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The Story of Prajapati and Its Meaning

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The Upanishads are called Vedanta. The purpose of the Upanishads is to teach man his real nature and the way to know it. A man is what his core is and the Upanishads say that man's core is divine and knowledge of this core—Self—is the purpose of human life. Not only is man's core divine, the whole creation is, in essence, divine. Says Swami Vivekananda, the modern *rishi*, 'We believe that every being is divine, is God.'¹ Explaining this, Swamiji further said:

"The whole universe is one. There is only One Self in the universe, only One Existence, and that One Existence, when it passes through the forms of time, space, and causation, is called by different names."

*'Everything in the universe is that One, appearing in various forms. Therefore the whole universe is all one in the Self, which is called Brahman. That Self when it appears behind the universe is called God. The same Self when it appears behind this little universe, the body, is the soul.'*²

The Use of Stories

In order to simplify this highest knowledge and make it available to a commoner, the Upanishads often clothed it in stories and similes. The stories of Nachiketa in Katha Upanishad, Uma Haimavati in Kena Upanishad, Bhrigu's quest for Brahman in the Taittiriya Upanishad, and Prajapati's instructions to Indra in Chandogya Upanishad are some of the best known examples.

Here is a charming and highly inspiring story from the Chandogya Upanishad.³

Once Prajapati, a knower of Brahman, declared:

"The Atman which is free from evil, free from old age, free from death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst, whose desire is of the truth, whose resolve is of the truth, he should be sought, him one should desire to understand. He who has found out and who understands that Atman attains all the worlds and all the desires."

Both gods and demons heard this proclamation. Indra among the gods and Virochana among the Asuras, then approached Prajapati and said :

"We have heard that the Atman has to be known, the Atman that is not touched by sin, or old age or death or sorrow or thirst or hunger, the Atman whose desires are always true (satyakama), whose resolutions are always firm. Please instruct us about this Atman".

Prajapati asked them to practice austerities and celibacy for thirty-two years, and then instructed them thus: 'The Purusha (the Self) visible in the eyes, reflected in the water or in the mirror is the Atman. Look at yourselves in water and let me know what you see.'

When they did this Prajapati asked them, 'What did you see?' 'We saw the whole body', they said. Prajapati asked them to dress well and again look at the image and they said that the images also looked well-dressed. Prajapati said, 'This is the Atman that you seek', and they went away satisfied.

Virochana went back to the Asuras and proclaimed, 'The body is the Atman, serve it well and you will obtain all your desires here and hereafter'. To this day people generally say, 'He is a *demor*' when a person has no charitable nature, no faith in the supernatural realms, who never worships gods, who does not perform sacrifices, who is selfish, and body-centred. Those who are identified with the body and think that the body is very valuable, and cater to its whims, falsely thinking that it is the true self of man—in other words, those who identify themselves with the body and worship it are called Asuras, the children of Virochana.

Now let us follow Indra. As a result of living a right type of austere life, Indra became endowed with intelligence, the power of discernment. On his way back he reflected, 'If the Atman becomes lame if the body is lame, and blind if the body is blind, and is well-dressed if the body is well-dressed, and is

destroyed if the body is destroyed—I see no good in this teaching.'

So he went back to Prajapati who asked him to live a life of celibacy for another thirty-two years. Then he said: 'He who moves about as the Lord in the state of dream, is the Self, the Atman.' Indra, again reflected on the way back:

"Though this dream Purusha is not affected by any damage to the body, yet at times he is being chased or hurt or that Purusha feels pain or weeps. This certainly cannot be the Self. "

Again he went back to Prajapati. After thirty-two years more of celibacy, Indra was told, 'The Self in the state of deep sleep is the Atman, immortal, fearless, he is Brahman'. Indra again expressed doubt: 'The Self is not affected by dream, or damage to or destruction of the body, but it seems not to know itself, and is, as it were, dead in this state of deep sleep (*sushupti*). I do not see any real good in this.'

He again went to Prajapati and was told to practise celibacy for five more years. Thus he lived a spiritual life for a total of one hundred and one years. This indicates one should devote, if necessary, one's whole life for spiritual practice.

At last Prajapati found Indra to receive the true teaching and instructed him:

'O Indra, mortal indeed is this body, held by death. But it is the support of this deathless, bodiless Atman. Verily,

the embodied self is held by pleasure and pain. Surely, there is no cessation of pleasure and pain for one who is embodied. But pleasure and pain do not indeed touch one who is bodiless.

'Bodiless is air; and white cloud, lightning, thunder, these also are bodiless. Now as these arise out of the yonder sky, reach the highest light and appear each with its own form, even so this serene one rises out of this body, reaches the highest light and appears in his own form. He is the Highest Person. There he moves about, laughing, playing, rejoicing with women, vehicles or relations, not remembering this body in which he was born. As an animal is attached to a chariot, even so is the life attached to this body.

Now, where the sight merges in space (inside the eye, i.e., the black pupil of the eye), there exists that which is the person in the eye; and the eye is only for seeing. And he who knows 'I smell this' is the Atman; the nose is for smelling. And he who knows 'I speak this', is the Atman, the organ of speech is for speaking. And he who knows 'I hear this' is the Atman; the ear is for hearing.

And he who knows 'I think this', is the Atman, the mind is his divine eye. Through this divine eye of the mind he verily sees these desired objects which are in the Brahman-world, and rejoices.

Verily, this is the Atman whom the gods worship. Therefore all the worlds and all the desired objects are

held by them. He obtains all the worlds all the desired objects, who having known that Atman (from the teacher and the scriptures) understands it.'

The Moral of the Story

The story above is instructive in many ways.

Some people criticise Prajapati saying that deliberately he misled his students by not speaking of the Atman outright. This view is not correct. He was leading his students gradually from a lower to a higher state of understanding. A good teacher always suits his teaching to the receptivity of his student. Had he given the highest truth at the very outset, they would not have understood it.

This becomes clear if we reflect on the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He used to say that no one could achieve anything until the right time comes. A mother-bird will not break open the shell until the chick is fully formed and is ready to come out. Here 'right time' means acquisition of fitness to receive what is given.

We may recollect that Sri Ramakrishna awakened the spiritual consciousness of many of his devotees on first January 1886 by his divine touch. But on that day he did not bless two devotees saying they will have to wait but will receive his grace later on. We may also recollect that the great Swami Vivekananda was also not able to withstand Sri Ramakrishna's touch on his first visit to Dakshineswar. So also Mathur could not sustain the ecstatic state granted to him by Sri Ramakrishna.

Likewise, the same teaching was given to both Indra and Virochana. While Indra's education continued, Virochana's progress stopped because he did not reflect on the teaching properly but was satisfied with what he (mis)understood. This shows us that much depends on our aspiration, sincerity and receptivity. Austerities purify the mind and that is the only way to develop our receptivity.

Both Indra and Virochana were asked by Prajapati to live the life of celibacy (*brahmacharya*) for thirty-two years. Both of them did as they were instructed. Yet Virochana was unable to grasp the teaching clearly. Just as we can infer the cause by observing the effect, we can guess that though Virochana did perform austerity, it did not serve the purpose for he could not grasp his teacher's words rightly.

In Hindu mythology we come across many instances of demons like Ravana, Narakasura or Bana who performed rigorous austerities. Instead of making their minds pure, their austerities only intensified their worldly desires like lust, greed, jealousy and anger. As a result, they did immense harm to others and in the end had to be vanquished. Swami Yatiswarananda (1889-1966), Vice President of the Ramakrishna Order, used to say that the development of concentration without some amount of mental purity can only harm us and others.

What is True Tapasya?

We find in the Upanishads the idea of tapas acquired a variety of meanings such as knowledge, meditation or concentration of the mind and the control of the senses. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that 'Truthfulness is the greatest austerity for this age', because Truthfulness leads to the realization of Truth.

Once Swami Brahmananda was asked about austerity. He replied:

'It is to direct the mind towards God in order to taste divine bliss. Sri Ramakrishna's message in this age is renunciation of lust and gold. Real austerity consists in the control of the passions. It is very difficult to renounce lust and greed, to give up the desire for name and fame. Real austerity is based upon these three principles: First, take refuge in the truth. Truth is the pillar to which you must always hold while performing any action. Second, conquer lust. Third, renounce all cravings. Observe these three principles. That is real austerity, and the greatest of these is to conquer lust.' 4

Clearly, the purpose of Tapasya or austerity is to purify the mind and direct it towards God.

If after performing austerity one becomes a slave to passions that cannot be called austerity. Apparently Virochana did live a life of brahmacharya but obviously it did not bring about the right result. Had he lived a right type of life, his mind would have become pure and he would have been able to reflect on the instruction of his teacher correctly. He would have come to

the same conclusion as Indra that the body could not be the Atman, for the body is subject to the six-fold changes like growth, old age, disease, death and so on. Had he understood the teaching properly, like Indra, he too would not have stopped until he realised Brahman.

Vedanta, however, assures that no one is lost forever. Everyone will, in due course, turn towards higher life. Many spiritual aspirants fall into the same trap as Virochana. While we find them doing so much japa, pilgrimage, study of scriptures and charities, we do not find them much changed. In fact, sometimes, we find them even more self-centred, uncaring, and blissfully unaware of their behaviour.

Understanding the 'Three States'

One of the favourite themes of the Upanishads is the analysis of three states (*avastha traya*) of our normal life. Prajapati's instructions also mention these three states of the self: the waking state (*jagrata*), the dream state (*svapna*) and the state of deep-sleep (sushupti). By mentioning them, he gradually leads his pupils to Turiya, the stateless state.

Every being experiences these three states. The Atman as the lower self functions in these three different states : the waking state, which experiences gross objects; the dream state, which experiences subtle objects; and the state of deep sleep, in which it experiences rest and relaxation. Brahman as *chit* or Absolute Consciousness illumines the activities of the senses and mind during their states of waking and dreaming, as well as their inactivity in dreamless sleep.

Through proper analysis we can conclude that deep sleep, dream and waking are three distinct and independent states, each with its peculiar characteristics and each implying the absence of the other two, though Pure Consciousness is present in all the three states all the time. We infer Pure Consciousness because conscious beings can never conceive of unconsciousness. Some circumstances, which are present in one of the states, are absent in other states. Naturally, what is present in one state but is absent in another is inessential and does not form part of the real Self. Each state clearly contradicts the other two states.

All the time we are changing from one state to another state. Whatever is changeable cannot be real. What then is real? The unchangeable alone is real. There must be an entity which remains unchangeable which at the same time is the knower, the cogniser, the witness of these states. It is to this unchanging being which is the Self or Atman to which Prajapati leads Indra.

This is how the process of self-analysis takes an aspirant to the Knowledge of the Self. Sri Ramakrishna summarises the essence of this story so succinctly through a beautiful parable:

'Yes, all one's confusion comes to an end if one only realizes that it is God who manifests Himself as the atheist and the believer, the good and the bad, the real and the unreal; that it is He who is present in waking and in sleep; and that He is beyond all these.'

*'There was a farmer to whom an only son was born when he was rather advanced in age. As the child grew up, his parents became very fond of him. One day the farmer was out working in the fields, when a neighbour told him that his son was dangerously ill—indeed, at the point of death. Returning home he found the boy dead. His wife wept bitterly, but his own eyes remained dry. Sadly the wife said to her neighbours, "Such a son has passed away, and he hasn't even one tear to shed!" After a long while the farmer said to his wife: "Do you know why I am not crying? Last night I dreamt I had become a king, and the father of seven princes. These princes were beautiful as well as virtuous. They grew in stature and acquired wisdom and knowledge in the various arts. Suddenly I woke up. Now I have been wondering whether I should weep for those seven children or this one boy." To the followers of Jnana ^{Marga} the waking state is no more real than the dream state.'*⁵

When one reaches the state of Turiya then one becomes free; only then does one truly understand Prajapati's declaration. He then reaches a state of blessedness and remains immersed in Eternal Bliss.

References

1. CW, 4: 357
2. CW, 2: 461
3. cf. *Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII. vii - xii
4. cf. *The Eternal Companion*, p. 205
5. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 236