

LINGODBHAVA - UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE MEANINGS

Note: This write-up is likely to benefit only Vaishnavas, so any others who feel they cannot bear to read such things, should desist for their own good. Follow your inclinations without imposing anything on anybody.

The incidents that occur in the Shaiva purANAs are considered as arthavAdAs by vedAntins. What this means is that since they are spoken in the tAmasa kalpAs, they are not true, but at the same time, they serve the purpose of exalting a particular god like Shiva for those inclined to worship him in that manner.

By the term "tamas" what is meant is, they impart meanings which are the opposite of how they should be. Dharma is considered adharm, lower is considered higher and vice versa. Thus, we have the following pramANAs,

yA vedabAhyAH smRRitayo yAshcha kAshcha kudRRiShTayaH |

sarvAstA niShphalAH pretya tamoniShThA hi tAH smRRitAH (~Manu Smriti 12.95)

Meaning: Those smRi^tis (the purANAs composed by rishIs) which are considered "veda-bAhya" or equal to nAstika works, and those meditations and works enjoined in them which are distorted perceptions of shAstra (kudRRiShTayaH) --- all these are devoid of fruits as a means to liberation after death, as they have been declared to be founded in tamas (by the classification of the purANAs)

The idea is, though these purANAs recommend certain vaidika kAryAs, the fact that they contradict the Veda has made Manu bhagavAn call them "Veda-bAhya" - equivalent to actual veda-bAhya darshaNAS like boudha or jaina. "pretya" means freedom from bondage of all types, "niShphalAH" means they yield no fruits that are conducive to such freedom.

adharmAM dharmam iti yA manyate tamasAvRRiitA sarvArthAn viparItAnshh Cha buddhiH sA pArtha tAmasI (~gIta 18.32)

Meaning: Due to dominance of tamas, the intellect gets contaminated. It understands dharma as adharm, and vice-versa. It perceives the existence as non-existence, the good as bad, the bad as good. In this way, it grasps everything in the contrary manner.

But these stories, like every portion of shAstra do impart inner meanings. So, there is an inherent value even in these stories as they contain certain tattvArthAs. But only one who has read and understood the sAttvika shAstra can venture to understand this. A person who takes these stories literally will not be able to understand their inner meaning. Let us just examine what Lingodbhava teaches.

What does the Shiva Linga represent? Why does Shiva appear in the Linga which is said to be a nishkala-sakala form? Need to first understand this.

mahAdeva is one who teaches knowledge of Brahman to all. He is a j~nAni who sees the self in all beings. His is the form of an upAsaka - whatever form he assumes, it teaches something about how an upAsaka should be. Thus, his form as a Linga represents the true nature of the jIvAtma which is indescribable in shape, yet can be perceived by meditation. The term "Linga" means "sharIra". The shvetAsvatAra upanishad calls the jIvAtman "dehaM" - which again means "sharIra" because it is the body of Brahman.

Alternatively, the term "sharIra" can also mean, the jIvAtman associated with a sharIra. Due to close association, the embodied self is also called "sharIra".

What is the proof for this? Take the words of the Linga purANa which defines the Shiva Linga as below,

ali~Ngo li~NgamUlaM tu avyaktaM li~Ngamuchyate /

ali~NgaH shiva ityukto li~NgaM shaivamiti smRRitam /

Meaning: The root or support of the the self that is called "Linga" as it is the body of Brahman, is the body which is of a nature opposite to that (alinga). The unmanifest pure self (avyakta) is indeed called "Linga" as it is embodied, ie, the embodied self is the pure self by nature. The self, which is distinct from the body, is called "Shiva" as it is agreeable by nature, and the body called "Lingam" is said to belong to the self.

By this shloka, we understand that the Shiva Linga represents the pure self and at times, also the embodied self. When worshipped in accordance to shAstra, the Shiva Linga represents the pure self, with the term "Linga" conveying the tattva that the jIvAtman (shiva in this case) is the body of Brahman. When worshipped in a manner contrary to shAstra, the Linga assumes the meaning, "embodied self", which is a lower state of existence for the jIvAtma.

When one worships the Linga the right way, mahAdeva provides him with a knowledge of the true nature of the pure self and elevates him to Brahman. When one worships him in an incorrect manner, mahAdeva provides him with contrary knowledge and keeps him embodied in samsAra. Thus, mahAdeva caters to both groups of people by his form of the Linga.

The Linga is also sometimes compared to the organ of generation. This is not a dosha, because the self is a doer of great works and a producer of fruits, much like the penis is required for progeny. Such a meaning is also acceptable and is not a slight on mahAdeva.

Now, as mentioned earlier, whenever the Linga is worshipped in a manner contrary to shAstra, it assumes the meaning of "embodied self" and not "pure self". That indeed is the case with Lingodbhava, which I will describe below.

INNER MEANINGS OF THE INCIDENT OF LINGODBHAVA

Here, I will describe the inner meanings of this incident.

Tattva of the "Anala-Sthambha" - Pillar of Fire

The Linga which appeared before brahmA and vishNu represents the embodied self. The fire surrounding it is the fire of rajo guNa. Thus, it signifies the embodied self in samsAra afflicted by rajo guNa. That such a tattva is made the supreme object of worship in this story is the reason why it is declared to be founded in "tamas".

Tattva of the Top and Bottom of the Linga

brahmA and vishNu were tasked with finding the top and bottom of the Linga. The top, signified by "urdhva", "Adi" etc. is the higher nature or origin of this embodied self - the pure nature of being free of karmas, sin, thirst etc. The bottom (adha) is the base of the embodied self - the karmas which are supporting it's state of embodiment and affliction by rajo guNa.

Tattva of brahmA's endeavors to see the top

brahmA represents one who is performing the duties of the 4 Vedas by karma yoga (chaturmukha). The goal of karma yoga is to eventually proceed to j~nAna yoga, which leads to perception of the self in it's pure state. Thus, brahmA went to see the "top" of the Linga, which means, he endeavored by his works (karma yoga) to see the pure state of the embodied self. He assumed the form of a swan, because a karma yogI should have discrimination of separating the good in shAstra (knowledge of the self) from the bad (petty fruits like svarga etc) just as a swan separates milk from water.

Tattva of vishNu's endeavors to see the bottom

vishNu, even in the inner meaning of this incident, is paramAtma only. As paramAtma, he endeavors to find the bottom, or root of this Linga (the embodied self) which is the origin of the karmas causing samsAra. bhagavAn assumed the form of a boar, because a boar likes filth, and the karmas are impure.

Reason for failure of vishNu's efforts

Now, why did brahmA and vishNu fail in their efforts? Let me start with vishNu, which is easier to understand and more straightforward.

The origin of karmas cannot be found because one cannot say exactly when one performed a specific action to incur a particular puNya or pApa, since our existence and births in samsAra is anAdi. Thus, bhagavAn failed in his efforts to find a beginning to our suffering in samsAra.

The tAmasatva of the incident is that the superficial meaning paints this as a dosha on vishNu's part, when it really is a shAstric tattva that even he cannot find the origin of the karmas. The fact that it claims he failed "like a **napum-saka**", thus insulting him in a

manner that other shAstrAs do not, is another thing to note. Yet another fact is that the purANa says he became despondent at his failure. If even paramAtma becomes despondent, who can save us? That paints it as a hopeless situation overlooking his mercy and ability to extinguish the karmas.

Reason for failure of brahmA's efforts (and Ketaki)

So much for vishNu. Why did brahmA fail? We know that the text says a ketaki flower fell down from the top of the Linga and as it approached brahmA, it encouraged him to give up but lie to vishNu and shiva that he had seen the top. What is the significance of this?

It is simple. The flower represents the mind of brahmA. "pushpaM" means "vikasati" - to blossom or expand which is a function of the mind. The flower is said to be fragrant, and vishNu purANa likens the agitations of the mind (by sense objects/attachments/thoughts) to fragrances.

Why the Ketaki flower in particular? Will explain later.

This flower was initially at the top of the Linga. It means, brahmA's mind was focused on the pure state of the self. But during the course of performing duties of the Vedas, the flower fell down, meaning, his mind began to covet the fruits of actions. Thus, the mind or flower had become contaminated with the fragrance of attachment and thus "fell down" from the state of contemplation of the true nature of the self.

This mind, tells brahmA to lie saying he had seen the top. Meaning, sometimes, some who still have attachments, make the mistake of transitioning from karma yoga to j~nAna yoga. They are not yet ready to meditate on the self because they still have desires, but nonetheless they undertake such meditation in haste when they should have continued karma yoga. Thus they fail.

The act of lying that he had seen the top represents a person not ready for j~nAna yoga, nonetheless undertaking it. The lie is spoken to vishNu, meaning, the meditation of j~nAna yoga is undertaken by meditating on bhagavAn as being essentially similar to the self in terms of being free of karmas, hunger, thirst etc. But he is not qualified for such meditation.

The lie is spoken to Shiva as well, meaning, one meditates on the embodied self as the pure self, but again, he is not qualified for it.

The tAmasatva of this is that the superficial meaning makes brahmA the representative of the fallen yogI when in reality, brahmA is "lokagururum" and "devANam prathamaM" - he is the one who teaches others on perfection in karma and j~nAna yogAs.

Explanation of Shiva's boons and curses

Three things happen because of this act:

- Shiva curses brahmA that he would not be worshipped for this act.
- Shiva says vishNu would gain an equal status with him due to his act of speaking the truth.
- Shiva curses the ketaki flower saying it would not be used for his worship but can be used for worship of vishNu.

The inner meanings of this are as follows

- brahmA, the karma yogI, is no longer considered worship-worthy, ie, a j~nAnI.
- The way to eliminate desires and attachments is to meditate on bhagavAn's divine form by karma yoga, which then leads to a meditation of bhagavAn as being similar to the self, then finally providing a perception of the self. Hence, Shiva (the embodied self) says vishNu will be equal to him, meaning, he is enjoining this meditation on vishNu to attain the self.
- The impure mind is not fit to directly meditate on the self which is a highly difficult entity to meditate on. It can be used to meditate on bhagavAn, to purify itself, as mentioned above. Thus the flower is to be used for vishNu, but not for shiva.

Significance of Ketaki

Why Ketaki now out of all flowers? shrI vedAnta desikan in his pAduka sahasram says that out of all flowers, the ketaki is the favorite of bhagavAn, and that mahAdeva, in his nitya naimittika karmas, is always offering this flower to bhagavAn's lotus feet, and then wearing it on his head. Thus, he does not desire the Ketaki, a flower that he uses in his worship of vishNu, to be used in his own worship by those who do not worship him in a manner conducive to shAstra. Hence, this story cleverly finds an excuse to exclude use of Ketaki in worship of mahAdeva.

EXPLANATION USING PRAMANAS

Now, the above is all good, but one needs to show pramANAs that this indeed is the meaning of the incident. So, as an appendix of sorts, I will quote a few shlokas from Shiva purANa that establish these truths.

First, here is a description of the anala-sthambha from the vidyeshvara samhita of shiva purANa:

atIMdriyamidaM staMbhagnirUpaM kimutthitam | asyordhvamapi chAdhashcha AvayorlakShyameva hi

Meaning: (brahmA reflected) "What is this sthambha that is beyond the range of the senses, of the form of fire, which has risen up? We have to find it's top and bottom."

Note that this perfectly translates into the following inner meaning,

Inner Meaning: What is the true nature of this embodied self, called "sthambha" as it supports the body, beyond the range of the senses, having the form of rajo guNa that is "fire", which is performing fruitive actions (utthitam)? We have to find it's higher portion (the state of the pure self) and that which is the bottom, ie the origin of the karmas that supports it's embodiment.

So, the terms used in the description of the pillar of fire clearly establish that the inner meaning is as I had described it.

Next, see how the Ketaki flower convinces brahmA to utter a lie that he had seen the top.

itaH paraM sakhe me.adya tvayA kartavyamIpsitam | mayA saha tvayA
vAchyametadviShNoshcha sannidhau staMbhAMto vIkShito dhAtrA tatra
sAkShyahamachyuta

Meaning: Dear Friend! You must do as I desire. With me, you must speak in the presence of vishNu, "I have seen the (top) end of this sthambha, O Achyuta!

As I mentioned earlier, the Ketaki is the mind associated with attachments and brahmA is the karma yogI who hastily goes into j~nAna yoga with this impure mind. Such a mind is a friend of such a person. Hence, the meaning below.

Inner Meaning: Dear Friend (jIva performing fruitive actions). Do as I, the mind, desires or seeks after. With my association, speak (reflect) in the presence of vishNu, the antaryAmin of all, "O One who does not slip from his glory (achyuta)! I have perceived the nature of the pure self, which is the (top) end or limit of this sthambha or the embodied self."

In shAstrA, "speaking" is a metaphor for meditation. bhagavAn is called "Achyuta" as he never slips from his glory despite his births. This is a similarity with the pure nature of the jIvAtma which never changes despite being born in samsAra and so he is called "Achyuta" here.

The idea is, one should not undertake j~nAna yoga without proper chitta shuddhi. Hence, this endeavor is a falsehood.

Finally, note the words of shiva who tells vishNu that he will be on an equal footing to him in terms of honor.

brUyAstataste bhavItA janeShu sAmyaM mayA satkRRitirapyalaphAH

Meaning: You will be on an equal footing with myself among the devotees, who will honor you.

This has the following inner meaning,

Meaning: Among the people who meditate on the self, you shall have an equal status, ie, they will meditate on the self by considering you as equal to the self in terms of being free of karma, hunger, thirst etc. You will attain great fame of the form of being the means to attain the self.

This much is the significance of Lingodbhava.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A question may be asked, if the tattvAs match the shAstra, why is this incident rejected?

It is impossible to understand these tattvAs merely by just reading this story. One has to have had a knowledge of the sAttvika shAstra to understand the true intent of this story.

In contrast, if one reads the mahAbhArata or vishNu purANa, one can atleast grasp the basic essence - for eg, that duryodhana is on the side of adharma, yudhiShThira who worshipped kRi^shNa is on the side of dharma etc. You do not need to know duryodhana signifies the body and yudhiShThira signifies the jIvAtma meditating on bhagavAn to destroy the body --- merely the superficial meanings convey who is on the path of dharma and who is adhArmic and match the inner meaning.

But here, the superficial meaning completely contradicts the inner meaning. Though the inner meaning conveys the tattvAs, it does so in a very crooked manner. It makes brahmA, a lokaguru and reciter of the Vedas, someone who is incapable of Yoga and speaks untruth. It makes bhagavAn appear despondent that he cannot find the source of the karmas of the jIvAtma, implying a rather pessimistic state of perpetual samsAra ignoring his ability to dispel karmas. It exalts the worship of the embodied self signified by shiva over paramAtma signified by vishNu.

Shiva, a disciple of brahmA, is also giving orders and cursing his own guru, something that is impossible for mahAdeva who is called "**padmayoni**" as he ever abides in the lotus born brahmA in the sense of always following his directions. The Ketaki, a blemishless flower, is also supposedly cursed by the person who uses it for worship and values it highly.

Are all these not what gIta 18.32 was alluding to as mistaking dharma as adharma etc., which is indicative of "tAmasIka buddhi"?

The rishIs and gods are those who are rooted in satyam. Thus, even when they propagate some arthavAdAs for the sake of loka-kshema, they do it in a manner that even these stories indirectly convey the same truths.