

The Human Problem

The Chāndogya Upaniṣad describes an encounter between a student named Nārada and his teacher, Sanatkumāra.¹ Nārada desired religious instruction from Sanatkumāra, but the teacher requested him to describe first the various intellectual disciplines and skills that he had already acquired and mastered. Nārada went on to provide an exhaustive list that included the four Vedas, the Mahābhārata, grammar, rituals, mathematics, logic, ethics, philology, war, physical science, astronomy, and the fine arts! At the end of it all, he confessed to his teacher that, in spite of all the knowledge he had mastered, he was in sorrow and requested his teacher's help in overcoming his sorrow.

In the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, we encounter the famous teacher Yājñavalkya and his wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī.² Yājñavalkya informs his wives that he is ready to enter the order of monasticism or the fourth stage of a traditionally ordered Hindu life.³ Before doing so, he wants to distribute his wealth between both of them. The Upaniṣad records the ensuing conversation between Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyī.

“Maitreyī, I am about to go away from this place. So come, let me make a settlement between you and Kātyāyanī.”

Maitreyī asked in reply: “If I were to possess the entire world filled with wealth, sir, would it make me immortal?” “No,” said Yājñavalkya, “it will only permit you to live the life of a wealthy person. Through wealth one cannot expect immortality.”

“What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal?” retorted Maitreyī. “Tell me instead, sir, all that you know.”

These two dialogues are typical of encounters between seekers and teachers (*gurus*) in the Upaniṣads and illustrate central aspects of the Advaita understanding of the fundamental human predicament.

THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE

In the case of Nārada, the Upaniṣad obviously wants to comment on the limitations of secular knowledge and scriptural learning that do not address and resolve the fundamental problem of human sorrow. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad the teacher, Aṅgiras, distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge and refers to these as higher knowledge (*parā vidyā*) and lower knowledge (*aparā vidyā*).⁴ Included in the category of lower knowledge are the four Vedas (R̥g, Sāma, Yajur, and Atharva), phonetics, ritual, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy. The authoritative scriptures are included here, not to devalue their significance, but to distinguish between a superficial mastery and memorization of the words of the texts and the deeper liberating wisdom that is the result when a mature seeker, with the aid of a teacher, approaches the texts.⁵ Higher knowledge, on the other hand, is described as that by which one attains the imperishable.⁶ Through it, the wise come to know “What cannot be seen, what cannot be grasped, without colour, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet; What is eternal and all-pervading, extremely minute, present everywhere—That is the immutable, which the wise fully perceive.”⁷

A well-known story explaining the circumstances leading to the composition of a famous poetic text, the *Bhajagovindam*, tells of an incident involving Śaṅkara and his disciples in the holy city of Varanasi. One day, while on his customary walk, Śaṅkara heard, amidst the general din and chaos of the city, the sounds of someone trying to memorize a grammar rule by repetition. The famous teacher’s curiosity was aroused and, as he approached the source of the sound, he encountered an unusual sight. Before him sat an old, toothless man, with sparkling white hair, wrinkled skin, and a bent back. In his hand, was an equally aged Sanskrit grammar text held close to his eyes. The old man was absorbed in laboring to memorize a rule of grammar. While not condemning the old man’s persistence, Śaṅkara used the occasion to remind him of the limits of grammatical knowledge in the first verse of the poem. This verse is also sung as a refrain throughout the text.

Adore the Lord, adore the Lord, adore the Lord, O fool! When the appointed time (for departure) comes, the repetition of grammatical rules will not, indeed, save you.⁸

Advaita and, broadly speaking, the Hindu tradition, it must be emphasized, does not condemn the pursuit of secular knowledge, or *aparā vidyā*. The spectacular achievements of human civilization are directly attributable to discoveries and breakthroughs in this field. The criticism leveled against *aparā vidyā* is very specific. Such knowledge does not liberate one from the anxiety and fear of mortality or satisfy the human urge for fullness of being. Its field is the realm of the finite and perishable and it does not, as the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad reminds us, lead to the imperishable. In spite of all the accomplishments of technology and our mastery of the universe, secular knowledge, as

Nārada discovered, still leaves the human being with a deep and inexplicable sorrow, a sense of inner lack and incompleteness. Nārada's need for a deeper meaning to his existence could not be satisfied by information about the world gained through the numerous intellectual disciplines that he enumerated.

THE LIMITS OF WEALTH

If Nārada's longing for the ultimate was awakened by his experience of the limits of secular knowledge, Maitreyī awoke to her need for the eternal through her understanding of the limitations of materialism. She does not ask her husband, Yājñavalkya, if wealth has any value. Her question is quite specific. She wants to know whether she could attain immortality through wealth and his answer, as we have noted, is negative.

The Hindu tradition, on the whole, is not antimaterialistic or averse to wealth.⁹ *Artha* (wealth) is one of the four legitimate goals of Hindu life along with pleasure (*kāma*), virtue (*dharmā*), and liberation (*mokṣa*). In the *Rāmācaritamānasa*, a sixteenth-century Hindi vernacular poetic reworking of the story of Rama, by Tulasidāsa, a disciple asks his teacher, "What is the greatest human suffering?" "There is no suffering in the world as great as poverty," replies his teacher without hesitation.¹⁰ The tradition has never glorified involuntary poverty. A utopian society, as envisaged by the poet Tulasidāsa, is one that is free from suffering occasioned by poverty.

There was no premature death or suffering of any kind; everyone enjoyed beauty and health. No one was poor, sorrowful or in want; no one was ignorant or devoid of auspicious marks.¹¹

While the significance of wealth and its role in human well-being are recognized, there are specific guidelines for its acquisition and use. In the popular schematization of the four goals of life, *dharmā*, which includes ethics and moral values, serves to regulate the pursuit of wealth (*artha*) and pleasure (*kāma*). *Dharma* emphasizes the social and interconnected character of existence and requires us to be cognizant of the effects, positive and negative, of wealth-producing activities. It is a violation of *dharmā*, for example, to accumulate wealth through methods that inflict suffering on others, that are unjust, and that deplete the resources of the community. A person who selfishly exploits the resources of the community to gain wealth, without care for its well-being and without striving to replenish these resources, is described and condemned in the *Bhagavadgītā* as a thief. Such a person enjoys the gifts of the community and nature without giving anything in return.¹²

Wealth is not an end in itself. It must be acquired by legitimate means and used to satisfy personal and family needs. It ought to be shared also with those who are in want. *Dāna*, or generosity, is a core value and a central teaching.¹³ There are specific guidelines provided in the tradition for sharing and distributing wealth. First, generosity should be motivated by the conviction

that it is good and noble to share. The suggestion here is that we should not give with the expectation of receiving a favor from the recipient or with the motive of attracting the attention and praise of others. Second, it is need that should dictate our choice of a recipient and not considerations such as religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Third, our generosity must be quick and timely. Fourth, our gifts must be shared with the needy in the right places. The choice of an appropriate place to distribute our gifts should be influenced by our concern for accessibility and the dignity and self-respect of the receiver. Places and times should not be selected with the intention of enhancing the public reputation of the donor.

While generosity is encouraged and wealth not condemned, the same cannot be said for greed. The tradition speaks eloquently and continuously about the problems and dangers of greed. Greed is regarded as a direct cause of evil action and suffering and as a force that impels human beings, even unwillingly, to do wrong. One who is able to resist its impulse is considered to be disciplined and happy.¹⁴ Although it is true that there are some human beings who are quite content with wealth in moderation, there are many others who are perpetually discontented in spite of abundance. They are driven by an immoderate, and what seems to them to be a natural, urge for wealth. They become victims of a greed that can never be quenched. Greed and peace, in the perspective of the tradition, are incompatible because greed is a condition of discontent that keeps one feeling that one never has enough. Greed is an obsession about acquisition. The *Bhagavadgītā* presents a detailed psychological profile of this obsession, capturing the anxiety, arrogance, self-centeredness, and competitiveness that are its essential ingredients.

This has been obtained by me today;
 This wish I shall attain;
 This is, and this wealth also,
 Shall be mine.
 That enemy has been slain my me,
 And I shall slay others too;
 I am the Lord, I am the enjoyer,
 I am successful, powerful and happy.¹⁵

A human being is likely to become a victim of greed when wealth becomes the central means of achieving self-value and meaning. There is an increasing likelihood of this in a community where consumerism and materialistic success are glorified. The problem, however, is that the value that one may confer on oneself as a consequence of possessions is not an independent or absolute one. The meaning and worth of one's wealth is relative to the material worth of others and self-value turns out to be a fluctuating commodity. Self-worth increases when one's assets are worth more than one's rivals' and is diminished when these assets decline in value. The consequence is a state of anxiety and insecurity fed by a constant evaluation of oneself in relation to others and the

perception of others as rivals and threats to one's sense of self-adequacy. One is now a participant in a race without a finishing line and without any hope of attaining contentment. A more accurate analogy is a race with a distant finishing line that recedes each time one approaches it.

The greed for wealth reduces the value of the human being to a quantifiable economic quantity. The question, "What is his worth?" is one that sharply expresses this outlook since it equates the value of a person with his or her material assets. The significance of the person is not distinguished from possessions, but fully identified with the economic quantification of these. The greed for wealth is likened to a voracious fire that will not be satiated, but only increases in intensity with the fuel of acquisition. There is also, as Maitreyī understood, a finite quality to all material things which adds to their ultimately unsatisfactory character.

What is true of wealth is also, as Huston Smith reminds us, true of gains such as power and fame. When these become the principal focus of our quest for meaning and value, we condemn ourselves to anxiety and uncertainty. "The idea of a nation," Smith writes, "in which everyone is famous is a contradiction in terms; and if power were distributed equally, no one would be powerful in the sense in which we customarily use the word. From the competitiveness of these goods to their precariousness is a short step. As other people want them too, who knows when success will change hands?"¹⁶

THE LIMITS OF PLEASURE

The Kāṭha Upaniṣad begins with the story of Uśan, son of Vājaśravā, who is performing a religious ritual in which he is expected to give all his possessions away. His son, Naciketas, however, observes that his father is contravening the requirements of the ritual by giving away only those cows that are old and incapable of producing young. To dramatically draw his father's attention to this flaw, Naciketas says, "Father, to whom will you give me?" Surprised by his son's question, Uśan does not reply and Naciketas repeats his question three times. Eventually, in a fit of anger, Uśan shouts, "I'll give you to Death!"

Naciketas reaches the abode of Yama, lord of death, but discovers that Yama is not there. He patiently awaits his return for three days and nights without food and water. Yama is very apologetic when he returns and offers Naciketas three boons as a form of compensation. For his first boon, Naciketas requests that his father be free from anxiety and from anger toward him. For his second boon, he asks for the details of a fire ritual for the attainment of the heavenly world. Yama readily grants his desires.

The boy's third request surprises Yama. "There is this doubt about a man who is dead. 'He exists,' says some; others, 'He exists not.' I want to know this so please teach me. This is the third of my three wishes."¹⁷ Yama pleads to be relieved of the difficulty of teaching about this subject because of its subtlety and difficulty of comprehension. "Choose sons and grandsons who'd live a

hundred years! Plenty of livestock and elephants, horses and gold! Choose as your domain a wide expanse of earth! And you yourself live as many autumns as you wish!" Yama offers him a long life, wealth, prominence in the world, and sexual pleasures. Naciketas turns down the generous offer of Yama with a powerful statement on the limits of wealth and the pleasures that it affords.

Since the passing days of a mortal, O death,
sap here the energy of all the senses;
And even a full life is but a trifle;
so keep your horses, your songs and dances!

With wealth, you cannot make a man content;
Will we get to keep wealth, when we have seen you?
And we get to live only as long as you will allow!
So this alone is the wish that I'd like to choose.¹⁸

The youth's observation to Yama that the human being will never be content with wealth alone is at the heart of the tradition's indictment of pleasure and materialism. Materialism lures us with a dazzling but false promise of contentment. We are induced to expend our energies in a vain quest that leaves us with a feeling of inadequacy and emptiness. "The spiritual problem with greed," as David Loy observes, "—both the greed for profit and the greed to consume—is due not only to the consequent maldistribution of worldly goods (although a more equitable distribution is, of course, essential), or to its effects on the biosphere, but even more fundamentally because greed is based on a delusion: the delusion that happiness is to be found this way."¹⁹

Naciketas comments also on the transient character of worldly pleasures, a common theme in Hindu sacred texts. In clarifying this critique, however, it must be stated that the Hindu tradition is not opposed to pleasurable experiences in the world. *Kāma* (pleasure) is one of the four approved goals to which we have already referred. As with the quest for wealth, there are guidelines within which pleasure may be legitimately sought. One ought not to pursue pleasure through methods that are injurious to self or that exploit and cause suffering to others. In the search for pleasure, one must follow basic moral values (*dharma*) and be considerate to others. In the Bhagavadgītā (7:11), Kṛṣṇa gives his approval to pleasure by stating, "I am pleasure which is not opposed to righteousness."²⁰

While approving of pleasures within the ambit of *dharma*, the text cautions that unnecessary frustration and pain can be avoided if we understand the limitations of sense pleasures. Kṛṣṇa offers a pertinent and succinct comment in this regard.

Pleasures born out of contact, indeed,
Are wombs (i.e. sources) of pain,
Since they have a beginning and an end (i.e. are not eternal), Son of Kuntī,
The wise person is not content in them.²¹

Kṛṣṇa does not deny the pleasures of sensual experiences, but realistically identifies their central limitation. By describing these as having a beginning and an end, he is pointing, like Naciketas, to their transient character. The temporary quality of sense-enjoyments is a consequence of the unstable nature of the factors that make such experiences possible. The sense-object is subject to time and change, the relevant sense organ is gradually worn out through indulgence, and the mind grows saturated and bored with repetitiveness.

The human being who is addicted to sense gratification of any kind is caught in a vicious circle. He is in search of an enduring happiness but does so through fleeting and impermanent experiences. Although dissatisfied, he turns again and again to these momentary forms of pleasure and, before long, becomes hopelessly addicted and dependent. The problem is not in the nature of the sense experience, but in unrealistic expectations of what we may gain from it. When we understand that lasting joy is not to be found through temporary sense experiences we take a significant step toward maturity and wisdom.

THE REFLECTIVE LIFE

The Advaita tradition claims that if we live our lives thoughtfully and reflect, with detachment, on our experiences, each of us will come to experience, like Nārada, Maitreyī, and Naciketas, that the achievement of wealth, power, fame, and pleasure leave us unfulfilled. This awakening may be sudden or gradual and is not to be equated with chronological aging. The young Naciketas of the Kāṭha Upaniṣad came to this realization, while the old man, on the brink of death in the *Bhajaḡovindam*, did not. It depends entirely on how we exercise our human capacity for self-critical reflection.

It must be emphasized that this moment of awakening is not the consequence of a fear of life or a sense of failure. Nārada was not an unaccomplished intellectual. His achievements were considerable and he had mastered nearly every discipline of his age. Maitreyī was not living in poverty. Yājñavalkya was leaving her with enough wealth to live a very comfortable life. Naciketas had the opportunity, with the blessings of Yama, to enjoy wealth, power, fame, pleasure, and long life. All three had reflected on the limits of their gains and accomplishments and yearned for something more enduring, meaningful, and satisfying. Arjuna's words in *Bhagavadgītā* (2:8) express well their predicament.

Indeed, I do not see what should
 dispel
 This sorrow of mine which dries up
 the senses
 Though I should obtain on earth unrivalled and
 Prosperous royal power, or even the
 sovereignty of the gods.

This existential dissatisfaction, so common in the Hindu tradition, is a universal phenomenon. One of the best-known examples is the famous Russian author, Leo Tolstoy. At the pinnacle of his success, when he was wealthy, famous, and enjoyed the love of his family, Tolstoy was gripped by an unshakable sense of the meaninglessness of his life. All that he had formerly sought and found delight in seemed empty and insignificant. "All this," wrote Tolstoy, "took place at a time when so far as all my outward circumstances went, I ought to have been completely happy. I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved; good children and a large property which was increasing with no pains taken on my part. I was more respected by my kinsfolk and acquaintance than I had ever been; I was loaded with praise by strangers; and without exaggeration I could believe my name already famous. . . . And yet, I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life. . . . One can live only so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life; but when one grows sober, one cannot fail to see that it is all a stupid cheat."²²

What does the tradition advise for the person who experiences sorrow in the midst of pleasure, and want in the midst of plenty, and who struggles with an angst for meaning which cannot be assuaged by any worldly gain? The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12) gives quite specific directions:

A brahmin, after examining worldly gains achieved through action, understands that the uncreated cannot be created by finite action and becomes detached.

To know that (the uncreated), he should go, with sacrificial twigs in hand, to a teacher who knows the Vedas and who is established in *brahman*.²³

This verse provides one of the clearest statements about the tradition's understanding of the fundamental human problem as well as the means for its resolution. A human being who engages in reflection on the nature of her actions and the outcomes produced, discovers that actions, which are by nature finite, are capable of producing only finite and hence limited results. One is still left, however grand one's attainments, in a state of want. The text also implies that at the heart of every human quest is a search for what it calls the uncreated (*akṛta*). The uncreated is synonymous with the absolute or limitless, referred to, in the Upaniṣad, as *brahman*.²⁴ In other words, at the back of every finite search and action is a quest for the infinite and hence one of the reasons why the finite will always fail to satisfy. One comes to appreciate through the analysis of life experiences, with the help of the teacher, that one is aspiring for a reality that cannot be created through limited actions. This grasp of the limits of human action causes what the text refers to an attitude of detachment (*nirvedam*) from finite efforts and achievements. It is important to note here that the text does not completely negate the value and significance of human action in the world. Its aim is to comment on the limits of these in relation to the attainment of the limitless.

While such a discovery is likely to cause despair, its value from the Advaita viewpoint is unquestionable. As long as one does not appreciate the limits of the finite, one's expectations of its rewards will be unrealistic. One will seek from it more than it is capable of granting. Understanding its limits leads to an intellectual and emotional detachment that protects from despair. Dissatisfaction with the finite, in other words, is the beginning of the conscious journey to the infinite.

The Upaniṣad does not leave the seeker in despair. It affirms the possibility of gaining the limitless, the true object of human seeking, and, for this purpose, advises the student to approach a teacher (*guru*) who is learned in the scriptures (*śrotriyam*) and established in the limitless (*brahmaniṣṭham*). The student goes to the teacher "with twigs in hand." These twigs are meant for use in the teacher's ritual fire and indicate a humble readiness to serve the teacher during the learning process.

If we restated the human predicament in terms of traditional Hindu goals, we may say that the seeker has come to grasp the deficiencies of *artha* (wealth, power, and fame) and *kāma* (pleasure), and has awakened to the necessity of liberation (*mokṣa*) or an attainment that is free from the constraints of the finite. At this stage, one painfully knows the limits of finite gains and experiences, and has a yearning for something more enduring and fulfilling. A seeker, at this point in her quest, is traditionally referred to as a *jijñāsu* (one who desires knowledge) or a *mumukṣu* (one who desires liberation). "I have heard it said by your peers," Nārada told his teacher, Sanatkumāra, "that those who know the self pass across sorrow. Here I am, sir, a man full of sorrow. Please, sir, take me across to the other side of sorrow."²⁵ It is dissatisfaction with the finite and the desire to be free from sorrow that brings one to the door of a teacher.