Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s Criticism of the Hiraṇyagarbha School:
On the Liberation Theory

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1. Introduction

In the works of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (ca. 16th cent.), a scholar of the Advaita Vedānta School, one finds descriptions of the Hairanyagarbha (the Hiraṇyagarbha School), who embraced Hiraṇyagarbha as a supreme god. It is well known that Hiraṇyagarbha is an old deity dating back to Ṛgveda and in ancient times was thought to be a supreme god who created the world. However, for the Advaita School, Hiraṇyagarbha was merely a creator deity of the dualistic world and is a lower level being than the absolute Brahman. Because Madhusūdana belonged to the Advaita School, it has been assumed that he also considered Hiraṇyagarbha to be an inferior being. In order to elucidate the religious philosophy of Madhusūdana, it is important to clarify at what level of being he positioned Hiraṇyagarbha compared with Brahman. This paper, as a preliminary toward clarifying this point, specifically takes up Madhusūdana’s criticism of the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha, revealing his main points of criticism as well as his own views regarding this liberation theory.

2. The Liberation Theory of the Hairanyagarbha

First, I look into the argument of the Hairanyagarbha in the works of Madhusūdana. Madhusūdana described the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha in his Vedāntakalpatikā (VKL).

T1: The Hairanyagarbha [says] that liberation means verily reaching Hiraṇyagarbha through the flamy path and so forth by meditation (upāsana) on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth. (VKL 10,5–6)
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The statement of the Hiranyagarbha quoted here coincides with a doctrine of reaching the world of Brahman through the divine path by knowing the teaching of the five fires found in Chāndogyanopaniṣad (ChānUp) and Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (BrhadUp).\(^1\) Here, meditation (upāsana) means the mental process equating A with B, and the meditation on the knowledge of the five fires, such as “the ritual fire is that world, its fuelwood is the sun . . . ,” is thought to be equating that ritual fire with the world, its fuelwood with the sun and its fume with the ray and so forth in the teaching of the five fires.\(^2\) However, according to Madhusūdana’s criticism discussed later, neither Brahman nor Hiranyagarbha is the object of the meditation. This point is important. Additionally, ChānUp states that “the impersonal Puruṣa leads them to Brahman,”\(^3\) and the Hairanyagarbha maintained that liberation meant being led to and reaching the world of Brahman. In addition, according to the interpretation of Śaṅkara (ca. -756-772-) on ChānUp and BrhadUp, the Brahman reached through the divine path in ChānUp and BrhadUp is Hiranyagarbha.\(^4\) Moreover, the Hairanyagarbha seems to have equated the Brahman found in the Upaniṣads to Hiranyagarbha. Thus, the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha could have been based on ChānUp and BrhadUp.

3. Madhusūdana’s Criticism of the Liberation Theory of the Hairanyagarbha

The gradual liberation (kramamukti) theory in the Advaita School corresponds to the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha discussed above. Madhusūdana criticized the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha from the viewpoint of the gradual liberation theory. Then, how did Madhusūdana criticize the above argument of the Hairanyagarbha? Regarding the person left for the divine path, Madhusūdana states as follows in his Bhagavadgītādhīrthadīpikā (BhGGAD) on Bhagavadgītā (BhG) 8.23:

T2: On the other hand, some of the people who have gone to the divine path will return [to this world]; of the people meditating on the symbols (pratīka),\(^5\) the one who have gone up to the world of thunder (taḍī) [will definitely return at the end of their enjoyment of the world of thunder], and the men who do not meditate on this (Hairanyagarbha and so forth) but meditate on the knowledge of the five fires will definitely return at the end of their enjoyment [of the world of Hiranyagarbha] even if they are led up to Hiranyagarbha by the impersonal Puruṣa.\(^6\) Even in this way, those who meditate on small (dahara) [space] and so forth\(^7\) will gradually be liberated at the end of their enjoyment [of the world of Hiranyagarbha]. (BhGGAD 403,26–28)
These men who meditate on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth should be the Hiranyagarbha. Madhusūdana accepted the possibility of reaching Hiranyagarbha by meditating on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth. However, by stating that they will return from the world of Hiranyagarbha at the end of their enjoyment, he denies the liberation view of the Hairanyagarbha, that liberation means reaching Hiranyagarbha. If follows that, while accepting the aforementioned tenet that “the knowers of the knowledge of the five fires reach the world of Brahman” in ChāndUp and BṛhadUp, differing from the Hairanyagarbha who considered it to be liberation, Madhusūdana did not interpret it as liberation. Moreover, stating that if people only meditate on the knowledge of the five fires and so forth without meditating on Hiranyagarbha and so forth, they will return from the world of Hiranyagarbha, Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hairanyagarbha, i.e., liberation is also obtainable by meditating on the knowledge of the five fires. In this way, Madhusūdana denied the soteriology of the Hairanyagarbha. Meanwhile, by stating that the meditators of small space and so forth reach Hiranyagarbha and that they can gradually be liberated at the end of their enjoyment, he argued that they can obtain gradual liberation.

Now, what is the meaning of the meditation on small space and so forth in T2? This point is made clear in Madhusūdana’s following argument in BhGGAD on BhG 8.5:

T3: From the standpoint of meditation on the conditioned [Brahman], there is a man who goes through the divine path, which is referred to as “a fire, a light, the daytime, the bright fortnight” and so forth and which is superior to the ancestral path, that man will reach, i.e., attain, my state, my nature, the unconditioned Brahman at the end of his enjoyment of the world of Hiranyagarbha. (BhGGAD 382,21–23)

According to this passage, at the time of death the meditator on the conditioned Brahman will reach the state of the unconditioned Brahman through the divine path. But, since reaching the state of the unconditioned Brahman will take place at the end of his enjoyment in the world of Hiranyagarbha, Madhusūdana believes that at first the meditator on the conditioned Brahman will reach the world of Hiranyagarbha through the divine path, and finally he will attain the state of the unconditioned Brahman at the end of his enjoyment there.

Since T3 is consistent with T2, it is understood to be an argument of gradual
liberation. Thus, it can be said that “to meditate on small space and so forth” in T2 means to meditate on the conditioned Brahman. In addition, since according to T3 the practitioner attains the unconditioned Brahman, we can conclude that “the liberation” of gradual liberation means absolute liberation.

Thus, Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hairanyagarbha, liberation is obtained by meditation on the knowledge of the five fires. On the other hand, he regarded this as gradual liberation through the meditation on the conditioned Brahman. Further, he states that immediate liberation is possible through the meditation on the unconditioned Brahman. From these points, we can conclude that the reason why Madhusūdana rejected the means to the liberation of the Hairanyagarbha is that the object of meditation is not Brahman. On this point, Śaṅkara already stated that those who do not want to go to Brahman, i.e., who do not meditate on Brahman, cannot reach Brahman, so Madhusūdana seems to have taken over Śaṅkara’s view.

4. Conclusion

Above, I have investigated the criticism of the liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha by Madhusūdana. The liberation theory of the Hairanyagarbha was based on the five-fire and the divine-path theories found in ChāndUpaniṣad and BrhadUpaniṣad. However, for the Advaita School, which Madhusūdana belonged to, these theories concerned the gradual liberation theory. Therefore, Madhusūdana criticized the soteriology of the Hairanyagarbha by characterizing it as a gradual liberation theory. Thus, I conclude that the controversy between Madhusūdana and the Hairanyagarbha was induced by the difference in their interpretations of the five-fire theory and the divine-path theory mentioned in ChāndUpaniṣad and BrhadUpaniṣad.

Notes
1) See ChāndUpaniṣad 5.4.1–5.10.2, BrhadUpaniṣad 6.2.9–6.2.15. See especially ChāndUpaniṣad 5.10.1–5.10.2, BrhadUpaniṣad 6.2.15.
2) With respect to the teaching of the five fires, see ChāndUpaniṣad 5.4.1–5.9.2, BrhadUpaniṣad 6.2.9–6.2.14, Hattori 1979, pp. 170–172.
4) For instance, see Chāndogyopaniṣadbhāṣya (ChāndUpBh) 485.18–20 (on ChāndUp 5.10.2): śrutyantragadye ca satyaṁ brahma hiranyagarbhābhikhyam upāsate te sarve 'ṛciṣam arcirabhimānīṁ devatām abhisambhavanti pratipadyante.

5) In his Brahmaśūtrabhāṣya (BSBh) Śaṅkara said that the meditators of the symbol (pratika) cannot reach the world of Brahm. See BSBh 502.22–503.2 (on Brahmaśūtra [BS] 4.3.15): pratikālambanān varjayitvā sarvān anvān vikārālambanān nayati brahmalokam īti bādārayana ācāryo manyate. na hi evam ubhayathābhāvābhupagame kāscid doṣo 'sti, aniyamanyāyasya pratikavatyatīktesv apy upāsanesūpapatteḥ. tatkratuṣ ca asya ubhayathābhāvāsya samarthako hetur draṣṭavyaḥ. yo hi brahmakratuḥ, sa brāhmaṁ aśivaryān āśited īti śiṣyate, “tāṁ yathā yathopāsate tad eva bhavati” īti īṣtuḥ, na tu pratiçeṣu brahmakratutvam āsti, pratikapradhānātvaḥ upāsanasya.

6) See ChāndUp 4.15.5 (= ChāndUp 5.10.2, see n. 3). In addition, see ChāndUpBh 462.12–14 (on ChāndUp 4.15.5): tat tatrasthams tāṁ puruṣaḥ kāscid brahmalokād ēty āmānavo mānavyāṁ srṣṭau bhavo mānavo na mānavo 'mānavaḥ sa puruṣa enān brahma satyolokasthaṁ gamayatī.

7) See ChāndUp 8.1.1: īdām āsmin brahmāpurān puṇḍarikaṁ veśma daharo 'śmin antar ākāśas āsmin yayānt tad eva viṣyānīṣitavyam īti. Furthermore, the discussion concerning “small space” (*daharākāśa) is found in BSBh on BS 1.3.14–21.

8) Śaṅkara states that “small space” (*daharākāśa) is the highest Ātman in BSBh on BS 1.3.14–21 (daharādhikarana). But in BSBh on BS 1.3.20, he also maintains that a man, who considers “small space” as the highest Ātman can see the “small space” as a living soul. One can conclude that the “small space” interpreted as a living soul corresponds to the conditioned Brahman. See BSBh 115.23–116.10 (on BS 1.3.20): atha yo 'yaṁ daharavākyaśeṣe jīvaparāmarśo darśītaḥ “atha ya eṣa saṃprasādaḥ” (ChāndUp 8.3.4) ītyādiḥ, sa dahare parameśvare vyākhyaṁāne na jīvopāsanopadeśaḥ, nāpi praṅṭavāteṣo padeśaḥ īty anarthakatvaṁ prāṇotiti ātā āha—anyārtho 'yaṁ jīvaparāmaṣaḥ. na jīvasvarūpaparyavasyāḥ, kim tarhi parameśvarasvarūpa-paryavasāyī. īty evam artho 'yaṁ jīvaparāmaṣaḥ parameśvaravādino 'py upapadyate. Moreover, Śaṅkara also believes that the gradual liberation is possible by meditation on the conditioned Brahman. See Nakamura 1989, pp. 792–793.

9) See BhGGAD 382.23–25 (on BhG 8.5): nirguṇabrahmasmaranapaṇake tu kalevaṁ tyaktvā prayātīti lokadṛṣṭyabhiprāyam. “na tasya prāṇā utkramanti” (BrhadUp 4.4.6) “atraiva samavaniyante” (BrhadUp 3.2.11) īti śruteḥ, tasya praṇotkramanābhāvena gatyaḥHAVAT. sa maddbhāvaṁ sākṣaṁ eva yāti, “brahmaiva san brahmāpītī" (BrhadUp 4.4.6) īti śruteḥ.

10) See BSBh 503.2–4 (on BSBh 4.3.15): nāv abrahamakratut api brahma gacchatī tīṣyate. yathā paṇcāṅgvinivyāyām “sa enān brahma gamayati” (ChāndUp 4.15.5) īti bhavatu. yatru eva āhatyavāda upalabhayē, tadabhāve tu autsargikeṇa tatkratunyāyena brahmakratūnāṁ eva tatprāptiḥ, na itareṣāṁ īti gayate. See also n. 5.

Abbreviations
BrhadUp Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad. In Ten Principal Upaniṣads with Sankarabhāṣya. Works of
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BS Brahmasūtra. See BSBh.
BhG Bhagavadgītā. See BhGGAD.
ChāndUp Chāndogyopaniśad. See BhṛhadUp.
ChāndUpBh Chāndogyopaniśadbhāṣya (Śaṅkara). See BhṛhadUp.

References

Key words Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, Hairanyakarīgha, Advaitavedānta, kramamukti, paṇcāgnividyā, devayāna

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