

Paths to Transcendence according to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart

By Reza Shah-Kazemi

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Reviewed by Renaud Fabbri

Brahma satyam

jagan mithya

*jivo brahmaiva na'parah.*⁵⁶

Reza Shah-Kazemi is a Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and one of the most prominent contemporary Perennialist writers. Although initially written as a Doctoral Thesis, this book is dedicated to the memory of Frithjof Schuon, and presented as a demonstration of the “transcendent unity of religions” based on a comparative study of three major figures of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, -namely Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart - and their respective approaches of the non-dual Absolute. Each study is divided systematically into three parts: a first one on the doctrine of the Absolute, the second one on the spiritual path and the last on the return of the God-realized man to the creatures. The book concludes on the “essential elements of communality” between the three perspectives. In very substantial appendices, Reza Shah-Kazemi criticizes some of the more contemporary attempts to “reduce transcendence” in academia but also by pseudo-Perennialists such as A. Huxley.⁵⁷

This long-awaited book certainly represents one of the more important work recently released by World Wisdom. In this review, I will focus on Reza Shah-Kazemi’s study of Shankara’s *Advaita Vedanta* and more particularly *sadhana* (spiritual discipline): how does one

⁵⁶ Brahman is real, the world is illusory, the Self is not different from Brahman.

⁵⁷ This critic was partially anticipated in Reza Shah-Kamezi’s article “Tradition as Spiritual Function”, which will be presented in the next issue of *Vincit Omnia Veritas*.

become a delivered soul? What is the *Advaita* path to Transcendence? This review won't be exhaustive. I will address only some of the questions covered by this book, focusing on the more original aspects of his study of Shankara. The interested readers will also find in the present issue of *Vincit Omnia Veritas* Reza Shah-Kazemi's "Eckhart's Image of the Eye and the Wood" and "The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue", referring respectively to Meister Eckhart and to Ibn Arabi's conception of religious pluralism.

Reza Shah-Kazemi, having explained the metaphysical perspective underlying *Advaita Vedanta*, then analyzes at length its methodological aspect, its own operative path to transcendence. What from the objective viewpoint of the doctrine is the more transcendent, the Brahman without attributes (*Brahman nirguna*), is from the initiatory and subjective viewpoint, the innermost essence of the individual being. The Self, mysteriously identical with the Absolute, dwells in the heart, hidden under different sheets (*kosa*), which corresponds microcosmically to the different degree of realities (gross, subtle and informal manifestations in the Guenonian terminology).

Reza Shah-Kazemi does not spend much time on the distinctions made by Shankara, particularly the *Brahmasutra Bhasya* between the different posthumous conditions. It is enough to remind our readers, that Shankara, declaring the supremacy of knowledge (*jnana*) as the only mean to final liberation (*moksa*), distinguishes, for those who have not realized the Supreme Identity, while still alive (*jiva-mukti*) or at the moment of death (*viveha-mukti*), the path of the gods (or angels) (*deva-yana*) and the path of the ancestors (*pitris-yana*) The world of the *pitris* is only a transitory condition where the good-doers - as opposed to the wrong ones promised to hell- are rewarded for their ritual actions before returning to the world and the cycle of birth and death. On the contrary, those who have followed the path of knowledge (*jnana marga*) but have not yet realized the Supreme Identity, take the path of gradual deliverance (*krama mukti*) which ends in the *Brahma Loka*, the supreme paradise of the non-Supreme *Brahman* where the virtually liberated soul waits for the final dissolution of the world (*pralaya*). In the perspective of Shankara, *Brahma Loka* does not represent however the ultimate possibility of the human condition, and his own initiatory teachings is aimed at the realization of the unconditioned state itself, rather than gradual liberation (*krama mukti*). Shankara recognizes however several means, more or less direct, to Deliverance that Reza Shah-Kazemi successively analyzes.

As the author explains, Shankara certainly admits the possibility for a born-*Jnani*, to realize the Supreme Identity only by hearing of the great Upanishads sentences such as the *Tatvam asi*. This being said, in the case of the vast majority of the students of Vedanta, the illusion can only be dissipated gradually by the combination of study of the scriptures, moral and meditative disciplines and oral transmissions from the *guru*.

The Advaitin path being not only a metaphysical path but also a traditional one, based on the revealed authority of the *Vedas*, the study of scriptures (*sruti* and *smirti*), religious rites and the practice of virtues play a preliminary function, and more precisely a role of purification of the mind, by removing the poisons of doubt but also of worldly dissipation. More deeply, the Vedic revelation can serve as a “reminder” of the knowledge virtually present in the very substance of the spirit. As Schuon explains, revelation is a cosmic intellection as much as intellection is a subjective revelation. If the study of the religious scriptures and the fulfillment of religious duties represent, at an early stage, a complement to the *Guru's* teaching, the practice of virtues should not be neglected either by the student of Vedanta. Whereas acts are conditional and ultimately have to be abandoned, virtues represent in fact permanent dispositions for the spiritual seeker. In the *Vivekacudamani*, Shankara specifies the “qualifications”, both moral and intellectual of the Advaitin path: ability to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal, dispassion for the enjoyment of the fruits of one's actions both here and in the hereafter, attainment of the means of tranquility, self restraint and the like and the desire of liberation. Following Frithjof Schuon, Reza Shah-Kazemi thus insists, possibly more than it is usually done in a Western scholarship disconnected from operative concerns, on the importance of virtues in the teaching of Shankara, namely on renouncement and humility, which are only anticipations of the extinction of the individual in the universal Self.

In the context of a traditional teaching, of master-disciple relationship, the threefold discipline of *svarana*, *manama* and *nididhyasana* (hearing, reflection and deep meditation) constitutes a more direct form of discipline oriented toward the rise of the intuitive knowledge (*jnana*) of the supreme Reality. Being not only the knowledge of the Absolute but more deeply the knowledge of the Absolute by the Absolute itself, effective *Jnana* coincides with the unveiling of the Divine Subjectivity virtually present in our heart. Thus, if discursive reflection (*manama*) is certainly able to play an important role, the teaching of the *Guru* is aimed more deeply, as the Vedic scriptures themselves, at a kind of platonic *anamnesis*, prepared by

systematic meditations. Reza Shah-Kazemi explains that we have to distinguish here between dualist meditations prescribed in the *Sruti (upasana)* and non-dualist ones (*dhyana*). Dualist meditations start with the individual self and imply the methodological use of a material or mental support in a ritual or a strongly theistic context. Those meditations cannot lead to the highest state but only to the *Brahma Loka*. In his commentary of the *Brahma Sutra*, Shankara mentions different examples of these techniques, prescribed in more ancient Hindu scriptures.

“As for meditations on the qualified *Brahman*, a journey is mentioned in connection with some, as for instance, the *Paryanka-Vidya*, the meditation on the five fires (*pancagni*), the meditations of *Upakosala* and the meditation on the small space (*dahara*), but not so in connection with others, as for instance, the meditation on the essence (*madhu*), the meditation of *Sandilya*, the meditation on *Brahman* with sixteen digits (*sodasakala*) and the meditations on *Vaisvarana*.” (III,3,31)

On the contrary, in non-dualist meditations, the subject is not the individual self (*jiva*) but the universal Self, *Atman* itself. These higher meditations are preliminary aimed at the metaphysical discrimination between the Real and the unreal and the concentration on the Real. About discrimination between the Self and the non-self, Reza Shah-Kazemi explains that whereas “the form of meditation in the action of the rites is called *upasana*,” it has to “be distinguished from the higher type of meditation, called *dhyana*, by virtue of the fact that *dhyana* is not so much a meditation on the Absolute as “other”, but is more an assimilation of the individual to his true Self”. He then quotes the following passage where Shankara defines *dhyana* as “the withdrawal of the outward-going perception of the senses into the mind, and the one-pointed focusing of the mind on the source of consciousness.”⁵⁸ To withdraw from the outward and inward superimpositions, Shankara prescribes the radical method of double negation (*Neti, Neti*). By the gradual removal of the *upadhis*, the everlasting light of *Atman* is progressively revealed. The aim of this apophatic method is not the negation of the positive content of our experience but rather the negation of a negation in view of the self-manifestation of the underlying divine substance, which far from being nothing, is *Sat-Cit-Ananda*: Pure Being, Pure Consciousness and Pure Beatitude.

“By a process of negation of the conditionings (*Upadhis*) through the help of the scriptural statement ‘It is not this, It is not this’, the oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, as indicated by the great *Mahavakyas*, has to be realized. (...) The body, etc., up to the “Causal Body” – Ignorance – which are objects perceived, are as perishable as bubbles. Realize through discrimination that I am the ‘Pure

⁵⁸ *Paths*, p.24-25.

Brahman’ ever completely separate from all these. ”

Having removed the false-identification, the *Jnani* can then concentrate on his true self. Here, the invocation (*Japa*) of the sacred mantra “*OM*” may be used as a quasi-sacramental mean to actualize the everlasting Supreme Identity. This is an aspect of Shankara’s teaching that is rarely emphasized, for in general *Japa* is presented as a lower means of realization. This judgment although rightly based on some passages of Shankara’s commentary of the *Brahma Sutra* is balanced by other texts such as his commentary of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in which he wrote that the sacred syllable is virtually identical with the Absolute itself, God and His Name being (metaphysically) non-different:

« Although the words “*Brahman*,” “*Atman*,” etc. are names of *Brahman*, yet on the authority of the scriptures we know that *Om* is Its most intimate appellation. Therefore it is the best means for the realization of *Brahman*.

“It is so in two ways—as a symbol and as a Name. As a symbol: Just as the image of Vishnu or any other god is regarded as identical with that god [for purposes of worship], so is *Om* to be treated as *Brahman*. Why? Because *Brahman* is pleased with one who uses *Om* as an aid; for the scripture says, “This is the best help and the highest. Knowing this help one is glorified in the world of *Brahman*.”

Interestingly enough, whereas other *mantras*, are associated with different deities or aspect of the divine, there seems to be no limitations in the eyes of Shankara in the sacred syllable *OM*. Likewise for the name *Allah*, the Supreme Name (*ism al-azim*) in Sufism, which designates the pure Absolute itself and actualize directly its presence in the center of the individual, the goal and the means being non-different any longer.

“Whether the unconditioned *Brahman* or the conditioned *Brahman*, the Syllable *Om* becomes a means of realizing It. For another scripture has it, “The Syllable *Om* is the higher and lower *Brahman*.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In his commentary of the *Mandukya Karika*:

“*Om* is both the higher and the lesser *Brahman*. When the letters disappear, *Om* becomes verily the supreme Self that is *Brahman*... The idea implied is that It is coextensive with all that is inside or outside; It is birthless; and It is a mass of Consciousness, homogeneous like a lump of salt. *Om* is the origination, continuance, and dissolution of all—of the whole phenomenal universe... In this way indeed, having known *Om* that is the Self, one attains identity with the Self at that very moment.

One should know *Om* as God existing in the heart of all living beings. Having meditated on the all-pervasive *Om*, that is the Self beyond the worldly state, the intelligent man does not grieve, for no cause of grief can be possible then, in accordance with such Vedic tests as, “The knower of the Self transcends sorrow.”

Om being beyond measures is *Turiya*, It has infinite dimension and Its extent cannot be determined. It is auspicious and holy because of the negation of all duality. He who knows *Om* is a sage because of his meditating on the Supreme Reality, and not any other man, though he may be learned in the scriptures.”

Japa-Yoga can also be complemented by the practice of *Adhyatma-Yoga*. Shankara describes *Adhyatma Yoga* as a progressive re-absorption of the individual into the universal, of the different faculties and envelopes (*kosas*) into the intellect (*buddhi*), the intellect finally merging into the Self (*Atman*) itself. In his commentary on the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.4.11, Shankara describes the ascending process as the following:

“...as the skin is the one goal of all kinds of touch [commentary] such as soft or hard, rough or smooth... By the word 'skin', touch in general that is perceived by the skin, is meant; in it different kinds of touch are merged, like different kinds of water in the ocean, and become nonentities without it, for they were merely its modifications. Similarly, that touch in general, denoted by the word 'skin', is merged in the deliberation of the *manas* [mind], that is to say, in a general consideration by it, just as different kinds of touch are included in touch in general perceived by the skin; without this consideration by the *manas* it becomes a non-entity. The consideration by the *manas* also is merged in a general cognition by the intellect, and becomes non-existent without it. Becoming mere consciousness, it is merged in Pure Intelligence, the Supreme *Brahman*, like different kinds of water in the ocean. When, through these successive steps, sound and the rest, together with their receiving organs, are merged in Pure Intelligence, there are no more limiting adjuncts, and only *Brahman*, which is Pure Intelligence, comparable to a lump of salt, homogeneous, infinite, boundless and without a break, remains. Therefore the Self alone must be regarded as one without a second.”⁶⁰

Reza Shah-Kazemi explains that from the point of view of realization, the intellect (*buddhi*) plays an intermediate role between the domain of the relative and the Absolute (*Atman*) if one could say so. On the one hand, the intellect is a product of *Prakriti* and the source of bondage for it is by its power, that the embodied self identifies itself with the mind and the body. On the other hand, the intellect receives directly its light from *Atman*, the spiritual sun. The light of the intellect is the light of the divine Witness itself (*saksin*).

“The *Atman* does not shine in everything although He is All-pervading. He is manifest only in the inner equipment, the intellect (*buddhi*): just as a reflection in a clean mirror.”⁶¹

In the ascending process of *adhyatma yoga*, *buddhi*, being essentially non-different from *Atman*, represents the gate of exit from the cosmic dream and the key to final liberation.

Given the non-dualist perspective of *Advaita Vedanta*, the goal of the *Sadhana* is paradoxically a non-goal. It is not something to attain but the everlasting Identity between the

⁶⁰ Quotation in Michael Comans, Ph.D. « The Question of the Importance of Samadhi in Modern and Classical *Advaita Vedanta* », *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 43, No. 1 (Jan. 1993), pp. 19-38

⁶¹ *Atmabodha*, 17

individual self and the Supreme Principle that needs only (if one could express it in this manner) to be realized. Said differently, *Mosksa*, which, in essence, is the Supreme *Brahman* itself, can be described as the fruit of the spiritual discipline, the end of ascending movement through higher states of being *only from the viewpoint of the relative*. From the viewpoint of the Absolute, the self is *already* delivered for there is nothing to know except the unique object of knowledge, no subject to deliver except the *already* delivered divine Self.

“With regard to the supreme *Brahman* there can be no such conceptions as an approacher, a goal, and progress towards It, for the Absolute is omnipresent and is so the inmost Self of the travelers.” (IV, 3, 8)

Having explained the Vedantin path to *Mosksa*, Reza Shah-Kazemi analyzes with subtlety and discernment the paradoxes of enlightenment itself, of an “extra-temporal” and liminal experience which rigorously speaking is enjoyed neither by the conditioned *jivatma* nor by the unconditioned *Atman*. He insists however, without contradicting the central message of *Advaita*, that the realization of the Supreme Identity cannot simply abolish the distinction between *jiva* and *Isvara*. Following Frithjof Schuon, Reza Shah-Kazemi responds indirectly here to some misunderstandings, largely spread by neo-vedantists, who underestimate not only the role played by faith, devotion and grace in traditional *Advaita Vedanta* but also the metaphysical distinction between the degrees of reality (and thus truth) within the realm of *Maya*.⁶² If ultimately, there is only the Absolute, the One without a second, if there is eternally identity between the self and the Absolute, from the point of view of the relative however, the Lord and the servant remain necessarily distinct.

The *jivamukta* himself remains a human being as long as embodiment lasts, despite his “divine state” and his essential identity with the Absolute. As Frithjof Schuon himself has repeated more than once, the individual self does not simply merge into the Universal one - “deification” does not mean “divinization”- and Reza Shah-Kazemi remains faithful to this teaching when interpreting Shankara. “Two subjectivities”, namely the ego and the self, located respectively at two different degrees of reality, coexist in the *jivamukta*, and that it is why, explains Reza Shah-Kazemi, the delivered-men still worship the *Isvara*.⁶³ As Schuon remarked, *Advaita* is in general more elliptical and schematic on the delivered state than the Sufi tradition. Shankara recognizes however in several passages that the *jivamukta* is not identical with the

⁶² More technically between the *paramarthika* perspective, the viewpoint from the Absolute itself and the *vyavaharika* perspective, where the Absolute is viewed from the relative.

⁶³ Toward the end of his life, Shankara wrote many hymns to the Divine Mother (*Shakti*).

Absolute *in every respect* and remains indeed subordinated in his human form to the *aparabrahman*. At the end of the commentary of the *Brahma Sutra*, quoted by Reza Shah-Kazemi Shankara explains for instance that the power of creation⁶⁴ remains forever the unique privilege of the *Isvara*.

“It is proper that barring the power of creation etc. of the universe, the liberated souls should have all the other divine powers like becoming very minute etc... The power, however, of creation etc. of the universe can reasonably belong to God only who exists eternally.” (IV,4, 17)⁶⁵

In this respect, another example given by Reza Shah-Kazemi is the residual *karma* of the *jivamukta*. It is indeed a well-known paradox in Hindu hagiography. Despite the fact that liberating knowledge has burned the karmic burden of the *jivamukta*, the *prarabdha karma*, that portion of *sanchita karma* that is to be experienced in the current life is active until final Deliverance at the moment of death. The *jivamukta*, for he is non-different from *Atman*, only in his innermost essence, may still experience some kind of suffering, but in this case, contrary to the average man -and that is a crucial distinction- he does not identify himself with suffering. His true Self is the impassible and detached witness of the suffering body-mind complex.⁶⁶

According to Frithjof Schuon,

“the *Vedanta* appears among explicit doctrines as one of the most direct formulations possible of that which makes the very essence of our spiritual reality. (...) The contemplative must become absolutely 'Himself'; according to other perspectives, such as that of the Semitic religions, man must become absolutely 'Other' than himself --or than the 'I'-- and from the point of view of pure truth this is exactly the same thing.⁶⁷”

This book is precisely a metaphysical and erudite demonstration of such a convergence and of the unicity, beyond religious boundaries, of the “language of the Self”. Inwardly nourished by the providential teaching of Frithjof Schuon, himself a pure Advaitin, *Paths to Transcendence*

⁶⁴ It could even be argued, although this question is not directly raised by Shankara, that on the plane of knowledge, the *Jivamukta* experiences some *accidental* limitations. As Titus Burckhardt has written in the introduction of his partial translation of the Abdel Karim Al-Jili’s *Universal Man*, the deified man has the knowledge of the Substance of all things but he does not have the knowledge of everything. Put it differently, he knows that the world is a divine dream, a movie in which every character is played in fact by the same actor (*Atman*), but as long as he is playing a role himself in the narrative (as *Jivatma*), he does not know every single elements of the script. His knowledge could then be characterized as synthetic not analytic.

⁶⁵ Analogically speaking, the divine Self is the witness of the inward man as the inward man is the witness of the outward.

⁶⁶ One could take here the well-known example of the Maharshi who had to suffer from cancer at the end of his life. To the crying of a compassionate devoted, the Maharshi replied the following:

“My body is suffering but I am not suffering. When will he realize that I am not this body?”

⁶⁷ Frithjof Schuon: *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, chapter 2

also represents in many respects a merciful response to the predominant relativism in the field of Comparative Religion and certainly a landmark both in the traditional study of *Advaita* and in comparative metaphysics.