

## ***From Death, Lead us to Immortality!***

(Death and the Philosophy of Yājñavalkya)

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**Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad**, the last part of **Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa**, the major source of Śaṅkara's Nondualistic Vedānta, takes death - both cosmic and individual, organic and spiritual - to be one of its central concepts. Its speculative account of Origin contradicts, on the face of it, the Nāsadīya hymn and asserts (BU 1,2,1 --- 1,2,7) that "In the beginning there was nothing here, and all this was covered by Death." But what was the nature of this Death? It was a hunger! "Hunger indeed is death". What the Rgvedic hymn denied was the presence of ordinary individual deaths at this primordial precreative state. What is being asserted here is the presence of that dark abyss of an unmanifest causal state in which all future potentialities slumber indeterminately. So the contradiction is only apparent. This passage, nevertheless, is hermeneutically crucial for Śaṅkara. The fact that after 'there was nothing', the śruti adds, "everything was covered by Death" is taken by him to mean that even before the world arose, both as cause and effect, it was real but hidden. "Death" here cannot mean sheer nothing because as Śaṅkara says humorously "the barren woman's son does not get concealed by the skyflower." The cause conceals the effect as for instance the lump of clay conceals the pot-to-come. For such concealment to be possible as a real relation, both cause and effect, the screen and the screened, must exist. By two closely argued passages Śaṅkara first proves that Death as cause could not be an ontological void, nor could the future creation be nonexistent at this causal state ("the time at which seeing the potter working for it, we ascertain that the pot will be, could not be the time when the pot is unreal, on pain of contradiction"). The drift of these arguments suggests that Śaṅkara is ready to existentially generalise from "A is dead/A will be born" to "there is an X such that X is dead/X will be born."

But why identify hunger with death? People of course can die of hunger. But Śaṅkara thinks that a carnivorous desire to kill and consume is more to the point here as the link between the two notions. Indeed this story of creation develops as if Death/Hunger duplicate itself through a "mental" act of willing to have a self so that it can eat whatever it begets! It created the basic time unit of a year and then as the first embodied being was born, the primordial Hunger tried to devour that baby whose frightened cry became speech. With the help of this speech proliferating as the sacred Vedic Word,

Hunger-Death kept producing all other people and animals. "Whatever it created it ate up". Everything that is born thus became the food for Death. One who knows this nature of Death (who is here called Aditi-the mother of Sun and all the gods) as all-consuming becomes the Universal Self of Enjoyer of All.

At least four points seem to be suggested by this baffling text :

A. Before every cosmic beginning there is a dark dead period of universal latency.

B. This is also a state of dying or striving to create in order to eat. It brings forth causally fecund forms so that by consuming them it can grow and bring further effects into being. (The cause crushes its own earlier evolving state in order to make place for the next effect-state. Such "devouring of own child" is not self-annihilation, as the flux-theory of Buddhism would have it. It is only "disappearance of the earlier effect" like the melting of the old gold-ornament without which a new one can't "appear to be born". The real gold of Being endures through all such deaths and births.)

C. All emergent entities are subject to death.

D. To know Death as this universal creative consuming hunger is to become death and hence to go beyond repeated death into an all-encompassing immortality.

(*punarmṛtyum jayati..mṛtyur asya ātmā bhavati*)

From C it follows that the human body "had by death, though it is the locus of an immortal soul" would die. BU describes the departure of the individual from its dying body using the old Rgvedic analogy of the ripe fruit falling away from the branch of a tree. The distinction between the person (puruṣa) and his physical limbs is already clear in this analogy. At the time of this departure the frail old body usually makes painful noises like an overloaded cart. BU, CU and KU all give detailed general description of the stages of the final hour: "It is the ensouled alive body (*jivāpetam*) which dies, not the soul which had made it alive." says CU (6, 11-15) succinctly, "When around the sick old person relations and friends gather asking "Do you know me? Can you recognise me?" first his speech withdraws into his mind, then his mind is withdrawn back into his vital breath (*prāṇa*), then the vital breath fades back into the fire (*tejas*)". The process which looks like the gradual failure of all his faculties is explained as a reverse causal process of the effects merging back to their original causes. Its warmth back to fire, its breath to air, its moisture to water, and its mass thus reduces to ashes (*bhasmāntam śarrīam*), but what is it that really dies or ceases to exist? The material elements get transformed, hence the body is supposed to "attain quintuplicity" but not supposed to perish. The enlivening principle or ātman is by definition deathless. So it is the combination, the living body which suffers death.

But giving up the body is only one part of the BU story. The second book of BU asks the question "Released from here where does it go?" Keen observation of the organic and inorganic environment around them characterises all the protoscientific speculations of the Vedic people. So the above question is answered in terms of a beautiful description of the movement of a caterpillar or a leech from one blade of grass to another, "Just as having reached the edge of one leaf of grass the insect coils up its body in order to crawl on to another leaf, this soul departing one body and making it unconscious finds for itself a newer and better body fit for the ancestors (*paitram*), gods (*daivam*) or of some other kind. "(BU4,4,3-4) This partially solves the metaphysical problem: How can we talk of the disembodied soul *migrating* from one region to another? The migrating soul is never quite without a body, it simply replaces one body with another. The agency to this act of re-embodiment is clearly ascribed to the 'dying' individual self, even if "he does not know" that he is preparing for a change of body. The dying process is not only a riddle to the average mortal, even the confident challenging Yājñavalkya hesitates to talk about it in public. When Artabhāga (BU3,2,11) question him: "As the dead man's speech goes back to fire, breath to air, eyes to the sun, mind to the moon, hearing to the directions, and the body to earth...where then does the individual reside?", Yājñavalkya, who had first given an almost materialistic answer "No, the vital breaths don't go anywhere, they merge back to the physical elements and the rotting corpse alone remains", later took him by the hand and talked in private about *karma*, good deeds and bad deeds. Why should we talking about the results of one's actions answer a question about the status of the soul after death?

In this connection we must mention a famous dialogue (recorded both in BU and CU) between King Pravāhaṇa Jaibali of Pāñcāla (ancient Punjab?) and the Brāhmaṇa sage Gautama, the father of Śvetaketu. Here, interestingly enough, it is the King who knew the answer to the death-related question while the wise Brāhmaṇa confessed ignorance and learnt from him. It is because this "Science of Death" has been known to the warrior class that they have ruled the rest. The contents of this dialogue have been ignored as mythical by Indologists like A.B.Keith. But it raises the central issue regarding the doctrine of death and rebirth. The king asks five questions :

- i. Where does the spirit go from this mundane realm?
- ii. How does it come back to earth?
- iii. What distinguishes the path of the gods from the path of the fathers?
- iv. Why the heavens don't get overcrowded with departed souls?
- v. How does the fifth oblation to the fire make a man out of water?

The fifth question assumes a geneology of embodied humans in the idiom of sacrifice (*yajña*). Behind every birth is a sacrifice. To backtrack from the empirical world, the first oblation is that of semen in to the fire of female womb, out of which is born a human child. The second is the sacrifice of food in the human body out of which semen is born. The third is the offering of rain into the fire of the thirsty soil of the earth out of which food is born. At this point the naturalistic ecology becomes esoteric. The fourth link in the reverse causal order is the offering of Soma to the Rain-god Parjanya which produces rain. Finally soma is produced by offering faith (*śradhā*- the term from which the name of the initial and annual oblation-ritual addressed to the deceased *śrāddha* is derived) to the fire of the celestial sphere. The gods may be the efficient causes but the natural order of the sky, clouds, earth, men and women are the stuff out of which the lived world is made. These fires of life must be understood in order to solve the mystery of death and rebirth.

It is hard, for minds trained in physicalistic Western Science, to relate to this sacrificial way of thinking now. But from its earliest reference in **Rgveda** upto its mention in the **Bhagavadgītā**, exactly the same detailed accounts are given of the two alternative routes of man's posthumous journey, one of which is a return-trip from and back to a mortal body while the other is simply one way. We are never told what perceptual or inferential basis there is of such a belief-system. Since the sole proof of this comes from the testimony of the authorless (or, according to Nyāya, God-spoken) Vedic corpus, sometimes a pragmatic proof is impiled by the apologists: The acute logician Jayanta says that he was witness to a *kārīri* sacrifice for bringing down rain on a drought stricken village. A sacrifice-centered ontology naturally leads people to the life of tradition-prescribed duties which is intrinsically valuable. Ultimately, the proof of the Vedic eschatology will have to be in the ethical fallout of it, unless we can take the words of the Vedas about empirically unverifiable matters as epistemic rock-bottom where our digging for justification simply stops.

For two kinds of people there are allegedly two distinct "paths" to follow after death. Those wordly persons who, desiring to be happy hereafter, perform religious and social duties like sacrifices and charities "go" from their dead (and burnt) body to a smokey stage, and then into a tunnel of dark night, then into the dark fortnight, next through the six months when the sun leans towards the south, and from there go to the realm of the ancestors. For a certain period then they dwell in this "lunar" realms of the ancestors becoming "food for the gods" ("not that the gods gobble them up", Śaṅkara comments, "but that the gods derive satisfaction out of these deceased people's enjoying

or suffering the karmic consequences of their actions"). After this period which varies from person to person depending upon the time it takes for each person's accumulated but unfructified seeds of *karma* to be ready to sprout, once they are earth-worthy, as it were, they turn to a vapour-like subtle substance, then to clouds and with rain fall on the earth to become food-particles through which they turn into the generative seeds in the body of the eaters wherefrom they are born in human wombs again with new bodies. This is roughly the ancestral path (*pitryāna*).

Two major questions arise about this eschatology if we try to make sense of it.

What is it that "goes" along this path. We shall later on see that pro-Vedic schools of Indian thought like Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya and Vedānta (except Rāmānuja) believed the individual self or the spiritual substance (*atman*) to be ubiquitous. An all-pervasive partless substance cannot go from any place to anytoher place. It is best described as not in space at all. So it must be anoher alive body which "travels" through these realms. Without body there is no individuation or movement. Life after death is described in all Hindu and Buddhist thought as a "way to go" (*gati*). Therefore death is not even complete disembodiment, let alone complete cessation. Since the gross flesh and body goes back to the five elements which body is it what takes this route? The philosophical schools differ among themselves in answer to this question. The Vedānta camp holds that a normal alive human has three bodies: the gross, the subtle and the causal. The gross body is made of tangible or mixed form of the five material elements. Thus tangible earth is fifty percent pure earth, but there is 12.5 percent air, fire, water and *ākāśa* in it. This process of mixture with predominance of one is called quintuplication (*pañcīkaraṇa*). The subtle body is also made of five elements but in their intangible pure state. It consists of seventeen "limbs": the five cognitive sense organs, the five active faculties, the psychic faculty, the intellectual faculty and the five pure objects of the sense namely colour-essence, sound-essence, touch-essence, smell-essence and taste-essence. In other words the entire aparatus of basic grasping insturments and the inner world of grasped objects which makes a life-world possible-a body after all is a microcosm-makes up the subtle body. It is the world of this subtle body where memories and desires are stored that we experience when we are dreaming: it is the body for dreaming just as the gross body is the body for waking life. This body is also meaningfully called "body of the recognisable sign (*liṅga-śarīra*)" since the psychological criterial of personal identity and continuity are carried along with it despite the change of the gross food-constructed body through infancy, youth and old age and through death. But there is a state of ourselves with which death is compared in almost all prescientific thought : the state of deep dreamless

sleep. In the Indian traditions it is sometimes called "daily death". In so far as this state also does not destroy our individual ego, and it is a state of pure insentience (not knowing anything at all), and it gives a sense of refreshing restfulness - this state corresponds to the causal body, the root of all individuality, the ego-making ignorance which is sometimes identified with the bliss-sheath of the self. At death only the gross body is left behind. The traveller in the darker path of the fathers is saddled with his own individual sheath of blissful ignorance and his whole stock of memories stored in his subtle body which transmigrates. That is why the departed is supposed to be able to see, touch and taste etc. though we cannot see or touch them!

The Nyāya and the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā school does not believe this account of the three bodies. Human bodies are made of earth only, according to them, though other kinds of bodies in watery or airy realms may be made of water or air. For Nyāya, which also believes that without the operative contact between the sense-organ of touch and the introspective psychic organ of attending called *manas* there cannot arise any awareness in the soul of any kind, the departed soul which has to be able to know and desire objects would have to have a nonearthy body with the capacity to touch. Since touch would be minimally required, we could postulate an airy body which would fit in which the description of its going into smoke found in the Upanishads with which Nyāya usually does not want to quarrel.

The only problem with both the subtle body theory and the airy body theory is that Śaṅkara in the commentary clearly says that the bodies at least in the lunar ancestral realm have to be aquatic (*āpyam*).

The second and harder question about the journey of the dead is : What are the spatial locations through which this path passes? It is not even clear that the path is in space. After the first step of smoke, each segment is described as a segment of time: the night, the dark fortnight, six months of the winter solstice and so on. How can a being with a subtle body "travel to six months" (with a gross body one can only travel for six months!). There is a traditional solution of this problem (anticipated by Madhusudana Sarasvatī in his gloss on **Bhagavadgītā** VIII,25). It is hermeneutically permissible to take the time-words here to mean, by implication, the specific "carrier" gods presiding over those time periods. Repeatable seasons and months and fortnights and other time-segments have gods who identify with them, just as rivers, natural forces, and astral bodies have gods associated with them. It is one of those gods who carries the psychic body of a dead person and delivers to the next higher authority of another god, until it arrives at the realm of the dead fathers.

Since the concept of a celestial being who identifies with a time period is far from clear, one could try a different interpretation. After all, the world of psychic bodies are mental in the same sense as the world of dreams are so. This entire travel could therefore, be a nonspatial transformation of the psychological sensory images, feelings and proclivities through shorter and longer periods of time until in some semi-timeless zone the psychic being in the limbo with some celestial being! During each death there is supposed to be a miniature re-enactment of the reversal of the process through which from the primordial watery darkness/Death/hunger first the largest human unit of *time*, the year emerged-*samudrād arṇvād adhi samvatsaro ajāyata*. In the reverse process therefore the elemental being would have to mentally pass through those time units before reaching a watery body (Creation is not actually reversed in dying, but it is "dreamt" to be so by the dream body, hence the dreaming journey back to the six months.

The second and rarer route to follow after death is the illuminated path of the gods (*devayānam*). Only those who renounce worldly possessions and worship God striving to be free from all further embodiment, after a special kind of death, would merge into the blazing flames (*arcis*) of fire, and is then carried away by the god of daytime, then by the god of the bright fortnight, through the six months of the summer solstice when the sun is on the northern sky, to the god presiding over the full year's time who, in turn, takes the psychic individual to the Sun and to the moon, and to the god of lightning upto the path of no return crossing the river originally called "*vijarā*" (beyond-decay) and later "*viraja*". into the highest Brahamaloka. This path was talked about in the reverse sequence in the **R̥gveda** as the path along which from the high heavens gods came down to the ritually sanctified fire in order to receive the offerings made by sacrificing humans. The Upanishads naturally make the offerings of the last sacrifice go back to the gods by this route. (see the incomparably insightful and erudite footnote number 203, on page 143 Vol. 1 of **Vedamīmāṃsā** by Anirban on the Vedic roots of this idea).

Apart from these two ways there is the third way of dying as sub-humans like mosquitoes and insects die, which involved immediate rebirth into another similar species without any intervening upward journey or celestial interlude. This is also the way lowly wrongdoers die and get reborn without overpopulating the heavenly abode of the ancestors or gods (this, incidentally answers Pravāhaṇa Jaibali's 4<sup>th</sup> question quoted above).

### ***Yājñavalkya and his Philosophy***

Yājñavalkya comes to king Janaka's court at least three times in the BU; first time in the first Brāhmaṇa of Adhyāya III. Here, he is a bright young man who suddenly claims all the thousand cows with horns wrapped in gold, before even the philosophical

debate begins. When the assembly of scholars protest, he politely cracks this joke, with almost a Socratic sense of irony:

*"Namo Vayam brahmiṣṭhāya kurmaḥ gokāma eva vayam"*

"I know these cows were supposed to be given to the greatest knower of Brahman and I salute such a wise person. But I am only interested in the cows."\*

Second time, Yājñavalkya visits Janaka again, in the first Brāhmaṇa of Adhyāya IV. This time, Janaka recalls the last occasion and asks: "Why have you come this time, do you want cows or do you want to respond to deep and subtle questions?" Notice the word for 'philosophical questions' here: "aṅvantam" - "with atomic ends" - minute analysis (Śaṅkara explains *"sūkṣmāntān sūkṣma vastu nirṇāyāntān"*). And Yājñavalkya says : "For both, your majesty, the Emperor!"

The third time he arrives at Janaka's court (in the third Brāhmaṇa of Adhyāya IV), Yājñavalkya did not wish to lecture on philosophy at all. But on the previous occasion, Janaka had been granted the boon by this - now fully matured - great wise man. It was that he would answer any sincere question that the king may ask. And Janaka started asking "What serves as the light for this human person?" (*kiṁ jyotir ayam puruṣaḥ?*). Thus, started the longest discourse on the four states of consciousness - walking, dreaming, deep sleep and the fully awakened identification with pure Brahman consciousness, and further investigations into death, rebirth and cessation of rebirth-or liberation from the cycle of repeated deaths. At the end of this profound and elevating discourse, Janaka was so moved and grateful that he offered his entire kingdom to his teacher Yājñavalkya and added : "With that I also offer myself as your servant" (*mām cāpi saha dāsyāya*).

It is only a small fragment of Yājñavalkya's and **Brhadāranyaka's** own philosophy of death. But while paying attention to the concepts and theory of this earliest recorded systematic philosopher of India, we must also study his life, his personal character, his sense of humour, his method of teaching, his knowledge of when to stop and when to retire from the life of a public processional teacher.

So, in the fifth Brāhmaṇa of Chapter IV, we find him ready to renounce family life and take up monastic life. He proposes to divide his wealth between his two dear wives: Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī. And remember how much wealth he had. Not only all that gold which came with the thousand cows, but all of Videha - Janaka's entire empire was virtually in his possession. But endearing herself even more to her husband, Maitreyī

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\* Of course, the word "*go-kāmā*" could be a pun, since "go" can also mean speech or words. "We are only interested in talking, conversation, discourse!"

asks that historic question: "Even if this entire earth fills up with my wealth, shall I be immortal by that or not?" And the husband answered: "No, my dear, your life will only be like the lives of those who possess lots of accessories" - and we all know what Maitreyī said then: "What shall I do with that with which I cannot become deathless?"

Now, in this age of globalisation through shameless greed and consumption of accessories and gadgets, when our lives are "*yathā upakaraṇavatām jīvitām*", we must reconsider Maitreyī's question very seriously. In the beginning of his teaching career, two sharp questions flung at him like poisonous arrows of ferocious warriors from Kāśī and Videha, by the unstoppable woman Gārgī, brought out Yājñavalkya's *akṣara-brahma-vāda*. At the end of his career, another woman, this time his own wife, draws out the blissful message of the all-pervasive *Ātman* - the Soul of all Souls - for the love of which everything else becomes dear to us ("*ātmanas tu kāmāya sarvaṁ priyaṁ bhavati*").

Thus, the questioning critical spirit of the Indian women, and the spiritual thirst of the Indian women- which would not be quenched by anything less than immortality - have always been the moving force of the Indian Intellect, the Indian Heart and the Indian Spirit.

Let us hope that our present day Gargīs and Maitreyīs will also provoke and push and awaken the yearning of immortality in our minds again and save us from the *mahati vinaṣṭi* - the great disaster that human civilization seems to be facing right now, *asato mā sad gamaya*.

