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THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY
AND THE NOTION OF THE TERM *NĀMAN*

The starting point of the presented considerations is the statement pronounced by the Yājñavalkya in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2.12 that only the name, *nāman*, is left over after one's death. It may be inconsistent with the doctrine of the classical *Upaniṣads*, explicated, for instance, by Yājñavalkya in his famous dialogue with Maitreyī. Yājñavalkya explains that immortality is the realm of *ātman*. As it is known, *ātman*, understood as the base of persistence, transcends the individual form and the individual name. It is the supraindividual and suprapersonal reality. Therefore, it is worth to examine how the term "immortality" can be understood. It is necessary to confront it with the notion of individual immortality and look for its relation to the idea of eternity and that of immutability. The presented paper cannot resolve these problems. It includes proposals and questions rather than answers.

Interpretation of any fragment of the *Upaniṣads*¹ can be performed within the frames of the canon or on the basis of the development of particular terms. I am going to limit my considerations pointing out just a few (I think very meaningful) possible interpretations of the terms *nāman* and "immortality" and contrasting them with the notions of immutability, eternity, as well as with liberation – *mokṣa*.

1. *The fragments from Upaniṣads* by Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

“Yājñavalkya, Ārtabhāga said again, tell me – since this whole world is food for Death, of which deity is Death the food? Yājñavalkya replied: Death is fire, and it is the food of water. Whoever knows this averts repeated death.

Yājñavalkya, Ārtabhāga said again, tell me – when a man dies, do his breaths depart from him, or do they not? They do not, replied Yājñavalkya. They accumulate within this very body, causing it to swell up and to become bloated. So a dead man lies bloated.

Yājñavalkya, Ārtabhāga said again, tell me – when a man dies, what is it that does not leave him? His name, replied Yājñavalkya. A name is without limit, and the All-gods are without limit. Limitless also is the world he wins by it.” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2.10-12.)

Further words of Yājñavalkya in this excerpt refer to the secret meaning of the learning of *puruṣa*. One of the first definitions of *Karma* appears in this context. I will come back to this analysis, but now I have to explain some pivotal terms from the quoted excerpt in the light of other Upanishadic fragments. A very significant fragment with the term *nāman* appears in the very beginning of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (I 4.1.):

“In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was – Here I am! – and from that the name “I” came into being. Therefore, even today when you call someone, he first says, “It” is “I”, and then states whatever other name he may have.”

It is very interesting that the term *nāman* is close to the term *puruṣa*. The name *aham* – “I” must be the first hyposthesis of the unmanifested and unconditioned reality. The name “I” is the border between the unconditioned reality and that, which is conditioned. Giving the name to the self is the creation of the self. The beginning of reality, together with its individual attitude, starts with the moment of giving the name. The desire of immortality can be understood as the desire for keeping the name even after death. This can be an explanation of the expression: “averts repeated death”; death is the death of the name.

The world that existed at the very beginning is described as “*ātmāpuruṣavidhā*”. This stage is a combination of the description of the initial state of being in its universal aspect – *ātman*, and a reference to the individual, anthropomorphical aspect – *puruṣa*. Therefore,

the self-designation, i.e. giving the name to the self, seems to be the realm of *puruṣa*. The nature of *puruṣa* can be manifested through words, but it does not mean that it is something different from the nature of the universal, absolute being. The primordial name “*aham*” refers to the subject and object together. That dual nature can be the secret name of the unmanifested *puruṣa*. So, maybe, “the immortal name” should be limited to the secret name and in this context the desire for immortality can be combined with the desire for liberation – *mokṣa*. The understanding of *nāman* as the start of individuality is confirmed by the picture of the world perceived as the process of manifestation. The unmanifested world turns into the manifested one; the manifested level is described as differentiated by the *nāman* and *rūpa*.

“At that time this world was without real distinctions; it was distinguished simply in terms of name and visible appearance – He is so and so by name and has this sort of an appearance. So even today this world is distinguished in terms of name and visible appearance, as when we say ? He is so and so by name and has this sort of an appearance.” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I. 4.7.)

The totality of the being, when it is not differentiated by *nāman* and *rūpa*, remains invisible and unchangeable. The totality is unmutability and the name is immortality. In the next words of this fragment he (*ātman-puruṣa*) penetrates into the entities which he created. The senses – *indriyās* – are the last stage of manifestation of the being. The senses are called immortal. We find a very interesting fragment in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I 5.17, where senses come from father to son in the ritual of transmission. The *prāṇās*, called there immortal, come from one ground to the other, they penetrate into the related elements. The individual form and the individual attitude disappear, only the principle of vitality remains immortal. The immortality (as in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I 2.6.) is called splendour and vigour. That expression is found in further cosmogonical sequels.

The world appeared as the result of the primordial sacrifice. *Tapas* comes next. *Tapas* is a very important factor, it can be understood as the inner essence of the vital forces. The sacrifice can be continued by the *tapas* only. In the context of the above fragments we can interpret the story from *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Naciketas had not been well treated, nor

honoured enough by Yama. Instead, as a compensation, he was given a chance to ask three questions. The second question concerned the nature of immortality. Naciketas also received a description of sacrifice with a soteriological value. Having answered the questions, Yama gave the name of Naciketas to the divine fire. He treated giving the name of Naciketas to the fire as an extra bonus. In the context of the discussion of immortality it was quite a unique bonus, guaranteeing that the immortal name would exist for ever. (It is of course the wider context, immortal name related to the sacrifice, various rites of ancestors, to keep ancestors in the outer world...). The name of Naciketas was given to the divine fire, that is, to the sacred fire. This means that as long as Vedic rituals are observed, Naciketas' name will be immortal. (According to the Vedic point of view, this means for ages.) But Naciketas was not satisfied with the knowledge of immortality, he wanted to acquire the knowledge of the more fundamental level of reality.

In our considerations we found *nāman* as some kind of a limit between the manifested world and the unmanifested one. And the notion of *nāman* can also be found in the realm of the manifested world. The fragment from *Praśna* VI 3-5 is very distinctive:

“That person thought to himself: “Who is the one that when he sets off, I will set off and when he settles down I will settle down?” He then created the lifebreath, and from the lifebreath, faith, space, wind, fire, water, earth, senses, mind, and food; from food, strength, austerity, vedic formulas, rites, and worlds; and in the worlds, name.

Now, take these rivers. They flow towards the ocean and, upon reaching it, merge into the ocean and lose their name and visible appearance; one simply calls it the ocean. In just the same way, these sixteen parts of the person who is the perceiver proceed towards the person and, upon reaching him, merge into that person, losing their names and visible appearances; one simply calls it the person. He then becomes partless and immortal.”

The *nāman* looks here like the end of creation or like the limit in the process of emanation. The *nāman* embraces the whole world. The position of *nāman* in the cosmological scheme is in analogy to the position of *puruṣa* in *Aitareya*. In *Aitareya* it is clearly said that only the last entity in the creation is perfect, only that stage can embrace by itself all created worlds. Only the man – *puruṣa* – can cover all created

worlds. These ideas let us understand *nāman* in the universal and individual aspect simultaneously. This understanding is related to the notion of *puruṣa*. As we have already found, the notion of *nāman* can be understood in its universal meaning and in the individual sense. It could be very interesting to find some factors responsible for separating these aspects.

In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I 6.1-3 the world is presented as a triple reality: name, visible appearance and action. The individual name is connected with *sāman* and *sāman* is borne by *brahman*. The same regards *rūpa* and *karman*. It is clearly shown here that the ground for the triple world is homogenous, it is an unconditioned *brahman*. Therefore, *ātman* is homogenous and the same refers to the triple reality. Till now we had two levels of reality but here we have a new element – *sāman*, which looks like a borderline between two stages. The *sāman* is the same (*sāma*) as song while the song is the word and the word belongs to the realm of thought. These three terms together form the limit between two stages. We find the best description of the ritual and also of the secret meaning of the song in *Chāndogya*. Overlapping of the levels of reality is indicated there several times. For example in *Chāndogya* I 7.5. we read:

“Now, the person one sees within the eye – he, indeed, is the Ṛg verse, he is the *Sāman* chant, he is recitation, he is the recitation, he is the Yajus formula, he is formulation of truth (*brahman*). This person down here has exactly the same appearance as that person up there in the sun, and this person has the same two songs and the same name as he.”

In this fragment we have, apart from the classical Upanishadic equality between the micro- and macrocosmos, identification of the notion and function of song and of *nāman*.

One of the most interesting fragments, in which the world was manifested through the thought, is the very beginning of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. After the sequences of manifestation of the world, the desire-death (*aśanāyā mr̥tyu*) gets combined with speech. This gives rise to the entity, which can be considered in the categories of time. Thus, something immutable, something beyond time turns into a mutable entity, submitted to time. This entity determines itself by a

shout of terror. (Maybe here we have some intuition to understand the “*abhiniveśa*” of “*Yogasūtrāni*”.) The result of this self determination, which is a kind of individualization is speech. Speech is the basis for pronouncing sounds and words. A spoken word becomes something different from a thought. It starts to live its own life. And the word starts to give the name and, therefore, individuality.

In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2.10-12, before the description of *nāman* as immortality, we find a fundamental question: by what knowledge can one avert repeated death? Most frequently, in the *Upaniṣads* such a question regards liberation – *mokṣa* and the way to attain the realm of *ātman-brahman*. To resolve this problem we have to examine excerpts containing the expression: *punar mṛtyuṃ jayati*. We find the first example in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I 2.7. There, in the frame of sacrificial rite we have a description of the activity of *manas* in a bloated body. It can also be found in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* I 5.2. The cosmogonical scheme there is connected with the sacrifice and it is by sacrificial knowledge that one can avert repeated death. In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 3.2. we have a picture of the divine world, the destination of those people who observed the *aśvamedha*. The wind transports them to that world. But the wind in this excerpt is understood as both individual and universal. The one who knows the dual nature of the wind averts repeated death.

The situation of observing cosmological rites is the common motif of the above fragments. And our leit motif, Yājñavalkya’s statement, was pronounced during his discussion with brahmins about the sacrifice. The discussion is placed in the situation which goes back to the *Brāhmaṇas* period, where by the sacrifice one could gain what he desired. It is well known that in the *Brāhmaṇas* the world is understood as having three levels. We can find there the image of a soul migrating after death but it is not a classical *saṃsāra*. The most desirable goal is to attain the world of the gods. That world could be attained by the sacrifice. But in the latest *Upaniṣads* and in the classical Indian thought even the world of the gods is understood as the realm of *saṃsāra*.

The sacrifice is a ritual act. The world was begun as the result of the sacrifice and by the sacrifice it is supported. The hymns, *mantras* and words play the main role in observing the rites (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2.3.). Thus, the word becomes a very distinctive factor of cosmological value. A lot of obscure passages in the Indian thought are con-

nected with a number of terms that are not strictly philosophical, but rather have a philosophical value. Moreover, they cover not only the static aspect of the meaning of the words but also their dynamic sense. The same situation concerns terms like: name, word, thought.

We can treat the *Upaniṣads* as the text speaking of the transition from the ritualistic conceptions to the more speculative ones. Due to the very vivid use of many terms the limit between these stages seems fluent. Thus, it is most important to find some regular occurrences. All excerpts under discussion appear in the context of sacrificial formulae, especially in the cosmological schemes connected with the sacrifice. Therefore, on the one hand they go back to the *Brāhmaṇas* period but on the other hand some new philosophical and religious conceptions appear in these fragments.

In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2., a few of great brahminic masters of ritual ceremony examine Yājñavalkya in the knowledge of observing sacrifice. He answers all the questions and shows that his knowledge comprises not only the strictly ritualistic level but the esoteric level as well. He points out that a ritual ceremony is merely the outer appearance of a situation occurring on another, more subtle level of reality. And then we find the famous dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Ārtabhāga. Their debate is ended by a definition of the law of *Karma*. It is considered one of the first definitions of this concept in the orthodox texts.

“Yājñavalkya, Ārtabhāga said again, tell me – when a man has died, and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into the wind, his sight into sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters, his physical body into earth, his self (*ātman*) into space, his hair of his body into plants, the hair of his head into trees, and his blood and semen into water – what then happens to that person? Yājñavalkya replied: My friend, we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Ārtabhāga; let’s go and discuss this in private.

So they left and talked about it. And what did they talk about? – they talked about nothing but action. And what did they praise? – they praised nothing but action. Yājñavalkya told him: A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.”

The sacrifice in the orthodox *Brāhmaṇas* conception had a great, creative power. All regulations and all worlds were dependent on it. However, in the fragment quoted above we can read that the secret

meaning of the sacrifice aims to limit its autonomy. The superior law, the law of *Karma* controls everything, even the functions of the three worlds. The outer appearance of the law of *Karma* is connected with the terms *sukṛta* and *duṣkṛta* as well as other related terms. One of the possible interpretations of the phrase: *puṇyo vai puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati, pāpaḥ pāpena iti* is: by properly observing the sacrifice one can obtain good results and by an improper observance, not adequate to the rules, one cannot obtain the desired result. This conception of the world is connected with a desire to avert repeated death. That desire is the same as the desire of immortal persistence in one of the longed-for worlds. It is also a desire to keep one's individual name immortal.

In the first *Upaniṣads*, the conception of sacrifice is still very important. But the understanding of the sacrifice changes. The classical interpretation of the definition of *Karma* given in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 2.13. assumes that Upanishadic *Karma* was understood as an ethical result since the very beginning. However, it is not evident in this excerpt. First, the understanding of *Karma* had to be connected only with the result of observing the sacrifice. Moreover, the secret meaning of the *Karma* could have ethical value. Thus, the ethical issue appears as something new. But the previous understanding was not simply replaced by the new one. One level is interlaced with the other one.

The same situation pertains to many other terms. The word, the speech – *vāc* – is an expression of the unconditioned *brahman* and a way to move from one level to another one. In the first *Upaniṣads*, the immortal name is the highest desire, but in *Kaṭha* that desire becomes relative. Naciketas acquired an immortal name but he did not stop inquiring into the deep knowledge of *brahman*. He is not interested in immortality in the relative worlds of gods, he wants to know the unconditioned reality. He does not want to obtain immortality, he wants to achieve liberation. If we discuss this problem in such a simplified way, immortality and liberation seem to be divided by an abyss. But most of the Upanishadic texts lie within this abyss. Moreover, the phrase “immortal name” in the one of the oldest *Upaniṣads* need not mean the same as in the latest text. The desire for immortality plays the same role as the desire for liberation. The differences arise from different paradigms of the world. But though the paradigms were changed, some words did not change their meaning too much.