

EXEGETICAL NOTES AND TRANSLATIONS II

VIKRAMAN BALAJI

In this series of articles, we will be guided by the following general principle: the deeper one comprehends the Veda, the more one unravels the mysteries in the Upanishads. Our primary sources of inspiration are the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Coomaraswamy. In this article, we take another verse from the Isha Upanishad as an illustration of this general principle.

Our attempt at translation and explanation is guided by the following lines of Sri Aurobindo:

“The text has to be studied with a great patience, a great passivity, waiting for experience and waiting for light and then waiting for still more light. ...if a man can make his mind like a blank slate, if he can enter into the condition of bottomless passivity proper to the state of the all-embracing Chaitanya Atman, not attempting to fix what the Truth shall be but allowing Truth to manifest herself in his soul, he will find then that it is the nature of the Sruti to reveal perfectly its own message.”¹

Design and Memory in the context of the Isha Upanishad

We shall discuss a profound line which occurs towards the end of the Isha Upanishad.

As we begin to meditate deeper on the Upanishads, we perceive multiple points of view coexisting in any hymn reflecting the essential unity of the underlying principle, like the play of rays from within a jewel. This is precisely the reason why these hymns offer a possibility of such a multitude of interpretations.

We first look at the Kānva version:

Om, om, om. krato smara, k.rtam smara, krato smara, k.rtam smara
(Kānva, 17)

while the Mādhyandina recension reads as follows:

Om, om, om. krato smara, klibe smara, k.rtam smara
(Mādhyandina, 15)

In the Kānva² version it occurs after the hymn on the *Hiranmayena Patram*, while in the Mādhyandina version³ it occurs before it. From a superficial standpoint, this placement of the verse may seem insignificant but a closer examination reveals a deeper

import.

The very first word that occurs is *kratu* a word which has its origins in the *Rig Veda*. It can be translated as “Will, design, purpose or counsel”. In the *Rig Veda* it is the capital function of the deity Agni, one of whose epithets is *kavi kratuh*; a rik in the very first Hymn of the *Rig Veda* goes as *Agnir hotaa kavi kratuh* meaning “Agni, the invoker of the gods, the one whose design is that of a seer”. In other words, it is the Seer-Poet’s ability to “create by design, by will” and it is the flaming Agni in our willings, with his power to design, who is being referred to in this line from the Isha. Significantly, the next line (both in the Kānva and the Mādhyandina versions) is a hymn to Agni from the *Rig Veda*.

One of the earlier Rig Vedic epithets of Agni is *Jaatavedas*, i.e. “knower of births” because “he is the Knower of all things born” (*vishvaa veda janimaa jaatavedaah*)(*Rig Veda*, Book VI, Hymn 15.13). We stress that this “Knowing” is not “knowing as successive events”, but is a “Knowing in a now-ever moment”. Elsewhere in the Veda (Mandala X, 5.1), we see Agni being called *ekah samudrah dharunah rayinaam asmat hrdah bhuuri janmaa vi chashte*, meaning “One ocean bearing the flows, the one with multiple births, from our heart sees all”. *Kratu* also means power or strength (as in the Greek *Kratos*, “effective of action”⁴). The word has also a derived sense of “mind or intellect”.

The next word in the hymn we take up is *smara* and the closely related word *smrti* which means “memory or recollection”. Our contention is that the memory that is referred to here is deeper and at a certain level of consciousness may be termed a *lightning remembrance*, a memory which brings to experience the thing remembered. So by *smrti* is meant “an immediate awareness of what one is seeking, an intuitive reference to the constant presence of the subject meditated upon”. The Chandogya Upanishad (VII, 26.1) goes even deeper and talks of the origins of this memory as *aatmatah smarah* i.e. “memory is from the Atma”. This Atma or Self has earlier in the Isha been described as *kavi, manishi, paribhuh, svayambhuh ... vyadadhaat sasvatibhyah samaabhyah*, “the Seer, the Thinker, the one who has come to be all that is around, the self-existent ... has ordered perfectly from years sempiternal”⁵. The Self’s timeless omnipresence implicitly implies an omniscience. Memory or *smrti* is therefore a total participation in the Self’s awareness, the Self which does not “remember” things in the usual sense since the Self has never forgotten anything. So *smara* could

well be translated in this light as “to recollect in Self-awareness”.

The next word which occurs in the Mādhyandina version is *klibe* which comes from the root *klrip* and which means “to sculpt, to fashion”. Thus, *klibe* can be translated as “what needs to be fashioned, sculpted”. The word *kalpa* is also from similar roots. Finally, the word *k.rtam* simply means “what has been done, made”, from *k.rta* which means “made”.

With the translation of the individual words in place, we now offer a translation of the hymn both from the Kānva and from the Mādhyandina version, although in exegesis, we will stick to the Mādhyandina:

O Kratu, O Power of Design, recollect in Self-awareness!, Recollect! what has been done, Recollect OWill, what has been done. (Kānva)

O Kratu, O Power of Design, recollect in Self-awareness!, Recollect in Self-awareness what needs to be fashioned, Recollect OWill, what has been done. (Mādhyandina)

It highlights at a certain level a *constant triple memory*, to strengthen, revivify the Will, examine the resolve, to perpetually measure oneself in its light.

Deeper still, more is revealed; these lines come towards

The individual is born with a *nama* and *rupa*, a “name” and “form” together with an antenatal potentiality and takes birth in the world to fulfil or accomplish something specific to the true nature of the person. The experiences taken up in the Isha begins with *idam sarvam*, “all this that exists here” and is for this individual who is born in this world and who is exhorted to “wish to act in this world” *jijivishe iha karmaani*. This world is the field of his actions for this movement from potentiality to act. In the process of life, there is a perpetual enforcing of the ego-self and a consequent mixture of a conscious and an unconscious will which seeks to express itself. The gradual failing of the true memory is reflected in the deviation of the actions from the true potential (the prayer to Agni in the Isha is to “lead on the path away from these deviations”, *agne nayati asmat juhuraanam enah*). Functioning in this manner, the individual seems more and more driven by circumstances. The intrinsic freedom available to the individual to realize his native potentiality is now gradually chained in a determinism and he is driven as it were by destiny or fate. Hence the necessity to perpetually measure oneself in the inner light. Here again, a Rishi in the *Rig Veda* (Mandala I, 109.3) exclaims, *maa chchedma rashmi*, “may this thread of light remain unbroken”.

The Rishi of the Isha is reflecting on his state when he has made in himself the conscious shift from the world of determinism

As we begin to meditate deeper on the Upanishads, we perceive multiple points of view coexisting ... like the play of rays from within a jewel.

the end of the Isha and are words of a Rishi who has realized the immanence of the presence of the Self in all that exists, the all pervasive nature of *Matariswan* (the breath that expands in the matrix) (Isha Up 4), the proximate experiencing of Oneness (*ekatvam anupashyatah*) (Isha Up 6), who has reconciled in a higher synthesis *Vidya* (the knowledge of Brahman in the Timeless realm) and *Avidya* (the knowledge of Brahman in manifestation in the Time realm) (Isha Up 9,10,11). Such then is the stature of the Rishi who is making the statement in the Upanishad and we should view these lines as such. The lines in both recensions starts with a triple *pranava* (which is an integral part of the chanting of the Upanishad) which indicates the triplicity of Time, and which our limited perspective would regard as the succession of “past, the present and the future”⁶

to one of free-will. True self-knowledge is indicated by his realization of identity with *Kratu* and an onset of a triple memory.

Time is now for the realized Rishi no longer “linear” but “cyclic”. He realizes that in his state of identification with *Agni kavi kratuh*, his “futuristic” designs as a Seer-Poet have the potential to even modify the “past” in a certain sense! All is an ever-present now and the identification with the omniscient Self gives an unbroken memory together with a temporal and spatial omnipresence.

Viewing space and time within a “circle of existence”, with the radii converging at the centre, the closer one is to its circumference the more limited the vision of time, hence linear. Movement inwards towards the centre widens the vision; and in the centre, where every point on the circumference is equidistant, is

the experience of “now-ever and everywhere”. Within this total experience is also the awareness of the succession of the evolution of moments. There is a simultaneous turning within and without as in a pure mirror, in a poise of passive receptivity (*k.rtam smara*) and a realizing activity (*klibe smara*). This centre is the inmost seat where Agni is seated as the Flame-Will.

The Rishi of the Isha, ranging freely in the highest spiritual realms is aware of the movement of the timeless Brahman as well as Brahman in manifestation. These two states are conflicting to those who are “placed close to the circumference” but to the one established in the Knowledge, who “proximately sees” (*anupashyati*) the presence of Brahman in all this that exists, the two states are a coexistent state in a seamless movement of the Truth. To the Rishi it is a continuous single wide-vision which to our limited vision appears as the past, the present and the future. In our view this is the grand experience that the Rishi expresses in the compact hymn.

Vikraman Balaji • Chennai Mathematics Institute, Chennai, India •
balaji@cmi.ac.in

NOTES

¹This can be found on page 305 of the Supplement to the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 27, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

²Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, Volume 12, pp.63-88.

³Satvalekar, p.150.

⁴Aurobindo, Volume 10, p. 59 and Coomaraswamy, p. 169.

⁵Aurobindo, Volume 12, p. 65.

⁶As the Sufi mystic Jellaluddin Rumi says “We look back and analyze the events of our lives, but there is another way of seeing, a backward-and-forward-at-once vision, that is not rationally understandable.”

REFERENCES

Sri Aurobindo, *Secret of the Veda*, The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Birth Centenary Library) , Volume 10, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads*, The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Birth Centenary Library) , Volume 12, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

Dr Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Perception of the Vedas*, Indra Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 2000.

Pandit Shripad Damodar Satvalekar (Editor), *Vajasaneyi-Mādhyaṇdina-ShuklaYajurveda Samhita*, Swaadhyaya Mandal, Paradi Nagaram, Balsaad Pradeshe, Gujarat.

VEDA AND SPIRITUAL LAWS

“... the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.

The discoverers of these laws are called Rishis, and we honour them as perfected beings. I am glad to tell this audience that some of the very greatest of them were women. Here it may be said that these laws as laws may be without end, but they must have had a beginning. The Vedas teach us that creation is without beginning or end. Science is said to have proved that the sum total of cosmic energy is always the same. Then, if there was a time when nothing existed, where was all this manifested energy? Some say it was in a potential form in God. In that case God is sometimes potential and sometimes kinetic, which would make Him mutable. Everything mutable is a compound, and everything compound must undergo that change which is called destruction. So God would die, which is absurd. Therefore there never was a time when there was no creation.” (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 1)



Swami Vivekananda

Photo Credit: Advaita Ashrama/Thomas Harrison
(Chicago, 1893)