

Key concepts

- Upanishad was originally translated as ‘to sit down near’ by Max Mueller, 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’.
- The Upanishads were recorded over many centuries across different regions of India; therefore, 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.
- 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.
- One significant teaching in the Upanishads is the teaching on the relationship between Brahman and Atman. The Upanishads comprise the final Vedas and concern the soul (Atman) and its pursuit of ultimate reality (Brahman). The teachings of the scriptures are both religion and philosophy.
- The Upanishads are mystical texts describing the nature of infinite ultimate divine reality (Brahman) and its relationship to the inner self, or soul (Atman).
- The fundamental claim of the Upanishads is that Atman is Brahman, or in other words, that the soul is part of, or equivalent with, ultimate reality. Thus, the human soul is, at its essence, divine. The Chandogya Upanishad includes some of the oldest verses on the Atman and Brahman teachings.
- The Upanishads also teach about the achievement of jnana. Jnana has many meanings, such as 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.
- Another concept given prominence in the Upanishads is the concept of yajna. For yajna to be of any value to a renunciate, they need to reflect on the hidden meanings and knowledge underlying the yajna descriptions. 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.

Key quotes

“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. ‘The Early Upanishads’, Oxford University Press, (2014).

*“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. 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.” “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).***

“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).

Key words

Upanishad	Yama	jnana	Atman	yajna
Ultimate reality	shada	Katha	shruti	
Chandogya	Mukhya	Vedas	Brahman	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the Upanishads are not important for Hindus today.

Others would argue that their teachings are timeless and therefore always relevant.

Some would argue that they are important for those that follow Vedanta but not for Hindus who follow other philosophical schools of thought.

Key questions

Are the Upanishads important to Hindus today?

Is the Katha Upanishad the most important of the Upanishads?

Are there any alternative explanations or conclusions to be drawn from the debate?