

Key Ideas in the Upanishads

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

The Upanishads

- A body of texts marking the culmination of the Vedas (c.800-300 BCE).
- 18 principal Upanishads (of which the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, attached to the Yajur Veda, and the *Chandogya Upanisad*, attached to the Sama Veda, are the earliest).
- *Upa* = near; *nishad* = to sit down; reference to esoteric teaching.
- Often referred to as the 'Vedanta' (*Veda* + *anta*: the 'end' or 'culmination' of the Vedas).
- Not ritualistic but philosophical.

Karma, Samsara and Reincarnation

- The word ***karma*** derives from the Sanskrit verbal root *kr* and simply means 'to do' or 'to act'.
- A moral principle of causality in which no deed is without its consequences.
- The mechanics of karma described as akin to other processes observed in the natural world.
- Acts spoken of as seeds (*bija*) that will germinate and bear fruit (*phala*) under the appropriate conditions.
- Karma the force that drives reincarnation.

Karma, Samsara and Reincarnation

- The term **samsara** literally means 'to flow together', or 'to wander [without purpose]' and thus refers to this cycle of repeated rebirths.
- Beings wander through the various realms, taking up birth and ultimately dying again and again. This cycle is virtually endless, and is generally regarded as having no beginning.
- The quality of the life into which the soul is reborn depends on *karma*.
- The ultimate aim of the soul is to be liberated from this cycle altogether.

Moksha

- **Moksha** derives from the Sanskrit root *muc* meaning 'to release' and refers to freedom from *samsara*.
- The idea of liberation arises in conjunction with the **sramana** movements that began in the Upanishadic period.
- *Moksha* (or *mukti*) contrasted with *bhukti*, the enjoyment of worldly pleasures.

How to Attain *Moksha*

- Since *moksha* entails transcending *samsara* and *karma* completely, 'good *karma*' is not enough to secure liberation.
- What is required is a liberating knowledge of the truth concerning the Self and the Absolute Reality.
- The Upanishads encourage the individual to reach this awareness through a system of practical reflection (*yoga*) and by detachment from the material world.

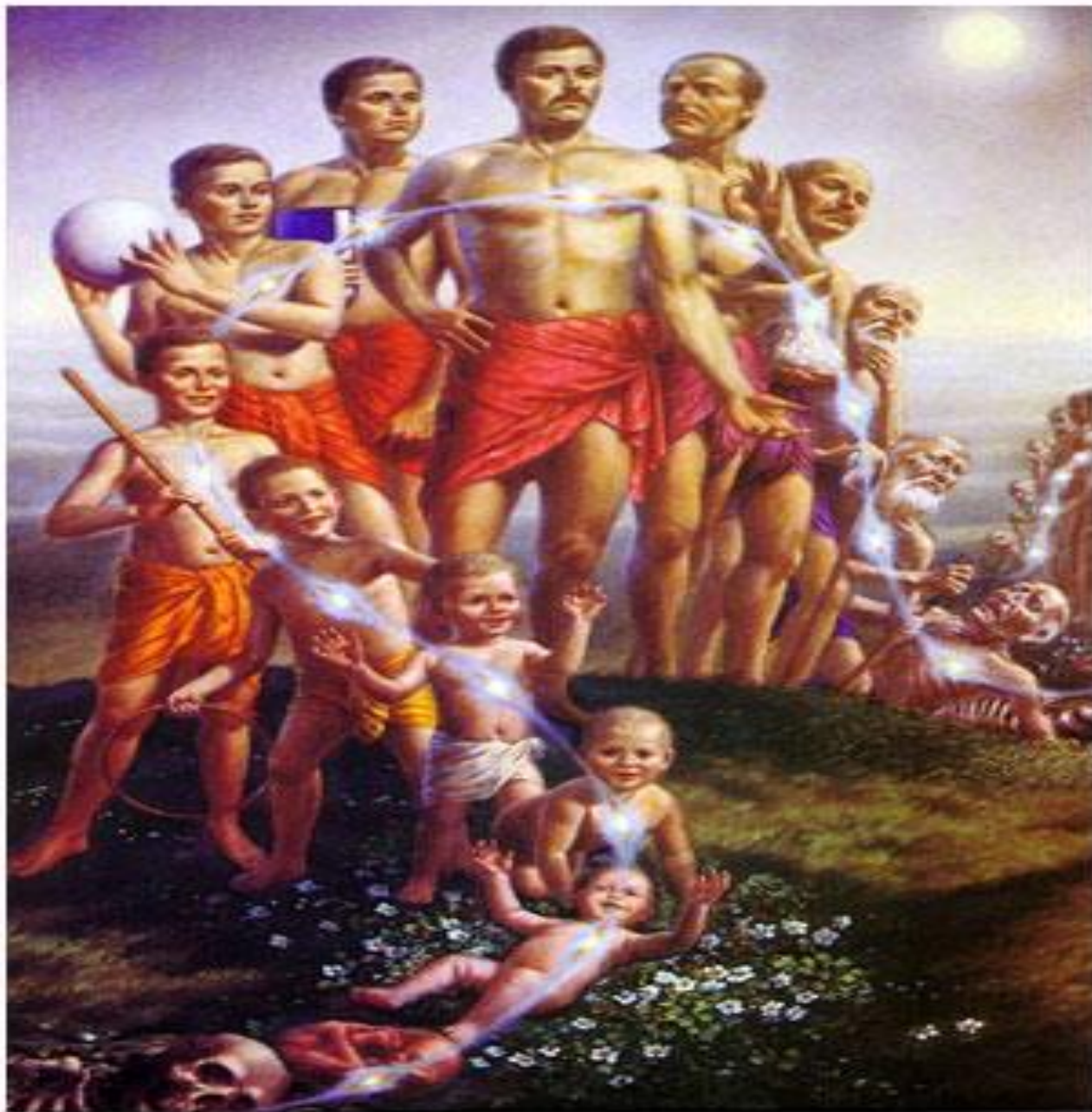
Brahman

- In the early Vedas, ***brahman*** refers to the power of the sacrificial ritual.
- In the later Vedas, *brahman* comes to assume more abstract meaning.
- The essence of the universe; the Absolute or Ultimate Reality; the Divine breath; the force or energy that underpins everything; that of which nothing greater can be conceived; God.

**Brahman in this sense is not to be confused with the Brahmins (the highest varna), Brahmanas (branch of the Vedas), or the creator god Brahma!*

Atman

- ***Atman*** means 'eternal Self'.
- The *atman* refers to the real self/soul which underlies our existence.
- The idea of the Self as a spiritual rather than material being.
- The understanding of the Self as eternal supports the idea of reincarnation in that the same eternal being can inhabit temporary bodies.



The Upanashadic Emphasis on *Atman* as *Brahman*

- True knowledge is understood as the knowledge that the Self is the *atman*.
- It is the further knowledge that the *atman* is *brahman*.
- To say that the *atman* is *brahman* is to say the Self is god/godly.
- The *atman* is the Absolute in each individual. Awareness or EXPERIENCE of this reality is what leads to liberation!
- **Monism**: the belief that everything is one.

Moksha (Hilary Rodrigues)

- '*Thus moksha* becomes synonymous with freedom from *samsara* and freedom from *karma*. *Moksha* is release from worldly existence. It is freedom from the bondage of ignorance into the liberation that comes with knowledge of the Self (*atman*) or Absolute Reality (*brahman*)'
- Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, p. 52.

***ATMAN =
BRAHMAN!***



The Katha Upanishad on Atman-Brahman

'When the wise rests his mind in contemplation on our God beyond time, who invisibly dwells in the mystery of things and in the heart of man, then he rises above pleasures and sorrow. When a man has heard and has understood and, finding the essence, reaches the Inmost, then he finds joy in the Source of joy...I will tell you the Word that all the Vedas glorify, all self-sacrifice expresses, all sacred studies and holy life seek. The Word is OM. That Word is the everlasting Brahman: that Word is the highest End. When that sacred Word is known, all longings are fulfilled...Atman, the Spirit of vision, is never born and never dies. Before him there was nothing, and he is ONE for evermore. Never-born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, he does not die when the body dies. If the slayer thinks that he kills, and if the slain thinks that he dies, neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in man cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die'.

TAT TVAM ASI

तत्त्वमसि

THOU ART THAT

A photograph of a field of flowers, likely cosmos, with purple and white blossoms on thin green stems. The background is a soft, out-of-focus yellow. The text "Ahm Brahmasmi" is overlaid in the center in a simple, black, sans-serif font.

Ahm
Brahmasmi

Vedanta and Vedantins

- ***Vedanta*** (end/culmination of the Vedas): a term that includes not just the Upanishads but also a range of philosophical systems that provide different interpretations of the ideas contained in the Upanishads (as well as the *Vedanta/Brahma Sutra* attributed to Badarayana).
- The Vedantins are philosophers who sought to comment on and interpret the ideas contained in the Vedanta.

The Three Major Vedantic Schools

- We will consider three such philosophical orientations:
 - ❖ ***Advaita*** ('Non-Dualism')
 - ❖ ***Viśiṣṭadvaita*** ('Qualified Non-Dualism')
 - ❖ ***Dvaita*** ('Dualism')
- Each was developed by South Indian philosopher-theologians, all Brahmins, particularly adept at philosophical exposition.

The Philosopher-Theologians: Sankara/Adi Shankaracharya (8th-9th Centuries)



Sankara and Advaita (Non-Dualism)

- Atman IS Brahman, Self IS 'god'/Absolute Reality.
- All is one – there is only one Absolute Reality; there are no two, there is no plurality.
- The plurality we see around us (*maya*) is illusory.
- To achieve enlightenment we need to wake from our state of illusion/delusion.
- ***Nirguna***: brahman 'without attributes'

The Philosopher-Theologians: Ramanuja/Ramanujacharya (11th-12th centuries)



Ramanuja and Visistadvaita (Qualified Non-Dualism)

- God is understood not in abstract terms (pure consciousness/ supreme reality) but is personified as Vishnu (*Isvara*, the Lord).
- ***Saguna***: brahman 'with attributes'
- Reality as we understand it is not false – the world is plural, internally qualified/differentiated.
- We are not god, we are an aspect of god, just as the sun's rays are not the sun but an aspect of the sun.
- Enlightenment and liberation requires not just knowledge of god but also the grace of god.

Ramanuja's Sri Vaishnava Tradition

- The Northern (Vadagalai) School: the monkey allegory (human agency as necessary for securing liberation)
- The Southern (Tengalai) School: the kitten allegory (complete surrender to god's grace)



The Philosopher-Theologians: Madhva/ Madhvacharya (1238-1317)



Madhva and Dvaita (Dualism)

- There is complete distinction between god and self.
- Everyday reality is not illusory.
- Our different selves are not identical – we are each distinct.
- The only way to strive for liberation from this world is to engage in devotion to, and worship of, god.
- Ultimately, liberation is the result of the divine grace of Vishnu alone.

Summary: Key Ideas in the Upanishads

- The Upanishads speculate (among other things) about the nature of life, the Self and the Absolute.
- Knowledge and experience of the truth concerning the Self and the Absolute considered to liberate the individual from *samsara*.
- Different interpretations of the ideas contained in the Upanishads offered by the Vedantins.

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Klostermaier, K. K., *Hinduism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), chs. 9, 11-12
- Patton, L. L., 'Veda and Upanishad', *The Hindu World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), ed. S Mittal and G. R. Thursby, pp. 37-51, see especially 45-50
- Shattuck, C., *Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 27-31