

## Exploring *śakti* in Śrīdhara's *Subodhinī*

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### Abstract

Śrīdhara (c. 1350-1450 CE), in his *Subodhinī* (commentary on the *Bhagavād-gītā*), faces the challenge of making sense of a transcendent *brahman* who acts in the world by taking on a body in Kṛṣṇa. This is problematic for Śrīdhara because he proclaims to be an Advaitin, holding that *brahman* and *ātman* (self) are non-dual. So, how can Śrīdhara talk about a 'body' – which inherently implies plurality – for the transcendent? In the *Subodhinī*, Śrīdhara makes it clear from the outset that the intellectual problem he faces is Arjuna 'drowning' in the 'ocean of grief and delusion'. The purpose of this paper is to assess exactly how Śrīdhara shows that Kṛṣṇa saves Arjuna – and therefore humanity – from drowning. I argue that, in his *Subodhinī*, Śrīdhara understands Kṛṣṇa as the one who saves Arjuna by using Kṛṣṇa's body as offering a language for speaking about the transcendent in everyday terms.

The way that Śrīdhara makes the transcendent accessible is primarily through his theological understanding of the concept *śakti*. Between Citsukha (c. 1220 CE) and Madhusūdana (16<sup>th</sup> century CE), two understandings of the concept *śakti* emerge: first, we have Citsukha's understanding of *śakti* functioning in a formal sense, in that words/propositions ultimately, through their *śaktis*, indicate *brahman*; second, we have Madhusūdana's understanding of *śakti* functioning on a more theological level, in that *śakti* functions as both *āvaraṇa* (concealing) and *vikṣepa* (revealing). Śrīdhara proves to be an important link between the two positions – although in the *Subodhinī* it is indeed the case that words indicate the *nirguṇa brahman*, we also see the model of *śakti* being both concealing and revealing beginning to develop. In the *Subodhinī*, Śrīdhara holds that the form of *śakti* that conceals is *tamasic*, while the form that can reveal is *sattvic*. For Śrīdhara, Kṛṣṇa is able to rescue Arjuna because Kṛṣṇa's purest (*sattvic*) body manifests the revealing form of *śakti*, which is precisely the way in which *brahman* is made known to us. Śrīdhara directly equates 'becoming *brahman*' with the devotee developing a *sāttvika* understanding of the transcendent, meaning that the devotee is learning to develop the *sattvic guṇa* by his response to Kṛṣṇa's grace; the devotee's nature, therefore, is becoming closer to the way in which the divine manifests.