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Brihadaranyakopanishad [Upanishad Vahini]

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BRIHADARANYAKOPANISHAD

The Brihadaranyakopanishad is affiliated to the Sukla Yajur Veda. It has six sections, of which all except the third and fourth, describe Upasana or Worship associated with Karma or ritualistic Action. The third and the fourth sections deal with the teachings of Yajnavalkya on spiritual Truth imparted to Janaka. The grandeur of the intellectual eminence of that sage is impressively evident in this Upanishad. For aspirants eager to reach the goal of Liberation, this part of the Brihadaranyaka offers the best guide. The sections are therefore referred to as Yajnavalkya Kanda. It is the last of the famous Ten Upanishads. On account of its size, it is named Brihath or Big;. Since it is best studied in the silence of the forest or Aranya, it is an Aranyaka. It instructs in Brahma Jnana and so is classed as an Upanishad.

Scholars have designated the first two sections of this Text as Madhura Kanda, the next two as Muni Kanda and the last two as Khila Kanda. Khila means appendix and hence the name is appropriate. The first section deals with the basic principles, as they are. The second proves their truth by reference to experience. The third shows how to practise the same and get mastery over it. The first section teaches Jnana, essential for spiritual progress; it is related to the paths of Karma and Upasana. It is not mere dry intellectual discipline.

For those eager to earn Jnana, there are four instruments or media for acquiring this wisdom. They are: *Pada*, *Bija*, *Sankhya* and *Rekha*. Pada means the Vedas, and the Smrithis that attempt to explain them. Bija connotes the entire gamut of manthras learnt directly from the Guru. Sankhya is of two kinds, *Vaidika* and *Loukika*. Vaidika-sankhya means the calculations and quantitative analysis of the various manthras. Loukika-sankhya refers to the numbers and their interrelations so far as they are related to the external world and the interrelations of human activities. Rekha too has two such categories, the Vaidika-Rekha being a part of the Upasana activity mentioned in the Vedas and Loukika-Rekha being the part of the Mathematics of the Universe.

The Madhura Kanda describes the *Brahma-thathwa* or the Brahmam Principle in the light of the categories accepted as authoritative by the Scriptures.

Purusha is the Primeval Person, from whom or on whom all this Name-Form manifoldness has emanated. We conceive the horse in the *Aswamedha* (Horse sacrifice) as *Prajapathi* (Lord of Creation) Himself. He is directed to impose on the Horse the characteristics and attributes of *Prajapathi*, so that he might acquire the fruits of that ritual. This portion is known also as *Aswa-Brahmana*. Again, the Fire which is the central figure in the sacrifice is also to be felt and consecrated as *Prajapathi* and there are descriptions attributing the qualities of *Prajapathi* to the *Agni*. So this is called *Agni-Brahmana*.

This Jagath, taken as true by the deluded, is just a jumble of Names and Forms devoid of the permanence that *Atma* alone can have. Hence, it breeds disgust and discontent and causes renunciation to grow. The mind is soon free from attachment to the objects of sensory pleasure and it moves along its natural bent to *Brahmam* itself. All sounds are names; *vaak* or voice is the cause for its emergence. *Rupa* or form is the result of vision or sight. It emerges from the eye. *Karma* similarly has the body as its source. The body is just a context for *vaak* and other instruments. Contemplation on such truths helps the process of *Atma vichara* (Inquiry into nature of *Atma*) to start and progress.

The *Prana* or Vital Air, the *Sarira* which is its basis, the *Siras* (head), which is the seat of the instruments of acquiring knowledge, the strength that is derived from food—all these are considered in this Upanishad.

As the sweetness of a thousand flowers is collected into honey, this Jagath is a concatenation of the elements. Dharma, Sathya and such abstract principles, men and such concrete living beings, the *Virat-Purusha* and such conceptions—all these again are the effects of the same Brahmathathwa, that is, an immortal changeless Thathwa (principle). The realisation that the Thathwa inheres in every individual is Brahma Jnana.

Janaka, the King of Videha, celebrated a Sacrifice giving away vast wealth in gifts. Many Brahmins attended this Yaga from the Kuru-Panchala territory. The King had a thousand cows decorated with anklets, necklaces and hornlets of gold. He announced that they would be donated to whomever taught him the Brahman. But such Brahmins, though great scholars in their own line, hesitated to claim the cows, through fear of failure. But Yajnavalkya was so confident that he asked his students to drive the cows to his Ashram! The other Brahmins got enraged at his audacity and started testing his scholarship and experience.

The first to come forward to challenge Yajnavalkya was the family priest of Janaka. The answers that the sage gave to his questions clarify the method of attaining the Atma encased in the pranas, through the conjoint yogas of Karma and Bhakthi. In the Yajna, the Rithwik's voice is Agni, the Kala is Vayu, the Mind of the performer is

Chandra—such is the manner in which one has to grasp the meaning of ritual and free oneself from the limitations of mortality.

The next to accost the sage was Bujyu. His questions were: Is there an Entity called Purusha who is ruled by the senses and who is entangled in this current named Samsara? Or is there no Purusha of this type? If there is one such, what are his characteristics?

Yajnavalkya answered him thus: Your Atma is the Entity you inquired about. Just as a wooden contrivance cannot operate on its own, but must be moved by some outside power or inside force, or just as this arm can move like this only when the will operates on it, so too, unless a superspiritual power presides, the body cannot act nor can the vital airs function as they do. He is the seer of the seeing function of the body. He hears, and not the ear. That *Chethana* or Superconsciousness that sees and hears and feels is but a reflection of the Atma on the mind. That Chethana sees even the Seer; what happens is that the Chethana reflected in the mind moves out through the senses and grasps the external world of the five elements and so it appears as if the Chethana is engaged in activity. Really speaking, it has no activity.

That Chethana is the Atma. It is beyond the reach of the senses, it is above and beyond the subtle and even the causal Sariras. It has been understood by experience

where the Atma is, and what its nature is. It is the same in all. The Atma is to be attained by total renunciation. Attachment to children, riches, wife, etc.—all have to be given up. These originate in *Kama*, Desire. Why, all activities whether ordinary or ritual or worshipful are basically the products of Kama. The desire for the fruit is present in Karma-sadhana also. There is no denying this. And hence they are opposed to true Sanyasa.

Light and darkness cannot be together, at the same place and time. So too, Karma – activity and Atma-jnana cannot be together. Sanyas is *Sarvakriya-parithyaga* (renunciation of all activities); begging for food is a Karma and against Sanyas. The Brahmins of ancient days knew this. They gave up attachment, and through the path of *Nivritti* or withdrawal, realised the Reality. He alone is a Brahmin who has detached himself from all things which are concerned with non-Atmic ends. All other credentials are secondary.

In this Upanishad, the *Sarvantharyamithwa* (all-pervasiveness) of the Atma is described. All this earth becomes habitable through association with water, or it would fall apart like a lump of rice flour. Gargi asked Yajnavalkya on what is the earth based. This question and the answer given inform us that Earth, Water, Akasa, Surya, Chandra, Nakshatra, Deva, Indra, Prajapathi, Brahma Loka—all these, one from the other, were woven

out of the *Paramatmathathwa*, which is the warp and woof, the garment of Creation. Such truths are beyond the reach of the imagination of man. They have to be imbibed from the Sastras by a clarified intellect.

Yajnavalkya refuted the arguments of Gargi for her questions could not be solved by mere intellectual feats. They could be solved only by intuition, earned by the guidance of a Guru. The earth is pervaded and protected by Vayu, or air. The individualised Universal, individualised according to the impressions of experience in previous lives, is associated with the five *Karmendriyas*, five *Jnanendriyas*, the five Pranas, Manas and Buddhi—these seventeen instruments. The concrete body is a vikara or mutation of the Earth. It is pervaded by vayu or ‘air.’ There are forty-nine ‘earth-bits,’ or *angas* which can be identified in the body and like a string that holds pearls together, ‘air’ holds these together as one co-ordinate whole. When the ‘air’ leaves the body for good, the angas become distinct and derelict. The body then, becomes a ‘corpse.’ There is however an *Antharyami*, the immanent spirit in the body-complex abode, the mystery that is beyond the reach of that complex, the motivating force of the impulses and intentions of that complex; that Antharyami has no death; It is Atma.

Gargi put her second question, after taking due permission from the gathering, for, it is not courteous to

hurl problems without such notice. Her question was: On what does the Inner Core—the Atma—rest in the Past, Present and Future, in this Dual World? The intention of Gargi was to bring about the discomfiture of Yajnavalkya, for he would be forced to admit, “The timeless Entity is beyond words and cannot be described at all”. This also shows that Gargi too was an adept in Brahma Jnana and hence you can infer that in the field of Brahma Vidya, there is no place for distinctions based on sex.

“The *Brahmavids* or masters of Brahmic wisdom declare that the Parabrahma is immanent in the unmanifested Akasa” said Yajnavalkya, thus escaping from the trying situation into which Gargi wanted to drive him. Then, he described the nature of that Indestructible Akshara thus: It has no gross, subtle or such changes. It has no material qualification like colour, smell, shape, etc. There are no measures to comprehend It. Time is but the execution of Its Will. Why elaborate? The Sun and the five elements all carry out Its Will. Gargi then asked the assembled Brahmins to bow before Yajnavalkya and acknowledge his supremacy. That stopped further questionings.

The Atma is Effulgent, as the Sun is, by its very nature. People say that they “see” the Atma or Its effulgence. But there is no seeing It. Since It has no second, nothing is outside It. It is neither seen nor can

It see. It has no organs of sight or smell; nor has it any part, which when co-ordinated can perform any function.

From the lowest joy to the highest Brahmanandam, each step is an increase of the feeling. Words like Paramanandam indicate only stages of *Anandam* (bliss). As a matter of fact, all types of Anandam are derived from the primary basic source of Brahmanandam. Yajnavalkya explained all this to Janaka, for he took great delight in instructing the King on all that he knew.

Like a tree sprouting from a tiny seed the body grows and the seed in the fruit grows into another tree. When the body, like a ripe fruit, falls to the ground, the *vaak* and other Indriyas also follow him. The breath too takes to its own path. The Atma alone is not affected, one way or the other. It remains as ever: unmoved, immovable.

Through sinful deeds, sin; through meritorious deeds, merit—thus *paapa* and *punya* accumulate. They produce the impulses for a new body, as the primary motive force of the Sarira. The Atma leaves the old body, with its vision directed to the new one it occupies, like the caterpillar which fixes its forelegs on a spot, when it lifts up the hind legs. The *Atmajnani*, however, has no impulse towards bodily activities and so the Atma in his case is not bothered by a new body at all. The Jnana Marga is the path of the Brahmaavid, the knower of

Brahmam.

The Karma-enthusiasts are led on to Thapas, the Atmajnani has escaped from Kama or desire and so his mind knows no anguish or agony or yearning, which is the mark of Thapas. He is the *Viswakartha*—the very Artist who has evolved the Viswa or Creation. He who has attained the vision of Brahmanhood has nothing further to attain or realise or guard or seek.

The instruction that Yajnavalkya gives in this Upanishad to Maithreyi, his consort, reveals to us clearly the Atmajnana which comes after a study of the Sastras with *Tarka* (logic) as a constant companion. It also describes the principles of Sanyas, which is the instrument for getting that Jnana. The entire sensory world and the senses too have to be equated with the dream-reality only. There is no use pursuing them, as ultimate and valuable.

The Atma alone has to be loved. All other things are loved for the sake of the Atman. When the Atman is understood, everything else is understood. All effects are subsumed by the Cause. The ocean is the goal of all the waters, so too all tastes find their goal in the tongue. All forms realise themselves in the eye. All sounds are for the ear. All resolutions have the mind as their goal. That is to say, the entire Jagath merges in Brahmam.

In his reply to Bhujyu, Yajnavalkya reveals his knowledge of the process of evolution of the Universe, the *Brahmanda-nirmana*. In his reply to the two questions of Gargi, he reveals and instructs the Swarupa of Brahman, which is *Aparoksha*. In the Sakalyabrahmana, the sage has astounded everyone by his erudition in spiritual mysteries. He earned victory in the Hall of Janaka from the wisest of the land. He sanctified it by his teaching. He met the hard tests of the crooked Bhujyu and the harder tests of the eager inquirer, Gargi, with equal equanimity and skill. He was acclaimed as the crown jewel of scholars. Of course, he himself acknowledged greatness wherever he recognised it. He was generous enough to recognise the greatness of the teachers who were instructing Janaka till then. Lastly he felt that he had no more to learn or earn and so, he became a monk. Realising that Maitreyi, his consort, was also eager to attain Realisation, he instructed her in Brahma Jnana, for in those days, women were considered equally fit to practise the Jnana Marga, which leads to Liberation.

Contemplate on this and reach up to the Thuriya stage of consciousness. Then Nama, Rupa, Vasthu, Bhava, all get merged in the One All-pervasive All-inclusive Atma.

The Upanishad teaches man the essential philosophy, in the briefest terms. It does not refer in the least to Karma or Kindred subjects. It concerns itself purely with the Science of Atmathathwa.