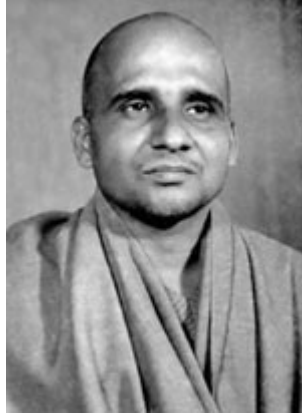




THE BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

DISCOURSE-1 (24 JANUARY 1977)

INTRODUCTION

In all principles which guide human life, there are two aspects known as the 'exoteric' and the 'esoteric'. The formal routine of daily life is mostly guided by what we call the exoteric principles which have a working value and a validity within the realm of human action. In this sense, we may say that the values which are called exoteric are relative, inasmuch as every activity in human life is relative to circumstances. Hence, they do not have eternal value, and they will not be valid persistently under every condition in the vicissitudes of time. This principle which is exoteric, by which what we mean is the outward relative principle of life, becomes, tentatively, the guiding line of action, notwithstanding the fact that even this relative principle of exoteric life changes itself according to the subsidiary changes with which human life has to adjust itself. For instance, human history in its totality can be regarded as a process of exoteric value; but within this exoteric relativity of human history, there are internal changes and subsidiary modifications, calling for further adjustments, internally, as can be observed through the march of history. We adjust ourselves from day to day in different ways. Every day we may have to call for a new mode of adjustment in our practical life, suited to the changing conditions of different days, though all days are guided by the exoteric principles throughout the history of the cosmos. So, when we speak of the exoteric principles of life we actually mean two things at the same time - the law that operates universally upon every human being, right from creation till the dissolution of the universe, as well as the minor adjustments which are called for in the daily life of the individual from minute to minute, from second to second. So, this is a very significant word - the exoteric principle. It has meanings and meanings within it, but all these are comprehended within a single meaning, namely, the principle of the outward mode of behaviour, conduct and action.

This principle is seen applied even in the religions of the world, so that we have several exoteric religions. The religions, as they are known to us, the 'isms', as we call them, are exoteric religions, because they are modes of religious conduct, action and behaviour. The temple-worships, the church-goings and the performance of rites and the Mass, the reading of the scriptures, and the ritual celebrations, and whatnot - all these come under the exoteric aspects of religion, so that whatever we do religiously from a practical point of view, comes under exotericism, because it is a mode of external behaviour.

But this exoteric mode of living, religious or secular, is based on another principle which is known as the esoteric value of life, because there must be some rationality behind our conduct in life, whatever be that conduct, religious or otherwise. Why do we go to the temple? Why do we have to go to the church? Why do we worship any god? Why should there be any kind of attitude at all? This is because there is a fundamental rock-bottom of deciding factor, though it always happens to be inside and never comes outside to the vision of the human eye. The principle of ultimate law is always invisible, though its activity can be seen in outward life. When law acts, we can see how it acts; but law, by itself, cannot be seen with the eyes. It is a general impersonal principle. This impersonal general principle of living which is not subject to the changes of time and which is permanently of a set value is known as the esoteric principle of life. And we have, thus, the aspects of exotericism and esotericism, both in religious and secular life, which means to say, there is an internal, secret, guiding principle, as well as an outward manifestation of it in every aspect of life.

Now, primarily at present, we are concerned with a very important subject - the principle of life which can guide every individual, whether of the East or the West, North or South, of today or tomorrow, under every condition. Is there such a principle? We have in the Dharma-Sastras, or the law codes and ethical mandates, mention made of Dharma, known as Samanya-Dharma and the Vishesha-Dharma. Dharma means a principle of behaviour and action, a law, a regulation, a rule. And it is Samanya or Vishesha, i.e., general as well as particular. The general Dharma or the generally applicable principle of life upon every individual is called Samanya-Dharma, but that which varies from individual to individual, from one class to another class etc. is the Vishesha-Dharma, which we need not dilate upon here, as it is not concerned with our present theme.

The laws of life are esoteric and exoteric, even as they are general and particular. All these divisions of law and principle are manifestation of an inviolable principle, that is, the ultimate principle of life which is impossible to grasp easily, inasmuch as our intellects, our minds, our total personalities are all involved in certain conditions of living. We cannot extricate our personalities from the circumstances in which we are involved. We cannot judge things, understand things or behave in a manner which is not conditioned by our atmosphere. Hence, it is impossible for ordinary human beings to appreciate what the ultimate principle of life is, because to understand this ultimate principle, one has to stand above conditions and circumstances, which is

practically impossible for people. How can we stand above conditions and circumstances? We have the summer condition; we have the winter condition; we have the hunger condition; we have the thirsty condition; we have the sick condition; we have the healthy condition; we have the male condition; we have the female condition; we have the white condition; we have the black condition; we have the happy condition; we have the unhappy condition; and so on. So we are involved in millions and millions of conditions, and to stand above them is almost an impossibility. It is a superhuman task; and thus, the ultimate principle of existence cannot be known; and any judgment that we pass, any understanding that we project from our intellects has naturally to be conditioned. The conditions reflect the character of the unconditioned, which is a saving factor, though it is true that we are all conditioned and the unconditioned cannot easily be known. One solacing principle that is available to us is that the invisible and the impersonal principle of life, though it is impossible of grasp by conditioned intellects, casts certain reflections upon every condition in life and it is seen to be working in me, in you and in everyone under every circumstance. So, it is possible for us to reach the impersonal and the ultimate principle of life through the conditions, the circumstances and the vicissitudes. The esoteric can be known through the exoteric. The Superindividual can be reached through the individual, and conditions can be broken and the unconditioned can be reached.

This was the great theme of discussion in ancient times, recorded in the Vedas and Upanishads, and masters and sages sat together in congregation, and discussed the problems of life, of here and hereafter. What is life? What is this world, and what is our duty? What are we expected to do and in what way are we to behave, and so on. Is there a life beyond, or is this life everything? Is this earth the evaluating principle of all, or is there something beyond? These questions were discussed in great detail through centuries, right from the time of the Vedas.

We have, in India particularly, a series of records available of such discussions of ancient masters, which are given to us today in the form of what we call the Veda-Rasi, or the lore of sacred wisdom, normally known as the Vedas. It is a book of wisdom or we may call it a group of books of wisdom - records of such discussions, findings, realisations and experiences of various experts who tried to dive into the depths of 'being' and brought out the pearl from the ocean of existence, and proclaimed to humanity the value of it, and the meaning of it to everyone.

The Veda-Sastra is classified into the exoteric and the esoteric, as in the case of every religious lore. We have this distinction in Christianity, in Islam, and everywhere - the outward religion and the mystical approach to Truth. The Vedas are a general term for this entire group of scriptures which discuss by a long range of development of thought, every approach to Reality possible, from the lowest to the highest. These layers of approach, recorded in the Vedas, are available to us in the groupings, today known as the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. These are terms known to many of us, and we know very well that the Samhita portion of the Veda is constituted of hymns and

prayers to deities, transcendent powers, spiritual forces, which guide the configurations in the form of bodies and created beings. They are the summonings of the soul in terms of the higher spirits which were felt to be present in the depths of contemplation, and visions of various kinds. These hymns, known as the Samhitas in the Veda, could be applied for two purposes - for meditation, as well as for ritual. When they become instruments of meditation or contemplation, they are the contents of what are known as the Aranyakas; and when they become the guidelines for action, ritual and sacrifice and worship, they are called the Brahmanas. So there are two further developments in the religious path of the Veda, known as the Brahmanas and the Aranyakas, developed from the Samhitas, branching forth in two different directions, as it were - contemplation and action. But there was a time when the peak of experience spiritual, culminated in a blend of both these approaches, in what are known as the Upanishads; and the Upanishads represent the quintessence of thought, the essence that is drawn out from the Veda knowledge, and the honey that is sucked, as it were, from the body of wisdom - Samhita, Brahmana and Aranyaka - not representing conditioned life merely, but reaching up to the utmost of effort to discover the nature of unconditioned existence.

The seers of the Upanishads were bent upon entering into the kernel of Reality by casting off all vestures which limit human life, and attaining a kind of attunement with it, if necessity arose, and the unconditioned was plumbed and experienced. So, in a way, we may say that the Upanishad texts are records of experiences and explanations of Masters who set themselves in tune with ultimate Truth. Such are the Upanishads. It is a very strange word, 'Upanishad', which is supposed to mean a secret knowledge, not to be imparted to the uninitiated or to the common public who are wedded to the exoteric approach only, who are totally conditioned in their life, and who cannot rise above the bias of sense life and social regulations. Hence the Upanishad wisdom was kept very secret. It was never imparted to anyone except the near disciples who went to the Masters for training and underwent discipline for a protracted number of years, and made themselves fit to receive this knowledge which is unconditional. That was the greatness of it, and that was also the danger of it, because it is unconditioned.

The Upanishads, therefore, are mystical revelations, secret wisdom; and, as the word itself denotes, they are supposed to be listened to, heard about, or learnt from a Master by one's being seated in front of him, beside him, near him - *Upa,ni,shad*. When the word splits, it is split into its components, and it is supposed to be the meaning of a knowledge that is secretly obtained from a Master by being seated near him in holy reverence and obedience. 'Sit near' - that is the literal meaning of the term, Upanishad. Sit near the Guru, the Master, and receive the wisdom by attunement, at-one-ment of being. This is the peculiarity of Upanishad knowledge. It is not like science or art or any other exoteric learning that we can have in a College or a University. It is not a lecture that is delivered, but a wisdom that is communicated to the soul by the soul. That is the speciality of the Upanishad wisdom. It is a conversation between soul and soul,

and not merely a discourse given by a professor to the students in a College. That is the speciality of the Upanishad wisdom. It is a light that is to mingle with another light. Hence, the Upanishads were kept as greatly guarded secrets.

The texts, known as the Upanishads, are spread out throughout the range of the literature of the Veda, and each section of the Veda has its own Upanishad or Upanishads. We are proposing to take up the study of the most important of them, very rarely studied by people and very rarely still discussed about - the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad - the great forest of knowledge, as its name suggests. One can find everything there, as one finds in a forest. This Upanishad, particularly, is never studied by students, nor is it taught by tutors, because of its complicated structure, difficult to grasp, and not safe also to communicate if its import is not properly rendered. If its meaning is properly grasped, it would be the ultimate, unfailing friend of a person, till death. It will guard you, protect you and save you, and provide you with everything, at all times. But, if it is not properly understood, it can be a sword in the hands of a child. So is this Upanishad to be studied with great reverence and holiness of attitude, not as a mere book that you study from the library. It is not a book at all. It is Spirit that manifests itself in language, not merely a word that is spoken. Such is this Upanishad, the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad.

This Upanishad, the Brhadaranyaka, which we are trying to study, is a very lengthy text, ranging from thought to thought, in various stages of development; and I have particularly found that it is something like a very elaborate commentary on one of the Master-hymns of the Veda, that is, the Purusha-Sukta. Some others have thought that it is an exposition of the principles of the Isavasya Upanishad. It may be that they are right. But I, in my own humble way, tried to discover another meaning in it when I studied it and contemplated upon it - that it is a vast body of exposition of the inner significance of the Purusha-Sukta and, perhaps, also, of the Nasadiya-Sukta, where the Cosmic Person is described, and creation hailed, about which we shall be studying, shortly, stage by stage.

The Upanishad begins with a startling exposition of the very methodology of living adopted in our country. As I tried to mention to you, the method of the Upanishad is secret, esoteric and intended to go into the meaning of action which is otherwise exoteric. I have also mentioned that the Veda has an aspect, namely, the ritual aspect, the aspect of sacrifice, performance of religious ceremony by the application of the Mantras of the Samhitas, as expounded in the section known as the Brahmanas. The Aranyakas go to the contemplated side of the Brahmanas, and tell us that a sacrifice need not necessarily be outward; it can also be inward; and the inward is as powerful as the outward. It can even be more powerful than the outward. The ritual that is performed by the mind, say the Aranyakas, is more puissant in the production of effect than the ritual that is outwardly performed through the sacred fire, or in the holy altar. The entire range of the Aranyakas is filled with this meaning, that mental action is a greater action than outward action. Its capacity is greater than external activity. Thought is more potent than word and deed. This principle is carried to its logical limit in the Upanishads.

If thought is more potent than action, there may be something more potent than even thought; greater than thought, and more powerful than thought, which can explore even the content of thought itself. If action is superseded by thought, thought is superseded by 'being'. So, we go to the Upanishads where the principle of 'being' is expounded as transcendent even to the operations of thought, which, otherwise, are superior to all action outside. The range of the Upanishads, expounding the character of 'being' as transcendent to thought of every type, is very wide, and no one can understand a Upanishad unless one understands what 'being' is. We cannot even know what thought is, far from knowing what 'being' is. We can know how we think at a particular time, but we cannot know exactly what mind is, what thought is, where it is situated, and how it acts. The reason is that what we call the mind or thought is involved in a process. Inasmuch as it is involved in a process or transition, it becomes difficult of exposition and investigation. And what are the processes in which thought, or the mind, is involved? Everything that we call outward life - in that the mind is involved. We always think in terms of some thing. That something is what we call life, or at least an aspect of life. Since every thought is an involvement in a particular aspect of outward existence, thought never finds time to understand itself. Thought never thinks itself; it always thinks others. We never see at any time our own mind contemplating its own self. It always contemplates other persons, other things and other aspects of life. There is a peculiar proclivity of thought by which it rushes outward into the objects of sensual life, externally, into persons and things, and never can know what it is itself. How can the mind know what another thing is when it cannot know what it itself is? If you cannot know what you are, how can you know what others are? But this is life - a great confusion and a mess and a conglomeration of involvements in the objects of sense. This is called Samsara, the aberration of consciousness in spatio-temporal externality.

We are to free ourselves from this mess of involvement, through a deeper diagnostic technique applied to our own life; and this is the purpose of Upanishad. The difficulty of this achievement is well-known. Every one of you knows what this difficulty is. Just as you cannot peel your own skin from the body, you cannot dissociate yourself from the conditions of life. But such a feat has to be performed in this superpsychic technique known as Upanishadic contemplation of 'being'.

The beginning of the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad is, thus, a rise of thought into the inward principles of outward sacrifice as advocated in the Brahmanas of the Vedas: What is a sacrifice; what is a ritual; what is a performance; and what is an action? When this is understood in its principle, its inward significance, it becomes commensurate with human thought; it becomes inseparable from mind; it becomes a part of one's psychic life. You will find, on a careful investigation of the matter, that anything that you do is involved in a process of thought. It may be a religious ritual or a worship, a performance or a sacrifice, or it may be a secular deed - it makes no difference. It is mind that is working in a particular fashion; - that is all, and nothing more, nothing less. So, unless the mind in its essentiality is probed into, human action is not understood. The Upanishad is a

revelation of the inner principles of life as manifest in actions of a variegated nature. The ritual of the Brahmanas is contemplated in the Upanishads. The Vedic sacrifice, or, for the matter of that, any kind of religious performance, is a symbol, ultimately, which is the point of departure in all esoteric approaches to religion. External religion is symbolic of an internal principle which is true religion, towards which the Upanishad drives our minds. This departure is to be found in every religion in the world. The symbolic character of human activity and religious performance is brought out in a study of esoteric principles, which is the philosophy of life. The activities of human life are symbolic in the sense that they are not representative of the whole Truth, but manifest only certain aspects of Truth. Every action is involved in cosmic relations of which very few are brought to the surface of one's notice when the action is really performed. We always think that an action is motivated by an individual or a group of individuals towards a particular relative end which is visible to the eye and conceivable by the mind, but never do we imagine for a moment that there can be farther reaches of the tentacles of this action, beyond the reach of the human eye and mind and our little action can really be a cosmic deed, that God can see what we do, and the whole universe can vibrate with the little word that we utter. This is a difficult thing for us to understand; and the Upanishad explains it to bring to the purview of our consciousness these inward secrets of outward action, telling us that the outward sacrifice is symbolic of an inward contemplation of Universal Reality.

The Upanishads are embodiments of different types of contemplation on Ultimate Truth, and so is the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. The beginning of the Upanishad is a contemplation of the inward meaning of a great sacrifice described in the Brahmanas, known as *Asvamedha Yajna*. It is an external performance of a religious character for the purpose of achieving higher results in the form of celestial enjoyment, etc., but, the Upanishad tells us that the proper approach to the aims of human life, such as ultimate satisfaction, delight, etc., need not be the method of the Brahmanas, which is only symbolic, and there should be a technique more affiliated to the nature of Reality than is the external action of the Brahmanas. The sacrifice known as the *Asvamedha* signifies the consecration of a horse in a large ritual performance, mostly undertaken by princes and kings in ancient times for the purpose of name, fame etc. in this world and heavenly exaltation hereafter. The Upanishad, however, tells us that its meaning is something quite different and more profound. What we see with our eyes and what we do with our deeds are indicative of a deeper aspiration in our minds, and what we actually seek is not pleasure, not satisfaction in the ordinary sense, not power, not name or fame, because all these are transient and tantalising.

Everything passes away; nothing in the world can last. Everything shall end, one day or other. What are these joys in heaven? What is this power this world? What is this name and status? They are mirages; they are nothing but husk, because they pass like the wisp of wind. And how is it possible for the soul to ask for that which is perishable and vanishes the next moment? Will any wise person crave for a perishable joy? How could anyone engage oneself in activities,

performances, religious or otherwise, which are capable of promising only apparent joys, which rob us of all our strength and then land us in sorrow most unconceivable? What is the real aspiration of the soul of the individual? What is it that it really needs? What is it that it hungers for? It is difficult to answer this question. The child cannot answer the question, "What do you need?" "I want a sweetmeat, a sugar candy, a toy". What else can the child say? Such seems to be the reply of the untutored mind, the illiterate soul, sunk in the darkness of ignorance which speaks in terms of name, fame, power, wealth, rejoicing, diversion, gain, pleasures - whether they are real and lasting, or not, it cares not. It asks for pleasure, which shall end in a complication from which it is difficult for one to free oneself.

The Upanishad promises us a freedom which is above the turmoil of all earthly existence. It can make us happy perennially under every condition, even after death, not merely in this life. In fact, the Upanishad assures us that death is not a bar and not a fear. There is no such thing as death as we think of it. Death is another kind of process which is intended for the training of the soul in its march to a greater perfection; and perfection is what we seek, not pleasure. This is what the Upanishads teach us; that is what the Brhadaranyaka contemplates in vast detail.