

PRASNOPANISHAD

The Prasnopanishad is an appendix of the Atharvana Veda. It is named so, since it is in the form of questions (*Prasna*) and answers. By this means, it discusses more elaborately some topics dealt with briefly in the Mundakopanishad. It has thus become a commentary on the Mundakopanishad.

For example, the Mundaka says that Vidya is of two types: Para and Aparā, and that Aparā Vidya is of two kinds: Karma and Upasana. Of these, the second and third Prasnas in this Upanishad deal with Upasana. Since the discipline of Karma is fully covered in the Karma Kanda it is not elaborated here. When both Karma and Upasana are practised, regardless of the fruits thereof, they promote renunciation and non attachment. This is the conclusion arrived at by the First Prasna. So, if the

Prasnopanishad is studied after the Mundaka, the subject would become clearer.

Of the two entities, *Parabrahma* (God, Universal Oversoul) and *Aparabrahma* (The lower self unrelated to the Oversoul), the *Aparabrahma* is incapable of conferring the *Purusharthas* (goals of life), which are of lasting value. Realising this, and eager to attain the Eternal *Parabrahma*, the aspirants approached the competent Teacher, Pippalada. The word *Anveshamaanaa* (seeking) used here to signify the attitude of the disciple shows that these, attached to the *Aparabrahma*, fail to identify their own basic truth as the Atman. That is why they still “seek” it, somewhere outside the truth of their being! The eternal unique *Parabrahma* principle can be known only through the discipline of the Sastras, directed personally by a Guru or Teacher.

The seekers have to approach the Guru, as a “*Samithpaani*”; that is to say not simply “holding the ritualistic fuel, the sacrificial fire”. It also implies the presentation of worthy desirable offerings. The seekers meet Pippalada and he tells them, “The rare and precious teaching related to the fundamental mystery of the Universe and the Self, known as *Brahma Vidya*, cannot be imparted to the uninitiated. The students have to be first kept under observation and tested for a year.”

When the year was over, Kathyayana asks Pippalada thus: “On account of what reason are beings born?” Those who wish for progeny are the *Prajakamas*; the wish is basically to become oneself the progeny, to perpetuate oneself. Hiranyagarbha who is non-separate from Parabrahma, is the Prajapathi. Hiranyagarbha, as Prajapathi, wishes for progeny. He has traces of Apara Vidya attached to Him from past origins that induce in Him the wish.” This is the reply of the Guru.

Surya or the Sun with His Rays illumines all beings in the ten regions. Surya is the very Self of Prajapathi, and hence, all beings—both in the regions so illumined—become the very “self” of Prajapathi. The word “Prana” therefore refers to Adithya Itself, for Adithya (the Sun) gives Prana (the Vital Essence). Since all beings are able to live by consumption of food, etc., the Sun is also known as Viswanara. The whole Universe is of His Nature and so He is also known as Viswarupa. *Samvathsara* or the year, is an indicator of Time, according to the position of the Sun. Time is but a series of days and nights, and these are phases caused by the Sun. The rotation of the Moon causes *Thithis* or stages in fullness. The twin Forces, the Sun and the Moon, are the products of Prajapathi and so, Time, which is marked out by the tropics, the seasons, the months, etc. is also of the same essence. Prajapathi has the Northern and the Southern cycles also.

The contemplation and worship of Prajapathi in this universal aspect is referred to as “Jnana” itself. He, who is endowed with this Jnana and who has mastery over the senses as well as faith in the Vedas, can easily convince himself that he is the very Atman. Pursuing the *Uttaramarga* or the Northern Path, he reaches the spiritual stage known as *Surya Loka*. That Loka is the refuge of all living beings. Only those who worshipfully engage themselves in their daily duties, without any desire for the fruits thereof, can enter that Loka.

The seasons like *Vasantha* or Spring are the Feet of the Sun, the symbol of Time. The twelve months are His Personal Traits. He is the Cause of the worlds—these are truths expressed in the fourth and sixth mantras. The rains too are caused by the Sun. So, He is the master of another Loka too, the third, the *Dyu Loka*.

Akasa, Vayu, Agni, Jala, Bhumi—the elements which compose the body have their presiding deities. The “activating” senses like speech and the “knowing” senses like the eye have also their deities which reside in them and promote their functions. The mind and the intellect too have their deities. They are all pillars which support the Being and prevent the structure of the body from falling asunder.

The body is a complex produced by a combination of the five elements. The Jnanendriyas are the

consequences of this combination. So the body is a bundle of consequences and causes. Like the spokes of the wheel, they are fixed in the hub of Prana. So too, the Riks, the Yajur Vedic manthras, the Sama Vedic manthras, the Yajnas where they are employed, the *Kshathra* which protects the people from danger, the Brahmanic Force consecrating the Yajnas—all these are of the nature of Prana. When Prajapathi becomes the Cloud and pours rain, all beings rejoice and are enabled to live. “All things that contribute to happiness are bound to You; cherish us therefore as the Mother. You cause all wealth and welfare, related to spiritual and physical protection. Give us that wealth and that wisdom.” The Rig, Yajus, Sama manthras are the Brahmanic wealth. Riches are the Kshatriya wealth. Thus, the Upanishad elaborates on the Prana, as Prajapathi and its functions and attributes.

Thereafter, Pippalada takes up the question of Bhargava, and, later, Kosalya, the Aswalayana, asks him about Prana. Then, Pippalada says, “My dear boy, like the shadow caused by a person, the Prana is produced by the Atma. The Prana dedicates itself to the Atma through the *sankalpa* (resolve) of the *Manas* (mind). Like a ruler who arranges for the governance of his possessions, the Chief Prana appoints different Pranas, assigning functions and areas of work for each. The Mukhya Prana or the Chief has Adithya and other Gods

as its Impelling Force. Like sparks leaping out of the flames of a raging fire, beings emanate from the Imperishable Paramatma. They lose themselves in the selfsame Fire.” This is mentioned in the Mundaka, (II-1-1).

Then, Pippalada answered Gargi thus: “The rays of the setting sun merge in the Sun itself. They emanate and spread again, when the sun rises the next day. In the same manner, during dream, the sensory world gets merged in the consciousness-reflecting Mind and when one wakes from sleep, the sensory impressions emanate as of old and move out in their native form. That is why the Self or Purusha does not hear or see or touch or enjoy. He does not walk or talk.

The Atma, which is Pure Effulgence during the dream Stage, sees, hears and experiences, as Vasanas, whatever it sees, hears and experiences during the waking stage. When the statement is made that “The Atma is the base of everything,” the impression is created that everything is different from It. But the distinction that is apparent between the “Base of All,” and the “Jivas” that rest upon It is merely an illusion caused by circumstances. It is mental, not fundamental. Pippalada also said that whatever Loka is connoted by the deity worshipped through Pranava, that Loka will be attained.

Next, Sukesha, the son of Bharadwaja questioned the master, and his answer ran thus: “The Purusha you inquire about is in this body itself, as the resident of the Inner Sky, the Heart. It is on account of His being there, that you are shining forth in full splendour of attainment and personality. They emanate from Him and merge in Him. Like milestones, progressively increasing and interdependent, the Earth, *Durga*, Food and Purusha—all four Principles originate from the other (according to the second section of the *Thaithiriya*). The origin might not be evident to the eye but, since the origin of the *Jnanendriyas* and the *Karmendriyas* has been described already, the origin of the Purusha is as good as said. All rivers join the sea and lose therein their Names and Forms. The rivers are thereafter called the “sea.” So too, only the Purusha remains. He is without any attainment and traits or changes. He is imperishable, endless. That is all I know about Brahman and that is all there is to know,” said Pippalada to Kadandhi and other disciples.

This Upanishad ends with the respectful homage paid by the disciple to the master. The father gives but the body. Pippalada gave them the *Brahma-sarira* by teaching them the *Atmathatwa*. The six disciples, Kadandhi, Vaidarbhi, Kosalya, Souryayani, Sathyakama and Sukesha finally ask six questions in all. These questions

and answers bring out the implications of the Mundaka and serve as a nice commentary on the succinct text.

The six questions are:

1. What exactly is Para and Apara?
2. Who protects and guards created beings?
3. How does Hiranyagarbha emerge from Paramatma?
4. How does Creation take place from Paramatma?
5. How does the Chaithanya-full principle, the Prana, enter the body and get diverted into five channels?
6. Which are the senses that operate in the three stages—the waking, dreaming and sleeping?

These are the lines of inquiry that are followed in this Upanishad.