

osophy. It can be understood only in terms of personality as the search of the individual soul or Jiva for God. It longs for a new immediacy, a direct perception of God in which, in the inimitable words of Tagore: 'we feel the throb of the soul-life in our own soul'. As personality is not reason, nor feeling nor will, religion cannot be interpreted in the language of these mental states which are only the imperfect attributes of the ego. The four yogas elaborated by the Vedanta for the attainment of release are mainly based on the recognition of these cardinal aspects of personality. Their inadequacy to meet the needs of religion may be stated as a case of negation by fulfilment; as long as the soul is not touched, their efficacy is only of doubtful worth. But Mumukshutvam is an intense, irrepressible thirst of the spirit for God. It is the craving of the individual soul for divine life. This thirst, this craving, may originate in thought, feeling or will or in all. But whether it is produced by knowledge or devotion or action or by all, it is in effect the longing for release and salvation of the individual soul which is more than all these; it is a living function and a unique experience. Any attempt at analysis kills the soul and leaves a

number of dead, mechanical things like thought and feeling. Just as a man immersed in water pants for breath, just as a man struggles hard to throw down a piece of burning charcoal placed on his head, so does a Mumukshu yearn for release from the unutterable woes of Sam-sara and pant restlessly for divine communion. The period of stress and storm, of struggles, trials and backslidings, of intense agony and burning anguish which intervenes before the birth of God-consciousness, is the mightiest, the most terrible and the most bloody of all wars ever waged by humanity. But the prospect of the joy of fruition and fulfilment transfigures sorrow itself into joy. The struggle itself is worth having and the Mumukshu certainly prefers the strife of the soul to the little joys of worldliness. When the Ahankara-ridden ego gives up at last all its voluntary efforts, lets go the hold and looks up in absolute self-abnegation and negation, a flood of ecstasy pours over it, the little self is lost and swallowed up in the boundless expanse of ethereal light and lives forever in the "supreme state" of immortality from whence there is no return.

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The Concept of Liberation According to the Upanisads

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[The Upanishads are the final authority for the followers of Vedanta. And all the Upanishads are one in declaring that complete Liberation is the goal of life. But which way Liberation? Swami Harshananda of the Sri Ramakrishna Order presents a bird's-eye view of the Upanishadic position and underlines that both Knowledge and Devotion are paths—and not contradictory paths—to the final Beatitude.]

Introduction

The sublime principles taught by the great religions of the world have always saved mankind from self-destruction whenever they have been understood properly and practised sincerely. If these religions—some of which belong to the prehistoric eras—have survived to this day, it is mainly because of their great books in which are recorded these sublime principles revealed to their founders, prophets, messiahs, sages, seers and saints.

How the book or the scripture has saved a religious community can be understood better by analysing the Sanskrit equivalent for the same, viz., *sastra*. A *sastra* is that which protects (*tranana*) if its commands (*sasana*) are adhered to (*sasanat trananac caiva sastramity abhidhiyate*).

The book places before the members of the community a great ideal to be striven for. It gives them a code of conduct by following which they can maintain internal peace and

harmony. It helps them to resolve their doubts and conflicts by offering them the necessary norms and standards. It is the fountainhead of eternal inspiration for the entire community.

The Upanisads

Among the basic scriptures of Hinduism, Upanisads, forming part and parcel of the Vedic literature, rank first. The word 'Upanisad' literally means 'sitting devotedly near the (guru)'. The body of knowledge transmitted by the spiritual preceptors to their pupils sitting devotedly near them and eagerly asking questions about the ultimate values of life, came to be known as Upanisad. The word Upanisad also means, in a more technical sense, that esoteric and sacred knowledge which destroys our ignorance of the highest Truth (called *Brahman*), thereby loosens our worldly bonds and leads us to It.

Their Philosophy in brief

Man wants happiness and peace. Vainly does he seek for them in the life of the senses, both here and hereafter. But what he is seeking is already there within himself, behind and beyond the senses. This is the Self, the *Atman*, the indwelling as well as the all-pervading Spirit. Looked at from the stand-point of the created universe, as its origin, sustenance and goal, it is termed *Brahman*. Viewed from the standpoint of the individual, it is termed *Atman*, his essential nature, without which he is a non-entity. Knowledge of, devoted meditation on, this *Brahman* leads to Its direct experience. This experience puts an end to the isolated and miserable existence of the individual once for all. He will live in bliss for ever.

Jiva, the individual soul

The Upanisads describe the nature of the individual soul or the *jiva*. Though in his essential nature he is birthless, deathless, changeless and eternal, being enmeshed in the body as a result of past *karma*, he suffers following the afflictions of the body (Ka.U. 2.18; Br.U. 4.4.12; 3.2.13). How and when the *Atman*, who is essentially and eternally free, got himself enmeshed in the psycho-physical organism is a mystery that can never be unravelled. Hinduism has solved this problem by accepting that creation is a continuous

cyclic process with no particular beginning or no definite end.

His bondage and liberation

The Mundakopaniṣad (3.1.2) compares the *jiva* to a bird perched on the tree of the body, jumping from branch to branch, eating bitter as well as sweet fruits and hence alternately experiencing sorrows and joys (of life). The fruits are the results of past *karma*. On the self-same tree, there is another bird, sitting majestically at the top, not a whit interested in the fruits. This is the *Paramatman*, the Supreme Self. When the *jiva* discovers this *Paramatman*, sees His glory, desires to approach Him and understand Him, and finally succeeds in doing so, he becomes freed from all sorrow and suffering once for all (*ibid* 3.1.2,3).

The remedy cannot be prescribed unless the root of the malady is discovered first. Suffering is inevitable as long as there is embodiment. Embodiment, call it birth or rebirth, is the result of *karma*. *Karma* results from *kama* (desire). *Kama* proceeds from *dvaita* or the perception of duality. This again is the direct result of *avidya* or ignorance of one's real nature, the origin of which cannot be delved into as long as one is involved in it. (Once it is transcended, the question itself melts away!) Hence the right royal remedy recommended by the Upanisads is to get the knowledge of the *Atman*, *Brahman* or God. To those who want to end all their troubles without taking the trouble of obtaining the knowledge of God, the Svetāśvatara Upanisad (6.20) tauntingly replies: 'When men succeed in rolling up the sky as if it were a piece of leather, then (they will certainly succeed) in ending all sorrow even without knowing God!'

This *avidya* cannot be wished away since it is deep-rooted. The knowledge of the Self is not intellectual knowledge that can be obtained from the books or through logic and reasoning (Ka.U. 2.9). The *jiva* has to undergo a rigorous training disciplining the body, refining the speech, sharpening the intellect and purifying the heart (Mu.U. 3.1.5).

The need for such a discipline is stressed by the Kathopaniṣad when it declares: 'One who has not desisted from bad conduct, whose senses are not under control, whose mind is

not concentrated, whose heart is not free from anxiety (about the result of concentration), cannot attain the Self through knowledge.' (2.24).

The very first step in this journey towards perfection is to learn to distinguish the good—what is morally and spiritually good—from the pleasant, which is deceptively pleasant and attractive, but will result in utter misery and ruin at the end (Ka.U. 2.1, 2). Once the good is chosen, all-out efforts should be made to reach the goal through it.

It is interesting to note that the Upaniṣads exhort the aspirant to cultivate strength—strength in every sense of the term—including physical strength. The Chândogya Upaniṣad (7.8.1) says: 'When he becomes strong, he gets up. Getting up, he approaches the teacher and starts serving him. Serving him, he becomes dear to him. Through this loving relationship he learns to see, to hear, to think, to know, to do and to understand.' The Muṇḍakopaniṣad (3.2.4) rules out the attainment of the *Atman* by the weak.

This strength in the ultimate analysis is strength of character. Self-control, purity of mind and an assiduous pursuit of spiritual knowledge resulting in deep-rooted convictions, are the basis for this strength of character. One who has it, reaches the goal; one who lacks it, gets involved in *samsara* or transmigratory existence.

Severe warning is also administered to the human beings, who by nature are very greedy (Br. U. 5.2.2.). They are advised not to covet the wealth of others (Iśa. U.1). Wealth can never lead to immortality (Br.U. 4.5.3). Desires involve one in the meshes of death (Ka.U. 4.2).

The Upaniṣads advise the aspirant, afflicted with the malady of *samsara*, to approach a suitable guru (spiritual preceptor) respectfully and obtain spiritual illumination through him (*vide* Mu.U. 1.2.12). What is taught by the guru, should be heard with attention (*śravaṇa*), reflected upon (*manana*) and meditated upon (*nididhyasana*) (Br. U. 4.5.6). Even the details of such a meditation are supplied through a captivating simile: 'Taking hold of the bow (which is the great weapon familiar

in the Upaniṣads), one should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string with a mind absorbed in Its thought, hit, O good-looking one, that very target that is Immutable. *Om* is the bow; the soul is the arrow; and *Brahman* is called its target. It is to be hit by an unerring man. One should become one with It just like an arrow.' (Mu.U. 2.2.3,4).

Broadly speaking, the Upaniṣads prescribe a two-fold path to perfection, that of knowledge and that of meditation and devotion. Whether they are parallel paths leading to the same goal or whether one leads to the other which alone is the direct path, is a moot point. It depends upon the basic philosophical standpoint from which the various statements of the Upaniṣads are interpreted. For instance, the following statements seem to stress that *jñāna* or knowledge is the direct means to *moksa* or liberation: 'The knower of the *Atman* crosses over sorrow' (Chā. U. 7.1.3); 'The knower of *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*' (Mu. U. 3.2.9); 'Those who know this become immortal' (M.N.U. 1.11).

On the other hand some Upaniṣadic statements as follows, stress the importance of *upasana* or devoted meditation: 'One should meditate upon It as *Brahman*' (Tai. U. 3.10); 'The Self, O dear, is to be meditated upon' (Br.U. 2.4.5); 'I, the seeker of liberation, take refuge in Him, the Lord' (Sve.U. 6.8). The doctrine of *prapatti* or Self-surrender and the doctrine of grace which are concomitant to *bhakti* or devotion are also seen here and there (Sve.U. 6.18; M.N.U. 79.16; Ka.U.2.23).

What is the nature of the state of liberation which the *jiva* obtains at the end of his spiritual sojourn? One thing is certain: he will never again be caught in the cycle of transmigration. Hence he is freed once for all from the shackles of birth, change, disease, old age and death which have played havoc with him all through! On the positive side, he fully regains his original state of eternal bliss. His personality is not extinguished, but expanded to its full stature.

But what about his relationship with *Brahman*, the ultimate Reality? Here again there seems to be scope for different opinions or interpretations. The Kathopaniṣad (4.15) declares that the self merges completely in the Supreme Self even as pure water poured into pure water

becomes one. The Muṇḍakopaniṣad (3.2.5) concurs with this view (3.1.3 & 3.2.6). The famous *mahavakyas* (great Vedāntic dictums) speak in unmistakable terms, of the unity of the *jīva* with the *Paramatman* in the ultimate analysis. As opposed to this, there are also statements which appear to teach that the individual and the Supreme are eternally distinct (Mu.U. 3.1.1,2; Sve.U. 6.16; 1.9.12; Ka.U. 5.13). Again there are other statements which seem to strike a compromise between these two views by positing the Supreme Self as the *antaryamin* or the inner controller of both the *jīvas* and *prakṛti* (inert nature) (Br.U. 3.7.3).

Whether this liberation can be obtained here and now (*sadyomukti*), even while living in this body (*jīvanmukti*), or it can be obtained only after the fall of the body (*videhamukti*) which is the last vestige of bondage, that too in course of time (*kramamukti*), is another point about which there is no unanimity in the Upaniṣads. The idea of two paths—*pitṛyana*, the path of the manes and *devayana*, the path of the gods—is found in most of the Upaniṣads. Between these two, the *devayana*, which is also called as the *arciradimarga* (the path of light) because of the increasingly brighter stations of light on it, leads to *Brahmaloka* or *Satyaloka* (the world of Brahman or Truth) from which there is no return to mundane existence (Br.U. 6.2.15; Chā.U. 4.15.5; Pr.U. 1.10). The

jīvas who go to *Brahmaloka* by this path live there with *Isvara* (God with form) till the end of the world cycle and then get dissolved in the Supreme *Brahman* when the *Brahmaloka* itself gets dissolved.

To sum up: The *jīva* who in his essential nature, is eternally free, somehow forgets it and hence gets enmeshed in transmigratory existence and suffers. Constant and continuous suffering gradually awakens him to the intense need for getting rid of this misery and suffering. Turning to the *sastra* (the scripture) and the *acarya* (the spiritual preceptor) he learns to give up evil ways, starts performing good deeds, cultivates purity of body and mind, and finally, makes intense efforts for progress in the spiritual path. Knowledge, meditation and devotion help him to regain his pristine state, after which he will live in eternal freedom and bliss.

Abbreviations

Br.U.	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
Chā.U.	Chāndogya „
Iṣa.U.	Isāvāsya „
Ka.U.	Kaṭha „
M.N.U.	Māhānārāyaṇa „
Mu.U.	Muṇḍaka „
Pr.U.	Praśnopaniṣad „
Sre.U.	Svetāśvatara „
Tai.U.	Taittiriya „



The principal aim of human life is the realisation of God, or the attainment of Mukti. Man alone has the prerogative or the ability to attain this highest object of life—none else, not animals, not even Gods, or heavenly beings, can have it. It is denied to animals, because they are devoid of the faculty of discriminating between the Real and the unreal. Attainment of liberation is impossible for Gods, because they are too occupied with the continuous enjoyment of the intense pleasures and splendours of heaven. What time is left for them for the practice of discrimination and renunciation? For this same reason, it is also difficult for those persons who own vast riches and much property to attain Mukti. Again, for those who are extremely poor and destitute and are ever tormented and perplexed, gnawed by hunger and driven by want, it is difficult to gain spirituality. Realisation of God is far easier for men of moderate means, because they stand between those two extremes. It is seen in the history of the world that nearly all the great personalities who have left an indelible impress on religion, society, polity and other fields of human activity or realms of thought, by the power of their genius, have been born of middle-class parents of moderate means—neither rich nor poor.

— Swami Virajananda