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THE IDEAL OF THE LIBERATION IN A LIFETIME (JĪVANMUKTI) IN THE AṢṬĀVAKRAGĪTĀ

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The Aṣṭāvakragītā is a philosophical Sanskrit poem originating most probably in the 14th century. The author of the poem, representing the advaita vedānta school of thought, remains unknown. It seems evident that the Vedantins always hold the Aṣṭāvakragītā in high esteem. Its other title, Aṣṭāvakrasaṃhitā, points this out as well. In modern times, the Aṣṭāvakragītā owes its popularity to the great Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (1836-1886). He used the verses of the Aṣṭāvakragītā, in order to initiate his beloved student Vivekananda into the deepest truth of the vedānta “man is god”.

The Aṣṭāvakragītā has been translated into a few European languages. The very first rendering was done into Italian by Carlo GIUSSANI in 1868. The German translations were done by Heinrich ZIMMER (1929) and Richard HAUSCHILD (1967). There exist a number of English translations, among them that of Swami NITYASWARUPANANDA (1953), of R.S. BALSEKAR (1989) and of Thomas BYROM (1990). Into Polish fragments were translated by Wanda DYNOWSKA (1959), and I have now translated the whole text which is due to be published by PWN in Warsaw.

The Aṣṭāvakragītā belongs to the very large group of Sanskrit texts (more than 100) having in the title the word “gītā” and known as the “gītā literature”. The prototype of this group – the Bhagavadgītā – is very well known, but the group as a whole is a long neglected chapter in the research on Sanskrit literature.

Among all the gītās, the Aṣṭāvakragītā along with the Avadhūtagītā, occupies a very special position. The teaching of the Aṣṭāvakragītā is purely philosophical, and not like other gītās connected with any Hindu sect. It does not preach the cult of any god.

The Aṣṭāvakragītā in the form of the philosophical dialogue between the sage Aṣṭāvakra and his pupil, king Janaka, conveys the essential teachings of the advaita vedānta. The central problem of the dialogue, however, remains that of liberation (*mokṣa*). The question of how to attain to liberation is asked by Janaka in the very first śloka of the Aṣṭāvakragītā.

The sage Aṣṭāvakra gives his pupil a very deliberate and differential answer to this question. He describes all conditions necessary to fulfill in order to attain liberation, and his exposition culminates in the description of a sage liberated within his lifetime (*jīvanmukta*).

THE WAY TO ATTAIN TO THE LIBERATION IN A LIFETIME

Moral discipline and control over the senses.

Aṣṭāvakra lists moral discipline as the very first condition for the aspirant striving for liberation. It involves avoiding the objects of the senses, and observing such virtues as forgiveness (*kṣamā*), straightforwardness (*ārjava*), compassion (*dayā*), contentment (*toṣa*), truthfulness (*satya*). Further on in the lecture of Aṣṭāvakra, there is no more mention of observing these virtues, but the motif of the control over the senses continues to be present throughout the text. The senses and its objects are sources of pleasure and pain and therefore they bind a man to the circle of deaths and births.

Attitude towards the body.

The senses have their seat in the physical body, which is looked upon by Aṣṭāvakra as a burden for a one who strives for liberation. The Self has to be isolated from the body. As Aṣṭāvakra says to Janaka (I. 4):

*yadi dehaṃ prthakṛtya citi viśrāmya tiṣṭhasi /
adhunaiva sukhī śānto bandhamukto bhaviṣyasi //*

If you differentiate yourself from the body and abide in rest and pure intelligence, then (in this existence) you will become happy, serene, and free from bondage. (M)¹

Thus the liberated sage is free from his body. He does not care for it (*nīścintah svaśarīre* XVIII. 84). He does not even care whether his body lives or dies (*patatūdetu vā deho nāsyā cintā mahātmanaḥ* XVIII. 86). The actions of his body do not taint his Self, and therefore the body is the mere function of his karmic deeds which have to be fulfilled. Aṣṭāvakra talks to Janaka about the liberated sage in the following words (XVIII. 25):

1 All quotations from: *The Song of the Self Supreme (Aṣṭāvakra-gītā)* by Radhakamal Mukerjee, Delhi 1971, (M); or *Aṣṭāvakra Saṃhitā* by Swami Nityaswarupananda, Calcutta 1990, (N).

*kṛtaṃ dehena karmedaṃ na mayā śuddharūpiṇā /
iti cintānurodhī yaḥ kurvann api karoti na //*

One who acts in conformity with such thoughts as ‘this is done by the body and not by me, the pure Self’ – such a one, even though acting, does not act. (N)

Liberation and the *varṇāśrama* system.

Aṣṭāvakra, in his deliberation on the final emancipation, considers the problem of the relation between liberation and social life with its established values.

According to Aṣṭāvakra’s teaching, an aspirant for liberation does not have to remove himself from the society. Such a condition is not expressed anywhere. What he demands from his student Janaka, however, is the consciousness that his true Self is forever free from the legitimate rules of the society established in the *varṇāśrama* system. The sage teaches Janaka (I. 5):

*na tvaṃ viprādiko varṇo nāśramī nākṣagocaraḥ /
asaṅgo 'si nirākāro viśvasākṣī sukhī bhava //*

You are neither a *varṇa* a such as the Brāhmaṇa, nor do you belong to an *āśrama*, nor are you perceived by the senses. You are non-dual, formless and witness of the universe. Thus contemplating be happy. (M)

Fulfilling the duties ascribed to the position defined in the *varṇāśrama* system does not have any liberating power. Dharma, in the view of Aṣṭāvakra, is merely a part of a pair of opposites, and the liberated person has to be free from all opposites. Pairs of opposites do not belong to the Self, they are modifications of the mind. Aṣṭāvakra says (I. 6):

*dharmādharmau sukhaṃ duḥkhaṃ mānasāni na te vibho /
na kartāsi na bhoktāsi mukta evāsi sarvadā //*

Oh all-pervasive one, virtue and sin, happiness and sorrow are attributes of the mind, not of yourself. You are neither the doer, nor the enjoyer. Surely you are ever free. (M)

The liberated sage has no duty towards the society, he does not have to follow the established values codified in the concept of *trivarga* (XVI. 5, XVIII. 12). He has only to live out his *karma* and thus he may go on living in the society or he may leave it.

Liberation, meditation and yoga practices.

Aṣṭāvakra expresses very negative opinion about meditation (*dhyāna*) and yoga practices (*abhyāsa*) as methods leading to liberation.

From the point of view of Aṣṭāvakra, meditation is not a proper method to gain liberation. Meditation and concentration imply the existence of subject and object, and thus bind a meditating person to the phenomenal existence which is dual (*dvaita*) and illusive (*māyā*). The Self which is one (*eka*), non-dual (*advaita*) and all-pervading (*sarvagatam*) cannot be reached by a dualistic method. Aṣṭāvakra advises Janaka to reject meditation (XV. 20):

*tyajaiva dhyānaṃ sarvatra mā kiñcid dhṛdi dhāraya /
ātmaṃ tvaṃ mukta evāsi kiṃ vimṛśya kariṣyasi //*

Forsake in every way even contemplation. Hold nothing in your consciousness. You are the Self and surely ever free. Why do you ponder (over the Self) for nothing? (M)

Meditation, according to the teaching of Aṣṭāvakra, is an effort (*āyāsa*), and any effort is a source of pain (*duḥkha*). The Self, which embodies all-bliss (*śiva*) cannot be realized through suffering (XVI. 2-3). The liberated yogi has nothing to meditate upon, since he has transcended any form of duality. Thus Aṣṭāvakra says (XVIII. 16):

*yena dṛṣṭaṃ paraṃ brahma so 'ham brahmeti cintayet /
kiṃ cintayati niścinto dvitīyaṃ yo na paśyati //*

One who sees the supreme Brahman meditates 'I am Brahman'. What would he meditate who sees no duality and ceases to think? (M)

Only ignorant people practice concentration (*ekāgratā*) and the control of the mind (*nirodha*). The practice of yoga (*abhyāsa*) is performed by those who do not know the true nature of the Self (XVIII. 35). Those confused adepts will never attain liberation. Aṣṭāvakra says (XVIII. 36):

nāpnoti karmaṇā mokṣaṃ vimūḍho 'bhyāsarūpiṇā /

The ignorant one does not attain liberation through his effort of yoga practice. (M)

Abhyāsa is regarded by Aṣṭāvakra again as an act of effort and volition not leading to the state of freedom from phenomenal existence. The mind of the liberated man is spontaneously meditative without any volitional act. Aṣṭāvakra puts it this way (XVIII. 31):

*nirdhyātum ceṣṭitum vāpi yac cittam na pravarttate /
nirnimittam idaṃ kintu nirdhyāyati viceṣṭate //*

The mind of the liberated one does not engage itself in either meditation or activity, but becomes meditative and active without any intention. (M)

There is no mention in the Aṣṭāvakragītā about the need of the *guru* or any personal authority on the path to liberation.

Knowledge of the Self as the only liberating force.

Aṣṭāvakra postulates knowledge (*jñāna*) of the Self, gained in the act of direct perception (*anubhava*), as the only liberating force. The postulate of knowledge of the Self forms the essence of the teaching on liberation in the Aṣṭāvakragītā. The sage declares the Self as pure consciousness (*cidrūpa*) and non-dual (*advaita*), single (*eka*) witness of all (*sākṣī*). The Self is ever free (*sarvadā mukta*), and it is only due to cognitive error (*bhrama*) that it seems to be subjected to transmigration (*saṃsāra*). Aṣṭāvakra teaches Janaka (I.12):

*ātma sākṣī vibhuḥ pūrṇa eko muktaś cid akriyaḥ /
asaṅgo niḥspṛhaḥ śānto bhramāt saṃsāravān iva //*

The Self is witness, all-pervasive, perfect, non-dual, free, intelligent, action-less, desire-less, unattached and serene. It appears through illusion as if absorbed in the world. (M)

The Self, though different from the phenomenal world and transcendent to it, is at the same time immanent in it. Aṣṭāvakra depicts it in the comparison (I. 20):

*ekaṃ sarvagataṃ vyoma bahirantar yathā ghaṭe /
nityaṃ nirantaraṃ brahma sarvabhūtagaṇe tathā //*

Just as the same all-pervading space is inside and outside a jar, so the eternal, all-pervasive Brahman exists in all things. (N)

The knowledge of the Self, according to the teaching of the sage Aṣṭāvakra, is to be obtained in the act of direct perception (*anubhava*). Anubhava is the intuitive insight into the true nature of the ever liberated Self which is without form (*arūpita*), indivisible (*nirvibhāga*), beyond duality (*gata-dvandva*), absolute unity (*kaivalya*), free from attributes (*niḥsvabhāva*), taintless (*vimala*), actionless (*niṣkriya*), non-limited (*nirupādhi*), immutable (*kūṭastha*), non-originated (*akiñcanabhava*) and bliss (*śiva*).

According to Aṣṭāvakra, liberation is the knowledge of, and the identification with, the Self.

Between the act of knowing and the state of being liberated, there is no gap. Liberation is not attained in any process. It arises spontaneously with the knowledge of the Self. For an aspirant for liberation, there is no state of being closer or further from liberation. One is simply liberated or not. Therefore this concept, as opposed to such ideas as liberation after death (*videhamukti*) or gradual liberation (*kramamukti*), permits only one form of emancipation – liberation while living (*jīvanmukti*).

Sage liberated in a lifetime.

A large portion of Aṣṭāvakra's deliberations is devoted to the description of the life and conduct of the person liberated in a lifetime (*jīvanmukta*). Aṣṭāvakra does not preach any fixed ideas about the social position, life style or moral conduct of the liberated man. He may be a king, a prince, a beggar or a mendicant. He may live in a society or in solitude. There are no moral restrictions for him either. He might indulge in pleasures, or he might live alone in a mountain cave (XVIII. 53). Whoever he is, and wherever he stays, he lives happily in the world (*yathāsukham* XVIII. 47), for he has no desires and passions. Aṣṭāvakra puts it this way (XVIII. 13):

*kṛtyaṃ kim api naivāsti na kāpi hṛdi rañjanā /
yathā jīvanam eveha jīvanmuktasya yoginaḥ //*

For the yogi who is liberated while living, there is neither any duty nor passion in the heart. In this world his needs merely follow the lot of his life. (M)

The phenomenon of liberation in a lifetime is explained by Aṣṭāvakra through the concept of threefold karma. The conduct of the *jīvanmukta* is determined only by his already released karma (*prārabdha*). *Prārabdha karma* is the only force which shapes the action and experience of the liberated person. The deepest karmic layer (*sañcita*) was burnt up through the knowledge of the Self, and his future karma (*kriyamāṇa*) cannot arise, for he is devoid of desires (*niṣkāma*) and passions (*nirañjana*). Thus the *jīvanmukta* does only what is necessary for him to do (*yat kartum āyāti* XVIII. 20) in order to live out the existential patterns formed by the energy of the *prārabdha karma*. To illustrate that particular state, Aṣṭāvakra uses a very beautiful comparison (XVIII. 21):

*nirvāsano nirā lambaḥ svacchando muktabandhanaḥ /
kṣiptaḥ saṃskāravātena ceṣṭate śuṣkaparṇavat //*

Blown by the wind of the *saṃskāras*, the desireless, independent, free, and liberated person moves about like a dry leaf. (N)

Thus the *jīvanmukta* might live in the world like an ordinary man (*varṭta-māno* ‘*pi lokavat* XVIII. 18), yet he is different from the world (*lokaviprayastaḥ* XVIII. 18) because, though engaged in existence, he is free from any opposites. He is even beyond being concerned about liberation, for liberation is merely the opposite of bondage. Aṣṭāvakra thus teaches Janaka (XVIII. 28):

*asamādhēr avikṣepān na mumukṣur na cetaraḥ /
niścītya kalpitaṃ paśyan brahmaivāste mahāśayaḥ //*

The wise one being without both concentration and distraction is neither a seeker of liberation nor the reverse. Knowing for certain that this world is a figment of imagination, even though he sees it, he lives as Brahman. (M)

The liberated one acts, but he is not tainted by the action. His strivings bring him the fruits of withdrawal. Though engaged in the practical life, he is in complete repose meaning that he does not think (*na kalpate*), does not know (*na jñāti*), does not hear (*na śṛṇoti*), and does not see (*na paśyati*). He is simply – under all conditions – the same (*samaḥ*).

