

Questioning: An Upanisadic Perspective

A philosophical inquiry begins with a question. An intense question finds a profound answer. That is why the preceptors of the Upanisads seek for the disciples who can put right questions in the right context.¹ The perennial questions raised by Naciketas, Janaka, Maitreyi, Gargi, Svetaketu and others in the Upanisads are marked with proficiency and intensity. In evaluating the method of inquiry in the Upanisads, we have to understand the way questions are raised and answered. Not only in the Upanisads, in the entire philosophical arena, questioning is the most important factor through which a philosophical concept is taken up and is subjected to serious scrutiny.

In the ordinary level, a question is raised to understand an object or a situation with a utilitarian or pragmatic end in view. We may ask, "What is an apple?" The answer may be, "An apple is a sweet, red, round, juicy fruit." Both the question and its answer have some pragmatic end. Even the scientific question regarding the botanical or chemical composition of the apple is rooted in its utility. In the worldly level, we are concerned with our immediate needs; hence the things or the facts that have some bearing on them come to the purview of our inquiry. But the questions regarding God, soul, other world etc, have no practical utility. These are primarily metaphysical questions even though having some normative consequence. Metaphysical questions can never be value-neutral. However, these are more fundamental than the value-specific questions. Ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge which is an elongation of the former are concerned with the immediate existence of the objective world, vyavaharika satta; metaphysical questions aim at the understanding of the ultimate nature, paramarthika tattva, of the things. Even questions regarding the ultimate status of an ordinary thing, i.e. a piece of stone, is metaphysical. When we push further and further an ordinary question, it becomes scientific; but when it encounters a different level of reality, it becomes metaphysical.

In the Upanisads, we encounter great questions regarding life and its experiences put up from different angles. The seers stared at the expansive universe and sought to know the great cause of the world, Brahman, from which all are born and are held as they are.² They looked inward and inquired about the self which impels the mind, prana, speech and other sense organs to act in their specific ways.³ Through Naciketas the perennial question whether the self outlives its bodily death is raised.⁴ Saunaka asks Angirasa about that by knowing which everything else is known.⁵ Janaka directly puts the question to Yajnavalkya, "Which one is the self?"⁶ Sometimes, in a series, subtler and subtler questions are asked in order to bring home the ultimate answer as we find in the aksara brahmana or in the sakalya brahmana of Br.Upanisad.⁷ However, the Upanisadic questions are not mere expression of

intellectual curiosity. Existential problems of life prompted the sages to ponder over these questions. The allurements of the world became meaningless for them. Maitreyi asked Yajnavalkya, “If I cannot become immortal by these, then, what I shall do therewith?”

We acquire knowledge through experience and reason. But the limitations of both these methods are conspicuous. This tends us to speculate, since human mind cannot accept an agnostic end as the final attainment in man’s quest for knowledge. However, speculations are misleading. Unguarded by experience and reason, they may land us in the wonderland of fantasy and imagination. It seems as if the entire human framework of knowledge is exhausted with the empirical, rational and the speculative activities. Had it been so there would be no possibility of any knowledge beyond the phenomenal level. But in rare moments, we are prompted by some inner urge to transcend our apparent limitations and we come face to face with a higher reality; that we call intuition. The dynamics of intuition is not properly understood since the science of consciousness has not yet crossed its infancy. For it, the entire spectra of consciousness are to be understood. However, all intuitions are not self-knowledge. Questions in the Upanisads cover the entire ranges of knowledge but they culminate in intuitive knowledge of the self.

The Upanisads raise two types of questions related to their two broad-based subjects. The first type consists of questions regarding various vidyas or forms of upasana. These questions take up either some macrocosmic objects or some microcosmic objects as their subject-matter, so they fall under two groups, adhidaivika or adhyatmika. Their intention, according to Sankara and Suresvara, is to lead the aspirant gradually to the ultimate goal, even though these forms of meditation may give rise to other worldly fulfillments.⁸ In both these forms, such questions are thematically related to the earlier Vedic world-view and the belief-system. In some sense or other, these are the legacy of the older Vedic mind. But the second type of questions deal with pure brahma-vidya or atma-jnana which is universal and perennial. In contrast to adhidaivika, macrocosmic, and adhyatmika, microcosmic, these are purely atmika, pertaining only to self-knowledge. In this form, most profound questions are raised and answered in a distinct and convincing manner which is unparallel in the entire world of philosophy.

Upanisads are written in a free and unrestricted manner. The sages had different preferences, so the questions are put forth in multiple forms with scanty logical consideration. However, underlying these questions there is one single vision, realization of one’s own self as one with the Absolute, the source of all life and existence. Sankaracarya wrote his marvelous commentaries on the principal Upanisads and his greatest contribution to the world of knowledge is systematizing the apparently disconnected and contradictory lines of these illuminating works and

showing that the message of the Upanisads is not confined to the contingencies of time, place and person.

The manner of questioning as found in these works is the real starting point of any genuine search for meaning of life and its experiences.

(This is the paper presented at the UGC sponsored national seminar held at Sanskrit University, Puri, February 2010)

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8. Br.Up.Bhasya Vartika, 5.4-5