

Excerpt from the Upanishads

Background: The *Upanishads* (ninth to fifth centuries BCE) follow the *Rig Vedas* as the foundational literature for Indian spirituality. A significant transformation has occurred between the two. The *Vedas* consist of rituals to placate the gods who represent natural forces. The *Upanishads* renounce worldly matters for the inner spirit, which seeks unity with the universal. There are several *Upanishads* each written at different times. The *Kena Upanishad* attempts to grasp ideas of the Brahma, who is the universal or absolute being. Brahma is typically conceptualized as a Trinity, Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Transformer.

Source: Paramanada, Swami. *Upanishads*.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- 1. According to the *Upanishads*, how does the universe work?**
 - 2. What are the differences between the *Upanishads* and pagan polytheistic religions?**
 - 3. What are the similarities to the later monotheistic religions?**
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Part Third

- I The Brahman once won a victory for the Devas. Through that victory of the Brahman, the Devas became elated. They thought, "This victory is ours. This glory is our." Brahman here does not mean a persona Deity. There is a Brahma, the first person of the Hindu Trinity; but Brahman is the Absolute, the One without a second, the essences of all. There are different names and forms, which represent certain personal aspects of Divinity, such as Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Transformer; but no one of these can fully represent the Whole. Brahman is the vast ocean of being, on which rise numberless ripples and waves of manifestation. From the smallest atomic form to a Deva or an angel, all spring from that limitless ocean of Brahman, the inexhaustible Source of life. No manifested form of life can be independent of its source, just as no wave however mighty, can be independent of the ocean. Nothing moves without that Power. He is the only Doer. But the Devas thought: "This victory is ours, glory is ours."
- II The Brahman perceived this and appeared before them. They did not know what mysterious for it was.
- III They said to Fire: "O Jataveda (All-knowing)! Find out what mysterious spirit this is." He said: "Yes."
- IV He ran towards it and He (Brahman) said to him: "Who art thou?" "I am Agni, I am Jataveda," he (the Fire-god) replied.

- V Brahman asked: "What power resides in thee?" Angi replied: "I can burn up all whatsoever exists on earth."
- VI Brahman placed a straw before him and said: "Burn this." He (Agni) rushed toward it with all speed, but was not able to burn it. So he returned from there and said (to the Devas): "I was not able to find out what this great mystery is."
- VII They said to Vayu (the Air-god): "Vayu! Find out what this mystery is." He said: "Yes."
- VIII He ran towards it and He (Brahman) said to him: "Who art thou?" I am Vayu, I am Matarisva (traveler of Heaven)," he (Vayu) said."
- IX Then the Brahman said: "What power is in thee?" Vayu replied: "I can blow away all whatsoever exists on earth."
- X Brahman placed a straw before him and said: "Blow this away." He (Vayu) rushed toward it with all speed, but was not able to blow it away. So he returned from there and said (to the Devas): "I was not able to find out what this great mystery is."
- XI They they said to Indra: "O Maghaven (Worshipful One)! Find out what this mystery is." He said: "Yes," and ran towards it, but it disappeared before him.
- XII Then he saw that very space a woman beautifully adorned, Uma of golden hue, daughter of Haimavat (Himilaya). He asked: what is this great mystery?" Here we see how Absolute assumes concrete form to give knowledge of Himself to the earnest seeker. Brahman, the impenetrable mystery, disappeared and in His place appeared a personal form to represent him. This is a subtle way of showing the difference between the Absolutes and the personal aspects to make Himself know to His devotees. Thus Uma, daughter of the Himalaya, represents that personal aspect as the offspring of the Infinite Being; while the Himalaya stands as the symbol of the Eternal, Unchangeable One.

Part Fourth

- I She (Uma) said: "It is Brahman. It is through the victory of Brahman that ye are victorious." Then from her words, he (Indra) knew that it (that mysterious form) was Brahman. Uma replied to Indra, "It is to Brahman that you owe your victory. It is through His power that you live and act. He is the agent and you are all only instruments in His hands. Therefore your idea that "This victory is ours, this glory is ours," is based on ignorance." At once Indra saw their mistake. The Devas, being puffed away with vanity, had thought they themselves had achieved the victory, whereas it was Brahman, for not even a blade of grass can move without His command.

Excerpt from the *Bhagavad-Gita*

Background: The *Bhagavad-Gita* is part of the Hindu epic The *Mahabharata*, written in India between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Modern Hinduism after the advent of Buddhism took shape around such epic poetry, which was easier for the common person to understand than the Upanishads, earlier philosophical writings. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is set on the battle field where two great armies are lined up facing each other. The hero, a Kshatriya prince named Arjuna, is about to go to war against the other side, an army filled with relatives and others he deeply respects. He is having a moment of ethical crisis: his duty as a warrior is to fight, but his sense of compassion keeps him from killing the people he loves on the other side. Fortunately, his charioteer is an AVATAR (earthly incarnation of a god, like Jesus in Christianity) of Krishna, the Hindu god of love. Krishna (referred to below as SRI KRISHNA – SRI is a term of respect) counsels him to follow his dharma as a warrior and see death for what it really is – an ever-recurring phenomena that is always replaced with new life through reincarnation. The story is told by the narrator, SANJAYA.

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

1. **What Hindu belief is Sri Krishna referring to when he says “Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth, and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body”?**
2. **What Hindu concept is Sri Krishna referring to when he says “Even if you consider this from the standpoint of your own caste-duty, you ought to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war.”?**

SANJAYA: Then his eyes (ARJUNA’S) filled with tears, and his heart grieved and was bewildered with pity. And Sri Krishna spoke to him, saying:

SRI KRISHNA: Arjuna, is this hour of battle the time for scruples and fancies? Are they worthy of you, who seek enlightenment? Any brave man who merely hopes for fame or heaven would despise them. What is this weakness? It is beneath you. Shake off this cowardice, Arjuna. Stand up.

ARJUNA: Bhishma and Drona are noble and ancient, worthy of the deepest reverence. How can I greet them with arrows in battle? If I kill them, how can I ever enjoy my wealth, or any other pleasure? It will be cursed with blood guilt. I would much rather spare them, and eat the bread of a beggar.

Which will be worse, to win this war, or to lose it? I scarcely know. Even the sons of Dhritarashtra stand in the enemy ranks. If we kill them, none of us will wish to live.

Is this real compassion that I feel, or only a delusion? My mind gropes about in darkness. I cannot see where my duty lies. Krishna, I beg you, tell me frankly and clearly what I ought to do. I am your disciple. I put myself into your hands. Show me the way.

Not this world’s kingdom,
Supreme, unchallenged
No, nor the throne

Of the gods in heaven,
Could ease this sorrow
That numbs my senses!

SANJUNA: When Arjuna, the foe-consuming, the never-slothful, had spoken thus to Govinda (the person whose body Krishna is using), ruler of the senses, he added: "I will not fight," and was silent.

Then to him who thus sorrowed between the two armies, the ruler of the senses spoke, smiling:

SRI KRISHNA: Your words are wise, Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing. The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead.

There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.

Just as the dweller in this body passes through childhood, youth, and old age, so at death he merely passes into another kind of body. The wise are not deceived by that.

Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are caused by the contact of the senses with their objects. They come and they go, never lasting long. You must accept them.

That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be. Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of *is* and *is not*.

But if you should suppose this Atman (soul) to be subject to constant birth and death, even then you ought not to be sorry.

Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable.

Before birth, beings are not manifest to our human senses. In the interim between birth and death, they are manifest. At death they return to the un-manifest again. What is there in all this to grieve over?

There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.

He who dwells within all living bodies remains forever indestructible. Therefore, you should never mourn for anyone.

Even if you consider this from the standpoint of your own caste-duty, you ought to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war. Happy are the warrior to whom a battle such as this comes; it opens a door to heaven.

Excerpt from *The Gospel of Buddha: Chapter 53 Identity and Non-Identity*

Background: Siddhartha Gautama (623 – 543 BCE) was also a prince who renounced his title and property at the age of 30. After years of seeking truth he meditated under the Bodhi tree and achieved enlightenment, calling himself the enlightened one he then traveled around India teaching. After his death, Buddha's followers wrote down many of his teachings for posterity and to help others achieve enlightenment. Buddhist beliefs are based on the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering, the origin of suffering is attachment, cessation of suffering is achievable, and the enlightenment may be achieved by the eightfold path. The alleviation of suffering, according to Buddha is through detachment and moderation, not in hedonism or asceticism.

Source: Carua, Paul. *The Gospel of Buddha, According to Old Records*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1894.

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- 1. How does Buddha compare law and belief?**
- 2. How are the universe and the individual defined?**
- 3. How would you interpret verse 25?**

Kutadanta, the head of the Brahmans in the village of Danamati having approached the Blessed One respectfully, greeted him and said: "I am told, O samana, that thou are the Buddha, the Holy One, the All-knowing, the Lord of the World. But if thou wert Buddha, wouldst thou not come like a king in all they glory and power?" (1)

Said the Blessed One: "Thine eyes are holden. If the eye of thy mind were undimmed thou couldst see the glory and the power of truth." (2)

Said Kutadanta: "Show me the truth and I shall see it. But thy doctrine is without consistency. If it were consistent, it would stand; but as it is not, it will pass away." (3)

The Blessed One replied: "The truth will never pass away." (4)

Kutadanta said: "I am told that thou teachest the law, yet thou tearest down religion. Thy disciples despise rites and abandon immolation but reverence for the gods can be shown only by sacrifices. The very nature of religion consists in worship and sacrifice." (5)

Said the Buddha: "Greater than the immolation of bullocks is the sacrifice of self. He who offers to the gods his evil desires will see the usefulness of slaughtering animals at the altar. Blood has no cleansing power, but the eradication of lust will make the heart pure. Better than worshipping gods is obedience to the laws of righteousness." (6)

Kutadanta, being of religious disposition and anxious about his fate after death...continued: "Thou believest, O Master, that beings are reborn; that they migrate in the evolution of life; and that subject to the law of karma we must reap what we sow. Yet thou teachest the non-existence of the soul! Thy disciples praise utter self-extinction as the highest bliss of Nirvana. If I am merely a combination of the sankharas, my existence will cease when I die. If I am merely a compound of sensations and ideas and desires, wither can I go at the dissolution of the body." (7)

Said the Blessed One: "O Brahman, thou art religious and earnest. Thou art seriously concerned about thy soul. Yet is thy work in vain because thou art lacking in the one thing that is needful." (8)

"There is rebirth of character, but no transmigration of a self. Thy thought-forms reappear, but there is no egoentity transferred. The stanza uttered by a teacher is reborn in the scholar who repeats the words. (9)

"...Verily I say unto thee. The Blessed One has not come to teach death, but to teach life." (12)

"This body will be dissolved and no amount of sacrifice will save it. Therefore, seek thou the life that is of the mind. Where self is, truth cannot be: yet when truth comes, self will disappear. Therefore, let thy mind rest in the truth; propagate the truth, put thy whole will in it, and let it spread. In the truth thou shalt live for ever." (13)

...Said the Blessed One: "Meanest thou that there is no wisdom, no enlightenment, no righteousness, and no salvation because Nirvana is not a locality? As a great and mighty wind which passeth over the world in the heat of the day, so the Tathagata comes to blow over the minds of mankind with the breath of his love, so cool, so sweet, so calm, so delicate; and those tormented by fever assuage their suffering and rejoice at the refreshing breeze." (23)

Said the Kutadanta: "I feel, O Lord, that though proclaimest a great doctrine, but I cannot grasp it. Forebear with me that I ask again: Tell me O Lord, if there be no atman, how can there be immortality? The activity of the mind passeth, and our thoughts are gone when we have done thinking." (24)

Buddha replied: "Our thinking is gone, but our thoughts continue. Reasoning ceases but knowledge remains." (25)

Excerpt from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (“The Discourse That Set Turning the Wheel of Truth”)

Background: According to Buddhist tradition this was the first sermon preached by the Buddha. After gaining enlightenment under the Tree of Wisdom of Gaya he proceeded to Varanasi, where in a park outside of the city, he found five ascetics who had formerly been his associates and who had left him in disgust when he gave up self-mortification and self-starvation as useless in his quest for supreme wisdom. In the presence of these five the Buddha “set in motion the Wheel of Law” by preaching this sermon, which outlines the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Middle way, three of the most important concepts of Buddhism.

FOCUS QUESTIONS:

- 1. How does the Eightfold Path translate to the thoughts and actions of its followers?**
- 2. Summarize the Four Noble Truths. How do Buddhist beliefs contrast with the caste system that had dominated classical India?**

...Thus I have heard. Once the Lord was at Varanasi, as the deer park called Isipatana. There he addressed the five monks:

There are two ends not to be served by a wanderer. What are these two? The pursuit of desires and the pleasure which springs from desire, which is based, common, leading to rebirth, ignoble, and unprofitable; and the pursuit of pain and hardship, which is grievous, ignoble, and unprofitable. The Middle Way of the Tathagata avoids both these ends. It is enlightened, it brings clear vision, it makes for wisdom and leads to peace, insight, enlightenment, and Nirvana. What is the Middle Way?...It is the Noble Eightfold Path – Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is the Middle Way....

And this is the Noble Truth of Sorrow. Birth is sorrow, age is sorrow, disease is sorrow, death is sorrow; contact with the unpleasant is sorrow, separation from the pleasant is sorrow, every wish unfulfilled is sorrow – in short all the five components of individuality are sorrow.

And this is the Noble Truth of the Arising of Sorrow. It arises from craving, which leads to rebirth, which brings delight and passion and seeks pleasure now here, now there – the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for continued life, the craving for power.

And this is the Noble Truth of the Stopping of Sorrow. It is the complete stopping of that craving, so that no passion remains, leaving it, being emancipated from, being released from it, giving no place to it.

And this is the Noble Truth of the Way which leads to the Stopping of Sorrow. It is the Noble Eightfold Path – Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.