

# The Spirit of the Upanishads

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**T**he Upanishads are called the Vedanta. The Vedanta is the essence, and forms the concluding section of the Vedas.

The Vedas are the basis of the orthodox Hindu philosophical systems. They are the earliest extant literary, philosophical, and religious monument of the Indo-Aryans. The age of the Vedas has been a matter of controversy amongst Western and Indian scholars, but we are told that the Vedas date from 1500 B.C. to 3000 B.C. Now the Hindu students of the Upanishads are not very much disturbed by the matter of age, because to them the Vedas are eternal, without beginning or end, and devoid of any human authorship. Of course, by the Vedas we do not mean a particular book, for the Vedas refer to eternal truths and eternal wisdom. These deal with supersensuous and supra-mental topics such as the Godhead, the soul, the nature of creation, the hereafter of souls, and the invisible planes of Being.

## The truths of the Vedas and their character

The truths of the Vedas, the supra-mental and superconscious truths of the Vedas, were revealed to those spiritually qualified souls whom we call *rishis*. These *rishis* reached great spiritual heights by the practice of *yoga*, which mainly consists of self-control and concentration. Thus they made themselves the conduits for the manifestation of the eternal truths, and realized, through direct and immediate

perception (*aparokshānubhuti*), these truths, which cannot be reached through our senses or reasoning.

When we say that the *rishis* had a direct and an immediate perception of the truths, we mean that the perception was uncoloured by the senses or mind. What we call direct perception of reality in science is but sense perception; but according to the Hindu seers, our senses, or even our mind, cannot always be relied upon, because our senses and mind are always conditioned by various factors, both internal and external. So the *rishis* transcended the mind, the conscious mind, and they realized truths by what Sri Ramakrishna called *shuddha-buddhi*, the inner consciousness which realizes the universal Consciousness. That does not mean that the Vedic truths are opposed to reason; reason helped the *rishis* as much as it could and then bowed itself out.

Now we realize that there are three factors, which determine truth: *Shruti*, *yukti* and *anubhuti*, that is, the scriptures, reason, and personal experience. Because these truths are supersensible and superconscious, in order to understand them, you must accept certain hypotheses and then use reasoning. The scriptures, as explained by qualified teachers, are subjected to rigorous reasoning and then, after reason is satisfied, the student immerses himself in these truths and realizes their inner meaning. If we rely only upon scriptures, then revelation becomes dogmatic. If we depend entirely upon

reason, then also we cannot get a correct appreciation of truth, because reason, as we know, is oftentimes only the rationalization of our desires: If we depend solely upon experience, we may be misguided, because experience without reason may lead us astray. But if all the three point to the same conclusion, then we can be sure that we have found the truth. When truth meets with the approval of the *Shruti*, that is, the record of past experience, and of our reason and personal experience, then that truth becomes valid.

### The two parts of the Vedas and their aim

The Vedas are divided into two parts: the first is called *karma-kānda*, which deals chiefly with rituals and sacrifices. The purpose of this part of the Vedas is *abhyudaya*, which means material happiness in life and happiness hereafter in heaven. In order to enjoy happiness in life, the Hindu philosophers followed a method which is different from the methods followed in modern times in this competitive world. The Vedas uphold the cosmic view of life. According to this view, all beings are interdependent, especially human beings in relation to nature. This cosmic view of life is opposed to the selfish or egocentric or competitive view of life. It is said in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that the gods, being pleased by the offering of sacrifices, confer the desired enjoyments on mankind. So in the Vedic sacrifices the gods are propitiated. When that is done, we get rain; from rain comes food, which sustains our physical bodies. This system of the Vedas has now become more or less obsolete; we have other methods of worship.

The second part of the Vedas is called *jnāna-kānda*, the purpose of which is

*niḥshreyasa* or the attainment of the highest good. This is the subject-matter of the Upanishads: the immortality of the soul, the freedom of man, and the highest good. In the early stages of our spiritual development, we are full of desires, and we may enjoy the fulfilment of desires in this world and the next. But the time comes when we seek deliverance from desire, and then we follow the teachings of the Upanishads.

### The Upanishads and their study

There are one hundred and eight Upanishads, of which ten or eleven are the most important. For centuries the teachings of the Upanishads were transmitted by words of mouth from the teacher to the student, and later on they were put down in writing. These Upanishads were made the basis of the Indian philosophical systems, especially the Vedānta. There have been three main interpretations of the Upanishads: the non-dualistic (Advaita) interpretation of Shankarācārya, the qualified non-dualistic (Viśiṣṭādvaita) interpretation of Rāmānujācārya, and the dualistic (Dvaita) interpretation of Madhvācārya.

Now, what is the meaning of the term 'Upanishad'? According to Shankarācārya, the word etymologically means wisdom or knowledge. When a qualified student accepts this knowledge from a competent teacher, it enables him to get rid of ignorance, which is the root of all false values, and ultimately enables the student to attain supreme bliss.

The Upanishads are called *Ātmavidyā* or knowledge of the Self, ie Brahman or the Absolute. In the Upanishads, both Ātman and Brahman are identical. The Upanishad is a philosophy of life. We call it *darshana*. The purpose of *darshana* is the discovery of Reality, and also the application of this

knowledge of Reality to our daily life. Therefore by philosophy we do not mean mere intellectual knowledge or intellectual understanding; we mean the transformation of life, the control of our lower nature, and the manifestation of the higher nature. Therefore mere intellectual honesty or truthfulness is not enough to qualify a student for the study of the Upanishads. The Western tradition demands of student that he be truthful and honest; if he does not falsify facts, if he is intellectually fit, he is well qualified to study philosophy. But here, for the study of the Upanishads, there are four qualifications prescribed for the student: first of all, we have *viveka*, or that sharp intellect by which we can discriminate between the real and the unreal. Secondly, we must have *vairāgya*, or detachment from passion, or that intense power of the will by which we can discard that which to our reason appears to be unreal. Thirdly, we must have the six virtues: *Shama* (calmness), *dama* (self-control), *uparati* (self-withdrawal), *titikshā* (forbearance), *shraddhā* (faith), and *samādhānā* (self-settledness). Fourthly, we must have *mumukshutā*, or that intense desire for liberation from all bondage.

### **The Upanishadic view of man**

What does the Upanishad teach? The Upanishad teaches knowledge, the knowledge that liberates. It deals with the nature of God and the nature of the soul and its destiny. This knowledge is very important in our daily life. Man has a deeper reality in him than is seen on the surface; he is not a mere psycho-physical entity; he has a deeper foundation. Man may be compared to an iceberg. Only a very small part of an iceberg is seen above the water, and the remaining part is below the surface. Likewise, only an infinitesimal part of man is seen on the

surface; there are deeper layers, which we cannot know through our senses. The Upanishad gives us the knowledge of the complete man. Therefore the knowledge of the Upanishad is very important even in the daily problems of life.

The Upanishad, like any other system of knowledge, is not the monopoly of any country, race, or religion. Though the wisdom of the Upanishads has been developed in India, it is universal knowledge, and it offers the key to the understanding of other systems of religion and philosophy. When we deal with the Upanishads, we find that they contain different strands of philosophical speculation, though all culminate, shall we say, in the Advaitic or non-dualistic or idealistic view of life. When knowledge is attained, duality ceases. Everything is lighted by 'That thou art' (*Tat-tvam-asi*); so the spirit in man is identical with the Spirit behind the universe. The ultimate Reality in the Upanishads is called Brahman, which is the cause of creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe.

### **Relationship between God and the world**

Four different positions have been taken by the Indian philosophers regarding the relationship between God, or Brahman, and the universe.

First of all, we have the philosophy of realism, according to which matter exists independently of God, and for eternity. God may be called the world fashioner, as has been described by the Naiyāyika philosophers. The Sāmkhya philosophers discarded the idea of God, but they cannot be called materialistic, because they admitted *Purusha* or the Soul, which is of the nature of consciousness.

The second stand, which you find in the Upanishads, is theism. According to this, God creates the universe as a real existence. It can exist independently of God.

Then we have the third standpoint of truth, which we call pantheism. According to this, God creates the universe by transforming Himself into the universe; God becomes the universe.

Finally, we have the last stand which can be called non-dualistic idealism. According to this, God is pure Spirit; an undifferentiated, homogeneous mass of consciousness devoid of attributes; and described as '*neti, neti*' (not this, not this). It is also described as Saccidānanda.

The word '*Sat*' means Being, the substratum of all things. When we talk of existence, we mean what we call empirical existence, of things seen and felt. But the existence of Brahman is different from the existence of material things. It is the unrelated, unattached substratum of all visible objects. No mirage can be seen without the substratum of the desert. Brahman is the Reality that makes the appearances appear as real. Likewise the word '*Cit*', or Consciousness, does not mean empirical consciousness. It means that absolute Consciousness which is directly and immediately present as the soul within all. The Upanishad describes it as the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, and the mind of the mind. It says, 'You cannot see the seer of seeing, you cannot hear the hearer of hearing, you cannot know the knower of knowing, you cannot apprehend the apprehender of apprehending. There is no other seer, no other hearer, no other knower, no other apprehender, but He'. In this experience the subject and the object become one, and this *Cit* is realized in the

deepest meditation. The wise man sees the whole universe as the projection of the power of *Cit*. The word '*Ānanda*' does not mean sense pleasures. It is the absolute Bliss which one experiences when the subject and the object become one. Sense pleasures are only the particles of that bliss. *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda*—Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss—are not the attributes of Brahman, because in the realm of the Absolute there is no such thing as substance and attribute. They are the very essence of Brahman. We cannot think of *Sat* without *Cit* and *Ānanda*; or of *Cit* without *Sat* and *Ānanda* or of *Ānanda* without *Sat* and *Cit*.

### **Māyā and creation**

The Upanishads describe creation, from the relative standpoint, as a superimposition upon Brahman through the power of *Māyā*. What is *Māyā*? *Māyā* has been described as *paramesha-shakti*, the power which is inherent in Brahman, but which cannot be understood by our ordinary reasoning. This means that our ordinary reason or mind cannot understand the precise relationship between the One and the many, between the Absolute and the relative. Therefore creation has been explained by certain illustrations, such as the snake and the rope, and the desert and the mirage. Both the illustrations are very significant. For instance, when we mistake a rope for a snake, we are seized with fear, but this fear is false, because there is no actual snake. Likewise, when we become victims of fear—the fear of death, of losing our property, or of losing our near and dear ones—this fear is absolutely false like the fear we experience when we mistake the rope for the snake. Similarly, in the case of the mirage: a man sees water and runs after it, expecting to quench his thirst, but that is

false, because no water exists there. Likewise, in this world, when we run after pleasures, regarding them as eternal bliss, we become victims of false expectation. All that exists is Brahman; as all that exists in the first illustration is rope and not the snake.

How does *Māyā* work? The Vedanta philosophers say that *Māyā* works through power, the power of concealment (*āvarana-shakti*) and the power of projection (*vikshepa-shakti*). First comes the concealing power by which the true nature of man is concealed, and then comes the power of projection. First of all, we forget that we are the eternal Spirit. We say: I am a man, I am a Hindu, I am rich, poor, and so on. But when we put our heads on the pillow, we become oblivious, our consciousness is blacked out, as it were. And then we project our lives in dreams, and we have many fantastic dreams. So first comes the power of concealment and then the power of projection. Forgetfulness of our real nature leads to illusion.

There are two characteristics of *Māyā*: on account of the first, the appearance appears to be real; trees, houses, and individual beings all appear to be real. The second characteristic of *Māyā* is that, though the appearances appear as real, the true nature of Reality is not affected. I may consider myself to be a man, or a Hindu, and so on, yet, in truth, I am pure Spirit. Under the influence of *Māyā*, the pure Spirit, namely, the formless, undifferentiated, and homogeneous mass of consciousness, appears as *Ishvara*—the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe, endowed with various powers—and also as the *jiva*, the creature subject to *samsāra* (transmigratory existence), and the *jagat*, or variegated

nature, the stage of action for the *jiva*. But, in truth, the universe is pure Spirit. *Jiva* is Spirit, and *Ishvara* also is the undifferentiated Spirit.

Some philosophers describe the Vedanta doctrine as a sort of *Māyāvāda*. They think that the purpose of the Vedanta is to expound the doctrine of *Māyā*. But, in my opinion, the aim of the Vedanta is not *Māyāvāda*; the aim of the Vedanta is *Brahmāstivavāda*, to demonstrate that all that exists in the universe is Brahman.

This is the difference between the Vedanta and Buddhism. Buddhism says all is illusion; the Vedanta asks us to seek the Reality behind the illusion. Brahman is in front of us, Brahman is behind us, to our right and left, above and below. Shankarācārya says that what the ignorant man sees as the universe, the wise man sees as pure Brahman. So, the aim of the Upanishads is to remove *Māyā* or cosmic illusion, which differentiates between the *jiva*, *Ishvara*, and *jagat*.

### The nature of the individual

According to the Upanishads, the individual soul is pure Spirit; and it is very beautifully explained in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* by Yājñavalkya. Maitreyī, the second wife of Yājñavalkya, went to her husband to learn the secret of attaining immortality. She asked him about the Self. She was told that the Self is the source of all bliss, it is the Ātman. It is on account of the Self that the wife loves the husband, and the husband loves the wife. Likewise, it is the source of personal love between the parents and children, between man and woman, and so on. Therefore Yājñavalkya says, ‘This Ātman is to be realized. First of all, it should be heard from a qualified teacher; then one

should reason it out, and, last of all, one should contemplate; and through the realization of the Ātman, all is known'. And then he goes on to say, 'If one sees the worlds as different from the Self, they oust him'. It is exactly this idea of separation that is the principal cause of the present world dissension. As long as we see only division in this world between East and West, between the Christian world and the non-Christian world, between the Hindu world and the Muslim world, as long as we divide humanity into capitalistic and non-capitalistic types, as long as we see only this diversity, there will be friction, fear, and greediness. The Upanishad says, 'Though we see this difference, it does not exist in reality'. Then it is we who create this friction.

To resume our story, Yājñavalkya declares, 'These worlds, gods, and beings, all are the Self; all the scriptures and all knowledge have been projected by the Self, as from one fire kindled with wet faggot diverse kinds of smoke issue. The ocean is the goal of all waters, where all waters become one. Likewise, we become one in the Self. There is no more of duality or separate individuality when that Self is realized'.

When Yājñavalkya said that there should be no consciousness of separate individuality, Maitreyi was frightened, because she felt that she was going to lose her individuality. Then Yājñavalkya explained that one becomes conscious of individuality only in the realm of duality. One smells another, one hears another, one knows another, when there is the perception of duality, but to one who has realized oneness, everything becomes the Self. In that state, when everything has become one,

what should one smell and through what? What should one see and through what? What should one hear and through what? What should one speak and through what? And how should one know that through which all this is known? Through what should one know the knower? This is the highest teaching of the Upanishad. This is called self-transcendence, and the wise man perhaps experiences this in *samādhi*. All this we experience in a measure when we contemplate art or poetry.

I believe the spirit of the Upanishads can be described in this one sentence: you can have the knowledge of the soul's non-duality, divinity, and immortality, and yet discharge the daily duties of life. The Upanishads do not teach us to run away from the world, from the duties of life. All that the Upanishad insists on is always to be conscious of the true nature of the Spirit, that we are pure Spirit, non-dual and eternal, and at the same time do our duties which have been determined by our past *samskāra*, and ultimately lay down the body in the spell of this immortality.

### Self is the light within

The non-duality of the Self has been further discussed in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*. There is a discussion between Janaka and Yājñavalkya. Janaka asked, what serves as light to enable man to carry on his activities? Yājñavalkya replied that it is the light of the sun. Then Janaka asked, when night comes, what shines? Yājñavalkya said that it is the moon. Suppose, the moon is set, what serves as light? Yājñavalkya replied, fire. Suppose the fire is extinguished? Then speech. But suppose all these, the sun, moon, fire, and speech stop functioning, what serves as light for man? Then

Yājñavalkya said that it is the Self, the infinite *Purusha*, that which is identified with the self-effulgent light within the heart. While we are sleeping, there is no sun, no moon, no fire, and the senses do not function, yet in dream we see these things, and the senses appear to function. Yājñavalkya says that the sleeper carries the impression of the waking state and illumines it with the light of the Self. In dream, there are no tangible pleasures, joys, or delights, yet the soul creates all. This is Yājñavalkya's point of view.

Thus man moves between the two states, waking and dream, creating material objects in the waking state and subtle objects in the dream state. But when he is tired of these two, when he is tired of wandering between the waking state and the dream state, in other words, between this world and the other world, he falls into deep sleep, and then the picture changes. Like a hawk flying and, when its wings are tired, seeking its nest for rest, man, when he is tired of these two states, goes to sleep, where there is no more dream, no more desire. He forgets all duality and realizes that he is the all. That is his true condition, beyond desires, free from evils, and fearless. What man experiences in deep sleep is the merest glimpse of the experience of non-duality, and this experience is to be cultivated.

### **Non-duality of reality and divinity of man**

The last point I want to make is that the science of the Upanishads has been summed up in this great statement: '*Tat-tvam-asi*'

(That thou art). The world that I perceive implies or refers to a reality behind the universe. By 'That' we may understand a reality which is unlimited, as the universe is unlimited, but which is hypothetical, although it may be material in nature. The word 'thou' refers to a reality in man. When I say 'I', it is not the material person or the physical body that is meant, it is something spiritual behind the body; and it is not hypothetical, for no one has any doubt about his inner Self. It is directly perceived, but it seems to be limited, because the Self in me can be limited by other 'selves'. But when we say 'That thou art', then we get another conception of reality, unlimited like the reality which lies behind 'That', the universe. And this reality is not hypothetical; it is not of the nature of matter, as it is the reality behind all beings.

When the seers of the Upanishads made the statement 'That thou art', they really referred to a spiritual consciousness, a Reality which is unconditioned, unlimited, Spiritual in nature, and immediately and directly perceived. Herein we have the declaration of the divinity of the soul, and this is the unique message of the Upanishads. We are being told today that man is a mere cell in a hive, a mere cog in a machine; individual man has no right to bliss or happiness. The Upanishads affirm that individual man is unique, he is divine. Man is not a mere terrestrial being, he is celestial. If we remember the divine nature of the soul, which is the spirit of the Upanishads, then all our actions will be endowed with great significance and real meaning. ■

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