

This is the twenty third part of the serial article, continuation from April 2023 newsletter.

Knowledge is the only means

In the next verse, the Upaniṣad makes it clear that the knowledge of the self as *brahman* is the only means to liberation.

स एव सर्वं यद्भूतं यच्च भव्यं सनातनम् ।

ज्ञात्वा तं मृत्युमत्येति नान्यः पन्था विमुक्तये ॥ ९ ॥

sa eva sarvaṃ yadbhūtaṃ yacca bhavyaṃ sanātanam

jñātvā taṃ mṛtyumatyeti nānyaḥ panthā vimuktaye

सः - he एव - is in fact सर्वम् - everything यद् भूतम् - whatever is in the past
यत् च भव्यम् - whatever is in the future सनातनम् - timeless ज्ञात्वा - having
known (in knowing) तम् - him मृत्युम् - death अत्येति - crosses over न
अन्यः - no other पन्थाः - way विमुक्तये - for gaining freedom

He is, in fact, all that was and all that will ever be; the timeless one.
Knowing him, one crosses over death. There is no other way to gain
freedom. (9)

He alone is everything. *Yad bhūtam*, whatever was in the past, and *yat ca bhavyam*, whatever will be in the future; this also includes whatever is in the present. Thus, he alone is whatever was in the past, whatever is in the present, and whatever will be in the future. So *īśvara*, *brahman* or the self is that which exists through the past, the present, and the future, because it is the one substratum upon which all the various superimpositions are made. Just as the 'single entity' of water manifests variously as all the different movements in water, such as the surf, ripples, and waves, so also, the one self alone manifests as whatever exists in this universe.

It will be said later that the self or the 'I' is both the material and efficient cause of everything. As the material cause, the 'I' is all-pervasive, the self of all, and is, therefore, whatever was the past. It's not that the self 'existed' at some point in the

past, but simply that the self of each one of us has always existed. The self is whatever is in the present, as also whatever will be in the future. We do not change the "I am" to "I was" or "I will be." There cannot be a "was" or a "will be" associated with the 'I.' There is no notion of time in the 'I.' Time exists at the level of the mind. Change and everything else happens at the level of the mind. The 'I,' the consciousness, illumines the mind and thus time, because time is a concept of the mind. Therefore, there is no past or future in the 'I' that is consciousness; there is only the present.

The truth about time

What is meant by the present? What is the duration of the present? Does the present mean one year? Six months? One month? One day? One hour? Each hour also has a beginning and end, so what is the present? "One minute?" "No, that also has a dimension." "One second?" "No, that also has a dimension." "One millisecond, then? Or one nanosecond?"

Any unit of time, even a miniscule, infinitesimally small length of time, has a beginning and an end. So what is the present? The present is where the very concept of time disappears. When you keep dividing time into smaller and smaller fractions, what does it resolve into? It resolves into dimensionless time; that is the present.

The present cannot have a dimension. Each moment has a dimension, there is beginning and there is end. No matter how infinitesimal the dimension, it is bound to have a beginning and an end. The past and the future represent change; they are but concepts in time. The present is that which transcends the very concept of change. The past is a projection and the future is as much of a projection; there is only the present. What you call the past was the present moment at some time. What you call the future will be the present at another time. What there truly is, therefore, is nothing but the present. The present or the presence is all there is. Therefore the self or the 'I' alone is everything, the past, future or present, meaning that it is the substratum upon which the superimposition of the past, present,

and future takes place. The 'I' is the substratum upon which the creator, the sustainer, and the dissolver are superimposed. Just as upon the rope, different plays of snake, garland etc., take place without affecting the rope in any way, so also, the entire drama of creation, sustenance, and dissolution or past, present, and future takes place with the 'I' being its very substratum, yet without it being affected in any way. Whatever was in the past, whatever will be in the future, and whatever is in the present, is the 'I,' the self alone. Indeed, the 'I' alone imparts *sattā* or existence and *sphūr̥ti*, intelligence and awareness, to everything. One is of the nature of that principle of existence and intelligence and awareness.

Jñātvā tam, knowing him as one's own self, *mṛtyum atyeti*, one crosses death. Knowing the self in this manner, one transcends death or transcends time, because the present or the presence is nothing but consciousness, which is existence, and existence or consciousness has no dimension. Just as the present has no dimension, existence also has no dimension or attribute. Consciousness has no qualification; it is unqualified. That unqualified present, unqualified existence, unqualified consciousness is the nature of each one of us. Knowing oneself in this manner, one goes beyond time, beyond death, because death belongs to the body, death belongs to the mind, and death belongs to the *upādhi* or personality; it does not attach to the 'I.'

The meaning of immortality

What happens upon crossing over death? One becomes immortal upon crossing over death. 'Becoming' immortal means that one recognizes the self as immortal. Again, being immortal doesn't mean existing for some great length of time. However great the length of time may be, it will still be limited. As Naciketā says, *api sarvaṃ jīvitam alpam eva*. "However long the duration of life, it still is limited with reference to the infinite¹." Therefore, *mṛtyum atyeti* means that one becomes free from the very concept of time, and, therefore, free from birth, death or change.

¹ Ka. Up. 1.1.26

We saw in verse three that some seers attained immortality through renunciation; that is what this verse refers to here. Having known him or the self of all as one's own self, *jñātvā tam*, one becomes immortal.

We must understand that by gaining the knowledge one does not become anything. Knowledge simply reveals what is. For instance, in knowing the people sitting in front of me, I do not become something. No change takes place either in me or in those people. Then what does the knowledge do? Knowledge only dispels ignorance, as well as all the notions created by ignorance. For example, where here is an error or projection of a snake on rope, in knowing that it is only rope, the fear of the snake also goes away along with the snake. Knowledge itself doesn't remove the fear. What knowledge does is merely remove the notion of the snake. It is the notion of the snake that has created fear, and, therefore, upon gaining the knowledge of the object being rope, the fear that is the product of ignorance also goes away.

When we are told that upon gaining the knowledge of the self one becomes immortal, the implication is that mortality is itself a product of ignorance, because knowledge dispels ignorance. Think of it like this: When it is totally dark, we do not see anything, but as soon as the light is switched on, we are able to see various objects. Yet the light only dispels darkness, it doesn't do anything else. The light has not created the objects. It has only made the existence of the objects evident. So also, knowledge only makes evident what is. If upon knowing the self one becomes immortal, it means one has always been immortal. It is entirely on account of ignorance that one has been taking oneself to be mortal, to be changing, and to be subject to time, and subject to birth and death. In the wake of the knowledge, however, one recognizes that mortality was but a notion born of ignorance, and so that notion also drops off. Therefore, it is not that one crosses death; one simply recognizes that one has always been beyond death.

Nānyaḥ panthāḥ vimuktaye, to gain liberation, there is no means other than knowledge. The Upaniṣad says very clearly that there is no path or means other

than knowledge to gain liberation, to gain immortality, to gain freedom and happiness, and gain whatever may be one's goal in life. What does knowledge do? Knowledge brings to light what is, and, therefore, there being no other means to liberation than knowledge, it means is that one is always liberated. Only when we are already liberated but take ourselves to be bound can knowledge bring about liberation at all. Knowledge doesn't remove bondage; knowledge removes the notion of bondage. It doesn't remove mortality; it removes the notion of mortality. It doesn't remove sorrow; it removes the notion of sorrow.

Bondage is but a notion

If bondage were real, there would have to be a real means to remove the bondage. But bondage is a notion that is purely a product of ignorance. Therefore, all that is needed is that we become free from the notion that we are bound. "Swamiji, still, why is there ignorance and why is there bondage?" Who says there is bondage? "But I feel I am bound." That is the wrong feeling. It is not the truth about you. Truly, therefore, it is not that you have to 'become' liberated; instead, you have only to become free from the notion that you are bound.

There is a story that illustrates the notion of bondage. A hunter once shot down a pregnant lioness. While she lay dying, she delivered a baby lion. The cub was lying unattended in the forest. A shepherd, who happened to pass by, saw the little lion cub lying there. Taking pity on the helpless creature, he took it home with him. He raised the lion cub in the company of his lambs. It soon took itself to be a lamb and would do everything that the lambs did, including making the sounds that they made. One time, it so happened that a lion approached the flock of sheep as they grazed. As soon as the lambs smelled the lion, they started running away.

The lion cub was also among the flock and it also started running away. The lion saw this lion cub running away with the lambs and wondered why it was trying to escape. He let all the lambs go, but caught hold of the cub. The lion cub was shivering with fear. He pleaded with the lion not to kill him because he was just a poor lamb. The lion said "Why do you run away with the lambs? You are not a

lamb. You are a lion. Come with me.” He led the lion cub to a pond and said, “Look at your reflection in the water. Look at me. Now look at your reflection again. Are you not like me, a lion? Now roar. Hear me roaring and roar. Are you not a lion?” The young lion looked at his reflection in the water. He roared and realized that he was indeed a lion. That very instant, he stopped taking himself to be a lamb. It was because of identification with lambs that the lion cub had thought he was a lamb and suffered from the sense of being a lamb. Such is the nature of bondage.

What is the bondage in this example? The bondage of the lion is his notion that he is a lamb. A notion is very powerful. It creates the same effect as reality does. If what is lying here is a rope and I have a notion that it is a snake, the notion creates in me the fear of the snake. It has the same effect on me as would a real snake; all that it takes is for me to conclude that there is a snake. Similarly, the conclusion on my part that I am but a *jīva*, a helpless and hapless creature, has the same effect as my really being a helpless and hapless creature. That is why the teaching is that one is *brahman*. This Upaniṣad will say later, *tat tvam eva tvam eva tat*, “that is you and you are that ².”

Aham brahmāsmi. I am *brahman*. Here *brahman* is the lion and the *jīva* is the lion cub-lamb. In the story, this ‘lamb’ is asked to look at its own reflection in a clear pool of water. The *śruti* asks us to look to see how we reflect in a mind that is tranquil and clear. In such a mind, look at your reflection. “How do you appear?” “I appear as happiness, *ānanda*.” “Who are you?” “I am *ānanda*. I am not sadness.” This is why it is necessary to practice *viveka*, discrimination.

There is identification with this body-mind equipment and only upon becoming free from identification or seeing one’s true nature can one become free from all the complexes born of the identification. Just as the lion became free instantly from all the complexes of being a lamb and all that goes along with that complex,

² Kai. Up. 16

the wise man becomes free from all complexes. He burns all his bondage. How can the bondage burn if it were real? If the lion cub were a real lamb, even if he kept on roaring "I am a lion," he would not become a lion. He is even able to roar only because he is indeed a lion. Bondage is a projection of the mind and that notion goes away in the wake of the knowledge of the self; the 'I' is ever free.

A wise person does not say "I am liberated." What he says is, "I have always been liberated." If one is liberated now, the implication is that earlier one was bound. Yet that which is truly bound can never get liberated, for the simple reason that a thing can never change its nature. A thing cannot become different from what it is;

its true nature cannot change³. This is a fundamental rule. If bondage were one's true nature, there is no way that a person can ever become liberated, because that which is intrinsic cannot change. There is also a second rule that a thing is always comfortable with its true nature. Therefore, it stands to reason that if bondage were our true nature, we would be comfortable being bound. If limitation were our nature, we would be comfortable being limited. If sorrow were our nature, we would be comfortable being sorrowful. But we are not comfortable being bound or being limited or sorrowful, because it is contrary to our true nature. Therefore, the wise person's knowledge is not that he is liberated, but that he was never bound; it is a true recognition that all bondage is a notion.

³ न भवत्यमृतं मर्त्यं न मर्त्यममृतं तथा ।

प्रकृतेरन्यथाभावो न कथंचिद्भविष्यति ॥

*na bhavatyamṛtaṁ martyaṁ na martyamamṛtaṁ tathā
prakṛteranyathābhāvo na kathañcidbhaviṣyati*

The immortal cannot become mortal, nor can the mortal ever become immortal. For, it is never possible for a thing to change its nature. (Mā. K. 3.21)

To be continued...