

# Introduction to Yoga Philosophy

## 10: The *Upanishads*

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Going to *Upanishads* after some familiarity with the classical Yoga of Patanjali is like going to the roots of a tree after noticing its growth. As the blueprint of the growth of a tree is already in the seed, it may not be wrong to assume that Yoga in its germinal form existed at the time of the *Upanishads*, although we do not get full details of it in this literature. We have already seen what material we find in the *Upanishads* to form an idea of the concept of Yoga in the *Upanishadic* times. What is important here to note is that the *Katha Upanishads* (2.3.18) informs us about the knowledge of the theory and entire practice (*yogavidhim cha kritsnam*) Nachiketas received from the God of Death. This incidental reference points in the direction of the existence of a tradition of Yoga at that time, may be on a man-to-man level. This reference also reflects the outlook that mere intellectual knowledge was not considered complete unless it was accompanied by Yoga which alone could translate it into experience. According to some scholars, the Sanskrit term '*darshana*', basically meaning perception/realisation and conventionally a philosophical system, implies this outlook.

As we know the place of Yoga in the *Upanishads*, we can turn to the main thrust of the *Upanishads* as the earliest Indian philosophical treatises originated from and in turn encouraged the spirit of enquiry. The *Upanishads* came into existence as a revolt against the ritualistic ethos of the *Brahmana* literature which is, in brief, a ritualistic interpretation of the earlier literature termed *Samhitas*, viz. *Rigveda* and *Athrvaveda*. For the *Brahmanas*, to perform sacrifices and obtain merit leading to heaven and the life of pleasure believed to be prevailing there is all-in-all of one's purpose of life. It was the *Upanishadic* thinkers who pointed out that no ritual can yield a lasting happiness, for, all that is produced by an act is bound to end sooner or later. The other side of this logic is that, for a state to be lasting, it is necessary for it to be inherent or in the very nature of the thing. This thought gave a direction to their search for the essential nature of the soul. After an analysis of the states of consciousness of the soul, they came to the conclusion that it is in the state of deep sleep that the soul reveals his essential nature – free from all worldly attributes which lead to a mistaken identity and thereby land the soul on misery. In the states of waking and dream, worldly attributes do not leave him. It is wrong to state that there is a total cessation of consciousness in deep sleep. A man rising from deep sleep feels: I slept happily, did not know anything. This is memory/recollection; and no memory is possible without an experience. Even the aspect 'did not know anything' reflects the awareness of the absence of the knowledge of worldly objects.

If the experience of deep sleep where individuality is absent reflects the real nature of the soul, there is reason to believe that individuality is the creation of

ignorance/nescience. The inevitable conclusion is that all souls are one, as pure consciousness, and their separateness is unreal. This consciousness is an all-pervading principle: the *Upanishads* term it the *Brahman* which is *sat* (existence), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss). The embodied soul is in reality one with the universal principle. To realise it and be freed from worldly misery is the highest goal of human life – declare the *Upanishads*. This is the line of thinking of the non-dualistic philosophy which is the main stream of *Upanishadic* thought.

*Upanishads* as literature reveal features that cannot but engage an intelligent reader. They are full of similes, sustained metaphors and the like, illustrating philosophical points, genuine poetic outbursts, lucid dialogues and interesting anecdotes/stories. The sixth chapter of the *Chandogya Upanishads* excels in literary qualities besides offering a progressive elucidation of a subject significant even from the point of view of pedagogical technique. Some small *Upanishads* are framed with stories that are products of no small skill. Larger *Upanishads* contain more such stories in the body of their contents.

This does not mean that all that is contained in the celebrated *Upanishads* is worthy of their reputation. Dry-as-dust passages on theology and ritual which demolish the popular image of this literature are not exceptional; and a few are really morbid to the core. Some *Upanishads* like the *Isha* present problems of understanding that cannot be overcome despite great efforts of brilliant scholars like Shankara to cull a relevant and consistent thought out of them. The reason perhaps is that the editors of *Vedic* literature grouped under the name *Upanishads* all that they could not include in the well-defined ritualistic texts. This is the reason why it is advisable to make a selective reading from the *Upanishads* under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

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