
UNIT 4a PRASNA UPANISHAD

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4a.0 OBJECTIVES

This Upanishad is in the form of questions. It is considered to be the Upanishad of the later period around the time of Buddha. This simple Upanishad deals with practical inquisitive questions of the disciples. The Upanishad clearly portrays

- How from the empirical observations and the natural enquiry on them, human beings are led to higher notions and meaning of life.
- The right preceptor allows the disciples to raise their doubts and rightly instructs them regarding the essential source and Ultimate cause of the world. This unit presents the insights of Prasna Upanishad very briefly.

4a.1 INTRODUCTION

Prasna Upanishad has evolved from the *atharva* veda. It is also a mystical Upanishads. This Upanishad is said to be a commentary on the Mundaka Upanishad. The mantras of Mundaka Upanishad have been elaborately dealt in *Prasna Upanishad*. *Prasna* etymologically means question. As the name *Prasna* implies, this Upanishad is an Upanishad of questions. It contains six chapters. Each prasna, chapter is logically connected to the next. The first section contains sixteen verses and the second with thirteen. The third has twelve verses. Fourth deals with eleven verses. Fifth Prasna has seven while the Sixth Prasna contains eight verses.

Each of the chapter comprises of question asked by a group of six inquiring students on various aspects of reality. Six seekers of the Supreme, namely Sukesha, Satyakama, Kausalya, Kabandi, Son of Bhrigu and grandson of Surya approach the master Pippalada. They raise six questions pertaining to Cosmology, the devas, the nature and origin of *prana*, sleep and dream, *Pranava* or mystical *AUM* and *purusha* of sixteen *kalas* or parts. The teacher, Pippalada, answers them. The

request made by the disciples with keen interest for knowing the supreme reality is accepted by the teacher. Pippalada starts his teaching by life asking them to live for a year with complete control of their senses, with *brahmacarya* and *sraddha*, faith. Thereafter they are asked to approach the guru for higher knowledge. The disciples, taking the instruction of the teacher live a life of penance and abstinence for a year strictly and once again approach the guru, the preceptor for further knowledge on the Supreme. As these disciples are keen on knowing the nature of ultimate cause and so on, these questions and answers are formulated as chapters. The six questions put forth are as follows.

- 1) From where are these creatures born?
- 2) Who are the deities that sustain them?
- 3) How does life imbibe the body?
- 4) What is the truth about wakefulness, dream and dreamless sleep?
- 5) What purpose is served by being devoted to *AUM*?
- 6) What is the relationship between the Supreme God-head and the individual Self?

The statements made in the Upanishad are precise and the words used are definite. Through them the essential truths are very well brought out. They take the readers from the experience of the gross material world through the subtle to the beyond marvelously.

4a.2 SOURCE OF ALL BEING

The sage Kabandhi, son of Ka⁻tya, asks the teacher about the source of all the beings. The question is about the source from which all creatures are born. The Creator performed austerity in the form of meditation first created a couple. Then matter (*rayi*, food) and energy (*pra[?]nòà*, the consumer of food) emerged for producing beings. The sun is *pra[?]nòà* and the moon is food. Anyone who takes up path of action reaches the world of the moon. Once again the person returns to this material and mortal world to be born again. The Sun is the sum total of all creation as it absorbs all living beings into its rays. The sun holds the vital-force of every created being. It is the source of all energy and is immortal and free from free. It becomes the supreme destiny from where there is no return to the world or rebirth. By searching for the self through the control of sense, abstinence, faith and meditation, one conquers the Sun. The sun is understood as the father with five feet i.e. five seasons and twelve forms i.e. twelve months of the year. It is a common understanding that sun causes the rains. The rays of the sun is symbolically presented as the seven wheels of a chariot with six spokes. The lord of creatures is *Praja⁻pati*. Day and night are *Praja⁻pati*. Day is energy and night is matter. Every month is divided into two parts, first dark fortnight is said to be of matter (*rayi*) and the bright fortnight is energy (*pra[?]nòà*). The matter (*rayi*, food) is the food which is *Praja⁻pati* from whom all creatures are born.

4a.3 PRANA: SUSTAINER OF BEINGS

A sage Bhargava of the Vidarbha country, approaches the teacher and asked a question about the number of powers that sustain a being and who among the these powers or factors is the Supreme. Pippalada answered that the powers that

support and illumine the beings are ether, air, fire, water, earth, speech, mind, sight and hearing. All of them sustain and support the material world and the physical body. Life breath or *prana* is Supreme. The queen bee goes upward or downward or goes out or comes in, all the bees do the same. Similarly all other vital energies journey travel with *pra?nòà*. It is *pra?nòà* that sustains beings. They all accept and praise life energy. The sensory organs and other elements obey the *prana*. It is praised as the prajapati who entered the womb as the foetus to play the game of life. The *prana* is subtle as well as gross. It is held to be the one who pours as rain for all the creatures to be happy hoping for a good harvest and plenty of food. As a giver of food it is said to be the father. *Prana* is the enjoyer of the offering and the universal lord of existence. In fact, it is everything. All creatures who are under the control of life pray thus, “Protect us as a mother and grant to us prosperity and wisdom”.

4a.4 PRANA AND HUMAN BODY

The sage, Kausalya, son of Asìvala, asked the teacher about the *prana*. From where the *prana* was born, how it entered this body, how it resided there, how it departed from the body and how it supported the external things. What is its relation with Self? The teacher, Pippalada answers these questions in the third chapter. *Prana* born from the Self enters the body, due to the actions of the mind. A person’s life in the body is appropriated by the activities in the previous existence. *Prana* engages the other energies as king who employs all the others and orders them, “reside here and govern such and such places.” So *Prana* commands others to reside in their respective places.

The residence of *Prana* is said to be in the eyes, ears, mouth and nose. *Apana*, out-breath is in the two lower parts of the body, namely organs of excretion and procreation. In the middle, *samana*, equalizing energy distributes the food all over the body. The self, the subtle body is in the heart. There are 101 chief nerves in the body. Each of these nerves has 100 divisions. Each division is further divided into 72000 sub branches, known as *nadis*. Among these *nadis*, *Vyana*, all pervading air, moves and spreads out in the body and moves in all the nerves. *Udana*, up-breath moves upward due to virtues, moves downwards due to sins and to the human world due to virtues and sins. The external *prana* is Sun. The air that is within is *samana*. The air outside is *Vyana*. *Udana* is luminous. One enters into *Prana* in rebirth as per whatever he thought at the time of death. *Prana* with *Udana* and soul leads to the world of his desire. One who knows all about *prana* achieves immortality.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided to write your answer

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit

1) How does Prasna Upanishad explains the ultimate cause of the world?

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4a.5 PRANA AND STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The grandson of Surya, Gargya asks the teacher about the organs that go to sleep, organs that function during sleep, the experiencer of the dream, happiness and so on. Pippalada replies with the simile of sunrise and sunset where the rays of the sun get diversified and dissolved respectively. Likewise, everything gets unified in mind during sleep. In the state of sleep a person hears not, sees not, smells not and tastes not. The vital force, *Prana* alone is said to be keeping awake in the body. Samana carries the two oblations of inspiration and expiration equally into the system. Life conceived as a sacrifice and life breath is compared to the sacred home fire of a householder called *garhapatya*. The mind is said to be the sacrifice. The fruit of the sacrifice is *udana*, up-breath. Deep sleep leads the sacrifice nearer to Brahman everyday. In the dream state, mind experiences. In deep sleep, everything gets merged into the Self. All – earth, water, light, air, ether and their respective element; the eyes, the senses of smell, taste, touch, speech, and hands, organs of generation, the feet, the mind, the intellect, the ego and all activities – rest in the self in deep sleep. A comparison is made with that of the nest on the tree to which birds return back after a long flying. The self is the doer, the intelligent and the supreme immutable higher self. The one who realizes that the complete all-pervasiveness is in that imperishable being, attains the Self and becomes omniscient.

4a.6 MEDITATION ON AUM

The sage Satyakama, son of Sibi, asked Pippalada about the result of meditation on *AUM*. Brahman is equaled with *AUM*. The supreme ever remains attracting all towards Him and is ever the highest reality. Everyone who meditates upon one element, A, becomes an enlightened person, but comes quickly to the earth after death. As a human being born on earth one becomes great with self-control, countenance and faith. The one who meditates on two elements, 'AU' identifies himself with the mind. He is exalted to the intermediate space, the world of moon. Yet, having enjoyed its grandeur and greatness of life, one would come back to this world again. Anyone meditating on the identity on *purusa* with *AUM*, is said to be unified with the light, the sun. He is freed from sin and lifted to the *Brahmaloka*, world of Brahma. He sees the person that dwells in the body as higher than the highest life. This person is an enlightened and undisturbed one and he reaches supreme reality that is beyond old age and death through *AUM*. The supreme bliss which is eternal is attained by means of meditation upon *AUM*.

4a.7 EXISTENCE OF PURUSA

The sage Sukesha of the clan of Bharadvāja asks the teacher regarding the existence of the *purusa* of sixteen parts. The teacher replies saying that *purusa* exists inside the body. The sixteen limbs of the *purusa*, namely life, faith, space, air, light, water, earth, senses, mind, food, virility, discipline, mantra, action, world and individuality, all originate from him. These parts are said to be like spokes of a wheel with the spirit at its hub. He created the *prana*. From *prana* came faith, space, air and food. From food came vigor and self control. Just as the rivers get merged into the sea ultimately, similarly the sixteen parts disappear

on reaching the Ultimate and become *Purusa*. The one who realizes this becomes immortal. The Upanishad ends up with a call, “Know the Self, the worthy one to be known. Beyond this *purusa*, the supreme, there is no other thing.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided to write your answer

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Explain the Meditation on AUM with its significance.

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4a.8 LET US SUM UP

The Prasna Upanishad in six sections deals with six questions raised by the disciples who have keen interest to know of the nature of the ultimate cause, the power of AUM, the relation of the Supreme to the world and so on. First enquiry is about the origin of creatures in the world. The Lord of creatures, the prajapathi is established from the discussion on creation of various things. The ultimate source of all beings is said to be the vital energy. The second question mainly relates to the different aspects of the vital breath, *pra?nà*. How this vital life energy is the sustainer of all beings and all other energies gain support from *pra?nà* for their existence, are well dealt. As a queen bee the *pra?nà* leads every other energy. The third *prasna* enumerates the relation of *pra?nà* with the human body. The fourth question is about the presence of *pra?nà* in various states of consciousness, such as waking, dreaming and deep sleep states. It is the witness that always keeps awake during all the stages. It is infact, present in all and it is called the self which is all pervading in nature. The fifth section beautifully explains the meditation on the syllable *aum* and its significance. The results of meditation on each part of the syllable are well elaborated. The final question is about the nature of the *purusa*. It is present in the body throughout and is the source of all. The teacher concludes that there is nothing higher than the Supreme which is worthy to be known.

4a.9 KEY WORDS

Mantra : Mantra is a sound, syllable, word, or group of words that are considered capable of “creating transformation.” Mantras originated in the Vedic tradition of India, later becoming an essential part of the Hindu tradition and a customary practice within Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

Sraddha : Sraddha (Pali: saddha, Sanskrit: sraddha = faith) is an important constituent element of the teachings of the Buddha for all traditions of Buddhism, though the kind and nature of faith changes in the different schools.

4a.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4a.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The sage Kabandhi, son of Katya, asks the teacher about the source of all the beings. The question is about the source from which all creatures are born. The Creator performed austerity in the form of meditation first created a couple. Then matter (*rayi*, food) and energy (*prana*, the consumer of food) emerged for producing beings. The sun is *prana* and the moon is food. Anyone who takes up path of action reaches the world of the moon. Once again the person returns to this material and mortal world to be born again. The Sun is the sum total of all creation as it absorbs all living beings into its rays. The sun holds the vital-force of every created being. It is the source of all energy and is immortal and free from free. It becomes the supreme destiny from where there is no return to the world or rebirth. By searching for the self through the control of sense, abstinence, faith and meditation, one conquers the Sun. The sun is understood as the father with five feet i.e. five seasons and twelve forms i.e. twelve months of the year. It is a common understanding that sun causes the rains. The rays of the sun are symbolically presented as the seven wheels of a chariot with six spokes. The lord of creatures is *Prajapati*. Day and night are *Prajapati*. Day is energy and night is matter. Every month is divided into two parts, first dark fortnight is said to be of matter (*rayi*) and the bright fortnight is energy (*prana*). The matter (*rayi*, food) is the food which is *Prajapati* from whom all creatures are born.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The sage Satyakama, son of Sibi, asked Pippalada about the result of meditation on *AUM*. Brahman is equaled with *AUM*. The supreme ever remains attracting all towards Him and is ever the highest reality. Everyone who meditates upon one element, A, becomes an enlightened person, but comes quickly to the earth after death. As a human being born on earth one becomes great with self-control, countenance and faith. The one who

meditates on two elements, 'AU' identifies himself with the mind. He is exalted to the intermediate space, the world of moon. Yet, having enjoyed its grandeur and greatness of life, one would come back to this world again. Anyone meditating on the identity on *purusa* with *AUM*, is said to be unified with the light, the sun. He is freed from sin and lifted to the *Brahmaloka*, world of Brahma. He sees the person that dwells in the body as higher than the highest life. This person is an enlightened and undisturbed one and he reaches supreme reality that is beyond old age and death through *AUM*. The supreme bliss which is eternal is attained by means of meditation upon *AUM*.