

THE UPANISHADS

Professor Russell Kirkland
Department of Religion
University of Georgia

1. The Term "*Upanishad*"

Literally, "to sit down close around." Hence: "a teaching session," "a circle of initiated students," and finally the "**secret doctrine**" that was taught to them. The word was first used to refer to short statements and secret formulae that contained the essence of the doctrine. Later it came to refer to entire texts that dealt with esoteric knowledge. Eventually, this tradition came to be called *Vedanta*, which means "the end or conclusion of the Vedas." The texts called *Upanishads* came to be regarded as forming the concluding section of the Vedic corpus. Though today they are in the public domain, remember that they were originally secret.

2. Number and Chronology of the *Upanishads*

The earliest *Upanishads* were pre-Buddhist, i.e., circa 800-600 BCE. Texts called *Upanishads* continued to be composed long into the Common Era, resulting in a total of over 200, but the traditional number is 108. Only **13** of the *Upanishads* are regarded as "**classical**." These (sometimes called the Vedic *Upanishads*) were composed during three periods:

1. The Ancient Prose *Upanishads* (before sixth century BCE)

<i>Brhadaranyaka</i>	<i>Chandogya</i>
<i>Taittiraya</i>	<i>Aitareya</i>
<i>Kausataki</i>	<i>Kena</i>

2. The Metrical *Upanishads* (sixth-fifth centuries BCE)

<i>Katha</i>	<i>aaa</i>
<i>avetaavatara</i>	<i>Mundaka</i>
<i>Mahanarayana</i>	

3. The Later Prose *Upanishads* (late fifth to early fourth centuries BCE)

<i>Praana</i>	<i>Maitri</i>	<i>Mandukya</i>
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3. Fundamental Points

The *Upanishads* do not all teach the same doctrine. Various views, some obsolete and contradictory, are recorded side by side with the more famous doctrines. None of the *Upanishads'* doctrines are presented systematically: what we have are brilliant insights, broad outlines, sagely wisdom, but no orderly "**philosophical system.**" Later Indian tradition — and all Western presentations — emphasize certain ideas that came to be considered the most important and original of the teachings of the *Upanishads*. But do not make the mistake of thinking that those ideas were in any sense "basic teachings," in the sense of being original or definitive.

4. What is Commonly Regarded as "the Main Teachings" of the *Upanishads*

A quest for something that is unchanging, some deeper reality that does not pass away like everything else in life does. That quest had two foci: (1) a quest for the essential reality of one's own personal being; and (2) a quest for the essential reality of life as a whole.

(1) At various stages, different elements of human life were called the most essential (e.g., breath, mind, etc.). Such ideas were eventually systematized into a hierarchical scheme — a person is composed of 5 "sheaths," the inner ones being more essential than the outer:

1. the sheath of food (i.e., the body)
2. the sheath of breath
3. the sheath of mind
4. the sheath of intelligence
5. the sheath of bliss = *atman* (the "self").

(2) **The search for the essential reality of the world began in contemplation of Vedic sacrifice.** Correct performance of that sacrifice was believed to bring desired blessings through a power called *brahman*, a power that is beyond all human realities, and even beyond the gods. Now, a new idea of *Brahman* evolved: in the *Upanishads*, it is no longer as an element of the Vedic sacrifice, but rather the Ultimate Principle of the entire universe; it is *Sat*, "Pure Being."

(3) The search for the point at which the individual and *Brahman* are one. The idea evolved that the individual attains **freedom (*moksha*)** through identifying himself with *Brahman*. In the Vedic sacrifice, one acquired *brahman*, i.e., the creative power of the words of the *brahman* priest. But **in the *Upanishads*, one realizes that one is *Brahman*:** there is ultimately an identity between the individual and the universal reality called *Brahman*. This idea is expressed in the famous saying *tat tvam asi* — "**That thou art.**" So the "essential self" (*atman*) is now said to be

the same as **Brahman**: *atman = Brahman*. Some modern writers inaccurately call this idea the essence of Hinduism. In reality, Hinduism contains many other teachings that are equally important, and even the classical *Upanishads* teach other doctrines as well.

5. Philosophical Problems that Arose from those Teachings

Certain problems that are not resolved in the *Upanishads* themselves become a central focus of the later philosophical traditions of Hinduism (e.g., *Vedanta*).

(1) The Relationship of Brahman to the Universe. Some *Upanishad* passages present Brahman as totally different from the empirical world, hence as "unknowable." Other passages present it as the source of the universe: the universe emanates from Brahman, like the web from the spider. There is no clear resolution of the question whether the universe is ultimately distinct from Brahman. The tradition that believed in their identity gave rise to **Advaita Vedanta**, the philosophical tradition systematized by **aankara** (ca. 800 CE). The tradition that supported the distinction between ultimate reality and the visible world was emphasized in the philosophical tradition of Samkhya/Yoga, as well as in the views of some later Vedanta thinkers.

(2) Knowledge of Brahman. The *Upanishads* state that Brahman is unknowable, because knowledge is possible only when there is duality, and in Brahman there is no duality. Also, Brahman is without attributes by which it can be known, so we can speak of it only in negative terms: *neti, neti* — "not thus, not thus." Yet, paradoxically, one achieves liberation from bondage by knowledge of Brahman, i.e., experiential knowledge of the nature of reality.

(3) The Nature of Brahman and the Nature of Moksha (liberation). **Experiencing the reality of Brahman constitutes moksha, and ends suffering and rebirth.** This state, like Brahman itself, cannot be described. The closest positive statement is that it is *sat/cit/ananda*, "being/ consciousness/bliss."

(4) "Liberation in Life." **Moksha is attained during life**, and a liberated person (*javanmukta*) continues to live human life, subject to headaches, etc. Yet, theoretically, he is completely one with Brahman, and no longer subject to *karma*. All schools had to explain how the liberated person can still seem to be subject to the same life-conditions as those who are not liberated. The usual answer is that such a person creates no new *karma*, but remains in *samsara* until all previously accumulated *karma* has been exhausted; thereafter, he is no longer born into the empirical world.