

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

MUNDAKA UPANISHAD

THE BRIDGE TO
IMMORTALITY

KARAN SINGH



BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN Bombay-400 007

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BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN
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to
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KULAPATI'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once.

It is our intention to publish the books we select not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting itself to the utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions that allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the framework of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life,

by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the Indian mind, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H.V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a

code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone, the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

K. M. M.

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INTRODUCTION

If the Vedas, to paraphrase Kalidāsa, can be compared to the mighty Himalayas stretching majestically from the Hindu Kush in the West all the way across to the Eastern sea, like some gigantic measuring rod against which the world's great traditions will have to be gauged, then the Upanishads may be likened to those great Himalayan peaks which stand in splendour reflecting on their eternal snows the sparkling glory of the sun of wisdom. They have rightly been described as the supreme expression of the Hindu mind, indeed one of the high watermarks of the human spirit since the dawn of civilization. A record of the deepest spiritual experiences of a whole series of Rishis or sages across many centuries, they are, as Sri Aurobindo puts it "documents of revelatory and intuitive philosophy of an inexhaustible light, power and largeness and, whether written in verse or cadenced prose, spiritual poems of an absolute and un-failing inspiration, inimitable in phrase, wonderful in rhythm and expression."

The traditional classification of the Vedas by Western scholars into the Karmakānda dealing with ritualistic action and sacrifice, and the Jñānkānda concerned with philosophy cannot be considered sacrosanct. Vedic hymns are by no means merely ritualistic in the sense that they are used only for purposes of the sacrificial Yajnas. In fact, if rightly interpreted, they contain the deepest spiritual truths veiled in an intricate and imposing symbolism. Nonetheless, the Upanishads do constitute the Vedānta, or the culmination of the Vedas, both

because chronologically they come at the end of the Vedic collections and also because of the sublime philosophical nature and superb poetical structure that they present.

As is frequently the case with Sanskrit, a rich, many-splendoured language, the word 'Upanishad' can be interpreted in more than one way. The literal meaning is 'sitting down near', and describes the disciples sitting around the guru as he expounds the 'Brahmavidyā', the Science of Brahman. This is in interesting contradiction to Socrates and his disciples who, apparently, preferred to conduct their philosophical discussions while walking up and down the pathways of the Academy, thus earning the name of 'peripatetic' philosophers. By extension, the term 'Upanishad' could mean 'the secret doctrine' or 'the saving wisdom', to be imparted only to those disciples who followed the monastic discipline and were thus entitled to sit near the master. In a more abstract sense, the Upanishads are referred to in the Mundaka itself as 'the great weapon, the mighty bow' through which the individual soul (the Ātman) can be sped towards the goal of Brahman and become one with it. Ādi Shankarāchārya takes the word 'Upanishad' to mean that knowledge by which ignorance is loosened or destroyed.

Taken together, it is clear that the Upanishads represent a unique corpus of philosophical thought and spiritual experience. In the Hindu tradition there is not the curious dichotomy that we find in the West between philosophy and religion, the former being merely a mental formulation not necessarily connected with spiritual vision and experience. The Upanishads, in

fact, flow from the spiritual vision and realization of the masters, who express their experience in superb prose and poetry. There are various views regarding the number of Upanishads, the traditional belief being the auspicious number one hundred and eight. The great Shankarāchārya commented upon eleven—Isa, Kena, Katha, Praśna, Mundaka, Māndūkya, Taittirīya, Aitareya, Chāndogya, Brhadāranyaka and Svetāshvatarā—which are generally accepted as being the principal Upanishads. These range from short, cryptic texts such as the Isa, which has only eighteen verses, to the great Brhadāranyaka which runs into many hundreds.

The texts have been composed over several centuries. Without entering into the scholarly dispute about their chronology, one might generally accept the view that they date from about 1000 B.C. down to the first or second century after Christ. The orthodox Hindu tradition, of course, is that the Vedas are timeless, and this is certainly true as far as the Vedāntic teachings are concerned as they have a universality that places them beyond the limitations of time and geographical location. While many of the texts are anonymous, a common feature of Hindu philosophy and iconography, a number of historical personages figure in the Upanishads, notably the great King Janaka of Mithila and the sage Yāgnavalkya, whose dialogues form such a striking feature of the Brhadāranyaka, the Upanishad of the Great Forest.

It is impossible to describe the inner luminosity of the Upanishads. The Rishis or seers speak with the authority of authentic spiritual experience, "not as the scribes."

There are two qualifications laid down for the teacher—he should be “shrotrium” or well-versed in the scriptures, and also “brahma-nistham” firmly based on the realization of Brahman. In other words, he must combine intellectual ability with spiritual experience, knowledge with wisdom. Then and then only was he considered qualified to impart the secret doctrine. On their part the disciples, whether young acolytes resident in the hermitage or distinguished citizens—rulers, householders, merchants—had also to be dedicated to the quest for truth with humility and devotion. Acolytes had to live under strict discipline and perform penance and austerities before they were considered capable of receiving the teaching.

The teaching itself, sublime and multi-faceted, runs like a crystal stream emanating from the lofty heights of the Himalayas, dancing in ecstasy down the glittering slopes, widening into broad, life-giving rivers, and finally merging into the radiant ocean of wisdom. It is a stream that is never ending, arising as it does from the springs of spiritual power deep within the heart of the earth, and flowing down across the millennia as the sacred Ganga itself meanders through the matted locks of Shiva Mahadeva before appearing on earth as the benefactor of humanity—a rainbow bridge to immortality.

Mankind today is poised precariously at a crucial crossroads in its long and tortuous history on this planet. Over the last few decades there has been an explosion of knowledge, resulting in all the glittering achievements of science and technology. And yet there has been no

parallel growth in wisdom, and the erosion of traditional cultures has proceeded apace. In the result, mankind today stands on the verge of destruction, unable to cope with its own technological ingenuity. A nuclear holocaust is now very much within the realms of possibility—some would say probability—and with each day that passes nuclear arms continue to multiply and this planet moves closer to the edge of the precipice. At a time like this, we turn to the great scriptures to see whether we can derive from them a viable philosophy capable of comprehending and confronting the dilemma of man in the present age, of nuclear weapons in the global village. The Upanishads, though composed thousands of years ago, present a philosophy of life and human existence that is startlingly relevant in the present context.

There are five fundamental concepts that could perhaps be considered to constitute the foundations of the Vedāntic worldview, all of which find their expression and elucidation in the Upanishads. The first is the all-pervasiveness of the Divine—*Ishāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkinchya jagatyām jagat*—the view that all creation, whether this tiny speck of cosmic dust we call our world, or the billions of galaxies that stretch endlessly into the chasm of time, is in the ultimate analysis a manifestation of the same divine power. Thus, despite the multitudinous manifestations in this space-time continuum, there is ultimately no dichotomy between mind and spirit, between matter and energy, between the human and the divine.

The second concept flowing from this is that the divine, which is all-pervasive, resides hidden but

discoverable in what we may call consciousness, specially in human consciousness which at present appears to be the highest broad level of evolution. As the Gita has it, "*Ishwara sarvabhūtānām hriddeshe tishthati*", the lord resides in the heart of all beings. This implies that despite differences of caste and creed, race and religion, nationality and ideology, the entire human race is held together by a deep and fundamental inner spiritual bond.

With this we may link the next concept, that all members of the human race in reality belong to a single, extended family—"*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*". In view of the blood-drenched history over the last several thousand years—it would require the very last generation of supercomputers to calculate the slaughter and torture that human beings have inflicted upon each other in the name of religion and ideology—this concept would appear to be absurdly romantic. And yet, on deeper thought, it becomes clear that unless this view is adopted there is really little hope of man being able to survive for long into the next century. The mechanical, exteriorized attempts at human unity—whether through the United Nations, UNESCO or any other multilateral organization—have failed precisely because of the lack of an inner, unifying philosophy.

The fourth Vedāntic concept is that of the ultimate unity of all religions and ideologies—"*Ekam sad viprāh bahudhā vadanti*", the Truth is one, the wise call it by many names. True, the history of mankind down to the present moment is replete with the most frightful massacres and strife, not only between religious groups but

between tribes, nation-states and conflicting ideologies. Millions have died on opposing sides, carrying with them to the end the conviction that they were fighting for right and justice, for truth and God as they understood those terms. But the Vedāntic doctrine gives an alternative scenario. Could it be that all these lesser formulations are in fact simply fragmentary approaches to a single, unified Truth flowing from differing ethnic, economic, geographical and political backgrounds? Are we not like the blind men in the fable who touched different parts of the elephant and then flew at each other in a rage because their descriptions—true in themselves—did not match?

Finally, there is the concept of welfare, not of any particular person or group or class, but of all creation. As the ancient prayer goes—"*Sarvēpi sukhinah santū, sarve santū nirāmayā*"—may all beings be happy, may all beings be free from fear. Here welfare is described not in limited terms but as all-embracing, covering not only the human race but also what, in our arrogance, we call 'lower' beings—animals and birds, insects and plants, as well as 'natural' formations, such as mountains and oceans. In addition to the horrors that mankind has perpetrated upon its own members, we have also indulged in a rapacious and ruthless exploitation of the natural environment. Thousands of species have become extinct, millions of acres of forest and other natural habitat laid waste, the land and the air poisoned, the great oceans themselves, the earliest reservoirs of life, polluted beyond belief. And all this because of a limited concept of welfare, an inability to grasp the essential

unity of all things, a stubborn refusal to accept the earth not as a material object to be manipulated at will but as a shining, spiritual entity that has over billions of years nurtured consciousness up from the slime of the primeval ocean to where we are today.

These five concepts, then, represent an alternative philosophy for the nuclear age. While Vedāntic in origin and expression, they are by no means confined to Hinduism. They are universal in their sweep and applicability, and can provide an invaluable input into the new, holistic, global consciousness that, despite the discords and conflicts of our age, is desperately struggling to be born. Indeed, it is as a small offering to this great Yajna of global transition that this study of one of the most beautiful and sublime of the Upanishads has been undertaken.

The word 'Mundaka', etymologically, derives from a razor and, by extension, can be taken to refer to a person who has shaved his head. This was common among young students who were sent to the forest hermitages, or ashramas, to study at the feet of a master. It could indeed refer to all monks who, in the Eastern tradition, shave their heads after donning the ochre robe. This would imply that the teachings of this Upanishad are intended for novices or monks, who have dedicated their lives to finding the eternal reality behind waking consciousness and material objects. However, another interpretation could be that the Upanishad presents the higher wisdom in such a sharp and lucid manner that it shaves off or removes the crust of ignorance with which

we are surrounded, and enables us to realize the clear light of the divine. Accepting both the interpretations, it would be correct to say that the Mundaka Upanishad, while certainly representing a teaching that valued renunciation above worldly involvement, nonetheless expresses the eternal Vedāntic truths with great effectiveness and in unforgettable imagery.

The Upanishad belongs to the Atharva-Veda and is a rather short one, comprising only 64 verses divided into three chapters with two sections each. Each section is a compact presentation of a fundamental Vedāntic concept, compressing into few verses a great wealth of wisdom and illumination. Its setting is in the forest hermitage of a great seer Angiras, who is approached by an eminent householder, Śaunaka, with what has become one of the most famous questions in the history of human thought. "Revered Sir", he asks, "what is that knowledge whereby everything in the world becomes known?" In reply to this leading question, the seer propounds in brief compass the whole Vedāntic worldview.

In translating and commenting upon the Upanishad I have been greatly helped by Dr. Radhakrishnan's scholarly work on the Upanishads, the excellent commentary by Swāmi Sarvānanda in the Upanishad series brought out by the Sri Ramakrishna Math, the lectures of two contemporary Swāmis for whom I have the highest personal regard—Swāmi Ranganāthananda and Swāmi Chinmayānanda, the deeply intuitive comments of Sri Aurobindo—surely one of the greatest seers of modern times—and the extraordinary work on the Yoga of the

Kathopanishad by the late Sri Krishna Prem. None of these eminent persons, however, can in any way be held responsible for such errors of interpretation as this essay may contain.

The reason for my undertaking to write on an Upanishad is twofold. Firstly, I have derived immense pleasure and guidance from this text, and felt that I should share this with a wider audience. Secondly, there is an unfortunate impression prevalent in India and abroad that the Upanishads are too abstruse and difficult for the general reader, and should therefore be left severely alone as the preserve only of scholars and academicians. This is simply not true. Indeed the Bhagavad Gita which, along with the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras, makes up the Prasthānatrayi or the three foundations of Vedānta, is a much more complex text than most of the Upanishads, but this has not prevented it from becoming a seminal work for all those interested in the Hindu view of life. It is my hope that this modest study of one of the most illuminating of the Upanishads will help introduce a glowing text to a wider audience and, thus, contribute towards the development of the deeper wisdom so urgently needed if mankind is to survive in this nuclear age.

PEACE INVOCATION

ओं भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवा भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिर्व्यशेमहि देवहितं यदायुः ॥
स्वस्ति न इन्द्रो वृद्धश्रवाः स्वस्ति नः पूषा विश्ववेदाः ।
स्वस्ति नस्तार्क्ष्यो अरिष्टनेमिः स्वस्ति नो बृहस्पतिर्दधातुः ॥

ओं शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ।

Aum, O worshipful Ones, may our ears hear that which is auspicious, may we, well-versed in the sacrifice, see with our eyes that which is auspicious. May we, singing your praise, enjoy our allotted span of life with strong limbs and healthy bodies.

May Indra, extolled in the scriptures, Pūṣah, the all knowing, Tārksya, who protects us from harm and Brihaspati, who protects our spiritual lustre, grant us prosperity and further our welfare.

Aum, Peace, Peace, Peace.

Traditionally, each Upanishad begins with one or more Vedic verses which set the tone, as it were, for the teaching that is to follow. These verses, when chanted in the correct manner, produce a powerful impact which it is virtually impossible to capture in a translation. The prayers are directed towards various Vedic gods, but it is important to realize that these are simply various manifestations of the same supreme spiritual Being, the Brahman, and not, like in the Greek pantheon, independent gods. Indeed the Upanishads contain several verses

where this important fact is stressed again and again, lest the underlying monism be misunderstood for an apparent polytheism.

Vedic verses generally begin with 'Aum', a word which is considered to be the closest audio-visual symbol of the divine. One whole Upanishad, the Māndukya, is devoted to 'Aum', and indeed it is looked upon as the symbol par excellence of the Brahman—'Aum iti ekā-ksharam Brahm'. Briefly it may be mentioned that 'Aum' is made up of three syllables—A, U and M—plus an invisible but clearly discernible fourth resonance. This has been interpreted in a variety of creative ways. For instance, it represents the entire gamut of sounds that can be produced by the human voice, beginning with 'A' when the mouth opens and ending with 'M' when it closes. Again, the three syllables could stand for the three states of consciousness—waking, sleeping and deep sleep—along with the transcendent fourth dimension of spiritual awareness. Similarly they could be taken as representing the three 'Gunas'—Tamas (dark inertia), Rajas (passionate activity) and Sattwa (harmonious purity) through which in varying combinations we are constantly passing, again with the fourth dimension that enables us to rise above these limitations.

'Aum' is a word sacred not only to the Hindus but also to the Buddhists, the Jains, and the Sikhs. It is generally believed that it also has close etymological and spiritual links with the 'Āmen' and 'Amēen' of Christianity and Islam. It is thus a powerful symbol of spiritual and gnostic life the world over. It is often looked

upon as a symbol of the original divine vibration from which the universe sprang into being—"in the beginning there was the Word," as the Old Testament puts it or, perhaps, as a faint echo of the original 'Big Bang'. A whole science of Tantra has developed in India around various mantras or combination of sounds, all of which revolve in some way around 'Aum'. If chanted in a certain manner for a prolonged period, it creates a sort of vibratory field which is conducive towards the study of the deeper truths that lie behind scriptural texts. Also, if one is following that particular path, it helps in unlocking the powerhouse of spiritual energy that is believed to reside at the base of the human spine, known, as the Kundalini Shakti or Serpent Power.

CHAPTER I—Section 1

ओं ब्रह्मा देवानां प्रथमः सम्बभूव विश्वस्य कर्ता भुवनस्य गोप्ता ।
 स ब्रह्मविद्यां सर्वविद्याप्रतिष्ठामथर्वाय ज्येष्ठपुत्राय प्राह ॥१॥
 अथर्वणे यां प्रवदेत ब्रह्मार्थं वा तां पुरोवाचाङ्गिरे ब्रह्मविद्याम् ।
 स भारद्वाजाय सत्यवाहाय प्राह भारद्वाजोऽङ्गिरसे
 परावरात् ॥ २ ॥

Aum, Brahmā, the creator of the universe, the protector of the world, arose before all the gods. He taught the knowledge of Brahman, which is the foundation of all knowledge, to his eldest son Atharvan. That knowledge Atharvan imparted in ancient times to Angir. He in turn taught it to Satyawāhā, son of Bhāradvāja, and the son of Bharadvāja passed it on to Angiras, the science thus descending from the greater to the lesser sages.

The origins of knowledge, in most ancient traditions, are believed to lie in the very act of creation. Cosmogonensis, the bursting forth of matter into manifestation, is not looked upon as merely a physical phenomenon but rather as the result of a divine will, of pure spirit taking upon itself the burden of matter, of the One deciding to become the Many. The creation of our universe over which Brahmā presides is symbolized in Vedic cosmology as the bursting of the cosmic egg, the Hiran-yagarbha, the spiritual parallel to what scientists now call the 'Big Bang'. It should be noted, though, that Brahmā is not to be confused with the Brahman. The

former is simply the aspect of power that presides over the creation of this universe, while the latter is the all-pervasive consciousness that permeates countless billions of possible universes—anantakoti brahmānda.

The gods in the Vedic sense, the 'devas' or shining ones, represent a later stage of manifestation. Again, a semantic confusion is to be avoided. The word 'God' as used in the West is closer to the Hindu concept of 'Ishwara', the personified Brahman. The 'devas' could perhaps be considered more like the Archangels in the semitic religions. These verses thus trace the genealogy of the spiritual wisdom back to the very dawn of creation. It is characteristic of Hindu philosophy, as well of its art and architecture, that the great masters often choose to remain anonymous or, if their names do figure, they make it clear that they are not creating a new philosophy but simply expounding in fresh idiom the perennial wisdom that has come down through the ages. They look upon themselves as inheritors and trustees of a priceless treasure which they wish to enrich and pass on to their disciples.

The end of the second verse can be interpreted in two ways. The translation I have given implies that the teaching descended from the great spiritual beings down to human teachers. The alternative reading would be "both the higher and the lower knowledge". This reading also fits the context, as will be clear in subsequent verses.

शौनको ह वै महाशालोऽङ्गिरसं विधिवदुपसन्नः पप्रच्छ ।
 कस्मिन्नु भगवो विज्ञाते सर्वमिदं विज्ञातं भवतीति ॥ ३ ॥
 तस्मै स होवाच । द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म यद्
 ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति, परा चैवापरा च ॥ ४ ॥

तत्रापरा, ऋग्वेदो यजुर्वेदः

सामवेदोऽथर्ववेदः शिक्षा कल्पो व्याकरणं
 निरुक्तं छन्दो ज्यौतिषमिति ।

अथ परा, यया तदक्षरमधिगम्यते ॥ ५ ॥

Śaunaka, the renowned householder, once approached Angiras with reverence in the manner laid down by the scriptures, and asked: "Venerable Sir, what is that, knowing which, everything becomes known?" To him Angiras replied: "The knowers of Brahman declare that there are two kinds of knowledge to be acquired—the higher as well as the lower. Of these the lower consists of the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sāma Veda, the Atharva Veda, phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metrics and astrology. And the higher is that by which the Imperishable is attained.

It is significant that the master here is not instructing one of his celibate disciples, but, rather, a man who has achieved distinction in the outer world, a man evidently whose wealth and position have not overwhelmed his desire for spiritual enlightenment. The traditional division of Hindu life was into four periods of twenty-five years each—first the Brahmacharya, when the student

was expected to remain celibate and pursue his studies under a qualified master; then Grihastha, the life of a householder when he would marry, raise a family and undertake such professional activities as suited his background; then Vānaprastha, when there would be a period of gradual detachment, a deepening of the spiritual quest, a graceful transition to old age, and, finally, Sanyāsa when he would sever all bonds with society, don the ochre robe and wander at will totally dedicated to the search for the divine.

This pattern which, incidentally, is based on the Vedic concept of a hundred years as the full human life-span, was obviously an ideal only partially followed by society. Nonetheless it did give a certain spiritual chronology to human life, specially when juxtaposed with the four Purushārthās, or goals of life—Dharma (the religious-philosophical foundation), Artha (material wealth), Kāma (sensual enjoyment) and Moksha (spiritual liberation). Śaunaka clearly was transiting from the householder's stage, where he had made his mark in society, to the next one in which his quest for wisdom had led him to the hermitage of Angiras. It is mentioned that he approached the master 'vidhivat', which we have translated as being in accord with the scriptures. What is evidently implied is that he approached him with humility and reverence, a pre-requisite for the spiritual quest. Not only does such an attitude evoke a positive response from the teacher, it also puts the seeker in a receptive frame of mind conducive to absorbing the teaching that he is about to receive.

Śaunaka now asks his famous question, the reply to which constitutes the rest of the Upanishad. The purport of his question is to discover that knowledge which forms the basis of all other knowing. The world we live in, consisting of what the Chinese call "the hundred thousand things", is so vast and varied that it is impossible for any individual to know more than a tiny fraction of current knowledge. This was true thousands of years ago, and is even truer now with the recent information explosion linked with the new technology. However, there has always been the tradition of a secret knowledge, a philosopher's stone which can open the key to illumination, an alchemical formula to convert the dross of our normal consciousness into the gold of mystical awareness, and it is about this wisdom that Śaunaka asks Angiras.

The master begins his reply with the celebrated statement about the two kinds of knowledge, the higher and the lower, or what we could call knowledge and wisdom. Significantly, he defines the lower knowledge in terms of the four Vedas and the six recognized branches of intellectual study in those times. Considering that the Vedas are the most sacred of Hindu scriptures, believed by the orthodox to be the voice of the Divine itself, it is remarkable that Angiras relegates them to the lower knowledge. Quite clearly, what he is saying is that any purely intellectual perception, even one so sublime and multi-faceted as that of the Vedas, cannot in itself constitute real spiritual illumination. For that what is required is the spiritual perception of the Immutable, Imperishable, Eternal Brahman.

The spiritual realization, ultimately, is beyond verbalization or intellectualization. It is the state, as the Rig Veda has it, "where words along with the mind fall back, unable to attain." A common misconception among intelligent people, whether in the age of the Upanishads or today, is that by mere intellectual gymnastics they can arrive at spiritual illumination. The mystic tradition throughout the world tells us that this is not so. Certainly the human intellect is a marvellous instrument for grasping and manipulating the lower knowledge, but when it comes to spiritual illumination the mind has at some stage to be transcended or transmuted into the higher consciousness. This brings a direct perception of the divine power that permeates the entire cosmos, both in its universal aspect as Brahman and in its individualized aspect as the Atman within each one of us. Such knowledge is not mediated by the senses or mental activity, and is characterized by an intuitive immediacy overwhelming in its impact.

यत् तदद्रेश्यमग्राह्यमगोत्रमवर्णमचक्षुः

श्रोत्रं तदपाणिपादम् ।

नित्यं विभुं सर्वगतं सुसूक्ष्मं तदव्ययं

यद् भूतयोनिं परिपश्यन्ति धीराः ॥ ६ ॥

That which is invisible, ungraspable, without origin or attributes, which has neither eyes nor ears, hands nor feet; which is eternal and many-splendoured, all-pervading and exceedingly subtle; that Imperishable Being is what the wise perceive everywhere as the source of creation.

There is a dilemma built into the very texture of a truly spiritual utterance. On the one hand, as has been mentioned, the experience is supra-intellectual and therefore almost impossible to verbalize. On the other, it has to be expressed in words, because that is the generally prevalent mode of transmitting thoughts from master to pupil. This double-bind is particularly acute in the Upanishads, which deal largely with suprarational concepts. It is for this reason that the language of paradox and even contradiction has often to be used, so that the disciple sees that words can never be a substitute for experience, that they bear the same relation to the actual realization that a map does to the actual land that it seeks to delineate.

In this verse we have two sets of descriptions regarding the Brahman. The first are a set of six negative attributes, saying what the Brahman is *not*. Considering the basic Vedāntic tenet that the Brahman pervades everything, this may appear to be contradictory, but the intention clearly is to make the point that the Imperishable Brahman is not something that can be restricted or limited within any particular manifestation, anthropomorphic or any other. Then follow four attributes which stress the eternal, all-pervasive aspect of the Divine. Between these two seemingly opposed descriptions, some sense of what the seer is trying to convey comes across.

The implication regarding the changing and evanescent character of manifestation—the world of *nāma-rūpa*,—name and form—is clear. The Hindu word for

the manifested world is *samsāra* which means ‘that which constantly changes’. What the Vedāntic seers realized was that behind this constant process of change there was an unchanging reality which, nonetheless, could become manifest to us in states of purified consciousness. Further, we ourselves contain in some way a direct access to that higher consciousness, because while our bodies last for only a few decades, the Atman within us is immortal and indestructible as is the Brahman of which it is a part.

यथोर्णनाभिः सृजते गृह्णते च

यथा पृथिव्यामोषधयः संभवन्ति ।

यथा सतः पुरुषात् केशलोमानि

तथाक्षरात् संभवतीह विश्वम् ॥ ७ ॥

As the spider sends forth and gathers in (its web), as herbs sprout upon the face of the earth, as hair grows upon the head and body of man, so, from the Immutable, springs forth the universe.

Here, in three simple, almost homely, similies, the teacher attempts to illustrate the fact that this entire universe, with all its myriad and multi-faceted manifestations, is a natural and spontaneous emanation from the Brahman, the unchanging, imperishable divine basis for all existence. This is a clear refutation of the often misunderstood concept of ‘*Māyā*’, where the universe is considered to be an illusion. While it has no existence independent of the Brahman, as our three

similies suggest, it does have a dependent existence that is certainly not illusory.

The deeper question of cosmogenesis, of *why* the universe is created at all, is not directly touched upon in this verse, except that it hints at a recurrent, spontaneous process, not a unique, one-shot event. Also, the underlying Hindu view of Time as being cyclical rather than linear is clearly indicated, because the three processes of a spider weaving its web, of plants growing upon the earth and of hair on the human body are all recurrent and repeated phenomena. In the next two verses the cosmological question is tackled at a deeper, more fundamental level.

तपसा चीयते ब्रह्म ततोऽन्नमभिजायते ।

अन्नात् प्राणो मनः सत्यं लोकाः कर्मसु चामृतम् ॥ ८ ॥

यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद् यस्य ज्ञानमयं तपः ।

तस्मादेतद् ब्रह्म नाम रूपमन्नं च जायते ॥ ९ ॥

By concentrated meditation Brahman expands; from Him matter is born, from matter life, mind, truth and immortality through works. From Brahman, the all-seeing, the all-knowing, whose energy consists of infinite wisdom, from Him is born Brahma, matter, name and form.

The transmutation of the infinite, formless, eternal Brahman into the manifested cosmos in which everything is constantly changing represents the mystery of creation. Caught as we are within the space-time continuum it is virtually impossible for us in our normal

state of consciousness to answer the question as to why creation took place at all. In their forays into the higher consciousness, the Vedic seers seem to have had the insight that the entire cosmos is but a manifestation of the divine ground, the Brahman. The interesting notion of Brahman expanding into the cosmos could perhaps be linked with a 'Big Bang' at some point in time, except that there could be an infinite number of such bangs each resulting in a cosmos and, also, regardless of how often the Brahman manifests, it does not detract from or dilute its transcendent dimension.

In these two verses we are given a broad picture of cosmogenesis, which begins when the supreme, self-conscious being plunges into the opposite pole and bursts into material manifestation. From there in slow stages lasting billions of years life emerges, then mental consciousness evolves until we come to the human race which is entangled endlessly in works. However, there is the significant indication here that these works themselves can be the pathway to immortality. Thus the Vedāntic worldview is essentially positive and life-affirming. Man is not a sinner, hopelessly condemned to eternal suffering until redeemed by a saviour, but, rather, a product of evolution itself who can work out his own salvation through involvement in outer and inner activity in this universe of name and form.

CHAPTER I—Section 2

तदेतत् सत्यं मन्त्रेषु कर्माणि कवयो

यान्यपश्यंस्तानि त्रेतायां बहुधा सन्ततानि ।

तान्याचरथ नियतं सत्यकामा

एष वः पन्था सुकृतस्य लोके ॥ १ ॥

यदा लेलायते ह्यर्चिः समिद्धे हव्यवाहने ।

तदाज्यभागावन्तरेणाहुतीः प्रतिपादयेत् श्रद्धयाहुतम् ॥ २ ॥

This is the truth; the rituals which the seers beheld in the sacred hymns are elaborated in the three Vedas. Ye lovers of the truth, perform them constantly, for they are your paths to the world of good deeds. When the sacred fire is well-kindled and the flames begin to move, offer your oblations with faith between the two portions of fire.

Dealing with what in the first section has been termed the lower knowledge, the Upanishad now proceeds to a statement that the ritualistic works elaborated in the Vedas are in their own sphere true and valid. The predominant mode of prayer for the early Aryans was the pouring of offerings into the sacred fire, looked upon as the intermediary between the human and the divine powers. The fire sacrifice was mainly in the form of melted butter, although other ingredients were also used. In the deeper sense, the sacrifice was an exquisite symbol of the inner offering that lies at the heart of the spiritual quest, but in the outer sense also it was believed to bring great rewards in present as well as future lives. It

was considered a good and meritorious action, and elaborate texts developed which laid out in meticulous detail the modus operandi of these sacrifices or 'Yagnas'.

The first verse mentions "three Vedas", the Rig, Sāma and Yajur, the Atharva Veda evidently being a later compilation. It can also be interpreted as meaning "in the 'tretā' age", which refers to the second of the four ages or yugas through which the earth passes—the Satya, Tretā, Dwāpara, and Kali Yugas—in which there is a steady descent and decline of Dharma until at the end of the Kali Yuga there is a 'Pralaya', or destruction, and the cycle begins all over again. We are at present living in a Kali Yuga, although opinions differ as to how near we are to the final destruction. Given the incredible amassing of nuclear material over the last few decades, enough now to destroy not only mankind but all life on this planet many times over, it seems that we are nearer the end than is generally believed. But then we must also be nearer the new beginning, the dawning of the next Satya Yuga!

In the second verse there is the intriguing statement that the oblation should be made "between the two portions of fire". This could simply mean that they should be poured when the fire is brightly burning and not merely smouldering, or between the northern and the southern portions of the sacrificial platform. On a more esoteric level, however, it could refer to the inner symbolism of the sacrifice in which the fire is that mystic power, the Kundalini, present in every human body. In this interpretation the two portions of the fire would

be the two channels—the Idā and the Pingalā—flowing on either side of the central Sushumnā channel which carries the fiery power from the base of the spine up to the thousand-petalled chakra in the cortex. This is in line with the Satapatha Brāhmana which narrates how the gods prevailed over the demons, though both were offspring of Brahmā, because while the latter performed the sacrificial rites externally, the devas interiorized them, thus becoming immortal and invincible.

यस्याग्निहोत्रमदर्शमपौर्णमासमचातुर्मास्य-

मनाग्रयणमतिथिर्वाजितं च ।

अहुतमवैश्वदेवमविधिना

हुतमासप्तमास्तस्य लोकान् हिनस्ति ॥ ३ ॥

For those whose fire sacrifice is not accompanied by the rites to be performed at the new moon and the full moon, at the four months of rain and at the first harvest, which is without guests and without offerings to all the gods, or which is performed contrary to scriptural injunctions; for such their hopes are destroyed in all the seven worlds.

Given the premise that the sacrifice is a potent means for the achievement of desirable ends, even though these may be material possessions, social status or political power and not the greater bliss of spiritual enlightenment, it follows that it has to be performed with scrupulous regard to the correct rituals and methodology laid down in the scriptures. These include seasonal offerings, feeding of guests and other practices associated

with the sacrifice. If these are not followed, the sacrifice is flawed and will either bring no result or even a contrary and negative outcome.

It must be remembered that these minute details built into the fire rituals were not created in a casual or arbitrary manner. They emerged as a result of careful and meticulous experimentation by many generations of sages over several centuries. This could be compared with a complex experiment in nuclear physics. Unless the details worked out by scientists through repeated experimentation are carefully followed, the result is likely to be either nil or, sometimes, an unexpected explosion with disastrous consequences.

The word in Sanskrit for guest is an interesting one. 'Atithi' literally means one who comes without fixing a date, an unexpected visitor. In many mystical traditions the world over, the stranger who appears on an auspicious occasion carries a magic mantle, and it was looked upon as a good omen if some person of wisdom and austerity arrived during a sacrifice and consented to partake of the sacrificial meal.

The 'seven worlds' referred to in this verse probably denote the traditional seven states of consciousness—Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah, Mahah, Janah, Tapah and Satyam, starting from the material and rising all the way up to the spiritual. The drift seems to be that an incorrect rendering of the fire sacrifice can have adverse effects on many levels, and that either this should be left severely alone or performed with due diligence and devotion. The worlds could also be taken to mean places or states

of consciousness that the Atman experiences after the death of the physical body.

काली कराली च मनोजवा च सुलोहिता
 या च सुधूम्र वर्णा ।
 स्फुलिङ्गिनी विश्वरुची च देवी
 लेलायमाना इति सप्त जिह्वाः ॥ ४ ॥
 एतेषु यश्चरते भ्राजमानेषु
 यथाकालं चाहृतयो ह्याददायन् ।
 तं नयन्त्येताः सूर्यस्य रश्मयो
 यत्र देवानां पतिरेकोऽधिवासः ॥ ५ ॥

The Black, the Fierce, the Swift-as-mind, the Crimson, the Smoke-hued, the Scintillating, the Many-splendoured—these are the seven swaying tongues of the fire. Whoever performs the rites and makes the offerings into these shining flames at the proper time, these in the form of the rays of the sun lead to where the lord of the gods resides.

In powerful language the Upanishad portrays the leaping tongues of fire, symbolized as seven aspects of the Shakti, the feminine power that quickens the universe. While the all-pervasive Brahman is generally alluded to as 'it', beyond gender, the motive force behind creation is, in the ancient Hindu tradition, referred to as a feminine power. It is significant that, unlike the semitic religions which postulate a male God, Hinduism is deeply aware that if the divinity is to be worshipped in an anthropomorphic form, it will have to combine

both the male and the female aspects, with the female taking precedence similar to that of the mother over the father. Thus Lakshmi is linked with Nārāyana, Gauri with Shankar, Sitā with Rāma, Rādha with Krishna and so on.

In the present context, the fire is looked upon as the seven-hued goddess, the Sapta-mātrikā or seven-mothers who are worshipped in many rituals. The goddess, while maternal towards her devotees, also has a terrible aspect. She is both Kālī and Durgā—the benign protectress of the righteous but also the dark destroyer of the wicked. Both these aspects are evident in the seven names by which the fire-goddess is invoked in this verse.

The Upanishad then proceeds to state that if the sacrifice is performed at the proper time, with the proper rituals, the offerings are, in a subtle, invisible form carried through the rays of the sun and reach the 'lord of the gods'. In the Hindu heavenly pantheon which, it must be remembered, is far below the great trinity of Brahmā-Vishnu-Mahesha, the chief of the gods or devas is Indra. It is he, in Vedic symbolism, who rides upon the divine, six-tusked white elephant Airāvata and gives battle to the Asuras, or the powers of the darkness. He holds the thunderbolt, and a large number of Vedic hymns are addressed to him, particularly those praying for victory in battle.

Within their intrinsic limitations, therefore, the rituals bear fruit. But, as will be sharply pointed out

soon, these heavenly rewards are mere trifles when compared with the supreme bliss of spiritual liberation.

एह्येहीति तमाहुतयः सुवर्चसः
सूर्यस्य रश्मिभिर्यजमानं वहन्ति ।

प्रियां वाचमभिवदन्त्योऽर्चयन्त्य

एष वः पुण्यः सुकृतो ब्रह्मलोकः ॥ ६ ॥

The radiant ones cry "Come with us, come with us" as they carry him up on the rays of the sun. They speak pleasant words of sweetness and honour, saying "This is the holy world of Brahma gained by your good works."

The rewards to be gained by the performance of good deeds, whether through the fire sacrifice or any other, are indeed pleasant. These can be thought of in terms of terrestrial enjoyment or heavenly enjoyment after death. Yet the fatal flaw in both these is that they are evanescent. Viewed not in the context of a single human life-span, but in the infinitely larger time dimension of a cosmic cycle, these rewards turn out to be fleeting, and when the effect of the good works is repaid, as it were, through such enjoyments, the individual has once again to tread the inner path towards salvation.

The treasures that we can store up, whether on earth or in heaven, are not eternal and incorruptible. In fact they soon wear out, and even if the process of earning them through good deeds is repeated again and again through the long aeons of time, it will still bring the individual no closer to spiritual enlightenment than

he was before. It is for this reason that the Upanishad, having first praised good works and vouchsafed for the efficacy of the fire sacrifice, now proceeds with startling abruptness to decry these and, instead, to point to a different path that leads to salvation.

प्लवा ह्येते अदृढा यज्ञरूपा

अष्टादशोक्तमवरं येषु कर्म ।

एतच्छ्रेयो येऽभिनन्दन्ति मूढा

जरा मृत्युं ते पुनरेवापि यन्ति ॥ ७ ॥

अविद्यायामन्तरे वर्तमानाः स्वयं धीराः

पण्डितं मन्यमानाः ।

जङ्घन्यमानाः परियन्ति मूढा

अन्धेनैव नीयमाना यथान्धाः ॥ ८ ॥

Verily, frail are these rafts of the eighteen sacrificial forms, which represent only the inferior work. The ignorant who acclaim them as the highest good fall repeatedly into the domain of old age and death. Though they consider themselves to be wise and learned, they are fools wandering aimlessly like the blind led by the blind.

Seldom in spiritual literature does one come across such a sudden and radical change of emphasis. Apart from being sublime philosophers, the seers of the Upanishads were great teachers and used the Sanskrit language to perfection. By first describing the benefits of sacrificial works, Angiras makes his point even more effective by demolishing them and describing those who

follow that path as fools. According to the Vedānta, such works can never break the cycle of birth and death in which the Ātman is caught. They can lead to increased prosperity and fame, but ultimately old age and death catch up with us inexorably.

It needs to be pointed out that the Upanishadic teaching here extols the path of renunciation and decries mere sacrificial works. This does not mean that all work is negated. Indeed the Bhagavad Gītā which, in a way, is a logical offshoot of the Upanishads, points out that if performed with devotion and dedication to the divine, and without selfish motives, work can also be a potent means of spiritual realization. It would appear that in the Upanishadic times there was a school of thought, as there is today, that held material possessions to be the summum bonum of human existence. It is against this attitude that the seer comes down with such severity.

The “eighteen forms of the sacrificial work” can also be read as “eighteen members”—the sacrificer, his wife and the sixteen priests who are required for an elaborate and expensive ritual. Eighteen has a deep symbolic significance also—note the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavad Gītā and the eighteen days of the Mahābhārata war.

अविद्यायां बहुधा वर्तमाना

वयं कृतार्था इत्यभिमन्यन्ति बालाः ।

यत् कर्मिणो न प्रवेदयन्ति रागात्

तेनातुराः क्षीणलोकाश्च्यवन्ते ॥ ९ ॥

इष्टापूर्तं मन्यमाना वरिष्ठं

नान्यच्छ्रेयो वेदयन्ते प्रमूढाः ।

नाकस्य पृष्ठे ते सुकृतेऽनुभूत्वेमं लोकं

हीनतरं वा विशन्ति ॥ १० ॥

Revelling in multifarious ignorance, such people think they have achieved the goal of life. But being bound to passions and attachment they do not attain knowledge and sink down in misery when the effects of their good deeds are exhausted. Such bewildered minds regard sacrifices and good works as most important and do not know any greater good. Having reaped in heaven their rewards of good deeds they enter again this world or even a lower one.

Unsparring in his criticism of those who seek heavenly rewards by the performance of rituals and good deeds, Angiras again points out that the rewards gained thereby are fleeting, and after they are exhausted they leave the individual soul no better off than it was before. Indeed, because of the hubris that often accompanies such works, the soul may even have to be reborn in a “lower world”. This could mean that they are reborn on earth in a less fortunate position than when they began or perhaps, in some other world even less conscious than ours.

There are, as modern cosmology has now confirmed, hundreds of millions of stars like the sun in our own milky way galaxy, and hundreds of millions of galaxies in the observed universe. For us to hold the view that this tiny planet of ours is the only cradle of human life is

ridiculous. How can we presume to strait-jacket the infinitely creative power of the Brahman with our arrogant and obsolete geocentricity.

A word needs to be said about the "good deeds" mentioned in these verses. Apart from the fire sacrifice, these deeds fall into two categories. 'Ishta' includes the fire ceremony, austerity, truthfulness, learning and teaching the Vedas, hospitality and the feeding of animals and birds, while 'Pūrta' consists of sinking of wells, construction of temples and water tanks, laying out of gardens and planting of trees, feeding the poor and other such benevolent activities. It can well be argued that such desirable and beneficial acts should be encouraged rather than condemned, because they are far preferable to selfish and cruel deeds to which the bulk of mankind is so addicted. Indeed Angiras' condemnation of these activities is difficult at first sight to appreciate.

However, the key to understanding this lies in the concept of spiritual liberation which is the cornerstone of the Vedāntic world-view. When compared to the bliss of liberation, any material or mental enjoyments earned by good deeds pale into insignificance as do even the brightest stars when the sun rises in all its majesty. The seer does not condemn the 'good works' as bad in themselves, which obviously they are not, but simply points out vehemently that their worth is temporary and limited when compared with the other path which he now proceeds to expound.

तपःश्रद्धे ये ह्युपवसन्त्यरण्ये
शान्ता विद्वांसो भैक्षचर्या चरन्तः ।
सूर्यद्वारेण ते विरजाः प्रयान्ति
यत्रामृतः स पुरुषो ह्यव्ययात्मा ॥ ११ ॥

But those who live in the forest leading a life of austerity and faith, tranquil, wise and keeping the mendicant's rule, they, purged of all impurities, go by the solar gate to where the immutable, imperishable Being dwells.

In sharp contradistinction to the path of heavenly rewards mentioned in earlier verses, the seer now goes on to state that it is only by renouncing worldly possessions and desires that real immortality is to be gained. Clearly this path is only for those who are prepared to spend their lives in a hermitage or as wandering monks, and it is curious that the teaching is being given to Śaunaka who has earlier been described as "a great householder". It is not recorded whether Śaunaka actually renounced the world after receiving this teaching.

The tradition of the two paths, one radiant and resplendent like the sun, the other pale and feeble like the moon, is to be found in many of the world mythologies, both Eastern and Western. As the most dramatic object in the sky and, very literally, the source of all life and light on this planet, the sun is par excellence the ideal symbol of the divine. One of the best known mantras, the Gāyatri, is directed at the sun and prays

for spiritual illumination, and the Upanishads contain many beautiful verses in praise of it.

The “immutable, imperishable Being”, of course, is the Brahman. The basic argument of these verses is that as long as we remain caught in the net of the senses, so long will we shuttle between heaven and earth or, to put it another way, between birth and rebirth, because our very desires will inexorably pull us back again and again. It is only if we alter course drastically, and, renouncing worldly attractions, turn all our energies and aspirations to the inner path that we can obtain release from this cycle and attain the supreme state of being.

परीक्ष्य लोकान् कर्मचितान् ब्राह्मणो

निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत्

समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥ १२ ॥

तस्मै स विद्वानुपसन्नाय सम्यक्

प्रशान्तचित्ताय शमान्विताय ।

येनाक्षरं पुरुषं वेद सत्यं

प्रोवाच तां तत्त्वतो ब्रह्मविद्याम् ॥ १३ ॥

Having examined the worlds gained by deeds, the wise seeker should become indifferent to them, for the Eternal cannot be attained by works. To know that let him approach with humility a Guru who is learned in the scriptures and established in the Brahman. To such a seeker, whose mind is tranquil

and senses controlled, and who has approached him in the proper manner, let the learned Guru impart the science of Brahman through which the true, Imperishable Being is realized.

The first chapter of the Mundaka Upanishad closes with the important statement that the real science of Brahman, what has been called the higher knowledge, can be imparted only if two essential pre-requisites are present. There must be a seeker who is humble, genuinely devoted to the spiritual quest and who, having tasted or witnessed the material joys of life, has seen that their worth is fleeting and therefore no longer craves after them. And there must be a Guru who is not only well-versed in the scriptures but, even more important, firmly established in the divine consciousness.

This is to be carefully noted, because though the turn towards spirituality is generally to be welcomed, we often find these days that unripe disciples and unbalanced ‘gurus’ combine to produce a great deal of confusion and sometimes cause real damage. There is actually a book written some years ago by a lady from the West entitled ‘Hunting the Guru in India’, as if he was some rare trophy to be shot, beheaded and carried back in triumph across the seven seas. The word ‘Guru’ means one who dispels darkness, and the tremendous reverence shown to the Guru in the Hindu tradition is because, while our parents give us physical birth, it is the Guru who dispels the darkness of ignorance and help our spiritual rebirth into the light.

It can well be objected that it is not possible for a seeker to judge the spiritual worth of the guru and, therefore, how can he be sure he has made the right choice. This is a good question; the only answer is that ultimately we have to be guided by our inner intuition, instinct, sixth sense or whatever it is that we call that special phenomenon which all of us encounter from time to time. There is no assurance that our choice will be correct, but if the aspiration is pure, that is, if we are genuinely devoted to the divine and not simply looking for a subtle stratagem to bolster our egos, then there is really no danger.

Many people learn from more than one master, some from reading the scriptures or from a dream. If correctly understood, these are all fingers pointing inward towards the divine Guru seated in our hearts. The Guru points the way; he can, to apply a statement from political science, "encourage, guide and warn," but he cannot do the work for us. The inner path is one that has to be trodden, in the final analysis, alone. The Guru dispels the darkness so that we can see the way ahead, but he or she cannot do the actual walking in our place. Sometimes, after our long sojourn in the dark, the light is too bright for us and instead of illuminating the path it dazzles and disorients us. Sometimes, when we see the path winding precariously up precipitous slopes to the mountain-top we are aghast and draw back into the shadows. It is too difficult, we say, too hazardous. As Arjuna asked Sri Krishna on the battlefield, what will happen if we leave the security of our present lives and fail to reach the goal?

Sri Krishna's answer is the only one that can be given. No truly spiritual activity will ever go in vain. The night of death may descend on us long before we reach the summit, yet every step taken is a step gained, and though it may take a thousand lifetimes the moment will surely come when the wonderful hour strikes and we stand face to face with what another Upanishad calls "the Great Being, shining like the sun on the other shore beyond the darkness." And the only way to cross the turbulent ocean of samsāra is the Brahma-vidyā, the Higher Knowledge, the rainbow bridge to immortality.

CHAPTER II—Section I

तदेतत् सत्यं यथा सुदीप्तात् पावकाद्
 विस्फुलिङ्गाः सहस्रशः प्रभवन्ते सरूपाः ।
 तथाक्षराद् विविधाः सौम्य भावाः
 प्रजायन्ते तत्र चैवापियन्ति ॥ १ ॥

This is the truth. As from a blazing fire thousands of fiery sparks leap out, just so, my beloved, a multitude of beings issue forth from the Imperishable and, verily, fall back into it again.

Using the graphic description of a great fire from which millions of sparks are constantly arising and falling back, the seer now proceeds to give a description of the Brahman, the Imperishable, Eternal Being that is the very source and foundation of all manifestation. The ten verses of this section are all directed towards attempting to describe what is essentially beyond verbalization, and they forcefully make the point that everything that exists owes its being to the Divine ground. From that great matrix they emerge, and whether their span is a billionth of a second or a billion centuries, it is to that same ground that they ultimately return. In the final analysis there is no dualism. Birth and death, light and darkness, day and night, good and evil, joy and sorrow, all the dualities that are so striking in the manifested cosmos, are ultimately reconciled and united in the one Imperishable Being.

The cosmic dance of Shiva is eternal; it has no beginning and no end because it transcends space and

time. In one hand is the drum, the creative sound from which spring countless universes. In the other is the sacred fire into which, in the fullness of time, these universes disappear. At every moment a billion galaxies spring into existence, and a billion disappear into the endless mystery of that great Being. Our own world, which we consider so large and abiding, is but a grain of sand on the endless beaches of eternity, and we ourselves infinitesimal sparks from the mighty fire. And yet each spark is illuminated with the fiery element; each one of us embodies in some mysterious fashion the divine spark of consciousness. And because we do, we have the unique possibility of a conscious participation in the divine bliss.

दिव्यो ह्यमूर्तः पुरुषः सबाह्याभ्यन्तरो ह्यजः ।
 अप्राणो ह्यमनाः शुभ्रो ह्यक्षरात् परतः परः ॥ २ ॥
 एतस्माज्जायते प्राणो मनः सर्वेन्द्रियाणि च ।
 खं वायुर् ज्योतिरापः पृथिवी विश्वस्य धारिणी ॥३॥
 अग्निर्मूर्धा चक्षुषी चन्द्रसूर्यौ दिशः
 श्रोत्रे वाग् विवृताश्च वेदाः ।
 वायुः प्राणो हृदयं विश्वमस्य पद्भ्यां
 पृथिवी ह्येष सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा ॥ ४ ॥

The divine Being is formless, eternal and pure, pervading within and without, anterior both to life and mind. He transcends even the highest immutable. From him are born life, mind and the senses; ether, air, fire, water and the all-supporting earth.

Fire is his head, the sun and moon his eyes, space his ears, the Vedas his speech, the wind his breath, the universe his heart. From his feet the earth has originated; verily he is the inner self of all beings.

The divine being is the origin, the support, the foundation, the inner spirit of all that exists. This fundamental Vedāntic insight is the very essence of the higher wisdom. The word God, as it is used generally in the West, is really much closer to the later Hindu concept of Ishwara, the personified, anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine. The Brahman of the Upanishads is a very much wider and deeper concept. Long before the elements were created, long before life and then mind began manifesting themselves, the Im-mutable Being was there, radiant with the splendour of a million suns. Without that great Being there could be no creation, no time, no space, nothing.

The Vedas have some beautiful hymns to that great Being; one of the most remarkable is the famous Hymn of Creation in the Rig Veda (X-129-1/7). It is so powerful, and expresses so well the Vedāntic concept, that I reproduce it here in full in the Griffith translation :

There was not non-existent nor existent:
There was no realm of air, no sky beyond it:
What covered it and where? and what gave shelter?
Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal:
No sign was there, the day's and night's divider,

That One thing, breathless,
breathed by its own nature:

Apart from it was nothing whatsoever.

Darkness there was; at first concealed in darkness
This All was indiscriminate chaos.

All that existed then was void and formless;

By the great power of warmth was born that unit.

Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning
Desire the primal seed and germ of spirit.

Sages who searched with their heart's thought
discovered

The existent's kinship with the non-existent.

Transversely was their severing line extended:

What was above it then, and what below it?

There were begetters, there were mighty forces,

Free action here and energy up yonder.

Who verily knows and who can here declare it,

Whence it was born and whence comes this
creation?

The Gods are later than the world's production,

Who knows then whence it first came into being?

He, the first origin of this creation,

Whether he formed it all or did not form it,

Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven,

He verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not,

तस्माद्ग्नः समिधो यस्य सूर्यः

सोमात् पर्जन्यः ओषधयः पृथिव्याम् ।

पुमान् रेतः सिञ्चति योषितायां

बह्वीः प्रजाः पुरुषात् सम्प्रसूताः ॥ ५ ॥

तस्माद्दृचः साम यजूषि दीक्षा

यज्ञाश्च सर्वे क्रतवो दक्षिणाश्च ।

संवत्सरश्च यजमानश्च लोकाः

सोमो यत्र पवते यत्र सूर्यः ॥ ६ ॥

From Him comes the fire fuelled by the sun; from the moon the rains which nourish herbs upon the earth. (Nourished by them) the male casts his seed into the female; thus are these many beings born of the divine Being. From Him are born the hymns of the Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas; the sacrificial chants and the sacrifice; the ceremonies and the sacrificial gifts; the time of the sacrifice, the sacrificer and the worlds purified by the moon and illuminated by the sun.

The process of the origin of all beings from the divine Purusha is described in these verses. The entire cycle of creation, the delicate and intricate web of causal relationship through which the human species and all its transactions with nature are governed, all ultimately derive from the Great Being. From Him spring the heavens, the sun and moon cause clouds to form which, raining upon the fertile earth, produce herbs. Men live on these plants, either directly or through animals which feed on them, and secrete semen. When this is

cast into the womb of woman, living beings come into being and the mysterious cycle begins afresh.

There is, thus, a direct causal relationship between the divine and earthly life. The Vedāntic view is not that God sits in some seventh heaven, aloof and detached from his creation, only judging human follies on doomsday. On the contrary, we are all very literally part of his own divine power. The very processes that have brought us into being, and that pervade us as well as our universe, are but manifestations of his immense all-pervasive divinity.

The Vedic chants which, when the Upanishads were taught, represented the entirety of the religious tradition, and the whole intricate network of sacrificial rituals and practices, were all clearly seen as flowing from the divine Being. It is this unifying vision that, unlike in ancient Greece, prevented the Vedic system from dissolving into an ultimately sterile polytheism.

तस्माच्च देवा बहुधा सम्प्रसूताः

साध्या मनुष्याः पशवो वयांसि ।

प्राणापानौ व्रीहियवौ तपश्च

श्रद्धा सत्यं ब्रह्मचर्यं विधिश्च ॥ ७ ॥

सप्तप्राणाः प्रभवन्ति तस्मात्

सप्ताचिषः समिधः सप्त होमाः ।

सप्त इमे लोका येषु चरन्ति

प्राणा गुहाशया निहिताः सप्त सप्त ॥ ८ ॥

From Him are born the many gods and celestial beings; men, beasts and birds, the in-drawn breath and the out-breath; rice and barley; austerity and faith, truth, chastity and the law. From Him also are born the seven senses; the seven flames and their fuel; the seven oblations and the seven worlds in which move the life-breaths; seven and seven which dwell in the secret place of the heart.

There are many orders of beings, not only human, animal and vegetable but super and supra-human. These include a whole spectrum of celestial beings, gods and demi-gods or, in Christian terminology, archangels and angels. Just because they are not generally visible to the naked eye it is wrong to assume that they do not exist. Taking an example from the science of medicine, we know that for millennia germs and viruses were invisible, yet they continued to fulfil their functions even before they were "discovered". It is interesting that in this verse a number of different categories are mentioned together—Gods and barley, rice and chastity. The point clearly is that *everything*, whether what we would call an abstract idea or a concrete object, is within the realm of manifestation and derives its existence from the divine Being. The neat intellectual categorization to which we are so prone has no ultimate validity.

The seer has mentioned the in-breath and the out-breath. At one level, breathing is the most fundamental of all activities, without which most creatures including man simply cannot stay alive in material manifestation.

But there is a deeper significance; one of the major insights of the Rishis was that, if properly regulated and accompanied by an appropriate mantra and psychological conditioning, the breath can open doorways into vastly enhanced states of consciousness. It is not possible here to do more than simply mention this, and to point out that subsequent seers, specially the great Pātanjali who composed the Yoga Sūtras, have elaborated this technique whereby control of the breath—Prānāyāma—holds the key to "stilling the modifications of the mind".

Verse 8 again is redolent with symbolic meanings not apparent at first reading. Indeed as a general comment it should be said that it is a mistake to bring a purely intellectual approach to bear upon a study of the Upanishads. Certainly we must strive for intellectual understanding, but there are deeper meanings and resonances to which we must also open ourselves, and which do not necessarily come out at first reading. The figure seven has in many mystic traditions a special significance. Why, for instance, are there seven days in the week in all civilizations of which we have any record? The decimal system has been explained by the fact that we are born with ten fingers, but then why not five or ten days to a week? The "seven senses" are often explained as two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth, but this is unsatisfactory because these comprise four—sight, hearing, smell and taste—and not seven senses. Perhaps a better reading would be to add touch and two other extra-sensory modes of perception. The "seven flames" have already been personified in an

earlier verse as seven powers of the Shakti, the multi-splendoured Goddess.

Again, the 'seven worlds' are well known in Vedāntic literature as seven states of consciousness, but what mysteries lie within the seven breaths which dwell in the secret places of the heart will have to be unravelled by each one of us for ourselves. Suffice it to say that within this human frame, and deep in the recesses of our heart, can be found the secret of the ages, the philosopher's stone that can change the dross metal of our normal consciousness into the gold of spiritual realization; the elixir of immortality which carries us to the other shore beyond the darkness. This "heart", of course, is not the one with which cardiac surgeons are familiar, which can now be transplanted from a dead to a living person. The "secret place" referred to in this verse is the mystical heart, said to be located ten finger-breadths above the navel, from whence the spiritual life-blood pours out from eternity.

अतः समुद्रा गिरयश्च सर्वेऽस्मात्
 स्यन्दन्ते सिन्धवः सर्वरूपाः ।
 अतश्च सर्वा ओषधयो रसश्च
 येनैष भूतैस्तिष्ठते ह्यन्तरात्मा ॥ ९ ॥
 पुरुष एवेदं विश्वं कर्म तपो ब्रह्म परामृतम् ।
 एतद् यो वेदे निहितं गुहायां
 सोऽविद्याग्रन्थि विकिरतीह सोम्य ॥ १० ॥

*From him are all these mountains and the oceans;
 from him the multifarious rivers flow; from him also*

are all the herbs and juices which, together with the elements, support the inner soul. Verily, that great Being is all this universe—sacrificial works, austerity and knowledge. O handsome youth, he who knows this immortal Being as seated in the secret caverns of the heart cuts asunder the knot of ignorance even during this life on earth.

The Vedānta does not accept an incurable dichotomy between matter and energy, body and spirit. The elements that make up our universe, the very fluids that circulate within our bodies are themselves manifestations of the divine. The invisible inner soul—the antarātma—itself a spark of the divine fire, is held in a physical form by the elements which, in their turn, flow from the divine. The difference, thus, is not between a divine and a non-divine manifestation, but between various gradations of evolution beginning with the primordial elements and growing into forms that progressively manifest the divine spirit.

"Verily that great Being is all this universe," is a statement that sums up the quintessence of the Vedāntic viewpoint and, it is important to remember, that the same verse goes on to say that this great Being can be discovered within the secret caverns of the heart even here when we are in a physical birth. The importance of this statement cannot be overemphasized. If the Upanishad had merely given the majestic, all-embracing definition of the divine and left it at that, we might have

been led to believe that it is simply not possible for us to comprehend, far less actually experience it while we are in the body. In many religious traditions, the confrontation with the divine is conveniently postponed until after death. Not so the Vedānta, which holds that, given the right conditioning and aspiration, which need lifetimes to nurture, it is possible to realize the great, all-pervasive divine Being as seated within our own hearts. The roads leading to this magnificent denouement are many—one can go through the Gyāna Mārga—the way of wisdom; the Bhakti Mārga—the way of devotion; the Karma Mārga—the way of works; the Rāja Mārga—the way of mysticism, or through a combination of these. And any genuine religious teaching, if sincerely and diligently followed, can lead us there—*Ekam sad viprah bahudha vadanti*—Truth is one, the wise call it by many names—as the Rig Veda has it. But it *can* be done, and once the divine presence is actually felt within the mystic heart, the great knot of Ignorance, the primeval unknowing through which all of us have passed for millennia since our spiritual adventure began, is finally rent asunder.

That is the divine moment, the glorious upshot of a million lives. It may come, as the Veda has it, like a flash of lightning against a dark-blue thunder cloud—*neela toyada madhyastha vidyulekhaiva bhaswara*—or, as the Gitā puts it—with the splendour of a thousand suns rising simultaneously in the sky. The great mystics

of all the religious traditions known to mankind have testified to this amazing phenomenon, the birth of the divine within the human, of the eternal spirit within matter. They have sung of this in different tongues and climes, in various ages and aeons, but all have been trying to express the Great Experience when we become not merely intellectually or emotionally aware of the divine, but actually find it pulsating within the deepest recesses of our being.

CHAPTER II—Section 2

आविः सन्निहितं गुहाचरं नाम

महत् पदमत्रैतत् समर्पितम् ।

एजत्प्राणन्निमिषच्च यदेतज्जानथ सदसद्वरण्यम्

परं विज्ञानाद् यद्वरिष्ठं प्रजानाम् ॥ १ ॥

यदाचिमद् यदणुभ्याऽणु च

र्यास्मल्लोका निहिता लोकिनश्च ।

तदेतदक्षरं ब्रह्म स प्राणस्तदु वाङ् मनः

तदेतत् सत्यं तदमृतं तद् वेद्व्यं सोम्य विद्धि ॥२॥

The Brahman is the mighty foundation, manifesting deep in the secret caverns of the heart. In it are established all that breathe, and move and see. Know this both as being and non-being, as the supremely desirable, greatest and highest of beings beyond all understanding. Luminous, subtler than the subtle, the imperishable Brahman is the abode of the worlds and all their peoples. It is life, it is speech, it is mind. It is reality and immortality. O beloved one, it is this which must be pierced; know it.

It is reiterated that the mighty Brahman manifests within the mystic heart and pervades all things. It is also added that Brahman is “both being and non-being”, which means that it pervades the visible as well as the invisible, the manifested as well as the unmanifested reality. The point here is that even this entire wondrous creation, involving an infinite number of galaxies,

does not exhaust the power of the Brahman. He is all this, but also all that is unmanifested or that can at some point become manifest. The whole question of creation or cosmogenesis is a fascinating one. The Upanishads would seem to suggest that the Brahman really has no beginning and no end—anādi-ananta. There was never a time when it was not, nor will it ever cease to be. In some way, impossible perhaps to express within semantic limitations, the Great Being has always been there. The real wonder is that such an unthinkably resplendent power can manifest itself within human consciousness, although beyond mere intellectual “understanding”. It is, indeed, the supremely desirable achievement, because in the splendour of its radiance all else pales into insignificance.

Mind, through which we seek to understand the world in which we live; speech, through which we seek to express our deepest thoughts and perceptions; life itself, the *elan vitāle* which energizes our being, all flow from the Brahman. It is subtler than atoms and sub-nuclear particles because they, as much as the Himalayas which they combine to form, are manifestations of the great power that surges through the cosmos unto eternity. This, then, is the reality which the disciple has to grasp, and it is this alone which leads to immortality. It should be noted that in the Hindu system, immortality does not mean merely survival after death. That, in fact, is taken for granted. It means the realization of the divine, which enables us to transcend both birth and death, to free ourselves from the wheel of karma on which all manifested beings revolve.

This is the reality which, says the Guru, has to be perceived, penetrated. The word used in the Upanishads by the teachers when they address their disciples is 'Saumya', which has been variously translated as "handsome youth", "beloved friend", "dear one", "fair son" and so on. It is a term of great tenderness and endearment. The Upanishadic teaching is not some grim command issued by an aloof divinity to a cringing disciple far below. It is a loving gift, an affectionate transmission of wisdom from one human being to another for whom he feels infinite love, compassion and tenderness. The Guru seeks to guide, not command; encourage, not brow-beat; inspire, not intimidate.

धनुर्गृहीत्वौपनिषदं महास्त्रं

शरं ह्युपासानिशितं सन्धयोत् ।

आयम्य तद्भावागतेन चेतसा

लक्ष्यं तदेवाक्षरं सोम्य विद्धि ॥ ३ ॥

प्रणवो धनुः शरोऽह्यात्मा ब्रह्म तल्लक्ष्यमुच्यते ।

अप्रमत्तेन वेद्धव्यं शरवत् तन्मयो भवेत् ॥ ४ ॥

Having taken as a bow the great weapon of the secret Teaching, one should fix in it the arrow sharpened by constant meditation. Drawing it with a mind filled with That (Brahman), Penetrate, O good-looking youth, that Imperishable as the mark. The Pranava (Aum) is the bow; the arrow is the self; Brahman is said to be the mark. With heedfulness is It to be penetrated; One should become one with It as the arrow in the mark.

These celebrated verses are among the best known in the Upanishadic corpus, and rightly so because they express in clear and powerful imagery the significance of the Vedāntic teaching. The translation of these verses is taken bodily from a remarkable book by Sri Krishna Prem 'The Yoga of the Kathopanishad', in which that great seer, born an Englishman, expounds the inner meaning of the Upanishad with a combination of deep intuition and wide-ranging scholarship. He has translated 'Upanishads' as 'the secret teaching' which, indeed, is one of its several meanings.

In these striking verses the Upanishads referred to collectively as embodying the spiritual wisdom are likened to a great bow and this, in turn, is equated with the sacred syllable Aum. Elsewhere in Vedāntic literature is the statement "Aum itiekāksharam Brahma" —The one syllable Aum is the Brahman— and a popular stanza refers to Aum as the giver both of sensual enjoyment and spiritual liberation. The Upanishads, therefore, in their most fundamental aspect as Aum are to be used as the bow, the individual soul as the arrow and the Brahman, the Great Being, as the target. The bow is to be drawn with "heedfulness", with an unflinching and undistracted awareness. The divine is not something which can be achieved along with others, a sort of a by-product of a generalized activity. It has to become the clear focus of our aspiration, and the arrow, our inner self, must also be constantly sharpened by meditation and spiritual practice.

If the goal is not clearly seen, if the arrow is blunt or crooked, if the drawer of the bow is distracted and disturbed, then there is no way in which the target can be hit. It is only if the target is clear, the arrow sharp and eager, the drawer of the bow calm and undistracted, that the Great Being can be penetrated or, as a great European mystic has put it, the flight of the alone to the Alone can take place. When this happens, the soul becomes one with the divine, the Atman merges with the Brahman, the dualities of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, of good and evil, of man and God, disappear.

That this process does from time to time take place is testified to by the prophets and saints, seers and mystics of all the great religious traditions of humankind. That it is a supremely difficult task is also clear; as Sri Krishna says in the Gita only one in many thousands even hears of the teaching, and of them only one in many thousands actually achieves the goal. And yet this should not be a source of discouragement. Rather, knowing that what a human being has done, once another can do again, we must with redoubled vigour bend all our energies to the spiritual quest so beautifully described in these verses.

यस्मिन् द्यौः पृथिवी चान्तरिक्षमोतं

मनः सह प्राणैश्च सर्वैः ।

तमेवैकं जानथ आत्मानमन्या

वाचो विमुञ्चथामृतस्यैष सेतुः ॥ ५ ॥

अरा इव रथनाभौ संहता यत्र नाङ्घ्रिः
स एषोऽन्तश्चरते बहुधा जायमानः ।
ओमित्येवं ध्यायथ आत्मानं

स्वस्ति वः पाराय तमसः परस्तात् ॥ ६ ॥

He in whom are in-woven the sky, the earth and interspace, along with mind and all the life-breaths, know him as the one self and desist from other utterances. This is the bridge to immortality. Where all the nerves and arteries come together like the spokes of a chariot wheel at its hub, there, moving within the heart, he becomes manifold. Meditate on that self as Aum; may your passage to the other shore beyond the darkness be pleasant and auspicious.

One of the major hindrances on the spiritual path is verbosity, the endless talk and disputation which lead to nothing more than sterile intellectual gymnastics. The intellect is a marvellous instrument invaluable within its own sphere of rationalization. But the spiritual reality, as has been said before, is essentially supra-intellectual. The mind can take us up to a point, but beyond that it becomes a positive hindrance. Therefore it is that the sage advises the disciple, once he has grasped the tremendous, all-encompassing nature of the Brahman in which all the outer and inner dimensions of space are comprehended, to desist from idle chatter and futile speculation. The higher knowledge is the bridge to immortality, and once this is glimpsed the disciple must start preparing himself for the great

journey, and not merely sit at this end of the bridge and argue endlessly about the crossing. As the Chinese saying goes, 'a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step', and often intellectual disputation is an elaborate psychological ploy to conceal our reluctance to take that crucial first step.

Changing the metaphor, the seer again reiterates the fact that the Brahman manifests itself in the secret heart, where all the channels of the body meet—not only the nerves and arteries which are known to medical anatomy, but the subtler, invisible channels that carry the vital energy through our bodies. The human body is surely one of the most complex and marvellous structures that ever existed, and within it are dimension upon dimension of visible and invisible mechanisms which, between them, enable us to be vital, living, thinking, feeling, human beings. The simile of the spokes of a wheel meeting at the hub is a powerful one. However fast the wheel may rotate, and wherever it may travel, its centre remains the hub, without which the whole structure would collapse into a jumble of twisted metal.

"Meditate on the self as Aum," says the seer again, and wishes his disciple a safe and auspicious passage to the other shore beyond the darkness. This is a statement of great significance; it shows what the guru can and what he cannot do. He can point out the way, inspire and guide the disciple lovingly on the path, help to save him from the myraid temptations and dangers that lie on the journey. But the actual travelling has to be done by the disciple himself. A guru cannot be

a substitute for the sādhana, the sustained work and effort on many levels, which alone can actually move us along the inner path. This path, as all the mystics of the world testify, involves at some point a journey across the dark and turbulent ocean. This can be interpreted in intellectual terms as referring to the darkness of ignorance, and that is certainly one of the meanings, or the turbulence of emotions. It could also mean the inner state of the soul as it moves out of ordinary waking consciousness into the psychic and spiritual realms. At another level, it could refer to the after-death states of being which formed such an important element in many civilizations, notably that of ancient Egypt and of Tibet.

The essential point is that the inner path and its divergences are constantly upon us, and we have at every moment to make a choice. Robert Frost in his poem 'The Road not Taken' says :

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
and sorry I could not travel both
and be one traveller, long I stood
and looked down one as far as I could
to where it bent in the undergrowth,
Then took the other"

And Sri Krishna Prem in his glowing work on *The Yoga of Bhagavad Gitā* speaks of these inner paths in these memorable words :

"Two are the Paths, there is no third for man.
Cleave to the self in Yoga or lose yourself in matter,

Brief is the choice, yet endless, too, for at each point the way is forked; one can go up or down. Now should the choice be made, while yet the heart is flexible with life, for in that after-State the mind is fixed, fixed like a death-mask, by its previous thoughts. There but a ghostly shade of choice remains. Sped by its former thoughts and deeds, the soul will either sink through dread illusions to rebirth in matter, or it will rise past heavenly realms of light, stopping at none till it attains the goal, the Deathless and Supreme Eternal State."

यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद् यस्यैष महिमा भुवि ।

दिव्ये ब्रह्मपुरे ह्येष व्योम्न्यात्मा प्रतिष्ठितः ॥

मनोमयः प्राणशरीरनेता

प्रतिष्ठितोऽन्ने हृदयं सन्निधाय ।

तद् विज्ञानेन परिपश्यन्ति धीरा

आनन्दरूपममृतं यद् विभाति ॥ ७ ॥

The omniscient, the all-wise, whose glory is reflected here on earth, is the self enthroned in the luminous city of Brahman, his etherial heaven. Firmly established in mind, seated in the heart, he controls life and body. The wise by the higher knowledge see him clearly as the radiant, blissful, immortal.

The Brahman is self-resplendent and luminous, and all the glories that we see on earth—the splendour of the sunrise; the wonder of the starry skies on a moonless night; the moon itself, waxing and waning to the

rhythm of the ages, the blue of the sky and the green of the forest, all these are but faint reflections of its lustre. He is seated in the brain, where he builds up the thought; he is found in the deep caverns of the heart from where he controls life and body. The force that resides in the tiniest atom with the capacity to destroy a city is the same whose smile kindles the Universe.

With the normal eye, the ordinary consciousness, he cannot be seen. At best he can be thought about, written about. But just as a map of an unknown continent may be useful in giving us some idea of its shape and topography, but in no way enables us to actually see it, so do the mere intellectual ideas about the divine help to some extent in giving us a faint idea but in no way enable us to actually realize it. For that, the Vedānta teaches, what is required is the higher knowledge, the Brahma-vidyā. When that knowledge dawns, then the Great Being shines forth through every pore of our being as the blissful, the immortal. As Sri Aurobindo puts it in one of his poems entitled 'Who'—

"He is lost in the heart, in the cavern of nature,
He is found in the brain where he builds up the
thought.

In the pattern and bloom of the flowers he is woven,
In the luminous net of the stars He is caught.

In the strength of a man, in the beauty of woman,
In the laugh of a boy, in the blush of a girl.

The hand that sent Jupiter spinning through heaven,
Spends all its cunning to fashion a curl."

भिद्यते हृदयग्रन्थिः छिद्यन्ते सर्वसंशयाः ।

क्षीयन्ते चास्य कर्माणि तस्मिन् दृष्टे परावरे ॥ ८ ॥

हिरण्मये परे कोशे विरजं ब्रह्म निष्कलम् ।

तच्छुभ्रं ज्योतिषां ज्योतिस् तद् यदात्मविदो विदुः ॥ ९ ॥

When the Great Being is seen as both the higher and the lower, then the knot of the heart is rent asunder, all doubts are dispelled and Karma is destroyed. In the highest golden sheath dwells the Brahman—stainless and indivisible. He is the light of all lights; it is he that the knowers of the self realize.

What actually happens when the beautiful vision dawns upon the individual? This is difficult to describe, as difficult as explaining to one who is blind the colours of a rainbow. And yet some indications can be given, and three are mentioned here in our text, each referring to a different dimension of the personality—physical, emotional and intellectual. These correspond to the three knots well known on the spiritual path—the knot of Brahma which ties the Ātman to the sensory world and particularly the body; the knot of Vishnu which binds it to the desire world, the world of the emotions; and the knot of Shiva, the knot of the mind which binds us to the world of thought, the final bastion of our separate ego-centric self-hood. These three knots, says the Upanishad, are rent asunder when the divine is seen; seen integrally, not only in the higher but in the lower, not only there above but here below, not only in spirit but in matter.

The Brahman, although permeating all manifestation, dwells specially in the highest or deepest sheath of consciousness. In the Hindu tradition, the Ātman is encased in five sheaths, the physical, the vital or etherial, the emotional, the intellectual and, finally, the blissful, the Ānandamaya Kosha. It is within and beyond this fifth and inmost sheath that the Brahman shines out in all its glory; stainless, because by its nature it is beyond contamination; indivisible, because being all-pervasive it cannot be divided or fragmented.

This Brahman, says the seer, is the light of all lights, the truth of all existence, the inner power behind all that has been, is and is to be. It is this Brahman that the knowers of the self, the realized ones, know.

न तत्र सूर्यो भाति न चन्द्रतारकं

नेमा विद्युतो भान्ति कुतोऽयमग्निः ।

तमेव भान्तमनुभाति सर्वं

तस्य भासा सर्वमिदं विभाति ॥ १० ॥

ब्रह्मैवेदममृतं पुरस्ताद् ब्रह्म पश्चाद्

ब्रह्म दक्षिणतश्चोत्तरेण ।

अधश्चोर्ध्वं च प्रसृतं ब्रह्मैवेदं

विश्वमिदं वरिष्ठम् ॥ १२ ॥

There the sun does not shine, nor the moon and the stars; there these lightnings do not shine, how then this earthly fire? Verily everything shines only after his shining; his shining illuminates this entire cosmos. Verily the immortal Brahman is every-

where; in front and behind, to the north and the south, above and below; verily Brahman alone is this great universe.

At the conclusion of this chapter the seer bursts into an ecstasy of realization. Many of the Upanishadic verses are cryptic and mysterious, specially when they seek to describe the spiritual vision. Here Angiras seems to imply that neither the celestial lights—the sun, the moon and the stars—nor the terrestrial lights—flashes of lightning and the sacred fire—can be said to illuminate the Brahman, because it is the Brahman itself that is the source of all these lesser lights. He, shining, causes everything else to shine. This fundamental truth is reiterated throughout the Vedāntic texts, lest the seeker get carried away by the limited splendour of the lesser powers. These powers are certainly worthy of worship, whether they are the earthly illuminations, the celestial ones, or the Devas—the shining ones—themselves. But, in the final analysis, they are to be worshipped because they are brilliant manifestations of the all-encompassing, all-illuminating Brahman.

The various lights referred to could also be taken to mean the flashes of inner illumination which the disciple often encounters as his consciousness alters with the progress of spiritual disciplines and arousal of the Kundalini power in the spine. The mystical tradition reaffirms that such flashes, intermittent at first and then gradually growing into a steady blaze, are frequently associated with the spiritual path. In this reading, what the seer is saying would be that the disciple

must not get stuck with any of these preliminary stages, howsoever glorious they may appear after the darkness of 'normal' consciousness, but must always remember that these lights are simply faint reflections of the light of Brahman, which kindles the universe.

In the last verse we have a rhapsodic statement about the all-pervasiveness of the radiant Brahman. Above and below, in all the directions, within and without, there is nothing else. All that we look upon as 'real', our "too-too solid flesh", the earth itself that has nurtured our race from the dawn of history, everything is seen to be but as the surface of a bubble, devoid of weight or density. Wherever we look we see only the divine Brahman because, in truth, we ourselves have become one with it or, to put it in another way, it is the Brahman which looks at itself through our eyes. No more are we tied with strong knots to the body, the emotions or the mind. As Shiva's great arrow pierced the three cities of iron, silver and gold within which the demon of false individuality sought to take shelter, so does the light of Brahman invade and pervade all our citadels one by one, until we are naked in the overwhelming glory of its illumination. And it is then that we realize that all this magnificent and resplendent universe is indeed Brahman itself.

CHAPTER III — Section 1

द्वा सुपर्णा सयुजा सखाया

समानं वृक्षं परिषस्वजाते ।

तयोरन्यः पिप्पलं स्वाद्वत्त्य-

नश्नन्नन्यो अभिचाकशीति ॥१॥

समाने वृक्षे पुरुषो निमग्नोऽनीशया

शोचति मुह्यमानः ।

जुष्टं यदा पश्यत्यन्यमीशमस्य

महिमानमिति वीतशोकः ॥ २ ॥

Two beautiful birds, closely bound in friendship, cling to a common tree. Of these one eats the delicious fruit with relish, while the other looks on without eating. Seated on the same tree one of them—the personal self—grieves on account of its helplessness. But when he sees the other—the worshipful lord in all his glory—then his sorrow passes away from him.

After the great ecstasy of the last few verses, in which the unsurpassing radiance of the all-pervasive Brahman is sought to be described, one could well assume that the highest attainment having been reached there is really no need for the teacher to proceed further. Had this flight into the Brahman been the final goal, the Upanishad could well have ended with Chapter Two. Why then, does it continue the teaching? Evidently because, despite the tremendous vistas described earlier, the disciple is still far from ready for the actual flight,

and therefore the teacher has once again to come down to earth, as it were, and to address the disciple at his level. The same situation occurs in the Bhagavad Gītā, which does not end with the great vision of the eleventh chapter but continues to convert that tremendous attainment into permanent spiritual progress.

The seer now descends from the vastness of the previous vision to a simple but telling allegory of two birds seated on the same tree. The tree is the body, and the two birds are the Ātman and the Brahman, or the Jivātman and the Paramātman, both of whom reside there. Or, to put it differently, below and beyond our surface personalities is the real self which is the spark of Brahman from the great fire referred to earlier in this Upanishad. These two are described as being indissolubly linked in friendship, because in fact the Jivātman, due to its bondage in the three great knots of the body, the emotions and the mind, looks upon itself as different but in fact is inseparably linked to the Paramātman much as the reflection of the sun in a bowl of water is to the sun itself.

The lesser self is said to eat the fruits of the tree with relish, meaning thereby that it partakes of the unending treadmill of Karma and hence gets caught up in the cycle of duality—of joy and sorrow, birth and death. This ultimately brings it to a point of satiation and helplessness. 'Na vittēna tarpaniyo manushyāh,' says another great Upanishad, 'Man is never satisfied by wealth'. The quest for material possessions, for sensual enjoyment, for emotional gratification is,

ultimately, a self-defeating one. Howsoever overjoyed we may be at some gain in these spheres, there are always spectres that, consciously or unconsciously, haunt our victory like Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's banquet. Disease, old-age and death—these three await all embodied beings at some point in their lives, and even if, by some stroke of signal good Karma, we are able to avoid the first, then the second is there, and if we avoid the second, the third, death, comes inevitably at the last.

The greatest of emperors, the richest of tycoons the most glamorous of playboys, the most seductive of femmes fatale, all, in the end, fall into the widespread net of death. And when, having tasted the material joys of life, one is suddenly brought face to face with harsh reality, a sense of helplessness sets in. It is at this stage that, if one is fortunate enough to have imbibed the teaching, one turns for help to the other bird, our higher self unencumbered with karmic burdens and convolutions, that has all this time been serenely sitting on the same tree looking at us with love and compassion.

He was there all along, ever since we reached the stage of human consciousness and began the long and complicated processes of karma lasting for aeons, but we did not know of him till now. He has always been closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands or feet but we have not recognized him. As Sri Aurobindo puts it :

“The Master of man and his infinite lover,

He is close to our hearts had we vision to see.

We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our
passions,

We are bound in our thoughts where we hold
ourselves free.”

And then, one day, dejected and despondent, discouraged and disillusioned, we throw down our weapons as Arjuna did on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, and turn in despair to our friend and comrade, the charioteer of our lives, the great Being who, though he exceeds the splendour of a million suns, is yet seated within us in a form like unto ours. And when we look up at our greater selves, at the one who is the true recipient of devotion, a miracle occurs. Our sorrow passes away from us; we realize in a flash that the sweet and bitter fruits we have been eating birth after birth, age after age, are the real cause of our bondage, and that for release all we have to do is to surrender our false ego, to open ourselves to the power and the light and the glory of the great Being who resides within our deepest consciousness.

यदा पश्यः पश्यते स्वमवर्णं

कर्तारमीशं पुरुषं ब्रह्मयोनिम् ।

तदा विद्वान् पुण्यपापे विधूय

निरञ्जनः परमं साम्यमुपैति ॥ ३ ॥

प्राणो ह्येष यः सर्वभूतैर्विभाति

विजानन् विद्वान् भवते नातिवादी ।

आत्मक्रीड आत्मरतिः

क्रियावानेष ब्रह्मविदां वरिष्ठः ॥ ४ ॥

When the seer sees the golden-hued Lord, the Great Being who is the maker of the world and the source of Brahmā the creator, then the wise one, shaking off good and evil, free from stain, attains unity with the supreme. Verily it is the divine spirit that shines forth in all beings. Knowing this, the wise one desists from unnecessary talk. Sporting in the self, delighting in the self, yet involved in outer activity, such a one is the greatest among the knowers of Brahman.

The simile of the two birds is now projected onto the human condition. When, after long striving, we finally reach the point of being able to 'see' the higher self of which our lower selves are reflections, then do we become 'seers' in the true sense of the term. At that point the conventional distinctions between 'good' and 'evil' disappear. These were important in their own sphere, the sphere of conventional life and its attendant social and moral mores which, incidentally, differ drastically from age to age, from civilization to civilization. But when the higher being is seen, these realms are transcended, and the seer, shaking off the dark stain of the polluted lower consciousness, attains unity with the Great Being. He is described as golden-hued, refulgent with divine light, and as 'the one who created the creator, Brahmā.' In other words, he is prior to the creation as we know it and, therefore, ipso facto, the source of Brahmā himself.

Once again the great truth is proclaimed—verily it is the divine spirit that shines forth in all beings. And

one who knows this, who has realized the Brahman within and without, then ceases from unnecessary talk and disputation. People who talk incessantly about the path, who argue endlessly about the superiority of their respective faiths or gurus, are often so busy with their intellectual gymnastics that they hardly have any time to actually move forwards on the inner quest. As Fitzgerald puts it in his superb re-creation of Omar Khayyam :

“Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Scholar and saint, and heard great argument
About it and about, but evermore,
Came out by the same door wherein I went.”

Sincere exposition of the sacred texts, or genuine discussion about the path is one thing. Indeed, such Satsanga is useful in clarifying many issues that perplex us. But it must be realized that ultimately we have to go beyond words, beyond verbalization, into an experiential dimension. And according to the Vedānta the highest attainment is when the seer, delighting in the bliss of self-knowledge, is yet involved in outer activity—Kriyāvān. This is a profoundly significant statement, which places the whole teaching in a new light and makes it relevant for all times. Had it not been made, it would have meant that the only way to liberation was to give up all worldly activity, retire to a hermitage and spend the rest of our lives striving to realize the Brahman.

Certainly that path is open for sannyāsis, for those who are prepared to renounce worldly affairs. But here we have a clear-cut reiteration that outer works

are not in any way inconsistent with intense inner activity, a point which many centuries later was made a central theme by Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gitā. Indeed, the Upanishad describes such persons who have attained the divine realization and continue to be active as the 'highest' among the knowers of the Brahman. This explains the great reverence given to the 'Rājā-rishis', the Royal Sages, in the Hindu tradition. Pre-eminent among these was King Janaka of Mithilā, who, apart from having been the father of Sitā, appears in the Upanishads in his own right as a realized soul, and is specifically mentioned by Sri Krishna in the Gitā as having attained enlightenment through works.

सत्येन लभ्यस्तपसा ह्येष आत्मा
सम्यग्ज्ञानेन ब्रह्मचर्येण नित्यम् ।
अन्तःशरीरे ज्योतिर्मयो हि शुभ्रो
यं पश्यन्ति यतयः क्षीणदोषाः ॥ ५ ॥

सत्यमेव जयति नानृतं
सत्येन पन्था विततो देवयानः ।
येनाक्रमन्त्यृषयो ह्याप्तकामा
यत्र तत्सत्यस्य परमं निधानम् ॥ ६ ॥

The Self within the body, pure and resplendent, is attained through the cultivation of truth, austerity, right knowledge and chastity. When their impurities dwindle then the ascetics behold him. Truth alone triumphs, not untruth. By truth is laid out the divine path along which sages, their desires fulfilled, ascend to where Truth has its supreme abode,

The gaining of the self is, after all, no easy matter. It involves a constant process of purification, not only of the body through dietary and sensual restrictions, but more importantly of the mind, both conscious and subconscious. The alchemical symbolism of transmuting the lead of normal consciousness into the gold of spiritual realization through a constant process of heating and purifying is relevant here. Unless we go through the fire, as it were, we cannot burn away the dross in which we are enmeshed through the millennia ever since our human adventure began in the mists of time. Four requirements are mentioned—truth, which means an unswerving commitment to that within us which infallibly shows the way; austerity, which means a concentration of energy towards the spiritual goal undistracted by outer temptations; wisdom, which means the insight and discrimination necessary to keep unwaveringly to the spiritual quest; and chastity which implies sensual continence.

These four between them constitute a whole discipline and framework for the spiritual quest. The fourth was generally expected only of the sannyasis or monks, not of householders who could hardly be expected both to raise a family and abstain from sexual intercourse. However, even for them, a certain discipline and conservation of psychic energy was required. The powerful, primeval sex drive is a force which cannot be thwarted with impunity. It can be sublimated, not repressed without doing grave psychological damage. The Tantra, in fact, turns the sexual urge itself into a powerful vehicle for the spiritual quest.

In the sixth verse we come across the celebrated words 'Truth alone triumphs', which is the motto inscribed on the seal of the Indian Nation. By 'truth' here is obviously meant not the conventional sense of that word but the overriding sense which, as Mahatma Gandhi pointed out, was equivalent to God. The truth is both the divine path or, in an alternative reading, the path laid out by the gods, which really comes to the same thing, and also the supreme goal.

It should be noted, firstly, that the path is an ascending one, in the sense that it does involve a conscious effort to fight against the downward current of inertia and entropy in which we all find ourselves caught. If we simply float along, we will inevitably drift downstream, imperceptibly at first but then with increasing speed as we crash to our doom in the rapids and waterfalls ahead. Therefore the Vedas exhort —'Charaiwaitē, charaiwaitē'—move on, move on, and another great Upanishad, the Katha, exhorts us to 'awake, arise and cross the difficult and dangerous razor-edged path.' Secondly, it is only when our lower desires have been fulfilled, or sublimated, that we can really undertake the journey. If we attempt it while still overloaded with the heavy baggage of physical and emotional cravings, of psychological and intellectual confusions, we will hardly be able to walk a few steps before we stumble and fall,

And yet, whatever our weaknesses, we have to start moving. Far above us, and deep inside, is the blazing truth, although in the beginning it may appear just a tiny flicker within the encircling gloom. This truth, as has been said, is both the path and the goal. Gradually as we move onwards and upwards new vistas unfold, the radiant sun grows brighter until finally, at the crossing, the rainbow bridge appears which takes us to the other shore beyond the darkness, where the Great Being shines with the splendour of a million suns.

बृहच्च तद्व्यमचिन्त्यरूपं

सूक्ष्माच्च तत् सूक्ष्मतरं विभाति ।

द्वरात् सुदूरे तदिहान्तिके च

पश्यत्स्विहैव निहितं गुहायाम् ॥ ७ ॥

न चक्षुषा गृह्यते नापि वाचा

नान्यैर्देवैस्तपसा कर्मणा वा ।

ज्ञानप्रसादेन विशुद्धसत्त्वस्ततस्तु तं

पश्यते निष्कलं ध्यायमानः ॥ ८ ॥

Vast, divine, beyond all thought processes shines the Brahman; subtler than the subtle, further than the furthest. Yet it is nearer than the nearest, and the seer sees it within the secret heart. He cannot be grasped by the eye, by speech nor by the other sense organs. Nor can he be revealed by penance and austerities. Only when the mind becomes calm and purified by the grace of the higher knowledge does one, meditating, behold the great, indivisible Being.

The human mind is a marvellous instrument, in its subtlety and complexity indeed a miracle of evolution. And yet, as has been reiterated throughout the Vedāntic texts, the mind by itself is unable to behold the Brahman because it is Brahman itself that activates the mind. The same is true of speech and other sensory organs, as is strikingly portrayed in the parable of the Kena Upanishad where the gods are unable to comprehend the Brahman who appears before them as a spirit. They all look outwards, while the Brahman lies within and behind their capacity to function. It is further away than each incredibly distant quasar that unfolds before the startled eyes of radio-astronomers, because wherever anything exists at all it is due to the radiance of the Brahman. Yet it is near, nearer to us than our bodies themselves, and therefore can be perceived glowing within the secret caverns of the heart.

Austerity and penance, intellectual study and learned disputation, are all valuable elements on the spiritual path. They can prepare and pacify our consciousness, but they cannot *in themselves* take us to the supreme Being. For that we will need to turn our purified consciousness inwards, to reverse a billion years of natural evolution in which the senses reach outwards, and to see what it is that energizes the senses, what it is that activates the mind, what it is that lies behind our ego-consciousness.

This looking inwards is often most effective in a quiet, harmonious atmosphere conducive to meditation. It was for this reason that the ancient seers chose

mountain caves and the banks of lakes, deep forests and sylvan glades to set up their hermitages. In this day and age, with the hustle and clamour of modern civilization and the growing pollution of the natural environment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find such quiet retreats. Yet deep within us, if only we can find it, is an abode of silence which is always available. Even in the full flood of outer activity, the very thick of the daily battle, it is possible to detach a part of our consciousness so that it continues to search within for the divine guest who lives in our inner citadel. In some way, also, this turning inwards has to carry over into the sleeping state, because in that shadowy realm also we can continue our search.

एषोऽणुरात्मा चेतसा वेदितव्यो

यस्मिन् प्राणः पञ्चधा संविवेश ।

प्राणैश्चित्तं सर्वमोतं प्रजानां

यस्मिन् विशुद्धे विभवत्येष आत्मा ॥ ९ ॥

यं यं लोकं मनसा संविभाति

विशुद्धसत्त्वः कामयते यांश्च कामान् ।

तं तं लोकं जयते तांश्च कामां-

स्तस्मादात्मज्ञं ह्यर्चयेद् भूतिकामः ॥ १० ॥

The subtle Atman within the body, pervaded by the five-fold life-force, is to be known by thought. The mind is constantly pervaded by the senses; when it is purified, the self shines forth. Whatever world the man of purified mind desires, whatever desires he

wishes to fulfil, all these he attains. Therefore let whoever is desirous of prosperity worship the man of self-realization.

Our consciousness in this physical body is pervaded by the five senses and the sensory inputs being constantly received through them. This is so universal that some materialistic philosophies look upon the five senses as the sole mode of knowledge and do not accept any higher reality. However, the Hindu tradition has always been aware of the fact that beyond and behind the senses is the mind, which itself is the reflection of the deeper reality, the Ātman-Brahman complex. The purification of the mind, therefore, is the first step towards self-realization. When this is achieved, it gives not only a mastery over the senses, which are then seen to be powerful but subordinate elements of the personality, but also over material objects and attainments.

Such mastery brings with it a plenitude of what are generally known as psychic powers or Siddhis. The mind of a seer is much more powerful than that of an ordinary man, as, for example, is the beam of a finely crafted torch with a strong lens in comparison with the same bulb without this equipment. It is, therefore, believed that such a person can successfully apply his will-power to the attainment of any worldly or material end if he so desires. Subsequent texts, specially Pātanjali's celebrated Yoga Sūtras, deal with these psychic powers at some length. It is also generally believed that an undue involvement in or demonstration of such

powers becomes ego-inflationary and thus a hindrance to further progress on the spiritual path.

However, some great masters do use these powers for benign, non-selfish purposes; to help a disciple, for example, or alleviate the sufferings of someone in pain or deep distress. It is for this reason that the seer advises people in search of prosperity and good fortune to worship and serve such masters in order to earn their blessings and grace. Having earlier in the Upanishad roundly condemned the quest for material wealth, this advice may appear to be slightly out of place, but it should be recalled that Angiras is speaking not with an ascetic but with Śhaunaka, a great householder, whose Dharma involves the creation of wealth by legitimate means.

CHAPTER III—Section 2

स वेदैत् परमं ब्रह्म धाम

यत्र विश्वं निहितं भाति शुभ्रम् ।

उपासते पुरुषं ये ह्यकामास्ते

शुक्रमेतदतिवर्तन्ति धीराः ॥ १ ॥

कामान् यः कामयते मन्यमानः

स कामभिर्जायते तत्र तत्र ।

पर्याप्तकामस्य कृतात्मनस्तु

इहैव सर्वे प्रविलीयन्ति कामाः ॥ २ ॥

The man of self-realization knows the supreme Brahman upon which the universe is based and shines radiantly. The wise who, free from desire, worship the Brahman pass beyond the seed of rebirth. Whoever in his mind longs for the objects of desire is born again and again for their fulfilment; but one whose desire for the Brahman is fully satisfied, for such a perfected soul all his desires vanish even here in this life.

Desire is the basis of the constantly turning wheel of existence; it is the seed that leads to birth after death, and death after birth, until the whole drama is fully played out and the individual soul has overcome this burning thirst. In Hinduism and Buddhism this insatiable desire is known as Trishnā, and it is this that compels us to seek desperately for material and sensual fulfilment. The Vedic seers realized very clearly that this desire is in the nature of a fierce fire, each offering

into it, far from appeasing its appetite, will further fan the flames. Thus our unfulfilled desires carry their impressions, or Sanskāras, from life to life, and force us to be reborn again and again for their fulfilment.

This process will continue into infinity unless we, in our wisdom, reverse the process. It is this reversal that is at the heart of the spiritual quest, a looking inwards to the source of our consciousness rather than outwards towards the objects of desire. It may appear as if our desires are ours alone, but if we step back and analyze ourselves we will see that in fact these are great tidal waves in which we allow ourselves to be washed away. Seeing the Brahman in ourselves and in all things, we must gradually start moving from the outside in. Then only can there be a release from the cycle of Samsāra, the wheel of death and change to which all creation is strapped.

It is significant that the seer clearly states the possibility of liberation even in this life. Esoteric religions preach of heavens *after* death where, if we dutifully follow their particular teachings, we will all dwell happily ever after. The Vedānta, however, postulates the concept of the Jīvanmukta, one who is liberated in this very life. If we have not achieved spiritual realization while yet alive, the act of dying by itself is not likely to bring this about. Hence the constant reiteration in the Upanishads of the importance of following the spiritual path to its source *now*, while we are still embodied and endowed with consciousness and wisdom. Indeed the whole Vedāntic teaching, as the Gītā points

out, is 'Pratyakshāvāgaman', something which can be actually experienced right now in our lifetimes, not something to be postponed until after death.

नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यो

न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन ।

यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष

आत्मा विवृणुते तनुं स्वाम् ॥ ३ ॥

नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यो

न च प्रमादात् तपसो वाप्यलिङ्गत् ।

एतैरुपायैर्यतते यस्तु विद्वांस्तस्यैष

आत्मा विशते ब्रह्मधाम ॥ ४ ॥

Not by discourses, nor by intellectual analysis, nor through much learning can the Ātman be attained. He is attained only by one whom he chooses; to such a one the Ātman reveals its own form. This self cannot be attained by one without strength, nor by the careless, nor through improper austerities. But the wise who strive by all these means enter into the abode of Brahman.

As has been said earlier in the Upanishad, while intellectual disputation, rationalization and scriptural study are useful for the lower knowledge, they are not able to take us through the barrier that separates our consciousness from the divine. They have not to be negated but transcended by a different *kind* of wisdom which involves direct perception and realization of the all-pervasive Brahman. That can be attained only by

one whom he chooses or, in an alternative reading of the text, by one who longs for it with his whole heart. In effect the difference between the two interpretations is not as sharp as may appear on the surface. The first reading, "by one whom he chooses" is the basis for the doctrine of grace. But this grace itself is not capricious and arbitrary, it is invoked when there is a genuine and overwhelming aspiration from below.

Again, the Ātman is not to be won by a person devoid of 'strength'. This could mean physical stamina, because the intense psychological activity involved often throws a heavy strain upon the body, as has been demonstrated in the lives of great saints such as Sri Chaitanya and St. Francis of Assisi, Sri Rāmakrishna and Sri Ramana Maharishi. But even more important than physical strength is psychological strength and emotional stability. It must be remembered, after all, that the spiritual achievement is no mean task; it involves a total reorientation of our inner and outer perspectives. Sri Aurobindo would go further and say that it involves a transformation in the very cellular and molecular structure of our bodies.

Carelessness is the worst enemy on the path, as dangerous as it is to a climber attempting to scale the great Himalayan peaks. In fact the imagery of climbing a great mountain is peculiarly appropriate to illustrate the spiritual quest. The higher we get, the more difficult and dangerous the ascent becomes, and a single false step which, in the plains, would involve only a minor inconvenience can, at those heights, send us

crashing down precipitous slopes. There we simply cannot afford the luxury of carelessness as we proceed towards the divine. At each moment our consciousness must be alert and attuned; nor should we allow ourselves to be so carried away by the euphoria induced by the glorious new vistas opening up at every turn that we allow ourselves to slip or stumble.

Similarly, improper and excessive austerities are not to be encouraged. Both in the Eastern and the Western mystical tradition there are instances of undue torturing of the body as a means to spiritual realization. This is to be avoided, and the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gitā and the Buddha point out that at some stage these become counter-productive. Indeed, if Sujātā had not brought him a bowl of sweetened rice at a critical moment, Siddhārtha would have perished and one of the world's greatest teachers would never have shed his light upon suffering humanity. What is needed is a combination of strength, attention and balanced austerity—the reverse of the three weaknesses mentioned earlier. These combine to help the culmination of the quest, the entry of the Ātman into the supreme abode of the Brahman.

संप्राप्यैनमृषयो ज्ञानतृप्ताः

कृतात्मानो वीतरागाः प्रशान्ताः ।

ते सर्वगं सर्वतः प्राप्यधीराः

युक्तात्मानः सर्वमेवाविशन्ति ॥ ५ ॥

वेदान्तविज्ञानमुनिश्चितार्थाः

सन्न्यासयोगात् यतयः शुद्धसत्त्वाः ।

ते ब्रह्मलोकेषु परान्तकाले

परामृताः परिमुच्यन्ति सर्वे ॥ ६ ॥

Having attained the Self the seers are fully satisfied with wisdom, perfect in their souls, non-attached and tranquil. Having realized the all-pervasive everywhere, these disciplined souls verily enter into the Brahman. Firmly established in the Vedāntic wisdom through the yoga of renunciation, their consciousness purified, these seers at the end of time achieve immortality and liberation in the world of Brahman.

These verses reiterate the central theme of the Vedānta, that by means of the higher knowledge it is possible for human beings first to refine and purify their inner consciousness and then, ultimately, to enter into the radiance of the Brahman. The purification involves renunciation of desire and the cultivation of inner tranquillity, while the illumination involves spiritual realization in this very life. In verse six the term 'Parānt-kāle' can be translated, as we have done, as 'the end of time' or, alternatively, 'at the time of death'. The question of what happens to a liberated soul after the death of the body is a complex one which is the object of considerable Upanishadic literature, notably the famous Katha Upanishad with its celebrated dialogue between the boy-seeker Nachiketas and Yama, the god of death.

There would seem to be three possibilities: the spirit can merge in the bliss of the divine for ever; it can continue to function in a benign manner for the sake of humanity, but from the astral rather than the physical level; or it can voluntarily seek rebirth in a human form so as to help suffering mankind and sweeten the bitter sea of sorrow. In any case, once the Ātman and the Brahman have become one, the individual soul is released from the necessity of blind and instinctive rebirth.

गताः कलाः पञ्चदश प्रतिष्ठा

देवाश्च सर्वे प्रतिदेवतासु ।

कर्माणि विज्ञानमयश्च आत्मा

परेऽव्यये सर्वं एकीभवन्ति ॥ ७ ॥

यथा नद्यः स्थन्दमानाः समुद्रेऽस्तं

गच्छन्ति नामरूपे विहाय ।

तथा विद्वान् नामरूपाद् विमुक्तः

परात्परं पुरुषमुपैति दिव्यम् ॥ ८ ॥

Gone are the fifteen parts into their foundations; the senses into the corresponding dieties; the deeds and the intellect into the supreme, immutable Being. As flowing rivers disappear into the ocean, losing their separate name and form, even so the seer, freed from name and form, becomes one with the effulgent Being, the highest of the high.

When the great liberation is attained, the material and astral constituents of the human body go back into

the matrix from whence they came—ashes to ashes, dust to dust, molecule to molecule, atom to atom. In the Hindu systems of philosophy there are several categorizations of the constituent units that make up the physical, astral and psychological body of man. It is significant that in verse seven the word used for senses is 'Deva' or the shining ones; thereby implying that it is the divine powers themselves that, reflecting the light of the Ātman, glow forth through our senses. Far from denying or denigrating the senses, the Hindu tradition sees them as manifestations of the divine powers, and indeed it is nothing short of divine that we have the power to think, to see, to hear, to smell, to taste and to touch.

How much poorer our lives become if even one of these senses is lost. And yet, in our arrogance and ignorance, we denigrate these great gifts, either through ascetic refusal or hedonistic over-indulgence. But, divine though they may be, the senses are not the *source* of consciousness. That lies in the Ātman, and when it achieves oneness with the Brahman then the body with all its marvellous mechanisms is no longer needed, and its constituent units go back into the great ocean from whence they arose.

As rivers arise from different parts of the earth, bear different forms and different names through their long and tortuous journeys and ultimately merge into the great ocean in which it is no longer possible to identify them as separate waters, so does the realized soul, when oneness with the Brahman has been achieved,

get freed from the individual labels that it has borne through countless lives and find freedom and fulfilment in that radiant Being, the highest of the high. The simile of the river and the ocean is most appropriate. The rivers themselves are, ultimately, derived from the ocean through the rain that feeds them, and for long periods they bear a separate location and name of their own. Thus the divine Gangā issues from the heart of the Himālayas, and for thousands of kilometres retains its name and form, varying at every moment and from season to season. Yet ultimately it merges into the ocean and once that happens it ceases to exist there as a separate entity.

The water is still there, of course, but it is no longer labelled nor constricted by narrow banks. Rather, its work fulfilled, it merges calmly into the ocean from where its molecules originally sprung. In such a way, says the Upanishad, the individual Jiva is born again and again, until by its karma and the grace of the higher knowledge, it finally achieves the supreme Being. The dewdrop slips into the shining sea; the human journey is complete; the spiritual evolution has reached its supreme goal.

स यो ह वै तत् परमं ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवन्ति
नास्याब्रह्मवित् कुले भवति ।

तरति शोकं तरति पाप्मानं

गुहाग्रन्थिभ्यो विमुक्तोऽमृतो भवति ॥ ९ ॥

Verily, he who knows the supreme Brahman himself becomes Brahman. In his lineage none is born who knows not the Brahman. He crosses beyond sorrow, he crosses beyond sin. Liberated from the knots of the heart he becomes immortal.

The bridge to immortality has now been crossed. By knowing, in the deepest and most integral sense of that word, the supreme Brahman, the seer himself becomes a part of that divine radiance. His body will still continue to exist for as long as his previous karma requires, but even when embodied his consciousness is one with the divine, and after he sheds the body he is under no compulsion to assume another unless, as a deliberate act of compassion, he decides to do so.

The statement that no-one in his 'kula', translated as lineage or family, is born who does not know the Brahman is rather difficult to interpret. It can hardly be taken literally in the sense that all present and future descendants will become knowers of the Brahman. The individual jiva has its own karma, and the network of outer family relationships is a transient and ever-changing one. What is probably meant is the spiritual lineage. It will be recalled that when the Buddha, having attained enlightenment, returned as a monk to his father's kingdom of Kapilavastu and was sternly asked by the King as to why he was setting aside his family traditions, he answered that his real lineage was the line of Buddhas who had always laboured for the welfare of mankind.

The enlightened ones do, indeed, constitute a race apart, a race based not on colour or creed, sex or

religion, but upon spiritual realization. This great community transcends time and location. Every great civilization in one period or the other, and some down to the present day, continue to produce men and women of spiritual realization. Some have been worshipped as Avatārs and Prophets, some revered as philosophers and saints, still others have lived out their lives in silent radiance, unknown to all except a handful of close associates. Some have been learned and eloquent, others illiterate and largely silent. But whatever the outer variations, inwardly they have crossed beyond sin and sorrow, the knots of their heart have been sun-dered, they have become immortal.

तदेतद्चाऽभ्युक्तम्—

क्रियावन्तः श्रोत्रियाः ब्रह्मनिष्ठाः

स्वयं जुह्वत एकर्षिं श्रद्धयन्तः ।

तेषामेवैतां ब्रह्मविद्यां वदेत

शिरोव्रतं विधिवद् येस्तु चोर्णम् ॥ १० ॥

तदेतत् सत्यमृषिरङ्गिराः पुरोवाच

नेतदचोर्णव्रतोऽधीते ।

नमः परमर्षिभ्यो नमः परमर्षिभ्यः ॥ ११ ॥

This very doctrine is declared in the Vedic verse: To them alone who perform the rites, who are well-versed in the scriptures, who are firmly grounded in the Brahman, who tend the sacred fire with devotion, who have duly performed the rite of the head, should this knowledge of the Brahman be imparted. This

is the truth imparted to his disciples in ancient times by the seer Angiras. Let no-one who has not performed the rite study this.

Salutations to the great seers

Salutations to the great seers.

The Upanishad now ends with the mystic exhortation that the higher knowledge is not to be imparted to one who is not intellectually, psychologically and spiritually qualified to receive it. This admonition is necessary, not because of a desire to be secretive or elitist, but for the very good reason that imparting the knowledge to the unqualified would be useless or, worse, downright dangerous. Useless because without the required discipline, devotion and perseverance, the teaching would be totally wasted—in the Biblical phrase, a casting of pearls before swine. It would either not be understood at all or, even if grasped by the surface mind, would fail to make any deeper impact. It could also be dangerous, because in these rarified realms a little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing. It would be safer to send a sub-standard electrician to repair a nuclear reactor than to let those of unripe or hostile minds dabble with the great truths expounded in the Upanishad.

Hence the qualifications of the disciple are enumerated, and, interestingly enough, the first two—being well-versed in the scriptures and firmly founded in the Brahman—are the same as those for the teacher mentioned in Chapter I. Although the disciple would

not be expected to have these qualities in the same degree as the teacher, they are nonetheless essential for a successful crossing of the rainbow bridge. Two more qualifications are added—that they duly tend the sacred fire, both the outer sacrificial one and the more profound inner Kundalini, and also that they should have performed the 'Shirovrata', the rite or discipline of the head.

This can be interpreted in several ways. At one level it can simply mean one who has shaved his head or, in other words, renounced the world and donned the ochre robe of a mendicant. This interpretation is sought to be justified on the ground that the whole Upanishad is called the Mundaka which, as has been mentioned at the outset, could refer to the shaven heads of the sannyasis. However, it is also specifically mentioned in the text that the disciple to whom the seer Angiras is expounding the secret teaching is not a sannyasi at all but a great householder. Another explanation is that it refers to a special rite mentioned in the Atharva Veda which involves carrying fire on the head.

Once again, however, we have to look deeper below the surface meaning to try and find the real significance. The Kundalini Shakti, the fiery serpent-power that lies dormant at the base of the human spine, can, under certain conditions, be aroused and led upwards along the spine, irradiating various chakras or centres on the way, until it bursts in splendour into the cortex and illuminates the highest of these chakras, the thousand-

petalled lotus in the head. Surely this is the rite or ceremony of the head to which the seer refers, and which indeed is a rare achievement.

This, then, is the secret teaching, the luminous truth imparted by Angiras in ancient times. Truly such realized seers are the salt of the earth, the highest evolution of humanity, the saviours and torch-bearers of mankind. To such sages humanity owes a profound debt of gratitude, and to them it bows again and again in love and reverence.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The literature on the Upanishads is vast and voluminous. Apart from the texts themselves, there have been numerous commentaries written upon them down through the ages. These range from the classical Sanskrit commentaries of the great Shankārāchārya many centuries ago, down to the translations and commentaries in English and other European languages in the last hundred years. Indeed the whole study of Vedānta is so rich and fascinating that not a year passes without several new translations or commentaries being published in India or abroad, and a full bibliography would fill a volume by itself. I only mention below some of the books which I found to be of particular value in seeking to grasp the inner meaning and significance of the Mundaka Upanishad, one of the most glowing and fascinating of the Vedāntic texts :

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