UNIT 2 VISISTADVAITA

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

One of the prominent philosophical schools that gave Bhakti a philosophical foundation is Visistadvaita which originated in the 11th century C.E in south India. The aim of the unit is to familiarize students with this origin and historical development and to impart to them the basic tenants of this school.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Visistadvaita is the name given to the philosophy of Sri Ramanuja and his followers. It means 'advaita’ = "oneness" ; "Visistasya" = of the Lord who is "qualified." Here the Lord is qualified by a 'body' (sarira) constituted by the animate (cit) souls and the inanimate (acit) universe.
While 'visistadvaita' is the name given to the philosophy of Ramanuja, its another name 'Sri-Vaishnavism' stands for the religious aspects of this theistic school of vedanta. The term 'Sri-Vaishnavism' refers to the system of thought where Vishnu, along with His consort Sri (Laksmi) occupies the supreme position. She is the mother of the entire creation, being the consort of Lord Visnu. She also acts as the mediator (purusakara) between man and God and brings about union between them. It is because of this reason the theistic philosophical system of Ramanuja is significantly known as 'Sri-Vaishnavism'. It is also known as 'Sri-sampradaya' because 'Sri' is recounted as one of the 'teachers' in the transmission of this tradition. Thus both the expressions Sri-Vaishnavism and 'Sri-sampradaya' signify the role of 'Sri' (Laksmi) in the process of liberation.

2.2 THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL

Though the origin of 'Visistadvaita' is historically associated with the philosopher Ramanuja, long before him, from the 2nd to the 9th century CE, a group of 12 Vaishnavite mystics—known as Alwars in South India—poured out, in the regional language of Tamil, their love of God and their vision and experiences of the divine through ecstatic, soul-stirring and moving metaphors and symbols. Their outpourings constitute one of the most important scriptures of Tamil Vaishnavism, known as Nalayira Divya Prabandham (literally it means 'The Book of Four-thousand Divine Stanzas') that contains the four thousand songs of these Vaishavite saints. These songs are regarded as the primary source book for the philosophy of Ramanuja and his followers. Though these songs probably were in circulation among the people of this region in oral form, it was Nathamuni who set them to writing and put them to singing in the temples. But the tradition has it that Nammalwar, alias Sathakopa revealed these songs to Nathamuni in his yogic trance.

Another great figure in the pre-Ramanuja period was Yamunacharya alias Alavandar, the grandson of Nathamuni. Alavandar picked up Ramanuja as his chosen instrument for propagating the philosophy of the Vedas. He wrote several works such as Siddhi-traya and Girartha Samgraha and Stotra Ratna. Ramanuja never forgets to express his indebtedness to Yamuna by proclaiming his glory in his works. The works of Ramanuja such as Sri-Bhasya, Vedartha-sangraha and Gadya-traya and his commentary on the Bhagavad-gita serve as a strong philosophical foundation for the development of Visistadvaita philosophy. Yet it should be noted that some of Ramanuja works in many ways are further developments on and reminiscent of Yamuna's writings. For instance while Ramanuja's commentary on Brahma Sutra finds in it good deal of arguments from Yamuna's Siddhi-traya, former's work of Saranagati Gadya is an imitation of Yamuna's Stotra Ratna.

After Ramanuja the school of Visistadvaita got divided in course of time into two groups Vadagalai (the Northen School) and Thengalai (Southern School) the separation of which was based on eighteen doctrinal matters. While the former sub-school is founded vastly on the views of Vedanta Desika, the latter owes allegiance to the ideas of Pillai Lokacarya.
2.3 THE SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE SCHOOL

According to Visistadvaita tradition, the hymns of Alwars, Divya Prabhandam, were considered to be equal in importance to Sanskrit Vedas. Sri-Vaishnavites call Divya Prabhandam as the Tamil Veda and they regarded it as authoritative as Prasthana-traya (the triple cannon of Vedatanta philosophy: Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma-Sutra). Since this school considers both Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures as normative and foundational, the Visistadvaita system itself is regarded as Udbhaya-Vedanta (double Vedanta). To the group of authoritative texts, they also add the Vaishnava Agamas and the Puranas especially the Bhagavata Purana.

As mentioned above, one of the distinguishing characters of this school is the pre-eminence given to Alwars and their vision as supreme models of Vaishnavite tradition. According to Vaishnavite belief, these Alwars were incarnations of Lord Vishnu's attendants such as Adi-sesa and Garuda and the accoutrements such as conch (sakha) and the discus (cakara). The Alwars, twelve in number including a woman saint (Andal), were born in all castes and strata of society, and in areas widespread in the South. Among the alwars, the most important saint is 'Nammalvar' whose work 'Tiruvaymozhi' is compared to 'Sama Veda' in its richness and depth. As their name Alwars (meaning the ones 'who dived into the divine,') denote, they were immersed in God-love and God-bliss and their primary mission was nothing but spreading the glory and love of God. It is to be noted that their vertical love for God encompassed their horizontal relationship with other fellow Vaishnavites and other human beings needing God's mercy.

2.4 PHILOSOPHY OF VISISTADVAITA: AN OVERVIEW

Visistadvaita philosophy believes that the supreme reality is Saguna Brahman, a personal being with countless auspicious attributes, and it is a qualified whole of which Brahman is the soul, and the Jiva and the Jagat (the soul and material nature) constitute the body, which has an inseparable relationship with the whole. Though it is a non-dual whole, yet it is characterised by internal differences in it. This is why this one reality is called 'Visistadvaita' meaning 'qualified non-dualism'. Here the non-dual reality is made known by its qualities—the souls and the world which are of two different natures. These two kinds of entities are distinct yet real parts of the whole. The 'Visistadvaita' was not coined by Ramanuja but came to be used by others afterwards. Some regard the doctrine of Visistadvaita as absolute realism, without any place for illusion of any kind. There is no category like maya which is described in Advaita as an indeterminate existent-non-existent entity. Ramanuja considers such a description as a philosophical fantasy. Maya for him is the power of Brahman and its effects are absolutely real, though changing.

2.5 THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE
According to this school, perception, inference and scripture are valid as sources of knowledge, and each valid source is an affirmation of reality in its own domain. Unlike Sankara Ramanuja does not admit a distinction between illusory perception and true perception; for even in the so-called illusory perception there is some perception of reality. Even in the famous mistaken cognition of ‘shell as silver’ when someone makes a statement that ‘this is silver,’ it is not only ‘this’ that refers to what is real, but also ‘silver.’ In other words, both are the reality of ‘this’ (the object) and that of the silver (and the identification of the object as something) are real. Visistadvaita argue for their point with the help of the doctrine of *pancicarna* (quintiplicaion), according to which in any given gross element the other four elements are also present as subordinate parts. This school would say that all things should be present in all things. In shell there are particles of silver; and in the so-called illusion (*maya*) ‘this is silver’ it is the particles of ‘silver’ that are perceived. And so, the silver-cognition in ‘shell’ is of the “real”, and not of what is fictitious or imaginary. Even in the case of mistaken identity of ‘mirage’ as ‘water’ there is some truth in it, because in the desert-sand which belongs to the category of element ‘earth’ there is the element of ‘water’ also. Thus knowledge necessarily refers to what is real, even in cases where cognitions are considered to be erroneous. This theory of error is known as *yathartha-khyati-vada* (the doctrine of the apprehension of what is real).

If so how does one distinguish between valid cognition and invalid cognition, if both refer to what is real? The distinction is not a logical one. We cannot even say that in erroneous cognition, the reference is to a part of what is perceived whereas in valid cognition, the reference is to the whole; for in valid cognition too, it is only a part of that is perceived. In shell, for example, the shell-particles do not constitute the whole of the object presented; they too are only a part, although the predominant part. Psychologically, the experience of shell as silver takes place because of greed, defective sense-organ etc. and one sees only the silver-element, although it is minute, and omits to notice the other elements, of which the shell-element is predominant. The distinction between truth and error can be accounted for in terms of success and failure, respectively, in practice. What is of service to people in life is true and what fails to serve people in their practical needs is said to be false. That is why Visistadvaita defines valid knowledge ‘as that which reveals an object as it is and is useful in practice.’ Thus all knowledge, according to Ramanuja, is of the real.

Visistadvaita is known for its peculiar view of dual aspects of knowledge (*jñana*) of the *jīvas*. The knowledge or consciousness of the *Jīva* has two aspects. The first is its basic or substantive consciousness (*dharma-* *jñana*) and the second its attributive-consciousness (*dharma-bhuta-jñana*) By virtue of *dharma-* *jñana*, the *Jīva* is only self-aware. It is the *dharma-bhuta-jñana* that makes it aware of others including Isvara. If the substantive consciousness is like light, the attributive consciousness is like luminosity. In the state of ignorance it is almost one with unconscious matter (*Prakriti*) but its *dharma-* *jñana* keeps up its individuality and the possibility of developing the *dharma-bhuta-jñana* further. What stands in the way of this expansion of *dharma-bhuta-jñana* is its load of *karma* from beginningless time. It is the creative process of Isvara that helps this development. When fully developed, it embraces the all-knowing *dharma-bhuta-jñana* of Isvara Himself. The *Jīva* however never merges in Him. Its *dharma-* *jñana* keeps up its individuality, just as a wick-light maintains its separateness even when its effulgence becomes submerged in the brilliance of the sun.
Brahman is the basis of all existence. The universe is composed of cit (the sentient) and acit (the non-sentient) and both have their source in Brahman, and he is the indwelling Self within all and the ruler of all. Brahman is both the first and the final cause of the universe. Like in any other system of Indian thought, the universe alternates between the phases of evolution and dissolution. In the phase of dissolution, the universe goes back to Brahman and remain latent in Brahman and creation or evolution is the actualization of the latent. The one becomes many in the sense that Brahman, by exercise of his will, evolves into twenty-four categories and the jivas, or individual souls. Thus Brahman is the material as well as the efficient cause of the universe. To put it differently, God, as the source and support of the universe, has transformed himself into the cosmic manifold; and he is the indwelling Self in his creation, the ruler and director of the cosmic process. The evil that the universe contains is the result of the karma of the individuals, for whom God is the dispenser of the Law. But God himself remains unaffected by evil and is forever absolutely good. God, though he has transformed into the universe of sentient and non-sentient forms, remains distinct from them. He is defined in Upanishads as satyam (real), jnanam (conscious) and anantam (infinite). Ramanuja, while commenting on this text, states that because of this distinctive attributes God is above and beyond matter—a changing phenomenon, and distinct from individual souls caught up in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Though, the universe is the transformation of Brahman, he remains by his nature beyond change, and though immanent, he is transcendent.

As mentioned earlier, Brahman is related to the cosmos as the soul is related to the body. As human beings have a soul and a body, and as the soul, though distinct from the body, yet controls and guides it, lives in it, and uses it as an instrument, similarly Brahman is the soul of the universe, the source and sustenance of all beings within it, and the ruler of all. In the metaphor of body-soul relationship between God on the one hand, and the world and the individual jivas on the other hand, are present threefold relations defined by Ramanuja: adhara and adheya—support and the supported; niyama and niyamya—the controller and the controlled; seshin and sesa—the Lord and his servant. God as the controller of the universe is absolutely good and the redeemer of all beings. Evil and suffering are caused by individual’s karmas, Karmas—good or evil deeds—create happiness or misery; but by karmas alone man cannot redeem himself. Only the grace of God can save him; God is therefore the saviour. In his infinite love, his absolute goodness, he is forever merciful and takes avatara to redeem them.
1. What is the meaning of Visistadvaita?

2. Describe Ramanuja's idea of maya.

3. Is Brahman the material and efficient cause of the universe? Is God transcendent and immanent?

2.7 JIVAS OR INDIVIDUAL SOULS

The Visistadvaita philosophy establishes that the finite self is an eternal spiritual entity yet not a separate self-existent entity, but an organ, an element of Brahman. It is part of Brahman, essentially different from him but inseparably bound to him. Jiva always maintains its distinctiveness even though it is part of Brahman. Even in the state of Moksa, it does not lose its individuality. Jivas are infinite in number. It is monadic in substance (anu). Svetasvatara Upanishad (V 9) says that the self is infinitely smaller than the hundredth part of the point of a hair divided a hundred times and yet it is infinite in range. The monadic character of jiva is its natural form. That is, it is not caused or conditioned by any physical limitation. The finite self is essentially an attribute (prakara) of God. As substance and attribute, they are inseparably associated with God on the one hand, and distinct from one another and from God on the other hand. As inseparably associated with God, the individual self is eternal; and as distinct from him, it has a personality of its own.

The jivas are essentially of the nature of knowledge (jnana-svarupa). They are not merely of the nature of knowledge but are also the substrata of knowledge (jnana-srya). The individual self which is the knower is also the agent of action (karta) and enjoyer of pleasure and pain (bhokta). It is to be noted that jiva is regarded as knower in the sense that it is the asraya or a substratum for knowledge through which all experiences take place. By being a substratum (asraya) for jnana which is subject to modifications, jiva is not subjected to any change. In the same way kartrtva and bhoktrtva admitted in jiva do not involve change in it. Jiva is karta or doer in the
sense that it is the *asraya* or substratum for *krti* or effort. Effort is caused by a desire (*iccha*) to do an act. It is therefore a mental modification or an *avastha* of *jnana*. It is not to be confused with the actual physical activity which follows subsequent to the desire to do an act. In so far as *jiva* is the *asraya* for the *krti* which is a particular state of knowledge, *jiva* becomes the *karta*. The change involved in the physical activity does not affect the *karta*. The same explanation holds good for *jiva* being the *bhokta*. Pleasure and pain are different states of mind resulting either in an agreeable disposition of mind (*anukulatva-jnana*) or in a disagreeable disposition of mind (*pratikulatva-jnana*) respectively. As *jiva* is the *asraya* for such states of experience, it is regarded as *bhokta* or enjoyer of pleasure and pain. The change involved in such mental dispositions applies to the attributive-knowledge and not to *jiva*. Such an explanation is logically tenable in the Visistadvaita system because of the admission of *dharma-bhuta-jnana* as distinct from *jivatman*. The modification applies to the former, while the latter remains unaffected.

### 2.8 THE MEANS OF LIBERATION

According to Visistadvaita system, *Bhakti* (loving devotion) and *Prapatti* (whole-hearted self-surrender) are the alternate means of liberation. They are adopted by people according to their own eligibility and taste. *Bhakti* basically means loving devotion towards God. The term (*Bhakti*) derived from the root *bhaj* = ‘to share, partake, to enjoy’ calls for a reciprocal relationship between the deity and the devotee. *Bhakti* is not a mere emotional pursuit, according to Ramanuja. It involves training one’s mind and intellect towards love of God. Non-stop constant contemplation is the very essence of *Bhakti*. It implies an unperturbed total concentration on God. Ramanuja compares it to the continuous flow of oil poured from one vessel to another. “*tailadharavad avicchinna-smriti-santana-parampara,*”

In Ramanuja's view, various terms such as “*upasanam*”, “*dhyanam*”, “*niddhyasanam*” found in the Upanishads, along with the term “*janam*” are all synonymous with *Bhakti*. By *Bhakti* is meant unbroken chain of thoughts on God. When that is assured, liberation is near at hand. Traditionally, *Bhakti* has several aspects like *sravana* (listening to the discourses on the Lord), *Kirtana* (singing His glories), *Smarana* (remembering Him), *Padasevanam* (serving Lord's lotus feet, i.e., worshiping him in the sacred places), *arcanam* (doing pooja to him according to the rules laid down in the sacred texts), *vandanam* (doing namaskaras/prostrations), *dasyam* (serving him like a servant), *sakhyam* (becoming his friend) and *atmanivedanam* (offering everything one has, including the body, to the Lord).

Sri Vaishanava tradition points out that this *Bhakti* can be cultivated through seven steps, called the “*Sadhana-saptaka.*” They are: *Viveka*, *Vimoka*, *Abhyasa*, *Kriya*, *Kalyana*, *Anavasada* and *Amuddharsha*. They can be explained as follows:

*Viveka*: Discrimination of food. Taking *sattvic* food (sweets, fruits, ghee, etc.) makes one’s mind pure. Purity of mind leads to steady contemplation on the Lord.
Cf. “Aharasuddhau sattvasuddhiḥ, sattvasuddhau dhruva smritih.” (When the food is pure, mind becomes pure; when the mind is pure, recollection of the Lord becomes steady).

**Vimoka**: Cessation of all desires for material enjoyment.

**Abhyasa**: Repeated thinking on the Lord.

**Kriya**: Performing “five great yajnas” (*Panchamahayajnas*) according to one’s capacity. They are:

1. Study of sacred scriptures/ teaching them (*Brahma-yajna*),
2. Offering food etc. to the departed spirits (*pitr-yajna*),
3. Performing fire sacrifices for the gods (*daiva-yajna*)
4. Offering food to the other beings like animals (*bhuta-yajna*) and
5. Hospitality to the guests (*narayana*).

It may be noted that according to the traditional view, those who are not invested with the sacred thread and women are not eligible to perform the first of the five *yajnas* listed above, namely, *Brahma yajna* which involves teaching/ studying the Vedas. “Brahma” here means the “Veda.”

**Kalyana**: Cultivating auspicious qualities like truthfulness, non-injury to animals and straightforwardness.

**Anavasada**: Displaying unwavering faith, not losing one’s heart even in the worst calamity but continuing contemplation on God with cheerfulness.

**Anuddharsa**: maintaining moderation and not becoming over-joyed even when there appear indications that God is becoming favourable.

Visistadvaita holds that although these seven steps are prescribed to cultivate *Bhakti*, they are not easy for an ordinary man to follow. Hence it is declared that *Bhakti* is difficult to practice in the manner expected of the devotees. In contradistinction to *Bhakti*, *Prapatti* or whole-hearted surrender is easier. It can be adopted by one and all, without any distinctions of caste, creed or sex. It can be adopted at any time and place. All are eligible for it. *Prapatti* is also known as *Saranagati, Nyasa, Bharanyasa, Atmaniksheapa, Thyaga, Samnyasa, Namaskarta* etc.

*Prapatti*, like *Bhakti*, is only a kind of mental attitude towards God. If one thinks one can please God by one's own personal efforts like *kirtana, vandana*, etc. one is called a *Bhakta*. If however, one feels convinced that one cannot please God by one's own personal efforts, and that nothing apart from God’s grace can save him or her, one becomes a *Prapanna*. *Prapatti* needs to be done only once. It need not be done again and again, as *Bhakti*.

There are five subsidiaries (*angas*) or *Prapatti*. They are:
1. **Anukulya-sankalpa**: Resolve to do only things favourable to God and wishing good for all
2. **Pratikulya-varjana**: Avoiding things disliked by God.
3. **Raksishyati iti visvasah (Mahavisvasah)**: Firm faith in the saviourship of God.
4. **Goptritva-varanam**: Requesting the Lord to be the protector.
5. **Atmaniksepa-karpanyam**: Placing one’s burden at the feet of the Lord in all meekness and humility.

These five angas make Prapatti complete and efficacious. Of all these, Mahavisvasa is the very heart of Prapatti. Without it, all the other angas become insignificant.

The later Srivaishnava teachers add one more point to the means of liberation. Apart from Bhakti and Prapatti “Acaryanistha” is also capable of procuring Moksa. It consists of trusting one’s own acarya as the savior. Those who entertain this view argue that since one’s acarya himself has done Prapatti to the Lord, one need not separately do it. Tengalai holds that since Sri Ramanuja did Prapatti in his life-time, his followers, direct and indirect are exempted from doing individual Prapatti. The Vadagalai, however, contend that what Sri Ramanuja did was for his own sake and that the successors of his have to do Saranagati separately, for their own good. According to those who advocate this Acarya-nistha, even the Supreme Being becomes unimportant when compared to the guru. Madurakavi Alvar, for instance, declared in his Kanninn Siruthambu that his own guru Nammalvar was more important to him than Lord Krsna Himself, whom Nammalvar resorted to.

### 2.9 THE TWO SECTS OF SRI-VAISHNAIVSM

As mentioned earlier, after Ramanuja Sri-Vaishnavism got divided into two sects namely Vadagalai and Thengalai. While Vadagalai considered the Sanskrit scriptures (vedas) more authoritative than the Tamil scriptures (Divyarahambam), Thengalai believed just the opposite. Subsequently, Vadagalai privileged the teachings of Risis over those of the Alwars and the Thengalai considered the teachings of Alwars more important than those of Risis. Further, while the northern school believed in Markata-nyaya (monkey's model) for Moksa (liberation) giving more emphasis on effort than grace, the southern school promoted Marjara-nyaya (cat’s model) that regarded grace more important than human effort to attain liberation. The northern school recommended Bhakti (unbroken chain of thoughts on God) as a means of liberation for the male twice-born and advocated Prapatti (self-surrender) to others as another means of liberation. The southern school regarded Prapatti as the only means of salvation and prescribed it for all. Even if one were to practice Bhakti, it has to mature into Prapatti for one to attain liberation.

### 2.10 COMPARISON WITH OTHER TRADITIONS
The philosophy of Visistadvaita can be easily compared with and contrasted to other schools of thought. For instance while Sankara's Advaita believes in Nirguna Brhaman as the supreme reality, Ramanuja's school regards Saguna Brahman as the supreme reality: For Sankara, the world is unreal and for Ramanuja the world is real. For Sanakara, Jnana marga is the only means of liberation while Ramanuja believes in the Bhakti/Prapatti marga to attain liberation. Further while Sankara believes in Jivanmukti (liberation while living), Ramanuja believes in Videhamukti (liberation only after death). Besides, one can find similarity between Sri-Vaisnavism and Christianity. Both believe in the idea of personal God as the supreme being. Both believe in liberation after death. Both believe in the role of grace in salvation and both understand liberation as state of union with the ultimate, without losing one's distinct identity.

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<td>2. According to Sri-Vaishnava tradition can all regardless of caste and sex practise Bhakti? Why?</td>
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<td>3. Which sect in Sri-Vaishnavism believes in Prapatti as an all-inclusive means of liberation and why?</td>
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2.11 LET US SUM UP
In the history of philosophy in India, Visistadvaita is described as a system of thought that gave a strong philosophical and theological foundation to the practice of Bhakti found in the popular traditions of different linguistic cultures across the country. While one can become wary of intense Bhakti as a form of emotional outburst, Visistadvaita has brought intellectual content to the practices of Bhakti and Prapatti as it is described above. By doing this, on the one hand they have built an intellectual domain for Bhakti, but on the other hand, they have shown the limitations of human mind and its efforts in matter of 'faith' by their belief in Prapatti. Besides, historically speaking, Visistadvaita grew as a competing philosophical discourse to the Advaita of Sankara. While the latter makes this world as unreal in order to preserve the transcendence of God, the former found a way out by making the world as real part of God, thus enabling its practitioners to deal with the world in a non-dualistic and non-conflictual manner. Thus Visistadvaita can be praised as a balanced philosophical system of thought in India.

2.12 KEY WORDS

Dharma-bhuta-jnana: The knowledge or consciousness of the Jiva has two aspects. The first is its basic or substantive consciousness (dharmi-jnana) and the second its attributive-consciousness. By virtue of dharmi-jnana, the Jiva is only self-aware. It is by means of dharma-bhuta-jnana that the jiva becomes aware of others including Isvara. Dharma-bhuta-jnana has to evolve and grow in human beings. What stands in the way of expansion of dharma-bhuta-jnana is its load of karma from beginningless time. It is the creative process of Brahman that helps this development. When fully developed, it embraces the all-knowing dharma-bhuta-jnana of Brahman Himself.

Bhakti: Bhakti is a loving devotion towards God. Bhakti is not a mere emotional pursuit, according to Ramanuja. It involves training one’s mind and intellect towards love of God. It calls for an unperturbed total concentration on God and unbroken chain of thoughts on God. But these demands of Bhakti cannot be met by ordinary common man and woman.

Prapatti: Prapatti stands for wholehearted self-surrender to God. Prapatti is easier than Bhakti. It can be adopted by one and all, without any distinctions of caste, creed or sex. It can be adopted at any time and place. All are eligible for it. Prapatti is also known as Saranagati, Nyasa, Bharanyasa, Atmanikshea, Thyaga, Samnyasa, Namaskarta etc.

2.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


