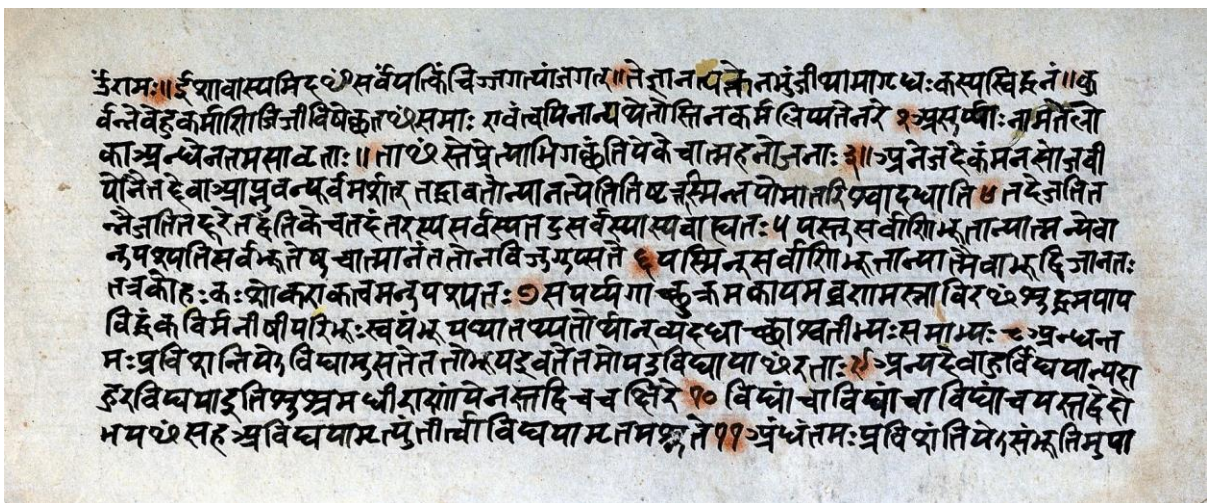


UPANISHADS

Overview The *Upanishads* appeared toward the end of the Vedic period (c. 800 BE), as part of a series of commentaries or auxiliary texts attached to the four Vedas. While there are more than 200 texts bearing the title 'Upanishad' (lit. 'sitting near [a sage]'), only twelve are considered major texts and each of these is attached to one of the four Vedas. The *Upanishads* express a fundamental shift in Indian religious thought, signalling doubts about the efficacy of the ritual world presented in the Vedas and revealing scepticism about the externalised and optimistic perspective of those early texts. In broad terms, the emphasis on ritual as action is replaced by the idea of ritual as symbol; as a result, knowledge of the sacrifice became more important than the performance of the sacrifice. And the most important piece of that knowledge was a new philosophical conception of the soul or self (*atman*) and its transmigration, which could only be gained by introspection or meditation. This pivoting away from action and toward thought is even more significant because it is shared by the two other great Indian religions of Buddhism and Jainism, which emerged in the same period as the *Upanishads*.

It is also possible to view the *Upanishads* as a culmination of the Vedas since they present a more coherent religio-philosophical system than the somewhat haphazard musings of the earlier texts. The key principle in that edited worldview is that of unity, the idea that two seemingly dissimilar or even opposed things are in fact one. And the grand equation in this view is that the *atman* (individual self or reality) is the same as the *brahman* (the universal self or reality). Another important development represented by the *Upanishads* is literary: they enhance a prose style that had begun in the other Vedic commentaries by extending it from short passages to the equivalent of full pages. This prose style evolved further and was used in medieval scholarly commentaries in a form that we would today recognise as an essay. Finally, the complex philosophical discussions in the *Upanishads* are presented as a discourse from teacher to student, which became a popular genre of Indian and Indo-Persian literature in later periods.

History The set of twelve major *Upanishads* emerged over a number of centuries, probably from about 800-300 BCE. Like all early Indian literature, these texts were orally composed and transmitted; however, tradition maintains that they were created by named sages. The earliest surviving written texts date from about the 14 century CE, although, like other early Indian texts, they were probably written down long before that date. As far as we know, the *Upanishads* were first translated into Persian at the Mughal court of Akbar in the 16th century. That Persian text was then translated into French in the early years of the 19th century, followed soon after by translations in English and German.



(Manuscript page of the *Isa Upanishad*, unknown date)

Cultural significance The primary impact of the *Upanishads* in Indian culture is that they articulated a philosophical system of monism (or unity) that is now understood as Vedanta (lit. 'end of the Vedas'). It is a fitting term because the *Upanishads* were, in fact, the culmination of the Vedas. This Vedanta school of Hinduism was codified by Shankara, a south Indian Sanskrit scholar and philosopher who lived in the 8th century CE. Then, following the translations into English and German in the 19th century, the *Upanishads* and their Vedanta philosophy became widely popular in Europe and America. Among those whose thought was influenced by these ancient Indian texts are the German philosopher Schopenhauer, who placed the *Upanishads* on a par with Kant and Plato. The American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson borrowed a story from the *Katha Upanishad* for his famous essay 'Immortality'. And the American poet T.S. Eliot concludes his famous 'The Waste Land' with a section inspired by these contemplative texts. It is arguable, therefore, that the *Upanishads* have had a greater impact on world literature than any other Indian text.



(a teacher and pupil, painting on parchment, date unknown)

Themes

Soul The key teaching of the *Upanishads* is its radical revision of the notion of the soul or the self (*atman*). In the earlier Vedic texts, speculation tended to focus on the 'big things', the cosmos, the gods and natural phenomena. Priests attempted to control the external world and ensure prosperity through the ritual sacrifice, which was understood as a microcosm of the larger world. There was little philosophical analysis about the soul and inner reality, except to say that it (the *atman*) was distinct from the *brahman* (the underlying reality of the universe). By the time of the *Upanishads*, several centuries later, the focus had turned inward, toward the soul. And the grand conclusion of the *Upanishads* is that the *atman* and the *brahman* are one. There is no difference between individual souls and the ultimate reality. This realisation is possible only when a person understands, through meditation, that the *atman* is pure consciousness and that the body is a mere manifestation of that consciousness. The flux of fleeting impressions that make up the material world is unreal because it is impermanent and therefore subject to death.

Rebirth This idea then led to the other radical concept expressed in the *Upanishads*, the idea of karma and transmigration. If the soul is *brahman* and does not die, what happens to the mortal body? The earlier Vedas contained no clear concept of the afterlife or rebirth. Dead people were merely said to go to 'the House of the Fathers' or 'to the House of Clay,' where they would reside permanently, although there are a few cryptic references to souls becoming plants or animals and then reborn. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, however, the principle of merit is introduced. The souls of those who have lived lives of charity and austerity pass into the paradise of Yama (god of death), then to the moon, to empty space, to the atmosphere and eventually descend to earth as rain. This is an early articulation of the law of karma, which explains that we die and are reborn according to the merit of our past lives. Now, for the first time, we have an ethical dimension to Hinduism and its understanding of the world. Good acts will result in a favourable rebirth; bad acts will bring a low-status birth in the next life. This new concept of a transmigration and its ethical principle was then given even greater prominence by early Buddhist and Jain thinkers, who tended to stress the pain and suffering inherent in the cycle of what was originally known as 're-death' (not 'rebirth'). In this respect, the *Upanishads* are important in demonstrating that the religions of India share a deep conceptual foundation.

Release The final theme of the *Upanishads* is 'release' or freedom from this cycle of 're-death'. This is the logical conclusion of the first two themes: we can escape the endless wheel of birth and death only if we achieve the pure consciousness represented by the equation that *atman = brahman*. That is, we must realise that our true self is identical with a universal reality that is immutable. If we gain that understanding, then we do not die because we are not born. Everything else is *maya*, or illusion. This understanding is achieved only after extensive meditation and training (as illustrated by the life of the historical Buddha in the *Buddhacarita*). Hindus and Buddhists refer to this state of oneness achieved through meditation by the term *samadhi*, which in the *Upanishads* is sometimes likened to a 'deep sleep.' The sages who composed these ancient texts struggled to describe this ineffable state, but it is often understood to be simply 'release' or 'freedom.' From the medieval period onward, Hindus have called this state of release *moksa* (similar to the Buddhist *nirvana*).

Key stories

The True Soul The essence of the *Upanishads*, as we have said, is the statement that the soul (*atman*) is indivisible from the universal reality (*brahman*). This equation is repeated in various ways throughout the texts, but it is best illustrated by the story of a young boy. Svetaketu was only twelve when he was sent to a teacher with whom he studied until he was twenty-four. After learning all the Vedas, he returned home convinced that he had learned everything there was to know. Noticing his pride, his father decided to test him. 'Since you are so convinced of your learning, my son, tell me one thing,' his father said. 'Do you know that by which we hear the unheard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived and know what cannot be known?' When Svetaketu admitted that he was stumped, his father gave him the answer: 'When you know one lump of clay you know all that is made of clay.' The young boy was amazed. His great Vedic teachers had not taught this truth, and when he asked his father to teach him, his father told him to bring him a fruit from a large tree and then to look inside the fruit and tell him what he sees. 'I see seeds, father, very small seeds,' the boy said. Then his father told him to break a seed and tell him what he sees inside. 'I see nothing, nothing at all,' the boy said. 'That is the imperceptible essence that is the huge tree,' the father said. 'That is the true self (*atman*) of the tree. That is the total reality. And you are that.' The young boy did not quite grasp this meaning, so his father told him to bring a cup of water and to put some salt in it. 'Can you see the salt?' the father asked. No was the answer. 'But can you taste it?' 'Yes.' 'In other words, the salt is present but not visible,' his father said. 'And in the same way, the true reality within you is invisible.'

Nachiketa and Death The *Katha Upanishad* tells the story of another boy, named Nachiketa, who noticed that his Brahmin father was trying to secure a place in heaven by making gifts to the gods. The problem was that his father was donating cows that were old, barren or blind, and these would never earn him a good afterlife. Desiring the best for his father, Nachiketa told him that he should give him, his own son, to the gods. The father agreed and sent his son to the house of Yama, god of death. For three days, Nachiketa waited for Yama to return, and when he did, Yama was impressed his guest's patience and offered him three boons. First, the boy asked for a good life for his father and himself. Nachiketa next asked to be taught the fire sacrifice, and Yama taught him. For his third boon, the boy asked to be taught what happens at death, but Yama prevaricated, saying it was a

great mystery known only to the gods. 'Please ask for another boon instead,' Yama said to the boy. 'Ask for gold, or cows or land, but do not ask for this.' When Nachiketa said he did not want such perishable things, that he only wanted to know what was beyond death, Yama was impressed and began to teach him. Just as with the first story, Yama explained the fundamental truth that the individual soul is inseparable from the supreme spirit. Yama suggested new techniques to impart this knowledge, including the importance of chanting and meditation. He also employed novel images, such as the famous analogy of the chariot: the senses are the horses and the true self is the rider. He ended his teaching with this enigmatic statement: 'The true reality is smaller than the smallest and larger than the largest.' Nachiketa, after years of instruction, made the breakthrough, realised the ultimate truth and was released from the cycle of rebirths.



(Wood sculpture of Yama, left, teaching Nachiketa, 19th c., Ramesvaram)

Texts

From the *Katha Upanishad*, translated by Eknath Easwaran, 2009

Know the Self as lord of the chariot,
The body as the chariot itself,
The discriminating intellect as charioteer,
And the mind as reins.

The senses, say the wise, are the horses;
Selfish desires are the roads they travel.
When the Self is confused with the body,
Mind, and senses, they point out, he seems
To enjoy pleasure and suffer sorrow.

[...]

What befalls the Self after death. Of those
Unaware of the Self, some are born as
Embodied creatures while others remain
In a lower stage of evolution,
As determined by their own need for growth.

That which is awake even in our sleep,
Giving form in dreams to the objects of
Sense craving, that indeed is pure light,
Brahman the immortal, who contains all
The cosmos, and beyond whom none can go.
For this Self is supreme!

As the same fire assumes different shapes
When it consumes objects differing in shape,
So does the one Self take the shape

Of every creature in whom he is present.
10. As the same air assumes different shapes
When it enters objects differing in shape,
So does the one Self take the shape
Of every creature in whom he is present.

As the sun, who is the eye of the world,
Cannot be tainted by the defects in our eyes
Or by the objects it looks on,
So the one Self, dwelling in all, cannot
Be tainted by the evils of the world.
For this Self transcends all!

From the *Chandogya Upanishad*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda, 1959

Nachiketa said: There is this doubt about a man when he is dead: Some say that he exists; others, that he does not. This I should like to know, taught by you. This is the third of my boons.

Yama said: On this subject even the gods formerly had their doubts. It is not easy to understand: the nature of Atman is subtle. Choose another boon, O Nachiketa! Do not press me. Release me from that boon.

Nachiketa said: O Death, even the gods have their doubts about this subject; and you have declared it to be not easy to understand. But another teacher like you cannot be found and surely no other boon is comparable to this.

Yama said: Choose sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years; choose elephants, horses, herds of cattle and gold. Choose a vast domain on earth; live here as many years as you desire.

Nachiketa said: 'Oh, death, these things endure only until tomorrow. Even the longest life is short. Keep your horses and cattle. I shall certainly obtain wealth, but give me that which is beyond wealth.

Yama said: The knowing Self is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting and ancient, It is not killed when the body is killed. If the killer thinks he kills and if the killed man thinks he is killed, neither of these apprehends aright. The Self kills not, nor is It killed

Reading

Patrick Olivelle, *Upanishads*, 2008

Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1, 1988

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, 1953