

## 14 Karma, Vidyā, Mokṣa: Liberation from Rebirth

From the unreal lead me to the Real,  
From darkness lead me to light,  
From ignorance lead me to knowl-  
edge, From death lead me to immor-  
tality.

—Aitareya Brāhmaṇa II, 1

Thus does the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describe the death of a man:

Just as a heavily loaded cart moves creaking, so the *ātman* of the body with the *ātman* of wisdom on it moves creaking, when breathing becomes small through old age or disease then just as a mango or some other fruit loosens itself so this *puruṣa* frees himself from these limbs and returns again to the womb. . . . When this *ātman* becomes weak and confused, as it were, all the *prāṇas*, the life-breaths gather round him. He takes into himself those sparks of light and recedes into the heart. When the eye-*puruṣa* departs, he cannot recognize forms any more. 'He is becoming one, he does not see' so they say; 'he is becoming one, he cannot smell', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not taste', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not speak', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not hear', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not think', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not feel', they say; 'he is becoming one, he does not know', they say. The point of his heart becomes lighted up and by that light the *ātman* departs either through the eye or through the head or through other apertures of the body. And when he thus departs, the *prāṇas* depart after him. He becomes understanding, he follows after understanding. His knowledge and his deeds follow him as does also his previous wisdom. Just as a caterpillar, when it has come to the end of one blade of grass, and after having made its approach to another one, draws itself together towards it, so this *ātman*, after having thrown away this body and after having dis-  
pelled ignorance, draws itself together. And as the goldsmith, taking a

piece of gold, turns it into another, newer and more beautiful shape, even so does this *ātman*, after having thrown away this body, make unto himself newer and more beautiful shapes like that of the *pitṛs*, the *gandharvas*, the *devas*, of *prajāpati*, of *brahmā* or some other being. This *ātman* indeed is *brahman* consisting of understanding, mind, life, sight, hearing, earth, water, air, space, light and darkness, desire and desirelessness, anger and freedom from anger, righteousness and unrighteousness and all things. This is what is meant by saying: 'It consists of this and consists of that'. As one acts and as one behaves so one becomes. The one who does good becomes good; the one who does evil becomes evil. One becomes righteous by righteous action, unrighteous by unrighteous action. Others, however, say: a *puruṣa* consists of desire (*kāma*). As his desire is, so is his determination, as his determination is, such deed he commits; whatever deed he commits, that he attains.

On this there is the following verse: The object to which the mind (*manas*) is attached, the subtle self (*liṅga*) goes together with the deed, being attached to it alone. Exhausting the results of whatever works he did in this world he comes again from that world to this world for work. This is true for the mind with desires. The mind who is free from desire, whose desire is satisfied, whose desire is the *ātman*, his *prāṇas* do not depart. Since he is *brahman*, he goes into *brahman*.

On this there is the following verse: 'When all the desires that dwell in the heart are cast away, then does the mortal become immortal, the he attains *brahman* here.'<sup>1</sup>

Death is a theme that looms large in the Upaniṣads. Death is the creator and the destroyer of all that is. Death, especially in the form of redeath (*punar-mṛtyu*)<sup>2</sup> is the greatest evil that threatens the existence of man. Faith in rebirth seems to be accepted in the Upaniṣads without further argument. Scholars generally assume that it forms part of the religion of the indigenous peoples of India, which influenced Vedic religion quite heavily. According to the Upaniṣads the Vedic *yajña* cannot save from repeated death, to which even the *devas* are subjected in one way or another. At the root of the Upaniṣadic search for the liberation that goes beyond the attainment of the status of *devas*, there is already a certain skepticism with regard to the nature of the *devas*: for the Upaniṣads, they are in the sphere of sense experience and therefore in the lower ranges of consciousness and reality. The process of liberation does not, therefore, depend on any intervention from the side of the *devas*. The Upaniṣads do not deny a Supreme God; certain texts quite clearly speak of the *puruṣottama*, of grace and election as essential for liberation;<sup>3</sup> but their concern is the immanent

process of liberation in the subjective consciousness. Death is a happening on the periphery of external consciousness, as are all physical and psychical ills, and so one is affected by these only so long as one is caught up in the lower stages of consciousness. Reality and consciousness are identical, a unity of bliss and immortality, freedom from change, freedom from rebirth and redeath.<sup>4</sup>

The most important synonym for death in the Upaniṣads is *kāla*, time. Everything that is created by time must also find its end in time: *manas*, *apas*, *arka*, *prithvī*, *tejas*, the body and the senses, sun, earth, and water, everything must die. Only that which is not born from death-time, the *ātman*, is not liable to die. The dialogue between Naciketas and death in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, a most beautiful and profound passage, makes it quite evident that the basic aim of the Upaniṣads is to show a way of escape from repeated death.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamental to the Upaniṣadic understanding of death and liberation is the metaphysical anthropology presupposed in it, which differs substantially from both the popular and the academic philosophical understanding in the West. We have seen before the five different *ātman* corresponding to five different components or "sheaths" of human existence. Barring more detailed subdivisions, Vedāntic anthropology considers the human person to be composed of *sthūla śarīra*, *sūkṣma śarīra*, and *ātman-brahman*. The gross body is destined to disintegrate at the time of death. The subtle body with all the imprints of deeds and thoughts of the previous life, is preserved and clings to its *ātman*; this results in intermediate existences in heavens or hells, depending on the quality of the deeds, and finally in an earthly rebirth. Karma keeps in motion the vicious circle of action, desire, reward, and new action. The karma of former births is worked out in the present birth; and karma acquired in this birth, good or bad, works toward a future birth. The Upaniṣads have several similar accounts of the route that the dead take before they are reborn as human beings; these texts, often elaborated, have found a place also in the Purāṇas and other popular Hindu scriptures. The Upaniṣads generally describe a *devayāna* and a *pitṛ-yāna*, the former leading to no return, the latter leading to relatively enjoyable rebirths on earth; those who go neither way are reborn as animals or demons, before slowly ascending the ladder of being again.

Thus says the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

Those who meditate on the truth in the forest with faith, pass into the light, from the light into the day, from the day into the half-month of

the waxing moon, from the half-month of the waxing moon into the six months which the sun travels northward, from these months into the world of the *devas*, from the world of the *devas* into the sun, from the sun into the lightning. Then one of the mind-born goes to the sphere of lightning and leads them to the *brahma-loka*. In the *brahma-loka* they live for a long time. For these there is no return. Those who, through *yajñas*, gifts and austerities, conquer the worlds, pass into the smoke, from the smoke into the night, from the night into the half-month of the waning moon, from the half-month of the waning moon into the six months during which the sun travels southward, from these months into the world of the fathers, from the world of the fathers into the moon. Reaching the moon they become food. There the *devas*, as they say to king Soma, increase, decrease even to feed upon them there. When that is over, they pass into space, from space into wind, from wind into rain, from rain into the earth. Reaching the earth they become food. Again they are offered in the fire of man.<sup>6</sup> Thence they are born in the fire of woman with a view to going to other worlds. Thus do they go round. But those who do not know these two ways, become insects, moths and whatever there is here that bites.<sup>7</sup>

Other texts describe rebirth as the search for a womb of the *puruṣa*, the thumb-sized homunculus made up of subtle body and *ātman*.

The cause of rebirth is karma, inherent in the subtle body; the cause of liberation from rebirth is the cutting of the bond that ties *ātman* to the subtle body and with it to karma.

Though it is easy to give a correct etymology of karma from the root *kr-* to do, to act, and although the word has become one of the favorite terms of the present generation, its meaning is difficult to explain.<sup>8</sup> Literally, it is simply the deed done, work performed. But the deed is not terminated when a certain action comes to an end; the accomplished deed itself is a new entity that as such continues to exert its own influence, even without the will and activity of the doer. The whole *karmamārga* is based on this teaching of the objective efficacy of the accomplished deed; the *apūrva* of the Mīmāṃsākas, the suspended latent causality of ritual actions is quite an ingenious invention in this direction; it allows substantiated causality to accumulate like a bank account for later use in heaven. Karma is neither material nor spiritual in the usual sense of those terms. It can be produced and annihilated, it can lead to good and to evil consequences, but it is always finite, however powerful its influence may be. It is, in a sense, the law of nature; universal, because it applies to all of nature, but finite, because nature

itself is finite. Karma is often understood as fate, especially by Westerners;<sup>9</sup> they might then also relate it to the Greek *moira*. But we must take note of a very important difference: the *moira* of the Greeks cannot be influenced; karma can! To the Greek mind, this helplessness makes tragedy possible, tragedy being the ultimate and inevitably fatal clash of human will with fate. Indian literature does not know tragedy; karma can be influenced or even totally neutralized through religion! The aspect of life, so prominent in Western thought, that decisions once made cannot be revoked, that the "laws of being" cannot even be changed by the Supreme, himself a being—this aspect is absent from Indian thought; the possibility of rebirths, of world creations and destructions in an endless series, offers the possibility of ever new changes in decisions made, of ever new developments, so that no being's downfall is final and irredeemable. Karma does not cancel free will and genuinely free decisions; nor do free will and one's own decisions neutralize karma. Karma has been called *scientific* by many modern Indians, and serious psychologists are investigating experimentally the memories of former birth in such people who claim to have them.

The Upaniṣads maintain that they have found a way to deal with karma that is better than that of the Vedas: not to produce good karma as counterbalance for bad karma, but to eliminate karma altogether!

Unsteady, verily, are these boats of the eighteen sacrificial formulas, which are said to be the lower *karma*. The deluded, who delight in these as leading to good, fall again into old age and death. Abiding in the midst of ignorance, wise in their own esteem, thinking themselves to be learned, fools, afflicted with troubles, they go about like blind men led by one who is himself blind. The immature, living variously in ignorance, think 'we have accomplished our aim'. Since those who perform sacrifices do not understand because of their attachment, they sink down, wretched, when their *lokas* are exhausted. These deluded men, regarding sacrifices and works of merit as most important, do not know any other good. Having enjoyed heaven won by good karma they enter this world again, or a lower one. But those who practise *tapas* and *śrāddha* in the forest, the *sānta*, the tranquil and peaceful ones, knowers, who live the life of a mendicant, depart free from sin, through the door of the sun to the place where dwells the immortal, imperishable *ātman*.<sup>10</sup>

The Upaniṣads contain a sacred teaching that does what Vedic work could not do. The Vedas give to the Ārya the means to influ-

ence karma, and he is far above the *mleccha* who is excluded from it; but the knowledge contained in the Upaniṣads grants a degree of happiness and freedom and light that makes the Vedas look like a fetter, like night and unhappiness. Far from providing only a temporary relief from the ills of the world, the knowledge of the Upaniṣads uproots the weed called karma and deprives it of its soil, the body. The body is where karma operates and from whence it comes: at the level of the *dvandvas*, the pairs of opposites, that make up the world—heat and cold, pleasure and suffering, birth and death—it is impossible to obtain pure and eternal bliss and life. The body cannot be redeemed, because it is part of the world of the *dvandvas* itself. Freedom implies freedom from the pairs of opposites, from the body. The one who is completely free is "beyond good and evil" in an ontological sense. "As water does not cling to the lotus leaf, so evil deeds do not cling to one who knows *brahman*."<sup>11</sup> There is not a transformation of the finite into the infinite, of the mortal into the immortal; there is only the separation of the finite and the infinite, of the mortal from immortal, of the subtle body with its karma from the *ātman* that is by nature free, infinite, immortal. "The knot of the heart is cut, all the doubts are dispelled and karma comes to an end when He is seen."<sup>12</sup>

The path of the Upaniṣads was and is that of an elite which could afford to cut all ties with society and devote itself to the spirit. For the majority of Hindus, in ancient as well as in contemporary India, the path of works is what religion is understood to be: pilgrimages, almsgiving, recitation of prayers, and other good works are supposed to create *puṇya*, which allows one to dwell for some time in heaven and attain a good rebirth. The Purāṇas, however, in an attempt to assimilate Vedāntic teaching as well as popular practices, promise "enlightenment" as the result of the uttering of the name of God or of devotional worship of the image, and assure the devotee that the Supreme God will take upon himself all the karma of his devotees. The *bhakta* is freed from rebirth, not so much through the process of gradual sublimation, as through an act of grace of God.<sup>13</sup>

There is no longer any meaning in ritual actions if one has wholly transcended the sphere of karma. But the *Brahma-sūtras* enjoin the one who has knowledge to continue performing the usual rituals, lest he be considered an irreligious man. *Nitya karma*, the daily obligatory ritual does not result in karma for one who performs it with wisdom, but augments *vidyā*. Work done in a disinterested way, as *niṣkāma karma*, does not entangle in this world, but

is a symbol of freedom to act without considering the results of one's actions. The Upaniṣads have the notion of a *jīvan-mukta*, the one who is completely free while still living in a body: like a potter's wheel that turns for some time after the pot has been shaped, due to the impetus given to it by the potter, so the physical life of the free person is carried on without any connection to the *ātman* that has found its meaning in itself.

*Mokṣa* or *mukti*, liberation, the key term of Vedāntic philosophy, is hardly ever used by the Upaniṣads to describe the ultimate condition; they prefer expressions like *immortality*, *bliss*, *becoming brahman*.<sup>14</sup> This freedom is "not a new acquisition, a product, an effect or result of any action, but it always existed as the Truth of our nature; we are always emancipated and always free."<sup>15</sup> In the Upaniṣadic doctrine a person is given the means to remove the obstacles, the wrong notions; liberation itself is an event that comes from the *ātman's* own interiority. This is the deeper truth beneath apparently paradoxical statements. The Upaniṣads say that release from old age and death, bliss and immortality consists in "knowing the unknowable *brahman*."<sup>16</sup> It entails both a separation of consciousness from sense-object knowledge and an extension of consciousness until finally it includes everything. The Upaniṣads say "the liberated becomes everything."<sup>17</sup> The statement "*ātman* is *brahman*" is the liberating truth itself and as such it is immortality. From the standpoint of objective knowledge the ultimate knowledge is a negation of knowledge: *brahman* is not to be seen, not to be heard, not to be thought, but those who understand the seeing of the seeing, the hearing of the hearing, the innermost principle underlying all, know *brahman* also in a positive way. The very differentiation between the Self and the not-Self is enlightenment about the Self; there is no further need to prove the nonexistence of not being. The supreme condition of man, his true freedom, is identical with Truth-Reality-Being-Bliss: it is "self-awareness" that has no object-subject polarity but is everything as pure consciousness.<sup>18</sup> There is no further need to cleanse the *ātman* from sin and make it perfect: being free from sin, incapable of sin, incapable of being perfected, is a result of the fact that it is. "Deathlessness," then, consists in becoming conscious of the innermost support of the personality, in gaining unity with the Ultimate.<sup>19</sup> Whatever has been created goes back to its source, the body with all its parts and faculties is dissolved into the elements from which it was derived. The *ātman* withdraws its support to these its creations and thus they fall back into their nonexistence, into their difference from *ātman*

that proves them to be nothing by themselves. By leaving everything it gains the whole, and by reducing its consciousness to the barest subject awareness it becomes all-consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

*Mokṣa* is but the recognition of a situation that always existed as such; it is a psychological breakthrough, not an ontological change. It is not a quickening of the dead, not a resurrection and transfiguration of the body, but is its rejection. It is not heaven but the overcoming of heaven, making all objective bliss redundant.

Liberation is beyond happiness and unhappiness, beyond heaven and hell. He who wants something must take its opposite into the bargain; he who seeks redemption as a positive reality must accept bondage with it. For the Upaniṣads the way out from the tragic hopelessness, which sees human life as a constant frustration, is given by the insight that sorrow and death do not touch the innermost core. The way of knowledge is, therefore, strictly speaking, not a path to salvation but a method of discrimination; the *jīvan-mukta* is not a saint, but a wise person. As the Upaniṣad says: "Such a one, verily, the thought does not torment: Why have I not done the right? Why have I committed sin? One who knows this, saves oneself from these. Truly, from both of these one saves oneself—one who knows this."<sup>21</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Upaniṣads are amoral. On the contrary, they contain many passages with rigorous ethical commands. Thus the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* contains the following instruction to a pupil: "Speak the truth! Practise dharma! Do not neglect the study of the Veda! Be one to whom mother, father, teacher and guest are like *devas*! Do not do what others find reproachable!"<sup>22</sup> The very prerequisite for being accepted as a student was a high moral standard, and the life of the student itself demanded a more rigorous self-discipline than would normally be considered necessary. But morality is only a prerequisite; it is a matter of course for the one whose interests are no longer in sense gratification and possession of material goods. There comes a point when a person realizes that real goodness is not to be found in the accidental quality of a finite act, but in the heart of being itself, at one with the ultimate reality. Although several other ideas are at work in the *karmamārga*, as we have seen earlier, and in the *bhaktimārga*, which will be described in the following chapters, the Upaniṣads as the basis of the *jñānamārga* had, and have, a tremendous impact on Hinduism as such and are representative of one of the major themes of eastern religion: the acceptance of the aloneness of human existence not only as inevitable but as fulfilling, the

overcoming of suffering and sorrow by realizing their nonreality, liberation through insight into one's true nature, the negation of redemption because of a profound recognition of its intrinsic impossibility. It is useless to try to save a human—all are saved, if they would only see it! "Just as the flowing rivers disappear in the ocean casting off shape and name, even so the knower, freed from name and shape, attains to the divine *puruṣa*, higher than the high. One, indeed, who knows the Supreme *brahman* becomes *brahman* himself."<sup>23</sup>

## 15 The Path of Loving Devotion: *Bhaktimārga*

Fix thy mind on Me; be devoted to Me, sacrifice to Me; prostrate thyself before Me; so shalt thou come to Me. I promise thee truly, for thou art dear to Me.

—*Bhagavadgītā* XIII, 65

The majority of Hindus today are followers of the *bhaktimārga*, whose exterior manifestation in temples, images, processions, feasts, and popular gurus characterize so much of present-day India. The term *bhakti*, used so frequently as the key word in this form of religion, defies an exact and adequate translation.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the general difficulty of translating crucial words from Sanskrit into English, the problem is compounded by two quite peculiar handicaps. First, the etymology of the word is not clear. Grammatically, *bhakti* is an abstract noun formed from a past participle. It can be derived from two different roots: if derived from the root *bhañj*, to separate, *bhakti* would have to be translated as separation. That makes sense insofar as *bhakti* systems presuppose the supreme, absolute Being to be nonidentical with and separated from the being of the individual. In this view, inner longing for reunion is the characteristic of human life, and the *bhakta* is one who is aware of the painful separation between himself or herself and God and tries to overcome it. The majority of Indian scholars, however, derive *bhakti* from the root *bhaj*-, to worship, to be devoted to. This, too, makes sense, because *bhakti* religion consists of acts of worship and loving devotion toward God. According to Vallabha *bhakti* is derived from the root *bhaj* and the suffix *kṭi*; the suffix means "love" and the root, "service." *Bhakti* thus means the action of service (*seva*). *Seva* is a bodily affair; in order that it may be complete it implies love, and without love the service would be