



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

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ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2024; 10(2): 210-213

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 15-11-2023

Accepted: 21-12-2023

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The Anagnorisis of the Manifestations of the Brahma in the Oral Tradition of the *Kena Upaniṣad*

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Abstract:

Ventures to divulge the elusive nature of the Brahma have led to the myriad inquiries propounded in the *Upaniṣads*. Such questions, embarking from the curiosity of the young *śiṣyas* which propels the *guru* to unveil his contemplations upon the subject, form the quintessential discourse in the *Kena Upaniṣad*. However, the *ślokas* are also symbolically embedded with subtle lessons upon the proposed way of leading our life. This research paper aims to unravel those lessons and synchronize them in an empirical way. The paper exemplifies qualitative research where the library method of research has been carried out to substantiate the claims. The primary text is originally composed in Sanskrit, which is why the research paper contains multiple Indic names and words. All of them are written in accordance with the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). For scholarly purposes in some cases, the exact Sanskrit texts and words have been exerted. This paper attempts to demonstrate how the refulgence of the sacred wisdom expatiated in the *Kena Upaniṣad* not only deals with the theosophy, but also with our everyday life.

Keyword: *Kena Upaniṣad*, brahma, *guru*, *śiṣya*, questioning

Introduction

Hailed as one of the eleven major *Upaniṣads* as per most scholarly consensus, the *Kena Upaniṣad* indeed possesses a volume of gravity in the Sanskrit literature, although it might not be the oft-quoted ones. Located in the *Sāma Veda* (Talavakāra Brāhmaṇa, Chapter 9), it is also titled as the '*Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*' and the '*Jaiminīya Upaniṣad*' in some texts. The *Kena Upaniṣad*, just like the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, is also titled after the first word of the first *śloka*. The Sanskrit word '*kena*' implies a certain form of theosophical inquisition, meaning "by what", "by whom", or "how" the cosmos function. The entire text is divided into four *khaṇḍas*, containing thirty-four *mantras* and one *śānti mantra* placed twice (in the beginning and at the end). Whereas the *mantras* are eternal and *ipso facto* cannot be dated, the first recorded manuscript also has a controversial chronology apart from its unusual metrical structure, i.e. thirteen *mantras* in the form of *śloka* and twenty-one in prose. Dealing with the esoteric concepts of the *brahmavidyā* of the Sanātana Dharma, it has attracted theosophical masters like Ādi Śaṅkarācārya and Ānandagiri who have written several commentaries on it. The two commentaries (*viz.* *Kena Upaniṣad Prabhāṣya* and the *Kena Upaniṣad Vākyabhāṣya*) by the former scholar are of great importance. Although there is no unanimous agreement among the scholars from its chronology to its interpretations, this research paper endeavours to analyze the text from five pivotal aspects, followed by a conclusion.

Questioning and Seeking

Etymologically, the word very word '*Upaniṣad*' means "to sit together" or "to sit near". In the ancient time when the Indian education system was run by the *gurukula* tradition *in toto*, the *śiṣyas* used to sit near the *guru* and the *guru* used to verbally dictate the lessons on the theosophical aspects. Attaining the highest forms of wisdom through empirical enquiries, rational debates, and principled introspection was the prime object of these gatherings. The *Kena Upaniṣad* not only exemplifies this in the most ideal way, but it also encapsulates the cardinal tenets of such discourses. The gathering of the *guru* and the *śiṣyas* as an underlying context can easily be assumed. The sacred text begins with one *śiṣya* inquiring the *guru* about the source of the vim which regulates the function of the cosmos:

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ॐ केनेषितं पतति प्रेषितं मनः
केन प्राणः प्रथमः प्रैति युक्तः।
केनेषितां वाचमिमां वदन्ति
चक्षुः श्रोत्रं क उ देवो युनक्ति॥

(Kena Upaniṣad 1.1)

[By whose inspiration is the mind driven? Who employs it in the various domains that it acts upon? By whose volition is the air breathed, the words be spoken, the sights be seen, and the voices be heard?]

Whereas the Abrahmic faiths abhor all sorts of sceptical questions and interrogations upon what is prescribed in their holy texts, the Sanātana Dharma lays emphasis upon the celebration of the curiosity. Questioning and seeking are two aspects that have been, time and again, encouraged and promoted in this culture. Let us, for instance, refer to Arjuna's similar question in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (8.1-2) which might prove to be substantial in this regard:

किं तद्ब्रह्म किमध्यात्मं किं कर्म पुरुषोत्तम।
अधिभूतं च किं प्रोक्तं मधिदैवं किमुच्यते॥
अधियज्ञः कथं कोऽत्र देहेऽस्मिन्मधुसूदना
प्रयाणकाले च कथं ज्ञेयोऽसि नियतात्मभिः॥

[O lord! What is this Brahma? What is *ādhyātma*? What is *karma*? What is known by *adhibhūta*? What is *adhidaiva*? O Madhusūdana! What is *adhiyajña*? How is it in this physique? How is it experienced by the wise people at the last moment?] It is not just Arjuna who asks similar questions regarding such noble aspirations, but the whole of the Sanātana literature is stuffed with them. The *Kena Upaniṣad* is just one of them, but what makes it important is that whereas some religious texts decree to their devotees not to eat the 'Fruit of Knowledge' from the 'Tree of Reason', this text approves and embosoms such action. If Bhārata (India) wants to be a '*viśva guru*' once again as it envisages, it is imperative that the attitude of seeking and questioning must be instilled rather than allowing them passively to consume whatever the worldly views have to offer.

The Encrypted Axioms

Once the question is raised, the *guru*'s erudite response follows. However, he abstains from answering them in platitudes. His words are succulently entailed into a flurry of uncanny demonstrations. He asserts:

श्रोत्रस्य श्रोत्रं मनसो मनो यद्वाचो ह वाचं
स उ प्राणस्य प्राणः चक्षुषश्चक्षुः।
अतिमुच्य धीराः प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृता भवन्ति॥

(Kena Upaniṣad 1.2)

[That which is mental in the mind, that which is breathing in the breath, that which is voiced in the utterance, that which makes the ears auditory, that which visions the eyes – comes from the Brahma. One, who realizes this, attains the *mokṣa*.] But the effusion of mysticism holds no constrain as he then proceeds to enunciate the previous *śloka* in an even perplexing way:

यद्वाचाऽनभ्युदितं येन वागभ्युद्यते।
तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते॥
यन्मनसा न मनुते येनाहूर्मनो मतम्॥

तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते॥
यच्चक्षुषा न पश्यति येन चक्षूषि पश्यति।
तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते॥
यच्छ्रोत्रेण न शृणोति येन श्रोत्रमिदं श्रुतम्॥
तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते॥

(Kena Upaniṣad 1.4-7)

[The Brahma cannot be described by words for the lexicon itself originates from it. That, which can be described by words, is not the Brahma. The Brahma cannot be conceived by the mind for conceivability itself originates from it. That, which can be conceived by the mind, is not the Brahma. The Brahma cannot be seen by eyes for eyes themselves get their vision from it. That, which can be seen by the eyes, is not the Brahma. The Brahma cannot be heard for the audibility itself comes from it. That, which can be heard, is not the Brahma.] Indeed the Brahma is ineffable! It is beyond all sensory perceptions and which is why the multitudes of the negative connotations actually emerge as the only positive functionality to depict it. Many other major *Upaniṣads*, such as the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* et cetera, have echoed the same tone. For instance:

नान्तःप्रज्ञं न बहिष्प्रज्ञं नोभयतःप्रज्ञं नप्रज्ञानघनं
न प्रज्ञं नाप्रज्ञम्। अदृष्टमव्यवहार्यमग्राह्यमलक्षणं
अचिन्त्यमव्यपदेश्यमेकात्मप्रत्ययसारं प्रपञ्चोपशमं
शान्तं शिवमद्वैतं चतुर्थं मन्यन्ते स आत्मा स विज्ञेयः॥

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (7)

[It neither knows the inside, nor the outside. It knows no side. It is nowhere. It knows nothing. It does not see, nor can it be seen. It cannot be used. It cannot be accepted. It does not have any feature or aspect. It cannot be thought of. It is not located anywhere. The only proof of its existence is it itself because it does not exist. It is the *tabula rasa*, non-dual, and it is the *summum bonum*. One who knows this feature of the Brahma-that it cannot be known- is a wise man.]

Thus, it is congenial to articulate that the amalgamation of the affirmatives and the negatives formulate and, at the same time, eliminate the non-duality of the Brahma. It is all-pervading and yet it is a nonentity, void of action.

The Canons of the *Brahmavidyā*

One might find an extravagance of litotes in the esoteric statements of the *guru* and ask in a layman's words why there have been so much negative statements in the approach towards contemplating the aforesaid highest form of wisdom. Sadhguru, one of the most popular *yogīs* and mystics of contemporary times, has come up with one of the best arguments in this regard. In the IACTS Conference (2018), he uttered:

“Acknowledging that ‘I do not know’ is not a negative state of mind. Every discovery has come from this realization. ‘I do not know’ is an immense possibility. Only when you realize ‘I do not know’, the longing, the seeking, the possibility of knowing arises.”

But, quite intriguingly, he was, perhaps, reiterating the same words that are located in the *Kena Upaniṣad* (2.1) where it is stated that the Brahma is even beyond the metaphysical conceptualization orchestrated by the human intelligence:

यदि मन्यसे सुवेदेति दहरमेवापि
नूनं त्वं वेत्थ ब्रह्मणो रूपम्।
यदस्य त्वं यदस्य देवेष्वथ नु
मीमांस्येमेव ते मन्ये विदितम्॥

(Kena Upaniṣad 2.1)

[If you think you have known the Brahma, you have hardly known the real nature of it. You will blunder if you think that the Brahma is merely the source of the spirit that regulates the functions of the cosmos, for it is more and beyond.]

However, it is imperative to mark a clear distinction between the ignorance of a buffoon and the admission of the unknown made by the wise seeker. Ignorance is, by no means, considered to be bliss in the Sanātana Dharma, but rather a despicable vice that one must cast away.

But the twist in the plot comes when the *guru* unflinchingly upholds that he might not be capable of conjecturing the entirety of the Brahma, he is not at all utterly detached from the realization of its perpetual existence *hic et ubique*. In other words, it is neither that he knows the all of the Brahma, nor does he not know anything of it at all. This vacillation apparently conforms to a theosophical dilemma, but that is what we confront when we audaciously dare to define it. So, the *guru* synthesizes:

नाहं मन्ये सुवेदेति नो न वेदेति वेद च।
यो नस्तद्वेद तद्वेद नो न वेदेति वेद च॥
यस्यामतं तस्य मतं मतं यस्य न वेद सः।
अविज्ञातं विज्ञानतां विज्ञातमविज्ञानताम्॥
प्रतिबोधविदितं मतममृतत्वं हि विन्दते।
आत्मना विन्दते वीर्यं विद्यया विन्दतेऽमृतम्॥

(Kena Upaniṣad 2.2-4)

[I do not think that I know the Brahma, I also do not think that I do not know the Brahma for the *brahmavidyā* is not something that can be utterly known, as well as, not something that cannot be known at all. One, who thinks that the Brahma is not a subject that can be fathomed with the mundane wisdom, has realized the truth. Those, who boast of knowing him, hold a vain conceit. Those, who humbly acknowledge that it is unfathomable, have realized the truth. From that great realization, the vim to explore the Brahma arises and this everlasting exploration leads the wise men to immortality.]

The *brahmavidyā* is not just any other kind of education or a set of skills that can be acquired by mere perseverance. It is to be intrinsically realized with uttermost veneration towards the wisdom of the *Veda*. It is always imperative that the seeker is humble in acknowledging the fact that s/he is striving to immerse into an ocean of wisdom where one can delve deeper and deeper without ever finding the nadir.

The Fable of the Deities

The entire third *khaṇḍa* and the first *śloka* of the fourth *khaṇḍa* narrate a fable par excellence. Charles Johnston, an Irish theosophist of the nineteenth century, ascribed the fable as “one of the deepest passages in all of the *Upaniṣads*”. Once, the Devatās had a victory over the Dānavas in a battle that would, in turn, determine which clan would establish their claim and legacy over heaven. Post-victory, the Devatās revelled and rejoiced without paying homage to the Brahma. In a moment of celebrating the feat, they become hubristic

and insolent enough to disregard the Brahma by bragging and boasting about themselves to be the almighty.

In order to bring the Devatās to the path of *dharma*, the Brahma, who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, appeared in a disguised apparition of a *yakṣa*. Observing the luminous halo of the apparition, the Devatās were mesmerized and awestruck. Unable to hack their curiosity, they delegated Agni, the lord of the fire, to discover the identity of the mysterious being. When Agni appeared in front of the apparition, he was asked to express his identity first. Agni, who prided in his all-burning power, responded that he was the ‘*Jātaveda*’ for he possessed the energy to burn any physical entity into ashes. The mysterious being smiled and gave him a single leaf of grass to be burned down. Agni smirked and employed his flames in a frivolous manner, but it did not work. Taken aback, he then used all his powers to burn the grass leaf, but failed. Ashamed, Agni returned to the Devatās and expressed his inability. Then, the Devatās incited Vāyu, the lord of the air, to accomplish the task. When he went to the apparition, he too was asked the same question. Vāyu replied that he is revered as the ‘*Mātariśvā*’ for he could blow anything away with his force. The mysterious being smiled again and offered him that same single leaf of grass to be blown away. Vāyu exerted all his might, but he also bit the dust and returned disappointed. Observing this, Indra, the king of the Devatās and the mightiest of them all, decided to confront that mysterious figure. But as soon as he appeared to the spot, the apparition vanished and, in its place, there stood Umā Devī, the virgin incarnation of Devī Pārvatī, the supreme goddess. Identifying her, Indra immediately bowed down and humbly asked her who that mysterious being was. Umā Devī blessed Indra and uttered with conspicuousness:

सा ब्रह्मेति होवाच ब्रह्मणो वा एतद्विजये महीयध्वमिति ततो हैव विदाञ्चकार
ब्रह्मेति॥

[It was the Brahma itself. The victory you had was because of his will, and not because of your valour as you misunderstood. He wanted you to know the ultimate truth.]

Thus, the Brahma shattered the illusion of the Devatās by enlightening them with the celestial truth. As a result, Agni, Vāyu, and Indra together are regarded as the triumvirate of the deities in the heavenly sphere. However, Indra is regarded as the chieftain of them because although the former two caught a glimpse of the Brahma in disguise, Indra was the first amongst them to discover the wisdom of the *brahmavidyā*.

This fable teaches us that, as Aristotle in his *Poetics* pointed out, hubris leads to downfall. Therefore, we must not become arrogant of our calibre and potential. The youth is the backbone of the country, and if Bhārata (India) wants to be the ‘*viśva guru*’ again, our youth must be saved from the vainglorious egotism and atheistic hedonism.

The Way of the Wise

Carrying on from the previous segment, the *Kena Upaniṣad* has one vital advice for the all of us. It asserts importance over life and, especially, on the present moment that we are living. Not only it vehemently stimulates our cognitive faculty to meditate upon the Brahma, but also incessantly reminds us that whatever we contrive in the abstract must also be concretely manifested in this life and this life alone. That is the way of the wise as per the *Kena Upaniṣad* as the wise folks always assert important over the present life and the present deed:

इह चेदवेदीदथ सत्यमस्ति
न चेदिहावेदीन्महती विनष्टिः।
भूतेषु भूतेषु विचित्य धीराः
प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृता भवन्ति॥

(*Kena Upaniṣad* 2.5)

[If one realizes this sublime truth within his or her lifetime, it is the greatest good for him or her. If one does not, it is the worst fatality. Knowing this, the great and the wise beings attain immortality.]

Now, the *Kena Upaniṣad* not merely leaves us with the advice to indulge into the theosophical notions, it also ascertains the ways to attain it. With three simple words, it paves the way for a sustainable solution for the human beings. Devoting the self to the will of the Brahma, one must perform *tapa* (spiritual endeavour), *dama* (rigorous control over the mind), and *karma* (action) in this present life to attain the ever-blissful *brahmavidyā*.

तसै तपो दमः कर्मेति प्रतिष्ठा वेदाः सर्वाङ्गानि
सत्यमायतनम्॥

(*Kena Upaniṣad* 4.7-8)

[The *brahmavidyā* can only be attained by *tapa* (spiritual endeavour), *dama* (rigorous control over the mind), and *karma* (action). Only by these, one can realize the wisdom of the *Veda*.]

Conclusion

It is always a bane upon the researcher working on the theosophical aspects to draw a definite conclusion that would incorporate all the elementary ideas in a laconic way. But when it comes to the *Kena Upaniṣad*, perhaps there can be no better way to sum up the arguments and conclude the article than to quote the *śānti mantra* of the sacred text itself. In this *mantra*, one prays for the *śānti* of the three spheres of the cosmos: the *ādhyātmika* (beyond the self), *adhibhautika* (beyond the matter), and *adhidaivika* (beyond the divinity).

ॐ आप्यायन्तु ममाङ्गानि वाक्प्राणश्चक्षुः श्रोत्रमथो बलमिन्द्रियाणि च
सर्वाणि। सर्वं ब्रह्मौपनिषदं माऽहं ब्रह्म निराकुर्यां मा मा ब्रह्म निराकरोद
निराकरणमस्त्वं निराकरणं मेऽस्तु। तदात्मनि निरते य उपनिषत्सु धर्मास्ते मयि
सन्तु ते मयि सन्तु। ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः॥

[O Supreme Being! May all my organs, words, breaths, eyes, ears, and senses be invigorated by your celestial grace! The Brahma, of whom the *Upaniṣads* sing, may never be detached from me, nor I from it! May all the *dharmas* that the *Upaniṣads* talk of be perpetually exemplified by my actions! May everyone attain *śānti* in the three realms of the *ādhyātmika*, *adhibhautika*, and *adhidaivika*!]

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