

The Dynamics of Knowledge, Action and Liberation: A Study of Jñāna– Karma–Samuccaya in Śāṅkara’s Taittirīyopaniṣad Commentary

Shradha Aggarwal, Professor Om Nath Bimali

Department of Sanskrit University of Delhi-110007

Abstract. This paper investigates the intricate relationship between jñāna (knowledge), karma (action), and mokṣa (liberation) in Śāṅkara’s Taittirīyopaniṣad Bhāṣya. The study explores how Śāṅkara reinterprets Vedic exegesis—originally grounded in ritual action—through the lens of Advaita Vedānta, redefining liberation as a state of self-realization rather than ritual achievement. Through textual analysis of the Śikṣāvallī, Ānandavallī, and Bhṛguvallī, this work argues that Śāṅkara systematically dismantles the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of jñāna–karma–samuccayavāda and establishes knowledge alone as the direct means to liberation.

keywords: Śāṅkara, Advaita Vedānta, Taittirīyopaniṣad Bhāṣya, jñāna (knowledge), karma (action).

I Introduction

Any The dialogue between action and knowledge is one of the oldest and most complex debates in Indian philosophy. The Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā school, led by Jaimini, maintained that the Vedas are primarily injunctions to act, defining dharma as codanā-lakṣaṇo’rtho dharmah—“duty is that which is enjoined by scriptural command.”¹ For Kumārila and Prabhākara, action was indispensable: ritual performance generated apūrva, the unseen potency that leads to future reward.

Śāṅkara, however, transformed this vision. In his commentaries, particularly on the Taittirīyopaniṣad, he asserts that the Vedas’ highest portion—the Upaniṣads—are not injunctions to act but revelations of truth. Knowledge, not work, liberates; liberation is recognition, not creation. In Śāṅkara’s hands, the Vedic performer (karmayogin) becomes the contemplative seer (jñānayogin).

II. Mīmāṃsā’s Jñāna–Karma–Samuccayavāda

The Mīmāṃsaka system proposed that jñāna and karma must function together for fruition. Kumārila’s doctrine of jñāna–karma–samuccaya claims that knowledge of the

ritual's meaning empowers action. Without such understanding, ritual cannot yield results.²

Śaṅkara, while acknowledging this logical structure, rejects its metaphysical foundation. In his Bhāṣya on Taittirīyopaniṣad II.1.1—*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*—he declares: *na hi brahma-jñānānantaraṃ karma mokṣa-sādhanam sambhavati* —“No action can follow the knowledge of Brahman as a means to liberation.”³

Here, Śaṅkara identifies an epistemic rupture: action presupposes ignorance and doership (*kartṛtva*), whereas knowledge dissolves both. To combine them, he says, is as futile as trying to unite darkness with light.

III. Karma as Preparatory, Not Co-Operative

The Śikṣāvallī of the Taittirīya begins with moral and ritual injunctions—truthfulness, discipline, service to teachers, and social virtue. Śaṅkara interprets these as preparatory means (*sādhana*) for mental purification (*citta-suddhi*), not as direct paths to liberation. He notes:

vidyāyāḥ sādhanam karma śuddhānta-karaṇotpādanam —

“The role of works is to purify the inner instrument required for knowledge.”⁴ Once purity arises, ritual ceases to be necessary. Knowledge dawns spontaneously through *śruti-pramāṇa*. He emphasizes that the Upaniṣads are autonomous means of knowledge (*svataḥ pramāṇa*), not dependent upon ritual performance. Action and knowledge, he asserts, are mutually exclusive: *karma jñānābhyāṃ viruddham iva tamaḥ-prakāśavat* “as light and darkness cannot coexist, so cannot knowledge and action.”⁵

IV. Transition from Karma to Jñāna

Śaṅkara interprets the Taittirīyopaniṣad as a deliberate progression: from ritual discipline to realization. The Śikṣāvallī ends with injunctions—*satyam vada, dharmam cara*—addressed to students who are yet in the preparatory stage. The Ānandavallī begins with *brahmavid āpnoti param*—“the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme.”

Śaṅkara clarifies that “attainment” here means realization, not acquisition:

nāyam āpādo'rtho'bhisambandhaḥ, api tu svānubhava-lakṣaṇaḥ —

“The word ‘attainment’ indicates immediate self-experience, not an act of reaching.”⁶ Thus, *mokṣa* is intrinsic (*svābhāvika*), not the result of any deed (*na kriyā-phalatvāt*). The Upaniṣads only reveal the Self; they do not produce it.

V. Bṛgu's Tapas and The Redefinition of Action

In the Bṛguvallī, the seeker Bṛgu approaches his father Varuṇa for knowledge of Brahman. The text says: *tapasā brahma vijjñāsasva*—“Seek to know Brahman through tapas.” Śāṅkara redefines tapas as *brahma-vicāra-rūpa*, contemplative inquiry, not ritual penance:

tapasā na karmanā; vicāreṇa brahma vijjñāsasva — “Seek Brahman through inquiry, not through ritual action.”⁷

Bṛgu successively meditates upon food, *prāṇa*, mind, intellect, and bliss, rejecting each as non-ultimate until he realizes *ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*—“He realized that bliss is Brahman.” The repetition of inquiry is symbolic of the deepening of understanding, not a cycle of new ritual performances.⁸

VI. Ānanda as Liberation

Śāṅkara explains that *ānanda* is not a sensory pleasure but the intrinsic nature of Brahman—the bliss of pure being-consciousness. The *Ānandamimāṃsā* section that quantifies grades of joy is, according to him, an allegory for the transcendence of limitation. He writes:

mokṣasya svābhāvikatvāt, na tu kriyā-phalatvāt — “Liberation is natural, not the product of work.”⁹

Even after realization, the body continues by the force of prior action, as a potter's wheel keeps spinning after the hand has withdrawn:

yathā cakra-pravṛttiḥ preraka-nivṛttau'pi na upaśāmyati yāvat na pratyavāyati — “The motion continues until its momentum is exhausted.”¹⁰

Thus, the liberated sage (*jīvanmukta*) acts outwardly but remains inwardly free.

VII. Śāṅkara and Mīmāṃsā: Dialogue and Refutation

Śāṅkara does not ignore *Mīmāṃsā*; he employs its logic to surpass it. He accepts its interpretative methods—*upakrama-upasaṃhāra*, *arthavāda*, *anvaya-vyatireka*—yet applies them to reveal non-duality. The *Mīmāṃsaka* declares the Veda to be *niṣedha-vidhi-rūpa* (a collection of injunctions); Śāṅkara replies that the Upaniṣads are *bodha-rūpa* (statements of truth). In the *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (III.4.26), he says:

vidhi-śeṣatvāt na jñānasya pravṛttiḥ —

“Knowledge does not operate as a limb of injunction.”¹¹

He uses the *Mīmāṃsā* principle of *anvaya-vyatireka* (agreement and difference) to prove that wherever the Upaniṣads teach unity, ritual references must be taken figuratively. Thus,

Śaṅkara integrates Mīmāṃsā's method while overturning its premise.

VIII. Knowledge and Liberation

Śaṅkara's central claim is that liberation is immediate upon realization. Commenting on Taittirīyopaniṣad II.7, he states:

brahma-jñānānantarameva mokṣaḥ, na tu kālena —

“Liberation follows knowledge immediately, not after a lapse of time.”¹²

This insight reconciles the experiential and metaphysical aspects of mokṣa. The Gītā Bhāṣya (III.17) mirrors this: *yasya sarve samārambhāḥ kāma-saṅkalpa-varjitāḥ, jñānāgni-dagdha- karmanam tam āhuḥ paṇḍitaṃ budhāḥ*—“He whose works are burnt up in the fire of

knowledge is called wise.”

Knowledge, once arisen, cannot coexist with ignorance-born action. In Śaṅkara's metaphor, as darkness vanishes with the rise of light, so do rituals lose relevance when truth is known.

IX. Ethical and Practical Implications

Śaṅkara does not negate morality. Ethical discipline (dharma) remains necessary until knowledge arises. Duties purify the mind; renunciation stabilizes it. After realization, morality becomes spontaneous expression. Commenting on Gītā IV.18, he says: *karmany akarma yaḥ paśyet sa buddhimān*—“He who sees inaction in action is the wise one.”

Hence, renunciation (saṁnyāsa) is not negation but transformation—the insight that the Self neither acts nor causes action. This understanding integrates pravṛtti (activity) and nivṛtti (withdrawal) as successive, not opposed, stages. The true saṁnyāsin may act outwardly, yet within he knows: *nāyam kartā, nāyam bhoktā, kevalaṃ draṣṭā*—“I am not the doer, not the enjoyer, but the mere witness.”

X. Modern Relevance

Śaṅkara's doctrine continues to hold philosophical and ethical importance. In a world of activism and ritualism, he reminds us that transformation begins within consciousness. Knowledge without ethical preparation leads to abstraction; action without insight leads to bondage. His teaching unites both: action purifies; knowledge liberates.

Psychologically, his idea of citta-śuddhi aligns with modern notions of self-awareness and cognitive purification. Philosophically, his rejection of samuccaya-vāda anticipates non-dual phenomenology: liberation arises when the structure of doership collapses.

XI. Conclusion

Śaṅkara's Taittirīyopaniṣad Bhāṣya stands as a monumental reconciliation between ritual tradition and spiritual realization. By redefining karma as preparatory, jñāna as revelatory, and mokṣa as intrinsic, he transforms the Vedic worldview from action-centered to knowledge-centered.

His refutation of jñāna-karma-samuccayavāda does not demean ritual but restores it as a ladder leading to renunciation. The ultimate unity of knowledge, action, and liberation is realized not through synthesis but through transcendence—the stillness of Brahman, “yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha,” from which words and mind return unable to reach.

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