

The Upanishads – Asking for simplicity

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Interpreting the texts

The Upanishads are ancient texts, which record the foundation of Hindu philosophy. They are the final part of the Vedas, the part that is concerned with pure knowledge. The word ‘veda’ means ‘knowledge’; and the Upanishads are sometimes described as ‘vedānta’, which means the ‘culmination of knowledge’.

The Vedas start out as mythical and ritual texts. They tell stories about various gods; and they prescribe rituals for making use of the gods’ divine powers, to attain prosperity and other objectives in the world.

But, at the end of the Vedas, the Upanishads leave all cosmology and all applied knowledge behind. It is not their basic concern to describe the world, nor to help achieve the various objects that people desire. Their basic concern is philosophical: to look for clear truth. They do not accept our habitual compromises, with assumption and make-belief. Instead, they ask basic questions: which turn attention back, into the foundations of knowledge.

Accordingly, the Upanishads do not construct any complex system of ideas and beliefs. They do not put together any elaborate picture from the doctrines of their time. Instead, in somewhat brief and uncompromising language, they ask what is plainly and simply true: beneath all the complications of our uncertain beliefs.

In traditional times, this skeptical questioning was a source of some difficulty. Socially, it presented a major problem. It went against the habits of faith and obedience upon which traditional society depended. As a result, the Upanishads were kept traditionally secret and inaccessible. They were hidden behind a forbidding reputation: as teaching an esoteric and mystical doctrine, to be kept away from all but a few special initiates.

Today, with our modern freedom of thought, the situation has rather

changed, in India more recently than in the West. We are learning to thrive on skeptical questioning, and so there is room for new interpretations of the Upanishads: to bring out their direct search for a simple, unconditioned truth.

In fact, they are expressed in a highly condensed way: which leaves them rather open to interpretation. It is now more than two and a half thousand years since they began to be composed. Since then, they have been interpreted and explained in many different ways, through many different schools of thought. The interpretation made here, in this talk, is only one of many. It is a modern version of the Advaita tradition that was put forward by Shri Shankara, more than a thousand years ago.

The condensed statements of the Upanishads were called ‘shruti’ or ‘heard’; because they were meant to be learned by hearing them from a living teacher, who would recite and interpret the words. Having received such a statement of condensed philosophical teaching, a student would think about it over and over again, through a sustained process of individual reflection and enquiry. In this process, questions would come and go, along with different meanings. Such differing questions and meanings would have to be thought and rethought, over and over again; until the student came to a thorough and independent understanding, in his or her own right.

So, for all their terse finality, the statements of the Upanishads were designed to raise questions and hence a variety of interpretations. But this was always on the way to a reflection back: from the complex variety of the apparent world, to an eventual simplicity of underlying truth.

Coming back home

Why is the world such a complicated place? The answer is obvious. The world seems complicated because we see so many things in it, including ourselves. From our many different perceptions, we build our complex pictures; and in these pictures, we see ourselves as persons, who are caught up in the complication.

It is these complex pictures that the Upanishads question. In fact, such fabricated pictures are not real knowledge. They are only the apparent superstructures of artificial learning, which we have constructed from names and forms and qualities.

To keep things simple, one needs to go back home to basics. And one needs to stay grounded there, in the underlying basis of knowledge, upon

which we build our various constructions of name and form and quality.

Such a simplifying return, to one's own home ground, is illustrated in a story from the Chāndogya Upanishad, chapter 6. The story starts like this:

There was once Shvetaketu,
born of Aruṇa's line.
His father said to him: 'Shvetaketu,
live a students life.

'No one from our family
has been without learning –
as one who is a brahmin
by birth alone.'

from
6.1.1

He left at twelve years old;
came back at twenty four,
stiff with great regard
for what he'd learned.

His father said to him: 'Shvetaketu,
fixed as you are in great regard
for what you've learned,

'did you ask for that teaching
by which the unheard gets to be heard,
the unknown gets to be known?'

from
6.1.2-3

'Sir, how indeed is that teaching?'

Behind the terse language, the problem is a familiar one. Shvetaketu has acquired a customary and formal education. He has been trained in the names and forms and qualities of conventional learning. But now he is being asked how he can get to know what he hasn't already learned. How can he find out things for himself, beyond the mere conventions that he has learned so far? And here he is at a loss. He has not learned to question things directly, beyond his acquired learning. For he has never asked about knowledge itself, beneath the trappings of learning that he has so proudly acquired. He realizes that something is missing, and asks his father to teach him.

As the story goes on, Shvetaketu is taught through a number of illustrations. For one of these, he is taken to a large tree, whose fruits have

fallen on the ground. He is asked to pick up a fruit and break it open. It has tiny seeds in it. He is asked to break a seed and say what he finds here. He has to reply: ‘Nothing Sir, the seeds are far too small.’

So now his father says:

‘And yet, within each tiny seed,
there is a subtle something which
your eyes don’t see, something unseen
from which this spreading tree has grown *from*
and now stands manifested here. *6.12.1-2*

‘This subtle something is that
“this-itself-ness” which is all this world.

‘That is the truth. That is your self. *from*
That is what you really are. *6.12.3*

In the original Sanskrit, this last statement is the famous aphorism: ‘Tat tvam asi.’ It is one of four ‘mahāvākyams’, or ‘great statements’, which are said to sum up the teaching of the Upanishads.

This particular mahāvākyam shows the importance of a living teacher. Such a teacher points to one’s own, direct experience, beneath all the words and ideas of formal learning.

Through the metaphor of a large tree, Shvetaketu’s father is describing how we picture the whole universe, with all its vast size and mind-boggling complexity. Compared with our big pictures of the universe, our little personalities are very small and insignificant, like tiny little seeds. But there are some huge trees that grow from the unseen essence of life within a tiny seed. So also, our big pictures of the world all rise from an inner basis of knowledge that is found within each of our little personalities. That knowledge is the unseen essence of our lives, in each person’s body and mind.

When knowledge is seen like this, as our inner essence, it is called ‘consciousness’. It is the home truth which Shvetaketu’s father shows. ‘That,’ he says, ‘is what you really are.’

A little later, he describes how this home truth is found, with the help of a teacher:

‘Suppose a man, blindfolded, finds
himself quite lost in a strange place; *from*
and wanders, crying out for help. *6.14.1*

‘Suppose that someone takes away
the blindfold from his eyes, and shows
him how to seek and find his way.

‘Then he can journey on, from place
to place, and get back home again.

‘So also, one who has a teacher
knows that he’s delayed
only so long as he is not
released from ignorance.

‘And when released, he knows
that he’s arrived,
entirely complete.’

from
6.14.2

Complete reality (brahman)

In three of the four mahāvākyams, or great statements of the Upanishads, the word ‘brahman’ is found. Literally, the word means ‘expanded’; and it is used as a philosophical concept to mean ‘complete reality’.

This concept implies one of those basic questions for which it often seems that there can be no practical answer. How can we expand our narrow perceptions of things; so as to understand ‘complete reality’, with nothing left to be added by further perception? How can we understand reality as a complete whole, so that this understanding includes everything that there is to see?

At the beginning of the Muṇḍaka Upanishad, this same question is put in a very concise way:

‘What is it that being known,
all this [entire universe]
becomes known?’

from
1.1.3

At first it may seem that the question is asking for what modern physicists call a ‘T.O.E.’, or a ‘theory of everything’. Such a theory would be a complete picture that describes and predicts all happenings in the universe.

But, when one fantasizes like this, about a ‘complete picture’ or a ‘theory of everything’, one is simply missing the point. The problem here is that our minds and senses are inevitably partial and limited. They do not see

everything at once. Whatever they see is only a limited object, or a limited happening: with a limited name, a limited form and limited qualities.

In each of our physical or mental perceptions, there is always something left out. There is always something left unnamed, something whose form and qualities are left unperceived. Anyone who imagines otherwise is merely indulging in a ‘know-all’ fantasy. In practice, we are always faced with a problem of partiality, in all our perceptions of physical and mental things.

We usually deal with this problem by putting our partial perceptions together, in order to construct bigger pictures that include many different things. But as our pictures include more objects, they also get more complicated; and we are less able to take the details into account. In the end, what we gain in broader pictures, we lose in detail and accuracy; and so our perceptions remain partial.

Through all the theories and the pictures that we construct, we only see more or less of the world; and this ‘more or less’ is always relative. It can never amount to everything. All scientific theories, all religious creeds, all systems of belief, all myth and ritual, all mystical and artistic metaphors are only different kinds of constructed learning.

No such constructed learning can tell us everything. It can only give us a partial and relative view that differs from one kind of learning to another.

The concept of ‘brahman’, or ‘complete reality’, thus throws into question all our constructed pictures of the world. If we are looking for an understanding of complete reality, we are not going to find it *within* any picture that can only give us a partial and relative view. So we are forced to ask what lies *beneath* all our differing pictures and all the various appearances that they show.

As we picture the world, it seems to be made of the bits and pieces that our bodies and minds perceive. In particular, it seems made up from objects and events, which are pieces of matter and happening. But, it is only our pictures that are made up like this, from bits and pieces. To find out what ‘reality’ might be, we have to ask what the pictures show.

For example, if one looks at a table, one sees a visual picture, which is made up of a table-top and four legs. But this is only a picture, which changes from one point of view to another. The picture is only a partial appearance of what the table is. If one looks from another angle, or from closer up, one sees another partial appearance, which tells one something else about the table.

So, the reality of a table is not the same as any picture or any view of it. Instead, this reality is something which is shown in common, by all pictures and all appearances of the table. One may look through a microscope at some tiny part of a particular leg. Or, one may turn attention to this leg as a whole, or to other legs. Or, one may inspect the joints or the table-top. Or, one may step back and see a picture of these different parts relating together.

But in every case, one is seeing a partial appearance of the whole table. This whole reality underlies each picture and each appearance that one perceives by looking at the table, or at any of its parts.

It is the same with the complete reality of the entire universe. This complete reality underlies each picture and each appearance that anyone perceives; not just when picturing the universe as a whole, but also when looking at any part. No matter what object or happening anyone looks at, no matter where or when or how, what we perceive is always a partial appearance of this complete, universal reality. It is a common, unchanging principle, which underlies all the various appearances that our changing perceptions see.

Our pictures of the world are conditioned by partial perception. In these pictures, we see particular objects and happenings, with particular names and forms and qualities. But these are only partial and changing appearances. Each of them appears in some particular place and for some particular period of time. But each of them also disappears, when one looks elsewhere, towards other parts of space and time.

By contrast, complete reality appears everywhere and at all times. It is not restricted to any particular objects or happenings, nor to any particular names or forms or qualities. It is the changeless ground of being to which no conditions apply; because it underlies all the names and forms and qualities that condition our constructed pictures of the world.

Here is how the Muṇḍaka Upanishad puts it:

‘Those who know complete reality
say that there are two kinds
of knowledge to be known:
the higher and the lower.

‘Among the lower of these are:
the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda,
the Sāma Veda, the Atharva Veda,

phonetics, ritual, grammar,
etymology, metrics, astrology.

‘But the higher knowledge
is just that by which
the unchanging is attained.

from
1.1.4-5

‘That which can’t be seen or grasped,
which has no family, no class,
no eyes or ears, no hands or feet;

‘which is constant and continual
in different happenings,
extending everywhere,
completely subtle;

‘that is the changeless source of being
which the wise and steadfast see.’

from
1.1.6

Self (ātman)

There is one obvious problem with the concept of a ‘complete reality’, underlying all happenings throughout all space and time. Since our senses and minds see only limited objects and events, how can anyone get to know what ‘complete reality’ is, beyond merely saying the words?

On this question, as on many others, the Upanishads take an uncompromising position. The same reality underlies everything, including each person’s body, senses and mind. For every one of us, this same reality is one’s own true self, beneath the appearances of personality.

There is absolutely no need to *perceive* reality, through any physical or sensual or mental faculty. One simply *is* reality, beneath all personal faculties. To clear all misunderstanding, and to know reality completely, one has only to realize the truth of one’s own identity.

This position is explicitly stated in two mahāvākyams. Of these, the most famous is: ‘Aham brahmāsmi.’ It means: ‘I am the totality of all existence.’ By using the word ‘I’, this mahāvākyam emphasizes the essential subjectivity of self. But there is a danger here. ‘Subjective’ does not mean ‘personal’, as people habitually think it does. This mahāvākyam does not mean: ‘I am a great person who dominates the world.’ The correct meaning is just the opposite: ‘I am the impersonal ground of reality upon which all pictures of the world are built.’

This impersonality is brought out by the other of these two mahāvākyams. In the original Sanskrit, it reads: ‘Ayam ātmā brahma.’ Translated into English, it means: ‘This self is all reality.’ It says the same thing as the previous mahāvākyam; but it replaces the word ‘I’ by the alternative phrase ‘this self’. These alternative descriptions show that each person’s true identity is purely subjective, as suggested by the word ‘I’; and it is also completely impersonal, as suggested by the phrase ‘this self’.

Each little personality is only a misleading appearance of self, in some artificially constructed picture of the world. Beneath the names and forms and qualities of such fabricated pictures, one’s true self is purely subjective and completely impersonal. For here, beneath all constructed pictures, it has no name or form or quality that could limit it to any particular object or personality. This purely impersonal, subjective ‘I’ is identical with the same, complete reality that underlies all apparent persons and all apparent objects, in our pictures of the world.

Our usual assumptions about personal identity are thus thrown radically into question. Through force of ingrained habit, most people take it for granted that the word ‘I’ refers to a particular person: with a particular body, a particular set of senses and a particular mind. Even when one questions one’s own identity, one is usually asking a personal question: about what sort of person one is. It is far less usual to ask the impersonal, philosophical question: ‘Am I really a person at all?’

And yet, this philosophical question is built into the very word ‘person’. The word comes from the Latin ‘persona’, which originally meant an actor’s mask, and hence an actor’s role. Each time we use the word ‘person’, we imply that personality is only an outward mask, or an outward role, which is overlaid upon an inner self.

A person’s body, senses and mind are only small parts of a much larger world. But, when one identifies them as oneself, one somehow gives them a disproportionately large importance. By this personal identification, one’s view of the world becomes ridiculously distorted, with a petty little personality puffed up to a ludicrous sense of inflated importance, at the centre of one’s personal world.

To this personal identification, with its implied distortion of experience, the Upanishads give the name ‘ahankāra’ or ‘ego’. This ingrained sense of personal ego is our central mistake. It is a false identity at the centre of all our misunderstandings and dissatisfactions.

As we falsely identify with our bodies and minds, we thereby misun-

derstand the partial appearances and the imperfect pictures that they perceive. By confusing the purely subjective self with our objective personalities, we confuse reality with the partial appearances and the imperfect pictures of physical and mental perception. Thus we picture ourselves as ‘real persons’, with only a partial knowledge of an imperfect but ‘real’ world: in which we are forced to suffer conflict and unhappiness.

But the moment one’s true identity is realized, the whole picture is seen for what it is. It is only an imperfect picture, not reality itself. The partialities and imperfections belong to the picture; not to reality, nor to oneself. In truth, beneath the many egos that appear in the world, there is only one real self; and it is identical with all reality.

Thus, both ego and world are imperfect expressions of one same reality. Like anything else in the world, the ego may seem to be an obstruction, but it is better seen as a means to truth. When rightly seen, it reflects attention back to the truth of self, which it imperfectly expresses.

This question of ego and self is described in the following passage from the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, chapter 2:

Just as a mirror, stained by dust,
shines brilliantly when cleaned;

so also the embodied [ego],
when it sees the self’s true nature,
comes to be at one, fulfilled,
set free from misery and grief.

from
2.14

And by the nature of the self,
as by a lamp, one who is joined
with it can see, right here,

impartial truth: complete, unchanged,
unfabricated and uncompromised;
through all [apparent] truths.

from
2.15

Consciousness (prajnyānam)

In any discussion of final truth, beyond our relative perceptions, two skeptical questions arise. It is all very well to talk, or to theorize, about a ‘final truth’; but how can one actually know it? And what is the use of such knowledge, in actual practice?

Again, the Upanishads are uncompromising. These very questions be-

tray a basic problem. They are both questions about knowledge. But are we clear what knowledge is? The problem is that we are not. Such lack of clarity keeps driving us round and round, in circles of confused ignorance. So we need to ask: what is meant by the word 'know'?

This is essentially a reflective enquiry. It requires an about turn: from perceiving outward pictures to reflecting back within, towards the inner basis of knowledge from which our perceptions rise.

Such a reflective enquiry is described in the Aitareya Upanishad, chapter 3. Here is a translation:

What is this self
to which we pay such heed?

Which is the self?

Is it that by which one sees,
or that by which one hears,
or that by which scents are smelled?

Or is it that by which
speech is articulated,
or that by which taste
and tastelessness are told apart?

from
3.1.1

Or is it mind and heart?

Is it perception, direction,
discernment, consciousness,
learning, vision, constancy,
thought, consideration, motive,
memory, imagination, purpose,
life, desire, vitality?

All these are only names
attributed to consciousness.

from
3.1.2

This passage starts with an enquiry into the self. As it enquires, it points out that one identifies oneself as many different things.

- First, one identifies with various faculties of sentient body: as for example when one thinks 'I see', or 'I hear', 'I smell', 'I speak', or 'I taste'.
- And second, one identifies with a whole assortment of mental and emo-

tional faculties: as for example when one thinks ‘I perceive’, or ‘I learn’, ‘I think’, ‘I remember’, ‘I imagine’, or ‘I wish’.

Through these many identifications that one adopts, one seems to have many different selves. But all these different, seeming selves have one thing in common. Each of them *expresses* something that we call ‘consciousness’. In our various identifications of self, consciousness is the common principle that underlies them all.

The Aitareya Upanishad says this in no uncertain terms. It says that our seeming selves are only ‘nāma-dheyāni’, or ‘attributed names’. They are only changing names: given to one common, unchanging principle of consciousness.

And here, another question is raised, about our ingrained assumptions. We usually think of consciousness as something that keeps changing. We think of it as a stream of changing perceptions, which come and go in a person’s mind. As one perception is replaced by another, it seems to our minds that consciousness is also changed.

For example, suppose that a person steps out of a cool house, into the bright sunshine outside. Then perceptions of a cool and shady interior give way to very different perceptions of a warm and bright outdoors. To the mind, it seems that consciousness is also changed, from consciousness of one thing to consciousness of another.

But, how does one know that something has changed? In order to know any change, consciousness must continue at the background of experience, while perceptions change in the mind.

When a person steps out of the house, perceptions of coolness and shade give way to perceptions of warmth and brightness; but there is also an underlying consciousness that remains present, before and after the change. This underlying consciousness is shared in common by different perceptions: of cold and heat, shade and light, indoors and outdoors. When a person perceives that it is warmer and brighter outdoors, that very perception implies a basis of underlying consciousness which was also present before, in the cooler and shadier indoors.

For a further illustration, suppose there are two friends. One is indoors, just waking up from sleep. The other is shouting from outside: ‘Come on out! It’s a lovely morning.’ The two friends have different perceptions: one of a bright and energetic world outside, the other of a shaded bedroom that is still musty with sleep. Because of their different perceptions, each friend seems to have a different consciousness from the other. And

yet, each has some understanding of the other. The sleepy friend indoors understands very well what the other is shouting.

They understand each other because both are conscious beings, with a basis of underlying knowledge that they share in common. As they talk to one another, each refers back to this same, underlying consciousness which is the basis of all their differing and changing perceptions.

Thus, if we reflect back from the changing surface of our minds, we come upon a continuing consciousness, which different perceptions and different people share alike. This is, quite literally, the meaning of the word 'consciousness'. Just as 'playfulness' is the one principle that is shared in common by all playful acts; so also 'consciousness' is the one principle that is shared in common by all conscious states, at different times and in different minds.

Used in this way, the word 'consciousness' means something quite distinct from mental or physical perception. Perception is only a superficial and partial appearance of consciousness, in our limited faculties of body and mind.

Where perception is personal, consciousness is not. Our perceptions change and differ with our changing and differing personalities. But consciousness is always the same. It is impersonal: quite unaffected by the changeable conditioning of our bodies and our minds.

Where perception is partial and has particular objects, consciousness is completely impartial and objectless. Each perception is only a limited action of body and mind towards some particular object. Through this limited act of personal perception, a particular object appears in some person's picture of the world.

But consciousness is not a limited act. It does not start with some personal faculty and end with a particular object. Instead, it is pure illumination. It is the common, underlying principle of light which illuminates all the appearances that we perceive.

In sum, here is the essential distinction between perception and consciousness:

- *Perception is a personal activity, which produces the partial and varying appearances of limited objects, in our pictures of the world.*
- *Beneath all perceived appearances, consciousness is their common principle, which lights each one of them from within.*

As we perceive appearances at the surface of our minds, we usually think of consciousness as a superficial light. And thus we think that there must

be a dark ‘unconsciousness’ at the ‘unseen’ depths beneath the surface of the mind. But this is not correct. The illumination of consciousness is common to different appearances, and thus it underlies them all.

In truth, all appearances are illuminated *from below*, as they arise from consciousness, which is their underlying basis. At this underlying basis, there are no appearances, no objects, no events, no names, no forms, no qualities. There is only pure illumination, quite unaffected by all the pictures that arise from it.

But then, what reality is shown by all our pictures of the world, with all the appearances that our perceptions produce in them? They cannot show any more reality than the common principle of illumination that underlies them all. Since it is shown by *all* appearances, past, present and future, no appearance can show anything further.

This common principle, of unmixed consciousness, is all the reality that can ever be shown, by any appearance, or any picture of the world. It is the basis of complete reality, on which all pictures are built.

Hence the Aitareya Upanishad goes on to the fourth mahāvākyam. In the original Sanskrit, it reads: ‘Prajnyānam brahma.’ Translated into English, it means: ‘Consciousness is all there is.’ Like the other mahāvākyams, it states a final conclusion: which is meant to be reached and rigorously tested, by a careful and thorough examination of common experience.

Here is what the Aitareya Upanishad says:

Consciousness is everything:

God, all the gods,
the elements of which the world is made,
creatures and things of every kind,

however large or small,
however born or formed,
including all that breathes, walks, flies,
and all that moves or does not move.

All these come after consciousness,
which is their seeing principle.

So they are all established
upon the base of consciousness.

The world comes after consciousness;
and it is here, in consciousness,
that all the world is found to stand.

Consciousness is all there is.

from
3.1.3

One who knows self as consciousness
has risen, from the seeming world,
to this unconditioned state
where everything is only light.

Here, all desires are attained,
and deathlessness is realized.

from
3.1.4