

Chapter 3

The Upanishads

As we saw earlier, the word *upanishad* is a combination of three Sanskrit words *upa*, *ni*, and *shad*, which translated become, ‘near’, ‘below’ and ‘sit’ respectively.¹ The idea is that these writings arose from the recorded notes of students sitting ‘below’ or ‘near’ an illumined sage. This is an important idea in the Indian philosophical tradition. Knowledge in its most essential form cannot be taught through books but rather is transmitted by example, by experience, by life. In that ancient tradition, the student would live with the teacher and slowly imbibe an outlook on life that resonates with the sage’s teaching, the idea being that knowledge is not to be separated from daily life, but must also become practical. Even in our modern world, we see clearly that some form of this tradition enters into our method of transmitting higher learning. For example, the outlook of a graduate student must be different from that of an undergraduate, where in the case of the latter, the focus is on learning tracts of information and passing various examinations. The graduate program can be seen as an initiatory rite, in which we try to convey that knowledge is not a finished book and the activity of the scholars is to expand and broaden our horizons of understanding. In this, we try to initiate the students to think for themselves, to question, to probe deeper and ultimately make an original contribution to human thought. In essence, we teach them that they too must add new chapters to humanity’s book of knowledge.

The 6th century philosopher, Shankara, gives a slightly different meaning to the word *upanishad*. He traces the meaning to the root word *sad*, meaning “to loosen,” “to reach” or “to destroy.” If this root meaning is taken, Shankara says that the word *upanishad* means “that knowledge which destroys ignorance, or that by which ignorance is loosened.”²

¹See p. 19, S. Radhakrishnan, The Principal Upanishads.

²See p. 20 of S. Radhakrishnan, The Principal Upanishads.

There are over 200 Upanishads. Of these, 14 Upanishads have become prominent in the study of Indian philosophy. They are: *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Māndukya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, *Brhadāraṇyaka*, *Svetāsvatara*, *Kausītaki*, *Mahānārāyana* and *Maitri*. These are called the principal Upanishads. They have certainly been written before the Buddhistic period and are dated around the 8th or 7th century B.C.

We do not know the names of the authors of the Upanishads. The writings are to be thought of as brief jottings by the student of the teachings of the sage. From their brevity, one can infer that their purpose was only to nudge the memory of the student to reflect and meditate upon teachings which seemed to be familiar in the period of time they were written.

A major portion of these writings is pure philosophy and the modern philosopher would have no difficulty in understanding the drift of thought and would be quite at home with the questioning. Occasionally, we find in them examples that clearly refer to some social custom or mythological tradition of that time. Thus, in our study of them, we will be careful to separate those passages from the pure philosophical inquiry.

The central theme of the Upanishads is best illustrated by the opening question of the Mundaka Upanishad (1.1.3) where the student asks the sage, “What is that by knowing which everything is known?” This is a fundamental philosophical question that ignites further questions such as “What is knowledge” and “What do we mean by knowing?”

The core message of the Upanishads is that there is an ultimate Reality that they label as *Brahman*, derived from the Sanskrit word *brih* which means that which is vast and expansive. A refrain in the Upanishads is *Tat tvam asi*, which means “you are that.” That is, at the fundamental level, we are That which is vast and expansive. To indicate that dimension of the ultimate Reality at the individual level, the Upanishads use the word, *ātman*. The English word “atmosphere” is derived from the Greek word *atmos* which means vapor or air and the Greek word in turn, is derived from the Sanskrit word *ātman*. This does not mean that the word means vapor or air. Rather, the sages used the word to indicate the dimension of the ultimate Reality as reflected in the individual. It is often incorrectly translated as the “soul” in the early translations, but a more accurate English rendering would be “Self”. Here again, this is a poor translation since the *ātman* is beyond thought and feeling and cannot be objectified. Thus, one should definitely not confuse it with the ego.

We will therefore be alert to indicate the subtle nuances of the Sanskrit passages. It is important to keep in mind that the dominant theme of the

Upanishads is monism, or more accurately, it is non-dualism, and it is most unfortunate that early translations of the Upanishads have distorted their meaning by introducing the word ‘God’ or the word ‘Lord’ when no such dualism was meant. These words now have precise theological meanings and we must be cautious in reading these translations.

3.1 The Isa Upanishad

The Isa Upanishad is one of the smaller Upanishads consisting of only 18 verses. Even though it is short, it is considered to be very important and foremost in giving the trend of thought of all the Upanishads. Thus, we will study it in its entirety. The opening verse of the Isa Upanishad is worth examining in some detail. It is

*Isāvāsyam idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyām jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjīthā mā grdhah kasyasvid dhanam.*

Isa is the cosmic ruling force. The highly complicated and abstract word ‘is’ of the English language is derived from the Sanskrit word *asti*. This is not unrelated to *īsa*. This conveys a clearer idea of what is meant by *īsa*. In many translations, *īsa* is translated as God or Lord³, but this is inaccurate. These erroneous translations give the impression of some deity sitting up in the clouds, and this is the opposite of what the Upanishads are trying to convey. As we have emphasized, the underlying theme of the Upanishads is non-dualism.

A faithful and accurate translation of the first verse is as follows. The ruling force dwells in everything, in every bit of it, even in anything that is changing or moving. By that renunciation, enjoy. Do not covet the wealth of anyone.

These verses have to be meditated upon deeply before their inner meaning is revealed. Often, several important ideas are compressed into a terse verse. Each verse is to be reflected upon further. Seldom is it the case that the deeper meanings are instantly revealed.

The Upanishadic sages recognised that there is something holding this universe together, some form of ‘cosmic glue’, the *īsa*, the ruling force. Thus the verse says that the ruling force is in everything, not in a part of everything, but in every bit of it, even in those things that are changing and moving. Thus,

³See for example, S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy, Princeton University Press, p. 39.

it is all-pervasive. At the same time, it is not changing. It is eternal, because anything changing is subject to the laws of decay and death.

The last two lines of the verse are equally profound. “By that renunciation, enjoy. Do not covet the wealth of anyone.” The word ‘renunciation’ or *tyaga* is a recurrent word in the Upanishads and later in the Bhagavad Gita. Thus, we must understand its precise meaning. It means, to give up the sense of ownership, to be detached, to give up the sense of possession. It does not mean, as is often the view, that we should give up everything and walk away. Nor does it mean we should become cynical and pessimistic. Rather, renunciation is something that arises as a corollary of the main thesis that all of this that we see, including ourselves, is *īsa*, is One. ‘By that realisation, enjoy,’ is the instruction we get from the second line.

In this line, the sage has isolated for clinical study that trait of the human being that is responsible for all the difficulties on the planet, namely, the sense of ownership. Thus, if the first line is an assertion of monism, the second line is a total rejection of dualism, since dualism is rooted in the notion of separation, in the idea of ‘you’ and ‘me’. If this universe is pervaded by the cosmic ruling force, and in fact, every particle of it is that, then it follows that nothing belongs to me. Thus, we are to enjoy this world by giving up the sense of ownership. Hence, if the first line states that this entire universe, including ourselves, is pervaded by *īsa*, the next line indicates how we may attain to that realisation, namely by giving up the sense of ownership, which is rooted in the idea of duality.

When we take a cosmic perspective, things come into clearer focus. Nothing really belongs to us. Even this body and mind are not our handiwork. We are simply, for the time being, trustees, as it were of our body and mind. This idea, is the meaning of renunciation. When we analyse in life what it is that makes us miserable, invariably we find the idea of possession lurking in the background. We have tried to grasp something and it has slipped from our hands. Or often, it is that someone has bruised our ego, which arises from our mind grasping at the idea of ‘I’, at the sense of individuality, which again is based on duality. Our enjoyments at present seem to be through grasping or possession. However, there is, as this verse indicates, a higher form of enjoyment and that is through renunciation, with the awareness that nothing really belongs to us and that we are merely trustees of whatever we temporarily have.

Vivekananda⁴ explains the idea of renunciation as follows. Suppose that in an art auction, there are paintings for sale and we go there just to look at them

⁴See S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 149, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Advaita Ashrama.

but not to buy anything. “Who enjoys the picture, ” Vivekananda asks, “the seller or the seer? The seller is busy with his accounts, computing what his gain will be, how much profit he will realise on the picture. His brain is full of that. He is looking at the hammer and watching the bids. He is intent on learning how fast the bids are rising. That man is enjoying the picture who has gone there without any intention of buying or selling. He looks at the picture and enjoys it. So this whole universe is a picture, and when these desires [of possession] have vanished, we will enjoy the world, and then this buying and selling and these foolish ideas of possession will be ended.”

The last line, ‘Do not covet the wealth of anyone,’ is to emphasize that again, it is the covetous attitude that is the source of difficulty, that is the cause of misery. If we give these ideas up, we can enjoy life. Thus, enjoyment in the Upanishadic sense, can only be when we give up our mental ideas of ownership. It is not attained by outwardly becoming a mendicant, but inwardly, by giving up all ideas of possession. It is a mental process.

A philosopher in this ancient tradition, after having reasoned things out, tries to carry out that reasoning into practice. The understanding must transcend the intellect and this can only be done by trying to live the idea. This is really what it means to be a true philosopher. Is it easy to do? In practice, it is not because we have been conditioned in many ways, through family, through social conventions, and in other ways. To be a philosopher means we must examine how these conditionings have entered our thinking and remove them from our thinking. It will be noticed that all of these conditionings arise from the notion of duality.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote that the first verse of the Isa Upanishad encapsulates the entire theme of Indian philosophical thought. He wrote⁵, “Since *īsa* pervades every fibre of my being and all of you, I derive from it the doctrine of equality of all creatures on earth ... This *mantra* tells me that I cannot hold as mine anything ... and if my life and that of all who believe in this *mantra* has to be a life of perfect dedication, it follows that it will have to be a life of continual service of our fellow creatures.”

With this in mind, the next verse becomes more meaningful. “Only by doing work should one desire to live here a hundred years. Thus, and in no other way, work will not stain you.” That is, work is to be understood as ‘service to our fellow creatures’ and if we work with this view, we will not be attached to our work. The idea here is that when selfish desire enters our work, we become attached to results. So, in this second verse, we see the

⁵The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 64 (1936-1937), Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1976, p. 290.

emergence of a philosophy of work, or *karma yoga*, that is later amplified in subsequent philosophical writings. It is a theme that occurs later in the *karma yoga* expanded upon in the Bhagavad Gita.

The opening word of the third verse requires careful translation. The word *asurya* is a combination of two parts *a* and *surya*. *Surya* means sun or light, and *asurya* means without light. Thus, the meaning of the third verse is that those who do not understand this life principle, *īsa*, are without light and live in a world of blind gloom, as it were.

The fourth verse indicates the understanding of *īsa* is beyond mind and the fifth verse, through beautiful poetic style, tries to convey this mystery. “Unmoving, the One is faster than the mind. The sense organs cannot reach It. ... It moves and It moves not. It is far and It is near. It is within all this. It is also outside all this.”

As *īsa* is animating mind and the sense organs, *īsa* cannot be reached through either the mind or the sensory system. Movement can only be described relative to something that is motionless. If *īsa* animates everything, it clearly moves in this sense, and at the same time, it does not move since there is nothing else you can use as a reference point.

At the level of living things, what is meant by ‘It’ in these verses can be taken to mean awareness, or consciousness. It is this mystery of consciousness that is taken up in the later Upanishads and more fundamentally, in the Kena Upanishad. Consciousness animates the mind and the sense organs. ‘It’ can also be viewed as the principle of life. In fact, the word *mātarisvan* that appears in the fourth verse, is a combination of two words, *māta* and *īsvara* derived from the root word *īsa* that we have already met. The word *īsvara* signifies the principle of existence, or more accurately, the principle of ‘isness’. The word *māta* brings the mother aspect and the combination thus connotes the ‘life principle’. That this word is used here is significant since the theme of the mother principle pervades much of the later mythology of India. The English word, ‘mother’ is derived from the Latin word *mater* which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word, *māta*.

Aurobindo translates ‘*mātarisvan*’ as the matrix out of which things evolve and this is a more accurate translation. The word ‘matrix’ is derived from the Latin *mater*. It means “that within which something originates, takes form” according to the Webster dictionary. The usage of the term in mathematics can be traced back to the 19th century, to the fundamental work of Hermann Grassman, who was the first to write the foundational treatise on linear and multilinear algebra. It is curious that Grassman was in fact a Sanskrit scholar

and compiled a translation of the Rg Veda before his mathematical work. Apart from being a philologist, he was also a mathematician of the highest rank, as is now evidenced by a study of his works. Unfortunately, during his lifetime, Grassman was not recognized for his mathematical abilities and spent his life as a school teacher. Based on his deep knowledge of languages, it is clear that Grassman's use of 'matrix' in mathematics was quite deliberate since it is derived from the Latin word *mater* and the Sanskrit word *māta* both signifying "mother" or more accurately, "the womb." The theory of matrices is definitely the womb of mathematics, as any serious student of the subject quickly learns. According to Hermann Weyl ⁶, it is "Her All-embracing Majesty, $GL(n)$," which is at the heart of mathematics.

Expanding on his translation of the word, Aurobindo⁷ writes, "*Mātarisvan* seems to mean 'he who extends himself in the Mother or container' whether that be the containing mother element, Ether, or the material energy called Earth in the Veda and spoken of there as the Mother. It is a Vedic epithet of the God, Vayu, who representing the divine principle in the Life energy, Prana, extends himself in Matter and vivifies its forms. Here it signifies the divine Life-power that presides in all forms of cosmic activity."

The sixth verse says, "One who clearly perceives the *ātman* in all beings, and all beings in the *ātman* does not separate oneself from the cosmic principle." As stated earlier, the Greek word *atmos* signifying vapor, or air, and the Sanskrit word *ātman* are related, though in the latter case, the word indicates the *īsa* principle at the individual level. The next verse expands this theme. "What sorrow, what delusion is there for one who sees intimately the unity of existence and knows all beings to be one's own Self (*Atman*)."⁸ Thus, the sage who perceives the underlying unity within and without is free from delusion.

The eighth verse is: "It is all pervasive, radiant, indivisible, without a body, without a scar of imperfection, without sinews. It is pure and uncontaminated by ignorance. The poet is the ruler of the mind, the ruler of nature and self-existent. It has assigned all things properly." The last part is to be interpreted as follows. On one hand, all things seem to have an intrinsic order and arrangement. At the same time, it signals that there is more to this universe than what is perceived.

The next verse is, at first, rather enigmatic. "They enter into blinding darkness who adore ignorance. Into greater darkness, as it were, they enter who are devoted to knowledge alone." At a superficial level, it means to be cautious about the arrogance of knowledge. But there is a deeper idea. The idea here

⁶H. Weyl, *The Classical Groups*, p. 136, Princeton University Press.

⁷See Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, *The Upanishads*, p. 64

is very profound: the more you know, the more you discover that is yet to be known. One can say that this is an illumined form of ignorance.

That we must transcend ‘the greater darkness’ is the import of the next two verses. Taken together, they mean, “One result they say is obtained by knowledge, and quite another by non-knowledge. Thus have we heard from the wise who explained it to us. He who understands both knowledge and non-knowledge, conquers death through non-knowledge and attains immortality through knowledge.” Here knowledge refers to the knowledge of the changeless, the ultimate Reality and non-knowledge refers to knowledge of the changing, phenomenal nature. Thus, we conquer death through knowledge of the changing but transcend both life and death, that is, gain immortality in this sense, through knowledge of the ultimate Reality.

A faithful translation of the next two verses is as follows. “Those who think That is beyond manifestation enter into blinding darkness. Those who say That has form enter into greater darkness, as it were. One result, they say is obtained from the adoration of manifestation and quite another from the adoration of the unmanifest. Thus we have heard from the wise who explained it to us.” The meaning is clear here. The human being is conditioned to think in forms and words. Thus, if we are to grasp the ultimate Reality without these methods, we plunge into darkness. Without words, we have no support and nowhere to stand on. If on the other hand we insist on thinking only in terms of words and forms, then we plunge into greater darkness as it were, since we will limit our idea of That through definitions.

The last four verses are more like a prayer to the mind. In the process of meditation, we may propel our mind to a higher stage of awareness but fail to maintain that awareness due to our past impressions. Thus, the student is praying this does not happen. “Like a lid, Thy shining golden orb covers the entrance to the Truth. Please remove it, O Supporter, so that I who am devoted to Truth may behold That. O Nourisher, the sole Seer. O Controller, O Sun, the supporter of all. Gather thy brilliance, draw together thy light. Through your grace, I behold That which is beyond. I am That. Let my life force be merged in the all-pervading Life. Let the body be reduced to ashes. Om. Remember the goal. Remember the goal.” And finally, we have, “O Agni, lead us by the goodly path. You know all the ways. Prevent all distractions from the goal. We salute you again and again.”

These verses are attempting to convey the state of mind in deeper stages of meditation. According to the sages, it is possible to completely silence all mental modifications so that one may ‘perceive’ the underlying awareness. True, it cannot be objectified, because to do that would put it in the realm of the mind.

However, it can be experienced. This is the meaning of the line 'I am That', indicating at that point the student has realised his oneness with the Ultimate Reality. The body and mind are only vehicles for this experience and so the next line says, 'Let the body be reduced to ashes.'

This experience can be likened to the process of putting a multi-stage rocket into orbit. To escape the gravitational pull of the earth, the booster rockets carry the rocket to the higher regions and then drop off so that the main rocket may ascend higher. A similar process is occurring here. Both the body and the mind are instruments to soar into a higher level of awareness and when the sage (or the student recording this teaching) manages to silence his mind to experience the underlying Awareness, he exclaims, 'I am That.' But then, lest he (or she) descend again to a lower level of awareness, he reminds himself to focus on the goal again. 'Om' is the recurrent symbol of the Ultimate Reality that occurs later in many of the Upanishads as well as the Bhagavad Gita. The final prayer to Agni is thus an invocation to the cosmic Will, so that the student may maintain this higher awareness.

In this short upanishad, we see the trend of thought that is fundamental to the whole of the Indian philosophical tradition. It is therefore fitting that we begin our survey of the Upanishads with the *Isa*.

