

Chāndogya Upaniṣad

A BRIEF OUTLINE

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AMONG THE six traditional systems of Hindu philosophy known as Ṣaḍ-darśanas, the Vedānta system, undoubtedly, gets the pride of place. This system, which is very much alive even in the modern times and quite popular, is based entirely on the Upaniṣads, the predominantly philosophical sections of the Vedas. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is one of the ten Upaniṣads considered to be ancient and authoritative, and on which Śaṅkara (AD 788-820) has written a voluminous commentary. Its importance can be judged from the fact that the work *Brahmasūtras* has drawn heavily upon it, for topics of discussion.

Though the word 'chandas' ('that which exhilarates') is one of the names of the Vedas in general, it is more particularly applied to the *Sāmaveda*, the third of the four Vedas wherein the mantras, known as 'sāmans,' are set to music and sung. Those who have specialized in the singing of these sāmans, are called 'Chandogas' and the Brāhmaṇa (liturgical section) pertaining to them is designated as *Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa*, which itself forms a part of the Tāṇḍya branch of the *Sāmaveda*. This Brāhmaṇa contains ten prapāṭhakas or sections out of which the first two form the *Mantra Brāhmaṇa*, and the rest, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. It comprises eight chapters and each is subdivided into 'khaṇḍas' or sections (total number of

khaṇḍas being 154) and contains 628 kaṇḍikās or mantras, all in prose.

The speciality of this Upaniṣad is that it describes a number of 'upāsanās' or 'vidyās' or meditations, based generally on Vedic rituals. Since the average spiritual aspirant has devoted the major part of his life to the performance of these rituals, it will be rather difficult for him to take to meditation on God straightway. Hence he is led to it gradually by a series of graded meditations on the rituals, each of the parts being substituted by appropriate symbols that elevate the whole process to spiritual levels. The entire first chapter is devoted to one such meditation, that on the 'udgītha,' the principal part of a sāman chant. Since the udgītha invariably starts with Om, and Om is the best symbol of Paramātman, the Supreme Self or God, the Upaniṣad begins with its upāsanā. The second section, with the help of an ancient anecdote stresses the importance of meditation on the udgītha as identified with the mukhya-prāna, the primary life-force within the body, which at the cosmic level has manifested itself as the sun. Meditation on Om in various aspects is continued till the 7th section. The twelfth section gives an amusing incident of dogs singing udgītha (hence called 'śauva-udgītha,' śauva = related to dogs) for obtaining food. Śaṅkara opines that some supernatural deities assuming the forms

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of dogs revealed this udgītha to the sage Baka-Dālbhya, and that it helps a hungry person in securing food.

If the first chapter concentrated on prescribing meditation on the different parts or limbs of the sāman, the second chapter is devoted to meditations on the whole sāman. Sections 2 to 10 deal mainly with such meditations. Sections 11 to 21 deal with the meditations on certain special sāmans like the *Gāyatrāsāman*, *Rathantarāsāman*, *Revatīsāman* and so on. The twentythird section, which mentions about the four āśramas or stages of life, deals with the result of meditating purely on Om, which is the attainment of immortality.

The first eleven sections of the third chapter deal with the meditation on Āditya or the sun, who is the personification of the results of all sacrifices as also the karmas of all beings. The whole series of meditations is called *Madhu-vidyā*, since Āditya has been compared to 'madhu' or honey. Sections 12 and 13 deal with meditation on Brahman through the *Gāyatrī* since that is the best among the Vedic meters. Meditation on Brahman in the space or ether outside, has also been described. The 14th section gives the famous *Śāṅḍilya-vidyā*. It prescribes meditation on the Ātman in the lotus of one's heart, but as identified with Brahman, called here as 'tajjalān.' This leads to the attainment of Brahman after the fall of the body. Sections 15 and 16 deal with *Kośa-vidyā* for the longevity of one's son and *Puruṣa-vidyā* for one's own longevity. The sage Mahidāsa Aitareya, who discovered the latter vidyā, is said to have lived for 116 years.

The fourth chapter describes four important vidyās: *Samvarga vidyā*, *Ṣoḍaśakala-vidyā*, *Upakosala-vidyā* and *Akṣipuruṣa-vidyā*. Jānaśruti Pauṭrāyaṇa, a

king well-known for his generosity, comes to know of the spiritual eminence of the sage Raikva through the accidental hearing of a conversation between two swans flying over his palace. After a thorough search he discovers Raikva resting in the shade under a cart. Honouring him suitably with presents, the king seeks spiritual wisdom from him. Raikva teaches him to meditate upon Vāyu (cosmic wind) outside and the mukhya-prāṇa (chief 'life-force') inside, as 'samvarga,' ie one which absorbs and dissolves everything within itself. 'Samvarga' is Prajāpati, the Self of all gods. This is the subject-matter of the first three sections. The touching story of the young boy Satyakāma Jābāla and the *Ṣoḍaśakala-vidyā* he received directly from supernatural deities has been described in sections 4 to 9. Meditation on Brahman, the final cause of this world, through meditation on its 16 'kalās' or parts or aspects, is the subject matter of this particular vidyā. Sections 10 to 14 deal with the story of Upakosala, a disciple of Satyakāma, and his obtaining knowledge of Brahman from the three sacred fires in the house of his guru. This has been called *Upakosala-vidyā*. The fires taught that prāṇa or the chief life-force, manifesting in the heart as bliss, is Brahman. The teacher Satyakāma completed their teaching by imparting the knowledge of the 'akṣipuruṣa,' the power behind the senses, the ātman. One who realizes this ātman goes to the abode of Brahman after death and does not return to transmigratory existence.

The fifth chapter puts before us three kinds of destination for a soul after death of the body: (1) Those practising *Pañcāgni-vidyā* ('meditation on the five fires') and similar other upāsānās will go by 'arcirādi-mārga' or the path of light, to Brahmāloka, the abode of Brahman, and will not return to transmigratory worlds.

(2) Those who perform only rituals without enlightenment will travel by the 'dhūmādi-mārga,' the path of smoke, and attain the world like 'pitṛloka' or the world of manes, from which they return to the human world after some time. (3) Those who lead a beastly life without practising either upāsanās or ritualistic karmas, will constantly go through the rounds of birth and death.

The first two sections prescribe meditation on the mukhya-prāṇa, the chief life-force, after establishing its superiority over other prāṇas (the sense-organs) through an anecdote. Sections 3 to 10 deal with the famous *Pañcāgni-vidyā* ('the doctrine of the five fires') and eschatology. Young Śvetaketu, puffed up with the pride of learning, goes to the court of the king Pravāhaṇa Jaivali with a view to establishing the superiority of his learning, but is rebuffed by the king who knew better. He returns crest-fallen and angry to his father, the sage Gautama. Gautama approaches the king Pravāhaṇa Jaivali in all humility and requests him to teach the *Pañcāgni-vidyā* about which he had questioned Śvetaketu earlier. In this vidyā, heavenly world, rains, earth, man, and woman are to be contemplated upon as fire into which oblations of faith, subtle body (of the sacrificer), rain, food, and semen are poured, the final oblation being responsible for the rebirth of the sacrificer. Those who know this science go to the world of Brahman after death and will not return here. The rest of the chapter (sections 11 to 24) deals with the *Vaiśvānara-vidyā*. Six sages under the leadership of Uddālaka Āruṇi obtain this vidyā from the king Aśvapati Kaikeya who was an adept in it. Vaiśvānara Ātman is Īśvara or the Cosmic Being, pervading the universe. He is also inside us as the chief life-force, mukhya-prāṇa. Hence the act of eating food should be contemplated

upon as Agnihotra sacrifice. One who achieves perfection in this will become identified with the Cosmic Being. This is the gist of this vidyā.

The last three chapters—6th, 7th and 8th—contain the quintessence of Vedānta philosophy. The whole of the sixth chapter is devoted to a delineation of the *Sad-vidyā*, knowledge and meditation pertaining to *Sat* (the eternal Truth) or Brahman. It is in the form of a dialogue between the son Śvetaketu and his father Uddālaka Āruṇi. When Śvetaketu returns home after completing a twelve-year course in Vedic studies, the father Uddālaka Āruṇi notices his conceit born of that learning and questions him whether he has known that by knowing which everything will be known. However, the boy had not known it and so requests his father himself to teach it to him. Citing the examples of clay, gold and iron, and their products (like pot, ornament and nail-cutter), the father first draws the attention of his son to the identity between the cause and its effects, pointing out that names and forms are unreal, the substance alone being real. Applying this principle, he states that before creation, *Sat* (the eternal Truth) alone existed and that *Sat* evolved into this world of names and forms through the three primary elements: tejas (fire), ap (water) and anna (earth). All objects of creation, including the bodies of living beings, have come out of these elements through permutation and combination. This is the gist of the teachings of the first seven sections. Sections 8 to 10 deal with the merging of the individual self, the jīva, into *Sat* during the state of deep sleep. However, since ignorance persists, he comes back to his original state. The same logic applies in the case of rebirth after death also. But, those who attain knowledge will get liberated. The famous Vedāntic dictum *tat tvam asi*, 'That thou

art,' appears for the first time in the eighth section and is repeated later, nine times in all. Sections 12 and 13 teach that *Sat*, the primary Cause of the universe, is too subtle to be perceived even as the seed of the banyan tree in which the whole tree exists in an involved state. But it pervades the entire creation like the lump of salt dissolved in a jar of water. To know this *Sat*, the help of a teacher, guru or guide, is necessary. It is like a blindfolded traveller, let off in the forest by robbers, finding his way out with the help of a kind soul. This is the teaching of the 14th section. Though the mode of death is similar to the ignorant as well as the enlightened souls, the latter will not transmigrate whereas the former do. This is explained in the last two sections with the help of an anecdote of the police catching a thief. The purport of the whole chapter seems to be to teach the identity of the *jīvatman* or the individual self with Brahman, the Cosmic Soul.

The seventh chapter teaches *Bhūma-vidyā*, knowledge of the infinite. Narada, though himself a great sage and a man of considerable erudition, approaches the distinguished sage Sanatkumāra with a heavy heart seeking peace and joy. Sanatkumāra takes him step by step through meditations on fifteen objects like name, speech, mind and so on, to *Bhūman*, the Infinite. This *Bhūman*, which is everywhere, which is established in its own glory, and by knowing which there is nothing else to be known, is the Self of all beings. One who realizes it, becomes 'svaṛāt'; like a king, he will have full freedom in all the worlds. To obtain this knowledge, purity of mind got through purity of food and purity of sense-experience, is necessary. It is only a pure mind that can retain and realize spiritual truths.

It is rather difficult to comprehend and contemplate upon Brahman without

qualities, described as *Sat* and *Bhūman*. It is easier to meditate upon the saguna or qualified aspect of Brahman, as possessing of blessed qualities. The eighth chapter precribes such a meditation on Brahman in the region of one's heart, as also related disciplines like brahmacarya. The first two sections deal with *Dahara-vidyā*, meditation on Brahman in the 'daharākāśa,' the little space in the region of the heart. This ākāśa or space in the heart is itself Brahman. It is not limited to that spatial area nor does it get destroyed with the destruction of the body. One who realizes this obtains whatever he wants, in whichever world he contemplates. The next three sections extol and prescribe brahmacarya or celibacy and other related disciplines, for realizing the Ātman-Brahman, who like an embankment is protecting all the worlds. The sixth section describes the various nāḍīs or passages for the flow of prāṇic energy and how the soul of a man of knowledge, at the time of death, enters into suṣumnā nāḍī, departs through the aperture in the top of the head and reaches Brahmāloka, the abode of Brahman, from which there is no return. Sections 7 to 12 deal with the teachings of Prajāpati to Indra and Virocana. Hearing from Prajāpati, the father of creation, that one who realizes the Ātman, the Self, who is sinless and beyond all limitations like hunger and thirst, old-age and death, Indra the king of gods and Virocana the king of demons decided to get that knowledge of the Ātman. After undergoing brahmacarya (disciplines necessary for spiritual studies) for 32 years, they both approached him for the teaching. When Prajāpati said that the 'person seen in the eye' is the Ātman, Virocana understood it as the reflection seen in the eyeball, which again is the body. Fully satisfied with this understanding that the body is itself the Ātman, he returned to his tribe and taught it to

them. Indra too took it that way; but very soon he got doubts since the body, which is seen in the reflection, is subject to mutilation, disease and death, whereas the Ātman is not. He returned and expressed his doubts when Prajāpati instructed him, after a further period of brahmacarya for 32 years, that the 'person who moves about in the dream is the Ātman.' When Indra discovered the limitations of this teaching as also of the next that 'the person in dreamless sleep is the Ātman,' he was truly instructed (after further periods of brahmacarya, totalling in all, 101 years) that the Ātman is the 'seer' behind the eyes and all other sense-organs, is the witness of all the states, and is the immortal spirit different from the mortal body. The last section gives the list of teachers of spiritual wisdom. It also adds that one who leads a life in accordance with dharma and meditates on Brahman in the heart, will reach Brahmaloaka after death and will not return.

Apart from the fact that this Upanisad is the second longest and one of the more ancient ones, it throws an interesting

light on contemporary history and customs. It mentions many geographical names like Pāñcāla, Kuru, Naimiṣa, Gāndhāra, and Kekaya. References to many sciences and arts, villages and towns, buildings and parts of buildings, tools of iron and other implements, different kinds of articles of food and drink, musical instruments, minerals and metals mentioned by name, carts and chariots, keepers of cows and horses, kings and law-enforcing agencies, several calendaric terms—all these indicate a fair degree of civilization. Family life was highly valued and social life was generally peaceful. Truth and righteousness were given the pride of place. For acquiring knowledge from competent teachers no sacrifice was considered too great. The teachers also enforced discipline strictly. Though ritualistic religion was very much in vogue, philosophical inquiry was considered a superior pursuit.

Thus, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is a unique text of the Vedānta system, giving an insight into a philosophical inquiry of the highest kind. □

BOOK REVIEWS

ESSAYS ON HINDUISM by Karan Singh
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Universal principles have no location in place or time. They exist everywhere and at all times, and they have no 'choice' of their own as to whose heart they may be revealed through or which part of the world they may be discovered in. While this is true in every field of science, it is all the more so in the field of religion. Just as the sun shines upon everyone, the blessings of universal spiritual laws are for one and all without distinction

of nationality, colour, creed, or sex. From time immemorial India has been the land of spirituality. Even in very ancient times, many pure hearted sages in India were the recipients of spiritual revelations, which they treasured and handed down to successive generations for the good of mankind. One cannot easily fathom the depth of the inspired divine utterances enshrined in the sacred books of Hinduism. The scriptures of Hinduism are vast, oceanic and multi-faceted. Their apparent diversity and complexity may be sometimes bewildering, especially to the modern man. At times one is so baffled as to wonder where to look for to find the salient, essential elements of Hinduism. For such a person in particular,