

33. Knower of the *Brahman*

IN the *Tretha Yuga*, the Emperor Janaka performed a great *Yajna* (sacrificial rite) to make known to the world the value of *yajnas* and *yagas*, *japa* and *tapas* and arouse in men the consciousness of their divinity. He invited many sages, seers, *yogis* and scholars to attend *the yajna*. *The yajna* was performed successfully.

On the last day, Janaka organised a grand assemblage of sages and savants. He invited whoever *was a Brahmavetha* (Knower of *Brahman*) to come forward. Among the sages and scholars present several doubts cropped up. Yajnavalkya alone came forward without any doubt or hesitation.

Janaka had arranged for a thousand richly caparisoned cows to be presented to the Knower of *Brahman*. Yajnavalkya directed his disciples to lead all the cows to his *ashram*. At that stage, the high priest of the sacrifice, Aswala, got up and said: "Yajnavalkya! It is only after demonstrating that you are Knower of the *Brahman* will you be entitled to take the cows to your *ashram*."

Responding to this challenge, Yajnavalkya started putting a volley of questions to the assembled sages and scholars. None of them could give proper answers to his questions.

There is no greater power than *Agni*

When the assembly was plunged in silence, Aswala got up and asked Yajnavalkya: "What is the way to conquer death?" Yajnavalkya replied: "*Vaak* (Speech). *Vaak* is *Agni* (the fire God). With the help of this fire, death can be conquered." He also said that this is *mukti* (liberation), *Athimukti* (supreme liberation). Aswala asked him to explain his answer. Yajnavalkya replied: "When a person is born, his mother's womb is a *Agni-Kunda* (fire-place). All his limbs are formed within the womb. This is the *Garbha-Agni* (Womb of Fire). When he dies, his body is cremated in the *chitagni* (funeral pyre) and is reduced to ashes. Fire is the cause of the body and fire is the destroyer of the body. There is no greater power in the world than *Agni*."

Many others present in the assembly put questions to Yajnavalkya to justify his claim to be a Knower of *Brahman*. Uddalaka got up and asked him whether he could give the number of the planets. Today we call the planets by the names *Rahu*, *Kethu*, etc. In those days these names did not exist. Yajnavalkya said there were the following eight planets: *Prana* (life-breath), *Vaak* (speech), *Jihva* (the tongue), the eye, the ear, the hands, the mind, the skin. Uddalaka resumed his seat.

Yajnavalkya's intelligent answers

Another sage got up and put a series of questions: "Yajnavalkya! Can you say how many deities are there?" Unhesitatingly, the sage answered: 33013. The next question was: "Can you reduce the number to 33?" Yajnavalkya said there were 8 *Vasus*, 11 *Rudras*, 12 *Adityas*, *Indra* and *Prajapathi*, making up in all 33. Yajnavalkya was asked further whether he could bring down the number to six. The sage said: "*Agni* (the fire God), *Vayu* (the wind-God), *Aditya* (the Sun-God), *Adityamandala* (the solar system) and the *trilokas* (three worlds)." Not content with this answer, the questioner asked the sage further, "Can you reduce this number further to three?" Yajnavalkya replied "The three worlds are embodiments of the Trinity." The three worlds are *Devaloka* (the realm of the gods), *Maanavaloka* (the world of human beings) and *Daithyaloka* (the world of Asuras and Demons). For *Devaloka* the deity is *Dama* (self-control). For the world

of men, it is *Dharma* (Righteousness) and for the world of demons, it is *Daya* (compassion). These are the respective deities for the three worlds, he said.

The sage went on to ask whether the number could be reduced to two. Yajnavalkya replied' *Prana* (the Life-Principle) and *Annam* (food). He then put an intriguing question. "Can you reduce this to one and a half?." All the scholars and sages present: wondered at such a question. However, Yajnavalkya replied: "It is *Vayu*" (the wind-god). The sage asked how *Vayu*, who is a single deity, and be regarded as one-and-a-half God? Yajnavalkya said: *Vayu* is present in all substances and has got the name *Adhyaardham*, which also means one-and-a-half. He then asked, "Can you reduce it to one?" Yajnavalkya replied' "That is *Prana* (the Life-Principle)."

The sage was satisfied with Yajnavalkya's answers and declared that he was a knower of the *Brahman* and was entitled to be an honoured member of Emperor Janaka's assembly of sages.

Basis of love is primarily self-motivation

Thereafter, Yajnavalkya addressed the assembly thus to give them an insight into spiritual truths: The mother loves the child; the child loves the mother. The wife loves the husband and the husband loves the wife. Some love wealth, others love possessions and some others love knowledge. For whose sake do they love them? Whom are they loving? The husband loves the wife not for her sake. The mother loves the child not for its sake. Each loves the other for his or her own sake and not for the sake of the other. All these expressions of love are associated with *atmanuragam* (self-love) and not associated with the body. One loves an object. Is he loving it for its sake? He is loving it for his sake. Likewise, if people love various objects in the world, it is not for the sake of the objects that they love them but for their own sake. Thus the love is primarily self-motivated.

What is this self? The self is a composite of *Vaak* (speech), *Manas* (mind) and *Prana* (the life-principle). Wherefrom has *prana* emerged? Wherefrom has the mind come? Yajnavalkya explained that out of the food consumed by man, the gross part comes out as excreta and the subtle part becomes mind. Out of the water consumed by man, the gross element comes out as urine

and the subtle part becomes *prana* (life-force). *Vaak* represents the *Tejas* (splendrous element in man). Speech, mind and the life-force together constitute the *Atma* (Self).

On hearing this, Gargi, who was a profound scholar and supremely virtuous lady, asked the question how *the Atma*, which is one, could be made up of three constituents. Yajnavalkya replied that three colours are inherent: in *Agni* (fire): White, red and black. They are not different: Fire appears reddish, assumes the form of whiteness and when it subsides, it appears black. Black is the sign of night. Red is the sign of day. The sun is the one common factor in all the three. Likewise, *the Atma*, which is one and the same, assumes at different times different forms. Yajnavalkya affirmed that no one can determine the specific characteristics of *Atma*.

The four types of people in the world

Not satisfied with this answer, Gargi asked the sage how many types of people there were in the world. Yajnavalkya replied that there were four types: One, man-Divine; two, man-human; three, man-demon; four, man-animal. The world contained these four types of human beings. The *Brahmajnas* or Knowers of the *Brahman*, are the human-divine type. ("*Sathya Dharma rathomarthiyah*"). The human-man type is the one who is wedded to *Sathya and Dharma*. "*Suraapaano daithya samaanah*"--those who are addicted to drink belong to the man-demon

category. The people lacking in wisdom belong to the animal-man category. The *Brahmajna* is one who is ever immersed in the contemplation of the Supreme, is totally free from selfishness and is conscious of the presence of the Divine in everyone.

The human-man is one who adheres to Truth and Righteousness, respects human values, leads a sacred life, performs his duties, indulges in charitable acts and lives in harmony with his fellow-beings, causing no harm to others and bearing love towards all.

Addicted to alcoholic drinks, forgetting his true nature, having no self-control, talking ill of others and causing harm to them, and always immersed in selfish pursuits--such persons belong to the human-demon category (demons in human form).

The human-animal is the type of human being who is concerned only with eating, drinking and sleeping, who takes no interest in the affairs of the world, lacks the power of discrimination and is immersed in sensuous pleasures.

In this manner, Yajnavalkya expounded to that assemblage the inner truths about the human birth and its divine potential.

The spirit of sacrifice yields peace

In essence, the *yagas and yajnas* of ancient times were performed to lead man to divinity and not for any inferior purposes. Unfortunately, by the efflux of time, these sacrifices lost their sacredness. Self-interest became the dominant motive in every action. The spirit of sacrifice is not to be seen. Those who perform *yajnas* today are making them a sort of business. This practice should go. Any sacred act should be performed in a selfless spirit. The man who has no spirit of sacrifice can have no peace. Do not give room for any kind of ostentation or show. Render service in a spirit of sacrifice. That itself is a great *yajna*. It is Karma *Yajna*. What is done internally is *Brahma Yajna*. *Karma Yajna* is a reflection of *Brahma Yajna*.

The *Vedas*, which are the embodiment of *Brahman*, have become unfortunately mere *vaangmayam* (verbal expressions) today. People are not practising the *Vedic* life. There should be complete accord between thought, word and deed. That is the mark of a truly great soul. Divergence between thought, speech and action signifies that one is worse than a demon.

Consider every action as a divine injunction. The Divine is totally free from self-interest. Every action of the Divine is for promoting the welfare of the world. When you conduct yourself on the basis of this truth, your life will be sanctified. Even a small act done with a pure and unselfish heart will develop into a great *yajna*.

Whatever the number of discourses you may listen to, you should not be content with mere listening and forget their import after going away. You must make an enquiry as to how far you have been transformed by attending these discourses. You must try to put into practice at least one or two of the teachings, get rid of worldly attachments gradually and make your journey towards the Divine. In due course divinity will blossom in your hearts. If, on the contrary, you go on expanding your worldly concerns and multiplying your desires, you will go down to the animal level.

You must be content with what you have. Even a loss of something must be considered a form of sacrifice. Rejoice in what you have, make good use of that and develop faith in God. The *yajnas* performed by rulers like Janaka were intended to promote general welfare and direct the people's minds towards God.

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