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# WORLD RELIGIONS

## HINDUISM

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Then they enjoined Agni [fire] in this world: 'Agni, if anyone escapes evil and aspires to do good things in this world, try to ruin him.' And they enjoined Vayu [wind] in the intermediate air in the same way, and the sun in the sky. But Ugradeva Rajani[3] said, 'I will not harm mankind, though I have heard that these three high gods are inclined to harm mankind.' And the gods do not harm the man who knows this, though they do try to destroy the man who tries to harm the man who knows this.

3. In the *Rig Veda* (1.36.18) Ugradeva Rajani is a powerful protector; in the *Panchavimsha Brahmana* and the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* he is a leper. Here he seems to be saying that a human like himself cannot be blamed for injuring human beings, since he is acting as an instrument of the gods. He may be referring to his own situation—as a leper he may have been regarded as dangerous and as personally responsible for the danger he was producing.

# RENUNCIATION IN THE UPANISHADS 600–200 B.C.E.

The Upanishads (meaning "sitting beside," which may refer to the method of placing one thing next to another, to making connections, or to pupils sitting beside their teacher) are often referred to as "the end of the Veda" (Vedanta), for they are the final texts in the body of literature called *shruti* ("what is heard"), unalterable divine revelation, in contrast with the rest of Hindu literature, called *smriti* ("what is remembered"), the tradition attributed to human authors, which is therefore fallible and can be changed. Just as the Brahmanas are, among other things, footnotes to the Vedas, so the Upanishads began as notes to the Brahmanas and as explanatory meditations on the meaning of the Vedic rituals and myths. The different Upanishads belong to different branches of the Vedic traditions, but they share so many stories and ideas that they are clearly in conversation with one another. The early Upanishads probably were composed in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. Again we find a major shift in language, between the Sanskrit of the Brahmanas and that of the Upanishads, not merely in the grammar and vocabulary but also in the style, which is far more accessible, conversational, reader-friendly.

In the kingdoms of the eastern Ganges at this time, trade flourished, and the towns were connected by trade routes: all roads led to Kashi. The development of the idea of action (karma) whose merit (also karma), once earned, can be accumulated, occasionally transferred, and eventually cashed in, owes much to the post-Vedic moneyed economy. More generally, where there's trade, people leave home; new commercial classes emerge; and, above all, new ideas spread quickly and circulate freely. They certainly did so at this time in India, and there was little to stop them: the Vedas did not constitute a closed canon, and there was never any religious authority to enforce a canon had there been one.

A vast transformation of society was taking place in response to the social, economic, and political reorganization of northern South Asia, as small-scale, pastoral chiefdoms gave way to hierarchically ordered settlements organized into states. Students and thinkers moved over a wide geographical area in search of philosophical and theological debate, encountering not merely royal assemblies of South Asian thinkers but new peoples and ideas from outside of South Asia.

Like other great religious innovations, such as those inspired by Jesus, Muhammad, and Luther, the Upanishads did not replace but merely supplemented and reinterpreted the earlier religion, so that, just as Catholicism continued to exist alongside Protestantism within Christianity, Vedic Hinduism (sacrificial, worldly) continued to exist alongside Vedantic Hinduism (philosophical, renunciant). But in Hinduism, unlike Christianity, there was no official schism. Certain words from earlier periods—karma (now in the sense of merit as well as action), *tapas* (as ascetically generated inner heat as well as the heat of sacrificial action)—took on new meanings at this point, though their original meanings never disappeared, resulting in a layering that served as one of the major sources of multiplicity within Hinduism.

The early *dharma-sutras* (ca. 300–100 B.C.E.) speak of four *ashramas* or ways of life (also, confusingly, the word for a hermitage) as four options for lifestyles that could be undertaken during any period in a person's life: the chaste student (*brahmacharin*), the householder or family man (*grihastha*), the forest dweller (*vanaprastha*),

An older sage instructing a younger sage.

and the renouncer (*sannyasin*). The system was an attempt, on the part of Brahmins who inclined to renunciation, to integrate that way of life with the other major path, that of the householder. Hinduism came up with various solutions to the potential conflicts between renunciation and the householder life. First, it was said that the goals of family life and renunciation were to be followed not simultaneously but in sequence, first one then another. The four *ashramas* came to be known no longer as simultaneous options (ways of life) but as four stages of life. The first *ashrama*, the chaste student, always retained its primary meaning of a vow of chastity undertaken *at any time of life*. But by the second century C.E., the four *ashramas* had become serial, rather than choices that one could make at any time.

The Upanishads speak of the self or soul (*atman*), the individual self that is also the universal Self, identified with the world-soul (*brahman*), the divine substance of which the universe is composed. *Brahman*, which in the *Rig Veda* designates sacred speech, is the root of a number of words in later Sanskrit distinguished by just one or two sounds (or letters, in English): *brahman* (the divine substance of the universe); Brahma (the creator god); Brahmin or Brahman (a member of the first or priestly class); Brahmana (one of a class of texts that follow the Vedas and precede the Upanishads); and Brahma-charin ("moving in *brahman*," designating a chaste student).

The world of *brahman* is a world of monism (which assumes that all living things are elements of a single, universal being). This is the central teaching of the Upanishads, a doctrine of pantheism (in which God is everything and everything is God). This philosophy views the very substance of the universe as divine, and views that substance and that divinity as unitary. The pluralistic world has a secondary, illusory status in comparison with the enduring, real status of the underlying monistic being.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

Aditi: *uh´-di-tee´*
archatas: *ar-chah´-tus*
arka: *ar´-kuh*
Aruna: *uh-roo´-nuh*
ashva: *uh´-shvuh*
Ashva-medha: *uh´-shvuh-may´-duh*
ashvat: *ush-vut´*
atman: *aht´-mun*
atti: *uh´-tee*
Bhan: *bhun*
Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: *bree´-hud-ah´-run-yuh-kuh oo-puh´-ni-shud*
Chandogya Upanishad: *chun-dohg´-yuh oo-puh´-ni-shud*
Gandharva: *gun-dar´-vuh*
Gautama: *gow´-tuh-muh*
Janashruti Pautrayana: *juh-nuh-shroo´-tee pow-truh´-yuh-nuh*
kam: *kum*
Kshatriya: *kuh-shah´-tri-yuh*
medhyam: *may´-dyum*
Panchala: *pun-chah´-luh*
pat: *puht*
pati: *puh´-tee*
patni: *puht´nee*
Prajapati: *pruh-jah´-puh-tee´*
Pravahana Jaibali: *pruh-vah´-huh-nuh jai´-buh-li*
Purusha: *poo-roo´-shuh*
purva: *poor´-vuh*
Raikva: *raik´-vuh*
Shudra: *shoo´-druh*
Shvetaketu: *shvay´-tuh-kay´-too*
Shvetashvatara Upanishad: *shvay´-tash-vuh-tuh-ruh oo-puh´-ni-shud*
Soma: *soh´-muh*
Vaishya: *vaish´-yuh*
Yajnavalkya: *yuj´-nuh-val´-kyuh*

## BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD

Bridging the Brahmanas and the Upanishads are the Aranyakas ("Jungle Books"), so called presumably because they were composed in the wilderness, or jungle, outside the village; they dealt both with ritual, like the Brahmanas, and with cosmology and metaphysics, like the Upanishads. The Upanishads seem to have been composed by people who left the settled towns for rustic settings where master and student could sit under a tree, the ancient Indian equivalent of the bucolic liberal arts college; the renouncers are said to live in the wilderness, in contrast with the conventional Vedic sacrificers, who live in villages (or cities). No individuals in the Ganges Valley could have remembered the old days up in the Punjab, but there was certainly a group memory, or at least a literary memory, of an idealized time when people lived under the trees and slept under the stars, a cultural memory of wide open spaces. The movements to renounce the fleshpots of the Ganges Valley may have been inspired in part by a longing to return to the lost world preserved in the texts, when life was both simpler and freer, more heroic. Such a longing is reflected in the name of the Aranyakas, in the village settings of so much of the Upanishads, and in the forest imagery that abounds in the writings of the early Indian sects, both inside and outside of Hinduism.

The earliest of the Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka* ("Great Jungle Book"), is the final section of the massive *Shatapatha Brahmana*, and its name indicates that it is both an Aranyaka and an Upanishad. It is, like the Aranyakas and the early Upanishads, mostly in prose.

## THE CREATOR CREATES DEATH

This Upanishad begins with a brief meditation on the horse sacrifice ("Killing the Sacrificial Horse," p. 96) before it goes back to the beginning of creation. A number of etymologies establish connections among the sounds of the names of things, the origins of their names, and their cosmic meaning. Death here functions both as death and as the creator, Prajapati (an earlier form of the god Brahma), who exerts himself simultaneously ritually and sexually. As in the Brahmanas, food and eating is a central theme; the rich and powerful eat the poor and weak, by the "law of the fish." To eat the world is to have complete power over the world.

### *Bridhadaranyaka Upanishad 1.1.1–2, 1.2.1–7*

Om! The dawn is the head of the sacrificial horse. The sun is his eye, the wind his breath, the fire within-all-men his open mouth. The year is the body of the sacrificial horse. The sky is his back, the middle realm of space his stomach, the earth his underbelly; the quarters of the sky are his sides, the intermediate quarters his ribs; the seasons are his limbs, the junctures between the months and the fortnights his joints; day and night are his feet, the stars are his bones, and the clouds are his flesh. The food in his stomach is the sands, and the rivers are his entrails; his liver and lungs are the mountains, and the plants and trees are the hairs on his body. The east is his forehand, and the setting sun is his hindquarters. When he yawns, then there is lightning; when he shakes himself, it thunders; and when he urinates, it rains. Speech is his whinny.

The day is the golden bowl in front of the horse; its womb is in the eastern ocean. The night is the golden bowl behind the horse; its womb is in the western ocean. These two bowls arose on both sides of the horse. He becomes a charger and carries the gods; he becomes a racehorse and carries the Gandharvas; he becomes a running horse and carries the demons; he becomes a stallion and carries men. The sea is his kinsman; the sea is his womb.

In the beginning, there was nothing at all here. This world was enveloped by death, by hunger, for truly hunger is death. Then (death) thought to himself: 'I wish I had a body.' He moved about, praising, and water[1] came out of him as he was praising. 'Water (*kam*) came out of me while I was praising (*archatas*),' he thought; and this is why brightness is called brightness (*arka*). Whoever knows this reason why brightness is called brightness always has water. For the waters are brightness.

The froth of the waters became solid; it became the earth. He became exhausted on this (earth); and from him, exhausted and heated, came out a heat[2] that became fire. He divided himself into three parts. (Fire was one third); the sun was one third; and air was one third. Thus the vital breath is divided into three parts. The eastern quarter is his head; the north-east and south-east are his shoulders; the western quarter is his tail; the north-west

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. The cosmic ocean.
2. Heat is said to be the essence of the god, which can also mean his semen, with which he impregnates the earth.

and south-west are his thighs; the south and north are his flanks; the sky is his back; the middle realm of space is his stomach. This (earth) is his chest. He stands firm in the waters; whoever knows this stands firm wherever he goes.

He desired, 'I wish that a second body were produced for me.' He, who was hunger, death, caused speech to copulate with mind. The seed that was there became the year; for there had not been a year before that. (Death) bore (the year) for as long a time as a year, and after that he emitted him. As soon as (the year) was born, (death) opened his mouth wide to eat him. (The year) made the sound, 'Bhan!',[3] and that became speech.

(Death) thought to himself, 'If I kill him, I will make just a little food for myself, less (than if I let him live and grow).' With that speech, with that body, he emitted this whole world, whatever exists—the hymns, the formulas, the chants, the meters, the sacrifices, the creatures, the animals. And whatever he emitted, he started to eat. Indeed, he eats (*atti*) everything; that is why Aditi (the infinite) is called Aditi. And whoever knows why Aditi is called Aditi becomes an eater of everything; everything becomes his food.

He desired, 'Let me sacrifice more, with a greater sacrifice.' He exhausted himself, and he generated heat in himself, and out of him as he was exhausted and heated came glory and virility. Now, glory and virility are the vital breaths; and so when the vital breaths had gone out of him, his body began to swell. His mind was in his body.

He desired, 'I wish this body were fit for sacrifice: I wish that I could have it for my own body.' And it became a horse (*ashva*) because it had swelled (*ashvat*). 'It has become fit for sacrifice (*medhyam*),' he thought, and that is why the horse sacrifice is called the Ashva-medha. Whoever knows him in this way really knows the horse sacrifice.

He thought about him but did not confine him.[4] After a year, he sacrificed him to himself, and assigned (other) sacrificial animals to the (other) gods. Therefore when men sacrifice to Prajapati they call it a sacrifice to all the gods.

The (sun) who heats is really the horse sacrifice, and the year is its body. This (earthly) fire is brightness, and the worlds are its body. They are two, the (solar) brightness and the (earthly fire of the) horse sacrifice; but they are also a single god, death.

He (who knows this) conquers repeated death;[5] death does not get him; he becomes one of these gods.

3. A double meaning: it is the cry that the baby makes, and it is a verbal root meaning "to speak."
4. Because the sacrificial horse is said to wander freely for a year ("Killing the Sacrificial Horse," p. 96).
5. This may mean either that after the natural death on earth a person would die a second or third time, or, more likely, that a person would keep on being born and dying.

## CREATION

Like the *Rig Veda*, the Upanishads offer several different models for the origins of the universe. This passage in the *Brihadaranyaka* concentrates on a quasi-incestuous myth of androgyny. It combines all three of the major methods of creation in the Vedas and Brahmanas—incest, oblation, and dismemberment—together with a concern for the relationship between the names of things and the nature of those things. The distinction between mortal and immortal is further developed, but now a ritual etymology for the name for a human being is derived from the androgynous primeval Man, the Purusha ("The Hymn of the Primeval Man," p. 82), here regarded as a mortal but also identified with Brahma, the Creator, the god who supersedes the Prajapati of the earlier Brahmanas.

### *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.1–6*

In the beginning this world was just a single body (*atman*) shaped like a man.

He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, 'Here I am!' and from that the name 'I' came into being. Therefore, even today when you call someone, he first says, 'It's I,' and then states whatever other name he may have. That first being received the name 'man' (*purusha*), because ahead (*purva*) of all this he burnt up (*ush*) all evils. When someone knows this, he burns up anyone who may try to get ahead of him.

That first being became afraid; therefore, one becomes afraid when one is alone. Then he thought to himself: 'Of what should I be afraid, when there is no one but me?' So his fear left him, for what was he going to be afraid of? One is, after all, afraid of another.

He found no pleasure at all; so one finds no pleasure when one is alone. He wanted to have a companion. Now he was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace. So he split (*pat*) his body into two, giving rise to husband (*pati*) and wife (*patni*). Surely this is why Yajnavalkya used to say: 'The two of us are like two halves of a block.' The space here, therefore, is completely filled by the woman.

He copulated with her, and from their union human beings were born. She then thought to herself: 'After begetting me from his own body (*atman*), how could he copulate with me? I know—I'll hide myself.' So she became a cow. But he became a bull and again copulated with her. From their union cattle were born. Then she became a mare, and he a stallion; she became a female donkey, and he, a male donkey. And again he copulated with her, and from their union one-hoofed animals were born. Then she became a female goat, and he, a male goat; she became a ewe, and he, a ram. And again he copulated with her, and from their union goats and sheep were born. In this way he created every male and female pair that exists, down to the very ants.

It then occurred to him: 'I alone am the creation, for I created all this.' From this 'creation' came into being. Anyone who knows this prospers in this creation of his.

TRANSLATED BY Patrick Olivelle.

Then he churned[1] like this and, using his hands, produced fire from his mouth as from a vagina. As a result the inner sides of both these—the hands and the mouth—are without hair, for the inside of the vagina is without hair. 'Sacrifice to this god. Sacrifice to that god'—people do say these things, but in reality each of these gods is his own creation, for he himself is all these gods. From his semen, then, he created all that is moist here, which is really Soma.[2] Food and eater—that is the extent of this whole world. Food is simply Soma, and the eater is fire.

This is *brahman*'s supercreation. It is a supercreation because he created the gods, who are superior to him, and, being a mortal himself, he created the immortals. Anyone who knows this stands within this supercreation of his.

1. Or "rubbed." That is, he twirled the fire sticks, his two hands, as in the Brahmana myth "Prajapati Creates Fire," p. 94. The sexual symbolism of the churning of the fire stick within the concave base of the bottom slab, a symbolism always implicit, here becomes explicit in the concern for semen and the references to human anatomy.
2. The ambrosia that the gods drink to make them immortal; Soma is an elixir, unlike the solid ambrosia that the Greek gods eat.

## DREAMING

The Upanishads have a lot to say about altered states of consciousness, beginning with ordinary dreaming. Some Upanishads (such as *Mandukya Upanishad* 3–7) speak of four levels of consciousness: waking, dreaming, sleeping without dreaming, and deep meditation; each of these is progressively closer to the correct perception of reality, waking life being furthest from it. The passage below speaks only of the first three states and of the imaginative power of dreaming.

### *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.3.9–14, 18

The individual person has two states: the state in this world, and the state in the other world; and there is a third, liminal state, the state of dreaming. When one remains in this liminal state he sees both states—this world and the other world. Now, whatever approach there is to the state in the other world, by taking that approach one sees both the evils (of this world) and the ecstasies (of that world). When he dreams, he takes the elementary matter of this all-encompassing world, and he himself takes it apart, and he himself builds it up, and by his own brightness, by his own light, he dreams. For the individual person becomes his own light in this state.

There are no chariots there, no harnessings, no roads; but he emits chariots, harnessings, and roads. There are no ecstasies, joys, or delights there; but he emits ecstasies, joys, and delights. There are no ponds, lotus pools, or flowing streams there, but he emits ponds, lotus pools, and flowing streams. For he is the maker.

And there are verses about this:

Striking down with sleep what belongs to the body, he who does not dream looks down upon those that dream. Taking up the bright seed, he goes back

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

to his place; he is the golden person,[1] the one swan.[2] Guarding the low nest with his breath, the immortal one wanders about outside the nest. The immortal one goes wherever he wishes; he is the golden person, the one swan. Moving up and down inside the dream, he makes many forms, for he is a god. Now he seems to take pleasure in women, now he laughs, or sees terrifying things. People see his pleasure, but no one at all sees him. And that is why people say, 'Don't wake him up suddenly.' For it is hard to find a cure for the one who does not come back.

Now, some people say, 'This (dream state) is just his waking state, for whatever things he sees when he is awake, he sees them too when he dreams.' (But this is not so, for) here (in his dream) the person himself becomes his own source of light. . . .

As a big fish moves along both banks of a river, the eastern side and the western side, even so this person moves along both of these states, the state of dreaming and the state of being awake.

1. A common Upanishadic image for the world-soul, the indescribable *brahman* (see "The Origins of the Self," below).
2. This wild swan, or wild goose, is a common metaphor for the soul, perhaps suggested by the migratory habits that the wild birds share with the soul.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE SELF

This passage, which follows the general cosmogony in the passage about creation, speaks of the creation of the individual self.

### *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.7*

At that time, all of this (world) was undifferentiated. By means of name and form[1] it became differentiated—'This has this name; this has this form.' And even now people say, 'This is his name; this is his form,' distinguishing by means of name and form. He entered in here, right up to the tips of his fingernails, as a razor is hidden in a razor sheath, or as fire is inside firewood.[2] People do not see him, for (whatever they see) is incomplete. Whenever one breathes, he becomes breath; whenever one speaks, he is speech; seeing, he is the eye; hearing, the ear; thinking, the mind. These are just the names for his acts. Whoever worships one (aspect) or another does not understand, for he is incomplete in any one or another. Rather, one should worship with the thought, 'This is the Self,' for all of these become one in that. That by which one can follow the footprints of this All, that is the Self, through which this All is known, just as one might track down and find something by a footprint. Whoever knows this finds fame and praise.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. *Rupa* (here "form") is often translated as "visible appearance" but probably means something more like "hue."
2. Another reading of this verse is "as a termite (or 'ant' or 'insect' in general) is inside a termite-hill (or ant-hill)."

# CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD

Although the *Chandogya Upanishad* ("Upanishad of the Singers of the *Sama Veda*") belongs to the *Sama Veda*, it has a number of close parallels with the *Brihadaranyaka*, and parts of it are even older than the *Brihadaranyaka*. Predictably, its central concern is the cosmic significance of the chants of the *Sama Veda*.

## THE SELF

The passages below are part of a long instruction that the sage Uddalaka Aruni gives to his son Shvetaketu. After discussing the nature of sleep (somewhat differently from the parallel discussion in the *Brihadaranyaka*), Uddalaka says, "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 (or, that is what you are: *tat tvam asi*), Shvetaketu." When Shvetaketu replies, "Sir, teach me more," Uddalaka begins with the analogy of bees gathering honey, and then goes on to rivers and salt (in the passage here) as well as trees, a banyan fruit, a dying man, and a thief in chains. For the soul can never be described, merely analogized; whatever you say it is *like*, it is not really that: "Not thus, not thus" (*neti, neti*).

### *Chandogya Upanishad 6.10.1–4, 6.13.1–3*

'Now, take these rivers,[1] son. The easterly ones flow towards the east, and the westerly ones flow towards the west. From the ocean, they merge into the very ocean;[2] they become just the ocean. In that state they are not aware that "I am that river," and "I am this river." In exactly the same way, son, when all these creatures reach the existent, they are not aware that "We are reaching the existent." No matter what they are in this world—whether it is a tiger, a lion, a wolf, a boar, a worm, a moth, a gnat, or a mosquito—they all merge into that.

'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, Shvetaketu.'

'Sir, teach me more.'

'Very well, son.'

* * *

'Put this chunk of salt in a container of water and come back tomorrow.' The son did as he was told, and the father said to him: 'The chunk of salt you put in the water last evening—bring it here.' He groped for it but could not find it, as it had dissolved completely.

'Now, take a sip from this corner,' said the father. 'How does it taste?'

TRANSLATED BY Patrick Olivelle.

1. These may be terrestrial rivers that flow down from the Himalayas, or the celestial rivers in the Milky Way, which flow down to earth eventually as the Indus and Ganges.
2. The two oceans may be the heavenly and earthly (Indian) oceans.

'Salty.'

'Take a sip from the center.—How does it taste?'

'Salty.'

'Take a sip from that corner.—How does it taste?'

'Salty.'

'Throw it out and come back later.' He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: 'You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there.[3]

'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, Shvetaketu.'

'Sir, teach me more.'

'Very well, son.'

3. The meaning seems to be that even when the son throws the water on the ground, the salt, though invisible, is still present in the ground and would become visible when the water evaporated.

## TRANSMIGRATION

Where did the potentially revolutionary ideas of transmigration and karma come from? In the Upanishads, as in the *Rig Veda*, the body of the dead man returns to the elements—his eyes to the sun, the hair of his body to plants, the hair of his head into trees, his blood and semen into water—but the Upanishadic sages regard this as the beginning, not the end, of the explanation of death. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3.2.13), the sage Yajnavalkya lists the correspondences between the parts of the body and the cosmos, whereupon his pupil asks, "What happens to the person then?" In answer to his pupil's question, Yajnavalkya takes him aside: "And what did they talk about? Nothing but karma. They praised nothing but karma. Yajnavalkya told him: 'A man becomes something good by good karma and something bad by bad karma.'"

The first and most basic meaning of karma is action. The noun *karma* comes from the verb *kri*, cognate with the Latin *creo*, to make or do, to make a baby or a table or to perform a ritual. Karma in the sense of "action" is often contrasted with mind and speech: one can think, say, or do [*kri*] something. The second meaning of karma is ritual action, particularly Vedic ritual action; this is its primary connotation in the *Rig Veda*. Its third meaning, which begins to be operative in the Upanishads, is morally charged action, good or bad, a meter that is always running, that is constantly charging something to one's account. And its fourth meaning, which follows closely on the heels of the third, is morally charged action that has consequences for the soul in the future, both within one's life and across the barrier of re-death: you become a sheep that people eat if you have eaten a sheep. (We saw the germ of this theory in the Brahmana descriptions of people soundlessly screaming in the other world in "Bhrigu's Journey," p. 101; it also recurs in statements that sacrifice generates merit that guarantees an afterlife in the other world.) In this sense, karma determines the nature of your future rebirths. Consequences have consequences, and first thing you know, you're born as a sheep.

Turned on its head, this link led to a fifth meaning of karma, not as the cause of future lives but as the result of past lives and the agenda for this life, the inescapable role in life that one was born to play, one's work, or innate activity. Many people besides Hindus believe that we often cannot remember the past causes of present circumstances, and that the present will influence the future; but the Hindu view

differs from this in extending the past and future beyond the boundaries of this life span. The last (sixth) meaning of karma is the implication that good and bad karma maybe transferred from one person to another under certain circumstances, not merely between parents and children (as we saw in the Vedic poem "Varuna Provoked to Anger," p. 88) and between sacrificial priest and patron, but between any people who meet. This transfer may take place either intentionally or unintentionally: if someone lets a guest depart unfed, the guest will take away the host's good karma and leave behind his own bad karma. It is not always clear which of these meanings of *karma* is intended in any particular passage in the Upanishads (or in other texts).

Moreover, the idea of karma was certainly not accepted by everyone as the final solution to the problem of death (or the problem of evil); many other, conflicting ideas were proposed and widely accepted, alongside the karma theory. The Upanishads continue to speak of "recurrent death" (BU 3.2.10, 3.3.2) and describe the process in cruel detail (BU 4.3.36, 4.4.2). For heaven is no longer the end of the line, as it was in some of the Brahmanas; it is simply another place that, eventually, everyone leaves. The Upanishads spell out the assumption, sketched in the Brahmanas, that we are all on the wheel of re-death, transmigration (*samsara*, literally, "flowing around"). From the very start, the idea of transmigration was qualified by two other ideas: that some people wanted to get out of it, and that there was a way to do this—a restoration not merely for any one of life's mistakes but for life itself, a way to put the fix in on death.

The theory of reincarnation, the recycling of souls, may reflect an anxiety of overcrowding, the claustrophobia of a culture fenced in, a kind of urban *angst*. The spread of paddy rice cultivation into the Ganges Valley, producing a surplus that could support cities, and the emergence of societies along the Ganges created an unprecedented proximity of people. Population densities significantly increased, the result of the incorporation of indigenous peoples, a soaring birthrate, and agricultural surpluses. The Upanishadic discussion of the doctrine of transmigration begins when a teacher asks his pupil (the young sage Shvetaketu), "Do you know why the world beyond is not filled up, even when more and more people continuously go there?" and it ends with the statement, "As a result, that world up there is not filled up" (CU 5.10.8; BU 5.1.1 and 6.2.2). Reincarnation addressed this social problem and formulated it in terms of individual salvation. The Upanishads emphasize a more personal religious experience than the one addressed by the Brahmanas. In this way, at least, these movements were individualistic—"Look to your own house"—rather than socially oriented, as nonrenunciant Hinduism was—"Your identity is meaningful only as one member of a diverse social body." This was a tremendous innovation.

The Upanishads assume, like the Vedas and Brahmanas, that people pass into heaven or hell when they die, but they are far more concerned with the fate of the dead beyond heaven or hell. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (6.2) tells us that people within the Vedic fold at this time had two ways to be religious. The people who reach *brahman* have lived in the forest, the jungle, either permanently as forest ascetics or merely on the occasions when they held religious rituals there. By contrast, the sacrificers, who follow the Vedic path of generosity (to gods and priests, or to people more generally) or engage in the ritual practices that generate internal heat (*tapas*), go to heaven but do not stay there; they die again and are reborn. This text does not tell us where these people have lived, but the *Chandogya Upanishad* (5.10.1–8) tells us that the people who devote themselves to giving gifts to gods and to priests live in villages. *Tapas*, internal heat, can belong to either group, for it is a transitional power: for sacrificers, it is the heat that the priest generates in the sacrifice, while for people of the forest, *tapas* becomes detached from the sacrifice and internalized as the heat that an individual ascetic generates within himself. The only criterion that marks the sacrificers in both texts is their generosity, and the only criterion that marks the people of the forest is their life in the forest.

The people who reach the moon in the *Brihadaranyaka* are eaten by the gods (as they were eaten by animals in the other world in the Brahmanas), but the gods

in the *Chandogya* merely eat the moon, a more direct way to account for its waning. The *Chandogya* also has a slightly different ending for the second group, the sacrificers who pass through the smoke. It is clear from the *Chandogya*, and implicit in the *Brihadaranyaka*, that one does not want to end up in the company of the worms and other tiny creatures in the third state, the place from which no traveler returns. It's better to be a dog.

But it is not so clear from these texts that the path of Vedic gift-giving is undesirable, that *everyone* wants to get off the wheel and onto the path of flame. For renouncers, the very idea of good karma is an oxymoron: any karma is bad, because it binds you to the wheel of rebirth. But the *Chandogya* spells out the belief that, for sacrificers, some rebirths are quite pleasant, the reward for good behavior. Their fate corresponds to Yajnavalkya's statement "A man becomes something good by good karma and something bad by bad karma." The *Brihadaranyaka* says much the same thing: "What a man turns out to be depends on how he acts. If his actions (karma) are good, he will turn into something good. If his actions are bad, he will turn into something bad." But then it adds that this applies only to the man who has desires; the man who is freed from desires, whose desires are fulfilled, does not die at all; he goes to *brahman* (BU 4.4.5–6). So, too, the funeral ceremonies include instructions that ensure that the dead person will not remain in limbo but will move forward, either to a new life or to final Release (*moksha*) from the cycle of transmigration, further evidence of a deeply embedded tension between the desire to assure a good rebirth and the desire to prevent rebirth altogether. The fear of re-death led to the desire for Release (including release from the values of Vedic Hinduism); but then the ideal of Release was reabsorbed into Vedic Hinduism and reshaped into the desire to be reborn better, in worldly terms: richer, with more sons, and so forth. These two tracks—one for people who want to get off the wheel of re-death, and one for those who don't want to get off the wheel of rebirth—continue as options for South Asians to this day.

## *Chandogya Upanishad 5.3–10*

Shvetaketu the descendant of Aruna went to the assembly[1] of the Panchala (kings). Pravahana Jaibali said to him, 'Young man, has your father taught you?' 'Yes, sir, he has.' 'Do you know where created beings go from here?' 'No, sir.' 'Do you know how they come back again?' 'No, sir.' 'Do you know about the separation between the two paths, the path of the gods and the path of the fathers?' 'No, sir.' 'Do you know how the world (of heaven) over there does not get filled up?' 'No, sir.' 'Do you know how, in the fifth oblation, water comes to have a human voice?' 'No, sir.' 'Then why did you say that you had been taught? How could someone who didn't know these things say that he had been taught?'

Quite upset, he went to his father's place and said to him, 'Sir, you said, "I have taught you," but in fact you *didn't* teach me. Some man of the ruling class[2] asked me five questions, and I wasn't able to answer a single one of them.' (His father) said, 'As you have told them to me, I don't know a single one of them. If I had known them, how would I not have told you?'

Then Gautama (the father of Shvetaketu) went to the king's place, and when he arrived he was received with honor. The next morning, he went to

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. The king's audience hall, where privileged people gathered to speak about religious and political issues.

2. The term (*rajanya bandhu*) is quite pejorative, perhaps better rendered as "second-rate prince."

the assembly hall and (the king) said to him, 'Gautama, sir, choose anything you want of human wealth.' 'Your majesty,' answered (Gautama), 'human wealth is for you. But tell me just what you said to the young man.' (The king) was troubled and commanded him, 'Wait a while.' Then (the king) said to (Gautama), 'What you are asking me, Gautama, is knowledge that has never gone to Brahmins before you.[3] And that is why, among all people, only the Kshatriyas have had the power to rule.' But then he told him:

'The world (of heaven) over there, Gautama, is a sacrificial fire. The sun is its fuel, the rays of the sun are its smoke, the day is its flame, the moon its coals, the stars its sparks. Into this fire the gods make an offering of faith, and from that oblation king Soma is born.

'The rain cloud, Gautama, is a sacrificial fire. The wind is its fuel, the mist its smoke, lightning its flame, the thunderbolt its coals, and the roar of the thunder its sparks. Into this fire the gods make an offering of king Soma, and from that oblation rain is born.

'The earth, Gautama, is a sacrificial fire. The year is its fuel, space its smoke, night its flame, the four directions its coals, the four intermediate directions its sparks. Into this fire the gods make an offering of rain, and from that oblation food is born.

'Man, Gautama, is a sacrificial fire. Speech is his fuel, breath his smoke, the tongue his flame, the eye his coals, the ear his sparks. Into this fire the gods make an offering of food, and from that oblation semen is born.

'Woman, Gautama, is a sacrificial fire. The vagina is her fuel, foreplay her smoke, the womb her flame, the penetration her coals, and the orgasm her sparks.[4] Into this fire the gods make an offering of semen, and from that oblation the embryo is born.

'Thus in the fifth oblation, water comes to have a human voice. When the embryo has lain inside there for ten months or nine months, or however long, covered with the membrane, then he is born. When he is born, he lives as long as his allotted life-span. When he has died, they carry him to the appointed place and put him in the fire, for that is where he came from, what he was born from.

'Those who know this, and those who worship in the forest, concentrating on faith and asceticism,[5] they are born into the flame, and from the flame into the day, and from the day into the fortnight of the waxing moon,[6] and from the fortnight of the waxing moon into the six months during which the sun moves north; from these months, into the year; from the year into the sun; from the sun into the moon; from the moon into lightning. There a Person who is not human leads them to the ultimate reality. This is the path that the gods go on.

'But those who worship in the village, concentrating on sacrifices and good works and charity, they are born into the smoke, and from the smoke

3. In the *Brihadaranyaka* the king says, "This knowledge has never before been in the possession of a Brahmin. But I will reveal it to you, to keep you or an ancestor of yours from doing harm to me" (BU 6.3.8). In the *Chandogya*, the king adds, "That is why, among all people, only the Kshatriyas have had the power to rule." These are among a number of hints in the Upanishads that the new ideas about karma and rebirth may not have developed entirely within the Brahmin community.

4. The idea that the sacrifice is a sexual act is developed in great detail at *Brihadaranyaka* 6.4.3.

5. The meaning seems to be that the forest people accept the equality of the two concepts. "Faith" here is associated with giving gifts, while "asceticism" as usual translates the more complicated concept of generating inner heat (*tapas*).

6. The moon's waxing and waning were believed to be caused by dead people arriving there to become the food of the gods. It was also believed that the immortal drink of the gods, *Soma*, was stored in the moon.

into the night, and from the night into the other fortnight, and from the other fortnight into the six months when the sun moves south. They do not reach the year. From these months they go to the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers to space, and from space to the moon. That is king Soma. That is the food of the gods. The gods eat that.

'When they have dwelt there for as long as there is a remnant (of their merit), then they return along that very same road that they came along, back into space; but from space they go to wind, and when one has become wind he becomes smoke, and when he has become smoke he becomes mist; when he has become mist, he becomes a cloud, and when he has become a cloud, he rains. These are then born here as rice, barley, plants, trees, sesame plants, and beans. It is difficult to move forth out of this condition; for only if someone eats him as food and then emits him as semen, he becomes that creature's semen and is born.

'And so those who behave nicely here will, in general, find a nice womb, the womb of a Brahmin or the womb of a Kshatriya or the womb of a Vaishya. But those whose behavior here is stinking will, in general, find a stinking womb, the womb of a dog or the womb of a pig or the womb of an Untouchable. Then they become those tiny creatures who go by neither one of these two paths but are constantly returning. "Be born and die"—that is the third condition. And because of that, the world (of heaven) over there is not filled up. And one should try to protect oneself from that. There is a verse about this: "One who steals gold, or drinks wine, or sleeps with his teacher's wife, or kills a Brahmin—these four fall, along with the fifth, (any person who is) their companion." But whoever knows these five fires is not smeared with evil, not even if he is the companion of these people. He becomes pure, purified, and wins a world of merit, if he knows this, if he really knows this.'

## JANASHRUTI AND RAIKVA

Kshatriyas were not the only non-Brahmins who contributed new ideas to the Upanishads. Even homeless people could have unique religious knowledge. In the following passage, Janashruti is a rich king. Raikva is, by contrast, evidently a street person. At first the steward presumably searches for a Brahmin, for he has to be specifically instructed to search elsewhere; and elsewhere is where he finds Raikva. Raikva despises cows and gold (two things that Brahmins like best) and likes women. It is extremely bold of him to call Janashruti a Shudra, a member of the lowest of the four social classes. Raikva is said to be a gatherer, which may refer to his knack of gathering up everyone else's good karma, as a successful gambler gathers up the dice of the losers—another early example of the transfer of karma from one person to another. (This Upanishad goes on to say that the two gatherers are the wind and the breath.) But "gathering" may also refer to Raikva's poverty, for he may have been a gleaner (like Ruth in the Hebrew Bible), gathering up the dregs of the harvest after everyone else has taken the real crop, or even, like so many homeless people, gathering up other peoples' garbage for his own use. The two meanings work well together: the man who lives on richer peoples' garbage also lives off their good deeds. (Much later, in the *Mahabharata* [14.90], several people—including a mongoose—sing the virtues of "the way of gleaning.")

That Janashruti can understand the talking animals (wild geese, who often carry messages in Hindu mythology) is evidence of his high spiritual achievement, but the non-Brahmin Raikva is higher still; his secret knowledge (about the wind and breath as gatherers) trumps Janashruti's Vedic generosity.

## *Chandogya Upanishad 4.1–2*

There was one Janashruti Pautrayana, a man who was totally devoted to giving and used to give a lot, a man who gave a lot of cooked food. He had hospices built everywhere, thinking: 'People will eat food from me everywhere.'

Now, it so happened that some wild geese were flying overhead at night, and one of them said to another: 'Hey, Bright-Eyes! Look out, Bright-Eyes! Look, a light like that of Janashruti Pautrayana has spread out through the sky. Don't touch it, it you don't want to be burnt.'

The other replied: 'Come now! Given who he is, why do you speak of him as if he were Raikva, the gatherer?'

'That man—how is he Raikva, the gatherer?'

'As the lower throws all go to the one who wins with the highest throw of the dice, so whatever good things people may do, all that goes to him. I say the same of anyone who knows what Raikva knows.'

Now, Janashruti Pautrayana overheard this conversation, and, as soon as he got up in the morning, he said to his steward: 'Look, my man! [This is what I heard:]

> '"Why do you speak of him as if he were Raikva, the gatherer?" "That man—how is he Raikva, the gatherer?"
>
> "As the lower throws all go to the one who wins with the highest throw of the dice, so whatever good things people may do, all that goes to him. I say the same of anyone who knows what Raikva knows."'

The steward searched for Raikva and returned, saying: 'I didn't find him.' Janashruti told him: 'Look for him, my man, in a place where one would search for a non-Brahmin.'

The steward respectfully approached a man under a cart scratching his sores and asked: 'Sir, are you Raikva, the gatherer?' The man replied: 'Yes, I am.' The steward then returned, saying: 'I did find him.'

Taking with him six hundred cows, a gold necklace, and a carriage drawn by a she-mule, Janashruti Pautrayana went back to Raikva and said to him: 'Raikva, here are six hundred cows, a gold necklace, and a carriage drawn by a she-mule. Please, sir, teach me the deity that you venerate.' But Raikva replied: 'Hey, you! Drive them back to your place, Shudra! Keep your goods and your cows!'

Then, taking with him a thousand cows, a gold necklace, a carriage drawn by a she-mule, and his daughter, Janashruti Pautrayana went back to him once again and said: 'Raikva, here are a thousand cows, a gold necklace, and a carriage drawn by a she-mule, here is a wife, and here is the village where you live. Sir, please teach me.'

Lifting up her face, Raikva said: 'Hey you! Drive them to my place, Shudra! With just this face you would have swindled me!'

TRANSLATED BY Patrick Olivelle.

## SHVETASHVATARA UPANISHAD

The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* ("Upanishad of the Man with a White Mule"), traditionally ascribed to the *Yajur Veda*, is much later than the *Brihadaranyaka* and the *Chandogya* and is in verse. It shares many of the words and ideas of the *Gita* (*Bhagavad Gita*, p. 166), though its deity is Rudra (analogized in many ways to Agni) rather than Krishna. It incorporates a number of rather disparate cosmologies and theologies.

## THE TWO BIRDS

This passage represents another attempt to describe, in metaphor, the relationship between the individual soul and the world-soul. It also begins to endow that world-soul with specific characteristics that are more theistic than pantheistic, to identify it with the god Rudra, and to address him. The unborn Person to whom the passage refers is Purusha ("The Hymn of the Primeval Man," p. 82), the male, spirit; the female is Prakriti, nature. Each soul is an unborn spirit that becomes involved with Prakriti during each incarnation and leaves her at each death. The passage quotes *Rig Veda* 1.164.20, a famous verse about two birds, which tells us that the one who does not eat is the world-soul; the other, the one who does eat, is the individual soul.

### *Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.1–10*

The One who has no color himself but distributes many colors in his secret purpose, by the various uses of his power (*shakti*), the One into whom the whole world dissolves, as he is its end and its beginning—he is god. Let him give us clear minds! It is he who is fire, he who is the sun; he who is the wind, and he who is the moon. He is what is pure; he is Brahma. He is the waters; he is Prajapati.

You are woman; you are man. You are the boy and also the girl. You are an old man stumbling with his cane. As soon as you are born, you face in every direction. You are the dark blue bird and the green bird with red eyes. The lightning is your child. You are the seasons and the seas. You have no beginning, but you exist with power, from which all creatures are born.

The one unborn[1] Person takes his pleasure in lying with the one unborn female, who is red, white, and black,[2] and produces many creatures like herself. Another unborn person takes his pleasure from her and then leaves her.[3]

'Two birds, friends joined together, clutch the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit; the other looks on but does not eat.' On that one tree one person grieves for his impotence; he is deluded and depressed. But when he

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. This verse plays on the double meaning of the word *aja* ("unborn"), which also means "goat." So the unborn male is both the soul and a billy goat, and the unborn female is both Nature (Prakriti) and a nanny goat. The sexual and metaphysical meanings overlap.

2. The three colors are associated with the three strands (*gunas*) of Nature or matter, according to Sankhya philosophy: goodness (*sattva*, white), energy (*rajas*, red), and darkness (*tamas*, black).

3. The unborn male who leaves his partner is the soul that has achieved Release (*moksha*).

sees the other, the Lord who takes pleasure in his own greatness, (the first) becomes free from sorrow.

The undying syllable[4] of the hymn [the *Rig Veda*] is the final abode where all gods have taken their seat. What can one who does not know this do with the hymn? Only those who know it sit together here. The sacred chants,[5] the sacrifices, the ceremonies, the laws, the past, the future, and what the Vedas declare—the one who uses Illusion[6] projects the whole world out of this (ultimate reality) and confines the other one in it by means of Illusion. So you should realise that Nature is Illusion, and that the great lord is the one who uses Illusion. This whole universe is pervaded by creatures that are parts of him.

4. The word *akshara* means both "syllable" and "undying"; as "syllable" it refers particularly to the sacred syllable "Om."
5. A reference to the Vedic hymns.
6. This may be an early reference to Illusion as a cosmic category or simply an example of the Rig Vedic usage of the word to denote a trick or magic. On the cosmic level, "the one who uses Illusion" is the cosmic magician, the Lord, who creates the illusory world that traps "the other one" (i.e., the individual soul).