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# The 'Knot of the Heart' in Upanishadic Thought\*

STEPHEN CROSS

The purpose of what follows is to explore several verses from the Upanishads. All of them share a common theme: the Knot of the Heart, or the Knot of Ignorance as it is also called in some places. Let us take as a starting-point a verse from the *Mundaka Upaniṣad*; here the heart is spoken of as 'the secret place' (*guhā*). The verse reads:

He, indeed, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself . . . Liberated from the knots of the secret place, he becomes immortal.<sup>1</sup>

This is a celebrated verse and it is interesting to note that when the first translation of the Upanishads into any Western language was published more than two centuries ago by the French scholar-traveller Anquetil Duperron, he placed its opening words on the title-page of his translation in order to indicate that they summarize the essential content of the Upanishads. Duperron's translation was into Latin, still at that time the international language of scholarship, and the words he placed on the title-page were *Quisquis Deum intelligit, Deus fit*—'Whoever knows God, becomes God'. This might well seem at first an extraordinary statement, but let us explore the meaning of the verse and see if we can understand some of the ideas which lie behind it.

First of all, what exactly does the term *Brahman* mean? What is 'the Supreme Brahman'? The word is related to the Sanskrit verb, *br̥h*, meaning 'to expand, to grow, to extend', and it conveys the idea of an immensity which contains all, or as Dr Ravi Ravindra has suggested, 'the Vastness'.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore an altogether more impersonal concept

\* This is the text of a lecture which was presented to the Temenos Academy on 22 September 2008.

1. *Mundaka Up.* 3.2.9; trans. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953).

2. Ravi Ravindra, *The Spiritual Roots of Yoga* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2006). The present writer is indebted to Dr Ravindra's book, especially for its discussion of the *buddhi*.

than the Western term 'God' used by Anquetil Duperron, and is better translated by such expressions as 'supreme Reality', 'the Godhead', 'the All-Pervasive', or as we have seen, 'the Vastness'. Shankara, who is widely regarded as the primary commentator on the texts of the Hindu tradition and probably its most influential thinker, describes Brahman as formless and all-pervasive, birthless, free of all modifications and changes, constant, free of fear and, very relevantly for our purposes, 'resident in the hearts of all'.<sup>3</sup>

This all-embracing 'Vastness', according to the Upanishadic concept, is what is real—that is to say, utterly and finally real. It is, Shankara explains, 'the essence of this phenomenal existence, the source from which it springs' and that into which it is again dissolved.<sup>4</sup> Everything else, everything which takes on form, appears within this Brahman or Vastness, and so the physical world, the entire universe, and also the inner 'subtle' or psychic worlds of the mind are all of them only relatively real. Both the external world and the inner world of emotions and thoughts change. And anything which changes, Shankara argues (as of course did many Western philosophers), is not truly and ultimately real, although it may well have a relative reality. It is only an appearance which arises in consciousness, exists for a time and then passes away. If something is completely real, finally and utterly real, it will not and cannot change. So the 'Supreme Brahman' (*paramam brahma*) that the verse of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* speaks of is ultimate, unchanging Reality.

Shankara, and the *Advaita* or 'Non-dual' tradition of Upanishadic interpretation to which he belongs, go further than this. He tells us that this supreme Reality, Brahman, which is 'Immutable . . . beyond direct cognition'<sup>5</sup> and yet 'resident in the hearts of all', is consciousness.<sup>6</sup> It is our own consciousness or awareness, in which all perceptions, con-

3. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.1.2. Unless otherwise indicated, all remaining translations from the Upanishads and from Shankara's Commentaries are taken from *Eight Upaniṣads: with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda, 2 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957–8).

4. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.*, introduction to verse 2.1.1.

5. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.1.1.

6. Shankara writes that Brahman is seated in the space within the lotus of the heart, 'this being the place where Brahman is ever manifested in its nature of Consciousness' (Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.2.7). See also *Upadeśasāhasrī* (verse section), chapter 11; Sengaku Mayeda, ed. and trans., *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śaṅkara* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 126–7.

cepts and emotions appear. And this is in full conformity with one of the four *Mahāvākyas* or 'Great Sayings' of the Upanishads, which are the cornerstones on which Hindu thought rests: *prajñānam brahma*—'Consciousness is Brahman'.<sup>7</sup> In his commentary on the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* Shankara writes that different kinds of creatures are made to appear different and various by the different subtle and physical bodies which are their *upādhis* or 'limiting adjuncts', and which have formed as the result of past activities or *karman*.<sup>8</sup>

The bodies—both 'subtle' (i.e. mental) and physical—of living beings appear to divide up consciousness, Shankara goes on to explain, in much the same way as a collection of clay pots of differing shapes and sizes assembled on the ground appears to divide up space into many small, distinct spaces. When the pots are taken away space again resumes the undivided and homogeneous character which in reality it had never lost. So it is with consciousness. With the final dissolution of the individual nature—and this does not mean at death, for as we shall see later the Indian teaching is that at death the subtle body remains in seed form and eventually brings about rebirth—but at the final and complete dissolution not only of the physical body but of the subtle body also, consciousness resumes its undivided and homogeneous character. Like space in the case of the clay pots, it had never really lost this but only appeared to do so from our present standpoint.

So in the light of this we can begin to understand what at first appeared to be the amazing and somewhat incredible statement of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* that 'He, indeed, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself'. Brahman, the Vastness, the all-pervasive Reality, is consciousness: not conditioned, separated consciousness as we at present know it, apparently enclosed within the separate body of the individual, but consciousness in itself. Not consciousness 'of' anything, but pure, undifferentiated awareness or consciousness.

This, the Upanishad is telling us, is what we really are in our deepest essence and most essential self. But we do not know this. Even if we know it intellectually—and this at least is a start—we do not experi-

7. *Aitareya Up.* 3.1.3. The other three *Mahāvākyas* are 'I am Brahman' (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* 1.4.10), 'That art thou' (*Chāndogya Up.* 6.8.7), 'This Self is Brahman' (*Māṇḍūkya Up.* verse 2).

8. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.1.1.

ence it as a living fact, an actual experience, and so it is not for us real and living knowledge. But if we come to know it in the true and full sense, then, the Upanishad states, we 'become Brahman'—even here in this world. We realize that we are and have always been in our most essential nature consciousness or sheer awareness; and that all the rest, all that conditions consciousness, is in the final analysis no more than passing and changing appearances arising in the mind: 'For the entire world is a modification of the mind,' writes Shankara; it merges back into the mind in deep sleep and re-emerges from it again on waking 'like sparks out of fire'.<sup>9</sup>

What is it, then, which according to the Indian teaching stands in the way? What keeps us from a living and direct knowledge of our own deepest and most real nature, and encloses us—like space apparently enclosed in a clay pot—in the vulnerable and often painful individual nature and separate body? The second part of the verse we have cited from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* gives us the clue: 'Liberated from the knots of the secret place,' it reads, 'he becomes immortal.' So our task now is to discover what is meant here by 'the secret place'; and what are the 'knots' in it?

We have already seen that 'the secret place' is a synonym for the heart. Although the word for 'heart' (*hṛdaya*) is not used in the verse in question, all the translators and commentators are agreed that this is the meaning. They do so because there are a number of other references in the Upanishads to 'the knot of the heart'; for example in an earlier verse of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* it is said: 'When that Self . . . is realized, the knot of the heart (*hṛdaya-granthi*) gets untied; all doubts become solved, and one's actions (*karmāṇi*) become dissipated'.<sup>10</sup> And in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* we read: 'When all desires clinging to one's heart fall away, then a mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman here. When all the knots of the heart are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the instruction (of all the Upanishads)—that is to say, this is the core of their message, their essential teaching.'<sup>11</sup>

9. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.1.4. 10. *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.2.8.

11. *Kaṭha Up.* 2.3.14–15 (trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda, slightly adapted). The first of these two verses is found in the much older *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* (4.4.7), where it is referred to a still earlier source. The doctrine is therefore deeply rooted in the Upanishadic tradition.

In both these passages the Sanskrit word for the heart, *hrdaya*, is used. But what exactly is meant by it? Clearly, the word as used in the texts we have cited refers not just to the physical organ but to something which the physical heart symbolizes. And this is easy enough to understand for we do the same thing in English and other European languages; we often speak of the 'heart' meaning not the physical organ but something subtle and of a psychological nature. Thus W. B. Yeats, for example, writes the lines: 'Consume my heart away; sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is'; and we frequently speak of a person as having a 'kind heart' or a 'soft heart', or on the other hand as being 'hard hearted' or having 'a black heart'.

So in these instances the physical heart at the centre of the body is used to symbolize something which is thought of as equally central in the psychological structure of human beings. In broad terms the heart stands for our moral nature, the kind of willing which we engage in; it is essentially the same as what we sometimes call the 'soul', that in us which chooses between good and evil and makes us the kind of person we are. The Upanishads use the term 'heart' or 'the secret place' in very much the same way. It is not the mind which is referred to—this in fact is an instrument of the heart, its means of expression. And it is certainly not the unchanging consciousness or awareness, the Self or *ātman* which is the true reality in men and women. What is meant in the Upanishads by the 'heart' is, on the contrary, the essence of our *human* nature as such—the clay pot formed of the 'limiting adjuncts' (*upādhis*) enclosing and restricting (in appearance at least) the light of consciousness which is at the centre of our existence.

Closely linked with this is one of the most important ideas in what we might call Indian psychological theory. This is the concept of what is named the *buddhi*. *Buddhi* is usually translated as 'higher mind', as opposed to the *manas*, the 'lower mind'. *Manas* is that mental faculty which on the basis of sense impressions perceives and presents the external world, and then continually suggests ways in which we might relate or react to it. It is what we usually mean when we speak of the mind—unstable, ever-changing and hard to control. The *buddhi*, however, is a different faculty. It is *buddhi* or 'higher mind' which discriminates and takes decisions; which decides whether we act selfishly or unselfishly, cruelly or kindly—in other words, whether we are essentially 'kind hearted' or 'black hearted'.

*Buddhi*, according to Indian thought, is the highest element in the

individual nature of human beings, but it is not the highest element of *all* in human nature. That, as we have already seen, is the *ātman* or Self. It is important to be clear that the Self, or changeless consciousness, does not in the Indian view form a part of our individual nature. It transcends it: it is supra-individual, and it is precisely our ephemeral individual nature which stands in the way and prevents us from identifying with the true centre of our being, the *ātman*.

Nevertheless, within the confines of the individual nature it is *buddhi* which is the decisive factor. When it is 'pure'—i.e. not contaminated by the lower mind and the fears and desires which control this—*buddhi* stands, as it were, on the borderline between our nature as a limited human individual (*jīva*) and our ultimate and transcendent nature as pure consciousness or *ātman*. The purified *buddhi* can, on occasion, see across this border to the other side and catch glimpses of our supra-individual nature, and it is this which is the source of the common ground which binds together the mystics of different traditions.

The *buddhi* or higher mind, then, is not itself the *ātman*, but it is that element in the individual nature which can draw closest to it. When it is pure and, so to speak, transparent it functions as the faculty of spiritual intuition giving us insights into supra-sensible reality; it was this purified *buddhi* which was intended by the philosophers of medieval Europe when they spoke of 'the intellect' and by Plato when he extolled 'Reason'.

But a purified *buddhi* is rare. According to the Indian teaching, in the great majority of persons the *buddhi* is *not* purified. On the contrary, it is dispersed and driven this way and that by what is called *saṃkalpa*, 'desire-imagination', the desires and fears which lie behind and bring about the constant activity of the mind. In this condition *buddhi* has lost its pre-eminence and tends to fall under the control of the lower mind (*manas*) and the fears and desires which energize this. The entire inner order is reversed, with the result that the power of discrimination is corrupted and our resources and energies dispersed and scattered. It is a condition represented in the myths of many cultures: as the battle of the Titans with the Gods, or of the *asuras* with the *devas*, or, in the *Mahābhārata*, the temporary overthrow of the Pāṇḍavas by their cousins the Kauravas. The loss of Paradise is another way of presenting this 'fallen' and disorientated condition. In this state our mental processes are, to a greater or less degree,

disintegrated. We move rapidly from one desire or thought to another with little control—like a monkey, which in India is often thought of as a representation of the unstable condition in which *manas* dominates the power of discrimination or *buddhi*.

A central purpose of Indian spiritual disciplines, Buddhist and Jain as well as Hindu, is to correct this state of affairs and to gradually free the *buddhi* from the desire-imagination of the lower mind so that it is no longer dominated and pulled this way and that, but itself controls and guides the *manas* and is able to use it freely as its instrument. Only then, when the *buddhi* is purified and in charge, as it were, do we start to realize our real nature; and only then, on the Upanishadic view, are we really what a human being should be.

This, then, is what is meant by the term 'heart', or 'the secret place', in the verses we have been examining. The 'heart' is the *buddhi*, the highest element within the individual nature of men and women, which, when purified and in control of the lower mind, opens the door to that pure and unchanging consciousness which is our innermost and essential nature.

Let us now consider the 'knots' to which the verse we are exploring refers: 'Liberated from the knots of the secret place (or the heart)', it tells us, 'he becomes immortal'. So it is the 'knots of the heart' which stand in the way.

It is not only this one verse from the *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* which tells us this, for the same thing is said in other places. We have seen that in the *Kātha Upaniṣad* it is said that: 'When all the knots of the heart (*hṛdayasya . . . granthayah*) are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the instruction.' And we have also seen that another verse of the *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* tells us: 'When that Self . . . is realised, the knot of the heart (*hṛdaya-granthi*) gets untied; all doubts become solved, and one's actions (*karmāni*) become dissipated.'

In yet another verse from the *Munḍaka Upaniṣad*, belonging to an earlier section of the text, it is said: 'He who knows this supremely immortal Brahman, as existing in the heart, destroys here the knot of ignorance (*avidyā-granthi*).'<sup>12</sup> And in one of the earliest of the Upaniṣads, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we can already find the same doctrine: 'From the purification of the internal organ,' it says, 'comes

12. *Munḍaka Up.* 2.1.10.



unfailing memory [of the Infinite]. After the achievement of memory comes falling asunder of all the knots of the heart.'<sup>13</sup> So it is clear that the concept of the 'knots of the heart', or 'the knot of ignorance', is a long-established and important idea. What, then, are these 'knots'?

We can find the answer if we examine Shankara's commentaries to the above-mentioned verses. The knots of the heart, he tells us, are 'concepts arising from ignorance, that bind one fast like knots'.<sup>14</sup> The 'knot of ignorance', he writes in another place, is formed of 'the tendencies and impressions created by ignorance that are hard to untie like knots'.<sup>15</sup> And again: the 'knot of the heart [is] the host of tendencies and impressions of ignorance in the form of desires that hang on the intellect (*buddhi*)'.<sup>16</sup> And commenting on the passage cited above from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* he says the 'knots existing in the heart' are 'the bonds . . . created by ignorance, which had become hardened by the impressions left by the experiences in many past lives'.<sup>17</sup>

You will notice that two words, 'impressions' and 'tendencies', keep recurring in these quotations from Shankara. The Sanskrit words are *vāsanā* and *saṃskāra*; they are important technical terms corresponding to a fundamental conception in Indian thought and playing a very significant part in its development. The word *vāsanā* means a residual impression left in the mind as a result of past activity; and the second term, *saṃskāra*, means a predisposition or 'formative force' within the mind, which is gradually built up as a result of accumulated mental impressions or *vāsanās*. Both the impressions and the formative forces, Shankara tells us, are 'created by ignorance (*avidyā*)'—and in fact we have seen that in one of the verses cited above the 'knot of the heart' is referred to as 'the knot of ignorance' (*avidyā-granthi*).

This ignorance, according to Shankara, is our ignorance of our own selves, of our own nature, of who and what we really are. It consists in a deep-seated but mistaken identification with the day-to-day, empirical self—the individualized self which is constantly changing and so cannot have more than an apparent and temporary reality—and a failure to realize (except perhaps in theory, if we are students of the Vedānta) that behind this changing everyday self or *jīva*, and entirely free from its wants and fears and troubles and ambitions, is

13. *Chāndogya Up.* 7.26.2; trans. Swāmī Gambīrānanda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983).

14. Commentary on *Kaṭha Up.* 2.3.15. 15. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.1.10.

16. Commentary on *Muṇḍaka Up.* 2.2.8. 17. Commentary on *Chāndogya Up.* 7.26.2.

another Self, the *ātman* or transcendent consciousness which is unchanging and therefore entirely real.

The doctrine of impressions and formative forces is not confined to Shankara and the school of Advaita Vedānta; it is an essential part of the Indian world-view, shared alike by Buddhists, Jains and Hindus. Both thoughts and actions, it is held, leave in the mind residual impressions—the *vāsanās*—and the greater the element of emotion and therefore of willing which the thought or action contains the stronger and deeper the impression that is left in the mind. The process is of course unconscious and as long as the mind is active it is incessant: ‘No one can determine’, Shankara writes, ‘the beginning or the end or the middle or the number or the place or the time or the immediate occasion of the rise of these impressions. Impressions are innumerable and innumerable their causes . . .’<sup>18</sup>

The impressions and formative forces lie deep in the unconscious memory and it is they which give substance to the doctrine of *karman*: they are the reality of *karman*, the stuff of which it is formed, the karmic seeds accumulated in the course of lifetimes. Moreover, this is thought of as a quasi-physical process. The mind is regarded as having two grades or layers, the subtle body and the causal body. Both are thought of as composed of matter of an immensely subtle and imperceptible kind, and it is this subtle matter which receives and stores the impressions generated by the emotions and will. The subtle body, consisting essentially of the formative forces (*saṃskāras*), is regarded as more durable (and therefore in Indian terms more real) than the physical body, from which it withdraws at the time of death. The causal body, which receives and stores the impressions (*vāsanās*) from which in due course the formative forces arise, is more durable and real still. But even this is not finally real. It is only the *ātman*, the consciousness or awareness in which the whole of this process takes place, which enjoys full and lasting reality.

At death the causal and subtle bodies, which together enclose the *ātman* like the clay pots enclosing space which were described earlier, are not dissolved; they carry over in a latent state. Subsequently rebirth takes place when certain impressions or ‘seeds’ start to stir into life (to ‘vibrate’, as the Tantric texts express it), and to take on shape as

18. Commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* 2.3.6; trans. A. J. Alston, *A Śaṅkara Source-Book*, 6 vols (London: Shanti Sadan, 1980), vol. 2, p. 168.

definite formative forces (*samskāras*). In the Indian view, it is these subtle but powerful psychological forces which shape and create the new individual being and ultimately determine the experiences which he or she subsequently undergoes.

This is the doctrine which lies behind the strong emphasis placed upon the need for action free from emotional attachment (*Karma Yoga*) found in the earlier chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and also the emphasis placed upon devotion (*bhakti*) in later chapters. Devotion, and to a lesser extent meditation and ritual when properly carried out, are believed to result in favourable karmic seeds helping to free the *buddhi* from the desires and fears of the lower mind and tending towards liberation. This, then, is the process, beginningless and without end—except when cut short by the attainment of 'release' (*mokṣa*)—by which the empirical world arises and is sustained in the conditioned consciousness of living beings.

When Shankara in his commentaries tells us that the host of impressions and formative forces, *vāsanās* and *samskāras*, 'bind one fast like knots', it is this to which he is referring: the fact that living beings are conditioned by past emotions, thoughts and actions—in short, their *karman*—which assume the shape of definite and powerful formative forces, so that we have only a limited freedom of action within these bounds. Here, then, are 'the knots of the heart' which condition consciousness and in so doing prevent the realization of our true nature as *ātman*.

Nevertheless, the Upanishads affirm that the knots of the heart can be overcome: 'When all desires clinging to one's heart fall away, then a mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman here. When all the knots of the heart are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal', says the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* in the passage cited earlier.

How, then, are the knots of the heart to be overcome? How, in the Indian view, do we free ourselves from the accumulation of karmic impressions and formative forces stored in the deep unconscious levels of the mind and keeping us bound to the ever-changing and ultimately illusory world? The answer is given in the verse from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* with which we began: 'He, indeed, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself . . . Liberated from the knots of the secret place, he becomes immortal.' How, then, do we 'know' the Supreme Brahman?

We have seen what is meant by the term *Brahman*. We have also seen what the 'heart' is: it is the *buddhi*, the power of discrimination and choice which should rule the mind, the highest faculty within the limited individual nature of men and women. And now we have also seen what the 'knots' which exist in the heart are: they are the accumulated impressions and formative forces which condition life and when taken together constitute *karman*. The verse tells us that it is by knowing Brahman—the Vastness, the supreme Reality—that we become liberated from these knots. And this is also the teaching of Shankara: that it is by knowledge rather than by activity of any kind that we attain release.

So our final question must be, what is meant here by the word 'knowing'? As Dr Ravi Ravindra has pointed out in a talk given to the Temenos Academy,<sup>19</sup> the Indian understanding of the true meaning of the word *knowing* is very different from that to which we have become used in the West—so what kind of knowing is it which can liberate us from the knots of the heart binding us to the world as conditioned individual beings?

Clearly it is not intellectual knowing, theoretical knowledge alone, which can liberate us; that, after all, is not so hard to attain and if it were all that is needed many a scholar would have gained release. What the Upanishad means by 'knowing Brahman' is something different from and much more fundamental than this. It has little to do with an accumulation of facts or with the subject–object mode of knowing, but consists in a profound change of our identity: a living and actual realization that we are not what we have always thought ourselves to be—an individual human being subject to continual change and to birth and death—but that behind this everyday existence we are in reality something quite different from this. The German philosopher, Schopenhauer, perhaps the first European to consistently study the Upanishads throughout the course of his life, wrote almost two hundred years ago: 'Individual existence [is] . . . an obstacle which stands between me and the knowledge of the true extent of my being. . . . I believe that, at the moment of dying, we become aware that a mere illusion has limited our existence to our person'.<sup>20</sup> That too is the message of the Vedānta and of Indian thought as a whole.

19. Dr Ravindra's talk was delivered on 15 September 2008.

20. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), vol. 2, p. 601.

The Upanishads tell us that the true Self of living beings, the *ātman*, and the all-pervasive cosmic essence, Brahman, are one: 'That art thou' (*tat tvam asi*), 'This Self is Brahman' (*ayam ātmā brahma*).<sup>21</sup> And they also tell us, as we have seen, that 'Consciousness is Brahman' (*prajñānam brahma*).<sup>22</sup> This is the clue to the change of identity which Indian teachings seek to bring about—the change of identity which is final release, *mokṣa*, or to use the Buddhist term, *nirvāna*. For behind the changing and ultimately unreal individual self, and as it were surrounding and containing it, is the unchanging Consciousness or Awareness in which it arises. Indian thought maintains that in spite of the fact that we at present experience consciousness as conditioned—which is to say that we know ourself as a subject having objects—its true nature is unconditioned: consciousness *as such*, as it is in itself, 'pure consciousness'. And this is also what is affirmed by certain Buddhist texts when they employ such terms as 'Buddha Nature' (*Buddha-dhātu*), 'Buddha Matrix or Womb' (*Tathāgatagarbha*), and 'Buddhic Essence' (*Dharmakāya*); all terms which refer to that inner essence of Buddhahood which, as these texts maintain, everyone bears within themselves: 'this eternal, firm, pure and unchanging refuge that is free from arising and cessation, the inconceivable pure *Dharmadhātu*', as one such text puts it.<sup>23</sup>

We saw earlier that consciousness can be likened to the space apparently contained within a clay jar, but it is still more true to say that the clay jar (and indeed, an infinity of such jars) is contained in space. For Shankara and other Vedāntins the consciousness which is both *ātman* and Brahman may well be likened to space (*ākāśa*),<sup>24</sup> and the individual self (*jīva*) and its experiences to all the things which happen in space and are contained within it and yet have no effect at all upon space itself. Shankara calls the all-pervasive consciousness the 'Witness' (*sākṣin*)<sup>25</sup> and it is sometimes likened to an eye. What it sees changes constantly, but in its own nature pure consciousness is unchanging and therefore free from fear or want or desire of any kind. It witnesses life and death and rebirth. None of this touches it.

21. *Chāndogya Up.* 6.8.7; *Brhadāranyaka Up.* 25.19. 22. *Aitareya Up.* 3.1.3.

23. *Anūnatvāpurnatva-nirdeśaparivarta*, translation slightly adjusted from that of Stephen Hodge, cited by Anthony Page, 'Buddha Nature is Not Mere "Upāya"', <http://www.nirvanasutra.net/buddhanaturenotupaya.htm>.

24. See *Chāndogya Up.* 3.18.1, and Shankara's commentary thereon.

25. *Upadeśasāhasrī* (verse section) 7.1–3.

It is this unchanging Consciousness which the Upanishads call the *ātman* or Self, identical with the Vastness or Brahman. For Indian thought, it is the underlying Reality within which the world and all that appears before us has its being, and it is when we *know* this—and *knowing* here means actual experience, immediate and living knowledge—that the ‘knots of the heart’ are dissolved. For with the realization that we are not the individual self or *jīva* as we had always supposed, but the unchanging Consciousness or Awareness within which the individual self appears for a time, the knot of the heart formed of deeply rooted karmic impressions and formative forces and binding us to the world is destroyed—cut through, not by main force as Alexander cut the Gordian knot, but by the sword of knowledge. It is what the verse with which we began seeks to tell us:

He, indeed, who knows the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself  
... Liberated from the knots of the secret place, he becomes immortal.

