

The Concept of *Devayānamārga* in Principle *Upaniṣads*

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Abstract: *Na hi kaścit kṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt*(3/5) –according to *Bhagavadgītā* one cannot exist a single moment without doing *karma*. *Karma* in its simplest term is ‘action’ only. But according to Indian philosophy, the word *karma* has a much greater significance than just simple meaning as ‘action’. As per the Indian Philosophy, any action that we do, produce some fruits or has a consequences. *Upaniṣads* say, if one sows goodness, will reap goodness; if one sows evil, will reap evil. In the *Upaniṣads* there are primarily three kinds of *karma*—*prārabdha Karma*, *sañcita Karma* and *kriyamāṇa Karma*. Every living being has to live through these three types of *karma*. Because the ultimate characteristic of the body in which the living being born is *karma*. From birth to death, and even the state after death, a living being is determined by this *karma*. The *Upaniṣads* describe three state of life after death, depending on the action of the *Jīva*: the path of the *Devayāna* for the *Saguṇa Brahmins*, the path of the *Pitṛyāna* for the one who performs Vedic rituals, and the third state for the lower beings.

Keywords: *Upaniṣads*, *Saguṇa Brahmins*, *Devayānamārga*, *Pitṛyānamārga*, *jīva*, *Brahman*.

The *Vedas* are known as the ancient literature of India. But its scope was not limited to literature alone. Due to the depth of its theories, the *Vedas* used to enjoy the status of scriptures. Every sentence of the *Vedas* was like a mirror to truth. This is why it is called the standard scripture. The *Vedas* are divided into two main parts: *Mantra* (the collection of mantras) and *Brāhmaṇa* (application of the mantras). This *Brāhmaṇa* is again divided into two parts: *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣad*. Between these two, the *Upaniṣad* developed later and it deals with the theories of the *Ātman* or the *Brahman*. The *Upaniṣad* says that the attainment of the knowledge of the *Brahman* is the only way to attain salvation. The individual who receives this knowledge comes out of the cycle of *Karma* as well as the bondage of *Samsāra* or the perceptible world. Such an individual is not born again. The *Upaniṣad* talks about three types of *Karma*: *prārabdha Karma*, *sañcita Karma* and *kriyamāṇa Karma*.

Sañcita Karma: This is like arrows in a quiver. It is the sum of one’s past *Karma* (accumulated work). Tendencies seen in the character of an individual comes from the deeds he has accumulated in his previous lives.

Prārabdha Karma: This is like arrows in flight. It is that portion of *Sañcita Karma* which influences human life in the present incarnation.

Kriyamāṇa Karma: These are the deeds an individual does in his current life, the fruits of which will be experienced in future. These are like arrows going to hit a target.

Every living being has to live through these three types of *karma*. Because the ultimate characteristic of the body in which the living being born is *karma*. It is said in *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* that *Jīva* cannot exist even for a moment without do-

ing karma- *Na hi kaścit kṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt*(3/5). From birth to death, and even the state after death, a living being is determined by this *karma*. The *Upaniṣads* describe three state of life after death, depending on the action of the Jīva: the path of the *Devayāna* for the Saguṇa Brahmins, the path of the *Pitṛyāna* for the one who performs Vedic rituals, and the third state for the lower beings. According to the *Upaniṣads*, attainment of the knowledge of the Brahman ensures the destruction of an individual's *sañcita* and *kriyamāṇa karma*. Only the *prārabdha karma* persists. This state is called *jīvanmukti*. After this, when death claims the physical body it is called *videhamukti*. In this state, the individual with the knowledge of Brahman – referred to as *Brahmajñānī* – becomes one with the Brahman. Now the question which arises is, if the *Brahmajñānī* individuals become one with the Brahman after death, then how does the *Upaniṣad's* statement of them going out to the *Devayānamārga* make sense? An answer to this question may be that there are two kinds of *Brahmajñānī*: *saguṇa Brahmajñānī*, or the knower of the *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa Brahmajñānī* or the knower of its Brahman. The *Upaniṣads* opine that only the latter becomes one with the Brahman; the former does not. After death, the *saguṇa Brahmajñānī* comes out of his body in a few steps and eventually embarks on the path to the attainment of the Brahman. This locus of the *saguṇa Brahmajñānī* is described as the *Devayānamārga* in the *Upaniṣads*, and it is the topic of our present discussion.

The *Chāndōgya Upaniṣad* says that at the time of death, the *vāk* (word) of the *jīvātmā* (the Ātman of an individual) goes back into the mind; the mind goes back into the *prāṇa* (life force), the *prāṇa* goes back into *teja* (energy) and *teja* becomes one with the *parama devatā* (the absolutely divine). (*Chāndōgya Upaniṣad* 6.8-6) Now the question is, does *vāk* go back into the mind as an *indriya* (sense organ) or merely as a collection of deeds? Supporters of the former option say that it is the *indriya* which goes back because the immediate sense of the word *vāk* is the ability to speak, and this ability is itself the *vāk indriya*. On the other hand, supporters of the latter option make a distinction between the *vāk indriya* and the ability to speak. This ability, they maintain, is merely a potential associated with the *indriya* and not the *indriya* as a whole. The *Advaiavedāntīns* say that here the meaning of the destruction of *vāk* should be interpreted as the destruction of the physical manifestation of the *indriya* of making words or the ability to speak. If analyzed logically, the *indriya* of words itself cannot merge with the mind which is another *indriya*. This is because the *indriyas* can go back only into their material cause, and the mind is not the material cause of any of the *indriyas*. Therefore, the word *vāk* here denotes only the ability to speak, and not the *indriya* itself. The mind is not the cause of the act of speaking, so how can this act be absorbed into the mind? An example has been given to clarify this point. In the real world, a burning log shows fire's potential to burn things. If water is poured over that log, then it displays a destruction of that potential in the fire that was lighting the log. Thus, although fire and water are separate from each other, we can witness in water the destruction of fire's potential to burn things. Similarly, as the *indriya* that is the mind is not the material cause of the *indriya* that is *vāk*, we cannot accept that *vāk* in its full faculty as an *indriya* is destroyed and goes back into the mind. But there should be no objection in accepting the destruction of the ability to speak – which is a potential of *vāk* – in the mind. Moreover, a person on his death throes loses his ability to speak while his mind keeps functioning. Thus, even experiences from the real world demonstrate that it is the ability to speak which is lost in the mind, and not

the entire *vāk indriya*. Similarly, the all other *indriyas* too lose their function in the mind at the time of death. (Prašnopaniṣad.3.9)

According to the *Śruti*, the mind where the functions of all the *indriyas* cease is itself destroyed and absorbed into *prāṇa* or the life force at the time of death (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. 6.8.6). Again we can confirm from real experience that even after a person's mind stops functioning on the verge of death, his heart often keeps pumping blood, keeping the tissues alive. Thus both the *Śruti* and real life testify to the fact of the mind's destruction and absorption into *prāṇa*.

Eventually *prāṇa* is absorbed into the *jīvātmā*. Supporters of the former group object by pointing out that the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* says *prāṇa* is absorbed into *teja*. So how can it be absorbed into the *jīvātmā* ? The *Siddhāntis* reply that in this case, merging of the *prāṇa* into *teja* should be interpreted as merging of the *jīvātmā* with *prāṇa* into *teja*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, too, mentions the *prāṇa* following the transcendental body of the individual; it is not possible for the individual to pass over without the *prāṇa*. (4/4/2) Even in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* (3/4) it is accepted that the *jīvātmā* and *prāṇa* pass over together. It is supported by the *Prašnopaniṣad* as well. (6/4) The *Brahma Sūtra* (2/3/29) logically proves that the *jīvātmā* cannot pass over without an individualized transcendental body with *prāṇa*. Thus the interpretation of merging of *prāṇa* into *teja* should be the merging of *prāṇa* with *jīvātmā* and other necessary elements.

Thereafter *teja* merge into the Supreme deity. Here it must be remembered that the merging mentioned here is not a final dissolution. Rather, it is more like the merging of the waking consciousness into deep sleep. In case of *saguṇa Brahman* and ordinary men, all the *indriyas* merge with the *jīvātmā* at the time of death. As long as the *jīvātmā* does not take on a new physical body, those *indriyas* cannot active. But the *indriyas* of *nirguṇ Brahman* merge with the *Paramātmā* in an absolute way. The *nirguṇ Brahman* does not take up any more physical bodies. Therefore, just as the sense resume their functions as soon as their *ātman* takes on a new physical body. In the above discussion, the merging of the *teja* with the Supreme deity does not denote the ultimate merging of *nirguṇ Brahman*'s *indriyas* with the *Paramātmā*. This is what we are trying to clarify here. Even the *Śruti* does not recognize the state of ultimate oneness before the attainment of the knowledge of the *Brahman* or *Brahma-jñāna*, because in that case death would emerge as nothing less than *mukti* or salvation. However, *Śruti* accepts the presence of a transcendental body up to the point of death. The *Kāthopaniṣad* (2.2.7) also speaks about the transcendental body after death. In here the details of the body one is to get are determined according to one's deeds and wisdom. The souls must enjoy or suffer the consequences of their past lives and therefore they enter their new mothers' wombs according to these criteria to be born again.

Now we have to describe the journey of the afterlife of a knower of the *saguṇa Brahman*. The departure of such a person is not exactly the same as that of an ordinary person. The path the former follows is called the *Devayānamārga*, whereas the path followed by the latter is the *Pitryānamārga*. The difference between these two paths starts right after the *ātman* embarks on the journey. Describing the death of a person, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says that "When this self becomes weak and senseless, as it were, the organs come to it...it comes to the heart" (4.4.1); again, "The top of the heart brightens. Through that brightened top the self departs, either through the eye, or through the head, or through any other

part of the body” (4.4.2). These show that at the time of death the soul together with the organs comes to the heart. At that moment the departing soul, on account of his past works, has a peculiar consciousness picturing to it its next life, and goes to the body which is revealed by that consciousness. This is what is referred to as the illumining of the top of the heart. With this particular consciousness the soul goes out, along one of the arteries that issue from the heart, to the eyes, or ears, or the skull, or other parts of the body, which it finally leaves through that particular exit.

The exit process of a knower of *Saguṇa Brahman*:

Now, we describe the exit from the body of a knower of *the saguṇa Brahman*. The departure of a knower of *saguṇa Brahman* and an ordinary man is mostly the same, till the soul's entering on the path (knower of *saguṇa Brahman* = *Devayānamārga*; ordinary man = *Pitṛyānamārga*). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* describing the death of a person says “When this Self becomes weak and senseless, as it were, the organs come to it... it comes to the heart” (4.4.1); again “The top of the heart brightens. Though the brightened top the self departs, either through the eye, or through the head, or through any other part of the body” (4.4.2). These show that at the time of death the soul together with the organs comes to the heart. At that moment the departing soul, on account of his past works, has a peculiar consciousness picturing to its next life, and goes to the body which is revealed by that consciousness. This is what is referred to as the illumining of the top of the heart. With this particular consciousness the soul goes out, along one of the arteries that issue from the heart, to the eyes, or ears, or the skull, or other parts of the body, which is finally leaves through that particular exit. Through the illumining of the top of the heart is common to both (*saguṇa Brahman* and ordinary man), yet the knower of *saguṇa Brahman*, through the grace of the Lord who abides in the heart, departs through the skull only, while ordinary man departs through other parts. The following *Upaniṣad* makes clear it “There are hundred and one arteries of the heart; one of them goes out into the Head; passing upwards by way of that, one reaches the immortal; while the other arteries serve as ways for departing in various directions” (*Chāndogya upaniṣad*. 8.6.6). So, it is very clear that when soul travels to *Devayānamārg* it goes out through the hundred and one arteries, the *suṣumnā*. The soul of the knower of *saguṇa Brahman*, after departing from the body along the *suṣumnā*, follows the rays of the sun. But if this Soul departs in night how it follows the rays of the sun? The answer has given that the connection between the rays and the arteries lasts as long as the body lasts. So, it is immaterial whether the Soul passes out by day or by night. Moreover, the sun, rays continue even during the night, though we do not feel their presence (*Chāndogya upaniṣad*: 8.6.2).

The detail description of *Devayānamārg*:

The departure of the knower of *saguṇa Brahman* from the body during death has been described. Now we try to sketch in details the *Devayānamārg* (the path of the Gods) by which the knower of *saguṇa Brahman* travels to Brahmaloka after death. The different *Upaniṣads* give various stages about the *Devayānamārg*. We try to fix the order of the stages according to *Brahmasūtra* (4.3.1-3). The *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* describe the path as follows: “The *upāsaka*, having reached the path of the gods, reaches the world of *Agni* (fire); of *Vāyu* (air); of *varuṇa*; of *Indra*; of *Prajāpati*; and then of *Brahman*” (1.3). Again the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.10.1), describes the path as follows: “They reach the deity identified with the

flame, from him to the deity of the bright half of the month (*Īkḷapakṣa*), from him to the deities identified with the six months of the northern path of the sun (*Uttarāyaṇa*), from them to the deity of the year (*Samvatsara*), from him to the deity of the sun (*Aditya*), from him to the deity of the moon (*Candra*), from him to the deity of lightning (*Vidyut*). In these two *Upaniṣads* the first deity they reach is said to be the deity of the flame or fire. So, the starting point is clearly pointed out by both text, for they say that having reached the path of gods the departed soul reach this deity. Combining these two *Upaniṣads* we have to place the deity of air in between the deity of the year and the deity of the sun. Why? Because of the absence and presence of specification. “When a man departs from this world, he reaches the air, which makes an opening there for him... He goes upwards through that and reaches the sun” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad*: 5.10.1). This *Upaniṣad* fixes that air comes immediately before the sun because we perceive a regular order of succession. But as regards air coming after the deity of the flame, there is no specification, but simply a statement; He comes from the world of fire to that of air. In between these two stages we have several other stages which the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* mentions. Again in the *Upaniṣad* “From him the deities of the six months in which the sun travels northward, from them the deity identified with the world of gods” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad*: 6.2.15). To keep the immediate sequence of the deity identified with air and that identified with the sun, we must understand that the Soul passes from the deity of the world of the gods to the deity of the air. Again in the *Upaniṣads* of the *Chāndogya* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, the deity of the world of the gods is not mentioned in the former and the deity of the year in the latter. Both have to be included in the full description of the path, and since the year is connected with the months, the deity of the year precedes the deity of the world of the gods. After reaching the deity identified with lightning the Soul reaches the world of *Varuṇa* (*Brahmasūtra* 4.3.3). The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* reads, “From the sun to the moon, from moon to lightning”. The *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* reads, “From *Vāyu* to *Varuṇa*”. Combining these two *Upaniṣads* we have to place *Varuṇa* after lightning, on account of the connection between the two. *Varuṇa* is the god of rain, and lightning precedes rain. So after lightning comes *Varuṇa*, and after *Varuṇa* come *Indra* and *Prajāpati*, for there is no other place for them, and *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* also puts them there.

So, the complete enumeration of the stages of the path of the gods is as follows:

First the deity of the flame or fire, then the deity of the day, the deity of the bright half of the month (*Īkḷapakṣa*), the deities of the six months when sun travels to the north (*Uttarāyaṇa*), the deity of the year (*Samvatsara*), the deity of the world of gods, the deity of the air, the sun, the moon, the deity of lightning, that world of *Varuṇa*, the world of *Indra*, the world of *Prajāpati*, and finally *Brahmaloka*.

Now to conclude the discussion, we sum up with the following:

Different *Upaniṣads* offer differing views on the nature of the *Devayānamārga*. These descriptions share some similarities but dissimilarities outnumber those points of agreement. But because of all these opinions’ one common ground in marking the *Brahmaloka* as the ultimate destination of the *jīvātmā*, the *Brahma Sūtra* (4.3.1-4.3.3), has tried to frame an inclusive argument incorporating all of them. Secondly, on the way of the *saguṇa Brahmajñāni*’s journey to the *Brahmaloka*, there are a number of stages named such as Flame etc. These names de-

note the deities of those places, and not the places themselves. This is because the flame etc. being without intelligence cannot guide the souls. On the other hand, the soul, too, cannot follow them on their path after death because their organs etc. are withdrawn into the mind. So they are incapable of guiding themselves. Therefore, the *Upaniṣads* accept the presence of a carrier by the name of consciousness who takes the soul to the path of *Brahmaloka*. (*Chāndōgya Upaniṣad* 4.15.5 and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.15) Thirdly, as has already been said, if a knower of the *saguṇa Brahman* dies at night, his soul will follow the flame as surely as the person who dies at the time of the sun's six month long southward leaning attains the *Brahmaloka*. After the death of the physical body, the soul must travel to the *Brahmaloka* because it is there that the ultimate destination of all worshippers of the *Brahman*. Therefore, the soul must reach it. Otherwise, the rule of karma might be interrupted. Even in *The Mahābhārata* we see *Bhīṣma* wait for the sun to turn north to die. The *Smṛti* accepts that *Bhīṣma* went to the *Devayānamārga*. But it would not be correct to assume that he was waiting for the sun's northward shift precisely to embark on that path. As it is stated in *Nyāyamālā* of *Brahmasūtra* (4.2.20) –“*naityuttarāyaṇādyukterbhīṣmasyāpi pratīkṣaṇāt*”. This wait may have been an indicator of the respect paid to tradition, or it can be an implementation of the boon of euthanasia he had received from his father. At the end of the discussion, we can say that those who are endowed with the knowledge of *Saguṇa Brahman* attain the path of *Devayāna* after leaving the body. Some of them attain attribute less Brahman through spiritual progress on their journey and merge into Brahman without returning. On the other hand, those who cannot merge into Brahman again take on another body (an incarnate person or great soul) and return to this world.

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