

Chapter VII. Prasna Upanishad

The *Prasna Upanishad* is an appendix of the *Atharvana-veda*. It is so named because it is in the form of questions (*prasnas*) and answers. By this means, it discusses more elaborately some topics dealt with briefly in the *Mundaka Upanishad*. It has thus become a commentary on the *Mundaka Upanishad*.

For example, the *Mundaka* says that knowledge (*vidya*) is of two types —absolute transcendent and worldly— and that knowledge of the world-related *Brahman* is of two kinds —action and worship (*karma* and *upasana*). The second and third questions in *Prasna Upanishad* deal with worship. The discipline of action is fully covered in the section on action (*Karma Kanda*), so it is not elaborated on here. When both activity and worship are practised, regardless of the fruits thereof, they promote renunciation and non-attachment. This is the conclusion arrived at by the first question. So, studying the *Prasna Upanishad* after the *Mundaka* makes the subject clearer.

Seekers meet the guru with sincere heart offerings

Of the two entities, the eternal supreme transcendent (*para*) *Brahman* and the worldly or qualified (*a-para*) *Brahman*, the worldly *Brahman* is incapable of conferring the goals of human life (*purusha-arthas*), which are of lasting value. Realising this, and eager to attain the eternal supreme *Brahman*, aspirants approached Pippalada, a competent teacher. The word *seeking* (*anveshana*) used here to signify the attitude of these disciples shows that these disciples, attached to the lower Self (*a-para Brahman*) and unrelated to the Supreme Absolute Over-Self, fail to identify their own basic truth as the *Atma*. That is why they still seek it somewhere outside the truth of their being! The eternal unique transcendent *Brahmic* principle can be known only through the discipline of the scriptures (*sastras*), directed personally by a teacher.

Seekers have to approach the *guru* as holding in the hand sincere heart-offerings, that is to say not simply “holding the ritualistic fuel, the sacrificial fire”. Further, worthy, desirable offerings should be presented.

The seekers meet Pippalada, who tells them, “The rare and precious teaching related to the fundamental mystery of the universe and the Self, known as knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-vidya*), cannot be imparted to the uninitiated. Students have first to be kept under observation and tested for a year.”

Beings are born to perpetuate Creation

When the year is over, Kabandi Kathyayana asks Pippalada, “Why are beings born?”

“Those who wish for progeny are the desirers of offspring. The wish is basically to become the progeny, to perpetuate oneself. *Hiranyagarbha*, who is non-separate from the supreme *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*), is the *Prajapathi* (God presiding over creation). *Hiranyagarbha*, as *Prajapathi*, wishes for progeny; he has traces of knowledge of the lower or world-related *Brahman* (*a-Para-vidya*) attached to Him from past origins, which induce in Him the wish.” This is the reply of the *guru*.

Contemplate on the orderly universe and its principles

Surya (the Sun) illumines all beings in the ten regions with His rays. Surya is the very Self of *Prajapathi*,

so all beings born in the regions so illumined become the very “self” of *Prajapathi*. The word “vital air (*prana*)” therefore refers to Aditya (the Sun) Itself, for the Sun gives the vital essence (*prana*). Since all beings are able to live by consumption of food, etc., the Sun is also known as the Cosmic Universal Personality (*Vaiswanara*). The whole universe is of His nature, so He is also known as Cosmic Form (*Viswa-rupa*).

The year is an indicator of time, according to the position of the sun. Time is but a series of days and nights, and these phases are caused by the sun. The rotation of the moon causes phases in fullness. The twin forces, the sun and moon, are products of *Prajapathi*, so time, which is marked out by the tropics, seasons, months, etc., is also of the same essence. *Prajapathi* also has northern and southern cycles.

The contemplation and worship of *Prajapathi* in this universal aspect is referred to as “spiritual wisdom (*jnana*)” itself. Those who are endowed with this spiritual wisdom and who have mastery over the senses as well as faith in the *Vedas* can easily convince themselves that they are the very *Atma*. Pursuing the northern path (*uttara-marga*), they reach the spiritual stage known as the world of the Sun (*Surya-loka*). That world is the refuge of all living beings. Only those who worshipfully engage themselves in their daily duties, without any desire for the fruits thereof, can enter that world of the Sun.

The seasons like spring are the feet of the Sun, the symbol of time; the twelve months are His personal traits; He is the Cause of the worlds —these truths are expressed in the fourth and sixth *mantras*. The rains are also caused by the Sun, so He is the master of another world too, the third, the heavenly world (*dyu-loka*).

Consecrate the body, a complex of vital elements, by sacrifice

Ether (*akasa*), air (*vayu*), fire (*agni*), water (*jala*), and earth (*bhumi*) —the elements that make up the body— have their presiding deities. The “activating” senses like voice and the “knowing” senses like the eye also have their deities, which reside in them and promote their functions. Finally, the mind and the intellect also have their deities; they are all pillars that support the being and prevent the structure of the body from falling asunder.

The body is a complex produced by a combination of the five elements. The organs of perception (*jnanendriyas*) are the consequences of this combination. So, the body is a bundle of consequences and causes. Like the spokes of a wheel, they are fixed in the hub of vital airs (*prana*). So too, the sacred hymns, the *Yajur-vedic mantras*, the *Sama-vedic mantras*, the sacrificial rituals (*yajnas*) where they are employed, the valour of the warrior (*kshatriya*) who protects the people from danger, the *brahmanic* force consecrating the sacrifices —all these are of the nature of the vital air.

When *Prajapathi* becomes the cloud and pours rain, all beings rejoice and are enabled to live. “All things that contribute to happiness are bound to You; cherish us therefore as the Mother. You cause all wealth and welfare related to spiritual and physical protection. Give us that wealth and wisdom.” The *Rik*, *Yajur*, and *Sama mantras* are the *brahmanic* wealth; riches are the warrior (*kshatriya*) wealth. Thus, the *Upanishad* elaborates on the vital air (*prana*) as *Prajapathi* and its functions and attributes.

The Sun governs the vital air and vital functions

Thereafter, Pippalada takes up Bhargava’s question. Later, Kausalya, from the Aswalayana school, asks him about the vital air (*prana*). Pippalada replies, “My dear boy, like the shadow caused by a person, the vital air is

produced by the *Atma*. The vital air dedicates itself to the *Atma* through the resolve of the mind (*manas*). Like a ruler who arranges for the governance of his possessions, the chief vital air appoints different airs (*pranas*), assigning functions and areas of work for each. The chief vital air has the Sun (Aditya) and other Gods as its impelling force. Like sparks leaping out of the flames of a raging fire, beings emanate from the imperishable supreme *Atma* (*Paramatma*) and lose themselves in the self-same fire.” This is mentioned in the *Mundaka* (II-I-I).

The Self abides in all beings

Then, Pippalada answers Gargi, “The rays of the setting sun merge in the Sun itself; they emanate and spread again when the sun rises the next day. In the same manner, during a dream, the sensory world gets merged in the consciousness-reflecting mind, and when one wakes from sleep, the sensory impressions emanate as of old and move out in their native form. That is why the Divine Self (*Purusha*), which abides in all beings, doesn’t hear or see or touch or enjoy. It doesn’t walk or talk.

The *Atma*, which is pure effulgence during the dream stage, sees, hears, and experiences as subconscious impulses (*vasanas*) whatever it sees, hears, and experiences during the waking stage. When the statement is made that “The *Atma* is the base of everything”, the impression is created that everything is different from It. But the distinction that is apparent between the “Base of all” and the “individual souls (*jivas*)” that rest upon It is merely an illusion caused by circumstances; it is mental, not fundamental. Pippalada also said that whatever world (*loka*) is connoted by the deity worshiped through the *Om* (*Pranava*), that world will be attained.

God resides in the heart

Next, Sukesha, Bharadwaja’s son, questioned the master. Pippalada’s answer ran thus: “The Divine Self (*Purusha*) you inquire about is in this body itself, as the resident of the inner sky, the heart. It is on account of His being there that you shine forth in full splendour of attainment and personality. Souls emanate from Him and merge in Him. Like milestones, progressively increasing and interdependent, the Earth, Durga (the mother goddess), food, the supreme Soul (*Purusha*) —all four principles originate from the other (according to the second section of the *Taithiriya Upanishad*). The origin might not be evident to the eye, but, since the origin of the sense organs (*jnanen-driyas*) and the organs of action (*karmen-driyas*) has been described already, the origin of the supreme Soul is as good as said. All rivers join the sea and lose their names and forms therein. The rivers are thereafter called the “sea”. So too, only the supreme Soul or Self remains. He is without any attainment and traits or changes. He is imperishable, endless. That is all I know about *Brahman* and that is all there is to know,” said Pippalada to Kabandi and other disciples.

The never-changing Absolute Reality and the ever-changing phenomenon

This *Upanishad* ends with respectful homage paid by the disciple to the master. The father gives only the body; Pippalada gave them the body of *Brahman* by teaching them the *Atmic* principle (*Atma-thathwa*). The six disciples, who asked six questions in all, were,

1. Sukesha, son of Bharadwaja.
2. Sathyakama, or Saibya, son of Sibi.

3. Souryayani, grandson of Surya, born in the family of Garga (hence, called Gaargya).
4. Kausalya, son of Ashvala.
5. Bhargava or Vaidarbhi, who was born in Vidarbha in the line of Bhrigu.
6. Kabandi Kathyayana, a descendent of Kathya.

The first section of *Mundaka Upanishad* elaborates on both the highest or transcendental (*para*) and the lower or creation- or world-related (*a-para*) aspects, along with the causal or creative aspect of *Brahman*. Although its second section begins by extolling the creation-related aspect, it ends with the firm declaration of the evanescent nature of the creation-related aspect.

In the answer to the sixth question, the *Om (Pranava)* as the core of all methods of gaining the transcendental and the non-transcendental aspects is fully elaborated upon.

The questions and answers in the *Prasna Upanishad* bring out the implications of the *Mundaka* and serve as a nice commentary on that succinct text. The 6 questions are:

1. What exactly is the relationship between the transcendental or non-dual (*para*) and the differentiating or dualistic (*a-para*) principles?
2. Who protects and guards created beings?
3. How does *Hiranyagarbha* emerge from the Supreme *Atma (Paramatma)*?
4. How does creation take place from the Supreme *Atma*?
5. How does the consciousness-full (*chaithanya*-full) principle, the vital air (*prana*), enter the body and get diverted into five channels?
6. Which senses operate in the three stages of waking, dreaming, and sleeping?

These lines of inquiry are followed in this *Prasna Upanishad*.