

## Historical context

As part of the **Brahmanic Lineage**, where **all teachings accept the basic truths of the Vedas**, we see developments upon the Vedas over the following period.

1) First there are the “**Brahmanas** (c. 2500 – 1500 BCE)....prose works expounding and systemizing the Vedic sacrificial rituals and their accompanying mythology. They are the creations of the Vedic sacerdotal elite and are thoroughly orthodox in their orientation”<sup>1</sup>. Of these only a very few have survived but they are largely concerned with Brahmins creating physical soma and agni sacrificial rituals with a distinct psychocosmic significance.

2) Later we see the rise of the **Aranyakas**, the forest teachings, which were very similar to the Brahmanas, being concerned primarily with ritual, but differed in that there was the beginning of the internalization of the sacrificial rituals, with the practitioners living a life of meditation and contemplation, and practicing mystical rites. The practitioners were orthodox Brahmins who had moved away from general society to live in the secluded areas of forests and mountains. [Indeed the word ‘aranyakas’ can be translated simply as the ‘wilderness’] “These forest ‘books’, which were deemed too sublime or sacred to be imparted in the villages or towns, prepared the ground for the still more esoteric teachings of the Upanishads and also the subsequent Yoga tradition in its more ascetical mode.”<sup>2</sup> And certainly within the Aranyakas, whilst we see a development of the Brahmanas, we can also find the beginnings of the later Upanishadic ideas and expressions, with some remarkable symbolic and meditative concepts to be found within their pages.

Few forest teachings are available and certainly much of this knowledge would have been passed down orally through from teacher to student however we can say that the later forest teachings prepared the ground for the Upanishads.

3) So the **Upanishads** are part of the **Brahmanic Lineage** where the ‘truths’ contained within the Vedas were accepted, but they represent part of a complete ideological revolution whereby there was a movement away from what had become the ritualistic Vedic tradition where Brahmins were the guardians of all knowledge, and where spiritual life had become ‘smriti’ meaning a ‘tradition’ or ‘memory’. They rejected the authority of the Brahmins, where the priests held all ceremonies, acting as intermediaries between the participants and the Divine. Now with the advent of the Upanishads we see a **distinct movement away from Smriti towards Sruti where there is a direct experience of the ‘Truth’**.

As part of this development the practitioners were still to be found away from the bustle of everyday life, living within the forests and mountains in solitude, it seems they practiced alone or in small groups, and would meet to discuss their experiences and insights. They entered deep states of meditation and contemplated upon the mysteries of our reality. In a real way this was harking back to the origins of the Vedas where the ancient Rishis discerned the ‘Truths’ directly.

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<sup>1</sup> Feuerstein, Georg, The Yoga Tradition, (2001), Hohm Press:Arizona, page 124

<sup>2</sup> Feuerstein, Georg, The Yoga Tradition, (2001), Hohm Press:Arizona, page 125

The upanishadic material was not public knowledge but one could go to the forest sages with due humility and respect and learn from them. It seems that often individuals may have been required to undergo initiations and may have had to become disciples for a number of years before the hidden knowledge could be revealed. Indeed some say that all could enter, not just those from the Brahman caste.

The knowledge was traditionally passed orally from a self-realized teacher to a disciple who memorized the material. The renunciation of the world was emphasized and they believed that **Jnana Yoga** was the way to achieve liberation. Interestingly the art of meditation was never discussed in the written works but we find references to the importance of service to a teacher and the necessity of a burning desire to know the truth of reality

‘Upanishad’ can be translated as ‘to sit at the feet of a teacher’.



‘Shad’ = ‘to sit or settle’   ‘Upa’ = near   ‘Ni’ = down

This usually relates to a seeker approaching a teacher in order to receive spiritual instruction.

With the advent of the Upanishads we move from the Vedic period into **Vedanta** meaning the ‘end of the Vedas’ or the ‘conclusion or development of the Vedas’. Indeed ‘vedanta’ can also mean ‘the end of knowledge’ as it is considered to be the direct knowledge of the Whole.

The Upanishads contain the essence of Vedic religion and philosophy but cannot be considered to be a pure philosophy or theology in the western sense for two main reasons. Firstly each is a compilation of experiences and insights, ranging from metaphysics to ethical instruction and practical guidance that cannot be thought of as a ‘system’. Secondly, they occasionally seem to be contradictory or conflicting since each is a personal experience. As a result we therefore find that sometimes different religious sects will expound those Upanishads that are most suitable for them.

Traditionally the number of Upanishads is given as 108 although it is often said that there are between 200 and 300. Most were created between 500BCE and 1200CE although a few belonging to this genre were written before the rise of Buddhism; this means that the Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad, Chandogya and Taittiriya Upanishads are thought to be more than 3000 years old!

### **The content**

The Upanishads are essentially metaphysical texts meaning that they seek to discern the nature of reality beyond the physical world that we can explore with our five senses. They are **non-dualistic** meaning that they take as their core belief the idea that **all is one**, i.e. they are **Monistic** or follow **Monism**. In essence this means that everything manifested within our world is a modification of that one Reality and sits within that Reality, so for example if the One is the ocean then every manifestation is a wave upon the ocean. The illusion of Maya being that we think everything is separate.

The Upanishads investigate questions such as 'Why am I here?', 'What is death?' and 'Who Am I in relation to the higher force?' They can be considered to be a type of jnana yoga, meaning a yoga of wisdom, whereby our true nature is disclosed to us through inquiry, in conjunction with deep meditation or contemplation. Here it is important to remember that the answers to these questions cannot be known purely through the intellect and logical analysis rather the questions are set against actual experience via personal investigation, and also released into the stillness of deep meditation, and from these sources knowledge arises in an experiential revelatory fashion. Jnana Yoga, as found in the Upanishads, relies upon the growth of the silent centre of awareness and from here increasingly there is discrimination where it becomes possible to discern the truth, the real from the unreal, the eternal from the transitory and so forth.

From the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

Om Asato Maa Sad-Gamaya |  
Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya |  
Mrtyor-Maa Amrtam Gamaya |  
Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

Om, Lead us from Unreality (of Transitory Existence) to the Reality (of the Eternal Self),  
Lead us from the Darkness (of Ignorance) to the Light (of Spiritual Knowledge),  
Lead us from the Fear of Death to the Knowledge of Immortality.  
Om, Peace, Peace, Peace.

Because the emphasis of the Upanishads is experiencing the Absolute rather than learning about it intellectually we find that the Truth is often expressed in a poetical style. We also find there is the heartfelt expression of awe because the inner experience of inquiry is conducted within the inner peacefulness and 'bliss' of the witness state of love and connectivity.

Whilst the Upanishads vary in their focus many of the themes are shared. At no time was the existence of 'God' or 'Brahman' questioned, although we can say that they are a development of the Vedas whereby an individual sought to link with 'God' or 'Brahman' in a more personal way without the need for a mediator.

The main concepts shared by the different Upanishads are:-

- **Brahman is Atman** i.e. our inner nature is identical with 'all that is' (this is the first time this is clearly spelt out although can be inferred from the Vedas)
- We are subject to the **Law of Karma** i.e. there will always be cause & effect
- Until we leave the **Wheel of Samsara**, i.e. of death, rebirth and life, we shall be subject to **Reincarnation**
- Only **Self-Realization** i.e. the realization that we are Brahman can lead to the release from the cycle of the Wheel of Samsara
- Eventually we all can, and will, achieve Self-Realization

The main Upanishads are:-

- Isha
- Kena
- Katha
- Prashna
- Mundaka
- Mandukya
- Taittiriya
- Aitareya
- Shwetashwatara
- Chandogya
- Brihadaryanyaka

The Upanishads vary in age tremendously from 800BCE to only 200 years ago. A new one could be written at any time! The teachings of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita form the basic literature of Vedanta.

