

Upanishads

What is an Upanishad? How many Upanishads are there?

The word "Upanishad" comes from the Sanskrit roots "Upa" (near), "Ni" (certainly/with determination), and "Shad" (sitting down/destroying). It has several meanings:

1. **Knowledge obtained by sitting near the Guru:** One meaning is the secret knowledge obtained by sitting near the Guru, motionlessly and with determination, through him. This indicates the method where the Guru instructs the disciple on the highest spiritual truths such as Jivatma (individual soul), Paramatma (supreme soul), Brahma Swaroopam (the nature of Brahman), knowledge, and Moksha (liberation).
2. **That which destroys ignorance (Avidya):** The root "Shad" also gives the meaning "to destroy." That means, the Brahma Vidya (divine knowledge) which destroys ignorance (Avidya) and leads to liberation.
3. **That which leads towards liberation:** Upanishads also mean that which loosens the worldly bonds (Samsara Bandhalu) and unites the living being with the Supreme Soul.

Upanishads are the final parts of the Vedas, which is why they are also called Vedantas. Vedic literature mainly consists of four parts:

- **Samhitas:** These contain mantras, hymns, and invocations.
- **Brahmanas:** These explain rituals, sacrifices (Karmakandas), and the explanations of mantras.
- **Aranyakas:** Existing as an intermediary stage between Brahmanas and Upanishads, these explain the inner meanings of rituals.
- **Upanishads:** These are the Jananakanda (knowledge section) of the Vedas. They explain deep philosophical and spiritual aspects such as Brahma Vidya, self-knowledge (Atmajnanam), the oneness of Jivatma-Paramatma, paths to liberation, the theory of Karma, rebirth, nature, etc.

Upanishads are generally in the form of arguments, counterarguments, and dialogues. That is, a disciple or a sage asking a question, the Guru or another sage giving the answer to it, and then the discussion proceeding.

How many Upanishads are there?

There are differing opinions on the number of Upanishads. The numbers generally in circulation are:

1. **According to Muktikopanishad:** It is said that there are a total of 108 Upanishads. These one hundred and eight Upanishads belong to different Vedas.
2. **According to Vedic Branches (Shakhas):** Some traditions say that there are around 1180 Upanishads across the four Vedas, however, all of them are not available now.

3. **Principal Upanishads (Dashopanishads):** Among those available, 10 Upanishads are considered the most important. These are called Dashopanishads. Sri Adi Shankaracharya composed his Advaita Bhashya (commentary) on these 10 Upanishads only. They are:

- Isha (Ishavasya Upanishad)
- Kena (Kena Upanishad)
- Katha (Katha Upanishad)
- Prashna (Prashna Upanishad)
- Mundaka (Mundaka Upanishad)
- Mandukya (Mandukya Upanishad)
- Taittiriya (Taittiriya Upanishad)
- Aitareya (Aitareya Upanishad)
- Chandogya (Chandogya Upanishad)
- Brihadaranyaka (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

Some traditions also consider a few others like Shvetashvatara Upanishad, Kaushitaki Upanishad, and Maitrayani Upanishad as important.

Upanishads are the pillars of Indian philosophy; they provide magnificent guidance for searching the ultimate truth of human existence.

The summary of all Upanishads is one and the same: to turn our intellect from plurality towards unity.

You have explained the summary of the Upanishads very simply, powerfully, and in accordance with the Advaita perspective: "The summary of all Upanishads is one and the same: to turn our intellect from plurality or diversity towards unity."

This is truly the focal point of the Upanishads' Jananakanda (knowledge section). Let us analyze this further:

The Central Message of the Upanishads: Unity in Plurality

Since the Upanishads are the final parts of the Vedas, they turn the focus from rituals (Karmakandas) toward the knowledge section (Jananakanda). Their primary goal, as you mentioned, is to make the living being experientially realize the unity that lies behind the world which appears in plurality.

Plurality (Dualism):

Our senses, mind, and intellect generally view the world as different objects, living beings, and events. We think that 'I' am different, 'you' are different, 'this world' is different, and 'God' is different. This is the concept of dualism, or plurality. Because of this plurality, fears, desires, sorrows, and bonds arise in us. This is because we consider ourselves as limited, perishable bodies.

Unity (Non-dualism):

The Upanishads teach that this plurality is merely born of Maya (illusion) or a delusion. In reality, the source and basis of this entire creation is only one eternal, true, and non-dual Brahman.

- **The entire creation is Brahman:** The Upanishads declare "*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*" (All this is indeed Brahman). That means, everything we see in this world, whatever the name or form may be, is ultimately Brahman.
- **The Individual Soul is one with the Supreme Soul:** The most crucial message lies in Mahavakyas (great sayings) like "*Aham Brahmasmi*" (I am Brahman) and "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (That thou art). This teaches that there is no difference whatsoever between the individual soul (Jivatma) and the universal soul (Paramatma/Brahman), and that both are one.
- **Turning the Intellect:** As you said, the job of the Upanishads is to not let our intellect get stuck in this plurality, but to turn it towards the unity behind it. This is not just an intellectual exercise, but an experiential realization.

Benefits of Turning Towards Unity:

1. **Fearlessness:** When one realizes that they themselves are the limitless Brahman, the living being has no fear whatsoever. Because, fear arises only when there is a second entity ("*Dvitiyat Vai Bhayam Bhavati*"). When unity is achieved, there is no such thing as a second entity, hence there is no fear.
2. **Infinite Bliss:** Sorrows and sufferings all arise due to dualities (pleasure-pain). When unity is attained, eternal bliss (Brahmananda) that transcends dualities comes into experience.
3. **Liberation (Moksha):** The cause of worldly bondage and rebirth is ignorance and the concept of plurality. When the intellect turns from plurality towards unity, ignorance is destroyed, karmic bonds are removed, and eternal liberation is attained.
4. **Peace:** The conflicts and dissatisfactions seen in the plurality of the world are all eradicated through the knowledge of unity. Then, perfect internal peace is obtained.

Conclusion:

As you have said, the ultimate goal and summary of all Upanishads is to turn our intellect from the visible plurality towards the unity called the formless, eternal, and non-dual Brahman. This is

the core principle of Advaita Vedanta and the highest knowledge offered by the Upanishads to mankind.

Every Upanishad begins by declaring the absolute non-dualism (Advaita) of the ultimate truth like a pledge. After that, anticipating the seeker's question—"How is this possible?"—the Upanishad introduces a clear distinction in the middle as a temporary explanatory tool.

After establishing the teaching through this temporary distinction, it ultimately negates that distinction or dualism which it had introduced. Finally, the Upanishad concludes by reiterating the original non-dual truth mentioned at the beginning—showing that the initial statement alone is the ultimate, absolute reality.

You have explained the teaching methodology of the Upanishads very subtly and deeply. Declaring the absolute non-dualism of the ultimate truth like a pledge, then anticipating the seeker's question and introducing a temporary distinction or dualism, and finally negating that distinction and reiterating the original non-dual truth – this is the crown jewel of the Upanishads' style of teaching in Advaita Vedanta.

Upanishads introduce the distinctions and dualities we see in the world (such as creation, the individual soul, and God) as if they actually exist. This helps to start from the seeker's current level of understanding, in a way that he can comprehend.

As you said, the Upanishad anticipates the seeker's question, "How is this possible?" When creation, individual souls, and diversity appear to exist, how is it possible that all is one (Advaita)? In answer to this question, the Upanishad temporarily introduces dualism and distinction.

For example, explaining Brahman as the creator and controller (as Ishvara), and explaining the Jivatma (individual soul) as being endowed with things like the body, mind, and life-force (Prana). Concepts like the Panchakoshas (five sheaths) and Avasthatrayam (the three states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and deep sleep) are part of this superimposition (Adhyaropa). Even though these do not exist in reality, they are attributed as existing due to ignorance.

Once the seeker gains a gross understanding, the Upanishad gradually negates those temporary distinctions and dualities that it had introduced. This happens through the method of "not this, not this" (Neti Neti).

By explaining creation as Maya (illusion), the individual soul as a limitation (Upadhi) related to the Atman, and Ishvara as Saguna Brahman (Brahman with attributes), it finally clarifies that all of these are not the ultimate truth, and that they are merely superimposed upon Parabrahman.

Showing that the Panchakoshas and Avasthatrayas are not the Atman, and that the Atman is that which transcends them, is an example of negation (Apavada).

Reiteration of the Ultimate Truth: Finally, it reiterates the original non-dual truth mentioned at the beginning (Brahman alone is truth, the world is a myth/illusion, the individual soul is Brahman itself). The seeker then clearly understands that all the distinctions introduced were merely for the purpose of teaching, and that the ultimate reality is Advaita.

The instruction "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (That thou art) in the Chandogya Upanishad is a wonderful example of this process. Uddalaka Aruni, while explaining the diversity in the world and the variety among living beings to Shvetaketu through nine examples, finally proves that the source of that diversity is the one and only truth, and that truth is Shvetaketu's own soul ("That thou art").

The Mahavakyas "*Aham Brahmasmi*" (I am Brahman) in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and "*Ayam Atma Brahma*" (This soul is Brahman) in the Mandukya Upanishad also follow the same method. It explains the various states of the soul (waking, dreaming, deep sleep) and proves that Turiya, which transcends them, is Brahman.

Significance of this Teaching Methodology:

1. **Easy Comprehensibility:** It is difficult to teach the non-dual truth directly because the mind is accustomed to dualities. Through the process of negation, it imparts knowledge by gradually removing the illusions formed by ignorance.
2. **Practicality:** This is not just a philosophical discussion; it shows a path to the practitioner (Sadhaka) on how to remove the layers of ignorance within oneself.
3. **Deep Understanding:** This helps in examining many dimensions of truth and finally experiencing the most subtle and ultimate truth.

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