

The Upanishads- An overview

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The word 'Upanishad' denotes Brahma-vidya by its derivation. Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada says in his Bhashya on the Kathopanishad that this word is derived by adding the prefixes 'upa' (meaning near) and 'ni' (with certainty) to the root 'sad' which means 'to destroy', 'to reach', and 'to loosen'. Thus the meaning of the word 'Upanishad' is that it is the knowledge that destroys the seeds of worldly existence such as ignorance in the case of those seekers of liberation who, after becoming free from all desires approach (upa sad) this knowledge.

The subject-matter of the upanishads is Brahman, the only Reality. Brihadaaranyaka upanishad, 3. 9. 26 says, "I ask you about Him, the Purusha of the upanishads". The upanishads are the only source of knowledge about Brahman.

The method adopted in Vedanta to impart the knowledge of Brahman is known as the method of superimposition (*adhyaaropa*) and subsequent negation (*apavaada*). In the Bhashya on Br.up.4.4.25 Bhagavatpada says, "The transmigrating self is indeed Brahman. He who knows the self as Brahman which is beyond fear becomes Brahman. This is the purport of the whole upanishad put in a nutshell. It is to bring out this purport that the ideas of creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe, as well as the ideas of action, its factors and results were superimposed on the Self. Then, by the negation of the superimposed attributes the true nature of Brahman as free from all attributes has been brought out". This is the method of *adhyaaropa* and *apavaada*, superimposition and negation, which is adopted by Vedanta.

Brahman cannot be directly described by words because it has no quality, activity or relationship with anything else. A substance which has a quality, such as redness, bigness, etc, can be described by reference to that quality. A person who performs a particular activity such as cooking can be described by reference to that activity, as a cook, etc. A stranger can be identified by reference to his relationship

with a known person. Because of the absence of any of these qualities, Brahman cannot be described at all by any words. The method of superimposition and subsequent negation has therefore to be resorted to. Brahman appears, because of our ignorance of its real nature, to be limited by the body, mind and organs. On the basis of this apparent limitation it is said that Brahman is the cause of the activities of the mind and organs. Kenopanishad, I. 2 says: "He (Brahman) is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech, the Vital air (Prana) of the vital air, and the Eye of the eye". The meaning of this mantra is that it is Brahman that is the cause of all the organs and prana performing their respective functions. But Brahman is the cause only in the sense that in its mere presence the mind and organs act. In Vivekachudamani it is said, "By whose mere presence the body, the organs, the mind, and the intellect act in their respective spheres as if impelled by it". This is explained by the analogy of the sun being considered as the cause of the activities of all beings. When the sun rises, everyone begins his work in its light, but the sun does not make anyone act in any particular manner. The sun merely provides the light for all activity. What kind of activity a person engages in depends on himself alone. The sun is not at all involved in it. The sun neither benefits nor suffers because of the activities of any person. In the same way, Brahman gives the mind and organs sentiency, which makes them capable of performing action, but Brahman does not make any one act in any particular manner. Brahman (Atman) is neither benefited by the virtuous actions of any person, nor is it adversely affected by any evil deeds of any one.

From the point of view of absolute reality, since Brahman alone exists, it can have no association with the mind, etc, which are not real from the absolute point of view, just as an object experienced in dream cannot have any association with an object known in the waking state. Space, which is infinite, is referred to as pot-space, room-space, etc, when it is looked upon as limited by a pot, a room, etc, but these do not really limit space. In the same way Brahman, which is pure consciousness, is all-pervading and is not limited by the body, mind, etc. It is only because of our ignorance of its real nature that we consider the Self as limited and separate in each body. By this comparison with space it is also shown that the Self is unattached and is not affected by the pleasures and pains

experienced by the body and mind, in the same way as space is not destroyed or affected by the destruction of the pot or by any damage to it.

Kenopanishad says that Brahman is different from the known as well as the unknown. That means that is not an object which can be known or experienced by any of the sense-organs. Kathopanishad, II.i.i says that the sense organs can experience only external objects and so they cannot know the indwelling Atman. The only way to realize the Atman is by withdrawing all the senses from external objects and concentrating the mind on the Atman.

In Kathopanishad, I. iii. 3 the Atman or individual self (which is in reality identical with Brahman) is compared to the owner of a chariot, the body to the chariot, the intellect to the charioteer, the mind to the bridle, the senses to the horses, and the sense-objects to the paths for the chariot. The Atman is considered as the enjoyer when it is associated with the body, senses and mind.

The sentence, “Brahman is truth, knowledge and infinite” in Taitt. up. 2.1 is meant to be the definition of Brahman. In Vedanta a thing is said to be *satyam* –true- if it never undergoes any change; and a thing that undergoes change is said to be unreal. Brahman alone is true in this sense. Every modification is therefore unreal. The *sruti* says- all modification is mere name, created by words alone; what is called clay is alone real. (Ch.up. 6.1.4). Various forms such as pot, etc, made out of clay are all unreal. Their reality is only as clay. Thus, by the word ‘truth’ the *sruti* distinguishes Brahman from all changing forms.

By the word ‘knowledge’ the *sruti* makes it clear that Brahman is not insentient like clay.

By the word ‘infinite’ it is shown that Brahman is free from the limitations of time, space and objects.

By the three words – truth, knowledge and infinite – it is made clear that Brahman is different from everything in the universe which is always subject to change, is insentient and limited by time, space and other objects.

Here knowledge means ‘pure consciousness’ and not a particular knowledge, which has a beginning and an end and is therefore finite. This consciousness is not distinct from Brahman, but it is its essential nature, like the light of the sun or the heat of fire. This consciousness is eternal and is present even during deep sleep. A specific act of knowing takes place only when the mind functions in association with the relevant sense-organ, but this must be distinguished from pure consciousness, which is ever present. It is this consciousness which is known as Brahman. Brahman, which is Pure Consciousness, becomes a ‘knower’ only when the intellect is superimposed on it.

The Self is looked upon as a knower only because of the superimposition on it of the knowership of the intellect. Similarly, the intellect is considered as a knower only because of the superimposition of consciousness on it. (Upadesa saahasri-(Metrical portion)-Ch.18. Verse 65)

The words *satyam*, *jnaanam*, etc, apply to Brahman only in their secondary sense (*lakshyartham*) and not in their primary sense (*vaachyartham*)— (Samkshepasaaarirakam Ch.1. verses 178 to 184). No word can express Brahman by its primary sense because, as the Taittiriya up. says, “Words return along with the mind without reaching it”.

Brahman is in reality attributeless.

In Brahma sutras 3.2.11 to 3.2.21, it is established that, though the scriptures describe Brahman as both qualified (Ch.up.3.14.2) and as unqualified (Br.up.3.8.8), Brahman is really attributeless. The description of Brahman as qualified is only for the purpose of meditation.

Brahma sutra 3.2.22. S.B.—In Br.up.2.3.1 it is said that Brahman has two forms—gross and subtle, mortal and immortal, limited and unlimited, defined and undefined. Then it is said in Br.up.2.3.6 –“Now therefore the description (of Brahman)—*neti, neti*—not so, not so”. These two negatives deny the two aspects, gross and subtle etc. By this the reality of all creation is denied.

Two kinds of definition of Brahman

There are two kinds of definition of Brahman—(1) *svarupalakshanam*—definition with reference to the essential nature, e.g. *satyam jnaanam anantam brahma*—*taitt,up. 2.1.* (2) *tathasthalakshanam*—This is based on an accidental feature, which helps to distinguish the object defined. An example is the identification of a house by pointing out a crow sitting on it. While the crow may fly away, it nevertheless helps a person to know which is the house meant. In the case of Brahman, such a definition is—*yato vaa imaani bhuutaani jaayante*-----That from which all these beings are born, that by which they live and that into which they merge. (*Taitt.up,3.1.1*).

How the Self pervades all bodies—examples

As a razor lies in one part of its case, as fire lies in wood, pervading it, so does the Self dwell in the body, pervading it in a general and particular way. There it is perceived as doing the functions of living, seeing, etc. (*Br.up.1.4.7- Bhashya*).

The meaning of “*neti, neti*”---

It is said in the Bhashya on *Br,up. 2.3.6*: “How is it sought to describe Brahman, the Truth of truth? By the elimination of all differences due to limiting adjuncts, the words “*neti, neti*” refer to something that has no distinguishing mark, such as name, form, action, heterogeneity, species or qualities. Words refer to things through one or more of these marks. But Brahman has none of these distinguishing marks. Therefore it cannot be described as, “It is such and such”, as we can describe a cow by saying, “There moves a white cow with horns”. Brahman can be described only by the superimposition of name, form and action. When, however, we wish to describe its true nature, free from all differences due to limiting adjuncts, the only way is to describe it as –not this, not this”.

Brahman transcends all qualities

Br.up.3.5.1, Bhashya says: As the sky, fancied by the ignorant as being concave and blue, is really without these qualities, being untouched by them, so also Brahman-Atman, although thought of by the ignorant as being subject to hunger, thirst, etc, really transcends all these qualities. The *Sruti* says—“It is not affected by human misery, being beyond it”- Kathopanishad, 2.2.11”.

Brahman, the individual self and Isvara

In the Bhashya on Br.up.3.8.12 it is said: “What is the difference among them? It is only due to the difference in the limiting adjuncts. Intrinsically, there is neither difference nor identity among them, for all the three are in essence Pure Consciousness, homogeneous like a lump of salt. When the unconditioned Self has, as the limiting adjuncts, the body and organs which are characterized by ignorance, desire and action, it is called the transmigrating individual self. When the limiting adjunct is the power of eternal and unlimited knowledge, which is Maya, the same Self is known as *Isvara*, who is the *antaryami* or Inner Controller. The same Self, free from all limiting adjuncts, is Brahman. When the limiting adjuncts are the bodies of *Hiranyagarbha*, the gods, men, animals and others, the same Self assumes those particular names and forms”.

Om is both the name and symbol for Brahman

Br. Up.5.1.1, Bhashya says: “Although the words ‘Brahman’, ‘Atman’ etc, are names of Brahman, we see from the *sruti* that Om is its most intimate appellation. Therefore, Om is the best means for the realization of Brahman. Om is both a symbol for Brahman and its name”.

Brahman is both the material and the efficient cause of the universe.

Panchadasi-1.44—Brahman becomes the material cause of the universe when it is associated with that aspect of Maya in which there is predominance of *tamas*. It becomes the efficient cause when associated with that aspect of Maya in which there is predominance of *sattva*.

The Upanishads describe the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe. This should not, however, be taken to mean that creation, etc, are real. According to Advaita, creation is not real, but is only a superimposition on Brahman, which alone is real in the absolute sense. The universe, which is a transformation of *maya*, is *anirvachaniya*. It cannot be described either as real or as unreal. It has empirical reality only. The description of creation, etc, in the Upanishads is only to bring out the truth that Brahman, the cause, alone is real. The effect, universe, has no independent existence apart from the cause, Brahman. The following passages from Sri Sankara's Bhashya bring out the real purpose of the statements about creation, etc, in the Upanishads.

From the introduction and conclusion it is clear that the passages speaking about the origin, sustenance and dissolution of the universe are intended only to strengthen the idea that the individual self is the same as the Supreme Self. (Br.up.2.1.20—Bhashya).

Therefore, the mention in all the Vedanta texts of the origin, sustenance and dissolution of the universe is only to strengthen our idea of Brahman being a homogeneous entity, and not to tell us that the origin, etc, is real. Nor is it reasonable to suppose that a part of the indivisible, transcendental Supreme Self becomes the relative, individual self, because the Supreme Self is intrinsically without parts. (Br.up.2.1.20- Bhashya).

neha naanaa asti kinchana- Br. up.4.4.19- There is no diversity whatsoever in it.

Brahman is free from all the three types of differences

Panchadasi-2.20 and 21.—Differences are of three kinds. The difference of a tree from its leaves, flowers, fruits, etc, is the difference within an object. This is known as *svagata bheda*. The difference of one tree from another tree is the difference between objects of the same species. This is known as *sajaatiya bheda*. The difference of a tree from a rock is the difference between objects of different species. This is known as *vijaatiya bheda*. None of these differences exists with regard to Brahman, because there is nothing else of the same species or of a different species and there is no

internal difference because Brahman is homogeneous. This is what is affirmed in the Chhaandogya upanishad (6.2.1) by the words “*ekam eva advitiam*”—one, only, without a second. The word “one’ negates *sajaatiya bheda*, the word ‘only’ negates *svagata bheda* and the words ‘without a second’ negate *vijaatiya bheda*.

Brahman is free from all limitations

Panchadasi-3.35, 36, 37—Being all-pervasive, Brahman is not limited by space. Being eternal, it is not limited by time. Since all objects in the universe are merely superimposed on Brahman, Brahman is not limited by any object, just as a rope is not limited by the illusory snake superimposed on it .

Conclusion

The essence of the upanishads is that Brahman is the only reality. 'Reality' is defined as that which does not undergo any change at any time. By this test, Brahman, which is absolutely changeless and eternal, is alone real. The world keeps on changing all the time and so it cannot be considered as real. At the same time, we cannot dismiss it as unreal, because it is actually experienced by us. The example of a rope being mistaken for a snake in dim light is used to explain this. The snake so seen produces the same reaction, such as fear and trembling of the limbs, as a real snake would. It cannot therefore be said to be totally unreal. At the same time, on examination with the help of a lamp it is found that the snake never existed and that the rope alone was there all the time. The snake cannot be described as both real and unreal, because these two contradictory qualities cannot exist in the same substance. It must therefore be said that the snake is neither real nor unreal. Such an object is described as 'mithya'. Just as the snake appears because of ignorance of the fact that there is only a rope, this world appears to exist because of our ignorance of Brahman. Thus the world is also neither real nor unreal; it is also 'mithya'. Just as the snake is superimposed on the rope, the world is superimposed on Brahman. Our ignorance of Brahman is what is called Avidya or Ajnana or Nescience. This ignorance not only covers Brahman, but it projects the world as a reality. The world has no reality apart from Brahman, just as the snake has no reality apart from the rope. When the

knowledge of Brahman arises, the world is seen as a mere appearance of Brahman. Another example may be taken to explain this. Ornaments of different sizes and shapes are made out of one gold bar. Their appearance and the use for which they are meant vary, but the fact that they are all really only gold, in spite of the different appearances and uses, cannot be denied. The appearance may change, a bangle may be converted into rings, but the gold always remains as gold. Similarly, on the dawn of the knowledge of Brahman (which is the same as the Self), though the different forms continue to be seen by the Jnani, he sees them all only as appearances of the one Brahman. Thus the perception of difference and the consequences of such perception, such as looking upon some as favourable and others as the opposite, and the consequent efforts to retain or get what is favourable and to get rid of or avoid what is not favourable, come to an end. This is the state of liberation even while living, which is known as Jivanmukti.

The Jiva, or individual, is Brahman Itself, but because of identification with the body, mind and senses he looks upon himself as different from Brahman and as a limited being, subject to joys and sorrows caused by external factors. This identification with the body, mind and senses is what is called bondage. In reality the Jiva is the pure Brahman and is different from the body-mind complex. When this truth is realized as an actual experience, the identification with the body-mind complex ceases. This is liberation. Thus liberation is not the attainment of a state which did not exist previously, but only the realization of what one has always been. The illusory snake never existed. What existed even when the snake was seen was only the rope. Similarly, bondage has no real existence at all. Even when we are ignorant of Brahman and think of ourselves as limited by the body, we are really none but the infinite Brahman. Liberation is thus only the removal of the wrong identification with the body, mind and senses.

The body of the Jivanmukta continues until the praarabdha karma which brought the body into being is exhausted. Then the body falls and he becomes a videhamukta.
