

The Body of the Ātman in the Katha Upanishad

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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 (Secret of the Veda, 1972), (The Upanishads, 1972) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (Perception of the Vedas, 2000). In this article we will make an attempt to comprehend certain hymns from the Katha Upanishad.

THE BODY OF THE ĀTMAN IN THE KATHA UPANISHAD

We take up for our meditation the following hymns from the Katha Upanishad which shed light on issues concerning the mysteries of realizing Brahman *here and in this body*. We would make brief comments on existing translations and interpretations with complete references to enable the readers to make their own comparisons, our sole aim being to stimulate the study of this fascinating text from our hoary past.

In attempting to gain insight into the root sense and inner meaning of the words which occur in the Vedic literature, it may not be out of place to reiterate some of the basic principles we are following. Our basic hypothesis is that words that occur in these ancient texts, the Śruti, retain a definite core root sense, “the heart of the word” which simultaneously represent complex ideas viewed from multiple standpoints, emphasizing aspects, functions and connotations. The vocabulary of these texts is simultaneously a vocabulary of spiritual experience and of poetic art, since the mystic Seer was, at the same time, a *Kavi*, a *Rṣi*, a *mañīṣī*, and even more. Thus there was no trenchant division among seers, poets and saints. The person who uttered or expressed something was blessed with the power of the Word, which was creative in every sense of the word.

Let us turn to the hymns with our translations, based on the word studies of Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Coomaraswamy. We shall follow them with exegetical comments and justifications.

**Aṅor aṅīyān mahato mahīyān,
ātmāsya jantor nihito guhāyām |
Tam akraṭuḥ paśyati vīta-śoko
dhātu-prasādān mahimānam ātmanah ||1.2.20**

Smaller than the infinitesimal, more immense than any immensity, the Self-Essence is hidden in the secret heart within the one born here. When man is freed from intentions¹ and casts away sorrow, he beholds Him; by the transparency of the elemental substratum is experienced the abundance and im-

ensity of the Essence.

**aśarīraṁ śarīreṣu
anavastheṣv avasthitam |
mahāntaṁ vibhum ātmānam
matvā dhīro na śocati || 1.2.22**

Realizing the incorporeal in the corpus, the settled in the unsettled, the immense and expansive Self, the contemplative wise one grieves no longer.

**nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyo
na medhayā na bahunā śrutena |
yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas
tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām || 1.2.23**

The Self-Essence is not to be attained by teaching nor by the intellect nor by much learning. Only by he whom this Being chooses can one attain Him; to such a one this Ātman unveils its own extended body.

**iha ced aśakad boddhum
prāk śarīrasya visrasaḥ |
tataḥ sargeṣu lokeṣu
śarīratvāya kalpate || 2.3.4**

If here one is able to awaken to it² before the body falls away, then in the emanated worlds, he is fashioned³ for embodiment⁴.

**na saṁdr̥ṣe tiṣṭati rūpam asya
na cakṣuṣā paśyati kaścanainam |
hṛdā mañīṣā manasābhikṣpto
ya etad vidur amṛtās te bhavanti || 2.3.9**

Not within the totality of vision stands His form, nor with the eye does one behold Him, Super-sculpted by the heart, by the inspired thought, by the mind, they who know Him, thus become the deathless ones.

**astīty evopalabdavyas
tattva-bhāvena cobhayoḥ |
astīty evopalabdhasya
tattva-bhāvaḥ prasidati || 2.3.13**

Both as “He Is” must one apprehend Him as well as in His essential nature; when He is apprehended as “He is”, then His essential nature shines forth clearly.

A common theme threads the garland of hymns we have selected. Our meditation is stimulated by the profound phrase *esa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām*, which we translate as “this Ātman reveals its own extended body” and we note that the word *vivṛṇute* comes from a different etymon than does the word *vṛṇute*, which comes earlier in the very same sentence. In *vṛṇute* the root *vṛ* is from *var*, or “to choose”, while the root *vṛ* in *vivṛṇute* is from “cover, veil”, hence, for instance, in *apāvṛṇu*, i.e., to “uncover, unveil, reveal, etc”⁵.

The word *tanū* is Vedic in its origin and since the Katha Upanishad is considered among the older Upanishadic texts, it seems legitimate to stick to the Vedic sense (as opposed to the modern one) if we are to get to the heart of the hymn. This word simply means “body”, coming from the root sense of *tan* meaning “to stretch” as in the Latin root “*ten*”, hence “extension”, etc. In this sense, we translate it as “extended body”. It has also its connotation of “tenuity” or “subtlety” and this also fits the sense we make. That it does not merely mean “form” in an abstract sense comes through in numerous instances in the Vedas, but we point out its occurrence in the Bhagavad-Gita, where we have *mānuṣīm tanum āśritam*, i.e., “lodged in a human body”.

A clear distinction is being made between this “extended body” and the “corporeal” one since we have *aśarīram śarīreṣu* placed consciously by the Rishi in the previous line. The hymn says this extended body is revealed to one whom the Being chooses and the Upanishad gives us desirable qualities for being chosen. The one quality we are especially fascinated by comes in the phrase *dhātu-prasādān mahimānam ātmanah*.

Usually the word *mahimā* is rendered as “greatness”, which is general and does not do full justice to the word. As is so often the case, the root *mah*, from which all these derivations arise, is burdened with so much sense and meaning that a single English equivalent is well nigh impossible. It does stand for “greatness,” but it stands for much more, for immensity, for

ration for the experience of the extended body of the Ātman. As the *sādhana* progresses, layer upon layer of substance in the individual is taken up and shown forth in the light, beginning from the mental elements and going all the way down to the physical substratum, and the *dhātu prasāda* is carried out, preparing, as it were, the totality of the person to experience simultaneously the growing immensity from within and the enveloping abundance from without, *mahimānam ātmanah*. The Veda says this beautifully:

**Abhyavasthāḥ prajāyante pra vavrer vavriś ciketa |
Upasthe mātur vi caṣṭe || Rig Veda 5.19.1.**

States upon states are born, covering upon covering awakens to consciousness, in the lap of the mother (or the matrix) he wholly sees. (see Sri Aurobindo, Secret of the Veda, page 405)

How does one carry out the central process of *dhātu prasāda* in one’s *sādhana*? To carry this out, first there must be some perception, a comprehension, however imperfect, of the complexity of the substratum. The Taittiriya Upanishad says, *the Eternal Brahman having created all, entered it (tat sṛṣṭvā, tad evānuprāviśat)*, and descending grade by grade all the way down, He gets concealed in a total fragmentation. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad even says:

**sa eṣa iha praviṣṭa ānakhāgrebhyah yathā,
kṣurah kṣuradhāne’vahataḥ syāt |
viśvam-bharo vā viśvam-bhara-kulāye ||1.4.7**

Brahman entered⁸ here even to the tips of the nails, as a razor is covered in its razor-case, or as the all-supporting within his all-supporting nest (or axle)¹⁰.

To get a deeper comprehension of this statement, we give a part translation (based on the renderings of Sri Aurobindo (Life Divine, footnotes of page 240, and Coomaraswamy, Perceptions of the Vedas, page 78-79) of the magnificent Hymn 10.129 of the Rig Veda.

**ānīt avātam svadhayā tat
ekam tasmāt ha anyat na
paraḥ kim cana āsa | 2.2**

Breathless (avāta), That One breathed (ānīt) by intrinsic-power¹¹ (svadhā), there was none other, nor aught there-beyond.

**tamaḥ āsīt tamasā gūḷham
agre apraketaḥ salilam sarvaḥ aḥ idaḥ |3.1
tucyena ābhu apihitam yat āsīt tapasaḥ tat mahinā ajāyata ekam ||3.2**

In the beginning (agre) Darkness (tamas) was hidden (gūḷha) by darkness, all this was the inconscient (apraketa) surging ocean (salila)¹². The universal becoming (ābhu¹³) was covered over (apihita) by fragmentation (tucchi); That One was born (ajāyat) by the immense might (mahi) of intention (tapas).

The vocabulary of these texts is simultaneously a vocabulary of spiritual experience and of poetic art, since the mystic Seer was, at the same time, a Kavi, a Ṛṣi, a maṇiṣī, and even more.

might, for abundance, and vastness, for the quality of *ghanatvam*, a denseness which precludes any sense of separation, an intrinsic characteristic of the plane of *Mahas* of the Taittiriya Upanishad ⁶. We recall the beautiful and revealing phrase *chidghana kāya*⁷ that Swami Vivekananda uses to describe Sri Ramakrishna’s body!

So the Katha Upanishad says by the transparency, *prasāda*, or more precisely, “by the clear showing forth”, of the “elemental substratum” (the *dhātu* ⁸) can one experience the immensity and vastness of the Self, a prepa-

sataḥ bandhuṃ asati niḥ avindaṃ hṛidi prati iṣya kavayaḥ maṇiṣā ||4.2

The seer-poets (kavayaḥ) by their seeking (iṣya) and inspired thought (maṇiṣā) discovered (avindaṃ) in the heart (hṛidi) the kin of Being (sat) in non-being (asat).

tīrascīnaḥ vitataḥ rāsmiḥ eṣāṃ adhaḥ svit āsīt upari svit āsīt |5.1 retaḥ dhā āsaṃ mahimānaḥ āsaṃ svadhā avastāt prayatiḥ prastāt ||5.2

What thread of Light (rāsmi) was extended across, what below and what above? There were casters of the seed (retadhā), there were greatness and immensity (mahimānaḥ), there was intrinsic-power below, there was intention (prayati) above.

The breathless one which breathed is the *Mātariśvan* (that which expands as breath in the matrix or the mother), and is also the incorporeal within the body, the *āsarīraṃ śarīreṣu* of the Katha Upanishad. Seer-poets divined, with the arrow of seeking (*iṣya*)¹⁴, the Being deep within the secret heart of the elemental substratum (Katha Upanishad 1.2.20). They also discovered the seed (*retaḥ*) for the growing Presence and immensity together with the self-organizing power of Nature (*svadhā*) essential for its growth, both coexisting in this fragmentation. They perceived the Divine intention, the pressure which acts from above for the realization¹⁵ of That which is seated within.

By a conscious self-offering in the inner Agni, there is a *showing forth of the elements, a dhatu prasāda*, in the shaft of Light which penetrates and transfigures the atomic substratum. What follows is a gradual conversion of the human into a likeness of a fundamental oneness with the Ātman, a forging, a shaping of the body of God in man and a filling in of its contours. It is as a growing Presence and Power, a Śakti, which “in matter is an automatic action and effectuation of the hidden idea in things; in life its most seizable form is instinct, an instinctive subconscious or partly conscious knowledge and operation; in mind it reveals itself as intuition, a swift, direct and self-effective illumination of intelligence, will, sense and aesthesis. While these are merely irradiations ... which accommodate themselves to the limited functioning of the obscurer instruments, its own characteristic nature is a gnosis superconscious to mind, life and body” (Sri Aurobindo, Synthesis of Yoga, page 599).

The body of this Ātman is conceived and fashioned in the secret heart by the enlightened mind and inspired thought, *hṛdā maṇiṣā manasābhikṣptaḥ*, and in consonance with the transparency of the substratum, this body emerges shining forth in its essential nature, *tattva-bhāvaḥ prasīdati*, as the Vedic Rishi sings magnificently (*Rig Veda 5.1.2*)

sam iddhasya ruṣat dadarśi pājah, mahān devaḥ tamaso niḥ amōci

When he is entirely kindled, a red-glowing mass of Him is seen; an immense Being of Light has been delivered from within the darkness, (based on Sri Aurobindo, Secret of the Veda page 364).

The *mahān devaḥ* resonating with the *mahimānam ātmanaḥ* of the Katha Upanishad. This fashioning suggests the hands of a skillful sculptor chipping away the covering from a mass of matter, revealing the Deity hidden within, *nihitam guhāyām*. The wonderfully symbolic “eye-opening” of the sculpted *vigraha* in the inner sādhanā signals the final opening of the inner eye of the sādhanā, who recognizes the hands that sculpted. This is the

Divine’s choosing, coinciding mysteriously at this timeless point in “Time” with the epiphany, when the Ātman allows the cloak to slip from his own body, *vivṛṇute tanūm svām*.

This emerging body of God becomes the *chidghana kaya*, and the sādhanā is now perfectly suited for an “embodiment in the worlds”, *śarīratvāya kalpate*. Such is the embodiment that is envisaged for the realized soul, and the Upanishad tells us in (2.3.4) that this is no after-death experience in some yonder-world; this mystery¹⁶ is perhaps the central mystery in the Katha Upanishad. We are drawn to the first boon of Yama to Nachiketas, where Yama assures Nachiketas of recognition and acceptance by his father on his return to this world even though he would be clothed in the new embodiment after the visitation to the House of Death.

We close this essay with a few remarks on the word *prasāda*. In the Bhagavad-Gita (as well as in some well-known commentaries on the Katha Upanishad¹⁷) the word *prasāda* is taken to mean “grace”. The word occurs several times in the Gita and is rendered differently in different places even by Sri Aurobindo. In Chapter II, it occurs twice where the rendering we give applies naturally. In Chapters XI and XVIII, the word gets a relatively modern connotation of “grace”, as for instance in *matprasādāt*, by “my grace”, where no other rendering fits the sense¹⁸. But as Sri Aurobindo clearly elucidates, “this divine grace, if we may so call it, is not simply a mysterious flow or touch coming from above, but the all-pervading act of a divine presence which we come to know within as a power of the highest Self and Master of our being entering into the soul and so possessing it that we not only feel it close to us and pressing upon our mortal nature, but live in its law, know that law, possess it as the whole power of our spiritualised nature” (Sri Aurobindo, Synthesis of Yoga, page 595). Its appropriateness in the Gita is clearly impeccable.

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NOTES

- 1 Kratu = will, intention, design, usually seen as a higher willing; for instance as an attribute of Agni.
- 2 Become aware of it
- 3 Sculpted, moulded, fitted.
- 4 To interpret this hymn, we can safely ignore the extraordinary ellipsis in which Sankara indulges!
- 5 See, for example, the new translation of Upanishads by Patrick Olivelle (Oxford University Press, 2009), wherein this error is seen.
- 6 which also comes in our previous essay as *vijñānaghana*.
- 7 consciousness-dense body.
- 8 The dictionary meaning is “layer, stratum, constituent part, ingredient, primary element, etc.” (page 513, Monier-Williams).
- 9 *viśvam-bhara* = all-supporting becomes a “termite” in Patrick Olivelle’s translation.
- 10 Like the nave of a wheel supporting all that moves around it.
- 11 Or self-power, Nature’s own-power.
- 12 The nether ocean marked by its surge and flux in contrast with the upper ocean in its movelessness.
- 13 As Sri Aurobindo explains in the Secret of the Veda (page 269), “ābhu, is used of divine form of godhead falling on form of humanity, to become, take shape, as it were, in him”.
- 14 We use both roots of *iṣ*, (1) arrow and (2) seeking, which get harmoni-

ously coalesced in the process of “divination” or “belomancy”.
15 i.e., in the literal sense, “making real, give reality to”.

16 What ensues when this *dhātu prasādāna* is carried out in the most fragmented states, when the consciousness is itself centred there, when the intrinsic power (*svadhā*) is awakened there, is a mystery that Sri Aurobindo has elaborated on in his work.

17 On the other hand, we believe it does not quite fit the Katha Upanishad. though it has been rendered in this manner by Sri Krishnaprem in his brilliant commentary “The Yoga of the Katha Upanishad”. Our rendering is inspired by Coomaraswamy’s study.

18 As to the usual English sense of “grace”, the OED defines it as “favour, said with reference to God”.

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Realisation

By Swami Vivekananda

(from Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 2, pp. 155-157)

I will read to you from one of the Upanishads. It is called the Katha Upanishad. Some of you, perhaps, have read the translation by Sir Edwin Arnold, called the Secret of Death. In our last [i.e. a previous] lecture we saw how the inquiry which started with the origin of the world, and the creation of the universe, failed to obtain a satisfactory answer from without, and how it then turned inwards. This book psychologically takes up that suggestion, questioning into the internal nature of man. It was first asked who created the external world, and how it came into being. Now the question is: What is that in man which makes him live and move, and what becomes of that when he dies? The first philosophers studied the material substance, and tried to reach the ultimate through that. At the best, they found a personal governor of the universe, a human being immensely magnified, but yet to all intents and purposes a human being. But that could not be the whole of truth; at best, it could be only partial truth. We see this universe as human beings, and our God is our human explanation of the universe.

Suppose a cow were philosophical and had religion, it would have a cow universe, and a cow solution of the problem, and it would not be possible that it should see our God. Suppose cats became philosophers, they would see a cat universe and have a cat solution of the problem of the universe, and a cat ruling it. So we see from this that our explanation of the universe is not the whole of the solution. Neither does our conception cover the whole of the universe. It would be a great mistake to accept that tremendously selfish position which man is apt to take. Such a solution of the universal problem as we can get from the outside labours under this difficulty that in the first place the universe we see is our own particular universe, our own view of the Reality. That Reality we cannot see through the senses; we cannot comprehend it. We only know the universe from the point of view of beings with five senses. Suppose we obtain another sense, the whole universe must change for us. Suppose

we had a magnetic sense, it is quite possible that we might then find millions and millions of forces in existence which we do not now know, and for which we have no present sense or feeling. Our senses are limited, very limited indeed; and within these limitations exists what we call our universe; and our God is the solution of that universe, but that cannot be the solution of the whole problem. But man cannot stop there. He is a thinking being and wants to find a solution which will comprehensively explain all the universes. He wants to see a world which is at once the world of men, and of gods, and of all possible beings, and to find a solution which will explain all phenomena.

We see, we must first find the universe which includes all universes; we must find something which, by itself, must be the material running through all these various planes of existence, whether we apprehend it through the senses or not. If we could possibly find something which we could know as the common property of the lower as well as of the higher worlds, then our problem would be solved. Even if by the sheer force of logic alone we could understand that there must be one basis of all existence, then our problem might approach to some sort of solution; but this solution certainly cannot be obtained only through the world we see and know, because it is only a partial view of the whole.

Our only hope then lies in penetrating deeper. ... The ancient sages penetrated deeper and deeper until they found that in the innermost core of the human soul is the centre of the whole universe. All the planes gravitate towards that one point. That is the common ground, and standing there alone can we find a common solution. So the question who made this world is not very philosophical, nor does its solution amount to anything.

This the Katha Upanishad speaks in very figurative language.