

Vedanta Literature

The term Vedanta literally means the end portion of the Vedas. Vedanta unfolds the essential identity of the individual, the world and the Lord. This knowledge is revealed through the words of the Upanishads which make up the end portion of the Vedas. The teaching tradition by which this knowledge is unfolded is known as sampradāya. This teaching tradition has been kept alive through a teacher-student lineage, guru śiṣya paramparā.

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The lineage of teachers can only originate from a teacher who has all knowledge and himself does not need a teacher. Such a source can only be the omniscient Lord. Thus the lineage is traced to the Lord himself. The Lord in his role as the first teacher is given the name Dakṣiṇāmūrti. He taught his four disciples: Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanātana and Sanatkumāra. Many illustrious teachers in this unbroken lineage of teachers have greatly contributed to the teaching tradition of Vedanta through their scholarly treatises. These works along with the upaniṣads, form the Vedanta literature.

Upaniṣads

The word Upaniṣad means self-knowledge. “Up” and “ni” are prefixes to the root “sad”. Upa means “the nearest” and ni means “ascertained knowledge”. The meaning of these two prefixes together is ascertained knowledge of the nearest, which is the self-knowledge of the nearest, which is the self. The root “sad” means that which removes, destroys, and helps one to know. Thus the word Upaniṣad means: the ascertained knowledge that destroys the undesirable life of becoming and helps one know the whole, Brahman, which is oneself.

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In the various Upaniṣad, the truth of oneself is presented from various standpoints. For instance, Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad unfolds the nature of the self with reference to the three states of experience: waking, dream and deep sleep. The Taittirīya upaniṣad reveals the self by correcting the universal error of taking oneself to be the physical body, mind and senses. Kena Upaniṣad presents the

self as limitless awareness that illumines the mind and the senses.

Even though there are many Upaniṣads in the Vedas, the ones listed below have gained prominence due to Śaṅkarā's commentaries on them.

Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad

This Upaniṣad gets its name from the first word of the Upaniṣad which is Īśāvāsya. It is also known as Samhitā Upaniṣad since it belongs to samhitā portion of the Śukla Yajur Veda. The Upaniṣad has eighteen mantras; the first line of the first mantra itself presents the Vedic vision of the Lord: *īśāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkiñca jagatyām jagat*—the entire world consisting of inert and conscious is pervades by the Lord:.

Kena Upaniṣad

This Upaniṣad also gains its name from the **first word of its first mantra**. Kena Upaniṣad belonging to the Śāma Veda, has thirty-four mantras spread out in four chapters. The first two chapters unfold the self as limitless, the third chapter brings out the glory of the self through a story, and the fourth chapter deals with certain upāsanās, meditations, as well as qualifications necessary for self knowledge.

In the story, Brahman, the Lord gained victory for the devas in their fight against the asuras, demons. Due to their pride, however, the devas took the credit for the victory. Hearing of this, Brahman decided

to make them understand that which makes things happen. Assuming a charming and shining form, Brahman appeared before the devas who were celebrating their victory. The devas were wonderstruck by the celestial form, yakṣa, but could not recognize who it was. The god of Fire, Agni devatā, was asked to find out who the being was. Before Agni devatā could ask the yakṣa, the celestial being asked Agni, "Who are you?". Surprised that he was not known to the yakṣa, Agni said "I am the popular Agni, who is also called Jātaveda. "What makes you so popular and great asked the yakṣa. Agni answered by saying he could burn anything. The yakṣa then asked him to burn a dry blade of grass but Agni could not burn it. Humiliated, Agni went back and told the devas that he could not find out who the yakṣa was. Next, the god of Air, Vāyu devatā, was sent to discover the identity of the yakṣa, but he also returned without finding out. Finally, Indra, lord of the devas, approached the yakṣa, but before he could contact the being it disappeared and in the same place stood Goddess Umā. Indra then asked her for the identity of the being and she replied that it was Brahman, the Lord who gained victory for them in their fight against the asuras. Indra reveals this truth to the other devatās and thus glorifies Brahman.

Katha upaniṣad

Katha upaniṣad, belonging to the Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda, consists of one hundred and twenty mantras in three chapters, each having two sections. The first three sections

of the upaniṣad are generally chanted during śrāddha, the death anniversary. The upaniṣad is presented through a story leading to the student Naciketa asking for self knowledge from Yama.

The story begins with Vājaśravas, Nachiketa's father, performing a ritual known as Viśvajit in which the performer of the sacrifice gifts away all his wealth. Naciketa sees his father giving away old worn-out cows as gifts and is concerned that his father might not obtain the desired results from the sacrifice. Wanting to help his father, he offers himself as a gift. He asks his father, "To whom will you offer me?". Annoyed by Naciket'S persistence, his father in anger says, "i give you TO Yama (the god of Death.

After convincing his father that spoken words should be fulfilled, Naciketas goes to the god of Death and waits for three days before he meetshim. Lord Yama extends all the honours that a guest should receive and grants him three boons to compensate for the three nights that Naciketa waited for the Lord without food. Naciketa encashes the first boon for the welfare of his father. He uses the second boon to acquire a ritual which can be performed by people desirous of a future heavenly life. For the third boon, he asks for the knowledge of the soul that survives death. Lord Yama tries to lure Naciketas away from his question by offering him various objects of security and pleasure. Naciketas rejects them all and asks only for knowledge. Convinced of his

maturity, the Lord teaches him Brahma Vidhyā, knowledge of the Self.

Praśna Upaniṣad

The Praśna Upaniṣad, belonging to the Atharva Veda, contains six sections with a total of sixty-eight mantras. The Upaniṣad is presented in the form of dialogues between a teacher and six students. The teacher is; the students are Śukeśā, Satyakāma, Gārgya, Āśvalāyana, Bhārgava and Kabandhi. Each student asks a question and the questions progress in their subtlety and depth. The Upaniṣad derives its name from the fact that questions, praśnas, form the context for unfolding the teaching.

The first question refers to the origin of the created beings, the second to the number and nature of the devatās functioning in the human body; the third to the nature and origin of prāṇa, the life breath; the fourth discusses the nature of the individual and the three states of experience: waking, dream and sleep; the fifth refers to the results of meditation on Om; and the last question is about the nature of the self.

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad is also from the Atharva Veda. It has three chapters, with two sections each and contains sixty-four mantras. Śaunaka's question to Sage Aṅgiras regarding "the knowledge knowing which everything is as well known" forms the context of the Upaniṣad.

This Upaniṣad points out that knowledge is the means for freedom, mokṣa, and prayers and meditations as means to prepare the individual for that knowledge. It also presents values such as truthfulness, austerity and brahmacharya as prerequisites for knowledge.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

This upaniṣad belongs to the Atharva Veda and consists of twelve mantras. Unlike most of the upaniṣads, this upaniṣad does not have any anecdote or dialogue and it directly unfolds the nature of ātmā. It is said that if a person cannot study all the upaniṣads, the study of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad is enough to obtain self-knowledge. Here, the three states of experience are analyzed to reveal the self as free and limitless in nature.

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Taittirīya Upaniṣad

This upaniṣad belongs to the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka of Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda. It is presented in three vallīs, chapters: Śikṣā vallī, Ānanda vallī and Bhṛgu vallī. The upaniṣad has a total of thirty-one anuvāka , sections of a vallī, each comprising a few mantras.

The first valli discusses upāsanās, meditations. It also contains instructions to

students who have completed their study in a gurukula. The second valli unfolds the nature of the self as being limitless happiness. There is an interesting calculus of ānanda, happiness, presented in this section. The happiness of a strong, brave, healthy, well-educated and clean young man who rules the entire world is counted as one unit of happiness. The happiness of Brahman is figuratively measured as trillion times more than this unit of human happiness.

In the third valli, the truth of the self is unfolded through the dialogue between Varuṇa and Bhṛgu. Bhṛgu, wanting to know Brahman, was taught by his father Varuṇa that he should contemplate and understand that out of which everything has emerged, by which everything is sustained, and unto which everything will go back. Bhṛgu, by his contemplative inquiry, comes to discover the self to be Brahman.

Aitareya Upaniṣad

The Aitareya Upaniṣad belongs to the Ṛg Veda. How this upaniṣad got its name is told in the story of Mahīdāsa, who was born to a Ṛṣi and his wife Itarā. The Ṛṣi also had sons by other wives whom he cared for more than Mahīdāsa. Seeing that her son was not treated properly by his father, Itarā prayed to her kula devatā Bhūmi Devi, Goddess Earth, for help. Pleased with her prayers and Mahīdāsa's knowledge, Bhūmi Devi appeared and gave Mahīdāsa a boon that he would thereafter be known

as Aitareya, and a Brahmaṇa and the corresponding Āraṇyaka section of Ṛg veda would be named after him.

The Aitareya Upaniṣad consists of three chapters with a total of thirty-three mantras. The first chapter discusses the creation of the world and the Lord's presence therein. The second chapter describes how the individual perpetuates himself through various births. The third chapter unfolds the ultimate destination of the individual as knowing oneself to be Brahman. Here we find the mahāvākya: "prajñānam brahma", consciousness is Brahman."

Chāndogya Upaniṣad

This upaniṣad is from Sāma Ved. It contains eight chapters. A major portion of the upaniṣad discusses upāsanās, various forms of meditation. The sixth chapter is a dialogue wherein Uddālaka teaches his son Śvetaketu that the self is the limitless Brahman and the mahāvākya: "Tat tvam asi – that thou art" is repeated nine times. Through Uddālaka's illustrations and teachings, each restatement of the identity as indicated by the mahāvākya is an inevitable conclusion from the preceding discussion.

The sixth chapter opens with a story of Uddālaka and his son. Uddālaka sends his son Śvetaketu to a gurukula to study the Vedas. Returning home after twelve years of study, Śvetaketu has the pride of a learned scholar which is unbecoming of a person endowed with spiritual knowledge.

Desirous of finding out whether his son had received self knowledge, Uddālaka asks Śvetaketu whether he sought this knowledge from his teacher. At first Śvetaketu responds overconfidently saying that his teacher did not know about this knowledge. He felt that had his teacher known, he would have surely taught him since he was the most brilliant of all the students. Śvetaketu later discovers his arrogance and requests his father to teach him.

The seventh chapter begins with Nārada's request to Sanatkumāra to teach him knowledge of the self, knowing which he would be free from sorrow. Sanatkumāra wants to know all that Nārada has studied and Nārada lists all the disciplines of knowledge that he has mastered. Nārada tells Sanatkumāra that in spite of all his knowledge, he is still subject to sorrow. Sanatkumāra teaches him the knowledge of the self which is free from sorrow, which is bhūmā, limitless.

There are a number of inspiring anecdotes of the Chāndogya upaniṣad. One such story is told of Satyakāma who went to a teacher in search of truth. The teacher asks Satyakāma about his parentage and Satyakāma tells him that he only knows his mother and that he has no knowledge of his father. Moved by Satyakāma's truthfulness, which indicates his qualification for knowledge, the teacher teaches him.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

This found in the Śukla Yajur Veda , is the largest of all upaniṣads. It consists of three khāṇḍās: Madhukāṇḍa, Yājñavalkyakhāṇḍa and Khilakhāṇḍa, each kāṇḍa having two chapters. The first kāṇḍa imparts Vedantic teachings; the second kāṇḍa embodies logical analysis to support the teaching of the Vedantic vision; and the third kāṇḍa discusses various forms of meditation.

Like the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, this upaniṣad has many stories illustrating the teachings, such as Gārgī's debate with, Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī's search for self-knowledge. In one such debate, Gārgī stands against the mighty Yājñavalkya.

As the story goes, King Janaka once performed a great sacrifice. Eager to listen to debates on spiritual topics he promised to give gifts in the form of one thousand cows adorned with gold and precious ornaments to the victor of the debate. Yājñavalkya declared himself as undefeatable and ordered his disciples to take away all the offered cows. The other scholars in the assembly raised different

questions and the sage calmly answered all of them. Lastly, Gārgī asked Yājñavalkya a number of questions and he patiently answered them. As the debate progressed, Yājñavalkya discouraged Gārgī from pressing for answers to certain difficult questions. One such question she put to him was: 'O Sage, what is the one beyond the heavens, below the earth, and in between, what is the one which is not subject to past, present and future?' Finally, the Sage replied, telling Gārgī that everything is pervaded by the unchanging akṣara, which is Brahman.

In another story, Yājñavalkya desires to leave his home and two wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyini, to live a life of a renunciate. Yājñavalkya calls Maitreyī and informs her of his plans. He tells her that he has equally divided his property between Kātyāyini and her. Maitreyī asks him whether this wealth would give her freedom from saṃsāra. The Sage truthfully replies that there is no hope of immortality through wealth. Maitreyī then wants to know what will give her that freedom and Yājñavalkya teaches her Brahma vidhyā.

"The factual response is the approach to situations of a truly practical person. One is most practical when one sees situations objectively. This is the real human strength. Human strength is not found in powerful miracles but in the quiet mind of the one who faces situations as they are. Such a one is a strong person. Human weakness is the inability to accept situations, to face facts. Human strength is the strength of reducing situations to simple facts".

Pujya Swamiji