

Frequently Asked Questions About Upanishads

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QUESTION: What does the term 'Upaniṣad' mean?

ANSWER: The word 'Upaniṣad' is derived from the verbal root *sad* which has several meanings: loosening, movement and annihilation. Putting all these three senses together, the word 'Upaniṣad' refers to that divine knowledge or wisdom which loosens the bonds of *saṁsāra* (transmigratory existence) of a being, annihilates his *ajñāna* or ignorance of his real nature and leads him to Brahman or God, the Absolute. The book or the scriptural work that teaches this wisdom is also called 'Upaniṣad'.

The word may also mean 'sitting devotedly near'. Hence it represents the 'secret teaching, of spiritual wisdom' imparted in private to worthy pupils, but zealously guarded from the unworthy ones.

QUESTION: How old are the Upaniṣads?

The orthodox view is that the Upaniṣads are Revealed Word. They are revealed by God himself at the commencement of each cycle of creation to the worthy few. Hence they are eternal. However, treating them as books of spiritual wisdom, can we assign any date or period, in relation to human history as known till now? Attempts in this direction have rather been frustrating, thanks to that peculiar trait of the Hindu mind which accords much greater importance to the principle than to the person or the period.

The Upaniṣads have been an integral part of the Vedas. Hence, a date assigned to them can as well hold good for the Upaniṣads also. The date of the *Ṛgveda* has varied from 4500 B.C. (B.G. Tilak) and 2400 B.C. (Hang) to 1200 B.C. (Max Muller). Modern European scholars assign the period 700 B.C. – 600 B.C. to the Upaniṣads assuming a gradual evolution to the philosophical ideas from the period of the Vedic hymns to that of the *Āraṇyakas* and the Upaniṣads. B.G. Tilak, on the basis of an astronomical data provided in the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*, has however, assigned 1900 B.C. as the date of the Upaniṣad. Hence, according to him and the scholars that concur with him, the Upaniṣads belong to the period 2500 B.C. – 2000 B.C.

QUESTION: Please specify the number of Upaniṣads.

ANSWER: From among the extant Upaniṣads, only ten to fifteen are considered to be the older ones. They are the basic sources of ancient Hindu philosophy.

The number of works that go by the name 'Upaniṣad' and available in print today exceeds 200. The *Muktikopaniṣad* gives a list of 108 Upaniṣads. Śaṅkara (A.D. 788-820), the earliest commentator, has chosen only ten Upaniṣads to expound. He refers to a few more in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*. Rāmānuja (A.D. 1017-1137) has chosen, in addition, two more. Considering the ones



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chosen by them as more ancient and authoritative we can now list them (in the alphabetical order) as follows:

Aitareya Upaniṣad
 Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
 Chāndogya Upaniṣad
 Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad
 Jābāla Upaniṣad
 Kaivalya Upaniṣad
 Kaṭha Upaniṣad
 Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad
 Kena Upaniṣad
 Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
 Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad
 Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
 Praśna Upaniṣad
 Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
 Taittirīya Upaniṣad
 Vajrasūcīkā Upaniṣad

Most of the Upaniṣads, outside the list given above, belong to a much later period in our history and were written to propagate specific cults and sects. The nomenclature 'Upaniṣad' was conveniently added to them to gain respectability, acceptance and authority in the orthodox circles or among the followers. However, it must be conceded that these Upaniṣads also, though sectarian in character, have contributed quite a lot to the propagation of popular religion and ethics as also to the maintenance of the Vedāntic spirit among the people.

These minor Upaniṣads are sometimes grouped as follows:

- a) Vedānta Upaniṣads
- b) Śaiva Upaniṣads
- c) Śākta Upaniṣads
- d) Vaiṣṇava Upaniṣads
- e) Yoga Upaniṣads
- f) Sannyāsa Upaniṣads

The Vedānta Upaniṣads follow the beaten track of the major Upaniṣads as far as the general principles are concerned. The Śaiva,

the Śākta and the Vaiṣṇava Upaniṣads deal with the respective cults of Śiva, Devī and Viṣṇu. The Yoga Upaniṣads supply a lot of information about Haṭhayoga and Rājayoga based on the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali and other works. The Sannyāsa Upaniṣads deal exclusively with monasticism, its ideals and practices.

QUESTION: Considering their vast diversity, do all these Upaniṣads teach a single system of philosophy? Or, do they contain several, mutually conflicting, systems?

ANSWER: The orthodox Hindu tradition has always considered the entire body of the Upaniṣadic literature as one unit ('Śruti') and hence teaching one philosophy. Though this philosophy may contain several aspects, they always form a homogeneous unit. Hindu religious tradition has always accorded the Upaniṣads the status of the highest authority.

A look at the different and divergent teachings of these Upaniṣads does not easily convince us about the soundness of the orthodox standpoint. The traditional commentators have, however, solved this problem by sticking to one view as *the* teaching of the Upaniṣads and explaining (explaining away?) the others in a way that suits their interpretation.

Could it be that, over the centuries, many vital links have been lost and what we now have, are only fragments of the original works leading to this dichotomy of views? Though this is a plausible explanation, there is no clinching evidence to prove it.

Or, can we say that the various sages that we come across in the Upaniṣads—like Gautama Āruṇi, Yājñavalkya, Śvetaketu or Raikva—were great thinkers and mystics in their own right, who have given independent views, based on their own logic and experience? The Truth, Brahman (the Infinite,

the Absolute), is too great to be known exhaustively by anyone. One can get only a glimpse of the same, like the six blind men touching the same elephant. Hence, could it not be that the views of these sages, though apparently different, reflect the several facets of the same Brahman?

Question: Who is a ṛṣi?

ANSWER: Derived from the verbal root 'ṛṣ jñāne', the word 'ṛṣi' means any person possessing knowledge and expertise in any field. Thus Caraka and Susruta of Āyurveda (Health Sciences), Bharata of Nāṭyasāstra (Dramaturgy, including music and dancing) or Kauṭilya of Arthasāstra (Political Science including Economics) are all ṛṣis. However, the word is commonly used to indicate persons of spiritual eminence.

QUESTION: How many ṛṣis Upaniṣads mention?

ANSWER: We come across a good number of ṛṣis or sages in the Upaniṣads. Some like Yājñavalkya are extraordinarily great geniuses. Others like Gautama Āruṇi are excellent teachers. A few others like Śvetaketu are hard task-masters. Sacrifices conducted by rich and powerful—but noble—kings provided opportunities to these sages not only to exhibit their skills but also earn wealth and fame.

A selected list of sages that occur in the major Upaniṣads may now be given just for the sake of information:

Āṅgiras, Bhṛṅgu, Gārgī, Ghora Āṅgirasa, Hāridrumata, Mahidāsa Aitareya, Nārada, Pippalāda, Raikva, Sanatkumāra, Śāṅḍilya, Satyakāma Jābāla, Uddālaka Āruṇi, Vāmadeva and Varuṇa.

Yama, the god of death, Prajāpati, the creator, great kings like Janaka, Ajaṭāśtru and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali also appear in the role of teachers. One thing that strikes us is that these teachers were revered for their knowledge and

excellence, irrespective of their birth, caste or gender.

QUESTION: How have the Upaniṣads influenced Hinduism?

ANSWER: If there is one mass of scriptures that has inspired and sustained the Hindus over the millennia, it is the Upaniṣads. By advocating the ultimate triumph of the spirit over matter, of man over nature, the Upaniṣads have created, strengthened and preserved a great tradition of spirituality. This they have done, not only by a fearless spirit of inquiry to its logical conclusions, but also by intuitive mystical experiences beyond the ken of the intellect, these experiences almost always converging to a unitive principle.

No school of thought, no religious movement, of the subsequent periods in the history of India has remained untouched by their influence, if not pervaded by them. In fact, many of these schools and movements could gain respectability or acceptance only because they tread the path lighted up by the Upaniṣads.

Scholars of Indian thought have discovered the influence of the Upaniṣads on the religio-cultural life of other nations far beyond the boundaries of India, whether it is Japan, China and Korea in the East or Central Asia in the West.

QUESTION: What do the Upaniṣads contain?

ANSWER: The Upaniṣads contain the quintessence of Vedic religion and philosophy. The Ṣaḍdarśanas or the six systems of Indian Philosophy derive their strength and inspiration from them. The Vedānta systems are entirely an outcome of their study. The idea of mokṣa as the primary goal of life, which has permeated the Indian religions and culture of the succeeding centuries, owes its origin entirely to the Upaniṣads. And, they are the basis of the *prasthānatraya* (the three

foundational scriptures), the other two being the *Bhagavadgīta* and the *Brahmasūtras*.

The depth as well as the catholicity of their thought has attracted the attention of the savants of other religions and societies also, resulting in their being translated into other languages too.

QUESTION: What is the basic teaching of the Upaniṣads?

ANSWER: The Upaniṣads say that the basic cause of the universe, the cause of all causes, is called as 'Brahman'. Ātman, Sat, Akāśa and Bhūmā are the other appellations used for this Brahman. The world rises out of him, is supported by him and gets dissolved back into him. He is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. He is greater than the greatest, smaller than the smallest and is also the inmost Self of all. He is immanent in this world even as salt is, in saline water. He is beyond all wants and limitations. He is the lord as well as the substratum of the whole creation. He sees, hears and knows although none can see or hear or know him. He is the very personification of all the great virtues to their perfection. It is he who responds to the prayers of his votaries and grants them whatever they seek. He is the ultimate goal of all.

QUESTION: What is atman?

ANSWER: The atman is the core of all living being. He is neither born nor does he die with the birth and the death of the body. He is unborn and eternal. He is different from the body, the senses, the vital airs, the mind and the ego-sense and is ever free. All of them are enlivened by Him, made to work by Him, for Him. The defects and the infirmities in them, or even their loss, can never affect Him.

QUESTION: Why are we born?

ANSWER: Though ever-free as atman, it is also a fact of experience that we are born and we die. This atman has been, as it were,

encased and bound in this corporeal frame and has lost much of his freedom. In this state, he is called as 'jīvātman' or simply as the 'jīva'. The answer to the question as to why and how he has come to such a pass is 'karma,' the inexorable consequence of his past actions. For the question, how and when the very first karma started this chain of bondage, there is no answer, since the Upaniṣads accept creation as an eternal process, without beginning or end.

QUESTION: What is saṁsāra or relative existence?

ANSWER: Atman's involvement in the cycle of birth and death, and consequent suffering, has been called 'saṁsāra.' Mokṣa or liberation from this bondage of saṁsāra has been presented before him as the goal of his life. And, this can be achieved by jñāna, or knowledge and, bhakti or devotion, which includes upāsanā or meditation. Karma or action as prescribed in the scriptures is an aid to this mokṣa.

QUESTION: How to be free from saṁsāra?

ANSWER: An aspirant seeking spiritual freedom should first cultivate certain moral and ethical virtues as the first step. Through discrimination he should understand that the Vedic rituals can never lead him to the eternal Truth and hence renounce them. He must be ever ready to reject the *preyas* (the pleasant) and choose the *śreyas* (the good). By eschewing evil conduct and by practicing self-control, he should turn back his mind from outside, into himself, the region of the heart, the seat of the atman, and meditate on it. He should show compassion to all the living beings. He should try to give them what they need and should never be greedy. He must be vigilant forever and should always speak the truth and act according to dharma or righteousness, by following the scriptural injunctions. Study of

the Upaniṣads, performing austerities and observing brahmacharya or celibacy are also invaluable aids in his inner struggle.

QUESTION: How to begin this inner journey?

ANSWER: He should approach a competent guru or spiritual teacher in all humility and learn the truth about the atman from him, through proper questioning and sevā or service to him. The Upaniṣads make it incumbent on the guru to teach spiritual wisdom to a worthy disciple, after testing him if necessary.

The disciple should then practise manana (reflection) and nididhyāsana (meditation) on the atman which will result in anubhūti or realization.

QUESTION: What is the nature of the spiritual experience that an aspirant gets when he realizes the atman?

ANSWER: He sees all beings in himself and himself in all. Hence he feels neither special attraction nor repulsion for others. Behind every thought of his, he is able to feel the power of the atman, the pure consciousness. He clearly perceives that all the bonds of his heart which had him tied down to this mundane existence, have broken down. He experiences great joy and bliss within himself. When he directs his attention outside, there too he sees the same spirit, the atman or the Brahman. Spiritual experience, thus, leads to same-sightedness and resultant love for all.

QUESTION: In practical terms, what kind of happiness does an aspirant experience when he realizes atman?

ANSWER: The bliss he experiences is incomparably superior to any other happiness one can get in this world. And he will never have any type of regret for anything in life. He may even roam about the world in a joyous state, declaring his experiences for the benefit of others.

QUESTION: When such a one, the jīvanmukta (one who is liberated even while living here in this body), gives up his body, what happens to him?

ANSWER: According to one view, his physical body and the subtle body disintegrate at death and get absorbed into the five elements. And, he gets merged in Brahman, like a river entering into the ocean. Losing his separate identity, he attains complete and perfect unity with Brahman.

However, a large body of the Upaniṣadic lore propounds the theory of the liberated soul travelling by the Arcirādimārga or the Bright Path (also called Devayāna and Uttarāyaṇa) to the Brahmaloaka (also known as Satyaloka) and reside there permanently in infinite peace and bliss. The various stations on the path are fire, day, bright fortnight, the six months of the northern solstice, the year, the sun, the moon and the lightning. All these actually represent the guardian deities of these stations. From the last station, the vidyut or lightning, an 'amānava puruṣa,' a non-human (divine) being, leads the liberated soul to the Brahmaloaka.

Anyone reaching Brahmaloaka will not return to mundane existence.

QUESTION: What kind of society existed during the time of Upaniṣads?

ANSWER: Gleaning through the various Upaniṣads it is possible to have a fairly good idea of the type of society that existed during the period of the Upaniṣads.

The country extended up to Gāndhāra (Afghanistan) in the northwest, and included several kingdoms like Madra (Sailkot), Kuru (Delhi), Kekaya (Punjab), Pāñcāla (Bareilly, Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh), Kosala (Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh), Videha (Tirhut in Bihar), Kauśāmbi (Kosam, in Uttar Pradesh) and Kāśī. The kings who ruled over these countries were all kṣatriyas who were experts in warfare and

administration, as also in the Vedic lore. In fact, they were the traditional custodians of some types of esoteric sciences. They not only sheltered learned brāhmaṇas and sages but also strove to propagate the Vedic dharma. They were ruthless in enforcing the highest standards of satya (truth) and dharma (righteousness). The varṇa system was very much in vogue. As for the āśrama system, brahmacharya, gārhaṣṭhya and vānaprastha were more common though there is enough reason to believe that sannyāsa was also being practiced. Great stress was laid on the purity and integrity of personal life, irrespective of a person's station in life.

QUESTION: Some more details about the Vedic society?

ANSWER: Apart from religion, ethics and philosophy, a number of secular sciences like grammar, music, dance, archery, astrology, exorcising the evil spirits, preparing of perfumes, toxicology and so on, were also well-known.

Vedic sacrifices were very common. If they provided an occasion for the kings to earn merit and show their generosity, it was also an opportunity to the scholars to display their knowledge and earn name and fame, as also some wealth.

On the whole, people seemed to be contented with whatever they could earn by right means. They believed that their sorrows and misfortunes were caused by their own karma in their previous lives and hence did not hold others responsible for the same.

QUESTION: It is said that the Upaniṣads are full of stories. Please tell us something about them.

ANSWER: Strangely enough, the Upaniṣads, though teaching abstruse philosophy, also give us some interesting stories.

The *Kena* describes how the gods in heaven, under the leadership of Indra, were taught a lesson by Brahman in the guise of a yakṣa or demigod (3.1 to 11).

Major part of the *Kaṭha* is devoted to the story of Naciketas and Yama.

The *Chāndogya* contains the following stories: Dogs singing the udgītha (1.12); the king Jānaśruti learning from the sage Raikva (4.1 to 3); the story of Satyakāma Jābāla approaching Hāridrumata for knowledge (4.4 to 9); the story of Satyakāma and his disciple Upakosala (4.10 to 15); Śvetaketu the proud boy, his humble father Gautama and the king Pravāhaṇa Jaivali (5.3 to 10); Sanatkumāra teaching Nārada (7.1 to 26); Indra and Virocana approaching Prajāpati for the knowledge of the atman (8.7 to 12).

QUESTION: How are the Upaniṣads relevant in today's context? How to practise thier teaching in our day-to-day life?

ANSWER: The greatest problem of the modern man is lack of inner peace and constant conflict with the outside world. By stressing meditation on the inner incorporeal self (called Ātman or God) and harmonious relationship with others—in whom too the same God dwells—in the outside world, the Upaniṣads are very relevant even today. This solution which has worked for five millennia (or more)—as indicated by the men who lived such a life—can work even today if taken seriously and implemented sincerely.

An earnest study of the Upaniṣads, without preconceived notions and prejudices, is bound to inspire one to aspire for the life of the spirit. Swami Vivekananda said that Upaniṣads are a mine of strength, and anyone who reads them will derive strength and succour. Unlike earlier times, now they are available to all. □

