

Upanishads.

What are they and what is their message?

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The Veda is the source of the Hindu religion and the Upanishads are an integral part of the Veda. If we may use the metaphor of an ancient, living tree, with its various spreading branches, the whole tree would represent the Hindu religion, the trunk of that tree represents the Vedas, while the different branches that have spread out from, and are supported by that trunk, could be compared to the variety of Hindu religious traditions that have developed over the centuries.

The Veda was originally one, but tradition says that for greater ease of memorization the sage Vyasa divided it into four and gave each of his four disciples one Veda to commit to memory. The four Vedas are the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda. Originally these Vedas were not written down, each Veda was preserved in the mind of the teacher who taught it to his students, and they, in turn, preserved what they had learnt and transmitted it to their students. Though some portions have been lost over time, what we now possess has been preserved by an elaborate and remarkable feat of human memory over many centuries.

Each Veda is said to consist of four portions: firstly the Mantras or hymns, followed by a lengthy prose portion called Brahmana which discusses how to perform the Vedic rituals, then a portion called Aranyaka which contains many meditations (upasana) using the rituals as symbols, and lastly the brief portion called Upanishads. The word Upanishad literally means “sitting down close” and the word refers to is a “secret teaching” that was transmitted by a teacher to select students.

Classical commentators on the Upanishads, such as Adi Shankara, considered that the Upanishads constitute a distinct part of the Vedas, because they address (1) a different type of person from the person who is satisfied solely with rituals; (2) they have a subject matter; (3) a different goal; and (4) a different relationship between the subject matter and the goal. Whereas the adhikari (qualified person) for the Vedic rituals is a person who seeks only a material result, the adhikari for the Upanishadic knowledge is a seeker of ultimate truth; and whereas the subject matter (visaya) of most of the Veda is rituals, the subject matter of the Upanishads is the ultimate truth or knowledge of God; and whereas the result of the Vedic rituals is heaven, the result of the

Upanishadic knowledge is liberation (moksha); and whereas the connection (sambandha) between the subject matter and the result for the ritualistic portion of the Veda is the actual performance of the ritual, the connection between the subject matter and the result in the case of the Upanishads is the connection between teaching and understanding.

It is very important to know that the entire Veda is traditionally held to be a means of knowledge (pramana) for matters that fall outside the scope of perception and inference. If something can be known by sense-perception (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching), or by an inference from sense data, then the Veda is not a means of knowledge about such a thing. But the question whether there is a heaven or not is beyond the scope of our senses, and the question as to whether there is a Reality behind the cosmos is not something we can know through our senses. Much of the earlier portion of the Veda reveals the existence of other worlds and the means to reach them. The Upanishads reveal the existence of God, or Ultimate Reality, and reveals the nature of that God to the seeker. Thus the Upanishads are traditionally held to be the means of knowledge about ultimate Reality. Though the Upanishads are in the form of words, and though words only describe sense objects, the Upanishads can nonetheless directly reveal the truth by preparing the context and then by directly pointing to the Truth as a finger is able to show the moon by pointing to it.

There are ten major Upanishads which have been commented upon by Adi Shankara. These are Isha, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya and Brhadaranyaka. The Isha is found in the Mantra portion of the Sukla Yajur Veda, the Brhadaranyaka is to be found at the end of the Aranyaka portion of that Veda, the Kena and the Chandogya Upanishads belong to the Sama Veda, the Taittiriya Upanishad belongs to the Krsna Yajur Veda, and the Katha is traditionally held to be a part of that Veda though it is not longer to be found there, the Prasna, Mundaka and Mandukya Upanishads belong to the Atharva Veda, and the Aitareya belongs to the Rig Veda. Though a person can gain an idea of what the Upanishads say by reading them for oneself, the traditional method is not independent reading, but to listen to them explained from a guru who knows the method of traditional meaning.