

THE MEANING OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE UPANISHADS

BY KURT F. LEIDECKER

IF one were to name one outstanding characteristic of Upanishadic philosophy, one's choice would properly fall on the identification of knowing with being. This equation, whether in an outspoken or implied form, may be met with on every hand throughout the Upanishads. Deussen, who has done the most important work on the Upanishads, regarded the *ātman brahman* equation, that is, the equation between the individual self and the universal spirit, as the basic thought in this literature. Yet the above named identification is more primitive, pervasive, and commoner. The *ātman brahman* idea, perhaps, is but a particular case of this mode of thought which goes back to earlier literature. In the Upanishads, however, the coalition of knowledge and existence finds a more rational expression and is exploited philosophically.

In the Brāhmanas and the Aranyakas already we frequently read: *ya evam veda*, 'he who knows this.' And not solely to indicate the end of a paragraph is it repeated: 'yea he who knows it!' The word is too weighty, too sincere, to be comparable to our lightly thrown out 'I know.' All the depth of human experience and emotion stirred to the very bottom speaks out of it. Dear and gratifying it must have sounded to those who had the first-hand knowledge and could now relate it to the eager student: quickening and fascinating to the *cela* in his first lessons whereby he was to aspire to the great experience in communion with his venerable teacher; challenging and warning to those who never were allowed to gain possession of the liberating knowledge.

One might rightfully raise the question as to why the ancient Hindus insisted on knowledge and in how far knowledge for them contrasted with action. The first of these inquiries will never be

wholly satisfied. The social and historical background is too scanty to permit a conclusive judgment. Certain it is, that the knowledge so frequently referred to relates to the Vedic complex of knowledge. Whether this complex wholly or partly owes its origin to a deliberate attempt to set up a barrier between the Aryans and the original inhabitants, or whether it has grown up independently of such or similar considerations, must remain a matter of dispute. Yet even in pre-Upanishadic literature we find this complex in a stage of transformation, reshaping and supplementing. This *ya evam veda* refers at times to individual experiences which are not wholly in line with the great bulk of tradition. Moreover, the Upanishads are known to obliterate the distinctions between caste, age, and sex. From all that it is highly improbable that the *ya evam veda* is designed intentionally as an impediment for any other but the intellectual class. This consideration leads, by inference, to the conclusion at which we shall arrive in a different way later, that the knowledge referred to is not a knowledge by description but one of acquaintance and, furthermore, not of intellectual familiarity, erudition or learning, but of insight, experience, and living.

Anquetil Duperron, the first to make known the Upanishads in Europe through his Latin rendering of the Persian translation of some Upanishads, struck the keynote and the spirit of these treatises aright when he prefixed to his work this motto: "*Quisquis Deum intelligit, Deus fit.*" He took it from the Upanishads themselves which say, for instance, in Muṇḍaka 3.2.9, *yo brahma veda brahma eva bhavati*, 'he who knows *Brahma* becomes *Brahma*.' However, the Latin formulation sounds religious, whereas the Upanishads are primarily philosophically oriented. Thus their characteristic is, perhaps, better formulated more broadly as: '*Quidvis scio, idem sum,*' whereof the Muṇḍaka passage is but an illustration.

The fourth Brāhmaṇa of the first Adhyāya of the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upanishad teaches throughout that knowledge is self-distinguishing being, or that being is self-distinguishing by knowing. The primeval *ātman*, or self, perceiving nothing but himself, came to know this and hence the world-all arose. In this Brāhmaṇa there are at least three versions of the creation of the world, and it is pervaded with very primitive conceptions. However, there is nothing accidental to these treatises and the phraseology is of no

mean importance. If a wish, a mere word, or a conscious act of judgment is made responsible for the existence of the cosmic sphere, it is so many different points of view which presuppose a certain philosophic reflection.

It is again this curious relationship between knowing and the existence of that which is known. There is, furthermore, a real participation or sharing in the being of what is known. In the same section of this ancient Upanishad the promise is that he who knows the creation as having taken place in that fashion (*ya evaṁ veda*) will be in that very creation.

The examples are too plentiful to be worth enumerating. However, mention must be made of the later much discussed correlation of one's state of knowledge and one's circumstances at birth. In Kaushītaki Upanishad 1.2 this typical doctrine of reincarnation is already well developed. The passage stresses action also as determining one's birth.

The consequence of knowing (*vid*) are various. The expectations of the knower vary from terrestrial joys and possessions to more celestial and lasting happiness and pleasure or the encompassing of philosophic truth.

It is to Deussen's great credit that he pointed out that the relationship which obtains between the knower of *ātman* and salvation is one of logical implication. This is true beyond doubt and comes to conscious expression in technical philosophical passages. But the great majority of the sections in question may hardly be interpreted in this way. The explanation is much simpler and has a primitive root.

In the first place, the correlation of knowing and being may be due to the general affinity of *vid* and *sat*. The native grammarians divide the root *vid* into three classes: (1) *vid—jñane*; (2) *vid—sattayam*; and (3) *vid—labhe*. That is, *vid* has three connotations (philologists say there are three distinct roots), to know, to be, to find. Whatever theories we may have about this word, the philosophical implication of the correlation between knowing and being is not irrelevant to this philological peculiarity.

In the second place, to a person even of moderate philosophic training the bearing which knowing has on being, in short the epistemological problem, must be of interest, and a less cool intellect is apt to pass rash judgment. To this may come, as a mo-

ment of second rate importance, however, that the class which had 'knowledge' was at the same time that portion of the population which enjoyed also all earthly comforts.

In the third place, knowing, for the Upanishadic philosophers, involves a psycho-physical relationship. This is the case notably when, especially in the later literature, the word for knowing in the original text is not *vid*, but *jñā*. Philological discussions are usually irrelevant to philosophical problems, but we venture to say that this minimum of philological digression is absolutely necessary for an understanding of the Hindu conception of knowledge.

It may not solely be due to the fact that the verb *jñā* occurs especially in later literature that the philosophic import (as we understand the word) is commonly more obvious than in *vid*. Where the two are found together, *vid* has the tendency to characterize intellectual knowledge, while *jñā* ought never to be translated by 'to know' simply. To aid our interpretation of the Hindu frame of mind we therefore should always take it more pregnantly as 'to realize' in order to convey a little the profundity attaching to the word and its derivatives. Realizing has a depth which bare knowing does not possess. If we duly take into account the facts it becomes difficult to understand why some have charged the thinkers of ancient India with intellectualism.

It may serve as a good example of the life and character of the Upanishad sages and philosophers if we investigate first some of the results of knowing (*vid*), and then those of realizing (*jñā*). These Indian ascetics—as we are liable to picture them to ourselves—appear in quite a different light. They are concerned with satisfaction of all desires when they have attained knowledge of a certain type: they hope for offspring, cattle, general prosperity, and longevity; and in their worldly interest they think even of keeping off hostile relatives, should one be acquainted with a certain doctrine, while fame, honor, greatness, freedom from rivals, and dominion, as well as praise, service and worship by the people are common rewards of knowledge. The Baconian "knowledge is power" seems weak in comparison with all these assertions.

On a more psychological level and more reasonable are the quite numerous descriptions of the knower as shining and glowing with lustre, glory, splendour, beauty, and so on. He is also said to get a firm basis and support, and win the worlds, which again

is equivalent to becoming immortal or imperishable, to leaving the body behind, overcoming repeated death, reaching the heavenly world, or however else the phrase may run.

Under the head of philosophic knowledge which constitutes liberation in itself will go all those cases in which the knower is believed to become one with the highest reality, be it *ātman*, *brahman*, *puruṣa*, Viṣṇu, Kṛiṣṇa, etc. Expressed references to liberation as caused by knowledge are ever recurring: being saved, being born no more, attaining unity, non-duality, identity, bliss, and peace. Knowing a Upanishad would indicate not an intellectual acquaintance with its contents, but realization in the fullest measure.

Knowledge of the type of realizing (*jñā*) is used preferably in a context that deals with very vital problems. In a large number of cases it is a matter of liberation, perfection, peace, and immortality—all problems most essential to the Hindu mind. It is hardly probable and possible even that a mere knowing, a bare intellectual relationship, should ever have been considered as the only requirement for moral goodness and everlasting satisfaction.

The consequences of *jñā* are in many ways similar to those of *vid*. A person having the experience of realization believes himself to have gone to non-death, having reached *amṛtyu* (immortality) already, or at least to have conquered or cut the cord of death, as the expression is. It 'frees from all fetters', liberates, and is instrumental in attaining the three worlds or reaching *brahman*. Peace, happiness, and bliss also are a reward, and likewise individual perfection, release from all misfortune, dispelling all delusion (*moha*), as well as obtaining or losing all desires (the two being synonymous for Hindu thought, according to the saying "*nihil habentes omnia possidentes*").

In more philosophic passages we have a realizing of or grasping in its full meaning and significance a thing of worth, a fundamental truth, or a character of reality as such. Elsewhere the verb may be taken to mean recognizing or acknowledging or gaining a deep and vital insight. This insight must be, or cannot otherwise be imparted by a teacher by word of mouth.

Oldenberg is essentially right when he says that in the Upanishads one is not concerned with knowledge of the order of cool and supercilious apprehension, nor with a knowledge of clear-cut, objective conceptions. Not for the reason that they did not know the art

of definition; but because they were frank, sincere, and personal in their attitude.

The fervor with which the Hindu considers the acquisition of right knowledge from a *guru*, a teacher, may well be regarded as a religious predilection. If so, however, that which is so characteristically Hindu is lost. Religion is too vague a concept to be applicable to the Upanishads in their entirety.

Into this category of interpretation falls also the contention that Hindu thinking especially with reference to the knowledge problem is essentially magical. It is, in as far as knowledge of whatever kind is reputed to bluntly cause changes in the objective universe. However, leaving alone this unphilosophic and naïve view which, to some extent, is current even now, the Hindu definition of philosophy has always distinguished itself from our Western definitions in that it meant, and still means to the Hindus (and, as a matter of fact, to the whole Orient) a *Lebensanschauung*. In other words, they believe, as many advocates of a philosophy of life even now do, that my philosophic point of view colors my relation and attitude towards the universe. Call this magic, if you like, but you might in labelling it thus do injustice to those early thinkers to whom the greatest respect is due for their formulating for the first time in history the greatest and sublimest of all truths, *tat tvam asi*.

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Chapter

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 - IV Concerning the Postulational Treatment of Empirical Truth
 - V The Structure of Exact Thought
 - VI The Notion of Doctrinal Function
 - VII Hypothesis Growing into Veritable Principle
 - VIII What is Reasoning?
 - IX The Larger Human Worth of Mathematics
- Index

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