

Adoration of the Universal Man in the Upanishads - Swami Ranganathananda (Ramakrishna Order)

A. The Theme of the Upanishads

Without understanding the Upanishads, it is impossible to get an insight into Indian history and culture. Every subsequent development of philosophy and religion in India has drawn heavily on them. The path of bhakti or devotion to a personal God, the path of karma or detached action, and the synthesis of all spiritual paths in a comprehensive spirituality, expounded in the G  t  , are all derived from the Upanishads. The Upanishads are thus the perennial springs of strength and creativity.

Their theme is freedom of the human spirit and their message is of fearlessness and love and service. They summon men and women everywhere to this mighty adventure of freedom and fearlessness, love and service, and to the realization, by each man and woman, of his or her essential spiritual nature, and the transcendence of the limitations of finitude. They explain every great movement— social, political, or religious—nay the phenomena of life itself, as an expression of the urge to freedom inherent in every organism— the struggle of the Infinite caught up in the cell or in a body.

B. Human Excellence

India asked, ages ago, ‘What is the highest excellence of man?’ This question was tackled with a thoroughness that is very impressive. Man, endowed with a body, with the senses, with various capacities, has yet to rise to the point of his highest excellence, which he has in a small measure even in his very childhood. The achievement of this highest excellence is the product of a converging life endeavour; it is education and religion in one. Man’s supreme excellence, says the Upanishads, consists in transcending the limitations of his senses.

We have transcended many things. We have transcended our animal ancestry to some extent in this human psycho-physical organism, but this is not the last nor the highest achievement. Even man’s technical achievements up to date do not touch a fringe of his total possibilities; in spite of these intellectual developments, he has still about him and in him much of the primeval evolutionary slime; he has to shed much of his animal ancestry. He represents a great advance in evolution, but evolution has still greater heights to scale in him and through him. The Upanishads took up this challenge, the challenge of deeper levels of human experience. This is the theme of the Upanishads.

C. The True Nature of Man

What then is this eternal glory of man? It is the inborn divine nature, birthless, deathless, pure and holy. Man is not the body, nor the senses; these are but the instruments of manifestation and action in the spatio-temporal world of the Atman. It is limitless and one, yet expressing itself through the little finite forms of body and mind. This is the true nature of man. This is not a mere philosophical concept but a realized fact. All sensitive

minds are inspired by these ideas. They inspired people when the Upanishads were composed; they inspired people a thousand years later; and today, after 3000 to 4000 years, they still inspire us. Neither the phenomenal progress of science and technology, nor the wealth and power of modern world has been able to reduce their relevance of these ideas. They have only increased it.

The world today is seeking for precisely this spiritual growth for man; it is the only means of breaking through the stagnation that has come upon the human mind. 'The human mind has lost its bearings in the delusion of wealth and power, *pramādyantam vittamohena médham*' (Katha Upanishad). Continued stagnation means death. So the Upanishads give us their gospel of hope for man through their grand theme: Man shall have wealth; man shall have power; man shall have all this; but he shall not get lost in any one of these. These are the means, not the end; he shall break through the crust of experience and realize the Atman, his divine Self which is Sat - Chit - Ānanda, Existence - Knowledge- Bliss. Thus do the Upanishads show us the way to creative living and fulfilment.

D. Dynamic Creativity

Creative living is a beautiful term. What is creativity? Merely doing the same things over and over again does not indicate creativity. The body, the senses, the nervous system, their recurring excitements and titillations do not make for creative living. Some time or another we have to break through the prison wall of body and mind. We have to reach true creativity, and it is this type of creativity that the Upanishads represent. Those who are modern fall into two categories. First, there are those who are modern simply because they use modern amenities. That is the ordinary meaning of the word modern. But there is another meaning, a more profound meaning. In the second meaning the modern man is he who is nourished on the spirit of science, who is alert of mind, and on the tract of truth, who has the capacity to question.

That man is modern who is inquisitive, who has the passion for truth, who never takes things for granted, but always strives to get into the heart of things. Such a modern mind is the mind closest to the spirit of the Upanishads. For in the Upanishads too there is this atmosphere of alertness, this mood of constant seeking, a deep passion for truth, a constant desire to forge ahead and not take things for granted in a complacent spirit. It is here that you find the close kinship between the Upanishads and the modern spirit. The spirit of inquiry which possessed the sages of the Upanishads led them to question experience, to question the environing world; it also led them to fearlessly question their gods and the tenets of their traditional faiths.

They showed their uniqueness in contrast to other gifted people of the ancient world, namely, the Greeks, who did not experience the same urge to subject their religion to that rational investigation which they so diligently and passionately applied to social and political phenomena. The Upanishadic and earlier—even the Vedic—sages did not also fear to doubt when rational, certain knowledge was difficult to come by. They illustrate the creative role of skepticism; in the pursuit of truth, such skepticism is but a prelude to

rational faith. When they sought for the truth of the external world, they found it difficult and baffling; inquiry only deepened the mystery. The Násadiya-Sékta of the Rig Veda records the impact of this mystery on the ancient Indian mind. The mind discovered early, as modern thinkers are slowly discovering today, that the mystery of the external world will only deepen and not diminish, in spite of advancing knowledge, if the mystery of the inner world is not tackled.

E. The Knower and the Known

For a complete philosophy of Reality, there is need to have data from both the fields of experience, the outer and the inner. Modern science has become aware of the influence of the datum of the observer on the knowledge of the observed data. If the Self as knower is inextricably involved in the knowledge of the not-Self, of the known, an inquiry into the nature of the Self and the nature of knowledge becomes not only a valid, but an indispensable and integral part of scientific investigation into the nature of Reality.

The Upanishads, therefore, were far in advance of human thought when they decided to dedicate themselves to the tackling of the inner world. They not only gave a permanent orientation to Indian culture and thought, but also blazed a trail for all subsequent philosophy in the East and the West. They reveal an age characterized by a remarkable ferment, intellectual and spiritual. It was one those rare ages in human history which have registered a distinct breakthrough in man's quest for truth and meaning, and which have held far-reaching consequences for all subsequent ages.

F. Spirituality is Man's Greatest Adventure

The Upanishads boldly proclaim that spirituality is the prerogative of every individual. This Atman, the divine, the immortal, is the Self of every man and woman and child. It is the true nature of man. It is also the true nature of all animals, but animals cannot realize it. The Upanishads tell us that wealth and power are not the highest glory of man. They do not condemn man's pursuit of worldly wealth and power; they never condemn any values pursued by man. They only say, 'there is something better and higher than these.' The Upanishads ever urge us to go on to the realization of this something better within us. Sri Ramakrishna, in one of his parables, tells the story of a woodcutter who, going into the forest to cut wood, was told by a holy man to go forward. Following this advice, in due course the woodcutter came across, first, a sandalwood forest, then, a silver mine, then, a gold mine, and, going deeper still into the forest, he found at last a diamond mine, and became exceedingly rich.

G. Transcending the Ego

The Upanishads summon man to a constant struggle to gain the highest, the struggle to achieve the eternal, the permanent, the immortal imbedded in life and experience. Other races and cultures have spoken of man as a dominator of external nature, as a creator of values in the context of man's collective life. In Greek thought, for example, we have the concept of the Promethean spirit, the power of the human spirit to overcome external

obstacles and establish man's supremacy over the forces of nature and, if necessary, over the forces of other human beings as well. The great defect in this line of thought, when pursued by itself, is that it does not carry all humanity together. It is based on the concept of man's dominating everything external to himself; it does not stress the need to chasten and overcome the ego, which results from such domination of his external environment. Man dominating his external environment is a valid concept; it is a form of human excellence.

The West has carried it to the highest level of expression. But this is not the highest that man is capable of. Indian thought will not accord it the highest point in the scale of human excellence. That point involves the transcendence of the ego and the emergence of the universal within man. When man achieves the supreme self-transcendence he finds that there is nobody to dominate. He finds that he is one with all, for he has realized the Self in all. In other words, he discovers himself as the Universal Man, integrated within and without, and himself pulsating in the heart of man and nature. This liberation of the Universal Man out of the common men and women that we are is the theme of the Upanishads.