

The Upanisads

The sacred Indian texts, the Upanisads, contain the accumulation and interpretations of the many philosophical ideas presented in the Vedas, forming the concluding portion of Veda. For this reason the Upanisads are referred to as the *Veda-anta*, literally meaning the end or *anta* (kumar 37). Underlying this literal meaning is a far more implicit of spiritual interpretation of a central goal or purpose, whereby their ultimate reason for existence – their highest Knowledge – is expressed (Prabhavananda 39). Such inference suggests that within the Upanisad writings are the central essence of Vedic teachings (Radhakrishnan 138). In Sankara's introduction to the *Taittiriya Upanisad*, he says: "Knowledge of Brahman is called Upanisads, because in the case of those who devote themselves to it, the bonds of conception, birth, decay, ect., become unloosed or because it destroys them altogether, or because therein the highest God is seated." (Radhakrishnan 138). As Sankara's interpretation of the essence of these texts indicates, the underlying meaning behind the Upanisads has developed into a secret doctrine, which enables the expression of truth destroying error and ignorance (Radhakrishnan). The word, Upanisad, itself implies an implicit spirituality. Derived from *upa ni sad*, "sitting down near," Upanisad means to sit down near a teacher (Radhakrishnan 138). While this interpretation is of most significance, the Upanisads have other underlying meanings including the secret teachings and knowledge of the Gods (Prabhavananda 39). This idea of secret doctrine and secret teachings is exemplified by the few individuals and groups that are interested in spiritual development. The language present within the Upanisads also conjures beliefs of secrecy through word selections such as *rahsayan* (meaning secret) and *paraman guhyam* (meaning supreme secret) (kumar 39-40). The secrecy of teachings found within these texts implies the esoteric nature of the ideas

present within the Upanisads emphasizing the importance of subjectively grasping their concepts rather than analyzing or describing them (Kumar 39).

The many ambiguities concerning the Upanisad's authorship and dates of composition lead to them being regarded as impersonal (*aparushya*), as their teachings are from more than one *rsi* (Kumar 38). The Upanisads have no set individual philosophical theories, containing ideas and interpretations derived through intuition, leading towards readers towards the truth in life (Radhakrishnan 140-141). Contrasting with the Veda's externalization through Vedic rituals and sacrifices, the Upanisads focus on an inwardness, openly ridiculing the rituals and practices of Brahmin priests (Kumar 40). The Upanisad texts recognize priestly ritualistic worship as preparation for true "enlightenment," as a manner of mental discipline to aid in the recognition of spiritual insight (Kumar 40). This realized inwardness is recognized as Atman and Brahman, translated as the supreme spirit, Brahman literally means the "ever growing," the "expanding," the "Absolute" (Raju 49). Atman is often associated synonymously with Brahman, meaning "spirit" or "self," being the highest reality attained by human beings (Raju 49). The Upanisads are complementarily concerned with the recognition of two forms of experiences, internal and external, which contribute to a realized inwardness (Kumar 41). External experiences are concerned with the physicality of the senses, such as sight, sound, touch, taste, etc., while internal experiences are concerned with experiences which lead to the discovery of the inner most self, Atman (Kumar 41). The Upanisads recognize two sources of awareness, higher (*para*) and lower (*apara*), which allow individuals to have internal and external experiences. *Apara vidya* classifies and studies physical, mental, and emotion experiences, giving them names and recognizable forms (Kumar 41). *Para vidya* is achieved through the attainment of Atman, allowing objects to be recognized in their true form (Kumar 42).

While the total number of existing Upanisads is uncertain, one hundred and eight texts, of varying lengths, have been preserved. The literary style and manner found in these works varies greatly, often exemplified within individual pieces of work (Prabhavananda 39). Little to nothing is known about the *rsi* authors(s) who composed these texts, as well as the time periods in which the Upanisads were written. The Indian philosopher, Sankara, composed several commentaries on the Upanisads, where he recognized sixteen of the hundred and eight confirmed Upanisads as authentic and authoritative (Prabhavananda 40). Sankara wrote elaborate commentaries on ten of the sixteen texts, while he discussed the other six in his Vedanta Aphorisms commentary (Prabhavananda 40). The ten in which Sankara composed commentaries around have become regarded as the principal Upanisads, containing the primary objects of attention for Hindu religion. The ten principal texts include: *Isavasya*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Chandogya*, *Brhadaranyaka*, *Aitareya*, and *Taittiriya* (Prabhavananda 40).

The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, believed to be composed first is the largest of the Upanisad texts. This Upanisad belongs to the transition period between the Aranyakas and the Upanisads as it is a Forest Treatise and an Upanisad (Raju 54). The philosophical speculations found within this text lead to the reality of Atman, where everything in the material world, species of animals, and the laws of nature and ethics originated from (Raju 54). The *Brhadaranyaka* specifically says that Atman is Brahman where its nature is consciousness and bliss, indicating the light of Atman is and the same as the light of the sun (Raju 54).

In the *Isavasya Upanisad*, Atman is described as the lord of the Universe, expressing pure activity, movement, having no definite description which truly expresses its nature (Raju 55). The *Kena Upanisad* examines the profound connection between Atman and the senses and an organ, questioning that which makes the mind, senses, and speech (Raju 55).

In the *Katha Upanisad* the story of Naciketas, son of Vajasravasa, is described. Naciketas gives away all that he has to charity in a ceremony, thereby angering his father who in turn sends him to the house of death (Raju 55). At the house of death Naciketas waits three days without eating for the god Death. As result Death grants Naciketas three boons. For his last boon Naciketas asks Death to instruct him in what occurs to people after they die. Having no choice Death is forced to answer his question, revealing in the process, the secret of the universe, that Atman is found within everyone. Through Naciketas' story in the *Katha Upanisad*, Atman is explained as the ultimate truth, being imperishable with no birth or death, where there is no deeper or greater form of reality than Atman itself; it is existence and being (Raju 56).

The Mundaka Upanisad uses the tale of two birds to distinguish the existence of the two kinds of knowledge, higher and lower. While one bird eats sweet fruit the other simply looks on, similarly to the manner in which Atman is present within the body to enjoying the pains and pleasures of the world while being unable to unbind itself from the ties that hold it to the world (Raju 56).

Considered by some scholars to be the most important of the Upanisad texts the *Mandukya Upanisad* explains the nature of Atman as it passes through four states: the state of pure Atman, waking state, dream state, and the state of deep sleep (Raju 47). In the waking state Atman is called *vaisvanara* (the worldly person) as Atman is a gross body, identifying itself with the physical body, directing its consciousness outwards (Raju 57). The dream state identifies Atman as *taijasa* (the person of the psychic force), projecting its consciousness inward, distinguishing the objects and things found within this state as results from the impressions of the waking state (Raju 58). In the state of deep sleep Atman is referred to as *prajna* (Intensely

Conscious Being), as people are in a state of complete unity and rest, finding absolute satisfaction within themselves (Raju 58).

The *Taittiriya Upanisad* presents the five ways of explaining the world in the form of secret meaning: physical entities (*adhilokam*), gods or luminaries (*adhijyotisam*), creative powers (*adihividyam*), creativity of the sexes (*adiprajam*), and the world as it originates from Atman (Raju 59). Through a mythologically cloaked story of creation, the *Aitareya Upanisad* presents the philosophically important account of Atman's creation of man and the gods. This text establishes the relation between macrocosm and microcosm, and between man, the universe and the penchant towards spiritual absolutism and idealism (Raju 60-61).

The *Chandogya Upanisad* identifies Brahman. Brahman is the Supreme spirit, the entire universe; it is found within every heart in the depths of all beings. Brahman is like the Unconsciousness; it watches and retains every experience. People are identical to Brahman, unable to act without it (Raju 61). The *Svetasvatara Upanisad* details the numerous doctrines found within its time period, discussing Maya (the God of the creation of the world) as the source of the world (Raju 61).

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Written by Jessica Durand (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.