

have been proposed, the name is commonly thought to be derived from words that mean “sitting near.”⁶ If the term’s derivation is correct, the word suggests disciples sitting near a master, learning techniques for achieving religious experience. In any case, primary to the Upanishads is the notion that with spiritual discipline and meditation, both priests and nonpriests can experience the spiritual reality that underlies all seemingly separate realities. Unlike much of the earlier Vedic material, which dictates that only hereditary priests can be religious masters, the Upanishads tell us that a person who has the necessary experience can be a spiritual master. The Upanishads thus possibly continue the religious interest of the forest dwellers of the Aranyakas.

The Upanishads are written primarily in dialogue form, appearing both as prose and as poetry. Because they were produced over many hundreds of years, dating them is not easy. It is generally thought that those in prose form—such as the Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Taittiriya, and Kena Upanishads—may be earlier works and that than those in poetic form—such as the Katha and Mandukya Upanishads—may be later. About a dozen Upanishads are especially popular.

Important Concepts of the Upanishads

The most important notions in the Upanishads are *Brahman*, *Atman*, *maya*, *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*.⁷ These primary concepts, which would become essential notions in much later Hindu spirituality, continue to be taught today.

Brahman and Atman The term **Brahman** originally stood for the cosmic power present in the Vedic sacrifice and chants, over which the priest had control. (The Sanskrit word *Brahman* is neuter and comes from a stem meaning “to be great.”) In the Upanishads the word *Brahman* was expanded to mean a divine reality at the heart of things. One of the most famous dialogues appears in the Chandogya Upanishad. It involves a priestly father and his son in discussion. The young man, Shvetaketu, has been away, studying with a specialist for many years. He has memorized chants and learned priestly rituals. The young man’s father questions him



Many Hindu concepts are complex, and serious Hindus often seek guidance from a priest as they try to improve their practice and understanding
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about what he has learned, and the son proudly recites the formulas that he knows. The father then asks him what he knows about Brahman, the Supreme Spirit. About this, though, the young man knows nothing. Trying to assist his son's understanding, the father asks his son to fill a glass with water, put salt in it, and leave it overnight. The next day the father asks his son to find the salt:

"Bring me the salt you put into the water last night."

Shvetaketu looked into the water, but could not find it, for it had dissolved.

His father then said: "Taste the water from this side. How is it?"

"It is salt [salty]."

"Taste it from the middle. How is it?"

"It is salt."

"Taste it from that side. How is it?"

"It is salt."

"Look for the salt again and come again to me."

The son did so, saying: "I cannot see the salt. I only see water."

The father then said: "In the same way, O my son, you cannot see the Spirit. But in truth he is here.

"An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality.

That is Truth. Thou art That."⁸

The Upanishads insist that Brahman is something that can be known—not simply something to be believed. The Shvetasvatara Upanishad, for example, says "I *know* that Spirit whose infinity is in all, who is ever one beyond time."⁹ Brahman, the Divine Spirit, is so real that it may be known directly. As the boy Shvetaketu has learned, knowledge of Brahman can be as immediate as tasting the flavor of salt.

What is it to know Brahman? The Upanishads insist that it cannot be put fully into words. However, the Upanishads give hints. Brahman is the lived experience that all things are in some way holy because they come from the same sacred source. It is also the experience that all things are in some way ultimately one. This is an experience that seems to defy common sense, since the world appears to be divided into many objects and types of reality. Nevertheless, when we consider reality more deeply, we recognize many unities: a piece of wood can become a boat or a house or fire or ash, and water can turn into a cloud or a plant. So, on closer inspection, all apparent separations and divisions blur. To experience Brahman is to know, firsthand, that every apparently individual reality in the world is actually a wave of the same sacred ocean of energy. Brahman, according to the Upanishads, "is the sun, the moon, and the stars. He is the fire, the waters, and the wind."¹⁰ Brahman is "the God who appears in forms infinite."¹¹

Brahman is also referred to by three words that help describe its nature as perceived by the knower: Brahman is *sat*, reality itself; *chit*, pure consciousness; and *ananda*, bliss. And although Brahman can be experienced within our everyday world of time and space, those who speak of their experience say that Brahman is ultimately beyond time and beyond space. Thus the Upanishads often add that experiencing the timelessness of Brahman can bring an end to everyday suffering and to the fear of death.

The notion of **Atman** is related to Brahman and is an equally important term in the Upanishads. Although Atman is sometimes translated as “self” or “soul,” the notion of Atman in the Upanishads is different from the notion of an individual soul. Perhaps the term *Atman* would be better translated as “deepest self.” In Hindu belief, each person has an individual soul (*jiva*), and the individual soul confers uniqueness and personality. Hinduism, though, asks this question: At the very deepest level, what really am I? I am clearly not just my body—my height and weight and hair color, all of which are subject to alteration. Am I then my tastes, thoughts, and memories? Or is there more? Is there not in me a reality more fundamental than those changing individual characteristics? According to the Upanishads, at the deepest level of what I am is a divine reality, a divine spirit that everything shares. The Upanishads teach that it is true to say that I am God, because, for the person who understands reality at the deepest level, everything is God. Atman, when experienced fully, is identical with Brahman. Atman, like Brahman, is divine, holy, and timeless. Often the term *Brahman* refers to the experience of the sacred within nature and the external universe, while *Atman* refers to the experience of the sacred within oneself. However, the same divine nature simply has two names, and both terms may be used interchangeably.

Maya The Upanishads speak of the everyday world as **maya**, which is usually translated as “illusion.”¹² This translation, though, needs explanation. Its root suggests illusion and mystery (as in “magic”), but it also has a more positive, objective connotation that suggests the original stuff of which something is made (as in “material”). The word *maya* thus contains both meanings: “magic” and “matter.” To say that all reality is “maya” is not to say that the world does not exist or that the world is a totally false perception. The world is real, but not in quite the way most people assume. For one thing, human beings view the world as consisting of individual things and people, all separate. In reality, the world is one basic holy reality that takes on many different forms. The Shvetasvatara Upanishad advises us to “know therefore that nature is Maya, but that God is the ruler of Maya; and that all beings in our universe are parts of his infinite splendour.”¹³

People also assume that the world is solid and permanent. In reality, the outside world is more like the inner world of thoughts and dreams—it shifts and changes, just as thoughts and dreams shift and change. People assume that time is real, that it advances at a regular rate, and that past, present, and future are distinct divisions. In reality, time is relative.

The model of reality set forth by the Upanishads is less like a machine made of individual moving parts. Instead, it is more like a great consciousness. This view also produces a sense of amazement at the forms and shifts that the universe takes—it is all, ultimately, unexplainable magic.

As I look out at reality from my own individual standpoint, I may see the end of my life as the end of everything. The Upanishads see things differently. First, individuals are not as individual as they suppose. Rather, they are all manifestations of the Divine Spirit, which does not end when the individual dies. They are also the continuation of earlier forms of life that have simply taken new forms. Hinduism, from about 500 BCE, generally adopted the belief that everything living has its own

life force and that every life force, when it loses one form, is reborn into another. This process is known as reincarnation.

Karma The general Hindu notion of rebirth assumes that human beings have at one or another time existed as a “lower” form, such as animal, insect, and possibly even plant. Hinduism also recognizes grades of human life, from limited and painful to exceptionally pleasant and free. Human beings are also capable of achieving “higher” forms of life, such as superhuman beings and demigods. Rebirth can move in either direction, and the human stage is a dangerous one because each human being must make dramatic choices about how to live. If a human being does not live properly, he or she may be reborn into a very poor or cruel human family—or possibly in a form of life that may be even more limited and difficult, such as a dog, a pig, or an ant. A human being can also make a spectacular leap upward beyond the human level to a superhuman existence or even beyond—to complete freedom.

What determines the direction of one's rebirth is **karma**. The word comes from a root that means “to do,” and it implies the notion of moral consequences that are carried along with every act. Karma is the moral law of cause and effect, and belief in karma is a belief that every action has an automatic moral consequence. One well-known saying expresses nicely the nature of karma: “What goes around comes around.” Karma does not work because it is the will of God or Brahman, but simply because karma is an essential part of the nature of things. It is the way that things work. Good karma brings “higher” rebirth, and bad karma brings rebirth in “lower,” more painful forms. In a certain way, this belief allows for upward mobility, since human beings, by their actions, have influence over their future births. Ultimate freedom comes when karma ceases to operate. Then rebirth, whether upward or downward, has entirely ended.

Some teachers say that karma is intrinsically neither good nor bad. Karma only seems so to the person who experiences it. In this conception, karma is like gravity—it works like a force of nature. It is like rain, which can cause a plant to grow, just as it can bring a picnic quickly to its end. Karma helps explain why some people are born with great gifts and others are born with few.

Samsara The term **samsara** refers to the wheel of life, the circle of constant rebirth, and it suggests strongly that the everyday world is full of change, as well as of struggle and suffering. The Hindu view of human life, because of its belief in reincarnation, is rather different from that commonly held in the West. Think of how often you hear someone say, “You only live once.” This view of life is not shared by Hindus, who believe an individual is constantly being reborn, having come from different earlier forms and going on to emerge in new forms in the future. Because our present human life is so short, we may think that we would like several lives in the future as well. But how many would each of us really like? Ten might sound reasonable, but a hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? A million? It's tiring just to think about all those lifetimes! And many of those forms would inevitably be unhappy ones. Sooner or later most of us would want to jump off the merry-go-round of life. We would want escape, release, liberation. This leads us to the next important concept of the Upanishads.

Moksha The term **moksha** means “freedom” or “liberation.” It comes from a root that means “to be released.” In the Upanishads, moksha is the ultimate human goal. It has various connotations. Moksha certainly includes the notion of getting beyond egotistic responses, such as resentment and anger, which limit the individual. Furthermore, unlike the modern ideal of seeking complete freedom to satisfy your individual desires, moksha implies liberation even from the limitations of being an individual—from being born as a particular person at a specific time to a unique pair of parents—a person with distinct physical characteristics, emotions, desires, and memories. You can take action to overcome these restrictions—for example, by leaving home. Sometimes this is a way of attaining moksha. Yet a person can also accept life’s limitations, even while living with them. Doing this can bring inner peace and mental freedom.

As you become freer, you look at life less from a selfish and egotistic point of view. You see life more from a perspective that embraces the whole. The unity and the sacredness that everything shares become a part of everyday experience. Kindness to all—to animals as well as to people—is one natural result of this insight, and kind actions also generate helpful karma. Detaching yourself from pleasure or pain is another practice that leads to freedom from egotism.

Ultimately, with enough insight and ascetic practice, you can go entirely beyond the limited self to know the sacred reality that everything shares. When insight and kindness are perfect, at last the pain of rebirth ends. The limitations of individuality are gone, and only Brahman remains. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad explains complete freedom in this way: “when all has become Spirit, one’s own Self, how and whom could one see?”¹⁴

The Upanishads, though sometimes obscure, are devoted to promoting an insight into ultimate oneness. Yet the Upanishads do not give detailed instructions for achieving that kind of insight or for living spiritually in the everyday world. Such guidance would have to be developed by later Hindu commentators and practitioners.

LIVING SPIRITUALLY IN THE EVERYDAY WORLD

The Hinduism that guides people’s lives today is a practical mixture of elements. Some of these came from the early stages of religious practice, which have already been discussed, and others developed later. For the ordinary layperson, Hindu practice usually involves devotion to at least one deity. It recommends finding one’s proper work and then doing it unselfishly. Hindu practice may also include the study of religious texts, meditation, and other specifically religious disciplines. The following section will deal with the elements of this practical synthesis, much of which can be found in the short classic, the Bhagavad Gita.

The Bhagavad Gita

The **Bhagavad Gita** (“divine song” or “song of the Divine One”) is part of a very long epic poem called the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata, written some time between 400 BCE and 400 CE, tells how the sons of Pandu (the Pandavas) conquered their cousins, the Kauravas, with the help of the god Krishna. The Bhagavad Gita



Krishna has long been one of Hinduism's most venerated divinities. Here, a temple's celebration of Krishna's birthday includes a child dressed as Krishna.
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was inserted at some time into this poem but has its own identity and is often printed separately from the Mahabharata. The Bhagavad Gita, shaped by the priestly class between 200 BCE and 200 CE, has become a spiritual classic. It recalls themes from the Upanishads, but it also tries to strike a balance between mysticism and the practical needs of everyday life. Action and adherence to duty are approved and can even be thought of as a spiritual path. As the Bhagavad Gita says, "the wise see knowledge and action as one."¹⁵

The Bhagavad Gita, like the Upanishads, is written in dialogue form. It occurs almost entirely between two figures: a prince, Arjuna, and his charioteer and advisor, Krishna. Arjuna's royal power is threatened by his hundred cousins, called Kauravas, and he must decide whether to fight with his brothers against them to restore his throne or to accept their rule. He is torn. On the one hand, he knows that his rule is correct. On the other hand, he wants to avoid violence. That his enemies are family members makes the matter even harder. Depressed, Arjuna "threw aside his arrows and his bow in the midst of the battlefield. He sat down on the seat of the chariot, and his heart was overcome with sorrow."¹⁶ In response, Krishna, who later reveals that he is a form of the god Vishnu, explains the need for action. "Now you shall hear how a man may become perfect, if he devotes himself to the work which is natural to him. A man shall reach perfection if he does his duty as an act of worship to the Lord."¹⁷ This means that Arjuna must follow not

merely his own desires—neither his fears nor his hope for reward—but he must simply do what is right.

Contrary to the teaching of nonviolence—which was at the same time growing strong in India in Buddhism and Jainism—Krishna advises Arjuna to fight to protect both his throne and the structure of society. In fact, to fight is his duty. At a moment of great revelation, Krishna shows Arjuna that a divine reality is at work within everything in the universe—in living and also in dying. Krishna even says that for the warrior "there is nothing nobler than a righteous war."¹⁸

The recommendation that Arjuna should fight has posed a moral problem for some followers of Hinduism. Mohandas Gandhi is typical of those who have solved this problem by saying that the Bhagavad Gita is religious allegory. Gandhi held that the call to arms is not about real war but rather a call to fight against dangerous moral and psychological forces, such as ignorance, selfishness, and anger. This interpretation, although it seems to go against the literal intent of the text, has been influential.