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### Devkota's Realization of Ultimate Reality: A Vedantic Reading on "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī"

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#### Abstract

This article analyzes Laxmi Prasad Devkota's Nepali poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī" ("Being Empty in Emptiness") by using the insights of the Vedanta that has a special focus on non-dual (*Advaita*) philosophy. The poem is devotional as well as confessional, which is a common theme of South Asian literature composed in the *Bhakti* ("devotional") tradition. Devkota, the last hour of his life, realized that he really went astray and could not follow his own tradition, culture, religion and spirituality properly. Although it was too late for him to correct his past mistakes, he accepted Lord Shri Krishna as the essence of life; all the other things are *Sūnya* ("void, *Māyā*, illusion, nothing, or meaningless"). *Sūnya* means *asat* ("unreal"), which is not in existence really. Finally, the poet Devkota acknowledged that he vanished into void like a void being meaningless. He could not devote his life to seek Lord Shri Krishna, who is the ultimate reality or essence of the universe. Devkota suggests that the goal of life should be to attain the ultimate reality for eternal liberation or perpetual peace and unbound joy. Life should be spent for this spiritual purpose. Life becomes meaningless if one dies without this kind of spiritual awareness.

**Keywords:** Brahman, *Māyā*, non-dual, Shri Krishna, Vedanta, void

#### Introduction

Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959) is the *Mahākavi* ("the Great Poet") of Nepal.

His death-bed poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī" ("Being Empty in Emptiness") is one of the best devotional and confessional poems ever written by South Asian literary writers. Though he is known as a romantic poet with human sensitivity, the influence of the Vedanta can be seen in his poems such as in this poem. He expresses his death-bed realization that ultimately nothing is true except the non-dual existence of Lord Shri Krishna, who is the ultimate reality or essence of the universe.

The objective of this paper is to identify the conditions of life that make life meaningless and to analyze the ultimate reality of life and the universe with Krishna consciousness. Therefore, this paper analyzes Devkota's poem under two headings:

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realization of the world as meaningless and ephemeral, and realization of the world as Brahman with Krishna consciousness.

Devkota's poem under discussion is an essence of his lifetime experiences. The poet experiences spiritual revelation of truth as occurred before the end of his physical life. He answers such questions as "What is the essence of life?" "What is the ultimate reality or truth?" "What is the world like?" The poem is a confessional one in which he regrets not following the path of spirituality. Commenting on the last words of the poet lying at Āryghāta ("the place of holy cremation at Pashupatināth temple"), Nityaraj Pandey opines that Devkota was atheist; he did not utter the name of Lord Shri Krishna while he was alive. At the end, he accepts his past mistakes and dies realizing the truth of life due to cancer at the age of fifty.

The *Srimad Bhāgavata* confirms that the knowledgeable people call knowledge *Tattva* ("the essence"); some others address *Tattva* as Brahman ("the ultimate reality without a second"), *Paramātma* ("the supreme self"), or *Bhagavān* ("God") (1.2.11). Though late, Devkota realizes that the ultimate reality of the universe is Lord Shri Krishna that is another name of Brahman, the essence of all existence. He failed to appreciate this truth before death. Rather he spent his life in material pleasures forgetting Lord Shri Krishna. Devkota spent his life writing the literature of material concerns, not obviously the spiritual ones. He indulged in mundane activities. In terms of the *Īshāvāsyā Upanishad*, we need to harmonize two activates of life: selfless action (*karma*) and knowledge or wisdom (*jnāna*) to make this life and afterlife successful (11). In this case, the *Yogavāsishtha* expresses that as a bird needs two wings to fly over the sky, so also a person can attain perennial destination by knowledge and action (1.1.7). We need to balance between the material and spiritual life, but the poet could not do so. This idea finds its expression in his poem.

Thus, Devkota's poem highlights Vedantic insights regarding the duty and essence of life. The Vedanta holds the ideas of monism or non-dualism and postulates that the ultimate reality is only one, not two. It means that nothing is independent of Brahman; everything is an embodiment, expression, or appearance of Brahman; what we see is not what is seen; to say more directly, everything is Brahman. We see the world, but in fact it is not the world; rather it is Brahman appearing as the world, just as a rope appears like a snake at night. In this article, thus, the poem has been analyzed from the perspective of these Vedantic insights.

### Review of Literature

Narendra Raj Prasai critiques that Devkota was a literary genius (22). Praising the poet's literary genius, Berkley Hill remarked, "A man like Devkotashouldn't have been born in Nepal. Because he is born in a country like Nepal, he is counted amongst the mad. It is a 'geographical mistake' for him to be born in Nepal" (qtd. in Prasai 22). According to Prasai, Devkota wrote three poems, one in Nepali and two in English while on his deathbed. The Nepali poem was "Shūnyamā Shūnyasārī" ("Being Empty in Emptiness"); the English poems were "Life of the Richest" and "Promethean Pain I Bear," which he gave to Edgar R. Miller, who tried to save him from cancer (265). Anukritika translated the last couplet of Devkota's poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasārī," which was included in Prasai's book entitled *The Great Poet of Nepal*:

I lost all of my rituals and purifications  
I vanished in emptiness being empty  
I was born and raised in this heaven  
But at last, I disappeared in ashes. (265)

Here, Devkota expresses his intense feeling of not being able to lead a life that is supposed to be lived by a Brāhmaṇa ("a person of high rank") whose duty, according to

the Hindu cast system, is to study and teach the Veda in order to pursue the highest goal of life.

In his book, Prasai has critically appreciated the works of Devkota, stating that Devkota was serious about Hinduism while alive. On his deathbed confession at Āryaghāt, he tells Purna Prasad Brahman, "I spent my life as an atheist, now I lack time even to consider God. Lord Krishna is eternal" (qtd. in Prasai 266). According to Prasai, Devkota's confession is his realization of the existence of Lord Shri Krishna. Prasai further remarks that Devkota is not atheist, which is in the following lines: "In fact, Devkota had faith on the existence of God but he strongly disliked the vanity in the name or religion. According to Choodamani Bandhu, Devkota did not "believe in priesthood and always emphasized that God is within self" (266). Devkota is critical of his own weaknesses as he tells Shankar Lamichhane during his last hours of life, "I have understood the true meaning of life at this stage. Wish, I could write today and survive for two more years with this new found knowledge of life!" (267). This knowledge is about Lord Shri Krishna, who is the only one eternal reality of the universe that itself is illusory and transitory.

Devkota himself refutes the accusation against him as being atheist, Padma Prasad Devkota views that Devkota would seek God in the beautiful and joyful aspects of nature and life. God is there where there are truth (*satyam*), benevolence (*shivam*), beauty (*sundaram*) and joy (*ānandam*). Beauty is the cause of creation. Beauty arises from joy. Thus, truth, benevolence, beauty and joy go together (iii). God is love. Love seeks beauty that creates, sustains and renews life on earth. This sentiment is expressed through art. This is the main assumption of Devkota's several works (Padma Prasad Devkota 106). Actually, everything is done for the sake of joy that is the main ground of our existence. In this connection, the *Taittirīya Upanishad* says that joy is Brahman. All the creatures spring from joy, live by joy and go into joy after departing from this world (3.6.1). Similarly, sweetness/love is Brahman and by getting that sweetness/love (Brahman) one becomes joyful, which is expressed in Sanskrit as "*rasovaisaḥ, rasa gumhyevāyam labdhvānandibhavati*" (2.7.2). Hence, love (*rasa*) is the essence of existence or life. The search for love, beauty and joy is the search for Brahman or God. Indeed, psychical love is aspark of divine love.

On the other hand, Suvas Chandra Kandel and Mahesh Paudyal interpret Devkota's Nepali poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī" from the perspective of Buddhism in relation to the concept of "Nirvana" ("liberation from rebirths"). They have translated this Nepali poem as "From the Death Bed" (1-2). In the Buddhist concept, "Nirvana" refers to realization of non-self and emptiness, marking the end of rebirth by stilling the fires that keep the process of going" (2). At the last moment of life, Devkota "was letting go of all the attachments ... one sign of liberation is let go of all the attachment. Buddha himself told that "the root of suffering is attachment," which Devkota is losing at this moment (4-5). The state without attachment or desires is similar to the state when a ball of salt loses its existence and becomes the ocean losing its all identity when it falls into the ocean (6). So, Devkota asserts, "Finally I turned into as hand disappeared" (6). Thus, Kandel and Paudyal suggest that Devkota attained "Nirvana" by destroying his attachment to the world and annihilating the self, becoming non-self (*anātmā*). In this way, this article has explored this aspect of the poem by Devkota regarding his realization of the existence of God and transforming himself as a theist. This actually happened in the last hour of his life.

### **Vedantic Approach to Reality**

This article uses the Vedantic philosophy as a methodological approach to study

Devkota's poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī." The Vedanta deals with the issues of the spiritual part of life as discussed in the *Bhḡavadgītā*, the Upanishads, the *Brahmsūtra*, the *Yogavāsishtha*, and the *Ashtāvakra Gītā*. The material life is not ultimately real. But ignorant human beings do not know this fact. As a spider creates its web and finds itself entrapped in it, so also a person creates a wonderful world and finds himself or herself entrapped because of not knowing his or her true spiritual nature due to ignorance. All the things of the world are created by *Māyā* ("illusion"). So, they are nothing or void (*asat* or not in existence in reality). In this regard, Shaṅkarāhārya in the *Vivekacūdamāṇi* highlights that everything from *Mahat* ("Cosmic Intelligence which is the first to proceed from the *Prakṛiti* or *Māyā*") down to the gross body is the effect of *Māyā*. These things including *Māyā* are the non-self, and therefore unreal like the mirage in a desert (123). The *AshtāvakraGītā* reveals that all the illusions of the world look like dream when one knows ultimate reality (18-21).

The world is not true, but it looks like beautiful and wonderful. This is only an illusory feeling. In terms of the *Aitareya Upanishad*, the three conditions of life – awakening, dream and deep sleep – all are dreams, i.e., unreal (1.3.12). Gaudapāda says, "*manodriśhyamidamdvaitam*," which means that this duality or the whole world is the creation of the imagination of the mind (3.31). According to the *Shvetāshvatara* and *Katha Upanishads*, non-dualism (*advaitavāda*) or monism stresses on the existence of one Brahman, not two (3.1.2; 3.2.2; 6.2.15; 6.3.11-12; 2.2.12-13). The term non-dual (*Advaita*) "negatively implies the negation of dualism and positively asserts the reality of non-difference (Chakraborty 23). Brahman appeared as many in the form of the world without losing Its essential nature. Thus, the world is the *vivarta* ("false appearance") of Brahman. They, who suppose this world to be real and cling to their physical desires, cannot have the non-dual knowledge of one's identity with Brahman. As a result, they are trapped in the cycle of life and death repeatedly. Exactly, as the *Katha Upanishad* highlights, human beings are never satisfied with their temporary pleasures and wealth. They get older but never their desires (1.1.6; 1.1.26-28).

The *Yogavāsishtha* concludes that all kinds of enjoyments are finally destructible. Those who are in rise meet decline at the end. All kinds of unions are sure to end in separation (Upashama Prakaraṇa 86.54-55). So, it is best to avoid desires. Regarding this, Lord Shṛī Krishṇa advises his disciple Arjun to avoid all desires as he says, "When one thoroughly dismisses all cravings of the mind, and is satisfied in the Self through (the joy of) the Self, then he is called stable of mind" (2.55) and attains him. The *Yogavāsishtha* declares that – if one practises all these three – the knowledge of the ultimate essence (*Tattva*), losing cravings and destroying mind or ego – together for a long time, they lead to the attainment of the Supreme Self (Upashama Prakaraṇa 92.17). Duality ceases to exist after realization.

Before realization, one needs to practice the virtue of renunciation. In this connection, the *Kaivalya Upanishad* proclaims that not by work, nor by offspring, nor by wealth, but by renunciation, one can attain immortality, i.e., Brahman (2). One has to be free from pride, illusion, attachment, desires and the conflict of pleasure and pain by being immersed in the contemplation of the self to reach the immutable state (*Gītā* 15.5; *Yogavāsishtha* 6.154.18). Above all, knowledge is more important. As Bādarāyana declares in the *Brahma Sūtras*, one can attain the highest goal of life through the knowledge of Brahman or the supreme self (3.4.1).

Thus, the main themes of the Vedanta are: realization of the world as meaningless and ephemeral, meaninglessness of human pleasures, and impermanence and suffering of human existence and their spiritual treatment through the knowledge of the ultimate reality, e.g., Lord Shṛī Krishṇa, or through the realization of

the world as Brahman with Krishna consciousness. Finally, everything turns out to be empty. This emptiness is also the ultimate reality.

Devkota's poem has the common traits of *Bhakti* Vedanta philosophy, which describes how a devotee develops his deep longing for a single God of the universe, expressing his or her different feelings of separation and union, guilt and confession, fear and anger, bondage and liberation, or delusion and despair. God is one but each devotee can love him with different name(s). This *Bhakti* tradition is found commonly used by the literary figures in different languages in South Asian literature, especially in Nepal and India. For example, Indian Hindu poet Jayadeva composed "Gīta Govinda" ("Song of the Cowherd [Krishna]") in Sanskrit in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, describing the devotional love between Krishna and his consort Rādhā and the gopikās ("girls") of Vrindāvana. Tāllapāka Annamayya or Annamācārya was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian poet, who wrote poems in Telugu language devoted to God (Venkateśvara-Vishnu) at the great hill shrine of Tirupati. His poems are translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman into English under the title of *God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati* (Preface v). Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a devotional poem *Gītānjali* (*Song Offerings*) in Bengali and translated them into English with an introduction by W. B. Yeats for which Tagore was awarded with the Noble Prize in literature in 1913 (Introduction 8-13).

These devotional poems written across Nepal and India are of great interest to the scholars of South Asian history and culture. Both *Bhakti* Vedanta and (pure) Vedanta traditions accept that there is only one ultimate reality in the universe. So, both forms of Vedanta describe the non-dual existence of the ultimate reality. The practice of *Bhakti* Vedanta ultimately leads to the path of (pure) Vedanta through which self-realization takes place. Both the traits of *Bhakti* Vedanta and (pure) Vedanta are found in Devkota's poem.

### Realization of the World as Meaningless and Ephemeral

Life is meaningless if spent only for material pleasures without realizing the ultimate goal of life or attaining immortality through which we attain eternal peace and unbound joy. Physically, life is impermanent and full of sufferings. One can attain immortality and happiness only through spirituality. The *Katha Upanishad* asserts that physical pleasures are ephemeral. Life is also brief (1.1.26). One gets old and dies (1.1.28) like a corn does (1.1.6). This body is mortal and surrounded by death, but the self is immortal and without body (*Chhāndogya* 8.12.1). Similarly, one is never satisfied with wealth (1.1.27). So, physical pleasures are insignificant, futile, or meaningless.

As in the *Upanishads*, Devkota's poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasārī" shows meaninglessness of human pleasures and their impermanence, resulting in sufferings. As the world is a place of illusions, it is meaningless and ephemeral.

In the first couplet of the poem, the poet admits that he went making merry and also pleased others to his great satisfaction with perfect freedom in this world, which is a heaven of material comfort and pleasures. He quenched his carnal desires and ardent passions by taking their images or pictures inward. So, he admits:

In the pleasing paradise of the word,  
Pleasing myself  
With its image inside  
I pleased others. (my trans.)

He wrote literature including poems and was established as a renowned poet. He had a happy-go-lucky attitude. However, he could not think the other side or the spiritual one of human life except this material one. He forgot his real goal of life due to being lured by the *vāsanā* ("the images, impressions, smells, or residues of the past life") of the world.

In the second couplet, Devkota depicts a grim reality of life. Now, all those pleasures enjoyed during his life time are meaningless as he is going to die in the middle of his age now. So, he regrets:

All that has become  
Like a desert  
Now do I realize  
As if night befell me. (my trans.)

The poet understands the reality of life and the universe at the eleventh hour of his life. He feels that now everything has changed into a desert. A desert is symbolic of a useless and barren state where people are entrapped as if by deer's mirage or thirst. All of the things of enjoyment consumed in this world are now giving the poet a painful experience. He feels that as if a terrible night befell him. He has passed into a state of darkness, which is a symbol of spiritual loneliness, barrenness, and helplessness. Pleasure invites pain ultimately. When pleasures end, sufferings start. In this connection, the *Īshāvāsya Upanishad* boldly declares that those who follow the path of worldly actions go into darkness (9). They are reborn in the dark world(s) and face much more suffering. Actually, the minds of human beings become like the objects in which they immerse.

The God-conscious people die remembering him happily, but the worldly-minded one, lamenting or weeping sadly. Devkota's literary creations of worldly concerns are now no more helpful to give him consolation, peace and happiness at his deathbed. In fact, literature without spiritual contents is not a proper literature because that sort of literature cannot help humans to attain immortality though some people desire to be immortal in their works. In this connection, Lord Shri Krishna declares in the *Bhagavadgītā* that he is the science of the self or metaphysics (10.32). From this perspective, the literature with spiritual contents is a great literature. Hence, literature should be pregnant with spiritual contents. But in Devkota's works, we find more humanistic thoughts than the spiritual ones.

In the third couplet also, Devkota states what he has realized recently. He finds the world like a night, dark and gloomy. So, he reiterates:

The world is Akin to night—This did not Flash to me  
While alive. (my trans.)

Night stands for spiritual bareness and ignorance (*Māyā*), which is the cause of all sorts of troubles and sufferings. To the poet, the things supposed to be true turn out to be untrue now at the last hour of his death, like a dream. In reality, the physical body and everything connected with it, viz., wealth, children, friends, status, caste, power, money, etc. are separated from us after death. But an ignorant soul (*jīvātmā*) fails to understand this reality of life while alive due to being deluded by *Māyā* or ignorance.

Ultimately, Devkota understands his shortcomings and realizes that the true knowledge of spirituality could not occur to him while alive. In terms of the *Muṇḍaka Upanishad*, the results of worldly actions cannot give eternal satisfaction and happiness. The fruits of selfish actions (*sakāma karma*) are temporary. Brahman cannot be attained through such selfish actions (1.2.12). So, we need the knowledge of the self and Brahman to attain eternal satisfaction and happiness. There is no permanent liberation without having such a spiritual knowledge. Knowledge alone liberates while he is alive. In this connection, the *Īshāvāsya*, *Chhāndogya*, *Taittirīya*, and *Bṛihadāranyaka* Upanishads rightly declare that one can attain immediate (*aparoksha*) liberation through knowledge alone (11; 2.23.1; 2.1.1-2; 4.5.15). But Devkota regrets not having this kind of spiritual knowledge while he is alive.

In the fifth couplet, Devkota compares himself to a heated particle of tiny sand in a vast desert and to a dumb person as well. Therefore, he asserts:

As heated

As a tiny sand,  
In a vast stretch of desert, Hopeless and dumb, I Am going to die  
By being burnt. (my trans.)

The tiny particle of sand becomes hot for intense heat of the sun and lack of water. Like the heated particle, the poet is heated with cravings due to the lack of spiritual water. In addition, he is helpless to remove the pain of his cancer that is as unbearable as the heated particle. Now, he is about to die by being burnt with his cravings and pain. The worldly passions have killed him. Truly, pleasures are poisonous and desires destructive. In terms of the *Katha Upanishad*, physical pleasures and desires weaken and destroy the power of all the senses of a human being (1.1.26).

Devkota is as helpless as a dumb, suggesting that he is devoid of devotion, spiritual knowledge and conscience. He cannot remember and love Lord Shri Krishna with his all heart and soul at the last moment of his death though he wishes to do so. Human beings can remember or love only those things at the moment of their death which they did as a part and parcel throughout their life. So, the acting and rehearsal of good things and ideas from the beginning of life are necessary to make the last moment of death meaningful. But the poet feels that his life went in vain without achieving the spiritual goal of life.

Death is inevitable. It is the wage of one's *karma* ("worldly actions"). In the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, presenting the theory of *karma* and *vipāka* ("action and its result"), Yāgyavalkya says that one determines/decides as per desires, then acts as per determinations and finally gets results or destiny as per actions (4.4.5). Devkota meets his destiny as per his thoughts, desires and actions.

In the sixth couplet, he expresses his feelings of impermanence and suffering accompanied by his impending death, caused by his own *karma*. Hence, he compares himself to a drying tree, which is running short of sap due to lack of water and is, therefore, becoming empty. Therefore, he finds himself:

As empty as a Drying tree, I am  
Basking by the funeral fire  
To be washed away by water. (my trans.)

When the tree becomes completely dry and empty, it falls down. Similar is the situation of the dying poet. Here, the word "empty" indicates that he is spiritually hollow that is the cause of his anguish. The poet visualizes an impending situation at the crematory place where his body is situated amid the fire of funeral pile and other people are basking by that fire, ready to throw water over the residual ashes of his burnt body in order to clean the crematory place as per the Hindu rituals.

This impending death image of the poet's own funeral rites or cremation indicates that he can no more escape from his past actions the result of which is death. Now, he is in dire need of spiritual knowledge because, as Lord Shri Krishna proclaims in the *Bhagavadgītā*, "On earth there is no purifier as great as Knowledge" (4.38). But one should have a pure heart to be qualified for attaining such a knowledge. Only the devotion to Lord Shri Krishna can purify the polluted heart. Here, the poet is hinting the importance of devotion that can pacify the empty heart burnt by worldly passions.

Following one's *samskāra* ("Hindu ceremonies, rites, rituals, customs and rules of do's and don'ts") and religion or duty is important. In this connection, Lord Shri Krishna advises: "One's own duty, though devoid of merit, is preferable to the duty of another well performed. Even death in the performance of one's own duty brings blessedness; another's duty is fraught with fear" (3.35).

In the seventh couplet, Devkota repents having lost all his *samskāra*. He has lost a lot of meaningful things in life that are now irrevocable and irreparable at the time of his

impending death. Hence, he regrets:

Losing all my rituals, Becoming void,  
Here I am vanished  
Into void like a void. (my trans.)

Here, the poet feels being void due to being deprived of rituals and spirituality in life. Rituals form the first step of the spiritual ladder and the topmost step is formed by the spiritual knowledge.

Every existence is void except that of Brahman or God. But, according to *Shrī Devyatharvashīrsham*, the witness of the void is Brahman (24). In this regard, the *Yogavāsishtha* proclaims that from the higher level of reality, the entire world does not exist; so it is void without any form. Yet it appears in form “like the appearance of a visionary city in dream.” The world “is a reflection of the intellect, as the dream is that of images (seen or experienced during the awaking state) in the memory” (Nirvāṇa Prakaraṇa 80.55). So, the world is a projection or creation of *Māyā*. As Nirod Baran Chakraborty defines, *Māyā* does two important things: it hides reality by creating ignorance and shows the things which are not in existence really like a magician does (129-30). *Māyā* is a type of delusion due to which a person supposes this unreal world to be real and distinct from the supreme spirit (*Swami*).

The poet while he was young, he forgot the importance of rituals due to being overwhelmed by the power of *Māyā*. He laments not having followed them, but it is too late for him to mend his ways. So, voidness attacks him; this voidness is ignorance or lack of the knowledge of the ultimate reality. In the seventh couplet, Devkota realizes that he has vanished into void, becoming himself void or meaningless. It implies that he could not attain the four *purushārthas* (“achievements of life”) to his satisfaction: religion/duty (*dharma*), money (*artha*), pleasure (*kāma*) and especially liberation (*moksha*). He could not merge in Brahman. A person can merge in Brahman or attain immediate liberation only when he or she has self-knowledge and self-realization.

The greatest achievement of life is to attain Brahman or Godhood. But the poet has just vanished into void becoming void without attaining the greatest achievement of life. About voidness, Lord Shrī Krishṇa teaches Arjuna that all human beings spring from void and vanish into void. They appear only in the interim between birth and death (*Gītā* 2.28). No human body is manifest twice exactly in the same form. So, the human body is rare and should be utilized to the fullest for the betterment of life. Though the human body is rare, it is unreal (*mithyā*). In this regard, Gaudapāda in his *Māndukya Kārikā* concludes that the object which does not exist in the beginning and the end does not exist in the present, either, i.e. in the middle. Though they are unreal, they seem to be real in the eyes of the dual-minded, unwise (*avivekī*) persons (Vaitathya Prakaraṇa 6).

Everyone desires for immortality. But, from the standpoint of the *Katha Upanishad*, the wealth-like fruits of selfish actions are impermanent and destroyable. The permanent Brahman or the supreme spirit cannot be attained through such impermanent and destroyable fruits as the results of actions (1.2.10). Devkota, too, desires for immortality. But, in the eighth couplet, he laments spending his whole life for material pleasures without being spiritual or enlightened in this heaven-like world:

In this heaven, where I was born and grown,  
At last I have Vanished vainly  
Turning into ash. (my trans.)

The poet immersed in the worldly activities (*prapañcha*) forgetting the greatest goal of life, i.e., the achievement of Brahman/God, liberation, or permanent peace and unbound joy. An old body dies just as a fruit falls off a tree automatically when the fruit gets too ripened. Similarly, the poet's diseased body is disappearing from this heaven-like world



due to his incurable cancer. No one can enjoy the pleasures of the heaven for ever because they are temporary and under the grip of *Māyā* and death. Even Indra, the king of gods in the heaven, has to leave it after a specified period of enjoyment. The poet seems to be aware of this truth. Therefore, we find the tune of lamentation in his voice, indicating that though we cannot control time, we can still utilize it for our spiritual upliftment.

As instructed by the *Chhāndogya Upanishad*, though the body dies when a soul leaves the body, the soul does not die (6.11.3). The five elements of the body vanish into the five elements of the cosmos. As implied in the eighth couplet, Devkota knows that physical death does not matter. More importantly, he desires to be immortal spiritually. But he confesses that he has turned into ashes (meaninglessness) without being anything. Actually, life is meaningless, but richly and pleasurable we spend it in this heaven-like world if we are devoid of spirituality.

Thus, in the poem, Devkota finds his life hollow due to lack of spirituality. He finds the world and life meaningless and ephemeral. Pleasures count nothing because they are brief. They do not make anyone great. It is the suffering what makes us really great. Really thinking, suffering enriches or endows us with the divine knowledge that gives us the gift of eternal life.

### Realization of the World as Brahman with Krishṇa Consciousness

Brahman alone exists permanently in the universe. All the objects except Brahman are transitory. In this regard, Śaṅkarāchārya proclaims in his *Vivekacūḍamaṇi* that Brahman is real and the universe is unreal (20). Similarly, the *Chhāndogya Upanishad* proclaims that there is Brahman alone, the One without a second (6.2.1). In this line of argument, in the *Bhṅavadgītā*, Lord Śrī Krishṇa proclaims that there is nothing else except him; He is the eternal seed of all beings (7.7; 7.10). He is the all – "*vāshudevḥsarvam*" (7.19).

The realization of the world as Brahman with Krishṇa consciousness is found in the fourth couplet that carries the central theme of Devkota's poem. A divine revelation occurs to him. Accordingly, nothing is true in this universe other than Lord Śrī Krishṇa, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Lord Śrī Krishṇa does not mean only Lord Śrī Krishṇa. He stands for Brahman or the ultimate reality of the universe. The wise sages call him by different names in different religions. In fact, the world is not real, which merely appears and disappears in Brahman as waves appear and disappear in the ocean. But, with this knowledge, Devkota could not dedicate himself to Lord Śrī Krishṇa in his life time. Nor could he follow Lord Śrī Krishṇa's divine teachings with devotion, knowledge, or conscience either. So, he decisively speaks in his fourth couplet:

There is nothing ultimately Except Śrī Krishṇa.

But I had neither devotion,

Nor knowledge, nor conscience. (my trans.)

Though Devkota forgot Lord Śrī Krishṇa during his lifetime, he, at his deathbed, remembers Lord Śrī Krishṇa because of his unbearable suffering caused by his cancer. Thus, though late, spiritual knowledge reveals to him. It is better late than never. Though he could not devote his whole life merely to develop Krishṇa consciousness in him, yet his final realization and confession make his life somewhat meaningful because something is better than nothing.

According to the *Kena Upanishad*, those are the wise who know while they are alive that Brahman is within all creatures and, thus, by knowing this truth before death they become immortal. Otherwise they bear massive loss (2.5). Actually, the earning of physical property does not matter more whereas the loss of spiritual property is more devastating. Those are not lucky who are rich merely by material prosperity but those are

lucky who are rich by spiritual enlightenment.

According to Shaṅkarāchārya in his *Prabodhasudhākara*, the mind is not purified without the grace one receives through devotion to Lord Shrī Krishṇa (16.167). "This (devotion) is also of the nature of immortality" – "*amritasvarūpācha*" (*Nārada Bhakti Sūtras* 2). An individual self (*jīva*) is surrounded by three defects: defect of the physical body due to sin and habitual tendency (*mala dosha*), defect of the mind due to impure ideas and feelings (*vikshepa dosha*) and defect of the soul (*jīvātmā*) due to ignorance (*āvaraṇa dosha*). If we believe in the teachings of Lord Shrī Krishṇa in the *Bhḡavadgītā*, those who depart from their body, thinking of him alone even at the time of death, attain his state; there is no doubt about it (8.5). Similarly, those who resign all their duties to him and take refuge in him alone will be absolved of all sins by him; there is no doubt about it (18.66).

Further, Lord Shrī Krishṇa teaches that they attain their another life according to their thinking, wishes, or desires at the last moment of life (8.6). This is the secret of secrets which explains why human beings have life after death or why they suffer in the world. This idea is related to the theory of *karma* that best explains the mystery of life, death and suffering in this world. Similar idea is presented by the *Prashna* (3.10), *Bṛihadāraṇyaka* (4.4.6), *Chhāndogya* (3.14.1) and *Muṇḍaka* (3.2.2) *Upanishads*. In terms of these insights, we can deduce that now the dying poet Devkota will have a better life after death because he dies with the knowledge of the ultimate reality of life. Knowledge is like the light in whose presence all the darkness of ignorance disappears as the night disappears in the presence of sunlight at dawn.

According to Lord Shrī Krishṇa in the *Bhḡavadgītā*, as the blazing fire burns the fuel to ashes, even so the fire of knowledge burns all actions to ashes (4.37). While viewed from the non-dual Vedantic insight, an individual soul/self and Brahman are one. This is the right knowledge that liberates humanity from the cycle of life, death and rebirth. As the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad* highlights that there are two forms of Brahman: *mūrta* ("Brahman with a form") and *amūrta* ("Brahman without any form") (2.3.1). Lord Shrī Krishṇa is the Brahman with a form. He is the embodiment of *Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram* ("Truth-Benevolence-Beauty"). As instructed by the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad*, there is no any other way to cross death except through the knowledge of Brahman (6.6.15). Those who know Brahman become Brahman (Enlightened) alone (*Muṇḍaka* 3.2.9). It is the Essence or Ground of all existence. In his poem, Devkota feels lacking in the spiritual wealth that can be gained only when one renounces the material one.

According to Shaṅkarāchārya, conscience is one of the four means of attaining spiritual knowledge: conscience, renunciation, the group of six attributes (calmness, self-control, self-withdrawal, forbearance, faith and self-settledness), and the yearning for liberation (18-27). Now, at his deathbed, Devkota remembers Lord Shrī Krishṇa, who is the only one full incarnation among the main twelve ones of Lord Viṣṇu, a final liberator, perfect and infinite in all attributes. In his fourth couplet, Devkota gives high priority and respect to devotion, knowledge and conscience that are the means to attain the final goal, i.e., liberation from all sorts of sufferings and the attainment of everlasting peace and unbound joy.

In the third stanza, Devkota clearly finds the world, inhabited by him, being like a night but he could not understand it while alive. Nor could he attain knowledge before. So, here regrets with surprise:

Oh! the world is like a night  
But knowledge did not  
Occur to me

While alive. (my trans.)

Here, the word "knowledge" means the spiritual knowledge, not the worldly one. The worldly knowledge is simply an information, skill, or art, not knowledge in its true sense. According to the *Vishṇu Purāṇa*, action is that which does not promote attachment and knowledge is that which liberates one from bondage. The rest of the actions is merely an effort or hardship. Likewise, the rest of the knowledge is merely a skill or craftsmanship (1.19.41). Hence, that is not knowledge which entraps us in bondage. In the poem, Devkota seems to be aware of this kind of spiritual knowledge at the last moment of his life. Therefore, he wishes that if he had had the spiritual knowledge in the prime of his life, his life had been better or changed. His life would not have gone astray.

Thus, viewed from the Vedantic perspective, everything is transitory and destroyable though they seem to be in existence. They are just a nine days' wonder. In this sense, life becomes meaningful if it is spent with Kṛṣṇa consciousness also known as God consciousness. This is one of the themes of Devkota's poem that is rich in meanings and, hence, can be interpreted from many perspectives.

### Conclusion

Devkota, in his poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī," expresses his regrets for not being able to do something spiritual to attain immortality and eternity. He spent his life in the worldly activities such as writing literature of the worldly concerns. He realizes that it is too late for him to correct his mistakes because he is going to die. His all worldly desires and actions are meaningless. He has vanished into the world or *Māyā* as a void just as ashes.

With the use of negative metaphorical vehicles such as desert, night, heated particle of sand, dying by fire, dumb, drying tree, the fire of funeral pyre, void and ashes, Devkota expresses that the material pleasures of this world are transitory and painful, causing mental suffering. The mortal can be immortal if they become without desires (*nispriha*) for worldly pleasures. In addition, the mortal can be immortal through devotion to Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa with the non-dual knowledge (wisdom) that there is Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa (the ultimate reality) alone, the one without a second in the universe. At his deathbed, Devkota realizes this truth. Hence, he wishes that he had devotion and knowledge so that he could attain perpetual peace and unbound joy instead of transitory peace and limited joy here and there. Life becomes meaningful if the spiritual goal is put ahead of all the goals in life with Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

This is the teaching of the Vedānta that is acknowledged by Devkota in his devotional and confessional poem "Shūnyamā Shūnyasarī." Devotion includes the activities of confession as well. It is a central theme of the literature of *Bhakti* tradition; the theme of devotion is shared by the figures in South Asian literature, society and culture.

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