

2. The Nature and Form of Akṣarabrahman

In the chapter on Akṣarabrahman, titled “Akṣarabrahmadhārā,” Sadhu Bhadreshdas expounds upon Akṣarabrahman as a separate ontological entity.

The *Sudhā* begins with a systematic exposition of the entity Akṣarabrahman as it forms one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. This entity is stated as having been embedded (*pracchanna, gūḍha*) in the *Vedic* texts, which was brought forth by Swaminarayan.⁸⁰ Further, the entity Akṣarabrahman is shown to denote the term ‘svāmī’ in the mantra ‘Svāminārāyaṇa,’ signifying the requisite of realising Akṣarabrahman in attaining Nārāyaṇa or Puruṣottama. In the first chapter of the *Sudhā* titled “Mangaladhārā,” Sadhu Bhadreshdas invokes both, Akṣara and Puruṣottama, with the mantra ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’:

Svāminārāyaṇam naumi hyakṣarapuruṣottamam |
*Svāminārāyaṇau naumi hyakṣarapuruṣottamau ||*⁸¹

This prayer brings forth the synonymity between Akṣara-Puruṣottama and Svāminārāyaṇa. This synonymity is shown by highlighting that the mantra ‘Svāminārāyaṇa’ consists of the terms ‘svāmī’ and ‘nārāyaṇa’ where ‘svāmī’ corresponds to Akṣara, while ‘nārāyaṇa’ corresponds to Parabrahman. The mantra signifies that Svāmī, that is, Akṣara is always to be associated with the worship of Nārāyaṇa, that is, Puruṣottama. Without a profound association with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and acquiring his auspicious virtues, one cannot sincerely immerse in the devotion to Parabrahman.⁸² This demonstrates the significance of understanding the form and nature of Akṣarabrahman for the realisation of the Supreme Being Parabrahman. Thus, in the endeavour of systematising this Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, encapsulated in the Svāminārāyaṇa mantra, Sadhu Bhadreshdas begins with the exposition of the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman.

This chapter of the thesis begins with examining the term ‘akṣara’ and its synonyms and how the etymology of these terms identifies their reference as Akṣarabrahman. It then provides an overview of the superiority of Akṣarabrahman to the entities *jīva*, *īśvara* and *māyā*, and

⁸⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 18)

⁸¹ “I bow to Nārāyaṇa along with Svāmī, that is, Puruṣottama along with Akṣara. I bow to both, Svāmī and Nārāyaṇa, that is, Akṣara and Puruṣottama.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 1)

⁸² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 8)

highlights the ontological distinction of Akṣarabrahman from the other entities, including the supreme Parabrahman. The chapter further examines the depiction of Akṣarabrahman in the *Muṇḍaka*, *Praśna* and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads* respectively, by presenting alternate readings of the *Upaniṣadic* passages as offered by Shankar and Ramanuja. The chapter then elucidates four forms of Akṣarabrahman identified as *Cidākāśa*, Akṣaradhāman—the abode of Parabrahman, the servant in this supreme abode and manifest on earth as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Their nature and form are examined in detail through various *Upaniṣadic* references. The chapter ends by highlighting the relation between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman and the essential distinction between these two entities. Thus, the chapter studies the entity Akṣarabrahman through various *Upaniṣadic* statements and examines the exegetical analysis offered in the *Sudhā*.

2.1. The Terms ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’

Etymologically, the term ‘akṣara’ is derived from the verb ‘kṣarati,’ meaning *that which diminishes or perishes*. Accordingly, the negation of this verb forms the term ‘akṣara’ (*na kṣarati iti akṣara*). ‘Akṣara,’ thus, means *the imperishable*. The *Sudhā* accepts this meaning of ‘akṣara’ and adds that this Akṣara is all-pervasive, residing in every place and being.⁸³ This meaning is based on another derivation of the term ‘akṣara’ from the verb ‘āśnūti,’ which means *to pervade*.⁸⁴ This way, the all-pervasive Akṣara is distinct from the other eternal metaphysical entities, such as *jīva*, *īśvara*, and *māyā*. Further, the term ‘akṣara’ is synonymous with the term ‘brahman,’ meaning *that which is immensely great and vast*. This is affirmed in the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts, such as in “etaddhyevākṣaram brahma,”⁸⁵ “adetadakṣaram brahma,”⁸⁶ “akṣaram brahma paramam.”⁸⁷

P. M. Modi, in his work *Akshar: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Indian Philosophy*, claims that this term is one of the most “puzzling” metaphysical terms.⁸⁸ Gadhia also observes that the various interpretations of the term have resulted in a rich hermeneutic

⁸³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 19)

⁸⁴ The derivations of ‘akṣara’ as that which is imperishable and pervasive are stated in the Pantañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*, “akṣaram na kṣaram vidyād āśnotervā saro’kṣaram.”

⁸⁵ “That Akṣara is indeed is Brahman.” (Ka. Up. 2.16)

⁸⁶ “That Akṣara is this Brahman.” (Mu. Up. 2.2.2)

⁸⁷ “Brahman is the supreme Akṣara.” (BG. 8.3)

⁸⁸ (Modi 1)

layering.⁸⁹ Indeed, in commentarial literature, the term ‘akṣara’ is used as an adjective, adjectival noun, and proper noun.⁹⁰ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in his commentaries on the *Prasthānatrayī*, mainly identifies it as a proper noun. It is barely reduced to its adjectival meaning. Instead, it is mainly understood as referring to a distinct entity that possesses various qualities, such as of being imperishable, all-pervasive, and vast.

Concerning the term ‘brahman,’ Sadhu Bhadreshdas has contextually interpreted it as both, Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. Reminiscent of the Advaita tradition, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta also accepts two Brahman. However, unlike the former, this Siddhānta marks an ontological distinction between the two. The *Sudhā* throws light on the fifth chapter of the *Praśna Upaniṣad* where Pippalāda instructs Satyakāma on the mantra “Om,” “etadvai satyakāma paraṁ cāparaṁ ca brahma yadoṅkāraḥ tasmād vidvān etenaivāyatanen aikātaramanveti.”⁹¹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas elucidates the higher (*para*) Brahman as Parabrahman and the lower (*apara*) Brahman as Akṣarabrahman. Akṣarabrahman is lower and subordinate only to Parabrahman. It is also worthy to note that Parabrahman can be attained and truly worshipped by cultivating deep attachment with Akṣarabrahman.

In fact, the significance of comprehending and realising the nature of Akṣarabrahman is spelt out at the beginning of the second chapter of the *Sudhā*. *Sudhā* seems to justify the elaborate discussion on Akṣarabrahman before moving on to Parabrahman—the supreme entity—by providing extensive references from the *Vacanāmṛta*, one of the seminal *sampradāyic* texts. These references underscore the centrality of Akṣarabrahman in the discussions on fundamental principles of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta—such as the enumeration of metaphysical entities (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.7; Gaḍhaḍā III.10), rightful worship of Parabrahman (Vac. Loyā 7; Gaḍhaḍā II.3), the divine abode of God (Vac. Pancālā 1), the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.41; Kāriyāṇī 7). Each of these aspects is then analysed separately and expounded upon through supportive references from the authoritative texts.

⁸⁹ (Gadhia 156)

⁹⁰ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 162)

⁹¹ “*Om* entails both the higher and the lower Brahman. The knower of *Om* attains either of the two, as both are worthy of realisation.” (Pr. Up. 5.2)

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in many instances, understands the term ‘avyakta,’ which is mentioned in various *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts, to denote the metaphysical entity, Akṣarabrahman. ‘Avyakta’ is generally translated as *the unmanifest*. Since Akṣarabrahman is the source of the universe, it is identified as *avyakta* in its unmanifest form. In fact, the term ‘akṣara’ is regarded synonymous with the term ‘avyakta,’⁹² as only *avyakta* or akṣara is showcased to be higher to everything except the Supreme Being. This aspect is affirmed through the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Here, Yamadeva narrates to the child yogi Naciketā the order of the various elements in an ascending order leading to *puruṣa*, the Highest Being. The element just before *puruṣa* is *avyakta*, “avyaktāt puruṣaḥ paraḥ.”⁹³

2.2. Akṣara Distinct from Other Metaphysical Entities

One of the fundamental *Upaniṣadic* statements upheld to differentiate Akṣarabrahman from Parabrahman, the highest metaphysical entity endorsed by the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, is from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* that reads “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ.”⁹⁴ This statement is considered essential in understanding this and other texts.⁹⁵ It is essential mainly because it explicitly expresses the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta as distinct from other Vedāntic schools. In most schools, only one entity is admitted as supreme and primary. However, here, the entity Akṣara is superior to *jīva*, *īśvara* and *māyā*; only Parabrahman is higher than the supreme Akṣara. This distinction becomes apparent through the above statement of the *Upaniṣad*.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains that the first chapter of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* dwells on the glory of Akṣara and the second chapter on Parabrahman, who is higher than Akṣara. Shankar, in his commentary, interprets the statement “akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ”⁹⁶ to mean that *puruṣa* (*para*) is higher than the supreme Akṣara where Akṣara is the seed of all name and form—the unmanifested form of *prakṛti*. The *puruṣa* is beyond this Akṣara as it is not subject to any conditions.⁹⁷ Thus, Akṣara is explained as the root of the ever-changing material world, a part of *avidyā*. Ramanuja, however, does not interpret it as the non-sentient *prakṛti* or *avidyā*,

⁹² (Modi 13)

⁹³ “The *puruṣa* is superior to *avyakta*.” (Ka. Up. 3.11)

⁹⁴ “[*Puruṣa* is] superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

⁹⁵ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 162)

⁹⁶ “[*Puruṣa* is] superior to the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

⁹⁷ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 127–28)

rather as “Hiraṇyagarbha,” who is understood as the deity entrusted with comic creation.⁹⁸ Sadhu Bhadresdhas, on the other hand, explains it as a separate pure ontological entity, distinct from the Highest Being, Parabrahman.

Though Parabrahman is higher than Akṣara, both Akṣara and Parabrahman ever remain uninfluenced by *māyā* and its creations. Accordingly, Akṣara is distinct from *māyā* and also from *jīva* and *īśvara* that are ever under the influence of *māyā*,⁹⁹ as specified in the statements “pārāya tamasah parastāt,”¹⁰⁰ “śudhamapāpavidham.”¹⁰¹ In his commentary on the statement “pārāya tamasah parastāt,” Sadhu Bhadresdhas explains that mediation on Akṣarabrahman, who ever transcends *māyā*, enables one (*jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*) to transcend *māyā* and attain Parabrahman.¹⁰² This explanation brings forth the distinction of the eternally pure Akṣarabrahman from the *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* whom Akṣarabrahman guides towards Parabrahman and thus away from the aversions of *māyā*. This distinction between Akṣarabrahman and the *ātman* (*jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*) is also highlighted through the statement, “mahataḥ paramavyaktam.”¹⁰³ Sadhu Bhadresdhas understands the term ‘mahat’ as the great *ātman* that presides over the intellect, mind, senses, and the body. He notes that the *ātman* alone cannot attain the supreme bliss of Parabrahman, for it is ever influenced by *māyā*. This is asserted through the two eternally pure entities, *avyakta* and *puruṣa*, which are depicted to be higher than the *ātman*.¹⁰⁴ This depiction thereby underlines the distinction of *ātman* (*jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*), Akṣarabrahman (denoted here through ‘avyakta’), and *puruṣa* or Parabrahman.

Moreover, Sadhu Bhadresdhas enumerates the qualities of Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman, which showcase the distinctness of Akṣarabrahman from these entities. Akṣara is described as the cause of all creation, encompassed by auspicious qualities, capable of leading one to liberation, the controller of all beings—except Paramātman.¹⁰⁵ This description aims to showcase Akṣarabrahman superior to all beings, *jīva* and *īśvara*, beyond *māyā* but ever subordinate to the Supreme Being, Parabrahman. In this way, Akṣarabrahman is elucidated as a distinct metaphysical entity.

⁹⁸ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 123, 328)

⁹⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 20–21)

¹⁰⁰ “[Akṣarabrahman is] beyond the darkness of *māyā*.” (Mu. Up. 2. 2. 6).

¹⁰¹ “[Akṣarabrahman is] untouched by sin or misdeeds.” (*Īśa* Up. 8)

¹⁰² (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 275–76)

¹⁰³ “The *avyakta* is superior to the great [*ātman*].” (Ka. Up. 3.11)

¹⁰⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 129)

¹⁰⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 23)

Each of these qualities of Akṣarabrahman is expounded later in the chapter with *Upaniṣadic* references.

2.3. Akṣara and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*

As mentioned earlier, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is vital in understanding the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Thus, Sadhu Bhadreshdas presents this Siddhānta by beginning with the concept of Akṣara in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.

The *Upaniṣad* begins with Ṛṣi Aṅgiras describing two types of knowledge, namely, the higher (*para*) and lower (*apara*). He first briefly defines lower knowledge as comprising of the four *Vedas* and the *Vedāṅgas* (limbs of the *Vedas*), such as grammar, phonetics, and astronomy and then elucidates higher knowledge at length. He begins the explanation of higher knowledge with the statement “*atha parā yayā tadakṣaramadhigamyate*.”¹⁰⁶ Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands it as: “That by which the entity Akṣara is known.”¹⁰⁷ He identifies ‘akṣara’ as a proper noun and not as an adjective. In this vein, the remaining chapter is also seen as the description of the attributes and efficacy of Akṣarabrahman. Sadhu Bhadreshdas seems to be implicitly responding to other commentators who have identified the term ‘akṣara’ as an adjective of Brahman. For instance, Shankar interprets it as that by which the immortal (Brahman) is directly realised;¹⁰⁸ Ramanuja interprets it as the immutable Brahman revealed out of *aparokṣa jñāna*.¹⁰⁹ Through the medium of this *vādagrantha*, the author puts forward arguments that reveal the exegetical difficulties and inconsistencies that would arise with such interpretations here and elsewhere in the *Upaniṣad*.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas argues that if ‘akṣara’ is interpreted as an adjective of Brahman, a difficulty will arise while interpreting the statement of the same *Upaniṣad*, “*akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ*,”¹¹⁰ through which *puruṣa* is described. Here, *puruṣa* is explained to be higher than the supreme Akṣara. In this case, Akṣara cannot be an adjective of *puruṣa* or Brahman as the statement, through the ablative case of ‘akṣara,’ clearly indicates two separate entities wherein the one is superior to the other. Reading ‘akṣara’ as an adjective would thus lead to inconsistencies in exegesis. Such inconsistency is witnessed in Shankar’s commentary. As

¹⁰⁶ “Now higher knowledge, that by which the immortal is known.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

¹⁰⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 23)

¹⁰⁸ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 98)

¹⁰⁹ (H. Apte 154)

¹¹⁰ “[*Puruṣa* is] Higher than the supreme Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

mentioned above, in Mu. Up. 1.1.5 Shankar interprets ‘akṣara’ as an adjective of ‘Brahman’, while here in Mu. Up. 2.1.2 he interprets it as the root of all name and form, distinct from Brahman or *puruṣa*. Even Ramanuja interprets ‘akṣara’ first as an adjective of ‘Brahman’ in Mu. Up. 1.1.5 and then as deity administering comic creation, *Hiraṇyagarbha* in Mu. Up. 2.1.2. Such inconsistencies are seen as a violation of the semantic consistency—the first and the most important of the six *lingas* (hermeneutical devices) accepted by all commentators.¹¹¹ To preclude such semantic inconsistencies, Sadhu Bhadreshdas applies other entities that could be denoted through the term ‘akṣara’ in 1.1.5 and then evaluates each instance based on the latter mantras of the *Upaniṣad*.¹¹² For instance, he rejects the identification of ‘akṣara’ as *jīvātman* or *īśvarātman* as the later mantras describe Akṣara as being all-pervasive, the cause of all creation, and worthy of attainment, such as in “tad veddhayam,”¹¹³ “akṣarātsambhavatīha viśvam.”¹¹⁴ Likewise, *prakṛti* is also rejected as a denotation of ‘akṣara’ for the subsequent mantras describe Akṣara as being a sentient entity that is all-knowing and possesses a human-like body, as in “yaḥ sarvajñaḥ,”¹¹⁵ “ejatprāṇanmiṣacca.”¹¹⁶ By highlighting these possible inconsistencies, Sadhu Bhadreshdas concludes that the term ‘akṣara’ denotes the eternal ontological entity Akṣarabrahman.

The author succinctly summarises this argument in the *Sudhā* in the following verses:

akṣaram na param brahma parā yayetyupakrame |
akṣaram puruṣam hyatra na puruṣaviśeṣaṇam||
tatraiva śravaṇādagre hyakṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ|

¹¹¹ The appropriate import of any section is determined through the six hermeneutical tools, presented in the verse as follows:

“upakramopasaṁhārābhyāso’pūrvatā phalam
 Arthavādopapatti ca liṅgam tātparyanirṇaye.”

“Commencement, conclusion, reiteration, novelty, profit, eulogy, and demonstration are marks by which the purport is ascertained.” (Madhavacharya 101)

The *Vedāntasāra* informs that the path towards realisation can be mastered by the ascertaining the final purport of the *Upaniṣads* aided by the six indicators. (Hiriyanna, *Vedāntasāra: A Work on Vedānta Philosophy* 59)

Of these six tools of exegesis, the tool of consistent commencement and conclusion is considered the most significant indication of intention. (Lipner 150)

¹¹² (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 236–37)

¹¹³ “That should be attained.” (Mu. Up. 2.2.2)

¹¹⁴ “The universe proceeds from Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.7)

¹¹⁵ “That is omniscient.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.9)

¹¹⁶ “That moves, breathes, blinks.” (Mu. Up. 2.2.1)

The author assertedly denies ‘akṣara’ as denoting an attribute or aspect of *puruṣa*— “na puruṣaviśeṣaṇam”—but only as Akṣarabrahman, beyond whom prevails Puruṣottama.

Further, Sadhu Bhadreshdas emphasises the role of Akṣarabrahman in the process of creation, which is illustrated in this *Upaniṣad*. Akṣara is described as the source of the universe, “akṣarātsambhavatīha viśvam.”¹¹⁸ It is the material and efficient cause of the universe. This is explained in the mantra through the illustration of a spider—just as a spider produces thread of its web from itself and withdraws it within itself, Akṣara creates the universe out of itself and dissolves it within itself. Shankar and Ramanuja identify ‘akṣara’ as the immortal Brahman and thereby, through the illustration of the spider, highlight Brahman as the sole cause or agent of the universe.¹¹⁹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, identifies ‘akṣara’ as the entity Akṣarabrahman and highlights the unchanging aspect of Akṣarabrahman. He contrasts the unchanging form of the spider to milk that transforms into curd.¹²⁰ Thus, Akṣarabrahman, as the material and efficient cause, creates various mobile and immobile life forms and essentially remains unchanged and unaffected.

The second illustration in this *Upaniṣadic* mantra is of the growth of plants on earth—just as plants grow from their respective seeds, in the same way, the universe expands from Akṣara. Here, the implication suggested is of the impartiality of Akṣara towards any particular being. Every being grows forth in the world as per the seeds of the action it has sown.¹²¹ The third illustration stated in the mantra is of hair and nails—just as hair and nails grow effortlessly on the human body, the universe is created effortlessly by Akṣara.¹²² This way, Sadhu Bhadreshdas underlines the nature of creation through these illustrations. Akṣara, as per the will of Parabrahman, is the unchanging cause of the universe that creates impartially and effortlessly.

¹¹⁷ “Akṣara does not allude Parabrahman in the mantra stating—”*atha parā yayā tadakṣaramadhigamyate*” [‘This higher knowledge is by which Akṣara is attained’ (Mu. Up. 1.1.5).] ‘Akṣara’ is also not the adjective of the term ‘puruṣa’.” (*Kārikā* 23)

“As later it is asserted—”*akṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ*” [the Supreme Being] is beyond even the supreme Akṣara [Mu. Up. 2.1.2]. Thus, Akṣara is Brahman itself, above which is Puruṣottama.” (*Kārikā* 24)

¹¹⁸ “The universe proceeds from Akṣara.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.7)

¹¹⁹ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 103; S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 122)

¹²⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 39)

¹²¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 39)

¹²² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 39)

Sadhu Bhadreshdas warns that this description of Akṣarabrahman should not be understood to signify Akṣarabrahman as the only cause of creation. This is clarified by anticipating a potential objection which claims this verse of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* describes Akṣara as independently engaging in creation. In response, he clarifies that though Akṣara engages in the creation, it does so as per the wish of Parabrahman.¹²³ Thus, the ultimate cause of the universe will always be Parabrahman.

Parabrahman is presented in the *Upaniṣad* (Mu. Up. 1.2.11) as “puruṣa,” distinct from Akṣara. This distinction, *Sudhā* asserts, becomes sharp in the proceeding verses with the definition of *brahmavidyā* as that through which the true form of both, Akṣara and *puruṣa* are realised, “yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyam provāca tām tattvato brahmavidyām.”¹²⁴ Here again, Sadhu Bhadreshdas interprets ‘akṣara’ as a noun and not as an adjective. Such an interpretation differs from other commentators who interpret it as an adjective of *puruṣa*.¹²⁵

Thus, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is identified by Sadhu Bhadreshdas as an important *Upaniṣad* which reveals the nature and efficacy of Akṣara at length and also highlights the distinction of Akṣara from Puruṣottama. Furthermore, it proclaims the necessity of realising the true form of both, Akṣara and Puruṣottama, as encompassing the core of *brahmavidyā*. In this way, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is asserted to be embedded in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.

2.4. Akṣara and *Praśna Upaniṣad*

Another reference presented for the concept of Akṣara is of the fifth chapter of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. This *Upaniṣad* also belongs to the *Atharva Veda* and is named after the six questions or *praśna* asked by six students to their teacher Pippalāda. The fifth chapter opens with a question raised by a student Satyakāma. He inquires, “What world does the one who meditates on *Om* attain?”¹²⁶ As discussed earlier in the chapter, Pippalāda responds first with the definition of ‘Om’—“*Om* is verily the higher and the lower Brahman.”¹²⁷ Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies lower Brahman as Akṣarabrahman and higher Brahman as

¹²³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 40)

¹²⁴ “That by which akṣara and puruṣa are truly understood is brahmavidyā.” (Mu. Up. 1.2.13)

¹²⁵ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 122; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 679; Swami Sharvananda 26; H. Apte 163)

¹²⁶ “sa yo ha vai tabhdagavanmanuṣyeṣu prāyaṇāntamoṅkāramabhidhyāyīta katamaṁ vāva sa tena lokam jayatīti tasmai sa hovāca.” (Pr. Up. 5.1)

¹²⁷ “etadvai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yadoṅkārah” (Pr. Up. 5.2)

Parabrahman. Since Akṣarabrahman is ever subordinate to Parabrahman, it is referred to here as lower or *apara*.¹²⁸ Moreover, such an understanding maintains exegetical consistency as the term ‘Om’ is shown to interchangeably refer to both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. For instance, the *Sudhā* cites the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* where Yamarāja refers to the supreme abode (*padam*) with the mantra ‘Om’ and then immediately identifies “Om” with Akṣarabrahman, “Om iti etaddhyevākṣaram brahma.”¹²⁹ However, in the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, the term ‘Om’ is stated in the prayer to Parabrahman that appeals for realisation, and thereby denotes Parabrahman.¹³⁰ Accordingly, the two Brahman denoted by “Om” in the *Praśna Upaniṣad* are coherently explained as Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.

Other commentators like Shankar and those influenced by his philosophical principles have interpreted the lower Brahman as the Brahman with attributes (*saguṇa* Brahman). For instance, it is interpreted as *prāṇa* or the firstborn,¹³¹ as the qualified Person, *īśvara*,¹³² manifested *Hiraṇyagarbha*.¹³³ Ramanuja imparts a vague explanation of the lower Brahman as the effected Brahman, which is again two-fold—in relation to the material world and beyond this relation.¹³⁴ However, there is no further clarification of how this lower Brahman is distinct from the higher Brahman. Another explanation offered by the Ramanuja tradition identifies lower Brahman with *Hiraṇyagarbha*.¹³⁵

There is no specification of manifested or unmanifested Brahman, nor of Brahman being with or without attributes, rather a clear demarcation of two separate Brahman, both of which are worthy of meditation. In his commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas offers various *Upaniṣadic* references that instruct on the meditation of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. For instance, in the famous dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi, he instructs “ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ.”¹³⁶ Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies ‘ātmā’ as Paramātmā and accordingly explains this statement as a teaching on the reflection and mediation on Parabrahman. Further, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is cited, “om ityevam dhyāyatha

¹²⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 28)

¹²⁹ “Om it is called. That [Om] is verily Akṣarabrahman.” (Ka. Up. 2.15,16)

¹³⁰ (Īśa Up. 17) (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 26)

¹³¹ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 163)

¹³² (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 664)

¹³³ (Swami Sharvananda 61)

¹³⁴ (Thibaut 313)

¹³⁵ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 184)

¹³⁶ “Paramātmā should be realised through listening, reflection and contemplation.” (Br. Up. 2.4.5)

ātmānam,”¹³⁷ which is stated to assert meditation on Akṣarabrahman. The mantra that precedes this mantra discusses Akṣarabrahman as the bridge to reach Parabrahman. Accordingly, in continuation of this theme, this mantra is explained as indicating the path of associating with Akṣarabrahman, which is through meditating on the form of Akṣarabrahman.

After teaching the significance of “Om” as entailing both lower and higher Brahman, Pippalāda states that upon meditating on “Om” with this understanding, one unites with or attains either of the two Brahman. Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that attaining the lower Brahman or Akṣarabrahman is tantamount to attaining higher Brahman or Parabrahman as the Akṣarabrahman Guru eternally beholds the form of Parabrahman.¹³⁸ Thus, attainment of lower Brahman or higher Brahman reaps the same result. In this way, by maintaining such exegetical consistency, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta is given further referential cushioning:

*Parā'paretibhedokterjñāyete brahmaṇī hyubhe |
Pañcame bibhrataḥ praśne hyakṣarapuruṣottamau ||*¹³⁹

2.5. Akṣara and Kaṭha Upaniṣad

In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the god of death, Yamarāja, instructs the child yogi Naciketā on the supremacy of the Highest Being and the means of realisation. The supremacy of the Highest Being, “*puruṣa*,” is explained through an enumeration of various elements, each superior to the preceding element. Accordingly, the mantras 3.10-11 begin with the bodily senses at the lowest end and then ascend in sequence to include the sense-objects, the mind, intellect, *ātman*, *avyakta* and ultimately the *puruṣa*.

The *Sudhā* discusses these mantras to highlight the term ‘avyakta,’ which it identifies as the entity Akṣarabrahman. Other commentators understand the term ‘avyakta’ differently with respect to their metaphysical principles. Shankar explains it as the seed of the universe. Since

¹³⁷ “Meditate on Om [Akṣarabrahman] as one’s ātman.” (Mu. Up.2.2.6)

¹³⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 28) Discussed later in this chapter.

¹³⁹ “One should understand the two kinds of Brahman—*para* and *apara*; such is the teaching of the fifth question. Thus, it affirms the entities, Akṣara and Puruṣottama.” (*Kārikā* 25)

he endorses the universe as a mere appearance, he refers to *avyakta* as *māyā*, *avidyā* or *mūla-prakṛti*.¹⁴⁰ Radhakrishnan specifies:

By *avyakta*, Śankara means not the *prakṛti* of the Sāṅkhya but the *māyā-śakti* which is responsible for the whole world including the personal God.¹⁴¹

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, not only denies *avyakta* as *prakṛti* of Sāṅkhya but also the Advaitin understanding of *avyakta* as “*māyā-śakti*.” The Sāṅkhya school reads the elements *mahat*, *avyakta* and *puruṣa* listed in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* as denoting the elements of *mahatattva*, *prakṛti* or *pradhāna* and the inactive *puruṣa*. *Sudhā* argues against this understanding by highlighting the exegetical inconsistency that would arise with the other mantras of this section. *Sudhā* notes that the enumeration of the sequence of elements is grounded on the analogy of the chariot presented in the preceding mantras 3.3-3.9.¹⁴² This analogy relates to the body and other elements associated with the body, hence there lies no reference to *prakṛti* or *pradhāna*. In fact, *Sudhā* also refers to the beginning of this section of the *Upaniṣad* to point out that the section introduces Akṣarabrahman in the very first verse “*ṛtaṁ pibantau sukr̥tasya loke...*”¹⁴³ Here, the two enjoyers are identified as Akṣarabrahman and the *akṣara-mukta*, that is, the released *ātman*, who enjoy the bliss of Paramātman in the divine abode. Thereafter, Akṣarabrahman is revealed as the medium that leads the *ātman* to the supreme Paramātman and his divine abode.¹⁴⁴ Thus, by tracing the chronology and coherence of this *Upaniṣadic* teaching, Sadhu Bhadreshdas denies any reference to an insentient entity like *prakṛti* or *pradhāna*.

Though there is no explicit reference or argument against *avyakta* being Shankar’s *māyā* or *mūla-prakṛti*, the above argument can also be used to nullify Advaitin interpretation.

Ramanuja understands the term ‘avyakta’ as the body:

¹⁴⁰ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 54–55; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 625)

¹⁴¹ (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 626)

¹⁴² The analogy of the chariot compares the body to a chariot, where the *ātman* is master of the chariot, the intellect is its driver, the ten sense organs are the horses which are controlled by the reins, the mind. The path on which this chariot runs is the path of sense-objects.

¹⁴³ “The two enjoyers enjoy the bliss of Paramātman in the divine abode and also reside in the cavity of the heart.” (Ka. Up. 3.1)

¹⁴⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 36)

Superior to that Self again is the body, compared to the chariot, for all activity whereby the individual Self strives to bring about what is of advantage to itself depends on the body.¹⁴⁵

This reading is peculiar as the body is understood as higher than the *ātman*. Radhakrishnan understands this explanation in terms of the subtle body of Brahman. Since Ramanuja accepted the theory of *Brahman-pariṇāmavāda*—where Brahman transforms to create the universe—*avyakta* is taken as the first phase of this transformation.¹⁴⁶ This understanding can be seen as an implied reading, as the quotation shows that Ramanuja does not interpret it as the subtle body of Brahman but rather as the physical body where the *ātman* resides. Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not refer explicitly to the philosophy of Ramanuja as he does of Sāṅkhya, yet he dismisses the interpretation of the *avyakta* as the body or *śarīra*. He asserts that nowhere has the term ‘avyakta’ been used for *śarīra*, which is the residence of indulgence. Moreover, it will be difficult to explain how this *śarīra* can lead one away from the jaws of death, as shown in verse 3.15.¹⁴⁷ All arguments on the term ‘avyakta’ are summarised as:

Avyaktam na pradhānam syāccharīram na mahatparam |
*Rūpakādeśca gītokteḥ kaṭhe hyavyaktamakṣaram ||*¹⁴⁸

Thus, according to the *Sudhā*, no difficulties will arise if the ‘avyakta’ is understood as Akṣarabrahman, which cannot be perceived or grasped as it lies above *māyā*. The *ātman*, while reigning over the body, remains under the influence of *māyā*. It alone is not adequate to transcend this influence and thereby requires an association with the eternally pure Akṣarabrahman. Accordingly, *avyakta* or Akṣarabrahman is superior to the great *ātman*. This implies that nothing is higher to Akṣara apart from the Supreme Being, Puruṣottama.

2.6. Akṣara and Its Four Forms

Swaminarayan, who revealed the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, specified that each of the five ontological entities possesses an *anvaya* and a *vyatireka* form. The schools of Indian Philosophy utilise the terms ‘anvaya’ and ‘vyatireka’ in different ways. They are often used

¹⁴⁵ (Thibaut 356)

¹⁴⁶ (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 626)

¹⁴⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 37–38)

¹⁴⁸ “The term ‘avyakta’ does not refer to either pradhāna or the *śarīra* as being higher than mahat; Whether it occurs in the *Bhagavad Gītā* 8.21, or in the analogy of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*—it should be taken to refer to Akṣarabrahman.” (*Kārikā* 35)

within the Indian logical system as forms of inference (*anumāna*), while in certain schools, they are used with a grammatical connotation as a mode of reasoning.¹⁴⁹ For instance, Shankar has used these terms as a mode of reasoning—he uses them for explaining the essential terms of his philosophy:

He [Shankar] primarily uses ‘anvaya-vyatireka’ in order to emphasise discriminatory understanding between the continued presence of the pure subject or consciousness and the discontinuity of the material world which is merely superimposed on it.¹⁵⁰

However, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta engages with these terms in a different manner.

Based on the teachings of Swaminarayan, ‘anvaya’ is explained as the pervasive form of the respective ontological entity, that is, its form as it pervades within the other. While the term ‘vyatireka’ is explained as the essential form of the respective ontological entity, that is, its distinguishing nature amongst other entities.¹⁵¹ In other words, *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms are the immanent and transcendental forms of an entity.¹⁵² Dwelling on the *anvaya* and the *vyatireka* forms of Akṣarabrahman, Swaminarayan reveals:

Akṣarabrahman pervades *māyā* and the elements risen from *māyā*—the countless millions of *brahmāṇḍas*—it is said to be its *anvaya* form. When it is distinct from everything and has the attributes of eternal existence, consciousness and bliss, that is said to be its *vyatireka* form.¹⁵³

Accordingly, the all-pervasive or the *anvaya* form of Akṣarabrahman is also its *nirākāra* form. Through this form, it is immanent in the universe. This form of Akṣarabrahman is called *Cidākāśa*. On the other hand, possessing the attributes of eternal existence, consciousness and bliss is the *sākāra* form of Akṣarabrahman. In this form, Akṣarabrahman is the abode of Parabrahman, serves Parabrahman in this abode and takes birth on earth as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, the four forms of Akṣara are:

¹⁴⁹ (Thacker 89)

¹⁵⁰ (Thacker 89)

¹⁵¹ (Thacker 89)

¹⁵² (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 188)

¹⁵³ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.7)

	Form
Anvaya and Nirākāra	Cidākāśa
Vyatireka and Sākāra	Akṣaradhāman
	The Ideal Servant
	Akṣarabrahman Guru

Table 2.6-1 Four forms of Akṣara

Though being a single ontological entity, Akṣarabrahman assumes four forms performing four different functions. Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that though Akṣarabrahman in all forms is the same single entity, it takes more than one form when on earth as the Akṣarabrahman Guru.¹⁵⁴ Akṣarabrahman's four forms are lyrically presented:

Cidākāśastathā deśastaddeśasthaśca sevakaḥ |
Gururbrahmasvarūpaśca catasro brahmaṇo vidhāḥ ||
Ādyatrayaṁ sadaivaikaṁ gururūpaṁ ca bahvapi |
*Iti saṁkhyāvivēko'yaṁ vijñeyo brahmavedane ||*¹⁵⁵

These four forms present Akṣarabrahman as all-pervasive and manifest at the same time. Sadhu Bhadreshdas elaborates on each of these forms and affirms them with the help of the readings from the *Prasthānatrayī*.

2.6.1. Cidākāśa—Daharākāśa

As discussed above, the all-pervasive form of Akṣarabrahman is called *Cidākāśa*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas defines this form as sentient (*cit*), residing in every being, beyond space and

¹⁵⁴ There are more than one Akṣarabrahman Gurus present at a time, each situated in a different phase in life. While one may be openly nominated as the Guru by the former Guru, the other may have received initiation as an ascetic, while one may have just taken birth. Accordingly, only one's identity is explicitly known to the *sampradāya* and is recognised as its spiritual head.

¹⁵⁵ "As Cidākāśa, as the divine abode, as servant in that abode, and as a brahmasvarūpa Guru—are the four forms of Akṣarabrahman." (*Kārikā* 41)

"One in the first three forms, more than one in the fourth form; such should be the awareness of number, while understanding the form of Akṣarabrahman." (*Kārikā* 42)

time, luminous, unchanging, and formless.¹⁵⁶ This definition is based on the description given by Swaminarayan:

Everything is dependent on that *ākāśa*. That *ākāśa* resides within *Prakṛti-Puruṣa* and their creation, the body and the *brahmāṇḍa*. It resides externally as their creator...It is this *ākāśa*—the support of all—that is known as Brahman, as *Cidākāśa*. *Cidākāśa* is present on all four sides of the *brahmāṇḍa* as well as within the *brahmāṇḍa*. When one's vision reaches the perspective of that all-supporting *Cidākāśa*, it is known as *daharavidyā*.¹⁵⁷

Swaminarayan refers to the knowledge of *Cidākāśa* as *daharavidyā*, and Sadhu Bhadreshdas establishes this form of Akṣarabrahman with reference to the *daharavidyā* described in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.

The eighth chapter of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* begins with “*atha yadidamasmin brahmapure daharam puṇḍarīkaṁ veśma daharo'smin*.”¹⁵⁸ It describes the city of Brahman (*brahmapura*), the body, within which lies the cavity of the heart. Within this cavity prevails the *daharākāśa*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains this ‘*daharākāśa*’ as the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman as it is an *ākāśa* and hence without any form or shape. He does not accept it as just some space in the heart, which would imply the presence of the *ākāśa* or ether belonging to the five gross elements (*pañca bhūta*) namely, land (*pṛthvī*), water (*jala*), fire (*teja*), air (*vāyu*) and ether (*ākāśa*). As Swaminarayan himself clarifies:

However, the *ākāśa* that has risen from *tamoguṇa* is subject to change, whereas the *ākāśa* that is the support of everything is not subject to change; it is eternal. It is this *ākāśa*—the support of all—that is known as Brahman, as *Cidākāśa*.¹⁵⁹

Arguing against the reading of *ākāśa* as ether, Sadhu Bhadreshdas highlights that later in the same chapter, this *ākāśa* is denoted with the term ‘*ātman*,’ which encompasses the attributes of being beyond death, grief, hunger, thirst¹⁶⁰ and the knowledge of this “*ātman*” is asserted to attain these auspicious qualities and thus experience fulfilment.¹⁶¹ Such a description

¹⁵⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 48)

¹⁵⁷ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.46)

¹⁵⁸ “Now in the brahmapura lies the lotus-shaped, within which lies a small space.” (Ch. Up. 8.1.1)

¹⁵⁹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I.46)

¹⁶⁰ (Ch. Up. 8.1.5)

¹⁶¹ (Ch. Up. 8.1.6)

implies that the “ākāśa” of 8.1.1 denotes an eternal sentient entity and thereby cannot be applied to ether which is essentially inert and subject to creation and destruction.¹⁶² Thus, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta affirms the existence of two *ākāśas*—one is the material *ākāśa*, and the other is the conscious and luminous *ākāśa* which is the support of all, eternal and ever unchanging. Though both are pervasive, the former pervades only the material world, while the latter eternally pervades the material world and all that beyond it.

However, another reading of the same statement explains ‘daharākāśa’ itself as the highest entity. Shankar understands Ch. Up. 8.1.1 of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* as an explanation of the highest entity, Brahman, within the limitation of space for the benefit of those with dull intellect.¹⁶³ It is seen as a “preparation” for the highest knowledge.¹⁶⁴ Here, Brahman is explained within the space of the heart:

In this small palace, there is a smaller inner *ākāśa* which is Brahman... *Ākāśa* is its name.¹⁶⁵

This reading is also admitted by the Ramanuja tradition, which understands ‘daharākāśa’ as implying Paramātmān.¹⁶⁶ Ramanuja supports this reading by understanding the term ‘ātman’ in the subsequent mantras as Paramātmān. Sadhu Bhadreshdas questions this explanation by raising the difficulty it would cause in reading the succeeding line in the same mantra 8.1.1, “aharo'sminnantarākāśastasminyadantastadanveṣṭavyaṁ tadvāva vijijñāsītavyamiti.”¹⁶⁷ Thus, there is a reference to that which lies within the *ākāśa*, which is worthy of attainment. This inner entity within the *ākāśa* will become difficult to explain if the *ākāśa* itself is taken as the highest entity.

Furthermore, Sadhu Bhadreshdas nullifies the interpretation of *daharākāśa* as the individual *ātman*. He argues that *daharākāśa* cannot be interpreted as the individual *ātman* as later in the chapter this *ākāśa* is described as that which is the support of the universe—it prevents the worlds from destruction¹⁶⁸—and realising this *ākāśa* one attains freedom.¹⁶⁹ Such a

¹⁶² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 49)

¹⁶³ (Jha, *The Chhandogya Upanishad and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 269–70)

¹⁶⁴ (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 491)

¹⁶⁵ (Jha, *The Chhandogya Upanishad and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 271)

¹⁶⁶ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 92–93; H. Apte 563)

¹⁶⁷ “...that which is within this daharākāśa is worthy of search; that verily should be inquired after.” (Ch. Up. 8.1.1)

¹⁶⁸ “Atha ya ātmā sa seturvidhṛtīreṣāṁ lokānāmasambhedāya.” (“Now that ātmā (Akṣarabrahman), he is like a bridge, and supports the various worlds for their sustenance.”) (Ch. Up. 8.4.1)

description showcases this *ākāśa* as free from aversions of *māyā*, and thus different from the individual *ātman* which is ever deluded by *māyā*.¹⁷⁰

Thereby, by ruling out the explanations of this *daharākāśa* as the elemental ether, Paramātmā and the individual *ātman*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas affirms it as the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman. In this vein, the term ‘ātman’ in the subsequent mantras is also understood as Akṣarabrahman that resides within each being as *Cidākāśa*. Akṣarabrahman encompasses various auspicious qualities, realising which one attains liberation.

2.6.2. All-Pervasive and Sentient

The vastness and pervasiveness of Akṣarabrahman are also affirmed in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. In the third chapter of this *Upaniṣad*, Gārgi challenges the scholarship of Maharṣi Yājñavalkya by raising a series of questions. In her final question, she inquires, “kasminnu khalu ākāśa otaśca protaśceti.”¹⁷¹ To this, Yājñavalkya responds, “tad akṣaram gārgi.”¹⁷²

Here, the term ‘akṣara’ is described as being without any shape or form—neither long nor short, without any eyes or ears, without taste or smell, having neither an interior nor exterior. Most commentators understand ‘akṣara’ as an adjective of Brahman—the immutable Brahman. While Shankar denotes it as the attributeless or *nirviśeṣa* Brahman,¹⁷³ Ramanuja, on the other hand, interprets it as denoting *saviśeṣa* Brahman who is devoid of any material qualities.¹⁷⁴ Sadhu Bhadreshdas reads ‘akṣara’ as a noun—the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman. He explains the negative descriptions as not just implying the absence of material qualities in Akṣarabrahman but also suggesting its pervasive nature.¹⁷⁵

The *Sudhā* warns against understanding ‘akṣara’ in these mantras as the *pradhāna* of Sāṅkhya. This understanding of ‘akṣara’ as *pradhāna* can arise if the term ‘ākāśa’ in Gārgi’s question, “By what is ākāśa pervaded,” is read as elemental ether. *Sudhā* disapproves ‘ākāśa’ to be elemental ether as the same mantra describes this *ākāśa* as being beyond past, present and future. Elemental ether, however, is a product of creation and thus belongs to the

¹⁶⁹ “Tadya evaitaṁ brahmalokam.” (“They attain this brahmaloka.”) (Ch. Up. 8.4.3)

¹⁷⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 48–49)

¹⁷¹ “What is that by which ākāśa is pervaded?” (Br. Up. 3.8.7)

¹⁷² “That is Akṣara, Gārgi.” (Br. Up. 3.8.8)

¹⁷³ (Swami Madhavananda 518–19)

¹⁷⁴ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 31; H. Apte 169)

¹⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopīṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 191)

transient realm of *prakṛti*. *Sudhā* identifies this ‘ākāśa’ as released *ātman* that is inspired by Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman to engage in creation through the association with *mūla-prakṛti*. Sadhu Bhadresdhas notes that ‘ākāśa’ is a compound word which signifies one who remains (*āsamantāt*) effulgent (*prakāśate*), suggesting the divine body of the released *ātman* that is acquired upon liberation.¹⁷⁶ Thus, having attained liberation, this released *ātman* is no longer influenced by *prakṛti* and remains beyond material space and time.

The *Upaniṣad* thereafter continues to describe Akṣara as supporter and controller of the universe, which further rules out the insentient *pradhāna* as ‘akṣara.’ It explains, “etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane gārgi sūryācandramasau vidhṛtau tiṣṭhataḥ, etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane gārgi dyāvāpṛthivyau vidhṛte tiṣṭhataḥ.”¹⁷⁷ Here, this mighty rule (*praśāsana*) is attributed to Akṣarabrahman, who supports, controls, and pervades the entire universe.¹⁷⁸ In his commentary, Sadhu Bhadresdhas reminds that this function of Akṣarabrahman is subject to the will of Parabrahman.¹⁷⁹

This power of Akṣarabrahman is not limited to the entire universe but also lies beyond the universe. This explanation is supported through the statement of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, “tadantarasya sarvasya tadu sarvasyāśya bāhyataḥ.”¹⁸⁰ Here, ‘sarvasya’ is specified in the *Sudhā* as encompassing *jīva*, *īśvara*, *māyā* and all that is created by it.¹⁸¹ Accordingly, whatever lies beyond *māyā* is pervaded by the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman. Through this, Sadhu Bhadresdhas argues that even in the absence of anything, Akṣarabrahman prevails.

Underling the infinite vastness of *Cidākāśa*, Sadhu Bhadresdhas notes that the seed of all creation, that is, *mūla-prakṛti*, covers only a small portion of the *Cidākāśa*.¹⁸² This implies that ether, which belongs to *mūla-prakṛti*, is not all-pervasive but pervades only a limited area. In comparison, *Cidākāśa* is limitless and pervades all that is and will be. Further, *Cidākāśa*, as residing within all that prevails and beyond, regulates the cosmos. *Prakṛti*, on the other hand, is non-sentient and cannot control or regulate that which it pervades. *Sudhā*

¹⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdhas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 54)

¹⁷⁷ “Under the mighty rule of akṣara the sun and moon uphold their positions, the heaven and earth uphold their positions.” (Br. Up. 3.8.9)

¹⁷⁸ (Bhadreshdhas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 54)

¹⁷⁹ (Bhadreshdhas, *Brhadāraṇyakopiṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 195)

¹⁸⁰ “That (Akṣarabrahman) is inside of all this and is also its outside.” (*Īśa* Up. 5)

¹⁸¹ (Bhadreshdhas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 55)

¹⁸² (Bhadreshdhas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 56)

explains the distinction between *Cidākāśa* and *prakṛti* through the example of an earthen pot¹⁸³— clay, as the material cause of the pot, only prevails in the space occupied by that pot and not outside it. Additionally, the clay lacks the power to regulate the pot. Likewise, *prakṛti*, despite being the material cause of the diverse creation, lacks the power to control it or pervade outside the limit of creation. Thus, though *Cidākāśa* pervades *prakṛti* and its manifestation in the form of diverse life forms, it remains essentially distinct from it.

Interestingly, Madhva also accepts the existence of two *ākāśas*, which he calls *avyaktākāśa* and *ākāśa*. The former is the unmodified space that continues to exist even after the dissolution of *prakṛti* or the material world. The latter is the *ākāśa* that is part of *prakṛti* as one of the five elements.¹⁸⁴ However, unlike Sadhu Bhadreshdas, Madhva does not take *avyaktākāśa* as a separate ontological entity of Akṣarabrahman.

2.6.3. *Cidākāśa* and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*

The *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman is also discussed within the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*. After introducing Akṣara as the subject-matter of *parāvidyā*, Aṅgiras Ṛṣi describes Akṣara as “yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam agotram avarṇamacakṣuḥśrotram tadapāṇipādam.”¹⁸⁵ As discussed earlier, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands the first chapter of this *Upaniṣad* as an elaborate elucidation of the nature of Akṣara. Accordingly, the above statement is explained in the *Sudhā* as a description of the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman.

Further, as in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* also mentions the presence of an inner dweller of the body. Chapter three of the *Upaniṣad* begins with “dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā samānaṁ vṛkṣaṁ pariśasvajāte tayoranyaḥ pippalaṁ svādvattyanaśnannanyo abhicākaśīti.”¹⁸⁶ Here, the analogy of the tree is used to refer to the material body. The two birds are variedly explained. Shankar identifies the two birds as the individual *ātman* and the conditioned Brahman, that is, *īśvara*,¹⁸⁷ Ramanuja also understands them in a similar line as

¹⁸³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 56)

¹⁸⁴ (Swami Tapasyananda 167–68)

¹⁸⁵ “That which is unperceivable, ungraspable, without origin, colourless, without eyes and ears, or hands and feet.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.6)

¹⁸⁶ “Two birds that cling to the same tree. While one eats its fruits, the other witnesses the same without eating.” (Mu. Up. 3.1.1)

¹⁸⁷ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 154)

jīvātman and *Paramātman*.¹⁸⁸ However, Sadhu Bhadreshdas, in line with his explanation of the *daharākāśa* of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, explains the two birds as the individual *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman.¹⁸⁹

Though he does not directly refute the Advaitin or Viśiṣṭādvaitin interpretation, Sadhu Bhadreshdas warns against interpreting the two birds as the individual *ātman* and Parabrahman as the following mantra introduces the *puruṣa* as seated on the same tree, “samāne vṛkṣe puruṣo nimagno'niśayā śocati muhyamānaḥ.”¹⁹⁰ Here, both Shankar and Ramanuja understand ‘puruṣa’ as the individual *ātman*, which is described as grieving in sorrow.¹⁹¹ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, on the other hand, identifies ‘puruṣa’ as the Parabrahman and bases this identification on the repeated use of this term throughout the *Upaniṣad* to refer to the supreme Parabrahman. Accordingly, he explains ‘nimagna’ not as the being drowned or immersed in sorrow but as pervading the *ātman*. The *ātman*, which is deluded by *māyā*, upon realising the bliss of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman that ever dwell within it, overcomes this delusion and attains liberation.¹⁹² Thus, while Ramanuja asserts the distinction of the individual *ātman* and *Paramātman* through this mantra, Sadhu Bhadreshdas asserts the distinction of the individual *ātman*, and Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman that eternally reside within the *ātman*. More so, he notes that this mantra reinforces the significance of *brahmavidyā* explained in the same *Upaniṣad* as entailing both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman.¹⁹³

This way, the *Sudhā* justifies the presence of the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman as dwelling in every being along with Parabrahman. Akṣarabrahman does not bear the fruits of the actions of the body, as it is ever untouched by the material world.

2.7. Akṣaradhāman

In its *vyatireka* form, Akṣarabrahman is asserted to coexist in three different aspects. One of them is the abode form of Akṣarabrahman. An essential feature of many Vedānta schools is

¹⁸⁸ (H. Apte 177)

¹⁸⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 51)

¹⁹⁰ “On the same tree dwells the *puruṣa* as the ruler of the *ātman*, which being influenced by *māyā*, mourns.” (Mu. Up. 3.1.2)

¹⁹¹ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 155; S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 126)

¹⁹² (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 282)

¹⁹³ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 283)

the affirmation of the transcendental divine abode of the highest Being, Paramātmā. Attainment of ultimate liberation entails the attainment of this divine abode of God. For instance, the Viśiṣṭādvaitins accept Viṣṇu as the highest Being and his eternal abode as Vaikuṇṭha, also referred to as *nitya vibhūti*. Moreover, one of the three hymns (*gadyas*) attributed to Ramanuja is called *Vaikuṇṭha Gadya*, which narrates the importance of meditation on Vaikuṇṭha for liberation, after one has performed the act of *prapatti*.¹⁹⁴ Vaikuṇṭha is often described as:

In Vaikuṇṭha, the Lord is seated on the serpent Śeṣa, supported by his consort Lakṣmī.¹⁹⁵

Viṣṇu is ever accompanied by his consort, Śrī or Lakṣmī along with a countless number of *mukta ātmā* in their service.

The Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta also accepts the personal form of God seated in his divine abode. This abode is known as Akṣaradhāman. It is described as the dwelling place of Paramātmā Swaminarayan where:

Brahmeśaḥ sahaajānandaḥ svayaṁ brahmā'kṣaraṁ tathā |
*Muktāśca yatra tiṣṭhanti hyakṣaradhāma kīrtitam ||*¹⁹⁶

Thus, in this divine abode, Akṣaradhāman, Swaminarayan is not accompanied by a consort but is served by Akṣarabrahman and surrounded by countless released *ātmā* who have attained a body of Brahman (*brāhmī-tanu*).

Sadhu Bhadresdas establishes this form of Akṣarabrahman by explaining Akṣaradhāman through the different *Upaniṣadic* terms like ‘dhāma,’ ‘pura,’ ‘loka,’ ‘pada’ and ‘vyoma.’¹⁹⁷ He defines the term ‘loka,’ as stated in “teṣāmevaiṣa brahmaloko yeṣāṁ tapo brahmacaryaṁ yeṣu satyaṁ pratiṣṭhitam”¹⁹⁸ and other such aphorisms, as not just a place or world, but one that is extremely luminous and illuminates all that around it. The term ‘dhāma’ as seen in

¹⁹⁴ (Carman 63)

¹⁹⁵ (Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 689)

¹⁹⁶ “Where Parabrahman Sahajanand himself along with Akṣarabrahman; and countless released ātmā reside—that place is called Akṣaradhāman.” (*Kārikā* 49)

¹⁹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 57–58)

¹⁹⁸ “Those who abide by tapas, brahmacarya and truth, for them verily is brahmaloka.” (Pr. Up. 1.15)

aphorisms like, “*ātmā viśate brahmadhāma*”¹⁹⁹ is explained as that support and uphold. The term ‘vyoma’ is explained as *ākāśa* or inhabitable space. He further remarks that the highest abode in this sense is referred to as ‘param vyoma’ (supreme *ākāśa*) as seen in “*ṛco akṣare parame vyoman yasmindevā adhi viśve niṣeduḥ*.”²⁰⁰ Lastly, the term ‘pada’ as stated in “*yadicchanto brahmacaryam caranti tatte padam saṁgrahaṇa bravīmyomityetat*”²⁰¹ is explained as the place, which is worthy of attainment.

In each of these cases, Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies the terms ‘brahmaloka,’ ‘brahmadhāman,’ ‘parame vyoman,’ and ‘padam’ as the highest abode Akṣaradhāman. Accordingly, Akṣaradhāman is a place that is effulgent, that upholds the highest Being, Parabrahman, is habited by countless released *ātmā* and is worthy of attainment. It is supreme and ever beyond the limits of space and time.

2.7.1. Akṣaradhāman Is Akṣarabrahman

The terms ‘brahmaloka,’ ‘brahmadhāman,’ ‘padam,’ and the like are often understood as the *loka* or place of Brahman, the realm or *dhāma* of Brahman. Such an understanding implies that the realm or place is the residence of the highest entity, Brahman.

Sadhu Bhadreshdas, while accepting this explanation, specifies the way of breaking the compound word ‘brahmadhāman’ or ‘brahmaloka.’ When explained as the “abode of Brahman,” the term ‘brahmadhāman’ or ‘brahmaloka’ is following the compound type called *tatpuruṣa samāsa*. This type is defined as:

[a] compound in which the last word is determined by the preceding words, for instance, *tatpuruṣa* or his man or *rajapuruṣa* or king’s man.²⁰²

In these examples, the last word can be separated from the first word—the man can be separated from the king. So, when the term ‘brahman’ is taken as the highest entity—Parabrahman—the words ‘brahmadhāman’ or ‘brahmaloka’ can be understood to signify Parabrahman as distinct, who can be separated from his abode.

¹⁹⁹ “The ātman enters Brahmadhāman.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.4)

²⁰⁰ “The vedic mantras prevail in the highest realm, where the gods reside.” (*Rg Veda* 1.164.39)

²⁰¹ “The place which those deeply associated with Brahman attain, I will explain to you briefly.” (Ka. Up. 2.15)

²⁰² (Muller 235)

Sadhu Bhadreshdas also understands the term ‘brahman’ as denoting the entity Akṣarabrahman. To elucidate this, he gives a slightly different example of *tatpuruṣa samāsa*. He notes that the “abode of Brahman” should be understood in terms of “the head of Rāhu.”²⁰³ Here, though the genitive case is used to suggest a sense of belonging, as the head belonging to Rāhu, it also points to the fact that Rāhu is nothing but the head.²⁰⁴ Likewise, Akṣarabrahman is inseparable from the abode as Akṣarabrahman is the abode.

Additionally, *Sudhā* puts forwards another way of breaking apart the words ‘brahmadhāman’ and ‘brahmaloka.’ They can be understood as Brahman as the *dhāma* or Brahman being the quality of *dhāma*. Such an explanation follows the compound type called *karmadhāraya samāsa*:

[This is a compound] in which the last word is determined by a preceding adjective e.g. *nilotpalam*, blue lotus. The component words, if dissolved would stand in the same case.²⁰⁵

Accordingly, the last word, ‘dhāma’ or ‘loka,’ is determined by the word ‘brahman.’ In order to explain this *samāsa*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas gives the example of the *niṣādasthapati nyāya*—where the *niṣāda* or the tribal is the *sthapati* or the leader.²⁰⁶ So, the tribal himself is the leader. Similarly, Brahman or Akṣarabrahman is itself the *dhāman* or the abode. Applying this logical and grammatical technique, Sadhu Bhadreshdas analyses the terms ‘brahmadhāman’ and ‘brahmaloka’ and thereby establishes the abode of Parabrahman as Akṣarabrahman.

Interestingly, this logic of *niṣādasthapati nyāya* is also used by the followers of Shankar to prove that ‘brahmaloka’ does not refer to the world of Brahman but is a condition or a state that is Brahman. For instance, Swami Sivananda, in his commentary of the *Brahma-Sūtra*, remarks:

²⁰³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 69)

²⁰⁴ Rāhu is famously known as the demon that disguised as a god to drink the nectar. He was exposed by the Sun and the Moon which led to Viṣṇu to sever his head. Since he had consumed some nectar, his head became immortal and is referred as Rāhu. In Indian astrology, Rāhu is also referred as the ascending node of the moon. (V. S. Apte, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* 469)

²⁰⁵ (Muller 235)

²⁰⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 69)

The word Brahmaloka does not mean the Loka of Brahman but the Loka or condition which is Brahman Himself, just as we explain the compound word Nishadasthapati, not as the headman of the Nishadas but a headman who at the same time is a Nishada. It is a Karmadharaya compound which does not mean the “world of Brahman, but that world which is Brahman.”²⁰⁷

Despite using the *niṣādashapati nyāya*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not accept this understanding and insists on ‘loka’ as an abode and not a state or a condition. He distinctly spells out that *videha-mukti*, that is, liberation attained after shedding the mortal body, is not a state but involves attaining and reaching a particular place.²⁰⁸ He affirms this through the verbs used in the *Upaniṣads*, such as “ātmā viśate”²⁰⁹ and “svayāmbhūḥ.”²¹⁰ Such verbs are asserted to indicate an action of entering and residing in a place. Through such clarification, Sadhu Bhadreshdas discreetly disapproves the Advaitin notion of ‘loka’ as a state of being.

2.7.2. Nature and Form

The Akṣaradhāman, a place worthy of attainment, is also described as infinite (*ananta*), as in “anantalokāptima,”²¹¹ “anante svarge.”²¹² While analysing the term ‘ananta,’ the *Sudhā* first offers an argument of negation specifying what the term does *not* mean. Firstly, it claims that the ‘ananta’ does not mean that the supreme abode of God is many in number. This argument is supported with several references from the *Upaniṣads* where the words like ‘brahmaloka,’ ‘brahmapura,’ ‘svarga loka’ are used in singular tense (*eka vacana*).

However, one may counter-argue that there are references in which such words are used in their plural form, such as in “brahmalokeṣu.”²¹³ Answering this potential objection, Sadhu Bhadreshdas proclaims that such a mention is often a way to show respect and honour to the person or object in question.²¹⁴ Indeed, such a denotation is accepted and prevalent in Sanskrit:

²⁰⁷ (Swami Sivananda 131)

²⁰⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 64–65)

²⁰⁹ “The ātman enters Brahmadhāma.” (Mu. Up. 3.2.4)

²¹⁰ “Residing or dwelling.” (*Īśa* Up. 8)

²¹¹ “Attains the infinite abode.” (Ka. Up. 1.14)

²¹² “The infinite heaven.” (Ke. Up. 4.9)

²¹³ “In the realm of Brahman.” (Br. Up. 3.6.1)

²¹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 62)

Sometimes the plural is used to show respect, or to speak of a person in reverence, as, इति श्रीशंकराचार्याः, ‘so says the revered Śaṅkara.’²¹⁵

In the same way, the abode of God is said to be stated with great reverence. Thus, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands even the plural form of ‘brahmaloka’ as the singular Akṣaradhāman. Through this argument, he seems to be responding to those commentators who have identified ‘brahmalokeṣu’ as the worlds of Brahmā.²¹⁶ In fact, in his commentary on Br. Up. 3.6.1, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explicitly argues against understanding ‘brahmalokeṣu’ as “caturmukhaloka.”²¹⁷ He provides a few instances from the *Upaniṣads*, where *Brahmaloka* always follows the *Prajāpatiloka* (another name for *Caturmukhaloka*). In the same *Upaniṣad*, for example, the bliss of *Brahmaloka* is affirmed to be a hundred times more than *Prajāpatiloka*.²¹⁸ Here, the word ‘brahmaloka’ is used in the singular tense. In this way, the denotation of ‘brahmaloka’ and ‘brahmalokeṣu’ is ascertained as the same place, the highest divine abode.

Secondly, the *Sudhā* argues that the term ‘ananta’ is not to be understood as denoting a boundless supreme abode. Such an understanding is noted to cause exegetical difficulties. The *Upaniṣads* often refer to the path of light (*arci mārg*), as in “te’rciṣam,”²¹⁹ “devapatho brahmapatha,”²²⁰ which leads to the highest place. This path is known as the path of gods and as the path beginning with the realm of light.²²¹ Since there is a path, it implies that this path takes one to a particular destination. If the highest abode is taken as infinite and boundless, such statements of the *Upaniṣads* will lose relevance.²²² There will be no particular place to reach or access, as the abode will be all-pervasive.

Another difficulty highlighted against the all-pervasiveness of the abode is that it would dissolve the *anvaya* and *vyatireka* forms of Akṣarabrahman. The abode form of Akṣarabrahman is the *vyatireka* form of Akṣarabrahman, and thereby it has a particular form or shape. But if described as all-pervasive, it will become formless and will coalesce with the

²¹⁵ (V. S. Apte, *The Student’s Guide to Sanskrit Composition* 3)

²¹⁶ (Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 223)

²¹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopīṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 176)

²¹⁸ “atha ye śataṁ prajāpatiloka ānandāḥ sa eko brahmaloka ānandāḥ.” (“A hundred units of the bliss of Prajāpati’s realm is equal to one unit of the bliss of Brahman’s realm.”) (Br. Up. 4.3.33)

²¹⁹ “That arci path.” (Ch. Up. 5.10.1)

²²⁰ “The path of deva, the path of Brahman.” (Ch. Up. 4.15.6)

²²¹ (Thibaut 744–45)

²²² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 63)

anvaya form of Akṣarabrahman, that is, *Cidākāśa*.²²³ In order to uphold the form of Akṣaradhāman, Sadhu Bhadreshdas rejects the explanation of the term ‘ananta’ as boundless and all-pervasive.

Through the above two-fold argument, the ‘ananta’ is ascertained in the *Sudhā* as eternal. Thus, the above-mentioned *Upaniṣadic* statements that describe *Brahmaloka* as *ananta* are affirmed to be expressing the eternality of the highest abode. Such an explanation sustains its form and singularity.

Akṣaradhāman, as singular and non-pervasive, is the *vyatireka* form of Akṣarabrahman. It is described as:

Manuṣyākāratastaddhi sākṛtikam bhavet sadā |
*Tasya catuḥṣu pārśveṣu naikabrahmāṇḍasaṁsthitih ||*²²⁴

Akṣaradhāman is so vast that countless universes float around it in every direction. This vastness does not undermine its definiteness. Despite being so vast, Akṣaradhāman has a definite boundary. This boundary or shape is described to be of a human form. Sadhu Bhadreshdas validates this aspect through the *sampradāyic* text, *Vacanāmṛta*. Here, Swaminarayan, describing God and his abode, states:

Within that abode, countless millions of such *brahmāṇḍas* float like mere atoms in each and every hair of Akṣara. Such is the abode of God.²²⁵

Such a form of the celestial abode of God is unique in the Vedānta tradition. The description of the abode usually entails the beauty of nature that surrounds the deity. For instance, in the *Vaikuṇṭha Gadya*, Ramanuja narrates the surroundings as replete with gardens embellished with various trees and fragrant flowers. Streams of water with crystal clear water flows and chirping birds enhance the beauty of the environs.²²⁶ However, nowhere is there a specification of the form of the entire abode.

²²³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 63)

²²⁴ “Possessing a human form, Akṣaradhāman eternally has a form, and countless universes float around it, in every direction.” (*Kārikā* 55)

²²⁵ (Vac Gaḍhaḍā I.63)

²²⁶ (*Sri Vaikuṇṭha Gadhyam*)

Despite the absence of a specification of the form of the abode, the Ramanuja tradition insists that the supreme abode is composed of the element called ‘śuddha sattva.’ S. M. Srinivasa Chari observes:

It [*nitya vibhūti* or *Vaikuṇṭha*] is also named as *śuddha sattva* implying that it is a spiritual substance characterised only by unalloyed *sattva*, unlike the physical matter which has all the three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.²²⁷

This spiritual substance is explained to be characterised by pure *sattva*, which is different from the alloyed *sattva*—an essential constituent of *prakṛti*. Against this, Sadhu Bhadreshdas argues that the abode is pure Brahman and cannot be explained to be made up of a spiritual material like *śuddha sattva*.

Moreover, despite being *śuddha sattva*, this substance can be claimed to belong to *prakṛti*. Such a view echoes that of Advaitins, who have identified *śuddha sattva* with *māyā*:

[i]t is not an element independent of *prakṛti*. It is *māyā*, the *upādhi* of *īśvara*.²²⁸

As a reply, the Viśiṣṭādvaitins assert that being pure *sattva*, it transcends the material world and thus is “non-material.”²²⁹ Responding to this claim, Sadhu Bhadreshdas argues that if one may suppose a pure *sattva*, why not suppose pure *rajas* or pure *tamas*? Further, he asserts that accepting the existence of a pure *sattva* will lead to exegetical difficulties.²³⁰ This is illustrated through the statement of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, “teṣāmasau virajo brahmaloko na yeṣu jihmamanṛtaṁ na māyā ceti.”²³¹ Here, the term ‘virajo’ is construed to mean *without rajas guṇa*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas discerns that *rajas guṇa* is mentioned as a generic term (*upalakṣṇa*) which also alludes to *sattva* and *tamas guṇa*. Thereby, *Brahmaloka* or Akṣaradhāman transcends all *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. For these reasons, he does not accept the existence of a spiritual element called “śuddha sattva.”

²²⁷ (S. Chari 340)

²²⁸ (Sircar 45)

²²⁹ (S. Chari 340)

²³⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 65–66)

²³¹ “Those who do not resort to deceit or falsehood, transcend *māyā* and attain the Brahmaloka which is ever beyond the three *guṇas* of *māyā*.” (Ka. Up. 1.16)

In contrast, the *Sudhā* describes the supreme abode as “triguṇātita,”²³² which is ever beyond the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti* and, thus, ever pure and divine. In fact, in all four forms, Akṣarabrahman is *guṇātita*. As Swaminarayan states:

Thus, the same form that is in Akṣaradhāman—which is *guṇātita*—is manifest. There is no difference between the two. Just as the form in the abode is *guṇātita*, the human form is also *guṇātita*.²³³

Furthermore, many belonging to the Ramanuja tradition uphold the spiritual substance, *śuddha sattva*, as inert or non-sentient.²³⁴ This perspective has puzzled scholars:

We confess we cannot understand what kind of substance what kind of substance Ramanuja’s *śuddha-sattva* is. Anything unconscious though illuminating forming the *materia* of spiritual manifestations is a paradox.²³⁵

A similar contention is raised in the *Sudhā*. How can the abode, where countless *mukta ātmā* possess sentient divine bodies, be non-sentient? Moreover, holding the supreme abode as inert contradicts the *Upaniṣadic* statements that reveal it as being *sat-cit-ānanda*, devoid of all vices, such as in “vipāpo virajo’vicikitso brāhmaṇo bhavatyēṣa brahmalokaḥ.”²³⁶ Such attributes cannot be ascribed to that which is inert. Sadhu Bhadreshdas endorses Akṣaradhāman as sentient, which averts the paradox mentioned above. The *Sudhā* submits:

Sarvajñam saccidānandam niṣpāpamiti cetanam |
*Jaḍe na jñānapāpādi tasmānnā'cetanam padam ||*²³⁷

In addition, the released *ātmā* who acquire divine bodies in this eternal and sentient Akṣaradhāman are affirmed to never return to *māyā* or the material world. It is the final destination. This finality is supported with references such as “teṣāṃ na punarāvṛttiḥ.”²³⁸ Sadhu Bhadreshdas highlights a two-fold implication of such an assertion—supremacy and

²³² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 65)

²³³ (Vac. Gadhada III.31)

²³⁴ (Bharadwaj 138)

²³⁵ (Sircar 138)

²³⁶ “It is sinless, beyond the three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, free from doubts, known by the knowers of Brahman. This is the world of Brahman.” (Br. Up. 4.4.23)

²³⁷ “All-knower, characterized by existence, consciousness and bliss, devoid of adverse qualities—thus sentient; an inanimate object can never be characterized as omniscient, devoid of adverse qualities—thus Akṣaradhāman is sentient.” (*Kārikā* 57)

²³⁸ “They do not return.” (Br. Up. 6.2.15)

immortality of Akṣaradhāman. Firstly, such a statement implies that attaining any other realm apart from the highest abode ensures a return to the material world.²³⁹ Thus, Akṣaradhāman is supreme and above all realms. Secondly, the no return of the released *ātmā* to the land of mortals indicates that Akṣaradhāman alone is immortal and ever existing.²⁴⁰ All other realms are temporary. Echoing the same, Swaminarayan states:

With the exception of God's Akṣaradhāman, the form of God in that Akṣaradhāman and his devotees in that Akṣaradhāman, everything else—all the realms, the devas, and the opulence of the devas—is perishable.²⁴¹

Ramanuja also, in his commentary of the *Brahma-Sūtra*, notes that even the world of Brahmā, which is closest to the highest abode, is perishable:

[f]or the holy books teach that Hiranyagarbha [the ruler of the world of Brahmā], as a created being, passes away at the end of dviparardha-period...those who have gone to Hiranyagarbha necessarily return also.²⁴²

Moreover, Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that the movement of the released *ātmā* to Akṣaradhāman is constant. The Vedic statement, “sadā paśyanti surayaḥ,”²⁴³ is cited to explain the enlightened seers ever perceiving the form of Parabrahman surrounded by the countless released *ātmā*. This implies that the countless *ātmā* amongst the countless eternal *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* have been attaining liberation and the divine abode since eternity. The *Sudhā* warns against reading this statement as asserting the presence of eternal released *ātmā*.²⁴⁴ The Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are the only entities that eternally transcend *māyā*, while the various *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* are bound by *māyā* till they attain liberation. This constant movement of released *ātmā* to the divine abode also confirms the eternality of Akṣaradhāman. Akṣaradhāman must be ever existing such that the released *ātmā* can attain it at all times.

Thus, being immortal and imperishable, Akṣaradhāman is showcased as the ultimate and supreme abode worthy of attainment. Its supremacy is said to be unequivocally spelt out at

²³⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 60–61)

²⁴⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 61)

²⁴¹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.24)

²⁴² (Thibaut 749)

²⁴³ “The enlightened seers perceive.” (R̥g Veda 1.22.20)

²⁴⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 61)

several places in the *Upaniṣads*. Sadhu Bhadreshdas makes a special mention of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1.²⁴⁵ At this juncture in the *Upaniṣad*, Maharṣi Yājñavalkya enumerates each realm in the ascending order of their supremacy as a response to Gārgi questions. He lists the realm of the Gandharvas, which is followed by the *loka* of Sun, Moon, the stars, Indra, Prajāpati and *Brahmaloka*. When Gārgi asks what pervades *Brahmaloka*, Yājñavalkya is enraged and warns her of going too far in asking questions. This anger and the absence of any higher realm is taken to showcase the supremacy of *Brahmaloka* or Akṣaradhāman.

In the end, the *Sudhā* asserts that the supremacy of Parabrahman itself informs the supremacy of his dwelling place, Akṣaradhāman. Thus, after expounding the supremacy of Akṣaradhāman through a thorough examination of the *Prasthānatrayī*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas ends with the following *kārikā*:

Nāstyaparaḥ paro loko hyasmāddhyakṣaradhamataḥ |
*Yato virājate nityam atra parā kṣarāt paraḥ ||*²⁴⁶

This *kārikā* that concludes the section expresses that the abode gains its supremacy not just from scriptural validation but primarily from the supremacy of the resident.

To sum up, the abode form of Akṣarabrahman, that is, Akṣaradhāman is elucidated as:

- A place worthy of attaining
- The dwelling place of the Highest Being, Parabrahman, who is surrounded by Akṣarabrahman and countless released *ātmā*
- It is divine and greatly luminous
- It is immensely vast yet has a human-like form
- It is eternal and supreme, one without a second
- It is Brahman and not made of any other spiritual substance
- It is eternally beyond *prakṛti*
- It is ever sentient [*sat-cit-ānanda*]
- Once attained, there is no return to the material world

²⁴⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 68)

²⁴⁶ “There is no abode higher than Akṣaradhāman. Here, in Akṣaradhāman, resides the One who is higher than even Akṣara.” (*Kārikā* 58)

2.7.3. Eligibility

The supreme abode, which ever transcends the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti*, is affirmed to be attained by only those who overcome these three *guṇas*. In this view, overcoming the three *guṇas* is upheld as the essential criterion, which can be realised through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The Akṣarabrahman Guru, being eternally beyond the aversions of *māyā*, alone can lead others to the same. This state of overcoming *māyā* through the Akṣarabrahman Guru is referred to as attaining *brahmabhāva*, or the auspicious qualities of the Guru Akṣarabrahman.²⁴⁷

The requisite of associating with the Akṣarabrahman Guru for attaining Akṣaradhāman is supported through several *Upaniṣadic* statements like “yadicchanto brahmacaryam caranti tatte padam saṁgrāheṇa bravīmyomītyetat.”²⁴⁸ Here, as discussed earlier, Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies the term ‘padam’ as a place that is attained, which is the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman. The statement presents those wishing for this “padam” as engaged in the endeavour specified with the terms ‘brahmacaryam caranti.’ ‘Brahmacaryam’ is explained as associating with the “brahman,” that is, the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru, and developing profound attachment (“caryam”) in the form of identifying one’s *ātman* as the Akṣarabrahman Guru by acquiring his auspicious qualities.²⁴⁹ This explanation greatly differs from those offered by other commentators. Both Shankar and Ramanuja explain the ‘brahmacarya’ as following celibacy when staying with the preceptor for the purpose of acquiring knowledge.²⁵⁰ The *Sudhā* does not deny this meaning of ‘brahmacaryam’ but notes that it is already entailed in the more comprehensive understanding of attaining *brahmabhāva*.

Another such *Upaniṣadic* statement is “tena dhīrā apiyanti brahmavidāḥ svargam lokamitā ūrdhvaṁ vimuktāḥ.”²⁵¹ It explains the attainment of “svargam lokamita,” the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman, by those who have gained knowledge of Brahman (*brahmavid*). Unlike Shankar and Ramanuja, who identify ‘brahmanvidāḥ’ as knowledge of the supreme entity, Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies it as the realisation of Akṣarabrahman. Further, he explains the

²⁴⁷ This is explained in detail in chapter 5.

²⁴⁸ “The place which those that are deeply associated with Brahman attain, I will explain to you briefly.” (Ka. Up. 2.15)

²⁴⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 66)

²⁵⁰ (S. Shastri, *The Katha and Prasna Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 38; H. Apte 61)

²⁵¹ “...through that the knowers of Brahman go to the heavenly abode after the shedding the mortal body.” (Br. Up. 4.4.8)

term ‘dhīrā’ as not simply as the wise sages but all those who associate with the Akṣarabrahman Guru and remain immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman. Accordingly, Akṣaradhāman can be attained by all *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

It is important to note that the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru must not be directed for attaining the supreme abode but for earning his divine approval and acquiring his auspicious qualities. This is also reflected in the prayer with which Sadhu Bhadreshdas opens the chapter “Akṣarabrahmadhārā”:

Guṇātīto gurum prāpya brahma rūpaṁ nijātmanaḥ |
*Vibhāvya dāsabhāvena svāminārāyaṇaṁ bhaje ||*²⁵²

This prayer is well-known in the *sampradāya* as the “dhyeya mantra,” literally the goal mantra. Thus, the goal is the realising the Akṣarabrahman Guru and performing selfless devotion to Parabrahman. The attainment of Akṣaradhāman is inevitable upon this realisation.

2.8. Akṣarabrahman—The Ideal Servant

Within this Akṣaradhāman resides the transcendental human-like form of Akṣarabrahman ever in the service of Parabrahman. As discussed above, Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāman is described to be accompanied by his devoted disciple, Akṣarabrahman, and countless released *ātmā*. Many Vedānta traditions accept the Highest Being, Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, as always accompanied by his divine consort Śrī or Rādhā. For example, Ramanuja in the *Vaikuṇṭha Gadya* describes the divine realm as:

Bhagavān-Nārāyaṇa seated on the body of the serpent Ananta by the side of Lakṣmī, who fills the world of Vaikuṇṭha and all its divine wealth of the appurtenances with the splendour of Her form.²⁵³

The ontological status Śrī, also referred to as Lakṣmī, remains ambiguous in the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. She is often described as being “one and coeval” with Viṣṇu who is ever united

²⁵² “Having attained a realised Guru, I believe my ātman to be brahmarūpa, and offer worship to Bhagwan Swaminarayan with humility.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 16)

²⁵³ (Carman 241)

with him and serves as a mediator between Viṣṇu and the aspirants.²⁵⁴ Akṣarabrahman, on the other hand, is endorsed not just as an ideal devotee but as forming a separate ontological entity. The form of Akṣarabrahman in Akṣaradhāman is also a *vyatireka* form of Akṣarabrahman. Accordingly, it possesses a form, which is described as divine and possessing a human-like shape. Sadhu Bhadreshdas affirms the form of Akṣarabrahman located in Akṣaradhāman through the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.

The second chapter of the second *muṇḍaka* opens with the mantra “mahat padam atraitatsamarpitam ejatprāṇannimiṣacca” (Mu. Up. 2.2.1). Here, the term ‘padam’ is understood by many as “support.”²⁵⁵ However, Sadhu Bhadreshdas, consistent with his explanation of the same term in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.11, identifies ‘padam’ as a dwelling place or abode. Subsequently, he takes the verb ‘samarpitam’ as being in service in this abode. He specifies that the term ‘atra’ (here) indicates the location that is under discussion, the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman. As discussed in the earlier section, the abode Akṣaradhāman is a form of Akṣarabrahman. Thus, the following term ‘etat’ (that) is explained as Akṣarabrahman, which as the abode, is also in service (*samarpit*) in this abode.²⁵⁶ Thereby, this aphorism alludes to two forms of Akṣarabrahman—first the abode form and then the servant form in the abode.

Once the reference to the servant form of Akṣarabrahman is determined, the remaining part of the verse is explained to affirm its form or shape. The mantra continues with “ejat” (walks), “prāṇat” (breathes), “nimiṣat” (and blinks). These actions are attributed to Akṣarabrahman, who is “samarpit” or dedicated in the abode, Akṣaradhāman. Thus, through such actions, the Akṣarabrahman in the abode is affirmed to have a human-like form.

Most commentators have interpreted the verse in terms of the Highest Being. For instance, those of the Shankar tradition who uphold the highest Being, Brahman, as formless, understand the verse as—who [Brahman] is the great support of all. In whom is fixed all that walks, breathes, and blinks.²⁵⁷ Ramanuja also reads it in terms of Brahman, but as the Brahman with attributes, which is qualified with *cit* (sentient beings) and *acit* (non-sentient

²⁵⁴ (Swami Tapasyananda 52–53)

²⁵⁵ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 138; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* 682; Swami Sharvananda 37)

²⁵⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 73)

²⁵⁷ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 138; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*; Swami Sharvananda)

world). Thus, instead of Shankar's "in whom", he understands it as "on whom" all beings are centred.²⁵⁸ Sadhu Bhadreshdas dismisses both these understandings. He argues that if 'etat' (that) is interpreted as the Highest Being, then to whom would that be dedicated? He remarks that the word 'samarpit' implies *dedication* to the Highest Being, Parabrahman.²⁵⁹ The significance of this verse is primarily in the affirmation of the servant form of Akṣarabrahman—that is sentient, one and possesses a human form. This form of Akṣarabrahman, in essence, is:

Sahajānandasevāyām dhāmni yad rājate sadā |
*Sākṛti cetanaṁ hyekaṁ sarvārṅgadvivigrahaṁ ||*²⁶⁰

2.8.1. The Ideal

Akṣarabrahman as the servant of Parabrahman, an ideal worthy of emulation, is validated through the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*. The sixteenth mantra of the *Upaniṣad* reads "yatte rūpaṁ kalyāṇatamaṁ tatte paśyāmi yo'sāvasau puruṣaḥ so'hamasmi."²⁶¹ Here, there is a prayer that appeals to behold the gracious form of Parabrahman and then proclaims, "that *puruṣa*, I am he." The term used for "that" is 'asau.' Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands 'asau' not simply as 'that' but as 'that nearby' (*ati sāmīpya*), meaning the person close to Parabrahman. This person nearest to Parabrahman is Akṣarabrahman.²⁶² This understanding of "that nearby" rules out the released *ātmā*, who surround Parabrahman in the divine abode.

The term 'puruṣaḥ' is not seen as an allusion to Parabrahman but to the human form of Akṣarabrahman. Consequently, the following statement, "so aham asmi" ("I am he"), is read as "I am that person, Akṣarabrahman." This is a unique understanding of these famous words of the *Upaniṣad*. It greatly differs from the Advaitin and the Viśiṣṭādvaitin traditions of Vedānta. Both these traditions accept the word "puruṣaḥ" as denoting the Highest Being and subsequently "so aham asmi" is taken as an identification with the Highest Being. While

²⁵⁸ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 124)

²⁵⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 72–73)

²⁶⁰ "Residing in the divine abode and eternally in service of Sahajanand, it has a form, is sentient, is one in number and possesses a divine human-shaped form." (*Kārikā* 60)

²⁶¹ "May I behold your form, that the scriptures venerate as being blissful, that person nearby you, I am he." (*Īśa Up.* 16)

²⁶² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 73)

Shankar upholds complete identification,²⁶³ Ramanuja claims the individual and the Highest Being stand in co-ordination as the latter is the body of the former.²⁶⁴ Another interpretation of the Viśiṣṭādvaitin tradition claims “I” in “I am that” as a reference not only to the *jīvātman* but also to the Paramātmā residing within it as *antaryāmī*.²⁶⁵ In this sense, the identification is of the Highest Being with the Paramātmā residing within.

In the commentary of *Īśa Upaniṣad*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas remarks realisation of Akṣarabrahman as “inevitable” (*anivārya*).²⁶⁶ Through the explanation of “so aham asmi” in terms of Akṣara, Sadhu Bhadreshdas alludes to the significance of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman in the Siddhānta. The end is to realise Parabrahman, behold his gracious form, and this realisation can be possible only through the realisation of Akṣarabrahman—this forms the very essence of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Since Akṣarabrahman is a servant of Parabrahman, he is the ideal for one and all. Every individual must aim to be a servant of Parabrahman and offer devotion in the manner of Akṣarabrahman, thus, the statement “I am that Akṣarabrahman.”

A mantra suggesting the same—“I am Akṣarabrahman, the servant of Parabrahman” (*akṣaram aham puruṣottama dāśosmī*)—is recited during the initiation ceremony of sadhus in the Svāminārāyaṇa sampradāya. Raymond Williams, in his book *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism*, translates the mantra as “I take refuge in Swaminarayan.”²⁶⁷ However, it is unable to capture the essence and deeper meaning of the mantra where the person being initiated aims to walk on the path of Akṣarabrahman, realise his virtues and then worship Parabrahman with devotion and humility. Today, this mantra is no longer only limited to initiation ceremonies but is recited by all members of the *sampradāya* every morning in their daily prayers, enabling one to be constantly vigilant of one’s spiritual ideal of life.²⁶⁸

The statement “I am that Akṣarabrahman” means becoming one with Akṣarabrahman. Swaminarayan warns that such oneness is not like water becoming one with water, but it is

²⁶³ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 24)

²⁶⁴ (Thibaut 130)

²⁶⁵ (S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 173)

²⁶⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 24)

²⁶⁷ (Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* 114)

²⁶⁸ (J. M. Dave)

like a greedy person constantly thinking about money or like a lustful person thinking about his beloved:

If a devotee has ‘merged’ into his *īṣṭadeva*, he would never develop affection for anything else except his *īṣṭadeva*. In fact, he would continuously think of him. If he were forced to live without his *īṣṭadeva*, he would live life in days of deep misery, but in no way would he be happy.²⁶⁹

Becoming one thereby entails acquiring profound attachment to and complete absorption in Akṣara.

2.8.2. Enjoying Bliss of Parabrahman

Akṣarabrahman as the servant in the abode of Parabrahman, remains immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman. The *ātman*, upon realisation, also enjoys this supreme bliss of Parabrahman with Akṣarabrahman. This is stated to be depicted in the famous lines of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, “brahmavidāpnoti param | tadeṣā'bhyuktā | satyaṁ jñānāmanantaṁ brahma | yo veda nihitaṁ guhāyāṁ parame vyoman | so'snute sarvān kāmān saha | brahmaṇā vipaściteti” (2.1.1). The aphorism “brahmavid āpnoti param”²⁷⁰ is recognised as the ultimate fruit. Here, the term ‘brahmavid’ is interpreted by Sadhu Bhadreshdas as “the knower of Akṣarabrahman,” that is, the Akṣarabrahma-jñāni or one who has realised oneness with Akṣarabrahman.²⁷¹

He argues against reading it as “the knower of Highest Being” as the sentence conveys a progression towards something higher (*param*). Accordingly, Brahman and the Supreme are distinct entities.²⁷² Through such a specification, Sadhu Bhadreshdas seems to be responding to the Advaitin tradition. The latter accepts the attributeless Brahman as the sole ontological entity. Thereby, in the above statement, they specify:

²⁶⁹ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā II.38)

²⁷⁰ “The knower of Brahman attains the supreme” (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)

²⁷¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 73–74)

²⁷² (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 74)

[B]rahman is omnipresent, the Atman of all. Therefore, Brahman cannot be attained because attaining is to be of one by another.²⁷³

Since this statement mentions an attainment, the Advaitins interpret it as reaching Brahman through knowledge:

Therefore, it is right that Brahman should be reached by one who had not reached Brahman by the reason of his (previous) ignorance.²⁷⁴

Such an explanation is dismissed in the *Sudhā*. Moreover, Sadhu Bhadreshdas observes that the term ‘param’ comes after ‘brahmaivid,’ suggesting two different entities.²⁷⁵

The verse of the *Upaniṣad* further describes Brahman as *satyam* (truth), *jñānam* (knowledge) and *anantam* (eternal). It is described as dwelling in the cavity of the heart (*nihitam guhāyām*) and the supreme abode (*parame vyoman*). Coherent with the understanding of the first part of this statement, Sadhu Bhadreshdas accepts Brahman here as Akṣarabrahman.²⁷⁶ Thereby, that dwelling in the cavity of the heart is understood as the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman, while that in the supreme abode as the servant form of Akṣarabrahman.

Thus, the realisation of the nature and form of Akṣarabrahman yields fulfilment of all desirable objects, “sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipāściteti.” This fulfilment is explained as an experience of the bliss of Paramātmā.²⁷⁷ This explanation seems relevant as the verse of the *Upaniṣad* marks the beginning of the *Brahmānanda Valli*, literally, the chapter on the bliss of Brahman. This mantra, thus, underlines the ultimate bliss of Parabrahman, experienced along with Akṣarabrahman, upon the realisation of Akṣarabrahman.

The experience of enjoying Parabrahman’s bliss by the released *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman in the supreme abode is also described in the statement “ṛtaṁ pibantau sukr̥tasya loke guhām praviṣṭau parame parārdhe.”²⁷⁸ It describes the presence of two enjoyers in the “sukr̥tasya loke.” Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains the term ‘sukr̥tasya loke’ as the place attained as a result of good deeds. This place is described as the greatest and the most supreme (*parama*

²⁷³ (S. Shastri, *The Aitareya & Taittiriya Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 126)

²⁷⁴ (S. Shastri, *The Aitareya & Taittiriya Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 127)

²⁷⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 74)

²⁷⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 74)

²⁷⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 74)

²⁷⁸ (Ka. Up. 3.1)

parārdha). Accordingly, Sadhu Bhadresdhas identifies this supreme place as the ultimate abode Akṣaradhāman. Other commentators, like Ramanuja, identify the location as the cavity of the heart in the physical body. He explains ‘sukṛtasya loke’ as the place where good deeds are performed (*sukṛtasādhye loke*), and the adjectives ‘parame parārdhe’ as denoting a supreme *ākāśa* within the heart. However, Sadhu Bhadresdhas argues against any such reading by pointing to the preceding mantra that states, “ka itthā veda yatra saḥ.”²⁷⁹ Here, the term ‘yatra’ is identified as denoting the place or abode where Parabrahman eternally resides.²⁸⁰ Consequently, the succeeding mantra 3.1 also states this supreme abode Akṣaradhāman.

The mantra further describes the presence of two enjoyers in this supreme place. Ramanuja identifies these two enjoyers as the individual *ātman* and Paramātman. Since he assumes the supreme place as the cavity of the heart, the act of enjoying is explained as the enjoyment of fruits of one’s actions. However, this would raise the difficulty of the Paramātman also enjoying the fruits of the *ātman*. Ramanuja clarifies this difficulty by introducing the relation of the inspirer (*prayojaka*) and the inspired (*prayojya*). The Paramātman is the *prayojaka* who inspires the *ātman*, that is, the *prayojya*, to perform actions and enjoy its fruits. Even while Paramātman is the inspirer, his description as the enjoyer is further specified through the *chatri nyāya*. According to this *nyāya*, when a group of people are going of which only a few carry umbrellas, from a distance, it appears as if all are carrying umbrellas. Likewise, the act of enjoyment of fruits is applied to Paramātman due to its proximity with the *jīvātman*.²⁸¹ Shankar, who identifies the two enjoyers as the attainer and attained, also uses the support of *chatri nyāya* to convince that only one of the two enjoys.²⁸²

The *Sudhā* clearly denies any such figurative meaning of this *Upaniṣadic* statement and firmly disapproves of the relation of *prayojaka* and *prayojya* between the two enjoyers.²⁸³ It identifies the two enjoyers as the released *ātman* and the Akṣarabrahman, who enjoy the bliss of Parabrahman in the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman. Upon departing from the mortal body, the released *ātman*, like the servant form of Akṣarabrahman, experiences the supreme bliss of Parabrahman. This implies that the released *ātman* acquires a divine body like

²⁷⁹ “How can one know the place where the Paramātman resides [without the Akṣarabrahman Guru]?” (Ka. Up. 2.25)

²⁸⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 52–53)

²⁸¹ (H. Apte 71)

²⁸² (S. Shastri, *The Katha and Prasna Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 47–48)

²⁸³ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 52)

Akṣarabrahman that can experience this divine bliss. The released *ātman*, even when on earth, enjoys the same divine bliss of Parabrahman with the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman in the cavity of the heart (*guhya*).

Even in this state of liberation, the released *ātman* remains ontologically distinct from Akṣarabrahman. This is shown through the same mantra, which then compares the two enjoyers to light and darkness (*chāyātapa*). Shankar and Ramanuja explain this illustration as highlighting the ignorance of the individual *ātman* and the all-compassing knowledge of Paramātmā.²⁸⁴ Sadhu Bhadresdhas, on the other hand, denies this understanding as the released *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman are beyond ignorance. He instead explains the significance of this illustration in underling the essential distinction between the released *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman.²⁸⁵ Unlike the eternally pure and divine Akṣarabrahman, the released *ātman* has attained freedom from the aversions of *māyā*. Thus, they remain essentially different, just as light and darkness.

In this way, the servant form of Akṣarabrahman and the released *ātman* experience the bliss of Parabrahman but ever remain ontologically distinct. Akṣarabrahman ever remains superior to the released *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman*.

2.8.3. Servant in Service of Creation

The *Sudhā* explains that while being in the service of Parabrahman in Akṣaradhāman, one fundamental service performed by Akṣarabrahman is of creation. The process of creation or the protological process as Swami Paramtattvadas calls it,²⁸⁶ as explained in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, is rooted in not one but two fundamental entities. The process is initiated by the independent will of the Highest Being, Parabrahman. The Parabrahman then is said to merely glance at the servant form of Akṣarabrahman with the purpose of creation. Consequently, Akṣarabrahman, on intuitively understanding the will of Parabrahman, inspires one of the countless released *ātmā* to engage in the process of creation along with *mūla-*

²⁸⁴ (S. Shastri, *The Katha and Prasna Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 48; H. Apte 70–71)

²⁸⁵ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 122)

²⁸⁶ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 262)

prakṛti.²⁸⁷ Sadhu Bhadreshdas remarks that owing to this service of Akṣarabrahman, it is also explained as the cause of all creation alongside Parabrahman. He composes:

*Sisṛkṣuḥ sahaṇānandaḥ prathamatastadīkṣate |
Tadapi muktavṛndam ca hyevaṁ tat sṛṣṭikāraṇam ||*²⁸⁸

As discussed earlier, Parabrahman, for the author, is his beloved deity (*īṣṭadeva*), Sahajanand Swami. Thus, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta attributes both Akṣarabrahman and Puruṣottama Sahajanand Swami as the root of creation. However, the former is ever dependent and subordinate to the latter. Unlike other Vedānta Schools, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta acclaims great importance and role of the choicest devotee in its ontology, cosmology and even soteriology.

2.9. Akṣarabrahman Guru

Another *vyatireka* form of Akṣarabrahman is that of the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Sadhu Bhadreshdas, highlighting the importance of this form, states it as the only form of Akṣarabrahman that is accessible to the individual *ātman* on earth. Akṣarabrahman is not only eternally present in the Akṣaradhāman in service of Parabrahman but also remains his service and worship before all on earth in a human-like form. His life and teachings offer an ideal to all aspirants enabling the benefit of personal association and connection. More importantly, Parabrahman, as per his own will, continues to manifest on earth through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, the Guru grants the supreme bliss of Parabrahman; the bliss of being in the presence of Parabrahman. This section elucidates the nature and form of the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the importance of his association and his role in one's path to liberation.

2.9.1. Manifestation on Earth

One may question the manifestation of the eternal ontological entity Akṣarabrahman on earth. It can be objected that while the *Upaniṣads* clearly state the all-pervasive nature of (Akṣara)Brahman and the presence of a divine abode, they do not seem to state its presence

²⁸⁷ (Vac. Gaḍhaḍā I. 12, 41, 51; Gaḍhaḍā II. 31) (See Chapter 4 for detail)

²⁸⁸ “Sahajanand, with the wish for creation, looks at Akṣarabrahman. Akṣarabrahman then glances at the released ātman—in this way, Paramātman Sahajanand is the cause of all creation.” (*Kārikā* 62)

on earth. The *Sudhā* addresses this by highlighting the mantra 2.2.1 of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* that affirms all the four forms of Akṣarabrahman, including his manifestation on earth. The mantra begins with the term ‘āviḥ,’ which, unlike Shankar and Ramanuja who understand it as bright or self-luminous,²⁸⁹ is explained as “manifest,” suggesting a human-like form. In his commentary, Sadhu Bhadreshdas specifies that ‘āviḥ’ signifies the abode form, the servant form in this abode and the Guru form of Akṣarabrahman on earth.²⁹⁰ Akṣarabrahman, in all these three forms, possesses a human-shaped form. The mantra further states the Akṣarabrahman as dwelling in the cavity of the heart (*guhācara*). This signifies the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman.

The second half of the mantra states Akṣarabrahman as moving (*ejat*), breathing (*prāṇat*) and blinking (*nimiṣat*). Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that these actions also describe the various forms of Akṣarabrahman. As discussed earlier, these actions are attributed to the servant form of Akṣarabrahman in the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman. Additionally, they are also shown to denote Akṣarabrahman’s manifestation on earth.²⁹¹ Akṣarabrahman as moving, breathing and blinking implies possessing other human-like organs and features. The Akṣarabrahman on earth manifests with a human-like form, with the purpose of granting liberation to countless *jīvas* and *īśvaras*. He is described as the supreme (*variṣṭham*) among all beings, thus worthy of taking refuge.

In this way, this *Upaniṣad* affirms Akṣarabrahman’s manifestation on earth, the supremacy and worthiness of his attainment. This supremacy of the Akṣarabrahman Guru is discussed in detail in the following section.

2.9.2. The Qualities of Akṣarabrahman Guru

The Supreme Being Parabrahman is stated to remain accessible to all *jīvātman* and *īśvarātman* through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Akṣarabrahman alone is deemed as worthy of upholding Parabrahman with all his extraordinary powers:

Yathā brahmagurau vāsaḥ svāminārāyaṇaprabhoḥ |

²⁸⁹ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara’s Commentary* 138; S. M. S. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* 124)

²⁹⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 267)

²⁹¹ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 269)

Here, the Akṣarabrahman Guru is described as the most appropriate “pātra” (vessel) for upholding the form of God. The worthiness of such a Guru is presented by elucidating the nature of the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The *Sudhā* characterises the Akṣarabrahman Guru through the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*. Ṛṣi Aṅgiras distinguishes between the higher (*parā*) and the lower (*aparā*) knowledge. While discussing the highest knowledge, he showcases the medium for acquiring and realising this knowledge in “tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchetsamitpāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭham.”²⁹³

This statement is closely examined word by word. The term ‘sa’ is shown to denote the one who aspires to realise the highest knowledge; ‘tadvijñānārtham gurumevābhigacched’—for this purpose a Guru must be approached; ‘samitpāṇiḥ’—the Guru must be approached in a ceremonious manner such as offering a herb; ‘śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭham’—only a Guru who has these qualities must be approached.²⁹⁴ Though this statement is understood in line with other commentators, the explanation of “śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭham” slightly differs.

Many commentators identify only two qualifiers, “śrotriyaṁ” and “brahmaniṣṭham.”²⁹⁵ Sadhu Bhadreshdas, however, argues that they are three separate qualifiers, “śrotriyaṁ,” “brahma,” and “niṣṭham.” The term ‘śrotriyaṁ’ is understood as being well versed in the *Vedas*. This signifies that the Guru has realised the true meaning of the scriptures and reveals the same through his deeds and discourses. The term ‘brahma’ asserts that the Guru is Akṣarabrahman himself, and the term ‘niṣṭham’ is read as being immersed in Parabrahman.

Through this understanding, Sadhu Bhadreshdas makes a strong assertion of not only the nature of the Guru but also his identity. Echoing the same, Swami Paramtattvadas notes:

[B]hadreshdas provides the crucial distinction here that the Guru is one not just ‘established in Brahman’ {brahmaṇi niṣṭhaḥ} but ‘the very form of Brahman’

²⁹² “Bhagwan Swaminarayan resides within the Akṣarabrahman Guru. No one else will ever be a suitable vessel that would behold Parabrahman in the manner of Akṣarabrahman.” (*Kārikā* 69)

²⁹³ (Mu. Up. 1.2.12)

²⁹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 76–77)

²⁹⁵ (S. Shastri, *The Isa, Kena and Mundaka Upanishads and Sri Sankara's Commentary* 121; Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* 679; Swami Sharvananda 24; H. Apte 163)

{brahmasvarūpa eva}. Hence, the correct qualifier for the Guru is ‘brahmasvarūpa,’ the form of Brahman (or Akṣarabrahman).²⁹⁶

This way, the *Sudhā* affirms that the Guru who imparts the highest knowledge is himself Akṣarabrahman. Such a qualifier gives the Guru an ontological status and distinguishes him from other persons. This distinction is valuable as the term ‘guru’ is often used for any person who imparts knowledge in any field of study. This is so as etymologically, the word ‘guru’ denotes one who takes another from darkness or ignorance to light or knowledge. It is thereby used even to refer to those who impart worldly knowledge (*aparā vidyā*). To highlight this contrast, Sadhu Bhadreshdas explains the term ‘guru’ in the *Upaniṣadic* statement 1.2.12 as the Akṣarabrahman Guru who not only dispels deep-rooted ignorance but also grants liberation. He is the living embodiment of the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta.²⁹⁷ The *Sudhā*, in fact, opens the chapter “Akṣarabrahmadhārā” by invoking the Akṣarabrahman Guru as “brahmākṣaram gurum vande sākṣāt siddhāntarūpiṇam.”²⁹⁸

Further, through this *Upaniṣadic* statement, *Sudhā* put forwards a definition of a true Guru—one who reveals the true meaning of the *Vedas* and is Akṣarabrahman, eternally beyond the three *guṇas* of *māyā*, and is ever absorbed in the devotion and service of Parabrahman. One who effortlessly practises and lives the highest knowledge or *brahmavidyā*. Claiming these qualities as essential in a Guru, Sadhu Bhadreshdas remarks that the term ‘eva’ (verily or alone) in the *Upaniṣad* statement endorses that the one with all these qualities alone is capable of imparting *brahmavidyā* and leading one towards liberation.²⁹⁹ He alone can rightly be pronounced as the true Guru. Thus, though others imparting worldly knowledge are referred to as ‘gurus,’ the realisation of the highest spiritual knowledge, *brahmavidyā*, can only be possible through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Anyone else teaching other kinds of knowledge or even spiritual knowledge cannot endow its complete realisation. Moreover, unlike the other teachers, the actions, purpose, and all other aspects of the Akṣarabrahman are absolutely pure and divine.

In fact, even those who have attained enlightenment (*jīvana-mukti*) are also ruled out as true Gurus. Though they have realised the highest knowledge (*brahmavidyā*), they are not capable

²⁹⁶ (Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* 206)

²⁹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 76–77)

²⁹⁸ “I bow to the Akṣarabrahman Guru, who is the manifest form of the Siddhānta.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 16)

²⁹⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 77)

of granting liberation to others. Moreover, they were once within the realm of *māyā*, while Akṣarabrahman is ever untouched by *māyā* (*nitya mukta*). The Akṣarabrahman Guru's extraordinary disposition is encapsulated as:

Prayojanam nimittādi rītiśca kālanirṇayaḥ |
*Sahajānandavajjñeyam nityanirmāyikabrahmaṇaḥ ||*³⁰⁰

Though the Akṣarabrahman Guru possesses a material (*māyika*) body, his actions and purposes are believed to be as divine (*amāyika*) as those of Parabrahman himself. Only Such a Guru, along with Parabrahman, are considered worthy of meditation. As discussed earlier, the mantra “Om” as defined in the fifth chapter of the *Praśna Upaniṣad* entails both Parabrahman (higher Brahman—“para”) and Akṣarabrahman (lower Brahman—“apara”).³⁰¹ In the commentary on *Praśna Upaniṣad*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas notes that this *Upaniṣadic* teaching throws light on the significance of the meditation and worship of Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such a Guru ever upholds the form of Paramātman; thus, worship of the Guru is equivalent to the worship of Paramātman himself.³⁰² He cites the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, “yasya deve parā bhaktiḥ yathā deve tathā gurau,”³⁰³ which instructs on offering supreme devotion to the Guru as one would offer to Parabrahman. Only such devotion and reverence for the Guru enables one to realise the spiritual teachings and attain ultimate liberation. Thus, the worship and meditation of Akṣarabrahman Guru secure the same result as that of Parabrahman, which suggests that Parabrahman is ever manifest in the Akṣarabrahman Guru.

The similar result acquired upon associating and mediating on the Akṣarabrahman Guru and Parabrahman is also showcased through the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, “mahataḥ paraṁ dhruvaṁ nicāyā tad mṛtyumukhāt pramucyate.”³⁰⁴ Here, Sadhu Bhadreshdas understands the determiner ‘tad’ (that), which depicts that lying beyond “mahat” or the individual *ātman*, as denoting both Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This denotation is based on the earlier mantra of the same *Upaniṣad*, which proclaims the *avyakta* or Akṣarabrahman and *puruṣa* or Parabrahman as superior to *mahat* or the individual *ātman*. The statement further mentions

³⁰⁰ “[Akṣarabrahman’s] purpose, reason, and time for manifesting on earth, the various actions performed on earth—all are eternally pure and divine just like those of Parabrahman Sahajanand.” (*Kārikā* 75)

³⁰¹ (Pr. Up. 5.2)

³⁰² (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 216)

³⁰³ “Who has supreme love for Paramātman, of the Guru like that of the Paramātman.” (Sve. Up. 6.23)

³⁰⁴ “Knowing that which is superior to mahat one is released from the jaws of death.” (Ka. Up. 3.15)

the fruit of mediating and realising Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as a release from the “jaws of death,” that is, attaining ultimate liberation.

Thus, due to the presence of such qualities as affirmed in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, the Akṣarabrahman Guru alone is considered as the suitable vessel to uphold Parabrahman and leads others to liberation. As ever upholding Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman Guru is worthy of mediation and realisation. Such characterisation identifies the Akṣarabrahman Guru as the true Guru, thereby distinguishing him from other teachers.

2.9.3. The Bridge

Akṣarabrahman, as an entity, is understood as the ideal and the guide that facilitates one to attain the ultimate destination. The role of the choicest devotee as the ideal and mediator between the individual *ātman* and the Supreme Being is presented in certain schools of the Vedānta tradition. For instance, Ramanuja’s surrender to Śrī before that to Nārāyaṇa in the *Śaraṇāgati Gadyam* represents her role as the mediator (*puruṣakāra*). Likewise, Rādhā’s bond with Kṛṣṇa, as explained in the Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava sampradāya, is a relationship harbouring the *madhura rasa*:

Madhura rasa can only be developed if one understands Radha’s single-minded devotion to the Absolute Being and thereby yearn for Krishna in the same way as her heart ached for him.³⁰⁵

In the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, on the other hand, the continued presence of the Akṣarabrahman Guru on earth makes this purpose of guidance more profound and significant. Moreover, the Akṣarabrahman Guru not only personally guides the aspirant but, as the eternally upholding Parabrahman, also grants liberation.

The *Sudhā* affirms the role of the Akṣarabrahman Guru as the mediator through the *Upaniṣadic* analogy of a bridge. Sadhu Bhadreshdas alludes to the statement of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, “yaḥ seturījānānāmakṣaram brahma yatparam.”³⁰⁶ As this sentence begins with the term ‘yaḥ’ (that), it implies a connection with the earlier verse Ka. Up. 3.1 that mentions the

³⁰⁵ (Gadhia 168)

³⁰⁶ “That Akṣarabrahman is a bridge for those who wish to cross the ocean of this saṁsāra.” (Ka. Up. 3.2)

two enjoyers.³⁰⁷ Sadhu Bhadresdhas identifies these two enjoyers as the individual *ātman* and Akṣarabrahman—both enjoy the bliss of Parabrahman in the divine abode.³⁰⁸ Accordingly, in the following mantra 3.2, the term ‘yaḥ’ is taken in reference to Akṣarabrahman.

Further, a bridge signifies a medium through which one can reach the other shore. The other shore here is the “param” (supreme), which denotes the supreme abode of Parabrahman. The medium through which the individual *ātman* can attain Parabrahman and his supreme abode is the Guru form of Akṣarabrahman. The bridge, thus, signifies the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Just as one becomes relaxed and stress-free upon embarking on a bridge, one gains a sense of assuredness and contentment upon associating with the Akṣarabrahman Guru.³⁰⁹ Such a Guru offers constant support and guidance, alleviates suffering through spiritual understanding and reinforces one’s purpose of attaining supreme bliss of Parabrahman.

Sadhu Bhadresdhas understands the term ‘akṣaram’ here again as a noun and not as an adjective of the Supreme. On the other hand, Shankar identifies the bridge as the immortal Brahman in both its manifested and unmanifested state. The *Sudhā* warns against reading the term ‘setu’ as the Supreme Being. It argues that such a reading is not consistent with the sequence of the teachings presented in the *Upaniṣad*. The earlier mantras describe Akṣarabrahman as the supreme abode through the statements “etad dhyevākṣaram brahma.”³¹⁰ This description is also continued in 3.1, which brings to light other virtues of Akṣarabrahman. Further, the *Sudhā* insists that the mantra 3.1, through the term ‘pāram,’ depicts attaining a particular place or abode. This is supported by drawing attention to another mantra, “so’dhvanaḥ pāram āpnoti tadviṣṇoḥ paramaṁ padam.”³¹¹ Here, the term ‘pāram’ is evidently used in reference to one overcoming the cycles of transmigration and attaining the *padam* or abode of Parabrahman.

Thus, by explaining the bridge as the Akṣarabrahman Guru, the *Sudhā* makes a distinction between “that which is reached” and “that which is the means for reaching it.” This distinction is blurred not just in Shankar’s understanding but also in Ramanuja, who takes both means and the end as the highest Brahman.

³⁰⁷ “ṛtaṁ pibantau sukr̥tasya loke guhāṁ praviṣṭau parame parārdhe.” (“The two enjoyers enjoy the bliss of Paramātmā in the divine abode and also reside in the cavity of the heart.”) (Ka. Up. 3.1)

³⁰⁸ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 51)

³⁰⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Īśadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 123–24)

³¹⁰ “That [abode] is verily Akṣarabrahman.” (Ka. Up. 2.16)

³¹¹ “He who crosses the path of the saṁsāra attains the highest place of Viṣṇu (the all-pervading Paramātmā Sahajanand).” (Ka. Up. 3.9)

[Brahman is] characterised as all-knowing, the bridge of immortality and the Self of all.³¹²

This highlights an interesting aspect that though Śrī is revered as the ideal devotee and mediator, she is not part of the Vaiṣṇava metaphysics. In contrast, the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana offers such a connection:

[H]e [Swaminarayan] is the first to draw a connection between the ideal devotee and a distinct metaphysical and ontological being—between the guru and Akṣarabrahman.³¹³

Moreover, Akṣarabrahman as a mediator is accessible in-person to all individual *ātman* as the legacy of the Akṣarabrahman Gurus remains incessant. This is specified by stating the presence of more than one Akṣarabrahman Guru at a particular time. This at once puts into question the singularity of Akṣarabrahman as an entity.

Mindful of the possibility of such reservations, Sadhu Bhadreshdas clarifies that the presence of many Akṣarabrahman Gurus does not contradict its essential singularity. There is no essential difference between their divinity and virtues, but only in their outer form.³¹⁴ To elaborate, each Guru encompasses the same identity of being the entity Akṣarabrahman and upholding the form of Parabrahman. Accordingly, each Guru possesses countless auspicious virtues like that of being omniscient, eternally untouched by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* etc., remains engaged in the service of *sampradāya* while ever immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman. The difference thus is not of identity but only of their external appearance. Despite the presence of more than one Akṣarabrahman Guru at a time, there is only one officially recognised spiritual head of *sampradāya*, who then, as per his will, declares the other Akṣarabrahman Guru as his spiritual successor. Thus, only one Akṣarabrahman Guru reveals his identity at a time, who then, as per his will, reveals the identity of the other Akṣarabrahman Guru.

In this way, Sadhu Bhadreshdas once again affirms the essential singularity of Akṣarabrahman. Despite the four different functions performed by Akṣarabrahman and the presence of more than one Akṣarabrahman Guru at a time, it is one distinct ontological entity.

³¹² (Thibaut 299)

³¹³ (Gadhia 169)

³¹⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 84–85)

There is no hierarchy in these forms as in each form Akṣarabrahman is eternally pure, transcending the aversions of *māyā*.

2.9.4. Divine Association

Akṣarabrahman is advocated as an essential and crucial medium for attaining liberation. One is thereby required to associate and attach oneself to the Akṣarabrahman Guru. For this reason, Sadhu Bhadreshdas warns against reading the term ‘abhigacched’ as found in “tadvijñānārthaṁ sa gurumevābhigacchetsamītpāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ brahma niṣṭhaṁ”³¹⁵ as merely to approach a spiritual Guru.

The meaning is explained to be much more profound as merely approaching the Guru will not lead to sincere attachment. Through the references of the *Gītā*, the ‘abhigacched’ is shown to allude to qualities of humility, service, hunger for knowledge, devotion, and conviction in the Guru.³¹⁶ Absolute refuge encompassing these qualities are necessary for optimum engagement and realisation of the Akṣarabrahman Guru and his teachings. Merely approaching the Guru can be seen as the first step in the journey to liberation. Strengthening one’s attachment to the Guru through servitude, conviction, and devotion, one develops detachment towards the material world and experiences the supreme bliss of Parabrahman.

2.10. Single Entity

While performing different functions through these four forms, the entity Akṣarabrahman remains a single ontological entity. One may question its singularity and claim Akṣarabrahman, like *jīvas*, to be many in number. Raising this potential objection, the *Sudhā* responds by specifying that a difference in functions does not necessarily entail a difference in the entity.³¹⁷ Akṣarabrahman, through its immense divinity and power, performs diverse functions simultaneously, such as of being all-pervasive while manifesting on earth in a human-shaped form. Akṣarabrahman’s essential singularity whilst engaging in diverse functions is supported by the *Upaniṣadic* statement, “āviḥ saṁnihitaṁ guhācarannāma mahatpadamatraitat samarpitam ejatprāṇanimiṣacca yadetajjānatha sad asad vareṇyaṁ

³¹⁵ “For realising that ceremoniously approach the Akṣarabrahman Guru who reveals the true meaning of scriptures, is a form of Akṣarabrahman and immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman.” (Mu. Up. 1.2.12)

³¹⁶ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 77)

³¹⁷ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 80–81)

param vijñānādyadvaiṣṭham prajānām.”³¹⁸ As discussed earlier, Sadhu Bhadresdhas identifies all the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in this statement. For instance, the term ‘avih’ (manifest) is explained to denote the human-like forms of Akṣaradhāman, the servant form of Akṣarabrahman in this abode, and the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Likewise, in “mahatpadamatraitat samarpitam,” the supreme abode Akṣaradhāman (*mahat padam*) is itself (*etat*) here (*atra*) residing in service of Parabrahman (*samarpitam*).³¹⁹ These words thus showcase that the same Akṣarabrahman, in its abode form, is serving Parabrahman in this abode. While performing two different functions, Akṣarabrahman remains a single ontological entity. Further, the actions of “ejatprāṇannimiṣacca” are attributed to both, the servant form of Akṣarabrahman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru on earth who is superior (*variṣṭham*) to all beings.

In this way, this *Upaniṣadic* statement reveals the “sad” or the human-like form of Akṣarabrahman as the Akṣaradhāman, the servant form in this Akṣaradhāman and the Akṣarabrahman Guru; and the “asad” or the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman that is all-pervasive and resides in all beings in the cavity of the heart (*guhāyam*).³²⁰ In all these forms, whether “sad” or “asad,” Akṣarabrahman is to be known as (*jānatha*) a single ontological entity.

2.11. Relation between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

Akṣarabrahman, as the residence, servant and bridge to Parabrahman, is an entity that is ever subordinate to the supreme entity, Parabrahman. This relation is proclaimed strongly in:

Setunmānādihetubhyo bhinno parā'kṣarāddhariḥ |
*Svarūpaiśca svabhāvaiśca guṇaiśvaryāditastathā ||*³²¹

Sadhu Bhadresdhas stresses that Parabrahman is superior in every respect—form and nature. His emphasis on Parabrahman’s superiority is to rule out any sense of equivalence between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman as both ever transcend *māyā*. Akṣarabrahman is described

³¹⁸ “That [Akṣarabrahman] is manifest, resides within the heart, is the great abode which also serves in this abode. It moves, breathes, and blinks. Due to its supreme knowledge, it is superior to all beings. This manifest and unmanifest forms should be known as Akṣarabrahman. (Mu. Up. 2.2.1)

³¹⁹ (Bhadreshdas, *Īsadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 268–69)

³²⁰ (Bhadreshdas, *Īsadyaṣṭopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam* 269)

³²¹ “The relation of bridge and the destination and on various other grounds, Hari is superior and distinct from Akṣarabrahman. Superior and distinct in every way—in form, disposition, virtues, power.” (*Kārikā* 39)

as the source of all creation, the support and inspirer of all beings. Such a description essentially showcases the supremacy of Akṣarabrahman over all other entities, *jīva*, *īśvara* and *māyā*. But Akṣarabrahman is always dependent on Parabrahman. Thus, the relationship between the two is that of the worshipper (*upāsaka*) and the worshipped (*upāsya*):

Upāsyopāsakatvaṁ syāt sambandho dāsabhāvataḥ |
*Param brahma sadopāsyam akṣaram tadupāsakam ||*³²²

Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman remain ontologically distinct, and thereby any relation type that coalesces this distinction is rejected.

2.11.1. Snake and Its Coil

A metaphor of the snake and its coil is used to describe a relation type of difference and non-difference. The *Sudhā* responds to this relationship type while discussing the relation between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. This metaphor of the snake and its coil is cited in the *Brahma-Sūtra*, “ubhayavyapadeśāttvahiṇuṇḍavat.”³²³ The metaphor states that upon perceiving a coiled snake, some may give precedence to its shape and refer to it as a coil-shaped snake, while some may refer to it as a snake twisted in a coil shape. Both these cases refer to the same snake. Though the shape of the snake can be mentioned separately, it is essentially non-different from the snake.

One may attribute this relationship type to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. One may claim that the relation of Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman is of the difference and non-difference like that of the snake and its shape. While some may use the term 'Akṣarabrahman,' others may use the term 'Parabrahman.' But both cases may refer to the same entity Brahman. Though the terms used are different, referring to the different functions performed, they may be essentially non-different from the entity Brahman. Sadhu Bhadreshdas dismisses this relationship type between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman on account of the eternal ontological distinction between the two. Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman are essentially separate entities at all times. Moreover, the shape of the snake changes as it unfolds from a coil to an extended posture. In contrast, Akṣarabrahman is described as unchanging, not

³²² “The relation is of the worshipped and the one who worships with deep humility; Parabrahman is eternally the worshipped, and Akṣarabrahman is eternally the worshipper.” (*Kārikā* 36)

³²³ “On the account of the two-fold designation of the snake and its coils” (BS. 3.2.26)

undergoing any modification or change.³²⁴ Hence, this relationship category is identified as inappropriate and insufficient as it denotes identity and only an ephemeral difference.

2.11.2. Effulgence and Its Substratum

Another type of relationship is described through the metaphor of light and its effulgence. This metaphor is also cited in the *Brahma-Sūtra*, “prakāśāśrayavadvā tejjastvāt.”³²⁵ Unlike the snake and its changing shape, this relation type is of a substance and its attribute illustrated through the light and its rays. Here, the rays, being the attribute of light, are essentially rooted in the light. Though a luminous body and its effulgence are different as the effulgence is more pervasive than the body, the effulgence cannot be separated from its substratum.

This relationship type may be attributed to Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman, as Akṣarabrahman is affirmed as “jyotiḥ” (effulgence) in *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*.³²⁶ In this respect, Akṣarabrahman may be explained as the effulgence that is essentially rooted in Parabrahman. However, Sadhu Bhadreshdas also dismisses this relationship type between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman. He argues that the succeeding mantra of the same *Upaniṣad* states that the light of Akṣarabrahman illumines everything.³²⁷ Accordingly, Akṣarabrahman is described as the light that has the quality of luminosity. In this way, Akṣarabrahman is showcased as a distinct entity with attributes and, thus, cannot be reduced to an attribute of Parabrahman.

2.11.3. Relation

Sadhu Bhadreshdas does not apply these relation types to explain the relationship between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman but illustrates it mainly through *Upaniṣadic* references.

³²⁴ (Bhadreshdas, *Svāminārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 41–42)

³²⁵ “Or on the account of light and its substratum.” (BS. 3.2.27)

³²⁶ “jyotiṣaṁ jyotiḥ.” (“The light of all lights.”) (Mu. Up. 2.2.9)

³²⁷ “sarvaṁ tasya bhāśa sarvamidam vibhāti.” (“All shines by his light.”) (Mu. Up. 2.2.10)

Akṣarabrahman	Parabrahman	<i>Upaniṣadic</i> reference
Pervaded	Pervasive	<p>Ch. Up. 8.1.1,</p> <p>Br. Up. 4.4.22</p> <p>Within the cavity of the heart lies the ‘daharākāśa’ or ‘antarhṛdākāśa,’ that is, <i>Cidākāśa</i> form of Akṣarabrahman, and within resides Parabrahman. Thus, Parabrahman pervades everything, even Akṣarabrahman.</p>
Worshipper	Worshipped	<p>Mu. Up. 1.2.12</p> <p>Akṣarabrahman Guru is described as being “niṣṭham,” that is, ever immersed in the worship of Parabrahman.</p>
Bridge	Destination	<p>Ka. Up. 3.2</p> <p>Akṣarabrahman Guru is the “setu,” knowing and associating with him, enables to overcome the ocean of birth and death, and attain Parabrahman.</p>
Servant	Master	<p>Mu. Up. 2.2.1</p> <p>Akṣarabrahman is “samarpit” dedicatedly serving Parabrahman in the divine abode, Akṣaradhāman.</p>
Lower	Higher	<p>Pr. Up. 5.2</p> <p>The word ‘Om’ entails both the higher (<i>para</i>) Brahman and the lower (<i>apara</i>) Brahman, a meditation on either of them bears the same</p>

		fruit of liberation.
--	--	----------------------

Table 2.11-1 Relation between Akṣarabrahman and Parabrahman

In this way, Akṣarabrahman, in all its forms, is established as a separate ontological entity, ever serving and subordinate to Parabrahman. His devotion and servitude is an exemplar for other beings, enabling them towards the bliss of the supreme Parabrahman. Thus, though understanding the entity Akṣara is described as “puzzling,” Sadhu Bhadreshdas unravels the apparent bewilderment surrounding it through the readings and explanation from the *Prasthānatrayī*, which are based on the teachings of *Vacanāmṛta*.

2.12. Akṣarabrahman in All *Upaniṣads*

The chapter “Akṣarabrahmadhārā” ends with a collection of *kārikās* that highlight the distinctive features of the entity Akṣarabrahman as revealed in the *Prasthānacatuṣṭaya*, that is the principal *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma-Sūtra*, the *Gītā* and the *Vacanāmṛta*. Through the medium of *kārikās*, Sadhu Bhadreshdas pans across each of these authoritative texts, in a very concise manner, without compromising on the depth and extent of their content. The title given is “Prasthānacatuṣṭaye’kṣarbrahmaghoṣaḥ;” the term ‘ghoṣa’ here refers not just to a proclamation but can also be read as a victory cry since the section forms the concluding portion that logically expounds the entity Akṣarabrahman.

While accounting the presence of Akṣarabrahman in the *Upaniṣads*, each *Upaniṣad* from *Īśāvāsya* to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* is enumerated. This enumeration explicitly highlights the assertion of Akṣarabrahman, its nature and form, in all the principal *Upaniṣads*. Each *kārikā* quotes the exact words from the *Upaniṣad*, and in many cases, also specifies the form of Akṣarabrahman that is embedded within those words. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, is claimed to reveal all four forms of Akṣarabrahman. The first *muṇḍaka* affirms its human-like form, implying the ideal servant in Akṣaradhāman and the Guru on earth. The second *muṇḍaka* focuses on the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman as it described as pervading all directions. The third *muṇḍaka* affirms the supremacy of Brahmadhāman or Akṣaradhāman, that is, the abode form of Akṣarabrahman. Hence, the *kārikās* on the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* ends

with “muṇḍakam maṇḍitam purṇamakṣarabrahmaguṇjanaiḥ,”³²⁸ noting that every chapter of *Upaniṣad* contributes to shaping the complete form of Akṣarabrahman.

Interestingly, this section also mentions the *Śvetāśvetara Upaniṣad*. Though it is not part of the first ten principal *Upaniṣads*, it is of great significance to the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta as it upholds the importance of *bhakti* to the Guru, which this *Upaniṣad* lucidly proclaims as being equivalent and reaping the same benefits as the *bhakti* of God. This informs the understanding of the continued manifestation of Parabrahman through the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Thus, the importance of Akṣarabrahman is shown to prevail not only in the ten principal *Upaniṣads* but even beyond, in other *Upaniṣads*.

Similarly, each of the eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and four *adhyāyas* of the *Brahma-Sūtra* is enumerated as revealing the various aspects of Akṣarabrahman. This succinct, yet comprehensive catalogue again shows the paramount importance of Akṣarabrahman in the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta. Since understanding this entity is critical for the *ātman* to attain Parabrahman, these *kārikās* shed light on the true form of Akṣarabrahman.

2.13. Summary

In the Akṣara-Puruṣottama Siddhānta, the term 'akṣara,' denoting that which is imperishable and pervasive, is a distinct ontological entity. It is synonymous with the term 'brahman,' the immensely vast, and 'avyakta,' the unmanifest. The term 'akṣara' is repeatedly used in the several *Upaniṣads*. In each of these cases, Sadhu Bhadreshdas identifies 'akṣara' as a noun, denoting the entity Akṣarabrahman. This understanding differs from other commentators who, in many cases, explain it is as an adjective for the Supreme Being.

The exegetical consistency maintained in understanding 'akṣara,' 'brahman' and 'avyakta' as Akṣarabrahman is showcased through illustrations from the *Muṇḍaka*, *Praśna* and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads*, respectively. In the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, Shankar and Ramanuja identify the term 'akṣara' in the statement "akṣaramadhigamyate"³²⁹ as an adjective of the Supreme Being. But this understanding causes difficulties in explaining the later statement "akṣarāt parataḥ

³²⁸ “The entire *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* resonates with the praise of Akṣarabrahman.” (Bhadreshdas, *Svāmīnārāyaṇasiddhāntasudhā* 88)

³²⁹ “That by which the immortal is known.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.5)

paraḥ,"³³⁰ which indicates the presence of an entity higher than Akṣara. Shankar here is then compelled to identify 'akṣara' as the *prakṛti*, and Ramanuja as *Hiraṇyagarbha*. Such inconsistencies are avoided by reading 'akṣara' as the entity Akṣarabrahman, above which prevails the Supreme Being Parabrahman. This is further consistent with the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*'s statement "avyaktāt puruṣaḥ paraḥ,"³³¹ which is explained as denoting Parabrahman's supremacy over *avyakta* or Akṣarabrahman. These two entities are once again stated in the *Praśna Upaniṣad* as the "para" Brahman and "apara" Brahman, which also brings forth their distinction and the supremacy of Parabrahman over Aparabrahman or Akṣarabrahman.

The *Sudhā*, through such *Upaniṣadic* references, puts forward four forms of Akṣarabrahman. While prevailing as a single ontological entity, Akṣarabrahman is all-pervasive as the *Cidākāśa* form, is the residence of the Supreme Being as Akṣaradhāman, ever dwells in this abode as an ideal servant and manifests on the earth as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Akṣarabrahman as the all-pervading *Cidākāśa* is referred to as its *anvaya* or immanent form, while the remaining three wherein Akṣarabrahman ever possesses a human-like shape, are its *vyatireka* or transcendental form.

The *Cidākāśa* is specified to differ from the elemental ether, which is part of the five gross elements (*pañca bhūta*). *Cidākāśa*, unlike the elemental ether, is eternal and sentient. While ether only pervades all that is created, *Cidākāśa* pervades ether and all that beyond creation. This characterisation of *Cidākāśa* is affirmed through the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. The *Upaniṣad* asserts the presence of *daharākāśa* in the cavity of the heart, and within this *daharākāśa* prevails the Supreme Being Parabrahman. This *daharākāśa* is identified as *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman as the *Upaniṣad* in the following mantras refer to it as 'ātman' implying that it is a sentient entity. Further, this sentient entity is described as the cause of the universe and the realisation of which frees one from the cycles of birth and death. Such a description signifies an all-pervasive eternally pure entity Akṣarabrahman and rules out the explanation of *daharākāśa* as the elemental ether or even the individual *ātman*. Likewise, all those *Upaniṣadic* statements that describe Akṣarabrahman as being formless, and pervading the *ātman* and all creation, are identified as denoting the *Cidākāśa* form of Akṣarabrahman.

³³⁰ "[Puruṣa is] superior to the supreme Akṣara." (Mu. Up. 2.1.2)

³³¹ "The puruṣa is superior to avyakta." (Ka. Up. 3.11)

The *Upaniṣads* also allude to a supreme abode through the terms 'brahmaloka,' 'brahmadhāman,' 'brahmapura,' as the dwelling place of Parabrahman. This supreme abode denotes the abode form of Akṣarabrahman, known as Akṣaradhāman. The terms 'brahmaloka,' 'brahmadhāman' and the like are analysed through the rules of grammar and are showcased as revealing an identity between the two words 'brahman' (Akṣarabrahman) and 'dhāman.' Accordingly, the *dhāman* or abode is itself Akṣarabrahman. This abode is described as eternal, one without a second, ever transcending the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti*, supreme from which there is no return. Being a form of Akṣarabrahman, this *dhāman* is argued as not being made of any spiritual substance like “śuddha sattva.” This supreme abode is immensely vast but not boundless as it ever possesses a human-shaped form. Moreover, being the abode of the supreme Parabrahman itself validates the supremacy of Akṣaradhāman.

Parabrahman eternally dwells in this supreme abode surrounded by countless released *ātman* and is served by his ideal servant Akṣarabrahman. The *ātman* can only attain Akṣaradhāman through the association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru on earth. Developing profound attachment with the manifest Akṣarabrahman Guru, realising his auspicious virtues and selflessly worshipping Parabrahman inevitably secures the attainment of Akṣaradhāman.

Whilst eternally upholding Parabrahman as Akṣaradhāman, Akṣarabrahman ever remains in the service of Parabrahman in this abode. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* asserts this form as being "samarpitam" or dedicatedly in service and by depicting it as moving, blinking and walking, the *Upaniṣad* suggests this form to possess a divine human-like form. In the supreme abode, Akṣarabrahman engages in service and remains immersed in the bliss of Parabrahman. Being the choicest devotee of Parabrahman and eternally near him, he is the ideal for all *ātman*. This is stated in the *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad* as a prayer to behold Parabrahman and remain close to him. Through the words “so aham asmi” ("I am that Akṣarabrahman"), one prays to offer devotion and enjoy the bliss of Parabrahman like Akṣarabrahman. In this form, Akṣarabrahman engages in the process of creation and thereby is also described as the cause of the universe.

The entity Akṣarabrahman is accessible to all *ātman* through his manifestation on earth as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. Such a Guru is characterised in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* as not only manifesting on earth in a human-like form but also encompassing the true meaning of the scriptures (*śotriya*), being the manifest form of Akṣarabrahman and immersed in the service

and bliss of Parabrahman (*nistham*). This understanding of the *Upaniṣadic* mantra greatly differs from Shankar and Ramanuja, who do not accept the entity of Akṣarabrahman and thereby refrain from identifying the “guru” described here as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The *Sudhā*, through the understanding of this mantra, underlines the characterisation and identity of a true Guru. Since the Guru is manifest Akṣarabrahman, he is eternally pure and ever transcends the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. As the *Upaniṣad* further proclaims, only such a Guru can impart and enable the realisation of the highest spiritual knowledge, *brahmavidyā*.

Being ever beyond *māyā* and encompassing such auspicious virtues, Akṣarabrahman Guru is deemed the most suitable vessel for upholding Parabrahman. Parabrahman resides within and through the Akṣarabrahman Guru with all his extraordinary powers. Thus, every action and feature of the Akṣarabrahman is as pure and divine as that of Parabrahman.

The legacy of the Akṣarabrahman Guru continues to preserve and uphold the manifestation of Parabrahman. The manifest Guru is, thus, explained as a "bridge" that personally guides the aspirants towards the bliss of Parabrahman. The *Sudhā*, unlike other commentators, identifies the term ‘setu’ in the *Upaniṣadic* statement "yaḥ seturījānānāmākśaram brahma yatparam"³³² as the Akṣarabrahman Guru. The *Sudhā*, thus, insists on not simply approaching the Guru but creating a profound bond and attachment with him and acquiring his qualities. Such an association is the only "bridge" or medium to attain Parabrahman and his supreme abode Akṣaradhāman.

Encompassing countless auspicious virtues, Akṣarabrahman is identified as ontologically distinct and superior to the entities of *jīva*, *īśvara* and *māyā*. However, the supreme Akṣarabrahman remains not only ontologically distinct but ever subordinate to the ultimate Being Parabrahman. Thus, the relation between the two is not of difference and non-difference but of absolute difference whereby Akṣarabrahman ever worships Parabrahman as a servant, is ever pervaded by Parabrahman remains the medium for his attainment.

The affirmation of the four forms of Akṣarabrahman in the *Upaniṣads* is summarised in the table below:

Form of	Nature	<i>Upaniṣadic</i> References

³³² “That Akṣarabrahman is a bridge for those who wish to cross the ocean of this saṃsāra.” (Ka. Up. 3.2)

Akṣarabrahman		
Cidākāśa	Residing in the <i>ātman</i>	“atha yadidamasminbrahmapure daharam puṇḍarīkaṁ veśma daharo'smin.” (Ch. Up. 8.1.1)
	Pervading everything in the universe	"kasminnu khalvākāśa otaśca protaśceti tad akṣaram gārgi." (Br. Up. 3.8.7-8)
	Regulating the universe	"etasya vā akṣarasya praśāsane." (Br. Up. 3.8.9)
	Pervading all that beyond creation	"tadantarasya sarvasya tadu sarvasyāśya bāhyataḥ." (Īśa Up. 5)
	Transcending <i>māyā</i> and all-pervasive	“yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam agotram avarṇam acakṣuḥśrotram tadapāṇipādam.” (Mu. Up. 1.1.6)
Akṣaradhāman	Eternal	"anantalokāptima" (Ka. Up. 1.14) "anante svarge" (Ke. Up. 4.9)
	Beyond the <i>guṇas</i> of <i>māyā</i>	“teṣāmasau virajo brahmaloko na yeṣu jīhmamanṛtaṁ na māyā ceti.” (Ka. Up. 1.16) "vipāpo virajo'vicikitso brāhmaṇo bhavatyēṣa brahmalokaḥ.” (Br. Up. 4.4.23)
	From where there is no return	"teṣāṁ na punarāvṛttiḥ.” (Br. Up. 6.2.15)

	Attained by those who attain <i>brahmabhāva</i>	"yadicchanto brahmacaryam caranti tatte padam saṁgrahaṇa bravīmyomityetat." (Ka. Up. 2.15)
	Necessity to associate with Akṣarabrahman	"tena dhīrā apiyanti brahmavidaḥ svargaṁ lokamita ūrdhvaṁ vimuktāḥ." (Br. Up. 4.4.8)
Ideal servant	Possesses a human-like form	"mahatpadamatraitatsamarpitam ejatprāṇannimiṣacca" (Mu. Up. 2.2.1)
	Ideal for all <i>ātmā</i>	"yatte rūpaṁ kalyāṇatamaṁ tatte paśyāmi yo'sāvasau puruṣaḥ so'hamasmi." (Īśa. Up. 16)
	Experiences bliss of Parabrahman	"so'snute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipaściteti" (Tai. Up. 2.1.1)
Akṣarabrahman Guru	Characteristics of such a Guru	"tadvijñānārthaṁ sa gurumevābhigacchetsamitpāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ brahmaniṣṭham" (Mu. Up. 1.2.12)
	A medium for attaining the supreme abode	"yaḥ seturījānānāmakṣaram brahma yatparam" (Ka. Up. 3.2)

Table 0-1 Akṣarabrahman: *Upaniṣadic* References