



KENA UPANISHAD

(The Quest)

Comments by Sri Sri Vedananda

Kena Upanishad

This Upanishad is taken from Sama Veda. 'Kena' means 'By whom'. As this Upanishad starts with the word 'Kena' and this Upanishad stands as an answer to the question of 'By Whom' it has got this name.

However, the name of the Upanishad is not of much importance.

One question was raised as to "Who is the Ultimate reason" and the entire Upanishad forms an answer. This Upanishad is spread over four chapters.

The reader is request to go through the general introduction to Upanishads before proceeding further.

Let me repeat. Mere reading or literal understanding of any Upanishad will be of no use. The purpose of the Upanishad is attained only by experiencing the Ultimate Bliss in one's own life. Let the Almighty bestow its grace for such an experience.

Shanthy Pada or Peace invocation

Shanthy Pada or Peace invocation is a prayer for good health and peace of mind. Each Veda has its own Shanthy Pada. That prayer will be assigned to all the Upanishads from that Veda. Hence, this Kena Upanishad is assigned with the shanthy Pada of Sama Veda.

"Let my organs like eyes, ears and the forces which empowers those organs including my life and speech shall be in good condition. Let me experience that 'Everything is Brahman'. Let each word of this Upanishad be experienced by me. Let me not negate the Ultimate Energy. Let the Ultimate Energy or Brahman not negate me. No negations. Let me be free of negations. Whatever this Upanishad says as Dharma or right path, Let them reside in my self. May I delight in such residence. Let Dharma be delighted in residing.

Let Peace Prevail. Let Peace Prevail. Let Peace Prevail.

By repeating the words 'Let Peace Prevail', it is prayed that Peace shall prevail in mind, body and spirit, without which nothing could be taught or learnt effectively. *But, Sri Adi Sankara's commentary gives a different meaning. It speaks of 'protection from obstacles'. But, the literary meaning doesn't suggest such a meaning and there is no necessity to interpret in that way.*

This peace invocation shows us the mind set up of a disciple. His prayer for good health is to succeed in his quest for the Ultimate.

Though there can be no negation from Brahman – for Brahman is all – the prayer for ‘Let Brahman not negate me’ should be taken as prayer for Brahman not using its hiding tricks called ‘Maya’ or ‘Prakruthi’.

First Chapter

Hymn 1

By whom or whose desire does the mind move. At whose order does the Prana function? By whose wishes, men speak? Who indeed, directs the eye and the ear?

Here in this first hymn, the disciple raises some question about the basic or Ultimate force. By giving this, Upanishad implies that no knowledge can be imparted without a quest. In Hinduism, Each and every thing is explained in detail. Knowledge is free everywhere for anybody. But, the basic requirement is the quest. Without being asked, nothing is given out. Now, the Upanishad goes into the answer.

Hymn 2

The hearing power of the ear, the power behind creation of thoughts, the power behind the speech is the Prana of the Prana and the vision power of the eye. Knower of this shall conquer death.

This hymn induces quest for the search of the Ultimate in the mind of the disciple by telling ‘He conquers death’. As this Upanishad is from Sama Veda which is basically musical, the Seer plays with words. In Sanskrit, most names are derived from the Verbs. The term ‘Srothra’ – for example – stands for both hearing and ear. The word ‘Kara’ means both ‘Hands’ and ‘doing’. In this hymn, the Seer plays with a bunch of such words.

He uses the words ‘sakshu’, ‘Srothram’ etc in both meanings so many commentaries translate this hymn as “the ear of the ear and the eye of the eye”.

‘Conquering death’ or ‘becomes immortal’ should not be taken literally. It means that the bodily connection of the Atman will be broken and he is liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

Hymn 3

Eyes are unable to perceive it. Speech too can not enter. Even mind cannot perceive. How or when this can be ‘known’ is also unknown.

Organs like Eyes, speech or our mind can only imagine worldly things. They are not able to perceive the Ultimate Energy. Moreover, if a thing is to be known, the object should be different from the knower. In this case, the object Brahman is the Ultimate and hence the knower also. So, Brahman can never be known. But, the ultimate Bliss can be experienced if the seeker melts into the Ultimate Brahman or in other words becomes Brahman itself. Guru now kindles the fire of quest by saying that ‘When or How it can be ‘known’ is not known’. *Here too, we differ a little from Adi Sankara’s commentary. It runs something like “We know it not: Nor do we know how to teach one about it....” If this is to be taken, it means that the guru is an unenlightened person or pretends to be so. That cannot be the case because only enlightened seers were recognized as Guru in those days.*

Hymn 4

Moreover, It was told that the Ultimate is beyond what is known and what is unknown. None was there ever before who can explain it even more.

Here, there is little confusion. Normally, a thing may be known or unknown. Only two stages are possible. But, the hymn says that the Ultimate is neither known nor unknown. As explained earlier, in the case of Brahman, the knower is not different from the object. Hence, it is said that Brahman or Ultimate is beyond the terms 'known' and 'unknown'. As knowledge of Brahman is an experience, it is said that there was none who can explain it further.

A worldly thing or force may be unknown. It is not unknowable. By some time or means it may become known. Even some knowledge of it may be sufficient. But, the Ultimate is not so. Mere bookish knowledge or hearsay about it won't do any good.

Hence, Brahman is only to be experienced.

Hymn 5

What no speech can express, but which is the force behind speech, know that alone as Brahman and not this which people think as Brahman.

Brahman or the Ultimate can not be explained by words. But, the force behind such speech is that Brahman. Seer explains this and gives a caution - Don't take the organ or any other thing as Brahman.

In this and following four hymns, this caution is repeated. By such repetition, it is iterated that the terms such as 'Vak' 'Sakshu' 'Srothram' etc which mean, as we explained in a previous hymn, both the name and the function. If the terms are taken to mean the physical organs, it will be suicidal.

Please note that in this commentary we take the term 'Upasana' used in this and the following hymns to mean 'Think'. In other works, it is taken to mean 'worship'.

Hymn 6

Which is not attainable by mind or imagination, By which mind or imagination is recognized, that alone, you know, as Brahman. Not that which people think.

Mind is a bunch of thoughts. Thought or imagination can not go beyond one's worldly knowledge. But, Brahman is not within such knowledge. Hence, mind cannot reach there.

But, the presence or absence of thought is recognized by some inner thing. This hymn says that alone as Brahman.

Caution is repeated here. One should be cautious of the inner or sub conscious mind which at times make one feel that it is the ultimate force.

Hymn 7

That which our naked eyes are unable to see and which is the power behind such sight, let you know, that alone is Brahman. Not that which people think.

As Brahman has no physical presence, naked eyes cannot see it. But, eyes, as just organ, are inert. There should be some force behind them to make them see. That force or power is Brahman.

Caution is repeated here to ensure the terms are not misunderstood.

Hymn 8.

That which can not be heard by the ears and that force which makes the ears function, that alone, let you know, as Brahman. Not that which people think.

As told in an earlier hymn, speech cannot explain Brahman. Then, naturally, Ears are unable to hear. Again, as organs, ears are inert. The force behind their functioning is Brahman.

Caution is repeated to avoid misunderstanding.

Hymn 9.

That which the life force can not get into life and that which is the base for the life force, that alone, let you know, is Brahman. Not that which people think.

Brahman is the Ultimate Base of everything – live or inert. So, life force or Prana is not the vital force of Brahman. Brahman is the base for the life energy.

Thus, the first chapter of Kena Upanishad ends.

Second Chapter

Hymn 1

If you think that you know the 'form' of Brahman, for sure, your thinking is wrong. I think you will know by probing, which is its form and which constitutes the forms of various gods.

This hymn is to be deeply understood. First, Guru says that if the disciple feels that he knows the form of the Brahman (by understanding the previous chapter) it is surely wrong. Because, bookish knowledge, as we have already explained, is not for knowing Brahman or the ultimate.

He further says that the disciple should rather probe the issue of his own and find out the form of Brahman. Further, the disciple should also understand the secrets behind the forms of the Gods.

For the information of the reader, there is no single God in Hinduism. Numerous Gods were described. This hymn implies that there is something behind such personifications and wants the disciple to probe and realize it for himself. Some of those secrets were unfolded in this site's sub page titled 'Gods and Goddesses'.

Hymn 2.

I don't think that I know very well. I don't think it can be intellectually perceivable. Whoever knows not it by intellect, he alone realizes it. Intellect can never perceive it.

The previous hymn was spoken by the Guru and now the disciple answers. After the warning raised by Guru, disciple agrees that he don't think that he knows Brahman very well. He further adds his inference that it is not intellectually perceivable.

The second line of this hymn is to be deeply understood. "He who knows not intellectually, only he perceives Brahman". Here it is clarified that intellectual knowledge of Brahman or Ultimate is misdirecting and so, it is an hindrance for experiencing the Ultimate.

The disciple ends with his conclusion that intellect cannot perceive Brahman.

By this reply, the disciple expresses that he had clearly understood the warning raised by the Guru and also its secret implications. The probe mentioned in the previous hymn is not intellectual or external. It is purely an inner journey.

Hymn 3.

As such, one who relies upon his intellect, for him, Brahman is a concept. Concept cannot be experienced. For the intellect, experience is not there. One who experiences, is not an intellectual.

The disciple continues: One relies upon his intellect and builds a concept and takes it as Brahman. But, it need not be real. There is no way of experiencing, because the concept itself will be a barrier for the experience.

Hence, there are two sets of people. One set is of intellectual or conceptual understanding of Brahman. Another set experiences Brahman. There is no meeting point. (*While, the intellectual set has lost its direction, the experienced resides in Eternal Bliss.*)

Hymn 4

One who understands that the underlying energy for every sensing is Brahman alone, he attains immortality. By understanding that only by Atma or Brahman, he is energized, he attains immortality.

In this hymn, the disciple speaks of a way for experiencing Brahman. In the previous hymns, he showed his understanding and spoke of experiencing. Now, he speaks of a way to experience, possibly to get a nod from his guru.

Here, the disciple says that one should feel the underlying energy in every sensing. Normally, we see, hear, smell or speak. We take it for granted. We feel that it is due to the energy of the Organs. But, if the spirit/Atma/Brahman is not there, Organs can not sense. Hence, Brahman is the Ultimate energy for all those sense. If one starts from a single sense and expands to every sense, going on feeling the underlying energy as Brahman, he is, for sure, to experience Brahman.

Experiencing Brahman is enlightenment and thus he attains immortality. This knowledge, it is reiterated, is not intellectual.

Hymn 5.

The Ultimate or Brahman knowledge is here beyond ignorance. If ignorance is not crossed, there is a great danger. One who sees the Ultimate or Brahman in all the worldly things, guided by such enlightenment, attains immortality.

Now, the Guru speaks. After hearing from his disciple, in approval of his words, Guru offers his comments. In the East, Knowledge of the Ultimate alone is considered as knowledge in those days. Hence, Guru says "if ignorance is crossed, Knowledge is here."

But, why should he say that there is danger, if ignorance is not crossed? He implies that half knowledge is even more dangerous. Enlightenment is not a step-by-step path. It is a leap. It may be enlightenment or otherwise. There is no half way. If enlightenment is not attained, if one has given up half way, he may turn more dangerous for the society due to his misconception.

If one is able to see through all the worldly things and sense the Ultimate Energy or Brahman in everything, that enlightened person attains immortality.

Thus the Second Chapter of Kena Upanishad ends.

Third Chapter

The third chapter of this Upanishad is in the form of a parable. To understand the parable in most appropriate manner, reader – especially non-hindu reader – should know certain things.

In Hinduism, some divine beings are described. These divine beings are not gods but one step lower or demi gods. They are called Deva. They control nature such as rain, cloud, wind, fire etc. They are different from human beings. There are two types within themselves. Those who are born to devas are of one type and those who were human beings by birth and became deva due to their good deeds on earth.

Their existence depend on human beings. Those which were offered in fire rituals by human beings are their food.

Their king is called Indra.

With this, let us enter the third chapter.

Hymn 1.

Atma or Brahman descended upon them. They didn't recognize it. They thought that the life force is theirs. They thought that the pride of life is their right.

In Hinduism, everything is the manifestation of Brahman. Brahman in a form and name is called Atma. Before the entry of Atma, every manifested form is just inert. Here, Deva or the divine beings were first inert. Atma entered them to give them life. But, Deva didn't recognized it. They thought that the life is theirs and they are powerful by virtue.

Hymn 2.

Knowing, Atma in them, appeared before them. Unable to recognize, they were confused as to what is this Yaksha.

Yaksha means 'formless'. Knowing their pride, Atma which entered them, came out and appeared before them as formless. As Devas were unable to recognize it, they were confused as to what is this 'formless'. As Atma or Brahman is the Ultimate energy, without it, Devas were just inert beings. But, due to their pride, they turned a deaf ear to the universal truth and thought that they were still powerful.

Eastern way of thinking basically differs from the western thinking in this point. Eastern mind thinks based on its duty and western mind thinks based on its Right. If everything is just manifestation of Brahman or Atman, where is the question of any right?. This universe, this life, this body etc., everything is just a gift of nature. There can be no Right on a gift. Hence, Eastern mind thinks only on its duty to the society. This point is implied in this portion of the Upanishad. Devas pride is nothing but their claim for 'Right' which they think they possess. But, Atman has gone out, leaving them just inert or powerless. Let us see what happens.

Hymn 3

Devas told Agni deva, "O' knower of everything, go and find out what is that 'Yaksha'.

Devas first trial is to know about the formless through fire. Fire, here stands for light and Heat. If a thing is not normally visible, then it is natural for anybody even today to seek the help of light and heat.

Moreover, Even today, science recognizes many objects with the heat or radiation it emits. This phenomena is implied here. Fire-God, Agnideva is known as 'Knower of everything' because there is nothing in this universe which has no heat. This scientific truth is also said centuries ago in this Upanishad.

Hymn 4.

Approaching the Yaksha, Agni deva asked "Who are You?" and said, "I am Agni, knower of everything"

This Hymn was written centuries ago. But we see manners in the dialogue. As instructed by the Devas, Agni Deva approached Yaksha and asked about him. As it is not good manners to ask anybody without properly introducing oneself, he introduces himself. He tells that he is 'Knower of Everything'.

Hymn 5

Yaksha asks, "What is your special power?" Agnideva replied, "I can burn down everything in this world."

Yaksha wants to prove their powerlessness. Hence, he asks agnideva about his special power. Agni deva replies with pride.

In spiritual sense, if pride is there, the Ultimate Truth cannot be attained. Everything is powerless before that Ultimate. Hence, no pride is possible.

Hymn 6.

Yaksha kept a grass before him and asked agni deva to burn it. Agnideva tried hard. But, he was unable to burn it. With this failure, he returned unable to know about 'Yaksha'.

This is very interesting. Agnideva introduced himself as knower of everything. But, he asked Yaksha about him. Then Agnideva said that he can burn everything on earth. But, now, he is unable to burn a single grass.

This failure might have made a tremendous change in him. He returned unable to know about Yaksha. But in his inner self, he has realized that Yaksha is the Ultimate. Here, the implication is that a failure or pain can be the game changer.

Hymn 7.

Then, Devas requested Vayu – God of Air – to go and know about that 'Yaksha'.

Again, this is highly scientific approach. If one thing is not naturally visible and no radiation or heat is sensed, it is but normal to see whether it emits any gas. Here, Devas decided to send Vayu Deva – 'God of Air' to know about the 'Yaksha'.

Hymn 8.

Vayudeva approached Yaksha and asked, "Who are You" and said, "I am Vayudeva, Wanderer all over the world."

Vayudeva too, approached Yaksha and asked about him. He too introduces himself. He told Yaksha that he is the 'Wanderer all over the world'

As the proverb goes, "Rolling stone gathers no mass", Wanderer seldom attains his goal. Spiritually also, to attain Ultimate Bliss or enlightenment, one has to try hard without any deviation.

Hymn 9

Yaksha asks, "o' what is your special power". Vayudeva replied, "I can lift anything in this world"

Not knowing that the ultimate energy which is the real base for all powers is that yaksha, vayudeva, with pride, told that he can lift anything in this world.

Hymn 10.

Yaksha kept a grass before him and asked vayudeva to lift it. Vayudeva approached the grass with all his vigour and tried to lift it. He was unable to lift. With that defeat, vayudeva returned back, unable to know about 'Yaksha'

Previously Agnideva faced such defeat. Yaksha gave a simple test and vayudeva was proved powerless. Here it is interesting to see that not only vayudeva failed to lift the grass, but he had not learnt anything from Agnideva's mission. This is the very sad part of pride. It prevents us from perceiving things in right perspective.

But again, this defeat must have had a change in Vayudeva's attitude and made him to realize the Ultimate. But, as of now, he accepted his inability and returned.

Hymn 11.

Devas asked Indra to go and find out about that 'Yaksha' Indra went there. It disappeared.

As both Agnideva and Vayudeva could not find out about Yaksha, Devas asked 'Indra' their king to find it out. The entire approach is highly scientific. They had an unknown object. First, heat and light was used. That mission failed. Then radiation or vibration was employed. Again there was failure. With no other option left, Devas asked their king, symbol of power and might, to identify that yaksha.

When Indra approached that place, Yaksha disappeared. When light, heat, radiation etc were employed, at least they could sense that yaksha. But when Indra – symbol of worldly power – approached, Yaksha could not even be seen. His might and power was proved to be nothing.

Hymn 12.

There in the sky, she, Uma, appeared with enormous beauty and adorned with jewels. Indra asked her "what is this yaksha"

Yaksha had disappeared and Indra was unable to see anything there. Then, Uma, a female appeared with beauty and jewels. Indra asked her about the Yaksha.

By specifying beauty and jewels, Indra's pride of wealth and might were shattered. He melts into a true seeker. As he could not see anything there, he enquires Uma about that Yaksha . This shows that he has become a true seeker. He asks with a burning quest.

Thus Third Chapter of Kena Upanishad ends.

Fourth Chapter

Hymn 1:

She told it is Brahman. It is the power of Brahman Pervading. From that alone he realized.

Indra had asked Uma about the Yaksha. Uma replied that it is Brahman, the Ultimate Energy. She further told that everything was happening only due to Brahman pervading. With that reply Indra realized the Ultimate.

Shedding his ego and all, Indra has become a true seeker. Hence, when the reply came, he got enlightened.

Hymn 2.

Among others, those known as Agni, Vayu and Indra are, for sure, blessed ones. For, they tried and realized Brahman or Ultimate.

Agni, Vayu and Indra tried to know about the Ultimate. Indra realized. Agni and Vayu might have been enlightened when they accepted their defeat. Hence, this hymn says that these three are blessed ones. Because, other devas had not even tried and had no intention to try. They awaited for the experience of others. They deployed other in the path of seeking, hoping to enjoy the fruits of other's labour. Enlightenment is purely individual and being in company of the enlightened will do no good.

Hymn 3.

Among those three, Indra for sure, is great. As he intended, tried and got enlightened.

In the Previous hymn, Agni, Vayu and Indra were praised. Among that three, Indra was told to be great because he tried and got enlightened.

In the case of Agni and Vayu, they accepted their inability and returned. Their defeat taught them a good lesson and they got an idea of Brahman. But, there was no experience. But, Indra had experienced enlightenment or the knowledge of the Ultimate Brahman from the words of Uma.

Hence, if compared with all devas, Agni, Vayu and Indra were great as they tried. But among the three, Indra was great because he got enlightened.

Hymn 4.

By the grace of Brahman, enlightenment flashes as like lightning and winking of eyelids. It is divinity.

This hymn's meaning is explicit. But the implied idea is important. Brahma vidya or knowledge of the Ultimate is not the fruit of hard work. This is implied in first sentence. It is not hard work or knowledge that can touch Brahman. It is divine grace.

Second point is also very important. Enlightenment flashes like lightning. It is not a step-by-step process. One may meditate, work, read or indulge in Bakhti/devotion. That path may have many steps. But enlightenment is just a flash. It may or may not happen. It is just divine grace. There is no such thing as 'Half enlightened or missed by horse's nose' in enlightenment. One can be enlightened or ignorant.

Hymn 5: Then, Atma – the base – and mind follows. As being connected, ever remain unaltered.

Then, (After such enlightenment as given in the previous verse) Atma and mind (gets connected to Brahman and) follows Brahman. As mind is connected to Brahman – the Ultimate – it becomes unwavering.

It is implied that all doubts can come up only in an unenlightened mind. Frequently we hear one question in meditation groups. "How do I know I have become enlightened". This hymn is the answer. If one is enlightened, this doubt will not raise and he will be sure of his enlightenment, resting peacefully in equanimity.

Hymn 6: That is the Ultimate. Ultimate to sound. To be meditated upon. One who knows this alone, is loved by every being on earth.

That enlightenment or knowledge of the Ultimate is the Ultimate. It is Ultimate to all sounds i.e., words. One should meditate upon as such. If one knows and practices such meditation, every being on earth love him.

Enlightenment gets one into equanimity and in connection with cosmic energy and intelligence. Hence there is reason for him to rejoice. But, why all beings on earth love him? If one becomes enlightened, he enters equanimity of mind and becomes one with nature. So, he feels himself in perfect tune with every being on earth. That is why this hymn says that every being on earth loves one who is enlightened.

Hymn 7. O' Guru, Teach me the Upanishad with its secret implications. For sure, the sweet knowledge of the Ultimate, the hidden implications, to sit down near, will be taught to you.

As enlightenment is praised in previous verse, the disciple has got enchanted and asks, "Guruji, kindly teach me the hidden implications of Upanishad" Guru replies, "For sure, the sweet knowledge of the Ultimate, the hidden implications which paves the way for sitting down in total equanimity will be taught to you."

The term 'Upanishad' literally means 'To sit near'. But in Hindu scriptures, it is used to mean philosophical chapters of Vedas.

Hymn 8: As fixed in meditation, control over senses and duty, Disciple, Ultimate truth should become part and parcel of entire body.

In the previous verse, disciple asked for the hidden technique for Brahma vidya or knowledge of the Ultimate. Here, the Guru teaches the technique.

O' my student, you are fixed in meditation, sense control and dutifulness. But, for enlightenment, these are not going to help. The ultimate Truth and the quest for it should become part and parcel of your flesh and bones. It should be in every inch of one's body.

Hymn 9: One who experiences Brahman like this, is freed from sins. He resides, He resides eternally in equanimity and in company of alike.

As technique is given in the previous verse, Guru encourages the student. He says that if one experience Brahman, which is Ultimate, in every inch of his body, as told, will be free from all sins and will rest endlessly in complete equanimity. The word 'resides' is repeated twice for reiteration.

Thus, Kena Upanishad ends.