

This is the twenty fifth part of the serial article, continuation from June 2023 newsletter.

Mahā-vākya Vicāra

(Contemplation upon the great statement)

We may understand the text thus far as being an unfolding of the truth by the Upaniṣad, which is gathered through *śravaṇa*, listening to the teaching. In case this *upadeśa* or teaching has not resulted in knowledge on the part of the student, it means that further deliberation is required. Therefore, we can take the next several *mantras* as presenting another way of deliberating upon the nature of the self or as being meant for *manana*, deliberating and resolving doubts. The student now needs to deliberate upon his true nature. This is one way of looking at these verses. Or, we could simply say that, upto this point the teacher has unfolded the truth, and, in the next few *mantras*, he gives us methods to deliberate upon the self. Thus begins the eleventh *mantra*:

आत्मानमरणिं कृत्वा प्रणवं चोत्तरारणिम् ।

ज्ञाननिर्मथनाभ्यासात्पाशं दहति पण्डितः ॥ ११ ॥

ātmānamaraṇim kṛtvā praṇavam cottarāraṇim

jñānanirmathanābhyāsātpāśam dahati paṇḍitaḥ

आत्मानम् - the I-sense अरणिम् - the lower block of wood कृत्वा - having made प्रणवम् - *omkāra*, *brahman* च - and उत्तर-अरणिम् - the upper block of wood ज्ञान-निर्मथन-अभ्यासात् - by repeatedly churning with the rod of contemplative inquiry पाशम् - bondage दहति - burns पण्डितः - the learned one

By treating the individual I-sense as the lower block of wood and *brahman* as the upper block of wood, and by repeatedly churning with the rod of contemplative inquiry, the wise burns all bondage (as a result of the knowledge obtained by the churning). (11)

As pointed out before, the student is being told about the process of abiding in the startling truth about the self. First, the words of the *śruti* are to be learned from a competent teacher. At this point, if the student is well prepared, due to efforts in

either this life or previous lives, meaning that he or she is an *uttama-adhikārī* or most highly qualified person, the truth is grasped right there and then. But such a person is very rare indeed. Generally, *śravaṇa* is to be augmented by continued *vicāra*, which means deliberating upon this truth and systematically removing all doubt. This is called *manana*. A very interesting metaphor is given to illustrate the method of practicing *manana*. It is the way the *araṇi* is used to kindle a fire.

An *araṇi* is a wooden block with a hemispherical hollow carved into it. Imagine a square wooden block with a hemispherical hollow in the middle. Another block with a similar hemispherical hollow is taken and the two blocks are held together with the hollow sides facing each other. The lower block is the *araṇi*, and the upper block is the *uttara-araṇi*. A wooden rod is held between the two blocks, and then, with the help of a rope, the wooden rod is churned. The action of the rod rotating between the hemispheres creates friction and generates sparks of fire. These sparks are made to set a piece of cotton alight, and this flame is used for kindling the fire at a fire altar. This was one method of lighting the fire in the Vedic times. Even though match-sticks are now available, this traditional method is often used even now. This is a very sacred method, wherein there are particular specifications for where the wood should come from, how it should be taken, and so on. The wooden blocks are sanctified and *mantras* are chanted even while churning the rod and generating fire. That is the analogy or imagery that is used to explain the process of generating knowledge, which is compared to fire.

The *śruti* says that just as fire is generated by the churning of the rod, the 'fire' of knowledge can be generated when we do a similar churning. The Upaniṣad tells us, *ātmānam araṇim kṛtva*, make the *jīvātmā*, the *ahaṅkāra*, the ego or the individual the lower block, and, *praṇavam ca uttarāraṇim*, let *praṇava* be the upper block. *Praṇava* means the *omkāra*. *Omkāra* is the name of *brahman*. In the Vedic period, the most famous and most sacred name of *brahman* or *īśvara* was *om*. It was only later that the *purāṇic* names like Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Śiva appeared. If the student focuses his deliberation in this manner, the spark of knowledge will be generated.

A name and its object cannot be separated

A thing cannot be separated from its name. The *abhidhāna* and *abhidheya*, the word

and its meaning, always occur together; you cannot separate one from the other. The moment the word is heard, the meaning also flashes in the mind. When the word 'apple' is heard, the meaning of the word, apple, viz., the object, flashes in the mind. Similarly, when the object-apple is seen, the word 'apple' immediately occurs in the mind. But suppose there is a strange object, the name of which is not known. Then what?

Well, when you come across something unknown, something strange or something new, your mind will think of it as being 'strange,' and thus a word will still be there. The mind will respond to anything with a concept that is appropriate to that object. A word is a sound symbol that expresses a concept. For example, the word 'pot' is a sound symbol that expresses a concept that is the 'pot object.' The word disappears leaving the meaning in its place. Thus, a word and its meaning cannot be separated. That is why there is so much emphasis on repeating the Lord's name, such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and others. That is also why saints always prescribe the repetition of the name of God. The idea is that the name is already one with God, because it signifies God, and since God is the meaning of that name, sooner or later, the thought of God will also come, because every name is always followed by the named. However, a word will convey its meaning only when the mind has the right preparation. For example, the word 'pot' will convey the meaning of the 'object pot,' only when the mind is prepared in terms of language, familiarity with the object, and so on. That is called *saṁskāra*. When the mind has the appropriate *saṁskāra*, every word will convey the appropriate meaning.

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When you hear the word *brahman*, however, it does not seem to convey the meaning. Why is it so, when in fact the word and its meaning are always connected? It is because that also requires a corresponding *saṁskāra*, orientation or preparation. That is why we go to schools and colleges. We learn new concepts. The preparation of the mind and learning takes place as we go ahead; that's how we learn new things. As we learn physics, chemistry, mathematics, and so on, new terminologies keep coming, and, provided the 'technical' preparation of the mind has taken place, there is comprehension. The preparation of the mind is also a requirement for the word and its meaning to occur in the mind.

How is the mind to be prepared to gain self-knowledge? Such preparation is called *antaḥ-karaṇa-śuddhi*. What we require is a *śuddha-antaḥ-karaṇa*, a mind that enjoys purity and serenity. It also requires *śravaṇa*, listening to the scriptures. When we listen to the scriptures with a mind that enjoys purity and serenity, then, given that the right *saṁskāras* are in place, the words convey their meaning. The word *brahman* becomes a live word for the prepared student; it does not remain just a sound. Today, for example, the word 'pot' is not just a sound. It conveys the meaning. So also, to a qualified and prepared student, the word *brahman* conveys its meaning. Therefore, one must continue to work with *śravaṇa* or *vicāra* to generate the right *saṁskāras* or orientation, until the word *brahman* conveys its meaning.

To be continued...