

Chapter VIII. Kena Upanishad

Seek to know the Eternal, not the ephemeral

The *Kena Upanishad* is ascribed to *Sama-veda* and its *Thalavakara* branch, so it is also referred to as the *Thalavakaropanishad*. The name *Kena* is derived from the first word of the stanza of the first section of the *Upanishad*:

Who impels the mind to alight on its object? Enjoined by whom does the vital force proceed to function? At whose behest do men utter speech? What intelligence, indeed, directs the eyes and the ears?

*Keneshitham pathathi preshitham manah, kena praanah prathamah praithiyukthah,
keneshithaam vaacham imaam vadhanthi, chakshuh shrothram ka-u-deveo yunakthi?*

The ear, skin, eye, tongue, nose —these five senses are able to cognise sound, touch, form, taste, and smell respectively. Objects of knowledge are cognised only through these five. The world is experienced through these instruments, which stand intermediate between the knower and the knowable. The inner capacity to understand objects is named mind (*manas*). The mind moves out through the senses (*jnanen-driyas*) mentioned before and attaches itself to objects. At that time, by that very occurrence, the mind assumes the form of that object; this is called a function (*vrutti*). The mind is non-intelligent (*a-chetana*), so its transformations and manipulations (*vikaras*) are also non-intelligent, non-vital. A wooden doll has only the property of wood; a sugar doll, the property of sugar. The unintelligent mind cannot achieve knowledge of the supreme Intelligence (*Chetana*), which pervades the Universe.

Just as the unintelligent chariot is directed by a charioteer, a charioteer must direct the unintelligent mind (*manas*), seated in the mind and having it as His vehicle. The motive force that activates the inner instruments, the senses of action, the senses of knowledge, the five vital airs (*pranas*) —that force is God. The questions quoted above imply that this force is distinct from the senses. Naturally, therefore, the motivator of the entire group of senses must be distinct from the mind too, right? Those who seek to know the eternal, convinced that all acts and activities are ephemeral, will not worry about the ephemeral.

The Atma activates and illumines all

That eternal entity is agitationless, so it is not moved by the three-fold urge. It does not order the senses about for this purpose or that. The question then arises: Do the mind (*manas*), the vital air (*prana*), speech, the eye, the ear, etc., carry out their respective functions prompted by the law of cause and effect? Or are they moved by the wish of a conscious force? That is the doubt.

The ear has the capacity to know sound, the eye is endowed with the skill to know and distinguish form. The other senses are also similarly equipped. When the mind passes out through the knowing-senses toward objects and envelops them, you acquire knowledge about them. Therefore, the five senses and the mind are all instruments of knowledge. How could they manage to perform this intelligent function, being themselves devoid of intelligence?

Well, the answer is: It is all due to the presence of the *Atma*, due to the reflection of the effulgence of the *Atma* on the inner instrument of mind, intellect, memory, and ego (*an-thah-karana*). The Sun illumines the world and makes it active in a thousand ways. So too, the *Atma*, by its spiritual power (*tejas*), activates and illumines the world. All instruments of knowledge are activated by the *Atma*. The electric current energises a machine and does various operations —printing, etc.— but it is not visible or concrete. The electric current is the mover of the movement, the machine of the machine. So too, the *Atmic* splendour (*tejas*) is the Ear of the ear, the Eye of the eye. That is the activating current.

The wonder is: the *Atma* is inactive and without qualifications. It does not get anything done with the mind or the senses, remember. They get activated by the very presence of the *Atma*! The rays of the Sun are not at all aware of the activity they invoke; the *Atma* is not responsible for the activity of the senses. (This teaching was given by Varuna to his son, Bhrigu.)

No knower can know the Knower of All: Atma is beyond senses

The eye, when illumined by the splendour of the *Atma*, is able to grasp form, which is its sphere; it can never hope to illumine the *Atma*, which is self-luminous. The lamp illumines objects, but the objects cannot, in their turn, illumine the lamp. Words can describe or denote only such as possess qualifications, like name, form, quality (*guna*), and action (*kriya*). How can they describe or define that which has no qualifications, no name, no form, no characteristic, viz. the highest *Atma* (*Paramatma*)? You cannot describe sweetness or similar tastes by means of words. The *Atma* is not a subject for description. The non-intelligent mind (*manas*) cannot experience the Intelligence. There is no knower who can know the Knower of all. He is beyond all knowable things. When known, He is no longer knower or knowledge.

Brahman is spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) itself, so it can never be “known” by a “knower”. By the process of knowing, other things can be known, not knowledge itself. The lamp will not crave for another lamp to see itself; nor will it crave for its own light. It has light, it is light —that is all. It sheds light on other objects; it does not shed light on its light. So, you are also light, you are *Atma*. The *Atma* in you is of the same nature as the *Atma* in all beings. It is the only one reality; it has no limitation or attribute or qualification.

Those who claim to know Atma don't really know

The *Atma* can be cognised by the study of the scriptures (*sastras*) and by following the injunctions laid down there. That which cannot be illumined by words or speech or by the senses, that which illumines the word, speech, and all senses —that is *Brahman*, or *Atma*. The first section of this *Upanishad* makes clear that *Brahman* is incapable of being limited or discarded or overlooked.

So, for those who claim that they have seen *Brahman*, “It” is yet a subject for further investigation and inquiry. They have not reached the final stage. For theirs is not authentic wisdom (*jnana*); theirs is but a delusion. The *Atma* of the person who knows is itself the very *Brahman*; that is the undoubted verdict of *Vedanta*, isn't it? Fire can't burn itself; how can *Atma* know *Atma*, how can the knower know Himself? Therefore, the statement “I have known *Brahman*” is an indication of delusion, not of real knowledge.

All people are entitled to knowledge of God; experience is the approach, the proof the result

It is said that *Brahman* has various cognisable and countable forms, but that is only in the limited sense of being qualified by name and form. By Itself, the Absolute doesn't have sound or smell or taste or touch or form. It is ever-existing. In whatever activity you become aware of its presence, that activity lends its appropriate characteristic. In whatever sphere the scriptures (*sastras*) discuss and decide, that sphere becomes the characteristic of *Brahman* for that particular scripture. The consciousness that becomes apparent when it is limited by certain bounds or vessels —that consciousness (*chaithanya*) is *Brahman*. Consciousness is attachment-less; yet, when associated with objects like the physical body, It gives the impression that It is attached. From the fact that when the waters of the lake are agitated the image of the Sun under the water shakes, you cannot infer that the Sun in the sky, which is remote and far away, also shakes! The Sun and the sheet of water are unrelated. No relationship can be posited between these two. Similarly when the body undergoes growth, decay, destruction, etc., it gives the impression that the *Atma* is also affected, but the *Atma* is unaffected.

Brahman is beyond the reach of the intellectual seeker; *Brahman* can be reached only by those who give up the intellect as a useless instrument. Experience alone is the method of approach, the proof, the result. The ultimate state of knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*) is the end of all enquiry, all search. Actual realisation (*saksat-kara*) is the fruition thereof. This highest stage is reached in the quietening of all agitations in all levels of consciousness (*samadhi*), though, of course, the preliminary steps of listening, reflection, and profound meditation are concerned with the intellect (*buddhi*). One will acquire the nature of truth if one understands the nature of the *Atma*; if one does not, then it is a big loss, no doubt. Wise souls recognise in every being and every object the principle of the all-pervading *Atma*, and when they leave the world, they become free from birth and death.

Knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*) is the heritage of all; all people are entitled to it. If one is aware of this, and if, by one's efforts, one achieves spiritual wisdom or *Brahman* using the above-mentioned methods, then verily, one's career in this world is worthwhile. Otherwise, it is all a waste.

Snap the strings of worldly attachment

The *Atma*, when cognised in the consciousness, flashes like a streak of lightning; in a second it will reveal its brilliance and splendour. It is impossible to grasp its full majesty. The mind is the cloak of the *Atma*; it conditions the *Atma*, or rather appears to. So it seems to be very close to the *Atma* and makes you believe that it attains It. But the mind is incapable of doing so. Since the mind is closest, the spiritual aspirant imagines that the mind has realised the *Atma* and yearns for the experience again and again. This, of course, is good, for it fosters the search for merging with *Brahman*.

For the knower of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnani*), the opposites of *dharma* and lack of *dharma*, of merit and demerit, are nonexistent. *Dharmic* life offers the upper realms (*lokas*) after death, and unrighteous life leads one to the lower worlds. But both are shackles for the aspiring aspirant, whose eye is on the removal of ignorance and realisation of spiritual truth. He has to seek to snap the strings that bind the heart to the objective world. So, he wants an answer to the question with which this *Upanishad* starts: By what does the mind grasp things? To attain the spiritual knowledge (*jnana*) of *Brahman*, austerity (*tapas*), self-control, *Vedic* rites, and image worship are all good aids. Spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) has truth (*sathya*) as its location.

This *Kena Upanishad* gives all seekers the instruction of knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*); it deals with *Brahman*, which is spiritual truth (*sathya*), spiritual wisdom (*jnana*), and eternal (*an-antha*).