

## ETHICS IN UPANISHADS

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### Abstract

In common sense, what we understand by the western term ETHICS is a rational enquiry in to the standards of right and wrong, good and bad, in respect of character and conduct, which ought to be accepted by a class of individuals. In the philosophy of Upanishads this kind of study falls in the category of "àcàramimàsà" which is practiced under the supervision and guidance of an "Ächaryà" who is competent authority to usher his disciple on the path of self realization. His discourses are based on the statement like "Satyamev jayate nàñftam" viz. "only the truth sustains and false has no ground" and "Yànyàsmàkam sucharitànì tànì tvyà sevityànì no itrànì" viz. "whatever are our righteous actions, only those are to be followed by you and not others which might be challengeble". Such statements are used enormously by the thinkers of Upanishads. They do talk of Dharma and "Skandhàs" of dharma to be performed in the practice of rituals like "yajnà, adhyayana and dānam" which are nothing but the welfare of society and individuals.

But if we want to analyse the "àcàrmimàsà" of the Upanishads in the later period then find the two types of morality followed by the Vedantins- one is followed during the period of "Sādhanà" to attain purity of mind essential to achieve the goal of Brahman experience. The other one is not followed under any circumstances but it is spontaneous and flows effortlessly without any predetermined conditioning from the activity of Brahmavit -- "Brahmavit brahmaiv bhavati". This conduct of a Brahmjnani is a manifestation of his masterly siddhavasthà which cannot be judged by the prerequisites of the bookish texts. Maharshi Yajñavalkya, Kings like Janaka, Pravahini, AjātShatru and Ashvapati are the living examples of morality of Siddhavasthà or finality.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Ancient Indian ethics, Ancient Indian wisdom, Ancient Indian Morality.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The word ethics literary means "moral principles that control or influence a person's behavior or a system of moral principles or rules of behavior. Meaning can be drawn from above given statements thereby that those normative principles which affect a person's behavior in a positive sense may be termed as ethics. These principles have a great, definite and undoubtedly a great deal of direct influence on a normal human behavior. In other words ethics can be defined as the mental faculty which enables a man to probe distinguish and choose from the good and bad in positive sense which comes to a person with inward concentration.

### 2. ETHICS EXPLAINED

Indian society, right from the beginning, had been aware of these normative principles so as to make the world a better place for living. It is needless to say that these principles, which Indian society chose in the primordial period of its development which have been serving the light house to the entire world. In fact the Indian subcontinent is the one of the oldest civilization of the world which was well aware of improving the quality of life through these means and they have much been talked about through Indian poetry, drama, prose and fictions. The entire ancient Indian literature, in one way or the other way, have been much emphasizing on these very normative principles of moral conduct and it had been showing the path of renunciation to the trekker and had been invoking the man to seek the ultimate reality. Hence the metaphysics and ethics are two side of a single coin. Dr. Ranade's comments, in this regard, seems to much sensible to quote "The problem of the relation of metaphysics and morality has been much debated from the

ancient times"<sup>1</sup>.

It is needless to say that the entire ancient Indian literature has revealed the importunate of a sensitive which guide the seeker e heart for the perfection right from the beginning and through these Upanishadic texts, it is clearly indicated the very fact. These prayers seem to be more intense when they are revealed through various statements such as "From the unreal, lead me to the real, from darkness, lead me to the light and from death lead me to immortality"<sup>2</sup>. The Upanishads, from the Prasthantrayee are the milestones in the ancient Indian literary works which guide the seeker to a definite. Way for the ultimate growth of the individual and this journey of self-emancipation or the self realization is the process of becoming from being<sup>3</sup>. An individual, who is on the path of self realization and who has to achieve his objective yet, is a bundle of imperfections and only through these means of moral corrections, he can achieve the final destination. There, it is a process of becoming from being or coming to the real existence. This very process of becoming is revealed through moral up-righteousness on which all of the Upanishads have categorically emphasized upon to a great extent although the main contents of all of the Upanishads are Soul, immanent world and the ultimate lord<sup>4</sup>. According to Upanishadic literature, the all pervading lord is the ultimate reality in the universe, after knowing which, nothing is left to attain<sup>5</sup>. Therefore it becomes quiet essential for the one to uplift his conscious to such a level to attain the Supreme bliss before he could proceed on the path of self-realization and achieve his final destination of emancipation. In this way, the scope of improvement in the moral conduct is there. It may be the key expression to say that the Upanishads not only, emphasize on the ultimate reality that is the final destination of human life but also provide the substantial guidelines for the seeker who is on this very path of self realization.

Before we could talk about these certain guidelines which the Upanishads provide, it is worth mention that the western minds have been raising their own doubts about the teachings of Upanishads. According to these western minds, the ethical contents are meaningless. It will not be amiss to mention to quote Dussen when he speculates that "Moral conduct cannot contribute directly but only indirectly to the attainment of knowledge that brings emancipation"<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary to this, AB Keith puts forwards his opinion by saying that the ethical contents of Upanishads are valueless when he comments "In comparison with the intellectual activity of Brahmans, the ethical contents of the Upanishads must be said to be negligible and valueless<sup>7</sup>". RE hume has also repeated his version more or less in the same manner when he says " No longer the worship or the sacrifice or the the good conduct is the requisite for the religious life or for salvation in the next... Sacrifice and works of merit toward hypostatized activities are, in the light of metaphysical knowledge, seems to be futile"<sup>8</sup>. It will be worthwhile here at this point to say that such comments undermine and devalue the ethical contents of Upanishads undoubtedly, where as the Brihadarnyak and other Upanishads put emphasis on the fact that after obtaining the supreme goal, the moral conduct loses it's significance<sup>9</sup>. We, here, must commit to our memory that one when obtains the ultimate goal of life or faces the final reality, in such a case, he is not bothered about his actions or conduct because after having known the supreme reality, the morality becomes redundant. It may be said that when the seeker find that everything is the part and parcel of the ultimate lord and nothing except lord, has it's own peculiar identity or say, everything is a part of the lord, then in such a case, meritorious actions or sinful deeds have no place for implementation. Eventually thus downsizing or neglecting the values completely, which have been taught by The Upanishads over centuries, is not possible which emphatically provides the certain guidelines for enhancement in spiritual conduct.

But it must be borne in mind here that to attain such a goal is not a child's play. It must be added here that the seeker must be aware of his moral conduct which enables him to proceed on the path of emancipation. It

<sup>1</sup> RD Ranade: A constructive survey of the Upanishadic philosophy P.287

<sup>2</sup> Br. Upa. 1.3.28

<sup>3</sup> Shaoun Hino Wisdom in Indian tradition. P.192

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Paul dussen Philosophy of Upanishads P.362

<sup>7</sup> AB Keith: Religion and philosophy of the Vedas P. 584

<sup>8</sup> Cf Hume: Thirteen Principle Upanishads

<sup>9</sup> BrihadaranyakoUpanishad IV.3.22 & ChhandogyoUPanishad IV.14.3 etc.

is but natural that morality never leads anyone on the path of self liberation or spiritual awakening. The entire Upanishadic literature depicts the whole of the Universe as the adobe of the Supreme Master and in continuation to this, it points out the specific way for spiritual salvation for the one who believes that he is staying in the adobe of The Master Supreme which enhances the ethical values of the Upanishads. May it be known that no one in this world, is born perfect on this earth who has the knowledge about the Master Supreme or the ultimate controlling power of this world. But on the contrary, one has to make his way and struggle very hard if he wants to attain the Supreme reality and ultimate stage of self realization. This struggle becomes less conflicting and more conducive when one is on this very path with the help of moral conduct. So, it seems to be quiet unfair to comment that the ethical values of the Upanishads have no meaning or if they have, at all, are of negligible value and importance. Eventually, when one takes a closer look at the Upanishads, they reveal themselves to the great exposition and thereby setting the greatest standards for the human life.

Thus, the ethics of Upanishads can be divided in to two major categories, namely

- Ethics of Upanishads which contribute towards the stability of the healthy human society. It includes the qualities such as sense of Unity, negation of malpractices etc. It can be called as social ethics.
- Ethics of Upanishads which contribute to the onlooker in the spiritual progression in the life such as longing for goodness in life, negation of escapism, penance, chastity, compassion, truthfulness etc. It may be called as personal ethics.

## 2.1 Social Ethics:

Before we deal with this category of ethics, it would be much sensible to make it clear that we should not consider the man made barricades of social stratum or divisions made on the basis of caste, creed, stages of human life and religion. We must constrain ourselves here, at this juncture, to the moral values which are meant for the healthy growth of the man as a social being.

As it is a known fact that the individual and the society are the two different side of a single coin and without each other nothing is feasible, for, the individual constructs or forms the society and it is the society which moulds the individual according to it's needs. Thus both are inseparable from each other. It must be told beforehand that the healthy individuals form the healthy society and the healthy society can carve the healthy individuals. Keeping this fact in mind, the Upanishadic literature has always made specific recommendations in the form of ethics that may be benevolent and beneficial for the human society at large.

The Ishavaso Upanishad makes a distinctive and clarion call to all of the people, disputing with each other over a small piece of land to give up every type of niggardliness and consider the whole of the earth as the abode of the lord. It is proclaimed when everywhere the Supreme Master prevails, it is a trivial matter of no importance to quarrel over the material gains. It must be told here, at this juncture, that this very Upanishad asks the human beings to renounce the selfishness or the meanness by which the future of this world may be changed.

Shantipatha or the prayers made in the beginning of all of the Upanishads denote the longing for the peace "serenity that yields the understanding to all". It not only, indicates the sense of oneness at common platform but also, on the contrary, shows the selective sense of sharing<sup>10</sup> which enables the person to transcend the unworthy ideas of meanness and self domination. It also, on the other hand, tries to concentrate on the concept of cosmic unity<sup>11</sup> when such kind of proclamation is made that " One, who sees all beings in self and self in all beings , he never hates anyone at all"<sup>12</sup>. Needless to say that the idea of hate emerges in a situation when one does not consider himself as a part of team in positive sense and separates or individualizes himself from the other on the basis of selfishness, greed, lust and other unworthy ideas. But as one considers and realizes the other beings as his own integral part, in such a case, whole of the picture takes turns topsy-turvy in positive sense and presents itself in a different perspective. Thus concentrating on this very fact, all of the Upanishads emphatically stress upon the sense of unity, oneness and sense of equality<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> KathoUpanishad

<sup>11</sup> IshoUpanishad 6

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 7

For the healthy development of society, it is the responsibility of the society to guard themselves against the malpractices. A human society has to guard itself from the unethical practices and follow the social norms so that it can flourish in the right direction because there is the tendency of growth in unwanted direction of the human behavior by default and these very tendencies which include stealing, prostitution bribery, gambling etc. play the negative role for the human society. In order to make the society aware of these factors, the ChandogyaUpanishad denounces such practices and makes the entire society not to make mistakes.

Thus moral guidelines provided by the Upanishadic literature not only set guard the human society against all odd practices but on the contrary to it asks the society to be aware of such damaging vices which are avoidable and are not demanded in a healthy society.

## 2.2 Personal Ethics:

It is said that one who has realized his true inner self is the ideal ethical person<sup>14</sup>. Thus, as far as the achievement of the self realization is concerned, the entire Upanishadic literature provides the necessary guidelines for the onlooker. It would be appropriate to quote Dr. Radhakrishnan here when he speculates "In one sense, Upanishadic morality is individualistic for its aim is self realization."<sup>15</sup> It will be worth to point out here at this juncture, that all of the Upanishads repeatedly emphasize on the life's greatest virtues like chastity, desire-less action, faith etc.<sup>16</sup> by rendering various stories to the one who is on the path of self-realization. Surprisingly. The KathoUpanishad, surprisingly is very conscious about the spiritual progression of every one when it proclaims suggestively "Arise, awake and get the final objectives and realize them"<sup>17</sup>. The process of self realization is a process of becoming from being in which one has to uplift himself by means of these very basic qualities of human life for self-liberation and this only can be done by means of adopting the greatest virtues of human life.

Right from the beginning, the Human mind has always been tempted and confounds to choose from the good, better, best and pleasant and KathoUpanishad very subtly, has presented the discrimination in this regard by proclaiming the idea that "The better is one thing, the pleasant may be other. Both of these, having different aims, bind the person. Of these two..."<sup>18</sup>. And at the same time, subtle difference is also made clear through proclamation "Of these both, come to the man at will. The wise person makes the discrimination after judging both of them and opts for the best for him and fool chooses the vice-versa"<sup>19</sup>. So eventually this shows that the person of intellect chooses the best which is socially approved and proceeds on the path of self realization and the fool goes wayward and chooses the other way round. The anecdote of Yajnavalkya and Maitrayee, as mentioned in the Brihadaranyakao-Upanishad is quoteable in this context where Yajnavalkya is willing to divide his property among his two wives and interestingly, Maitrayee, declines to opt for the worldly riches as she is willing for spiritual progression and thus raises a subtle question by asking Sage Yajnavalkya "If the whole of the earth, filled with gold were mine, Will I be immortal?"<sup>20</sup> The meaning of quoting the anecdote here, is that with attainment of worldly wealth one can be very rich, but cannot be a better person and cannot attain the spiritual progression at all. Maitrayee is definitely a wiser person with inward concentration and is a true trekker of self liberation. Almost all of the main Upanishads like Kath, Ken, Ishavasya Chaandogya etc. repeatedly stress upon the life's greatest virtues like non-greediness which is the pre-requisite for everyone who are on the path of self liberation. The IshavasyaoUpanishad categorically makes announcement in this regard "Yearn for not the wealth of anyone at all"<sup>21</sup>. The KathoUpanishad also suggests the same fact. The yarn knitted in the Yama and Nachiketa also suggests the same when lord of death Yama tells Nachiketa that "Not with the wealth is a man satisfied ever"<sup>22</sup>. Needless to say that any person with worldly wisdom can not quench his thirst on the said issue of

<sup>14</sup> Sharma TR: Sectarian Upanishads P.71

<sup>15</sup> S. Radhakrishnanan : Indian philosophy. P.212

<sup>16</sup> KenoUpanishad IV.8

<sup>17</sup> KathoUpanishad III.4

<sup>18</sup> Ibid II.1

<sup>19</sup> Ibid II.2

<sup>20</sup> BrihadaranyakoUpanikshad IV.5.3 & I.5.3

<sup>21</sup> Ishavasya 1

<sup>22</sup> Kath. 1.29

senses as he has his concentration outward<sup>23</sup>. A person, who is on the path of self emancipation, always considers the worldly riches as the barring substance of obstacle in his journey to the perfection or towards the path of ultimate truth and tries himself to keep at bay from the worldly pleasures. The said person, who is willing for progression on the path of self liberation and who has not experienced the ultimate truth, always tries to see it through sensible efforts. The prayer made in this regards is readable when he says with understanding that the ultimate truth is covered with the golden lid and prays further to the Master Supreme to remove that golden lid to uncover the ultimate truth<sup>24</sup>. Here, at this point, it must be admitted that the golden lid is the symbol of worldly riches which hinders the person from the sensible path leading to self realization. For, the ultimate path of self realization is quiet difficult and worldly riches always try to attract the person and produces the hindrance and obstacles in the path of onlooker.

Thus we see that the Upanishads repeatedly direct the entire humanity, irrespective of caste or creed, to be aware of the hazards which are present in the path of self liberation. Not only this, the Upanishads also provide the necessary guidelines for everyone who is on the sensible path for self liberation.

Similarly, the Upanishads not only guide the person for the proper channel but also makes him aware of the hazardous situations which one may have to face while he or she is on the path of self liberation. The tendency of not performing the right action or indulgence in non-action is one of the factors which make a person unworthy. Thus, the IshavasyoUpanishad makes every person aware of this very fact by pronouncing "Even while doing the deeds here, one may desire to live for hundred years... Not otherwise, than this is it.. the deeds adhere not on the man" <sup>25</sup>.

Here, the Upanishads clearly put forth the idea of not to give up one's life in order to be escaped from performing actions. But, on the contrary to this, one may wish to live full life while performing the sensible actions. The seer of these Upanishads clearly warns the entire humanity when it suggests "Satanic are these worlds called, with blinding darkness are they covered. One falls pray for this darkness who puts forth his prayer for self" <sup>26</sup> It might not be out of point to submit that the seers of these Upanishads warn every one not to develop the tendency of escapism at all. It must be admitted that the seers puts everyone on alert by putting the fact forth us that one would not cling to actions because he is not bound to <sup>27</sup>.

It will not be amiss to mention that the BrihadaranyakoUpanishad not only indicates that the actions performed by a man is of two types but it also suggests the type of actions which are to be performed by putting thr fact forth "Accordingly one acts, accordingly one conducts himself, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by performing worthy and vitreous deed and other becomes evil by performing the unworthy deeds". The Upanishad does not restrict itself here only but goes one step further by saying " But a person is made of desires only... what actions he has performed that he has produced for himself" <sup>28</sup>. Hence it is obvious a person desirous of attaining the spiritual growth , naturally performs the right and just actions always and gets the best results accordingly.<sup>29</sup>

The Upanishads categorically declare that the ultimate truth is the "Master Supreme". The MaandookyoUpanishad repeatedly eulogize that the truthfulness is one of the factor for self realizations and at the same time, it also emphasizes on the fact that it is an essential value as far as the progression in the spiritual life is concerned<sup>30</sup>. Satyakaam, even though non Brahmin, acquired the knowledge on the basis of his truthfulness. The idea behind quoting the instance is to consolidate the act that the truthfulness is the essential element in the process of self realization.

On the other hand, the Kenoupanishad considers the penance, chastity etc. as the primordial means of self

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Commentry of Shakaraon KathoUpanishad 1.27

<sup>24</sup> Ishavasya 15

<sup>25</sup> Ishavasya 2

<sup>26</sup> Ishavasya 3

<sup>27</sup> Ishavasya 2

<sup>28</sup> BrihadaranyakoUpanishad IV.4.5

<sup>29</sup> BrihadaranyakoUpanishad III.2.13

<sup>30</sup> MaandookyoUpanishad III.1.5 & III.1.16

realization<sup>31</sup>. It should not be out of point to quote Shankara, who states, through his commentary that "Knowledge takes place by purity of inner self aroused by chastity, penance and self control"<sup>32</sup>. But, on the contrary to this, it would be worthwhile to mention the yarn knitted in the BrihadaranyakoUpanishad that once gods, demons and human beings went to the Supreme Master to receive the suggestions regarding the living life in righteous direction. The Supreme master symbolically uttered the syllable "DA" thrice and went in to silence. The single syllable "DA" revealed the principle meaning of leading a righteous life meaning thereby self control, charity and compassion to deities, men and demons respectively<sup>33</sup>. This obviously marks the fact for every single living being, desirous of up-liftment, should practice all of these three principles<sup>34</sup>. Eventually it would not be out of context to say that the process of self realization is the process of self evaluation, a step towards becoming from being. Thus in process of becoming, the moral conduct starts playing the vital role from the very beginning. It will be justified to quote shaun Hino when he says "The actual process of up-liftment starts with the implementation of moral conduct"<sup>35</sup>. Thus considering the entire factual position, it would rather be unjustified to say that the Upanishads are devoid of ethical contents or their value is meager, if at all they have.

We may say that the instructions given in the Upanishads are the foremost steps which are essential for self awakening. Dr. Radhakrishnanan is truly right when he remarks "all the ethical theories are based on metaphysic in philosophical conception of relations between human conduct and ultimate reality"<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Kenoupanishad IV.8

<sup>32</sup> Ten Principle Upanishads with Shankara Bhasya P.36

<sup>33</sup> BrihadaranyakoUpanishad V.2.1

<sup>34</sup> Commentary of Shankara on BrihadaranyakoUpanishad

<sup>35</sup> Shaun Hino & Lalita Deodhar: Wisdom in Indian tradition P.199

<sup>36</sup> S. Radhakrishnanan: Eastern religionand western thoughts P.80