

Chapter 5

Prasna and Mundaka Upanishads

5.1 The Prasna Upanishad

The word *prasna* means question in Sanskrit. The Prasna Upanishad is a series of six questions asked by students to the sage Pippalāda. The opening verses are significant. When the students approached the sage for instruction, the sage said to them: “Live with me in this hermitage for one year, practicing self-control and austerity with faith (*sraddha*). Then ask me questions and if I can answer, I will try to answer.”

Even the ability to ask intelligent questions requires mental and physical preparation. We cannot rush into them. After posing the question, we must also have the ability to receive the answer. These abilities, according to the sage, can be acquired through self-control (*brahmācharya*) and austerity (*tapas*). The word *brahmācharya* is often translated as chastity or continence, however, its precise meaning is revealed by breaking the word into its component parts: *brahmā* and *ācharya*. The first word indicates the universal awareness and is one we have met before. The second, is derived from *āchāra* meaning conduct, or more precisely, a regulated way of living guided by self-discipline. Thus etymologically, *brahmācharya* means regulated self-discipline to realise *Brahman*, or universal awareness. However, there is more to the meaning of this word.

The fundamental teaching of the Upanishads is that the human being is not separate from the universe, but only a part of it, just as a wave is a part of

the ocean. Aurobindo elaborates¹ as follows. “An infinite energy ... pervades the world, pours itself into every name and form, and the clod, the plant, the insect, the animal, the man are, in their phenomenal existence, merely more or less efficient *ādhāras*² of this energy. We are each of us a dynamo into which waves of that energy have been generated and stored, and are being perpetually conserved, used up and replenished. The same force which moves in the star and the planet, moves in us, and all our thought and action are merely its play and born of the complexity of its functionings. There are processes by which man can increase his capacity as an *ādhāra*. There are processes by which he can clear of obstructions the channel of communication between himself and the universal energy and bring greater and greater stores of it pouring into his soul and brain and body.”

Thus, the essential principle of *brahmacharya* is the elimination of distractions and the focussing of energies for a higher purpose. We see this even in modern life. We cannot spend all our time watching television and at the same time expect to prove a great mathematical theorem, or compose a literary epic. Proficiency in anything requires self-discipline and regular practice. This is the message of the sage in the opening verse of the Upanishad.

The first question is “How did creation come into being?” The sage Pippalāda answers, “The Father of Creation (*prajāpati*) desired offspring and performed austerity (*tapas*) out of which life (*prāna*), or universal energy, and matter (*rayi*) have come. It thought, ‘The combination of these two will produce creatures in many ways.’ Thus everything we see is the combination of matter (*rayi*) and energy (*prāna*). The sun is life, matter is the moon. Matter is all this, whatever is formed and formless. Therefore, whatever is formed is matter. The rising sun pervades the east and fills with energy all the beings that are there. Likewise, when the sun’s rays fall on the south, the west, the north, the zenith, the nadir, and the intermediate regions, all beings there are energised. *Prāna* is the soul of the universe; it is the light that animates and illumines everything.”

Then another student approached the teacher and asked the second question. “What are the energies that sustain the body?” To him, the sage replied, “Ether, Air, Fire, Water and Earth, as well as Speech, Mind, Sight and Hearing sustain this body. But all of these are supported by *prāna*, the Life Principle. As fire, *Prāna* burns; as the sun, he shines. As cloud, he rains. As Indra, he rules the gods; as wind, he blows. As the moon, he nourishes all. He is all that is visible and all that is invisible. *Prāna* moves in the womb. As breath, it lives in the body. As fire, it transports energy to all the organs. *Prāna* protects us as a mother protects her children.”

¹Aurobindo, Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 332.

²vehicles, vessels or supports

Ether is to be interpreted as space. The message is that the manifestation of life is everywhere, in the sun, in the clouds, in the wind. The moon symbolises matter, as signalled in the earlier verse, and so it is that matter, or more precisely, food, ‘nourishes all.’ Now the third student approaches the teacher and asks, “How did *prāna* come about? How did it enter the body? How does it distribute itself there? How does it go out of the body? How does it hold together the body, mind and the sense organs?”

This student is clever. He managed to ask several questions and compress them into one. We may assume that this is one of the fruits of his year-long austerity. The sage responds by saying, “You ask very difficult questions, but since you are a sincere seeker of Truth, I will try to answer. *Prāna* is born of the *ātman* but like a man and his shadow, the *ātman* and *prāna* are inseparable. It enters the body by the action of Mind or *manas*. *Prāna* itself may be divided into five parts, *prāna*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*. *Prāna*, the first, dwells in the upper body, in the eye, ear, mouth and nose. The *apāna* dwells in the lower, in the excretory organs, *samāna* dwells in the middle, in the abdomen. In the heart are 101 arteries, from each of which emanate 100 smaller arteries. From each of these emanate 72,000 branch arteries. *Vyāna* dwells in them. In the nerve located in the center of the spine dwells *udāna*, leads the virtuous man upward, the sinful man downward and one who is both into the world of beings.”

In explaining these verses, Aurobindo writes³, “Prana manifests itself in five distinct vital powers, to which the names, Prana, Samana, Vyana, Apana and Udana have been given by the ancient writers. Prana, the vital force par excellence has its seat in the upper part of the body and conducts all mental operations, the indrawing and outdrawing of breath and induction of food. Samana, seated centrally in the body, balances, equalises and harmonises the vital operations and is the agent for the assimilation of food. Vyana pervades the whole body; on it depends the circulation of the blood and distribution of the essential part of the food eaten and digested throughout the body. Apana, situated in the lower part of the trunk, presides over the lower functions, especially over the emission of such parts of the food as are rejected by the body and over procreation; it is intimately connected with the processes of decay and death. Udana is the vital power which connects bodily life with the spiritual element in man.” Thus, the five-fold *prāna* controls the nervous energies of the human being.

Then the fourth student approaches the teacher and asks, “When a man’s body is asleep, who is it within that sleeps? Who is awake, and who is it that sees the dreams?”

³See Aurobindo, Collected Works, Vol. 27, p. 221.

The teacher replies, “When a man sleeps, the sensory organs are drawn in. However, the *prānas*, the fires of life, sleep not. The mind is led nearer to the *ātman*. In the dream state, the mind revives its past impressions. Whatever it has seen, it sees again. Whatever it has heard, it hears again. Whatever it has enjoyed in various places, it enjoys again. What has been seen and not seen, heard and not heard, enjoyed and not enjoyed, both the real and unreal, the mind sees all and becomes the all.”

This passage represents an early attempt at dream analysis. At the same time, it makes the vital point that while we sleep, the digestion, assimilation, circulation of blood and other bodily functions continue, so the *prāna* never sleeps. The last line, ‘the mind becomes the all’ is significant. In the dream state, we forget that we are all the characters of the dream. Modern in-depth psychology has shown that all the dream symbols are aspects of our own mind, whether individual or collective. However, the sage does not seem to attach too much importance to these dream symbols. His main point is to draw our attention to the *prāna* which never sleeps.

The sage continues, “When the mind is overpowered by deep sleep, it dreams no more. As the birds fly to the tree for rest, even so do all these things fly to the *ātman* for rest. Earth and its subtle essence, water and its subtle essence, fire and its subtle essence, air and its subtle essence, ether and its subtle essence, the eye and what it sees, the ear and what it hears, the nose and what it smells, the tongue and what it tastes, the skin and what it touches, the voice and what it speaks, the hands and what they grasp, the feet and what they walk on, the mind and what it perceives, the intellect and what it understands, the ego and what it appropriates, the heart and what it loves, the light and what it illuminates, the energy and what it binds together, are what is meant by all these things. It is the *ātman* that sees, hears, smells, thinks, knows and acts. That is Brahman, the essence of knowledge. He who knows this becomes omniscient.”

Then the fifth student approaches the teacher with the question, “If one meditates on *Om* until the end of one’s life, what does one gain by that?”

The master replies, “Om is the symbol of Brahman, both conditioned and unconditioned, the personal and impersonal. By meditating on Om, the wise reach one or the other. If one meditates only on one aspect (*ā*), the verses of the Rg Veda lead one into the world of beings with austerity, self-control and faith and achieves greatness. If one meditates on two aspects of Om (*au*), the verses of the Yajur Veda lead one to the Lunar world (heaven). But he who meditates on Om with full awareness of all three aspects, the verses of the Sama Veda lead one into union with Brahman. He sees the Being that dwells in the

body, which is higher than the highest life. That is the highest state, tranquil, unchanging, immortal, fearless and supreme.”

This requires some explanation. As we have seen in the second lecture, the hymns of the Rg Veda pertained first to natural forces and then led to an inner psychological significance. The hymns of Yajur Veda were more concerned with sacrificial duties. Neither of these lead us to the highest state, the verse declares. Only the Sama Veda combined with meditation on Om with full awareness leads one to the highest state. When we look at the verses of the Sama Veda, we find an emphasis on the glory of the brain and the workings of the *prānas*. The opening chapter of the Sama Veda is again devoted to the praise of Agni, the Cosmic Will. Thus, to turn the mind inward, one must focus first on the *prānas* and the workings of the brain.

The last student approaches the sage and asks him the following. “A prince once asked me if I knew the person with sixteen parts. I said I knew him not. Then the prince rode away. Can you please tell me where is that person?” To him, the sage replied, “You are the person of sixteen parts. You are life (*prāna*), faith (*śraddhā*), ether, air, light, water, earth, sensory system, mind, food, strength, austerity, knowledge, works, the world, and in the world, name.” As we shall see later in the Samkhya system of philosophy, the sixteen parts are said to comprise the subtle body, or *linga sarira*, with some modifications.

The sage continues, “The *ātman* dwells within the body, in every creature. As the flowing rivers tend towards the ocean and on reaching that, merge into it, losing their name and form, so also all living things flow towards the ocean of *Brahman* and merge into That, losing their name and form. That is without parts, and immortal. There is no state higher than this.”

The students then made obeissances to their teacher and saluted him for dispelling their ignorance.

5.2 The Mundaka Upanishad

The word *mundaka* is derived from the root word, *mund* meaning to shave. The idea is that the Upanishad shaves off our ignorance. This Upanishad begins by making a distinction between higher knowledge *parāvidya* and lower knowledge *aparāvidya*. It then teaches that through *parāvidya*, we can know Brahman.

After describing how knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation, we are told that a respected householder, Sounaka, approaches the

teacher Angiras with the question: “Sir, what is that by knowing which everything else becomes known?” The sage replied, “The knowers of Brahman declare that there are two kinds of knowledge, one higher and the other lower. The knowledge of the Vedas, phonetics, grammar, etymology, astronomy and so forth are considered to be lower. The higher is the knowledge of That by which one knows the changeless reality. That transcends the senses, it is uncaused, it is undefinable, it has neither eyes nor ears, hands nor feet, it is all-pervading, subtler than the subtle, and the wise perceive it as the source of all. As the spider sends forth its thread and draws it in, as herbs grow on the earth, as hair grows on the body of a living person, so also this universe arises from *Brahman*.”

As emphasized earlier, one of the fundamental themes of the Upanishads is to arrive at the essence of knowledge. “What is that by knowing which everything else becomes known?” This is the question. It is again taken up later in the Chandogya Upanishad.

The sage continues. “Abiding in the midst of ignorance, wise in their own esteem, thinking themselves to be learned, the deluded go round and round, like the blind led by the blind. Ceremonials and meritorious work do not lead to a knowledge of That. The wise, who are self-controlled and tranquil, who are contented in spirit, who practice austerity and meditation in solitude and silence realise the changeless Self. Let a person devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of worldly enjoyment, whether here or hereafter, and then give no thought to these transient things. Let him then approach a learned teacher (*guru*) who is devoted to Brahman. To such a disciple who approaches reverently, the learned sage imparts the knowledge of the changeless Self. ”

In these verses, some prerequisites are delineated. Though the student may not understand knowledge, it is expected that he recognize ignorance, which is here defined as that which is changing and transitory. The student must genuinely seek knowledge, not as a diversion for a day, but as a passionate quest for life. His direction must be fixed and he must be ready to practice austerity and meditation, the Upanishad says.

The sage continues. “As innumerable sparks fly upward from the blazing fire, so also all things have come from the Imperishable. That Being is self-luminous and formless. It dwells within and It dwells without. It is unborn, pure, greater than the greatest, without breath, and without mind. From That are born breath (*prāna*), mind, the sensory organs, ether, air, fire, water and the earth and It binds all these together. Fire is Its head. The sun and moon, Its eyes. The regions of space, Its ears. Its speech is that which is revealed in the Vedas. The air is Its life. The universe, Its heart. Out of Its feet, the earth

is born. Indeed, It is the innermost self of all beings. That is to be known, so therefore, know That.”

As an introduction to the higher teaching, the sage begins with images the student is already familiar with and reveals their cosmic dimension. How to go deeper? The sage Angiras continues.

“Taking as the bow the great weapon of the Upanishad, one should place the arrow of devotion, and drawing it with a mind absorbed in meditation on That, know that That is the target. The syllable Om is the bow, the arrow is the individual being and Brahman is the target. Merge the arrow in the target. The arteries of the body merge together at the center of the heart like the spokes of a wheel merge at the center. The Self dwells within the center. Meditate on That as Om. That is the light of lights. The sun does not illumine That, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning, nor the fires kindled upon the earth. That is the one light that gives light to all. That shining, everything shines. Brahman is spread everywhere and is indeed this universe. That is the supreme.”

The essential idea is that Brahman is not something remote and distant, but rather something we have all been familiar with and have been intimate with. We are to meditate on the symbol Om and recognize the energies manifesting both within and without our body are from That.

To convey a clearer idea of our relation to Brahman, the sage proceeds to give the following celebrated example. “Two birds of golden plumage are perched upon the tree of life. Of these two, one eats the sweet and bitter fruits of life. The other, tasting neither, observes calmly. The former is the individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of its identity with the Supreme Self. Bewildered by the ego, it is sometimes happy and sometimes sad. The latter is the *ātman*. When the former realises its identity with the latter, it grieves no more. The *ātman* is the life shining in every creature. It is within this body and is of the nature of light and purity. It is attainable by austerity, by self-control and by the practice of truth. Truth alone conquers, not untruth. By truth is stretched the pathway to the gods (*devas*), or luminous energies. It is vast, divine, beyond any mental conception, subtler than the subtle, farther than the far, nearer than the near. Yet, It can be perceived, for It is here, hidden in the secret heart. The *ātman* is not seen by the eye. Speech cannot grasp It nor the sensory organs. Neither can it be attained by austerity, or by work. However, when one’s nature is refined and purified through meditation, It can be perceived. The subtle self is to be known by thought. Our thoughts are pervaded by the sensory impressions. When the thought is purified, the *ātman* shines forth. He who entertains desires, brooding over them is born again and again. But he

who has gone beyond desire, attains liberation in this very life.”

In case the student feels that the way of going beyond desire is through inaction, or any form of mortification, the sage warns us: “The *ātman* cannot be attained without strength.”

nāyam ātmā balahīnena labhyah.

“It is not attained through heedlessness, nor through austerity without a definite aim. But he who strives through proper means can enter the abode of *Brahman*. Having known the Self, the sages are filled with joy. Blessed are they who are tranquil, free from passion. Realizing the all-pervading *Brahman* everywhere, the sages enter into That, the Self of all.” And now in verses which are reminiscent of the verses in the Prasna Upanishad, the sage continues, “The fifteen parts and the sensory organs, as well as the deeds, merge into the Self. Just as the flowing rivers merge into the ocean casting off name and form, even so the knower of Brahman merges the individual awareness into the universal awareness, that luminous Being, higher than the highest.”