

The Upanishads

With the last component of the Vedas, the philosophically oriented and esoteric texts known as the Upanishads (traditionally “sitting near a teacher” but originally understood as “connection” or “equivalence”), Vedic ritualism and the doctrine of the interconnectedness of separate phenomena were superseded by a new emphasis on knowledge alone—primarily knowledge of the ultimate identity of all phenomena, which merely appeared to be separate. The beginnings of philosophy and mysticism in Indian religious history occurred during the period of the compilation of the Upanishads, roughly between 700 and 500 BCE. Historically, the most important of the Upanishads are the two oldest, the Brihadaranyaka (“Great Forest Text”; c. 10th–5th century BCE) and the Chandogya (pertaining to the Chandogas, priests who intone hymns at sacrifices), both of which are compilations that record the traditions of sages (*rishis*) of the period—notably Yajnavalkya, who was a pioneer of new religious ideas.

The Upanishads reveal the desire to obtain the mystical knowledge that ensures freedom from “re-death” (*punararmrityu*), or birth and death in a new existence. Throughout the later Vedic period, the idea that the world of heaven is not the end of existence—and that even in heaven death is inevitable—became increasingly common. Vedic thinkers became concerned about the impermanence of religious merit and its loss in the hereafter, as well as about the transience of any form of existence after death—an existence that would culminate in re-death. The means of escaping and conquering death devised in the Brahmanas were of a ritual nature, but one of the oldest Upanishads, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, emphasizes the knowledge of the cosmic connection underlying ritual. When the doctrine of the identity of *atman* (the self) and *brahman* (the Absolute) was established in the Upanishads, those sages who were inclined to meditative thought substituted the true knowledge of the self and the realization of this identity for the ritual method.

This theme of the quest for a supreme unifying truth, for the reality underlying existence, is exemplified in the question posed by the seeker in the Mundaka Upanishad: “What is it that, by being known, all else becomes known?” What is sought is an experiential knowledge that is different from the “lower” knowledge that can be conceptualized and articulated by human beings. Thus, the supreme truth is understood as ineffable. The Taittiriya Upanishad says that *brahman* is this ineffable truth; *brahman* is also truth (*satya*), knowledge (*jnana*), infinity (*ananta*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). Other Upanishads describe *brahman* as the hidden, inner controller of the human soul. The experiential knowledge of the relationship between the human soul (*atman*) and the supreme being (*brahman*) is said to bring an end to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. To know *brahman* is to know all; in knowing *brahman*, one achieves a transcendental consciousness that comprehends, in some measure, the unity of the universe and the deep connection between the soul and *brahman*.

In subsequent centuries the main theories concerned with the divine essence underlying the world were harmonized and synthetically combined. The tendency of these theories was to extol one god as the supreme lord and originator (Ishvara)—at once Purusha and Prajapati and *brahman* and the self of all beings. For those who worshipped him, he was the goal of identificatory meditation, which leads to complete cessation of phenomenal existence and becomes the refuge of those who seek eternal peace. The Advaita Vedanta philosopher and theologian Shankara (8th century CE) exercised enormous influence on subsequent Hindu thinking through his elegant synthesis of the nontheistic and theistic aspects of Upanishadic teaching. In his commentaries on several of the Upanishads, he

distinguished between *nirguna brahman* (without attributes) and *saguna brahman* (with attributes). His was a monistic teaching that stressed that *saguna brahman* was a lesser, temporary form of *nirguna brahman*. He taught also that the self (*atman*) is identical with *nirguna brahman* and that through knowledge of this unity the cycle of rebirth can be broken.

The Upanishads were composed during a time of much social, political, and economic upheaval. Rural tribal society was disappearing, and the adjustments of the people to urban living under a monarchy probably provoked many psychological and religious responses. During this period many groups of mystics, world renouncers, and forest dwellers appeared in India, among whom were the authors of the Upanishads. The most important practices and doctrines of these world renouncers included asceticism and the concept of rebirth, or transmigration.

The Rigveda contains few examples of asceticism, except among the “silent ones” (*munis*). The Atharvaveda describes another class of religious adepts, or specialists, the *vratyas*, particularly associated with the region of Magadha (west-central Bihar). The *vratyas* was a wandering hierophant (one who manifested the holy) who remained outside the system of Vedic religion. He practiced flagellation and other forms of self-mortification and traveled from place to place in a bullock cart with an apprentice and with a woman who appears to have engaged in ritual prostitution. The Brahmins sought to bring the *vratyas* into the Vedic system by special conversion rituals, and it may be that the *vratyas* introduced their own beliefs and practices into Vedic religion. At the same time, the more-complex sacrifices of the later Vedic period demanded purificatory rituals, such as fasting and vigil, as part of the preparations for the ceremony. Thus, there was a growing tendency toward the mortification of the flesh.

The origin and development of the belief in transmigration of souls are very obscure. A few passages suggest that this doctrine was known even in the days of the Rigveda, and the Brahmins often refer to doctrines of re-death and rebirth, but it was first clearly propounded in the earliest Upanishad—the Brihadaranyka. There it is stated that the soul of a Vedic sacrificer returns to earth and is reborn in human or animal form. This doctrine of *samsara* (reincarnation) is attributed to the sage Uddalaka Aruni, who is said to have learned it from a Kshatriya chief. In the same text, the doctrine of karma (“actions”), according to which the soul achieves a happy or unhappy rebirth according to its works in the previous life, occurs for the first time and is attributed to the theologian Yajnavalkya. Both doctrines seem to have been new, circulating among small groups of ascetics who were disinclined to make them public, perhaps for fear of the orthodox priests. These doctrines must have spread rapidly, for they appear in the later Upanishads and in the earliest Buddhist and Jain scriptures.

Sutras, *shastras*, and *smritis*

The Vedangas

Toward the end of the Vedic period, and more or less simultaneously with the production of the principal Upanishads, concise, technical, and usually aphoristic texts were composed about various subjects relating to the proper and timely performance of the Vedic sacrificial rituals. These were eventually labeled Vedangas (“Studies Accessory to the Veda”).

The preoccupation with the liturgy gave rise to scholarly disciplines, also called Vedangas, that were part of Vedic erudition. There were six such fields: (1) *shiksha* (instruction), which explains the proper articulation and pronunciation of the Vedic texts—different branches had different ways of pronouncing the texts, and these variations were recorded in *pratishakhyas* (literally, “instructions for the *shakhas*” [“branches”]), four of which are extant—(2) *chandasa* (metre), of which there remains only one late representative, (3) *vyakarana* (analysis and derivation), in which the language is grammatically described—Panni’s grammar (c. 400 BCE) and the *pratishakhyas* are the oldest examples of this discipline—(4) *nirukta* (lexicon), which discusses and defines difficult words, represented by the *Nirukta* of Yaska (c. 600 BCE), (5) *jyotisa* (luminaries), a system of astronomy and astrology used to determine the right times for rituals, and (6) *kalpa* (mode of performance), which studies the correct ways of performing the ritual.

The texts constituting the Kalpa-sutras (collections of aphorisms on the mode of ritual performance) are of special importance. The composition of these texts was begun about 600 BCE by Brahmans belonging to the ritual schools (*shakhas*), each of which was attached to a particular recension of one of the four Vedas. A complete Kalpa-sutra contains four principal components: (1) a Shrauta-sutra, which establishes the rules for performing the more complex rituals of the Vedic repertoire, (2) a Shulba-sutra, which shows how to make the geometric calculations necessary for the proper construction of the ritual arena, (3) a Grihya-sutra, which explains the rules for performing the domestic rites, including the life-cycle rituals (called the *samskaras*), and (4) a Dharma-sutra, which provides the rules for the conduct of life.

Society was ritually stratified in the four classes, each of which had its own dharma (law). The ideal life was constructed through sacraments in the course of numerous ceremonies, performed by the upper classes, that carried the individual from conception to cremation in a series of complex rites. The Grihya-sutras show that in the popular religion of the time there were many minor deities who are rarely mentioned in the literature of the large-scale sacrifices but who were probably far more influential on the lives of most people than were the great Vedic gods.

Dharma-sutras and Dharma-shastras

Among the texts inspired by the Vedas are the Dharma-sutras, or “manuals on dharma,” which contain rules of conduct and rites as they were practiced in various Vedic schools. Their principal contents address the duties of people at different stages of life, or *ashramas* (studenthood, householdership, retirement, and renunciation); dietary regulations; offenses and expiations; and the rights and duties of kings. They also discuss purification rites, funerary ceremonies, forms of hospitality, and daily oblations, and they even mention juridical matters. The most important of these texts are the sutras of Gautama, Baudhayana, and Apastamba. Although the direct relationship is not clear, the contents of these works were further elaborated in the more systematic Dharma-shastras, which in turn became the basis of Hindu law.

First among them stands the Dharma-shastra of Manu, also known as the *Manu-smriti* (Laws of Manu; c. 100 CE), with 2,694 stanzas divided into 12 chapters. It deals with topics such as cosmogony, the definition of dharma, the sacraments, initiation and Vedic study, the eight forms of marriage, hospitality and funerary rites, dietary laws, pollution and purification, rules for women and wives, royal law, juridical matters, pious donations, rites of reparation, the doctrine of karma, the soul, and punishment in hell. Law in the juridical sense is thus

completely embedded in religious law and practice. The framework is provided by the model of the four-class society. The influence of the Dharma-shastra of Manu has been enormous, as it provided Hindu society with the basis for its practical morality. But, for most of the Indian subcontinent, it is the commentaries on it (such as Medhatithi's 9th-century commentary on Manu) and, even more, the local case law traditions arising out of the commentaries that have been the law.

Second to Manu is the Dharma-shastra of Yajnavalkya; its 1,013 stanzas are distributed under the three headings of good conduct, law, and expiation. The *Mitaksara*, the commentary on it by Vijnaneshvara (11th century), has extended the influence of Yajnavalkya's work.

Difference Between Vedas and Upanishads

Upanishads and Vedas are key terms that are frequently used interchangeably. For that matter, they are two distinct subjects. In reality, the Vedas include the Upanishads. The table below compares the differences between the Vedas and the Upanishads.

Difference between Vedas and Upanishads		
Point of Difference	Vedas	Upanishads
Meaning	In Sanskrit, Vedas means "knowledge."	Upanishads refer to sitting at the teacher's feet.
Period of Composition	1200 and 400 B.C.E.	700 and 400 B.C.E.
Essence	The ideas concentrate on philosophical and ceremonial practices.	The Upanishads discuss philosophical issues and the individual's role in the cosmos.
General Description	In their physical shape, the Vedas differ from one another.	The Upanishads are a subsection of Veda that is included in the final portion of Veda.
Concerned with	The Vedas are primarily concerned with rites, customs, and applications.	The Upanishads are primarily concerned with spiritual enlightenment.
Main Focus	The Vedas address ceremonies, conventions, and applications.	Spiritual enlightenment is the focus of the Upanishads.
Types	There are four types of Vedas: Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda.	Katha, Kena, Isa, Mundaka, Prasna, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Kaushitaki, Svetasvatara, and Maitrayani are the 14 most popular Upanishads.
Purpose	The Vedas were created to record the specifics of many traditions, sacrifice procedures, ceremonial acts, rites, and philosophical ideas. It was intended to be taught and referred to in external practices.	Upanishads are written philosophical opinions from a range of men and women, focusing primarily on spiritual enlightenment and rejecting the individual's association with the physical body.

What are Vedas?

The Vedas are foundational spiritual texts in ancient Hinduism, highly revered and considered sacred. The Sanskrit term "Veda" translates to "knowledge conveyed." These texts provide essential insights into life's fundamentals and our responses. Being the oldest texts, the Vedas offer deep historical significance. The term "Vedas" originates from the Sanskrit root "Veda," meaning "to know." They are also referred to as scriptures, encompassing divine essence. This distinguishes them from other religious writings. Unlike individual thoughts at a certain time, the Vedas have an enduring existence. They were initially transmitted orally through generations of sages. Teachers passed this knowledge to disciples, emphasizing precise pronunciation. Over time, the disciples began to write down the teachings, preserving the Vedas.

There are four main types of Vedas:

- Rigveda
- Samveda
- Yajurveda
- Atharvaveda

What is Upanishads

The Upanishads are sacred texts that delve into the core principles of Hinduism, especially its philosophical concepts. They consist of dialogues between teachers and students. These conversations occur with the teacher seated near the student (hence the term "Upanishad," meaning "sit down close"), explaining the illusory nature of the external universe and guiding individuals towards spiritual enlightenment, liberation from earthly attachments, and understanding their inner selves. The name "Upanishad" originates from Sanskrit, emphasizing the student's proximity to the teacher while receiving profound teachings.