

Foundations of Brahmanism: Vedas and Upaniṣads

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The primacy of substance

Orthodox Hinduism bases itself on scriptures called the Vedas. These were composed in the course of the Aryan migrations into northern India: population shifts occurring from around 2000 to 1100 B.C. They are called the Rig Veda, the Sāma Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda and are regarded by mainstream orthodox Hindus not as human (or divine) compositions but as a simply given timeless and infallible source of knowledge about religious and social duties. Enactment of those duties brings us into harmony with the natural universal order (*dharma*). The eternal sounds of the sacred canon are held to have been discerned by seven primordial ‘seers’ who transmitted them to subsequent generations. Priestly Brahmin families

preserve the different traditions of recitation of the sacred sounds. The basic component of each of the four Vedas is its collection (*saṃhitā*) of verses (*mantra*), evocative of the divinities whose sonic forms they are, which are used in rituals. Attached to each collection are works called ‘*Brāhmaṇas*’ that prescribe, describe and elucidate the purposes of the sacrificial rituals performed by Brahmin priests and their householder patrons. They include explanations of the meanings of the ritual actions, and posit correspondences between aspects of the rites and features of the cosmos including the social structure and the human body. It was believed that ritual performance orders, sustains and perpetuates the universe, creating new time and ensuring the regular succession of the seasons. Most rituals involve some sort of oblation to divine powers, thrown into a sacred fire. Agni, the god of fire, delivered the offerings to the other gods whose favour would confer benefits such as children, healthy cattle, a good harvest, long life, prosperity, wealth and martial success. Some obligatory rites are to be performed at crucial junctions of each day; some are seasonal requirements, and others are performed by people with specific ends in view.

Also included under the heading ‘Veda’ are the ‘*Āraṇyakas*’ (‘Forest Books’) that speculate about the ‘inner’ meaning of the rituals. These are closely associated with what are called the Upaniṣads. The latter were composed by Brahmins who had probably renounced the actual performance of ritual. The view was that the mental re-enactment of the meaning of the ritual is just as effective as its overt performance. These compositions contain many reflective explorations of fundamental metaphysical questions and encompass a diversity of viewpoints. I treat them as a starting point because they mark a departure from purely mythological ways of thinking. For example, a hymn belonging to the Rig Veda explains the creation of the cosmos and the establishment of the caste-based social order as the consequences of the dismemberment of a primeval giant.¹ Broadly speaking, the Upaniṣad thinkers ask where the giant came from and realize that the answer ‘another giant’ is not the sort of explanation that they are looking for. That explanation would be one that answered the question, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’

Such matters are also to be found in the hymns of the Rig Veda. These hymns celebrate and propitiate gods mostly associated with natural forces. Their cosmogonic hymns speak of the gods such as Indra and Varuṇa establishing inhabitable space and creating sustainable order out of chaos. They were used by Brahmins in rituals whose aim was the perpetuation of the cosmos. The questions about Being – Why is there something rather

than nothing? Where did it all come from? – feature there, if not prominently. One line of thought says that there is an original One, beyond being and non-being. Another idea is that Being (*sat*) arises from non-Being (*asat*).² Since everyone knows that nothing comes from nothing, ‘non-Being’ probably meant an amorphous, undifferentiated state in which are no things, no names and forms, no entities and kinds, no structures or organizing principles. ‘Being’ would then by contrast be a cosmos of differentiated, identifiable, organized realities, necessarily including sentient beings capable of registering information and making discriminations. But as we shall soon see, this notion of the priority of non-being was rejected by what might tentatively be called the dominant tradition of Upaniṣadic thought.

There are many works bearing the name ‘Upaniṣad’, of which twelve are usually deemed ‘major’. These were composed between 800 and 400 B.C. The doctrines they contain are many and various. For instance, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka, the vastest in extent, contains at least three cosmogonies. These texts are assemblages, recording many different views. It would be a mistake to expect consistencies in meaning throughout the postulated ‘corpus’. The meanings of terms such as ‘*sat*’, ‘*ātman*’ and ‘*brahman*’ differ according to context. In what follows, we shall be concerned with Brahminical concepts of substance, essence, first cause, sustaining cause and truth in the sense of the permanently real, all of which are examples of fictions according to Buddhists.

While the Upaniṣads contain many different views (including the idea that the original substance is water³), the idea that exercised the greatest influence on subsequent thought is that there is an ontologically independent primary reality or underlying substance. That concept was variously expressed as ‘the *brahman*’, ‘*sat*’, ‘*ātman*’ and *mahad bhūta*. This primary or original being is understood as a timeless, unconditioned and unlimited substance that needs nothing else in order to exist. *Sat*, sheer being without categorical determinations, is also the source, basis, support and final cause of all existents. It makes worlds and experiencers, mind and matter, while itself remaining intact. It is what Vedānta and Sāṃkhya thinkers, as we will see in later chapters, describe as the universal material cause (*upādāna-kāraṇa*) that is capable of self-transformation.

It is the foundational ‘something other’ out of which the world of entities, ‘name and form’, appears or unfolds.⁴ The Brahminical philosophers understand it as the ungenerated source of genesis. They saw that the first principle of generation cannot itself be a generated being. Nor can it share with the empirical cosmos of finite entities, their aspects of finitude, insubstantiality and transience, birth and death. The great being is boundless

(*apāram* cf Gk *apeiron*). It does not just last for a very long time: it endures eternally, outside time and space. To it are ascribed desire, thought and creative power. This first principle is alive. It is unsurpassably subtle or refined. Its generating sentient beings and environments (or worlds) is a manifestation of progressively less subtle – that is, grosser or coarser – forms of being. The ‘Vital Principle’ encompasses the mental and the physical, minds and matter.

This primal being has the spontaneous capacity to transform itself into a complex cosmos of individual cognizers and material things, while itself abiding unchanged. The *brahman* lacks nothing, which is why it is sometimes said to be blissful. The *brahman* is the essence of whatever actually exists. The *brahman* is the truth in the sense of the perfect reality. This reality behind and underlying all contingent, finite and mutable entities is sometimes characterized as the One, sheer Being beyond existence and non-existence. Those categories apply only to determinate entities falling within the sphere of our experience. The *brahman*, not being an identifiable individual, cannot be spoken of as ‘this’ or ‘that’.

According to this outlook, the cosmos has immanent order and purpose (*dharma*) independently of any meanings that human beings might create for themselves. It is a leading concept of the Upaniṣads that the universal nature (*ātman/brahman/sat*) individualizes itself into sentient beings limited by space and time. They participate in the universal reality. It is what they really are, the immortal element, the ‘inner guide’ immanent in the heart (rather than the mind or intellect), dwelling in the body and dwelling in the sun. And thus we often find the word ‘*ātman*’ (meaning the *nature* of something) used to mean the individualizations of the universal primary Being. Under the influence of much later Vedāntic ideas, the word ‘*ātman*’ is often translated as ‘soul’, ‘self’ or even ‘The Self’. Translation as ‘soul’ (essential nature of something) is fitting in some contexts, and ‘self’ is appropriate for reflexive usages. The reified notion ‘The Self’ is much more problematic. My view is that many translations of occurrences of ‘*ātman*’ in the Upaniṣads as ‘Self’ are misleading.

One meaning of the word is ‘breath’ (*prāṇa*), a word for the vital functions of seeing, hearing, speaking and thinking. But there developed the view that we are not reducible to physical factors and functions. The principle of reasoning is that when something – such as a sentient individual cognizer – can objectify a process (e.g. human vital functioning), it cannot itself have emerged from that process although it may be involved in it. In this light, *ātman* is no longer the breath, or any one vital function or the vital functions

taken collectively. *Ātman* is not a part of the human being but is that which is the source of vital functions, that which underlies them and explains their reason for being.⁵ '*Ātman*' will increasingly come to mean 'essential nature' and 'soul'. This concept of essential nature is different from what we ordinarily mean by self (so we have to be careful about translating the term) or person, that is to say, a subject of experiences or a thinking, willing, feeling, acting individual. It seems that in these early texts, the term '*ātman*' basically meant fundamental Being, understood as the self-transforming source of every kind of entity. Its signification was extended to cover individualizations of the universal reality. In other words, to the questions 'what are we really?' and 'what is our nature' (*ātman*), the answer was, 'manifestations of a greater reality' (*ātman/brahman*).

Some illustrative passages from the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

1.6.1 and 3: This world is tripartite: name (*nāma*), perceptible forms (*rūpam*) and action (*karma*).... While this is a tripartite reality, it is one nature (*ātman*).

2.1.20: As a spider emits threads and as little sparks flash from fire, so do all the vital functions, all the worlds, all the gods and all basic elements arise from this primary state (*asmad-ātmanaḥ*).

2.4.5: One values a husband, not out of love for the husband: rather, it is out of love for the universal nature (*ātman*) that one values a husband. One values a wife, not out of love for the wife: rather it is out of love for the universal nature that one values a wife.... One values the whole world, not out of love for the world: rather it is out of love for the universal nature that one values the world.

2.4.12: When a lump of salt is thrown into water [of which it is a solidified form], it dissolves into the water and cannot be grasped at all. But from wherever one takes a sip, the salt is there. This Great Element (*mahad bhūtam*) is infinitely unconfined concentrated sentience (*viṣṇānaghana*). It emerges from the basic elements and disappears after them. So I say, after death there is no perception [because there are neither individual subjects nor objects].⁶

3.4 and 5: Explain to me the primal reality (*brahman*) that is clear and not hidden, the nature (*ātman*) that is within all.

The universal nature is also your nature.

What is the universal nature?

You cannot see the seer who sees. You cannot hear the hearer who hears. You cannot think of the thinker who thinks. You cannot perceive the perceiver who perceives objects. The universal nature is yours too.... That is what is beyond hunger and thirst, beyond sorrow and delusion, beyond old age and death. When they know this nature, Brahmins cease to desire sons, wealth and other worlds of experience, and adopt the mendicant life.

3.7: What is the inner controller of this world and the next, as well as of all beings, who controls them from within?

This nature (*ātman*) of yours who is present within but is different from the earth [fire, air, wind and other physical features], whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is and who controls the earth from within – he is the inner controller, the immortal.... This nature of yours who is present within but is different from all beings, whom all beings do not know, whose body is all beings and who controls all beings from within – he is the inner controller, the immortal.... This nature of yours who is present within the breath but is different from the breath [from speech, sight and other sensory and cognitive functions], whom the breath does not know, whose body is the breath and who controls the breath from within – he is the inner controller, the immortal.... That is the seer who cannot be seen, the hearer who cannot be heard, the thinker who cannot be thought of, the perceiver who cannot be perceived. There is no other who sees etc. It is this nature of yours who is the inner controller, the immortal.

4.2.4: About this nature (*ātman*) one can only say, ‘it is not this’ or ‘it is not that’. It is incomprehensible for it cannot be grasped. It is undecaying, for it is not subject to decay.

4.3.7: What is *ātman* in humans?

It is the spirit (*puruṣa*), the vital power (*prāṇa*) consisting in perception (*viññāna*), that which is the inner light within the heart.

4.4.6: The one who does not desire, who is without desires, who is free from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, whose only interest is in the universal nature, his vital functions do not cease. The *brahman* he is and to the *brahman* he goes.

Such a one is at peace, in control, unperturbed, patient and focused for he sees the soul in himself and he sees all things as the soul [Br.Up. 4.4.23].

4.5.6: It is this nature (*ātman*) that one should see and hear and on which one should reflect and contemplate. When this nature has been seen and heard, reflected upon and understood, everything is understood.

The sixth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, sometimes called the ‘*Sad-vidyā*’ or ‘Knowledge about Being’, is a text on the borderland of creation mythology and metaphysical speculation.⁷ It begins with a sage called Uddālaka Āruṇi offering to teach his son Śvetaketu ‘how one hears what has not been heard before, how one thinks the hitherto unthought and how one understands what has not been understood’. The topic is nothing less than understanding the basic nature of reality. The general form of explanation is that by knowledge of one, there is knowledge of the all. The ‘one’ is the primary substance (variously called *sat*, the *brahman*, *ātman*), the first cause and source of the differentiated cosmos. As the text puts it: Being is the source of all these creatures, Being is their resting place and Being is their foundation.⁸ Although the precise character of this hyper-reality cannot be specified (since in this mortal life we only know its effects – ourselves included), this did not inhibit speculation.

Selections from Chāndogya Upaniṣad, chapter 6

6.1.4: It is like this: by means of one lump of clay, one understands [the substance or nature of] everything made of clay. The product is a singling out by speech, a naming, while the truth is just ‘it is clay’.

6.2.1–3: In the beginning there was being (*sat*), one only and without a second.

There are some who say that only non-being (*asat*) was here originally and that existence arose from non-existence. But how is it possible that existence arose from non-existence?⁹ No: *sat* alone was here originally.

And *sat* thought to itself, ‘Let me become many: let me multiply myself’.

It begat heat. The heat thought, ‘Let me become many: let me multiply myself’. Heat begat water.... Water begat food.

6.3.2: The same divinity (*devatā*, meaning *sat*) thought, ‘Let me create various entities (*nāma-rūpa*, lit. *names and perceptible forms*) by entering these three divinities (i.e. heat, water and food) by animating them (*jīvena-ātmanā*).

I shall make each of them three-fold.' So that divinity created various entities by entering those three divinities and making each of them threefold.

Learn from me how each of these three becomes threefold.

6.4: The red colour in a fire is the manifestation of heat. The white colour in a fire is the manifestation of water. The black colour in a fire is the manifestation of food.

Thus, the apparently singular character of fire has disappeared. Any product (such as fire) is a singling out by speech, a designation, while the truth is just that it consists of the three manifestations.

6.5: Learn from me how each of these three divinities on entering a man becomes threefold. Food when consumed becomes threefold: faeces, flesh and mind. Water turns into urine, blood and breath. Heat becomes bones, marrow and speech.

[The text's detailed account of the genesis of sundry kinds of creatures is omitted here. The theme is that there is an ultimate principle and source – called Being (*sat*) whence all kinds of entities arise as combinations of the primary derivatives: heat, water and food. The source remains unchanged as it is in itself. When entities finally revert to the primal being, their individuality is annihilated.]

6.8.6: Being (*sat*) is the source of all these creatures, Being is their abode and Being is their foundation. When a man is dying, his speech merges into his mind, his mind into his vital breath and his breath into the supreme divinity (*sat*).

That which is the finest essence¹⁰ here, that is the nature of the whole world. That is what's real, that is the primary substrate (*ātman*),¹¹ and that is what you are.¹²

6.9: Just as when the bees gather honey and condense into a unity the nectar from many trees, the nectars from each different tree lack the discernment 'I am from this tree' or 'I am from that tree'. Similarly, all these creatures, when they merge into Being, are not individually aware, 'I am merging into Being'. Whatever they were in the world, they merge into Being.

Whatever is the finest essence here, that is the nature of the whole world. That is what's real, that is the primary substrate (*ātman*), and that is what you are.

6.10: The easterly rivers flow towards the west and the westerly ones towards the east. Starting from the ocean, they eventually merge into the ocean. The ocean just continues in being. There they do not know 'I am this river' or 'I am that river'. In the same way, when all these creatures reach the Being that

is their source, they are not individually aware that they are reaching Being. Whatever they were in the world, they become Being.

Whatever is the finest essence here, that is the nature of the whole world. That is what's real, that is the substrate (*ātman*), and that is what you are.

6.12: 'Bring me a fruit from the banyan tree.

Here it is, Sir

Cut it up

I've cut it, Sir

What do you see here?

Tiny pieces.

Cut one of them up

What do you see?

Nothing?

You cannot see the finest essence here, but it is because of that essence that this great Banyan tree stands.

That which is the finest essence is the nature shared by everything. That is what's real. That is the substrate (*ātman*) and that is what you are.'

Selections from the Taittirīya Upaniṣad

2.1.1: He who knows the *brahman* attains the highest. The *brahman* is reality, consciousness and infinite. He who knows that as hidden in the heart attains all his desires and the *brahman*.

Space was produced from that substrate (*ātman*), air was produced from space, fire from air, water from fire, the earth from water, plants from the earth, food from plants and man (*puruṣa*) from food. A man is made of the essence of food. He has a head, a left and a right, this is his nature (*ātman*).

2.2: Different from and lying within this man made from the essence of food is the nature (*ātman*) made of breath. Different from and lying within this man made from breath is the nature (*ātman*) consisting in mind: different from mind is the nature consisting in perception; different from perception is the nature consisting of bliss.

Selections from the Aitareya Upaniṣad (*ātman* as primary substrate)¹³

1. In the beginning this world was *ātman*, one alone. There was nothing else that even blinked. He thought to himself, 'Let me create the worlds.'
- 3.1 What is this *ātman*? Is it that by which one sees, or hears, or smells, or speaks?
- 3.2 Is it the heart and the mind? Is it perceiving or thinking, wisdom, memory, decision, intention? All these are just names of modes of consciousness.
- 3.3 It is the *brahman*, it is Indra, it is Prajāpati: it is all the gods. It is the five base elements (*pañca mātābhūtāni*): earth, wind, air, water and light. It is also all sorts of things that are mixtures of the elements. It is living beings born from eggs and wombs, from sweat and from seeds. It is horses, cattle, men and elephants. It is everything animate, moving, flying and immobile. Consciousness is the eye of all that. It is all founded on consciousness. Consciousness is the world's eye. Consciousness is the foundation and the *brahman* is consciousness.

Selections from the Kaṭha Upaniṣad

2.20: More subtle than the subtlest, greater than the greatest is the soul (*ātman*) hidden in the heart of a living being. One who is free from desires and regrets sees the greatness of the soul by the grace of the creator.

2.22: When he knows this supreme and all-pervading nature (*ātman*) as bodiless within bodies, as constant in the midst of changes, the wise man ceases to grieve.

2.23: This soul cannot be comprehended by speech, by doctrine or by intelligence. Only the one he chooses can grasp him.

3.3: Know the soul (*ātman*) to be a passenger in a chariot and the body nothing more than a chariot. Know the intellect (*buddhi*) to be the charioteer and the mind (*manas*) to be the reins.

3.4: The senses are the horses and the perceptible objects their field. That which is linked to intellect, senses and mind, the wise call the experiencer.

3.5: The man lacking wisdom and whose mind is undisciplined, his senses are out of control, as bad horses do not obey a charioteer.

3.6: But as to the wise man whose mind is disciplined, his senses are under his control, as good horses obey a charioteer.

3.7: The man who lacks wisdom is careless and impure. He does not reach the highest place and continues on the cycle of rebirth.

3.8: The wise man is diligent and pure. He reaches the highest place from which he is not born again.

3.9: He who has wisdom as his charioteer and his mind as the reins reaches the journey's end – the place of Viṣṇu.

Further reading

For Vedic Hinduism and the contents of the Vedic corpus, see Jamison and Witzel (2003). This is accessible online via Professor Witzel's website.

Rig Vedic hymns are translated in Doniger (2005).

All the Upaniṣadic passages mentioned here can be found in Olivelle (1998). There is also an Oxford University Press paperback that just has the translation.

Essays II, V–X in van Buitenen (1988) have all been influential. Chapters I and II of Halbfass (1992) are thought-provoking about the 'question of being' in India.

Questions for discussion and investigation

1. Does it really make sense to suppose that the complex cosmos has a single source?
2. Are the Upaniṣads expressions of a timeless spirituality, or do they express beliefs current at the times of this composition?

Notes

1. Rig Veda 10.90.
2. See for example Rig Veda 10.129.
3. The view of the pre-Socratic thinker, Thales.
4. 'In the beginning there was only the *brahman*, and it knew only itself in thinking, "I am the brahman." From that, everything came into being' (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10).
5. 'Soul's secret name is, "the reality of what's real", for the real constitutes the vital breaths and the soul is their essence' [Br.Up. 2.1.2].
6. The passage is obscure. It is included to illustrate the composite nature of the Upaniṣad. The Great Element (*mahad bhūtam*) usually means the first cause, of which the elements (*bhūtas*) are the primary evolutes. The picture here is one of a great being emerging out of lesser sentient and insentient factors.
7. This text will be very influential especially in the Vedānta systematizations of the Upaniṣadic teachings. It will be interpreted by Śaṅkara and his Advaitin followers in monistic, gnostic and non-theistic terms. By contrast, Rāmānuja demonstrates its compatibility with a pluralistic ontology and devotional theism. See Chapters 10–13.
8. Ch.Up. 6.8.6.
9. Note: This is a response to an ancient doctrine found in Rig Veda 10.129; Tait.Up. 2.7.1; Bṛhad.Up. 1.2.1; Ch.Up. 3.19.1: 'In the beginning this world was just non-being. What now exists came from that. It developed and formed an egg' Exactly what its proponents meant by '*asat*' is obscure. Presumably they did not suppose that it simply meant nothing! See above p. 11.
10. *aṇiman* means the original and most refined or subtle state from which the infinitely boundless Being transforms itself into the cosmos of localized entities.
11. *Ātman* here might be translated as 'soul' but with a universal, perhaps impersonal, connotation. It should not be taken as meaning self or person, let alone the modern reification, The Self.
12. '*Tat tvam asi*', traditionally translated as 'That thou art', and one of the Vedāntic *mahāvākyas* or key statements according to Vedānta.
13. Cf. Ch.Up. 7.25.2 and 26.1. Translation of '*ātman*' as 'self' here is implausible.

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