



THE CHHANDOGYA UPANISHAD

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VAISHVANARA, THE UNIVERSAL SELF

In the course of the study of the Panchagni-Vidya, it has been incidentally pointed out that there is great sorrow in life if it is attended with ignorance. Ignorance is the cause of suffering because it breeds erroneous action towards motives which are wrongly directed. This is the cause for the transmigratory cycle of the soul, which can be put an end to only by proper meditation on the inward structure of the Universe in its essential nature, and not as it appears to the senses in ordinary life. The birth and death of an individual, the process of reincarnation, the impulsion to action propelled by desires and the compulsion to restrain the consciousness within the four walls of one's own body—all these are aspects of the bondage of the individual. Life is an essence of bondage, a prison-house, as it were, because of a very complicated type of nescience, or ignorance, which has enmeshed the phenomenal existence of the *jiva*, the individual. There must be some remedy for this state of affairs. Is there not a way of freedom? Are we to suffer only in this manner, subjected to the law of transmigration, conditioned by the law of cause and effect, and having to pass through the ordeal of this life in which no factors there seem to be over which we have either any control or of which we have any knowledge? With a view to expound a doctrine of freedom, or the liberation of the spirit from the bondage of *samsara*, the Upanishad embarks upon a new subject subsequent to the exposition of the Panchagni-Vidya. The new section will be confined to the elucidation of the renowned meditation known as Vaishvanara-Vidya. In this context we are introduced to an anecdote, or a precedent story.

There were five wise people learned in sacred lore, all great meditators, performers of sacrifices, but who could not come to a conclusion in regard to the final destination of their meditations. These great men are named here. Prachinasala Aupamanyava, Satyayajna Paulushi, Indradyumna Bhallaveya, Jana Sarkarakshya, Budila Asvatarasvi; these are the great men. They were all lofty meditators according to their own techniques, but they had doubts in their minds, because in the course of their meditations, in spite of the fact that they

discovered a palpable result of a magnificent nature, there was something lurking in their minds, pointing to a defect in their meditations. And they could not know what was the defect. So, they conferred among themselves: "What is Atman? What is Brahman? What is the difficulty with us? Can you enlighten me?" Each one was questioning the others: "What is the proper course? Is there a possibility of bringing about a harmony among our meditations?" Each one was meditating in a particular manner, and each one was a great person with grand results following from the meditation. In spite of these happy consequences of their meditations, they had different techniques altogether, one not agreeing with the other. And they had a suspicion in their minds, "Why is it that there is no agreement among ourselves? There must be some peculiar point which escapes our notice. We all meditate on the Atman, the highest Reality of things, as the Self of beings, the Supreme Absolute which is Brahman. In spite of this endeavour of ours, there seems to be something irreconcilable among our methods of meditation." And then they conferred among themselves, but could not come to a conclusion.

Then they thought, "Well, in our locality is another great man. Why do we not go to him? Perhaps he knows this secret of the Vaishvanara-Atman. He is Aruni Uddalaka, the great sage of Upanishad fame. Let us go to him." "Well," they said, "this is a good idea, we shall all go to this great man and put our questions to him if he can enlighten us and tell us what is the difficulty with us, what are the defects in our meditations, and what would be the proper procedure." So, they all went to him in a group, to raise a query on this subject.

But it was a surprise for Uddalaka to see all these great men coming in a mass to his cottage. They were not ordinary persons. So, he thought within himself, "Why are all these people coming? There must be some great point about it. Evidently they want to put some difficult question to me in regard to the highest Reality. Because they themselves are great men, and when they are all coming together to me, it definitely implies that they want to discuss with me the nature of the ultimate Reality, and I may not be able to answer their questions. Why should I risk my presence in the midst of these great men? So, when they come I shall direct them to somebody else, who, perhaps, will be in a position to answer all the questions." Thus he surmised within his mind that there must be some difficulty, and that he might not be able to swallow any poor show put before them if he attempted to answer their questions. So even before they arrived, he had been thinking like this. "They will certainly put questions to me. They are great learned people and renowned for their large sacrifices. I cannot say that I know everything. There are many things which I myself cannot understand. So, why should I put myself in this predicament of answering questions which I may not be able to understand? I shall direct them to another."

The king of that country was a very great soul. He was known as Ashvapati. He was a highly spiritual adept, a great meditator on the Principle called the Vaishvanara. His kingdom was well-administered. He was an ideal ruler. He was very much revered like a parent in the whole kingdom. There was every virtue embodied in his personality. Uddalaka Aruni said: "O great men! I know why you have come. I am also in the same boat as you are. I have also doubts of my own. I

do also meditate as you are all doing, and I have also some difficulties in spite of the fact I have been meditating for years together. Why not we all go together to the great emperor Ashvapati who is a master-meditator and a great adept in that supreme technique of meditation called Vaishvanara-Vidya?" They all, including Uddalaka, went to the king's palace and presented themselves before him.

When Brahmanas go to a king, naturally they go for some wealth. That is the usual tradition. The king thought that these people had come expecting some gift. He received them with great respect and honour, made them seated, and, lest they should not accept the gift that he offered to them, he said in his own humble way: "I follow the path of virtue. There is no defect in the administration of my country. I follow the path of simplicity and goodness. And here I am ready to offer you anything that you need by way of gift, if you have come for that." He received each person separately with due honour. He garlanded them, gave them water to drink and enquired how they were, etc. He was good enough to give them a proper lodging in the palace.

The next morning, when he got up and went to his audience, these great men came there, and the first thing that the king spoke was: "There is no thief in my kingdom. There is no miser in my country, no one who is greedy, no one who drinks, no one who does not perform the daily oblations and libations prescribed as duty or sacrifice, no one uneducated or unlearned, and also no one unrestrained in behaviour. And, I am going to perform a sacrifice. I shall offer you as much gift by way of wealth as I shall be offering to the *ritviks*, or the performers of the sacrifice. I hope you will be satisfied." All this the king was saying even before these people said anything, under the impression that they had come for wealth, gold, silver, etc. "So, you stay here in my palace for some time until I prepare myself for the performance of this sacrifice, where I shall engage you also."

These great men said: "Well, you are so kind, but there is a different purpose with which we have come to you. We have not come for money; we have not come for wealth. Whatever be the purpose for which a person has come, that he must express. That is his duty. He should not speak something else, nor should he be eager to receive things quite different from that for which he has come. So, our purpose is something else, quite different from what you are speaking of or thinking in your mind." "What is that?" The king was surprised. "What is it that these people are asking," pondered the king.

"We have heard that you are in possession of a great knowledge, the knowledge of the Supreme Being, about which we have great doubts and concerning which we have not come to any conclusion among ourselves. We have come as students begging for this knowledge that you possess, the wisdom-meditation on the Vaishvanara-Atman, which we do not know. This is the purpose for which we have come,—not for wealth, not for money, nor for gifts."

Naturally, the king was taken aback that this should be the purpose for which they had come. Anyhow, he seems to have been a very generous-hearted person. He said: "You may come tomorrow morning and see me."

The seekers were very great people, perhaps elder in age to the king himself, not ordinary persons, but they humbled themselves before this mighty knowledge which the king possessed; and approached the king with offerings of *samit* (sacred firewood) according to ancient tradition, the offering with which students used to approach the preceptor. They did not regard themselves as Brahmanas or *panditas* superior to the Kshatriyas. They went as students of higher knowledge to the great master that the king was.

Now, the king made a special exception to the rule in the case of these great people. Generally, knowledge is not imparted like that, so suddenly. It is not that someone comes today and receives initiation tomorrow. There is a great tradition of discipline. Sometimes it is imposed upon the students for years together. But, here, an exception to the rule was made by the king in the light of the fact that these students were not ordinary men. They were well-prepared already; they were Brahmanas, great meditators, religious people, and entirely devoted to spiritual life. They were not ordinary, raw *brahmacharins* approaching a Guru for knowledge. So, the king did not impose this discipline of staying with the Guru for a long time, serving him, etc. He simply accepted them as students at once, merely on their declaring themselves as students: "We have come as students." "Well, I accept you as students." Without any kind of formality of discipline and the like, he spoke to them directly.

HEAVEN AS THE HEAD OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

The king questioned them one by one, "What is it that you are meditating upon already? Why is it that you are in difficulty?" Now, each one was asked this question. The first question to be put was to the first among them. "Aupamanyava, which Atman are you meditating upon? You are certainly meditating on the Atman. It is a great surprise. How is it that everyone is meditating on the Atman and, yet, one differs from the other in the technique? What is the sort of Atman, or the kind of Atman that you are thinking of in your mind?" "I meditate on Heaven as the Supreme Being, Your Highness. That is the symbol I take for fixing my attention of consciousness. I consider the highest region of Heaven as the final symbol for my meditation. I regard it as the Absolute. I do not think anything else in my mind. I exclusively devote my attention to it, because I regard it as the All. Therefore, I consider it as the Atman. So, this is how I meditate. But I have no peace of mind. There is something wrong with this technique, and for that purpose I have come to you."

The king replied: "You are a very honest student of meditation, no doubt, and you have been reverentially pursuing this technique of meditation. Heaven is, of course, a part of the great Vaishvanara, the Universal Being, which you are meditating upon. Inasmuch as what you are meditating upon is part of the Supreme Reality, great benefits are being showered upon you as a result of this meditation. You have abundance of wealth in your house. You perform large sacrifices without end, and you have no difficulty in receiving guests and feeding them, etc. You press the *soma* juice in your house daily, which means to say, you perform *yajna*, sacrifice every day. This is the result of your meditation. You have plenty of food in your house; there is no lack of it. You see everything delightful

everywhere. You are a happy person. Whoever else also meditates like this, as you are doing, will receive the same benefits. He will be well-renowned, he will have plenty of every kind, he will be a very happy and amiable person, and he will be friendly with all people. There will be nothing lacking in his house. He will be spiritually resplendent. This is what will happen to any person who meditates like this, as you are doing, on the Vaishvanara-Atman. And this is your case also. But, there is a great mistake in your meditation. This is only a part of the whole Reality. This is the head, as it were, of Reality, the topmost region of the Vaishvanara, the crown, the head of the Universal Being, as it were, and it is this on which you are meditating. Inasmuch as you have mistaken a part for the whole, you have considered the head for the whole body, because you have made this mistake in your meditation, your head would have fallen, one day or the other; some great calamity would have befallen you if you had not come to me now, at the proper time, for rectification.” It is like a good doctor saying, “It is a good thing that you have come to me. This is a very advanced case.” Likewise, the king said, “It is a good thing you came to me at the proper time; otherwise some catastrophe would have come upon you due to this error in your meditation. You have mistaken the head for the whole body. Well, let it be. Now, be quiet.”

THE SUN AS THE EYE OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

Now, the king puts another question to the other sage: “Satyayajna Paulushi, what is the Atman that you are meditating upon?” “I meditate on the Sun, Your Highness, the most brilliant object conceivable. It is the Supreme Being for me. I regard the Sun, *surya*, as the symbol of the Absolute. That is the Atman on which I am meditating.” The king said: “Satyayajna, you meditate on the Sun as the Supreme Atman. Well, this is a part of the Vaishvanara’s Body. Because it is a part of this Great Being, and you meditate upon it as if it is the all, you have in your own life certain characteristics of the Sun. There is brilliance in your outlook; there is plenty in your family; and there is a sort of completeness in your life, as the Sun himself is a complete being in himself. There is material glory in your house, and your mind is satisfied. You have a very happy mind; and you have many other things in your family,—gold, silver, servants, rich food, and such other things. All this is the result of your meditation on the repository of the immensity of wealth which is the Sun himself. And, whoever meditates as you are meditating, also will enjoy the same fruits of immensity and magnificence in his life. He will have plenty of food to eat, and plenty of everything. He will be resplendent with the knowledge accruing from this meditation which is *brahmavarchas*; yes, whoever meditates thus. But the mistake that you are making in your meditation is that the Sun is the eye, as it were, of the cosmic body of Vaishvanara. It is not the whole of Reality. If you had not come to me, you would have become blind due to this error in your meditation, mistaking the eye of the *Virat* for the whole of *Virat*.”

AIR AS THE BREATH OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

Now, the king asks the third person the same question: “Indradyumna Bhallaveya, What is it that you are meditating upon? What is your Atman, regarding which you have difficulties?” “I meditate upon the Cosmic Air that

blows, as the all-pervading Reality, Your Highness.” The king said: “Well, so far, so good. As this, the Supreme Being, Vaishvanara, is all-pervading, so is this Air also all-pervading. You have taken this all-pervading Air which moves everywhere as the symbol of Reality. Very good. Due to this meditation on the widespread Air, *vayu*, which is moving everywhere, in every direction, coming from every side, as the Ultimate Being, tributes and offerings come to you from every side. Respect and honour come to you unasked. Your glory is moving everywhere, as the Air is moving everywhere. Plenty of vehicles you have, lines of chariots follow you. And you are also plentiful in every respect, in food, wealth, etc. So is the glory of everyone who meditates like this.” He repeats the glories of such meditation in the same way as he mentioned to the other persons. “This is a wonderful meditation, but there is a defect in this meditation. Air is only the vital breath, as it were, of the Vaishvanara-Atman. You have mistaken it for the whole. You would have had great trouble if you had not come to me. Your vital air would have left you if you had not come to me as you have rightly done.”

SPACE AS THE BODY OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

Jana Sarkarakshya, the other great man was questioned: “What is the Atman you are meditating upon?” “I meditate on the all-pervading Space, Your Highness.” This is also a symbol for meditation. Space is all-pervading. When one cannot think of anything that is all-pervading, what else can one think except Space? Space is a good symbol for meditation, indeed. The king said: “Space is extensive in every respect. You meditate upon it as the ultimate Reality, and so you have extensiveness of everything as a consequence of this meditation. You have plenty of everything in your house—wealth and dear ones. You are glory-incarnate at home and in your community. Everything blessed is with you due to this meditation on extensiveness. So is the glory of anyone who thus meditates. But, this is not the correct meditation; there is an error in this meditation also, because the Space that you are thinking of as the Cosmic Reality, is really the body, as it were, and not the whole, of Vaishvanara. If you had not come to me, what would have happened to you? Some catastrophe, like paralysis of the trunk, or something of that kind, would have befallen you. Your meditation would have failed you completely.” All these meditations are wonderful things, but they are also dangerous things. This follows from what the king is telling to these great men.

WATER AS THE LOWER BELLY OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

Budila Asvatarasvi, the other hero, was questioned: “What is it that you are meditating upon?” “I meditate on Water, Your Highness.” There are people who meditate on the ocean as a symbol of Brahman, just as there are people who contemplate Space as such a symbol. “I contemplate Water as symbolic of Reality (the ocean perhaps), as an endless expanse. This is my Atman.” The king said: “This meditation is good so far as it goes, on account of which you are endowed with plenty of every kind. Water is the source of foodstuff and wealth and strength. It is the cause of the abundance of foodstuff especially in your house. And so is the case with anyone who thus meditates. But, this is also a defective form of meditation because it is the lower belly, as it were, of the cosmic

Vaishvanara. It is just the watery element of the whole cosmic embodiment. It is one of the constituents of the Universal body; it is not the entire structure in its totality. If you had not come to me, you would have had a physical illness of this part of the body which is abundant with water. Your body would have failed or some such thing would have taken place, and you would have perished as a consequence of this defective meditation.”

THE EARTH AS THE FEET OF THE UNIVERSAL SELF

Then the king puts the question to Uddalaka Aruni himself: “What is it that you are meditating upon?” Uddalaka said: “I meditate upon the Earth in its comprehensiveness as Reality, Your Highness.” The king said: “This is all right, and so you have great virtue following from this meditation. You enjoy and see what is dear. As the Earth is the foundation of all things, you are well-founded in life. And so shall be anyone who meditates as you do. But, the Earth is only the footstool of the Vaishvanara-Atman, as it were. The Earth is like the feet of the Universal Self. It is the feet of the Atman because it is the lowest degree among the manifestations of Reality. If you had not come to me, something untoward would have happened to your feet. They would have withered away. Then you would have gone on crutches.”

THE SELF AS THE UNIVERSAL WHOLE

This is what the king said in answer to the representations made by all the six great men. “My dear friends,” spoke the king: “All of you are very sincere in your meditations, and honest, indeed. Because of your honesty and sincerity and tenacity in meditation, you enjoy plenty of everything in your houses and in your families and within yourselves. But you do not know that you have committed errors in your meditations. Ultimately, some trouble would have come to you as a consequence. It is good that you all came to me. In the beginning, everything looks all right even in an erroneous meditation, but afterwards some difficulty arises which cannot be rectified even by the best of medicines. So, what is it that we have to now? We have understood where we stand. Well, you have all made two mistakes, to put the whole thing precisely. You have considered some parts of the whole as the whole. You have mistaken the finite for the Infinite. Nothing that you are thinking in your minds can be the whole, because the mind is accustomed to think only finite objects. Whatever be our concept of expanse in regard to the particular object on which you are meditating, it is still finite. This is one error. The other mistake that you are making that you think of the Atman as an object, as if it is outside. You say, it is Space, it is Water, it is the Sun, it is the Earth, and so on. Well, it is all very beautiful. But, it is ‘outside you’! How can non-Atman be the Atman?

“And what do you mean by the Atman? How can the Atman be outside you? Your own Self is external to you? What a concept! You have really committed a blunder in conceiving your own Self as a non-Self. The Self cannot be outside itself; it cannot be an object of itself; it cannot think itself; meditate upon itself as another; it cannot be other than itself. The first point, then, is that a finite thing cannot be regarded as the Infinite. The other thing is that an external thing

cannot be regarded as the Self. You have committed both these mistakes. You are having the knowledge of this Great Being, little by little, part by part, as in the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each blind man was touching a part of the elephant's body and regarding it as something specific. The man never knew for a moment that he was touching a part of the elephant. Likewise, you are not aware of the fact that what you think as the Absolute is, in fact, relative. What you think as the All, is only a part. Therefore, you are well-to-do people, indeed, on account of the meditations, but there is also the defect that I have pointed out. One can have glory in this world, have renown, have plenty, and look all right in the eyes of people, even if there is a fundamental defect spiritually. And that cannot be known by mere observation from outside.

“There is no need to pour water and put manure on every leaf of the tree if you want to tend a tree. You have to water the root, that is sufficient. If you want to take care of a huge tree, what do you do? Do you go to the top of the tree and count every leaf and sprinkle manure over it, one by one, water every leaf, every flower, every fruit? No. You concern yourself with the root of the tree, and then you see there is an efflorescence of every part of the tree, automatically. Whatever you have obtained through these discrete forms of meditation, you can obtain at one stroke by a total meditation, which is the meditation on the Vaishvanara-Atman. The root of the Reality is missed by your consciousness. Whoever can conceive in his mind the true Vaishvanara as that which extends from the earth to the heavens, from the heavens to the earth, from the topmost level of manifestation down to the lowest level, missing no link whatsoever, visualises the Whole. If you can see through your mind this extensiveness of manifestation from the highest to the lowest, at once, without missing any part, which means to say, if you can be comprehensive in a universal way in your envisagement of the form of Reality, and if it can be the Atman, the Self at the same time, then what is it that you lack? This is the Vaishvanara-Atman, the All-Self. Whoever can meditate in this manner becomes the Self of every being all at once. One becomes the Self of all the worlds; he becomes the Self of anything that can be anywhere, and he becomes the possessor of the glory of anything that exists anywhere, in any realm, in any form, under any circumstance. This is the secret I let out to you, if you can contemplate in this manner. This is a Herculean feat, because the mind cannot think like this. If you slip from the grasp of your mind when you think like this, you will find that the mind falls back upon its old groove of thinking in terms of particulars and externalisation of objects. Who can contemplate the object as non-externalised? Not any human being. But this is what you are supposed to do. All these parts which you have mentioned are various limbs of the Cosmic Body. You have to bring them together and conceive the Whole, at once, in your consciousness. Do not say, ‘This is the sun, this is space, this is water,’ and all that. Do not think like this. Let all these be thought together, immediately, in their comprehensiveness, without missing any one whatsoever, by feeling oneness with Earth, Water, Sun, Air, Space, Heaven, and everything.”

Now, having described the cosmic aspect of the Vaishvanara-Atman as the Supreme Object of meditation, the Upanishad introduces us to an immediate consequence that follows from such meditation. The meditator cannot stand

outside this Great Object of meditation. This is very clear. Because of the comprehensiveness of the Object, the Universality of the Vaishvanara-Atman, the meditator has already undergone a transmutation of personality, entered into the bosom of Reality. And whatever one does, then, becomes an action of the Vaishvanara-Atman. This is a very serious consequence that follows from an intense meditation in this manner. Whatever I think becomes the Thought of the Vaishvanara-Atman. Whatever I speak becomes an expression of the Vaishvanara-Atman, and whatever I do becomes Its action. And, then, my actions become a Cosmic Sacrifice, just as the gods thought creation a Universal Sacrifice, as we have it in the Purusha-Sukta. One cannot make a distinction between God's thought and a human being's thought when one meditates in this way. What God thinks and man thinks will then be identical. Thus, the daily activity proceeding from the personality of an individual, in the case of a meditator in the manner mentioned, would be a Cosmic Sacrifice. This is called *Prana-agnihotra*, the sacred oblation at the Universal Altar of the Fire of the Absolute.