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 \textit{atman 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 \textit{atman 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: \textit{ya evāṁ vedā}, '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 \textit{cēla} 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 Deus intelligit, Deus fit." He took it from the Upanishads themselves which say, for instance, in Mundaka 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 Mundaka passage is but an illustration.

The fourth Brāhmaṇa of the first Adhyāya of the Brhadāraṇyaka 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 evam tvāda) 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 Kaushitaki 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 ātmān 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—jñāne; (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, Krishṇa, 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 brahmaṇ. Peace, happiness, and bliss also are a reward, and likewise individual perfection, release from all misfortune, dispelling all dilusion (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 but 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 characteris-
tically Hindu is lost. Religion is too vague a concept to be applica-
ble to the Upanishads in their entirety.

Into this category of interpretation falls also the contention that
Hindu thinking especially with reference to the knowledge prob-
lem 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 naive view which,
to some extent, is current even now, the Hindu definition of philo-
sophy 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 at-
titude 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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