
**PART 3: THEMES OF
SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY**

11) MUKTI

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11) MUKTI

We began this Part with Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation of theological knowledge:

A jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation (Vac. Loyā.7).

It helped explain how, even though knowing Parabrahman is of primary importance in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, a complete understanding of his nature necessarily requires understanding Akṣarabrahman, Prakṛti (māyā), as well as jīva and īśvara. It also served to structure our exposition on Parabrahman into the four themes of Sarvopari, Kartā, Sākāra, and Pragaṭa. What is also striking about the formulation is that it immediately and unequivocally ties knowledge with liberation. Svāminārāyaṇa is absolutely clear: the goal, culmination and fruit of all theology is final release from the incessant cycle of births and deaths, to enjoy eternal fellowship with God.

We have touched upon this and many other aspects of mukti along our way in the chapters on Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, jīva, īśvara and māyā. This in itself is telling, reinforcing liberation as what permeates all theological reflection and to what it must ultimately lead. Here, we have occasion now to bind those points together and add some more details to allow for a more complete, though still very introductory, picture of liberation within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

11.1) Nature and Cause of Bondage

Before we can move on to understanding liberation, we must first remind ourselves from what one is to be liberated and why. We should therefore begin with a brief review of the nature of spiritual bondage and its cause.

Earlier we learned that jīvas and īśvaras are essentially pure (devoid of any māyic traits) and have sat-cit-ānanda (existence, consciousness and bliss) as their most fundamental characteristics. So why, then, do they experience sorrow when they should be intrinsically and eternally blissful? Svāminārāyaṇa explains that it is the body which encounters pain and (worldly) pleasure. However, if the soul falsely self-identifies with the three bodies, it will also experience that same pain and pleasure. Only when it realises itself to be distinct from them can it experience the transcendental, continuous bliss of its own self and the God within [Vac. Gaḍh. I.78, Vac. Gaḍh. I.20, et al]. In other words, it is the soul's ajñāna or ignorance – better understood as 'anti-knowledge', that which *opposes* true knowledge, rather than simply the lack of knowledge – which is the root cause of pain and suffering.

This 'ignorance' (ajñāna or avidyā), we now know from the previous chapter, is of the form of māyā. Svāminārāyaṇa identifies it in Vac. Kār.12 with the soul's causal body, saying:

The causal body is the māyā of the jīva. That same causal body evolves into the gross and subtle bodies. Thus, all three – the gross, subtle and causal bodies – can be said to be the māyā of the jīva. In the same manner, virāṭa, suatrātman and avyākṛta can be said to be the māyā of īśvara.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes explicit this connection even further in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66.

The jīva also possesses the causal body, which is the embodiment of eternal ignorance.

Linking this ignorance back to māyā, Svāminārāyaṇa defines māyā as

nothing but the sense of I-ness towards the body and my-ness towards anything related to the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

Interestingly, then, ignorance (ajñāna, avidyā), māyā and the causal body are essentially the same in this soteriological context and are indeed often seen being used interchangeably. All three are charged as the very reason – as the name ‘causal’ suggests [Vac. Var.6] – why the soul has to transmigrate from one gross+subtle body to another in each subsequent life.

But how exactly is one’s ignorance instrumental in perpetuating transmigration?

This connection requires further elucidation.

Firstly, any actions performed while in a state of ignorance (i.e. self-identification with the bodies) accrue karmas which are then stored in the causal body. As these karmas fully ‘ripen’, they cling to the soul, as if becoming a part of it.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains how this ignorance or māyic causal body is attached to the soul in Vac. Kār.12.

This māyā of the jīva, i.e. the causal body, is attached so firmly to the jīva that they cannot be separated by any means whatsoever... [just as] the shell of a tamarind seed is extremely firmly attached to the seed.

He repeats the seed-shell analogy in Vac. Var.6, again emphasising the “intimate” and “abiding relationship” between the soul and its causal body.

Using another analogy in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Just as a piece of iron is attracted to a magnetic rock and then sticks to it, similarly, the jīva has a nature of sticking; it sticks to the two māyic bodies – the gross body and the subtle body. Then, due to its ignorance, the jīva believes those bodies to be its own.

Those ripened karmas so closely and firmly attached to the soul manifest themselves as desires for even more māyic pleasures [Vac. Gaḍh. III.20]. To fulfil these desires, i.e. to expend those stored karmas, the soul has to assume another body in another life. If in that subsequent life those karmas are not fully expended and if, by the soul’s continuing ignorance, still more karmas are accrued, the surviving stock in the causal body will again need to be lived out in yet more lives. Svāminārāyaṇa explains this in Vac. Amd.3 using the example of a banyan tree and its roots.

Everyone knows that the roots of a banyan tree keep the tree green. Even if all of its roots, except for a few minor roots, are uprooted, the banyan tree will still remain green. In the same way, one may have outwardly renounced the sense-objects, but if thoughts of them are entertained, then those thoughts become a cause of births and deaths.

And so desires, borne of ignorance, become the root cause of more and more lives in the perpetual transmigratory cycle.

What needs to be noted apropos is that even in a state of ignorance, there is no change in the essential nature of the soul – just as the seed’s shell does not affect

the seed nor the magnetic rock the piece of iron. To believe otherwise is the very form of ignorance – or “foolishness” – that Svāminārāyaṇa so emphatically admonishes.

The jīva, which resides in the body, feels, ‘Lust, anger and other vicious natures are attached to my jīva.’ In this manner, depending on which of the vicious natures, i.e. lust, anger, avarice, etc. is predominant in a person, he believes his jīva to be full of that nature due to his association with it. But, in fact, not a single one of these vicious natures lies within the jīva; the jīva has merely believed itself to possess them out of its own foolishness (Vac. Gaḍh. II.12).

Going further, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

Even before one had been graced with the attainment of God, kāla – a power of God – was unable to destroy the jīva; karmas were unable to destroy the jīva; not even māyā was able to absorb the jīva within itself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.50).

Nevertheless, māyā/ignorance/the causal body still enshrouds the soul, obstructing and obscuring a full realisation of its pure, conscious, blissful self and of the limitlessly blissful God who dwells therein and all around. Instead, that ignorance holds the soul captive to the never-ending needs of the body and insatiable desires of the mind, entrapping it ever more into an essentially painful transmigratory existence with all its limitations and sufferings of birth, decay, disease, disappointment, and death. This is what the Vedānta texts promise liberation from, and what mumkṣus (‘aspirants’, i.e. those seeking liberation) so earnestly endeavour towards.

11.2) Nature of Liberation

Mukti or mokṣa – from the Sanskrit verb-root ‘muc’ – relates in theological terms to freedom, liberation or release from the captivity and oppression of māyā and the incessant cycle of births and deaths it enforces. The first thing, therefore, we can say about mokṣa/liberation in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu soteriology is that it is a state of immortality, where death and rebirth are no more – because their very cause, māyā or ignorance, is no more.

Just like a grain of rice that has had its outer chaff removed does not grow, one who... is freed from eternal ignorance in the form of māyā becomes free of birth and death... (Vac. Sār.11).

This is explicitly and repeatedly corroborated by such important adjectives as “amṛta” – literally, immortal – found to describe the liberated soul in the Upaniṣads (IU 11, 14; KeU 1.2, 2.4, 2.5; KaU 1.28, 6.2, 6.9, 6.14, 6.15; PU 1.10, 3.11, 3.12; MuU 3.2.9; TU 1.10.1; AU 3.4; CU 1.4.4, 1.4.5; BU 1.3.28, 2.4.2, 2.4.3, 4.4.7, 4.4.14, 4.4.17, 4.5.4, 5.14.8) and Bhagavad-Gītā (13.12, 14.20). We also learned in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman that Akṣaradhāma, the abode of Parabrahman where liberated souls eternally rest in communion with him, is a place from where there is no return to a transmigratory existence (Vac. Sār.14; CU 4.15.6, BU 6.2.15, BG 8.21, 15.6, BS 4.4.22).

Of course, as we learned in the chapters on jīva and īśvara, the finite soul is by its very nature immortal and pure. However, mukti in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is more than just a return to an original state of being for the soul. It is a new, higher spiritual state – indeed, the highest, perfect spiritual state – that is

enriched by the direct realisation of Parabrahman. It is not just release from the pain and limitations of transmigration, but an eternal, overwhelming experience of the limitless and unending bliss of God. It entails not merely the dispelling of ignorance, but the positive receiving of Akṣarabrahman's qualities. In other words, this is the preeminent brahmic state, what Svāminārāyaṇa calls the state of being brahmarūpa or akṣararūpa, and described in the Bhagavad-Gītā as 'brāhmī sthiti' (2.72) or being 'brahmabhūta' (18.54). It is so called because the liberated soul becomes 'like Brahman', that is, it receives many of the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. As Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.20:

When the jīva attains a likeness to that Brahman..., then that jīva can also be said to be brahmarūpa.

This is made clear, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, by the identical descriptions of the universal soul, Akṣarabrahman, at CU 8.1.5,

Ya ātmā'pahatapāpmā vijaro vimṛtyurviśoko vijighatso'pipāsaḥ
satyakāmaḥ satyasaṅkalpaḥ |

That [universal] soul [i.e. Akṣarabrahman] is without evil, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst [i.e. physical or worldly desires], and has all his desires and wishes fulfilled,

and the individual, liberated soul at CU 8.7.1,

Ya ātmā'pahatapāpmā vijaro vimṛtyurviśoko vijighatso'pipāsaḥ
satyakāmaḥ satyasaṅkalpaḥ |

That [liberated] soul is without evil, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst [i.e. physical or worldly desires], and has all his desires and wishes fulfilled.⁴²²

⁴²² See CU-SB 8.7.1, pp. 367-68 for a detailed justification of the referents of both these verses – Akṣarabrahman at CU 8.1.5 and the liberated soul at CU 8.7.1. In the latter, the Bhāṣyakāra also clarifies that the first six qualities – being without evil and free of old age, death, sorrow, hunger and thirst – are the liberated soul's innate qualities, whereas the last two – having all

So central and fundamental to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is this doctrine of becoming brahmarūpa, and thereby completely and eternally liberated, that Svāminārāyaṇa reveals it as the very reason for his manifestation on earth in human form. As we saw earlier, he proclaimed:

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.⁴²³

It is also the reason why, Svāminārāyaṇa reveals, that whenever Parabrahman manifests on earth in human form to grant such liberation, he is always accompanied by Akṣarabrahman (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71). As we shall later see, this extends (or 'de-confines') the liberative work of God from his own time on earth, making the brahmarūpa state perpetually possible because of the unbroken lineage of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (the 'Guru Paramparā') who succeed Svāminārāyaṇa.

As we saw in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī both stress in many of their sermons the need to become brahmarūpa and rise above ignorance. This is not only for personal spiritual fulfilment, upliftment and safety, they explain, but also to be able to fully devote oneself to Parabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to say in Vac. Loyā.7:

Brahmarūp thayo tene j Puruṣottamni bhaktino adhikār che.

desires and wishes fulfilled – are received by association with Akṣarabrahman. He also emphasises that this latter verse is not just a description of the liberated soul, but an instruction to spiritually liken and join one's self with the living Akṣarabrahman Guru as a way to that liberated state.

⁴²³ *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa*, p.76. See also *Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7.

Only he who becomes brahmarūpa is eligible of offering devotion to Puruṣottama.

Closely after this statement, Svāminārāyaṇa cites a similar declaration found in the Bhagavad-Gītā.

Brahmabhūta... madbhaktiṃ labhate parām |

He who becomes brahmarūpa... attains my highest devotion (BG 18.54).

At this point, an important distinction needs to be drawn here between becoming brahmarūpa ('being *like* Brahman') and what might be called Brahmification ('*becoming* Brahman') or deification ('*becoming* God', i.e. theosis). The latter two suggests a complete union of substance with Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, which Svāminārāyaṇa strongly rejects (as we shall shortly see), whereas being brahmarūpa is not a substantial union but a qualitative similarity with Akṣarabrahman. The soul remains metaphysically jīva or īśvara, albeit it in a highly exalted spiritual state.

Svāminārāyaṇa reveals this brahmic state as one of ethical perfection, personal holiness, freedom from māyā (karma and base instincts), absolute fulfilment, and singular devotion to and total engrossment in God. The best way to elaborate upon these aspects is to understand them in the two contexts that the state can be experienced – after death, in Akṣaradhāma, and while alive, on earth – and through the liberated souls' distinction from and relationship with Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman.

11.2.1) Videha Mukti: Post-Mortem Liberation

The first and simplest way to understand liberation within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is as eternal fellowship with Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma. As a life of supreme, unending bliss and perfect, ceaseless devotion to God, this is the ultimate goal and consummation of all theological understanding and praxis towards which Svāminārāyaṇa inspires his devotees. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh.

I.21, he urges:

All of our satsaṅgis should develop the following singular conviction: 'We also wish to join the ranks of the akṣararūpa muktas and go to Akṣaradhāma to forever remain in the service of God. We have no desire for the temporary and vain worldly pleasures; nor do we wish to be tempted by them in any way.'

Similarly, framing this as beyond even the still-inferior goal of any paradisiacal attainment, he adds in Vac. Gaḍh. II.47:

One should keep the following desire: 'After leaving this body, I want to become brahmarūpa like Nārada, the Sanakādika, Śukajī, etc. and offer bhakti to God.' ... He should discard the pleasures of [even] Brahmaloḳa and Indraloḳa using the strength of his pure desires and make his way to the abode of God. He should resolve not to stop anywhere in between.

Again, after narrating the relative insignificance of worldly and devic pleasures and the paramount bliss of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Pan.1:

Therefore, keeping this thought in mind, all of you should resolve: 'Now we want to reach only the abode of God; we do not want to be tempted by the vain sensory pleasures along the way.' So, please keep such a firm resolve.

Svāminārāyaṇa calls this “my principle [siddhānta]” when asked by a follower of the Dvaita School to explain his theological system in brief. After concisely expounding the five eternal realities, Svāminārāyaṇa says in conclusion:

When a jīva seeks the refuge of God, it overcomes God’s māyā, becomes brahmarūpa..., attains the abode of God, and becomes his attendant. This is my principle (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

This, Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies, is the state of liberation achieved after death, upon leaving the material body behind. For this reason, it is called ‘videha mukti’ (incorporeal liberation). He reveals:

When such [perfect] devotees leave their body... they reach the abode of God (Vac. Gaḍh. I.1).

Devotees of God... attain that luminous abode [called Akṣaradhāma] after death (Vac. Gaḍh. I.12).

After such an ekāntika bhakta leaves his body and becomes free of all influences of māyā, he attains Akṣaradhāma (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21).

When that devotee leaves his body and attains the abode of God,... (Vac. Gaḍh. II.67).

When [the jīvātman] leaves its body and goes to the abode of God,... (Vac. Gaḍh. III.22).

But if, upon death, the soul leaves its material body behind, does it forever thereafter remain formless in Akṣaradhāma, as some sort of unbodied spirit or phantom? No, Svāminārāyaṇa explains.

God, who possesses a definite form, is always present in his abode, Brahma-pura. Devotees of God, who also possess a form, remain in his service in that abode (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

So then what form do the liberated souls take in Akṣaradhāma? What do they look like there?

This very question is posed by Brahmānanda Svāmī, another of Svāminārāyaṇa's senior paramahansas, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.66.

After the ignorance of the jīva is dispelled by the devotion of God, the association between the jīva and the three māyic bodies – gross, subtle and causal – no longer remains. So when the jīva attains the abode of God, with what type of form does it stay there?"

Svāminārāyaṇa replies:

When the jīva's ignorance is dispelled, its association with the three māyic bodies is broken. Thereafter, the jīva remains as pure consciousness and existence. Then, by God's will, the jīva receives a body composed of sentiency [caitanya prakṛti] – which is distinct from the eight inert elements [jāda prakṛti] of God, i.e. earth, water, etc. With that body, then, it resides in God's Akṣaradhāma. This is the answer to your question.

In answer to a similar question by Mukṭānanda Svāmī in Vac. Gaḍh. I.1 –

What type of body does a devotee of God attain when he leaves his physical body, which is composed of the five material elements, and goes to the abode of God?

– Svāminārāyaṇa replies that such a devotee receives, "by the will of God", a brahmic body, what he calls here a "brahmamaya tanu".

The Bhāṣyakāra draws upon this when commentating on the phrase "svena rūpeṇābhiniṣpadyate" found at CU 8.12.2 in Prajāpati's instruction to Indra about the true self. He explains that when the soul leaves the body and reaches the supremely glorious form of Parabrahman in the divinely luminous Akṣaradhāma,

it receives a divine, brahmic body [brāhma divyavigraha; brāhmatanu] in which it continuously experiences the divine bliss of Parabrahman and Akṣaradhāma.⁴²⁴

This is analogously and even more explicitly stated at BU 4.4.4:

As a goldsmith takes a piece of gold and turns it into another, newer, more beautiful form, in the same way, this soul, having discarded this body and dispelled its ignorance, receives another, newer, more beautiful... brāhma form.⁴²⁵

Elaborating upon this divine form in Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Svāminārāyaṇa speaks of it alongside God's form in the following way:

The form of God in Akṣaradhāma and the form of the muktas – the attendants of God – are all real, divine and extremely luminous. Also, the form of that God and those muktas is two-armed like that of a human being, and it is characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Going even further in his identification of the muktas' form with God's, Svāminārāyaṇa calls theirs a 'godly body', or "bhāgavatī tanu" (Vac. Sār.14). While we shall be making vital distinctions between both further on in this chapter, it is important to note that Svāminārāyaṇa does make explicit the identical nature and causal relationship between the divinity of God's form and that of the liberated souls. He states in Vac. Kār.1:

The bodies, senses, inner faculties and vital breaths of those who are devotees of God, due to their knowledge of God, become like

⁴²⁴ CU-SB 8.12.2, pp. 386-87. See also the discussion based on this verse at BS-SB 4.4.1, pp. 416.

⁴²⁵ See BU-SB 4.4.4, pp. 268-69 for a fuller explanation of this verse, and where it relates to the brahmarūpa mukta receiving a brāhmaśārīra for enjoying Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, whereas other, less-elevated souls will receive other types of bodies as they enjoy the pleasures of lesser abodes.

God. This is because God himself has a divine form. So, the bodies, senses and inner faculties of those devotees become like God's senses, inner faculties and body. That is why those devotees' bodies, senses, inner faculties and vital breaths become divine.

Being so divine or aprākṛta (immaterial, i.e. spiritual) means that the liberated souls are without any of the distinctions of name and form possible only with prakṛti (i.e. māyic materiality). In other words, the forms in Akṣaradhāma of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and all liberated souls are virtually identical, with the muktas themselves being visually indistinguishable from one another (even while retaining their ontological individuality).

Another reason for this is that the forms of the muktas are genderless, just as the souls themselves are (Vac. Gaḍh. III.22). In a sermon recorded at SV 7.2, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

The form of a mukta is different from the two genders of the world. It is neither female in shape nor male in shape. It has a wholly brahmic body, which is neither feminine nor masculine.

This also helps explain that, even while having a human-*shaped* form – complete with senses, inner faculties, etc. – the fact that it is divine, brahmic and entirely spiritual, the liberated souls are devoid of any human functions and urges.

Having transcended māyā, they are beyond hunger, thirst, fatigue, etc. and free of all forms of mundane passions.

This begs the question: So then what do they actually *do* in Akṣaradhāma?

Svāminārāyaṇa makes clear that there is nothing actually to do in Akṣaradhāma because the muktas are absolutely perfect and fulfilled; they have no reason to strive for anything, nor anything further to strive for. They are now and for ever in the direct fellowship of Parabrahman – the supreme, most beautiful and blissful being of all. Indeed, he is, as if, nothing but bliss.

Sa ya evaṃvid asmālokāt pretya... etam ānandamayam ātmānam
upasaṅkrāmati |

He, that knower [i.e. the brahmarūpa mukta], leaves this world...
and attains that Paramātman who is replete with bliss (TU 2.8.2).

The liberated souls thus have no need or desire for anything else.

Having had [on earth] an effectual body, frolicking with women,
playing with chariots, or enjoying with relatives, he [the liberated
soul with brahmic body] does not recall it [now]. He is engrossed
there [in Akṣaradhāma, in the highest Puruṣa] (CU 8.12.3).⁴²⁶

And why indeed would the liberated souls even crave such inferior pleasures
now? Svāminārāyaṇa adds:

That God, residing in Akṣaradhāma,... is always present there to
bestow supreme bliss upon those muktas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

In fact, so gracious is Parabrahman, he grants the muktas the same blissful
experience he himself (and Akṣarabrahman) enjoy of himself. Continuing the
sermon documented at SV 7.2, he states:

What bliss does God grant that [akṣararūpa] devotee? The same
bliss that God has of his own self. That is the bliss that God grants
that devotee.

⁴²⁶ Based on CU-SB 8.12.3, pp. 387-88. See BS-SB 4.4.10-12, pp. 422-24 for a discussion based on this verse, confirming that muktas do indeed not enjoy such pleasures as women or men, chariots, relatives, etc. in Akṣaradhāma.

This, as we shall see, forms a part of the debate about the similarities and differences between muktas and Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman at BS 4.4.17-22.⁴²⁷ Here we can simply cite BS 4.4.21,

Bhogamātrasāmyaliṅgācca |

On account of the indication of the equality of enjoyment only, in which the Bhāṣyakāra confirms this supreme and equal blissful experience by citing TU 2.1.1:

He [the brahmarūpa mukta who perfectly knows Brahman] enjoys all pleasures [in the highest abode] with the omniscient Brahman.

The muktas thus simply remain in complete engrossment of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāma, continuously experiencing his divine self – whose bliss, we learned in the chapter on Parabrahman, is supreme in quality and limitless in extent; absolutely fulfilling, consistent and unending; gratifying all of the senses – indeed, one’s whole being – simultaneously, immediately and everlastingly. Because this bliss is so inexhaustibly rich, there is never an instance of the muktas being bored or satiated, and so there is nothing else for them to do except, as Svāminārāyaṇa describes it, the ‘darśana’ of Parabrahman. For example, in one of his descriptions of Akṣaradhāma, he reveals:

There is an all-transcending mass of divine light which cannot be measured from above, below, or in any of the four directions; that is to say, it is endless. Amid this mass of light lies a large, ornate throne upon which presides the divine form of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Puruṣottama Bhagavān. Countless millions of muktas are seated around that throne⁴²⁸ and enjoy the darśana of God (Vac. Loyā.14).

⁴²⁷ See especially BS-SB 4.4.21, pp. 430-31.

⁴²⁸ It should be noted that everything within Akṣaradhāma is described as being composed of brahmic consciousness, and so even the throne upon which Parabrahman presides is

'Darśana' here can be taken to mean literally 'seeing' Parabrahman (for the muktas do have divine, brahmic senses and faculties, just like Parabrahman), and also, more deeply, as having the vision or realisation of Parabrahman, i.e. experiencing him and thus enjoying his presence. Indeed, when elaborating upon the phrase "parātparaṃ puriśayaṃ puruṣam īkṣate" at PU 5.5 –

That [mukta] who is free of all evil, just as a snake sheds its slough, rises to Brahmoloka... and 'sees' Puruṣottama, supreme among all living beings, dwelling in that abode

– the Bhāṣyakāra chooses to render the verb 'īkṣate' (literally, 'to see') as 'sākṣātkaroti', i.e. to directly realise. While such seeing or realisation is sometimes framed as 'service' [sevā] or the mukta described as an 'attendant' [sevaka, dāsa, or pārṣad (in Gujarati)], this is only because of the abiding sense of servitude the liberated souls feel towards Parabrahman their lord, as we shall see after the following section.

11.2.2) Jīvan-Mukti: Pre-Mortem Liberation

Svāminārāyaṇa's striking revelation about the liberated state is that it is available not only as some future hope, but as a present reality, while in this very body, before biological death, here on earth. This is called jīvan-mukti (literally, 'living liberation'), or liberation while alive. He unequivocally proclaims:

considered divine and non-different to anything else in the transcendental abode or to the abode itself.

Furthermore, with Akṣaradhāma being beyond space as well as time – it is eternal – the "countless millions of muktas seated around that throne" are understood to still be in absolute close proximity to Parabrahman, experiencing him as if he were right in front of each and every one of them.

If one practises satsaṅga⁴²⁹ with absolute sincerity, then no impurity will remain in one's heart, and one will become brahmarūpa in this very lifetime (Vac. Sār.9).

In another sermon Svāminārāyaṇa states:

If one were to perform a karma by which God and his Sant are pleased, then even if one were destined to fall into naraka, all of one's impure karmas would be destroyed and one would instead attain the highest state of enlightenment [paramapada] in this very body (Vac. Gaḍh. II.45).

We see Svāminārāyaṇa introducing here his common refrain of "God and his Sant", linking the important doctrines of Parabrahman being manifest before the eyes and final enlightenment also being tangible in the same way. In Vac. Gaḍh. III.2 he makes this connection even more explicit when he focuses solely on the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, who he refers to in Gujarati as "pratyakṣa gururūpa hari" ('God manifest before the eyes in the form of the Guru'). After drawing from the important verse at SU 6.23 – which Svāminārāyaṇa renders as follows:

If a person develops a conviction for the Guru – who is the manifest form of God before the eyes – in the same way that he has a conviction for God – who is beyond the eyes – then, as a result, he attains all of the objectives which are described as attainable

– he goes on to say:

In fact, when he attains the association of such a Sant, he has, while still alive, attained he who was to be attained after death [i.e. Parabrahman]. That is to say, he has attained that which is called the highest state of enlightenment [paramapada], or liberation [mokṣa], while being alive.

⁴²⁹ While the literal meaning of 'satsaṅga' is simply 'association with the truth or real', it is a richly complex term to define. It invokes the full gamut of theological belief and praxis practised within the religious community of devotees and, most essentially, under the guidance of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

Svāminārāyaṇa corroborates by adding this is not something one has to wait for until death.

When the devotee has kept his mind at the holy feet of God in this manner [like an iron nail firmly affixed in an iron surface], he does not have to die to attain the abode of God; he has attained it while still alive (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

That means that the experience of God is available here on earth.

If a person has the association of the Bhakta of God and God is pleased upon him, then even though he is in Mṛtyuloka [i.e. on 'earth'], he is still in the abode of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

As striking as these statements from Svāminārāyaṇa may seem, this emphasis on enlightenment "here" can also be found in the Upaniṣads. The last mantra of MuU 2.1, for example, begins:

Dear son, he who knows the dweller within the cave-heart, his knot of ignorance is untied here (MuU 2.1.10).

Similarly, in the last section of that Upaniṣad, we find:

All his desires are destroyed here (MuU 3.2.2).

Both KaU 6.14 and BU 4.4.7 identically talk of the enlightened person who has overcome all desires for māyic pleasures. Then, that

mortal becomes immortal and experiences Brahman here.

On commenting on all four of these phrases, the Bhāṣyakāra explains the "here" ['atra' or 'iha'] to mean "in this very body, on this very realm, i.e. while alive."⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ MuU-SB 2.1.10, pp. 266-67; MuU-SB 3.2.2, pp. 292-93; KaU-SB 6.14, p. 166; BU-SB 4.4.7, p. 273.

The Bhagavad-Gītā, too, has such mentions of “here” related to the enlightened brahmic state [brāhmī sthiti]. For example:

Even here, māyic existence is overcome by those whose minds are established in equality. Brahman is equal and guile-less. Therefore, they are established in Brahman (BG 5.19).

This earthly enlightened state continues to be described further on in the Bhagavad-Gītā’s fifth chapter, where a person without any desires and in complete control of his senses and mind is revealed as a “mukta” (28) and “brahmabhūta”, i.e. brahmarūpa (24), having indeed attained brahmanirvāṇa (24, 25 and 26) or the brahmic state (20) “here, before the body is shed” (23).

Similar and other characteristics can be found in BG 2 of the person with equipoised mind (“sthitaprajña”), in BG 6 of the “yogin”, in BG 7 of the “jñānin”, in BG 12 of the beloved devotee (“priya bhakta”), and in BG 14 of the person who has transcended the influence of all māyic qualities (“guṇatīta”) – all descriptions, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, of the brāhmī sthiti or brahmarūpa jīvan-mukta.⁴³¹ Svāminārāyaṇa similarly describes this state of living enlightenment as one characterised by complete desirelessness for worldly pleasures [Vac. Gaḍh. I.56, Vac. Gaḍh. I.60, Vac. Gaḍh. II.4], equanimity amid all dualities [Vac. Loyā.16, Vac. Loyā.10, Vac. Gaḍh. II.1, Vac. Gaḍh. II.4], and independence from the body, senses, faculties, and all other māyic or karmic influences [Vac. Gaḍh. I.62, Vac. Sār.11, Vac. Loyā.10, Vac. Amd.2]. Most importantly, it is a state of complete self- and God-realisation, wherein the jīvan-

⁴³¹ BG-SB 18.54, p. 361. See also IU-SB 6-7, pp. 15-17, CU-SB 8.3.3, pp. 352-53 and CU-SB 8.12.1, pp. 384-86 for similar upaniṣadic references to a pre-mortem state of spiritual perfection.

mukta has a direct experience of Parabrahman in all his resplendent glory [Vac. Gaḍh. I.20, Vac. Gaḍh. I.23, Vac. Sār.16], both within his own soul [Vac. Sār.10, Vac. Sār.12, Vac. Gaḍh. II.8, Vac. Gaḍh. II.62] and wherever he turns [Vac. Gaḍh. I.26, Vac. Kār.7], as if Parabrahman or his abode are not an atom away [Vac. Sār.10]. The mukta's senses and mind are now totally engrossed in Parabrahman [Vac. Gaḍh. I.51, Vac. Kār.1]. Nothing else remains noticeable [Vac. Gaḍh. I.24, Vac. Gaḍh. I.26]; he experiences God in everyone and in everything [Vac. Kār.7].

A valid question at this stage would be: Why does a jīvan-mukta live on at all? Should he or she not die straightaway and transcend into blissful fellowship with God in his abode?

The answer is that the jīvan-mukta, even while freed of all māyic influence and therefore not accruing any *new* karmas, still has a residual stock of *past* karmas (called prārabdha) which have been activated and need to be depleted. These are responsible for the current gross+subtle body. As soon as they are exhausted, no further reason remains for the body to exist, and the soul can then discard it and transcend to Akṣaradhāma. While alive, though, it must be stressed, the body carries no sway over the liberated soul within. Svāminārāyaṇa explains with various analogies that the soul “rattles” distinctly separate from within the body, like a sword in its scabbard or a seed within a dried mango; the body is merely the old slough on a moulting snake to be shortly shed (Vedarasa, p.149; see also BU 4.4.7).

More about this enlightened state – both pre- and post-mortem – is better explained in terms of the liberated soul’s relationship with Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, to which we now progress.

11.2.3) Ontological Distinction of Muktas from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman

The life of a mukta might be referred to as ‘communion’, a sharing in common life, in that the liberated soul has a form identical in shape⁴³² and divinity to Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, it shares certain qualities with them, and enjoys the same blissful experience as they do. Yet it is this sharing that, paradoxically, confirms their mutual distinction, for Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that there is never an ontological henosis of the muktas with either Akṣarabrahman or Parabrahman. The eternal entities always retain their coherence and internal consistency, even in the muktas’ state of liberation. So when Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. II.38,

When such an ekāntika bhakta [perfect devotee] abandons his physical body, he ‘merges’ into Śrī Kṛṣṇa Bhagavān,

he immediately clarifies:

Such ‘merging’ should be understood as follows: A person who is very greedy is said to ‘merge’ into money; a person who is very lustful is said to ‘merge’ into his beloved; and when a person who is very rich but childless receives a son, he is said to ‘merge’ into his son. In this way, a person should be known as having ‘merged’ into whatever he is attached to. However, this ‘merging’ is not like that of water merging with water or like fire merging with fire.

⁴³² It should be clarified that the brahmatanu (brahmic body), which is identical in shape to Parabrahman’s divine form, is possible only in videha mukti in Akṣaradhāma, not on earth during jīvan-mukti.

Thus:

If a devotee has 'merged' into his iṣṭadeva, he would never develop affection for anything else except his iṣṭadeva. In fact, he would continuously think of him.

Similarly, in Vac. Gaḍh. III.3, Svāminārāyaṇa talks of the ekāntika bhakta

(realised devotee) "entering" Vāsudeva Bhagavān. Again, he at once goes on to clarify:

But what is meant by 'entering'? Well, that devotee has affection for the divine form of Vāsudeva Bhagavān, who dwells within a mass of divine light. Due to that affection, he has constant awareness of the form of Vāsudeva Bhagavān in his mind, and he behaves as if he is infatuated by that form.

Svāminārāyaṇa is thus pointing to an intense lovesome engrossment of the muktas with Parabrahman, where their senses and mind are totally consumed by and immersed in Parabrahman and Parabrahman alone, an outcome of their profound, singular devotion for him in the brahmic state. Only in this sense is there any 'merging' or 'entering', but never a union of beings.

So then what is one to make of śāstric statements proclaiming the oneness or equality of such elevated souls and Parabrahman? For example:

Nirañjanaḥ paramaṃ sāmyaṃ upaiti |

He who is free from the stains [of māyā] attains the highest "sāmyaṃ" [literally, 'equality' or 'similarity'] (MuU 3.1.3).

Svāminārāyaṇa cites this very verse in Vac. Sār.11 and explains:

When one attains the grace of God, one becomes an ekāntik bhakta [perfect devotee]. Even the śrutis proclaim: 'Nirañjanaḥ paramaṃ sāmyaṃ upaiti |' The meaning of this Vedic verse is that a person

who is free from the stains of māyā attains qualities similar to those of God. That is, just as God is never bound by any pure or impure karmas that he may perform, the mukta is also never bound by pure or impure karmas.... Moreover, just as God is independent, that devotee also becomes independent. Such powers can be attained only by the grace of God (Vac. Sār.11).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus elucidates “sāmya” in the verse as meaning “sādharma”, i.e. qualitative similarity, not equality or identity. The Bhāṣyakāra further elaborates: Similarity is predicated on distinction. Only two or more distinct things can be similar. If they become the very same thing, they would be nothing else with which to be similar. Therefore, the muktas do not become one with Parabrahman; they simply become *like* him.⁴³³ Even then, Svāminārāyaṇa qualifies here, this ‘supreme similarity’ pertains to the muktas becoming, like Parabrahman, free from the binding forces of māyā – but not further.

This same Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad verse appears again in Vac. Kār.1, this time in a question posed to Svāminārāyaṇa as part of an interesting dialectic sermon. The enquirer, Gopālānanda Svāmī, also cites BG 4.10 –

Bahavo jñānatapasā pūtā madbhāvam āgatāḥ |

Many who have been purified by austerities in the form of knowledge have attained my qualities

– on his way to asking what to make of such statements.

⁴³³ See BS-SB 3.3.18, p. 326; BS-SB 4.4.4, p. 419; BG-SB 14.2, pp. 292-93.

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and Bhagavad-Gītā statements (and any other similar ones) refer to the state of liberation, yet even then, the similarity with or receiving of Parabrahman's qualities should be interpreted to relate to the same form and divinity as Parabrahman; nothing more. Having transcended māyā, the souls become divine, and so are no longer under the shackles of the mortal body or karmic law. But they do not in essence become Parabrahman.

In another sermon, Nityānanda Svāmī asks more specifically, citing also from the Bhagavad-Gītā:

But when all of the muktas are free from the association of māyic qualities [guṇas], and having become nirguṇa, dwell in Akṣaradhāma along with God – who dwells there in the same manner – then all of the muktas are nirguṇa and composed of consciousness. Also, as explained by 'Mama sādharmaṃ āgatāḥ [BG 14.2]', they have attained qualities similar to those of God. How, then, should we understand the distinction between the muktas and God?

To this Svāminārāyaṇa replies with two traditional analogies in terms with which his audience can relate. In the first analogy, he begins:

Look at the moon and the stars. Isn't there a difference between the two? They are not similar in terms of brightness, and there is a vast difference between their sizes as well. All of the herbs are nourished by the moon, but not by the stars. Also, it is the moon that dispels the darkness of the night, not the stars. God and the muktas differ in the same way.

Svāminārāyaṇa alludes here to the greater power and superior nature of Parabrahman compared to the muktas, and his ability to support and empower others and dispel their ignorance, which is wholly beyond the muktas

themselves. Making this superiority more explicit in the second analogy, he continues:

Also, a king and his servant are both the same in that both are humans, yet the authority, power, beauty and charm of the king are by far superior. His servant, regardless of how great he may be, cannot achieve what the king can achieve.

Thus, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

In the same way, Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa is the all-doer, the cause of all, the controller of all; he is extremely attractive, extremely radiant, and extremely powerful; also, he possesses the kartum, akartum and anyathā-kartum powers. If he wishes, he can eclipse all of the muktas of Akṣaradhāma by his own divine light and prevail alone. Also, if he wishes, he can accept the bhakti of the muktas and reside with them. He can eclipse even Akṣara, in the form of the Akṣaradhāma in which he dwells, and preside alone independently. If he chooses, he is capable of supporting the countless muktas by his own power, without even needing Akṣaradhāma.... [T]hrough his powers, God reigns as supreme. He who equates God with Akṣara and the other muktas should be regarded as evil-minded and as a grave sinner (Vac. Loyā.13).

Svāminārāyaṇa is unequivocal here and in several other sermons about the absolute and eternal superiority of Parabrahman over the liberated souls, thereby also confirming their internal distinction. For example, even when Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 to say,

A devotee in the abode of God who has attained attributes similar to God also possesses a form similar to that of God,

he immediately goes on to clarify:

Nevertheless, that devotee is still a mukta, and God is, after all, Puruṣottama. Indeed, God is supreme amongst everyone and is fit to be worshipped by everyone. He is also their master. No one, however, can fathom the greatness of that God. He has a divine form, is nirguṇa, and is worthy of being meditated upon. In fact, that form of God is such that a person who meditates upon him becomes nirguṇa himself (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

As we learned first in the chapter on Parabrahman, he is sarvopari, reigning supreme above everyone and everything; one without second. So as elevated and similar to Parabrahman as these countless millions of muktas are, their divinity or freedom from māyā in no way challenges or undermines God's paramount position.

Only God is like God. Many have attained qualities similar to his by worshipping him, yet they certainly do not become like God (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

In other words, the liberated soul remains a soul. It becomes, at the very most, in a very limited way, *homoiousian* with Parabrahman, but never completely *homoousian* with him.

The ontological distinction of muktas from Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman becomes a topic of keen debate in the Brahmasūtras. From the beginning of BS 4.2, the discussion focuses on how various bodily functions and the senses, mind, vital breaths and material elements of a person dissolve upon death. At BS 4.2.14, it is confirmed that even the subtle elements and the soul find rest in Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman during the state of deep sleep and the period of final dissolution. 'But is this combining a total union of beings?' asks the inquirer. No, explains the Sūtrakāra at 4.2.15. They are merely inseparable ["avibhāga"], because that is how the texts ["vacanāt"] describe the soul and Parabrahman. The Bhāṣyakāra confirms that it is not an ontological dissolving, as this would mean a metaphysical transubstantiation of one entity (a jīva or

īśvara) into another (Parabrahman). This is impossible. Statements which seem to suggest such a union during the state of liberation, for example,

As flowing rivers merge into the ocean discarding names and forms, so does the knower [brahmarūpa mukta], free of names and forms, attain the divine Puruṣa, who is greater than the greatest (MuU 3.2.8),

need to be properly understood. The Bhāṣyakāra cautions here that the analogy should not be simplistically taken to mean an ontological ‘merging’ of the liberated soul in Puruṣottama. If indeed the terms ‘astam gacchanti’ used to describe the rivers above were to be taken literally to mean ‘merging’, then the same words are used to describe the setting sun. Then, ‘the sun has set in the east’ would mean it has become one with the east, losing its individuality, and so would never be able to rise the following morning. Words need to be interpreted in their proper context, not always literally, and, like all analogies, the above has its natural limitations; not all aspects of the analogue (rivers) should be foolishly transposed onto the target (mukta). The analogy is only pointing to the fact that the rivers are no longer identifiable after they reach the ocean. In the same way, the mukta is so overwhelmed with intense love for Parabrahman upon realising him, that it loses all awareness of its self and ceases to be identifiable by its bodily name and appearance. It is, as if, immersed in God.⁴³⁴

Other instances of terms such as “ekibhavanti” (‘they become one’ [MuU 3.2.7]) – and statements already cited in the Vacanāmṛt mentioned above, i.e. MuU 3.1.3,

⁴³⁴ MuU-SB 3.2.8 pp. 297-98 and BS-SB 4.2.15 p. 402. See also BS-SB 4.4.4, p. 419 for a very similar discussion, in which the Bhāṣyakāra cites more fully the three analogies used by Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. II.38.

BG 4.10 and BG 14.2 – are similarly explained by the Bhāṣyakāra as referring to not a non-dualistic conflation of natures (“svarūpādvaita”), but an engrossment (“sanlagnatā”) and sharing of qualities (“sādharyma”).⁴³⁵

The Brahmasūtra text is keen to qualify even such qualitative similarity between liberated souls and Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. Taking this up in the very last adhikaraṇa, at BS 4.4.17-22, the Sūtrakāra argues that while it is true that brahmarūpa muktas receive the qualities of Akṣarabrahman⁴³⁶ (which are also ones enjoyed by Parabrahman), this does not constitute a blanket bestowal of all attributes and powers. It is with “the exception of world-functions” (“jagadvyāpāravarjyam” [BS 4.4.17]), i.e. the creating, sustaining, governing, pervading, supporting, empowering, dissolving, etc. of the world. Such powers remain the exclusive preserve of Parabrahman, and by his eternal wish, of Akṣarabrahman.⁴³⁷

After the penultimate sūtra BS 4.4.21 (already cited above in proving that the similarity is limited to the muktas’ blissful experience of Parabrahman), the Bhāṣyakāra further qualifies that a mukta therefore cannot uphold Parabrahman and the countless millions of muktas within Akṣaradhāma as Akṣarabrahman does, nor can it grant liberation to other aspiring souls. In fact, the Bhāṣyakāra

⁴³⁵ MuU-SB 3.2.7, p. 297. See also MuU-SB 3.1.3, p. 284; BG-SB 4.10, pp. 97-98; BG-SB 14.2, pp. 292-93.

⁴³⁶ For example, those cited at CU 8.7.1, i.e. being without evil and free of old age, death, sorrow, hunger and thirst, and having all desires and wishes fulfilled.

⁴³⁷ BS-SB 4.4.17, pp. 427-28.

clarifies, the qualities and body a brahmarūpa mukta receives from Akṣarabrahman are those which facilitate the perfect devotional relationship with Parabrahman in the state of liberation.⁴³⁸

It is this relationship between the muktas and Parabrahman that we shall now attempt to briefly understand.

11.2.4) Svāmi-Sevaka Relationship of Muktas with Parabrahman

It was evident from Svāminārāyaṇa's revelations about Parabrahman in chapter 6 that his favourite analogy to help describe him is that of the king – the sovereign master reigning supreme over his land and subjects. He employs it to impart various theological truths, sometimes even of other entities. In the chapter on Akṣarabrahman, we saw how in Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 he extends the analogy to describe the Sant (Brahmasvarūpa Guru) as the queen. He explains: Just as a queen, on account of her being the king's consort, enjoys equal authority and influence over his empire (at least in the politico-social milieu of nineteenth century India when Svāminārāyaṇa was speaking), so, too, does the Guru over Parabrahman's dominion, on account of his unique, preeminent and eternal relationship with the sovereign lord of all lords.

Svāminārāyaṇa expands the analogy further still in Vac. Loyā.13, this time incorporating muktas into the comparison. He likens them to servants while

⁴³⁸ BS-SB 4.4.21, pp. 430-31, BU-SB 4.4.4, p. 269, BS-SB 3.318, p. 326.

Parabrahman remains the impassable king. When Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to describe God in Vac. Gaḍh. III.37 as the “master” of the muktas and “worthy of being worshipped” by them, this provides a clearer indication of their relationship according to Svāminārāyaṇa. Since Parabrahman is the worshippable master, the muktas are his devout servants. This is the Svāmi-Sevaka-Saṃbandha, or master-servant relationship, that muktas enjoy with Parabrahman.

Svāminārāyaṇa makes this explicit in sermons such as Vac. Gaḍh. I.21 where he talks of muktas who “remain in the service” of Parabrahman as his “servants”.

A devotee who has reached Akṣaradhāma attains qualities similar to those of Akṣara and forever remains in the service [sevā] of God.... The countless millions of muktas, who have attained qualities similar to those of Akṣara, reside in that Akṣaradhāma, and all of them behave as servants [dās] of Puruṣottama. Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa himself is the master [svāmin] of them all and the Lord of the lords of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas.

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.63 he states:

In that Akṣaradhāma, countless millions of muktas, who have acquired qualities similar to those of God, remain in God’s service.

When instructing how a devotee should contemplate upon God, he includes in

Vac. Loyā.10 the following rumination:

‘He is the ātman of Akṣara and is also the ātman of the countless millions of muktas. I am the brahmarūpa servant [dās] of that Parabrahman Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa.’

Furthermore, Svāminārāyaṇa often describes these muktas in Gujarati as

“pārṣad”, or “attendants” [Vac. Gaḍh. I.71, Vac. Loyā.11, Vac. Pan.4, Vac. Pan.7,

Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Vac. Gaḍh. II.49, Vac. Gaḍh. II.62, Vac. Var.19, Vac. Gaḍh. III.5, Vac. Gaḍh. III.10, Vac. Gaḍh. III.21, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Vac. Amd.6]. To provide just two examples:

That God is the Lord of all lords. He is surrounded by immeasurable divine opulence and countless divine attendants, and he is the lord of countless millions of brahmāṇḍas (Vac. Pan.4).

In comparison, those who do the darśana of God's form and those who contemplate upon it escape from the bondage of kāla, karma and māyā; attain the highest state of enlightenment ['abhay-pad'; literally 'state of fearlessness']; and become attendants of God (Vac. Gaḍh. II.49).

Of course, as explained earlier, there are no specific *acts* of service in Akṣaradhāma for the muktas to discharge. They are engaged solely in the darśana of Parabrahman, enjoying his full and blissful self. The relationship here attests, rather, to the *spirit* of servitude and devotion that the muktas feel towards Parabrahman, even in their exalted brahmic state. This quickly dispels any misconception that the mukta's position resembles that of a slave, bound against its will and subjugated into service by some oppressive, tyrannical despot. After all, it is Parabrahman who imparts a divine body and qualities – just like his – to the muktas, and grants them the unparalleled bliss of his own self. Svāminārāyaṇa thus clarifies in Vac. Gaḍh. I.64 that the muktas' spirit of service is purely devotional, suffused with loving obedience, adoration and veneration for their lord.

After such a person's ātman has attained the brahmic state, he constantly remains in the service of Puruṣottama Bhagavān with love and great reverence (Vac. Gaḍh. I.64).

In fact, the muktas are so ardently devoted to God and find such delight in this form of devotion that, after describing their “radiant” and “divine form” in Akṣaradhāma, Svāminārāyaṇa adds at Vac. Amd.6:

There, they are forever eager for the service of God.

It is precisely this juxtaposition of the muktas – glorious and divine, completely beyond the influence of māyā now, and so free and perfect in every way – with their devotion and subservience to Parabrahman that makes their relationship with him rather remarkable. It is understandable that the aspiring devotee would surrender him/herself to God in earnest desire to be liberated from the torments and limitations of māyic existence. But now that liberation has been secured, and the mukta is enjoying unlimited bliss and freedom, what becomes the impetus for it to continue with such devotion? If the end has been accomplished (liberation), what need now is there for the means (subservient devotion)?

But this is precisely the point, we are informed, for this aptly confirms that such subservient devotion is indeed not just the means (sādhana) for liberation, but its very goal (sādhya), (even if the latter is of a superior, purer form). Hence, devout service does not cease upon becoming brahmarūpa. When describing the attributes of a perfect devotee, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

Moreover, even though he himself behaves as brahmarūpa, he does not abandon his feeling of servitude towards Puruṣottama Bhagavān; he staunchly worships God while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him (Vac. Loyā.1).

If anything, the worth of a brahmarūpa mukta's devotion is elevated even higher, for now it is absolutely pure and unconditional, rendered solely for the sheer joy of submitting itself to its compassionate, loving lord. It is thus, at the same time, a confession of the mukta's continuing insignificance – even while being brahmarūpa – as well as an extolment of Parabrahman's glory and an expression of appreciation for his untiring, loving grace.

The basis of this abiding relationship remains, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, the impassable greatness of Parabrahman. To help explain this in a little more detail, it would be useful to call upon two sermons wherein Svāminārāyaṇa employs similar analogies to convey two connected but slightly different theological points. In Vac. Gaḍh. II.67, he initiates the sermon by saying:

I wish to ask all of the sādhus the following question: A devotee of God leaves his body, becomes brahmarūpa, and attains the abode of God. Thereafter, what is the difference between that devotee and God, whereby the master-servant relationship between them still remains? After all, that devotee of God then becomes independent, just like God. He also becomes free from the shackles of kāla, karma and māyā – just like God. Therefore, what difference remains so that the master-servant relationship is maintained? This is my question.

The Vacanāmṛut notes that the paramahansas were unable to fully satisfy Svāminārāyaṇa with their replies, and so they requested Svāminārāyaṇa to answer his question himself. Thereupon he said:

The answer is as follows: In whatever way a devotee of God has realised God – i.e. 'God possesses this many powers; he possesses this much charm; he is the embodiment of bliss;' and so on – that is the extent to which he has realised the greatness of God. Then, when that devotee leaves his body and goes to the abode of God, he attains charm and powers based on the extent to which he has

realised the majesty of God. Despite this, that devotee still feels God's majesty in the form of his powers, charm, etc. to be much greater. He then realises, 'God has granted me just as many divine powers and as much charm as I had realised in him. Yet, God's divine powers and charm appear to be totally limitless. Like me, countless others have also attained qualities similar to that of God, yet, no one is capable of becoming like God.'

Asking "Why is this so?", Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain the unfathomable and unlimited nature of Parabrahman's greatness – his powers, bliss, charm, redemptive virtues and actions, etc. – such that it never diminishes in the slightest, even after granting countless millions of muktas their own divine powers and charm.

For example, if there were an ocean filled with freshwater from which all humans, animals and birds could drink as much as they wished and from which vessels could be filled, the water would still not decrease because of the vastness of the ocean. Similarly, God's greatness is extremely limitless; there is no way in which it can either increase or decrease. For this reason, then, those devotees of God who become like Brahman still behave as God's servants and engage in his worship.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes:

In this way, devotees of God attain qualities similar to those of God, and yet, the master-servant relationship between them is maintained. That is the answer to the question.

Svāminārāyaṇa's point is that despite the muktas becoming divine and sharing many of Parabrahman's qualities, they never forsake this devotional stance towards him because he forever remains infinitely beyond them. If anything, the devotion of the muktas becomes more intense and exalted, now that they have a fuller realisation of Parabrahman's unlimited greatness. In corroboration of this,

Svāminārāyaṇa employs in Vac. Sār.17 the same ocean imagery above along with another analogy, that of the limitless sky. He begins:

As the vision of a person who worships God becomes increasingly subtle, he realises the unlimited nature of God and he increasingly realises the greatness of God.

Svāminārāyaṇa then narrates various stages of a devotee's progressive journey in his understanding of God's nature (arising from his own progressive self-understanding), before applying the two analogies:

For example, ants, birds, men, cattle, horses, elephants, large crocodiles and fish all drink water from the ocean and become healthy; yet the ocean's level is not even slightly reduced. Thus, the greater the capacity of the being, the more it realises the vastness of the ocean.

Here is another example: a mosquito, a sparrow, a kite, a hawk, an *analapakṣī*⁴³⁹ and *Garuḍa*⁴⁴⁰ all fly in the sky, yet to all of them the sky is limitless. However, the greater the strength of their wings, the more they realise the vastness of the sky and their own inferiority.

"Similarly," Svāminārāyaṇa concludes,

as the powers of these devotees increase, they realise the greatness of God more and more. Moreover, as their own powers increase, their master-servant relationship with God is also consolidated (Vac. Sār.17).

If in the previously cited sermon Svāminārāyaṇa emphasised that Parabrahman's unlimited greatness remains undiminished despite bestowing countless millions

⁴³⁹ Literally meaning 'bird of fire', this is a large, mythological bird that is said to never land on the ground and have the strength to carry elephants as it flies. *Bhagavadgomandal*, ed. Bhagvatsinhji (Rajkot, India: Pravin Prakashan; 1986), p. 230.

⁴⁴⁰ This brilliant eagle-like bird with white head, red wings, and a golden male body, serves as Viṣṇu's mount and is considered to be one of his most devout attendants. See, for example, *Mahābhārata Ādi Parva* 23-34. BG 10.30 also alludes to it as the best or greatest among all birds.

of liberated souls with the brahmic state, hence the master-servant relationship remains intact, Svāminārāyaṇa's import here is that even a perfect devotee like a brahmarūpa mukta remains in devout service to Parabrahman for only one who is brahmarūpa can best realise the limitless greatness of Parabrahman, further enhancing the master-servant relationship.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus warns against anything that would violate this important devotional relationship with God. In a sermon delivered during one of his illnesses, Svāminārāyaṇa said:

Furthermore, by the grace of God, those who are devotees of God may become like... Akṣara. However, no one is capable of becoming like Śrī Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa. Therefore, just as one shuns a vile person, one should immediately shun the company of those persons and those scriptures that refute the upāsanā of God and break one's master-servant relationship with God (Vac. Kār.10).

11.3) Way to Liberation

In many ways, the final portion of this chapter concluding our exposition of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology is a recapitulation of many of the key doctrinal points already covered up till now. This is, again, revealing, reminding us of the nature of systematic theology, where the individual parts come together at the end, and, when the final part is 'slotted in', the whole becomes properly functional and all the more appreciable.⁴⁴¹ Of course, the task of theology is not simply the mechanical assembling of theoretical cogs and wheels, nor can we

⁴⁴¹ I am reminded again of Gavin Flood's metaphor for a project of this type. He likened it to the (re)assembling of an orange peel, rather than the unfolding of a sheet of paper. 'Everything will come together in the end,' he assured.

expect for an exposition of such a nature to function like clockwork, for theology is neither a machine nor God so simple or facilely reducible that he can be understood by a clever combination of doctrines. Nonetheless, the bringing together of many complex ideas within a coherently structured framework can indeed advance or at least aid our always-limited understanding of God. And as in assembling a still-imperfect, intricate scale model, the endeavour of systematic theology duly demands a wholesome level of patience, application, and cogency.

The subject of liberation perhaps more than any other doctrine also calls for good degree of humility. The broad, hefty and exceptionally complex topic cannot possibly be covered with its full gamut of accompanying issues in a few thousand words. Indeed, any treatment within even a few hundred pages would still fall woefully short; a treatise similar to the preceding overview of the five eternal realities could provide only a similarly brief introduction. We must therefore content ourselves with the following sections, wherein we can touch upon only a handful of the most fundamental topics and questions within the field of soteriology and orthopraxy, and merely point at possible ways of addressing them based on the theological sources of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition.

11.3.1) Grace and Effort

For our starting point in discussing the way to liberation, we should address the fundamental soteriological question of not *how* liberation can be achieved, but whether it can be *achieved* at all. That is, is it a state that really comes as the fruition of one's endeavours – often termed 'sādhanā' (literally 'means'), also

referred to as praxis – or is it purely an unearned gift from God? Framed another way, what roles do God’s grace and the aspirant’s efforts play in securing liberation?

We have already seen in Part 2 from our discussion about the ‘Source of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology’ how God can only truly be realised by revelation, itself a supreme act of his loving grace. To remind ourselves of the important Upaniṣadic verse we cited there:

This Self [Paramātman] cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing [i.e. learning]. He is attained only by the one whom the Self [Paramātman] chooses. To such a one, the Self [Paramātman] reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

When elaborating on the term “vṛnute” (‘chooses’), the Bhāṣyakāra explains this as the gracious and loving acceptance by Parabrahman – whom he variously describes as “an ocean of great compassion” (paramadayāsāgara) and “a treasure trove of grace” (kṛpānidhi) – of the worshipper who is solely dedicated to him (svaikaniṣṭha upāsaka). Only to such a vessel of Parabrahman’s grace (paramātmakṛpābhājana) does he become realisable (“labhya”) and reveal himself.

The Bhāṣyakāra adds that instruction or intellectual power or scriptural learning are representative of all endeavours that can be performed in an attempt to reach God. They alone are inadequate. Parabrahman thus remains “kṛpaikasādhyā”, attainable by grace alone.

The Bhāṣyakāra is careful, however, of not being overly forceful in pitting human effort against divine grace. In adding the “kevala” (‘alone’) in his comment, he makes the clarification that while all endeavours are inadequate in realising God, they *alone* are inadequate. They can still be effective in pleasing God, who will then bestow his liberating grace upon his beloved devotee. To be absolutely clear here: God is pleased with the devotee’s devout, sincere and persistent *effort*, or striving, not necessarily the ‘works’ themselves. God himself remains infinitely beyond their reach. So God’s grace is absolutely indispensable, but efforts are not totally useless either, even though they can only please God and never (fully or directly) earn his grace.

If there are any efforts that the Bhāṣyakāra does dismiss as utterly futile, they are the “self-imagined means” (svataḥkalpitasādhana) of a person who refuses to follow the authoritative teachings enjoined in revealed texts or by the Guru.

These qualifications are necessary because of the immediately following verse in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad:

This Self [Paramātman] cannot be attained by one who is weak, nor by inadvertency, nor by austerities marked without authoritative endorsement. But the knower who strives by these means attains this Self [Paramātman] and enters Brahmadhāma (MuU 3.2.4).

Thus, when these same efforts – including those mentioned at MuU 3.2.3 and all others – are informed by correct theological knowledge (‘brahmavidyā’), practiced according to the calling and guidance of the Guru, and directed solely to

pleasing God, they can indeed play some useful (though still meagre) part in securing liberation by God's grace.⁴⁴²

Praxis, therefore, is not in total contradistinction to the idea of *sola gratia*. All efforts are directed to pleasing God and thereafter receiving his grace, which alone is capable of granting liberation. Liberation thus comes at the end of one's endeavours, but not as their fruit. With liberation being totally unattainable by human effort alone, it leaves no scope for finite souls to boast of it as their 'accomplishment'. What praxis does do, however, is to develop the aspirant into a 'vessel' ('pātra', or 'bhājana' as the Bhāṣyakāra states) capable of effectively receiving and, importantly, retaining and responding to God's grace. Without in any sense diminishing the potency of God's grace, this also helps explain why God is not an unjust or whimsical distributor, injudiciously doling out his favour. In so saying, however, nor does God relinquish his absolute prerogative to shower his grace upon whomsoever he pleases.

But while God's grace remains indisputably free, it is by no means cheap. When Muktānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Sār.11,

Personal endeavour is mentioned in the scriptures, but how much is actually achieved by personal endeavour and how much is achieved by God's grace?

Svāminārāyaṇa presents a list of attributes of a recipient of God's grace. This includes a strict observance of dharmic disciplines such as non-violence and

⁴⁴² Based on MuU-SB 3.2.3-4, pp. 293-95. See also KaU-SB 2.23, pp. 118-19.

eightfold brahmacarya, an absolutely firm realisation of oneself as the ātman, firm detachment from worldly pleasures, and intense and enduring devotional faith⁴⁴³ – all, of course, developed “by the words of a true Guru and the scriptures”. Svāminārāyaṇa then concludes:

God's grace is only bestowed upon one who has such characteristics.

Perhaps sensing the enormity of the task of perfectly cultivating these characteristics, Nityānanda Svāmī firstly acknowledges Svāminārāyaṇa's point but then immediately asks:

But what becomes of one who has some deficiency in cultivating these characteristics?

Svāminārāyaṇa forthrightly answers:

Then he does not attain ultimate liberation, i.e. God's Akṣaradhāma. Instead, he attains some other abode of God.

Svāminārāyaṇa refers here to the abodes of other avatāras and even the paradisiacal realms of the devas, which, in comparison to Akṣaradhāma, are as

⁴⁴³ These four aspects of 'sāadhanā' relate to what is traditionally termed within Svāminārāyaṇa texts as Dharma, Jñāna (not to be confused with the broader, more theological knowledge of Brahman and Parabrahman), Vairāgya, and Bhakti. Collectively, they are called 'Ekāntika Dharma' or 'Bhāgavata Dharma', and feature repeatedly in the Vacanāmṛt and Svāmīnī Vāto as a matrix for endeavouring towards pleasing God. For example:

A devotee who in his mind desires to intensely please God can do so by developing the following: unshakeable resolve in observing the dharma of one's varṇa and āśrama, intensely firm ātman-realisation, dislike for all objects except God, and devotion which is devoid of all desires for fruits and which is accompanied with an understanding of God's greatness. It is through these four spiritual endeavours that God can be extremely pleased. They are collectively known as Ekāntika Dharma (Vac. Gaḍh. I.21).

When does one receive the gracious favour of Śrījī Mahārāja [i.e. Svāminārāyaṇa] and the Great Sant? When one staunchly observes dharma, has an extremely firm understanding of the ātman [as one's self] and of Paramātman, an intensely firm dislike for all sensorial objects, and singular devotion towards Puruṣottama Bhagavān which is accompanied with a realisation of his greatness (SV 3.25).

good as naraka, he states. Even after conceding that the soul would not enter naraka itself or lower life-forms, but repeatedly pass through only the lives of a deva and human being until becoming desire-free and capable of upholding God's grace, Svāminārāyaṇa ends his answer by reiterating his earlier position, this time with added force.

Hence, whether it takes one life or innumerable lives, only when one develops the previously described characteristics and becomes extremely free of worldly desires, does one become a worthy vessel of receiving God's grace, and only then will one attain ultimate liberation. Without it, one will definitely not attain it.

In the strictest sense, then, Svāminārāyaṇa does not pretend God's grace to be totally unmerited favour, even if it is only so that it can be properly received and retained.

Yet Svāminārāyaṇa is equally sure in chiding those who rely solely on their endeavours to achieve liberation, discounting the absolute need and power of God. He likens it to the "foolish" effort of attempting to cross the ocean by tying gourds to oneself (Vac. Gaḍh. II.35). He even disregards realising one's self as distinct from the body as useless for final liberation – even if such a distinction were possible to realise independently. It might prove helpful in negotiating the relatively minor challenges of daily life – just as, for example, a swimmer may be able to cross a river – but at the time of death, which Svāminārāyaṇa likens to an ocean again, "only the firm refuge of God is helpful"; all other endeavours are "of no use whatsoever at the time of death" (Vac. Gaḍh. I.60).

Evoking the imagery of crossing the ocean of life and death (saṃsāra) once more, Svāminārāyaṇa brings together these points in Vac. Gaḍh. I.37.

A person without such a [resolute] conviction [of God's nature] attempts to attain liberation using the strength of his own endeavours, but he does not strive for it by relying on the grace of God. Such a senseless person is as foolish as someone wishing to cross the ocean by his own efforts, without the aid of a ship. Conversely, one who wishes for liberation through the grace of God is wise, like one who wishes to cross the ocean by travelling in a ship.

“After leaving their body,” Svāminārāyaṇa adds, these wise devotees attain a form of pure consciousness in the abode of God and forever remain in his presence.

This might prompt us to frame our discussion another way, asking the classical question of whether liberation is a reward or gift from God. Surely grace has to be unmerited for it to be meaningfully grace at all. So can it ever be earned? But calling liberation a gift would implicate God with unfairness, for can liberation be bestowed arbitrarily upon the completely undeserving and unworthy? Some effort at least would seem warranted. Yet no matter how hard and long a seeker endeavours, so ultimately insignificant are his/her efforts in winning over the otherwise unattainable God, and God's blissful experience so staggeringly disproportionate to those efforts, that it can neither be called a reward in any legitimate sense. How can such a paradox be resolved?

Perhaps a more useful way within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology to resolve this important soteriological conundrum is to understand liberation as neither gift nor reward, but with reference to the model of a jackpot prize and the lottery

ticket that one buys for winning it. So negligible is the price of the ticket which leads to the jackpot that to call it as being 'earned' is ridiculous. Yet the prize is not totally arbitrary either, for only one who has bought a ticket is eligible to receive the prize. Of course, the analogy breaks down at the point where it is not sheer chance that provides the winner of the lucky draw, but God himself who decisively chooses ("vṛnute") the recipient of his overwhelming favour. The means for liberation are thus insignificant but nevertheless necessary; utterly meagre but not totally worthless either. They are necessary and worthwhile for receiving the gracious favour of God, who graciously grants his blissful experience in liberation infinitely many times more intensely that it could ever be earned or fully deserved, if at all.

At this must point we should ask the more pointed question: What form does this loving grace take?

The Bhāṣyakāra answers when commentating on KaU 2.23, the same verse found at MuU 3.2.3 cited above.

This is the form of his [Paramātman's] grace: Seeing his devotee earnestly endeavouring by several means to please him, God, the ocean of grace that he is, grants that devotee access to the profound association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru – who is his best worshipper, who has the greatest love for him, who eternally has a complete and perfect realisation of him, and who can be regarded as his own form – so that his devotee can easily realise him [Paramātman]. Then, by listening, reflecting, etc. upon the Guru's teachings, and serving him with the belief that he is the very form of God – as directed by such statements as 'Who has the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23)', etc. – that devotee, having developed a spiritual oneness with

Brahman [i.e. become brahmarūpa] and having received the grace of God, realises Paramātman.⁴⁴⁴

The following sections can now serve as an elaboration upon these means to liberation made possible by God's grace.

11.3.1) Knowledge of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman

We learned at the beginning of this chapter of the nature of the soul's karmic predicament – incessant transmigration through the cycle of births and deaths – and its cause as ignorance or avidyā in the form of māyā. To dispel this veil of ignorance and break free from this transmigratory cycle, the Vedantic texts unequivocally state:

Vidyayā vindate'mṛtam |

By knowledge, one attains the immortal state (KeU 2.4).

Vidyayā'mṛtam aśnute |

By knowledge, one enjoys the immortal state (IU 11).

The Vacanāmṛut is similarly clear about the essential role of knowledge in leading to liberation from saṃsāra, from both śāstric statements cited in its sermons – such as

Ṛte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna (Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti⁴⁴⁵)

⁴⁴⁴ KaU-SB 2.23, p. 119.

⁴⁴⁵ As explained earlier, this is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* at 115.7.

and

Tam eva vīditvā'timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte'yanāya ||

Only by knowing him [Parabrahman] does one pass beyond death;
there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8)

– to statements from Svāminārāyaṇa himself:

The knowledge of God's nature and the knowledge of God's
greatness are the two extraordinary means to liberation (Vac.
Gaḍh. I.57).

Ways to acquiring this knowledge of God is something we have already discussed
at some length in Part 2 when delineating the sources of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu
theology. Here, it would be useful to recall one especially relevant sermon where
Svāminārāyaṇa ties in the realisation of God's nature with liberation while
reiterating the enormity of this task and the way to accomplishing it through the
Sant, or Brahmasvarūpa Guru. He states in Vac. Kār.12:

This māyā of the jīva, i.e. the causal body, is attached so
inextricably to the jīva that they cannot be separated by any means
whatsoever. However, if a person attains the association of the
Sant, realises the nature of God through the words of that Sant,
meditates on that nature of God and imbibes the words of God in
his heart, then the causal body attached to his jīva is burnt
asunder.

“However,” Svāminārāyaṇa concludes in a particularly emphatic closing
statement,

even if one were to try a million other methods, one could not
destroy the jīva's ignorance in the form of the causal body.

We also learned in our elucidation of Parabrahman that as absolutely
indispensable the knowledge of God is, the most accurate description of his

limitless, unfathomable greatness is that Parabrahman is greater than

Akṣarabrahman:

Akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ (MuU 2.1.2) ||

This being so, we cannot really begin to know Parabrahman without first fully knowing Akṣarabrahman (who also reveals Parabrahman). Equally, if knowing Parabrahman is absolutely essential for liberation, and the best that can be said about him is that he transcends Akṣarabrahman, it follows that knowing Akṣarabrahman is also absolutely essential to securing ultimate liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus writes in one of his doctrinal letters:

There is no path to liberation without knowing Brahman.⁴⁴⁶

This is why we find the Upaniṣads (e.g. MuU 1.2.13) configuring brahmavidyā – the highest form of vidyā, which leads to final liberation – as the knowledge of both Brahman and Parabrahman (or Akṣara and Puruṣottama).

Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato
brahmavidyām |

The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad also explains how to realise that highest knowledge, by imperatively and devoutly surrendering to the Guru – who is Brahman by nature, firmly established in Parabrahman, and the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts.

Tadvijñānārthaṃ sa gurum evābhigacchet samidhpaṇiḥ śrotriyaṃ
brahma niṣṭham (1.2.12) |

⁴⁴⁶ Vedarasa, p. 18.

Hence also, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, the 'desire to know Brahman' (brahmajijñāsā), enjoined at the very beginning of the Brahmasūtras, must also necessarily comprise the knowledge of both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman if it is to effectively result in final liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa states the same in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3, using the synonym 'brahmajñāna' for brahmavidyā.

Brahman is the cause and support of all, including Prakṛti-Puruṣa, etc., and pervades everything by its antaryāmin powers... Parabrahman, that is Puruṣottama Nārāyaṇa, is distinct from that Brahman, and also the cause, support and inspirer of Brahman. With such understanding, one should develop a oneness between one's jivātman and that Brahman and worship Parabrahman while maintaining a master-servant relationship with him. With such understanding, 'brahmajñāna' also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment (Vac. Gaḍh. II.3).

In this key theological statement, Svāminārāyaṇa points to the cosmic role of Akṣarabrahman, its ontological distinction from and subordination to Parabrahman, and also the soul's need for Akṣarabrahman to properly worship Parabrahman (upon which we shall further elaborate shortly), all of which constitutes brahmajñāna/brahmavidyā, or what we might call theological knowledge.

11.3.2) Knowing and Serving Parabrahman Manifest through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

This returns us to Svāminārāyaṇa's familiar formulation of theological knowledge in Vac. Loyā.7. Framing it personally, in terms of the knower, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – having realised him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

What is immediately striking from this formulation of knowledge is that Svāminārāyaṇa constitutes it in terms of “serving” (what we shall be unpacking shortly, but for now can be understood as the physical, verbal and mental application of theological beliefs, i.e. sādhanā or praxis). For Svāminārāyaṇa, true knowledge immediately and irrevocably manifests itself (or results) in practice. And such practice is thoroughly informed by theological knowledge. Indeed, only then is ‘jñāna’ worthy of the name, and only then does it serve its purpose of being liberating.

The Bhāṣyakāra thus similarly defines ‘jñāna’ when commentating on BS 1.1.1 as follows:

Jñānaṃ ceha dhyānopāsanādirūpam |

And jñāna is the form of meditation, upāsanā, etc.,⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁷ BS-SB 1.1.1, p. 8.

where upāsanā, as we know, is ‘worship informed by correct theological knowledge’ and meditation is the mental application of that knowledge.

Knowledge and practice are more explicitly brought together in the soteriological context in IU 11.

Vidyām cā’vidyām ca yas-tad vedobhayam saha |
Avidyayā mṛtyum tīrtvā vidyayā’mṛtam aśnute ||

He who knows both ‘vidyā’ and ‘avidyā’ together, having crossed death by ‘avidyā’, by ‘vidyā’, enjoys the immortal state.

Here, the Bhāṣyakāra explains, ‘vidyā’ is shorthand for ‘brahmavidya’, the knowledge of (Akṣara)Brahman and Parabrahman. However, ‘avidyā’ in this instance does not mean ignorance, but that which is different from knowledge (‘jñānabhinna’), i.e. karma or action. This refers to the observance of religious, social and other duties prescribed by the scriptures and the Guru, i.e. one’s overall conduct (svācaraṇa) or praxis. Both must be necessarily practiced together, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses, for they are “mutually indispensable” and “mutually dependent” when endeavouring for liberation.⁴⁴⁸ Such intertwining and interlocking of praxis and doctrine thus relieves any tension between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ (jñāna and karma) often found preoccupying soteriological debates. It is also a key element of the Hindu conceptualisation of ‘theology’ that we shall be proposing and attempting to unravel in some detail in the final Part of this thesis. I therefore reserve further elaboration on this point for then.

⁴⁴⁸ IU-SB 11, pp. 20-21.

A further noteworthy point emerging from Svāminārāyaṇa's formulation at Vac. Loyā.7 is that he squarely makes the subject of this liberating knowledge and service not just God, but "God manifest before the eyes". Elaborating upon this in the same sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa defines "paripūrṇa jñāna [perfect theological knowledge]" as

to know and see with such an understanding of greatness that the God who dwells within all [material and spiritual realities] as their antaryāmin and as their cause is the very God who is manifest before the eyes.

What is crucial to note again is that, even when offering a definition of "perfect knowledge", Svāminārāyaṇa lays an equal emphasis on 'knowing' and 'seeing'. It is not enough, according to Svāminārāyaṇa, to merely *know* God as being so manifest "before the eyes", but it is equally necessary to *see* him. As we learnt in the section about 'Parabrahman as Pragaṭa', 'seeing' within such theological contexts is indicative of the face-to-face meeting with God, a personal, intimate encounter and devotional relationship with him. In a specifically liberative context, Svāminārāyaṇa states in Vac. Gaḍh. II.32:

The sole cause behind the jīva attaining liberation, transcending māyā and becoming like Brahman is its engagement in the knowledge, meditation, devotional songs, scriptural discourses, etc. of the manifest form before one's eyes of Vāsudeva Bhagavān, who is Puruṣottama. It is due to these that the jīva transcends māyā, attains an extremely elevated state, and also attains God's Akṣaradhāma.

From the cognate doctrine of 'Akṣarabrahman as Brahmasvarūpa Guru', we now know that all such theological statements containing the words 'God manifest before the eyes' forthrightly and exclusively denote the Brahmasvarūpa Guru,

through whom Parabrahman is substantively present and graciously active, and therefore through whom one can have such a personal, devotional relationship with God. As Svāminārāyaṇa himself revealed:

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes.... Since it is God who walks through his legs,... Since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27),

... when one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, 'I have had the darśana of God himself' (Vac. Sār.10).

Thus, while the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is revealed in and by the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to see the Guru is to see God; to relate to the Guru is to relate to God.

By expanding in Vac. Loyā.7 the definition of knowledge from beyond 'seeing' to include all of the senses as well as the mind and a spiritual experience, Svāminārāyaṇa further emphasises his conceptualisation of liberating 'knowledge' as a deep, personal engagement with pratyakṣa Parabrahman.

Calling it a part of "ātyantika jñāna [ultimate knowledge]", Svāminārāyaṇa says:

Thus, to know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience. Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

To secure liberation from saṃsāra, Svāminārāyaṇa is effectively calling for a full, direct and personal relationship with the Guru involving all of the senses and aspects of the mind and the spirit itself. Drawing from sermons such as Vac. Kār.11, Vac. Gaḍh. II.48, Vac. Gaḍh. II.55 and others, this relationship can be

understood to incorporate the following aspects: seeing the Guru going about his own daily acts of worship and service (i.e. relating through the sense of sight), listening to his sermons and teachings (sense of hearing), touching his feet or receiving his benedictory touch on the head (sense of touch), consuming sanctified food [prasāda] received from him (sense of taste), perceiving his distinctive odour (sense of smell), thinking of him (faculty of manas), reminiscing of him (buddhi), contemplating upon his divine nature and virtues (citta), mentally affirming him as the manifest form of God, one's liberator (ahamkāra), and enjoying his divine being (spiritual experience). It is Parabrahman's full and substantive presence in the Brahmasvarūpa Guru which allows for such a relationship with Parabrahman via the Guru, thereby allowing such knowing and serving of the Guru to be capable of securing ultimate liberation. Hence also the Upaniṣadic metaphor of Akṣarabrahman as the "setu" ('bridge') connecting humans to God (KaU 3.2, MuU 2.2.5, CU 8.4.1, SU 6.19).

This is the reason, it seems, we find a strongly recurrent theme throughout the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto where both Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reiterate the need to know, serve, love, obey, trust and surrender to the Guru as the way to overcoming māyā and securing liberation when God is not personally present on earth. For example:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him (Vac. Var.10).

It is clear from this that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend the liberative work of God to be limited to his own time on earth, and so reveals its continuation through the Guru. A seeker of liberation must therefore surrender to the Guru as he or she would to God in person.

As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 Svāminārāyaṇa firstly describes the insurmountability of māyā and how “no jīva can conquer it” alone. But then revealing “the means to transcend[ing] māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

What is important to note in these important soteriological statements is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned in tandem. For example, in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21, Svāminārāyaṇa stresses that all authoritative texts and wise seers reveal “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation.”

Whether this principle is understood after being told once or after being told a thousand times, whether it is understood today or after a thousand years, there is no option but to understand it.

“A person” who *has* understood this

has grasped all of the fundamental principles. What is more, he will never fall from the path of liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa concludes this sermon with the yet more emphatic statement:

Thus, this very fact is the essence of all of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

This final point is made even more explicit in Vac. Gaḍh. II.59, where

Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation.

He then goes on to conclude:

So, when one attains God or his Sant, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the self; this itself is ultimate liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī elaborates upon such ‘ultimate liberation’ (ātyantika mokṣa) and the way to securing it in his sermon at SV 5.5. Like Svāminārāyaṇa, he, too, aligns ‘manifest God’ with the ‘manifest Sant of God’.

Only ultimate liberation can be called liberation [mokṣa], but by entering the other abodes, one still has to return to the womb [i.e. the cycle of births and deaths], and as long as one has to return to the womb, it cannot be called liberation. Such liberation can be secured by seeking the refuge of manifest God or the manifest Ekāntika Sant of God, but this [granting of ultimate liberation] is not possible by others.

To reiterate the important clarification we learned earlier, the soteriological function of the “Sant”, “Sādhu”, “Bhakta”, “Satpuruṣa”, “great Puruṣa” described in these and all such statements unequivocally confirms his personhood as that of māyā-transcending Akṣarabrahman in the earthly form of the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru.

As if corroborating that this ‘serving’ of God manifest before the eyes does indeed also refer to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs in Vac. Gaḍh.

III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

Why? Because

such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates on how to serve the Guru “like God” in Vac. Var.5 by instructing perfectly “equal service” of both – for example, by offering the same mental worship to both – further establishing the full presence of God in the living Guru. Serving the Guru is thus serving God, the fruit of which, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, is that even “a devotee of the lowest calibre,” whose long and arduous spiritual advancement may span over a hundred lives, “will become a devotee of the highest calibre in this very life.”

This instruction of “equal service” is evocative of the famous proclamation at the end of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau |
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanaḥ ||

All objectives declared [in the sacred texts] shine forth [i.e. become attainable] for the great soul who offers the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23).

Svāminārāyaṇa himself substantiates such devotion to the Guru in Vac. Gaḍh.

II.28 by adding his personal example. He says:

Even I am the devotee of such a perfect Bhakta of God and offer my devotion to the Bhakta of God.

In stressing this as a crucial soteriological principle, Svāminārāyaṇa concluded this sermon with the following emphatic epilogue:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

11.3.2.1) Associating with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

What form(s) should this service of the Guru take? And what significance does this hold if all efforts for liberation should only be directed to pleasing God (in readiness for his essential grace)?

Svāminārāyaṇa provides a succinct answer to both these questions in the same sermon cited above before the emphatic ending.

The only method for a person to please God is to serve the Bhakta of God by thought, word and deed (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

Again, this is a striking revelation by Svāminārāyaṇa, made all the more emphatic with the 'ja' in Gujarati, making serving the Guru the *only* means to truly pleasing God. The means of serving the Guru, however, are noted as three-fold.

Svāminārāyaṇa calls upon the same three ways in Vac. Var.4, this time clarifying the concept of “service” as a holistic relationship⁴⁴⁹ with the Guru. When

Muktānanda Svāmī asked the important soteriological question,

For a devotee of God walking the path of devotion, which one spiritual endeavour incorporates all of the other endeavours for liberation?

Svāminārāyaṇa replied:

All of the spiritual endeavours for attaining liberation are incorporated in keeping the association – by thought, word and deed – of a Sant who possesses the 30 attributes of a Sādhu⁴⁵⁰.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī similarly states in SV 3.60:

A seeker of liberation becomes brahmarūpa if he faithfully associates with the Satpuruṣa by thought, word and deed.

This form of ‘association’ with the Guru – variously called “saṅga”, “prasaṅga” and “samāgama” in sampradāyic texts – warrants a little elaboration. Based on a collection of teachings from various theological sources of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, we can now unpack this relationship in an attempt to understand what it entails, even while appreciating that it cannot be compartmentalised into these three neat forms.

In the sermon just cited above, after Guṇātītānanda Svāmī offered this statement, a member from his audience asked him the same question we ourselves are

⁴⁴⁹ This is a broader rendering of the multivalent term “sevā” with which we began at Vac. Loyā.7. In Gujarati, the term “sevan” (present participle of the same verb) can also have connotations of ‘relating to, receiving or partaking, and absorbing’, for example, as one would with medicine or treatment.

⁴⁵⁰ These are described at BP 11.11.29-33. Svāminārāyaṇa mentions in Vac. Var.13 that God adopts these virtues when he manifests upon earth as a sādhu.

effectively asking now: What does it mean to associate with the Guru by thought, word and deed? Guṇātītānanda Svāmī replied:

[To associate] by deed is to do as the Satpuruṣa instructs; by word, is to extol the Satpuruṣa's infinite virtues; and by thought, is to not allow any disbelief towards the great Sādhu.

Briefly expanding upon each in turn now, to serve or associate with the Guru "by deed" – through one's actions – is simply to do as he instructs. When

Prasādānanda Svāmī asks Svāminārāyaṇa in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78,

What is the cause of the jīva's liberation?

Svāminārāyaṇa succinctly replies:

To do exactly as the Sant says without harbouring any doubts is the very cause of the jīva's liberation.

Again, in a sermon emphasising the essentiality of transcending the influences of māyā and realising the self to remain eternally happy, Svāminārāyaṇa concludes:

Only one who follows the commands of the Satpuruṣa is behaving as the ātman (Vac. Gaḍh. II.51).

This provides another example of the immediate connection Svāminārāyaṇa strikes between (external) actions and (internal) spiritual development, between outer behaviour (vartana) and inner state (sthiti). As we shall see shortly, the instruction at Vac. Gaḍh. II.51 is based on the practice of mentally 'joining' with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and realising him as one's true self, thereby acquiring his brahmic qualities and becoming brahmarūpa. By doing as the liberating Guru instructs, and not succumbing to the whims and distractions of the māyic mind, the aspirant is overcoming the limitations of his own material self and acting as

the ātman within, which he regards as assimilated with the Guru. In other words, he is emulating the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, the perfect devotee of God, and so acting as brahmarūpa (like Brahman) as he would in the state of living liberation. Understood this way, such obedience to the Guru becomes highly liberative, and his guidance can be appreciated as a gracious call to higher spiritual awareness and living. With this practice so inextricably tied with mentally (and spiritually) connecting with the Guru, we are already seeing how the three ways of associating with him tend to coalesce, supporting and enriching one another, confirming it as a holistic method of association.

Furthermore, as already mentioned earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa means for the devotee's encounter with the Guru to be wholly personal, as an intense and intimate relationship. This 'active' or 'physical' association thus includes being with him or near him in person – seeing him, listening to him, relating with him in ways that enhance a loving spiritual bond.

To serve or associate with the Guru verbally – “by word” – is to praise his divine nature, redemptive virtues and liberative role. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in other sermons that this can take the form of singing devotional songs in praise of his glory or discoursing upon śāstric statements revealing the nature of the Guru, especially as eternally transcending māyā and serving as the medium through whom Parabrahman can be reached and through whom Parabrahman lives, loves and liberates.

Svāminārāyaṇa mentions sharing such a proclamation in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71. After making the important revelation that

when God manifests for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas, he is always accompanied by his Akṣaradhāma,

he goes on to instruct:

Therefore, a devotee of God should realise that the form of God along with his Akṣaradhāma is present on this earth, and he should also explain this fact to others.

In sharing the revelation that God continues to be accessible on earth – here and now – and that the way to liberation remains open to all through the human-abode of God, i.e. the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the aspirant’s own conviction of the Guru’s divinity and liberative potency is fortified and clarified, and with it his/her own spiritual bond with the Guru.

To serve or associate with the Guru mentally – “by thought” – can take many forms, and is perhaps the most profound of the three, as it naturally and inescapably feeds into each of the others.

One important way of mentally associating with the Guru is to meditate upon his auspicious qualities and the attributes of his being as Akṣarabrahman – the one who, by the eternal will of Parabrahman, creates, sustains, inspires, empowers, supports, governs, pervades, and eventually dissolves the universe, who upholds Parabrahman and countless millions of liberated souls as Akṣaradhāma the abode, who exemplarily serves Parabrahman there in a distinct, human form, and who serves on earth as the complete and perfect medium for Parabrahman’s

love, bliss, blessings, and, importantly, the means to securing eternal fellowship with God in final liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa also describes the powerful tool of reminiscing times of personal interaction with the Guru. It will not always be possible to be with him or near him, yet vividly recalling past encounters can be just as fulfilling and liberative, Svāminārāyaṇa explains (Vac. Gaḍh. I.3, Vac. Gaḍh. I.38, Vac. Gaḍh. II.35, Vac. Jet.3).

Expanding this further, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs offering “mānsī pūjā” to the Guru (Vac. Var.5). This is a form of mental worship which mirrors all the outer actions of devotional worship, but performed within, as a form of visualisation. Svāminārāyaṇa assures this can be just as efficacious as physically performing puja, *if* it is accompanied with deep adoration and reverence (Vac. Sār.3). He elaborates upon this form of worship in great detail in Vac. Gaḍh. III.23, explaining that it is a potent method by which a devotee can “increase his love” for the manifest form of God and “gain tremendous spiritual fulfilment”.

Earlier in this chapter, we understood that liberation is a state of perfect spiritual purity and maturity, in which the soul becomes brahmarūpa – literally, ‘like Brahman’. This not only entails eradicating māyic impurities⁴⁵¹ borne of a

⁴⁵¹ Svāminārāyaṇa explains the method of eradicating these impurities in oneself is also by way of the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru, by realising him as being absolutely pure. See this remarkable statement corresponding the soul’s purity/impurity with its understanding of the Guru’s purity/impurity:

material self-(mis)understanding, but, more positively, acquiring the qualities of Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31 how both are made possible for a finite being by mentally associating with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

The jīva, however, has associated with the body, the senses and the sense-objects. As a result of this improper association, the jīva has become one with the body, senses, etc. After forsaking their association, the jīva realises, 'My self is Brahman, which transcends and is free from māyā.' If one associates with Brahman through continuous contemplation in this manner, the jīva acquires the virtues of Brahman. [...]

The jīva remains continuously attached to māyā... Only when one continuously associates with Brahman, one's inspirer, through contemplation – as previously described – is that attachment broken (Vac. Gaḍh. II.31).

This constant mental association with Akṣarabrahman, in the form of the living Guru, is the antidote, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, to the improper association the soul has forged from time immemorial with its māyic bodies and surroundings across countless life-experiences through transmigration.

11.3.2.2) 'Oneness' with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru

Svāminārāyaṇa expands mental association into a spiritual connection by calling for "attaching one's soul" with the Guru and developing a sense of oneness. In Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, he instructs:

If one realises the truly great Puruṣa to be absolutely lust-free, then, even if one is as lustful as a dog, one will also become lust-free. Conversely, if one perceives the fault of lust in the great Puruṣa, then no matter how lust-free one may be, one becomes full of intense lust. In the same manner, if one views the great Puruṣa to be full of anger or avarice, then one becomes full of anger and avarice. Therefore, if one understands the great Puruṣa to be absolutely free of lust, avarice, taste, egotism and attachment, one will also become free of all of those impurities and become a staunch devotee (Vac. Gaḍh. I.58).

One should also attach one's jīva to the Bhakta of God, the great Sādhu.

As we also saw earlier, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. II.3:

One should develop a oneness between one's jivātman and that Brahman.

In explaining how this association leads to receiving Akṣarabrahman's qualities, or becoming brahmarūpa, SV 2.41 reads:

Expounding upon how to associate [with the Guru, Guṇātītānanda Svāmī said]: First, one should attach one's jīva to the Ekāntika [Sādhu]. That Sādhu is absorbed in God, so he has the qualities of God, and so the Sādhu's qualities are imbibed by he who associates with him.

Then stressing the absolute essentiality of this form of association with the Guru, the sermon ends with the following pronouncement:

Whether one observes this method today or after a thousand lives, ultimately, there is no alternative but to observe it.

We find similar instructions or statements in the Upaniṣads identifying the finite soul with Akṣarabrahman. For example, the famous proclamation at BU 1.4.10 is "Aham brahmā'smi" (I am Brahman). The Bhāṣyakāra explains this as a meditation of the form 'My self is Akṣara; the Brahmasvarūpa Guru is my self',⁴⁵² in line with the contemplation offered by Svāminārāyaṇa above in Vac. Gaḍh. II.31. Hereby the aspirant becomes wholly absorbed in the divine Guru and rises above his current māyic awareness and self-understanding to the pure, transcendental brahmic state of liberation.

⁴⁵² BU-SB 1.4.10, p. 49.

Similar interpretations can be found for statements such as “sa ātmā tat tvam asi” (CU 6.8.7)⁴⁵³, “ayam ātmā brahma” (MāU 1.2)⁴⁵⁴, “sa vā ayam ātmā brahma” (BU 4.4.5)⁴⁵⁵, and “asau puruṣas-so’ham asmi” (IU 16 & BU 5.15.1)⁴⁵⁶ where the Bhāṣyakāra is keen to clarify that any predicated identity with Brahman is indicative of the brahmarūpa state – when the soul shares many of Akṣarabrahman’s qualities and becomes worthy of the highest devotion to Parabrahman. The ontological distinction between jīvas/īśvaras and Brahman nevertheless remains securely intact.⁴⁵⁷

In other upaniṣadic statements, we find actual instructions to know or meditate on that Brahman as one’s own self, such as “vijñānam brahma ced veda” (TU 2.5.1)⁴⁵⁸, “tam evaikam jānathā”tmānam” (MuU 2.2.5)⁴⁵⁹, and “Aum ityevam dhyāyathā”tmānam” (MuU 2.2.6)⁴⁶⁰.

One such series of instructions can be found allegorically at MuU 2.2.4, where one is called upon to “target” Akṣarabrahman⁴⁶¹ with one’s soul, the arrow, and “strike it unflinchingly”. Like an arrow lodged in its target that becomes one with

⁴⁵³ CU-SB 6.8.7, pp. 278-79.

⁴⁵⁴ MāU-SB 1.2, p. 313.

⁴⁵⁵ BU-SB 4.4.5, pp. 269-70.

⁴⁵⁶ IU-SB 16, p. 24 & BU-SB 5.15.1, p. 327.

⁴⁵⁷ See also BS-SB 1.3.5, p. 90.

⁴⁵⁸ TU-SB 2.5.1, pp. 373-74.

⁴⁵⁹ MuU-SB 2.2.5, pp. 273-74.

⁴⁶⁰ MuU-SB 2.2.6, pp. 275-76. For the meaning of ‘Aum’ as Akṣarabrahman, see, for example, KaU 2.15-16, PU 5.2, MāU 1.1-2, TU 1.8.1, CU 1.1.1, CU 1.4.1, and BG 8.13.

⁴⁶¹ See also the analogy at Vac. Gaḍh. II.22 where Svāminārāyaṇa refers to the abode of God as the “aim” of steadfast devotees battling to overcome māyā.

it – ‘śaravat tanmayo bhavet’ – so, too, the aspirant makes the Guru his/her focus and becomes one with him.

The imagery continues from the earlier verse at MuU 2.2.3, where the oneness is explained as taking on aspects of the Guru’s nature – ‘tadbhāvagatena’. The Bhāṣyakāra describes this as a form of awareness (anusandhāna), contemplation (anucintana), and engrossment (sanlagnatā).⁴⁶²

A term that Svāminārāyaṇa often uses to establish this sense of oneness with and constant awareness of the Guru is “ātmabuddhi”, literally ‘self-perception’ or perception of selfhood. When directed to developing it ‘with’ or ‘in’ or ‘for’ the Guru, it comes to mean ‘perceiving the Guru as one’s self’ as part of an assimilative relationship. Svāminārāyaṇa instructs at Vac. Jet.1:

One should develop a conviction of one’s ātman as follows: One should develop ātmabuddhi with the Sant who has attained the manifest form of God, and one should believe only that Sant to be one’s self.

“The purpose of being profoundly attached to the Sant” in this way, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, “is that he [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] has the ability of penetrating the barriers” of māyā. As we learned earlier from this same sermon, māyā is otherwise impregnable. Svāminārāyaṇa thus concludes with the following statement:

All should imbibe this principle, as it is the very life of everyone.

⁴⁶² MuU-SB 2.2.3-4, pp. 271-73. For a similar emphasis on constant and engrossing awareness of Brahman, see the Bhāṣyakāra’s definition of “brahmacarya” at KaU 2.15, p. 102, PU 1.2, p. 175, MuU 3.1.5, p. 286, CU-SB 8.4.3, pp. 358-59, and BG-SB 8.12, p. 184, and also of “brahma vyāvaharan” at BG-SB 8.13, pp. 185-86.

In various other sermons, Svāminārāyaṇa explains more about what he means by such 'ātmabuddhi', or what such 'ātmabuddhi' translates to in practical ways as part of an aspirant's endeavours towards liberation from māyā or ajñāna.

In the state of ignorance, the soul falsely identifies with the material body with a sense of I-ness ('I am male/female;' 'I am white/black/brown;' 'I am fat/thin/tall/short;' 'I am attractive/ugly;' 'I am clever/dumb;' etc.) and regards all that is associated with it as 'mine' ('My house, my car, my money, my assets, my belongings, my power, my fame, my relatives, etc.'). According to Svāminārāyaṇa, this is the very definition of māyā:

What is God's māyā? Māyā is nothing but the sense of I-ness towards the body and my-ness towards anything related to the body (Vac. Gaḍh. III.39).

To rise above such a māyic understanding, one must identify with something which is eternally beyond māyā and has the ability to lift one from it too, i.e. Akṣarabrahman. Svāminārāyaṇa thus instructs that it is not the body with which one should have ātmabuddhi (a perception of selfhood), but the māyā-transcending Guru. All notions of I-ness and my-ness should now be directed to the Guru. 'I am Akṣara. I am Brahman. The Guru is my self.'

Seen another way, just as the soul enlivens, inspires, activates the body and senses – without which a person can do or be nothing at all – now, the Guru becomes, as if, the aspirant's very soul, enlivening, inspiring, activating it in every aspect of life.

One important way in which this should manifest is as a life of perfect devotion to God, for the Guru is first, foremost and always the perfect devotee himself. He provides a model of the redeemed life for all others to emulate. Thus, if 'oneness' with Brahman is an acquisition of the Guru's virtues, in becoming more like him (Brahman-like, or brahmarūpa), it follows that these brahmic qualities promote and enhance the highest devotional relationship of the aspirant with God, itself a mark of liberation. While this is not a simple exercise in the external imitation of the Guru, the aspirant nevertheless has an example on which to model his/her sustained efforts and intentions, and craft a spiritually pure life immersed in God – like the Guru's. Nor, however, should this be reduced to a purely exemplarist understanding of the Guru's role. He actively makes possible and available liberation by way of his unique ontological position as Akṣarabrahman. This is most evident in two important ways: firstly, the aspirants assimilate from him their brahmic qualities, to become brahmarūpa; and secondly, he serves as the medium through whom they can most fruitfully offer worship to Parabrahman and, in return, receive Parabrahman's loving grace. This dual-role of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru helps explain his central position in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

It should come as no surprise that the Bhāṣyakāra picks up on many of these themes throughout the third and fourth chapters of the Brahmasūtras, traditionally named Sādhanaādhyāya (concerning the means [to liberation]) and Phalādhyāya (concerning the fruit [of liberation]), respectively. A good example of this is the Ātmaḡṛhītyadhikaraṇa (BS 3.3.15-18), where he equates "ḡṛhīti"

(literally 'acceptance') to "buddhi" ('perception'), and so centring the discussion on ātmabuddhi. He begins the debate by raising the following doubt: With so many endeavours – such as austerities, etc. – lauded in the śāstras as means to serving Parabrahman, which one should be predominantly practiced? The prima facie response is: Well, if they are all enjoined in the sacred texts, then they should all be predominantly practiced. The Sūtrakāra replies that one should develop ātmabuddhi predominantly, for that is the best and most important means (3.3.15). The Bhāṣyakāra substantiates this stance throughout the adhikaraṇa, especially with reference to many of the Upaniṣadic instructions we have already cited above. He points out, firstly, that ātmabuddhi relates to a spiritual awareness (anusandhāna), and manifests itself as profound love (prakṛṣṭānurāgodbhava). For example, just as a narcissist feels, 'This body is my soul', or a person obsessed with his wealth feels, 'This wealth is my soul', or an infatuated lover feels, 'He/she is my soul', the devotee should realise, 'the Brahmasvarūpa Guru before my eyes is my soul' and assimilate the qualities of Akṣarabrahman within his/her self.⁴⁶³

'But do not the Upaniṣads describe an identity of the soul with Parabrahman?', the objectors contend. The Bhāṣyakāra replies, in essence: Yes, it is true that there is some sort of identity between souls and Parabrahman, but only in the state of liberation, and that, too, not completely and ontologically. To reach that state, however, the Upaniṣads instruct a sense of oneness with Akṣarabrahman

⁴⁶³ BS-SB 3.3.15, pp. 323-24. See also BS-SB 3.3.16-18, pp. 324-26.

whereby the soul can newly acquire its qualities, i.e. become brahmarūpa, and thereby become capable of offering the highest devotion to Parabrahman.⁴⁶⁴

Svāminārāyaṇa also explains that ātmabuddhi with the Guru most readily manifests itself as concentrated spiritual love⁴⁶⁵, because the aspirant is now attached to the Guru, not the body or its affiliates. The Guru becomes the priority, the ultimate focus of all attention and efforts, not worldly matters or māyic pleasures. Even while diligently fulfilling every personal and social responsibility, all actions, thoughts and intentions of the aspirant are now imbued with a spiritual awareness of the Guru, and thus take on a wholly devotional character and spirit. This frees the aspirant of his/her karmic bondage. Svāminārāyaṇa therefore instructs:

For a person who desires his own liberation, nothing in this world is more blissful than God and his Sant. Therefore, just as a person has ātmabuddhi towards his own body, he should similarly have ātmabuddhi with God and his Sant (Vac. Gaḍh. III.7).

Extending this to include relatives of the body, and specifying the relationship as one of profound love, Svāminārāyaṇa states elsewhere:

One should develop affection for God's Sant just as one has affection for one's wife, son, parents or brother. Due to this affection, then, the jīva becomes absolutely fulfilled (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

⁴⁶⁴ Condensed from BS-SB 3.3.16-18, pp. 324-26. For a similar discussion about acquiring certain qualities of Aksarabrahman by realising Aksara as oneself, see also the Akṣaradhyaḍhikaraṇa at BS-SB 3.3.32-33, pp. 335-36.

⁴⁶⁵ It is useful to note that a further connotation of the term "sevā" is derived from its usage in defining the Sanskrit verb-root "bhaj", meaning worship or devotion. This also helps explain how service of or association with the Guru is a form of loving devotion.

If a person maintains profound love towards the Ekāntika Sādhu of God just as resolutely as he maintains profound love towards his own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens for him⁴⁶⁶ (Vac. Gaḍh. I.54).

Svāminārāyaṇa's tenor is that the Guru is the gateway to liberation. A profound and loving association with him opens that gateway.

Tying many of these ideas together in an important sermon for this discussion, Svāminārāyaṇa asks the following question in Vac. Var.11:

The Satpuruṣa, who is brahmasvarūpa, behaves above the three bodies and the three states. Moreover, he does not believe any of the actions of the fourteen senses [and faculties]⁴⁶⁷ to affect him. However, an ignorant person cannot realise this. Only when he attains a spiritual state similar to that of the great Puruṣa does he behave like the great Puruṣa, and only then does he understand the great Puruṣa's behaviour. However, as long as one has not realised the greatness of the Satpuruṣa, one does not attain the brahmic state. Yet, without realising the self, one cannot realise the greatness of the Satpuruṣa. Hence, there seems to be a paradox. Please explain how this paradox can be resolved.

After no one was able to satisfactorily resolve the paradox, Svāminārāyaṇa replies in conclusion:

Intense love for the Satpuruṣa is itself the means to realising one's ātman, is itself also the means to realising the greatness of the Satpuruṣa, and is itself also the means to having the direct realisation of God (Vac. Var.11).

⁴⁶⁶ This is an expanded translation by Svāminārāyaṇa of BP 3.25.20:

Prasaṅgam ajaraṃ pāśam ātmanaḥ kavayo viduḥ |
Sa eva sādhuṣu kṛto mokṣadvāram apāvrtam ||

The wise sages know: affection [for others] firmly binds the soul. However, if that same affection is directed towards the Sādhu, it becomes an opening to liberation.

⁴⁶⁷ The "fourteen senses" refers to the five cognitive senses, five conative senses, and the four inner faculties. These are often termed together as the fourteen senses or fourteen [outer and inner] faculties.

Svāminārāyaṇa’s striking insight here is that love for the Guru not only leads to a realisation of the Guru and the self, with whom the individual develops a spiritual connection, but also of God. It again points to the substantive presence of Parabrahman within the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, and explains the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad’s call to offer the highest devotion to the Guru on par with that offered to God.

Yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau (SU 6.23) |

Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly calls upon such ātmabuddhi with Akṣarabrahman in his doctrinal letters. For example, in one letter, after narrating the cosmic powers of Akṣarabrahman, he adds that that Akṣarabrahman “is among us”, referring to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru in human form. Svāminārāyaṇa then instructs:

O Paramahansas! One should develop ātmabuddhi with him [Akṣarabrahman], and with that thought, become a jīvan-mukta [i.e. a living liberated soul].⁴⁶⁸

In another letter, he writes:

He who offers upāsanā to Puruṣottama Paramātman while realising one’s self to be one with Akṣara is worthy of great honour.

However, Svāminārāyaṇa clarifies in the same letter, there should be no perception of selfhood with Parabrahman.

He who does not have a servant-master relationship with Puruṣottama, but behaves as if one with him, is worthy of scorn.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ Vedarasa, p. 166.

⁴⁶⁹ Vedarasa, p. 214.

In yet another extensive letter, Svāminārāyaṇa makes reference to himself as

“Parabrahman Puruṣottama” before explicitly instructing:

O Paramahansas! Offer upāsanā to me while having ātmabuddhi
with that [Brahman].⁴⁷⁰

In many ways, this is the essence and foundation of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, by which all of its doctrines are illumined and consummated, including the end and means to liberation: upāsanā – loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge – is to be offered to Svāminārāyaṇa as Parabrahman/Puruṣottama (albeit through his most accessible form, the current Brahmaśvarūpa Guru), after realising oneself as brahmarūpa/akṣararūpa by spiritually and lovingly associating with that same Akṣarabrahman Guru. This is why this theological system of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is traditionally referred to as Akṣara-Puruṣottama Upāsanā, and the Bhāṣyakāra offers as the classical appellation for the Svāminārāyaṇa School of Vedānta, **Brahma-Parabrahma-Darśana**.

This fittingly concludes this introductory exposition of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

⁴⁷⁰ Vedarasa, p. 158.