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Shubhangi Aggarwal

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Delhi, New Delhi,
India

Muṇḍaka upaniṣad and the concept of Parā and Aparā Vidyā

Shubhangi Aggarwal

Abstract

The following paper is a humble attempt at putting forth the idea of Parā Vidyā (higher knowledge) and Aparā Vidyā (Lower knowledge), as expounded in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad. The paper is broadly divided into three sections. The first section provides an introductory account of Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad and the themes of Parā and Aparā vidyā. The second section provides a detailed explanation of the same and the last section focuses on Brahman and its realisation through Parā Vidyā.

Keyword: Parā Vidyā, Aparā Vidyā, Brahman

Introduction

Section-1

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad is amongst the most important Upaniṣads commented upon by Śrī Śaṅkrācārya. Etymologically, the term 'Muṇḍaka' is composed of two terms- 'Muṇḍa' meaning head and 'Ka' meaning bliss. Thus, 'Muṇḍaka' literally means 'shaven head.' The teachings of the Upaniṣad are such that their revelation leaves its student clean like a shaven head, rid of the veil of ignorance¹. It throws a flood of light on the Jñāna Mārga (the path of knowledge) and leads the aspirants to the highest rung in the ladder of Jñāna- *Brahmaiv Bhavati*².

This Sanskrit text is embedded in the Atharvaveda and is written in verse form. It is composed of 64 mantras, explained in its 3 muṇḍakas (chapter), each of which is further divided into 2 khaṇḍas (parts). The subject matter of the first muṇḍaka is Parā and Aparā Vidyā; that of the second muṇḍaka, nature of Brahman, self and the relation between Brahman and the external world; and that of third muṇḍaka, the state of freedom attained after knowing Brahman. This paper deals with the first muṇḍaka which lays emphasis on Parā and Aparā Vidyā, supported by the themes put across in the other two muṇḍakas.

The Upaniṣad opens with an invocation in praise of Brahma, the creator (kartā) and protector (goptā) of the universe. He is believed to be first amongst the Gods to manifest Himself. He imparted the knowledge of Brahman (Brahmavidyā), that which is the basis of all knowledge, to his eldest son- Atharvā. Atharvā transmitted this knowledge that he received from Brahma to Aṅgira, who further passed it on to Satyavaha. Satyavaha imparted this knowledge to Aṅgiras, who was either his son or disciple. What is important here to note is that the knowledge is being imparted by one person to another, i.e. by a master to his disciple. This marks an important feature of Brahmavidyā, which is that this knowledge cannot be attained by a person all by himself; he ought to seek the guidance of a teacher³.

Śaunaka, the son of Śunaka (who, according to some sources happens to be a great sage known for performing large sacrifices⁴), approached Aṅgiras and asked-

‘Bhagavaḥ kasmin nu vijñate, sarvam idam bhavati vijñātam?
-(I.i.3, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad)

Corresponding Author:

Shubhangi Aggarwal

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Delhi, New Delhi,
India

¹ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-vi.

² Ibid, pg-5

³ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-4.

⁴ Swami Krishnanada (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (India: The Divine Life Society, 1951), sourced from http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mundak1/mundak1_1.html, accessed on 1 January 2023, 12:05pm, pg-10.

meaning, “O adorable sir, (which is that thing) which having been known, all this becomes known?”⁵

To say that there is something by knowing which everything else becomes known, implies that there is something, say A, which is common to all things and by knowing that common (A) everything else made of A, also becomes known. Drawing instance from Chāndogya Upaniṣad, clay, for instance, is common to all clay objects like pot, bowl, cup etc. No matter how diverse these objects may be, clay is the common element in them. Anyone who knows clay also knows pot, cup etc. i.e. to say all the objects made of clay.

Coming back to the question Śaunaka originally asked- ‘What is that by knowing which everything else becomes known? To this Aṅgiras answers, “There are two kinds of knowledge to be acquired- the Higher and the Lower⁶.” One may, however, object that Aṅgiras’ answer is not appropriate with respect to the question posed. The question demanded stating that entity by knowing which everything else becomes known like the clay in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad example and Aṅgiras’ response states the types of knowledge instead. In defense, Śaṅkarācārya clarifies that the “answer requires an order of procedure⁷.” and that there is nothing wrong with it. To explain, knowledge has variegated degrees ranging from lower to higher. The attainment of higher knowledge requires training of the mind, which itself has several degrees. From the perceptible, tangible reality we graduate our minds, through training, to reality which is not so easily acceptable. For instance, the idea that sun is the source of light, it rises at a particular time in the morning and sets at a particular time in the evening is something easily acceptable because it is something easily accessible for gaining perceptual knowledge. However, the idea that the Moon causes high and low tide in the ocean because of gravitational pull is something not so easily acceptable, for, it is not perceptible. It requires an understanding of the science behind this phenomenon, which eventually leads to acceptance of this idea⁸. Similarly, one needs to graduate from the lower level of knowledge which deals with worldly affairs to a higher level of knowledge which leads to realization of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. The lower knowledge is ignorance which needs to be eradicated to reach a higher level of knowledge.

At this point, it is important to recall the three levels of reality as discussed in Śaṅkarācārya’s Advaita Vedānta. The lowest level is called Pratibhāsika, the one above it Vyavahārika and finally the highest level is called Pāramārthika. One cannot reach the Pāramārthika level directly. One has to follow a fixed order of procedure whereby he is eventually graduated from the lowest to the highest level. The Pratibhāsika level is the level of experience in which the mind constructs its own reality, an apparent reality. Apparent, because once the person graduates to Vyavahārika level he realizes the falsity of what he once considered real. The perception of rope for a snake is a well-known example. The Vyavahārika level is the level of pragmatic or empirical reality which is true at a particular time, in a particular context. It consists of worldly experiences

which are true only till the time one does not reach the Pāramārthika level.

The world is not false, but only practically real at Vyavahārika level. Real is that which is true at all times- the past, present and future i.e., is *Trikālbādhasatyam*. Thus, the world is neither real nor unreal but is ‘non-Real.’ For instance, you see a rope for a snake at night and realize the falsity of your experience the next morning. The snake was real only till the time the perception of it was not falsified by another contradictory perception i.e. perception of rope as snake. The perception of rope as snake was false only in the morning but was true at night, therefore the snake is neither real nor unreal but non-real.

Section-2

Having discussed the need for gradation in types of knowledge we now proceed to provide a detailed account of Parā and Aparā Vidyā. To begin with Aparā Vidyā, it consists of the four Vedas (Ṛg-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sāma-Veda, Atharva-Veda) and the six auxiliary parts of Vedas (Vedāṅga), namely the science of pronunciation (Śikṣā), the code of rituals (kalpa), grammar (vyākraṇam), etymology (niruktam), metre (chandaḥ) and astrology (jyotiṣam)⁹.

Briefly, the Ṛg-Veda is a collection of mantras, Sāma-Veda a collection of chants, Yajur-Veda a collection of rituals and Atharva-Veda knowledge storehouse of the procedure of everyday life. These four Vedas are difficult to understand all by themselves. This is where the Vedāṅga comes to the rescue. Śikṣā is the science of phonetics, the art of voice modulation in the recitation of Vedic mantras. The difference in voice- modulation leads to difference in the meaning. Kalpa refers to the performance of rituals in specific ways, for instance, a priest while performing a marriage ceremony follows a specific pattern of rituals. Vyākraṇam is grammar which is crucial for making sense of a sentence. Nirukta refers to the etymology of words. By knowing a particular root and its meaning, it becomes easy to make sense of new words originating from the same root term. Chandaḥ is a metre, which the verses follow. Jyotiṣam is the astronomical science which tells us at what particular time is a ritual to be performed, based on the positions of planets¹⁰.

The Vedas along with Vedāṅgas are considered as lower knowledge because the lower knowledge by itself is not a sufficient means for the realisation of absolute reality - Brahma¹¹. However, this does not mean that the lower knowledge is not important. The lower knowledge plays a vital role in the attainment of ultimate reality, for, it prepares the primary foundation by purifying the mind and creating a religious peace in the person who takes up the study of Vedas. As explained in the example of Moon in the previous section, one cannot make sense of the scientific reasoning behind the rise of high and low tides in the ocean, if one does not even know about Moon and its unique gravitational properties in the first place.

The biggest difference between lower and higher knowledge is their subject matter. The subject matter of lower knowledge

⁵ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-7.

⁶ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015) pg-9.

⁷ Ibid, pg-10.

⁸ Swami Krishnanada (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (India: The Divine Life Society, 1951), sourced from http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mundak1/mundak1_1.html, accessed on 1 January 2023, 12:05pm.

⁹ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-10.

¹⁰ Swami Krishnanada (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (India: The Divine Life Society, 1951), sourced from http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mundak1/mundak1_1.html, accessed on 1 January 2023, 12:05pm.

¹¹ Ibid, pg-11.

is 'bondage' while that of higher knowledge is 'freedom.'¹² The periphery of lower knowledge involves diversity and distinction like that between agent, his actions and the fruits of his actions. "This state has no beginning or end; it has to be eradicated wholly by each embodied being because it consists of sorrow."¹³ To explain, any agent usually performs an action with an expectation that it will bring him desired fruit or end. For instance, a student works hard for his exams with an expectation to score well. But as we grow older our goals, desires and the resultant happiness keeps shifting from time to time. Achieving good marks which once were the centre of happiness for a student may not matter to him at all after a certain period of time. The centre of desire may shift from good marks to a good job, to a good home, to a good family and so on. The reason behind this shift of center is that is that the experience of happiness on attainment of fruits of action is not real happiness. It is merely a temporary excitement of the mind caused by its contact with the object¹⁴. Owing to incessant desires, it becomes difficult to fulfill them all in one birth, thus one get trapped in the cycle of karmas and has to take rebirth. This leads to the idea that all actions and desires lead to bondage. The following passage from the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad encompasses the gist of this argument-

"Continuing diversely in the midst of ignorance, the unenlightened takes air by thinking, 'we have attained the goal'. Since the men engaged in *karma*, do not understand (the truth) under the influence of attachment, thereby they become afflicted with sorrow and are deprived of heaven on the exhaustion of the results of karma."¹⁵

- (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, I.ii.9)

Section-3

The following section is an extension of the previous section and provides a descriptive account of Brahman and its realisation through Parā-Vidyā. As discussed in the previous section, due to the veil of ignorance the ignorant restricts himself to the periphery of lower knowledge, thus depriving himself of the opportunity to gain higher knowledge through which he can realise the Ultimate Reality- Brahman. What how does one go about transitioning to the higher level of knowledge? The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad suggests that "A brāhmaṇa should resort to renunciation after examining the worlds acquired through karma...For knowing the Reality he should go...only to a teacher who is well-versed in the Vedas and absorbed in Brahman."¹⁶ Swami Kṛṣṇānada in line with this suggests that the disciple should approach the teacher in a manner suitable for reception of Brahmavidyā. The most important of all attributes that need to be cultivated for receiving Brahmavidyā is thorough desire lessness¹⁷. Desires

¹² Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015),pg-19.

¹³ Ibid, pg-19.

¹⁴ Swami Krishnanada (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (India: The Divine Life Society, 1951), sourced from http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mundak1/mundak1_1.html, accessed on 1 January 2023, 12:05pm, Pg-20.

¹⁵ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-28.

¹⁶ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015),pg-28.

¹⁷ Swami Krishnanada (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (India: The Divine Life Society, 1951), sourced from http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/mundak1/mundak1_1.html, accessed on 1 January 2023, 12:05pm, Pg-25.

of any sought, even desire for life needs to be given up because desires lead to attachments which infect the purity of mind.

Having discussed the means of attaining Brahman, let us now turn to look at the end towards which it leads i.e., Brahman. The first canto of the second Muṇḍaka describes the ultimate reality as that which is imperishable, all-pervasive, formless, birth less, endless, without mind, without the vital force, pure and transcendental¹⁸. The term used for ultimate reality in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad is Puruṣa¹⁹. "From Him originates the vital force as well as the mind, all the senses, space, air, fire, water, and earth that support everything."²⁰ The oceans, mountains, seven sense-organs, human beings, beasts, bird, grains all emerge from him. Even God in various groups, the Ṛg, Sāma and Yajur mantras all emerge from Him²¹. He is considered as the source of everything. The instrumental and material cause are same here, unlike potter and pot where the potter is the instrumental cause who makes a pot out of the material cause, clay. Just "as a spider spreads out and withdraws (its thread), as on the earth grow the herbs...and as from a living man issues out hair...so out of the Imperishable does the Universe emerge here."²² The spider doesn't weaves web out of some external material, but out of itself. The upshot is that there is nothing whose origin cannot be traced back to Puruṣa.

However, one may ask, "How the Immutable can be known, though it is formless?"²³ The answer is through yoga (meditation). Yoga as the means of realisation is explained with the help of an imagery of bow and arrow in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad.

"Om is the bow; the soul is the arrow; and Brahman is called its target. It is to be it by an unerring man. One should become one with It just like an arrow."²⁴

-(Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, II.ii,4)

'Om' here refers to yoga or meditation. Just as bow is the medium that leads arrow to its target, similarly meditation is that bow which takes an individual self to Brahman. But, the arrow can never reach its target unless it is aimed properly. The target, i.e. Brahman should be aimed at by one who is free from desires to enjoy worldly objects, who is detached from everything, who has control over his senses and has a concentration of mind²⁵. Just as the success of arrow consists in hitting the right target, similarly the success of self consists in becoming one with Brahman- *Aham Brahmāsmi*. Having freed itself from the superficial categories of names and forms, the illumined soul becomes free and one with the self-effulgent Puruṣa.²⁶

Thus, the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad concludes with the following words-

Saḥ yaḥ ha vai tatparamam brahmaveda brahmaiva bhavati nāsyābrahmavitkule bhavati.

¹⁸ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad,(Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015),pg-39.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg-39.

²⁰ Ibid, pg-42.

²¹ Ibid, pg-46, 49.

²² Ibid, pg-14.

²³ Swami Gambhirananda (tr.), The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, (Kolkata: Trio Process, 2015), pg-52.

²⁴ Ibid, pg-56.

²⁵ Ibid, pg-56.

²⁶ Ibid, pg-92.

Tarati śokam tarati pāpmānam guhāgranthibhyaḥ
vimuktaḥ amṛtaḥ bhavati.²⁷

-(Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, III, ii,9)

Meaning,

Anyone who that supreme Brahman becomes Brahman indeed. In his line is not born anyone who doesn't know Brahman. He overcomes grief, and rises above aberrations; and becoming freed from knots of the heart, he attains immortality.

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²⁷ Ibid, pg-93.