

Chapter IV. Mundaka Upanishad

This *Upanishad* begins with an invocation, praying that the eye may see auspicious things, that the ear may hear auspicious sounds, and that life may be spent in contemplation of the Lord. The teaching of this *Upanishad* is referred to as knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*), either because it describes first the message of *Hiranyagarbha*, the causal *Brahman*, or because the message relates the glory of *Brahman*. This *Upanishad* speaks of knowledge of *Brahman* as the mystery that only those with shaven heads and those who go through a rite of having fire on the shaven head can understand. So, it is called *Shaven Head* (*Mundaka*). This *Upanishad* is honoured as the crest of all, since it expounds the very essence of knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*). It is assigned to the Fourth *Veda*, the *Atharvana*.

The transcendent and immanent aspects of Supreme Reality

This knowledge has been handed down from teacher to pupil by word of mouth, enriched and confirmed by experience. When it deals with the attributeless principle, it is also called the knowledge of the Transcendent (*Para-vidya*); when it deals with the attribute-full, the materialised principle, it is called the knowledge of the immanent (*a-Para-vidya*), not the transcendent aspect. These two are found in this *Upanishad*. They were taught by Sounaka to Angiras; that is what the text announces. The *Vedas* and the subsidiary texts (*Vedangas*) deal with knowledge of the immanent or materialised aspect of *Brahman*. The *Upanishads* deal specifically with knowledge of the transcendent *Brahman*. But the interesting thing is: knowledge of the immanent, materialised *Brahman* leads to the knowledge of the transcendent *Brahman*, which is the goal.

The spider evolves out of itself the magnificent manifestation of the web; so too, this moving, changing world is manifested from the causative *Brahman*. The objective world is the product of the creator-creation complex. It is true, factual, and useful as long as one is unaware of the Reality. The utmost that one can gain by activity—that is, holy or sacred activity—is heaven (*swarga*), which has a longer lease of life but nevertheless has an end. So, the seeker loses all yearning for heaven and approaches an elderly teacher full of compassion, who instructs the seeker in the discipline for realising *Brahman*.

Brahman is both the material and the instrumental cause of the world

All beings are *Brahman* and no other. They all emanate from *Brahman*. Just as sparks emanate from fire, just as hair grows on the skin but is different from it, so too beings originate from *Brahman*. *Brahman* causes the sun, moon, stars, and planets to revolve in space; *Brahman* grants the consequence of all acts of beings. The individual (*jivi*) and the Lord (Iswara), the individual and the Universal, are two birds sitting on the same tree—the human body. The individual acts and suffers the consequences of those acts. The Lord sits quietly, as a witness of the other bird. When the individual looks at the Lord and realises that it is but an image, it escapes from grief and pain. When the mind is drawn by yearning to know the Lord, all other low desires diminish and disappear. Then, knowledge of *Atma* is attained.

The last *mantra* of this *Upanishad* declares that its aim is to make people attain that spiritual wisdom (*jnana*). *Munda* means head, and we can say that this *Upanishad* is the head of all *Upanishads*. Even the *Brahma Sutra*

devotes two chapters to elaborate on the inner meaning of the *mantras* of this *Upanishad*.

This *Upanishad* has three sections, with two chapters in each. In the first section, knowledge of the materialised aspect of *Brahman* (*a-Para-vidya*) is dealt with; in the second, knowledge of the transcendental Supreme (*Para-vidya*) and the means of mastering it. In the third, the nature of the Reality and of the release from bondage are defined. Activity (*karma*) that helps attain the *Brahman* is described in the *mantras*. That is why this *Upanishad* is respected as very sacred.

As already indicated, the spider spins out the web from itself without any extraneous agency; it also takes in the web it has spun. So too, creation was effected without an agent and the universe emanated. This nature (*prakriti*) is but a transformation of the basic *Brahman*, like pot from mud, cloth from cotton, jewels from gold. So, *Brahman* is called the material (*upadana*) cause of nature. It is also the instrumental cause (*nimitta-karana*). For, nature can be the result only of a higher intelligence, an intelligence that is all-comprehensive (*sarva-jna*).

Perform individual duties as well as public service activities

Heaven is the highest attainable stage through activity (*karma*). Of such rites (*karmas*), the worship of fire, called *agnihotra*, is the chief. The performance of such rites contribute to the cleansing of the mind. Such cleansing is a necessary preliminary to knowledge of the Transcendent (*Para-vidya*). The flames that rise high from the sacrificial altar of fire appear to the performers as if they are hailing them on to realise the Reality or *Brahman*. One who does the rite with full awareness of the significance of the *mantra* is able to reach the solar splendour, through the offerings made; they take the performer to the region of Indra, the Lord of the gods.

The *Vedas* recommend two types of obligatory activities (*karmas*): individually auspicious and charitably auspicious (*ishtha* and *purtha*). The rite of *agnihotra*, adherence to truth, asceticism (*tapas*), study of the *Vedas*, service offered to guests in one's home —these are individually auspicious.

Construction of temples, caravanserais, rest-houses, tanks, planting of avenue trees —such acts are charitable. These give consequences that are beneficial, but all such cause-effect chains are transient; they are fundamentally defective.

Om is the arrow and Brahman the target

The entire creation is bound up with name and form and is thus unreal. It can be described in words, so it is limited and circumscribed by the intellect and the mind. Only the supreme Person (*Parama-purusha*) is eternal, real, and pure. He is the prompter of activity and the dispenser of consequence. But He is beyond the eye, beyond the intellect. Like the spokes of a wheel that radiate from the hub, that lead from all directions to the centre, all creation radiates from Him.

The mind is the instrument to reach the central hub and know that all spokes radiate from it. *Brahman* is the target to be reached by the arrow-mind. Have your mind fixed on the target and, using the *Upanishadic* teaching as the bow, shoot straight and hard, to hit the *Brahman* and master. *Om* (*Pranava*) is the arrow; *Brahman* is the target.

The *Brahman* illumines the individual soul (*jivi*) by getting reflected in the inner consciousness (*an-thah-karana*). One has only to turn that consciousness away from the objective world, contact with which contaminates

the mind. Now, train the inner consciousness to meditate on the *Om* with single-pointed attention. Meditate on the *Atma* as unaffected by the individual, though It is in one and with one and activating one. Meditate on Him in the heart, from which countless subtle nerves (*naadis*) radiate in all directions. If this process is followed, one can attain spiritual wisdom (*jnana*).

Brahman is beyond rituals or asceticism

The universe is an instrument to reveal the majesty of God. The inner firmament in the heart of man is also equally a revelation of His glory. He is the Breath of one's breath. Since He has no specific form, He cannot be indicated by words. Nor can His mystery be penetrated by the other senses. He is beyond the reach of asceticism, beyond the bounds of *Vedic* rituals. He can be known only by an intellect that has been cleansed of all trace of attachment and hatred, of egotism and the sense of possession.

Only spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) can grant self-realisation. Meditation can confer concentration of the faculties; through that concentration, spiritual wisdom can be won, even while in the body.

The *Brahman* activates the body through the five vital airs (*pranas*). It condescends to reveal itself in that same body as soon as the inner consciousness attains the requisite purity. For the *Atma* is immanent in the inner and outer senses just as heat is in fuel and butter is in milk. Now, the individualised consciousness is like damp fuel, soaked in the foulness of sensory desires and disappointments. When the pool in the heart becomes clear of the slimy overgrowth, the *Atma* shines in its pristine splendour. One who acquires knowledge of this *Atman* is to be revered, for that one is liberated. One has become *Brahman*, that which one strove to know and be.