

Review of Andrew O. Fort's *Jivanmukti in Transformation:*

Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta

Sri Vasudevacharya (Michael Comans, Ph.D.)

Though the theme of this book is very specific, discussing only the concept of “liberation in life” (*jivanmukti*) in the Advaita Vedanta, the author has nonetheless managed to broaden his treatment of the topic so as to shed light on a matter of considerable importance in understanding the internal dynamics of Advaita Vedanta. This book clearly identifies three streams of thought within Advaita Vedanta. The first the author calls “traditional” Advaita, which has its primary orientation in the elucidation of scripture and the study of commentarial literature and it has Sankara as its classic exemplar. The second the author refers to as “yogic Advaita”, while the third has become well known as “Neo-Vedanta”. Paul Hacker has discussed the central features of Neo-Vedanta and contrasted it with what he saw as traditional Advaita. But Hacker did not make the further distinction that there exists, within the classical tradition of Advaita itself, the type of Advaita that is exemplified by Sankara, as well as a more “yogic Advaita” which is quite different from the former in several respects. To Fort’s credit he has highlighted this distinction, which has hereto not been recognised, or has been insufficiently recognised.

I believe that Fort is fundamentally correct in distinguishing between the type of Advaita that we find in Sankara (and his immediate followers) and later yogic developments. Though it would be inaccurate to say that there are no yogic features to be found in the widely accepted commentarial writings of Sankara, it is nonetheless true that Sankara nowhere teaches the discipline that suppression of the mind (*cittavrittinirodha*), culminating in *nirvikalpasamadhi*, is the indispensable requirement for liberation. These two “yogic” elements, the emphasis on *cittavrittinirodha*, culminating in *nirvikalpa* (or *asampra*), are noticeably absent in the genuine works of Sankara. While Sankara no doubt speaks of certain types of mental discipline (*viveka*, *vairagya* etc.), the emphasis in his teaching is that liberation arises out of the insight generated through the

comprehension of the meaning of the words of the *sruti*. He does not even mention the word *nirvikalpasamadhi*, let alone make it the special requirement for liberation.

However, “yogic” traces can be discerned even within “traditional” Advaita, such as in the doctrine of “repeated meditation” (*prasakhyana*) of Mandana Misra, and so we cannot simply contrast a “traditional” Advaita and a “yogic Advaita”. But we can identify the fundamental difference between the Advaita of Sankara on the one hand, and the Advaita of Mandana and later more specifically “yogic Advaita” on the other, and the difference has to do with the way Sankara and Mandana (and “yogic Advaita”) view their source texts, the Upanisads. For Sankara, the Upanisad *meaning* can prove directly liberating, when the meaning is correctly grasped by a person (notably a male and a *sannyasin*) having the necessary qualifications (*sadhanacatusayampanna*), under the instruction of a competent *acharya*. For Mandana, as well as for later, more specifically yogic Advaita, the knowledge that could be generated by the Upanisad was considered to be merely verbal, or theoretical, and it always needed to be supplemented by other disciplines, such as the repetition of that verbal knowledge in the case of Mandana, or *samadhi* in the case of later yogic Advaita. In the case of yogic Advaita the importance of the Upanisad and its teaching (*sastra* and *acarya*) recedes into the background and primary importance is given to meditation leading to *nirvikalpasadhi*. “Yogic Advaita”, as Fort rightly points out, is concerned with the problem of “mental impressions” (*vasana*) and the techniques for their destruction (*vasanaksaya*). The theme of *vasanaksaya*, along with the two teachings previously mentioned, *cittavrittinirodha* and *nirvikalpasamdhi*, are foreign to the genuine writings of Sankara, and so I believe Fort is fundamentally correct in distinguishing these two streams within classical Advaita; this is the major achievement of the book, and the author deserves to be congratulated for bringing this distinction to light.

The book is divided into three parts each with four chapters. Of the twelve chapters, four are revisions of previously published articles. Chapter One, which is more of a survey, discusses embodied liberation (*jivanmukti*) in the period before Sankara (i.e. in the Upanisads, the Brahmasutra, the Bhagavadgita and the *karikas* of Gaudapada). The next

chapter deals with *jivanmukti* in the thought of Sankara. In the classical Advaita of Sankara and his followers the teaching of *jivanmukti* gave rise to the following theoretical difficulty. When knowledge (*jnana*) arises, it necessarily removes its opposite, i.e. ignorance (*avidya*). But if embodiment is due to *avidya*, embodiment should cease as soon as *avidya* has been removed. How then is *jivanmukti* possible? One answer, and in a sense the final answer after other answers fail, is to argue from experience: if a person feels that he (she) is liberated, in spite of having a body, who can deny their experience? Sankara resorts to this argument, though only on one occasion. At other times he argues that the karma that has already begun to bear fruit in this present life (*prarabdhakarma*) is not destroyed by knowledge because it is already manifest, it has a certain reality to it; and so it will continue until it has all been experienced, as an arrow already released from a bow will continue under its own momentum until it falls, or a potter's wheel continues to spin for some time even when it is no longer moved by the potter's stick. However the accumulated (*sancita*) karma is entirely destroyed as it is merely in a potential state. Sankara's defence of *jivanmukti*, that knowledge destroys most but not all karma, set the stage for the entire classical tradition that followed him and we find, as Fort shows, various subtle attempts to justify *jivanmukti* on the basis of the continuity of the *prarabdhakarma*.

Fort especially identifies one notable Upanisad passage that Sankara interprets as speaking of *jivanmukti*: "For him the delay is only as long as he is not free, then he merges" (*tasya tavad eva ciram yavan na vimoksyetha sampatsya iti. ChU 6. 14.2*). Fort's treatment of this passage, however, is not particularly well done. Fort explains that: "Sankara asserts that this means there is delay in attaining the self as long as an ignorant embodied person enjoys the (already commenced) fruits of *karma*" (p. 9). Fort then explains that Sankara: "makes a crucial distinction between *knowing (jna, vid) brahman*, which is immediate and happens in the body, and *attaining (sampad) brahman*, which is simultaneous with release from the body (but delayed as long as *prarabdhakarma* manifests)." The first problem with his explanation is that Sankara does not use the word "ignorant"; on the contrary, the person referred to here is not ignorant but is a knower of Brahman (*tasya= muktavidyabhinahanasya*). Secondly, Fort's distinction between

“knowing” (*vid*) and “attaining” (*sampad*) is not a good interpretation. The verbal form *sampad* is better translated as “merged” (cf. CU 6.8.1) than “attains”, the idea being that after the fall of the body the liberated person is “merged” in Existence. There is no distinction between “knowing” and “attaining” Brahman (to make such a distinction contradicts Sankara on numerous occasions), but there can be a distinction between “knowing” and “merging” (which happens after the body falls). Fort’s explanation is an example of an attempt at novelty at the expense of close textual accuracy. Fortunately there is not much of this. One other notable instance occurs early on, when Fort refers with approval to the view of another scholar. Fort paraphrases: “*isvara*, like the *jivanmukta*, is limited by being in *samsara*: he is constrained by the *karma* of creatures and the necessity of conforming to name and form arising from ignorance (as mentioned in Sankara’s commentary on Brahmasutra II.1.14).” Then, quoting, he says: “*isvara* is liberated but somehow not yet fully liberated (pp. 5f.)”. But this is an entirely mistaken view that involves a misunderstanding of the commentary on BS 2.1.14, as well as a general misunderstanding of *isvara* in Sankara’s Advaita.

Chapters three and four refer to the views on *jivanmukti* of ten well-known classical Advaitins: Mandana Misra, Suresvara, Sarvajnatman, Prakasatman and Madhusudana, to name a few. All these authors are treated quite briefly; some, such as Prakasatman, are treated quite well. These chapters give an understanding of the trend of the discussion on *jivanmukti* in traditional Advaita and they serve as a starting point for further examination of the thought of these authors.

Chapters six to eight discuss yogic Advaita; these chapters are especially valuable as they clearly differentiate ideas found in texts such as the *Yogavasistha* from the Advaita of Sankara. Fort shows how later, syncretic, “yogic Advaita”, as can be seen notably in the *Jivanmuktiviveka*, but even in parts of the *Pancadasi*, draws upon both Sankara’s Advaita and the Advaita of the *Yogavasistha*.

Chapters nine to twelve discuss *jivanmukti* in the context of Neo-Vedanta, whose exemplary representatives are Swami Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, both of whom are

discussed in chapter twelve, though the treatment here is not as incisive as that given by Paul Hacker. Fort devotes one chapter to the study of Ramana Maharshi whom he classifies as a Neo-Vedantin. I fail to see why Ramana should be considered a Neo-Vedantin, unless it is just because he was born after 1835. That is not to say that there are no Neo-Vedanta elements to be found in Ramana, but he cannot be so easily labelled a Neo-Vedantin. In any case, the chapter is weak; it tells us nothing about Ramana that is not already well known and it ignores his own writings (such as the Sanskrit composition, *Upadesasara*). The following chapter is more interesting, dealing with the much revered Sankaracarya of Kanchi, Candrasekharendra Sarasvati, who occupied an important position in South Indian religious life from 1907 until his death in 1994. Fort shows that Candrasekhara, who is held to be a staunch upholder of orthodoxy, actually exhibits a number of Neo-Vedanta influences. Little has been written on Candrasekhara, or on the Sankaracaryas in general, and Fort's choice is a good one. Instead of Ramana Maharshi, it would have been better if Fort had chosen to examine the Divine Life Society of Rishikesh, founded by Swami Sivananda, who was a quintessential NeoVedantin, or Swami Cinmayananda who founded the Cinmaya Mission. A detailed study of these two highly influential modern Vedanta organisations is overdue.