

## FERENC RUZSA

### THE MEANING OF ĀRUṆĪ'S PROMISE <sup>1</sup>

In the famous *Sadvidyā*, the VIth chapter of the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad*, Uddālaka Āruṇi promises his son, Śvetaketu to teach him “that teaching which makes the unheard heard, the unthought thought and the unknown known”<sup>2</sup>. This seems to imply omniscience. (Clearly this is how Śaṅkara understands it; he paraphrases Śvetaketu’s request so: “You yourself, sir, should tell me that substance, knowing which I shall have omniscience”<sup>3</sup>.)

To European notions this suggestion is shocking, but in the Indian scenery, rather densely populated with fully enlightened beings, it is not so astonishing. In a similar vein, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad* Yājñavalkya says to Maitreyī: “by seeing, hearing, thinking and understanding the self everything is known”<sup>4</sup>. Even more parallel is the question of Śaunaka to Aṅgiras at the beginning of the *Muṇḍaka-upaniṣad*: “What is it, sir, by knowing which all this will be known?”<sup>5</sup>.

---

1. I thank Dr. Harunaga Isaacson for his valuable suggestions.

2. *taṁ ādeśam [...], yenāśrutam śrutam bhavaty, amataṁ matam, avijñātam vijñātam*. CHU VI.1.3. ‘Rule of substitution’ (the translation in OLIVELLE 1996, p. 148) is probably accurate for *ādeśa*, but at the start of the discussion the vaguer meaning of ‘instruction’ etc. seems more appropriate.

3. *bhagavāms tv eva me (mahyam) tad vastu yena sarva-jñatvam jñātena me syāt, tad bravītu (kathayatu) ity* CHUB VI.1.7.

4. *ātmano vā are darśanena, śravaṇena, matyā, vijñānenedam sarvam viditam*. BU II.4.5.

5. *kasmin nu, bhagavo, vijñāte sarvam idam vijñātam bhavati?* MUU I.1.3.

Still it is quite unusual to suggest that there is such a *verbal* teaching that can be asked for and freely given. The boy is astonished, or rather sceptical; he says: “Sir! How is such a teaching possible?”<sup>6</sup>

By way of explanation Āruṇi offers his son three similes, all referring to objects being known by their substance: “As, my dear, by one lump of clay everything made of clay can be known...”<sup>7</sup>. The other two examples are a copper amulet for copper and a nail-cutter for iron<sup>8</sup>. He always adds the refrain: *vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāma-dheyam mṛttikēty* [etc.] *eva satyam*<sup>9</sup>. This sentence is notoriously unclear, and has been repeatedly analysed by eminent indologists, with widely different results<sup>10</sup>.

Its traditional interpretation is well represented by Radhakrishnan’s translation: “the modification being only a name arising from speech while the truth is that it is just clay”<sup>11</sup>. In spite of numerous interesting suggestions as to the construction of the sen-

6. *katham nu, bhagavaḥ, sa ādeśo bhavati?* CHU VI.1.3. The exact force of *bhavati* is not quite clear here, but ‘is possible’ seems to be consonant with Uddālaka’s answer and also with Śvetaketu’s remark a little later that his teachers surely did not know about it.

7. *yathā, somyaikena mṛtṭiṇḍena sarvaṁ mṛnmayam vijñātaṁ syāt...* CHU VI.1.4.

8. *loha-maṇi, lohamaya, loha; nakha-nikṛntana, kārṣṇāyasa, kṛṣṇāyasa* CHU VI.1.5,6.

9. CHU VI.1.4.

10. For some references see the Bibliography in OLIVELLE 1996, pp. xvi-xxii, and his Notes ad loc., pp. 346-47.

11. RADHAKRISHNAN 1953, p. 447. As a matter of fact he adds in a note that the text does *not* suggest “that change rests simply on a word, that it is a mere name”, but he does not explain the difference between ‘only a name’ and ‘a mere name’. Here he just repeats what he said earlier (1929, vol. I. p. 188 note): “Its meaning seems to be that all are modifications of the one substance, marked by different names. [...] The development is noticed by the giving of a different name”.

He seems to follow Barua 1921 (pp. 138-39, note 3): “We think that Uddālaka meant by Vikāra transformation, transfiguration of Matter or the material, in short, phenomenal changes. We perceive in him no conscious attempt at explaining away all objective changes by saying like a Buddha or a Śaṅkara that ‘It is a mere name arising from current language, and nothing more’. He did not certainly deny the reality of change, change in respect of form, not of matter, otherwise what is the force of ‘*nāmarūpe vyākarot*’ (*Chāndogya*, VI. 3.3), *vyākarot*, a verbal form of Vikāro. We take accordingly the passage to mean that it bears a name, a linguistic expression, corresponding to a palpable formal change in matter”.

While I think that their intuition is fundamentally correct, I do not see how they could find this meaning in the Sanskrit text, given the translations they use.

tence, the grouping of its words, the fundamental understanding seems to be the same with all translators<sup>12</sup>. For anything, e.g. a pot, made of clay, that it is a 'pot' is just a name – 'it is clay', only this much is truth. So, if *only* 'clay' is truth, then 'pot' is not truth, it is irreality, it must be illusion.

If this analysis is correct this important text supports *māyā-vāda*: ultimately only the substance, i.e. *Brahman* is real, the modifications, the apparent diversity of the world is only conventional, 'depends on speech'. Of course this approach goes back to Śaṅkara. It will be rewarding to see his interpretation; as he is quite determined to make our text a scriptural authority for his illusion-theory, at certain points he will take recourse to obvious distortions. These can be our starting-point to find out the undistorted, natural, hopefully original meaning.

"As in the everyday world by having known one lump of clay (being the cause of things like shining<sup>13</sup> jars), everything else that is a kind of its modification, i.e. made of clay (i.e. a kind of modification of clay) can be known. – How can a different thing, the effect, be known by knowing the lump of clay, the cause? There is no fault here, because the effect is identical with the cause. If you think, nothing is known by knowing something else – this would be true, if the effect would be different from the cause; but the effect is not so different from the cause.

Then how is it so in the everyday world: 'This is the cause, this is its modification?' Listen! It is seizing by speech, beginning with speech, dependent on speech. What is that modification? It is naming. ('Naming' is the same as 'name'; the '-ing' affix here does not modify

---

12. With the obvious exception of VAN BUITENEN 1955 & 1958. He translates the half-sentence *vācārambhaṇam vikāraḥ* as "(the Supreme's) creation is (his) taking hold of Vāc" (1958, p. 304), and *nāmadheyam trīṇi rūpāṇīty eva satyam* as "the name (of the supreme) is satyam, i.e. (as analysed in three syllables *sa-ti-yam*) the three *rūpas*" (1958, p. 302).

Though these articles are full of insightful suggestions, their conclusion seems to be untenable; if we try to use this translation for the first occurrences of the sentence, we get: "As, my dear, by one lump of clay everything made of clay can be known, creation is taking hold of *vāc*, the name is *satyam*, i.e. clay" – which is several degrees more obscure than the original sanskrit.

13. We would expect here the name of some other object typically or often made of clay, but in the dictionaries I could not find such a meaning for *rucaka*.

the sense). It depends only on speech, it is but a mere name; the modification is in fact not a substance in the final analysis. ‘Clay’, only this is truth = but only the clay is a true substance. (4)

As, my dear, by one copper amulet (lump of gold), everything else that is a kind of modification like a bracelet, a diadem or an armlet can be known. [...] (5)

As, my dear, by having observed one nail-cutter (its meaning is a lump of iron) everything made of iron, i.e. a kind of modification of iron, can be known. [...] (6)”<sup>14</sup>

1. First we may wonder why Śaṅkara explains an amulet (or ornament) and a pair of nail-clippers as a lump of gold and iron, respectively. He wants to say that effects are unreal, so you have to know the cause; therefore an illustration suggesting that from one effect you can know another one will not fit his purpose. So he tries to make it seem that the text speaks about their material, i.e. the cause.

But it does not; it speaks about the *things* made of that material, copper and iron. And the probable reason is that Uddālaka has not the slightest doubts about their ontological status – they are existent in the full sense.

2. Secondly, he says that nothing can be known by knowing something else. He does not argue for this thesis, because he introduces it seemingly as a *pūrva-pakṣa*, the opinion of the opponent. Then he says – well, O.K., I have to accept it, but in spite of this our position stands, as this objection is relevant only when the two things are different.

14. *yathā loke ekena mṛt-piṇḍena rucaka-kumbhādi-kāraṇa-bhūtena vijñātena sarvam anyat tad-vikāra-jātaṁ mṛn-mayaṁ mṛd-vikāra-jātaṁ vijñātaṁ syāt. – kathaṁ mṛt-piṇḍe kāraṇe vijñāte kāryam anyad vijñātaṁ syāt? naiṣa doṣaḥ, kāraṇenān-anyatvāt kāryasya. yan manyase: “nyasmīn vijñāte ’nyan na jñāyata” iti – satyam evaṁ syāt, yady anyat kāraṇāt kāryam syān; na tv evam anyat kāraṇāt kāryam.*

*kathaṁ tarhīdaṁ loka: “idaṁ kāraṇam, ayam aśya vikāra” iti? śṛṇu! vācārambhaṇaṁ vāg-ārambhaṇaṁ vāg-ālambanaṁ ity etat. ko ’sau vikāro? nāmadheyam. (nāmaiva nāmadheyam, svārthe ’dheya’-pratyaḥ.) vāg-ālambana-mātraṁ nāmaiva kevalam na vikāro nāma vastv asti paramārthato mṛttikety eva mṛttikaiva tu satyam vastv asti. (4)*

*yathā, saumyaikena loha-maṇinā suvarṇa-piṇḍena sarvam anyad vikāra-jātaṁ kaṭaka-mukuta-keyūrādi vijñātaṁ syāt. [...] (5)*

*yathā, saumyaikena nakha-nikṛntanenopalakṣitena (’kṛṣṇāyasa-piṇḍen’ety arthaḥ) sarvam kārṣṇāyasaṁ kṛṣṇāyasa-vikāra-jātaṁ vijñātaṁ syāt. CHU VI.1.4-6.*

It is cunning: he hides an important interpretative presupposition as an ostensible counter-argument. He has to do it, because it is neither true (seeing the snow I can know the cold); nor is it in the text. As a matter of fact, Āruṇi says something different, almost its opposite: knowing the qualities of one thing, you can infer the qualities of another thing made of the same stuff. Seeing a bottle break, you can know that the window might be broken.

3. Śaṅkara changes the phrase “‘Clay’, only this is truth” to “but only the clay is a true substance”. He does this perhaps because here he wants to understand ‘speech’ and ‘name’ as synonyms of the unreal, the nonexistent. In the original it would not work: *satyam* there refers to another linguistic entity, the sentence ‘Clay’.

So we might infer that in the upaniṣad language did not have this depreciative, negative value. It was perfectly neutral; in our text it was never actually called false, only in one place it was emphatically called true.

4. Lastly Śaṅkara equates ‘seizing by speech’, with ‘beginning with speech’, changing an instrumental case into a compound. Then further glosses as ‘dependent on speech’, changing the verb *ā-rabh* ‘to take hold of, to begin’ into *ā-lamb*, ‘to hang from, to depend’. This seems unjustified<sup>15</sup>. If we reject this, as we should, we may see what *vācā ārambhaṇam* could have originally meant.

As *vācā* is an instrumental, ‘with/by speech’, *ārambhaṇa* must mean an action of which language is the agent or the instrument. So language grasps, or somebody grasps with language. As ‘beginning’ is an important semantic element in the verb *ā-rabh*, I would prefer to interpret our word as ‘seizing at first’, ‘first grasping’.

If this is true, then the opposition: ‘modification’ and ‘first grasping’ on the one side, *satyam* on the other, can be interpreted anew. The

---

15. The overlap in meaning between *ā-rabh* and *ā-lamb* facilitates this shift. Strangely enough OLIVELLE 1996, p. 347 seems to suggest something similar. “The phrase is more easily explained, because *ārambhaṇa* is regularly used in the Upaniṣads with the meaning of support or foothold, especially the lack of such a support in the atmosphere: CHU 2.9.4; BU 3.1.6.” Now in both places we find – at least in all the editions I had access to – *an-ārambhaṇa*. (It is the more surprising because Olivelle translates *vācārambhaṇa* with “a verbal handle”, so he does not need the trick, as ‘handle’ is a regular meaning of *ārambhaṇa*).

verb *as*, ‘exist’, and its participle, *sat*, ‘existent, real’ is frequently contraposed to *bhū*, ‘become’ and *bhāva*, ‘becoming, transition’. So *satyam* would here specifically designate ‘constant truth, unchanging reality’; this, I think, is nicely consonant with its typical upaniṣadic use.

With these insights it is now possible to interpret our sentence. Though I am fairly convinced that in the absence of punctuation the *mahāvākya* cannot be unambiguously analysed, I propose a tentative translation:

“The designation is the specific modification, as the (first) grasping by language; only ‘clay’ is (constant) truth”.

This would mean something like this. Though we first (or normally) designate things by their form, their material is constant, while the form is transient. We say, ‘This is a cup or spoon or plate’, not that ‘This is metal or clay or wood’. But when we melt it, the metal will still be there, but the cup will be gone.

Now this is a merry outcome. Because what we got is, more or less, true; and what is more, it can be easily seen, that it is true. And that means that it can be used as a *clear illustration*, a *dr̥ṣṭānta*, to explain and to convince. And at its present location, at the very start of a lengthy argument, that is what it should be. An obscure metaphysical statement about the language-dependence of perceived reality would be extremely inappropriate at this position.

At the same time it is not a triviality: it is an important new observation about the relation of language and the deep structure of reality. Language concentrates on the specific and changing (the form), and relatively neglects the universal and constant (the substance).

So what Uddālaka Āruṇi promised his son was universal knowledge – and he gave him a teaching about the universal substance. Because types of stuff are more basic than the constantly changing manifestations, there is less variety among them – in fact there are only three final constituents (*rūpa*, colour/form) of the world (*tejas*, *āpaḥ*, *anna* – heat, water, food). And, in contrast to the infinite variety of the individual objects, they can be completely known. Āruṇi did fulfill his promise.

Abbreviations and bibliography

CHU = Chāndogya-upaniṣad  
BU = Brhadāranyaka-upaniṣad  
MUU = Muṇḍaka-upaniṣad

The upaniṣads are quoted from:

Shastri, J.L. (ed.): *Upaniṣat-saṁgrahaḥ*. Containing 188 Upaniṣads, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1970 (1980).

CHUB = Śaṅkara's commentary on the Chāndogya-upaniṣad, quoted from: *Ten Principal Upaniṣads with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*. (Works of Śaṅkarācārya in Original Sanskrit, vol. I.), Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1964 (1992).

Barua, Benimadhab 1921: *A History of Pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy*, Calcutta 1921 (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1998).

Van Buitenen, J.A.B. 1955: *Vācārambhaṇam*, in IL 16 (1955), pp. 157-162.

Van Buitenen, J.A.B. 1958: *Vācārambhaṇam reconsidered*, in IJ 2 (1958), pp. 295-305.

Olivelle, P. 1996: *Upaniṣads*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

Radhakrishnan, S. 1929: *Indian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.

Radhakrishnan, S. 1953: *The Principal Upaniṣads*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994.

