

The Upanishads: the Oneness of the Limitless Infinite and the Finite

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The most extraordinary thing about Upanishads is that young students like Svetaketu, or Satyakama, or Nachiketa or Bhrigu, the young boy or young Brahmachari beggar, or that band of six youthful seekers after truth, Sukesha, Satyakama, Gargya, Aswalayana, Bhargava and Kabandhi or the young women like Gargi or Maitreyi or common man like a cart driver Raikwa are found to be seeking answers or raising questions or even explaining the concept of the eternal or pure consciousness and how that acts as a source of truth and joy. When such kind of awareness is found in youth and common man it stirs a nation and leads to a movement and a renaissance takes place.

In a passage in the Chandogya Upanishad from the seventh millennium BCE, young Svetaketu's father, Uddalak Aruni, tells young Svetaketu about the manifestation of God in all beings including Svetaketu

himself. He says: It is the Self (atman), and thou, O Svetaketu, art thou (Tat tvam asi).

This idea turns into a revolution, an upheaval in the traditional mode of thinking; it was a new idea, a new thinking which shook the psycho-physico entity of human beings. This was the first renaissance in India that took place in the Upanishadic times during 800 BC when the human beings had this thrilling experience in the realization of the message of the Upanishads that the self or atman and Brahman or the Supreme Consciousness are not two distinct realities but two different levels for one and the same reality.

In the Upanishads (800 to 300B.C.) in place of early ritualistic religion and theology a search for the reality underlying the flux of things started. The Upanishads are about 180 in number. The philosophers of the Upanishads speak to us of the One Reality behind and beyond the flux of the world.

Their search was for that which, being known, everything else becomes known.

In the Vrihadaranyaka Upanishad it is said,

‘Let the Universal Soul give us the intellect to have access to His nature.’

What the intellect then discovers is the existing of a supreme ‘Power’ or a ‘World Soul’ or Brahman which pervades the entire universe and sustains and regulates it and which is also Pure Consciousness . (Pure Consciousness (*Cit*) is not an attribute of Mind. It is beyond Mind being independent of it. It is immanent (existing in all parts of the universe) in Mind and is the source of its illumination and apparent Consciousness.)

It is *svayamprakashya*, self-revealed. It is the knowledge of the real, of *Brahman (Atman)*. Though this realization comes through knowledge yet more through mystical intuitive insight and meditation or the *nirbijasamadhi* (the non dual state of consciousness also known as **chaitanya tanmayata** i.e. one is conscious but absorbed totally and realises that one is one with that power. In fact you are that power) .

How to be one with Supreme Reality

The main focus of the Upanishads is to tell human beings that one has all the potentiality to reach the level of godhead. Everything which is described in these texts exemplifies the process as how to reach that stage of divinity or how to be one with the Supreme reality. HOW TO REALIZE ONE'S OWN SELF.

The word Upanishad means, 'sitting down near' and the rest is applied meaning i.e. sitting down near the teacher to learn from him and understand the nature of the supreme truth or Brahman who stands behind the mundane world of ordinary experience.

Shankaracharya gives another meaning that Upanishad means the knowledge of Brahman by which ignorance is loosened and destroyed. Both the meanings are important and they are to be understood in unison.

Brahman which manifests itself in and through the variety of the universe, is essentially one and indivisible. The knowledge of the Supreme is the real knowledge. If we remove the bonds of finitude, the emancipated soul (Atman) will be the same as the 'one' eternal all pervading existence. The meaning of our self is to be found in the ceaseless realization of yoga, of union with

Brahman. Separateness of the self is *maya*, an illusion, because it has no reality.

The power of Comprehension

One becomes the supreme Brahman when one dwells in the infinite.

When man shuts himself out from the vitalizing and purifying touch of the infinite, and falls upon himself for the sustenance, then he loses his own self. This indeed kills the very spirit of his being which is the spirit of comprehension (understanding). By this power of comprehension, this permeation (penetration) of his being – from embodied self to atman and then the realization of being one with Brahman become possible. He is united with the all-pervading Spirit, who is also the breath, Prana of his soul.

There are three stages of acquiring this power of comprehension: i) *Shravana*: literary means ‘hearing’ or the process of gaining knowledge; ii) *Manana*: means contemplation or action of mind to understand the truth. The doubts are removed by analyzing the knowledge gained and finally demonstrative (emotional)

comprehension of the truth is gained and lastly, iii) *Nididhyasana* which means meditation on truth. *Nididhyasan* is a constant and spontaneous flow of knowledge. The truth known becomes your own, he becomes what he believes.

The person has to exercise the powers of *Shravan*, *Manan* and *Nididhyasan* to realize the truth regarding the nature of Brahman, the world and Self.

The cardinal truth of the Upanishads is '*Atmanam Biddhi*', know thy self. The highest knowledge is the knowledge of the self.

Knowledge of metaphysical self (atman) does not make one indifferent to the world

In the Upanishads the term freedom does not mean negation of life. Freedom means liberation from the bondage of the finitude. One becomes one with man and nature; and therefore in undisturbed union with God. it is the pursuit of wisdom by a way of life. The Wisdom is that

there is no bliss in finite things, the Infinite alone is bliss (Chandogya Upanishad).

To feel all, to be with all, to be conscious of everything, is the spirit. **By realising him in each and all** (*bhuteshu bhuteshu vichintya*) we attain our world – consciousness, we have to unite our feeling with this all-pervasive, infinite feeling. It is said in the Isopanishad:

“He who sees all beings in his self, and his self in all the beings does not hate any one, and knows the truth”

In the unity of beings one realizes the spirit, *atman* or the Supreme Brahman and this recognition of truth paves the way to our openness to others, and generates in us love and concern for our fellow beings.

Once we acknowledge this oneness, we are necessarily inhibited from doing harm to others. What is emphasised above all in the Ishopanishad is amity or loving kindness towards other people and the corresponding rejection of apathy, cruelty, violence and everything else that is destructive of cordial, harmonious relations with one another (kalyan Sen Gupta)

Supreme Being is the innate good in all

It is said, The supreme being is all pervading, therefore he is the innate good in all.(*sarvavyapi sa bhagavan tasmad sarvagatah shivah*).

To be (1) truly united in knowledge, love, and service with all beings, and thus (2) to realize one's self in the all-pervading God is (3) the essence of goodness, and this is the keynote of the teachings of Upanishads.

Hence the spirit of the teachings of the Upanishads is: In order to find Him, who is the essence of goodness, you must embrace all.

In the pursuit of wealth you give up everything to gain a few things, and this is not the way to attain him who is completeness.

One can be complete when the difference between finitude and infinite vanishes and the person becomes one with the Ultimate Truth. This is so nicely explained by Gorakhnath, a Siddha living between (2nd century BC – 2century AD) by one of his poems:

“Die, o Yogi die, die

Sweet is dying

Gorakh says, I teach death

The death I passed through when I became awakened

It was the death of sleep not of me

The ego died, not me, duality died , not me

Duality died and I met the eternal
 The small constricted life broke,
 And the drop became the ocean.”

Yes, when the rain drop falls into the ocean it is certainly dying in one sense, it is dying as a drop and in other sense the drop attains for the first time to the great life – it lives as an ocean and hence dissolve, die –but it is the ego that dies – then the divine manifestation, the union or the realization of oneness or completeness becomes a reality. Brahman reconciles death and immortality and does not recognise any essential opposition between them (*yasya chaya amritam yasya mrityu* – His reflection is death as well as immortality). It does not find any difference between life and death, materialism and spirituality, between mundane and transcendental. It is said, ‘Everything has sprung from immortal life and is vibrating with life (*yadidan kincha prana ejati nihsritam*) for life is immense (*prano virat*).

Upanishad does not ignore the material life

Upanishads do not ignore the material life. Tagore by endorsing Upanishad says that it will never do the least

good to attempt the realization of the Infinite apart from the world of action.

But at the same time Upanishad illustrates by the story of Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi, the nature of human predicament and the limitations of material world. When Yajnavalkya *decided to divide his material property* between his two wives Maitreyi and Katyayani, and take the path of *sannyasa* (The path of ascetic or renunciation),

Maitreyi asked Yajnavalkya, ‘Will this property make me immortal and take me beyond all sorrow and suffering.’ The sage replied, ‘No dear, not at all. Your life will be comfortable with wealth but it cannot give you immortality.’ Maitreyi immediately retorted, ‘What then have I to do with things that do not give me immortality. Teach me that spiritual knowledge, which I believe, you possess, rather than talk to me about things material.’

If one reads the statement of Maitreyi carefully, as says Amartya Sen, “it will be revealed then that Maitreyi is not discarding material life. Maitreyi’s worldly worries might well have some transcendental relevance but they have certainly worldly interest also. **While there is a connection between opulence and our ability to**

achieve what we value, the linkage may or may not be very close.”

The knowledge of Brahman and the realization of its oneness with the self are possible **by living this life**. But at the same time if we are concerned with the freedom to live long and live well for doing action for 100 years as says Ishopanishad, it is to be self less action and then only spiritual knowledge becomes a reality.

In another verse, in Ishopanishad, it is said that by the knowledge of the transient or worldly things (*avidya*) you overcome death or manage to live hundred years and that helps one to concentrate on true knowledge (*vidya*) and realize Brahman. But if one remains absorbed only in *avidya* one enters in to blinding darkness (*andham tama pravisanti*) and by rejecting wealth (*avidya*), (Maitreyi is in fact referring to that stage), one can have the true knowledge (*vidya*) but she also knows that without that one (*avidya*) one cannot make a journey from attachment to non attachment.

Amartya Sen is justified to say that with the freedom to live long and live well, our focus has to be directly on life and death or I would add on the transcendental relevance of our self , and not just on wealth and economic

opulence. Let us not forget that there is a connection between the two, however distinct it may be.

From embodied self to metaphysical self or Atman and the realization of Brahman is a progressive movement

While seeking the meaning of the higher self the sages map out a path of progressive movement for human beings. The empirical self or the embodied self (*jiva*) moves to metaphysical Self (*atman*) or/and Pure Consciousness. It is possible through knowledge (*jnana*), intuitive mystical insight and meditation. At the same time inversely *atman* or Pure Consciousness goes on inspiring, without making it obvious about this progressive movement of empirical self or empirical ego to the ultimate realization of the Self as pure consciousness.

Two Paradoxes

One may raise a question that you are dividing the metaphysical self and the Supreme Self as two entities but they are just one entity. This is the paradox and one must understand it that the Supreme Self is one with

jiva(embodied self) and the metaphysical Self but it is discussed as separate also as Cartesian duality (immortal souls as says Rene Descartes, occupy an independent "realm" of existence distinct from the embodied self or that of the physical world) as well but in reality there is a Vedantic oneness of the empirical self and the Supreme Self .

There is another paradoxical statement to be found. Uddalaka Aruni while explaining the subtle essence, known as the Supreme Self, to his son Swetaketu asks him to bring a fruit of a Nyagrodha tree and to break it. Then he asks his son, ‘what do you see there?’ ‘These extremely fine seeds,’ responds his son. ‘Of these break one,’ asks the father. ‘It is broken’, the son says. ‘What do you see there?’ ‘Nothing at all’, Venerable Sir.’ ‘This is the **subtle essence**,’ father said, ‘having no name and form and out of this the world and this Nyagrodha tree and everything arise.’ This is not only paradoxical but mysterious and so these texts are called mystic texts. Mystery widens when Yajnavalkya says atman or the pure self is free from differential quality or without internality and externality and hence it can be understood only through negative, not so, not so (net,neti) e.g. it is non-destructible, non-perishable, incomprehensible, non-

attachable, neither large nor infinitesimal, neither burning nor moist etc.

Reality is one, and the individual is essentially identical with it. In the sentence, ‘ Prajnanam Brahma’ or Consciousness is Brahman, a definition of Reality is given. **The best definition of Brahman would be to give expression to its supra-essential essence,** and not to describe it with reference to accidental attributes, such as creatorship etc. **That which is ultimately responsible for all our sensory activities, as seeing, hearing, etc., is Consciousness.** Though Consciousness does not directly see or hear, it is impossible to have these sensory operations without it. Hence it should be considered as the final meaning of our mental and physical activities. Brahman is that which is Absolute, fills all space, is complete in itself, to which there is no second, and which is continuously present in everything, from the creator down to the lowest of matter. It, being everywhere, is also in each and every individual. This is the meaning of Prajnanam Brahma occurring in the Aitareya Upanishad.

How does one reach such a stage of subtle essence?

How does it happen? How the progressive movement of Man's life from physical self to metaphysical self or atman and ultimate realization of the atman as one with Parmatman or Brahman happens ?

Apara and Para Vidya

The embodied self also has knowledge (consciousness) but it is lower knowledge or the knowledge of the material world (*apara vidya*). On the other hand the higher knowledge (*para vidya*) or the knowledge of Brahman, who is known as pure consciousness and that knowledge unfolds a reality which transcends the subject-object distinction and also which takes one beyond all duality. The knowledge acquired empirically creates the difference between *jiva* and *Atman* but when the true knowledge (*samyak jnana*) leads to *para vidya*, or revelation of the supreme knowledge, then the *jiva* realizes the unity and turns into *jivatman*.

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Because of ignorance and also due to lack of knowledge or true knowledge (prajna or prakista jnana) the empirical self - the *Jiva* - cannot realize that he is the immortal soul or Atman.

The Upanishad seers are to extend the law of **spiritual universalism** to the utmost bound of human existence. The goal is not a heavenly state of bliss or rebirth in a better world, **but freedom from the objective, cosmic law of karma or finitude** and identity with the Supreme Consciousness and Freedom.

Freedom is that when one leaves the path of discursive knowledge and goes for the path of intuitive knowledge , which is the way of wisdom born by **love**, contemplation (meditation or *upasana*) of the One and then losing oneself in **ecstasy and joy (*anandam*)**. It concludes with the affirmation that Absolute Reality is *Satyam*, truth, *Jnanam*, consciousness, *anantam*, infinity

Two birds perch on the self same tree

This is explained in Mundaka Upanishad by an imagery of two birds bound one to another in close friendship, perch on the self same tree. One of them eats the fruits of the tree with relish, while the other looks on without eating. One of the birds, who is eating the fruit, is the jiva, limited by ignorance and therefore bound by body, mind, attachment and action. The other is untainted by the

passing phase of life or by the forms of enjoyment and is only a witness, *sakshi*, but both are bound one to another in close friendship and *jiva* is nothing but the image of the *Paramatman/Brahman*. They are inseparable from each other as is the sun's image from the sun, and when *jiva* sees the other perching on the same branch and also his glory (*justam yada pashyatanyamishamasya/mahimanamiti vitashokah, Mundako, 5.2*), he becomes free from dejection and attains to the unbroken eternal bliss of his own self.

The Upanishadic sage is not describing a schizophrenic personality but the normal division of the self into an acting self and a witnessing self.

When the individual comes to realize the transcendental reality of his own self, which is the Lord of all beings untouched by the passing phenomenon of life, even as the sun is not really tarnished by the dust and dirt of the materials on which it reflects – then his dream of suffering and enjoyment disappears, and he attains to the unbroken eternal bliss of his own self.

Both the birds are important if one is to understand this deep philosophy of the *Atman*. We will have to convert the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” to “I am, therefore I think”. Man therefore seeks to discover what he is.

But this does not happen on its own. He attains this through **veracity** (*satyena, Munduko, 5.5*), **concentration and austerity** (*tapasaa, ibid, 5.5&8*), **the comprehensive knowledge** (*samyak jnana, ibid, 5,5*), **thought** (*chetasaa*), **refinement and purification of understanding** (*jnana prasedana, ibid, 5.8*) and with **purified nature** (*vishudhah svattah, ibid, 5.10*).

New humanity in which both consciousness and sensuous live together

When all distinctions between the internal and the external vanish, the distinction between the Supreme Self and the non-Self also vanishes and one experiences self (pure being) as Pure Consciousness then everything becomes sacred. This is the religiousness of the Upanishads which could be understood by realizing the intertwining of the sacred with the secular and this could lead to the creation of a new humanity in which both

consciousness and sensuous live together and that becomes a reality.

Any split between two brings a split in the self. We are both together, we are neither just spirituality nor just consciousness – nor are we just matter. We are a tremendous harmony between matter and consciousness, between the secular and the sacred

The distinguished psychologist Sudhir Kakkar challenges the claim that Hindus are unique in self-knowledge and self-development. His contention is that Hinduism encourages men and women to be members of groups rather than self determining individuals. Kakkar is not correct. Indian philosophical thought presents the self transcending individuality to realize its higher level of existence and ultimately inspires one to be a good individual.

It is the realization of the limitless infinite in the finite and hence emancipation; in this way the individuality of the self as well as its sublimation fulfills one of the biggest demands of the modern times, i.e. sublimation of one's ego. *Advaita tattva*, says Gaudapada in his magnum opus, *Mandukya Karika*, if properly understood does not oppose any duality whatsoever. Even Shankaracharya by calling his concept of advaita as “non-dualism” accepts the existence of diversity on empirical level.

However as Tagore says that the quality of the infinite is not the magnitude of extension; it is in the advaitam, the mystery of Unity. Hence the Upanishad ultimately says

From unreality lead me to the real,

From darkness to the light,

From death to immortality

But how can one hope to have this prayer granted because infinite is the distance that lies between truth and untruth, between death and deathlessness. Yes this measureless gulf is bridged in a moment when the self-revealing one reveals himself in the soul. There the miracle happens, for there is the meeting ground of the finite and the infinite. This is the mystery of the Upanishads.

A baul, dancing mendicant of Bengal, says that we have first of all to know our own soul under the guidance of our spiritual teacher, and when we have done that we find him, who is the supreme soul, within us.

According to the Upanishads the key to cosmic consciousness, to God-consciousness, is in the consciousness of the soul. To know our soul apart from the self is the first step towards the realization of the supreme deliverance. We must know with absolute certainty that essentially we are spirit. This we can do by

winning mastery over self, by rising above all pride, greed and fear, by knowing that worldly losses and physical death can take nothing away from the truth and the greatness of our soul. The Upanishads say with great emphasis, Know thou the One, The Soul (*tamevaikam janatha atmanam*). It is the bridge leading to the immortal being (*amritasyaisha setuh*).

This is the ultimate end of man, to find the One which is in him, which is his truth, which is his soul; the key with which he opens the gate of the spiritual life, the heavenly kingdom.

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