MEDITATION ON SOUND (NĀDOPĀSANĀ), DEVOTION, AND LIBERATION

Kalpakam Sankarnarayan

1. Introduction

In ancient Indian culture, robust philosophy of action was governed by a four-fold goal: dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa. Dharma was an all embracing code of conduct that enjoined duties to god, ancestors, elders, family, guests and the community. Artha was the pursuit of wealth to promote dharma; kāma was emotional fulfillment for the development of personality. Mokṣa was liberation from the bondage of birth and death. This attitude to life as a journey towards an ultimate goal exerted a sobering influence on all human activity and gave it discipline and direction.

Collectively termed Purusārthas, these four objectives demanded sustained effort. For this, both body and mind were kept in good fettle through practice of yoga, control of breath, meditation etc. No philosophy had any claim to our understanding and recognition unless it had something to do with our life. Though vedic chanting was the daily duty of the students of those days, instead of making the chanting mechanical, a little reflection in the form of "upāsanā" was added to that routine works.

2. History of the term *upāsanā*

According to the Vedic tradition, $up\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ is an integrated discipline of the head, the heart and the mind. It is based on a complete and rigorous study of the spiritual literature of $brahmavidy\bar{a}$, dealing with the supreme Reality and its relation to the souls in Saṃsāra. The subject of $brahmop\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ dealt with in the Upaniṣads here and there have been codified and subjected to systematic exposition in the $Brahmas\bar{u}tras$ which are the earliest systematization of upaniṣadic philosophy.

The subject of *upāsanā* of Brahman finds a prominent place in the III pāda of Sādana Adhyāya of the sūtras where it is discussed at very great length and detail in all its ramifications. This pāda is designated as Guropāsamharapāda. This designation is significant in that the conduct of *upāsanā* based on the various attributes of Brahman given in the numerous *vidyās* set forth by them.

In vedic literature, we come across several definitions of this term. The *Vedāntasāra* defines "*upāsanā*" as a kind of mental process relating to the qualified *Brahman* (*saguṇa brahman*), for e.g. Sāndilya Vidyā. 1 *Upāsanā* is mentally approaching the form of the deity or the like, as it is presented by the eulogistic portions of the Vedas relating to the objects of meditation, and concentrating on it, excluding conventional notions, till one is as completely identified with it.

"Upāsanā" which is here roughly translated as upaniṣadic meditation, aimed in part at engendering higher mental attitudes with regard to the daily avocations, social contacts, and religious preoccupations.² This path of Inner transformation, in the midst of outward confirmity, was worked out in all its philosophical bearing and practical details by men of action.

However "upāsanā" is a much more comprehensive term and covers not only a life of action, but actionless life as well. Literally, the term "upāsanā" means sitting near, mentally approaching an ideal. "Upāsanā" sometimes referred to as meditation. The Chāndogyopaniṣad³ says "one should reflect on "sāman" with which one would eulogize, on the rc on which the Sāman rests, on the seer who saw the rc verse and one should reflect on the deity which one would eulogize." Thus the upaniṣadic concept of "upāsanā" lays stress on meditation.

The Upaniṣads no doubt deal largely with *Upāsanās* or meditations which aim at the experience of mystic oneness and the ecstasy resulting from it. "*Upāsanā*" or "meditation" is thus an essential means to salvation. Hence the upaniṣadic seers thought that sub-mental vital forces should be divinized before the higher ascents in spiritual life could be practiced. The course of discipline is prescribed as "*prāṇa-upāsanā*" and also "*mana-upāsanā*", and *vijñāna-upāsanā*.5

Upanisads have, thus laid so much stress upon $up\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ (meditation) for $up\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ gives the right attitude which can put us in touch with the radiant forces that vibrate everywhere. $Up\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ not only elevates our feelings, it also widens our being. Thus upanisadic attitude of $up\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ is more of a knowledge attitude than a feeling attitude.

Śankara defines upāsanā in his commentary on Brahmasūtra as samanapratyaya pravāha-karanam upāsanam- the continued flow of an identical current of thought. It is also of the nature of meditation. Upāsanā is the basis of the doctrine of "bhakti" or devotion. Devotion

¹ Vedāntasāra, 12.

² Chāndogyopaniṣad, I. 1. 10, Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, I. 4. 7.

³ *Ibid.* 1. 3. 8., 9.

⁴ Praśnopanisad, II. 2.

⁵ Taittirīyopanisad, III. 1. 6.

⁶ Brahmasūtrabhāsya of Śańkara, IV. 1. 7., 8.

to personal god is recommended as a means for attaining spiritual enlightenment.⁷

The great protagonist of "bhakti" was Rāmānuja, to whom meditation (dhyāna) and devotion (bhakti) were interchangeable terms. According to him "Meditation means steady remembrance, that is a continuity of steady remembrance, uninterrupted like the flow of oil. Steady remembrance of this kind is designated by the word "devotion" (bhakti); this term has the same meaning as "upāsanā" (meditation or worship). Thus according to Rāmānuja, continuous meditation or dhyāna is the synonym of "upāsanā".

Upāsanā or bhakti or dhyāna means dedication also. It is the dedication of a disciple to a preceptor, of a devotee to God Almighty, dedication to one's own faith (bhāva) etc. It is an outlet of one's own emotion and feelings to enjoy and experience the Ultimate reality or beauty or truth; call it "nirvāṇa" or "mokṣa". Śaṅkara in his commentary on the Brahmasūtra8 states "nirguṇam api sadbrahma nāmānurūpagatair guṇaiḥ Saguṇam Upāsanārtham tatropadiśyata ity etad apy uktam eva"; it has been properly stated that Brahman, though devoid of qualities, is to be held, for purposes of meditation as possessing qualities depending on name and form.

3. Meditation on sound (nādopāsanā)

Thus the term "upāsanā" in terms of "bhakti" (devotion or worship) can be derived as "upa" means "samīpe" and "āsanā" means "sthiti" (i.e. close proximity i.e. to sit near by) through devotion or meditation.

The word "bhakti" is derived from the root "bhaj", by the application of the "ktin" suffix, which expresses an action. ⁹ Śaṅkara in his commentary on the Bhagavadgītā says that worship is bhakti (bhajanam bhaktiḥ). Vyāsa, the son of Parāsara, in Nārada Bhakti sūtras, defines bhakti: "pūjādiṣvanurāga iti pārasaryāḥ" (bhakti is attachment to the worship of God).

Upanisad propagates "control of breath and meditation on the sacred syllable "Om" constituted $Pr\bar{a}nay\bar{a}ma$, a vital element in yoga (dedication). That was also the starting point for " $n\bar{a}da\ vidy\bar{a}$ " or " $n\bar{a}dop\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ ".

The term "nādopāsanā" can be interpreted either as "nāde upāsanā" (meditation/worship on Sound) or "nādena upāsanā" (meditation/worship through the sound) or "nādasya upāsanā" (meditation/worship of the sound).

⁷ Śvetāśvataropaniṣad, IV. 21., 23.

⁸ Brahmasūtrabhāsya of Śankara, I. 2. 14.

⁹ Astādhyāyī of Pānini, III. 3. 94.

¹⁰ Bhaktisūtra of Nārada, III. 16.

The two letters " $n\bar{a}$ " and "da" are interpreted as life and body heat. The word " $n\bar{a}da$ " meant the interaction of the two forces air and fire. In the $Sangitaratn\bar{a}kara$, $n\bar{a}da$ is defined:

nakāram prāṇanāmānam dakāramanalam viduh / jātah prāṇāgnisamyogāt tena nādo 'bhijāyate // 11 Letter 'nā' is termed as prāṇa (life) and the letter 'da' is the fire (body heat). Nāda - the sound is produced due to the combination (association) of prāṇa (life) and fire (body heat).

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with the God; and the Word was God, says Bible. *Nādabrahma*, God manifests in primordial sound, bodied forth as Śrī Rāma says Saint Tyāgarāja, one of the Triratna or Trimūrti of South India.

"The Universe hangs on Sound" says Hindu thought. 12 The elements of language dropped from the vibrations of the Dhakka in the hands of Natarāja as danced in ecstasy. "Vedānām sāma vedo 'smī", says Lord Kṛṣṇa. Brahmā developed music with the help of the Sāmaveda. 13 The Vedas are known as Śruti - eternal truths heard through institution. Music is but a subsidiary branch of the Vedas. It is "nāda vidyā" science of sound. It's study leads to nādopāsanā, self-realization through contemplation on sound nāda.

"The warbing bird, the bubbling brook, the buzzing bee, the drowning beetle, the whistling wind, the sighing bamboo, the roaring sea - are some of the organs in Nature's glorious Symphony. The music with its symphony has the greatest power to take us away effectively, easily, immediately and fully from mundane plane and keep our spirit absorbed completely in the spirit's own inner ineffable essence. Our ancestors realized this truth almost at the very dawn of our History. They first extolled the gods in poetic hymns called rc, but soon found that the gods were more easily gratified by the singing of those hymns. Hence they fitted their rcs to tune. i.e. they produced the Sāmaveda. Of the many vidyās or esoteric means of realization taught in the Upaniṣads, one is called udgītha vidyā, the worship of the udgītha or pranava or omkāra of it, the Chāndogyopanisad, 14 says:

aum ity etad akṣaram udgītham upāsīta eṣām bhūtānām pṛthivī rasaḥ, pṛthivyā āpo rasaḥ, ... puruṣasya vāg rasaḥ, Vāca ṛgrasaḥ, ṛcaḥ sāma rasaḥ, sāmna udgītho rasaḥ. Sa eṣa rasānām rasatamaḥ paramaḥ parārdhyo 'ṣṭmo yad udgīthaḥ ... samastasya khalu sāmna upāsanam sādhu, yat khalu sādhu tat sāmety ācokṣate, yad asādhu tad asāmeti.

¹¹ Sangītaratnākara of Śārngadeva, Chap. I. 4.

¹² History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music (From Vedic Times), Chap. I., p.3.

¹³ Bhagavadgītā, Chap. 22.

¹⁴ Chändogyopaniṣad, I. 1. 1-4, II.1.1.

This 'Aum' this imperishable udgītha, must be worshipped. Of all these of creation, earth is the essence of earth, the essence is water; speech is the essence of man; poetry is the essence of speech; music is the essence of poetry; the Udgītha or Praṇava is the essence of Music. Thus this Udgītha is the quintessence of the essences, the Supreme, the highest, the eighth; Meditation on entire Sāman is good. Whatever is good, people call Sāman and whatever is not good a-Sāman.

Out of the complete fabric of subtle sound arose the concept of Praṇava, Omkāra, as the source of all sound. Sound and life being inseparable, the former was identified with God, and the later with life, the jīvātma. Herein lay the unity of spirit and matter. As the word of god, the Vedas and the Upaveda, music were part of Him. They were derived from Praṇava. Sadyojātam, Vāmana, Tatpuruṣa, Ēsānam and Aghoram were the five faces of Lord Śiva. The notes of the music scale emanated from this pañcamukha.

The origin of Sapta Swaras, the vital notes of the music is enumerated in Nārada's Sangītamakaranda¹⁵

sa: <u>sadjasya jamadagniś ca</u> ri: <u>ātreyo rsabhasya ca</u>

ga: <u>gāndhārasya</u> gautamas tu ma: vasisto <u>madhyamasya</u> ca pa: śrivatsaḥ <u>pañcamasyaiva</u> dha: dhaivatasya pārāsaraḥ

ni: śālakāyo nisādasya

This lofty conception of origin and purpose of Music gave it the status of an Adyātma Vidyā - a means of self realization, a pathway to beautitude. Great votaries and exponents of music from Yājñavalkya to Tyāgarāja have proclaimed this unique role of Gāndharva.

Sage Yājñavalkya, the great Smrti authority, says in his Smrti:16

yathāvidhānena paṭhan sāmagāyam avicyutam, sāvadhānas tadabhyadāsāt param brahmādhigaccati vīṇā // nādatatvajñaḥ śrutijātiviśāradaḥ, tālajñaś cāprayāsena mokṣamārgam niyacchati.

Intoning the $S\bar{a}mag\bar{a}ya$ in the proper manner and without break, and practicing it with concentration, one attains the supreme Godhead. He who knows the truth of $V\bar{i}n\bar{a}$ music, is an expert in *śrutis* and their varieties and understand Tāla also, reaches the path of salvation without exertion. ¹⁷

Tyāgarāja, one of the three gems of South Indian Music, the crown jewel of Tanjore District, asserts:

¹⁵ Sangīta Makaranda of Nārada, Chap. I. 2-6.

¹⁶ Yājñavalkyasmṛti, pp.349-350, III. 5. Nirṇaya Sagar Edition.

¹⁷ Ibid.

sangīta jñānamu bhakti vīṇā, sanmārgamu galade, manasā? knowledge of music (sangīta) without devotion (bereft of bhakti) is valueness and cannot secure salvation.¹⁸

The Bhāgavata purāṇa enumerates the forms bhakti¹⁹ as follows:

śravaṇaṃ kīrtanaṃ Viṣṇoḥ smaraṇaṃ pāda sevanaṃ arcanaṃ vandanaṃ dāsyaṃ sakhyaṃ ātma nivedanam//

Śri Tyāgarāja chose *kīrtanam* as the form of his *bhakti* to his beloved Śrī Rāma. He defines *kīrtanam* as follows:

nigamaśirothamu galgina nijavākkulato svarasuddhamuto, yti - visrama - sadbhakti virati - drākṣārasa - navarasa - yuta Kritiche²⁰ Kriti or kīrtan is that which expounds the true words of exalted Upaniṣads, which are marked by correct placements of Svaras and rhythmic turns and pauses, which reflect true devotion and vairāgya, which are dripping inside and out with juice like grapes and rich in the nine Rasa.

Tyāgarāja, the "nāda-vidyopāsaka" absorbed in the contemplation and enjoyment of primordial sound, which bodied forth from the tip of his tongue as rapturous song describing his mystic experiences and glorifying divinity. He has woven philosophy and mysticism into his music. The philosophic content of his songs has elevated them to the level of Upaniṣads.

Tyāgarāja offers his obeisance to Lord Śiva, 21 the embodiment of nāda with his mind and body - "nāda tanumanisam, Śankaram namāmi, me manasā śirasā" --- Tyāgarāja bows down to HIM who delights in the art of seven svaras "sa-ri-ga-ma-pa-dha-ni---" which are born of his five faces, "sadyojāta ---etc./ --- "sadyojātādi pañcavaktraja, sa ri ga ma pa dha ni, vara saptaswara" --- etc./

Tyāgarāja in his composition in Rāg "Hindolam" expresses:22

sāmajavaragamana, sādhu hrtsārasābjapālakalātita, vikhyāta; sāmanigamaja sudhāmayagānavicakṣaṇa guṇaśīla dayālvāla mām pālaya; vedaśiromatrja saptasvaranādacaladipasvīkṛta yādava kula muraļi vādanavinoda! mohanakara! Tyāgarājavandaniya.

¹⁸ Kīrtanmālā, Tyāgarāja Kriti, Vol. I., p.110.

¹⁹ Bhāgavatapurāņa, VII. 5. 23.

²⁰ The Spiritual Heritage of Tyāgarāja, p.36.

²¹ Kīrtanmālā, Tyāgarāja Kriti, op. cit. p.287.

²² *Ibid.* p.286.

Oh bewitching Lord! shining like a beacon light on the mountain of *nāda* of the seven *svaras* born of the *praṇava* which is the source of all vedānta, oh, adept in nector like music born of the Sāmaveda! of you, who restored to the Yādavarace; who delighted in the playing of the flute, protect me, oh Lord of magnificent gait, the sun who makes the lotus of goodmens' heart blossom! oh celebrated lord who transcends time!

nīdayace rāma ... nāda brahmānanda rasakṛti gala, ... ²³ By your grace, I have attained the everlasting bliss, your physical constitution is of Essence of nāda Brahman; you are one of soft words; your ornament is pure musical sound; the words of Tyāgarāja are your excellent garment.

Thus sings Tyāgarāja. In the composition in Rāg "Ārabhi" he describes "nāda sudharasambilanu ... mānasa veda purānāgama śāstradula kadharamau, swaramūlarugnokati ghantalu; ... dhara bhajana ... ²⁴ - the nector of "nāda", which is the bliss of all Vedas, purānas, āgamas and śāstras has taken human form (in Rāma); the seven swaras have become the seven bells of the bow; the rāgas have become the bow itself; the styles Dura, Naya, Desaya, have become the three strings of the bow; the steady pace has become the arrow, the melodious apt vibrations of phrase have become his speech; singing in devotion has become his very fortune.

Tyāgarāja's "nādopāsanā" runs forth through his composition in Rāg, "Sāramati":

mokṣamu galadā? bhuvilo jīvanmuktalugāni vāralaku sākṣātkāra nī sadbhakti sangīta jñāna vihīmulavu, prāṇānala sāmyogamu valla, praṇava nādamu saptasvaramulai varaga ...

... tyāgarāja vinuta ... ²⁵

Is it possible for any but the realized souls to attain salvation? Is it possible for one who is devoid of real devotion and knowledge of divine music, to attain salvation? Vital force containing with fire produces praṇava (Om) and the seven notes. People do not generally know the secret of Lord Śiva deriving immeasurable joy from music of vīṇā?

nādopāsanace śaṇkara nārāyaṇa vidhulu velaśiri ... vedoddhārulu, vedatitulu, viśvamella ... yantra tantrātmūla mari, mantramu lenni gala vāralu tantilaya swararāga vilolulu ... ²⁶

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. p.284.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.590.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.591.

Śankara, Nārāyana, and Brahmā have attained their distinctive glory through $n\bar{a}dop\bar{a}san\bar{a}$ and have thereby become the upholders of the Vedas. They even transcend the vedas and fill the whole Universe. They impart life to mantras, yantras, and tantras. They are free souls and revel in being experts in Svara, Rāga, and Laya and live for countless ages.

nāda loluḍai brahmānanda mandave manasa svādu phalaprada saptasvara rāga nicayasahita; Hariharātma bhūsura patiśarajanma gaṇeśādi varamaunu lupāsincare dhāra Tyāgarāju deliyu²⁷

Oh mind! Attain the highest bliss, by losing yourself in $n\bar{a}da$, which is associated with varieties of Ragas, themselves the manipulations of the seven notes, and which fulfills and righteous desires. The Trinity, all the gods and the great sages have followed this path. Tyagaraja knows this.

vidulaku mrokkeda sangīta ko -mudamuna śankarākṛta sāmanigama vidulaku nādātmaka saptaswara ... ²⁸

I make obeisance to all those great beings who are well-versed in the divine music of vedas and of the seven notes; with nada as their soul and dive deep into ocean of highest happiness.

nādaswaramunu navaratnapu vedikapai---

Paramātmuni Śri Rāmuni Pādamulanu ... pūjince²⁹

If one would spend his time adoring the Lord like this, with music and the singing of his holy name, then Tyāgarāja says, human life is the greatest of all lives: "nara janmame janmamu, o manasā ...

Thus for Tyāgarāja, *nāda* (music) is *bhakti* and *bhakti* is *mukti*. *Bhakti* combined with the ambrosial *rasa* of *svaras* and *rāgas*, is itself heaven and salvation.

In his Devagāndhari piece *Sītāvara*, Tyāgarāja prays that he may be blessed with the knowledge of music so that he might attain to that state of *jīvanmukti* which is the teaching of Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*.

In his composition Andolikā (the Rāga-name)-rocks us, as it were; on the billows of nāda:

rāga sudhārasa pānamu jesi rājillave; manasā; yāga yoga tyāga bhoga phala mosange; sadāśiva mayamagu nādonkāra svaravidulu jīvanmukthalani Tyāgarāju deliyu³⁰

The nectar of Rāga gives one the beneficent results of yāga, yoga, tyāga (sacrifice) and bhoga (enjoyment). Drink it and delight, oh, mind! Tyāgarāja

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.592.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.35.

²⁹ Ibid. p.105.

³⁰ Ibid. p.594.

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knows that those who have knowledge of *nāda*, *omkāra*, and *svaras* which are nothing but Sadāśiva Himself, are realized souls.

In his Garudadhwani Kīrtan, Tyāgarāja proclaims:

śrināyakākhila -naigamārchitasangīta jñānamanu -Brahmānandasāgara midani dehamu bhūmi bh<mark>āramu³¹</mark>

Oh! Rāma, one that does not float on the ocean of music, adored by the Gods and vedas, which is Brahmānanda itself, is verily a burden to the earth.

As pointed out in $Bhagavadg\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$, 32 Tyāgaraja says that $j\tilde{n}\bar{a}ni$ attains liberation after numerous birth, he who has by nature a devoted mind and has also knowledge of Rāgas is verily a liberated soul here itself i.e. $j\bar{\imath}vanmukta$.

In "sukhi evaro" (in Rāg Kanada), Tyāgarāja says that he indeed is blessed and happy, who with the twin endowments of music and devotion, has learnt not to make distinction between one form of worship and another, considered himself the servant of the whole humanity: "jaganmella sudhā dristice brocu varu endaro mahānu-bhāvalu" 33

4. Conclusion

Thus the $n\bar{a}da$ -brahman of Tyāgarāja paves the path for mukti through $n\bar{a}da$ (sound = music). This path of inner transformation, in the midst of outward conformity, was worked out in all its philosophical bearings and practical details. Last, but not the least, of the great requisites for realization is the yearning for liberation (moksa) for which Tyāgarāja, the great saint musician of South India, has given the status of veda/upaniṣad to his music compositions.

Thus through this article, a humble attempt has been made to understand the transition from the devotional practices expressed in the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads to those expressed in the Purāṇas of "Classical" Hinduism as bhakti (devotion) in the form of music by which the man can elevate himself to the highest bliss. It is this final objective that gave the direction to upāsanā which was not allowed to be alienated from life, but through which life was to be progressively spiritualized. It is in this realistic attitude leading to the highest realization that the present-day worth of nādopāsanā lies.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.55.

³² Bhagavadgītā, VII. 19.

³³ Kīrtanmālā, Tyāgarāja Kriti, p.142.

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Director
K.J. Somaiya Centre of Buddhist Studies
Bombay