

Was Maitreyī Answered Fully by Yājñavalkya?

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 (*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 the conversation between the seer Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad II.4.12 (and again a little differently in IV.5.13).

Was Maitreyī answered fully by Yājñavalkya?

The episode of the seer Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī in the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad is one of the glorious chapters of our spiritual heritage. It contains extraordinary spiritual truths which form the foundation of much of the later spiritual developments in India. Yājñavalkya had two wives, Kātyāyani and Maitreyī, of whom Maitreyī was the younger one. When Yājñavalkya was about to “take up the other path” (*anyad-vṛttam upākaraṇa*) “to become a wanderer” (*parivṛājaka*), he offers all his worldly riches to both his wives to be divided equally among themselves. It is mentioned that Kātyāyani has only her *stṛi-prajñā* with which she accepts this dictum of her husband while Maitreyī, being the seeker (*brahma-vādinī*), asks him whether these riches would give her the experience of That Highest Truth. On hearing this, Yājñavalkya is delighted and begins to instruct Maitreyī.

We take up the profound conversation (which occurs in Brahmaṇa IV.5.13 of the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad) between the realized Teacher and the aspiring disciple. The disciple Maitreyī is fully aware of the depth and subtleties involved in the discussion and her questions come from an enquiry clearly arising from the seeking *Ātman* of the disciple. After many profound words on experiences of Brahman, Yājñavalkya says:

Sa yathā saindhava-ghanaḥ anantaro bāhyaḥ, kṛtsno rasaghana eva, evaṁ vā are’yam ātmā, anantaro bāhyaḥ, kṛtsnaḥ prajñāna-ghana eva, IV.5.13

As an ocean-dense is with neither a within nor a without, through and through a mass of delight is this Ātman my dear one, a dense (compact) block of consciousness which has neither a within nor a without, through and through only a compact mass of apprehending consciousness.

In II.4.12, Yājñavalkya further describes this experience as:
Evam vā ara idam mahad bhūtaim

anantaṁ apāraṁ vijñāna-ghana eva; II.4.12

Truly this immense Being, endless, with nothing beyond, is nothing but a Gnostic-denseness.

The terms employed are *vijñāna ghana*, (Gnostic-mass), *mahat* (with the quality of “mahas”, immense.), *anantaṁ* (endless, not in its linear indefiniteness but like a circle without beginning or end), *apāraṁ*, (nothing beyond or above). Then he goes on to say,

etebhyo bhūtebhyaḥ samutthāya, tāny evā anuvinaśyati na pretya saṁjñāsti, IV.5.13

if this Ātman were to ascend out of the manifested being, then the sense-mind and associated faculties, following it would vanish (vinaśyati).

He says *na pretya saṁjñāsti*. In other words,

having gone forth from this, there is no apprehending consciousness or cognoscence (saṁjñāna); the one having entered the Absolute is no longer conscious of things external to itself, but conscious only as itself. When everything has become the Ātman, whereby and whom would one know of?

Maitreyī, on hearing the phrase *na pretya saṁjñā asti*, is perplexed and shaken, and seems to say “Lord, this makes no sense, what on earth do you mean by this annihilation after so Grand an experience”. Yājñavalkya responds by saying,

na vā are’ham moham bravāmi, avināśī vā are’yam Ātman, an-ucchitti-dharmā, IV.5.14

I did not say anything perplexing. This Ātman is truly imperishable, the matrix which cannot be rent asunder.

Yatra hi dvaitam iva bhavati, tad itara itaram paśyati... jighrati, rasayati, abhivadati, śṛṇoti, vijānāti, yatra tu asya sarvaṁ ātmaivābhūt, tat kena kim paśyet, .. jighret, rasayet, abhivadet, śṛṇuyāt..vijāniyāt, yenedaṁ sarvaṁ vijānāti, tam kena vijāniyāt, Sa esa neti nety Ātman; ...vijñāram aré kena vijāniyāt, IV.5.15

For where there is duality, there one sees another, touches, thinks, knows of other. But when one sees all as the Ātman, by what shall one see it, smell it, taste it, by what and whom should one know

it. By what should one know him by whom all this is known? The Ātman is not this, not this... Indeed my dear, by what should one comprehend the Knower?²

The source for comprehending anything in the Vedic texts is the Vedic text itself, a constant refrain in all our expositions. In the Upanishad, the word *pretya* is used widely and its verbal meaning would be *after having gone forth*. This has come to connote *death* or *departure*. For the one who is not initiated into the path, any going forth from an established state would naturally mean death of sorts. Not surprisingly, the extreme experience of losing all sense-faculties in an experience of dense-oneness naturally appears as an experience of death or departure. But for the initiate, his inner light of consciousness is not blown-out even in the experience of death. Therefore, in the sense of the uninitiated, the word *pretya* would mean after death and for the learned initiate or Yogin, it means *having left the human shore*. This crossing-over of consciousness is termed *preti* in the Rig Veda³. The other striking word that appears is *vināsyati*, a word which occurs in the Isha Upanishad, where we see *vināśena mṛtyuṃ tīrthvā*, i.e., *by vināśa one traverses across death*. Nachiketas' third seeking in the Katha Upanishad is also a *pretya saṃjñā*. He asks whether consciousness has its reality even after entering and crossing over the death-world. We encounter the word *pretya* yet again, now in the Taittiriya Upanishad:

Sa yaś cāyam puruṣe yaś cā sāvāditye sa ekaḥ, III.10.4
saya evaṃ-vit asmā lokāt pretya
etaṃ anna-mayam ātmānam upasaṅkramya,
etaṃ prāṇa-mayam ātmānam upasaṅkramya,
etaṃ mano-mayam ātmānam upasaṅkramya,
etaṃ vijñāna-mayam ātmānam upasaṅkramya,
etaṃ ānanda-mayam ātmānam upasaṅkramya,

The Person who is here and who is there in Āditya, he is the One. One who is an Evamvit, the Comprehensor, when he crosses over these loci, having entered the Annamaya-Ātman; having entered the Prāṇamaya-Ātman; having entered the Manomaya-Ātman; having entered the Vijñānamaya-Ātman; having entered the Ānandamaya-Ātman.

We note the capital phrase *upasaṅkramya*⁴ used repeatedly here. A technical phrase, it means *having proximately entered and attained union with, and in a sense in-gathered, and drawn within*. After the re-entry into all these planes of existence, and a drawing-within, as it were, the Knower ranges these worlds⁵ as He desires, participates as He desires, and takes on any form as He desires in his ranging (*anusāṅcarāṇi*).

etat sāma gāyannaste.
Haa u Haa, u Haa, u Haa uu, III.10.5

ahaṃ annam, ..; ahaṃ annādaḥ, .. ahaṃ ślokakṛt,....,
ahaṃ asmi prthamajā ṛtāsyā,

pūrvam devebhyo amṛtasya nābhā I,
yo mā dadāti, sa id eva mā vāḥ,
ahaṃ annam annam adantam ādmi, III.10.5

He sings the mighty Sāma, Haa u Haa, u Haa, u Haa uu, I am all this Substance, I am this Food, I am the participant in this Substance, the eater of this Food, ...I am the One who has scripted all this, I am the creator of the rhythms of the revelatory Word, I am the First born of the Rta, prior to the Gods, I am at the nodus of immortality, he who gives me, verily preserves me, I am Food and eats him who eats.

Clearly, this is no after-death experience or an attaining of a quietus in the ocean of non-being but a re-possession and claiming of the Kingdom of the World, as the Rishi sings triumphantly:

ahaṃ viśvaṃ bhuvanaṃ abhyabhavāṃ. Suvarṇa jyotiḥ!

I have encompassed and become this Universal existence, lo! Golden-Light!

The culminating consciousness-dense experience is the immense impact on the self-substance when it comes in contact with Mahas. Having entered into this immensity, the normal *saṃjñāna* gets dissolved, but only to emerge anew, transformed into a higher order of *saṃjñāna*. The Bhagavad Gita speaks always of *Brahma-Nirvāṇam*, or being *blown out* in *Brahman*.

While the normal faculty of *saṃjñāna* is an experience which exists by virtue of duality and the usual apprehending consciousness functions only when there is a separation and frontal placing, the term *saṃjñāna* in Mahas becomes the contact of consciousness with an image of things by which there is a sensible possession of it in substance, the in-bringing movement of the apprehending consciousness which draws the object placed before it back to itself so as to possess it in conscious substance.

When drawn into Mahas, this *saṃjñāna* is now transformed into the substance of *vijñāna*, which is the substance of Mahas, a compact-dense concentrated Consciousness of the Infinite Being. Gnosis or *vijñāna* is the original comprehending consciousness which holds an image of things in its essence, totally and in parts and properties. Once drawn here into Mahas, then indeed *na pretya saṃjñā asti* in the usual sense; but there emerges the Supramental experience of a universal pervasion in substance, *viśvaṃ bhuvanaṃ abhyabhavaṃ* sung by the Rishi of the Taittiriya Upanishad or *Turīyam svij janayad viśvajanyaṃ* as sung by Rishi Ayasya Angirasa⁶.

It seems to us that the *strī-prajña* in Maitreyī was clearly not satisfied with the explanation of Yājñavalkya and sought to go beyond. In the total realization of the being we seem to be encountering within the Upanishad itself two aspects, two phases of the realization: one, an ascending realization, followed by the other, a descending realization. In the first phase, the being begins in a certain state of limited manifestation and ascends to an identification

with its essential un-manifest principle, leading to the emergence from the cosmos and a liberation, *mokṣa*.

The descent, or re-entry which is highlighted in the Taittiriya is quite special and Vedic in its content. The descent is a victorious repossession and should not be understood as a regression of any kind (which the English word “descent” might be taken to connote). This is the fundamental position of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga. In the spiritual history of the earth, this has been individually achieved and the traces of this journey of the Rishis are indelibly left in the pathways of spiritual experience. The fourth *Turiya* of the Māndūkya Upanishad, beyond the states of waking, dreaming and deep-sleep, or the fourth *vyāhṛti*, the mahas, of the Taittiriya Upanishad, is neither the manifested nor unmanifested since it is the underlying principle of both and includes within it the manifest and the unmanifest, *sadasat*, *vyaktāvyaktaḥ*. It is the synthesis of the ascent and the descent which enables the expression of the double nature which is included in His unique essence (see the previous article on “Two Birds” [Balaji, 2013] and BU II.3).

Indeed the experience of the ascent is solely for the individual being, a freeing, as it were, from the limitations of manifestation. It leads to the plunging into the all-negating Absolute of non-being, which the Isha declares is the darker among the darkneses that one experiences. Here the individual Ātman shines but fails to shine forth or radiate. The descent on the other hand enables the radiation, an act by which all things are illuminated, *tasya bhāsā sarvaṃ idam vibhāti*; the golden-radiation, *suvarṇa jyotiḥ*, after *viśvaṃ bhuvanāṃ abhyabhavāṃ*, is an explosive pervasion of the person in a supreme sacrifice, *ātmānaṃ vibhajya*, a universal distribution of the Ātman. The Veda uses the phrase, *viśvajanyaṃ*, being universally born. This is a creative experience as the Taittiriya Upanishad says:

Asad vā idam agra āsīt, tato vai sad ajāyata, II.7.1

In the beginning all this was Non-Being. Thence verily Being was born.

The individual is now a Universal participant and has become a Universal Man. In fact, Sri Aurobindo asserts that this is not an experience of an exceptional individual being alone but is the spiritual destiny of the collective.

Sri Ramakrishna describes the substance of the Absolute dense experience in his inimitable style: “First you have to follow the process of ‘Neti, Neti’...it is like reaching the roof leaving the steps behind one by one. But the vijnāni, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman (substance) (Brahmavastu in the Kathamrita), realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same substance as the roof, bricks, lime and sand-dust.”⁷

And what of the annihilation of sense perception in the *saṃjñā vinaśyati*? Curiously, elsewhere in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, IV.3.23, 32, Yājñavalkya does go deeply into this question. Hear what Yājñavalkya says, although here the Upanishadic word seems visibly to struggle in giving expression to the experience!

***Yad vai tan na paśyati, paśyan vai tan na paśyati;
na hi draṣṭur draṣṭer viparilopo vidyate, avināśitvāt;
na tu tad dvitīyaṃ asti, tato’nyad vibhaktaṃ yat paśyēt
I IV.3.23***

Truly, when one is in That state, he is not “seeing”, he sees truly but, yet he sees not; for there is no complete breaking or the annihilation of the seeing of the seer. But there is no “second one” or “other”, distinct from himself to behold...

Salila eko draṣṭādvaito bhavati I IV.3.32

he becomes like One Vast Ocean, the Witness-Seer without a second one to behold!

Yes indeed, *na pretya saṃjñā asti*, truly, there is an ending of Time, a sinking of Space, but what emerges is an eyeless perception, a silent-speech reverberating behind mortal speech, a silent-ear for the unstruck note, a thought-free conception, a dense-Void which gives way to a new Order of Space, where Time is an enduring moment. As the Bhagavad Gita XV 8-10, puts it, there arises a *jñānacakṣuḥ*, an eye of Gnosis for the new order of perception.

The Kena Upanishad speaks of Brahman as the Speech *behind* speech, Sight *behind* sight, Hearing *behind* hearing, the Mind *behind* the mind, which reveals a new order of sense perception. This emerges when I no longer see as a mere sensation; what my eye saw earlier was only an aspect of which I had no knowledge by identity. When Brahman sees in me, he sees an object by simultaneously knowing it and giving it being. He sees naught else but Himself, sees himself stationed in all beings and all beings in Himself⁸. The “ascent” is now a “going within” to the deepest core, and from there, the “descent” begins and Brahman, now arisen gradually, comes up front as the leader taking charge of his Kingdom. Then, as the Maitri Upanishad II.6 (*The Principal Upanishads*, page 802) puts it:

ataḥ khānīmāni bhūtvodītaḥ pañcabhī raśmibhir viṣayān atti, II.6

having arisen, he breaks opens these doors of the senses (or perception) and by means of his five rays participates in the sense-objects.

Here we quote Sri Aurobindo (*Synthesis of Yoga*, page 884): “The action of the supramental sense is founded on this true truth of sense; it is an organization of this pure, spiritual, infinite, absolute, saṃjñāna. The supermind acting through sense feels all is God and in God, all as the manifest touch, sight, hearing, taste, perfume, all as the felt, seen, directly experienced substance and power and energy and movement, play, penetration, vibration, form, nearness, pressure, substantial interchange of the Infinite. Nothing exists independently to its sense, but all is felt as one being and movement and each thing as indivisible from the rest and as having in it all the Infinite, all the Divine. This supramental sense has the

direct feeling and experience, not only of forms, but of forces and of the energy and the quality in things and of a divine substance and presence which is within them and round them and into which they open and expand themselves in their secret subtle self and elements, extending themselves in oneness into the illimitable...it is an oceanic and ethereal sense in which all particular sense knowledge and sensation is a wave or movement or spray or drop that is yet a concentration of the whole ocean inseparable from the ocean”.

Although Yājñavalkya, in his characteristic manner, dismisses Maitreyī’s bewilderment as incomprehension, we feel that her question was pregnant with the aspiration for the experience of the descent, an aspiration which arises from her *strī-prajña*, the feminine-consciousness.

Was she seeking the Supramental consciousness which solves the riddle of this world — not an escape from this world but a triumphant re-entry and rulership of it, a *svarājya* and *sāmrājya*?

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

NOTES

¹ Sankara adds his gloss *strī-prajña = grhapati yojanāvesana-lakṣaṇa*, i.e., “busied about household matters” and *brahma-vādinī = brahmavadana-śīla*, i.e., “having the habit of exegesis”. This gloss does not seem to have support anywhere in the Vedic texts. A trenchant division is being made by Sankara between this worldly and the other worldly experiences and riches. In our opinion, the phrase *strī-prajña* needs a more careful consideration.

² It does not seem inconceivable that the ‘neti, neti’ experience which occurs here is the origin of the Buddhist Nirvana, and Buddha’s statement *na me so attā*, as well as Sankara’s Maya.

³ Agni is the leader or guide in this passage. He is called *pretiṣaṇiṃ* or *preti – iṣaṇiṃ* or the mover to the journey beyond, who drives us in this journey in the Bharadvaja Hymn 6.1.8 of the Rig Veda.

⁴ *sam-kramaṇa* = going or meeting together, union with, entrance into, transference to (Monier-Williams, page 1127). The prefix *upa* = towards, near, together with (loc. cit., page 194), and in the Vedic texts, the verb gets supplied by the context; hence our rendering of the word *upa-sam-kramya*.

⁵ loci = lokas

⁶ Rig Veda Book X, Hymn 67. See the previous essay on “Two birds” (Balaji, 2013).

⁷ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Abridged Edition, tr. Swami Nikhilananda, p. 155, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta Society of New York, New York.

⁸ *Sarvabhūtastham ātmānam, sarvabhūtāni ca ātmani iṅsate* (Bhagavad Gita VI.29).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

V. Balaji, Exegetical Notes and Translations III, *Vivekananda Review*, 1 (2013), Number 4, pp. 5-7

S. Radhakrishnan. (1996). *The Principal Upanishads*. Harper-Collins.

Coomaraswamy, A. K. (2000). *Perception of the Vedas*. New Delhi: Indra Gandhi National Centre for Arts.

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

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

Sri Aurobindo. (1972). *The Synthesis of Yoga, The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 20-21*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.