

The Three Advices of the Upanisads

The Upanisads contain the highest spiritual revelation of the ancient Indian mind. Among them, the Brihadaranyka Upanisad is the biggest one. In one of its chapters, it presents an interesting symbolic story, famed for its reference in the Waste Land of the great English poet, T.S.Eliot, which is intended to show the required qualities of different types of people with different attitudes and mindsets to pursue the highest spiritual truth. It is stated earlier that upasana (worship) being an intense mental activity of a higher order requires a change in one's attitude towards the objects he encounters. It also requires a special mindset that makes him capable of looking into the essential nature of the things. The three disciplines required for upasana are dama (self control), dana (giving charity or non-avarice) and daya (sympathy or mercy).

The story runs like this. The three types of sons of Prajapati (Lord of beings or God) lived a life of brahmacharya (the life of self control of a disciple) with their father. They are the gods (small divinities like angels), the men and the demons. First the gods approached him. After completing their term the gods requested Prajapati to instruct them to which he only uttered a letter 'da' and asked them if they understood what he told. The gods answered in the affirmative and said that the meaning of the letter 'da' is damyata 'control your senses'. Thus the gods understood that Prajapati advised them self-control.

Then the humans went to Prajapati and asked him to instruct them to which he instructed the same letter 'da' and asked them if they understood what he taught. The humans, like the gods, thought that they too understood the meaning of the letter 'da', but they differed from the gods in its interpretation. They thought that Prajapati advised them to give, datta, or to give up greed. At last the demons approached Prajapati and besought instruction. To them also he uttered the same letter 'da', which appeared to them to mean dayadhvam, 'sympathise or have mercy'. So, they, the gods, the men and the demons, understood three different meanings from the same instruction. The gods or devas have all other qualities, but they lack self-control because of their craving for amusements and pleasures. For this, they interpreted 'da' to mean dama or self-control. The most obvious aim of men in life is to amass as much wealth as possible, since all their worldly fulfillments come out of wealth. So they interpreted the letter to mean non-avarice. The demons, on the other hand, are marked by their cruelty for which they understood 'da' to mean dayadhvam, 'have mercy'. Thus the same word or letter meant different things to different persons.

After narrating this parable, the seer-narrator breaks into a cosmic vision and finds that this voice of the mighty Prajapati has not yet died; till now it reverberates in the thunderous voice of the cloud- " That this divine voice what the cloud is still

repeating (as thunder) da, da and da- damyata, datta, dayadhvam. Therefore, one should learn these three, self-control, charity and compassion.”

We interpret the world through our knowledge. All knowledge is nothing but interpretation. What we need is right interpretation according to our propensities and perceptions. This parable of the Upanisad contains the timeless advice for all the men of all the times.

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