

The Concept of Jiva in the Yogavasistha

In different branches of study we encounter different basic concepts such as the concept of matter, the concept of man, the concept of the state, the concept of morality, the concept of beauty, etc, which give us an idea of the way we relate to the things of the world. But the concept of jiva is more a fundamental one which gives us an insight into our own selves, a peep into our own reality, around which all other concepts revolve. This is not only a metaphysical idea, but a stark reality, from the standpoint of which we encounter the things of the world – we perceive, conceive, enjoy and transcend the world of objects. Our world-view necessarily flows from our conception of what we are, thereby determining our sojourn in the world or our pilgrimage for the eternity.

Jiva is commonly known as the individual consciousness marked by its association with the psycho-physiological mechanism known as the body characterized by birth, growth, reproduction and death. However, consciousness being the greatest mystery in the world where unconscious matter apparently predominates, the individual consciousness is also shrouded in mystery. Our study of consciousness as merely a biological phenomenon or even a psychological phenomenon with all its scientific fanfare is the outcome of a myopic vision, which does not withstand a philosophical scrutiny. The deeper meaning of the concept of jiva springs from its capacity of apperception and self-inquiry. It not only encounters and enjoys the things of the world but also tries to comprehend its own self. Self-perception tends it to assert itself, leading it along the path of self-inquiry, which consummates in self-knowledge at the end. From the state of being conscious of the objective world it turns inward, realizing the utter fruitlessness of sense enjoyment. This state, in which the jiva is neither totally wise nor unwise, is said to be the beginning of self-inquiry.¹

The concept of jiva as given in the Yogavasistha is unique in both its conception and depiction. It seems to be the synthesis of the Vedantic and the Agamic views. The approach of this work is non-discursive yet comprehensive. Like the Upanisads, it does not conform to any rigid logical framework, though its basic tenets are quite conspicuous. The Vedantic world-view with an Agamic overtone is what the fundamental note of this work is. Though theoretical accuracy is never given importance in this work, the vision and perception of the basic non-dual reality are never lost. The mystery of jiva can never be solved in the relative plane of perception where the knower, knowable and knowledge appear to be distinct. However, the explanations given in the scriptures provide us the paradigms which facilitate our understanding. The essence of the teachings of the Upanisads which signifies Advaita in some form or the other forms the basis of the later Vedantic and the Agamic traditions.

In Advaita Vedanta, jiva is conceived as consciousness either conditioned by or reflected in avidya or antahkarana. The views are known as avaccheda vada and pratibimba vada. Both these examples are given in the Upanisads in order to explain the oneness of Brahman which is the same as Atman from the individual point of view. However, the later Advaitins have to take a lot of pains to meet the logical challenges arising out of such views. In fact, it is not so simple to explain the entire mystery by means of some examples. Still the mystery persists. Why at all there should be a reflection or a conditioning is not easy to comprehend. Advaita Vedanta tries to solve this by advocating that avidya is beginning less (anadi), anirvacaniya and does not stand any logical scrutiny. A group of Advaitins also accept the six beginning less principles like jiva, Isvara, pure consciousness, etc. There is no self-contradiction, since, though beginning less, the jiva-hood is never endless. To explain the things of the world, the Advaitins say that the world of objects with manas and the senses is only a product of maya, which like the prakrti of the Samkhyas is unconscious, but unlike it, is not separately real. Thus, according to Advaita Vedanta, the entire world, beginning from maya to the five mahabhuta-s, including the antahkarana, is unconscious. The jiva, unlike maya and its creation, is of the essence of consciousness. But non-dualism is never affected, since maya and its manifold creation are nothing other than superimposition or adhyasa. We find in Advaita Vedanta, a perfect logical explanation expressed, upheld and defended boldly. But we should bear in mind what the great Advaitin Suresvara says, "In whichever method one gets proficiency in the non-dual self, here it is known as a prakriya which is valid yet un-established (anavasthita)."2 Explanations are intended to make others understand the truth, but by no means are these to be taken as the reality. The origination of jiva which is apparent but not real is only a prakriya devised to instruct the truth of non-duality.

In the non-dualistic Agamic schools, prominent among which is the Kashmir Saivism, Siva is said to have assumed the form of jiva with a desire to conceal his svarupa through his unbound power of freedom or svatantrya. The five powers of Siva, cit, ananda, iccha, jnana and kriya become limited. The power iccha becomes anava mala, jnana becomes mayiya mala, kriya becomes karma mala, omnipotence becomes kala, omniscience becomes vidya, plenitude becomes raga, eternity becomes kala and all-pervasiveness becomes niyati. Thus the bound consciousness, jiva, being limited is known as anu and being fettered is known as pasu. The numerous individuals are classified under six categories, viz., sakala, pralayakala, vijnanakala, mantra, mantresa and mantramahesa, beyond which is Siva endowed with his principal Sakti which manifests in innumerable forms. Through the aspect of Sakti, otherwise known as vimarsa as distinct from prakasa as Siva himself is known, the world of sabda and artha comes into existence. Since Sakti, unlike prakrti of the

Samkhyas and maya of the Vedantins, is of the nature of consciousness, non-dualism is never affected. This Sakti , non-distinct from Siva, is the matrix and the material of the entire world. She (in the feminine) is variously called as kula, samarthyā, urmi, hrdaya, sara, spanda, vibhūti, kali, vani, drk , etc, meaningful, as it is, in these special appellations. 3 The all-pervasive and all-knowing caitanya has assumed the form of citta through its self-limitation.4 This same citta has become prana as it is said, “prak samvit prane parinata.” Prana , inherently intent upon activity, is said to be spanda, sphuratta, visranti, jiva, hrt and pratibha. Assuming the form of the five vital airs, it consumes the entire body, so, the body appears as being filled with consciousness.5 Kashmir Saivism adopts both maya and prakṛti of the Vedantins and the Samkhyas respectively and ingeniously incorporates these in its own fold. They lose their inherent nature in the new paradigms and become helplessly impotent in the presence of the imposing concept of the supreme Sakti. The process of creation is more akin to that of the Samkhyas than to the view of the Vedantins. So far as the concept of jiva is concerned, it agrees with the Vedantins in upholding this view that the jiva is essentially Siva himself. It needs to be awakened to its inherent divinity. Jiva, like Siva, is also endowed with both jnana and kriya which get distorted in this state. In the condition of vijñānakāla, jnana alone manifests, which restricts it from acquiring its unconditioned freedom, its aisvarya. The remarkable difference between these two schools is this that, in Advaita Vedanta, caitanya is conceived as pure illumination devoid of activity(jñānarūpam niskriyam), which relegates all activities to the realm of maya, where as in the Agamic schools, both kriya and jnana are said to be its essential nature.6

The Yogavasistha depicts the concept of jiva in a lucid and unique manner. It does not take any fixed sectarian view. Though its conception of jiva is basically non-dualistic, it does not always conform to either the theoretical paradigms of Advaita Vedanta or that of the Agamas. Characteristically it seems to be a great poetry of sublime revelations, unbound, as it is, by the rigidity of philosophical concepts and logical reasoning. With hundreds of stories adopted from earlier sources and designed ingeniously it brings home to the seeker self-knowledge in an inimitable manner. It abounds in thousands of illustrations, similes and metaphors which make self-inquiry a breeze. The concept of jiva is central to its description, since all its efforts are intended to awaken the jiva to its pristine glory.

In the Yogavasistha, the jiva is depicted as a minute spandana, vibration or wave in the unbound stir-less ocean of supreme consciousness. It is likened to a little bit flickering of the flame of the limitless consciousness, motionless as it is, like that of a candle in a place free from wind.7 As motion is to wind, heat is to fire and coldness is to ice, so is the jiva related to Brahman.8 The process in which the all-pervasive consciousness comes to assume the form of jiva is described in a vivid manner. In the

utpatti prakarana, it is said, “From this Brahman which is of the essence of pure consciousness and supreme bliss, comes into existence jiva which is citta itself, and from citta the world emerges. This citta being concretized with awareness takes the form of ahamkara, as a tiny spark of fire furnished with plenty of fuel gains resplendence. The aham-bhava (remarkably different from ahamkara), supreme consciousness in the form of primary “I”-ness, being conditioned by space and time by its own resolution, like the movement of the wind, intent upon samkalpa, comes to be designated as ahamkara, citta, jiva, manas, maya and prakrati. This citta, of the nature of samkalpa, also fancies the tanmatra-s and becomes five-fold through resolution.”⁹ In the nirvana prakarana, the same process is again described, “Beginning-less and endless Brahman, the root of the world, free from all defects, luminous, of the essence of pure consciousness, which is devoid of limits of kala, being inwardly intent upon kalana, is known as jiva. This jiva obviously, within the body, grasps the objects and activates it. Because of the feeling of “I” or aham, it becomes ahamkara, by manana (thinking) it becomes manas, determining knowledge it becomes buddhi (intellect), providing outlet for Indra’s knowing (Indra here means the self) it becomes indriya, fancying the body it becomes the body, and imagining the ghata (pot) it becomes ghata. Of this nature, the self is perceived as the puryastaka (the self inseparably connected with the subtle body).”¹⁰

This process is also depicted elsewhere in this work with some minor alterations. However, the intention remains in tact. In this work, unlike in other systems, the theoretical differences among various principles such as the citta, jiva, manas, prakrati, maya, etc, are obliterated. It is noteworthy that the process of Brahman assuming the form of jiva as depicted here does not corroborate either the view of the Advaita Vedantins or that of the upholders of the Agama-s. The theoretical paradigms of Vedanta, the logically perfected explanations of pratibimba and avaccheda, the logically conceived and dialectically defended a-logical maya, the juxtaposition of drk and drsya , etc, do not correspond to the not-so-logically conceived, non-discursive and intuitive description of the Yogavasistha. The process of the origination of jiva as given in the Agama-s with its framework of the three mala-s and the five kancuka-s, does not conform to the manner in which it is described in this work. However, so far as the basic tenets are concerned, it agrees with both these schools. It is to be noted that in Kashmir Saivism, caitanya, citta, jiva and prana are never conceived as qualitatively different from each other, which resembles the view of the Yogavasistha. But the conceptual framework of the former does not stand in agreement with the depiction given in this work.

It is to be noted that the way Yogavasistha describes this concept broadly corresponds to the manner in which it is expressed in the Upanisads. The Brihadaranyka Upanisad, while describing how the non-dual reality assumes the form of the myriad things of the world, says, “He verily becomes prana by the activity of

living (pranana), through speech (vadana) becomes vak, seeing the objects becomes vision, through manana (thinking) becomes manas, these are the names consequent upon his activities.”¹¹ The interpretation of this line may differ keeping in view the specific stand-point of the interpreters. With Samkara we may take it to mean that the activity of prana, vak, caksu, etc, are superimposed on Atman, for which it appears falsely as such, or we may take this line in its face-value and maintain that such and such principles actually originate from Atman though thereby they do not become real on a par with the latter. It is to be borne in mind that in the non-dualistic framework, whether we view the world in a phenomenistic manner or in a realistic manner, the world of objects is never conceived as of the same ontological status as that of the Absolute. If we adopt the latter stand-point, the interpretation of the Upanisads will bring us the same perceptions of the world as that of the Agama-s. This is, however, expressed in a broader sense; the world-view of this work is as free as that of the Upanisads. It satisfies both the Vedantic and the Agamic stand-points.

The primary aim of the Yogavasistha is to make the individual realize his true non-dual reality. In this sense, it is more a yogic work than a work on philosophy. No amount of philosophisation can make one free from the fetters of samsara. One has to practise the truth with an indomitable spirit, live it and realize the ultimate goal of life. This work inspires the seeker to probe the hidden realities underlying the apparent manifestations of his superficial being, providing him the means and the potentials to pursue the goal undeterred. It is not only important to explain the jiva-hood from the philosophical point of view, it is even more important to go deep into the recesses of one's own being and to discover one's true nature. The Yogavasistha oftentimes emphasizes this and unveils the secrets of self-discovery in no uncertain terms. According to it, the ativahika deha or puryastaka otherwise known as the subtle body is the conditioning of the jiva. The gross body disintegrates at the time of death, but the subtle body continues till one realizes his identity with Brahman. The yogic practices are intended for gaining control over this. The person who can control his subtle body will no longer be a puppet in the hands of fate. By unveiling the dynamics operating in the subtle spiritual levels, it brings home the subtle realities which hitherto remain unrevealed. When the mind is free from impure vasana-s and is prompted by purity, it gets converted into the ativahika body through which a person can travel in different subtle worlds while living verily within a gross body.¹² Though, after death, every departing soul has to travel in the astral world through this, the ativahika deha remains inoperative in the gross body stage. Even after death it does not acquire that amount of freedom, unless one has realized its full potentials by sadhana in the previous body. A beautiful description of this is met with in the Lila upakhyaana of the Yogavasistha (See the utpatti prakarana). Truth is not merely a concept; it is very much a reality. Our reductionistic conception of consciousness and

our limited knowledge of the only form of carbon-based life, obtained from our so-called scientific research are the outcome of a deep-rooted ignorance which can never be uprooted unless we awake from the bodily sleep. Advancement in the scientific research in the fields of genetics and stem-cell cannot help us in waking from this bodily sleep. The Yogavasistha makes it conspicuous that the subtle body is not an imagination; it is a reality although of a different dimension, which can only be realized by getting rid of our deep-rooted ignorance that binds us to the gross body and the world of gross objects.

The seven stages of delusion of the jiva are bija jagrat, jagrat, maha jagrat, jagrat svapna, svapna, svapna jagrat and susupti. These are the elongation of the three states of consciousness, viz, waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep, described elsewhere. The jiva confined to these seven conditions passes from one delusion to the other like a boat fallen in a whirlpool. In some stages it remains in the state of svapna jagrat and in some other stages it experiences the state of jagrat svapna. The former is a special state of consciousness where a dream seems to be a long experienced reality, while the latter is what is known as manorajya or fantasy. A departed soul, so far as it continues as a preta, undergoes such experiences. Some states may last for a long time where as others may last for a short while.¹³ One who transcends these and thereby attains the state of turiya or the state of turyatita, he alone realizes his true non-dual reality.

The jiva encounters reality-shifts in its various stages of existence. Through the expansion of its field of perception, it discovers different layers of truth until it becomes aware of the fact that the entire world of matter with its own longtime associates, the subtle body and the gross body, is nothing but a figment of its own mind. This entire world is nothing more than an experience; there is no brahmanda (the universe); no samsara (the cycles of birth and death), no barriers, nor any distance caused by space and time. For him who has realized this, the entire world is even voider than the space, and for the other, it is impenetrable like a mountain hard as the thunderbolt.¹⁴

Through the parinami drsti of the Samkhya, it discovers its difference from prakrti and asserts its independence; through the vivarta drsti of the Vedantins it finds that the world of experience has only a relative existence and through the Saivi drsti of the Agama-s it subsumes the world of difference within itself. Self-knowledge, effortless and spontaneous, comes to the person who remains awake, as illumination happens to a person with open eyes when a candle is lit even without asking.¹⁵

The Yogavasistha synthesizes the views of both the Advaita Vedanta and the Advaya Agama and reveals the supreme glory of the Self in an inimitable manner which is unique in its conception as well as in the exposition.

Dr. Haramohan Mishra

Principal, Govt. Women's Jr. College

Bolangir

<http://www.reflectionsindia.org/>

References

1. Yogavasistha, 1.2.2, Chukhamba Ed., 2001
2. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad Bhasya Vartika, 1.4.402
Mahesh Research Institute Ed., 1982
3. Tantrasara, p.123, Choukhamba Ed., 1996
4. Pratyabhijnahrdayam, Sutra 5, Motilal , Ed., 1983
5. Tantraloka, 6.12, Sampurnananda Ed., 1992
6. Isvarapratyabhijna, 1.5.11, Motilal Ed. 1986
7. Yogavasistha, 3.64.6-8
8. ibid, 3.64.10
9. ibid, 3. 64.2; also 3.64.11-16
10. ibid, 6.50.14-18
- 11 Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, 1.4.7
12. Yogavasistha, 3.22.9-10
13. ibid, 3.117. 11-28
14. ibid, 3.28, 9; also 3.28.13
15. ibid, 2 .17.7