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THE VIEW
OF
THE UPANISADS

By

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THE Upaniṣads are the fountain-head of our spiritual culture. The subject I have chosen for this evening is: A Bird's-eye View of the Upaniṣads. In dealing with the subject, I have kept in view, not the scholar who is well-versed in the Upaniṣadic lore, its religion and philosophy, but laymen who, having been born as heirs to the grand cultural tradition of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, are interested in getting acquainted with their glorious inheritance.

At the very outset, it must be stated that the present treatment of the Upaniṣads cannot claim to be an exhaustive one, for the field to be covered is so vast that such a full and complete treatment is not possible in the course of a single talk. Nor is it possible to touch upon all the diverse currents of religio-philosophical thought found in them. As the title suggests, I am chiefly concerned in presenting here a cursory survey, a bird's-

eye view, of the principal Upaniṣads, and in focussing our attention on their salient features as well as their spiritually significant ideas and ideals. As we proceed with our survey, we shall take a closer view of a few landmarks which stand out prominently from among others.

WHAT ARE THE UPANISADS?

What are the Upaniṣads? The Upaniṣads constitute the most important section of the Vedas, which are the primary authority for millions of our countrymen in all matters pertaining to their spiritual life. The Vedas are the most ancient religious literature extant today, and the Vedāntins, wrongly but popularly known as the Hindus, believe them to be revealed scriptures, in the sense that the principles enunciated in the Vedas were revealed to some exceptionally gifted persons called the *ṛṣis* or sages. The extant Vedic literature is still vast, notwithstanding the fact that a major section of the original bulk has been irretrievably lost to mankind.

As we know, the Vedas are four in number, and the entire body of the Vedic literature is classified into four groups—the

Samhitās, the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, and the Upaniṣads. The Samhitās contain hymns in praise of the Vedic gods and goddesses; the Brāhmaṇas deal with the Vedic rituals and sacrifices; the Āraṇyakas allegorize those rituals and sacrifices and offer philosophical interpretations to them; and the Upaniṣads contain the real philosophy of the Vedas.

Each of the Vedas contains some of the Upaniṣads. Generally speaking, the Upaniṣads stand at the end of the Vedas. Hence their name Vedānta, which means *end of the Veda* (*Veda+anta*). Philosophically, too, the Upaniṣads are designated as 'Vedānta', because they contain the essence of the Vedic teaching, so that this word 'Vedānta' indicates not only the physical position of the Upaniṣads in the Vedas, but also the philosophical or spiritual end or aim of the Vedic teaching. In the broad division of the Vedas into two distinct portions according to their chief content—one dealing with rituals and the other devoted to knowledge—the Upaniṣads are brought under the second division, known as the *jñāna-kāṇḍa* or the philosophical section.

Thus the Upaniṣads constitute the philosophical or knowledge section of the Vedic literature.

THE MEANING OF 'UPANISAD'

What does the word '*upaniṣad*' mean? Broadly speaking, it means 'secret' knowledge. Secret knowledge is sacred knowledge. Sacred knowledge is spiritual knowledge. According to the Upaniṣads, Self-knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of the inmost reality in us, alone is spiritual knowledge, and this knowledge confers spiritual freedom on man. The Upaniṣads, therefore, impart knowledge of the Self which, when realized, leads man from death to immortality, and eventually gives him spiritual illumination. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, who was responsible for the revival and re-establishment of Advaita Vedānta, defines the word '*upaniṣad*' in two places. First, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, he says: 'By the word "*upaniṣad*" is denoted the knowledge of the knowable reality. . . . This knowledge splits up or destroys the seeds of worldly existence, namely, ignorance, desire, action, etc. . . . in the case of

those seekers of emancipation who, after becoming detached from the desire for the seen and the unseen objects, approach the knowledge that is called Upaniṣad. Or, the knowledge of Brahman is called Upaniṣad because of its conformity to the idea of leading to Brahman.' Secondly, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkarācārya says: 'Upaniṣad leads to the acquisition of the knowledge of Brahman. Knowledge (of Brahman) is referred to by the word "*upaniṣad*", for, in the case of those who are devoted to it, it either loosens or ends such things as birth, old age, etc., or because it takes one near Brahman, or because the highest good is proximately embedded in it.' He also adds: 'Even books that contain that knowledge are called Upaniṣads, as they contribute to that knowledge.' So the word primarily means knowledge—knowledge that liberates ; and secondarily, books relating to it.

THE NUMBER OF UPANISADS

The Upaniṣads are many in number. Some of them are considered major, and the rest minor. One of the minor Upaniṣads, the

Muktikā Upaniṣad, gives a list of one hundred and eight Upaniṣads, and they are classified under different Vedas. All these Upaniṣads are not of equal importance, or authority. Quite a few of them, which eulogize sectarian deities or religious doctrines, are of much later origin. There are Upaniṣads which are devoted to the glorification of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Śāktism—the three prominent religious schools of India. We are not concerned with any of these sectarian or doctrinal Upaniṣads here. We shall focus our attention on what are known as the major or principal Upaniṣads, which are only ten in number. They are: *Īśāvāsya* or *Īśā*, *Kena*, *Kaṭha*, *Praśnā*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Māṇḍūkya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. Ācārya Śaṅkara has written elaborate commentaries on each one of them; and they have been commented upon by other teachers, too, who belong to the theistic schools of Vedānta. Śaṅkara's commentary, it is needless to point out, is from the absolutistic or *advaitic* point of view.

There is neither a logical nor a chronological order in the Upaniṣads. It is very dif-

difficult to say which of these principal Upaniṣads are earlier and which later. Nor do we find any systematic development of philosophical thought in them. A particular theme is taken up, as it were, and significant spiritual truths are pronounced relating to that theme. We may not even find sometimes a connected or continuous treatment of a particular theme fully. And we do come across in the Upaniṣads philosophical concepts which are not merely absolutistic, but also theistic in character. While most of these Upaniṣads are predominantly absolutistic in their teaching, some are predominantly theistic. It is because of the presence of both these strains of thought in the Upaniṣads that the several later-day schools of Vedānta became possible.

THE PRASTHANA-TRAYA

The currents of philosophical thought are not organized or systematized in the Upaniṣads. For this systematization, however, we have to go to the *Brahma-Sūtra* or *Vedānta-Sūtra*, in which a master mind, Veda-Vyāsa, has strung a beautiful philosophy from the scattered thoughts of the Upani-

ṣads. Even this book, the *Vedānta-Sūtra*, in which the philosophy of the Upaniṣads is presented in the form of aphorisms or *sūtras*, is liable to different interpretations. And, indeed, several commentaries have been written by different commentators, ranging from purely personal and dualistic interpretation to the impersonal and non-dualistic. Each and every commentator interprets the *sūtras* in such a way as to make them yield the meaning appropriate to his own mode of philosophy, sometimes even going to the extent of twisting some of the words and making them reflect his own thought. Anyway, it is to the *Brahma-Sūtra* or *Vedānta-Sūtra* that we have to look for a systematic presentation of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads.

For a practical application of the religion and philosophy of the Upaniṣads, however, we have to turn to that well-known book, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which is rightly called an Upaniṣad in the book itself; in the colophon at the end of each chapter of the *Gītā*, we come across this expression—*Iti śrīmad-bhagavad-gītāsu upaniṣatsu* etc. For the *Gītā* contains not only the essence of the Upani-

ṣadic teachings, but even some verses from the Upaniṣads are bodily incorporated in it. Swami Vivekananda describes the *Gītā* as a 'bouquet composed of the beautiful flowers of spiritual truths collected from the Upaniṣads'. The *Gītā* not only presents the philosophy of the Upaniṣads pertaining to the ultimate Reality, but also unfolds the various disciplines, mental and moral, by which that Reality may be attained. The *Gītā* brings down the teachings of the Upaniṣads from their dizzy heights and makes them applicable in the lives of diverse types of minds, working on the principle that each is to follow a path most suitable to his temperament, taste, or aptitude. So we may say that the Upaniṣads pronounce certain spiritual truths and universal principles that govern the universe; the *Brahma-Sūtra* or *Vedānta-Sūtra* builds a philosophy based on those truths and principles; and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* brings them to practical application in the lives of men and women.

Now, against the background of what has been said so far, we can see what a unique position the Upaniṣads occupy in the spiritual life as well as in the philosophical

thought of India. As the chief and first constituent of the *prasthāna-traya*, that is, the three source-books or basic texts of the Vedānta schools, the Upaniṣads, as stated above, proclaim the fundamental truths regarding the Reality underlying the universe. The *Brahma-Sūtra*, the second constituent of the *prasthāna-traya*, gives an exposition of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. And the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the third constituent of the *prasthāna-traya*, unfolds methods for the practice in actual life of the truths enunciated in the Upaniṣads. A popular verse in the *Gītā-dhyāna* says: *Sarvopaniṣado gāvo dogdhā goṣālanandanah; Pārtho vatsah sudhīrboktā dugdham gītāmṛtam mahat.* 'All the Upaniṣads are the cows; the son of the cowherd, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, is the milker; Pārtha or Arjuna is the calf; men of purified intellect are the drinkers; and the supreme nectar, *Gītā*, is the milk.' The main teachings of the Upaniṣads run right through the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā*.

It has been the practice in India that every philosophical system, which claims to speak for and on behalf of Vedānta, and which likes to be called by, and associated

with, the sacred name of Vedānta, has got to take its inspiration from these three texts—the Upaniṣads, the *Brahma-Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—and trace its doctrinal deviations, differences, and interpretations to them. This is an essential requisite among all the different schools that go under the name of Vedānta. Indeed, there are several schools of Vedānta, as already pointed out, based on the different interpretations of these source-books, ranging from the dualistic and personalistic interpretation, at the one end, to the non-dualistic and absolutistic interpretation, at the other. In between, there are several schools of different shades.

THE TEN PRINCIPAL UPANISADS

Popularly, however, Vedānta has come to mean the non-dualistic school, known as Advaita in Sanskrit. Śaṅkarācārya was its greatest exponent, and it was he who established it on firm foundation. We are here concerned with his school of thought. Before proceeding to consider the main teachings of the Upaniṣads as a whole, let us cursorily survey the principal Upaniṣads and note the central theme, the dominant idea,

in each one of them. Every student of Vedānta, or anyone interested in the thought of Vedānta, should know about the ten principal Upaniṣads, which have already been enumerated, and become acquainted with their contents.

The *Īśāvāsya* or *Īśā Upaniṣad*, mentioned as the first in every traditional enumeration—first not in any logical or chronological sense, as pointed out already—speaks of the divinity of man and nature, and the spiritual oneness of all existence. Its very opening verse says: *Īśāvāsyam idam sarvaṁ yatkiñcit jagatyām jagat*—‘Whatsoever there is changeful in this world is to be enveloped by God.’ It says that everything is spiritual or divine in essence. Everything is enveloped and permeated by the Lord. God covers everything, and is in the heart of all beings. He is not only transcendental, but also immanent in nature. This Upaniṣad exhorts man to live and function in this world, seeing God everywhere and in everything, and to spiritualize all his activity. If a person can successfully achieve this attitude to life, he is said to attain the highest goal. It is said that such a person is never bound by

work, for he works like a master with a new spiritual vision:

*Kurvanneveha karmāṇi jīviṣet śataṁ
samāḥ;*

*Evam tvayi nānyatheto'sti na karma lip-
yate nare.*

The *Īśā Upaniṣad* also beautifully describes the condition of a man of spiritual realization, when it says:

*Yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmanyevānuṣā-
yati;*

*Sarvabhūteṣu cātmānam tato na vijugup-
sate.*

‘He who sees all beings in the very Self, and the Self in all beings, feels no hatred by virtue of that realization.’ Again:

*Yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmaivābhūd-
vijānataḥ;*

*Tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śokaḥ ekatvamanu-
ṣāsyataḥ.*

‘When, to the man of realization, all beings become the very Self, then what delusion and what sorrow can there be for that seer of oneness?’ Mark the words ‘that seer of oneness’—*Ekatvamanuṣāsyataḥ*. The main

teaching of this Upaniṣad, namely, that God is in everything, that man and nature are essentially divine, and that all existence is basically one and spiritual, provides the fundamental theme of Vedāntic thought. It is no exaggeration to say that the teaching of the *Īśā Upaniṣad* can be looked upon as the basis or foundation of Vedāntic thought, and the entire Vedānta literature that has grown in the course of centuries, as a magnificent superstructure on that ancient foundation. Referring to the opening verse of the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, which speaks of the divine essence of all things, Mahatma Gandhi once said: 'If all Upaniṣads and all other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the *Īśā Upaniṣad* were left intact in the memory of Hindus, Hinduism would live for ever.' Hinduism lives today, lives quite strong and vigorous, because the attitude to life conveyed in this verse is very much alive in the heart of every devout Hindu.

In the *Kena Upaniṣad*, we get the notion of the ultimate Reality as the origin, ground, and goal of all the manifold manifestation. It speaks of the Reality as the inner Self

behind all our conception and perception, after freeing it from all touch of relativity and finitude and revealing it in its intrinsic spiritual character. In doing this, the *Kena Upaniṣad* reveals the ultimate Reality of the Upaniṣads as a *given* fact of experience—*Pratibodha viditaṁ matam*—which is the ever-present subject of all experience. It is Brahman alone that is the eternal witness behind all the different states of consciousness; and it is that alone which is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. This Upaniṣad tells a story how this highest spiritual knowledge was imparted to the gods by a female deity, Umā, the daughter of the king of mountains, Himavat. In this Upaniṣad, we get another idea, namely, the greatness of this human birth and the highest possibility that lies before it. Self-realization is to be had in this very life, says this Upaniṣad, and warns that if we do not achieve it, then there is great destruction, meaning that this unique opportunity of human birth has been missed:

*Iha cedavedīdatha satyamasti
Na cedihāvedīn mahatī vinaṣṭiḥ;*

*Bhūteṣu bhūteṣu vicitrya dhīrāḥ
Pretyāsmālokaḍamṛtā bhavanti.*

‘ If one has realized here, then there is truth; if one has not realized here, there is great destruction. The wise ones, having realized Brahman in all beings, and having turned away from this world, become immortal.’

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* stands in a class by itself. It combines in itself charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy. The subject of the mystery of death is introduced through an interesting anecdote, and the teaching of the Upaniṣad is given through the medium of a dialogue between young Naciketā, a mere boy, who had gone to the abode of Death in search of the mystery of life and death, and Yama, the very king of Death. Naciketā is the student, and Yama the teacher, and in the course of their dialogue, there issues forth from the lips of the teacher the wisdom that lies beyond life and death. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, we get an exposition of the nature of the Self, or the ultimate Reality, in clear language. It also points to the limitations of logical reason

in understanding the deeper spiritual reality, which is imbedded in the heart of every being. Quite a few verses of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* find place in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. One of the verses of this Upaniṣad says: 'One who has not desisted from bad conduct, whose senses are not under control, whose mind is not controlled, who is not free from anxiety, cannot attain this Self through knowledge'—

*Nāvirato duṣcaritāt nāsānto nāsamāhitaḥ;
Nāsāntamānaso vā'pi prajñānenainamāpnuyāt.*

It is this Upaniṣad, again, that compares spiritual struggle to walking on the edge of a razor; and it exhorts men and women not to get faint-hearted or frustrated, but to press on till the highest goal, immortality, is reached. Its exhortation is: *Uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varānnibodhata*. Swami Vivekananda, who was never tired of repeating it, has freely rendered it as: 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.' The Swami was greatly fascinated by this Upaniṣad, and more so, by the sterling character of that young boy, Naciketā, who

was imbued with *śraddhā*, deep faith, in spiritual values, inquisitiveness as regards higher knowledge, and fearlessness in spiritual adventure, and who knocked at the very door of Death to acquire the knowledge that takes man beyond life and death.

The *Praśna Upaniṣad*, as the very name implies, discusses philosophical problems in a general way through the medium of questions and answers between six students and a sage. The students approach the sage and ask him various questions relating to the source of all beings, the number of deities, and the chief among them, the nature and function of *prāṇa*, the vital force, the nature of waking, dream, and sleep states and the function of the senses in each of the states, meditation on the sacred syllable *Om*, and what it leads to, and finally the nature of the supreme Person, the conscious Being in man, Brahman, higher than whom there is nothing to be known. And to each of these questions, the sage gives a suitable answer, making it more intelligible and easy of comprehension by means of interesting analogies and similes.

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* begins with a

classification of knowledge into higher and lower, and says that the higher knowledge is that by which the immutable Self is realized. As against this, every other kind of knowledge, knowledge of all sciences and arts, is considered as lower knowledge. All secular knowledge is included in this category of lower knowledge. As the name of the Upaniṣad indicates, this upholds the ideal of *sannyāsa* or monasticism as the most suitable means for those who wish to tread the path of *jñāna* or knowledge. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* compares the individual soul, *jīva*, and the universal Soul, Brahman, to two birds of beautiful plumage perching on the self-same tree. It says further that these two birds are 'ever associated and have similar names. . . . Of these, the one eats the fruit of divergent tastes (that is the *jīva*); and the other looks on without eating (that is Brahman)'. 'On the same tree, the individual soul remains drowned, as it were; and so it moans, being worried by its impotence. When it sees thus the other, the adored Lord (i.e. the higher Self or Brahman) and His glory, then it becomes liberated from sorrow.'

*Dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā samānam
vṛkṣam pariśasvajāte;*

*Tayoranyaḥ pippalam svādvatti anaśnan
anyo abhicākaṣīti.*

*Samāne vṛkṣe puruṣo nimagno'nīśayā
śocati muhyamānaḥ;*

*Juṣṭam yadā paśyati anyamiśam asya
mahimānamiti vītaśokaḥ.*

In soul-stirring poetry, this Upaniṣad bursts into songs of spiritual freedom and describes the glory of those to whom the entity presented by the Vedāntic knowledge has become fully ascertained, and who endeavour assiduously with the help of the *yoga* of monasticism and become pure in mind. At the supreme moment of final departure, they become identified with Brahman, having become freed on every side. This is the Upaniṣad which proclaims that 'anyone who knows Brahman becomes Brahman indeed'. And for the information of those who may not be aware of it, we may add that this is the Upaniṣad which has provided the motto for our State emblem: *Satyameva jayate*—'Truth alone triumphs'—

which is inscribed beneath the Aśoka Capital used as our State emblem.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, which is the shortest of the principal Upaniṣads, speaks of Reality as a mass of mere consciousness, and says that 'All this is surely Brahman'; 'This Self (Ātman) is Brahman' (*Sarvam hi etat Brahma; ayamātmā Brahma*). Among the non-dualistic Vedāntins, this Upaniṣad is looked upon as the book of books, and it has been amplified and expounded elaborately by two great teachers—Gauḍapāda and his grand-disciple, Śaṅkara. In this brief Upaniṣad, we get the result, as it were, of all the various investigations into the realm of Reality, and a rational synthesis of all experience. This Upaniṣad identifies the Self with the sacred syllable *Om*, discusses the spiritual significance of the constituent letters of the sacred syllable, and says that when meditated upon in the proper way, it becomes helpful for the realization of Brahman.

The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* enters into a discussion on the theory of creation and cosmology, and eventually leads to an understanding of the spiritual character of the Absolute. This Upaniṣad also speaks of

Brahman as Consciousness, and says that this universe has Consciousness as its end, i.e. the support of the whole universe—

*Sarvaṁ tat prajñānetraṁ prajñāne prati-
ṣṭhitam*
*Prajñānetrolokaḥ prajñāpratiṣṭhā prajñā-
naṁ Brahma.*

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* takes up the question of the nature of individuality, which, according to it, is made up of five sheaths—the material, the vital, the psychical, the intellectual, and the intuitive. Beyond these is the inmost reality, the Ātman, which is the real Self of man. The nature of the Self is described here as truth, knowledge, and infinity—*Satyam jñānam anantaṁ Brahma*. This Upaniṣad says: ‘That from which all these beings take birth, that by which they live after being born, that towards which they move and into which they merge, know that—That is Brahman.’

*Yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante; yena
jātāni jīvanti;*
*Yat prayanti abhisamvīśanti; tat vijijñā-
sasva; tat Brahma.*

In this Upaniṣad, Brahman is spoken of as

supreme Bliss. The Bliss of Brahman is perceivable as the perfection of desirelessness; it is enjoyed and experienced by one who realizes Brahman. That is the only real Bliss from which all this bliss that we see in the world 'has separated like spray from the sea and into which it gets united again'.

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, the second biggest of the ten major Upaniṣads, introduces us to such lovable and earnest seekers after truth as Nārada, Satyakāma, and Śvetaketu, and sagely teachers like Āruṇi and Sanatkumāra. The problem of appearance and reality is discussed threadbare, and the Upaniṣad, through grand similes and metaphors, points to the essential unity and reality of being in the midst of apparent diversity and multiplicity. Appearance is false; it is unreal. Names and forms are ultimately unreal. Brahman, the Reality, is alone absolutely real; and that is the Self of all. The Upaniṣad declares: *Tat tvam asi*—'That thou art', and adds further that 'the knower of the Self crosses all sorrow'—*Tarati śokam ātmavit*. This Upaniṣad contains also the deeply human story of the discipleship of Indra, the king of gods, and

Virocana, the king of demons, under a great sage known as Prajāpati. The story is immensely interesting in that it enables us to distinguish materialism and its bitter fruits of selfishness and secularism from spirituality and its blessings of peace, love, and fellowship. This and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* are so extensive in their stretch and contain so many strains or currents of philosophical and spiritual thought that it is well-nigh impossible to mention even barely all of them in the course of a brief talk.

Lastly, we come to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the biggest of the Upaniṣads, as the very name suggests. This is a veritable forest of sublime thought and spiritual inspiration. We are introduced to four illustrious personalities in this Upaniṣad, who stand out prominently from among scores of others whose names occur in the book. These four include two women ; and they are: Janaka, the philosopher king ; Yājñavalkya, the philosopher sage ; Maitreyī, a highly sensitive soul, who was the wife of Yājñavalkya ; and Gārgī, the gifted woman philosopher, who enters into a debate with Yājñavalkya. This Upaniṣad expounds the

chief theme of Vedāntic thought, namely, the spiritual unity and solidarity of the ultimate Reality, and the divinity and purity of the human soul, by resorting to much detailed and rational thought and impressive illustrations. It characterizes the highest Reality as the *Fearless*, and says that one who realizes the Highest attains absolute fearlessness.

One of the fascinating themes of this Upaniṣad is that everything is dear and lovable to us because of the presence of the same spiritual Self in everything and every being: *Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṁ priyaṁ bhavati*. In one of the most memorable passages, this Upaniṣad says that husband, wife, sons, wealth, worlds, gods, and all beings are dear to us because of the love of Self—not the physical self, but the underlying spiritual Self of all. This higher Self, says the Upaniṣad, is 'dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than everything else'. Instructing Maitreyī about the knowledge of the Self, Yājñavalkya says: 'The Self, my dear Maitreyī, should be realized—should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated upon. By the realization of the Self, my dear, through hearing, reflection, and meditation,

all this is known'—*Ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyo Maitreyi; ātmano vā are darśanena śravaṇena matyā vijñānena idaṁ sarvaṁ viditam*. The knowledge of the Self leads to the knowledge of everything. That is the burden of this Upaniṣad. This knowledge of the Self is the culmination of spiritual illumination.

In this brief survey of the major Upaniṣads, an attempt has been made to present only the dominant ideas of each one of them. These few ideas, however, are the essence of the Upaniṣadic teaching; they, indeed, echo the immortal voice of the Upaniṣads.

SOME IMPORTANT THOUGHT-CURRENTS

Next, we pass on to a quick survey of the Upaniṣadic literature as a whole, and take a glimpse of the most important thought-currents found therein.

The Upaniṣads form the pinnacle of the religio-philosophic thought of India. They have occupied this exalted position for centuries, informing and inspiring the spiritual life of the Indian people. Their soul-elevating message has uplifted and transformed hundreds and thousands of men and

women, and transported them to a realm of supreme bliss and beatitude, beyond all human comprehension. The Upaniṣadic truths are the outpourings from the hearts of perfected souls, who had a vision of the Reality face to face. The voice of the Upaniṣads, speaking through the sages of dim antiquity, has come down to us through the corridor of time undimmed and full of vigour. The teachings of the Upaniṣads are there for anyone to take up and live up to them. For the children of the soil, of this sacred land, of this *punjabhūmi*, the Upaniṣads have always provided 'the solace of life and the solace of death', to borrow the well-known expression of the great German philosopher, Schopenhauer. The Upaniṣads urge every individual, every earnest seeker, to march along and progress in the moral path, to scale the heights of spiritual Truth, to know the nature of Reality that is in the heart of all beings, to give up the vanity of this world, to get free from the thralldom of matter, and to attain spiritual illumination, which confers on man eternal peace, eternal happiness, and eternal blessedness.

The Upaniṣads are called *Brahma-vidyā*

or *adhyātma-vidyā*, the science or knowledge of the transcendental Reality. They not only give us the knowledge of the Reality behind man and nature, but also show us the path of attaining that Reality, which is the spiritual basis of all beings, of the entire universe. The chief aim of the Upaniṣads is to lead man from the darkness of the material world to the light of the spiritual. Lured by the apparent glamour of this world, man is running after it like one pursuing the mirage in a desert, which ever eludes his grasp. In this pursuit, he has forgotten the divine treasure lying hidden in the depths of his own being. The Upaniṣads point this out to him and urge him to dive deep within and discover the precious spiritual gem that shines as his own Self. Self-discovery is the greatest adventure, and Self-conquest, the greatest conquest, according to the Upaniṣads. Self-realization or Self-knowledge is the highest of all knowledge. The Upaniṣads tell us that, in the ultimate analysis, man is neither the body, nor the mind, nor the intellect, nor even the conglomeration of all these three, but he is the Spirit unconditioned by any of them. This Spirit is one, universal,

and all-pervading; it is not only immanent in the universe, but transcends it also. It is this Spirit that infuses life into matter, as it were. It is because of the presence of the Spirit that all beings become active and animated, and perform their respective functions. *Tameva bhāntam anubhāti sarvaṃ; tasya bhāsā sarvamidaṃ vibhāti*—‘He shining, all these shine; through His lustre, all these are variously illumined’, says the Upaniṣad. There is neither life nor light in the absence of the Spirit. The Spirit is self-luminous, self-creative, uncreated, and ever-present. It is beyond and unconditioned by time, space, and causality. There is no place where It is not; no time when It is not. Says the Upaniṣad: *Īśāno bhūtabhavyasya sa eva adya sa u śvaḥ*—‘He is the ruler of the past and the future; He exists today, and He will exist tomorrow.’

The Spirit is one and infinite; it is one without a second—*Ekameva advitīyam*. Its infinite and all-pervasive character is expressed in enigmatic language in the Upaniṣads: ‘It is unmoving, one, and faster than the mind’—*Anejadekaṃ manaso javīyo*. ‘Remaining stationary, it outruns all other run-

ners'—*Taddhāvato anyān atyeti tiṣṭhat.* 'While sitting, it travels far away'—*Āsīno dūraṁ vrajati.* 'While sleeping, it goes everywhere'—*Śayāno yāti sarvataḥ.* 'As the moving sun, He dwells in heaven; as air, He pervades all and dwells in inter-space; as fire, He resides on the earth; He lives among men; He lives among gods; He dwells in space.'

The Spirit is ever present behind all the thought and activity of man, whether in the waking state or in the dream state. It is the abiding witness even during the dreamless deep sleep. 'Through its help, man perceives the objects in both the dream and the waking states', says the Upaniṣad—*Svapnāntaṁ jāgaritāntaṁ cobhau yenānuṣāsyati.* The Spirit is uncaused; yet it is the basis and the background of all this world-show, which is conjured up in the cosmic mind. The Upaniṣads speak of the Self or Brahman as the first or the ultimate cause of the whole universe.

Thus the Upaniṣads have three objects in view. First, they describe the nature of the universal Being or Brahman, which is also the indwelling Self of every being, the

Ātman. The Self of man, the Ātman, is not different from but identical with Brahman. Secondly, the Upaniṣads speak of the special qualities, moral and spiritual, with which the seeker or the aspirant has to equip himself in order to fully realize the meaning of their words and get a direct, immediate, and intuitive knowledge of Brahman. Thirdly, they describe the blissful state of self-realization (*Brahmajñāna*) and the status of one who experiences it—the state of illumination, or spiritual emancipation, or *mukti*, which confers freedom from the trammels of this truncated, limited worldly existence—*saṃsāra*.

THE AIM OF LIFE

Man must realize the Self—that is the aim of life according to the Upaniṣads. Of all beings, man is most fitted to receive the knowledge of Truth and realize it. He has in him the requisite instrument to apprehend as well as to comprehend the truth of things. No other being save man has a claim to this prerogative. It is said that even the gods have to be reborn as human beings if they have to achieve the highest spiritual perfection. That is the privilege and the

glory of human birth. So it is that the Upaniṣads exhort men and women, again and again, to make full use of this rare privilege afforded to them to realize Truth and thereby attain eternal freedom and everlasting peace.

The Upaniṣads contain several sacred and mystic statements which may be adopted for purposes of meditation. These statements, *mahāvākyas* as they are called, impress upon the mind of the seeker the abiding nature of Brahman, showing that It alone constitutes the spiritual basis of all existence. The most important of these statements express great spiritual truths in very simple words. Some of the well-known statements are: *Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi*—I am Brahman; *Tat tvam asi*—Thou art that; *Prajñānaṁ Brahma*—Consciousness is Brahman; *Ayam ātmā Brahma*—This Self is Brahman; *Sarvaṁ khalu idaṁ Brahma*—All this is verily Brahman.

Man must pierce through the veil of names and forms, which is the phenomenal world, and arrive at the core, which is Brahman. For doing this, he must needs undergo strenuous spiritual *sādhana*. Through earnest application and constant

practice, the mind of man is rendered pure, and his perception undergoes a complete transformation. He gets a truer understanding of the essential nature of the world. Everything gets spiritualized, and all things become divine in his eyes. When Truth is realized, all doubts vanish. Temptations cease. Man, then, no longer runs after the elusive objects of this ephemeral world. He recognizes their trivial nature and recoils from them.

The fruit of spiritual life is Self-knowledge, which leads to freedom, *mukti*, according to the Upaniṣads. To the knower of Truth, there is no more return to this world—*Yasmāt bhūyo na jāyate*. Such a one becomes free from the round of birth and death, and attains that which is 'birthless, eternal, undecaying, and ancient'—*Ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo*. Man's true being is in the being of Brahman, which is his real home and in which he must finally rest.

Freedom is the birthright of every individual, and everyone should strive to achieve it. Man should become physically free, mentally free, and spiritually free. The Upaniṣads show him the way to freedom. The

spiritual evolution of man must be a gradual process. The Upaniṣads recognize this basic fact. Man must fulfil his physical needs to begin with. Then he should outgrow them by the cultivation of mental powers and moral virtues. By further sublimation, he should develop spiritual aptitude and aspiration. The method of sublimation is the true spiritual path, which is most efficacious. The Upaniṣads point to this method as the most fruitful of all avenues to reach the spiritual goal. Man should be physically fit and strong, mentally pure and alert, and spiritually sensitive and sincere, to undertake the pilgrimage of the Spirit.

There are several passages in the Upaniṣads praying for physical health and happiness, as well as for the development of the body, mind, and intellect. These are necessary for a useful and purposeful life. The body, mind, and intellect should be strengthened and trained to work for a great purpose—the greatest purpose of human birth, namely, Self-realization. Man should grow harmoniously and develop a well-integrated personality. Addressing such an able, strong, and intelligent aspirant, the Upaniṣad says:

*Dhanurgrhitvā aupaniṣadam mahāstram
 Śaram hyupāsā niṣitam sandadhīta;
 Āyamyā tadbhāvagatena cetasā
 Lakṣyam tadevākṣaram somya viddhi.*

‘Taking hold of the bow (that is the great weapon familiar in the Upaniṣad), one should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string with a mind absorbed in Its thought, that is, in the thought of Brahman—hit, O good-looking one, that very target that is the Immutable.’

Faith, fearlessness, and freedom are the watchwords of the Upaniṣads—*faith* in ones’ ultimate divine destiny, *fearlessness* in undertaking the spiritual adventure, and *freedom* from this finite life of matter. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, who strove hard to revive and restore the pure religion of the Upaniṣads in the heart of India: ‘They (the Upaniṣads) will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the downtrodden of all races, all creeds, and all sects to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upaniṣads.’ Man must get out of this

finite life of matter and enter into the eternal life of the Spirit by Self-realization, by Self-knowledge. That is the supreme message, the dominant voice of the Upaniṣads.

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