

Swami Ranganathananda

## Introduction to *The Message of the Upanishads*

### THE CHARM AND POWER OF THE UPANIŞADS

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*The Message of the Upanisads* [Published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai] is a study, verse by verse, of three of the principal Upanisads, namely, *Isha*, *Kena*, and *Katha*. The first contains eighteen, the second thirty-five, and the third one hundred and nineteen verses. Though constituting a small portion of the total Upanisadic literature, they yet contain a lucid exposition of all the essential ideas of this immortal literature.

Scholars are divided as to the date of the composition of the Upanisads. Many of them are agreed, however, that most of the principal Upanisads belong to the period prior to the advent of Buddha in the seventh century before Christ. There are over two hundred Upanisads, many of them sectarian in character and palpably post-Buddhistic and even post-Sankaracarya.

## **The Principal Upanisads**

The principal Upanisads are accepted to be those which Shankaracarya (A.D. 788-820) chose to comment upon; they are ten in number and are enumerated in the Indian tradition as follows: *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *MandUkya*, *Taittirilya*, *Aitareya*, *Chandogya*, and *Brhadhranyaka*.

According to some scholars, Sankara also commented on an eleventh Upanisad, the Svetashvatara. In his commentary on the Brahma-Sutra, he refers to four more, namely, *Kausitaki*, *Jabala*, *Mahanarayana*, and *Paingala*.

1. The *Isha* Upanisad embodies in its very opening verse the central theme of all the Upanisads, namely, the spiritual unity and solidarity of all existence.

2. The *Kena* illumines the nature of knowledge by pointing out the eternal knower behind all acts of knowing, and purifies man's concept of ultimate reality of all touch of finitude and relativity by revealing its character as the eternal Self of man and the Self of the universe.

3. The *Katha* holds a special fascination for all students of the Upanisads for its happy blend of charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy; it contains a more unified exposition of Vedanta than any other single Upanisad; its charm is heightened by the two characters of its dialogue, namely, old Yama, the teacher, and young Naciketa, the student.

4. The *Prasna*, as its name implies, is an Upanisad of questions; each of its six chapters comprises a question asked by each of a group of six inquiring students on various aspects of Vedanta, and the answers given by their teacher, the sage Pippalada.

5. The **Mundaka**, after classifying all knowledge into *para*, higher, and *apara*, lower, and describing all science, art, literature, politics, and economics—in fact, all positive knowledge, the knowledge of the changeful many—as *apara*, and boldly including even the holy Vedas and all sacred books in this category, proclaims that *one knowledge* as *para* ‘by which the imperishable changeless reality (of the One behind the many) is realized’. And the Upanisad sings in ecstasy the glorious vision of the One in the many.

6. In the brief compass of its twelve verses of condensed thought, the **Mandukya** surveys the whole of experience through a study of the three states of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, and reveals the Atman, the true Self of man, the *Turiya* or the Fourth, as it puts it, as pure consciousness, eternal and non-dual. It proclaims in its second verse the infinite dimension of man in a pregnant utterance—one of the four *mahavakyas* or ‘great utterances’ of the Upanisads: *ayam citma brahma*—‘This Atman (Self of man) is Brahman’.

7. The **Taittiriya**, after majestically proclaiming that ‘the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme’: *Brahmavidapnoti param*, describes the five *koshas* or sheaths that enclose and hide Brahman, and demonstrates the technique of piercing these sheaths of relativity and finitude with a view to reaching the infinite and the eternal at the core of experience. It also provides a scientific definition of Brahman as ‘That from which all these beings are born, by which, after being born, they live, and into which they merge when they cease to be’.

8. The **Aitareya** establishes the spiritual character of the Absolute through a discussion of the nature of the Self of man, and proclaims this truth in another of the four *ma-*

*havakyas* (V. 3): *Prajñanam brahma*—‘Brahman is pure Consciousness.’

9. The ***Chandogya*** introduces us to charming truth-seekers like Satyakama, Svetaketu, and Narada, and outstanding spiritual teachers like Aruni, Sanatkumara, and Prajapati. Through several illuminating teacher-student dialogues, the Upanisad helps us to discriminate the reality of being from the appearance of becoming. In a brief utterance of deep spiritual and philosophical import, treated as another of the four *mahnvakyas*, it sings in refrain the divinity of man: *tat tvam asi*—‘That thou art’. It prescribes a knowledge of this innate divinity of man as the one remedy for the deeper ills of life (VI. 8. 7): *tarati gokam atmavit*—‘The knower of the Atman crosses all sorrow’. In its profoundly human episode of the discipleship of Indra under Prajapati, it instructs us in the true nature and technique of man’s spiritual quest and the blessings that flow from spirituality. It is an impressive account of man’s spiritual education, his growth from worldliness to spirituality. It points out the limitations of materialism as a philosophy of life and the evils that flow from it.

10. The ***Brhadaranyaka***, the longest of the Upanisads, is, as its name implies, a big (*brhat*) forest (*aranya*) of philosophical thought and spiritual inspiration. Four outstanding personalities illumine its pages—two men and two women—Janaka, the philosopher-king, Yajñavalkya, the philosopher-sage, Maitreyi, the deeply spiritual wife of Yajñavalkya, and Gargi, the *vacaknavi*, the ‘gifted woman speaker and philosopher’, who is foremost among the questioners of Yajñavalkya in philosophical debate. The Upanisad majestically expounds, through its fascinating dialogues conducted by these outstanding and other lesser personalities, the central theme

of all the Upanisads, namely, the divinity of man and the spiritual solidarity of the whole universe in Brahman. It contains another of the four *mahavakyas* (I.4.10), namely, *aham brahma asmi* —‘I am Brahman’, besides the *ayam atma brahma* of the *Mandukya* already referred to. It dares to characterize Brahman as ‘the fearless’, and presents its realization by man as the attainment, here and now, of the state of absolute fearlessness and fullness of delight.

### **From Obscurity to Prominence**

It goes to the eternal credit of Sankara that, through his masterly commentaries on the principal Upanisads, he brought out of obscurity this immortal literature, as also the great *Bhagavad Gita*, and made them accessible and intelligible to a wider audience; and that audience has been steadily widening ever since, aided by the contributions of subsequent commentators, thinkers, and sages, until, in the present age, thanks to the techniques of modern western civilization, the whole world has become its actual or potential audience. Apart from the great western orientalists, whose translations and expositions brought this and other books of the Indian tradition to the attention of scholars in East and West, it was from Swami Vivekananda, the most authentic voice of Vedanta in the modern age, that vast masses of men and women in both the hemispheres became drawn to the spiritual charm and rational strength of this literature and to a recognition of its relevance to man in the modern age. In his lecture on ‘Vedanta and Its Application to Indian Life’, the Swami says (Complete Works, Vol. III, Eighth Edition, pp. 237-38):

‘Strength, strength is what the Upanisads speak to me from every page. This is the one great thing to remember,

it has been the one great lesson I have been taught in my life. Strength, it says, strength, O man, be not weak. “Are there no human weaknesses?”—says man. There are, say the Upanisads, but will more weakness heal them, would you try to wash dirt with dirt? Will sin cure sin, weakness cure weakness.... Ay, it is the only literature in the world where you find the word *abhih* ‘fearless’, used again and again; in no other scripture in the world is this adjective applied either to God or to man.... And the Upanisads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world. The whole world can be vivified, made strong, energized through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the down-trodden of all races, all creeds, all sects, to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom—physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom—are the watchwords of the Upanisads.’

Sankara's commentaries on these Upanisads, especially on those of their passages pregnant with philosophical and spiritual import, are masterpieces of philosophical discussion illuminated by deep spiritual insights. His masterly handling of the Sanskrit language in these commentaries gives us a prose which is marked by brevity and vigour, simplicity and poetic charm.

### **What the Upanisads Contain**

In the Upanisads, we get an intelligible body of verified and verifiable spiritual insights mixed with a mass of myths and legends and cosmological speculations relating to the nature and origin of the universe. While the former has universal validity, and has a claim on human intelligence in all ages, the latter forswears all such claim. All positivistic knowledge contained in any literature, including religious literature, is limited and conditioned by the level of contem-

porary scientific knowledge. Modification, and even scraping, of much of this knowledge due to subsequent advances has affected the truth-validity of much of man's literary heritage, including his religious and philosophical ones.

The spiritual insights of the Upanisads, however, are an exception to this tyranny of time. Subsequent scientific advances have not only not affected their truth-value but have, on the contrary, only helped to reveal the rational basis of their insights and enhance their spiritual appeal. This is no wonder, because these insights are the products of an equally scientific investigation into a different field of experience, namely, the world of man's inner life.

### **Satyasya Satyam**

By sheer speculation on the meaning of the facts of the external world, the Vedic thinkers had earlier arrived at a unitary conception of the universe, at a materialistic monism, through their concepts of *avyakta*, indeterminate nature, or *prana* cosmic energy. But the culminating point of their discoveries was the spiritual unification of all experience in the Atman or Brahman: *Brahmaivedam visvamidam varishtham*—‘All this manifested universe is verily Brahman the Supreme’ (*Mundaka*, II. 2. 12); *idam sarvaram yadayam atma*—‘All this (manifested universe) is this Atman’ (*Bṛhadaranyaka*, II. 4. 6); and *tat etat brahma apurvam anaparam anantaram abahyam, ayam atma brahma sarvanubhuh*—‘This Brahman is without a prior or a posterior, without interior or exterior, this Atman is Brahman, the experiencer of everything’ (*ibid.*, II. 5. 19).

If everything is the Atman or Brahman, the universe of name and form cannot be an illusion. The Upanisads consider

it as *maya*; but this does not mean illusion. *Maya* is a mere statement of fact, what we are and what we see around us. It refers to the inner contradictions involved in our experience of the world and in our knowledge of it. These contradictions will remain, say the Upanisads, so long as we remain at the sensate level, so long as we fail to take into account the Atman, the Self behind the not-Self, the One behind the many. Yet, all our experiences and knowledge in the sphere of *maya* are experiences and knowledge of the Atman, coming through the sense-organs. Hence they are not illusory, but true. Man travels, says Swami Vivekananda, not from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from truth that is lower to truth that is higher. Hence the Upanisads describe the world of the not-Self as 'truth' and the Self or Atman as 'The Truth of truth'. This is conveyed in a significant passage of the *Brhadaranyaka* (II. 1. 20) :

*Tasyopanisat satyasya satyamiti; prana vai satyam; tesam esa satyam*—'Its (Atman's) intimate name is the 'Truth of truth'; the cosmic energy (*prana*) is, verily, truth; and This (the Atman) is the truth of that'.

Elucidating this Vedantic idea, Swami Vivekananda says (Complete Works, Vol. V, Seventh Edition, p. 272):

'There is really no difference between matter, mind, and Spirit. They are only different phases of experiencing the One. This very world is seen by the five senses as matter, by the very wicked as hell, by the good as heaven, and by the perfect as God.'

### **Inquiry into the 'Within' of Nature**

Pointing out the reason for this change in the field of search from the external to the internal, which occurred in ancient India, and its significance for human thought, Swami



Vivekananda says (ibid., Vol. III, Eighth Edition, pp. 330-31):

‘Just as the Greek mind, or the modern European mind, wants to find the solution of life and of all the sacred problems of being by searching into the external world, so also did our forefathers; and just as the Europeans failed, they failed also. But the western people never made a move more, they remained there; they failed in the search for the solution of the great problems of life and death in the external world, and there they remained stranded. Our forefathers also found it impossible, but were bolder in declaring the utter helplessness of the senses to find the solution. Nowhere else was the answer better put than in the Upanisads: *yato vaco nivartante aprapya manasa saha*—‘From whence words, unable to reach, come back reflected, together with the mind’ *Taittiriya*, II. 4); *na tatra caksurgachati na vaggacchati*—‘here the eye cannot go, nor can speech reach’ (*Kena*, I. 3). There are various sentences which declare the utter helplessness of the senses, but they did not stop there; they fell back upon the internal nature of man, they went to get the answer from their own soul, they became introspective; they gave up external nature as a failure, as nothing could be done there, as no hope, no answer, could be found; they discovered that dull, dead matter would not give them truth, and they fell back upon the shining soul of man, and there the answer was found’.

Posing the question how the West, which has undoubtedly been in the forefront of advance in several fields of knowledge from the time of the Greeks, could lag behind India in this field of inquiry these thousands of years, Professor Max Müller answers (Three Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy, London, 1894, p. 7):

‘But if it seems strange to you that the old Indian philosophers should have known more about the soul than

Greek or medieval or modern philosophers, let us remember that however much the telescopes for observing the stars of heaven have been improved, the observatories of the soul have remained much the same.'

### **Science and Religion**

All science is the search for unity. Vedanta discovered this unity in the Atman; it followed its own method relevant to this field of inquiry. But it illustrated its conclusions with whatever positive knowledge was available at the time. In recent centuries this knowledge has been advanced radically and vastly by modern science, the impact of which on Vedanta, however, has been most wholesome. In fact, Vedanta hopes for and welcomes further radical advances in modern science by which its own spiritual vision of the One in the many may be corroborated by positive scientific knowledge, so that the spirituality of science and the spirituality of religion may flow as a united stream to fertilize all aspects of human life. Referring to this fact and hope in his 'Paper on Hinduism' read at the Chicago Parliament of Religions on 19 September 1893, Swami Vivekananda says (Complete Works, Vol. I, Eleventh Edition, p. 15):

'All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run. Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today, and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language and with further light from the latest conclusions of science.'

Vedanta is thus both religion and philosophy. As religion, it discovers the truths of the inner world, and fosters the same discovery by others; and as philosophy, it synthesizes this science of the inner world with the other sciences of the outer world, to present a unified vision of total reality, and to im-

part to human life and character depth of faith and vision along with breadth of outlook and sympathy.

Religion, according to Vedanta, is supersensual knowledge; it is not supernatural, but only supersensual. Vedanta does not speak of any supernatural revelation. What lies within the sphere of the senses is not the concern of religion; nor has it the competence for it, says Vedanta, for that is the field of the positive sciences, the verdict of which will always hold in this field in preference to the verdict of religion. 'Not even by a hundred statements of the Sruti (body of supersensual knowledge, or scripture), can fire become cold', says Sankara, because it goes against what has been ascertained by sense experience and positive knowledge. On the other hand, the positive sciences have no authority in the super-sensual field of experience. They overreach themselves when they pronounce judgements on subjects like soul and God; they may, and often are, competent to provide hints and suggestions; but the inquiry itself is the concern of another science, the science of religion. Clarifying the position of these two types of sciences, Swami Vivekananda says (Complete Works, Vol. VI, Sixth Edition, p. 81):

'Religion deals with the truths of the metaphysical world just as chemistry and the other natural sciences deal with the truth of the physical world. The book one must read to learn chemistry is the book of (external) nature. The book from which to learn religion is your own mind and heart. The sage is often ignorant of physical science because he reads the wrong book—the book within; and the scientist is too often ignorant of religion, because he, too, reads the wrong book—the book without.'

### **Sruti versus Smrti**

The Upanisads are an impressive record of this 'reading of the book within'. The scriptures of every religion are such records. But all of them, except the Upanisads, contain also a good bit of extraneous matter, not only myths and legends and cosmological theories, which the Upanisads also contain, but also a large number of rules and regulations, with their do's and don'ts, to guide the individual and collective conduct and behaviour of their respective followers. The significance of these latter being merely local and temporary, they are not capable of universal application and are not relevant for all time; the fundamental message of all religions, however, derive from their central core of essential spiritual truths which are universal and for all time. The Upanisads are the only sacred books which addressed themselves exclusively to the discovery of these essential spiritual truths and to leading man, irrespective of creed and race, to their realization in his own life. Indian tradition refers to the Upanisads, therefore, as Sruti, as contrasted with another class of religious literature known as Smrti, including the Dharma Sastra, to which it wisely left the work of forging social rules and regulations in the past, as it would leave it to the political constitutions and social consciences today



*Source: Pages 1-8 of the Introduction to The Message of the Upanishads by Swami Ranganathananda. Mumbai. Bharatiya Viaya Bhavan. 2<sup>Nd</sup> Edition 1971.*

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