

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

Upanishad in the Eyes of Swami Vivekananda

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In the Shvetàshvatara Upanishad you find the rishi giving the clarion call to all and sundry and says: O children of immortality and all the gods residing in the highest spheres, listen, I have known that Being who is as resplendent as the sun; knowing Him alone one can transcend miseries.

Swami Vivekananda in his famous 'Paper on Hinduism', delivered at the Chicago Parliament of Religions on 19th of September, 1893, had translated the verse into English. The clarion call that came out of Swamiji was remarkable enough. He had said on that day: "Children of immortal bliss"—what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter'. (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I, p. 11)

Sister Nivedita says somewhere in her writing: For the Westerners, this call of Swamiji was the greatest message we have ever heard. We, who have been used to listening from our very birth that we are sinners, hearing from a monk from the far East, telling us that we are children of immortality and not born sinners, was a great message to all of us.

Swamiji had declared in his later life that it was the mission of his life to bring the Vedanta of the forests to the everyday life of man. Indeed, Swamiji, as Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya Shastri mentions in his wonderful book on the Vedantic thoughts of Swami Vivekananda, was never keen on establishing himself as a great pundit of Vedanta. On the contrary, his sole aim was to bring the life-giving thoughts of the Upanishads and Vedanta into the workaday life of humanity.

Swamiji had delved deep into the Upanishads. Right from his student days he was a keen reader of Western philosophical literature. But the contact with Sri Ramakrishna opened up a new world for him. Indian philosophy, the great thoughts contained in Sanskrit language, the great philosophical systems that India had nurtured in her bosom for centuries enlightened his exceptional mind.

In course of time he started mastering the Upanishads, the Vedas, the Samhitàs. In fact, as one goes through The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, one sees him as a perceptive student of the Upanishads, the Samhitàs, the Vivekachudàmuni, the Brahmasutras and the Gità. Not only that, he had read thoroughly the bhàshyas or commentaries of Shankara, Ràmànuja and even the Sàyana bhàshya of the Rig-Veda. Swamiji was thus eminently qualified to speak on the Upanishads. But no, he did not want to go into the intricacies and the roundabout arguments of the Vedas; his main purpose was to bring the life-giving principles and truths and spread them to the society at large.

Swamiji's method

How did Swamiji do that? Let us take a view of Swamiji's method of study, his method of delivering lectures, his method of preaching. He had used all the three prevalent norms of Sanskrit scriptures—first, 'Nyàya'; second, 'Shruti'; and finally 'Smriti'. The scriptures say that to understand the Upanishadic dictums, you must have a logical mind. You must have a rational mind which can weigh the pros and cons of a subject. That is Nyàya. Traditionally, the Brahmasutras is considered to be the text which synthesizes the thoughts of the Upanishads into a coherent whole. Swamiji's writings and

lectures thus have enough of Nyàya or logic. In fact, as Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya mentions very rightly, Swamiji often had laid stress on logic, on rationality because today's modern men and women would like to discuss religion and the scriptures rationally. Thus Nyàya or logic takes up lots of space in Swamiji's discussion on the Upanishads. But he was not contented merely with that. He gradually went ahead and took us to 'Shruti', the Vedas, the great message of the Shrutis.

The Brahmasutras tells us 'Shàstrayonitvāt' (1.1.3). What does it say? It tells us that the indriyagràhya jagat or the world of sense perceptions is good. But to realize the eternal Soul, 'âtman' or 'Paramàtman', you must be able to look beyond. A wonderful example comes up in the discussions. Consider sight. We can have the sight; we can see the world through the eyes. Again we can hear the sound through the ears. But you cannot hear the sound through the eyes because every indriya or sense organ has its specific object of perception. Similarly, there are things which are beyond the grasp of the indriyas. It is to this reality that the 'Shruti' draws our attention. The Shruti tells us about âtman, about Brahman. Thus, after Nyàya comes the Shruti. The great scriptures, the Vedas and the Vedanta, tell us about the âtman or Brahman which is immutable, which is beyond the senses.

Third comes 'Smriti'. As all of you know, the famous Smriti text is the Gità. In fact, the Gità has been referred to as a synthesis of the Upanishads. Swamiji thus takes up the message of the Gità and discusses the Karmayoga. To Swamiji, the message of the Upanishads—'Tat tvam asi', 'Ayam âtmā brahma' or 'So'ham'—this great lesson of oneness can only be understood by the comprehension of the particular yogas discussed in the Gità.

Upanishadic message

Let us now turn to the message of the Upanishads. The most important message is the identity of jivâtman and the Paramàtman. The Upanishads take up a wonderful allegory. It says, let us take a lump of clay. From this lump of clay have been fashioned a pot, a doll, and various other items. All of them have been manufactured out of clay. Essentially they are all clay. If you dip them into water they will dissolve. They would be bereft of what we call nàma (name) and rupa (form).

The Upanishads tell us that it is nàma and rupa which separate us from one another. Essentially we are âtman. But it is these upàdhis or adjuncts of nàma and rupa which have created all these differences, all this variety in life. Thus we have become individuals—men or women, a young man or an aged woman, etc. All these differentiations are caused by name and form.

Then, how do we know about the essential oneness? About Brahman? The Upanishads tell us that we must be able to do shravana, manana and nididhyàšana. That is, listen to the great message first (shravana). Then think over that rationally (manana). Then delve deep, meditate on it (nididhyàšana). As you do that, these apparently difficult truths gradually reveal their secrets to you. You then understand that essentially the self and the Supreme Self are not different. It is nàma and rupa which have separated them, as it were! The Upanishads thus mention a number of dictums which are to be thought over. Swamiji mentions them again and again in his writings and throws light on the essential oneness of the Self. He tells us: Bring the thoughts of the Upanishads down to every man, to the fisherman, to the farmer on the field, the student working in the class-room; discuss with everyone the great message of the Upanishads.

Swamiji tells us a wonderful story about the greatness of the Upanishads. The story goes that there was a flock of sheep. Into that flock fell a lioness. As she was about to catch her prey, she gave birth to a cub. This cub gradually grew up and moved along with other sheep. One day it so happened that another lion saw the flock but was amazed to see a lion in their midst. The young lion was moving like other sheep! How could it be so, thought the lion in wonderment! So he came running, left the other sheep and caught the young lion by the neck and drew him to a river. The young lion kept bleating in terror. He wanted to go with the other sheep. But the big lion would not let him go. He took him to the

riverside and said: 'Don't you see that my face and that of yours are similar?' But the cub would not believe. He went on bleating as before. Then the lion searched around and found a pound of flesh smeared with blood. He thrust the flesh into the mouth of the cub. As the cub tasted blood, his lion-spirit was roused and he roared out as the lion does. At last the huge lion was happy. Swamiji says, the Upanishads also want to give us the message of truth, the message of strength. 'Be strong', Swamiji would say. From the Upanishads, he wanted us to learn how to become àshisto, drarishtha and valishtha. Be strong. Only then you can understand this great message of the Upanishads, he said again and again.

Swamiji was very fond of the Kathopanishad. It includes a story of a young student called 'Nachiketà'. His father was about to perform a sacrifice. But being a stingy person, he did not want to give away all his belongings as he had pledged earlier. Nachiketà was seated there and watched his father giving away the calves and cows which were bereft of any strength whatsoever. He offered such cows that would not be able to give any milk, would not be able to produce any offspring. Nachiketà observed all this niggardliness and went up to his father at last in utter dismay and said, 'Father, whom do you give me to?' His father was annoyed. He understood that his son was making a dig at him. He listened to the question once, twice, thrice, and then blurted out: 'Yes, I give you to Yama.' Nachiketà was surprised. He said, 'Bahunàm emi prathamò bahunàm emi madhyamah; kimsvit yamasya kartavyam yanmayàdya karishyati.' That is, 'Among many I am the first, among many I could be the middle one. But I am last among none. Then how is it that my father sends me to Yama. What service will father render to Yama by sending me to him?'

Swamiji says, the Upanishad mentions 'shraddhà àvivesha'. Shraddhà descends on Nachiketà and he said, 'Am I a riff-raff? I am a person with dignity. How can my father send me to Yama, the Lord of Death?' His father, Vājashravà, is now repentant. He comes to Nachiketà and cajoles him. But Nachiketà is firm. He, says, 'No, just like the corns, they are born and they die. Similarly, men and women, they are born and they die. But truth remains. So what you have said, let that take place.'

The young boy then reached the land of Yama. Yama, as you know, is a very busy person. He was not there in his mansion. So the young boy waits at his doorsteps. After three days Yama returns and he wants to please the boy. But is it easy to please that boy? Yama gives him three boons and the third boon contains the essence of this Upanishad. Nachiketà here asks the prime question which Swamiji was greatly fond of. Nachiketà asks Yama,

Yeyam prete vichikitsà manushye-'stityeke nàyamastiti chaikè;

Etadvidyàmanushishtastvayà'ham varànàmesha varastritayah.

Thus Nachiketà asks Yama, 'When this body withers away, men die, where do they go? There are some who say that nothing remains after the body is burnt out. But there are others, who say, "No, there is a continuum. There is something which stays back". Will you, O Yama, tell me about this continuum? Will you give me a clear answer to this question?'

Yama was shaken. He did not answer this question in a straightforward manner. In fact, he did not expect this question. So, he puts a number of temptations in front of Nachiketà. He said, 'You are a young boy. Even the gods would not like to put that question.' But Nachiketà stuck to his question. This deep self-confidence, uncompromising quest for Truth is a lesson for all of us.

Swami Saradanandaji in his great Bengali biography of Sri Ramakrishna—Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga—has written a chapter the title of which is 'àshcharyo vaktà kushalosya labdhà.' The purport of this title is that when both the teacher and the student are equally wonderful, only then you can find the greatest flow of knowledge about the Self or àtmajnàna. Saradanandaji refers to this statement in connection with the conversation that Sri Ramakrishna had with Narendranath (later

Swami Vivekananda). The 'àshcharya vaktà, that Sri Ramakrishna was, gave the highest principles of Vedanta to his young disciple, Narendranath, who was like a lion cub. It was not easy to convince him. But Sri Ramakrishna was a patient teacher who gradually convinced his disciple. It was thus Narendranath took upon himself the task of preaching the message of Vedanta in the modern age.

What did Swamiji pick out as the carnel of Vedanta? Let us look at another Upanishad, the Brihadàranyaka Upanishad, that Swamiji was fond of. This is often described as the prime of the Upanishads. This Upanishad was narrated by a sage whose name was Yàjnavalkya. As with all Upanishads, there is a story in this Upanishad also. The story goes that Yàjnavalkya had two wives. One was Maitreyi and another was Kàtyàyani. Yàjnavalkya decided to give up his hearth and home and retire to the forests forever. Before he could do so, he called his two wives and said, 'Maitreyi and Kàtyàyani, I want to divide up this property between you two'. Kàtyàyani was happy. But Maitreyi was not. She looked up to Yàjnavalkya and said, 'Will this property give me immortality?' 'No, it won't', said the sage. 'In that case, what is the use of this property?' said Maitreyi. Yàjnavalkya was satisfied because he noticed the prajñà or wisdom of his wife. It was thus the flow of his teachings started.

The wonderful teaching of Yàjnavalkya was also a great favourite of Swami Vivekananda. Yàjnavalkya says, 'Na vā are patyuh kāmāya patih priyo bhavati, àtmanastu kāmāya patih priyo bhavati.' Yàjnavalkya says, 'O dear, it is not that for the husband per se that the wife is fond of the husband. But it is because of the àtman that shines within that makes the husband so dear to her.' Then he goes on saying that all objects in this universe, the husband to the wife, the son to the mother, the belongings of the world—all these are dear and covetable because, after all, they are reflections of the Eternal Supreme àtman. It is here in the discussion on the Brihadàranyaka Upanishad that Swamiji turns out, as the great historian K. M. Panikkar says, to be the modern-day Shankara.

Swami Vivekananda, in his discussions on the Upanishads in his wonderful book, the Jnàna-Yoga, borrows many of the arguments of Shankara, the great Advaitic philosopher. But, in fact, he went beyond; he even surpassed Shankara in certain respects. For example, in his discussion on the Brihadàranyaka Upanishad referred to earlier, Shankara had said that it is for the satisfaction of the individual self—mark the words 'àtmanastu kāmāya'—that the wife is fond of the husband and vice versa. But Swamiji has enlarged the interpretation. According to Dinesh Chandra Shastri, Swamiji's interpretations have been still liberal enough because he has said that it is because of the presence of the Supreme àtman behind all entities of the world that things are covetable, that relations are lovable. It is because of that Supreme Being which shines in all of them, we love them and cherish them.

How does Swamiji discuss the àtman? All of you know that the Upanishads and the Vedanta say that the àtman is unchanging and unmoving. The Vedanta has been referred to as the end of the Vedas. That is, it contains the essence of the Vedas. The Veda is, in fact, a huge literature. But Swamiji said that three-fourth of it is karma-kānda or rituals that tell us how to perform a sacrifice or how to lead a proper life and so on. But only a small fraction of it deals with jnàna-kānda, the Vedanta or the Upanishads. But although small in volume, the jnàna-kānda deals with àtman or Brahman. It deals with the life beyond. It tells us that we are not merely encased in the small body of ours. It tells you about àtman, Brahman or the Supreme Being Ishvara.

Swamiji uses a unique simile to explain this ultimate reality. He says, consider a dark room. There are a number of spectators in the room. There is a white screen and there is a projector going on. As the lights are on, different characters in the film become living, as it were. They cry, they laugh, they do all sorts of things. And we, who watch the movie, gradually become one with it. We also start crying, we also become cheerful and laugh. A discerning mind, however, would understand that it is merely a film roll moving because the actors and actresses had finished their job long ago. They are now perhaps resting in their own rooms! But when we see the film we forget it all. The light, the sound, the action engulf us. We become one with the film! Swamiji says, such is the world. We become one with it. We become one with its sorrow and happiness. The relationship, the objects, we cherish them as our own.

Swamiji says: well, look at the screen on which the film was being projected. The white screen is there unchanged. It was there before the movie started, it is still there after the movie ended. Swamiji says that similar is the âtman. Without that white screen the movie would not make any sense; all the laugh, dance, happiness and misery would not take shape without that substratum. âtman or Brahman is that unchanging substratum.

So this âtman, which is unchanging, everpresent, and everpure must be sought, must be looked after. Thus the Upanishads tell us 'Tat tvam asi'. Swamiji untiringly mentions this great Upanishadic dictum. What does it say? It says Tat, meaning 'That', ie the Supreme Being. Tvam is 'you'. 'You are That'. Vedanta says you must be able to discern this clearly and understand that all nâma and rupa (names and forms), which are nothing but upâdhis or adjuncts, can be gradually removed. If one is able to do that one would understand that he or she is essentially the pure, undiluted, unchanging Self.

What is the benefit of all this methodology of shravana (hearing the truths of the scriptures), manana (cogitation of what is heard) and nididhyâsana (meditation on the truth)? What do you gain from all these? Swamiji says, we gain the highest. What do we gain? We become fearless. Here, Swamiji has given a wonderful example in his Jnâna-yoga. He says, Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Emperor had come to India. He had crossed the Hindukush and fought against king Puru. Then Alexander was a young man. But he had a great teacher whose name was Aristotle. He must have heard about the wisdom of the Hindus from that great philosopher. So, before leaving the land of knowledge, ie India, Alexander wanted to meet a sage. He was taken to one such sage and he found that the sage did not have any belongings, nor did he have any craving for anything. All the same, he was beaming with happiness. Alexander was satisfied when he saw this sage and reasoned—'Could there be such a man who is without any craving for belongings, for property, for name and fame!' He made up his mind to take this wonderful specimen to Greece. He made the proposal but the yogi declined to move an inch. Then, an infuriated Alexander threatened the yogi that he would kill him if he did not comply. Now the sage laughed aloud and said: 'You haven't uttered a greater falsehood earlier. How can you kill me? I'm not the body. I'm not the mind. I'm the âtman, the Soul, the Spirit eternal. I can't be pierced by the sword. I can't be burnt by fire.' Think of this person! He had no worldly possessions, yet he was stronger than the Greek Emperor because he was rooted in his Self, because he had realized his Self, realized his kingdom within.

Therefore the Upanishads declare that 'brahmavid brahmaiva bhavati'. That is, the person who knows Brahman verily becomes Brahman. The limitations of the flesh have disappeared forever from him.

Poetic imageries

Swami Vivekananda was not content to look only at the philosophical side of the Upanishads. The poet in him also recognized their wonderful imageries. In his 'Lectures from Colombo to Almora', as also in many other lectures, he referred to one of the most poetic imageries of the Mundaka Upanishad. The verse runs as follows:

Dvâ suparnâ sayujâ sakhâyâ samânam vriksham parishasvajâte; Tayoranyah pippalam svâdvattya-nashnannanyo abhicâkashiti. (III.1)

What does it say? It says, two birds were sitting on the branch of a tree. One of them was busy eating the fruits—bitter fruits of life. The other bird was calm, eating nothing. Both of them were friends and looked alike. Both of them clasped the branch of the tree. Yet their nature was different. One of them, the jivâtman was busy tasting the bitter and sometimes the sweet fruits of life. The Paramâtman, the other bird, sitting higher is calm in its resplendent glorious Self. Swamiji says, gradually the busy bird started hopping towards the calm, serene, majestic bird. And one day it had disappeared into the other. That is, the jivâtman gradually became nearer and nearer the Paramâtman. They become one.

This is brahmajñāna about which Vedānta tells us again and again through various imageries. We must not forget that the jivātman is essentially the same as paramātman.

Again, the Upanishads do not tell us always about Advaita. There are dualistic passages in the Upanishads as well. The Upanishads thus have all streams of thought—Dvaita (dualism), Vishishtādvaita (qualified monism) and Advaita (Monism).

For instance, Bhakti-Yoga tells us about devotion. Swamiji has discussed the sublime passage of the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad that tells us about the unity of the Self. In the passage which I have referred to a little earlier, he said: Can't you see the wonderful flow of devotion, of love, which engulfs a person who sees the ātman everywhere? As he sees the same ātman everywhere, he feels the welling-up of compassion within. As he feels his self in all, he wants to have all as his very own. None of them are strangers to him anymore. He wants to serve them. It is thus that Swami Vivekananda has discussed 'Practical Vedānta' in this age. The Vedānta which remained confined in the dense forests, the books of the Brahmins, and the monasteries of sadhus have been brought to our everyday life. This life-giving message is not theoretical merely, as we have pointed out earlier.

Western historians have again and again blamed Indians for their passionate attachment to religion. But, when Swamiji was returning from the West, someone asked, 'How do you feel Swamiji after four years of life in the West?' Swamiji replied, 'India was holy to me earlier, but now every dust of it is holy to me.' India was punyabhumi (holy land) to him. Returning from the West, in a wonderful historical analysis, he pointed out that every nation in the world has some prime area of concern. The English have justice, the French have their love for liberty, and in India we have dharma. Dharma is what holds us.

Swamiji said, all reforms in India must come through dharma. In sharp contrast to what the Western historians have claimed, he said; who said that it was this devotion to the Vedic dharma that led to our decline? The decline came because people had forgotten over time what real religion was all about. Dharma had been confined in the cooking pots, had been restricted to achāra and vichāra, some local rites and small areas of worship. Swamiji argued that people had forgotten the sublime message of the Vedānta, great life-giving call of the Vedānta.

Therefore Swamiji exhorted us to go back to the Upanishads, to the great lives of Nachiketā and Yājñavalkya and listen to the 'Song Celestial', ie the Gītā, which has its roots in the Upanishads. Swamiji would say: Attend to the call 'I am Brahman, I am Brahman'. Meditate on its truth day and night. There would be various obstacles in the way, there would be vikshepa or distractions. Remove them forcibly and tell yourselves—you are strong, you are sinless, you are the Soul Immortal. Remove all thoughts of duality. Remove all thoughts of limitation. Remove all sorts of past sins. Remove all old samskāras (tendencies). Yes, earlier lives, earlier actions have been there. Earlier samskāras have been there. But today I have listened to the words of the Upanishads, the great teachings of the Upanishads. So I should not look back anymore. I must delve deep into the nectarine ocean of immortality.

Sri Ramakrishna had once asked young Narendranath: Naren, if you have a pitcher of amrita, where would you sit and drink the nectar? Young Narendra who used to go to the Brahmo-Samaj, with his intellectual rationality gave a cautious reply. He said he would sit at the corner of the pitcher. Sri Ramakrishna asked, 'Why?' Narendra said, 'Because, if I dip too much, I may get drowned.' Sri Ramakrishna laughed and said, 'Don't be afraid. This is the pitcher of immortality; one who sinks there, doesn't die. He or she becomes immortal.'

The Upanishads thus preach to us the message of immortality. It was Swami Vivekananda, who in this age carried the torch, the flame of the Upanishads. Just as Bhagirath had brought down the Ganga from the locks of Mahādeva into the plains, Swamiji in this age has brought the Upanishads down to

all of us. People, who do not know the intricacies of the scriptures, but want to lead a blessed life, a life of light and wisdom, should read Swamiji's Complete Works. May Swamiji enlighten us and open our eyes so that we can comprehend the real meaning of the Upanishads.

* This article is the edited version of the Mina-Kamal Memorial Lecture Swami Tyagarupananda, Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math, delivered at the Institute on 4 August 2006.