

## Ramanuja

Born and raised in South India in 1017 CE, Ramanuja was a philosopher and a theologian whose ideas and writings have had a lasting impact on Indian religious practices.

Ramanuja is attributed with the theology of qualified non-dualism, which can be contrasted to Sankara's radical non-dualism and Madhva's dualism (see Rodrigues 373-379). Ramanuja belonged to the Vadama caste, within the Brahmin class, who are claimed to uphold the scholarly study of the Vedas (Carman 28). As a result, he was very learned in the Vedic texts and as such left his first guru early because he could not follow his teaching (Carman 29). He later attempted to become a disciple of two non-Brahmin *gurus* before he was finally able to find another non-Brahmin *guru* who would take him as a disciple even though he was a Brahmin (Carman 30-31). He became a *samnyasi* fairly early in life and established a monastic house but soon became very prominent in the Srirangam temple where he started out and came back to many years later (Carman 34, 44). Ramanuja was a devout follower of Visnu; furthermore, throughout his life he was very adamant in promoting devotion only to Visnu (Carman 34, 37-44).

The most widely known text that Ramanuja wrote is the *Sribhasya*, which is a comprehensive commentary on the *Vedanta Sutras* (Carman 49). However, Ramanuja is also credited with writing a commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a work titled *Vedarthasamgraha* ("The Summary of the Meaning of the Vedas"), two commentaries on the *Vedanta Sutras*, three *Gadyas* (prose hymns), and the *Nityagrantha* (a manual of daily worship) (Carman 49). All of these writings were in Sanskrit although Ramanuja's native language (and the one he taught in) was Tamil (Carman 49-50).

Ramanuja is most widely known for his philosophical and theological teachings. He taught a philosophy called Visistadvaita, which means qualified non-dualism. Sankara taught that the only thing that is real is Brahman, and Madhava taught that there are three entities, Brahman, the soul, and matter (see Rodrigues 373-379). Ramanuja, by contrast, taught that the universe is the body of Brahman, which is the unchanging foundation of reality (Edattukaran 179). He also describes the body as a substance completely controlled by the soul (Iturbe 42), however, they are inseparable (Edattukaran 185). Ramanuja uses the concepts of *prakrti* and *purusa* to explain the link between the body and the soul. He says that the body, which is linked to the primordial matter (*prakrti*), is governed by *purusa* (the sentient soul), in a relationship where *prakrti* is entirely subordinate to *purusa* (Iturbe 42). The existence of these two related but distinct entities is the grounds for qualified non-dualism. This is also classified as qualified non-dualism because Brahman is not identical with the universe even though it is real (compared to illusory objects as identified by Sankara) and thus remains the eternal changeless single reality while the souls and matter – which are the modes and expressions of Brahman – are constantly undergoing modifications (Edattukaran 190). Ramanuja thus assigns qualities to Brahman, which makes his philosophy qualified non-dualism (see Rodrigues 376-377). Ramanuja has fused some of the previous traditions together by explaining “the body as the essential mode of Brahman’s being” (Edattukaran 187).

Ramanuja also talks about God as the activator while humans are the activated (Iturbe 49). This happens by God seeing humans’ good efforts and granting grace so that

humans can properly perform their actions (Iturbe 49). Actions are primarily dependent on humans' own efforts, but God needs to grant permission for those actions to be performed (Iturbe 48). God allows humans to make their own actions; however, he is favourable to those who are devoted to him (Singh 159). As well, God must choose to reveal himself to someone, and has to be invoked to do so (Raghavachar 388). Ramanuja says that *bhakti* (loving devotion) is the path that leads one to invoke God to reveal himself to you (Raghavachar 388). This can be accomplished through spending time meditating (*dhyana*) on God (Raghavachar 388). Through *dhyana* and *bhakti*, one can achieve *moksa*, which is liberation from the cycles of *samsara*.

Yoga, according to Ramanuja, is the way to attain *moksa* (Vadakethala 36).

Through the practice of yoga, one can learn how to lovingly devote him-/herself to God and how to meditate on God (*bhakti* and *dhyana*). There are three types of yoga that are the way to final release, *karmayoga* (the yoga of work), *jnanajoga* (the yoga of knowledge), and *bhaktiyoga* (the yoga of loving devotion) (Vadakethala 36). Karmayoga means to do actions of spiritual detachment, which is a renunciation in action but not of action (Vadakethala 40). This means acting dispassionately and renouncing all attachment to material things and performing the action without becoming attached in any way (emotionally, for example) to the act of performing the action (Vadakethala 42). Jnanayoga means achieving the knowledge of the self; Ramanuja only prescribes *jnanayoga* to those who already have advanced knowledge (Vadakethala 43-45). Higher than these two yogas is *bhaktiyoga*, which leads man to a "blissful communion with God" (Vadakethala 45). This loving devotion to God (*bhakti*) is what draws one away from the material world (allows for someone to detach from the world) and achieve union

with God (Vadakethala 49). Bhakti is thus the means of achieving *moksa*, however through *bhakti* all three yogas are interrelated because *bhakti* is shown through *karmayoga* and *jnanayoga* (Vadakethala 43). In other words, loving devotion to God is demonstrated through one's actions and one's knowledge, however a person's prime motive should be to lovingly devote his-/herself to God and thus detach his-/herself from the world.

However, if someone does not have the knowledge required for *bhakti*, or the ability to wait for its progressive maturation (for example, he is from a lower class), he can resort to *prapatti*, which is the "surrender or taking to God for refuge" (Raghavachar 389-390). This means that anybody has the means to be freed from *samsara* because if he cannot practice *bhakti*, he can resort to *prapatti* and still attain *moksa*. Thus, Ramanuja claims that because class distinctions do not touch the nature of the soul, anybody can attain *moksa* (Singh 157). However, there is a weakness in *prapatti* because the person will desire knowledge, the power of action, and spiritual patience (Raghavachar 391). This desire will draw that person away from the purpose of the trying to attain *moksa* because it will keep them attached to this world (where the main goal is to detach from the world). However, it is ultimately God who decides who gets liberated, which means that in *prapatti* the person must stop human initiative in order to prepare for passing the initiative entirely to the Divine (Raghavachar 391). In this way, someone who is using *prapatti* may attain *moksa*.

Ramanuja's theology is one of qualified non-dualism in which Brahman is the ultimate reality in which humans strive for union with, but Brahman has qualities that make this theology qualified (see Rodrigues 376-377). According to Ramanuja, God

chooses who he wants to liberate from *samsara* based on their *karma*, *jnana*, and *bhakti* (Raghavachar 388, 391). Yoga is the means of attaining union with the divine, and *bhaktiyoga* is claimed as superior to *karmayoga* and *jnanayoga* (however all three types of yoga are interrelated) (Vadakethala 36, 45). Ramanuja also states the *prapatti* is another path that can lead to liberation, however it is a weaker path (Raghavachar 391). Ramanuja's ideas have made a significant impact on Hindu religious practice and have thus been compared and contrasted with the ideas of many other great thinkers.

### **References and Further Recommended Readings**

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[http://www.sanatansociety.org/yoga\\_and\\_meditation/bhakti\\_yoga.htm](http://www.sanatansociety.org/yoga_and_meditation/bhakti_yoga.htm)

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