

What are The Upanishads?

Upanishad means the secret knowledge that you learn from a wise and virtuous teacher by sitting near him. You sit near him because the knowledge is secret, and secondly you cannot easily understand it without asking questions and seeking clarifications. In other words, Upanishads are not meant for everyone or for remote learning. We do it nowadays, but it was not the ancient custom. Since the Upanishads contain a variety of ritual and spiritual information which is often clothed in symbolic imagery and archaic metaphors, we need a teacher's help.



You learn from the Upanishads mainly the secret or the hidden knowledge of the Vedas. What is that knowledge? It is the knowledge of the invisible and subtle aspects of creation, namely the Self, the breath, the deities in the body, and the Supreme Brahman. Therefore, when you read the Upanishads, you enter a hidden realm, which is not perceptible to the senses or comprehensible to the intellect. The Upanishads are therefore special. They challenge you to rise above your ordinary thinking and see the world differently with the vision of your inner soul. Since you cannot easily acquire that vision, you need a teacher to guide you and help you until your mind opens and you begin to see the world and its essence with your inner eye.

Even modern science acknowledges that reality is partly visible but mostly invisible. The Upanishads are the first scriptures in the history of the world to affirm this truth. The seers of the Upanishads realized that the essential reality that was hidden in the parts of existence was also present in the entire existence. Thus, they concluded that by making sense of its individual objects and beings one could comprehend the truths of the universe itself.

Following this methodology, the Upanishads use the human personality as the basis to present the idea of the Supreme Being. They focus upon the outer visible body, the invisible inner body, and the hidden Self. The body is the visible aspect of a being. The individual Self, popularly known in the West as the soul is the hidden part. The material universe is the visible part of the creation. The Supreme Self, who presides over this visible universe and who is also hidden in it as its sole support, is the invisible or the hidden part. The Upanishads deal with all these aspects to describe

that nature of the Supreme Self called Brahman, and the individual Self called Atman.

They also speak about the outer aspects of existence (such as the senses, materiality, and the body) in relation to the hidden ones. The body of a living being (jiva) be it human or animal is divided into two parts, the gross body (stula) and the subtle body (sukshma). The gross body is made up of the various individual parts or organs. It is perceptible through the senses. We can identify it by its shape, and we usually give it a name. The Upanishads call it the food body (annamaya kosa) because it is largely or entirely made up of the food we eat.

Inside the gross body is hidden another body, called the subtle body. It is made up of prana (breath), mind (manas), intelligence (buddhi or vijnana), and bliss (ananda). The subtle body is perceived fully only by highly spiritualized people, called the seers. Most of us can partially reach the breath, the mind and intelligence layers and see only parts of the subtle body. We gain a direct and complete knowledge of the subtle body (also called linga sarira), only when we perfect our bodies and purify them fully.

The Upanishads speak about both the gross and subtle bodies, and how they are organized in the human personality. This knowledge is important to understand the true nature of our existence and our connection with the entire universe. The Upanishads thus probe into the mysteries of our existence, and the truth (sat) hidden behind the illusions of the phenomenal world. To understand them, however, you need some introductory knowledge of Hinduism, especially, some familiarity with the ritual-model presented in the Samhita (hymns) portion of the Vedas.

The ritual knowledge (called avidya) is the basis for the spiritual knowledge (called vidya) presented in the Upanishads. Some scholars tend to suggest that the Upanishads were the result of the development of an advanced philosophy. The truth is the Upanishads are an extension of the preceding three parts of the Vedas, just as the subtle body is an extension of the physical body in the spiritual plane. Since they constitute the end part of the Vedas, they are collectively called as Vedanta.

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