

Ancient Hindu Philosophy

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

(excerpt)

The Upanishads are treatises expounding ancient Hindu philosophy. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is considered by many to be one of the most important Upanishads. It explains the nature of the individual self and the Universal Self (or Brahman), as well as the concept of the transmigration of souls (reincarnation). For more see: <http://sanatan.intnet.mu>.



Chapter III—Investigation of the Three States

1

Yajnavalkya called on Janaka, Emperor of Videha. He said to himself: "I will not say anything." But once upon a time Janaka, Emperor of Videha and Yajnavalkya had had a talk about the Agnihotra sacrifice and Yajnavalkya had offered him a boon. Janaka had chosen the right to ask him any questions he wished and Yajnavalkya had granted him the boon. So it was the Emperor who first questioned him.

2

"Yajnavalkya, what serves as light for a man?"

"The light of the sun, O Emperor," said Yajnavalkya, "for with the sun as light he sits, goes out, works and returns."

"Just so, Yajnavalkya."

3

"When the sun has set, Yajnavalkya, what serves as light for a man?"

"The moon serves as his light, for with the moon as light he sits, goes out, works and returns."

"Just so, Yajnavalkya."

4

"When the sun has set and the moon has set, Yajnavalkya, what serves as light for a man?"

"Fire serves as his light, for with fire as light he sits, goes out, works and returns."

"Just so, Yajnavalkya."

5

"When the sun has set, Yajnavalkya and the moon has set and the fire has gone out, what serves as light for a man?"

"Speech (sound) serves as his light, for with speech as light he sits, goes out, works and returns. Therefore, Your Majesty, when one cannot see even one's own hand, yet when a sound is uttered, one can go there."

"Just so, Yajnavalkya."

6

"When the sun has set, Yajnavalkya and the moon has set and the fire has gone out and speech has stopped, what serves as light for a man?"

"The self, indeed, is his light, for with the self as light he sits, goes out, works and returns."

7

"Which is the self?"

"This purusha which is identified with the intellect (vijñanamaya) and is in the midst of the organs, the self—indulgent light within the heart (intellect). Assuming the likeness of the intellect, it wanders between the two worlds; it thinks, as it were and moves, as it were being identified with dreams, it transcends this waking world, which represents the forms of death (ignorance and its effects).

8

"That person (the individual self), when he is born, that is to say, when he assumes a body, is joined with evils and when he dies, that is to say, leaves the body, he discards those evils.

9

"And there are only two states for that person: the one here in this world and the other in the next world. The third, the intermediate, is the dream state. When he is in that intermediate state, he surveys both states: the one here in this world and the other in the next world. Now, whatever support he may have for the next world, he provides himself with that and sees both evils (sufferings) and joys.

"And when he dreams, he takes away a little of the impressions of this all—embracing world (the waking state), himself makes the body unconscious and creates a dream body in its place, revealing his own brightness by his own light—and he dreams. In this state the person becomes self—illuminated.

10

"There are no real chariots in that state, nor animals to be yoked to them, nor roads there, but he creates the chariots, animals and roads. There are no pleasures in that state, no joys, no rejoicings, but he creates the pleasures, joys and rejoicings. There are no pools in that state, no reservoirs, no rivers, but he creates the pools, reservoirs and rivers. He indeed is the agent.

11

"Regarding this there are the following verses:

‘The effulgent infinite being (purusha), who travels alone, makes the body insensible in sleep but himself remains awake and taking with him the luminous particles of the organs, watches those which lie dormant. Again he comes to the waking state.

12

‘The effulgent infinite being (purusha), who is immortal and travels alone, guards the unclean nest (body) with the help of the vital breath (prana) and himself moves out of the nest. That immortal entity wanders wherever he likes.

13

‘In the dream world, the luminous one attains higher and lower states and creates many forms—now, as it were, enjoying himself in the company of women, now laughing, now even beholding frightful sights.

14

‘Everyone sees his sport but him no one sees.’ They say: ‘Do not wake him suddenly.’ If he does not find the right organ, the body becomes difficult to doctor.

15

Yajnavalkya said: "That entity (purusha), after enjoying himself and roaming in the dream state and merely witnessing the results of good and evil, remains in a state of profound sleep and then hastens back in the reverse way to his former condition, the dream state. He remains unaffected by whatever he sees in that dream state, for this infinite being is unattached."

Janaka said: "Just so, Yajnavalkya. I give you, Sir, a thousand cows. Please instruct me further about Liberation itself."

16

"Yajnavalkya said: "That entity (purusha), after enjoying himself and roaming in the dream state and merely witnessing the results of good and evil, hastens back in the reverse way to his former condition, the waking state. He remains unaffected by whatever he sees in that state, for this infinite being is unattached."

Janaka said: "Just so, Yajnavalkya. I give you, Sir, a thousand cows. Please instruct me further about Liberation itself."

17

Yajnavalkya said: "That entity (purusha), after enjoying himself and roaming in the waking state and merely witnessing the results of good and evil, hastens back in the reverse way to its former condition, the dream state or that of dreamless sleep."

18

"As a large fish swims alternately to both banks of a river—the east and the west—so does the infinite being move to both these states: dreaming and waking."

19

"As a hawk or a falcon roaming in the sky becomes tired, folds its wings and makes for its nest, so does this infinite entity (purusha) hasten for this state, where, falling asleep, he cherishes no more desires and dreams no more dreams."

20

"There are in his body nerves (nadis) called hita, which are fine as a hair divided into a thousand parts and are filled with white, blue, brown, green and red fluids. They are the seat of the subtle body, which is the storehouse of impressions. Now, when he feels as if he were being killed or overpowered, or being chased by an elephant, or falling into a pit, in short, when he fancies at that time, thorough ignorance, whatever frightful thing he has experienced in the waking state, that is the dream state. So also, when he thinks he is a god, as it were, or a king, as it were, or thinks: "This universe is myself and I am all,": that is his highest state."

21

"That indeed is his form—free from desires, free from evils, free from fear. As a man fully embraced by his beloved wife knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, so does this infinite being (the self), when fully embraced by the Supreme Self, know nothing that is without, nothing that is within."

"That indeed is his form, in which all his desires are fulfilled, in which all desires become the self and which is free from desires and devoid of grief."

22

"In this state a father is no more a father, a mother is no more a mother, the worlds are no more the worlds, the gods are no more the gods, the Vedas are no more the Vedas. In this state a thief is no more a thief, the killer of a noble brahmin is no more a killer, a chandala is no more a chandala, a paulkasa is no more a paulkasa, a monk is no more a monk, an ascetic is no more an ascetic.

"This form of his is untouched by good deeds and untouched by evil deeds, for he is then beyond all the woes of his heart.

23

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not see, yet it is seeing though it does not see; for there is no cessation of the vision of the seer, because the seer is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the seer that it could see.

24

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not smell, yet it is smelling though it does not smell; for there is no cessation of the smelling of the smeller, because the smeller is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the smeller that it could smell.

25

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not taste, yet it is tasting though it does not taste; for there is no cessation of the tasting of the taster, because the taster is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the taster that it could taste.

26

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not speak, yet it is speaking though it does not speak; for there is no cessation of the speaking of the speaker, because the speaker is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the speaker that it could speak about.

27

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not hear, yet it is hearing though it does not hear; for there is no cessation of the hearing of the hearer, because the hearer is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the hearer that it could hear.

28

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not think, yet it is thinking though it does not think; for there is no cessation of the thinking of the thinker, because the thinker is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the thinker that it could think of.

29

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not touch, yet it is touching though it does not touch; for there is no cessation of the touching of the toucher, because the toucher is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the toucher that it could touch.

30

"And when it appears that in deep sleep it does not know, yet it is knowing though it does not know; for there is no cessation of the knowing of the knower, because the knower is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the knower that it could know.

31

"When in the waking and dream states there is, as it were, another, then one can see the other, then one can smell the other, then one can speak to the other, then one can hear the other, then one can think of the other, then one can touch the other, then one can know the other.

32

"In deep sleep it becomes transparent like water, the witness, one and without a second. This is the World of Brahman, Your Majesty. This is its supreme attainment, this is its supreme glory, this is its highest world, this is its supreme bliss. On a particle of this bliss other creatures live." Thus did Yajnavalkya teach Janaka.

33

"If a person is perfect of body and is prosperous, lord of others and most lavishly supplied with all human enjoyments, he represents the highest blessing among men. This human bliss multiplied a hundred times makes one measure of the bliss of the Manes who have won their own world. The bliss of these Manes who have won their world, multiplied a hundred times, makes one measure of bliss in the world of the gandharvas. The bliss of the gandharvas, multiplied a hundred times, makes one measure of the bliss of the gods by action (those who attain godhood through sacrificial rites). The bliss of the gods by action, multiplied a hundred times, makes one measure of the bliss of the gods by birth, as also of one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. The bliss of the gods by birth, multiplied a hundred times, makes one measure of bliss in the World of Prajapan (Viraj), as also of one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. The bliss in the World of Prajapati, multiplied a hundred times, makes one measure of bliss in the World of Brahma (Hiranyagarbha), as also of one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. This, indeed, is the supreme bliss. This is the state of Brahman, O Emperor," said Yajnavalkya.

Janaka said: I give you a thousand cows, venerable Sir. Please instruct me further about Liberation itself."

At this Yajnavalkya was afraid that the intelligent emperor was driving him to give the solution of all his questions.

34

"That entity (the self), after enjoying himself and roaming in the dream state and merely witnessing the results of merits and demerits, hastens back in the reverse way to its former condition, the waking state.

35

"Just as a heavily loaded cart moves along, creaking, even so the self identified with the body, being presided over by the Self which is all consciousness (the Supreme Self), moves along, groaning, when breathing becomes difficult at the approach of death.

36

"When this body grows thin—becomes emaciated or diseased—then, as a mango or a fig or a fruit of the peepul tree becomes detached from its stalk, so does this infinite being completely detaching himself from the parts of the body, again move on, in the same way that he came, to another body for the re-manifestation of his vital breath (prana).

37

"Just as, when a king comes, the ugras appointed to deal with crimes; the sutas and the leaders of the village await him with food and drink and lodgings ready, saying: 'Here he comes, here he comes,' even so, for the person who knows about the fruits of his own work, there wait all the elements, saying: 'Here comes Brahman, here he comes.'

"Just as, when the king wishes to depart, the ugras appointed to deal with crimes, the sutas and the leaders of the village gather around him, even so do all the organs gather around the self, at the time of death, when it struggles for breath."

Chapter IV—Death and the Hereafter

1

Yajnavalkya continued: "Now, when that self becomes weak and unconscious, as it were, the organs gather around it. Having wholly seized these particles of light, the self comes to the heart. When the presiding deity of the eye turns back from all sides, the dying man fails to notice colour.

2

"The eye becomes united with the subtle body; then people say: 'He does not see.' The nose becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not smell.' The tongue becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not taste.' The vocal organ becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not speak.' The ear becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not hear.' The mind becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not think.' The skin becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not touch.' The intellect becomes united with the subtle body; then they say: 'He does not know.'

"The upper end of the heart lights up and by that light the self departs, either through the eye or through the head or through any other part (aperture) of the body.

"And when the self departs, the vital breath follows and when the vital breath departs, all the organs follow.

"Then the self becomes endowed with a particular consciousness and passes on to the body to be attained by that consciousness.

"Knowledge, work and past experience follow the self.

3

"And just as a leech moving on a blade of grass reaches its end, takes hold of another and draws itself together towards it, so does the self, after throwing off this body, that is to say, after making it unconscious, take hold of another support and draw itself together towards it.

4

"And just as a goldsmith takes a small quantity of gold and fashions out of it another—a newer and better—form, so does the self, after throwing off this body, that is to say, after making it unconscious, fashion another—a newer and better—form, suited to the Manes, or the gandharvas, or the gods, or Viraj, or Hiranyagarbha, or other beings.

5

"That self is indeed Brahman; it is also identified with the intellect, the mind and the vital breath, with the eyes and ears, with earth, water, air and akasa, with fire and with what is other than fire, with desire and with absence of desire, with anger and with absence of anger, with righteousness and unrighteousness, with all—it is identified, as is well known, with this (i.e. what is perceived) and with that (i.e. what is inferred). According as it acts and according as it behaves, so it becomes: by doing good it becomes good and by doing evil it becomes evil. It becomes virtuous through virtuous action and evil through evil action.

"Others, however, say that the self is identified with desire alone. As is its desire, so is its resolution; and as is its resolution, so is its deed; and whatever deed it does, that it reaps.

6

"Regarding this there is the following verse:

"Because of attachment, the transmigrating self, together with its work, attains that result to which its subtle body or mind clings. Having exhausted in the other world the results of whatever work it did in this life, it returns from that world to this world for fresh work."

"Thus does the man who desires transmigrate. But as to the man who does not desire—who is without desire, who is freed from desire, whose desire is satisfied, whose only object of desire is the Self—his organs do not depart. Being Brahman, he merges in Brahman."

7

"Regarding this there are the following verses:

"When all the desires that dwell in his heart are got rid of, then does the mortal man become immortal and attain Brahman in this very body."

"Just as the slough of a snake lies, dead and cast away, on an ant—hill, even so lies this body. Then the self becomes disembodied and immortal Spirit, the Supreme Self (Prana), Brahman, the Light."

Janaka, Emperor of Videha, said: "I give you, venerable Sir, a thousand cows."

8

"Regarding this there are the following verses:

'The subtle, ancient path stretching far away has been touched (reached) by me; nay, I have realized it myself. By this path the wise, the knowers of Brahman, move on to the celestial sphere (Liberation) after the fall of this body, having been freed even while living.'

9

'Some speak of it as white, others as blue, grey, green, or red. This path is realized by a knower of Brahman and is trod by whoever knows Brahman, has done good deeds and is identified with the Supreme Light.'

10

'Into blinding darkness enter those who worship ignorance; into a greater darkness than that, as it were, enter those who are devoted to knowledge.'

11

'Cheerless indeed are those worlds covered with blinding darkness. To them after death go those people who are ignorant and unwise.'

12

'If a man knows the Self as I am this, then desiring what and for whose sake will he suffer in the wake of the body?'

13

'Whoever has realized and intimately known the Self, Which has entered this perilous and perplexing place (the body), is the maker of the universe; for he is the maker of all. All is his Self and he, again, is indeed the Self of all.'

14

'Dwelling in this very body, we have somehow realized Brahman; otherwise we should have remained ignorant and great destruction would have overtaken us. Those who know Brahman become immortal, while others only suffer misery.'

15

'When a person following the instructions of a teacher directly beholds the effulgent Self, the Lord of all that has been and will be, he no longer wishes to hide himself from It.'

16

‘That under which the year with its days rolls on—upon that immortal Light of lights the gods meditate as longevity.’

17

‘That in which the five groups of five and the akasa rest, that very Atman I regard as the Immortal Brahman. Knowing that Brahman, I am immortal.’

18

‘They who know the Vital Breath (Prana) of the vital breath (prana), the Eye of the eye, the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, have realized the ancient, primordial Brahman.’

19

‘Through the mind alone is Brahman to be realized. There is in It no diversity. He goes from death to death who sees in It, as it were, diversity.’

20

‘Unknowable and constant, It should be realized in one form only. The Self is free from taint, beyond the akasa, birthless, infinite and unchanging.’

21

‘The intelligent seeker of Brahman, learning about the Self alone, should practice wisdom (prajna). Let him not think of too many words, for that is exhausting to the organ of speech.’

22

"That great, unborn Self, which is identified with the intellect (vijnanamaya) and which dwells in the midst of the organs, lies in the akasa within the heart. It is the controller of all, the lord of all, the ruler of all. It does not become greater through good deeds or smaller through evil deeds. It is the lord of all, the ruler of all beings, the protector of all beings. It is the dam that serves as the boundary to keep the different worlds apart. The brahmins seek to realize It through the study of the Vedas, through sacrifices, through gifts and through austerity which does not lead to annihilation. Knowing It alone one becomes a sage (muni). Wishing for this World (i.e. the Self) alone, monks renounce their homes.

"The knowers of Brahman of olden times, it is said, did not wish for offspring because they thought: ‘What shall we do with offspring—we who have attained this Self, this World?’ They gave up, it is said, their desire for sons, for wealth and for the worlds and led the life of religious mendicants. That which is the desire for sons is the desire for wealth and that which is the desire for wealth is the desire for the worlds; for both these, indeed, are but desires.

‘This Self is That which has been described as Not this, not this. It is imperceptible, for It is not perceived; undecaying, for It never decays; unattached, for It is never attached; unfettered, for It never feels pain and never suffers injury.

‘Him who knows this these two thoughts do not overcome: For this I did an evil deed and For this I did a good deed. He overcomes both. Things done or not done do not afflict him.’

23

"This has been expressed by the following Rig verse:

‘This is the eternal glory of Brahman: It neither increases nor decreases through work. Therefore one should know the nature of That alone. Knowing It one is not touched by evil action.’

"Therefore he who knows It as such becomes self—controlled, calm, withdrawn into himself, patient and collected; he sees the Self in his own self (body); he sees all as the Self. Evil does not overcome him, but he overcomes all evil. Evil does not afflict him, but he consumes all evil. He becomes sinless, taintless, free from doubts and a true Brahmana (knower of Brahman). This is the World of Brahman, O Emperor and you have attained It." Thus said Yajnavalkya.

Janaka said: ‘Venerable Sir, I give you the empire of Videha and myself, too, with it, to wait upon you.

24

That great, unborn Self is the eater of food and the giver of wealth. He who knows this obtains wealth.

25

That great, unborn Self is undecaying, immortal, undying, fearless; It is Brahman (infinite). Brahman is indeed fearless. He who knows It as such becomes the fearless Brahman.