

Mundakopanishad

3.2.3

Śaṅkara gives a nice connection¹⁹⁰ to the following *mantra*. He says, if all the desires get fulfilled in one stroke, it is a big result. The effort, therefore, should be equally big. The rule¹⁹¹ is that more the effort, greater is the result. If one makes a small amount of effort, one gets only a small result. An infinite gain requires infinite effort. It is not so. There is no effort at all here. It is what this *mantra* says.

नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यः
न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन ।
यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यः
तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणुते तनुं स्वाम् ॥ ३.२.३ ॥

nāyamātmā pravacanena labhyaḥ
na medhayā na bahunā śrutena.
yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ
tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanuṁ svām. (3.2.3)

ayam-- this; *ātmā*-- self; *pravacanena* -- by (mere) recitation of Veda;
na -- not; *labhyaḥ* -- can be gained; *na* -- not;
medhayā -- by mere memory; *na* -- not;
bahunā śrutena -- by study of many disciplines of knowledge;
tena -- by that person; *eva* -- alone;
labhyaḥ -- it is gained; *yam* -- whom;
eṣaḥ -- this person; *vṛṇute* -- chooses to know;
tasya -- for that person; *ātmā* -- the self;
svām -- its own; *tanum* -- nature; *vivṛṇute* -- reveals

The self neither gained by mere recitation of the Veda, nor by memory or study of many disciplines of knowledge (or by repeated listening to Vedanta without the right teacher). The person who chooses to know the self gains it. Then the self reveals its nature to that person.

Na ayam ātmā pravacanena labhyaḥ: this self cannot be gained by mere Vedic study. *Pravacana* does not mean discourse here. It means recitation of Veda.¹⁹² In *vedādhyayana*, study of Vedas, one has to repeat the *mantras* in the way the teacher chants, and commit the whole thing to one's memory. 'One should study one's Veda'¹⁹³ --- it is a Vedic mandate. Just because one has followed this injunction, it does not mean that one will gain the *ātman*. One may be a Dvivedi, who has studied two Vedas, or Trivedi, who has studied three Vedas, or Caturvedi, one who has studied all four Vedas.

It does not make any dent in his self-ignorance. A Vedic Pandit may have physical lustre due to his chanting of *gāyatrī-mantra*, but he reveals his ignorance the moment he begins to talk on spirituality.

One should not, however, commit the mistake of concluding that '*pravacana*' is not important. Only when it is there it can be negated by the *śruti*. People do think that study of Veda is enough to gain *ātman*. The *śruti* negates this thinking and says that mere recitation of Veda is not adequate for gaining the knowledge of the self.

Again, *na medhayā labhyaḥ*: it is not gained by mere memory.¹⁹⁴ One can have a great memory. Memory is unlike a recorded tape, where the old material is erased when new things are recorded. Memory is cumulative in nature. A Vedic pandit has tremendous memory. Even a tape recorder may stop in the middle due to some technical problem, but once a Vedic pandit goes into the mode of chanting, he can go on for days, non-stop. He is able to recite the entire Veda, which is an accomplishment. People commit to memory huge texts like *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Pāṇini-sūtras*¹⁹⁵ and *Amarakośa*.¹⁹⁶ One gains the knowledge of any language only by *medhā*. One is able to repeat everything that one has learnt due to the power of memory. The power to remember is a glory. But mere *medhā* is not enough to gain *ātman*. Self-ignorance will continue to be there.

Further, *na bahunā śrutena*: not by becoming a great scholar. *Bahunā śrutena* means by the study of different disciplines of knowledge that may subserve the self-knowledge, but do not constitute self-knowledge. Etymologically, the word '*śruta*' comes from the Sanskrit root '*śru*' meaning 'to do *vicāra*, inquiry.' Inquiry into the Vedas based on *mīmāṃsā*, prescribed form of analysis, is helpful in gaining the key to opening the sentences of the Veda and understanding their meaning. But that alone will not help one get *mokṣa*.

The words '*bahunā śrutena*' can also mean listening to Vedanta without the right teacher. That listening will not help a person. One has to choose a proper teacher. Since the teacher unfolds the words of the scripture, choice of the teacher is very important. One should have *śraddhā* in the words of the teacher.

If one cannot gain *ātman* through all these means, then how does one gain this *ātman*? *Yam eva eṣaḥ vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ*:¹⁹⁷ it is gained by that person who chooses it. *Eṣaḥ* refers to *akāmaḥ*, the one who is not interested in any other pursuit except the pursuit of *mokṣa*. *Ātman* becomes the object of his desire to know, so the desire for *ātman* does not even have the status of a desire. A thought has the status of a desire only if it is a source of action and result. But if it is a desire for the thing that one already has, it is not a desire; it is foolishness. Therefore, the desire for *ātman* means the desire for the knowledge of *ātman*. The idea here is that one has to choose to know.

The desire to be free is there in everyone. If one analyses one's desire for any object, at the back of the desire, there is a sense of incompleteness from which one wants to be free.

But that is not a desire to know, which is why a person desirous of freedom need not enquire into *ātman*, but can do varieties of things. So the conversion of a 'desire to be free' into the 'desire to know' itself is a great step. One sees this conversion in Arjuna when he prays to Lord Kṛṣṇa to teach him. For the person who chooses to know, *ātman* reveals its own *svarūpa*. By that very choice, *ātman* is gained by that person.¹⁹⁸ The *Brahmasūtra*, which analyses the various *mantras* of different *upaniṣads*, confirms this when it starts with the *sūtra*, '*athāto brahma-jijñāsā*, thereafter, therefore, (for the sake of *mokṣa*) let one desire to know Brahman,' meaning, let one enquire into Brahman. One has to enquire into the words revealing Brahman.

Tasyaiṣa ātmā viorṇute tanuṁ svām: for him *ātman* reveals itself. It has been revealing itself as 'I am,' but now it reveals as 'I am Brahman.' Śaṅkara says¹⁹⁹ here, for want of knowledge, *ātman* was not so far recognised in the *buddhi*. In the light of knowledge it comes to reveal itself as Brahman---like even for want of light an object like pot is not seen, and when the light is brought in, it comes to light.

When one chooses to know the self, one has to go to the teacher. Mere choice to know is not enough. If one chooses to know a subject matter like calculus, one has to place oneself in a situation where calculus is available for grasping. One, therefore, one goes to a school and places oneself in a situation where can grasp calculus from a teacher who knows. It means mere ears and eyes are not adequate to pick up the subject matter, but they are to be exposed to the source of knowledge. One will then gain the knowledge if one is ready for it. Similarly, when one exposes oneself to the teaching with the right attitude, *ātman* reveals itself. The *śāstra* becomes the mirror for seeing oneself. One who looks at the mirror alone can see, even though the mirror is available for all to see.

We can interpret the third line of the mantra in another way. *Yam eva eṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ*: this *ātman* will be gained only by him, whom the teacher chooses to teach, not by anybody else. Unless the person is ready, the teacher is not going to teach. The word 'eṣaḥ' refers to the teacher who knows the *ātman* and the word 'yam' refers to the disciple. In the previous interpretation 'eṣaḥ' referred to the seeker and 'yam' referred to the *ātman*.

This interpretation is given here because often a question is raised, "Why should one require a teacher? After all, the *pramāṇa* is only the *śāstra*. Even without the teacher one can study the *śāstra*." But the *pramāṇa* has to be handled by a teacher who has the knowledge of the methodology of communication. One gains this methodology only from a teacher who comes in the tradition of teaching Vedanta. Through self-study one will only pick up words like *satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma*, Brahman is eternal, consciousness and bliss, and then ask, "How can it be realised?" These words are unlike the words table, chair, big, small, young, old and so on, something that one knows. Each one of them has to be unfolded by negating their limited meaning. There is a *prakriyā*, method, involved in this. Hence, it is said that for him alone who has a proper teacher, this *ātman* reveals itself.

- 190 यद्येवं सर्वलाभात् परमः आत्मलाभः तल्लाभाय प्रवचनादय उपायाः बाहुल्येन कर्त्तव्या इति प्राप्ते इदमुच्यते । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)
- 191 अधिकस्य अधिकं फलम् ।
- 192 वेद-शास्त्राध्यायन-बाहुल्येन । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)
- 193 स्वाध्यायोऽध्येतव्यः ।
- 194 ग्रन्थार्थ-धारण-शक्त्या । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)
- 195 A work on Sanskrit Grammar.
- 196 A dictionary of synonyms.
- 197 यमेव परमात्मानमेव एष दिद्वान् वृणुते प्राप्तुम् इच्छति तेन वरणेन एषः परमात्मा लभ्यः नान्येन साधनान्तरेण । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)
- 198 तस्मादन्य-त्यागेन आत्मलाभ-प्रथमैव आत्म-लाभ-साधनमित्यर्थः । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)
- 199 तनुं स्वात्म-तत्त्वं स्वरूपं विवृणुते प्रकाशयति प्रकाशे इव घटादिः विधायां सत्याम् आविर्भवतीत्यर्थः । (मुण्डक भाष्यम्)

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Editor.