

Words as vehicles of abstract thinking

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Authors of the Upaniṣads are aware of the difficulties in the treatment of their subject which, as they themselves pronounce, is beyond the power of words to express. 'Not at all by words, not by mind can (the *Puruṣa*) be grasped, and not also by sight.' (Kaṭha. VI.12) It is in brief, beyond the span of the normal machinery of knowledge, since it is this principle whose presence enables the machinery to function. In other words, it is 'the hearing of the hearing, mind of the mind, speech of the speech, breath of the breath, sight of the sight¹.' It must then be 'unknown', one would say. The ancient thinker says: 'It is neither known nor unknown¹.' It is beyond these worldly categories. The only way to its knowledge is the 'spiritual union' (*adhyātma-yoga*, Kaṭha. II.12), implying Yogic meditation, elsewhere termed 'the honed and minute intellect' (*agryayā buddhyā*, Kaṭha. III.12). This situation makes room for all sorts of apparently contradicting wording in its discussion. 'It moves, and it moves not,' says a seer, 'it is far and it is near, it is inside everyone and it is also outside everyone³.' 'It is different from religiosity and also non-religiosity, from the action and the non-action, from the past as well as the future².' A serious student of the Upaniṣads has to find his/her way through such difficulties created by the very nature of their subject. It is in an attempt to bring out this nature that the authors of the Upaniṣads are forced to adopt figurative language as illustrated by examples cited above. These difficulties have enabled the Upaniṣads to mould their own literary elegance.

Under these conditions, what comes to the aid of the Upaniṣadic thinkers is their imaginative faculty in fashioning frame stories and exploring the world of analogies. It also makes their writing readable. In his attempt to establish the supremacy of the breath power in the body complex, the Upaniṣadic thinker conceives of an imaginary contest between the faculties of the body -- as in Olympic Games, for instance. As in all games, he thinks of a strategy to test the ability of each contestant: each organ to leave the body in succession for a pre-determined period; that one would stand supermost at whose absence the body would stop to function. This test established the main breath as the winner. This theme occurs in several Upaniṣads with slight differences. In one of the versions, there is an 'umpire' also, the Creator! (Praśna. II.10, Chāndogya. V.1, Bṛhad. I.5.21 and VI.1)

Another cleverly fabricated story (Chāndogya. VIII.7-12) makes Indra and Virocana approach the Creator on behalf of the gods and demons respectively to acquire knowledge of the Self which, they were told, fulfils all desires. After the formal qualifying period (32 years!), comparable to today's system of keeping Terms in educational institutes, the Creator, to test the grasping power of the students, asked them to look into a large vessel filled with water. 'What you see is the Self,' said he. Obviously, the water showed them their own images, making the impression that the gross body constitutes the Self. The students departed, feeling satisfied that they got what they were searching for. In mid-journey, however, Indra had doubts about the correctness of the impression he formed. He returned to the Creator, who asked him to stay for another qualifying period which he did. The story tells us that Indra spent a total of 101 (32+32+32+5) years for acquiring the true knowledge. Incidentally, this story illustrates the pedagogical tenet that the level of the knowledge should be matching to the ability of the student to receive.

Authors of the Upaniṣads some times start with a series of questions³ and present their discoveries as a reply to them. At other times, they prompt some inquisitive minds to approach an authority for authentic replies as in Praśna. in its very opening. Here, too, as in the story of Indra and Virocana, they are asked to 'keep terms' (luckily, for one year only!) to qualify themselves to receive the replies. The story ends with a touching expression of gratitude from the students: 'You are indeed our father who have reached us to the other shore of ignorance⁴.' We also find one-to-one dialogues on philosophical issues like the one

between Nārada and Sanatkumāra (Chāndogya. VII). This time, the professor asks the student for details of what he already knows and what more he seeks. In reply, Nārada gives a long list of the subjects – all formal – he has studied before and expresses a desire to acquire knowledge which would take him beyond all grief. In reply, Sanatkumāra introduces him to the knowledge of the All-pervasive (*bhūman*) step by step.

As to their basic form, some Upaniṣads are composed exclusively in prose (Māṇḍūkya), while some (Īśa, Kaṭha, Muṇḍaka) are entirely in verse which is mostly regular. Most Upaniṣads are composed in prose interspersed with verses. Closer to the Vedic Saṁhitās, they no doubt reveal propensity to some peculiar older grammatical forms (e.g. *ānandayāti*, Taittirīya. II.7), to the use of expletives (e.g. *uta*, *vāva*, *ha...*) and saṁdhis (e.g. *agniḥ + te = agniṣṭe*, Chāndogya. IV.6.1) as well as the formation of augmentless past forms (e.g. *pari-cacārīt*, Chāndogya. IV.10.2); but, on the whole, their language is akin to classical Sanskrit even to the extent of involved constructions at times⁵. Long compounds are generally conspicuous by their absence (with exceptions such as *vedānta-viṣṭāna-suniścītārthāḥ*, with six components! Muṇḍaka. III.2.6); two-member or three-member compounds is the norm. Vedic peculiarity of treating a prefix as a separate word from the following verbal form is at times seen inherited by the Upaniṣads (*upa tvā neṣye*, Chāndogya. IV.4.5); what is more, even the members of a compound are separated by an outside word (e.g. *evam yo vid*, Kaṭha. VI.18).

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NOTES

- 1 Cf. *śrotrasya śrotram manaso mano yat vāco ha vācam sa u prāṇasya prāṇaḥ / cakṣuṣaś cakṣuḥ...* (Kena. I.2) Also, *anyad eva tad viditād atho aviditād adhi /* (Kena. I.4)
- 2 Cf. *tad ejati, tan naijati, tad dūre tadv antike / tad antr asya sarvasya tad u sarvasyāsya bāhyataḥ //* (Īśa. 5)
Also, *anyatra dharmād anyatrādharmād anyatrāsmāt kṛtākṛtāt / anyatra bhūtāc ca bhavyāc ca...* (Kaṭha. II.14)
- 3 For example: *kiṁ kāraṇam brahma kutaḥ sma jātā jīvāma kena kva ca saṁpratiṣṭhāḥ /...* (Śvetāśvatara. I.1) What is brahman, the cause? Where are we born from? To what do we owe our life? Where are we established?...
- 4 Cf. *tvam hi naḥ pitā yo 'smākam avidyāyāḥ param pāram tārayasi.../* (Prašna. VI.8)
- 5 For instance, *yathā kṛtāya-vijitāyādhare 'yāḥ saṁyanty evam enam sarvam tad abhisameti yat kiṁca prajāḥ sādhu kurvanti, yas tad veda yat sa veda /* (Chāndogya. IV.1.4) 'As when the *kṛta* dice is won, the lower dices are covered, thus all that good which the people do accrues to him who knows what he (Raikva) knows.' Is not this sentence complex enough to test one's ability in clause analysis? Incidentally, this statement makes a reference to the game of dice which is perhaps as old as humanity. We find in the R̥gveda a full hymn expressing repentance of a gambler who finally advises: 'Do not play dice; take to agriculture. Money is precious; enjoy saving it.' (R̥g. X.34.13) Though very old, Vedic society did not have a plain and simple life. Golden days are but a dream of the human mind.