

Source: The Vedanta Kesari 550 December 2007  
+ [http://www.myvedanta.gr/pdf/upanishads\\_en.pdf](http://www.myvedanta.gr/pdf/upanishads_en.pdf)

## **Upanishads—The Basis of All**

### **World Religions**

**SWAMI ABHIRAMANANDA**

Swami Abhiramananda is the Manager of Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. His thoughtfully written articles appear in The Vedanta Kesari occasionally.

Swami Vivekananda's talk on 'The Vedanta' delivered at Lahore on 12 November 1897 created an electric atmosphere. Swamiji himself expressed satisfaction over the talk while his scribe Goodwin remarked that it was a masterly exposition on the subject. The lecture lasted nearly two and half hours and transformed the minds of many people, the most notable among them being Tirtha Ram Goswami who later on became famous as Swami Rama Tirtha. 1

During the course of this talk, which was studded with several original and brilliant ideas, Swamiji stated: 'Nearly every chapter (of every Upanishad) begins with dualistic teaching, Upasana. God is first taught as someone who is the creator of the universe, its preserver and unto whom everything goes at last. He is one to be worshipped, the Ruler, the Guide of nature, external and internal, yet appearing as if He were outside of nature and external. One step further, and we find the same teacher teaching that this God is not outside of nature, but immanent in nature. And at last both ideas are discarded, and whatever real is He; there is no difference... that immanent One is at last declared to be the same that is in the human soul.'2

According to the above statement of Swamiji, not only every Upanishad but each chapter of every Upanishad describes God in three phases—as external, immanent, and united with Jiva. When we carefully study the Upanishads from this perspective, they throw a new light. The following are some illustrations: Example 1: Taittiriya Upanishad, Part-I In the first stage, the Upanishad recommends meditation on the various deities of the Bhuh, Bhuvah and Suvah lokas as symbols of Brahman, just as a Salagrama is worshipped externally as a stone symbol of Lord Vishnu.3

In the second stage, God is described as being present in the cavity of the heart of the Jiva denoting the immanent aspect of God.4

In the third and final stage, the Jiva is fully identified with Brahman in such statements as

'My source is the Pure Brahman. I am the pure Self which is in the Sun. I am the immortal and undecaying.'5

## **Example 2: Taittiriya Upanishad, Part-II, III**

In the first stage, Brahman is considered external to nature in passages as,

'From Brahman indeed was produced space, air, fire, water, earth, herbs, food, man, etc.'<sup>6</sup>

In the second stage, the immanent aspect of Brahman is described in passages such as

'That Brahman having created all that exists, entered into that very thing. And having entered there, It became the form and the formless, defined and undefined, the sustained and nonsustaining, the sentient and the insentient and the true and the untrue.'<sup>7</sup>

In the final stage, the identity of Jiva with Brahman is stated in the exclamatory passage,

'Oho! Oho! Oho, I am the food, I am the eater, I am the unifier, I am the first born of this world, etc.'<sup>8</sup>

## **Example 3: Mundaka Upanishad, Chapter III**

This Upanishad brings out the identity of Jiva-Brahman through the beautiful imagery of two birds upon the self same tree, one on the top branch and other on a lower branch. The bird on the top is calm, silent and majestic, immersed in its own glory. The bird on the lower branch eats sweet and bitter fruits by turns, hops from branch to branch, and becomes alternately happy and miserable. After a time he eats an exceptionally bitter fruit, gets disgusted and looks up. There he sees the other bird eating neither sweet fruits nor bitter ones. Being devoid of desires, he is always calm and sees nothing beyond his Self.

The lower bird longs for that condition and hops a little towards him. But soon he forgets all about it. Filled with desires, he begins to eat the fruits once again. After a little while he eats another exceptionally bitter fruit which makes him miserable. He looks up again and tries to get nearer to the upper bird. This journey continues until he gets very near the upper bird. At this stage, the lower bird realizes that he is only a shadow, a reflection of the upper bird. When he goes still nearer to the upper bird, he merges in him.

This imagery is symbolic of a man's struggle to attain God. The lower bird represents the Jiva while the upper one, the Brahman. In the first stages, the Jiva experiences worldly joys and miseries by turns. In the second stage, the Jiva understands that he is only a reflection or shadow of Brahman. The final stage indicates the merging of the Jivatman with the Paramatman.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Example 4: The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad**

In the first stage, the following famous dualistic prayer to God is mentioned, 'O, Lord, Lead me from the evil to good. Lead me from darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality.'<sup>10</sup>

In the second stage, God is described as pervading the entire universe:

'Causal universe developed of itself into name and form. . . That Supreme Self has entered into all these bodies from Hiranyagarbha down to a crump of grass, up to the very end of the nails.'<sup>11</sup>

In the third and final stage, the Jiva is fully identified with Brahman as stated in the following declaration: The sage Vamadeva understood the real nature of his Self as 'I am Brahman.'<sup>12</sup>

#### **Example 5: The Chandogya Upanishad**

In the first stage, the Upanishad teaches dualistic meditation:

'All these creatures, dear boy, have Being as their root, have Being as their abode, and have Being as their support'.<sup>13</sup>

In the second stage, the immanent aspect of God is described:

'That Being which is this subtle essence, even that has this world for its Self.'<sup>14</sup>

In the third and final stage, the Jiva is fully identified with Brahman in such statements as

'That is the Truth. That is the Atman. That Thou Art, O Svetaketu'<sup>15</sup>

The five examples mentioned above are only illustrative of this recurring theme of all the Upanishads.

The first stage marks the externalization of Jiva from Brahman and is expounded in the Dvaita philosophy of Madhvacharya.

The second stage of the immanence of Brahman pervading the universe in and through is detailed in the Vishishtadvaita philosophy of Ramanujacharya according to which the Jiva and Brahman are inseparably related to each other like a body to its limbs or a tree to its branches.

The final stage of identity of the jivatman with paramatman is elaborated in the Advaitic philosophy whose chief exponent is Shankaracharya.

### **Swami Vivekananda's Great Discovery**

Swami Vivekananda discovered that the above three schools are mutually complementary and together, systematically enable the aspirant to rise to higher levels of spiritual consciousness. It was on his return to India in 1897 that Swamiji made this important contribution to the thought-world. Before Swamiji, the followers of the different schools argued that only their own school of interpretation was the correct one and even went to the extent of twisting the original texts to suit their line of thinking. They regarded the three philosophical systems as three distinct and different ideals for the liberation of the soul. No attempt was made to reconcile them. Swamiji boldly declared that even the highest realizations of Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita were only stages on the way to the ultimate Advaitic experience. When some one asked Swamiji that if this were the truth, why was it that none of the Masters who preceded him had mentioned it, Swamiji replied with his characteristic nonchalance,

'Because I was born for this, and it was left for me to do!' 16

In his lectures on the Jnana Yoga, Swamiji summarizes this thought in his inimitable style:

'The idea that the goal is far off, far beyond nature, attracting us all towards it, has to be brought nearer and nearer, without degrading or degenerating it. The God of heaven becomes the God in nature, and the God in nature becomes the God who is nature, and the God who is nature becomes the God within the temple of this body, at last becomes the temple itself, becomes the soul and man—and there it reaches the last words it can teach.'17

### **World-Religions and the Three Schools of Indian Philosophy:**

Swamiji makes another equally startling revelation that all the major world religions are contained in the above three schools of Vedanta. He points out that when Vedanta is applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, the outcome is the birth of Hindu religion. And the application of this philosophy to specific Indian cults and forms gives rise to different branches of Hinduism such as Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Ganapatya, Kaumara and Saura sects. The philosophy of Dvaita when applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe results in birth of Christianity with its various ramifications; when the same Dvaita philosophy is applied to Semitic groups the result is the birth of Islam. Further he also points out that the application of the philosophy of Advaita in its yoga-perception form is the cause of origin of Buddhism.

Through this two-step formula provided by Swamiji, we can reinstate:

Step 1: All the Upanishads show us the way to Brahman by leading us through the stages of Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita and Advaita.

Step 2: All the major world religions can be traced to their origin, viz., to the three schools of Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita and Advaita

*Hence comes the conclusion: The Upanishads are the basis of all the major world-religions.*

The same can be deduced even by simple logical reasoning. The watchword of Upanishads is unity—unity behind the entire universe. All the world religions advocate unity, although in a limited sense, at least among their own followers. The Upanishads thus naturally encompass all the major world religions and hence form their basis.

It was Swamiji's firm conviction that if at all there is going to be a universal religion for the entire world, it would be the religion of the Upanishads and Upanishads alone. Whereas all other religions are founded upon a Book, a Prophet and a Personal God, the religion of the Upanishads stands on its own glory, independent of these three. At the same time, it allows for any number of Books, Prophets and Personal Gods. Vast as the sky and deep as the ocean, the philosophy of the Upanishads, though the oldest in the world, has always remained young and would continue to do so by virtue of its unifying and inclusive features.

### **Application of This Thought in the National Context**

India is an ancient nation known for its rich cultural, linguistic and regional diversities. She has survived a thousand years of onslaught of foreign invasions by virtue of her deep spiritual resilience. The secret of her survival has been the intuitive perception of unity in diversity nurtured through ages of sustained spiritual realizations.

Swamiji was firm in his conviction that religion alone can unite India. He placed it as the first condition for the development and progress of a future India. There must be one religion throughout the length and breadth of the land, he said.<sup>18</sup> Evidently, the Upanishadic religion alone can satisfy such criteria.

Unfortunately some bigoted elements have lost sight of this fact and have laid emphasis on the diversity. They have usurped wealth and power by dividing the people of India along the lines of caste, region, language, culture, etc. The corrective antidote for this dangerous trend pervading the present society is recognizing the religion of the Upanishads as the mother of all the religious sects, and putting their precepts into practice by living in unison with each other.

### **Application of This Thought in the Global Context**

Although the nations of the world have combined together and put up organizations like the United Nations Organization (UNO) to prevent wars on a full-fledged scale, they have not been able to stop wars. At any given time, war is going on in some part of the world or the other. It is also taking indirect and subtle forms like the cold wars and guerrilla tactics. Terrorism is raising its head like never before. The general reasons for all these are analysed to be economic, political, social and similar causes. But in every case, we find invariably religion plays a major part—the parties involved belong to either two different religions or sects of the same religion. Instead of unifying, these religions are dividing humankind. The only solution to these serious and apparently interminable global problems is to accept and follow the message of the Upanishads which has discovered unity not only between different races and religions, but the unifying force behind the whole universe. Hence the message of the Upanishads is the only viable solution to enduring world peace.

### Source

1. Vivekananda, His Gospel of Man Making Ed., and pub. by Swami Jyotirmayananda, Madras, p.572
2. CW, 3: 398
3. Taittiriya Upanishad, 1-v
4. *ibid.*, 1.vi
5. *ibid.*, 1.x
6. *ibid.*, II-i-1
7. *ibid.*, II-vi-1
8. *ibid.*, III-x-5-6
9. Based on Swami Vivekananda's commentary on Mundaka Upanishad, 3.1.2

### References

10. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, I-3- xxviii
11. *ibid.*, I-4-vii
12. *ibid.*, I-4-x
13. Chandogya Upanishad, VI-8-vi
14. *ibid.*, VI-8-vii
15. *ibid.*, VI-8-vii. This statement is repeated nine times in the text.
16. The Master as I saw Him by Sister Nivedita, pub. by Udbodhan Off., Kolkata, p-200-01
17. CW, 2: 128
18. *ibid.*, 3: 287

Vedanta Kesari DECEMBER 2007

\*\*\*\*\*