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CHAPTER 2

UPANISHADS

WHAT?

Upanishad is derived from “upa” (near), “ni” (down), “sad” (to sit) and literally means “sitting down near”. Student sitting down near the teacher and listening to, and imbibing, his teachings (the secret and sacred doctrine) is intended. When two persons with similar interests sit closely together, their minds and thought processes also may be in tune with each other which, in turn, will further the transference of ideas between each other. In that sense, not only physical but also intellectual proximity is intended by the word ‘upa’ (near).

Upanishad thinkers pondered on the problems of deepest concern – problems involving the human Soul and the Ultimate Reality – and the answers they found were communicated to their pupils who were spiritually oriented. In other words, these teachers wanted to ensure that the pupils were fit to receive such knowledge and are not otherwise disposed. In fact, examples exist where the teacher repeatedly tests the student and satisfies himself that the student indeed is inclined spiritually and interested to receive such knowledge when entreaties by the student that the teacher instruct him on the burning questions faced by him. The Upanishads contain accounts of the significance of human Soul – ‘Atman’ or ‘the Self’ -, significance of ‘AUM’, significance of Ultimate Reality or ‘Brahman’, the relationship between Atman and Brahman and so on. Naturally, Upanishads soon came to be understood as the work containing ‘esoteric doctrines’, ‘secret (*rahasyam*) knowledge’, and understandable only by the selected few who are initiated into such knowledge. Such labeling may have contributed to many serious seekers avoiding study of these texts which in turn may have contributed to these Upanishads remaining ‘secret’ and ‘esoteric’, thus becoming a ‘self-fulfilling’ prophecy.

WHERE?

Upanishads are part of Vedas and are considered as Vedanta, the end of the Vedas. They are physically organized at the end of the Vedas; the intellectual and philosophical nature of the contents leads one to '*jnana*' or knowledge and the end stages of one's spiritual quest. For both these reasons, the word 'Vedanta' aptly describes the Upanishads.

HOW MANY?

Upanishads is a body of works growing from earliest times. The four Vedas are divided into 1180 *Veda Saakhas* (Rig Veda:21; Yajur Veda:109; Sama Veda 1000; Atharva Veda;50). Each *Veda Saakha* is organized into 4 sections (see, for example, Chapter 1, page 4) – Samhita, Brahmana, Aaranyaka and Upanishad -, many researchers believe that there must have been one thousand one hundred and eighty Upanishads originally. Presently, however, only one hundred and eight Upanishads are available (see Appendix C).

CLASSIFICATION OF UPANISHADS INTO PRINCIPAL AND MINOR UPANISHADS

Principal Upanishads:

Adi Sankara has commented on eleven of these Upanishads:

- Isa
- Kena
- Katha
- Prasna
- Mundaka
- Mandukya
- Taittiriya
- Aitareya
- Chandogya
- Brihad-aranyaka
- Swetasvatara.

The above upanishads together with the Maitrayaniya or Maitri Upanishad constitute the 'principal Upanishads', so-called because Saint-thinkers like Adi Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa have written commentaries or Bhashyas on these twelve Upanishads. Kausitaki, Jabala, Mahanarayana and Paingala Upanishads were referenced in his commentary on Brahma-Sutra by Adi Sankara. Ramanuja and Madhwa who have also written commentaries or bashyas on Upanishads have added three or four more Upanishads to the preceding set. Some authors include these additional Upanishads also under the category of 'Principal Upanishads', even though the above listed eleven Upanishads are identified as the 'principal upanishads'.

Minor Upanishads:

The rest of the Upanishads (among those that are presently available) are called as 'Minor' Upanishads.

The contents of ALL of these Upanishads – Principal or Minor – are all equally important and address issues of serious and fundamental importance. In a sense, the principal Upanishads can be considered to be the more philosophical Upanishads as opposed to most of the rest which are said to belong to the Purana or Tantra aspects than to Vedic aspects.

A list of available Upanishads is given in Appendix C.

WHEN?

Upanishads, as part of the Vedas, belong to the 'sruti' or revealed literature and are eternal or timeless or 'sanatana'. Some researchers, however, date the prose Upanishads to 8th Century B. C. or nearly three thousand (3,000) years ago. Other researchers claim that the Upanishads existed tens of thousands years ago.

WHO WROTE THESE UPANISHADS (AUTHORSHIP)?

No one claims to be the author of these great works, the Upanishads. These are the divine revelations experienced by great Sages or Rishis or Saints when they were in their 'superconscious state'. Such divine revelations were seen ('mantra drashtas') or 'heard' ('sruti') by the Rishis and are the 'breathings of God' that existed always. The seers or Rishis have power of 'spiritual vision' just like we have power of 'ordinary vision'. The revelations of seers from their spiritual vision is different from the results of their introspection, the latter being subjective whereas the former is the 'divine revelation' being reproduced by the seers & hence the 'sruti'.

Therefore none of these Rishis have claimed any authorship.

Though this knowledge is transmitted by the seer or Rishi and in that sense it is an experience of the seer or Rishi, it must be noted that the experience is that of an independent reality which is received by him, the direct disclosure from the 'Divine', composed when the seers or Rishis were in a state of inspiration. The contemplation by the seer of God's revelation can be stated as His Breath blowing on us. Rig Veda states "Of that great Being, this is the breath, which is the Rig Veda". (Ref. 1). In that sense, Vedas and Upanishads are said to be 'apourusheyam' – no authorship or not written by any Purusha or person, they are the breathings of the Supreme ('yasya nishwasitham vedah') and existed always and so they are 'anadi' - without a beginning or in other words, always existed as the 'breath of that great Being'.

Thus, the Upanishads are:

- Apourusheyam – not written by any author
- 'Breathings of the Supreme' ('yasya nishwasitham vedah')
- Anadi – existed always.

WHY STUDY UPANISHADS?

For leading a happy life:

All human beings want to lead a happy life.

Advances in science and progress in the material comforts have not ensured a happy and comfortable living for the people.

Real happiness has also eluded human beings by pursuing religion.

The inability of human beings to find answers to the various questions that face them like

- the purpose or meaning of life
- the meaning of this universe
- the existence of God, and,
- various other questions that have attracted the attention of human beings from time immemorial.

Spirituality and Jnana or Knowledge related to such questions, as opposed to rituals practiced in the various religions, have been said to be the way to understand ourselves. Upanishads provide a path to such knowledge. It is therefore hoped that the study of Upanishads containing answers and discussions of such difficult questions will help the readers attain tranquility and inner peace thus enabling them to lead a happy and purposeful life.

For its grandeur and impact:

For the beauty of the poetry and/or the textual write up and for sheer elegance of the many utterances made therein and for the lucid and lofty ideas discussing the human soul (the Atman or the Self) and the Universal Soul (Brahman) as well as the secret and sacred relationship between the two, there are not many works available comparable to the Upanishads. For this, and this reason alone, all thoughtful persons and seekers of knowledge, should study Upanishads. The beauty of the utterances, and the elegance of the poetry (or prose, as the case may be) of the Upanishads, comes out much more brilliantly if one can read the original 'Sanskrit' texts of these Upanishads.

For its contents:

The secret teachings on topics like the human soul (Atman or the Individual Self) and that of the Universal Reality (Brahman) and the relationship between Brahman and Atman are some of the aspects that have challenged human beings from time immemorial and that continue to challenge them even today. The Upanishads answer these questions and provide simple lucid explanations that their students are able to understand.

The Upanishads deal with questions that occur to all human beings when they reflect seriously on the causes for their being here and the purpose.

The real study of Upanishads, say the Upanishads themselves, is not study of themselves but study of that “by which we realize the changeless” (Ref. 2)

Upanishads talk of the ‘Ultimate Reality: Brahman’ of the Universe, the ‘Ultimate Reality: Atman’ of the individual person and the connection between Brahman and Atman. Terms like Maya and Avidya (Ignorance) are explained.

The quest to learn about ourselves and the world we live in is ever present – from the people of the earliest days, those that lived in the stone age, to the modern day persons of highly evolved intellectuals. Surely, the same quest will extend far into the future: who we are, what is the Universe or this world of objects all about, is there any connection between the two and if so what such connection might be etc. Questions like; “What is that, by knowing which, everything else becomes known?” are posed and answers provided.

For historical reasons:

Human beings always are inquisitive of their own history, who and how they have come about. Purely for historical considerations, persons should read the Upanishads which are the foundations of the belief systems of millions of human beings.

For its Influence on Civilization:

Upanishads have dominated Indian philosophy, religion and life for over three thousand years. Every subsequent religious movement had to show that they are in accord with their philosophical statements. They have influenced the cultural life of many other nations – Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Persia and its Sufism.

The thoughts contained in the Upanishads can be found in Persian Sufism, in the doctrines of Neo-Platonics and the Alexandrian Christian Mystics, Eckhart & Tauler, and in the philosophy of the great German mystic of the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer.

For all of the above reasons:

In summary, therefore, we attempt the study of Upanishads to learn more about the following questions that have engaged the attention of mankind:

- Who are we?
- Whence did we come from, where we go to, what is the purpose of this sojourn?
- How did the Universe come about?
- What is Reality, The Changeless Presence? Is there such a One that never changes? The Ultimate Reality – Brahman – Who and What is It?
- Maya (Illusion), Vidya (Knowledge), Avidya (Ignorance)
- The Individual Soul, Self, Atman – what are these? How are these related to each of us?
- Brahman & Atman
- Ethics and Morality

- Religion – and the role played by it in Life Eternal

How do we go about the study of Upanishads?

Having made a case for the study of Upanishads, it is only natural that we should turn our attention to the how of it. How do we go about the study? Where do we find the teacher? If we identify a teacher, will the teacher be prepared, ready and willing to teach Upanishad to each and everyone who desires? Are there pre-requisites for the student before embarking upon a study of the Upanishads?

Clearly, the study of Upanishads requires preparation and personal interest for one to understand the esoteric ideas and philosophy conveyed therein. The quest in the person has to be as strong as, or even stronger than, the desire in the person for the effort to be successful. What is conveyed in the Upanishads and how we benefit from studying should be known and understood at least in an overall sense prior to beginning the study of Upanishads.

**DOES ONE HAVE TO BE HINDU TO STUDY UPANISHADS?
DOES ONE HAVE TO BELIEVE IN RELIGION TO BE ABLE TO STUDY AND
UNDERSTAND UPANISHADS?**

The answer to both these questions is a loud and clear ‘no’.

Firstly, Upanishads are part of Vedas which describe the Sanatana Dharma (the Eternal and Everlasting Fair-minded, Proper and Right way of living). Sanatana Dharma was practiced by inhabitants of the Indus Valley which was later on called as India and the Sanatana Dharma itself was referred to as Hindu religion. Even though, thus, the Vedas and Vedanta are considered part of the Hindu Religion, they are in fact part of Sanatana Dharma. Since ALL inhabitants of this Universe can, and should, lead their lives as prescribed by the Sanatana Dharma way of living, ALL individuals can study and learn from Upanishads.

Secondly, the contents of the Upanishads, as stated earlier, address questions about who we are, whence we came from, what is the origin of the world and so on and do NOT describe any ‘religious dogmas or rituals’ because, as stated earlier, Upanishads deal with Jnana (Knowledge) part of the Sanatana Dharma and ALL human beings have a right to this knowledge.

Stated simply, Upanishads are the dialogue between an earnest and interested student and a knowledgeable master (a ‘realized’ master at that) and contain the ‘Jnana’ aspects of Sanatana Dharma. They provide answers to fundamental questions on individual soul, universal soul, personal God, impersonal God, Maya or Illusion, ways of ‘realization’ of the Self or Atman, relationship between Atman and Brahman and so on. In that sense, any and every seeker – seeking answers to these fundamental questions – can study Upanishads.

Some pre-requisites would, however, help the study. Knowledge of Sanskrit would be helpful because these texts are written in Sanskrit. While these texts are translated into various languages, the grandeur and elegance of some of these utterances come through clearly only when we are able to read the original works and not the translations. An inquiring mind would be helpful because the questions answered and problems posed and responded to are spiritual in nature (as opposed to material aspects). Familiarity with practices like yoga, reading and familiarity of literature and philosophy and interest for the study of these would also be helpful pre-requisites. A more complete description of qualities required for study of Vedanta (or Upanishads) is provided in the next section.

WHO CAN STUDY VEDANTA? WHO IS “THE FIT STUDENT”?

Adi Sankara in the celebrated work, “Vivekachoodamani” provides the qualifications of “the fit student” to study Upanishads and Vedanta. In verses 14 thru 17 of the book, Sankara states as follows (from the book, “Talks on Sankara’s Vivekachoodamani by Swami Chinamayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Bombay, India, Revised 1989 Edition):

*Adhikarinam-Ashaasthe Phalasiddhi-Viseshathah
Upaya Desakaladhyaah Sandhyasmin-Sahakarinah (verse 14)*

Ultimate success in spiritual endeavours depends entirely upon the degree of fundamental qualifications in the seeker. Auxiliary conveniences such as time and place all have a place indeed, but they are essentially secondary.

*Atho Vichara Karthavyo Jijnasorathma-Vasthunah
Samasadya Dayasindhurum Gurum Brahma-Vidutthamam (verse 15)*

Therefore, a true seeker of the Self should learn to enquire and meditate after duly approaching a Guru who is himself established in the experience of the Self and who is an ocean of kindness.

*Medhavi Purusho Vidvan-Oohapoha-Vichakshana
Adhikaryam-Atma-Vidyayam-Uktha-Lakshana-Lakshithah (verse 16)*

He who has a keen memory with enough knowledge of the world outside and understanding of the world within, who can argue for the scriptures and refute arguments against them, is fit for receiving Atma-Vidya.

*Vivekino Virakthasya Shamadhi-Gunashalinah
Mumukshoreva Hi Brahma-Jijnasa-Aayogyatha Matha (verse 17)*

He alone is considered qualified to enquire after the Supreme Reality who has discrimination, detachment, qualities of calmness etc. and a burning desire for liberation.

From the above 4 verses, it is clear that the student of Vedanta must possess deep desire to know the Atma-Vidya (Knowledge of Self), must possess keen memory and intellect, must possess viveka or discrimination (to know right from wrong), must not be attached to worldly items and must have qualities of calmness. Deep desire to know the Self or learn about the Self must be present in the student; in other words, such desire must run very deep. Simple answers or mere hand waving to questions posed by the seeker will not satisfy such desire of the seeker. The seeker will persist until seeker receives clear and well-defined answers that the seeker understands; in other words, seeker possesses determination, dedication and willingness to undergo any hardship to understand the answers to the questions that the seeker has posed. Thus, it can be stated that the ‘burning desire’ or ‘the quest’ or ‘thirst’ to understand Atma-Vidya is the first and foremost

essential trait for the student fit to study Vedanta. Each and every one of the other traits mentioned in the four verses must also be looked at very carefully before deciding whether one is a fit student to study Upanishads and Vedanta.

Adi Sankara in his work “Atma Bodha” provides similar definition of who is a fit student to learn about Atman or Self, in other words, qualifications for one to study about Self and Vedanta.

*tapobhih ksheeNa-pApAnAm shAnthaanAm veetha-ragiNA
mumukshUNAm-apEkshyOyam Atma-bOdho vidheeyathE*

I am (Adi Sankara is) composing the Atma-Bodha, this treatise of the knowledge of the Self, for those (i) who have purified themselves by austerities, (ii) who are peaceful in heart and calm, (iii) who are free from cravings, and (iv) who are desirous of liberation.

It is also instructive to note in this context the answer provided by Lord Brahma to the question of Sage Ashwalayana in Kaivalya Upanishad. Sage Ashwalayana who was a Rig Vedic scholar and had lived a very pious and strict life according to the Vedic Shaastras went to Lord Brahma and requested that the latter teach him Brahma Vidya (Knowledge of Brahman). Lord Brahma’s immediate reply was to “know Brahman by faith (sraddha), devotion (bhakthi) and meditation (dhyana)”.

Therefore, the student fit to study the Upanishads (or Vedanta) to obtain knowledge (of Brahman) must have these qualities.

In summary, persons who have all the above qualifications, those described in VivekaChoodamani and Atma-Bodha and in Kaivalya Upanishad, and summarized as shown below are fit to study Vedanta and to attain *moksha*:

- discrimination between Real and Un-Real
- detachment to things connected with Un-Real
- all the desirable qualities like calmness, good memory and all that, in particular, the six-fold virtues (control of mind; control of external senses; cessation of worldly enjoyments or cessation of thinking about objects of desire; endurance of pleasure and pain or heat and cold; faith in the word of the teacher or the Upanishads; deep concentration)
- argue in favor of scriptures
- refute arguments against scriptures
- burning desire to seek liberation

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 2

This chapter discusses what is meant by Upanishad, what they are, what is contained in them, why should one study/read/understand the Upanishads etc. The categorizations of Upanishads into Major and Minor are provided. The list of presently available Upanishads is provided in Appendix.