
UNIT 5 INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF UPANIṢADS*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit presents an overarching view of the *Upaniṣads*. It outlines the central Upanishadic (*Aupaniṣadik*) concepts and foregrounds their philosophical significance. Learner will be able to understand after reading this unit,

1. Purpose of Upanishadic Tradition,
2. Various philosophical methods employed in the *Upaniṣads* to establish Upanishadic philosophical thesis.
3. Concept of *Ātmān*, *Brahman* and *Mokṣa*.

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Upaniṣads* are a collection of texts philosophical in nature, written around 900-300 BCE, a period when Indian society started questioning the traditional Vedic ritualistic order. These texts are marked by an inward turn, a decisive shift in understanding the religious life not in terms of rites and sacrifices but fundamentally as a spiritual quest.

The *Upaniṣads* are considered to be a part of the Vedic literature which comprises *Rig (Ṛk)*, *Sāma*, *Yajur (Yajuh)* and *Atharvaveda*. Each of these *Vedas* in turn has a *Samhitā*, a *Brāhmaṇa* and a *Sūtra*. The *Brāhmaṇa* is then further divided by the exponents of Vedānta into three orders. Their contents are part closely connected with one another, viz. - *Vidhi*, *Arthavāda*, and *Vedānta* or *Upaniṣads*. The *Upaniṣads* thus belong to the Vedic corpus. Since they occur in the end as the concluding portion of the *Vedas (Vedasya antaḥ)*, they are called *Vedānta*. They are not only the concluding portion, but also the consummation of the *Vedas*, and so they are also called ‘*Veda-sīras*’, the crown of the *Veda*. According to philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, Indian tradition mentions one hundred and eight *Upaniṣads* based on a list enumerated in the *Muktikā Upaniṣad*, of which the 108th is *Muktikā* itself. Sukumar Azhikode states that more than 200 *Upaniṣads* have been traced and gives a reference about 1180 *Upaniṣads*, but states that most of the later *Upaniṣads* are imitations. Although there are over 200 *Upaniṣads*, only 14 are considered to be the most important. They are: *Īśa*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśna*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Svetāśvatara*, *Kauṣītaki*, *Mahānārāyaṇa* and the *Maitri*. These texts provide the basic source for all major philosophical themes in Indian thought. In general they remain neutral among competing interpretations and they attempt to integrate most of the opposing views regarding philosophical and spiritual matters. The *Upaniṣads* form a part of ‘Śruti’ literature. *Śruti* means ‘heard’. Thus it can be said that the *Upaniṣads* were not written by humans but were revealed to the seers (by gods). None of the *Upaniṣads* are identified with any particular author. Each *Upaniṣad* is traditionally associated with one *Veda* or the other. For example, *Aitareya upaniṣad* belongs to *Rig Veda*, *Taittiriya* to *Yajur Veda*, *Chāndogya* to *Sāma Veda* and *Praśna* to *Atharva Veda*.

5.2 SCOPE OF THE SUBJECT

The whole Indian tradition from the Ṛg vedic period to the recent philosophical tradition represents one significant fact about the Upanishadic literature; that *Upaniṣads* are product of

highest human intellect or thinking in the field of philosophical speculation. Its uniqueness lies in its holistic approach to the problem of Ultimate Reality or understanding nature as well as the practical solution to the age old problem of sorrow and suffering. The present day relevance, encompassing all aspects of human development whether it is scientific or spiritual, has shown its universality of ideas.

Upaniṣads represent teachings of the sages who experienced the Reality or Truth, i.e. became Reality itself (*Brahma vid brahmaiva bhavati*- the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. The purpose of the *Upaniṣads* is not mere intellectual satisfaction, but a practical solution to the ultimate problems of life. It seems that the concept of liberation, the fourth *puruṣārtha* or the ultimate goal of life, has been established in its fullest form in the *Upaniṣadic* thought. Consequently, *Upaniṣads* move one step ahead from the *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* of the Vedic goals of life. In fact, *Upaniṣads* bring the concept of *Mokṣa* as the supreme purpose of all inquiries of life. Since, all phenomena are transient in nature, worldly life ultimately leads to suffering and cycle to rebirth. Therefore, human beings are always in search of a way to end suffering completely and to reach a state of immortality. This, according to the *Upaniṣads*, can be achieved when we know the true nature of our Self (*Ātmān*). This theoretical aspect of the teachings of the *Upaniṣads* deals with the following three issues-

1. The Self or essence of human- *Ātman*
2. The Self or essence of the world- *Brahman*
3. The relation between *Ātman* and *Brahman*

However, in Indian tradition, theory and practice go hand in hand. People do not do philosophy, rather live in philosophy. Ramaṇ Maharṣi, Swami Dayananda, Swāmi Vivekānanda, Gāndhi, etc. are such people who realized the truth and showed the true meaning and purpose of human life to the society. This practical side is the realization of the highest truth to fulfil the highest purpose of life and *Upaniṣads* present the most practical philosophy of self-realization. As per *Upaniṣadic* philosophy, there is the pure-consciousness as the ultimate essence of human being which is called as *Ātmān* and it is identical with the essence of the world which is called as Brahman. In the practical realization of this truth, one needs to go through a proper methodological as well as experiential approach, which can be framed within a formal epistemological study and it can be said as epistemology of self-realization.

Check Your Progress I

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Write a short note on the historical background of the *Upaniṣads*.

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2. What is the relevance of *Upaniṣads* in our life?

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3. What are the central teachings of the *Upaniṣads*?

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5.3 MEANING OF UPANIṢADS

There is a great diversity concerning the meaning of the word “*Upaniṣad*”. The word *Upaniṣad* has been put forward by German Indologist Paul Deussen. *Upaniṣad* occurs with three distinct meanings-

- (1) Sacred word,
- (2) Sacred Text,
- (3) Sacred Import.

The word “*Upaniṣad*” is derived by adding *upa* (near) and *ni* (with certainty) as prefix and as a suffix to the root, *sad* (to sit) meaning to split up (destroy), go (reach, attain), or loosen. Therefore, word *Upaniṣad* is denoted as the knowledge of the knowable entity presented in the book that is going to be explained. The *Upaniṣad* itself was understood in terms of ‘knowledge’ by virtue of its association with the significance. This means that sitting down a

disciple near his/her teacher in a devoted manner is not just a matter of physical posture but is essentially about receiving instructions about the highest reality that loosens all doubts and destroys all ignorance of the disciple. In fact, the seekers of emancipation, who have detached themselves from the worldly objects and desires and who can contemplate on this knowledge with stability and firmness, attain this knowledge.

As discussed earlier, there are four *Vedas* and each *Veda* has four sections- *Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣads*. While *Samhitā* contains hymns praising gods and goddesses, the *Brāhmaṇas* deal with the sacrificial rites. The *Āraṇyaka* exposition consists of the meditative practices. The *Upaniṣads* are philosophical treatises discussing the fundamental problem of existence and its purpose and the nature of reality. The transition from the *Samhitā* to *Upaniṣads* is comparable to the change from the mystifying twilight to the bright and brilliant sunlight of the day. What is implicit or suggested in the hymns becomes explicit through in-depth rigorous exploration in the philosophical tracts. For example, the Great- person of *Puruṣa-Sūkta* with thousands of heads, eyes, and feet can be read as an all-pervading conscious principle which is in some way witness to everything.

All the Upanisadic teachings revolve around the self or *Ātman*. The term “*Ātman*” or “Self” used in the *Upaniṣads* means both the universal self or Brahman and the individual self or *Ātman*. There is one absolute reality that is Brahman and all the other individuals in this world are a reflection of the one supreme Brahman. Individuals resolve themselves in the universal absolute so long as the world of manifestation is functioning. There is no mixing up of the fruits of action, as the different individual selves are kept distinct by their association with the intellect, the senses, and the ego. The soul represents an idea of the divine mind, and the different souls are the members of the supreme. The soul draws its idea of perfection from the divine creator who has given its existence. There is no reference of any object to the consciousness and bliss of the self. *JivĀtman* or the individual self means the infinite self, conditioned by the body, the senses, and the mind.

5.4 PHILOSOPHICAL METHODS IN UPANIṢADS

Upaniṣads are marked by a dialogical method. Each of the concepts it analyzes is framed within a dialogue characterized by questions and answers, narratives and episodes, similes, metaphors, illustrations, and so on. As stated in the following lines there are several dialogues. The dialogue between father Uddālaka and son Śvetaketu in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the

dialogue between Satyakāma and his mother Jabala in Chaandogya, PRājapati and his sons in *Bṛhadāranyaka*, Yama and Naciketā in *Kaṭha*, Nārada and Sanatkumāra in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* are some of the classical examples of how the dialogical method is used in developing philosophical concepts. A dialogue is a process of conversation, argumentation, and mutual supplementation of ideas between two individuals. The method demands that the opponent should be allowed to speak and express his view regarding the same subject matter. Thus a dialogue is possible only when both the speakers

- (a) Speak and Listen to each other
- (b) Aim at truth,
- (c) Understand each other's language
- (d) Understand each other's way of thinking and
- (e) Do not live in two worlds whose contents totally differ.

Thus the process of dialogue proceeds with both disagreement and consensus. Dialogue comes to an end if there is either complete agreement or total disagreement. Again, dialogical methods can be seen in two ways - first, as a mode of argumentation to bring out contradiction in the views of the other party. Secondly, it resolves, dissolves or sublates the contradictions at a higher level. For example in the dialogue between Uddālaka and Nachiketā, we find that it begins with the empirical experiences, the *vyavahārika sattā*. In order to resolve contradictions at the *vyavahārika* level, we go to the *pāramārthika* level. In short, there is always a need to overcome and sublimate the contradiction either in terms of higher ideas or by recognizing the superiority of the leading philosopher. The other method is story. A story makes us understand the concepts very clearly and the purpose of the story is to convey the moral implications of that concept. There is a famous story of Gods and demons narrated in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.

Check Your Progress II

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How many sections do the *Vedas* have? What are they? Explain each of them.

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2. What is the philosophical method of the *Upaniṣads*?
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5.5 CENTRAL IDEAS OF UPANIṢADS

The *Upaniṣads* contain discussions on the genesis of the world, the ontology of the self and the body, the spirit and matter, the meaning of true knowledge, the character of the world, bondage and liberation, and so on. While some of the verses are in the form of Mantras or chants, the *Upaniṣads* also include anecdotes, dialogues between teacher and pupil, between father and son, between supernatural characters and human beings and between animals and human beings. Most of the dialogues are centred on the distinction between the real and unreal, sacred and profane, the true and the false.

Even though the *Upaniṣads* do not offer a single comprehensive system of thought, they do develop some basic general principles. Some of these principles are *samsāra*, *karma*, *dharma* and *Mokṣa*. These principles form a metaphysical scheme that was shared with varying adjustments made by most Indian religions and philosophers. The concept of *samsāra* is reincarnation, the idea that after we die our soul will be reborn again in another body; perhaps in an animal, perhaps as a human, perhaps as a god, but always in a regular cycle of deaths and resurrections. Another concept is *Karma*, which literally means “action,” the idea that all actions have consequences, good or bad. *Karma* determines the conditions of the next life, just as our life is conditioned by our previous *Karma*. There is no judgment or forgiveness, simply an impersonal, natural and eternal law operating in the universe. Those who do good will be reborn in better conditions while those who are evil will be reborn in worse conditions. *Dharma* means “right behaviour” or “duty”, the idea that we all have a social obligation which is to be

fulfilled. Each member of a specific caste has a particular set of responsibilities, a dharma. For example, among the Kṣatriyas (the warrior caste), it was considered a sin to die in bed; dying in the battlefield was the highest honor they could aim for. In other words, dharma encouraged people of different social groups to perform their duties the best they could. *Mokṣa* means “liberation” or emancipation. The eternal cycle of deaths and resurrection can be seen as a pointless repetition with no ultimate goal attached to it. Seeking permanent peace or freedom from suffering seems impossible, for eventually we will be reborn in worse circumstances. *Mokṣa* is the liberation from this never-ending cycle of reincarnation, a way to escape this repetition.

Upaniṣads discuss Ultimate Reality as an object of inquiry and the process through which it can be realized. When we go through the *Upaniṣads*, we get a division of the entire knowledge domain into two as *parā* and *aparā* where *parā vidyā* is the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality and *aparā vidyā* is the knowledge of this phenomenal world. This same distinction is seen in the *Kaṭhaopanishad* as *sreyas* and *preyas* in a different manner and also as *vidyā* and *avidyā*. Svetasvatara *Upaniṣad*, making the distinction of *vidyā* and *avidyā*, says that *vidyā* is that which is *amṛta* and *avidyā* is that which is *kṣara* or impermanent. This division of knowledge is related to the doctrine of accepting the distinction of realities of experience as higher and lower where *parā* is related to the higher and *aparā* is related to the lower. The two levels, in which these two kinds of wisdom of knowledge reside and in which the explanations take place, are called *pāramārthika* “the absolutely real level” and *vyavahārika* “the practical level.” In this way, we get two layers of reality as transcendental and empirical so to say as Brahman and the phenomenal world.

5.6 ĀTMAN AND BRAHMAN

What is the true nature of existence and more particularly what is the true nature of our own being has been given intensive treatment in *Upaniṣads*. The same reality is called from the objective side as ‘Brahman’ and from the subjective side as ‘Ātman’. What is *Ātman*? It is the subject, which persists throughout the changes, the common factor in the states of waking, dream, sleep, death, rebirth, and final deliverance. The *Upaniṣads* tell us that the core of our own being is not the body, or the mind, but *Ātman* or self. *Ātman* is the core of all creatures, their innermost essence. It can only be perceived by direct experience through meditation. It is when we are at the deepest level of our existence. *Upaniṣads* present *Ātman* as an ontological being, an epistemological subject, a moral being, a psychological being and so on. The term

“*Ātman*” used in the *Upaniṣads* means both the universal self or Brahman and the individual self. An individual self is described as a combination of five layers. The first one is *ānnamaya koṣa* or the food layer. This represents our physical body. *Prāṇamaya koṣa* is the second layer, which signifies the sheath of vital energy. Vital energy finds its grossest expression in our breath. The third layer is the *manomaya koṣa* signifying our mind. It acts as the source of our will, emotions, and imaginations. The fourth layer is the *vijñānamaya koṣa* which is the seat of our intelligence. And the last ontological layer is *ānandamaya koṣa* representing the blissful aspect of being or existence. All these put together form the structure of the self.

There is one absolute reality that is *Brahman* and all the other individuals in this world are a reflection of the one supreme *Brahman*. Individuals resolve themselves in the universal absolute so long as the world of manifestation is functioning. There is no mixing up of the fruits of action, as the different individual selves are kept distinct by their association with the intellect, the senses, and the ego. The soul represents an idea of the divine mind, and the different souls are the members of the supreme. The soul draws its idea of perfection from the divine creator who has given its existence. There is no reference of any object to the consciousness and bliss of the self. *Jivātman* or the individual self means the infinite self, conditioned by the body, the senses and the mind. *Upaniṣads* admits that the self is one but it is manifested in many forms of individual self. In the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, it is said “the illimitable Brahman is derived from this limitative counterfeit, its limitations through which it manifests as God, and man and animal and plant and so forth. It is through this union from before all time with this inexplicable illusion, that the one and only self is present in every creature, as one and the same ether is present in many water jars, as one and the same Sun is mirrored on countless sheets of water. It is through this union that the one and only one self permeates and animates the world.” There is one absolute reality that is Brahman and all other individuals in this world are reflections of the one supreme Brahman. Brahman is the one underlying substance of the universe, the unchanging “Absolute Being,” the intangible essence of the entire existence. The undying and unchanging seed creates and sustains everything. It is beyond all description and intellectual understanding. Individuals resolve themselves in the universal absolute so long as the world of manifestation is functioning. There is no mixing up of the fruits of action, as the different individual selves are kept distinct by their association with the intellect, the senses and the ego. The soul represents an idea of the divine mind, and the different souls are the members of the supreme. They describe the plurality of individual self. The self is said to be free from all contact and thus proves it to have Brahman for itself.

One of the great insights of the *Upaniṣads* is that *Ātman* and *Brahman* are made of the same substance. When a person achieves *Mokṣa* or liberation, *Ātman* returns to *Brahman*, to the source, like a drop of water returning to the ocean. The *Upaniṣads* claim that it is an illusion that we are all separāte: with this realization we can be freed from ego, from reincarnation and from the suffering we experience during our existence. *Mokṣa*, in a sense, means to be reabsorbed into *Brahman*, into the great World Soul. It is said that this great unborn self, undecaying, undying, immortal fearless is indeed *Brahman*. Thus the relation between self, body and senses is given by the same *Upaniṣad*. Nature and relation between *Ātman* and *Brahman* can be expounded on the basis of five Mahāvākyas.

1. *Prajñām Brahma* “Consciousness is Brahman” (*Aitareya Upaniṣad*).
2. *Aham Brahmāsmi* “I am Brahman” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*).
3. *Tat Tvam asi* “That thou art” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*).
4. *Ayam Ātmā Brahma* “This Ātman is Brahman” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*).
5. *Sarvaṁ Khalu idaṁ Brahma* “Everything is Brahman” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*).

Check Your Progress III

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the important principles of *Upaniṣads*?

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2. What are the two divisions of knowledge in *Upaniṣads*?

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3. What is the intensive treatment of the *Upaniṣads*?

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5.7 MOKṢA

Mokṣa, has been discussed most extensively in the major *Upaniṣads*. *Mokṣa* comes from the root ‘*muc*’ meaning ‘let loose or let go’. Thus *Mokṣa* stands for release. This is release from the cycle of birth and death and a consequent cessation of the concomitant suffering. This can probably be treated as the most important since liberation of the individual from the cycle of rebirth, according to *Upaniṣads*, is the ultimate purpose of existence. There are various passages in *Upaniṣads* describing the nature of *Mokṣa* and that of the liberated soul or the liberated individual. According to many passages, this liberation comes through the true knowledge of the self. Therefore, *Ātman* is the highest object of desire and love. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* reads as- “The self is dearer than a son, is dearer than wealth, is dearer than everything else and is innermost. If one were to say to a person who speaks of anything other than the self as dearer, he will lose what he holds dear, he would very likely do so. One should meditate on self alone as dear. He who meditates on self alone as dear, what he holds dear, verily, will not perish.” This implies that whoever holds anything other than liberation as the final end will lose him in the whirlpool of the *samsāra* and one who aspires for liberation will not only lead a meaningful life but also enjoy the world.

Again the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* reads - “As here on earth the world which is earned by work perishes, even so there the world which is earned by merit (derived from the performance of sacrifices) perishes. Those who depart, hence, without having found here the self and those real desires - for them in all worlds there is freedom.” Thus *Upaniṣads* maintain that self-knowledge is the only source of freedom in the true sense. Vedic rituals, which have been emphasised by *Mimāṃsā* School also does not lead to emancipation. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* puts it as - “If one is able to perceive (Him) before the body falls away (One would be free from misery); if not he becomes fit for the embodiment in the created worlds.” This verse can be understood as if a person comes to know the true nature of his/her self, no further rebirth takes

place or in other words *Mokṣa* is attained. So the realization of the divinity within is the gateway to the cessation of suffering since existence itself is synonymous with pain in final analysis.

How is *Mokṣa* achieved? There are many ways, according to the *Upaniṣads*, to attain *Mokṣa*: meditation, introspection, knowledge/realization- that behind all forms and veils the subjective and objective are one that we are all part of the Whole. The *Upaniṣads* agree on the idea that men are naturally ignorant about the ultimate identity between the individual self or *Ātman*, the self within, and *Brahman*. One of the goals of meditation is to achieve this identification with *Brahman*, and abandon the ignorance that arises from the identification with the illusory or quasi-illusory nature of the sensory world. It is due to ignorance the self gets separated from the supreme self, the ocean and due to the limiting adjuncts - body, senses, mind, transformation, birth, death, name form, action, thought. But when these differences are destroyed, the self becomes non-dual, there is only one great being, cause of everything. The elements of body, name, and form end in *Brahman* by means of knowledge of the truth. By attaining this identity there is no particular consciousness. When there is duality then one smells something, one sees something, one speaks something, one thinks something, one knows something; the consciousness in that case is marked by the subject pole and the object pole. When there is complete identity, when the duality and ignorance is destroyed by knowledge then all the means of seeing, hearing, and thinking is no more there. This is the state of complete unity or oneness and no duality.

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad says “*Brahmavid Brahmaiva bhavati*”, which means he who knows that highest *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*. However, before entering the path of liberation one has to acquire the eligibility or competency. *Kāthopaniṣad* says, “Everyone cannot be competent to study the sacred knowledge of the Supreme Self. He who has not refrained from doing sinful acts, who has not restrained his senses, who has no single-pointed mind, who has no tranquil mind, cannot have knowledge of the Brahman.” Knowledge consists in *Śravaṇa*, i.e., listening about the nature of individual soul and the supreme self from the learned teachers, *Manana*, i.e., reflecting on those truths and *Nididhyāsana*, i.e., intense meditation on the self.

Check Your Progress IV

Note - a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is the ultimate content of the *Upaniṣads*?

5.8 LET US SUM UP

Human nature is basically divine, but the problem is that he is not aware of his divinity. He is not aware that ego or empirical self is a part of the *Brahman* and it wants to go back to its original source. *Brahman* is all bliss full, all pervading and supreme consciousness. Therefore, ego is all the time after happiness and wants to be Supreme in all respects. But instead of looking for this experience, turning inward, in the self, man looks for this experience in the world outside. He looks for happiness in the worldly objects and wants to grow big in his society. But none of the external objects makes him perfectly happy. Thus all vices can be understood as a form of ignorance in *Upaniṣads*. When ignorance is removed man gains proper directions to put his efforts and gives up his vices. But even during his ignorance, he unconsciously looks for the supreme non-dual experience which will make him perfectly happy.

Finally we may say that all the major *Upaniṣads* exhaust themselves in describing the true nature of the human being. Ordinarily we all believe that there is a self in us or it would rather be contradictory to say that I do not exist. Even materialists like Cārvakas also have accepted the existence of the self; of course, as a by - product of matter. But we know ourselves to be very painful, limited and mortal beings. We look for happiness in the objects of the world outside. Every human being aimlessly wanders around seeking for happiness and satisfaction. We spend our entire life seeking for security and safety from all known and unknown dangers.

Here comes the great contribution of the *Upaniṣads* in understanding and revealing the true nature of the Human being. The *Upaniṣads* maintain that *Ātman* is *Sat- Cit- Ānanda*; means it is the Existence - Knowledge – Bliss, Absolute. Thus all that human beings are looking for in the outer world actually lies within. The realization of the true nature of the human being makes one aware of his eternity and probably makes him feel the most secure. The lifelong wonder for happiness ends with this realization. *Upaniṣads* provide a blueprint to get rid of this painful

existence. Knowledge of *Brahman* ends this painful existence. Thus this knowledge is supreme and its supremacy is revealed to us by the *Upaniṣads*.

5.9 KEY WORDS

Ātman : *Ātman* is a *Sanskrit* word that means inner self or soul. *Ātman* is part of the universal *Brahman*, with which it can commune or even fuse. So fundamental was the *Ātman* deemed to be identified with *Brahman*.

Brahman : *Brahman* is a *Vedic Sanskrit* word, and it is conceptualized in Hinduism, states Paul Deussen, as the “creative principle which lies realized in the whole world”. *Brahman* is a key concept found in the *Vedas*, and it is extensively discussed in the early *Upaniṣads*.

Mokṣa : *Mokṣa*, also called *vimokṣa*, *vimukti* and *mukti*, is a term in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism which refers to various forms of emancipation, enlightenment, liberation, and release. In its soteriological and eschatological senses, it refers to freedom from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth.

5.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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5.11 Answers to Check your Progress

Check your progress I

1) The *Upaniṣads* are a collection of texts philosophical in nature written around 900-300 BCE, a period when Indian society started questioning the traditional Vedic ritualistic order. The *Upaniṣads* belong to the Vedic corpus. Since they occur in the end as the concluding portion of the *Vedas* (*Vedasya antaḥ*), they are called *Vedānta*. They are not only the concluding portion, but also the consummation of the *Vedas*, and so they are also called ‘*Veda-siras*’, the crown of the *Veda*.

2) Upanishadic literature is the product of highest human intellect or thinking in the field of philosophical speculation. Its uniqueness lies in its holistic approach to the problem of Ultimate Reality or understanding nature as well as the practical solution to the age old problem of sorrow and suffering. The present day relevance, encompassing all aspects of human development whether it is scientific or spiritual, has shown its universality of ideas.

Upaniṣads represent teachings of the sages who experienced the Reality or Truth, i.e. became Reality (*Brahma vid brahmaiva bhavati*- the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman. The purpose of the *Upaniṣads* is not mere intellectual satisfaction, but a practical solution to the ultimate problems of life and it seems that the concept of liberation, the fourth *puruṣārtha* or the ultimate goal of life as determined in the Indian tradition, has been established in its fullest form in the Upanishadic thought. Moving one step ahead from the *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* of the Vedic goals of life; *Upaniṣads* bring the concept of *Mokṣa* as the supreme purpose of all inquiries of life.

3) There are two aspects of Upanishadic teachings. One is the theoretical aspect and the other is the practical aspect. The theoretical aspect of the teachings of the *Upaniṣads* deals with the following three issues-

1. The Self or essence of man- *Ātman*

2. The Self or essence of the world- *Brahman*

3. The relation between *Ātman* and *Brahman*

Check your progress II

1) Each *Veda* has four sections- *Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣads*. While *Samhitā* contains hymns praising gods and goddesses, the *Brāhmaṇas* deal with the sacrificial rites. The *Āraṇyaka* exposition consists of the meditative practices. The *Upaniṣads* are philosophical treatises discussing the fundamental problem of existence and its purpose and the nature of reality. The transition from the *Samhitā* to *Upaniṣads* is comparable to the change from the mystifying twilight to the bright and brilliant sunlight of the day. What is implicit or suggested in the hymns becomes explicit through in-depth rigorous exploration in the philosophical tracts.

2) *Upaniṣads* are marked by a dialogical method. Each of the concepts it analyzes is framed within a dialogue characterized by questions and answers, narratives and episodes, similes, metaphors, illustrations, and so on. The dialogue between father Uddālaka and son Śvetaketu in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the dialogue between Satyakama and his mother Jabala in *Chāndogya*, *PRājapati* and his sons in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, Yama and Naciketa in *Kaṭha*, Nārada and Sanatkumara in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* are some of the classical examples of how the dialogical method is used in developing philosophical concepts. Again, dialogical method can be seen in two ways - first, as a mode of argumentation to bring out contradiction in the views of the other party. Secondly, it resolves, dissolves or sublates the contradictions at a higher level. For example in the dialogue between Uddālaka and Nachiketā, we find that it begins with the empirical experiences, the *vyavahārika* satā. In order to resolve contradictions at the *vyavahārika* level, we go to the *pāramārthika* level. In short, there is always a need to overcome and sublimate the contradiction either in terms of higher ideas or by recognizing the superiority of the leading philosopher. The other method is story. A story makes us understand the concepts very clearly and the purpose of the story is to convey the moral implications of that concept.

Check your progress III

1) The *Upaniṣads* contain discussions on the genesis of the world, the ontology of the self and the body, the spirit and matter, the meaning of true knowledge, the character of the world, bondage and liberation, and so on. While some of the verses are in the form of Mantras or chants, the *Upaniṣads* also include anecdotes, dialogues between teacher and pupil, between father and son, between supernatural characters and human beings and between animals and

human beings. Some of these principles are *samsāra*, *karma*, *dharma* and *Mokṣa*. These principles form a metaphysical scheme that was shared with varying adjustments made by most Indian religions and philosophers. The concept of *samsāra* is reincarnation, the idea that after we die our soul will be reborn again in another body; perhaps in an animal, perhaps as a human, perhaps as a god, but always in a regular cycle of deaths and resurrections.

Another concept is *Karma*, which literally means “action,” the idea that all actions have consequences, good or bad. *Karma* determines the conditions of the next life, just as our life is conditioned by our previous *Karma*. There is no judgment or forgiveness, simply an impersonal, natural and eternal law operating in the universe. Those who do good will be reborn in better conditions while those who are evil will be reborn in worse conditions. *Dharma* means “right behaviour” or “duty”, the idea that we all have a social obligation which is to be fulfilled. Each member of a specific caste has a particular set of responsibilities, a *dharma*. For example, among the *Kshatriyas* (the warrior caste), it was considered a sin to die in bed; dying in the battlefield was the highest honor they could aim for. In other words, *dharma* encouraged people of different social groups to perform their duties the best they could. *Mokṣa* means “liberation” or emancipation. The eternal cycle of deaths and resurrection can be seen as a pointless repetition with no ultimate goal attached to it. Seeking permanent peace or freedom from suffering seems impossible, for eventually we will be reborn in worse circumstances. *Mokṣa* is the liberation from this never-ending cycle of reincarnation, a way to escape this repetition.

2) This division of knowledge is related to the doctrine of accepting the distinction of realities of experience as higher and lower where *parā* is related to the higher and *aparā* is related to the lower. The two levels, in which these two kinds of wisdom of knowledge reside and in which the explanations take place, are called *pāramārthika* “the absolutely real level” and *vyavahārika* “the practical level.”

3) An intensive treatment in *Upaniṣads* about understanding the true nature of our own being has been given an intensive treatment in *Upaniṣads*. The same reality is called from the objective side as ‘Brahman’ and from the subjective side as ‘Ātman’. What is *Ātman*? It is the subject, which persists throughout the changes, the common factor in the states of waking, dream, sleep, death, rebirth, and final deliverance. The *Upaniṣads* tell us that the core of our own being is not the body, or the mind, but *Ātman* or self. *Ātman* is the core of all creatures, their innermost essence. It can only be perceived by direct experience through meditation. It is when we are at the deepest level of our existence. *Upaniṣads* present *Ātman* as an ontological

being, an epistemological subject, a moral being, a psychological being and so on. The term “*Ātman*” used in the *Upaniṣads* means both the universal self or *Brahman* and the individual self. There is one absolute reality that is *Brahman* and all the other individuals in this world are a reflection of the one supreme *Brahman*. Individuals resolve themselves in the universal absolute so long as the world of manifestation is functioning. There is no mixing up of the fruits of action, as the different individual selves are kept distinct by their association with the intellect, the senses, and the ego. The soul represents an idea of the divine mind, and the different souls are the members of the supreme.

Jīvātman or the individual self means the infinite self, conditioned by the body, the senses and the mind. *Upaniṣads* admits that the self is one but it is manifested in many forms of individual self. *Brahman* is the one underlying substance of the universe, the unchanging “Absolute Being,” the intangible essence of the entire existence. The undying and unchanging seed creates and sustains everything. It is beyond all description and intellectual understanding. Individuals resolve themselves in the universal absolute so long as the world of manifestation is functioning. One of the great insights of the *Upaniṣads* is that *Ātman* and *Brahman* are made of the same substance. When a person achieves *Mokṣa* or liberation, *Ātman* returns to *Brahman*, to the source, like a drop of water returning to the ocean. The *Upaniṣads* claim that it is an illusion that we are all separate: with this realization we can be freed from ego, from reincarnation and from the suffering we experience during our existence. *Mokṣa*, in a sense, means to be reabsorbed into *Brahman*, into the great World Soul.

Check your progress IV

1) The ultimate content of *Upaniṣads* is the realization of *Mokṣa*. This is release from the cycle of birth and death and a consequent cessation of the concomitant suffering. This can probably be treated as the ultimate purpose of existence. There are various passages in *Upaniṣads* describing the nature of *Mokṣa* and that of the liberated soul or the liberated individual. According to many passages, this liberation comes through the true knowledge of the self. Therefore, *Ātman* is the highest object of desire and love. There are many ways, according to the *Upaniṣads*, to attain *Mokṣa*: meditation, introspection, knowledge/realization—that behind all forms and veils the subjective and objective are one that we are all part of the Whole. The *Upaniṣads* agree on the idea that men are naturally ignorant about the ultimate identity between the individual self or *Ātman*, the self within, and *Brahman*. One of the goals of meditation is to achieve this identification with *Brahman*, and abandon the ignorance that

arises from the identification with the illusory or quasi-illusory nature of the sensory world. It is due to ignorance the self gets separated from the supreme self, the ocean and due to the limiting adjuncts - body, senses, mind, transformation, birth, death, name form, action, thought.

But when these differences are destroyed, the self becomes non-dual, there is only one great being, cause of everything. The elements of body, name, and form end in Brahman by means of knowledge of the truth. By attaining this identity there is no particular consciousness. When there is duality then one smells something, one sees something, one speaks something, one thinks something, one knows something; the consciousness in that case is marked by the subject pole and the object pole. When there is complete identity, when the duality and ignorance is destroyed by knowledge then all the means of seeing, hearing, and thinking is no more there. This is the state of complete unity or oneness and no duality.



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