

## « The Central Ideas of Upanishads »

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The Upanishads represent the philosophical core of Indian wisdom traditions, evolving both as an introspective counterpart and an extension of the Vedas. These texts serve as a timeless reservoir of wisdom, profoundly influencing the Indian intellectual tradition since their inception around 800 BCE.

From approximately 1500-800 BCE, the Vedas gained prominence across the Indian subcontinent, establishing practices steeped in ritualism and presided over by a priestly class serving the warrior elite. Concurrently, societal structures began to crystallize into rigid caste delineations. This era marked a pivotal shift as some individuals, disillusioned with the prevailing orthodoxy, retreated to forests in pursuit of deeper truths. It was within these retreats, termed forest academies, that the Upanishads were conceived.

This essay delves into the Upanishads' historical backdrop, elucidates their core philosophies, and explores their varied interpretations within India's wisdom tradition.

### 1. Historical Overview

The term 'Upanishad' translates to 'sitting down near,' denoting the disciples' proximity to a teacher or enlightened being. The essence of Upanishadic learning, termed "Darshan," emphasizes visionary insight, advocating for a philosophy not merely to be learned but to be experienced and realized personally. Admission to these forest academies was contingent upon a sincere quest for knowledge, ensuring that only genuinely committed students were enrolled. These pupils lived alongside their mentors, embarking on a journey to unearth their intrinsic truths.

Upanishadic teachings, encapsulated in narratives, everyday analogies, and natural phenomena, aimed to resonate and be comprehensible. The texts feature diverse stories, such as a young boy engaging the God of Death in dialogue, a woman posing profound inquiries to her departing husband, and allegories represented by two birds. These narratives continue to echo, shaping daily life and ethos within Indian culture.

Dubbed "*Vedanta*," meaning 'the culmination of the Vedas,' the Upanishads are perceived as a concluding segment of the Vedic corpus. Among the approximately 108 recognized Upanishads, a select dozen hold particular significance. The key Upanishads include:

- *Isha*: Exploring the “divine” inner self
- *Katha*: Narrating “Story” of Death as a Teacher
- *Brihadaranyaka*: Delving into the 'Forest of Wisdom'
- *Chandogya*: Celebrating the 'Sacred Song'
- *Shvetashvatara*: Contemplating divine visions symbolized by a 'White Horse'
- *Mundaka*: Addressing the “eradication of ignorance”
- *Mandukya*: Discussing consciousness and its stages, attributed to Sage Manduka
- *Kena*: Questioning (“by whom”) the prime mover of the universe
- *Prashna*: “Questioning” life's vital breath

- *Taittiriya*: Offering wisdom from Sage Tittiri on joy's ascent
- *Aitareya*: Reflecting on life's unity, associated with Sage Aitareya

Penned between 800 and 500 BCE, these Upanishads refined certain Vedic conceptions and introduced novel philosophical dimensions absent from their predecessors. Eknath Easwaran characterizes the Upanishads as a fresh tributary enriching the vast Vedic river, symbolizing their pivotal role in the continuum of Indian philosophical thought.

## 2. Central Ideas brought forward by Upanishads

The teachings of the Upanishads are profound and boundless, with each core concept offering infinite depths for exploration and realization. Despite the expansive nature of these ancient texts, we endeavor to distill and comprehend three fundamental ideas that the Upanishads have imparted. This endeavor not only introduces us to the essence of Upanishadic wisdom but also invites us to embark on a journey of philosophical inquiry, illuminating the timeless truths these texts elucidate.

### *Brahman & Atman*

Upanishdic text revered an all encompassing “*Brahman*” representing the ultimate, unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world of changing phenomena. It is the foundational essence from which everything emanates and to which everything returns. Unlike the more anthropomorphic deities of earlier Vedic traditions, Brahman is abstract and transcends all dualities and descriptions.

Etymologically, the word “*Brahman*” is derived from the Sanskrit root “*brh*,” which means to grow or to expand. This root reflects the concept of Brahman as the ultimate reality that is expansive and infinite, encompassing the totality of existence. The Upanishads often use negation (*neti neti*, not this, not this) to describe Brahman, indicating that it is beyond all empirical experience and conceptualization.

The Upanishadic teachings intricately weave the concept of *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, with that of *Atman*, signifying one's innermost self or essence, often equated with 'breath' or the individual soul. Upanishadic wisdom asserts that the *Atman* dwells within each individual, residing beyond the layers of senses, mind, and intellect, serving as the core of our being. This innermost essence, *Atman*, is not an isolated entity but a direct manifestation or mirror of the grander cosmic principle, *Brahman*.

This profound connection is eloquently encapsulated in the celebrated *Mahavakya* (great saying), “*Tat Tvam Asi*,” which translates to “Thou Art That.” This pivotal phrase articulates the deep-seated unity between the individual self (*Atman*) and the universal essence (*Brahman*), urging a realization that the individual self is fundamentally non-different from the cosmic totality.

Through this realization, the Upanishads guide individuals toward a transcendent understanding, bridging the personal and the universal, the microcosm and the macrocosm, thereby illuminating the path to ultimate knowledge and liberation

### ***The Four Consciousness – waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and “turiya”***

The Upanishadic texts elucidate a sophisticated framework of consciousness, delineating four distinct states underpinning our reality experience.

The first state, waking consciousness, is our everyday state of awareness where we engage with the world, make decisions, reflect on past experiences, and plan for the future. This is the realm of active self-awareness, where our interaction with external stimuli, emotional responses, and cognitive processes take center stage.

In the dreaming consciousness, akin to our dream states, external sensory inputs are absent, yet emotional and subconscious dynamics are active. This state allows us to process residual emotions and experiences, offering insights and understandings that may not surface in waking life. Here, we delve into the depths of our subconscious, encountering unprocessed emotions and potential revelations.

The third state, deep sleep or dreamless sleep, represents a profound connection with our inner self. Scientific research corroborates that this state is crucial for physical rejuvenation; however, Upanishadic wisdom extends this understanding to spiritual dimensions, suggesting a communion with our Atman, or true self. Beyond the barriers of senses, intellect, and even ego, this state offers a glimpse into a unified consciousness.

Finally, *Turiya*, the fourth state, transcends the preceding three. It is characterized by an ongoing, profound awareness that parallels the clarity of dreamless sleep yet occurs within full waking life. In *Turiya*, individuals operate with enlightened presence, continually anchored in their inner essence and drawing upon this deep connection for guidance and insight. This ultimate state of consciousness reflects a harmonious integration of the self with the vast expanse of universal being.

This framework not only enriches our comprehension of the self but also offers a pathway to realizing our intrinsic unity with the cosmos. By delving into and integrating these states of consciousness, we are encouraged to embody wisdom, compassion, and mindfulness, fostering a life that is deeply connected to the essence of our being and the universe at large.

### ***Maya & Reincarnation***

The Upanishads introduce the intriguing concept of *Maya*, which, despite being mentioned infrequently, later evolved to hold significant sway in Indian philosophical discourse. *Maya*, often interpreted as a divine illusion or cosmic delusion, represents the veil cast by Brahman to sustain the play of ignorance. However, this veil is not just an obstruction; it is also a threshold that beckons to be crossed on the journey toward enlightenment and true knowledge.

This concept suggests that, much like actors who immerse themselves in their roles only to return to their true selves once the performance concludes, we too are participants in the cosmic drama under the influence of *Maya*. We are invited to see beyond this illusion, to recognize and embrace our authentic essence. This narrative mirrors the allegorical insights found in Plato's cave, where the challenge is to discern the shadows from the reality.

Failure to transcend Maya confines the soul to a cycle of rebirth, each life an opportunity to pierce through this illusion and awaken to the unity of Atman with Brahman. It is through this realization and the subsequent alignment of our actions with this profound understanding that one can achieve Moksha, or liberation, thereby ending the cycle of reincarnation. Those who accomplish this realization and live in accordance with their true self, connected to the universal essence, are said to break free from the wheel of births and attain ultimate freedom in their existence.

### C. How different Schools have interpreted Upanishads?

The Upanishads, while consistent in their core teachings, have been subject to diverse interpretations by various thinkers, each foregrounding a distinct philosophical perspective and approach to existence. These interpretations have crystallized into key philosophical schools, including:

1. **Advaita Vedanta or Kevaladvaitavada** by Adi Shankara: In this interpretation, the 8th-century CE mystic and philosopher Adi Shankara championed the concept of Nirguna Brahman (the impersonal Ultimate Reality) as the only truth, positing the phenomenal world as an illusory appearance or Maya. According to Shankara, realizing the non-duality of Atman (self) and Brahman is the path to liberation.
2. **Visistadvaitavada or Qualified Non-Dualism** by Ramanuja: The 12th-century philosopher Ramanuja presented a nuanced view where the divine or Saguna Brahman (Brahman with attributes) is seen as the absolute reality, imbued with infinite qualities. This school suggests that while there is unity, there is also a distinction, allowing for a personal relationship with the divine, which can be realized within one's own being.
3. **Dvaitadvaitavada or Dualistic Non-Dualism** by Nimbarka: Nimbarka, another 12th-century thinker, proposed a synthesis where both difference and non-difference are acknowledged. This perspective appreciates the diversity of the world and individual identities while also recognizing their ultimate unity with the divine.
4. **Purnadvaita or Integral Non-Dualism** by Sri Aurobindo: In the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo offered a comprehensive interpretation, asserting the necessity of realizing all aspects of the divine—from the impersonal Nirguna Brahman to the personal Saguna Brahman and the individual soul or Jivatman. His approach integrates various dimensions of spiritual experience, advocating for a holistic realization.

These diverse interpretations reflect the richness and adaptability of Upanishadic wisdom, providing multiple pathways for individuals to engage with and understand the profound teachings of the Upanishads. Rather than presenting a monolithic view, these interpretations invite seekers to explore their own paths to spiritual insight and enlightenment, each offering a unique perspective on the unifying essence of the Upanishadic teachings.

The Upanishads themselves continue to be a source of infinite wisdom, encouraging introspection and the pursuit of inner truth as we navigate the complexities of existence.

**Reference:**

- a) The Upanishads; Eknath Easwaran
- b) Isha Upanishad; Sri Aurobindo
- c) Prophet of Life Divine; Haridas Chaudhuri