

DÁNIEL PÁL:

FREEDOM AS IDEAL, CONCEPT AND REALITY IN ŚAÑKARA'S *UPADEŚA-SĀHASRĪ*

Theses of the PhD dissertation

1. Choice of topic and aim of inquiry

The aim of this dissertation is to undertake the comprehensive analysis of the concept of freedom in Śaṅkara's *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* ('A thousand teachings'). Śaṅkara is the most prominent representative of the Hindu advaita vedānta school, and the most influential thinker in Indian philosophy. The *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* was chosen because among the works attributed to Śaṅkara in which he expounds his thoughts freely and not by commenting some scripture, it is the only one the authenticity of which is accepted by all the leading scholars.

In this work Śaṅkara sets forth an idealistic monism, and defends it against the doctrines of other philosophical schools. The essence of his teaching is the following: from the viewpoint of the highest truth, there exists only one absolutely real substance, Brahman, the essence of the universe, which is identical to the Ātman, the fundamental core of human consciousness. The reality of multiplicity is only superimposed on this absolute by a fundamental ignorance, thus the reality of the world and the multiplicity of things in it is nothing more than transient illusion. The realization of all this amounts to final beatitude which is nothing but unconditioned and eternal freedom. For Śaṅkara philosophy is not an end in itself. On the one hand, philosophical knowledge seeks the possibility of unconditional freedom (understood as final beatitude), and on the other, it serves as a direct guide to the metaphysical journey of the seekers of liberation.

2. Methods of inquiry

The structure of the work is rather hectic: its nineteen metrical and three prosaic chapters are in fact separate units, the concepts within each chapter are often loosely connected, and several topics recur frequently. For this reason the main focus was on making the complexity of ideas clear and transparent. The method for this was inspired by one of Arvind Sharma's propedeutical writings on advaita vedānta (*Advaita vedānta. An introduction*) where Sharma introduces the system of advaita vedānta from a "scriptural", a "rational" and an "experiential" point of view. These we might as well call a theological, a philosophical and a mystical perspective. The concept of freedom of the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* was thus sought to be discussed from these three angles, since this approach makes it possible to analyze the main aspects of the work's concept of freedom relying on categories that are comprehensible for minds trained in western philosophy. Furthermore, it enables us to discuss the complex structure of ideas within the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* in a thematic order.

The text was translated into Hungarian, it appears in an appendix. The translation was based on Sengaku Mayeda's critical edition of the Sanskrit text.

3. Course of inquiry and its major findings

The first part of the dissertation introduces the notion of freedom as the leading ideal of Indian philosophy, then places Śaṅkara's concept of freedom in a wider context and discusses its connection with the other schools of Indian wisdom. In the course of this the analysis of the relationship between freedom and knowledge, power and morality is given a great emphasis.

The next chapter turns to the theological foundations of Śaṅkara's philosophy of liberation. The major soteriological categories (bondage, freedom, ignorance and knowledge) and the basic metaphysical concepts (action, rebirth, suffering and liberation) are discussed as well as the "scriptural reflection" relying on which he interprets the canonical texts and key concepts he inherited from the tradition.

The role of freedom in the actualization of the ideal of a philosopher's life is emphasized, and it is indicated that freedom experienced here and now means not only the fulfillment of this ideal, but it is the necessary condition of true philosophizing. The role of the connection of freedom and power is stressed, and during the discussion of the positive aspect of freedom the relevant moral problems are also touched upon.

This is followed by the discussion of the "rational" aspect of Śaṅkara's philosophy, then an in-depth analysis of the questions concerning the possibilities of achieving freedom is provided. The inner tensions of the monist concept of freedom are indicated along with the difficulties they evoke concerning the actualization of freedom. Following this, Śaṅkara's attempts for the solution of the problem are investigated discussing the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī*'s concepts pertaining to the nature of the relationship of knowledge and action as well as to the nature of freedom. Highlighted is the transformative role of knowing: true metaphysical knowledge brings about the radical transformation of the awareness of self-identity, this way serving as a springboard for liberation. The second part of the chapter analyzes the metaphors through which Śaṅkara seeks to carry out the psychological and epistemological confirmation of the fundamental difference of the Ātman and the psyche in preparation for the direct experience of the Ātman.

The last chapter of the dissertation provides a discussion of the "mystical" aspects of freedom. First of all, a careful definition of the term is attempted, albeit the difficulties of the study of the topic are also indicated. It is pinpointed that philosophical thinking, religious exegesis and mystical experience are inseparably intertwined in Śaṅkara's thought. Highlighting the role of the subjective mystical voice in the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* the following sections discuss the function of mystical experience in Śaṅkara's soteriology and seek to interpret the "mystical testimonies" that amount roughly to the tenth of the metric part.

Concerning the nature of freedom its moral respects are also discussed, and it is shown that although for the liberated person moral goodness and evil proves to be meaningless, Śaṅkara regards morality as an indispensable prerequisite of liberation.

In the concluding sections of the chapter the reconstruction of the mystical praxis is attempted. It is shown that the spiritual praxis Śaṅkara's propounds in this work is markedly different from what modern scholarship or today's neo-vedānta considers advaitic spiritual practice. Full reconstruction, however, is made impossible by the fragmented nature of the work, therefore hardly anything other than indicating the uncertainties of the topic can be done in this regard. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that – similarly to the *Bhagavadgītā-bhāṣya* – the *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* gives place not only for sudden realization but for a gradual progress towards liberation, although the characterization of this path is even more scanty.

4. Publications

Publications concerning the topic of the dissertation:

- „Ékesen szóló csend” – Megváltó tudás és megváltó kegyelem egysége Śaṅkara *DakSiNamUrti-himnuszában*. in *Acta Studiorum Religionis Szegedini* III. (2007.) p. 122–169.

- *Moraltárs és morálfelettség a Bhagavad Gītāban*. in Máté-Tóth András – Básti Ágnes (szerk.): *Mircea Eliade egykor és ma. Centenárium tiszteletére*. Belvedere Meridionale, Szeged, 2008, p. 113–120.

- *JJAnamAtA – the Role of Bhakti in the teachings of RamaNa MaharSi* in Tibor Porció (editor): *Selected Papers in the Hungarian Study of Religions*. Department of the Study of Religion, Szeged (in press)