

THE PERENNIAL FRESHNESS OF THE UPANISHADS

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Professor S. S. Raghavachar, who retired after long and meritorious service as Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Mysore, was invited to deliver late Professor N. A. Nikam Memorial Address' in November, 1980.

He spoke on the Upanishads which form the fundamental basis of the Hindu religion and philosophy. Despite their age and antiquity the principal Upanishads, of which there are ten in number, offer a perennial fount of fresh thought which is the subject matter of this address.

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THE PERENNIAL FRESHNESS OF THE UPANISHADS

Professor S. S. RAGHAVACHAR

-I-

In the history of western thought, the tradition of Idealistic Philosophy has come to be named 'the Perennial Philosophy', both in technical treatises and popular writings. It is this line of philosophical thinking that is recorded in all the requisite majesty in the Upanishads. Among the Upanishads, which are many, the most ancient ones, about ten in number reach the highest level of vision, while the later ones descend to more popular and sectarian modes of thought. These ancient Upanishads may be taken as representing Perennial Philosophy at its best. All subsequent philosophizing in Indian culture are attempts, with varying degrees of success, to recapture and articulate in some kind of scholastic order their fundamental insights. What I propose to dwell on is not the Perennial Philosophy as such, which has been brilliantly presented by Prof. N. A. Nikam, but its inexhaustible freshness which survives all the subsequent systematizing interpretation. It is a genuine paradox that these most ancient works of Vedanta carry imports that surpass in their altitudes and aspirations, all that later thinking has built up through exhausting labour on their foundation. The Upanishads thus possess a wondrous novelty, and it is a pleasure to contemplate on this freshness which I regard as perennial.

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I may permit myself the liberty of indicating the salient points at which the Upanishads manifest their openness to new approaches and their refusal to be confined to forms of religion and philosophy established in the history of Indian thought. It is interesting to watch how the early Vedic outlook gets imperceptibly but surely superceded. The Mundaka and Chandogya clearly point to the spiritual inadequacy of the mere learning of the Vedas. The Brihadaranayaka lays down the cardinal virtues of Dharma, Dana and Daya, which seem to transcend the ritualistic prescriptions of the old ethos. The Creator is said to have been dissatisfied with the creation of the principal divisions of society but seems to have been gratified by the setting up of the ideals of Dharma and Satya. The Gods that absorbed all the attention of the pious of the Vedic age are brought down to an inferior and derivative status of power in the Kena Upanishad. The cult of rituals is decried in the Mundaka Upanishad as "Weak Boats". Instances can be multiplied to show how the world-and-life outlook of the preceding age is subjected to a critical supercession in the Upanishads.

-III-

At the same time we can see that the Upanishads are not petrified in the shape of the later theological structures of thought. The mythological Hinduism with its cults of Vishnu, Shiva and Sakti is not yet born. The well-formed caste system as codified in the Dharma Sastra literature is yet to emerge. Preceptors of great stature are found in castes other than that of the priests; such are Janaka, Ajatasatru and Aswapati. There are clear mentions of Brahma-vadins among women. Social fluidity and valuation of truth from all sources are yet possibilities in this age of spiritual voyage. In short, the elaborate and finished mythologies and theologies of the classical puranic Hinduism are still things of the future for the

Upanishads, There is thus a delightful freedom in the spiritual atmosphere of the Upanishads, for which the old order of thought is somewhat dead and the new order of post-Vedic Hinduism is yet to be born. Often we hear of the unsystematic character of the teachings of the Upanishads. The point may be conceded in so far as they portray a spirit that is free from the older and later organizations of doctrinal and practical precepts.

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We can go beyond this negative demarcation of the Upanishadic thinking. The fundamental characteristic of the dialogues in the major Upanishads is that they portray a fervent and insatiable quest of the spirit. They are neither hymns nor the transmissions of ready-made doctrines. It is needless to say that they are not records of pointless curiosity with no depth of commitment to the inquiry. In fact, as one Upanishad puts it, they are for one who has conquered evil, enjoys the right tranquility of mind and is given to contemplation (Katha). The whole soul of the seeker is concentrated, as it were, in the quest. The atmosphere of the Upanishads is in general surcharged with a passionate thirst for knowledge and we are not treated to any sophistry. The spirit of quest runs through all the Upanishads that matter and, what is more, it remains as a part of their very conclusions. A rough idea of the questions that figure in the Upanishads may illustrate this characterization. The Isavasya, no doubt, opens with a metaphysical affirmation and follows it with an equally prominent gospel for action. But it ends with a sublime prayer for revelation, a more abundant revelation. The Kena is full of questions and it seeks to discover not the objects of knowledge but the foundation and presupposition of knowledge and life itself. The search for the root of experience is its dominant concern. The Katha Upanishad is an elaborate and grand unfoldment of the answer to the question about the core and destiny of human personality in terms of matter and spirit, of time and eternity. The entire Mundaka Upanishad is in answer to the enquiry concerning the ultimate truth that comprehends all truths. The implication of the enquiry is worked out and it is met in all requisite fullness and poetic grandeur. Mandukya is an exploration into the modes of consciousness and culminates in an enunciation of the unspeakable depths of the principle of consciousness itself. The Aitareya engages itself in discerning the correspondence between Macrocosm and Microcosm without any pretensions to cosmological rigidity and ends in the declaration that Brahman or the Supreme Reality is of the nature of Supreme Consciousness. The finite spirit seeking enlightenment finds its consummation in the infinite and all-enfolding spirit. The Taithiriya Upanishad after significant preliminaries presents the search for Brahman, the Infinite Reality — which only could bring satiation to the infinite quest of man — through various levels of progress and ends in the intuition of the infinite as infinite joy, which passes beyond thought and words. The final note is one of joyful wonder. The exploration does not close but opens up endless vistas. In Prof. Nikam's words, this is rational scepticism combined with rational diligence. The Chandogya is one of the greatest Upanishads. Its summit dialogues concern three questions.

The first question is:

“ What is that by understanding which one understands everything ? ” The question, it may be noticed, is one that marks out the distinctive scope of philosophy, for philosophy is an endeavor after a synoptic insight to reality. The knowledge that is to be sought after is not a summation of all the different spheres of knowledge but an approach to the fundamentals of knowing and the basic principle of all existence.

The second question is:

“ What is that by attaining which one has attained everything worthy ? ” This ideal the

Upanishad designates as ' Bhuman', the ' Immense ' or the ' Abundant in which all the aspirations and values are fulfilled. The Upanishad categorically pronounces that there is no joy in the finite and trivial, ' Nalpe sukhamasti '.

The third question is:

“ What is there in the inmost recess of the heart ? ” Therein man should seek the final essence of reality. This course of inquiry is named 'Dharavidya the Science of the Subtle The inmost reality is Brahman, with all the infinitude of its perfections. Reaching out to it, the human soul is said to attain its proper stature.

The substantial dialogues of Chandogya are taken up by these primordial questions of philosophy.

The Prasna Upanishad, as its name itself signifies, is a search for answers to six questions by six sages and the preceptor makes an honest and unpretentious attempt to offer answers to them.

The Brihadaranyaka is the biggest and perhaps the greatest Upanishad and its central figure is Sage Yajnavalkya. He is pictured in the text as a philosophical hero. All the great dialogues in the Upanishad consist of his wise and profound answers to a multitude of questions. The dialogues are to be viewed as forming three groups. The first group of two — which are the same but with minor variations — contains Yajnavalkya's discourses in answering the questions of his philosophically inclined wife, Maitreyi. She is an alert listener and does not take the teachings uncritically. The second group consists of Yajnavalkya's replies to the great questions raised by the other distinguished sages assembled in the court of Janaka, a king-philosopher. The third group made up of a single dialogue is taken up by Yajnavalkya's long discourse to King Janaka himself in answer to his very fundamental questions. Almost all the central questions of philosophy are comprehended in the dialogues of Yajnavalkya.

This brief survey of the methods of inquiry in the principal Upanishads confirms the proposition that the moving spirit in them is that of a free and boundless quest for absolute truth and absolute value. In one word, we may characterize the Upanishads as a quest after the Infinite. The attitude of inquiry keeps alive their freshness, especially as the questions asked spring from the depths of the human spirit in all ages and among all the peoples of the world, in so far as they are reflective.

-V-

While such is the spirit and temper of the Upanishads, we can go forward to their philosophical affirmations. The entire philosophy of the Upanishads centres round the concept of a transcendent Reality named Brahman. The term Brahman is strictly connotative and it signifies infinite being. The Upanishads exalt it beyond the empirical world of the mundane universe of nature and the finite minds such as we are. It is declared to be one and indivisible. Further, it is also affirmed as spiritual, of the nature of consciousness. The concept of this supreme spirit is the central doctrine of the Upanishads and it is variously designated as Atman, Paramatman, Purusha, Uttama Purusha, Sat or simply Jyoti. The very transcendence ascribed to it renders it an entity of surpassing wonder. With such a principle at the heart of their conception the Upanishads always carry a freshness and novelty of import, for they depart radically from the obvious, the familiar and the conventional, the finite manifold of temporal existence. Their very remoteness from the passing trivialities of the empirical order invest them with a fascinating mysteriousness not to be compassed by our habitual understanding. By their countless paradoxes the Upanishads keep up their uncomprehended

grandeur. They further maintain that the unawareness of this reality is the basis of all evil and to seek it by a contemplative endeavour is to reach fullness of life. The transcendent is thus invested with Supreme Value and the power of imparting perfection, whose other name is Ananda. The Upanishads are firm and clear in this orientation.

-VI-

There is a further point of marvellousness, 'ascharya in the conception of Brahman. It is not a sheer 'Other a surplus category added to the stock of empirical categories, such as Jiva and Jagat, going beyond them in every significant sense. On the contrary, it is their immanent ground, permeating soul, from which they spring into being, in which they exercise their functions whatever they be and to which they return in their states of inoperativeness. Whatever worth they acquire is in strict consequence of the presence of Brahman in them. In reality Brahman is the inner substance of the entire realm of existence. Transcendence would end in a stark dualism, were it not for this, sustaining immanence of the super-cosmic supreme in the otherwise meaning-less and unaccountable world order. The Cosmos is taken up and transmuted into a self-expression of the Absolute in this conception. This is the cardinal point in the declarations such as 'Sarvam Khalu Idam Brahma', 'Purusha Eva Idam Sarvam' and 'Atmaiva Idam Sarvam' As the Taittiriya Upanishad has it, the highest principle of the metaphysical hierarchy is the pervasive substratum of all the lower orders of existence.

The marvellousness of the transcendent supreme over-flows and covers the totality of the cosmic order with its own hues and fragrance, sublime and fascinating. There is nothing in existence, which cannot transport into raptures its onlooker by virtue of its divine content. All that the Gita glories in, in its theory of Vibhuti, is anticipated in principle in the Upanishadic doctrine of Brahman's immanence. The first and greatest sentence of Isavasya communicates this illuminating perception of the Upanishadic seers.

The immanence of the transcendent Brahman seems to stand as the fundamental and comprehensive metaphysical proposition of the Upanishads. It sweeps away, as it were, the notion of the insignificant in the picture of reality, as nothing is bereft of the inward light and glory of Brahman. There is no vacuous existence. All is packed with value, the value that flows out of the source of all value. The consciousness that is awake to this ultimate position cannot but revel in the exuberance of spirit, which comes of the elimination of the insignificant in life.

It is to be remarked at this stage that the wonder and freshness of the Upanishadic vision is not exhaustively captured in any one of the Vedantic systems which purport to set forth in an orderly form the teachings of the Upanishads. It looks as if the inspiration of these originals outruns the later formulations. This is a bold assertion that needs some measure of substantiation. All these systems take their basic framework from the Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana. The Sutras are designed to resolve the apparent contradictions and remove the ambiguities in certain passages in the Upanishads. They intend to give a coherent and clear shape to the doctrines of the basic texts. In addition they offer a dialectical defence of the resulting philosophy. Much that is non- controversial and enjoys luminous clarity is left out in the reconsideration. This selective character of the dialectical formulation is amply demonstrated in the form of practically every Adhikarana or topical section of the Brahma sutra, wherein a doubt is presented, a *prima facie* view is then stated and then a decisive conclusion is argued out. This procedural structure cannot compress within itself all that is of significance in the body of the Upanishadic vision of Reality. The design of the Brahma sutra is, therefore, such that it cannot include within itself the total import. Following up this finding, we can take a cursory view of the representative systems to see if they exhaust all

that the Upanishads signify and if they do not contain strands of thought not contemplated in them. For instance, the bifurcation between Saguna Brahman, the God of Theism, and Nirguna Brahman, the Absolute, is hardly to be found in decisive terms in any of the Upanishads. The distinction is vital for the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara. In the same way, the unreality of the Cosmic manifold is nowhere set down with all the desired clarity and firmness. But Advaitic insistence on the unity of Ultimate Reality is a faithful derivation from the Upanishads. The Theistic Schools such as Visistadvaita and Dvaita seem to reflect correctly the immanence of the transcendent God-head, without the controversial postulates of the Nirguna Brahman and Maya; but charmed by the personalistic conception of Brahman, they easily glide in the hands of lesser exponents into anthropomorphism. The right balance between Divine Supremacy and Divine accessibility is not always consistently maintained. In both the trends the finished Vedantic schools seem to suffer from tight formulations hardly agreeing with the almost formless intuitions of the Upanishadic seers. While Advaita is abstract with a vengeance, as it were, the theistic Bhakti versions of Vedanta sometimes humanise the Divine at considerable philosophical cost. Later Buddhism seems to get re-born somewhat in Advaita, and the Epics and Puranas mould the Theistic Schools of Vedanta into theological shapes. The consequence is that the original vastness and openness of conception fade out. Frigidity of thought, Buddhistic or Purnic, invades Vedanta and robs it of its original adventurousness and creativity of exploration. The Upanishadic spirit is one of commitment without dogmatism. But in historical Vedanta the two go together. Hence we can hazard saying that the Upanishads have a primeval freshness outstepping the bounds of the system-builders.

It is of course arguable that the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara is a valid elaboration of the Monism of the Upanishads and the theologies of the Theistic Schools are capable of a richly symbolic interpretation. Even conceding these plausible lines of vindication the general observation can stand. The Upanishads are like the Purusha of the Purusha Sukta, only one quarter of His glory forming the universe of ours, and three other quarters going beyond it. Analogously a part of their import gets systematised in the historical schools of interpretation and a vastly greater range of it remain unrepresented in their scholastic formulation. The invocatory verse saying that when the Infinite is taken out of the Infinite, what remains also is Infinite, may be stretched to apply to the present situation also. After the schools are allowed to have their full say, there still remains an immensity in the Upanishads unencompassed in them. The greater commentators are aware of the limitation of their fixation of the meaning of the Upanishads. For instance, Shankara, while opening his commentary on the Katha Upanishad, makes the noble statement: Yadaprati- bhanam Vachakshmahe. The freshness and the mysterious depths of the Upanishads stand un- diminished and they outlast the utmost exegetical conceptualization. Such inexhaustibility of content is the test of authentic, revelation.

-VIII-

The Upanishads constitute a body of revelations and contain a fairly distinguishable theory of knowledge. This theory enables us to make out the pathway to the apprehension of Brahman, their supreme point of concern.

They propound the basic Vedantic view that knowledge is the single road to the attainment of self-perfection in Brahman. The knowledge is not obtainable from sense-perception or even ratiocination based thereon: Nasandrashetishtati Rupamasya, Nachakahusha Pashyati Kashchi- dainam — Naishatarkenamati Rasaneya. Knowledge of the transcendent supreme is to be acquired through a transcendent source. That source is

specified as Veda: Navedavinamanute kambrah- mamtam. The position so enunciated implied that the sphere of Vedic knowledge ought to concern itself with the super-sensible realm of existence. This principle is standardised by later theorists in the dictum ‘ Apraptehi Sastram Arthavat’. This adjustment of jurisdiction resolves in anticipation all possible conflicts between Vedantic wisdom and empirical knowledge. Such an autonomy secures for the revelation in question uniqueness and the consequent element of mystery which cannot be borne out by the progress of secular science.

But the comprehension of the meaning of revelation must go forward and must issue in the conviction that the teaching of the scripture is rational and logically sound. Hence the Upanishads advocate the necessity for ‘Manana reflection after ‘Sravana’ devout reception of the revelation; what is received must be pondered over and must be found logically compelling. There are four lines of reflection that could compel the acceptance of the received contents of revelation. In the first place the contents must be internally self-consistent The scripture should not say and unsay the same thing. In the second place it should not be such as to be stultified by empirical knowledge or be such as to seek to stultify it. Thirdly, it should be such that it brings about an integration and organic coherence of the entire realm of human understanding. It should be a harmonizing supplement to the rest of knowledge. What would remain a chaos of fragments of uncoordinating information should be brought to a unified structure of insight by revelation. Lastly, any intellectual endeavour to harmonize and explain the data of experience, independent of the thesis of revelation, must be exhibited as untenable. The negation of the opposite standpoints is one of the negative factors reinforcing the affirmation of the scripture. ‘Manana in this comprehensive form confirms the deliverance of revelation. This knowledge emerging as reasoned conviction is no final stage of the process. The Upanishads advocate a third stage called ‘Vijnana ’ or ‘ Nididhyasana This can be rendered as meditation or contemplation, dwelling internally on the truth intellectually established by the previous stages. The Upanishads declare that this leads to what is called ‘ Darsana ’ or direct intuitive vision of the Supreme Reality, which is the ultimate phase of the search for truth. Attainment of this marks the final cessation of ignorance and all the evils accruing from that basic flaw. This is bliss and freedom. The Upanishads — particularly Mundaka and Katha — assert that this fulfilment is not an achievement on the part of the aspirant but a gift of divine grace. It is a gracious self-revelation of the Supreme, What starts with the initial revelation by way of scripture culminates in this ultimate revelation, immediate and object generated. This is the last and complete miracle in the spiritual voyage of discovery. The element of mystery and wonder crowns the human effort, with all the possibility of a vaster and more stunning novelty in the experience. If the words carrying the tidings of Brahman were to thrill and enchant the recipient, the direct self-disclosure of the Supreme Spirit must surely be an unspeakably profounder and vaster thrill and enchantment to the enraptured spectator.

By such a promise of a fulfilment beyond themselves, the Upanishads keep alive, rather enhance and intensify, zestful hope and the excitement of the soul’s further adventure. There is no termination of the spiritual quest and every conquest seems to open up powers and prospects of a greater conquest.

-IX-

Prof. Nikam with his deceptive brevity, packs this great discovery of the Upanishads into one of his memorable aphorisms: “The higher we go in our knowledge, the higher we can go There are three great Upanishads which record failure of knowledge at the summit of the vision of Absolute. The Taittiriya has the dictum twice that words and thought return baffled

by the ecstatic experience of Brahman. The Kena propounds the paradox that he who confesses he does not know, knows. The Supreme is known by the unknowing and is unknown to the knowing. The Brihadaranayaka has the formula 'Neti, Neti' five times in the course of its vast progression of enlightened mysticism. This is no negation in reality, no anguish of dark blankness but a triumphant glimpse of what surpasses the achieved comprehension. We have here no negative infinite, but the infinite of abundance. It is a knowing that stretches beyond the known. The right name for this state of consciousness is wonder, Supreme Wonder. The fostering of this Ultimate Wonder is the perennial freshness of the Upanishads. Their fundamental injunction is 'Seek Vijignayasatva, 'Vignayapragnyamsarvita'. After understanding, proceed towards a larger understanding. 'Tadanveshvavyam Tadvavijignanitavyam'. It has to be sought, it has to be inquired into'.
