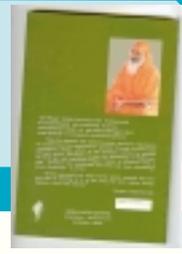


Muṇḍakopaniṣad



Introduction

Among the many upaniṣads available now, ten are well known since Ācārya Śaṅkara has commented upon them. They are Īśa, Kena, Katha, Praśna, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chāndogya and Brahadāraṇyaka. These ten upaniṣads are from the four Vedas. Aitareya appears in the Ṛgveda. Katha and Taittiriya are from Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda¹ while Brahadāraṇyaka and īśāvāśya are from śukla Yajurveda. Kena and Chāndogya are from Sāmaveda. Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya and Praśna are from Atharvaveda.

The upaniṣads are divided into Mantropaniṣads and Brahmaṇopaniṣads. Mantra means a hymn. Mantropaniṣad is in the form of hymns and is supposed to be very significant. Brahmaṇopaniṣad is in prose form and is looked upon as explaining the Mantropaniṣad from the Śaunakīya-śākhā, a recension of Śaunaka Ṛṣi.

In the teaching tradition this upaniṣad occupies an important place inasmuch as it covers all the important topics besides the main topic which every upaniṣad reveals. The importance of this upaniṣad increases when we recognize the number of mantras from this upaniṣad quoted in the traditional discussions of Vedānta.

It talks first about how the knowledge is to be gained through a sampradāya, tradition.

The source of this knowledge is traced to Brahmaji, the creator, who gave this knowledge to his own son Atharvā. From the Atharvā onwards a lineage is mentioned. Whether the names of the teachers are mentioned or not, the knowledge unfolded in the upaniṣad is to be gained only from a teacher since the upaniṣad is always in the form of a teacher-student dialogue.

The upaniṣad also talks about a mumukṣu very beautifully. A mumukṣu is a seeker of mokṣa, freedom. The desire for mokṣa is natural to all. It is not a cultivated desire. A desire for a television is cultivated. If one does not know anything about television, one does not have a desire for a television set. Similarly, many desires that we have are cultivated. But a desire to eat is not cultivated. That is something natural. Nobody has to teach a person to eat when he or she is hungry. Even a baby cries when it is hungry. An urge to eat, an urge to quench thirst—these are all natural urges. Like these natural urges, the urge to be free is uncultivated. Everyone is a mumukṣu because everyone has a desire to be free from being small and insignificant. It is more than a desire; it is an urge. 'I am small' is a conclusion and one wants to be free from that conclusion. If that conclusion is real, then it is knowledge. If it is knowledge, then 'I am small and insignificant' is a fact. Then, there is no way of freeing oneself from being small and insignificant.

Suppose this sense of smallness is a conclusion that is not real, the truth would be just the opposite. If the truth were that I am already free from being small and insignificant and I am the only significant being in this world, then my urge to get rid of my sense of insignificance is very natural. The urge to become significant stems from the notion, 'I am insignificant'.

If I am insignificant in reality, there is no mokṣa possible. Then the urge to become significant becomes meaningless. A cultivated desire can be meaningless like a desire to go to the sun because one will become ashes even if one goes a little nearer to the sun. Lord Hanumanji tried once, in vain. It is difficult even to survive the summers in many parts of India like Rajasthan; what is there to say about approaching the sun? A lame person's desire to climb Mount Everest is meaningless; he should give it up and he can give it up. He can have some other desires. A deaf person cannot have a desire to become a telephone operator. Such a desire is meaningless and it can be given up. A cultivated desire is something one can either dismiss or grow out of it, but if it is a natural urge, it is not in one's hands to give up and one cannot dismiss it.

The urge to become significant is natural and one cannot dismiss it. If one cannot dismiss it, the only thing one can do is to fulfil it. We do see in life that there are means of fulfilling the urges that are natural. Hunger is a natural urge and there is a means for fulfilling it; food is available in the creation. Thirst is a natural urge and there is a means for fulfilling it; water is available in the creation. The urge to breathe is natural; there is air for fulfilling it.

When these natural urges can be fulfilled, the fundamental urge to become free from

being small and insignificant must have a means of fulfilment. The urge to become significant is there in all, and hence, there is a lot of pressure inside to become different. Everyone wants to be special. Everyone wants to be loved and wants to be recognized as someone special. In other words, everyone sets himself or herself up to prove himself or herself to be somebody. It is very natural. You cannot complain that a person is ambitious. The urge comes from the conclusion that 'I am small and insignificant'. This urge being very natural, it has a means of fulfilment, but the means that one follows does not seem to be appropriate because it is never successful.

The pursuit of money and pleasures that we follow does not seem to remove this insignificance significantly. The more we gain them, the more we desire them. Any experience that gives some pleasure has got to be repeated. If it is repeated then one gets bored. Monotony is the result of repeated experience of anything. So, one turns one's attention towards something else. Even if the pursuit of money and pleasures are fulfilled, one wants something else, like power. One is ready to spend any amount of money for the sake of power. Mere money alone is not enough. Power seems to make one significant. Even if one is a moneyed person without any power, one cannot accomplish anything.

Thus we find that the means we follow do not fulfil the fundamental urge. At the same time, we cannot dismiss it because it has not taken our permission before coming, like anger. One cannot tell an angry person, "Do not get angry". He will get angrier if he is told so because he has not decided to be angry. The situation is one of helplessness. One's urge to become significant is natural; one cannot dismiss it.

The known means that one follows are incapable of fulfilling it.

Unless one sees this helplessness, one cannot seek help. People think that they themselves can fix up problems. They do not seek help when they need to. Their situation is like that of one given to alcohol. As long as one thinks that one can stop alcohol at any time, one has no way of getting rid of it. Only when one thinks, 'I do not have any power over alcohol' one has a chance to stop it. This is the first step. When one discovers that one has no say over alcohol, one will seek help. Similarly, mumukṣutva, the desire for freedom, is also

something that is discovered through a process of discernment. The discovery is in this form: "I cannot fulfil the natural urge to be free from being small and insignificant with the means available with me, through the gain of 'what is not yet gained' like money, pleasures and so on". If the gain of 'what is not yet gained' is not going to help, then what is the solution? We cannot say there is no solution because the desire to be free is a natural urge and there must be a way out. Through this kind of reasoning, a person discovers the desire for freedom and become a mumukṣu.

To be continued

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