Chapter IV. Mundaka Upanishad

This Upanishad begins with an invocation, praying that the eye may see auspicious things, that the ear may hear auspicious sounds, and that life may be spent in contemplation of the Lord. The teaching of this Upanishad is referred to as knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-vidya), either because it describes first the message of Hiranyakarabha, the causal Brahman, or because the message relates the glory of Brahman. This Upanishad speaks of knowledge of Brahman as the mystery that only those with shaven heads and those who go through a rite of having fire on the shaved head can understand. So, it is called Shaven Head (Mundaka). This Upanishad is honoured as the crest of all, since it expounds the very essence of knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-jnana). It is assigned to the Fourth Veda, the Atharvana.

The transcendent and immanent aspects of Supreme Reality

This knowledge has been handed down from teacher to pupil by word of mouth, enriched and confirmed by experience. When it deals with the attributeless principle, it is also called the knowledge of the Transcendent (Para-vidya); when it deals with the attribute-full, the materialised principle, it is called the knowledge of the immanent (a-Para-vidya), not the transcendent aspect. These two are found in this Upanishad. They were taught by Sounaka to Angiras; that is what the text announces. The Vedas and the subsidiary texts (Vedangas) deal with knowledge of the immanent or materialised aspect of Brahman. The Upanishads deal specifically with knowledge of the transcendent Brahman. But the interesting thing is: knowledge of the immanent, materialised Brahman leads to the knowledge of the transcendent Brahman, which is the goal.

The spider evolves out of itself the magnificent manifestation of the web; so too, this moving, changing world is manifested from the causative Brahman. The objective world is the product of the creator-creation complex. It is true, factual, and useful as long as one is unaware of the Reality. The utmost that one can gain by activity—that is, holy or sacred activity—is heaven (swarga), which has a longer lease of life but nevertheless has an end. So, the seeker loses all yearning for heaven and approaches an elderly teacher full of compassion, who instructs the seeker in the discipline for realising Brahman.

Brahman is both the material and the instrumental cause of the world

All beings are Brahman and no other. They all emanate from Brahman. Just as sparks emanate from fire, just as hair grows on the skin but is different from it, so too beings originate from Brahman. Brahman causes the sun, moon, stars, and planets to revolve in space; Brahman grants the consequence of all acts of beings. The individual (jivi) and the Lord (Iswara), the individual and the Universal, are two birds sitting on the same tree—the human body. The individual acts and suffers the consequences of those acts. The Lord sits quietly, as a witness of the other bird. When the individual looks at the Lord and realises that it is but an image, it escapes from grief and pain. When the mind is drawn by yearning to know the Lord, all other low desires diminish and disappear. Then, knowledge of Atma is attained.

The last mantra of this Upanishad declares that its aim is to make people attain that spiritual wisdom (jnana). Munda means head, and we can say that this Upanishad is the head of all Upanishads. Even the Brahma Sutra
devotes two chapters to elaborate on the inner meaning of the mantras of this Upanishad.

This Upanishad has three sections, with two chapters in each. In the first section, knowledge of the materialised aspect of Brahman (a-Para-vidya) is dealt with; in the second, knowledge of the transcendent Supreme (Para-vidya) and the means of mastering it. In the third, the nature of the Reality and of the release from bondage are defined. Activity (karma) that helps attain the Brahman is described in the mantras. That is why this Upanishad is respected as very sacred.

As already indicated, the spider spins out the web from itself without any extraneous agency; it also takes in the web it has spun. So too, creation was effected without an agent and the universe emanated. This nature (prakriti) is but a transformation of the basic Brahman, like pot from mud, cloth from cotton, jewels from gold. So, Brahman is called the material (upadana) cause of nature. It is also the instrumental cause (nimitta-karana). For, nature can be the result only of a higher intelligence, an intelligence that is all-comprehensive (sarva-jna).

**Perform individual duties as well as public service activities**

Heaven is the highest attainable stage through activity (karma). Of such rites (karmas), the worship of fire, called agnihotra, is the chief. The performance of such rites contribute to the cleansing of the mind. Such cleansing is a necessary preliminary to knowledge of the Transcendent (Para-vidya). The flames that rise high from the sacrificial altar of fire appear to the performers as if they are hailing them on to realise the Reality or Brahman. One who does the rite with full awareness of the significance of the mantra is able to reach the solar splendour, through the offerings made; they take the performer to the region of Indra, the Lord of the gods.

The Vedas recommend two types of obligatory activities (karmas): individually auspicious and charitably auspicious (ishta and purtha). The rite of agnihotra, adherence to truth, asceticism (tapas), study of the Vedas, service offered to guests in one’s home —these are individually auspicious.

Construction of temples, caravanserais, rest-houses, tanks, planting of avenue trees —such acts are charitable. These give consequences that are beneficial, but all such cause-effect chains are transient; they are fundamentally defective.

**Om is the arrow and Brahman the target**

The entire creation is bound up with name and form and is thus unreal. It can be described in words, so it is limited and circumscribed by the intellect and the mind. Only the supreme Person (Parama-purusha) is eternal, real, and pure. He is the prompter of activity and the dispenser of consequence. But He is beyond the eye, beyond the intellect. Like the spokes of a wheel that radiate from the hub, that lead from all directions to the centre, all creation radiates from Him.

The mind is the instrument to reach the central hub and know that all spokes radiate from it. Brahman is the target to be reached by the arrow-mind. Have your mind fixed on the target and, using the Upanishadic teaching as the bow, shoot straight and hard, to hit the Brahman and master. Om (Pranava) is the arrow; Brahman is the target.

The Brahman illumines the individual soul (jivi) by getting reflected in the inner consciousness (an-thah-karana). One has only to turn that consciousness away from the objective world, contact with which contaminates
the mind. Now, train the inner consciousness to meditate on the *Om* with single-pointed attention. Meditate on the *Atma* as unaffected by the individual, though It is in one and with one and activating one. Meditate on Him in the heart, from which countless subtle nerves (*naadis*) radiate in all directions. If this process is followed, one can attain spiritual wisdom (*jnana*).

**Brahman is beyond rituals or asceticism**

The universe is an instrument to reveal the majesty of God. The inner firmament in the heart of man is also equally a revelation of His glory. He is the Breath of one’s breath. Since He has no specific form, He cannot be indicated by words. Nor can His mystery be penetrated by the other senses. He is beyond the reach of asceticism, beyond the bounds of *Vedic* rituals. He can be known only by an intellect that has been cleansed of all trace of attachment and hatred, of egotism and the sense of possession.

Only spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) can grant self-realisation. Meditation can confer concentration of the faculties; through that concentration, spiritual wisdom can be won, even while in the body.

The *Brahman* activates the body through the five vital airs (*pranas*). It condescends to reveal itself in that same body as soon as the inner consciousness attains the requisite purity. For the *Atma* is immanent in the inner and outer senses just as heat is in fuel and butter is in milk. Now, the individualised consciousness is like damp fuel, soaked in the foulness of sensory desires and disappointments. When the pool in the heart becomes clear of the slimy overgrowth, the *Atma* shines in its pristine splendour. One who acquires knowledge of this *Atman* is to be revered, for that one is liberated. One has become *Brahman*, that which one strove to know and be.