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CHAPTER 3

SOME DEFINITIONS OF BASIC TERMS DISCUSSED IN UPANISHADS

ULTIMATE REALITY – BRAHMAN

The Rishis and pioneers of Upanishads pondered over the fundamental questions: what is this world rooted in? Is there a Supreme Reality that does not change and which supports, and/or which is the causal form of, the world of shape and form?

How is the world formed? By automatic evolution? If so, where did it all begin? Is there a plan or pattern or intelligent principle behind it all or it just ‘occurred’ by chance and others got built around it?

While answers to the above questions are not easy to find, the Rishis concluded that the world of shape, name and forms that we see is not the result of meaningless chance or that ‘intelligence’ cannot be created out of ‘inert matter’ but that there has to exist ‘some pure consciousness’ before anything else can exist. That is the only way life forms can get started. This ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘spirit’ or the ‘supreme reality’ was named Brahman by these Rishis from the root ‘brh’ meaning ‘to grow’ or ‘to burst forth’. In other words, this world has ‘grown’ or ‘burst forth’ from Brahman. Sankara, the saint who established the Advaita doctrine and who has written ‘bhashyas’ or ‘commentaries’ on the major Upanishads, derives the word Brahman from ‘brhathi’ meaning to exceed and derives the meaning of Brahman as ‘purity and eternity’. Rig Veda, one of the four Vedas according to Veda Vyasa’s classification, uses the term Brahman to denote ‘sacred knowledge or utterance, a hymn or incantation’, the concrete expression of spiritual wisdom. In later references, Brahman meant wisdom or Veda. Gradually, the word acquired the meaning, power and potency of prayer, knowledge and the ‘Reality’ itself. It came to be called the first created Being, ‘Brahma Prathamajam’ and even to be treated as the ‘creative principle’, the cause of all existence.

Brahman is a great word in Upanishads and Vedanta. Upanishads state that no word can explain the ultimate Reality. But we have to use some word to denote it. Upanishads use two words to denote It, Brahman and Atman. The universal soul or the soul of the infinite cosmos is denoted by Brahman; the individual soul or Self is denoted by Atman, pure Consciousness. The Brahman and Atman, both being pure consciousness, is the same; there cannot be more than one consciousness, it is one and the same, it is expressed in the singular and no plurality exists as far as consciousness is concerned. Just like air or space is vast and infinite, yet inside a pot, space is limited or conditioned by the size (and shape) of the pot, so also the vast, infinite consciousness in the individual seems conditioned and limited by the size and shape of the individual. Consciousness is not plural but the bodies in which consciousness manifests are plural.

Upanishads and Vedanta also state that it is not possible to describe the Ultimate Reality referred to by the name of Brahman. The Taittiriya Upanishad says, “ यत वाच निवरतनते अपरापया मनसा सह यातस्व वाचहस्व नविरतहानते ऽपरापया मानासा साहा” ‘That from which all speech with the mind turns away, not having reached It’ – Neither words nor mind nor senses can reach It, then how is one able to explain It? Brahman can only be explained by stating what it is not – known as the ‘neti’ description (not this, not this). When asked whether this is Brahman or that is Brahman, those possessed of Brahmajnana, the experiencers of Brahma knowledge, answer that It is not this or It is not that etc. This is known as the ‘neti, neti’ way of describing Brahman.

Faced with the task of explaining Ultimate Reality which can neither be described nor defined by a word, the common tools of perception used in the secular sphere of knowledge and education, the Rishis have provided sufficient metaphors, imagery and prosaic descriptions that allowed their disciples to understand and experience Brahman; this is what is contained in the Upanishads.

The Upanishads state that

the Real is not the actual, is not what we see and hear.

Bhrgu, the son of Varuna, asks his Dad Varuna in *Taittiriya Upanishad*: “What is that from which all things are born (take shape), in which having been born they live, and into which after having lived they go unto?”

The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* maintains that the ultimate reality is Being.

Nothing is without reason. There must be a reason why something exists. The world is not self-caused, self-dependent and self-maintaining. The world is not the result of meaningless chance.

The Upanishads affirm that everything depends on Brahman, the divine principle at work in the universe.

Brahman, the unmanifest, the pure consciousness, the spirit, the Absolute, the One, the Real, supercedes everything. From this spirit the creative principle or Ishvara came. Hiranya-garbha meaning the golden egg, the great self or ‘mahan atma’, contains in seed form the earth with all its islands, all worlds and the manifested names-and-forms world just like the ‘future’ tree is contained in the seed.

Whereas the “Supreme Reality” or Brahman is ‘pure consciousness or spirit’, Ishvara is the self-awareness that comprehends everything and is the creative principle or spirit. Ishvara is the ‘Supreme Reality’ in action as the Lord and Creator. The world of names-shapes-and-forms contained in seed form is the Hiranya-garbha; the existence of, and the seen, world is known as the Virat (Purusha). The Upanishadic seers and thinkers or rishis consider these as the integral nature of the ‘Supreme Reality’.

There is a logical succession to it – the Absolute must be there before the Divine or Creative Spirit which must be there before the world-spirit or hiranya garbha which must

be there before the world appears. Dr. Radhakrishnan in his classic work, 'The Principal Upanishads' (ref. 1, p.72), meticulously discusses these ideas very clearly, with references to various Upanishads, and states that these are four sides of one whole, the Brahman, and co-existent but not alternating poses where each one can exist without the other. These are simultaneous sides of One Reality, the Ultimate Reality. These are:

- the transcendental universal being anterior to any concrete reality, *the Brahman*
- the causal principle of all differentiation, *Ishwara*,
- the innermost essence of the world (and in seed form), *Hiranya-Garbha*,
- the manifested world, *Virat*.

These are not alternating poses but are coexistent and are all representations of *Brahman*.

ULTIMATE REALITY – ATMAN

The word 'Atman' is derived from 'an' which means 'to breathe'. It is the breath of life. It is also used to express 'Soul', 'Self' or 'Essential Being' of the Individual. Atman is what remains when everything that is not the self is eliminated. *Rig Veda* talks of the 'unborn part' or 'immortal' part of man. This 'unborn' or immortal part is not to be confused with body, mind, intellect (what Chinamayanda, the founder of Chinmaya Mission Vedanta groups in India, USA and many countries, calls as the BMI syndrome; in fact, the BMI is nothing but the 'external expressions' of the 'Self'). Our true self is 'pure existence, self-aware' unconditioned by the forms of body, mind and intellect. If the self can be freed from its upadhis or adjuncts that surround or enclose it, if one can 'realize' one's self by being able to go past the body, mind and intellect, then it is stated by those who have reached such a state (the 'self-realized' souls or 'jivanmukthas' as they are known) that one would get an experience that is at once and at the same time 'secret, wonderful, great and marvelous'. Getting to this stage, to be a 'jivanmuktha', is the goal; this knowledge is 'self-realization' or 'atma-jnana'. Thus, 'self' is the 'real' thing or the substratum that is surrounded or enclosed by BMI. Human beings spend their time thinking about the BMI as the 'Real' thing (when they should be treating BMI as the 'not-Real'). Never for a moment do they think of, or want to be, looking for the 'real' thing. The 'discernible' few among the vast multitude, however, ask questions of the purpose of life and develop the 'burning desire' required to follow the path of 'self-realization'. Just like Brahman is the underlying 'real' thing of the universe with the world and everything else that we see as the adjuncts enveloping the 'real', so also 'Atman' is the 'real' thing with body, mind and intellect as the 'upadhi's surrounding, covering and conditioning It.

Bhagavad Gita talks of that part of human being (soul) that is not cleaved by weapons nor burnt by the fire nor wetted by water nor dried by the wind.

***'nainam chindhanthi shastrANI, nainam dahathi pAvakah,
na chainam kledayantyApo na soshayathi mAruthah'***

Chandogya Upanishad describes the attempts by the Devas (the godly folks) and Asuras (demons) to learn about the true nature of the Self in the form of a story. Devas (Gods) and Asuras (Demons) wanted to know the true nature of 'Self' and approached Praja-Pati (the creator). The Gods sent Indra and the demons sent Virochana to learn of the true 'Self'. The first thing they thought about as the true 'self' is what is seen by the eye or in a pale of water or in a mirror. Praja-Pati told them to adorn new clothes and to look again from which they concluded that the body is not the true 'self'. They next thought that the true 'self' is the dreaming self which was also disproved because the dreaming self undergoes pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow etc. Next, Praja-Pati suggested to try the consciousness in deep sleep. Indra feels that in that state he does not know himself nor does he know anything that exists; however 'self' exists in deep sleep; so this also was eliminated. Finally, it was shown that the 'real' self is the 'active universal consciousness'. It is an experience in which Self is the knowing subject and is also the known object. Self is open only to Self. It is neither 'subjective' nor the 'objective

reality'. The subject-object concept has meaning only in the world of 'names-and-forms'. The self is the light of lights and through it alone is there any light in the universe. It is that which sees and the object seen. Whatever is an object belongs to the 'not-self'. The self is the constant 'witness-consciousness'. Whenever persons wake up after enjoying deep sleep and claim that they had a very sound sleep and they didn't know of a thing, the question can be posed that if they had such a sound sleep and didn't know anything, how did they then know that they had such a sound sleep? The answer lies in the fact that the 'self' is awake always, acts as a witness or 'saakshi' and that's what people refer to as one's consciousness – as when they say, 'ask/convince your own consciousness whether what you say is true or not, do not try to convince others etc.'. The implication here being that one's self is always awake and acts as one's 'witness-consciousness'. This is 'Atman'.

The four states of Self are stated as:

- *Vaiswanara*, the experiencer during waking state
- *Tajasa*, the experiencer during the dream state
- *Prajna*, the experiencer during deep sleep state
- *Turiya*, the Supreme Self.

Mandukya Upanishad states that the fourth state, *Turiya*, is the basis of the other three.

BRAHMAN AS ATMAN

From the preceding discussions, we can note that the Upanishads show us the similarity of Brahman and Atman. Just like Brahman is the 'Soul' (Reality) of the name-and-form Universe, so also Atman is the 'Soul' (Reality) of the name-and-form individual being.

The Rishis discovered that the Atman and Brahman, both terms used to denote pure consciousness, are one and the same. Consciousness is not more than one, there cannot be difference between them, they can only be stated in the singular, there is no plurality associated with consciousness, the bodies that enclose consciousness are many but they enclose the same consciousness, just as various pots enclose space, while space is vast and infinite, the space in each pot appears to be different etc.

MAYA (ILLUSION), VIDYA (KNOWLEDGE), AVIDYA (IGNORANCE)

What is Maya or Illusion?

Maya or Illusion can be stated as the feeling that includes ‘mistaken belief’ as the ‘correct answer’. If an erroneous or mistaken solution is viewed and accepted as the correct solution, then those who accept the mistaken solution as the correct solution will be said to be under an ‘illusion’ or under the influence of ‘Maya’. It will also be stated that the reason that the ‘erroneous solution’ appears as the ‘correct solution’ is due to ‘Avidya’ or ‘Ignorance’, when the light of knowledge dawns on the person, (i.e, when the person becomes a ‘jnani’ or ‘realized master’), all duality (and multiplicity) will disappear and the person sees ‘brahman’ everywhere.

The example of ‘rope’ being mistakenly considered as ‘snake’ in darkness and correctly identified as ‘rope’ when the light comes on is used to communicate the ‘effect’ of ‘maya’ and persons under the influence of ‘maya’ treating the non-Real’ as ‘Real’ and the ‘non-Self’ as the ‘Self’. When the ‘light’ of ‘realization dawns, the ‘truth’ is seen and all doubts, and ignorance, are removed. When the ignorance is removed, one’s self-inquiry has led the person to ‘self-realization’ and the person becomes a ‘*jnAni*’ and a ‘*jivan-muktha*’ while still living in this world.

The World of Names and Forms:

We live in this world of names and forms. This world around us is changing always. The people living in the world face tremendous pressures and stresses in their day-to-day living and seek shelter in a spirit beyond. The Rishis of Ancient times who have pondered on this world, life in this world and its battles and wars and all idiosyncracies have concluded that the changeless Reality, also known as Brahman, is indeed the Real thing (permanent) and the world of names and forms is unreal (transitory or non-permanent). The world of names and forms is changing constantly; anything that changes is NOT Real, not permanent – because we define Real as That which NEVER changes and is thus permanent; hence the world is NOT real (or, not-permanent). The references to the ‘unreal’ world of names and forms and the ‘real’ Brahman occur all over the Upanishads. The collective wisdom of these Rishis is available to us in these Upanishads and helps the seeker ‘realize’ here itself (‘iha eva’ is the phraseology used in the Upanishads) .

The mistaken notion of the world around us, changing always, and represented by its names and forms as the real thing when the changeless Reality, also known as Brahman, is indeed the real thing is attributed to Maya (or Illusion). Since the world of names and forms is unreal, then there cannot be Real in the world because Real cannot come from unreal. Therefore, the Real, which is the substratum or the Absolute of the unreal manifestations of the world, has to exist and exists as the First cause and the material cause of the world.

‘Vidya’ and ‘Avidya’ are defined as ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ (‘avidya’, with the ‘a’ character negating the meaning of ‘vidya’). A more proper meaning for these words are

‘Higher knowledge’ and ‘Lower knowledge’. The direct perception of ‘Brahman’ alone is considered as the ‘Higher knowledge’; all knowledge that does not contribute to the ‘direct perception’ and ‘realization’ of Brahman is treated as ‘Lower knowledge’. Viewed in this context, all secular education, religious works including the Vedas (Rik, Yajur, Sama & Atharva) are all considered as ‘avidya’ (Lower knowledge).

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3

The Ultimate Reality is neither able to be explained nor given a name because this Reality is beyond description by the senses, mind and intellect. Upanishads call this by the name of 'Brahman'. It is defined by the 'neti, neti' (not this, not this) argumentation; in other words, one can state what Brahman is not, not what Brahman is or how Brahman is seen etc. It is stated to be the First or Primal Cause of this world; it is also the material cause of this world. It transcends everything that we know of in this world. It is 'Pure Consciousness'. Even though the world is insentient, it has arisen, and caused by, the sentient, all-knowing, ever present, Pure Consciousness, the Ultimate Reality.

The individual soul, similarly, is the pure consciousness embodied within the senses, mind and intellect. This is called as Atman by the Upanishads.

Since Consciousness is singular and no plurality can be associated with It, Upanishadic thinkers, the great Rishis, conclude that Brahman and Atman are one and the same. Just like the infinite space is only one but appears as many when one considers the space enclosed by the various conditioned elements like pots or buildings, so also the consciousness or Atman appearing in the individual beings, animate and inanimate, that appear to be many is really only one and the same.

The world of names and forms that constantly changes being considered by many as the Real thing is due to Maya or illusion. Such illusion is caused by Avidya (or Ignorance); when Vidya, the knowledge, occurs, Maya disappears and Reality is perceived by the individual who becomes a '*jivan-muktha*' – liberated while living in this world.