

THE BRHAD-ĀRANYAKA UPANIṢAD

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CHAPTER THREE, PART ONE

Janaka, the king of Videha, once set out to perform a sacrifice at which he intended to give lavish gifts to the officiating priests. Brahmins from the Kuru and Pañcāla regions had flocked there for the occasion, and Janaka of Videha wanted to find out which of those Brahmins was the most learned in the Vedas. So he corralled a thousand cows; to the horns of each cow were tied ten pieces of gold.

He then addressed those Brahmins: ‘Distinguished Brahmins! Let the most learned man among you drive away these cows.’ But no one dared. So Yājñavalkya called to his pupil: ‘Sāmaśravas! Son, drive these cows away.’ And he drove them away. The Brahmins were furious and murmured: ‘How dare he claim to be the most learned?’

Now, Janaka of Videha had a Hotṛ priest named Aśvala. He asked: ‘Yājñavalkya, do you really think you are the most learned among us?’ Yājñavalkya replied: ‘We bow humbly to the most learned man! But we are really after the cows, aren’t we?’ At this the Hotṛ Aśvala became determined to question him. [...]

FOUR

Then Uṣasta Cākrāyaṇa began to question him. ‘Yājñavalkya,’ he said, ‘explain to me the *brahman* that is plain and not cryptic, the self (*ātman*) that is within all.’

‘The self within all is this self of yours.’

‘Which one is the self within all, Yājñavalkya?’

‘Who breathes out with the out-breath—he is the self of yours that is within all. Who breathes in with the in-breath—he is the self of yours that is within all. Who breathes across with the interbreath—he is the self of yours that is within all. Who breathes up with the up-breath—he is the self of yours that is within all. The self within all is this self of yours.’

Uṣasta Cākrāyaṇa retorted: ‘That is fine explanation! It’s like saying “This is a cow and that is a horse!” Come on, give me a real explanation of the *brahman* that is plain and not cryptic, of the self that is within all.’

‘The self within all is this self of yours.’

‘Which one is the self within all, Yājñavalkya?’

‘You can’t see the seer who does the seeing; you can’t hear the hearer who does the hearing; you can’t perceive the perceiver who does the perceiving. The self within all is this self of yours. All else besides this is grief!’

Thereupon, Uṣasta Cākrāyaṇa fell silent.

SIX

Then Gārgī Vācaknavī began to question him. ‘Yājñavalkya,’ she said, ‘tell me—since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth?’

‘On air, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, is air woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the intermediate region, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the intermediate region woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the Gandharvas, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the Gandharvas woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the sun, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the sun woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the moon, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the moon woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the stars, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the stars woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the gods, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the gods woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the Indra, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the Indra woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the Prajāpati, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the Prajāpati woven back and forth?’

‘On the worlds of the *brahman*, Gārgī.’

‘On what, then, are the worlds of the *brahman* woven back and forth?’

At this point Yājñavalkya told her: ‘Don’t ask too many questions, Gārgī, or your head will shatter apart! You are asking too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions. So, Gārgī, don’t ask too many questions!’

Thereupon, Gārgī Vācaknavī fell silent.

SEVEN

Then Uddālaka Āruṇi began to question him. ‘Yājñavalkya,’ he said, ‘once we were living in the land of the Madras learning about the sacrifice in the house of Patañcala Kāpya. He had a wife possessed by a Gandharva. We asked him who he was, and the Gandharva said that he was Kabandha Ātharvaṇa. He then asked Patañcala Kāpya and the students there who were learning about the sacrifice: [...] “Tell me, Kāpya—do you know the inner controller of this world and the next, as well as of all beings, who controls them from within?” “That, my lord, I do not know,” replied Patañcala Kāpya. He then told Patañcala Kāpya and the students there who were learning about the sacrifice: “Clearly, Kāpya, if a man knows [...] who that inner controller is—he knows *brahman*; he knows the worlds; he knows the gods; he knows the Vedas; he knows the spirits; he knows the self; he knows all.” That’s what he told them.

‘And I know it. So, if you drive away the cows meant for the Brahmins, Yājñavalkya, without knowing [...] who that inner controller is, your head will shatter apart!’

‘Gautama, I do know [...] who that inner controller is.’

‘Of course, anyone can say, “I know! I know!” Tell us what precisely you know.’ [...]

‘This self (*ātman*) of yours who is present within but is different from the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, and who controls the earth from within—he is the inner controller (*antaryāmī*), the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the waters, whom the waters do not know, whose body is the waters, and who controls the waters from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the fire, whom the fire does not know, whose body is the fire, and who controls the fire from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the intermediate region, whom the intermediate region does not know, whose body is the intermediate region, and who controls the intermediate region from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the wind, whom the wind does not know, whose body is the wind, and who controls the wind from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the sky, whom the sky does not know, whose body is the sky, and who controls the sky from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the sun, whom the sun does not know, whose body is the sun, and who controls the sun from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the quarters, whom the quarters do not know, whose body is the quarters, and who controls the quarters from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the moon and stars, whom the moon and stars do not know, whose body is the moon and stars, and who controls the moon and stars from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the space, whom the space does not know, whose body is the space, and who controls the space from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the darkness, whom the darkness does not know, whose body is the darkness, and who controls the darkness from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the light, whom the light does not know, whose body is the light, and who controls the light from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal. [...]

That was with respect to beings. What follows is with respect to the body.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the breath, whom the breath does not know, whose body is the breath, and who controls the breath from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the speech, whom the speech does not know, whose body is the speech, and who controls the speech from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the sight, whom the sight does not know, whose body is the sight, and who controls the sight from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the hearing, whom the hearing does not know, whose body is the hearing, and who controls the hearing from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the mind, whom the mind does not know, whose body is the mind, and who controls the mind from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the skin, whom the skin does not know, whose body is the skin, and who controls the skin from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal.

‘This self of yours who is present within but is different from the perception, whom the perception does not know, whose body is the perception, and who controls the perception from within—he is the inner controller, the immortal. [...]

‘He sees, but he can’t be seen; he hears, but he can’t be heard; he thinks, but he can’t be thought of; he perceives, but he can’t be perceived. Besides him, there is no one who sees, no one who hears, no one who thinks, and no one who perceives. It is this self of yours who is the inner controller, the immortal. All besides this is grief.’

Thereupon, Uddālaka Āruṇi fell silent.

EIGHT

Then Gārgī Vācakanvī spoke. ‘Distinguished Brahmins!’ she said. ‘I am going to ask this man two questions. If he can give me the answers to them, none of you will be able to defeat him in a theological debate.’

‘Ask, Gārgī.’

She said: ‘I rise to challenge you, Yājñavalkya, with two questions, much as a fierce warrior of Kāśī or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy. Give me the answers to them!’

‘Ask, Gārgī.’

She said: ‘The things above the sky, the things below the earth, and the things between the earth and the sky, as well as all those things people here refer to as past, present, and future—on what, Yājñavalkya, are all these woven back and forth?’

He replied: ‘The things above the sky, the things below the earth, and the things between the earth and the sky, as well as all those things people here refer to as past, present, and future—on space, Gārgī, are all these woven back and forth.’

She responded: ‘All honour to you, Yājñavalkya. You really cleared that up for me! Get ready for the second.’

‘Ask, Gārgī.’

She said: ‘The things above the sky, the things below the earth, and the things between the earth and the sky, as well as all those things people here refer to as past, present, and future—on what, Yājñavalkya, are all these woven back and forth?’

He replied: ‘The things above the sky, the things below the earth, and the things between the earth and the sky, as well as all those things people here refer to as past, present, and future—on space, Gārgī, are all these woven back and forth.’

‘On what, then, is space woven back and forth?’

He replied: ‘That, Gārgī, is the imperishable, and Brahmins refer to it like this—it is neither coarse nor fine; it is neither short nor long; it has neither blood nor fat; it is without shadow or darkness; it is without air or space; it is without contact; it has no taste or smell; it is without sight or hearing; it is without speech or mind; it is without energy, breath, or mouth; it is beyond measure; it has nothing within it or outside of it; it does not eat anything; and no one eats it.

‘This is the imperishable, Gārgī, at whose command the sun and the moon stand apart. This is the imperishable, Gārgī, at whose command the earth and the sky stand apart. This is the imperishable, Gārgī, at whose command seconds and hours, days and nights, fortnights and months, seasons and years stand apart. This is the imperishable, Gārgī, at whose command rivers flow from the snowy mountains in their respective directions, some to the east and others to the west. This is the imperishable, Gārgī, at whose command people flatter donors, and gods are dependent on patrons of sacrifices, and forefathers on ancestral offerings.

‘Without knowing this imperishable, Gārgī, even if a man were to make offerings, to offer sacrifices, and to perform austerities in this world for many thousands of years, all that would come to naught. Pitiful is the man, Gārgī, who departs from this world without knowing this imperishable. But a man who departs from this world after he has come to know this imperishable—he, Gārgī, is a Brahmin.

‘This is the imperishable, Gārgī, which sees but can’t be seen; which hears but can’t be heard; which thinks but can’t be thought of; which perceives but can’t be perceived. Besides this imperishable, there is no one that sees, no one that hears, no one that thinks, and no one that perceives.

‘On this very imperishable, Gārgī, space is woven back and forth.’

‘Distinguished Brahmins!’ said Gārgī. ‘You should consider yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects. None of you will ever defeat him in a theological debate.’

Thereupon, Vācakanvī fell silent.

NINE

Then Vidagdha Śākalya began to question him. ‘Tell me, Yājñavalkya—how many gods are there?’ Saying, ‘As many as are mentioned in the ritual invocation within the laud to the All-gods,’ he answered in accordance

with this very ritual invocation: ‘Three and three hundred, and three and three thousand.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘Thirty-three.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘Six.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘Three.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘Two.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘One and a half.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but really, Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?’

‘One.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, ‘but then who are those three and three hundred, and those three and three thousand?’

‘They are only the powers of the gods,’ Yājñavalkya replied. ‘There are only thirty-three gods.’

‘Who are those thirty-three?’

‘The eight Vasus, the eleven Rudras, and the twelve Ādityas—that makes thirty-one. Then there are Indra and Prajāpati, making a total of thirty-three.’

‘Who are the Vasus?’

‘The Vasus are fire, earth, wind, the intermediate region, sun, sky, moon, and stars. They are called Vasus because this whole treasure (*vasu*) is entrusted to them.’

‘Who are the Rudras?’

‘The ten vital functions (*prāṇa*) in a man, with the self (*ātman*) as the eleventh. They make people weep when they depart from this mortal body. They are called Rudras because they make people weep (*rud-*).’

‘Who are the Ādityas?’

‘The Ādityas are the twelve months of the year, for they carry off this whole world as they proceed. They are called Ādityas because they carry off (*ādadānāḥ*) this whole world as they proceed (*yanti*).’

‘Who is Indra? And who is Prajāpati?’

‘Indra is just the thunder, and Prajāpati is the sacrifice.’

‘What is thunder?’

‘The thunderbolt.’

‘What is the sacrifice?’

‘The sacrificial animals.’

‘Who are the six?’

‘The six are fire and earth, wind and the intermediate region, sun and sky—for these six are this whole world.’

‘Who are the three gods?’

‘Just these three worlds, for all the gods live in them.’

‘Who are the two gods?’

‘Food and breath.’

‘Who are the one and a half?’

‘The purifying wind that is blowing here. Now, some may ask: “But the purifying wind here blows as one only. So how can he be one and a half?” He is one and a half (*adhyardha*) because in him this whole world increases (*adhyardh-*).’

‘Who is the one god?’

‘Breath. He is called “Brahman” and “Tyad”.’

[...]

[Yājñavalkya:] ‘About this self (*ātman*), one can only say “not—, not—.” He is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing sticking to him, for he does not stick to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury. [...] I ask you about that person providing the hidden connection (*upaniṣad*)—the one who carries off these other persons, brings them back, and rises above them? If you will not tell me that, your head will shatter apart.’

Śākalya did not know him, and his head did, indeed, shatter apart. Robbers, moreover, stole his bones, mistaking them for something else. Yājñavalkya then addressed them: ‘Distinguished Brahmins! If any one of you would like to question me, let him do so; or, if you prefer, you may question me all together. Or else, if any one of you would like me to, I will question him; or, if you prefer, I will question all of you together.’ But those Brahmins did not dare.