

## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO *UPANIṢADS* AND MESSAGE OF THE *UPANIṢADS*

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO UPANIṢADS AND MESSAGE OF THE UPANIṢADS

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The cultural and spiritual legacy of India is vast as well as rich. There is nothing sectarian or regional about it. It is so universal in its appeal and so catholic in its approach that it belongs to the whole world. This legacy is derived from the *Vedas*. They include all schools of Indian thought except that of the *Lokāyata*, *Buddhists* and *Jains*. The word *Veda* is derived from the root of the Sanskrit verb ‘*vid*’ which means to know, to understand. They are four in number - *Ṛgveda* (*Veda* of poems), *Yajurveda* (*Veda* of sacrifices), *Sāmaveda* (*Veda* of songs), and *Atharvaveda* (*Veda* of black magic). Each of them is subdivided into *Samhitā* (collections), *Brāhmaṇa* (dealing with Vedic rituals, sacrificial rites), *Āraṇyaka* (sacrificial rites) and *Upaniṣads*.

*Vedas* have been handed down to us since time immemorial, they have neither a beginning (*anādi*) nor an end (*anaṅta*). They are not authored by any individual in any point of time and therefore they are called as *apauruṣeya*. They were only seen or visualized by the sages in their deep contemplative moods and hence sages are called as the seers of the *mantra-s* and not the authors (*mantra draṣṭaraha na tu kartāraha* |). The *Vedas* stand for the divine truth and indescribable truth. Sāyanacārya, the commentator of the *Vedas* say that ‘The entire world was created out of the vedic knowledge (‘*yo vedebhyāha akhilaṃ jagat nirmame*’). Hence it can be understood that the supreme knowledge existed even before the origin of mankind. The *Vedas* does not depend upon any other external authority or validity but are themselves a supreme authority or validity (*svataha prāmānya*).

*Samhitā-s*, *Brāhmaṇa-s* and *Āraṇyaka-s* deal with the work and action and are called as *karma kāṇḍa* where as the *Upaniṣads* deal with knowledge and hence are called *Jñāna kāṇḍa*. The first three deal with the praising of a personal god, the way to worship the god through sacrifices and ceremonies. The *Upaniṣads* come at the end of the *Vedas* and are called as *Vedānta*. More than 360 *Upaniṣads* have been enlisted in the Indian tradition of which 108 have been preserved. Although Śankarāchārya has recognized 16 of them to be authentic and authoritative, the following ten are called as major *Upaniṣads*:

*Īśa-Kena- Kaṭa-Praśna- Mūṇḍa-Māṇḍūkya-Tittirīhi* |

*Aitareyam ca Chāndogyam Bṛhadāraṇya eva ca* ||

## 1.1 MEANING OF THE WORD UPANIṢAD

The word *Upaniṣad* is derived from the root of the Sanskrit verb 'sad' with two prepositions 'upa' and 'ni'. *Sad* means movement, to loosen the bondage, refuge or shelter. *Upa* means nearness, continuity. *Ni* means totality, command, completely or fully. Two meanings are derived by joining these three words (*upa*, *ni*, and *sad*). 1) Sitting close to the teacher 2) Learning the secret knowledge from the teacher which releases the disciple from worldly bondage and ignorance. Śankarāchārya gives another meaning i.e. knowledge of god. The *Upaniṣad* is called royal knowledge (*rāja vidyā*) and royal secret doctrine (*rāja guhya*) as a person should be spiritually ready to receive it and get benefited by it.

## 1.2 THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE UPANIṢADS

Homogeneity can be found in all the *Upaniṣads*. They deal with the topics of supreme reality (Brahman), individual soul (Ātman), world (jagat) and their inter – relationships. These concepts are in the form of an enchanting dialogue between a teacher and a student, father and son, mother and son and so on. Generally people are under the impression that the *Upaniṣads* are a hard nut to crack and have formidable concepts and hence should be read at leisure or after retirement from professional service. But how can this study be done when such people have become weak physically, mentally and intellectually. In fact, the study of the *Upaniṣads* should begin at a young age for a clear perspective of life.

Just as *upanayana* (the sacred thread ceremony) can be taken to mean both ways leading to the Guru, or “leading to the *Paramātmān*” the *Upaniṣads* also permit a dual interpretation. Instructing by keeping close to the disciple implies that the thing taught is in the nature of a secret personal advice. It is not those who are not mentally conditioned to absorb the teaching. That is why the *Upaniṣad*, when propounding subtle truths, says pointedly.

That which is Latent in the *Vedas* is called *Rahasya* or secret. The *Upaniṣads* are such confidential personalized instructions to those fit to receive the mean. *Upaniṣads* come towards the end of the *Āraṇyakas*. If the *Samhitā* is linked to a tree, the *Brāhmaṇas* are its flowers and the *Āraṇyakas* are its fruits, in an unripened state, the *Upaniṣads* are the ripen fruits. The direct methods of realizing through the path of knowledge (*Jñāna mārga*) the no duality (*abhedha*) of the Supreme Being and the soul are explained in the *Upaniṣads*. Although *Upaniṣads* contain reference to various discipline of learning (*Vedas*) *Yajnas* and

worship of *devatas* etc. essentially, their main theme is a philosophical enquiry and dealing with that state of the mind with all shackles destroyed.

On this basis, the *Vedas* are generally considered to have two portions, viz., *Karma Kāṇḍa* (portion dealing with knowledge). These are also referred to as *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* and *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*.

After analyzing the *Karma Kāṇḍa*, Maharshi Jaimini expressed the view that it was the end-product or fruit of vedic philosophy. His treatise is called *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*. Similar analysis of the *Jñāna Kāṇḍa* by sage Vedavyāsa and these he stated in the form of aphorisms – *Brahmāsūtra*. Compared to the *Karma Kāṇḍa*, the *Upaniṣad* portion of *Jñāna Kāṇḍa* is very small in extent and is in a condensed form. Whereas Jaimini's *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā sūtras* contain 1000 sections, the *Brahmā sūtra* has only 192 sections.

Just as a tree has a profusion of leaves but only a relatively small number of flowers and fruits, so also the tree of the *Veda* has many leaves in the form *Karma Kāṇḍa* and the *Upaniṣad* portions are much fewer like the fruits of a tree. Foreign scholars and philosophers in their intellectual approaches have not delved deep enough to touch the fringe of *satyam* or Transcendental Truth. Experimental verifications of the conclusion which is reached by the intellect is necessary, the special characteristic of the *Upaniṣads*, which other philosophical systems do not share, is that they contain *mantras* which translate philosophical thought through the aid of vibrations of the *mantras* into actual experience.

Unlike other philosophy, which is in the nature of intellectual research, the *Karma Kāṇḍa* of the *Vedas* prescribes a way of its philosophy. If one lived according to its dictates, it would lead to purity of thought, when one could withdraw from worldly activities. If, at this stage, one studied the *Upaniṣads* assiduously, it would not be merely a mental exercise but a way of life, a part of one's experience of life, as it were.

It is at this summit of philosophical experience that the non-duality of the Soul and Supreme Being (*Jīva* and *Brahman*,) become clearer. It is to reach this stage that a person, who has conditioned his mind by the performance of *Karma*, has to leave all activities and become a monk - *sanyasi*. But for one from each *Veda* is very important, thought-provoking and one meditates deeply, the non-duality will be actually experienced.

### 1.3 WHAT UPANIṢADS CONTAIN

In the *Upaniṣads*, we get an intelligible body of verified and verifiable spiritual insights mixed with a mass of myths and legends and cosmological speculation relating to the nature and origin of the universe. While the former has universal validity, and has a claim on human intelligence in all ages, the latter forswears all such claim. All positivistic knowledge contained in any literature, including religious literature, is limited and conditioned by the level of contemporary scientific knowledge.

Modification, and even scrapping, of much of this knowledge due to subsequent advances has affected the truth-validity of much of man's literary heritage including his religious and philosophical ones.

### 1.4 THE PRINCIPLE UPANIṢADS

The principle *Upaniṣads* are accepted to be those which Śaṅkarācārya (ce 788) chose to comment upon: they are ten in number and are enumerated in the tradition as follows: *Īśa*, *Kena*, *Kaṭa*, *Praśna*, *Mūṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, and *Bṛhadāranyaka*.

According to some scholars, Śaṅkara also commentated on an eleventh *Upaniṣad*, the *Svetasvatara*. In his commentary on the *Brahmā-Sūtra*, he refers to four more – Namely, *Kausitaki*, *Jābāla*, *Mahānārāyana* and *Pingala*.

The *Īśa Upaniṣad* embodies in its very central theme of all the *Upaniṣads* namely the spiritual unity and solidarity of all existence.

The *Kena* illumines the nature of knowledge by pointing out the eternal knower behind all acts of knowing, and purifies man's concept of ultimate reality of all touch of finitude and relatively of the universe.

The *Kaṭa* holds a special fascination for all students of the *Upaniṣads* for its happy blend of charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy; it contains a more unified exposition of *Vedānta* than any other single *Upaniṣad*; its charm is heightened by the two characters of its dialogue, namely, old Yama, the teacher and young Naciketas, the student.

The *Praśna*, as its name implies, is an *Upaniṣad* of questions, each of its six chapters comprises a question asked by each of a group of six inquiring students on various aspects of Vedānta and the answers given by their teacher the sage Pippalāda.

The *Mūṇḍaka*, after classifying all knowledge into *parā* higher and *aparā*; lower , and describing all science , art, literature, politics, and economics- in fact all positive knowledge, the knowledge of the changeful many- as *aparā*, and boldly including even the holy *Vedas* and all sacred books in this category, proclaims that one knowledge as *parā*, by which the important changeless reality (of the One behind the many) is realized and the *Upaniṣad* sings in ecstasy the glorious vision of the One in many.

In the brief compass of its twelve verses of the condensed thoughts, the *Māṇḍūkya* surveys the whole of experience through a study of the three states of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, and reveals the *Ātman*, the self of man, the *Turīyā* or the fourth, as it puts it, as pure consciousness, eternal and non-dual. It proclaims in its second verse the infinite dimension of man in a pregnant utterance – one of the four *mahāvākyas* or “great utterances” of the *Upaniṣads*; *ayam ātma brahmā* – this *Ātman* (self of man) is *Brahman*.

The *Taittirīya* after majestically proclaiming that “the knower of *Brahmān* attains the supreme (*Brahmāvidāpnoti param*), describes the five *kośas* or sheaths that enclose and hide *Brahman*, and demonstrates the technique of piercing these sheaths of relativity and finitude with a view to reaching the infinite and the eternal at the core of experience . It also provides a scientific definition of *Brahman* as “that from which all these beings are born, by which after being born, they live and into which they merge when they cease to be.

The *Aitareya* established the spiritual character of the absolute through a discussion of the nature of the self of men, and proclaims this truth in another of the four *mahāvākyas* (v.3): *Prajñānam Brahmā-Brahmān* is pure consciousness.

The *Chāndogya* introduces us to charming truth- seekers like Satyakāma, Śvetaketu and Nārada, and outstanding spiritual teachers like Āruni, Śanatkumāra, and Prajāpati. Through several illuminating teacher –student dialogues, the *Upaniṣad* helps us to discriminate the reality of being from the appearance of becoming. In a brief utterance of deep four *mahāvākyas*, it sings in refrain the divinity of man; “*Tat tvam asi*” –That thou art. It

prescribes knowing of this innate divinity of man as the one remedy for the deeper ills of life; (*Tarati śōkam ātmaviti*) - the knower of the Ātman crosses all sorrow.

In this profound human episode of the discipleship of Indra under Prajapati, it instructs us in the true nature and technique of man's spiritual quest and the blessings that flow spirituality, it is an impressive account of man's spiritual education his growth from worldliness to spirituality. It points out the limitation of materialism as a philosophy of life and the evils that flow from it.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* the longest of the *Upaniṣad*, as its name implies, is a big forest of philosophical thought and spiritual inspiration. Four outstanding personalities illumine its pages: Janaka, the philosopher – king, Yajñavalkya, two women i.e. Gargi, and the Vacaknavi, the gifted woman speaker and philosopher “Who is foremost among the questioners of Yajñavalkya in philosophical debate”. The *Upaniṣad* majestically expounds, through its fascinating dialogues conducted by these outstanding and other lesser personalities, the central theme of all the *Upaniṣads*, namely the universe in *Brahman*. It contains another of four *mahāvākyas*, namely, *Āham Brahmasmi; I am Brahman*, besides the *ayam ātma Brahma* of the *Māṇḍūkya* already referred to. It dares to characterize *Brahman* as the attainment, here and now, of the state of absolute fearlessness and fullness of delight.

Śankara's commentaries on these *Upaniṣads*, especially on those of their passages with philosophical discussions are illuminated by deep spiritual insights. His masterly handling of the Sanskrit language in these commentaries gives us a prose which is marked by brevity and vigor, simplicity and poetic charm.

Ādi Śankarāchārya selected ten of the *Upaniṣads*, called *Dāsopaniṣads* and wrote *Bhāṣya* or commentary on them. He highlighted the non-duality doctrine propounded in them. Rāmanuja and Mādhva who came later, also wrote *Bhāṣya* on their very ten *Upaniṣads* but each of them emphasized their respective doctrines, Viz. *Viśiṣṭha-Ādvaita* (qualified non-dualism) and *Dvaita* (dualism).

The following *śloka* enumerates the ten *Upaniṣads*:

***Iśa Kena Kaṭa Praśna Mūṇḍa Māṇḍūkya Tittirihi /  
Aitareyam Ca Chāndogyam Bṛhadāraṇyakam Dasa ||***

Ādi Śankara wrote his commentary also in the above order of texts.

## 1.5 THE FOUR MAHĀVĀKYAS

*Mahāvākyas* are at the heart of *Vedānta*. Actually, all of these emerged out of the one source of teachings, and now appear to be three separate practices. The higher understandings and direct experience comes from person-to-person listening (written and oral.), followed by deep reflections, contemplation, and deep contemplative meditation.

The four *Mahāvākyas* are contained in four *Upaniṣads*. Although there exist numerous rituals or *Karmas* varieties of worship and ways of life as propounded in the end of the journey and realizing the ultimate objectives, the *upaniṣads* alone are of help. There is a *Mahāvākya* in *Aitareya Upaniṣad* of the *R̥gveda* which says that exalted actual experience alone is *Brahman*. “*Prajñānam Brahmā*”. I am *Brahman* is another *Mahāvākya* from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* of *Śukla Yajur Veda*. The fourth Chapter of the *Taittirīya upaniṣad* contains a the statement *Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahmā* I

There is a *Mahāvākya* in *Chāndogya upaniṣad* of the *Sāma Veda* in the form of a Guru teaching his disciple to the effect that “that thou art”, the *Ātman* is *Brahman*, *Ayam ātma brahma* is the *Mahāvākya* from *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* of *Atharva Veda*.

Ādi Śankarācārya's terse and pithy advice to spiritual aspirants is contained in *Sōpāna Pañcaka*, a string of five verses which outline the steps to be taken on the ladder of spiritual ascent. He started by saying “Study and recite the *Vedas*, perform the various rituals prescribed there in” and concludes; “being guided by the *Mahāvākyas*, meditate on them constantly and reach the state of *Brahman*”. Thus, it will be seen that the *Upaniṣad* contain the ultimate message and purpose of the *Vedas*. They are therefore, known as *Vedānta* the word *Anta* means End, *Upaniṣads* are the end of the *Vedas* in two senses. When each *Veda Śākhā* is taken the *Āraṇyaka*, at whose concluding portion comes the *Upaniṣad*. The ultimate goal of or aim of the *Vedas* is contained in the *Upaniṣad*. Thus the *Upaniṣads* are the “end” of the *Vedas* both in the senses of textual presentation and realization of the end-product.



## 1.6 THE MESSAGE OF THE UPANIṢAD

The message of the *Upaniṣads* is a study, verse by verse, of three of the principle *Upaniṣads*, Namely *Íśa*, *Kena*, and *Kaṭa*.

The first contains eighteen, the second thirty-five, and the third one hundred and nineteen verses. Through constitution a small portion of the total Upaniṣadic Literature, they yet contain a lucid exposition of all the essential idea of this immortal Literature.

Scholars are divided as to the date of the composition of the *Upaniṣad*. Many of them have agreed however, that most of the principle *Upaniṣads* belong to the period prior to Before the Common Era (BCE). There are over two hundred *Upaniṣads*, many of them are sectarian in character and palpably post-Buddhist and even post-Śankarācārya.

## 1.7 SATYASYA SATYAM

By sheer speculation on the meaning of the facts of the external world, the vedic thinkers had earlier arrived at a unitary conception of the universe, at a materialistic monism, through their concepts of *avyakta*, indeterminate nature, or *prāṇa*, cosmic energy, but the culminating point of their discoveries was the spiritual unification of all experience in the *Ātma* or *Brahman*: *Brahmāivedaṃ viśvamidaṃ varisthaṃ* –All this manifested universe is verily *Brahman* the supreme.

If everything is *Ātman* or *Brahman*, the universe of name and form cannot be an illusion. The *Upaniṣads* consider it as *māyā* but this is what we see around us. It refers to the inner contradictions involved in our experience of the world and in our knowledge of it. These contradictions will remain, says the *Upaniṣads*, so long as we remain at the sensate level, so long as we fail to take into account the *Ātman*, the self behind the non-self, the one behind the many. Yet all our experience and knowledge in the sphere of *Māyā* are experience and knowledge of the *Ātman*, coming through the sense-organs. Hence they are not illusory, but true. Man travels, says Swami Vivekananda, not from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from truth that is lower to truth that is higher. Hence the *Upaniṣads* describe the world of the not-self as truth, and the self or *Ātman* as The Truth of Truth, This is conveyed in a significant passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*.

*Tasyopanīsat satyasya satyamiti; prāṇa vai satyaṃ; teṣāṃ eṣa satyaṃ* – Its intimate name is the truth of truth”; the cosmic energy is verily truth and this is the truth of that.

Here are really no difference between matter, mind and Spirit. They are only different phases of experience the One. This very world is seen by the five senses as matter, by the very wicked as well by the good as heaven and by the perfect as God'.

## 1.8 THE UPANIṢADS AND INDIAN CULTURE

Without understanding the *Upaniṣads*, it is impossible to get an insight into Indian history and culture. Every subsequent development of philosophy and religion in India has drawn heavily on the *Upaniṣads*. The path of the *bhakti* or devotion to a personal God, the path of *Karma* or detached action, and the synthesis of all spiritual paths in a comprehensive spirituality, expounded by the *Gīta*, are all derived from the *Upaniṣad*. The *Gīta* is described as *Brahmāvidyāntargata yogaśāstra* - the science of *Yoga* derived from the science of *Brahman*. Emphasizing this pervasive influence of the *Upaniṣad* on Indian religion, Swami Vivekananda says thus:

"In *Upaniṣad* we also find all subsequent development of Indian religious thought. Sometime it has been urged, without any ground whatsoever that there is no ideal of *Bhakti* in the *Upaniṣads*. Those who have been students of the *Upaniṣads* know that it is not true, there is enough of *Bhakti* in every *Upaniṣad*, if you will only seek for it. But many of these ideas which are found so fully developed in their later times in the *purāṇas* and other *Smṛtis* are only in the germ in the *Upaniṣads*. The sketch the skeleton was there as it not one full-growth Indian ideal that cannot be traced back to the same source the *Upaniṣads*.

The *Upaniṣads* are thus the perennial spirit of strength and creativity. This creativity and strength derive from their vision of men as the *Ātman* the eternal, infinite dimension of the human personality. Their theme is freedom of the human spirit and their message is fearlessness, love and service. They summon men and women everywhere to this mighty adventure of freedom and fearlessness, love and service and to the realization, by each man or woman, of this or her essential spiritual nature, and the transcendence of the limitations of finitude. They explain every great movement- social, political, or religious – nay the phenomena of life itself, as an expression of the urge to freedom inherent in every organization the struggle of the infinite caught up in a call or in a body, in a social scheme or a political system, in a religious or the network of relativity itself. Hence their constant summons to man is to wake up and march on. 'Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached' as conveyed by Swami Vivekananda, adapting the powerful word of the *Kaṭa Upaniṣad*: '*uttiṣṭata jāgrata prāpya varāṇnibodhata*'.

"India owns almost all the brighter sides of her life and culture. To them she owns her impressive record of active toleration within her borders and the uniformly, peaceful and benevolent nature of her foreign relations in the field of religion. To them she owns the periodical renewal of her national springs of life when they seem all but choked and about to dry up. To them also she owns the periodical renewal of her national springs of life when absence of the heavy hand of an all powerful church and the tentacles of an inescapable dogma on the national life and mind".

## 1.9 SUMMARY

In the first chapter titled '*An Introduction of Upaniṣads and message of Upaniṣads*, I have given the meaning of word *upaniṣad*, which means 'Sitting close to a teacher and understanding the secret and spiritual knowledge'. The three main subjects of *upaniṣads*, namely *Ātman*, *Brahman*, World, and their inter relationships are explained.

The essences of the ten major *upaniṣads* are summarized along with the four *Mahāvākyas*. The relationship between *upaniṣads* and Indian culture are brought out with the powerful message of Swami Vivekananda from the *Kaṭa upaniṣad* that is *uttaiṣtata jāgrata prāpya varāṇnibodhata* || (Arise, Awake, and Stop not till the goal is reached).

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