
UNIT 2 BRIHADARANYAKA

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit you are expected to know the essential content of the Upanishad such as:

- significance of the Asvamedha sacrifice and the creation of the Universe
- the meaning of ‘prana’ (life)
- the importance of vital force
- the theme of ‘Righteousness’
- the magnanimity of Supreme Brahman
- the direction of seeking the Truth and Supreme Brahman

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Brihadaranyaka is literally translated as ‘Great-forest-teaching’. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is generally recognized to be the most important of the Upanishads. It forms the part of Shatapatha Brahmana. It illustrates an all-embracing, absolute, self-luminous and blissful reality of Brahman recognized as Atman. The Upanishad is widely known for its philosophical statements. The whole composition of the Upanishad is in prose except for a few verses here and there. There are six chapters. They are further divided into forty seven sections called Brahmanas and they are further divided into paragraphs called Kandikas. There are three major sections or Kandas consisting of – Madhu Kanda which explains the teaching of basic identity of the individual and the universal self. Muni Kanda or Yajnyavalkya Kanda has philosophical teachings and Khila Kanda narrates certain modes of worship and meditation. The aim of the Upanishad is to teach about self and thereby to show the identity of Atman and Brahman.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW

The first chapter deals with Asvamedha sacrifice and creation. It is known as Madhu Kanda. The Upanishad starts with the description of a sacrificial horse as

a cosmic form. Each part of the horse is described as a divine thing in nature. And the horse has to be meditated as Prajapati or Hiranyagarbha. The Upanishad says that meditating on the horse is equivalent to the horse sacrifice

There is a fable to illustrate the magnanimity of the vital force. Gods requested different organs to sing hymns for them. Once demons learnt about it they put evil to the organs and it was only Vital force who could chant for the gods, rescued the organs from evil, fought against the death and brought victory to the gods. As an appreciation, gods offered food for vital force and all the organs agreed to be the part of the vital force.

The creator created the Universe and food. There are seven types of food created. One is the basic food for sustenance. Two foods for gods mean of making libation to the gods. One is for animals – milk. The other three he retained for himself.

Second to fourth chapters are Muni Kanda or Yajnyavalkya Kanda. The second chapter starts with a discussion between Ajathasathru and Gange. Ajathasathru preaches about self and explains three state of mind – waking, dream and deep sleep.

Whereas Yajnyavalkya teaches, answers and speaks; about Self with his wife, scholars at the emperor Janaka's court and to the emperor Janaka himself. Yajnyavalkya tells his wife Maitreyi about the knowledge of self. He says that the real self is heard, reflected on and meditated upon and thus realized. Everyone even the gods, being and all reject the man who knows them to be different from the self, because all these are only the self. As various kinds of smoke proceed from the fire kindled with damp fuel, even so the Veda etc. have come out of the Supreme Self.

The Emperor Janaka performed a sacrifice and wished to give a thousand cows to a learned Vedic scholar. Yajnyavalkya instructs his pupil to lead the cows to his place. And when challenged by the other scholars he answered all their questions satisfactorily.

One of the scholars asked him - what is immediate and direct, to the inner self. He replied that it is that which works in the body – 'prana, apana, vyana and udana'. He further explained that it is a sun, hearer, thinker and knower in every body and it cannot be seen directly, heard, thought or known like a sense object. He said more by explaining that it does have physical or psychological emotion. The one who understands this knowledge, he too will be just such. Self knowledge he said once attained will not be lost. When asked if he is aware of 'inner control' and the sutra connect to it. He confirmed that he knows and said that the sutra is 'vayu', and explained about the inner control how it is in all being but not acknowledged. It does not have a separate body but it is his presence that makes the body and the organs. He gave in detail the strength of the inner control,

“adrsto drasta, asrutah srota, amato manta, avijnato vijnataesa ta atmantaryamy amrtah ato'nyad artam,” (3. 8.1)

He said, “The inner self that control is yourself and immortal.”

For the question which is above heaven, below the earth, which is heaven and earth both in between and which was, is and will be. Without hesitation he replies that it is 'unmanifested ether'.

Once he was examined by the scholars, Yajnyavalkya questioned the scholars in return. He asks them: if the tree is pulled out, it springs again, from what root does man spurts after he is cut down by death. None was able to answer his question. He gave an explanation to his question by saying that Brahman, the absolute, intelligence and bliss, is the root from which a dead man is re – born.

Yajnyavalkya guides the emperor Janaka in understanding the Supreme Brahman. He tells him that recognizing the vital force, one has to understand Brahman at - the gross, subtle and causal body respectively in the state of waking, dream and deep sleep called as ‘Vaisvanra, Taijasa and Prajna’. He clarifies further.

Fifth and sixth chapters form the third and the last division, Khila Kanda of the Upanishad. Khila means supplement. In the beginning of fifth chapter, invocation is repeated. Adi Sankara’s commentary says, “Brahman, which is the them of all the Upanishads, is describing once more in this Mantra to introduce what follows; for certain aids, to be presently mentioned, viz, ‘OM’. Self – restraint, charity and compassion, have to be enjoined a steps to the knowledge of Brahman – aids that, occurring in this supplementary portion, from part of all meditation.”

Some explain the Mantra thus “From the infinite causes the infinite effect is manifested. The manifested effect is also infinite or real at the present moment even in its dualistic form.

The fifth chapter introduces some of the auxiliary meditation which do not clash with rites, confer to prosperity and lead one gradually to liberation.

“tad etad evaisa daivi vag anuvadati stanayitnuh – da, da, da, iti damyata, data, dayadhvam iti. Tad etad trayam sikset, daman, danam, dayam iti.” (5. 2. 3)

There is a parable about how gods, men and demons understood one sound, ‘da’. Prajapati taught gods, men and demons. At the conclusion of the education before leaving the Guru they asked for a final guidance from the Guru. Prajapati said, ‘da’ and asked them how they understood the sound. Gods said ‘da’ was ‘control,’ men said it was, ‘charity’, and demon said that it was, ‘merciful’. At that moment they heard the rumbling of the clouds sounding, da, da, da and repeated – control, give and have compassion.

The third section has, the deeper and significance of the Prajapati - heart, (intellect) – hr da ya. If one meditate on these three syllable, one obtains results corresponding to the meaning of ‘hr’ receive presents, ‘da’ receive power, ‘ya’ have heavenly world. If the meditation on the three syllables is so powerful, how much more must be that on intellect itself?

Whole of fifth chapter deals with meditation and the result of such meditation. There are meditations on – Satya, Solar being, Mind, Lightning, Vedas as cow, and Vaisvanara. The main objective of these meditations is that one must have definite goal. It is meaningless and will not yield result if one meditate on different things at a time. Meditation means concentration on one thing, deeply, regularly and with determination. The main aim of the meditation is to get enlightenment.

There is an elaborate discussion how one should be able to face illness, death and funeral. The Upanishad says that one should look at it as a penance.

The qualities, virtues and importance of the vital force are explained at different sections, with explanations and with fables. Here is a meditation on the vital force in different names. As vital force is the chief of all the organs, it has to be meditated as, “Uktha,” as it raises the universe. The one, who meditate on vital force as ‘Uktha’, will have a son who is a knower of vital force. And the one who meditates will achieve union with and abode in the same world as ‘Uktha’ then the vital force has to be meditated as “yajus,” for all the beings are joined with one another. Next one is to meditate on vital force as, ‘saman’, because it brings in the union, for him who knows it. The last one is to meditate on vital force as, ‘ksattra’, as vital force protects the wounds. The one who knows the significance of the word will not need any other protection and achieve the world of ‘ksattra’.

The meaning and the power of Gayatri chandas, meter is dealt in detail. Gayatri is the chief of the poetic meters. Only Gayatri chandas has the power to protect those who chant Gayatri Mantra. It is a prayer to ‘Savit’, the Sun. Each pada is of eight syllables. The first pada’s eight syllables are equivalent to – ‘bhumi’, the earth, ‘antariksa, the sky, ‘dyaus’, heaven. The second pada’s eight syllables are same as ‘Rcah’, ‘Yajumsi’, and ‘Samani’, the three treasures of knowledge, the three Vedas. The third pada’s eight syllables are similar to ‘prana, apana, and udana’. And the fourth pada is ‘supermundane,’ ‘paro’raja’. It is a visible foot, because the solar being is visualized and he alone shines the entire universe. The results of knowing the whole of Gayatri are incalculable.

The sixth chapter opens with an allegory. The organs had a dispute among themselves and each claimed that it was ancient and very important. Finally they decided to take their dispute to Prajapati. He said that, the organ which makes the body wrenched while leaving would be the superior than the others. So, to test each one’s superiority, organs one by one left the body for a year and came back after that period to find out how the body was in its absence. The explanation given is very practical and beautiful. The answer carries scientific meaning. To give an example, the organs said that that they lived like ‘idiots’ in the absence of mind. But still the body functioned. The last one to leave was vital force. Once it started leaving, all the organs started losing their strength. Immediately, they pleaded that the vital force should not leave the body.

“ma bhagavah utkramih, na vai saksyamas tvad rte jivitum iti, tasyo me balim kurutcti, tatheti.” (6. 1. 13)

They agreed that the vital force is the superior and offered food to the vital force.

There is an interesting, incidence about S’vetaketu, son of Goutama and grandson of Aruna. S’vetakeru after completing his education went to the court of the king Prajanya. The king asked him five questions and S’vetaketu failed to answer all the questions. Even then the king invited him to stay. But S’vetaketu left the court in shame and went to his father who was also his Guru and narrated what happened in the court. His father expressed his genuine ignorance about subject talked about in the king’s court. But at the same time, decided that he had to go to the king and learn what he did not know. He invited his son to join him. But S’vetaketu refused. The father went and requested the king to take him as a student and learnt about the doctrine of five fires - of heaven, the rain gods, the world, man and woman. The king further instructed that the householder and the hermit if they meditate on these fires then they would go to Brahma loka.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

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

3) What does the cosmic horse symbolize?

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4) Explain briefly Yajnavalkya's difference between one God and many gods

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2.3 REFLECTION ON A CORE ISSUE

The first chapter is ritualistic. At the Vedic time, Ashvamedha sacrifice was considered to be the greatest sacrifice and one who performed it would attain Brahmaloaka, the highest heaven.

In the Upanishad, the description of the sacrificing horse is symbolic. It is looked as a cosmic horse and the description brings out the psychological element that is present in the counterparts of the body of the horse, and the body of the universe out side. Adi Sankara observes that meditating on such horse will derive the result of the horse sacrifice even without performing the sacrifice.

The universe was created as creator was all alone and he wanted a company. He created male and female from his desire. At the same time he did not lose his entity. When the male and female took different species form, all creatures were born. The creator created Gods. Then he himself entered all his creation in a microcosm level as vital force. Vital force guided the different organs in the body. The description of creation is both spiritual in nature and has poetic beauty.

Perhaps, the core-statement of the Upanishad is the following:

“asatoma sadgamaya, tamasoma jyotir gamaya, mrtiyorma amrtam gamaya.” (1. 3. 28)

The Upanishad says that repetition of Mantra is being given for one who knows the vital force. The one who understands the meaning of the Mantra, if one chants the Mantra the result is elevation to divinity.

The literal meaning of the Mantra is –

“From unreality lead me to reality,

From darkness lead me to light,

From death lead me to immortality.”

The first two lines have deeper meaning. ‘From unreality (evil) lead me to reality (good),’ evil is death, if our thoughts and actions are evil, they will degrade us. So lead me away from that type of death. Lead me to good, good is immortality, if one follows righteousness, it will lead to divinity and that is immortality. The second line, ‘from darkness lead me to light,’ darkness is death, all ignorance, being of the nature of a veil, is darkness and it is death. And light is immortality opposite of darkness and divine in nature. Knowledge brings luminous, is called light, an imperishable nature. The first Mantra says help me to identify myself with the means of realization, instead of with things that are not such; while the second line says, help me to move away, for it is a form of ignorance – and attain identity with the result. The third Mantra ‘from death lead me to immortality,’ gives combined meaning of the first two and it does not have any inner meaning. If the chanter knows that the vital force is identified with the Mantra, then he will be able to obtain a boon that he desires for.

2.4 PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

The Upanishad speaks of a universal Brahman and an individual soul, Atman, and at times asserts the identity of both. Brahman is the ultimate, both transcendent and immanent, the absolute infinite existence, the sum total of all that is, was or shall be. The Upanishad brings out the mystic nature and intense philosophy, Brahman is not described as the God in a monotheistic sense but He is be all and end all, who resides within us.

The Upanishad opens with a description of a symbolic placement of the parts of the individual in the cosmic quarters, with the spiritual purpose of an individual meditation, where the subject mingles with the object. The individual mentioned here is the horse of the Ashvamedha Sacrifice, which is the object of sacred use and while, commonly considered, it is one of the items in the Asvamedha Yajna, and it becomes a part of an external act; in the Upanishad. It becomes a piece of contemplation to transfer every object to universal subject. It transforms the ritual technique into an inward contemplation of the spirit.

Adi Sankara and others have mentioned that the horse mentioned here is Prajapati or a creator of the cosmos. It is not just an animal in the sacrifice. That is how one needs to look at it. So, there is a descent from casual condition to subtle condition and from subtle to gross and from gross to the variegated forms of manifestation in this world. So also the horse to be contemplated in the various aspects of its functions, and the functions are mentioned here in respect of the ritual of the Asvamedha Sacrifice.

The creation of the Universe has symbolic description. How things came, and what is that we see with our eyes. What is the connection between the effect and cause? What is our connection with the Universal Being? What is the relationship between the individual and the Absolute? All these are discussed in detail.

The Upanishad narrates how the ignorance can be removed by understanding the vital force - the self. It is difficult to say when or how the ignorance comes. But the knowledge, determination to know the truth, a seeker can understand self. Once it is realized that the self is the supreme Brahman, knower will become Brahman, there will be no distinction between the two.

“The coordination of the functions of the body, mind and vital force points to the existence of an extra corporeal being for whose sake all those exist. This is what

we know as the individual self. But its nature is transcendent. Stripped of the limiting adjuncts that are superimposed by nescience, the individual self is identical with the Supreme self.

Only material things, which effects and have dimensions, come within the range of the organs, but not the Self. Similarly it is beyond all other characteristics of limited objects such as decay, relationship, bondage, pain and death.”(Ramakrishna Math publication)

Adi Sankara says even though each caste is assigned with specific rituals, meditation guides to enlightenment. In the Upanishad it is repeatedly stressed on the importance of meditation and suggests that it is equivalent to rituals and brings intelligence and understanding of self. And who ignore this and deport this world with ignorance will sustain great lose, lose of enlightenment.

But to understand an Absolute with inner intelligence is challenging to the seeker. He has to understand a Brahman who is neither coarse nor fine, neither short nor long, neither redness nor oiliness, neither shadow nor darkness. He is neither ether nor air. He is without a physical form. He cannot be measured, and devoid of interior or exterior. But every thing exists because of him. He is the seer, thinker, hearer, knower of all, “*etasmim nu khalv aksara, garga, akasa otas ca protas ca.*” Brahman is reflected in the eternal and the infinite power of knowledge, He is unconditional and a pure essence of creation.

The realization of such Brahman as supreme self will lead to ‘Truth’. This truth does not come in slow pace, but like flash of a lightning. The enlightenment is instantaneous. “Not this, not this, suggest that while there is a realm which consists of the duality of subject and object, which is perceived by the intelligence to be coextensive and reciprocally necessary, there is absolute unity from which all dualities proceed, which is itself above duality. Many systems of thought distinguish between the absolutely transcendent Godhead, ‘who dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto’ and the creator God. In this famous passage of ‘na iti na iti,’ the Upanishad speaks to us of the absolute transcendent non – empirical Godhead.” (S. Radhakrishnan)

The Upanishad takes the readers to examine the depth of perfection in them and see the purity within to realize Brahman. The means to this end is ‘Knowledge Truth, Righteousness, and understanding the magnanimity of the Heart.’ If one is determined and honest in seeking the enlightenment, one is sure to experience the power of Supreme Brahman within.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

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

1) What is the difference between ritual performance and meditation?

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2) Write a brief note on the significance of 'OM.'

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

The Upanishad starts with Asvamedha sacrifice; the horse is compared to the cosmic Being and says that each part of the horse has to be meditated upon in relation to cosmic being. Starting from the horse it takes to the creation of the Universe. There was nothing whatsoever here in the beginning. From nothing every thing started, the creation of a beautiful universe. And the magnanimity of life is 'Prana.' Self, Atman is superior to every thing else.

The Upanishad covers rituals, enthralling description of the creation of universe. It has interesting fables to make the reader to understand the importance of Vital force. The creation of 'Righteousness' is fascinating and beautiful. It brings out how Righteousness is the answer to seek the 'Truth' and Brahman. There are intellectual discourses to emphasize the magnanimity of Supreme Brahman. Literal and inner meaning of the sound 'da' word 'food,' and Mantra, astoma sadgamaya...' are narrated in highly significant way.

The Upanishad successfully narrates that the meditation is as powerful as the ritual. Various meditations are given and the results of such meditations are stressed. There is a lengthy discussion on 'Gayathi' meter.

The Upanishad is successful in helping the reader to work in the direction of seeking the Truth and Supreme Brahman.

2.6 KEY WORDS

Asvamedha : The Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice) was one of the most important royal rituals of Vedic religion, described in detail in the Yajurveda (YV TS 7.1-5, YV VSM 22-25 and the pertaining commentary in the Shatapatha Brahmana ŚBM 13.1-5). The Rigveda does have descriptions of horse sacrifice, notably in hymns RV 1.162-163 (which are themselves known as *asvamedha*), but does not allude to the full ritual according to the Yajurveda.

Hiranyagarbha : *Hiranyagarbha* (literally the golden fetus or golden womb) is the source of the creation of the Universe or the manifested cosmos in Indian philosophy. It finds mention in one hymn of the Rigveda (RV 10.121), known as the *Hiranyagarbha sukta* and presents an

important glimpse of the emerging monism, or even monotheism, in the later Vedic period, along with the Nasadiya sukta suggesting a single creator deity predating all other gods (verse 8: *yó devé?v ádhi devá éka ásit*, Griffith: “He is the God of gods, and none beside him.”), in the hymn identified as Prajapati. The Upanishads calls it the Soul of the Universe or Brahman, and elaborates that Hiranyagarbha floated around in emptiness and the darkness of the non-existence for about a year, and then broke into two halves which formed the Swarga and the Prithvi.

- Macrocosm and Microcosm** : Macrocosm/microcosm is a Greek compound of “Macro” and “Micro”, which are Greek respectively for “large” and “small,” and the word kósmos means “order” as well as “world” or “ordered world”.
- Prajapati** : In Hinduism, Prajapati (Sanskrit *praja-pati* means “Lord of creatures”) is a Hindu deity presiding over procreation, and protector of life. He appears as a creator deity or supreme god above the other Vedic deities in RV 10.121.10 and in Brahmana literature. Vedic commentators also identify him with the creator referred to in the Nasadiya Sukta.

2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The main tenor of the Upanishad is ritualism and it is characteristic of the Brahmanas in the Vedas. The description of the cosmic horse is entirely symbolic, and highly complicated to understand, as the purpose of the Upanishad is to bring out the psychological element that is present in the comparison that is made between physical counterparts of the body of the horse, and the body of the universe.
- 2) Yajnavalkya’s answers help in immediate and direct understanding of Brahman. There are references to the contraction and expansions of different gods who are ruled by it. Yajnavalkya explains that gods are nothing but manifestations of the one God – Hiranyagarbha, who is the cosmic aspect of Vital force. He expands into countless gods and contracts into one entity.

Answering about the number of gods, Yajnyavalkya says vasus are fire, the earth, air, the sky, the sun, heaven, the moon and stars. Rudras are ten organs in man and the mind. Adithyas are twelve months. Thunder is Indra and sacrifice is Prajapati. Thunder-cloud is the thunderbolt. Sacrifice is animal. The six gods are the fire, the earth, the air, the sky, the sun and heaven. Three gods are three worlds. The two gods are matter and vital force and one and half a god is air that blows.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Meditation is one of the best ways to attain enlightenment. Meditation is effective and important like rituals. The difference between rituals and meditation is the following: for a ritual performance, one has to find a place for performing the ritual, determine auspicious time, get chanters, follow rigid discipline, and prepare offerings to the gods; whereas meditation does not need most of these things. One has only to meditate for a specific duration of time, and the time suitable to one's own convenience. Of course, self-discipline is necessary. One has to meditate every day with determination and dedication. The end result of both is the same, realizing Brahman.
- 2) Usually meditation needs a word. 'OM' is the powerful word for the same. Meditative repetition of the same is the best way of realizing Brahman. Even though Brahman and Atman are the names of the same reality, it is said that OM is its most intimate appellation. Therefore, it is the best means to realize Brahman. It is both a symbol and a name.