

The Experience of *Itman*

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“Neither non-existence nor existence... neither death nor immortality, then [...] desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind.” (Rig Veda, 10.129)¹ What was the desire of *brahman*? What is it that the *ātman* (the essence of *brahman* embodied) is experiencing through the manifestations of the physical world? In order to examine these questions, I will look at the discussion between Yājñavalkya and Janaka of Videha in Chapter 4 of the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which focuses on existence through the conscious experience as well as the corporeal world. Section 3 highlights three realms; the serene realm, the realm of dream, and the realm where one is awake. In section 4 three worlds unfold: there is the world of *brahman*; the world(s) which exist between ours and the highest realm [*brahman*]; and the world of our physical reality. I will endeavor to follow the experience of *ātman* through these conscious realms and worlds of existence in order to explore the question of how *ātman* perceives the corporeal world. I propose that, because *brahman* is the state of everything unmanifested, in its singularity *brahman* is incapable of experiencing its own nature. It is in the state of the serene realm, the world of *brahman*, that:

He does not perceive anything; but although he does not perceive, he is quite capable of perceiving, for it is impossible for the perceiver to lose his capacity to perceive, for it is indestructible. But there isn't a second reality here that he could perceive as something distinct and separate from himself. (Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 4.3.30)²

¹ *The Rig Veda*, trans. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (London: Penguin Books, 1981)

² *Upaniṣads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

I believe that it was the *desire* to perceive, to speak and to think in order to know its own nature, that drove *brahman* to create these other realities which are experienced through the *ātman*.

The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad identifies the realm of *brahman* as a place in which nothing is distinct or separate from itself. What does this world look like? How can this reality be conceptualized? A reality in which there is nothing to perceive, nothing to think, nothing to speak; nothing in nor beyond the realm of *brahman*:

With the mind alone must one behold it--/ there is here nothing diverse at all!/ From death to death he goes,/ who sees here any kind of diversity./ As just singular must one behold it--/ immeasurable and immovable./ The self is spotless and beyond space,/ unborn, immense, immovable. (BU, 4.4.19-20)

Brahman cannot be thought of in any quantitative terms because any given amount would be something manifested, something measurable, movable, something in space. The only exception is the philosophical concept of “zero”; a state of unactualized potential. Theoretically “zero” is not the same thing as none or nothing. In our common understanding of zero these two concepts are entwined and we face two difficulties; one, the meaning of nothingness; and two, our understanding of nothingness through its contrast to the idea of somethingness. In the reality of *brahman* however, something does exist- *brahman*. At the same time, there is nothing separate or distinct from *brahman*. Therefore, there is no comparative lense of somethingness through which *brahman* may thus comprehend itself in the same way that we understand that

which is by that which is not. Thus in order to understand the world of *brahman* the concept of "zero" must first be separated from the idea of none or nothing. *Brahman* cannot be anything manifested, because even as a singular unit, it would exist in opposition to what it is not, and in the state of *brahman* not even this diversity exists. In this way, the concept of zero can be taken as one (and every other number) unmanifested, a place that is neither something nor nothing. Thus when it is said in the world of *brahman* nothing exists, what is meant is "zero" exists; an infinite unmanifested potential. For what else but this unmanifested potential can be "beyond space, unborn, immense and immovable" (BU, 4.4.19-20)?

The *Rig Veda* tells us that it was from this state that desire arose. What was that first desire of *brahman* which created the seed of mind? According to Chapter 4 of the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, a person consists simply of desire and it is through knowing the true nature of *ātman* that all desires are fulfilled. If it is through the understanding of *brahman* that *ātman*- this self that is made of everything- is freed from all desires, then it seems logical to propose that the desire which arose in the beginning must have been none other than for *brahman* to know itself.

Why did *brahman* wish to know itself? What is the desire that is satisfied by knowing one's self? And how did *brahman* know that it didn't know itself? I can theorize the state of *brahman* but I question my capacity to know the experience of *ātman* within the state of *brahman*. I exist in a state of

manifestations and understand the world as well as the state of *brahman* in juxtaposition to what it is not. How to comprehend the *experience of brahman* in a singular unmanifested existence seems to be a concept my logic of oppositions does not prepare me to grasp. Yājñavalkya said, “about this self (*ātman*) one can only say ‘not-----, not-----’ ” (BU, 4.4.22). From the creation of realms outside the world of *brahman*, it appears as though even *brahman* had to create something which contrasted its true nature in order to fully conceptualize itself. Thus once “by *brahman* was this path discovered ” a second reality in which “he could think as something that is distinct and separate from himself” came into existence (BU, 4.4.9, 4.3.28). From the desire of *brahman* arose this world, the realm where one is awake.

In this world, “it is this person [*ātman*] -that consists of perception among the vital functions (*prāṇa*), the one that is the inner light within the heart [that] travels across both worlds, being common to both” (BU, 4.3.7). *ātman* is that which resides in us beyond our vital functions and physical form. What is it *ātman* is perceiving in this ephemeral world of sense objects; this world that seems to lie in complete opposition to the world of *brahman*? It is told to Janaka of Videha that the process of *ātman* knowing the true nature of *brahman* is “his highest goal!, his highest attainment!, his highest world!” (BU, 4.3.32). Is our physical *ātman* no more than a vessel through which the eternal *ātman* may know itself in opposition to what it is not? “A person here [in the physical realm] consists simply of desire” (BU, 4.4.5), thus perhaps our human desire to

experience and to know our physical world is merely a means for *ātman* to perceive that which is in contrast to its true nature and thus know itself:

It is like this. As a caterpillar, when it comes to the tip of a blade of grass, reaches out to a new foothold and draws itself onto it, so the self (*ātman*), after it has knocked down this body and rendered it unconscious, reaches out to a new foothold and draws itself onto it. (BU, 4.4.3)

It is said in the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that through the mind and the world of manifested objects one may eventually obtain insight regarding the true nature of *brahman*. For the *ātman* embodied in individual beings, it is the fulfillment of the desire for this insight through which each *ātman* returns to the world of *brahman*.

Why is this fulfillment an ongoing process without end? If, for example, *brahman* wished to know the nature of its immortality through mortality, why wasn't one experience of death enough? What is the unfulfilled desire of *brahman* that keeps the *ātman* in the corporeal world? Is it possible that the infinite nature of *brahman* necessitates incalculable opposing experiences in order for it to fully understand its own nature? One can easily concede that hearing a single sound does not constitute an understanding of the full capacity to hear, but perhaps there is an argument to be made; It is not until one has heard every sound that the full capacity of hearing can be known. Without yet having perceived every possible experience, could it be that *brahman* does not yet know the full nature of *brahman*?

If this world, the realm where one is awake, is a place for $\square tman$ to experience itself through the senses and physical form, what is experienced by $\square tman$ in the world of dreams? “People say,” recites Yājñavalkya, “that one should not awaken a man who is sound asleep; it is very hard to cure anyone to whom that person has not returned” (BU, 4.3.14). These verses assert there is a part of us that leaves the “lower nest” [physical body] when passing from “the realm where one is awake” into “the realm of dream”. Who is this “immortal that roams outside the nest” (4.3.12)? The only part of us that is referred to as immortal is the $\square tman$, that which consists of perception. It seems as though the perception $\square tman$ carries into the dream is not only that of its eternal brahman essence but its understanding of the physical world as well:

This is how he dreams. He takes materials from the entire world and, taking them apart on his own and then on his own putting them back together, he dreams with his own radiance, with his own light. In that place this person becomes his own light. (BU, 4.3.9)

Sometimes the $\square tman$ is referred to as “the golden person, taking the light, returning to his place” (BU, 4.3.11). In this light it seems like the $\square tman$, a perceiver in the realm of the awake, is fully aware of its true nature and consciously returning to *brahman* through the dream realm. At other times it seems as though “that immortal that enters the dream realm” has to realize his own light before freely crossing into the other world. In the dream realm one often “ignorantly imagines dangers one has seen while awake” (BU, 4.3.20). Is it the $\square tman$ that is mistaking the physical world- a secondary reality which may

merely be meant to facilitate the understanding of *brahman*- to be its true nature? The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says the realm of dreams serves as an entryway between this world and the world of *brahman*. When one “appearing to be a god or a king, thinks ‘I alone am this world! I am all!’- that is his highest world” (BU, 4.3.20). According to the words of Yājñavalkya, it is in the dream realm, in which we are free from our physical form and the limitations of our sense faculties, that we become most like *brahman*. One moves freely; creates at will; all is “his pleasure ground; but him no one sees at all” (BU, 4.3.14). Once one becomes “embraced by the *ātman* consisting of knowledge”, there is no second reality separate or distinct from one's self (BU, 4.3.21). Thus one does not hear, speak, think, touch or perceive. In dream one may truly experience the paradoxical nature of *brahman*.

The realm of dream seems like the opportunity for *ātman* to gain a different understanding of itself than what it attains in the physical world: “Travelling in sleep to places high and low,/ The god creates many a physical form--”(BU, 4.3.13). The corporeal world is a realm in which *ātman* is a perceiver, experiencing through senses. In contrast, this realm of dream is a place where *ātman* is a creator, unconfined by any physical limitation:

After this person has enjoyed himself and travelled around in that serene realm and seen for himself the good and the bad, he rushes along the same path and through the same opening back again to the realm of dream. (BU, 4.3.15)

This traversing of *ātman* is carried on between the realm of dream and the realm where one is awake as well. The *ātman* travels between these realms “as

a large fish moves between both banks" (BU, 4.3.18). After discoursing on the nature of *ātman* to enjoy itself passing through the three realms, Yājñavalkya tells Janaka; "It is like this. As a hawk or an eagle, after flying around in the sky and getting tired, folds wings and swoops down into its nest, so this person rushes into that realm where as he sleeps he has no desires and sees no dreams" (BU, 4.3.19).

Maybe the world in between is more than just a place to facilitate understanding. Maybe this is the only place where the *ātman* can fully experience brahman. The serene realm, likened to the world of brahman, is a place where "as he sleeps he has no desires and sees no dreams" (BU, 4.3.19). It seems as though in the state of *brahman*, *brahman* cannot actually be experienced, which is why *brahman* created realities outside of itself in the beginning. Maybe the physical world is only necessary insofar as it provides the world in which the experience of *brahman* can be manifest. The true experience of brahman takes place between the physical world and the world of *brahman*. So perhaps the function of *ātman* is not merely the desire of brahman to know itself, but to *experience* itself.