



Muṇḍakopaniṣad Mantrā 3



शौनको ह वै महाशालः अङ्गिरसं विधिवदुपसन्नः पप्रच्छ ।

कस्मिन्नु भगवो विज्ञाते सर्वमिदं विज्ञातं भवतीति ॥ १।१।३ ॥

śaunako ha vai mahāśālah aṅgirasam vidhivadupasannaḥ papraccha ।
kasminnu bhagavo vijñāte sarvamidam vijñātaṁ bhavatīti ॥ 1।1।3॥

Śaunakḥ - Śaunakḥ; ha vai – indeed; mahāśālah – the famous householder; aṅgirasam – Angiras; vidhivat – as per stipulations; upasannaḥ – approached; papraccha – (and) asked; iti – thus; bhagavaḥ – O revered Sir!; kasmin nu vijñāte – by knowing which one thing alone; idam – this; sarvam – all; vijñātaṁ – known; bhavatī – becomes.

Śaunakaḥ, the famous householder, approached Angiras as per the stipulations and asked thus: ‘Oh Revered Sir! By knowing which one thing alone, does everything become known.

Śaunakaḥ ha vai mahāśālah: Śaunakaḥ was indeed a great householder. ‘Ha’ and ‘vai’ are particles used in order to either emphasise a point, or just to say ‘this happened before’. They mean ‘indeed’, or ‘once upon a time as it happened’. Śaunaka, the son of Rishi Śunaka, was indeed a famous householder. The word ‘mahāśālāḥ’ is an adjective to Śaunakaḥ. Whenever śāstra uses an adjective, there is an additional meaning brought in. The word ‘mahāśālāḥ’ has a purpose to serve. Mahāśāla means ¹ the one who has big śālas, halls, including yajñāśālā, the hall used for performing yajña, sacrifice. Distribution of food is one of the limbs in the performance of a ritual. Śaunaka had distributed a lot of food to people while performing rituals. The word mahāśālāḥ indicates he had done a lot of rituals and lived a life of prayer and dharma, and thereby he had gained purity of mind.

‘Mahāśālāḥ’ also indicates he was a famous grāhastha, married person. Unless one is a grāhastha one cannot be a mahāśāla. A grāhastha means one who can be ready for knowledge. As a grāhastha one should become ready, otherwise it is useless. Grāhasthāśrama has got its own difficulties and also its own benefits. It gives the benefit of readiness, preparedness of mind to gain this knowledge. One can perform the sacrifices, because one is married. One cannot become a mahāśālā as a bachelor. A mahāśālā is the one who is married, who has succeeded and who has the benefit of grāhasthāśrama.

How can you say so? It is so because Śaunaka goes to Angiras for this ultimate knowledge. So, all the yajñās, yāgās and prayers have paid off. He knew how to

¹ महत्यः यज्ञ-पाक-शालादयः यस्य सः

approach a teacher. That is why Śruti says vidhivat upasannah, he approached the teacher according to the stipulated method. Later, in this section it is made clear that a student should approach a teacher as a samitpāṇi, with a small bundle of twigs, which are used for daily ritual, in his hands. The twigs represent the student's readiness to be of service.

There is a rule that says:² "Do not see a king, a deity (in a temple) or teacher empty-handed". One should not go to them empty-handed. That is how the King of England collected a lot of precious stones and jewellery from Indian kings. The British Crown ruled over these kings, and whenever the kings had an audience with the British Crown, they always carried these precious stones, not twigs. They followed this rule. Even now this rule is being followed, and we see people carrying fruits or sweets when they visit any of them. Only a student takes twigs when he goes to a teacher who is a householder. He thereby declares, "I am ready to bring firewood daily for your rituals". If he is a sannyāsi guru one cannot take twigs because he does not perform rituals and twigs are of no use to him. The student has to take something appropriate. It is symbolic. That shows his readiness to serve the teacher. He is ready to do everything that he has to do—washing the house, grazing the cows. The student has śraddhā and sense of surrender. That is how one approaches the teacher.

Here Sankara raises a point. Before Śaunaka, Atharva approached Brahmaji, Aṅgir approached Atharva, Satyavaha approached Aṅgir, and Aṅgiras approached Satyavaha. There was no mention about the vidhi, the rule, in approaching the teacher. The stipulated approach is pointed out only here. Does it mean it was not there before? Sankara himself replies³ saying that perhaps there was no rule before, up to Śaunaka, but from Śaunaka onwards the rule has come into force. Or else, we have to look at it like the analogy of a lamp placed at the doorstep, dehalī dīpa nyāyavat. What is this analogy? Dehalī is a doorstep. Suppose you keep a lamp on the doorstep. That lamp will throw light outside as well as inside. Similarly, the statement that Śaunaka approached according to stipulation, throws light upon both sides. It tells the students who come later that they should always approach the teacher following the rules of approach. It also indicates that those who had approached the teacher before did so in keeping with the niyama, rule.

There is a simple answer to the above question. We can say that everyone approached the teacher vidhivat only. It was not mentioned before because the mention of earlier teachers and students was purely to point out the tradition of learning from a teacher. But Śaunaka is the student of the upaniṣad and Aṅgiras is the teacher. But Śaunaka is the student of this upaniṣad and Aṅgiras is the teacher. Śaunaka is asking the question here to Aṅgiras. Aṅgiras is going to teach. What we are going to get is only what Aṅgiras taught. So, the approach of Śaunaka is stated here with specific mention of 'proper approach'.

To be continued.....

² रिक्तपाणिर्न पश्येत राजानं दैवतं गुरुम् ।

³ शौनकाङ्गिरसो सम्बन्धाद् अवार्गं विधिवद्विशेषणाद् उपसदन विधेः पूर्वेषाम् अनियमः इति गम्यते । मर्यादा करणार्थं मध्य दीपिका न्यायार्थं वा विशेषणम् । अस्मदादिष्वपि उपसदन विधेरिष्टत्वात् । मुण्डक भाष्यम्