

Topic A Factual Analysis of the Fundamentals of the Upanishadic Philosophy

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Abstract

The Upanishads are ancient texts from India that were composed orally in Sanskrit between about 700 B.C.E and 300 B.C.E. The Upanishads are the Philosophical religious texts of Hinduism (also known as Sanatan Dharma meaning “Eternal order” or “Eternal Path”) which develop and explain the fundamental tenets of the religion. The name is translated as to “sit down closely” as one would to listen attentively to instruction by a teacher or other authority figure, but Upanishad has also been interpreted to mean “secret teaching” or “revealing underlying truth”. The truths addressed are the concepts expressed in the religious texts known as the Vedas which orthodox Hindus consider the revealed knowledge of creation and the operation of the Universe. The word Veda means “knowledge and the four Vedas are thought to express the fundamental knowledge of human existence. These works are considered Shruthi in Hinduism meaning “what is heard” as they are thought to have emanated from the vibrations of the universe heard by the sages who composed them orally before they were written down between c.1500-c 500 BCE. The Upanishads are considered the “end of the Vedas” (Vedanta) in that they expand upon, explain and develop the Vedic concepts through narrative dialogues and, in so doing, encourage one to engage with said concepts on personal, spiritual level 180-200 Upanishads but the best known are the 13 which are embedded in the four Vedas known as 1.RigVeda 2.Sama Veda 3.Yajur Veda 4.Atharva Veda

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Upanishads are late Vedic and post-Vedic Sanskrit books that record the evolution of the core Hindu religious principles as well as “the transition from the ancient ritual of the Veda into new religious ideas and institutions”. The Upanishads portray the immortal soul of the human being. In this article, the meaning, History, facts, an interconnected world in which seeming diversity of the Universe is based on a single, unifying principle, known as Brahman, in any of its speech. In this regard, the Upanishads impart the knowledge that Brahman is a part of the atman, which means importance, and teachings of Upanishads. According to the Upanishads there is a higher power which enables us to grasp this central spiritual reality. Spiritual things require to be spiritually discerned. The Yoga Philosophy is a practical discipline pointing out the road to this realization. Man has the faculty of divine insight or mystic intuition, by which he transcends the distinctions of intellect and solves the riddles of

reason. The chosen spirits scale the highest peak of thought and intuit the reality. By this intuitive realization “the unheard becomes heard”, the unperceived becomes perceived, and the unknown becomes known”¹ The Vedas are generally considered to have two portions viz, Karma Kanda (portion dealing with action or rituals) and Jnana –Kanda (portion dealing with Knowledge). The Samhita and the Brahmanas represent mainly the Karma-Kanda or the ritual portion, while the Upanishads chiefly represent Jhana-Kanda or the Knowledge portion. The Upanishads, however, are included in the Shruti.

1. The Upanishads and the Vedanta

The oldest surviving systematic interpretation of the Upanishads is the Brahma Sutra (200 B.C.E-200 C.E.), Attributed to Badarayana. The Brahma Sutra is an explanation of the philosophy of the Upanishads, treating the texts as the source for knowledge about Brahman. Despite being considered a Vedanta text, the Brahma Sutra was composed centuries before the establishment of Vedanta as a philosophical school. The Brahma sutra uses the Upanishads to refute the position of dualism, as put forth by the Samkhya School. Like Sankara does later, the Brahma sutra states that sruthi is the source of all knowledge about Brahman. Additionally, the Brahma Sutra maintains that moksa is the Ultimate goal as opposed to action or sacrifice. The Vedanta darsana was the first philosophical school to attempt to present the Upanishads as holding a unified philosophical position. Vedanta means ‘end of the Vedas’ and is often used to refer specifically to the Upanishads. The school divides the Vedas into two sections: Karmakanda, the section of spiritual (consisting of samhitas and the Brahmanas), and Jhanakanda, the section of knowledge (consisting of the Upanishads, and to a certain extent, the Aranyakas).

According to Vedanta school, the ritual section contains detailed instructions of how to perform the rituals, whereas the Upanishads contain transcendent knowledge for the sake of achieving moksha. Despite disagreeing with each other, all three of the most well known philosophers of the Vedanta school- Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhava –wrote commentaries on the Upanishads, presenting them as having a single, and consistent philosophical position. The most well-known philosopher of the Vedanta school was Sankara (c.700 C.E), Whose interpretations of the Upanishads made a major impact on the Indian Philosophical traditions in the centuries after his lifetime and continued to dominate readings of the texts throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Sankara the fundamental teaching of the Upanishads is the Atman and Brahman are one and the same. For Sankara, the Upanishads are not merely sources to back up his claims, but they also provide him with techniques for making his arguments. Sankara takes the Upanishads as outlining methods for their own interpretation, following a number of literary criteria as clues for how to read the texts². Sankara can maintain that his arguments are based on scripture, for as long as he argues in the same way that the Upanishads do, he can claim that his arguments are based on his sources.

2. Major Theme of the Upanishads

The Upanishads are religious and Philosophical treatises. They constitute the last phase of the Vedic revelation. They represent the knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-Vidya). What is this world? Who am I? What becomes of me after death? Such questions are asked and answered in these Upanishads. The essential theme of the Upanishads is the nature of the world and God. From the innumerable gods to the one infinite as in the famous passage ‘Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti’ the doctrine of true knowledge and salvation are major subjects of the Upanishadic Philosophy. In the Upanishads, we get an intelligible body of verified and verifiable spiritual insights mixed with a mass of myths and legends and cosmological speculations relating to the nature and origin of universe. Besides, Brahman and His creation are also discussed in these texts. The principal contents of the Upanishads are speculations. The

spirit of their contents is anti-ritualistic. The Upanishads undertake the task of a more logical definition of the Eternal Spirit ever acting and ever resting. In another place we have traced the progress from the lower imperfect conceptions to the more adequate ones as formulated in the Taittiriya Upanishad³. In chapter iii the son approaches the father with the request to teach him the nature of reality from which all things flow and to which all return. The son is given the general features of Brahman, and is asked to discover the content which satisfies these requirements. “That from which these beings are born, that in which when born they live, and that into which they enter at their death, that is Brahman. Things of the world are ever changing their forms, and they cannot be considered to be real in an ultimate sense. The son considers matter to be the ultimate reality. It is the most prominent aspect of the outer world. This view is held by the lokayatas, or the materialists. The son soon discovers that matter cannot account for the life phenomena. He hits upon prana or life as the ultimate principle⁴. Matter does not hold the secret of life, though life cannot exist without matter. There is something in life which enables it to absorb and transmute the inorganic elements. This something is the vital principle which pervades the universe and binds human beings with the rest of creation

2. The Upanishads and the Vedas

a. Main Upanishads

The Upanishads are the fourth and final section of a larger group of texts called the Vedas. There are four different collections of Vedic texts, the Rgveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharva Veda, with each of these collections containing four different layers

Major Upanishads –The collection of texts, often referred to as the Mukhya Upanishads, are considered the most significant scripture within the Upanishadic tradition. They are foundational to the understanding of key Philosophical concepts in Hinduism and have had a profound influence on various spiritual practices, including yoga. They delve deeply into Philosophical concepts such as Brahman (the ultimate reality) and Atman (individual soul). Among the most prominent major Upanishads are the Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya and Chandogya Upanishads. Each of these texts explores profound metaphysical questions, ethics, and the nature of existence, often employing dialogues, metaphors, and parables to convey complex ideas and Philosophical theories.

The teachings found in the major Upanishads have significantly influenced various schools of Indian Philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, which emphasizes the non-dualism of Atman and Brahman. The language of these Upanishads, though often abstract and esoteric, is rich with poetic imagery and rigorous inquiry, inviting readers and scholars alike to engage in introspection and spiritual contemplation. The Upanishads contain some of the oldest discussions about key philosophical terms such as atman (the self), Brahman (ultimate reality), karma and Yoga as well as samsara (worldly existence) moksha (enlightenment). Purusa (person) and prakriti (nature) all of which continue to be central to the philosophical vocabulary of later traditions. In addition to contributing to the development of a discursive language, the Upanishads further frame later philosophical debates by their exploration of a number of means of attaining knowledge, including deduction, comparison,

Introspection and debate

b. Minor Upanishads

In addition to those affiliated with the Vedas, there are literally hundreds of others texts bearing the name “Upanishad”. These texts have been grouped together by scholars according to common themes. Such as the Yoga Upanishads (Upanishads on Yoga) The sanyasa Upanishads (Upanishads on

Renunciation) the Saiva Upanishads (Upanishads other Hindu God Siva), and the Vaisnava Upanishads (Upanishads on the Hindu God Visnu⁵. Many of the post-Vedic Upanishads further develops core concepts from the Vedic Upanishads, such as Atman Brahman, Karma, and moksha. In addition to a shared conceptual world, the post-Vedic Upanishads often quote extensively from the earlier texts and feature many of the same teachers and students, such as Yajnavalkya, Janaka and Saunaka.

The minor or Gauna Upanishads are those texts that, while still valuable for their insights and teachings, do not carry the same weight or authority as the Major Upanishads. They often elaborate on specific themes or concepts found in the Major texts or provide commentary on established principles. There are many such texts, each contributing to a broader understanding of yogic Philosophy and practice.

3. History of Upanishads

The Upanishads were written around 700-400 BCE. Upanishads are also known as Vedanta because Vedas end with Upanishads. It deals with consciousness, meditation and Philosophy. There are thirteen main Upanishads which are written in different styles by different writers. Historical and comparative value of the Upanishads undoubtedly have, but they are also great present day importance. Upanishads are also known as India's intellectual heritage. There are a total of 13 major Upanishads which are discussed.

1. Isavasya Upanishads

Isavasya Upanishad is a small Upanishad consisting of 18 mantras and it belongs to Shukla Yajur Veda. And Yajur Veda itself has two divisions. One is known as Krishna Yajur Veda and the other as Shukla Yajur Veda. Isavasya Upanishads is one of the few Upanishads like Taittiriya Upanishad for which the svara is still maintained and available for chanting. Svara means the intonation for chanting. This Upanishad is a Mantra Upanishad because it occurs in the mantra or the samhita portion of the Vedas. Isavasya can also be called a Samhitopanishad. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad which also belongs to Shukla Yajur Veda is a Brahmanopanishad, and is considered to be a commentary on the Samhitopanishad. The eighteen mantras of Isavasya Upanishad are elaborated in more than 400 mantras of Brihadaranyaka. From that we know that Isavasya is a very condensed Upanishad. The Isa Upanishad asks us to worship Brahman both in its manifested and unmanifested conditions⁶. It is not an abstract monism that the Upanishads offer us. There is difference but also identity. Brahman is infinite not in the sense that it excludes the finite, but in the sense that it is the ground of all finites. It is eternal not in the sense that it is something back beyond all time, as though there were two states temporal and eternal, one of which superseded the other, but that it is the timeless reality of all things in time. The absolute is neither the infinite nor the finite, the self or its realization, life and its expression. The word Brahman

Isavasya Upanishad gets its name because of the first portion of the beginning verse "Isavasyam Idam Sarvam". The first two words are "Isa" so it can also be called Isa Upanishad or Isopanishad. All Upanishads begin with Pathah (a mantra) invoking the grace of Lord. And the convention is that all the Upanishads belonging to one particular Veda will have the same Shanti Pathah. Atharva Veda Upanishads will have the same Shanti Pathah and all Sama Veda Upanishads will have the same Shanti Pathah.

2. Kena Upanishads

Kena Upanishad is a small Upanishad in Sama Veda, and it has four chapters, each chapter known as a Kanda or Adhyaya. There are in total 35 mantras and therefore it's a relatively small but a very important Upanishad. And this Upanishad also begins with a Shanti Pathah which is a common Shanti

Pathah to all Sama Veda Upanishads. This Upanishad begins with the word “Kena” hence the name for the Upanishads. The verse part of the Upanishad presents a psychological argument for the existence of the Atman. In a paradoxical passion, it hammerse the spiritual truth that ‘those who know really do not know, and those who do not know may alone be said to know the Ultimate Reality’. The Upanishad advises us to find the same reality in objective as well as subjective existence in the flash of the lightning as in the notion of the mind.

3. Katha Upanishads

Kathopanishad belongs to Krishna Yajur Veda. This is a big Upanishad consisting of 119 mantras spread over two chapters. Each chapter is called an Adhyaya, and in each chapter there are three sections known as Vallis. The Katha Upanishad has its natural termination at the end of the first Adhyaya. This is evident from the repetition of words at the end of the Adhyaya as well as the ‘phalasruti’, which is also given at the same place. The second Adhyaya thus seems to furnish a sequel to the Nachiketa’s death story as may be seen in the last verse of the first Adhyaya. In the second Adhyaya (5, 6) Yama seems just to be furnishing an answer to the query of Nachiketas in Adhyaya one (29). This suggests that the entire intervening portion is a later addition. Two of the most prominent features of the Katha Upanishad are the description of the ‘Chariot of the Body’, and the death and the dream approaches to the problem of reality. The whole of the Katha Upanishad is surcharged with lofty ideas about the immortality of the soul, as well as suggestions for the practical attainment of the Atman. The Upanishad teaches that the knowledge of what happens to man after death is more valuable than anything in the world, than even sovereignty of the whole world. Such knowledge is the knowledge of the Atman. Atman is smaller than the smallest and the greater than the greatest. The objects are higher than the senses; mind higher than the objects, the individual’s reason (buddhi) higher than mind, the cosmic reason (Mahan, Atman. Logos) higher than the individual’s reason, the unmanifest (Avyakta) higher than the cosmic reason and the Purusa (Atman) higher than the unmanifest; there is nothing higher than the Purusa. The Atman cannot be understood by reason; it has to be grasped only as ‘Is’. It can be realized by withdrawing speech (senses) into mind, mind into reason (Jnana Atman), reason into the cosmic reason and that into the Atman of peace (Santa Atman). Everything else is a branch of the Atman and the Atman is the root.

4. Prasna Upanishads

Prasna Upanishad belongs to Atharva Veda like the Mundaka and Mandukya Upanishads. Mundaka Upanishad is considered to be a Samhitopanishad, Prasna Upanishad is considered to be a Brahmanopanishad. Generally a Brahmanopanishad is considered to be a commentary on the Samhitopanishad. Prasna Upanishad is a commentary on elaboration on Mundaka Upanishad. Prasnopanihad it is given in the form of a dialogue between a Guru named Pippalada and six disciples. There are 6 chapters with 67 mantras in this Upanishad and each chapter is a dialogue with one of the six disciples. Therefore it is a reasonably big Upanishad.

5. Mundaka Upanishads

Mundaka Upanishad belongs to Atharva Veda and it is known by the name Mundaka Upanishad because of several reasons. “Mundaka” means “head”, and the word “head” generally indicates importance. For. e.g. the head of an organization. Mundaka Upanishad is known by this name because it is one of the most important Upanishads. Therefore it being a primary Upanishad it’s called Mundaka Upanishad. This Upanishads has got 3 chapters and 6 sections each. Each chapter is known as Mundaka and each section as a Kanada. There are in total 65 mantras in the entire Upanishad.

The Upanishad differentiates the higher and the lower forms of knowledge. The higher is the knowledge of the Brahman and the lower is the knowledge of the empirical sciences, and arts including the Veda and its subsidiaries. As the spider throws out its web and withdraws it into itself again, the atman throws out the world out of it and withdraws the world again into it. The life of action and sacrifices is as unstable as an unsteady boat and is, therefore, not the highest, and belong to the world of Ignorance.

6. Mandukya Upanishads

This Upanishad belongs to Atharva Veda like Mundaka Upanishad. Many people get confused between Mundaka and Mandukya Upanishad. Mandukya Upanishad is associated with a Rishi named Manduka and hence the name Mandukya Upanishad. The word “Manduka” in Sanskrit means a frog. Some people suggest that since in Mandukya Upanishad the teachings is given in stages, the Upanishad leaps from one stage to another, just like a frog leaps from one place to another. This is the smallest Upanishad among the 10 main Upanishads, containing only 12 mantras.

Another Upanishad called the Muktika Upanishad praises the Mandukya Upanishads saying “one Mandukya Upanishad is enough because it contains the whole Vedanta.” Mandukya Upanishad is a summarization of the elaborate teachings contained in the other Upanishads. In Mandukya Karika Gaudapada writes an analysis of the entire Upanishad. And this analysis is in the form of verses. “Karika” means a verse analysis. And there are 215 verses (karikas) on the 12 Upanishad mantras. Mandukya Upanishad can be understood only with the help of these karikas, the Upanishad and Mandukya karika are generally studied together.

7. Taittiriya Upanishads

This Upanishad belongs to Yajur Veda and as Yajur Veda has 2 branches: Krishna Yajur Veda (Black school branch) and Shukla Yajur Veda (White school Branch), and Taittiriya Upanishad belongs to Krishna Yajur Veda. This is a very significant Upanishad, both in the Karma Kanda or ritualistic circles and in Vedantic circles. This Upanishad is called Taittiriya Upanishad because of various reasons. One of the reasons is that in the succession of Acharyas was known as Tittiri Acharya and hence the name of the Upanishad. This Upanishad is in prose form and has three chapters, each chapter being known as a “Valli”. The three chapters are called Shiksha Valli, Brahma Valli and Bhrigu Valli. The Upanishad mentions five forms of union-the union of physical elements, the union of shining beings, the union of knowledge, the union of creative beings and the union of physiological parts, incorporating the idea of union as the act of creation. It establishes that, by the time of the Upanishad, five forms of causal explanation of creation came to be accepted. They are the physical explanation of the creation of the universe, creation as due to the actions of the divine beings, as due to the potency of esoteric knowledge, as due to the actions of the divine beings, as due to the potency of esoteric knowledge, as due to some cosmic sexes and as due to the Atman or man as the centre.

8. Aitareya Upanishad

This Upanishads belongs to Rig Veda and among the 10 Upanishads the only one from Rig Veda. This Upanishad was given out by a Rishi named Aitareya and hence the name of the Upanishad. Aitareya Rishi is also known as Mahidasa. So some people call him Aitareya Mahidasa Rishi. According to a traditional story Aitareya was once very depressed because he felt his father did not love him. So he went to his mother and told her of his sorrow. So to remove her son’s unhappiness, Itara prayed to their family deity (Kuladevata) who was Prithvi Devata (Earth Deity). And that is why Aitareya is also called Mahidasa because “Mahi” means Prithvi and “Dasa” means devotee. So Mahidasa means a devotee of Prithvi. Aitareya Brahmanam has in total 40 chapters, and towards the end of it comes Aitareya

Aranyakam. And a portion of that is Aitareya Upanishad. And this Upanishad has in total 3 chapters divided into 5 sections. The first chapter has 3 sections and the last 2 chapters have 1 section each. This is a relatively small Upanishad consisting of 33 mantras. The Upanishad gives a semi-mythological account of creation. According to it, the Atman correlates the microcosm and the macrocosm. The gods become the psychological principles. The mental functions are only the rays of our rational consciousness (prajnanam). Our rational consciousness is the constant integrated awareness (prajnam-brahma)

9. Chandogya Upanishads

Chandogya Upanishad belongs to Sama Veda like Kena Upanishad. And it's a big Upanishad consisting of 8 chapters and 627 mantras. In fact among the 10 Upanishads, Chandogya has the highest number of mantras. Chandogya Upanishad is also said to be chanted with svara (intonation) like Isavasya and Taittiriya Upanishads. Even Brihadarnyaka Upanishads is available with svara. Chandogya is considered to be an important Upanishad because Vyasa selects many mantras from Chandogya for his analysis in Brahma Sutra. Chandogya has the most number of mantras in Brahma Sutra. The Sanskrit word "chand" has two meanings. One meaning is "to protect" or "to guard". And the word "Chanda" is derived from the root "Chand". Vedas in general are called Chanda because they protect a human being from samsara. They not only protect but also give happiness.

10. Brihadaranyaka Upanishads

The Upanishad name is a compound of two words "Brihad" and "Aranyakam". In ancient times the Sannyasin after renouncing the world would go and live in the forests and study the Upanishads. So "Aranyakam" means "what is studied in the forests". And "Brihad" means "great" or "big". Brihadaranyaka is a great Upanishad not only in terms of its volume; it's great in terms of the depth of its insight. So it's a great Upanishad in terms of both quantity as well as quality. The name Brihadaranyaka can mean either "a great Upanishad studied in the forests" or "an Upanishad as great or big as a forest."

This Upanishads has got 434 mantras which makes it a very big Upanishad. Based on mantra count Chandogya seems to be bigger with 627 mantras, but the size of each mantra in Brihadaranyaka is bigger. So ultimately volume-wise Brihadaranyaka is as big as Chandogya. The 434 mantras of Brihadaranyaka are spread out over 6 chapters. Each chapter is called an Adhyaya. And traditionally these 6 chapters are divided into 3 pairs, each pair being called a "Kandam." The Upanishads represent a great chapter in History, they are respected not only because of the unique and beautiful way in which they are presented, but because they inspired generations of people from different cultures by the wisdom of their ideas and spiritual power. "The fire still burns bright on their altars". Their light is for the Seeing Eye, and their message is for the seeker of truth.

Upanishads and their place in Indian Philosophy

The Upanishads are religious and philosophical treatises forming part of the early Indian Vedas⁷. The preceding portions are the Mantras, or Hymns to the Vedic gods, and the Brahmanas, or directories on and explanations of the sacrificial ritual. Accordingly these three divisions of the Sruthi, or 'Revelation', may be roughly characterized as the utterances successively of poet, priest, and philosopher. The Upanishads themselves contain several references to writings which undoubtedly are much later than the beginnings of the Upanishads.

- The Upanishads occupy a unique place in the development of Indian Philosophical thought. They contain the highest authority on which the various systems of Philosophy in India rest. Vedanta Philosophy is directly related to the Upanishads.
- The Upanishads are associated with the Vedas and make the entire range of Vedic knowledge as complete. ‘The Upanishads generally mention the Vedas and their study with respect. Certain verses from the Vedas, such as the Gayatri form the subject of meditation.
- Brahavidya or the knowledge of Brahman, the supreme Reality is the great kingdom of the Principal Upanishads. They give importance to ‘knowledge’ alone. Anyone having knowledge may be Guru or Acarya.
- Each of the Vedas has many Mahavakyas or great sayings. But four Mahavakyas found in the Upanishads related to four Vedas are very important, thought-provoking and powerful. These spell out the non-duality of the Jiva and the Brahman-Parijnanam Brahma–Rig-Veda Aham Brahmas am-Yajurveda Tattvamasi- Samaveda Ayamtma Brahma-Atharvaveda.
Without understanding the Upanishads, it is impossible to get an insight into Indian history and culture. Every subsequent development of philosophy and religion in India has drawn heavily on the Upanishads.

The importance of Upanishads are Upanishads are considered one of the most important texts of Hinduism. Upanishads consider everything around us as an illusion. The Upanishads have influences Indian Philosophy and religion. Upanishads are necessary to understand Indian history and culture. Upanishads emphasize meditation, ethical principles, truth non violence and compassion. It imparts moral and ethical values. It also emphasizes on interconnectedness of all living beings and foster sense of harmony

It is important to note that the Upanishads were recorded over many centuries across different regions of India, with different ones held within various Vedic schools as they were disseminated and taught throughout India. There are around 200 known Upanishads in the Present day, but this is only a fraction of the original, and more Upanishad manuscripts do occasionally surface.

Conclusion

The Upanishads are some of the most well-known Indian sources outside of India. Philosophy in the Upanishads does not merely consist of abstract claims about the nature of reality, but also presented as a way of living one’s life. Karma is characterized as a natural moral process, with knowledge. Karma is characterized as a natural process, with knowledge of the self as a way out of that process. A fundamental assumption throughout many teachings of the self is that it is untouched by karma. Yajnavalkya teaches Janaka that knowledge of the self is that it is untouched by karma. Yajnavalkya teaches janaka that knowledge of the self is beyond virtuous (kalyana) and evil (papa)-that, through knowledge of the self one reaches the world of Brahman.

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3. Ubhayam saha, both together That which is hidden in the secret of the Vedas, even the Upanishads- Svetasvatara Upanishad 5.6.