

Om, Sri Gurubhyo Namaha

Upanishads

DR. S. YEGNASUBRAMANIAN

The term "*upa* (near) - *ni* (down) - *shada*-(sit)" means "to sit by the side". The knowledge that was imparted by the teacher by keeping the student closely by his side, is dealt with in the Upanishads. This implies that the subject that is taught is of the nature of a secret personal advice that could be imparted only to the "eligible" (*adhikaari*), who is conditioned to absorb the teaching! It also means, "that knowledge that makes one reach near *Brahman*" similar to the term "*upanayana*" (leading to the *Paramaatman*). The upanishads give the spiritual vision and philosophical arguments and contain the ultimate message and purpose of the Vedas. They are known as "*vedanta*". The term "*anta*" means "end". Upanishads are the "end" of the Vedas in two senses: 1. Physical location of the Upanishads in the scriptures - first *Samhita*, then *Braahmana*, followed by *Aaranyaka*, at the concluding portion of which is the upanishads; 2. The ultimate goal or aim of the Vedas is contained in the Upanishads beyond which there is nothing more to go further!

Upanishads expound the direct method of realization through *jnaana maarga* (the path of knowledge), the *abhedha* (non-duality) of the Supreme Being and the *Jiva*. Even though Upanishads contain information about rituals (*yajnas*), worship of deities etc., the focus is on the philosophical analysis and deals with a state of free mind with all its attachments (bondage) removed. The *karma kaanda* portion

of the scriptures conditions the mind to develop an internal discipline at the summit of which experience, analysis of the non-duality of the *Jiva* (soul) and *Brahman* becomes clearer! At this stage (of removal from all physical bondage), one gets initiated to the "*mahaa vaakhyas*" (the great sayings) ! If one meditates intensely on these, scholars say, that the non-duality could be actually experienced. Four *mahaa vaakhyas* are considered most important and are contained in four upanishads. They are:

1. *prajnaanam brahma* (प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म) - the actual experience alone is *Brahman* - Aitareya Upanishad : Rig Veda.

2. *aham brhamaasmi* (अहं ब्रह्मस्मि) - I am *Brahman* - Brihadaraanyaka Upanishad: Sukla Yajur Veda. The fourth chapter of Taittiriya Upanishad of Krishna Yajur Veda has a slightly different *mahaa vaakhya* - *ahamasmi brahmaahamasmi* (अहं अस्मि ब्रह्माहमस्मि)

3. *tat tvam asi* (तत् त्वं अस्मि) - that you are - Chaandogya Upanishad: Saama Veda.

4. *ayamaatmaa brahma* (अयमात्मा ब्रह्म) - the *Atman* (soul) is *Brahman* - Maandukya Upanishad : Atharva Veda.

As one would understand, these are instructions which can be given only to a spiritual aspirant who is highly qualified (*adhikaari*) to receive them, and so are treated like a *rahasya* (secret) !

There are several upanishads (over two hundreds!) and Sri Adi Sankara chose to write commentaries (*bhaashya*) upon ten of them, known as *dasopanishads*. Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhva also wrote commentaries on the same ten upanishads. Whereas Adi Sankara highlighted the non-dual (*advaita*) philosophy propounded in them, Sri Ramanuja emphasised *visishta-advaita* (qualified non-dual) and Sri Madhva, the *dvaita* (dual) philosophies. The ten upanishads are given in the sloka :

ईश केनकथाप्रश्न मुण्ड माण्डूक्य तैत्तिरी ।
ऐतरेयंच छान्दोग्यं ब्रह्दारण्यकंदशा ॥

They are *Isa, kena, kathaa, praSna, muNda, maandukya, taittiriya, aitarEya, chaandogya and brahadaraanyaka Upanishads*. Adi Sankara's commentary is written in the same order as above.

1. Isaavaasya (ईशावास्य) or Isa Upanishad

It is placed at the end of Sukla Yajur Veda's *Samhita* portion. It begins with the words "*Isaa vaasyam*" and hence the name. The upanishad begins by saying that *Iswara* pervades the whole cosmic makeup and one should attain the state of realization of this "*paramaatma tattva*" by dedicating one's fruit of all *karmas* to That Divinity alone !

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किंच जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेनत्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मागृधःकस्य स्वध्दनम् ॥

2. Kenopanishad केनोपनिषत्

This Upanishad starts with the word "*kena*" and so the name. It is also called *talavakaara upanishad* since it appears in the *talavakaara braahmaNa* of the *Jaimini saakha*

of *Saama veda*. This describes how the Mother Herself enlightened Indra with divine wisdom to understand the nature of *paramaatman*. It is glorified with a saying "search for whatever is lost in *Kena*"! The Upanishad starts with a set of questions, "Willed by whom does the directed mind go towards its object? Being directed by whom does the vital force that precedes all, proceed (towards its duty)? By whom is this speech willed that people utter? Who is the effulgent being who directs the eyes and the ears?" . The Upanishad proceeds to declare that "*It (Brahman)* is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know well, and known to those who do not know" - an intense and minute analysis!

3. Kathopanishad कठोपनिषत्

This upanishad occurs in the "kathaka Saakha" of *Krishana Yajur Veda*. It contains the dialog between the Lord of Death and *Nachiketas*, a young boy who demanded to know the answer for the question, "what happens to the soul after death?" Although it begins with a story, it expounds a great truth that the *Atma* is different from the body and all afflictions of the body (like anger, hatred, likes, passion, etc.) and so one should train the mind to view the body as an external object to *Atman*.

4-6 Prasna (प्रश्न) Mundaka (मुण्ड) and Maandukya (माण्डूक्य) Upanishads

These three belong to *Atharva Veda*. *Prasnopanishad* deals with the analysis of six questions (*praSna* means question) and they are: 1. How creation began ? 2. Devas are

whom? 3. How body and life are connected? 4. What are three states - wakefulness, dream and deep sleep? 5. What is the benefit of worshipping the *Pranava*? 6. What is the relation between *Purusha* and *Jiva*?

Mundaka Upanishad is believed to be followed by Sannyasins with detached disposition of the phenomenal world. The term *mundaka* means "fully shaven-head" or "tonsure". The upanishad deals with 'akshara brahman' which may mean either as the one which is free from dissolution (decay) or as "syllable". The imagery of the *Jivaatma* and *Paramaatma* as two birds perched on the tree of *sareera* (body) where the *Jiva* bird eats the fruits of action and the *paramaatma* bird remains a mere witness, is given in this Upanishad the motto of India, "Truth alone triumphs" is also derived from this upanishad!

सत्यमेव जयते नानृतं सत्येन पन्था विततो देवयानः

The smallest of all upanishads is Maandukya upanishad (contains only twelve mantras!). Manduka (मण्डुक) means "frog". As a frog can leap from the first to the fourth step of a stairs without having to climb each stair, this upanishad gives the way to transcend the three stages of awakening (*jaagrati*), dream (*swapna*), and sleep (*susupti*) and reach the fourth stage of *turiya* through the worship of *Pranava*.

7. Taittiriya (तैत्तिरीय) upanishad

This belongs to the Krishna Yajur Veda. This has three chapters: Seekshaa valli deals with aspects of studies and teaching, various *upaasanas* including that of *pranava*, *aavahanti*

homa mantras, fundamental duties and values etc. The famous statements that "mother, father, teacher and guest are personifications of divinities" occur in this chapter.

मातृ देवो भव। पितृ देवो भव।
आचार्य देवो भव। अतिथि देवो भव ।

The second chapter, brahmaananda valli, deals with an unique analysis of five sheaths - *panca kosas* namely, *annamaya* (food), *praana maya* (life), *mano maya* (mind), *vijnaana maya* (knowledge) and *aananda maya* (bliss) sheaths. The popular inquiry of "bliss" in an ascending order culminating with '*brahmaananda*' is expounded at the end of this chapter.

The third chapter, brighu valli, is the teaching (*upadesa*) of Varuna to his son Brighu where he enables his son to go through an intense enquiry of the Self through the stages of the *panca kosas*, and the son finally achieves the results. The value of food - "do not abuse food, grow more food; do not waste food"- is given in detail. The chapter ends with the proclamation that the Realized *Jiva* thinks that he alone is the food, the one who eats it, the one who generated link between the food and the eater. He sings in bliss where himself and divinity are One.

8. Aitareya (ऐतरेय) Upanishad

This is placed at the end of the Aitareya Aranyaka of Rig veda and is so called because it came through the revelation of the rishi Aitareya. This expounds the cycle of life and death according to one's own merits (*punya*) and demerits (*paapa*) and how freedom from

this cycle is possible through knowledge (*jnaana*) of the nature of *aatma*. This contains the great saying "*prajnaanam brahma*".

9. Chaandogya (छान्दोग्य) Upanishad

This is placed in the *chaandogya braahmana* portion of *saama veda*. The term '*chaandoga*' means 'the one who sings the *saama gaana*'. This Upanishad deals with several disciplines (*vidya*) like *akshi vidya*, *aakaasa vidya*, *saandilya vidya*, *praana vidya*, *panchaagni vidya* etc. The most important *vidya* is *dahara vidya* which deals with the realization of the limitless spatial expanse of the *Paramaatman* within the small space (*aakaasa*) of the *Jiva*. It contains several popular stories such as that of *Satyakaama*, *Uddalaka Aaruni* etc. This also gives the famous *mahaavaakhya* "*tat tvam asi*"!

10. Brahadaaranyka (ब्रह्दारण्यक) Upanishad

This is the biggest of all the Upanishads and occurs as the entire *aaranyaka* portion of *sukla yajur veda* ! There are two versions of this, the *Maadhyandina* version and the *Kaanva* version. *Adi Sankara's* commentary is on the *Kaanva* version only. It contains 3 *kaandas* (*Madhu*, *Muni* and *Khila kaandas*) divided in to six chapters. In this Upanishad, the *Atman* is described through a series of negations as "not this, not this", known as *neti neti* (नेति नेति - न + इति) *vaada* . According to this argument, the world, the body and the mind have to be negated and the *Atman* is realized

as transcending any description through words! It starts with the famous saying,

असतो मा सद्गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मूर्धोर्मा अमृतं गमय ॥

(lead me (by giving knowledge) from unreal to real; from darkness (ignorance) to light; from death (limitation) to immortality (limitless))

This Upanishad relates stories of *brahma jnanis* like kings *Ajaata Satru* and *Janaka*; that women were also *brahma vaadins*, in the story of *Gargi* ! *Madhu kaanda* gives the message that everything is the manifestation of *Paramaatman* and that a realized *Jiva* will feel that the entire creation is as sweet as honey! *Muni kaanda* relates the advaitic philosophic discussions of Sage *Yaajnavalkya* with King *Janaka*, and his council of scholars, the sage's *vedantic* instructions to his wife *Maitreyi* etc. *Khila kaanda* consolidates many messages that lie scattered at various places (*khila - scattered*)!

If the *samhita* is like a tree, the *braahmanas* are its flowers, the *aaranyakas* are the fruits in the unripened state and the *upanishads* are the ripe fruits. They being the most important part of the *vedas*, they are rightly known as "*sruti siras*" or the head of the *vedas*!!

Ref. "*The Vedas*", *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, *Bombay 1988*.