

Vedānta Literature

From Vedic Heritage Teaching Program

The term *Vedānta* literally means the end portion of the *Vedas*. *Vedānta* unfolds the essential identity of the individual, the world, and the Lord. This knowledge is revealed through the words of the *Upaniṣads* which make up the end portion of the *Vedas*. The teaching tradition by which this knowledge is unfolded is known as *saṁpradāya*. This tradition has been kept alive through a teacher-student lineage, *guru-śiṣya paramparā*.

The lineage of teachers can only originate from a teacher who has all knowledge and himself does not need a teacher. Such a source can only be the omniscient Lord. Thus the lineage is traced to the Lord himself. The Lord in his role as the first teacher is given the name *Dakṣiṇamūrti*. He taught his four disciples: *Sanaka*, *Sanandana*, *Sanātana*, and *Sanatkumāra*. Many illustrious teachers in this unbroken lineage of teachers have greatly contributed to the teaching tradition of *Vedānta* through their scholarly treatises. These works, along with the *Upaniṣads*, form the *Vedānta* literature.

Upaniṣads

The word *Upaniṣad* means self knowledge. “*Upa*” and “*ni*” are prefixes to the root “*sad*”. *Upa* means “the nearest” and *ni* means “ascertained knowledge”. The meaning of these two prefixes together is: ascertained knowledge of the nearest, which is the Self. The root “*sad*” means that which removes, destroys, and helps one to know. Thus the word *Upaniṣad* means: the ascertained knowledge that destroys the undesirable life of becoming and helps one know the whole, *Brahman*, which is oneself.

In the various *Upaniṣads*, the truth of oneself is presented from various standpoints. For instance, *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* unfolds the nature of the self with reference to the three states of experience: waking, dream, and deep sleep. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* reveals the self by correcting the universal error of taking oneself to be the physical body, mind, and senses. *Kena Upaniṣad* presents the Self as limitless awareness that illumines the mind and the senses.

Even though there are many *Upaniṣads* in the *Vedas*, the following ten listed below have gained prominence due to *Śaṅkara*'s commentaries on them:

Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad

This *Upaniṣad* gets its name from the first word of the *Upaniṣad*, which is *Īśāvāsya*. It is also known as *Samhitā Upaniṣad* since it belongs to the *Samhitā* portion of the *Śukla Yajur Veda*. The *Upaniṣad* has eighteen *mantras*; the first line of the first *mantra* itself presents the *Vedic* vision of the Lord: “*Īśāvāsyamidagum sarvaṁ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat* – the entire world consisting of inert and conscious is pervaded by the Lord.”

Kena Upaniṣad

This also gains its name from the first word of its first *mantra*. *Kena Upaniṣad* belonging to the *Sāma Veda*, has thirty-four *mantras* spread out in four chapters. The first two chapters unfold the Self as limitless, the third chapter brings out the glory of the Self through a story, an fourth chapter deals with certain *upāsanās*, meditations, as well as qualifications necessary for Self Knowledge.

In the story, *Brahman*, the Lord, gained victory for the *devas* in their fight against the *asuras*, demons. Due to their pride, however, the *devas* took the credit for the victory. Hearing of this, *Brahman* decided to make them understand that which makes things happen. Assuming a charming and shining form, *Brahman* appeared before the *devas* who were celebrating their victory. The *devas* were wonderstruck by the celestial form, *yakṣa*, but could not recognize who it was. The god of Fire, *Agni devatā*, was asked to find out who the being was. Before *Agni devatā* could ask the *yakṣa*, the celestial being asked *Agni*, “Who are you?” Surprised that he was not known to the *yakṣa*, *Agni* said, “I am the popular *Agni*, who is also called *Jātaveda*.” “What makes you so popular and great?” asked the *yakṣa*. *Agni* answered by saying he could burn anything. The *yakṣa* then asked him to burn a dry blade of grass but *Agni* could not burn it. Humiliated, *Agni* went back and told the *devas* that he could not find out who the *yakṣa* was. Next, the god of Air, *Vāyu devatā*, was sent to discover the identity of the *yakṣa*, but he also returned without finding out. Finally *Indra*, lord of the *devas*, approached the *yakṣa*, but before he could contact the being it disappeared and in the same place stood Goddess *Umā*, *Indra* then asked her for the identity of the being and she replied that it was *Brahman*, the Lord, who gained victory for them in their fight against the *asuras*. *Indra* reveals this truth to the other *devatās* and thus glorifies *Brahman*.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Kaṭha Upaniṣad, belonging to the *Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda*, consists of one hundred and twenty *mantras* in three chapters, each having two sections. The first three sections of this *Upaniṣad* are generally chanted during *śrāddha*, the death anniversary. The *Upaniṣad* is presented through a

story leading to the student *Nachiketas* asking for Self Knowledge from Lord *Yama*,

The story begins with *Vājaśravasa*, *Nachiketas's* father, performing a ritual known as *Viśvajit* in which the performer of the sacrifice gifts away all his wealth. *Nachiketas* sees his father giving away old worn-out cows as gifts and is concerned that his father might not obtain the desired results from the sacrifice. Wanting to help his father, he offers himself as a gift. He asks his father, “To whom will you offer me?” Annoyed by *Nachiketas's* persistence, his father in anger says, “I give you to *Yama* (the god of Death).”

After convincing his father that spoken words should be fulfilled, *Nachiketas* goes to the god of Death and waits for three days before he meets him. Lord *Yama* extends all the honors that a guest should receive and grants him three boons to compensate for the three nights that *Nachiketas* waited for the Lord without food. *Nachiketas* encashes the first boon for the welfare of his father. He uses the second boon to acquire a ritual which can be performed by people desirous of a future heavenly life. For the third boon, he asks for the knowledge of the soul that survives death. Lord *Yama* tries to lure *Nachiketas* away from his question by offering him various objects of security and pleasure. *Nachiketas* rejects them all and asks only for knowledge. Convinced of his maturity, the Lord teaches him *Brahma vidyā*, knowledge of the Self.

Praśna Upaniṣad

The *Praśna Upaniṣad*, belonging to the *Atharva Veda*, contains six sections with a total of sixty-eight *mantras*. The *Upaniṣad* is presented in the form of dialogues between a teacher and six students. The teacher is *Pippalāda*; the students are: *Sukeśa*, *Satyakāma*, *Gārgya*, *Āśvalāyana*, *Bhārgava* and *Kabandhi*. Each student asks a question and the question progress in their subtlety and depth. The *Upaniṣad* derives its name from the fact that questions, *praśnas*, form the context for unfolding the teaching.

The first question refers to the origin of the created beings; the second to the number and nature of the *devatās* functioning in the human body; the third to the nature and origin of *prāṇa*, the life breath; the fourth discusses the nature of the individual and the three states of experience; waking, dream, and sleep; the fifth refers to the results of meditation on Om; and the last question is about the nature of the Self.

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is also from the *Atharva Veda*. It has three chapters, with two sections

each, and contains sixty-four *mantras*. *Śaunaka's* question to Sage *Āṅgiras* regarding “the knowledge knowing which everything is as well known” forms the context of this *Upaniṣad*.

This *Upaniṣad* points out that knowledge is the means for freedom, *mokṣa*, and prayers and meditation as means to prepare the individual for that knowledge. It also presents values such as truthfulness, austerity, and *brahmacarya*, as prerequisites for knowledge.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

This *Upaniṣad* belongs to the *Atharva Veda* and consists of twelve *mantras*. Unlike most of the *Upaniṣads*, this *Upaniṣad* does not have any anecdote or dialogue and it directly unfolds the nature of *ātma*. It is said that if a person cannot study all the *Upaniṣads*, the study of *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* is enough to obtain Self Knowledge. Here, the three states experience are analyzed to reveal the self as free and limitless in nature.

Taittirīya Upaniṣad

This *Upaniṣad* belongs to the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* of *Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda*. It is presented in three *vallīs*, chapters: *Śikṣā vallī*, *Ānanda vallī*, and *Bhṛgu vallī*. The *Upaniṣad* has a total of thirty-one *anuvākas*, sections of a *vallī*, each comprising a few *mantras*.

The first *vallī* discusses *upāsanās*, meditations. It also contains instructions to students to complete their study in *gurukula*. The second *vallī* unfolds the nature of the Self as being limitless happiness. There is an interesting calculus of *ānanda*, happiness, presented in this section. The happiness of a strong, brave, healthy, well educated, and clean young man, who rules the entire world is counted as one unit of happiness. The happiness of *Brahman* is figuratively measures as trillion times more than this unit of human happiness.

In the third *vallī*, the truth of the Self is unfolded through the dialogue between *Varuṇa* and *Bhṛgu*, wanting to know *Brahman*, was taught by his father *Varuṇa*, that he should contemplate and understand that out of which everything has emerged, by which everything is sustained, and unto which everything will go back. *Bhṛgu*, by his contemplative inquiry, comes to discover the Self to be *Brahman*.

Aitareya Upaniṣad

The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* belongs to the *Ṛg Veda*. How this got its name is told in the story of *Mahīdāsa*, who was born to a *ṛṣi* and his wife *Itarā*. The *ṛṣi* also had sons by other wives whom he cared for more than *Mahīdāsa*. Seeing that her son was not treated properly by his father, *Itarā* prayed to her *kula devatā*, *Bhūmi Devī*, Goddess Earth, for help. Pleased with her prayers and *Mahīdāsa's* knowledge, *Bhūmi Devī* appeared and gave *Mahīdāsa* a boon that he would thereafter be known as *Aitareya*, and a *Brāhmaṇa* and the corresponding *Āraṇyaka* section of the *Ṛg Veda* would be named after him.

The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* consists of three chapters with a total of thirty-three *mantras*. The first chapter discusses the creation of the world and the Lord's presence therein. The second chapter describes how the individual perpetuates himself through various births. The third chapter unfolds the ultimate destination of the individual as knowing oneself to be *Brahman*. Here we find the *mahāvākya*: “*prajñānam brahma*, consciousness is *Brahman*.”

Chāndogya Upaniṣad

This *Upaniṣad* is from the *Sāma Veda*. It contains eight chapters. A major portion of the *Upaniṣad* discusses *upāsanās*, various forms of meditation. The sixth chapter is a dialogue wherein *Uddālaka* teaches his son *Śvetaketu* that the Self is the limitless *Brahman* and the *mahāvākya*: “*Tat tvam asi* – that thou art” is repeated nine times. Through *Uddālaka's* illustrations and teachings, each restatement of the identity as indicated by the *mahāvākya* is an inevitable conclusion from the preceding discussion.

The sixth chapter opens with a story of *Uddālaka* and his son. *Uddālaka* sends his son *Śvetaketu* to a *gurukula* to study the *Vedas*. Returning home after twelve years of study, *Śvetaketu* has the pride of a learned scholar which is unbecoming of a person endowed with spiritual knowledge. Desirous of finding out whether his son had received Self Knowledge, *Uddālaka* asks *Śvetaketu* whether he sought this knowledge from his teacher. At first *Śvetaketu* responds overconfidently saying that his teacher did not know about this knowledge. He felt that had his teacher known, he would have surely taught him since he was the most brilliant of all the students. *Śvetaketu* later discovers his arrogance and requests his father to teach him.

The seventh chapter begins with *Nārada's* request to *Sanatkumāra* to teach him knowledge of the Self, knowing which he would be free from sorrow. *Sanatkumāra* wants to know all that *Nārada* has studied and *Nārada* lists all the disciplines of knowledge that he has mastered. *Nārada* tells *Sanatkumāra* that in spite of all his knowledge, he is still subject to sorrow. *Sanatkumāra* teaches him the knowledge of the Self which is free from sorrow, which is *bhūmā*, limitless.

There are a number of inspiring anecdotes in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. One such story is told of *Satyakāma* who went to a teacher in search of truth. The teacher asks *Satyakāma* about his parentage. *Satyakāma* tells him that he only knows his mother and that he has no knowledge of his father. Moved by *Satyakāma*'s truthfulness, which indicates his qualification of knowledge, the teacher teaches him.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

This *Upaniṣad* found in the *Śukla Yajur Veda*, is the largest of all the *Upaniṣads*. It consists of three *kāṇḍas*: *Madhukāṇḍa*, *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa*, and *Khilakāṇḍa*, each *kāṇḍa* having two chapters. The first *kāṇḍa* imparts the *Vedāntic* teachings; the second *kāṇḍa* embodies logical analysis to support the teachings of the *Vedāntic* vision; and the third *kāṇḍa* discusses various forms of meditation.

Like the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, this *Upaniṣad* has many stories illustrating the teachings, such as *Gārgī*'s debate with *Yājñavalkya* and *Maitreyī*'s search for Self Knowledge. In one such debate, *Gārgī* stands against the mighty *Yājñavalkya*.

As the story goes, King *Janaka* once performed a great sacrifice. Eager to listen to debates on spiritual topics he promised to give gifts in the form of one thousand cows adorned with gold and precious ornaments to the victor of the debate. *Yājñavalkya* declared himself as undefeatable and ordered his disciples to take away all the offered cows. The other scholars in the assembly raised different questions and the sage calmly answered all of them. Lastly, *Gārgī* asked *Yājñavalkya* a number of questions and he patiently answered them. As the debate progressed, *Yājñavalkya* discouraged *Gārgī* from pressing for answers to certain difficult questions. One such question she put to him was, "O sage, what is the one beyond the heavens, below the earth, and in between; what is the one which is not subject to past, present, and future?" Finally, the Sage replied, telling *Gārgī* that everything is pervaded by the unchanging *akṣara*, which is *Brahman*.

In another story, *Yājñavalkya* desires to leave his home and two wives, *Maitreyī* and *Kātyāyanī*, to live a life of a renunciate. *Yājñavalkya* calls *Maitreyī* and informs her of his plans. He tells her that he has equally divided his property between *Kātyāyanī* and her. *Maitreyī* asks him whether this wealth would give her freedom from *saṃsāra*. The sage truthfully replies that there is no hope of immortality through wealth. *Maitreyī* then wants to know what will give her that freedom and *Yājñavalkya* teaches her *Brahma vidyā*.

Dialogues

As seen in these brief accounts, the subject matter of the *Upaniṣads* reveal the identity of the individual and the Lord. This subject matter is presented in the form of dialogues in the different *Upaniṣads*. Whether the names of the people are mentioned or not is irrelevant. The use of dialogues is only meant to show that the subject matter is to be understood and therefore questions are welcomed. The characters in the dialogues often reveal the attitudes and qualifications of the students as well as the teacher. By implication they also reveal that this knowledge is to be gained from a teacher.

Brahma Sūtras

The subject matter of *Vedānta* is analyzed by *Vyāsa* in his *sūtra* work called *Brahma sūtras*. The text, containing five hundred and fifty five *sūtras*, is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter of the *Brahma sūtras*, *Vyāsa* presents the main vision of *Vedānta* after negating all other possible interpretations. In the second chapter, he defends the *Vedāntic* vision against various schools of thought. In the third and fourth chapters, he discusses various forms of meditation mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*, along with their results. The study of *Brahma sūtras* with *Śaṅkara's* commentary is a part of the traditional study of *Vedānta*.

Bhagavad Gītā

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a dialogue between Lord *Kṛṣṇa* and *Arjuna*. Presented by *Vyāsa* in his epic *Mahābhārata*, the *Gītā* contains seven hundred verses which are divided into eighteen chapters. Most of the verses are in *anuṣṭubh* meter. The *Gītā* is given the status of the *Upaniṣads* since it has the same subject matter as the *Upaniṣads*. In addition, it deals with certain important details regarding qualifications for this knowledge, values and attitudes to be cultivated, and mastery of the mind.

Śaṅkara's commentaries

The *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma sūtras*, and *Bhagavad Gītā* together are known as the *prasthāna traya*. These *prasthāna traya* texts enjoy the thorough commentary, *bhāṣya*, of *Ādi Śaṅkara*. *Śaṅkara's* commentaries also form an integral part of the *Vedānta* literature. These commentaries are famous for their lucid profundity which have earned *Śaṅkara* prime place in the world of Sanskrit literary giants.

Ṭikā

A *ṭikā* is a book of explanatory notes on a *bhāṣya*, commentary. Among the many *ṭikās* available, the *ṭikās* of *Ānandagiri* on all the commentaries of *Śaṅkara* are popular and widely read. There

are many *ṭīkās* written on the *Brahma sūtras bhāṣya*. These include: *Ratnaprabhā Ṭīkā*, by *Govindānanda*; *Bhāmati Ṭīkā* by *Vācaspati Miśra*; and *Pañcapādikā* by *Padmapāda*.

Vārttika

A *vārttika* is a critique on an original work such as a *bhāṣya*. There are two important *vārttikas* written by *Śrī Sureśvara*, a disciple of *Ādī Śaṅkara*, on the *Taittirīya* and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka bhāṣya*. There is also *vārttika* known as *Mānasollāsa* on the *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram* of *Ādī Śaṅkara*.

Kārikā

A *Kārikā* refers to a composition in verse form explaining an original work. *Kārikā* is defined as: “*saṅkṣipta sūtrabhāvārtha sūcakaḥ ślokaḥ kārikā* - work in the form of verses explaining another work, cryptic and profound in nature, is known as *Kārika*.”

The famous *Kārikā* in the *Vedānta* literature is *Gauḍapāda's Kārikā* on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. This work consists of four *prakaraṇas*, sections. *Āgama prakaraṇa* is the first section, dealing mainly with the *Upaniṣad mantras*. It has twenty-nine *kārikās*. The second section, called *Vaitathya prakaraṇa*, logically shows how duality is unreal. This *prakaraṇa* contains thirty-eight *kārikās*. The third section, *Advaita prakaraṇa*, logically presents how the ultimate reality can only be nondual. It has forty-eight *kārikās*. The fourth section, *Alātaśānti prakaraṇa*, analyses and negates other schools of thought by pointing out their mutual contradictions. This final *prakaraṇa* has one hundred *kārikās*.

Vṛtti

A *vṛtti* is a brief explanation of an original work. There are number of *vṛttis* written on the *Brahma sūtras*; however, *Sadāśiva Brahmendra's vṛtti*, *Brahmatattvaparakāśikā*, is widely used book.

Ṭippani

A *ṭippani* is a gloss, a footnote, on a topic in the body of a work requiring explanation. There are authors who have devoted themselves exclusively to writing *ṭippanis* on different works. There is a traditional collection of *ṭippanis* under the name *Govindaprasādinī*, written on the *prasthāna trya* commentaries of *Śaṅkara*.

Prakaraṇas

The vast body of *Vedānta* literature also includes a number of independent works called *prakaraṇas*. These books are either written in verse or prose, or sometimes both.

There are two types of *Prakaraṇas*: introductory and advanced. Introductory texts present various elements of *Vedānta* in a simple style arranged systematically. *VedāntaSāra*, by *Sadānanada*, is an example of an introductory *prakaraṇa*. Advanced texts are either *prakriyā granthas*, texts that deal with the methodology of unfoldment of *Vedānta*; or *siddhi granthas*, texts that ascertain different elements of *Vedānta*. *Pañcadaśi*, by *Vidyāraṇya*, is an example of *prakriyā grantha*. *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi*, by *Śrī Sureśvara*, establishes that knowledge alone is the means for freedom and is an example of a *siddhi grantha* including *Advaita Siddhi*, by *Madhusūdana Sarasvatī*; and *Svārājya Siddhi*, by *Gaṅgādharendra*.

A *Vedānta prakaraṇa* is also presented in the forms of hymns, stotrams, which are sung in praise of the Lord. *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram* is a typical hymn of this nature. There are a number of *prakaraṇa* texts of varying length. For example, *Ekaślokī* which has only one verse; while *Daśaślokī* has ten verses; and *Śataślokī* has one hundred verses.

[From *Vedic Heritage Teaching Program* by *Swamini Pramananda* and *Śrī Dhira Chaitanya*]

One's wisdom and appreciation of beauty manifests through various forms of one's culture. And the study of one's cultural heritage leads to the appreciation of beauty and wisdom in life.

-Pūjya Swami Dayananda Saraswati

