

Madhusūdana Sarasvatī's Criticism of the Hiraṇyagarbha School: On the Liberation Theory

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1. Introduction

In the works of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (ca. 16th cent.), a scholar of the Advaita Vedānta School, one finds descriptions of the Hiraṇyagarbha (the Hiraṇyagarbha School), who embraced Hiraṇyagarbha as a supreme god. It is well known that Hiraṇyagarbha is an old deity dating back to *R̥gveda* and in ancient times was thought to be a supreme god who created the world. However, for the Advaita School, Hiraṇyagarbha was merely a creator deity of the dualistic world and is a lower level being than the absolute Brahman. Because Madhusūdana belonged to the Advaita School, it has been assumed that he also considered Hiraṇyagarbha to be an inferior being. In order to elucidate the religious philosophy of Madhusūdana, it is important to clarify at what level of being he positioned Hiraṇyagarbha compared with Brahman. This paper, as a preliminary toward clarifying this point, specifically takes up Madhusūdana's criticism of the liberation theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha, revealing his main points of criticism as well as his own views regarding this liberation theory.

2. The Liberation Theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha

First, I look into the argument of the Hiraṇyagarbha in the works of Madhusūdana. Madhusūdana described the liberation theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha in his *Vedāntakāpalatikā* (VKL).

T1: The Hiraṇyagarbha [says] that liberation means verily reaching Hiraṇyagarbha through the flamy path and so forth by meditation (*upāsana*) on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth. (VKL 10,5–6)

The statement of the Hiraṇyagarbha quoted here coincides with a doctrine of reaching the world of Brahman through the divine path by knowing the teaching of the five fires found in *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (ChāndUp) and *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (BṛhadUp).¹⁾ Here, meditation (*upāsana*) means the mental process equating A with B, and the meditation on the knowledge of the five fires, such as “the ritual fire is that world, its fuelwood is the sun . . . ,” is thought to be equating that ritual fire with the world, its fuelwood with the sun and its fume with the ray and so forth in the teaching of the five fires.²⁾ However, according to Madhusūdana’s criticism discussed later, neither Brahman nor Hiraṇyagarbha is the object of the meditation. This point is important. Additionally, ChāndUp states that “the impersonal Puruṣa leads them to Brahman,”³⁾ and the Hiraṇyagarbha maintained that liberation meant being led to and reaching the world of Brahman. In addition, according to the interpretation of Śaṅkara (ca. –756–772–) on ChāndUp and BṛhadUp, the Brahman reached through the divine path in ChāndUp and BṛhadUp is Hiraṇyagarbha.⁴⁾ Moreover, the Hiraṇyagarbha seems to have equated the Brahman found in the Upaniṣads to Hiraṇyagarbha. Thus, the liberation theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha could have been based on ChāndUp and BṛhadUp.

3. Madhusūdana’s Criticism of the Liberation Theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha

The gradual liberation (*kramamukti*) theory in the Advaita School corresponds to the liberation theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha discussed above. Madhusūdana criticized the liberation theory of the Hiraṇyagarbha from the viewpoint of the gradual liberation theory. Then, how did Madhusūdana criticize the above argument of the Hiraṇyagarbha? Regarding the person left for the divine path, Madhusūdana states as follows in his *Bhagavadgītāgūḍhārthadīpikā* (BhGGAD) on *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG) 8.23:

T2: On the other hand, some of the people who have gone to the divine path will return [to this world]; of the people meditating on the symbols (*pratīka*),⁵⁾ the one who have gone up to the world of thunder (*taḍit*) [will definitely return at the end of their enjoyment of the world of thunder], and the men who do not meditate on this (Hiraṇyagarbha and so forth) but meditate on the knowledge of the five fires will definitely return at the end of their enjoyment [of the world of Hiraṇyagarbha] even if they are led up to Hiraṇyagarbha by the impersonal Puruṣa.⁶⁾ Even in this way, those who meditate on small (*dahara*) [space] and so forth⁷⁾ will gradually be liberated at the end of their enjoyment [of the world of Hiraṇyagarbha]. (BhGGAD 403,26–28)

These men who meditate on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth should be the Hiraṇyagarbha. Madhusūdana accepted the possibility of reaching Hiraṇyagarbha by meditating on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth. However, by stating that they will return from the world of Hiraṇyagarbha at the end of their enjoyment, he denies the liberation view of the Hiraṇyagarbha, that liberation means reaching Hiraṇyagarbha. It follows that, while accepting the aforementioned tenet that “the knowers of the knowledge of the five fires reach the world of Brahman” in ChāndUp and BṛhadUp, differing from the Hiraṇyagarbha who considered it to be liberation, Madhusūdana did not interpret it as liberation. Moreover, stating that if people only meditate on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth without meditating on Hiraṇyagarbha and so forth, they will return from the world of Hiraṇyagarbha, Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hiraṇyagarbha, i.e., liberation is also obtainable by meditating on the knowledge of the five fires. In this way, Madhusūdana denied the soteriology of the Hiraṇyagarbha. Meanwhile, by stating that the meditators of small space and so forth reach Hiraṇyagarbha and that they can gradually be liberated at the end of their enjoyment, he argued that they can obtain gradual liberation.

Now, what is the meaning of the meditation on small space and so forth in T2? This point is made clear in Madhusūdana's following argument in BhGGAD on BhG 8.5:

T3: From the standpoint of meditation on the conditioned [Brahman], there is a man who goes through the divine path, which is referred to as “a fire, a light, the daytime, the bright fortnight” and so forth and which is superior to the ancestral path, that man will reach, i.e., attain, my state, my nature, the unconditioned Brahman at the end of his enjoyment of the world of Hiraṇyagarbha. (BhGGAD 382,21–23)

According to this passage, at the time of death the meditator on the conditioned Brahman will reach the state of the unconditioned Brahman through the divine path. But, since reaching the state of the unconditioned Brahman will take place at the end of his enjoyment in the world of Hiraṇyagarbha, Madhusūdana believes that at first the meditator on the conditioned Brahman will reach the world of Hiraṇyagarbha through the divine path, and finally he will attain the state of the unconditioned Brahman at the end of his enjoyment there.

Since T3 is consistent with T2, it is understood to be an argument of gradual

liberation. Thus, it can be said that “to meditate on small space and so forth” in T2 means to meditate on the conditioned Brahman.⁸⁾ In addition, since according to T3 the practitioner attains the unconditioned Brahman, we can conclude that “the liberation” of gradual liberation means absolute liberation.

Thus, Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hairaṇyagarbha, liberation is obtained by meditation on the knowledge of the five fires. On the other hand, he regarded this as gradual liberation through the meditation on the conditioned Brahman. Further, he states that immediate liberation is possible through the meditation on the unconditioned Brahman.⁹⁾ From these points, we can conclude that the reason why Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hairaṇyagarbha is that the object of meditation is not Brahman. On this point, Śaṅkara already stated that those who do not want to go to Brahman, i.e., who do not meditate on Brahman, cannot reach Brahman,¹⁰⁾ so Madhusūdana seems to have taken over Śaṅkara's view.

4. Conclusion

Above, I have investigated the criticism of the liberation theory of the Hairaṇyagarbha by Madhusūdana. The liberation theory of the Hairaṇyagarbha was based on the five-fire and the divine-path theories found in ChāndUp and BṛhadUp. However, for the Advaita School, which Madhusūdana belonged to, these theories concerned the gradual liberation theory. Therefore, Madhusūdana criticized the soteriology of the Hairaṇyagarbha by characterizing it as a gradual liberation theory. Thus, I conclude that the controversy between Madhusūdana and the Hairaṇyagarbha was induced by the difference in their interpretations of the five-fire theory and the divine-path theory mentioned in ChāndUp and BṛhadUp.

Notes

1) See ChāndUp 5.4.1–5.10.2, BṛhadUp 6.2.9–6.2.15. See especially ChāndUp 5.10.1–5.10.2, BṛhadUp 6.2.15.

2) With respect to the teaching of the five fires, see ChāndUp 5.4.1–5.9.2, BṛhadUp 6.2.9–6.2.14, Hattori 1979, pp. 170–172.

3) See ChāndUp 5.10.2: puruṣo 'mānavaḥ sa enān brahma gamayati. Cf. BṛhadUp 6.2.15: tān vaidyutān puruṣo mānasa etya brahmalokān gamayati.

4) For instance, see *Chāndogyopaniṣadbhāṣya* (ChāndUpBh) 485,18–20 (on ChāndUp 5.10.2): śrutyantagadye ca satyaṃ brahma hiraṇyagarbhākhyam **upāsate te sarve 'rciṣam** arcirabhi-māniniṃ devatāṃ **abhisambhavanti** pratipadyante.

5) In his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (BSBh) Śāṅkara said that the meditators of the symbol (*pratīka*) cannot reach the world of Brahman. See BSBh 502,22–503,2 (on *Brahmasūtra* [BS] 4.3.15): pratīkālambanān varjayitvā sarvān anyān vikārālambanān nayati brahmalokam iti bādārāyaṇa ācārya manyate. na hi evam ubhayathābhāvābhyupagame kaścid doṣo 'sti, aniyamanyāyasya pratīkavyatirikteṣv apy upāsaneṣūpapatteḥ. tatkratuś ca asya ubhayathābhāvāsya samarthako hetur draṣṭavyaḥ. yo hi brahmakratuḥ, sa brāhman aīsvaryam āsided iti śliṣyate, “taṃ yathā yathopāsate tad eva bhavati” iti śruteḥ, na tu pratīkeṣu brahmakratutvam asti, pratīkapradhānatvād upāsanasya.

6) See ChāndUp 4.15.5 (= ChāndUp 5.10.2, see n. 3). In addition, see ChāndUpBh 462,12–14 (on ChāndUp 4.15.5): **tat** tatrasthāṃs tān **puruṣaḥ** kaścid brahmalokād ety **āmānavo** mānavyāṃ sṛṣṭau bhavo mānavo na mānavo **'mānavāḥ sa puruṣa enān brahma** satyalokasthāṃ **gamayati**.

7) See ChāndUp 8.1.1: yad idam asmin brahmapure daharaṃ puṇḍarīkaṃ veśma daharo 'sminn antar ākāśas tasmin yad antas tad anveṣṭavyaṃ tad vāva vijijñāsitavyam iti. Furthermore, the discussion concerning “small space” (**daharākāśa*) is found in BSBh on BS 1.3.14–21.

8) Śāṅkara states that “small space” (**daharākāśa*) is the highest Ātman in BSBh on BS 1.3.14–21 (*daharādīkaraṇa*). But in BSBh on BS 1.3.20, he also maintains that a man, who considers “small space” as the highest Ātman can see the “small space” as a living soul. One can conclude that the “small space” interpreted as a living soul corresponds to the conditioned Brahman. See BSBh 115,23–116,10 (on BS 1.3.20): atha yo 'yaṃ daharavākyaśeṣe jīvapārāmarśo darśitaḥ “atha ya eṣa samprasādaḥ” (ChāndUp 8.3.4) ityādīḥ, sa dahare parameśvare vyākhyāyamāne na jīvopāsānopadeśaḥ, nāpi prakṛtaviśeṣopadeśaḥ ity anarthakatvaṃ prāpnotity ata āha—anyārtho 'yaṃ jīvapārāmarśaḥ. na jīvasvarūpaparyavasāyī, kiṃ tarhi parameśvarasvarūpaparyavasāyī . . . ity evam artho 'yaṃ jīvapārāmarśaḥ parameśvaravādinō 'py upapadyate. Moreover, Śāṅkara also believes that the gradual liberation is possible by meditation on the conditioned Brahman. See Nakamura 1989, pp. 792–793.

9) See BhGGAD 382,23–25 (on BhG 8.5): nirguṇabrahmasmaraṇapakṣe tu **kalevaraṃ** tyaktvā **prayātīti** lokadrṣṭyabhiprāyam. “na tasya prāṇā utkrāṃanti” (BṛhadUp 4.4.6) “atraiva samavāniyante” (BṛhadUp 3.2.11) iti śruteḥ, tasya prāṇotkramaṇābhāvena gatyabhāvāt. **sa madbhāvaṃ** sākṣād eva **yāti**, “brahmaiva san brahmāpy eti” (BṛhadUp 4.4.6) iti śruteḥ.

10) See BSBh 503,2–4 (on BSBh 4.3.15): nanv abrahmakratur api brahma gacchatiti śrūyate. yathā pañcāgnividyaṃ “sa enān brahma gamayati” (ChāndUp 4.15.5) iti bhavatu. yatra evam āhatyavāda upalabhyate, tadabhāve tu autsargikeṇa tatkratunūyena brahmakratūnām eva tatprāptiḥ, na itareṣāṃ iti gamyate. See also n. 5.

Abbreviations

BṛhadUp *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad*. In *Ten Principal Upaniṣads with Sankarabhāṣya*. Works of

(76) Madhusūdana Sarasvatī's Criticism of the Hiraṇyagarbha School (MANABE)

- Śaṅkarācārya in Original Sanskrit, vol. I. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964. Repr., 2007.
- BS *Brahmasūtra*. See BSBh.
- BSBh *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (Śaṅkara). *Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya*. Works of Śaṅkarācārya in Original Sanskrit, vol. III. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985. Repr., 2007.
- BhG *Bhagavadgītā*. See BhGGAD.
- BhGGAD *Bhagavadgītāgūḍhārthadīpikā* (Madhusūdana Sarasvatī). *Srimadbhagavadgita with the Commentaries Śrīmadśaṅkarabhāṣya with Ānandagiri, Nīlakaṅṭhī, Bhāṣyotkarṣadīpikā of Dhanapati, Śrīdharī, Gītārthasaṃgraha of Abhinavaguptācārya, and Gūḍhārthadīpikā of Madhusūdana with Gūḍhārthattvāloka of Śrīdharmadattaśarmā (Bhachchāśramā)*. Ed. Wāsudev Laxmaṇ Shāstrī Paṇṣīkar. 2nd ed. Bombay: Nirṇaya Sāgar Press, 1936.
- ChāndUp *Chāndogyopaniṣad*. See BṛhadUp.
- ChāndUpBh *Chāndogyopaniṣadbhāṣya* (Śaṅkara). See BṛhadUp.
- VKL *Vedāntakalpalatikā* (Madhusūdana Sarasvatī). *Vedāntakalpalatikā*. Ed. R. D. Karmarkar. Post-Graduate and Research Department Series, no. 3. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1962. Repr., 2006.

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