

Upaniṣads: A cross section

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I propose to present in this note some major or minor points arising out of the Upaniṣadic literature which are missed when material is selected to suit a pre-planned scheme.

Being part of the tradition of Vedic schools, Upaniṣads have an unbroken oral tradition in which the recitation starts and ends with a well-wishing chant or prayer associated with the school or branch ending with *Om śāntiḥ. śāntiḥ. śāntiḥ* (May there be peace... cp. Amen!)¹. These chants are at times handed down as part of the text as in the case of the Taittirīya Upa. Shankara takes the *śānti* chant at the end of the Kaṭha Upa. (*Om, saha nav avatu /...*) as part of the text and explains it. Like the main Vedic texts, Upaniṣads are also preserved with their accents which are ignored when they are studied for their contents. Vedic accents are musical in that voice is raised or lowered according to the kinds of accents (mostly 3). Another feature of tradition consciousness is seen in some places in the recording of the line of the teacher and the taught, consisting of over fifty names, through which the Upaniṣad was preserved. We find the same list in Bṛhad. II.6 and IV.6, and a different one in VI.5. It is significant from a sociological point of view that most of the names in the second list are derived after mothers' names, -- a matriarchal trait. A sporadic reference of the kind under discussion is made to Kṛṣṇa Devakī-putra (Chāndogya. III.17.6), presumably the same as played a key-role in the Mahābhārata war and is associated with the immortal work, the Bhagavad-gītā.

Since literature inevitably reflects life, we find in Upaniṣads many aspects of the contemporary common man's life. Howsoever high the goal of philosophy may be, the benefits obtainable from the study of the text are in some places as profane as securing plenty of food². In keeping with this is the reference to the three common desires: for a son, for wealth and for heaven. One who knows the Self, stands above these desires and willingly adopts the life of a mendicant³. Least expected as it may be, we find a section devoted to the details of sex and conception, with parallels from ritual, and also a reference to a paramour of the wife (Bṛhad. VI.4). Even in philosophical discussions, ordinary passions are not unusual. Inordinate pressing for answers was threatened with the falling of the head (i.e. death), and an actual event of such a consequence is noted in the context of a philosophical conference⁴. Such stories may have been fabricated to heighten the status of a famous personality, but the present one may also imply that one must know where to stop. Achievements comparable to Yogic powers are listed as resulting from the knowledge of the Self with a note of dissent: they are said to be true gains covered in untruth⁵. Even Patañjali warns that Yogic powers, although regarded as achievements in worldly life, are but obstacles in meditation (YS III.37). Interestingly enough, there is a reference to underground/buried treasures of gold: people walk over them but do not know what they are treading on. Only the experts know it⁶.

Talking of human nature, we may peep into some hard practices in ancient educational system which conventionally elicits high praise. In ancient times, a student used to live in the house of the teacher (thus making the word *ante-vāsin*, a student, meaningful), do household work and acquire learning. A boy of unknown descent (Satyakāma Jābāla) approached a teacher. After initiation, the teacher assigned to him four hundred starving cows to tender and asked him to come back not before they become a thousand, -- a duty that lasted for several years! We are informed that this boy finally received learning from non-human sources (a bull, the fire, a swan,...) towards the end of his arduous task. When he himself became a teacher, he followed in the footsteps of his teacher. He taught nothing to a student (Upakosala Kāmalāyana) who lived under his roof for twelve years! The student, disappointed and depressed, gave up food. The teacher's wife took pity on him, asking: 'Boy, why are you not eating?' The boy replied: 'My mind is not at peace. I will not eat⁷.' The story goes on to inform us that he finally received learning from

non-human sources (the sacred fires, which he served for years), -- as his teacher did. Falling in this line, the traditional story (in later texts) of an easily irritable teacher forms the background of the emergence of the 'White (*Śukla*) Yajur-veda' from a self-respecting student, Yājñavalkya, who was disowned by his teacher for a paltry reason.

We find two references (Bṛhad. III.3.1 and III.7.1) supporting the belief that human beings are some times 'possessed' by super-human beings or ghosts (a *gandharva*, a celestial musician, in the present cases) commanding super-sensory powers. Both occur in the course of the famous conference of scholars convened by king Janaka and involve the name of Patañjala Kāpya whose daughter and wife were 'possessed' and became the vehicles of the possessing *gandharva* who answered through their mouths the questions put to him by the inquirers. Such beliefs still prevail in Indian society among the credulous.

Talking of beliefs, human mind has always been curious about where the departed souls go. This point has engaged the minds of the Upaniṣadic thinkers who have conceived of three post-death courses: (a) the course of gods (*deva-yāna*), (b) the course of manes (*pitṛ-yāna*), (c) the course of creatures of no consequence. The first two are for those in possession of high knowledge or the meritorious, and the third one for those who are nowhere on the path of merit and are destined to an uninterrupted cycle of births and deaths⁸. Specific stops on the first two paths are mentioned (copied in the Bhagavad-gītā also, VIII.24-26, under the names 'white' and 'black' paths) which later challenged scholars like Bādarāyaṇa and Shankara who offered a rational explanation thereof (Brahma-sūtra IV.3.4-6). Details are also given about the return journey of the souls on the second path: going through some stages, they enter the clouds, thence to plants and grains, thence to living body where they turn into semen, eventually turning into a foetus, and, in the course of time, undergo the further process of birth and life commensurate with their merit (Chāndogya. V.10.5-6). Four classes of living creatures are conceived (Aitareya. III.3): *aṇḍaja* (born of eggs, -- birds, snakes..), *jāruja* (also, *jarāyuja*, born of embryo, -- humans, animals..), *svedaaja* (born of sweat, -- mosquito etc), *udbhijja* (plants). It is the consideration of impermanence of the gains of merit which persuades serious minds to turn to the path of liberation⁹.

We come across interesting details regarding the analysis of the body and the mind. We find a reference to 101 arteries originating from the heart: one of them reaches the top of the head. A soul which exits from that opening attains immortality (Kaṭha. VI.16; Chāndogya. VIII.6.6). The rest spread all over the body. We are informed that, depending upon the association of the basic fluid with the three constituents of the body (*vāta*, *pitta*, *kapha*), as Shankara explains on the authority of Āyurveda, they differ in colour – tawny, white, blue, yellow and red (Chāndogya. VIII.6.1). Another reference gives the number of arteries/veins as 72,000 (Bṛhad. II.1.19). In yet another context (Praśna. III.6), this number is astronomical: $101 \times 100 \times 72,000 = 72,72,00,000!$ They are as tiny as a hair split into a thousand splinters¹⁰. We find two lists of the faculties of mind: one giving 16 (Aitareya. I.5.3), and the other 10 (Bṛhad. III.2), with some common to both. Shankara does help to some extent in identifying them; but, for him it is a secondary topic to be gathered from Āyurveda. A passage relates purity of mind to the kind of food: pure food promotes pure mind, which, in its turn, gains stability on the Supreme principle, which, again, frees one from worldly knots/bonds¹¹.

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NOTES

- 1 The Taittirīya. Ch. I begins and ends with the following chant:
Om, śaṁ no mitraḥ śaṁ varuṇaḥ / śaṁ no bhavatu aryamā / śaṁ na indro bṛhaspatiḥ / śaṁ no viṣṇur urukramaḥ // namo brahmaṇe / namaḥ te vāyo / tvam eva pratyakṣaṁ brahmāsi / tvām eva pratyakṣaṁ brahma vadiṣyāmi / ṛtaṁ vadiṣyāmi / satyaṁ vadiṣyāmi / tan mam avatu / tad vaktāram avatu / avatu mām avatu vaktāram / Om, śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ // (May Mitra bestow

good on us. May Varuṇa .. Aryaman .. Indra .. Bṛhaspati .. Viṣṇu of wide strides .. Salutation to Brahman .. to you O vāyu. You are Brahman in a visible form. I shall call you Brahman visible. I shall speak the right, .. the truth. May that protect me, .. the speaker .. Om, peace, peace, peace!) When it is recited at the end of the unit, the future form is changed to the past form: *vadiṣyāmi* becomes *avādiṣam*, *avatu* is *āvīt*. As additional examples, the following chants may be noted:

*Om, pūrṇam adaḥ pūrṇam idam pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate /
pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya pūrṇam evāvaśiṣyate // Om, śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ //*

‘That is complete, this is complete. The complete arises from the complete. Having taken the complete of the complete, the complete alone remains.’

Om. saha nav avatu / saha nau bhunaktu / saha vīryam karavāvahai / tejasvi nav adhītam astu / mā vidviṣāvahai / Om, śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ //

‘May He (God) protect us (the teacher and the taught) together. May He feed us together. May we two develop strength together. May our learning be resplendent. May we not hate each other.’

- 2 Cf. *ya evam veda prati-tiṣṭhati / anna-vān annādo bhavati / mahān bhavati prajayā paśubhir brahma-varcasena / mahān kīrtiyā /* (Taittirīya. III.6) ‘Whosoever knows this, becomes firmly established; becomes possessed of and eater of food; becomes high-placed with progeny, cattle and the brāhmin’s lustre, and with reputation.’ This is said of the search of brahman pursued by Bṛghu starting with *anna*, food, and ending with *ānanda*, bliss.
- 3 Cf. *etaṁ vai tam ātmānam viditvā brāhmaṇāḥ putraiṣaṇāyās ca vittaiṣaṇāyās ca lokaiṣaṇāyās ca vyutthāyātha bhikṣācaryam caranti /* (Bṛhad. III.5)
- 4 Cf. Bṛhad. III.9.26. This theme occurs elsewhere also. See Chāndogya. I.8.8.
- 5 Cf. *ta ime satyāḥ kāmā anṛtāpidhānāḥ /* (Chāndogya. VIII.3.1).
- 6 Cf. *tad yathā ’pi hiraṇya-nidhiṁ nihitam akṣetrajñā upary upari saṁcaranto na vindeyuḥ /* (Chāndogya. VIII.3.2) This analogy is given for the philosophical truth that all creatures get united with the state of *brahman* every day in sleep, but do not know what they are united with. Consequently, they return to their worldly identity on waking up as a tiger, a lion, a wolf,...(Ibid. VI.9.2-3).
- 7 *sa ha vyādhinā ’naśitum dadhre / tam ācārya-jāyovāca – brahmacārin, aśāna / kiṁ nu nāśnāśīti / sa hovāca – bahava ime ’smiṁ puruṣe kāmā nānātyayāḥ / vyādhibhiḥ pratipūrṇo ’smi / nāśiṣyāmīti /* (Chāndogya. IV.10.3)
- 8 *athaitayoḥ pathor na kataraṇacana tānīmāni kṣudrāṇy asakṛd-āvartīni bhūtāni bhavanti, jāyasva mriysvety, etat tṛtīyam sthānam /* (Chāndogya. V.10).
- 9 *tad yatheha karmajīto lokaḥ kṣīyate, evam evāmutra puṇyajīto lokaḥ kṣīyate /* (Chāndogya. VIII.1.6)
- 10 *yathā keśaḥ sahasradhā bhinna evam asyaitā hitā nāma nādyo ’ntarḥḍaye pratiṣṭhitā bhavanti /* (Bṛhad. IV.2.3).
- 11 *āhārasuddhau sattva-śuddhiḥ / sattva-śuddhau dhruvā smṛtiḥ / smṛti-lambhe sarva-granthīnām vipramokṣaḥ /* (Chāndogya. VII.26.2)