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Nature of the Supreme Reality

After enunciating the 20 virtues, excellences, that verily engender and strengthen true spiritual wisdom and realization, Krishna now expounds, in six verses, the nature of the supreme Reality, using very lofty, profound words, but with practical all-fold relevance.

To the devotionally inclined, Krishna's exposition should serve as a timely enlightenment and singular guidance. In reality, is the Almighty the way the devotees generally imagine and worship? Does the Supreme have a variety of physical features, as popularly believed? Or is the supreme Reality more a substance or source, **which can be compared and contrasted with the *pañcabhūtas*?**

As a devotee progresses in his devotion, his mind and intelligence must evolve steadily and imbibe higher dimensions, higher qualities. Sri Krishna has emphatically declared that the twenty virtues constitute knowledge. All else is ignorance alone!

A question arises: Does spiritual life end in the cultivation of good qualities, virtues or excellences? Or, is there a goal, something distinct, like the supreme Reality, the ultimate Source? Is that goal something the mind and intelligence can grasp clearly? **Can it be approached confidently to get a very vital personal, experiential truth or realization?** Does it equally have the power and potential to bestow fulfillment? Krishna answers all these questions with a clear "yes". And that is the pivot of the entire spiritual life and pursuit!

Thus, his next exposition commences with the words *jñeyam yat tat pravakṣyāmi*:

ज्ञेयं यत्तत्प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वामृतमश्नुते ।
अनादिमत्परं ब्रह्म न सत्तन्नासदुच्यते ॥

*jñeyam yat-tat-pravakṣyāmi yaj-jñātvāmṛtam-aśnute ।
anādimat-param brahma na sat-tan-nāsad-ucyate ॥*

(13.12)

I shall now describe clearly that great Knowable, knowing which one attains immortality. It is the beginningless, supreme Brahman, which is neither existence nor non-existence.

Realization - an inner process

All the disciplines and regulations, refinement and sublimation the seeker aims at, pursues and embodies are towards an ultimate goal. And **this goal is in the nature of a perception, realization of the supreme Reality, Brahman.**

In all sensory perceptions, perceiving is really an inner process, done by mind and intelligence. The same inner mind and intelligence have to perceive the Supreme, as well and as naturally as they do external objects. But generally they are unable to do so.

Why is it that our mind and intelligence do not bring about this? Kaṭhōpaniṣad explains it very beautifully, holding that the plight is squarely due to the Creator:

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत् स्वयम्भुः
तस्मात्पराङ्पश्यति नान्तरात्मन् ।

*parāñci khāni vyatṛṇat svayambhūḥ
tasmāt-parāñ-paśyati nāntarātman*

Kaṭhōpaniṣad (II.i.1)

The self-manifested Lord rendered the senses outgoing. Therefore, one perceives the outer things and not the inner Self.

So, the entire effort of the seeker should be to overcome this handicap and enrich, equip and empower the mind-intelligence duo to gain the great inner perception. And this is the sole purpose of spiritual sādhanā.

Thus the seeker must test his inner purity and refinement by finding out whether Krishna's words on the ultimate Reality make meaning, relevance and inspiration to him. Krishna asserts that knowledge of the ultimate Reality alone will shower immortality on the seeker.

In knowing anything whatever, we must first have a proper description about it. With regard to instances transpired long ago, we only have a rendering of the events and episodes before us. Nevertheless, it is through such historical narration that we can access the past and draw our lessons for the present.

Here, it is not history, but the one great source of all, the supreme Reality, that permeates and surrounds every form of animate and inanimate existence. It is this supreme Reality that we have to perceive and realize. The effort will be properly guided only with the apt descriptions about it.

Probing the Source of existence

Krishna begins his depiction with *anādimat*. It is beginningless. *Anādi* is a very common word in spiritual parlance, often used without any deliberate attempt to reflect upon its import. What is its deeper significance?

The whole world is an outcome, a becoming. In fact, this process of becoming is ceaseless. The entire phenomenon consists of cause and effect. Think of a tree. First a seed is sown in the soil. Necessary moisture and nutrition are provided to it. It then sprouts and grows steadily. To the extent the new growth has taken place, the source substances, namely nourishment from earth, air, light, heat, etc. will also be depleted as an inevitable counter and complement.

Cause-effect relationships are inseparable. Matter gets converted, energy is transformed. There is a measure of equalness, balance, in the cause and effect transformation.

Keeping this common ground before us, we have to probe into the very source of existence, the ultimate Reality. We are born of earth. But wherefrom was earth born? What about water, air, fire and ultimately space itself?

If all these have come from another source, what is that other source from which this source has derived its emergence? Can such an investigation be extended endlessly? Then it will lead, *ad infinitum*, to a situation that will make our search fruitless and abortive.

Is there not an original source, which itself does not have any cause for its being? That first thing thus transcends the cause-effect sequence. Remaining independent by itself, it gives rise to the others, subjecting all thereafter to the cause-effect links. While cause-effect sequences govern all the other things, this one Supreme source reigns beyond them all.

Such a line of thinking cannot be avoided. That is how religious people conceive of God as inevitable and ineffable, possessing all the mastery to bring about any phenomenon any time because, **the entire visible creation, in its full splendour, has sprung up from a previous 'nothing'**. Naturally, it stands to reason that what has progenerated such emergence must and will have the same potential to give rise to anything, anytime, anywhere.

To conceive of this stupendous creation, its Source must inevitably have 'all-knowledge'. Thus it becomes omniscient. The visibles are endless; their Source too should be endless and 'all-pervading', omnipresent. As we find countless qualities and powers imbued with the world constituents, their great Source too has to be 'all-powerful', omnipotent.

Religionists thus prefer to regard their God as omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. At first look, it may appear to be mere eulogistic supplication. But on deeper examination, it is true to the letter.

Krishna then says It (such a Source) is neither *sat*, existence or being, nor *asat*, non-existence or non-being. An intriguing statement, no doubt, at least on first hearing!

Think well, and reflect deeply. We are first of all born physically into the visible world. Thereafter through the bodily limbs and senses, we interact with the objects around and gain knowledge. Every word denoting anything is formed, derived, expressed and conveyed like this. So the whole knowledge we have gained is based on the existence around.

This existence is subject to change. That is, everything is getting continuously destroyed and also equally replaced.

This means that the visible existence is not the be all and end all. It is preceded by non-existence and succeeded by extinction. Thus existence and non-existence become relative and mutual. Neither has absolute status.

Not only that. The very idea of existence arose only after creation emerged from its source. That source thus is pre-existence and post-extinction. Thus Krishna says that the supreme Reality, Brahman, **is neither existence nor non-existence.** For both these have their relevance only after creation emerges and is in force.

What does Krishna aim at by thus describing the supreme Reality and designating it as the Knowable? To think about, reflect upon, enquire into or explore such a concept will, in effect, be to **instill into the mind and intelligence lofty dimensions of absorption and delight.** When the mind expands and intelligence becomes increasingly perceptive, it will elevate the seeker's personality.

Normally the things of the world allure the mind, making one deluded and dislodged from his moorings. This plight will change when the supreme Reality is contemplated upon and by that, the mind and intelligence grow, shedding their delusion. About the source of joy too, a new discovery takes over. **Compared to the delight the Supreme can bestow directly through the mind and intelligence, the joy from the sensory objects will appear trifling.**

Dispassion is an indispensable virtue of seeking and a sure associate of the spiritual seeker. The joy of wisdom is another associate of the

seeking mind. Both start welling forth from within by contemplating upon the *jñeya*, the Knowable, as Krishna describes it.

Comprehending the Universal Sentience

In the next few verses Krishna brings forth the magnitude, untaintedness, subtlety, all-comprehensiveness, indivisibility, and all-powerfulness of the ultimate Reality. Each verse has its distinct relevance and import:

सर्वतःपाणिपादं तत्सर्वतोऽक्षिशिरोमुखम् ।
सर्वतःश्रुतिमल्लोके सर्वमावृत्य तिष्ठति ॥
सर्वेन्द्रियगुणाभासं सर्वेन्द्रियविवर्जितम् ।
असक्तं सर्वभृच्चैव निर्गुणं गुणभोक्तृ च ॥
बहिरन्तश्च भूतानामचरं चरमेव च ।
सूक्ष्मत्वात्तदविज्ञेयं दूरस्थं चान्तिके च तत् ॥

sarvata:pāṇi-pādaṃ tat-sarvato'kṣi-śiro-mukham ।
sarvata:śrutimal-loke sarvam-āvṛtya tiṣṭhati ॥
sarvendriya-guṇābhāsaṃ sarvendriya-vivarjitam ।
asaktaṃ sarva-bhṛc-caiva nirguṇaṃ guṇa-bhokṭṛ ca ॥
bahir-antaśca bhūtānām-acaraṃ caram-eva ca ।
sūkṣmatvāt-tad-avijñeyaṃ dūrasthaṃ cāntike ca tat ॥
(13.13,14,15)

With hands and feet, eyes, head, face and ears everywhere, it stands embracing all.

Revealing all sense-objects, though itself devoid of senses, it is dis-attached, sustainer of all, attribute-free, yet the enjoyer of all qualities (*sarva-bhṛt* and *guṇa-bhokṭṛ*).

External and internal in beings, mobile and immobile alike, it remains incomprehensible due to subtlety. It is far away and also close alike.

Verse 13.13 echoes the pronouncements in the Vedic *Puruṣasūktam*. The ability to act, think, understand and create, found in any life-form on the earth or anywhere in the universe, has its source in the ultimate

Reality. As the creation is endless, the capacity displayed by it is also endless. These skills become manifest everywhere.

Somewhere in the universe hovers our earth. We, its denizens display animation, consciousness and intelligence. Naturally our source also must have these in far greater measure. Seemingly the earth, our progenitor, is not animate. From such inanimate earth all the living beings around us have come to be. Unless the ultimate Reality, the Source of all, from which has emerged our earth, embodies all these qualities and powers, how can it host the beings living upon it?

Myriad planets and bodies are floating in the sky throughout the universe. Every one of them must potentially have the creative and animating qualities, although they are manifest only in a few.

Thus the supreme Source is supremely Intelligent, creative and potent, and these qualities are, in fact, present everywhere in creation, no matter whether it appears to be inert or sentient.

Next comes a logical consideration. If the ultimate Source is intelligent and creative, like us, does it have any constrictions – mental, intellectual or sensory – as we seem to be suffering from? Krishna makes it clear that though associated with sensory powers, the supreme Source is equally dissociated from them. It does not therefore suffer from any note of attachment or identity, as we humans do. Involved, associated with, it is equally dis-involved and dis-associated too. It is full of qualities and equally rid of them all.

Is it not because of this distinction that all kinds of contradictions and opposites are displayed abundantly in this world? An animal cruelly preys upon another. The gentle is killed, making the killer cruel. At the same time both are manifestations of the same Supreme. The ultimate Source is neither affected by cruelty nor graced by gentleness. It does not ratiocinate.

But will the human psyche be able to remain unaffected like this? Herein lies the difference.

Krishna then points out how full and complete the presence of the Supreme is. It is external and internal alike (*bahir-antaśca*). It is mobile and immobile, sentient and insentient (*acaram caraṃ eva ca*) alike. Why are we missing such an ever-present and everywhere-present Reality? It is solely because of its extremely subtle nature!

Among the *pañcabhūtas*, which are discernable to our senses, space is invisible. However with a little effort we are able to infer the prevalence of space, grasp it by the power of intelligence. What to speak then of the ultimate Reality, which is even more invisible to the senses (*sūkṣmatvāt tad-avijñeyam*)?

Space, *ākāśa*, is unlike the other four elements. All the four are restricted in their form and permeation. Space alone remains full and everywhere. It reigns in and through the other four. Likewise, it is inside as well as outside of every small and big form of existence. How all-permeating should the spiritual presence, Brahman, then be? The fact that Brahman is sentience, Consciousness, makes it infinitely so.

The differentiation as mobile and immobile, sentient and insentient is *prima facie*, superficial. It is primarily meant for comparison and contrast, to facilitate interactions. On probing into them further, both will reveal as existence, permeated equally by the Spiritual presence. But this is a truth, not understood initially. The mind has to expand and intelligence has to become more perceptive in order to strike at this higher dimension.

To be *sūkṣma*, subtle, is to be 'indistinct' before the senses. Such indistinctness instantly makes Brahman unintelligible, imperceptible, too. That does not mean Brahman's existence cannot be comprehended. Our mind, intelligence and ego are themselves imperceptible to the senses. Yet, are they incomprehensible? If one does not feel the presence of these himself, can he live and move at all?

Mind, intelligence and ego can be felt only by oneself. Just like the senses have the power to perceive external gross objects, our inner faculty has the ability to perceive these subtle inward entities. Thus Brahman,

despite its extremely subtle and omnipresent nature, is fully accessible. *Buddhi-grāhyam, atīndriyam* is how Krishna described it earlier (6.21).

Krishna adds that its extensive range and endless magnitude make it amazingly distant, very far (*dūrasthan*). But, because of its omnipresence, it is also very close, nay the closest within (*antike ca*)!

We tend to think of anything that is all-pervading as more distant from us than near. Our immediate thoughts will be on its vastness and hence inaccessibility. Even though close, its closest nature is missed!

Suppose you stand on the seashore and look at the sea. The vastness of the sea, endlessness, will be the first to strike your attention. But, remember, your feet are already in the sea-waters. Vastness and closeness are both equally applicable. **More so is the case with Brahman, the universal sentience.**

True seeking is Knowledge-oriented

By describing *jñeya*, the thing to be known (the Knowable), and clarifying that a proper knowledge of it alone will fetch immortality (*amṛta*), Krishna adds a Vedic note to his discourse. He thereby makes the dialogue comprehensive and authoritative. Two points are to be specially noted here:

(1) The supreme Reality is something to be **known** and is not so much to be worshipped or seen or propitiated, as many seem to think. God is to be inquired into, reflected upon, understood and realized. Knowledge of any kind resides within. External senses do act as a help in bringing about knowledge, but knowledge every time is undoubtedly an inner fruition.

All **devotional practices are only preliminary**, leading to cardinal spiritual search or seeking. True devotion as explained in the 12th chapter, rests solely upon mind and intelligence (12.8). Mind does its work by thoughts, feelings and imaginations. Intelligence, on its part, does the probing. That is why the study and understanding of Scriptures becomes supreme in the Hindu way of life.