

Chapter 12

UPANIṢADS

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Introduction

The Upaniṣads are often considered the beginning of Indian philosophy. Yet despite containing some of the first detailed discussions about philosophical topics such as the self and the nature of existence, there has been considerable disagreement about whether the Upaniṣads themselves constitute philosophy and about their status within the later philosophical tradition in India. This chapter examines some of the main ideas put forth by the texts, as well as some of their most significant influences on subsequent developments in Indian philosophy, while also briefly considering the question of whether the Upaniṣads themselves are philosophy, or merely the pre-philosophical basis for later traditions.

The Upaniṣads and the Vedas

The Upaniṣads are the fourth and final section of a larger group of texts called the Vedas. There are four different collections of Vedic texts, the *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, with each of these collections containing four different layers of textual material: the *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, and Upaniṣads. In addition to those attached to the Vedas, there are literally hundreds of other texts bearing the name *Upaniṣad*. Because the Vedic ones have been the most influential in Indian philosophy and beyond, this discussion will focus exclusively on them.

From ritual to philosophy

Due to their connection with previous Vedic material, the Upaniṣads generally assume a ritual context, containing many passages that explain the significance of ritual actions or interpret *mantras* (sacred verses) spoken during the ritual. One of the most prevalent tendencies to continue from the ritual texts is an attempt to identify the underlying connections (*bandhus*) that exist among different orders of reality. Often these connections were made among three spheres: the cosmos, the body of the sponsor of the ritual (*yajamāna*), and the ritual grounds – in other words, between the macrocosm, the microcosm, and the ritual.

The Upaniṣads, particularly the earlier ones, extend such Vedic modes of thinking beyond the ritual context. In its earliest textual contexts the word *upaniṣad* takes on a meaning similar to *bandhu*, describing a connection between things, often presented in a hierarchical relationship. In these contexts *upaniṣad* designates equivalences between components of different realms of reality that were not considered to be observable by the senses, but remained concealed and obscured, and required special knowledge or understanding. On several occasions, *upaniṣad* means ‘secret teaching’ (i.e. CU 1.1.10; 1.13.4; 8.8.4; BU 2.1.20; 4.2.1; 5.5.3–4), a notion that is reinforced by the use of other formulations such as *guhya ādeśā* (‘hidden instruction’; BU 3.5.2) and *para guhya* (‘supreme secret’; KaU 3.17; SU 6.22).

Another important idea that emerges out of a ritual context is karma (*karman*), which literally means ‘action’. In earlier Vedic material karma refers to any ritual action, which, if performed correctly, yields beneficial results, but, if performed incorrectly, brings about negative consequences. The Upaniṣads do not offer any explicit theory of karma, but do contain a number of teachings that seem to extend the notion of karma beyond the ritual context to a more general understanding of moral retribution. Yājñavalkya, for example, when asked by Ārtabhāga about what happens to a person after death, responds that a person becomes good by good action and bad by bad action (BU 3.2.13).

Similarly, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.4–10) King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali links karma to the process of rebirth when he discloses to the brahmin Uddālaka Āruṇi the knowledge of the five fires (*pañcāgnividyā*). Pravāhaṇa’s instruction, which also appears in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.2.9–16) but without the explicit connection to karma, describes human life as part of a cycle of regeneration, whereby the essence of life takes on different forms as it passes through different levels of existence. In both the *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads*, Pravāhaṇa combines his teaching of the five fires with the discourse of the two paths of the dead – a discourse which also appears in slightly different variations in other Upaniṣads: e.g. *Muṇḍaka* (1.2.10–11), *Kaṭha* (1.3), *Praśna* (1.9–10). According to Pravāhaṇa, those who know the teaching of the five fires follow the path of the gods and enter the world of *brahman*, but those who do not know this teaching will follow the path of the ancestors and continue to be reborn.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.10.7–8), Pravāhaṇa elaborates further, stating that one’s actions in this lifetime affect one’s birth status in the next. Although the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* version of this teaching does not contain this explicit link between *karma* and rebirth, in both accounts Pravāhaṇa teaches that knowledge of the teaching of the five fires will affect the conditions of one’s future births. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (6.2.16) he warns that those who do not know will become worms, insects, or snakes, while in the *Chāndogya* (5.10.10) he suggests that knowledge can lead one to be free of karmic consequences.

Such discussions linking actions in one lifetime to consequences in a future one would become widely accepted in subsequent philosophical discourse – not only among Hindus, but also by Buddhists and Jinas, and, to a certain extent, by the Ājīvikas. A related term, *saṃsāra*, which refers to the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, begins

to be used in the comparatively late *Kaṭha* (3.7) and *Śvetāśvatara* (6.16) *Upaniṣads*. Closely related to *saṃsāra* is *mokṣa*, the concept that one can escape or be released from the endless cycle of repeated births. Similar to *saṃsāra*, the *Upaniṣads* do not contain an explicit theory about *mokṣa*, with the term only assuming its connotations of spiritual liberation in the later texts (i.e. *SU* 6.16). The Hindu *darśanas* would subsequently consider *mokṣa* to be a fundamental teaching of all the *Upaniṣads*, but the texts themselves, particularly the early ones, focus much more attention on securing wealth, status, and power in this lifetime than on describing existence as an endless cycle. They also tend to present life as desirable, and not as a condition from which people need release or escape. One of the most common soteriological goals is immortality, *amṛta*, which literally means ‘not dying’. The *Upaniṣads* describe immortality in a number of different ways, including having a long life span, surviving death in the heavenly world, becoming one with the essential being of the universe, and being preserved in the social memory.

The self in the *Upaniṣads*

One of the most widely discussed topics throughout both the early and late *Upaniṣads* is the self (*ātman*). In its earliest textual appearances, *ātman* is used as a reflexive pronoun, much like ‘self’ in English, but by the time of the late *Brāhmaṇas* and early *Upaniṣads*, the word was associated with a wide range of meanings, sometimes referring to the material body, but often designating something like an essence, a life-force, consciousness, or even ultimate reality.

Although *ātman* does not have one consistent meaning across all of its textual appearances, there is considerable consistency as to its meaning according to any particular teacher. Indeed, it is perhaps more fruitful to consider the *Upaniṣads* as collections of teachings from different teachers, than it is to consider them as unified texts. Not only do different *Upaniṣads* often have discernibly different philosophical agendas, but different teachers offer distinct teachings that are often in contradistinction to each other, as teachers compete to recruit students, to secure patronage, and to win public debating competitions.

One of the best-known teachings of the self appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1–16), as the instruction of Uddālaka Āruṇi to his son Śvetaketu. Uddālaka begins by explaining that one can know the universal of a material substance from a particular object made of that substance: by means of something made of clay, one can know clay; by means of an ornament made of copper, one can know copper; by means of a nail cutter made of iron, one can know iron. Uddālaka uses these examples to explain that objects are not created from nothing, but rather that creation is a process of transformation from an original being (*sat*) which emerges into the multiplicity that characterizes our everyday experiences. Uddālaka’s explanation of creation is often assumed to have influenced the *satkāryavāda* theory – the theory that the effect exists within the cause – which was accepted by the *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga*, and *Vedānta darśanas*.

Later in his teaching, Uddālaka makes a series of inferences from comparisons with empirically observable natural phenomena to explain that the self is a non-material

essence present in all living beings. He first uses the example of nectar, collected by bees from different sources, but when gathered together becomes an undifferentiated whole. Similarly, water flowing from different rivers merges together without distinction when reaching the ocean. Uddālaka uses these examples to illustrate that the self will eventually merge into the original being (*sat*). After each of these descriptions Uddālaka brings attention back to Śvetaketu, as he repeats the words ‘you are that’ (*tat tvam asi*), emphasizing that the self operates the same way in him as it does in all living beings (CU 6.8.7).

Yājñavalkya, the most prominent teacher in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, characterizes *ātman* more in terms of consciousness than as a life-force. In a debate that pits him against Uddālaka – his senior colleague and, by some accounts, his former teacher (BU 6.3.7; 6.5.3) – Yājñavalkya explains that the self is the inner controller, present within all sensing and cognizing, yet at the same time distinct: ‘He is the seer that cannot be seen, the hearer that cannot be heard, the thinker that cannot be thought, the knower that cannot be known’ (BU 3.7.23). Here, Yājñavalkya explains that we know the existence of the self through actions of the self, through what the self does, not through our senses – that the self, as consciousness, cannot be an object of consciousness. As Yājñavalkya rhetorically asks his wife Maitreyī later in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*: ‘By what means can one know him, by means of whom one knows this whole world?’ (4.5.15).

Prajāpati, the creator god of Vedic ritual texts, is recast in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* as another prominent teacher of the self. Similar to Yājñavalkya, Prajāpati conceptualizes the self in terms of consciousness, describing *ātman* as the agent responsible for sensing and cognizing: *ātman* is ‘the one who is aware’ (CU 8.12.4–5). However, despite some similarities with Yājñavalkya’s teaching, Prajāpati rejects a description of *ātman* in terms of dreamless sleep, a teaching of the self that Yājñavalkya describes as the ‘highest goal’ and ‘the highest bliss’ in his instruction to King Janaka (BU 4.3.32).

Perhaps the most famous teachings of the self, the identification of *ātman* and *brahman*, is delivered by Śāṇḍilya in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. Similar to the term *ātman*, *brahman* has a number of different, yet related, connotations in Vedic literature. The oldest usages of the word are closely connected with the power of speech, with *brahman* meaning a truthful utterance or powerful statement. In the Upaniṣads *brahman* retains this connection with speech, but also comes to refer to ultimate reality.

Śāṇḍilya begins his teaching by stating that *brahman* is the entire world. He then explains what happens to people at the time of death as in accordance with their resolve in this world. After describing *ātman* in various ways, Śāṇḍilya equates *ātman* with *brahman*: ‘This self (*ātman*) of mine within the heart is *brahman*. On departing from here, I will enter into him’ (CU 3.14.4). This teaching clearly implies that if one understands *brahman* as the entire world, and one understands that the self is *brahman*, then one becomes the entire world at the time of death.

Although Śāṇḍilya’s teaching of *ātman* and *brahman* is often considered the central doctrine of the Upaniṣads, it is important to remember that this is not the only characterization either of the self or of ultimate reality. While some teachers, such as

Yājñavalkya, also equate *ātman* with *brahman* (BU 4.4.5), others, such as Uddālaka Āruṇi, do not make this identification. Indeed, Uddālaka, whose famous phrase *tat tvam asi* is later taken by Śaṅkara to be a statement of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*, never uses the term the *brahman* – neither in his instruction to his son Śvetaketu, nor on any other of his many appearances in the Upaniṣads. Moreover, it is often unclear, even in Śāṇḍilya's teaching, whether linking *ātman* with *brahman* refers to the complete identity of the self and ultimate reality, or if *ātman* is considered an aspect or quality of *brahman*. Such debates about how to interpret the teachings of the Upaniṣads have continued throughout the Indian philosophical tradition, and are particularly characteristic of the Vedānta *darśana*.

Furthermore, while most teachings about *brahman* assume that the world emerged from one undifferentiated abstract cosmic principle, there are a number of passages explaining creation in terms of a more materialist point of view, describing the world as coming forth from an initial natural element, such as water or air. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (5.1), for example, contains a teaching attributed to the son of Kauravyāyāni, depicting *brahman* as space. This same section of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (5.5.1) includes a passage describing the world as beginning from water. Similarly, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.3.1–2), Raikva traces the beginnings of the world to wind in the cosmic sphere, and breath in the microcosm.

Returning to the self, despite the differences among various teachers' conceptions of *ātman*, there are some general tendencies. Most of the philosophers in the Upaniṣads assume that *ātman* dwells within the body when it is alive, that *ātman*, in one way or another, is responsible for the body being alive, and that *ātman* does not die when the body dies, but rather finds a dwelling place in another body. Such depictions of *ātman* seem to have been a catalyst for or to have developed alongside early Buddhist conceptions of selfhood. The Buddhists explicitly rejected any notion of an indivisible and unchanging self, not only introducing the term not-self (*anātman* in Sanskrit; *anattā* in Pāli) to describe the lack of any fixed essence, but also explaining karmic continuity from one lifetime to the next in terms of the five *skandhas* – a theory maintaining that what Upanishadic thinkers take to be a unified self is really made of five components, all of which are subject to change.

The Upaniṣads as represented in the Hindu *darśanas* before Vedānta

Five of the six so-called 'Hindu' *darśanas* officially recognize the Upaniṣads as a source of philosophy in so far as they recognize *śabda* as a valid means for attaining knowledge. *Śabda* literally means 'word', but in philosophical discourse refers to verbal testimony or reliable authority, and is sometimes taken to refer specifically to *śruti*. Despite the nominal acceptance of *śabda* as a *pramāṇa*, however, the Upaniṣads are only cited occasionally in the surviving texts, and rarely as a source to validate fundamental arguments, before the emergence of the Vedānta school in the seventh century.

Rather, in the extant sources from the early period of the systematized philosophical schools, the influence of the Upaniṣads is more oblique than explicit, with few direct references, yet with many of the dominant terms and concepts seemingly inherited

from them. Perhaps most notably, the Upanishadic notion of self – as a spiritual essence separate from the physical body – is generally accepted by the classical Hindu philosophical schools. The Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā *darśanas*, for example, which do not cite the Upaniṣads to prove its existence, nevertheless describe the self as an immaterial substance that resides in and acts through the body. In addition to conceptual similarities with certain passages from the Upaniṣads, both schools seem to consider the Upaniṣads as texts that specialize in the self. The Nyāya philosopher Vātsyāyana (c. 350–450 CE), for instance, characterizes the Upaniṣads as dealing with the self.

Similarly, the early texts of the Sāṃkhya and Yoga *darśanas* do not reference the Upaniṣads when making their fundamental arguments, but do seem to inherit much of their terminology, as well as some of their views, from them. At the beginning of Uddālaka Āruṇi's instruction to Śvetaketu in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2–5), for instance, he describes existence (*sat*) as consisting of three forms (*rūpas*): fire (red), water (white), and food (black) – a scheme that closely resembles the later Sāṃkhya doctrine of *prakṛti* and the three *guṇas*. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (4.5), the oldest extant text in Indian literature to use the word *sāṃkhya* (5.2), seems to build on Uddālaka's threefold scheme when describing the unborn as red, white, and black. Also, a number of core terms in Sāṃkhya philosophy first appear in the Upaniṣads, such as *ahaṃkāra* (CU 7.25.1) and the *tattvas* (BU 4.5.12), while some passages contain groups of terms appearing together in ways that are similar to how they appear in later Sāṃkhya texts: the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (3.10–11), for example, lists a hierarchy of principles including consciousness (*puruṣa*), discernment (*buddhi*), mind (*manas*), and the sense capacities (*indriyas*).

A number of details about the practice of yoga, which would become more systematized by the Yoga *darśana*, are also first found in the Upaniṣads. The *Kaṭha* (3.3–13; 6.7–11) and *Śvetāśvatara* (2.8–11) *Upaniṣads* both contain some of the first descriptions of exercises for controlling the senses, breathing techniques, and bodily postures, with the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (e.g. 2.15–17) making explicit connections between yogic practice and union with a personal god – a connection that would be of central importance in the Yoga *darśana*. The *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (6–7) has the most extensive and systematic discussion of yoga in the Upaniṣads, containing a number of parallels with the *Yoga Sūtra*.

In addition to employing terms and concepts from the Upaniṣads, there are occasions when classical Indian philosophers cite the Upaniṣads directly. Vātsyāyana, of the Nyāya school, quotes passages from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* when discussing *mokṣa*, the means of attaining it, and the stages of life. Additionally, the grammarian Patañjali (c. 150 BCE) argues that the study of grammar is useful for a correct understanding of passages from the Upaniṣads, and thus for attaining *mokṣa*.

Such examples indicate that the philosophers of classical Hindu philosophy knew the Upaniṣads quite well and would dip into the texts from time to time to provide an analogy or, occasionally, to support one of their arguments. However, the early surviving texts of the Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga schools do not tend to use the Upaniṣads to validate their core positions. The *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* (3.2.8), for

example, agrees that the self is discussed in the Upaniṣads, but then argues that proof of the existence of the self should not be established exclusively by means of *śruti*, but also can be determined through inference. Additionally, none of the early schools produced a commentary on the Upaniṣads, nor did any of them aim to offer an interpretation on the Upaniṣads as a whole. As such, the Upaniṣads provided a general philosophical framework, as well as served as a repository for terms and analogies, but none of the early schools claimed the texts for themselves.

An interesting illustration of this point is that competing schools would sometimes recognize that their rival's positions were also to be found in the Upaniṣads. The Nyāya philosopher Jayanta Bhaṭṭa even finds the positions of the heterodox Lokāyata *darśana*, or Materialist school, in the Upaniṣads. In the context of criticizing the validity of *śabda* as a *pramāṇa*, Bhaṭṭa argues that if *śabda* were a valid means for establishing knowledge, then even the doctrines of the Lokāyatas must be true, because their doctrines can be found in the Upaniṣads. Due to lack of sources from the Lokāyata school, we do not know if they ever referred to the Upaniṣads in their own texts, but Bhaṭṭa's argument is illustrative of a general reluctance of most of the early schools to put too much stake in *śruti* as a means of knowledge. His comments also reflect an acknowledgement that the Upaniṣads contain a variety of viewpoints.

The Upaniṣads and Vedānta

The oldest surviving systematic interpretation of the Upaniṣads is the *Brahma Sūtra* (200 BCE–200 CE), attributed to Bādarāyaṇa. Although not technically a commentary (i.e. it is a *sūtra* rather than a *bhāṣya*), the *Brahma Sūtra* is an explanation of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads, treating the texts as the source for knowledge about *brahman*. Despite being considered a Vedānta text, the *Brahma Sūtra* (aka *Vedānta Sūtra*) was composed centuries before the establishment of Vedānta as a philosophical school.

The Vedānta *darśana* was the first philosophical school to attempt to present the Upaniṣads as holding a unified philosophical position. Vedānta means 'end of the Vedas' and is often used to refer specifically to the Upaniṣads. The school of Vedānta divides the Vedas into two sections: *karmakāṇḍa*, the section of spiritual exegesis (consisting of the Saṃhitās and the Brāhmaṇas); and *jñānakāṇḍa*, the section of knowledge (consisting of the Upaniṣads and, to a certain extent, the Āraṇyakas). According to the Vedānta school, the ritual section contains detailed instructions on how to perform the rituals, whereas the Upaniṣads contain transcendent knowledge for the sake of achieving *mokṣa*. There are three main branches of the Vedānta school: Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and Dvaita Vedānta. Although these branches of Vedānta would put forth distinct philosophical positions from each other, they all took *śabda* as the exclusive means to knowledge about its central doctrines and considered the Upaniṣads, the *Brahma Sūtra*, and *Bhagavad Gītā* as its core texts (*prasthānatraya*). Despite disagreeing with each other, all three of the best-known philosophers of the Vedānta school – Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva – wrote commentaries on the Upaniṣads, presenting them as having a single, consistent philosophical position.

The best-known philosopher of the Vedānta school was Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE), whose interpretations of the Upaniṣads made a major impact on the Indian philosophical tradition in the centuries after his lifetime and continued to dominate readings of the texts throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Śaṅkara was the main proponent of Advaita Vedānta, which put forth a position of non-dualism. According to Śaṅkara the fundamental teaching of the Upaniṣads is that *ātman* and *brahman* are one and the same.

Despite the significance of Śaṅkara's philosophy, it is important to note that his interpretation of the Upaniṣads was not the only one accepted by philosophers of the Vedānta school. Rāmānuja (c. 1000 CE), the main proponent of a form of Vedānta known as Viśiṣṭādvaita, or qualified non-dualism, used the Upaniṣads to argue that *ātman* is not identical with *brahman*, but an aspect of *brahman*. Rāmānuja also found in the Upaniṣads a source for *bhakti*, as he identified the Upaniṣadic *brahman* with God. Two centuries later, Madhva (c. 1200 CE) used the Upaniṣads as a source for a dualist branch of the school, known as Dvaita Vedānta. Madhva interpreted *brahman* as an infinite and independent God, with the self as finite and dependent. As such, *ātman* is dependent upon *brahman*, but they are not exactly the same.

It is well known that the Vedānta school became extremely influential in shaping subsequent philosophical debates, and we may conjecture that the tendency for various Vedānta philosophers to use the Upaniṣads in support of their own positions, as well as in their criticisms of rival schools, prompted other schools to engage the Upaniṣads more closely. This is illustrated by the fact that schools such as Nyāya and Sāṃkhya, which previously seem to have relied very little on the Upaniṣads, began invoking them to counter the claims of Advaita Vedānta.

The Upaniṣads as philosophy

Despite their undeniable contribution to subsequent Indian philosophical traditions, there has been disagreement about whether or not the Upaniṣads themselves constitute philosophy. Much of this debate depends, of course, on how one defines philosophy.

A recurring argument as to why the Upaniṣads might not be considered philosophy is that they do not contain a unified or systematic position. This, however, largely reflects the composite and fragmented nature of the texts. Moreover, the teachers portrayed in the Upaniṣads do not seem to make linear arguments that start with premises and build to larger conclusions, but rather tend to make points through analogies and metaphors, with many core ideas presented as truths or insights known to particular teachers, not as logical propositions that can be independently verified.

Nonetheless, in a number of sections of the texts there appear to be implicit philosophical methods in place. We have already noted that Yājñavalkya's discussion of the self is based on a reflective introspection. The early Upaniṣads do not contain passages explicitly articulating method, but with the development of *yoga* and meditation in the later texts, introspection begins to be formalized as a philosophical mode of enquiry. Also, many of Uddālaka Āruṇi's descriptions of *ātman* are derived from his

observations of the natural world. Moreover, some dialogues contain an implicit dialectic, where opposing views lead towards a unified position. Indeed, the Upaniṣads appear to have been influential in the development of debate, which would become one of the central social practices associated with Indian philosophy. Although the texts do not discuss debate reflectively, a number of the most important teachings are articulated within the context of discussions between teachers and students, and verbal disputes among rival brahmins. In this way, debate is another way by which the Upaniṣads extend ideas first articulated in the context of the Vedic ritual into a more philosophical discourse.

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