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Jayasree Banerjee

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEACHINGS OF THE EARLY UPANIṢADS

The purpose of this thesis is to present the most important teachings of the old Upaniṣads on topics which were formulated in them in clear conceptual language for the first time in the history of Indian thought.

The introduction provides a picture of the historical and literary framework in which the Upaniṣadic texts are set out and gives a survey of the semi-mythical thinkers who were involved in formulating the Upaniṣadic ideas. These are presented in the thesis in four chapters.

Chapter One traces the emergence of the doctrine of *brahman* as the essence underlying the universe and the doctrine of *ātman* as the inmost self of man. In the course of the development of these two doctrines it was realised that *brahman* and *ātman* are, in fact, one. The direct experience of their oneness in man's own heart represents liberating knowledge and secures final salvation for him.

Chapter Two describes the development of the teaching on transmigration, through successive lives, of the unliberated individual and examines the ethical implications of the law of karma which governs those lives. The liberation (*mokṣa*) from the necessity to transmigrate through the intuitive knowledge of *brahman/ātman* is the topic of Chapter Three and the final chapter attempts to outline the initial formulations of the practical path leading to the liberating knowledge in the Upaniṣads before it was turned into a systematic yoga method in subsequent teachings of the Buddha and Patañjali.

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEACHINGS  
OF THE EARLY UPANIṢADS

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Submitted for the degree of M.A.

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## Introduction

The Vedic Aryan having settled down in his new homeland, led a comfortable and secured life. With abundance of food, shelter and mastery over his domain he was relieved of the daily struggle for existence, which allowed him to turn his attention to the world around him. The mysterious forces of nature, the sun, the moon, lightning, the regular changing of the seasons, the dawn following the night - all these roused curiosity and wonder in his mind. Many questions regarding the universe and the cosmic phenomena came to his mind, to which he could find no ready answer. When he turned his attention from his environment to himself, he discovered a great mystery there too. There were questions about himself that he could not answer either. These were questions about the meaning of his own existence, his own position in relation to the universe and his destiny. So he took upon himself the task of finding the answers to these questions which occupied his mind profoundly. This was the Vedic period, the dating of which is obscure, but is generally placed between 1500 B.C. and 600 B.C. It was a period when philosophy, religion and magic practices went hand in hand and yet were in constant conflict with each other. Nevertheless it was a period of philosophical development, in which major doctrines were formulated and expounded in the Upaniṣads, which have influenced the course of Indian philosophical development ever since.

The literature of this period consists of the four Vedas, the Ṛg Veda, the Sāma Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. Each Veda also has four parts: Mantras, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads.



## MANTRAS

The Mantras are hymns, a creation of the poets, who were called the ṛsis (seers). They 'saw' the truth while in an inspired condition. This seeing is not seeing in an ordinary sense, it is seeing with the mind's eye, an intuitive seeing. Radhakrishnan referring to the derivation of vision from the Latin video and ideas from the Greek eidos says that veda is derived from the Aryan root  $\sqrt{\text{vid}}$  which means "seeing".<sup>1</sup>

The Mantras are usually hymns to the praise of the gods and the goddesses, but in some of the later Ṛg Vedic hymns the beginnings of philosophical speculations are quite clear. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that Barua in 'A history of Pre-Buddhistic Indian philosophy'<sup>2</sup> points out that in ancient India philosophy was called hymn (*uktha*), the poets (*kavis*) were the divine philosophers and hymn chanting (*udgītha*) denoted the act of philosophising.

Also noticeable from these later Ṛg Vedic hymns is the shifting of the polytheistic ideas of the early Vedas through monotheistic to monistic tendencies, which was later developed by the Upaniṣads. There are many hymns containing speculation on the origin of the world, from which the idea of a single creator began to emerge amidst the multiplicity of the Vedic deities. This creator was variously called Prajāpati, Viśvakarman, Puruṣa, Brahmanaspati and Bṛhaspati. But this divine creator was still only a deity. However, such speculations also produced hymns such as the 'creation hymn' (R.V.10.29), in which we perhaps witness the dawn of monism. According to this hymn the world is evolved out of one. But 'that one' (*tad ekam*), the first principle is not a god like Indra or Varuṇa or Prajāpati because these gods

themselves emerged later. 'That one' (*tad ekam*) of the 'creation hymn' is beyond human grasp. It is even beyond the concept of being and non-being.

### BRĀHMANAS

These speculations of the Vedic seers continued through the Brāhmanas into the Upaniṣad. The Brāhmanas however are mainly religious texts. They discuss the duties and the rituals to be observed by the householders and guide the priests through the complicated details of sacrificial rites. They also describe the origin, purpose and meaning of the ritual acts and establish the significance of the sacrificial rites. The Aitareya and Śatapatha are the two chief Brāhmaṇas.

The Mantras are composed by the poets, while the Brāhmanas are the works of the priests and therefore lack the freshness and the inspiration of the Vedic hymns.

It is noteworthy that it was in this period of the Brāhmanas that the class system of the Aryans was transformed into the rigid cast system of the later times and the system of the four āśramas (the four stages of life) was also formulated around this time, which became one of the central features of Hindu religion later on. According to this system every Vedic Aryan has to go through four stages of life, i.e. of *brahmacārin* or a student, when one has to learn the Vedas and live in celibacy; of *gṛhastha* or a householder, when he gets married, enjoys the family life and fulfils his social and sacrificial duties

as laid down in the scriptures; of *vānaprastha* or a forest dweller, when he detaches himself from his home and family and lives in the forest to prepare himself for the next life by fasting, penances and meditation; of *saṅnyāsīn* or a homeless wanderer, when he has renounced all worldly attachments and possessions and lives the life of an ascetic and strives for enlightenment.

### ĀRANYAKAS

The next development in the Vedic literature was the *Āraṇyakas* or the forest books. They come between the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Upaniṣads* and form the concluding portions of several *Brāhmaṇas*. Some scholars believe that the name *Āraṇyaka* indicates that they were not for general circulation but to be studied in seclusion in the forest. Most of them are composite works, containing hymns, *Brāhmaṇa* and *Sūtra* elements. They mainly expound the mysticism and symbolism involved in the ritual acts and serve as objects of meditation for those who have become forest dwellers (*vānaprastha*) after leaving home. The rituals of a householder (*gṛhastha*) is substituted by meditation on the symbolic and spiritual aspects of sacrifice. The concept of inner sacrifice rather than other, formal sacrifice is developed and the meditation takes the place of the performance of the sacrifice. The *Āraṇyakas* form a transition between the predominantly ritualistic *Brāhmaṇas* and the predominantly speculative *Upaniṣads*.

### UPANIṢADS

The *Upaniṣads* form the concluding portions of the Vedas and are

called the Vedānta (Veda-anta), the end of the Vedas. They contain records of Indian speculations on the origin, the nature and the destiny of man and of the universe from the earliest time in which philosophy and the mysticism of the Vedic hymns were developed to their highest peak. Many different philosophical theories and ideas are set in them in a dialogue form. They also contain records of a number of great philosophical debates.

As a part of the Veda, the Upaniṣads belong to śruti or revealed literature. The truth is revealed to the 'seer' in a state of ecstasy. It is a direct experience of the real, a revelation of the divine.

The Samhitas and the Brāhmaṇas (the hymns and the liturgical books) represent the *karma-kāṇḍa* or the ritual portion, while the Upaniṣads represent the *jnāna-kāṇḍa* or the knowledge portion. An individual has to prepare himself step by step through the learning of the hymns, the performances of the rites and meditation and understanding of the Āraṇyakas for the higher knowledge of the Upaniṣads, which leads one to enlightenment.

#### THE ORIGIN AND THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'UPANIṢAD'

Many different views are held on the origin and meaning of the word 'Upaniṣad'. According to Radhakrishnan,<sup>3</sup> the word is derived from the root √ṣād - to sit, preceded by the two prepositions - ni-down uap-near. It means "sitting down near" the teacher to receive instruction.

Gradually it came to mean a sort of secret doctrine or *rahasyam*. Sometimes it is made to mean what enables us to destroy error, and approach truth.

Deussen<sup>4</sup> points out that 'Upaniṣad' is usually explained by the Indian writers by *rahasyam* (secret). He supports them by referring to many instances in the Upaniṣads where instructions have been given not to impart a certain doctrine to students unworthy of it. Several passages<sup>5</sup> instruct that the doctrine should be imparted only to a son or a pupil. Other passages<sup>6</sup> warn that the doctrine must not be communicated to the common people, to a Śūdra or to a woman, otherwise both the teacher and the pupil, 'go downwards after death'.

There are also many instances<sup>7</sup> when a teacher refuses to instruct a pupil until by his perseverance he has proved to be worthy of receiving instruction. All these certainly indicate that the teachers of the Upaniṣads wished to keep their doctrines secret from the unworthy persons and therefore according to Deussen the Indian writers are justified in explaining the word 'Upaniṣad' by *rahasyam*.

In an attempt to understand how 'Upaniṣad' came to signify 'secret meaning', 'secret instruction' and 'a secret', he explains that the word is derived from the root ṣad - to sit, which denotes 'a sitting', preceded by the preposition upa - nearby which indicates 'a confidential secret sitting'. He assumes that 'Upaniṣad' (secret sitting) was also used in course of time to denote the purpose of the sitting, i.e. secret instructions. In time the original concept of 'sitting' was forgotten and it came to signify 'secret instruction', etc.<sup>8</sup>

Sankara derives the word from the root  $\sqrt{\text{ṣad}}$  - to 'loosen', to 'reach' or to 'destroy'<sup>9</sup> and says that the knowledge of *brahman* is called Upaniṣad

because it loosens or destroys ignorance and with it the bonds of conception, births and decay or because it leads one to *brahman* or because the highest God is seated therein.<sup>10</sup>

In general 'Upaniṣad' is recognised to be the title of a group of books containing a collection of secret philosophical theories and doctrines imparted by various teachers to their worthy pupils at various sessions and assemblies.

#### NUMBERS AND DATES OF THE UPANIṢADS

There are over two hundred Upaniṣads though only one hundred and eight of them are recognised by the Indian tradition. However, there is considerable difference of opinion about the most original of them.

Śankara commented on eleven Upaniṣads, they are - Īśa, Kena, Kāthaka, Praśṇa, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Taittirīya, Aitareya, Chāndogya, Bṛhadāraṇyaka and Śvetāśvatara. Max Müller translated these as well as Maitrāyaṇīya. Hume translated the above mentioned twelve together with Kauśītaki as the thirteen principal Upaniṣads. Deussen although he translated at least sixty Upaniṣads, considered fourteen of them to be original and having a connection with Vedic schools. These fourteen are Bṛhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Taittirīya, Aitareya, Kauśītaki, Kena, Kāthaka, Īśa, Śvetāśvatara, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Praśṇa, Maitrayaṇīya and Mahānārāyaṇa. According to Radhakrishnan however, the eleven Śankara translated along with the four - Kauśītaki, Jābāla, Mahānārāyaṇa and Paiṅgala - that he commented on in the Brahma-Sūtra together with Maitrī Upaniṣad constitute the sixteen principal Upaniṣads.

It is not possible to date the Upaniṣads accurately because they have been compiled over a long period of time and also most of them contain both earlier and later elements side by side. However, the earliest of them are evidently pre-Buddhistic. The accepted dates for these are between 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. The oldest of them are in prose and are non-sectarian. Deussen arranges them chronologically in the following order:

The ancient prose Upaniṣads are Bṛhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Taittirīya, Aitareya, Kauśītaki, and parts of Kena. The earlier parts of these Upaniṣads are closely linked with their Brāhmanas and Āraṇyakas. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka and the Chāndogya, according to Deussen, are the oldest as well as the richest in content. Verses 1-13 of the Kena and 4.4.8-21 of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka form the transition to the Metrical Upaniṣads and are probably later additions.

The Metrical Upaniṣads are Kāthaka, Īśa, Śvetāśvatara, Muṇḍaka and Mahānārāyaṇa. The language of these is almost throughout metrical. Mahānārāyaṇa appears to make use of Muṇḍaka and Muṇḍaka of Śvetāśvatara. Īśa seems to be less fully developed than Śvetāśvatara and free from sectarian bias, but is rather dependent on Kāthaka.

After the Metrical Upaniṣads come the later prose Upaniṣads. These are Praśna, Maitrāyaṇīya and Māṇḍukya. The composition of these is in prose again but a prose quite different from the ancient prose Upaniṣads. The style is more like the later Sanskr̥t proses.

These Upaniṣads are rather dependent in their ideas on the earlier Upaniṣads as there are numerous quotations and adaptations from them.

Praśna is evidently earlier than Maitrāyaṇīya because it is quoted in Mait.6.5. The position of Māṇḍukya is difficult to determine however, as the theory concerning OM in Māṇḍukya 3 seems to be more advanced than that of Mait. 6.4. It is most probably later than Maitrāyaṇīya.

#### THE AUTHORS OR THINKERS OF THE UPANIṢADS

The names of the authors or thinkers of the Upaniṣads are not mentioned anywhere but there are some names associated with some of the chief doctrines of the Upaniṣads as their exponents. These names are: Mahidāsa Aitareya, Raikva, Pratardaṇa, Gārgyāyana, Jaivali, Jābāla, Varuṇa, Bālāki, Ajātaśatrū, Uddālaka, Yājñavalkya and Gārgi.

#### BRIEF ACCOUNTS OF THEIR LIVES

##### Mahidāsa

Mahidāsa Aitareya was the founder of the Aitareya School. According to Chān. 3.16.7 he lived for one hundred and sixteen years. He named his system after his mother Itarā.

According to Sāyana's introduction<sup>11</sup> to the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa Mahidāsa was a son of a Brāhman sage by a low caste woman called Itarā. His father preferred his other sons to Mahidāsa. His mother, sad at this, prayed to Mahi, the goddess earth, who granted her prayers. With her blessings Mahidāsa was able to compose the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa

and the Āraṇyaka. However, there is considerable doubt now about whether the Aitareya Āraṇyaka as we now have it have been actually composed by him or not, though it may without doubt be ascribed to his school.

### Raikva

A brief account of Raikva's life is given in Chān. 4.2.5. According to it he lived under the patronage of King Mahāvriṣas. He was a famous teacher of the time. The part of the country where he lived became famous under the name of Raikva-parṇa villages.

### Pratardaṇa and Gārgyāyana

Pratardaṇa and Gārgyāyana were both royal princesses. Pratardana's father was the King Divodāsa<sup>12</sup> of Kasi. Very little else is known about his life. Citra Gārgyāyana or Gāngyāyana is mentioned in Kauś. 1.1-2 to be a contemporary and teacher of Uddālaka but Bṛhad. 4.6.2 mentions him to be a pupil of Uddālaka.

### Jaivali

According to Bṛhad. 6.2.1 Pravāhaṇa Jaivali was the King of Pāncāla. Chān. 1.8.1 mentions him as the contemporary of Silaka of Salavati and Dalbhya of the school of Cikita. In a later part of the Upaniṣad (1.9.3) reference is made by Jaivali of Udara Śāndilya which indicates that he was probably later than Śāndilya.

Jābāla

Jābāla's full name is Satyakāma Jābāla after his mother Jabālā who conceived him in her youth when she was a maid servant and did not know who his father was. According to Chān. 4.4.1-5 he was a pupil of Gautama Haridrumata.

Varuṇa

Varuṇa was the father of Vṛgu Varuni (Tait. 3.1). Barua regards<sup>13</sup> Uddālaka to be his immediate predecessor. He is regarded to be the best exponent of the Taittirīya system.

Bālāki

Bālāki was from the family of Gārgya. He was known as a scholar learned in the scriptures (Kauś. 4.1 and Bṛhad.2.1.1). He lived among the Uśīnaras, the Matsyas, the Kuru Pancālas and the Kāśī Videhas. He was a Brāhman and a contemporary of the famous sage Yājñavalkya.

Ajātaśatru

Ajātaśatru was the king of Kāśī, a warrior and a philosopher. He was a contemporary of King Janaka of Videha, the famous patron of philosophy. Kauś. 4.1-20 and Bṛhad.2.1-20 give two accounts of a famous philosophical discussion between these two.

### Uddālaka

Uddālaka was born in a Brāhman family distinguished in history for Vedic learning. His father was Āruni and his son was Śvetaketu (Chān. 6.1.1), a famous Vedic scholar of his time (Chān. 4.11.2).

Uddālaka was a life-long student, an earnest seeker of truth, a lover of wisdom. He sought after truth and it did not matter to him from whom he might learn it. When his son Śvetaketu went to learn, he accompanied him, even though he was himself a renowned teacher. It is even said of him that he wandered around the country offering a gold coin to anyone who in a disputation on spiritual matter could prove him wrong. When defeated he used to become a pupil of his conqueror. Chān. 5.3.10 describes him as a younger contemporary of Jaivali. Another passage, Chān. 5.11.1-4, mentions him to be a contemporary of Aupamanyava, Paulusī Indradyumna, Śārkarākṣya, Budila-Āśvatarasvi and Aśvapati Kekaya.

According to Kauś. 1.1 he is a contemporary of Gārgyāyana, while Bṛhadāraṇyaka, in several passages, refers to him as a contemporary of Yājñavalkya. Two lists of teachers in the same Upaniṣad consider Yājñavalkya to be one of the successors and pupils of either Uddālaka or his son Śvetaketu.

### Yājñavalkya

Yājñavalkya was a famous philosopher of his time. He is also the most prominent and frequently mentioned philosopher in the

Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad. Most of the information about him is obtained from this Upaniṣad, which is the main authority on his teachings.

During his time there were philosophical debates and discussions taking part all over northern India and philosophical contests were being held at the courts of certain kings who were great patrons of philosophy. The most knowledgeable minds of the land gathered together to take part in these contests. Yājñavalkya took part in many of them and contested a number of prominent philosophers of the time. It is from the account of one of these contests<sup>14</sup> that we catch a glimpse of his bold and confident nature. This was the famous contest held by the King Janaka of Videha. The king performed a sacrifice at which were present many learned Brāhmins of the land. The king wishing to know who was the most learned of them all, enclosed a thousand cows in a pen and tied ten gold coins to the horns of each cow and announced, "Venerable Brāhmins, let him of you who is the wisest Brāhman among you, take away these cows". None of the Brāhmins dared except Yājñavalkya, who asked one of his pupils to take the cows away and thus in the most obvious way challenged the enraged Brāhmins into a contest which he was confident to win.

He was married with two wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī. The latter was a rather worldly minded woman, who cared more for worldly possessions than her husband's philosophical quests. Maitreyī on the other hand was quite the opposite. She was eager for a share of her husband's knowledge rather than his wealth.

When we meet Yājñavalkya in the 4th chapter of Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, holding the famous conversation with his wife Maitreyī, he

had already passed through the first two stages (*āśramas*) of life, i.e. *brahmacarya* (studentship) and *gṛhastha* (householder) and was on his way to *vānaprastha* (forest dweller). As a Brāhman he had already achieved at least three of the four goals of life, i.e. *dharma*, *kāma*, and *artha* (in this context respectively religious duties, love and wealth) and was on his way to try for the fourth one, which is *mokṣa* (enlightenment). He fulfilled his religious duties as a *brahmacāri* and as a *gṛhastha*. He was married with two wives and must have acquired an impressive amount of wealth by winning handsomely at many contests such as the one mentioned above.

Apart from his wife Maitreyī the name of another Indo-Āryan female philosopher is closely associated with Yājñavalkya. She was Gārgī.

### Gārgī

Gārgī probably had a more philosophically trained mind than Maitreyī who had difficulties understanding some of her husband's teachings. Gārgī on the other hand twice challenged Yājñavalkya quite skilfully (*Bṛhad.* 3.6.1 and 3.8.1-12) though she did not win on either occasion. However, it is obvious that when the whole of Northern India was reverberating with the clashes of philosophical theories and ideas, the women of the time were not sitting idle at home but taking active part in them as well.

Another point which comes out clearly from the lists of the thinkers of the Upaniṣads is that philosophy at that time was not

confined only to the Brāhmins, the Kṣatriyas also took an active part. The Kṣatriya kings held philosophical debates and assemblies at which they themselves took part and even instructed some of the famous Brāhman teachers on the deeper problems of philosophy. There are instances in the Upaniṣads when a Brāhman has been instructed by a Kṣatriya king on the famous *brāhman-ātman* theory of the Upaniṣads,<sup>15</sup> which indicate that there were seers among the Kṣatriyas as well *and* these seers or ṛṣis came to be called the rājarṣis in the post-Vedic literature.

Deussen believes that there is plenty of evidence in the Upaniṣads to suggest that the theory of *ātman*, which stands in sharp contrast to all the principles of the Vedic ritual, may have been originated by Brāhmins but was taken up and cultivated primarily in Kṣatriya circles and was kept away from the Brāhmins for a long time. It was adopted by Brāhmins in later times.

An alternative view regards the theory as being originated by Brāhmins as is evident in the Brāhmanas, however, the majority of the Brāhmins, being preoccupied with rituals and consequently uninterested in philosophy, treated the theory with indifference and hence the knowledge resided with and was cultivated by only a small group of élite Brāhmins which included seers like Yājñavalkya and Uddālaka. The theory was also accepted and nurtured by a small circle of Kṣatriyas and by another group of seers who remained outside the popular Vedic religion. They are mentioned in the Vedas (Ṛg. 10.136) as the '*munis*' (the silent wanderers). They were (the *munis*) believed to be 'liberated', which means that they were in possession of the 'liberating knowledge'. The Kṣatriyas probably kept close touch with these *munis* and were probably instructed in the theory of *ātman* by them.

THE TEACHINGS OF THE UPANIŞADS

It is not easy to say what exactly the Upaniṣads teach. Many different theories and ideas on a range of different topics that were developed by a number of different thinkers over a long period of time are presented in the Upaniṣads in the form of dialogues and discussions. Some of these theories are neither philosophical nor scientific. They represent the restlessness and striving of the human minds to grasp the true nature of reality and although the Upaniṣads do not present any set theory of philosophy or a coherent system of metaphysics, a few fundamental doctrines stand out as the central teachings of the Upaniṣads. These are: the doctrine of *brahman* and *ātman*; the doctrine of transmigration; the doctrine of *mokṣa*; and the doctrine of the path leading to *mokṣa*.

## Chapter One

### EMERGENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF BRAHMAN AND ĀTMAN

The idea of a single creator which began to emerge in some of the later Ṛg Vedic hymns was taken up by the Upaniṣadic thinkers. The hymns to the gods and goddesses were replaced by a search for the ultimate reality. Many different theories and ideas were formulated on the origin of the world. Some of these, especially the earlier ones still contain some of the early cosmogonic ideas of the Vedas. In Chān. 7.10.1 and Bṛhad. 5.5 water is regarded to be the primal entity. In Chān. 1.9.1 space is thought of as the ultimate ground. Then in Tait. 2.7 we find the more abstract idea of non-being as the origin of the world;

"In the beginning verily, this (world) was non-being.  
There from, verily, being was produced."

Chān. 3.19 combines this theory with the theory of the cosmic egg (found in Ṛg Veda, Atharva Veda, and in the Brāhmaṇas). But in the later part of Chāndogya Upaniṣad this theory is opposed in favour of 'being' as the origin of the world. It says;

"In the beginning, my dear, this (world) was just being, one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say, 'In the beginning this (world) was just non-being, one only, without a second; from that non-being - being was produced'. But verily, my dear, whence could this be? How from non-being could being be produced? On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was being, one only, without a second. It thought itself: would that I were many! Let me pro-create myself."

(Chān. 6.2.1-3)

A similar dilemma faced by the poet of the 'creation hymn' (Ṛg 10.12) trying to describe or characterise the 'absolute reality' in the condition before manifestation is apparent here. The existent

then had not emerged in its manifested form but that does not mean that it was non-existent, that there was nothing. Something cannot come into being from nothing. This absolute reality, which is the source of this universe cannot be characterised as non-existence for it is a positive being from which the whole universe came into being. But it cannot be characterised as being either, for it was not in its manifested aspect then. This is why the poet of the 'creation hymn' described it as 'the one' beyond being and non-being. However, none of these early concepts satisfied the Upaniṣadic thinkers for long and therefore, the search continued and new ideas developed.

The seers mainly followed two separate lines of investigation. One was through the analysis of the nature of cosmic phenomena, when the supreme was termed *brahman*. The other was through the analysis of the nature of man, to ascertain what he actually is in himself, when the supreme was termed *ātman*.

The search continued along these lines until the thinkers realised that what they were facing at the end of their quest was the one and the same mysterious transcendent power which is the source of all that exists and is manifested in everything that exists. It is the inmost essence of both man and the universe, the source of their existence. The two separate concepts *brahman* and *ātman* meet here. *Brahman* is *ātman* and *ātman* is *brahman*. *Brahman* is the philosophical principle realised in the universe and *ātman* when it is experienced in the inner self of man.

ETYMOLOGY OF BRAHMAN

In the Ṛg Veda *brahman* at first seems to have meant 'sacred knowledge' or utterances (*mantra*). Gradually it came to mean the mysterious power of the utterances. It was only in the Brāhmaṇas that the concept of *brahman* has acquired a great significance as the primal principle. "Puruṣa Prajāpati creates the water, enters into them as an egg in order to be born from them, and issue forth from them as *brahman*." (S.B. 6.1.1.) "There is nothing more ancient or brighter than this *brahman*." (S.B. 10.3.5.11)

The same idea that *brahman* is the primal entity is also evident in the early Upaniṣads, "Verily, in the beginning, this world was *brahman*". (Muṇḍ.6.17, Bṛhad.1.4.10-11) However, there are different views held on how *brahman* came to denote the supreme reality of the Upaniṣads. Radhakrishnan in 'Philosophy of the Upaniṣads'<sup>16</sup> lists a few of them. He relates Haug's view that *brahman* is derived from the root  $\sqrt{\text{br̥h}}$  - to swell or to grow. At first it meant sacred prayer, then it came to mean the force of nature, and later the supreme reality. Roth's view is that *brahman* is first the force of will directed to the gods, then it came to mean a sacred formula and then the absolute. Oldenberg believes that in Vedic times when the medicine man with his magic spells was the most powerful man, *brahman* means a magic spell. Then during the time of the Brāhmaṇas, *brahman* referred to the sacred hymns used in the sacrifices. Gradually it came to mean the central energy which produces the world.

Max Müller traces its origin back to 'word' as is evident from the name 'Bṛhaspati' or 'Vācaspati', lord of speech. That which

utters is *brahman*.<sup>17</sup>

Deussen assigns it a primary meaning 'prayer' which elevates the soul when we perceive the truth and the truth came to be denoted by the word.

Whatever the etymology of the word is and however it came to denote the supreme reality, it is absolutely certain that *brahman* means the supreme reality of the Upaniṣads.

#### THE THEORY OF BRAHMAN

According to the theory of *brahman* underlying this world of multiplicity there is one single primary reality, which is the basis of this world. It is omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, unchangeable and remains unaffected by time. This supreme reality is called *brahman*. It is the inmost essence of the world, which pervades everything, underlies everything and yet at the same time it transcends everything. It is self-sustained and self-existent, while everything else depends on it. *Brahman* is the mysterious force from which everything originates, by which everything is sustained and into which everything is dissolved. It is the sole source of life in all that exists, therefore this world of multiplicity can be reduced to this one single primary reality. *Brahman* as the primal entity created this universe out of itself and then entered into it as the self (*ātman*) and therefore, the universe, although created by *brahman*, is not something apart from it rather *brahman* is this universe. The universe in this sense is not a creation rather an emanation of *brahman*. The universe has no existence apart from *brahman*, and although *brahman* exists in the universe as its essence, at the same time it is transcendent to

it and therefore it is unaffected by the periodical manifestation and dissolution of the universe.

SUPREMACY OF BRAHMAN OVER THE GODS AND NATURE

Once *brahman* had become established as the supreme reality, the position of the Vedic gods in relation the *brahman* was under question now. If *brahman* is the supreme reality then what about the multitude of Vedic gods? Is *brahman* greater than the gods? Whom should one worship now, the gods or *brahman*?

"How many gods are there, really, O Yājñavalkya?  
'One', he said."

(Bṛhad. 3.9.1-9)

"Now answer a further question: Agni, Vāyu, Āditya, Kāla, Prāṇa, Anna, Brahmā, Rudra, Viṣṇu. Thus do some meditate on him, some on another. Say which of these is best for us?' And he said to them, 'These are but the chief manifestations of the highest, the immortal, the incorporeal *brahman*'."

(Mait. 4.5-6)

So the multitude of the Vedic gods were reduced now to one *brahman* and the gods were said to be manifestations of *brahman*.

There is a legend in the Kena Upaniṣad (3.1-12 and 4.1-2) which also illustrates the superiority of *brahman* to all the manifestations including the divine ones. It is the inner essence of the gods and the source of their power and greatness.

It is also the power behind all natural phenomena. In Bṛhad. 3.8.9. Yājñavalkya declares to Gārgī,

"verily, at the command of that Imperishable, O Gārgī, the sun and the moon stand in their respective positions.

At the command of that Imperishable, O Gārgī, heaven and earth stand in their respective positions. At the command of that Imperishable, O Gārgī, what one called moments, hours, days, and nights, half-months, months, seasons, years stand in their respective positions. At the command of that Imperishable, O Gārgī, some rivers flow to the east from the white (snow) mountains, others to the west in whatever direction each flows ..."

Naturally there was a great deal of curiosity about the nature of this great, divine power which is *brahman*. There were numerous speculations on the subject. Many attempts were made by the thinkers of the Upaniṣads to define *brahman* of which I shall discuss a few here.

#### DEFINITION OF BRAHMAN

The Upaniṣads record many attempts made by various seers to define *brahman*, most of which were regarded as inadequate or only partial definitions of *brahman*.

At first *brahman* was introduced as being the sun, the powerful, mysterious phenomenon which from the high heaven illuminates the whole world by its mysterious power. Dr. Werner in 'Yoga and Philosophy',<sup>18</sup> points out the philosophical significance of introducing the sun as *brahman*. He says,

"As the language of philosophy in ancient time was ... that of symbols and images, *brahman* was first introduced as being the sun and all that the sun can stand for: in the first place as the revealer of the things of this world by its illumination but also the spiritual light by which the world of knowledge is revealed."

A slight advancement of the concept resulted in *brahman* being regarded to be the person (*puruṣaḥ*) inhabiting the sun, the moon, lightning and other such cosmic phenomena (Bṛhad. 2.1).

In the next stage of its development *brahman* is identified with the physical and psychical activities of a person. In Bṛhad 4.1 King Janaka of Videha tries to define *brahman* to Yājñavalkya using six different definitions that he had learnt from six different teachers. He defines *brahman* as *vāc* (speech), *prāṇa* (vital breath), *caḥṣus* (eyes), *śrotram* (ear), *manas* (mind) and *hṛdayam* (heart). Yājñavalkya however, calls them all 'one footed' (*eka-Pāda*), which means that all of them are incomplete or only partial definitions of *brahman*. The term *eka-Pāda* seems to be reminiscent of the *puruṣa sukta* of the Ṛg Veda, which tells us that only one quarter of the cosmic person is visible and emerges into the sphere of the manifested and the other three quarters are immortal, concealed on unmanifested. This manifested universe is thus only one quarter of *brahman*. It follows then that *vāc*, *prāṇa*, *caḥṣus*, *śrotram*, *manas* and *hṛdayam*, - each of these is only a partial manifestation of *brahman*. However, according to Yājñavalkya one can meditate on either of these as *brahman* as a starting point of meditation, as long as one knows that an insight into the real nature of *brahman* can never be gained through either of them.

Again, in Tait. 3.1, Vṛgu approaches his father Varuna to be instructed on *brahman*. He is told,

"That, verily, from which these being are born, that, by which, when born they live, that into which, when departing, they enter. That, seek to know. That is *brahman*."

So Vṛgu goes away and contemplates on what his father said and then considers one by one *anna* (matter), *prāṇa* (life), *manas* (mind), and

*vijñāna* (intelligence) to be *brahman* but rejects each one of them. First he considers matter (*annam*) but rejects it for it does not explain the principle of life. So he considers life or the vital breath (*prāṇa*) to be the ultimate reality, but he is dissatisfied with that too because life or vital breath does not explain consciousness. Our ability to perceive, our thought processes are distinct from *prāṇa* (life). So he considered mind (*manas*) to be *brahman*, but on reflection he realises that our perceptions, our thoughts are not perfect, they are affected by our senses. But there is a higher level than our ordinary perceptual consciousness, which is intelligence (*vijñāna*), therefore he considers *vijñāna* (intelligence) to be *brahman*: then it occurs to him that the knowledge we are capable of gaining through intelligence is subject to duality because knowledge in its ordinary sense involves a subject and an object, but *brahman*, the ultimate reality, is beyond this duality of subject and object. It is the unity of existence. All differentiations vanish into it. So he rejects *vijñāna* and at last arrives at *ānanda* (bliss) as the ultimate reality.

*Brahman* has been described many times in the Upaniṣads as bliss, or consisting of bliss, but this bliss is not bliss that we ordinarily experience. It is perfect bliss where the knower, the known and the knowledge become one. So *brahman* is that perfect bliss which is beyond the grasp of our knowledge, our understanding, and cannot therefore be described or characterised by us.

Many other similar attempts are found in the Upaniṣads. Sometimes *brahman* is identified with the phenomenal forms of the objective nature and sometimes with the physical and psychical activities of

a person. In Bṛhad. 20.14.2 and Chān. 7.2.2 *vāc* (speech) is said to be *brahman*. In Bṛhad. 1.5.23 and 3.7.1-2, Chān. 4.3.3 and 7.15, Tait. 3.3, Kauś. 2.1-2 and 2.13, *brahman* is regarded to be the vital force (*prāṇa*). In Chān. 1.7.4, 4.15.1 and 8.7.4, Kauś. 4.17-18, Bṛhad. 2.3.5 and 5.5.4, the eye (*cakṣus*) is said to be *brahman*. The ear (*śrotram*) in Tait. 3.1 and Kauś. 4.14; the mind (*manas*) in Chān. 3.18.1 and Ait. 3.2; the heart (*hrdayam*) in Chān. 3.12.4, 8.3.3 and Bṛhad. 5.3, are regarded to be *brahman*. These definitions are the efforts of human minds and imaginations to define that which is indefinable and for this purpose, as Deussen says in 'Philosophy of the Upaniṣads',<sup>19</sup>

"No source is open but to conceive it with conscious or unconscious symbolism under the form of someone of its phenomenal appearances".

When we consider how strange and wondrous are the qualities and activities of these phenomena, which no-one can explain, then we begin to understand why they were regarded to be the ultimate reality of things.

Gradually it was realised that *brahman* is present not only in the phenomenal forms of external, objective nature and in the physical and psychical activities of a person, but also within the person as the knowing subject.

The renowned Brāhman Gārgya Balāki (Bṛhad. 2.1) offered to explain *brahman* to King Ajātaśatru of Benares, and attempted twelve times to define *brahman* as the person (*puruṣa*) in the sun, the moon, lightning, air, fire, water, a mirror, the sound, the quarters, who consists of shadow, and the person who is in the self. The King, however, found fault with each definition and disclaimed it as both inadequate and

incomplete. Indeed, to each definition he added a broader one that not only incorporated but also surpassed Gārgya's definition. Thus when Gārgya's speculations on the subject were exhausted he requested Ajātasatru to accept him as a pupil and instruct him on *brahman*.

Ajātasatru then, using the illustration of a man in deep sleep, explained that *brahman* is that in which one goes to sleep and from which one wakes again. He asks Gārgya that when a person is in deep sleep he does not seem to have any consciousness but as soon as he is awake the conscious returns, how is this possible? Where does the consciousness go during deep sleep and from where does it come back? Gārgya cannot answer.

The king then explains that during deep sleep our senses are withdrawn into the self (*ātman*), the knowing subject within us which continues to exist during deep sleep. This self (*ātman*) is the principle behind all the sense organs. It is the seer of seeing, the hearer of hearing, the thinker of thinking, the understander of understanding (Bṛhad. 3.4.2). But in the state of deep sleep the self (*ātman*) is free from the bondage of the body and mind and perceives nothing. It is of the nature of inactive consciousness and that is why there does not seem to be any consciousness at all, but as soon as one is awake the consciousness returns. This self, the knowing subject within us, which continues to exist during deep sleep even when there does not seem to be any consciousness at all, is *brahman*, the highest reality, the source of everything,

"as a spider moves along the thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, so from this self come forth all breaths, all worlds, all divinities, all beings. Its secret meaning is the reality of the reality. Vital breaths are the reality and their reality is it (the self)."

(Bṛhad. 2.1.20)

This manifold universe which lies before us is reality, but the real in it is the self (*ātman*). Then in Chān. 7.1 the teacher Sanat Kumāra leads his pupil Nārada step by step through a whole range of inadequate concepts of *brahman* and discarding each one for another higher and more adequate one, so that Nārada may rise step by step to an even purer knowledge of *brahman*.

Nārada confesses to Sanat Kumāra that with all the Vedic and wordly knowledge he possesses he still does not know the self. Sanat Kumāra calls his knowledge a mere name (*nāma*), which means that all the knowledge he has gained is worth as much as just knowing the name but not the person, but then tells him that he should meditate on name (*nāma*) as *brahman* because

"he who meditates on name (*nāma*) as *brahman* his freedom will extend to the limits of the realm of name".

But speech (*vāc*) is greater than name (*nāma*), because through speech (*vāc*) name (*nāma*) and everything else is revealed. Greater than speech (*vāc*) is mind (*manas*) for it holds both name (*nāma*) and speech (*vāc*). Through mind one learns, makes decisions, desires, and generally interacts with ones environment. Will (*saṃkalpo*) however, is greater than mind (*manas*) because when one wills then one directs his mind (*manas*) to utter speech (*vāc*) and utters it in a name (*nāma*). Thought (*cittam*) is even greater than will (*saṃkalpo*) because one first thinks and then wills, but contemplation (*dhyānam*) is greater than thought although no reason is given for this statement. However, contemplation (*dhyānam*) is generally regarded as the concentration of ones thoughts on one subject only. It makes one tranquil, content, firm and established. Similarly the earth, the atmosphere, the heaven, the waters, the mountains - all appear to be tranquil, firm and

established as a result of their contemplation (*dhyānam*).

From contemplation he proceeds to understanding (*vijñānam*) and says that understanding is even greater than contemplation (*dhyānam*) because through it one understands whatever there is to understand. Through understanding (*vijñānam*) one gains knowledge. Then from the sphere of consciousness he suddenly descends to the physical sphere and says that strength (*balam*) is greater than understanding (*vijñānam*). Perhaps he wants to point out that *brahman* is present not only in the mental sphere but also in the physical universe and therefore refers to strength (*balam*), food (*annam*), water (*āpa*), heat (*tejas*) and ether (*ākāśa*) to be *brahman*, or perhaps by strength (*balam*) here he means mental strength. Without food (*annam*) the body weakens and so does the mind and then instead of thoughts of *brahman*, the mind is filled with thoughts of food. In this situation one cannot concentrate on anything else but food.

Food (*annam*) is therefore greater than strength (*balam*) for it upholds strength. Food (*annam*) depends on water (*āpa*) so water is greater than food. Water (*āpa*) depends on heat (*tejas*) to produce rain, so heat (*tejas*) is greater than water (*āpa*), but the ether or space (*ākāśa*) is greater than heat (*tejas*) for the sun, the moon, lightning, the stars and fire is contained in it. From here he returns to the mental sphere of memory (*smara*) and hope (*āśa*) and says that memory (*smara*) is greater than ether (*ākāśa*) for without memory (*smara*) one cannot learn, think or understand anything. But hope (*āśa*) is even greater because hope (*āśa*) of knowing *brahman* inspires memory (*smara*) to learn about *brahman* and memorise the sacred hymns and the scriptures, which is the first step to the knowledge of *brahman*.

Life breath (*prāna*) is still greater than hope (*āśā*) for without it there is no life. All the constituents of the body are fastened to it 'as the spokes are fastened to the hub'. Then finally he comments that he who comprehends *brahman* as life-breath (*prāna*) excels as a speaker in discussion on *brahman*. Nārada seems satisfied with this definition of *brahman* as the life-breath (*prāna*) and does not press Sanatkumāra further, so he himself explains further that *prāna* (the life-breath) is *brahman* - is not quite the truth. One must understand (*vijñāna*) the truth (*satya*) before he can speak about it. To understand (*vijñāna*) the truth (*satya*) one must think deeply about it, contemplate upon it, but without faith (*śraddhā*) or belief only thinking is not enough. Yet without steadfastness (*niṣṭhā*) mere faith (*śraddhā*) is not enough either, for without steadfastness (*niṣṭhā*) ones faith (*śraddhā*) can waver or even be destroyed. To have steadfastness (*niṣṭhā*) one must be self-disciplined, for which one must engage oneself in activity (*kṛti*) of the right kind, which involves learning the scriptures, taking part in discussions, restraint of the senses and concentration of the mind.

His next comment is that one is active only when one is happy, and therefore one must desire to understand happiness (*sukham*). This can be explained in two different ways. One is that when a person is happy or satisfied with his situation in general, then only he can engage himself in activities of this kind. One who has to struggle hard for his daily bread is not likely to do so. But one who is content with his environment and life in general is in possession of that happy and calm state of mind where he can engage himself in such activities to gain ultimate happiness.

The other explanation is that a person is joyful or happy because he believes that he can, through his own efforts, gain ultimate happiness and therefore engages himself in these activities.

Whichever explanation seems agreeable to us, happiness is mentioned here in two different senses, one in a limited, temporary sense and another in an unlimited, permanent sense, although the word *sukham* is used for both.

Nārada then wishes to know the nature of the ultimate happiness that Sanatkumāra speaks about. He is told that the ultimate happiness consists in *bhūman* - the infinite, beyond which there is nothing. There is no real happiness in anything finite. The infinite (*bhūman*) encompasses all, fills all space. In the plain of *bhūman* there is no duality, no distinction of subject and object. All distinctions vanish into the infinite. The individual self becomes one with *bhūman* and loses its individuality and therefore, no duality, no distinction of subject and object remains.

"Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understands nothing else, that is the infinite."

Nārada is still not fully satisfied and enquires further about what *bhūman* is established on or if *bhūman* has any support anywhere. Sanatkumāra's reply to him is that *bhūman* is established on its own greatness, or perhaps not even on greatness. The meaning of this statement is that finite things are established in others. 'Greatness' of people depend on their possessions, such as wives, gold, houses, land properties, domestic animals and servants. They subsist on these, but the infinite is not established in anything this way for there cannot be any causal relation between *bhūman* and its greatness like

the way there is between man and his greatness. The infinite cannot be established on anything but itself, it is itself everything.

"That (infinite) indeed is below. It is above. It is behind. It is in front. It is to the south, it is to the north. It is indeed all this (world)..."

But this *bhūman* is not something different from the 'I' that we experience as ourselves. This 'I' however should not be confused with the body, and the senses. This is probably the reason why in the next verse it is replaced by *ātman* or the self in man.

It is the innermost essence of man (*ātman*) which is identical with *bhūman* the infinite, and he who realises this finds his pleasure, delight, joy and union in the self (*ātman*), for he knows that everything is conditional on the self (*ātman*). Everything from *nāma* to *prāna* springs from the self (*ātman*), in fact the whole world springs from the self (*ātman*).

So *brahman* the ultimate reality, the source of this universe, which presents itself to us manifest in all existing things is now recognised as identical with our *ātman*, our inmost essence, our self. This universe is *brahman* and *brahman* is *ātman* within us.

#### BRAHMAN IS UNKNOWABLE

Alas, despite all their efforts, the seers and the thinkers of the Upaniṣads did not succeed to give a positive definition of *brahman* or to describe its nature, for the essential reality of things is beyond human intelligence.

*Brahman* is simply beyond all our categories, our intellectual capacities are not adequate for its comprehension.

Our capacity to understand or to gain knowledge extends only as far as our perception and our perception extends only as far as the physical universe, but *brahman* is beyond the physical universe. It is not subject to the laws of space, time and causality which rule the physical universe. It is independent of all limitations of space, time and causality, and has been described as omnipresent (Śvet. 6.17, 3.11 and Mund. 3.2.5, 1.1.6), all pervading (Mund. 1.1.6), infinitely great and infinitely small (Chān. 3.14.3-4), immortal (Kāth. 2.3.1), lord of what has been and what will be (Bṛhad. 4.4.15), imperishable (Bṛhad. 3.8, 4.4.20) and many others. Therefore, it is beyond all empirical attributes, definitions and relations. That is why the Upaniṣadsic thinkers sought to describe *brahman* by negative terms, to show that *brahman* is not like anything we know from our experience.

"That O Gārgī, the knowers of *brahman* call the imperishable. It is neither gross, nor fine, neither short nor long, neither glowing red (like fire) nor adhesive (like water). (It) is neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor space, unattached, without taste, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without voice, without mind, without radiance, without breath, without a mouth, without measure, having no within and no without. It eats nothing, no one eats it."

(Bṛhad. 3.8.8)

"That which is ungraspable, without family, without caste, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet, eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle, that is the undecaying which the wise perceive as the source of beings."

(Mund. 1.1.6)

"This is that great unborn self who is undecaying, undying, immortal, fearless, *brahman*."

(Bṛhad. 4.4.25)

*Brahman* is also the knowing subject in all knowledge. For our

intelligence to acquire any knowledge there must be a subject of knowledge and an object of knowledge. Here, *brahman* itself is the subject of knowledge and therefore an objective knowledge of the subject is impossible.

"Verily, that Imperishable O Gārqi, is unseen but is the seer, unheard but is the hearer, unthought but is the thinker, unknown but is the knower. There is no other seer but this, there is no other hearer but this, there is no other thinker but this, there is no other knower but this. By this Imperishable, O Gārqi, is space woven like warp and woof."

(Bṛhad. 3.8.11)

This knowing subject is beyond the scope of our intelligence and therefore it cannot be known by us. As it is explained in Kena. 2.1,

"If you think you have understood *brahman* well, you know it but slightly ..."

Again in Kena 2.3,

"To whomsoever it is not known, to him it is known; to whomsoever it is known, he does not know ..."

Those who think that they know *brahman* do not really know it, or know only a very limited form of it, but those who realise that *brahman* cannot be known as an object of knowledge, do have a knowledge of it.

In later Vedānta *brahman* has been described as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being, intelligence, bliss). But we cannot reach any definite conclusion as to the nature of *brahman* based on these three, for *brahman* is not the being we know by experience, rather in an empirical sense *brahman* is not-being.

About *brahman* being the knowing subject within us (as is implied here) it is also mentioned about the 'knower of the knowing' that he always remains himself unknowable and thereby denied of all objective experience.

The bliss is not such a bliss that we know or experience, for it is experienced only in deep sleep, when there is no distinction of subject and object and therefore no empirical consciousness.

However, the Upaniṣads emphasise again and again that *brahman* has to be known, for only with the knowledge of *brahman* can the individual achieve freedom from empirical existence (from repeated births and deaths in this world) and attain immortality.

"That is luminous. What is subtler than the subtle, in which are centred all the worlds and those that dwell in them, that is imperishable *brahman*. That is life, that is speech and mind. That is true, that is immortal, O beloved, that is to be known, know (that)."

(Mund. 11.2.2)

"That which cannot be expressed by words but that by which the word is expressed - this is *brahman*, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such.

That which cannot be thought by the mind, but that by which, they say, the mind is thought - this is *brahman*, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such.

That which cannot be seen by the eye, but that by which the eyes have sight - this is *brahman*, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such.

That which cannot be heard by the ear, but that by which the ear has hearing - this is *brahman*, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such.

That which cannot be breathed by breath, but that by which the breath can breathe - this is *brahman*, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such."

(Kena. 1.5-9 in  
Panikkar, p.684)

So how does one acquire this knowledge and by what means?

It is explained that the only way to know *brahman* is through our *ātman*, our inmost essence, which is in essence one with *brahman*. Therefore to know *ātman* is to know *brahman*.

"The one controller of many, inactive, who makes the one seed manifold. The wise one who perceived Him as abiding in this self, to them belongs the eternal happiness, not to others."  
(Śvet. 6.12)

### ETYMOLOGY OF ĀTMAN

The etymology of the word *ātman* is obscure. In the Ṛg Veda it is generally used to denote vital breath in man, but in at least one passage *ātman* is used to mean the inmost self of the world,

"who has seen how the first born being the Bone possessing (the shaped world) was born from the Boneless (shapeless)? Where was the vital breath, the blood, the self (*ātman*) of the world? Who went to ask him that knows it?"  
(R.V. 1.164.4)

In the Brāhmanas and Āraṇyakas *ātman* generally came to mean the self of the world and then the self in man.

In the Upaniṣads *ātman* means the ultimate reality, the source of all existence. It is the inmost essence of both man and the universe.

### THE THEORY OF ĀTMAN

The theory of *ātman* is analogous to the theory of *brahman* but, although its beginnings were later than the beginnings of the theory of *brahman*, the theory of *ātman* does not appear to be a development subsequent to the theory of *brahman*. Both the theories, it seems, progressed simultaneously and influenced each other till their final union.

Similar to the *brahman* theory the theory of *ātman* also declares that underlying this universe of multiplicity there is one single primary reality which in this case is *ātman*. It is omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, unchangeable and remains unaffected by time. It is the inmost essence of the universe, which pervades everything, underlies everything and yet at the same time transcends everything. It is self sustained and self-existent, while everything else depends on it. Everything in this universe originates from it, is sustained by it and dissolves into it. It is the sole source of life in all that exists and the multiplicity of this universe can be reduced to this single primary reality without residuum.

*Ātman*, as the primal principle, created this universe out of itself and then entered into it as its self and thus *ātman* became this universe. The universe, although created by *ātman*, is not something apart from *ātman*, rather *ātman* is this universe. In this sense the universe is not a creation rather an emanation of *ātman*, and is real only so far as it has *ātman* as its inner essence. The universe has no existence apart from *ātman*, and although *ātman* exists in the universe as its essence, it is at the same time transcendent to it (the universe) and therefore remains unaffected by the periodical manifestation and dissolution of the universe.

This *ātman*, the universal self, which is manifested in everything in the universe, is also the self of man, his inmost essence. *Ātman*, the universal self and *ātman*, the self of man, is in essence one and the same. Therefore man is in essence one with the universe. The mystery of the universe then lies within ones own self (*ātman*) and that is where it should be looked for and not outside in the objective

universe. The ultimate reality can be realised only by knowing ones own self, ones *ātman*.

"It is the self that should be seen, heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. Verily, by the seeing of, hearing of, understanding of the self, all this is known."

(Bṛhad. 2.4.5)

### BRAHMAN AND ĀTMAN

Once it was established that *ātman* is the inner essence of both man and the universe, then the obvious questions were raised about the relationship of *ātman* with *brahman*. In Chān. 5.11.1 five learned Brāhmins came together to investigate "What is our *ātman*, what is *brahman*?" At the end of their investigation they learn that *brahman* and *ātman* are one and the same. *Brahman*, the universal self which has assumed the shape of the whole universe, is the self of all beings. It is indential with our *ātman*, our individual self. The individual I and the universal I are one.

Again in Bṛhad. 3.4.1, Uṣasta Cakarāyana asks Yājñavalkya,

"Explain to me the *brahman* that is immediately present and directly perceived, who is the self (*ātman*) in all things?"

Yājñavalkya's answer to him is,

"This is your self (*ātman*) that is within all things."

The two separate lines of investigation meet here and it is realised that it is the same mysterious transcendent power which is the source of all that exists and the two separate concepts of *brahman* and *ātman* unite here. *Brahman* is *ātman* and *ātman* is *brahman*. This identity of *brahman* and *ātman* is evident in many passages in the Upaniṣads,

"This is my self (*ātman*) within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice, than a barley corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or than a kernal of a grain of millet. This is my self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the atmosphere, greater than the sky, greater than these worlds. Containing all works, all desires, all odours, all tastes, encompassing this whole world, without speech, without concern, this is the self of mine within the heart: this is *brahman* ..."

(Chān. 3.14.3-4)

Chān. 8.1 describes the human body as the city of *brahman* and the heart as the abode of *brahman*. Inside the heart there is a small space,

"... as far as this (world) space extends, so far extends the space within the heart. Within it are contained both heaven and earth, both fire and air, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever there is of him in this world and whatever is not, all that is contained within it."

(Chān. 8.1.3)

In Bṛhad. 2.1 and Kauś. 4 Gārgya Bālāki tries twelve times to define *brahman* to King Ajātaśatru as the person (*puruṣa*) in the sun, moon, lightning, ether, fire, water, etc., until the king refers him to the *atmān* (self) for its explanation.

This unity of *brahman* and *ātman*, god and man - the universal oneness is probably best illustrated by the dialogue between the father and son, Aruni and Śvetaketu in Chān. 6.12:

"Fetch me a fruit of the Nyagrodha tree"

"Here it is, venerable sir"

"Break it"

"It is broken, venerable sir"

"What do you see there?"

"These extremely fine seeds, venerable sir"

"Of these break one"

"It is broken, venerable sir"

"What do you see there?"

"Nothing at all, venerable sir"

Then he said to him,

"My dear, that subtle essence which you do not perceive, verily, my dear, from that very essence this great Nyagrodha tree exists. Believe me, my dear. That which is the subtle essence this world has for its self. That is the true. That is the self. That art thou, Śvetaketu."

Generally, the terms *brahman* and *ātman* are employed synonymously but where a difference does appear, *brahman* is used to denote the first principle so far as it is comprehended in the universe, and *ātman* so far as it is known in the inner self of man. This universe is *brahman* and *brahman* is *ātman* within us. *Brahman* can be comprehended only through *ātman*.

Now the questions arise - What is our *ātman*? What do the Upaniṣads consider to be our *ātman*?

#### ĀTMAN THE INNER ESSENCE OF MAN

Our *ātman*, which the Upaniṣads refer to, is not the ego but it is that which remains when all that is not self is eliminated from our persons. It is the principle of our life, our inmost essence. It is that which pervades our breath, our intelligence and at the same time transcends them both. It is the unborn, immortal element in man.

The *ātman* should not be confused with the body, mind or intellect. The body is the abode of *ātman* and the mind and intellect are its external expressions. It is pure existence, self-illuminated, mass

of consciousness and unconditioned by the forms of mind and intellect.

It is the knowing subject within us which the Upaniṣads describe as 'the life of life, the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear and the mind of the mind' (Bṛhad. 4.4.18); as the person 'consisting of knowledge among the senses' (Bṛhad. 4.3.7); as 'the seer of seeing, the hearer of hearing, the thinker of thinking and the understander of understanding' (Bṛhad. 3.4.2).

This divine essence which is our *ātman* is beyond pain and suffering. It can not be injured, neither can it be destroyed. It is not affected by the results of our deeds. This is our *ātman*, our inmost essence which is common to all of us. In our everyday life, however, we do not experience our true and pure self, rather, we experience the limited individual self which is described by Yājñavalkya as the self which arises from the elements as a separate entity having a name, a form, a separate identity. The individuality that one experiences is due to one's ignorance of the true self, but when one has realised the true nature of the self then the ignorance, and with it the individuality, is destroyed. Then one attains oneness with *brahman* (*ātman*). The cosmic and the individual become one.

However, there still remains the problem of how to define this true self of ours. How do we define our *ātman*?

#### DEFINITION OF ĀTMAN

The Upaniṣadic thinkers sought a definition of our true self,

our *ātman*, and tried many times to fulfil their quest. It is these attempts that are presented in the Upaniṣads, and of which a few are discussed below.

In Chān. 8.7 there is a progressive development in the definition of the self through the stages of the bodily self, the empirical self and the absolute self. Here Prajāpati first describes certain characteristics that the true self is believed to possess,

"The self which is free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from hunger and thirst, which desires nothing by what it ought to desire, and imagines nothing, but what it ought to imagine ..."

Then he goes on to say that

"... that is which we must try to understand".

Having heard this, both the gods and the demons become anxious to learn about the true nature of the self. Indra and Virochana, the two representatives of the gods and the demons respectively, approach Prajāpati for instructions.

The first instruction given is that the person who is seen in the eye or in a pail of water or in a mirror - is the self. Indra and Virochana, following the instruction, see the reflection of the body in the water and understand the body to be the self. But then a doubt occurs to Indra that if the body is the self then when the body is blind or lame or crippled then so will be the self, and the self will then perish when the body perishes. So he realises that the body cannot be the true self. So he approaches Prajāpati again and is told that "He who moves about happy in dreams is the self". But Indra is not satisfied with this answer for long either, for he realises that in the dream state, although the self is free

from physical afflictions it is not free from mental afflictions. In dreams one feels pain, pleasure, sheds tears and has ever-changing mental experiences, therefore, this self which is subject to the accidents of experience and is changing continually cannot be the true self. The true self is self-existing, independent of time and space, but the dream state, though independent of the body, does not seem to be self-existent, neither is it independent of time. Its domain is the world of experience. It is neither indestructible, nor has it unlimited freedom. In fact this self is the empirical self, which is free from corporeality but not free from individuality and therefore cannot be the true self.

Indra approaches Prajāpati again and is told this time,

"When a man is asleep, composed, serene and knows no dream, that is the self ... that is the immortal, the fearless. That is *brahman*."

What is meant by this statement is that in deep sleep when a person's waking and dreaming experience are suspended, he does not feel, think, want or dream anything, he is totally unaware of himself and his surroundings, in fact he has no empirical consciousness at all. But just because the consciousness is not there does not mean that the self is not there either. The consciousness, although not present during sleep, returns as soon as the person is awake. His experiences which exist at the time he goes to sleep and the experiences when he is awake unite themselves immediately. This continuity of experience is possible because of the permanent self that is underlying all contents of consciousness. The conscious states are a part of this self but the self is not these states. Thus in deep sleep, although there is no empirical consciousness, the self continues to exist. This self, in deep sleep state, unaffected by the physical and mental

experiences of the waking and dreaming states, is, according to Prajāpati, the true self. Indra fails to understand how this self in deep sleep could be the true self for in this state one neither knows himself, nor does he know anything else that exists. He feels that this self, freed from all experiences of the waking and dreaming states, free from the experiences of all that exists, is a state of annihilation. If the self in this state does not feel, think or will anything, then how can it be different from the total unconsciousness?

"In truth this one does not know himself that I am he, nor indeed the things here. He has become one who has gone to annihilation, I see no good in this."

Prajāpati then tries to remove Indra's dilemma by explaining that it is the body which is mortal, not the self. The true self is deathless, bodiless, immortal and therefore it can neither be destroyed, nor can it be affected by the physical experiences of pleasure and pain which affect the embodied self. In deep sleep, however, the embodied self is liberated temporarily from the bondage of the body, and is united with the highest self which is the knowing subject within us. Our sense organs are only the instruments, it is the self which perceives. In deep sleep when the self is freed from the body and has withdrawn all the senses within itself then there is nothing to perceive, nothing to experience, only the self as the knowing subject continues to exist.

The self, as the knowing subject, cannot experience itself as an object, and therefore in deep sleep there is no experience of anything at all - neither external, nor internal. In this state there is no subject-object relationship, no duality whatsoever. Thus,

the deep sleep state is not an annihilation, rather it is a union of the individual self with the highest.

However, this union of the individual self with the highest self that occurs in deep sleep is only temporary, for the deep sleep state is not a permanent state. At the end of deep sleep the self regains its individuality and can remember nothing that preceded, only an after taste of bliss remains with him. Therefore the deep sleep state cannot be regarded as the highest state of the self.

In Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad we find an even higher state than the deep sleep state called *turīya*.

According to Māṇḍūkya the embodied self has four states, these are: *vaiśvānara*, or the waking state, *taijasa*, or the dreaming state, *prajñā*, or the deep sleep state, and *turiya*, or the state of pure intuitional consciousness. *Turīya*, the fourth state, is the common ground of all the other three states and the basis of their unity.

*Vaiśvānara*, or the waking state, is where the consciousness relates to external objects. The self in this state experiences gross material objects and is dependent on the body. In this state the self accepts the universe as it finds it without reflection. Radhakrishnan calls it the perceptual self.

*Taijasa*, or the dreaming state, is where the consciousness relates to internal objects. The self in this state has subtle mental experiences. In dreams it fashions an imaginary world for itself based on the experiences of the waking state, where it roams

about free from the bondage of the body. This is called *taijasa* or the luminous self because when it is free from the body and the senses are withdrawn, the self perceives in its own light.

In *vaiśvānara* the self experiences externally. The consciousness is directed outward, but in *taijasa* the self experiences internally. The consciousness here is directed inward. Radhakrishnan calls *taijasa* the imaginative self.

*Prajñā*, or the deep sleep state, is where there is no perception of anything at all. The self in this state experiences neither externally nor internally. It dreams nothing and desires nothing. It is temporarily free from the bondage of the body and mind and has no objective consciousness any more. The self thus cut off from the distracting world becomes united with the universal self - and enjoys absolute bliss.

In the waking state one perceives the external world and accepts it as he finds it. In the dream state he creates an imaginary world based on the waking experiences and perceives it internally. But in deep sleep there is no perception of either external or internal objects. All objects of consciousness, in this state, become a mass of consciousness and therefore there is no differentiation of subject and object, no duality whatsoever. The phenomena of subject-object duality, which is caused by the action of the mind and are present in the two previous states, is totally absent here. However, although there is no objective consciousness in *prajñā*, it is present in an unmanifested form.

This state is called *prajñā*, or the state of knowledge, probably because it is the doorway to the cognition of the waking state and the dream state. Radhakrishnan calls *prajñā* the perceptual self. *Prajñā* is regarded by some to be the highest state of the self, for in it the individual self is united with the universal self and in this union all distinctions vanish, only the universal self continues to exist. But in this condition or state, as there is no objective consciousness present, there is a likelihood of its being confused with sheer unconsciousness. This problem is highlighted by Indra's confusion in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, which I have discussed earlier, where he took this state to be a state of total annihilation. Similarly, the subject without any object may reduce the self to a mere abstraction, whereas in the highest self the reality of all objects is included.

Two other arguments may be presented against *prajñā* being the highest state of the self. One is that *prajñā* is not a permanent state, at the end of deep sleep the self returns to the dreaming state and then to the waking state, whereas the highest self is said to be permanent and unchanging. The other point is that the highest self is said to be bliss itself, whereas *prajñā* is only the enjoyer of bliss.

Therefore, according to Māndūkya, it is not *prajñā* but *turiya*, the fourth state, which is the highest and the ultimate state of the self. It is a state of pure intuitional consciousness; a permanent state, unchanging and persisting through time; totally free from the interruptions and alterations of the three previous states. It is neither deep sleep, nor dreaming, nor waking, but it is always

conscious of them all and at the same time transcending them all.

As in *prajñā*, also in *turīya*, there is no perception of anything at all, neither external, nor internal. There is no distinction of subject and object, no duality at all. But although there is no objective consciousness in either of them, in *prajñā*, however, it is present in an unmanifested or 'seed' form, while in *turiya* it is completely transcended.

Both in *prajñā* and *turīya* the individual self, free from the bondage of the body, is united with the highest, universal self (*brahman*), but, unlike *prajñā* in *turīya*, it is a state of permanent union with *brahman*.

In *prajñā* one comprehends neither himself, nor others; neither truth, nor falsehood. The whole universe is obliterated to him. But in *turiya* he is one with the universal self in which the reality of all objects is included. there is nothing outside it. Therefore, according to Māndukya, *turīya* is the highest and the ultimate state of the self.

Taittirīya 2 however has a different approach to the problem. According to Taittirīya we experience our *ātman*, our inmost being, in four different ways, depending on our state of consciousness. We refer to these as four different *ātmans*, although these are merely sheaths around the highest *ātman*. Each of these corresponds to a different state of consciousness and by transcending these one by one we may attain the highest self, the *ānandamaya ātman*.

The most superficial sheath is the one through which we experience the world about us. It is that of the *annamaya ātman*, or the self which is made up of the essence of food, and is maintained by food. It is the physical body that practically one identifies oneself with.

The second sheath is that of the *prāṇamaya ātman*, or the self which is made up of or consists of life breath. A man cannot live without breathing, therefore, breathing is considered to be the life of beings. Without it the outer sheath cannot survive.

The third sheath is the *manomaya ātman*, or the self which is made up of or consists of mind. The mind is the principle of perception, the instrument of volition. It is the processor of the outside world that we perceive through the outermost sheath.

The fourth sheath is that of the *vijñānamaya ātman*, or the self which is made up of or consists of understanding. Understanding is the interpreter of that which we perceive through mind. For this we draw on accumulated knowledge and experience stored within the mind. It is a higher level of consciousness still. In the mind we accept outside authority unquestioningly, but with understanding we ask questions, look for proofs and make our own decisions.

Enclosed in the fourth sheath is the highest *ātman* - the *ānandamaya ātman*, or the self which is composed of or consists of bliss.

Bliss is said to be the essence of existence, *brahman* is bliss

and therefore when one realises the true nature of this *ānandamaya ātman* then one becomes bliss itself. But because this bliss itself is the subject, it can not be experienced as an object, and therefore the nature of that bliss cannot be defined in any positive terms. That is why this supreme reality is described here, as in many other cases in the Upaniṣads, by negative terms such as 'invisible', and 'undefined'.

The same struggle of the Upaniṣadic thinkers to define that which is undefinable can be observed throughout the Upaniṣads. At the end of each investigation they came up with the same message again and again, that however hard they tried they could not define *ātman*.

#### ĀTMAN IS UNKNOWABLE

No conceptual knowledge of *ātman* is possible because knowledge in an ordinary sense involves a subject or a knower and an object or that which is to be known. *Ātman* in all knowledge, is the subject of knowledge. It is also the subject of knowledge within us and as such can never be an object of knowledge, and therefore no conceptual knowledge of *ātman* is possible.

*Ātman* - the knowing subject within us, is described as, 'the inner controller (*antaryāmi*) of everything' (Bṛhad. 3.7.1, 4.4.22); 'the light within the heart' (Bṛhad. 4.3.7-8); 'the person consisting of knowledge among the senses' (Bṛhad. 4.3.7-8), 4.4.22). Bṛhad. 2.4.10 describes *ātman* to be pure intelligence, the source of all knowledge. In Bṛhad. 1.4.7, *ātman* is said to be, 'when breathing he is called

breath, when speaking - voice, when seeing - the eye, when hearing - the ear, when thinking - the mind. These are merely the names of his acts ...' This knowing subject consequently by its own nature cannot be perceived by us. As Yājñavalkya explains to Usasta in Bṛhad. 3.4.2,

"you cannot see the seer of seeing, you cannot hear the hearer of hearing, you cannot think the thinker of thinking, you cannot understand the understander of understanding. He is your self which is in all things."

Again in Bṛhad. 2.4.12 he says to his wife Maitreyī,

"By what should one know that by which all this is known? By what, my dear, should one know the knower?"

Therefore whatever conception one may form of *ātman*, Yājñavalkya maintains,

"This is not this, not this."

(Bṛhad. 4.2.4, 4.4.22, 4.5.15, 3.9.26, 2.3.6)

The Upaniṣadic thinkers therefore sought to describe *ātman* the best possible way they could - by using negative terms, such as 'invisible', 'ungraspable', 'imperishable' (Muṇḍ. 1.1.6-8), 'infinite' (Śvet. 5.1), 'incorporeal' (Śvet. 5.14), 'the immortal', 'the bodiless' (Mait. 4.6). Without sound, without touch, without form, undecaying, without taste, without smell, without beginning, without end (Kātha. 1.3.15), without parts, without activity, irreproachable, without blemish (Svet. 6.19).

The three attempts of the Upaniṣadic thinkers to define *ātman*, which I have discussed above, also use negative terms, such as 'deathless' and 'bodiless' (Chān. 8.10.1); 'unseen', 'incapable of being spoken of', 'ungraspable', 'without any distinctive marks', 'unthinkable', 'unnameable' (Man. 7); 'invisible', bodiless, 'undefineable', 'without

support' (Tait. 2.7.1). The last one also confirms that he, who tries to make *ātman* an object of knowledge, only succeeds in alienating himself further from the truth.

Thus, in its essential nature *ātman* remains inaccessible to our knowledge. Yet, the Upaniṣads make it quite clear that only by the knowledge of *ātman* can the final liberation be achieved.

So what is this liberating knowledge?

The Upaniṣads explain that this liberating knowledge is not knowledge in an ordinary sense. It is in fact an intuitive knowledge, a direct experience of the whole universe within oneself; of becoming one with *brahman*, and when one thus identifies oneself with *brahman* then he attains the final liberation. There are no more births and deaths for him in this world, but until that state of final liberation is achieved, the unliberated person is subject to repeated births and deaths in this world. When one body dies, the self (*ātman*) finds a new abode for itself. Just as a caterpillar after finishing off a blade of grass draws itself over to a new blade of grass, so does the self after casting off one body move forward to a new existence (Bṛhad. 4.4.3), and in that new existence what kind of form (i.e. human, animal or insect) the person will have depends on his deeds in his previous life. Not only his form but also his character and his position in the new environment will also be determined by his deeds in his previous life. The process by which this transition occurs is explained in the Doctrine of transmigration and the Law of *karma*.

## Chapter Two

### THE DOCTRINE OF TRANSMIGRATION

The view that the doctrine of transmigration has its origins in the Vedas is a controversial one. However, it is well accepted that the doctrine in its most comprehensive and advanced form is to be found in the Upaniṣads.

In the Vedas, the destiny of each individual after death depended on his character and on the quality of his preceding life. After death different people went to a variety of places or spheres of life, some of which were only transitory stations (R.V. 10,15,1). There were various heavenly (R.V. 10,135,7; 10,14,10; 9,113,7-11; A.V. 18,14,10) and intermediary abodes (R.V. 10,15,1) and dark places or hells (R.V. 4,5,5; 7,104,3; A.V. 12,4,36). There was also a possibility of gaining 'immortality' which was asked and prayed for in some hymns as a special gift or achievement (R.V. 5,55,4; 7,59,12; 9,113,8-11).

Immortal life in one of the heavenly worlds in the company of the gods, Yama and the fathers, was most desired, but it was promised only to those who had lived a life of religious austerities, or had lost their lives in battles, or who had brought many sacrificial offerings (R.V. 10,154,2-5). It was also said to be for the good-hearted and well-doing (A.V. 6,130,3), for those who had obtained merits from good deeds and religious activities (R.V. 10,14,8), who were devoted to the gods (R.V. 1,154,5) and who knew the law (*ṛtajnā* R.V. 10,15,1).

Those who were wicked and unrighteous (*pāpaśāḥ*, *anṛtāḥ*) went

to a deep place or hell (R.V. 4,5,5), into a pit (vavra, R.V. 104,3), into the outer darkness (R.V. 10,152,4) or into *naraka loka* (Hell-A.V. 12,4,36).

Scholars such as Oldenberg, Macdonell and Deussen seem to think that the idea of successive lives for the unliberated is of later origin, although they admit that the seeds of the idea could possibly be traced in some of the hymns of the Ṛg Veda.<sup>20</sup> Keith, however, refutes all supposed references to transmigration in the Ṛg Veda and believes it to be of later origin.<sup>21</sup> Radhakrishnan agrees that there is no direct reference in the Ṛg Veda to rebirth; however, he lists a few passages<sup>22</sup> which contain elements of it. He says:

"The passage of the soul from the body, its dwelling in other forms of existence, its return to human form, the determination of future existence by the principle of karma are all mentioned. Mitra is born again. The dawn (uṣas) is born again and again. 'I seek neither release nor return' (na asyāh vaśmi vimuchan na āvṛtam punah. 5,46,1). 'The immortal self will be reborn in a new body due to its meritorious deeds' (jivo mṛtasya carati svadhābhir/amartyo martyenā so yonih. 1,164,30; see also 1,164,38). Sometimes the departed spirit is asked to go to the plants and 'stay there with bodies'. There is retribution for good or evil deeds in a life after death. Good people go to heaven and others to the world presided over by Yama. Their work (dharma) decided their future."

Dr. Werner, however, is of the opinion that the idea of rebirth, of return, and of successive lives are expressed several times in different contexts in the Ṛg Veda. He argues his case in his article 'The Vedic concept of human personality and its destiny'. He says:

"There are two other passages which have direct relevance to the teachings of rebirth. The first mentions the two different paths along which all creatures have to travel: 'I have heard of two ways for fathers, gods and mortals. Everything that moves between heaven and earth goes on one of them' (R.V. 10,88,15). Griffith explains the two ways fully in the spirit of Indian tradition thus 'The

way to the other world and the way back to earth'. And this is undoubtedly the right way to explain the verse in the light of the Brāhmanic and Upaniṣadic teaching on *devayāna* and *pitṛyāna* referred to above. There is no reason whatsoever why this interpretation should not be valid even for the time of the compilation of the Ṛg Veda.

The second passage (R.V. 4,54,2) is very important, because it speaks directly about the successive lives given to men. The hymn in which the stanza occurs is addressed to *Savitṛ*, the 'stimulator' or 'vivifier', the golden solar deity who bestows 'riches' on creatures. He can be interpreted as standing for the divine creative power. Griffith translates the verse as follows: 'For thou at first producest for the holy Gods the noblest of all portions, immortality: Thereafter as a gift to men O *Savitṛ*, thou openest existence, life succeeding life.' Despite otherwise frequent inaccuracies in Griffith's rhythmical translation of the Ṛg Veda - considered by some to be 'notoriously bad' - this is basically a correct translation of the verse and it is almost astonishing that it has never been fully discussed by the pioneers of Vedic scholarship in the West. Instead it was several times inaccurately translated or paraphrased as if to fit the preconceived opinion that there was no evidence for transmigration in the Vedas. Translated literally the verse goes like this: 'For at first you bestowed on gods, worthy of offerings, immortality, the supreme lot. Then, as a gift, *Savitṛ*, you opened successive lives for men.'"

He concludes by saying that the case for Vedic belief in successive lives is much stronger than the previously advocated view that there are no traces of the rebirth teaching in the Vedas. While accepting that the belief of ordinary Vedic people may have been incomplete, confused and in some measure even primitive, he believes that there is strong evidence in the Vedas for us to assume that the Vedic ṛṣis

'had a comparatively clear and elaborate notion of human personality and its destiny and that the belief in successive lives shaped by the quality of the preceding life was an integral part of this outlook whose culmination was the aspiration to win immortality.'

Therefore he believes that the later doctrines of *samsāra* and *mokṣa*

not only had their beginnings in the Vedas but were apparently living knowledge among the elite, which was gradually diffused to the people at large.

In the Brāhmaṇas immortality in heaven in the company of the gods is still much desired, and the sacrifices of the right kind gains one a place in heaven (Ś.B. 11,6,2,5). Particular sacrifices enable one to reach the spheres of particular gods (Ś.B. 2,6,4,8). However, along with this desire for immortality, a fear of renewed death is also expressed frequently.

According to Ś.B. 11,2,7,33, after death all are born again in the other world. Here they are recompensed according to their deeds. The good are rewarded and the wicked punished.

"For they lay it (the good and evil) on the scales in the yonder world; and whichever of the two sinks down, that will he follow, whether it be the good or the evil."

(Ś.B. 11,2,7,33)

The underlying concept seems to be that there is only one life after death and its nature is determined by our conduct here.

"A man is born into the world which he has made."

(Ś.B. 6,2,29)

In Ś.B. 6,6,2,4 a distinction is made between the way of the fathers and the way of the gods, and consequently between the world of the fathers and the world of the gods. The world of the gods became the abode of the pious and the world of the fathers became the place of retribution.

Then one encounters the idea of repeated deaths or *punarmṛtyu*,

the freedom from which was pursued mostly through sacrificial rituals. (Ś.B. 10,4,3,10; 2,3,3,9; 10,1,4,14; T.B. 3,11,8,6; K.B. 15,1).

According to Deussen this recurrent death should not be understood as transmigration, but only as a resurrection and repeated death in the other world.<sup>23</sup> Radhakrishnan, however, writes,

"When we finish experiencing our rewards and punishments, it is suggested that we die to that life and are reborn on earth."

24

Whether we believe this process of being born and dying repeatedly to take place in this world or in the other world, it still creates a bleak future for the individual, consequently the true ideal became the release from this bondage of birth and death instead of the company of the gods in heaven.

"He who sacrifices to the gods does not gain so great a world as he who sacrifices to the *ātman*."

(A.B. 11,2,6)

"He who reads the Vedas is freed from dying again and attains to a sameness of nature with *brahman*."

(A.B. 10,5,6,9)

There is a passage in Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa where knowledge replaces the sacrificial rituals as the means to gain freedom from repeated deaths. It states that those who merely perform rites without knowledge are born again and repeatedly become the food of death (Ś.B. 10,5,4,15).

The Brāhmanas therefore contain all the relevant stimuli necessary for the development of the doctrine of transmigration, although individual immortality remains the main tendency of the Brāhmanas.

In the Upaniṣads the idea of repeated births and deaths of the Brāhmaṇas is transformed into the doctrine of rebirth in this world. However, the Upaniṣads did not discard the Vedic ideas of reward and punishment in the other world and a combination of both the ideas are often found together in the Upaniṣads. Both good and evil deeds experience a two-fold recompense, once in the other world and then again by a renewed life on earth.

The earliest passages which are generally recognised as incorporating the belief of rebirth are Chāndogya 5.3.10 and Bṛhadāraṇyaka 6.2.

According to Bṛhad. 6.2.14 the departed, having journeyed to heaven in radiant form on the burning of the corpse, returns immediately through the three regions of heaven, atmosphere and earth, and through the bodies of father and mother to a new existence on earth. This passage does not mention any recompense in the other world. But the theory as presented in Bṛhad. 6.2.15-16 and Chān. 5.10.1-8 seems to be a combination of the Vedic idea of reward and punishment in the other world and the Upaniṣadic belief of rebirth in this world. These two passages describe the two separate ways by which the departed ones travel to their future destinations. The two ways are called *devayāna* and *pitryāna*.

*Devayāna*, or the way of the gods, is the way by which the departed enters into the funeral fire, from the fire into the day, from the day into the bright half of the month, from the bright half of the month into the bright half of the year and proceeds in this way through the sun, the moon, lightning and finally enters into the plane of

Brahmā. From here there is no return. This is the way for the one who is wise and the one who leads the austere life of a forest dweller, meditating on the truth.

*Devayāna* was regarded to be the way to the plane of Brahmā as long as Brahmā was regarded as a high god reigning in his kingdom in the high heaven, but when *brahman* came to be regarded as the highest reality, and the eternal life or immortality lay in union with *brahman*, *devayāna* came to mean the way to oneness with *brahman*.

*Pitṛyāna*, or the way of the fathers, is the way leading to the world of the fathers, and one who goes through *pitṛyāna*, after enjoying the fruits of his *karma* (deeds) there, comes back to the earth. This is the way by which the departed enters into the smoke of the funeral fire, from the smoke into the night, from the night into the later (dark) half of the month and in this way the departed proceeds through the regions of ever increasing darkness to the world of the fathers. From there through space to the moon, where the departed remains as long as his good *karma* (deeds) lasts, then he returns to earth. This is the way for the one who lives a life of sacrifice, charity and austerity (probably the householder).

Apart from *devayāna* and *pitṛyāna* there is a third way mentioned both in the Chāndogya and the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣads, which leads to the dark and joyless region. This is the way for the wicked. They are born as lower animals, such as worms and insects. They are born and die continually.

"But on neither of these ways are those small creatures (which are) continually revolving (those of whom it is said), be born and die. Theirs is a third state."

(Chān. 5.10.8)

"But those who do not know these two ways become insects, moths and whatever there is here that bites."

(Bṛhad. 6.2.16)

All other passages on transmigration more or less follow the above passages, though there are differences in detail. For instance, according to Kauś. 1,2 all who depart from this world go without exception to the moon first. From there a few proceed by the way of the fathers to *brahman*, while others return to earth, to various forms of existence ranging from man to worm, according to the quality of their deeds (*karma*) and the degree of knowledge.

In Kāthaka 2.2.7 we come across the idea of migration of human souls into trees. It says,

"Some souls enter into a womb for embodiment, others enter stationary objects (tree) according to their deeds (*karma*) and according to their thoughts."

This idea of human souls migrating into trees and animals is probably taken from the original inhabitants of India and is incorporated into the doctrine of transmigration.

From the above discussion it seems clear that the principal factor for determining one's destiny after death is one's *karma* (deeds), which survives the death of the body and persists from one life to another.

"Yājñavalkya, said he, 'when the speech of this dead person enters into fire, the breath into air, the eye into the sun, the mind into the moon, hearing into the quarters, the self into the ether, the hairs of the body into the herbs, the hairs of the head into the trees and the blood and the semen deposited into the water, what then becomes of this person?' 'Ārtabhaga, my dear,

take my hand. We two alone shall know of this, this is not for us two (to speak of) in public.'

The two then went away and deliberated. What they said was *karman* and what they praised was *karman*. Verily one becomes good - by good deeds and bad by bad deeds."

(Bṛhad. 3.2.13)

### THE LAW OF KARMA

In the Ṛg Veda *ṛta* represents the cosmic order of the universe. It is because of *ṛta* that day follows night, the sun rises in the east and the water always flows downhill. It is the principle underlying everything that is ordered in the universe. *Ṛta* represents order as opposed to chaos, not only in the physical universe, but also in the moral world. It determines the rules of conduct for a man in relation to his fellow men, as well as to the whole of reality. Misdemeanours against *ṛta* do not necessarily create adverse results in the next life. Most of them can be remedied in this life by appropriate action such as the performance of a ritual or offerings to Varuna, the guardian of *ṛta*. The best way to avoid offences against *ṛta* however is to be constantly aware of it and thereby avoiding offences and their consequences, which indicates that knowledge of *ṛta* gives one some control over one's destiny or at least some influence over its course. The law of *karma* of the Upaniṣads seems to be the development of this belief of the Ṛg Veda.

According to the law of *karma* there is nothing chaotic or disordered in the moral world. The future destiny of an individual is formed by the quality of his deeds performed in this life. Good deeds will bring good results and evil deeds will bring pain and

suffering. Not only his deeds but also his conduct has a great effect upon the kind of birth he will have in his next life.

"Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly attain a good birth, the birth of a Brāhman or a Kṣatriya or a Vaisya. But those whose conduct here has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog or a hog or a Candāla."

(Chān. 5.10.7)

His deeds also determine his character in the future life.

"one becomes good by good deeds and evil by evil deeds."

(Bṛhad. 3.2.13)

"According as one acts, according as one behaves, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous deeds and bad by bad deeds."

(Bṛhad. 4.4.5)

Therefore ones inborn character is actually the consequence of ones own deeds in his previous life.

*Karma* literally translated means actions or deeds, but it has another deeper meaning which is evident in Bṛhad. 4.4.2, that it is also the process of consciously determining the action. Here Yājñavalkya explains to King Janaka of Videha that when a person's physical organism dies and the vital breath departs from it, then,

"He becomes one with intelligence. What was intelligence departs with him. His knowledge and his works take hold of him as also his previous experience."

Here *karma* is associated with knowledge and previous experience, and since *karma* means an action or a deed, and that action or deed is determined through knowledge (that he has consciously and actively acquired in his lifetime) and previous experience (that he has gathered in this life), *karma* must mean not only the action but also the process of consciously determining the action.

It is also clear from the above passage that although in the formulation of the doctrine of transmigration *karma* receives the most emphasis, knowledge and previous experience are also two very important factors in shaping ones future destiny. These three survive the death of the body and together they form the mental structure, or what we may call the 'personality' of the person. Out of these he creates a new body for himself, a more beautiful one like that of the fathers or the *gandharvas* (the celestial beings) or the gods, depending on the degree of ignorance that he has done away with (Bṛhad. 4.4.4).

Desire is also said to be a very important factor because desire leads one to selfish actions, which lead to rebirth and also determine ones character and position in the new life. Bṛhad. 4.4.5 has this to say about the man who desires:

"Exhausting the results of whatever works he did in this world he comes again from that world to this world for (fresh) work."

But he who has cast away, or has conquered, all selfish desires and desires only to know the true self, he attains *brahman* here, in this body.

"When all the desires that dwell in the heart are cast away, then does the mortal become immortal, then he attains *brahman* here (in this body)."

(Bṛhad. 4.4.6)

There are no more births and deaths for him, for he has achieved the final liberation (*moksa*). He is *brahman* himself.

Thus, according to the law of *karma*, whatever we are and whatever happens to us in this life, we have to accept without protest because they are the results of our past deeds, but that does not mean that

there is no hope, no prospect for a better future. We can improve our situation in the next life by conscious, unselfish deeds. It is not only our deeds but the will behind the deed is also important, and therefore we should not only do good but also will the good.

When we are asked to give up desire, it is not meant to be all desires but only the selfish ones. As long as we are ignorant of the true nature of our self and identify ourselves with the body, we are full of lust and greed and selfish desires, which lead us to selfish deeds, which in turn cause rebirth. But when we rid ourselves of ignorance and selfish desires, and desire only to know the true self, then we are ready to break the endless circle of births and deaths and gain final liberation (*mokṣa*). That is why although it is necessary to give up selfish desires, desires for knowledge and final liberation is highly commended.

## Chapter Three

### THE DOCTRINE OF MOKṢA (LIBERATION)

In the Vedic times the tendency of the people was to enjoy life on earth. They hoped to continue living after death in the heavenly worlds of the gods and the fathers. However, some of the hymns express concern that life after death may not be eternal, and there is uncertainty about what would come afterwards. The hymns sometimes express a wish to attain immortality, but it is not clear from the hymns what that state of immortality is like.

The Brāhmanas express fear of repeated deaths and freedom from repeated deaths is pursued persistently, but the texts are not explicit about the final state of one who has overcome repeated deaths.

The thinkers of the Upaniṣads felt the endless sequence of births and deaths to be unbearable and longed for an escape from phenomenal existences. This longing for freedom, combined with the realisation that man is in essence one with *brahman*, seems to have led to the formulation of *mokṣa* (emancipation).

*Mokṣa* is a state of deliverance. It is not a release that is brought about by death from the present life, but a release from empirical existence in general. This release does not have to be achieved after death, it can be achieved here and now.

Good deeds or rituals cannot help one to attain *mokṣa* because they lead to temporary rewards. Only knowledge as a personal,

individual achievement can remove the ignorance that prevents us from seeing the unreality of our individuality and realising our universal oneness. But this knowledge is quite different from what we ordinarily understand knowledge to be, which is concerned with the objects of this manifested universe. It is also different from the knowledge acquired from the religious texts. Knowledge in the ordinary sense involves a subject or the knower, an object or that which is to be known, and the act of knowing. But this liberating knowledge is beyond the duality of the subject and object - the knower and the known and the process of knowing as a process is also absent here.

As I have discussed before, the Upaniṣads make it quite clear that in all knowledge *brahman* is the subject of knowledge and therefore cannot be known as an object of knowledge, and that conceptual knowledge of *brahman* is not real knowledge in the ultimate sense, it amounts to not knowing *brahman* at all or knowing it in a very limited way.

The real knowledge of *brahman* is said to be an intuitive act of knowing, an inner awakening within oneself to be the self, the inner essence of everything. This knowledge is therefore not like the knowledge that is gained through perception and then conceptualised by the mind, but it is a direct experience of everything, the whole of reality with all its diversity within oneself. It reveals the essential oneness of all that exists, and of transcendence, without abolishing the surface diversity. Thus knowing *brahman* in the real sense means becoming *brahman*. It is the realisation of the fact that one is and has always been *brahman*. This knowledge is freedom, and freedom is this knowledge. Man is essentially free, has always

been free, but this fact is concealed from him by his ignorance, *mokṣa* is only the realisation of this fact.

The Upaniṣads do not describe precisely the condition of ultimate freedom (*mokṣa*) except to say that it is a condition of total bliss (*ānanda*) and that in this condition after death there is no individuality, no consciousness and therefore no possibility of any activity. This seems similar to the condition of deep sleep where the person has neither physical nor mental activities, in fact no empirical consciousness at all.

In Bṛhad. 2.4.12 Yājñavalkya explains this condition of *mokṣa* to his wife Maitreyī:

"As a lump of salt thrown in water becomes dissolved in water and there would not be any of it to seize forth as it were, but whenever one may take it is salty indeed, so, verily, this great being, infinite, limitless, consisting of nothing but knowledge. Arising from out of these elements one vanishes away into them. When he has departed there is no more knowledge. This is what I say, my dear."

The statement seems to be self contradictory and confusing. The universal self is pure knowledge and yet after the death of the body, when the individual self has merged into it, it has no more knowledge, no more individual consciousness! Therefore, Maitreyī says to him,

"You have bewildered me, venerable sir, by saying that. When he has departed there is no more knowledge."

25

Yājñavalkya replies,

"For where there is duality as it were, there one smells another, there one sees another, there one hears another, there one speaks to another, there one thinks of another, there one understands another. Where, verily, everything has become the self, then by what and whom should one smell, then by what and whom should one see, then by what and whom should

one hear, then by what and whom should one speak, then by what and whom should one think, then by what and whom should one understand? By what should one know that by which all this is known? By what, my dear, should one know the knower?"

26

It is difficult for our intellect to grasp such a condition of the liberated self, devoid of any activity, perception or consciousness. However, all physical and mental activities depend on the subject-object duality, and are possible only in the world of relativity. In the absolute world there is no such duality. All duality vanishes into *brahman*. Therefore, when the individual self becomes one with *brahman*, there is no more separate consciousness, no individuality, and no distinction of subject and object.

Although there are numerous instances in the Upaniṣads where the final freedom is said to be achieved in the actual moment of death of the one with the liberating knowledge, the Upaniṣads are generally in agreement with the oldest tradition of the liberating *munis* (the silent wonderers) of the Ṛg Veda (10,136) that liberation can be achieved in ones lifetime.

One who has attained *mokṣa* in his lifetime is said to be free from desire because there remains nothing for him to desire. He knows himself to be one with the universe, hence there is no worldly possession that he can possibly desire. He, therefore, possessing nothing and desiring nothing lives like a mendicant, without fetters and without any attachment.

"The Brāhmanas, having known that self, having overcome the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, the desire for world, live the life of a mendicant."

(Bṛhad. 3.5.1)

"on knowing Him, in truth, one becomes an ascetic. Desiring Him only as their worlds, monks wander forth. Verily, because they know this, the ancient (sages) did not wish for offspring. What shall we do with offspring (they said). We who have attained this self, this world. They, having risen above the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, the desire for worlds, led the life of a mendicant."

(Br̥hd. 4.4.22)

He is free from all kind of fear because nothing can harm him any more.

"He who knows that bliss of *brahman* fears not at any time."

(Taitt. 2.4.1)

He is free from sorrow because he has no desire, no fetters, no attachment and therefore no possibility of any pain or sorrow.

"Now the self is the bridge, the (separating) boundary for keeping these worlds apart. Over that bridge day and night do not cross, nor old age, nor death, nor sorrow, nor well-being, nor ill-doing. All evils turn back from it for the *brahman*-world is freed from evil."

(Chān. 8.4.1)

His deeds do not affect him anymore. Whether they are good or bad they do not cling to him. Having lost his individuality, and having become one with the universe, he has no particular interest and therefore does not act out of desire for himself. He acts at all time with calmness, self-control, concentration and without doubt. He is doubtless because his knowledge of *ātman* is based on immediate intuition and cannot therefore be shaken by any doubt. All his illusions are removed and he cannot be deluded any more.

"This eternal greatness of the knower of *brahman* is not increased by work nor diminished. One should know the nature of that alone. Having found that one is

not tainted by evil action. Therefore he who knows it as such, having become calm, self-controlled, withdrawn, patient, and collected sees the self in his own self, sees all in the self. Evil does not burn (affect) him, he burns (consumes) all evil. Free from evil, free from taint, free from doubt he becomes Brāhmana (a knower of *brahman*)."

(Bṛnad. 4.4.23)

Now that we know what *mokṣa* is, how do we achieve it for ourselves? How can we develop the insight into our inmost essence? Through what kind of active personal effort can we bring this about? What kind of discipline can prepare us for this inner vision, this direct experience of the supreme reality? How can we train ourselves or prepare ourselves to receive this liberating knowledge, by following which discipline, which path? By going through the Vedic literatures we find that there existed such a path from the ancient time which remained under the surface during the Brāhmanic culture, but was developed further in the later Upaniṣads as the Yoga Path, the path to enlightenment, to immortality.

## Chapter Four

### THE DOCTRINE OF THE PATH LEADING TO MOKṢA

Various hymns of the Ṛg Veda indicate that originally there was no immortality in the universe. Even the gods were mortals like other beings. According to some Ṛg Vedic hymns the gods won immortality through Agni (R.V. 5,3,4; 6,7,4 etc.). According to the Brāhmaṇas it was through sacrifice that the gods won immortality (Ś.B. 1,5,2,6; 1,7,3,1; T.B. 1,6,10,2). Among men our ancestors (the ancient seers - ṛṣis), those who had the 'vision', found the path to immortality for us (R.V. 1,71,1) and by following it they reached immortality (R.V. 10,56,4; A.V. 6,41,3). However, there are no instructions in the hymns about how to follow the path. Although the seers may have had some spontaneous vision and experience of the transcendent, there seems little doubt that there was a path, which constituted of real spiritual discipline, and which could be followed methodically by the seekers of subsequent generations.

The mystical vision and the knowledge of the path must have been achieved only by a few seekers and were probably handed down from one generation to the next and thus remained within the families of these few seekers. Then during the period of Brāhmaṇas, when the attitude of the people changed progressively from spiritualism to ritualism, the knowledge of the path deteriorated until only the knowledge of the existence of the path remained. However, the knowledge of the path was not lost altogether. It was kept alive throughout the Vedic period by those seers who stayed outside the Vedic religious practices and did not aspire to priesthood. These seers were called *munis*, or the silent ones. They adopted a totally different kind

of life style to the Vedic ṛṣis. While the ṛṣis lived in the community and conveyed their knowledge through their hymns, rituals and stories, and through direct teachings of their pupils, the *munis* lived a life of renunciation, solitude, meditation and pilgrimage. They passed on their knowledge to their disciples who also adopted the same life style. The Vedic seers were aware of them, which is evident from the 'keśin' hymn of the Ṛg Veda (10,136), but being outside the trend of Vedic ritualistic practices, very little evidence of their existence, practices and achievements can be found in the Vedas. Whatever little evidence is there is scanty and indirect. Nevertheless, the existence of the 'keśin' hymn is strong enough evidence to suggest the existence of accomplished Yogis in Vedic times.

Dr. Werner summarises the *keśin* hymn like this,

"The long-haired one is described in the hymn as someone who is on friendly terms with the natural elements and is equally at home in this world as in the spiritual world, is a master of the creative flame present in himself and is one with the light of wisdom. He travels around homeless, clad only in dust (or, perhaps, in a yellow robe of rags). His is the path of the winds, he is inscrutable to other people, a companion to gods, belonging, in fact, to another dimension of life. Others can see only his body; his mind or real personality dwells in the "inner region", in the centre from which he can see everything that has taken form and understand the whole world. Gods are his friends, he is one with life itself, dwelling simultaneously in the physical and spiritual universe. He is seen as a gentle friend not only by gods and other higher beings, but by all other creatures, including wild beasts, and he knows what is going on in the hearts of all other beings he encounters. He has mastered all the forces of the universe, even the dark ones, and unharmed endures and overcomes all the vicissitudes and dangers of existence."

27

Outside the Vedic culture there was another group of people who lived in the eastern part of Northern India, the centre of which was Magadha. These were the Vrātyas, a brotherhood of semi-military

religious people. As they began to settle down, there developed amongst them on the one hand a class of aristocrats and rulers who ruled over the settled part of the population, and on the other hand small religious communities practicing magic. Some of these groups moved about constantly performing various rites for the members of the settled communities. They also visited the Vedic area where they were held in high esteem because of their magic practices. Some of these magic practices contained elements of Yoga practices, particularly of the kind which later came to be known as Tāntric Yoga. The Brāhmans looked down upon these people as barbarians.

There were also Vrātyas who were solitary, wandering ascetics, and were respected for their holiness. These were probably another group of ancient Yogis.

In time the Vedic culture spread to the east and absorbed the Vrātya culture. The literature of the Vrātyas has survived only in part in the Atharva Veda. However, the Brāhmanic culture itself did not remain unaffected for long, for it could not ignore the influence the Yoga tradition and the wandering ascetics had on the people at large. In the course of time the Brāhmanic culture, in its aspiration to become universal, incorporated within its own system the ideals of the ascetic and Yogic way of life, which was to renounce everything in the world and to concentrate on the search for the ultimate truth. The system of the four stages (*āśramas*) of life was probably formulated to accommodate both the practices of the Vedic ṛṣis and the *munis* by first living in the community for a certain period of time fulfilling ones duty to the family and to the community while acquiring knowledge and preparing oneself for the highest knowledge, and then

by living the life of a renouncer, following the path to enlightenment. The four stages are like four steps, each of which takes one nearer to the goal. However, there has always been the option that if one feels that he is ready to enter the life of a renouncer, that he does not need to go through all the other stages one by one then he can do so from whichever stage he is in.

#### THE FOUR ĀŚRAMAS

The oldest passage which mentions all four āśramas in the proper order is in Jābāla Upaniṣad.

"Yājñavalkya said, 'after completing the life of a student, let one become a householder; after completing the life of a householder let one become a forest dweller; after completing the life of a forest dweller, let one renounce'".

(Jāb. 4)

The first stage of life is then *brahmacarya*, the disciplined life of a student. Having been accepted by a teacher the student receives instructions from the teacher for the next twelve years. He learns the Vedas, the secret formulas of sacrifice, and how to perform them. In return for these instructions he serves the teacher by begging alms for him, tending to the sacrificial fires, looking after his cattle and performing other household duties. He lives a life of celibacy.

Chān. 8,4,3 says about *brahmacarya* :

"But only they find that Brahmā-world who practice the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge; only they possess that Brahmā-world. For them there is unlimited freedom in all worlds".

At the end of the twelve years, when the pupil has learnt the

sacred knowledge and presented his teacher with gifts, then he returns home to begin the life of a householder - *gṛhastha*.

As a householder he has to perform the daily rituals at home for the family, study the Vedas regularly and instruct his sons and disciples on the Vedas; give alms, look after his parents and perform sacrifices for his ancestors and his family. The most important duty of a householder is to establish a family, especially to produce a son to continue the family line.

According to Bṛhad. 6.2.16 and Chān. 5.10.3-6 those who live by practicing sacrificial rituals, charity and austerity, after death they go to the world of the fathers and after enjoying the fruits of their *karma* there, return to earth. However, Chān. 8.15 has this to say about the householder.

"He who has learned the Veda from the family of a teacher according to rule, in the time left over from doing work for the teacher, he, who after having come back again, settles down in a home of his own, continues the study of what he has learnt and have virtuous sons, he who concentrates all his senses in the self, who practices non-hatred to all creatures except at holy places, he who behaves thus throughout his life reaches the Brahmā-world, does not return hither again, yea, he does not return hither again."

(Chān. 8.15)

Here, 'continue the study of what he has learnt' seems to indicate that the householder after settling down in his own home should continue the study of the scriptures by contemplating on the deeper meaning of them, to enhance his own understanding of their significance.

'He who concentrates all his senses in the self' indicates towards an element of Yoga practices which is the 'withdrawal' of senses

or *pratyāhāra* in Patañjali's eightfold path. In *pratyāhāra* the senses are withdrawn from the sense objects into the mind and the mind is thus kept clear from the disturbances of the outside world for the inner vision.

The householder should practice 'non-hatred to all creatures' because everything in the world has the same self (*brahman*) and therefore in essence he is at one with everything. The practice of non-hatred also points at another element of Yoga, which is 'abstinence' from killing and injuring other beings. In Buddha's eightfold path it comes under '*Right acting*' and in Patañjali's under '*yama*' as '*ahimsa*'.

According to this passage if the householder lives his life according to the above instructions then he may remain in this state until the end of life, after which he goes to the world of *Brahmā* never to return to earth.

The third stage is *vānaprastha* - the life of a forest dweller. When one has fulfilled his duties as a householder and is approaching old age, he then proceeds to *vānaprastha*, often accompanied by his wife. In the forest, released from the duties of a householder, one pursues the spiritual practices in solitude. There one reads the Vedas, meditates on the deeper meaning of the Vedas in silence, practices austerities and takes part in philosophical discussions. In this way one could gradually grasp the symbolical and hidden meaning of the texts and the ritual actions which point to the mysterious forces underlying life as well as the visible universe.

In this stage one gains knowledge of *brahman* and prepares oneself for the final stage of *sañnyāsa*. When one feels that he has freed himself from desire and has loosened all his attachments with the world, then only he enters the fourth and the final stage of *sañnyāsa* - the life of a renouncer.

According to Jābāla 4 one normally enters into *sañnyāsa* after passing through the stages of *brahmacarya*, *gṛhastha*, and *vānaprastha*, but it says that it can be entered into directly from any stage if a person felt that he was ready to renounce everything and embrace the life of a *sañnyāsī*.

The fourth stage is *sañnyāsa*. It is a life of total renunciation. Before entering it one has to surrender all possessions, renounce all relationships and leave his family and friends forever. It is a complete separation from the normal life of a person. Before entering it a person has to perform a purification ceremony such as the one performed at death. A final offering to the ancestors and a final sacrifice is also performed. For all practical purposes he is dead to his family and friends.

A *sañnyāsī* does not belong to any class and therefore does not wear his sacred thread anymore, nor does he keep the lock of hair that indicates his family descent. He lives by begging alms and wanders about homeless as a pilgrim. He keeps silent, meditates and practices *yoga*. He observes chastity, poverty, truth and abstinence from causing injury to others. For his garment he can either wear a robe or stay naked.

A *sañnyāsī* should have no anger, lust, desire, infatuation, pride, envy, jealousy, hatred, sorrow, pleasure, disappointment, deceit or falsehood, for these are all obstacles on the way to his goal and therefore he must rid himself of them. He has to control his senses, restrain them, because the senses lead him outward towards the sense objects when he should be looking inward into his own self.

"The self is not to be sought through the senses.  
The self caused pierced the openings (of the senses)  
outward and not within oneself. Some wise man,  
however, seeking the life eternal, with his eyes  
turned inward, saw the self."

(Kāth. 2.1.1)

Unruly, uncontrolled senses scatter the mind and attention and one loses the right direction.

"Just as water, rained down on the mountain, flows at random down the downward slopes, so also, one, who runs after the sense-impressions, gets lost among them."

(Kāth. 4.14)

Kāth. 2.3.9 explains that the vision of self is an inner vision that cannot be perceived by the eye but only by the mind, the consciousness.

"Not within the field of vision stands this form.  
No one soever sees him with the eye. By heart, by  
thought, by mind apprehended, they who know him  
become immortal."

(Kāth. 2.3.9)

But the ordinary state of one's mind is full of everyday experiences. To achieve such a state of mind one must withdraw it from all outside activities, from all sense-perceptions, for which one needs complete control over his mind and senses. Kāth. 1.3.3-9 explains that the senses are controlled by the mind and the mind by the intellect. It describes the body as the chariot and the *ātman* as the rider. The intellect (*buddhi*) as the charioteer

and the mind as the reins. The senses as the horses and the objects of the senses as the paths on which the horses drive. The mind is therefore the rein by which the intellect controls the senses. By restraining the mind the senses are also restrained, brought under control, like the good horses of a charioteer. But one who does not restrain his mind, the senses are also unrestrained and unruly, like the bad horses of a charioteer. The one who has control over his mind and the senses is receptive to the highest knowledge, and therefore he attains *brahman*.

"He who has the understanding for the driver of the chariot and controls the rein of his mind, he reaches the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the all pervading."

(Kāth. 1.3.9)

But how does one restrain the mind? By what means, which method does one attain that highest state of mind?

According to Kāth. 2.3.10-11, that highest state of mind is the realm of yoga. Although Kāthaka is the first Upaniṣad to spell out yoga as the path to oneness with *brahman*, the oldest Upaniṣads were definitely under the influence of yoga trends which is shown mainly by the importance of the concept of *dhyāna* in them.

*Dhyāna*, or meditation, is the contemplation of an object without any break. The whole energy of the mind is centred on the object to the exclusion of everything else. Gradually the essence of the object meditated upon fills the mind and the consciousness transcends the superficial or surface mind (*citta*) and enters into a supra-intellectual plain where the meditator has a direct vision of reality. Later on *dhyāna* became an important feature of the yoga system of Patañjali.

The Yoga Path:

The term yoga signifies the method of concentration by which one attains the highest state of mind where one can have a direct experience of reality. It is a realm of transcendental spiritual reality where the individual feels at one with the essence of reality or with reality as a whole.

In yoga the senses are firmly controlled so that the mind remains void of conception and is elevated higher and higher from one state to the other till in the mental vision of yogī appears the realm of absolute existence. This yoga path is probably the path to enlightenment that was practiced outside Brāhmanism by the *munis*. Kāth.

1.3.14 says about this path

"... sharp as the edge of a razor and hard to cross, difficult to tread is that path (so) sages declare."

Śvet. 2.8-10 mentions the appropriate place for yoga meditation, and instructs on the sitting position as well. It instructs that sitting in the right position one should concentrate on controlling the senses by the mind and making an inward journey to the heart, where the *ātman* resides. One should retrain his <sup>one's</sup> breathing and all the while one should restrain his <sup>one's</sup> mind vigilantly as he <sup>one</sup> would a chariot yoked with vicious horses (Śvet. 2.9). At first there are visions of fog, smoke, sun, wind, fire, fireflies, lightning and crystal moon, before the actual revelation of *brahman*.

In Maitrī Upaniṣad we find the anticipation of a system of yoga training. Mait. 6.18 instructs on a sixfold yoga to achieve oneness with *brahman* - control of the breath, withdrawal of the senses, meditation,

concentration, contemplative inquiry and absorption (Mait. 6.18). These are later on systematized by Patañjali in his eightfold yoga path.

According to Mait. 6.20 by pressing the tip of the tongue down the palate and by restraining voice, mind and breath a higher concentration is achieved and then one has vision of *brahman* through contemplative thought. He perceives the self (*brahman*) in the self (*ātman*) and becomes selfless, meaning that he loses his individuality, as to know *brahman* is to become *brahman*.

"Because of his being selfless he is to be thought of as immeasurable, without origin."

(Mait. 6.20)

Then we come across the concept of *a-u-m* as an image of *brahman*. Just as a name is in some way one and the same as the person it names, *a-u-m* is said to be one with *brahman* the same way.

Mait. 6.22 instructs that there are two *brahmans* to be meditated upon, sound and non-sound. The non-sound is revealed only by the sound; *a-u-m* is the sound and the meditator moves upwards by the syllable *a-u-m* and ascends to *brahman*. It also instructs on another method of meditation on the sound which is to close the ears with thumbs to shut out all outside noise and to concentrate on the sound from within one's heart. There are seven different kinds of sound one encounters; the sound of rivers, a bell, a brass vessel, a wheel, the croaking of frogs, rain, and one speaking in a still place. By passing them all one by one the meditator reaches 'the supreme, non-sound, unmanifest *brahman*'.

Muṇḍ 2.2.4 describes *a-u-m* as the bow, the self (*ātman*) as

the arrow and *brahman* as the target of the arrow. The target has to be hit without any mistake and as the arrow, when it hits the target becomes one with the target, just so one becomes united with *brahman*.

According to Māṇḍ. 8.12 *brahman* has four quarters, and the three letters of *a-u-m* each represents a state of the soul. *A* represents the waking state, *u* the dream state and *m* the state of deep sleep. The fourth state is the unmanifested state of the self, where there is no subject-object duality, no perceiver and no object of perception, there is only the self (*brahman*). One has to rise above the first three states to enter into the fourth state to be united with the self (*brahman*).

Mait. 6.25 summarises it all by saying

"He who has senses indrawn as in sleep, who has his thoughts perfectly pure as in dreams, who, while, in the cavern of the senses is not under their control, perceives him who is called *Pranava*, the leader. Of the form of light, sleepless, free from old age, deathless, and sorrowless, and thus it is said: 'Because in his manner he joins the breath, the syllable *a-u-m* and all this world in its manifoldness or perhaps they are joined, therefore this (process of meditation) is called *Yoga* (joining). The oneness of the breath, the mind and likewise, of the senses and the abandonment of all conditions of existence, this is designated as *Yoga*'."

The outward expressions of the progress in yoga are

"lightness, healthiness, steadiness, clearness of complexion, pleasantness of voice, sweetness of odor and slight exertions, these say, are the first results of the progress of yoga".

(Śvet. 2.13)

Then when the body of yogi is purified by the practices of yoga, the elements composing the body are elevated to the level of

their subtleness, then there is no longer sickness, old age or death for the yogi. Radhakrishnan has this to say about the accomplished yogi,

"He leaves his gross body and attains an indefectible one. It is a consciousness-body, akin to that of the supreme with whom the contemplator has identified through meditation".

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Thus when through yoga one has identified his self (*ātman*) with *brahman*, has attained to oneness with *brahman* - the supreme reality, then he becomes free from all bonds, he is liberated.

From the instructions on the different methods and practices of yoga in the Upaniṣads and from the indirect evidence of the existence of different types of *yogis* in the Vedas, it can be concluded that from a very early time there may have been a number of schools of yoga, each with a different technique or method of practice. However, none of these schools developed strong separate identities over a long period of time and were finally absorbed into Patañjali's Yoga System which is a great synthesis of yoga trends going back to very ancient times.

The first and the oldest school of systematised yoga practice is found in Buddhism. The school of Jaina Yoga, although slightly older than the Buddhist one, its literary documents were composed several centuries later than the Buddhist ones, and therefore the original form can no longer be distinguished from the later developments within the system.

Patañjali's Yoga is the second of the systematic expositions of the yoga technique that have been preserved from ancient times.

It is regarded to be the classical expositions of yoga and is sometimes referred to as Rājā Yoga, which can be translated as the 'Royal Path'.

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