

Ethicality and Spirituality in Kathopniasadic Philosophy

Dr Nandini Mishra

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Utkal University

Abstract

The concept of Atman is central to the Vedantic religious-philosophical thought. Vedanta Darsana is also regarded as Atmadarsana. The Upanisads, also known as Vedanta Sruti, impart the teaching of Atman (Atmavidya). Among the principal Upanisads, Kathopniasad is the most prominent one so far, as far as Atman and its realisation are concerned. The concept of Atman has been elucidated through the anecdote of Yama to Nachiketa. Also, there is the exploration of Atmajana or Atmopodobdhi while exposing the Upanisadic concept of Atman in the background of the Advaita perspective. I have tried to mention how the idea of Atman can be regarded as philosophically illuminating and how the comments of the Upanishadic concept of Atman are all with obscure mysticism and thus transcendent to a minimum sort of rational scrutiny can be avoided. By way of discussion, it seems to me to be entirely plausible that the concept of Atman and its realisation becomes more comprehensible through an ethical instead of theological rendering.

Keywords: *Atmajana, revelation, Upanisads, Atman and Vedanta Darsana*

The expressions 'Brahman' and 'Atman' give the impression that Brahman is different from Atman. But Brahman is the same as Atman because both the terms represent the same reality. Hence, Brahman is not different from Atman. The word 'Atman' is defined as moving constantly and pervading everywhere. It is noteworthy that the ultimate, eternal and intelligent principle, when studied from the subjective point of view, is called Atman and that reality, from the objective point of view, is called Brahman. To Sankara, Brahman is also the same as Atman. The Kathopniasad is regarded as one of the perfect specimens of the mystic thought and poetry of the ancient Hindus. Kathopniasad is mainly devoted to answering Nachiketa's third question, whether something survives after death. Yama explains Nachiketa by stating that the individual self is the same as the universal self. The individual survives death and takes up another body according to his deeds and knowledge. Considering the ultimate reality is one of the most critical aspects of Upanisadic philosophy. It is also said in the Upanisads that Brahman is absolutely real. The expressions 'Brahman' and 'Atman' give the impression that Brahman is different from Atman. But Brahman is same as Atman. There are more than one hundred Upanisads. But Atma-jnana is singularly

focussed on the Kathopniasad. Here, Nachiketa, while asking for the third boon, requests Yama to instruct him about Atman's knowledge. And Yama, after carefully testing the sincerity of Nachiketa's request, imparts him the necessary instruction regarding the knowledge of Atman.

The objectives:

- The nature of Atman
- The concept of pure knowledge
- Attainment of Pure knowledge
- Realisation of Atmanjnana

Yama also describes the true nature of the Individual self and his relation to the supreme self. He prescribes a few means by which the mystic principle of total identity or tadatmya between Jiva and Brahman can be realised. Yama tells Nachiketa that a being neither lives by breath nor by Apaṇa. Man lives by something else, which is none other than the self. He is the final substratum and the highest goal (Sa katha sa paragatih). The intelligent or the all-pervasive principle, which Yama professes as the ultimate, is not an object of demonstration or empirical verification. Brahman can neither be grasped by a theoretical knowledge of the Vedas nor by average intelligence or reasoning.

Revelation or direct intuition (Aparokhsha anubhuti) is claimed to be the source of the knowledge of Atman or the supreme self. Atman is difficult to realise. It is very subtle. It cannot be obtained by arguing (atarkyam). A self-realised Guru is necessary for the aspirants on the spiritual path. There are paramatma and jivatma. The former is the light; the latter is the shadow. The pure Atman is actionless (Nishkriya). It is a non-doer (Akarta). When Avidya is destroyed through the Atmajnana, one becomes identical with Brahman or Paramatman. Control of the senses is also required to attain the goal of moksha. Nachiketa, having acquired this knowledge imparted by Yama, attained Brahman. He becomes free from all impurities and free from mortality. Atman cannot be divided into parts by any sword, and it cannot be affected by water or fire. It is eternal and ever-present. Here, Atman is supposed to be spiritual. It is consciousness. It represents the intelligence of the being. The being may die, but the spirit of the being is unaffected. It need not be confused with the capacity of knowing.

After the death of man, it cannot be said that he knows or he is having knowledge. That means after death, the individual is as good as Jada (unconscious) and cannot acquire further knowledge. But when it is said that Atman is conscious, it does not refer to the mere knowing capacity of the being. It relates to the consciousness itself. But it may be asked what itself. If it is understood as the consciousness about the consciousness of the being, then it will further lead to the notion of consciousness. In this way, it will lead to an infinite regression. Hence, consciousness itself is to be understood as the universal consciousness. The individual jivatman has consciousness, and thereby, it is conscious. But the universal consciousness that is paramatmam is said to be pure consciousness as such. Through universal consciousness, the individual appears to differ because of a lack of proper discriminative wisdom; eventually, both do not differ and hence, they are non-different or identical. Here, too, Kathopanisad advocates in favour of Advaitism in identifying the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. In Kathopanisad, Atman is sometimes

considered as the knower and, as the knower, it is the master of the body. Atmanam rathiram viddhi sarira ratha meva tu.... (i, iii,4). In the above-mentioned and following verses, Atman is described as the knower with consciousness. It is described with the help of a metaphor. That is, the organs of the being are the horses. Atman controls the sense organs in the sense that Atman is the charioteer who holds the bridle of the different horses of the chariot (body).

In Kathopanisad, the mind (mana) and the intellect (buddhi) are considered Atman's close associates or the chariot's controller. It has been said that if the charioteer is associated with a restrained or balanced mind, the horses are in good control, so liberation becomes more accessible for him. The being with an uncontrolled mind faces problems like a charioteer having unruly horses. At this explanation stage, Kathopanisad seems to have a touch of personalism. It has been said that being controlled with a restrained mind and having complete control over his senses, passion, etc., obtains the highest place of Vishnu. That means liberation has been considered as getting shelter in the holy feet of Vishnu. Again, it has also been said that Purusa is at the highest state and is the goal. Purusa is the same as Brahman or the supreme self. The being who realises that he is the supreme self, with the help of his finer intellect, is glorified in the region of Brahman (Brahma loka). He has the knowledge of Brahman, who understands that it is Aditi, comprising all the deities, takes birth as Hiranyagarbha, is manifested in association with the elements and is seated in the heart's core. (II.1.7. KV). But, on close study, it becomes evident that the impression of personalism attributed to Brahman /Atman is only apparent and can never be construed as real. Because Atman, as already indicated before, is neither an object nor a subject (na visaya na visayi). It transcends the subject-object dichotomy. The moment it is thought to be only conscious (cetana as distinct Jada), it becomes limited and can be described. But Atman is indescribable and not limited to conscious or unconscious categorisation. Hence, the passages where Atman is explained in terms of mahapurusa or

paramapurusa or even Vishnu or Narayana need not be construed as referring to a transcendental spiritual Supreme Being. Such expression has metaphorical significance. Since the Atman is viewed at the root of all description and is regarded as value par excellence (parama sreya), it is addressed with a reverential adoration and, in that way, a personal touch is given to appease the mass of the initial stage. But for the jñani (a man of wisdom), this personal attribute is rightly understood as an unnecessary feature ascribed to Atman, devoid of all features and characteristics.

Certain expressions in the Brahadaranyaka and the Chandogya Upanidads emphasise the oneness of Brahman and Atman. Brahman is considered as the ultimate reality. Being is regarded as the ultimate reality. The significance of saying Being is the ultimate reality is that the Atman is the ultimate reality. This view is almost clear in the expression of Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, i.e., *San matram hi Brahma*. The conversation between Uddalaka and Svetaketu reveals the same view through the expressions: *Tat Satyam, Sa Atma, tat tvam asi, Svetaketu, iti.* (The Atman is the reality 'that thou art'). Thus, one can try to relate Brahman and Atman through the relation of identity. This view can be further strengthened if one considers the following few lines. In Katha Upanisad, it is maintained that Brahman is soundless, colourless, tasteless, eternal, odourless, beginningless and endless. In Isa Upanisad, the ultimate reality is described as bodiless, invulnerable, untouched by evil, etc. In Mandukya Upanisad, Brahman is considered unthinkable, ungraspable, etc. All these negative descriptions expose the transcendental nature of Brahman. Brahman is found to be nirguna, the featureless absolute ultimate reality.

On the other hand, in Svetasvatara Upanisad, Brahman is conceived as a bird, beast, and insect. Sometimes, Brahman has been expressed as the world-soul or world, which is the manifestation of the Brahman. These later descriptions expose the immanent aspect of Brahman. Thus, Brahman is viewed from two aspects: nirguna (without quality) and saguna (with qualities). While the Advaitins only

emphasise Brahman as the nirguna, visistadvaitins emphasise Brahman as the saguna. For the former, the Upanisadic expression of Brahman as saguna is only the mark of vyavaharika maya and thus devoid of the paramarthika stage. For the latter, the Upanisadic expression of Brahman as nirguna only refers to the devil of bad qualities (mandaguna), while Brahman is saguna endowed with good qualities.

In the Kabopanisad, the discussion starts with the distinction between preya (pleasurable) and sreya (preferable), and subsequently, sreya is approved. To Sankara, preya is rooted in Avidya, and sreya is Vidya. Since for Sankara Atmainana is the supreme goal (paragatih) it is nothing other than sreya. A question is raised as to why Upanisad Approves Atmadhana as knowledge proper and the craving for more and more pleasurable objects like wealth, sex, etc., is due to ignorance. What are the grounds to maintain such a point of view? The view widely spread in this connection is that worldly existence is illusory, and ignorance continues so long as one clings to this worldly existence. The very idea that this is the only world (*ayam lokah*) and there is no other world in a *para lokah asti*) is due to Avidya. For whatever is found in this world is transitory perishable and hence can never be taken as absolutely real. Accepting the self as eternal and imperishable is ultimately considered real (*paramartha sat*). Realising this ultimate reality, one becomes removed from this world of Prapanca, and this is entirely free from all sorts of sorrows and sufferings (*vitoshakah*).

Upanisad, it is true, is not exclusively recognised as a philosophical treatise. A philosophical study of the Upanisad is undoubtedly different from a religious study. A philosophical study of a treatise is mainly concerned with a detailed unravelling of the reasoned thesis that the treatise in question attempts to establish and evaluate, if possible. These different arguments are advanced for justifying such a thesis. For a devout Hindu, the saying of the Katbopanisad is words of revelation. For spiritualists, this Upanisad may contain elements of the most significant spiritual wisdom since it deals with

such topics as spirit and its immortality. But, as already indicated, for a philosophical study, the exposition and evaluation of the rational basis of the subject matter dealt with in this Upanisad seems quite relevant. In this connection, Sankara's commentary on the Katha Upanishad is significant. This Upanisad does not directly deal with the concept of mukti or the supreme ideal. Self-knowledge is the direct and most fundamental topic with which this Upanisad is preoccupied. That's why it qualifies the knowledge of the supreme as 'Paramaṇuhyān.

There are more than one hundred Upanisads. But Atma-jnana is singularly focussed on the Kathopanishad. Through the anecdote of Yama and Nachiketa, the conception here is to discuss in detail the issue of self-realisation in the background of Kathopanishad. Here, Nachiketa, while asking for the third boon, requests Yama to instruct him about Atman's knowledge. And Yama, after carefully testing the sincerity of Nachiketa's request, imparts him the necessary instruction regarding the knowledge of Atman. But it should be marked, in this connection, that the third boon regarding self-knowledge is relevant to the attainment of mukti. Sankara, in the course of his interpretation, clearly states that knowledge of the self has, for its object, absolute emancipation. The third boon is the means for the attainment of the highest goal. Here, the highest goal is construed as nothing but the attainment of Brahman (Brahmaprāpti), which is possible, according to Sankara, not by the performance of any ritual or Karma but by pure knowledge (suddhajñāna) alone, maintains that knowledge of the self is possible only when there is the cessation super-imposition (adhyasa) of the self.

According to Katha Upanisad and Sankara, heavenly existence is never considered suitable for attaining the highest good. Sreya, in the sense of Atma-jnana, is not beyond morality. Of course, the concept of morality here should not be confused with the localised conception of morality. Mukti is attained only after the complete cessation of false attribution. In Katha Upanisad, it is said that the world tree is rooted in Brahman: 'That is pure, that is Brahman, and

that is called immortal. Tadeva Sukram Tad-Brahma Tadeva artanuchyate (2 III.). It is also said (in 2.2.15) that the supreme illuminates the whole world. The sun, moon, star, or other cannot be considered light sources. The proper source of the light is the supreme alone. And in the whole of the Upanisad, Brahman is considered supreme. Certain expressions in the Brahadaranyaka and the Chandogya Upanisads emphasise the oneness of Brahman and Atman. Brahman is regarded as the ultimate reality. Being is considered as the ultimate reality.

Here, one can understand how the Atman is gudham and guhahitam. The knowledge of Atman is not available at the surface level. One interested in knowing about it cannot get the knowledge of it. It is supposed to be placed in a cavity (Guha). However, the cavity is not a physical cavity with a hard covering in front of any outlet. Still, the cavity of the consciousness or awareness is supposed to be beyond the perceptual level. Thus, though the knowledge of Atman is hidden, it can be achieved. Kathopanishad, it is said that such knowledge is unavailable from external sources or outside of himself. In this sense, Atmajnana is not an impossibility. One who talks about Atman may not be one Atman-jnani. The description of Atman may be within his knowledge. In other words, he might have been informed about the various sayings about Atman found in different Vedic and Upanisadic sources. But he might not have realised it or might not have comprehended Atman. There is no difference between knowing and being so far as Atman is conceived. One Atmajnani does not differentiate between himself and Atman. There is the realisation of total non-difference (tadataya). The knowledge about is the bare knowledge of information. It might have been acquired by reading a text or listening to some authority. However, knowledge of Atman is not obtained through some mediate source. It is more than bare information. It is the knowledge itself. It is the first-hand knowledge obtained directly through realisation or immediate awareness (asat). This view can be elaborated further by considering an example. Suppose a teacher is asked to give a talk on the Upanisadic notion of Atman. He prepares a good

note by going through various Upanisads and delivers the lecture on the Upanisadic notion of Atman. It is his knowledge about the Upanisadic notion of Atman. The person might not accept those statements. He has performed the act of reproduction without having any commitment to it. Here, it cannot be said that he has the 'knowledge of Brahman. The knowledge of Atman is not possible without having the realisation of Atman. The teacher has Atmajnana in the sense of learning, but he is not an Atmajnani. Atmainana, In the Upanisadic sense, is the realisation of Atman. It is not the knowledge about Atman. We can find hundreds of people who have mastered the verses and recite them at various places. In all those cases, one cannot deny that they are efficient at learning Atman.

Because they provide the correct answer to the question of what the view of Atman is according to Kathopanisad. But they are not Atmajnani in the proper Upanisadic sense. It is a case like that of a parrot who can recite the verses of Nyaya sastra by listening repeatedly to its master. The bare information or having the report is no knowledge in the Upanisadic sense. It is the realisation of Atman (Brahmi) or Anubhuti that is duly emphasised in this context. While listening to the responses of Nachiketa, Yama was convinced that Nachiketa is the proper person, for which he says that consider you fit for emancipation, as the essence of the knowledge is wide open to you". Vivrtan Sadna Naciketam Manye (1 11 13).

A pertinent question may be raised: in what sense is Nachiketa Atma Jnani? The answer has been expressed clearly: Atman cannot be known through rigorous study, having sharp intellect, or listening a lot about Atman." The knowledge of Atman is not possible if the conduct, the senses and the mind are not in control."2 It is said that the nature of Atman is to be realised. Then the question comes: what is the real nature of the Atman? According to Kathopanisad, even though no sense organ can experience it, no mind can grasp it fully, but that exists or 'It is' has to be realised. Asti iti eva upalabdhyah 11, 111, 13), The Atmainani realises it as the only

reality Itattva bhavena). One who realises he attains Brahman Brahmajnana.

With regard to the knowledge about Atman, Kena Upanisad suggests that Atman, which is beyond speech and mind, is also "other than all that is known" and, in that way, it is beyond the unknown, 4th verse: anyadeva tat vidadat atho aviditat adhi....) Explaining this verse, it can be said that Atman is positively unknowable. It is unknowable in the sense that no sense organ can know it. However, a very common question comes up when accepting Atman as unknowable. If it is unknown, how can it be said the reality of Atman cannot be denied and that it is the only reality to overcome such a dilemma? Sankara has commented upon this point by saying that apart from the Atman, there cannot be any entity other than the known and the unknown; therefore, the Atman is Brahman.

Hence, it is known in one sense. In that sense, no other knowledge is possible if it is unknown. It is also unknown in another sense. In that sense, its knowledge is unavailable through the usual methods of knowing. Atman is not an impossibility. In the background of this Upanisad, one can find the following two recommendations regarding Atman's knowledge. The knowledge of Atman is hard to grasp. The knowledge of Atman is the subtle knowledge available to the finer intellect. It is not the case that knowledge of the Atman is confined to a selected few. The majority of the people do not possess adequate knowledge of Atman. When the knowledge becomes adequate, the being is identified with Atman. That is the test of the proper knowledge of the being. It is known through realisation neither through experience nor through argumentation (Atarkyam), One Atmajnani (knower of the self) has the realisation that I am that (Atman)".

In Kathopanisad, Atman has been described as *durdasam* because it is beyond the ordinary person's comprehension. It is too complex to be known and to be described. Had it been something to which physical characteristics or perceivable characteristics would have been ascribed, it would not have been difficult to know about it. The physical attributes are

ascribed to the object's shape and size (Sthula). But no physical characterisation is possible since Atman is highly subtle (Suksma). So, it is unknown through perceptual means that sense organs are helpless in acquiring the knowledge of Atman. It can be said that no knowledge is possible without Atman as Atman is the basic pre-supposition behind any knowledge; Atman represents the consciousness of awareness. No knowledge is possible without awareness of the knowledge. The very fact of awareness leads to the principle of awareness and, consequently, to pure awareness. As Atman is often defined as pure consciousness or pure awareness, the knowledge of Atman cannot be an Impossibility. Instead, it is the basis of the possibility of knowledge itself. This view has been expressed effectively in the Kena Upanisad in the following Hanner. It is accepted that without Atman. Perceptual judgment is impossible because Atman is behind all such activities (prati vodha veditam).

Conclusion

The non-deviation of Atman in any kind of knowledge-consideration shows the eternality of Atman. In this sense, Atman is eternal, or the eternal reality. The speciality of the Upanisadic

message is that there is no difference between individual awareness of the Atman and Atman itself. It is the transcendental presupposition of all-knowing to borrow the expression of Prof A.C. Mukharji (The Nature of Self). There is no difference between knowing and being so far as Atman is conceived. An Atmajnani does not differentiate between himself and Atman. It is said that if someone chooses the series, he is on the path of a moral choice. It opines the consideration of 'ought'. Here, one uses his inner voice, which is intuitive in support of morality. There has been no importance on immediate gains. The goals of life are not to run after pleasant acceptances. Rather, such pleasure cannot have a long-standing effect. Thus, for living a good life *sreya* is important.

From the discussion above, one thing at least becomes pretty straightforward: Atman cannot be ordinarily known using sense perception or discursive reasoning. The moral consideration is of prime importance. In this sense, it seems reasonable to hold that the concept of Atmajnana is of ethical significance and, in that way, becomes universally convincing and illuminating.

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