

## Kaivalyopaniṣad Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati's transcribed talk

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### 1. Introduction

The Kaivalya Upaniṣad is part of the Atharva Veda. The Vedas are considered to be the sourcebooks of knowledge in the Vedic culture. They are held to be texts that were not written or composed, but 'revealed' to the *ṛṣis*. The *ṛṣis* are thus called *mantra-draṣṭārah*, the 'seers' of the *mantras*. The knowledge contained in the Vedas is such that it cannot be gained directly by human beings, not only because it is beyond the range of sense perception but also because no human intellect is adequately equipped to receive the knowledge. The *mantras* are seen to have been revealed to the ancient *ṛṣis* through the power of their penance and the purity of their hearts, which made them capable of receiving this knowledge in the form of the *mantras*. It is in this manner that the profound knowledge of the Vedas became available to us.

The Vedas can be seen to be segmented into two sections, one dealing with *karma* or *dharma* and the other dealing with *jñāna* or the knowledge of the self. The first section of the Vedas tells us about things that we cannot arrive at through our limited means of knowledge. For example, we have no way of proving the idea of a previous birth for the human being or a subsequent birth after the death of this body. Similarly, there is no way for us to determine whether heaven or hell exists. Heaven and hell remain *nitya-parokṣa*, always invisible to us, and cannot be verified. The Vedas talk of an afterlife and also of the kind of actions we should perform to achieve various desired ends. Because human beings have many desires, the Vedas prescribe the means to achieve those ends, as well as the kinds of related disciplines to follow, as in what to do and what not to do.

The Vedas also teach of the basic values of life that must be followed, called *dharma* or the righteous way of life, as also the nature of one's duty, as in the appropriate action to be performed in a given situation. They prescribe various kinds of duties for different people, keeping in view the particular situation in a person's life, his disposition, and his responsibilities. Thus, the duties of people of different dispositions, such as the *brāhmaṇa*, the *kṣatriya*, or the *vaiśya*, are clearly described, as also the duties of people in different stages of their lives, such as *brahmacarya*, *gārhasthya*, or *vānaprasthya*. All of this comprises the subject matter of the first section of the Vedas, called the *karma-kāṇḍa*.

The primary effort in our lives must be to live the right way, exercise discrimination, and live intelligently. To do so, however, we need guidance and direction. As human beings, we are blessed with a free will that affords us the freedom to choose the course of our lives; we have the freedom to determine our goals in life, as well as the freedom to determine the means of achieving those goals. Thus, there is freedom with reference to choosing both the means and the ends. This freedom can be better appreciated when we compare ourselves to other living beings, whose lives seem to be pre-programmed and without the benefit of any such freedom of choice. They appear to have neither any particular destination nor any particular agenda other than survival and the propagation of their species. However, while human beings are endowed with an awareness of their destination in life, every person appears to have a different notion of the destination and how to reach it. Thus, we turn to the Vedas, which teach us of the one true destination and the way to approach it.

### **The Vedas speak of true fulfillment**

The Vedas tell us that we already are what we are seeking to be. It is clear from the behavior of every human being that he is constantly seeking something. The fact is that, whether or not he is aware of it, what he is seeking is to be free, to be happy. If you ask a person how much happiness he wants, he will reply that he

wants boundless happiness, and of the kind that is not mixed with any kind of unhappiness at all. Indeed, whenever one depends on any external factors for deriving happiness, there is also a bit of unhappiness mixed up with that happiness. Man cannot truly accept that; he wants pure and unconditional happiness at all times, in all places, and under all conditions. Asking if one wants to be happy in the morning or in the evening, inside the house or outside the house, or whether in the company of one's friends or one's relatives will not make any sense to any human being. Everybody only wants that kind of happiness, which knows no boundaries, has no limits, and is subject to no conditions.

### **Happiness must be uncovered from within oneself**

Very often, in not knowing of the nature of true boundless or limitless happiness, people confuse this freedom with licentiousness; it is thought that freedom lies in doing whatever one pleases, saying whatever pleases, writing whatever one pleases, and so on. In short, freedom is confused with the ability to live entirely as one pleases. If we do not discriminate between freedom and licentiousness, the very process of seeking freedom will only serve to bind us, as surely as the very process of seeking happiness only leads us to unhappiness.

The Vedas teach that the true freedom and true independence that one is constantly seeking is to be found within oneself alone and may only be discovered through living a certain way of life. We are told that happiness has to be uncovered from within ourselves, rather than created, and, therefore, life must primarily become a process of discovering the happiness or freedom that is already our true nature. Attaining one's true nature is thus the gain of that which is already gained. It is a process in which knowledge plays a primary role, as opposed to the process of gaining that which is not yet gained, in which *karma* or action is primary instead.

There are many that may not be ready or willing to understand the teaching that true happiness or freedom lies within ourselves, because they remain preoccupied

with fulfilling strong desires and their minds are crowded with aspirations and ambitions. Not everybody is ready to accept this message right away. The Vedas recognize this fact and therefore say that while we have the freedom to pursue whatever ends we desire, it is necessary to make sure that our attempts to attain these ends do not compromise the means we employ. The most important thing in life is, therefore, making sure that we follow the right means. This is called *dharma*, righteousness. We should ensure that in the process of achieving our desired goals, we do not trample upon the rights and requirements of other people. We must recognize that just as we ourselves love happiness and freedom, others also love happiness and freedom. Similarly, just as we would not want anybody to come in the way of our pursuit of freedom and happiness, others also do not want us to come in the way of their pursuit of happiness and freedom. This, then, is the basic value and we can see that every other value has its basis in this one.

### **Following a life of values fosters inner growth**

The process of following a life of values results in inner growth or inner purification, because following the values requires us to control the impulse to violate the values. There are temptations that constantly prey on the mind, and tendencies, such as violence, dishonesty, falsehood, stealing, hoarding, or aggrandizing, may also be present. For instance, there may be a tendency to appropriate something that does not rightfully belong to us or a tendency to hurt somebody in the process of achieving our goals. In order to follow the life of values, it is necessary that such tendencies are kept under check. As Lord Kṛṣṇa points out in the Gita, *kāma*, *krodha*, and *lobha*, meaning lust, anger, and greed are likely to be present in us to varying degrees, and in order to follow a life of *dharma*, it becomes necessary that we curb these tendencies. For instance, we cannot lead a life of nonviolence unless we keep anger under control, just as we cannot live a life of honesty unless we keep greed under control. Similarly, we cannot live a healthy life unless we keep lust under control. It is required that we keep these harmful tendencies under control in order to maintain good relationships and live a life in which we reach out

to other people and address their needs as well.

Even if the primary teaching of the Vedas is to show the way to true inner fulfillment, they are not insensitive to our material needs. For instance, the Vedas accept the validity of the desire for cattle, progeny, wealth, power, or even *svarga* or heaven. They even prescribe specific means in order to fulfill such desires and only caution us to make sure that we follow the right values in achieving these ends. The important thing is that we live the life of *dharma*. When we do that, we progressively start becoming free from all negative propensities; the goodness and purity already obtaining within us, our true nature, become manifest.

### **Living a life of *dharma* leads to self-purification**

Living a life of *dharma* becomes a process of self-purification and makes the mind *sāttvika*; the mind becomes tranquil, transparent, contemplative, and more objective. On the other hand, when *kāma* (desire), *krodha* (anger), or other such harmful impulses arise in the mind, there is a tendency to project, thereby making the mind see things that are not there. For instance, when we get angry, our perception is vitiated and we project either guilt or offence upon the object of our anger; such projection leads us to see faults that are not there in that person. In a similar fashion, even when we become greedy we tend to project, perhaps unjustifiably, that we need more than somebody else.

When such tendencies in the mind gradually reduce, one becomes more contemplative, more thinking, and more objective with reference to life around oneself, as well as with reference to oneself. The mind is then able to discriminate between right and wrong and examine the quality and usefulness of one's daily pursuits in life. Until then, however, comforts and pleasure remain very important. The desire for success and pleasure is so strong that one never thinks about whether or not their pursuit is right or justified. Once the mind begins to inquire into whether or not pleasure and success do indeed give lasting peace and deserve to be desirable goals, we begin to see that life has something more to offer. We begin to real-

ize that what we are truly seeking is more lasting and much greater than that which success and pleasure can ever offer.

### **The limited cannot offer happiness or satisfaction**

When the understanding that success and pleasure are fleeting and impermanent dawns upon us, the entire course of our lives changes. An important verse of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad<sup>1</sup> says, “After examining the worlds (achievements) gained through actions, may the discriminative person discover dispassion, because *mokṣa*, which is not created, cannot be gained through action. Therefore, to gain the knowledge of *brahman* he must go with sacrificial twigs in hand to a teacher who is well-versed in scriptures and who abides in the knowledge of *brahman*.”

*Karmacitān lokān parīkṣya*, having examined the achievements gained through *karma*, efforts. Upon such enquiry, one comes to recognize that whatever has been achieved through effort has been limited and unsatisfactory. There is also the recognition that whatever one can hope to achieve in future through any kind of effort is also going to be just as limited, because, regardless of the degree of effort, that which is achieved through any kind human effort is bound to be limited. The limited can never offer satisfaction or happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> परीक्ष्य लोकान् कर्मचितान् ब्राह्मणो निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत् समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥

*parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brāhmaṇo nirvedamāyānnāstyakṛtaḥ kṛtena*

*tadvijñānārthaṁ sa gurumevābhigacchet samitpāṇiḥ śrotriyaṁ brahmaniṣṭham*

(Mu.Up 1.2.12)

effort is also going to be just as limited, because, regardless of the degree of effort, that which is achieved through any kind human effort is bound to be limited. The limited can never offer satisfaction or happiness.

As a result, regardless of how wealthy, famous or powerful one can become, one will still remain a limited person. No degree of wealth, fame or power can ever satisfy. One will remain a limited person, a seeker dissatisfied with oneself. Once this understanding is gained, not only because it is what Vedānta tells us but because it has become one's own understanding, the search for that which is permanent and limitless finally begins.

*Gurumeva abhigacchet*, for that knowledge one should approach a teacher. This is where the teaching of the Upaniṣad comes into the picture. The need of such a seeker has changed. His need so far was for success and pleasure, both in this life and in the hereafter, and the rituals prescribed in the *karma-kāṇḍa* along with other efforts were adequate for gaining both; the setup of means and ends thus far was satisfactory. However, he now seeks the permanent and recognizes well that the permanent cannot be achieved through action that is limited.

The permanent or lasting is something to be discovered. The section of the Vedas, called the *jñāna-kāṇḍa*, helps one in this objective. It deals with knowledge that one could call the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of the reality, the knowledge of the self, or the knowledge of God. This section of the Vedas addresses a smaller number of people who, upon thinking through their needs, have become sensitive to their one true inner need. There are two lifestyles for one to choose from: *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*; the life of activity and achievement, and the life of contemplation. The life of achievement involves thinking about something other than oneself, something outside of oneself. The life of contemplation involves thinking about something that is within, looking into one's own self. Yes, it is true that some sense of achieving something still remains, but the method of achievement has changed because the perception of what has to be achieved has changed. This

is the subject matter of the *jñāna-kāṇḍa* of the Vedas. It is also called the Upaniṣad.

The *karma-kāṇḍa* addresses the first stage of one's life and *jñāna-kāṇḍa* addresses the second stage. *Karma-kāṇḍa* is meant for a *gṛhastha* or householder and *jñāna-kāṇḍa* is meant for a *sannyāsī* or renunciate. Although, technically, there are four *āśramas* or stages of life, called *brahmacarya*, *gārhasthya*, *vānaprasthya*, and *sannyāsa*, they can broadly be divided into two stages—the life of activity and the life of contemplation.

### **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.

*To be continued...*