



## **THE CHHANDOGYA UPANISHAD**

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The Upanishads are mainly meditations intended to act as correctives to the binding effects that are produced by the phenomena of natural processes. While what we call a natural process subjects us to its own laws, these laws can be overcome and their imposition upon the individual can be counteracted by techniques of meditation. The philosophy of the Upanishads is that it is an ignorance of the way in which the Universe works that binds the individual to *samsara*—the series of births and deaths. Our sorrows are, in a way, created by our own selves, because they follow as a consequence of our not abiding by the law of the universe. The affirmation of a reality independent of what really is, is called the ego. That is the centre of personality. This affirmation of individuality, *jivatva*, personality, or something separate from the organic structure of creation, is the cause of the sorrow or the suffering of the *jiva*, the individual manifested due to the affirmation of the ego. Births and deaths are the punishments, as it were, meted out to the individual in order that it may be reformed in the field of experience of the world for the purpose of enabling it to return to the normal state of consciousness which is universality of being, of which it is deprived at present due to the ignorance of its connection with the universe and a false notion that it has about its own self that it has an independence of its own.

The sections of the Chhandogya Upanishad, which we are going to study, are a gradational ascent of knowledge for the purpose of meditations which lift us above the phenomena of ordinary experience, such as birth and death and bondage of every kind, and point to the methods of transcending all sorrow, whatever be its nature, and regaining the originality of being. The various sections that follow are a systematic teaching on what we may call Adhyatma-Vidya, or Atma-Vidya, a knowledge of the ultimate Self, which is the only remedy for the malady of empirical existence.

This section which we are about to commence, is a treatise on a particular method of meditation called Panchagni-Vidya, the knowledge of the Five Fires, by which the Upanishad means the various processes of manifestation, or, we may say, evolution, it being one's bondage and the way in which the cycle of

transmigration revolves. There is a coming and going, descending and ascending in this *samsara-chakra*, or the revolving wheel of bondage. How it happens, and how one can be free from it, what are the methods to be employed for the purpose of freeing oneself from the clutches of this involuntary law that imposes itself upon us and binds us to its own mandate so that we do not seem to have any say in the matter of births and deaths or even the experiences that we have to pass through—these are our themes. The law of the universe is so vastly spread in its magnitude that it weighs heavy upon us when it is not followed. This question of the bondage of the soul brought about by its own ignorance, and the various remedies therefore, are discussed in the various sections.

While the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is more transcendent in its approach and provides techniques of meditation which are mostly above the reaches of the ordinary mind, the Chhandogya Upanishad takes us along the path of ordinary experience, and then, finally, lifts us above into the empyrean of supreme transcendence. Often, scholars have held the opinion that the Brihadaranyaka is *aprapancha* in its view and the Chhandogya is *saprapancha*, which means to say that the Brihadaranyaka concerns itself with the ultimate Absolute and every solution is from the point of view of the Absolute only. So, it has taken the final step in setting about finding a remedy for the problems of life, while the normal man has also been taken into consideration in the Chhandogya, though the ultimate aim is the same, here also. Thus, the Brihadaranyaka and the Chhandogya form, in a way, complementary aspects of a single study.

### **THE COURSE OF THE SOUL AFTER DEATH**

The Panchagni-Vidya, to which reference has been made, is a particular type of knowledge, or meditation, which is introduced to know the inner meaning of the common phenomenon of birth and death. What we experience in normal life is only the effect of certain causes which are invisible to the eyes. We see people being born and people dying, but we do not know why people are born and why people die. The causes are unknown to us. What is it that compels a person to be born and what is it that forces him to die? We know very well, we have no say in either of these ways. We cannot say this or that in respect of these processes. Nor is there any adequate knowledge of the secret of one's own experiences. Birth, death and the experiences in life are apparently effects produced upon us by causes of which we seem to have no knowledge. The Upanishad, in these meditations, tries to introduce us into a new type of knowledge which is the solution to the sorrows that are incumbent upon being subject to the laws of this natural phenomenon.

In this connection, the Upanishad commences with a story. There was a student named Svetaketu who was the son of sage Uddalaka. This student was well-read and finely educated. He was so confident about his knowledge that he used to parade his learning and calibre in the midst of all learned people, have discussions in courts of kings etc., and was very reputed for his great educational gift. This boy went, by chance, to the court of the king called Pravahana Jaivali, a noble emperor. The moment the boy arrived at the court, the king received him with respect, and after offering him the requisite hospitality becoming of a

Brahmin boy well-versed in the Vedas and all the branches of learning, the king put a question to the boy.

“Are you well educated? Have you studied? Is your education complete? Has your father instructed you?” The boy said, “Yes, my education is over, and I am well-read.”

Then the king put some questions. “Naturally, you are a well-informed person so as to be able to answer any pose. You are proficient in every branch of learning.” That the boy professed to be, that he would be able to answer any question. Then the king posed five questions.

The first question was: “Do you know where people go after they depart from this world? When people die, where do they go? Do you know the answer to this question, my dear boy?” The boy said, “I do not know. I cannot answer this question.” Then the king asked another question, “Do you know wherefrom people come when they are reborn into this world?” The boy said, “I do not know this also.” “Do you know, have you any idea of the paths along which the soul ascends, the paths being known as the *devayana* and the *pitriyana*? Do you know the difference between these two paths? Why is the one distinct from the other?” The boy said, “I do not know the answer to this question also.”

Then the fourth question: “Why is it that the yonder world is not filled with people and overflowing? Always, the world is able to contain people and it is never flooded with them. What is the reason for this?” “This, also, I do not know.” Now the fifth question: “Do you know what are the five oblations that are offered and how the fifth oblation as liquid becomes a human being?” “This, too, I do not know,” said the boy.

Then, the king said, “Why did you say that you are instructed and well-read? How is it possible for one to regard oneself as properly educated if one cannot answer even these questions? What made you think that you are educated? What is it that your father taught you if he has not told you these things?” The boy was humbled, his pride vanished, he began to realise that there are things which he could not understand. His education was not complete. This was the first time that he was taken aback from the conviction that he knew everything.

Though the king asked him to stay, he ran in agony back to his father. He did not stay in the palace, and in the intensity of discomfiture he rushed to the father and cried out, “How is it that you told me once that I have been instructed and well-educated, and that I have been informed in every branch of learning? This is what you told me one day. You told me that there is nothing more for me to learn, that I have completed my education.” The father replied, “Yes, what about it?” “No,” retorted the boy. “It is not like that. This fellow of a king put me some questions and I could not answer even one. Not properly educating me, you merely told me that I am accomplished.” “What are the questions?” the father asked. The boy repeated all the five questions. “These are the five questions that were put to me by the king. Now, what is the answer to these questions?” he asked the father. The father said, “If I knew the answers to these questions, naturally I would have taught them to you. I myself do not know what these mean. I have taught you

what I knew, and these are things which are beyond myself, also. I have never heard of these things. So, how is it possible for me to give a reply to this query? Let us both go as students before the king. This is the only alternative left to us. We can learn this knowledge from the king himself. We have to go as humble students." The boy said, "You yourself may go, I am not coming." He was so ashamed that he would not like to show his face before the king, again. And so, the father went; the boy did not go.

The father humbly went to the court of the king. The king, of course, received the great Brahmin with high honour, with great respect and showed the required hospitality. Gautama stayed in the palace, for the night. The next morning, when the king came to the court, in the assembly, to give audience, the Brahmin also went there. The king said: "Revered one, ask for anything which is of this world; any material gain, any amount of wealth, whatever you need for your maintenance. Ask for it, and I am ready to give it to you. Anything that pertains to this world, anything that is human, anything that is material,—ask for such a boon and I shall give it as a gift." The Brahmin replied: "By God's grace I have enough of material wealth. I do not need anything of this world. You may keep this wealth for yourself. I do not require this wealth, but do give me the reply to the questions you put before my son. I have come to you for knowledge, not for wealth, not for any material gift which you are so kindly offering to me and which I do not need. But I want the wisdom of the questions which you posed before my son, and which he could not answer."

The king was perplexed; he was disturbed in his mind when the Brahmin spoke thus. He did not know what to say, because it is difficult suddenly to impart knowledge to a person the moment he asks for it. That is the procedure of any teacher. This is the position of the imparting of knowledge. Also, Kshatriyas do not seek Brahmins to be their pupils. That was the ancient custom. The king was a Kshatriya and now the student here is a Brahmin. Brahmins teach Kshatriyas; Kshatriyas do not teach Brahmins. So, under those circumstances, the king did not know what to tell this Brahmin. He was a little bit concerned in his mind and was not sure as to what to tell him.

What the king could tell the Brahmin then was just this: "You stay here for some time. We shall think about it." It is believed that he was asked to stay, perhaps, for a year. That is what the tradition makes out. The Brahmin stayed there as a preparatory austerity for the reception of this knowledge. Thereafter, the king said one day: "You ask me to give you the knowledge of the things which have been set apart as a secret by the Kshatriyas up to this time. It has never gone to the circle of Brahmins till today. But, now the time has come for it to go out of the circle of Kshatriyas, because you have come to me as a student and you want this knowledge. Till now, because of this secret of knowledge which the kings held, they were predominant everywhere. They could rule over everybody due to the power that they wielded by this knowledge, and now you want to get this secret out of me." Anyhow, the king was ready, he was not reluctant; he was prepared to share this knowledge with the Brahmin, the elderly man who came as a humble student in the ordinary tradition of obedience and humility. And to him the king spoke the great truth.

Now comes the actual answer which follows in respect of every one of the questions which the king put to the boy. These answers which the king gives are certain meditations. They are processes of the attunement of the mind to higher levels of being. They are called *vidyas* because they are specific types of knowledge. *Vidya* also means a meditation, a contemplation. A higher knowledge is called *vidya*, something distinct from ordinary knowledge, scientific or artistic knowledge, and the like.

The superiority of the knowledge arises on account of the fact of its being more inclusive in its character than all the other known branches of learning. Every form of learning in this world is isolated in the sense that it bears no connection to the other branches of learning. A person who is proficient in one branch need not be proficient in another, and, therefore, there is a limitedness of such knowledge. Our knowledge is finite; it is not all-comprehensive. Whatever be the education of a person, he cannot become all-knowing. There is something which he does not know, which keeps him subject to laws of which he has no knowledge. What binds us is the ignorance of something which exists somewhere, but about which we have no information whatsoever. Wherever there is ignorance, there is also bondage in respect of that subject or that circumstance. When we have knowledge of a thing, we are not bound to that thing, we have a control over that thing. The greater is the knowledge that we have about anything, the greater also is the capacity we have in making it subservient to our own selves. But, the more is the ignorance we have about a thing, the more are we subservient to its laws. The world binds us; the law of gravitation limits us; the law of Nature restricts us, because we do not have an adequate knowledge of these laws. We do not know how they operate and why it is that we have been made subject to these laws. What is wrong with us? We do not know this, though we know that there is something fundamentally wrong with every one of us, on account of which the whole world keeps us in subjection. We are under the thumb of every law in the world. The reason is that we are apparently outside the realm of the operation of this law. We are like exiles cast out into the winds, and the law set around our necks, as it were, compels us to follow its dictates. We cannot overcome the law of gravitation, to give only one instance. We are slaves of this law. We can fall down and we can break our legs; we can get drowned; we can be burnt; anything can happen to us. Our very life on earth is based on and is decided by that law. But this happens on account of certain patent limitations in our life. There is some sort of a finitude in our own bodies and the entire personality of ours. Our fate is the same in respect of any law that operates anywhere. We cannot think things which are not purely sensory or physical; we cannot visualise things which are super-physical; we cannot understand any aspect of reality which is not in space, which is not in time and which is not casually related. And outside the realm of our own organic personality, we cannot have a real knowledge. We are finites, we are bound, we are limited in every way.

The processes of birth and death, again, are to be explained from this point of view. There is some law which works in some peculiar manner on account of which we are compelled to follow this course known as transmigration. Is anyone prepared to die? But we have no say in the matter. We will die one day or the

other. But why should we die? Who tells you that you must die? No one knows this. And if somebody is born, well, it is doubtful if anyone is born due to the personal wish of anyone. There is some force working behind. So is the case with every kind of experience through which we pass. We do not know what will happen to us tomorrow. So much is our ignorance, so that it appears that we are utterly humiliated beings, shamefaced in every way, ignorant to the core and completely subject to the law of forces of which we have absolutely no knowledge.

Now, the Panchagni-Vidya is a kind of remedy prescribed by way of a meditation which is regarded as a great secret by the Upanishadic teachers. Even if you hear it being expounded once, you will not be able to understand much out of it. It does not mean that you will get out of the law of Nature merely by listening to what the king appeared to have said, because they are secrets bound up with one's own personal life. To us, they are only theoretical information like the existence of a fourth dimension etc. as propounded by physics. You may hear it a hundred times, but you are not going to enter it for reasons obvious. Likewise is this Panchagni-Vidya, or even the greater still Vaishvanara-Vidya, which will follow. They will remain as a mere doctrine and exposition. To the Upanishads, knowledge is the same as being. It is practice. A thing that you live in your own personal life is true knowledge, and apart from the fact that it has to be a part of your being, it is also to be comprehensive. It should not exclude any reality or any aspect of manifestation. These two conditions have to be fulfilled. Neither can we be confident that some aspect of reality is not excluded from our purview, nor are we sure that this knowledge can become a part of our vitals. So, they will remain a mere theorem in the books. However, we can have an outline of the knowledge which the great king imparted to the circle of Brahmins by way of this initiation called the knowledge of the Panchagni-Vidya.

As I mentioned, *vidya* means knowledge, meditation, a comprehensive insight into the nature of the reality behind any phenomenon. Now, what are these phenomena? The insight into which the Upanishad here leads us is the phenomenon of the descent of souls from the other regions into this world and the phenomenon of the ascent of souls from this region to the higher ones,—how souls descend and how souls ascend. When we consider these processes as mere events among many others, they exert a binding influence upon us. You know people are born; you know people die. This much of knowledge we do have. And, perhaps, we have also a knowledge that certain actions that we perform are responsible for our births and deaths and our experiences in life. The good that we do brings good experiences, the pleasant ones; and the bad ones produce contrary results. This much of information we have gathered by study, hearing etc. But this is not the knowledge that will liberate us.

The Five Fires, called the *Panchagnis*, mentioned here, are not actually fires in the physical sense. They are meditational techniques. The Fire, here, is symbolic of a sacrifice which one performs through contemplation. How are these sacrifices performed visibly with the traditional sense of rituals? There is a sacrificial ground; there is a sacred altar in which the holy oblations are offered through the instrumentality of the sacred fire. There is the blazing fire flaming forth from the altar in the holy atmosphere of the sacrifice. And there is a

substance that is offered, the sacrament. And certain ideas are entertained in the mind of the *yajamana* or the performer of the sacrifice, which are conveyed through the recitation of certain *mantras*. The *mantras* that are chanted or recited, in the performance of the *yajna*, or the sacrifice, are the sacred intentions of the performer expressed in language. This is the methodology of the performance of a sacrifice usually. The offerings are made to certain deities. The invocation of a particular celestial, a god, or a deity is the intention behind the performance of the sacrifice. Now, the Upanishad here tells us that the whole universal activity of creation may be conceived as such a kind of sacrifice—*yajna*.

If we are unable to conceive the internal connection and the pros and cons and the relative relationships involved in a particular process of creation, we would not be free from the law of subjection to these forces which are responsible for this creation. Again, unless we have a practical living knowledge of the various factors that are involved in the process of manifestation, or creation, we cannot be free from the law of manifestation. Births and deaths are parts of the universal process. What we call the universal process of manifestation is inclusive of every event that takes place anywhere, in any manner, including the experiences through which we are passing here in life.

The point that the Upanishad would make out is that no event or no experience can be isolated from other experiences. Just as every performance or every item of ritual in a sacrifice is connected to every other item, the whole *yajna*, or the sacrifice is a single comprehensive act of which the various items are only parts internally connected, the whole universal manifestation is a single process. It is a continuity throughout from beginning to end, and births and deaths and other phenomenal experiences are not isolated factors. They are connected to ultimate causes. If we can contemplate the internal connection that obtains between the effects that are visible with the causes that are invisible, then we would be free from the clutches, or the harassments, of these laws which are operating outside us.

There are various stages of manifestation. Here, a specific type of manifestation is under consideration for the purpose of meditation. How the birth of an individual takes place, how a child is born, is the actual question on hand. We are so ignorant that we think that the child is born from the womb of the mother. We know only that much, but this is the least type of knowledge that one can have about the birth of a child. The child is not pushed out of the womb of the mother, as if by magic. It is a tremendous process that takes place throughout the cosmos. All the officials of the government of the universe are active in the production of a single child's career. The whole universe vibrates with action even if a single baby is to be born somewhere in the corner of a house. It is not a private phenomenon of a little child coming out unknown somewhere in a nook and corner of the world, as people ignorantly behold or believe. The whole universe feels the presence and the birth of a single child anywhere. So what produces a child is not the father or the mother. It is the whole cosmos that produces the child. The universe is the parent of this little baby. It may be a human baby, a subhuman one or a superhuman form. Whatever be the character of that child, even if it may be an inorganic production, an atom, or an electron, or the composition of a

molecule, the birth of it is regarded as the birth of a child, and it is made possible by the operation of cosmic factors. The whole universe is our father; the entire universe is our mother; the universe is the parent. That is the cause, and even if a little liquid is jetted from a pore we would realise that, ultimately, it has some connection with the universal cause of all causes, by a chain of relations.

The Upanishad tells us this secret of cosmic interconnectedness and involution of factors which are unknown to the senses and unthinkable to the mind. There is no such thing as a private act in this world. There is also no such thing as 'my' child and 'your' child. If this secret is known, no one will say, "It is my son, my daughter." It is neither yours nor anybody's. It belongs to that from where it has come. And from where has it come? It has come from every cell of the universe. It has not come from the seminal essence of the father or the mother, as it is believed. It is the quintessence of every particle of the whole of Nature, so that the cosmos is reflected in every body. That is why we say the *brahmāṇḍa* is in the *pīṇḍāṇḍa*—the macrocosm is in the microcosm. The cosmos is reverberating and is reflected in the little baby. How, then, can you say that it is your child? It is the child of the universe, which is to take care of it; and it shall withdraw it when it is to be summoned back; it projects it when it is to be sent out for reasons which are known to the universal law alone. Here is the philosophical background of the *vidyā*, called Panchagni-Vidyā.