

Kaivalyopaniṣad
Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati's transcribed talk

This is the fifth part of the serial article, continuation from September 2021 newsletter.

Approaching the Teacher

The Upaniṣad, which is in the form of a dialog between the teacher and the disciple, begins with a request from the disciple.

ॐ अथाश्वलायनो भगवन्तं परमेष्ठिनमुपसमेत्योवाच ।

अधीहि भगवो ब्रह्मविद्यां वरिष्ठां

सदा सद्भिः सेव्यमानां निगूढाम् ।

ययाऽचिरात्सर्वपापं व्यपोह्य

परात्परं पुरुषं याति विद्वान् ॥ १ ॥

om athāśvalāyano bhagavantam

parameṣṭhinamupasametyovāca

adhīhi bhagavo brahmavidyāṁ varīṣṭhām

sadā sadbhiḥ sevyamānām nigūḍhām

yayā'cirātsarvapāpam vyapohya

parātparam puruṣam yāti vidvān

ॐ अथ - Om thereafter; आश्वलायनः - Āśvalāyana; भगवन्तम् – revered; परमेष्ठिनम् - Brahmājī, the grandsire; उपसमेत्य – having approached; उवाच – said; अधीहि - please teach; भगवः (भगवन्) - Oh Lord; ब्रह्मविद्याम् - knowledge of the self; वरिष्ठाम् – The Noblest; सदा – always; सद्भिः - by the good people; सेव्यमानाम् - being resorted to; निगूढाम् – secret; यया - by which; अचिरात् – in Approaching the Teacher no time; सर्वपापम् - all evil, sins (the cause of sorrow); व्यपोह्य - having discarded; परात्परम् - the highest; पुरुषम् - the being; याति – goes; विद्वान् - the learned one

Om. Thereafter, the sage Āśvalāyana approached Brahmājī, the revered grandsire, and said, “Oh Lord! Please teach me *brahma-vidyā*, self-knowledge, which is the noblest and always resorted to by the good people, which is the highest secret,

and by knowing which the learned ones cross all sins in no time and reach the highest *puruṣa*. (1)

We often find that the teaching imparted in the *sāstras* is in the form of a dialog between the teacher and one or more students. The process is similar to the teaching in a classroom, where the teacher encourages questions so that doubts can be removed and the knowledge becomes clear. As in the style of the Upaniṣads, even in the Bhagavad Gita, the teaching is in the form of a dialog between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Often, the teaching is imparted against the background of a story, which may be either brief or fairly elaborate, and specific names of the teacher or the students are not always mentioned. In the Kaṭhōpaniṣad, the story is of a young boy named Naciketā, who is taught by Yamarāja, the Lord of Death. The story is about how the young boy is received by the Lord of death, how his suitability is tested, and how he is subsequently taught by Yamarāja. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, the story is of a young man, called Śvetaketu, and of how he is taught by his father, Uddālaka. Elsewhere in the Chāndogya, we also see how the heavenly sage Nārada is taught by the sage Sanat Kumāra, and so on.

The idea is that the Upaniṣads are not just academic texts. The dialogs reveal the fact that there were real students who indeed went on to gain self-knowledge. Sometimes, the stories also indicate the essential preparation required to receive the knowledge, such as having the proper attitude necessary to understand the subtle truths. The stories give us a certain amount of confidence that we can also aspire to gain immortality.

The Kaivalyōpaniṣad is also in the form of a dialog. The first verse describes the background of the dialog, how and where it takes place, and so on. Here the sage Āśvalāyana goes to the teacher seeking *brahma-vidyā*. Āśvalāyana was no ordinary student. We may not be familiar with the name, but those who know the Vedas know well that Āśvalāyana was a very learned person and himself a teacher of the Ṛg Veda. It is such an accomplished and intelligent person as he that goes to a teacher seeking self-knowledge.

The text begins with the word *atha*, thereafter. This shows that something has transpired, following which Āśvalāyana goes to the teacher. The sacred Brahma sūtras begin with the aphorism *athāto brahma-jijñāsā*,¹ “Thereafter, therefore, there is the desire to know *brahman*.” It is said there that the desire to know *brahman* arises upon appropriate preparations having been made.

Going to a teacher with a request for the knowledge of *brahman* is itself very auspicious, because such a desire rarely occurs in the mind of a person. Many people approach Swamis with a variety of requests. Some requests may be for reading palms, while others may be for astrological predictions; people come with a request for things that concern them. Even when we ourselves come to a *gurukula* or teacher’s home and school, we have our own concerns and problems for which we seek solutions. Naturally, therefore, the study of an Upaniṣad will only be of interest if the Upaniṣad has something to do with our daily lives and concerns. If it does not tell us something that we can apply to our lives, however great the teaching, it is of no use to us.

Here, however, is a person who goes to the teacher on his own. You cannot imagine how difficult it was in those days to go to a teacher. It was not some week-long retreat that one could just attend and leave. Going to a teacher meant that one would be living with the teacher for all of twelve years for the purpose of study. Imagine how much leisure they must have had! Here we bring our cell phones and laptops with us so that we can constantly be in touch with what is going on in our homes, in our places of work or business, and politics. But there was no such thing in the *gurukulas*. Going meant being gone, totally. As Pūjya Swamiji would say, you cross the river by boat, and, having crossed the river, burn the boat so that you cannot go back. Otherwise, you cannot totally apply yourself to the pursuit of knowledge. The mind is not fully available for application as long it has any other concerns. Going to the teacher meant taking *sannyāsa*, becoming a renunciate.

¹BS 1.1.1

Who is a renunciate?

A *sannyāsī* is one who has renounced not only all duties and responsibilities, but also all claims. That he gives up his home means that he gives up the warmth and support that the home and society provide. When can we give up that kind of a secure atmosphere? It can only happen when we discover an inner security, not otherwise. An insecure person cannot and indeed should not give up that which he thinks of as a source of security; there is no need to give it up. In renunciation, very often, only giving up seems to be emphasized, and not the taking up of something in its place, like going to the teacher. That is just as important, if not more so. We find people renouncing their previous lifestyles and just wandering around and begging; that is not renunciation. There is a vacuum created by renunciation, which must be filled with something that is more important, more fulfilling. Otherwise, what is the use of renunciation?

A true renunciate is one who has discovered an inner security, an inner self-sufficiency. It is not that he rejects or turns away from people, his home or society. Instead, he has simply grown out of the need for such security as that can provide; he has done everything that needed to be done and fulfilled all the responsibilities that needed to be fulfilled. In the process of fulfilling those responsibilities, he has lived an intelligent life and has, therefore, gained emotional maturity.

To be continued...

“What exactly is the aim of life? It can only be living. I am born not for anything except to live, which is what we find in every organism. A plant wants to live, a bug wants to live, an insect wants to live. Any organism that is born, wants to live. So living is the aim of life, nothing more..”

- Swami Dayananda Saraswati