



मुण्डकोपनिषद् Muṇḍakopaniṣad



इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं वरिष्ठं
नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वा
इमं लोकं हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १।२।१०
iṣṭāpūrttaṁ manyamānā varīṣṭhaṁ
nānyacchreyo vedayante pramūḍhāḥ ।
nākasya pṛṣṭhe te sukṛte' nubhūtvā
imaṁ lokam hīnataram vā viśanti ॥ 1|2|10

pramūḍhāḥ – deluded ones; iṣṭāpūrttaṁ – rituals enjoined by the Veda and karmas originating in the smṛtis; varīṣṭhaṁ - to be exalted; manyamānāḥ considering; anyat – another; śreyaḥ - means of mokṣa; na vedayante - do not know; anubhūtvā - having enjoyed; nākasya - of heaven; pṛṣṭhe - in the middle; sukṛte - gained through good actions; te - they; imam - this; lokam – the form of human being; hīnataram vā - or any other lower form; viśanti – enter

‘Those deluded ones who consider the performance of rituals enjoined by the Veda and actions enjoined by the smṛtis to be exalted, do not know the right means of mokṣa. Having enjoyed the heaven gained through good actions, they enter the human form or any other lower form.’

Iṣṭā here does not mean ‘what is desired’; it refers to rituals etc. It is derived from the root yaj to worship. iṣṭā_karmas are those enjoined by the Veda. They include performance of karmas like agnihotra, practice of tapas, self-discipline, the study and teaching of the Vedas involving how to recite the Vedic mantras, and so on. All smārta-karmas, karmas enjoined by smṛtis are called pūrta. Pūrta is mainly charity. Examples of pūrta-karma are making reservoirs, digging wells, making cattle ponds, constructing temples for worship, building a choultry where people can rest and distributing food to the needy.

In our culture, the practice of selling food was not there. Food was always distributed free. In the village where I was growing up, one woman began selling ghee. It became a big topic of gossip for the whole village. I remember another instance very well. One woman from our village refused to give her

girl in marriage to a boy whose father was running a big restaurant in a nearby town. She said, "I will not give my girl to that family where they are earning money by selling food". Making money through selling food was considered as pāpa.

One can improve upon the above list of actions of charity. Building a hospital for the public, building a school for the society, providing water to thirsty people in summer, putting up an umbrella for the traffic police, making a bus shelter – these are all pūrta-karmas. Indians do a lot of charitable works. In doing charitable works, without any strings attached, India perhaps stands first in the world.

Variṣṭhm̐ _ manyamānāḥ : these people consider iṣṭa pūrta as exalted and enough. They also think that this alone is the means for mokṣa and there is no other means. They do not have the vision of the śāstra and so they commit themselves to iṣṭa pūrta.

Nānyacchreyo vedayante pramūḍhāḥ: these deluded people do not know any other means for mokṣa. This is due to their conviction that these actions alone are great and the only means for mokṣa. It is not that iṣṭa pūrta - karmas are criticized here. They are good actions. They are highly praised as yoga, a secondary means for mokṣa. They can bring puṇya to the person who performs them. If they are done for the sake of purification of the mind, they can create the desire for mokṣa. One should, therefore, make use of these karmas. The pay-off of these karmas should result in the pursuit of mokṣa. That is being told here. Otherwise, if one stops with the iṣṭapūrta, no doubt one will get highly desirable results, but one will miss the ultimate end, the mokṣa. Having done iṣṭa pūrta and not opting for mokṣa is like cooking food and not eating it.

I hear this argument all the time: "Nara sevā, service to other human beings, is Nārāyana sevā, equivalent to service to the Lord, and it is the best means for mokṣa. There is no other means for freedom." Every human being who does sevā to others also requires sevā. A number of people have a role to play in everyone's living. Many people are required to provide food, shelter, clothes and so on, to keep a person going. Everybody requires sevā from others. So, it is a question of sharing. It is not anything big. If this is understood very well, then one will find that all these actions are meant for one's own growth. In another śruti, Yājñavalkya says. " Oh Maitreyî, ātman has to be known; to know ātman one has to listen." So, all actions are meant for one's own growth and self-discovery. One has to pursue knowledge; otherwise one cooks the food and goes hungry, because one has no time.

They are pramūḍāḥ deluded, without a chance of being convinced otherwise. It is not they will not get karma-phala, but there is no mokṣa for them. They miss out on that. It is a loss really. When they could get mokṣa by making use of the karmas, they settle for a small result. One has to choose mokṣa; otherwise, these karmas do not become yoga. They become simple karma and produce limited results. What a loss it is! The loss is infinite because the infinite is missed. What happens to these people is told now.

Nākasya prṣṭhe te sukṛte anubhūtvā: having enjoyed the result of rituals in heaven. sukṛte is the karma-phala. The word nāka is derived thus: ka means sukha, happiness. So, aka is the opposite of sukha, that is duḥkha, pain. Nāka means that which is free from aka, free from sorrow and pain. So, nāka is a place of consistent pleasures, without any pain, relatively. There again, he gets an exalted place where the degree of pleasure is higher. Nākasya prṣṭhe, in the middle of the heaven, or in the worlds beyond heaven. One can go up to tapo-loka, but to go to brahma-loka, iṣṭā pūrta is not enough. One has to have upāsana-phala also. So nākasyap[cm_he means in the lokas which are in the form of results of one's actions. They reach such a place and enjoy the results of actions in the form of heavenly pleasures. Then what happens to them?

Imaṁ lokaṁ hīnataram vā viśanti: they come down to this earth again to take another human body or enter lower wombs. This is the lot of heaven-bound people. Hīnataram means that which is something lower, a lower yoni, womb, like that of an animal body. In Sanskrit, an animal is called tiryac because it grows in an order that is opposed to the growth of a human body. Tira means bent or reverse. You grow vertically, but animals grow horizontally. Therefore an animal is called tiryanc. A yoni in naraka, hell, also is a lower yoni because there is a predominance of pain. These people after having enjoyed heaven enter lower wombs also.

After having performed such great actions that took them to heaven, how can they go to lower wombs or lower region of birth? Śaṅkara makes it clear here. This is because their sañcita -karma piled up past karma, is waiting and a set of karmas out of that can order for them, either a human body or even a better body or an animal body also. We do not know what is in store. Sañcita -karma is countless. Therefore, the possibilities are infinite. One cannot always expect a human body. Then what should one do? One has to look into śāstra to find out the means for destroying sañcita -karmas.

The previous mantra talked about the result of kevala-karma. Now, the result of karma done along with upāsanā is being told. If one does upāsanā, meditation also, along with karma, he will go to brahma-loka. It is very difficult to go to brahma-loka. That is the last thing one can accomplish in saṁsāra. Reaching brahma-loka means that one cannot be promoted further, and so one has reached one's maximum inefficiency. Up to brahma-lok one can be promoted. A person who is promoted is both efficient and inefficient. He is inefficient, so he is not promoted further, but he is efficient enough to be promoted up to this point. You have to understand this particular logic. When he reaches a point from where he cannot be promoted at all, that means he has reached the maximum inefficiency. That is the gain of brahma-loka. From brahma-loka also one will come back, unless one gains self-knowledge taught by Brahmaji. Then alone one has mokṣa. Otherwise one will come back like a bad coin. That is being said here now.

तपःश्रद्धे ये ह्युपवसन्त्यरण्ये
 शान्ता विद्वांसो भैक्ष्यचर्यं चरन्तः ।
 सूर्यद्वारेण ते विरजाः प्रयान्ति
 यत्रामृतः स पुरुषो ह्यव्ययात्मा ॥ १।२।११
 tapaḥśradde yehyupavasantyarāṇye
 śāntā vidvāṁso bhaikṣyacaryāṁ carantaḥ ।
 sūryadvāreṇa te virajāḥ prayānti
 yatrāmṛtaḥ sa puruṣo hyavyayātmā ॥ 1|2|11

te – those; vidvāṁsaḥ – meditators; śāntaḥ – of resolved mind; ye – who; bhaikṣyacaryāṁ carantaḥ – subsisting on alms; hi upavasanti – pursue; tapaśradde duties along with meditation; arāṇye – (dwelling) in the forest; virajāḥ – those who are free from papā; prayānti – enter; sūrya dvāreṇa – through the solar path; yatra hi – (that world) where indeed; saḥ – he; amṛtaḥ – the immortal; puruṣaḥ -hiraṇyagarbhaḥ avyayātmā – of imperishable nature is.

Those meditators of resolved mind, who live on alms, who pursue their duties along with meditation dwelling in the forest, are freed from papā and through the solar path they enter the world where the immortal hiraṇyagarbha of imperishable nature dwells.

The karma-phala of those who perform their duties in keeping with their stage of life and do meditation is stated here. Between sannyāsa and

gṛhasthāśrama there is a stage of life called vānaprasthā. In this stage, a householder resorts to a forest having handed over the management of the home to the younger generation. He is called vanin, one who dwells in a forest. What is meant by 'forest' here is not a place where there is dense vegetation and wild life. It is a place away from the din and bustle of the market place. It is an upalakṣaṇa, figurative reference for a quiet place. It is a more wooded place, usually next to a village, where there are not many people. A vanin retires to such a place because he wants to spend the whole day in meditation. In this mantra these vanins are talked about. This mantra also covers a type of sannyāsins who are committed to upāsanā.

Tapahśradde yehi upavasanti: those people who perform karmas and do meditation. Tapas refers to karma enjoined according to one's stage of life. They perform those karmas and other religious disciplines that they decide to follow. They do not give up their gṛhasthāśrama karmas, but perform them mostly mentally. Śraddha means upāsanā, meditation, here because of the presence of the word 'upavasanti'. It stands for a certain meditation upon Īśvara with form.

They continue to perform their nitya-karmas in a deliberate fashion and with diligence, coupled with upāsanā. Previously they were playing many roles, now they have a minimum number of roles. They do not have any emotional entanglement with the family, and thus, they live a retired life. This is the retirement of the religious person who was playing various roles. It is purely a life of religious commitments. Then one takes to sannyāsa which is the fourth stage in life.

According to the Vedas, there are four stages in one's life. The first stage is the brahmacaryāśrama, bachelorhood, in which one is committed to education. Once that Vedic education is over, he is called snāta, graduated. After the valediction he takes a religious bath called avabhṛta-snāna, and becomes a snāta. For him, the first āśrama is over and he is now without an āśrama. The śāstra does not allow him to live like that for long because when one is neither a brahmacārin nor a gṛhastha, one does not know what karma one has to do. He should arrange to offer guru-dakṣiṇā to his teacher, and then get married, not before that. The śāstra seems to know that once he gets married he cannot pay anything. That is what is said in Taittirīyopaniṣad, "Giving adequate money to the teacher as dakṣiṇā, gift, which is pleasing to him, one should get married in order

to have progeny. One is supposed to collect that money from the king or any other source. A small period of time is given for this purpose. One should get married as early as one can, because one should not snap the lineage.

The second stage is gr̥hasthāśrama, married life, where a person, along with role-playing, prepares himself for a spiritual life. He performs the enjoined ritual called nitya-naimittika-karmas. The family life is lived with healthy attitudes to gain maturity. Then he becomes a vinin, a retired person. This is the third stage. Finally he takes to a life of a sannyāsin, renunciate. Sannyāsa is the fourth stage. This is the order in general. When there is an order, we have an exception. The exception is that one may take to sannyāsa from brahmacaryāśrama or from gr̥hasthāśrama also. The exception is not the rule, however, and we must always adhere to the rule, not the exception. Here, the vanins who take to tapas and śraddhā are talked about. They are further described.

Śāntā vidvāmsaḥ: they are resolved in mind and they have knowledge. Vidvāmsaḥ means those who know śāstra. They do not know Vedanta, because upāsanā is pointed out here. They have lived a meaningful life, and thereby they have gained a certain resolution of mind with reference to rāga dveṣās. Their senses and mind are quietened. They are committed only to meditation.

They can also take to a life of vividiṣā sannyāsa, renunciation for gaining knowledge. Then, they can give up all karmas, but continue to do saḡuṇa brahma upāsanā, meditation on Īśvara. In sannyās sannyāsa a, external religious disciplines like rituals are given up. One cannot be a sannyāsin and at the same time perform karmas like agnihotra, but the ritual that one was performing earlier can be converted into upāsanā. If they die away without gaining the knowledge, they take to solar path.

To be continued...

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