

## A Tale of Two Birds: Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.1–3.1.4

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- Swami Vivekananda: “We must interpret the Vedas in the light of the experience of Sri Ramakrishna. Śaṅkarācārya and all other commentators made the tremendous mistake to think that the whole of the Vedas say only one thing. Therefore they were guilty of torturing those of the apparently conflicting Vedic texts which go against their own doctrines, into the meaning of their particular schools...[N]o one can truly understand the Vedas and Vedānta, unless one studies them in the light of the utterance of Sri Ramakrishna.” (CW7: 411-12)
- According to Swami Vivekananda, we should interpret the Vedāntic scriptures “on an independent and better basis than by blindly following the commentators.” (CW3:233)

### 3.1.1

*dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā samānaṃ vṛkṣaṃ pariśasvajāte  
taylor anyah pippalaṃ svādv atty anaśnann anyo abhicākaśīti.*

(“Two birds, ever united and close companions, cling to the same tree. Among the two, one tastes the bitter and sweet fruits. The other looks on without eating.”)

### 3.1.2

*samāne vṛkṣe puruṣo nimagno ’nīśayā śocati muhyamānaḥ  
juṣṭaṃ yadā paśyaty anyam īśam asya mahimānam iti vītaśokaḥ.*

(“On the same tree, the individual soul remains sunk and grieves due to its impotence/identification with the body. When it sees the **other**, the Lord who is worthy of worship, and **His glory**, then it becomes liberated from sorrow.”)

*anīśayā* (Śaṅkara): due to its impotence (*dīnabhāva*)  
*anīśayā* (Rāmānuja): due to its identification with the body

Śaṅkara’s interpretation: The individual soul becomes liberated from all suffering when it realizes, “I am God which is the Self of all; I am not the other illusory [individual] self delimited by conditions conjured up by ignorance.”

*asya mahimānam* (Śaṅkara): “God’s Glory is indeed *my* glory, since I am the Supreme Lord”

*anyam* (Madhva): “God is other than the individual soul and independent” (*jīvād anyah svatantraḥ*)

### 3.1.3

*yadā paśyah paśyate rukmavarṇaṃ kartāram īśaṃ puruṣaṃ brahmayonim  
tadā vidvān puṇyapāpe vidhūya nirañjanaḥ paramaṃ sāmyam upaiti.*

(“When the seer sees the Puruṣa—the golden-hued creator, the Lord, who is the **source of Brahman**—then the illumined one completely shakes off both merit and demerit, becomes free from all impurities, and attains **supreme equality**.”)

*brahmayonim* (Śaṅkara): 2 meanings:

(1) Brahman itself is the source (*yoni*) of all

(2) Nirguṇa Brahman is the source (*yoni*) of apara Brahman (i.e. saṅguṇa Brahman, the personal God)

*brahmayonim* (Sri Aurobindo): “the Spirit who is the source of Brahman”

- Compare with Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings: “God is with form, without form, and much more besides” (*tini sākār, nirākār, ābār kato ki*) (K 602 / G 577); “There is no limit to God” (*tāhār iti nai*) (997/920).
- Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.27 (*brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhāham*; “I am the foundation of Brahman”): “I (the Purushottama) am the foundation of the silent Brahman”
- Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of *Gītā* 15.18 (*yasmāt kṣaram atīto ’haṃ hy akṣarād api cottamaḥ | ato ’smi loke veda ca prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ*; “Since I am beyond the mutable and am greater and higher even than the immutable, in the world and the Veda I am proclaimed as the Purushottama”): “The Purushottama is...greater than the Akshara, because he is more than this immutability and he is not limited even by the highest eternal status of being.”

*paramaṃ sām̐yam* (Śaṅkara): absolute equality, consisting in nonduality (*samatām advayalakṣaṇām*)

*paramaṃ sām̐yam* (Rāmānuja, BSB 4.4.4): The liberated individual soul is equal in *certain attributes* to Viṣṇu—namely, in purity, knowledge, and bliss—but it is not identical to Viṣṇu. Rather, the liberated soul remains a mere “mode” (*prakāra*) of Viṣṇu in the sense that the soul has no independent existence apart from Viṣṇu, and it can never be omnipotent like Viṣṇu.

### 3.1.4

*praṇo hy eṣa yaḥ sarvabhūtair vibhāti vijānan vidvān bhavate nātivādī ātmakrīḍa ātmaratiḥ kriyāvān eṣa brahmaidāṃ variṣṭhaḥ.*

(“This is the Life that shines through all creatures. Having realized this through the attainment of *vijñāna*, the Knower becomes quiet. Playing with the Self, delighting in the Self, ever engaged in action, this person is the greatest Knower of Brahman.”)

*kriyāvān* (Śaṅkara): the “actions” of this knower of Brahman are “knowledge, meditation, dispassion, etc.” (*jñāna-dhyāna-vairāgyādi kriyā*)—i.e., practices of Jñāna-Yoga

*kriyāvān* (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, p. 687): “*kriyāvān*. performing works. Śaṅkara, feeling the incompatibility of performing works after attaining knowledge of Brahman, suggests that it may mean only the previous performance of meditation and other acts conducive to a knowledge of Brahman. The verse, however, tells us that he who knows the *ātman* is also a performer of works. The soul frees itself from all attachments, enters into the stillness of the self, becomes composed and yet breaks forth into temporal works without compulsion, without seeking for reward, without selfish purpose. Its life is a free outpouring of a liberated consciousness and it is incapable of resting even as the living God Himself does not rest. Deep unmoved repose at the centre and perpetual creativity are his features.”

- Swami Vivekananda’s free translation/interpretation of Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.1–3.1.4 (CW9; “The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad”; A Jñāna-Yoga class delivered in New York, January 29, 1896]

[3.1.1] Upon the same tree there are two birds with most beautiful wings, and the two birds always go together — always live together. Of these, one is eating the fruits of the tree; the other, without eating, is looking on. So in this body are the two birds always going together. Both have the same form and beautiful wings. One is the human soul, eating the fruits; the other is God Himself, of the same nature. He is also in this body, the Soul of our soul. He eats neither good nor evil fruits, but stands and looks on.

[3.1.2] But the lower bird knows that he is weak and small and humble, and tells all sorts of lies. He says he is a woman, or he is a man or a boy. He says he will do good or do bad; he will go to heaven and will do a hundred sorts of things. In delirium he talks and works, and the central idea of his delirium is that he is weak. Thus he gets all the misery because he thinks he is nobody. He is a created little being. He is a slave to somebody; he is governed by some god or gods, and so is unhappy. But when he becomes joined with God, when he becomes a Yogi, he sees that the other bird, the Lord, is his own glory [*asya mahimānam*]. “Why, it was my own glory whom I called God, and this little ‘I’, this misery, was all hallucination; it never existed. I was never a woman, never a man, never any one of these things.” Then he gives up all his sorrow.

[3.1.3] When this Golden One, who is to be seen, is seen — the Creator, the Lord, the Purusha, the God of this universe [*brahmayonim*] — then the sage has washed off all stains of good and bad deeds....Then he attains to total sameness [*paramam sāmyam*] with the Pure One.

[3.1.4] The sage knows that He who is the Soul of all souls — this Ātman — shines through all. He is the man, the woman, the cow, the dog — in all animals, in the sin and in the sinner. He is the Sannyāsin, He is in the ruler, He is everywhere. Knowing this the sage speaks not [*nātivādī*]. (He gives up criticizing anyone, scolding anyone, thinking evil of anyone.) His desires have gone into the Ātman. This is the sign of the greatest knowers of Brahman [*brahmavidām varīṣṭhaḥ*] — that they see nothing else but Him. He is playing through all these things [*ātmakrīḍaḥ*]. Various forms — from the highest gods to the lowest worms — are all He.

- Sri Ramakrishna on the spiritual stages of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*: “The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, ‘Not this, not this.’ Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of ‘Not this, not this’ is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *sagūṇa*... A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. . . . This is known as *vijñāna*.” (*Kathāmṛta* 50–51 / *Gospel* 103–4)
- Sri Ramakrishna’s scolding of Narendra—he should be a *vijñānī* rather than a dry *jñānī*: “Shame on you! You are asking for such an insignificant thing. I thought you would be like a great banyan tree, and that thousands of people would rest in your shade. But now I see

that you are seeking your own liberation. There is a state higher than that. It is you who sing, “O Lord, Thou art all that exists.” (Chetanananda 1997: 36)

- Sri Ramakrishna likens *jñānīs*, who seek only their own salvation, to “a hollow piece of driftwood” that “sinks if even a bird sits on it” (*Kathāmṛta* 482 / *Gospel* 479).
- By contrast, *vijñānīs* like Nārada, who strive to help others achieve spiritual enlightenment, “are like a huge log that not only can float across to the other shore, but can carry many animals and other creatures as well” (*Kathāmṛta* 482 / *Gospel* 479).
- Conversation between Swamis Atulananda and Turiyananda in 1910 (quoted in Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived With Them*, p. 387):  
“Did not Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings differ somewhat from Shankaracharya’s maya theory?” I asked.  
“Yes,” he [Swami Turiyananda] replied. “Shankara taught only one phase, how to get freedom, nirvana. Our Master first made one free and then taught how one should live in the world...Be free first. Do away with name and form and the entire universe. Then see Mother in all. Then be Her playfellow.”
- From the standpoint of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedānta, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.3 describes the spiritual state of *jñāna*, supreme identity with nondual Pure Consciousness (*paramaṃ sām̐yam*)
- Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.4, by contrast, describes the even greater spiritual state of *vijñāna*, the realization that the impersonal-personal Infinite Divine Reality manifests as everything in the world (*Brahma-Śakti satyaṃ, jagat satyam; śivajñāne jīver sevā*)
- The *vijñānī* is “*kriyāvān*” and “*ātmakrīḍaḥ*,” the playmate of God who is ever active in striving to uplift others spiritually
- I think Swami Vivekananda would have agreed with Radhakrishnan in rejecting Śaṅkara’s interpretation of *kriyāvān*
- Compare with Swami Vivekananda’s Ramakrishnan interpretation of the second mantra of the Īśā Upaniṣad (“*kurvann eveha karmāṇi jijīviṣec chatam samāḥ*”): “Desire to live a hundred years...Have the desire to live a long life of helpfulness, of blissfulness and activity on this earth. Thus working, you will find the way out. There is no other way....So work, says the Vedānta, putting God in everything, and knowing Him to be in everything.”