

Kaivalyopaniṣad
Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati's transcribed talk

This is the second part of the serial article, continuation from June 2021 newsletter.

The four āśramas or stages of life

As we understand it, *brahmacarya* is the first stage of life. It is the life of a student. A *brahmacārī* is one who approaches the teacher, lives with the teacher and serves him, and studies the Vedas and related texts under his tutelage. It is not only a period of the study of scriptures in the *gurukula* or teacher's house, but also a study of how to live life effectively. Traditionally, the students learned *dharma-śāstra* or texts dealing with the righteous way of life, and learned of various rituals, their purpose, and how and when to perform them. They learned to recite the Vedas and were required to memorize them with their meanings. They learned *vyākaraṇa* or Sanskrit grammar, the principles of logic, astrology, and so on. The student's only priority was to study, along with observing the discipline required to pursue knowledge and keeping oneself fit. Service to the teacher included going out into the community to beg for food and serving food to the teacher. All of that was a part of the duties of the students. Sometimes, such service also included taking cows and other cattle out to graze and taking care of them. If there was a farm, the service included participating in the activities of farming, and so on. One can see that all this also provided the students sufficient exercise. Such was the life of a student—no political activities or any other kinds of activities at all.

The second stage of life is *gārhasthya*, the life of a householder. Well-equipped with knowledge and training, the student would come home from the *gurukula*. He was now ready to lead an active life, a life of pursuing *artha* and *kāma*, success and pleasure, both here and in the hereafter, on the basis of *dharma* or duty, righteousness, responsibility, and accountability, wherein there is sensitivity towards the needs of others.

The life of a householder is one of duty and pleasure, though not indulgence.

There is a fair amount of self control because indulgence damages a person. When a householder lives life intelligently, he turns from being a consumer to becoming a contributor; he gains maturity, by which he becomes free from the cravings for pleasure and success. He discovers the inner poise with which one can live with oneself without any need for external props. Such is the life of a *gṛhastha*.

Living in this manner equips one for the next stage of life - that of a *vānaprastha* or 'forest dweller.' The person now retires to a forest, a place devoid of social activity. A man goes alone, or, if the wife chooses to join him, with his wife. They hand over all the responsibilities of the household to their children and live a life of worship in a secluded place. They live as friends in preparation for a life of *sannyāsa*.

The final stage of life is *sannyāsa* or the life of renunciation, in which *mokṣa* is the primary pursuit; the person renounces all possessions and relationships. *Sannyāsīs* forfeit even the right to earn money to feed themselves; they have to depend upon the mercy of others for that. Of course, they have no home. Traditionally, they were wandering monks and, if they did stay at one place, it would either be to sit at the feet of the teacher for scriptural study or to teach others.

The four *āśramas* or stages of one's life are thus *brahmacarya*, *gārhasthya*, *vānaprasthya*, and *sannyāsa*. These days, we don't have *vānaprasthya* as a distinct stage of life, and leaving home as a child to stay at a *gurukula* is also quite rare; so we may say that there are two stages of life, *gārhasthya* and *sannyāsa*.

Each of the Vedas is made up of four sections: the *Samhitā*, the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Āraṇyaka* and the *Upaniṣad*. The first two sections, the *Samhitā* and the *Brāhmaṇa*, are mainly concerned with rituals and *dharma* and address the needs of the *gṛhastha*. The *Āraṇyaka* contains meditations and forms of worship that are to be performed in the forest and so this section addresses the needs of the *vānaprastha*. Finally, the *Upaniṣads* address the needs of a *sannyāsī*.

The *Upaniṣads* occur after the *karma-kāṇḍa* and at the end of the teachings of the Vedas and are called *Vedānta*, as in *vedānām antaḥ vedāntaḥ*, the end of the Vedas.

There is another way to understand why they are called Vedānta. The word *anta* does not just mean the physical end; *anta* also means final ascertainment. In that sense, Vedānta can be understood to be the ultimate vision of the Vedas.

The meaning of the word *upaniṣad*

Upaniṣad means self-knowledge. The word *upaniṣad* is derived from the root *sad*, to which the prefixes *upa* and *ni* are added. In the root *sad*, the letter *sa* gets changed to *ṣa* because of a *sandhi*-rule, and thus we have the verbal root *upaniṣad*. A *pratyaya* or suffix called *kvip* is added to this verbal stem to convert it into a noun; this suffix is added and dropped. Even in the English language, we find instances of such usage; for example, the suffix 'er' in the word *cooker*, which indicates the verbal noun, is subsequently dropped, but the meaning of the word *cook* remains, 'the one who cooks.' The suffix added to the verbal root *upaniṣad* transforms it into the verbal noun *upaniṣad*. In addition, the suffix *kvip* imparts to the noun the sense of agency and, therefore, *upaniṣad*, which means knowledge, is seen to bring something about or do something.

The subject matter of the knowledge contained in the *upaniṣad* is indicated by the first prefix *upa*, which implies a sense of nearness. Hence, the word *upaniṣad* means the knowledge of something that is near. How near is near? When nearness is not qualified, it implies unqualified nearness. So what is it that is near? Nearness, as we know, is a relative concept. For instance, this table is nearer to me than you are. Then again, my body is nearer to me than this table is. However, my mind is even nearer than the body, and, in truth, my self is nearer than anything else. Thus, the word near ultimately resolves into the self. By this, we can understand that the *upaniṣad* is the knowledge of the self.

Ni means *niścitam*, well ascertained. Here it indicates a knowledge that is free from any doubt or vagueness. Therefore, not only is the *upaniṣad* the knowledge of the self, but it is also a knowledge that is free from doubt, vagueness or error. Doubt is an obstacle to clarity, as are vagueness and outright error, of course. Sometimes, we have knowledge, but it may be erroneous knowledge. If what is

lying in front of us is a rope and we imagine it to be a snake, it is knowledge all right, but an erroneous knowledge. Sometimes, we may wonder, “Is it a rope or a snake?” That would be a kind of knowledge that is mixed with doubt. Such knowledge cannot be called true knowledge either. It could also be that sometimes, it appears as though something is there, but we don’t know what it is. In such an instance, there is some degree of knowledge, but it is devoid of clarity. *Niścitam jñānam* is a clear, abiding knowledge that is free from any hint of vagueness, doubt or error.

Self-knowledge is unlike any other knowledge

In the case of self knowledge, unlike the condition of every other form or kind of knowledge, what one seeks is what one wishes to attain or become. The fact is that we are seeking to become something all the time. We are seeking to become different from the way we now are because we are not happy with what we find ourselves to be. Therefore, there is a constant endeavor to bring about some change, so that we may be different, and thus happier and more acceptable to ourselves. As Pūjya Swamiji¹ says, one is always only seeking to be a pleased self, a happy self, a satisfied self. Yet why does one want to become a pleased self? It is because he is not pleased with the person he finds himself to be; his perception of himself does not measure up to his expectations of himself. He perceives himself as being inadequate, wanting or lacking, and is not willing to be that wanting, lacking or inadequate being. Therefore, he wants to be free from every limitation; he wants to become limitless.

When we analyze what we are seeking to be, we will discover that we are seeking to be free from every form of limitation; in being limitless alone can we be pleased with ourselves. In the Chāndogyopaniṣad, sage Sanatkumāra says to sage Nārada, *yo vai bhūmā tatsukham nālpe sukham asti*², indeed, in that which is *bhūmā* or abundant and limitless alone is happiness. Only the limitless can provide happiness.

¹ Swami Viditatmananda’s teacher, Swami Dayananda Saraswati

² Chā.Up. 7.23.1

Na alpe sukham asti, there cannot be *sukha* or happiness in that which is limited. It is a very fundamental definition of happiness that the Upaniṣad lays out, in that happiness can only be in the limitless and not in anything that is limited. It is therefore that, whenever we find ourselves limited or lacking in any way, we become unhappy.

In fact, when we say that we want to be happy, it amounts to saying that we want to be limitless. This may not be understood by most people, because happiness is usually associated with things other than oneself, such as wealth, name, fame, recognition, heaven, and so on. These are things that the vast majority is trying to achieve, accomplish, or become. Yet, going by the definition given in the Upaniṣad, it is very clear that happiness can only lie in limitlessness and also that there cannot be happiness in being limited.

Wanting to be adequate, or happy, or pleased, amounts to wanting to be free from every limitation. This is the endeavor of every individual. It is this endeavor to become limitless that has been making us assume embodiments one after the other endlessly, from the beginning of time itself. Vedānta says that this desire to become limitless can be satisfied only when it is discovered that we already are the limitless. A limited being cannot become limitless. Regardless of what one does, regardless of how much one acquires or gains or attains, one can indeed never *become* limitless. As the Muṇḍakopaniṣad says, *nāsti akṛtaḥ kṛtena*³. That which is *akṛta*, uncreated, cannot be created through *karma*, action. By nature, the limitless is uncreated and free from all considerations of time. That it is timeless means that it is here right now. Whatever is present right now does not have to be created; it has only to be discovered.

That the limitless has only to be discovered or only to be known amounts to saying that what one wants to become is but what one needs to know, because 'becoming' limitless can only be accomplished by knowing that one already is of

³ Mu.Up. 1.2.12

the nature of the limitless. Vedānta says, *tat tvam asi*⁴, 'that thou art.' Because one is limitless, the knowing of this fact and the becoming of what one seeks to be are one; in truth, what each one of seeks is nothing but our own true nature. When one gains the knowledge, one spontaneously becomes limitless, one spontaneously owns up to his true nature, which is limitlessness. Such spontaneous or abiding knowledge alone is true knowledge. If it is an effort to remember, it cannot be called knowledge. While it may need remembrance for a while or until it becomes abiding knowledge, as long as it takes effort to remain limitless, it cannot be called an abiding knowledge; knowledge is called *niścitam jñānam* only when it is free from error, vagueness or doubt.

The third element of the word *upaniṣad* is the root *sad*. We saw earlier that the *kvip-pratyaya* imparts an element of agency. Therefore, the teaching of the *upaniṣad* or self-knowledge is seen to do something. What it does is indicated by the root *sad*. According to the *dhātupāṭha* or dictionary of verbs, the root *sad* has three meanings: *gati*, *viśaraṇa*, and *avasādana*. *Gati* means movement as in going somewhere; this knowledge 'takes' us somewhere. *Viśaraṇa* means loosening; this knowledge loosens something that is deep set. *Avasādana* means destruction; this knowledge is seen to destroy something.

When we say that the knowledge of the self takes us somewhere, what do we mean? Where does it take us? It takes us where we want to be; it takes us to limitlessness. This knowledge 'takes' us to *brahman* by revealing the fact that limitlessness or *brahman* is our very nature. It does not take us to any place in a literal sense, but it is as though taking us to limitlessness, because we feel separate from limitlessness. By removing the distance that is created by ignorance and eliminating the inhibiting factors that are responsible for this notion, the knowledge enables us to recognize that we are limitless.

To be continued...

⁴ Chā.Up. 6.8.7