

Vidyās in the Upanishads

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The scriptures of the East provide modes of meditation leading to gnosis and transcendence. The mystic meditations are referred to as *Vidyās*. As the description is often cast in archaic language formats, it needs unravelling by intuitive as well as scholastic insights. An enlightened guru is deemed essential for interpretation, initiation and guidance through the practices of the *vidyā*, leading to fruition.

The *Vidyās* found in the well-known Upanishads are covered here. Mystic meditations are of three kinds, *Nirguna*, *Saguna* and *Pratika*, corresponding to the attributeless highest reality, the conditioned qualified entity at the apex of creation, and the specific symbolic entity respectively.

The essence of Vedanta is captured by *Bhumā Vidyā*, (Ch Up VII. 24.1), wherein Sanatkumāra instructs Nārada on the nature of the Unconditioned Highest Reality:

Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, understands nothing else—that is called the Infinite Plenum. But where one sees something else, hears something else, understands something else—that is called the finite.

That which is infinite is Immortal, and that which is finite is mortal.¹

Many of the immortal passages found in the Upanishads are a flow of nectarine dialogues between spiritually evolved individuals. The dialogue between Rishi Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi forms the basis of *Maitreyi Vidyā* (Br Up II 4.5).

O dear not for the love of this all, this all is dear,

But for the love of the Self, this all is dear.
This Atman, O Maitreyi, is to be seen, heard of, reflected upon and meditated upon.

O dear, through the seeing of, hearing of, reflecting upon and knowledge of this Self, all this becomes known.²

Sage Yājñavalkya continues further and explains that when there is Duality, then one sees the other, hears the other, speaks to the other and understands the other. But when one realises that one's Self alone exists everywhere, then through what can one see what, hear what, smell what, speak what; through what can one think of what?

...through what can one understand that by which everything is understood..

O dear, through what can one understand the understander?³

Dahara Vidyā (Ch Up VIII 1.1-1.3) is another significant *vidyā* where the meditator focuses on the spiritual heart, dwelling on the all-inclusive nature of the Self, where the external and the internal, the macrocosm and the microcosm, the universal and the individual all coalesce in 'One Unified Field of Pure Consciousness'.

This abode the small lotus that is here within the city of Brahman, and the small space within that lotus—what is there within this space, that is to be searched out, that certainly is to be known.

Verily, as extensive as the external Akasha, is this eternal Akasha.

Within it are contained the heaven and the earth, both fire and wind, both sun and moon, lightning and stars, both what exists here and what does not exist; everything here is contained within it ...⁴

Panchāgni Vidyā (Ch Up V 4.1-10.10) is the mystic meditation on the Five Fires. This is the means to ascend to *Saguna Brahman* through the Path of Light: *Devayāna*.

Ākāsha Vidyā (Ch Up I 9.1) is based on the highest *Tattva* in creation: *Ākāsha*, referred to as Space. Space is the receptacle of creation, seen as closest to transcendental Brahman.

Verily all things here arise out of Space. They disappear back into Space, for Space alone is greater than all these. It is the great goal. This is the most excellent Udgitha. This is endless.

The most excellent belongs to him, the most excellent worlds does he win, who, knowing it thus, meditates on the most excellent Udgitha.⁵

Prāna Vidyā (Kaus Up. II.3) uses the universality of the vital force that animates all life. *Prāna* is the Life principle of the universe. All beings enter into *Prāna* and depart from it as in cycles of transmigration. Its all-encompassing nature and subtlety makes it an effective ally as a deity for meditation.

Prāna in conjunction with the vital element *Vāyu* is invoked in *Samvarga Vidyā* (Ch Up IV 3.1-3.4), wherein sage Raikva initiates King Janashruti in this *vidyā*. *Samvarga* is the term implying absorption or taking in. At the cosmic level, *Vāyu* is the seat of merger of all constituents. At the individual level, the vital force *Prāna* comes into play as the locus for the merger of all the senses and the mind as during sleep.

Cosmically, Vayu is the ultimate of all. Fire, Sun, Moon, Waters merge into Vayu only. Individually, Prana is the ultimate of all. In sleep, speech, eye, ear, mind merge into Prana only. Vayu and Prana are the two Samvargas or absorbents. Earth, Water and Fire merge into Vayu.⁶

Udgitha Vidyā (Ch Up I 1.1-1.3) deploys the primordial *OM*, the singularity of the universal creation matrix and the transcendence beyond it. With its roots in *Shabda Brahman*, the particular meditative practice deploys the precise sound dynamics found in the *Sāma Veda* in conjunction with specific instructions to meditate on the *Udgitha*.

One should meditate on this letter OM which is Udgitha...

Of these objects the earth is the essence; of earth, water is the essence; of water, herbs are the essence; of herbs, the human body is the essence; of human body, (the organ of) speech is the essence; of speech, Rik is the essence; of Rik-mantras, the Sama-mantras are the essence; of Sama mantras, Udgitha is the essence.⁷

Purusha Vidyā (Ch Up III 16.1-16.7) looks at the life of a human being as a Sacrifice. It is said that Mahidāsa Aitareya who knew this *vidyā* lived for 116 years, consecrating his entire life as a sacrifice. The first phase of life is dedicated to study, the second to the householder-life and the third to spiritual practice.

Verily a person is a sacrifice. His first twenty-four years are the monthly oblations, the next forty-four years are the midday oblations, and the third forty-eight years (i.e. until the age of 116) are the third oblation.⁸

Neti-Neti Vidyā (Br Up III 9.26) deploys negation of all superimpositions perceived

subjectively in the finite world. All that is cognized as an object is transcended. The Self is beyond body, mind and life-force. It is Imperceptible, Unattached and Imperishable.

Thus the stage is set to attempt the flight to the Highest Reality: the Unbounded. *Akshara Vidyā*, (Br Up III 8.8) leading to the knowledge of the Imperishable Being is a corollary of *Neti-neti Vidyā*. Rishi Yājñavalkya gives this *vidyā* in his instruction to Rishika Gārgi. Herein all conceptual and phenomenal attributes are set aside to arrive at ‘That which remains’.

That O Gārgi, Brāhmanas call the Imperishable. It is not coarse, not fine, not short, not long, not glowing, not adhesive, not shadowy, not dark, not airy, not space, not sticky, odourless, tasteless, without eye, without ear, without voice, without wind, without energy, without breath, without mouth, without measure, without inside, without outside. It eats nothing. No one eats It.⁹

A related *vidyā* is the *Pancha Kosha Vidyā* (Tait Up II 8.5) which entails meditation on Five Sheaths (*Pancha Kosha*) consisting of the gross body, mind, life-force, intellect and bliss. The sheaths are seen as ascending levels. The meditator moves from gross to subtle and transcends all the adjuncts on his way to the Highest Reality. This approach is analogous to ‘finger pointing to the moon’, initiated by pointing to a particular tree branch (used as reference) and then gazing in to find the moon in the night sky.

Aparā Vidyā (Pras Upa I 3-10) is instructed by Rishi Pippalāda with the focus on *Hiranyagarbha*, The Cosmic Person. The *rishi* answers the questions asked by Kabandhi, one of his disciples, who starts by asking:

‘Venerable Sir, from what indeed are all these things born?’¹⁰

The answers given by the *Rishi* encompass the format of *Aparā Vidyā* enabling movement from lower to higher knowledge. The twin aspect of Creation in terms of the first couple of *Prāna* and *Rayih*, Sun and Moon, Eater and the Eaten, the Northern and Southern path etc. are elucidated.

Aitareya Vidyā (Ait Up I 1.1-1.3) imparted by the Rishi Aitareya to Vāmadeva and others leads to the realisation of Cosmos as Pure Existence-Consciousness. It states that at first, in the beginning, there was the Absolute Alone. Nothing else blinked. It thought of creating the Four Worlds and fashioned the Protecting Agent.

Meditation using the span of powerful visualization is explored in *Virāt Vidyā* (Mu Up II 1.4-1.10) where the Manifested Macrocosm is explored. *Virāt* is meditated as the ‘Indwelling Self in all beings’, having Heaven as His head, the Sun and Moon as His two eyes, the Directions as His ears, the revealed Vedas as His speech, Air as His ear, the Universe as His heart and the Earth as His two feet. He is all-pervading and yet, seated in the heart of man, He illumines action and knowledge.

Ashvattha-Vriksha Vidyā (Ka Up II 3.1-3.4) is another system of meditation that focuses on the Eternal Imperishable Brahman, the invisible ‘Tap-root of the Tree of Universal Life’. The analogy of an upside-down Peepul tree is used here. Dwelling on the Imperishable Brahman brings freedom from the cycles of *samsāra* with the perennial origin, decay and death of all entities in the ocean of impermanence.

Shodasakala Vidyā (Pras Up. VI 4-5) is the meditation on the Purusha, the Supreme Being. It explores sixteen aspects. It explains how from *Prāna*, He created faith,

space, air, fire, water, earth, organs, mind and food; and from food He created vigour, self-control, *mantras*, sacrificial rites, the worlds and names in the worlds.

Ānandamaya Vidyā (Tait Up II 8.1-8.4) is elucidated by explaining the ascending scale of happiness from the terrestrial to increasingly subtler worlds, (inhabited by *Gandharvas*, *Pitris*, *Karma Devas*, *Indras*, *Brihashpati*, *Prajāpati* etc.) all of which fall short of the Infinite Bliss of Brahman. The supreme bliss is immeasurable as it is beyond finite passions, desires, attainments and enjoyments of gross and subtle worlds.

Further, Rishi Varuna imparts the illuminating instruction to his son Bhrigu that *Ānanda* (Bliss) is the Alpha and Omega of all beings. There is the progressive realisation that the Self is not the body, vital energy, mind or intellect but the Bliss beyond, realised in the cave of the heart, leading to fullness and glory.

(He) knew Bliss as Brahman. For, from Bliss, all these beings originate; having been born, they are sustained by Bliss; they move towards and merge in Bliss...¹¹

The identity of *Ātman* with *Brahman*, the awe-inspiring revelation of the individual consciousness being the locus of the infinite Cosmic Field is expounded by the *Mahāvākyas*: The Great Sayings. This is seen in *Shvetaketu Vidyā* (Ch Up VI 8.7) where Rishi Uddālaka instructs *Shvetaketu* with the revelation: *Tat Tvam Asi*:

That which is the finest Essence, the Whole Universe has That as its Self. That is the Reality. That is the Atma. That thou art, O Shvetaketu!¹²

Ādesha Vidyā (Ken Up IV 4-7) uses the device of powerful analogies. The analogies used here include the flash of lightning illuminating the dark sky and the effortless

blinking of an eye. The spiritual realisation is a form of instantaneous intuition, a flash that dispels the illusion of the snake and reveals the rope. This leads to right perception with the birth of insight and ending of ignorance, *Avidyā*.

Mystic syllables are also used as keys to transcendence. *Stobha Vidyā* (Ch Up I 13.1-13.4) is based on mystic syllables from the *Sāma Vedā*. The unique sounds are mapped to the stellar constituents of the Universe.

The mystic sounds include *hāu*, *hāi*, *atha*, *iha*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *auhoi*, *him*, *svara*, *yā*, *vāk* and *hum*. These are meditated upon as earth, air, moon, *Ātman*, fire, sun, the invocation, *Vishvadeva*, *Prajāpati*, *Prāna*, food, *Virāt*. The last syllable *hum* (which is indeterminate) refers to the Unmanifested Supreme Entity. It is beyond existence as well as non-existence and is the final frontier to transcendence.

The next *vidyā* is based on the common experience of daily life. Just as an individual passes through the rooms of his house, the individual self passes through waking, dream and deep sleep states and finally passes from gross body to subtler realms after death. The Witness remains unchanged even as states of consciousness come and go.

Avasthā Catushtaya Vidyā (Br Up IV 3.6-3.20) focuses on the Ground of Being which remains unchanged even as it illuminates the three states of consciousness, comparable to passing clouds in the sky of pure consciousness. The Self is ever-present as the Pristine Effulgent Non-dual Awareness.

The famous passage wherein Lord Yama instructs Nachiketā in the intricacies of the path of Light forms the basis of *Nachiketā Vidyā* (Ka Up I 3.1-3.16). It is said that the Self is hidden in all beings. A finely honed intellect, focused inwards, becomes the able charioteer of the body—

using the mind as the reins to control the sense organs which run like horses on the road of the objects of the world.

The golden key, the spiritual fire to attain to the Highest is gained by a steadfast focus on the Self, being rooted in discrimination and detachment. Initiated by the illumined spiritual preceptor, the disciple undertakes the three *karmas* of sacrifice, charity and study of scriptures, ascends through the triad of listening, reflection and meditation on the Great Truth in the heroic journey towards Immortality.¹³

The last mile is reached with the cessation of all desires. Thus is born the Sage, the *Jivanmukta*. The fruits of meditation are attained as states of self-absorption crystallize into an abiding stage

where all knots have been cut asunder and there is tranquility and bliss. The sage sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self.

One continues to wonder at the procession of the *vidyās* found in the Upanishads. This would include other significant meditations referred to as *Isha*, *Vaishvānara*, *Madhu*, *Ashvamedha*, *Shāndilya*, *Satyakāma*, *Upakosalā*, *Āditya*, *Sāvitri*, *Gāyatri*, *Parā Vidyā* and many more. These meditations encompass multiple layers of insight and require a steadfast walk on the razor's edge, ably guided by an Enlightened Master. The *vidyās* provide the keys to the flowering of gnosis and immersion into the ocean of cosmic consciousness. ■

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| 8 <i>Essence of Vedanta</i> , op.cit., p. 40. | |

ABBREVIATIONS

Br Up: <i>Brihadāranyaka Upanishad</i>	Ch Up: <i>Chāndogya Upanishad</i>
Ka Up: <i>Katha Upanishad</i>	Pra Up: <i>Prashna Upanishad</i>
Ken Up: <i>Kena Upanishad</i>	Tait Up: <i>Taittiriya Upanishad</i>
Kau Up: <i>Kaushitaki Upanishad</i>	Ait Up: <i>Aitareya Upanishad</i>
Mu Up: <i>Mundaka Upanishad</i>	

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