descriptive in style. The deliberate intention has been to lay the ground work, ready for subsequent rounds of theologising and critical analysis. As Lipner too chose for his presentation of Rāmānuja’s thought in *The Face of Truth*¹⁸, I believe it was vital at this nascent stage of Svāminārāyaṇa studies to concentrate on carefully expounding the Svāminārāyaṇa system rather than critiquing it, though I hope this has not been at the expense of any academic rigour or clarity.

To help ensure a clear, concise and precise exposition, I have endeavoured (though admittedly not always with the same degree of success) towards simplicity and economy of expression without simplifying or abbreviating the ideas themselves. Nor have I felt the need to impress my readers with linguistic sophistication. Rather, the objective has always been a clear communication of theological concepts, which, I have been keenly aware of throughout, may already appear new and abstruse to those inhabiting a world which is markedly different linguistically, culturally, historically and religiously to that of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

¹⁷ I am grateful to my communication with Graham Schweig which led to this analogy and the clarity it lends to the approach of this project.

¹⁸ “It seemed to be more important at this relatively early stage of Rāmānuja studies to concentrate on critically expounding Rāmānuja’s difficult thought than to give it a critique, and though I have made no concessions to rigour in analysis I have tried always to be clear.” Lipner, *The Face of Truth*, p. xi.

As way of further testing for Hindu theology within the Svāminārāyaṇa system, I cite abundantly from the tradition's original primary sources. Though it may be the first time some will be encountering the Vacanāmṛta and Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, for example, this shall hopefully serve well in introducing their theological content and style as well as the potential for further theological study by serious scholars of Hindu theology.

To avoid becoming totally unwieldy, however, I have had to delimit the project in a number of ways. Reluctantly, for example, I have not been able to draw upon the Pañcarātra texts, which are a vast and rich corpus of source material for many of the beliefs and especially of the practices associated with Svāminārāyaṇa theology. Perhaps this can be the subject of a later project.

This project is also delimited by the immediate context of my writing and experience, about which I want to be clear. As an ordained monk of the Svāminārāyaṇa order, I do not pretend for a moment to represent all Hindu theologians or to articulate *the* comprehensive or definitive version of Hindu theology, as if one even exists. The Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is but one strand in the richly diverse tapestry that is Hinduism. Furthermore, the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition itself comprises many denominations – fibres constituting that strand – each espousing its own version of the truth revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa¹⁹. I write

¹⁹ Svāminārāyaṇa was born on 3 April 1781 in northern India. After a childhood of prodigious learning and the passing of his parents, he left home at the age of 11 to travel alone as a child-yogi, wearing only a loin-cloth and carrying little besides a staff and gourd. His journey took him to the Himalayas, around India, into Nepal and Tibet, and through Myanmar (Burma) and

from within one of those denominations, the Bocāsanavāsī Śrī Akṣara Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā (commonly abbreviated to ‘BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā’ or sometimes simply ‘BAPS’)²⁰. This exposition is thus an example of *a* Hindu theology, of which there are many others, none definitive or representative of the whole.

1.3.1) Terminology

A short note on terminology is also in order.

Clooney rightly observes in his notes that in presenting Hindu theology, one must find a comfortable mode of commuting between Sanskrit (and other Indian languages) and English. “This is not an endeavour”, he warns, “for those who think that no term in English can ever suitably represent a term from the Sanskrit language.”

Bangladesh. After seven years and 7,000 miles (12,000 kilometres), he settled in the west-Indian state of Gujarat. There, at the age of 21, he founded what came to be known as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. Over his 28-year ministry, he introduced many social and religious reforms and initiated 3,000 sadhus (ordained monks), 500 of whom were of the highest order, called ‘paramhansas’. He also built six traditional temples and inspired many works of poetry and prose. He is reported to have been worshipped as God in his own lifetime. He passed away on 30 June 1830.

For a comprehensive biographical account of the life and work of Svāminārāyaṇa, see Harshad T. Dave’s five-volume *Bhagvān Śrī Svāminārāyaṇ* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2005). For a concise introduction in Gujarati, see Sadhu Adarshjivandas’s *Sarvāvatārī Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ: Jīvan ane Kārya* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2005), 240 pages, and in English, Sadhu Mukundcharandas’s, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan: An Introduction* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2007), 106 pages. For a short summary, see Williams, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, pp. 12-32.

²⁰ For a concise historical and photographic introduction, see the centennial commemorative publication *100 Years of BAPS: Foundation, Formation, Fruition* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2007), 188 pages, with text by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas.

Translating into any language, even from within a tradition, can be fraught with danger and difficulty. One need only look at the centuries of continuing efforts in faithfully transposing biblical ideas from Greek and Aramaic, and how it may have affected the concept of the ‘virgin’ birth, key eschatological themes such as the ‘Kingdom’ of God, etc., to appreciate this. How more, then, is this project littered with potential pitfalls when translating into a language which is so syntactically and culturally different from Gujarati and Sanskrit? It is also true that technical words hold not only intellectual content but emotional associations. Holding true to this ‘idiom’ of Hindu theology is especially difficult and important.

The challenge for me, then, was a delicate double-balancing act, of writing in a language that is familiar to theologians and scholars unfamiliar with Hindu theology, especially the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, while obviously remaining faithful to the concepts I was trying to present, *but* being careful also to not distort those concepts in an overzealous attempt to familiarise them in theological language. To be absolutely certain of avoiding such simplifications, I could have lazily resorted to using native Gujarati or Sanskrit terms, or coining new ones, but then those might not be easily understood by my readers. Then again, nor did I wish to make it so simplistically similar that it led to the false impression that ‘Oh, that is just like what we find in Christianity.’ I trust my

Christian readers will appreciate the many nuances of each faith and not make such facile connections.²¹

To restate this challenge: in using words that are familiar to communicate concepts which are not, the danger is that the reader will read her familiar understanding into a concept which is in fact different (though not always vastly so). So should the familiar word be used, and risk a misunderstanding? Or should one use a foreign word, and risk no understanding at all? To say that one needs to strike a balance is beside the point.

As is becoming common practice now, I use familiar words as a starting point, qualifying them sufficiently to lead the reader into understanding something which is analogous to what she might already know yet would require some reasonable modification. This careful reading and re-reading is itself a deeply inter-religious act of learning which Clooney proposes through his many works on comparative theology.²² Parimal Patil, too, notes: “Explaining, in English, theological arguments formulated in technical philosophical Sanskrit (or Tamil and others) is already a deeply interreligious, comparative and dialogical task.”²³

²¹ Of course, there are a great many points that can serve as valuable nodes of comparative work – both similarities and differences – which I pick up on in the final part when I suggest ways forward from this preliminary work. See chapter 13.2.3.

²² See especially his *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

²³ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 192.

Perhaps more than sheer etymological translatability, our challenge pertains to the doctrinal connotations of theological terms which have a first and predominantly Christian meaning. For example, how can ‘soteriology’, which generally presupposes original sin in Christianity, be legitimately used or adapted for Hindu theology when discussing mukti, where the soul is conceived as being inherently pure but in need of liberation from a false self-understanding?

This also raises the politically charged question of who *owns* theological words, such as ‘God’ and ‘salvation’? Does salvation *have* to presuppose original sin? If not, what will the Christian be saved from? How distinct is the concept of being ‘saved’ from being ‘freed’? Or can soteriology also mean being *liberated* from the bondage of sin, from the clutches of death the enemy, with Christ the victor over forces that enslave humanity? Conversely, if souls can be liberated from sin, can jīvas be *saved* from māyā? Can indeed doctrines be argued on words? For example, can that which is not hidden be revealed? If not, how accurate is ‘revelation’ in referring to scriptural descriptions about God in Hindu theology? Can that which is not damned be saved? If not, how proper is it to speak of the ‘salvation’ of the jīva?

Those who brazenly dismiss such debates as ‘mere semantics’ would do well to remember that theologians for centuries have fought zealously over meaning and interpretation, from the early ecumenical councils arguing the union of the two natures in Christ and his consubstantiality with God the Father, to disputes

among the Vedāntic schools arguing for which type of non-dualism is accurate – pure, qualified, singular, or none at all.

In an effort for increased accuracy and intelligibility, one alternative to using Sanskrit terms, such as ‘mukti mīmāṃsā’, could be to employ their Latin or Greek equivalents, such as *liberātiō*. Extending this to parallel various derivatives, we can have ‘liberation’ (for ‘salvation’), ‘liberatology’ (for ‘soteriology’), ‘liberatological’ (for ‘soteriological’), ‘liberative’ or ‘liberatific’ (for ‘salvific’), and ‘liberator’ (for ‘saviour’). But this still does little to clarify the different and nuanced doctrinal meanings underlying such terms.

Another option could be to apply Greek suffixes to Sanskrit terms. Like Christology, could we have ‘Brahmology’ or ‘Gurology’? When suggesting ‘Buddhology’ or ‘Dharmology’ for Buddhist theology, José Ignacio Cabezón observed that “new nomenclature..., besides being infelicitous, will become meaningful only through consensual use, which in any discipline is difficult to achieve.”²⁴ A more prevalent practice has been to form adjectives and even adverbs from popular Sanskrit nouns, such as ‘yogic’ and ‘yogically’ from ‘yoga’.²⁵

What should be apparent is that there does not (yet) appear to be a consensus among scholars on the best or accepted way to proceed on this matter. Until

²⁴ José Ignacio Cabezón, ‘Buddhist Theology in the Academy’, in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. by Roger Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), p. 25.

²⁵ See Style Guide for further examples of such usage in this thesis.

there is, and possibly even thereafter, there will need to be a patient learning process for both readers and writers. Readers will have to avoid, as far as possible, (dis)colouring their understanding of new concepts with already known ideas from their own faith. If I use 'salvation', for example, can I be sure that the Christian will not assume that the Hindu soul is also born of original sin which needs to be 'saved' rather than liberated? Equally for the writers, they will be called to adopt new terms and ways to express their theological ideas, often learning from other systems, all the while being true to the ideas themselves, without compromising, as far as possible, their complexity, richness, profundity, and subtle nuances.

In an effort to make Hindu theology intelligible and appreciable, I struggled, as perhaps was inevitable, towards a 'happy middle' (not a compromise) between the two extremes of stubborn adherence to native terminology and wilful ascension to over-translation, happily and humbly appreciating the power and limitation of words. More often than not, I had to concede to Patil's pragmatic observation: "Hindu intellectuals will be forced, at least for the present, to conform to the vocabulary and genre conventions of contemporary philosophical theology."²⁶

²⁶ Patil, 'A Hindu Theologian's Response', in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 188.

1.4) Sources

For Clooney, so inextricably tied are theology and theological texts, he often moves from defining one to the other almost instinctively, as if both were one and the same project. Indeed, identifying Hindu texts of theological merit goes a long way in identifying Hindu systems of theological merit, since the latter is necessarily so firmly rooted in the former. With such a clear and strong emphasis on texts within theology in general, especially revelatory texts, this project for Hindu theology shall similarly be guided by and grounded in Hindu texts.

In particular, I rely upon two sets of textual sources for this project. The primary sources from the Svāminārāyaṇa corpus primarily include the Vacanāmṛt and the Svāmīnī Vāto, both of which are in Gujarati. These will be closely substantiated with the three Sanskrit texts which comprise the Prasthānatrayī – the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-Gītā – and their respective commentaries, as well as other treatises from the rich commentarial tradition of the Vedānta system.²⁷ I also draw upon existing scholarship from within and on the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition (mainly found in Gujarati, with some works in Hindi and English), with other secondary sources including writings in English from the academic discipline of theology in general.

Some further description is warranted to introduce the main primary texts.

²⁷ The polysemantic nature of the Prasthānatrayī texts makes commentaries a necessary and integral part of Vedāntic literature. Traditionally, each of the Vedānta schools formulated their own interpretations in their commentaries to establish and validate their doctrines as being in consonance with the original revelatory sources.

Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya: This voluminous set of commentaries on the canonical texts of Vedānta forms an important *magnum opus* of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition. It provides a detailed *verbo in verbum* explication and elaboration of the root text as well as a thorough elucidation and defence of the theological and philosophical concepts interpreted to be embedded therein. Though published very recently, between May 2009 and April 2012, the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya is very much composed in the genre of other Vedāntic schools' much older, classical commentaries, that is, it is written in Sanskrit and is rich in ratiocination while religiously protecting the revelatory status of its sources, foreseeing and forestalling contestations by offering *prima facie* views before consummately dismantling them and advancing the one, exegetically sound and conclusive interpretation according to the Svāminārāyaṇa school of thought.

Comprising five volumes and spanning over two thousand pages, the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentates on the three foundational Vedāntic texts, commonly referred to collectively as the 'Prasthānatrayī', i.e. the Brahmasūtras, the ten principal Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavad-Gītā, as follows:

1. Brahmasūtra-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (462 pages)
2. Īśādyāṣṭopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (476 pages)

This contains a commentary on the following eight:

- Īśā Upaniṣad
- Kena Upaniṣad
- Kaṭha Upaniṣad
- Praśna Upaniṣad

-
- Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
 - Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
 - Taittirīya Upaniṣad
 - Aitareya Upaniṣad
3. Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (389 pages)
 4. Chāndogyopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (419 pages)
 5. Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (404 pages)

The author, Bhadrēśa Svāmī, is a scholar-sādhu of the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa order with a string of academic qualifications and accolades to his name, including: Śaḍdarśanācārya (the equivalent of a Masters degree in each of the six orthodox schools of theistic Indian thought), Navyanyāyācārya (a Masters in neo-classical Indian logic), Vyākaraṇācārya (a Masters in classical Sanskrit grammar), a Ph.D. in Philosophy based on the Bhagavad-Gītā, and a D.Litt. in Vedānta. Most recently, he was conferred the title of ‘Mahāmahopadhyāya’ by Kavikulaguru Kālidāsa Saṃskṛta Viśvavidyālāya in recognition for his outstanding contributions to ‘Indian Philosophy’ by way of these commentaries. Throughout, I refer to him as the ‘Bhāṣyakāra’ (the ‘commentator’).

Vacanāmṛut: The Vacanāmṛut – literally, ‘(immortalising) ambrosia in the form of words’ – is a collection of 274 discourses²⁸ delivered by Svāminārāyaṇa during

²⁸ The version I am using is the original Gujarati text published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith, which itself is a letter-to-letter, printed version of the original manuscript, containing 262 discourses, published in 1928 under the auspices of Acharya Shripatiprasad of the Vartal diocese. A further eleven discourses accepted as canonical by the Ahmedabad diocese only are

the last ten years of his life, between 1819 and 1829 CE. These discourses were meticulously documented and compiled by four of his most learned and senior disciples – Gopālānanda Svāmī, Muktānanda Svāmī, Nityānanda Svāmī and Śukānanda Svāmī – and later presented to him for review and personal approval (see, for example, the mention in Vac. Loyā.7).

The text is divided into ten sections, based on the various villages and towns in which the discourses were delivered. The sections are chronological in order and are named as follows: Gaḍhaḍā I, Sāraṅpur, Kāriyānī, Loyā, Pancālā, Gaḍhaḍā II, Vartāl, Amdāvād, and Gaḍhaḍā III. An additional section includes eleven discourses from Amdāvād, Aślālī and Jetalpur, and a letter dictated from Gaḍhaḍā containing a cosmological description of the world (therefore titled ‘Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ’). Each individual discourse is also called a ‘Vacanāmṛut’, and these are arranged chronologically and numbered sequentially within each section. Hence, ‘Vacanāmṛut Vartāl 11’ (abbreviated to ‘Vac. Var.11’), for example, is the eleventh recorded discourse delivered by Svāminārāyaṇa in the town of Vartāl.

Ingeniously, each Vacanāmṛut opens with an introductory paragraph meticulously describing the setting of the assembly in which the discourse was delivered. Even at the risk of sounding repetitive, the compilers invariably recorded the date, the month, the year, the village, the location within the village, and a mention of the audience seated in the assembly. In many instances, they

appended as ‘Additional Vacanāmṛuts’. To this is traditionally added the ‘Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ’ letter, thereby making 274 sermons in total.

also noted the time of day and described the clothes and adornments Svāminārāyaṇa was wearing. In some instances, they even describe the seat upon which he was seated and the direction in which he was facing. This does much to lend the text a sense of historical authenticity.

In literary style, the *Vacanāmrut* is highly dialogical and didactic, with most discourses taking the form of a question-and-answer session, where either Svāminārāyaṇa asks the questions or members of his audience do, sometimes at his urging. Even if he begins a sermon unprompted, he would sometimes question his own explanation to confirm if his audience had understood him correctly or to proleptically counter opposing views. More often, though, his aspiring seeker-followers, ranging from senior monks to lay farmers, would be braced with questions from their current readings of Hindu texts or their own personal application of those teachings. As Svāminārāyaṇa would answer, sometimes a series of follow-up questions or counter-questions would ensue as they probed for further clarity or refinement in their understanding of his teachings. This orality and reciprocal aurality between Svāminārāyaṇa and his disciples situates the *Vacanāmrut* in the ancient Upaniṣadic tradition of a guru-śiṣya dialogue.²⁹

Svāminārāyaṇa spoke in the local language of Gujarati, presenting complex concepts in simple, lucid terms, drawing extensively on popular stories from the

²⁹ See Sadhu Brahmadarshandas's *Vacanāmrut Rahasya* Vol. 1 (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpath; 1999), 242 pages, for a detailed and insightful introduction to the *Vacanāmrut*.

Purāṇas and epics and employing analogies and day-to-day examples, perhaps in an attempt to make his teachings as accessible as possible to his wide-ranging audience. He also cited profusely from the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, and various other authoritative Hindu texts.

Most importantly, the Vacanāmrut is accepted within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as the primary revelatory text by which its doctrines are established and articulated. As we shall see in Part 2, this abiding status of the Vacanāmrut is predicated on the distinctive belief of the faith community that Svāminārāyaṇa, as the self-manifestation of God, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within it.

Vedarasa: Svāminārāyaṇa also sent long, preceptive letters addressed to his paramhansas (Hindu monks of the highest order). Apart from high moral instruction for a monastic way of life, the letters also included considerable doctrinal elucidation. Some of these letters have been compiled and published under the title ‘Vedarasa’ (the ‘essence of the Vedas’).

Svāmī Vāto: Guṇātītānanda Svāmī (1785-1867 CE) was one Svāminārāyaṇa’s most prominent ordained monks and, accordingly to some denominations within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, including the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa order, was revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa as the personified human form of Akṣarabrahman on earth. He is thus the first spiritual successor of Svāminārāyaṇa and the first in the lineage of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus continuing to this today. He taught extensively

over his forty-year ministry, and many of these most important teachings were noted by followers who lived and travelled with him. In his lifetime, these notes were compiled and even discoursed upon after being reviewed by Guṇātītānanda Svāmī, thereby giving the compilation the status of an authentic text. It came to be known simply as “Svāmīnī Vāto”, the ‘talks of [Guṇātītānanda] Svāmī’. Eventually this was published, first in five chapters and later in seven chapters.³⁰

The ‘talks’ themselves range from short, pithy sayings, some just one or a few lines long, to extensive explanations running over several pages. A key feature of the style of instruction is that it makes good use of parables and vivid imagery, drawing freely from quotidian occurrences and scriptural examples. The lucid, colloquial Gujarati language belies the sophisticated concepts it addresses and the practical guidance it provides in applying those concepts, an important emphasis of the teachings. It draws extensively from the Vacanāmṛut and also cites several other Hindu texts. In elucidating, elaborating, and providing further insight upon many of the important teachings of the Vacanāmṛut, the Svāmīnī Vāto thus serves within the tradition as a ‘natural commentary’ upon it.³¹

Apart from these textual sources, this thesis has gained immeasurably from the erudition of several scholars who have graciously taken the time to discuss my

³⁰ I am using the most recent version of the Gujarati text published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith, which takes advantage of the latest research and a critical study of the original manuscripts.

³¹ For a useful introduction to the Svāmīnī Vāto, see Sadhu Brahmadarshandas’s *Brahmavidyānā Amūlya Grantho: Vacanāmṛut ane Svāmīnī Vāto* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith; 2008), pp. 72-150.

work. They continue to be not only a source of profound knowledge and insight but also of invaluable encouragement and inspiration. Some of these scholars include Francis Clooney himself (Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, Harvard Divinity School), Parimal Patil (Professor of Religion & Indian Philosophy and Chair of the Department of South Asian Studies; Harvard University), Raymond Brady Williams (LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities *emeritus*; Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana), Ravi Gupta (Associate Professor of Religious Studies; College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia), Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad (Professor and Associate Dean for Research, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; Lancaster University), Graham Schweig (Professor of Religion and Director of the Asian Studies; Christopher Newport University, Virginia), and Patrick Olivelle (Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities, Department of Asian Studies; University of Texas at Austin). Deserving special mention here would be my academic guide and friend, Gavin Flood (Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, University of Oxford; and Academic Director, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies).

1.5) Structure

I provide here an overview of how this project is intended to unfold.

The thesis is sectioned into four broad parts, each being divided more finely into discrete chapters and sub-chapters.

This first, introductory part will have served to explain the rationale and scheme of the thesis, including, as it does, a detailed summary of Clooney's chapter and how it functions as the springboard for the exposition ahead and discussion thereafter.

As explained above, this thesis is as much about *doing* Hindu theology as it is about discussing or defining it. But before embarking upon any theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa theology will need to be delineated. This is covered in Part 2.

With theology so rooted in revelation – indeed, it is what distinguishes it from philosophy and perhaps all other intellectual disciplines – the crux of this section will deal with the revelatory sources of theology within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. It will begin with an understanding of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and how this relates to Parabrahman, the Guru, the soul, and 'Scripture', by which I refer to the Vacanāmṛt and Svāmīnī Vāto, the principal theological texts of the tradition. I shall examine their determinant features as revelatory sources, including, importantly, how they must be read and interpreted. Additionally, I hope to touch upon the position and role of other tools of theology – reason, tradition, and praxis – especially in relation to the primacy of Scripture.

With tools in hand, the discussion will then be able to proceed to the heart of the thesis in the form of Part 3. After introducing the five eternal metaphysical

entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta – Parabrahman, (Akṣara)Brahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – each entity will be systematically expounded within its own chapter. This exposition will include, wherever relevant, the nature of each entity, its relationship with other entities, and important clarifications and related discussions – all along, keeping in mind (but not being bound by) Clooney’s clues to Hindu theology.

In a discipline where deviation from sacred revelation renders any theologising unauthentic, all doctrines must conform to a valid interpretation of the canonical texts. Hence, it is both natural and necessary that this part be firmly grounded in the Vacanāmṛut and the Svāmīnī Vāto as well as the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā with their respective commentaries. But while being a deep textual study, it shall operate at multiple levels, freely oscillating between philology, exegesis, and theology.

At a relevant juncture, I also engage with other Vedantic schools – Śāṅkara’s Kevalādvaita, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madhva’s Dvaita, Nimbārka’s Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda and Vallabha’s Śuddhādvaita – though, to be clear, this project is neither intended to be polemical in style nor apologetic in genre.

Finally, in Part 4, I revert to the clues Clooney indicated in his chapter and relate them to the theological discussions from Parts 2 and 3. This will provide a measure of the relative success of this endeavour in testing his ideas. I then expand upon this test by engaging with a broader, more ‘Christian’ definition of

theology set by St Anselm of Canterbury, and read it alongside a Hindu verse from the Bhagavad-Gītā, seeing how it is demonstrated by the example of Arjuna, thereby suggesting a *Hindu* formulation of Hindu theology (and maybe even of theology).

But why or how is all this significant and to whom? This I will address in relation to practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa community, scholars within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, scholars studying the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and community from other disciplines (both from within and outside of the Svāminārāyaṇa community), theologians (both Hindu and non-Hindu) of other Hindu traditions, and theologians of other religious faiths.

Since this thesis is envisioned as creating an entry-point for further theological reflection and critical analysis, both within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and beyond, the final portion of this Part 4 will consider possible ways forward, or as Clooney puts it, to “chart the course of the future of Hindu theology.”³² A part of that future course will expectedly trace secular concerns and concerns of modernity – such as science, law, politics, art, etc. – where theology meets, intersects, collides and coalesces with other fields of study and interest. The hope would be that (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theologians and theologians interested in (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theology will be better placed to embark upon this journey – or journeys, rather – now that this vital theology of the Svāminārāyaṇa

³² Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

tradition is in place. Characteristically, Clooney rests this responsibility squarely on the “intellectuals writing today who are willing to be called ‘Hindu theologians’”.³³

1.6) Summary

In 2001, when concluding *Hindu God, Christian God*, Clooney had invited Hindu theologians to “enter this larger conversation” of theology as an “interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and again confessional” project and “do a favour to the rest of us and to themselves”³⁴. To this, Patil had responded in his prolegomenon to the imagined *Christian God, Hindu God* that “although the invitation to participate in the project of ‘comparative theology’ is issued to all Hindu intellectuals, it is, in reality, directed toward those already capable of writing in the languages and style of the Euro-American academy. And since there are, in effect, no professional Hindu theologians, the invitation is directed more narrowly still to Hindu intellectuals in disciplines such as Anthropology, Area Studies, Indology, or History of Religions.”³⁵ Of course, much has transpired over the recent years, and it is safe to believe that this larger conversation has indeed been made possible now.

Of course, one need not be humble to acknowledge here that there have already been great works of theological significance based on Hindu thought, though

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 182.

³⁵ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 188.

admittedly, virtually all have been produced by Western, non-Hindu theologians. Furthermore, new and credible, albeit only a few, Hindu scholars are beginning to engage in the theology of their own traditions. So what makes this a unique project is not that it is about Hindu theology or by a Hindu theologian, but that 1) it is self-consciously dealing with theology in a Hindu context *qua* 'Hindu theology'; and 2) it is aiming to systematically affirm 'Hindu theology' as a category in Indian intellectual discourse by theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition, for which no such comprehensive theological study exists.

To summarise, this thesis is an attempt by a practitioner-theologian to explain the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition in theological terms according to recognised scholarly standards and conventions. This will provide an entry-point into a wider theological study of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, and also, hopefully, access to more nuanced understandings of the tradition for scholars of religion, South Asian studies, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines. More broadly, the thesis aims not just at describing or justifying Hindu theology; it involves constructively and systematically *doing* theology as well. It is a serious attempt to engage with Western theology from a Hindu standpoint using a Hindu example and working from within that tradition. This will inevitably take Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders; the fact that this is in English and uses terms previously reserved solely for Christian theology makes it immediately comparative and relevant. Yet it will also be an opportunity to compare ancient Hindu theology with contemporary Western understandings of

theology – how and where they overlap and differ, and how this can enrich both – opening up, as Clooney too hopes, “more fruitful ways of understanding traditional Hindu thinking, and stimulate an exchange of ideas between India... and the contemporary scholarly world.”³⁶

³⁶ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.

**PART 2: SOURCES & TOOLS OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

2) Introduction

- The Imperceptibility and Ineffability of God

3) Revelation – The Exclusive Source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

- Revelation as Self-Manifestation
 - Revelation as Unveiling of the Soul
- Revelation in and by the Guru
- Revelation through Scripture
 - Primacy of Scripture
 - Essentiality of Guru in Receiving Scripture

4) Tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

- Reason
- Praxis
- Tradition

2) INTRODUCTION

A good starting point for the study of a theological system is the basis upon which its ideas are established and articulated. When venturing to provide an example of Hindu theology by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, this is as good a place as any to set off on our project, by asking: What are its sources and the tools by which we can understand its theological foundations and, indeed, theologise within the tradition? But like many of the matters we encounter in Hindu theology – as in any other theological system perhaps – this is a deeply complex subject requiring considerable foundational knowledge and consequential discussion to be able to understand it even somewhat satisfactorily. Here, then, in this first real introduction to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, we are quickly faced with a tricky paradox: this initial discussion about the basis of our theological exposition can only properly become clear after the exposition itself. This interdependency among the various doctrines is in many ways characteristic of a functioning theological system, as we shall soon and repeatedly discover throughout this thesis.

For the topic of ‘Sources and Tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology’ especially, we should know that some of the most intricate interlocking occurs with the sections on Parabrahman as Pragaṭa (chapter 6.5), Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru (7.4.4), Māyā as ignorance (10.1.7), and Mukti as a whole (11), to which we shall allude wherever necessary. In the interest of economy and coherence, it would not make sense of course to repeat all of those overlapping ideas in this Part, especially as they will be far more appreciable in

their proper context alongside other important aspects of their respective themes. But nor is a healthy dose of recapitulation necessarily a bad thing, particularly if it helps us tie together the intricate workings of the theological whole. Indeed, sometimes it will be unavoidable; even though we shall be engaging with certain discussions and sermons in detail later, it might be necessary to introduce them here, if only to better understand them again in their full hereafter. In this sense, this part, Part 2, functions rather like a preview of the chapters to follow in Part 3. Many of the topics we begin to tackle are more fully discussed at their appropriate juncture in later sections among the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. This explains the many instances we will encounter here of “as we shall see later” or “as will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on...”. This patient deferral of some discussions (or some aspects of a discussion) calls us to provisionally accept certain ideas now in order for them to be tested more rigorously in the coming exposition, leaving open the opportunity to return to this ‘prolegomenon’, if it can be called that, and understanding it more fully afterwards. Again, this is another salient feature of what we might mean (and shall soon cover) as ‘appealing to revelation’; revelation is accepted to begin the theological project, even if it becomes a focus of discussion and investigation later, which often argues for its authority and validity. This fittingly introduces this section on the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

But before we can proceed to answering the question ‘How can we know about God?’, a still more fundamental and provocative question awaits us: Can God be known at all?

2.1) The Imperceptibility and Ineffability of God

The Upaniṣads famously extol the imperceptibility and ineffability of the highest reality. For example:

From where speech returns with the mind having not grasped it...
(TU 2.4.1).

It cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other senses or by austerities or work (MuU 3.1.8).

Not by speech, not by mind, nor by the eyes is it possible to reach him (KaU 6.12).

There the eyes go not. Speech goes not. Nor the mind (KeU 1.3).

In picking up on each of the three key tools of perception mentioned in this last verse – cakṣus (eyes), vāk (speech), and manas (mind) – the Bhāṣyakāra offers a basic epistemological analysis of why perception, worldly testimony and inference cannot serve as independent means to valid knowledge of God. In summary, it is as follows:

- cakṣus (eyes): The eyes are representative here of all cognitive senses, which are instrumental in directly cognising tangible objects. For example, the sense of sight allows eyes to perceive physical form, the sense of hearing allows ears to perceive sounds, and so forth with the

senses of touch, taste and smell and their respective sense organs, the skin, tongue, and nose. However, their scope is firmly confined within the realm of the physical world, composed as it is, like the senses and sense organs, of *māyā*. They cannot possibly perceive anything which is beyond *māyā*, such as the form and virtues of the divine, transcendental and limitless Parabrahman. Parabrahman is thus “*atītindriya*” – beyond the senses; intangible.

- *vāk* (speech): This represents the faculty of speech and the capacity of words. While everyday patterns of speech (*vyavahāra*) or vivid descriptions may be able to elucidate the qualities of worldly objects and events, they cannot fully describe God, his form and his qualities, because he is absolutely not of this world. Besides, the *Bhāṣyakāra* adds, worldly testimony still relies on the senses of perception and physical organs, whose limitations have already been identified above.
- *manas* (mind): The mind is the ‘inner sense’, and here indicates the means of inference. With inference also predicated upon direct perception, it, too suffers from the same limitations highlighted above. [The role of ‘reason’ as a *tool* or an ancillary source for theological knowledge is discussed in more detail later in this Part, hence any further elucidation on this topic has been reserved for then.]

While spelling out the scope and limitations of these means of cognition and articulation, the *Bhāṣyakāra* is careful to make two important points. Firstly, in his refutation of sensory and mental means, he is sure to qualify them with the

term ‘laukika’, relating to this world, i.e. anything composed of māyā. This has important implications for the authority of divinely inspired and divinely spoken words which constitute Scripture (verbal testimony), and also for the state of liberation when the liberated soul is endowed with brahmic mind and senses by which it enjoys the direct realisation of Parabrahman. A more general denial of sensory perception of Parabrahman would preclude this climactic experience as well as the possibility of Scripture as an authentic source of theological knowledge. (We shall be covering both of these topics in some detail in the chapter on Mukti and further in this chapter, respectively.)

Secondly, the Bhāṣyakāra invariably adds that the senses and mind return from Parabrahman not entirely empty-handed, so to speak, but having not grasped him fully.³⁷ With each of the three means mentioned at KeU 1.3, for example, the Bhāṣyakāra adds “sampūrṇatayā”, “sākalyena” and “kārtsnyena” – each meaning “completely” – to emphasise that the eyes, speech and mind cannot have a *complete* perception of Parabrahman. But this does not deny them *any* perception of Parabrahman whatsoever. After all, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, if that were not the case, the following statements instructing individuals to know, see, realise or contemplate upon Parabrahman would be rendered futile:

Verily, that Self [Paramātmā] is to be realised, heard, reflected and contemplated upon (BU 2.4.5 & 4.5.6).

Seek to know that. That is Brahman (TU 3.1.1).

³⁷ TU-SB 2.4.1, p. 370.

Seek indeed to know that Truth [Parabrahman] (CU 7.16.1).

Know that Puruṣa who should be known (PU 6.6).

Equally, descriptions of knowing, seeing, realising Parabrahman would also have to be non-veridical. For example:

Your most auspicious form, that I see (IU 16, BU 5.15.1).

When he knows him thus... (CU 1.9.2).

It [the Self] is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers (KaU 3.12)

The wise who perceive him residing within the soul, theirs alone is eternal peace, not others' (KaU 5.13).

When a person knows God... as that cause, he is liberated from all sins (SU 6.13).

They continuously extol me (BG 9.14).³⁸

But then how can these two sets of statements be reconciled? On the one hand they attempt to describe God and urge that he should be known, and yet, on the other, he is described as ineffable and not completely knowable. But that is precisely the thrust of the Vedāntic argument, the Bhāṣyakāra observes. Even after knowing all that one can know about God, what one really needs to know – indeed, what one *can* know – about God is that he is unlimited, unfathomable. In

³⁸ The Bhāṣyakāra also cites many of these passages in response to the objector's claim at BS 1.1.1 that it is futile to desire to know 'Brahman', simply because 'Brahman' is unknowable. See BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.

fact, when concluding this comment, the Bhāṣyakāra questions whether the limited human mind and senses can ever fully grasp even meagre, tangible objects such as a pot or rag (or describe everyday human experiences³⁹). What, then, can be said of their inadequacy in comprehending someone as subtle and transcendental as Parabrahman?⁴⁰ What this ensures is that any authentic knowledge or description of Parabrahman, even while being useful and meaningful, is never exhaustive; he remains that much beyond the limited capacity of māyic faculties and this-worldly means of cognition and articulation. In other words, any knowledge of God does not subvert his unlimited nature (or ‘mystery’).⁴¹ Even the fullest realisation will always be of the form ‘neti neti’ – “Not this much; not this much.”⁴² The experience is so staggeringly overwhelming that any sincere attempt to articulate it in words seems woefully inadequate. Whatever eloquence one can muster and however many superlatives one can summon, human language and devices of expression seem certain to fall short of fully describing the greatness, power, charm, beauty, and auspicious qualities of God.

³⁹ We are reminded here of Wittgenstein’s argument that if human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee, how could they possibly cope with something as subtle as God.

⁴⁰ KeU-SB 1.3, pp. 35-37. See also BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 11-12.

⁴¹ We shall be expounding upon the unlimited nature of Parabrahman in detail in the next Part (chapter 6.2.2), and discussing it again in the chapter on Mukti when surveying the state of liberation (11.2.3) and the relationship of the liberated souls with Parabrahman (11.2.4).

⁴² While still apophatic, this interpretation is markedly different from the entirely negating “Not this; not this.” The difference is between totally (and lazily) denying any descriptive power or worth to theological language, and realistically and humbly acknowledging its inadequacy even while continuing to endeavour in theology (or ‘God-talk’).

This seems to be the inevitably humble realisation candidly shared by the seers of the Kena Upaniṣad:

We know not, we cannot understand how one can expound him (1.3).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains here that the sheer transcendence or other-worldliness of Parabrahman means that there is no known tangible reference point with which to begin describing him. He is simply incomparable to anything that can be found in this māyic world or can be perceived by māyic senses. Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises these two points at considerable length in Vac. Pan.4 when he begins:

The Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Smṛtis and the other scriptures proclaim that the original form of God – which is eternal, without a beginning and divine – resides in his Akṣaradhāma. They also mention what that God is like. His form is not like any form that can be seen by the eyes. His sound is not like any sound that can be heard by the ears. His touch is not like any touch that can be felt by the skin. His smell is not like any smell that can be smelt by the nose. The tongue cannot describe that God. He cannot be conceived by the mind; he cannot be contemplated upon by the citta; he cannot be comprehended by the buddhi, nor can the ahaṁkāra fully claim, ‘I am God’s, and God is mine’. In this manner, God remains beyond the reach of the senses and inner faculties.

Moreover, the beauty of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa [‘world’ or planetary system] – including everything from Brahmā to the smallest blade of grass. His sound is such that it cannot be compared to any other sounds in this brahmāṇḍa. The smell of God is such that it cannot be compared any other smell in this brahmāṇḍa. The touch of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other touch in this brahmāṇḍa. The tastes related to God are such that they cannot be compared to any other taste in this brahmāṇḍa. The abode of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other place in this brahmāṇḍa. Specifically, out of all of the various places in the seven dvīpas and the nine khaṇḍas, the extremely beautiful places of Brahmā and others on Meru, the

various places on Mount Lokāloka, the realms of Indra, Varuṇa, Kubera, Śiva and Brahmā, and many other places, not one can compare to the abode of God. The bliss experienced by the devotees of God residing in that abode is such that it cannot be compared to any other type of bliss in this brahmāṇḍa.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain the basis of this incomparability, ironically, with the help of several similes.

The form of that God is such that it cannot be compared to the form of anyone in this brahmāṇḍa. Why? Because all of the forms in this brahmāṇḍa which evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa are māyic, whereas God is divine. So, since the two are totally different, how can they possibly be compared? For example, we can compare a man to something by saying, ‘This man is like a buffalo, like a snake, like a sparrow, like a donkey, like a dog, like a crow or like an elephant.’ But in reality, such comparisons are not appropriate for humans. Why? Because all of those animals are of a totally different category than humans. Even between a human and a human, there is no exact similarity whereby one can claim, ‘This person is exactly like that person.’ If he were exactly like the other person, then how could the original person be recognised? Therefore, despite the fact that all humans belong to the same category, no two are exactly alike. Just look at Bhago and Mūḷo. The two are said to be identical [twins], but if one stays with them for a few days, one can distinguish between them and say, ‘This is Bhago and this is Mūḷo.’ But if there were no difference, how could they be recognised? So, if there is no great similarity between human and human, how can there be similarity between that which is māyic and that which is not māyic? What can possibly be compared to God and the abode of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes again:

After all, all scriptures claim, ‘God is beyond the reach of the senses and the inner faculties.’

But if God is not knowable as an object of sensorial perception, empirical investigation or intellectual speculation, how indeed – even in the limited sense possible – can he be known? Svāminārāyaṇa provides the answer himself in Vac.

Pan.4 and other sermons, but before we go on to discuss this in detail, let us firstly see a more general answer from Vac. Gaḍh. I.24 which will help us frame this discussion. Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the conviction of a devotee with intense faith is always of the form,

‘The manifest form of Puruṣottama has compassionately revealed his form to me’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.24).

This is similar to a statement found identically in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Kaṭha Upaniṣad:

Nā’yam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena |
Yam evaiṣa vivṛṇute tena labhyas-tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm
svām ||

This Self [Paramātmā] cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing [i.e. learning]. He is attained only by the one whom the Self [Paramātmā] chooses. To such a one, the Self [Paramātmā] reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

Quite simply, both statements explain, God can be known only when *he* chooses to be known; or, to paraphrase them even more closely, when God graciously “reveals” (“vivṛṇute”) himself. We find here the clearest possible reference to what is commonly termed in theology as ‘revelation’.

With this background and starting point, we can now proceed with the following chapter as we attempt to unfold the complex doctrine of revelation as it is conceived in its various forms within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and understand its role as the exclusive source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

3) REVELATION – THE EXCLUSIVE SOURCE OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

Acknowledging the limited scope of human cognition impaired by our māyā-corrupted senses and mind is the first step in accepting revelation as the exclusive source of authentic theological knowledge. The divine, transcendental and unlimited nature of God means that he is hardly, if at all, accessible by human intelligence, imagination and ingenuity. So we need to be *told* what God is like. Indeed, *God* needs to tell us what he is like. Better still: God needs to *show* us who he is. And so he reveals himself.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this points to the three modes of revelation discernible within the tradition. They are:

- 1) Revelation as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa
- 2) Revelation as Parabrahman being substantively present in and made known by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru
- 3) Revelation through Scripture, i.e. Svāminārāyaṇa's sermons documented in the Vacanāmṛta, and the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus' teachings, such as the Svāmīnī Vāta

As we expand upon each mode in turn, we shall also look to address some important questions and useful discussions that we can further develop in Part 3 concerning the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

3.1) Revelation as Self-Manifestation

The actual appearance or ‘self-manifestation’ of Parabrahman on earth in an accessible, endearing human form is the most decisive, explicit and direct form of revelation possible. It allows God to not only tell us and show us what that ultimate reality is, but to present it in himself. This self-presenting to humanity of the God who cannot be seen or reached by human effort alone is thus a supreme act of God’s loving and liberative grace. Svāminārāyaṇa iterates this repeatedly throughout his sermons, most often while explaining the purpose of this human manifestation in terms of granting ultimate liberation to countless souls. To cite a few brief statements:

That God himself... becomes like a human for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

That God... becomes like a human, out of compassion, to liberate the jīvas (Vac. Pan.7).

Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest... for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Added to this is the distinctive, fundamental belief of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya that this earthly manifestation of Parabrahman occurred in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa between 1781 and 1830 CE. The specificity of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa is what lends the concept of revelation its power and authority to the faithful of the tradition. For them, Parabrahman *is*

Svāminārāyaṇa; or, even more personally, Svāminārāyaṇa *is* Parabrahman. He appeared *himself* so that humans may identify who God is and begin to know and relate to him, even within their limited human capacity.

As we shall see in some detail towards the end of the chapter on Parabrahman, followers find instances of Svāminārāyaṇa referring to himself as this highest reality in several of his sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Vac. Amd.6, Vac. Amd.7). At this point, it will suffice to quote just one statement cited from old manuscripts of the tradition, personalising the more general statements excerpted above. It reads, firstly using Svāminārāyaṇa's original north-Indian Hindi⁴³:

Dūsarā avatār hai so kārya-kāraṇ avatār huā hai, aur merā yah avatār hai so to jivoku brahmarūp karke ātyantik mukti dene ke vāste Akṣarātīt Puruṣottam jo haṃ vah manuṣya jaisā banyā hu.

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa ['like Brahman'] and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.⁴⁴

⁴³ In his later years, Svāminārāyaṇa's extensive stay in Gujarat meant he became well-versed in Gujarati, and thus delivered sermons (many of which are now documented in the Vacanāmṛut) to his local audience in Gujarati rather than Hindi or Sanskrit.

⁴⁴ Nandkishor Swami, *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa* (Bhuj, India: the author, 1958), p. 76.

See also a similar statement found in one of Svāminārāyaṇa's few extant letters, written to his lay and monastic devotees:

Kalyāṇke karne vāste merā avatār hai. Āj to mai avidyārūp je māyā hai, tiske nāṣke vāste pragaṭ huā hū. Āj to merā prayojan ehi hai, jyo avidyāku nāṣ karnā, jivku brahmarūp karnā. Is prayojan vāste me pragaṭ huā hū. Jivuke mukti deneke vāste, manuṣya eṣā banyā hū (*Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7).

The unequivocal proclamation in this statement of the purpose and person of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa is something that will require a lot more elucidation, which we shall cover in its proper place in the chapters on Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and Mukti.

The striking but apparent contradiction of Parabrahman being beyond eyes, speech and mind, as described in the Upaniṣads and by Svāminārāyaṇa himself, suddenly becoming “pratyakṣa” (‘manifest before the eyes’), as Svāminārāyaṇa also claimed, was not lost on his followers. How could both be possible? Was indeed the one before the eyes that same imperceptible, transcendental Parabrahman? This appears to be the pointed question posed by Daharānanda Svāmī in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78. He asks:

God transcends Akṣara; he is beyond mind and speech; and he is imperceptible to all. Why, then, can everyone see him as manifest before the eyes?

Svāminārāyaṇa replies:

God – who transcends Akṣara, who is beyond mind and speech, and who is imperceptible – himself, out of compassion, resolves: ‘May all the enlightened and unenlightened people on Mṛtyuloka behold me.’ Having resolved in this manner, God – whose will always prevails – becomes perceivable to all people on Mṛtyuloka out of compassion (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus confirms that the human manifestation of Parabrahman is indeed wholly real and transcendental, made possible only by his loving and gracious will.

A similar question initiates the discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51. After establishing the māyic composition of human senses and the inner faculties (by which we think, reason, contemplate, identify, etc.), Pūrṇānanda Svāmī asks:

God, however, transcends māyā. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the māyic inner faculties? How also can one perceive God with one’s māyic eyes and other senses?

Svāminārāyaṇa first sought to clarify the question by asking:

Māyic objects can be realised by māyic means, and if one has realised God through the same māyic inner faculties and senses, then it implies that God must also be māyic. That is your question, is it not?

Pūrṇānanda Svāmī and the other paramhansas in the audience confirmed:

Yes Mahārāja, that is precisely our question. You have clarified it for us.

Svāminārāyaṇa then began a lengthy exposition of the impassable supremacy of Puruṣottama, the highest Being among all other realities and cosmic elements.

He then concluded:

It is this very God who, out of compassion for the liberation of the jīvas, gives darśana in a manifested form to all of the people on this earth.

Then moving to explain how it can be possible for humans to not only perceive that God but to hold a firm conviction of him, he states:

At that time, if a person realises this greatness of Puruṣottama Bhagavān by profound association with the Sant [i.e. Guru], then all of his senses and inner faculties become divine like Puruṣottama Bhagavān's senses and inner faculties. Then, through those senses and inner faculties, he can develop the conviction of that God.

To help his audience understand, Svāminārāyaṇa employs a useful analogy.

For example, a diamond can be cut only by a diamond; it can never be cut by anything else. Similarly, the conviction of God can only be cultivated through God. In the same way, the darśana of God is also possible only through God, but it is not possible through the māyic senses and inner faculties.

Svāminārāyaṇa's explanation here is relevant to our understanding of his conceptualisation of revelation because it confirms that, firstly, revelation leads to a resolute conviction or realisation of God, and, secondly, that such a realisation is only made possible by God himself or through the help of the Guru,

whom Svāminārāyaṇa refers to here and elsewhere as ‘the Sant’. This has important implications about the ontological position of the Guru within the five-reality system of the Svāminārāyaṇa School which we shall consider at length in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman. His role in leading devotees to a realisation of Parabrahman is something we shall turn to shortly in this chapter.

The striking revelation also worth noting from both these last sermons is the declaration of the utterly transcendental becoming wholly personal – he is *different yet among us* – which is something that makes this self-manifestation especially gracious and powerful for the followers of the tradition and, unsurprisingly, what permeates and guides the whole of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. It is the self-expression of the supremely divine on māyic earth, the eternal in time, the universally pervasive in a particular human form.

The paradox, of course, is that in showing us what he is like, God has to become like us, partially concealing (not curtailing or abandoning) his divinity and presenting himself as human. As we shall see, this is the conscious and supremely gracious choice God makes in order for humans to be able to relate to him. It seems it is more important to God that humans can love him rather than be impressed by an exhibition of his lordly powers.

This brings us to an important aspect of what it means to know God and how it can be possible. At the heart of Svāminārāyaṇa’s conceptualisation of complete knowledge of God is the entering of the devotee into a direct and intimate

relationship with him, made possible now because of his self-manifestation (and, as we shall see, continued presence through the Guru). This is brought to light in an important epistemological and soteriological discussion that ensues between Svāminārāyaṇa and his senior paramahansas in Vac. Loyā.7. It is worth citing here in some detail to help also demonstrate the theological and dialogical nature of the Vacanāmṛut. The discussion is initiated by Muktānanda Svāmī citing from the Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti⁴⁵ –

Ṛte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna

– and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad –

Tam eva viditvā'timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte'yanāya ||

Only by knowing him does one pass beyond death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8).

Thereupon he asks:

These Vedic verses proclaim that the jīva attains liberation only when it realises the true 'jñāna' of God. If liberation can only be attained by 'jñāna', why do the scriptures also prescribe other spiritual endeavours for attaining liberation?

Hearing this question, Svāminārāyaṇa simply stated that “jñāna” means ‘to know’, to which Nityānanda Svāmī raises a doubt.

If jñāna means merely ‘to know’, then the whole world ‘knows’ God through the scriptures, yet everyone does not attain liberation.

Acknowledging the point, Svāminārāyaṇa raised a further question:

Just as one does not attain liberation by knowing the previously incarnated forms of God through the scriptures, do you think all

⁴⁵ This is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* at 115.7.

those who actually had the darśana of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and the other avatāras of God with their own eyes attained liberation?

Muktānanda Svāmī replied:

Those who merely see the manifest form of God attain liberation only after several lives.

To this, Svāminārāyaṇa added:

Those who know God through the scriptures also receive liberation after several lives. Why? Because whom these people know through the scriptures is whom the other people see with their eyes; and whom the other people see with their eyes is whom these people know through the scriptures. Thus, the resulting fruits of both are equal, and both attain liberation after several lives.

Svāminārāyaṇa's point here is that mere information about God from the scriptures – even though they are considered revelatory – is inadequate to secure one's liberation because it is not constitutive of theological knowledge. He equates this sterile data to merely seeing God without a true and clear understanding of his glory. To reiterate his point, he continues with a series of rhetorical questions.

After all, is not hearing God with one's ears 'jñāna'? It is, but that can be said to be merely hearing God. Is not touching God with one's skin also 'jñāna'? It is, but that can be said to be merely touching God. Is not seeing God with one's eyes 'jñāna'? It is, but that is merely seeing God. Is not smelling God with one's nose 'jñāna' as well? It is, but that is merely smelling God. Does not describing God with one's tongue also constitute 'jñāna'? It does, but that is merely having described God. In this way, 'jñāna' can be received through the senses. It can also be received through the mind as well as directly from a spiritual experience of the jīva, which transcends both the senses and the mind.

In conclusion to this point, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

To know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience.

Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that God can indeed be (partially) known by the senses and the mind, but the ultimate realisation of God can only be complete when it climaxes in full experience within the soul. Nevertheless, all three ways of relating to God are essential. It is important to note here early on Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis on the manifest, or "pratyakṣa", form of God – the 'one before the eyes' – for only such a form can be known by all three means, including directly through the senses. Furthermore, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in the same sermon to frame this formulation of theological knowledge in terms of "serving", explaining that complete knowledge irrevocably manifests itself as a personal, devotional relationship with God.⁴⁶ This clearly distinguishes the mere accumulation of brute facts concerning God, that is, 'knowing *about* God', from '*knowing* God' personally, as one would another living being.

Faith is thus not simply an assent to a set of doctrines, but the entering into a devotional, liberating relationship with God which transforms the recipients of that revelation. In this sense, revelation can sometimes be difficult, because it calls upon the changing of the person in light of what has been revealed,

⁴⁶ We shall pick up on this important formulation in the next Part, drawing upon it several times: in the Introduction as a tool to explain why the study of all five eternal entities is a necessary part of the theological project in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology (chapter 5.1), in the chapter on Parabrahman to frame our exposition of God (6), and finally in the chapter on Mukti when elucidating the way to liberation (11.3).

especially her previously held notions about understanding and serving God.⁴⁷

Svāminārāyaṇa thus senses potential for resistance and rejection, making revelation all the more valuable and meaningful when it *is* willingly accepted.

Equally, though, he sees no option but to share his vision of the truth about God's nature, so fundamental it is, he believes, to a devotee's spiritual existence and welfare.

To develop the conviction⁴⁸ of God is more difficult than anything else. Because this topic of conviction is extremely complicated, I am afraid of discussing it. I feel, 'Upon discussing this topic, what if someone were to take it wrongly⁴⁹? If, due to this discussion, any personal understanding that one may have firmly cultivated were to be broken, the person would be uprooted.' Yet, there is no alternative but to reveal this fact. If one does not know how to understand it correctly, many problems can arise. Yet, until one has not understood this fact, much deficiency will remain in one's conviction [of God]. That is why I wish to deliver this discourse (Vac. Loyā.18).

This apprehension also helps explain why Svāminārāyaṇa spoke of himself in varying ways, reportedly in accordance to the receptivity and spiritual maturity of his varying audiences.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See William J. Abraham, 'The Offense of Divine Revelation', *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002), 251-64 (p. 259).

⁴⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa frequently uses the terms 'nīścaya' or 'niṣṭā', meaning 'conviction', when talking of one's beliefs about or in God. These words can be understood as referring to faith, but of a much stronger and resolute sort.

⁴⁹ This rather literal translation of 'koine avḷu pade' has been chosen because it allows the broad, open-ended meaning of the original Gujarati that can incorporate such connotations as misunderstanding or even taking offence.

⁵⁰ Brahmadarshandas offers an extensive analysis of these statements in his *Vacanāmṛut Rahasya*, II, pp. 257-333. To this, Shrutiprakashdas adds a useful historical perspective and contextualises several other sampradāyic sources in another in-depth interrogation in *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ*, pp. 242-453.

This leads us to an associated discussion about the receptivity of revelation and understanding it now from the perspective of the individual soul.

3.1.1) Revelation as Unveiling of the Soul

Members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith community will see the self-manifestation of Parabrahman on earth as a supremely significant, gracious and unprecedented⁵¹ event. Apart from being an objective occurrence, though, it is also a subjective experience for all those who encounter that revelation (in its various modes), even today. Seen from the perspective of the individual soul, we are offered an opportunity to understand ‘revelation’ anew from within a Hindu theistic context, especially if we are to take the basic meaning of *apokalypsis*, the Greek word usually translated for “revelation”, as the ‘removing of a veil so that something can be seen’.

The basic idea is this: if God is indeed hidden, as the term ‘unveiling’ would presuppose, it is not God who is doing the hiding under some intractable disguise or sheath of darkness. Rather, it is the *soul’s* veil of ignorance – *māyā* – which is obstructing or obscuring a full vision of Parabrahman. In other words, the veil that is removed in *apokalypsis* is not shrouding Parabrahman, but the individual

⁵¹ According to the Svāminārāyaṇa theological system, as we shall learn in the next Part, the *avatāras* are metaphysically *īśvara*, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa is believed to be Parabrahman, the *Avatārin* (or source of the *avatāras*). The ontological distinction and supremacy of the latter makes Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth all the more unique, significant, and powerfully liberative. Svāminārāyaṇa is recorded as revealing that this self-manifestation of Parabrahman has never occurred before in this *brahmāṇḍa* (planetary system), nor shall it ever occur again (SV 4.10, SV 4.13). Guṇātītānanda Svāmī and other ordained and lay disciples have also noted this revelation several times in their own works. See Shrutiprakashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ*, pp. 194-215.

ātman. In unveiling (or ‘de-veiling’) the soul of its ignorance, God is there to be seen, as he always was. The realisation thus takes the form of not God saying, ‘Look, here I am!’, but the soul discovering God: ‘Oh, there you are!’ That is why ‘sākṣātkāra’ or ‘darśana’ – the highest state of enlightenment, possible upon liberation from māyā – is, literally, the direct realisation or vision of God, as if ‘before the eyes’. Svāminārāyaṇa describes this state as follows:

One who has attained God-realisation... experiences the following: Wherever he casts his eyes – among all the mobile and immobile forms – he sees the form of God as if it is before his eyes, the same form that constantly remains in Akṣaradhāma even after the dissolution of the body, the brahmāṇḍa and Prakṛti-Puruṣa. Other than that form, he does not perceive even an atom (Vac. Kār.7).

We have already seen above that it is by the gracious resolve of Parabrahman that he manifests on earth and makes himself perceptible to humans, notwithstanding their still-māyic senses. However, we also learned from Vac. Loyā.7 that the actual realisation of that Parabrahman – in all his transcendental glory – only occurs when that initial outer perception culminates in an internal liberative experience. It is how well one appropriates this grace of revelation bestowed by Parabrahman that determines the final outcome of realisation. In between these two points on the spiritual journey – from revelation to realisation – lies the process of religious praxis, or sādhanā (literally ‘means’).

A good example of the soul’s need to properly appropriate the grace of God’s revelation can be found in the eleventh canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā, often cited by Svāminārāyaṇa in the Vacanāmṛt (Vac. Kār.8, Vac. Pan.6, Vac. Var.18; especially Vac. Gaḍh. I.25 and Vac. Pan.4.).

When Arjuna prays Kṛṣṇa show him his divine, lordly form (11.4-5), Kṛṣṇa reveals his viśvarūpa (cosmic form). But even then, Arjuna is unable to see it with his own eyes. Kṛṣṇa states:

It is not possible to see me with these [māyic] eyes of yours. I therefore grant you divine eyes. [Now] see my yogic powers (11.8).

We see here two rounds of grace at play: firstly, the gracious revealing of the transcendental form; and secondly, the gracious granting of divine eyes by which to see that form which is otherwise “sudurdarśa” (11.52), very hard to see, and “durnirīkṣya” (11.17), difficult to discern. Arjuna, however, was unable to properly receive that grace and hence could not appreciate the divine form. He found the vision astounding and terrifying (11.20, 11.23, 11.24, 11.25, 11.35, 11.45). Unnerved and bewildered, he beseeches Kṛṣṇa once more, this time to retract the revelation and appear to him as he was (11.45-46). Kṛṣṇa does so, explaining that this vision is not attainable by mere scriptural study, nor by severe austerities, generous gifts, sacrificial rites, or any other means (11.48, 11.53). He explains:

O Arjuna the Oppressor! Only by singular devotion is it possible to thus perfectly see me, know me, and enter into me (11.54).

Here we must summon an important verse from the final canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā to make better sense of the method suggested by Kṛṣṇa. He explains how such devotion, of the very highest form, can be attained:

Brahmabhūta... mad-bhaktim labhate parām |

He who becomes like Brahman [i.e. brahmarūpa]... attains the highest devotion to me (18.54).

So why was Arjuna unable to enjoy the divine form so readily and graciously revealed to him? Because he was not ready to receive that type of grace. He was not yet brahmarūpa – spiritually pure and mature like Brahman – which is the prerequisite to offering devotion par excellence to Parabrahman. And only with such devotion, according to BG 11.54, is the perfect ‘vision’ or realisation of Parabrahman possible. In many ways, this is, as we shall learn, the core doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, that one must become like Brahman to perfectly realise and offer devotion to Parabrahman.

What Arjuna’s example shows is that even with the unmerited grace of God, his revelation cannot be fully appreciated without the necessary receptivity and spiritual maturity. Even while Parabrahman can be fully in sight, he cannot be seen if the māyic veil has not been removed. This leads to the interesting discussion of divine grace and the role of human effort in being ready or able to properly receive that grace, which we shall rightly reserve for the chapter on Mukti.

Sometimes, though, Parabrahman *is* described as “hidden”. For example, KaU 3.12 begins:

Eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūḍhotmā na prakāśate |

This hidden Self [Paramātmā] in all these beings does not shine forth.

Even so, it goes on to explain how the individual soul can see that God by way of a focused, spiritually elevated mind. The verse is completed thus:

Dr̥śyate tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ |

It is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers
(KaU 3.12).

Similarly at MuU 3.1.8, the verse opens with the familiar Upaniṣadic
proclamation that Parabrahman

cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other
senses or by austerities or work,

but then is immediately qualified by saying that those who are of pure spirit
("viśuddhasattva") do indeed see him, by the grace of knowledge
("jñānaprasādena").

Other references to the covertness of God, such as being 'hidden within the cave
of the heart', can be found in several Upaniṣads (KaU 1.14, 2.20, 3.1, 4.6, 4.7, TU
2.1.1, MuU 2.1.10), but here too, even if God is "difficult to see" (durdarśa), he can
still be realised by those with a correct spiritual understanding
("adhyātmayogādhigamena").⁵² The paradox of God being so tantalisingly near
and yet beyond grasp is brought home especially in MuU 3.1.7. Parabrahman is
both "farther than the farthest" and "here at hand". The wise seers find him
hidden within the cave of their own souls. The Bhāṣyakāra makes the important
point that God resides equally in the hearts of all beings – indeed, he is pervasive
throughout creation – yet it is only the brahmajñānin who can see him, for they
are the "seers" ("paśyatsu").⁵³

⁵² KaU-SB 2.12, pp. 96-97.

⁵³ MuU-SB 3.1.7, p. 288. While this verse is directly denotative of Akṣarabrahman, it equally
applies to Parabrahman as well.

We shall be examining further on several sermons in which Svāminārāyaṇa brings together the correct seeing of both the transcendental form of Parabrahman, immanent throughout the universe, and the personal, human form before the eyes. Here, for the purpose of our discussion on revelation as the soul's discarding of its māyic vision, it is worth citing Vac. Pan.7. Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution. One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

Since not everyone has such a realisation of the manifest form of God, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain why this is so, and how it can be resolved.

However, when an ignorant person looks at that manifest form of God before the eyes with a māyic vision, he perceives a human like himself. Just as he himself is born, becomes a child, becomes a youth, becomes old and dies, in the same way, he believes God to undergo the same process. But when one sincerely worships God having faith in the words of the Ekāntika Sant of God, one's māyic vision is resolved. Thereafter, one realises that same form of God as being the supreme conscious being [paramacaitanya], characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānandamāya].

Svāminārāyaṇa clearly distinguishes those who are ignorant, whose perception of God's fully divine reality is clouded by their māyic vision, and the devotees who have learned from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God. With the use of an extended analogy here and also in Vac. Amd.4,⁵⁴ Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to elaborate at great length the absolute divinity of the

⁵⁴ See section 6.5.2.2 where these analogies are discussed in detail.

revealed, self-manifested God while reiterating the erroneous perception of him as borne of the seer's own ignorance, as opposed to the correct and complete theological knowledge of a true devotee made possible by the Ekāntika Sant, or Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

This neatly leads us to the next mode of revelation: God revealed in and by the Guru.

3.2) Revelation in and by the Guru

A thorough study of the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto leads to a patent observation that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend the words 'God manifest before your eyes' to be restricted to his own relatively short time on earth. Nor did he wish to limit the promise of final liberation to only those who had encountered revelation through his own self-manifestation of Parabrahman. For Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, revelation is not a one-off event, but a continuing occurrence. This is because Svāminārāyaṇa reveals the continuing substantive presence of Parabrahman through Akṣarabrahman, which presents itself on earth in human form as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru (referred to variously in the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto as the 'Sant', 'Sādhu', 'Bhakta' and 'Satpuruṣa', and often qualified with such terms as "Ekāntika" ("ultimate"), "great", "God's" or alongside the soteriological imperative). The reality of Akṣarabrahman in its various forms is a central aspect of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, but one that may seem novel to even those familiar with the other

schools of Vedānta. We shall have ample opportunity to discuss this topic and question its assertions in the following chapters. Here, we can proceed to briefly introduce it in light of the doctrine of revelation, reserving the more detailed elucidation for its proper context.⁵⁵

If the self-manifestation on earth of Parabrahman himself is a supremely gracious and benevolent act of revelation, this revelatory grace is no more demonstrated and made available than through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. This is seen to be active within the faith community in two highly related ways which are sometimes difficult to tell apart. Nevertheless, they can be explained in simple terms thus: Firstly, the Guru is the ‘vessel’ which perfectly holds the complete presence of Parabrahman and therefore through whom Parabrahman liberatively works and relates to humans. Because of this, the Guru is, secondly, by whom others can know God, i.e. relate to and serve him, as correctly and completely as possible. God is thus made known both *in* the Guru and *by* the Guru.

To briefly elaborate upon the first of the Guru’s revelatory roles, we see numerous references in the Vacanāmṛta where Svāminārāyaṇa reveals Parabrahman living on and working through the Guru, and therefore making it possible to personally encounter God via ‘the Sant’. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

⁵⁵ See, for example, chapter 7.4.4.

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes.... Since it is God who walks through his legs,... Since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27),

it therefore follows that

When one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, 'I have had the darśana of God himself' (Vac. Sār.10).

This striking proclamation by Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that even while the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is substantively revealed in the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to see the Guru is to see God; to relate to the Guru is to relate to God.

This revelatory presence is the reason why Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī repeatedly and emphatically reiterate in the Vacanāmṛut and Svāmīnī Vāto the need to know, serve, love, obey, trust and surrender to the Guru as one would to God (when he is not personally present on earth), the fruit of which is still realising God, overcoming māyā, and securing liberation. For example, in Vac. Var.10 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him.

This clearly evidences Svāminārāyaṇa's intention that the liberative work of God is to extend beyond his own self-manifestation on earth and continue by way of the Guru.

As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 Svāminārāyaṇa firstly describes the insurmountability of the binding forces of māyā. But then revealing “the means to transcend[ing] māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

What is important to note is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned in tandem in these important soteriological statements. This liberative function of the Guru confirms his person as Akṣarabrahman and his direct, complete and substantive relationship with Parabrahman. Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 that

such a Sant has a direct relationship [sākṣāt saṁbandha] with God.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reinforces this relationship in his sermon at SV 5.392 when he states:

The association of the Sādhu is a direct relationship with God and leads to the bliss of God. Why? Because God fully resides in the Sādhu.

That it is possible to experience the bliss of God when associating with the Guru implies it is God who is granting the bliss through the Guru. This is an idea that can also be found in the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Bhāṣyakāra notes that while God is described in the final verse of the fourteenth canto as the “foundation of the highest, eternal bliss” (14.27), it is stated at 5.21:

Sa brahmayogayuktātmā sukham akṣayyam aśnute |

He who has joined his soul with Brahman [i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] enjoys undiminishing bliss.

The two statements find their internal coherency, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, in the proof that it is God who is granting the blissful experience to the soul through his presence in the Guru.⁵⁶

The same blissful, liberative experience is also reiterated in the Praśna Upaniṣad. When asked by Satyakāma about the after-life upon meditating on ‘Aum’, Pippalāda replies:

Etad vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad aumkāraḥ |
Tasmād vidvān etenaivā’yatanenaikataram anveti ||

That which is the sound of ‘Aum’, O Satyakāma, is verily the higher and lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the knower attain either (PU 5.2).

After showing that the dual classification of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ Brahman confirms the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and the superiority of the former over the latter, the Bhāṣyakāra emphasises that this verse also enjoins the meditation of Parabrahman on par with that of Akṣarabrahman, since ‘Aum’ is *equally* denotative of both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman. Furthermore, because the fruit of such meditation is described as the attainment of “either” (“ekatara”) of them, this is further evidence of Parabrahman’s liberative presence in Akṣarabrahman. The meditation of

⁵⁶ BG-SB 5.21, pp. 126-27. Note the important observation from the BG-SB that ‘Brahman’ *never* refers to God anywhere in the Bhagavad-Gītā.

Akṣarabrahman leads to no lesser an experience or result than that of meditating on Parabrahman himself.⁵⁷

We therefore see similar calls to serving the Guru in order to attain God in final liberation. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs at Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

Why? Because

such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates with examples in Vac. Var.5 on how to serve the Guru “like God” by instructing perfectly “equal service” of both, further establishing the revelation of God in the living Guru. Serving the Guru is thus serving God.

Such an instruction of “equal service” resonates with the famous declaration at the end of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Yasya deve parā bhaktir-yathā deve tathā gurau |
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanah ||

All objectives declared [in the sacred texts] shine forth [i.e. become attainable] for the great soul who offers the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly explains:

Intense love for the Satpuruṣa is itself the means to realising one’s ātman, is itself also the means to realising the greatness of the

⁵⁷ PU-SB 5.2, pp. 214-16.

Satpuruṣa, and is itself also the means to having the direct realisation of God (Vac. Var.11).

Again, the remarkable and instructive revelation here is that devoutly relating to the Guru leads to the realisation of God.

Because Parabrahman is revealed *in* the living Guru, it seems natural that he should also be an authentic and vital source of theological knowledge. This is the second revelatory role of the Guru, *by* whom God is revealed or made known. The Guru leads the faithful to the realisation of God, without whom, such a realisation would remain elusive. Svāminārāyaṇa thus instructs that one should develop faith in Parabrahman – or ‘the conviction of God’ (“niṣṭā” or “niścaya”), as he often terms it – only by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Indeed, he bases his very definition of niścaya around the Guru. After asking the question,

What is the conviction of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27:

The attributes of the Sant – being free of lust, avarice, egotism, taste, attachment, etc. – are described in the scriptures. The Sant who possesses these attributes has a direct relationship with God. Therefore, one should develop the conviction of God based on his words. In fact, to have firm faith in the words of the Sant is itself the conviction of God.

It is interesting to see here that the starting point is scripture, at least in identifying the spiritually pure Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be suggesting that the Guru then takes over. One is properly convinced about the existence and nature of God only after having faith in the Guru, because, again, it is in the Guru that God himself chooses to be fully present and so by whom God

can be revealed. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to omit the causal connection and equate the two: faith in the Guru *is* the conviction of God.

Of course, God is not restricted to the Guru and is still free to reveal himself independently, though, as shall be explained, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru remains his most accessible and endearing “medium” through which to personally interrelate with humans.

Nor, of course, does Svāminārāyaṇa mean to discount the role of scripture in revealing God, as we shall shortly learn. There, too, though, the role of the Guru in relation to scriptural revelation will become evident when Svāminārāyaṇa stresses the ‘reading’ of Scripture only through the Guru if one is to arrive at the most accurate understanding of God. If Svāminārāyaṇa is not elevating the Guru above scripture, he is surely positioning him as a living scripture of the most authoritative kind.

It comes as no surprise that the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā – themselves treaties richly steeped in the ancient Vedic tradition of guru-disciple learning – also emphasise the need of the Guru in order to avail of true theological knowledge, or, in other words, to realise God and be liberated. For example:

Only knowledge learned from the Guru leads one to the goal (CU 4.9.3).

Arise, awake, and understand [this liberative knowledge] having approached the best [teachers, i.e. the Guru] (KaU 3.14).

Some of these calls to imperatively seek the Guru also include vital hints about the essential credentials of such a bona fide spiritual teacher, as opposed to others of an “inferior” sort.

It [liberative knowledge] is difficult to grasp when taught by an inferior man, even though one may be highly contemplative. Yet there is no way to it without it being taught by the non-inferior [i.e. superior teacher, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru], [for] it is subtler than an atom [and] beyond the realm of reason. Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation. Yet, Dearest [Naciketas], it is well known when taught by the other [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] (KaU 2.8-9).

To realise that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is Brahman, who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, and who is firmly established [in God] (MuU 1.2.12).

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service. Those enlightened [Gurus] who ‘see’ the truth will teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34).

While we shall be discussing these later in much more detail, it is important to note here that in all these verses, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses that they refer only to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, for only he is capable of making known God perfectly because of his own perfect, eternal and sublimely inherent God-realisation.

This returns us to the Upaniṣadic statement with which we began this discussion of “revelation”.

This Self [Paramātman]... is attained only by the one whom the Self chooses. To such a one, the Self reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that God is attainable by grace alone (“kṛpaikasādhya”), and only when and how he chooses to reveal himself. Apart from his self-manifestation on earth, one way that Parabrahman chooses to graciously reveal himself is by providing earnest seekers of the truth the association of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, within whom he substantively resides, who can then lead them to him. Therefore, when elaborating upon the “form of his [Paramātmān’s] grace”, the Bhāṣyakāra states:

God, the ocean of grace that he is, grants that devotee access to the profound association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru... so that his devotee can easily realise him [Paramātmān].⁵⁸

In conclusion to this section, we can end with a simple analogy to help summarise and further elucidate the unique revelatory dual-function of the Guru and his relationship with God. Consider a cup of water. The cup itself is not made of water, but as its container, it is normal to refer to it, especially when full, as ‘a cup of water’. Without dismissing the value of the cup itself, it is its contents to which attention is drawn. Similarly the Guru, though ‘composed of’ Akṣarabrahman, holds – is brimming with – the divine presence of Parabrahman. Only such a Brahmasvarūpa vessel could perfectly hold Parabrahman, and that, too, only by Parabrahman’s will, and so, it is the God within who ultimately becomes the focus of devotional attention. Nevertheless, the cup and contents never become one. In the same way, the Guru *never* becomes God; he forever remains ontologically distinct and infinitely subordinate to God.

⁵⁸ KaU-SB 2.23, p. 119.

This also means that earnest seekers can be liberated and can enjoy the limitless bliss of God by associating with the Guru, just as those who drink from the cup experience the contents, not the cup. The Guru becomes the indispensable means, or medium, by which to encounter God. Without the cup though, such an experience or encounter would hardly be possible, for how else would one partake of the water considering its fluidity? While water in its various forms may be available elsewhere – in freshwater lakes or even in the air as vapour – it is found in its fullest, most ‘handy’ form when contained in the cup. Here, too, the transcendental, all-pervasive God becomes available and readily accessible by his substantive presence in the Guru.

Consider further now a perfectly transparent cup. It not only holds the water but also reveals what it is holding. In a similar way, the eternally māyā-free, all-divine Guru makes God known through his own perfectly pure Akṣarabrahmic being.⁵⁹

3.3) Revelation through Scripture

The third mode in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology by which God reveals himself is through teachings, which, for ease and consistency, we can refer to as ‘Scripture’. In this section, we can address the scope of Scripture within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, pertaining to the Vacanāmṛt and the wider Vedic

⁵⁹ Like all analogies, the similarity breaks down when considering the wider, active role of the Guru. The Guru is not a passive vessel; as we shall see, he plays an important dynamic function in leading seekers to liberation and bestowing his brahmic qualities in making them brahmarūpa.

canon, its role as the cornerstone upon which all doctrines of the faith are articulated, and the sanctioned way to ‘read’ this primary source. First, then, what do the faithful of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition primarily mean when they speak of ‘Scripture’, and why is it so important to them?

Svāminārāyaṇa’s manifestation on earth in human form allowed for him to teach his ideas about God, liberation, and the meaning of life. It is not difficult to appreciate the extraordinary religious significance of this event for members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith. The sacred perennial wisdom of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, and other canonical texts, which ancient seers had received by way of divine inspiration, was now available *in person*. Parabrahman was not inspiring those wise words remotely through some distant medium, but speaking them himself, here on earth, in human form. These ‘immortal, immortalising words’ were meticulously documented by some of Svāminārāyaṇa’s most learned and closest disciples, themselves also advanced seekers of liberation, and the compilation later presented to him for personal authentication (see, for example, the mention in Vac. Loyā.7). This set of 274 sermons is the Vacanāmṛut (‘the immortalising words’). Its abiding status in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as the most authentic source of scriptural revelation lies in the distinctive belief that Svāminārāyaṇa, as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within the Vacanāmṛut. For the Svāminārāyaṇa community this means, quite literally, it is *God talking about God* – “theology” (if essentially ‘God-talk’) in its fullest sense.

Equally, the Vacanāmrut attests to the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa, but its faithful readers would see it as more than a witness to that revelation. As a receptacle of the spoken words of Svāminārāyaṇa, the Vacanāmrut is not a mere book. A footing for this belief can be found in an important sermon where Svāminārāyaṇa implicitly identifies himself as “the avatārin”, not a form of the past avatāras but “the cause of all of the avatāras.” In conclusion, he adds:

Although these talks are extremely subtle, even a person of average intelligence can understand them. It is as if these talks are personified [‘mūrtimān’] (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasis here seems to indicate that the sermons are not to be considered a dead letter, because they speak of a living God ‘manifest before the eyes’ in person, in human form (“mūrtimān”), rendering even the most abstract of ideas tangible and easier to grasp. Elsewhere he adds that “My words are my form”, implying that a proper engagement with these teachings can be evocative of relating to God in person, and should, in fact, lead to a personal encounter with his living form.

Of course, ‘revelation’ as the manifestation of Svāminārāyaṇa cannot itself be equated to the text of the Vacanāmrut.⁶⁰ It is Parabrahman self-revealed as Svāminārāyaṇa who lends the Vacanāmrut its authority and sanctity, not vice versa. And it is God who grants liberation, not a text. In this sense, it might be

⁶⁰ Emil Brunner speaks of the “fatal equation of revelation with the inspiration of the Scriptures”. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1947), p. 7.

more accurate to say that the theological truths of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith are revealed not *in* the text but *through* the text, by Svāminārāyaṇa himself. If the Vacanāmrut as a ‘book’ is holy, it is because of its divine author, or rather, orator.⁶¹

The above can also be applied to the sermons of Guṇātītānanda Svāmī compiled in the Svāmīnī Vāto and other teachings of the subsequent Brahmasvarūpa Gurus. The community of faithful recognises the authority that these texts already inherently hold on account of them being spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. This authority is not imposed upon them by any external source; their veradicality is intrinsically certified, i.e. they are ‘svataḥ-pramāṇa’. This divine oratory is why other religious works – such as the biographical accounts of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus, or the thousands of devotional songs of praise and moral teaching composed by Svāminārāyaṇa’s disciples – while still rich in theological content, cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a direct source of theological knowledge on par with “revelation”. They can certainly be useful tools that help one reflect upon and illumine revelation (as we shall see in the next chapter). But alone, they are not the foundation upon which the faith of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition stands and grows. To reiterate, the revelatory value

⁶¹ Although the Vacanāmrut comes to us in textual form, it is regarded and revered within the tradition for the *spoken* words of Svāminārāyaṇa it holds. Correspondingly, it receives its authority from *Svāminārāyaṇa* speaking and authenticating the words that are documented in it, not the transcribers or compilers of those words (even if they were assumed to be divinely inspired to complete their task as accurately as possible).

The Vacanāmrut thus follows in the wider aural tradition of Hindu sacred literature, where revealed texts are śruti – heard, not read. ‘Scripture’, therefore, in Hinduism, is not necessarily something written. See Thomas B. Coburn, “‘Scripture’ in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 52.3 (1984), 435-59.

of the Vacanāmrut, Svāmīnī Vāto and Guru-teachings as authentic and authoritative sources of theological knowledge is undergirded by the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa (the first mode of revelation we saw in this chapter) and his continued revelation in and by the Akṣarabrahman Guru (the second mode of revelation we saw). Thus, it is always Parabrahman who is revealing knowledge of himself, *through* the text of Scripture. It is in this sense that Scripture serves as “revelation”.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this extends the boundaries of scriptural revelation beyond the ancient canon of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, Brahmasūtras, Purāṇas, etc. To be clear, though, Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings in the Vacanāmrut represent for his devotees the most direct and authentic source possible of knowledge about God. What may have been germinal, scattered and abstract in other texts, has been able to be brought together more clearly and concretely than ever in the Vacanāmrut. To be even more explicit, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the Vacanāmrut – personally delivered by the self-revealed Parabrahman and ‘heard’ (i.e. received) via the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (as we shall shortly learn) – is *the* climactic primary revelatory text by which its theological doctrines are established and articulated.

This, however, in no way relegates the Vedic corpus to a secondary canonical tier; the revelatory status of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmasūtras remains intact. The Vacanāmrut simply provides the proper perspective with which to correctly read them now. What may have been dim

and blurry before, is now bright and clear. With the Vacanāmrut, Svāminārāyaṇa has shone a new light onto the ancient teachings and brought them into sharper focus. The freshly illumined texts suddenly reveal meanings which appear as if anew. Of course, they have always been there, but this act of re-reading is the seeing of what was in sight but had been hitherto overlooked. So if we are to return to the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā to read them in light of what is learned from the Vacanāmrut – for example, that Akṣarabrahman (or ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’) is an ontologically distinct entity apart from Parabrahman – it can lead to that ‘Aha!’ moment of insightful theological discovery, sometimes accompanied with an elated exclamation of “*Eureka!*” – ‘I found it!’

In this sense, the Vacanāmrut serves as a natural commentary on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmasūtras, as it interprets, illuminates and sometimes expands upon many of the key themes and ideas latent within the ancient texts. As we shall see throughout the exposition in Part 3, the major themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology find resonance and grounding in these classical, canonical sources.

This is also attested to in the Vacanāmrut when Svāminārāyaṇa presents his teachings as a distillation of the many Hindu texts. For example, he proclaims in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10:

From all the scriptures of the Vedas, Purāṇas, Itihāsa and Smṛti, I have gleaned the principle that jīva, māyā, īśvara, Brahman and Parameśvara are all eternal.

In another sermon, when addressing another point, he states even more emphatically:

In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

When in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21 Svāminārāyaṇa similarly stressed “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation”, he concluded:

This very fact is the essence of all of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

On the same topic again, Svāminārāyaṇa completed his address in Vac. Gaḍh.

II.28 with the following emphatic addendum:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

Properly understood, then, it is not a question of whether the Vacanāmṛut supplants or supersedes other Hindu texts. For the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition’s faithful, it provides the vital light and perspective needed to understand them correctly and completely in consonance with the revelation of Svāminārāyaṇa himself.

Having thus understood Scripture, particularly the Vacanāmrut, as a mode of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, we can now move on to understanding its primary position as a source of theological knowledge.

3.3.1) Primacy of Scripture

The priority and authority placed on the Vacanāmrut within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as a source of theological knowledge can also be traced to Svāminārāyaṇa's own emphasis on appealing to authentic texts whenever possible. He often corroborated important points within his sermons by citing widely accepted scriptures. In the sermons compiled within the Vacanāmrut, 98 scriptural references are directly quoted a total of 110 times, including 45 verses or verse-portions from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and 33 from the Bhagavad-Gītā. Other scriptures directly referenced include the Aitareya Upaniṣad, Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Subāla Upaniṣad, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Āraṇyaka (Yajur Veda), Mahābhārata, Skanda Purāṇa, Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti, Carpaṭapañjarī and Maṇiratnamālā. Indirectly, Svāminārāyaṇa refers to more than fifty works of religious and other significance, including some extremely remote texts, such as Sūryasiddhānta and Siddhāntaśiromaṇi.

When engaging his audience with theological questions, he would similarly insist that they, too, offer answers supported by scriptural testimony. For example, when asking in Vac. Gaḍh. I.69,

What exactly is dharma?

he follows up immediately by requesting the respondents to

Please base your reply on the scriptures.

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71 he requests:

Therefore, please base your answer on the principles of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

When in reply to one of his questions the sādhus did not substantiate their answer, Svāminārāyaṇa quickly responded:

From what principle in the scriptures do you claim that...? Please quote any reference from the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

At the heart of this insistence to root all reflection in Scripture lies the principle of scriptural revelation as the only authentic knowledge-source of all things Godly. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this explicit in Vac. Sār.13 when describing how to develop faith in God.

Whosoever develops faith in God does so only through the scriptures. Why? Because the scriptures describe the characteristics of God as well as the characteristics of the Sant. So, only faith developed through the scriptures remains steadfast. On the other hand, faith developed by one's own mind, without the help of the scriptures, eventually dissolves....

Only one who has faith in the scriptures is able to develop unshakeable faith in God, and only such a person attains liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 to assert Scripture as the ultimate source of all theological knowledge. In other words, all theological knowledge, wherever it exists, has its root in Scripture.

For Svāminārāyaṇa, then, scriptural testimony is the only knowledge-source (“pramāṇa”) among all the epistemological means whereby one can properly know the nature of the transcendental, otherwise imperceptible Parabrahman (and Akṣarabrahman).⁶² To this, there is a useful (though untraceable) Sanskrit verse which reads:

Anekaśaṅyocchedi paroṣārthasya darśanam |
Sarvasya locanam śāstram yasya nāstyandha eva saḥ ||

Scriptures dispel all doubts and reveal intangible truths [literally, make visible that which is beyond the eyes]. They are the eyes of all. Without them, a person is indeed blind.

Here, though, we must pause to face a contention raised by the Bhāṣyakāra in his extensive commentary of BS 1.1.3. The sūtra itself –

Śāstrayonitvāt |

– affirms that Scripture is that by which one can know ‘Brahman’, which has already been identified as the subject of the Sūtrakāra’s inquiry (BS 1.1.1) and minimally referred to as the cause of the world’s origination, sustenance and dissolution (BS 1.1.2).

The objection takes this form: Upaniṣadic statements such as

Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya...

From where speech returns... having not attained it (TU 1.4.1 & TU 2.9.1);

Eṣa ta ātmā’ntaryāmyamṛto’dṛṣṭo draṣṭā’śrutah śrotā...

⁶² We shall be considering in the following chapter the means of reason, praxis and tradition as, not *sources* of theology but, *tools* to illuminate and better receive revelation.

This Self, the immortal inner dweller, is the unseen seer, the unheard listener... (BU 3.7.23);

and

Yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam...

That which is unseeable, ungraspable... (MuU 1.1.6)⁶³

confirm that God is beyond the subject of speech and sound; he cannot be described nor can he be heard. He is therefore unknowable by scriptures, which, after all, are nothing but “a pile of words” [śabdarāśi eva śāstrāṇi].

To this the Bhāṣyakāra retorts that these are the ramblings of those who have not grasped the true import of the scriptures and rely solely on the imagined proficiency of their flawed reasoning. Statements such as the above serve simply to affirm the unlimited nature of God and the limited scope of human means. Indeed, it is by these very scriptures that this is established! How can those same scriptures, which you, too, cite, then become invalid? If you argue, on the basis of these statements, that God is not the subject of verbal testimony, then what will you make of other statements, in those same set of scriptures, which describe him as knowable through scriptures? Such statements include:

Tam tvaupaniṣadam puruṣam...

That Self extolled in the Upaniṣads... (BU 3.9.26);

Vedaiśca sarvair-aham eva vedyaḥ...

I alone am to be known by all of the Vedas... (BG 15.15).

⁶³ According to the Bhāṣyakāra, these last two statements refer in particular to Akṣarabrahman, but can also apply to Parabrahman.

They assure that, even with all their usual limitations and imperfections, words, when divinely spoken or inspired, can invaluablely serve as a reliable source of knowledge about God. As always, though, we must also accept that this revelation, even though adequate, is never exhaustive.

3.3.2) Essentiality of Guru in Receiving Scripture

As direct as the Vacanāmrut and the Svāmīnī Vāto are the words of Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī, the inescapable fact remains that they still come to us as words, fraught with the potentiality of being misread (like other texts) by frail, imperfect human minds. Unlike ordinary texts, however, they are, according to the tradition, words spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman – divine speakers – and so any interpretation of them must also be faithfully undertaken. Indeed, reading and interpreting the Vacanāmrut as the authentic, normative source of theological knowledge for the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community is an endeavour that must adhere to certain guidelines. The correct methodology of reading theological texts is a complex topic, though, deserving a lot more detail and discussion than is available here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to cover the most important guideline Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly emphasised in the Vacanāmrut itself, that is, the ‘reading’ or ‘listening’ of Scripture from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

Firstly, it is important to clarify that we are allowed here a broader meaning of the terms ‘reading’ and ‘listening’. It is, of course, highly desirable to hear first-hand the Guru reading and exegetically elaborating upon Scripture. But when

that is not possible, the practice of reading personally or even when listening to a text-based discourse from another expert, the exegetical import is always derived from the Guru. The final, decisive responsibility of valid interpretation is invariably deferred to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, because it is only he, as (Akṣara)Brahman and being fully established in Parabrahman (“brahma niṣṭham”), who has the most direct and perfect realisation of scriptural truths (“śrotriyaṃ”) and is thus the most qualified and able to convey them.⁶⁴ The Guru, to be precise, is not only a knower of the revealed truth (“jñānin”), but a direct *seer* (“tattvadarśin”)⁶⁵ and embodiment of it. These attributes become all the more vital when one appreciates the multivalency of scriptural words, and thus the potentiality of their misreading, alongside the primacy of Scripture above all other sources of theological knowledge. Others, even erudite scholars but who are without a direct experience of God, would be prone to misinterpret or incompletely understand scriptural teachings, and would therefore not be able to fully and properly explain them as God intended them to be understood. This would mean that experts theologising upon primary and secondary texts can still be innovative and imaginative in their exegesis, insofar as it conforms to the overarching reading provided by the Guru. Anything contradictory to or divergent from the original revelation, however, would be deemed inauthentic.

⁶⁴ See MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56 for an elaboration of the words and this point. See also BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 22-24.

⁶⁵ See BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.

What is further clear from Svāminārāyaṇa's sermons is that, in his mind, the reading of Scripture is not a barren, academic activity. When Gopālānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Var.11,

Why is it that despite reading the Śāstras, the Purāṇas, and other scriptures, the pundits of the world still do not understand the greatness of God and the Sant as it really is?

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the fault lies in their lack of refuge in God. As a result, the pundits, as learned as they may be, are “overpowered” by their own “inner enemies” of “lust, anger, avarice, jealousy,” etc., leading them to arrogantly misunderstand God and the Guru.

So, even though they read the Śāstras and Purāṇas, they fail to realise the greatness of God and his Sant as it really is.

To capitalise on its inherent liberative benefits, scriptural reading thus needs to be conducted with a firm grounding in faith. In the very next sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa warns against hearing the holy scriptures from faithless exponents. He likens someone who “does not have such firm faith coupled with the knowledge of God's greatness” to an “impotent”, from whom no woman can ever beget a child. “Similarly,” Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

no one attains liberation by hearing even holy scriptures such as the Gītā and the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from one who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness (Vac. Var.12).

It is thus the fertile intercourse of *faith* with scripture that bears the liberative and joyous understanding of God.

Going even further in Vac. Var.12, Svāminārāyaṇa warns that receiving the holy texts from faithless readers can not only be fruitless, but gravely dangerous to one's faith.

Just as death is assured to whoever drinks sweetened milk into which a snake's venom has fallen, similarly, no one can ever attain liberation by listening to the Gītā or the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from a person who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness. On the contrary, it can be detrimental.

The natural culmination of this instruction can be found in Vac. Loyā.11 where Svāminārāyaṇa states simply and concisely:

One should only hear the sacred scriptures from the Satpuruṣa, but never from an unholy person.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises even more clearly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13 the essentiality of the Guru in helping access revelatory truths from the scriptures. After delivering an exceptionally important sermon on the nature of God, in particular alluding to himself as Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa appends his address with the following reminder:

However, such discourses regarding the nature of God cannot be understood by oneself even from the scriptures. Even though these facts may be in the scriptures, it is only when the Satpuruṣa manifests on this earth, and one hears them being narrated by him, that one understands them. They cannot, however, be understood by one's intellect alone, even from the scriptures.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa adds categorically:

The words of the scriptures cannot be [fully] understood by anyone except an Ekāntika Bhakta.

"Which words?" he asks rhetorically, before elaborating:

Words such as ‘God is formless’, ‘universally pervasive’, ‘luminous’, and ‘nirguṇa’. On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the scriptures describe God as being formless. On the other hand, an Ekāntika Bhakta realises, ‘When the scriptures describe God as being formless and nirguṇa, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a māyic form or māyic attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

Thus, in Svāminārāyaṇa’s mind, the Vacanāmṛut or any other scriptural text is only correctly interpreted when it is read under the loving, faithful tutelage of the Guru. Reading from the Guru ensures that each detail is understood ‘sampradāyically’ (i.e. ecclesiastically), so to speak, in conformation with the norms, faith and history of the tradition.

In conclusion to this chapter, this is what can be succinctly said of ‘revelation’ in the Svāminārāyaṇa system: God, out of his loving grace, has chosen to be revealed in person as Svāminārāyaṇa, in and by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, and through Scripture, which most directly means the Vacanāmṛut when faithfully received via the Guru.

4) TOOLS OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

If it is by revelation alone – the gracious, loving act of God revealing himself in person or through Scripture and the Guru – that God can be known, the question then remains, what place do human reason and endeavour, both past and current, have in the quest to better understand that revealed God? This shall be the subject of inquiry in this chapter. In particular, I shall be touching upon the role of reason, praxis and tradition in the Svāminārāyaṇa system by which to understand God and progress towards the goal of liberation.

First, though, it is important to note the function of these factors as *tools* in relation to revelation. That is, unlike revelation, they are not independent *sources* of theological knowledge, nor are they complementary or supplementary to it, for revelation is not necessarily deficient in any way that they could add anything new to whatever is already inherent within revelation. Needless to say, reason, praxis or tradition neither function as correctives to what is axiomatically believed to be infallible and sacred. Nor would it be correct to say that they somehow hold a decorative role; the beauty of raw revelation can be just as joyous and rewarding. In fact, any embellishments to revelation are not only unnecessary, but possibly even distractive, or worse, damaging. Similarly, reason, praxis and tradition do not serve as condiments to ‘enhance’ revelation, spicing up an otherwise bland version of the truth.

What the tools do provide, however, is a new vigour of light with which to better appreciate revelation and its latent beauty and power. They help illuminate

revelatory truths, so that seeing the same in a new light sometimes leads to a discovery of what had previously been missed. What may have been dim and blurry before, is now bright and clear. In this sense, these tools can also function like spectacles, bringing into sharper focus what – due to defects or deficiencies in the observer, not the object (i.e. revelation) – may have seemed obscure or indistinct. Rather than enhancing revelation, they enhance the capability of the reader to access and receive revelation more intensely. They serve to clarify and fortify its meanings, helping unlock deeper chambers of truth not immediately apparent. Again, all these are highly complex topics, warranting far more detail and discussion than is possible here. At the very most, we may be able to fleetingly point to their basic function in the sections below as we briefly introduce each in turn.

4.1) Reason

In his extensive commentary on BS 1.1.3, the Bhāṣyakāra strongly defends the primacy of śabda (verbal testimony) and its irreducibility to an inductive expression. In particular, he argues in some detail about the limits and defects of rational induction when employed independently of Scripture to prove the creatorship of Brahman. Using the Nyāyists' syllogism of 'All effects have an agent; the world (comprising of sprouts, etc.) is an effect, therefore it must have an agent, as with a pot', he systematically dismantles each technical constituent of the argument and rejoins a series of counter-arguments before issuing a warning: an overzealous application of reasoning or confidence in one's intellect

can blind one from seeing one's own limitations and fallacious argumentation, leaving one empty of higher, more subtle truths.⁶⁶

Elsewhere⁶⁷, the Bhāṣyakāra adds that adeptness in argumentation alone is inadequate (“akiñcitkaram”), simply because the divine, not-this-worldly and sensorially imperceptible God can never become the subject of reason alone – just as the ears can never grasp the visual beauty of a rose and the eyes fail to apprehend the melody of a birdsong. Besides, all instances of inference are predicated on perception, and therefore the senses, whose limitations have already been well established.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad, for example, clearly states that this highest theological knowledge is “atarkyam” (2.8), not of the realm of suppositional reasoning and thus not fully comprehensible by the intellect alone. The very next verse begins:

Naiṣa tarkeṇa matir-apaneyā...

Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation (KaU 2.9).

As the Bhāṣyakāra affords some extra elaboration on this topic, he again warns that reasoning left to its own devices can be dangerous, because, after all, argumentation is a skill. A strong argument can always be thwarted by a stronger argument. So there is no telling which incisive piece of logic might be superseded by a yet more rational objector or by the same thinker at a different time or

⁶⁶ BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 19-22, esp. p. 20.

⁶⁷ The following is based on BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 17-24; BS-SB 1.1.5, pp. 29-31; BS-SB 2.11, pp. 164-66; KaU-SB 2.9, pp. 92-94; and KaU-SB 6.12, pp. 164-65, with added personal reflection.

place. Such contestations and disputes are endless and ultimately meaningless, he asserts, for this is not the way to decide or judge siddhānta ('established principles'). Besides, reasoning is designated as a quality of the buddhi (intellect), which the Kaṭha Upaniṣad later concedes is increasingly inferior to the soul, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman (KaU 3.10-11). It is thus a futile if not perilous and ridiculously arrogant venture to attempt to grasp knowledge of the supremely divine by that which is still shackled by māyā.

In conclusion, the Bhāṣyakāra states: how can there be any other reliable means of knowing that which is not fully perceptible to human senses and graspable by human intellect? Therefore, rather than perception or inference, it is the intrinsically certified, divinely spoken or divinely inspired words constituting Scripture which we must solely rely upon to form a valid understanding of God. Among all the sources of knowledge, Scripture is thus "paramapramāṇa" (the principal knowledge-source)⁶⁸, and God is, simply, "śāstraikagamyā" (understandable by Scripture alone)⁶⁹.

Even so, while the above places reasoned argumentation in its proper epistemological position, it need not be totally abandoned in order to defer to scriptural authority. In the same comment on KaU 2.9, the Bhāṣyakāra makes the crucial difference between correct reasoning ("sattarka") and incorrect

⁶⁸ KaU-SB 6.12, p. 165.

⁶⁹ BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.

reasoning (“dustarka”).⁷⁰ The former is that which is informed by and undergirded by śraddhā, which he describes at BS-SB 2.1.11 as “utmost faith in the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and the śāstra and siddhānta he propounds”⁷¹. Conversely, incorrect reasoning is that which is uncommitted to and independent of Scripture and Guru. Reason alone may be blind, but holding the hand of faith, it is able to reliably explore the wider contours of theological reflection. Faith gives it direction, leading it safely to fruitful ends.

Reason, therefore, becomes a valuable tool in understanding revelation when properly grounded in and guided by Scripture and the Guru. It helps not necessarily in discovering theological ideas anew, for their roots can always be traced to revelation, but exploring those ideas further and excavating from them deeper truths which had been within sight but not really seen. This is what we mean by reason providing ‘insight’, as it opens one to fresh, deeper, richer understandings of revelation.

Reason can also help in confirming and consolidating what has already been learnt from Scripture and refuting claims contradictory to it. Early on in the Brahmasūtra-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, an objection is raised about the inquiry into ‘Brahman’. The question is this: If śāstra (Scripture) is the supreme authority of brahmic knowledge (theology), it is futile, then, to debate upon it because now there is no room for doubt and therefore there are no doubts to

⁷⁰ KaU-SB 2.9, p. 93.

⁷¹ BS-SB 2.1.11, p. 166.

dispel. The Bhāṣyakāra rejects that idea, asserting realistically that doubts can still occur even within Scripture. Moreover, he adds, once doubts are dispelled, it is useful and even necessary to test and consolidate what one knows, just as one shakes a peg which has been freshly hammered into the ground.⁷²

The very project of the Brahmasūtras testifies to the faithful employment of reasoned argumentation to harmonise meanings, clarify ambiguous content, refute contradictory interpretations, and rebut objections. Reason thus serves to consolidate and clarify that which has already been established by Scripture, to protect and embolden faith. The Bhāṣyakāra too defends his interpretations in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya as being “śruti-yuktisammata”, that is, in agreement with both revelation and reasoning.⁷³ Ratiocination is still permissible and profitable, when deployed on the basis of Scripture (“śāstrād evānumitam”⁷⁴). Applying reasoned reflection, therefore, is not in contradistinction to the concept of *sola scriptura*, insofar as it is in consonance with and submission to revelation. Indeed, reason often works in the service of revelation, bolstering its authority and justifying its priority.

4.2) Praxis

Validation for reasoned argumentation or faithful inquiry can also be found at BG

4.34. The first half of the verse reads:

⁷² BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 10-11.

⁷³ BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.

⁷⁴ BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.

Tad-viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā |

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service.

Importantly, though, ‘paripraśna’ (inquiry) is bookended by humble obeisance and sincere application. That is, the Bhāṣyakāra explains,

only such an inquiry is herein advocated which is doubly bound and refined by being preceded by surrender and succeeded by service. Otherwise, any questioning divorced of a faithful obeisance to begin with and not followed by a subsequent commitment to practice is not conducive to theological understanding; it is verily averse to it.⁷⁵

True inquiry must thus not only be grounded in revelation; it must also follow through into ‘sādhana’ (literally ‘means’ or liberative endeavours), also referred to as praxis⁷⁶. Indeed, a sincere application of theological ideas is an integral and necessary part of the process of understanding theological teachings. It becomes clear from Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons that he did not intend theological beliefs to be simply articles of faith for subscription. Rather, they are to be lived out and deeply integrated into every aspect of one’s actions, thoughts, intentions and being. They are to be experienced, because, as Svāminārāyaṇa stressed, only when one experiences what one has learned from Scripture by faith is one’s knowledge truly complete (Vac. Loyā.7).

⁷⁵ BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.

⁷⁶ This should not be confused with the “praxis” of Liberation Theology which binds together action, suffering and reflection.

In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa taught that theological concepts *grow* in their meaning as they are translated into personal theological praxis (which can take a physical and mental form). For example, in Vac. Sār.17 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God and he increasingly realises the greatness of God.

He goes on to elaborate:

When that devotee identifies himself with the body, he sees God as the witness of his waking, dream and deep sleep states. Later, when he realises himself as transcending the waking, dream and deep sleep states, he realises God as transcending them too. Then, as his vision becomes increasingly subtle, he realises God as being far beyond himself and understands the greatness of God even more. Then, as he becomes more and more lovingly attached to God, his upāsana [loving worship informed by theological understanding] of God becomes even more firmly established.

Svāminārāyaṇa's import here is that one's understanding of God is predicated on a how well one understands one's self. Importantly, as one progresses in a correct spiritual self-understanding, one grows not only in understanding God but, naturally and inevitably, a deeper, richer and loving relationship with him.⁷⁷ In effect, Svāminārāyaṇa is saying: Along the path of theological understanding, one can only see from where one stands; as the aspirant walks further and rises higher, she advances in her theological vision and insights upon what had been accepted on trust from Scripture. This is the role of praxis in the task of theology.

Another example can be drawn from a particularly important sermon wherein Svāminārāyaṇa expounds the crux of his theological system with notable brevity

⁷⁷ See chapter 8.2.1 for a fuller discussion of 'Understanding the Self to Understand and Relate to God'.

and simplicity. He begins by explaining the nature and function of Brahman and then its ontological distinction from and subordination to Parabrahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa then states:

Having understood this [i.e. having accepted these beliefs], one should develop a oneness between one's jivātman and that Brahman, and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him.

What is noteworthy here is that Svāminārāyaṇa immediately calls for the highly theological concept (the Brahman-Parabrahman distinction and connection) to be implemented by way of a living relationship with Brahman (i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru) and God. Furthermore, he brings even such an application into the domain of 'understanding' as he goes on to conclude the sermon thus:

With such *understanding*, 'brahmajñāna' also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3; emphasis added).

This interplay between understanding and praxis is a key feature of Svāminārāyaṇa's teachings, revealing that he never intended faith to be passive. True faith is not an exercise in intellectual excogitation, but calls one to act, sincerely and devoutly. That is why Svāminārāyaṇa advocated and indeed engaged his followers in such endeavours as temple-building (Vac. Gaḍh. II.27) and works of religious service and public welfare (Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Vac. Var.17). He admonished those who "sat idly", and urged those who wished "to attain the highest state of enlightenment" to "make an effort, but... not relax or lose courage" (Vac. Gaḍh. II.12). In one sermon he categorically stated:

All deficiencies which do remain in a devotee are due to his own lethargy (Vac. Gaḍh. I.20).

Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa added, the location of this praxis is the crucible of the faith community itself. Reading of Scripture may be a deeply personal endeavour, but imbibing its teachings in daily life becomes inescapably a communal enterprise. To be clear, this remains an individual effort, but one made within a living community of practitioners. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasised patient praxis within the community as a mark of faith, whereas those who sought to escape the community and practise in isolation as lacking in an essential understanding of God and what it means to be a person of faith (Vac. Var.5).

Svāminārāyaṇa was also careful not to reduce faith to emotional outpourings or intellectual musings, nor confining acts of devotion to mechanical procedures bereft of love and reflection. The key term he used to describe one's relationship with God, as noted above in Vac. Sār.17, was 'upāsanā', which, as we shall later discover more fully, is worship energised by loving devotion and informed by correct theological knowledge.

He often integrated the theoretical and practical aspects into what may be termed 'Applied Theology', that is, having seemingly abstract concepts brought to fruition through ways of practical application. For example, to gain in spiritual strength, Svāminārāyaṇa prescribes sincerely serving devotees of God through word, thought and deed (Vac. Gaḍh. II.63). To control or win over the mind, one should engage in acts of reverent devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.11). Dispassion towards material pleasures can be achieved by observing the basic code of conduct prescribed in religious texts, including physically serving other

devotees, listening to scriptural discourses, and performing other acts of devotion (Vac. Gaḍh. III.34). And after describing the essentiality of a correct, spiritual understanding of the self, Svāminārāyaṇa emphatically asserts that observing the commands of the Guru is indeed tantamount to realising oneself as the ātman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.51).

This emphasis on the pragmatic is also discernible in the questions posed by his disciples who sought not only answers to their theological queries but clear guidance for their sādhanā in progressing towards liberation. For example, when Mukṭānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Kār.8,

Mahārāja, the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures have described the saṁguṇa form of God and have also described his nirguṇa form. So how should one understand the nirguṇa form and how should one understand the saṁguṇa form of Śrī Puruṣottama?

his question is not complete until he concludes with the following:

How much does a devotee of God benefit by understanding the nirguṇa form of that God, and how much does he benefit by understanding the saṁguṇa form of that God?

What is apparent is that the question being asked is not for mere data collection. It is not enough to simply know a concept. Rather, the aspirant is keen to incorporate the concept into his daily practice, and hence is seeking to understand its practical significance as well. As mentioned above, in-between the starting point of faith (based on revelation) and the finishing line of realisation (i.e. experience) lies this journey of praxis, of physically and mentally applying theological concepts until they come to full consummation.

This emphasis stems from the conviction that these theological ideas or beliefs are true, and the truth is to be lived. In living the truths, they in turn are vivified through personal experience. As we shall see frequently throughout the exposition of the main themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, Svāminārāyaṇa insists upon not just knowing about God, as in gathering cerebral information about him, but developing an intimate, personal relationship with him and his living medium, the Guru. Theology, for Svāminārāyaṇa, is not simply about ideas, but the transformation of the individual – progressing from material to spiritual, from bondage to liberation, from māyic to Brahmic.

This is why sheer textual information or theoretical knowledge was ever enough for Svāminārāyaṇa (Vac. Gaḍh. I.50, Vac. Gaḍh. I.35, Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Vac. Gaḍh. III.36, Vac. Var.11, Vac. Gaḍh. III.2, Vac. Gaḍh. III.27). He insisted that only those who were making the sincere effort to reflect upon his teachings and imbibing them would be able to understand them (Vac. Gaḍh. I.18). Faith, then, which is operative, is attended by sincere and patient praxis, by which faith itself is fostered and fortified.

4.3) Tradition

If praxis is the application of scriptural teachings, how these theological ideas have been implemented and practiced over time provides further insight into their finer meaning. ‘Tradition’, as we may call it, thus becomes another useful tool in better understanding revelation. A verse from the Mahābhārata (Ādi Parva 1.267) often cited to substantiate this concept reads:

Itihāsapurāṇabhyām vedam samupabṛhayet |

It calls us to draw upon historical and epical texts to clarify and consolidate the meaning of the Vedas.

Vedic literature itself also attests to the tradition of drawing upon previous authorities of verified knowledge, whose lineage is often narrated as way of substantiating its authenticity. We see this in practice in the beginning of the Bhagavad-Gītā's fourth canto when Kṛṣṇa recounts preaching the yogic knowledge to Vivasvān, who in turn passed it on to Manu, who subsequently conveyed it to Ikṣvāku. He confirms:

Evam paraṃparāprāptam imaṃ rājarṣayo viduḥ |

Thus this [knowledge] received by succession is known by the royal sages (BG 4.2).

Similarly in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.1.1-2), the author traces the transmission of brahmavidyā from Brahmā (not to be confused with Brahman) to his eldest son Atharvan, then successively on to Aṅgiras, Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Aṅgirasa, and finally, to Śaunaka.

In other Upaniṣads we find the more general acknowledgement:

Iti śuśrūma purveṣāṃ ye naś-tad vyācakaṣire |

Thus we have heard from past [teachers], who explained it to us (KeU 1.4; similarly also IU 10 & 13).

Indeed, the very term 'Śruti' (literally 'hearing'), used synonymously with the Vedas and to describe revelatory literature in general, pays further testimony to

this emphasis on ‘tradition’. The fact that the transmission of knowledge from guru to śiṣya is framed as an *aural* tradition, rather than an *oral* tradition, is telling. One would assume that the guru as speaker, being of much higher authority and learning than his audience of disciples, would be the protagonist in the guru-śiṣya dialogue, and thus the revealed texts should be more aptly termed ‘Vakti’ (‘speaking’). The fact that they are not, and instead called ‘Śruti’, affirms, as above, that even the teacher has *heard* whatever knowledge he is imparting from his own previous teachers, extending the lineage indefinitely to, presumably, the initial divine revelation by God himself.

Within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this idea of drawing upon ‘tradition’ and the transmission of divine knowledge takes on a more specific meaning revolving around the human personhood of Svāminārāyaṇa and, in particular, the Guru Paramparā, the unbroken succession of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus in and by whom Parabrahman chooses to be revealed and remain liberatively active. As perfect devotees, their lives serve as the ideal example of how theological principles should and must be practiced, of living out faith in all aspects of everyday life.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus urges his devotees to “reminisce” the “divine incidents and actions (līlā)” of God who lived among us, sometimes alluding to himself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.35; see also Vac. Gaḍh. I.3 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.38) and also the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66). In Vac. Gaḍh. II.58, he explicitly instructs Mukṭānanda Svāmī, one of his most senior sādhu-disciples, to “continuously preach and write” about “your īṣṭadeva for the rest of your life”,

because it is in the texts which narrate the life of one's own īṣṭadeva that "dharma [righteous, or 'right', living] as well as the glory of that īṣṭadeva are naturally revealed". In other words: If the Vacanāmrut is the 'textbook', the biographies of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus are the 'workbooks' wherein we find real-life examples of theological ideas being put into practice, calling us also to emulate them. This is important because practices can be a useful tool when understanding or interpreting beliefs, since how one prays and worships reflects what one believes (and, correspondingly, what one believes, affects how one prays and worships).

The Guru-centric nature of 'tradition', and its continuous flow over time, ensures that 'tradition' itself is not a fossilised view of 'how things were done', but becomes an active process of reflection and interpretation, by which theological and spiritual insights are valued, tested, and transmitted. The very definition of 'sampradāya', even if translated as 'tradition', points both ways – not just to the past but, ironically, also to the future. The Halāyudhakośa lexicon states:

Sampradāyaḥ syāt pāramparyam gurukramaḥ |

A sampradāya is a lineage of successive gurus (2.402).

When elaborating upon the second half of the Bhagavad-Gītā verse cited above –

Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattvadarśinaḥ ||

Enlightened seers shall teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34)

– the Bhāṣyakāra is also keen to point out the use of the future tense in the verb 'upadekṣyanti' ('will preach') and the plurality in the nouns 'jñāninaḥ'

('knowers') and 'tattvadarśinaḥ' ('seers'). He interprets this as a clear affirmation of the succession of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus who will continue to transmit this knowledge to generations of seekers indefinitely.

Properly understood, then, tradition along with praxis and reason do not relegate revelation to an equal or lesser authority, but secure its position as the primary theological source even while establishing themselves as useful tools in the task of theology. This shall prove particularly useful when we (re)turn to these factors in the final Part to discuss a Hindu formulation of (Hindu) theology.

**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

5) Introduction

- Five Eternal Entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta

6) Parabrahman

- Absolute Essentiality of Knowing God
- SARVOPARI: God as Supreme
- KARTĀ: God as Omniagent
- SĀKĀRA: God as Having Form
- PRAGAṬA: God as Manifest

7) Akṣarabrahman

- Akṣarabrahman as Ontologically Distinct from Parabrahman
- Essentiality and Centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology
- Nature of Akṣarabrahman
- Four Forms of Akṣarabrahman

8) Jīva

- Nature of Jīva
- Relationship with Parabrahman

9) Īśvara

- Nature
- Roles and Functions
- Distinction from and Relation to Parabrahman

10) Māyā

- Nature of Māyā
- Māyā as Jagat

11) MUKTI

- Nature and Cause of Bondage
- Nature of Liberation
- Way to Liberation

5) INTRODUCTION

This Part represents the heart of the thesis in that it is where, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, an example of Hindu theology can be presented. It offers an opportunity to not just *discuss* possible traits of Hindu theology, but to *demonstrate* them – that is, to actually theologise within a living Hindu tradition using its own sources and tools (as identified in Part 2). This Part thus provides an exposition – by no means exhaustive, though nonetheless thorough – of the major theological themes of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta tradition.

While expounding on the theology of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, it is important to allow Clooney's clues and categories to recede into the background, not so far that they are totally out of sight, but far enough to make possible a clear and broad view of Svāminārāyaṇa theology on its own terms; in other words, for Svāminārāyaṇa theology to present itself clearly and precisely. As clarified earlier, the project is not to 'fit' Hindu theology into certain boxes (as Clooney himself surely did not intend), but to discover what *a* Hindu theology may comprise allowing us to further build on the salient features of Hindu theology in general. This will facilitate in the final Part a more fruitful return to the features originally proposed by Clooney, leading us to a clearer picture of Hindu theology more broadly.

5.1) Five Eternal Entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta

A discussion of any classical Hindu school of thought invariably begins with an inquiry (mīmāṃsā) into, or discussion of, its basic entities or realities (tattvas):

How many metaphysical entities does it accept as real and which ones? The answer to this fundamental question more often than not reveals much about the school's basic premises and beliefs. For example, within Śaṅkara's absolute monism, the singular attribute-less (nirguṇa) entity of Brahman necessarily requires the visible world to be unreal and illusory, whereas Rāmānuja's acceptance of both cit (sentient) and acit (non-sentient) entities as well, allows for both the world to be real and the non-identity between individual souls and God.

Subsequent and related questions for each entity include inquiries into its essential nature, characteristics, role, relationships, etc. These questions and their answers will occupy the discussion of the following chapters within this Part.

But first it will be necessary to identify these basic entities within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. They are the following five:

1. Parabrahman (or Puruṣottama)
2. Brahman (also Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman)
3. māyā
4. īśvara
5. jīva

Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly lists these in two sermons of the Vacanāmṛt:

Puruṣottama Bhagavān, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – these five entities are eternal (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7).

From all the Vedas, Purāṇas, Itihāsa and Smṛti scriptures, I have gleaned the principle that jīva, māyā, īśvara, Brahman and Parameśvara are all eternal (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

To further emphasise that all five of these entities are indeed real (satya), that is, that they truly exist and are not illusory, Svāminārāyaṇa writes in one of his doctrinal letters:

Some claim that jīvas and māyā are imaginary [kalpita]. But O Paramahansas! The jīva is real, māyā is real, īśvara is real, Brahman is real, Parabrahman is real (Vedarasa, p. 177).

He similarly reiterates in Vac. Gaḍh. I.39 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.42 in response, more explicitly than above, to claims from the Advaitins that “Brahman alone exists and all else besides – jīva, īśvara, māyā, etc. – is unreal [mithyā]”. Rather, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, along with the highest two entities, even jīva, īśvara and māyā are real but not illusory.

The Bhāṣyakāra also mentions the five entities are real and eternal in several of his comments on the Upaniṣads. For example, in elaborating on KeU 2.4,

Pratibodhaviditam matam amrutatvam vindate |

He who realises the highest teachings attains immortality,

he qualifies the highest teachings as being from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru who precisely explicates, among other things, “the form of the five eternal entities –

jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman.” Only such transcendental speech (parāvāṇi) from the Guru can lead to a disciple’s liberation, he adds.⁷⁸

Among the several short phrases of the salutatory śānti-mantra of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, we find the pledge:

Satyam vadiṣyāmi |

I shall proclaim the truth (TU 1.1.1).

Here, ‘satyavacana’ – words of truth – is explained as those words which reveal what is real (satya), that is, “the eternal forms of the five entities – jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman”⁷⁹.

Further along in the same Upaniṣad, the term ‘satya’ appears again. Here, too, it is reiterated as explaining “the eternal forms and [mutual] distinction of the five entities – jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman”⁸⁰.

For anyone familiar with other Vedānta schools, what is immediately striking is that there are *five* tattvas in the Svāminārāyaṇa system, in contrast to, say, Śaṅkara’s one (Brahman), Madhva’s two (svatantra-tattva and asvatantra-tattva), and Rāmānuja’s three (īśvara, cit and acit) – and this is indeed a distinguishing feature of the tradition. It also raises a number of important and sometimes difficult questions of the system. For example:

⁷⁸ KeU-SB 2.4, p. 47.

⁷⁹ TU-SB 1.1.1, p. 330.

⁸⁰ TU-SB 1.9.1, p. 350.

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- a) Is the 'Brahman' of the Svāminārāyaṇa School the same 'highest reality' as that of the other schools?
 - b) If so, then what/who is 'Parabrahman'?
 - c) If not – and 'Parabrahman' is the name simply applied to what others call Brahman – then what/who is this other 'Brahman'?
 - d) Are there *two* 'highest realities' in the Svāminārāyaṇa School? Clearly not, for this, by definition of the superlative, is implausible. But then how are 'Brahman' and 'Parabrahman' related? Indeed, how are the two distinct?
 - e) Furthermore, what is the difference between 'īśvara' and 'Parabrahman'? Is not 'īśvara' God and divine? If not, how do(es) it/he/she/they relate to both God and individual souls (jīvas)?
 - f) What role do the two seemingly superfluous entities of 'Brahman' and 'īśvara' play, within creation and for God and individual souls?

All of these and many others questions will be addressed in the proceeding chapters as and when each of the entities are discussed. However, to assist in a primary understanding of the five entities as we begin and progress through this detailed exposition, the succinct overview below (provided in reverse order) will hopefully prove useful.

- Jīvas are distinct, individual souls, atomic in subtlety and innumerable in quantity. Each one is bound by māyā which shrouds the jīva's

radiant self essentially characterised by existence (sat), consciousness (cit) and bliss (ānanda).

- Īśvaras are higher beings endowed with special powers for fulfilling various functions within a particular brahmāṇḍa ('universe'), of which there are countless millions. But like the jīvas, Īśvaras, too, are shrouded by māyā.
- Māyā is an instrument of God that constitutes the base substance from which this material world is formed. It is also the cause of ignorance for jīvas and Īśvaras.
- To transcend this ignorance, jīvas and Īśvaras must seek Brahman, also called Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman, who is forever untouched by māyā. It takes the form of the abode of Parabrahman, and also appears in human form as his ideal devotee, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Brahman in this form leads jīvas and Īśvaras to the highest elevated state (brahmarūpa or akṣararūpa) wherein they experience the undisturbed bliss of Parabrahman. It also has an all-pervading form, known as Cidākāśa.
- Parabrahman, or Puruṣottama, is God Supreme; the one and unparalleled cause, controller and support of the entire world; omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omnibenevolent. Eternally human in form yet fully divine, he manifests on earth with Brahman to release aspirants from their ignorance and elevate them to an enlightened state, finally granting them an eternal place in his transcendental abode, Akṣaradhāma.

By enumerating these entities as being explicitly five – and five only – confirms that all matter, whether material or spiritual, will be subsumed within one of these five categories. In other words, there is nothing that is not one of the five, but the five categories themselves are reducible no further. Moreover, everything can be only one of the five but never a hybrid of any two or more of them, since all five of the entities are ontologically and eternally distinct from one another. That one entity can never become any other entity, and that none is ever destroyed (because it is endless), means that there will always be five categories, hence, again, explaining them as ‘the five eternal entities’.

Being eternal, of course, must mean that each entity is not only without end (ananta), but also without beginning (anādi), i.e. that it has always existed and will forever continue to exist; there never has been and never will be a time when it does not exist. A term closely related to this concept and confirming that the entities are truly real (satya) is trikālābādhita – meaning literally that they are unaffected by ‘the three times’, the past, the present and the future.⁸¹ It is in this sense that all five entities are said to be eternal (nitya).

However, the permanence of all five is not the same, and it will be useful in this discussion of ‘eternal’ entities to briefly touch upon the three types of permanence in Hindu metaphysics.

⁸¹ The chapter on Parabrahman, in particular, contains a brief discussion about his relationship with ‘time’.

The first type is *kūṭastha nityatā*, or ‘immutable permanence’. Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, Īśvaras and jīvas are all permanent in their being and immutably so; they never undergo any modifications in their essential nature or form.⁸² Māyā, however, does metamorphose into the myriad forms of the material world, yet all the while still being essentially māyā itself. This is called ‘*pariṇāmī nityatā*’, or mutating permanence. Finally, not immediately relevant here but useful for later, is ‘*pravāha nityatā*’, or flowing permanence. This relates, for example, to the incessant cycle of creation, from origination through to sustenance and dissolution and back again to origination, meaning that the world will permanently be in some state of this process of creation although any one state is not permanent.⁸³

In this way, the immutability of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, Īśvaras and jīvas groups them against the mutability of māyā.

The same entities are also contrasted by nature of their sentiency. Of the five, Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, Īśvaras and jīvas are *caitanya* (sentient or spiritual), whereas māyā is essentially *jaḍa* (non-sentient or material)⁸⁴.

⁸² Even so, the immutability of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman differs to that of the Īśvaras and jīvas, as we shall see in their respective chapters.

⁸³ Another example of *pravāha nityatā*, using a contemporary analogy, is that of a prime minister or president. The position is permanent, but its occupancy ‘flows’ from one person to another.

⁸⁴ Māyā can also be described as ‘*jaḍacidātmikā*’, but its sentiency is only by way of association with jīvas and Īśvaras. See Chapter 10.1.2.

A further straightforward categorisation of the entities also useful to emphasise at the outset is their ontological position to māyā. As is apparent from the sequence in which they are usually listed, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are ‘above’ or transcending māyā, whereas Īśvara and jīvas are ‘below’ or within it.

Parabrahman	}	Above Māyā
Akṣarabrahman		
Māyā	}	Below Māyā
Īśvara		
Jīva		

The meaning and significance of these characteristics will become more apparent as each entity is discussed in the subsequent chapters of this Part.

What needs to be clarified first, however, is how expounding upon all five entities can still be relevant to a project attempting to present an example of Hindu theology.

The answer is two-fold.

Firstly, all five entities are revealed and explicated alongside God in the theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, hence making their study both

unavoidable in and immediately relevant to a discussion of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

Secondly, and the reason why all five entities are discussed in Svāminārāyaṇa theological texts, is because they are related to – in fact, a necessary part of – the study of God. Most obviously, a study of Parabrahman is the study of the nature of God, but alongside that, the other four entities are inextricably tied to God and the ultimate goal of human life. The five entities thus involve:

- | | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| Parabrahman | – | the study of the form, nature, function, significance, etc. of God |
| Akṣarabrahman | – | the study of God's abode, and how to become eligible to experience God therein after death and also now |
| māyā | – | the study of God's creation and its function as ignorance, which needs to be transcended |
| īśvara | – | the study of other divinities and their role in God's creation |
| jīva | – | the study of individual souls and their relationship with God |

This composite approach to the study of God is made all the more necessary by Svāminārāyaṇa's own definition of 'jñāna', or theological knowledge. In concluding an important epistemological discussion in Vac. Loyā.7, he offers a

summary of what constitutes ‘knowing God’ or the ‘knowledge of God’ and the characteristics of one who has such knowledge. He explains:

A jñānin is one who precisely knows God through the senses, mind, and experience.... Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Here we find associated with the definition of jñāna (true knowledge of God) all four of the other entities: knowing God as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa (i.e. māyā) and Akṣara necessitates the knowledge of these two entities; and those who must serve God with this knowledge points to the jīvas and īśvaras who have not yet been liberated. In all, if theology is, in its most basic and literal sense, the study of God, then for a complete and correct understanding of God, the study of all five metaphysical entities is an essential part of the theological project within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

How exactly and to what extent these themes are helpful in understanding, describing and affirming Hindu theology in general is something that will be addressed in the final Part as we return to correspond with and re-examine Clooney’s original, proposed clues.

In turn now, the following chapters will expound on each of the five metaphysical entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa School – Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, jīva, īśvara and māyā – ending with an inquiry into the nature and way of liberation (mukti). Like all intricate theological systems, the deeply interwoven themes of

Svāminārāyaṇa theology mean that each theme will require an understanding of the others, and so each will almost always remain a little incomplete until the final theme is fully unravelled, calling for a patient, assiduous, and often reflexive reading of the text.⁸⁵ As Keith Ward recognises at the very beginning of his series on the key theological issues within the world’s major religions: “There is no one proper starting-point in theology, since every question leads on to every other.... Only when the study is complete will one be able to check back to see if such a preliminary analysis was correct.”⁸⁶

This exposition will be grounded in śāstric revelation, i.e. statements from the Vacanāmṛut, the primary theological text of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, and, wherever relevant, supported by Svāminārāyaṇa commentaries on the Prasthānatrayī (the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-Gītā). After setting the framework, I have aimed to allow the theological texts to ‘do the talking’, applying exegesis, elaboration, clarification and connection only where necessary or useful. Also, in this necessarily limited exposition, I have tried to resist the temptation to be exhaustive in covering all of the aspects of all of the themes – though I hope it is no less thorough and nothing essential is missing – or even presenting all of the supporting statements from all of the textual sources; only the most relevant, useful and interesting have been cited to help elucidate the point. Mindful of the fact that this is still only the first such attempt

⁸⁵ Gavin Flood likened this expository project to the assembling of an orange peel rather than the unfolding of a flat piece of paper. ‘It will all come together in the end,’ he reassured.

⁸⁶ Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 1.

at presenting Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology to a western academic audience, I have endeavoured to keep the presentation as simple and lucid as possible, without, of course, simplifying the complex themes themselves.

PART 3: THEMES OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

6) PARABRAHMAN

- **Absolute Essentiality of Knowing God**
- **SARVOPARI: God as Supreme**
 - Superiority of Parabrahman Over All Others
 - One Without Second
 - Sovereign Lord, Owner and Controller
 - Soul of All Beings and Things
 - Source of All Avatāras
 - Transcending Akṣara
 - Limitless Nature of Parabrahman's Own Being
 - Time: Nitya
 - Space: Sarvavyāpaka
 - Knowledge: Sarvajña
 - Power: Sarvaśaktimān
 - Splendour: Sarvasundara
 - Bliss: Sarvasukhamaya
 - Virtues: Sakalaśubhagaṇasampanna
- **KARTĀ: God as Omniagent**
 - Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as the All-Doer
 - Parabrahman as the All-Doer & All-Cause
 - Parabrahman as Creator, Sustainer and Dissolver & Both Efficient Cause and Material Cause
 - Some Challenges to Parabrahman's Omnidoership and Perfect Nature
 - Parabrahman as Support, Controller, Indweller, Inspirer, Permitter, etc.

○ **SĀKĀRA: God as Having Form**

- Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as Having a Form
- Reasoning for Why Parabrahman has a Form
 - Śāstric Consistency
 - Divine Light from a Divine Source
 - Immanent Yet Distinct
- Parabrahman as Eternally Having a Form
 - Parabrahman's Human-Shaped Form
 - Dispelling Some Doubts about Parabrahman's Human-Shaped Form

○ **PRAGAṬA: God as Manifest**

- Centrality of Parabrahman as Pragaṭa
- Parabrahman as Pragaṭa
 - Divine Embodiment of the Transcendental Form
 - Absolute Divinity of the Embodied Form
 - Divine Embodiment by Free, Loving, Gracious Will
 - Purpose of Divine Embodiment
 - Svāminārāyaṇa as Parabrahman
 - Continued Presence through Akṣarabrahman

6) PARABRAHMAN

Returning to Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation of 'jñāna' from Vac. Loyā.7, we find not only how the other entities contribute to the understanding of God, but also an indication of the aspects of God that constitute that theological knowledge. As a reminder, that summary is as follows:

A jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Thus, in effect, true knowledge of God constitutes the knowledge of:

1. God as manifest before one's eyes
2. God as eternally having a form
3. God as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa (i.e. māyā) and Akṣara (also known as Akṣarabrahman or Brahman)
4. God as the cause and support of all

This corresponds neatly to the four aspects of knowing God traditionally used within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya known simply by the following four terms:

1. Pragaṭa ('manifest')
2. Sākāra ('with form')
3. Sarvopari ('supreme')
4. Kartā ('doer')

These four broad terms, though in a slightly different order⁸⁷, will provide the framework for the four main themes under which aspects and characteristics of Parabrahman can be grouped to aid in a coherent, systematic exposition of the nature of God as found within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. It is not a strict framework, and there will inevitably be some overlap and double-berthing between the aspects of God's nature, but all of the most important aspects have been covered and hopefully without too much repetition. As perhaps with any intellectual endeavour, the framework itself is not as important as the ideas it supports and contains.

6.1) Absolute Essentiality of Knowing God

Before we delve into a detailed exposition of the nature of Parabrahman, it would be useful to begin with a brief understanding of the absolute essentiality of knowing God's nature as held within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. While the need for God within a theological system may seem obvious, this emphasis on *knowing* him is significant and will prove helpful when discussing Akṣarabrahman, mukti (especially when relating 'knowing' and 'doing'), and also later when returning to the salient features of Hindu theology in general.

We can gather from the brief introductions to the Vacanāmṛut and Svāmīnī Vāto provided in Part 2 that their principal subject is God, and that their prime

⁸⁷ On this occasion, the order is insignificant. Besides, English syntax has not allowed the order from the original Gujarati to be retained in the translation.

objective is what can be called ‘applied theology’ leading to liberation.

Unsurprisingly, we find a strong and direct link between knowing God and liberation in both of these theological texts. For example:

The knowledge of God’s nature and the knowledge of God’s greatness are the two extraordinary means to liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.57).

The cause of liberation is resolute faith⁸⁸ in God (SV 1.307).

In the above reference from Vac. Loyā.7 as well, after providing a formulation of jñāna, Svāminārāyaṇa is quick to conclude that “such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.” This follows from the other śāstric statements cited in that discourse mentioned earlier:

Ṛte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna (Hiranyakeśiyaśākhā Śruti⁸⁹).

and

Tam eva viditvā’timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte’yanāya ||

Only by knowing him does one pass beyond death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8).

Such ‘jñāna’, or knowledge of God, is often used synonymously in sampradāyic literature with terms such as ‘niścaya’ (resolute faith) or ‘svarūpaniṣṭhā’ (literally, ‘conviction of [God’s] nature’), and upāsanā, i.e. worship and faith informed by correct theological understanding, reiterating that ‘knowing God’ is

⁸⁸ Such unassailable faith is necessarily informed by and “coupled with the knowledge of God’s greatness” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Gaḍh. I.72, Loyā.3 and Var.12).

⁸⁹ This is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* at 115.7.

not the mere accumulation of cerebral data concerning the Divine – ‘knowing *about* God’ – but a deep and personal theological endeavour leading to an intimate and everlasting relationship.

For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Mukṭānanda Svāmī asks a question about how one can form an abiding conviction that the ātman is distinct from the non-ātman, i.e. the physical body, senses, mind, etc. He queries that, even after learning about this within the religious community from sermons and scriptural reading,

why does the blissful jīvātman still associate with the senses, mind, etc. while engaged in the worship and remembrance of God and thereby become miserable due to the influence of disturbing thoughts?

Svāminārāyaṇa prefaces his reply with the following emphasis on upāsana:

Some become accomplished yogis, some become omniscient, some become devatās, and thus attain countless types of greatness, including the highest state of enlightenment. All this is achieved on the strength of the upāsana of God, but without upāsana, nothing can be accomplished.

He then goes on to reply to the original question by explaining that the distinction between ātman and non-ātman cannot be realised by mere study of scriptures or personal resolve, but only by faith in God informed by correct theological knowledge. “In fact,” Svāminārāyaṇa reinforces, “no spiritual endeavours can be fulfilled” without such faith (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56).

It is upāsanā, then, above all else, which leads to and fulfils all other spiritual endeavours.

This is explained further in sermon 6.294 of the Svāmīnī Vāto, where Guṇātītānanda Svāmī is asked a question by an unnamed devotee but one who clearly has a sound familiarity of the Vacanāmṛut's teachings. The inquirer asks:

One finds in the Vacanāmṛut that sometimes the power of surrendering to God is propounded, whereas sometimes dharma, sometimes detachment from the world, sometimes realisation of the self as ātman, or sometimes ātma-realisation has been cast aside. With so many endeavours propounded in so many statements, please tell me one thing within which all spiritual endeavours are subsumed and one can attain the highest liberation.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī replied:

If one has upāsanā and the highest faith in God, then all else will follow from that (6.294).

In three other key sermons, which we shall return to again later, Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates the same point.

When you firmly understand the nature of God as such, you will encounter no obstacles on the path to liberation. However, without such firm understanding of the nature of God, one will never be able to overcome one's weaknesses, regardless of however much one renounces [worldly objects] or the number of fasts one observes....

A person [with such a firm understanding of God] has nothing left to accomplish; he is fulfilled and has reached the culmination of all spiritual endeavours. If one has such a firm belief in the nature of God, then even if a slight flaw remains in the observance of the vows of non-egotism, non-avarice, non-lust, non-taste or non-attachment, there is still nothing to worry about. Conversely, if any deficiency remains in understanding the nature of God, then in no way will one ever be redeemable. Therefore, one should attempt to

understand this profound principle by any means within this lifetime (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

A person who has such a conviction of God [as explained yesterday in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13] will not attain an ill fate – even if some small deficiency remains in him. In fact, ultimately, he will definitely attain the nirguṇa state. But a person without such a conviction of God – even if he is a sincere renunciant and is vigilantly striving to eradicate lust, anger, avarice, etc. – will not be able to eradicate those vicious natures by his efforts alone. Ultimately, he will become impure and be consigned to naraka.

Therefore, whoever realises such jñāna of God, even if he has only a feeble intellect, should still be regarded as possessing much intellect. On the other hand, if he has not realised such jñāna of God, then even if he has much intellect, he should still be known as having no intellect (Vac. Gaḍh. II.14).

One who has known God in this way [as perfectly divine when manifest on earth as he is in his transcendental abode] can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, māyā can be said to have been eradicated. One who realises this is called a jñānin and an accomplished devotee.... On the other hand, if one who has doubts in realising God in this way [i.e. perfectly divine], then even if he is a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant, securing liberation would still be extremely difficult for him (Vac. Pan.7).

In all three examples, Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal in emphasising not only the absolute need to know God for liberation, but also the utter uselessness of everything else if one does not know God perfectly.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly emphasises both the need for complete theological knowledge, i.e.

If there is any deficiency in upāsanā, one might attain other pleasures but will not be redeemed of the miseries of entering the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths] (SV 5.73),

as well as the pre-eminence of this knowledge above all other religious endeavours:

However much one may have endeavoured otherwise, if one does not have proper upāsanā, then one will not be liberated (SV 5.126).

In another sermon, he uses the following nuptial simile to make the same point:

The conviction of God's nature and the realisation of his greatness are like the groom [whereas] all endeavours are like the wedding guests (SV 1.298).

Just as the guests at a wedding would be rendered purposeless if there was no bride or groom – indeed, there would be no wedding – similarly, without the full knowledge and conviction of God's nature, all other religious endeavours would be useless; there would be no theology.

In yet another typically laconic sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly emphasises the primacy of theological knowledge above all other endeavours:

God is the 'one' and religious endeavours are all 'zeros' (SV 5.192).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī means that while religious endeavours are important and necessary, if they are not preceded by a correct theological understanding of God, they will be as worthless as a long string of zeros lacking the digit '1' in front of them. Just as the '1' gives value and meaning to all the zeros, it is God who gives value and meaning to all other religious endeavours and brings them to fruition. The knowledge of God, then, must be prioritised so that it is first and foremost among all endeavours.

Going even further, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī adds:

He who has a firm conviction of the nature of God has accomplished all spiritual endeavours; he has nothing left to achieve (SV 1.123).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly explains that after knowing God, not only is there nothing else to know but there is also nothing else to achieve.

A person who has realised the form of God perfectly has nothing left to realise.... Time, karma and māyā are incapable of binding a person who has developed in his heart such firm faith coupled with an understanding of God's greatness. Therefore, he who realises God perfectly in this way has nothing left to achieve (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

These statements echo some of the famous Upaniṣadic proclamations about 'knowing the one by which all can be known' (e.g. CU 6.1.3 & MuU 1.1.3).

Together these statements from the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto emphasise the primary importance and absolute indispensability of knowing God within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, especially in relation to other theological understanding and religious practices (sādhana). As a summary, then, knowledge of God is:

- Foundational – all religious practice and theological understanding must be grounded in the knowledge of God
- Central – all religious practice and theological understanding revolves around the knowledge of God
- Apical – the aim and culmination of all practice is to know God as fully as possible

6.2) SARVOPARI: God as Supreme

Ontologically, Parabrahman is the highest, most transcendental entity. As the term ‘sarvopari’ – literally, ‘above all’ – suggests, no other being or thing can ever surpass him in any way whatsoever. The Upaniṣads proclaim:

Puruṣān na param kiñcit |

There is nothing greater than Puruṣa [i.e. Puruṣottama or Parabrahman] (KaU 3.11).

Yasmāt param nāparam asti kiñcit |

Beyond whom there is nothing at all (SU 3.9).

Nātaḥ param asti |

There is nothing greater than [Parabrahman] (PU 6.7).

Other terms apart from ‘para’ and ‘parama’ (supreme or best) which describe Parabrahman’s preeminent position include ‘uttama’ (highest or best), ‘utkrṣṭa’ (best), ‘śreṣṭha’ (best), and ‘kāṣṭhā’ (ultimate).

Superlatives such as ‘supreme’ or ‘best’ invite two questions, however. Firstly, ‘Best among whom?’; and secondly, ‘Best at what?’. As we look to expound upon the supremacy of Parabrahman in this section, specific aspects of his supreme nature have thus been grouped into two sets broadly corresponding to these two questions. The first set deals with topics which show Parabrahman’s transcendence over other entities. How exactly is he greater than all other beings and things? We answer this through the following topics:

-
- Parabrahman, the one without second
 - Parabrahman, the sovereign Lord and Master of all realms
 - Parabrahman, the Soul of All
 - Parabrahman the Avatārin, the cause of all avatāras
 - Parabrahman as Akṣarātīta (greater even than Akṣarabrahman)

The second set of topics deals with the transcendence of God in his own mode of being. In these, we shall be exploring some of Parabrahman's most important inherent qualities and seeing how they are the best they could possibly be. Of course, while Parabrahman has infinite qualities and each one of them is infinitely excellent, for the purposes of our study, we shall limit our focus to seven aspects of his limitless nature: Parabrahman with respect to time, space, knowledge, power, splendour, bliss, and virtues.

6.2.1) Superiority of Parabrahman Over All Others

We begin to expound upon Parabrahman's supremacy by examining his position in relation to the other entities.

6.2.1.1) One Without Second

In all senses of the term, Parabrahman is unique. He is one and one of a kind, quite literally in a class of his own; *sui generis*. But that in and of itself does not make him supreme, for this description also applies to Akṣarabrahman. In fact, in being fundamentally distinct from the other four entities – remember that there is nothing outside of these five metaphysical categories – and singular in quantity

within this category (if it can be called that), Parabrahman is of course going to be ‘unique’. But by virtue of his infinite greatness, power, charm, auspicious qualities, etc., no other entity can even approximate him – neither his nature (svarūpa) nor his divine attributes (guṇa)⁹⁰. They are – and he is – limitless and matchless.

As in Upaniṣadic statements, such as at CU 6.2.1, which proclaim the highest Truth⁹¹ as being ‘eka’ (one) and ‘advitīya’ (without second), we find a similar emphasis in the Vacanāmṛt on both the uniqueness and peerlessness of God.

Citing this phrase, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Only God is like God; no one can become like him. The Vedic verse ‘ekam evādvitīyam Brahma’ also explains that God alone is like God. This is the principle of all of the scriptures (Vac. Loyā.13).

Elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa straightforwardly explains:

There is only one form of God. This God is extremely powerful and no one, including Akṣara, is capable of becoming like him. This is an established principle (Vac. Loyā.4).

In fact, only God is like God; no one else can even compare to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

⁹⁰ A brief note here might be necessary: Svāminārāyaṇa does not distinguish between ‘svarūpa’ and ‘svabhāva’, translated by Carman as essential nature and inherent nature, respectively (see especially chapter 6 in his *The Theology of Rāmānuja*) when referring to God. In fact, we hardly see ‘svabhāva’ being used for Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman in the Vacanāmṛt or Svāmīnī Vāto. Hence, ‘God’s svarūpa’ throughout has been translated as ‘God’s nature’ without distinguishing, if even possible, between his essential or inherent forms. ‘Guṇas’ such as loving compassion, mercy, auspiciousness, charm, etc. are referred to as his divine characteristics or attributes.

⁹¹ Note that according to the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, the term ‘sat’ at CU 6.2 is denotive of both Brahman and Parabrahman. See the chapter on Akṣarabrahman for a fuller discussion.

This also echoes the proclamation of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Na tat-samaścābhyadhikaśca dṛśyate |

No one/thing is found to be on par or greater than him (SU 6.8).

In the last documented sermon of the Vacanāmṛut, where Svāminārāyaṇa again reiterates the singularity and uniqueness of God, we also find his a parsimoniae argument for a monotheistic system.

Only God is like God. Many have attained qualities similar to his by worshipping him, yet they certainly do not become like God. If they did become like God, this would suggest the existence of several Gods. As a result, the governance of the world would not remain orderly. One God would say, 'I will create the world,' while another God would say, 'I will destroy the world.' One God would say, 'I will make it rain,' while another would say, 'I will not.' One would say, 'I will instil human instincts in animals,' while another would say, 'I will instil animal instincts in humans.' A stable state would not be possible in this situation. But see how orderly everything functions in the world! There is not even the slightest irregularity. Thus, the governor of all activities and the lord of all is one God. Not only that, it seems that no one can ever challenge him. Therefore, God is definitely one, and no one can become like him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa alludes at the beginning of this statement to those liberated, accomplished souls who have attained qualities similar to those of God. How this is possible and what these qualities are will be discussed in detail in the section on Mukti, but it is important here to reiterate that this in no way challenges or undermines God's greatness. For example, even when Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 to say,

A devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God,

he immediately goes on to clarify:

Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

Similarly, in another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that by the grace of God, devotees may rise to the ranks of Śukadeva and Nārada, or become like Brahmā and Śiva, or may even become like Akṣara (i.e. akṣararūpa, fully enlightened).

However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa (Vac. Kār.10).

Thus, the outright greatness, supremacy or uniqueness of Parabrahman is never challenged or undermined. Ontologically, essentially and characteristically, Parabrahman is one, matchless and unsurpassable. He is supreme.

6.2.1.2) Sovereign Lord, Owner and Controller

A recurring motif found in the Vacanāmṛt conveying Parabrahman's infinite supremacy is a description of him as the 'King of all kings' or 'Lord of all lords' reigning over the entire universe. For example, in an extended explanation in Vac. Pan.4, Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

That God is the Great King of all kings [mahārājādhirāj], he is surrounded by countless divine luxuries and countless divine attendants, and he is the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Then, perhaps to help his village audience grasp this rather esoteric concept, he literally brings it 'down to earth' with an analogy to which they can relate.

For example, suppose there is a great world-emperor whose kingdom stretches from where the sun rises to where it sets.... So powerful is this world-emperor that it is not possible to count the villages in his empire, as they are innumerable. Nor can the chiefs of these villages be counted, as they too are innumerable. Furthermore, the countless chiefs of those villages come to his court to make requests. The emperor's money, property, pleasures, palaces and wealth are also countless. Similarly, God is the king of the kings of countless villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas.

Moreover, the chiefs of those villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Just as in one village one chief is senior and the whole population of that village bows before him and follows his command, and just as the chief in turn bows before the king, similarly, in each brahmāṇḍa, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are superior, and the others in that brahmāṇḍa, that is the devas, demons, humans, seers and prajāpatis of that brahmāṇḍa, worship them and follow their command. But Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān and follow his command.

Furthermore, all of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, 'Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa' – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, 'Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.' In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: 'Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your darśana; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.' Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).⁹²

A number of points emerge from this description. Firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa adds an important element to the understanding of God as 'world-emperor' – as not just

⁹² The same analogy is given in Vac. Gaḍh. III.39, wherein Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises the utter insignificance of the brahmāṇḍas Parabrahman rules over in relation to his infinite supremacy.

God is the Lord of the lords of countless brahmāṇḍas. However, the brahmāṇḍas over which he reigns as lord are insignificant [compared to him]....

Within each brahmāṇḍas there are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, as well as the pṛthvi with its seven dvīpas, seven oceans, Meru, and Lokāloka and other mountains. The brahmāṇḍas also contain the 14 realms, the eight barriers, and many other things. God is the lord of countless such brahmāṇḍas. For example, one can realise the eminence of an emperor of the world, even though his villages can be counted. But the eminence of God is much greater because even those countless brahmāṇḍas are insignificant to him. So then, of what significance can the beings of those brahmāṇḍas be before God? Of no significance at all; they are utterly insignificant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

lording over a vast dominion of land and wealth, but having subjects over whom he reigns. He is not merely a landlord, but indeed the sovereign emperor.

Secondly, these subjects include īśvaras such as Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa – used in the plural by Svāminārāyaṇa to emphasise that he is talking about multiple brahmāṇḍas over which Parabrahman reigns – who themselves are “chiefs of the brahmāṇḍas” yet “poor” in comparison to “the Great King of all kings”. The utter supplication presented in their prayer to Parabrahman, beseeching him to grace them with his audience, cements his position of paramount sovereignty.

That these authoritative īśvaras – themselves worshipped and obeyed – worship and obey Parabrahman adds a third and important message to be drawn from the analogy. Yes,

God is very powerful; even the devas such as Brahmā and others live under his command (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66),

so of course the less powerful and even more insignificant jīvas should also obey Parabrahman. But to impress that this is more than fearful compliance, Svāminārāyaṇa adds that the īśvaras *worship* Parabrahman, for he is eminently worthy of their highest reverence and adoration.

Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

And indeed, his subjects do accord Parabrahman their highest reverence, adoration and humility – subjects who are themselves some of the most exalted, powerful and holiest of all the worlds.

Even the great such as Brahmā, Śiva, Lakṣmījī, Rādhājī, Nārada, Śuka, the Sanakādika, and the nine Yogeśvaras apply the dust of God's holy feet upon their heads. They put aside all of their self-importance and constantly offer devotion to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

What is also notable from the excerpt of Vac. Pan.4 is the use of the term 'pati'. Svāminārāyaṇa adds this to the list of others terms he uses to signify God as the overlord. Other instances include, for example:

This God is the lord [pati] of all abodes such as Brahmamahola, Goloka and Śvetadīpa, etc. and the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.59).

God is the lord [pati] of Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha, Śvetadīpa, Brahmamahola... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56).

Etymologically, 'pati' literally means protector, from the verb-root 'pā', to protect, but is more generally used for lord, master or husband. In thus portraying Parabrahman as a lord of an estate or head of a household, it provides another nuance useful in understanding him within this continuing, multifaceted theme, as not just an owner or ruler but also a provider and protector, especially when 'pati' is used alongside other terms such as 'rājādhirāj' and 'niyantā'.

The term 'pati' in the sense of husband also takes on a special theological significance when considering Parabrahman's relationship with the finite beings (jīvas and Īśvaras). It implies a sense of mutual love, faithfulness and

commitment characteristic of marriage while also providing the sense of God being the provider and protector as head of the house (at least in the context of early nineteenth century India when the Vacanāmrut was delivered). Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly talked about devotees being ‘wedded’ to God with singular devotion akin to the love and fidelity of a pativrata wife, literally ‘one whose husband is her vow’ (Vac. Sār.14, Loyā.2, Loyā.11, Gaḍh. II.1, Gaḍh. II.5, Gaḍh. II.62, and Gaḍh. III.16).

These latest statements from the Vacanāmrut provide yet another insight into Parabrahman’s sovereignty. His dominion stretches not just across the territory of the brahmāṇḍas – still ‘worldly’ in scope – but even across the superior abodes of the other avatāras, i.e.

God is the master of all abodes – Vaikuṇṭha, Goloka, Brahmanahola, etc. (Vac. Gaḍh. I.60),

thereby further establishing an even higher superiority for him.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to establish Akṣaradhāma as the highest, most transcendental, and most blissful among the various distinct abodes. While this will be discussed with śāstric excerpts in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman⁹³, it is important to note here that Svāminārāyaṇa also establishes Parabrahman as the presiding lord of Akṣaradhāma (sometimes also referred to as Brahmadhāma, Brahmaloaka, Brahmapura or Brahmanahola). For example:

⁹³ Chapter 7.4.2.

The form of God within that light is called the essence of the ātman, Parabrahman or Puruṣottama.... He is the lord of Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

Again, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

The master of countless millions of such Virāṭa-Puruṣas [the administrative heads each brahmāṇḍa] is Puruṣottama Bhagavān – whose abode is Akṣara. Within that abode, countless millions of such brahmāṇḍas float like mere atoms in each and every hair of Akṣara. Such is the abode of God. In that abode, Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself resides eternally with a divine form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Being the sole, undisputed overlord of the highest realm, again, reinforces Parabrahman as the highest of the highest, the highest among all.

In many other statements similar to those above describing Parabrahman as the supreme lord over a vast realm, we invariably find reference to him also being the niyantā (from prefix ‘ni’ with verb-root ‘yam’, meaning to restrain or to control).

He is the lord [pati] of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings [rājādhirāj], the controller [niyantā] of all, the antaryāmin of all... (Vac. Loyā.18).

This offers an understanding of Parabrahman as being not just a ruler in the sense of exercising authority, but actually controlling affairs over whatever he rules. He does this by being the ‘antaryāmin’ – the inner-controller – dwelling within everything that he controls. It is a much more involved and intimate relationship.

This connection between Parabrahman's controllership, lordship and supremacy is brought together in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38:

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all lords [īśvarnā paṇ īśvara].... He reigns supreme (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

So vast and authoritative is this control, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, that

without that God's wish, not even a blade of grass is able to flutter (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Elsewhere, when describing the six different levels of resolute faith,

Svāminārāyaṇa adds that a person with the third level of faith

understands God to be the all-doer, the supreme lord, and the experiencer [enjoyer (bhoktā)] of everything. Such a person realises that whatever actions take place in the world are the result of God, who is immanent within all beings as their controller (Vac. Loyā.12).

Of course, as the sole ruler reigning supreme over all the worlds, Parabrahman himself is wholly autonomous and independent, for he is, as we have seen already, one and without second. This idea gains further force in the sense of God being the soul of the intelligent and material world, and will be expanded in the following discussion on Śarīra-Śarīri-Saṁbandha⁹⁴. Together, however, this brings to light a striking resonance with similar descriptions of Parabrahman found in the Vedāntic texts. For example, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad states:

Tam īśvarāṇām paramam maheśvaram
Tam devatānām paramam ca daivatam |
Patim patīnām paramam parasatād
Vidāma devam bhuvaneśam idyam ||

⁹⁴ 6.2.1.3.

He who is the Supreme Great Lord of all the lords, he who is the highest Deity of all deities, the Supreme Master of all masters, may we know that God, the adorable lord of the universe (SU 6.7).

Na tasya kaścīt patir-asti loke
Na ceśita naiva ca tasya lingam |
Na kāraṇam karaṇādhīpādhipo
Na cāśya kaścij janitā na cādhipaḥ ||

Of him there is no master in this world, no ruler over him, nor even a distinguishing mark [by which he can be inferred]. He, the Overlord of the overlords of all the sense organs, has no cause, no progenitor, nor overlord (SU 6.9).

Whether described as the King of all kings, the Lord of all lords, the world-emperor, master or ‘pati’, the sense is that Parabrahman is not just a minister conferred with some governing powers over a particular jurisdiction (who in every other sense, though, would still be a person like any of us), but also the owner of his vast realm. This affords a more personal, invested relationship between the owner and the owned, the proprietor and the property. It also means, importantly, as Carman, too, notes, that God rules not only out of his superior powers, in the sense of overpowering or suppressing his subjects, but by right over what belongs to him.⁹⁵

Furthermore, it is not as if Parabrahman has usurped the realm from some other rival lord. He has created it himself and he is its very cause, the cause of all causes⁹⁶, making him even more so the rightful ruler of the entire universe. The complete statement from Vac. Gaḍh. III.38 is actually thus:

⁹⁵ *Theology of Rāmānuja*, p. 157.

⁹⁶ See section 6.3 below on God as Kartā (agent) and Kāraṇa (cause).

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all lords and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

And because Parabrahman's rule is so eminently right, appropriate and blissful, the devotees find their greatest joy and fulfilment in being ruled by him *as* a part of the property of the Great Lord. Indeed, they feel privileged and indebted to have been accepted as such, their worth now having been exalted on account of their owner's own status, just as an otherwise ordinary and inexpensive object suddenly becomes invaluable and priceless having been used or owned by a global celebrity. To so serve their master marks the culmination and fruition of all the devotees' devotional praxis.⁹⁷

This feeling of awe, elation, honour, gratitude and fulfilment on the part of the devotees of God is expressed most vividly in the many thousands of devotional songs composed by the poets of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya.

Svāminārāyaṇa, too, hints at these emotions when he explains how a realised devotee would feel at being merely in the presence of God and his community.

'I am extremely fortunate in that I am able to stay in the presence of these sādhus.' If [a devotee] understands this, then he will experience awe all day and night and will sway in an ocean of bliss throughout the day (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

From master, ruler and owner of the universe, this relationship is brought to an even more intimate and a more spiritual climax with Parabrahman as its very soul.

⁹⁷ More about the Master-Servant relationship (svāmīsevakasambandha) will be covered in the chapter on Mukti. See 11.2.4.

6.2.1.3) Soul of All Beings and Things

A key doctrine of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School of Vedānta is Śarīra-Śarīri-Saṃbandha – the analogous body-soul relationship between the universe and God. The belief is: just as the physical body is to its soul, so is the world to God. And vice versa: just as the soul is to its body, so is God to the world. An almost identical doctrine can be found within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.⁹⁸

In narrating the nature of Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa often drew upon this relationship to explain that God was the ‘omni-soul’ (Sarvātman) or ‘super-soul’ (Paramātman) of the entire world:

God is the soul [ātman] of all (Vac. Loyā.7).

That very God is the soul of countless brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.17).

In one particular sermon, he also mentions the world as being the body of Parabrahman.

The nirguṇa form of God... is the soul of all of the elements such as earth, water, etc.; it is the soul of Pradhāna-Puruṣa, which are higher than those elements; and it is the soul of pure Puruṣa and Prakṛti which are themselves higher than Pradhāna-Puruṣa; it is the soul of even Akṣara who is higher than them. All of these constitute the body of God (Vac. Kār.8).

⁹⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa respects and pays tribute to Rāmānuja for his many contributions to Hindu devotional thinking. As the founder of another Hindu theological system, Svāminārāyaṇa also states that he finds Rāmānuja’s theistic ideas more agreeable than that of Śaṅkara’s strict monism in which ‘Brahman’ is propounded as an impersonal reality, without form and attributes. See Vac. Loyā.14.

Then in Vac. Sār.10, Svāminārāyaṇa brings this to an individual level, citing an expression of what a correct understanding of this doctrine would be:

‘Just as the soul resides in the body, God resides within my soul. My soul is the ‘śarīra’, and God is the ‘śarīrin’ of my soul.’

But how exactly is God the soul of all these beings and things and how are they his body?

Svāminārāyaṇa asks this question himself to his audience in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64. He begins with an objection to including the ātman (i.e. jīva) and Akṣara as the body of God. His point is that a body (śarīra) – even by its etymological meaning (from ‘śīr’, to decay), i.e. that which decays – is normally expected to be that which undergoes modifications and which ultimately perishes, whereas the soul is immutable and imperishable. So while identifying Parabrahman as the soul is agreeable because he is immutable and imperishable, it is not so when considering ātman and Akṣara as his body, for they do not decay and perish, because they, too, are immutable and eternal.

How, then, can that ātman and Akṣara be described as the śarīra of God?

The paramhansas offer their answers, but cannot fully satisfy Svāminārāyaṇa.

And so he continues:

Allow me to answer. All finite sentient beings [ātman, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras] and Akṣara constitute the body of Puruṣottama Bhagavān in that they are pervaded, dependent and powerless. In what way? Well, by means of his antaryāmin powers, God pervades all finite beings and Akṣara, whereas they are the pervaded. He is independent, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are supported by God and dependent upon him. Furthermore, he is extremely

powerful, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are utterly powerless before him. In this way, God is the embodied soul [śarīrī] of both all finite beings and Akṣara, and they both are the body [śarīra] of God.

In his explanation, Svāminārāyaṇa picks on three pairs of terms to define the body-soul relationship, where a body is not just a physical vessel which is born and which grows, decays and eventually dies, but, more broadly, that which is empowered by, pervaded by and dependent on a sentient being within. This makes even jīva, īśvara and Akṣara – and everything in between, i.e. māyā in all its myriad forms – the ‘body’ of Parabrahman for they are totally empowered by, pervaded by, and dependent on him.

Continuing his elucidation of the relationship between God and the other entities, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

Furthermore, [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is the inspirer of both the finite souls and Akṣara, is independent from them and is their controller. He also possesses all spiritual powers. He is greater than even Akṣara, which is greater than everything (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa substantiates these points in Vac. Loyā.7 by citing from various classical sources. He begins by quoting the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka of the Yajur Veda:

Antaḥpraviṣṭaḥ śāstā janānām sarvātmā |

The omnisoul, entering within, is the controller of all beings (3.11), and ends with passages from BU 3.7 (of the Mādhyandina recension), famously known as the Antaryāmī Brāhmaṇa:

Yasya pṛthivī śarīram yaḥ pṛthivīm antaro yamayatyēṣa ta
ātmā'ntaryāmyamṛtaḥ |...

Yasyātmā śarīram ya ātmānam antaro yamayati sa ta
ātmā'ntaryāmyamṛtaḥ |

He, whose body is earth and who controls it from within, is your
soul, the immortal inner-controller (3.7.7)...

He, whose body are the souls and who governs all souls from
within, is your soul, the immortal inner-controller (3.7.30).

Collectively, from the excerpts above, we can arrive at the following summary of
the role and characteristics in the relationship between Parabrahman and the
other entities:

Parabrahman	Other entities in relation to Parabrahman
Extremely Powerful / Empowering	Extremely Powerless / Empowered
Independent	Dependent
Pervading	Pervaded
Controller	Controlled
Inspirer	Inspired
Support(er)	Supported

As the soul, then, Parabrahman becomes the very life-source of the entire
universe, the cause for its existence and the ontic ground (ādhāra) upon which it
can function. Just as a physical body perishes once separated from its soul, so,
too, the world of spiritual and physical things cannot survive even momentarily

without Parabrahman. Even if alive, the body is wholly incapable of doing anything without the will, knowledge and strength of the inner self. As the Kena Upaniṣad and Aitareya Upaniṣad both confirm: Parabrahman is the Self (ātman) of the self (jīva) – the ear of the ear, the eye of the eyes, the mind of the mind,... [KeU 1.2] – by which it can see, hear, smell, speak and taste [AU 3.1].

In the same way, the entire world is totally dependent on Parabrahman to enliven it and bring it to action. Even then, those actions are controlled by Parabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa states, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37:

Indeed, God is the very life of all jīvas. Without him, those jīvas are not capable of doing anything or indulging in anything.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises this utter dependence of the other entities on Parabrahman in a way that describes him as their ‘ādhāra’ or support, the fundamental Being underlying all beings, the ultimate reality undergirding all things. He says, for example:

It is God who supports the entire earth along with its mobile and immobile forms of life (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

That manifest form of God before the eyes is such that he is the support of both the eight material elements [earth, water, etc.], which are pervaded, as well as of the spiritual element that pervades therein [i.e. the souls] (Vac. Loyā.7).

He [God] is the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

What is God like?... He is Parabrahman, beyond Akṣara... and the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Amd.4).

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, Svāminārāyaṇa draws together Parabrahman as the soul with Parabrahman as the support as integral to one another:

Just as God is the soul of 'kṣara' [i.e. māyā and all finite beings]⁹⁹, he is also the soul of Akṣarabrahman, who transcends Prakṛti-Puruṣa. With his own powers, God supports both kṣara and Akṣara, yet he himself is distinct from them both.

This last statement leads us to an important clarification necessary in this discussion, one that Svāminārāyaṇa provides elsewhere as well. A natural corollary of the body-soul relationship is that in being so closely associated with imperfect and mutable objects, Parabrahman will assumed to be contaminated by their mutations and imperfections. However, Svāminārāyaṇa was sure to include in his description above that while Parabrahman is the soul of all that is perishable and imperishable, "he himself is distinct from them both." So, just as the distinct self is not affected by the imperfections of the body it ensouls, neither, too, do the imperfections of māyā, etc. affect God who ensouls those entities. He makes this absolutely clear, with specific reference to the body-soul relationship, in Vac. Kār.8. In continuing the statement cited earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains using a material example to explain the metaphysical:

Just as the jīva is subtler, purer and of greater luminosity than the body, in the same manner, compared to all of the other entities, God is much more subtle, pure, unaffected and luminous. For example, space pervades the four material elements – earth, water, etc. and it remains unaffected by those four elements; the influences of those four elements do not affect space. In fact,

⁹⁹ While 'kṣara' literally means perishable, it is translated traditionally here to include all finite beings, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras, whose bodies perish in every lifetime during transmigration. In fact, it is evident that Svāminārāyaṇa means more than the literal meaning of 'perishable' and 'imperishable' in this passage by his use of 'Akṣarabrahman' rather than just 'akṣara'. Furthermore, this translation also maintains semantic consistency with verses such as BG 15.16 which distinguishes 'kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni' from the 'kūṭastha' (immutable) Akṣara.

despite dwelling in those four elements, space remains absolutely unaffected. In the same way, Puruṣottama Bhagavān dwells in all as their soul. Despite this, he is absolutely unchanged and untainted, and he maintains his own unique characteristics.... In this manner, being extremely subtle, extremely unaffected, extremely pure, extremely untainted, extremely luminous, and possessing tremendous, divine powers is the nirguṇa aspect of the form of that God.

Using the body-soul analogy again in Vac. Gaḍh. II.17, Svāminārāyaṇa firstly states that Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the ‘soul of all souls’ before immediately adding,

but he is still immutable; the mutations of māyā and other mutable objects, etc. do not at all affect [literally ‘touch’] Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

He then goes on to say:

In fact, if the mutations of the gross, subtle and causal bodies do not affect a person who has realised himself as the inner soul, what can be said about them [māyic mutations] not affecting [literally ‘touching’] Puruṣottama Bhagavān? Therefore, God is indeed immutable [nirvikārin] and untainted [nirlepa].

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad at 5.11 provides a reference to this clarification, describing Parabrahman as the “one inner soul of all beings” (eka... sarvabhūtāntarātmā) and yet who is “not sullied by the misery of the worlds” it ensouls. Why? Because Parabrahman is “bāhya” (literally, ‘outside’ of everything) as well, i.e. it is still inherently different and ontologically distinct from all the other entities. The mantra itself provides an example. It explains that this is like the sun who is the inner ‘eye’ of the whole world (by providing light with which seeing is made

possible), yet it is not affected by the outer defects and impurities of any individual eye.¹⁰⁰

In further distancing God from any of the undesirable corollaries when describing him as the soul, Svāminārāyaṇa also mentioned in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64 that he is “independent”. He seems to have in mind that while the physical body is necessary for the soul to experience and enjoy (and also suffer), the same is not true for Parabrahman. He does not need the jīvas, īśvaras, māyā or even Akṣara for anything. He can survive absolutely alone, independently, autonomously. In taking this important difference to the highest possible degree, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Loyā.13:

Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is... extremely powerful.... If he wishes, he can eclipse all of the liberated souls of Akṣaradhāma by his own divine light and prevail alone. Also, if he wishes, he can accept the devotion of the liberated souls and reside with them. He can eclipse even Akṣara, in the form of the Akṣaradhāma in which he dwells, and preside alone independently. If he chooses, he is capable of supporting the countless liberated souls by his own lordship, without even needing Akṣaradhāma.... [T]hrough his own lordship, God reigns as supreme (Vac. Loyā.13).

To remember, this section is serving to present a theological understanding of God as found within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. This body-soul doctrine is useful in that regard, especially when reconciling texts which may identify other things as ‘the highest’ or ‘God’, etc., so that a consistent doctrine of God’s nature can be preserved. Technically, everything can be denoted as being ‘God’ because the soul within everything is Parabrahman, and it is usual, as with people, to

¹⁰⁰ KaU-SB 5.11, p. 154. See BG-SB 13.31 and 13.32, p. 290 for similar analogies, and also the Ubhayalingādhikaraṇa at BS-SB 3.2.11-25, pp. 291-302 for more on this discussion.

identify the distinct body by the name of the person (the living entity within). In Vac. Loyā.7, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa explains why even anna (food), manas (the mind), vijñāna (knowledge) and ānanda (bliss) have been described as ‘Brahman’ in various Vedāntic texts¹⁰¹.

Even those things have been called Brahman because God is the cause of all and the supporter of all. However, they are all the body [śarīra], and their soul [śarīri] is the manifest form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Puruṣottama.

This doctrine is also brought into sharp use by the Bhāṣyakāra on several occasions in the commentaries of the Prasthānatrayī. For example, in commenting on the famous Upaniṣadic text

Sarvam khalv-idam Brahma |

All this is verily Brahman (CU 3.14.1),

he writes:

It is because Paramātmā is the controller and soul of everything that statements placing him in identical predication [sāmānādhikaraṇya] with other things can be reconciled.¹⁰²

Similarly, when explaining another famous Upaniṣadic statement,

Tat tvam asi (CU 6.8.7),

the Bhāṣyakāra writes:

Both the terms ‘tat’ [that] and ‘tvam’ [you]... are placed in identical predication because ‘tat’ pervades, controls and is the very soul of the entire sentient-insentient world, including ‘tvam’.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Such as in chapter 2 (the Anandavallī) of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad.

¹⁰² CU-SB 3.14.1, p. 132.

¹⁰³ CU-SB 6.8.7, p. 278.

The Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya similarly employs the defining characteristics of a soul provided by Svāminārāyaṇa in responding to the debate in the Ananyatvādhikaraṇa of the Brahmasūtras at 2.1.14-21. The objection raised at the beginning by the Nyāyists is that there is difference between Parabrahman (along with Akṣarabrahman¹⁰⁴) and the world of sentient (jīvas and īśvaras) and insentient (māyā and its various mutations) things, and so Parabrahman cannot be the cause of the world. The Sūtrakāra argues that a correct reading of the Upaniṣads reveals that there is in fact non-difference (ananyatva) between Parabrahman and the world, and so there can be no objection to him being its cause. In defence of this, the Bhāṣyakāra opens with an explanation of causes and effects (which we shall see in more detail when discussing Parabrahman as Kartā) before going on to conclude the debate thus:

So this has been established from this discussion, that even though Brahman and Parabrahman are ontologically distinct from Mūla-Prakṛti [māyā] and all her mutations – which are characterised as being insentient – and jīvas and īśvaras – which are eternally associated with Mūla-Prakṛti [though] characterised as being sentient – by virtue of being their cause, their inner-dweller, their controller and their support, [i.e.] their body [śarīri], they [Brahman and Parabrahman] are non-different [from them].¹⁰⁵

Parabrahman thus undergirds, pervades, empowers and controls – indeed, he enlivens – the entire universe, all the while remaining totally distinct from and unaffected by any of the imperfections of the entities he ensouls. This body-soul

¹⁰⁴ Note that throughout, both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are explained as the cause of the world, though Parabrahman is the cause of Akṣarabrahman as well. For a full discussion, see chapter 7.3.5 on Akṣarabrahman's role in the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the universe.

¹⁰⁵ BS-SB 2.1.21, p. 173.

relationship again affirms the outright supremacy of Parabrahman in relation to all these other entities.

6.2.1.4) Source of All Avatāras

Being superior among all māyic objects and finite beings is one thing, but perhaps a sterner test of Parabrahman's supremacy would be in seeing how he stands in relation to the other 'Gods', or avatāras.

Avatāravāda, the doctrine of God manifesting (or 'descending') on earth in human or other form, is a familiar feature of most theistic Hindu traditions. However, a closer study of the Vacanāmṛut, Svāmīnī Vāto and other theological and historical texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya reveals that this doctrine takes on a more nuanced form within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. Perhaps one of the most striking features is that the avatāras are considered to be not of Parabrahman directly, but of īśvaras. That is, Parabrahman and the avatāras are ontologically distinct.

How, then, is Parabrahman related to the avatāras? Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, an important sermon for understanding the supremacy of God. He begins by saying:

Let us talk about God.

He then continues:

The path of jñāna should be understood in such a way that one does not malign the nature of God in any way....

With this emphasis of developing an accurate understanding of God's nature,

Svāminārāyaṇa states precisely the belief that a devotee should have.

One should also intensely maintain the strength of conviction in God's form, i.e. 'I have attained the very form of God who reigns supreme, who forever possesses a divine form, and who is the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras.'

In part conclusion, he reiterates this point with greater force a little later in the sermon, this time adding a stern note of warning as well.

Therefore, one should realise the manifest God that one has attained to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras. If, however, one does not realise this, and instead realises God to be formless or like the other avatāras, then that is regarded as committing blasphemy against God.

What is clear from these words is that Parabrahman is *not* the same as the other avatāras. Rather, he is their cause. The term Svāminārāyaṇa uses for Parabrahman in this context is 'avatārin' – attaching the 'in'¹⁰⁶ suffix in the sense of 'belonging to'¹⁰⁷ – meaning 'lord or master of the avatāras'.

That the avatāras are ontologically distinct from Parabrahman will hopefully become clearer when expounding upon īśvara and the process of creation in the subsequent chapters on īśvara and māyā, respectively¹⁰⁸. Immediately, though, it will be useful to cite a dialogue from the Svāmīnī Vāto which explains this

¹⁰⁶ *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 5.2.115.

¹⁰⁷ *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 5.2.94.

¹⁰⁸ See especially sections 9.3 and 10.2.3.

ontological distinction more explicitly with the help of various analogies.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī once asked in an assembly:

How should one understand the distinction between the avatāras
and the avatārin?

Someone answered:

Like that of an actor and his character.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī corrected:

No, that is not how the avatārin is distinct from his avatāras.
Rather, one should understand the distinction as like that between
a king and his minister, an archer and his arrow, the moon and the
stars (SV 6.33).

The thrust of Guṇātītānanda Svāmī's examples seems to be two-fold: firstly that the two sets of analogues are different from each other, i.e. the king, archer and moon are different from the minister, arrow and the stars; and secondly, that the former are more powerful than the latter. Importantly, he rejects the analogy of the actor and his character, which would imply that it is Parabrahman himself who directly transforms into the avatāras.

But this then leads to the question that if Parabrahman is indeed ontologically different from the avatāras, how can the avatāras be said to be 'avatāras of God'? Moreover, if the avatāras are ontologically īśvara, how, then, can they be said to be divine, since we learned at the beginning that even īśvara as a category was 'below' or within māyā?

Both questions can be answered conjointly by understanding more closely the relationship between the avatārin and the avatāras.

In an extensive discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 about Virāṭa Puruṣa (sometimes called Vairāja Puruṣa), the first being and ‘executive administrator’ of each created brahmāṇḍa, Svāminārāyaṇa reveals:

It is said in the scriptures¹⁰⁹ that the avatāras emanate from that Virāṭa Puruṣa.

Svāminārāyaṇa then clarifies that only when Parabrahman (referred to in that sermon as Vāsudevanārāyaṇa and Vāsudeva Bhagavān) ‘enters’ into Virāṭa Puruṣa can avatāras be possible.

It is when Vāsudevanārāyaṇa resides in Virāṭa Puruṣa... that there are said to be avatāras.

Conversely,

When that Vāsudeva Bhagavān withdraws himself and separates from Virāṭa Puruṣa, then it is not possible for an avatāra to emanate through Virāṭa Puruṣa alone.... In fact, when Vāsudeva the over-soul had not yet entered him, that Virāṭa Puruṣa was not even capable of performing any of his own activities.

And yet because of this special ‘entering’ by Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

Thus all those avatāras are Vāsudeva Bhagavān’s only.

What Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be emphasising from this sermon is three things:

- firstly, all avatāras actually emanate from Virāṭa Puruṣa;
- secondly, this emanation is only possible when Parabrahman enters into Virāṭa Puruṣa; in fact, without Parabrahman, Virāṭa Puruṣa is incapable of doing anything;

¹⁰⁹ E.g. BP 1.3.5.

-
- and thirdly, because of Parabrahman's special presence in Virāṭa Puruṣa, the avatāras can be said to be emanating from Parabrahman.

The technical term used to describe Parabrahman's presence in Virāṭa Puruṣa for the emanation of avatāras is 'anu-praveśa' – literally, 're-entering' – signifying a specific empowering presence of Parabrahman above and beyond the blanket antaryāmin presence in all things and beings. Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in more detail in Vac. Pan.7 with the help of two more analogies:

In whomever that Puruṣottama Bhagavān 'enters' for the purpose of fulfilling many types of tasks, he eclipses that entity by his own divine light and he himself reigns preeminently through that entity. Moreover, in whomever he resides, he suppresses their own light and manifests his own divine light – just as when fire enters iron, it suppresses the quality of coldness and the black colour of the iron and exhibits its own quality; or like when the sun rises, the light from all of the stars, the moon, etc. merges into its own light, and only the sun's light remains. In the same way, in whomever God 'enters', he overpowers their light and exhibits his own divine light to a greater degree. Then, after completing the task for which he had 'entered' that entity, he separates from it. Thereafter, the other entity remains as it was before. Thus, the additional powers that that entity appeared to have should be known to actually be Puruṣottama Bhagavān's powers. In this way, the manifest form of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the cause of all.

It is this empowering presence of Parabrahman which makes him the cause of the avatāras; which allows the avatāras themselves to be called 'avatāras of God', and therefore be fully divine for their tasks on earth and venerable by all others;

and which also helps reconcile statements which speak of avatāras ‘emanating from Puruṣottama’ or God ‘assuming’ the form of various avatāras.¹¹⁰

As he who empowers, inspires and divinises the various avatāras across the countless brahmāṇḍas, Parabrahman is further established as the supreme reality among all.¹¹¹

6.2.1.5) Transcending Akṣara

As might be apparent from the discussions so far on Parabrahman’s supremacy, Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly describes Parabrahman in relation to Akṣarabrahman. For example:

There is only one form of God. This God is extremely powerful and no one, including Akṣara, is capable of becoming like him (Vac. Loyā.4).

Puruṣottama is the soul of all, yet no one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming as powerful as him (Vac. Kār.8).

Similarly, in Vac. Kār.10, Svāminārāyaṇa begins a list of beings that a devotee of God may become like by the grace of God. He begins with Brahmā and Śiva before moving onto sages such as Śukadeva and Nārada. Then, after including other realised souls, he ends:

¹¹⁰ For a full scholarly discussion of this and other related topics, drawn extensively from a wide range of theological and historical sources, see Shrutiprakashdas’s *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāyā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ* (521 pages with charts and appendices).

¹¹¹ The ‘descent’ or manifestation of avatāras is well-narrated in Hindu texts such as the various Pūrāṇas, and well-explained in technical texts such as the Bhagavad-Gītā (see especially 4.7-8 et al).

For the extraordinary event of Parabrahman the avatārin himself manifesting on earth in human form, see section 6.5 below on Parabrahman as pragaṭa (‘manifest’).

Or he may even become like Akṣara [i.e. akṣararūpa, fully enlightened]. However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

It is as if Akṣarabrahman is the highest benchmark by which to measure Parabrahman, but one which he still surpasses.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa states the greatness of Parabrahman in relation to Akṣarabrahman more directly. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, for example, he clearly states:

Puruṣottama is greater even than Akṣara, who is greater than all else.

This seems to be a direct translation of the phrase at MuU 2.1.2:

Akṣarat parataḥ paraḥ |

While a fuller discussion of this Upaniṣadic passage along with the relevant commentaries will be covered in the following chapter on Akṣarabrahman¹¹², it is sufficient to simply note here the Bhāṣyakāra's comment in relation to Parabrahman.

In this way, Akṣara is greater than all the jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and akṣaramuktas [released souls in Akṣaradhāma]... And with Paramātmān being greater [para] even than such a great Brahman by virtue of being his ruler, master, inspirer, support, soul, etc.... it is fitting that Paramātmān is also called 'Parabrahman' [literally, 'greater-Brahman'].¹¹³

¹¹² See section 7.1.

¹¹³ MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 260.

In another comment, the Bhāṣyakāra explains why the adjective “great” (mahantam) found in verse 2.22 of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad is appropriate in qualifying Parabrahman. He writes:

Greater than Prakṛti [i.e. māyā] and its effects, all jīvas and īśvaras, countless emanations such as Matysa, Kaccha, etc., and countless akṣaramuktas who are brahmarūpa, is Akṣarabrahman. Greater even than Akṣarabrahman – by totally pervading it, being its master, and being worshipped by it – is Parabrahman, who by his nature, virtues, powers, etc., is great, indeed the best [utkr̥ṣṭa].¹¹⁴

In a similarly ascending style, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 how to understand God’s greatness. He begins with the important statement, cited earlier as well:

A person who has realised the nature of God perfectly has nothing left to realise.

He then continues, using a familiar analogy:

Please listen as I now explain the method of realising this; hearing which, one develops unfaltering faith in God.

Firstly, one should realise the greatness of God. To illustrate this, consider the analogy of a great king. If even his servants and maids stay in seven-storey mansions, and their gardens, horses, carriages, ornaments, and other such luxuries make their houses appear as majestic as Devaloka, then imagine how majestic the palace and its luxuries of that king must be. Similarly, consider the realms of the lords of this brahmāṇḍa – Brahmā and the other devatās – who follow the commands of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān. If there is no limit to those realms and their opulence, then how can one possibly comprehend the extent of the opulence of Virāṭa Puruṣa from whose navel Brahmā was produced? Furthermore, the master of countless millions of such Virāṭa Puruṣas is Puruṣottama Bhagavān – whose abode is Akṣara. Within that abode, countless millions of such brahmāṇḍas float like mere atoms in each and every hair of Akṣara. Such is the abode of God. In

¹¹⁴ KU-SB 2.22, p. 118.

that abode, Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself presides eternally with a divine form.... So, if this is the greatness of Akṣara, how, then, can one possibly comprehend the extent of God's greatness? One with faith understands God's greatness in this manner (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

“So, if this is the greatness of Akṣara, how, then, can one possibly comprehend the extent of God's greatness?” By this conclusion, Svāminārāyaṇa seems to imply that, ultimately, the most accurate description of Parabrahman's unfathomable greatness can be only that he is greater even than Akṣarabrahman. In fact, in several sermons of the Vacanāmṛut, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the term ‘Akṣaratīta’ – transcending Akṣara – to qualify Parabrahman, even when other topics are under discussion. These include Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Gaḍh. I.42, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.66, Gaḍh. I.78, Sār.5, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.18, and Gaḍh. II.31.

In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa brings the supremacy of Parabrahman over Akṣarabrahman into focus by way of other aspects of God's nature. For example:

The God present within this Satsaṅga fellowship... is the King of all kings of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and the cause even of Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Amd.6).

Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is... the cause, support and inspirer of even Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

The nirguṇa form of God... is the soul of even Akṣara (Vac. Kār.8).

[Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa] can eclipse even Akṣara... and preside alone independently (Vac. Loyā.13).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus describes Parabrahman's greatness by explaining that he is:

- greater than all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the cause of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the support of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the inspirer of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the controller of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- pervasive within all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the soul of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- independent from all, even Akṣarabrahman

This not only serves to mark Akṣarabrahman as being exceedingly great, it also, indirectly, indicates him as one who also causes, supports, inspires, controls, pervades, ensouls, and is independent.

Here, the use of “even” (‘paṇ’ in Gujarati) and “including” in the above excerpts is especially instructive. It reveals Akṣarabrahman as an otherwise unsurpassable extreme – the highest of the high, the greatest of the great. But such is the extraordinary greatness of God, that he transcends even that. He is, quite simply, Akṣaratīta. In other words, Akṣarabrahman provides the fulcrum with which to fully understand Parabrahman, and it is to Akṣarabrahman that we shall turn after completing this exposition on Parabrahman.

*

So far, in attempting to understand the nature of Parabrahman, we have been looking at the first of four aspects, his supremacy, i.e. Parabrahman as Sarvopari. Within that, the discussions of Parabrahman as the one and without second, the supreme lord and master, the soul of the entire world, the cause of the avatāras, and, now, as greater even than Akṣarabrahman, have been primarily concerned with his supremacy in relation to others, i.e. who is he greater than and how.

We now move on to understanding his greatness on its own terms.

6.2.2) Limitless Greatness of Parabrahman's Own Being

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to repeatedly establish God's greatness by emphasising that it is unfathomable. For example, the reference earlier from Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 includes the statement:

No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God.

Similarly, in Vac. Kār.8 Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

No one is able to fathom the limit of [God's] greatness.

In both sentences, the Gujarati – “koi pār pāmtā nathi” – literally translates as ‘no one can reach its end (or limit)’. This raises the question: Is God's greatness really without limit, or is it simply beyond the grasp of our limited human comprehension? That is, is it actually limitless or just incomprehensible, unfathomable?

Svāminārāyaṇa seems to argue that God’s greatness truly is without limits, and therefore unfathomable. He begins one of his discourses by asking the assembly the following question:

A devotee of God leaves his body, becomes brahmarūpa, and reaches the abode of God. Thereafter, what is the difference between that devotee and God, whereby the master-servant relationship between them still remains? After all, that devotee of God then becomes independent, just like God. He also becomes free from the shackles of time [or death (kāla)], karma and māyā – just like God. Therefore, what difference remains so that the master-servant relationship is maintained? This is my question.

It is an important question in the discussion of God’s uniqueness and uncompromising supremacy, and we shall revisit it when discussing liberated souls, but here we can note what Svāminārāyaṇa reveals more specifically about Parabrahman’s nature. After the audience’s replies to his question were unable to fully satisfy him, he said:

The answer is as follows: To the extent to which a devotee of God has realised God’s greatness – that ‘God possesses this many powers; he possesses this much splendour; he is the embodiment of bliss;’ and so on – that devotee attains charm and powers to that same extent when he leaves his body and goes to the abode of God. Despite this, that devotee still feels God’s majesty, by way of his powers, splendour, etc., to be much greater. He then realises, ‘God has granted me just as many divine powers and as much splendour as I had realised in him. Yet, God’s divine powers and splendour appear to be totally limitless. Like me, countless others have also attained qualities similar to that of God, yet, no one is capable of becoming like God.’

And why is no one capable of becoming like God?

Because not even Śeṣa, Śārādā, Brahmā or the other devatās – in fact, not even the four Vedas – can fathom the vastness [pārṇe pāmtā nathi, literally, ‘cannot reach the end’] of God’s greatness, his virtues, his actions, his birth, his power, his splendour, his

blissful nature, or his countless other redemptive characteristics (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

So not only is God's greatness – indeed God himself in so many ways – beyond the reach of the relatively meagre intellect and perception of mere humans, but also beyond those of Śeṣa, proverbially the voluble orator with a thousand mouths; of Śārādā, the most adept scribe of the gods as well as a prolific writer; of Brahmā and the gods themselves, with their expansive knowledge, skills and lifespan; and even of the Vedas, the divinely inspired repository of all spiritual knowledge. All of them fail miserably in adequately comprehending and communicating God's divine nature. In another sermon also, Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates:

Even Śeṣa, Śārādā, Brahmā and other devatās are unable to fathom the extent of [God's] greatness. In fact, even the Vedas describe his glory as 'Not so; not so [neti, neti]'¹¹⁵ (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

Yet this still only serves to raise the bar of God's nature. Admittedly, it is so high that even all these immensely competent beings and sources of knowledge fall short of it. Nevertheless, it does not conclusively establish that there are no limits to God at all. Svāminārāyaṇa thus goes on to say in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67:

In fact, God himself does not reach the limits of his own greatness.¹¹⁶ Thus God, by all of his powers, is beyond all limits.

¹¹⁵ A fuller interpretation of this Vedic phrase according to the Bhāṣyakāra is 'Not this much, not this much', implying that God is not fully describable.

¹¹⁶ If God can perfectly know all that there is to know, then if he himself knows his own greatness to be without limits, then it must follow, as Svāminārāyaṇa asserts in the subsequent sentence, that God is beyond all limits.

Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be echoing here a verse from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [10.87.41], which he also cites at Vac. Loyā.10. It forms a part of the Vedastūti, where the Vedas are extolling God. The verse reads:

After employing an analogy of the ocean, a common device in Hindu literature for describing limitlessness, Svāminārāyaṇa again concludes:

God's greatness is extremely endless; there is no way in which it can either increase or decrease (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

By thus stating that there can be no further increase in God's greatness, let alone any decrease, Svāminārāyaṇa consolidates the belief that God's greatness is indeed infinite, not just unfathomable or incomprehensible.

By earlier mentioning "his virtues, his actions, his birth, his power, his splendour, his blissful nature, or his countless other redemptive characteristics",

Svāminārāyaṇa provides a clue in this sermon to understanding what this infinite greatness entails, or in other words, ways in which God is infinite.

Adapting, expanding and simplifying these for our purpose of expounding God's nature, we shall now very briefly cover seven of these limitless aspects of Parabrahman as they are described in Svāminārāyaṇa theological texts. These seven aspects are: God's infinity or unbounded nature with regards to Time, Space, Knowledge, Power, Splendour, Bliss and Virtues. That is, how he is unbound by time and space, and has infinite knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and virtues.

Even the masters of the higher realms [i.e. devas such as Brahmā] cannot fathom your glory [literally, reach your end], because you are endless. [In fact,] neither do you yourself [reach your own end]. Indeed, in your each and every hair, countless brahmāṇḍas accompanied with their barriers fly simultaneously at immense speed, like mere specks of dust flying in the air. Even the Śrutis, describing you as 'neti neti' [i.e. indescribable and limitless], ultimately perish in you [i.e. fail to extol your complete glory].

6.2.2.1) Time: Nitya

When initially delineating the five metaphysical entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta school, we noted that Parabrahman is one of the five entities which is eternal (nitya), i.e. without beginning (anādi) as well as without end (ananta).

Svāminārāyaṇa says specifically of God, for example:

Puruṣottama is eternal [nitya] (Vac. Loyā.14).

We also noted that another term used to explain eternal existence is satya, meaning ‘truth’ or ‘being’, implying that God truly exists and is actually characterised by existence.

God’s form is supremely true [parama satyasvarūpa] (Vac. Pan.7).

Svāminārāyaṇa bring God’s existence together with time to explain:

The form of God is true [satya] at all times (Vac. Loyā.4).

That is, God exists at all times and, by the Vedāntic definition of ‘satya’, he is trikālābādhita, totally unaffected by the three forms of time – the past, the present and the future. As Svāminārāyaṇa declares:

Time devours everything except God; that is to say, time’s powers are incapable of affecting God (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

So not only does God exist at all times, he exists as he is at all times, because he is immune to the ravaging affects of time. In other words, God is forever immutable.

That God remains as he is during the time of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos; i.e. he does not undergo any changes like worldly [māyic] objects do (Vac. Kār.7).

Apart from time, there are other ways as well in which God's immutability might be challenged, especially when he assumes a human form, so this important discussion will be covered more fully in the section on Parabrahman as Pragaṭa (manifest)¹¹⁷. However, since Svāminārāyaṇa mentioned 'birth' among the list of God's limitless aspects in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, it will be relevant and useful to cite here from Vac. Pan.7.

The phases of childhood, youth and old age apparent in God, as well as his birth and death, are all perceived due to his yogic powers [yoga-māyā]. In reality, God remains exactly as he is....

One who is said to have perfectly realised the nature of God understands God to be eternal and imperishable – absolutely unchanging.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that God, despite taking birth even, remains totally outside the otherwise inescapable influence of time; he is unborn, unchanging, and undying.

In another sense, God is not only unaffected by time when he enters the world or is immanent within it, he is also *beyond* time in his eminently distinct, transcendental self. This is a topic that we can discuss together with the following section on space.

6.2.2.2) Space: Sarvavyāpaka

To say that God is unbound by space is to mean that God exists everywhere (simultaneously); he is never just in one place and not in another place (at that

¹¹⁷ See especially section 6.5.2.2.

same time), nor is there any place where is not. That is to say, God is omnipresent.

Svāminārāyaṇa often describes Parabrahman as being all-pervasive (sarvavyāpaka), i.e. that his existence pervades all entities, as, for example, we saw in the discussion on God being the soul of the entire universe [Vac. Gaḍh. I.64].

However, Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to add that God pervades everything by his special indwelling powers, as not just their witness but as their inner controller – the antaryāmin.

So, in fact, there is only one Puruṣottama Bhagavān, and it is he who enters all and resides in them as the antaryāmin (Vac. Gaḍh. I.41).

While this consolidates the ideas of Parabrahman being the sovereign king ruling over his entire dominion and the inner self pervading all that he ensouls, it also has another important outcome, for if God “enters all”, as stated above, it follows that he must also be distinctly somewhere else from where he enters from.

Svāminārāyaṇa is indeed keen to point out that this inner-dwelling within all is by Parabrahman’s extraordinary ‘yogic powers’ (variously called yoga-śakti, yoga-māyā and yoga-kalā), because in fact, he still has a distinct and definite form of his own forever present in his abode.

God possesses a definite form in his Akṣaradhāma, but through his antaryāmin powers, he pervades the jīvas (Vac. Kār.4).

Drawing upon the sovereign theme again, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises in Vac. Gaḍh. II.64 that Parabrahman never abandons this transcendental form even while being able to be present everywhere else.

Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa Puruṣottama is the sovereign ruler and is eternal. He is forever present on his throne in his Akṣaradhāma....

Śrī Kṛṣṇa Bhagavān forever dwells within that abode. But despite being present in Akṣaradhāma, he also grants darśana to whomever, wherever and in whichever way it is necessary. He speaks to whomever it is necessary to speak to and even touches whomever it is necessary to touch. Just as an accomplished yogi [siddha-puruṣa] can, while remaining in one place, see for thousands of miles and hear talks from thousands of miles away, similarly, despite being in his Akṣaradhāma, God also reveals himself in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas wherever there is a need to be revealed. Nevertheless, he himself is still always present in his Akṣaradhāma. The fact that he remains in one place and yet reveals himself in infinite places is due to his yogic powers [yoga-kalā].

He then goes on to conclude:

To thus remain in one place and at the same time to appear in infinite places is itself God's pervasive form by way of his yogic powers. But unlike space, he does not pervade without possessing a form (Vac. Gaḍh. II.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains in Vac. Var.13 as well that Parabrahman is sarvadeśin (in all places) while eternally being ekadeśastha (situated in one place). This is how, he argues, that scriptural statements describing God as 'sarvagata'¹¹⁸, 'vibhū'¹¹⁹ or 'vyāpaka'¹²⁰, etc. should be interpreted.

So, even though the scriptures describe God as pervasive, he actually possesses a definite form. In those scriptures, he is

¹¹⁸ E.g. SU 3.21.

¹¹⁹ E.g. BU 6.3.4.

¹²⁰ E.g. KaU 6.8.

described as pervasive in the sense that using his own powers, he appears to all while still residing in one place. But he is not pervasive in the sense of being formless like space. So, in reality, God eternally possesses a form. It is that God with a definite form, who, while always residing in Akṣaradhāma, appears in countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Var.13).

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this several times throughout the Vacanāmṛut to avert what he believes is the grave blasphemy of misunderstanding God as pervading all and existing only formlessly, that is, without having a distinct, definite and eternal transcendental form in his abode.

That Parabrahman can be within all and yet distinct, and conversely, distinct yet within all, is another idea relevant here and important in Svāminārāyaṇa's theology that needs to be noted. He uses the terms anvaya (immanent, existing concomitantly within all) and vyatireka (transcendental, existing distinctly alone), respectively. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

[Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is distinct [vyatireka], yet is immanently present within everything [sarvamā anvaya], and while being immanent, is still distinct from everything.

Again, in Vac. Var.7 he explains:

God's form is such that he is immanent within māyā and yet, at the same time, he still exists as distinct.

This also accounts for, as we saw above in the section about God as the soul of all entities, how Parabrahman can, despite being immanent within all, remain unaffected by the imperfections of all that he is immanent within. Svāminārāyaṇa

explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.10 while drawing upon an analogy of the material elements:

Space pervades earth, water, light and air – there is not even a single atom that is devoid of space – yet the mutations of earth, water, etc. do not affect [literally ‘touch’] space at all. In the same manner as space, no māyic flaw can affect [literally ‘touch’] Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

Parabrahman is thus immanent in all only while having an eternally transcendental form entirely distinct from everything else. But by being present in everything everywhere, even while having such a distinct form, ensures that Parabrahman is unbound by the confinements of physical space. Furthermore, when we expound upon Parabrahman’s distinct form in more detail in the section on Sākāra, we shall see that since he transcends all physicality, it is not possible to ‘measure’ him by any physical measurements. Hence, physical boundaries do not apply to Parabrahman even in his distinct [vyatireka] form in Akṣaradhāma. In all ways, he is spatially limitless.

6.2.2.3) Knowledge: Sarvajña

Closely related to God being unbound by time and space is the idea that God has unlimited knowledge, for if God can be in all places at all times, and he is a conscious (knowing) being, it follows that God can always know everything from everywhere. Svāminārāyaṇa affirms this in Vac. Jet.5, for example, by revealing that God knows

everything... all happenings from the three times – the past, the future and the present.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.53 he describes this more vividly.

God sees [knows] all of the jīvas and īśvaras who dwell in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas as clearly as he sees a drop of water in his palm.

Svāminārāyaṇa's primary emphasis from this statement seems to be that God's knowledge is always complete, perfect, and effortless. Additionally, because "all of the jīvas and īśvaras... in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas" are infinite in number, knowing them all perfectly means God's knowledge is also infinite in measure.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates on what such infinite knowledge means by citing a phrase from the Pañcarātric Pārāśarya Saṃhitā (3.20):

Yo veti yugapat sarvaṃ pratyakṣeṇa sadā svataḥ |

He who simultaneously knows everything as if before his eyes, always and independently,... (SV 3.15).

This all follows, of course, because Parabrahman is indeed a conscious, knowing being. Svāminārāyaṇa describes God as "paramacaitanya", the supreme conscious being [Vac. Pan.7], and confirms in Vac. Gaḍh. II.17:

He who realises God's nature to be replete with pure consciousness, free of māyic elements, is correct in his understanding.

The extra emphasis applied with "supreme" on God's consciousness is perhaps to distinguish him from the other spiritual beings (Akṣarabrahman, īśvaras and jīvas), for they, too, are caitanya, i.e. composed of and characterised by consciousness. And since each of the jīvas and īśvaras is also a knower (jñātā)

within its own field of scope, Svāminārāyaṇa often calls the soul of the finite being the 'kṣetrajña' – literally, 'knower of the field'. For Parabrahman, however, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that his knowledge is far superior to that of any other conscious being. He declares:

Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the kṣetrajña of all kṣetrajñas (Vac. Gaḍh. II.17).

This relates back to Parabrahman being the inner soul of everything (antarātman or sarvātman), of even the knowing beings, including Akṣarabrahman. But by using a term explicitly denotative of a knowing agent – literally, 'the knower of all knowers' – rather than simply 'the ātman of all ātmans', Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that, just as God is 'the Lord of all lords', he is the sole supreme knower. In fact, the body-soul relationship in this context also helps to confirm God as the supreme all-knower. Just as the jīvātman (soul of a finite being) pervades its entire body and is the source of consciousness throughout the body, allowing it to know (feel, see, hear, etc.) – that is to say, the soul is the knower of its entire body – in the same way, God, as the soul of the entire universe, pervades it and is the source of all consciousness throughout the universe; he is the knower of everything because he ensouls everything. It is in this sense also that the Upaniṣads proclaim Parabrahman as

the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, verily the speech of speech, the breath of the breath, the eye of the eye... (KeU 1.2).

Commenting on this verse, the Bhāṣyakāra elaborates on how it applies to Parabrahman – 'the divine, supremely conscious inspirer of the inert senses and mind, etc.' – (and not the finite soul within), citing also from Vac. Gaḍh. I.65

where Svāminārāyaṇa describes God's "jñānaśakti".¹²¹ This is Parabrahman's supreme cognitive power which allows all beings to know, and, along with his icchāśakti and kriyāśakti, to also will and act.

When a jīva enters the state of deep sleep [suṣupti], it becomes inert like a slab of stone and retains no type of consciousness.... When a jīva enters such a state, God awakens it from unconsciousness through his 'jñānaśakti' and makes it aware of all things.

So it is the supremely conscious Parabrahman

by whom one sees, by whom one hears, by whom one smells odours, by whom one utters speech, and by whom one recognises the tasteful and distasteful (AU 3.1).

Earlier, we had also noted how Svāminārāyaṇa stressed that those rare accomplished yogis who become omniscient only do so "on the strength of the upāsanā of God" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56]. As the bestower of knowledge to infinite beings, and even omniscience to some, it is evident again that God himself has infinite knowledge and is indeed omniscient.

Furthermore, the Bhāṣyakāra adds another layer of meaning to KeU 1.6-9 when he explains that Parabrahman does not need inner faculties or cognitive organs to know, as bound souls need the mind, eyes, ears, etc. This is because his knowledge is "sadā svataḥsiddha" – always self-accomplished or independent.¹²²

¹²¹ KeU-SB 1.2, p. 34.

¹²² KeU-SB 1.6, p.40.

By drawing together these as well as some previous and other corollary ideas (some of which will be elaborated later), we are able to arrive at a basic overview of God's omniscience within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. God having infinite knowledge means that:

- Gods knows everything there is to know
- God knows everything perfectly
- God knows everything immediately
- God knows everything simultaneously
- God knows everything continuously
- God knows everything directly, 'as before his eyes', not by inference, analogy, testimony or any other means
- God knows everything independently; he does not require any senses, organs or mental faculty for cognition
- God knows everything effortlessly; he does not need to exert himself in any way to know anything
- God's knowing is always fruitful and meaningful; it is never useless

6.2.2.4) Power: Sarvaśaktiman

In many ways, several of the aspects of Parabrahman's nature discussed so far are also aspects of his powers. We have already seen, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa talking about God's "antaryāmin śakti", the power to dwell within everyone and everything as their inner-controller; his "jñāna-śakti", "iccha-śakti" and "kriyā-śakti", allowing finite beings to know, will and act; or his other yogic powers (various called yoga-śakti, yoga-māyā, yoga-kalā), for

example, to exist distinctly within his transcendental abode and yet be immanent throughout the universe.

When discussing Parabrahman as the avatārin, the cause of the various avatāras, we also saw how he, by his ‘anu-praveśa’ (special ‘re-entering’) of Virāṭa Puruṣa, empowers selected īśvaras to become a divinised avatāra.

Before that, we learned that Parabrahman is the soul of the entire universe. He not only pervades all that he ensouls, but also supports, empowers and inspires it.

Going back even further, we looked at Parabrahman as the sole sovereign master, owning and ruling over his realm, the entire universe. The term used by Svāminārāyaṇa to denote Parabrahman’s lordship was ‘aiśvarya’, which is also used synonymously with powers associated with his lordly rule, i.e. supreme and divine powers.

Ahead, as we expound upon Parabrahman as the all-doer (sarvakartā) and all-cause (sarvakāraṇa), especially in his relation to the material creation, it will become apparent that these, too, are powers of Parabrahman.

So in this sense, all of these are a part of Parabrahman’s extraordinary, godly powers.

Svāminārāyaṇa also speaks more generally about these powers. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Puruṣottama Bhagavān is described as being “replete with all lordly powers” (sakala aiśvarya sampanna), which in fact are “innumerable” (asaṅkhyāt) [Vac. Loyā.1], “infinite” (anant) [Vac. Gaḍh. III.37], and “extremely limitless” (atīśay apār) [Vac. Gaḍh. II.67]. Furthermore:

Puruṣottama Bhagavān is the master yogi [or Lord of Yoga (yogeśvara)] and the treasure store of all yogic powers [yogakalānā nidhi] (Vac. Loyā.4).

In Vac. Sār.4, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

After all, God is extremely powerful; whatever he wishes, occurs (Vac. Sār.14).

Svāminārāyaṇa indicates here – as we saw with God’s power to know all things – the absolute effortlessness with which Parabrahman applies his power of conation. By his mere will do all things happen. There is no exertion on his behalf whatsoever.

A text that deserves particular mention in this discussion of Parabrahman’s powers is Vac. Loyā.13. We have seen parts of it earlier in describing God’s independence over and above all other entities. An earlier portion of that same excerpt reads:

Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the cause of all, the controller of all; he is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful. He possesses the powers of kartum, akartum and anyathā-kartum (Vac. Loyā.13).

What are these three powers? Literally, they mean that Parabrahman is '[able] to do', '[able] to not do', and '[able] to do otherwise'. While the first already establishes him as powerful enough to do (kartum) everything, the second answers questions of his undiminished overall authority over his own laws and even over powers he may have devolved to the Īśvaras. For example, if something is destined to happen by way of the law of karma, or if an Īśvara has determined something to happen in the brahmāṇḍa over which he is presiding, Parabrahman, by his akartum śakti, can prevent it from happening, i.e. to not-do it (akartum).¹²³ This is his inviolable superiority and independence at work, for it is only by his command in the first place that the Īśvaras are administrating their assigned realms, though one must hasten to add that Parabrahman rarely overrules the Īśvaras or the law of karma in this way. The final power, anyathā-kartum śakti, is even more rarely wielded – in fact, never. It implies a superlative power by which Parabrahman can do absolutely anything, including even the outright impossible. Svāminārāyaṇa gives a hint of this in Vac. Sār.14:

By his will, that which is inert can become conscious, and that which is conscious can become inert (Vac. Sār.14).

It must be stressed again that this is a *potentiality* of Parabrahman – he is *able* to do this – but one that he never actually exerts in a way that would disturb the normal flow of reality.¹²⁴ It is, rather, to stress the absolute omnipotence and complete authority of Parabrahman; he has unlimited powers, each to an

¹²³ See also Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, discussed in more detailed in the following section on Kartā, Parabrahman as the all-doer.

¹²⁴ See also Vac. Gaḍh. III.39, where Svāminārāyaṇa explains the chaos that would result if there were more than one God.

unlimited degree, allowing him to do everything and anything he so wills, by his mere will.

6.2.2.5) Splendour: Sarvasundara

In the upcoming section on Parabrahman as Sākāra, we shall be looking at in detail how Svāminārāyaṇa describes God's divine, human-like form and the stress he lays on understanding it as such. Here, though, as we continue to follow the list of aspects of God's limitless nature mentioned by Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, we come now to briefly understand the nature of God's splendour (sundaratā) or charm and beauty (rūpa).

Svāminārāyaṇa describes Parabrahman as “exceedingly beautiful” (ati rūpavān) [Vac. Loyā.13] and “extremely arresting” (atīśay manohar) [Vac. Gaḍh. II.13], going further in Vac. Loyā.18 to say:

God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame (Vac. Loyā.18).

Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon the attractiveness of the Hindu deity of love, a conventional exemplar of allure and charm in Hindu literature, and multiplies it millions of times over to impress upon his audience the overwhelming excellence of God's attractiveness, before which even those innumerable Kāmadevas feel utterly insignificant and humbled.

But in fact, Svāminārāyaṇa acknowledges, even such hefty comparisons are inadequate, because

the beauty of God cannot be found anywhere else (Vac. Pan.3),
and

the beauty [or form] of that God is such that it cannot be compared
to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa – up to and including
everything from Brahmā, etc. to the smallest blade of grass
[brahmāḍika sthamba paryanta] (Vac. Pan.4).

This is, of course, as Svāminārāyaṇa had explained earlier in the Vac. Gaḍh. II.67
sermon, because Parabrahman’s splendour is “extremely limitless” (atiśay apār).

6.2.2.6) Bliss: Sarvasukhamaya

For Svāminārāyaṇa, an important aspect of Parabrahman’s nature is his
blissfulness. He elucidates and emphasises it in various ways in several of his
sermons, making it deserving of a closer look as we seek to understand
Parabrahman’s unlimited-ness and supremacy within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu
theology.

In Vac. Pan.1, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies Parabrahman as “formed of bliss”
(sukharūpa), and in Vac. Pan.7 as “formed of extreme bliss” (atiśay
sukhasvarūpa). In Vac. Gaḍh. III.27, Gaḍh. III.28 and Gaḍh. III.39, he also
describes God as being “replete with bliss” (sukhamāyā).

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain the nature of this bliss more extensively in
sermons such as Vac. Sār.1. He states there:

If one were to gather all of the sensorial pleasures¹²⁵ of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, even then it would not equal even one millionth of a fraction of the bliss which is present in just one pore of God.

And so, Svāminārāyaṇa suggests in the same sermon, one should be ready to

utterly discard all of the sensorial pleasures of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas to see [darśana] God for just one second even.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa implies that one need not even see God. By merely closing one's eyes and contemplating on his form,

that bliss cannot be found even in a kingdom consisting of the 14 realms (Vac. Var.16).

In other words:

Before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance (Vac. Loyā.18).

In reiterating that Parabrahman's bliss is far superior to anything else that a person could ever attain, Svāminārāyaṇa often draws upon a common analogy.

For example, he states:

Consider the following analogy: An extremely wealthy man enjoys a great variety of food at home. Then, after finishing the meal, he throws a leftover piece of rotlo [unleavened millet bread] to a dog. In this case, the leftover piece of rotlo can be considered utterly inferior, and the various delicacies that the wealthy man enjoys can be considered to be full of pleasure. In the same way, God has given the countless jīvas of the brahmāṇḍas the sensorial pleasures. But they are inferior like the piece of rotlo thrown to the dog, whereas the bliss of God himself is far superior (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

¹²⁵ Throughout, "pañcaviśaynu sukh", literally, pleasures derived from the subjects of the five senses, i.e. sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches, has been translated as 'sensorial pleasures' for brevity and simplicity. Where only "pañcaviśay" or "viśay" is used, this is translated more generally as 'sense-objects'.

In Vac. Pan.1, Svāminārāyaṇa extends this analogy to beyond the pleasures available to ordinary people.

Compared to the bliss of God, the pleasures of Brahmā and others are like that of a poor man who begs with an earthen vessel at the door of a rich householder (Vac. Pan.1).

Svāminārāyaṇa's point from this is not to degrade the devatās to the level of paupers and beggary, but rather to stress the utter superiority of God's bliss and, in turn, inspire devotees away from this high-though-ultimately-finite happiness to instead the highest, infinite bliss of Parabrahman. Elaborating upon the above, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

For example, a wealthy merchant may have had trees planted on both sides of a road to provide shade. He may have had water fountains constructed. He may also have had almshouses and guesthouses constructed. He does all of this for the poor.... It is obvious that compared to those [amenities], the luxuries in the merchant's own home must be far greater. Similarly, God has created happiness for Brahmā and others; so it is obvious to an intelligent person that, compared to those, the bliss of his own abode must be far superior. An intelligent person, then, can infer that there is an extreme abundance of bliss in the abode of God. As a result, the alluring sensorial pleasures become repulsive to him (Vac. Pan.1).

So superior is this bliss of God's abode compared to the pleasures of the other paradisiacal realms that

it is said in [the Mahābhārata's] Mokṣa-Dharma¹²⁶ that the realms of the other devatās are like naraka [i.e. hell] compared to the Akṣaradhāma of God (Vac. Sār.1).

In reality, though, the bliss in God's abode is simply incomparable.

¹²⁶ Ete vai nirayāstāta sthānasya paramātmanah (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 191.6) |

The bliss experienced by the devotees of God residing in that abode is such that it cannot be compared to any other type of bliss in this brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

Yet, to provide some sort of indication at least of its superiority, Svāminārāyaṇa adopts a style reminiscent of the famous Ānanda-Mīmāṃsā found in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī [2.8.2]. He explains in Vac. Pan.1:

The happiness of humans exceeds the happiness of animals; and the happiness of a king exceeds that; and the happiness of devatās exceeds that; and the happiness of Indra exceeds that; then Br̥haspati's happiness, then Brahmā's, then Vaikuṇṭha's. Beyond that, the happiness of Goloka is superior, and finally, the bliss of God's Akṣaradhāma is vastly superior (Vac. Pan.1).

Later in the same sermon, he adopts another ascending series to reassert his point.

For example, a paisa is worth more than a cowry, and a rupee more than that; a gold coin is more valuable than that, and a cintāmaṇi [wish-fulfilling stone] is more valuable than that. Similarly, the bliss of God in his abode is vastly superior to wherever there are sensorial pleasures (Vac. Pan.1).

But apart from being superior in quality, how else is God's bliss different from the worldly pleasures? Firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

the bliss of God is imperishable (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

But more than being just everlasting, it also absolutely fulfilling.

Even if one experiences it for only a moment, the person who is engaged in worship feels, 'I've enjoyed the bliss of God in samādhi for thousands of years.' ... On the other hand, even if one indulges in māyic pleasures for a long time, ultimately one feels as if it was momentary (Vac. Var.9).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds in the same sermon that God’s bliss is “infrangible” [akhaṇḍa], and similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.10, that it is “unshakeable” [acala]. That is, nothing is able to disturb its fullness and consistency.

While reiterating that “whereas the worldly pleasures... are all perishable, the bliss related to God is everlasting”, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain in Vac.

Gaḍh. II.1 another significant way in which the two differ.

Sounds contain only pleasures related to sounds; the pleasures of the other four types of sensorial pleasures cannot be found in sounds. In the same way, only the pleasures of touch, and no other sensorial pleasures, can be found in touch. Similarly, only the pleasures of sight exist in sights. The same applies for tastes and smells in that only their own respective pleasures exist, but all types of sensorial pleasures cannot be experienced in just one sensorial object. On the other hand, in God, all pleasures exist simultaneously. Thus, even if a devotee only sees [God], he still feels totally fulfilled. Similarly, touch and other types of contact with God also make his devotees feel totally fulfilled.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 he reiterates:

The pleasures associated with sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch are all found to co-exist in one place – the blissful and divine form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān. When we have the darśana of that form of God, we can enjoy the bliss of that beauty, as well as the bliss of the other four types of sense pleasures, i.e. sounds, touch, etc. That gratification occurs simultaneously. With worldly objects, however, when one indulges in one sense pleasure, one receives the gratification of only that sense, but not of the others. Thus the pleasures of worldly objects are found separately. Moreover, those pleasures are insignificant, perishable and ultimately the cause of extreme misery. But in God, one enjoys the bliss of all of the senses simultaneously. That bliss is extremely divine [mahā alaukika; literally, ‘greatly non-worldly’]; it is eternal and imperishable.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus describes the bliss of Parabrahman as supreme in quality and limitless in extent; totally fulfilling, consistent and unending.

But as inferior, limited, incomplete, unstable and transient as the worldly pleasures may be, Svāminārāyaṇa explains their source, too.

Whatever happiness related to the sense-objects is apparent in this world – be it for animals, humans, devatās, spirits, etc. – it is due only to some association with God and when coupled with dharma (Vac. Pan.1).

When arguing the case for Parabrahman in the Brahmasūtras'

Ānandamayādhikaraṇa [1.1.13-20], this point helps answer the question of whether the jīvas or īśvaras can also be understood as being ānandamaya, or 'replete with bliss'. The Sūtrakāra ends the objections with the following aphorism:

Asmin-nasya ca tad-yogam śāsti |

The Bhāṣyakāra explains it thus:

While the jīvas, īśvaras, etc. may have some association with bliss [ānandayoga], they cannot be said to be full of bliss [ānandamaya], for their bliss is totally dependent on the bliss of Paramātman, since he is their controller [śāsti], and it is he who is replete with supreme bliss [paramānandamaya].¹²⁷

In the commentary for TU 2.7.2, which closely follows the passage from where the above adhikaraṇa is drawn, the Bhāṣyakāra further adds:

Paramātman is the essence, i.e. the very form of superlatively limitless bliss [anavadhīkātiśayānandarūparasamūrti]. The jīva or īśvara who worships this essence – Paramātman, the Lord of Akṣara – becomes blissful, i.e. is surrounded by supreme bliss [paramānanda]. Thus, to desire divine, limitless supreme bliss from anywhere apart from this Lord of Akṣara, who is composed of bliss and is replete with bliss, is as futile as to wish milk as sweet

¹²⁷ BS-SB 1.1.20, p. 43.

as nectar from the wattle of a goat¹²⁸. Thus, only he [Paramātman] should be worshipped. This is the [gist of the] instruction.¹²⁹

So, all that is pleasurable in the world is due to God's presence and influence, because, after all,

God is the repository of all forms of bliss [sukhamātranā rāśi] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

As if echoing the Upaniṣadic instruction from above, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes and declares in Vac. Gaḍh. II.56:

The essence of all scriptures is simply this: God is the sole source of supreme bliss and the supreme essence of everything. Excluding God, all other objects are absolutely insignificant and utterly unsubstantial.

As a summary then, we have the following table:

¹²⁸ This is a common example used in Hindu literature to exemplify futility, since the wattle of a goat, though resembling an udder, does not contain any milk.

¹²⁹ TU-SB 2.7.2, p. 382.

Bliss of Parabrahman	Enjoyment from Sensorial Pleasures
Vastly superior	Utterly inferior
Everlasting	Transient
Consistent	Unstable
Pure	Marred by misery
Immediately fulfilling	Eventually unfulfilling
All senses can be gratified simultaneously	Senses can be gratified only individually
Source of all other bliss	Source is Parabrahman

6.2.2.7) Virtues: Sakalaśubhagaṇasampanna

When describing the auspicious qualities that God possesses, Svāminārāyaṇa often draws from other Hindu texts. For example, in Vac. Var.10, he states:

God assumes an avatāra on this earth in one of two forms – either in the form of a king or in the form of a sādhu. When he assumes an avatāra upon the earth as a king, he possesses the 39 characteristics [lakṣaṇa] of a king, and when he assumes an avatāra upon the earth in the form of a sādhu, he possesses the 30 characteristics [lakṣaṇa] of a Sādhu.

The 39 “characteristics” – or divine virtues – of God in a lordly manifestation are identified in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [1.16.26-28] as follows: (1) satya – truthfulness or benevolence to all beings; (2) sauca – [inner] purity, i.e. flawlessness; (3) dayā – compassion, i.e. intolerance of others’ pain; (4) kṣānti – forbearance, i.e. tolerance of contempt from adversaries; (5) tyāga –

renunciation, i.e. forsaking of all things, including one's self; (6) santoṣa – contentment, i.e. free from restlessness; (7) ārjava – sincerity, i.e. congruence of mind (thoughts), speech (words) and body (actions); (8) śama – tranquillity, i.e. restraint of mind; (9) dama – self-control, i.e. restraint of outer sense organs; (10) tapas – austerity, i.e. contemplation upon the creation of the world; (11) sāmya – equality, i.e. equal behaviour with friends and foe; (12) titikṣā – endurance, i.e. withstanding of comforts and hardships; (13) uparati – abstinence, i.e. refraining from unnecessary activities; (14) śruta – learning, i.e. knowledge of the precise meanings of the scriptures; (15) jñāna – knowledge, i.e. knowledge useful in helping aspirants attain the desirable and avoid the undesirable; (16) virakti – disaffection, i.e. unattraction towards the pleasures of the sense-objects; (17) aiśvarya – power, i.e. control over all things; (18) śaurya – valour, i.e. boldness in battle; (19) tejas – brilliance, i.e. resistance to defeat; (20) bala – strength, i.e. power to govern all beings; (21) smṛti – memory, i.e. remembering of devotees' favours in their times of faltering; (22) svātantrya – independence; (23) kauśala – expertise; (24) kānti – lustre; (25) dhairya – fortitude, i.e. strength of mind in adverse times; (26) mārḍava – suppleness, i.e. modesty; (27) prāgalbhya – courage; (28) praśraya – courtesy; (29) śīla – chastity, i.e. purity of character; (30) sahas – potency; (31) ojas – vitality; (32) bala – strength, i.e. power to support all things; (33) bhaga – excellence; (34) gāmbhīrya – profundity; (35) sthairyā – stability; (36) āstikya – faith in God and scriptures;¹³⁰ (37) kīrti – glory; (38) māna – self-respect; (39) anahamkṛti – egolessness, i.e. humility.

¹³⁰ Remember that these qualities are, in effect, the characteristics of an ideal king, which God

Similarly, the 30 attributes of a Sādhū, which God perfectly adopts when he manifests as one, are distinguished in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa [11.11.29-33] as follows: (1) kṛpālu – one who selflessly showers grace upon others; (2) sarvadehinām akṛtadroha – one who does not harm any living being; (3) titikṣu – one who remains equipoised in all situations, such as in the dualities of praise and insult, happiness and misery, hunger and thirst, etc.; (4) satyasāra – one whose strength comes from satya; (5) anavadhyātmā – one who is devoid of jealousy or other such vices; (6) sama – one who views others with equality; (7) sarvopakāraka – one who does only good to others; (8) kāmair-ahataadhī – one whose mind is not disturbed by engaging in sensorial pleasures; (9) dānta – one whose senses are restrained; (10) mṛdu –gentle-natured; (11) śuci – one with inner and outer purity; (12) akincana – one without any worldly desires; (13) anīha – one without any desires for worldly gains; (14) mitabhuk – one who eats in moderation; (15) śānta – one whose mind is restrained; (16) sthira – one who is equipoised; (17) maccharaṇa – one whose only refuge is God; (18) muni – one who has noble thoughts; (19) apramatta – one who is aware; (20) gabhīrātmā – one whose motives are beyond our understanding; (21) dhṛtimān – one who is patient even in testing circumstances; (22) jitaṣaḍguṇa – one who has overcome the six ‘urges’: thirst, hunger, grief, infatuation, old age and death; (23) amānī – one with humility; (24) mānada – one who can praise others; (25) kalpa – one who has the ability to speak for others’ benefit; (26) maitra – one who does not deceive others; (27) kāruṇika – one who is compassionate without any selfish

assumes the role of when he manifests as a king.

motive; (28) kavi – one who fully knows the animate, the inanimate and God; (29) one who worships God; (30) one who has single-minded worship with the realisation of God in his true glory.

Svāminārāyaṇa also points out, though, that these or any other list is never exhaustive, for

God possesses countless such redemptive virtues (Vac. Gaḍh. I.77).

Similarly, in an extensive list of appellations for Parabrahman describing various aspects of his nature, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī includes the following two:

“Anantakalyāṇakāriguṇabhājana” and “Anavadhikātiśaya-ajahat-...guṇamohadhadi”, meaning God is “a vessel of endless auspicious qualities” and “a superlatively limitless grand ocean of perfect virtues (literally, which cannot be discarded) [SV 7.2]. That is, it cannot be said that God has only certain virtues and not others, or that he has a virtue only to a certain degree; he has limitless virtues, each one to a limitless degree.

For Svāminārāyaṇa, this is what is meant when the scriptures describe God as “saguṇa”, literally ‘with attributes’.

But what about when they describe him as “nirguṇa” – literally, ‘attribute-less’?

He argues:

When the scriptures describe God as being... nirguṇa, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess.... māyic attributes. In reality,... he possesses countless redemptive virtues (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

One such example of a śāstric description of Parabrahman as “nirguṇa” can be found at BG 13.31. The commentary on that particular word interprets it in consonance with Svāminārāyaṇa’s explanation above, as “devoid of prākṛta [i.e. worldly] qualities”.¹³¹

According to Svāminārāyaṇa theology, then, Parabrahman is saguṇa in that he is replete with infinite auspicious and redemptive qualities, and he is nirguṇa in that he is totally devoid of any māyic, evil or defiling qualities.¹³² Together, it makes him perfectly virtuous and pure¹³³, the highest *summum bonum*.

*

Having thus covered Parabrahman as unbounded by time and space and having limitless knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and virtues, this completes the discussion of Parabrahman’s limitless nature, and also Parabrahman as Sarvopari (supreme). We now move onto expounding another key aspect of Parabrahman, which in many ways further corroborates his supremacy.

¹³¹ BG-SB 13.31, p. 290.

¹³² Svāminārāyaṇa also gives another meaning to the ideas of ‘saguṇa’ and ‘nirguṇa’ in relation to the size of God’s form. This shall be covered in Parabrahman as Sākāra. See section 6.4.3.1.

¹³³ More about Parabrahman as free from māyic influence and hence being divine (divya) is especially relevant to Svāminārāyaṇa in terms of God’s human-like form, and so will be covered in more detail in the sections on Parabrahman as Sākāra (6.4) and Pragaṭa (6.5).

6.3) KARTĀ: God as Omniagent

In this section, we shall see, firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis on understanding Parabrahman as sarvakartā – the all-doer or omniagent – before moving on to unpacking that term and seeing what exactly Svāminārāyaṇa means by it, i.e. what does God actually 'do'. Along the way, we shall encounter a number of challenges to this claim and the perfect nature of God as a result of his doership or divine agency. These we shall understand with their refutations as addressed in the commentarial tradition.

6.3.1) Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as the All-Doer

Some of Svāminārāyaṇa's most emphatic instructions to know the true nature of God concern descriptions of Parabrahman as sarvakartā, the 'all-doer'. These include, for example, a sermon when he was "seriously ill", though the illness itself seems to have done little to subdue his fervour in conveying what he believes is a key soteriological principle. He said:

The jīva's liberation is attained only by the following understanding: 'All that happens is by the doing of the manifest form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Nārāyaṇa, but nothing at all is done by any of time [kāla], karma, māyā, etc.' In this manner, understanding God alone to be the all-doer is indeed the supreme cause of liberation (Vac. Kār.10).

The last sentence of this excerpt is worth seeing in its Gujarati. It reads:

Ā rite Bhagavān-ne viśe ja ek kartā-paṇu samajvu e ja kalyāṇ-nu param kāraṇ che.

What is noticeable is the use of multiple accentuations – terms such as 'ek' ('one' or 'alone') and 'param' ('supreme') as well as two instances of 'ja' ('only',

denoting exclusivity or certainty) – which indicate the imperative need in Svāminārāyaṇa’s mind for such an understanding as well as his own conviction of its truth. We see the same intensity and a similar array of certainty-stressing modifiers in another sermon, which he prefaces this time with śāstric corroboration.

I have attentively listened to all of the scriptures which Vyāsajī has written regarding the attainment of liberation. The conclusive principle [siddhānta] prevalent in all those scriptures, and the only principle for the liberation of the jīva, is simply this: The sole ‘doer’ of this entire cosmos is God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.37, Svāminārāyaṇa describes some salient attributes of a perfect devotee. He includes in the list of attributes key aspects of how that devotee correctly understands God’s nature. Such a devotee

realises that there is indeed no other ‘doer’ of this world besides that God.

When the topic moves to how a devotee in turn can develop “extraordinary love” (asādhāraṇa sneh) for God, Svāminārāyaṇa includes the same understanding, but with a little more detail.

He should realise the lordship [aiśvarya] of God, i.e. “This God is the master of Brahmamahola, Goloka, Śvetadvīpa and all of the other abodes. He is the master of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas and is the all-doer.’ He should never believe Puruṣa, time [kāla], karma, māyā, the three guṇas, the 24 [māyic] elements, or Brahmā and the other devatās to be the doers of this brahmāṇḍa; instead, he should realise only Puruṣottama Bhagavān to be the doer and the inner-controller [antaryāmin] of all. Resolute faith in the manifest form of God before the eyes with such an understanding is the only way to develop extraordinary love for God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.59).

An important clarification needs to be made here: jīvas, īśvaras and Akṣarabrahman, by way of being sentient beings themselves, are also able to do, see, hear, enjoy, experience, etc.; that is, they too have individual agency. However, this is all due to Parabrahman – who pervades them, supports them, empowers them – without whom they would not be able to do anything. It is in this sense that Parabrahman alone is the *independent* doer of everything; the others are all doers, though not independently. Furthermore, even while Parabrahman is the all-doer, he does not necessarily intervene upon the actions of the jīvas and īśvaras; he allows the natural course of events and effects to unfold. As we shall see in their respective chapters, Parabrahman delegates power and authority to īśvaras and also allows jīvas the freedom to choose¹³⁴.

Equally emphatic as Svāminārāyaṇa's advocacy that God is the sole all-doer is his reproof of the belief that anyone or anything besides God could be this independent agent. When asked by a leading devotee about how God is pleased, he simply replied:

If one does not malign God, then God is pleased.

Continuing, he said:

Then you may ask, 'What does it mean to malign God?' Well, God is the all-doer of this world. However, if one does not understand him to be the all-doer and instead believes that it is time that is the all-doer of this world, or that it is māyā, or that it is karma, or that it is nature [svabhāva] that is the all-doer, then one is maligning God. This is because actually God is the all-doer. To ignore this and to claim that only time, karma, māyā and nature are the all-doers of this world is severe slander [ati droh] against God.

¹³⁴ See sections 8.2.2 and 9.2, respectively.

Svāminārāyaṇa then drew upon a familiar analogy which also ties in God's supremacy with his omniagency. He said in direct response to the questioner:

For example, you are the chief of your village. If someone does not acknowledge your status in the village, then he can be said to be your slanderer. Also, if someone does not accept the sovereignty of an emperor of the world, but instead accepts the sovereignty of one who is not even a king, then that person is known as a slanderer of the emperor.... So, to say that God is not the all-doer... and that time and others are the doers – not God – is indeed tantamount to maligning God (Vac. Var.2).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds a string of further admonishments in Vac. Kār.10, where he censures such a person as 'the worst of sinners', "worse even than one who has killed a cow, killed a Brahmin, associated with the wife of one's own guru, or maligned a true guru who is a knower of Brahman", and warns others to "not even stand in such a person's shadow" nor "even mistakenly listen to any words from such a person's mouth". "Why?" Svāminārāyaṇa asks.

Because he believes time, karma, etc. to be the doers of everything, not God.

If we look closely at these statements above, what emerges from them is not so much Svāminārāyaṇa's insistence that God is the all-doer, but rather, more specifically, that it is *only* God who is the all-doer. Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises this by firstly reinforcing his statements in favour of God with such terms as 'only', 'alone', 'sole', and 'indeed' (often with 'ek' and 'ja' in Gujarati), and secondly, by explicitly naming that which should *not* be considered to be the independent all-doers, i.e. time (or kāla), karma, māyā, nature (svabhāva), etc. In the first text from Vac. Kār.10, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa also contrasts "*all*

that happens” as the doing of God alone, whereas “*nothing at all* is done by *any* of time, karma, māyā, etc.” [emphasis added].

With this, Svāminārāyaṇa is implicitly countering the various non-theistic strands of thought which propound(ed) that all that happens is not by the will and strength of God, but, independently of him, by time in the inevitable unfolding of events in temporal succession; or as determined by the karmas of the individual beings which are capable of administering their own rewards and punishments but do not require an independent, omniscient, omnipresent grantor of the fruits of those karmas; or by simple illusion [‘māyā’] because nothing besides the One or Nothingness is ‘real’ anyway; or by svabhāva [‘inherent nature’], since all phenomena are naturally bound to happen anyway; or by the inert Pradhāna which is activated by the conscious Puruṣa.¹³⁵

This very much resonates with the debates played out in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad in adhikaraṇas such as Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa [BS 1.1.5-12]. This is a

¹³⁵ Some of these ancient schools of thought are alluded to in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad. When the sages ask,

What is the cause? Is it Brahman? From where are we born? By what do we live? And on what are we established? (1.1),

they rhetorically suggest:

Is it worth considering as the cause time, inherent nature, necessity [niyati], chance [ṛccha], the [māyic] elements, or Puruṣa? (1.2)

All these are rejected because they are inert and cannot be the cause of the spiritual. Nor is the individual soul possible as the cause, for it, too, is ‘not in control’ [anīśa] and ‘subject to pleasure and pain’ [sukhadukhaḥhetu], i.e. it is not independent nor free of karma. Instead, the sages proclaim, the ultimate cause is

God, the one, who rules over all these causes, from ‘time’ to ‘the individual soul’ (1.3).

relevant section to briefly see how the Bhāṣyakāra, based on Svāminārāyaṇa's conclusive statements (siddhānta), offers his exegetical argumentation on this topic. However, to appreciate that argumentation more fully, we shall first have to unpack what Svāminārāyaṇa means by the term 'all-doer' and its other related terms.

6.3.2) Parabrahman as the All-Doer and All-Cause

When Svāminārāyaṇa insists that Parabrahman is the all-doer, what does he mean? What does Parabrahman actually 'do'?

A study of the Vacanāmṛt reveals that Svāminārāyaṇa includes a number of aspects in the agency of God. As 'kartā', Parabrahman:

- Creates, Sustains and Dissolves
- Supports
- Controls
- Inspirers
- Empowers
- Permits
- Administers

We shall look at the first set of aspects in some detail, and then most of the others will follow collectively more briefly.

6.3.2.1) Parabrahman as Creator, Sustainer and Dissolver & Both Efficient

Cause and Material Cause

In several sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa explains Parabrahman is responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world. For example:

Beyond that Akṣara is Akṣarātīta Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything.... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

That greatness [of God] should be understood as follows: [Puruṣottama Bhagavān] is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

It is through God that everything mobile and immobile is created (Vac. Gaḍh. II.10).

Thus God... is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of countless brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

It is God who is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of the world (Vac. Loyā.17).¹³⁶

Strictly speaking, though, Parabrahman does not himself directly engage in the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution. As we shall see in more detail in the chapter on māyā and the ‘evolving’ of the physical world (jagat), it is Parabrahman’s will (sankalpa) – working through Akṣarabrahman who then instructs an akṣaramukta and Prakṛti (i.e. māyā) – which initiates the entire creative process (utpatti-sarga). Nevertheless, it is also completely true to say

¹³⁶ In several other statements, we often find the word ‘kartā’ being used conjointly with ‘hartā’ – as ‘kartā-hartā’, literally, the ‘doer-and-taker’ – connoting, at a cosmological level, both the creative and terminative aspects of God’s work, and by extension, everything in-between. At a personal level, individuals can understand God as both their ‘giver and taker’.

that without Parabrahman there would be no creation, sustenance or dissolution, and hence, it is correct to describe Parabrahman as, *ultimately*, the creator, sustainer and dissolver.

Moreover, with māyā, the primordial material of which the world is composed, already existing – it is co-eternal with God – it is questionable how exactly God can have actually *created* anything new and so justifiably be called the ‘creator’. Again, we shall be discussing this at its proper juncture in the chapter on māyā, but it is important to observe here that this is why Parabrahman is also emphasised as the ‘kāraṇa’, i.e. the *cause* of all things, including creation, rather than directly the ‘creator’. Nevertheless, as we shall see with various analogies – such as the sculptor and his statue created from a boulder of stone – Parabrahman can still be properly understood as ‘the creator’.

In this sense, Parabrahman is known as the efficient cause – the nimittakāraṇa – of the world, and we find Svāminārāyaṇa using the general term ‘kāraṇa’ for Parabrahman, often alongside ‘kartā’. For example:

What is that God like? Well,... he is indeed the cause of all causes
[‘sarva kāraṇāṇaṁ paṇ kāraṇaṁ’] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

One who is wise realises, ‘God appears like a human, but, in fact, he is the cause of all and the doer of all; he is powerful (Vac. Loyā.2).

Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the all-cause, the all-controller. He is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful (Vac. Loyā.13).

In fact, in the first excerpt cited in this section, the complete sentence reads:

Beyond that Akṣara is the Akṣarātīta Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything – and the cause of all (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

However, with there being two types of causes – the effective cause as well as the material cause – which one does Svāminārāyaṇa mean? The answer is both; Parabrahman is the abhinnanimittopādānakāraṇa, the ‘indistinct efficient and material cause’ of the world.

With the above statements pointing to Parabrahman as the efficient cause of the world, others also point to him being the material cause as well. For example, the excerpt above from Vac. Gaḍh. I.51 immediately goes on to mention:

A cause always pervades its effect, and simultaneously, also remains distinct from it. Thus, if one looks from the perspective of Puruṣottama Bhagavān – the cause of all – then nothing else appears to exist except Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

The causality intended here by Svāminārāyaṇa refers to the material cause, thus bringing together both causes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51.

6.3.2.1.1) Some Challenges to Parabrahman’s Omnidoership and Perfect Nature

But how can Parabrahman be the material cause of the universe? Does Parabrahman actually ‘take the form of māyā’ and *become* the physical world with its myriad objects that have names and forms? Surely not completely, for we have already learned that Parabrahman has a definite, distinct and transcendental form in his abode which he never forsakes. So then is it the case

that Parabrahman only partially becomes the visible world, still remaining in part in his transcendental form? But that would make him fragmentary, divisible and effectively mutable, whereas the śāstras, including the Vacanāmṛut, proclaim Parabrahman to be nirañśa (whole, without parts), akhaṇḍa (indivisible), and avikārin (immutable) [e.g. SU 6.11; Vac. Pan.2]. The detractors raising these objections, as presented in BS 2.1.27, can be summarised as saying this: If you insist on Parabrahman being the material cause of the world, then you will either have to accept him as having parts or being without a distinct transcendental form.

This apparent theological dilemma is reconciled by the Bhāṣyakāra by firstly resorting to śāstric revelation, insisting that that which is beyond the senses cannot have any other means of confirmation (śrutiśabdābhinnapramāṇa'mūlatvāt). 'If the Śrutis reveal Parabrahman as being the material cause as well as being whole, indivisible, immutable, etc., then who are we to argue?' is the reasoning.¹³⁷

Elsewhere, additionally, two key doctrines that Svāminārāyaṇa has accepted are called into action to reconcile the problem. Firstly, that Parabrahman is the inner soul of the entire world. It is natural and right for him to pervade, control and empower his entire 'body'. However, this pervading is by his antaryāmi-śakti, or special yogic powers, allowing him to therefore be immanently present within all

¹³⁷ BS-SB. 2.1.27-28, pp. 177-79.

while actually being distinctly transcendental as well. For the task of creation, specifically, Parabrahman also ‘re-enters’ (anu-praveśa) māyā and the various elements, overpowering their own identity and reigning supreme within them. It is in this sense that Parabrahman is said to ‘take the form of māyā’.

The second doctrine concerns the view of causality adopted by Svāminārāyaṇa, which has as its starting point the satkāryavāda of the Sāṃkhya School. In brief, it is the belief that an effect is pre-existent in its cause as a different state (avasthāntara). In other words: states change; not substances created. So what one sees as ‘new’ is not a new or different substance, but merely the causal substance (i.e. the material cause) in a different state. For example, a gold chain is nothing but the gold it is made of in a different form; it is not a new substance apart from gold. At a cosmological level, then, creation is the changing of māyā – its causal substance – from its causal state (kāraṇāvasthā) to its effected state (kāryāvasthā). Conversely, dissolution is the opposite; the returning of māyā from its effected state (kāryāvasthā) to its original causal state (kāraṇāvasthā).

Now, since Parabrahman enters into māyā, controls it and empowers it – he is its very soul – he is thus said to be non-different (ananya) from māyā.¹³⁸ This being so, Parabrahman, as the material cause, does not have to change ‘in substance’ to become the effect which is the world, but only change states – from Parabrahman as māyā in its causal state to Parabrahman as māyā in its effected state.

¹³⁸ This was discussed in the section about Parabrahman as the ‘Soul of All Beings and Things’, with specific reference to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad’s Ananyatvādhikaraṇa [2.1.14] that is being alluded to here.

Svāminārāyaṇa brings some of these points together in Vac. Loyā.2 when he explains:

God, who is the cause of all, appears like a human being, yet by his yogic powers, he is able to create countless millions of brahmāṇḍas from his body [i.e. māyā] and is able to absorb them back into himself.

The famous Sadvidyā instruction to Śvetaketu by his father in the sixth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad also refers to this idea. As the Bhāṣyakāra explains, the opening –

Sattveva saumyedaṁ agra āsīd-ekamevādvitīyaṁ |

Dear son, in the beginning there was verily only this Being, one, without second (6.2.2) –

refers to Parabrahman as being the material cause, the primordial Being from which all springs forth. The immediately following verse,

Tadaikṣyata bahu syāṁ prajāyeyeti

That [Being] thought [literally, ‘saw’], ‘Let me be many’, ‘Let me propagate’ (6.2.3),

which indicates an intelligent being, establishes that primordial Being as also the efficient cause who wills, inspires and thereby initiates each new cycle of creation.¹³⁹

The same two-fold representation of Parabrahman is made at TU 2.6.3-2.71 and AU 1.1.1 (and at BU 1.4.10 for Akṣarabrahman). All contain similar words to the

¹³⁹ CU-SB 6.2.1-3, pp. 252-58.

Sadvidyā instruction above, with the last being especially useful because it uses the term ‘ātmā’ instead of ‘sat’, i.e.

Ātmā va idam eka evā’gra āsīt |.... Sa īkṣata lokān-nu srujā iti | Sa
imān lokān asrujata |

In the beginning there was only this one Self.... He thought
[literally, ‘saw’], ‘Let me be create the worlds’. He thus created the
worlds (1.1.1),

thus explicitly tying in Parabrahman’s omnisoulship with his dual causality.

In this way, Parabrahman is the material cause of the world, and, as its intelligent initiator, also the world’s efficient cause. That is, he – though being one – is both the efficient and material cause of the world, the abhinnanimittopadanakāraṇa.

It is precisely because of this dual causality coming together in Parabrahman – by way of his being the inner soul of everything – that makes it possible for only God to be the sole and complete cause of the universe, and not anyone or anything else. This, at least, is the argument when objections are raised about the plausibility of other potential causes of the world, such as at BS 1.1.5 through to 1.1.12, which take their cue from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad verses cited above. In introducing the debate, the Bhāṣyakāra asks the question: What could be taken as the denotatum of ‘sat’ in these verses? That is, could time, karma, inherent nature, the inert Pradhāna of the Sāṃkhya, or anything else be the omnicause?

This list of potential candidates includes all that Svāminārāyaṇa had explicitly and emphatically instructed against being the cause or agents of the world, as we saw earlier. Accordingly, then, the Sūtrakāra states:

Īkṣater-nā'śabdam (BS 1.1.5) |

No, the Bhāṣyakāra explains. That which is 'aśabda' – which does not have verbal testimony, or revelation, as its main means of proof, i.e. the Pradhāna of Sāṃkhya – cannot be the cause 'sat'. Why? Because 'seeing' is mentioned in the verse, and this seeing, preceded by will (saṅkalpapurvakekṣaṇa), must be of an intelligent being only. This confirms that 'sat' can refer to 'Brahman', who is pure Being, and that 'Brahman' can be the efficient cause of the world.

Various contentions, counter-arguments and refutations follow in the characteristic style of a Brahmasūtra-adhikaraṇa, for example, debating on whether the 'seeing' is just a figurative expression or a real description, etc. The Sūtrakāra ends the debate by reverting again to śāstric revelation as emphasised at the opening:

Śrutatvāc-ca (BS 1.1.12) |

Because it is stated throughout the Śruti itself, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, that that same 'sat' was alone in the beginning, as stated at the start of the chapter, and, at the very end of the chapter, is also stated as being the soul of all this (aitadātmīyam idam sarvam... sa ātmā [CU 6.16.3]), it means that that 'sat' is also the material cause of the world. It is wholly implausible for the inert Pradhāna or any of the others – time, karma, nature, etc. – to be both the material cause *and* the efficient cause, whereas, as shown, it is so revealed in texts that 'Brahman' is.

These same points are emphasised when a similar question was raised near the very beginning of the Brahmasūtras, even when some of the alternatives proposed are not inert concepts but sentient beings. After the opening aphorism instructs that an inquiry into ‘Brahman’ should be conducted, the Sūtrakāra goes on to define in this next aphorism,

Janmādyasya yataḥ (BS. 1.1.2),

that Brahman is ‘that from which [occurs] the origination, etc. of this [world]’.

But, the objectors argue, how can one be sure that it is ‘Brahman’ as God¹⁴⁰ that should be known, for cannot the term in this second sūtra also refer to the Vedas, or a Brahmin, or Brahmā the īśvara, or even a jīva or liberated soul? To prove that their question is valid, they cite several verses which indeed show ‘Brahman’ being used to mean the Vedas, etc. That being so, the Bhāṣyakāra states, it is impossible that any of the others can be the cause of the world. Why? Because the Vedas are a collection of words (i.e. inert), while Brahmins, Brahmā, other īśvaras, and jīvas, though intelligent beings, are themselves bound by māyā and a part of creation.¹⁴¹ A mukta, who is liberated from māyā, is only ever involved in the process of creation by joining with Prakṛti (i.e. māyā) at the behest of Parabrahman, and even then, only once for the creation of one brahmāṇḍa only, not continuously for all the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas. Crucially, there is

¹⁴⁰ As stated earlier, we shall learn in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman that ‘Brahman’ here also denotes ‘Akṣarabrahman’.

¹⁴¹ While the jīvas and īśvaras are eternal, their bodies are composed of māyā, and, due to their karmas, pass through the cycle of birth, degeneration and death, only to be reborn again, due to those karmas. It is in this respect that they are considered a part of ‘creation’. See the respective chapters on jīva and īśvara.

no way in which any of them can be *both* the efficient and material cause of the world as Brahman is.¹⁴²

Even if Parabrahman is accepted as the efficient cause of the world, believing him to be the material cause as well poses serious and irredeemable challenges to his perfect nature, the objectors claim. Why? Because a causal substance is not dissimilar from its effect; a pot is similar to the clay from which it was produced or a piece of cloth from its threads, but threads cannot create a pot, nor clay a piece of cloth. So, since the world is composed of things that are inert, in flux, mutable, ordinary, sorrow-filled, sullied by the impurities of *māyā*, and always constituted of the three *guṇas*, how can it be that God is its material cause? The objectors are effectively saying: If you insist on Parabrahman being the material cause of the world, you will have to accept that he is no longer conscious, unchanging, immutable, divine, replete with bliss, pure, and forever *triguṇatita* (transcending the three *māyic* qualities – *sattvaguṇa*, *rajoguṇa* and *tamoguṇa*). Since the objectors know that this would be entirely unacceptable for the Svāminārāyaṇians, they assume that the Svāminārāyaṇians will inevitably have to concede that Parabrahman is not the material cause of the world.

The objectors bolster their case by pre-empting potential arguments and offering counter-arguments in advance.¹⁴³ But in response, the Sūtrakāra states:

Dṛśyate tu |

¹⁴² BS-SB 1.1.2, pp. 12-14.

¹⁴³ BS-SB 2.1.4-5, pp. 159-61.

But it can be seen (2.1.6).

That is, there are examples – found both around us and mentioned in texts – that disconfirm the thesis that the effect is necessarily of the same nature as its cause. For example, hairs grow from a man, or as stated in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, “From space came air; from air, fire;” etc. (2.1.1). Space is without any of the tactile qualities found in air, nor does air have the visibility of fire. Thus, there is nothing inordinate in Parabrahman being the material cause and still being different in nature from the world and unsullied by all its imperfections. This is possible by way of him being the inner-pervader, controller, support, and soul of everything, including of māyā from which the world is composed.¹⁴⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in Vac. Var.7 by further elucidating upon the concept of God as anvaya and vyatireka, that Parabrahman can still be immanent within or non-different from māyā as its soul and yet be wholly distinct from it in his abode. He says:

The principle of anvaya-vyatirek is not that God has become half immanent within māyā and remains half distinct in his abode. Rather, God’s form is such that he is immanent within māyā and yet, at the same time, he is distinct. God is not afraid, ‘What if I enter māyā and thereby become impure?’ Instead, when God associates with māyā, even māyā becomes like Akṣaradhāma [his abode]; and if he associates with the 24 elements [of creation], then they also become brahmarūpa [i.e. like Brahman].

So, there is no question of Parabrahman becoming imperfect. He can safely be the material cause of the world as well as its efficient cause.

¹⁴⁴ BS-SB 2.1.6, pp. 161-62.

Still, the objectors rise to question again, how can the efficient cause be the same as the material cause? It is unseen of in the world to have both as the same. The potter who makes the pot is always different from the clay with which he makes it. The Bhāṣyakāra argues that while that may be true on a worldly plane when dealing with a finite being, here, the creator is totally other-worldly (alaukika) and composed not of a finite body and qualities but is divine and infinite, with limitless powers and knowledge, and totally unbound by time and space. Moreover, being the inner soul of the entire world, he already pervades everything, supports it and empowers it. Thus, it is wholly appropriate and acceptable (if not entirely conceivable by finite minds) that Parabrahman is both the efficient and material cause of the world.¹⁴⁵

The arguments continue along the same lines in adhikaraṇas of the first chapter of the Brahmasūtras as well as subsequent adhikaraṇas of the second chapter, dealing mainly with contestations – more often from the Sāṃkhya School – that anything other than ‘Brahman’ is the source of the world and hence the goal of knowledge. The winning conclusion from them all is that Parabrahman is irrefutably the cause of the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ BS-SB 1.1.2, p. 15; CU-SB 6.2.3, p. 257.

¹⁴⁶ Two major objections still need to be contended with, which appear in consecutive adhikaraṇas in the second chapter of the Brahmasūtras. Firstly, regarding why Parabrahman would create the world in the first place, and, secondly, if he did, why he would make it so that it is an intermixture of happiness and suffering. These have been saved for when we discuss the nature of the manifest world in the chapter on māyā, allowing, also, a fuller appreciation of the argumentation after having covered a description of jīvas and īśvaras. See 10.2.2.

One doubt still remains, though. If Parabrahman is the all-doer, by whose wish and inspiration all things happen, do the consequences of those actions (i.e. karmas) return to affect him? Svāminārāyaṇa anticipates this question and answers it in a number of sermons. For example, in describing one of the six types of higher understandings regarding God, he includes in Vac. Loyā.12 that Parabrahman “does all actions and yet is akartā”, i.e. is unaffected and unbound by those actions. In the same sermon as well as in Vac. Loyā.1 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.10, he adds the following analogy: just as all actions happen within space yet space is unaffected by them, similarly, God is totally ‘untouched’ or ‘untainted’ [nirlepa] by all these actions. There is no damage incurred to his perfect nature.

Understanding Parabrahman’s role in the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the world, as both its efficient cause and material cause, helps explain what else he does as a part of and in addition to that role. Some of these aspects of his nature have already been covered at length in earlier sections dealing with his supremacy, as the ruling sovereign and inner-soul. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to revisit some of them again, albeit collectively and very briefly, in the context of Parabrahman’s divine doership.

6.3.2.2) Parabrahman as Support, Controller, Indweller, Inspirer, Permitter, etc.

It is easy to limit our understanding of Parabrahman as being the ultimate creator of (each cycle of) the world. However, as is hopefully apparent from many of the excerpts quoted above, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that Parabrahman is

just as much sustainer of what he creates as well as its eventual dissolver. In other words, the work of God is not over after the initial phase. Each brahmāṇḍa needs to be sustained – indeed, it needs to actually function – and this requires Parabrahman with all his ensemble of powers and providence to continue to play an ‘active’ role. Thus Parabrahman’s work continues until the timely end of each cycle, and thereafter even, because each brahmāṇḍa is dissolved – not just destroyed – and ‘returns’ into māyā (with even māyā ultimately becoming dormant within Parabrahman). This same cycle is what each brahmāṇḍa passes through, and there are “countless millions” of such brahmāṇḍas.

Svāminārāyaṇa brings this incessant work of Parabrahman into focus – i.e. how he continues to be active in the world – in several sermons highlighting many of the powers or aspects of his nature already discussed earlier. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Svāminārāyaṇa describes Puruṣottama Bhagavān as

by whose wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created¹; who, by his powers, supports these brahmāṇḍas²; who is distinct, yet is immanently present within everything, and while being immanent, is still distinct from everything; who dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form³; without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter⁴; who is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas¹, and the pain and pleasure beings encounter therein⁵. All that God does is all that happens.

Svāminārāyaṇa is implying that incorporated into Parabrahman’s sole-doership, apart from the fact that he 1) creates, sustains and dissolves everything (by his mere wish), is that he also 2) supports everything, 3) indwells within everything (even while being distinct), 4) controls everything, and 5) administers the fruits

of the karmas of all beings (as karmaphalapradātā). It reveals a God continuously and intimately involved with all that he creates, for he continuously and meticulously sustains it until and after its end.

A good hint of this intimate relationship between Parabrahman and his world is given by Svāminārāyaṇa with the phrase

without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

It not only reveals the total efficacy of God’s power of control, but also that, in the end, it is by his will that even a blade of grass flutters. This becomes a recurring motif in the sermons of Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī when discussing Parabrahman’s doership, sometimes drawing upon a ‘dry leaf’ as the analogy. For example, in the Vac. Gaḍh. I.37 excerpt stated earlier, the complete statement reads:

[An ideal devotee] realises that there is indeed no other doer of this world besides that God, and he also realises that without God, even a dry leaf cannot be stirred.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states:

All that happens is the doing of my lord, but without him, no one is able to stir even a leaf (SV 1.88).

Parabrahman’s absolute control as a part of his absolute doership and absolute causality extends over the most meagre of things to the otherwise most powerful and ubiquitous. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.62, for example, Svāminārāyaṇa states that a person with the “perfect conviction of the nature of God”

realises that God is not like time, not like karma, not like nature, not like māyā, and not like Puruṣa. He realises God to be distinct from everything, as the controller of them all and the cause of them all (Vac. Gaḍh. I.62).

In every way, then, Parabrahman is the independent, pure and sole cause and controller of all.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses the omniagency of Parabrahman by again placing him in direct relation to the very things which he has argued are not the doers of the world.

It is God who is the inspirer of everything – of place, time, karma and māyā. It is he himself who allows the factors of place, time, etc., to be predominant. Thus, they are all dependent upon God... just as all the subjects of a kingdom are dependent on their king. Furthermore, in a kingdom, the minister and secretaries can only do as much as their king allows them to do; when the king does not allow it, they cannot do even the smallest of tasks. In the same way, the factors of place, time, karma and māyā can only do as much as God allows them to do; they cannot do a single thing against the wish of God. Therefore, only God is the all-doer.

What Svāminārāyaṇa accepts here is that place, time, karma, māyā, and many other factors may all have some influence over our complex world. However, he maintains, it is Parabrahman who inspires them all and *permits* them to operate. They do so, always within his laws and wishes. In other words, as the analogy Svāminārāyaṇa used suggests, Parabrahman still retains his impassable sovereign rule over everything. “Therefore”, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes only God is the all-doer (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

Inevitably, we are coming to find that many of the aspects of Parabrahman's supremacy – as sovereign ruler, over-soul, support, inner-controller, etc. – are all re-emerging, meeting and overlapping in his doership. Indeed, the two affirm each other: he who is the sole doer of everything is the most supreme among them all; only the most supreme among all can be the sole doer of everything.

We now move on to understanding another aspect of Parabrahman, which, like his supremacy, is also inextricably tied with him being the omniagent and omnicause.

6.4) SĀKĀRA: God as Having Form

In his many descriptions of the nature of Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa has spoken repeatedly and most decidedly about the actual form of God. He insists that Parabrahman is sākāra (literally, 'with form'), that he has an *eternally divine human form*. Each of these four terms is important for him, for while God is not formless, the form he has is human in shape though not composed of any māyic material, and so is divine and bereft of any of the limitations (pertaining to time and space), imperfections or impurities of māyā. This is always true for God, when he is forever present in his transcendental abode or immanent throughout the world, and even when he chooses to manifest on earth.

We shall look into each of these aspects of Parabrahman having a form and what that form is like, while also looking at the reasoning for it offered by

Svāminārāyaṇa and how potential charges against this belief have been addressed. First, though, as before, we shall learn of Svāminārāyaṇa's emphatic advocacy of what he believes is an imperative theological belief.

6.4.1) Emphasis on Knowing Parabrahman as Having a Form

We saw at the opening of the previous chapter that Svāminārāyaṇa stressed the need to know Parabrahman as the all-doer by explaining it as a soteriological requirement; to know God as kartā is essential for finite beings to secure liberation. A similar emphasis is applied when speaking of Parabrahman as sākāra. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.36:

The most extraordinary spiritual endeavour for liberation is to understand Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is seated amidst the mass of brahmic light [brahmajyoti], as eternally having a form.

We also saw at the very beginning of this chapter the importance Svāminārāyaṇa lays on 'upāsanā' (worship informed by correct theological knowledge), without which, he said, "nothing can be accomplished" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56]. In Vac. Gaḍh. I.40 he defines upāsanā almost entirely in terms of understanding Parabrahman being sākāra.

Upāsanā can be defined as having a firm conviction that God eternally possesses a form. Even if a person becomes brahmarūpa, that conviction would never subside. Moreover, even if he happens to listen to any other texts propounding the view that God is formless, he would still understand God to always have a form. Regardless of what is mentioned in the scriptures, he would only propound that God has a form, never allowing his own upāsanā to be impaired. One who has such a firm understanding is considered to have upāsanā.

Such a person, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, “acquires qualities similar to those of God as well as countless other spiritual powers” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64), so much so that “time, karma and māyā are unable to administer their power over him”, and, besides God, “no one else has any authority over him” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37). In fact, “ultimately, when he leaves his body, he will go to God’s Akṣaradhāma and stay near God” (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

In further emphasising the power of knowing Parabrahman as having a form, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in one sermon:

If a person realises God to possess a form and is convinced of this, then even if he may happen to commit some sin, what is there to worry about? All those sins will be burnt by the grace of God and his jīva will attain God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that no matter how grave a sin may be, it is always atoneable. Conversely,

however, to realise God as being formless is a sin much graver than even the five grave sins. There is no atonement for that sin (Vac. Gaḍh. II.39).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly admonishes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71:

Of all offences made against God, to denounce the form of God is a very grave offence. One should never commit this offence. One who does do so commits a sin more serious than the five grave sins.

Such an offence is so irredeemable, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, because it is tantamount to maligning God, something he has repeatedly warned against when working towards correct theological knowledge.

The path of jñāna should be understood in such a way that one does not malign the form of God in any way. In fact, one should not worry if at some time or other one has transgressed God's commands, but one should never malign the form of God. If one does disobey God's commands, then one can still be freed from that sin by praying to God. However, there are no means of release for one who has maligned the form of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

Similarly, in the statement from Vac. Var.2 mentioned in the previous section, Svāminārāyaṇa used the example of undermining the sovereignty of a world-emperor and instead accepting the rule of someone else. In the same sermon, he also includes another aspect of the analogy.

If one writes and distributes letters stating, 'Our king has no nose and ears; he has no hands or feet,' and thereby describes the king as being deformed even though he has a normal body, then he is also known as a slanderer of the king. Similarly, God is complete, with limbs, hands, feet, etc.; there is not the slightest deformation in any of his limbs. He eternally possesses a definite form. So, to say that he is... formless... is equivalent to maligning God.

What is the consequence of such a grave offence? Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

A person may well be endowed with each and every virtue, but if he believes God to be formless – not possessing a definite form – then that is a grave flaw. So much so, that because of this flaw, all of his virtues become defective (Vac. Loyā.16).

More seriously, according to Svāminārāyaṇa, not only does one who misunderstands God as being nirākāra (formless) “not go to the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān” but instead “go to dwell in the realms of other devatās” (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 & Vac. Gaḍh. I.37), he is “consigned to brahma-susupti”, a state of impenetrable oblivion, “from which he never returns”¹⁴⁷ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64). To

¹⁴⁷ This should not be confused with eternal damnation. Svāminārāyaṇa explains that, eventually, by God's extreme grace, such souls can still be redeemed in later lives if they seek the refuge

this, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī adds, rather strongly, that such a person will “endlessly suffer despair for countless eons but never be happy” (SV 3.16).

6.4.2) Reasoning for Why Parabrahman has a Form

Three major reasons can be discerned from Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings in the Vacanāmṛut for why Parabrahman must have a form:

1. Śāstric consistency
2. Divine light must emanate from a Divine form
3. Only a sākāra Parabrahman can be resident in one place while pervading all places

We shall briefly cover each reason in turn.

6.4.2.1) Śāstric Consistency

Firstly, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon śāstric revelation. He argues that to not believe Parabrahman as sākāra would be to contravene the truth of how he is described in the Śrutis (revelatory texts). Citing AU 1.1.1, Svāminārāyaṇa thus argues in Vac. Pan.7:

If God did not have a form then what about the fact that the Śrutis have said that during ātyantika-pralaya [i.e. the beginning of a new cycle of creation], “Sa īkṣata”, meaning, ‘That God saw....’ If God ‘saw’, then he had to have a form, possessing eyes, ears, and other organs.... Therefore, God has always had a form.

The argument is repeated in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45:

of God and earn his or the Guru’s favour (e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.58, Vac. Gaḍh. II.45, Vac. Var.6, Vac. Var.7, Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

Puruṣottama Bhagavān eternally possesses a form.... The Śrutis also mention: “That God looked towards māyā.” Now if God sees, does that mean that he has only a pair of eyes and nothing else? In reality, he does have hands and feet. This proves that he possesses a form.

Expectedly, the Bhāṣyakāra draws upon this when commenting on AU 1.1.1 as well as CU 6.1.3 and BU 2.1.5, all of which mention ‘seeing’, and also the Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa at BS 1.1.5. As an example, the comment at the beginning of the Aitareya Upaniṣad includes:

“Īkṣata” refers to the thoughtful seeing of the Self to create.... Also, this mention of ‘seeing’ confirms that Paramātmā has a divine form complete with divine senses and inner faculties [divyendriyāntaḥkaraṇasañyutadivyakalevara].¹⁴⁸

But this then leads to the natural question of what to make of the other śāstric statements – which are all also equally true and revelatory – that literally describe Parabrahman as being “without body [aśarīra]” (KaU 2.22) or “without sound, without touch, without form” (KaU 3.15). More elaborately, for example, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad states:

Apānipādo javano grahīta paśyatyacakṣuḥ sa śṛṇotyakarṇaḥ

Without hands and feet he moves and grasps. He sees without eyes, hears without ears (SU 3.19).

Svāminārāyaṇa anticipates this charge in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 after he cited the ‘seeing’ śruti. He immediately goes on to say:

Someone may claim that the Śrutis propound ‘God is all-pervasive and perfect, without hands, feet, etc.’ But those Vedic verses that

¹⁴⁸ AU-SB 1.1.1, p. 417.

refute the hands, feet, etc. of God are actually refuting *māyic* hands, feet, etc.

He thus reconciles the apparent contradiction in texts by showing a correct way of carefully reading and interpreting them. What they are proclaiming, Svāminārāyaṇa maintains, is not that God has no form and is without eyes, ears, hands or feet, but that he has no *māyic* form and no *māyic* eyes, ears, etc. Thus, God certainly has a body, complete with all limbs and organs, but it is divine.

Svāminārāyaṇa accepts, though, that without such careful reading, these seemingly diametrically opposite śāstric statements can be confusing and could potentially lead to dangerously incorrect conclusions. He says in Vac. Gaḍh. I.66:

When [God is] described as ‘nirguṇa’, the minds of the listener and the reader are baffled, and they draw the conclusion that God does not possess a form. This, however, is their misunderstanding. Reiterating the need for careful scriptural reading and the correct conclusions it can lead to, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain:

Besides, the words of the scriptures cannot be [perfectly] understood by anyone except an Ekāntika Bhakta [i.e. the Guru]. Which words? Words such as: ‘God is formless’, ‘universally pervasive’, ‘luminous’ and ‘nirguṇa.’ On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the scriptures describe God as being formless. On the other hand, an Ekāntika Bhakta realises, ‘When the scriptures describe God as being ‘formless’ and ‘nirguṇa’, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a *māyic* form or *māyic* attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues.

“Therefore,” Svāminārāyaṇa concludes,

regardless of which scriptures are being read, if they describe God as being ‘nirguṇa’, one should realise that they are merely extolling the glory of God’s form, but in fact, God always possesses a definite form.

Similarly in Vac. Kār.7 Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

It is that very same God, who has a form and is divine, whom the Vedānta scriptures propound as being uncuttable, unpierceable, nirguṇa, and pervading everywhere. It is to dispel the māyic [i.e. incorrect] perception [of God] from the mind of the jīva that he has been propounded as being nirguṇa.

Such a method of correct interpretation closely mirrors the harmonisation and refutation project of the Brahmasūtras' first and second chapters, respectively, where seemingly contradictory or inconsistent texts from the Upaniṣads are correctly read from within the tradition to arrive at conclusions (siddhānta) that are in consonance with its theology at large, and refute those of various objectors that are contrary to it.

For example, in the Sarvopetādhikaraṇa of the Brahmasūtras (2.1.31-32), the debate centres on the causality of 'Brahman'. The objection posed is that if the cause of the entire world is 'nirañśa' – i.e. whole, without parts – then it cannot be fully composed (sarvopeta) of eyes and other sense organs, etc. The Sūtrakāra replies that it can, because that is how he is described in revelatory texts, for example, having a mind and vital breath [CU 3.14.2 & MuU 2.2.7], being replete with all smells and all tastes [CU 3.14.2], and even possessing "beautiful eyes" [CU 1.6.6-7].

Yes, but, the objectors counter, we can also cite other statements – from the same revelatory source that you cite from – which describe that Being, the cause of the world, as completely the opposite. For example, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad talks of

the cause as being “formless [amūrta]”, “without vital breath [aprāṇa]” and “without mind [amanas]” (2.1.2), having no colour [avarṇa], no eyes or ears [acakṣuḥśrotra], nor hands and feet [apānīpāda] (1.1.6). Therefore, the objectors continue, if, as you claim, Brahman fully comprises all sense organs, etc., then according to these statements, he cannot be the cause of the world. Instead, it should be Pradhāna, which is indeed formless and limbless, as described by these statements.

When posed with these two sets of directly opposing statements, the Sūtrakāra refers the objectors to the first sūtra on this topic – Īkṣater-nā’śabdam (BS. 1.1.5) – where it was conclusively proven that Pradhāna could not be the cause of the world precisely because the ‘seeing’ necessitates eyes and other parts of a fully formed being. The Bhāṣyakāra elaborates:

That seeing is preceded by thought. This explicit mention of ‘seeing’ necessitates eyes, which in turn implicates all sense organs. Moreover, since thinking is a function of the mind, all inner faculties are also implied here. Since all of these are only associated with a conscious being, it is impossible for the inert Pradhāna [to be the cause of the world].... And these statements which proscribe organs, limbs, etc. do so only insofar as proscribing worldly [prākṛta] organs, limbs, etc., but they do not proscribe divine organs, limbs, etc.

“Otherwise,” the Bhāṣyakāra importantly concludes, if these statements are not so reconciled,

the Śrutis themselves would be guilty of the flaw of being contradictory [vyāhatavadana; literally, ‘pounding its own face’].¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ BS-SB 2.1.31-32, pp. 181-83.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Svāminārāyaṇa provides another explanation for why there are these two types of statements in the śāstras – some describing Parabrahman as having a form and others which describe him as being formless. It is to do with God’s body-soul relationship with a world that is composed of both formless and formed things. He begins by explaining that Parabrahman ensouls the material objects of the world, which have various forms and are visible (hence called ‘dṛśya’), and the souls of spiritual beings, which do not have a form and are therefore invisible but who are in fact the conscious seers (hence called ‘draṣṭā’). Thus,

when referred to in the scriptures as the soul of dṛśya [the visible material world] – which has a form – that Puruṣottama Bhagavān is described to have a form, like the dṛśya. When referred to in the scriptures as the soul of draṣṭā [the formless seers], he is described as formless. In reality, however, Puruṣottama Bhagavān is different from both the dṛśya, which has a form, and the formless souls.

6.4.2.2) Divine Light from a Divine Form

In the excerpts from Vac. Gaḍh. I.66 cited above, we saw Svāminārāyaṇa explaining how to reconcile apparently conflicting texts which describe God as attribute-less (nirguṇa) or formless (nirākāra). He also provides in that sermon a second argument for why Parabrahman must have a form. He first refers to other texts which describe God as “being an immense mass of divine light”, or, for example, as “replete with light [jyotirmaya]” (MuU 3.1.5), “the highest light [param jyotis]” (CU 8.12.3), “the light of all lights [jyotiṣām jyoti]” (BU 4.4.16).

Svāminārāyaṇa himself also often describes the form of Parabrahman being “extremely luminous [mahātejomaya mūrti]” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.45; also Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, Vac. Loyā.13, Vac. Pan.1) and having “the light of countless millions of suns” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71; also Vac. Loyā.18).

However, Svāminārāyaṇa argues,

if there is no form, then there can be no light either. Therefore, that light must definitely be from that form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

Svāminārāyaṇa is asserting that since there is light, there must also be an effulgent source of that light, because light is not self-luminescent. This source is the divine form of God.

To bolster his argument, Svāminārāyaṇa adds what he believes to be axiomatic:

Take, for example, the form of Agni [the deity of fire]. When flames emanate from his form, only the flames – not the form of Agni – are seen. A wise man, however, realises that the flames are definitely emanating from Agni’s form. Similarly, water emanates from the form of Varuṇa [the deity of water]. Although only the water – not the form of Varuṇa – is visible, a wise man realises that the water emanates from Varuṇa’s form. In the same way, having the intensity of a million suns, the divine light... is the light of Puruṣottama Bhagavān’s form.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes the same point with the same and other similar analogies in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.10.

The extreme intensity of this divine light emanating from God’s form also helps explain why sometimes that form is not always visible. Seers are sometimes

overwhelmed or dazzled by its sheer brilliance and fail to reach the light's source, i.e. the actual form of God. Svāminārāyaṇa calls this a “breach of upāsanā” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.73), because that light does not mean, of course, that there is no source. On the contrary, he is saying; the divine light proves that Parabrahman – in some shape or form at least – is that source.

6.4.2.3) Immanent Yet Distinct

Svāminārāyaṇa's third argument for Parabrahman having a form concerns him being distinct (vyatireka) even while being immanent (anvaya) within all.

When discussing Parabrahman's limitless nature in being unbound by space, we learned that Svāminārāyaṇa was keen to point out that this all-pervasive inner-dwelling of Parabrahman was by virtue of his extraordinary yogic powers, because, in fact, he still has a definite form in his abode, which he never forsakes [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.63]. Parabrahman is thus sarvadeśin (in all places) while eternally being ekadeśastha (situated in one place). He explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.64:

To thus remain in one place and at the same time to appear in infinite places is itself God's pervasive form by way of his yogic powers.

He immediately clarifies, however:

But unlike space, he does not pervade without possessing a form.

The danger that Svāminārāyaṇa is trying to avert here is the misunderstanding that Parabrahman exists *only* as permeating everything, and therefore having no distinct, definite, transcendental form at all.

Again, in Vac. Var.13 he explains:

So, even though the scriptures describe God as pervasive [vyāpaka], he actually possesses a definite form. In those scriptures, he is described as pervasive in the sense that using his own powers, he appears to be in all places while still residing in one place. But he is not pervasive in the sense of being formless like space. So, in reality, God eternally possesses a form.

Svāminārāyaṇa is using this concept of Parabrahman being immanent-yet-distinct to argue the case that he must therefore have some form.

Besides, if God did not possess a form, then he could not... be said to reside in one location. Thus God eternally possesses a form (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

This is especially necessary for Svāminārāyaṇa because he also asserts that even the antaryāmin form of Parabrahman within every being should be considered to have a form.

Moreover, despite the fact that Puruṣottama Bhagavān's brahmarūpa light, which pervades all jīvas and īśvaras as their antaryāmin, is formless, it should be considered to possess a form. This is because it governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all jīvas and īśvaras according to their respective karmas. This power of governing makes it function as if it possesses a form. Thus, that divine light should be considered to possess a form as well (Vac. Gaḍh. I.45).

According to Svāminārāyaṇa, then, if even the immanent form of Parabrahman is to be considered to have a form, it is of course necessary that his distinct form should also have a form.

6.4.3) Parabrahman as Eternally Having a Form

Svāminārāyaṇa explains in over twenty sermons that Parabrahman is 'sākāra'.

For example:

God, who is Puruṣottama, forever presides with a divine form in his Akṣaradhāma, whose divine light is comparable to that of millions of suns and moons (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

In that Akṣaradhāma, Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān is present in an eternally divine form (Vac. Var.12).

How does a true devotee of God understand God's greatness? He believes, 'God, who possesses a definite form, forever presides in his luminous Akṣaradhāma...' (Vac. Gaḍh. III.32).

Therefore God indeed forever possesses a form... and is forever present in his Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

What is important to note from such statements is that Svāminārāyaṇa invariably mentions Akṣaradhāma, the divine abode of God wherein he eternally resides, and includes the term 'sadā', translated as 'forever' or 'eternally'. Both serve to dispel the misconception that Parabrahman assumes a form *only* when he manifests on earth, but that in actual fact he is formless at all other times. Svāminārāyaṇa describes this problem in Vac. Gaḍh. I.66 as arising from a potential misreading of theological texts.

The scriptures also state, ‘A thorn is used to remove a thorn. Thereafter, both are discarded. Similarly, God assumes a physical body to relieve the earth of its burdens. Then, having relieved the earth of its burden, he discards that physical body.’¹⁵⁰ Hearing such words, the foolish are misled into the understanding that God is formless; they fail to realise the form of God as being divine.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises that Parabrahman always has a form, even when resident in Akṣaradhāma, and since he is forever resident in his abode, he always has a form. This is true even during the causal state of the universe. He clearly states:

Even at the time of ātyantika-pralaya [final dissolution, i.e. before the beginning of a new cycle of creation], God and his [liberated] devotees remain in Akṣaradhāma with a divine and definite form enjoying divine bliss (Vac. Pan.7).

But it is not enough to know that God has a “divine and definite form”. We need to – want to – know what that eternal form is like, for even objects such as pots and pans and creatures such as cows and horses have ‘a form’.

6.4.3.1) Parabrahman’s Human-Shaped Form

So what does God look like? This tantalisingly simple but audacious question is at the heart of many spiritual strivings and debates. Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal in his description: God is manuṣyākāra – human in shape.

¹⁵⁰ This is in reference to BP 1.15.34:

Yayāharad bhuvo bhāram tām tanum vijahāvajaḥ |
Kaṇṭakam kaṇṭakeneva dvayam cāpīśituḥ samam ||

We saw earlier that to malign God was to deny him of this shape. Instead,

Svāminārāyaṇa insisted,

God is complete, with limbs, hands, feet, etc.; there is not the slightest deformation in any of his limbs. He eternally possesses a definite form. So, to say that he is... formless... is equivalent to maligning God (Vac. Var.2).

In Vac. Gaḍh. III.38 as well, Svāminārāyaṇa indicates a full normal human form

by mentioning that God is ‘dvibhuja’ (two-armed). He states:

The form of God in Akṣaradhāma and the form of the muktas – the attendants of God – are all true [satya], divine and extremely luminous. Also, the form of that God and those muktas is two-armed like that of a human being (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

He adds more detail about that two-armed form in Vac. Loyā.18, as if in answer

to our very own question above.

Then you may ask, ‘What is the form of that God like?’ I shall explain. God is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānanda], and possesses a form full of divine light. In every single pore of his body, there is light equivalent to millions and millions of suns. Moreover, that God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame. He is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings, the controller of all, the antaryāmin of all, and extremely blissful. Before his bliss, the pleasure of seeing countless beautiful women pales into insignificance. In fact, before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance. Such is the form of God. That form always has two arms...

Anticipating a follow-up question about other extraordinary forms of God, he

quickly clarifies:

but by his wish, he may appear to have four arms, or sometimes to have eight arms, or he may even be seen as having a thousand arms (Vac. Loyā.18).

In addition, Svāminārāyaṇa also mentions the “holy feet” [‘caraṇārvinḍa’ or simply ‘caraṇa’] of God in several other sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Vac. Gaḍh. I.74, Vac. Loyā.13, Vac. Loyā.17, Vac. Gaḍh. III.4, Vac. Gaḍh. III.7, Vac. Gaḍh. III.9, Vac. Gaḍh. III.11, Vac. Gaḍh. III.13), often as being worshipped in Akṣaradhāma by “countless millions of liberated souls [akṣararūpa muktaḥ]” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31; also Vac. Gaḍh. II.25, Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Earlier, we had also seen Svāminārāyaṇa’s commitment to descriptions from other śāstric texts, which describe Parabrahman as ‘seeing’, and therefore arguing that God has eyes and indeed all other sense organs as well [Vac. Gaḍh. I.45 & Vac. Pan.7].

This is a fact not lost on the Bhāṣyakāra. When concluding the important debate at the first sūtra of the Īkṣatyadhikaraṇa, he writes:

So, this [that ‘seeing’ and ‘willing’ can only be attributes of a conscious being] not only denies any denotation of the term ‘Being [‘sat’]’ – and thus world-causality – to the inert Pradhāna, it also establishes that that which is denoted by ‘Being’ – the cause of the world – has a form composed of a body with divine eyes, etc. and other faculties.¹⁵¹

Together, these statements create a strong, clear image of Parabrahman as having a fully formed, human shape, with two arms, feet, eyes and all other sense organs, etc.

¹⁵¹ BS-SB 1.1.5, pp. 30-31.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides the most vivid vignette of all in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, where he describes the “extremely luminous form of God” present within the “extremely luminous divine light” of his abode.

The form is dark, but due to the intensity of the light, it appears to be rather fair, not dark. The form has two arms and two legs, not four, eight or a thousand arms; and its appearance is very captivating. The form is extremely serene. It appears like a human in shape and is youthful. Sometimes that form in the divine light is seen standing, sometimes sitting, and at other times, it is seen walking around.

Svāminārāyaṇa furthermore iterates that this human-shaped form is eternal; Parabrahman looks like a human when he manifests on earth, just as he does in Akṣaradhāma, even at the time of final dissolution.

[A true devotee] understands that the manifest form of God which resides on this earth, and the devotees of God who remain in the vicinity of God, remain exactly as they are even during ātyantika-pralaya (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37).

Svāminārāyaṇa therefore describes this in Vac. Kār.8 as Parabrahman’s “original form” [mūl svarūp]. We had cited an extensive excerpt from this sermon during the discussion of Parabrahman as the soul of the universe. In it, Svāminārāyaṇa describes Parabrahman’s nirguṇa form as being “subtler than that which is subtle”, because he ensouls and indwells all of the material elements and spiritual beings, including Akṣarabrahman. In the same sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa also describes Parabrahman’s saguṇa aspect, as being ‘extremely vast’; so vast, in fact, that

before the vastness of Puruṣottama Bhagavān, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, which are encircled by the eight barriers [i.e. earth, water, etc.], appear extremely minute, like mere atoms. Those brahmāṇḍas do not become smaller, but before the vastness of God

they appear small. In this way, the extreme vastness of the form of God is the saguṇa aspect of God.

This leads Svāminārāyaṇa to anticipate a natural question:

Then someone may doubt, ‘In his nirguṇa form, God is subtler than the extremely subtle, and in his saguṇa form, he is more vast than the extremely vast. What, then, is the nature of the original form of God, who assumes both of these forms?’

He continues:

The answer to that is that the manifest form of God visible in a human form is the eternal and original form of God. His nirguṇa and saguṇa aspects are the special, divine powers of that form.

Many of these points and earlier arguments are brought together by the Bhāṣyakāra in the conclusion of the Antasdharmādhikaraṇa [BS 1.1.21-22]. The debate hinges on the correct interpretation of the following Chāndogya Upaniṣad verse:

Ya eṣo’ntarāditye hiraṇyamayaḥ puruṣo dṛśyate hiraṇyaśmaśrur-
hiraṇyakeśa āpraṇakhāt sarva eva suvarṇaḥ |
Tasya yathā kapyāsam puṇḍarīkam evam akṣiṇī tasyoditi nāma sa
eṣa sarvebhyoḥ pāpmabhya uḍita... |

That golden [i.e. brightly resplendent] Puruṣa, who can be seen within the Sun [Āditya], has a golden beard and golden hair. Everything is indeed golden to the tip of his nails. His two eyes are [beautiful] like red lotuses. His name is ‘Up’ [‘ut’], for he has risen above all evil (CU 1.6.6-7).

The question is: Is that Puruṣa which dwells within the Sun a jīva, an īśvara, or Paramātmā? The Sūtrakāra proclaims it to be Paramātmā, “because of the virtues mentioned” in that verse; none of the others can be “above all evil”, i.e. eternally untouched by māyā. The Bhāṣyakāra elaborates further on in the debate:

Also, the objection that some śrutis – such as ‘formless’ [KaU 3.15], ‘bodyless’ [KaU 2.22], ‘without hands and feet’ [SU 3.11], etc. – propound the absence of form, limbs or body [in Paramātman] is quashed, because those verses only intend on refuting māyic limbs, body, etc. Hence also the prayer in the Īśa [Upaniṣad]: ‘May I see your most auspicious form’ [IU 16]. In this way, this here [verse from the CU] itself proves that Paramātman has a form. But that form is not any other form. As [the term] ‘Puruṣa’ explicitly resolves, that form is human in shape, complete with divine hands, feet, and all other limbs, etc. Furthermore, he is two-armed only. Having four arms and other [extraordinary anatomical features] is by way of his personal powers as called upon by some special reason; it is not permanent. Even though his youthful form is dark in complexion, he is described as ‘golden’ because of his immense divine light. In this way, he is seated upon his divine throne in his divine Akṣaradhāma. Without leaving this form, by his mere wish, and by his grace, he manifests [on earth] in human and other forms. Thus, on earth and elsewhere, he forever has a form. Even during final dissolution, untouched by time, he is resident in Akṣaradhāma seen by countless millions of akṣaramuktas, proving he has a visible form [then as well], as is mentioned in the topic on creation, ‘In the beginning, there was only Self, like a puruṣa’ [BU 1.4.1].¹⁵²

Similarly, elsewhere in the Upaniṣads where ‘Puruṣa’ denotes Parabrahman – for example at MuU 3.1.3 and BU 2.3.6 – the Bhāṣyakāra is quick to summon this set of beliefs to reinforce that it alludes to a form which is human in shape and divine in nature. On commenting on the Īśā Upaniṣad phrase cited in the adhikaraṇa above, the Bhāṣyakāra explains the “most auspicious form [rūpam kalyāṇatamam]” as the

forever not-this-worldly form complete with not-this-worldly powers, etc. residing in his divine Akṣaradhāma, and which is forever human in shape, with two arms and an attractive young frame, forever embellished with infinite sets of virtues replete with auspiciousness, full of infinite auspicious qualities, forever served by the human-shaped Akṣarabrahman and countless millions of

¹⁵² BS-SB 1.1.21; pp. 45-46.

akṣaramuktas who have attained his [Akṣarabrahman's] likeness,
and is free of māyic qualities and divine.¹⁵³

This universal yet personal form of Parabrahman becomes the basis, as we shall understand later, for the intimate, loving relationship that devotees are to enter into with God.

6.4.3.1.1) Dispelling Some Doubts about Parabrahman's Human-Shaped Form

As should be apparent from the statements cited above, a term that repeatedly features when Svāminārāyaṇa talks about the 'eternally human-shaped form' of God, is "divya", or divine. This is to dispel the doubt that if Parabrahman has a human form, then it will necessarily be flawed, sullied and limited by all the imperfections, impurities and limitations of human corporeality. By adding 'divine' in his descriptions, Svāminārāyaṇa is affectively saying: Parabrahman's form is certainly human in shape (anthropomorphic), but it is by no means human in nature or substance (anthropophysitic or -substantic). So while ordinarily human bodies are composed out of māyā, God's form is not.

God's form is not like any other form that has been created out of Prakṛti [i.e. māyā], like that of other devas or humans (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

[Puruṣottama Bhagavān] eternally possesses a definite form, which is not an ordinary, worldly [prākṛta] form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

¹⁵³ IU-SB 16, p. 24.

In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa makes it a point to stress that God's form is totally unlike any other form. He explains at considerable length in Vac. Pan.4:

The Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Smṛtis and the other scriptures proclaim that the original form of God, which is eternal, without a beginning and divine, resides in his Akṣaradhāma. They also state what that God is like. His form is not like any form that can be seen by the eyes. His sound is not like any sound that can be heard by the ears. His touch is not like any touch that can be felt by the skin. His smell is not like any smell that can be smelt by the nose. Nor is God like anything that can be described by the tongue....

Moreover, the beauty of that God is such that it cannot be compared to any other object in this brahmāṇḍa – up to and including everything from Brahmā, etc. to the smallest blade of grass. His sound is such that it cannot be compared to any other sounds in this brahmāṇḍa. The smell of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other smell in this brahmāṇḍa. The touch of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other touch in this brahmāṇḍa. The tastes related to God are such that they cannot be compared to any other taste in this brahmāṇḍa....

The form of that God is such that it cannot be compared to the form of anyone in this brahmāṇḍa. Why? Because all of the forms in this brahmāṇḍa which evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa are māyic, whereas God is divine. So, since the two are totally different, how can they possibly be compared? For example, we can compare a man to something by saying, 'This man is like a buffalo, like a snake, like a sparrow, like a donkey, like a dog, like a crow or like an elephant.' But in reality, such comparisons are not appropriate for humans. Why? Because all of those animals are of a totally different category than humans. Even between a human and a human, there is no exact similarity whereby one can claim, 'This person is exactly like that person.' If he were exactly like the other person, then how could the original person be recognised? Therefore, despite the fact that all humans belong to the same category, no two are exactly alike. Just look at Bhago and Muḷo. The two are said to be identical [twins], but if one stays with them for a few days, one can distinguish between them and say, 'This is Bhago and this is Muḷo.' But if there were no difference, how could they be distinguished? So, if there is no great similarity between human and human, how can there be similarity between that which is māyic and that which is not māyic? What can possibly be compared to God and the abode of God?

One reason for this stark difference is that God’s body is not formed, as human or even devic bodies are, as a consequence of karmas accrued over numerous lives by way of their ignorance and association with māyā. Parabrahman, rather, is absolutely and eternally free of māyā, transcending it and controlling it instead. He is never defiled by māyā in the slightest.

In no way does even a hint of māyā [māyāno leśa] taint the form of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.4).

In fact, Parabrahman is wholly “untouched by māyā” [Vac. Loyā.13] and

does not have any māyic qualities [guṇas]. He is forever gunātīta [transcending māyic qualities] and divine in form [divyamūrti] (Vac. Kār. 7).

As we saw earlier from Vac. Kār.8 as well, Parabrahman is “nirguṇa” which includes being “extremely unaffected, extremely pure, extremely untainted”. Again, this is eternally so for Parabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa stressed this while commenting on the first verse of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa – “Janmādasya yataḥ...” – as it was being read in one of his assemblies. He explained that “yatra trisargo mṛṣā” should be understood as meaning

that the entities evolved out of the three qualities [guṇas] of māyā – namely the five material elements, the senses, the mind, etc., and their presiding devatās – are never at all present in God at any time, past, present or future (Vac. Pan.7).

This point is used to refute one of the other objections at BS 2.1.32, part of the Sarvopetādhikaraṇa, which we saw earlier when dealing with śāstric consistency as a source of understanding Parabrahman’s formfulness. Drawing from the same verse of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad,

Dear Son, in the beginning, there was verily only this Being [sat]
(6.2.1),

the objectors ask how it can be possible for Parabrahman to have eyes, ears, hands, feet, life-breath, mind, etc. when there was absolutely nothing apart from Being ['sat'] to make them from? The Bhāṣyakāra effectively retorts: Precisely! They are not 'made' from anything but are Being itself.¹⁵⁴

This helps explain that God's eyes, ears and other 'sense organs' (as we would call them) are not like the organs of a human. As we learned when expounding upon Parabrahman's unlimited knowledge, he does not need any senses or organs or mental faculty to know. He knows everything independently, directly, immediately, simultaneously, continuously, effortlessly, perfectly. This is because he is infinitely full of knowledge, and his mind, senses and organs are all divine and unlimited.

Continuing further, this non-material composition of God also helps explain why he is not ascribed a particular gender. As we shall see in more detail in the chapter on jīva, Svāminārāyaṇa describes even the finite soul as "neither male nor female. "It is", like Parabrahman, "characterised by pure existence and consciousness" [Vac. Gaḍh. III.22]. We receive another clue about the non-sexuality of God's form from the new, divine body that the jīvas and īśvaras receive during the state of post-mortem liberation when dwelling in the transcendental abode with God. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, as

¹⁵⁴ BS-SB 2.1.32, pp. 181-83.

mentioned above, that this body is like God's two-armed human-shaped form, but adds elsewhere that it is

different from the two genders of the world. It is neither female in shape nor male in shape. It has a wholly brahmic body, which is neither feminine nor masculine (SV 7.2).

Yet, in applying some sort of name or identity to God, the limitations of human language and imagination force us to use nouns, pronouns and imagery which inevitably have gender connotations. For example, 'Bhagavān', the most commonly used term for God in the Vacanāmṛut, is unmistakably masculine, as is 'king', an analogy we have found being employed often. This, though, is not to discount the fact that God is equally identified by other names and images throughout Hindu texts, such as Puruṣottama (male), Paramātmān (male), Parabrahman (neuter), and many others, such as Devatā (female). Thus, to attribute any form of sexuality to God would be a mistake.

To be clear, throughout this discussion, it needs to be remembered that Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis is on Parabrahman being 'manuṣyākāra' – human in shape or *form* – not on him having a human *body*. Not understanding this will lead to another false assumption, that like ordinary humans, Parabrahman's form must also be subject to change and decay – growing from that of a child, a youth and an adult, to eventually becoming old and infirm. But as Svāminārāyaṇa explained in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, the form of God "appears youthful" [kiśora] and is unchanging. He adds elsewhere:

That God remains as he is during the time of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the cosmos, i.e. he does not undergo any changes

like worldly objects do. He always maintains a divine form (Vac. Kār.7).

This is because

time devours everything except God; that is to say, time's powers are incapable of affecting God's form (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

The same is true for space. One could question how God could have any form – let alone one which is human in shape – and not be limited to being within a certain spatial boundary. But as we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa insists that Parabrahman is already unbound by space; there is no place where one can say that God is not. He is omnipresent, even while having a definite form, because of his divine powers. The point being made to any proponents of a formless God is this: If you resort to calling God nirākāra simply to avoid him being limited by space, well, Parabrahman for us is already unbound by space. He is everywhere at all times. So there is no question of avoiding any undesirable but inescapable limitations. Besides, it is not possible to 'measure' him by any physical measurements, simply because he transcends all physicality and eludes all measurements. Svāminārāyaṇa stated in Vac. Kār.8 that God is "subtler than the extremely subtle, and... vaster than the extremely vast." The Upaniṣads also hint at this. They proclaim Parabrahman is

smaller than a grain of rice, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or than a kernel of a grain of millet.

And yet equally he is

larger than the earth, larger than the intermediate region, larger than the sky, larger than these worlds (CU 3.14.3).

Quite simply, God is:

Smaller than the smallest, larger than the largest (SU 3.20 & KaU 2.20).

What the Upaniṣads and Svāminārāyaṇa are trying to say, in effect, is that such physical measurements or boundaries do not apply to God. He is beyond all limitations of space, even as he remains in his “original” human form [Vac. Kār.8].

According to Svāminārāyaṇa, then, Parabrahman has an eternal human form which is wholly unique, uniquely pure, and purely divine.

6.5) PRAGAṬA: God as Manifest

We move now from Parabrahman possessing a divine human form in his transcendental abode to Parabrahman manifesting in divine human form on earth.

We opened this chapter on Parabrahman by summarising Svāminārāyaṇa’s formulation of ‘jñāna’ from Vac. Loyā.7. It told us about the four aspects of God that constitute true theological knowledge. So far, we have covered three of these aspects – God as Sarvopari (transcending everything, even māyā and Akṣarabrahman), as Kartā (being the doer and cause of all), and as Sākāra (eternally having a divine form which is human in shape). In this final and all-important aspect, we shall expound upon Parabrahman as Pragaṭa, being manifest on earth among humans.

While some of the specifics might differ, in the generalities, the description so far of a supreme, loving, almighty, all-knowing, all-pervasive creator God is what one might expect, especially in a Hindu theist religious tradition. But perhaps what dramatically sets apart the Svāminārāyaṇa theological understanding of God from other systems is its emphasis that that supremely transcendental God can be, and indeed is, wholly present and personable among us, in human form, here and now.

Of course, that God descends upon earth in human – or any other freely chosen – form at and for a particular time is a concept that is familiar to many Hindu theologies, especially the Vaiṣṇava kind. So what is different in this corresponding doctrine in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition? Two things primarily. Firstly, Parabrahman as Pragaṭa is the descent of the avatārin himself, not an avatāra.¹⁵⁵ As we noted when understanding the absolute supremacy of Parabrahman, he is the source of all avatāras, and though empowered by his special indwelling presence and thereby divinised for their assigned task and time on earth, the avatāras themselves are metaphysically īśvara, not Parabrahman.¹⁵⁶ This makes the coming of Parabrahman himself all the more

¹⁵⁵ Svāminārāyaṇa explains, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9:

One should realise the manifest God that one has met to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārī, the cause of all of the avatāras.

¹⁵⁶ The various Vaiṣṇava schools differ significantly in their doctrines of divine descent regarding the many avatāras, including their classifications and the terminology used to describe the various types. While some avatāras are regarded as ‘aṃśa avatāras’ or ‘kalā avatāras’ (in whom only a partial manifestation of Viṣṇu has occurred, i.e. in whom Viṣṇu has manifested his powers, knowledge, etc. partially), some – variously, for example, either exclusively Kṛṣṇa; or just Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Nṛsiṃha; or the ten principal forms, including Matsya, Varāha, etc. – are regarded as the pūrṇa avatāra (in whom a complete manifestation of Viṣṇu has occurred, with all his powers, knowledge, etc.). For the latter, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava school, for example,

unique, gracious, and powerfully liberative. Secondly, after first descending upon and carrying out his desired plan on earth, Parabrahman continues to remain fully present even after returning to his abode upon completing a typical human lifespan. He does this by living on through Akṣarabrahman, whom, as we shall later see, he invariably brings with him in human form [Vac. Gaḍh. I.71], and who then takes the role of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. This sets in motion the Guru Paramparā, an unbroken succession of enlightened Gurus through whom Parabrahman continues his liberative work. So even while the Guru is metaphysically Akṣarabrahman in entity and ontologically distinct from Parabrahman, he serves as the complete and perfect medium for God's love, bliss, blessings, and grace, and, importantly, functions as the means to securing eternal communion with God in final liberation.

As we carefully unpack these ideas in the exposition ahead, we shall also need to address some important questions and challenges to this key Svāminārāyaṇa doctrine in order to enable our understanding of it to be somewhat thorough. First, though, as has become the set pattern now, we shall learn the centrality of this doctrine in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology as decidedly emphasised in the primary revelatory texts of the tradition.

accepts all ten descended forms as the direct vibhava, or manifestation, of Vāsudeva or Nārāyaṇa. As another example, the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava school believes Kṛṣṇa to be the source of all other avatāras and as 'Mahā-Viṣṇu' himself. In this respect, it is similar to the Svāminārāyaṇa doctrine that Parabrahman is the cause of all other avatāras and he himself also descends in human form. However, the significant difference I am pointing to here is that, in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, the other avatāras (Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.) are metaphysically different and ontologically distinct from Parabrahman, i.e. they are īśvaras, albeit endowed by Parabrahman's special divinising and empowering presence, but not Parabrahman himself; in the other Vaiṣṇava schools, the cause of the other avatāras and the pūrṇa avatāra or vibhava, whoever and however many they may be, are metaphysically the same.

6.5.1) Centrality of Pragaṭa/Pratyakṣa Parabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa

Hindu Theology

Of all the aspects of Parabrahman discussed so far, Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī place special stress on the importance of God being manifest [pragaṭa] and realising him as such. As we shall repeatedly encounter in his sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa often brings this belief into even sharper focus by referring to that God as being ‘pratyakṣa’ – literally, ‘before the eyes’. This is in direct contrast to God being ‘parokṣa’, i.e. ‘beyond the eyes’, as is Parabrahman’s distinct, transcendental form in Akṣaradhāma or his immanent form pervading throughout the universe. And yet the two are dramatically brought together in sermons such as Vac. Loyā.7, which, as we have been seeing from the beginning, includes an important epistemological discussion about what constitutes ‘jñāna’. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa defines “paripūrṇa jñāna [perfect theological knowledge]” in that discussion as

to know and see with such an understanding of greatness that the God who dwells within all [material and spiritual realities] as their antaryāmin and as their cause is the very God who is manifest before the eyes.

What is also interesting here, especially when offering a definition of “perfect theological *knowledge*”, is the equal emphasis laid by Svāminārāyaṇa on ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’. It is not enough, then, to merely ‘know’ God as being so manifest “before the eyes”, but it is equally necessary to ‘see’ him, that is, to be among him, allowing a direct and personal relationship with him.¹⁵⁷ We shall

¹⁵⁷ Very soon below we shall also learn the converse, that merely seeing God in manifest form is insufficient; one must perfectly know him as well.

pick up on and develop this idea later with more soteriological context, but it is sufficient to note here that the statement used in our formulation of theological knowledge at the start of this chapter follows on directly from the excerpt above and includes a further hint about that relationship by mentioning “ananyapaṇe seve”, i.e. to singularly serve that pratyakṣa form. As a reminder, it reads:

Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this need for personal engagement with God in that same sermon, expanding it from ‘seeing’ to include all of the senses as well as the mind and a spiritual experience [jīvasattā tadāśrit je anubhav]. Calling it a part of “ātyantika jñāna [final, ultimate or highest knowledge]”, Svāminārāyaṇa says:

Thus, to know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience. Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

If in Vac. Loyā.7 Svāminārāyaṇa urges that the parokṣa form of Parabrahman which is immanent and pervasive is the same as the one manifest before the eyes (i.e. pratyakṣa), in Vac. Pan.7 he stresses that that pratyakṣa form is the same as the parokṣa form of Parabrahman which is distinct and transcendental in Akṣaradhāma.

Those who realise this esoteric truth understand the human form of God on this earth as being exactly the same as the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; they do not feel that there is even a slight difference between that form and this form. One who has

known God in this way can be said to have known God perfectly. For him, māyā can be said to have been eradicated. One who realises this is called a jñāni-devotee and an ekāntika bhakta [realised devotee].

Wishing to emphasise the worth of this realisation still more, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

If, by chance, a person possessing such firm upāsanā of the manifest form of God before the eyes – never doubting any māyā to be present in that form of God – were to behave unbecomingly due to the influence of bad company or due to the influence of his own past karmas, even then he would attain liberation. On the other hand, one who has doubts in realising God in this way, then even if he is a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant, attaining liberation would still be extremely difficult for him (Vac. Pan.7).

In both Vac. Pan.7 and Vac. Loyā.7, as we have seen elsewhere, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the soteriological imperative to emphasise the essentiality and primacy of such “perfect” and “ultimate” (or final, highest) theological knowledge. This becomes a recurrent theme throughout the Vacanāmṛut and Svāmīnī Vāto, where both Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reiterate the need to know and serve the manifest form of God as the only way to overcome māyā, to purify the self, and to secure ultimate liberation (ātyantika mukti). When mentioning God, both also often refer to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru through whom Parabrahman continues his presence on earth after his return to Akṣaradhāma. Various terms are used for the Guru, including ‘Sant’, ‘Sādhu’, ‘Satpuruṣa’, and ‘Bhakta’, and usually qualified as ‘God’s Sant’, ‘God’s Sādhu’, ‘Parama-Bhāgavata Sant’, ‘Ekāntika Sant’, ‘Ekāntika Bhakta’, ‘Uttama (Highest) Bhakta’, ‘Perfect Bhakta’ and similar modifiers to distinguish him from other renunciants or eminent devotees,

depending also on the context. What is important to note is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned alongside each other in these important soteriological statements. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21 – traditionally titled ‘The Main Principle’ – Svāminārāyaṇa begins by saying:

If a person realises the greatness of the manifest form of God before the eyes and the Sant who is God’s devotee in exactly the same way as he realises the greatness of parokṣa [i.e. past] avatāras of God such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.¹⁵⁸ as well as the greatness of parokṣa [i.e. past] sādhus such as Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, Jaḍabharata, Hanumāna, Uddhava, etc.¹⁵⁹ – then nothing remains to be understood on the path of liberation.

To stress the absolute essentiality of understanding this principle, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say:

Whether this principle is understood after being told once, or after being told a thousand times; whether it is understood today, or after a thousand years, there is no option but to understand it.

As if to further corroborate his point, he calls upon the “wise” of the past who, too, unreservedly endorse this principle.

Even if one were to ask Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, Brahmā and Śiva, since they are wise, even they, using many different techniques, would point to the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only granters of liberation. They would also explain that the greatness of the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes is exactly the same as the greatness of past forms of God and the Sant.

What does such an understanding of this ‘main’ principle result in?

¹⁵⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies and adds to this in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 by saying that “one should realise the manifest God that one has met” to be not a form of the past avatāras, but “to be the avatārī, the cause of all of the avatāras.”

¹⁵⁹ As we shall see later in this section, Svāminārāyaṇa explains the ‘Sant’ is actually Akṣarabrahman.

A person who has such a firm conviction has grasped all of the fundamental principles. What is more, he will never fall from the path of liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes the sermon with the yet more emphatic statement:

Thus, the essence of all of the scriptures is this very fact (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

This final point is made explicit in Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, where Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation.

He then goes on to conclude:

So, when one attains God or his Sant, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the self; this itself is ultimate liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates upon what such ‘ultimate liberation’ means and how it can be secured in his sermon at SV 5.5, and like Svāminārāyaṇa, aligns manifest God with ‘God’s Sant’.

Only ultimate liberation can be called liberation [mokṣa], but by entering the other abodes, one still has to return to the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths], and as long as one has to return to the womb, it cannot be called liberation. Such liberation can be secured by seeking the refuge of manifest God or the manifest Ekāntika Sant of God, but this is not possible by others.

All of these statements serve to confirm ultimate liberation for those who fully realise Parabrahman as Pragaṭa – either as manifest himself during his own time on earth or living on through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru thereafter. We shall see in the chapter on Mukti how liberation can take not only a post-mortem form, of eternal communion with Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, but also be a state of

enlightened living while still inhabiting the mortal body. Related to this latter state, Svāminārāyaṇa indicates in other sermons that knowing and developing resolute faith in God in human form here on earth leads to a sense of complete spiritual fulfilment and a feeling of heightened bliss. Devotees rejoice in the assurance that they have nothing left to accomplish and that their ultimate liberation is secured – indeed, it is already actuated – for the God they will meet and reside with after death in Akṣaradhāma they are seeing here, now, while alive. They thus feel extremely blessed and thankful for the grace bestowed upon them in meeting and serving God in human form.

Svāminārāyaṇa describes this experience as accompanied by “extreme elation” [Vac. Gaḍh. I.63] and continuous “awe all day and night”, such that a devotee “will sway in an ocean of bliss throughout the day” [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78] and “continuously experience wonder in his heart” [Vac. Kār.8].

Such overwhelming joy is the result of not some pollyannaish hope but a deep-seated internal conviction that Svāminārāyaṇa narrates in sermons such as Vac. Loyā.2. A devotee who has developed absolute faith in the manifest form of God

does not harbour any fear of death and believes, ‘I have attained before my eyes the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān, and so I am fulfilled.’

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 he adds more about what that (post-)mortal fear is replaced with.

A person with perfect faith feels within, ‘I have attained all there is to attain; and wherever the manifest form of God resides, that itself

is the highest abode.... Now I have nothing more to achieve. I have attained Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha and Brahmapura.'

In this same sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa states again that after perfectly knowing God in the manifest form, one is left with “nothing more to realise” and “nothing more to achieve”. Elsewhere he reiterates that such a person has “nothing left to accomplish; he is fulfilled”, concluding that this is because “he has reached the culmination of all spiritual endeavours” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.13].

The overriding feeling that Svāminārāyaṇa is describing is one of absolute fulfilment. It is not to be mistaken with contentment, where one is satisfied with one's lot, however meagre it may be. Rather, it is when one becomes 'pūrṇakāma' (having all desires fulfilled) and 'kṛtārtha' (having all things accomplished) – with nothing more to achieve or desire, nothing lacking for the future, because such a person has attained 'paramapada', the highest goal possible, here and now.

In stark contrast, one who has not been blessed with such a relationship with the manifest form of God, or one who has been so blessed but does not have a true understanding of him as such, is left reeling in confusion, apprehension and a gnawing feeling of insufficiency, especially tormented by misgivings about his fate after death.

A person who has not been graced with the presence of the Sant nor graced even with the presence of the form of God will feel in his mind, 'I am ignorant, and I will not be liberated.' As is his understanding, so will be his fate after death (Vac. Gaḍh. I.14).

But as explained earlier from Vac. Loyā.7, it is not enough to merely ‘see’ God in manifest form; one has to ‘know’ and realise him perfectly for what he is.

Otherwise, Svāminārāyaṇa warns in Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, one will doubt, “‘Although I have met God, will I be liberated or not?’”. He adds to this in Vac. Var.12 that one who has a weak understanding of God in this regard, despite being within the religious community,

still doubts, ‘Who knows whether I will be liberated or not? When I die, will I become a devatā? Or will I become a king? Or will I become a ghost?’

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī therefore explains that even if one has the manifest God before one’s eyes, but if one cannot recognise him and appreciate his full, unbounded glory, then that God is as good as being parokṣa (beyond the eyes) [SV 5.392].

As noted already, such a person is not a perfect jñānin and will therefore not “overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths” [Vac. Loyā.7]. Even if he be “a perfect celibate of the highest order and a great renunciant”, securing liberation for him will be “extremely difficult” [Vac. Pan.7]. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa adds, even if such a person “is a sincere renunciant” and “is vigilantly striving to eradicate lust, anger, avarice, etc.”, these impurities will not be “eradicate[d]... by his efforts alone.” Instead, “ultimately, he will become impure and be consigned to naraka” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.14]. At the very most, by virtue of their other spiritual endeavours, such persons may enter the paradisiacal realms of other devas, but they will

certainly not be eligible to enter the highest abode of Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, Vac. Gaḍh. II.13].

“Therefore,” Svāminārāyaṇa urges,

one should attempt to understand this profound principle by any means within this lifetime.

Otherwise, he warns,

in no way will one ever be redeemable (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

It might have been noticed that some of these sermons are the very same ones – often using the same excerpts with greater detail – from those cited at the beginning of this chapter when highlighting the essentiality of correct theological knowledge within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. What this means is that all those statements, when read in full and with their correct semantic context, actually refer to knowing the *manifest* form of God. So, if perfectly knowing the nature of God is foundational, central and apical to Svāminārāyaṇa theology, and that nature of God is crucially of the *manifest* form of God, it therefore follows that perfectly knowing the nature of the *manifest* form of God is foundational, central and apical to Svāminārāyaṇa theology. In other words, while this doctrine is not the whole of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, it is by what all other doctrines are illumined and consummated.

6.5.2) Parabrahman as Manifest

But what does it mean that Parabrahman is ‘manifest before the eyes’? What does understanding Parabrahman as *pragaṭa* or *pratyakṣa* involve? Here we shall

unpack this essential theological doctrine and understand its various facets while, along the way, considering some of the questions and challenges that arise from accepting God as being manifest in human form.

As an initial overview, to aid and guide our progress through the rest of this section, Parabrahman as pragaṭa involves the following:

- The manifest human form of Parabrahman is the very same transcendental form resident in Akṣaradhāma, complete with all his lordship and powers
- In his human form, Parabrahman is still totally divine and unaffected by māyā
 - Yet he generally conceals his divinity, out of compassion, to be accessible and relatable to his devotees
 - Yet he often exhibits human traits and tendencies, to be relatable to his human devotees
- Parabrahman assumes a human form out of his free, loving and gracious will
- Parabrahman manifests in human form to fulfil the wishes of his beloved, loving devotees, to liberate innumerable finite beings, and to establish Ekāntika Dharma
- Parabrahman is Svāminārāyaṇa, who personally descended on earth in 1781 CE
- Parabrahman remains present on earth through his Sant (the Brahmasvarūpa Guru), who is the living form of Akṣarabrahman

We now address these aspects of Parabrahman’s manifestation more fully below.

6.5.2.1) Divine Embodiment of the Transcendental Form

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it abundantly clear that the form of God ‘manifest before the eyes’ is the very same transcendental form that eternally presides over Akṣaradhāma. Should there be any lingering doubts, he explicitly and repeatedly stresses that “both are one”, with “absolutely” “no difference between the two”.

The same form that is in Akṣaradhāma – which transcends the qualities of māyā [i.e. is gunātīta] – is manifest before the eyes. There is no difference between the two (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

There is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; both are one (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds to this by often describing the manifest form in the same terms as the transcendental form, such as being replete with all his divine light, powers and lordship, etc. Phrases such as “*that* God”, “*that very* God” and intensifiers such as “*himself*” serve to further enunciate the identity between the two. For example:

God, who is Puruṣottama, forever resides with a divine form in his Akṣaradhāma, whose divine light is comparable to that of millions of suns and moons. Countless millions of brahmarūpa muktas serve the holy feet of that God. That God, Parabrahman Puruṣottama, himself manifests on earth...

When that God manifests, he is indeed accompanied by... all of his divine lordly powers [sarve aiśvarya] (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

That God himself, possessing countless divine powers, becomes like a human... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

To cite again from Vac. Pan.7, a sermon we have used often, Svāminārāyaṇa states in one part:

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution.

He then immediately follows with the familiar declaration:

One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

Even the excerpt from this sermon we have cited twice before, emphasising ‘knowing God perfectly’, is preceded as follows:

That God, who has a luminous and divine form, becomes like a human... always doing so with all of his strength, divine powers and attendants. Those who realise this esoteric truth... can be said to have known God perfectly (Vac. Pan.7).

This again helps to contextualise ‘perfect theological knowledge’ in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology as knowledge of the *manifest* form of God before the eyes.

As we near the end of our exposition of Parabrahman, many of the descriptive statements of his nature excerpted elsewhere will resurface, as can be noticed above. This is because, in their full, they actually go on to climax by stating that that very same God – one without second, the Lord of all lords who impassably reigns supreme, who is the cause of all avatāras and who transcends even Akṣara, who is the super-soul residing within all, controlling, pervading, supporting, empowering the whole universe, who is its ultimate creator, sustainer and dissolver, indeed, the doer and cause of all, and who, unbound by

time and space, is replete with unlimited divine glory, knowledge, power, splendour, bliss and auspicious virtues – is he who manifests in human form. This will mean that while many of these statements have already been cited elsewhere in this chapter, often piecemeal, it will be worth revisiting them in full – even though they are sometimes long and at the risk of some repetition – to see the force and clarity of this point as well as how these earlier aspects come together in providing a fuller, clearer image of the nature of Parabrahman. For example, when discussing the all-doership of Parabrahman and his role as both the efficient cause and material cause of the universe, we cited excerpts from Vac. Gaḍh. I.51. In the build-up to those statements, Svāminārāyaṇa carefully and sequentially delineates each of the material elements (earth, water, light, air and space) and metaphysical entities involved in the creation process, each time highlighting the causality, subtlety and pervasiveness, and therefore the superiority, of each succeeding element. After describing Akṣarabrahman, the highest of all other elements, he states:

Beyond that Akṣara is Akṣarātīta Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who is the all-doer – responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything – and the cause of all. Now, a cause always pervades its effect, and simultaneously, also remains distinct from it. Thus, if one looks from the perspective of Puruṣottama Bhagavān – the cause of all – then nothing else appears to exist except Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

It is this very God who...¹⁶⁰ gives darśana in a manifested form to all of the people on this earth (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51).

¹⁶⁰ A small phrase has been elided here (and in similar excerpts in this discussion) so to not prematurely reveal the answer to a question we shall be asking very soon hereafter.

In another discourse, Svāminārāyaṇa wishes to state simply that ‘Puruṣottama Bhagavān manifests on this earth.’ How he explains this at length perfectly demonstrates the point we are making here. He says:

Puruṣottama Bhagavān transcends Akṣara. By his wish, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created, and by his powers, these brahmāṇḍas are supported. That God is distinct [vyatireka], yet is immanently present [anvaya] within everything, and while being immanent [anvaya], is still distinct [vyatireka] from everything. He dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form before the eyes. Without that God’s wish, not even a blade of grass is able to flutter. He is responsible for creating, sustaining and dissolving countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and all the pain and pleasure the beings encounter therein. All that God does is all that happens. It is this God who manifests on earth... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

When in Vac. Loyā.18 Svāminārāyaṇa asks the fundamental question,

What is the form of that God like?

he answers with an extensive description beginning thus:

God is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānanda], and possesses a form full of divine light. In every single pore of his body, there is light equivalent to millions and millions of suns. Moreover, that God is so handsome that he puts even millions of Kāmadevas to shame. He is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, the king of kings, the controller of all, the antaryāmin of all, and extremely blissful. Before his bliss, the pleasure of seeing countless beautiful women pales into insignificance. In fact, before the bliss of the form of that God, the sensorial pleasures of this realm and the higher realms pale into insignificance. Such is the form of God. That form always has two arms but by his wish, he may appear to have four arms, or sometimes to have eight arms, or he may even be seen as having a thousand arms.

As the exposition continues at some length with examples and counter-examples, he returns to the idea of that very same God manifesting in human form, confirming and clarifying that

even though God appears to be like a human, that form still has the aforementioned luminosity and bliss. Those who are adept in the [yogic] practices of meditation [dhyāna], concentration [dhāraṇā] and contemplative absorption [samādhi] see that very form as having the light of millions and millions of suns (Vac. Loyā.18).

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37, he provides an extensive exposition with the same conclusion. It, too, is worth citing here in full, if only to provide another useful summary of many of the aspects of Parabrahman's nature discussed so far.

Now I shall narrate to you the jñāna of the form of God. No deva, human or anything created from Prakṛti possesses a form like God. In addition, time devours everything except God; that is to say, time's powers are incapable of affecting God. This is what God is like. In fact, only God is like God; no one else can even compare to him. Also, a devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God. Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme among everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself.

Moreover, while staying in one place – in his abode – God resides by way of his immanent [anvaya] form as the antaryāmin and the giver of the deserved fruits of karmas to all of the jīvas in countless brahmāṇḍas. Indeed, he is the very life of all jīvas; without him, those jīvas are not capable of doing anything or indulging in anything.

In addition, that God is the master of all yogic powers. Just as a person who has attained yogic powers can obtain with his own hands any object even in Brahmaloka while sitting here, similarly, God, using his yogic powers, performs all activities while staying in one place only. Also, for example, the fire that is latent within wood and stone is different from the wood and stone themselves. Similarly, God dwells within all jīvas, but his form is different from the jīvas.

That God himself, possessing countless divine powers, becomes like a human... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

In the very next sermon, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāminārāyaṇa reverses the order of his statements while still maintaining the tenor of his point. This sermon is also noteworthy for the important clarification it provides that the manifest form of God is not an avatāra, but the avatārin.

There is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; both are one. Moreover, this manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all lords and cause of all causes. He reigns supreme, and he is the cause of all of the avatāras (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa also mentions in Vac. Gaḍh. II.9 that “one should realise the manifest God that one has met” to be not a form of the past avatāras, but “to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras.”

Amid these emphatic statements, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that Parabrahman still never vacates his place in Akṣaradhāma; he does not ‘move’ from there to be manifest on earth. That distinct (vyatireka) form remains as it is, eternally presiding over the highest abode where innumerable liberated souls continue to enjoy his divine communion. Even more so, then, this serves to underscore the enormity and uniqueness of Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth, among bound beings, where his form is real and full, and diminished not in the slightest by human corporeality. It is to this aspect of Parabrahman’s manifest form, and the associated questions, that we now turn.

6.5.2.2) Absolute Divinity of the Embodied Form

Parabrahman's manifestation on earth is real and full. The very same transcendental God of Akṣaradhāma is he who manifests on earth in human form.

An important clarification that Svāminārāyaṇa makes throughout this discussion on Parabrahman's manifestation on earth is that Parabrahman does not *become* human *per se*, but *assumes* a human form, or, as he says, “becomes like a human” [Vac. Gaḍh. I.72]. By doing so, he does not forfeit any part of his inherent nature. Parabrahman remains, as he is in his abode, absolutely divine and untouched, unsullied by māyā.

Indeed, if it is the “very same” transcendental Parabrahman of Akṣaradhāma who manifests himself on earth, replete in all his divine powers, light and lordship – “without the slightest difference” – it should evidently follow that he is as divine and untouched by māyā on earth as he is in his abode. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this point clear in Vac. Gaḍh. III.31. It was cited above in part. It reads more fully thus:

The same form that is in Akṣaradhāma – which transcends the qualities of māyā [i.e. is gunātīta] – is manifest before the eyes. There is no difference between the two. Just as the form in the abode is gunātīta, the human form is also gunātīta (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

That is to say, both forms are equally divine, equally transcendental of māyā.

Yet it is also true that Parabrahman at least *assumes* a human form. What is one to make of that? Is his ‘body’ of flesh and bones like that of any other human being? It is to be considered material?

Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71 that it is not, because “when Puruṣottama Bhagavān manifests on earth, all entities that he accepts become divine” by his own overwhelming divine nature. Therefore, he adds, “the three bodies, i.e. the gross, subtle and causal; the three states, i.e. the waking, dream and deep sleep; the ten senses; the five life-breaths; etc.” may all be *apparent* in the manifest form, and “although all of them appear to be like those of ordinary humans,” in reality, though, they are all divine, “not māyic.” Svāminārāyaṇa’s point is that there can be no material-spiritual dichotomy to be found in God’s human form; it is *all* ‘Parabrahman’. It is as if, he explains, “like an image made of pure sugar crystals”; it is entirely sweet, “with no scope for any part being worthy of disposal” [Vac. Pan.7, Vac. Gaḍh. II.17].

This effectively answers the charge that if Parabrahman has a human form then he will necessarily be sullied and limited by all the imperfections and limitations of human corporeality. However, as Svāminārāyaṇa has explained, a human form for God is not detrimental to his perfect nature because even that material body is divinised and subsumed within or absorbed into God’s complete, eternally divine being. It is for this reason also that I have avoided using the term ‘incarnation’ for the manifestation of Parabrahman in human form, because, strictly speaking, it is not ‘God become flesh’.

It may also have been noticed at the other junctures where Parabrahman's perfect nature has been challenged – when he is immanent within *māyā* and the whole universe as their inner soul or material cause, or as the doer of all actions, or even in his distinct human-shaped form in Akṣaradhāma – Svāminārāyaṇa has repeatedly and explicitly stated that Parabrahman is “*sadā divya*”, *eternally* divine, and he remains totally pure and “unaffected, untouched, untainted” by *māyā*, and is immutable and the very same at all times [e.g. Vac. Kār.7, Vac. Kār.8, Gaḍh. II-10, Gaḍh. II.17, et al]. This necessarily includes Parabrahman's time on earth.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.49, Svāminārāyaṇa more specifically addresses the divinity of this human form by contrasting it with other forms. He firstly states:

There is a great difference between the form of God manifest before the eyes and other, *māyic* forms. However, those who are ignorant and those who are utter fools consider God's form and *māyic* forms to be the same.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain why they differ so fundamentally.

Those who see *māyic* forms and those who contemplate upon *māyic* forms spend countless millions of years wandering in the cycle of births and deaths. In comparison, those who see God's form and those who contemplate upon God's form escape from all bondages of time, karma and *māyā*, attain the highest state of enlightenment, and become attendants of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.49).

The argument seems to be that if other beings can be liberated from the otherwise inescapable thralls of time, karma and *māyā* by contemplating upon God's manifest form, how can that very form be binding to God himself? Just as those bound beings, by his overwhelming divinity, are elevated to the highest

spiritual state, so, too, the body that God accepts is transformed from a material substance to a divine, Godly nature.

This expectedly leads to two difficult questions: If Parabrahman is indeed fully divine in his manifest form – complete with all his powers, light and lordship – why is that divinity not (always and fully) visible? And if he is not really human like other beings, why, instead, are human features and traits visible in him?

Svāminārāyaṇa answers both questions in an extensive sermon he delivers in Vac. Pan.4. It is worth working through that sermon and following his line of explanation, which we can intersperse with other useful points provided by Svāminārāyaṇa elsewhere in the Vacanāmṛut.

Svāminārāyaṇa begins in Vac. Pan.4 by stating:

When that [transcendental] God assumes the form of a human being, he behaves exactly like a human.

He elaborates on this by explaining that God assumes the same lifespan, strength and all the outer appearances of a normal human being passing through the phases of life, from birth, childhood, youth, old age, and eventually on to death.

These outer similarities are accompanied by inner human tendencies.

Svāminārāyaṇa lists these extensively: “such as lust, anger, avarice, cravings for taste, egotism, affection, arrogance, envy, jealousy, enmity, attachment, infatuation, happiness, misery, fear, fearlessness, bravery, cowardice, hunger, thirst, desires, cravings, sleep, prejudice, a feeling that this belongs to others, a

feeling that this belongs to me, renunciation, detachment, etc.” All of these, Svāminārāyaṇa adds, “are apparent in God as well when he assumes a human body.” This is how “all of the scriptures have also described that human form of God along with his original, divine form.”

Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies, though, that even while God assumes a human form and behaves just like a human, his inherent divinity is not totally indiscernible. “One who is intelligent,” he explains, can discern that even though such human tendencies are apparent in God,

they certainly are not like those possessed by other humans. An intelligent person realises that there is something divine about that God, and with this understanding, he develops the conviction of him being God.

He uses the example of the great theologian Śaṅkarācārya who yogically entered the body of a king in order to learn certain amorous details necessary for a debate to which he had been challenged by a female scholar.¹⁶¹ During his time inhabiting the king’s body,

[Śaṅkarācārya’s] bodily gestures and his emotions were all amorous like those of the king. The queen, however, was intelligent and realised, ‘My husband did not possess such powers. Therefore, some other soul has entered his body.’ In the same manner, divinity is apparent in God in human form. As a result, one develops the conviction of him being God (Vac. Pan.4).

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.4, Svāminārāyaṇa provides another insight into how Parabrahman can be discerned on earth as different from others. He uses the

¹⁶¹ *Śrīmatśaṅkaradigvijayaḥ*, Chapters 9-10.

contrast between gold and other metals. When buried, other metals decompose and become one with the soil, whereas gold remains distinct and unaffected. In the same way, when others, “regardless of how great they may be”, are surrounded by sensorial pleasures, they lose their integrity and “become engrossed in those sensorial pleasures”. God, on the other hand, even though he “seems to be like a human, there is no worldly object capable of affecting him. Regardless of how alluring a sense-object may be, he is never enticed by it. Such is the transcendental greatness of God.”

If that is the case, Svāminārāyaṇa continues probing in Vac. Pan.4 by anticipating a query from his audience:

Then you may say, ‘If someone develops the conviction of God on noticing something divine, then if he were to display much divinity, many people would develop such conviction.’

Svāminārāyaṇa is effectively asking our first question: Why does God not display his full divinity if it helps in people realising him as God?

He answers this most directly when he draws upon two famous incidents, one from the Mahābhārata and the other from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa. He firstly narrates:

When Kuntājī invoked Sūrya [the deity of the sun] using the mantra given by Durvāsā, Sūrya came to Kuntājī in a human form just like Kuntājī’s own form. As a result, she was able to enjoy his intimacy and thus conceived Karṇa.¹⁶² In actuality, Sūrya is extremely luminous; if he had come with all of his light, Kuntājī

¹⁶² This is narrated in the Mahābhārata at Vana Parva 290-291.

would have been burnt to death, and she would not have been able to enjoy his intimacy. Also, when Sūrya used to come to Satrājīta Yādava, he came as a human.¹⁶³ But when he came to Kuntājī and came to Satrājīta, did he leave his place in the sky? In reality, he did remain in the sky; but assuming another form, that very same Sūrya came to Kuntājī and Satrājīta. Moreover, there was just as much luminosity in that form as there is in the sun, but he suppressed that luminosity and came as a human.

Then moving on to the point at hand he explains:

In the same way, if God were to present himself to beings with all of his divinity, then humans would not find it suitable, and they would wonder, ‘Is this a ghost, or what?’ Therefore, God suppresses his own divine powers and presents himself exactly like a human. But at the same time, he still remains present in his own abode. Only when God manifests as a human are people able to see him, touch him, and offer the nine types of devotion to him. If God does not become like a human and instead behaves with complete divinity, then people would not be able to develop affection or feelings of affinity for him.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains very clearly here that God does not abandon his original divine form, but deliberately, and only temporarily, conceals his full divinity. He has good reason to, he explains. It is so that he can become accessible and adorable to ordinary beings and they in turn can relate to him, developing that personal, intimate relationship that we have mentioned is an essential aspect of ‘perfect theological knowledge’. To reiterate this vital point, Svāminārāyaṇa explains the reasoning further.

Why? Because a human develops affection and affinity for another human, animals develop mutual affection and affinity for other animals, but humans and animals do not develop the same affection and affinity for each other. Why? Because those belonging to the same category [sajātīya] develop affection towards each other, but not towards those belonging to different categories

¹⁶³ This is mentioned in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa at 10.56.3.

[vijātīya]. Similarly, God suppresses his divinity and becomes exactly like a human so that his devotees can develop affection for him. He does not exhibit his divinity. His exhibiting divinity would place him in a different category, and as a result, devotees would not be able to develop affection and affinity towards him. It is for this reason that when God appears in human form, he remains extremely wary in ensuring his own divinity is concealed.

Svāminārāyaṇa then cites the famous example of Arjuna when Kṛṣṇa revealed to him his ‘universal form’ [viṣvarūpa], as narrated in the eleventh canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā. Arjuna did not enjoy seeing the divinely magnificent but terrible form, and became agitated instead. Only when Kṛṣṇa presented himself in a human form again was Arjuna appeased and ‘returned to his senses’.¹⁶⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes:

Therefore, only when God behaves like a human does a person find it suitable; otherwise he would not (Vac. Pan.4).

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon another useful, classical analogy and similarly stresses:

The greatness of God is such that within the pore of his each and every hair, countless millions of brahmāṇḍas appear as mere sub-atomic particles. Only when that vast God becomes like a human for the sake of the liberation of the jīvas do they have an opportunity to serve him. If he were to remain exactly the same size as he is, then even the ruling devatās of this brahmāṇḍa, i.e. Brahmā and others, would be incapable of seeing him or serving him. What, then, can be said of mere humans? Consider, for example, the vaḍvānala fire that dwells in the ocean. Despite consuming the waters of the ocean, it is so vast that even the water of the ocean itself cannot extinguish it. If we wished to light an oil lamp in our homes and that vaḍvānala fire were to enter our homes, instead of enjoying the light of the oil lamp, we would all be burnt and reduced to ashes. However, if that same fire were to assume the form of an oil lamp, its light would provide joy – even

¹⁶⁴ BG 11.51.

though the oil lamp is that very same fire. The oil lamp is so weak that it could be easily extinguished by blowing on it or smothering it by hand. Nevertheless, only it can provide comfort to us, whereas the *vaḍvānala* fire cannot. In the same way, God may appear to be as powerless as a human, but only through that form can countless *jīvas* attain liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

Svāminārāyaṇa makes it decidedly clear, then, that it is the conscious and supremely loving and compassionate choice of God to become as human-like as possible – while remaining exactly as he is – so that humans can relate to him and love him, which otherwise would not be possible. It seems it is more important to God that humans can grow to love him than be impressed by his lordly powers. We shall elaborate upon the nature and efficacy of this choice in the following section, but here we can say that in order to become so relatable and endearing, Parabrahman must necessarily conceal his transcendental powers [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78] and positively “exhibit” all the same outer appearances and inner tendencies – flaws, failings, foibles and all – of a typical human being [Vac. Gaḍh. I.72],¹⁶⁵ even at the very real risk of being perceived by the ignorant as being ‘just like any other human’ [Vac. Gaḍh. I.58, Loyā.18, Vac. Gaḍh. II.65, Vac. Amd.4]. This is why the (full) divinity of God when he is manifest before the eyes is not (always) perceivable, but the humanity is.

If we return to our two questions, the above explanation provides the answer from God’s side as to why *he* does not reveal his divinity and exhibits human

¹⁶⁵ Svāminārāyaṇa adds in several other sermons that for the discerning devotees, even these ‘weaknesses’ and the apparently human behaviour become worthy of narrating, extolling and remembering, for they are just as auspicious and carry just as much liberative value and potency [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.3, Gaḍh. I.47, Gaḍh. I.78, Loyā.9, Gaḍh. II.10, Gaḍh. II.17, Gaḍh. II.35, Gaḍh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.58].

traits instead. There is an equally important and useful answer to be yielded when we reframe the questions to lay the burden of responsibility on humans: Why is that *humans* cannot see that divinity in the manifest form of God and instead see only the human traits?

Svāminārāyaṇa provides answers for this in Vac. Pan.7, another extensive sermon rich in imagery and an extended analogy, which, again, we shall follow in detail corroborated with excerpts from other sermons.

He begins with a familiar statement:

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution. One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

It is true, though, that not everyone has such a realisation of the manifest form of God. Svāminārāyaṇa therefore explains:

However, when an ignorant person looks at that manifest form of God before the eyes with a māyic vision, he perceives a human like himself. Just as he himself is born, becomes a child, becomes a youth, becomes old and dies, in the same way, he believes God to undergo the same process. But when one sincerely worships God having faith in the words of the Ekāntika Sant of God, one's māyic vision is resolved. Thereafter, one realises that same form of God as being the supreme conscious being [paramacaitanya], characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānandamaya].

Here Svāminārāyaṇa has clearly distinguished those who are ignorant, whose perception of God's fully divine reality is clouded by their māyic vision, and the

devotees who have learned from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God.

Svāminārāyaṇa briefly vindicates “the phases of childhood, youth and old age apparent in God, as well as his birth and death” which are “perceived” by the foolish as being “due to his yogic powers [yogamāyā]”. “In reality,” however, “God remains exactly as he is”, and that is how the discerning devotees see him.

Svāminārāyaṇa then goes on to explain these two types of audiences using an elaborate version of the ‘classical Indian rope trick’ as an analogy.

For example, an adept magician arms himself with weapons and ascends to the sky to fight against the warriors of the demons, the enemies of Indra. Then, having been cut to pieces, he falls to the ground. Thereafter, the magician’s wife gathers those pieces together and burns herself on his funeral pyre. After a short while, the magician appears out of the sky, armed with weapons, exactly as he appeared before. He then asks the king for a reward and requests, ‘Please return my wife.’ Having seen such an astonishing performance, if one is unable to comprehend the ‘māyā’ of even a magician, how, then, can the yogic powers [yogamāyā] of God possibly be comprehended? One who does comprehend the ‘māyā’ of the magician realises: ‘That magician has not died, nor has he been burnt; in reality, he is exactly the same as he was before.’ In a similar manner, one who is said to have perfectly realised the nature of God understands God to be immutable¹⁶⁶ and imperishable, absolutely unchanging (Vac. Pan.7).

This idea is taken up again in Vac. Amd.4 where Svāminārāyaṇa explains the seemingly incomprehensible mystery of God’s human manifestation further. He

¹⁶⁶ The original term here is ‘akhaṇḍa’. Considering the context and how it is used more widely throughout the Vacanāmṛut, the more consistent translation here would not be ‘indivisible’ but ‘eternal’ or ‘immutable’. I have chosen the latter since ‘avināśī’ (imperishable or indestructible) follows immediately.

firstly describes the “mystification” or “confusion” [bhrahma] of those who are not devotees and who, having an unfavourable or atheistic intelligence [nāstika mati], allege that God, too, passes through birth and death, just like themselves, and his body is the result of an accrument of karmas, just like their own. They thus “superimpose” their own māyic transformations onto God. To this, Svāminārāyaṇa contrasts the devotees who, with their favourable, theistic intelligence [āstika mati],

realise the understanding of the atheists [nāstika] to be wrong. They know the body of God to be eternal, and that the birth, childhood, youth, old age and death of God, as well as whatever other bodily traits he may display, are his līlā [intended sport]. This is because time and māyā are not powerful enough to have any sort of influence on God’s body. In fact, all transformations that do appear to occur in God’s body are all due to his yogic powers. Those who are devotees of God are not confused by this, whereas the minds of those who are not devotees become bewildered, just like worldly people become bewildered on seeing a magician’s acts. Those, however, who are aware of the magician’s techniques are not bewildered (Vac. Amd.4).

Svāminārāyaṇa also rebuts here the non-believers’ challenges about Parabrahman’s human form. Ordinarily, a human body is necessitated by, and its nature and development are governed by, the good and bad deeds performed over previous lives. But Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies that Parabrahman’s manifestation is not compelled or determined by karma, nor is his human form detrimental to his perfect nature. He manifests independently, by his own free will, or ‘līlā’ as he calls it.

Returning to Vac. Pan.7, Svāminārāyaṇa similarly concludes:

One who has such an understanding is not confused about God in any way (Vac. Pan.7).

Throughout both sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa's use of the magician's astonishing and mystifying act points to the wondrous and otherwise incomprehensible mystery of that transcendental, wholly divine, immutable and eternal Parabrahman manifesting in human form, apparently being born, changing, and eventually dying. How can this be? It is by God's freely willed application of his "yogamāyā" (yogic powers), which Svāminārāyaṇa juxtaposes with the magician's own "māyā" or amazing powers. "If one is unable to comprehend the 'māyā' of even a magician, how, then, can the yogamāyā of God possibly be comprehended?" However, moving on to the audience now, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies that those "who are aware of the magician's techniques" – such as his wife, children and assistants – are not at all "bewildered" and realise that the magician has neither been severed nor died; "in reality, he is exactly the same as he was before." Similarly, those devotees with the correct theological understanding of Parabrahman's divine, eternal and immutable nature, realise him to be "exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma".

Here, it is important to note, Svāminārāyaṇa is also positioning the erroneous perception [ayathārth jñān] of God, borne of the seer's own ignorance (māyā), against correct and complete theological knowledge [yathārth paripūrṇa jñān] made possible by the Ekāntika Sant. The 'māyā' therefore referred to in the magician's act is not to be misconstrued as suggesting that God's 'show' of human

traits is somehow illusory in the sense of being a deception or a falsehood. Rather, it is explaining the seer's veil of ignorance both obstructing and distorting the reality that God is unborn, unchanging and undying, divine, unlimited and transcendental. Those who are freed of this veil have the unhindered vision to see the reality as it is. As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Even though God appears to be like a human, that form still has the aforementioned luminosity and bliss. Those who are adept in the [yogic] practices of meditation, concentration and contemplative absorption see that very form as having the light of millions and millions of suns... (Vac. Loyā.18).

Properly understood, then, both set of answers to our pair of questions combine to explain that Parabrahman manifests in his human form concealing his divine powers and instead, by his yogic powers, exhibits human traits. Those who have the correct theological knowledge can appreciate the absolute divinity of that manifest human form.

6.5.2.3) Divine Embodiment by Free Will and Loving Compassion

Parabrahman chooses to manifest on earth ontologically unchanged, to offer no less an experience to his human devotees, but in a form that makes him accessible, appreciable and adorable. Having already learned this much about God's freely-willed manifestation in the preceding section, we can now examine it further here, leading also in the next section to answer questions of why he manifests on earth at all.

We begin by referring to a question asked to Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, a sermon in which he calls upon his younger, student sādhus to pose various questions to him. One such student asks:

God transcends Akṣara; he is beyond mind and speech; and he is imperceptible to all. Why, then, can everyone see him as manifest before the eyes?

It is a natural question, especially when Svāminārāyaṇa has previously extolled the absolute transcendental nature of Parabrahman. Underlying the question seems to be the query that if Parabrahman is so divine, transcendental and imperceptible to the mind and senses, and it is that same eminently distinct form which manifests on earth, then that too should be similarly imperceptible. Otherwise, if it is perceptible, it cannot be the same transcendental form.

Svāminārāyaṇa duly replies:

God – who transcends Akṣara, who is beyond mind and speech, and who is imperceptible – himself, out of compassion, resolves: ‘May all the enlightened and unenlightened people on Mṛtyuloka behold me.’ Having resolved in this manner, God – whose will always prevails – becomes perceivable to all people on Mṛtyuloka out of compassion (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that Parabrahman is indeed how you describe him – transcendental and truly beyond the full grasp of the mind and senses – yet it is by his own free, compassionate will [saṅkalpa] that he makes himself perceptible to the people on earth. Notably, he calls the earth here by its technical name of Mṛtyuloka (literally, ‘realm of death’), referring to the inevitable perishability of the world and the embodied beings who inhabit it. Furthermore, his will to be

seen by, and therefore become accessible to, mere mortals is not restricted to the enlightened devotees only; his manifestation is for the benefit of all those on earth, irrespective of their deserving or undeserving worth. This is why Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies God's resolve as being formed "out of compassion".

Another similar question triggered the discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51.

Svāminārāyaṇa was asked:

The ten senses are produced from rajoguṇa, and the four inner faculties are produced from sattvagūṇa. Thus, all of the senses and inner faculties are māyic. God, however, transcends māyā. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the māyic faculties? Also, how can one perceive God with one's māyic eyes and other senses?

Svāminārāyaṇa first sought to clarify and corroborate the question by asking:

Māyic objects can be realised by māyic means, and if one has realised God through the same māyic faculties and senses, then it implies that God must also be māyic. That is your question, is it not?

The audience confirmed:

Yes Mahārāja, that is precisely our question. You have clarified it for us.

Svāminārāyaṇa then embarked on an extensive elucidation of the utter supremacy of Puruṣottama with respect to the other elements and entities within the creative process (which we touched upon earlier). He then concludes:

It is this very God who, out of compassion, for the liberation of the jīvas, makes himself personally visible in a manifested form to all the people on earth.

Again, we see a conscious, compassionate act by Parabrahman to present himself to all those on earth. What is especially striking, again, is that Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises it is “this very” supremely transcendent Parabrahman who has made himself available to those who are incapable of availing him, “out of compassion”, “for the[ir] liberation”. They could in no way rise up to reach him, and so he ‘stoops down’ to uplift them.

Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth as an act of supreme grace is made all the more clear when Svāminārāyaṇa describes the earnest supplication of even the great devas who beseech him to grace them with his audience.

All of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, ‘O Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa’ – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, ‘Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.’ In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: ‘Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your audience; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.’ Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

Svāminārāyaṇa accentuates this unmerited grace even further by describing the utter insignificance (compared to Parabrahman) of the beings of each brahmāṇḍa before whom he presents himself.

God is the Lord of the lords of countless brahmāṇḍas. However, the brahmāṇḍas of which he is lord are insignificant compared to him.... Within each brahmāṇḍa there are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, as well as the pṛthvi with its seven dvīpas, seven oceans, Meru, and Lokāloka and other mountains. The brahmāṇḍas also contain the 14 realms, the eight barriers, and many other things. God is the lord of countless such brahmāṇḍas. For example, one can realise the eminence of an emperor of the world, even though his villages can be counted. But the eminence of God is much greater because even those countless brahmāṇḍas are insignificant to him. So then, of what significance can the beings of those brahmāṇḍas be before

God? Of no significance at all; they are utterly insignificant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

And yet the climax of God's loving compassion is that before such "utterly insignificant" souls, Parabrahman, too, makes himself equally insignificant in order to be so accessible to them.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, Svāminārāyaṇa provides another extensive description of the unfathomable, ineffable greatness of Parabrahman. He begins by drawing upon the analogy of a great king whose commands the other devas unreservedly obey. Then describing the opulence of the other realms which are insignificant before Akṣaradhāma, Parabrahman's abode, he describes the limitless and unfathomable greatness of Akṣarabrahman. Even the liberated souls (called 'attendants' here) within Akṣaradhāma have "divine light equivalent to that of millions and millions of suns around each and every hair." His point is:

Therefore, if those attendants are so great, how can the greatness of their master, Puruṣottama Bhagavān, possibly be described?

Nevertheless, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say:

In this way, that God, who is extremely powerful, extremely luminous, and extremely great, contains his spiritual powers and divine light within himself and becomes like a human being for the liberation of jīvas. He assumes a form that allows people to see him, serve him, offer worship to him, etc. For example, a minute thorn that has pricked an ant's leg cannot be removed with a spear or a spike; it can only be removed using an extremely fine pin. In the same manner, God confines his greatness within himself and assumes an extremely modest form. Just as Agni [the deity of fire] constrains his light and flames to assume a human form, similarly, God also suppresses his powers and acts as a human for the liberation of jīvas. However, a foolish person thinks, 'Why does God not manifest any powers?' But he does not realise that God

deliberately conceals his powers for the sake of the jīvas' liberation. After all, if he were to manifest his greatness, then even the brahmāṇḍa would pale into insignificance. What, then, can be said of jīvas? (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Svāminārāyaṇa further emphasises in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78 the dramatic contrast between Parabrahman's inherent powers and the "modest" form he graciously assumes. After listing the transcendental features of Puruṣottama Bhagavān's nature – he transcends Akṣara, by whose mere wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created,... and without whose wish not even a blade of grass is able to flutter, etc. – and stating that it is "this God who manifests on earth", he immediately says:

Yet, when that very God mounts a horse, it appears that the horse is carrying him; though, in reality, it is God who is the upholder of the horse. Furthermore, when God sits on the earth, it seems that the earth is supporting God; yet, in reality, it is God who supports the entire earth along with its mobile and immobile forms of life. Moreover, at night, the light of the moon, an oil lamp or a torch allow one to see God; or during the day, the light of the sun allows one to see God. In reality, however, it is that God who provides light to the sun, the moon, and the flames of fire. Such are the magnificent powers of God. Despite this, though, God has become like a human for the sake of the liberation of the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Such is the magnanimity and utter graciousness of Parabrahman that he manifests on earth in so modest a human form. It is an act borne of his free, loving and supremely compassionate will.

6.5.2.4) Purpose of Divine Embodiment

Parabrahman's love, compassion and grace become even more appreciable by understanding the reasons for his manifestation, for the important question of

‘Why?’ still remains to be answered. Why does Parabrahman so manifest in human form on earth and continue to remain present? Even if he can – and without injury to his perfect nature – why should he? What is his purpose [prayojana] in making himself so relatable and endearing?

Three objectives seem to be discernible from Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons, though they may hold varying degrees of precedence in his mind.

Firstly, as the many afore-cited excerpts have already iterated, Parabrahman manifests on earth to grant ultimate liberation to countless souls. To reprise a few brief statements:

That God himself... becomes like a human for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

That God... becomes like a human, out of compassion, to liberate the jīvas (Vac. Pan.7).

Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest... for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Related to this is the second reason for Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth: to establish dharma. Svāminārāyaṇa, however, clarifies that this is not merely the moral injunctions codified in the śāstras enjoining people of various classes

(varṇa) and stages (āśrama). Rather, it is to establish the more comprehensive Ekāntika Dharma, of which the aforementioned is only a part.

Ekāntika Dharma, also known as Bhāgavata Dharma, is a four-fold system of theological praxis defined by Svāminārāyaṇa that finite beings need to observe to please God and thereby secure their liberation. It comprises: 1) dharma – leading a righteous life by observing the moral codes of the śāstras; 2) jñāna – realising oneself to be the ātman, distinct from the body; 3) vairāgya – being dispassionate towards worldly pleasures; and 4) bhakti – offering selfless devotion to God while realising his greatness.

We shall be elucidating upon these in a little more detail in the chapter on Mukti when discussing the way to liberation. Here, it is suffice to confirm from Vac. Gaḍh. II.46 and Vac. Gaḍh. III.21 that Svāminārāyaṇa states Ekāntika Dharma as a reason for God's manifestation.

The third reason why Parabrahman personally manifests on earth, and for Svāminārāyaṇa, what seems to be the principal reason, is so that he can personally fulfil the wishes of his beloved, loving devotees. Svāminārāyaṇa reveals this in Vac. Kār.5, firstly announcing to the assembly that “I wish to ask a question.” After receiving the signal to proceed, he asks:

God assumes a form on earth to grant liberation to the jīvas. But is he not capable of granting liberation while remaining in his abode, without assuming a form? After all, God can grant liberation in any manner he wishes. What, then, is the purpose of him assuming a form on earth? Furthermore, if God can only grant liberation when

he assumes a form, and he is incapable of granting liberation otherwise, it would suggest that much of a weakness in God. But in reality, God is capable of granting liberation to the jīvas by assuming a form, and he is also capable of granting liberation to the jīvas without assuming a form. So, then, what is the purpose of God assuming a form on earth? That is the question.

The question itself is a classical question related to God’s descent or manifestation on earth. The Vacanāmṛut notes that many senior sādhus in the assembly answered Svāminārāyaṇa’s question according to their understanding but none to his complete satisfaction. An interactive discourse ensued, wherein he raised doubts to their answers and ultimately refuted them. The sādhus then “folded their hands and requested, ‘O Mahārāja, only you are capable of answering this question.’” Svāminārāyaṇa thereafter explained:

The very purpose for which God assumes a form is this: Having surrendered himself to the loving devotion of those devotees who have intense love for him, God assumes whichever form the devotees wish for in order to grant them bliss. Whatever wishes those devotees may then have, he fulfils all of them. Since the devotees are physical and have bodies, God also assumes physicality and becomes like a person with a body, and showers affection upon those devotees. In addition to this, he hides his powers and behaves with the devotees as a son, or as an intimate companion, or as a friend, or as a relative. Because of this, the devotee may not maintain much protocol with God. Nonetheless, God showers his affection upon the devotee in whichever manner he desires.

“Thus,” Svāminārāyaṇa concludes,

the very purpose God assumes a form is to fulfil the desires of his loving devotees. Along with this, he grants liberation to innumerable other jīvas and also establishes dharma.

While Svāminārāyaṇa does include the other aforementioned two reasons at the end of this sermon, he clearly gives primacy to the third by twice referring to it

as the “very purpose”. This may be due to the vital importance he lays on the personal relationship between Parabrahman and individuals. As we shall see later, it is this intimate loving relationship with the manifest form of God before the eyes which is central in the practice of Ekāntika Dharma and by which liberation of the soul is secured. In this sense, then, it is clearer why Svāminārāyaṇa should regard this third reason as the principal or even exclusive reason for Parabrahman’s manifestation, and the other two as incidental or consequential.

What is also striking from this sermon is that while Parabrahman manifests for the benefit and uplift of everyone, it is for his loving devotees that he offers himself most unreservedly. Svāminārāyaṇa uses the phrase “ādhīn thaine” to describe how Parabrahman, literally, ‘becomes supported by’ the devotion of those devotees who love him intensely [atīśay prītivālā bhakto]. He, who is the grand support and ontic ground of all [sarvādhāra], willingly becomes ‘supported’ [ādhīna] by the love of his otherwise feeble devotees. He, by whose mere wish countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are created, sustained and dissolved, and without whose wish not even a single blade of grass is able to stir, readily submits to the wishes of his mortal devotees, surrendering his wishes and actions to them in order to fulfil *their* will, not his; to do as *they* want, not as he. He, who is supremely divine and characterised by existence, consciousness and bliss, and who is replete with unlimited lordly powers, deliberately conceals that divinity and instead assumes a modest, physical form, just like that of his devotees, so that they can relate to him as *they* prefer. He is aware that this may – and often does – result in a breach of all proper decorum with him. But that is of

no significance to him. What *is* vitally important to him is that he, personally, is present on earth to receive their love and reciprocate it, personally. Such is the intensity and intimacy of Parabrahman's uncompromising love for his beloved, loving devotees.

6.5.2.5) Parabrahman Manifest in Human Form as Svāminārāyaṇa

The exposition of Parabrahman as found in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition comes to its full culmination and concreteness in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa. The first and best way to examine this is to consider Svāminārāyaṇa's own words from the Vacanāmṛut where he reveals himself as such. This revelation is confirmed, clarified and consolidated by Guṇātītānanda Svāmī in the Svāmīnī Vāto, and attested to by many others in other texts and personal accounts. The limited nature of this study will not permit a study of all these sources. In any case, it is certainly not the remit of this project to prove or disprove Svāminārāyaṇa's claim to Godhood, which would need to be done by examining the full gamut of his life, work and teachings, including the many miracles attributed to him and the spiritual experiences of those who lived with and met him. These are chronicled in the scores of voluminous books and diaries and thousands of kīrtanas (or bhajanas, devotional songs) written about him by these witnesses, and any such project would necessarily involve a careful examination of this corpus along with several other relevant sources. Here, we are concerned only with the theological nature of Parabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology, and need only to draw from our already established theological texts.

It needs to be acknowledged first, though, that Svāminārāyaṇa spoke of himself in varying ways, reportedly in accordance to the receptivity and spiritual maturity of his varying audiences.¹⁶⁷ These and other factors would need to be properly understood in their full contexts before a complete and accurate theological picture can emerge about Svāminārāyaṇa from these texts or any one text or statement alone. He was, nevertheless, unequivocal in his most profoundly revelatory statements. For example, from many of the statements cited in this chapter discussing the various aspects of Parabrahman, it may have been noticed that they often contained references to Parabrahman as ‘manifest before the eyes’ or ‘this manifest form’, or similar. Svāminārāyaṇa is evidently referring to himself as he spoke these words to his audience at the time. Some of these important statements include the following:

God eternally possesses a form. He is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of countless brahmāṇḍas; he is forever present in his Akṣaradhāma; he is the lord of all; and it is he who is manifest here before your eyes (Vac. Gaḍh. III.35).

And what is that God like [who resides in his abode which is filled with an ocean of divine light and who assumes a form on earth]? Well, he transcends both kṣara [māyā and all finite beings]¹⁶⁸ and Akṣara; he is the cause of all causes; and countless millions of akṣarārūpa muktas worship his holy feet. Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest now and visibly present before your

¹⁶⁷ Brahmadarshandas offers an extensive analysis of these statements in his *Vacanāmṛta Rahasya*, II, pp. 257-333. To this, Shrutiprakashdas adds a useful historical perspective and contextualises several other sampradāyic sources in another in-depth interrogation in *Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpaṇ*, pp. 242-453.

¹⁶⁸ While ‘kṣara’ literally means perishable, it is translated traditionally here to include all finite beings, i.e. jīvas and īśvaras, whose bodies perish in every lifetime during transmigration. This also maintains semantic consistency with verses such as BG 15.16 which distinguishes ‘kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni’ from the immutable Akṣara. See also the almost identical phrase in Vac. Gaḍh. I.72 which uses ‘kṣara’ and ‘Akṣarabrahman’ – not just ‘Akṣara’ – further justifying this translation here.

very eyes for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution (Vac. Pan.7).

It is the same master of that [Brahmapura] abode – the lord of Akṣara and the muktas, Parabrahman Puruṣottama – who is present here in this Satsaṅga fellowship (Vac. Amd.6).

If the above statements identify Svāminārāyaṇa with the distinct, luminous and supremely sovereign Parabrahman resident in Akṣaradhāma (i.e. vyatireka), the following identify him with that same transcendental being who is also immanent (anvaya) within every being and thing.

[Puruṣottama Bhagavān] dwells within each and every atom in his antaryāmin form just as he is in his manifest form before the eyes (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

One should think of the greatness of God in the following way: ‘I am the ātman, while the manifest form of God before the eyes whom I have met is Paramātmān. I have attained Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān in person, the very Puruṣottama Bhagavān who is the lord of Goloka, Vaikuṇṭha, Śvetadvīpa and Brahmapura, as well as the master of Brahmā and the other devas, who themselves are the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas. That Paramātmān forever resides in my ātman (Vac. Sār.1).

Here he reveals himself as sarvakartā and sarvakāraṇa (the doer and cause of all):

God fully resides in the heart of a person who possesses the following understanding: ‘The earth remains stable and trembles; the stars remain steady in the sky; the rains fall; the sun rises and sets; the moon appears and disappears, waxes and wanes; the vast oceans remain constrained within their boundaries; a drop of

liquid develops into a human possessing hands, feet, a nose, ears and the rest of the ten senses; the clouds, through which lightning strikes, float unsupported in the sky – these and a countless variety of other wonders are due only to the form of God that I have attained.’ With this understanding, he has the conviction that no one except the manifest form of God is the cause of these wonders. He realises, ‘The countless wonders which have occurred in the past, those which are currently taking place, and those which will occur in the future are all only due to the manifest form of God that I have met before my eyes’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27).

In this way, the manifest form of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa before the eyes is the cause of all; he is forever divine and has a form (Vac. Pan.7).

In the following statements, Svāminārāyaṇa identifies himself as the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras.

One should realise the visible God that one has met to forever possess a divine form and to be the avatārin, the cause of all of the avatāras (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

It is this Puruṣottama [residing within the divine light of Akṣaradhāma] who transcends Akṣara and who is the cause of all avatāras.... Realise that the form amidst the divine light is this Mahārāja visible before you (Vac. Gaḍh. II.13).

All of the avatāras of God manifest from the very God that is present in this Satsaṅga fellowship. That is to say, he is the cause of all of the avatāras and is the antaryāmin of all. It is he who, in Akṣaradhāma, is radiant, full of countless powers and eternally has a form. He is also the Lord of all of the lords of the countless brahmāṇḍas. He is even the cause of Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Amd.6).

Bringing many of these aspects together in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān [true, divine and extremely luminous; characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss; resident in Akṣaradhāma in a two-armed

form like a human being, and served there by the liberated souls upon whom he bestows his supreme bliss] who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas. He is presently visible before everyone, he is your favoured deity [iṣṭadeva], and he accepts your service. In fact, there is absolutely no difference between the manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān visible before you and the form of God residing in Akṣaradhāma; both are one. Moreover, this manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the Lord of all īśvaras and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme, and he is the cause of all of the avatāras. He is worthy of being worshipped single-mindedly by all of you. The many previous avatāras of this God are also worthy of being paid obeisance and are worthy of reverence (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Svāminārāyaṇa also spoke explicitly about himself in the first person. For example, in Vac. Amd.7, he reveals the following by way of describing his yogic journey through various realms and abodes:

I went alone to the abode of Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, which transcends everything. There, I saw that it was I who am Puruṣottama; I did not see anyone eminent apart from myself. In this manner, I travelled to these places [the various realms and abodes] and finally returned to my body.

Then, when I looked within again, I realised that I am the creator, sustainer and dissolver of all of the brahmāṇḍas. In those countless brahmāṇḍas, it is by my divine light that countless Śivas, countless Brahmās, countless Kailāsas, countless Vaikuṇṭhas and Golokas, Brahmapuras, as well as countless millions of other realms are all radiant.

And what am I like? Well, if I were to shake the earth with the toe of my foot, the worlds of countless brahmāṇḍas would begin to shake. It is also by my light that the sun, the moon, the stars, etc. are radiant.

Several texts of the tradition also carry a statement from Svāminārāyaṇa found in old manuscripts which reveal the divine purpose of his manifestation on earth in

a human form. It reads as follows (with the original north-Indian dialectic Hindi first):

Dūsarā avatār hai so kārya-kāraṇ avatār huā hai, aur merā yah avatār hai so to jivoku brahmarūp karke ātyantik mukti dene ke vāste Akṣarātīt Puruṣottam jo ham vah manuṣya jaisā banyā hu.

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.¹⁶⁹

In one of his sermons, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī also quotes Svāminārāyaṇa as saying:

I have come from Akṣaradhāma with my Akṣaradhāma, countless liberated souls and the Īśvaras of other abodes to grant ultimate liberation to innumerable souls (SV 7.14).

Apart from direct revelations of himself as Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa also revealed several other aspects of his nature in various sermons, especially with regard to being untainted and unaffected by the world around him. To cite a few here, in Vac. Kār.6 he states:

As for me, not even the slightest bit of lust, anger, avarice, egotism, envy or jealousy enters my heart. Also, in my heart, I experience a strong aversion for the sensorial pleasures, namely sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. In fact, I do not have even the slightest interest in any one of the sensorial pleasures. Whenever I accept food or clothes, I do so on seeing the loving devotion of the devotees; never do I accept them for my own physical pleasure. In fact, all of my actions of eating, drinking, wearing, etc. are for the

¹⁶⁹ *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p.76.

See also a similar statement found in one of Svāminārāyaṇa's few extant letters, written to his lay and monastic devotees:

Kalyānke karne vāste merā avatār hai. Āj to mai avidyārūp je māyā hai, tiske nāške vāste pragaṭ huā hū. Āj to merā prayojan ehi hai, jyo avidyāku nāś karnā, jivku brahmarūp karnā. Is prayojan vāste me pragaṭ huā hū. Jivuke mukti deneke vāste, manuṣya esā banyā hū (*Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7).

sake of all the sādhus and satsaṅgīs [monastic and lay followers]. If I feel that it is for my own sake and not for their sake, then I would immediately discard it. Actually, the only reason I keep this physical body is for the sake of the satsaṅgīs; besides that, there is no other reason. Devotees such as Mūljī Brahmācārī, Somlā Khācara and others who have been staying close to me for so many years, know my nature and realise, ‘Besides the devotees of God, Mahārāja does not have affection for anyone else. In fact, Mahārāja is unaffected by anything, just like space.’ In this manner, those who constantly stay near me know my nature. In fact, I have sacrificed my body for the sake of those who are devotees of God by word, thought and deed. Therefore, in all ways, I am attached to whosoever is a devotee of God. To me, the wealth of the 14 realms, without the devotees of God, seems as worthless as a blade of grass.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.73 he adds:

My dispassion for the world [vairagya] is [inextinguishable] like that of the fire of lightning and the vaḍvānala fire. This nature of mine is known by those who have stayed extremely close to me. However, those who remain far from me are unable to realise my nature. This Mūljī Brahmācārī [my personal attendant] may appear to be naïve, yet he thoroughly knows my nature, realising, ‘Mahārāja is as untouched as space. He has no prejudices against or in favour of anyone.’

When about to deliver an important sermon on the nature of Parabrahman in

Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Svāminārāyaṇa prefaced the sermon with this extensive personal revelation:

I remain naturally in a state in which even if I wished to engross my mind in the most charming sounds, the most charming touch, the most charming smells, the most charming tastes and the most charming sights of this world, I could not do so; I remain absolutely dejected towards them. In fact, all of the attractive sense-objects and the repulsive sense-objects are the same to me. Also, a king and a beggar are the same to me. Further, to rule all the realms and to beg for food carrying a broken begging bowl are the same to me. Even sitting with honour on an elephant and walking on foot are the same to me. Whether someone honours me with sandalwood paste, flowers, fine clothes and ornaments, or throws dirt on me – all are the same to me. Whether someone praises me or insults me

– both are the same to me. Gold, silver, diamonds and refuse are all the same to me. Moreover, I look upon all devotees of God as being equal; I do not differentiate one as being superior and another as being inferior....

When I outwardly praise some object or criticise another, I do so purposefully. Whenever I forcefully engage the attention of my senses towards objects, they remain there very reluctantly; as soon as I relax that force, they withdraw immediately. It is like throwing a stone into the air; it goes as high as it can depending on the force of the throw, but ultimately it falls back to earth. Or consider a weak bull; it can stand only as long as a man forcefully supports it. But as soon as he withdraws the support, it slumps to the ground. Further, imagine a very strong man who is able to crack a betel nut between his teeth. But, after sucking ten or twenty very sour lemons, he would have great difficulty chewing even roasted chick peas. In this manner, it is only when I forcefully engage my attention in the sense-objects that they remain engaged in them.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.33, Svāminārāyaṇa swears by his inner purity in the following way:

If it appears to me that I have a liking for something, I would only be happy after I have discarded it. Should I recall in my mind any object or any person other than devotees of God, then I would feel comfortable only after I have totally distanced myself from that object or person. Also, in my heart, in no way do I ever experience an aversion towards a devotee of God. Even though I am insistently offered objects of enjoyment without actually wishing for them myself, I still do not have any desire for them. In fact, I push them away. In fact, I swear by the lives of these paramhansas that from the day I was born to this very day, I have never harboured an improper thought regarding women or wealth, either in the waking state or in the dream state. Thus, I am eternally pure.

These and many other statements about the life and character of Svāminārāyaṇa would need to be checked against evidence from historical and other sources to confirm their consistency or prove any contradictions. However, as already explained, this lies beyond the scope of this project.

Before completing this section, it will be useful to refer to at least two sermons from the Svāmīnī Vāto where Guṇātītānanda Svāmī adds his revelation about the nature of Parabrahman and identifying him decisively with Svāminārāyaṇa. The statements are worth citing here almost full for the classical style they adopt – addressing Parabrahman with panegyric names that each celebrate a particular attribute, aspect or excellence and thereby providing greater insights about his identity – and also because, as we draw this whole chapter to a close, they serve as a useful compilation of the many aspects of Parabrahman that have been expounded from the beginning. The first sermon is as follows:

That avatārin of all avatāras Śrī Harikṛṣṇa Pūrṇa Puruṣottama... reigns supreme with his divine form and replete with divine radiance, lordship, glory, strength, fame and similarly infinite divine qualities. He is one whose every wish is fulfilled, who is replete with the divine powers of doership, knowledge, action, dissolution, support, inspiration, eternal existence, extremely arresting charm, and whose powers are unfathomable, unrestricted, extraordinary, flawless, invincible, and is replete with the powers of grandeur, controllership, splendour, and infinite other divine powers. He is Śrī Harikṛṣṇa Puruṣottama Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī, who is replete with multiple magnificently wondrous virtues, having the most divine of all divine forms while presiding in his Akṣaradhāma, who is unborn even while taking birth, unaltered, indivisible, having a divine form while having a human-shaped form, and having a human-shaped form while having a divine form, who is in Akṣaradhāma and yet here; in fact, wherever he is is the very centre of Akṣaradhāma. He, replete with magnificently wondrous and divine virtues such as generosity, profundity, sweetness, motherly love, integrity, knowledge, strength, radiance, taste, smell, etc., is the supremely highest Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī Puruṣottama, who presides over his Akṣaradhāma while being served by infinite liberated souls and infinite powers. He is blissful by his own bliss [yet], out of loving mercy on Akṣara and all others, he accepts their service offered unto him. He himself is flawless in all ways and has all his desires fulfilled. He is served by Akṣara, and infinite liberated souls and powers and infinite vibhūtis [emanations], infinite lordship, and is replete with eternally accomplished, superlatively limitless, unrestricted, divine lordly powers, and whose birth has been

through Dharmadeva and Bhaktimātā. This very Śrī Svāminārāyaṇa is indeed Akṣarātīta, the supreme Puruṣottama from whom all avatāras manifest and in whom they all return (SV 7.27).

In the other sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī quotes the address made to Svāminārāyaṇa when he was ritually anointed as the head of the religious fellowship as a 20-year-old by the then-leader Ramānanda Svāmī. The extensive sermon reads in most part:

This [Svāminārāyaṇa] is worthy of being believed by, worshipped by and attained by everyone. There is a myriad variety of sounds, touches, sights, tastes and smells in this world, but he is beyond them all as extremely supreme – beyond all avatāras, all vibhūti [emanations], all powers, the akṣaramuktas and even Akṣaradhāma. He is Akṣarātīta, replete with all happiness and bliss, the all-knower, fully present everywhere, having a divine form, the highest of all causes, the grantor of fruits to everyone's karmas, the support of all, the teacher of all, all-pervading, worthy of being offered upāsanā to by all [sarvopāśyamūrti], worthy of being contemplated upon by all, replete with all essences, replete with all wishes, absolutely perfect, flawless, indivisible, worthy of being offered devotion by all, the vessel of all lordship, the vessel of all powers, the vessel of all vibhūti, the vessel of all splendours, the vessel of all charm, the vessel of all mercy, the vessel of infinite divine, redemptive qualities, magnificently wondrous, a superlatively limitless grand ocean of perfect forms, qualities and virtues, that is, Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī Puruṣottama, worthy of being offered upāsanā by all, the Lord of all lords and the avatārin of all avatāras.... Thus he has manifested from Akṣaradhāma to liberate countless jīvas... the lord of Akṣaradhāma, the supreme and perfect Puruṣottama Bhagavān (SV 7.2).

I have relied in this section on simply presenting the statements from our two theological texts with little or no commentary, hoping that the statements themselves – already of quite considerable length – would adequately elucidate the point being made about the revelation of Svāminārāyaṇa as Parabrahman. All that needs to be said in conclusion is that based on these and other such

statements and sources, those of the Svāminārāyaṇa religious community confess their faith in Svāminārāyaṇa as being the human form of Parabrahman manifest on earth during the relatively recent and short period of time between 1781 and 1830 CE. ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’ therefore becomes the name of choice for followers of the tradition by which to identify and worship Parabrahman, hence the name of the tradition itself.¹⁷⁰

6.5.2.6) Continued Presence of Parabrahman through Akṣarabrahman

Our chapter on Parabrahman is not quite complete, especially the aspect of his manifestation on earth. We earlier established that one of the distinguishing features of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology was that Parabrahman – distinct from and the cause of all avatāras – himself manifests on earth in human form, and, vitally, that he chooses to remain present ever thereafter.

How does he do this? If Svāminārāyaṇa was only present on earth from 1781 to 1830, how does Parabrahman remain present to continue his liberative work after that period? Crucially, to whom do the evocative words of ‘God manifest before your eyes’ apply now, today?

These tantalising questions can only be properly answered after our exposition of Akṣarabrahman is complete, so it is to this to which we now promptly turn.

¹⁷⁰ The Bhāṣyakāra elucidates upon the nomenclature of the ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’ School, or Svāminārāyaṇa Darśana, at MuU-SB 3.2.11, p. 306.

PART 3: THEMES OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

7) AKṢARABRAHMAN

- **Akṣarabrahman as Ontologically Distinct from Parabrahman**
- **Essentiality and Centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology**
- **Nature of Akṣarabrahman**
 - One Without Second
 - Transcending All (Except Parabrahman)
 - Immutable
 - Satyam, Jñānam, Anantam
 - Role in the Origination, Sustenance and Dissolution of the Universe
 - Anvaya and Vyatireka
 - Nirguṇa and Saguṇa
 - Nirākāra and Sākāra
 - In Relation to Parabrahman
- **Four Forms of Akṣarabrahman**
 - As Cidākāśa
 - As Akṣaradhāma
 - As Sevaka in Akṣaradhāma
 - As Brahmasvarūpa Guru

7) AKṢARABRAHMAN

When we began Part 3 with an overview of Svāminārāyaṇa theology's tattva mīmāṃsā (metaphysics), we noted that an immediately distinguishing feature of the system is that it hosts *five* eternal entities (or realities) – Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – in contrast to other systems which have one, two or three. One of the metaphysical entities which readers might be unfamiliar with as found within Svāminārāyaṇa theology is Akṣarabrahman, known also as Akṣara and Brahman. Specifically, we noted that it raised a number of important and difficult questions of the system, such as:

- a) Is the 'Brahman' of the Svāminārāyaṇa School the same 'highest reality' as that of the other schools?
- b) If so, then what/who is 'Parabrahman'?
- c) If not – and 'Parabrahman' is the name simply applied to what others call Brahman – then what/who is this other 'Brahman'?
- d) Are there *two* 'highest realities' in the Svāminārāyaṇa School? Clearly not, for this is, by definition of the superlative, implausible. But then how are 'Brahman' and 'Parabrahman' related? Indeed, how are the two distinct?

During the process of our exposition of Akṣarabrahman in this chapter, we shall be answering all of these questions in some detail, beginning with the last question, which, in many ways, will help answer the rest as well as others about the nature, function and significance of Akṣarabrahman. While it will not be possible to raise and address all of the debates here concerning Akṣarabrahman,

especially when introducing it for the first time in such a theological context, all of the major themes will nonetheless be covered using our key theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as well as the Prasthānatrayī and its commentaries.

As before, though, it will be helpful to our progress through this chapter if we first have an initial outline.

Akṣarabrahman (also called Akṣara and Brahman) is ontologically the second-highest entity – transcending everything, including māyā, except Parabrahman. It serves in the following four forms:

- As the abode of Parabrahman – the divine, luminous realm called Akṣaradhāma (occasionally also Brahmadhāma, Brahmapura, Brahmaloḥa, Brahmamahola, etc.) which is presided over by Parabrahman in his distinct transcendental form, and which also holds the innumerable liberated souls (called akṣaramuktas) who enjoy the eternal unlimited bliss of Parabrahman.
- As a sevaka in Akṣaradhāma – the ideal devotee, human in form, forever residing in Akṣaradhāma as an exemplar to all other liberated souls.
- As Cidākāśa – the all-pervading light of Akṣarabrahman supporting countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.
- As the Brahmasvarūpa Guru – the human form on earth whom Parabrahman brings with him when he manifests in person and

through whom Parabrahman lives on and continues his work of liberation. The Guru leads jīvas and Īśvaras to the liberated state of brahmarūpa (or akṣararūpa), wherein they experience the undisturbed bliss of Parabrahman.

7.1) Akṣarabrahman as Ontologically Distinct from Parabrahman

Our first task will be to establish Akṣarabrahman as a metaphysical entity ontologically distinct from Parabrahman. Why does Svāminārāyaṇa theology feel the need to have another, discrete entity – apart from the highest entity Parabrahman – when other schools of Vedānta have managed fine without it? Crucially, is there scriptural support for such an entity within the Vedānta tradition?

To provide a fuller answer to these very important questions, we shall need to conduct a separate study of the Vedānta texts, checking for valid interpretations and arguments using the Vedāntic system's own tools of hermeneutics. If this study is to be satisfactorily thorough, it will also require juxtaposing the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition's interpretation with those of the other main schools of Vedānta and their rich commentarial corpus. For this, I have delimited the study to the following five schools: Kevalādvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Svābhāvika-bhedābheda, and Śuddhādvaita.

The aim, to be clear from the outset, is not to expose any flaws or inconsistencies in these other schools of Vedānta, or to establish the superiority of the

Svāminārāyaṇa school among them. Rather, the study offers a valuable opportunity for reasoned argumentation based on textual exegesis using classical hermeneutical tools on a doctrine that is central to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

While this study will necessarily demand a slight change in style from the one adopted thus far – by discussing other schools and drawing more heavily upon secondary sources – it should not be forgotten that it is still forms an important constitutive part in our meta-discourse of expounding the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, and shall be especially relevant when checking for the theological validity of a system by way of its potential for reasoned argumentation within the constricts of scriptural authority.

Before delving into this detailed textual inquiry that is to follow, we shall need to begin with a brief explanation of the factors that will facilitate and determine it.

For this limited inquiry, I have chosen to examine three passages from the Prasthānatrayī (the canonical treatise-triad of the Vedānta system): one from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, which invites a discussion from the Brahmasūtras; one from the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā; and one from the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. As we learned in Part 1 when introducing the sources of this project, all doctrines of the Vedāntic schools must conform to a valid interpretation of this triad in order for them to be deemed authentic. Any deviation from this sacred revelation would render the doctrines invalid.

Furthermore, the Vedānta tradition is a “coherent, organically integrated tradition of commentaries”.¹⁷¹ Each ācārya of a school (or its early proponents) wrote extensive, systematic commentaries on the triad. These commentaries received secondary commentaries which, in turn, were subjects of further commentaries, expositions and/or summaries. This provides us with what Clooney describes as a “luxuriant commentarial elaboration that grew over generations.”¹⁷² Any serious attempt to understand and discuss Vedānta must inevitably include an engagement with these scholastic texts. Failing to do so would be like “examin[ing] a gem in a totally dark room, [or] appreciat[ing] a tree by cutting away everything but its roots.”¹⁷³

Hence, we shall be scrutinising each of the aforementioned three passages with the aid of at least three levels of supporting material gleaned from the major Vedānta schools and key texts from the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta corpus. This will allow us to compare interpretations and fairly challenge the Svāminārāyaṇa School’s own theological propositions regarding Akṣarabrahman. As far as possible, we shall be using the primary sources in their original Sanskrit, supported at times with translations and secondary works of scholarship in English and occasionally Hindi and Gujarati.

¹⁷¹ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, p. 14.

¹⁷² *ibid*, p. 23.

¹⁷³ *ibid*, p. 22.

J.A.B. van Buitenen bemoans the fact that some “Western scholars disregard these erudite studies by the privileged [commentators] with great disadvantage to their comprehension of the scholastic background of the studied authors.” J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja’s Vedārthasaṃgraha*, annotated trans. and critical edn, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), p. vi.

Since the subject of our inquiry lies within the realm of Vedānta, we must also accept that this inquiry is subject to the rules of examination that govern this realm. These “rules of textual interpretation”, Olivelle explains, “were first systematized within the [Purva] Mīmāṃsā school”,¹⁷⁴ a tradition which developed rigorous hermeneutical methods to achieve precision in religious practices.¹⁷⁵ Some of these principles and methods were adopted, and later also modified, by the Vedāntins¹⁷⁶ to help them determine the correct interpretation of their more philosophical texts.¹⁷⁷ Chief among these hermeneutical devices, it may be asserted, is a set of six tools which are collectively known as the ṣaḍ-liṅga, or ‘six clues’. Sāyaṇa Mādhava (14th century) in his famous *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha*, a doxographic treatise of the various schools of Vedānta, cites a popular verse which encapsulates all six. It reads:

Upakramopasaṃhārāvabhyāso’pūrvatā phalam |
Arthavāḍopapattī ca liṅgam tātparyanirṇaye ||¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Patrick Olivelle, *Renunciation in Hinduism: A Medieval Debate*, 2 vols (Vienna: Gerold; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), I, p. 56.

¹⁷⁵ Later schools of Mīmāṃsā, such as those propounded by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Prabhākara (both eighth century), were arguably more philosophically evolved.

¹⁷⁶ Vedānta (also called ‘Uttara-Mīmāṃsā’, or the ‘Later Inquiry’) is a natural heir to these hermeneutical principles and methods because it is traditionally paired with its predecessor Purva-Mīmāṃsā (the ‘Early Inquiry’, often called simply ‘Mīmāṃsā’). Together they form a part of the six orthodox systems of Hindu thought; the other pairs being Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. Hence, also, Clooney urges that (Advaita) Vedānta must be read ‘within the paradigm’ of Mīmāṃsā. See: *Theology After Vedanta*, pp. 23-26 and ‘Binding the Text: Vedanta as Philosophy and Commentary’, in *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, ed. by Jeffrey R. Timm (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), pp. 47-68.

¹⁷⁷ “Vedanta employs all the Mīmāṃsā theory of hermeneutics in all its efforts towards the understanding of the Absolute as proclaimed by the Vedas.” A. Ramaswamy Iyengar, ‘Hermeneutics: A Vehicle of Perennial Wisdom’ in *Indian Theories of Hermeneutics*, ed. by P.C. Muraleemadhavan (New Chandrawal Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2002), p. 123.

¹⁷⁸ Sāyaṇa Mādhava, *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha* (Pune: The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1924), pp. 405-06.

That is, to determine the import (tātparyanirṇaya) of a text treated within a particular section (prakaraṇa), one must check for:

- 1) upakrama and upasaṃhāra (opening and ending) – consistency between what is stated in the introduction and at the conclusion;
- 2) abhyāsa (repetition) – what is stated repeatedly;
- 3) apūrvatā (novelty) – what is novel or stated in a novel way as compared to other sections;
- 4) phala (fruit) – what the fruits stated relate to;
- 5) arthavāda (commendation) – what is commended (or condemned); and
- 6) upapatti (reasoning) – what is logically argued for or against.

Importantly, Sāyaṇa Mādhava adds that this set of clues was “demonstrated by the earlier ācāryas.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, exponents of each of the major schools are known to have applied these tools to advance their arguments. Rāmānuja, for example, cites them repeatedly in his *Vedārthasaṅgraha*. Śāṅkarite commentators such as Akhaṇḍānanda (14th century),¹⁸⁰ Vidyāraṇya (14th century),¹⁸¹ and Govindānanda (16th century)¹⁸² have also used them, as has the Bengali scholar

¹⁷⁹ Sāyaṇa Mādhava, *Sarvadarśanasāṅgraha*, p. 405.

¹⁸⁰ Akhaṇḍānanda, *Tattvadīpana* in Padmapādācārya, *Pañcapādikā with Commentaries by Prakāśātma, Akhaṇḍānanda and Viṣṇubhaṭṭopādhyāya* (Varanasi: Mahesh Anusandhan Sansthan, 1992), p. 575.

¹⁸¹ Vidyāraṇyamuni, *Vivaraṇaprameyasāṅgraha* (Kashi: Achuyta Granthamala Karyalaya, 1940), p. 747.

¹⁸² Govindānanda, *Bhāṣyaratnaprabhā* in *Brahmasūtraśāṅkarabhāṣyam with Three Commentaries*, 2nd edn (Mumbai: Nirnayasagar Press, 1909), pp. 62 & 67.

of the Svābhāvika-bhedābheda School, Mādhava Mukundadeva (16th century).¹⁸³

As a result, the verse has since found its place in several encyclopaedic glosses of the Vedānta system.¹⁸⁴

Richard De Smet in his pioneering work *The Theological Method of Śaṅkara* elucidates upon how each of these six exegetical tools helps determine the sense and coherence of a text. In elaborating upon the first tool, he cites chapter six of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad as an example. It begins with the words “One only, without a second” (6.2.1), and ends with the sentence: “All this is one with that. That is the Truth. That is Ātman. Thou art that, O Śvetaketu” (6.6.13). De Smet then concludes: “Such clear beginnings and ends are the best sign of the intention of the śruti [Vedic verse or text].”¹⁸⁵ He thus gives prime importance to upakrama and upasaṃhāra.

This echoes Van Buitenen’s assertion in his notes to Rāmānuja’s *Vedārthasaṃgrah*. After listing the six “canons of exegesis... by which the right interpretation is determined”, he explains that “the most important are

¹⁸³ Mādhava Mukundadeva, *Adhyāsa-(Parapakṣa)-Girivajrākhyo Grantha* (Vrundavan: Śrī 108 Nimbārka Mahāsabhā, 1936), p. 207.

¹⁸⁴ For example: Tārānātha Bhaṭṭācārya, ed., *Vācaspatyam*, 7 vols (Varanasi: Chaukhamba, 1962), II, p. 1199; Bhīmācārya, ed., *Nyāyakośa*, 4th edn (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973), p. 158; and *Viśiṣṭādvaitakośa*, ed. by Lakṣmītātācārya, 6 vols (Melukoṭe: Saṃskṛta Saṃśodhana Saṃsat, 1983-), III (1989), pp. 211-12.

See also: A. Ramaswamy Iyengar, ‘Hermeneutics: A Vehicle of Perennial Wisdom’ and C. Rajendran, ‘Aspects of Ancient Indian Hermeneutics’, both in *Indian Theories of Hermeneutics*, ed. by P.C. Muraleemadhavan (New Chandrawal Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2002), pp. 123-24 and pp. 175-76, respectively.

¹⁸⁵ Richard de Smet, *The Theological Method of Śaṅkara*, (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1953), pp. 207-08 cited in Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), p. 150 n38.

upakrama and upasaṃhāra: the latter may never be in conflict with the former in order to establish the ekavākyatā¹⁸⁶ [consistency] of a context.”¹⁸⁷

Hence, throughout our inquiry here, we shall be applying this most important hermeneutical tool to check for semantic consistency within the various interpretations of the selected passages. We shall also refer to the other tools wherever the scope of the discussion allows. Importantly, then, our three passages and their interpretations, central as they are to Brahmanic discussion among the various schools of Vedānta, will be analysed using classical hermeneutical tools and methods developed within the Vedāntic tradition itself.

We can now proceed to carefully scrutinise our three canonical passages as interpreted within the various commentarial texts of each of the major Vedānta schools and then also in the theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition.

7.1.1) Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.1.2: akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad belongs to the Atharva Veda and is considered one of the principal Upaniṣads in Brahmanic discussion.¹⁸⁸ It comprises 64 verses¹⁸⁹ over

¹⁸⁶ Literally, ‘one-statement-ness’.

¹⁸⁷ Van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja’s Vedārthasaṅgraha*, annotated trans. and critical edn, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1956), p. 200 n134.

¹⁸⁸ Three of the twenty-eight adhikaraṇas in the Brahmasūtras which directly discuss Brahman are devoted to the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Śaṅkara alone cites it 129 times in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣyam*. Paul Deussen, *Sixty Upaniṣads of the Veda*, trans. by V.M. Bedekar and G.B. Palsule, 2 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), II, p. 569.

¹⁸⁹ Rāmānuja mentions a verse after 1.1.6 which is not found in some editions, making for him a total of 65 verses.

three chapters, themselves called muṇḍakas, with each muṇḍaka being further divided into two parts, called khaṇḍas.

The first part of chapter one introduces brahmavidyā, “the knowledge which is the basis of all forms of knowledge” (MuU 1.1.1), by tracing its transmission from Brahmā (not to be confused with Brahman) to his eldest son Atharvan, then successively on to Aṅgiras, Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Aṅgirasa, and finally, to Śaunaka, ‘the wealthy householder’. In the ensuing dialogue between the latter two, Śaunaka asks:

O venerable [Aṅgirasa], by knowing what can all else be known?
(MuU 1.1.3).

In reply, Aṅgirasa defines two types of knowledge – aparā (lower) and parā (higher). The lower knowledge, he explains, includes learning of the four Vedas and their auxiliary disciplines – phonetics, metrics, grammar, etymology, astronomy, and ritual science. In contrast:

Atha parā yayā tad akṣaram adhigamyate |

The higher knowledge is that by which ‘akṣara’¹⁹⁰ can be realised
(MuU 1.1.5).

The remaining portion of this first part is devoted to a description of that ‘akṣara’.

¹⁹⁰ We shall leave the term ‘akṣara’ un-translated since its interpretation is the very core of this discussion.

In part two of the first chapter, a comparison unfolds between the two knowledge-types, specifically describing the transient fruits of purely ritualistic Vedic karma. It ends with another mention of the higher, brahmavidyā. Thus, the first chapter serves as a foreword to the continuing elucidation of brahmavidyā.

The second chapter opens with a descriptive verse narrating the process of creation and dissolution in relation to ‘akṣara’:

This is the truth: As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by the thousands, similarly, O dear [Śaunaka], beings of various forms issue forth from akṣara and return to it only (MuU 2.1.1).

Immediately thereafter, we find a turn in subject. With the following verse begins the description of [Parama]Puruṣa, the supreme person:

Divine and formless is Puruṣa; residing without and within, unborn.

Without breath and without mind, pure, he is... (MuU 2.1.2).

The remaining portion of this verse, upon which we are focusing this section of our inquiry, reads in Sanskrit:

akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ

– a seemingly simple phrase which, as we shall see, can prove rather difficult to interpret consistently.

At the outset, what can be said about the three terms in this phrase? Most basically, the following:

Term	Type	Gender	Number	Case	Meaning
akṣarāt	?	male or neuter	singular	Ablative	?
parataḥ	invariable adjective	(any)	(any)	(ablative)	high
paraḥ	adjective	male	singular	nominative	high

At the core of our discussion lies the term ‘akṣara’ – which we must remember is synonymous with ‘Brahman’ and ‘Akṣarabrahman’ in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. A correct understanding of the term will naturally lead to a correct interpretation of the passage and, indeed, most of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad seeing how central it is to its underlying theme.

Etymologically, ‘akṣara’ is derived from the verb kṣiṇ, meaning ‘to wane’ or ‘to perish’. The negating ‘a’ prefix thus relates ‘akṣara’ to ‘imperishable’.¹⁹¹ But exactly how? The term – like ‘brown’, for example, in English – can serve as an adjectival noun, an adjective, and as a proper noun. Hence its lexical confusion. An introductory overview of how these three options can be applied and what their ramifications could be shall aid us later when we delve into a survey of the interpretations offered by the various schools.

‘Akṣara’ as an Adjectival Noun: Applying the rules of Sanskrit grammar, where an adjective must agree with its corresponding noun in gender, number and case,

¹⁹¹ Van Buitenen, in tracing “the career of *akṣara*” through Vedic texts, emphasises its meaning as ‘syllable’, and later as relating to the creative syllable AUM. He rejects its literal meaning as ‘imperishable’, but accepts that it becomes a descriptor of another being or entity – an adjectival noun. ‘Akṣara’, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 79.3 (1959), 176-87.

it is evident that ‘paraḥ’ – like the other adjectives in the verse – qualifies Puruṣa since both terms are male, singular, and in the nominative case. That would leave the invariable adjective ‘parataḥ’ as the qualifier of ‘akṣarāt’, thus providing us with a straightforward reading of the phrase:

The high [Puruṣa] transcends the high imperishable.

Or phrased more naturally:

Puruṣa is higher than the high imperishable.

But what is to be understood as this ‘imperishable’, i.e. which noun is it representing? Jīva, prakṛti (either sentient or insentient), Śrī, Paramātmā? All are intrinsically imperishable. As we shall see, the ācāryas are divided on this key issue.

‘Akṣara’ as an Adjective: If, alternatively, ‘akṣara’ is used as a simple adjective, the phrase as a whole becomes rather awkwardly constructed. There now appears to be a missing noun for the invariable adjective ‘parataḥ’ to qualify. It could qualify another qualifier, and so perhaps ‘parataḥ paraḥ’ together become “higher than the high” – which can plausibly apply to Puruṣa, the supremely highest person. But then that leaves the ablative ‘akṣarāt’. What is it qualifying? It cannot legitimately qualify Puruṣa because of the difference in cases. So again, there is a missing noun. We are left asking: ‘imperishable *what?*’

‘Akṣara’ as a Proper Noun: Treating ‘akṣara’ as a proper noun effectively implies it is a distinct entity – such as the individual ‘Mr Brown’ in our analogy, as

compared to the colour brown (adjectival noun) or a hue of that colour (adjective). This would be a ‘conventional’ (rūḍha) use of the term, as opposed to an etymologically derived (vyutpanna) one, since its significance as meaning ‘imperishable’ is rendered secondary. But this would raise numerous questions about how to interpret the same term when it appears elsewhere in the same Upaniṣad where it seemingly applies to Puruṣa. And so why the need for another, distinct entity?

These and many such questions are addressed in our discussion below.

Noteworthy at this point is how the lexical diversity of ‘akṣara’ has led modern Indian and Western scholars to offer a variety of translations (note: not *interpretations*) for the term. The following table illustrates:

Translation	Translator(s)
Creator	Mascaró ¹⁹²
Imperishable	Deussen ¹⁹³ Hume ¹⁹⁴ Müller ¹⁹⁵ Thibaut ¹⁹⁶
imperishable	Deussen ¹⁹⁷ Olivelle ¹⁹⁸ Roebuck ¹⁹⁹
immortal	Ram Mohun Roy ²⁰⁰
immutable	Radhakrishnan ²⁰¹
Indestructible	Thibaut ²⁰²
indestructible	Swami Sivanand ²⁰³
unchangeable	Dasgupta ²⁰⁴

¹⁹² Juan Mascaró, *The Upanishads* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 77.

¹⁹³ Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. by Charles Johnston (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 132.

¹⁹⁴ Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Upanishads*, 2nd rev. edn (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 370.

¹⁹⁵ Max Müller, *The Upanishads*, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1962), II, p. 34.

¹⁹⁶ George Thibaut, trans., *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, Part I, *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. by Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), vol. xxxiv, p. 283.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, 2nd edn, trans. by Rev. A.S. Geden (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1979), p. 202.

¹⁹⁸ Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 271.

¹⁹⁹ Valerie J. Roebuck, *The Upaniṣads*, rev. edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 323.

²⁰⁰ Ram Mohun Roy, *Translation of the Moonduk-Opunishud of the Uthurvū-Ved* (Calcutta: D. Lankheet, 1819), p. 10.

²⁰¹ RadhaKṛṣṇan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, Centenary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 680.

²⁰² George Thibaut, trans., *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*, Part III, *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. by Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), vol. XLVIII, p. 283.

²⁰³ Swami Sivananda, *Principal Upanishads*, 2 vols (Rishikesh: Yoga Vedanta Forest University, 1950), I, p. 343.

²⁰⁴ Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 1st Indian edn, 5 vols (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), III, p. 46.

All of these scholars have translated the term ‘akṣara’ as being either an adjective of or a synonym (adjectival noun) for Puruṣa. However, this evades important issues of contextual and semantic consistency when ‘akṣara’ appears both earlier (at 1.1.5, 1.1.7, 1.2.13, 2.1.1) and again later (at 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) within the same Upaniṣad. For a more hermeneutically grounded approach, we must now turn to the classical Vedānta schools, and observe how they have interpreted this passage in their commentarial literature.

7.1.1.1) Kevalādvaita

The first mention of ‘akṣara’ in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad is in reference to the ‘higher knowledge’, at 1.1.5. Śaṅkara states in his commentary of that verse:

Higher knowledge is that by which the imperishable Parameśvara can be realised.²⁰⁵

Clearly, Śaṅkara has taken ‘akṣara’ here as an adjectival noun representing Parameśvara, the imperishable supreme Lord. To support his interpretation, Śaṅkara argues that the description that immediately follows can only be of the supreme reality, hence, here, too, ‘akṣara’ must refer to the same. Indeed, verse 1.1.6 begins to describe ‘akṣara’ as:

invisible, intangible, without lineage or without caste, without eyes or ears, and without hands or feet; it is eternal, pervading, omnipresent, and exceedingly subtle. That is the immutable that the wise perceive as the source of all beings....²⁰⁶

Surely, this must be a description of the supreme reality, Śaṅkara maintains.

²⁰⁵ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1992), p. 12.

²⁰⁶ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 13.

This group of verses is also the topic of discussion in the Brahmasūtras. Taking their cue from the opening of MuU 1.1.6, aphorisms 1.2.21 to 1.2.23 are called the Adṛśyatvādiguṇakādhikaraṇa – “Regarding the attributes of invisibility, etc.” The doubt raised by Śaṅkara as a prima facie view is whether these qualities – invisibility, intangibility, etc. – can qualify the non-sentient Pradhāna of the Sāṃkhya system (referred to as Prakṛti in Vedānta²⁰⁷). After all, it is the material ‘source of all beings’, as mentioned above. Furthermore, how else could one reconcile the statement at MuU 2.1.2, placing Puruṣa as higher than the high ‘akṣara’? Pradhāna, being the source of all beings, transcends them all and yet is subordinate to Puruṣa.

Śaṅkara rejects this suggestion emphatically, arguing:

That which here is spoken of as the source of all beings, distinguished by such qualities as invisibility and so on, can be the highest Lord only; nothing else. Whereupon is this conclusion formed? On the statement of attributes. For the clause, ‘He who is all-knowing, all-perceiving’ [MuU 1.1.9 & 2.2.7] clearly states an attribute belonging to the highest Lord only, since the attributes of knowing all and perceiving all cannot be predicated... of the non-intelligent Pradhāna.²⁰⁸

But then what to make of “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”? Having ‘akṣara’ mean the imperishable highest Lord here at MuU 1.1.6 would imply that there is an even higher entity at MuU 2.1.2. Surely, nothing can be higher than the highest Lord. And yet this is what would result – *if* consistency was to be retained.

²⁰⁷ For the significance of Prakṛti and its interchangeability with Pradhāna, see Lipner, *The Face of Truth*, pp. 155-56 n28.

²⁰⁸ *Brahmasūtra with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, n.d.) pp. 82-83; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, I, pp. 136-37.

Śaṅkara, however, chooses ‘akṣara’ at MuU 2.1.2 to mean the “unmanifest form of Prakṛti”²⁰⁹ which to some extent reverts to the prima facie view mentioned earlier. In commentating on BS 1.2.22, he elaborates:

Here the term [‘akṣara’] means that undeveloped entity which represents the seminal potentiality of names and forms, contains the fine parts of the material elements, abides in the Lord, forms his limiting adjunct, and being itself no effect [but the cause] is high in comparison to all effects.²¹⁰

Srinivasa Chari thus summarises in his *The Philosophy of the Vedāntasūtra*: “The word akṣara here [MuU 2.1.2] does not mean Brahman as the source of the universe (bhūtayoni) but the primordial cosmic matter in its unmanifest form... for the obvious reason that there cannot be anything greater than the akṣara as Brahman.”²¹¹ There seems to be some inconsistency here between how Śaṅkara interprets ‘akṣara’ initially, as Parameśvara, and later, as prakṛti, within the same topic.

Śaṅkara realised this, of course, and so offers a number of arguments to justify his interpretation. One of particular interest is regards to the explicit mention at MuU 1.1.4 of two categories of knowledge – one lower and the other higher. If, Śaṅkara argues, he had obstinately interpreted ‘akṣara’ at MuU 2.1.2 in the same way he had at, say, MuU 1.1.6 – as Brahman – this would have necessitated a third knowledge-category higher than that of parāvidyā, because now its subject,

²⁰⁹ *Muṇḍakopaniṣad with Śāṅkarabhāṣya* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1992), p. 14.

²¹⁰ *Brahmasūtra with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 85; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, I, p. 140.

²¹¹ S.M. Srinivas Chari, *The Philosophy of the Vedāntasūtra* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), p. 37.

‘akṣara’, is no longer the highest entity. Having thus three categories of knowledge – the lower, based on the Ṛg Veda, etc.; the higher, based on the knowledge of ‘akṣara’; and the highest, based on this higher-than-‘akṣara’ entity – directly contradicts MuU 1.1.4, and hence is untenable.²¹² Moreover, the term ‘brahmavidyā’ would effectively be rendered meaningless, because now it no longer relates to Brahman or the highest entity, even though it is commended at the very beginning of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad as “the highest knowledge” (MuU 1.1.2) and “the base of all forms of knowledge” (MuU 1.1.1).²¹³ The logic is, of course, incisive – and necessary to defend the breach of an all-important exegetical rule.

A study of works by later scholars of the Kevalādvaita School reveals no clear attempt to resolve the apparent anomaly. Naturally, they offer further justification and support for Śaṅkara’s interpretation from within the matrix of their own doctrines and concepts. For example, Vācaspati Miśra (ninth century), the first and widely respected as the greatest champion of Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, continues in his own *Bhāmatī* commentary with a rejection of Prakṛti as the source of the universe, thus identifying Brahman as ‘akṣara’ at MuU 1.1.5-7.²¹⁴ When met at MuU 2.1.2 with the prospect of an entity higher than this highest Brahman, he applies Śaṅkara’s concept of vivarta (illusory

²¹² *Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya*, p. 83; trans. of Thibaut, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, I, p. 138.

²¹³ *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Vācaspati Miśra, *Bhāmatī* in *The Brahmasūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya with the Commentaries: Bhāmatī, Kalpataru and Parimala*, ed. by K.L. Joshi, 3 vols (Delhi: Parimal, 1987), I, pp. 255-57.

appearance) to redefine this earlier mention as the attribute-less (Nirguṇa or Nirviśeṣa) Brahman, and ‘akṣara’ here as the subordinate attribute-full (Saguṇa) Brahman.²¹⁵

This interpretation is essentially furthered by both Amalānanda (thirteenth century) in his *Vedāntakalpataru*,²¹⁶ a commentary on *Bhāmatī*, and thereafter by the famed Appaya Dīkṣita (sixteenth century) in his commentary on *Vedāntakalpataru*, *Kalpataruparimala*.²¹⁷

7.1.1.2) Viśiṣṭādvaita

Rāmānuja, in this instance, follows Śaṅkara closely. In his *Śrībhāṣya* commentary of the corresponding BS 1.2.22²¹⁸, he advances a similar prima facie view by raising the doubt of:

whether the Akṣara, possessing invisibility and other such attributes,²¹⁹ and the Being which is higher than what is beyond the Akṣara,²²⁰ are (respectively) the Prakṛti (i.e. material Nature) and the Puruṣa (i.e. individual self)?²²¹

²¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 257-58.

²¹⁶ Amalānanda, *Vedāntakalpataru*, *ibid*, pp. 255-58.

²¹⁷ Appaya Dīkṣita, *Kalpataruparimala*, *ibid*, pp. 255-58.

²¹⁸ Rāmānuja bifurcates an aphorism in 1.2, hence numbering of aphorisms in this *pāda* of his *Śrībhāṣya* is displaced by one in comparison to other commentaries.

²¹⁹ MuU 1.1.6.

²²⁰ MuU 2.1.2.

²²¹ Rāmānuja, *Śārīrakamīmāṃsā Śrībhāṣya* (Brindaban: Mohalla Gyan Gudarhi, 1937), pp. 218-19; trans. based on M. Rangacharya and M.B. Vardaraja Aiyangar, *The Vedāntasūtras with the Śrībhāṣya of Rāmānujācārya*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988-91), II (1989), p. 41.

In support of this position is the argument that the Puruṣa of the Sāṃkhya system is considered the aggregate of all individual selves (samaṣṭipuruṣa), and is thus higher than the undifferentiated Prakṛti (or Pradhāna), which also happens to be the material source of all beings. This is indeed an interesting argument because it is based on an attempt to retain semantic consistency for the term ‘akṣara’ as Prakṛti at both MuU 1.1.6 and 2.1.2.

However, Rāmānuja, like Śaṅkara, insists:

That which possesses invisibility and the other qualities, and that which is higher than the high Akṣara, is no other than the Paramapuruṣa [highest person] himself. Why? For the text declares attributes which belong to the highest Self only, namely, ‘He who is all-knowing, all-perceiving’ [MuU 1.1.9], etc.²²²

Realising that this is a deviation from how he has interpreted ‘akṣara’ in its previous occurrences, Rāmānuja attempts to justify his interpretation of MuU 2.1.2. He explains that the highest Puruṣa is, of course, the subject of the highest knowledge [MuU 1.1.5], characterised by such attributes as invisibility, etc. and the source of all beings [MuU 1.1.6], the creator of the world [MuU 1.1.7], from whom the world with all its differentiated names and forms evolves, and who is the all-knower and all-perceiver [MuU 1.1.8-9] – and thus identified by ‘akṣara’ in all these verses. However, this cannot be the case with “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ” [MuU 2.1.2] because:

being the all-knower and the cause of all, and hence also the highest of all, there can be nothing that is higher than him.²²³

²²² Rāmānuja, *Śārīrakamīmāṃsā Śrībhāṣya*, p. 83; trans. based on *The Vedāntasūtras with the Śrībhāṣya of Rāmānujācārya*, II, p. 42.

²²³ Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣya*, p. 219.

And therefore,

the word ‘akṣara’ here denotes the insentient [prakṛti] in its subtle, elementary form.²²⁴

Sudarśana Sūrī (13th century), the first and foremost commentator on Rāmānuja’s *Śrībhāṣya*, opts to explain (away) this inconsistency in his *Śrutaprakāśikā* by citing MuU 1.2.13, which alludes to brahmavidyā as the knowledge of “akṣara Puruṣa”. Interpreting ‘akṣara’ here as an adjective, he argues that this verse establishes ‘akṣara’ and [Parama]Puruṣa as being non-different, thus either term could equally be applied as pertaining to the source of all beings [MuU 1.1.7], etc. And so, because Puruṣa is akṣara, it is obvious, then, that some entity other than Puruṣa must relate to the ‘akṣara’ in “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”. This is the primordial prakṛti, as Rāmānuja has proclaimed.²²⁵ Such an explanation, however, does little to mend the original break in interpretative consistency.

A generation after Sudarśana Sūrī, two of the most important stalwarts of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School rose – Piḷḷai Lokācārya and Vedānta Deśika (both 13-14th century). The latter, in particular, was a prolific writer, expounding and defending Viśiṣṭādvaita doctrines through numerous independent works such as his *Nyāyapariśuddhi*, *Nyāyasiddhāñjana*, *Tattvamuktākalāpa*, and his magnum opus, the *Rahasyatrayasāra*. He also wrote a short work based on the *Śrībhāṣya*,

²²⁴ *ibid.*

²²⁵ Sudarśana Sūrī, *Śrutaprakāśikā on Rāmānuja’s Śrībhāṣya*, 2 vols (Mysore: Śrī Vedānta Deśika Vihāra Sabhā, 1959), II, BS 1.2.22.

called the *Adhikaraṇasārāvali*. As the name suggests, it is a summarisation of the various adhikaraṇas in the Brahmasūtras, and so adds very little to what Rāmānuja has already stated at BS 1.2.22-24.²²⁶

Rāmānuja himself did not write a commentary on the Upaniṣads. This was supplied in the 15th century by Raṅgarāmānuja, whose *Upaniṣatprakāśikā* is little more than a collation of Rāmānuja's arguments from the *Śrībhāṣya*. Hence at MuU 1.1.5 and 1.1.8 (1.1.7 in all other editions), he explains 'akṣara' is denotive of the highest entity, Paramātman.²²⁷ But then at MuU 2.1.2 he argues that this cannot possibly hold true here because there can be nothing higher than the highest Self. Thus, in "akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ", 'akṣara' must mean the unmanifest prakṛti.²²⁸

7.1.1.3) Dvaita

Madhva (also known as Ānandatīrtha) characteristically offers a novel solution to the problem of consistent interpretation within the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (which he calls the 'Ātharvaṇa Upaniṣad'). He differs initially from his two predecessors by classifying the teachings of even the four Vedas and the six Vedāṅgas as parāvidyā "if [they] reveal Viṣṇu."²²⁹ He thus relates the 'akṣara' mentioned in

²²⁶ Vedānta Deśika, *Adhikaraṇasārāvali with Two Commentaries: Adhikaraṇacintāmaṇi and Sārātharatanprabhā* (Madras: Sri Nilayam, 1974), pp. 172-74.

²²⁷ Raṅgarāmānuja, *Prakāśikā on Īśa-Kena-Kaṭha-Praśna-Muṇḍaka-Māṇḍukyānandavalli-Bhṛgūpaniṣadaḥ* (Pune: Anandashram Mudranalaya, 1947), pp. 153-54 & 157.

²²⁸ *ibid*, pp. 165-67.

²²⁹ *Shatprasna-Atharvana-Mandukya-Upanishads (with English Translation and Notes According to Sri Madhvacharya's Bashya)*, trans. by K.T. Pandurangi (Chirtanpur: Srīman Madhva Siddhantonahini Sabha, 1986), pp. 52-53 [emphasis added].

connection with the highest knowledge at MuU 1.1.5 to the highest deity (also referred to as Hiraṇyagarbha²³⁰).

How Madhva tackles ‘akṣara’ at MuU 2.1.2 is more fully apparent in his *Sūtrabhāṣya*, the first and most important of his four commentaries on the Brahmasūtras.²³¹ Together with its subsequent commentaries – chief of which are Jayatīrtha’s *Tattvaparakāśikā* (14th century), Vyāsatīrtha’s *Tātparyacandrikā* (15th-16th century) and Rāghavendratīrtha’s *Tātparyacandrikāprakāśa* (17th century), the latter two being successive commentaries upon the preceding commentary – we are provided a complete picture of the Dvaita School position.

To begin with, Madhva offers four options for a prima facie view at BS 1.2.21. Could that which is endowed with such attributes as invisibility, etc.²³² be 1) insentient prakṛti, 2) sentient prakṛti, 3) Brahmā, or even 4) Rudra?

The first view gains support from the analogies at MuU 1.1.7 – a spider spinning out its web and drawing it in again, herbs and plants sprouting from the earth, and hair growing on a person’s head – all of which affirm the material causality of ‘akṣara’. This insentient prakṛti’s relationship with its sentient counterpart could also allow the latter to qualify, because it could thus be regarded as the

²³⁰ *Sūtraprasthānam* and *Upaniṣatprasthānam* in *Sarvamūlagranthāḥ* (Bangalore: Akhila Bharata Madhwa Maha Mandala Publications, 1969), p. 30.

²³¹ The *Sūtrānuvṛtyākhyāna* is a versified form of the *Sūtrabhāṣya*; the *Nyāyavivraṇa* deals exclusively with the organic details of the Brahmasūtra adhikaraṇas; and the *Brahmasūtrānubhāṣya* is a brief extension upon the first commentary.

²³² MuU 1.1.6-9.

efficient cause, if only figuratively. Of the two, however, the former is thought to be more intimately connected to the effect (the world and all beings), and so, claims Vyāsatīrtha, the insentient prakṛti should be given priority of consideration.²³³

The latter two options stem from two references to the person of Brahmā²³⁴ and one to Īśa,²³⁵ and a confusion of whether brahmavidyā could possibly relate to either Brahmā or Rudra. This is quickly ruled out leaving the insentient prakṛti as Brahman’s sole challenger for the position of ‘akṣara’.

Madhva defends that Brahman is the efficient cause of the universe and only it is endowed with qualities such as invisibility, etc. For how can an insentient entity be “the all-knower and all-perceiver...”, as described at MuU 1.1.9? Hence, Brahman should be understood as being represented by the adjectival noun ‘akṣara’ throughout the MuU.

But then what of MuU 2.1.2? “This [verse]”, B.N.K. Sharma explains on behalf of the prima facie advocate, “makes the identification of the Akṣara with the Supreme Brahman impossible”, because it necessarily implies an entity higher

²³³ Vyāsatīrtha’s *Tātparyacandrikā* in *Srī Madhvācārya Brahmasūtrabhāṣya with Three Glosses*, critically ed. by R. Raghavendra Acharya, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1992), III, p. 498.

²³⁴ MuU 1.1.1 & 1.1.9.

²³⁵ MuU 3.1.3.

than this Brahman. “No Vedāntin”, he continues, “could consent to deprive Brahman of its summit position.... Hence Akṣara must be prakṛti.”²³⁶

Not so, Madhva maintains. Brahman can relate to ‘akṣara’ and retain its highest position if one accepts the notion of three ‘akṣaras’. He postulates that the insentient primordial prakṛti (or mūla-prakṛti), the sentient cit-prakṛti (or Śrī), and the Supreme Self (Paramātman) are all imperishable, and hence all three are ‘akṣara’. Furthermore, each stand in ascending order of imperishability to each other: prakṛti, the material source of the world, is the first and lowest ‘akṣara’; Śrī, the deity presiding over the insentient prakṛti, is the higher, second ‘akṣara’; and Paramātman is the highest, third ‘akṣara’. For his purpose, Madhva cites a verse purportedly from the Skanda Purāṇa. It reads:

Prakṛti, insentient in form, is the lower Akṣara. [Whereas] Śrī, the sentient higher prakṛti, consorted to Viṣṇu, is called higher Akṣara. Above her is Parameśvara [i.e. Viṣṇu], known as the high[est] Akṣara.²³⁷

This verse, however, is untraceable!

Sharma finally concludes: “It is fully conceded by Madhva that the akṣara that is placed at the starting point of the series of the three akṣaras in ‘akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ’ is different from the akṣara that stands at the summit of that series.”²³⁸

²³⁶ B.N.K. Sharma, *The Brahmasūtras and their Principal Commentaries: A Critical Exposition*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), I, p. 183.

²³⁷ Cited in *Sūtraprasthānam in Sarvamūlagranthāḥ*, p. 31; *Aṇubhāṣya of Śrī Madhvācārya with the Commentary Tattvaparakāśikā of Śrī Chalāri Śeṣācārya*, ed. by R.G. Malagi (Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1985), p. 29; and *Shatprasna-Atharvana-Mandukya-Upanishads*, p. 68.

²³⁸ Sharma, *The Brahmasūtras and their Principal Commentaries*, I, p. 184.

That is, there is an inconsistent interpretation of ‘akṣara’ within this passage of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad.

7.1.1.4) Svābhāvikabhedābheda

Like Rāmānuja, Nimbārka did not comment directly on the Upaniṣads. Moreover, his commentary on the Brahmasūtras, called the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, is extremely brief to the point of being aphoristic in itself, prompting his adherents to more correctly refer to it as a ‘vṛtti’ or ‘vākyārtha’²³⁹ (explanation) rather than a ‘bhāṣya’ (commentary). Indeed, his ‘explanation’ of BS 1.2.22-24 amounts to little more than a sentence for each of the three aphorisms.²⁴⁰ Later proponents of the Svābhāvikabhedābheda School, however, have furnished extensive works upon the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, chief among which is the *Vedāntakaustubha*²⁴¹ of Śrīnivāsa²⁴². To this day, it remains one of the principal expository texts of the School.

Satyānanda observes that “much of [t]his bhāṣya appears to be a summary of the bhāṣya of Śaṅkara wherever there is no doctrinal conflict between Nimbārka and

²³⁹ The colophon appended to each of the *pādas* reads: “*Iti śrīmad-bhagavan-nimbārka-viracite śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-vākyārthe vedānta-pārijāta-saurabhe...*”

²⁴⁰ Satyānanda, *Nimbārka*, p. 173.

²⁴¹ Bose explains that Śrīnivāsa’s *Vedāntakaustubha* is not technically a ‘commentary’ on Nimbārka’s *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha*, but an independent commentary on the Brahmasūtras which “elucidates admirably the points of Nimbārka by means of suitable arguments and quotations.” See: *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha of Nimbārka and Vedāntakaustubha of Śrīnivāsa: Commentaries on the Brahmasūtras*, trans. and ann. by Roma Bose, 3 vols (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1940-1943), I, p. 11. Also, its colophon reads: “*Śrīnivāsācāryyena viracite śārīraka-mīmāṃsā-bhāṣye vedānta-kaustubhe...*”

²⁴² Satyānanda, who claims Nimbārka predates Śaṅkara, places Śrīnivāsa after Śaṅkara but before Rāmānuja, i.e. between the 9th and 11th centuries; *Nimbārka*, pp. 119-48. Dasgupta finds this dating “hardly credible”; *A History of Indian Philosophy*, III, p. 399.

Śaṅkara.”²⁴³ Accordingly, then, Śrīnivāsa first treats the ‘akṣara’ of MuU 1.1.6 as an adjectival noun representing Paramātman, the highest self.²⁴⁴

But then at MuU 2.1.2, breaking from Śaṅkara, he offers three options. ‘Akṣara’, Śrīnivāsa claims, can denote: 1) Paramapuruṣa’s own power (sva-śakti), 2) pradhāna (i.e. prakṛti), or 3) Puruṣa, the aggregate of all individual souls. Each is greater than all individual souls, all modifications, and pradhāna, respectively, yet all three are subordinate to Paramapuruṣa, the Supreme Person.²⁴⁵

It is unclear why Śrīnivāsa feels compelled to offer so many options. What is clear, however, is that there seems to be some interpretative inconsistency. Śrīnivāsa admits: “[‘Akṣara’] mentioned the second time... does not refer to Paramātman as it did earlier.”²⁴⁶

7.1.1.5) Śuddhādvaita

Some eighty-four works are traditionally attributed to Vallabha, many of which are extremely short devotional tracts. One of his most important and theological works is his laconic commentary on the Brahmasūtras, the *Aṇubhāṣya*.²⁴⁷ This

²⁴³ Satyānanda, *Nimbārka*, p. 147.

²⁴⁴ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha* in *Brahmasūtranimbārkabhāṣyam*, 4 vols (New Delhi: Chawkhamba, 2000), I, p. 163.

²⁴⁵ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha*, pp. 164-65.

²⁴⁶ Śrīnivāsācārya, *Vedāntakaustubha*, p. 165; based on trans. by Bose, *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha of Nimbārka and Vedāntakaustubha of Śrīnivāsa*, I, p. 129.

²⁴⁷ There is a theory among adherents of the Śuddhādvaita School that Vallabha’s *Aṇubhāṣya* (literally, ‘small commentary’) was an abridgement of his more comprehensive *Brhadbhāṣya* (‘large commentary’) which is now lost. Jethalal G. Shah, *An Introduction to Anubhāṣya* (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), pp. 12-22.

has a string of extensive commentaries attached to it, most notable of which is the *Bhāṣyaparakāśa* by Puruṣottamacaraṇa (17th-18th century), which was in turn commentated upon by Yogi Gopeśvara (18th-19th century) in his *Bhāṣyaparakāśaraśmi*. Together they provide a window into the theology of the Śuddhādvaita School.

In a slightly different vein from his predecessors, Vallabha begins with a *prima facie* view wherein the Sāṃkhya system's aggregate soul (Puruṣa) – not prakṛti – is 'akṣara', since it, too, can be the source of the world as it shares dual causality with prakṛti. Like Rāmānuja, Madhva and Nimbārka, he advances this doubt by arguing that such an interpretation allows the higher-than-'akṣara' entity mentioned at MuU 2.1.2 to relate to Brahman – thus maintaining semantic consistency.²⁴⁸

Vallabha returns, of course, to affirm that only the highest entity, Brahman, can be the subject of brahmavidyā, because only then could it satisfy the answer to Śaunaka's original question.²⁴⁹ Moreover, no one besides the highest Brahman can be ultimately responsible for the creation of the world.

²⁴⁸ *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra with the Commentary Bhāṣyaparakāśa and Super-commentary Raśmi on the Bhāṣyaparakāśa*, ed. by Mulchandra Tulsidas Teliwala, 4 vols (Delhi: Akshaya, 2005), I, pp. 554-55.

²⁴⁹ "By knowing what can all else be known?" MuU 1.1.3.

Then in line with his principal doctrine of ‘concrete singularity’ (as opposed to Śaṅkara’s ‘abstract monism’),²⁵⁰ Vallabha explains that the one Brahman can also be denoted by ‘akṣara’ at MuU 2.1.2 since here Brahman should be regarded as a slightly ‘inferior’ version of the supreme Brahman mentioned earlier.²⁵¹ ‘Both’ are still ontologically indistinct, he maintains, because any difference is purely adjunctive. But then what belies this ‘superior-inferior’ relationship (parāparabhāva) between the two-yet-one Brahman? Vallabha explains: “‘Akṣara’ is Brahman with some of its bliss latent,” whereas the original Brahman is prakāśānanda, meaning that all of its intrinsic bliss is fully manifest.²⁵² Puruṣottamacaraṇa comments that this difference is quantitative – Akṣara’s bliss is quantifiable whereas Brahman’s bliss is not²⁵³ – and that the former should be seen as a “natural state” of the latter.²⁵⁴ On this, Yogi Gopeśvara extrapolates extensively stressing further the ontological identity of the two.²⁵⁵ This way, they all argue, Brahman’s summit position remains uncompromised. Nevertheless – identical as both may be – one must use Brahman when interpreting MuU 1.1.5, 1.1.7, etc., and ‘Akṣara’ when interpreting MuU 2.1.2.

²⁵⁰ Helmuth Von Glasenapp, *Doctrines of Shri Vallabhacharya*, trans. by Ishverbhai Amin (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), pp. 41-42.

²⁵¹ This is reminiscent of Vācaspati Miśra’s interpretation where he uses Saguṇa Brahman and Nirguṇa Brahman.

²⁵² *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, pp. 557-59; see also Jethalal G. Shah, *An Introduction to Anubhāṣya* (Baroda & Delhi: Shri Vallabha, 1984), p. 74.

²⁵³ Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Bhāṣyaparakāśa* in *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, p. 563.

²⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 559.

²⁵⁵ Yogi Gopeśvara, *Rāsmi* in *Aṇubhāṣya on the Brahmasūtra*, I, pp. 559-64.

7.1.1.6) Svāminārāyaṇa

As we know, Svāminārāyaṇa himself did not write a commentary on the Upaniṣads or Brahmasūtras directly. His teachings compiled in the Vacanāmṛut, however, constitute a natural, albeit indirect, commentary on the triad. Additionally, his long, encyclical letters also contained considerable doctrinal elucidation, some of which have been compiled and published as the Vedarasa. A study of these and other sources provides us with a reading of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad according to the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta tradition.

Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64:

Puruṣottama is greater even than Akṣara who is greater than all else.

This seems to be a direct translation of the passage at MuU 2.1.2, “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ.” The statement gains meaning as an interpretation, however, when we realise from its surrounding context that ‘Akṣara’ here is being used as a proper noun – not an adjective or adjectival noun – thus implying a distinct and unique metaphysical entity.

If this is so, and – crucially – semantic consistency is to be maintained, then that would mean that this same Akṣara is also the ‘akṣara’ described in the preceding verses as “bhūtayoni [the source of all beings]” (MuU 1.1.6), and from what all things spring forth and (ultimately) returns (MuU 2.1.1). This is indeed the case. At least twice in the Vacanāmṛut Svāminārāyaṇa describes Akṣara as “the cause of all” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 & Vac. Gaḍh. II.3) and a further three times as ‘wherein all

things return at the time of dissolution’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Vac. Kār.7 & Vac. Bhūgoḷ -Khagoḷ).

Furthermore, in the first letter of the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa’s description of Akṣara matches MuU 1.1.6 virtually verbatim. It reads:

And that Akṣara is invisible, ungraspable, and intangible; it is without lineage, without eyes, without ears, without hands and without feet; it is eternal, pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle and immutable; and that Brahman is the cause for the creation of all living beings.²⁵⁶

Thereafter in the final letter of the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates:

And the creator and dissolver of the whole world... is Akṣarabrahman.²⁵⁷

But this raises an inevitable question: If Akṣara is the ‘cause of all’ and to what all return, does this not undermine the supremacy and ultimate causality of Parabrahman? Apparently not. In line with MuU 2.1.2, Svāminārāyaṇa clearly explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

Parabrahman, that is Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from Brahman, and is also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises the supremacy of Parabrahman/Puruṣottama over Brahman/Akṣara on several other occasions also. We noted a few of these in the chapter on Parabrahman. As a reminder, they are:

Just as God is the soul of ‘kṣara’ [i.e. all sentient beings and māyā], he is also the soul of Akṣarabrahman... and he supports both

²⁵⁶ *Vedarasa*, 3rd edn (Ahmedabad: Svāminārāyaṇa Akṣarapith, 1978), p. 17.

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 213.

‘kṣara’ and Akṣara by his powers while he himself is different from both ‘kṣara’ and Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is the controller of all, including Akṣara. He is the lord of all íśvaras and the cause of all causes. He reigns supreme (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

By means of his antaryāmin powers, God pervades all finite beings [ātman] and Akṣara, whereas they are the pervaded. He is independent, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are supported by God and dependent upon him. Furthermore, he is extremely powerful, whereas all finite beings and Akṣara are utterly powerless before him (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).²⁵⁸

Moreover, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that no one – not even Akṣara – can challenge Puruṣottama’s position as supreme Lord. He states:

Puruṣottama is the soul of all, yet no one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming as powerful as him (Vac. Kār.8).²⁵⁹

Thus, despite Akṣara having such an exalted status, the supremacy and ultimate causality of Puruṣottama is in no way diminished or challenged. If anything, Puruṣottama’s supremacy is raised even higher, for he is, as we have been trying to understand, ‘greater even than Akṣara, the greatest.’

It is this ontologically distinct-yet-connected relationship between Brahman and Parabrahman within Svāminārāyaṇa theology which helps in consistently interpreting the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad from beginning to end. MuU 1.1.5, for example, begins with a definition of the lower knowledge. The verse then states

²⁵⁸ See also Vac. Kār.8 & Vac. Loyā.10.

²⁵⁹ Similarly Vac. Kār.10 & Vac. Loyā.4.

And now the higher [knowledge],
which initiates an extended description that continues until MuU 1.2.11. These
verses describe both Akṣara and the higher Puruṣa, i.e. Puruṣottama. After urging
the aspirant to seek a Brahmasvarūpa Guru at MuU 1.2.12 –

To realise that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial
wood in hand, to only that Guru who is Brahman...²⁶⁰

– MuU 1.2.13 then brings the two together as pertaining to brahmavidyā:

And that learned [Guru] must teach that brahmavidyā... by which
the truth of Akṣara and Puruṣa is perfectly known.²⁶¹

That is, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, both Akṣara (Brahman) and
Puruṣottama (Parabrahman) are the subjects of brahmavidyā, the highest
knowledge, thus avoiding the need for a third knowledge-category, as Śaṅkara
had warned. (We shall return to this conceptualisation of brahmavidyā in the
next section when elaborating upon BS 1.1.1.)

This is reiterated at the end of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad with an interestingly novel
concept being introduced. Verse 3.2.1 states:

The wise and desire-free who know that highest abode Brahman –
which is resplendent with light and wherein all resides – and offer
upāsana to Puruṣa, transcend the seed of this [transmigratory life].

²⁶⁰ This verse is explained in full according to MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56 further on in this
chapter when discussing Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

²⁶¹ This passage in Sanskrit reads:

Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato brahmavidyām |

It will be noticed that an explicit term for “and”, such as ‘ca’ or ‘tathā’, is missing from the
original. However, since “akṣara” here is not an adjective or adjectival noun – but, as we have
seen, is evidently denoting the *distinct* Akṣarabrahman – the subjects of brahmavidyā
delineated in this verse are both “akṣara” and “puruṣa”. Hence, “and” becomes a natural and
inevitable part of the articulation of this verse. See MuU-SB 1.2.13, pp. 256-57.

Brahman is described here as the ‘abode’. As we have initially learned and shall discuss at greater length later, in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, Akṣarabrahman also serves as the transcendental abode of Parabrahman. Moreover, this verse corresponds to arguably the central doctrine of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta School – realising oneself as Akṣara and worshipping Puruṣottama.

Svāminārāyaṇa brings both of these points together in many discourses which closely agree with the aforementioned MuU 3.2.1. He explains:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, each encircled by the eight barriers,²⁶² appear like mere atoms in Akṣara. Such is the greatness of Akṣara, the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa. One who offers upāsanā to Puruṣottama realising oneself as this Akṣara can be said to have attained the highest level of resolute faith (Vac. Loyā.12).

This faith, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, leads to “ultimate liberation” from the cycle of births and deaths (e.g. Vac. Kār.7, Vac. Loyā.7).

And this liberation is the fruit of brahmavidyā commended and described in further detail in the subsequent, final verses of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. This neatly concludes (upasaṃhāra) the topic of brahmavidyā that was introduced (upakrama) at MuU 1.1.1.

We thus notice here in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad all six tools, or ‘clues’, of exegetical analysis coming into play: repetition, novelty, fruit, commendation, reasoning, and, primarily, consistency between the introduction and conclusion.

²⁶² The eight barriers (aṣṭavarāṇa) are: 1) pṛthvi; 2) jala; 3) tejas; 4) vāyu; 5) ākāśa; 6) mahattattva; 7) Pradhāna-Puruṣa; and 8) Prakṛti-Puruṣa.

Each of these tools is also employed by the Bhāṣyakāra in his concluding comment at the end of the Adṛśyatvādhikaraṇa (for him, these are sūtras 1.2.22-24). Earlier, as his *prima facie* viewpoint, he had offered pradhāna, the individual soul, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as possible contenders for that which is qualified by invisibility, etc. (MuU 1.1.6), i.e. ‘akṣara’. He quickly rejects the first two options, arguing that the qualities of omniscience, etc. and world-causality mentioned later could not possibly apply to the insentient pradhāna or the limited soul. After explaining over the three sūtras how it can apply to Akṣarabrahman, he finally asks: But why can ‘akṣara’ not be denotive of Parabrahman? Surely all the qualities apply to him, as he is invisible, etc., omniscient, and also the cause of the world. Furthermore, ‘akṣara’ can simply be an adjective to Parabrahman, for he is, of course, imperishable and immutable. So why the need to introduce another entity distinct from Parabrahman?

The Bhāṣyakāra firstly acknowledges that this is natural question for those who “are unaware of the entity of Akṣarabrahman” and therefore “have an impoverished understanding of the actual denotation of revealed words.” He then goes on to demonstrate by employing the six hermeneutical tools that it is necessary and proper to accept Akṣarabrahman as the subject of MuU 1.1.6 because only then will the integrity of the entire Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad text be possible, especially with the explicit reference at MuU 2.1.2 to the higher-than-

highest Puruṣa transcending this Akṣara; the superiority [paratva] of the former over the latter itself confirming the distinction between the two.²⁶³

Thus, as the other schools have endeavoured to retain semantic consistency while interpreting “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ” and other Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad passages – all the while, within the framework of their doctrinal matrix – for the Svāminārāyaṇa School, if a semantically consistent interpretation throughout the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad has been possible it is because of its belief that Akṣarabrahman is a unique metaphysical entity ontologically distinct from Parabrahman.

7.1.2) Bhagavad-Gītā 8.21: tad dhāma paramaṃ mama

The Bhagavad-Gītā is in many ways an Upaniṣad itself²⁶⁴ – many even refer to it as the ‘Gitopaniṣad’ – least not because of its composition as a dialogic teaching to the inquisitive Arjuna (the śiṣya) from the wise master (or ‘guru’), Kṛṣṇa. This, along with its theme of brahmavidyā,²⁶⁵ makes the Bhagavad-Gītā especially fitting to consider alongside the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Moreover, with the subject of our inquiry being Akṣarabrahman, what better passage to select for our

²⁶³ BS-SB 1.2.24, pp. 78-79. See also MuU-SB 2.1.2, pp. 260-61.

²⁶⁴ The colophon at the end of each chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā (Iti śrīmad-bhagavad-gītāsūpaniṣatsu...) unequivocally states that the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (śrī-kṛṣṇārjuna-saṃvāde) is indeed an upaniṣad. Hence also the feminine-inflected proper noun ‘Gītā’ (rather than the masculine ‘Gītaḥ’ or neuter ‘Gītam’), since it follows ‘upaniṣad’, a feminine noun.

²⁶⁵ The colophon continues as “brahmavidyām yogaśāstre”, further revealing the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as concerned with brahmavidyā.

examination than from the Bhagavad-Gītā's eighth chapter, entitled 'Akṣarabrahmayoga'.

The chapter begins with a string of seven successive questions posed by Arjuna which have arisen from the terminology and teachings offered by Kṛṣṇa at the end of the previous chapter [BG 7.29-30]. Arjuna's questions are: 1) What is 'Brahman'? 2) What is 'adhyātman'? 3) What is 'karma'? 4) What is 'adhibhūta'? 5) What is 'adhidaiva'? 6) What is 'adhiyajña' and how does it reside in the body? and 7) How can Kṛṣṇa be known by the self-controlled at the time of death? [BG 8.1-2]. Our focus is Kṛṣṇa's answer to the first question and how the narration of 'Brahman' and 'akṣara' throughout the chapter is interpreted by the various schools.

The answer begins with a brief reply at BG 8.3. The relevant portion of the verse reads in Sanskrit:

Akṣaram brahma paramam....

With 'parama' the superlative meaning 'highest' or 'greatest', we are again left with a number of options for interpreting 'akṣara' depending on its connection with 'Brahman'. The term also appears in several other verses in the chapter. In particular, we are interested in how it is interpreted at BG 8.21. There, 'akṣara' is aligned with avyakta (literally 'unmanifest'), paramā gati (the highest goal or end), and also

Yaṁ prāpya na nivartante tad dhāma paramam mama,

which literally means, ‘It is my highest dhāma – (generally meaning ‘abode’) – from which, having attained, none revert.’ Similar mentions can also be found in later chapters, to which we shall also briefly refer.

A look now to the various schools and their interpretations.

7.1.2.1) Kevalādvaita

From the very outset at BG 8.3, we find the ācāryas differing considerably with each other. Śaṅkara opens his commentary here by unequivocally stating that ‘Brahman’ must mean ‘para ātmā’ (the higher self), for which both ‘paramam’ and ‘akṣaram’ are adjectives stressing its supremacy and non-perishability, respectively.²⁶⁶

Ānandagiri in his *Śāṅkarabhāṣyavyākhyā*, a gloss upon Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā, extrapolates upon the ācārya’s use of other Upaniṣadic references and emphasises that only Paramātmā can be both the highest and imperishable.²⁶⁷

Then at 8.21, Śaṅkara explains that ‘akṣara’ here refers to the highest abode of Viṣṇu – not to ‘para ātmā’. He specifies it as a place (sthāna) and the highest goal

²⁶⁶ Śaṅkara, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, trans. by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry (Madras: Samata, 1998), p. 223.

²⁶⁷ Ānandagiri, *Śāṅkarabhāṣyavyākhyā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, ed. by Gajanana Shambhu Sadhale, 3 vols (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 1992), II, pp. 69-70.

(parama pada), which relates to the ‘highest goal’ (paramā gati) mentioned explicitly at 8.13 and implicitly at 8.11. This latter verse actually reads:

Yad akṣaram vedavido vadanti... tat te padaṃ saṅgrahaṇa
pravakṣye |

For Śaṅkara, this translates as:

That Imperishable Goal which the knowers of Veda declare... that
Goal will I declare to thee with brevity.²⁶⁸

Interestingly, Śaṅkara has interpreted ‘akṣara’ here as an adjective, meaning imperishable, qualifying ‘pada’, which he takes to mean ‘goal’. This latter term appears in relation to ‘abode’ in the fifteenth chapter as well. Both BG 15.4 and 15.5 mention ‘pada’ which Śaṅkara continues to interpret as ‘goal’. Thereafter at 15.6, we see a recurrence of the second half of verse 8.21 cited above. Śaṅkara interprets it as he did earlier, as the “highest abode of Viṣṇu”²⁶⁹ from where there is no returning to a transmigratory existence.

Finally, in the last verse of chapter eight, another reference is made to ‘para sthāna’, the highest place a desire-free yogi is said to attain. Here, Śaṅkara begins interpreting this ‘highest place’ as “the Supreme Primeval Abode” of the Lord,²⁷⁰ but then ends by calling this final attainment “Brahman, the cause.”²⁷¹

Madhusūdana Sarasvati (15th-16th century), a later exponent of the

²⁶⁸ BG 8.11, trans. by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, p. 227.

²⁶⁹ *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, pp. 400-02.

²⁷⁰ BG 8.28, trans. by Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, p. 237.

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

Kevalādvaita School, picks up on this and explains that Śaṅkara intends ‘sthāna’ to mean not ‘place’ (i.e. relating to an abode of some sort) but to ‘state’. He thus asserts that the true meaning of this verse, indeed the whole chapter, is that the yogi “reaches the State of the Lord, which is supreme, all-surpassing... and primordial, the source of all. That is to say, he realises Brahman Itself, the Cause of all.”²⁷²

7.1.2.2) Viśiṣṭādvaita

Rāmānuja begins on a very different note. He writes in his commentary of BG 8.3:

That which is the Supreme Imperishable (Akṣara) has been named ‘Brahman’. The Akṣara is that which cannot be destroyed and forms the totality of all individual selves.²⁷³

But then immediately he qualifies ‘akṣaram’ with ‘paramam’ offering the revised interpretation of “all selves separated from prakṛti”, i.e. liberated souls, or muktātmanas.²⁷⁴

At 8.11, he offers yet more novel interpretations for both ‘pada’ and ‘akṣara’. The former he defines as “that by which [the goal] is reached”, implying the mind or spirit, because the latter, he asserts, is “[the Lord’s] imperishable self” – the goal that all are endeavouring to reach.²⁷⁵ Vedānta Deśika in his *Tātparyacandrikā*, a

²⁷² Madhusudana Sarasvati, *Bhagavad-Gita with the Annotation Gūḍhārtha Dīpikā*, trans. by Swami Gambhirānanda (Delhi: Advaita Ashrama, 1998), p. 568.

²⁷³ Rāmānuja, *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya with Text and English Translation*, trans. by Svāmī Ādidevānanda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001), p. 271.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 278.

gloss on Rāmānuja’s *Gītābhāṣya*, defends this by clarifying that ‘pada’ relates to upāsānā, and ‘akṣara’ means Paramātman.²⁷⁶ That is, one can reach Paramātman by upāsānā.

Now, at 8.21, when ‘akṣara’ appears again in reference to ‘dhāma’ and the highest goal, Rāmānuja offers two – again, novel – interpretations. First, he claims ‘dhāma’ refers to the “pristine nature of the freed self, free from contact with inanimate matter.” This is “a state”, he stresses – not a place – “of non-return to saṃsāra [the incessant cycle of births and deaths].”²⁷⁷ Alternatively, “the term ‘dhāma’ may signify ‘luminosity’. And luminosity connotes knowledge.”²⁷⁸ For some reason, Rāmānuja is avoiding the more common meaning of the term ‘dhāma’ as ‘abode’ despite having lavishly described its transcendent glory in many of his other devotional works.²⁷⁹ Even more surprising is it then, that in the final verse, which does not explicitly use this term, Rāmānuja accepts that the prefect yogi “reaches the supreme, primal abode.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Vedānta Deśika, *Tātparyacandrikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 91.

²⁷⁷ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, p. 286.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

²⁷⁹ See, for example, Rāmānuja’s *Vaikunṭhagadya* in *The Gadyatraya of Rāmānuja*, trans. by M.R. Rajagopala Ayyangar (Madras: M.R. Rajagopala Ayyangar, n.d.).

²⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 291.

7.1.2.3) Dvaita

Madhva's commentary on chapter eight of the Bhagavad-Gītā is rather sparse. Surprisingly, even at 8.3, he offers no real comment on Brahman or 'akṣara', but simply states,

The highest 'akṣara' is Brahman,²⁸¹

without elaborating on what precisely is meant by 'akṣara'. He does, however, in the next immediate mention of 'akṣara' at 8.11, enter into a brief debate about 'pada'. He insists that this term should be identified with 'abode', and not 'word', another valid synonym for 'akṣara'. He cites grammatical verb tables and other Vedic texts to support his case. This, as Jayatīrtha explains, is for two reasons: 1) to dispel the misconception that meditation on the sacred word (or syllable) 'Aum' only leads to gradual liberation and not to immediate post-mortem liberation; and 2) to make liberation more accessible because not all may be capable of uttering 'Aum' or the name of Viṣṇu at the time of death.²⁸²

After laying such stress on the abode of God, it is rather surprising that Madhva interprets 'dhāma' – normally translated as 'abode' – at BG 8.21 to mean 'light'. In fact, he diverts the attention of the whole verse away from 'the abode of Viṣṇu' to 'Viṣṇu' himself. This has prompted Sharma to complain that "Madhva's gloss [on chapter eight] seems a bit out of joint at places."²⁸³ But surely the Lord, Madhva

²⁸¹ Madhva, *Mādhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 71.

²⁸² Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, vol. II, p. 91; Arvind Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), pp. 180-81.

²⁸³ Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 229.

and Jayatirtha both maintain, is the ‘unmanifest’, the highest goal, and from whom, having reached, there is no return.²⁸⁴

Madhva reiterates this at BG 15.6 where the same statement recurs, but avoids any comment on terms such as ‘pada’ or ‘sthāna’ – to mean ‘place’ or ‘location’ – at BG 8.28, 15.4 and 15.5.

7.1.2.4) Svābhāvikaḥedābheda

Nimbārka, we are told, did not write a commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā. The only extant work we have from the Svābhāvikaḥedābheda School on the Bhagavad-Gītā is the *Tattvapraśāśikā* by Keśava Kāśmīrī Bhaṭṭa. It begins by following Rāmānuja’s interpretation almost identically. At BG 8.3, for example, ‘akṣara’ is either “the totality of all individual selves” or “all selves separated from prakṛti.”²⁸⁵ Even Bhaṭṭa’s definition of ‘pada’ at 8.11 matches Rāmānuja’s – “that by which one can reach”, i.e. not the goal but the way.²⁸⁶

For BG 8.21, however, we find a very different approach. Bhaṭṭa interprets ‘tad dhāma paramaṃ mama’ as “[the Lord’s] place of residence”, but he identifies this with the “pure soul devoid of prakṛti [i.e. māyā]”. One could ask: but does not the Lord reside in all souls? In anticipation of this, he answers, yes, God does reside

²⁸⁴ Madhva, *Mādhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatirtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, vol. II, p. 109.

²⁸⁵ Keśava Kāśmīrī Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvapraśāśikā* in *Shrimad-Bhagavad-Geeta Containing Eight Commentaries*, ed. by Jeevarama Lallurama (Mumbai: Gujarat Printing Press, 1912), p. 617.

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 637.

in all souls²⁸⁷ – even those still enmeshed in prakṛti – but his “best and eternal home” is the pure soul. Hence, the qualifier ‘paramaṃ’.²⁸⁸

7.1.2.5) Śuddhādvaita

Vallabha, as we learnt earlier, defines ‘Akṣara’ as non-different from Brahman but inferior to it because the bliss of each is, respectively, partially latent and fully manifest. He finds an opportunity to affirm this at BG 8.3. He writes in his *Tattvadīpikā* commentary:

Brahman, imperishable and unmanifest, with its unquantifiable bliss... who is that Paramātmā, the Lord Puruṣottama, with his bliss fully manifest... That Brahman is non-distinct from the imperishable Akṣara, with its quantifiable bliss.²⁸⁹

At 8.21, however, he defines ‘Akṣara’ as the name given to the Lord’s “base”, Vaikuṇṭhabhuvana,²⁹⁰ which Puruṣottamacaraṇa clarifies as the “home of God”.²⁹¹ This, they both assert, is the highest goal and a place where the souls are no longer subject to reincarnation.

Then again at BG 8.11, Vallabha offers a variation on this. He identifies ‘pada’ as not a place, but the holy feet of the Lord – ‘feet’ being another synonym for

²⁸⁷ For example: “I reside in the hearts of all” (BG 15.15).

²⁸⁸ Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvapraśāṅgikā*, pp. 655-56.

²⁸⁹ Vallabha, *Tattvadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 72.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁹¹ Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Amṛtataraṅgiṇī* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, II, p. 110.

‘pada’.²⁹² When the term appears elsewhere – at BG 15.4 and 15.5, for example – he refers again to the abode of God as he does at BG 8.28 and 15.6.

7.1.2.6) Svāminārāyaṇa

For the Svāminārāyaṇa School, Akṣara and Brahman are synonymous.²⁹³ In what could be called a commentary on BG 8.3, a letter from the Vedarasa reads:

Now to expound upon the term ‘Brahman’. That Brahman is entwined in everything... and is called Akṣarabrahman.²⁹⁴

Earlier in the same letter, another statement links this with BG 8.21.

Svāminārāyaṇa writes:

And that abode [dhāma] in the form of Akṣara is higher than the high [parāt-par].²⁹⁵

In the Vacanāmṛt, too, Svāminārāyaṇa makes several references to Akṣara as the abode of Puruṣottama. For example:

That Akṣara is the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

That Akṣarabrahman is the abode wherein God resides (Vac. Pan.1).

That same Akṣarabrahman serves as the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa (Vac. Amd.6).

²⁹² Vallabha, *Tattvadīpikā*, p. 91.

²⁹³ The synonymy of ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’ is confirmed by BG 8.3 itself, and can also be found in the Upaniṣads, e.g. at MuU 2.2.2, and KaU 2.16 and 3.2.

²⁹⁴ Vedarasa, p. 152.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 146.

On many other occasions, he simply refers to this abode as ‘Akṣaradhāma’ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Vac. Gaḍh. I.71) or ‘Brahmadhāma’ (Vac. Amd.6).

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes this abode in line with other verses in the Bhagavad-Gītā. It is the ultimate goal [8.13, 8.21],²⁹⁶ the highest abode [8.21, 8.28, 15.6],²⁹⁷ exceedingly luminous [15.6],²⁹⁸ and from where there is no return to the cycle of births and deaths [8.21, 15.6].²⁹⁹ Moreover, by stressing this abode as a place – not a ‘state’ or as ‘light’ or ‘knowledge’³⁰⁰ – the terms ‘pada’ [8.11, 15.4, 15.5] and ‘sthāna’ [8.28] can all be interpreted consistently.

We shall, of course, take up a more detailed exposition of this abode when discussing the four forms of Akṣarabrahman. Here, it is important to note that establishing Akṣarabrahman as Parabrahman’s abode also confirms the two are distinct entities and that the latter, being the ‘dweller’ or ‘Lord’ of the divine realm, is superior to the former.

In his extensive comment on this opening phrase of BG 8.3, the Bhāṣyakāra firstly explains why etymologically ‘Akṣara’ is a fitting name or defining term for Brahman, before going on to argue why it could not possible apply to any other

²⁹⁶ Vac. Gaḍh. I.21.

²⁹⁷ Vac. Gaḍh. III.21 and Amd.7 (twice).

²⁹⁸ Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Loyā.14, Gaḍh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.50, Vad.9, Vad.12, Gaḍh. III.30, Gaḍh. III.31, Gaḍh. III.32 and Gaḍh. III.33.

²⁹⁹ Vac. Sār.14.

³⁰⁰ See also Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmṛta Rahasya*, III, pp. 94-101.

entity. Since he draws heavily upon BG 15.16-18, which forms the third passage of our inquiry, we shall consider those arguments there in the immediately following section.

What is worth mentioning here is the interesting observation the Bhāṣyakāra makes at the very end of the eighth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. He notes that the text can in fact be conceived as being of two distinguishable parts, with the first eight chapters speaking predominantly of Brahman, and the latter ten chapters focussing predominantly on Parabrahman. To substantiate his point, he provides a summary with sample verses of each of the first eight chapters and alludes to what is to come in the remainder. He then concludes with the statement: “Thus, the entire Gītā is imbued with [the siddhānta of] Brahman and Parabrahman.”³⁰¹

7.1.3) Bhagavad-Gītā 15.16-18: Kṣara, Akṣara & Uttama Puruṣa

From ‘Akṣarabrahmayoga’ we move on to ‘Puruṣottamayoga’, the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā. A relatively short chapter – comprising only twenty verses – it is nonetheless “exegetically one of the more intricate”³⁰² because it refers so explicitly not only to the highest person, Puruṣottama (i.e. Parabrahman), from which the chapter receives its title, but also to that person’s juxtaposition with all other beings.

³⁰¹ BG-SB 8.28, pp. 198-99.

³⁰² Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 195.

Three verses lie at the heart of the chapter – 15.16, 15.17 and 15.18 – and form the focus of this, the last section of our investigation. In all, the three verses discuss three types of beings or spirits: ‘kṣara’, ‘akṣara’, and ‘uttama Puruṣa’. Except for these and one more technical term, the verses are in fact rather straightforward to read. Leaving the key terms un-translated, the verses state the following:

- there are two types of puruṣas (beings or spirits) in this world – ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’
- all beings are ‘kṣara’
- ‘akṣara’ is said to be ‘kūṭastha’
- the highest Puruṣa is ‘different’ [from the above two]. He:
 - is God, known also as Paramātman and Puruṣottama
 - is immutable
 - supports the whole world having entered it
 - is the highest; higher than both ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’

The simple structure of these consecutive verses allows us to survey their interpretations by the various schools collectively. We can tabulate the identification of each of the terms by each of the ācāryas, and thereafter consider any relevant arguments before examining the Svāminārāyaṇa School’s reading of the passage. Firstly, then, the overview.

7.1.3.1) All Schools

The following table provides a distillation of the ācāryas' commentaries on BG 15.16-18. It highlights how each of the key terms in these three verses is interpreted.

	‘kṣara’	‘akṣara’	‘kūṭastha’	‘uttama Puruṣa’
Kevalādvaita ³⁰³	all illusory forms in evanescent saṃsāra	māyā-śakti (illusion-power of the Lord), i.e. the seed of saṃsāra	immutable or illusionary	Supreme Self
Viśiṣṭādvaita ³⁰⁴	all individual selves bound by insentient matter	totality of all released selves	immutable	Supreme Person
Dvaita ³⁰⁵	all individual selves	sentient prakṛti	[no comment]	Supreme Self
Svābhāvīkabhedābheda ³⁰⁶	all embodied individual souls	all eternal souls	immutable/imperishable	Supreme Self
Śuddhādvaita ³⁰⁷	all individual selves bound by insentient matter	totality of all released selves at the feet of God	immutable	Supreme Person
Svāminārāyaṇa ³⁰⁸	all jīvas & īśvaras	Akṣara	immutable	Puruṣottama

³⁰³ *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Adi Sankaracharya*, pp. 409-11.

³⁰⁴ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, pp. 498-501. See also: John Braisted Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 100-01.

³⁰⁵ Madhva, *Madhvagītābhāṣya* and Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 186.

³⁰⁶ Bhaṭṭa, *Tattvapraśāṅgikā*, pp. 1075-76, 1078 & 1080.

³⁰⁷ Vallabha, *Tattvadīpikā* and Puruṣottamacaraṇa, *Amṛtataraṅgiṇī* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, pp. 187-88 & p. 190.

³⁰⁸ Sources to follow.

The percipient format of the table reveals some interesting comparisons. Firstly, it is clear that all schools agree that the ‘uttama Puruṣa’ is the highest self/person/being. However, almost all differ in their interpretation of what exactly this supreme position transcends, i.e. what are ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’?

‘Akṣara’ is described at BG 15.16 as being ‘kūṭastha’, which all agree means immutable. Śaṅkara, however, to substantiate his concept of vivarta (illusory appearances), offers as an alternative a number of synonymous terms all relating to ‘illusion’. This allows him to identify ‘akṣara’ with the power of ‘God’ that creates the illusory, evanescent world – the unchanging seed of change. The changing forms themselves are therefore ‘kṣara’. “Śaṅkara’s position”, Sharma remarks, “is cogent, but only... after [his philosophy] has been superimposed on the Gita.”³⁰⁹

One issue that has proven a little problematic for some of the other exegetes is the singularity of the term ‘akṣara’ in BG 15.16. Rāmānuja, for example, who wants to identify it with all individual souls released from insentient matter (acit), is faced with a question. How to identify multiple souls with a singular term? His solution is to group them into a “generic class” which he refers to as the “totality of all released souls”.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, p. 78.

³¹⁰ *Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, p. 499.

Madhva, as we see, raises the interpretation onto a cosmological level. He takes prakṛti, the primary matter of the world, as ‘akṣara’. Jayatīrtha adds that this prakṛti is cetanā, i.e. sentient,³¹¹ which in the Dvaita School refers to Śrī or Lakṣmī. On this point, Veṅkaṭanātha of the Kevalādvaita School directs a number of interrogative questions. Is Lakṣmī, he asks Madhva, non-distinct from Paramātmā (i.e. Viṣṇu) or distinct from him? If the former, then how can he be said to be “higher than ‘akṣara’” [15.18] if she is ‘akṣara’ and both are ontologically identical? If the latter, then since you believe in only two sentient metaphysical entities – jīva and Paramātmā – that would mean that Lakṣmī is another individual soul, which you have already described as ‘kṣara’. So then why the distinction between ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’? Furthermore, ‘kṣara’ according to you represents “all individual souls”, so how can Lakṣmī escape this all-inclusive classification and become ‘akṣara’?³¹² Veṅkaṭanātha’s questions do indeed seem valid because the Dvaita School has no metaphysical entity that stands higher than the jīvas and yet lower than Puruṣottama.

Similar questions can also be posed to the Śuddhādvaita School. Vallabha, perhaps realising this, makes no mention here of the ‘Akṣara’ he described earlier at BG 8.3 as the non-different form of Brahman with its partially latent bliss.

³¹¹ Jayatīrtha, *Prameyadīpikā* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 186.

³¹² Veṅkaṭanātha, *Brahmānandagīryākhyāna* in *The Bhagavad-Gītā with Eleven Commentaries*, III, p. 187.

7.1.3.2) The Svāminārāyaṇa School

Akṣara in the Svāminārāyaṇa School, as we saw with MuU 2.1.2, transcends all – jīva, īśvara and māyā – except Puruṣottama. This metaphysical juxtaposition is stated in the Vacanāmṛta in terms that agree closely with BG 15.18. For example:

And what is God like? He transcends both 'kṣara' and Akṣara...
(Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

Nevertheless, when that Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who transcends both 'kṣara' and Akṣara, assumes a human form.... He supports both 'kṣara' and Akṣara by his powers while he himself is different from both 'kṣara' and Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.72).

Similar statements affirming Puruṣottama's place above Akṣara, as "the highest", abound (Vac. Gaḍh. I.33, Gaḍh. I.47, Gaḍh. I.64, Gaḍh. I.72, Gaḍh. I.73, Kār.8, Loyā.7, Loyā.10, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. III.38, Amd.6). Many refer to him specifically as "Akṣarātīta", i.e. transcending Akṣara (Vac. Gaḍh. I.41, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.66, Gaḍh. I.78, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.18, Gaḍh. II.31), as we saw in detail in the chapter on Parabrahman.

Combining this with the following statement clarifies what we are to understand as 'kṣara'.

That form of Puruṣottama – which transcends jīvas, īśvaras and Akṣara – should be understood as his transcendental form (Vac. Sār.5).

By simple elimination, 'kṣara' thus represents all jīvas (individual souls) and īśvaras (empowered super-souls).³¹³

Moving on to Akṣara, Svāminārāyaṇa calls it 'kūṭastha' just as in BG 15.16. He writes:

That Akṣara is the seer of all, the witness of all, and worthy of being known by all of the Vedas.... It is kūṭastha and devoid of any insentience.³¹⁴

Elsewhere in the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa brings together the term 'kūṭastha' and Akṣara's immutability more specifically:

Now I expound upon the nature of Akṣara in another way. The being known as Akṣara is kūṭastha.... That Akṣara is immutable and does not falter from or change its extraordinary form by way of this immutability. Therefore, that Akṣara is unfaltering and constant. That Akṣara is eternal.³¹⁵

Svāminārāyaṇa also emphasises the singularity of Akṣara, which corresponds with the use of 'akṣara' in singular form at BG 15.16. He states:

There are many who, having realised Akṣara to be their ātman, have attained qualities similar to that of Akṣara. That Akṣara, however, is one.³¹⁶

³¹³ Etymologically, 'kṣara' means 'perishable'. However, jīvas and īśvaras are eternal entities and so their classification as 'kṣara' relates simply to their physical embodiments being subject to birth, change and death. This is how all ācāryas have explained this classification. See also BS-SB 1.1.2, p. 15.

³¹⁴ Vedarasa, p. 213.

³¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 171; similarly also pp. 144, 151 & 152.

³¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 213-14. See also *ibid.*, pp. 144, 146 & Vac. Loyā.17.

And finally, as in BG 15.17 and 15.18, Puruṣottama is described as ‘different’ (i.e. distinct) from and higher than the others. In the last portion of his last letter in the Vedarasa, Svāminārāyaṇa writes:

Puruṣottama is distinct from Akṣara, is the highest person [‘uttama Puruṣa’], and is [known as] Paramātmān, Parabrahman, and Parameśvara.³¹⁷

This distinction is of paramount importance to the unchallenged superiority of Puruṣottama. No one or nothing, Svāminārāyaṇa asserts, can ever be on par with Puruṣottama – not even Akṣara.

No one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming as powerful as Puruṣottama (Vac. Kār.8).

God is immensely powerful. No one up to and including Akṣara is capable of becoming like him. This is an established principle (Vac. Loyā.4).³¹⁸

The Bhāṣyakāra’s extensive comment on BG 15.16 actually comes at BG 8.3 when he cites the former in support of his identification of ‘akṣara’ in “Akṣaram brahma paramam” with the entity Akṣarabrahman. There he suggests a number of alternative readings for ‘kṣara’ and ‘akṣara’. After presenting their case as convincingly as possible, he rejects all of them one after the other using the qualifier ‘kūṭastha’ – which he explains as involving eternal and complete immutability – to assert that it cannot tenably apply to individual souls, liberated souls, or any other sentient form except Akṣarabrahman.

³¹⁷ Vedarasa, p. 214.

³¹⁸ Similarly Vac. Kār.10.

But why cannot it not also apply to Parabrahman, for surely he is also entirely and eternally immutable? The Bhāṣyakāra argues simply that the Bhagavad-Gītā itself explicitly mentions at 15.17 and 15.18 that Puruṣottama is “different [anya]” from and “higher [uttama]” than or “transcending [atīta]” both kṣara and Akṣara, and also calls the latter Puruṣottama’s “highest abode” at 15.6 and 8.21. And since Parabrahman is explicitly distinguished from Akṣara at 15.17 and 15.18, neither can Parabrahman be accepted at 8.3; that is, ‘akṣara’ is not merely an adjective qualifying the imperishable (Para)Brahman. Thus, the Bhāṣyakāra concludes, since ‘Akṣara’ at 15.16 applies to Akṣarabrahman, it must also apply to Akṣarabrahman at 8.3 where the same topic is being discussed, thereby preserving coherency and continuity throughout the Bhagavad-Gītā text.

7.1.4) Summary & Conclusion

Our survey of the various schools and their interpretations of selected passages from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā can now culminate in a final table. This will allow us to compare how the term ‘akṣara’ has been interpreted in each of these passages and thereby check for semantic consistency.

	MuU 1.1.7	MuU 2.1.2	BG 8.3	BG 8.21	BG 15.16/18
Kevalādvaita	Parameśvara	unmanifest form of prakṛti	para atma	imperishable [state of Brahman-realisation]	māyā-śakti, i.e. the seed of saṃsāra
Viśiṣṭādvaita	Paramapuruṣa	prakṛti in its subtle, elementary form	totality of all individual selves/ all selves separated from prakṛti	imperishable [Lord's self]	totality of all released selves
Dvaita	Brahman	Śrī	Brahman	imperishable [Lord's self]	sentient prakṛti
Svābhāvika-bhedābheda	Paramātmān	1) Paramapuruṣa's own power, 2) prakṛti, or 3) Puruṣa	totality of all individual selves/ all selves separated from prakṛti	imperishable [pure soul devoid of prakṛti]	all eternal souls
Śuddhādvaita	Brahman	Akṣara (inferior Brahman)	Akṣara (inferior Brahman)	imperishable [home of God]	totality of all released selves at the feet of God
Svāminārāyaṇa	Akṣara	Akṣara	Akṣara	Akṣara [abode of Puruṣottama]	Akṣara

Our aim in this inquiry, to reiterate, was never to refute or criticise the doctrines and/or interpretations of the various schools of Vedānta, but more positively, to offer a Svāminārāyaṇa reading of selected Vedāntic texts in reference to one the school's central doctrines. And yet it was necessary to study the interpretations offered by the other schools, and how they reached them, in order to contextualise the interpretation within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. Any comparison of the interpretations from the other schools was, hence, to firstly, challenge, and secondly, clarify the Svāminārāyaṇa School's own interpretation. Significantly, this was done within the framework of the classical Vedānta tradition as a whole, using its own tools and methods, and remaining faithful to its longstanding and collectively accepted premises and conventions.

Our inquiry has revealed many observations along the way. Firstly, we learned that classical Vedāntin theologians are relatively more alert to hermeneutical analysis, especially interpretative consistency, than their modern counterparts. Through the rich commentarial tradition of Vedānta, we were also able to discover how the proponents of each school have endeavoured to interpret the passages in concordance with their own doctrinal matrix. In doing so, we noticed, the ācāryas and later commentators have at times needed to forfeit semantic consistency to maintain their doctrinal consistency.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa School, we learned that these three passages provide canonical evidence for the ontological distinction between Brahman and

Parabrahman (or Akṣara and Puruṣottama).³¹⁹ In examining and understanding this distinction, we have also found much to answer many of the questions with which we began this chapter. To return to the questions briefly (in a slightly modified order to aid logical flow), we can now summarise:

- d) There is only one ‘highest reality’ in the Svāminārāyaṇa School, not two.
- a/b) This is known as ‘Parabrahman’ (or Puruṣottama), who is in some ways similar to the Brahman of the theistic schools.
- a/c) The ‘Brahman’ (or Akṣara) of the Svāminārāyaṇa School is distinct from and subordinate to ‘Parabrahman’.
- c/d) ‘Brahman’ has many roles and functions. One of its most important is to serve as the transcendental abode of Parabrahman.

Members and proponents of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition will feel that theological inquiries such as these prove the tradition as being both distinctive from other Vedāntic schools yet still authentic within the Vedānta system as a whole. For us, it has provided a useful insight into the deep exegetical discussions that can ensue in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology when difficult questions are raised and answered from within the tradition, often in defence of

³¹⁹ A similar survey of other Upaniṣadic and Gītā statements – such as “So’śnute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaścitā” (TU 2.1.1), “Anāndi mat-param brahma” (BG 13.12), “Brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhā’ham” (BG 14.27), etc. – have been found to lead to the same conclusion. Constraints of space and concerns about excessive replication of arguments have not made it possible or necessary even to include everything exhaustively. For a full discussion of this and other themes, see the complete Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentaries on the Prasthānatrayī.

the tradition itself, especially when engaged in a classical debate with other theological systems.

7.2) Essentiality and Centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

Having established Akṣarabrahman as an ontologically distinct metaphysical entity apart from and subordinate to Parabrahman, we can now move on to further understanding its role within Svāminārāyaṇa theology.

If we can briefly return to our formulation of jñāna from Vac. Loyā.7 that guided our exposition of Parabrahman, it will be recalled that one of the key aspects of correct theological knowledge which leads to ultimate liberation is that Parabrahman transcends Akṣarabrahman. We noted when discussing Parabrahman's supremacy that Svāminārāyaṇa frequently juxtaposes it against the greatness of Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Vac. Kār.8, Loyā.13, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. III.38, Amd.6).

In summary, we learned that Parabrahman is:

- greater even than Akṣarabrahman
- the cause of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the support of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the inspirer of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- the controller of all, even Akṣarabrahman
- pervasive within all, even Akṣarabrahman

-
- the soul of all, even Akṣarabrahman
 - independent from all, even Akṣarabrahman

We observed that while this unequivocally stressed the impassable supremacy of Parabrahman, it also served to highlight Akṣarabrahman's own position as being exceedingly great; indeed, as being impassable by all except Parabrahman. We can add here that this greatness is due entirely to Akṣarabrahman's relationship with and subordination to Parabrahman, and if the above summary also indicates Akṣarabrahman as one who also causes, supports, inspires, controls, pervades, ensouls, and is independent, it is only by the full will and calling of Parabrahman himself (e.g. Vac. Loyā.13).

“So,” when Svāminārāyaṇa concludes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63,

if this is the greatness of Akṣara, then how can one possibly
comprehend the extent of God's greatness?

he is implying that, ultimately, the most accurate description of Parabrahman's limitless, unfathomable greatness is that he is simply greater than Akṣarabrahman; he is 'Akṣarātīta' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.31, Gaḍh. I.42, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.66, Gaḍh. I.78, Sār.5, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.18, and Gaḍh. II.31).

This being so, our understanding of Parabrahman cannot have begun in earnest without having first fully understood Akṣarabrahman. In this sense, as we progress along our exposition of Akṣarabrahman, our journey to learn about God is only just beginning.

Equally, if knowing Parabrahman is absolutely essential, and the best that can be said about him is that he transcends Akṣarabrahman, it follows that knowing Akṣarabrahman is also absolutely essential – for all the reasons it is necessary to know Parabrahman, primary of which, as we learned, is for ultimate liberation.

We shall of course be addressing the many aspects of liberation in our final chapter in this Part, on Mukti, but it is relevant to include here that Svāminārāyaṇa explains such liberation – both pre- and post-mortem – as leading from a state of perfect spiritual purity and maturity, which he calls being akṣararūpa or brahmarūpa (literally, ‘like Akṣarabrahman’). It not only entails eradicating māyic impurities borne of an ignorant, material self-understanding, but, more positively, acquiring the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. How is both made possible for a finite being? Svāminārāyaṇa explains, for example, in Vac.

Gaḍh. II.31:

The jīva remains continuously attached to māyā.... Only when one continuously associates with Brahman, one’s inspirer, through contemplation – as previously described – is that attachment broken....

If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the jīva acquires the virtues of Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

It is this constant association and spiritual connection with Akṣarabrahman, in the form of the living Guru, that we shall discuss in more detail further on.³²⁰

³²⁰ See sections 11.3.2.1 and 11.3.2.2.

Clearly, though, it explains the essential soteriological role of Akṣarabrahman in helping devotees become brahmarūpa.

Svāminārāyaṇa further stresses the need of Akṣarabrahman by stressing the need to become brahmarūpa and rise above ignorance. Only then, he asserts, can one develop the highest level of resolute faith (Vac. Loyā.12) and spiritual experience (Vac. Gaḍh. I.40) and enjoy unhindered devotion to God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Loyā.13, Gaḍh. II.35); otherwise, all of one's spiritual understanding is rendered futile (Vac. Gaḍh. I.44) and the result will be incessant internal turmoil (Vac. Sār.15, Gaḍh. III.1, Gaḍh. III.21, Gaḍh. III.39) and certain uncertainty on the path of devotion (Vac. Sār.1, Sār.15, Loyā.17, Gaḍh. II.30). In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in Vac. Loyā.7:

Only one who is brahmarūpa is worthy of offering devotion to
Puruṣottama.

Conversely, he reiterates in the same sermon:

One who does not offer devotion to Parabrahman after becoming
brahmarūpa cannot be said to have attained ultimate liberation.

This statement needs to be read in both ways: to secure ultimate liberation, one must offer devotion to God even *after* becoming brahmarūpa; and equally, to offer devotion to Parabrahman in order to secure ultimate liberation, one must *first* become brahmarūpa. Thus both are essential – becoming brahmarūpa and offering devotion to Parabrahman. As we touched upon during our textual study, this is arguably the central doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa theology: to offer devotion to Parabrahman having become brahmarūpa.

Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī call a person who observes such a method of devotion a definitive (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39), perfect (Vac. Gaḍh. I.11) and complete devotee (SV 3.9, 5.88), with Svāminārāyaṇa adding in Vac. Amd.2:

He who worships God having discarded all māyic influences and become brahmarūpa is the best devotee.... Only he who worships Parabrahman having become brahmarūpa is the best.

Drawing upon this last sermon and four others – Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Vac. Amd.3, Vac. Gaḍh. II.30 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.45 – Guṇātītānanda Svāmī further stresses that no matter how eminent one may be, “there is no alternative in millions of eons” but to become brahmarūpa and offer devotion to Parabrahman, because “this is the principle of Svāminārāyaṇa” (SV 3.13).

In another sermon he succinctly states:

Believing oneself as brahmarūpa and offering devotion – this is *the* conclusive doctrine [siddhānta] (SV 1.59).

We should also recall here the very purpose of Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth in human form. Svāminārāyaṇa revealed in his own words:

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.³²¹

Svāminārāyaṇa notably brings together here the description of Parabrahman’s being as transcending Akṣarabrahman, and his function as making souls Akṣarabrahman-like.

³²¹ *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p. 76.

So, to fully know Parabrahman and to rise above mājā and become brahmarūpa, knowing and serving Akṣarabrahman is essential. As Svāminārāyaṇa simply states in one of his letters:

There is no path to liberation without knowing Brahman.³²²

This essentiality and centrality of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology is also iterated by the Bhāṣyakāra in a way that would be useful to cover here in some detail.

In the preface to each of the volumes of his Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, the Bhāṣyakāra opens with a statement about the central topic of these revealed texts. He asserts that it is brahmavidyā, the knowledge of ‘Brahman’. Citing the Īśā Upaniṣad and Kena Upaniṣad, he firstly explains that it is only by such ‘vidyā’ that ultimate liberation from the incessant cycle of births and deaths can be secured.

Vidyayā’mṛtam aśnute |

By knowledge, one enjoys the immortal state (IU 11).

Vidyayā vindate’mṛtam |

By knowledge, one attains the immortal state (KeU 2.4).

However, the Bhāṣyakāra observes from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, as we also did in our earlier study, that there are two types of vidyā: parā and aparā. It is the highest vidyā – synonymous with ‘brahmavidyā’ and also the Bhagavad-Gītā’s

³²² Vedarasa, p. 18.

‘adhyātmavidyā’ (10.32) – that can lead to ultimate liberation. The subject of this highest knowledge, as we saw, is both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman (or Puruṣottama and Akṣara).

An important way in which this is substantiated is through the exegesis of the crucial opening aphorism of the Brahmasūtras:

Athā’to brahmajijñāsā |

Next, therefore, the desire to know ‘Brahman’ (1.1.1).

After confirming continuity from the Purva Mīmāṃsā (Former Inquiry) to the Uttara Mīmāṃsā (Latter Inquiry) by the word ‘atha’ (‘next’), and explaining the consequential import of the term ‘ataḥ’ (‘therefore’), the Bhāṣyakāra begins to carefully dismantle the ‘brahmajijñāsā’ compound.

He firstly explains the genitive relationship between ‘jijñāsā’ (literally, ‘knowledge-desire’) and ‘Brahman’; i.e. it is the ‘knowledge-desire of Brahman’, or, more plainly, the desire to know ‘Brahman’. He then continues to unpack the term ‘brahma’ in ‘brahmajijñāsā’ by stating that it is a type of coordinative compound (dvandva samāsa) called the ekaśeṣa dvandva, or residual compound. It takes the dual (or plural) form of only its final constituent member, for example: mātā [mother] + pitā [father] = pitarau [i.e. two parents]. The morphological similarity of the two terms ‘Brahman’ and ‘Parabrahman’ allow both to be called collectively by their common parts, i.e. ‘Brahman’, also making them suitable candidates for the residual compound. Examples of this abound in

Hindu texts. For example, Rāma and Balarāma (the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa) are often referred together as simply 'Rāmau' [the two Rāmas]. Another common example, drawing on not philological similarities of the words themselves but extending to the affinity of the characters, leads Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa to sometimes be collectively known as 'Kṛṣṇau' [e.g. Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 221.33]. In the same way, 'Brahmau' is the conjugated form denoting Brahman and Parabrahman. The correct grammatical resolution thus takes the form: Brahma [Akṣarabrahman] + Brahma [Parabrahman] = Brahmau ['the two Brahman', i.e. Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman]. It is this term which conjoins with 'jijñāsā' to provide the full meaning of the 'brahmajijñāsā' compound: the desire to know Brahman and Parabrahman.

And since, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are eternally by their very nature greater than all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and liberated souls, the name 'Brahman' (literally meaning 'great' or 'vast') is wholly befitting for both.³²³

In support of the two types of Brahman, the Bhāṣyakāra cites from the fifth chapter of the Praśna Upaniṣad. In reply to the question posed by Satyakāma pertaining to the after-life, Pippalāda states:

Etad-vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad-aumkāraḥ |

That which is the sound of 'Aum', O Satyakāma, is verily the higher and lower Brahman (PU 5.2).

³²³ When the topic first arises in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya of the Upaniṣads, at KaU 2.16, the Bhāṣyakāra also explains why, etymologically, 'Akṣara' and 'Brahman' are appropriate names for Akṣarabrahman. He goes on to provide a useful overview of all four forms and the nature of Akṣarabrahman. See KaU-SB 2.16, pp. 103-11.

The dual classification of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ confirms the distinction between Parabrahman and (Akṣara)Brahman, especially when the fruit of meditating on ‘Aum’ is described as attaining “either” (“ekatara”) of them.

However, the Bhāṣyakāra is quick to warn against carelessly ascribing either or both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman to wherever the term ‘Brahman’ appears in Vedānta texts. Rather, he insists, as always, the import of a word must be determined by carefully considering the topic of a text from beginning to end, looking out also for such important clues as repetition, novelty, commendation, reasoning, etc. For example, just as the Sanskrit word ‘saindhava’ can denote both ‘salt’ and ‘horse’, its intended meaning in each instance must be ascertained by the context within which it is being used.³²⁴ Hence, in some cases, ‘Brahman’ might exclusively refer to Parabrahman (e.g. Yato vemāni bhūtāni jāyante... [TU 3.1.1]) or exclusively to Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Etadhyevā’kṣaram brahma etadhyevā’kṣaram param [KaU 2.16]), or, in some cases, it might refer to both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman (e.g. Sarvam khalvidam brahma [CU 3.14.1]).

But why, a resister asks, cannot ‘Brahma’ in ‘brahmajijñāsā’ denote Parabrahman alone? Why are you insisting on both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman being the subject of knowledge? The Bhāṣyakāra defends: “It is not our insistence at all, but rather the insistence of the sacred revealed texts that brahmavidyā constitutes the knowledge of both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, the fact of

³²⁴ Another example, in English, would be the word ‘bat’. Whether it was being used by a zoologist or a cricketer, and in which context, would help determine what it was denoting.

which the Sūtrakāra is supremely aware.” At this, the Bhāṣyakāra enters into an extensive defence of this interpretation based on the entire Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad text, employing all six of the hermeneutical tools mentioned earlier, to conclusively demonstrate how brahmavidyā must necessarily comprise both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. After citing a total of 28 verses in sequence from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, each time bringing them into the context of brahmavidyā, the Bhāṣyakāra concludes:

Thus, accepting both entities is certainly in consonance with revelation [śruti] and reasoning [yukti] as well as with the opinion of the Sūtrakāra. In so interpreting the texts, we are saved from maligning the letter [i.e. spirit] of the revealed texts [i.e. Upaniṣads], the letter of the sūtras, and also the letter of Brahman [or Akṣarabrahman³²⁵].³²⁶

However, if this interpretation of ‘Brahman’ denoting both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman at BS 1.1.1 is to be valid, it must also hold for BS 1.1.2-4 to then be applicable for the whole of the Brahmasūtra text. As Clooney explains: These four sūtras are in effect “a text in themselves” which also “set the parameters within which the ensuing analysis is to proceed.”³²⁷ The Bhāṣyakāra duly continues this interpretation throughout the catuḥsūtrī and the complete Brahmasūtras, and indeed the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā as well. At BS 1.1.2, he cites several Upaniṣadic verses which point to Akṣarabrahman as well as Parabrahman being both the efficient and material cause of the universe (which we shall explore

³²⁵ This also serves as a play on words since ‘akṣara’ also means ‘letter’.

³²⁶ BS-SB 1.1.1, pp. 4-8.

³²⁷ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, pp. 72 & 73.

below when discussing Akṣarabrahman's nature and his role in creation, etc.).³²⁸ Similarly, at BS 1.1.3, he cites several verses to show that, like Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman can be known because it is the source of the Vedānta teachings.³²⁹ And at BS 1.1.4, he confirms that Akṣarabrahman, along with Parabrahman, is also the consistent object of Vedānta, and therefore the texts need to be harmonised accordingly to bring opposing and incoherent interpretations into line. For this, the Bhāṣyakāra declares, either or both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman will be called upon during the course of the Brahmasūtras, as and when the topic demands.³³⁰

The Bhāṣyakāra continues this interpretation consistently until the very end, with the final sūtra [BS 4.4.22] proclaiming that those who realise this brahmavidyā, i.e. who know both Brahman and Parabrahman, attain an eternal place in the abode of God, from which there is no reversion (anāvṛtti).³³¹

To conclude, the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgi in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad succinctly summarises both affirmatively and negatively the result (or 'fruit') of including and excluding Akṣarabrahman from brahmavidyā.

Yājñavalkya warns his fellow sage:

In this world, O Gārgi, he whosoever without knowing Akṣara worships, makes offerings or performs austerities for many

³²⁸ BS-SB 1.1.2, pp. 13-16.

³²⁹ BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 18-19.

³³⁰ BS-SB 1.1.4, pp. 25-29.

³³¹ BS-SB 4.4.22, pp. 431-32.

thousands of years, the fruit of all his [endeavours] will indeed be impermanent.

O Gārgi, whosoever leaves this world without having known Akṣara, he is pitiful [kṛpaṇa].

Whereas,

O Gārgi, whosoever leaves this world having known Akṣara, he is a brāhmaṇa [a perfect knower of Brahman, i.e. brahmarūpa] (BU 3.8.10).

According to both primary Svāminārāyaṇa texts and the Prasthānatrayī, it can be discerned that Akṣarabrahman has an integral, central and indispensable role in Svāminārāyaṇa theology in helping devotees to fully know Parabrahman and reach the highest Brahman-like spiritual state for liberation here and for ever after.

7.3) Nature of Akṣarabrahman

Our initial textual inquiry and subsequent study of the essential role of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology have necessitated and therefore already resulted in the introduction of some important aspects of Akṣarabrahman's nature. These and other aspects will be developed yet further as we expound upon each of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in the following section. However, still more needs to be said about the nature of Akṣarabrahman in a way that will lead to a more complete elucidation about this central metaphysical entity. We therefore turn our attention here to see more closely what Svāminārāyaṇa texts and the Prasthānatrayī have to say about the nature of Akṣarabrahman.

What is noticeable in these śāstric descriptions of Akṣarabrahman is that they are not always found in neat categories ready for easy presentation in systematic expositions such as this. Even while listing some of Akṣarabrahman's many inherent qualities, a discussion may suddenly mention his role in creation or as the support of the world, for example. This need not hinder us particularly. Indeed, it will allow us to traverse more freely through the many passages, picking up important aspects as and when they are presented, and gradually building the complete theological image of Akṣarabrahman. However, it will mean that this and the following section will need to be read together to fully understand Akṣarabrahman's nature – reminding us readers again of the abiding patience necessary when attempting to grasp a complex system of ideas. Not until the very end after such long, careful and diligent reading do all the parts fit together, and our joy and satisfaction then is all the more richer for it.

7.3.1) One Without Second

There is only one Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa affirms this by using the singular pronoun when referring to Akṣarabrahman in his sermons. For example, when explaining how one can develop an aversion for worldly pleasures, Svāminārāyaṇa states that part of the solution is to realise the greatness of God. A person who has such a realisation also has a fair assessment of the entire world. "He knows", Svāminārāyaṇa explains, that

‘God is like this, and these are the rewards of engaging in the worship of God and listening to religious discourses. Akṣara is like this, and the bliss associated with *him* is like this (Vac. Loyā.17; emphasis added).

In the Vedarasa, too, Svāminārāyaṇa uses the same singular personal pronoun (“evo”) when discussing Akṣarabrahman.³³² In the last of these statements, Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly writes:

There are many who, having realised Akṣara to be their soul, have attained qualities similar to that of Akṣara. That Akṣara, however, is one.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states:

Akṣara in the form of [God’s] abode is only one while there are countless millions of akṣaramuktas (SV 5.177).

This singularity can also be noted in the Bhagavad-Gītā at 15.16 for example, where ‘kūṭasthaḥ’ used to define Akṣara is in the singular case whereas the ‘kṣara’ are “sarvāṇi bhūtāni”, all [other] beings.

More explicitly, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad proclaims Akṣara (in the form of Brahmaloka) as being simply “eka” and “advaita” (4.3.32), i.e. one without second. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that this is because no other being or thing is capable of eternally holding Parabrahman and countless millions of liberated souls.³³³

³³² E.g. pp. 144, 146, and 213-14.

³³³ BU-SB 4.3.32, p. 258.

7.3.2) Transcending All (Except Parabrahman)

We noted during our study of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad passage ‘akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ’ that an almost identical statement can be found at Vac. Gaḍh. I.64.

Svāminārāyaṇa said:

Puruṣottama is greater even than Akṣara, who is greater than all else.

While this affirms Parabrahman’s outright supremacy, it just as much describes Akṣarabrahman’s greatness above all other entities. In his comment at MuU 2.1.2, the Bhāṣyakāra firstly explains how “parataḥ” can indeed qualify “akṣarāt”, “because [Akṣara] is greater than all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and brahmarūpa liberated souls”. In what way precisely is Akṣarabrahman superior to them all? The Bhāṣyakāra explains individually, beginning with the insentient māyā.

Akṣarabrahman is superior to māyā because he is “the cause of the origination, etc. of the world”, for which māyā is the base material. As we shall see further on in this very section, Akṣarabrahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world, controlling, inspiring and using māyā for the purpose of creation.

For the jīvas and īśvaras, “who fall into the category of ‘kṣara’”, Akṣarabrahman “pervades them and is their inner controller [antaryāmin], support and governor; grants the fruits of their karmas..., and creates the places, bodies, etc. of these souls whereby they can experience these fruits; serves as the bridge for those of them seeking liberation, helping them cross the ocean of misery associated with the cycle of births and deaths, and being extremely instrumental

in them attaining the natural, superlative bliss of Paramātman; and makes brahmarūpa those who associate with him so that they are able to offer the highest devotion to Paramātman.”

This leaves the muktas, who have already reached this highest state. However, since even they are “not eternally devoid of any contact with māyā”, it is Akṣarabrahman who “grants the liberated state to the jīvas” and, “as the divine Akṣaradhāma”, also “serves as the support of all muktas even now [in their final, liberated state] by way of being their śarīrin, etc.”³³⁴

The Bhāṣyakāra then goes on to provide a string of śāstric references supporting each of these ways in which Akṣarabrahman is superior.

He similarly comments on the adjective “paramam” of BG 8.3 (also discussed in our study earlier) by explaining that Akṣarabrahman “transcends everything except Parabrahman, i.e. all jīvas, īśvaras, māyā and all its work, and all liberated souls.” In other words, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, Akṣarabrahman is “the best [śreṣṭha]”. Again, this “eternal transcendence” over all these entities is attributed to Akṣarabrahman “pervading, controlling, supporting and illuminating them, by being their cause and soul, and because of other qualities of excellence.” Here, again, several references are cited supporting each of these points.³³⁵

³³⁴ MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 259.

³³⁵ BG-SB 8.3, pp. 173-78.

What needs to added here is that the Bhāṣyakāra also uses the “paraḥ” at MuU 2.1.2 to describe how, despite all this greatness, Akṣarabrahman is still subordinate to Parabrahman, “because that highest Being is the governor, master, inspirer, support, śarīrin, etc. of even that great Akṣara.” Thus, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, the name for God as ‘Parabrahman’ (literally, ‘greater-Brahman’) is wholly appropriate, seeing as he is greater [para] even than Brahman. Moreover, he stresses, the fact that Akṣarabrahman is greater than all else besides Parabrahman is also only because of the wish of Parabrahman, but not otherwise.³³⁶

In support of this, he cites KaU 3.11 and 6.8 and TU 2.1.1, as well as such verses from the Bhagavad-Gītā as

Anādi mat-param brahma |

Brahman is eternal and transcended only by me (13.12)

and

Brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhā’ham |

I am the support of Brahman (14.27).

We shall also see later how Svāminārāyaṇa, when relating Parabrahman to the king of the world, describes Akṣarabrahman (in the form of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru) as the queen (Vac. Gaḍh. II.22).

³³⁶ MuU-SB 2.1.2, p. 260.

Not only do these statements serve to further establish the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, they also reveal the impassable greatness of Akṣarabrahman – impassable, that is, by all except Parabrahman.

7.3.3) Immutable

In describing the transcendence of Akṣarabrahman, it is especially stressed by Svāminārāyaṇa that it transcends māyā. This is to be absolutely clear that Akṣarabrahman is beyond the reach of māyā's defiling and destructive influence.

One way that Svāminārāyaṇa does this is to explain Akṣarabrahman's immutability and completeness. While we had touched upon Akṣara as "kūṭustha" in our study of BG 15.16 earlier, the topic warrants a little more attention here where we can provide further statements from sampradāyic texts. Svāminārāyaṇa states, for example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

Brahman is immutable and indivisible, that is, it does not suffer from any alterations nor can it ever be fragmented.

He similarly writes in one of his letters:

That Akṣara is immutable and does not falter from or change its extraordinary form by way of this immutability. Therefore, that Akṣara is unfaltering and constant. That Akṣara is eternal.³³⁷

This is all true – and all the more impressive – even though Akṣarabrahman is immanently present throughout all of māyā's work. Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

³³⁷ Vedarasa, p. 171.

And what is that Brahman like? Well, it is immanently present within all, from māyā to... the entire individuality and collectivity of the world. [Yet] it is devoid of the world's qualities and flaws; it is untainted. It cannot be cut, pierced, burnt, wet or dried. It is pure like space. It dwells within all things, yet it remains untouched by anything. It is pure [nirmala, literally 'unsullied'].³³⁸

In another letter, Svāminārāyaṇa wrote about the immutability or constancy of Akṣarabrahman by highlighting its power over time (an aspect of māyā).

That Akṣara is without the states of creation, sustenance and destruction. By its light, even time can be destroyed. Akṣara is stable [sthīra] and eternal [sanātana].³³⁹

Like Parabrahman, this is also due to Akṣarabrahman having a distinct (vyatireka) form of its own, as we shall see further on in this section.

Furthermore, Akṣarabrahman's transcendence over māyā will especially be brought into focus when we discuss its soteriological role in the form of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

7.3.4) Satyam, Jñānam, Anantam

An important description of Akṣarabrahman can be found in the opening passage of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī. It reads:

Satyam jñānam anantam brahma (2.1.1) |³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Vedarasa, p. 151.

³³⁹ Vedarasa, p. 144.

³⁴⁰ The Bhāṣyakāra argues that this description can only be of Akṣarabrahman, not Parabrahman. In the opening phrase of the same mantra,

Brahmavid-āpnoti param

He who knows Brahman attains the highest (2.1.1),

the term 'Brahma' relates to Akṣarabrahman, and 'param' (or highest) refers to Parabrahman, since this latter relative term must denote something which transcends even Akṣarabrahman. It is wholly correct according to Svāminārāyaṇa theology that he who perfectly knows

The Bhāṣyakāra expands each of these three important definers to explain that, firstly, Akṣarabrahman's existence is real, meaning that it is eternally divine and immutable in form and nature.

Secondly, Akṣarabrahman is eternally of the form of knowledge. This knowledge is devoid of even the slightest contact of māyā, saving it from any form of corruption or compromise. Furthermore, not only is Akṣarabrahman *made* of knowledge, it also *has* knowledge as a quality, because only then would it be able to know. This knowledge, again, is eternal and unlimited.

Lastly, 'ananta'. This is defined in two ways: without end, as in without destruction, to explain that Akṣarabrahman is imperishable; and without end, as in without limit, since Akṣarabrahman is also unlimited. On the latter, this infiniteness is to be further understood in three ways, as being unbound by space, time and object, which, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, means it cannot be said that Akṣarabrahman is 'here but not there', 'now but not then', 'this but not that'. This is because Akṣarabrahman is omnipresent (in its Cidākāśa form), eternal, and the omni-soul pervading everything (except Parabrahman).³⁴¹

Brahman (i.e. is brahmarūpa) attains Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Gaḍh. II.8, Gaḍh. II.62]. Furthermore, since the description immediately following "satyam jñānam-anantam brahma" in the very same verse clearly refers to Akṣarabrahman as the "highest abode [parame vyoman]", the portion in-between them must also relate to Akṣarabrahman. It is untenable that a denotation of a word would change so rapidly within the same verse or that God be called 'the highest abode'. TU-SB 2.1.1, pp. 361-63.

³⁴¹ TU-SB 2.1.1, pp. 362-63.

7.3.5) Role in the Origination, Sustenance and Dissolution of the Universe

In our discussion about the essential and central role of Akṣarabrahman in Svāminārāyaṇa theology, we came across the notable interpretation of the first aphorism of the Brahmasūtras, where ‘brahma’ in ‘brahmajijñāsā’ denotes both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

By its very function, however, the second aphorism of the Brahmasūtras,

Janmādyasya yataḥ (BS. 1.1.2),

is what defines the Brahman of BS 1.1.1, i.e. it is “that from which [occurs] the creation, etc. of this [world].” In other words, we can only accept Akṣarabrahman to also be the subject of the desirable knowledge if it can be proven to be the cause of the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world.

The Bhāṣyakāra endeavours to prove this is indeed the case by citing śāstric statements. For example, as we saw earlier, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad states:

This is the truth: As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by the thousands, similarly, O dear [Śaunaka], beings of various forms issue forth from Akṣara and return to it only (MuU 2.1.1).

Akṣarabrahman’s causality is also confirmed by an earlier verse from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad [1.1.6] where it is described as “bhūtayoni”, the cause of all beings. The text goes on to explicitly state:

Akṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam |

This world is created from Akṣara (1.1.7).

Three similes are provided in this verse to consolidate the point, which, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, provide useful insights about how exactly Akṣarabrahman is the cause. The world is created from Akṣara:

1. “as a spider spins out and draws in” its thread. This firstly points to Akṣarabrahman as the material cause of the world, since he creates the world from his own ‘body’, i.e. māyā, and māyā, too, at the time of dissolution, returns into him, just like the silk thread extruded and then retracted by a spider. Moreover, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, this simile also importantly indicates that Akṣarabrahman does not change its form or nature in any way while being the cause of the world; it remains immutable throughout. Using a counter-example, the Bhāṣyakāra explains that Akṣarabrahman’s causality is not like that of milk, which, as the material cause of yoghurt, turns *into* its effect; the milk ceases to exist in its original state after it has become the yoghurt. Akṣarabrahman, on the other hand, has an eternal existence, and remains exactly as it is throughout the process of creation, sustenance and dissolution.
2. “as plants sprout from the earth.” Here the Bhāṣyakāra highlights that various plants, shrubs and trees all grow from the soil – some bear thorns; some are lush with fragrant flowers; and some abound with fruits, sweet, sour, bitter or pungent – but each one only according to the qualities inherent in its own seed. Similarly, while Akṣarabrahman makes possible the origination of the world and all its inhabitants, they all ‘grow’ only according to their own ‘seed’ of karma which contains the code – the

combined impressions of all their past deeds, good and bad – that in turn determines the physical body they receive and the pleasures they will enjoy and pains they will suffer during that particular lifetime. This exonerates Akṣarabrahman from the double-charge of partiality (vaiṣamya) and cruelty (nairghrṇya) often associated with ‘the problem of evil’ – just as the unbiased earth is blameless for the disparate flora which sprouts from it. (We shall be taking up this point in more detail in the chapter on māyā, when discussing the nature and process of creation.³⁴²)

3. “as hair [grows] on a living person’s head and body.” This shows, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, that the world is created from Akṣarabrahman effortlessly, without exertion or labour, just as facial, androgenic or other types of hair grow naturally on a person.³⁴³

Akṣarabrahman is thus the cause of the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world, and it is so immutably, blamelessly, and effortlessly.

Sometimes, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, Akṣarabrahman’s role is mentioned in texts conjointly with that of Parabrahman, when generic terms such as ‘Brahman’ or ‘Sat’ (Being) are employed. This can be confirmed when the import of the entire text is examined, as we did with the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. Examples of such texts include the following:

³⁴² See section 10.2.2.

³⁴³ MuU-SB 1.1.7, pp. 239-40.

Sarvam khalvidam brahma taj-jalān³⁴⁴-iti śānta upāsīta... |

All this [visible world] is verily Brahman, from which it comes forth, in which it is dissolved, and by which it lives. This is how, tranquil, one should offer upāsānā to it... (CU-SB 3.14.1).

Brahma va idam agra āsīt... tasmāt-tat sarvam abhavat... |

In the beginning, there was only this Brahman... From that, all that was created... (BU 1.4.10).

Sanmulāḥ somyemāḥ sarvāḥ prajāḥ sadāyatanāḥ satpratiṣṭhāḥ |

O dear [Śvetaketu], all these beings have ‘Sat’ as their source, ‘Sat’ as their support, and ‘Sat’ as their resting place (CU-SB 6.8.4).

What thus begins at BS 1.1.2 to define ‘Brahman’, confirming both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as causes of the world and therefore worthy of being known [BS 1.1.1], continues throughout the first chapter of the Brahmasūtras where causality is a key tool in harmonising equivocal śāstric statements. In the last full adhikaraṇa of BS 1 before the final colophonic sūtra, we see the arguments against the Sāṃkhya School drawing to an end, confirming that Pradhāna (i.e. prakṛti or māyā) is not the independent cause of the world, but its inner soul, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, are in fact the cause. Why?

Sākṣāc-cobhayāmnānāt |

Because both have been explicitly proclaimed (1.4.26).

³⁴⁴ ‘jalān’ is a hapax legomenon, which requires the commentary to provide its full meaning. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that it is an acronym composed of ‘ja’ from ‘jāyate’, meaning ‘to be born’; ‘la’ from ‘liyate’, meaning ‘to be dissolved’; and ‘an’ from ‘aniti’, meaning ‘to live’. The term therefore becomes ‘jalān’, and together with ‘tat’, the demonstrative pronoun referring back to ‘Brahman’, provides the extricated meaning given above. CU-SB 3.14.1, pp. 131-32.

Here again the Bhāṣyakāra cites several verses from the Upaniṣads confirming Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, and both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as the material and efficient cause of the world, as indicated by the Sūtrakāra himself.

Like Parabrahman, though, Akṣarabrahman's cosmological role is not limited to the origination and dissolution of the world, but extends also to its sustenance in various ways. Svāminārāyaṇa states, for example:

Brahman, who is the witness, enters the brahmāṇḍa... and makes it conscious, giving it the powers to perform all activities. The nature of that Brahman is such that when it enters an object that is as inert as wood or stone, that object becomes such that it can move (Vac. Gaḍh. II.20).

It is Akṣarabrahman, then, which also enlivens and empowers the created world by entering within it. If we recall, this is similar to the description of Parabrahman being the śarīrin of the universe, and indeed, Akṣarabrahman is thus the embodied soul of all things and beings (except Parabrahman) in the same way.

That is probably why we see the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad talk of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman in almost identical terms. For example, at 2.1.10, Parabrahman (or Puruṣottama, the highest person) is identified with this whole world on account of his omnisoulship:

Puruṣa evedam viśvam... |

Just a few mantras later, the very same phrase is used for Akṣarabrahman, identifying him also with the world on account of *his* omnisoulship:

Brahmaivedam viśvam... (2.2.11) |

This omnisoulship is further confirmed when we learn of Akṣarabrahman as also being the ontic ground supporting the material and spiritual world, and controlling it by dwelling within it. While some of the statements above have mentioned this already, both these aspects can be seen more clearly, for example, in the cordial but vehement dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Gārgi in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad symposium.

After seeking permission from the assembled scholars and Yājñavalkya himself, Gārgi asks:

O Yājñavalkya, what is that which is above the sky and beneath the earth, and between both the sky and earth, and that which is called the past, the present and the future? Upon what is all this woven back and forth? (BU 3.8.3).

In response to her question, Yājñavalkya firstly replies that it is “ākāśa”. Either unsatisfied with this answer³⁴⁵ or not fully understanding it, Gārgi presses further, asking:

Upon what is ‘ākāśa’ woven back and forth? (BU 3.8.7).

It is then that Yājñavalkya states:

Etad vai tad-akṣaram gārgi brāhmaṇā abhivadanti |

³⁴⁵ See Olivelle’s opinion that Gārgi’s response to Yājñavalkya is “dripping with sarcasm” because she is unsatisfied with his initial answer. Hence, she asks the same question again. *Upaniṣads*, p. 311.

That, O Gārgi, is indeed what the knowers of Brahman proclaim as Akṣara (BU 3.8.8).³⁴⁶

Akṣarabrahman is thus the ontic ground upon which all of existence – past, present and future – subsists, just as the warp is upon which the weaver’s shuttle moves back and forth.

After describing Akṣarabrahman with a string of apophatic and sometimes contrastive terms – “it is neither gross nor subtle, neither short nor long,” etc. – Yājñavalkya then goes on to repetitively state Akṣarabrahman’s governance over all aspects of the universe that it also upholds (vidhṛta).

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld sun and moon verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld sky and earth verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the upheld moments, hours, days and nights, half-months, months, seasons and years verily stand.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do the rivers flow – some to the east from the white [snowy] mountains, others to the west in their own directions.

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do recipient men praise donors, deities [praise] the patron, and forefathers [praise] the ancestral offering (BU 3.8.9).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that these are just a few indicative features of the entire universe. For example, the ‘flowing rivers’ imply that Akṣarabrahman also

³⁴⁶ This verse is the subject of the Akṣarādhikaraṇa at BS 1.3.10-13. The Bhāṣyakāra explains here why the term ‘akṣara’ is indeed denotive of Akṣarabrahman and not pradhāna or the individual soul, whether jīva or īśvara. BS-SB 1.3.10-13, pp. 97-101.

governs the rains, and therefore the crops which grow by the rains. And since all of life is dependent on food and water, it is Akṣarabrahman who nourishes and supports all forms of life. Similarly, by mentioning benefactors and beneficiaries, noble people on earth as well as the dwellers of the higher realms, it should be understood that all beings of the universe are governed by Akṣarabrahman.

It should be stressed again that here and wherever else the causality and governance of Akṣarabrahman is mentioned, the Bhāṣyakāra keenly points out that it is only possible by and according to the “eternal wish of Paramātman”.³⁴⁷

As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Brahman is the cause and support of all, including Prakṛti-Puruṣa³⁴⁸, etc., and pervades everything by its antaryāmin powers.... Parabrahman, that is, Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from that Brahman, and also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

Like Parabrahman, then, and only by his will, Akṣarabrahman is the material and efficient cause of the world, its support and also its inner-controller by virtue of pervading everything as its soul.

Before we go on to further explore the nature and function of Akṣarabrahman, let us briefly touch upon three pairs of terms by which Svāminārāyaṇa describes Akṣarabrahman in the Vacanāmṛut. We shall explore these with a little more

³⁴⁷ E.g. MuU-SB 1.1.7, pp. 240 & 241.

³⁴⁸ ‘Prakṛti-Puruṣa’ is a shorthand term referring to the combined form of primordial māyā [Mūla-Prakṛti] and an akṣaramukta [Mūla-Puruṣa] (selected by Akṣarabrahman in Akṣaradhāma), who together initiate the creative process, as willed and commanded by Parabrahman. See chapter 10.2.3 for further elaboration on the protological process.

detail when looking at each of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in the following section, but it is useful nonetheless to see Svāminārāyaṇa's description of Akṣarabrahman's nature based on these statements alone. The three pairs are:

- Anvaya and Vyatireka
- Nirguṇa and Saguṇa
- Nirākāra and Sākāra

7.3.6) Anvaya and Vyatireka

As we learned when expounding upon Parabrahman, the two contrastive terms of 'anvaya' and 'vyatireka' essentially refer to immanence and transcendence, respectively. Svāminārāyaṇa applies them both to Akṣarabrahman in two sermons, Vac. Gaḍh. I.7 and Vac. Sār.5. In the former, he describes Akṣarabrahman's immanent form as when it

pervades māyā and the entities evolved from māyā, the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

To this, he adds in Vac. Sār.5:

That which is the inspirer of Prakṛti-Puruṣa and all of the devatās such as Sūrya, Candra, etc., should be known as the immanent form of Akṣara.

As for Akṣarabrahman's distinct, transcendental form, that is

when it is distinct from everything and has the attributes of eternal existence, consciousness and bliss (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7).

This is the form

in which there is not even a trace of the influence of Prakṛti-Puruṣa, etc. and in which only Puruṣottama Bhagavān resides (Vac. Sār.5).

Together, these statements also emphasise Akṣarabrahman's absolute purity, transcendence (especially above māyā), and independence, except, of course, from Parabrahman.

7.3.7) Nirguṇa and Saguṇa

When describing Akṣarabrahman as both saguṇa and nirguṇa, Svāminārāyaṇa mainly refers to its size. He explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.42 that Akṣarabrahman has an extremely subtle form, smaller even than an atom.

This is its nirguṇa form.

Conversely,

the saguṇa form is much larger than even the largest of objects.

In describing this further, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas dwell like mere atoms around each and every hair of that Akṣara. It is not that those brahmāṇḍas become small compared to Akṣara; they still remain encircled by the eight barriers. Rather, it is because of the extreme vastness of Akṣara that those brahmāṇḍas appear so small.

Then applying an analogy, he adds:

Take Mount Girnār³⁴⁹ as an example. Compared to Mount Meru³⁵⁰, it appears to be extremely small. However, compared to Mount

³⁴⁹ This is in fact a range of mountains found near the city of Junagadh, in south-west Gujarat. The tallest of them rises to 1,031 metres (3,382 feet), making it the highest peak in Gujarat.

Lokāloka³⁵¹, Mount Meru itself appears to be extremely small. In the same way, the brahmāṇḍas remain exactly as they are, but in comparison to the extreme vastness of Akṣara, they appear to be extremely small. This is why they are described as being like atoms (Vac. Gaḍh. II.42).

Like Parabrahman, however, it would not be incorrect to add that Akṣarabrahman is devoid of any defiling māyic qualities, hence also 'nirguṇa', and is replete with countless superlatively excellent auspicious qualities, hence also 'saguṇa'.

7.3.8) Nirākāra and Sākāra

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Svāminārāyaṇa alludes to two types of forms of Akṣarabrahman.

One, which is formless [nirākāra] and pure consciousness [caitanya], is known as Cidākāśa. In contrast, the other type is when Akṣarabrahman has a form (sākāra). While Svāminārāyaṇa mentions explicitly in the sermon above only two of the three forms which are sākāra, we shall move on to expounding upon all four forms (i.e. the one nirākāra form and the three sākāra forms) in more detail in the section following the summary below.

³⁵⁰ Also known as 'Sumeru', this refers to the sacred mountain mentioned in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology, considered to be the centre of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes. It is said to be 84,000 yojanas high (c. 672,000 miles or 1,082,000 kilometres). See references to 'Mahāmeru', for example, in the Mahābhārata at Ādi Parva 17. Śānti Parva 222.18 notes it as 'the king of mountains'.

³⁵¹ This is another mountain mentioned in cosmological accounts within Hindu texts. It is described as the boundary to the three worlds, and being golden in colour and as smooth as glass (Devī Bhāgavata 8).

7.3.9) In Relation to Parabrahman

A useful conclusion to this section on the nature of Akṣarabrahman can be provided by the following summary, listing the similarities and differences between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman gleaned from above and relevant parts of the chapter on Parabrahman.

Similarities between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

- Both eternally transcend māyā.
- Both are one without second.
- Both have a definite human-like shape in their distinct transcendental form.
- Both are replete with divine virtues and devoid of māyic impurities.
- Both have a causal role in the origination, sustenance and dissolution of the world, though neither engage actively; their mere will activates the process.
- Both support, empower, inspire, pervade, and control by dwelling within all other beings and things, and are their embodied soul (śarīrin).
- Both, even while eternally residing in Akṣaradhāma in human form, manifest in various brahmāṇḍas in human form for the liberation of countless souls. Yet, even then, they are both divine and unsullied by māyā.
- Both need to be known to attain brahmavidyā, which is essential for securing ultimate liberation.

Differences between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

- Parabrahman supports, empowers, inspirers, pervades and controls from within even Akṣarabrahman; whereas Akṣarabrahman does not support, empower, inspire, pervade or control Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is the soul of Akṣarabrahman, whereas Akṣarabrahman is a part of the body of Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is the extremely powerful owner and master (svāmin) of Akṣarabrahman; Akṣarabrahman is the extremely subservient servant (sevaka) of Parabrahman.
- Parabrahman is eminently worshippingable (upāsya), whereas Akṣarabrahman is the perfectly devout and humble worshipper (upāsaka).
- Parabrahman, with all his unlimited powers, splendour, knowledge, bliss, virtues, etc., is totally independent, even of Akṣarabrahman, whereas Akṣarabrahman and his unlimited powers, splendour, knowledge, bliss, virtues, etc. are all totally dependent on Parabrahman.
- As Akṣaradhāma, Akṣarabrahman is the abode of Parabrahman, where Parabrahman and countless liberated souls reside. Parabrahman is the Lord of Akṣaradhāma, presiding over it as its sovereign ruler and owner.³⁵²

³⁵² For a more detailed discussion about the relationship between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and the supremacy of the former over the latter, see the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentary on the Ubhayavyapadeśādhikaraṇa (BS-SB 3.2.26-29; pp. 302-04) and especially the Parādhikaraṇa (BS-SB 3.2.30-35; pp. 304-10).

7.4) Four Forms of Akṣarabrahman

Akṣarabrahman is 'one without second'. Yet as one entity, it functions in four different ways and so can be seen in the following four forms:

- As Cidākāśa, the all-pervading, all-supporting consciousness
- As Akṣaradhāma, the abode of Parabrahman
- As the ideal Sevaka in Akṣaradhāma
- As the Brahmasvarūpa Guru on earth

Before we turn to expound upon each, it is necessary to reiterate that in being of one substance, there is no internal relationship (causal or otherwise) between the four forms; they are all indistinctly, absolutely and truly the one and same Akṣarabrahman.

This is made all the more clear in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad where all four forms can be found in one particular mantra:

Āviḥ sannihitam guhācaram nāma mahat padam atraitat
samarpitam |

Ejat prāṇan nimiṣac ca tad etaj jānatha sadasadvareṇyam param
vijñānād yad variṣṭam prajānām (MuU 2.2.1) ||

According to the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the Bhāṣyakāra explains that the first two terms point to the two types of Akṣarabrahma: āviḥ, or 'manifest', is Akṣarabrahman as the abode, sevaka and Guru, all of which have a definite form; whereas sannihitam, or 'concomitant', is Akṣarabrahman in its all-pervading

form, i.e. Cidākāśa. These four are then individually referred to in the verse as follows:

Akṣarabrahman Form	Term/Phrase	Meaning
Cidākāśa	guhācaram	dwelling within the cave [of the heart]
Abode	mahat padam	great place
Sevaka in Abode	atraitat samarpitam	dedicated here [in the great place]
Guru	ejat prāṇan nimiṣat	moving, breathing, blinking

The verse concludes with the instruction:

Know that Akṣara, which is both gross and subtle, the most desirable, the highest because of its extraordinary knowledge, and what people most desire (MuU 2.2.1).³⁵³

We ourselves can now move on to understanding each of these four forms of Akṣarabrahman in more detail.

7.4.1) Akṣarabrahman as Cidākāśa

Of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman, the only one without a definite shape is Cidākāśa. As we saw, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, “Akṣara”,

which is formless [nirākāra] and pure consciousness [caitanya], is known as Cidākāśa.

³⁵³ See also MuU-SB 2.2.7, pp. 276-77 and MuU-SB 3.1.7, p. 288 for other instances, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, where all four forms of Akṣarabrahman are indicated in one verse.

This is also the anvaya (immanent) form of Akṣarabrahman described at Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, and the nirguṇa (subtle) form described in Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, which we also saw earlier. In both these senses, Cidākāśa is described as being all-pervading. As the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, too, explains:

This immortal Brahman is verily in front. Brahman is behind.
Brahman is to the right and to the left. It is below and above. This
Brahman verily pervades the whole world (2.2.11).

Furthermore, as the name suggests, Cidākāśa is a form of space (ākāśa), but it is wholly different from material space; it is spiritual and sentient, i.e. composed of consciousness (cit). Svāminārāyaṇa explains this difference at great length in Vac. Gaḍh. I.46 when he is questioned by a ‘Vedāntin’ about the assimilation of ‘ākāśa’. Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies that the two types of ākāśa – one which is full of consciousness and the other which is one of the five material elements (alongside earth, water, fire and air) – are different and should not be confused. How are they different? The gist of Svāminārāyaṇa’s explanation is as follows:

- Cidākāśa is never assimilated; it is eternal, i.e. it is not created or dissolved, unlike material space which originates during the creative process of each brahmāṇḍa.
- Cidākāśa is immutable and infinite; it has no states of contraction or expansion like material space.
- Cidākāśa is extremely bright, whereas material space is marked by the absence of light.

-
- Cidākāśa is immanently present everywhere, within the smallest part of an atom and around the vast brahmāṇḍas; countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are ‘within’ Cidākāśa.
 - Cidākāśa is the omni-support (sarvādhāra); it supports everything, including māyā and its work, i.e. countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

A similar description of Akṣarabrahman can be found in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad at 2.2.2. It reads:

Yad-aṇubhyo’ṇu ca yasminl-lokā nihitā lokinasca tad-etad-akṣaram
brahma |

That which is subtler than the subtle [atom] and within which the realms and their inhabitants rest, that is this Akṣarabrahman.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad similarly mentions that “all realms are supported by it [which is called Brahman]” (5.8), while the Bhagavad-Gītā simply calls Akṣarabrahman “bhūtabhartr̥”, the supporter of all beings (13.16), and “sarvabhṛt̥”, the supporter of all (13.14).

If we also recall Yājñavalkya’s answer to Gārgi in BU 3.8, it is this Akṣara upon which the whole world is “woven back and forth” and “within the governance of this Akṣara” that all is upheld in its proper place, functioning as it should. A similar proclamation can be found in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad –

What is luminescent, and upon which the sky, the earth, the intermediate region, and the mind with all its vital breaths are woven, that indeed is the one [Brahman] (MuU 2.2.5) –

which forms the topic of the Dyubhvādyadhikaraṇa at BS 1.3.1-7, and also at CU

8.1.3 –

As far as this [material] space extends, so extends the [spiritual] space within the heart. Within it rests both the sky and the earth, both fire and air, both the sun and the moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever of this [world] is here and whatever is not – it all rests within this [spiritual space] –

which forms the topic of the Daharādhikaraṇa at BS 1.3.14-23. Svāminārāyaṇa in fact points to this discussion by referring to the knowledge of Cidākāśa as “Daharavidyā” at the end of his explanation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.46. In much the same vein as Svāminārāyaṇa’s explanation noted above, the Daharādhikaraṇa argues that the ‘subtle space’ within the heart mentioned at CU 8.1.1 should refer to Akṣarabrahman dwelling in the form of Cidākāśa, not the material space of the worldly sort (bhautika ākāśa), because it is Akṣarabrahman that is full of higher consciousness and the all-pervading support of the world.³⁵⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa also states in one of his letters:

That Brahman is interwoven within all and is vast [yet] without the qualities of the gross [i.e. material] elements. It is unbound by time and space, and is unlimited. It transcends the elements of space, etc. It dwells completely within māyā and the work of māyā; it is within it and outside of it. Because of its vastness, it is called ‘Brahman’, and is also called Akṣarabrahman. It is the support of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and the inspirer of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, and at the centre of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ BS-SB 1.3.14-3, pp. 101-09.

³⁵⁵ Vedarasa, p. 152.

7.4.2) Akṣarabrahman as Parabrahman's Abode

The sākāra (having a definite shape) and saguṇa (vast) form of Akṣarabrahman described by Svāminārāyaṇa at Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, respectively, relates to Akṣarabrahman as the abode of Parabrahman. Called Akṣaradhāma (and occasionally Brahmadhāma, Brahmaloka, Brahmapura and Brahmanahola), it is the transcendental divine realm where Parabrahman and innumerable liberated souls eternally reside. It is the place where earthly souls aspire to transcend upon death, to forever enjoy the undisturbed, unlimited bliss of God. It is their place of final rest, the ultimate destination, the highest goal.

As we already saw in our study of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā passages at the beginning of this chapter, Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly states in sermons such as Vac. Pan.1 that

that Akṣarabrahman is the abode wherein God resides,

and in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63, that

the cause of all of these [elements and entities] is Akṣarabrahman,
which is the abode of Puruṣottama Bhagavān.

In his comment on the Kaṭha Upaniṣad phrase

Sarve vedā yat padam āmananti

That place which all the Vedas extol... (2.15),

and a similar phrase at BG 8.11,

Yad-akṣaram vedavido vadanti

Which Akṣara, the knowers of the Vedas proclaim...,

the Bhāṣyakāra provides scores of references from the Vedas, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā confirming Akṣarabrahman as the home of God as well as various aspects of its nature.³⁵⁶ We now have occasion to learn more about these aspects.

Undoubtedly the most important feature of Akṣaradhāma is that at its centre sits the distinct transcendental human-shaped form of Parabrahman in all his divine and resplendent glory. In our extensive discussions in the previous chapter about the immanently pervading (anvaya) yet eternally distinct (vyatireka) form of Parabrahman, we noted Svāminārāyaṇa explaining that this was possible by way of Parabrahman's extraordinary yogic powers. What he was stressing was that God, even while revealing himself throughout the universe,

Nevertheless, he himself is still always present in his
Akṣaradhāma....

He is forever present on his throne in his Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh.
II.64).

Svāminārāyaṇa adds that this is also true when Parabrahman manifests in human form on earth. He never abandons his place in Akṣaradhāma; he does not 'move' from there to be on earth.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī provides a description of this eternally resident form in one of his sermons. He states:

Who is unborn even though taking birth; whose form is unfaltering
and eternal; who has a divine form even while having a human-
shaped form, and who has a human-shaped form which is divine;

³⁵⁶ KaU-SB 2.15, pp. 99-102 and BG-SB 8.21, pp. 189-93.

who is in Akṣaradhāma yet here and here yet certainly in Akṣaradhāma; in fact, wherever he is, is indeed the centre of Akṣaradhāma; who is complete with magnanimity, profundity, sweetness, loving compassion, integrity, knowledge, strength, splendour, taste, smell, and other similarly extremely wondrous divine qualities – that is Puruṣottama, the supreme Śrī Sahajānanda Svāmī [Svāminārāyaṇa] who forever resides in his Akṣaradhāma being served by countless liberated souls and divine powers, where he is blissful in and of himself, but out of sheer compassion, accepts the service of Akṣara and all others (SV 7.27).

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes the throned form of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, giving special reference to the abode's extreme luminance.

There is an all-transcending mass of divine light which cannot be measured from above, below, or in any of the four directions; that is to say, it is endless. Amid this mass of light lies a large, ornate throne upon which presides the divine form of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Puruṣottama Bhagavān. Countless millions of liberated souls are seated around that throne and enjoy the darśana of God (Vac. Loyā.14).

Svāminārāyaṇa describes the divine and intense light of Akṣaradhāma in various other sermons also, calling the abode “replete with light [tejomaya]” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Gaḍh. II.39, Gaḍh. II.50, Gaḍh. III.31, Gaḍh. III.32), “a mass of light [tejno rāśi or tejno samūh]” (Vac. Loyā 14, Gaḍh. III.31), “a mass of Brahmic light [Brahmajoytino samūh]” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.36), and the “realm of light [tejnu maṇḍal]” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.33). In Vac. Var.12 he adds that it is “luminous [prakāśamān] like countless millions of suns, moons and fires”.

As bright as this may sound, though, this light is also described as extremely cool, pleasant, and beautiful. Svāminārāyaṇa begins describing this transcendental beauty in Vac. Gaḍh. I.12 with the following terms:

The abode of God is without a beginning and without an end; it is divine [‘aprākṛta’, i.e. non-māyic or not of this world], infinite and indivisible; and it is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss.

Seeking to provide some sort of visual representation after these abstract terms,

Svāminārāyaṇa then continues:

I shall describe it using an analogy. Imagine that this whole world, with all of its mountains, trees, humans, animals and all other forms, is made of glass. Also imagine that all of the stars in the sky are as bright as the sun. Then, just as this glass world would glow with extreme beauty amid this radiance, the abode of God is similarly beautiful. Devotees of God see this in samādhi and attain that luminous abode after death.

Similar descriptions of the luminous abode of God can be found at MuU 2.2.10, KaU 5.15, SU 6.14, BG. 15.6 and also CU 3.11.1-3. They all refer to it as ‘beyond the reach of the sun and moon’, i.e. worldly light, with the first three identically proclaiming that it is Akṣarabrahman’s light by which all else is illumined.

There shines not the sun. There shines not the moon or stars, nor does shine this lightning. How, then, can this fire [shine there]? By it alone, being luminous, is all else reflected. By its light is all this [world] illumined (KaU 5.15, MuU 2.2.10 & SU 6.14)

That the sun, etc. do not shine in Akṣaradhāma further points to the abode’s transcendence beyond all earthly and celestial regions. With the sun and moon also symbolic of the passages of time, it reiterates Akṣaradhāma as being eternal and beyond time. As we saw earlier:

That Akṣara is without the states of creation, sustenance and destruction. By its light, even time can be destroyed. Akṣara is stable, eternal, and the place of residence of Parameśvara.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁷ Vedarasa, p. 144.

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad also describes it as a place where “neither days nor nights, age nor death” can enter, adding:

nor sorrow, nor good or bad deeds. All impurities retreat from here. This is the pure Brahmaloka (8.4.1).

Such transcendence above time and impurities explains that Akṣaradhāma is beyond the destructive and defiling influence of māyā. This is the distinct form of Akṣarabrahman Svāminārāyaṇa describes in Vac. Sār.5,

in which there is not even a trace of the influence of Prakṛti-Puruṣa³⁵⁸, etc. and in which only Puruṣottama Bhagavān resides.

One way in which Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates Akṣaradhāma’s transcendence beyond all other realms, even those of other devatās, is by describing it as absolutely unique and incomparable to them. He states in Vac. Pan.4:

The abode of God is such that it cannot be compared to any other place in this brahmāṇḍa. Specifically, out of all of the various places in the seven dvīpas and the nine khaṇḍas, the extremely beautiful places of Brahmā and others on Meru, the various places on Mount Lokāloka, the realms of Indra, Varuṇa, Kubera, Śiva and Brahmā, and many other places, not one can compare to the abode of God.

This is why the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad at 4.3.32 describes Brahmaloka as “unique” and the “highest goal”, the “highest place”, the “highest realm”, with KaU 2.17 calling it simply “śreṣṭha”, the best. Similarly, as we saw in our study earlier, the Bhagavad-Gītā extols it as the “highest goal” (8.13 & 8.21), “highest place” (8.28), and “highest abode” (8.21 & 15.6).

³⁵⁸ As explained, ‘Prakṛti-Puruṣa’ is a shorthand term referring to the combined form of māyā [Mūla-Prakṛti] and an akṣaramukta [Mūla-Puruṣa], who together initiate the creative process.

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.24, Svāminārāyaṇa provides one reason for this uniqueness and transcendency of Akṣaradhāma above the other realms. He explains:

With the exception of God's Akṣaradhāma, the form of God in that Akṣaradhāma and his [liberated] devotees in that Akṣaradhāma, all realms, the devas inhabiting those realms, and the opulence of the devas – everything – is perishable.

Another important aspect of Akṣaradhāma further establishing its eminence is the highest, unparalleled bliss experienced there because of Parabrahman's unconcealed presence. When describing in ascending order the relative happiness of various realms and then the superiority of God's bliss, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Pan.1:

The happiness of humans exceeds the happiness of animals; and the happiness of a king exceeds that; and the happiness of devatās exceeds that; and the happiness of Indra exceeds that; then Bṛhaspati's happiness, then Brahmā's, then Vaikuṇṭha's. Beyond that, the happiness of Golok is superior, and finally, the bliss of God's Akṣaradhāma is vastly superior.

Reminiscent of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad's Ānandavallī, this is also similar to BU 4.3.33 where Yājñavalkya describes to King Janaka the happiness of the various realms in ascending order, each a hundred-fold greater than the previous, climaxing finally with the supreme bliss of Brahmaloaka.

So superior is this bliss of God's abode compared to the pleasures of the other paradisiacal realms that

it is said in [the Mahābhārata's] Mokṣadharmas³⁵⁹ that the realms of the other devatās are like naraka [i.e. hell] compared to the Akṣaradhāma of God (Vac. Sār.1).

³⁵⁹ Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 191.6.

What, then, can be said of this bliss in relation to the pleasures of the earthly realm?

Compared to the bliss of the abode of God, the māyic sensorial pleasures are like excreta. Only worms that live in excreta feel that there is profound bliss in excreta; a human would realise excreta to be nothing but utter misery (Vac. Var.19).

In reality, though, the bliss in Akṣaradhāma is simply incomparable.

The bliss experienced by the devotees of God residing in that abode is such that it cannot be compared to any other type of bliss in this brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

It is by a mere “trace” of this “supreme bliss”, explains the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, that “all other creatures survive” (4.3.32).

Furthermore, not only is Akṣaradhāma the only place where this highest bliss is available, it is available there forever, for this is a place from which there is no return to a transient, miserable existence (Vac. Sār.14, BU 6.2.15, CU 4.15.6, BG 8.21, BG 15.6, BS 4.2.2). Entry, though, is only possible to those who have reached the highest enlightened state of being brahmarūpa (Vac. Pan.7).³⁶⁰ Both of these points reaffirm Akṣaradhāma as the transcendental abode.

Another way of understanding Akṣaradhāma’s greatness is by its size.

Svāminārāyaṇa describes the immense vastness of Akṣaradhāma in Vac. Gaḍh.

I.63 and Vac. Gaḍh. II.42, stating that “countless millions of brahmāṇḍas float like

³⁶⁰ As the final place of rest after death for the liberated souls, we shall be revisiting some of these ideas when discussing liberation, as we deal also with such topics as the types of bodies that liberated souls assume in Akṣaradhāma and the ‘service’ they perform there. See Chapter 11.2.1.

mere atoms” around it. “It is not that those brahmāṇḍas become small compared to Akṣara”, he clarifies, because “they still remain encircled by the eight barriers”.

Rather, it is because of the extreme vastness of Akṣara that those brahmāṇḍas appear so small (Vac. Gaḍh. II.42).

Using an analogy, Svāminārāyaṇa further tries to explain:

Just as an ant moving on the body of a huge elephant appears insignificant, likewise, before the greatness of that Akṣara, everything else pales into insignificance (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

It is clear that Svāminārāyaṇa is talking here about Akṣarabrahman as the abode, and not the all-pervading Cidākāśa,³⁶¹ because he goes on to mention in Vac.

Gaḍh. II.42:

Moreover, God – who is Puruṣottama – forever remains present in that Akṣaradhāma.

Svāminārāyaṇa also states clearly in Vac. Loyā.12:

Countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, each encircled by the eight barriers, appear like mere atoms before Akṣara. Such is the greatness of Akṣara, the abode of Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

So large is this abode, Svāminārāyaṇa accepts, that it is unperceivable.

That Akṣara also possesses a form, but because it is so vast, its form cannot be visualised.... It is within that Akṣaradhāma that Puruṣottama Bhagavān himself eternally resides (Vac. Gaḍh. I.63).

Thus, by its size, bliss, finality, exclusivity, timelessness, imperishability, purity, luminance, and other qualities, we have attempted to understand the nature of

³⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of the problems that would arise were Akṣaradhāma not considered to be an actual place and simply like the all-pervading Cidākāśa, see Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmṛta Rahasya*, III, pp. 94-101. He also addresses questions arising from considering Akṣaradhāma as an actual place; *ibid*, pp. 87-93. See also BG-SB 8.21, pp. 190-91.

Akṣaradhāma and its transcendence. Of course, simply being the singular home of Puruṣottama – the highest being, the impassably supreme entity, the creator and controller of all brahmāṇḍas, the avatārin (cause of all avatāras), etc. – is evidently suffice in establishing it as the supreme abode, beyond all other abodes, realms and regions in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

7.4.3) Akṣarabrahman as Sevaka in Akṣaradhāma

We have already noted from Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 that Svāminārāyaṇa talks about the two types of forms of Akṣarabrahman: one which is formless, i.e. Cidākāśa; and the others which have a definite form. In that sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa specifically mentions:

In its other form, that Akṣara remains in the service of
Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.

Svāminārāyaṇa is referring to the human-shaped form of Akṣarabrahman that resides within Akṣaradhāma, itself another of its forms. As a sevaka (literally ‘servant’) there, he is the supreme devotee of Parabrahman, serving as an exemplar for all the liberated souls who are also resident within the divine realm. Together, they enjoy the bliss of Parabrahman. This is mentioned as a part of the description of the superlative, matchless bliss which forms the central theme of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad’s Ānandavallī. The long opening verse begins with a statement confirming the distinction between Brahman and the “highest”, i.e. Parabrahman, and the three terms we saw earlier describing Brahman – satyam, jñānam and anantam. It then states:

Yo veda nihitam guhāyām parame vyoman |

So'snute sarvān kāmān saha | brahmaṇā vipaściteti³⁶² |

Who knows [that Brahman] dwelling in the cavity [of the heart]
and in the highest abode, he enjoys all pleasures with the
omniscient Brahman (2.1.1).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that the person who knows the various forms of Akṣarabrahman, as including the all-pervading Cidākāśa and the abode of God, becomes liberated. Upon death, he reaches that abode of God and experiences the highest bliss along with Akṣarabrahman, who is also present there with other liberated souls.³⁶³ This verse therefore points to the form of Akṣarabrahman resident within Akṣaradhāma.

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad further describes this Akṣarabrahman “firmly residing” in that “divine Brahmapura abode” in terms suggesting a divine human-shaped form (2.2.7), which is pure, beautiful and resplendent (2.2.9).

As we also saw at the beginning of this section, MuU 2.2.1 describes this form as being “dedicated” or totally devoted (samarpita). This further reiterates that Akṣarabrahman, in *all* its forms, is first, foremost and always a devotee of Parabrahman, serving him variously in four different forms. This servitude and

³⁶² ‘vipaścita’ is another hapax legomenon. The Bhāṣyakāra explains that term in the instrumental case qualifying the neuter ‘brahmaṇā’ is composed of parts from three terms: ‘vi’ from ‘viśeṣa’, meaning ‘especially’; ‘paś’ from ‘paśyat’, meaning ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’; and ‘cit’, meaning consciousness. Together they provide the full meaning relating to Brahman’s extraordinary capacity to know all things on account of his supreme consciousness, which I have shortened in the translation below to ‘omniscient’.

³⁶³ TU-SB 2.1.1, p. 363.

devotion is perhaps most distinguishable in this human-shaped form within Akṣaradhāma.

This same transcendental form of Akṣarabrahman also manifests on earth in human form, just as Parabrahman manifested on earth as Svāminārāyaṇa (even while forever remaining present in Akṣaradhāma). It is to this, the fourth form of Akṣarabrahman, and perhaps the most important for the individual souls on earth, that we now turn.

7.4.4) Akṣarabrahman as Brahmasvarūpa Guru

If we recall, we left our chapter on Parabrahman ending on something of a cliff-hanger. We had already established that a cardinal and distinguishing doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, by which all others are illumined and consummated, is that Parabrahman – distinct from and the cause of all avatāras – himself manifests on earth in human form, and, vitally, that he chooses to remain present ever thereafter.

Our subsequent question was: How does he do this? If Svāminārāyaṇa was only present on earth from 1781 to 1830, how does Parabrahman continue to remain present to continue his work after that period? That is, to whom do the evocative words ‘God manifest before your eyes’ – which Svāminārāyaṇa uses so profusely – apply today?

We can now answer these questions about Parabrahman in this section on Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

From a careful study of the Vacanāmrut, it becomes clear that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend those words about ‘God manifest before the eyes’ to remain restricted to his presence alone for the limited time of his divine embodiment on earth. He makes the profoundly important revelation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71:

When God manifests for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas, he is always accompanied by his Akṣaradhāma, his attendants – who are formed of consciousness – and all of his divine powers.

Parabrahman, then, is never alone on earth; he is *always* accompanied by Akṣarabrahman (and some chosen liberated souls from Akṣaradhāma). So important and real is this co-manifestation of Akṣarabrahman that Svāminārāyaṇa concludes his sermon thus:

Therefore, a devotee of God should realise that the form of God along with his Akṣaradhāma is present on this earth, and he should also explain this fact to others.

It is this Akṣarabrahman – in another form, the abode of God – that is the Brahmasvarūpa Guru on earth. Just as in his eternally distinct form Parabrahman is fully manifest in his abode called Akṣaradhāma, on earth, he chooses to similarly reside in his ‘human-abode’, the same Akṣarabrahman who assumes the form of the Guru.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides two analogies in Vac. Pan.7 to help explain how this presence of Parabrahman within Akṣarabrahman can be understood. The first is of red-hot piece of iron. Having fully ‘entered’ the metal, fire “suppresses the quality of coldness and the black colour of the iron” and instead “exhibits its own

quality” of heat and redness. Similarly, “when the sun rises, the light from all of the stars, the moon, etc. merges into the sun’s own light, and only the sun’s light remains.” In the same way, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, when God ‘enters’ into the Guru, “he overpowers [Akṣarabrahman’s] light and exhibits his own divine light to a greater degree.”

In this way, Svāminārāyaṇa extends the full substantial presence³⁶⁴ of Parabrahman to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, whom, as we saw earlier, he refers to variously (and sometimes interchangeably in the same statement) as the ‘Sant’, ‘Satpuruṣa’, ‘Sādhu’, ‘Bhakta’, etc.

In Vac. Sār.10 he unequivocally reveals:

When one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, ‘I have had the darśana of God himself’.

These remarkable words epitomise the doctrine that God is present in and functions through the Guru. As we learnt in ‘Parabrahman as Pragaṭa’ in the previous chapter, ‘seeing’ within such theological contexts is indicative of the face-to-face meeting with God, a personal, intimate encounter and relationship

³⁶⁴ Of course, Parabrahman has a presence in all beings and things. However, his *substantial* presence in Akṣarabrahman is like in no other entity or element. After narrating the creative process involving the various entities and elements, Svāminārāyaṇa explains this point in Vac. Gaḍh. I.41, beginning:

Puruṣottama Bhagavān enters and dwells in all of the above as their cause and antaryāmin. However, he does not manifest in Prakṛti-Puruṣa to the extent he manifests in Akṣara; and he does not manifest in Pradhāna-Puruṣa to the extent that he manifests in Prakṛti-Puruṣa; and he does not manifest in...

continuing until all the creative constituents have been included. Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, Parabrahman resides most fully in Akṣarabrahman.

with him. While the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is revealed in and by the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to have seen the Guru is to have seen God; to have met the Guru is to have met God.

This also has an equally powerful implication from God's side. If the devotees see and relate to God through the Guru, it is just as true that God reciprocates by meeting and relating with his devotees through the Guru as well. The Guru is thus the mediator between humans and God, making possible the personal encounter that Svāminārāyaṇa stressed was the prime reason for Parabrahman's manifestation on earth. Equally, then, to have been seen by the Guru is to have been seen by God; to have been blessed by the Guru is to have been blessed by God.

Such emphatic statements are validated by the Upaniṣads (which we shall consider shortly) and Svāminārāyaṇa when he reveals the full presence of God in the Guru. For example, in explaining in Vac. Gaḍh. I.27 the "countless types of powers" of the Guru, he adds:

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes, he empowers the eyes of all of the beings in the brahmāṇḍa; and since it is God who walks through his legs, he is also capable of endowing the strength to walk to the legs of all of the beings in the brahmāṇḍa.

He goes on to conclude:

Thus, since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant, that Sant is able to empower the senses and limbs of

all beings in the brahmāṇḍa. Therefore, such a Sant is the sustainer [ādhāra] of the world.³⁶⁵

It is noteworthy that Svāminārāyaṇa relates both the Guru's cognitive sense-organs (jñāna indriya) as well as his conative sense-organs (karma indriya) – reflected in the specific examples of the eyes and feet – as being inhabited by God. He then expands this by mentioning “sarva indriya”, implying that all parts of the Guru's being are imbued with God's presence. This leads to the belief that God knows and functions through the Guru, and fully lives on through him.

This explains what Svāminārāyaṇa means when he says “such a Sant has a direct relationship [sākṣāt saṁbandh] with God” (Vac. Gaḍh. III.27). It is a direct, complete and substantive relationship.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reinforces this relationship in his sermon at SV 5.392 when he states:

The association of the Sādhu is a direct relationship with God and leads to the bliss of God. Why? Because God fully resides in the Sādhu.

Further along in the same sermon, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī is posed with an important question that we also need to address as a part of this elucidation on the Guru and the continued manifestation of God. A member from the assembly asked him:

Is not God manifest before the eyes through the mūrtis?

³⁶⁵ This also resonates with the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad statements of Yājñavalkya which talk of Akṣara as upholding the whole universe. See BU-SB 3.8.9, pp. 193-95.

It is a valid question borne of theological reflection and practice since mūrtis (sacred images ritually infused with the presence of the deity) hold a key role in the daily worship of God. The presence of God in them is undeniable, with Svāminārāyaṇa himself mentioning in Vac. Gaḍh. I.68 that God resides in the various types of mūrtis as well as in the Sant. However, is God's presence in mūrtis the same as it is in the Guru?

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī provides an extensive answer based on other Vacanāmṛut sermons (primarily Vac. Var.12), before concluding emphatically:

Therefore, only the walking-talking form of God should be understood as the manifest form before the eyes. Indeed, it is the great Sant who infuses the mūrti with the presence of God. Mūrtis, scriptures and places of pilgrimage cannot together form a Sādhū, but it is the great Sant who forms all three. Therefore, only the Sant in whom God fully resides is the manifest form of God before the eyes.

To iterate this unique theological status of the Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa extols him in his sermons in the highest possible manner, often in the first person. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.37 he goes as far as to say:

Even I place the dust of his feet on my head. In my mind, I am afraid of hurting him, and I also long to have his darśana.... The darśana of such a perfect Bhakta of God is equivalent to the darśana of God himself. He is so great that his darśana alone can redeem countless fallen souls (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37).

As he lauds the Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa also firmly and repeatedly warns against hurting or maligning him, often showing dire and irreparable spiritual consequences if one does [Vac. Gaḍh. I.1, Gaḍh. I.35, Gaḍh. I.53, Gaḍh. I.58, Gaḍh. I.73, Sār.18, Loyā.1, Gaḍh. II.46, Gaḍh. III.12]. In this regard, Vac. Var.14 is

especially noteworthy for its mention of ‘seeking the refuge of the Satpuruṣa’ and the pre-eminence of this above all other forms of dharmic living.

Thus, by seeking the refuge of the Satpuruṣa, regardless of how terrible a sinner a person may be, he becomes extremely pure and attains samādhī. On the other hand, a person who maligns the Satpuruṣa is still a terrible sinner, regardless of how sincere he may seem to be in abiding by dharma. Moreover, he can never have the realisation of God in his heart.

Conversely, Svāminārāyaṇa also stresses that serving the Guru and earning his favour is tantamount to serving God and earning God’s favour. That is why he explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on how to serve the Guru “like God” in Vac. Var.5 by instructing “equal service” of both, further establishing the full presence of God in the Guru. He states:

Just as one performs the mānsi pūjā [worship by mental visualisation] of God, if one also performs the mānsi pūjā of the highest Bhakta along with God; and just as one prepares an offering of food for God, similarly, if one also prepares an offering for God’s highest Bhakta and serves it to him; and just as one donates five rupees to God, similarly, if one also donates money to the great Sant – then, by performing with extreme affection such equal service of God and the Sant who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest calibre and was destined to become a devotee of the highest calibre after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after a hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life. Such are the fruits of the equal service of God and God’s Bhakta (Vac. Var.5).

Serving the Guru is thus serving God, the fruit of which can accelerate one spiritually a hundred-fold.

Svāminārāyaṇa substantiates the service of the Guru in Vac. Gaḍh. II.28 by adding his personal example again. He says:

Even I am the devotee of such a perfect Bhakta of God and offer my devotion to the Bhakta of God.

Equally remarkable statements continue throughout the rest of this sermon, in which Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates in various ways the influential theological role of the Guru.

Those who have perceived flaws in the Bhakta of God, even though they were very great, have fallen from their status of eminence. Those who progress do so only by serving the Bhakta of God, and those who regress do so only by maligning the Bhakta of God.

“In fact,” Svāminārāyaṇa declares, such is the direct relationship between God and Guru that

the only method for a person to please God is to serve the Bhakta of God by thought, word and deed. The only method to displease God is to malign the Bhakta of God.

Perhaps feeling that he had still not emphasised his point about the Guru enough, Svāminārāyaṇa completed his address with the following emphatic addendum:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline.

The soteriological imperative at the conclusion of the sermon here confirms that the ‘Bhakta’ Svāminārāyaṇa has referred to throughout these statements

consistently refers only to the Guru but not other devotees of God, however eminent.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon the 'king' analogy that we saw being used many times throughout the exposition of Parabrahman. Here, Svāminārāyaṇa still reserves the kingship for God, but includes the Guru as his 'queen'. He explains:

For example, in a kingdom, the queen reigns over the same land the king reigns over, and the queen has the same authority as the king's authority.³⁶⁶ In the same way, that Sādhū has the very same influence as God's influence (Vac. Gaḍh. II.22).

What is especially remarkable about all these statements is that they are being made by Svāminārāyaṇa, who has already revealed himself as Parabrahman. He evidently felt that revealing the Guru as bearing the full substantial presence of God would in no way undermine or compete with his own position as being Parabrahman in person. What this tells us about God in Svāminārāyaṇa theology is that Parabrahman remains Parabrahman – the one without second; impassable and unchallengeable. Yet his full glory and work is fulfilled through the Guru when Parabrahman is not personally present. Thus the cognate doctrines of Pragaṭa and Akṣarabrahman as Guru point to a continued presence of Parabrahman not limited to Svāminārāyaṇa's own time on earth.

³⁶⁶ This of course relates to the Indian conception of monarchy from the early nineteenth century.

This is brought most dramatically to light in the matter of liberation. For example, in Vac. Var.10, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him.

God thus continues his liberative work through the Guru.

Here, we should pause for some theological reflection to clarify and confirm the important issue about the metaphysical identity of the Guru.

Who is this Guru that Svāminārāyaṇa extols so profusely and to whom he affords such a prominent role throughout his sermons? Cannot the ‘Sant’ or ‘Sādhu’ from these many statements refer to any ordained monk of the Svāminārāyaṇa order, or the ‘Bhakta’ refer to any devotee of the fellowship, or the ‘Satpuruṣa’ refer to any noble person? How can we be certain that it is Akṣarabrahman that Svāminārāyaṇa revealed accompanies Parabrahman on earth?

The answer to this crucial question about the being of the Guru lies in his function that Svāminārāyaṇa reveals in these very statements. Throughout, he identifies the Guru with the work of liberation, as in the statement above from Vac. Var.10. As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 he firstly describes the insurmountability of māyā and how “no jīva can conquer it”. Then in explaining “the means to transcend[ing] māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā

and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

As we learnt at the very opening of this Part, the Svāminārāyaṇa School has accepted five metaphysical entities. Of these five, only two – Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman – transcend māyā, and so only they can possibly liberate others from it. Yet Svāminārāyaṇa mentions above that both “Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān” and “the Sant” can do this. What does this tell us about the metaphysical identity of the Guru? He is not Parabrahman, who, as we know, is one without second. But if the Guru is capable of functioning as liberator, then he must be Akṣarabrahman.

The same conclusion can be derived by bringing together two sermons Svāminārāyaṇa delivered at Vac. Sār.7 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.73. In the first, he unravels the significance behind an analogy found in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa alluded to at 1.1.4, that the ‘wheel’s edges are blunted at the sacred place of Naimikṣārāyaṇa Kṣetra’. He explains that the ‘wheel’ is the incessantly spinning mind and its jagged ‘edges’ are the senses (cognitive and conative). They are blunted, i.e. purified, in the holy association of the Sant, therefore he should be known as the metaphorical ‘Naimikṣārāyaṇa Kṣetra’. There (i.e. with him), he instructs, “one should seek liberation” and “remain there with an absolutely resolute mind.”

In the second sermon, Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, Svāminārāyaṇa states clearly that “the senses are the edges of the mind-wheel” and “they are blunted only by the

complete realisation of Brahman and Parabrahman.” Here Svāminārāyaṇa mentions both Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as instrumental in ‘blunting the edges’ of the mind, whereas in Vac. Sār.7 he pointed to only the Sant. The Sant is not Parabrahman. Therefore, he must be the other entity mentioned at Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, i.e. Akṣarabrahman.

But does this not undermine the unique and exclusive relationship one is to have with God? Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa himself instructs in Vac. Gaḍh. III.16, drawing upon one of his oft-used analogies:

A devotee should have firm fidelity to God. Specifically, like a woman who observes the vow of fidelity, he would never develop the same affection towards even other mukta sadhus, however great they may be, as he has developed towards whichever form of God he has had the darśana of. Nor does he develop affection for other avatāras of his Īṣṭadeva. He keeps affection only for the form that he has attained, and he acts according to his wishes only. If he does happen to respect others, it is only because of their association with his God. One who, like a faithful wife, has such faithful devotion towards one’s own Īṣṭadeva, never develops affection on seeing others, however virtuous they may be.

Clarifying and strengthening his point, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

For example, Hanumānjī is a devotee of Śrī Raghunāthajī. Following the avatāra of Rāma, there have been many other avatāras of God, but Hanumānjī’s devotion has been like that of a woman who observes the vow of fidelity, as he has remained faithful to Rāmacandrajī only. This is why Hanumānjī’s devotion is considered to be like that of a faithful wife. The devotion of a devotee of God who has such fidelity can be said to be like that of a faithful wife. Conversely, if a person does not have such an inclination, his devotion can be said to be like that of a prostitute. Therefore, one should not knowingly engage in devotion that would cause one to be disgraced. Instead, a devotee of God should thoughtfully engage in faithful devotion – like that of a faithful wife.

And yet, Svāminārāyaṇa also instructs, in the most clear and emphatic words, to associate with and develop profound love for the Guru. For example, after citing verse 3.25.20 from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, which he translates as

If a person maintains profound love towards the Ekāntika Sant of God just as resolutely as he maintains profound love towards his own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens for him,

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

Maintaining profound love towards such a Sant also opens the gateway to liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. I.54).

In another sermon he states:

For a person who desires his own liberation, nothing in this world is more blissful than God and his Sant. Therefore, just as a person is profoundly attached to his own body, he should be similarly attached to God and his Sant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

How can these statements be reconciled with that equally clear and emphatic teaching of Vac. Gaḍh. III.16 where not even muktaś are to be loved on par with God? It tells us, firstly, that the Guru is not a liberated soul; a mukta is liberated, yes, but nonetheless a soul like any other, who, by the very definition of 'liberated', was once bound by māyā. Rather, he must be something metaphysically greater than a liberated soul, something that has never been shackled or sullied by māyā. Only two such māyā-transcending entities exist: Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. The Guru is not God. Therefore, the Guru is Akṣarabrahman. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

Throughout the Vacanāmṛta, we find a similar and widely recurrent theme of the Guru being revealed in his soteriological role and as someone with whom to have

such a devotional relationship. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa unequivocally urges at Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve
such a Sant.

The Upaniṣads are similarly unequivocal, not only on the absolute need for a Guru to transcend māyā and realise the highest, final, brahmic state of enlightenment, but also on the Guru’s metaphysical credentials. For example, as part of the continuing elucidation of brahmavidyā in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, each aspirant is instructed thus:

Tad-vijñānārtham sa gurum evābhigacchet samidh-paniḥ
śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭhaṁ |

To realise that [higher knowledge of Akṣara (or Brahman) and Puruṣa (or Parabrahman), i.e. brahmavidyā], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is Brahman, who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, and who is firmly established [in God] (MuU 1.2.12).

By splitting “brahma” and “niṣṭhaṁ” normally considered as a single compounded term, the Bhāṣyakāra provides the crucial distinction here that the Guru is one not just ‘established in Brahman’ [brahmaṇi niṣṭha], but ‘the very form of Brahman’ [brahmasvarūpa eva]. Hence, the correct qualifier for the Guru is ‘brahmasvarūpa’ – the form of Brahman (or Akṣarabrahman).

This means the Guru is further qualified by two adjectives: niṣṭhaṁ, which reveals that he is “entirely and eternally established [nīṭāntam nityam tiṣṭhatī] in Parabrahman”; and śrotriyaṁ, which has the richly multifarious meaning of one who not only is well-versed in the true meaning of the revealed texts, but has a

direct and full realisation [sākṣātkāra] of them, which means that he has effortlessly applied their principles in his life, and who, by his own exemplary life [ācāra] and teachings [upadeśa], can adeptly convey those principles to those keen on seeking liberation.

The Bhāṣyakāra also makes clear what this list of essential credentials does *not* include. He emphasises this by way of the accentuating “eva” used in the statement. Not only, he explains, does it mean that it is *essential* to seek the refuge of such a guru in order to gain brahnavidyā, i.e. there is absolutely no other way to assimilate the highest theological knowledge, but also that one should seek the refuge of *only* such a guru, and not any other who may bear some semblance to a guru by way of his ochre robes, erudition, oratory skills, institutional power, large following, etc. but who in fact does not have the realisation of the revealed texts and is not metaphysically Akṣarabrahman.³⁶⁷

When expanding upon KaU 2.8-9 –

It [liberative knowledge] is difficult to grasp when taught by an inferior man, even though one may be highly contemplative. Yet there is no way to it without it being taught by the non-inferior [i.e. superior teacher, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru], [for] it is subtler than an atom [and] beyond the realm of reason. Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation. Yet, Dearest [Naciketas], it is well known when taught by the other [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] (KaU 2.8-9).

– the Bhāṣyakāra again draws a particularly sharp contrast between the essential bona fide Guru, who must above all be Akṣarabrahman, and the “inferior”

³⁶⁷ MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56.

teachers of brahmavidyā. Those who fall under this latter category are, he explains, they who worship merely the words of scriptures (rather than their meaning or practice), who are interested in mere debates about the Vedas (but not understanding their true meanings), who determine meanings of words independently (without appeal to revelation), who have not sought the refuge of a Guru themselves, who are unbelievers, who have imperfect knowledge, whose intellect on the spiritual path has been afflicted by unbridled reason, who are of weak faith, who identify with the body (rather than the soul), and who do not have a direct realisation of the ‘Akṣara-Puruṣottama siddhānta’.³⁶⁸

The Upaniṣads provide further evidence of the Guru being Akṣarabrahman by using a term which also elucidates his role in connecting humans to God. He is repeatedly described as the “setu”, or bridge.

Yaḥ setuḥ-ijānānām akṣaram brahma yat param |

The bridge for those who offer sacrifices is Akṣarabrahman, the highest (KaU 3.2).

Amṛtasyaiṣa setuḥ |

This is the bridge to the immortal (MuU 2.2.5).

Atha ya ātmā sa setu... |

Now, the Soul [of all] is the bridge... (CU 8.4.1).

Amṛtasya param setum... |

The best bridge to immortality... (SU 6.19).³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ KaU-SB 2.8, p. 91.

³⁶⁹ See also the other analogy used at SU 2.8, of Akṣarabrahman being a boat [uḍupa] used by the wise to cross the frightful forces of māyā.

In all four instances, the Bhāṣyakāra describes Akṣarabrahman as the bridge spanning across the incessantly gushing “great river of saṃsāra” (perpetual transmigration from birth to death and rebirth brought on by the ignorance which is māyā), allowing one to cross from this side of a worldly, transient and sorrow-mixed existence over to a divine, eternal and purely blissful existence with God.

The Bhāṣyakāra adds that the Guru thus serves as a “mādhyama”, literally ‘medium’, so that devotees can “reach” God and personally experience him – know him and love him – here and now on earth. As we noted, one – if not the prime – purpose of Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth in human form is to accept the loving devotion of his beloved devotees (Vac. Kār.5). While Svāminārāyaṇa was able to do this during his own presence on earth, this is still possible for the devotees by serving the Guru, through whom God also accepts the devotees’ devotion. That is why, as we saw, Svāminārāyaṇa advocates serving the Guru on par with God (Vac. Var.5, Vac. Gaḍh. III.26).

Extrapolating the analogy at KaU 3.2, the Bhāṣyakāra also adds that just as an expansive bridge can save even the strongest of swimmers from unknown dangers which lurk beneath the surface of treacherous waters, so, too, the Guru provides a safe transit across the unpredictable and sometimes dangerous course of māyic life.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ KaU-SB 3.2, pp. 123-24.

Interestingly, he also explains at MuU 2.2.5 that the analogy reiterates the distinction between the five metaphysical entities of Svāminārāyaṇa theology: if the bridge is Akṣarabrahman and the ‘other side’ is Parabrahman, what the bridge spans over is māyā and those who need the bridge to cross over it are jīvas and īśvaras.³⁷¹ What this also tells us, importantly, is that even while the Guru’s position can hardly be overstated, he remains the bridge, the means; he never becomes the end, which is always and only Parabrahman. Worship – or ‘upāsanā’, as it is more correctly known – is always of Parabrahman (the upāsya, or worshipping), albeit in his most accessible form manifest through the Guru. Thus, whatever reverence or devotion or praise is offered to the Guru, it is with the good knowledge that Parabrahman is fully residing within him and who is ultimately accepting the devotion. To recall the analogy introduced earlier of holy water within a vessel: in wishing to offer pūjā of the water, one must perform the pūjā of the vessel which contains the water. Similarly, if one serves the Guru it is because he is the vessel containing Parabrahman. The vessel and the contents never become one. Thus, of all the glory of the Guru mentioned above, upāsanā – loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge, as we have come to define it³⁷² – is exclusively of Parabrahman. The meaning of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Upāsanā, a technical name related to brahmavidyā describing the theological underpinning of some denominations of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, is thus not the worship of Akṣara *and* Puruṣottama, but

³⁷¹ MuU-SB 2.2.5, p. 274.

³⁷² As a shorthand definition for ‘upāsanā’, this will suffice for now, but it’s broad and multilayered meaning would require much more treatment in an independent study.

the worship of Puruṣottama *as* Akṣara; offering perfect devotion after realising the perfectly enlightened state of being like Akṣarabrahman (akṣararūpa or brahmarūpa) [e.g. Vac. Loyā.12; Vac. Gaḍh. II.3] – for which Akṣarabrahman is obviously essential. Akṣarabrahman is, after all, first, foremost and always a devotee of God; the perfect devotee of Parabrahman. And as great as he may be in relation to all other entities, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru is infinitely subordinate to Parabrahman himself (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Vac. Loyā.13).³⁷³

In balance, then, the Guru is metaphysically Akṣarabrahman in entity and eternally and ontologically distinct from and subordinate to Parabrahman, yet he serves as the complete and perfect medium for God's presence – his love, bliss, blessings, grace, etc. – and, importantly, functions as the means to securing eternal communion with God in final liberation.

There are clear and crucial connections here with liberation as well, and we shall clarify at its appropriate point how exactly the Guru facilitates it.³⁷⁴ Now, it is important to simply affirm that because of his role in liberating souls from māyā and leading them to Parabrahman, the 'Sant', 'Sādhu', 'Bhakta', 'Satpuruṣa', etc. mentioned in all such statements denotes only the māyā-transcending Akṣarabrahman Guru.

³⁷³ For a more extensive discussion of the meaning of 'Akṣara-Puruṣottama Upāsanā', see Brahmadarshandas, *Vacanāmṛta Rahasya*, III, pp. 195-214.

³⁷⁴ See especially section 11.3.2.

Such statements abound. Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly refers to such a Guru in the Vacanāmṛt immediately alongside God – quite literally, as ‘God and God’s Sant’, ‘God and God’s Bhakta’, etc. – when covering a range of important theological topics. While there are too many instances to cite them all individually, an overview should provide a sufficient idea of the emphasis Svāminārāyaṇa places on the Guru throughout the Vacanāmṛt.

- Attaining God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I. 14, Gaḍh. I.78, Gaḍh. II.59, Gaḍh. II.66
- Loving God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. II.63, Gaḍh. III.7, Gaḍh. III.11
- Realising God and the Guru to be divine: Vac. Loyā.18, Gaḍh. II.63
- Having faith in the words of God and the Guru: Vac. Sār.5, Sār.9, Loyā.2, Loyā.10
- Association of God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. II.28
- Resolute faith in God and the Guru: Vac. Loyā.3
- Greatness of God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, Kār.9, Loyā.3, Loyā.8, Loyā.16, Loyā.17, Gaḍh. II.21, Gaḍh. II.62, Gaḍh. III.14, Gaḍh. III.28
- Obeying God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.15, Gaḍh. I.16, Sār.2, Gaḍh. II.26
- Serving God and the Guru: Vac. Gaḍh. I.2, Gaḍh. I.8, Gaḍh. I.31, Loyā.8, Gaḍh. II.25, Gaḍh. II.41, Gaḍh. II.63, Var.5, Var.17, Amd.3
- God and the Guru as liberators: Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, Var.10, Var.19, Gaḍh. III.7

In addition, while in several sermons Svāminārāyaṇa mentions God alone, in several others he mentions only the Guru when discussing many of these topics above as well as a few others (Vac. Gaḍh. I.44, Gaḍh. I.54, Gaḍh. I.55, Gaḍh. I.58,

Gaḍh. I.60, Gaḍh. I.66, Sār.7, Sār.10, Sār.18, Loyā.12, Gaḍh. II.7, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.13, Gaḍh. II.28, Gaḍh. II.51, Gaḍh. II.54, Var.4, Var.11, Var.14, Gaḍh. III.2, Gaḍh. III.5, Gaḍh. III.26, Gaḍh. III.27).³⁷⁵

As we draw this section to a close, and with it the chapter on Akṣarabrahman – and apparently now, also the chapter on Parabrahman – it should be evident that the doctrine which Svāminārāyaṇa was most prolific about and for which he reserved some of his most emphatic statements was the doctrine of Pragaṭa – Parabrahman living on and working through Akṣarabrahman in the form of the Guru – a principle he feels is so essential that “there is no option but to understand it,” whether “after being told once, or after being told a thousand times”, whether “today, or after a thousand years.” It is the crux of “all the fundamental principles” and “the essence of all of the scriptures” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.21]; the “one central principle” of all śruti and smṛti texts [Vac. Gaḍh. II.59]. Indeed, this is “the most profound and fundamental principle”, “the essence of all essences”, “the essence” of all words “on this earth pertaining to liberation”, and the very “lifeline” of all those on the path to liberation – past, present and future [Vac. Gaḍh. II.28]. This is because Parabrahman fully resides in the Guru [Vac. Gaḍh. I.27]. So complete and substantive is this presence, that seeing him is seeing God [Vac. Sār.10, Gaḍh. I.37]; serving him is serving God; maligning him is maligning God [Vac. Gaḍh. II.28, Gaḍh. III.26, Var.5, Var.14].

³⁷⁵ I am grateful to Sadhu Brahmadarshandas for this study of Svāminārāyaṇa’s sermons from the Vacanāmṛut presented in his *Vacanāmṛut Rahasya*, III, pp. 174-75.

In this way, Parabrahman is entirely present and graciously active through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, who accompanied him on earth and through whom Parabrahman remains forever present, continuing his liberative work among the people and allowing them a direct and personal relationship with him. Though not God himself, all statements containing the words 'God manifest before the eyes' thus now refer forthrightly and exclusively to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

8) JĪVA

- **Nature of Jīva**
 - Distinct from the Body, Senses & Inner Faculties
 - The Three Bodies of the Jīva
 - The Three States of the Jīva
 - Sat-Cit-Ānanda and Pure
 - Knower
 - Atomicity
 - Agent and Enjoyer
 - Imperishability, Eternality, Individuality and Immutability
 - Multiplicity
- **Relationship with Parabrahman**
 - Understanding the Self to Understand and Relate to God
 - Dependent and Free

8) JĪVA

This is a good juncture to briefly pause and consult our roadmap, to look back on where we have come from and how far we have left to travel in our introductory exposition of the major themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

At the opening of this Part, we had been introduced to the five eternal metaphysical entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta: Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara, and jīva. As an initial overview, we learned that the entities were contrasted in their natures by virtue of their sentiency; the first two and last two are sentient, spiritual entities, whereas māyā is essentially insentient and material. Another way of categorising them, we observed, was that Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman transcend and are free of māyā, whereas jīvas and īśvaras are bound by māyā.

Having completed extensive expositions of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, the two highest entities, we now move on in the subsequent, smaller chapters to expounding upon the remaining three entities – jīva, īśvara and māyā – ending finally with some elucidation on the topic of mukti (liberation).

A brief explanation of my choice of sequence will be helpful as we go forward. After Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, both of which are sentient and beyond māyā, we shall firstly be moving on to expounding upon jīva and īśvara, which are also sentient but within māyā. This will mean that we will be covering all four of the spiritual entities first, before progressing on to the material māyā. Of the

two – jīvas and īśvaras – ontologically, īśvaras transcend jīvas. However, with īśvaras being so similar to jīvas, and with more to say about jīvas, it makes sense to cover the finer souls first before looking at the distinguishing features of īśvaras thereafter. My reason for dealing with these sentient entities first and holding back on expounding upon māyā is that the chapter on māyā will contain discussions about creation (how jīvas receive their bodies and the role of īśvaras in each brahmāṇḍa, for which a primary understanding of jīvas and īśvaras will be necessary) and ignorance (which forms the bondage of jīvas and īśvaras, therefore also serving as a better link to the final chapter on mukti, i.e. liberation from that māyic bondage).

And so we proceed, firstly, with the exposition of the nature of the jīva.

8.1) Nature of Jīva

Every living being (human, animal, insect, plant, fungus, etc.) is ensouled by – indeed, *is* – a spiritual entity.³⁷⁶ Svāminārāyaṇa calls it the ‘jīva’ – from the Sanskrit verb-root ‘jiv’, to breath or to live – sometimes also referring to it as the ‘ātman’ or ‘jīvātman’.

When once asked in an assembly by a devotee,

Mahārāja, what is the nature of the jīva? Please reveal it to me as it is,

³⁷⁶ We shall see in the following chapter how īśvaras may also embody a human form on earth in order to secure their liberation.

his reply was a succinct exposition which provides for us a useful introductory overview before we subsequently enter into the specifics. Svāminārāyaṇa explained:

The jīva is uncuttable, unpierceable, immortal, consciousness, and the size of an atom. You may also ask, ‘Where does the jīva reside?’ Well, it resides within the space of the heart, and while staying there, it performs different functions. From there, when it wants to see, it does so through the eyes; when it wants to hear sounds, it does so through the ears; it smells all types of smells through the nose; it tastes through the tongue; and through the skin, it experiences the pleasures of all sensations. In addition, it thinks through the mind, contemplates through the citta, and forms convictions through the intelligence. In this manner, through the ten senses and the four inner faculties, it experiences all of the sense-objects. It pervades the entire body from head to toe, yet is distinct from it. Such is the nature of the jīva (Vac. Jet.2).

In what follows, we look more closely at each of these aspects.

8.1.1) Distinct from the Body, Senses & Inner Faculties

A good place to start in expounding upon the jīva is where Svāminārāyaṇa ends in the summary above, to discount what the jīva is *not*. In being the conscious spirit which is the actual subject of a person’s ‘I’ – the very being of one’s self; indeed, the “self” itself – it is largely misidentified with the somatic body and its associated elements, the senses, mind, intellect, etc. Svāminārāyaṇa therefore repeatedly and firmly instructs spiritual aspirants to realise their true self to be the soul within, not the external body [Vac. Gaḍh. I.16, Gaḍh. I.21, Gaḍh. I.38, Gaḍh. I.44, Gaḍh. I.61, Gaḍh. I.72, Gaḍh. I.73, Sār.1, Sār.4, Sār.9, Sār.10, Sār.12, Loyā.17, Pan.3, Gaḍh. II.1, Gaḍh. II.2, Gaḍh. II.6, Gaḍh. II.33, Gaḍh. II.57, Var.8, Gaḍh. III.19, Gaḍh. III.24, Gaḍh. III.26, Gaḍh. III.33, Jet.3]. As an example,

Svāminārāyaṇa urges and describes a correct self-understanding in Vac. Gaḍh.

II.2 thus:

In this body resides the jīva, and the senses and inner faculties have attached themselves to that jīva. They have also attached themselves externally to the sense-objects. However, out of ignorance, the jīva believes those senses and the inner faculties to be its own form, whereas in actual fact, it is distinct from them.... One should think, 'I am the ātman, and the senses and inner faculties are absolutely unrelated to me.'

In attempting to emphasise the complete disassociation between the jīva and the physical body, Svāminārāyaṇa often juxtaposes both, highlighting their sharply contrary qualities.

One should realise the ātman as follows: 'I am sentient, while the body is insentient. I am pure, whereas the body is full of naraka [i.e. hellish defilement]. I am imperishable, while the body is perishable. I am blissful, whereas the body is full of misery' (Vac. Sār.1).

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates in a later sermon:

One should clearly understand, 'I am the ātman, and not a single one of my characteristics can be found in the body. Moreover, not one of the characteristics of the body – which is insentient, full of misery, and perishable – can be found in me since I am sentient' (Vac. Sār.4).

In yet another sermon, in response to the question,

How should one think of one's ātman?

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly replies:

One should ascribe the attributes of the body unto the body and the attributes of the seer [soul] – the conscious spirit– unto the spirit. Also, childhood, youth, old age, stoutness, thinness, birth and death are all aspects of the body; they should never be thought of as belonging to the ātman. On the other hand, being uncuttable, unpierceable, unaging, immortal, formed of jnāna, blissful, and

characterised by eternal existence are all aspects of the ātman; they should in no way be considered to belong to the body. Instead, those attributes should be understood to belong to the ātman (Vac. Sār.12).³⁷⁷

The differentiation emphasised here by Svāminārāyaṇa is one of mutual exclusion, where not only are the jīva's desirable qualities not to be found in and attributed to the body, but, equally, neither should the body's flaws and deficiencies be ascribed to or found in the jīva. In addition to providing a correct spiritual self-understanding, what Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be guarding against is an unhealthy preoccupation with the physical body which would inevitably detract one from spiritual praxis.

Along the same line, Svāminārāyaṇa adds that an inevitable corollary of a false understanding of the self as the body is a false and detracting attachment to whatever is associated with that body, such as the body's biological parents or its place of birth and social rank, and also its wealth and possessions in general. For example, he explains:

The jīva has a misconception in that it does not believe itself to be the jivātman, i.e. distinct from the body. Instead, it believes itself to be the body. To illustrate how the body clings to the jivātman, consider a person who wears a shirt after having it sewn by a tailor. That person then begins to believe, 'The tailor is my father and the tailor's wife is my mother.' Such a person would be considered a fool. In the same manner, the jivātman is given a shirt in the form of this body³⁷⁸, which is born sometimes to a Brāhmaṇa couple, sometimes to a couple of a lower social order, or in any of the 8.4 million life-forms (Vac. Gaḍh. I.44).

³⁷⁷ See also Vac. Gaḍh. I.72.

³⁷⁸ The analogy of a shirt as a body for the soul closely resembles that used at BG 2.22. Here, Svāminārāyaṇa extends it to relate the tailor of the shirt to a person's parents.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on the jīva's previous lives and why such a sense of "I'-ness [ahaṃtā]" for the body and "'my'-ness [mamatā]" for its relatives and belongings is so utterly foolish.

This body should not be believed to be one's true self. Nor should one's bodily relations be regarded as one's true relations. This is because the jīva has previously assumed 8.4 million bodies. In fact, the jīva has taken birth in the wombs of all females in this world; it has also taken birth numerous times in the wombs of all dogs, cats, monkeys, and all other types of life-forms in the cycle of 8.4 million life-forms. Moreover, of all the different types of females in this world, which has it not previously made its wife? All have been its wife at one time or another. Similarly, assuming numerous female bodies, that jīva has also made all of the different forms of males its husband. Hence, just as one does not believe the relations of those previous 8.4 million life-forms to be one's true relations, and just as one does not believe the bodies of those 8.4 million life-forms to be one's true body, similarly, one should not believe this present body to be one's true self, nor should one believe the relations of this body to be one's true relations. Why? Because just as no relationship remains with bodies from the previous 8.4 million life-forms, similarly, the relationship with this body will not remain either.

Therefore, Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

That ātman is neither a Brāhmaṇa, nor a Kṣatriya, nor a Kaṇbi³⁷⁹. It is no one's son and no one's father. It is of no social order and no community (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Furthermore:

The body – be it male or female – is material and perishable, but the jivātman, the worshipper, is neither male nor female. It is characterised by pure existence and consciousness (Vac. Gaḍh. III.22).

³⁷⁹ A sub-division of the Vaiśya order of communities, traditionally engaged in trade and commerce.

This important doctrine clearly has wide-reaching implications in a number of critical ways, least not socially and politically, and in fields such as medical ethics, human rights, gender studies, etc. It also raises important questions about how such a spiritual understanding of the self can, for example, be reconciled with maintaining one's physical health, or how such an understanding of one's relatives can accommodate a healthy family life or meaningful relationships with anyone. While it will not be possible to explore the full gamut of all these topics and questions in this introductory theological study, we shall, however, touch upon some of them at their proper points over the course of our discussions in subsequent chapters.

Here, we can briefly consider one aspect of such a self-realisation on how a person views him or herself and how one sees and behaves with others. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs in Vac. Gaḍh. III.12:

One who desires one's own liberation should not harbour any form of vanity – such as, 'I have been born in an upper-class family,' or 'I am wealthy,' or 'I am handsome,' or 'I am a scholar.' One should not keep any of these types of beliefs. In fact, even with a meek member of the fellowship, one should behave as a servant of servants.

The conceited beliefs that Svāminārāyaṇa advises against are the same aspects of the physical self mentioned above that he argues is not one's true identity. Thus, a correct understanding of one's self as the ātman guards one from such mistakes. Svāminārāyaṇa's mention here of how to humbly behave with a meek and otherwise modest fellow devotee – who may not be of the same social rank

and as wealthy, attractive or intelligent – is also instructive and borne of the same spiritual understanding.

Equally important, it must be noted, is that this knowledge is applicable not only to counter arrogance and egotism in times of praise and success, but also the opposite; to provide stability in the face of censure and failure, and prevent self-deprecation against such supposed shortcomings as physical unattractiveness, unintelligence, lower social standing, etc. If the attractive should not be vainglorious of their physical attractiveness, nor should the unattractive despise themselves for their unattractiveness. While geniuses should be accorded the appropriate respect and admiration, those of lesser talent and intelligence should not be derided. On a spiritual plane, it clears the playing field of all material, worldly factors. Of course, Svāminārāyaṇa is not suggesting that beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty, intelligence and vacuousness, and high and low status are in and of themselves bad or good; it is the conceit and disesteem brought on from them which he is warning against. What matters most spiritually, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, is one's complete and undisturbed relationship with God, for which, as we shall see further on, such a spiritual self-awareness is essential.³⁸⁰

³⁸⁰ See section 8.2.1.

8.1.1.1) The Three Bodies of the Jīva

In distinguishing the jīva from all that is not the self, it is apparent from Svāminārāyaṇa's statements above that he not only means the visible somatic body but also the non-visible senses and psychological self. Svāminārāyaṇa often refers to the non-self collectively as the jīva's "three bodies" [Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Gaḍh. I.23, Gaḍh. I.46, Gaḍh. I.56, Gaḍh. I.78, Sār.10, Pan.3, Gaḍh. II.32, Gaḍh. II.66, Var.2, Var.8]. These are as follows:

1. **sthūla deha:** the 'gross body' composed of the five material elements, i.e. pṛthvī ('earth'), jala ('water'), tejas ('light'), vāyu ('wind'), and ākāśa ('space'). This provides the physical support system for the senses, mind, etc. of the subtle body to function [Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Sār.14].
2. **sukṣma deha:** the 'subtle body' (referred to by some as the 'astral body') comprising of the following 19 elements:
 - five jñānendriya (cognitive senses), i.e. cakṣus (sight), śrotra (hearing), tvak (touch), rasanā or jihvā (taste), and ghrāṇa (smell). These should not be confused with their corresponding sense organs, which are parts of the gross body and by which the subtle senses inextricably operate, i.e. sight allows the eyes to see, hearing allows the ears to hear, etc.
 - five karmendriya (conative senses), i.e. vāk (speech), pāṇi (dexterity), pāda (locomotion), pāyu (excretion), and upastha (generation). These, too, are subtle powers, operating through

their respective external organs, viz. the mouth, hands, feet, anus, and genitals.

- five tanmātrā (quintessential elements), i.e. śabda (sound), sparśa (touch), rūpa (sight), rasa (taste), and gandha (smell). These are extremely subtle elements related to the five material elements mentioned above, which we shall cover in a little more detail in the chapter on māyā and creation.
- four antaḥkaraṇa (inner faculties), i.e. manas, buddhi, citta, and ahamkāra, by which a person can think, reason, contemplate, and affirm identity [Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Sār.14]. These are sometimes collectively referred to as the ‘manas’, or mind – the ‘eleventh sense’ – which is one but functions in four ways, hence the four names.

Together, these 24 elements – all products of māyā – create the psychosomatic body of the jīva. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.34:

Those 24 elements are produced from māyā, they are forms of māyā, and are insentient. They appear differently in the form of the body, senses, and inner faculties. For example, there is one earth that assumes the five forms of the skin, flesh, marrow, bones and muscles.... In the same way, that māyā, by the will of God, appears in different forms – the body, the senses, etc.

3. **kāraṇa deha:** the ‘causal body’ which stores the jīva’s karmas and is the form of ignorance, therefore the ‘cause’ of rebirth [Vac. Sār.11, Kār.12, Gaḍh. II.66, Var.6].

Svāminārāyaṇa provides more information about the causal body and the inter-relationship between all three in Vac. Kār.12.

The causal body is the māyā of the jīva. That same causal body evolves into the gross and subtle bodies. Thus, all three – the gross, subtle and causal bodies – can be said to be the māyā of the jīva.

We shall be exploring māyā as ignorance in a subsequent chapter, seeing also the causal body's determinant role in assigning the jīva its gross and subtle bodies. It should be noted, however, that all three bodies – including the subtle and causal – are considered a part of the material order, with the 24 elements from which the gross and subtle bodies are composed especially constitutive of each brahmāṇḍa, which will also be made apparent in that chapter.³⁸¹

Here, we can add that Svāminārāyaṇa explains in reference to these three bodies that when falsely identified with them (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7), thereby assuming their joys and sufferings (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78) – including birth and death (Vac. Sār.5) – as its own, the jīva is said to be known to be in its 'anvaya' (concomitant) form.

Conversely, when it realises itself as distinct from the three bodies, as purely consciousness (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7), separate from the bodies' joys and sufferings (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78), as uncuttable, impierceable, indestructible, etc. (Vac. Sār.5), that is the 'vyatireka' (distinct) form of the jīva. In other words, the anvaya form is the jīva in its state of ajñāna (ignorance or false self-understanding), whereas the vyatireka form is the jīva in its state of jñāna (enlightenment or correct self-realisation).

³⁸¹ See sections 10.1.7 and 10.2.3.

But while the jīva is not the body, mind and senses, what relationship do they hold with the jīva?

One way in which this relationship has been described is like that of a king (the jīva) ruling over the subjects (the mind and senses) living within his kingdom (the body). Svāminārāyaṇa presents this analogy in Vac. Gaḍh. II.12, preluding with a narration of how one should think about the self:

‘Just as the four inner faculties, the ten senses, and the five vital breaths reside in this body, similarly, I am the jivātman, and I also reside in this body. However, I am greater than all of them, and I am their controller.’

To explain the potential consequences of not controlling the mind and senses, he then goes on to extensively develop and carefully relate the analogy.

For example, if a king were to possess little or no intelligence, then even the members of his own family would not obey his orders. When the people in the village hear about this, no one in the village would obey his orders. Further, when the people throughout the kingdom hear about this, no one in the kingdom would obey his orders. As a result, the king would become depressed and powerless. He would sit idly and would not attempt to enforce his rule over anyone.

In this analogy, the king represents the jīva, the members of the household represent the inner faculties, and the people of the village and kingdom represent the senses. So, if the jīva becomes discouraged and relaxes its authority, then when it wishes to exercise its sovereignty over the inner faculties and orient them towards God, the inner faculties will not follow. Also, if it wishes to control the senses, even the senses will not comply. Then, even though the jīva is the king of the kingdom in the form of this body, it becomes helpless like a pauper. When a king becomes discouraged, his subjects who live in his kingdom assume power and do not allow him to exercise his authority at all. Likewise, in the kingdom of the jīva, represented by this body, lust, anger and other vicious natures – who are not the king – assume the kingship. Then, they do not allow the jīva to exercise control.

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes the analogy by teaching “the art of ruling” whereby “no one can overthrow [the soul’s] authority in the kingdom which is its body.”

We find a clue to another understanding of the body-soul’s integral relationship in the term “karaṇa”, meaning ‘instrument’. In opposition to the senses and mind (the inner faculties, or antaḥkaraṇa), the physical body is often called the ‘bāhyakaraṇa’, or outer faculty. Instructively, this tells us they are all *instruments* of the self, which the jīva can wield to know, act, and enjoy (as we shall soon see). They could be described as mere instruments, for what can an axe do without a carpenter? But the opposite is also true. No matter how humanly strong a carpenter may be, he requires an axe to accomplish his task. Similarly, as sentient as the jīva is, without the physical body, senses and mind, it cannot perceive the sensory world around it nor make sense of it. Notably, both the gross and subtle bodies are necessary for this; the physical body alone cannot perceive or cognise while the senses and mind cannot survive outside of the bodily substratum. Svāminārāyaṇa describes the intricate interdependence at play here using the following analogy:

Just as a flame cannot remain aloft in space on its own without the combination of oil, a wick-holder and a wick, similarly, without associating with the disc of flesh [in the body] – which is a transformation of the five material elements – the jīva cannot remain alone (Vac. Gaḍh. III.4).

More importantly, as we shall see further in the chapters on māyā and mukti, the body, senses and mind are all essential, invaluable and powerfully efficacious instruments, provided by God not just for personal enjoyment, but for

performing the necessary religious endeavours to secure ultimate liberation. This is not fully possible outside of human embodiment. The paradox worth noting here is that while the bodies are not the true self, to realise this – that is, to progress from a state of ignorance to a state of enlightenment – they are indispensably necessary. This being so, the physical body is not intrinsically evil and certainly warrants care. One should therefore endeavour to keep it as healthy and functioning as possible to optimally facilitate religious praxis. Properly understood, then, a deeply spiritual life and a healthy physical lifestyle are not contradictory but in fact finely compatible, if not also complementary.

8.1.1.2) The Three States of the Jīva

Alongside the three bodies, Svāminārāyaṇa also refers to the three “states” (avasthā) that the jīva experiences but in actual fact is also distinct from (Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Gaḍh. I.65, Gaḍh. I.77, Pan.3, Gaḍh. II.31, Gaḍh. II.51, Amd.2, Jet.3), and within which it enjoys the fruits of its karmas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Sār.6). The three states are:

- jāgrata avasthā: the ‘waking state’, in which the body, senses and mind are all alert and active
- svapna avasthā: the ‘dream state’, in which the body and senses are dormant and inactive; only the mind is alert and active
- suṣupti avasthā: the ‘deep or dreamless sleep state’, in which even the mind is dormant; it is characterised by total inertness and self-unawareness/unconsciousness

These three states are borne of mājā, with each state predominantly the cause of one of the three māyic qualities: sattvaguṇa, rajoguṇa, and tamoguṇa.

Furthermore, while in each state, the jīva is said to be more aware of and functioning in one of the three bodies than the others, lending it a specific technical title in that state: Viśva, Taijasa, and Prājña.³⁸²

A collation of this information can be succinctly tabulated as below:

State of Jīva	Predominant Māyic Quality	Predominant Awareness	Title of Jīva
Waking	Sattvaguṇa	Gross Body	Viśva
Dream	Rajoguṇa	Subtle Body	Taijasa
Deep Sleep	Tamoguṇa	Causal Body	Prājña

8.1.2) Sat-Cit-Ānanda and Pure

If the jīva is not to be identified with the somatic body made of material elements or the senses and mind made of similarly subtle elements, what *is* it composed of? What constitutes the jīva most fundamentally and essentially?

Svāminārāyaṇa answers this question in Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, again, juxtaposing the soul with that which it is not. He explains:

³⁸² See also MāU 2.1-3 for more on these three states and three titles for the jīva.

After developing knowledge of the ātman and the thorough knowledge of God's nature, one should think, 'I am the ātman, characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss, whereas the body and the brahmāṇḍa are māyic and perishable. How can they compare to me?

Svāminārāyaṇa also iterates the jīva as being 'sat', 'cit' and 'ānanda' by using these terms (and their synonyms) separately:

- “satya” and “sattārūpa”: Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, Gaḍh. I.14, Gaḍh. I.16, Gaḍh. I.47, Loyā.17, Gaḍh. II.57, Gaḍh. II.66, Gaḍh. III.3, Gaḍh. III.22, Gaḍh. III.33, Gaḍh. III.39
- “caityana” and “caitanyarūpa”: Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Sār.1, Sār.4, Sār.10, Sār.12, Loyā.7, Loyā.18, Pan.3, Gaḍh. II.2, Gaḍh. II.17, Gaḍh. II.20, Gaḍh. II.22, Gaḍh. II.55, Gaḍh. II.60, Gaḍh. II.66, Var.4, Gaḍh. III.2, Gaḍh. III.3, Gaḍh. III.19, Gaḍh. III.22, Gaḍh. III.27, Jet.2, Jet.3
- “ānandarūpa” and “sukharūpa”: Vac. Sār.1, Sār.12, Kār.3, Loyā.10

As is evident, Svāminārāyaṇa especially emphasises the pure consciousness of the jīva, often calling it “sattāmātra” as well. He does this by situating it as being distinct from and different to māyā which is wholly material. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.57, Svāminārāyaṇa asks rhetorically,

What is that ātman like which is of the form of consciousness?

He goes on to answer:

Within it there are no hindrances [literally, 'barriers'] either of māyā or the entities evolved from māyā, i.e. the three guṇas, the body, the senses, and the inner faculties. Whatever hindrances do seem to be in the ātman are, in fact, due to ignorance.

Similarly, in sharing his vision to free all devotees of “any trace of any of māyā’s three guṇas, ten senses, ten vital breaths, four inner faculties, five material elements, five sense-objects, and the devatās presiding over the 14 faculties”, he adds in Vac. Gaḍh. II.45:

Instead, I wish to make all of you such that you offer devotion to God realising your true form to be the ātman, which is characterised by eternal existence and is free from all of these māyic adjuncts.

What these many descriptions about the conscious nature of the jīva also lead to is an understanding of it, in its most pristine form, as being devoid of māyic flaws and impurities. Indeed, an important and striking characteristic of the jīva is that, in its very essence, it is pure. Svāminārāyaṇa thus calls the jīva “śuddha” in several sermons (Vac. Sār.1, Kār.8, Loyā.10), using “atisuddha” (‘extremely pure’) in Vac. Pan.3. Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on this spiritual purity more emphatically in Vac. Gaḍh. II.12, where he calls believing anything to the contrary nothing less than foolishness.

The jīva, which resides in the body, feels, ‘Lust, anger and other vicious natures are attached to my jīva.’ In this manner, depending on which of the vicious natures, i.e. lust, anger, avarice, etc. is predominant in a person, he believes his jīva to be full of that nature due to his association with it. But, in fact, not a single one of these vicious natures lies within the jīva; the jīva has merely believed itself to possess them out of its own foolishness.

As true as this is, though, the jīva’s false or perverse knowledge (viparīta jñāna) and lack of true knowledge (yathārtha jñāna) are equally real and problematic, propelling the jīva through the incessant cycle of births and deaths (saṃsāra), and hence the need for it to be enlightened and liberated.

Nonetheless, what is striking here are the clear points of similitude between the nature of the jīva (and īśvara) and the nature of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. While much is often made of their differences, we should also note that jīvas – characterised as they are by sat-cit-ānanda as well – share in the infinite nature of God and Guru, if only to an infinitesimally minute extent. That is, by nature, jīvas are qualitatively similar to Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman yet metaphysically distinct from and infinitely inferior to them.

8.1.3) Knower

The jīva is not just formed of or *is* consciousness (caitanya), Svāminārāyaṇa adds, but also *has* consciousness as a quality. He thus calls it “cetana” (having the quality of caitanya) in Vac. Loyā.10 and Vac. Pan.3. What this means is that it allows the jīva to also be a ‘knower’ (jñātā). This is essential if it is to be aware of (and be able to choose) its own actions and perceive the sensory world, including its own body, while also being able to acquire the necessary theological knowledge to secure its liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa often presents the jīva as the ‘knower’, again, usually in relation to the body and world around it, which are the ‘knowable’ or objects of knowledge (jñeya). For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.16, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that a “wise devotee”

accepts whatever teachings God and the Sant offer as the highest truth but does not doubt their words.

What are these teachings?

‘You are distinct from the mind, body, senses, and vital breaths.
You are real. You are the knower of the body, senses, and vital
breaths, which are all non-real.’

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly describes in Vac. Gaḍh. I.61 how one should reinforce
one’s true, spiritual identity:

‘I am not the body. I am the ātman, distinct from the body, and the
knower of all [the body, senses, mind, etc].’

In calling “the three bodies – gross, subtle and causal – and the three states –
waking, dream and deep sleep” the ‘field’ or “kṣetra”, he goes on in Vac. Pan.3 to
say:

[A jñānin] realises his ātman to be distinct from the ‘field’, and
believes, ‘They can never be a part of me. I am their knower...’,

thus calling the jīva “kṣetrajñā”, or the ‘knower of the field’, in other sermons also
(Vac. Gaḍh. I.57, Kār.12, Gaḍh. II.1, Gaḍh. II.17).

In Vac. Sār.12, he similarly makes the distinction between the soul as “draṣṭā”
(the seer) and the body and world as “dr̥ṣya” (the visible), while elsewhere
referring to the jīva alone as the “seer” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.20, Gaḍh. I.64, Gaḍh. II.6,
Gaḍh. II.20, Gaḍh. II.63).

This topic forms the subject of the Jñādhikaraṇa at BS 2.3.19-32, in which the
opening sūtra straightforwardly confirms on the basis of śāstric revelation that
the jīva (and īśvara) is not only “of the form of knowledge [jñānamātram]” but a
“knower also [jñātā’pi]”. The Bhāṣyakāra also makes the important clarification
here that this quality of knowledge is an intrinsic and natural, therefore

consistent, attribute of the jīva, but not adscititiously arising in the intellect or outside of the jīva, as is asserted by some schools.³⁸³

As the adhikaraṇa proceeds beyond this relatively brief first sūtra, the focus of the debate shifts to the size of the jīva, because this will affect how much the jīva can know and how. We can therefore continue this discussion in the following two sections, where we firstly see what Svāminārāyaṇa has to say about the size of the jīva and how he resolves the epistemological difficulty that arises from it, and thereafter as we discuss the jīva as the continuing subject of actions and experiences.

8.1.4) Atomicity

Three sizes of the individual soul have traditionally been propounded and defended by various schools of Vedānta. It can either be extremely minute, ‘like an atom’ (aṇu-parimāṇa), or assume the size of the body it inhabits (madhyama-parimāṇa, literally ‘mid-sized’), or be spatially limitless and all-pervading (vibhu).

Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal that the jīva is “atomic in size [aṇu-mātra]” (Vac. Jet.2), describing it analogously in Vac. Kār.1 “as fine as the tip of a spear”. In both cases, he is referring to its extreme subtlety.

³⁸³ BS-SB 2.3.19, pp. 232-33.

The Upaniṣads are similarly definitive in their descriptions. For example, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad states:

Know by thought this atomic ātman, in which the vital breath enters fivefold (MuU 3.1.9).

And like Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Kār.2, the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad analogises:

It is as fine as the tip of a goad (SU 5.8).

Before citing these statements at BS 2.3.23, the Bhāṣyakāra is quick to point out according to the immediately prior sūtra that other Upaniṣadic mentions of the “ātman” being all-pervading should not be facilely assumed to refer to the individual soul. Upon examining the proper semantic contexts, he observes, it is obvious those references refer to either Parabrahman or Akṣarabrahman, who, pervading the whole cosmos as its inner soul, can also rightly be called “ātman”.³⁸⁴

This being so, Svāminārāyaṇa adds that the eminently subtle soul resides primarily within the heart of the physical body (Vac. Kār.12, Gaḍh. II.34, Gaḍh. III.4, Loyā.15), as also described by the Upaniṣads:

This ātman resides within the heart (PU 3.6).

That [ātman] is full of consciousness within the vital breaths³⁸⁵ and is the inner light within the heart (BU 4.3.7).

³⁸⁴ BS-SB 2.3.22, pp. 234-35.

³⁸⁵ By extension, the Bhāṣyakāra takes the plural term for ‘prāṇa’ here to include all of the senses and faculties. See BU-SB 4.3.7, p. 241.

But this then leads at once to the question of how there can be sentiency throughout the body if the jīva is limited in size and located only within the heart. It is in fact a question that Svāminārāyaṇa himself asks his audience in Vac. Gaḍh. III.4.

Please describe how the jīva, which resides within the body, is present in one location and how it pervades the entire body.

The Vacanāmṛut notes that members of the audience answered according to their understanding, but none to Svāminārāyaṇa's full satisfaction. He thereupon answered his own question with the following analogy:

If an oil lamp is placed at one location in a mandira, its flame predominantly pervades the wick, and secondarily, it also pervades the entire building. In the same manner, the jīvātman also predominantly resides in and pervades the disc of flesh [in the heart] that is a product of the five material elements; and secondarily, it resides in and pervades the entire body. This is how the jīva resides within the body.

Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa makes clear,

the jīva actually resides in the disc of flesh [in the heart], and by its consciousness pervades the entire body. Therefore, regardless of where pain is felt in the body, it is the jīva itself that feels the pain (Vac. Gaḍh. III.4).

What this tells us about the jīva as consciousness in its very form and also having consciousness as an inherent quality is that, like the flame and its light, while both are self-illuminating (i.e. they do not require another source of consciousness to make them known), both differ somewhat in their form and function of illuminating others. The jīva, like the flame, is limited in its form and place, thereby unable to make known anything apart from itself, whereas its

consciousness, the light, can radiate out to illuminate other objects within its vicinity.

The Sūtrakāra offers the very same flame-light analogy at BS 2.3.26, and yet another analogy – of sandalwood ointment and its diffusive fragrance – at BS 2.3.24, before going on to confirm with support from various Upaniṣadic and Bhagavad-Gītā statements that the jīva and its consciousness are indeed distinct even if inseparable, as are the odorous and its odour (BS 2.3.27-28). We shall be able to better appreciate the significance of this further on.

The Jñādhikaraṇa which we began in the previous section thus concludes at BS 2.3.32, arguing that if the soul were hypothetically considered to be all-pervasive (rather than atomic) and merely formed of consciousness (but not having consciousness as a quality), then the perverse result would be that every soul would be continuously experiencing either all things or nothing, which is impossible and contrary to general perception. Therefore, the soul must be atomic in size and have the inherent quality of consciousness, which pervades its body even while the jīva resides in the heart, allowing it to be the consistent subject of its personal experiences, i.e. ‘the knower’.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ See BS-SB 2.3.19-32, pp. 232-39.

8.1.5) Agent & Enjoyer

A direct corollary of the jīva as jñatā (knower) is the jīva as kartā (doer) and bhoktā (enjoyer, or one who experiences). This is no less evidenced in the Brahmasūtras, where the Jñādhikaraṇa is immediately followed by the Kartrādhikaraṇa (BS 2.3.33-40).

In his comment on the opening sūtra of this adhikaraṇa, the Bhāṣyakāra boldly states that only the knower can be the agent, for knowership is to ‘do’ knowledge, i.e. to act out the process of knowledge, and such action is only possible for that which is cetana, i.e. has consciousness as an inherent quality. In a subsequent sūtra, 2.3.38, the Bhāṣyakāra extends this reasoning to experience as well; to enjoy is to ‘do’ enjoyment, i.e. acting out the process of enjoyment. Therefore, only the intelligent agent can also be the enjoyer.

The very thrust of the first sūtra’s argument is that if the jīva is not accepted as the intelligent agent (and enjoyer), all teachings and injunctions of the scriptures will be rendered meaningless, for to whom would they otherwise be addressed?

It is implausible to claim such calls to action as

Always performing works here, one should wish to live a hundred years (IU 2)

and

With inner tranquillity, one should offer upāsana (CU 3.14.1)

are made to an inert, insentient entity which is incapable of any action or even conceiving of it. Since the words of the scriptures are always meaningful, and

they enjoin action on only that which is able to act and enjoy the fruits of that action (i.e. reap its consequences), it therefore follows that that which is addressed is the sentient agent and enjoyer.

This also has much significance to the free will of the jīva, as debated in the final sūtra of the Kartrādhikaraṇa, which we shall examine towards the end of this chapter when discussing the jīva's relationship with Parabrahman.³⁸⁷ Here, let us briefly restate the above with some of our earlier points.

The body, composed of gross matter, is inherently inert. It cannot in and of itself know or act or experience. It must be vivified by a sentient entity, which is thus the true agent of all actions and the real subject of all experiences, even though it is by means of the body, the senses and other faculties that it can be so. As in the axe and carpenter example upon which we drew earlier, the axe is necessary for a carpenter to create his furniture or toy, but on its own, the axe being inert is utterly ineffective. In the hands of an expert carpenter, though, it is as if the axe springs to life, cutting through wood with consummate ease. Going further, since it is the carpenter who chooses how to use the axe and when to use it (or not use it), it is he who deservedly receives the payment for his labours – not the axe. Similarly, as the intelligent agent, it is the soul that is held accountable for its actions, good and bad, and to whom the deserts are accordingly conferred, not to the body.

³⁸⁷ See section 8.2.2.

As we saw in the introductory overview, Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that it is the jīva – using its bodily instruments – which knows, acts and enjoys.

[The jīva] resides within the space of the heart, and while staying there, performs different functions. From there, when it wants to see, it does so through the eyes; when it wants to hear sounds, it does so through the ears; it smells all types of smells through the nose; it tastes through the tongue; and through the skin, it experiences the pleasures of all sensations. In addition, it thinks through the mind, contemplates through the citta, and forms convictions through the intelligence. In this manner, through the ten senses and the four inner faculties, it experiences [literally, ‘enjoys’ or ‘indulges in’] all of the sense-objects (Vac. Jet.2).

Notably, Svāminārāyaṇa frames the knowing and experiencing here as “functions” – the *act* of seeing, hearing, tasting... even thinking – confirming the coherency and unity of the jīva as jñatā, kartā and bhoktā. This statement also closely resonates with the following Chāndogya Upaniṣad passage:

Now, when this sight here gazes into the sky, that is the seeing self; the faculty of sight allows it to see. That which knows ‘Let me smell this’, is the ātman; the faculty of smell allows it to smell. That which knows ‘Let me say this’, is the ātman; the faculty of speech allows it to speak. That which knows ‘Let me hear this’, is the ātman; the faculty of hearing allows it to hear. That which knows ‘Let me think about this’, is the ātman; the mind is its divine faculty of [inner] sight (CU 8.12.4-5).

In another sermon, one of Svāminārāyaṇa’s strongest admonishments against a false self-understanding, he emphasises the jīva’s role as the actual enjoyer and knower as opposed to the senses and mind, also touching upon the spiritual self, within which dwells God, as the real source of all joy. The sermon begins with the striking question:

Who is the most ignorant of all ignorant people?

Svāminārāyaṇa answers:

The jīva, which resides within the body, observes both the attractive and the unattractive. It witnesses childhood, youth and old age, as well as a countless number of other things. However, the observer fails to observe its own self. The jīva looks at objects externally; but it does not look at its own self. Therefore, it is the most ignorant of the ignorant.

Furthermore, just as the jīva enjoys a countless variety of sights with the eyes, it similarly enjoys and knows the pleasures of the other sense-objects with the ears, skin, tongue and nose, but it does not enjoy the bliss of its own self, nor does it know its own nature. For this reason, it is the most ignorant of the ignorant, the most senseless of the senseless, the most foolish of fools, and the vilest of the vile.

The Praśna Upaniṣad also states:

This intelligent self,... is verily the one that sees, feels, hears, smells, tastes, thinks, understands and acts (PU 4.9).

An important clarification that needs to be made here is that the jīva's (and īśvara's) ability to act and experience is not wholly independent. As the 'body' of Parabrahman (and Akṣarabrahman), it is supported, empowered and also governed by them. This is debated in the very next adhikaraṇa of the Brahmasūtras, which, too, we shall discuss in the section about the jīva's relationship with Parabrahman, attempting, as aforementioned, to also resolve how this doctrine can accommodate the jīva's freedom of will.

8.1.6) Imperishability, Eternality, Individuality and Immutability

A number of characteristics of the jīva were already mentioned in the opening section of this chapter as we looked to see how the jīva differs from the body. A

few of these characteristics deserve further elucidation, and can be treated together.

One point that Svāminārāyaṇa makes repeatedly, for example in Vac. Sār.12, is that it is the body that undergoes “birth and death” passing through phases such as “childhood, youth [and] old age”, whereas the jīva is “uncuttable, unpierceable, unaging, immortal”. Thus, the jīva is described as aja (unborn), ajara (unaging), and amara (undying). It is imperishable and immutable. It is eternal.

Svāminārāyaṇa iterates the jīva’s imperishability by making an interesting point in Vac. Gaḍh. III.39. He explains:

The ātman has passed through countless life-forms. In fact, it is said that a person has drunk as much milk from his mothers as there is water in the ocean. In those lives, the ātman has experienced death in countless ways, yet it has not perished. It has remained as it is. So, if it did not perish in that state of ignorance when it regarded itself as the body, how shall it perish now that we have knowledge of it?

The jīva’s insusceptibility to death and deterioration is thus a matter of fact.

Whether one knows this or not is immaterial to the reality.

Continuing the analogy of the oil lamp’s flame from Vac. Gaḍh. III.4,

Svāminārāyaṇa further explains:

Just as fire – which is distinct from the container, the oil and the wick – cannot be destroyed by breaking just the container, in the same way, the jīva, even though it pervades the disc of flesh [in the heart] and the body, does not die with the death of the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.4).

Those familiar with Vedāntic texts will be aware of numerous statements in the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā supporting this point. As one example, a popular phrase found identically in the Bhagavad-Gītā and Kaṭha Upaniṣad proclaims:

This [soul] is unborn and eternal, everlasting and primeval. It is not slain by the slaying of the body (KaU 2.18 & BG 2.20).

As in the verse, Svāminārāyaṇa also iterates the beginninglessness of the jīva, tracing it back to the very origin of each brahmāṇḍa. Using another analogy, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10 that even during the state of primeval dormancy, the jīvas continue to exist within māyā. So,

just as seeds in the soil sprout by the association of rainwater, similarly, the jīvas, which are eternal, arise from within māyā; but new jīvas are not created. Therefore,... the jīvas residing in māyā are also eternal, and they are not components of God; they are always jīvas.

Svāminārāyaṇa adds here an important point at the end, clarifying that the jīvas do not have an ‘aṁśa-aṁśin’ or component-composite relationship with Parabrahman. This predictably becomes the topic of discussion in the Aṁśādhikaraṇa between BS 2.3.43 and 2.3.53, where the Sūtrakāra argues that to believe sentient beings to be fragmented parts of God contradicts śāstric texts revealing Parabrahman to be indivisible (akhaṇḍa), non-fragmentary (niraṁśa), and without parts (niravayava). Those texts which do mention the jīvas as being the ‘aṁśa’ of Parabrahman should be understood as describing them as devotees of God, inseparable from him by virtue of their intense love and total dependency on him, as they are, of course, a ‘part’ of his body which is the entire universe. This is indeed the exegesis Svāminārāyaṇa provides for BG 15.7 –

Mamaiva'mśo jīvaloke jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ |

My 'aṃśa' alone in this living realm, of the form of the eternal jīva...

– when he cites the verse in Vac. Gaḍh. II.8.³⁸⁸

During the pre-origination stage of each brahmāṇḍa that Svāminārāyaṇa mentions above in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10, it should be noted that each jīva is dormant within māyā with only its causal body. When, by the will of Parabrahman, the creative process is initiated, each jīva receives its gross+subtle body according to the karmas encoded within its individual causal sheath. During the sustenance stage of the brahmāṇḍa, each jīva will continue to transmigrate – until securing final liberation – from one gross+subtle body to another as and when the lifetime of each body expires, again, always according to the jīva's own karmic blueprint which continues to evolve and be transferred from one life to another. To reiterate, the birth, development, decay and eventual death is of the body only; the jīva is distinct from the body and unaffected by its corporeal deterioration and death. Finally, at the time of that particular brahmāṇḍa's dissolution, the jīva discards its gross+subtle body and returns with its remaining causal body to a state of dormancy within māyā... until the next cycle of creation. This continues for the jīva until it can eradicate its causal body, i.e. māyā in the form of ignorance, and become brahmarūpa by acquiring the qualities of Akṣarabrahman making it eligible for eternal communion with Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma.

³⁸⁸ See BS-SB 2.3.43-53, pp. 246-53 and BG-SB 15.7, p. 310.

All throughout this time – while in a state of bondage within *māyā* and even when liberated from it in *Akṣaradhāma*; and during the origination, sustenance and dissolution stages of the world – the *jīvas* exist *as jīvas*, and each *jīva* retains its distinct individuality; it neither merges into *māyā* (during dissolution), nor into Parabrahman (upon liberation).

Some of these points are also clarified in the single-sūtra *Ātmādhikaraṇa* at BS 2.3.18. In the continuing debate about the omnicausality of Parabrahman and *Akṣarabrahman* (BS 1.1.2), and therefore whether they can be the subject of the desire to know ‘Brahman’ (BS 1.1.1), the contention raised by the objector is that *jīvas* (and *Īśvaras*) are unborn and therefore outside of the purview of ‘creation’. Hence, the sentient beings should not be said to have Parabrahman and *Akṣarabrahman* as their cause. In support of his case, the objector cites verses describing them as ‘*aja*’, i.e. KaU 2.18 and SU 1.9. In response, the *Bhāṣyakāra* goes on to cite other verses proclaiming the ‘creation’ of all beings. For example:

That from which these beings are born... (TU 3.1.1).

From that all these being are born... (PU 1.14).

That which the wise perceive as the source of all beings... (MuU 1.1.6).

But how should these verses and others like it be reconciled with those proclaiming sentient beings as unborn and eternal? For example:

This [soul] is never born nor does it ever die (KaU 2.18 & BG 2.20).

This soul within the body is eternal and cannot be killed (BG 2.30).

He [Akṣarabrahman] is the one eternal soul among many eternal souls... (SU 6.13).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that the ‘creation’ of souls should be understood as a figurative description; it refers to the new body a jīva receives in every new life-event. Similarly, ‘death’ is simply the falling of that body, not of the jīva itself. In this way, the jīva is eternal, and yet its bodies are created, allowing it to still be a part of the universal effect caused by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

Furthermore, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, since there is no alteration in the essential form of the jīva (svarūpā’nyathābhāva) at any time throughout this process, it can still be said to be immutable. Nevertheless, it may undergo other forms of change, such as the ceaseless contraction and expansion of its knowledge on account of it pervading its changing bodies.³⁸⁹ Since, as we learned earlier, this knowledge or consciousness is an inherent but distinct quality of the jīva (‘the light of the flame’ in Svāminārāyaṇa’s analogy at Vac. Gaḍh. III.4), this does not result in any distortion in the essential form of the jīva (‘the flame’ itself).

This brings us to an important clarification which needs to be made about the immutability of jīvas. If it can be recalled, we had opened this Part by introducing the five eternal metaphysical entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa School. As a part of that introduction, we also learned that there are three types of eternality or permanence (nityatā) in Hindu metaphysics. Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman,

³⁸⁹ BS-SB 2.3.18, pp. 231-32.

īśvaras and jīvas all have 'kūṭastha nityatā' (immutable permanence), that is, they exist eternally and never undergo any modifications in their essential form. Even so, the immutability of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman differs to that of the īśvaras and jīvas. As we have learned in the previous two chapters, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman forever transcend māyā and are absolutely untouched by it. In contrast, while jīvas (and īśvaras) are immune to senescent degeneration and survive physical death, they are still bound by māyā and therefore fall under its influence in the form of ignorance, causing their incessant passage through saṃsāra until they finally realise brahmavidyā and can offer perfect worship (upāsanā) to God.

8.1.7) Multiplicity

A small but nonetheless important point about the nature of the jīva remains to be made, related to its individuality mentioned above.

Even while all jīvas are ontologically the same, they are not one. The multiplicity of jīvas (and īśvaras) is shown by the plural nouns and pronouns used in verses such as

He [Akṣarabrahman] is the one eternal soul among many eternal souls... (SU 6.13);

That from which these beings are born... (TU 3.1.1);

From that all these being are born... (PU 1.14);

and

... whereas all beings are ‘kṣara’ (BG 15.16).

Svāminārāyaṇa also refers to the jīvas in the plural (Vac. Var.6, Gaḍh. III.10, Gaḍh. III.39), sometimes even adding such telling qualifiers as “all” and “each”. For example:

In addition, when all of those brahmāṇḍas are destroyed, all other jīvas lie dormant within māyā... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

That [God]... resides as the antaryāmin in all jīvas and grants each jīva a body according to its past karmas (Vac. Gaḍh. I.13).

God dwells within all jīvas, but his form is different from the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

Svāminārāyaṇa also talks of “countless millions of liberated souls” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21, Gaḍh. I.63, Loyā.14).

Because the jīvas’ individuality is preserved at all times – while in a state of bondage within māyā, when liberated from it in Akṣaradhāma, and during the origination, sustenance and dissolution stages of the world – so is their multiplicity. Just as jīvas do not merge into māyā or Parabrahman, nor do they ever merge into themselves to form one ‘super-jīva’; the inter-differentiation between them is real and eternal. Nor, as we saw, are the many jīvas fragments of one super-being, for, like Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, the jīvas (and īśvaras) are indivisible, non-fragmental, and without parts.

This multiplicity is also evidenced by the many differing personal experiences jīvas have simultaneously. While one may feel happy, another will feel sad. While one may be in a state of bondage, another will be liberated. And while all jīvas are identical in essence and form, each bound jīva differs from another by its own individual code of karma leading to differences in bodies and circumstances for each of them. All this would be untenable were it not for multiple jīvas.

So how many jīvas are there? “Ananta” is the answer we are met with, explaining that while countless souls have been liberated, countless more remain to be liberated, thus ensuring the continuous flow of transmigration in the countless brahmāṇḍas – from the beginningless beginning to the endless end.

8.2) Relationship with Parabrahman

A consistent feature of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, as probably with all theological systems, is that every discussion has God at its centre and as its ultimate goal. We saw this during the extensive chapter on Akṣarabrahman, and it remains true for the jīva. In what follows, we shall look at two ways this is so: firstly, learning how a correct spiritual self-understanding is essential for a correct theological understanding of and fuller relationship with God; and secondly, what this relationship entails, reconciling both the jīva’s dependency on God and its own freedom of will and action.

8.2.1) Understanding the Self to Understand and Relate to God

As emphatically and repeatedly as Svāminārāyaṇa talks about the nature of the ātman and realising it as one's true identity, it is not, he explains, to bask in a sense of self-exaltation unfettered by material limitations. No, the real purpose is to properly understand God and relate to him. He clearly explains this both affirmatively and negatively in Vac. Gaḍh. II.57. After having begun the sermon with a succinct exposition of the nature of the self, he goes on to say:

To behave as the ātman does not mean to believe one's self to be Brahman and act waywardly. Rather, the purpose of behaving as the ātman is to realise, 'I am the ātman, and there are no hindrances of māyā within me. If that is so, how can there be even the slightest trace of māyā in Paramātmā Nārāyaṇa Vāsudeva, who transcends the ātman?' For this reason, then, one should firmly realise the ātman so as not to perceive fault in God in any way.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises the same concept while drawing upon an example from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa's tenth canto in which Śukadeva narrates to Parīkṣita the episode of Kṛṣṇa dancing amorously with the gopis of Vṛndāvana.

If a devotee of God has not developed this elevated spiritual state [of ātman-realisation], he will perceive worldly attributes even in God. King Parīkṣita, for example, was not such a[n elevated] devotee, and so he raised doubts about the divinity of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Bhagavān after hearing of the rāsa episode³⁹⁰. On the other hand, because Śukajī was such an elevated devotee, he had no doubts whatsoever. Such a devotee firmly realises, 'If no flaws can affect me or bind me in any way, how can there possibly be any māyic flaws in God, by worshipping whom I have become [unaffected] like this?' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.23).

³⁹⁰ BP 10.29-33. These five cantos narrate the account of the devotional dance the gopis enjoyed all night with Kṛṣṇa having run away from their homes and husbands.

Svāminārāyaṇa interestingly adds in Vac. Sār.17 the progressive nature of this self-understanding and understanding of God.

As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God, and he increasingly realises the greatness of God. When that devotee identifies himself with the body, he sees God as the witness of his waking, dream and deep sleep states. Later, when he realises himself as transcending the waking, dream and deep sleep states, he realises God as transcending them too. Then, as his vision becomes increasingly subtle, he realises God as being far beyond himself and understands the greatness of God even more. Then, as he becomes more and more lovingly attached to God, his upāsana of God becomes even more firmly established.

Here, as Svāminārāyaṇa reveals the fascinating interplay between a correct spiritual understanding of the self and a fuller understanding of God, he includes its natural consequence – a deeper, richer loving relationship with God. In fact, in the Vac. Gaḍh. II.57 statement cited above, Svāminārāyaṇa begins the sermon with,

If one wants to love God, one should love him while believing oneself to be the ātman, which is characterised by pure existence,

before rhetorically asking,

What is that ātman like?

and then launching into his exposition:

Well, within it, there are no hindrances of māyā or the entities evolved of māyā... (Vac. Gaḍh. II.57).

One finds, indeed, that whenever Svāminārāyaṇa talks about the nature of the jīva or ātman, he invariably frames it in the context of a relationship with God. For example, after his detailed explanation in Vac. Gaḍh. III.4 about the relationship of the jīva with the body and its pervading consciousness, using the

flame-light analogy we repeatedly saw earlier, he ends the sermon with the clear and simple conclusion:

This is how the jīva resides within the body. Moreover, God resides within the jīva as a witness (Vac. Gaḍh. III.4).

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.73, after describing the jīva thus:

After developing knowledge of the ātman and the thorough knowledge of God's nature, one should think, 'I am the ātman, characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss, whereas the body and the brahmāṇḍa are māyic and perishable. How can they compare to me?

Svāminārāyaṇa immediately goes on to complete how one should think with the following:

Moreover, my Īṣṭadeva is Puruṣottama Bhagavān, who transcends even Akṣara – the supporter of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas. I have the firm refuge of that God' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.73).

In other sermons also, Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly places knowledge of the self and knowledge of God alongside each other (e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.25, Vad.11, Gaḍh. II.65, Gaḍh. III.39).³⁹¹

Many of the statements we have used throughout this chapter are similarly formulated in that they go on to clarify self-realisation as not an end in and of itself, but as a means – part of a larger body of theological praxis, as we shall note in our final chapter in this Part – ultimately leading to God and liberation.

After making such a distinction [between the ātman and the body] and becoming totally free of worldly desires, one should realise

³⁹¹ To this, Svāminārāyaṇa sometimes also adds a third knowledge, of the perishable nature of the world, e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. II.60.

oneself to be the conscious spirit and contemplate upon
Puruṣottama Bhagavān (Vac. Sār.4).

One should think, 'I am the ātman, and the senses and inner
faculties are absolutely unrelated to me.' With such resolute
thinking, by beholding God's form in that consciousness... one
should remain fulfilled (Vac. Gaḍh. II.2).

As another example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

This body should not be believed to be one's true self. Nor should
one's bodily relations be regarded as one's true relatives. This is
because the jīva has previously taken birth in each of the 8.4
million life-forms....

Then, after developing his reasoning at length, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

Therefore, having realised the body, all possessions and all objects
to be false [i.e. impermanent], and having realised one's own self to
be distinct from the body, senses and inner faculties, and while
observing one's own dharma, one should offer devotion to God
which is devoid of all desires for its fruits (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21).

Statements such as these help us to appreciate now that Svāminārāyaṇa's intent
on freeing oneself of all material limitations and distractions is actually to allow
for a direct, complete and undisturbed relationship with God. The problem lies
not in one's body or possessions or relatives – to be clear, they are not to be seen
as evil – but in the *attachment* one has for them borne of māyic ignorance.

In Vac. Gaḍh. I.72, Svāminārāyaṇa makes an important addition.

The best devotee believes himself to be the ātman, distinct from
his body.... He sees the jivātman residing in his body as well as
Paramātman dwelling within his ātman. Not only that, he sees the
ātman residing in the bodies of others as well.

Svāminārāyaṇa extends here the usual inclusion of one's relatives to the more general "others", explaining the spiritual perspective with which one is to see them and thus behave with them. They are the pure self, within whom resides the highest Self. Svāminārāyaṇa is indicating here how all relationships are to be mediated with the presence of God, answering our earlier question of how a devoutly spiritual person can possibly have a meaningful relationship with others.

Still, there is another danger that Svāminārāyaṇa feels could still impede one's relationship with God. It is the conceit that could result from the very realisation of the self. He therefore continues in Vac. Gaḍh. I.72:

Yet, despite having become so capable [of seeing the ātman and God in one's self and others], he realises God and the Sant of God to be superior to ātman-realisation and harbours not even the slightest conceit of the realisation he has attained. A person with such characteristics is said to be the best devotee.

In all, Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be preaching against a preoccupation with anything that would hinder or diminish a complete, loving relationship with God – whether it be the body, wealth, possessions and unmediated relationships, or even conceit of one's spirituality. After all, in Svāminārāyaṇa's mind, the very objective of one's spiritual understanding is to better understand God and freely and fully relate to him.

8.2.2) Dependent And Free

If the objective of realising the self is to better relate to God, what form does this relationship actually take? We turn our attention to answering this question with recourse to some critical theological questions and reflection.

In an earlier chapter, we made an effort to understand Parabrahman's overall supremacy by looking at his relationship with other entities. We learned there that Parabrahman is the King of all kings (Rājādhirāj) and the Lord of all lords (īśvarnā paṇ īśvar), ruling over his dominion which has jīvas and īśvaras as his subjects. His reign is eminently right and appropriate, for God has not usurped his vast realm from any other rival lord; he is the one without second, and its very creator and cause. That is why he is also the owner of the entire cosmos, giving him an especially personal interest in his subjects; the jīvas rightfully *belong* to him. For the jīvas' part, they find their greatest joy and fulfilment in being so owned and ruled by him, feeling privileged and exalted to have been accepted as such. They thus devoutly serve their master in joyful duty, because God reigns not by coercion or tyranny, but by loving providence.

In this sense, Parabrahman is also the 'Pati' of the world, like the lord of an estate or head of a household, providing for and protecting his extensive family who are eminently grateful and indebted to him, as adoring children to their doting father whom they worship.

We also learned that Parabrahman is the śarīrin (embodied soul), who has as his śarīra (body) the spiritual world comprising all jīvas, Īśvaras and Akṣarabrahman, as well as the material world of māyā and all things evolved from it. As the Soul of all souls, he supports them, empowers them, and controls them from within (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Vac. Kār.8, et al). To paraphrase from that section, he is their very life-source – the cause for their existence and the ontic ground (ādhāra) upon which they can function. Just as a physical body perishes once separated from its soul, so, too, the jīvas (and Īśvaras) cannot survive even momentarily without Parabrahman. Even if alive, the body is wholly incapable of doing anything without the will, knowledge and strength of the inner self. In the same way, the entire body of jīvas (and Īśvaras) is totally and radically dependent on Parabrahman to inspire them and bring them to action.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. I.65:

When a jīva enters the state of deep sleep, it becomes inert like a slab of stone and retains no type of consciousness.... When a jīva enters such a state, God awakens it from unconsciousness through his 'jñānaśakti' and makes it aware of its actions. This is known as 'jñānaśakti', the faculty of cognition. Furthermore, whatever action a jīva engages in, it does so with the support of what is known as God's 'kriyāśakti', the faculty of conation. Finally, whatever object a jīva desires, it acquires with the help of what is known as God's 'icchāśakti', the faculty of volition (Vac. Gaḍh. I.65).

The Bhāṣyakāra cites the above passage in his comment of KeU 1.2 which describes Parabrahman as

the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the tongue of the tongue,
the vital breath of the vital breath, the eye of the eye.

The ears can only hear because it is God who has empowered them with the ability of hearing. The mind can only think and perceive because God has infused it with the power of thinking and perception. The body is enlivened not by the breath alone, but by God who breathes life into that vital breath. In all, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, Parabrahman is “the provider of the power by which the inner and outer faculties can engage in all their respective functions... making them instruments for the jīva” by which to know, enjoy, act and live.³⁹²

The Aitareya Upaniṣad also states explicitly that it is by Parabrahman, the Self (ātman) of the jīvas, that they can see, hear, smell, speak, or taste (3.1).

So, even as the jīva is the knower, doer and enjoyer, it does not know, do or enjoy independently. It is always enabled by God. “Indeed,” Svāminārāyaṇa emphatically states,

God is the very life of all jīvas. Without him, those jīvas are incapable of doing anything or enjoying anything (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

This leads us to the natural and necessary question: Is the jīva, then, simply an automaton or puppet in the hands of an almighty God, absolutely dictated by *his* will but with no freedom of its own to act and enjoy? Without this free will, all that the jīva does is rendered inauthentic, meaningless – including its so-called devotion and obedience to God. So how can one make sense of the jīva as

³⁹² KeU-SB 1.2, pp. 33-35.

knower, agent and enjoyer as well as God’s omniscience, omniagency and omnicausality?

For this, we must turn to the Paratantrādhikaraṇa of BS 2.3.41-42.

Having established the sentiency and agency of the jīva (and īśvara) in the preceding Jñādhikaraṇa (BS 2.3.19-32) and Kartrādhikaraṇa (BS 2.3.33-40), respectively, the Sūtrakāra immediately moves to qualify both in this two-sūtra debate.

The first sūtra is preluded by the Bhāṣyakāra with the following prima facie view.

At that, there is a doubt. Is the agency of the ātman exclusively self-supported [svamātrādhīna], or is it dependent on anything else [paratantra]? What is appropriate? Self-supported is [appropriate]. Why? Because otherwise, if the dependent view is taken, that would undermine [literally, ‘damage’] [the ātman’s] independence, which would in turn fail to confirm its agency.

To this, the Sūtrakāra retorts that no, the jīva is indeed dependent [tantra] “on the highest” [para], “because that is what the śrutis proclaim” (BS 2.3.41). In support, the Bhāṣyakāra cites statements from the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā confirming, firstly, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman as the “highest” [para³⁹³] –

He... attains Puruṣa, the highest of the high (MuU 3.2.8);

O Son of Prthā [Arjuna], that Puruṣa is the highest (BG 8.22);

³⁹³ The Bhāṣyakāra is clear here that the ‘para’ within the compounded word ‘paratantra’ should be taken to mean not just ‘other’, but ‘higher’. While both translations are correct lexically, the latter ascribes the jīvas’ (and īśvaras’) dependency not generally, on any or all others, but specifically on Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

That Akṣara is verily the highest (KaU 2.16);

Akṣara, that is Brahman, is the highest (BG 8.3)

– and then how they both support and control the jīvas (and Īśvaras), for example:

[Parabrahman,] the soul of all, having entered within, is the controller of all beings (Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 1.3.21).

Within the governance of this Akṣara, O Gārgi, do recipient men praise donors, deities [praise] the patron, and forefathers [praise] the ancestral offering (BU 3.8.9).

But if the jīva is not considered independent, the fictive objector contends, the moral injunctions of the śāstras – enjoining humans to do some things and prohibiting them from doing others – and the extolled fruits of observing such injunctions would all be rendered meaningless, for they would be addressing those which are incapable of acting or enjoying freely. This being so, it would disarray the whole system of praxis and moral deserts. Moreover, if God is deemed the sole agent of all actions, then he will have to be held accountable for all the wrongdoings in the world. How can this apparent conflict be resolved?

The Bhāṣyakāra explains, in effect, that there is no conflict to resolve as soon as one appreciates that dependency and free will are not incompatible. The jīvas (and Īśvaras) are indeed free to decide what to desire, what to know and what to do. But since this freedom has been lovingly and graciously granted – permitted – by Parabrahman, and it is he who empowers them with the ability to desire, know and do (as seen above), they are still very much dependent on him.

To elucidate, he extends a familiar analogy. Just as a sovereign king³⁹⁴ bestows upon a subject from his realm some powers of authority and gives him or her the permission to exercise that authority in whatever tasks he or she sees fit, saying, ‘Here, use this as you wish,’ in the same way, Parabrahman gives his assent [anumati] to the jīvas and īśvaras to endeavour [prayatna] as they wish. The Bhāṣyakāra clarifies that this endeavour can take the form of both dharmic and non-dharmic acts.

At BG 13.22 also, when Parabrahman is described as the “anumantā” or ‘permitter’, the Bhāṣyakāra explains it in reference to allowing jīvas and īśvaras the freedom to perform their own actions, of which Parabrahman is the “upadraṣṭā” (close witness) dwelling within their bodies.³⁹⁵

Continuing the analogy at BS 2.3.42, the Bhāṣyakāra adds that as the authorised subject exercises his or her sovereign-granted powers in various tasks, the king observes those tasks, rewarding him or her when pleased by good accomplishments and penalising when displeased with bad accomplishments. So it is with the endeavours of the jīvas and īśvaras. Parabrahman is pleased with those endeavours which are dharmic (in accordance to scriptural prescriptions) and displeased with those which are adharmic (contrary to scriptural prescriptions), administering the fruits of those endeavours accordingly. To be

³⁹⁴ The Bhāṣyakāra appropriately includes in the analogy the “king’s secretary” who, by royal decree, can also bestow, permit and pay or penalise the authorised subject. This refers to Akṣarabrahman, upon whom the jīvas and īśvaras are also dependent.

³⁹⁵ BG-SB 13.22, p. 286.

clear, while the fruits of the jīvas' karmas are dispensed by God as an expression of his pleasure and displeasure, it is strictly according to the karmas freely accrued by the jīvas themselves.³⁹⁶ In this way, the Bhāṣyakāra concludes, the meaningfulness of scriptural injunctions is preserved and God is acquitted of any charge of partiality and cruelty, even while confirming both the jīva's dependency on God and its own free will.³⁹⁷

On this point, we should also refer to the final sūtra of the Kartrādhikaraṇa (immediately preceding the Paratantrādhikaraṇa) which likewise relates to the free will of the jīva to act. The objection there is that if the jīva is the conscious agent, and consciousness is its intrinsic, inseparable quality, why is it that the jīva is not continuously acting? The Sūtrakāra replies analogously, that, "like the carpenter", it can do "both" – act as well as not act. Just because a carpenter has tools at his disposable does not mean that he is enforced to always be at work. He works and rests as he pleases. In the same way, while the jīva has the body and its senses, etc. – its tools for cognition, action and enjoyment – they do not compel him to always act. The jīva will act when it wishes to act and not act when it does not wish to.³⁹⁸

Crucially, then, the jīva has the option to *not* act, making its actions all the more meaningful. There is now choice, and, to make that choice, the intelligent being

³⁹⁶ More on the Hindu doctrine of karma and God as karmaphalaprādātā will be explored in section 10.2.2, in relation to the diversity found within creation.

³⁹⁷ BS-SB 2.3.41-42, pp. 244-46.

³⁹⁸ BS-SB 2.3.40, pp. 243-44.

can weigh up the consequences for both acting and not acting, so, howsoever it eventually does choose to act, it is the jīva which is exclusively responsible for those actions, making also their consequences fully deserved for the jīva.

This free choice is also precisely why, as is so obviously evident, that all souls are *not* engrossed in joyful devotion to God nor totally subservient and obedient to him. Some do exercise their God-given freedom to not only disobey and disrespect him, but to outrightly reject him. Only then do the devotion and obedience of the faithful carry such force and value.

In this way, the apparent tension between ascribing all actions to God at the expense of the freedom and responsibility of individual souls, and compromising the omniagency of God by allowing some autonomy to human activity, is relieved. Both are respected and kept intact. The jīva is not totally independent though not enslaved either. And while God is still the omnipotent, omniscient cause and agent of all, he has, out of his loving grace, granted and empowered the jīvas with the tools, options and judgement to act freely.

**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

9) ĪŚVARA

- **Nature**
- **Roles and Functions**
- **Distinction from and Relation to Parabrahman**

9) ĪŚVARA

Of the distinctive five-entity system of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta, one entity (after Akṣarabrahman) which stands out from the other schools, despite its familiar name, is Īśvara. Not to be confused with Parabrahman or God, it is more akin to the jīva than anything else. In fact, it may have been noticed that as a category of essentially finite beings under the influence of māyā, it was mentioned alongside the jīvas throughout the previous chapter. This draws on a practice found in the Vacanāmṛut where Svāminārāyaṇa routinely speaks of both the jīvas and Īśvaras in tandem. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. I.45, Svāminārāyaṇa states how Parabrahman “pervades all jīvas and Īśvaras as their inner-controller” and “governs the granting of the deserved fruits of karmas to all jīvas and Īśvaras according to their respective karmas.”

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, on the same topic but related to the dream state, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

In reality, it is God – who transcends both jīva and Īśvara, and who is also the giver of the fruits of karmas – who creates the world experienced in dreams according to the karmas of each particular jīva and Īśvara.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

God sees all of the jīvas and Īśvaras who dwell in the countless millions of brahmāṇḍas as clearly as he sees a drop of water in his palm (Vac. Gaḍh. II.53).

It is not surprising, then, that the nature of Īśvara is also presented most succinctly in juxtaposition to the jīva. In this sense, much of what has been

explained about jīva stands also for īśvara. Having now expounded upon the nature of jīvas, here we can focus mainly on the distinguishing features of the nature and function of īśvaras, and their distinction from and relation to Parabrahman in particular.

9.1) Nature of Īśvara

In Svāminārāyaṇa theology, īśvaras are ontologically distinct from all other entities, and hold a place metaphysically higher than that of jīvas yet, like them, are still bound within māyā and infinitely inferior to Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. As eternal entities, they are without beginning and without end. Even after the dissolution of each brahmāṇḍa, they exist in a dormant state within māyā until called again to activity in the next round of cyclic creation. Throughout these phases of creation (origination, sustenance and dissolution) and in whatever state (bound or liberated), they remain immutable and pure in their essential nature. They are many and qualitatively the same, but not one; they forever retain their individuality, never merging into māyā, Parabrahman or each other. Essentially composed of sat-cit-ānanda (existence, consciousness and bliss), they are sentient beings. They are also intelligent agents, endowed by Parabrahman with the ability and freedom to know, act and enjoy as they wish, and therefore are also wholly dependent on him (and Akṣarabrahman). Like the jīvas, īśvaras, too, have three bodies and three states, which, out of ignorance, they fail to distinguish their true identity from, forcing them also to endure the incessant cycle of transmigration until securing final liberation through brahmavidyā.

As we shall see further on, the īśvaras' prime role as deputed to them by Parabrahman relates to the various functions of a brahmāṇḍa. In each function, an īśvara will take on a particular title or designation, such as 'Virāṭa Puruṣa' or 'Vairāja Puruṣa' (who is the inner soul or 'administrator' of the physical brahmāṇḍa). With countless brahmāṇḍas, each title or designation also has countless īśvaras in number. In describing one such īśvara in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31, Svāminārāyaṇa elucidates the nature of īśvaras in general more clearly. He firstly states:

That Virāṭa Puruṣa is just like this jīva, and his actions are also similar to that of the jīva.

As he proceeds to explain the similarities, Svāminārāyaṇa also indicates the points of difference between the two categories of beings.

The lifespan of that Virāṭa Puruṣa is two parārdhas [i.e. 2×10^{17} human years]. The creation, sustenance and dissolution of this world are his three states, just as waking, dream and deep sleep are the three states of the jīva. Virāṭa, sutrātmā and avyākṛta are the three bodies of that Virāṭa Puruṣa.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides more information about the causal body of īśvara in Vac. Kār.12, just as he does for the jīva. The relevant statement for both reads:

The causal body is the māyā of the jīva. That same causal body evolves into the gross and subtle bodies. Thus, all three – the gross, subtle and causal bodies – can be said to be the māyā of the jīva. In the same manner, virāṭa, sutrātmā and avyākṛta can be said to be the māyā of īśvara.

We find a similar description of īśvaras in the Bhāṣyakāra's comment to AU 1.1.2.

Having described in the preceding mantra the creation of brahmāṇḍas from Parabrahman, the Soul of all, the Upaniṣad goes on to state:

He [Paramātmān] saw [i.e. thought], ‘These worlds [have been created by me]. Now, let me create the guardians of the worlds.’

Here the Bhāṣyakāra confirms the being of the Vairāja Puruṣa as an īśvara. He then describes how, like the jīva, it is bound by māyā [but] has a considerably longer lifespan of about two parardhas, i.e. 2×10^{17} human years. Like the jīva’s gross, subtle and causal bodies, it has its own three bodies known as virāṭa, sūtrātman and avyākṛta. These are encircled by the eight sheaths [constituents of the creative process], and are evolved from mahattattva [itself originally evolved from māyā]. And like the jīva’s three states of waking, dream and deep sleep, so, too, the īśvara has the states of creation, sustenance and dissolution.³⁹⁹

These three states are borne of māyā, with each state predominantly the cause of one of the three māyic constituents: sattvaguṇa, rajoguṇa and tamoguṇa.

While in each state, the īśvara is said to be more aware of and functioning in one of the three bodies than the others, lending it a specific technical title in that state: Vairāja, Hiranyagarbha, and īśvara.

As we did for the jīva, this information can be succinctly tabulated as follows:

³⁹⁹ AU-SB 1.1.2, pp. 418-19.

State of Īśvara	Predominant Māyic Quality	Predominant Body	Title of Īśvara
Creation	Sattvaguna	Virāṭa	Vairāja
Sustenance	Rajoguna	Sūtrātman	Hiranyagarbha
Dissolution	Tamoguna	Avyākṛta	Īśvara

Together with the same information about the jīva, we can present a useful comparative summary of both in another table thus:

Body		State		Title	
Jīva	Īśvara	Jīva	Īśvara	Jīva	Īśvara
Sthūla (Gross)	Virāṭa	Jāgrata (Wakefulness)	Uttapati (Creation)	Viṣva	Vairāja
Sukṣma (Subtle)	Sūtrātman	Svapna (Dream)	Sthiti (Sustenance)	Taijasa	Hiranyagarbha
Kāraṇa (Causal)	Avyākṛta	Suṣupti (Deep Sleep)	Pralaya (Dissolution)	Prājña	Īśvara

Like the jīvas, when an Īśvara falsely identifies with its three bodies, that is known as its anvaya (concomitant) form, whereas when it correctly self-identifies itself as distinct from all its bodies and as characterised by pure eternal

existence, consciousness and bliss, that is its vyatireka (distinct) form [Vac. Gaḍh. I.7, Vac. Sār.5].

Since īśvaras suffer from ignorance, it is evident that they, too, are in need of correct knowledge. But are they eligible for brahmavidyā just as humans are? This question forms the topic of debate at BS 1.3.26. After a prima facie view rejecting their eligibility, the Sūtrakāra, as interpreted by the Bhāṣyakāra, emphatically asserts that they are indeed eligible, as evidenced by such śruti statements as the opening verse of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad:

Brahmā arose as the first among the gods [devas], as the creator of all and the guardian of the world. To Atharvaṇ, his eldest son, he revealed the knowledge of Brahman [i.e. Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman], the root of all knowledge (MuU 1.1.1).⁴⁰⁰

Svāminārāyaṇa mentions explicitly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 that “like the jīva, that Virāṭa Puruṣa is also bound”, adding that it can transcend māyā and become brahmarūpa only when it worships God (whom he calls there ‘Puruṣottama’ and ‘Vāsudeva Bhagavān’). Importantly, this is only possible for īśvaras on earth in human embodiment, which it receives when its karmas sufficiently ripen. Here on earth, an īśvara would need to perform the same praxis as a jīva, by devoutly serving with correct theological knowledge the manifest form of Parabrahman, i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Interestingly, then, when in human form, an īśvara would appear visibly indistinguishable from a jīva.

⁴⁰⁰ BS-SB 1.3.26, pp. 111-12.

As similar as they are, though, Svāminārāyaṇa warns against the mistake of equating jīvas and īśvaras. In Vac. Pan.2, he firstly states that such an identification

would suggest that the sthūla body is the same as virāṭa, the suṣṭma body is the same as sūtrātman, and the kāraṇa body is the same as avyākṛta. It also suggests that the waking state is the same as that of sustenance, the dream state is the same as that of creation, and the deep sleep state is the same as that of dissolution. Moreover, Viśva, Taijasa and Prājña would be considered equal to Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Śiva, respectively.⁴⁰¹

However, this understanding is incorrect, he stresses, and encourages that it be rectified by learning the following distinction from “a wise person”:

The five material elements residing in the body of īśvara are known as mahābhūtas [‘great elements’], and those elements sustain the bodies of all jīvas. On the other hand, the five material elements in the body of the jīva are minor and are incapable of sustaining others. Also, a jīva possesses limited knowledge compared to an īśvara, who is all-knowing.

īśvaras are thus distinct and superior to jīvas by way of their composition, knowledge, and also Parabrahman-endowed authority. Therefore, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

One should learn such a method of interpretation so that the jīva and īśvara are not misunderstood to be equal (Vac. Pan.2).

9.2) Roles and Functions of īśvaras

So who are these īśvaras? And what do they do?

⁴⁰¹ This prima facie view seems to be gleaned from the Mokṣadharmā, chapters 289-306, particularly 289.3-6 and 306.75-77, found in the Mahābhārata’s Śānti Parva.

By its very nature, this topic is inextricably tied with creation, and so can only really be treated satisfactorily by returning to it after a description of the creative process, which we shall be turning to shortly in the next chapter. There, a simple but complete classification of beings in a chart of the cosmic order shall hopefully elucidate the matter sufficiently.

Here, we can briefly note that Svāminārāyaṇa points to īśvaras generally in Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 as “the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas, i.e. Brahmā and other īśvaras”, and similarly again in the immediately previous sermon when talking about the visceral world of dreams:

In the same way as jīvas, īśvaras such as Brahmā, etc. also experience creations during their dream state (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

Svāminārāyaṇa is referring to the familiar Hindu triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva – the ‘gods’ assigned the tasks of origination, sustenance and dissolution within each brahmāṇḍa – and all other beings in the creative process up to and including the countless pairs of Pradhāna-Puruṣa first evolved from the converging of Mūla-Prakṛti (māyā) and Mūla-Puruṣa (an akṣaramukta). This includes Vairāja Puruṣa, who is the inner soul of each brahmāṇḍa and therefore has the physical brahmāṇḍa as its gross body (called virāṭa) [Vac. Kār.12, Gaḍh. II.10, Gaḍh. II.31]. Its subtle body (called sūtrātman), like that of a jīva, comprises its own senses and inner faculties. These are presided over by various divinities of nature which are said to facilitate each function. For example, Sūrya, the sentient being of the sun, facilitates the sense of sight. These divinities also preside over the senses and faculties of each jīva, and are listed as below:

Sense/Faculty			Presiding Divinity
4 Inner Faculties (Antahkarāṇa)	Manas	Thinking	Aniṛddha/Candra
	Buddhi	Reasoning	Pradyumna/Brahmā
	Citta	Contemplating	Vāsudeva
	Ahaṁkāra	Self-Identifying	Saṅkarṣaṇa/Rudra
5 Cognitive Senses (Jñānendriya)	Cakṣus	Sight	Sūrya
	Śrotra	Hearing	Dīśā
	Ghrāṇa	Smelling	Aśvinīkumāra
	Rasanā	Taste	Varuṇa
	Tvak	Touch	Vāyu
5 Conative Senses (Karmendriya)	Vāk	Speech	Agni
	Pāṇi	Dexterity	Indra
	Pāda	Locomotion	Viṣṇu
	Pāyu	Excretion	Mitra
	Upastha	Generation	Prajāpati

As explained, these divinities include the sentient beings enlivening the various forces of nature, reiterating the important Hindu belief of a living world infused with energy and emotion.

Sentient Divinity	Aspect of Nature
Sūrya	Sun
Candra	Moon
Ṁrthvī	Earth
Ākāśa	Space
Diśā	Directions
Varuṇa	Water
Vāyu	Wind
Agni	Fire
Indra	Rain

Some of these as well as a few other divinities are mentioned at AU 1.1.3 as “hatching” from the various organs and senses of Vairāja Puruṣa, who is the “guardian of the world” [AU 1.1.2]. The world is depicted there as a massive cosmic egg.⁴⁰²

As aforementioned, more about this topic will be covered in the following chapter on māyā when we discuss the order of creation for each brahmāṇḍa. A brief explanation can nonetheless be provided here analogously using the

⁴⁰² See AU-SB 1.1.3, pp. 419-20.

following downscaled model adapted from Svāminārāyaṇa's own sermons (which we shall be examining shortly).

Consider a country comprising many cities. Each city is assigned a minister to oversee its smooth and efficient running. Furthermore, each minister is assisted by junior ministers, secretaries and council members, each with a specific portfolio of duties. All these people are human, just like the citizens they serve, only with more power and authority. Similarly, each world ('city') is under the 'local' authority of Vairāja Puruṣa ('minister'), who is the soul of the living brahmāṇḍa and who has other divinities ('junior ministers') – such as Sūrya (of the sun), Pṛthvī (the earth), Varuṇa (water), etc. – working under him in various assigned duties to ensure its ordered functioning. All these beings are metaphysically īśvara; they are distinct from, superior and yet similar to the jīvas of each brahmāṇḍa, i.e. bound by māyā but with more power and authority.

A natural progression of this analogy would be to extend it up to the 'national' level, relating the prime minister or king of the land to Parabrahman, who holds overall power and control for the workings of each city/brahmāṇḍa (though he may not always exercise it directly), and who devolves some of that authority to each of his appointed ministers to allow them to fulfil their duties, who, all the while, remain answerable and subordinate to their leader. Importantly, however, one needs to remember that while the leader of the land is another human just like his/her ministers and deputies, Parabrahman is metaphysically distinct from

all īśvaras. This leads us neatly on to the following section, where we further explore this distinction and relationship between the two.

9.3) Distinction from and Relation to Parabrahman

By their name, one can be forgiven for mistaking 'īśvara' to mean God. They are in fact ontologically distinct entities; metaphysically different from Parabrahman as well as infinitely inferior to him.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises this repeatedly in various ways. For example, when narrating a correct form of theological reflection, he states in Vac. Sār.1:

One should think of the greatness of God in the following way: '... I have attained Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān in person, the very Puruṣottama Bhagavān who is... the master of Brahmā and the other devas, who themselves are the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates this form of relationship through his familiar analogy of Parabrahman as a world-emperor, in which the countless īśvaras are mere village chiefs. This is most vividly presented in Vac. Pan.4 and is worth re-citing here in this context.

For example, suppose there is a great world-emperor whose kingdom stretches from where the sun rises to where it sets.... So powerful is this world-emperor that it is not possible to count the villages in his empire, as they are innumerable. The chiefs of these villages also cannot be counted, as they too are innumerable. Furthermore, the countless chiefs of those villages come to his court to make requests. The emperor's money, property, pleasures, palaces and wealth are also countless. Similarly, God is the king of the kings of countless villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas.

Moreover, the chiefs of those villages in the form of brahmāṇḍas are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Just as in one village one chief is senior

and the whole population of that village bows before him and follows his command, and just as the chief in turn bows before the king, similarly, in each brahmāṇḍa Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are senior, and the others in that brahmāṇḍa, that is the devas, demons, humans, seers and prajāpatis of that brahmāṇḍa, worship them and follow their command. But Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān and follow his command.

Furthermore, all of the Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas of all of the brahmāṇḍas pray to God, ‘Mahārāja! Please have compassion on us and visit our brahmāṇḍa’ – just as the chief of a village requests the world-emperor, ‘Mahārāja! I am poor. Please visit my house. I shall serve you to the best of my ability.’ In the same way, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva pray to that God: ‘Mahārāja! Please have mercy upon us and grace us with your darśana; do visit our brahmāṇḍa.’ Only then does God assume a body in that brahmāṇḍa (Vac. Pan.4).

To be clear, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa (Śiva) are still the mighty lords of each brahmāṇḍa, exercising phenomenal power and commanding the veneration and obedience of humans and even lesser divinities. But as powerful and venerable and dominating as they may be, they are of utter lowly rank before the Lord of all lords – like “poor” “village chiefs” to the “Great King of all kings”. Even their mention in the plural – “Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Maheśas”, each of the countless brahmāṇḍas – further attests to their relative powerlessness; together, they are reigned over by only the one supreme Parabrahman. And their prayer of sheer supplication, beseeching Parabrahman to grace them with his audience, conclusively cements his position of paramount sovereignty and metaphysical supremacy.

This superior-subordinate or ruler-ruled relationship between Parabrahman and Īśvaras is especially reinforced by the evocative phrase “Īśvarnā paṇ Īśvar”, meaning that Parabrahman is the Īśvara (Lord) of all Īśvaras (lords) even. It

highlights Parabrahman as being at least as superior to the īśvaras as they themselves are over others. Whatever power or control they wield over their individual world, it is Parabrahman the Great Lord who reigns over all such lesser lords in all worlds. Svāminārāyaṇa uses the phrase at Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, framing it, importantly, within the doctrine of Pragaṭa. He proclaims:

This manifest form of Puruṣottama Bhagavān before your eyes is...
the Lord of all lords [īśvarnā paṇ īśvar] (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad similarly states:

Tam īśvarāṇām paramam maheśvaram... |

He who is the Supreme Great Lord of all the lords... (SU 6.7).

When the term “Maheśvara” appears in the Bhagavad-Gītā also, the Bhāṣyakāra relates it to Parabrahman as the “Lord of all īśvaras”, i.e. their controller [5.29, 10.3 and 13.22].

Significantly, the phrase “īśvarnā paṇ īśvar” can also be found in the Vacanāmṛt in directly addressing Svāminārāyaṇa. When a scholar of the “Mādhvī Sampradāya” entered one of Svāminārāyaṇa’s assemblies, Svāminārāyaṇa asked about the belief that Vṛndāvana, the earthly abode of God, survives final dissolution.⁴⁰³

The scholar acknowledged Svāminārāyaṇa’s “valid question”, but was unable to answer it. In supplication, he asked in return:

⁴⁰³ See, for example, *Padma Pūrāṇa*, Pātāla Khaṇḍa 69.69, 71, and 73.26.

In my mind, I have formed a firm belief in you, that you are the ācārya of all ācāryas and the Īśvara of all Īśvaras. Therefore, please have compassion on me and explain to me your doctrine (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

Svāminārāyaṇa duly went on to explain the five eternal entities of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, Īśvara and jīva.

As powerful as the Īśvaras are, though, their powers are of course delegated to them and ultimately regulated by Parabrahman. Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises, the Īśvaras are able to function at all only by the enlivening and empowering presence of Parabrahman within them, just as he dwells in all other beings and things as their śarīrin.

The inspirer of both the Īśvara known as Virāṭa Puruṣa and of this jīva is Puruṣottama (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

Further on in this sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa expands upon what he means by the “inspirer” of Virāṭa Puruṣa. He describes in detail how “the senses, inner faculties and their presiding divinities” had all “entered that Virāṭa” and “attempted to awaken him.” Yet, “despite Virāṭa’s soul being inside his body, Virāṭa still did not rise.” It was only when Parabrahman, the Soul of all souls, “entered him... did the body of Virāṭa rise.” And “only then did Virāṭa Puruṣa become capable of performing all his activities” [Vac. Gaḍh. II.31].⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ See also Vac. Gaḍh. II.10.

Svāminārāyaṇa extends this discussion into the important avatāra-avatārin doctrine. As we learned when looking at the supremacy of Parabrahman, he is described as the avatārin, the source of all avatāras, whereas these avatāras themselves actually emanate from Virāṭa Puruṣa, and so are metaphysically īśvara in being and distinct from Parabrahman. It is only by Parabrahman's special 're-entering' (anupraveśa) that they are empowered to fulfil their task on earth and become worthy of human veneration [Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 and Vac. Pan.7].

This concept of Parabrahman inspiring and mobilising the gods is also presented anecdotally at KeU 3-4, where Indra, Vāyu, Agni and the other divinities are seen arrogantly celebrating "our victory" over the asuras and congratulating each other on "our greatness". They are summarily made to realise how powerless they actually are and that their triumph was due only to the gracious empowerment of Parabrahman, without whom they would not be able to function at all.

Apart from functioning in general, even the īśvaras' enjoyment is not possible independently of Parabrahman, for he is the omniscient, omnipresent grantor of the fruits of their karmas, just as he is for the jīvas [Vac. Gaḍh. I.45], since the īśvaras, too, are still subject to karmas, just like the jīvas. This is also true of karmas that sometimes express themselves in the dream state. As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

In reality, it is God – who transcends both jīva and īśvara, and who is also the giver of the fruits of karmas – who creates the world

experienced in dreams according to the karmas of each particular jīva and īśvara.

In Vac. Kār.1, Svāminārāyaṇa extends Parabrahman's inspiration even to the state of "deep sleep" at the time of final dissolution, when the īśvaras (and jīvas) are dormant within māyā without name or form. Only when Parabrahman wills and inspires do those īśvaras assume a name and form.

In all ways and states, then, the īśvaras are absolutely dependent on Parabrahman – for their functioning and enjoyment, and for their very existence. This is confirmed in the Jyotirādyadhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa (BS 2.4.14-15), just as the Paratantrādhikaraṇa (BS 2.3.41-42), discussed in the previous chapter, helped in confirming the dependency of jīvas on Parabrahman.⁴⁰⁵ Parabrahman thus remains in full and ultimate control.

Svāminārāyaṇa is sure to add, though, that the relationship between Parabrahman and the īśvaras is a devout and loving one. While it is true that,

God is very powerful; even the devas such as Brahmā and others
live under his command (Vac. Gaḍh. II.66),

it is not a fearful compliance. Rather, as we saw in the sovereign king-village chief analogy above at Vac. Pan.4,

Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva in turn worship Puruṣottama Bhagavān
and follow his command,

⁴⁰⁵ See BS-SB 2.4.14-15, pp. 261-62.

even though they themselves are worshipped and obeyed in their respective worlds. This is because Parabrahman is eminently worthy of their highest reverence, adoration and humility, which the īśvaras so readily accord him.

Even the great such as Brahmā, Śiva,... apply the dust of God's holy feet upon their heads. They put aside all of their self-importance and constantly offer devotion to him (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, too, states:

The devas worship that immortal [Parabrahman]... (BU 4.4.16).

This best summarises and concludes the relationship īśvaras enjoy with Parabrahman.

**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

10) MĀYĀ

- **Nature of Māyā**
 - Triune
 - Characterised by Insentience and Sentiency
 - Eternal (Yet Mutable)
 - Indistinct
 - Material Substratum of All Beings and Things
 - Power (or Means) of God
 - Ignorance
 - Useful
- **Māyā as Jagat**
 - Parabrahman as Creator and Cause
 - Purpose of Creation and Irreproachability of the Creator
 - Creative Process
 - Dissolution
 - Nitya Pralaya
 - Nimitta Pralaya
 - Prākṛta Pralaya
 - Ātyantika Pralaya
 - Jñāna Pralaya
 - Actual Dissolution

10) MĀYĀ

Having expounded upon the four sentient eternal entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa metaphysical quintet, we now move on to the final and only non-sentient entity, māyā. Known variously as māyā, mūla-māyā and mahā-māyā, as well as Prakṛti and Mūla-Prakṛti, it is the root or universal material source of the world, the cosmic material principle. Often depicted as feminine in nature, juxtaposed against Puraṣa, its masculine counterpart in the creative process, it represents matter complementing – not necessarily opposing – the spirit (caitanya) of the other entities. While irreconcilably different from each other, together, they form and enliven all that there is.

Also known as avidyā, because it is antithetical to vidyā or knowledge, māyā is also the ignorance that shrouds intelligent beings. Māyā is thus the root cause of suffering and sorrow that attends the incessant transmigration through various live-forms. It has to be transcended to secure final liberation.

It is this dual form and function of māyā as primordial matter and ignorance that we shall be exploring in this chapter.

10.1) Nature of Māyā

Svāminārāyaṇa provides a succinct definition of māyā, calling it Prakṛti, in Vac.

Gaḍh. I.12. He states:

Prakṛti is composed of the three guṇas. It is characterised by both insentience and sentiency, is eternal, indistinct, the ‘field’ of all

beings and all elements including mahattattva, and also the divine power of God.

Our exposition of māyā can be guided by this compact elucidation. As we unpack each of these terms and aspects, we should eventually arrive at a fuller understanding of its nature.

10.1.1) Triune

Māyā has three fundamental qualities, or guṇas, known as sattva (literally, ‘goodness’), rajas (‘passion’) and tamas (‘darkness’). Literally meaning ‘threads’, these guṇas are sometimes described as the three fibres braided together to create the one māyā, but it should be noted that they are *qualities* of māyā, not its constitutive components. This is evidenced from the Bhagavad-Gītā where the guṇas are described as being “born of Prakṛti” (3.5, 13.19, 13.21, 14.5, 18.40) and otherwise distinct from it (3.27, 13.23). Svāminārāyaṇa, too, talks of them as “aris[ing] from māyā” (Vac. Loyā.10).

Each of the guṇas nevertheless lends its own specific strand to māyā.

Respectively, they lead to calmness and clarity, activity and creativity, inertia and obscurity. Naturally, each is found to be at work more sharply than the others in the three stages of creation: rajas is employed for and leads to generation, sattvas for sustenance, tamas for destruction. As we shall see shortly in the description of the creative process, the delicate balance of these forces, and their disturbance, is what triggers generation. Here, we should note that in all three

phases of the world – generation, sustenance and dissolution – māyā retains all three of its qualities.

In everyday life, these three primary qualities mix in differing proportions to create an infinitely diverse palette of propensities which colours everything created of māyā. (SU 4.5 describes māyā as “red, white and black”, referring to rajoguṇa, sattvagūṇa and tamoguṇa, respectively.) This helps explain why certain places or objects or foods are said to be predominantly sāttvic or rājasic or tāmasic. Since the mind and body are also products of māyā – the soul’s causal body is itself māyā – the three guṇas also deeply affect individuals. With all three qualities being in constant flux, the mood and attitude of each individual is accordingly fluid or unstable, influencing a person’s ever-changing actions and responses. When sattvagūṇa is predominant, one is more inclined to observe restraint, discretion, tolerance, humility, self-contentment (without indulging in sensorial pleasures), to engage in charity and other uplifting and enlightening activities, and generally be at peace with one’s self and in harmony with others. Under the influence of rajoguṇa, however, one finds a predomination of desire, intent, impulse, industry, indulgence, self-interest, arrogance, bravado. Most dangerously, tamoguṇa is what leads to avarice, anger, fear, quarrelsomeness, violence, infatuation, connivance, dejection, delusion, indolence, indecision, and the like.⁴⁰⁶ Importantly, however, no one guṇa works in isolation; there is always

⁴⁰⁶ See also, for example, BP 11.25.2-5, Mahābhārata Aśvamedha Parva 36-39, and BG 17.

a triadic combination at play, though one can have a greater prevalence over the other two.

Those who are uninfluenced by or have risen above the influence of these māyic qualities are called 'nirguṇa' (without the guṇas) or 'guṇātīta' (beyond the guṇas).

10.1.2) Characterised by Insentience and Sentiency

Māyā is essentially and eternally material, insentient, inert, without consciousness, i.e. jaḍa. It can never become sentient (cetana) like Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, Īśvaras, and jīvas.

However, it is sometimes referred to as being jaḍacidātmikā – characterised by both insentience and sentiency – because countless sentient beings (jīvas and Īśvaras) lie dormant within Mūla-Māyā after final dissolution, giving the notion that it is 'ensouled' by them, just as, indeed, the physical body composed of māyā is ensouled by the jīva. Similarly, Mūla-Māyā's concomitance with the sentient Mūla-Puruṣa (an akṣaramukta) when initiating the process of creation also helps explain why māyā can be called cidātmikā, if only by association.

10.1.3) Eternal (Yet Mutable)

Like Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, Īśvaras and jīvas, māyā is eternal – without beginning and without end. It was never created, nor will it ever be destroyed.

(See, for example, SU 1.9, 4.5 and BG 13.11.) One may overcome it to secure liberation, but never eliminate it.

But unlike the other four entities, māyā is not immutable. As we saw in the opening chapter of this Part, māyā is set apart from those sentient entities which are immutably eternal (kūṭastha nitya) by having pariṇāmī nityatā, i.e. mutable eternality. Though never being obliterated, it nonetheless undergoes various transformations during the process of creation and sustenance. Upon final dissolution, however, it is not destroyed; it simply dissolves into an indistinguishably subtle yet compact form within one part of Akṣarabrahman's light.

It is this aspect of māyā's mutability that allows its products – the material body, objects, and all the features that comprise the world – to be changing and perishable. Thus, all things evolved from Mūla-Māyā, including the elements of mahattattva, etc., are indeed generated and destroyed in each cycle of creation.

10.1.4) Indistinct

During the period of complete rest after final dissolution, māyā is said to be nirviśeṣa, or non-distinct, because all its creations with name and form have been dissolved within it. It, too, dissolves into a subtle, unmanifest (avyakta) form within Akṣarabrahman.

In contrast, when called into action for the process of creation, māyā becomes especially gross and manifest through its myriad creations, each with a distinctive name and form inspired by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

10.1.5) Material Substratum of All Beings and Things

Māyā as matter is not necessarily opposed to spirit. In fact, it can be complementary and positively useful, as we shall see further on, especially in attempting to understand God's purpose in creating the world. As we also learned earlier, the psychosomatic body is a necessary and powerful tool for the intelligent soul by which to know, act and enjoy, and eventually to secure liberation.

As the material from which the bodies of all jīvas and īśvaras are composed and from which all objects are made, Prakṛti serves as their substratum. This is often termed as māyā being the “field” or kṣetra (with the intelligent beings called the “field-knowers”, or kṣetrajña). This idea is also useful in analogously explaining the creative process. At the time of rest after final dissolution, the jīvas and īśvaras lie dormant like un-germinated seeds in the “field” (i.e. soil) of māyā. Upon raining, i.e. Puruṣa associating with Prakṛti, those beings ‘sprout’ forth from māyā into forms with names and identity. Svāminārāyaṇa employs this analogy in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10, using it also to reiterate the eternality of jīvas and īśvaras as well as of māyā.

Just as the seeds in the soil sprout by the association of rainwater, similarly, the jīvas, which are eternal, arise from within māyā, but new jīvas are not created. Therefore, just as īśvara is eternal, māyā

is also eternal. The jīvas residing in māyā are also eternal (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

10.1.6) Power (or Means) of God

Since māyā is insentient, it can only be effective in creation when ‘crafted’ by an intelligent creator, as clay is in the hands of a potter. In other words, while Prakṛti is the material cause of the world – the very ‘stuff’ from which all things are made – it is by the will and ‘skill’ (powers) of Parabrahman, the efficient cause, that creation is made possible. In this sense, Prakṛti is described as the “power” of God (see also SU 6.8) or the means by which he creates. This should not, however, be confused as implying māyā to be an inherent quality or consort of God. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this clear in Vac. Gaḍh. I.13 and Vac. Loyā.17 where he refers to māyā as well as kāla (time), Puruṣa, and even Akṣarabrahman as “God’s powers”, all of which have a role in the process of creation.

The possessive case in the phrase “God’s power” or, as Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly uses, “God’s māyā” [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.34, Pan.3, Gaḍh. II.65] also alludes to māyā *belonging* to God and being under his authority and dependence. As we have already learned earlier, māyā is a part of Parabrahman’s vast universal body, which he indwells, supports, mobilises and controls [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.64, Kār.8]. Thus, even if māyā is the immediate material cause of the world, it is not

so independently of Parabrahman, making him the ultimate material cause of everything as well as its efficient cause.⁴⁰⁷

At the disposal of and empowered by Parabrahman, māyā becomes a powerful and mystifying force. Though singular in its causal state, it goes forth to transform into myriad effects, producing a world – worlds, in fact – of unimaginable and bewildering diversity, filled with all things bright and beautiful, all things great and small; all things weird and wonderful, bringing joy and sorrow to all.

10.1.7) Ignorance

Apart from its role in creation as the primordial material reality, on the personal plane, māyā is also avidyā or ignorance. It is therefore framed in terms of darkness (tamas), because it is seen as directly antithetical to knowledge (analogously presented as prakāśa, or light) and all that is enlightening. It is this māyā that enshrouds the essentially pure, radiant, conscious, blissful soul, thus obstructing an accurate realisation of itself and God, and instead, goading one to hanker after transient, relatively petty, and ultimately misery-filled worldly pleasures. In effect, it falsely binds one to the body, other people, possessions, sensorial pleasures, places, etc., perilously hampering a complete and loving relationship with God.

⁴⁰⁷ For a fuller discussion of this, see section 6.3.2.1: Parabrahman as Creator, Sustainer and Dissolver & Both Efficient Cause and Material Cause.

This seems to have led Svāminārāyaṇa to also define māyā in simpler, more pragmatic terms. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in his very first documented sermon:

Māyā is anything that obstructs a devotee of God while meditating on God's form (Vac. Gaḍh. I.1).

Svāminārāyaṇa returns to this idea in his very last documented sermon, this time presenting it with respect to the body and its affiliates.

What is God's māyā? Māyā is nothing but the sense of I-ness towards the body and my-ness towards anything related to the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

In Vac. Gaḍh. II.36, he is yet more firm and unequivocal.

Affection for anything other than God is itself māyā.

This, then, is the māyā that needs to be transcended for self-realisation and God-realisation, and in order to secure release from the suffering and sorrow that accompanies the incessant transmigratory journey through birth, death and rebirth.

10.1.8) Useful

Having said this about the nature of māyā thus far, Svāminārāyaṇa raises an intriguing question in Vac. Loyā.10 when he asks his audience:

Is there only misery in māyā, or is there also some happiness in it?

The dialectic discussion that ensues is worth reproducing here to provide a more rounded understanding of māyā in the Svāminārāyaṇa system as well as another

example of the applied theological reflection available in and possible from the Vacanāmrut.

Muktānand Swāmi, one of Svāminārāyaṇa's most senior paramhansas, predictably replies to the question:

Māyā causes only misery.

To this, Svāminārāyaṇa counters that of the three guṇas arising from māyā, sattvaguṇa is said to be a positive force, inspiring wisdom, tranquillity, self-restraint, etc. Quoting from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, he adds:

Sattvam yad brahmadarśanam |

Sattvaguṇa leads to the vision [i.e. realisation] of 'Brahman' [i.e. Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman] (BP 1.2.24).

Svāminārāyaṇa therefore asks:

How is māyā in the form of knowledge which leads to liberation a cause of misery?

Muktānand Swāmi and the other paramhansas in the audience concede that they will not be able to answer the question, and request Svāminārāyaṇa to do so himself.

He begins, characteristically, with an analogy, this time of Yamarājā, the deity of Death. Reframed for simplicity in modern terms, it is akin to saying a police officer appears "frightful and terrible", "dreadful", or even "horrific like death" to

a grave criminal running from the law. To a law-abiding citizen, however, that same officer appears “very pleasant”. “Similarly,” Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

to those who are non-believers, māyā causes attachment and intense misery, while to a devotee of God, that same māyā is the cause of intense happiness.

In any case, he continues,

the entities that have evolved out of māyā – the senses and the inner faculties, and their presiding devatās – all support the devotion of God. Therefore, for a devotee of God, māyā is not a cause of misery; it is a source of great happiness.

At this, Muktānand Swāmi rightly counters:

If māyā is a cause of happiness, why is it that when a devotee of God visualises the form of God and engages in worship, māyā, in the form of the mind, causes misery by generating many disturbing thoughts?

Svāminārāyaṇa acknowledges the experience of most devotees, but explains how it can be different.

Māyā, in the form of the mind, does not cause misery to a person who thoroughly understands the greatness of God and has an absolutely firm refuge of God, but it does cause misery to a person who does not have such a refuge.

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain in practical terms how this is true, again drawing upon an analogy. For example, he says, a detractor may attempt to dislodge an irresolute devotee by disparaging his faith or luring him away with

enticements, but the same detractor would hardly succeed in dislodging a staunch adherent.⁴⁰⁸

Similarly, māyā, in the form of the mind, would never entertain a desire to daunt a person who has a firm refuge in God. Rather, it would help his devotion to flourish. However, māyā does deflect a person who has a slight deficiency in his refuge in God and does cause him misery. Then, when that person develops a complete refuge in God, māyā is not able to disturb him or cause him pain.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes the discussion by returning to his original question.

Therefore, the answer is that if a person has such complete faith in God, māyā is not capable of causing him misery.

What is interesting here is that Svāminārāyaṇa is subjectifying the positive or negative impact of māyā on the strength of the individual's faith in God; māyā itself is neither intrinsically evil nor good. Since māyā belongs to God and functions only under his authority, why indeed would it harm anyone who also belongs to God and is similarly acting under his authority? In fact, māyā is there to facilitate devotion of God for fellow dependants. What Svāminārāyaṇa is emphasising, it seems, is the need to fully and exclusively submit oneself to God, and thereby not only escape the detractive effects of māyā but, more positively, take full advantage of its potential usefulness in worshipping him. For us, this provides a more holistic understanding of the nature of māyā in the Svāminārāyaṇa system.

⁴⁰⁸ In other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa equally admonishes a foolhardy confidence over the mind and senses, warning that they are not to be trusted (Vac. Loyā.14) and should always be kept under careful watch and tight control by observing the moral injunctions codified in the scriptures (Vac. Pan.3).

10.2) Māyā as Jagat

While māyā in its state of rest is unmanifest and indistinguishably subtle, it becomes most distinctively manifest and gross as it transforms into the created world visible around us, including the bodies that each individual receives. It is to this world that we now turn to understand the workings of māyā, attempting to make sense as far as possible of how it was created, why it was created, particularly in the way that it is, and what happens to it hereafter.

The first thing that needs to be said about this world is that it is real, not illusory. This is made patently clear by Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. I.39 when he challenges an adherent and scholar of Advaita Vedānta who was sitting in the assembly at that time. As a good example of a theological discussion grounded in textual exegesis, it is worth recounting the sermon here in part.

First, Svāminārāyaṇa pointedly addresses the Advaitin regarding the central doctrine of strict monism. He says to him:

You claim that in reality only Brahman exists. Furthermore, you say that with the exception of that Brahman, jīvas, īśvaras, māyā, the world, the Vedas, the Śāstras and the Purāṇas are all illusory. I can neither understand this concept of yours, nor can I accept it.

Svāminārāyaṇa invites the scholar to defend the Advaitin position, but is clear about the terms upon which this theological discussion ought to proceed. The scholar should respond

by citing only the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas, the Smṛtis or the Itihāsa scriptures. If, however, you reply quoting the words of some inauthentic scripture, then I will not accept your answer. But,

since I have absolute faith in the words of Vyāsjī, I will be able to accept your reply if you reply quoting his words.

The Advaitin offered his defence using various arguments, but each time, the Vacanāmrut notes, Svāminārāyaṇa raised doubts to his response leaving the query unresolved. Thereupon Svāminārāyaṇa said:

Please listen as I resolve that query myself.

Svāminārāyaṇa began by explaining in detail that there are in fact “two different states” of spiritual experience, what he calls “savikalpa samādhi” and “nirvikalpa samādhi”. Those who attain the former state “see jīvas, īśvaras, māyā, and their supporter, Brahman, as being distinct from each other”, just as “a person standing atop Mount Meru⁴⁰⁹ sees everything in the vicinity of Meru distinctly – other mountains, trees, as well as the ground that supports the mountains and the trees.” In contrast, a person standing atop the exceedingly higher, cosmic Mount Lokāloka⁴¹⁰ “sees everything in the vicinity of Mount Lokāloka – the other mountains and trees, etc. – as being one with the ground, but he does not see them as being distinct.”

Similarly, those great liberated souls who have attained nirvikalpa samādhi see jīvas, īśvaras and māyā as being one with Brahman – but they do not see them as distinct entities.

⁴⁰⁹ Also known as ‘Sumeru’, this refers to the sacred mountain mentioned in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology, considered to be the centre of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes. It is said to be to be 84,000 yojanas high (c. 1,082,000 kilometres or 672,000 miles). See references to ‘Mahāmeru’, for example, in the Mahābhārata at Ādi Parva 17. Śānti Parva 222.18 notes it as ‘the king of mountains’.

⁴¹⁰ This is another mountain mentioned in cosmological accounts within Hindu texts. It is described as the boundary to the three worlds, and being golden in colour and as smooth as glass (Devī Bhāgavata 8).

It is due to these differing experiential states of the seers who then share their vision in the scriptures that we find seemingly contradictory or inconsistent statements.

The words of those who have attained the savikalpa state noted in the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas, etc. describe all of those entities as being satya [real]. However, the words of those who have attained the nirvikalpa state describe all of those entities as being asatya [non-real]. In reality, however, they are not asatya [non-real]. They are only described as being asatya [non-real] because they cannot be seen due to the influence of the nirvikalpa state.

Svāminārāyaṇa provides another analogy to reiterate his point about two different standpoints leading to two different views, and then explains how both descriptions can be correct – given that they are coming from different positions – thereby avoiding confusion and ensuring an essential congruency and harmony among all revelatory statements, since, crucially, they are all true. He concludes:

So, if one interprets ‘Brahman’ in this manner, then there will never be any contextual inconsistencies in the statements of the scriptures, but if one does not, then inconsistencies will arise.

Svāminārāyaṇa then ends the sermon with a stern warning against a lopsided reading of the scriptures – privileging those statements which propound the existence of Brahman alone and deny the existence of the world – without the contextual exegesis explained above, calling it “extremely foolish” and spiritually perilous.

Thus, for all its mutations and transience, the world is nonetheless real, and not some illusory figment of an inconceivable ignorance which will dematerialise

upon self-realisation. Even in the liberated state, Svāminārāyaṇa asserts, the world or māyā is not obliterated for the individual; it is merely transcended so as to become inconsequential. This means that if ever the world, the physical body, or any of māyā's other creations are described as "mithyā" [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.14, Gaḍh. I.70, Sār.14, Pan.2, Gaḍh. III.38] or "asatya" [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.16, Gaḍh. I.21, Gaḍh. II.30], it is simply to underscore their perishability and māyā's own mutability, especially in relation to the immutable eternality of Parabrahman and the other sentient beings. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this clear with his definition of 'satya' and 'asatya' in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38:

All forms that are the result of the entities evolved from māyā are asatya. Why? Because all those forms will be destroyed in time. Conversely, the form of God in Akṣaradhām and the form of the mukta – the attendants of God – are all satya....

Bringing this together with the earlier point that māyā can indeed be useful, we can arrive at an interesting theological and practical insight. Svāminārāyaṇa seems to advocate neither a world-negating nor world-affirming *Weltanschauung*, but what might be called a world-contextualising view. The world is not illusory; it is real, and therefore cannot be dismissed. Yet, being composed of māyā, it has a strong and natural propensity to distract the jīva away from God, and so cannot be blankly advocated either. Nevertheless, the world plays an essential role in providing a platform and set of tools with which the jīva can transcend it and reach God. What it requires is to be properly understood in its correct context, as a tool and servant of God. Those striving for liberation from māyā therefore find themselves straddling two realms; diligently fulfilling their duties in the material world yet using that as a form of praxis

(sādhana) to achieving a higher spiritual realisation of themselves and their creator and cause.

10.2.1) Parabrahman as Creator and Cause

Theologically, the most important thing that can be said about the world is that Parabrahman is its creator and cause. While this has been extensively discussed in our chapter on Parabrahman, it warrants some recapitulation and further reflection here in the context of our attempt to understand the māyic world.

We had earlier raised an important question on this topic: How justifiable is it that God be called the creator when Prakṛti, the primordial substance from which the material world is composed, is co-eternal with God? If Prakṛti already exists, what exactly has God ‘created’?

The question becomes even sharper when we recall the satkāryavāda view of causality adopted by Svāminārāyaṇa and most other Vedāntins. It maintains that nothing new is ever created; substances merely change state, from a causal state of being to an effected state. Just as an earthen pot is not a new substance apart from the clump of clay from which it was crafted, so, too, the world always existed, albeit without distinguishable names and forms, in the causal state of primordial dormant matter.

Notwithstanding the radically different conceptualisation of *creatio ex materia* found generally in the Hindu traditions to those of other theological systems,

particularly the Abrahamic faiths, the question is nonetheless intriguing and worth exploring. A clue to its answer lies in the metaphor used to define the question itself. Firstly, the familiar clay-pot metaphor of the Nyāya system, it is argued by the Vedāntins, reveals the need for an intelligent creator. Just as a clump of clay cannot be moulded into a pot by itself, but in the hands of an adept potter, it can be transformed into numerous vessels and artefacts, similarly, Prakṛti may be the primordial material reality, but it is insentient, like the clay. It cannot of its own accord create the world. It needs a sentient world-maker to bring it to action, transformation, generation.

If we now modify and develop this analogy slightly, we can find new ways of understanding the world-maker and the world he makes. Can God inasmuch be the creator of the world as a sculptor who creates a statue from a boulder of stone, a painter who creates a masterpiece with paints, or a musician who creates a symphony from musical notes? The stone, paints and notes all pre-exist, albeit indistinctively, but it is the creativity and mastery of the artiste that brings to life something wholly new from them yet not distinctly apart from what each was before. The creation is at once both new and the same. Similarly, it can be said, God inspires from the pre-existent, indistinguishable Prakṛti innumerable masterpieces each with their own name and form and all still intrinsically māyic.

This model of creation as art (as opposed to mere manufacturing) also helps in explaining how the ‘work’ of God might better be described as ‘play’ – joyful and

expressive. It is not the necessary, laborious, mostly unpleasant routine that is (unfortunately) most often associated with work, but that which occurs freely, willingly, and lovingly for the sheer joy of it by its creator. This metaphor of ‘play’ can in fact be found in an important discussion in the Brahmasūtras to help explain the purpose behind God’s creation, which we shall be turning to shortly. Here we can accept that in this sense of artistic expression, Parabrahman can still be properly conceived as ‘creator’ of the world even though Prakṛti always exists.⁴¹¹

From the perspective of the creation, as is Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, or Beethoven’s *9th Symphony*, the beautiful natural world of God can be understood as something to appreciate, cherish and protect, as it brings joy to its admirers and reveals something about the artiste himself.

But there is a danger associated with these analogies of which we should also be aware and guard against. They are not to become a basis of logical induction upon which to argue for the existence of God, moving from the world to its maker. To be clear, we are using the metaphors as a way of better understanding the world-maker God and God-made world as already primarily, completely and authoritatively revealed by scripture.⁴¹² Like all metaphors employed to help describe reality, those above are imperfect and incomplete. Where the clay-pot

⁴¹¹ I was pleasantly surprised and grateful to discover that George Hendry includes creation as “artistic expression” in his models of creation found in Christian theology. Reading his *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 147-62 has helped in enhancing this paragraph.

⁴¹² See ‘Arguing the Existence of God’, chapter 2 in Clooney’s *Hindu God, Christian God*, pp. 29-61.

or paint-painting, etc. metaphors reach their natural limits, for example, is that unlike the potter or painter, God is the material cause of the world as well as its efficient cause. This can only be learned from scriptural revelation (BS 1.1.3). It teaches us that in being the omnisoul – pervading, supporting, controlling, empowering everything, including Prakṛti – Parabrahman is, in every way, the fundamental and universal cause of the world. Since it is completely true to say, then, that without him there would be no creation, it is wholly correct to describe Parabrahman as the ‘creator’, the one who brings the world into being by his mere will. Svāminārāyaṇa thus describes Parabrahman as such repeatedly throughout the Vacanāmṛut (Vac. Gaḍh. I.37, Gaḍh. I.56, Gaḍh. I.59, Gaḍh. II.10), sometimes tying in Parabrahman’s role as sustainer and dissolver as well (Vac. Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.78, Loyā.1, Loyā.17, Pan.1, Gaḍh. II.53, Var.2, Gaḍh. III.35, Amd.7). As an example of each:

It is through God that everything mobile and immobile is created
(Vac. Gaḍh. II.10).

It is God who is the creator, sustainer and dissolver of the world
(Vac. Loyā.17).

As we shall see next, *creatio ex materia* is not only compatible with a Creator God, it also ensures his irreproachability. Otherwise, all evil that is ingrained in a previously non-existent material reality would have to be attributable to God.

10.2.2) Purpose of Creation and the Irreproachability of its Creator

Two major objections still need to be contended with in our discussion about creation, both of which appear in consecutive adhikaraṇas in the second chapter of the Brahmasūtras.

In the ongoing debate about whether ‘Brahman’ can be distinguished as the cause of the origination, etc. of the world [BS 1.1.2], and therefore the goal of knowledge [BS 1.1.1], the objectors firstly assert that even if Parabrahman is confirmed as the efficient and material cause of the world, it only means that he is *capable* of creating, sustaining and dissolving the world. But *why* would he do so?

This is the charge presented at BS-SB 2.1.33: It is obvious to everyone that all activities by sane people have some sort of purpose [prayojana]; they do things to satisfy some self-interest or for the benefit of others, or both. But if God eternally has all his desires attained [nityam avāptasamastakāma] and is forever fulfilled with his own divine bliss [divyanijānandasāntṛpta], he has no reason to create, sustain or dissolve the world for himself. As for anything that is done for the benefit of others, that is marked by benignity. Since the created world has a plenitude of misery and suffering, it cannot have been made out of any wish to be helpful and kind (especially by someone who has all his wishes fulfilled). If it had, the world would have been made such that everyone would always be perfectly happy. It is not, hence God cannot have made it for the benefit of others. And if God cannot have created, etc. the world for others nor for himself (and it is

axiomatic that he is sane), there is no other reason for him to have done so.

Hence, without a purpose, God cannot be the world's creator, etc.⁴¹³

To this, the Sūtrakāra pithily replies that there is a purpose.

Lokavat-tu līlākaivalyam |

But it is mere sport, as in the ordinary world (BS 2.1.34).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains: Just as a generous benefactor may naturally, effortlessly and happily engage in philanthropy, purely out of his own goodwill and because it brings him inner joy, similarly, God, who is supremely benevolent and compassionate – wishing to liberate all jīvas and īśvaras, which brings him joy even though he is innately blissful himself [sahajānanda] – will naturally and joyfully, without any exertion at all,⁴¹⁴ engage in the creation, etc. of the world.⁴¹⁵

The Bhāṣyakāra here is confirming that the act of creation by Parabrahman is indeed for the benefit of others. If there is any self-interest on God's part, it is only that he graciously wishes to help the finite beings to liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates upon this in Vac. Kār.1. He begins:

God does not create and sustain the world for his own sake.

⁴¹³ BS-SB 2.1.33, p. 183.

⁴¹⁴ The Bhāṣyakāra expands “sukṛtam”, which qualifies creation at TU 2.7.1, as meaning “easily [literally, ‘joyously’], effortlessly done”. He defends his explanation by explaining that there would be exertion if the efficient and material causes of the world were different. Since Parabrahman is himself both, he can create the world “joyously and effortlessly”. MuU-SB 2.7.1, p. 381.

⁴¹⁵ BS-SB 2.1.34, p. 184.

The framing of God's creative work as ‘līlā’ also reinforces the metaphor we explored in the previous section, where artistic creations are more ‘play’ than ‘work’, produced willingly, joyfully, and bringing joy to their admirers as well.

He then moves to explain the definite purpose of the world and how it is of benefit to others by firstly citing the following verse from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa,

Buddhīndriyamaṇaḥprāṇān janānām asṛjat prabhuḥ |
Mātrārtham ca bhavārtham ca hyātmāne kalpanāya ca (BP
10.87.2) ||

translating it thus:

This verse means: God created the intellect, senses, mind and vital breaths of all people to enable the jīvas to enjoy the sense-objects, to take birth, to transmigrate to other realms, and to attain liberation.

Then expanding upon the verse, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Therefore, God created this cosmos for the sake of the jīvas' liberation. God sustains it for the sake of the jīvas' liberation. In fact, God also causes its dissolution for the sake of the jīvas' liberation. How is that? Well, he destroys it to allow the jīvas – tired as a result of undergoing many births and deaths – to rest (Vac. Kār.1).

“In all ways,” Svāminārāyaṇa reiterates at the end, Parabrahman “acts... for the benefit of the jīvas”.

Svāminārāyaṇa repeats this benevolent intentionality in Vac. Pan.1, focussing on two main objectives:

God..., at the time of creation, gives an intellect, senses, a mind and vital breaths to the jīvas that had been absorbed in māyā along with their causal bodies at the time of dissolution. Why does he give these to the jīvas? Well, he does so to enable them to enjoy the superior, intermediate and inferior types of sensorial pleasures as well as for [securing] liberation.

What Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be saying is that, firstly, Parabrahman did not create this world by mere chance or caprice. As the “Let me be many” passages

from CU 6.2.1 and TU 2.6.3 also reveal, a deep and active resolve initiated the creation of our world by God. It comes to being only by his will. More importantly, that resolve was grounded in and suffused by his loving compassion. He thus creates a world [in this context, referred to as 'bhogabhūmi'; literally, 'land for enjoyment'] wherein he grants each soul a body [bhogāyatana, or 'body for enjoyment'] complete with senses and faculties [bhogasādhana, i.e. 'means of enjoyment'] that it may enjoy the sense-objects [bhoga] he has created for them, but also so that they – ultimately realising both the finitude and transience of worldly enjoyment and the suffering inextricably tied with them – develop dispassion from these māyic pleasures and strive to secure liberation to attain the divine, limitless, eternal bliss of God. Creation, in this sense, is a purposive and supremely gracious act of benevolence by a supremely compassionate creator.

This brings us to the objectors' second main charge against God. If indeed Parabrahman graciously wished to benefit others, which would be marked by kindness towards the beneficiaries (or would involve not harming them at the very least), would he not have created a world which was filled with perfect joy and goodness for all? Why, instead, is the world afflicted with such suffering and evil? Moreover, it is not even as if this misery is evenly distributed among the people. While some are born into abject poverty, others wallow in affluence. Some are born into royalty, others into less comfortable ranks. Some enjoy a long and healthy life, others suffer disease, disability and untimely death. How can a world vitiated by such harsh inequalities and often heart-wrenching misery be

the work of a fair and compassionate God? Either accept God is partial and cruel, the objectors impel the Sūtrakāra, or that he is not the creator of the world.

The Sūtrakāra refuses to be drawn into this fallacious dilemma. He explains in BS 2.1.35 that Parabrahman cannot be made culpable of partiality or cruelty, because the inequality and suffering that one observes in the world is relative to the souls' own karmas. Each soul is responsible for its own present (and future) life-conditions; God merely dispenses them as karmic deserts that the soul itself has accrued over successive lifetimes. The proof of this, the Sūtrakāra asserts, can be found in the scriptures as well as analogously in the visible world.

The Bhāṣyakāra elaborates on the scriptural evidence by citing BU 4.4.5:

As a person does and as a person behaves, so he becomes. He who does good becomes good. He who does bad becomes bad. By meritorious acts comes merit. By sinful acts comes sin.... As [a person] wishes, so he acts; as he acts, so he accrues karma; as he accrues karmas, so he attains.

The determinant factor behind any attainment, good or bad, is thus the personal resolve and actions of each individual. This causal relationship can be practically observed, the Bhāṣyakāra adds, in a seed and its growth. Svāminārāyaṇa draws upon this famous analogy when the very question raised at BS 2.1.35 is posed to him in an assembly. In the style of a double-binding purvapakṣa found preluding a Brahmasūtra-adhikaraṇa, Cimanrāvjī, a respectable lay devotee, asks

Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Var.6:

Mahārāja, initially, at the time of dissolution, the jīvas with their causal bodies were absorbed within māyā. Then, at the time of

creation, the jīvas attained their gross and subtle bodies. A variety of life in the form of devas, humans, animals, etc. was also created. Was this due to karmas? Or was it due to God's wish? If we say that it was due to karmas, then that would prove the [atheistic] Jain doctrine to be true. On the other hand, if we say that it was due to God's wish, then it would suggest that God is partial and not compassionate. Therefore, please grace us by telling us how things really are.

Svāminārāyaṇa responds by firstly establishing the “intimate relationship” between the gross and subtle bodies with the causal body, “in the same way that a tree is intimately related to its seed.”

Just as when seeds which are planted in the earth sprout forth after coming into contact with rainwater, similarly, during the period of creation, the jīvas, which had resided within māyā together with their causal bodies, attain various types of bodies according to their individual karmas by the will of God, the giver of the fruits of karmas.

Svāminārāyaṇa is effectively explaining that although rain allows the seeds to grow, it is inconsequential in *what* they grow into. That is determined entirely by each seed's own latent potentiality. Sugarcane seeds will only grow into sugarcane, and pepper seeds only into peppers. Equally, only sugarcane grows from sugarcane seeds, and only peppers from pepper seeds. Why is one sweet and the other hot? The difference is due to the genetic encoding within the respective seeds themselves, not due to the rain which indiscriminately falls for both. Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa maintains, the different conditions of individual beings is due to their own karmic 'DNA' stored in the causal body of each soul. This provides the decisive information according to which subsequent bodies will be composed and life-circumstances (place of birth, parents, etc.) determined. “That is why it is called the ‘causal’ body [kāraṇa śarīra],”

Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies, adding that it is “without beginning”. For each undying soul, this ensures two things: 1) an essential unity between lives, and 2) consistent fairness; he who sows the seed (in a past life) is the one who reaps the fruit (in a subsequent life), and the fruit he reaps is of the seed he himself sowed. The souls can neither complain about their lot nor blame it upon God.

But this then raises another complaint against God. If each soul is enjoying and suffering the consequences of its own karmas, where is there room in all of this for God’s compassion? How can creation still be regarded as an act of his benevolence, when it can neither fully be called ‘his’ nor is it fully ‘benevolent’? He is merely an automated dispenser, the last cog in the universal workings of karmic determinism. Impartial, yes. But apathetic, too.

Not so, the Bhāṣyakāra retorts. While the body, senses, faculties, sense-objects and physical realm that the soul deserves are its own earnings, they are nonetheless created for it by God, for who else has the power to activate Prakṛti and has the knowledge of what exactly needs to be made from it? Moreover, the dispensation of karmic fruits is not at all divorced of God’s pleasure and displeasure, just as a noble king metes out reward and retribution upon deserving subjects only after being pleased or displeased by their acts. You also forget, the Bhāṣyakāra reminds the objector, that it is God who graciously endows each soul with the means to act, know and enjoy in the first place. Along with that, he allows them the freedom to act and grants the capacity to discriminate between good deeds and bad, each having their own inescapable

consequences. With their highest welfare at heart, God has thus given finite beings the opportunity to use their God-granted material bodies and material things to secure liberation from their miserable transmigratory existence and enjoy eternal, blissful communion with him. How can God be so quickly dismissed from this system? And how can his compassion be denied? He is the very Soul of the souls, empowering, indwelling and supporting them, without whom they would not be able to do anything.

In that case, does this not make God at least partially or indirectly responsible for the souls' suffering or their inequality, for without him they would not have accumulated the karmas which they are now experiencing? No, the answer must be, for that would be tantamount to blaming the rain or soil for what the seeds grow into.⁴¹⁶

A marked feature of this Hindu theodicy, presented here in only a condensed and truncated form, is that it not only attempts to defend the goodness of God and ensure justice for individual beings, it also seeks to preserve God's indispensability and intimate relationship with those beings. God is not accountable for the inequity or suffering among the souls of the world because it is determined by the karmas that they themselves have accrued and therefore deserve. But nor does this make God redundant or detached, for the doctrine of karma is not simply an inert law of cause and effect. It requires to be presided

⁴¹⁶ Based on BS-SB 2.1.35-36, pp. 184-87 with further reflection.

over or mediated by God, because only an all-knowing, all-pervading, all-loving being – not the insentient karmas themselves (as the Jains believe) or some mysterious cosmic power (such as the Mīmāṃsākas’ apūrva) – can know all the actions and thoughts happening in all places at all times, and then dispense with the fruits accordingly. As we saw, Svāminārāyaṇa was clear to add at the end of the passage above that it was “by the will of God” that the karmic fruits are dispensed and therefore the world created.⁴¹⁷

Other aspects of the so-called ‘problem of evil’ still require attention and further reflection, but the limited discussion here should nonetheless provide an idea of the scripturally grounded and reasonably argued attempt to reconcile the presence of suffering in a world created by a compassionate God. It also allows us to retrace the argumentation for the world’s creatorship introduced at the beginning of this section: God is not responsible for the diversity and suffering in the world therefore his impartiality and compassion remain intact. Since he is benevolent, he creates the world for the benefit of others. Because this amounts to a definite purpose for creating the world, it means God *can* be its creator.

10.2.3) Creative Process

Svāminārāyaṇa describes the process of creation in various sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Gaḍh. I.13, Gaḍh. I.41), mentioning it still further in many others (e.g. Vac.

⁴¹⁷ See also the Phalādhikaraṇa – the last debate of BS 3.2 – that argues for Parabrahman as the grantor of karmic fruits to souls. BS-SB 3.2.36-39; pp. 310-12.

For a more detailed discussion on the topic of karma, including how endeavour, charity, sympathy, etc. can still be reconciled, see Brahmadarshandas’s *Karmasiddhānta ane Punarjanma*, 2 vols (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2002).

Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. II.31). What follows is an account of that protological process ('utpatti-sarga') based on these sermons.⁴¹⁸

Our beginning is the pre-creation state of final dissolution, when all sentient (jīvas and Īśvaras) and insentient (Prakṛti) matter is condensed within the being of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman (both residing with the akṣaramuktas in Akṣaradhāma). This is why CU 6.2.1 and AU 1.1.1, for example, speak of nothing existing "in the beginning" except pure "Being" or the "Soul". While according to the satkāryavāda view of causality it is true that the variegated world exists in all its potentiality during this causal state, it is indistinguishable by name and form from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, even though their distinction is real. Bringing this unmanifest world to its manifest, effected state is itself the very act of 'creation'.

The process for this creation is initiated when Parabrahman "sees" [CU 6.1.3, BU 2.1.5, AU 1.1.1] Akṣarabrahman, i.e. he looks with intent, with a resolve to create the manifest world for the benefit of the souls that they may seek liberation and redeem their karmic accrument. Upon perfectly receiving Parabrahman's will, Akṣarabrahman selects a liberated soul (akṣaramukta) from the countless millions in Akṣaradhāma and inspires it to engage with Prakṛti. Because of its primal role in this process, the akṣaramukta is given the designation of 'Mūla-Puruṣa' (sometimes also called 'Mahā-Puruṣa' or 'Akṣara-Puruṣa'), and the

⁴¹⁸ The Bhāṣyakāra also presents the same account, for example, at MuU-SB 1.1.7, pp. 240-41.

Prakṛti it engages with is similarly referred to as ‘Mūla-Prakṛti’ (or ‘Mahā-Prakṛti’). Together, they are called simply ‘Prakṛti-Purasa’. Parabrahman ‘re-enters’ this pair for the special task ahead, empowering both to continue forth the order of creation [e.g. TU 2.6.3].

Despite Mūla-Prakṛti being conceived of as feminine in nature, it is of course insentient. Moreover, the liberated soul, though termed in the masculine ‘Puruṣa’, is genderless and desireless. Hence the ‘coming together’ of Mūla-Prakṛti and Mūla-Puruṣa is not to be misconstrued as copulative, even though creation is sometimes metaphorically described in terms of human procreation [Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, BG 14.3, BP 3.5.26]. Rather, by its mere Parabrahman-empowered presence, Mūla-Puruṣa causes Mūla-Prakṛti to be stirred from its dormant state. Up until that point, the three fundamental qualities of Prakṛti – sattva, rajas and tamas – had been in perfect equilibrium. Once that delicate balance is disturbed, Mūla-Prakṛti produces countless parts from itself – rather like mini-versions of Prakṛti – each called Pradhāna-Prakṛti. Īśvaras (previously dormant within māyā) are called to individually join with each Pradhāna-Prakṛti, making countless pairs of what are each called ‘Pradhāna-Puruṣa’. To briefly recap to this point: the primeval Mūla-Prakṛti and Mūla-Puruṣa – known jointly as Prakṛti-Puruṣa – produce countless pairs of Pradhāna-Puruṣas.

From each pair of Pradhāna-Puruṣa is produced a brahmāṇḍa (what we have loosely been calling ‘world’). Since there are countless Pradhāna-Puruṣas,

countless such brahmāṇḍas are created, all as originally willed by Parabrahman and inspired by Akṣarabrahman.

Focussing now on a single brahmāṇḍa, a series of elements evolve from Pradhāna-Puruṣa which forms the 'body' of the world as we see it and beyond what is visible. We have to remember that this brahmāṇḍa is a living entity, which has an Īśvara – called Vairāja Puruṣa (or Virāṭa Puruṣa) – as its soul.

First to evolve from Pradhāna-Puruṣa is mahattattva. As the name might suggest (literally 'great element'), it is the fundamental material source from which the other elements of the world-body will evolve. It also represents the citta (contemplative mind) of the world.

From mahattattva evolve three types of Ahaṁkāra, a form of cosmic ego, each formed predominantly from one of the three qualities of Prakṛti. From Sāttvic Ahaṁkāra evolves the (cosmic) mind and the deities who preside over the (cosmic) senses; from Rājasic Ahaṁkāra evolve the (cosmic) senses, intellect and vital breaths; and from Tāmasic Ahaṁkāra evolves the five gross elements and the five subtle elements.

The five gross elements (mahābhūta) are, in order of creation:

1. ākāśa ('space' or 'ether')
2. vāyu ('wind'), i.e. gaseous matter
3. tejas ('light'), i.e. high energy matter

-
4. jala ('water') i.e. liquid matter
 5. pṛthvī ('earth'), i.e. solid matter

The sequence follows a descending order of subtlety, with the first element being the most subtle and used to create the next element. Hence, the basest element 'earth' is created using all of the other elements. Importantly, all the elements are said to have Parabrahman as their ultimate source [e.g. MuU 2.1.6], and are indwelt and therefore empowered and controlled by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

At [Brahman's] command, the work of creation – conceived of earth, water, fire, air, and space – unfolds (SU 6.2).⁴¹⁹

The causes of these five gross elements are the five extremely subtle, quintessential elements called the tanmātrā. They correspond with the material elements as follow:

Subtle Element (Cause)	Material Element (Effect)
Gandha ('Smell')	Pṛthvī ('Earth')
Rasa ('Taste')	Jala ('Water')
Rūpa ('Sight')	Tejas ('Fire')
Sparṣa ('Touch')	Vāyu ('Air')
Śabda ('Sound')	Ākāśa ('Space')

⁴¹⁹ See also, for example, MuU 2.1.3.

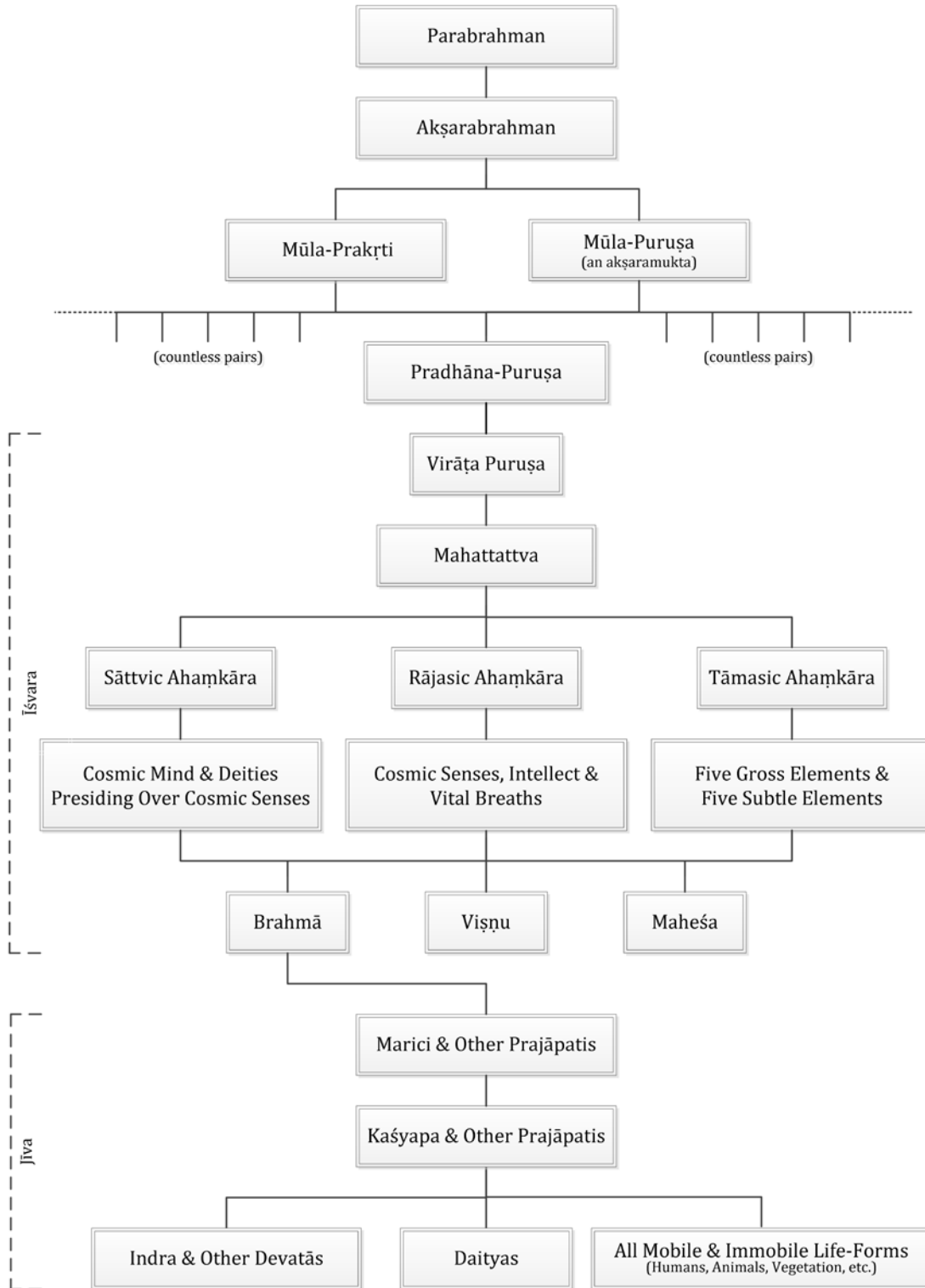
Together, these form the gross and subtle ‘body’, i.e. a brahmāṇḍa, of Vairāja Puruṣa (metaphysically an īśvara-soul), ready for it to enter and enliven it, only after being ‘re-entered’ by Parabrahman himself.

Parabrahman’s re-entering and empowering continues as each new element of the order is created, allowing it to continue the process further. This ensures that Parabrahman remains both the efficient cause and the material cause of all of creation.

From Vairāja Puruṣa originates Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa, each with their own īśvara-souls, and then from Brahmā (empowered by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman) extends the rest of the creation for jīvas. This begins with Marīci and other such Prajāpatīs, then Kaśyapa and other such Prajāpatīs, and finally Indra and other devatās (divinities), daityas (‘demons’), humans, animals, vegetation, and all other mobile and immobile life-forms.

This order of creation can alternatively be presented in the following chart.

The Protological Process (Utpatti-Sarga)



Each brahmāṇḍa is said to comprise of 14 realms, or lokas. Of these, the eighth from the bottom, called Mṛtyuloka, relates to earth, which humans inhabit. Above Mṛtyuloka, the higher realms (collectively called ‘svarga’) are inhabited by devatās, seers and higher beings, while the lower regions (collectively called ‘pātāla’) are inhabited by daityas, nocturnal creatures and lower beings. The 14 lokas are:

	Loka	Inhabitants
14	Satyaloka / Brahmaloka	Brahmā
13	Tapaloka	Bṛgu and other sages
12	Janaloka	Bṛgu and other sages
11	Maharloka	Aryam and other ancestral divinities
10	Svargaloka / Indraloka	Indra and other devatās
9	Bhuvarkala	Impure devatās
8	Mṛtyuloka	Humans
7	Atala	Daityas
6	Vitala	Daityas
5	Sutala	Daityas
4	Talātala	Nocturnal creatures
3	Mahātala	Nocturnal creatures
2	Rasātala	Nocturnal creatures
1	Pātāla	Serpents

Each fourteen-realm brahmāṇḍa is said to have aṣṭa āvaraṇa, or ‘eight sheaths’. These material constituents refer to, in ascending order: pṛthvī (‘earth’), jala (‘water’), tejas (‘light’), vāyu (‘wind’), ākāśa (space), ahaṁkāra, mahattattva (‘great element’), and Prakṛti (both Pradhāna-Prakṛti and Mūla-Prakṛti) [see also BG 7.4].

In all, each brahmāṇḍa is said to be composed of “the 24 elements”⁴²⁰. These are the māyic products of mahattattva which refer to the five elements (pṛthvī, jala, tejas, vāyu and ākāśa) that comprise its gross body plus the nineteen elements (the five cognitive senses, five conative senses, five subtle elements, and four inner faculties) that comprise its subtle body. Interestingly, these are the same elements that go into composing the human body (as we saw in the chapter on jīva), revealing an intimate connection between humans and the world.

10.2.4) Dissolution

What happens to the world once created?

In an earlier chapter we learned about the omniagency of Parabrahman and his relationship with the material and immaterial world. A model for this relationship is provided by the body-soul doctrine wherein Parabrahman has the whole world as his body. As the soul is to its body, God indwells, empowers,

⁴²⁰ This is similar to the 24 elements found within Sāṃkhya School (see, for example, Sāṃkhyakārikā 3), but with some significant differences in what is included, omitted or conflated within something else. For example, the Sāṃkhya School propounds mahattattva and buddhi (cosmic intellect) to be the same, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa distinguishes between them.

controls, and supports the world in every way possible. It is totally dependent on him. But while sustaining and nourishing the world and regulating its workings, Parabrahman also chooses not to directly intervene, allowing instead the natural course of events and effects to unfold, because while endowing beings with the power and means to act, he also grants them the freedom to choose their actions and the capacity to discriminate between them. These beings include not only the jīvas on earth but also the īśvaras deputed by Parabrahman to preside over the functioning of the universe. This is how the world is sustained upon creation, thus called its state of sustenance, or stithi.

By the very nature of Prakṛti, though – it is mutable and perishable in its effected states – the created world begins to degenerate immediately. This is called dissolution, or pralaya. It is not the destruction of māyā, since it is ontologically eternal, but the opposite of its evolution, where māyic products return towards their original condition of rest in Mūla-Prakṛti, i.e. from an effected state to the causal state. This “reverse order” is also debated and confirmed at BS 2.3.15.

It should be noted that all three states or phases of the world – origination, sustenance and dissolution – flow seamlessly in a continuum. As morning subsides it gives rise to the afternoon, and the afternoon eventually passes whereupon night is born. In this perpetual chain the day is maintained, as is the life of a brahmāṇḍa within its triadic phases.

Furthermore, of decisive importance in this context is the cyclic conceptualisation of time. After the night ends, morning will come again. Similarly dissolution is not the ‘final’ end, but the end to only one rotation of the cycle, which continues to spin perpetually at the will of God.

And just as night is as necessary as the morning and afternoon, so, too, is the state of dissolution following sustenance and origination. As we saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that God’s gracious purpose in creating the world extends until its end.

God also causes its dissolution for the sake of the jīvas’ liberation. How is that? Well, he destroys it to allow the jīvas – tired as a result of undergoing many births and deaths – to rest (Vac. Kār.1).

In what could be called ‘Hindu eschatology’, there are four types or degrees of ‘end’. In increasing level of dissolution, they are:

1. Nitya Pralaya (constant dissolution)
2. Nimitta Pralaya (stimulated dissolution)
3. Prākṛta Pralaya (general dissolution)
4. Ātyantika Pralaya (final dissolution)

Svāminārāyaṇa describes all four in detail in Vac. Gaḍh. I.12, Vac. Amd.2 and Vac. Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ, with the last also including an account of the vast cosmic timescale and domain of a brahmāṇḍa. Based on these sermons, we can arrive at the following description of each level of pralaya.

10.2.4.1) Nitya Pralaya

The first level and most frequent type of ‘end’ is the physical death of the beings of earth. Svāminārāyaṇa states simply:

The day-to-day death of the bodies of individual devas, demons, humans and others is called Nitya Pralaya (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

In explaining death, he adds in Vac. Amd.2 that the “adjuncts” of the jīva, i.e. the māyic constituents of its body, are all “absorbed” back into their respective mahābhūtas and other elements; bodily earth returns to cosmic earth, bodily water to cosmic water, and so on.

On a more personal level, Svāminārāyaṇa states in the same sermon that even “the jīva’s deep sleep” can be called Nitya Pralaya, because during this period of complete inertness and unawareness, the soul has absolutely no consciousness of its own body or the world around it.

10.2.4.2) Nimitta Pralaya

If the Nitya Pralaya is related to jīvas, the Nimitta Pralaya relates to īśvaras. In the same vein as above, Svāminārāyaṇa describes Nimitta Pralaya as “Brahmā’s deep sleep”, when the great part of “īśvara’s adjuncts are absorbed” [Vac. Amd.2].

He elaborates upon this in Vac. Gaḍh. I.12 drawing upon the cosmic timescale and composition of a fourteen-realm brahmāṇḍa.

The body of the īśvara called Virāṭa [Puruṣa] has a lifespan of two parārdhas [2×10^{17} human years]. Fourteen manvantaras [c.

306,720,000 human years]⁴²¹ elapse during one of Virāṭa Puruṣa's days. His night is of the same duration as the day. During his day, the lower ten realms of the brahmāṇḍa remain in existence, and after his night falls, they are dissolved. This is called Nimitta Pralaya.

At the end of Nimitta Pralaya, then, the bottom ten of a brahamanda's fourteen realms are disintegrated, i.e. up to and including Svargaloka.

10.2.4.3) Prākṛta Pralaya

Moving further now, we see an even greater return to the original causal state in the Prākṛta Pralaya. Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

When the two parārdhas [2×10^{17} human years] of Virāṭa Puruṣa have elapsed, the body of Virāṭa is destroyed along with Satyaloka and the other realms. At that time, Pradhāna-Prakṛti, Puruṣa, and the 24 elements including mahattattva are absorbed back into Mahā-Māyā. This is called Prākṛta Pralaya (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

In other words,

Prākṛta Pralaya is that in which all of the entities that had evolved from Prakṛti are assimilated back into Prakṛti (Vac. Amd.2).

This means that in Prākṛta Pralaya, “all of Puruṣa's adjuncts are absorbed” (Vac. Amd.2).

⁴²¹ This relates to the period that one Manu reigns over the world. Fourteen such Manus are said to reign successively during one day of Brahmā.

10.2.4.4) Ātyantika Pralaya

This brings us to the final and universal level of ‘end’, which can be of two types: subjective and actual. The first is called Jñāna Pralaya, or dissolution by knowledge.

10.2.4.4.1) Jñāna Pralaya

This is a state of individual spiritual understanding whereby Prakṛti-Puruṣa and the entities evolved thereof do not come into view, and one sees only pure consciousness, within which only the form of God resides, but no other forms remain. In other words, all māyic influences are dissolved, as if a complete dissolution (Ātyantika Pralaya) has taken place for that particular individual.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

In Ātyantika Pralaya, which is Jñāna Pralaya, everything up to and including Prakṛti is eclipsed by the light of Brahman (Vac. Amd.2).

Elaborating upon this state, he adds in Vac. Gaḍh. I.24:

I shall explain how an elevated spiritual state can be attained by jñāna. Firstly, what is that jñāna like? Well, it transcends Prakṛti-Puruṣa. When an elevated spiritual state is attained by this jñāna, Prakṛti-Puruṣa and the entities evolved from them do not come into view. This is known as Jñāna Pralaya.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī relates this to the state of being brahmarūpa, where all forms of māyā are transcended. He explains:

What is Jñāna Pralaya? It is to eradicate every single work of Prakṛti from one’s heart and become brahmarūpa. Then nothing else remains to be done. This was the very principle of Svāminārāyaṇa (SV 5.195).

What is also clear from this is that during this subjective state of enlightenment, the brahmāṇḍas still remain in existence for everyone else; after all, they are real, not illusory. They simply cease to have an influence on that particular enlightened being.

10.2.4.4.2) Actual Dissolution

Actual, final dissolution occurs when Parabrahman decides.

This is when countless millions of brahmāṇḍas are destroyed. At that time, even Prakṛti-Puruṣa – the cause of Pradhāna-Puruṣas – draws countless brahmāṇḍas within itself, and is then eclipsed by the light of Akṣara-Puruṣa [who in turn is absorbed into Akṣarabrahman]. This, the fourth type of dissolution, is called Ātyantika Pralaya (Vac. Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly describes it in Vac. Kār.7:

During the dissolution of the brahmāṇḍas, the 24 elements which have evolved from Prakṛti are assimilated into Prakṛti. Then Prakṛti-Puruṣa also disappear into the divine light of Akṣarabrahman.

Thus everything, including Mahā-Māyā, “is absorbed into the divine light of Akṣarabrahman – as night merges into day” (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

Quite simply, then:

During final dissolution, nothing remains of anything that has evolved from Prakṛti-Puruṣa (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

That would mean that everything that transcends māyā continues to exist beyond final dissolution. Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.24 that during this ‘end time’, nothing remains except the divine form of Parabrahman in

Akṣaradhāma, Akṣaradhāma itself (i.e. Akṣarabrahman), and the akṣaramuktas (liberated souls) in Akṣaradhāma. This fittingly leads us closer to the *end* of this thesis and the final chapter in this Part, where we expound upon this liberated spiritual state.

**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

11) MUKTI

- **Nature and Cause of Bondage**
 - Nature of Liberation
 - Videha Mukti: Post-Mortem Liberation
 - Jīvan-Mukti: Pre-Mortem Liberation
 - Ontological Distinction of Muktas from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman
 - Svāmi-Sevaka Relationship of Muktas with Parabrahman
- **Way to Liberation**
 - Grace and Effort
 - Knowledge of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman
 - Knowing and Serving Parabrahman Manifest through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru
 - Associating with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru
 - 'Oneness' with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

11) MUKTI

We began this Part with Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation of theological knowledge:

A jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation (Vac. Loyā.7).

It helped explain how, even though knowing Parabrahman is of primary importance in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, a complete understanding of his nature necessarily requires understanding Akṣarabrahman, Prakṛti (māyā), as well as jīva and īśvara. It also served to structure our exposition on Parabrahman into the four themes of Sarvopari, Kartā, Sākāra, and Pragaṭa. What is also striking about the formulation is that it immediately and unequivocally ties knowledge with liberation. Svāminārāyaṇa is absolutely clear: the goal, culmination and fruit of all theology is final release from the incessant cycle of births and deaths, to enjoy eternal fellowship with God.

We have touched upon this and many other aspects of mukti along our way in the chapters on Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, jīva, īśvara and māyā. This in itself is telling, reinforcing liberation as what permeates all theological reflection and to what it must ultimately lead. Here, we have occasion now to bind those points together and add some more details to allow for a more complete, though still very introductory, picture of liberation within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

11.1) Nature and Cause of Bondage

Before we can move on to understanding liberation, we must first remind ourselves from what one is to be liberated and why. We should therefore begin with a brief review of the nature of spiritual bondage and its cause.

Earlier we learned that jīvas and īśvaras are essentially pure (devoid of any māyic traits) and have sat-cit-ānanda (existence, consciousness and bliss) as their most fundamental characteristics. So why, then, do they experience sorrow when they should be intrinsically and eternally blissful? Svāminārāyaṇa explains that it is the body which encounters pain and (worldly) pleasure. However, if the soul falsely self-identifies with the three bodies, it will also experience that same pain and pleasure. Only when it realises itself to be distinct from them can it experience the transcendental, continuous bliss of its own self and the God within [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Vac. Gaḍh. I.20, et al]. In other words, it is the soul's ajñāna or ignorance – better understood as ‘anti-knowledge’, that which *opposes* true knowledge, rather than simply the lack of knowledge – which is the root cause of pain and suffering.

This ‘ignorance’ (ajñāna or avidyā), we now know from the previous chapter, is of the form of māyā. Svāminārāyaṇa identifies it in Vac. Kār.12 with the soul's causal body, saying:

The causal body is the māyā of the jīva. That same causal body evolves into the gross and subtle bodies. Thus, all three – the gross, subtle and causal bodies – can be said to be the māyā of the jīva. In the same manner, virāṭa, sūtrātman and avyākṛta can be said to be the māyā of īśvara.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes explicit this connection even further in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66.

The jīva also possesses the causal body, which is the embodiment of eternal ignorance.

Linking this ignorance back to māyā, Svāminārāyaṇa defines māyā as

nothing but the sense of I-ness towards the body and my-ness towards anything related to the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Interestingly, then, ignorance (ajñāna, avidyā), māyā and the causal body are essentially the same in this soteriological context and are indeed often seen being used interchangeably. All three are charged as the very reason – as the name ‘causal’ suggests [Vac. Var.6] – why the soul has to transmigrate from one gross+subtle body to another in each subsequent life.

But how exactly is one’s ignorance instrumental in perpetuating transmigration?

This connection requires further elucidation.

Firstly, any actions performed while in a state of ignorance (i.e. self-identification with the bodies) accrue karmas which are then stored in the causal body. As these karmas fully ‘ripen’, they cling to the soul, as if becoming a part of it.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains how this ignorance or māyic causal body is attached to the soul in Vac. Kār.12.

This māyā of the jīva, i.e. the causal body, is attached so firmly to the jīva that they cannot be separated by any means whatsoever... [just as] the shell of a tamarind seed is extremely firmly attached to the seed.

He repeats the seed-shell analogy in Vac. Var.6, again emphasising the “intimate” and “abiding relationship” between the soul and its causal body.

Using another analogy in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Just as a piece of iron is attracted to a magnetic rock and then sticks to it, similarly, the jīva has a nature of sticking; it sticks to the two māyic bodies – the gross body and the subtle body. Then, due to its ignorance, the jīva believes those bodies to be its own.

Those ripened karmas so closely and firmly attached to the soul manifest themselves as desires for even more māyic pleasures [Vac. Gaḍh. III.20]. To fulfil these desires, i.e. to expend those stored karmas, the soul has to assume another body in another life. If in that subsequent life those karmas are not fully expended and if, by the soul’s continuing ignorance, still more karmas are accrued, the surviving stock in the causal body will again need to be lived out in yet more lives. Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in Vac. Amd.3 using the example of a banyan tree and its roots.

Everyone knows that the roots of a banyan tree keep the tree green. Even if all of its roots, except for a few minor roots, are uprooted, the banyan tree will still remain green. In the same way, one may have outwardly renounced the sense-objects, but if thoughts of them are entertained, then those thoughts become a cause of births and deaths.

And so desires, borne of ignorance, become the root cause of more and more lives in the perpetual transmigratory cycle.

What needs to be noted apropos is that even in a state of ignorance, there is no change in the essential nature of the soul – just as the seed’s shell does not affect

the seed nor the magnetic rock the piece of iron. To believe otherwise is the very form of ignorance – or “foolishness” – that Svāminārāyaṇa so emphatically admonishes.

The jīva, which resides in the body, feels, ‘Lust, anger and other vicious natures are attached to my jīva.’ In this manner, depending on which of the vicious natures, i.e. lust, anger, avarice, etc. is predominant in a person, he believes his jīva to be full of that nature due to his association with it. But, in fact, not a single one of these vicious natures lies within the jīva; the jīva has merely believed itself to possess them out of its own foolishness (Vac. Gaḍh. II.12).

Going further, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Even before one had been graced with the attainment of God, kāla – a power of God – was unable to destroy the jīva; karmas were unable to destroy the jīva; not even māyā was able to absorb the jīva within itself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.50).

Nevertheless, māyā/ignorance/the causal body still enshrouds the soul, obstructing and obscuring a full realisation of its pure, conscious, blissful self and of the limitlessly blissful God who dwells therein and all around. Instead, that ignorance holds the soul captive to the never-ending needs of the body and insatiable desires of the mind, entrapping it ever more into an essentially painful transmigratory existence with all its limitations and sufferings of birth, decay, disease, disappointment, and death. This is what the Vedānta texts promise liberation from, and what mumkṣus (‘aspirants’, i.e. those seeking liberation) so earnestly endeavour towards.

11.2) Nature of Liberation

Mukti or mokṣa – from the Sanskrit verb-root ‘muc’ – relates in theological terms to freedom, liberation or release from the captivity and oppression of māyā and the incessant cycle of births and deaths it enforces. The first thing, therefore, we can say about mokṣa/liberation in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu soteriology is that it is a state of immortality, where death and rebirth are no more – because their very cause, māyā or ignorance, is no more.

Just like a grain of rice that has had its outer chaff removed does not grow, one who... is freed from eternal ignorance in the form of māyā becomes free of birth and death... (Vac. Sār.11).

This is explicitly and repeatedly corroborated by such important adjectives as “amṛta” – literally, immortal – found to describe the liberated soul in the Upaniṣads (IU 11, 14; KeU 1.2, 2.4, 2.5; KaU 1.28, 6.2, 6.9, 6.14, 6.15; PU 1.10, 3.11, 3.12; MuU 3.2.9; TU 1.10.1; AU 3.4; CU 1.4.4, 1.4.5; BU 1.3.28, 2.4.2, 2.4.3, 4.4.7, 4.4.14, 4.4.17, 4.5.4, 5.14.8) and Bhagavad-Gītā (13.12, 14.20). We also learned in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman that Akṣaradhāma, the abode of Parabrahman where liberated souls eternally rest in communion with him, is a place from where there is no return to a transmigratory existence (Vac. Sār.14; CU 4.15.6, BU 6.2.15, BG 8.21, 15.6, BS 4.4.22).

Of course, as we learned in the chapters on jīva and īśvara, the finite soul is by its very nature immortal and pure. However, mukti in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is more than just a return to an original state of being for the soul. It is a new, higher spiritual state – indeed, the highest, perfect spiritual state – that is

enriched by the direct realisation of Parabrahman. It is not just release from the pain and limitations of transmigration, but an eternal, overwhelming experience of the limitless and unending bliss of God. It entails not merely the dispelling of ignorance, but the positive receiving of Akṣarabrahman's qualities. In other words, this is the preeminent brahmic state, what Svāminārāyaṇa calls the state of being brahmarūpa or akṣararūpa, and described in the Bhagavad-Gītā as 'brāhmī sthiti' (2.72) or being 'brahmabhūta' (18.54). It is so called because the liberated soul becomes 'like Brahman', that is, it receives many of the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. As Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.20:

When the jīva attains a likeness to that Brahman..., then that jīva can also be said to be brahmarūpa.

This is made clear, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, by the identical descriptions of the universal soul, Akṣarabrahman, at CU 8.1.5,

Ya ātmā'pahatapāpmā vijaro vimṛtyurviśoko vijighatso'pipāsaḥ
satyakāmaḥ satyasaṅkalpaḥ |

That [universal] soul [i.e. Akṣarabrahman] is without evil, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst [i.e. physical or worldly desires], and has all his desires and wishes fulfilled,

and the individual, liberated soul at CU 8.7.1,

Ya ātmā'pahatapāpmā vijaro vimṛtyurviśoko vijighatso'pipāsaḥ
satyakāmaḥ satyasaṅkalpaḥ |

That [liberated] soul is without evil, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst [i.e. physical or worldly desires], and has all his desires and wishes fulfilled.⁴²²

⁴²² See CU-SB 8.7.1, pp. 367-68 for a detailed justification of the referents of both these verses – Akṣarabrahman at CU 8.1.5 and the liberated soul at CU 8.7.1. In the latter, the Bhāṣyakāra also clarifies that the first six qualities – being without evil and free of old age, death, sorrow, hunger and thirst – are the liberated soul's innate qualities, whereas the last two – having all

So central and fundamental to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is this doctrine of becoming brahmarūpa, and thereby completely and eternally liberated, that Svāminārāyaṇa reveals it as the very reason for his manifestation on earth in human form. As we saw earlier, he proclaimed:

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.⁴²³

It is also the reason why, Svāminārāyaṇa reveals, that whenever Parabrahman manifests on earth in human form to grant such liberation, he is always accompanied by Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71). As we shall later see, this extends (or ‘de-confines’) the liberative work of God from his own time on earth, making the brahmarūpa state perpetually possible because of the unbroken lineage of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (the ‘Guru Paramparā’) who succeed Svāminārāyaṇa.

As we saw in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī both stress in many of their sermons the need to become brahmarūpa and rise above ignorance. This is not only for personal spiritual fulfilment, upliftment and safety, they explain, but also to be able to fully devote oneself to Parabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in Vac. Loyā.7:

Brahmarūp thayo tene j Puruṣottamni bhaktino adhikār che.

desires and wishes fulfilled – are received by association with Akṣarabrahman. He also emphasises that this latter verse is not just a description of the liberated soul, but an instruction to spiritually liken and join one’s self with the living Akṣarabrahman Guru as a way to that liberated state.

⁴²³ *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p.76. See also *Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7.

Only he who becomes brahmarūpa is eligible of offering devotion to Puruṣottama.

Closely after this statement, Svāminārāyaṇa cites a similar declaration found in the Bhagavad-Gītā.

Brahmabhūta... madbhaktiṃ labhate parām |

He who becomes brahmarūpa... attains my highest devotion (BG 18.54).

At this point, an important distinction needs to be drawn here between becoming brahmarūpa ('being *like* Brahman') and what might be called Brahmification ('*becoming* Brahman') or deification ('*becoming* God', i.e. theosis). The latter two suggests a complete union of substance with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, which Svāminārāyaṇa strongly rejects (as we shall shortly see), whereas being brahmarūpa is not a substantial union but a qualitative similarity with Akṣarabrahman. The soul remains metaphysically jīva or īśvara, albeit it in a highly exalted spiritual state.

Svāminārāyaṇa reveals this brahmic state as one of ethical perfection, personal holiness, freedom from māyā (karma and base instincts), absolute fulfilment, and singular devotion to and total engrossment in God. The best way to elaborate upon these aspects is to understand them in the two contexts that the state can be experienced – after death, in Akṣaradhāma, and while alive, on earth – and through the liberated souls' distinction from and relationship with Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

11.2.1) Videha Mukti: Post-Mortem Liberation

The first and simplest way to understand liberation within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is as eternal fellowship with Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma. As a life of supreme, unending bliss and perfect, ceaseless devotion to God, this is the ultimate goal and consummation of all theological understanding and praxis towards which Svāminārāyaṇa inspires his devotees. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh.

I.21, he urges:

All of our satsaṅgis should develop the following singular conviction: ‘We also wish to join the ranks of the akṣararūpa muktas and go to Akṣaradhāma to forever remain in the service of God. We have no desire for the temporary and vain worldly pleasures; nor do we wish to be tempted by them in any way.’

Similarly, framing this as beyond even the still-inferior goal of any paradisiacal attainment, he adds in Vac. Gaḍh. II.47:

One should keep the following desire: ‘After leaving this body, I want to become brahmarūpa like Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, etc. and offer bhakti to God.’ ... He should discard the pleasures of [even] Brahmaloḥka and Indraloḥka using the strength of his pure desires and make his way to the abode of God. He should resolve not to stop anywhere in between.

Again, after narrating the relative insignificance of worldly and devic pleasures and the paramount bliss of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Pan.1:

Therefore, keeping this thought in mind, all of you should resolve: ‘Now we want to reach only the abode of God; we do not want to be tempted by the vain sensory pleasures along the way.’ So, please keep such a firm resolve.

Svāminārāyaṇa calls this “my principle [siddhānta]” when asked by a follower of the Dvaita School to explain his theological system in brief. After concisely expounding the five eternal realities, Svāminārāyaṇa says in conclusion:

When a jīva seeks the refuge of God, it overcomes God’s māyā, becomes brahmarūpa..., attains the abode of God, and becomes his attendant. This is my principle (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

This, Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies, is the state of liberation achieved after death, upon leaving the material body behind. For this reason, it is called ‘videha mukti’ (incorporeal liberation). He reveals:

When such [perfect] devotees leave their body... they reach the abode of God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.1).

Devotees of God... attain that luminous abode [called Akṣaradhāma] after death (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

After such an ekāntika bhakta leaves his body and becomes free of all influences of māyā, he attains Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21).

When that devotee leaves his body and attains the abode of God,... (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

When [the jīvātman] leaves its body and goes to the abode of God,... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.22).

But if, upon death, the soul leaves its material body behind, does it forever thereafter remain formless in Akṣaradhāma, as some sort of unbodied spirit or phantom? No, Svāminārāyaṇa explains.

God, who possesses a definite form, is always present in his abode, Brahmapura. Devotees of God, who also possess a form, remain in his service in that abode (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

So then what form do the liberated souls take in Akṣaradhāma? What do they look like there?

This very question is posed by Brahmānanda Svāmī, another of Svāminārāyaṇa's senior paramahansas, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66.

After the ignorance of the jīva is dispelled by the devotion of God, the association between the jīva and the three māyic bodies – gross, subtle and causal – no longer remains. So when the jīva attains the abode of God, with what type of form does it stay there?"

Svāminārāyaṇa replies:

When the jīva's ignorance is dispelled, its association with the three māyic bodies is broken. Thereafter, the jīva remains as pure consciousness and existence. Then, by God's will, the jīva receives a body composed of sentiency [caitanya prakṛti] – which is distinct from the eight inert elements [jaḍa prakṛti] of God, i.e. earth, water, etc. With that body, then, it resides in God's Akṣaradhāma. This is the answer to your question.

In answer to a similar question by Mukṭānanda Svāmī in Vac. Gaḍh. I.1 –

What type of body does a devotee of God attain when he leaves his physical body, which is composed of the five material elements, and goes to the abode of God?

– Svāminārāyaṇa replies that such a devotee receives, "by the will of God", a brahmic body, what he calls here a "brahmapamaya tanu".

The Bhāṣyakāra draws upon this when commentating on the phrase "svena rūpeṇābhiniṣpadyate" found at CU 8.12.2 in Prajāpati's instruction to Indra about the true self. He explains that when the soul leaves the body and reaches the supremely glorious form of Parabrahman in the divinely luminous Akṣaradhāma,

it receives a divine, brahmic body [brāhma divyavighraha; brāhmatanu] in which it continuously experiences the divine bliss of Parabrahman and Akṣaradhāma.⁴²⁴

This is analogously and even more explicitly stated at BU 4.4.4:

As a goldsmith takes a piece of gold and turns it into another, newer, more beautiful form, in the same way, this soul, having discarded this body and dispelled its ignorance, receives another, newer, more beautiful... brāhma form.⁴²⁵

Elaborating upon this divine form in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāminārāyaṇa speaks of it alongside God's form in the following way:

The form of God in Akṣaradhāma and the form of the muktas – the attendants of God – are all real, divine and extremely luminous. Also, the form of that God and those muktas is two-armed like that of a human being, and it is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Going even further in his identification of the muktas' form with God's, Svāminārāyaṇa calls theirs a 'godly body', or "bhāgavatī tanu" (Vac. Sār.14). While we shall be making vital distinctions between both further on in this chapter, it is important to note that Svāminārāyaṇa does make explicit the identical nature and causal relationship between the divinity of God's form and that of the liberated souls. He states in Vac. Kār.1:

The bodies, senses, inner faculties and vital breaths of those who are devotees of God, due to their knowledge of God, become like

⁴²⁴ CU-SB 8.12.2, pp. 386-87. See also the discussion based on this verse at BS-SB 4.4.1, pp. 416.

⁴²⁵ See BU-SB 4.4.4, pp. 268-69 for a fuller explanation of this verse, and where it relates to the brahmarūpa mukta receiving a brāhmaśarīra for enjoying Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, whereas other, less-elevated souls will receive other types of bodies as they enjoy the pleasures of lesser abodes.

God. This is because God himself has a divine form. So, the bodies, senses and inner faculties of those devotees become like God's senses, inner faculties and body. That is why those devotees' bodies, senses, inner faculties and vital breaths become divine.

Being so divine or aprākṛta (immaterial, i.e. spiritual) means that the liberated souls are without any of the distinctions of name and form possible only with prakṛti (i.e. māyic materiality). In other words, the forms in Akṣaradhāma of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and all liberated souls are virtually identical, with the muktas themselves being visually indistinguishable from one another (even while retaining their ontological individuality).

Another reason for this is that the forms of the muktas are genderless, just as the souls themselves are (Vac. Gaḍh. III.22). In a sermon recorded at SV 7.2, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

The form of a mukta is different from the two genders of the world. It is neither female in shape nor male in shape. It has a wholly brahmic body, which is neither feminine nor masculine.

This also helps explain that, even while having a human-*shaped* form – complete with senses, inner faculties, etc. – the fact that it is divine, brahmic and entirely spiritual, the liberated souls are devoid of any human functions and urges. Having transcended māyā, they are beyond hunger, thirst, fatigue, etc. and free of all forms of mundane passions.

This begs the question: So then what do they actually *do* in Akṣaradhāma?

Svāminārāyaṇa makes clear that there is nothing actually to do in Akṣaradhāma because the muktas are absolutely perfect and fulfilled; they have no reason to strive for anything, nor anything further to strive for. They are now and for ever in the direct fellowship of Parabrahman – the supreme, most beautiful and blissful being of all. Indeed, he is, as if, nothing but bliss.

Sa ya evaṃvid asmālokaṭ pretya... etam ānandamayam ātmānam
upasaṅkrāmati |

He, that knower [i.e. the brahmarūpa mukta], leaves this world...
and attains that Paramātmā who is replete with bliss (TU 2.8.2).

The liberated souls thus have no need or desire for anything else.

Having had [on earth] an effectual body, frolicking with women,
playing with chariots, or enjoying with relatives, he [the liberated
soul with brahmic body] does not recall it [now]. He is engrossed
there [in Akṣaradhāma, in the highest Puruṣa] (CU 8.12.3).⁴²⁶

And why indeed would the liberated souls even crave such inferior pleasures
now? Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

That God, residing in Akṣaradhāma,... is always present there to
bestow supreme bliss upon those muktas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

In fact, so gracious is Parabrahman, he grants the muktas the same blissful
experience he himself (and Akṣarabrahman) enjoy of himself. Continuing the
sermon documented at SV 7.2, he states:

What bliss does God grant that [akṣararūpa] devotee? The same
bliss that God has of his own self. That is the bliss that God grants
that devotee.

⁴²⁶ Based on CU-SB 8.12.3, pp. 387-88. See BS-SB 4.4.10-12, pp. 422-24 for a discussion based on this verse, confirming that muktas do indeed not enjoy such pleasures as women or men, chariots, relatives, etc. in Akṣaradhāma.

This, as we shall see, forms a part of the debate about the similarities and differences between muktas and Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman at BS 4.4.17-22.⁴²⁷ Here we can simply cite BS 4.4.21,

Bhogamātrasāmyaliṅgācca |

On account of the indication of the equality of enjoyment only, in which the Bhāṣyakāra confirms this supreme and equal blissful experience by citing TU 2.1.1:

He [the brahmarūpa mukta who perfectly knows Brahman] enjoys all pleasures [in the highest abode] with the omniscient Brahman.

The muktas thus simply remain in complete engrossment of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, continuously experiencing his divine self – whose bliss, we learned in the chapter on Parabrahman, is supreme in quality and limitless in extent; absolutely fulfilling, consistent and unending; gratifying all of the senses – indeed, one’s whole being – simultaneously, immediately and everlastingly. Because this bliss is so inexhaustibly rich, there is never an instance of the muktas being bored or satiated, and so there is nothing else for them to do except, as Svāminārāyaṇa describes it, the ‘darśana’ of Parabrahman. For example, in one of his descriptions of Akṣaradhāma, he reveals:

There is an all-transcending mass of divine light which cannot be measured from above, below, or in any of the four directions; that is to say, it is endless. Amid this mass of light lies a large, ornate throne upon which presides the divine form of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Puruṣottama Bhagavān. Countless millions of muktas are seated around that throne⁴²⁸ and enjoy the darśana of God (Vac. Loyā.14).

⁴²⁷ See especially BS-SB 4.4.21, pp. 430-31.

⁴²⁸ It should be noted that everything within Akṣaradhāma is described as being composed of brahmic consciousness, and so even the throne upon which Parabrahman presides is

‘Darśana’ here can be taken to mean literally ‘seeing’ Parabrahman (for the muktas do have divine, brahmic senses and faculties, just like Parabrahman), and also, more deeply, as having the vision or realisation of Parabrahman, i.e. experiencing him and thus enjoying his presence. Indeed, when elaborating upon the phrase “parātparam puriṣayaṃ puruṣaṃ īkṣate” at PU 5.5 –

That [mukta] who is free of all evil, just as a snake sheds its slough, rises to Brahmoloka... and ‘sees’ Puruṣottama, supreme among all living beings, dwelling in that abode

– the Bhāṣyakāra chooses to render the verb ‘īkṣate’ (literally, ‘to see’) as ‘sākṣātkaroti’, i.e. to directly realise. While such seeing or realisation is sometimes framed as ‘service’ [sevā] or the mukta described as an ‘attendant’ [sevaka, dāsa, or pārṣad (in Gujarati)], this is only because of the abiding sense of servitude the liberated souls feel towards Parabrahman their lord, as we shall see after the following section.

11.2.2) Jīvan-Mukti: Pre-Mortem Liberation

Svāminārāyaṇa’s striking revelation about the liberated state is that it is available not only as some future hope, but as a present reality, while in this very body, before biological death, here on earth. This is called jīvan-mukti (literally, ‘living liberation’), or liberation while alive. He unequivocally proclaims:

considered divine and non-different to anything else in the transcendental abode or to the abode itself.

Furthermore, with Akṣaradhāma being beyond space as well as time – it is eternal – the “countless millions of muktas seated around that throne” are understood to still be in absolute close proximity to Parabrahman, experiencing him as if he were right in front of each and every one of them.

If one practises satsaṅga⁴²⁹ with absolute sincerity, then no impurity will remain in one's heart, and one will become brahmarūpa in this very lifetime (Vac. Sār.9).

In another sermon Svāminārāyaṇa states:

If one were to perform a karma by which God and his Sant are pleased, then even if one were destined to fall into naraka, all of one's impure karmas would be destroyed and one would instead attain the highest state of enlightenment [paramapada] in this very body (Vac. Gaḍh. II.45).

We see Svāminārāyaṇa introducing here his common refrain of “God and his Sant”, linking the important doctrines of Parabrahman being manifest before the eyes and final enlightenment also being tangible in the same way. In Vac. Gaḍh. III.2 he makes this connection even more explicit when he focuses solely on the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, who he refers to in Gujarati as “pratyakṣa gururūpa hari” (‘God manifest before the eyes in the form of the Guru’). After drawing from the important verse at SU 6.23 – which Svāminārāyaṇa renders as follows:

If a person develops a conviction for the Guru – who is the manifest form of God before the eyes – in the same way that he has a conviction for God – who is beyond the eyes – then, as a result, he attains all of the objectives which are described as attainable

– he goes on to say:

In fact, when he attains the association of such a Sant, he has, while still alive, attained he who was to be attained after death [i.e. Parabrahman]. That is to say, he has attained that which is called the highest state of enlightenment [paramapada], or liberation [mokṣa], while being alive.

⁴²⁹ While the literal meaning of ‘satsaṅga’ is simply ‘association with the truth or real’, it is a richly complex term to define. It invokes the full gamut of theological belief and praxis practised within the religious community of devotees and, most essentially, under the guidance of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

Svāminārāyaṇa corroborates by adding this is not something one has to wait for until death.

When the devotee has kept his mind at the holy feet of God in this manner [like an iron nail firmly affixed in an iron surface], he does not have to die to attain the abode of God; he has attained it while still alive (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

That means that the experience of God is available here on earth.

If a person has the association of the Bhakta of God and God is pleased upon him, then even though he is in Mṛtyuloka [i.e. on 'earth'], he is still in the abode of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

As striking as these statements from Svāminārāyaṇa may seem, this emphasis on enlightenment “here” can also be found in the Upaniṣads. The last mantra of MuU 2.1, for example, begins:

Dear son, he who knows the dweller within the cave-heart, his knot of ignorance is untied here (MuU 2.1.10).

Similarly, in the last section of that Upaniṣad, we find:

All his desires are destroyed here (MuU 3.2.2).

Both KaU 6.14 and BU 4.4.7 identically talk of the enlightened person who has overcome all desires for mājyic pleasures. Then, that

mortal becomes immortal and experiences Brahman here.

On commenting on all four of these phrases, the Bhāṣyakāra explains the “here” [‘ātra’ or ‘iha’] to mean “in this very body, on this very realm, i.e. while alive.”⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ MuU-SB 2.1.10, pp. 266-67; MuU-SB 3.2.2, pp. 292-93; KaU-SB 6.14, p. 166; BU-SB 4.4.7, p. 273.

The Bhagavad-Gītā, too, has such mentions of “here” related to the enlightened brahmic state [brāhmī sthiti]. For example:

Even here, māyic existence is overcome by those whose minds are established in equality. Brahman is equal and guile-less. Therefore, they are established in Brahman (BG 5.19).

This earthly enlightened state continues to be described further on in the Bhagavad-Gītā’s fifth chapter, where a person without any desires and in complete control of his senses and mind is revealed as a “mukta” (28) and “brahmabhūta”, i.e. brahmarūpa (24), having indeed attained brahmanirvāṇa (24, 25 and 26) or the brahmic state (20) “here, before the body is shed” (23).

Similar and other characteristics can be found in BG 2 of the person with equipoised mind (“sthitaprajña”), in BG 6 of the “yogin”, in BG 7 of the “jñānin”, in BG 12 of the beloved devotee (“priya bhakta”), and in BG 14 of the person who has transcended the influence of all māyic qualities (“guṇatīta”) – all descriptions, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, of the brāhmī sthiti or brahmarūpa jīvan-mukta.⁴³¹ Svāminārāyaṇa similarly describes this state of living enlightenment as one characterised by complete desirelessness for worldly pleasures [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Vac. Gaḍh. I.60, Vac. Gaḍh. II.4], equanimity amid all dualities [Vac. Loyā.16, Vac. Loyā.10, Vac. Gaḍh. II.1, Vac. Gaḍh. II.4], and independence from the body, senses, faculties, and all other māyic or karmic influences [Vac. Gaḍh. I.62, Vac. Sār.11, Vac. Loyā.10, Vac. Amd.2]. Most importantly, it is a state of complete self- and God-realisation, wherein the jīvan-

⁴³¹ BG-SB 18.54, p. 361. See also IU-SB 6-7, pp. 15-17, CU-SB 8.3.3, pp. 352-53 and CU-SB 8.12.1, pp. 384-86 for similar upaniṣadic references to a pre-mortem state of spiritual perfection.

mukta has a direct experience of Parabrahman in all his resplendent glory [Vac. Gaḍh. I.20, Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Vac. Sār.16], both within his own soul [Vac. Sār.10, Vac. Sār.12, Vac. Gaḍh. II.8, Vac. Gaḍh. II.62] and wherever he turns [Vac. Gaḍh. I.26, Vac. Kār.7], as if Parabrahman or his abode are not an atom away [Vac. Sār.10]. The mukta's senses and mind are now totally engrossed in Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. I.51, Vac. Kār.1]. Nothing else remains noticeable [Vac. Gaḍh. I.24, Vac. Gaḍh. I.26]; he experiences God in everyone and in everything [Vac. Kār.7].

A valid question at this stage would be: Why does a jīvan-mukta live on at all? Should he or she not die straightaway and transcend into blissful fellowship with God in his abode?

The answer is that the jīvan-mukta, even while freed of all māyic influence and therefore not accruing any *new* karmas, still has a residual stock of *past* karmas (called prārabdha) which have been activated and need to be depleted. These are responsible for the current gross+subtle body. As soon as they are exhausted, no further reason remains for the body to exist, and the soul can then discard it and transcend to Akṣaradhāma. While alive, though, it must be stressed, the body carries no sway over the liberated soul within. Svāminārāyaṇa explains with various analogies that the soul “rattles” distinctly separate from within the body, like a sword in its scabbard or a seed within a dried mango; the body is merely the old slough on a moulting snake to be shortly shed (Vedarasa, p.149; see also BU 4.4.7).

More about this enlightened state – both pre- and post-mortem – is better explained in terms of the liberated soul’s relationship with Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, to which we now progress.

11.2.3) Ontological Distinction of Muktas from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman

The life of a mukta might be referred to as ‘communion’, a sharing in common life, in that the liberated soul has a form identical in shape⁴³² and divinity to Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, it shares certain qualities with them, and enjoys the same blissful experience as they do. Yet it is this sharing that, paradoxically, confirms their mutual distinction, for Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that there is never an ontological henosis of the muktas with either Akṣarabrahman or Parabrahman. The eternal entities always retain their coherence and internal consistency, even in the muktas’ state of liberation. So when Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. II.38,

When such an ekāntika bhakta [perfect devotee] abandons his physical body, he ‘merges’ into Śrī Kṛṣṇa Bhagavān,

he immediately clarifies:

Such ‘merging’ should be understood as follows: A person who is very greedy is said to ‘merge’ into money; a person who is very lustful is said to ‘merge’ into his beloved; and when a person who is very rich but childless receives a son, he is said to ‘merge’ into his son. In this way, a person should be known as having ‘merged’ into whatever he is attached to. However, this ‘merging’ is not like that of water merging with water or like fire merging with fire.

⁴³² It should be clarified that the brahmatanu (brahmic body), which is identical in shape to Parabrahman’s divine form, is possible only in videha mukti in Akṣaradhāma, not on earth during jīvan-mukti.

Thus:

If a devotee has ‘merged’ into his iṣṭadeva, he would never develop affection for anything else except his iṣṭadeva. In fact, he would continuously think of him.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.3, Svāminārāyaṇa talks of the ekāntika bhakta (realised devotee) “entering” Vāsudeva Bhagavān. Again, he at once goes on to clarify:

But what is meant by ‘entering’? Well, that devotee has affection for the divine form of Vāsudeva Bhagavān, who dwells within a mass of divine light. Due to that affection, he has constant awareness of the form of Vāsudeva Bhagavān in his mind, and he behaves as if he is infatuated by that form.

Svāminārāyaṇa is thus pointing to an intense lovesome engrossment of the muktas with Parabrahman, where their senses and mind are totally consumed by and immersed in Parabrahman and Parabrahman alone, an outcome of their profound, singular devotion for him in the brahmic state. Only in this sense is there any ‘merging’ or ‘entering’, but never a union of beings.

So then what is one to make of śāstric statements proclaiming the oneness or equality of such elevated souls and Parabrahman? For example:

Nirañjanaḥ paramaṁ sāmyam upaiti |

He who is free from the stains [of māyā] attains the highest “sāmyam” [literally, ‘equality’ or ‘similarity’] (MuU 3.1.3).

Svāminārāyaṇa cites this very verse in Vac. Sār.11 and explains:

When one attains the grace of God, one becomes an ekāntik bhakta [perfect devotee]. Even the śrutis proclaim: ‘Nirañjanaḥ paramaṁ sāmyam upaiti |’ The meaning of this Vedic verse is that a person

who is free from the stains of māyā attains qualities similar to those of God. That is, just as God is never bound by any pure or impure karmas that he may perform, the mukta is also never bound by pure or impure karmas.... Moreover, just as God is independent, that devotee also becomes independent. Such powers can be attained only by the grace of God (Vac. Sār.11).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus elucidates “sāmya” in the verse as meaning “sādharmya”, i.e. qualitative similarity, not equality or identity. The Bhāṣyakāra further elaborates: Similarity is predicated on distinction. Only two or more distinct things can be similar. If they become the very same thing, they would be nothing else with which to be similar. Therefore, the muktas do not become one with Parabrahman; they simply become *like* him.⁴³³ Even then, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies here, this ‘supreme similarity’ pertains to the muktas becoming, like Parabrahman, free from the binding forces of māyā – but not further.

This same Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad verse appears again in Vac. Kār.1, this time in a question posed to Svāminārāyaṇa as part of an interesting dialectic sermon. The enquirer, Gopālānanda Svāmī, also cites BG 4.10 –

Bahavo jñānatapasā pūtā madbhāvam āgatāḥ |

Many who have been purified by austerities in the form of knowledge have attained my qualities

– on his way to asking what to make of such statements.

⁴³³ See BS-SB 3.3.18, p. 326; BS-SB 4.4.4, p. 419; BG-SB 14.2, pp. 292-93.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā statements (and any other similar ones) refer to the state of liberation, yet even then, the similarity with or receiving of Parabrahman's qualities should be interpreted to relate to the same form and divinity as Parabrahman; nothing more. Having transcended māyā, the souls become divine, and so are no longer under the shackles of the mortal body or karmic law. But they do not in essence become Parabrahman.

In another sermon, Nityānanda Svāmī asks more specifically, citing also from the Bhagavad-Gītā:

But when all of the mukta are free from the association of māyic qualities [guṇas], and having become nirguṇa, dwell in Akṣaradhāma along with God – who dwells there in the same manner – then all of the mukta are nirguṇa and composed of consciousness. Also, as explained by 'Mama sādharṇyam āgatāḥ [BG 14.2]', they have attained qualities similar to those of God. How, then, should we understand the distinction between the mukta and God?

To this Svāminārāyaṇa replies with two traditional analogies in terms with which his audience can relate. In the first analogy, he begins:

Look at the moon and the stars. Isn't there a difference between the two? They are not similar in terms of brightness, and there is a vast difference between their sizes as well. All of the herbs are nourished by the moon, but not by the stars. Also, it is the moon that dispels the darkness of the night, not the stars. God and the mukta differ in the same way.

Svāminārāyaṇa alludes here to the greater power and superior nature of Parabrahman compared to the mukta, and his ability to support and empower others and dispel their ignorance, which is wholly beyond the mukta

themselves. Making this superiority more explicit in the second analogy, he continues:

Also, a king and his servant are both the same in that both are humans, yet the authority, power, beauty and charm of the king are by far superior. His servant, regardless of how great he may be, cannot achieve what the king can achieve.

Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

In the same way, Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the cause of all, the controller of all; he is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful; also, he possesses the kartum, akartum and anyathā-kartum powers. If he wishes, he can eclipse all of the muktas of Akṣaradhāma by his own divine light and prevail alone. Also, if he wishes, he can accept the bhakti of the muktas and reside with them. He can eclipse even Akṣara, in the form of the Akṣaradhāma in which he dwells, and preside alone independently. If he chooses, he is capable of supporting the countless muktas by his own power, without even needing Akṣaradhāma.... [T]hrough his powers, God reigns as supreme. He who equates God with Akṣara and the other muktas should be regarded as evil-minded and as a grave sinner (Vac. Loyā.13).

Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal here and in several other sermons about the absolute and eternal superiority of Parabrahman over the liberated souls, thereby also confirming their internal distinction. For example, even when Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 to say,

A devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God,

he immediately goes on to clarify:

Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme amongst everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

As we learned first in the chapter on Parabrahman, he is sarvopari, reigning supreme above everyone and everything; one without second. So as elevated and similar to Parabrahman as these countless millions of muktas are, their divinity or freedom from māyā in no way challenges or undermines God’s paramount position.

Only God is like God. Many have attained qualities similar to his by worshipping him, yet they certainly do not become like God (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

In other words, the liberated soul remains a soul. It becomes, at the very most, in a very limited way, *homoiousian* with Parabrahman, but never completely *homoousian* with him.

The ontological distinction of muktas from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman becomes a topic of keen debate in the Brahmasūtras. From the beginning of BS 4.2, the discussion focuses on how various bodily functions and the senses, mind, vital breaths and material elements of a person dissolve upon death. At BS 4.2.14, it is confirmed that even the subtle elements and the soul find rest in Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman during the state of deep sleep and the period of final dissolution. ‘But is this combining a total union of beings?’ asks the inquirer. No, explains the Sūtrakāra at 4.2.15. They are merely inseparable [“avibhāga”], because that is how the texts [“vacanāt”] describe the soul and Parabrahman. The Bhāṣyakāra confirms that it is not an ontological dissolving, as this would mean a metaphysical transubstantiation of one entity (a jīva or

īśvara) into another (Parabrahman). This is impossible. Statements which seem to suggest such a union during the state of liberation, for example,

As flowing rivers merge into the ocean discarding names and forms, so does the knower [brahmarūpa mukta], free of names and forms, attain the divine Puruṣa, who is greater than the greatest (MuU 3.2.8),

need to be properly understood. The Bhāṣyakāra cautions here that the analogy should not be simplistically taken to mean an ontological ‘merging’ of the liberated soul in Puruṣottama. If indeed the terms ‘astaṃ gacchanti’ used to describe the rivers above were to be taken literally to mean ‘merging’, then the same words are used to describe the setting sun. Then, ‘the sun has set in the east’ would mean it has become one with the east, losing its individuality, and so would never be able to rise the following morning. Words need to be interpreted in their proper context, not always literally, and, like all analogies, the above has its natural limitations; not all aspects of the analogue (rivers) should be foolishly transposed onto the target (mukta). The analogy is only pointing to the fact that the rivers are no longer identifiable after they reach the ocean. In the same way, the mukta is so overwhelmed with intense love for Parabrahman upon realising him, that it loses all awareness of its self and ceases to be identifiable by its bodily name and appearance. It is, as if, immersed in God.⁴³⁴

Other instances of terms such as “ekibhavanti” (‘they become one’ [MuU 3.2.7]) – and statements already cited in the Vacanāmṛut mentioned above, i.e. MuU 3.1.3,

⁴³⁴ MuU-SB 3.2.8 pp. 297-98 and BS-SB 4.2.15 p. 402. See also BS-SB 4.4.4, p. 419 for a very similar discussion, in which the Bhāṣyakāra cites more fully the three analogies used by Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. II.38.

BG 4.10 and BG 14.2 – are similarly explained by the Bhāṣyakāra as referring to not a non-dualistic conflation of natures (“svarūpādvaita”), but an engrossment (“sanlagnatā”) and sharing of qualities (“sādharyama”).⁴³⁵

The Brahmasūtra text is keen to qualify even such qualitative similarity between liberated souls and Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. Taking this up in the very last adhikaraṇa, at BS 4.4.17-22, the Sūtrakāra argues that while it is true that brahmarūpa muktas receive the qualities of Akṣarabrahman⁴³⁶ (which are also ones enjoyed by Parabrahman), this does not constitute a blanket bestowal of all attributes and powers. It is with “the exception of world-functions” (“jagadvyāpāravarjyam” [BS 4.4.17]), i.e. the creating, sustaining, governing, pervading, supporting, empowering, dissolving, etc. of the world. Such powers remain the exclusive preserve of Parabrahman, and by his eternal wish, of Akṣarabrahman.⁴³⁷

After the penultimate sūtra BS 4.4.21 (already cited above in proving that the similarity is limited to the muktas’ blissful experience of Parabrahman), the Bhāṣyakāra further qualifies that a mukta therefore cannot uphold Parabrahman and the countless millions of muktas within Akṣaradhāma as Akṣarabrahman does, nor can it grant liberation to other aspiring souls. In fact, the Bhāṣyakāra

⁴³⁵ MuU-SB 3.2.7, p. 297. See also MuU-SB 3.1.3, p. 284; BG-SB 4.10, pp. 97-98; BG-SB 14.2, pp. 292-93.

⁴³⁶ For example, those cited at CU 8.7.1, i.e. being without evil and free of old age, death, sorrow, hunger and thirst, and having all desires and wishes fulfilled.

⁴³⁷ BS-SB 4.4.17, pp. 427-28.

clarifies, the qualities and body a brahmarūpa mukta receives from Akṣarabrahman are those which facilitate the perfect devotional relationship with Parabrahman in the state of liberation.⁴³⁸

It is this relationship between the muktas and Parabrahman that we shall now attempt to briefly understand.

11.2.4) Svāmi-Sevaka Relationship of Muktas with Parabrahman

It was evident from Svāminārāyaṇa's revelations about Parabrahman in chapter 6 that his favourite analogy to help describe him is that of the king – the sovereign master reigning supreme over his land and subjects. He employs it to impart various theological truths, sometimes even of other entities. In the chapter on Akṣarabrahman, we saw how in Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 he extends the analogy to describe the Sant (Brahmasvarūpa Guru) as the queen. He explains: Just as a queen, on account of her being the king's consort, enjoys equal authority and influence over his empire (at least in the politico-social milieu of nineteenth century India when Svāminārāyaṇa was speaking), so, too, does the Guru over Parabrahman's dominion, on account of his unique, preeminent and eternal relationship with the sovereign lord of all lords.

Svāminārāyaṇa expands the analogy further still in Vac. Loyā.13, this time incorporating muktas into the comparison. He likens them to servants while

⁴³⁸ BS-SB 4.4.21, pp. 430-31, BU-SB 4.4.4, p. 269, BS-SB 3.318, p. 326.

Parabrahman remains the impassable king. When Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to describe God in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 as the “master” of the muktas and “worthy of being worshipped” by them, this provides a clearer indication of their relationship according to Svāminārāyaṇa. Since Parabrahman is the worshippable master, the muktas are his devout servants. This is the Svāmi-Sevaka-Saṃbandha, or master-servant relationship, that muktas enjoy with Parabrahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes this explicit in sermons such as Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 where he talks of muktas who “remain in the service” of Parabrahman as his “servants”.

A devotee who has reached Akṣaradhāma attains qualities similar to those of Akṣara and forever remains in the service [sevā] of God.... The countless millions of muktas, who have attained qualities similar to those of Akṣara, reside in that Akṣaradhāma, and all of them behave as servants [dās] of Puruṣottama. Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa himself is the master [svāmin] of them all and the Lord of the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 he states:

In that Akṣaradhāma, countless millions of muktas, who have acquired qualities similar to those of God, remain in God’s service.

When instructing how a devotee should contemplate upon God, he includes in

Vac. Loyā.10 the following rumination:

‘He is the ātman of Akṣara and is also the ātman of the countless millions of muktas. I am the brahmarūpa servant [dās] of that Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.’

Furthermore, Svāminārāyaṇa often describes these muktas in Gujarati as

“pārṣad”, or “attendants” [Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Vac. Loyā.11, Vac. Pan.4, Vac. Pan.7,

Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Vac. Gaḍh. II.49, Vac. Gaḍh. II.62, Vac. Var.19, Vac. Gaḍh. III.5, Vac. Gaḍh. III.10, Vac. Gaḍh. III.21, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Vac. Amd.6]. To provide just two examples:

That God is the Lord of all lords. He is surrounded by immeasurable divine opulence and countless divine attendants, and he is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Pan.4).

In comparison, those who do the darśana of God's form and those who contemplate upon it escape from the bondage of kāla, karma and māyā; attain the highest state of enlightenment ['abhay-pad'; literally 'state of fearlessness']; and become attendants of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.49).

Of course, as explained earlier, there are no specific *acts* of service in Akṣaradhāma for the muktas to discharge. They are engaged solely in the darśana of Parabrahman, enjoying his full and blissful self. The relationship here attests, rather, to the *spirit* of servitude and devotion that the muktas feel towards Parabrahman, even in their exalted brahmic state. This quickly dispels any misconception that the mukta's position resembles that of a slave, bound against its will and subjugated into service by some oppressive, tyrannical despot. After all, it is Parabrahman who imparts a divine body and qualities – just like his – to the muktas, and grants them the unparalleled bliss of his own self. Svāminārāyaṇa thus clarifies in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64 that the muktas' spirit of service is purely devotional, suffused with loving obedience, adoration and veneration for their lord.

After such a person's ātman has attained the brahmic state, he constantly remains in the service of Puruṣottama Bhagavān with love and great reverence (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).

In fact, the muktas are so ardently devoted to God and find such delight in this form of devotion that, after describing their “radiant” and “divine form” in Akṣaradhāma, Svāminārāyaṇa adds at Vac. Amd.6:

There, they are forever eager for the service of God.

It is precisely this juxtaposition of the muktas – glorious and divine, completely beyond the influence of māyā now, and so free and perfect in every way – with their devotion and subservience to Parabrahman that makes their relationship with him rather remarkable. It is understandable that the aspiring devotee would surrender him/herself to God in earnest desire to be liberated from the torments and limitations of māyic existence. But now that liberation has been secured, and the mukta is enjoying unlimited bliss and freedom, what becomes the impetus for it to continue with such devotion? If the end has been accomplished (liberation), what need now is there for the means (subservient devotion)?

But this is precisely the point, we are informed, for this aptly confirms that such subservient devotion is indeed not just the means (sādhana) for liberation, but its very goal (sādhya), (even if the latter is of a superior, purer form). Hence, devout service does not cease upon becoming brahmarūpa. When describing the attributes of a perfect devotee, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

Moreover, even though he himself behaves as brahmarūpa, he does not abandon his feeling of servitude towards Puruṣottama Bhagavān; he staunchly worships God while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him (Vac. Loyā.1).

If anything, the worth of a brahmarūpa mukta's devotion is elevated even higher, for now it is absolutely pure and unconditional, rendered solely for the sheer joy of submitting itself to its compassionate, loving lord. It is thus, at the same time, a confession of the mukta's continuing insignificance – even while being brahmarūpa – as well as an extolment of Parabrahman's glory and an expression of appreciation for his untiring, loving grace.

The basis of this abiding relationship remains, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, the impassable greatness of Parabrahman. To help explain this in a little more detail, it would be useful to call upon two sermons wherein Svāminārāyaṇa employs similar analogies to convey two connected but slightly different theological points. In Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, he initiates the sermon by saying:

I wish to ask all of the sādhus the following question: A devotee of God leaves his body, becomes brahmarūpa, and attains the abode of God. Thereafter, what is the difference between that devotee and God, whereby the master-servant relationship between them still remains? After all, that devotee of God then becomes independent, just like God. He also becomes free from the shackles of kāla, karma and māyā – just like God. Therefore, what difference remains so that the master-servant relationship is maintained? This is my question.

The Vacanāmrut notes that the paramahansas were unable to fully satisfy Svāminārāyaṇa with their replies, and so they requested Svāminārāyaṇa to answer his question himself. Thereupon he said:

The answer is as follows: In whatever way a devotee of God has realised God – i.e. 'God possesses this many powers; he possesses this much charm; he is the embodiment of bliss;' and so on – that is the extent to which he has realised the greatness of God. Then, when that devotee leaves his body and goes to the abode of God, he attains charm and powers based on the extent to which he has

realised the majesty of God. Despite this, that devotee still feels God's majesty in the form of his powers, charm, etc. to be much greater. He then realises, 'God has granted me just as many divine powers and as much charm as I had realised in him. Yet, God's divine powers and charm appear to be totally limitless. Like me, countless others have also attained qualities similar to that of God, yet, no one is capable of becoming like God.'

Asking "Why is this so?", Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain the unfathomable and unlimited nature of Parabrahman's greatness – his powers, bliss, charm, redemptive virtues and actions, etc. – such that it never diminishes in the slightest, even after granting countless millions of mukta their own divine powers and charm.

For example, if there were an ocean filled with freshwater from which all humans, animals and birds could drink as much as they wished and from which vessels could be filled, the water would still not decrease because of the vastness of the ocean. Similarly, God's greatness is extremely limitless; there is no way in which it can either increase or decrease. For this reason, then, those devotees of God who become like Brahman still behave as God's servants and engage in his worship.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes:

In this way, devotees of God attain qualities similar to those of God, and yet, the master-servant relationship between them is maintained. That is the answer to the question.

Svāminārāyaṇa's point is that despite the mukta becoming divine and sharing many of Parabrahman's qualities, they never forsake this devotional stance towards him because he forever remains infinitely beyond them. If anything, the devotion of the mukta becomes more intense and exalted, now that they have a fuller realisation of Parabrahman's unlimited greatness. In corroboration of this,

Svāminārāyaṇa employs in Vac. Sār.17 the same ocean imagery above along with another analogy, that of the limitless sky. He begins:

As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God and he increasingly realises the greatness of God.

Svāminārāyaṇa then narrates various stages of a devotee's progressive journey in his understanding of God's nature (arising from his own progressive self-understanding), before applying the two analogies:

For example, ants, birds, men, cattle, horses, elephants, large crocodiles and fish all drink water from the ocean and become healthy; yet the ocean's level is not even slightly reduced. Thus, the greater the capacity of the being, the more it realises the vastness of the ocean.

Here is another example: a mosquito, a sparrow, a kite, a hawk, an analapakṣī⁴³⁹ and Garuḍa⁴⁴⁰ all fly in the sky, yet to all of them the sky is limitless. However, the greater the strength of their wings, the more they realise the vastness of the sky and their own inferiority.

"Similarly," Svāminārāyaṇa concludes,

as the powers of these devotees increase, they realise the greatness of God more and more. Moreover, as their own powers increase, their master-servant relationship with God is also consolidated (Vac. Sār.17).

If in the previously cited sermon Svāminārāyaṇa emphasised that Parabrahman's unlimited greatness remains undiminished despite bestowing countless millions

⁴³⁹ Literally meaning 'bird of fire', this is a large, mythological bird that is said to never land on the ground and have the strength to carry elephants as it flies. *Bhagavadgomandal*, ed. Bhagvatsinhji (Rajkot, India: Pravin Prakashan; 1986), p. 230.

⁴⁴⁰ This brilliant eagle-like bird with white head, red wings, and a golden male body, serves as Viṣṇu's mount and is considered to be one of his most devout attendants. See, for example, Mahābhārata Ādi Parva 23-34. BG 10.30 also alludes to it as the best or greatest among all birds.

of liberated souls with the brahmic state, hence the master-servant relationship remains intact, Svāminārāyaṇa's import here is that even a perfect devotee like a brahmarūpa mukta remains in devout service to Parabrahman for only one who is brahmarūpa can best realise the limitless greatness of Parabrahman, further enhancing the master-servant relationship.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus warns against anything that would violate this important devotional relationship with God. In a sermon delivered during one of his illnesses, Svāminārāyaṇa said:

Furthermore, by the grace of God, those who are devotees of God may become like... Akṣara. However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa. Therefore, just as one shuns a vile person, one should immediately shun the company of those persons and those scriptures that refute the upāsana of God and break one's master-servant relationship with God (Vac. Kār.10).

11.3) Way to Liberation

In many ways, the final portion of this chapter concluding our exposition of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is a recapitulation of many of the key doctrinal points already covered up till now. This is, again, revealing, reminding us of the nature of systematic theology, where the individual parts come together at the end, and, when the final part is 'slotted in', the whole becomes properly functional and all the more appreciable.⁴⁴¹ Of course, the task of theology is not simply the mechanical assembling of theoretical cogs and wheels, nor can we

⁴⁴¹ I am reminded again of Gavin Flood's metaphor for a project of this type. He likened it to the (re)assembling of an orange peel, rather than the unfolding of a sheet of paper. 'Everything will come together in the end,' he assured.

expect for an exposition of such a nature to function like clockwork, for theology is neither a machine nor God so simple or facilely reducible that he can be understood by a clever combination of doctrines. Nonetheless, the bringing together of many complex ideas within a coherently structured framework can indeed advance or at least aid our always-limited understanding of God. And as in assembling a still-imperfect, intricate scale model, the endeavour of systematic theology duly demands a wholesome level of patience, application, and cogency.

The subject of liberation perhaps more than any other doctrine also calls for good degree of humility. The broad, hefty and exceptionally complex topic cannot possibly be covered with its full gamut of accompanying issues in a few thousand words. Indeed, any treatment within even a few hundred pages would still fall woefully short; a treatise similar to the preceding overview of the five eternal realities could provide only a similarly brief introduction. We must therefore content ourselves with the following sections, wherein we can touch upon only a handful of the most fundamental topics and questions within the field of soteriology and orthopraxy, and merely point at possible ways of addressing them based on the theological sources of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition.

11.3.1) Grace and Effort

For our starting point in discussing the way to liberation, we should address the fundamental soteriological question of not *how* liberation can be achieved, but whether it can be *achieved* at all. That is, is it a state that really comes as the fruition of one's endeavours – often termed 'sādhana' (literally 'means'), also

referred to as praxis – or is it purely an unearned gift from God? Framed another way, what roles do God’s grace and the aspirant’s efforts play in securing liberation?

We have already seen in Part 2 from our discussion about the ‘Source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology’ how God can only truly be realised by revelation, itself a supreme act of his loving grace. To remind ourselves of the important Upaniṣadic verse we cited there:

This Self [Paramātmān] cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing [i.e. learning]. He is attained only by the one whom the Self [Paramātmān] chooses. To such a one, the Self [Paramātmān] reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

When elaborating on the term “vṛnute” (‘chooses’), the Bhāṣyakāra explains this as the gracious and loving acceptance by Parabrahman – whom he variously describes as “an ocean of great compassion” (paramadayāsāgara) and “a treasure trove of grace” (kṛpānidhi) – of the worshipper who is solely dedicated to him (svaikaniṣṭha upāsaka). Only to such a vessel of Parabrahman’s grace (paramātmakṛpābhājana) does he become realisable (“labhya”) and reveal himself.

The Bhāṣyakāra adds that instruction or intellectual power or scriptural learning are representative of all endeavours that can be performed in an attempt to reach God. They alone are inadequate. Parabrahman thus remains “kṛpaikasādhya”, attainable by grace alone.

The Bhāṣyakāra is careful, however, of not being overly forceful in pitting human effort against divine grace. In adding the “kevala” (‘alone’) in his comment, he makes the clarification that while all endeavours are inadequate in realising God, they *alone* are inadequate. They can still be effective in pleasing God, who will then bestow his liberating grace upon his beloved devotee. To be absolutely clear here: God is pleased with the devotee’s devout, sincere and persistent *effort*, or striving, not necessarily the ‘works’ themselves. God himself remains infinitely beyond their reach. So God’s grace is absolutely indispensable, but efforts are not totally useless either, even though they can only please God and never (fully or directly) earn his grace.

If there are any efforts that the Bhāṣyakāra does dismiss as utterly futile, they are the “self-imagined means” (svataḥkalpitasādhana) of a person who refuses to follow the authoritative teachings enjoined in revealed texts or by the Guru.

These qualifications are necessary because of the immediately following verse in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad:

This Self [Paramātmā] cannot be attained by one who is weak, nor by inadvertency, nor by austerities marked without authoritative endorsement. But the knower who strives by these means attains this Self [Paramātmā] and enters Brahmadhāma (MuU 3.2.4).

Thus, when these same efforts – including those mentioned at MuU 3.2.3 and all others – are informed by correct theological knowledge (‘brahmavidyā’), practiced according to the calling and guidance of the Guru, and directed solely to

pleasing God, they can indeed play some useful (though still meagre) part in securing liberation by God's grace.⁴⁴²

Praxis, therefore, is not in total contradistinction to the idea of *sola gratia*. All efforts are directed to pleasing God and thereafter receiving his grace, which alone is capable of granting liberation. Liberation thus comes at the end of one's endeavours, but not as their fruit. With liberation being totally unattainable by human effort alone, it leaves no scope for finite souls to boast of it as their 'accomplishment'. What praxis does do, however, is to develop the aspirant into a 'vessel' ('pātra', or 'bhājana' as the Bhāṣyakāra states) capable of effectively receiving and, importantly, retaining and responding to God's grace. Without in any sense diminishing the potency of God's grace, this also helps explain why God is not an unjust or whimsical distributor, injudiciously doling out his favour. In so saying, however, nor does God relinquish his absolute prerogative to shower his grace upon whomsoever he pleases.

But while God's grace remains indisputably free, it is by no means cheap. When Mukṭānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Sār.11,

Personal endeavour is mentioned in the scriptures, but how much is actually achieved by personal endeavour and how much is achieved by God's grace?,

Svāminārāyaṇa presents a list of attributes of a recipient of God's grace. This includes a strict observance of dharmic disciplines such as non-violence and

⁴⁴² Based on MuU-SB 3.2.3-4, pp. 293-95. See also KaU-SB 2.23, pp. 118-19.

eightfold brahmacarya, an absolutely firm realisation of oneself as the ātman, firm detachment from worldly pleasures, and intense and enduring devotional faith⁴⁴³ – all, of course, developed “by the words of a true Guru and the scriptures”. Svāminārāyaṇa then concludes:

God’s grace is only bestowed upon one who has such characteristics.

Perhaps sensing the enormity of the task of perfectly cultivating these characteristics, Nityānanda Svāmī firstly acknowledges Svāminārāyaṇa’s point but then immediately asks:

But what becomes of one who has some deficiency in cultivating these characteristics?

Svāminārāyaṇa forthrightly answers:

Then he does not attain ultimate liberation, i.e. God’s Akṣaradhāma. Instead, he attains some other abode of God.

Svāminārāyaṇa refers here to the abodes of other avatāras and even the paradisiacal realms of the devas, which, in comparison to Akṣaradhāma, are as

⁴⁴³ These four aspects of ‘sādhana’ relate to what is traditionally termed within Svāminārāyaṇa texts as Dharma, Jñāna (not to be confused with the broader, more theological knowledge of Brahman and Parabrahman), Vairāgya, and Bhakti. Collectively, they are called ‘Ekāntika Dharma’ or ‘Bhāgavata Dharma’, and feature repeatedly in the Vacanāmṛta and Svāmīnī Vāta as a matrix for endeavouring towards pleasing God. For example:

A devotee who in his mind desires to intensely please God can do so by developing the following: unshakeable resolve in observing the dharma of one’s varṇa and āśrama, intensely firm ātman-realisation, dislike for all objects except God, and devotion which is devoid of all desires for fruits and which is accompanied with an understanding of God’s greatness. It is through these four spiritual endeavours that God can be extremely pleased. They are collectively known as Ekāntika Dharma (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21).

When does one receive the gracious favour of Śrījī Mahārāja [i.e. Svāminārāyaṇa] and the Great Sant? When one staunchly observes dharma, has an extremely firm understanding of the ātman [as one’s self] and of Paramātmān, an intensely firm dislike for all sensorial objects, and singular devotion towards Puruṣottama Bhagavān which is accompanied with a realisation of his greatness (SV 3.25).

good as naraka, he states. Even after conceding that the soul would not enter naraka itself or lower life-forms, but repeatedly pass through only the lives of a deva and human being until becoming desire-free and capable of upholding God's grace, Svāminārāyaṇa ends his answer by reiterating his earlier position, this time with added force.

Hence, whether it takes one life or innumerable lives, only when one develops the previously described characteristics and becomes extremely free of worldly desires, does one become a worthy vessel of receiving God's grace, and only then will one attain ultimate liberation. Without it, one will definitely not attain it.

In the strictest sense, then, Svāminārāyaṇa does not pretend God's grace to be totally unmerited favour, even if it is only so that it can be properly received and retained.

Yet Svāminārāyaṇa is equally sure in chiding those who rely solely on their endeavours to achieve liberation, discounting the absolute need and power of God. He likens it to the "foolish" effort of attempting to cross the ocean by tying gourds to oneself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.35). He even disregards realising one's self as distinct from the body as useless for final liberation – even if such a distinction were possible to realise independently. It might prove helpful in negotiating the relatively minor challenges of daily life – just as, for example, a swimmer may be able to cross a river – but at the time of death, which Svāminārāyaṇa likens to an ocean again, "only the firm refuge of God is helpful"; all other endeavours are "of no use whatsoever at the time of death" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.60).

Evoking the imagery of crossing the ocean of life and death (saṃsāra) once more, Svāminārāyaṇa brings together these points in Vac. Gaḍh. I.37.

A person without such a [resolute] conviction [of God's nature] attempts to attain liberation using the strength of his own endeavours, but he does not strive for it by relying on the grace of God. Such a senseless person is as foolish as someone wishing to cross the ocean by his own efforts, without the aid of a ship. Conversely, one who wishes for liberation through the grace of God is wise, like one who wishes to cross the ocean by travelling in a ship.

“After leaving their body,” Svāminārāyaṇa adds, these wise devotees

attain a form of pure consciousness in the abode of God and forever remain in his presence.

This might prompt us to frame our discussion another way, asking the classical question of whether liberation is a reward or gift from God. Surely grace has to be unmerited for it to be meaningfully grace at all. So can it ever be earned? But calling liberation a gift would implicate God with unfairness, for can liberation be bestowed arbitrarily upon the completely undeserving and unworthy? Some effort at least would seem warranted. Yet no matter how hard and long a seeker endeavours, so ultimately insignificant are his/her efforts in winning over the otherwise unattainable God, and God's blissful experience so staggeringly disproportionate to those efforts, that it can neither be called a reward in any legitimate sense. How can such a paradox be resolved?

Perhaps a more useful way within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology to resolve this important soteriological conundrum is to understand liberation as neither gift nor reward, but with reference to the model of a jackpot prize and the lottery

ticket that one buys for winning it. So negligible is the price of the ticket which leads to the jackpot that to call it as being ‘earned’ is ridiculous. Yet the prize is not totally arbitrary either, for only one who has bought a ticket is eligible to receive the prize. Of course, the analogy breaks down at the point where it is not sheer chance that provides the winner of the lucky draw, but God himself who decisively chooses (“vṛnute”) the recipient of his overwhelming favour. The means for liberation are thus insignificant but nevertheless necessary; utterly meagre but not totally worthless either. They are necessary and worthwhile for receiving the gracious favour of God, who graciously grants his blissful experience in liberation infinitely many times more intensely that it could ever be earned or fully deserved, if at all.

At this must point we should ask the more pointed question: What form does this loving grace take?

The Bhāṣyakāra answers when commentating on KaU 2.23, the same verse found at MuU 3.2.3 cited above.

This is the form of his [Paramātman’s] grace: Seeing his devotee earnestly endeavouring by several means to please him, God, the ocean of grace that he is, grants that devotee access to the profound association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru – who is his best worshipper, who has the greatest love for him, who eternally has a complete and perfect realisation of him, and who can be regarded as his own form – so that his devotee can easily realise him [Paramātman]. Then, by listening, reflecting, etc. upon the Guru’s teachings, and serving him with the belief that he is the very form of God – as directed by such statements as ‘Who has the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23)’, etc. – that devotee, having developed a spiritual oneness with

Brahman [i.e. become brahmarūpa] and having received the grace of God, realises Paramātmān.⁴⁴⁴

The following sections can now serve as an elaboration upon these means to liberation made possible by God's grace.

11.3.1) Knowledge of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman

We learned at the beginning of this chapter of the nature of the soul's karmic predicament – incessant transmigration through the cycle of births and deaths – and its cause as ignorance or avidyā in the form of māyā. To dispel this veil of ignorance and break free from this transmigratory cycle, the Vedantic texts unequivocally state:

Vidyayā vindate'mṛtam |

By knowledge, one attains the immortal state (KeU 2.4).

Vidyayā'mṛtam aśnute |

By knowledge, one enjoys the immortal state (IU 11).

The Vacanāmṛut is similarly clear about the essential role of knowledge in leading to liberation from saṃsāra, from both śāstric statements cited in its sermons – such as

Ṛte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna (Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti⁴⁴⁵)

⁴⁴⁴ KaU-SB 2.23, p. 119.

⁴⁴⁵ As explained earlier, this is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāśindhu* at 115.7.

and

Tam eva viditvā'timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte'yanāya ||

Only by knowing him [Parabrahman] does one pass beyond death;
there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8)

– to statements from Svāminārāyaṇa himself:

The knowledge of God's nature and the knowledge of God's
greatness are the two extraordinary means to liberation (Vac.
Gaḍh. 1.57).

Ways to acquiring this knowledge of God is something we have already discussed
at some length in Part 2 when delineating the sources of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu
theology. Here, it would be useful to recall one especially relevant sermon where
Svāminārāyaṇa ties in the realisation of God's nature with liberation while
reiterating the enormity of this task and the way to accomplishing it through the
Sant, or Brahmasvarūpa Guru. He states in Vac. Kār.12:

This māyā of the jīva, i.e. the causal body, is attached so
inextricably to the jīva that they cannot be separated by any means
whatsoever. However, if a person attains the association of the
Sant, realises the nature of God through the words of that Sant,
meditates on that nature of God and imbibes the words of God in
his heart, then the causal body attached to his jīva is burnt
asunder.

“However,” Svāminārāyaṇa concludes in a particularly emphatic closing
statement,

even if one were to try a million other methods, one could not
destroy the jīva's ignorance in the form of the causal body.

We also learned in our elucidation of Parabrahman that as absolutely
indispensable the knowledge of God is, the most accurate description of his

limitless, unfathomable greatness is that Parabrahman is greater than

Akṣarabrahman:

Akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ (MuU 2.1.2) ||

This being so, we cannot really begin to know Parabrahman without first fully knowing Akṣarabrahman (who also reveals Parabrahman). Equally, if knowing Parabrahman is absolutely essential for liberation, and the best that can be said about him is that he transcends Akṣarabrahman, it follows that knowing Akṣarabrahman is also absolutely essential to securing ultimate liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus writes in one of his doctrinal letters:

There is no path to liberation without knowing Brahman.⁴⁴⁶

This is why we find the Upaniṣads (e.g. MuU 1.2.13) configuring brahmavidyā – the highest form of vidyā, which leads to final liberation – as the knowledge of both Brahman and Parabrahman (or Akṣara and Puruṣottama).

Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato
brahmavidyām |

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad also explains how to realise that highest knowledge, by imperatively and devoutly surrendering to the Guru – who is Brahman by nature, firmly established in Parabrahman, and the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts.

Tadvijñānārthaṃ sa gurum evābhigacchet samidhpaṇiḥ śrotriyaṃ
brahma niṣṭhaṃ (1.2.12) |

⁴⁴⁶ Vedarasa, p. 18.

Hence also, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, the ‘desire to know Brahman’ (brahmajijñāsā), enjoined at the very beginning of the Brahmasūtras, must also necessarily comprise the knowledge of both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman if it is to effectively result in final liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa states the same in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3, using the synonym ‘brahmajñāna’ for brahmavidyā.

Brahman is the cause and support of all, including Prakṛti-Puruṣa, etc., and pervades everything by its antaryāmin powers.... Parabrahman, that is Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from that Brahman, and also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman. With such understanding, one should develop a oneness between one’s jivātman and that Brahman and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him. With such understanding, ‘brahmajñāna’ also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

In this key theological statement, Svāminārāyaṇa points to the cosmic role of Akṣarabrahman, its ontological distinction from and subordination to Parabrahman, and also the soul’s need for Akṣarabrahman to properly worship Parabrahman (upon which we shall further elaborate shortly), all of which constitutes brahmajñāna/brahmavidyā, or what we might call theological knowledge.

11.3.2) Knowing and Serving Parabrahman Manifest through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

This returns us to Svāminārāyaṇa's familiar formulation of theological knowledge in Vac. Loyā.7. Framing it personally, in terms of the knower, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – having realised him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

What is immediately striking from this formulation of knowledge is that Svāminārāyaṇa constitutes it in terms of “serving” (what we shall be unpacking shortly, but for now can be understood as the physical, verbal and mental application of theological beliefs, i.e. sādhanā or praxis). For Svāminārāyaṇa, true knowledge immediately and irrevocably manifests itself (or results) in practice. And such practice is thoroughly informed by theological knowledge. Indeed, only then is ‘jñāna’ worthy of the name, and only then does it serve its purpose of being liberating.

The Bhāṣyakāra thus similarly defines ‘jñāna’ when commentating on BS 1.1.1 as follows:

Jñānaṃ ceha dhyānopāsanādirūpam |

And jñāna is the form of meditation, upāsanā, etc.,⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁷ BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.

where upāsanā, as we know, is ‘worship informed by correct theological knowledge’ and meditation is the mental application of that knowledge.

Knowledge and practice are more explicitly brought together in the soteriological context in IU 11.

Vidyām cā’vidyām ca yas-tad vedobhayam saha |
Avidyayā mṛtyum tīrtvā vidyayā’mṛtam aśnute ||

He who knows both ‘vidyā’ and ‘avidyā’ together, having crossed death by ‘avidyā’, by ‘vidyā’, enjoys the immortal state.

Here, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, ‘vidyā’ is shorthand for ‘brahmavidya’, the knowledge of (Akṣara)Brahman and Parabrahman. However, ‘avidyā’ in this instance does not mean ignorance, but that which is different from knowledge (‘jñānabhinna’), i.e. karma or action. This refers to the observance of religious, social and other duties prescribed by the scriptures and the Guru, i.e. one’s overall conduct (svācaraṇa) or praxis. Both must be necessarily practiced together, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, for they are “mutually indispensable” and “mutually dependent” when endeavouring for liberation.⁴⁴⁸ Such intertwining and interlocking of praxis and doctrine thus relieves any tension between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ (jñāna and karma) often found preoccupying soteriological debates. It is also a key element of the Hindu conceptualisation of ‘theology’ that we shall be proposing and attempting to unravel in some detail in the final Part of this thesis. I therefore reserve further elaboration on this point for then.

⁴⁴⁸ IU-SB 11, pp. 20-21.

A further noteworthy point emerging from Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation at Vac. Loyā.7 is that he squarely makes the subject of this liberating knowledge and service not just God, but "God manifest before the eyes". Elaborating upon this in the same sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa defines "paripūrṇa jñāna [perfect theological knowledge]" as

to know and see with such an understanding of greatness that the God who dwells within all [material and spiritual realities] as their antaryāmin and as their cause is the very God who is manifest before the eyes.

What is crucial to note again is that, even when offering a definition of "perfect *knowledge*", Svāminārāyaṇa lays an equal emphasis on 'knowing' and 'seeing'. It is not enough, according to Svāminārāyaṇa, to merely *know* God as being so manifest "before the eyes", but it is equally necessary to *see* him. As we learnt in the section about 'Parabrahman as Pragaṭa', 'seeing' within such theological contexts is indicative of the face-to-face meeting with God, a personal, intimate encounter and devotional relationship with him. In a specifically liberative context, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. II.32:

The sole cause behind the jīva attaining liberation, transcending māyā and becoming like Brahman is its engagement in the knowledge, meditation, devotional songs, scriptural discourses, etc. of the manifest form before one's eyes of Vāsudeva Bhagavān, who is Puruṣottama. It is due to these that the jīva transcends māyā, attains an extremely elevated state, and also attains God's Akṣaradhāma.

From the cognate doctrine of 'Akṣarabrahman as Brahmasvarūpa Guru', we now know that all such theological statements containing the words 'God manifest before the eyes' forthrightly and exclusively denote the Brahmasvarūpa Guru,

through whom Parabrahman is substantively present and graciously active, and therefore through whom one can have such a personal, devotional relationship with God. As Svāminārāyaṇa himself revealed:

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes.... Since it is God who walks through his legs,... Since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27),

... when one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, 'I have had the darśana of God himself' (Vac. Sār.10).

Thus, while the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is revealed in and by the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to see the Guru is to see God; to relate to the Guru is to relate to God.

By expanding in Vac. Loyā.7 the definition of knowledge from beyond 'seeing' to include all of the senses as well as the mind and a spiritual experience, Svāminārāyaṇa further emphasises his conceptualisation of liberating 'knowledge' as a deep, personal engagement with pratyakṣa Parabrahman.

Calling it a part of "ātyantika jñāna [ultimate knowledge]", Svāminārāyaṇa says:

Thus, to know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience. Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

To secure liberation from saṃsāra, Svāminārāyaṇa is effectively calling for a full, direct and personal relationship with the Guru involving all of the senses and aspects of the mind and the spirit itself. Drawing from sermons such as Vac. Kār.11, Vac. Gaḍh. II.48, Vac. Gaḍh. II.55 and others, this relationship can be

understood to incorporate the following aspects: seeing the Guru going about his own daily acts of worship and service (i.e. relating through the sense of sight), listening to his sermons and teachings (sense of hearing), touching his feet or receiving his benedictory touch on the head (sense of touch), consuming sanctified food [prasāda] received from him (sense of taste), perceiving his distinctive odour (sense of smell), thinking of him (faculty of manas), reminiscing of him (buddhi), contemplating upon his divine nature and virtues (citta), mentally affirming him as the manifest form of God, one's liberator (ahamkāra), and enjoying his divine being (spiritual experience). It is Parabrahman's full and substantive presence in the Brahmasvarūpa Guru which allows for such a relationship with Parabrahman via the Guru, thereby allowing such knowing and serving of the Guru to be capable of securing ultimate liberation. Hence also the Upaniṣadic metaphor of Akṣarabrahman as the "setu" ('bridge') connecting humans to God (KaU 3.2, MuU 2.2.5, CU 8.4.1, SU 6.19).

This is the reason, it seems, we find a strongly recurrent theme throughout the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto where both Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reiterate the need to know, serve, love, obey, trust and surrender to the Guru as the way to overcoming māyā and securing liberation when God is not personally present on earth. For example:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him (Vac. Var.10).

It is clear from this that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend the liberative work of God to be limited to his own time on earth, and so reveals its continuation through the Guru. A seeker of liberation must therefore surrender to the Guru as he or she would to God in person.

As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 Svāminārāyaṇa firstly describes the insurmountability of māyā and how “no jīva can conquer it” alone. But then revealing “the means to transcend[ing] māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

What is important to note in these important soteriological statements is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned in tandem. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that all authoritative texts and wise seers reveal “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation.”

Whether this principle is understood after being told once or after being told a thousand times, whether it is understood today or after a thousand years, there is no option but to understand it.

“A person” who *has* understood this

has grasped all of the fundamental principles. What is more, he will never fall from the path of liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes this sermon with the yet more emphatic statement:

Thus, this very fact is the essence of all of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

This final point is made even more explicit in Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, where

Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation.

He then goes on to conclude:

So, when one attains God or his Sant, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the self; this itself is ultimate liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates upon such ‘ultimate liberation’ (ātyantika mokṣa) and the way to securing it in his sermon at SV 5.5. Like Svāminārāyaṇa, he, too, aligns ‘manifest God’ with the ‘manifest Sant of God’.

Only ultimate liberation can be called liberation [mokṣa], but by entering the other abodes, one still has to return to the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths], and as long as one has to return to the womb, it cannot be called liberation. Such liberation can be secured by seeking the refuge of manifest God or the manifest Ekāntika Sant of God, but this [granting of ultimate liberation] is not possible by others.

To reiterate the important clarification we learned earlier, the soteriological function of the “Sant”, “Sādhu”, “Bhakta”, “Satpuruṣa”, “great Puruṣa” described in these and all such statements unequivocally confirms his personhood as that of māyā-transcending Akṣarabrahman in the earthly form of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

As if corroborating that this ‘serving’ of God manifest before the eyes does indeed also refer to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs in Vac. Gaḍh.

III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

Why? Because

such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on how to serve the Guru “like God” in Vac. Var.5 by instructing perfectly “equal service” of both – for example, by offering the same mental worship to both – further establishing the full presence of God in the living Guru. Serving the Guru is thus serving God, the fruit of which, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, is that even “a devotee of the lowest calibre,” whose long and arduous spiritual advancement may span over a hundred lives, “will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life.”

This instruction of “equal service” is evocative of the famous proclamation at the end of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau |
Tasyaite kathitā hyarhāḥ prakāśante mahātmanah ||

All objectives declared [in the sacred texts] shine forth [i.e. become attainable] for the great soul who offers the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23).

Svāminārāyaṇa himself substantiates such devotion to the Guru in Vac. Gaḍh.

II.28 by adding his personal example. He says:

Even I am the devotee of such a perfect Bhakta of God and offer my devotion to the Bhakta of God.

In stressing this as a crucial soteriological principle, Svāminārāyaṇa concluded this sermon with the following emphatic epilogue:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

11.3.2.1) Associating with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

What form(s) should this service of the Guru take? And what significance does this hold if all efforts for liberation should only be directed to pleasing God (in readiness for his essential grace)?

Svāminārāyaṇa provides a succinct answer to both these questions in the same sermon cited above before the emphatic ending.

The only method for a person to please God is to serve the Bhakta of God by thought, word and deed (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

Again, this is a striking revelation by Svāminārāyaṇa, made all the more emphatic with the 'ja' in Gujarati, making serving the Guru the *only* means to truly pleasing God. The means of serving the Guru, however, are noted as three-fold.

Svāminārāyaṇa calls upon the same three ways in Vac. Var.4, this time clarifying the concept of “service” as a holistic relationship⁴⁴⁹ with the Guru. When Mukṭānanda Svāmī asked the important soteriological question,

For a devotee of God walking the path of devotion, which one spiritual endeavour incorporates all of the other endeavours for liberation?

Svāminārāyaṇa replied:

All of the spiritual endeavours for attaining liberation are incorporated in keeping the association – by thought, word and deed – of a Sant who possesses the 30 attributes of a Sādhū⁴⁵⁰.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states in SV 3.60:

A seeker of liberation becomes brahmarūpa if he faithfully associates with the Satpuruṣa by thought, word and deed.

This form of ‘association’ with the Guru – variously called “saṅga”, “prasaṅga” and “samāgama” in sampradāyic texts – warrants a little elaboration. Based on a collection of teachings from various theological sources of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, we can now unpack this relationship in an attempt to understand what it entails, even while appreciating that it cannot be compartmentalised into these three neat forms.

In the sermon just cited above, after Guṇātītānanda Svāmī offered this statement, a member from his audience asked him the same question we ourselves are

⁴⁴⁹ This is a broader rendering of the multivalent term “sevā” with which we began at Vac. Loyā.7. In Gujarati, the term “sevan” (present participle of the same verb) can also have connotations of ‘relating to, receiving or partaking, and absorbing’, for example, as one would with medicine or treatment.

⁴⁵⁰ These are described at BP 11.11.29-33. Svāminārāyaṇa mentions in Vac. Var.13 that God adopts these virtues when he manifests upon earth as a sādhu.

effectively asking now: What does it mean to associate with the Guru by thought, word and deed? Guṇātītānanda Svāmī replied:

[To associate] by deed is to do as the Satpuruṣa instructs; by word, is to extol the Satpuruṣa's infinite virtues; and by thought, is to not allow any disbelief towards the great Sādhū.

Briefly expanding upon each in turn now, to serve or associate with the Guru “by deed” – through one's actions – is simply to do as he instructs. When

Prasādānanda Svāmī asks Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78,

What is the cause of the jīva's liberation?

Svāminārāyaṇa succinctly replies:

To do exactly as the Sant says without harbouring any doubts is the very cause of the jīva's liberation.

Again, in a sermon emphasising the essentiality of transcending the influences of māyā and realising the self to remain eternally happy, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

Only one who follows the commands of the Satpuruṣa is behaving as the ātman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.51).

This provides another example of the immediate connection Svāminārāyaṇa strikes between (external) actions and (internal) spiritual development, between outer behaviour (vartana) and inner state (sthiti). As we shall see shortly, the instruction at Vac. Gaḍh. II.51 is based on the practice of mentally ‘joining’ with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and realising him as one's true self, thereby acquiring his brahmic qualities and becoming brahmarūpa. By doing as the liberating Guru instructs, and not succumbing to the whims and distractions of the māyic mind, the aspirant is overcoming the limitations of his own material self and acting as

the ātman within, which he regards as assimilated with the Guru. In other words, he is emulating the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, the perfect devotee of God, and so acting as brahmarūpa (like Brahman) as he would in the state of living liberation. Understood this way, such obedience to the Guru becomes highly liberative, and his guidance can be appreciated as a gracious call to higher spiritual awareness and living. With this practice so inextricably tied with mentally (and spiritually) connecting with the Guru, we are already seeing how the three ways of associating with him tend to coalesce, supporting and enriching one another, confirming it as a holistic method of association.

Furthermore, as already mentioned earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa means for the devotee's encounter with the Guru to be wholly personal, as an intense and intimate relationship. This 'active' or 'physical' association thus includes being with him or near him in person – seeing him, listening to him, relating with him in ways that enhance a loving spiritual bond.

To serve or associate with the Guru verbally – “by word” – is to praise his divine nature, redemptive virtues and liberative role. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in other sermons that this can take the form of singing devotional songs in praise of his glory or discoursing upon śāstric statements revealing the nature of the Guru, especially as eternally transcending māyā and serving as the medium through whom Parabrahman can be reached and through whom Parabrahman lives, loves and liberates.

Svāminārāyaṇa mentions sharing such a proclamation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71. After making the important revelation that

when God manifests for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas, he is always accompanied by his Akṣaradhāma,

he goes on to instruct:

Therefore, a devotee of God should realise that the form of God along with his Akṣaradhāma is present on this earth, and he should also explain this fact to others.

In sharing the revelation that God continues to be accessible on earth – here and now – and that the way to liberation remains open to all through the human-abode of God, i.e. the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the aspirant’s own conviction of the Guru’s divinity and liberative potency is fortified and clarified, and with it his/her own spiritual bond with the Guru.

To serve or associate with the Guru mentally – “by thought” – can take many forms, and is perhaps the most profound of the three, as it naturally and inescapably feeds into each of the others.

One important way of mentally associating with the Guru is to meditate upon his auspicious qualities and the attributes of his being as Akṣarabrahman – the one who, by the eternal will of Parabrahman, creates, sustains, inspires, empowers, supports, governs, pervades, and eventually dissolves the universe, who upholds Parabrahman and countless millions of liberated souls as Akṣaradhāma the abode, who exemplarily serves Parabrahman there in a distinct, human form, and who serves on earth as the complete and perfect medium for Parabrahman’s

love, bliss, blessings, and, importantly, the means to securing eternal fellowship with God in final liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes the powerful tool of reminiscing times of personal interaction with the Guru. It will not always be possible to be with him or near him, yet vividly recalling past encounters can be just as fulfilling and liberative, Svāminārāyaṇa explains (Vac. Gaḍh. I.3, Vac. Gaḍh. I.38, Vac. Gaḍh. II.35, Vac. Jet.3).

Expanding this further, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs offering “mānsī pūjā” to the Guru (Vac. Var.5). This is a form of mental worship which mirrors all the outer actions of devotional worship, but performed within, as a form of visualisation. Svāminārāyaṇa assures this can be just as efficacious as physically performing puja, *if* it is accompanied with deep adoration and reverence (Vac. Sār.3). He elaborates upon this form of worship in great detail in Vac. Gaḍh. III.23, explaining that it is a potent method by which a devotee can “increase his love” for the manifest form of God and “gain tremendous spiritual fulfilment”.

Earlier in this chapter, we understood that liberation is a state of perfect spiritual purity and maturity, in which the soul becomes brahmarūpa – literally, ‘like Brahman’. This not only entails eradicating māyic impurities⁴⁵¹ borne of a

⁴⁵¹ Svāminārāyaṇa explains the method of eradicating these impurities in oneself is also by way of the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru, by realising him as being absolutely pure. See this remarkable statement corresponding the soul’s purity/impurity with its understanding of the Guru’s purity/impurity:

material self-(mis)understanding, but, more positively, acquiring the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 how both are made possible for a finite being by mentally associating with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

The jīva, however, has associated with the body, the senses and the sense-objects. As a result of this improper association, the jīva has become one with the body, senses, etc. After forsaking their association, the jīva realises, ‘My self is Brahman, which transcends and is free from māyā.’ If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the jīva acquires the virtues of Brahman. [...]

The jīva remains continuously attached to māyā.... Only when one continuously associates with Brahman, one’s inspirer, through contemplation – as previously described – is that attachment broken (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

This constant mental association with Akṣarabrahman, in the form of the living Guru, is the antidote, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, to the improper association the soul has forged from time immemorial with its māyic bodies and surroundings across countless life-experiences through transmigration.

11.3.2.2) ‘Oneness’ with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

Svāminārāyaṇa expands mental association into a spiritual connection by calling for “attaching one’s soul” with the Guru and developing a sense of oneness. In Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, he instructs:

If one realises the truly great Puruṣa to be absolutely lust-free, then, even if one is as lustful as a dog, one will also become lust-free. Conversely, if one perceives the fault of lust in the great Puruṣa, then no matter how lust-free one may be, one becomes full of intense lust. In the same manner, if one views the great Puruṣa to be full of anger or avarice, then one becomes full of anger and avarice. Therefore, if one understands the great Puruṣa to be absolutely free of lust, avarice, taste, egotism and attachment, one will also become free of all of those impurities and become a staunch devotee (Vac. Gaḍh. I.58).

One should also attach one's jīva to the Bhakta of God, the great Sādhū.

As we also saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

One should develop a oneness between one's jivātman and that Brahman.

In explaining how this association leads to receiving Akṣarabrahman's qualities, or becoming brahmarūpa, SV 2.41 reads:

Expounding upon how to associate [with the Guru, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī said]: First, one should attach one's jīva to the Ekāntika [Sādhū]. That Sādhū is absorbed in God, so he has the qualities of God, and so the Sādhū's qualities are imbibed by he who associates with him.

Then stressing the absolute essentiality of this form of association with the Guru, the sermon ends with the following pronouncement:

Whether one observes this method today or after a thousand lives, ultimately, there is no alternative but to observe it.

We find similar instructions or statements in the Upaniṣads identifying the finite soul with Akṣarabrahman. For example, the famous proclamation at BU 1.4.10 is "Aham brahmā'smi" (I am Brahman). The Bhāṣyakāra explains this as a meditation of the form 'My self is Akṣara; the Brahmasvarūpa Guru is my self',⁴⁵² in line with the contemplation offered by Svāminārāyaṇa above in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31. Hereby the aspirant becomes wholly absorbed in the divine Guru and rises above his current māyic awareness and self-understanding to the pure, transcendental brahmic state of liberation.

⁴⁵² BU-SB 1.4.10, p. 49.

Similar interpretations can be found for statements such as “sa ātmā tat tvam asi” (CU 6.8.7)⁴⁵³, “ayam ātmā brahma” (MāU 1.2)⁴⁵⁴, “sa vā ayam ātmā brahma” (BU 4.4.5)⁴⁵⁵, and “asau puruṣas-so’ham asmi” (IU 16 & BU 5.15.1)⁴⁵⁶ where the Bhāṣyakāra is keen to clarify that any predicated identity with Brahman is indicative of the brahmarūpa state – when the soul shares many of Akṣarabrahman’s qualities and becomes worthy of the highest devotion to Parabrahman. The ontological distinction between jīvas/Īśvaras and Brahman nevertheless remains securely intact.⁴⁵⁷

In other upaniṣadic statements, we find actual instructions to know or meditate on that Brahman as one’s own self, such as “vijñānam brahma ced veda” (TU 2.5.1)⁴⁵⁸, “tam evaikam jānathā”tmānam” (MuU 2.2.5)⁴⁵⁹, and “Aum ityevam dhyāyathā”tmānam” (MuU 2.2.6)⁴⁶⁰.

One such series of instructions can be found allegorically at MuU 2.2.4, where one is called upon to “target” Akṣarabrahman⁴⁶¹ with one’s soul, the arrow, and “strike it unflinchingly”. Like an arrow lodged in its target that becomes one with

⁴⁵³ CU-SB 6.8.7, pp. 278-79.

⁴⁵⁴ MāU-SB 1.2, p. 313.

⁴⁵⁵ BU-SB 4.4.5, pp. 269-70.

⁴⁵⁶ IU-SB 16, p. 24 & BU-SB 5.15.1, p. 327.

⁴⁵⁷ See also BS-SB 1.3.5, p. 90.

⁴⁵⁸ TU-SB 2.5.1, pp. 373-74.

⁴⁵⁹ MuU-SB 2.2.5, pp. 273-74.

⁴⁶⁰ MuU-SB 2.2.6, pp. 275-76. For the meaning of ‘Aum’ as Akṣarabrahman, see, for example, KaU 2.15-16, PU 5.2, MāU 1.1-2, TU 1.8.1, CU 1.1.1, CU 1.4.1, and BG 8.13.

⁴⁶¹ See also the analogy at Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 where Svāminārāyaṇa refers to the abode of God as the “aim” of steadfast devotees battling to overcome māyā.

it – ‘śaravat tanmayo bhavet’ – so, too, the aspirant makes the Guru his/her focus and becomes one with him.

The imagery continues from the earlier verse at MuU 2.2.3, where the oneness is explained as taking on aspects of the Guru’s nature – ‘tadbhāvagatena’. The Bhāṣyakāra describes this as a form of awareness (anusandhāna), contemplation (anucintana), and engrossment (sanlagnatā).⁴⁶²

A term that Svāminārāyaṇa often uses to establish this sense of oneness with and constant awareness of the Guru is “ātmabuddhi”, literally ‘self-perception’ or perception of selfhood. When directed to developing it ‘with’ or ‘in’ or ‘for’ the Guru, it comes to mean ‘perceiving the Guru as one’s self’ as part of an assimilative relationship. Svāminārāyaṇa instructs at Vac. Jet.1:

One should develop a conviction of one’s ātman as follows: One should develop ātmabuddhi with the Sant who has attained the manifest form of God, and one should believe only that Sant to be one’s self.

“The purpose of being profoundly attached to the Sant” in this way, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, “is that he [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] has the ability of penetrating the barriers” of māyā. As we learned earlier from this same sermon, māyā is otherwise impregnable. Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes with the following statement:

All should imbibe this principle, as it is the very life of everyone.

⁴⁶² MuU-SB 2.2.3-4, pp. 271-73. For a similar emphasis on constant and engrossing awareness of Brahman, see the Bhāṣyakāra’s definition of “brahmacarya” at KaU 2.15, p. 102, PU 1.2, p. 175, MuU 3.1.5, p. 286, CU-SB 8.4.3, pp. 358-59, and BG-SB 8.12, p. 184, and also of “brahma vyāvaharan” at BG-SB 8.13, pp. 185-86.

In various other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa explains more about what he means by such 'ātmabuddhi', or what such 'ātmabuddhi' translates to in practical ways as part of an aspirant's endeavours towards liberation from māyā or ajñāna.

In the state of ignorance, the soul falsely identifies with the material body with a sense of I-ness ('I am male/female;' 'I am white/black/brown;' 'I am fat/thin/tall/short;' 'I am attractive/ugly;' 'I am clever/dumb;' etc.) and regards all that is associated with it as 'mine' ('My house, my car, my money, my assets, my belongings, my power, my fame, my relatives, etc.'). According to Svāminārāyaṇa, this is the very definition of māyā:

What is God's māyā? Māyā is nothing but the sense of I-ness towards the body and my-ness towards anything related to the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

To rise above such a māyic understanding, one must identify with something which is eternally beyond māyā and has the ability to lift one from it too, i.e. Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa thus instructs that it is not the body with which one should have ātmabuddhi (a perception of selfhood), but the māyā-transcending Guru. All notions of I-ness and my-ness should now be directed to the Guru. 'I am Akṣara. I am Brahman. The Guru is my self.'

Seen another way, just as the soul enlivens, inspires, activates the body and senses – without which a person can do or be nothing at all – now, the Guru becomes, as if, the aspirant's very soul, enlivening, inspiring, activating it in every aspect of life.

One important way in which this should manifest is as a life of perfect devotion to God, for the Guru is first, foremost and always the perfect devotee himself. He provides a model of the redeemed life for all others to emulate. Thus, if ‘oneness’ with Brahman is an acquisition of the Guru’s virtues, in becoming more like him (Brahman-like, or brahmarūpa), it follows that these brahmic qualities promote and enhance the highest devotional relationship of the aspirant with God, itself a mark of liberation. While this is not a simple exercise in the external imitation of the Guru, the aspirant nevertheless has an example on which to model his/her sustained efforts and intentions, and craft a spiritually pure life immersed in God – like the Guru’s. Nor, however, should this be reduced to a purely exemplarist understanding of the Guru’s role. He actively makes possible and available liberation by way of his unique ontological position as Akṣarabrahman. This is most evident in two important ways: firstly, the aspirants assimilate from him their brahmic qualities, to become brahmarūpa; and secondly, he serves as the medium through whom they can most fruitfully offer worship to Parabrahman and, in return, receive Parabrahman’s loving grace. This dual-role of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru helps explain his central position in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

It should come as no surprise that the Bhāṣyakāra picks up on many of these themes throughout the third and fourth chapters of the Brahmasūtras, traditionally named Sādhanaādhyāya (concerning the means [to liberation]) and Phalādhyāya (concerning the fruit [of liberation]), respectively. A good example of this is the Ātmagr̥hītyadhikaraṇa (BS 3.3.15-18), where he equates “gr̥hīti”

(literally ‘acceptance’) to “buddhi” (‘perception’), and so centring the discussion on ātmabuddhi. He begins the debate by raising the following doubt: With so many endeavours – such as austerities, etc. – lauded in the śāstras as means to serving Parabrahman, which one should be predominantly practiced? The *prima facie* response is: Well, if they are all enjoined in the sacred texts, then they should all be predominantly practiced. The Sūtrakāra replies that one should develop ātmabuddhi predominantly, for that is the best and most important means (3.3.15). The Bhāṣyakāra substantiates this stance throughout the *adhikaraṇa*, especially with reference to many of the Upaniṣadic instructions we have already cited above. He points out, firstly, that ātmabuddhi relates to a spiritual awareness (*anusandhāna*), and manifests itself as profound love (*prakṛṣṭānurāgodbhava*). For example, just as a narcissist feels, ‘This body is my soul’, or a person obsessed with his wealth feels, ‘This wealth is my soul’, or an infatuated lover feels, ‘He/she is my soul’, the devotee should realise, ‘the Brahmasvarūpa Guru before my eyes is my soul’ and assimilate the qualities of Akṣarabrahman within his/her self.⁴⁶³

‘But do not the Upaniṣads describe an identity of the soul with Parabrahman?’, the objectors contend. The Bhāṣyakāra replies, in essence: Yes, it is true that there is some sort of identity between souls and Parabrahman, but only in the state of liberation, and that, too, not completely and ontologically. To reach that state, however, the Upaniṣads instruct a sense of oneness with Akṣarabrahman

⁴⁶³ BS-SB 3.3.15, pp. 323-24. See also BS-SB 3.3.16-18, pp. 324-26.

whereby the soul can newly acquire its qualities, i.e. become brahmarūpa, and thereby become capable of offering the highest devotion to Parabrahman.⁴⁶⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa also explains that ātmabuddhi with the Guru most readily manifests itself as concentrated spiritual love⁴⁶⁵, because the aspirant is now attached to the Guru, not the body or its affiliates. The Guru becomes the priority, the ultimate focus of all attention and efforts, not worldly matters or māyic pleasures. Even while diligently fulfilling every personal and social responsibility, all actions, thoughts and intentions of the aspirant are now imbued with a spiritual awareness of the Guru, and thus take on a wholly devotional character and spirit. This frees the aspirant of his/her karmic bondage. Svāminārāyaṇa therefore instructs:

For a person who desires his own liberation, nothing in this world is more blissful than God and his Sant. Therefore, just as a person has ātmabuddhi towards his own body, he should similarly have ātmabuddhi with God and his Sant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

Extending this to include relatives of the body, and specifying the relationship as one of profound love, Svāminārāyaṇa states elsewhere:

One should develop affection for God's Sant just as one has affection for one's wife, son, parents or brother. Due to this affection, then, the jīva becomes absolutely fulfilled (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

⁴⁶⁴ Condensed from BS-SB 3.3.16-18, pp. 324-26. For a similar discussion about acquiring certain qualities of Akṣarabrahman by realising Akṣara as oneself, see also the Akṣaradhyadhikaraṇa at BS-SB 3.3.32-33, pp. 335-36.

⁴⁶⁵ It is useful to note that a further connotation of the term “sevā” is derived from its usage in defining the Sanskrit verb-root “bhaj”, meaning worship or devotion. This also helps explain how service of or association with the Guru is a form of loving devotion.

If a person maintains profound love towards the Ekāntika Sādhū of God just as resolutely as he maintains profound love towards his own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens for him⁴⁶⁶ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.54).

Svāminārāyaṇa's tenor is that the Guru is the gateway to liberation. A profound and loving association with him opens that gateway.

Tying many of these ideas together in an important sermon for this discussion,

Svāminārāyaṇa asks the following question in Vac. Var.11:

The Satpuruṣa, who is brahmasvarūpa, behaves above the three bodies and the three states. Moreover, he does not believe any of the actions of the fourteen senses [and faculties]⁴⁶⁷ to affect him. However, an ignorant person cannot realise this. Only when he attains a spiritual state similar to that of the great Puruṣa does he behave like the great Puruṣa, and only then does he understand the great Puruṣa's behaviour. However, as long as one has not realised the greatness of the Satpuruṣa, one does not attain the brahmic state. Yet, without realising the self, one cannot realise the greatness of the Satpuruṣa. Hence, there seems to be a paradox. Please explain how this paradox can be resolved.

After no one was able to satisfactorily resolve the paradox, Svāminārāyaṇa replies in conclusion:

Intense love for the Satpuruṣa is itself the means to realising one's ātman, is itself also the means to realising the greatness of the Satpuruṣa, and is itself also the means to having the direct realisation of God (Vac. Var.11).

⁴⁶⁶ This is an expanded translation by Svāminārāyaṇa of BP 3.25.20:

Prasaṅgam ajaram pāśam ātmanaḥ kavayo viduḥ |
Sa eva sādhuṣu kṛto mokṣadvāram apāvrtam ||

The wise sages know: affection [for others] firmly binds the soul. However, if that same affection is directed towards the Sādhū, it becomes an opening to liberation.

⁴⁶⁷ The "fourteen senses" refers to the five cognitive senses, five conative senses, and the four inner faculties. These are often termed together as the fourteen senses or fourteen [outer and inner] faculties.

Svāminārāyaṇa’s striking insight here is that love for the Guru not only leads to a realisation of the Guru and the self, with whom the individual develops a spiritual connection, but also of God. It again points to the substantive presence of Parabrahman within the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, and explains the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad’s call to offer the highest devotion to the Guru on par with that offered to God.

Yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau (SU 6.23) |

Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly calls upon such ātmabuddhi with Akṣarabrahman in his doctrinal letters. For example, in one letter, after narrating the cosmic powers of Akṣarabrahman, he adds that that Akṣarabrahman “is among us”, referring to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru in human form. Svāminārāyaṇa then instructs:

O Paramahansas! One should develop ātmabuddhi with him [Akṣarabrahman], and with that thought, become a jīvan-mukta [i.e. a living liberated soul].⁴⁶⁸

In another letter, he writes:

He who offers upāsanā to Puruṣottama Paramātmā while realising one’s self to be one with Akṣara is worthy of great honour.

However, Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies in the same letter, there should be no perception of selfhood with Parabrahman.

He who does not have a servant-master relationship with Puruṣottama, but behaves as if one with him, is worthy of scorn.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ Vedarasa, p. 166.

⁴⁶⁹ Vedarasa, p. 214.

In yet another extensive letter, Svāminārāyaṇa makes reference to himself as “Parabrahman Puruṣottama” before explicitly instructing:

O Paramahansas! Offer upāsanā to me while having ātmabuddhi with that [Brahman].⁴⁷⁰

In many ways, this is the essence and foundation of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, by which all of its doctrines are illumined and consummated, including the end and means to liberation: upāsanā – loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge – is to be offered to Svāminārāyaṇa as Parabrahman/Puruṣottama (albeit through his most accessible form, the current Brahmasvarūpa Guru), after realising oneself as brahmarūpa/akṣararūpa by spiritually and lovingly associating with that same Akṣarabrahman Guru. This is why this theological system of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is traditionally referred to as Akṣara-Puruṣottama Upāsanā, and the Bhāṣyakāra offers as the classical appellation for the Svāminārāyaṇa School of Vedānta, **Brahma-Parabrahma-Darśana**.

This fittingly concludes this introductory exposition of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

⁴⁷⁰ Vedarasa, p. 158.

PART 4: CONCLUSION & WAY FORWARD

12) Conclusion: Hindu Theology as Theology

- Completing the Test: Returning to Clooney's 'Clues' of Hindu Theology
- Broadening the Test: Using Anselm's 'Faith Seeking Understanding'
- A New Test: Suggesting and Demonstrating a Hindu Formulation of (Hindu) Theology
 - From 'Hearing' to 'Seeing': Śravaṇa, Manana, Nididhyāsana, Darśana
 - BG 4.34 and the Example of Arjuna

13) The Way Forward

- Why is this Study Significant and to Whom
- Opportunities for New Scholarship
 - On the Svāminārāyaṇa Tradition
 - Challenges to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology
 - In Hindu Theology and Other Disciplines
 - In Comparative Theology

12) CONCLUSION: Hindu Theology as Theology

In many ways, the extensive final chapter on Mukti has already served as a fitting conclusion to the exposition by recapitulating, converging and bringing to a finale the key theological points discussed so far. We continue that trajectory in this final part by travelling further back to the very beginning of the study and our opening, fundamental question: What is Hindu theology?

In our attempt to answer the question, we chose to draw upon a set of ‘clues’ presented by Francis X. Clooney, SJ in his chapter ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology” as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Having systematically explicated the beliefs and doctrines of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya as an example of a Hindu tradition’s beliefs and doctrines, we must now hold up the system to Clooney’s clues and ascertain whether indeed it can be justifiably deemed “theological”, thereby *a posteriori* affirming the viability and validity of Hindu theology more broadly.

But if Hindu traditions such as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya are to be genuinely accepted as ‘theological’ by a broader (academic) audience, surely they must also satisfy a more general (academic) definition of theology. Next, then, we shall move on to understanding Anselm’s classical theological formula – ‘faith seeking understanding’ – in a Hindu light, before suggesting and demonstrating a similar Hindu expression as a formulation of Hindu theology (if not of theology as a whole).

Finally in the very concluding part of the thesis, we shall pause to reflect upon what this study has achieved and look ahead to propose what new avenues of exploration it has opened up.

12.1) Completing the Test: Returning to Clooney's 'Clues' of Hindu Theology

First, then, we must proceed to the necessary task of checking the exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta tradition against each of Clooney's clues to test for its 'theologicality'. In the interest of economy and avoiding tedious, copious duplication, I have chosen to present only very briefly the corresponding points in the exposition rather than repeat them whole with all their extensive source material, exegesis and argumentation. Chapter references have been provided for the reader interested in returning to the fuller discussion or the exact scriptural passages. Otherwise, the following mentions should suffice while keeping this section succinct and wieldy, even if it runs the risk of appearing sparse.

Theology as the study of God: The obvious, overarching characteristic of a theological system or text is of course its primary focus on the study of God, 'a supreme, personal intelligent being who is the world source and guarantor of the significance of human life'.

Our exposition on the 'Themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology' rightly begins with the extensive chapter on Parabrahman [Chapter 6] in which we discuss at

length the form, function and nature of God as conceived in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. Indicatively, this is the largest chapter in the thesis alluding to the prominent position of ‘God-talk’ within the system and, consequentially, in the Vacanāmṛut and Svāmīnī Vāto, upon which we so extensively draw.

In the very opening of that discussion, we appreciated the primary importance and absolute indispensability of knowing God as understood within the tradition [Chapter 6.1]. We found that the knowledge of God, according to Svāminārāyaṇa, is foundational, central and apical to all else; that is, it is upon what all reflection and practice is grounded, around which it revolves, and into what it should ultimately culminate.

In further consolidating the God-centricity of the system, we learned from the Introduction to the Themes [Chapter 5] that the study of all other metaphysical realities discussed in Svāminārāyaṇa texts is justified insofar as they are in the service of knowing God. If inquiry into Parabrahman is the study of God’s form, nature, function, significance, etc., the inquiry into Akṣarabrahman is the study of God’s abode, and how to become eligible to experience God therein after death and also now; the inquiry into māyā is the study of God’s creation and its function as ignorance which needs to be transcended to fully realise God; the inquiry into īśvara is the study of other divinities and their God-given role in his creation; and inquiry into jīva is the study of individual souls and their relationship with God. In fact, using Svāminārāyaṇa’s definition of theological knowledge in Vac. Loyā.7, a correct and complete understanding of God

necessitates the study of all five metaphysical realities, thereby constituting the whole of Part 3 as a *theological* inquiry.

We enter more specifically into discussions about the nature of God – asking such audacious questions as ‘What does God look like?’ – in sections such as 6.3, explaining his human-like yet divine form and countering some associated arguments against such a claim.

If such a study of God is a legitimate starting point for identifying ‘theology’, Clooney moves on from this “adequate working criterion” to more specific indicators that can help define Hindu theology more carefully and thoroughly. He firstly suggests seven specific themes and then a few other considerations, all to which we shall now turn individually⁴⁷¹.

The nature of a sufficient world cause, world-maker: Of the four traditional aspects of Parabrahman conventionally used to describe his nature in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, ‘Kartā’ specifically deals with the agency of God. Chapter 6.3 is dedicated exclusively to this aspect, of God as sarvakartā and sarvakāraṇa, the all-doer and all-cause. More specifically, as we unpacked these terms, we realised his role as creator, sustainer and dissolver of the world, and as both its efficient and material cause.

⁴⁷¹ I have rearranged the sequence of Clooney’s themes to facilitate a more logical flow of the discussion.

Within the chapter on māyā, we again visited Parabrahman as creator and cause [10.2.1] when understanding māyā's manifestation as jagat, the created world visible around us.

The problem of evil: Closely associated with the function of God as world-maker and cause is the charge of why an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God would create a world vitiated by evil and suffering. In the section discussing the purpose of creation and the irreproachability of its creator [10.2.2], we see the scripturally grounded and reasonably argued attempt to reconcile the presence of inequality and suffering in a world created by a fair and compassionate God. The Hindu theodicy presented here based on the commentary of BS 2.1.34-6 and Vac. Var.6 not only attempts to defend the goodness of God and ensure justice for individual beings, it also seeks to preserve God's indispensability and intimate relationship with those beings.

Whether God is one or many: Another of the four aspects of Parabrahman that we addressed was his outright supremacy [6.2], starting with a clear elaboration of him being one without second, i.e. unique and unsurpassable [6.2.1]. This was confirmed further when we learned the distinction between the one supreme avatārin and his many avatāras, who in fact are ontologically īśvara [6.2.1.4]. When expositing this familiar-sounding yet perhaps novel metaphysical entity, we especially drew attention to the īśvaras' distinction from (and inferiority) to Parabrahman [9.3].

The doctrine of one, supreme God is challenged and corroborated again during our elaborate, technical examination of Akṣarabrahman using such Upaniṣadic passages as “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ (MuU 2.1.2)”. Even while establishing the eminent transcendence of Akṣarabrahman, he is confirmed as discrete from and infinitely subordinate to God [7.1; 7.3.9].

Divine embodiment: The fourth and arguably most soteriologically important aspect of Parabrahman is the manifestation of his divine transcendental self in an equally divine yet human form. This idea comes to its full concreteness and culmination in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa who lived on earth during the relatively recent period of 1781-1830 CE. In other words, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the divine embodiment of Parabrahman occurs in Svāminārāyaṇa, or to be clearer still, Svāminārāyaṇa *is* Parabrahman [6.5].

Related to this doctrine of Pragaṭa in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition is the concept of Parabrahman’s continued manifestation on earth through Akṣarabrahman. This we discussed at much length when understanding Akṣarabrahman as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru [7.4.4].

The nature and time of liberation: The final chapter in our exposition of Svāminārāyaṇa doctrines is dedicated to liberation [11]. There we described the two types of liberation – post-mortem, i.e. videha mukti [11.2.1], and pre-mortem, i.e. jivan-mukti [11.2.2] – clarifying also the ontological distinction of liberated souls from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman [11.2.3] and, even in this

perfect elevated state of liberation, the abiding servant-master relationship they enjoy with Parabrahman [11.2.4].

“Ignorance” as a theological category: Before elaborating on the nature of liberation, we first understood the nature and cause of bondage, i.e. from what liberation was necessary and desirable [11.1]. Having established this as the soul’s ajñāna or ignorance – better understood as ‘*anti*-knowledge’, that which opposes true knowledge, rather than simply the lack of knowledge – we could better appreciate our earlier exposition of māyā as ignorance [10.1.7]. Importantly, we understood this as the principal barrier to the full, blissful experience of God when we discussed the ‘unveiling’ of the soul as a form of revelation, especially when considering the Greek word *apokalypsis* [3.1.1].

The appeal to revelation: The means of valid and authoritative theological knowledge – which dispels ignorance and makes God known – was the focus of our discussion in Part 2. After acknowledging the limited scope of human cognition impaired by our māyā-corrupted senses and mind [2.1], we went on to argue for ‘revelation’ as the exclusive source of authentic theological knowledge in a Hindu tradition such as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya [3]. More specifically, we covered the three ways in which God is seen to be revealed within the tradition – as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa [3.1], as Parabrahman being substantively present in and made known by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru [3.2], and through Scripture, i.e.

Svāminārāyaṇa's sermons documented in the Vacanāmṛut and the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus' teachings, such as the Svāmīnī Vāto [3.3].

The authority and priority of Scripture, or verbal testimony, as the only knowledge-source to reliably cognise all matters divine was further reinforced in opposition to other epistemological means, especially inference [3.3.1]. Of all revelatory texts, we learned additionally, it is the Vacanāmṛut which holds prime position among the faithful of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, based on their distinctive belief that Svāminārāyaṇa, as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within it. For the Svāminārāyaṇa community, the Vacanāmṛut is, quite literally, God talking about God – “theology” (if essentially ‘God-talk’) in its fullest sense.

Apart from this range of themes which Clooney suggests are indicative of theological content, he also points to a set of considerations related to style, context and community, which he refers to collectively as “contextual factors”.

Language: Clooney proposes that Hindu theology is ordinarily Sanskrit-language discourse, either composed in Sanskrit or in languages and contexts deeply influenced by Sanskrit reasoning. This is indeed the case, we find, for the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. With the historical origins of the tradition in Gujarat, the western state of India, and Svāminārāyaṇa's strongly dialogical style of preaching, Gujarati is the language in which Svāminārāyaṇa delivered his sermons and in which they are recorded in the Vacanāmṛut. Still,

Svāminārāyaṇa's own familiarity with Sanskrit-based Hindu texts meant that he freely quoted them in his sermons such that we find substantial Sanskrit-language content in the Vacanāmrut. In any case, Gujarati itself, having closely evolved from Sanskrit, shares many of the characteristics which Clooney prizes about the classical language, primarily that it allows for rigorous and systematic reasoning and intellectually sophisticated discourse on God.

Apart from the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto, the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition's expansive corpus of religious literature – written from the time of Svāminārāyaṇa to the present day – is replete with texts in Gujarati, Sanskrit⁴⁷² and Hindi (apart from other languages), a great deal of which would justifiably merit the title 'theological' on account of its focus on understanding and relating to God.

Importantly also, in recent years, the tradition's commentaries on the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā have all been composed in Sanskrit, in the classical commentarial style of the scholastic Vedānta tradition.

Commentary: This is in fact another feature that Clooney suggests might indicate theological content within a system or text – the presence of commentarial literature. As introduced when delineating the primary sources of this thesis at the outset [1.4], the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya does indeed now

⁴⁷² See a recent study of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition's Sanskrit corpus by Sadhu Adarshjivandas. *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāyāṃ Saṃskṛt Sāhitya: Ek Adhyayan* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University, Vallabh Vidyanagar, India, 2009).

have a voluminous set of classical commentaries in the form of the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, on the Brahmasūtras, Bhagavad-Gītā and the ten principal Upaniṣads. The fundamental doctrinal basis of the original texts, upon which the Bhāṣyakāra explicates and elaborates, is sourced from the Vacanāmrut and the Svāmīnī Vāto. Furthermore, as we noted in the Introduction, while the Vacanāmrut itself is not commented on in a strict sense, the Svāmīnī Vāto does serve within the tradition as a ‘natural commentary’ upon the former’s most important teachings by providing elucidation, elaboration and further reflection. Similarly, more recent texts, such as the five-volume *Vacanāmrut Rahasya*, offer detailed analysis and elucidation of the Vacanāmrut and its teachings.

Community: Clooney rightly observes that theology does not occur in isolation from the religious community of those who write it and read it. Both have certain expectations of theological work; the latter hoping that the authors of theology will intelligently explicate their beliefs if not also defend them against competing systems, and, correspondingly, the former expecting an audience seeking to be guided through deeper thinking about the meaning and understanding of their faith. Historically, this certainly seems to have been the case for the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. From its inception and early fledgling years, a number of challenges to the tradition’s beliefs, from other Hindu denominations, meant that scholars had to respond by proving its authenticity. They did so by appealing to authoritative texts (śruti) and employing scripturally-grounded reasoning (yukti). Such acts which we can now identify as theological were necessary for lay and ordained members of the community as well as the

scholars themselves. Equally, those of the tradition who have been trained in its textual heritage and who draw upon it to evince finer reflections, are enthused to speak to a community already eager to receive their writings and addresses so that they may advance, clarify and consolidate their own faithful understanding. This commonly occurs in the weekly and, in some places, daily temple assemblies, and more eruditely in published articles and books and sometimes large seminars, as well as in many other situations.

There is yet one more important indicator of theology that Clooney advances, and that is **manana as theological reasoning**; in other words, “argumentative possibility”, even if that arguability is fully respectful of and guided by the authority of Scripture and Guru. This is a characteristic that hopefully should have been apparent throughout our exposition. As we traversed its various topics, we frequently encountered challenges along the way, for example, to Parabrahman’s omnidoership and perfect nature [6.3.2.1.1] or his human-shaped form [6.4.3.1.1], or even his creatorship: How justifiable is it that God be called the creator when Prakṛti, the primordial substance from which the material world is composed, is co-eternal with God? If Prakṛti already exists, what exactly has God ‘created’? [10.2.1] These and many other questions we addressed by sound reasoning grounded in scriptural exegesis. For example, this last doubt about *creatio ex materia* we were able to address rationally by drawing upon the analogy of a sculptor, painter and musician. Even the knottier issues, such as the ‘problem of evil’, as mentioned above, were tackled in a manner sensitive to scriptural authority even while calling upon robust, reasonable arguments.

In our exposition of Akṣarabrahman, we opened with a difficult set of questions underpinned by the ontological distinction of Akṣarabrahman from Parabrahman and why this discrete entity was necessary when other schools had managed without it [7.1]. With a hermeneutically-anchored technical inquiry into the meaning and implications of three Vedāntic passages, we were able to grasp a more precise and coherent understanding of a key doctrine of the tradition. Moreover, the study provided us with a useful insight into the deeply exegetical, reasoned discussions that can ensue in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology when difficult questions are raised and answered from within the tradition, often in defence of the tradition itself, and especially when engaged in a classical debate with other theological systems.

Additionally, in surveying ways in which we can know more about God, we established the role of reason as a useful tool of God-knowledge when that reason is driven by faith and steered by scripture [4.1].

Finally, as Clooney too concludes, those with theological sensitivities will be the ones to decide what is theological (and what not). Even while circular in its argument, it is true that as scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya – including this one – open up further to the idea and methodology of theology, we/they will be able to commit more vigorously to the theological project, serving not only the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition but Hindu studies and the discipline of theology more broadly. Characteristically, Clooney ends his chapter by reiterating this as a call to Hindu theologians: “It must be the theologians of

the Hindu tradition who must take the lead in maintaining and fostering Hindu theology.”⁴⁷³

Clooney accepts that of all these clues he has suggested, “each... has some merit on its own but none is independently sufficient”. Then again, nor is it “necessary to accept all of them to justify the acceptance of the category, ‘theology.’” “In significant combinations”, however, he clarifies, “they can help us to make choices about texts (and systems of thought) that should be called theological.” From the concise examination above, it is unsurprisingly evident that a theistic tradition such as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya does indeed satisfy, even if to varying degrees, all of Clooney’s clues, thus allowing it to be justifiably regarded as a theological system. Inductively, it also helps confirm the possibility, at least accordingly to these criteria, of ‘theology’ as a useful and appropriate category to describe Hindu intellectual discourse. Therefore, it answers by analogy our initial, driving question: Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is a good example of what Hindu theology is (or could be).

12.2) Broadening the Test: Using Anselm’s ‘Faith Seeking Understanding’

But of course, our intention was not simply to conduct an elementary tick-box exercise and be satisfied in proving the viability of *a* Hindu theological system and extrapolating that to Hindu theology as a whole. As necessary as the preceding exercise was in providing a succinct assessment of the Svāminārāyaṇa

⁴⁷³ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

system's theologicality according to Clooney's criteria, Hindu traditions, to be taken more seriously among the wider theologian guild, must pass a tougher test, one which strikes at the very definition of theology in general.

One classical and widely accepted definition of theology comes to us in the form of an expression delivered by one of Christian theology's most respected and influential exponents – a definition which has been employed, expatiated and examined for centuries ever since. It is Saint Anselm of Canterbury's apparently simple yet richly profound statement: *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding".

It appears in Anselm's preface to his famous *Proslogion*, a prayerful, argumentative meditation which he himself reveals was originally entitled 'Fides Quaerens Intellectum'. In explaining why, he writes:

I have written the following treatise, in the person of one who strives to lift his mind to the contemplation of God, and seeks to understand what he believes.

Drawing upon and paraphrasing Augustine's famous expression – *credu ut intellegam*, "I believe, in order that I may understand" – Anselm goes on to clarify:

For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand (*Proslogion* 1).

This quintessentially Christian characterisation of theology is one that clearly and loudly resonates with Hindu teachings about God, or rather, learning about

God. It is immediately notable, for example, that the route to understanding begins with faith, not doubt or suspension of belief. In the same vein, the Bhagavad-Gītā states:

Śraddhāvān labhate jñānam |

The person of faith attains knowledge (BG 4.39).

As if to confirm faith as the only possible starting point on the quest for knowledge, the Bhagavad-Gītā immediately and emphatically adds:

Aśraddadhānaśca sañśayātmā vinaśyati |

The doubter, without faith, perishes (BG 4.40).

Furthermore, echoing Anselm's goal of 'understanding seeking joy' –

I pray, O God, to know you, to love you, that I may rejoice in you
(*Proslogium* 26)

– the Bhagavad-Gītā too adds that the person of faith, having realised God, experiences immediately the highest level of peace [BG 4.39]. Conversely, joy eludes the doubter in this world and beyond [BG 4.40].

On a similar note, Svāminārāyaṇa explains that if one has “intense faith and extremely firm trust in the words of God and the Sant [i.e. the Guru]”, then one can be liberated from the darkest, most stubborn karmic bondage and realise the highest spiritual state of Godly experience “in this very lifetime” [Vac. Sār.9].

That faith is the essential beginning of understanding is something we have already covered in considerable detail when delineating the sources and tools of

Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology at the very outset of this project [Part 2]. It was determined that God is not knowable as an object of sensorial perception, empirical investigation or intellectual speculation. It is by revelation alone – the gracious, loving act of God revealing himself in person and through Scripture and Guru (the ‘living Scripture’) – that God can be known. Since Scripture is “paramapramāṇa” (the principal knowledge-source)⁴⁷⁴, and God is “śāstraikagamyā” (understandable by Scripture alone)⁴⁷⁵, it is faith in the intrinsically certified (“svataḥpramāṇa”), divinely spoken or divinely inspired words constituting Scripture which we must rely upon to lead us to a valid understanding of God. This we established from, among other sources, the commentary on BS 1.1.3, “Śāstrayonitvāt” [Chapter 6.3.1].

But nor does faith in Scripture or Guru demand a blanket rejection of thought, inquiry, reasoning. As we learned further along in that same comment, reason, when properly grounded in and guided by faith, is a valuable tool in the search for understanding. Even while not *devising* new theological ideas independently – the roots of authentic understandings of God can always be traced to revelation – reason helps in excavating deeper layers of meaning from Scripture and shedding new light to *discover* or clarify hitherto hidden and obscure truths [Chapter 4.1].

Thus, if we are to establish the priority of faith over reason, we have just as much to assert the reasonableness of faith. In fact, the basic insight of the Anselmian

⁴⁷⁴ KaU-SB 6.12, p. 165.

⁴⁷⁵ BS-SB 1.1.3, p. 22.

formula is that while faith precedes understanding, the content of that faith is still amenable to reasoned inquiry. It is certainly not opposed to it. Indeed, faith is the essential foundation upon which it grows. Equally, reasoning succeeds faith, rising from it. Faith and reason remain delicately poised in wholesome tension with each other, feeding off one another, gradually resulting in greater understanding. Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century's most prolific and influential theologians, confirms this as a distinctive, if not *the* definitive, feature of theology. "What distinguishes theology from blind assent is just its special character as 'faith seeking understanding'."⁴⁷⁶

If, then, like their Christian brethren, committed Hindu seekers wish to know more about the God they love and already believe, they should not be afraid to reflect, inquire, wonder. Sound faith calls into question unexamined assumptions about God and ideas not firmly grounded in Scripture even if they are attractively cogent.

Historically, the practice of sincere inquiry has long been embedded in Hindu intellectual discourse. Inquiry is the very beginning and basis of the ancient Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Uttara Mīmāṃsā schools – commonly translated as 'Former *Inquiry*' and 'Latter *Inquiry*' – to seek to know Dharma [Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā-Sūtras 1.1.1] (that by which everything is upheld in order) and Brahman [BS 1.1.1] (that by which all this is created, sustained and dissolved [BS 1.1.2]). But again, this

⁴⁷⁶ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, trans. by Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 36.

‘jijñāsā’, literally ‘desire to know’, is initiated by and anchored in the knowledge-source that is śāstra [BS 1.1.3].

The very project of the Brahmasūtras testifies to a fine balance between reason and scriptural authority; it teaches us that one need not abandon the former to defer to the latter. As Clooney observes elsewhere, “What is revealed is not inimical to reason. If a revealed truth does not seem reasonable at first glance, one must keep studying the sacred text until one sees how it shapes a reasonable way of viewing the world.”⁴⁷⁷ The Sūtrakāra himself employs reasoned argumentation to harmonise meanings, clarify ambiguous content, refute contradictory interpretations, and rebut objections. Reason thus serves to consolidate and clarify that which has already been established by Scripture, to protect and embolden faith. The Bhāṣyakāra too defends his interpretations in the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya as being “śruti-yuktisammata”, that is, in agreement with both revelation and reasoning.⁴⁷⁸ Reason or rational argumentation, therefore, is not in contradistinction to *sola scriptura* but exegetically fruitful when functioning in consonance with and submission to Scripture. Moreover, reason often works in the service of revelation, bolstering its authority and justifying its priority. To be clear, it is only when reason is recklessly left to its own devices, unbridled by revelatory sources, that attempting to understand God becomes a futile if not perilous venture. Brunner too warns: “The God who is

⁴⁷⁷ Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 130.

⁴⁷⁸ BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.

discovered through thought is always different from the God who reveals himself.”⁴⁷⁹

Moving to the Upaniṣads, we again find a rich tradition of faith-based inquiry. The ancient seers and students have not been afraid to ask deep questions in search of higher truths. In fact, the distinctive feature of the Upaniṣadic genre is its question-answer dialogues between teachers and their students or, in some cases, between fellow scholars, with discussants freely engaging the other with knotty queries and incisive counter-arguments. Questions, for example, are the starting point of a quest of knowledge by the students in the Kena Upaniṣad.

They ask:

Willed and directed by whom does the mind cognise? Commanded by whom does the principal breath move? Willed by whom do [people] utter this speech? Prompted by what God do the eyes and ears perceive? [1.1]

Similarly, the seekers of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad begin by asking:

What is the cause? Is it Brahman? From where are we born? By what do we live? And on what are we established? Governed by whom, O you who know Brahman, do we live in pleasure and pain, each in our respective situation? [1.1]

Questions lend the Praśna Upaniṣad its very name and divisions. Each of its six parts is an answer from sage Pippalāda to a question posed by six committed seekers.

⁴⁷⁹ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1947), p. 43.

Other Upaniṣads are also essentially a string of dialogues and debates, between Śaunaka and Aṅgiras (Muṇḍaka), Nachiketas and Yama (Kaṭha), Bhṛgu and Varuṇa (Taittirīya), Śvetaketu and Uddālaka (Chāndogya), Nārada and Sanatkumāra (Chāndogya), Indra, Virocana and Prajāpati (Chāndogya), and Yājñavalkya and, individually, Maitreyi, Gārgī, Janaka, Uddālaka, and Vidagadha, among several others (Bṛhadāraṇyaka). The same is true for Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad-Gītā, an Upaniṣad in its own right⁴⁸⁰ (which we shall turn to in more detail shortly). And again, the expansive, multi-generation commentarial literature that has developed over the centuries upon these texts is rich in ratiocination while religiously protecting the revelatory status of its sources, foreseeing and forestalling contestations by offering prima facie views before consummately dismantling them and advancing the one, exegetically sound interpretation of the commentator's own school.

Standing in this ancient Upaniṣadic tradition of faithful inquiry, as has been evident throughout our exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa system, is the Vacanāmṛut, a contemporaneous compilation of Svāminārāyaṇa's public discourses. In his assemblies, if someone had not proactively asked a question first, he would freely solicit questions [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.30, Gaḍh. I.34, Gaḍh. I.35, Gaḍh. I.49, Gaḍh. I.51, Gaḍh. I.53, Gaḍh. I.55, Gaḍh. I.56, Gaḍh. I.57, Gaḍh. I.58, Loyā.2, Pan.3, Pan.4, Var.2, Var.5, Var.6] – sometimes engaging members among

⁴⁸⁰ As previously mentioned, the colophon at the end of each chapter of the Bhagavad-Gītā (Iti śrīmad-bhagavad-gītāsūpaniṣatsu...) explicitly states that the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (śrī-kṛṣṇārjuna-saṁvāda) is indeed an upaniṣad. Hence also the feminine-inflected proper noun 'Gītā' (rather than the masculine 'Gītaḥ' or neuter 'Gītam'), since it follows 'upaniṣad', a feminine noun.

themselves [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.49, Gaḍh. I.65, Gaḍh. I.70, Gaḍh. I.71, Gaḍh. I.77, Sār.2, Kār.1, Kār.4, Kār.12] – or pose one to them himself [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.43, Gaḍh. I.44, Gaḍh. I.50, Gaḍh. I.64, Kār.2, Kār.5, Kār.9, Kār.11, Var.3, Gaḍh. III.11], often forcing them to reflect upon their own beliefs and practices [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.32, Gaḍh. I.37, Loyā.2, Pan.1]. Sometimes he would question his own explanation to confirm whether or not his audience had understood him correctly or to proleptically counter opposing views [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.14, Gaḍh. I.78, Var.11]. More often though, his learned and aspiring seeker-followers would be braced with questions from their current readings of Hindu texts or their own personal application of those teachings [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.14, Gaḍh. I.41, Gaḍh. I.45, Gaḍh. I.49, Gaḍh. I.54, Kār.1, Var.6]. As Svāminārāyaṇa would answer, sometimes a series of follow-up questions or counter-questions would ensue [e.g. Vac. Gaḍh. I.59, Gaḍh. I.71, Sār.14, Kār.1, Loyā.7], showing that even while Svāminārāyaṇa’s devotees were highly reverent of him, they were not disinclined to probe for further clarity or refinement in their understanding of his teachings. What all these Hindu texts teach us is that questions are not injurious to or incompatible with faith. One *can* be faithful and inquisitive, faithful and reflective, faithful and seeking.

If, then, ‘faith seeking understanding’ is indeed the defining, operative principle of theology, it seems quite reasonable to pronounce certain strands of Hindu thought as incontrovertibly theological.

Nonetheless, much more can be said on Anselm's formula from a Hindu perspective and many more insights from Hindu texts can be added. However, to continue this preliminary Hindu 'bhāṣya' on this celebrated Christian 'sūtra', we might be better placed to engage with it by encountering a similar Hindu expression. It confirms the search of understanding on the basis of faith, even while developing it with an added dimension.

12.3) A New Test: Suggesting and Demonstrating a Hindu Formulation of (Hindu) Theology

Some traditionalistic Hindu scholars might balk at the idea of Hindu systems having to confer to an essentially Christian definition of theology. Here though I attempt to illustrate that, with closer inspection, the concept of 'faith seeking understanding' is not new or alien to Hindu ways of framing a discourse on God; in fact, it is remarkably integral and ancient. This we establish with the help of a particular verse from the Bhagavad-Gītā and its application as seen through the example of Arjuna himself. First, though, we acknowledge its basis in another Upaniṣadic expression suggested by Clooney.

12.3.1) From 'Hearing' to 'Seeing': Śravaṇa, Manana, Nididhyāsana, Darśana

In defending his appellation of 'theology' for an essentially non-theistic school of thought such as Advaita Vedānta, Clooney writes in his earlier work, *Theology After Vedanta*: "I refer to Advaita as 'theology', as faith seeking understanding, a salvation-centered explication of the world generated out of an

exegesis of sacred texts which seeks to commit the listening (reading) community to specific ritual and ethical practices.”⁴⁸¹

He expands on this a little further in the *Blackwell Companion* chapter by invoking BU 2.4.5, which he translates as:

One’s self must be seen, must be heard, must be reasoned about,
must be meditated on.

Clooney explains that this injunction provides a useful “understanding of the ordering and organization of knowledge as theological”. Specifically, “hearing properly (*śravaṇa*), reasoning properly (*manana*), meditating properly (*nididhyāsana*), together climax in vision (*darśana*).” He further explains: “As attention to scripture, hearing (*śravaṇa*) is the necessary beginning of the project of learning; it must be followed by reasoning (*manana*) which inquires into the meaning and implications of what has been understood. But neither is reason theologically conclusive, since one must also go farther and engage in meditation, *nididhyāsana*.”⁴⁸²

Clooney’s focus in this passage of the chapter is to locate theological reasoning in ‘manana’, to provide another clue to Hindu intellectual discourse as *theological* discourse (rather than philosophical). He writes: “The intermediate stage, *manana*, is the reasoning which interests us here as properly theological reasoning.” Nevertheless, he goes on to correctly explain that manana “opens in

⁴⁸¹ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, p. 26.

⁴⁸² Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 457.

both directions – toward sacred word and toward meditation, constrained by scriptural boundaries and oriented to a completion in religious practice.”⁴⁸³

As a complete rubric, then, Śravaṇa-Manana-Nididhyāsana-Darśana (henceforth abbreviated to SMND) affirms and provides further insight on ‘faith seeking understanding’, and, in effect, offers itself as the beginning of a Hindu model of (Hindu) theology.

Like the Anselmian slogan, the basic insight here is the same: our point of departure to learn about God is always faith. In the Hindu context of its historically aural (śruti) tradition⁴⁸⁴, this faith is framed as ‘listening’, the receiving of revealed texts from an authoritative source such as the Guru. But this faith is not a blind or passive faith, nor is it purely emotional. It elicits – indeed, it demands – intellectual application; thoughtful reflection, careful analysis, genuine inquiry. However, nor is this merely an exercise in armchair excogitation. For faithful inquiry to fully mature, its ideas require practical application, to be lived out so that those beliefs may blossom into a direct and personal experience of them. It is here that the Hindu formulation expands upon Anselm’s formula by including the added dimension of nididhyāsana, which I extend beyond its conventional sense – ‘meditation’, ‘undisturbed mental

⁴⁸³ Ibid. p. 458.

⁴⁸⁴ See Thomas B. Coburn, “‘Scripture’ in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 52.3 (1984), 435-59.

application, like that of a stream of oil'⁴⁸⁵ – to its etymological meaning to represent religious 'practice' more widely, not just meditative.⁴⁸⁶ We shall be defending and elaborating upon this shortly, using the Bhagavad-Gītā, but it is worth noting first the interplay of faith, reflection and practice. No faith can come to fruition without intelligent and practical application, nor can either of these be properly realised apart from the necessary foundation of faith. If faith and reflection without practice are lame, practice without thoughtful faith is blind. The able seeker applies all three, not in a strict linear form of progression, but feeding off each other, driving one another cyclically. Deeper reflection on revealed teachings leads to an acuter application of those truths in daily living. This practical implementation of the theory results in a finer understanding of the original teachings, a stronger faith. In turn, this can inspire more and firmer practice, which further clarifies reflection, giving rise to an even better understanding, and hence stronger faith... and so on. One progresses, always on the basis of faith, towards understanding, through reflection and practice, practice and reflection... until faith is eventually consummated into joyful realisation, a full an understanding as humanly possible of God's limitless, ineffable nature.

⁴⁸⁵ Nididhyāsanam = dhyānam, tailadhārāvadavachinnasmṛtisantatirūpam. *Viśiṣṭādvaitakośa*, vol. 6 (Melkote: Academy of Sanskrit Research; 1997); pp. 482-85. See also Dinanath Shukla, *Bhāratīya Darśana Paribhāṣā Kośa* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 1993), pp. 125-26 which cites similar definitions from several Advaita scholars.

⁴⁸⁶ See also Radhakrishnan's note at BU 2.4.5: "Contemplation is not mere philosophic thought. It is a higher state of spiritual consciousness. It secures the direct conviction of the reality. While a teacher can help, personal effort alone can take us to the goal of realisation." *The Principal Upaniṣads*, pp. 197-98.

The Bhāṣyakāra confirms this as the essential way of knowing God when commenting on the following verse from the Kaṭha Upaniṣad describing the unfathomable nature of God:

Not by speech, not by mind, nor by the eyes is it possible to reach him. How besides saying ‘He is!’ can he be known? (KaU 6.12)

The import of Yama’s rhetorical question, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, is that there are no means to knowing Parabrahman except by his own revelation in the words of Scripture as received from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. When those revelatory words are faithfully heard (‘śrutvā’), and “refined [sanskṛtya] by manana and nididhyāsana”, by a firm regime of practice, one receives, by the grace of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, an unshakeable realisation of Parabrahman.⁴⁸⁷

This more developed version of the SMND rubric can be found at play in a single verse of the Bhagavad-Gītā, which I propose as a suitable formulation of (Hindu) theology. This becomes especially clear when we see it in practice through the example of Arjuna himself using the Bhagavad-Gītā as a whole.

12.3.2) Bhagavad-Gītā 4.34 and the Example of Arjuna

Following his exposition of Buddhi Yoga or Sāṃkhya Yoga (the way of knowledge) in BG 2, and about Karma Yoga (the way of action) in BG 3, Kṛṣṇa

⁴⁸⁷ KaU-SB 6.12, p. 165.

picks up from both and shows their essential integrity in BG 4, entitled

Jñānakarmasannyāsa Yoga. Verse 4.34 reads:

Tad-viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā |
Upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattvadarśinaḥ ||

Drawing from the context of BG 4, this becomes in translation:

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service. Those
enlightened [Gurus] who ‘see’ the truth will teach you that
knowledge [within which all actions culminate].

It does not require much imagination to appreciate that the key terms in this
verse map neatly onto SMND and thereby also ‘faith seeking understanding’.

BG 4.34		BU 2.4.5		ANSELM
Praṇipāta	Obeisance	Śravaṇa	Hearing	Faith
Paripraśna	Questioning	Manana	Reasoning	Seeking
Seva	Service	Nididhyāsana	Practice	
Jñāna	Knowledge	Darśana	Seeing	Understanding

When thus presented, it becomes clear that, while the terminology may differ,
structurally, the model is similar. As a proposed formula for (Hindu) theology,
then, the key terms deserve closer examination.

Praṇipāta: Kṛṣṇa is continuing to instruct Arjuna to cast aside his false
understanding, the cause of his dilemma and despair, and acquire the correct

worldview revealing the true nature of himself, the array of people and things around him, and the highest reality, so that even while living in this world, fulfilling his righteous duties, he can remain unaffected by those actions and rise to an elevated state of enlightenment. In this verse, Kṛṣṇa decisively and succinctly shows the way to such an enlightened state of theological knowledge (jñāna) begins with praṇipāta – obeisance or humble bowing. More than a formal nicety or a token gesture of decorum, such bowing is an outer act of a much deeper inner surrendering, of complete and utter faith in the instructor, recognising in him the ability and graciousness to provide the understanding one so earnestly seeks. In other words, it is taking refuge (śaraṇāgati or prapatti) at the feet of God or the Guru he works through. This is especially made clear by the latter half of the verse where Kṛṣṇa explicitly qualifies who shall impart this knowledge and thus to whom one should obeisantly bow. It is the jñāninaḥ, the knowers of truth, and, even more clearly, the tattvadarśinaḥ, those who can ‘see the realities’, i.e. who have an intimate realisation of all truths in all their intricacies, complexities, nuances, mysteries, and, equally importantly, can proficiently convey them to the seeker. This crucial qualification of the authentic provider of knowledge cannot be overstated.⁴⁸⁸

Arjuna, however, has already made a clear declaration of his readiness and willingness to receive this knowledge from Kṛṣṇa, that is, of his faith in Kṛṣṇa, at the very outset of the Bhagavad-Gītā. He states:

⁴⁸⁸ See also chapter 7.4.4 where I include the qualification of a bona fide guru provided by the Bhāṣyakāra when explicating “śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭhaṁ” from MuU 1.2.12. MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56.

Śiṣyas te'haṃ śādhi mām tvām prapannam |

I am your disciple. Please instruct me, who has taken refuge in you
(BG 2.7).

This verse signals the beginning of an important and perhaps new dimension to the Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa relationship. They are no longer just a warrior and charioteer conversing about the strategies of warfare or indulging in casual chatter as nephew and uncle. Now it is a master instructing his student on the highest truths of life, death, and life beyond death. From this point on, it has become a guru-śiṣya dialogue.

More specifically now to obeisance, Arjuna is depicted throughout the Bhagavad-Gītā as being subservient to Kṛṣṇa. Nowhere is this more graphically presented than in the eleventh canto when Kṛṣṇa reveals his cosmic form to him. Arjuna prays:

I bow to you from the front, from behind, and all sides.... I bow to you again and again, a thousand times, and yet again; I make my obeisance to you profusely (BG 11.39-40).

Arjuna continues for several verses delivering a heartfelt and elaborate paean. It is in such “invocation”, Daniel Migliore explains, that “serious theological inquiry begins, continues, and ends.”⁴⁸⁹ He also quotes Barth in saying: “Theological work must really and truly take place in the form of a liturgical act, as invocation of God, and as prayer.”⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 15.

⁴⁹⁰ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 145.

Despite such profuse and persistent physical bowing from Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa's teachings seem to imply that he expects a deeper, more spiritual form of obeisance. "Namana", meaning obeisance in Sanskrit, can be phonetically construed to also mean 'no-mind' ("na-mana"). It is this that Kṛṣṇa demands from Arjuna twice in the Bhagavad-Gītā, his state of 'no-mind' or, more correctly, 'Kṛṣṇa-mind'. He instructs Arjuna:

Man-manā bhava |

Fix your mind on me,

or, literally,

Be of my-mind (BG 9.34 & 18.65).

A deeper study of the Kṛṣṇa-Arjuna dialogue reveals this form of 'bowing' as Kṛṣṇa's very concept of śaraṇāgati. As we saw early in the second chapter, Arjuna had already accepted he had taken refuge in Kṛṣṇa –

Please instruct me, who has taken refuge in you (BG 2.7)

– yet Kṛṣṇa still asks him at the end of the final chapter to

Take refuge in me alone (BG 18.66).

The apparent redundancy of Kṛṣṇa's request can be explained by considering the discrepancy between Arjuna's *self-professed* śaraṇāgati and Kṛṣṇa's *expected* śaraṇāgati. This is highlighted by the appeal to singularity in 18.66 – "in me *alone*"⁴⁹¹ – and in the immediately preceding verse when Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna:

Man-manā bhava mad-bhakto mad-yājī māṃ namaskuru |

⁴⁹¹ See also BG 7.14, 8.14, 8.22, 9.13, 9.22, 11.54, 12.6-7, 13.10 and 14.26 for more calls for singularity (or 'ananyatā', literally 'non-otherness') in faith.

Be of my-mind, be my devotee, worship me, and make obeisance unto me (BG 18.65).

Arguably according to the Bhagavad-Gītā, then, faith is singular faith in the living God, the one manifest before the eyes ('pratyakṣa').

Paripraśna: Even as Arjuna falls silent⁴⁹² at the feet of Kṛṣṇa to faithfully and ardently listen to his instruction, he remains a thinking person like any other rational human being. And so as Kṛṣṇa begins to impart his teachings, Arjuna's yearning to understand prompts him to reflect upon those revelatory words and inquire further. Genuine faith, as we have said, causes us to think. It inspires reflection, but does not suppress it.

Arjuna's persistent inquiry is evident from the questions he asks. Of the Bhagavad-Gītā's 701 verses,⁴⁹³ 87 are attributed to Arjuna. Discounting the 33 laudatory verses of the eleventh chapter, Arjuna's remaining 54 verses are replete with questions. In all, Arjuna asks 43 questions. His subjects of inquiry include the equipoised seer, karma, sin, yoga, sannyāsa, Brahman, adhyātman, adhibhūta, adhideva, Prakṛti, Puruṣa, kṣetra, kṣetrajña, knowledge, the knowable, and renunciation, among others.

⁴⁹² Tūṣṇīm babbhūva ha ||

Then he fell silent (BG 2.9).

⁴⁹³ Some editions, including the *Śāṃkārā-Bhāṣyam*, do not mention the first verse at the beginning of Chapter 13, making for them a total of 700 verses.

It could be debated, however, whether an ideal disciple should pose any questions at all. To question could in effect be registering opposition. So was Arjuna opposing Kṛṣṇa in asking so many questions? Indeed, was Arjuna a sceptic?

There is of course a clear distinction between scepticism and sincere inquiry. Genuine inquiry stems from a positive desire to know. Scepticism, on the other hand, is asking with intent to disbelieve, disprove, or simply reject more strongly. Nowhere does Arjuna denounce or refute Kṛṣṇa. On the contrary, he shows the utmost respect for Kṛṣṇa, as evidenced by his glowing addresses to him.⁴⁹⁴ Moreover, Arjuna's polite requests for guidance, such as at BG 18.1 –

I wish to know the explicit nature of...

– seem to be rooted in his unflinching faith in Kṛṣṇa. In the tenth chapter he says:

All that you have said to me, O Keśava, I believe it to be true (BG 10.14).

This adds to what he had said earlier, in the sixth chapter:

O Kṛṣṇa! You are worthy of completely dispelling this doubt of mine. Indeed, no one besides you can be the dispeller of this doubt (BG 6.39).

Furthermore, Arjuna reveals his motive for inquiring at the very beginning of their dialogue. He pleads, repeatedly:

I ask you [Kṛṣṇa] to tell me for certain wherein lies my beatitude (BG 2.7).

⁴⁹⁴ For example, BG 10.15: "O Supreme Person! O Creator of all beings! O Lord of all beings! O Deity of all deities! O Lord of the world!"

Tell me decisively that one way by which I may attain beatitude
(BG 3.2).

Arjuna's questions thus originate from his yearning to attain the blessed truth rather than any corrosive scepticism or an arrogant attempt to test Kṛṣṇa and his views.

The Bhāṣyakāra likens this deep yearning for liberative knowledge to an ailing patient's pining for medication or the languishing for food by one famished by starvation.⁴⁹⁵ Arjuna is so 'hungry' it seems that he begs Kṛṣṇa in the tenth chapter:

Tell me more, for I am never satiated by hearing your nectarine
[words] (BG 10.18).

This is the 390th verse of the Bhagavad-Gītā. Even after having heard so much already, Arjuna is imploring Kṛṣṇa to instruct him still further. Even with such faith – in fact, *because* of it – true inquiry and reflection continue unabated. Because God is limitless and unfathomable, the seeker's understanding of him is never quite complete. As Svāminārāyaṇa too explained, the more one begins to know him, the more one realises the feeble deficiency of one's partial knowledge. To know God at all is to know him as beyond full comprehension (Vac. Sār.17; Vac. Gaḍh. II.67). And yet the relentless pursuit to know him still more persists for those occupied with the search of greater understanding.

⁴⁹⁵ BG-SB 4.34, p. 109.

Sevā: The Bhāṣyakāra notes in this verse that

only such an inquiry is herein advocated which is doubly bound and refined by being preceded by surrender and succeeded by praxis. Otherwise, any questioning divorced of a faithful obeisance to begin with and not followed by a subsequent commitment to practice is not conducive to theological understanding; it is verily averse to it.⁴⁹⁶

Inquiry must thus be disciplined by both revelation and application. So after several rounds of inquiry and clarification, Arjuna eventually accedes to Kṛṣṇa's wisdom in the 73rd verse of the final chapter. He pledges:

Kariṣye vacanaṃ tava |

I will do as you say!

And thus Arjuna is mobilised once more to observe his righteous duty of defending the collective good.

Arjuna's example shows us that faith inspires seekers to do more than think. Faith propels reflection and inquiry, when sincere, into action – prayerful and thoughtful, selfless and godly. This also serves as a counter to the charge that theology is a mere intellectualisation of faith or that it paralyses the believer. On the contrary, the example of Arjuna demonstrates that real faith, when properly reflected upon, is dynamic and actuating (even if the call to action is sometimes to be patient, silent and still).

⁴⁹⁶ BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.

Like Arjuna's faith, faith which is operative inevitably expresses itself in obedience to God's command, because it is in the daily observance of his word – the 'living out' of faith – that we grow in what we truly believe, in our understanding *of* him and relationship *with* him. Such full-blooded faith – in effect, understanding-in-progress – becomes inseparable from life, informing and illumining, shaping and guiding everything that one does, thinks and believes, because, as Calvin famously expressed in his *Institutes*, the gospel is not "a doctrine of the tongue but of life."⁴⁹⁷ Luther, too, emphatically admonished: "It is by living... that one becomes a theologian, not by knowing, reading, or speculating."⁴⁹⁸

Arjuna's example also teaches us that obedience is the surest validation of a living, thoughtful faith.⁴⁹⁹ As Jesus proclaimed to Philip and Judas:

If you love me, you will keep my commands (John 14:15).

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me (John 14:21).

Those who love me will keep my word.... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words (John 14:23-24).

With much the same tenor, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

He who loves God would never disobey his commands. He would act only according to God's wishes (Vac. Kār.12).

⁴⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1 and 3.6.4.

⁴⁹⁸ *Luthers Werke* (Weimar), 5.16.28, quoted by Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁹⁹ I am also drawing upon Galatians 5.6: 'Faith works through love.'

Arjuna's simple but solemn commitment to obey Kṛṣṇa's commands represents the very last of the warrior-prince's words in the Bhagavad-Gītā, and in fact of the entire dialogue. Apparently, neither Arjuna nor Kṛṣṇa needed to say anything further. Here ends, effectively, Kṛṣṇa's and Arjuna's 'duet' of the Holy Song (as the title of the Bhagavad-Gītā is sometimes rendered into English).

The climax of Arjuna's experience in the Bhagavad-Gītā is difficult to determine. But in the same breathe as pledging his obedience to Kṛṣṇa, he admits that his delusion has cleared and his doubts have been dispelled; he has regained his composure. He gratefully accepts:

By your grace, O stable-minded [Kṛṣṇa], I am of stable mind (BG 18.73).

So, by the end, Arjuna has become a little more like Kṛṣṇa himself, surely a fitting testimony to a fruitful guru-disciple relationship. Thus, what began with Arjuna's viṣāda (despair) progresses with Kṛṣṇa's prasāda (grace).

Like Arjuna, seekers of understanding must also progress with faithful surrender, humble inquiry and sincere practice – from revelation to realisation, from 'hearing' (śravaṇa) to 'seeing' (darśana). Indeed, if faith, as the common adage goes, is *believing* what one cannot (yet) see, realisation is *seeing* what one has up till now believed. This typically Hindu characterisation of theology as the

journey to ‘seeing’, or insight, neatly corresponds with ‘Darśana’⁵⁰⁰, the traditional title given to classical schools of Hindu thought.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ Wilhelm Halbfass defines ‘Darśana’ as “theoretically oriented, systematized ‘worldviews’” or “a certain spectrum of firmly established, fully developed doctrinal structures” dealing with “something given by tradition”. After surveying a number of Indian doxographies, he draws his conclusion of aligning ‘darśana’ to ‘philosophy’. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that when God is the central underpinning of that worldview and those doctrines, it can quite well be called ‘theology’. Wilhelm Halbfass, “Darśana, Anvikṣiki, Philosophy”, in *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), pp. 263-86.

⁵⁰¹ In compressing such an important discussion into one part of the conclusion, I am deliberately making clear that this is unfinished work deserving much more attention and care that can be afforded here. It would also be fruitful and necessary in subsequent work to check for SMND at play in the Bible while drawing more thoroughly from the likes of Anselm, Aquinas, Augustine, Barth, etc.

13) WAY FORWARD

The end of a demanding project such as a doctoral thesis is understandably accompanied with a sense of quiet delight, maybe even relief. There is the real temptation to stop and indulge in some self-congratulatory back-patting. But even if we are to pause and recognise what has been achieved, it should only be to plan the journey ahead. Our work in theology is not complete, because our understanding of God can never be complete. Indeed, to know God at all is to understand his infinite, unfathomable greatness, and so too must our trek along the path of theological learning be unending.

This is the point, then, where we must pause to reflect upon the important question of what has been achieved thus far, to whom it is significant, and to where it can potentially lead us. It is to this that we now dedicate the final part of this thesis.

13.1) Why is this Study Significant and to Whom

On the basis of the extensive exposition in Parts 2 and 3, and the brief assessment and subsequent discussion of definitions in the first half of Part 4, we are in a position now to say at least this much: The Svāminārāyaṇa system of intellectual discourse stands the test of ‘Hindu theology’ set by Clooney and even the broader test of ‘theology’ set by Anselm.

So what?

The task we set ourselves at the outset was not one of facilely testing a Western notion or Christian discipline with Hindu data, i.e. jamming Hindu content into Christian boxes or retrospectively relabeling Hindu ideas with Christian terminology – ‘avatāra’ for ‘Incarnation’, ‘māyā’ for ‘sin’, ‘mukti’ for ‘salvation’, and so on. Nor was it an exercise in crudely transposing Christian ideas and language onto Hindu beliefs because, as we have seen, they differ in theologically significant ways. So the question remains: What has been achieved through this study and to whom is it significant?

The answer will come to us more fully, I believe, with the potential it holds for further constructive study, but immediately also, this current study holds much that is useful to a number of groups, including practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition, scholars within the tradition (i.e. potential Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians), scholars *of* the tradition from outside of it (theologians and others), scholars of other Hindu traditions (potential Hindu theologians), and theologians of other faiths. I consider each of these briefly in turn.

For practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community: Firstly, as we have previously acknowledged, theology is a discipline that does not operate in a vacuum. It addresses and is inseparably bound to an expectant community of faithful worshippers seeking greater understanding. In this sense, the current exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu belief-system as an explicitly *theological* enterprise will be of considerable value. It elucidates in clear, simple terms the

core beliefs of the community in a way which, even if methodologically novel, is still immediately recognisable to them because of the exposition's firm grounding in its primary sampradāyic texts. Corroborating this elucidation by drawing on the wider corpus of authoritative, classical Hindu texts will provide the English-reading faithful with further clarity of and confidence in their system, as well as ample opportunities to pursue their own reflection, inquiries, and thoughtful discussions for their personal journeys toward faith-based understanding.

Moreover, in presenting a living Hindu theology which speaks to a community confessing a faith firmly rooted in ancient Hindu texts, yet who are living out their beliefs in the (post-)modern world, the project serves in making the community's faith relevant and communicable, especially in the West. While I suspect the tradition would not have been seeking any form of validation or legitimatisation in being labelled 'theology', some within the community will feel that this does in some way lend it extra credence or respectability, especially among those to whom they could not easily have explained their faith previously. Now they are able to speak of it to others – specifically, their Christian or Abrahamic others – in intelligible terms, using a somewhat common or analogous language of faith.

Of course, as mentioned in the Introduction, it is certainly not the case that there has been no prior communication of the tradition's beliefs or any previous defence of it in the face of opposition. This has been recurring since its origin in

the early 1800s. How else would the tradition have survived and flourished for so long. This communication, however, has happened in traditional ways, using traditional vocabulary and traditional tools and apparatus. The ‘tradition’ now inhabits a world far different from the one in which it was established, spreading outside of its native Gujarat in western India and surviving long since its inception over two hundred years ago. Today, Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism is considered one of the most transnationally diverse forms of Hinduism in the world, with large, active congregations growing in the United Kingdom, parts of mainland Europe, North America, and several nations of Africa as well as Asia-Pacific, not to mention all over India.⁵⁰² In all of these regions, practitioners face the inescapable reality of a religiously diverse social matrix. In fact, outside of India – and in some pockets, within India also – the Svāminārāyaṇa community lives as a minority Hindu faith, with its traditional forms of worship in non-traditional locations attracting the attention – sometimes positive interest, at other times suspicion or even hostility – of the dominant religious other. To counter common misconceptions borne of ignorance or misportrayal, the community has been forced in recent times to learn to articulate its beliefs and practices in a framework understandable to the dominant discourse, most commonly Christian, or else risk being misunderstood and misportrayed, since they would no longer be simply ignored. One hopeful outcome of this new theological vocabulary and framework is that it can serve as a useful

⁵⁰² See Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

communicative tool in fostering mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence, our differences notwithstanding.

For scholars within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community: Like their practicing audience and readers, practitioner-scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith will also benefit from all that has been outlined above. In addition, as individuals with a vocational aptitude and inclination to the study of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, some will now recognise themselves as ‘theologians’. They will thus be able – indeed, it will be their responsibility – to respond to the expectations of the community whose faith they elucidate, clarify, defend or even question in order to refine and consolidate. In much the same way in which I self-consciously located myself at the beginning of this project, I hope others living, thinking and practicing their faith in the West will also be cognisant of this responsibility. Experts need to articulate the faith of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community – one saddled by the concerns and challenges of modernity – in intelligible, relevant terms. This will entail these experts being theologians, not (just) pundits.

The hope is that this project now allows for this possibility by creating a space and framework for further reflection and to tackle many of the questions and topics mentioned further below. Indeed, we will even need to be self-reflective. What does it mean to be a *Hindu* theologian? In which significant ways does it differ to being a theologian of any other faith? Are all pundits who speak and

write in English ‘theologians’ by default? These and many other definitions and terms must not go without critical examination from within the tradition.

For scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition: Of course, the study of Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism is not the exclusive preserve of members from within its faith community nor is it limited to the discipline of theology. The tradition has a long history of being open to and the subject of several studies from various fields. For scholars studying the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and community from other disciplines – such as anthropology, phenomenology, religion, South Asian studies, history, political science, etc. – now there is no excuse to ignore its fundamental theological underpinning. Appreciating or at least recognising this essential core, without indulging in lazy reductionism, one hopes that more nuanced and accurate understandings and presentations of Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism can prevail in the academy.

For scholars of other Hindu traditions: There is no reason why the benefits I have identified for Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism should not extend to other Hindu traditions. Indeed, the earnest desire is that, like their counterparts from the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, scholars in and of other strands of Hindu faith may now also be able to recognise and develop themselves as theologians (as opposed to traditional pundits or indologists, orientalist, philosophers, etc.) and identify the theological merit of their own traditions and texts. The result would be to broaden and enrich the field of Hindu theology as a whole. After all, since Hinduism is better understood as a family of religious traditions, Hindu theology,

too, can only flourish with the flourishing of its constituent traditions. To reiterate my concession from the outset: the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is but one strand in the richly diverse tapestry that is Hinduism; this exposition is thus an example of *a* Hindu theology, of which there are many others, none definitive or representative of the whole.

The multiplicity of Hindu theologies is certainly not too unlike the many strands prevalent among the various denominations of the Christian faith, or any other faith for that matter. Like Christian theology, now Hindu theology, too, can – and should – be considered as a legitimate member of the theological guild. As José Ignacio Cabezón argues for Buddhist theology⁵⁰³, Hindu theology should also be seriously considered as deserving of a place *within* the field of Hindu Studies and *alongside* the field of, for example, academic Christian theology. For this, of course, more from the Hindu intelligentsia must self-consciously identify themselves as theologians and subscribe to the norms of open, honest and critical theological inquiry. Then, there can be no tenable reason why intellectual discourse that unapologetically locates itself within the Hindu tradition should not be considered a valid field of study at faculties of Theology and Divinity around the world (wherever they still exist).

For theologians of other religious traditions: If Hindu theology has been demonstrated to be functionally analogous to its counterparts in other religious

⁵⁰³ *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. by Roger Jackson and John Makransky. (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), p. 26.

contexts, this opens up the conversation in which Hindu theology can be an active and important dialogue-partner, contributing new insights about ideas and methods in the broader field of theology. Indeed, as more and more Hindu theologians work hard to devise, improvise and extend new ways of discussing and configuring Western or Christian religious thinking, the time for theologians of all faiths and the discipline of theology as a whole is an exciting if not also a challenging one.

The promise lies in the opportunity of making faiths mutually intelligible, helping 'break down boundaries'⁵⁰⁴ and allowing "deep learning across religious borders"⁵⁰⁵. The challenge is whether Hindu theology will be allowed the institutional space and respect it needs and deserves to help achieve this.

13.2) Opportunities for New Scholarship

A distinguishing mark of good, substantial scholarship, I believe, is the potential it holds for subsequent scholarly work. Directly or indirectly, what new avenues of theological reflection, analysis and description can this study now open up? Into which directions can we expect to – *need* to – see this project being taken? We explore this briefly as way of further demonstrating the viability, validity,

⁵⁰⁴ See *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵⁰⁵ This is the subtitle of one of Clooney's most recent works, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), suggested to him by John Makransky, himself a 'Buddhist theologian'.

and value of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, in particular, and Hindu theology, in general.

13.2.1) On the Svāminārāyaṇa Tradition

From the beginning, I have been at pains to stress that this thesis attempts, by all measures, a brief introduction to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. It is the necessary first step – quite often the hardest – in presenting a doctrinal account of a living Hindu tradition *qua* theology.

Precisely because this is the first time that a systematic exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition is being presented in this way, it has needed to be sufficiently broad, providing an overview of all its major themes and how they function together. The mass of content, including the copious source material from foundational texts upon which the exposition is necessarily grounded, has sometimes precluded a certain depth of analysis, but, to be fair, the expectation of this hefty primary task could only have been to provide an overview and thereby lay the groundwork for subsequent theological reflection and analysis. This necessarily and largely descriptive enterprise thus serves as the first of many rounds of more critical theological work to follow.

Moreover, now that this vital account is in place, we are in a position to explore not only deeper but also wider and farther into this vast theological landscape. The exposition will hopefully function as an entranceway, opening up the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition to new voices and alternative discussions, perhaps

paralleling its Abrahamic counterparts. For example, could there now be scope for subsidiary disciplines within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology – philosophical, philological, exegetical, practical? Fields and subjects such as Vacanāmrut Studies, Vacanāmrut Hermeneutics, Sampradāyic History, Pastoral Theology, Moral Theology, ‘Sampradāyology’, rituals, liturgy, devotional piety, and many others require attention. Certain, more specific concepts also have further scope for probing. For example, ‘time’: precisely how is it conceptualised within and/or apart from the universe and how does this impact God’s nature, role and functioning? Even within Systematic Theology, there are new and different ways in which to think and to configure that thinking, to plumb and push the depths of our theological understanding.

As we venture further out, the hope is that Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians and theologians interested in Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism will also be able and willing to address secular concerns and concerns of modernity, such as science, law, art, politics, etc. (as we shall shortly consider below under ‘Hindu Theology’), where theology meets, intersects, collides and coalesces with other fields of study and interest.

In many ways, then, this is an exciting time for scholarship on the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition. Being over two hundred years old, it can neither be considered all that young, nor very old. Whichever the case, it is still being invigorated with fresh insights and new theological work from within the tradition, a prime example of which is the *magnum opus* that is the five-volume Svāminārāyaṇa-

Bhāṣya commentary on the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā.

Another recent addition is the Akṣara-Puruṣottama-Māhātmya, a 19,000-verse epic styled in the genre of a Pañcarātric text covering in detail the rituals, mantras, festivals, precepts, rules of temple worship, image worship, personal and collective devotion, etc. of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu faith.

A principal and perhaps urgent task is to now make these and other works accessible to Western, theological and other scholarly circles. But it will not be enough to simply translate them into English; they will require *academic* renderings which are faithful to the original spirit while intelligible in word and form to Western academics, possibly with the help of generous annotations, through a sharp knowledge of and careful sensitivity to theological, philosophical, philological, and other Western disciplines. In fact, one of the positive outcomes of this current project has been a refined theological translation of many excerpts from the Vacanāmṛut, Svāmīnī Vāto, and the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentaries. A future project could involve a translation of the complete set of commentaries, seeing as it is so fundamental to a proper understanding of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu doctrines and for which nothing in English is yet available.

Generally, much more work is needed in English to properly articulate the complex, sophisticated and exigent theological ideas of the tradition. As more experts develop, they will surely lead each other into finer debate and harder discussion, from which will gradually emerge more theological literature. As a

corollary, they may help develop the current vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of theology so that it can more easily, fully and accurately accommodate ideas from other, non-Christian traditions.

In all senses, then, this appears to be a promisingly and challengingly formative stage in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu scholarship, particularly when it is conducted in English.

13.2.1.1) Challenges to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

A useful and important stimulant for this formation is acknowledging and addressing the challenges that Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology currently faces or will soon face. Scholars of the tradition must not be afraid to accept these challenges and even ask difficult questions of themselves and their tradition, questions that bear upon the life of the faithful community and its place in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world. With humility and courage, and through prayer and grace, as they think and work hard to articulate meaningful responses, the result will surely be a continuing clarification, enrichment, and fortification of the theology they hold true.

I foresee these challenges coming from three main corners.

From other Svāminārāyaṇa denominations: As I clearly and unapologetically declared at the outset, while I attempt to articulate Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology in this thesis, I write from within one of the many denominations of this

rapidly expanding Hindu tradition, specifically from within the Bocāsanavāsī Śrī Akṣara Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā (often abbreviated to ‘BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā’ or simply ‘BAPS’) which espouses, to use its classical appellation, Brahma-Parabrahman-Darśana as the conclusive truth revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa. Scholars of other schools of thought within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya may beg to differ on this systemisation, on my interpretation and exegesis of Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings from the Vacanāmṛut, or even on the Bhāṣyakāra’s rendering of Vedāntic texts. Can these positions be argued and defended theologically and respectfully using valid theological texts and accepted professional methods? Historically, the overarching rule prevailing within the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa tradition seems to have been to never oppose the other, and simply convey one’s own stance humbly yet unapologetically. It would nevertheless be interesting to see, for example, another denomination’s interpretation of the Prasthānatrayī through the formulation of its own commentaries, perhaps contesting the Bhāṣyakāra’s interpretations, and seeing how he and/or other scholars respond.

From other Hindu traditions and schools of Vedānta: Challenges, or at least questions, to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology will also be posed from other Hindu traditions, many of which will already have established commentaries on the same Vedāntic texts. Again, with key interpretative differences that bear significantly upon a school’s theology, respectful discussions on topics such as the nature of God, the soul, the world and liberation, and on the way to liberation, the role of religious authority, the sources of valid theological

knowledge, etc. will hopefully bear mutually fruitful results in refining ideas, arguments and methodology, even if without producing conclusive answers.

From the wider community of theologians and other scholars: In time, like Christian theology and other traditions before it, Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology will also be placed under examination from modern, post-Enlightenment scholarship. How, for example, will it hold up when seen through the lens of postmodernism? If, or when, the likes of Lindbeck, Wilhelm Frei, Hauerwas, or other proponents of post-liberal theology scrutinise its doctrines, premises, truth-claims, how will Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians respond? What may have seemed axiomatic to them will suddenly be viewed with suspicion and ambiguity. How will the foundational revelatory texts of the tradition, considered sacred and infallible to the community of faithful, fare when subjected to the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and other forms of literary criticism? How will the theologians continue to defend the role and legitimacy of religious authority, especially of a living guru, in an increasingly liberal, secular world?

Embarking even further outside the crucible of religion, the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, like other faiths, will also face questions from (atheistic) social and political scientists about the role and value of its religious position in postmodern society, including on important issues of public value and interest, such as social equality and justice, sexual orientation, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, bio-ethics, and many others. How and on what doctrines and texts will theologians draw upon to argue one way or the other? These are all

interesting prospects and, as of yet, part of uncharted territory. Nevertheless, scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition will need to train and develop themselves to be able to, firstly, be conversant in these debates, and then, to respond eruditely, rigorously, and humbly. Others will equally have to be patient and generous as the scholarly community of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition learns to crawl before it can walk, let alone run, in meeting these new and formidable challenges.

13.2.2) In Hindu Theology and Other Disciplines

Many of the challenges and opportunities identified above are also relevant to most other Hindu traditions and thus applicable to Hindu theology as a whole. Hindu theologians of every tradition, therefore, are now charged with the responsibility and must be infused with the enthusiasm to define, uphold and develop this important category within the larger discipline of theology. As we have seen Clooney already urge, “since theology has communal roots, it must be the theologians of the Hindu tradition who must take the lead in maintaining and fostering Hindu theology.” He adds with further foresight: “It will be up to intellectuals writing today, who are willing to be called ‘Hindu theologians,’ to chart the course of the future of Hindu theology.”⁵⁰⁶

This call to action must be tempered, though, with Patil’s sagacious insight about “the challenge for potential Hindu theologians”, that is, “to maintain the integrity

⁵⁰⁶ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

of tradition while attempting to recontextualize it in a context that is, in many ways, intellectually familiar but institutionally new. It is the challenge of forming tradition while continuing to be genuinely formed by it. Such work must have an authentic voice from Hindu tradition and also be a part of the discipline of theology; it must be the work of a Hindu scholar who is also a theologian; and it must serve both the interests of the tradition and the needs of the discipline.”⁵⁰⁷

Hindu scholars with a genuine concern for the intelligibility and credibility of the truth-claims of their tradition will have to be open, humble and brave enough to not only engage with their Christian colleagues but also learn from each other in this new, shared intellectual space of a common discipline. “It is here”, Patil adds, “that Hindu theology can be responsibly and rigorously recontextualized by (among others) those of us who are Hindu and interested in the practice of theology.”⁵⁰⁸

Patil cautions, however, that a lot more preparation and patience will be required of Hindu intellectuals because of the asymmetrical demands and contexts within which they find themselves. For example, he notes, “for Hindus, properly theological work must be preceded by a great deal of work in religious history, philology, and philosophy.”⁵⁰⁹ Nevertheless, in time and with persistent

⁵⁰⁷ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 189.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

hard work, Hindu theologians can more than hope to make valuable contributions to important debates in theology and theological disciplines.

More broadly, if the particular task of Hindu theology is to provide a relevant, coherent and timely articulation of Hindu faith, theologians of the various traditions must also venture, like their Abrahamic counterparts, to be informed by and, in turn, inform many other intellectual arenas and socio-cultural concerns. Of course, Hindu intellectuals – or ‘theologians’ if we can now retrospectively call them so – have a long and illustrious history of engaging with philosophy, the sciences and arts, society and culture. The challenge for the modern Hindu theologian is to now think and write in the *genre* of theology and the *context* of the modern/post-modern milieu, to be steeped in her own theological tradition while still being carefully receptive to the insights of other fields and respectfully contributing to them in return.

For example, in the overlapping area of Hindu theology and ecology or Hindu theology and social harmony, how can the decidedly Vaiṣṇava concept of śarīra-śarīri-saṁbandha, the body-soul relationship between God and the world, provide a useful model to understand and appreciate our relationship with nature, animals, and other humans? Seen through this panentheistic worldview, the incredible diversity of various species and communities is unified (though not homogenised) within God’s universal body. We are not just a part of his work; every one of us, even as individuals, is a vital limb or organ or cell

belonging to God, living in him and by him, the ontic ground (ādhāra) of all our shared existence.

Keeping with the theme of creation, I earlier suggested that Parabrahman can be justifiably conceived as creator of the world, even if the primordial matter from which it is composed has always existed, insofar as a sculptor creates a statue from a boulder of stone, a painter creates a masterpiece with paints, or a musician creates a symphony from musical notes. The stone, paints and notes all pre-exist, albeit indistinctively, but it is the creativity and mastery of the artiste that brings to life something wholly new from them yet not distinctly apart from what each was before. The creation is at once both new and the same (as in the satkāryavāda view of causality). Similarly, it can be said, God inspires from the pre-existent, indistinguishable Prakṛti innumerable masterpieces each with their own name and form and all still intrinsically māyic. While this analogy obviously provides much fodder for theological reflection – about creation as artistic expression and joyful play rather than prosaic manufacturing and laborious work, about the irreproachability of the creator and the purpose of creation, and so forth [see 10.2.1 for these discussions] – we also have opportunities to understand and explain the arts in a fresh, theological light. Like the beautiful natural world of God that brings joy to its admirers and reveals something about the artiste himself, art, music and literature, too, must be appreciated, cherished and protected as they invoke and perhaps are infused with the creative beauty and power of the ultimate creator. How also can the arts, of which Hinduism has been a most generous patron over the millennia, become a vehicle for theological

communication⁵¹⁰ and how can we use theological hermeneutics to (re)interpret the great works of religious art, music and literature past, present and forthcoming?

To provide a more contentious example, one more immediately and widely pertinent to public concern, we enter the vortex of politics. How or does indeed the conceptualisation of Parabrahman as Supreme Lord prove problematic for devotees who are also citizens of a democratic nation? Does living under the rule of a sovereign God call for the need to reconcile religious law and secular law? Do they ever collide? Are they incompatible? Or can one's commitment to God teach us about our duty to prime minister or president? More widely, how does Hindu theological thinking and belief underlie or impact political, social, cultural and economic discourse?

Another important and very interesting field of study is the interface of theology and anthropology. Understanding the human predicament from a Hindu perspective is imperative to more fully appreciating a faith community's behaviour, relationships (both within and outside of their group), and how they make sense of the world around them. For example, it would be necessary to have a good understanding of the ontological nature of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru's personhood and his liberative function for practitioners of the

⁵¹⁰ For example, in a recent message to the president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Pope Benedict XVI recalled this from a *motu proprio*: "The artist, like the Church, is a witness to the beauty of the faith." Online Source: <http://en.radiovaticana.va/articolo.asp?c=641038> [accessed 21 November 2012].

Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition before analysing their behaviour and actions – from their daily acts of personal worship at home and regular gatherings at a temple for collective worship, learning and celebration, to their on-going charity services in the wider community and the communication of their faith to religiously and culturally different others in a diasporic context. All these actions are guided and motivated by faith and understanding traced to revelatory texts. Any comprehensive study of these actions based on observations or ethnographical data alone would be abjectly deficient without some level of theological engagement with these texts.⁵¹¹

Theological anthropology (as opposed to theology and anthropology or the anthropology of theology/religion) is also a richly fertile area of inquiry needing to happen. As I briefly touched upon when expositing the jīva [section 8.1.1], how can the tripartite body-pure soul distinction help one reconcile a correct spiritual understanding of the self as ātman with physical well-being, healthy relationships, and human advancement? How does a better self-understanding lend itself to a more advanced God-realisation? And what implication does the (albeit limited) shared nature between soul and God – if both are sat-cit-ānanda – and their stark ontological difference – the former is irrevocably dependent

⁵¹¹ It would be apt to note here the chapter by Hanna Kim of Adelphi University on “Swaminarayan Bhakti Yoga and the Aksharbrahman Guru” in the forthcoming *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, edited by Ellen Goldberg and Mark Singleton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press). Relying on textual sources (with working notes I shared earlier from this thesis) as well as ethnographic material, the author “explores the role of Guru and his contribution to the making of a modern devotional community”, that is, seeing “what motivates Swaminarayan devotees to engage with their Guru in particular ways and how this relationship, informed by Swaminarayan bhakti, supports a multiplicity of ways for devotees to be actively religiously modern.”

upon the latter – hold for their relationship, for human life on earth, and for liberated reality upon death? All these questions, and their highly consequential answers, are predicated on a theological understanding of the nature and ultimate goal of humanity, human personhood, and human being.⁵¹²

Like these few, brief examples above, there are many more areas of learning and living which can be defined by and defining for a Hindu *Weltanschauungen*, be it social theory, history, the physical and natural sciences, or a plethora of other intellectual arenas. This reflexive viewing of Hindu theology through these ideas and theories and then looking back at them through the eyes of Hindu theology will surely prove mutually challenging and enriching. Encouragingly, we are already seeing the modest beginnings of this endeavour with excellent works of Hindu insight being produced by Hindu intellectuals willing to identify themselves as Hindu theologians.⁵¹³ They – we – may write and think with commitment to our respective traditions, but we inevitably enrich Hindu theology as a whole and, even more broadly, the discipline of theology. Writing in response to Clooney’s earlier invitation in *Hindu God, Christian God* for Hindu intellectuals to engage with their Christian colleagues, Patil remarks: “For those

⁵¹² A good example of such a work would be David Kelsey’s stupendous two-volume *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁵¹³ I have in mind here new works such as Jonathan Edelmann’s daring *Hindu Theology and Biology: The Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Contemporary Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tamal Krishna Goswami’s posthumously published *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* edited with Introduction and Conclusion by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ravi Gupta’s *The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī: When Knowledge Meets Devotion* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2007); Kenneth Valpey’s *Attending Kṛṣṇa’s Image: Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Mūrti-Sevā as Devotional Truth* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006); and several others.

of us who are Hindu and interested in practicing theology,... such a beginning must be celebrated, since for too long now the Hindu counterparts to Swinburne, von Balthasar, Rahner, and Barth have not received the attention that they so richly deserve.”⁵¹⁴

Like the challenge before theologians of all faiths, the work of Hindu theologians will be, while listening to the witness of tradition, to make Hindu concepts relevant to present-day situations and everyday aspects of life, as they speak to a community living in different times, places and circumstances to that of the original authors of their faith. Those willing to accept the tension of being creative and authentic, traditional but still relevant, will be able to bring home to new audiences the richness, profundity and exciting possibilities of Hindu theology. Again, this will demand, in no small amounts, courage and humility, patient labour and prayerful collaboration.

13.2.3) In Comparative Theology

So far, I have pointed out some of the new, difficult and exciting opportunities now available to scholars of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology and Hindu theology more generally, both in their respective fields as well as with several other disciplines. I wish now to draw attention to the specific sub-discipline of comparative theology. I believe this warrants special mention here for the important role it can play in theological learning and because of the sheer wealth

⁵¹⁴ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 186.

of interesting openings it now offers. If indeed Hindu traditions such as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya are compatible with accepted Christian understandings of theology, making ‘Hindu theology’ a legitimate and worthwhile subject of study and interlocution among theologians of Christianity and maybe even of other faiths, then such Hindu traditions can immediately lend themselves to inter-theological analysis and constructive dialogue with these faiths. In this closing section to this final chapter, I briefly suggest a few of the topics awaiting those willing to engage in this challenging, fruitful and growing field.

I should begin by sharing a recurring observation I made when, during the course of my research for this doctoral study, I discussed matters of theology with scholars of my order in India, England and America. I saw it as an opportunity when explaining my project to them to also gently introduce them to the discipline of theology and certain key Christian doctrines. At first I was a little wary of how this would be received by these (mostly) senior monks of Indian origin. My caution, however, proved unfounded. I was pleasantly surprised at how immensely respectful and receptive my monastic elders and younger brothers were to Western theological ideas. I have always been impressed by their remarkable erudition in matters of our tradition and the broader expanse of Vedānta, Pañcarātra, Nyāya, Sanskrit grammar, Sanskrit literature, and a whole host of other decidedly Hindu-related topics, but their warm response to Christian ideas and theology was especially pleasing. I believe this bodes well for a future of open, committed learning within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition by

scholars who are confident in their own faith and yet eager and unafraid to learn yet more, if necessary, from other faiths as well. From my basic study of Christian theology, I can quite easily foresee scholars from both traditions reaching across and learning deeply from each other, as they tackle valuable points of convergence and divergence with respect, sensitivity, and academic vigour.

Of course, the project of comparative theology is not about facilely highlighting similarities. Points of fundamental and irreconcilable difference are just as important and can in fact be just as enlightening, if not more so. *Creatio ex materia* and *creatio ex nihilo* is one such example of a seemingly diametrically opposite doctrinal concept. Even so, this should not shut off the possibility of fruitful learning from each other. Returning to the analogy above of viewing creation as artistic expression or a divine act of joyful play, as God's *līlā*, there are useful reflections to be made for a Christian doctrine of creation. Meanwhile, Hindu theologians would need to consider the shortcomings or weaknesses, if any, of a theology wherein God is co-eternal with matter and who does not strictly 'create' other beings.

Christianity's long and, at times, tumultuous, doctrinal history also provides much to learn from for Hindu theologians. In an earlier study of St Athanasius's

De Incarnatione Verbi Dei,⁵¹⁵ I came across his famous proclamation, often conveniently paraphrased as:

God becomes like us that we might become like him (54).

This clearly resonates with the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu doctrine of Pragaṭa [see Chapter 6.5], that the supremely transcendental Parabrahman manifests on earth in human form, temporarily concealing his lordly powers, so that he may liberate countless souls from their ignorance and grant them an eternal place in his abode where they enjoy his infinite bliss in a form almost identical to his own. However, the Hindu theologian who is quick to tout the obvious similarity here would do well to first ask whether Parabrahman is said to be *assuming* a human form or body, as the Alexandrians believed, or simply *indwelling* a human body, as was the Antiochian view and which was ultimately denounced as heretical, especially after the Council of Chalcedon in 451?

Other early Christological debates on the nature, person and function of Christ can be deeply useful in better understanding and expositing the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. For example, is the Guru conceived as being monophysitic (having one nature; only divine) or dyophysitic (having two natures; divine *and* human)? Svāminārāyaṇa texts propound that he is solely divine. But then how would the Guru be able to fulfil his role as mediator between humans and God if he were not human as well? The answer would probably need to come from a proper understanding of the true nature of humans, who are ontologically distinct from

⁵¹⁵ This was for the Christianity paper of my M.St. in the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford in 2007. The title of the submitted essay was ‘The Role of Imagery in St Athanasius’s *The Incarnation of the Word of God*’.

their material bodies and actually the soul within, which is essentially pure and therefore inherently 'divine'. Nevertheless, this now raises further questions about the Guru. If he is of one nature only, what is one to make of his human form? Is his human nature concealed or *absorbed*? Or is it, as Eutyches of Constantinople believed of Jesus, that the human nature is *overcome* by divinity? Or if the Guru merely *appears* as human, that is, his human personhood is illusory, does that fall foul of Docetism, the unorthodox doctrine of the Gnostics who argued that Jesus's suffering and death on the cross were apparent, not real? Clearly, such cross-traditional interaction between Christology and 'Gurology', as I have come to term the study of the Guru, his person and function, would prove very interesting indeed.⁵¹⁶

In the introductory Part 1 of this thesis, I broached the issue of translatability in theology, how fraught with difficulty the task is of using words from one religious and theological tradition to describe concepts from another. Even here, there can be opportunities for mutual learning. For example, when describing 'mukti' or 'mokṣa' – from the Sanskrit verb-root 'muc' – I explained that it relates in theological terms to freedom, liberation or release from the captivity and oppression of māyā and the incessant cycle of births and deaths it enforces [Chapter 3.7]. Framed in these terms, it is not difficult to appreciate how mukti can also be meaningfully called 'salvation'. But how distinct is the concept of being 'saved' from being 'freed'? If the Hindu conceptualisation of the soul is that

⁵¹⁶ I am grateful to my discussions on this topic with Tushar Shah, a graduate student at Oxford, which offered new ideas and insights included here.

it is eternally and innately pure, with an unending opportunity for final fulfilment, how can that which is not damned be saved? For the Christian, can salvation also mean being liberated from the bondage of sin, from the clutches of death the enemy, with Christ as victor over forces that enslave humanity? How proper is it, then, to speak of the 'mukti' of the soul in Christian soteriology? Not discounting the many significant differences from a Christian understanding of what it means to be saved and how such a saving is achieved or received, this collation nevertheless offers another useful node for comparative theology to enrich and deepen our understanding of our own faith as well as of the other, *from the other*.

Here is another example of theological learning stemming from reflection upon correct terminology: In the chapter on Akṣarabrahman when discussing the four roles in which the one entity serves [see 7.4], I was tempted to use the Greek term 'homooúsios'. Can the Brahmasvarūpa Guru be said to be *homoousian* with the abode of Parabrahman, the exemplary sevaka in that abode, and the all-pervading Cidākāśa? They are all one in substance; Akṣarabrahman. But are they four 'persons'? Here is an inquiry in which a Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologian would have much to gain from a study of Trinitarianism, Christology, Patristics, and other related Christian subjects. Conversely, I am sure a Christian theologian would also benefit from reading certain passages of the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā in light of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, as conceived within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu system, and then returning to enjoy a deeper, personal encounter with Jesus.

I have also been fascinated and encouraged to see how well certain biblical and other Christian passages respond when subjected to reflection from Hindu texts and perspectives. As I briefly attempted earlier with Anselm's formula for theology, it would be interesting to explore other examples of Hindu commentary on Christian texts which are ripe with theological and devotional insight. One modern example that comes to mind is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. I recall when studying his ideas of 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace'⁵¹⁷ how amenable they appeared to key Hindu concepts of guru-centric obedience and even ascetic renunciation in line with Jesus's common call to leave everything and "Follow me!"⁵¹⁸

As with their other faith partners, Hindu theologians must also be open to *intra*-traditional discussion and learning from within the Hindu fold. Fruitful comparative reflection could quite likely result from dialogue between two (or more) schools of Hindu theology, say, Svāminārāyaṇa theology with Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology, or even Advaita theology or a Śaivite theology. In fact, I have consciously endeavoured to tackle certain debates from the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā also covered by Carman in *The Theology of Rāmānuja* and Clooney in *Theology After Vedānta* to allow careful readers of these works the opportunity to see how Svāminārāyaṇa Vedāntic

⁵¹⁷ This was another essay for the Christianity paper of my M.St. in the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford in 2007. The title of the essay was 'Renunciation in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*'.

⁵¹⁸ "Follow me" is the common challenge Jesus issued to his prospective disciples. To cite from Mark alone, we hear the call coming personally to Andrew and Simon Peter (1.17), James and John (1.20), Levi (2.14), the rich young man (10.21), and also generally to the Twelve (3.13) and the crowd near Caesarea Philippi (8.34).

theology differs from or is similar to the thought of Rāmānuja and the Advaita school.⁵¹⁹

Again, the objective would not be to simply check off points of convergence and divergence. It would be quite easy to find aspects of similitude in pairings of some theistic traditions, especially those with a devotional focus. Having a personal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent world-maker is one such obvious similarity, but such general observations are usually not very helpful. Some traditions may even share certain doctrines. The śarīra-śarīrin relationship found within the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Vedānta, for example, is used almost identically in the Svāminārāyaṇa system, sometimes leading those without a complete understanding of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition to erroneously identify it as a ‘modified’ version of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School. A more careful and thorough study would reveal that even closely related Hindu systems can differ in some fundamental ways, not just in the details. Some of the distinctive features of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, for example, would include the following: its system of five eternal realities – jīva, Īśvara, māyā, (Akṣara)Brahman and Parabrahman; the continued substantive and liberative presence of Parabrahman on earth through Akṣarabrahman, i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru; the avatāra-avatārin distinction made possible by Īśvaras, where Svāminārāyaṇa the iṣṭadeva is not one of the many avatāras of Viṣṇu but the ultimate source of them all, i.e. Parabrahman the Avatārin; a cosmological model comprising

⁵¹⁹ See also Chapter 7.1 for a detailed example of comparing Svāminārāyaṇa theological interpretations vis-à-vis those of the Kevalādvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Svābhāvikaḥedābheda and Śuddhādvaita schools based on critical textual analyses.

innumerable brahmāṇḍas (worlds); and the possibility of jīvan-mukti, the highest state of blissful liberation experienced while still alive on earth; among others. Of these is the lynchpin concept of individual souls becoming brahmarūpa ('like Brahman') by way of their loving relationship with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and thereby offering perfect upāsanā (loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge) to Parabrahman, lending the system its classical name, **Brahma-Parabrahma-Darśana**. A detailed exposition of this system is what has dominated the central body of this study as we sought an answer, by way of analogy, to our opening question: What is Hindu theology?

To summarise in closing, this thesis has been an attempt by a practitioner-theologian to explain the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition in theological terms according to recognised scholarly standards and conventions. This will hopefully provide an entry-point into a wider theological study of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, and also, hopefully, access to more nuanced understandings of the tradition for scholars of religion, South Asian studies, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines. More broadly, the thesis has aimed to not just describe or justify Hindu theology; it has involved constructively and systematically *doing* theology as well. It has been a serious attempt to engage with Western theology from a Hindu standpoint using a Hindu example and working from within that tradition. This will inevitably push Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders; the fact that it is in English and using terms previously reserved predominantly for Christian theology makes it immediately comparative and relevant. Yet it has also been an opportunity to compare ancient

Hindu ideas with contemporary Western understandings of theology – how and where they overlap and differ, and how this can enrich both – opening up, as Clooney too hopes, “more fruitful ways of understanding traditional Hindu thinking, and stimulate an exchange of ideas between India... and the contemporary scholarly world.”⁵²⁰ Indeed, I hope this project has proven that it *is* possible to usefully apply theological language and methods to articulate Hindu doctrines, thereby opening the door and widening the scope for Hindu theology to engage with theologians of other faith traditions and scholars of various disciplines.

To put this another way, this thesis has been a work of classical Hindu Vedānta, while also a work of contemporary Hindu theology. It has been not only a work of Hindu theology, it has also been a work of theology. While it has been a work from within a tradition, it has also been a work from within an academic discipline. While it has been written by a practitioner of that tradition, it has also been written by a scholar who self-consciously locates himself within that discipline. And while its intended audience includes members and scholars of that tradition, it is hoped that certain parts of it will appeal to those outside of it as well. As Patil reminds us: “It is in the interreligious space defined by shared concerns, methods and conclusions that the discipline of theology is located.”⁵²¹ And it is within this discipline that this project has been located.

⁵²⁰ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.

⁵²¹ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 189.

As the project draws to an end now, one cannot help feel that, in fact, it signals just the beginning of what lies ahead. The onus must lie on the current and future generations of (Hindu) theologians, philosophers, historians, linguists, etc. to pick up the gauntlet and carry it forth into new, uncharted and exciting academic realms. Best wishes to us all!

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