

Kaivalyopaniṣad Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati's transcribed talk

This is the seventh part of the serial article, continuation from November 2021 newsletter.
Everybody is a *mumukṣu* in that everybody is seeking freedom, but it is necessary to recognize that freedom can be attained only through the knowledge of the true nature of the self. That is the kind of transformation that took place in Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. The verses of the first chapter and first ten verses of the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita show us the transformation of Arjuna from *mumukṣu* to *jijñāsu*, that is, from being a desirer of liberation to becoming a desirer of knowledge. He then submits himself to Lord Kṛṣṇa with a request for self-knowledge.

All of this must have happened to Āśvalāyana. He must have led a very mature and intelligent life. Such a transformation can take place only when a human being lives an intelligent life; the *rajas* and *tamas* in the mind are slowly replaced by *sattva*. The desires arising in the mind are dependent upon the disposition of the mind. If the mind is predominant in *rajas*, it will desire pleasure, enjoyment, achievement, accomplishments, and so on. On the other hand, if the mind is predominant in *sattva*, it will desire knowledge. This is mentioned in the Gita¹.

The use of the word 'thereafter' implies the state of mind subsequent to having lived a life of *dharma*, of *karma yoga*. This is what we would call an intelligent way of living, where one uses free will to see that life is lived in harmony with the prevailing universal order. The Upaniṣad says that when the desire for knowledge arises, one should go to the teacher, who is well versed in scriptures. In Pūjya Swamiji's words, such a teacher is a *sampradāyavit*, a knower of the *sampradāya* or

¹ सत्वात्सञ्जायते ज्ञानं रजसो लोभ एव च ।
प्रमादमोहौ तमसो भवतोऽज्ञानमेव च ॥

satvātsañjāyate jñānaṁ rajaso lobha eva ca
pramādamohau tamaso bhavato'jñānameva ca

From *sattva* results knowledge, from *rajas* only greed, and from *tamas* nothing but laziness, delusion, and ignorance. (BG 14.17)

tradition of teaching *brahma-vidyā*. The knower of the *sampradāya* is well versed in the scriptures, as well as in the art of communication.

Why should one go to a teacher?

Why is there this constant advice to seek out a teacher? Can we not figure this out by ourselves?

The reason we are told of the importance of being with a teacher is that none of us would ever suspect that what we consider ourselves to be is not right. Everybody entertains an unquestioning sense of limitation about himself or herself; the basic conclusion is that we are limited beings. There is simply no occasion to question the conclusion about the self. We question everything else, but take for granted that the questioner or seeker himself is a limited being. The questioner is never questioned.

We do not question our own conclusions about the world just as we do not question our conclusions about God. Yet taking those conclusions for granted, we set about leading our lives. Therefore, there is a necessity to go to the teacher, who alone can draw our attention to the fact that what we take ourselves to be is not right and what we think about the world is also not right, just as much as even what we think about *īśvara* is not right.

Life consists of three entities: I, the individual, called the *jīva*; the universe around me, called the *jagat*, and the creator, called *īśvara*. These three entities constitute our lives. It is therefore necessary that we come to know the true nature of these entities and the relationship that obtains between them. Vedānta addresses these basic realities of life. For example, if you read and analyze a text such as the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, you will find that the author spends some time talking of the qualifications of the seeker, but proceeds to elaborate more expansively on the nature of the individual, as in the *tvampadārtha* or meaning of the word 'you,' on the nature of the world around us, as in the *tat-padārtha* or meaning of the word 'that,' and upon the identity between the two or the *asipadārtha*, as in 'that you are.' This necessarily requires a teacher, because we have already taken things for granted,

just as the 'tenth man' is taken for granted, in the sense that he thinks he is not the tenth man. There is, in the very search for the tenth man, a denial of the truth about the tenth man.

The fact that we are searching for liberation, for freedom, and for happiness presupposes that we do not consider ourselves liberated, free or happy. Unless one denies one's own self, one would not remain in search of *mokṣa*. It takes a teacher to point that out to us. The teacher says, "What you take yourself to be is not what you truly are." It is to gain this knowledge that one should necessarily go to a teacher and submit to him or her with the right attitude.

The student must have the proper attitude

Merely going to a teacher does not necessarily ensure that the teacher will accept the person as a student. The teacher also needs to ascertain the qualifications of the student. Toward that end, the student needs to convince the teacher that he is a sincere seeker. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad tells us of how Indra, the lord of all the gods, himself had to wait for the teaching and perform penance for one hundred and one years before he could gain the knowledge of the self. This shows how great people have dedicated their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge and indicates how valuable this knowledge is.

How does the teacher determine the eligibility of the student?

Lord Kṛṣṇa says, "Understand that (which is to be known) by prostrating, by asking proper questions, (and) through service. Those who are wise, who have the vision of the truth, will teach you (this) knowledge."²

'Know that this is the method,' he says. 'Go and prostrate to the teacher.' What does prostration mean? Prostration means surrendering to the teacher. The student must have complete *śraddhā* or trust in him and serve him through his

² तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।

उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥

tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā

upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninastattvadarśinaḥ (BG 4.34)

actions, through his words, and through his thoughts. Doing this shows *bhakti* or devotion to the teacher. This alone enables the student to become attuned to the teacher in course of time. When the teacher is pleased in this way and recognizes the sincerity of the student, he consents to being asked the questions. All of this is understood to have taken place in the case of Āśvalāyana, as indicated by the word *atha*, thereafter.

Upasametya means having approached. *Upa* means proximity and *sametya* means having approached. *Upasametya* means approaching the teacher and being in the proximity of the teacher. Such proximity can occur in two ways. There can be physical proximity, inasmuch as the student lives with the teacher and at the feet of the teacher. There can also be emotional proximity, inasmuch as the student develops an emotional bond with the teacher. The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad says, “One who has total devotion to the Lord and has similar devotion to the teacher, to him do the secrets of self-knowledge that have been told become clear.”³

Āśvalāyana thus approaches the teacher, who is none other than Parameṣṭhī or Lord Brahmājī, the very creator of the world. Having approached in the manner that we have seen described, he prostrates to the teacher, serves him, wins his trust and affection, and then asks the question, “Oh Lord, Oh revered Sir, please teach me; impart to me the knowledge of *brahman*.” The literal meaning of *adhīhi* is, in fact, ‘remember.’ The student seems to say, ‘For my sake, for blessing me, please recollect.’ Indeed, the teacher does not have to remember *brahman* because he abides in that; hence *adhīhi* is to be seen to mean ‘please become a teacher to me.’

³ यस्य देवे परा भक्तिर्यथा देवे तथा गुरौ ।

तस्यैते कथिता ह्यर्थाः प्रकाशन्ते महात्मनः ॥

yasya deve parā bhaktiryathā deve tathā gurau

tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanaḥ (Śve.Up. 6.23)

***Brahman* is the subject of the teaching**

What does the student want to know?

The student wants to gain *brahma-vidyā*, the knowledge of *brahman*. *Vidyā* means knowledge and *brahman* means limitless. *Brahman* is a word that is derived from the root *bṛh*, in the sense of growth or greatness. *Brahman* means that which is unconditionally great, unconditionally big. Normally, the words 'big' or 'great' are used as adjectives. For example, we would say, 'a big mountain' or 'a great civilization.' But we could also say, 'What a big rat!' Or 'What a great person!' Here the sense of bigness or greatness is defined by the noun being qualified by the words big or great. However, the word *brahman* indicates 'big' or 'great' as a noun, to indicate that which is free of every kind of boundary, that which is limitless.

The presumption is that Āśvalāyana must have known of something called *brahman*. That also presupposes some stage of preparation. For *jijñāsā* or the desire for knowledge to arise, one must have some general knowledge. For example, sometimes, students ask me to tell them the meaning of the *mahā-mṛtyuñjaya-mantra*. It is clear that they know of something called the *mahā-mṛtyuñjaya-mantra*. *Jijñāsā* or the desire to know something in particular arises when there is some general knowledge of that thing. Then again, a student might ask, as mentioned in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad⁴, "What is it, knowing which everything is as well known?" It is clear that such a question cannot arise unless there is some background that has been acquired, either in some *satsaṅga*, class, or assembly of scholars debating the truth of existence. As Pūjya Swamiji says, reading paperbacks on spirituality can be useful, if not in gaining precise knowledge, at least in gaining some sense about it, which can lead to further inquiry.

The most exalted among all forms of knowledge

Āśvalāyana uses two adjectives to describe *brahma-vidyā*: *variṣṭhām* and *nigūḍhām*.

⁴Mu.Up. 1.1.3

Variṣṭhām means the noblest, the most exalted. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad⁵, it is said that two forms of knowledge should be gained: *parā-vidyā* and *aparā-vidyā*; the knowledge of that which is superior, and the knowledge of that which is inferior. These are the only two kinds of subject matter in all knowledge. The subject matter of the inferior or *apara* knowledge is the created world that can be objectified.

Why does the Upaniṣad say that we should have the knowledge of the world? What is that knowledge going to do for us? Why not only pursue *parā-vidyā*? It is because it is necessary to first understand that the world is impermanent, in that it is subject to creation, sustenance, and dissolution. Whatever is born is bound to perish. Whatever can be objectified, including Brahmalo⁶, is perishable. All achievements in the universe are perishable. We have to understand this clearly.

Mithyā

Mithyā means that which does not enjoy an independent reality and possesses only a relative reality. For example, take a length of cloth, with reference to cotton. Cotton is the substance from which the cloth is made. Cloth is perishable, in that if we separate all the strands, the cloth will no longer be. Yet, even if we separate the strands, the cotton yarn which constitutes the cloth will continue to be. These strands can also be cut into small pieces. The strands may then perish, but cotton, as the material of which the strands are made, will remain. Therefore, whereas this cloth, which is a name and a form, constantly undergoes change or is subject to change, the reality of the cloth, which is the underlying cotton, does not change. Just as in this example of cotton and the cloth, the whole universe is constantly changing, but that change is possible only against an unchanging substratum. This is the manner in which we need to understand the universe. There is no need to know how many stars there are or how many grains of sand there are or the like. There is no end to that knowledge and also no need for it. What we need

⁵ द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म यद्ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति परा चैवापरा च ।

dve vidye veditaavye iti ha sma yadbrahmavido vadanti parā caivāparā ca. (Mu.Up. 1.1.4)

⁶ Brahmalo⁶ is the highest of the seven superior worlds, also called Satyaloka.

to know about the world is that it is *mithyā*, only relatively real. Then there arises the need to know the absolute reality behind the world. For instance, it is not as if the piece of cloth does not exist; the cloth is certainly there, only, it is there entirely because of cotton. Similarly, the pot exists because of the clay of which it is made. When something exists because of something else, it is only relatively real and not absolutely real. It derives its reality from something else. Cloth derives its reality from cotton, the pot derives its reality from clay, and the wave derives its reality from water.

Pūjya Swamiji says that the human being is always in search of the infallible, as in that which can never go wrong, which never fails, never deceives, which is ever reliable, ever trustworthy, and which, in other words, is the truth. This is what one is ultimately pursuing. It is only after any object is gained that it is recognized as being perishable, as being changing or as being dependant on something else for its existence. It is not infallible. Such recognition leads to disillusionment and disappointment with the world.

One cannot bank upon a clay pot because it will someday merge back into clay; so it makes sense that we hold on only to that which is infallible, reliable, and trustworthy. This constantly changing world points to something that is its substratum, which does not change. Hence, when the Upaniṣad says that we should acquire two kinds of knowledge, the knowledge of the nonself or the world and the knowledge of the self or *brahman*, it indicates that we must grow out of the world.

The knowledge of the world becomes a gateway to the knowledge of the self through the recognition that because it is changing, the world is *mithyā* or unreal, and, therefore, there must be something that is absolutely real. All other forms of knowledge are seen to be inferior. *Brahma-vidyā* is called the most superior, noblest, and the most exalted, knowing which nothing else remains to be known. That is the extent to which the Upaniṣad glorifies *brahma-vidyā*.

To be continued...