

The Upanishads – An introduction

What are they?

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

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

But, at the end of the Vedas, the Upanishads leave all cosmology and all applied knowledge behind. It is not their basic concern to describe the world, nor to achieve the various objects that people desire. Their basic concern is philosophical.

In a very brief and uncompromising way, they ask questions about knowledge itself. They are not satisfied with all the descriptions and the pictures that we build on top of our knowledge. Beneath this show of pictures and descriptions, they want to find out just what we really know. And they go on to ask what happiness is; beneath all the desired objects through which we pursue happiness, or run away from it.

Unfortunately, such philosophical questioning is often thought to be very complicated and unfamiliar. It is thought to take one far away from ordinary life, through a highly technical and convoluted process of learning, into mystifying conclusions that can only be understood in high-flown and rarefied states of experience.

But philosophy doesn’t have to be like this. In fact, it is at its best when it is simple and straightforward. All that it does is to look for plain truth. And it looks by asking questions, about the various beliefs that we usually take for granted.

In traditional times, such skeptical questioning was deliberately kept covered up, by making philosophy seem difficult and strange. The problem was that traditional communities were organized through religious faith and belief. In ordinary life, open philosophical questioning was a threat to social order. For this reason, philosophy was usually kept away from ordinary people. Philosophical texts like the Upanishads were kept secret, hidden behind an aura of difficulty and mysticism. They were

taught only in restricted, esoteric cults: which were closed to all but a few special initiates.

In the modern world, the situation is quite different; because our society has now learned to thrive on skeptical questioning. There is no longer any need to hide philosophical enquiry, from ordinary life and education. In particular, there is no need for the traditional mystique that kept the Upanishads inaccessible.

Behind this mystique, the Upanishads are rather plain and direct. They do not construct any complex system of ideas and beliefs. They do not build any elaborate or strange or difficult picture of the world. Instead, they ask what is plainly and simply true, beneath all the complications of our uncertain beliefs. In short, they are only looking for the home ground of truth.

In the Chāndogya Upanishad, there is a famous story that illustrates this direct search, for a return to home truth. The story starts like this:

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

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

from
6.1.1

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

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

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

'Sir, how indeed is that teaching?'

from
6.1.2-3

Behind the terse language, the problem is a familiar one. Shvetaketu

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

As the story goes on, Shvetaketu is taught through a number of illustrations. For one of these, he is taken to a large tree, whose fruits have fallen on the ground. He is asked to pick up a fruit and break it open. It has tiny seeds in it. He is asked to break a seed and say what he finds here. He has to reply: 'Nothing Sir, the seeds are far too small.'

So now his father says:

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

'This subtle something is that
"this-itself-ness" which is all this world.

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

In this illustration, the tree represents the entire universe. To be more accurate, it represents the big picture that we have of the whole universe, with all its vast size and mind-boggling complexity. Compared with this huge picture, our little personalities are very small and insignificant, like tiny little seeds. But there are some huge trees which grow from the unseen essence of life within a tiny seed. So also, our big pictures of the world all rise from knowledge. This knowledge is the unseen essence of our lives, in each of our little personalities. We cannot see it with our outward-looking eyes; but it is always present here, within each person's body and mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And when released, he knows that he’s arrived, entirely complete.’ *from*
6.14.2

When were the Upanishads composed?

According to modern academics, the early Upanishads were composed over two thousand five hundred years ago, before the time of the Buddha. The Buddha lived around 500 B.C.; many of the major Upanishads were composed earlier. This is roughly at the same time as the earliest Greek philosophers of whom we know.

These early Greek philosophers were called the ‘Pre-Socratics’; because they lived before Socrates and other philosophers of classical Greece. Unfortunately, the pre-Socratic philosophers are recorded only through fragmentary accounts and quotations. What makes the Upanishads valuable is that they come down to us in a much fuller form, carefully handed over from generation to generation.

There are many Upanishads, of which some ten or twelve are considered to be the main ones. Of these main Upanishads, some half are dated before 500 B.C., and the rest are dated up to 200 A.D. But this dating is very approximate and rather uncertain; because our knowledge of early Indian history is very patchy and unsettled.

Despite the uncertainty, one thing is clear. The Upanishads are part of a

very long tradition of knowledge, which has been developing over many thousands of years. And this tradition is not just a dead relic from the past. It is very much alive today. It is a living tradition that has been passed down in an unbroken line from teacher to disciple, through all the social and cultural upheavals that have taken place.

As the Upanishads explicitly tell us, they continue from a previous tradition, which was already very ancient at the time they were composed. They show a sophistication and breadth of thought that must have been developing over a very long period of time, from long before we know.

This living tradition must have continued through the rise and fall of the Indus civilization, which we think was before the Vedas and the Upanishads were composed in their present form. The same philosophical tradition continued afterwards; as the gods of the Vedas gave way to further religions, like Buddhism and Jainism and the Hinduism of the Purāṇas. It continued also through the decline and fall of classical India, through the medieval period of Islamic conquest and the development of regional cultures. It has continued more recently, through British colonial rule and the freedom struggle, right into the modern world.

There is a simple reason why the philosophical tradition continues like this. It looks for a truth that is quite independent of our social and cultural structures. Such structures are built by art and religion, and by technology and science. Philosophy goes in the opposite direction. Instead of building up structures, it asks its way back down, towards the ground. And in the Upanishads, this ground is sought by distilling knowledge, until there is nothing left but its unchangeable essence.

In the course of history, cultural structures develop and change; but the home ground of knowledge continues, and remains the same. Thus, the *expression* of knowledge changes, through art and religion, technology and science. But philosophy reflects, from such changing expressions, to an underlying knowledge that stays unchanged.

For example, in modern physics, we can say that Einstein knew more than Newton. Or that more is known about chemistry in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth. But in the Upanishadic tradition, it would be ridiculous to say that Ramaṇa Maharishi knew more in the twentieth century than Shankara in the eighth century, or that Shankara knew more than the sages of the Upanishads, or that the sages of the Upanishads knew more than tribal sages before the development of civilization.

In this tradition, knowledge is not sought as something which grows or

declines, or is affected by time. According to the Upanishads, whoever finds knowledge finds the same thing, no matter when or where. The only difference between Ramaṇa Maharishi and Shankara, or any other sage, is that their common knowledge is differently *expressed*: in the languages and the ideas of their particular times.

The concern here is with a timeless ground, which is unaffected by its time-bound expressions. In the Taittirīya Upanishad, Varuṇa says this to his son Bhrigu.

‘That ground from which all things are born,
on which depends all that is born,
and into which all things return,
this ground is what you need to know.’ *from*
3.1

In the Muṇḍaka Upanishad, this same ground is described a little further, as ‘the changeless source of being’.

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

‘Among the lower of these are:
the Rīg Veda, the Yajur Veda,
the Sāma Veda, the Atharva Veda,
phonetics, ritual, grammar,
etymology, metrics, astrology.

‘But the higher knowledge
is just that by which
the unchanging is attained.’ *from*
1.1.4-5

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

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

‘that is the changeless source of being
which the wise and steadfast see.’ *from*
1.1.6

Who were the authors?

Unlike the Buddha or Mahāvira or Socrates or Aristotle, we do not know the authors of the Upanishads as historical persons. We do not know quite where or when they lived, nor who they were. In fact, the tradition deliberately discounts their personal identity.

Most Hindu texts are called ‘smṛiti’, which literally means ‘remembered’. The idea here is that these texts were written down by particular authors, and the writing represents a memory of the author’s experience. Such representation is *indirect*. It is qualified by personality, and it is liable to interpretation.

The Vedas and the Upanishads had a special position: in that they were called ‘śruti’, which literally means ‘heard’. These śruti texts were not supposed to be written down. Instead, they were meant to be passed directly from teacher to disciple, by immediate listening. For these texts were meant to show something that is directly ‘heard’, not indirectly ‘remembered’. They show a *direct* knowledge that has no personal author. The texts may have come through various personalities; but these personalities did not get in the way, and are thus unimportant.

This distinction of śruti and smṛiti should not of course be taken too literally; because it is only a traditional convention. But it does tell us something that is confirmed when we read the Upanishads themselves. They were composed by individuals who were concerned with impersonal knowledge, unmixed with anything personal. In particular, they thought that their own personalities were insignificant.

What the Upanishads contain is stories of such individuals and their teachings. These individuals are surprisingly often kings and warriors; they are sometimes scholars and priests; they are often householders, sometimes sannyāsis or ascetics; they may be men or women. But such personal characteristics do not matter. What matters is knowledge, beyond all personality.

This is illustrated in a dialogue from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad (3.5.1). Here is a retelling, a little paraphrased.

Kahola asked: ‘Yājnyavalkya, could you explain the nature of that complete reality which is immediately present and directly known, as the universal self in everything?’

Yājnyavalkya replied: ‘This reality is your own self. Your own self is always present, here and now, in everything.’

‘But *what* is it, in everything?’

‘It is beyond hunger and thirst, beyond grief and delusion, beyond decay and death. Realizing this self, men of knowledge rise above desire for family and wealth and worlds. And thus, they are naturally freed from the bondage of petty desires for the limited, passing objects of the apparent world. For they come to understand that all desires for objects are only varying manifestations of longing for the true happiness of unconditioned self.

‘A man of learning who has had enough of technical sophistication may seek a life of innocence and simplicity. When he has also had enough of innocence and simplicity, he may become contemplative. When he has had enough of contemplation and states beyond contemplation, then he may become a true man of knowledge.’

‘How may such a man of knowledge be?’

‘However he may seem to be, in that he is true to knowledge. All else is misery and wrong.’

According to the Upanishads, their authors are people who have let go all sense of personal identity. They have thoroughly questioned who they really are; and they have come to the conclusion that the real self is pure consciousness, which is utterly impersonal.

When we think of ourselves as personal egos, we identify with our personalities, or in other words with our bodies, our senses and our minds. But this personal identification is false; because our personalities are only outward instruments, through which the world is known. They are themselves mere objects, in the world that is known through them. We are not these changing personalities, which vary from person to person. Instead, each one of us is pure, impersonal consciousness, beneath all changes and variations in our bodies, our senses and our minds. The Upanishads describe their authors as people who have enquired so relentlessly into the nature of self that no trace of personal ego remains, to cloud their knowledge of truth.

Such a relentless enquiry, into the ultimate nature of self, is described in the Aitareya Upanishad, chapter 3.

What is this self
to which we pay such heed?

Which is the self?

Is it that by which one sees,

or that by which one hears,
or that by which scents are smelled?

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

from
3.1.1

Or is it mind and heart?

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

All these are only names,
attributed to consciousness.

from
3.1.2

This passage throws into question the meaning of the word ‘consciousness’. As a matter of ingrained habit, we usually look at consciousness as a personal faculty: which expresses a limited personality, with a limited body, a limited set of senses and a limited mind. In this habitual view, it is the person who is considered fundamental, and consciousness is just an expression of personality. Here, ‘knowing’ is just something which a person does, in order to deal with various objects and to achieve various objectives.

But, what we call a ‘person’ is just a collection of various faculties. On the one hand, there are various bodily faculties: like sight, hearing, speech and taste. On the other hand, there are various mental and emotional faculties: like memory, thought, imagination, purpose, wish and feeling. These differing faculties give rise to different identifications of self; as for example when a person says: ‘I see’, or ‘I hear’, or ‘I speak’, or ‘I think’, or ‘I imagine’, or ‘I wish’, or ‘I feel’.

So the Aitareya Upanishad asks: which of these identifications is correct? Which of them is the real self? And the answer given is that ‘All these are only names, attributed to consciousness.’ In other words, all our faculties and all our seeming selves have one thing in common. They all represent an underlying principle that we call ‘consciousness’. Thus, it is consciousness that is each person’s real self.

But here, ‘consciousness’ is not being viewed as a personal faculty of

any kind. Instead, it is the common, underlying principle that is shown by all personal faculties. This is just the reverse of our habitual view. Here, it is consciousness that is fundamental; and all our personalities are only differing and changing appearances, which express this common and unchanging principle of consciousness.

Hence, ‘knowing’ is not something that a person does, towards an object or an objective. Perceiving an object or thinking about an object are sensual and mental actions that take place at the apparent surface of experience. They are only *expressions* of knowledge. They are not knowledge itself. Knowing in itself is utterly impersonal and objectless, unmixed with any personal activities towards objects. It is pure illumination: at the unchanging ground of consciousness, beneath all changing appearances.

In everyone’s experience, all appearances express this one, same ground of consciousness. As the Aitareya Upanishad goes on to say, it is the one reality of the entire world: shown by all appearances throughout the universe, no matter when, no matter where, no matter how perceived, nor in whose experience.

Consciousness is everything:

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

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

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

So they are all established
upon the base of consciousness.

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

Consciousness is all there is.

*from
3.1.3*

One who knows self as consciousness

has risen, from the seeming world,
to this unconditioned state
where everything is only light.

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

from
3.1.4

Where were the Upanishads taught?

The Upanishads were composed in Sanskrit, the main language of classical Hindu learning. In the period when the major Upanishads were composed, Sanskrit learning was based in the northern part of the Indian sub-continent, so they were probably composed there.

But Sanskrit learning was spreading south, along with communities of Brahmins who travelled to the southern kingdoms and became influential there. So the south must have played a part in the composition of some later Upanishads, possibly including even one or two of the major ones.

In the teaching and interpretation of the Upanishads, the south played a major part. In particular, three great teachers, or ācāryas, came from there. They were Shankara, Rāmānuja and Madhva.

Around the eighth or ninth centuries A.D., Shankara put forward a systematic theory that interpreted and explained the philosophy of the Upanishads. To teach this theoretical system, he founded a number of sannyāsi or ascetic orders, distributed throughout India. Some centuries later, Rāmānuja and Madhva produced their own theoretical systems and founded their own institutions.

The difference between these three teachers was in their theories. In Shankara's theory, the basis was pure philosophy. In the theories of the other two teachers, the basis was a mixture of philosophy with religious ideas of God. But in practice, all these three, along with other teachers, took part in a general movement through which the Upanishads had a profound, though indirect effect on popular culture. This movement was the growth of devotional religion: in which the abstractions of traditional philosophy were metaphorically expressed, through more concrete forms of religious worship and imagination.

Geographically, the Upanishads were taught wherever Hinduism spread, including southeast Asia. But socially, the direct study of the Upanishads was limited to the upper castes; because it required an education in classical Sanskrit, which was quite different from the ordinary languages that

most people spoke, even in north India. So, while the philosophy of the Upanishads was being expressed in the popular forms of devotional religion, the texts themselves were accessible only to a restricted circle of scholarly families, ascetic orders and philosophical cults.

It is only recently, in modern times, that the Upanishads have begun to be translated and interpreted for ordinary people. Unfortunately, this work is still bogged down by the aura of mystery that hangs over from traditional times, when philosophical questioning was kept hidden. The Upanishads are still misrepresented as prescribing a strange and highly specialized doctrine, which applies only to some exclusive area of mystical experience.

In fact, the Upanishads are concerned with precisely that knowledge which is common to all experience, everywhere. As they point out, this knowledge cannot be restricted to any names or forms or qualities, to any words or texts, to any social classes or cultural systems, or to any geographical locations. In the end, it can only be taught and learned in one place: in each individual's direct experience. That is why so much emphasis is placed on direct learning, from a living teacher.

All that the teaching does is to reason back, into direct experience. And in thus reasoning back, it looks first for the true nature of the self. This inward reflection is described in a stanza from the Kaṭha Upanishad.

The world that happens of itself
has excavated outward holes,
through which perception looks outside
and does not see the self within.

But someone brave, who longs for that
which does not die, turns sight back in
upon itself. And it is thus
that self is seen, returned to self,
to its own true reality.

from
4.1

When the self is thus seen for what it is, it turns out to be universal. It is an unconditioned consciousness that is the same in everyone. At the centre of each individual's experience, the same consciousness is always found. And looking from here, the reality of whole world turns out to be nothing other than this one consciousness: unmixed with anything else.

Thus the Upanishads tell us that 'consciousness' and 'reality' are just different words for the same thing. When we look back, into our indi-

vidual experiences, we call it 'self' or 'consciousness'. When we look out, towards objects, we call it 'reality'. But it remains the same, no matter what it is called, nor how anyone looks at it. There is finally no difference between the self that knows and the reality that is known. When this seeming difference is dissolved in truth, we come to happiness and peace.

Here is a description from the Kāṭha Upanishad.

It is each being's inner self,
the single guiding principle
that makes from its own unity
the many seeming things of world.

It's known by those who see it as
it is: already standing here,
as one's own self. Just this, and
only this, brings lasting happiness.

from
5.12

In things that change, it is that
continuity which does not change.

In conscious things, it is the
consciousness that's common to them all.

Among the many, it is one:
the undivided unity
where all desire is fulfilled.

It's known by those who see it as
it is: already standing here,
as one's own self. Just this, and
nothing else but this, brings lasting peace.

from
5.13

It's found by seeing 'that out there'
as nothing else but 'this in here';
and coming thus to happiness,
unlimited and objectless.

How may I get to know it then,
as it shines out towards the world
or shines reflected back within?

from
5.14

In it, the sun and moon don't shine;
nor do the stars, nor lightning
flashing from the sky, nor burning fire.

It shines alone, by its own light;
and everything shines after it.

Here, all those things that may appear
shine back: as its reflected light.

from
5.15

How were the Upanishads learned?

The Upanishads were meant to be learned by listening: as the tradition specifically implies, when it calls them ‘shruti’ or ‘heard’ texts.

In traditional times, learning was generally oral: with the teacher reciting, and the students listening and repeating. This oral learning took on a special significance for the Upanishads; because their teaching is centred upon a number of short and very concentrated statements.

A teacher would recite such a statement and explain what it meant. Since the statement was short and the disciples were trained in memorization, they wouldn’t need to pay much attention to the business of recitation and remembering. Their attention was supposed to be focused on listening and understanding.

Later on, a disciple would keep repeating the statement and reflecting upon it. Mechanical repetition was no use. Here too, the disciple was required to listen: by reflecting upon the words, and thus getting back to what they meant. As a disciple kept reflecting like this, questions would come and go. They would be thought and rethought, over and over again; until the disciple came to a thorough and independent understanding of the statement, in his or her own right.

This was clearly not rote learning, but a sustained process of reflective examination and enquiry. The statements of the Upanishads have two aspects:

- The first aspect is called ‘mantra’, which literally means ‘device’ or ‘design’. Here, the shape of sound in the chanted words has an effect upon mood, in much the same way that music does. As a listener keeps concentrating attention through these shapes of chanted sound, the mind is thrown into special states of experience, called ‘samādhis’. These samādhis are trance-like states of mental concentration: where the powers of the mind get expanded to an extraordinary degree, beyond the usual limitations of ordinary experience. The mantra aspect is thus associated with the discipline of yoga or mystical meditation.
- The second aspect is called ‘vicāra’, which means ‘thought’ or ‘enquiry’.

Here, the mind reflects back to its own basis of understanding; beneath all physical or mental shapes of sound. The physical and mental sounds are heard at the limited surface of the mind's attention. The questioning thought of vicāra is not concerned with the shape of spoken sounds, but with their meaning. Here, thought looks back into meaning, thus reasoning its way towards the underlying ground of understanding. This vicāra aspect is nothing else but the reflective reason of philosophy.

When the Upanishads are viewed from the outside, it is their mantra aspect that seems predominant. Thus they often seem to be mystical pronouncements: which depend on esoteric practices of yoga, and are quite opposed to open-minded reasoning. But this is a misleading appearance, which mistakes the externals for the essential core.

Yes, the Upanishads were composed and learned in an environment that contained a great deal of mystical and ritual practice. And for this reason, they developed a powerful mantra aspect, which was often used to help with their philosophical enquiry. But this mantra aspect was only an optional device, for those who were inclined towards mystical practice. It was never the essence or the centre of the teaching.

There is a pernicious stereotype of traditional India: as a mystical land, somehow opposed to the rationalism of the West. Unfortunately, it is a stereotype in which many Indians have shamefully acquiesced. But it is simply untrue. The fact is that reason and mysticism were developed side by side. And reason was developed at the philosophical core, to which mysticism was only an optional approach.

In this respect, the Upanishads are very much like the Greek philosopher Socrates, who played a major part in the founding of Western reason. From what we are told of his life, he was something of a mystic, known for his trance-like states of mental absorption and for his extraordinary powers of endurance. From his childhood on, he was occasionally guided by an inner voice which he regarded as a divine sign or 'daimon'. He was deeply religious; and he paid due respect to the Delphic oracle and to the myths and rituals of his day. But all of this served only to reinforce his central interest: which was to uncover knowledge, from all the pretensions that are heaped upon it. And here he used reason. As he said: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

It is the same with the Upanishads. There was plenty of mysticism around them; and they took account of it, along with everything else. But they are not basically concerned with the mystical expansion of mental power. Their essential core is the pure knowledge of philosophy. And

here, the emphasis is clearly on the vicāra or enquiry aspect: of reflective reasoning.

For example, in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, when Yājnyavalkya is leaving home, he offers his wife Maitreyī a settlement. She says she is not interested in a material settlement, since that will not lead to deathlessness. Instead, she asks him: ‘Teach me what you know.’ This search for ‘deathlessness’ may seem mystical to some, but his answer shows that he doesn’t look at it like that. He only shows her how to reason back, towards the source of our common experience.

First, he tells her that he has always loved her, and what she asks him now makes her even dearer to him. Then he points out that what anyone loves in someone else can only be the inner core of knowing self. As he says:

‘What does a wife love in her husband?
Is it just that he’s a husband?
If it’s that, it isn’t love.
All she can love in him is self.

‘And when a husband loves his wife,
is it love if she’s just a wife?
All he can love in her is self.

‘So also love of children, friends,
living creatures, places, objects,
love of power, love of knowledge. *from*
All that’s loved is only self.’ *4.5.6*

But how is Maitreyī to realize the true nature of this essential self? How is she to find out what she really is? Yājnyavalkya does not tell her to meditate, nor to engage in any mystical practice, nor to seek any kind of mystical experience. Instead, he explains things to her a little, in a way that sets her thinking. And he finally leaves her with a single question, which he says will take her to deathlessness. The question is typically short and simple: ‘How can that which knows be known?’

In the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, the same reflective examination is described, in a slightly different way:

It’s grasped only by being it:
by coming just to what one is,
to one’s own true reality.

It is called 'bodiless'; for it
is not attached or limited
to any body in the world.

It is the source of love, from which
all doing and undoing comes.

It is the principle of light,
from which creation issues forth.

Whoever knows it leaves behind
all petty personality.

from
5.14

What are the Upanishads for?

The Upanishads have only one objective. They are looking for truth. And they take this search to the furthest extreme. They are looking for one hundred percent truth, unmixed with anything pretended or false.

In the normal course of life, what we usually take for truth has many compromises in it. It comes dressed up in our thoughts and desires, which contain an element of imagination and make-believe. This make-believe is a convenient pretence, a sort of white lie that we let pass and leave unexamined; while we are busy, going after various things that we currently want.

The Upanishads are not willing to accept any such compromises. They want truth plain and simple, without any dressing of make-believe. And they say that this truth is our underlying ground of happiness and peace. It is this that all our desires seek, through each of the particular objects that we try to achieve.

In a passage from the Kena Upanishad, this ground of truth is called 'tad-vanam', which means 'that which is desired'. Here is what the passage says, a little interpreted and paraphrased.

Objectively, seen from the world
created by our faculties
of outward sense, truth seems to shine
only in blinding flashes of
illuminated happiness,
which come and go away again.

from
4.4

Subjectively, seen where the mind
turns back to self from which it comes,
truth is at once both goal and base.

It's that to which all mind aspires,
and that on which all mind depends:

as it appears to carry on
through changing time, enabling world
to be conceived by seeming mind
from fragments of past memory.

from
4.5

Truth is just that which is desired
beneath all seeming goals of mind.

It's that which all desire seeks,
and it should thus be understood:

beneath the many different forms
imagined by our partial minds
to represent the truth they seek.

Whoever knows this truth of love
is loved, in truth, by everyone.

from
4.6

In this passage, it is clear that the Upanishads are not looking for anything objective. They are not looking for any physical or mental objects. Instead, they are looking for the subjective ground of truth, which is found in each person's own experience. From this subjective ground, all objects and desires rise. Through every object of desire, the happiness we seek is only a return, to home truth.

This same return is further illustrated by the famous metaphor of two birds, in the Muṇḍaka Upanishad. Here is a translation.

Two birds, in close companionship,
are perched upon a single tree.

Of these, one eats and tastes the fruit.

The other does not eat, but just looks on.

from
3.1.1

There is an obvious parallel here, with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. There is a tree of life, with fruit on it. And a question is implied, about eating the fruit. However, unlike the biblical story, this is not a religious myth about the fall of man, into temptation and sin. Instead, it is a philosophical description, of each person's current experience.

The two birds are jīva, the personal soul, and ātmā, the impersonal self.

- The personal soul is an apparent ego, which is caught up in various actions and their results. Thus it eats and tastes the fruits of various happenings, on the ‘tree’ of life.
- The impersonal self is quite unaffected by all happenings and activities. It only witnesses them, in the sense that they are illuminated by its light. It is the underlying ground from which all illumination comes, from which all appearances arise.

The subsequent stanza tells us how a person seems caught in misery and gets freed into happiness. Misery is just a result of the delusion that one is a personal ego: dispossessed of desired objects, and helplessly caught in a world of changing acts. Happiness is freedom from this delusion, as one returns to one’s own home ground. Here, subject and object are one; so there can be no sense of dispossession at all.

On this same tree, a person gets
depressed and suffers grief: deluded
by a sense of seeming helplessness,
and feeling thus quite dispossessed.

But when one sees what’s truly loved –
as one’s own self, unlimited,
impersonal, beyond all else,
the source from where all help and
guidance comes, where everything belongs –
there one is freed from misery.

from
3.1.2