



Peace Chant in Upanishads

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Introduction

All Upanishads begin with peace invocations called *shanti patha*. The Mundaka Upanishad, for instance, opens with two peace invocations. The significance is that, knowing full well that nothing happens in the world without the sanction of the Divine the Vedic *rishis* humbly seek guidance and blessings from the Divine so that their efforts may be fruitful. In all the Upanishads the first words invoke peace, not only for oneself but also for maintaining balance in the whole universe. Brahman, which is denoted by *Aum*, the *satyam* (the Real), the *ritam* (the cosmic order) is in equilibrium and in peace. The Vedic *rishis* experienced the fact that an individual is at peace with himself when he is at peace with his surroundings, when the *jivatma* (individual soul) has established an inseparable bond with the *Vishvatma* (Universal Soul). We are one with the universe and the universe is one with us; as long as this Oneness is not realised, there will be lack of balance and peace. The Brahman is in continuous

communion with Itself to be at peace with Itself and with the whole universe. Let us consider this *Shanti patha*:

ॐ भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवा भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिः व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ॥



Aum! O gods, the effulgent ones, may we with our ears hear what is propitious! While engaged in sacrifices, may we behold with our eyes what is propitious! May we, with firm and strong body and mind, lead a life full of worship working for the Divine.

Aum! Peace Peace Peace!

Understanding Aum

This is the first part of the *Shanti patha*. Everything starts with *Aum*. It consists of three letters – ‘a’, ‘u’, ‘m’ and the *bindu*. When ‘m’ is uttered with the mouth closed then there is an inner vibration known as the *nada-bindu*. This vibration is due to the short vowel (ā) which is a nasal sound similar to the resonance which follows the striking of a gong or bell. The main purpose here is to make the study fruitful to us. *Aum* has been defined in the Vedas in various ways because it symbolizes the whole gamut of spiritual wisdom relating man and the universe.

Aum can be subjectively interpreted in terms of the individual self. Corresponding to the four ‘parts’ of *Aum*, there are four states of the individual soul or *jivatma*. The *aham*, or ‘I’, fluctuates between these four states of awareness. In the waking state we are awake and alert. After some hours of hard work we are tired and go to sleep in which there are dreams. This state is called the dream state. While dreaming we are not aware that we are dreaming; for us the dream

is as real as the waking experience. We know we were dreaming only when we wake up and compare our surroundings with the dream experience. Then we realize that the latter was not real.

The third state is deep, dreamless, undisturbed sleep. On waking from this it takes a few moments to remember where one is and what the circumstances are, for in deep sleep one is not aware of the space, time and causation; only gradually do they soak into our consciousness again on waking. Then one says of his experience: 'Oh, I had such a joyous deep sleep. I was not aware of anything.' Unlike the dream state, in deep sleep the person experiences immense joy which is remembered after returning to waking state. We are ignorant about the source of the joy, so we say 'I knew nothing' though we experience the joy during that state. The veil of *avidya* or ignorance covers our real nature; still the bliss percolates through.

There is a fourth stage of awareness called *turiya-avastha* (*turiya* means transcendental). Going into *nirvikalpa samadhi*, (absolute concentration free of any differentiation), the individuality merges with Brahman, and the experience is—'This Self is Brahman, I am Brahman' (*Ayam atma brahma, Aham brahma asmi*). The aspirant experiences immense bliss in the glory of the Self. This occurs only through one's continued disciplined effort under the guidance of the guru, and with the grace of the Divine. It cannot be described as it is beyond the realm of relativity where alone words can be used. In this state the phenomenal world totally disappears and one is identified with the Essence of the universe, which is symbolized by the dot (*nada-bindu*) of the *Aum*.

Aum can also be seen as suggesting the forty-nine letters of the Sanskrit alphabet in their various permutations and combinations as 'a' is the starting point which ends with 'm' and 'u' rolls over

representing the other alphabets. Then the dot stands for the ultimate purpose of language, which lies beyond language itself: 'failing to reach which i.e., Brahman, speech falls back together with the mind.' Language is a vehicle through which man can attain to a level which is beyond language—this is how one can look at *Aum*.

Another Meaning of Aum

Aum can also be objectively interpreted, as the foundation on which the concept of the Oneness of the creation or universe is based. The universe can be classified into three categories. The first letter 'a' symbolizes the gross, physical, material aspect of universe which is perceived by the senses. It is called *jagat* because it changes constantly (*gaccati iti jagat*). Like the water of a fast flowing river the *jagat* or physical universe is never the same; it flows as a continuous stream in time-space-causation (*desha-kala-nimitta*) which is its underlying strata.

The second letter 'u', stands for the subtle aspect of the universe, which exists behind the things of the gross world. The senses have an upper and lower range beyond which they cannot perceive, though we can find ways to increase this range. For example, we have been able to increase or decrease the wavelength of sound to bring it within hearing level. Still, sounds exist which we do not hear with our ears. So it is with these subtle objects beyond the gross form. The subtle world, which is behind the manifested gross world, is not readily perceivable unless one's faculties or instruments are developed to bring it within the boundaries of our experience. The principles of time-space-causation, on which the gross world functions, are also part of the subtle world.

The third letter 'm', denotes the causal principle, the cause of both gross and subtle aspects of this universe. Why does one see the

world as tangible when in fact it is not? Why does one seek permanency in this transient world? Everyone knows that being born they will die but none is prepared to accept it and face the truth. It is because of the non perception of the Real Substratum that we take the appearance as true. We are unable to grasp the Truth underlying the world. However, we import and impose the permanence of the Reality onto the objects of this impermanent world. This ignorance is the fundamental cause of all misery. Everything in this universe depends on this divine Cause, or Source. Thus our inability to analyse this world correctly and to thoroughly grasp the truth behind the whole play of the universe is the cause of all suffering. Ultimately, not understanding the truth of the Oneness of *jivatma* and *paramatma* is known as primal cause or primal ignorance.

But by explaining the gross, subtle and causal aspects of the universe nothing positive has been suggested about their source the Absolute. The Ultimate Reality exists. It is both immanent and transcendent. When one sees someone as a human, it is partial seeing. When seen as a manifestation of the Divine, that perception is a little more complete. And when Absolute Knowledge dawns then one experiences the oneness of the seer, the seen and all the aspects of the universe. The Absolute, which is manifested in so many names and forms, is in its absoluteness beyond all diversity. This is suggested by the *nadadhvani*, the concluding nasal sound of the *Aum*. It suggests that there is only One Reality in the universe, and that It is manifesting as everything. The causal principle is what prevents one from seeing the Absolute in its totality as the immutable, without alternatives, formless Self, which is Absolute Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*chit*) and Bliss (*ananda*).

The significance of the symbol '*Aum*' is not confined to the scriptures alone, but applies to all knowledge, science and technology, called the *apara-vidya* or lesser knowledge. All branches

of knowledge, both scientific and philosophical, take into consideration the gross, subtle and causal aspects but the substratum of everything is the Spirit or Self. Thus, the purpose of the study of the Upanishads is to experience the Truth denoted by *Aum* in the *shanti-patha*, the prayer for inner peace, and not simply to recite it. The Upanishads ask for nothing apart from peace— neither success, nor wealth, nor victory nor any other-worldly object, because it is the peaceful mind alone which can fathom the secrets of Nature.

Understanding the Way to Peace

The invocation is addressed to *devas*, or lords of the universe. The concept of *devas* in the Upanishads should be harmonized with the concept of the universe we have today. To our ancestors at the Upanishadic time *devis* and *devatas* were not glorified human forms but were addressed as the principles controlling Nature. The word *Deva* here is derived from the verb *dyu dyotane* meaning 'to shine'. It refers to the 'effulgent ones', implying not only bright light but also that which removes lack of understanding. Each branch of learning follows a certain principle; get hold of it and that whole branch is within your grasp. In the invocation the principles of the universe governing sound, etc., are being addressed:

'O Principles of the universe! You who guide and conduct the cosmic affairs in a rhythmic manner, we pray to you to help us to use the hearing organ to hear only that which is inspiring, so that we may become worthy and adequately qualified to know the meaning of the sacred word Aum, the Truth.'

1. The prayer to the *devas* is a request that we may hear only the *bhadra*, the good. *Bhadra* also means grace. It means hearing, by the grace and guidance of the *devas*, all the truths in the world that are gracious, uplifting and ennobling. For only this will help us to

experience the total meaning of the symbol *Aum*. Therefore worship starts with this prayer that we may be granted the blessing of hearing the good. We are endowed with five senses, and we beg the *devatas* to help us put those senses to use only in order to attain to Oneness, through the experience of the meaning of *Aum*.

2. Then follows the second part of the prayer:

'Let our eyes develop the power of seeing everything in the world that ennobles us, inspires us, and makes us full of grace.'

The eyes, which now only see the various ordinary forms, should be enabled to see the unified essence of these forms. The Divine is to be seen everywhere by disciplining the organ of vision. The sages say that when the body-consciousness of an individual is absolutely melted away, he then experiences non-difference between himself and *Paramatman*, the Supreme Self, wherever his mind may roam.*

The performance of offerings or sacrifice, *yajna*, was an obligatory duty of life. It was more than merely the performance of a sacrifice with fire and other materials. It symbolized our obligation to parents, teachers, friends, society, spouse, children, other creatures, natural resources—to all the things that enable us to live and be comfortable. Above all, it symbolizes our obligation to ourselves, to be the knower of the Self. Such an obligation is *yajna*, and its application is universal. Seeing and hearing the good while performing the duties of life, does not hinder or stop the flow of our lives. The mistake we make is to equate spirituality with otherworldliness. But nowhere in the Upanishads is one asked to run away from the realities of life. In fact, the command is to perform *yajña*, sacrifice, as a daily duty in the world. This was relevant in the past and it is more so today.

3. Now we come to the third part of the prayer:

'May we, with firm and strong body and mind, lead a life full of worship doing work for the Divine.'

Most psychologists say that the movements of the body are controlled, motivated or guided by the movements of the mind. The Upanishad highlights the same in a different manner. Until you are physically stable and have got rid of your bodily restlessness, your mind too will jump around like a monkey that has been given wine and then been attacked by a swarm of bees. Thus the purpose here is to control all the limbs of the body and thereby gain control of the mind. For example sitting relaxed and still in *padmasana*, a yoga posture suitable for meditation, helps one to control the erratic movements of the mind. So the prayer is that the body and mind may be strong and calm. This will let us enjoy a long life for *devahita*, that is to say for the good of the many through the *devas*, the effulgent principles of the universe.

Vyashema means to enjoy, not selfishly but by dedicating oneself to the welfare of society under the guidance of the Divine. The ancient philosophers were greatly introspective, no doubt, but they also gave importance to the world in which they lived. There was no question of living in disharmony or in isolation, or for one's own self-interest. So they prayed for a life beneficial to one and all, and also in harmony with the principles of the universe, so as to be able to contribute to them and not to clash with them. They desired to be part and parcel of the symphony and equilibrium Bliss which is the purpose of human life. This comes only when one has grown beyond the demands of the body and mind and is no longer bound by them. Now let us consider the second part of the Shanti patha:

स्वस्ति न इन्द्रो वृद्धश्रवाः । स्वस्ति नः पूषा विश्ववेदाः ।
स्वस्ति नस्तार्क्ष्योऽरिष्टनेमिः स्वस्ति नो बृहस्पतिर्दधातु ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

'May Indra confer undisturbed prosperity on us. May Vriddhashrava (the ancient), Pushan, Vishvaveda (sustainer of the world and allknowing one), Tarkshya (celestial bird), Arishtanemi (protector from harm), Brihaspati (preceptor of devas), bestow on us undisturbed sustenance to grow in our endeavour. Aum! Peace Peace Peace!'

This is the second part of the peace-chant. In the earlier prayer the word *shanti* was used. In this verse the key word is *svasti*. The nearest meaning of *svasti* is 'absence of disturbance.'

Further, in this verse Indra, Pusan and Brihaspati are mentioned by name, whereas in the earlier verse only principles of nature were spoken of. Those principles are now personalized, so as to make communication with them easy. The sages must have thought that the principles by which rain, thunder, and lightning occurred needed to be identified and given names, so that prayers could be offered to them. Indra is thought of as the mastermind behind all the natural forces which either help or trouble the insignificant human being. He is the master-controller of all the forces of nature that can make life enjoyable and free from danger.

Vriddhashrava means the most ancient, the most powerful and revered. So the prayer is to Indra, the master of all the gods, to let us live free in *svasti*, from any disturbance. Pushan is the *deva* or god who manages the affairs of Mother Earth—the fertility of the land, the flow of the rivers, the atmosphere on which our existence depends,

and so on. Let it be auspicious and propitious so that life is undisturbed.

Arishtanemi is the *deva* who protects us from the evil influences that come between us and attainment of the Divine, and who helps us understand the secret of the Upanishads, which is our goal.

Brihaspati is the god of wisdom and we pray to him to prevent us from losing our balance and wisdom, to help us control ourselves, and thus to allow us to live undisturbed. In this way the prayer is that the forces of the universe may give us peace and the opportunity to manifest fully our creative talents.

Conclusion

This two-part *shanti-patha*, though ancient, is very modern and relevant to our times, for it is a prayer for peace. And it makes it clear that this human life has not been given to us to be lived as if we were simply a biological creature, but as a *manava*, a human being, who has the capacity to control the movement of the *manas* or mind. In this way we are differentiated from the animal world.

The purpose of our being born is to realise our true nature as well as the origin of Nature and the relation or equation of the two. This is clearly the purpose of the first part of the *shanti patha*. And the second part tells us of the struggle necessary to emancipate ourselves from the bondage created through innumerable births. Thus we pray for help to the *devas* of the universe who are stronger and wiser than us.



References :

* cf. *Drigdrishya-viveka*, 30, *Sarasvatirahasyopanishad*, 55

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