PAÑCARĀTRA’S CONCEPT
OF THE SUPREME GOD

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Brahman and Nonpersonal Aspect

As is the case with almost every religio-philosophical school in ancient India, the Pāñcarātrikas also adopt Upaniṣadic Para(ma)ṇ Brahma (or Brahman) as their “highest Principle”:

para-tattva, JS 1.41, VS 2.53, cf. NS 1.4, 9.35
“ultimate cause of all the causes”:
sarva-kāraṇa-kāraṇam, AS 2.53
sarva-tattvāśrayam tattvam, SS 12.163
or “supreme reality”:
paramāṃ vastu, JS 5.29.

In the Saṃhitās, however, Brahman is not regarded as an independent reality void of or beyond personal, theistic attributes. Here Brahman seems rather to represent the transcendent or nonpersonal aspect of the supreme God and reveals its borrowed metaphysical character in the Pāñcarātra theology. For It is not an integral part of this popular religious system, which centers on the ideas of a personal active god.

Thus in the Nārāyanīya, the oldest of our texts, detailed explanations of Brahman proper are scarcely to be found; so also in the Paramāṣ, and
hence even in the later VisṇuS. Nor does the name Brahman appear in
the lists of God’s epithets found in those Saṁhitās. 1

At times, even the transcendent and personal aspects are apparently
considered to be interchangeable. In Jayākhya 1.21~4 and 4.60~132,
especially in the latter passage which is an elaborate paraphrase of BhG
13.12~7, the descriptions of Brahman are totally interwoven with those
of God. 2 Only Ahirbudhnya chapter 2 offers a lengthy explanation of
Brahman, but in this case again we find a list of Its epithets (2.25~40),
all of which, excepting ātmatva (2.29) and brahman (2.37), are given in
the nominative singular masculine. Therefore, it would be almost im-
possible to regard Brahman as an independent, nonpersonal principle
distinguished from God in the Pāñcarātra. Should It be separated,
Brahman is at best merely a nominal and metaphysical principle which can
hardly appear in liturgical contexts of the Saṁhitās.

Why, then, did the Pāñcarātrikas see fit to integrate the primarily
nonpersonal Brahman into their system? There was an obvious intention
to brahmanize and strengthen the popular religion of the Vaiṣṇavas; that
is, to establish the orthodoxy of the sect. The orthodox Brahmin tradi-
tion, on its part, supported such a development in order to bring the
new movement under its control. We shall see later how the Puruṣa–
sūkta (RV 10.90) is utilized in the Pāñcarātra system. Secondly,
there seems to have been a theological necessity. According to the Saṁ-
ḥitās, the supreme God is akartṛ 3 and therefore cannot play an actual

1. MBh 12.328.35~51, 330.1~67 (cf. MBh 5.68.2~14), PS 2.95~9, VS 3.55~63.
2. Also see PauS 19.38~47, LT 2.8~11 et passim, VP 6.5.71 ff., H 31.59.
3. MBh 12.330.57, cf. BhG 4.13, 13.29 & 31; niskriya, MBh 12.325.4.2, 326.23,
30 & 41, PauS 22.62, NS 9.35; sarva–kriyā–vinirmukta, SS 5.81, JS 4.61; nirvyāpāra,
PS 2.106, VS 4.46; akrīya, VS 15.17.
role in the creation of this world; creative activity is entirely entrusted to His Śakti, personified and worshipped as the goddess Lakṣmī. The underlying idea in differentiating those two concepts is certainly to protect the perfect nature of God from the imperfection of the world. But there looms a difficulty: since God possesses the Śakti within Himself, there arises the danger that the Absolute will become split into an ultimate duality. Therefore, when the Pāñcarātrikas insisted upon monotheistic doctrine (ekānta), they must have managed to unify God and His Śakti goddess in some way. For this purpose the older concept of Brahman was quite helpful. The word, being neuter (napuṣaṇaṁ brahma, VS 17.93), can include both masculine and feminine within itself, for it is neither. Thus in the Lakṣmī T, Brahman is aprthag-bhūta-śakti (2.11, 16.24) and is sometimes compared to the waveless ocean. Viṣṇu is śaktimat also like an enormous ocean, the waves of which, when agitated, correspond to His śakti (LT 32.32). In Ahirobdhnya 4.75–8, Brahman consists of both God as śaktimat and His Śakti, harmoniously blended in their unmanifested condition, that is to say, in the relation of tādātmya.

The same correlation of God as śaktimat—śakti—bhāva, is already retained in the old Sātvata (19.82–3). This conception is clearly expressed in the following lines from the Lakṣmī T:


5. For the androgynous character of primeval cosmogonic beings, see J. Gonda, The Savayajnas, Amsterdam 1969, pp. 344ff. Also see BAUp 1.4.3–5, Manu 1.32–33, VP 1.7.11–16; cf. RV 10.129.5 & 3.38.3

6. Cf. VP 1.8.32.

7. Also see LT 2.11–21, JS 3.17–20, AS 3.4–5, 8.46, 21.7. For brahma—śakti, see AS 21.7–12.

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In the monotheistic religion of the Pāṇcarātra, the non-personal and personal aspects of the supreme God are not totally separate but overlapping, or rather intricately interwoven. Only for the purpose of simplification of analysis and conceptual explanations can these two aspects be distinguished. The nonpersonal dimension primarily emphasizes the transcendence of the Supreme beyond the world, while the personal stresses the immanence within it. As we shall see, through His personal aspect the transcendent God becomes accessible to man.

The non-personal aspect of the Supreme is implied in the various attributes of Brahman, and they are also applied to the god who is an object of actual worship. Those attributes of Brahman which necessarily contain essential characters of the nonpersonal God may thus be analyzed.

Brahman, the transcendent reality far beyond this world (bhavodadheḥ param param, AS 2.42, PauS 41.142) contrasts distinctly with all that is here in this world, relative, ever-changing and transient (kṣaṇa—

9. Cf. LT 8.8–9, 15.8–11.
10. Also uttamam paramārthataḥ. SS 5.81; parama dhāma, SS 7.3; viśvāṣṭita, SS 23.47; parā kāśṭhā, JS 4.61; sarvātisāyin, PauS 19.43; cf. KaUp 3.11. tattvātīśtaḥ param, NS 1.28.
bhangi jagat sarvam, VS 3.80). Attributes of Brahman thus include “eternal,” “undeckaying,” “changeless” and “without beginning and end.” As opposed to the finite and relative nature of the world, Brahman should be “infinite,” “without qualification,” and “void of all imposed properties.” It cannot possess any specific forms at all; hence

11. This seems to be the basic idea of Ramanuja in his definition of para—brahman; cf. sarva—vastu—vijayyātā, VAS 82 (p.119.8), 134 (p.165.10), 140 (p.169.4). For details, see VAS 136. Cf. SDS 4.37, aṣeṣa—vēṣa—pratyanākam.


15. E.g., anādy—ananta, SS 19.119; anādy—anta, JS 4.63, 70 & 101–2, AS 2.6 & 22, LT 22.5; nitya, SS 19.120; sanātana—tana, SS 25.119.


20. Cf. na vijñeyam rūpaḥ iti, MBh 12.323.42; amūrta, SS 2.70, et passim, PauS 29.34, 33.118; praśna—mūrti, SS 6.212; na tasya vidyate · · · rūpam, JS 4.110; anākāra, LT 22.4; aprakāra, LT 8.4; cf. BAUp 4.4.7, VP 4.11.2 (nirākṛti).
the transcendent God is invisible (AS 44.31, PS 23.51, 29.26). Since It is infinite, Brahman cannot be limited by form, space and time:

\[ \text{ākāra\text{d} deśataḥ kālād anavaccheda—yogataḥ} / (\text{AS 2.25}) \]

\[ \text{ananto deśa—kālādi—pariccheda—vivarjitaḥ} // (\text{LT 2.8}) \]

Consequently, there is no measure to define It. It must remain supersensible and unknowable through empirical knowledge. Here lies another striking contrast of Brahman’s omnipotence to the limited powers of the world.

To these is related the important unitary and static nature of the transcendent, in contrast to the dynamic diversity of this world. It is “only one” “without second.” Its essential character is an “absolute

\[ \text{21. Also see JS 4.77, AS 2.9, 9.37, LT 22.4, 43.20. Cf. P. Deussen, The Philosophy of the Upanishads, New York 1966, pp. 151—6.} \]

\[ \text{22. E.g., pramanair aparicchedyam, JS 4.105; na tasya vidyate mānam, JS 4.110; aprameya, SS 25.119, PauS 10.6, AS 9.37, 33.49, LT 32.30—1, BhG 11.17 & 42. Cf. BAUp 4.4.20.} \]


\[ \text{24. MBh 12.321.5—6 & 28, JS 4.66, cf. MBh 12.326.20 ff., 339.4; agrāhyā, PauS 19.42.} \]

\[ \text{25. E.g., sarva—śakti, SS 17.409, 19.119, 23.52, 25.122, PauS 19.40, JS 4.70 & 101, 6.223, AS 2.7 & 62, LT 10.5; ananta—śakti, SS 17.412, 23.57, PauS 38.180; sarva—kartr, PauS 43.113.} \]

\[ \text{26. I.e., eka eva : e.g., JS 4.110, AS 2.22, LT 2.10, 8.5, 32.29. Cf. ekam eva advityam, ChUp 6.3.2.1—2.} \]

\[ \text{27. I.e., advaita : SanatkS Indra 6.41, LT 2.11.} \]
unity,”28 which “cannot be disturbed,”29 because It is “supportless.”30

As Brahman is one only and absolutely unitary, It is “without parts”31 and is not simply an aggregate of elements seen as a composite whole. Since It is without constitutive elements, It cannot have any distinctions at all by which It could be characterized. Brahman is thus called “the void.”32 To illustrate this idea figuratively, Brahman is sometimes compared to a waveless ocean33 or to a cloudless and windless sky;34 but in reality It is far beyond any kind of comparison at all.35 Accordingly, the transcendent God cannot be an object of logical or philosophical investigation.36 This point is clearly seen in the following verses of the Nārāyanīya

30. E.g., nirālamba, JS 5.29, NS 9.34, LT 2.9, 10.5; or svādhīna & svatantra, JS 4.101. Also cf. nirādhāra (Gonda, Brahman, pp. 48–9).
33. SS 19.139 (nistaranga), PauS 22.70, 33.151, AS 2.23, 9.38, 24.7, LT 2.10, 3.4, 4.7, 32.32. Cf. PauS 1.41, 22.3.
34. AS 5.3, 9.38, LT 4.7.
35. E.g., sarvopāman—rahita, JS 5.29; anaupamya, SS 2.70, 6.212, PauS 19.41, 20.76, JS 4.61, 16.277, LT 10.12, cf. VP 1.22.41; anupama, AS 9.37, LT 8.4, 22.4.
and the *Harivamśa*:

\[
na \text{ hy } \textit{eṣa} \textit{ tarkyā} \textit{ śakyo vaktum} \textit{ varṣa}—\textit{śatair api} //
\]

ṛte deva—prasadād vā rājan! jñānāgamena vā / (MBh 12.321.5–6)

nīḥsaṃśayeṣu sarvesu nityaṁ vasati vai hariḥ /

\[
saṃśayān \textit{ hetu}—\textit{baḷān} nādhyāvasati mādhavaḥ // (MBh 12.337.66)
\]

\[
vimṛśanti \textit{ sma taṁ devaṁ} divyābhīr upapattibhiḥ /
\]

\[
\textit{na cāinām} \textit{ ṣekur anvesītum} \cdots // (H Cr. Ed. 40.18)
\]

Therefore, the Pāñcarātra theologians were well aware of the fact that Brahman is indescribable, and the *Jayākhya* expresses it in the following way:

\[
\text{avācye vartate kutra vāg vai, } \text{saṃvedanaṁ} \textit{ vinā} //
\]

\[
\text{ṣaṃnāṁ} \textit{ yadvad} rāśānāṁ ca svādutvaṁ nānubhūyate /
\]

\[
\text{prākṛtaih karaṇais, } \text{tadvan nābhivyaktim} \textit{ bahir vrajet} // (5.23–4)
\]

This conceptual voidness of Brahman is responsible for the predominance of negative attributes and the frequent negation of positive predicates (e.g., AS 2.47–52), which goes back to the “neti neti” of the Upaniṣads. On the other hand, the metaphysical voidness of Brahman is only one aspect, for we recall that It is also infinite. These two concepts, void and infinite, when fused into one, can have a strong positive consequence. An analogy from a different conceptual word is the modern concept of the number zero, for which one of the Sanskrit words happens to be śūnya. When any given number is divided by the one nearest to zero, the result is considered infinity. This arithmetical formula allows,

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37. E.g., avācyā, JS 5.23; vāg—āfiita, JS 5.29; anirdesya, PauS 19.46, AS 4.69, LT 8.4, 10.12; anāma—riṣṭa—sambhedyam avēn—manasa—gocaram, AS 2.6. Also see AS 2.20, 26 & 42, 51.78; cf. VP 6.5.72, asabda—gocara, and 6.7.53, agocaram vacasām.

38. See Deussen, *Philosophy of Ups*, pp. 147 ff.
though only from the theorematic point of view, an equivalent that infinity, when multiplied by zero, can stand for any finite number. In quite a similar way, Brahman, which is infinite and void at the same time, contains everything within It, as described in the \textit{Jayākhyā}. It is thus called “full” or “the All”.

However, Brahman is not only the container of all or the All itself, but also the pervader of all or omnipresent in remarkable contrast to the world, where each and every thing is distinct and cannot go beyond its own limit. Therefore, while formless as the transcendent, Brahman is immanent in this world and manifests itself in all holy and great objects


40. I.e., su–samāyita, SS 19.119; pūrṇa, AS 2.25; cf. MBh 5.68.10, and SS 6.212 (anākula). Also cf. a derivation of the name purusa: pürnatvāt puruso nityam pṛṇāteh pūrṇāthakāt / (AS 59.10). Here the purusa is identified with God. Also see BAUp 5.1.1:

\begin{quote}
 pūrṇam adah, pūrṇam idam, pūrṇat pūrṇam udacyate /
pūrṇasya pūrṇam adaya pūrṇam evāvasiṣyate // Cf. AV 10.8.29.
\end{quote}


of worship (mahāvibhūti—samsthāna, AS 13.18–21, 52.23); cf. JS 4.110, LT 17.5, BhG 10.16 ff., especially:

\[
yad yad vibhūtimat sattvaḥ śrīmad ūrjitam eva vā /
tat tad evāvagaccha tvam mama tejomā—sāmbhavam //
\]

(BhG 10.41)

In this way, it seems that this notion of infinite void provides a theological ground for the well–known inclusive tolerance of the Vaiṣṇavas, and for the popular Avatāra theory in particular, that is of course also conspicuous in the Pāṇcarātra Saṃhitās. They constantly tried to include devotees of other gods within the same Vaiṣṇava fold.

As seen above, Brahman can be placed in apparently contradictory categories from the empirical point of view, not only to indicate that It does not fit into any one of those, but also to reconcile the transcendent and immanent dimensions. A typical example of this coincidentia oppositorum is the traditional attempt to describe Brahman with totally contradicting phrases. Such descriptions are continually found from the time of the old Upaniṣads as well as in the later Pāṇcarātra texts, as for instance, in Jayākhyā 4.65–76.

Other qualifications of Brahman include the famous Vedantic formula sat—cit—ānanda (cf. TUp 3.5–6), which is applied to Brahman or God in the LakṣmiṬ (sac—cid—ānanda—lakṣaṇam, 15.8; cf. e.g., 7.2, 17.3, 43.36 : to Lakṣmi). This very formula is absent in our earliest

44. See AS 33.20–1, PS 2.106–10, 3.8 & 65–7.
46. E.g., IsaUp 4.14 passim, TUp 2.6, KaUp 2.21, BhG 13.14–6, KumS 2.9–11 & 14–5. See A. Gail, Bhakti im Bhāgavatapurāṇa, Münchener Indologische Studien 6, Wiesbaden 1969, pp. 32–4. For the two forms of Brahman, see Hume’s Intro. to The Thirteen Ups, pp. 34.6.
Samhitás. It is nowhere used in the Sātvata and the Jayākhyā, but the Pauśkara makes a sporadic reference to “cit—sad—ānanda—lakṣaṇa” in 1.40. The Akhirbudhnya uses it exclusively for the Vyūhas (5.44, 21.14). Even in these texts sat, cit and ānanda when used separately, clearly form the essential nature of the Absolute. We shall next examine briefly each of the three parts.

Little can be said about sat as it appears in our texts. On the one hand, since Brahman is the transcendent Absolute far from ordinary existence and is not a simple positive thing in the empirical sense (bhāvātīta, JS 4.109), it is impossible to discuss either that It exists or does not (na sad asad ucyate, JS 4.63). On the other hand, Brahman possesses an eternal reality beyond existence and nonexistence, that can be proved only by scriptural testimony (jñānāgama, MBh 12.321.6), or Yogic intuition (saṃvedana, JS 5.23; divya upapatti, H Cr. 40.18).

Brahman as ānanda is regarded as the final goal (parā gati) of yogins (JS 4.61, AS 3.41). Or more generally, It is the terminating point of worldly existence (bhavādadheḥ param pāram, AS 2.42) which is always considered to be painful. The final goal is not only the cessation of pain,

47 CF. BhG 13.12, ŚvetUp 4.18, MuUp 2.2.1, GP 1.2.20. See Deussen, Philosophy of Ups, pp. 128ff.

48 See JS 1.61, 5.29, AS 15.10, LT 2.1; Śaṅkara’s Intro. to ChUp 8.1.1 (paramārtha—sat), SDS 4.369~72 & 381~2, 5.278 (sad—āgamāika—viññeya). Cf. KaUp 6.12, KenaUp 3, MuUp 3.1.8. Further, cf. satyasya satyam, BAUp 2.1.20, 2.3.6; sat or satyam, ChUp 6, cf. BAUp 5.4; satyam, BAUp 2.3.1, TUp 2.6, VP 1.6.3, 1.7.1.

49 Cf. VP 1.22.44, 4.2.52, 6.7.75.

50 Also see PauS 1.48, AS 6.28, LT 2.3, VP 1.22.44 & 53. Cf. SDS 4.37 & 381, puram—purusārtha—bhūtam.

51 BAUp 3.1.3, PauS 30.138, JS 5.12~34 & 73, AS 57.76, LT 5.85, VP 1.17.59, 6.5.58.
but supreme bliss (paramānanda) or nirdūḥkha—niḥsīma—sukha (AS 2.22, LT 2.1). This ānanda is applied not only to Brahman, but to the state of release or mokṣa:

(paramā muktir sad—ānanda—phalā (AS 54.6)
sukham caṇuttamaṃ muktir aduḥkham avinaśvaram (PS 3.22)

Hence the released are nirmalānanda—lakṣaṇa and their bodies are also ānanda—maya (AS 6.24).

If Brahman is thus the final goal attainable by mankind, it cannot be purely transcendent. There must be some essential connecting link between Brahman and the world, for otherwise the former would be utterly foreign to the latter and there could be no way to attain It. Ancient Indian liberal philosophers of the Upaniṣads solved the problem of the isolation of the mundane from the transcendent by finding a connecting link in pure intellect or spirituality (cit or jñāna), for both Brahman and man participate commonly in it. The Pāñcarātrikas evidently inherited this notion. The Saṁhitās unanimously state that the true form of Brahman or


God is pure intellect, and offer abundant references from the time of the Sātvata. As for an instance, cf.:

brahma—svārūpam amalāṃ sva—caitanyaṃ (SS 17.38)

They also affirm that individual selves, jīva or ātman (AS 6.38), possess intellect as their true form (jñānam ātma—svārūpam, JS 4.58, AS 31.7), though in a limited degree when they are born in this world. Here again is a lucid contrast: while Brahman or God is omniscient, man’s intellect is limited.


jñānam eva, JS 4.68 & 97, AS 2.56~7 & 62, LT 2.24~7; jñāna—mūrti, SS 25.294;—rūpa, LT idid.;—vigrāha, VS 11.25.

samasta—samvit—pūrna, SS 17.123; sūdha—samvin—maya, SS 5.82; samvīl, JS 6.210 & 225;—sva-rūpa, SS 2.69;—maya, PauS 22.70, 27.239, JS 1.77.

sva—vedana, JS 5.29 & 23, LT 22.5; ātma—vedana, NS 9.200; sva—samvedya, JS 4.61 & 91; sambuddha, PauS 19.43.

Viṣṇu is thus jñāna—svārūpa (VP 1.2.6, 1.4.21, 39 & 41, 1.22.50, 2.6.46). Lakṣmī’s rūpa is said to be jñāna—ghana (LT 4.7). She also is svacchāṅdā samvīl (LT 7.29, 14.5, VP 1.12.69), sūdha—samvin—māyī (LT 3.8 & 28, 11.37, 14.39), and svasamvedana—samvedyā (LT 14.39). Cf. ātma—samvedya, VP 1.22.41, 6.7.53.


57. E.g., sarva—śīna, SS 25.122, PauS 30.100, 31.149, 43.113, JS 4.69 & 100, VS 2.18; sarva—vettr, JS 4.100. Cf. MuUp 1.1.9, 2.2.7, SDS 4.306~7 & 367.

(*) For a list of the Abbreviations employed, see The Mikkyo Bunka [Quarterly reports on Esoteric Buddhism] Vol.167, 1989, pp.93~89.