

Chapter VI. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Atmic principles, experience, and constant practise

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* is affiliated with the *White (Sukla) Yajur-veda*. Of its six sections, all except the third and fourth describe worship (*upasana*) associated with ritualistic action (*karma*). The third and fourth sections deal with the teachings of Yajnavalkya on spiritual truth, which he imparted to Janaka. The grandeur of the intellectual eminence of that sage is impressively evident in this *Upanishad*, so the sections are referred to as *Yajnavalkya Kanda*. This part of *Brihadaranyaka* offers the best guide for aspirants eager to reach the goal of liberation.

The *Brihadaranyaka* is the last of the famous ten *Upanishads*. On account of its size, it is named *brihath* (big); since it is best studied in the silence of the forest (*aranya*), it is an *aranya*; it instructs in knowledge of *Brahman*, so it is classed as a *Upanishad*.

Scholars have designated the first two sections of this text as *Madhu Kanda*, the next two as *Muni Kanda*, and the last two as *Khila Kanda*. The first section deals with the basic principles, as they are; the second proves their truth by reference to experience; and the third shows how to practise them and get mastery over them. The first section teaches spiritual wisdom (*jnana*), which is essential for spiritual progress; it is assimilated with the paths of spiritual activity and contemplative worship—it is not mere dry intellectual discipline. *Khila* means appendix, so the name *Khila Kanda* is appropriate.

The four knowledge instruments: word, seed, measure, and geometry

For those eager to earn spiritual wisdom, there are four instruments or media for acquiring it. They are: word (*pada*), seed (*bija*), measurement (*sankhya*), and geometry (*rekha*). *Word* means the *Vedas* and the codes of law (*smritis*) that attempt to explain them. *Seed* connotes the entire gamut of *mantras* learned directly from the spiritual teacher (*guru*). Measurement is of two kinds, *Vedic* and worldly (*loukika*). *Vedic* measurement means the calculations and quantitative analysis of the various *mantras*; *worldly* refers to the numbers and their interrelations as far as they are related to the external world and the interrelations of human activities. *Geometry* also has two such categories: *Vedic* geometry is part of the worship activity mentioned in the *Vedas*, and worldly geometry is part of the mathematics of the universe.

Unity in diversity in nature

The *Madhu Kanda* describes the Brahma Principle in light of the categories accepted as authoritative by the scriptures. God (*Purusha*) is the primeval Person, from whom or on whom all this name-form manifoldness has emanated. We conceive the horse in the horse sacrifice (*aswamedha*) as the Creator (*Prajapathi*) Himself. He is directed to impose on the horse the characteristics and attributes of *Prajapathi*, so that he might acquire the fruits of that ritual. This portion is known also as the “Sacrificial horse-related text” (*Aswa-Brahmana*). Again, the fire that is the central figure in the sacrifice is also to be felt and consecrated as *Prajapathi*. Some descriptions attribute the qualities of *Prajapathi* to the god Agni, so this is called *Agni-Brahmana*.

This world (*jagath*), taken as true by the deluded, is just a jumble of names and forms; it is devoid of the permanence that only *Atma* can have. Hence, it breeds disgust and discontent and causes renunciation to grow. The mind is soon free from attachment to the objects of sensory pleasure, and it moves along its natural bent to *Brahman* itself. All sounds are names; voice is the cause for its emergence. Form is the result of vision or sight; it emerges from the eye. *Karma* similarly has the body as its source; the body is just a context for speech and other instruments. Contemplation on such truths helps the process of inquiry into the *Atma* to start and progress.

The vital air (*prana*), the body that is its basis, the head, which is the seat of the instruments of acquiring knowledge, the strength that is derived from food—all these are considered in this *Upanishad*.

Just as the sweetness of a thousand flowers is collected into honey, so this world (*jagath*) is a concatenation of the elements. *Dharma*, truth (*sathya*), and such abstract principles, people, and such concrete living beings, the first incarnation of Brahma (*Viraat-Purusha*) and such conceptions—all these again are the effects of the same *Brahman* principle, i.e. an immortal changeless principle. The realisation that this principle inheres in every individual is knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*).

Janaka's sacrifice

Janaka, the King of Videha, celebrated a sacrifice, giving away vast wealth in gifts. Many *brahmins* from the Kuru-Panchala territory attended. The King had a thousand cows decorated with anklets, necklaces, and hornlets of gold and announced that they would be donated to whoever taught him the *Brahman*. The *brahmins*, though great scholars in their own line, hesitated to claim the cows, through fear of failure. Yajnavalkya, however, was so confident that he asked his students to drive the cows to his ashram (hermitage)! The other *brahmins* got enraged at his audacity and started testing his scholarship and experience.

Yajnavalkya explains the significance of ritual

The first to challenge Yajnavalkya was Janaka's family priest. The answers that the sage gave to his questions clarify the method of attaining the *Atma* encased in the vital airs (*pranas*), through the conjoint *yogas* of action (*karma*) and devotion. In the sacrifice, the sacrificial priest's voice is Agni, time (*kala*) is Vayu, and the mind of the performer is the moon—such is the manner in which one has to grasp the meaning of ritual and free oneself from the limitations of mortality.

Yajnavalkya explains the concept of Atma as super consciousness

The next to accost the sage was Bujyu. His questions were: Is there an entity called God (*Purusha*) who rules the senses and who is not entangled in this current named life (*samsara*)? Or is there no God of this type? If there is one such, what are his characteristics?

Yajnavalkya answered him thus: Your *Atma* is the entity you inquired about; just as a wooden contrivance cannot operate on its own but must be moved by some outside power or inside force, or just as this arm can move like this only when the will operates on it, so too, unless a super-spiritual power presides, the body cannot act and the vital airs cannot function as they do. He is the seer of the see-ing function of the body; He hears—not the ear. The super-consciousness (*chetana*) that sees and hears and feels is but a reflection of the *Atma* on the mind. That super-consciousness sees even the seer; what happens is that the consciousness reflected in the mind moves

out through the senses and grasps the external world of the five elements, so it appears as if the consciousness is engaged in activity. Really speaking, it has no activity.

Atma is to be attained by total renunciation

That consciousness (*chetana*) is the *Atma*; it is beyond the reach of the senses, it is above and beyond the subtle and even the causal bodies (*sariras*). It has been understood by experience where the *Atma* is and what its nature is. It is the same in all. The *Atma* is to be attained by total renunciation. Attachment to children, riches, wife, etc. —all have to be given up; these originate in desire. Why, all activities, whether ordinary or ritual or worshipful, are basically the products of desire. The desire for the fruit is present in ritual actions also. There is no denying this. Hence, they are opposed to true renunciation (*sanyasa*).

Light and darkness cannot be together, at the same place and time. So too, activity (*karma*) and knowledge of *Atma* cannot be together. Renunciation is renunciation of all action (*sarvakriya-parithyaga*). Begging for food is an action and is against renunciation. The *brahmins* of ancient days knew this; they gave up attachment and, through the path of withdrawal (*nivritti*), realised the Reality. This is scholarship —this understanding and this attainment. This is the achievement, the adventure, the fruit, the strength, and the endurance. He alone is a *brahmin* who has detached himself from all things concerned with non-*Atmic* ends. All other credentials are secondary.

Brahman is the warp and woof of Creation

In this *Upanishad*, the all-pervasiveness (*sarva-antar-yamithwa*) of the *Atma* is described. All this earth becomes habitable through association with water. Without water, it would fall apart like a lump of rice flour.

Gargi asked Yajnavalkya what the earth is based on. This question and the answer given inform us that earth, water, space (*akasa*), sun, moon, constellation, celestial being, Indra, *Prajapathi*, the world of Brahma —all these, one from the other, were woven out of the supreme *Atmic* Principle (*Param-atma-thathwa*), which is the warp and woof, the yarn of creation. Such truths are beyond the reach of the imagination of people. They have to be imbibed from the scriptures (*sastras*) by a clarified intellect.

Yajnavalkya negated Gargi's arguments, for her questions could not be solved by mere intellectual feats; they could be solved only by intuition earned by the guidance of a *guru*. The earth is pervaded and protected by air. The individualised Universal, individualised according to the impressions of experience in previous lives, is associated with seventeen instruments: the five organs of action (*karmen-driyas*), the five organs of perception (*jnanen-driyas*) the five vital airs (*pranas*), the mind (*manas*), and the intellect (*buddhi*).

The concrete body is a mutation of the Earth; it is pervaded by air. Forty-nine “earth-bits (*angas*)” can be identified in the body, and, like a string that holds pearls together, “air” holds them together as one coordinate whole. When the air leaves the body for good, the earth-bits become distinct and derelict. The body then becomes a corpse. However, the immanent spirit (*antar-yamin*) that is in the body-complex abode, the mystery that is beyond the reach of that complex, the motivating force of the impulses and intentions of that complex —that immanent spirit has no death; It is *Atma*.

The never-changing Reality is the basis of the phenomenal world

Gargi put her second question —after taking due permission from the gathering, for it is not courteous to pose problems without such notice. Her question was: On what does the inner Core —the *Atma*— rest in the past, present, and future in this dual world? Gargi’s intention was to bring about Yajnavalkya’s discomfiture, for he would be forced to admit that “The timeless Entity is beyond words and cannot be described at all.” This shows that Gargi was also an adept in the knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*), so you can infer that in the field of knowledge of *Brahman* there is no place for distinctions between one sex and the other.

“The masters of *Brahmic* wisdom declare that the highest *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*) is immanent in the unmanifested ether (*akasa*),” said Yajnavalkya, thus escaping from the trying situation into which Gargi wanted to drive him. Then he described the nature of that Indestructible (*A-kshara*): It has no gross, subtle, or other such changes; It has no material qualification like colour, smell, shape, etc. There are no “measures” to comprehend It. Time is but the execution of Its will. Why elaborate? The Sun and the five elements all carry out Its will.

Gargi then asked the assembled *brahmins* to bow before Yajnavalkya and acknowledge his supremacy. That action stopped further questionings.

Brahman is the Source of all Bliss

The *Atma* is effulgent, just as the sun is, by its very nature. People say that they “see” the *Atma* or Its effulgence, but there is no seeing It. Since It has no second, nothing is outside It. It is not seen, and It cannot see. It has no organs of sight or smell; it has no parts that, when coordinated, can perform any function.

From the lowest joy to the highest bliss of *Brahman* (*Brahma-ananda*), each step is an increase of the feeling of delight. Words like highest bliss (*Param-ananda*) indicate only stages of bliss (*ananda*). As a matter of fact, all types of bliss are derived from the primary basic source of the bliss of *Brahman*. Yajnavalkya explained all this to Janaka, for he took great delight in instructing the king on all that he knew.

The body grows like a tree sprouting from a tiny seed, and, when the body falls like a ripe fruit to the ground, the seed in it grows into another tree. Voice and other senses also follow; the breath also takes to its own path. The *Atma* alone is not affected, one way or the other. It remains as ever: unmoved, immovable.

Through sinful deeds, sin (*papa*) accumulates; through meritorious deeds, merit (*punya*). They produce the impulses for a new body, as the primary motive force of the body (*sarira*). The *Atma* leaves the old body, with its vision directed to the new one it occupies, like a caterpillar fixes its forelegs on a spot when it lifts up its hind legs. However, the knower of Self (*Atma-jnani*) has no impulse toward bodily activities, so in his case the *Atma* is not bothered by a new body at all. The path of spiritual wisdom is the path of the knower of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vid*).

The action-enthusiasts are led on to renunciation (*tapas*). The knowers of Self have escaped from desire, so their minds know no anguish or agony or yearning, which is the mark of renunciation. They are the very Artist who has evolved the creation (the very *Viswakartha*). One who has attained the vision of Brahmanhood has nothing further to attain, realise, guard, or seek.

All things are loved for Atma alone

The instruction that Yajnavalkya gives in this *Upanishad* to Maitreyi, his consort, reveals to us clearly the knowledge of the Self (*Atma-jnana*) that comes after a study of the scriptures with reasoning as a constant com-

panion. It also describes the principles of renunciation (*sanyasa*), which is the instrument for getting that spiritual wisdom. The entire sensory world and the senses have to be equated only with the dream-reality; there is no use pursuing them as ultimate and valuable.

The *Atma* alone has to be loved; all other things are loved for the sake of the *Atma*. When the *Atma* is understood, everything else is understood. All effects are subsumed by the Cause. The ocean is the goal of all the waters; so too, all tastes find their goal in the tongue, all forms realise themselves in the eye, all sounds are for the ear, all resolutions have the mind as their goal. That is to say, the entire creation merges in *Brahman*.

Yajnavalkya, the crown jewel of scholars of Brahmic knowledge

In his reply to Bujyu, Yajnavalkya reveals his knowledge of the process of evolution of the universe (*Brahmanda-nirmana*). In his reply to Gargi's two questions, he reveals and teaches the true nature of *Brahman*, which is direct spiritual knowledge (*a-paroksha*). In the *Sakalya-brahmana*, the sage has astounded everyone by his erudition in spiritual mysteries.

He earned victory in the Hall of Janaka from the wisest of the land. He sanctified it by his teaching. He met the hard tests of the crooked Bujyu and the harder tests of the eager inquirer, Gargi, with equanimity and skill. He was acclaimed as the crown jewel of scholars.

Of course, he himself acknowledged greatness wherever he recognised it. He was generous enough to recognise the greatness of the teachers who were instructing Janaka until then.

Lastly, he felt that he had no more to learn or earn, so he became a monk. Realising that Maitreyi, his consort, was also eager to attain realisation, he instructed her in the knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*), for in those days women were considered equally fit to practise the path of spiritual wisdom, which leads to liberation.