

INTRODUCTION TO THE UPANISHADS

by

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I made a brief reference to the natural difficulty that one may feel in understanding the subject of the Upanishads, that difficulty being the nature of the Upanishad discussion itself. It is the subject of the Atman, as this boy mentioned just now, but it is easily said than really understood.

All our educational technology these days, as education is generally understood, concerns itself with objects of perception and intellectual understanding. The Atman is not a subject which can be perceived through the sense organs, nor can it be understood intellectually by any kind of logical acumen, the reason being that the Atman is yourself; it is not somebody else. In all courses of knowledge and procedures of study, you place yourself in the position or context of a student, and you consider the world of objects outside as subjects of observation and experiment and study. In your education you do not study yourself; you study something other than your own self. You go to a college or university, and you have themes like mathematics, physics, chemistry, sociology and what not. All these themes which are so well placed before you in great detail are external to yourself. Everything that you study, anywhere, is outside you. You don't study yourself in any course of study that has been made available to you.

But the Upanishad is a study of yourself. *Atmanam vidhi* is the great oracle of the Upanishad. Know thyself and be free. It is something astounding to hear that we can be free by knowing our own selves. It is said because of the fact we have a feeling generally in the work-a-day life of the world, that we become free only when we know the world outside. We study sociology, history economics and what not, external studies and empirical observations, for the purpose of acquiring freedom in life. The more are you educated, the more you seem to be free in human society. But the Upanishad says this knowledge cannot make you free. It is only the knowledge of your own self that can assure you true freedom.

The reason for this opinion of the Upanishads is also very deep-rooted. How is it that freedom is embedded in you only and not anywhere else? I mentioned to you on the very first day that this particular something which the Upanishads call Atman is not a prerogative of any particular individual; it is not something that is in you only, it is the pure subjectivity of all things. The deepest essence of anything and everything in the universe is what is called the Atman. So the study of the Atman is not the study of the self of some person, Mr. So-and-so and all that; it is the study of the self of every Mr. So-and-so, so on and so forth. Everything, everyone, all things are a pure subjectivity in them. There is an I-ness or a feeling of self-identity even in a tree which grows according to its own predilection for the purpose of its own survival. The instinct of survival is present in each and every living entity, perhaps even in non-living elements like an atom. They maintain identity of themselves. Atman may be said to be the characteristic of self-identity of everything. You cannot become other than what you are. You are something, and you want to be that thing only, and you cannot be something else. A is A, A cannot be B, this is the law of identity and logic. And everything is what it is; nothing can be other than what it is. This peculiar inherent tendency of the maintenance of self-identity in all things (you have to listen to me carefully every word that I speak), this inherent tendency in everything in

respect of the maintenance of that vehement form of self-identity consciousness is the Atman.

It is the Atman not merely as a force that causes this impulse of self-identity in things, it is also a consciousness of their being such a self-identity. You are what you are, but not only that, you are also aware that you are what you are. So it is existing and it is also conscious that it exists. So the Atman is existence; it is also consciousness. Now, what sort of existence? The existence of the fact that it cannot be identified with anything other than itself. This is the characteristic of pure subjectivity. For no reason can you become somebody else. Rama cannot become Krishna, Krishna cannot become Jesus, Jesus cannot become Thomas, and so on and so forth. A particular thing is just that particular thing for the reason that it is constituted of characteristics that make that thing only that thing. This cohesive element which brings the parts of your personality into the centrality of apprehension, awareness, is the work of the Atman.

To repeat once again what I told you a few minutes before, this tendency is present in everything and everyone. Therefore the study of the Atman is not study of something somewhere – it is the study of everything. I hope you catch what I'm saying. The study of the Atman is the study of the essence of everything anywhere because of the fact everything everywhere has this Atman. There is an Atman in all things in the sense that they maintain an identity-consciousness of themselves. So the Atman has a peculiar characteristic of being just what it is; that it to say, it cannot be an object of anyone. The self-identity aspect of consciousness, which is the Atman, cannot become Anatman, to put it in the Sanskrit language. The Atman cannot become Anatman. The Self cannot become not-Self. The subject cannot become the object. Consciousness cannot become matter. You cannot become somebody else.

This is something that will follow from a proper analysis of the nature of what is called the Atman, the great, grand,

magnificent subject of the Upanishads. Inasmuch as this is something which you have never heard in your life, something which nobody else taught you anywhere in any educational institutions, something that cannot be included in the curriculum of any kind of science, arts, or humanities in the ordinary sense of the term, this is an astounding thing that you are hearing. That is the reason why the Upanishads are insisting that it is a secret knowledge; it is not a subject for public oration. It is secret because it cannot be understood by any amount of scratching your head. The reason is, you are studying yourself as a basic principle, this "yourself" not being a person, this physical body-mind complex, but the principle that is the principle of all things.

So the study of the Atman is the study of first principles. The Atman philosophy is the fundamental philosophy. When that is known, you have known the secret of all things. It is the vital spot of every individual, of anything in the universe. This knowledge is not communicated by mere reading books in a library; it is possible to acquire it through hard discipline.

The mind of the human being is usually characterized by three defects, and any kind of self-discipline implies the avoiding of these defects somehow or other, the stubbing out of the defect-ridden personality of the individual. In Sanskrit this three-fold defect of the human mind is called Mala, Vikshepa and Avarana.

Malameans dirt, something like a thick coating over a clean mirror, preventing reflection of light in it. Dirt is that which covers the essential nature of an object, like a thick coating of dust, etc. on a mirror. There is some such thing covering the mind of the human being also, on account of which correct knowledge is not reflected in the mind, as a mirror that is covered over with dust will not reflect sunlight. So some step has to be taken in order to see that this dirt of the mind is scrubbed off.

The other defect of the mind is known as Vikshepa, that is fickleness, inability to concentrate on anything for a long

time, instability is the basic nature of the mind. It will think twenty things in one minute and will not be able to fix its attention on one thing even for a few seconds. These are the superficial aspects of the defects of the mind.

But there is a deeper defect known as Avarana. It is like a thick veil over the mind, a black curtain, as it were, which prohibits the entry of the rays of light into itself totally. The Atman being pure subjectivity, the impulsion of the mind to move outward in the direction of sense objects, is an anti-Atman activity taking place in the mind, a movement towards the not-Self. Any psychic operation, any modification of the mind in the direction of other than what the Self is, is to be considered as impelled by some dirt in the mind.

Sometimes the mind operates like a prism which deflects rays of light in various forms and in various hues. It is up to each person to consider for one's own self what are the thoughts that generally arise in the mind from the morning to the evening. You may be doing anything, but what are you thinking in the mind? This is what is important. The thoughts which take you wholly in the direction of what you are not, and engaging your psychic attention on things which are not the Self—these things should be considered as a serious infection in the mind itself.

When basically everybody is what one is, and even when you are operating in the direction of a sense-object so-called, through the perceptive activity of the senses, what is actually happening is that one location of this Universal Self (it is universal because it is present in all beings), one particular psycho-physical location of this Universal Self tries to impinge itself upon another such location in the form of an object outside. It considers another thing as an object wrongly because of the movement of the Atman-consciousness through the eyes, through the various sense-organs.

There is a tendency inherent in the human mind by which the pure subjectivity which is the consciousness of the Atman is pulled, as it were, in the direction of what it is not,

and is compelled to be aware of what it is not in the form of sense-perception. Not only that, it cannot be conscious continuously of one particular object—now it is aware of this, now it is aware of another thing. It moves from object to object. The tendency to move in the direction of what the Atman is not, the impulsion towards externality of objects, is the dirt or Mala as it is called. The impossibility of fixing the mind on anything continuously is the distraction or the Vikshepa. The reason why such an impulse has arisen at all is the Avarana or the veil. These three defects have to be removed gradually by protracted self-discipline coupled with proper instruction. It takes its own time.

Usually, you must have heard, there are techniques of yoga practice known as Karma, Bhakti and Jnana; or Karma, Upasana and Jnana. Karma is activity, work, performance of any kind, discharge of one's duty, you may say. This impulsion of the mind to move always in the direction of objects outside is due to a desire that is present in the mind to grab something from outside and make good a particular lacunae that it feels in one's own self. This tragic movement of the mind in the direction of objects for the purpose of fulfillment of selfish desires can be obviated only by a certain type of activity called Karma. Karma does not mean any kind of work, but a specific kind of work. Everybody is doing some work, everybody is busy in this world—but it does not mean that they are doing Yoga in the form of work. Work becomes Yoga only when it is free from the impulse of selfishness behind the performance of work.

When you do a work, you must put a question to yourself—what is the reason behind your engaging yourself in that work? Is it because some extraneous or ulterior motive is there behind that work? Or is it done for mere self-purification? You must distinguish between work done as a job and work done as a duty. A duty may not apparently bring you a material benefit at the very outset, but it will bring you an invisible benefit. That is why duty is adored so much everywhere and people say you must do your duty. If duty is not so very important, but only remunerative job is

the only thing that is important, then insistence on duty would be out of point.

Everybody says duty must be done, but what is duty? Work done as duty can alone purify, no other work can purify the self. It is not any kind of labour that can be regarded as Karma yoga. Now, what is this duty that you are talking of which is going to chasten the personality of the individual, purify it? Briefly it can be called unselfish action. It is a work that you do for the benefit that may accrue to a larger dimension of reality and not merely to the localized entity called your own individual self.

When you serve people, you are to bear in mind always the reason why this service is done at all. Mostly, the reason is buried underneath. We have social reasons, political reasons, economic reasons, and family considerations when we do any work in the form of service of people. But service which is spiritually oriented is not a social work or a political activity, or it is not connected even with a family maintenance. It is actually a service done to your own self.

How is it? You may put a question. In what way is service of people, for instance, a service to my own self? Because you have to remember the few words that I spoke to you a little before—your essential being is also the essential being of everybody else. So the people that you see outside, the world of space-time even, is a wider dimension of the selfhood which is your own pure subjectivity. This is a subject which is a little difficult to understand, to be listened to with great caution and care. The service that you render to others, even to a dog let alone human beings, even manuring a tree for its sustenance, taking care of anything whatsoever, is not done with any kind of ulterior motive, much less even the consideration that it is something outside you.

Work becomes purely a spiritual form of worship—only the character of selfhood is introduced into the area of this performance of work, and into the location of the direction towards which your work is motivated. You are serving your own self when you serve humanity. People gibly sometimes

say, “Worship of man is worship of God.” It is just a way of saying without understanding what they mean. How does man become God? You know very well no man can be equal to God. So how to you say that service of man is equal to service of God?

So merely talking in a social sense does not bring much meaning. It has a significance that is deeper than the social cloak that it bears, namely, the essential being of each person is present in each other person also. So when you love your neighbor as yourself, you are loving that person not because that person is your neighbor in the sense of a nearby person, but because there is a nearness which is spiritual and not merely social. The person is near to me as a spiritual entity, as part of the same self that is me, rather than a nearness that is measurable by distance of yards or kilometers etc.

The spiritual concept of work is the great theme of the Bhagavadgita, which is another subject. The whole theme of the Bhagavadgita is how we can conduct our activity in the sense of a transmutation of all its values into spiritual worship. Actually, service is not service done to anybody else—that term ‘else’ must be removed from the sentence; it is service done to a larger area of one’s own self. This idea can be planted in one’s own mind by doing service of any kind, whether it is service of Guru, service of mankind, or work even in an office without laying too much emphasis on the salary aspect, etc. If the administration is well managed, the salary will come of its own accord – you need not cry for it; and this universe is a well-managed organization. It is not a political system which requires amendment of laws and regulations constantly. Everything is systematically ordained, and therefore you need not have any doubt in your mind whether you gain anything at all by doing service in this manner. When you serve your own larger self, which becomes largest when it is a service done to the universe as a whole, virtually you are serving God, because the largest self is God. And it is an expanded form of your own self—this is the point to be borne in mind. This has to be borne in mind

again and again because of the fact that this is the subject of the Upanishads.

So this dirt of the mind, so-called, the Mala or the impurity that compels the mind to move in the direction of sense objects, this dirt can be scrubbed off by work, hard work, service, labour—let it be, but done in the spirit of a service done to a larger self of one's own self. Then work becomes worship and Karma becomes Karma Yoga.

A discipline of this kind was instituted in earlier days when it was obligatory on the part of students to serve their Masters and learn under their tutelage. Narada, a master in all the arts and sciences conceivable by the human mind, went humbly to the great divine sage Sanatkumara, as we have recorded in the Chhandogya Upanishad. "I am unhappy, Great Master." "What have you learned already, Narada?" "All the things in the world, all the sciences, astronomy, physics, psychology, axiology, aesthetics, ethics, civics, astrology, economics, politics, religions, philosophy—there is nothing that I do not know. But I have no peace of mind."

The great master said, "All this that you have learned is only a word; you have not gone to the depths of things—the Atman has not been studied. You have only collected words, names, information about the outer structure of things, the name and the form complex of things has been made available to you by your studies that you have enumerated just now, as a series of learnings."

Likewise in the Upanishads we have instances of great seekers humbly moving towards sages and saints for the purpose of making themselves fit to receive this knowledge. Even after achieving considerable success in purifying the mind of this dross of the tendency of the mind to move in the direction of objects of sense, by duty, by service, unselfish work, the mind will refuse to concentrate on this subject. It has, as I mentioned, very fleeting ideas, one is this that I have been enumerating just now.

The other is incapacity to fix itself on anything for a long time. You try to think of something for a long time, continuously—let us see what happens. Go on looking at this tree and thinking this tree only and nothing else, after a few minutes you will think of another tree nearby. You will think of the mountain in front. You will look at the river; you will look at all the buildings, and people moving about. Distraction is another malady of the mind. How will consciousness rest itself in its pure subjectivity which is the Atman if this fickleness continues for a long time and then makes it impossible for one to be aware of anything other than what it outside?

But there is a greater danger, namely, the inability to know why this discipline is to be undergone at all. What for is all this study, Sir, finally? What do I gain? You bring a business mentality once again—what do I gain by way of profit? The mind of the human being is made in such a way that it will not undertake any kind of work, project or activity unless it is told that something will follow. This is exactly what the Bhagavadgita has condemned—you should not expect anything to follow from the pure subjectivity aspect of the work because that which follows, as it were, is a futurity which you are trying to inject into the presence. You are creating a conflict between the present and the future. Naturally there is a difference between the present and the future when you think of the future possibility of the attainment or obtaining an objective far ahead in time as a fruit accruing to the work that you are at this moment doing at the present. But the Atman is a present, it is not a future.

The reason or the rationale behind this study, this activity, is something beyond reason itself. The reason behind the need for study for the nature of the nature of the Atman—you have to say this reason is super-rational. What can be more important than your own self? Is any burden of material value superior to your own existence? Has the world any meaning minus you? Let your existence be isolated completely. You will find that the world will stand as a series of zeros or ciphers unless there is a single stroke of a

figure that makes sense and which is the Atman who does things.

There is a screen covering the consciousness of this pure subjectivity in oneself—that screen is called Avarana, the third defect of the mind. Dross—physical impurity, is removed by Karma Yoga or performance of unselfish action. The fickleness of the mind is subdued by Upasana or devout worship. And Avarana or the veil is removed by Jnana or wisdom of life. The Bhagavadgita is a standard gospel on the art of Karma Yoga, unselfish spiritual activity. The Epics and the Puranas highlight the path of devotion, Bhakti or Upasana, love of God. Upanishads deal with Jnana or wisdom of the ultimate reality.

So, this teaching that is going to be imparted to you is not to be taken as a diversion from the ordinary regime of life, but a very serious matter which will polish your personality, chasten your individuality and make you a perfect individual, not only in your own self but also in human society. The teaching in academy of this kind is a spiritual discipline, it is not just intellectual information.

So I have told you something briefly about the nature of Karma Yoga or unselfish action, performance of duty for duty's sake, as a standard method laid down before us by the ancient master for cleansing the mind of all dross of extraneous desires in the direction of objects of sense; and Upasana is the love of God that you evince in your own self by daily worship performed in whatever way you would like to carry on.

When you conceive the Supreme Being, you have in the beginning a spatio-temporal imagination of that Being. God is very big, very large, very far away, very great, adorable; you offer your prostrations to that Almighty as something lovable. Even the Upanishads sometimes refers to the Supreme Absolute as the most lovable. Vanam means adorable; that Being is the most adorable. That thing which you call God, that thing which pulls your attention in its own direction, that which is the ultimate reality of things, that

which is the Self of the cosmos, is the most magnificent, beloved, lovable, beautiful, most essential of all beings. And one who loves this Ultimate Being as the most lovable, is loved by the whole world. You attract things towards yourself because you are attracted towards that which is everywhere. This is the best way of making friends in this world. You need not read Dale Carnegie and all that. If you are attracted towards that which is everywhere wholly and souly, the entire world will be attracted towards you as a natural consequence of the attraction that you feel towards that Ultimate Reality. This is how you can honestly love it, if you want to be loved by others. How can you expect love from anybody if you yourself have no love for that which is the essence of all things?

Worship or Upasana is conducted in many ways, by ritualistic methods, as we have it done in temples or on alters in one's own house, by Japa or recitation of the Divine Name, by Japa Sadhana, by prayer which is offered in the form of actual articulation of voice or even mentally, or study of scriptures. All these constitute part of Upasana, adoration, the feeling of love for that which is supremely divine.

All this process will have to be carried on for a considerable period of time in order that the fickleness of the mind may be subdued. Otherwise, if you give scant attention to this difficulty in the mind, you will find that you will not be able to appreciate the methodology prescribed in the Upanishads for the realization of the Atman. You will not only not be able to do this, you will also have a difficulty in even knowing why this meditation is carried on at all. Because many people honestly feel or may feel a difficulty in knowing what will happen to them after attaining God. Everybody knows that one has to attain God, but what will happen to you afterwards? You cannot answer this question easily because you have still a defective understanding of what you are, and therefore there is a defect persisting even in your attempt to know what will happen to you at that time. However, by protracted practice of Upasana, by worship, by Japa Sadhana, by Svadhya, by Jnana, and your

own notion of God whatever that notion may be, the fickleness of the mind comes down. It will be attentive afterwards.

After having sufficiently undergone this discipline by which the distraction of the mind is subdued and also the impulse towards sense objects is curbed, you can become a good student of the Upanishadic philosophy.

In the Upanishads, three disciplines are mentioned which are equivalent to what I mentioned to you as Karma, Bhakti and Jnana, namely sacrifice, austerity, and Gurupasakti, approaching a master for teaching. Sacrifice in ancient Vedic terminology meant, of course, the offering of holy oblations in sacred fire, but sacrifice may also mean offering mentally anything that you would like to dedicate to God. There can be externally performed sacrifice or Yajna, or a mentally conceived Yajna or sacrifice. You can be charitable by a gesture outside, or you can be charitable in your own feeling. A charitable feeling is more important than a charitable gesture. I am not trying to dilate upon the subject of sacrifice now, as many of you may know what it actually means, and also as it is not the main subject of our study.

Austerity is very important. Tapas is the pre-eminent prescription of the Upanishads for self-control, which means actually the inhibition or abstraction of the tendency of the mind to move towards things other than the self. Austerity or Tapas can be performed or carried on gradually by systematic adoption of graduated methods. The first thing you can do in your life towards performance of austerity is avoidance of luxury and go-lucky attitude. Have or keep with you only those things which are necessary for you, and don't keep those things which are not essential for a reasonably comfortable existence. This is the first step that you can take in austerity. Something is necessary for you under certain given conditions, okay, granted. But more than that you need not ask for. Eating, sleeping and comforts of any kind have to be within the limit of the exigency that you feel under the conditions that you are living, for the work that you are

doing, etc, etc, and beyond the limit you need not go. This is the first step that you may take towards austerity.

Austerity is physical, verbal and mental. You have to be restrained not only in your physical appurtenances but also in the words that you speak and the acts that you do. That is, it should not cause any kind of disharmony, incongruity in the atmosphere, and towards that end you may manipulate and adjust yourself ably for being a humane individual, a good person, in the sense that your presence does not cause conflict with anyone. In eating and in other well-known comforts of life, you maintain a minimum to the extent that it is absolutely essential. Here also a note of caution has to be exercised, namely, austerity does not mean torture of the body, nor does it mean indulgence. The path of the spirit is a *via media*; the golden mean is the path of spirituality.

We have the well-known incident often cited by people in connection with the event that took place in the life of Buddha, or perhaps it is also connected with Raja Janaka's life. Some angels were playing a stringed instrument and they were saying, "Tune not the sitar too high nor too low. If the string of the sitar is tuned too high, it will not give music, it may even snap. If it is too low, it will make a dull humming sound, it will not give music." Neither this extreme nor that extreme is the path of the spirit. Any kind of suffering is to be avoided. Over-indulgence also is to be avoided. Therefore, austerity is also a cautious exercise of one's demeanor in respect of one's own self as well as in respect of others.

So the Upanishad prescribes sacrifice, Yajna, as one method or means of self-discipline, and the other method being austerity, self-control. Self-control is actually taking all necessary steps available for oneself to enable the mind to fix its attention on the root of its own existence, the Self that is behind the mind, the real you that is so valuable to you. When it is a question of yourself, you would like to abandon everything else for the sake of yourself, meaning thereby that the importance that you attach to yourself, for some reason

or other, surpasses the importance that one feels to anything else in the world.

So, sacrifice and austerity; and then you have the most important teaching again, the third one, study under a teacher, a competent master who has trodden the path, who knows the pitfalls, who knows the difficulties, who acts like a physician with you. With these methods the dirt of the mind is scrubbed off, the fickleness is brought down, and the veil covering the Atman is lifted gradually, and the light of the sun of the Pure Spirit will shed its radiance automatically from within one's own self; knowledge will arise from within you. This is why it is said when you know yourself, you know everything. Know thyself and be free. *Atmanam vidhi*.