

Ethical Dimensions of the Upanishads: A Review

Shikarbasini

Department of Philosophy, M. R. M. College, Darbhanga-846004, India

Author's e-mail: sbasini@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Even though, the chief aim of the Upanishads (=Ups) is to emphasize Brahman as the ultimate Reality, they have not missed an opportunity to indicate the path leading to the spiritual progression of an individual. The Ups at every step present rectitude which undoubtedly guides an individual, keen for his spiritual progress. In other words, virtues, namely truthfulness, faith, compassion, penance, self-control are considered requisite for an individual desirous to move on the path of self-realisation. Hence metaphysics and ethics are interrelated. It would not be amiss here to quote Dr. Ranade, who stated, "The problem of the relation of metaphysics and morality has been much debated from very ancient time."¹

It is true that the pleading of sensitive heart for the perfection has been revealed from very ancient times. From the Vedic era, human being's yearning for the spiritual upliftment is being expressed through prayers; and the same type of pleading on more intense level is revealed through the Ups.²

Keywords: *Ethical, Upanishads, Metaphysics, Self realization.*

INTRODUCTION

The Ups amongst "Prasthanatrayi" are the milestones showing the way for the spiritual growth of an individual. The journey towards perfection or the self-realisation is a process of becoming. An individual, a bundle of imperfections, a finite thing moves towards infinity. Hence it is a process of becoming is revealed through moral uprighteousness, emphasized in a Ups. of course, the main topics of the Ups are related to the Jiva, jagat and Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate truth, attaining which nothing is left to attain.³ But before one embarks upon the path to the ultimate realisation, it become essential for an individual to uplift his own individual consciousness. For this purpose, mortal conduct helps a lot and it is one of the noteworthy specialities of the Ups that they not only emphasize the ultimate goal of the human life, but at the same time they have provided a proper guideline to move on the path of spiritual progression. So, how can one neglect the value of rectitude emphasized in the Ups, Which undoubtedly enables. an individual to obtain his spiritual enhancement.

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS AND ITS PHILOSOPHY

So far as the ethical teachings of the Ups are concerned, it is to be noted that some western scholars have raised a doubt. They aver that the ethical content of the Ups is negligible. Deussen has stated-"Moral conduct cannot contribute directly but only indirectly to the attainment of the knowledge that brings emancipation."⁴ Futheron, according to A.B. Keith, the ethical content of the Ups is valueless; he has stated, "in comparison with the intellectual activity of the Brahmanas the ethical content of the Ups must be said to be negligible and valueless."⁵ Moreover, Hume has opined, "No longer is worship or sacrifice or good conduct the requisite of religion in this life, or of salvation in the next.Sacrifice and works of merit towards hypostatized activities are, in the light of metaphysical knowledge, seen to be futile."⁶ Such statement certainly devalue ethical content of the Ups. of course, Brhadaranyaka, Chandogya, Taittiriya and Kausitaki Ups do emphasize that after self-realization, moral conduct loses its significance. When one realises the Ultimate Truth, viz. Brahman, one is not worried about meritorious action or sinful conduct. After self-realization

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mortality becomes redundant. When it is realized that everything is Brahman, nothing ever exists independent of Brahman, then sinful conduct or meritorious action has no place of implementation.

But before attaining this state, an individual has to be aware of moral conduct, which enables him to march on towards the path of liberation. It is obvious that immortality never leads one to the path of liberation. It is obvious that immortality never leads one to the path of the spiritual awakening. The Ups depict this phenomenal world as an abode of God, and at the same time they point out the way for the healthy development of human beings residing in the abode of God. This itself enhances the ethical value of the Ups. No one is born here in this phenomenal world with the knowledge of the Ultimate Truth. On the contrary one has to struggle very hard to attain the ultimate stage of self-realization. And this struggle becomes easy with the help of moral conduct. Hence. It seems very unfair to declare the Ups as having very less ethical value. A deep and careful study of the Ups itself reveals that the Ups are replete with a great ethical value.

Now, so far as the moral conduct of the Ups is concerned, we may divide it into two groups.

1. Ethics related to the stability of the society.
2. Ethics related to the spiritual progression of an individual.

Before we peep into the ethics related to the stability of the society, it would be essential to make it clear that here we are not concerned with the divisions of caste and stages of human life, as they are emphasized in earlier time than the Ups. Here we are mainly concerned with the morals related with the healthy growth of the society.

Individual and society are two sides of one coin. Individuals construct the society and the society moulds a human being. Thus both are inseparable from each other. It is true that fully aware individuals construct a healthy society, and healthy societies can form a healthy nation. The Ups, a great treasure house of Indian culture, have gifted precious jewels in the form of ethics that is beneficial to the whole world.

IsaU makes a clarion call to human beings disputing with each other for a piece of land to give up meanmindedness of avaricity and rather to consider the whole world as an abode of God.⁷ When everything is pervaded by God, it seems merely a trifling matter to quarrel for some material gain. This mantra urges the human being to turn his selfishness into openmindedness; by which it becomes possible to change the future of the world.

Santipatha of the Ups invike "peace that passeth understanding." It reveals a sense of unity and at the same time it indicates a sharp sensitivity for sharing.⁸ which certainly demolishes meanmindedness or selfishness.

Furtheron, the IsaU concentrates upon emphasizing the cosmic unity.⁹ The one, who sees all beings in the self, and the self in all beings, he never hates any creature. It is true that when one considers others as separate from his own self, then only disgusting feelings of selfishness, hatred etc. take place. But as one starts understanding each and every living being as a part of one cosmic consciousness, then the whole picture turns reverse. The seer of this Up, being very much conscious of this, repeatedly states to develop the sense of unity and equality.¹⁰

For a healthy development of the society, it is incumbent upon the members of the society to guard it from malpractice. A society has to follow some moral values to keep it safe from being ruined. It is said that where there is a village, there is garbage. Accordingly, some vices prevailing in the society gradually play a destructive role. Malpractices like

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stealing, prostitution, the act of murdering etc. are social evils which, step by step, destroy the society. At present, these evils which, step by step by step, destroy the society. At present, these evils have reached to their zenith. Under the circumstances, a mantra from the chandU is enough to warn not only an individual performing such malpractice but also the one who supports the person involved in it.¹¹

In short, moral conduct or ethics revealed through the Ups provide a guideline for the healthy development of a society. This moral conduct produces self-awareness amongst individuals living in the society which ultimately leads them to the spiritual progression.

One who realises his self is known as an ideal ethical man.¹² Now, so far as an achievement of self-realization is concerned, the Ups undoubtedly provide the needful guidance. Here it would be very appropriate if we quote Dr. Radhakrishnan, who has stated, "In one sense Upanisadic morality is individualistic, for its aim is self-realization."¹³

The Ups repeatedly emphasize great virtues, namely truthfulness, penance, self control, faith, non greediness, absence of escapism, desireless action, desire of good etc.¹⁴ which ultimately enable an individual to realize his self.

The KathU is very inspiring, so far as the spiritual progression of an individual is concerned. "Arise, awake, obtain your boons and understand them!"¹⁵ The path of self realization or spiritual progression is very difficult. It is a process of becoming a process of evolution in which an individual has to uplift his self with the help of moral conduct or virtues.

Since from time immemorial human mind is being perplexed to choose between good and pleasant. This is the eternal dilemma that the human mind is facing. The KathU very subtly has presented the discrimination made by the human beings accordingly. "The better is one thing, the pleasanter quite another. Both these, of different aims, bind a person. Of these two, well is it for him who takes the better, he fails of his aim who chooses the pleasanter."¹⁶ At the same time, the difference is also made clear. "Both the better and pleasanter come to a man. Going all around the two, the wise man discriminates. The wise man chooses the better, indeed, rather than the pleasanter. The stupid man, from getting and keeping, chooses the pleasanter."¹⁷ This clearly shows that the person desirous of attaining spiritual progress selects sreyas rather than preyas.

In this context, the dialogue of Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi mentioned in the BU is remarkable. When Yajnavalkya wants to divide his property among his two wives, viz. Maitreyi and Katyayani, Maitreyi declines to accept his property, as she is desirous of spiritual declines to accept his property, as she is desirous of spiritual progression. She raises a subtle question, "If now, sir, this whole earth filled with wealth were mine, would I now thereby be immortal?"¹⁸

Thus, we see that the Ups repeatedly mention the guidelines for the seeker of the Ultimate Truth. They not only show the way, but at the same time indicate the proper guidance for the seeker.

The Ups not only direct one on the proper path, but at the same time they also make one aware of some hazardous situations, which one has to face while moving on the path of spiritual swakening. Tendency to be escaped from performing action is one of the risks faced by the seeker, about which the seer of the IsaU is very much aware. "Even while doing deeds here, one may desire to live a hundred years. Thus on the three.....not otherwise than this is it.....the adheres not on man."¹⁹

Now, so far as the performance of action is concerned, it would not be out of place to

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mention BU, Which not only indicates two types of action but subtly suggests the type of action that is to be performed by the seeker of the Truth. "According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become evil? One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action." ²⁰ Further on it is mentioned, "But people say: A person is made (not of acts, but) of desires only." (In reply to this I say:) "As is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs, what action he performs, that he produces for himself." ²¹ Hence the person, desirous of attaining his spiritual growth. Naturally performs virtuous action and accordingly gets the result. ²²

Moral values or virtues, namely truthfulness, faith, penance, charity etc. are regarded essential for the spiritual progress. All the Ups unanimously declare a great value of virtues. It is obvious that an individual possessing virtues can move further on the path of self-realization. In other words, the Ups by mentioning great virtues emphasize their essential presence in the life of the seeker of the Ultimate Reality. It is true that after realizing the Supreme Truth all the virtues are of no avail, but before that stage they do possess their great value in the life of the seeker.

Truthfulness:

The Ups declare that Truth is Brahman. ²³ The MundaU and the TaiU repeatedly extol Truthfulness and at the same time emphasize it as an essential virtue so far as an achievement of the spiritual life is concerned. ²⁴

Anecdote of Satyakama narrated in the ChandoU reveals a great value of Truthfulness. Satyakama, even though non-brahmin acquired knowledge on the basis of Truthfulness. ²⁵

This shows that the virtue of Truthfulness remains on the top.

Penance, charity, self-control, compassion :

The KenaU considers penance, charity and self-control as the means of self-realization. ²⁶ It would not be out of place to quote Sankara, who has stated while commenting on that mantra, "Knowledge takes place by purity of inner self aroused by penance, self-control." ²⁷

CONCLUSION

As these major Ups emphasize moral conduct as essential virtues required for spiritual progression, how can it be said that the Ups are devoid of any ethical value? From the foregoing discussion it would be clear that the Ups have given much thought to the ethical conduct of the human beings and they are not devoid of any ethical content. We may say that moral conduct is like the very first step of a ladder which leads to the highest goal. While summing up, it would be appropriate to quote Dr. Radhakrishnan, "All the ethical theories are based on metaphysics in a philosophical conception of relation between human conduct and Ultimate Reality." ²⁸

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4. Deussen, Paul, Philosophy of the Upanisads, Oriental Publishers, 1972, p.362

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5. Keith, A. B., Religion and philosophy of the Veda, Harvard Oriental Series 32, 1925, p. 584.
6. Cf. Hume, *ibid.*, p. 53
7. isavasyam idam sarvam yat kim ca jagatyam jagat (IsaU 1).
8. Om saha nav avatu saha nau bhanaktu saha viryam karavavahai.
9. yas tu sarvani bhutani atmany evanupasyati. Sarvabhutesu catmanam tato na vijugupsate// (IsaU 6)
10. yamin sarvani bhitani atmaivabluid vijanatah/ tatra ko mohah kah sokah ekatvam anupasyatah// (IsaU 7)
11. steno hiranyas ca suram pibams ca guros talpam dvasan brahmaha caite patanti catvardh paricamas cacarams tair iti (Chando 5.10.9).
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13. Radhakrishnan, S. Indian philosophy, George Allen and Unwin, 1929, p. 212
14. Cf. KenaU 4.86.3; MundU 1.1.8; 1.2.11, III.1.5; III.1.6; TaiU anuvaka 9;11 and bhrguvalli; ChandoU 1.1.10; IsaU 1; 2; KathU2.1; 2
15. uttisthata jagrata prapya varan nibodhatal (KathU 3.14).
16. anyac chreyo 'nyad utaiva preyas te ubhe nanarthe purusam sinitah/
17. sreya ca preyas ca manusyam etas tau samaparitya vivinakti dhirah/ sreya hi dhiro bhi preyas vrnite preyo mando yogaksemad vrnite// (KathU 2.2).
18. sa hovaca maitreyi yan nu me'yan bhagoh sarva prthivi vittena purna syat syam nv aham tenanrtaho.....(BU IV 5.3). Also sa hovaca maitreyi yenaham namrta syam kim aham tena kuryam (BU IV.5.4)
19. kurvann eveha karmani jijivisech chatan samah/ evam tvayi nanyatheto sti na karma lipyate nare// (IsaU 2)
20. yathakari yathacari tatha bhavati sadhukari sadhu/ bhavati papakari papo bhavati punyah punyena karmand bhati papah papena/ (BU IV.45)
21. atho khalv aluh kamamaya evayam purusa iti sa yathakamo bhavati tatkratur bhavati yatkraatur bhavati tat karma kurute yat karma kurute lad abhisampadyata (BU IV.4.5).
22. An anecdote of Artabhaga and Yajnavalkya also emphasizes a great value of meritorious actions. Tau hotkramya mantrayancakrate tau ha yad ucatuh karma haiva tad ucaturatha yat prasasamsatuh karma haiva tat prasasamsatuh punyo vai punyena karmana bhavati papah papeneti (BU III.2.13).
23. sayyam jnanam anantam brahma (TaiU 1.1.)
24. Cf. TaiU Anuvaka 9 and 11. Also cf. MundU III 1.5; III. 1.6.
25. Cf. ChandoU IV.
26. tasyai tapo damah karmeti pratistha vedah sarvarigaji satyan ayatanam (KenaU 4.8).
27. etair hi samskrtasya sattvasuddidvara tattvajnanotpatih drstal Ten Principal Upanisads with sankarabhasya, Motilal Banarsidass, 1974, p. 36
28. Radhakrishnan, S., Eastern Religion and Western Thought, p. 80