

Arvind Sharma, *Advaita Vedānta. An Introduction*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, pp. vii+125. ISBN 81-208-2027-4, Rs 295.00

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Any book about such a challenging matter as Advaita Vedānta is fascinating, therefore it is no wonder that reading a short introduction on the subject by Arvind Sharma is an exciting experience indeed, not only because the author manages to avoid getting involved in conflicting aspects of different schools of classical intellectual trend of India that is not yet widely known in the West, but also because the subject matter is presented in a condensed and very succinct manner.

Sharma, Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, attempts to overcome this challenge by consistently relying on three approaches: scriptural, rational and experiential.

Sharma says that he “tries to accord an independent status to each of these approaches without losing sight of their interconnectedness”.

In a short preface prior to the analysis, Sharma calls the readers' attention to a fundamental fact that in the West philosophy represents an intellectual movement which has achieved an independent status by shaking off constraints of theology. Meanwhile, within the framework of Indian culture such a divergence between philosophy and religion did not occur, and according to Sharma “the two, even when they become dual, remain undivided.” Sharma also draws attention to the concept of *jīvanmukti* and the pivotal idea, which supports the concept of *jīvanmukti*, that the results of one's faith can be attained while still living in this world. Sharma goes on saying that according to this notion faith is understood as “faith pending realization – it denotes the trust one must have in order to undertake an experiment, but the outcome of the experiment is independent of such a faith”.

In view of this, while trying to define ultimate reality or *Brahman*, Advaita Vedānta is relying not only on revelation and reason, but also on the teachings of those who achieved the state of *jīvanmukti* and became *jīvanmuktas* or living embodiments of *Brahman*.

In the first chapter devoted to a scriptural approach, the author mainly discusses the scriptural authority of Upanisads and the hermeneutical attempts of Advaita Vedānta in a unified way to interpret and harmonize four key statements called *mahāvākyas*. These are accepted as the authority by other schools of Vedānta as well, but they interpret them using a rather different exegetical clue. Each of the four *mahāvākyas* has been given a detailed analysis in separate subsections.

Sharma stresses that acceptance of Vedic authority is not as binding for philosophical purposes as it is for social cohesion.

The second chapter explains the subtleties of the rational approach. Using classical examples of a bracelet of silver and silver (*rūpyakundalanyāya*) and of a rope and a snake (*rajjusarpanyāya*), the author compares doctrines of Asatkāryavāda and Satkāryavāda. He emphasizes that for a rational presentation of Advaitic ontology we must rely upon the paradoxical logic of contradiction between the non-contradictable and contradictable.

Chapter Three, the last one, contains analysis of experiential approach to the study of Advaita Vedānta. Here Sharma says that our experience of life compels us to take into account all the three states of consciousness as postulated in the revealed scripture. These are waking, dreaming and deep sleep. Invoking the assumption of the triad points out that rationality is only one aspect of manifold mental activities and that it cannot be regarded as encompassing the whole of life. Also, this implies the existence of unchanging consciousness which undergirds the consciousness of change of the three states of consciousness and constitutes the unchanging core of our being – self or *ātman*, which in turn is identical with *Brahman*. Trying to underscore this “experientially most resonant dimension of Advaitic non-dualism”, the author produces some accounts of mystical experience from the hagiographies of the twentieth century yogis Swāmi Vivekānanda, Ramana Maharsi and Krishnamurti.

The author expresses hope that his attempt to present Advaita Vedānta with pedagogical variation will be a refreshing one, and surely it will be a useful addition to the literature available on this particular school of Vedānta, especially for students of comparative philosophy of religion.