

Yajnavalkya

The Incredible Sage of Shukla Yajur

The name of Yajnavalkya of Mithila stands distinguished both in the Srutis and in the Smritis. Yajnavalkya is especially known for his unsurpassed spiritual wisdom and power. The seer of a Veda Samhita from Bhagavan Surya, the revealer of Brahma Jnana to Janaka, Maitreyi and others. He is the famed author of the Shukla Yajurveda Samhita.

Yajnavalkya hails supreme among sages of sacred memory.

Yajnavalkya was the son of the sister of Mahamuni Vaishampayana, the Vedacharya of the Taittiriya section. He was studying the Taittiriya Samhita from Vaishampayana who was also his Guru. Vaishampayana had many other disciples too and they all were students of the Taittiriya Shakha.

Vishampayana however was irked by the independent and outspoken attitude of Yajnavalkya. Over a period the Guru Sishya relation became sore to the point of an open confrontation. Vaishampayana excluded Yajnavalkya from his student's team and foreclosed further learning of the compilations of Taitriya samhita authored by him (Vaishampayana). He restrained Yajnavalkya from quoting the Taitriya Samhita, which became known as the Krishna Yajur.

Yajnavalkya piqued by this development, determined not to have any human Guru thereafter. Inspired by the God Surya, he acquired fresh insights into the vedas; this was developed into what is now known as the Shukla Yajur. This is a very important watershed in the history of the Vedic evolution in India; A Ritual based religious system becoming credited with profound philosophical thinking. Yajnavalkya is known by his very advanced upanishadic philosophy. His masterly expositions in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in the form of debates and lectures are mind-boggling.

Yajnavalkya married two wives. One was Maitreyi and the other Katyayani. Of the two, Maitreyi was a Brahmavadini. There was a time when Yajnavalkya wished to divide his property between the two wives and proceed to forest as an ascetic. While Katyayani, a woman of common intelligence, was comfortable with this idea and immediately accepted the property given to her, Maitreyi mused on this proposal; she wanted to know from Yajnavalkya, whether she could become immortal through wealth. Yajnavalkya replied that there was no hope of immortality through wealth and that she would only become one among the many who were well-to-do on earth. On hearing this, Maitreyi requested Yajnavalkya to teach her what he considered as the best.

Then Yajnavalkya elaborately described to her the sole greatness of the Absolute Self, the nature of its existence, the way of attaining infinite knowledge and immortality, etc. This immortal conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi is recorded in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

The central theme of the discourse is this: "This Source of knowledge; this source of power; all these worlds; all these gods; all these beings; -- All this is just the Self. This Self alone exists everywhere. It cannot be understood or known, for It alone is the Understander and the Knower. Its nature cannot be said to be positively as such. It is realised through endless denials as "not this", "not this", a process of negation in the philosophical inquiries. The Self is self-luminous, indestructible, unthinkable".

Yajnavalkya through his other wife Katyayani, the daughter of Bharadhwaja, had three sons, "Chandrakanta, Mahamegha and Vijaya.

Yajnavalkya, though a great Brahmajñani, was a great Karmakandi too. He caused many Yajnas to be performed and himself became the Acharya of those great Yajnas. He was a celebrated Srotriya and a Brahma-nishtha Guru.

Once King Janaka of Videha wanted to know from which real Brahmanishtha to receive Brahma Vidya. In order to find out who was the real Brahma-nishtha, Janaka performed a huge Bahu-dakshina sacrifice to which all the Rishis from far and wide were invited. And he offered one thousand cows with their calves, all their horns being decked with enormous gold. Then he proclaimed to the assembled ones, "Whosoever is the best Brahmana amongst you may drive these cows home". None dared to get up and take away the cows as they were afraid of censure by the others. But Yajnavalkya stood up and asked his disciple Samasravas to drive the cows home.

The other Brahmanas got angry at this and said to one another, "How can he declare himself to be the best among us?". Thereupon several Rishis challenged Yajnavalkya with many questions on transcendental matters to all of which Yajnavalkya gave prompt reply. There was a great debate in which Yajnavalkya won over all the others. Janaka was convinced that Yajnavalkya was the best Brahma-nishtha and received Brahma Vidya from him thereafter.

The Verbal combat that ensued in the court of Janaka on this occasion is very famous. Apart from the fact that these arguments are interesting and enlightening, they are also known for its pungency and tragedy.

Noted among the arguers are a learned lady called gargi, sage uddalaka, sakalya and many others. Yajnavalky won over everone very convincingly. We can find these dabates verbatim in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

The third and the fourth chapters of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad abound with the great philosophical teachings of Yajnavalkya. Yajnavalkya was also the author of the famous Yajnavalkya Smriti. His other works are Yajnavalkya Shakha, Pratijna Sutra, Satapatha Brahmana, and Yoga-Yajnavalkya.

At the sacrifice of Janaka, there was an exchange of words between Yajnavalkya and Vaishampayana. But on hearing that Yajnavalkya had obtained a fresh Veda from the Sun-God, Vaishampayana was much pleased and he requested Yajnavalkya to teach that Veda to his own disciples also. Yajnavalkya consented and taught his Veda to the disciples of Vaishampayana.

In the end, Yajnavalkya took Vidvat Sannyasa (renunciation after the attainment of the knowledge of Brahman) and retired to the forest.

Yajnavalkya was one of the greatest sages ever known. We find him arguing with and overcoming even his teacher Uddalaka at the court of Janaka. His precepts as contained in the Upanishads stand foremost as the crest-jewel of the highest teachings on Brahma Vidya.

The master who guided thousands of persons, from King Janaka to the commonest students on the path of enlightenment, was Yajnavalkya. His was the mastermind that produced 'Shukla Yajurveda'. Yajnavalkya was born on the seventh day of the month of Kartik at an auspicious time. After coming into the world, Yajnavalkya regularly worshipped the God of Fire through yajnas and yagas. He had divine radiance like Vajreshwara. Therefore he was called Yajnavalkya from his childhood.

Yajnavalkya received the great Gayatri Mantra from his father. He was sent to Gurukula for further education. He won the love and admiration of everybody in the ashram, within a few days. Later, he was imparted knowledge of the Vedas by various sages. By the blessings of the Sun God he became a seer blessed with the vision of mantras, a Maharishi and also Brahmarsi, possessing divine knowledge, by writing his experiences in the form of Shukla Yajurveda.

Quoting from His Holiness, Swamy Krishnanandaji Maharaj, an authority on Yajnavalkya:

Idam brahma, idam kshatram, ime lokah, ime devah, imani bhutani, idam sarvam yad ayam atma.

"This Source of knowledge; this source of power; all these worlds; all these gods; all these beings; -- All this is just the Self."

This proclamation is like a *Brahma Astra* that Sage Yajnavalkya is discharging against every kind of attachment one can conceive in this world. It is somewhat easy to accept that *God is everywhere*. It becomes easy because we always externalise the location of God, however much we may try to universalise Him. The idea of location in space does not leave us so easily. God is everywhere, this is what we generally believe. The everywhere-ness of God implies that there is space, and inasmuch as our mind is wedded completely to the concept of spatial expansion, we feel a little bit comforted when we are told that God is everywhere.

Now, here, a thunderbolt is discharged by Sage Yajnavalkya when he says the *Self also is everywhere. Imani bhutani, idam sarvam yad ayam atma*. All the fourteen worlds are the Self. Here we will not find it so easy to accept it, because we cannot spatialise the concept of Self. Our Self cannot be somewhere else, it must be within us only. But, what does one mean by saying "all the worlds, all the gods, all this is the Self". What is this that the Sage is telling us? What exactly is the Self? Can anyone tell us what is the Self? What meaning can we attach to this word? There is myself, yourself, this self, that self! The self is something which cannot be externalised, objectified or spatialised in any way. *The Self is the utter subjectivity of universality*. The universal concept is rather easy to accept because we may spatialise even the universal being. But the Self cannot be spatialised - I cannot be anywhere else than in myself.

"Maitreyi, I have told you everything, I am now departing from this place," Yajnavalkya said. All this teaching to his consort Maitreyi ended with this renunciation. This renunciation is of a different kind. It is called Vidvat Sannyasa. It is not the Sannyasa that people take ordinarily for the sake of knowing something. Here, it renounces having already known everything. It is called Vidvat Sannyasa and not Vividisha Sannyasa. It is not Karma Sannyasa. What happened to Yajnavalkya afterwards, no one knows.

*The whole story ends here with this stunning, shaking, earth-shaking statement.
We cannot say anything more than this. Nowhere will you find statement or
speaking of this kind.*

----- Swamy Krishnanandaji Maharaj in his lectures on Yajnavalky and Brihadaranyaka Upainishad.
