

GCE A LEVEL

Eduqas A-LEVEL
RELIGIOUS STUDIES



**Theme 1D:
Nature and significance of the Upanishads**

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Glossary Key Terms

Chandogya Upanishad - One of the largest Upanishads. The foundation of the Vedanta school of Hinduism.

Jnana - Experiential knowledge of Brahman

Katha Upanishad - One of the primary and most widely studied of the Upanishads.

Upanishads - The section of the Vedas that deals with the philosophical principles underlying the practices documented in the Vedas. The most famous Upanishads, for example, the Chandogya or the Brihadaranyaka, speak of the inherent unity of atman and Brahman, and delineate a monist philosophy.

Rishi - Divinely inspired Seers, who revealed the Vedas in meditation.

Shruti - Classification of Ancient Texts which were 'heard' rather than constructed.

Samhita - Original shruti verse collection.

Origin and Background of the Upanishads

How the Upanishads fit into the Vedas

The four Hindu 'Holy Books' known collectively as 'The Vedas' are a collation of verses 'heard' in deep meditation by ancient Indian Rishis, beginning over 4000 years ago. The verses explore the nature of reality on many levels, physical, metaphysical and philosophical, collected as four layers within each Veda: (see next page).

<p>1st and 2nd layers make up the Karmakand meaning "for worldly well-being."</p>	<p>1st layer : Samhitas (Mantras)</p> <p>The primary collections of verses are known as Samhitas and are the foundational layer of the Vedas. Samhita literally means 'to collate' and gathers together the initial Shruti (revelatory) verses. The Rig Veda (Rig means to praise) Samhitas are the oldest and praise a range of named cosmic forces (deities). Over time, methods of chanting these verses as Mantras, in specific melodies, with ritualised ceremonies were developed and collected in the Yajur, Sama and Atharveda.</p> <p>These highly formalised ritual offerings came to be known as Yajna and detailed instructions on how to do them correctly made up the next layer of each Veda called the Brahmanas.</p>
	<p>2nd layer: Brahmanas (Instructional Commentary on Householder Rituals)</p> <p>The Samhitas and Brahmanas are collectively known as the Karmakand (Action Section) in each Veda as they deal with Yagna performed for worldly benefits and outcomes such as community well-being or rites of passage like weddings.</p>
<p>3rd and 4th layers make up the Jnanakand / (Jnana Section) and are "for spiritual advancement".</p> <p>They deal with the philosophical and spiritual knowledge contained in the Vedas.</p>	<p>3rd layer : is known as the Aranyakas or forest texts.</p> <p>These are interpretations intended for those living as forest-dwelling renunciates in the Vanprastha ashrama, transitioning from worldly-living to advanced spiritual development.</p>
	<p>4th layer : the final sections after the Aranyakas are the Upanishads.</p> <p>As these come at the end of each Veda and represent the conclusion or spiritual 'fruition' of Vedic knowledge, they are also known as Vedanta. These texts are to support those who wish to advance towards Moksha.</p>

Diversity of ideas and types of Upanishads

Upanishad was originally translated as 'to sit down near' by Max Mueller, one of the first Europeans to learn Sanskrit. Inferring that students must sit devotedly by the teacher to learn a secret doctrine. Earlier Hindu Masters like Shankaracharya interpreted 'shada' as destruction and an Upanishad as 'that which leads to destruction of ignorance or 'not-knowing'. However a literal meaning is 'Approaching that which lies beneath'. This seems closest to what the texts offer – access to the esoteric teachings that rest underneath the external systems described in the Samhitas and Brahmanas sections (Karmakand) of the Vedas.

“Here we have to do with the Upanishads, and the world-wide historical significance of these documents cannot, in our judgement, be more clearly indicated than by showing how the deep fundamental conception of Plato and Kant was precisely that which already formed the basis of Upanishad teaching.”

P. Duesson

Duesson, P., 'The Philosophy of the Upanishads', Cosimo, (2010), ISBN:9781616402396, p. 42.

It's important to note that the Upanishads were recorded over many centuries across different regions of India, with different ones held within the various Vedic schools as they were disseminated and taught throughout India. Thus the Upanishads don't represent a unified belief system to be embraced, but an eclectic wisdom collection to support progress into deeper enquiry and experience of the true nature of reality.

As the value of the ideas in the Upanishads became more widely appreciated, these have been extracted and collected as volumes in their own right in a range of formats. Whilst many key Hindu concepts such as Brahman and atman are examined in the Upanishads, it is not surprising that their explanation may vary depending on which Upanishads is being studied.

There are around 200 known Upanishads in the present day, but this is only a fraction of the original, and more Upanishad manuscripts do occasionally surface. Of the known 200, the most important 12 or 13 are known as the Mukhya or Principal Upanishads. This group contains diverse teachings about Brahman and atman and was collated with extensive philosophical commentaries by Shankaracharya, the 8th Century Hindu Master credited with establishing the now mainstream Hindu school of Vedantic philosophy called Advaita Vedanta. A further 95 Upanishads complete the Muktika canon. These are relatively recent and cover themes as diverse as Shaiva, Vaishnav, Shakt, Sannyasa and Yoga.

“Even though theoretically the whole of vedic corpus is accepted as revealed truth [shruti], in reality it is the Upanishads that have continued to influence the life and thought of the various religious traditions that we have come to call Hindu. Upanishads are the scriptures par excellence of Hinduism”.

Patrick Olivelle

Patrick, Olivelle. ‘The Early Upanishads’, Oxford University Press, (2014), ISBN:9780195124354.

As the Upanishads were philosophically derived from the knowledge and practice of Yajna, it is helpful to understand the concept of Yajna first.

The concept of Yajna and the achievement of Jnana

Origin and purpose of yajna

The Vedic Rishis saw the Universe as cosmically ordered on both the physical and metaphysical level. The Yajna rituals were designed to restore harmonious balance between impact of man-made society (karma) on cosmic balance (dharma).

In the Rig Veda, Yajna literally means “a form of offering or oblation as an act of praise, worship or devotion”. The Vedic Rishis recorded many types of Yajna as forms of codified ‘priest-craft’. They describe a specially sanctified fire called Agni in which the ‘offering’ known as Ahuti is added.

Some Yajna are like cooking recipes intended for particular socially beneficial outcomes such as prosperity, whilst others are on seasonal dates or for regular spiritual sanctification. The use of incense preparations for Ahuti, accompanied by chanting Vedic mantras, is a multi-sensory experiential ‘detox’, where both the sound of the Mantra and fragrance of the burning incense, have a soothing, air-cleansing effect radiating in all directions to contribute to universal well-being.

Yajna were important in ancient India, Brahmins spent a third of their time performing them. The importance was linked to the well-being of grihasti (householders) as these were considered the key drivers of Vedic communities, in terms of raising children, caring for the elderly, and generating prosperity for all. To the present day, wherever Hindus live in the world, they have taken the tradition of the smaller Yajna, the havan, with them. It is performed by Pandits (Brahmin scholars) at weddings, housewarmings and other milestones.

Achievement of Jnana

Veda literally means knowledge, and the difference between the two types of knowledge (informational and experiential) is covered in the respective Karmakand and Jnanakand sections of the Vedas.

The know-how for conducting Yajna and other Priestly rites and services for the community is informational, and covered in the Karmakand – first half of the Vedas. The second half which includes the Upanishads is known as the Jnanakand – ‘Jnana’ section.

Jnana has many meanings, such as:

- Knowing, perceiving, comprehending
- Knowledge, learning
- Consciousness, awareness
- Sacred knowledge derived from the Vedas or Self-knowledge
- Intelligence or wisdom.

This type of knowledge, an embodied awareness which integrates direct experience and intellectual understanding, is called Jnana.

The Upanishads themselves classify jnana into lower (apara) knowledge (of material objects, rituals and obligations) and higher (para) knowledge of True Self (Atman) and ultimate reality (Brahman). Upanishads such as Mundaka Upanishad, suggest that both types of knowledge are essential. However, they also state clearly that those who pursue the lower knowledge will at best enjoy temporary heavenly pleasures and keep reincarnating upon earth until their karma is exhausted, while those who pursue Brahman through higher knowledge will attain the immortal world and never be born again. This is the Jnana path to Moksha.

Upanishadic concept of yajna (yagna)

Some scholars see the Upanishads as an evolutionary leap of Vedic civilisation from elaborate rituals dedicated to cosmic forces to high-minded esoteric ideas about the nature of reality. However it is important to remember the Vedas were not locked away text books for academic study, but well-thumbed manuals for engaging with every-day living and teaching. Each section was fit for its own purpose.

The difference between the two types of knowledge (informational and experiential) is covered in the respective Karmakand and Jnanakand sections of the Vedas.

The Samhitas and Brahmanas don't serve those whose purushartha (main life aim) is moksha. In fact yajna work was seen as a potential trap for those who allow themselves to get caught up in outcomes, or in the gift donations that rich patrons might offer. So for those on the Jnana path to moksha, external yajna was considered valueless, and in some Upanishads, actually cited as an obstacle on the inner journey to moksha

For yajna to be of any value to a renunciate, they need to reflect on the hidden meanings and knowledge underlying the yajna descriptions. These are to be found in the Jnanakand, that is the Aranyakas and Upanishads, and used to gain Jnana of Brahman and atman as the way to self-mastery and eventually moksha. For example some of the Aranyakas, which deal with the preparatory stage before the sanyasi (renunciate) life, take the description for preparing the yajna site as allegorical instruction for preparing the body through yoga and meditation disciplines. Here the individual is effectively offering or sacrificing their small self-identity, to embody true knowledge of the infinite self. Hence the tapas practices are said to cultivate spiritual 'heat' or energy as the start of this transformational journey.

Self-mastery is not just for moksha. The more the priests mastered themselves, the better they could serve Hindu communities as officiates during yajna, as Gurus for student renunciates, as well as progress their own inner journey of developing Jnana and progressing towards moksha.

Typically Upanishadic knowledge would be taught to students, in shakhas (ancient Vedic schools) by those who had mastered the practices, rather than read independently by novices. In fact some texts appear to be deliberately encoded and layered to prevent reading by those who were not themselves initiated and sufficiently prepared. Hence it is not enough to be able to read or even 'know' the contents of the Upanishads, instead the student must be initiated by a guru who has direct personal experience of Jnana.

Teaching of the gurus - significant teaching on the relationship between Brahman and atman

Importance of the Guru - chela (disciple) relationship

The experiential nature of Jnana requires a very special relationship between the teacher (guru or master) and the student (chela or disciple). The Indic tradition of guru and disciples, does not only require the Guru to act as a teacher, transferring subject knowledge, but also act as both role-model embodying the knowledge in their way of living, and also mentor, someone to be obeyed with humility and reverence.

Thus the teaching and studying of the Upanishads would not be purely intellectual development but a full immersion 'apprenticeship', intended to purify and elevate the student's way of being, beyond their own needs and impulses, towards higher knowledge of atman and Brahman. There are many citations in the Upanishads of the crucial role of the Guru for one who wishes to attain moksha, such as Chandogya 6:14.

"As one might lead a person with his eyes covered away from [home], and leave him then in a place where there are no human beings; and as that person would turn towards the east, or the north, or the west, and shout, "I have been brought here with my eyes covered, I have been left here with my eyes covered," 'And as thereupon someone might loose his bandage and say to him, "...go in that direction;" and as thereupon, having been informed and being able to judge for himself, he would ... arrive at last, -- in exactly the same manner does a man, who meets with a teacher to inform him, obtain the true knowledge." (Chandogya 6:14)

Teachings from the Katha Upanishad: 2:8; 2:24; 2:16;

The key knowledge in the Upanishads is captured as live dialogue where a Guru is instructing a disciple. In Katha it is a teenager who confronts Yama (God of Death) himself with questions of life and death. In Chapter 2, Yama first talks about what it takes to be capable of achieving Jnana of this knowledge.

As we have seen, the Upanishadic teaching of atman and Brahman is not intended to be academic or philosophical theory, but experiential answers to the ultimate questions of life, such as what is the nature of reality (Brahman) and who are we (atman)? The texts, for example Katha 2:8, make it clear that such real-time transformational learning can only occur when both the teacher and student are first sufficiently qualified and ready for such impactful training.

“Atman when taught by an inferior person, is not easily comprehended, because it is diversely regarded by disputants. But when it is taught by him who has become one with Atman, there can remain no more doubt about it. Atman is subtler than the subtlest and not to be known through argument.”

(Katha, 2:8)

This verse also highlights the different ways of understanding this topic academically, by referring to ‘disputants’. So theoretical teaching alone won’t work. Only someone who has personal Jnana of the subtleties of the complete process can guide a disciple to reach Jnana.

Yama likens a human being to a horse-drawn chariot. Five horses represent the five senses. The reins are the mind – desires and emotions. The intellect, our wise judgement, is the charioteer, and our body is the chariot. The true self or atman, is riding within.

Yama explains only when the horses are guided by reins, expertly steered by the driver, can the atman within be realised. Otherwise all the attention and energy goes into trying to train a misbehaving driver, or deal with the crises of tangled reins or runaway horses (Katha, 2.24)

“He who has not turned away from wickedness, who is not tranquil and subdued, and whose mind is not at peace, cannot attain Atman. It is realised only through the knowledge of Reality.” (Katha, 2:24)

Yama explains the need to cultivate knowledge of Om, as a Mantra to dissolve illusions of separateness between Brahman and Atman, in order to reach the bliss-state of Moksha. (Katha, 2.16)

“This syllable Om is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the Highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires.” (Katha 2.16)

Katha Upanishad: 3:6; 3:12; 3:15;

In Chapter 3, Yama instructs Nachiketas in techniques needed to attain Jnana of Atman, with more teaching on the interplay between the mind and senses and the crucial role of meditation practices and disciplines to achieve knowledge of Atman (Katha, 3.6)

“But if the mind is always restrained, possesses discrimination, then the senses come under control, like the good horses of a charioteer.” (Katha, 3.6)

The senses can be a real obstacle as we have already discussed. However if the aspirant has learnt to control his mind's response to his senses, then those same senses can be used to inform his intellect and allow it to discriminate more sensitively, reinforcing the strong need to control the mind's reactivity (Katha, 3.12)

“That Self hidden in all beings does not shine forth; but It is seen by subtle seers through their one-pointed and subtle intellects.” (Katha, 3.12)

The ability for meditational focus on atman enables the ability to directly see beyond the physical and mental difference, to 'know' (in the Jnana sense) that the same divine and pure consciousness dwells within all beings. This is foundational to the Hindu worldview as exemplified in the greeting Namaste.

Understanding that atman cannot be 'detected' through the senses (Nirguna), as it is not a material thing but pure consciousness. All things that begin have causality and when the causality runs out of momentum, they end and so are not eternal. Atman transcends this as it is not affected by time, death or anything else. To know atman is to become immortal, as desire stems from ignorance and compels rebirth to meet those desires. This is the 'secret to immortal life' that Nachiketas is learning from Death as a Teacher (Katha, 3.15).

“Having realised Atman, which is soundless, intangible, formless, undecaying, and likewise tasteless, eternal, and odourless; having realised that which is without beginning and end, beyond the Great and unchanging - one is freed from the jaws of death.” (Katha 3.15)

Katha Upanishad: 4:3; 5:2; 5:7

One of the most powerful ideas from Vedanta, is this notion of the atman as the Subject, the real Seer, knower, etc. All outer things, including body, senses, mind and ego are the object, things that the Atman/self knows and understands. They themselves are not conscious, but the instruments of consciousness. 'This' Aware Self' is what Nachiketas was seeking to understand (Katha 4.3 - see below) and is the subtle heart of Upanishadic philosophy.

"It is through atman that one knows form, taste, smell, sounds, touches and carnal pleasures. Is there anything that remains unknown to Atman? This, verily is That." (Katha, 4:3)

In Katha 5.2 Yama spells out the diversity of forms, locations & names that are all one & the same atman, the all-pervasive self, without a 2nd & being no different from Brahman. In Katha 5.7 (key quote), we see a direct answer to Nachiketas question of what specifically continues after death and a key Vedantic teaching: that Brahman (the consciousness that is everywhere) and atman (the consciousness inside humans), are the same.

"He is the sun dwelling in the bright heavens. He is the air dwelling in the interspace. He is the fire dwelling on earth. He is the guest dwelling in the house. He dwells in men, in the gods, in truth, in the sky. He is born in the water, on earth, in the sacrifice, on the mountains. He is the True and the Great." (Katha, 5.2)

Having clarified that it is the same consciousness within us all, Yama goes on to explain how destinations for this conscious atman, from one life to the next is determined, by talking about Jiva.

Jiva is similar to the Christian term 'soul' i.e. an individualised manifestation (in this discourse, of the one atman). The manifestation is determined by the state of being of the life form at the time of previous death,

Also note, the atman is not altered by which body it inhabits. The body serves the purpose of atman. Ultimately it will achieve moksha.

Important to note that future life is not seen as a reward or punishment for previous lives, merely consequences to be experienced. If there remain unfulfilled desires, then rebirth is triggered in order to appropriately match and fulfil those desires until the Jiva realises the transitory nature of sense-gratification and seeks the less transitory aims and life fulfilment, Satchitananda - the bliss of realising that atman is its true nature.

Note that in this philosophy moksha is not a 'reward', but more of an inevitable consequence.

"Some Jivas enter the womb, to be embodied as organic beings, and some go into non-organic matter - according to their work and their knowledge." (Katha, 5.7)

Verses 6:13:1-3 from the Chandogya Upanishads

Brahman and atman in the Chandogya Upanishad

The Chandogya Upanishad includes some of the oldest verses on the Atman and Brahman teachings. One way to work with these terms is to think of the truth within beings as Atman, and truth beyond them as Brahman. Chandogya 6.2 (key quote) offers a sense of Brahman as pure timeless 'Being' or a single Consciousness present before all material beings.

'In the beginning the world was just Being, one only, without a second. Then it thought to itself: "Would that I were many, Let me procreate myself."' (Chandogya 6.2)

Having named atman and Brahman, the question of what is the relationship between them has been answered in different Upanishads and by Vedantic scholars in a range of ways, leading to the different Vedantic schools of Indian philosophy. In the Chandogya, this question is addressed through the famous story of the dialogue of Svetaketu learning from his father, (Chandogya 13:1-3)

'Place this salt in water and then come to me in the morning.' The son did as he was told. The father said to him: "My son, bring me the salt which you placed in the water last night." Looking for it, the son did not find it, for it was completely dissolved. 2 The father said: "My son, take a sip of water from the surface. How is it?" "It is salt." "Take a sip from the middle. How is it?" "It is salt." "Take a sip from the bottom. How is it?" "It is salt." "Throw it away and come to me." The son did as he was told, saying: "The salt was there all the time." Then the father said: "Here also, my dear, in this body you do not perceive Sat (Being); but It is indeed there." 3 "Now, that which is the subtle essence all that exists has it in its self. That is the Real. That Part is the Self.'" Chandogya (6:13:1-3)

This story captures what has been said about Brahman, but he goes on to add the famous phrase "Tat Tvam Asi" (thou art that), one of the Mahavakya (key sayings) that accent key themes in the Upanishads. In this story, atman and Brahman are clearly equated.

If Brahman is present as the 'soul' of everything in the world, and we are in the world, then it must also be within us.

Issues for discussion

Do the Upanishads matter to modern Hindus?

Is it possible to follow Vedanta without being a Hindu?

Is Jnana possible without a Guru?

Useful Resources

<https://resources.eduqas.co.uk/Pages/ResourceSingle.aspx?rlid=1246>

Eduqas Component 1E: Hinduism Scheme of Work

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