

Title

The Upanishads

**Translated and commentated by
Swami Paramananda**

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About this eBook

“The Upanishads”; translated and commentated by Swami Paramananda

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Contents

Title 2

About this eBook 3

Copyright and license 3

Contents 4

Introduction 8

Isa-Upanishad 10

I 11

II 11

III 11

IV 12

V 12

VI 12

VII 12

VIII 13

IX 13

X 13

XI 13

XII 14

XIII 14

XIV 14

XV 14

XVI 14

XVII 15

XVIII 15

Katha-Upanishad 16

Part First 17

I 17

II 17

III 17

IV 17

V 18

VI 18

VII 18

VIII 18

IX 19

X 19

XI 19

XII 19

XIII 19

XIV 19

XV 19

XVI 19

XVII 20

XVIII 20

XIX 20

XX 20

XXI 20
XXII 20
XXIII 21
XXIV 21
XXV 21
XXVI 21
XXVII 21
XXVIII 21
XXIX 21

Part Second 22

I 22
II 22
III 22
IV 22
V 22
VI 22
VII 23
VIII 23
IX 23
X 24
XI 24
XII 24
XIII 24
XIV 25
XV 25
XVI 25
XVII 25
XVIII 25
XIX 26
XX 26
XXI 26
XXII 26
XXIII 26
XXIV 27
XXV 27

Part Third 27

I 27
II 27
III 28
IV 28
V 28
VI 28
VII 29
VIII 29
IX 29
X 29
XI 29
XII 29
XIII 30
XIV 30
XV 30
XVI 31
XVII 31

Part Fourth 31

- I 31*
- II 31*
- III 31*
- IV 31*
- V 32*
- VI 32*
- VII 32*
- VIII 32*
- IX 32*
- X 33*
- XI 33*
- XII 33*
- XIII 33*
- XIV 33*
- XV 33*

Part Fifth 34

- I 34*
- II 34*
- III 34*
- IV 34*
- V 34*
- VI 34*
- VII 34*
- VIII 35*
- IX 35*
- X 35*
- XI 35*
- XII 35*
- XIII 35*
- XIV 36*
- XV 36*

Part Sixth 36

- I 36*
- II 36*
- III 36*
- IV 36*
- V 37*
- VI 37*
- VII 37*
- VIII 37*
- IX 37*
- X 38*
- XI 38*
- XII 38*
- XIII 38*
- XIV 38*
- XV 38*
- XVI 39*
- XVII 39*
- XVIII 39*

Kena-Upanishad 39

Part First 40

I 40
II 40
III 41
IV 41
V 41
VI 41
VII 41
VIII 41

Part Second 42

I 42
II 42
III 43
IV 43
V 43

Part Third 44

I 44
II 44
III 44
IV 44
V 44
VI 44
VII 44
VIII 45
IX 45
X 45
XI 45
XII 45

Part fourth 45

I 45
II 46
III 46
IV 46
V 46
VI 46
VII 47
VIII 47
IX 47

Introduction

The Upanishads represent the loftiest heights of ancient Indo-Aryan thought and culture. They form the wisdom portion or Gnana-Kanda of the Vedas, as contrasted with the Karma-Kanda or sacrificial portion. In each of the four great Vedas - known as Rik, Yajur, Sama and Atharva - there is a large portion which deals predominantly with rituals and ceremonials, and which has for its aim to show man how by the path of right action he may prepare himself for higher attainment. Following this in each Veda is another portion called the Upanishad, which deals wholly with the essentials of philosophic discrimination and ultimate spiritual vision. For this reason the Upanishads are known as the Vedanta, that is, the end or final goal of wisdom (Veda, wisdom; anta, end).

The name Upanishad has been variously interpreted. Many claim that it is a compound Sanskrit word Upa-ni-shad, signifying "sitting at the feet or in the presence of a teacher"; while according to other authorities it means "to shatter" or "to destroy" the fetters of ignorance. Whatever may have been the technical reason for selecting this name, it was chosen undoubtedly to give a picture of aspiring seekers "approaching" some wise Seer in the seclusion of an Himalayan forest, in order to learn of him the profoundest truths regarding the cosmic universe and God. Because these teachings were usually given in the stillness of some distant retreat, where the noises of the world could not disturb the tranquillity of the contemplative life, they are known also as Aranyakas, Forest Books. Another reason for this name may be found in the fact that they were intended especially for the Vanaprasthas (those who, having fulfilled all their duties in the world, had retired to the forest to devote themselves to spiritual study).

The form which the teaching naturally assumed was that of dialogue, a form later adopted by Plato and other Greek philosophers. As nothing was written and all instruction was transmitted orally, the Upanishads are called Srutis, "what is heard." The term was also used in the sense of revealed, the Upanishads being regarded as direct revelations of God; while the Smritis, minor Scriptures "recorded through memory," were traditional works of purely human origin. It is a significant fact that nowhere in the Upanishads is mention made of any author or recorder.

No date for the origin of the Upanishads can be fixed, because the written text does not limit their antiquity. The word Sruti makes that clear to us. The teaching probably existed ages before it was set down in any written form. The text itself bears evidence of this, because not infrequently in a dialogue between teacher and disciple the teacher quotes from earlier Scriptures now unknown to us. As Professor Max Miller states in his lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy: "One feels certain that behind all these lightning-flashes of religious and philosophic thought there is a distant past, a dark background of which we shall never know the beginning." Some scholars place the Vedic period as far back as 4000 or 5000 B.C.; others from 2000 to 1400 B.C. But even the most conservative admit that it antedates, by several centuries at least, the Buddhistic period which begins in the sixth century B.C.

The value of the Upanishads, however, does not rest upon their antiquity, but upon the vital message they contain for all times and all peoples. There is nothing peculiarly racial or local in them. The ennobling lessons of these Scriptures are as practical for the modern world as they were for the Indo-Aryans of the earliest Vedic age. Their teachings are summed up in two Maha-Vakyam or "great sayings": - Tat twam asi (That thou art) and Aham Brahmasmi (I

am Brahman). This oneness of Soul and God lies at the very root of all Vedic thought, and it is this dominant ideal of the unity of all life and the oneness of Truth which makes the study of the Upanishads especially beneficial at the present moment.

One of the most eminent of European Orientalists writes: "If we fix our attention upon it (this fundamental dogma of the Vedanta system) in its philosophical simplicity as the identity of God and the Soul, the Brahman and the Atman, it will be found to possess a significance reaching far beyond the Upanishads, their time and country; nay, we claim for it an inestimable value for the whole race of mankind. .

Whatever new and unwonted paths the philosophy of the future may strike out, this principle will remain permanently unshaken and from it no deviation can possibly take place. If ever a general solution is reached of the great riddle . . . the key can only be found where alone the secret of nature lies open to us from within, that is to say, in our innermost self. It was here that for the first time the original thinkers of the Upanishads, to their immortal honor, found it...."

The first introduction of the Upanishads to the Western world was through a translation into Persian made in the seventeenth century. More than a century later the distinguished French scholar, Anquetil Duperron, brought a copy of the manuscript from Persia to France and translated it into French and Latin. Publishing only the Latin text. Despite the distortions which must have resulted from transmission through two alien languages, the light of the thought still shone with such brightness that it drew from Schopenhauer the fervent words: "How entirely does the Oupnekhat (Upanishad) breathe throughout the holy spirit of the Vedas! How is every one, who by a diligent study of its Persian Latin has become familiar with that incomparable book, stirred by that spirit to the very depth of his Soul! From every sentence deep, original and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit." Again he says: "The access to (the Vedas) by means of the Upanishads is in my eyes the greatest privilege which this still young century (1818) may claim before all previous centuries." This testimony is borne out by the thoughtful American scholar, Thoreau, who writes: "What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum free from particulars, simple, universal."

The first English translation was made by a learned Hindu, Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1775-1833). Since that time there have been various European translations - French, German, Italian and English. But a mere translation, however accurate and sympathetic, is not sufficient to make the Upanishads accessible to the Occidental mind. Professor Max Müller after a lifetime of arduous labor in this field frankly confesses: "Modern words are round, ancient words are square, and we may as well hope to solve the quadrature of the circle, as to express adequately the ancient thought of the Vedas in modern English."

Without a commentary it is practically impossible to understand either the spirit or the meaning of the Upanishads. They were never designed as popular Scriptures. They grew up essentially as text books of God-knowledge and Self-knowledge, and like all text books they need interpretation. Being transmitted orally from teacher to disciple, the style was necessarily extremely condensed and in the form of aphorisms. The language also was often metaphorical and obscure. Yet if one has the perseverance to penetrate beneath these mere surface difficulties, one is repaid a hundredfold; for these ancient Sacred Books contain the most precious gems of spiritual thought.

Every Upanishad begins with a Peace Chant (Shanti-patha) to create the proper atmosphere of purity and serenity. To study about God the whole nature must be prepared, so unitedly and with loving hearts teacher and disciples prayed to the Supreme Being for His grace and protection. It is not possible to comprehend the subtle problems of life unless the thought is tranquil and the energy concentrated. Until our mind is withdrawn from the varied distractions and agitations of worldly affairs, we cannot enter into the spirit of higher religious study. No study is of avail so long as our inner being is not attuned. We must hold a peaceful attitude towards all living things; and if it is lacking, we must strive fervently to cultivate it through suggestion by chanting or repeating some holy text. The same lesson is taught by Jesus the Christ when He says: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Bearing this lofty ideal of peace in our minds, let us try to make our hearts free from prejudice, doubt and intolerance, so that from these sacred writings we may draw in abundance inspiration, love and wisdom.

Paramananda

Isa-Upanishad

This Upanishad derives its title from the opening words Isa-vasya, "God-covered." The use of Isa (Lord) - a more personal name of the Supreme Being than Brahman, Atman or Self, the names usually found in the Upanishads - constitutes one of its peculiarities. It forms the closing chapter of the Yajur-Veda, known as Shukla (White).

Oneness of the Soul and God, and the value of both faith and works as means of ultimate attainment are the leading themes of this Upanishad. The general teaching of the Upanishads is that works alone, even the highest, can bring only temporary happiness and must inevitably bind a man unless through them he gains knowledge of his real Self. To help him acquire this knowledge is the aim of this and all Upanishads.

Peace Chant

*OM! That (the Invisible-Absolute) is whole;
whole is this (the visible phenomenal);
from the Invisible Whole comes forth the visible whole.
Though the visible whole has come out from that
Invisible Whole, yet the Whole remains unaltered.*

OM! PEACE! PEACE! PEACE!

The indefinite term "That" is used in the Upanishads to designate the Invisible-Absolute, because no word or name can fully define It. A finite object, like a table or a tree, can be defined; but God, who is infinite and unbounded, cannot be expressed by finite language. Therefore the Rishis or Divine Seers, desirous not to limit the Unlimited, chose the indefinite term "That" to designate the Absolute.

In the light of true wisdom the phenomenal and the Absolute are inseparable. All