

2. Discuss the relationship between self and god as understood by the different schools of Vedanta philosophy.

In my essay I will take a look at the different schools of Vedanta philosophy. I will be focusing on how the different schools perceive the idea of the self, the god and the relationship between those two. I will be concentrating on the three main schools of Vedanta philosophy, however it is important to note that these are not the only schools of Vedanta philosophy. The three main schools of Vedanta philosophy which I will be looking at are Advaita Vedanta, Visistadvaita Vedanta and Dvaita Vedanta.¹ I will be looking into the biggest differences and similarities found in these three different schools and taking a closer look on how they view the self and the god and the relationship between them.

The powerful continuity of traditions and highly valued classic texts define Indian philosophy. One of these highly valued texts are the Upanishads.² The upanishads are seen as the basis for the Vedanta philosophy. The constitutive way of thinking which is seen in these classic texts is still shared among the modern day Indian philosophers. This does not mean that Indian philosophy would be somehow uncritically dogmatic. There are many different views and interpretations of these Upanishads and that is why there are so many different schools holding different interpretations. These interpretations of different classic texts are what is the biggest divider in the different schools. The point of view varies from polytheism to monotheism and even pantheism.³ It is hard to state when exactly the Vedas were written but the approximate Vedic period in Hinduism is considered to be from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. The Vedas were written down approximately in 500 BCE.⁴

There are four different types of Vedas. These four types are Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Athara Veda and Yajur Veda. In the Vedas there are no supreme deities although some deities are considered to be more important than others. The more important ones are usually more on display in the Vedas than the other deities. In all of these four different types of Vedas you can find four different types of texts. The four text types are Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. I will only be looking at the Upanishads and how each of these three different schools of Vedanta philosophy interprets them. I will be mainly looking at the differences and similarities regarding the relationship between self and god.⁵ The word Vedanta comes from two different words, Veda and anta. Veda means knowledge and anta means the end. Therefore the word Vedanta is often translated into the culmination of the Vedas.⁶ The word Upanishad can be divided into three

¹ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

² Kari Väyrynen, *Ympäristöfilosofian Historia* (Tampere: Eurooppalaisen Filosofian Seura, 2006), p. 66.

³ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

⁴ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 29.

⁵ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 224.

⁶ Gregg M. Singlair, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, 6th edn (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 37.

different words, upa, ni and sad. Upa meaning near, ni meaning down and sad meaning to sit. Therefore the word Upanishad is often translated into sitting near (the guru).⁷ As in many other cultures, also in Hinduism, these texts were written down after years and years of oral tradition of telling stories verbally from generation to generation. The upanishads are considered to be much more philosophical in nature than the other text types of the different Vedas. Only in the Upanishads the view on the spiritual idiosyncrasy of the human comes out more pronouncedly. This knowledge of ones own spirituality was seen as a means to be liberated from the physical reality and ones material being.⁸

Before I go further into discussing the similarities and differences between the interpretations of the Upanishads in the three different schools of Vedanta philosophy I will open the terms of the Self and god. The word Brahman is usually translated simply into god. Its more complex meaning is the absolute ultimate reality, it is something that is greater than everything else. Brahman is not usually seen as a specific god or deity but instead in a larger picture, it is everything in the universe. Brahman can be seen as the ultimate divine in which is highlighted the aspects of power, energy and potency.⁹ Atman means the eternal self. The self regarding here to the real spiritual soul rather than a temporary material being. In Hinduism, truly knowing and seeing the Self can be achieved by praying and meditating and thus becoming truly calm, patient and content. Achieving this, one gets freedom from the laws of Karma and therefore freedom from Samsara.¹⁰

The three main schools of Vedanta philosophy are all stemmed from different Vedantis interpreting the Vedas. The Vedantis behind the three main schools of Vedanta philosophy are Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. Shankara represents the Advaita Vedanta, Ramanuja represents the Visistadvaita Vedanta and Madhva represents the Dvaita Vedanta. The most apparent distinction between these three schools of Vedanta philosophy is their way of interpreting the relationship between self and god in the Upanishads.

The Advaita vedanta is a non-dualist school. The interpretation of the Upanishads is that self and god are one. That they can not be separated from each other. To Shankara the brahmana and the atman are identical, the self is the same as the god and the most important thing is to try and understand the relationship between these two and seeing that they truly are identical.¹¹

Visistadvaita vedanta is a qualified non-dualist school. The interpretation of the Upanishads here is also that self and god can not be separated from one another. The difference to the Advaita Vedanta is Ramanuja's account on the nature of Brahman and the Self.¹² Even though Ramanuja disagreed with Shankara to a certain point, he did build his interpretation on the ideas of Shankara. He agreed on the fact that reality was ultimately non-dualist. Shankara thought that the Brahman, the ultimate reality, is impersonal. This is where Ramanuja disagreed. Ramanuja saw that god is personal and

⁷ Gregg M. Singlair, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, 6th edn (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 37.

⁸ Kari Väyrynen, *Ympäristöfilosofian Historia* (Tampere: Eurooppalaisen Filosofian Seura, 2006), p. 66.

⁹ Kari Väyrynen, *Ympäristöfilosofian Historia* (Tampere: Eurooppalaisen Filosofian Seura, 2006), p. 68.

¹⁰ Gregg M. Singlair, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, 6th edn (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 38.

¹¹ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 29.

¹² Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

has qualities and that the knowledge of this god will be what liberates us from the laws of Karma and Samsara.¹³

Dvaita vedanta is a dualist school. It differs from the previous two in a significant way. Madhva's interpretation of the Upanishads is that self and god are two separate beings. In this view the reality is dualistic. The distinction between the god and the self is important in Madhva's view. They are not identical. The Atman can be dependent on the brahman but they are still not the same."¹⁴

“These philosophical ideas are not really a matter for everyday discussion by the majority of Hindus, but they do underline the way in which Hindus think about the divine. Whether a Hindu believes in an ultimate impersonal reality or a personal God has important consequences for his or her religious practice and spiritual journey. Acquiring more knowledge of ultimate reality and its relationship to the self is vital for the former; prayer and worship are central to the latter.”¹⁵

This paragraph shows us that the biggest distinction between the different schools of Vedanta philosophy is how the Brahmana is seen as and what its relationship with the self is. What combines all of these different schools is the belief in Karma and Samsara and trying to achieve the liberation of them. Even if there are differences in the interpretations of the Upanishads in the different schools of Vedanta philosophy I think that all that is in common is the core and the most important thing.

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¹³ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 30.

¹⁴ Brian Black, *History of Indian Philosophy*, ed. by Purushottama Bilimoria with Amy Rayner (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 195.

¹⁵ Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 31.

