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Formerly "Picture of the Month"

March-April 2015

***The Rational, the Moral, and the General: An Exploration***  
**Part 4 (Revised): Ideas in Ancient Indian Thought / Introduction**



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**An "Eastern" perspective: three ancient Indian ideas** In Part 3 of this series we considered the character of general ideas of reason as ideal limiting concepts and hence, the need for finding ways to "approximate" their intent and to unfold their meaning in real-world contexts of practice. We also considered the eternal tension of the particular (or contextual) and the general (or universal) in the quest for such meaning clarification and described two basic "critical movements of thought" involved as a contextualizing and a decontextualizing movement. We concluded that the notion of a cycle of critical contextualization (or "critically contextualist cycle") might provide an elementary heuristic for reflective and discursive processes of "approximation."

In view of the fundamental nature of these two movements of thought, it is to be expected that they can be found under varying names in many different traditions of human thought and will be employed in conjunction with many different types of "general ideas." I therefore suggest we try and complement the "Western," basically Kantian perspective that we have adopted thus far with an entirely different perspective, drawn from an "Eastern" tradition of thought. I have selected to this end the Hindu (or Vedic) tradition of ancient Indian philosophy as it is represented by the *Vedanta* scriptures and among these particularly by the *Upanishads*. My hope is that they can throw a new or additional spotlight on the emerging notion of critical contextualism.

**Sources** To many of my readers, the tradition of thought we are about to explore is likely to represent rather unfamiliar territory, just as for myself. They may appreciate to have a list of some basic sources that I have found useful. I can recommend them to those readers who, beyond reading what follows, would like to see for themselves and to study this tradition of thought in more detail. The list (see Box) will be followed by an introduction to the world of the *Vedanta* as I have come to understand it based on these sources, along with some additional sources referenced in the text. Thus

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*Revised version of  
5 March 2015\**

\*Note: With this revision of the *Bimonthly* essay of September–October 2014, I deviate for once from my practice of limiting revisions to editorial corrections *prior to* uploading PDF versions, so as to ensure stable web content and URLs.

The present revision reaches further. It reviews the original text with a view to even more consistently avoiding the one-sided emphasis often given in the reception of the *Upanishads* on their religious, metaphysical and mystic aspects. The aim is to give equal – not equally one-sided – importance to their philosophical and methodological content.

I offer this revision as a separate version, so that readers can compare the two versions and also because I am far from claiming that either account is the only correct one.

I plan a similar revision of the second part of my excursion into the world of ancient Indian thought, as published in the *Bimonthly* of November–December 2014.

It will follow in the next *Bimonthly*, before we will then continue the series with the third part of this excursion into ancient Indian ideas (Part 5 of the series overall).

prepared, we will then turn to an examination of three essential ideas of Upanishadic thought that I have selected for discussion.

#### BOX: RECOMMENDED BASIC SOURCES

**Introductory texts on ancient Indian thought:** As a first introduction to ancient Indian thought that is available in open-access mode, I recommend the very substantial and informative entry on "Hinduism" of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2013c, also compare 2013a and b), an encyclopedia entry that includes no less than 59 web pages. Not quite as substantial but still useful for a first approach are the Wikipedia entries on "Hinduism," the "Vedas," and the "Upanishads," along with many more specific entries to which I will provide links where they are relevant. Short entries on Hindu philosophy in general and on the teachings of the *Vedas*, *Vedanta*, and *Upanishads* in particular can also be found in many standard philosophical dictionaries. A concise introductory text on Indian philosophy in general, for those interested in the larger picture, is Hamilton (2001); however, the Upanishads are not given a central part in this account. For the purpose of the present essay more useful are the two short but inspiring introductions by Navlakha (2000) and Easwaran (2007) to their respective translations of the Upanishads (cited below). For further study, the pioneering accounts of Monier-Williams (1877; 1891), an early outstanding scholar of ancient Indian thought and also the renowned author of an influential Sanskrit dictionary (see below), continue to be rich and insightful sources, although their language is now somewhat outdated and at times may strike contemporary readers as being "politically incorrect" (an observation that should not distract attention from the scholarly merits of Monier-Williams' work).

**English translations of the Upanishads:** Probably still the most authoritative, because scholarly and faithful, translation is Müller's (1879 and 1884). It is the translation on which I have relied primarily for checking my understanding, along with Navlakha's contemporary revision of that early translation (see Müller and Navlakha, 2000). Easier and elegant reading is offered by Easwaran's (2007) translation; it is the one I have mostly used where I quote some literal passages from the Upanishads, although occasionally in slightly edited form (made transparent as such) as inspired by Müller and Navlakha. On a number of occasions where Müller/Navlakha and Easwaran diverge considerably or where I had reasons to doubt the accuracy of their translations for other reasons, I also consulted Nikhilananda's (1949, 1952, 1956, 1959; 2003) and Olivelle's (1996) translations as neutral third sources, both of high scholarly quality. Nikhilananda's translation is particularly useful with a view to avoiding the trap of a one-sidedly "Western" reading of the Upanishads, as it is based on, and includes literal extracts from, the famous commentary of Adi Shankara (also known as Sankara or Shankaracharya), a major early Vedanta philosopher who probably lived from 788 to 820 CE and whose writings were seminal in reviving interest in the then almost forgotten Upanishads.

**Introductory commentaries on the Upanishads:** Early and still influential, if somewhat dated sources (now in the public domain) are Müller's (1879 and 1884) Preface and Introductions to his two-volume translation of what he calls the eleven "principal" or "classical" Upanishads (1884, p. ix). I found them an excellent place to begin my reading, apart from being of historical interest. In addition, Müller's (1904/2013) three lectures on the Vedanta are still very readable. Nikhilananda's (1949-59, 2003) introductions and commentaries, along

with his translation, are equally a very relevant source, for the reason already mentioned; I have been drawing on them, for example, in my (hopefully, as a result, not merely "Western") reading of the Mundaka and the Isha Upanishads. Among the many contemporary introductory commentaries, I found the introductory essay of Nagler (2007) particularly well written and informative, and that of Easwaran (2007) particularly engaging. I would recommend these two latter, relatively short texts particularly at an early stage of reading the Upanishads. For further introductory reading, both Navlakha (2000) and Olivelle (1996) offer rather extensive, scholarly introductions to their translations. Readers looking for a broader scholarly overview and critical account of all major traditions of Indian thought, including the Upanishads, may want to consult Sharma (2000). Likewise, Ganeri (2001) offers a comprehensive and demanding scholarly analysis of Indian philosophy, with a focus on its rational rather than mystic side (a focus that I share); I should mention, however, that its analytical approach and historical erudition reach far beyond the limitations of the present essay and are not conceived for introductory reading. Some further sources on which I have relied will be indicated in the contexts where I draw on them.

**Sanskrit dictionaries and on-line translation tools:** I have relied mainly on the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* of Monier-Williams (1899 and less frequently 1872; as a searchable online tool, see also the HTML version by Monier-Williams et al., 2008, also accessible via Cologne Project, 1997/2008). Other dictionaries that I have used are Apte's (1890/2014 and 1965/2008) and Macdonnell's (1929) *Practical Sanskrit Dictionaries*, both of which also come in online versions that allow direct entering of either Roman or Devanagari script; the latter option helps avoid frequent transliteration problems. In addition, the two Böthlink dictionaries, the *Greater* and the *Smaller Petersburg Sanskrit-German Dictionaries* (Böthlingk and Roth, 1855, and Böthlingk and Schmidt, 1879/1928), occasionally also proved useful, as did Whitney's (1855) dictionary of Sanskrit verbal roots and their derivatives. Finally, on some occasions I consulted the earliest of all Sanskrit dictionaries (Wilson, 1819/2011) as well as the *Apte English-Sanskrit Dictionary* (Apte, 1920/2007), the latter allowing me to check my understanding by means of reverse translation of terms. As a last hint, searchable, digitized versions of most of these dictionaries are now accessible through Cologne (2013/14).

**Transliteration tools:** For occasionally converting Roman letters into the Devanagari letters used by Sanskrit texts, or vice-versa, as well as for looking up contemporary meanings of Sanskrit words, the *SpokenSanskrit* site (n.d.) and the *Tamilcube English to Sanskrit Converter Tool* (n.d.) are useful tools, along with the already mentioned HTML version of the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Monier-Williams et al. (2008), which also offers a transliteration function (choose "Devanagari Unicode" as output or input). Concerning my handling of transliterations into Roman letters, I decided to use the (approximate, simplified) phonetic spelling that many texts and dictionaries have adopted, rather than adhering to the diacritical conventions of Sanskrit scholars which, I fear, might not be reproduced properly by the default character encoding and computing platforms of many of my readers.

**Introduction to the Upanishads** "Upanishad" means as much as "secret teaching," or literally also "sitting nearby devotedly," suggesting the notion

of students listening to the teachings of a spiritual master. The *Upanishads* belong to the *Vedas*, the oldest collection of ancient Sanskrit scriptures or *shruti* (also written *sruti*), that is, "revealed" or "heard" texts that traditionally were not considered to be of human authorship; they were passed down in oral tradition already thousands of years ago before being written down. They count among the oldest known texts in any Indo-European language and of humanity in general. They also represent the main spiritual and theoretical basis of Hindu religion and philosophy.

"Veda" comes from the Sanskrit verbal root *vid-*, which means as much as to know or find (see Whitney, 1885, p. 159f). In its derivatives it also means "to understand, perceive, learn, become or be acquainted with, be conscious of, have a correct notion of" (Monier-Williams, 1899/2014, p. 963); compare the Latin verb *videre* (= to see, cf. Bopp, 1847, p. 319f) and the related German verb *wissen* (= to know), as well as the Middle-English noun *wit* (= intelligence, sharp reasoning, *esprit*). To simplify, we might say that the root term *vid* means "seeing" in all these various senses. The name *Veda* is thus best translated as referring to "knowledge" in a wide sense that includes insight, vision, and efforts of learning.

The development of the Vedas began with the *Samhitas*, archaic hymns and mantras that offer postulations about the cosmic reality that lies behind human existence and governs it. There are four collections of Samhitas – the Rig Samhitas, the Yajur Samhitas, the Sam Samhitas, and the Atharva Samhitas – and accordingly there are also four collections of Vedas, the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sam Veda, and the Atharva Veda (a distinction that will not matter to us in the following, so I will mostly refer to "the Vedas" in general). In addition to the Samhitas, each of these four Vedas consists of three more categories of scriptures. First, the *Brahmanas* were appended to each of the four Samhitas, discussing their meaning and describing rules and rituals for contemplation, worship, offerings, sacrifice, and purification. Subsequently, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* were added as commentaries on the Brahmanas, explaining and inviting contemplation of their speculative, cosmological and religious contents (in the Aranyakas) and later also of their increasingly spiritual and philosophical contents (in the Upanishads). Thus it comes that each of the four Vedas is made up of the four mentioned strands of shruti: the Samhitas (hymns and mantras), the Brahmanas (rules and rituals), the Aranyakas (cosmological and religious

contemplations) and finally, the Upanishads (spiritual and philosophical contemplations).<sup>15)</sup>

In Western terms we might think of the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Aranyakas as *liturgy*, that is, texts that can be recited in ritual ceremonies and also provide rules and guidelines for it. The underlying *world view*, briefly summarized, is that there are two levels of order in the universe: the visible, phenomenal and changing reality in which we live, and the cosmic, transcendent and unchanging reality that lies beyond what we can perceive. The importance of *ritual action* (e.g., ritual sacrifice and purification) is that it is to mediate between and connect these two levels of order or spheres, the world of human experience and that of cosmic (and partly also divine) reality. Note that the mediating power of ritual action is understood in these early Vedic texts to depend directly on its symbolic and ethical quality; it is a matter of cause and effect rather than of an appeal to divine intervention. This makes it understandable why the well-known notion of an individual's "karma," an Anglicized form of the Sanskrit noun *karman* (= action, work, or performance), refers to one's record of both ritual action and ethical deeds. The ritual and the ethical are closely intertwined in early Vedic thought, at least as much as the ritual and the divine (the usual emphasis in the predominantly mystic and religious readings that abound in both the Western and the Eastern reception of the Veda; for brief but careful accounts of the ritual origins of the Vedas that avoid this trap see, e.g., Olivelle, 1996, p. xlvii, and Hamilton, 2001, p. 19f, also in the latter account divine intervention does play a role).

We have, then, *three essential concerns* in early Vedic thinking: the cosmic order (the cosmological sphere); the human place in it (the human, biological and psychological sphere); and ritual action to mediate between the two (the ritual sphere).

The central concern of all Vedic thinkers, including the authors of the Upanishads, is to discover the connections that bind elements of these three spheres to each other. The assumption then is that the universe constitutes a web of relations, that things that appear to stand alone and apart are, in fact, connected to other things. A further assumption is that these real cosmic connections are usually hidden from the view of ordinary people; discovering them constitutes knowledge, knowledge that is secret and is contained in the Upanishads. And it is this *knowledge of the hidden connections* that gives the person with that knowledge power, wealth, and prestige in this world, and heavenly bliss and immortality after death. (Olivelle, 1996, p. lii, italics added)

In epistemological and analytic terms, we might speak today of first-order

knowledge (the cognitive level of each individual's awareness of the world and of itself) and second-order knowledge (the cognitive level at which we conceive of universal and unchanging ideas and principles that help us understand first-order knowledge). Similarly, in Vedic terms, knowledge is twofold: *para* (lit. = higher, i.e., postulational or suppositional, second-order) and *apara* (lit. = lower, i.e., observational or practical, first-order). *Para vidya* leads to spiritual knowledge of eternal truth and to self-realization; *apara vidya* to worldly knowledge of material things. These two epistemological levels run largely parallel, but should not be confused, with the basic two metaphysical spheres mentioned above, relating to the cosmic and the human order. It is the latter conception which is prevalent in the early Vedic texts that lead to the Upanishads. It teaches that a state of perfect *dharma* ("order, law") exists when the two spheres or levels of order – the individual micro-cosmos and the cosmic macro-cosmos – are in harmony (cf. Hamilton, 2001, p. 64f). The usual state, however, is *a-dharma*, "disorder"; the sacrificial rituals of the Veda are to reestablish a state of harmony. This explains why particularly the *Brahmanas* focus on sacrificial rituals and other instructions for living up to one's individual dharma (*svadharma*, "one's own law"), as the assumed only way to live according to the cosmic order (*sanatana dharma*, "the eternal law") and thus to help maintain it.

Apart from that early metaphysical conception, little philosophical thought (and none in the sense of active philosophical inquiry and reflection) is to be found in the *Brahmanas*. They are, philosophically speaking, dogmatic texts. Only with the *Aranyakas* (from *aranya* = "wilderness" or forest, thus "wilderness texts" or "forest scriptures"), things begin to change. They can be said to mark the transition from a mainly ritualistic to a more philosophical orientation of Vedic thought. As their name suggests, they offer interpretations of the brahmanic rituals (especially the sacrifices) for contemplation in the calm and solitude of the wilderness or forests. This new reflective stance leads on to the *Upanishads*, the most intensely spiritual and philosophical expression of Vedic thought (cf. Sharma, 2000, p. 14).

With the *Upanishads*, things change indeed. They represent the first and probably also the most important source of the *Vedanta*, the late-Vedic texts that embody the more intellectual and scholarly part of the Vedic tradition. It is worth mentioning that although the name "Vedanta" (literally = "Veda-end") is now commonly taken to refer to the temporal end (i.e., the concluding

parts) of the Veda, it originally referred to the object or *highest purpose* rather than just to the last portions of the Veda (see Müller, 1884, p. lxxxvi, note 1). The two other major Vedanta texts are the *Bhagavadgita* (also simply called the *Gita*) and the *Brahma Sutras* (also called *Vedanta Sutras*; *sutra* = aphorism). Together, these three Vedanta scriptures are now customarily considered the foundational texts of orthodox ancient Hindu philosophy, an ill-defined concept that is understood here to refer to the Vedic tradition (including the Vedantic tradition) of Indian philosophy rather than to Indian philosophy as a whole and which is therefore better replaced by references to Vedic philosophy.<sup>16)</sup>

While the first three strands of the Vedas (the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Aranyakas) can be dated back to about 1,500 to 1,000 BCE (e.g., Monier-Williams, 1891, p. 7) or perhaps in the main to 1,500 to 1,200 BCE (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013c, subsection "Veda"), that is, to the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age of India, the dating of the Upanishads and other Vedanta texts stretches over a larger period of time and is less certain. Some ten Upanishads are now generally considered to count as the principal Upanishads (*mukhya upanishads*) and these are also the earliest ones, although a number of authors count a few texts more. For example, the 8th/9th century mystic and philosopher *Shankara* (cited in Müller, 1884, p. ix) counts eleven, as do Nikhilananda (2003) and Sharma (2000); Prabhavananda and Manchester (1984) and Olivelle (1996) count twelve; Hume (1996) and Müller and Navlakha (2000) count thirteen. These "primary" Upanishads (primary in terms of both time of origin and importance) can be dated approximately between 900 and 500 BCE.<sup>17)</sup> In subsequent centuries, over 100 more texts were composed that understood themselves as Upanishads. As newer texts have continued to be discovered, there is no definitive list and thus also no definitive dating. As to the other late-Vedic or Vedanta scriptures, the *Gita* dates between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE and the *Sutras* probably originate in the first few centuries CE.

#### ***The dawn of philosophical reflection: the discovery of the knowing subject***

The Vedanta and particularly the Upanishads are considered mankind's oldest known philosophical texts. Like the earlier Veda scriptures, they often come in the forms of aphorisms, hymns, and poetry and use metaphors along with narratives and dialogues as didactic means; characteristic of the latter are

teacher-student dialogues. Unlike the earlier Veda scriptures, however, their aim is no longer mainly to offer liturgy and instruction for contemplative or ritual practice, so as to win the favor of the cosmic and divine powers that control the human destiny. The essential new idea is that the power to control and change man's destiny resides in man himself, in the ability to improve one's individual consciousness and understanding. Accordingly important it now becomes to know and discover one's inner reality, so as to expand one's self-awareness and ultimately, to achieve spiritual autonomy rather than devotion to cosmic forces and gods. The earlier focus on speculation about what lies beyond the phenomenal reality around us gives way to a new focus on discovering man's inner self, the *spiritual and intellectual reality within*. The Vedanta scriptures can thus be understood as an inquiry into human capabilities and ways to develop it. As Ganeri (2007, pp. 117, 125 and *passim*) puts it, their aim is both philosophical and *protreptic* (i.e., instructive or educational).<sup>18</sup>

Notably in the Upanishads, developing one's capabilities and self-understanding become all-important demands. They can be met through both philosophical study (ideally with a teacher) and spiritual practice (ideally with some meditative or contemplative experience leading to a higher state of consciousness). The major aim now is to encourage an *inquiring mind*, along with a dedication to clarity of thought, self-reflection, and self-discipline as sources of orientation for good practice, that is, the right way to live. The idea is that one can find a proper path of self-realization through *right thought and conduct* according to one's inner nature and place in the social order (the earlier-mentioned *svadharma*). "Right thought" includes awareness of the extent to which this path often fails to live up to the principles of the all-encompassing cosmic order (*sanatana dharma*). There is a normal *tension* between these two levels (or sources) of order in the world, one's individual and the cosmic dharma, of which "right thought and conduct" must not lose sight. In terms more familiar to the readers of my essays, the tension confronts us with a *challenge to reason* that is both intellectual (right thought) and moral (right conduct), whereby the two modes (and subjects) of reflection are closely interdependent. Such reflective efforts and conforming conduct are now, for the first time in the history of ancient Indian thought, understood to replace at least partly the brahmanic rituals, sacrifices, and other traditional efforts to improve one's *karma* – the record and future consequences of one's good

deeds, thought of as causes of one's fate. They can lead to eventual liberation (*moksha*) from the perpetual cycle of rebirth and transmigration of souls (*samsara*). Knowledge, not work, is the true liberating power. Ignorance, by contrast, is the origin of evil.

**"Higher knowledge"** Despite their poetic language and often metaphorical character, the Upanishads thus place a previously unseen emphasis on learning and *acquisition of knowledge* (*prama*), rather than mere observance of rules and rituals, as the sources of right thought and conduct. As the *Mundaka Upanishad* puts it, with explicit reference to the two levels of order and related knowledge to which we have referred above in terms of first- and second-order knowledge:

Knowledge is twofold, higher and lower.  
 The study of the Vedas, linguistics,  
 rituals, astronomy, and all the arts  
 can be called lower knowledge. The higher  
 is that which leads to Self-realization.  
 [...]  
 The rituals and the sacrifices described  
 in the Vedas deal with lower knowledge.  
 The sages ignored these rituals  
 and went in search of higher knowledge.

(Mundaka, 1.1.4-5 and 1.2.1, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 185-187)

We may understand "higher knowledge" as referring both to the traditional Vedic notion of an all-pervading, immutable universe that lies beyond the visible world and about which we cannot know through experience, and to the new Upanishadic notion of second-order knowledge in the sense of *knowledge about knowledge*, its sources and nature and limits, which includes knowledge about the *knower* – "the higher [knowledge] which leads to Self-realization."

It is the acquisition of such knowledge that the Mundaka Upanishad, in one of the earliest known references to the *Vedanta*, describes as the aim of a "full knowledge of the Vedanta" (Mundaka, 3.2.6, as transl. by Olivelle, 1996, p. 276, cf. p. 266; similarly Müller and Navlakha, 2000, p. 54, and Nikhilananda, 1949, pp. 262-264). There is a tacit criticism here of the older Vedic texts, if not outright rebellion against them. The Upanishadic mind no longer contents itself with a metaphysical focus that comes at the expense of epistemological clarity, nor with an unquestioned reliance on the power of rituals and rules that ignores the power of systematic inquiry and truth. The new and liberating motto is that spiritual and religious merit comes from the

effort of overcoming ignorance (*avydya*) and hence, from *studying* the nature of the world and man's relationship with it, rather than just engaging in ritual practice. Those seeking for higher knowledge will, for example, ask questions such as these:

- What can we know about this world we live in? (*first-order knowledge, observational*)
- How can we achieve such knowledge systematically (*second-order knowledge, epistemological*)?
- What may we hope to learn about that other realm of reality behind and beyond the visible world, what principles govern it and also manifest themselves in this world of ours and in our lives? (*second-order knowledge, postulational/metaphysical*)
- How do we live properly? (*first-order knowledge, practical*)
- How should we think properly about practical concerns and needs, and about adequate ways to handle them? (*second-order knowledge, practical in the philosophical sense of the term, that is, postulational/ethical*)
- And finally, how may we hope to grow as individuals, so as to develop reflective practices of inquiry and action and gain deeper awareness with regard to all the previous points? (second-order knowledge, spiritual, intellectual, and professional)

(Questions inspired through exchange with D.P. Dash, 2014)

**"Active search for truth"** In sum, how can we orient ourselves in this world and think and act properly, if not on the basis of well-understood, and reflectively practiced, principles of inquiry and action that would reach beyond the surface of mere appearance and habit? And hence, how may we hope to acquire such higher understanding, except by an *active search for truth* and by cultivating our skills and attitudes accordingly? Or, as the Mundaka Upanishad continues the lines cited above in powerfully simple words (especially in Easwaran's translation):

Truth is victorious, never untruth.  
 Truth is the way; truth is the goal of life.  
 Reached by sages who are free from self-will.

(Mundaka, 3.1.6, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 193)

In Müller and Navlakha's similarly concise translation:

The true prevails, not the untrue;  
 by the true that path is laid out  
 [...] on which the old sages, satisfied in their desires,  
 proceed to where there is that highest place of the true one.

(Mundaka, 3.1.6, as transl. by Müller and Navlakha, 2000, p. 53)

And finally, in Nikhilananda's (1949) commented version:

Truth prevails, not falsehood.  
 By truth the path is laid out,  
 the Way of the Gods, on which the seers, whose every desire is satisfied,  
 proceed to the Highest Abode of the True.

(Mundaka, 3.1.6, as transl. by Nikhilananda , 1949, p. 300)

**TRUTH:** That is to say, the *truthful person*.

**LAID OUT:** That is to say, the Way of the Gods is built and constantly maintained by truthful persons.

**THE WAY OF THE GODS:** By this path the seers arrive at the Abode of Brahma (*Brahmaloka*).

**WHOSE EVERY DESIRE ETC:** That is to say, who are freed from deceit, delusion, pride, and falsity, and also from worldly desires. They have renounced all desires and all longing for worldly enjoyments.

**HIGHEST ABODE ETC:** The supreme realization to be attained by the practice of truth.

(Nikhilananda's comment on Mundaka 3.1.6 (based on Shankara), 1949, p. 300f; italics added)

As Nikhilananda makes clear, "truth" is to be understood here not just as an epistemological quality of knowledge but also and more basically as an ethical quality of those who seek knowledge. Active and sincere search for truth, rather than traditional ritual conventions and brahmanic authority, lead toward higher knowledge, that is, towards "realizing" (in the double sense of the word) the true.

How truly revolutionary these words must have been in their time, comparable perhaps in our own epoch to the revolutionary force of Mahatma Gandhi's (1957) quest for *active nonviolence (ahimsa) grounded in the power of truth*, to which the title of his autobiography significantly refers as a succession of *Experiments of Truth*. As the experiment showed, truth still unfolds revolutionary and emancipator power in our "modern" epoch. The "attitude of experimenting, of testing what will and will not bear close scrutiny, what can and cannot be adapted to new circumstances" (Bok, 1993, p. xvi) is of timeless merit and virtue; but first in the history of human thought we find it formulated in the Upanishads.

In recognition of this insight, and surely also in deference to Mahatma Gandhi, the first line of the Mundaka's above-quoted verse was chosen as the Sanskrit motto of the modern Indian nation-state: *satyam eva jayate, nanritam*, "truth alone prevails, not untruth or falsehood." Its main clause, written in Devanagari letters, is also inscribed at the base of India's national emblem, as well as on one side



India's national emblem

of all Indian currency: *satyameva jayate*, "truth alone prevails." The added clause *nanritam* (literally = *na anritam* = not against the rite or ritual = not unethical) makes it clear that "truth" (or its absence, "falsehood") refers to the practical and ethical, not just epistemological, dimension of truth; the true triumphs over the unethical (J. Dash, 2015). This understanding conforms to the rich meaning of the root term *satya* (= "the real, actual, genuine, sincere, honest, truthful, faithful, pure, virtuous, good, successful, effectual, valid," Monier-Williams, 1899/2014, p. 1135), whence comes the verbal noun *satyam* = "to make true, ratify, realise, fulfill."

**Good deeds, good practice** The remarkable shift of focus that the Upanishads brought to ancient Indian spirituality had significant consequences for what could count as good practice (*ritam* rather than *anritam*). For the first time, proper practice and adequate knowledge became closely interdependent, in that the quality of each now depended on the other. Not only was the search for true knowledge and understanding now appreciated as the highest source of right thought and action, but good practice was equally understood to be a valuable source of knowledge itself. The insight is as relevant today as it was then: practice is a form of inquiry, just as inquiry is a kind of practice.

The Vedic demand for doing good deeds remained valid, but the nature of good deeds had changed. Knowledge and understanding are a better basis for them than just ritual exercise (e.g., a ritual sacrifice). What is more, not only the search for knowledge matters but also the inner attitude or "spirit" with which it is conducted. As the Mundaka Upanishad puts it in the above-quoted verse 3.1.6, inquiry should be a *practice "free from self-will"* or *"desire."* In today's terms we might think, for example, of a professional practice that engages with multiple stakeholders rather than just pursuing its own (possibly even undisclosed) agenda. So both the quest for knowledge and the attitude that guide it matter for the value and power of a "good deed."

It is clear, then, that the traditional brahmanic rituals could no longer meet the standards of Upanishadic reflection. As we read in the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

Side by side, those who know the Self and those who know it not do the same thing; but it is not the same: the act done with knowledge, with inner awareness and faith, grows in power.

(Chandogya, 1.1.10, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 126)

Those who know this and those who do not both perform [the same rites]. But knowledge and ignorance are two very different things. Only what is performed with knowledge, with faith, and with an awareness of the hidden connections (*upanishad*) becomes truly potent.

(Chandogya, 1.1.10, as transl. by Olivelle, 1996, p. 98, referring to the root meanings of closeness and connection in the *up-* term of *Upanishad*, cf. the earlier quote above from Olivelle, 1996, p. lii)

[The results of] knowledge and ignorance are different. Work that is done with knowledge, faith and the Upanishad (i.e., meditation on the deities) produces more powerful fruit.

(Chandogya, 1.1.10, as transl. by Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 116)

**KNOWLEDGE ... DIFFERENT:** Rituals without meditation produce quite different results from rituals performed with meditation. If a jeweler and a mere fool each sells a precious stone, the knowledge of the former bears better fruit than the ignorance of the latter. [...] One must perform rituals with knowledge arising from meditation on the deity, and not mechanically.

(Nikhilananda's comment, based on Shankara, on verse 1.1.10 of the Chandogya Upanishad [in his spelling: Chhandogya]; 1959, p. 116f)

Again, what a powerful and perennially "modern" thought, particularly in Easwaran's succinct formulation, which in the light of the two highly respected, scholarly translations by Olivelle and Nikhilananda can certainly be said to capture the Chandogya's intent while at the same time obviating a one-sidedly religious reading. And what an equally modern consequence the Upanishadic sages drew from it: along with the search for insight into the nature of reality and the meaning of human existence in it, the *search for ways to obtain such knowledge* had to become a primary focus of study. Are there reliable sources of knowledge or *pramanas* (lit. = proofs or measures), that is, means and methods of careful inquiry? Perhaps for the first time in the history of mankind, the *knowing subject* emerges as an object of systematic inquiry and (self-) reflection. This explains why the Upanishads continue to be of philosophical interest to date: they combine mankind's age-old metaphysical interest in "ultimate" reality with a newly emerging *epistemological*, as well as logical and psychological, interest in modes of thought and inquiry that would be conducive to gaining knowledge and, based on it, to living properly. Upanishadic epistemology is *pramana-sastra*, the theory or study of the pramanas or of how knowledge arises (e.g., Phillips, 2011, p. 1; 2012, p. 17). We will return to this subject a little later; suffice it here to point out that pramana-sastra is once again a type of second-order knowledge.

***Unity in diversity: the metaphysics of "this" and "that"*** There is a second

major shift of focus that the Upanishads brought to ancient Indian thought and which has been of lasting importance to this date. In the Upanishads emerges, probably equally for the first time in the history of human thought, the remarkably modern teaching that the world is an expression of cosmic forces and principles – and ultimately, of a single, *universal* principle as the source of all true being (*satyam*) and good practice (*ritam*) – that exist independently of a personified creator or, as in the earlier Vedas, of a multitude of more or less important and more or less regional deities and demons. Rather, such all-encompassing principles embody an impersonal, *pantheistic* source of power, of consciousness, and of intelligence. As the early scholar of ancient Indian philosophy, R.E. Hume, wrote in 1921:

If there is any one intellectual tenet which, explicitly or implicitly, is held by the people of India, furnishing a fundamental presupposition of all their thinking, it is this doctrine of pantheism. The beginnings of this all-pervading form of theorizing are recorded in the Upanishads. In these ancient documents are found the earliest serious attempts at construing the world of experience as a rational whole. (Hume, 1996, p. 1f)

From a contemporary Western perspective one might be inclined to dismiss such achievements as "just metaphysics"; but that would mean to miss the point. The point, methodologically speaking, is not to avoid metaphysical assumptions but to be aware of them and to handle them carefully. As the English novelist and poet Aldous Huxley, who thought highly of the Vedanta and also wrote about them, said quite accurately: "The choice is not between metaphysic and no metaphysic; it is always between a good metaphysic and a bad metaphysic." (cited in Sharma, 2000, p. 13) Or, perhaps more in line with the spirit of this series of essays, it is between reflected and unreflected metaphysics – which is to say, what matters primarily is not what metaphysics we have but how we handle them epistemologically. Metaphysical ideas *can* be a source of valuable orientation, so long as we are aware of their postulational (i.e., conjectural, based on incomplete or uncertain evidence) character and of the role they play in our thought and conduct.

Related to the pantheistic turn of the Upanishads is another metaphysical idea that was to become an all-pervading theme of Hindu philosophy and remains of methodological relevance today, the notion of a fundamental unity in all that exists. It proposes a *monistic* rather than dualistic view of all reality, a world view in which all aspects of reality, whether material or spiritual, mundane or divine, phenomenal or transcendent, are seen to

originate in and to be governed by a single, all-encompassing cause or principle that inheres and governs the world. Due to the same underlying forces that shape it, there is a unity in its infinite diversity that helps us to understand it and to deal successfully with it for practical ends. Although the Upanishads differ in the ways they interpret and often poetically (with artistic license, as it were) describe this unity, there is a remarkable unanimity in them about its importance, both in spiritual and philosophical respect:

There is an essential unity of purpose in them [the Upanishads]. They emphasize the same fundamental doctrine which may be called *monistic idealism* or *idealistic monism*. These poetic-philosophic works are full of grand imagery, extremely charming and lucid expression abounding in crystal clarity (*prasada guna*). To the mind, they bring sound philosophical doctrines and to the heart, peace and freedom. (Sharma, 2000, p. 18, italics added)

As the Upanishads formulate it, *this* world of an infinite variety of finite phenomena, and *that* infinite world of a cosmic reality of which our world is just an ever-changing expression, are one and the same. They are "one without a second" (Chandogya Upanishad, 6.2.1-2), so that we cannot properly appreciate either without appreciating the other. I find it striking – and helpful indeed – to see how carefully the Upanishads, notably in the Chandogya Upanishad and in some of the so-called "Invocations" (introductory formulas) that precede most of the principal Upanishads, differentiate and combine their references to "this" world and "that" world so as to help the student understand. For example, in the Chandogya's account of the wisdom of Shandilya, we read this about the nature of *brahman*, a central concept that we will analyze in the next essay of this series:

#### *About the nature of brahman*

This universe comes forth from *brahman*, exists in *brahman*, and will return to *brahman*. Verily, all [this] is *brahman* (*sarvam idam brahman*).

(Chandogya, 3.14.1 as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 126, with "[this]" and the Sanskrit formula added)

This whole universe is *brahman*. Let a man in all tranquility meditate on this visible world as beginning, ending, and breathing in the *brahman*. [...]

He from whom all works, all desires, all odours and all tastes proceed, who encompasses all this world, who is without speech and without concern, he, my self within the heart, is that *brahman*.

(Chandogya, 3.14.1-4, as transl. by Müller and Navlakha, p. 166)

Brahman, you see, is this whole world. With inner tranquility, one should venerate it [...].

This self (*atman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart – it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed. It is *brahman*. On departing from here after death, I will become that.

(Chandogya, 3.14.1, as transl. by Olivelle, 1996, p. 123f)

All this is Brahman. From It the universe comes forth, in It the universe merges, and in It the universe breathes. Therefore a man should meditate on Brahman with a calm mind.[...]

He whose creation is this universe, who cherishes all desires, who contains all odours, who is endowed with all tastes, who embraces all this, who never speaks, and who is without longing – He is my Self within the heart, he is that Brahman.

(Chandogya, 3.14.1-4, as transl. by Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 206f)

It helps indeed to know that phrases such as "*this* universe" and "all *this*" refer to the visible world in which we live, or perhaps more precisely, to our particular descriptions and narratives about it, as distinguished from "*that*" other, invisible world of universal notions and principles, a world about which we cannot say much except that it is *brahman*, the ultimate, unchanging, infinite reality behind and beyond the world of finite things and changing descriptions.

Similarly, there is the Chandogya's story about Shvetaketu, the son of Uddalaka, who returns to his father after studying the Vedas for 12 years, in a vain hope to fully know and understand the world, and who is urged by his father to search instead for a better understanding of himself. The son thus asks his father to tell him more about the nature of the Self, as a way to comprehend the origin and nature of the world. To appreciate the father's response, it is again crucial to understand the just mentioned meaning of "*that*":

#### *The origin of the universe*

"Yes, dear one, I will," replied his father.  
 "In the beginning was only Being.  
 One without a second.  
 Out of itself it brought forth the cosmos  
 and entered into everything it is.  
 There is nothing that does not come from it.  
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.  
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.  
 You are that, Shvetaketu; *you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)

(Chandogya, 6.2.2-3, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 133; italics added, slightly edited. The part beginning with "There is nothing ..." is subsequently being repeated eight times in verses 6.8.7-6.15.3. Note that the numbering of the relevant verses differs among the various translations; moreover, a majority of them introduce the famous "you are that" formula in verse 6.8.7 only, but then repeat it until verse 6.16.3. Easwaran's translation is probably not the most accurate here but certainly the most readable; he may have introduced the formula as early as in the quoted verse 6.2.3 to facilitate its understanding)<sup>19)</sup>

"In the beginning," that is, before space and time existed and *brahman* manifested itself in this world of ours, there was only that "one without a

second," pure being "prior to the manifestation of names and forms" (Nikhilananda, 1959, p. 294, referring to Shankara's commentary). Ever since, that all-pervading unity of being continues to inhere everything that exists and to express itself in it, including the human individual and its innermost sense of self. We can and must seek brahman within ourselves! This is what Uddalaka means to teach his son first of all: "You are that, Shvetaketu, *you are that.*" The path to knowledge and understanding leads through knowing oneself.

But of course, the abstract notion of "pure being" is not easy to grasp. We easily confuse it with the nihilist notion that nothing existed before the world – all that exists – emerged from the non-existent, yet it is difficult to explain how that should be possible. To avoid such a misunderstanding, Uddalaka, still in the Chandogya's story of Shvetaketu, uses two other famous metaphors to explain to his son the essential unity of "this" and "that" (note again the careful use of the two terms):

#### *The metaphor of the seed*

"Bring me a fruit from the nyagrodha [or banyan] tree." (a fig tree)  
 "Here it is, sir."  
 "Break it. What do you see?"  
 "These seeds, Father, all exceedingly small."  
 "Break one. What do you see?"  
 "Nothing at all."  
 "That hidden essence you do not see, dear one,  
 from that a whole nyagrodha tree will grow.  
 There is nothing that does not come from it.  
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.  
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.  
*You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)  
 (Chandogya, 6.12.1f, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 136, slightly edited)

and:

#### *The metaphor of salt water*

"Place this salt in water and bring it here tomorrow morning."  
 The boy did [as his father asked him].  
 "Where is that salt?" his father asked [on the next morning]. .  
 "I do not see it."  
 "Sip here. How does it taste?"  
 "Salty, Father."  
 "And here? And there?"  
 "I taste salt everywhere."  
 "It is everywhere, though we see it not.  
 Just so, dear one, the Self is everywhere,  
 within all things, although we see it not.  
 There is nothing that does not come from it.  
 Of everything it is the inmost Self.  
 It is the truth; it is the Self supreme.  
*You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that.*" (*tat twam asi*)  
 (Chandogya, 6.13.1-3, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, pp. 136f, slightly edited)

The two metaphors make it clear what Uddalaka means to explain to his son: to understand this world of ours, its origin and nature and our place in it, we need two different aspects or modes of inquiry into it (two research perspectives, as we might say today), the one dealing with observable things and the other with non-observable things. But although we cannot do without these two different perspectives, we need not therefore assume that there is an observable world that exists and another that does not exist. Just as salt dissolved in water exists and can be tasted although we can't see it, thus the unobservable inheres the observable all the time. Without it, we have no proper conception of that which exists. We cannot possibly explain how the existent originates in the non-existent; to the extent we try, we will entangle ourselves in contradictions and confusion. But there is indeed no need to assume such an emergence of the existent from the non-existent. We are facing, in terms that Uddalaka did not have available, an epistemological rather than an ontological distinction. Epistemologically speaking, it is useful to distinguish between the two object-domains and corresponding modes of inquiry, but ontologically speaking, it is misleading.

In the terms of the linguistic rule that the referring and describing functions of a sentence go together, we may say that the determiners "this" and "that" in all these formulations refer to *one and the same reality*. However, they describe that one reality in the light of two different aspects or modes of inquiry into it. References to "this" world entail an experiential mode of inquiry into the infinite diversity of the phenomenal aspects of the world, which requires us to make our descriptions and narratives clear by pointing to the specific phenomena we mean: "look, this is what I am talking about." References to "that" world, on the other hand, entail a postulational (i.e., contemplative, inferential, and reflective) mode of inquiry into the non-observable (because "inner," intellectual and spiritual) world of ideas, that is, notions and concepts that help us understand the order and ultimate unity in the manifold of the phenomenal, and without which we therefore cannot achieve meaningful and consistent descriptions of the experiential world. It is in fact due to this idea of an intrinsic order that the phenomenal world, despite its infinite diversity, is at all intelligible to human inquiry; science works by finding order in the diversity of the phenomena it studies. To that underlying source of order and unity, the Upanishads refer as *brahman*, a concept we will analyze in detail. We already begin to understand, however, that since "that" all-pervading order also inheres the

human self about which Shvetaketu was asking his father, it is to be expected that in Upanishadic thought the self and brahman, too, are "one [i.e., a unity] without a second."

**Monist, but pluralist at heart** All-encompassing as it is, this monist world view of the Upanishads does not ignore or rule out diversity at all, it merely has us deal with it more attentively and carefully. Thus an Upanishadic perspective does not deny the observation that everything that is alive and moves in "this" world tends to be different from everything else, for example, concerning the shape it assumes and the state of consciousness it reaches. At the same time though, this perspective also emphasizes that there is always unity in such diversity, inasmuch as the latter only expresses different shapes and states of the former. This *interplay between unity and diversity* matters because it has important implications, regarding both the quest for knowledge and the proper conduct of life. I have already mentioned the example of science, the success of which depends on the assumption that meaningful unity can be recognized in diversity.

A second example of important implications concerns the ways we deal with human affairs. The Upanishadic message in this respect is: *we have reasons to be tolerant*. That is, we are well advised to be aware of all the differences among human beings, natural, cultural, social, and spiritual, yet at the same time to respect their intrinsic unity and sameness. Mahatma Gandhi (1957) made this theme of *unity-in-diversity* a guiding principle of his political vision, by advocating what he called a "heart unity" among all, a sense of toleration of differences embedded in a deep concern for the dignity and welfare of others:

"Heart unity" means that no matter how different you are from me – in religion, outlook, caste, level of affluence, culture, race, or sex – I identify with your well-being; I want you to be happy. Not to be like me, but to thrive in your own way.... As long as there is heart unity underneath, even our active disagreement by nonviolent means will not cause us to feel hostility to one another; on the contrary, it will bring us closer together in our joint search for truth." (Mahatma Gandhi, cited in Nagler, 2006, p. 256; cf. Nagler, 2007, p. 328).

What an inspiring, genuinely Upanishadic and yet timeless thought: we think properly about diversity when in our hearts, thoughts, and actions we search for a kind of unity that lets others thrive in their own ways. This same theme of unity-in-diversity appears to have inspired the national motto of contemporary Indonesia, which like the earlier cited motto of India is part of Indonesia's national emblem: *bhinneka tunggal ika* ("many, yet one").

***Beyond metaphysics: analytical, second-order considerations*** Much of the discussion on the Upanishads has gone into metaphysical direction; but I find it important that the discussion does not stop there. The two examples of science and politics, briefly hinted at above, illustrate that the Upanishads' monistic metaphysics of "this" and "that" has implications that reach further and can be of epistemological (or, a bit more generally speaking, methodological) as well as ethical (practical-philosophical) relevance. They concern the nature of second-order knowledge and reflection in all conceivable domains, for example, in everyday practice, professional practice, the logic of inquiry and science, the logic of rational argumentation and discourse, research practice, ethics, and politics. What the Upanishads have to tell us – the kind of reflections they inspire – will depend on the type of second-order enterprise (or reflective practice) one is engaged in, as well as on the specific (first-order) situation at hand; but as a common denominator, the analytical scheme of first and second-order knowledge appears to be useful. It can remind us that it is always a relevant idea to ask what the Upanishads have to tell us, beyond (but inspired by) their monist metaphysics, about the logic and ethics of good research and practice.

***Sources of knowledge: inquiry and ideas*** Etymologically, philosophy means "love of knowledge" and thus, of learning. The Upanishads are among the earliest documents of humanity that invite us to control our destiny through learning. More than that, they also explain why it is possible: it is, as we have just seen, because there is unity in diversity. Since there is a unity of the forces or principles that shape the cosmic and the human (social) order, as well as our individual nature and consciousness, we can learn – with due effort – to better understand the world we live in and our fate in it, and thus can progress on the path to knowledge. In this invitation to study and learning, rather than just to worshipping, I see the deeply philosophical orientation of the Upanishads and their continuing relevance today.

F. Max Müller, the eminent Western scholar of Hindu philosophy and translator of the Upanishads, emphasizes the break that the Vedanta's reorientation from ritual to reflection entails in the history of ancient Indian thought:

The Upanishads are philosophical treatises, and their fundamental principle might seem with us to be subversive of all religion. In these Upanishads the whole ritual and sacrificial system of the Veda is not only ignored, but directly rejected as useless, nay as mischievous. The ancient Gods of the Veda are no

longer recognized. And yet these Upanishads are looked upon [today] as perfectly orthodox, nay as the highest consummation of the Brahmanic religion.

This was brought about by the recognition of a very simple fact which nearly all other religions seem to have ignored. It was recognized in India from very early times that the religion of a man cannot be and ought not to be the same as that of a child; and again, that with the growth of the mind, the religious ideas of an old man must differ from those of an active man of the world. (Müller, 1904/2013, p. 16)

To this reorientation conforms the shift from worship and sacrifice to learning and knowledge as major guides towards a proper practice of life (including religious as well as everyday practice), and a corresponding interest not only in metaphysical but also in epistemological questions. Upanishadic epistemology, as we have noted, is *pramana-sastra*, the theory or study of the pramanas (sources of knowledge or modes and tools of inquiry). Major sources of knowledge are seen in the triad of perception, of inference, and of testimony by others (see, e.g., Phillips, 2011):

1. *Perception*, the most important of the three, is mainly but not exclusively thought of as sensory perception (there are different views as to whether "inner" consciousness is also to be considered as a valid source of perception).
2. *Testimony*, the second most important, stands for oral evidence offered by a competent speaker (e.g., a sage or a *brahmin*, or a person well educated or experienced in the subject at hand) or for a statement from the Vedas or some other source acknowledged as authoritative.
3. *Inference*, finally, provides derived knowledge in the form of conclusions gained from certified perception or trustworthy testimony through careful reflection (e.g., early forms of syllogism, conclusion from analogy, and "suppositional" reasoning, the latter being a form of inference not unlike what Kant later meant with "transcendental" reasoning or Habermas today with "presuppositional analysis," e.g., by means of "universal-pragmatic" or "formal-pragmatic" reasoning), as well as through dialogue (e.g., characteristically, teacher-student dialogue).

Consequently also *logic*, understood as the study of valid forms of argument and inference (*tarka-vidya*, "science of argument," e.g., Ganeri, 2001, p. 7, cf. pp. 151-167) rather than of deductive logic only, becomes a subject of *pramana-sastra*. So does the study of *language* as a means to formulate, transmit, and preserve knowledge, specifically of course *Sanskrit*, the language of the shruti. There are early developments of linguistic disciplines such as phonetics, syntax, semantics, etymology, and grammar. Panini's (1977) *Ashtadhyayi*, a collection of some 4,000 grammatical rules (in the form of *sutras*) written in the 6th to 5th century BCE (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013d; other sources locate it in the 4th century BCE, e.g.

Hamilton, 2001, p. 60) stands out as an impressive work that covers all the just mentioned subdisciplines of a philosophy of language and employs them to clarify the meaning of Sanskrit words and the rules of their proper employment; it has been instrumental in establishing the "classical" form and usage of Sanskrit as a ceremonial and learned language and has remained an authoritative source that is still used and cited today (see Hamilton, 2001, pp. 60-62, for a short but interesting appreciation of the historical merits of Panini's grammar).

This early interest of the Vedic tradition in the philosophies of knowledge and language is influential to this date, in that India has developed a long-standing tradition of epistemological and language-analytical scholarship, not only but also as applied to the ancient scriptures. Remarkably, unlike today's analytical tradition in "Western" philosophy, the ancient Indian interest in the sources of knowledge and the role of language did not bring about a diminished appreciation of metaphysical questions but rather, it lead to a more careful way of dealing with them. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that the Upanishadic metaphysics of "this" and "that" makes it so clear how limited ordinary experiential knowledge is bound to remain in the face of the world of the "that," which nevertheless shapes this world of ours. Clearly (at least, for a Vedic thinker), additional sources of insight are needed, beyond the *pramanas* already mentioned.

One need not think of mystic experience and other esoteric sources of insight only in this context. In addition to the just mentioned study of language and logic, there is surely also a role, in Eastern no less than in Western thought, for the study of the nature and role of *general ideas* – ideas of reason that lead us beyond what we can know empirically but which are bound to remain problematic concepts. Since both the outer, transcendent reality of the cosmos and the inner, spiritual reality of the human self (the two main themes of the Upanishads) reach beyond what we can hope to know through inquiry, it is indeed to be expected that general ideas play no less an epistemological and methodological role in the Upanishads than in Western philosophy (e.g., of particular interest to us, in practical philosophy). Although they are basically metaphysical ideas, there is no reason why they should not lend themselves to methodological analysis.

This is the topic to which we must now return. Are there examples of major

concepts in the Upanishads that do play such a double role as metaphysical and methodological concepts? And if so, how do the Upanishads conceive of their proper use and perhaps also of related basic "movements of thought" as we have sketched them out in the previous essay of the series with respect to Western ideas of reason? With this sort of questions in mind, I have selected three concepts that play a particular role in the Upanishads and which I also find particularly interesting from a methodological point of view, the first two well known in Western philosophy, the third less so – *brahman*, *atman*, and *jagat*. Their analysis and discussion will be in the center of the next part of this excursion into the world of ideas of ancient India.

*(To be continued)*

### Acknowledgement

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### Notes

15) Navlakha (2000, p. x) offers a useful overview in tabular form of the four strands of Vedas, showing their internal organization around the four compilations of Samhitas. An earlier account by Monier-Williams (1877, pp. 14-16) structures the Vedas into only three main strands, to which he refers as "the three portions of the Veda, viz. Mantra, Brahmana, and Upanishad." As he explains, these three portions or subdivisions of the Veda are constituted by the following types of text:

1. *Mantra*, prayer and praise, embodied in texts and metrical hymns.
2. *Brahmana*, or ritualistic precept and illustration written in prose and occasional verse.
3. *Upanishad*, mystical or secret doctrine, appended to the aforesaid Brahmana, and written in prose and occasional verse. (Monier-Williams, 1877, p. 18, cf. p. 43)

A third major account distinguishes two main parts of the Vedas, the *Karma kanda* (meaning "the part relating to religious works," Navlakha, 2000, p. ix) and the *Jnana kanda* (meaning "the knowledge part," Navlakha, 2000, p. x). Each part is then divided into two collections of *shruti* or revealed texts; the Samhitas (or Mantras, in the scheme of Monier-Williams) and Brahmanas make up the Karma kanda, while the Aranyakas and the Upanishads make up the Jnana kanda. The reason why Monier-Williams does not consider the Aranyakas in his scheme appears to be that he counts them among the Brahmanas; he colorfully describes them as "certain chapters of the Brahmanas, so awe-inspiring and profound, that they were required to be read in the solitude of the forests." (1877, p. 44) The name "Aranyaka" indeed means as much as "of the forest" (e.g., Easwaran, 2007, p. 338). The common denominator of the Aranyakas and the Upanishads is that they represent the more reflective and philosophical (rather than merely ritual and religious) parts of the Veda. [\[BACK\]](#)

16) There are also non-Vedic (or "non-orthodox") traditions of Indian spirituality and philosophy, notably those of **Buddhism**, **Jainism**, **Sikhism**, and **Brahmoism** (the latter not to be confused with **Brahmanism**, which belongs to the Vedic tradition). These do not regard the Veda scriptures as authoritative sources and for this reason are referred to in Hindu texts as "non-orthodox" or "heterodox" texts, as distinguished from the Vedic orthodoxy. I will not consider these non-Vedic sources of Indian philosophical thought in the present essay at all; see King (1999) for a scholarly but very readable introduction to the subject of "Indian philosophy," including a discussion of the problematic side of this notion. [\[BACK\]](#)

17) The sources that I have consulted differ about the period of origin for the early Upanishads (i.e., those Upanishads which are directly linked to the earlier three strands of the Veda). For example, Müller (1879, p. lxvii) ascribes their origin to a time "older than 600 B.C., i.e., anterior to the rise of Buddhism" and Hume (1996, p.6) to "about 600 or 500 B.C."; Phillips (1996, p. 8) dates them between 800 and 300 BCE, Navlakha (2000, p. x) between 900 and 600 BCE, and Hamilton (2001, p. 108) between 800 and 500 BCE; and the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2013c) even inconsistently dates the Upanishads between 1000 and 600 BCE (subsection "Sacred Texts") and between 700 and 500 BCE (subsection "The Upanishads"). [\[BACK\]](#)

18) A protreptic text seeks not just to inform but also to instruct and transform students or readers through knowledge and insight. The term comes from Aristotle's text *Protreptikos* (literally = exhortation, instruction), of which only fragments have survived. A pertinent example of a protreptic text from classical Western philosophy is Seneca's *De brevitate vita*. [\[BACK\]](#)

19) I appreciate Easwaran's (2007, pp. 133-138) translation for its elegance and simplicity. However, as compared to the translations of Müller and Navlakha's (2000, pp. 186-194), Olivelle (1996, pp. 149-156), and Nikhilananda (1959, pp. 294-296, incomplete transl.), it may be seen to have a slightly more pronounced religious bent and to give a bit more weight to literary elegance as compared to scholarly precision. For my present purpose I have found it useful to rely on Easwaran but to slightly edit his translation in two respects, in the form of minor changes that also apply to subsequent citations from the Upanishads inasmuch as they are marked as "slightly edited":

(a) In the references to brahman, I have replaced Easwaran's use of the personified "he" and "him" by "it." This conforms better to the understanding that I propose, and it is backed by Müller and Navlakha (2000) and Olivelle (1996). Their translations of the three lines with that magic formula, the reiteration of which for them begins with verse 6.8.7, reads as follows:

Now that which is that subtle essence [the root of all], in it all that exists has its self. It is the true. It is the Self, and thou, O Svetaketu, art it. (Müller and Navlakha, 2000, p. 190, brackets original; read "all this" for "all").

And similarly:

The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*atman*). And that's how you are, Svetaketu. (Olivelle, 1996, p. 152)

(b) In this and in the previous quote from Easwaran's translation of the Chandogya, I have added (in italics) the original Sanskrit wording, as it stands for two of the four most famous short formulas by which the Upanishads sum up their essential teachings – *sarvam idam brahman* ("all [this] is brahman") and. *tat twam asi* ("you are that" or, more literally, "that is how you are"). The two other are *ahimsa paramo dharma* ("the highest law is nonviolence," Ghandi's Upanishadic principle of political struggle) and *tena tyaktena bhuñjitha*, "renounce and enjoy," a key Hindu principle expressed in the opening verse of the Isha Upanishad, which we will analyze later in some detail (see Seventh Reflection, in the next essay). For a helpful introductory discussion of all four formulas, see Nagler (2007, pp. 316-322). [\[BACK\]](#)

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**March 2015**

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**March-April, 2015**



*The cathedral of Burgos, Spain: built from 1221 to 1567 with knowledge and faith, it grew in power*

„The act done with knowledge,  
with inner awareness and faith, grows in power.”

(*Chandogya Upanishad*, 1.1.10, as transl. by Easwaran, 2007, p. 125)

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