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## Self-Realization in the Light of the Upaniṣads

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**Abstract:** The Upaniṣads, the culminating portions of the Vedas, offer a profound and timeless exploration of *ātma-vidyā*—the knowledge of the Self. In these texts, self-realization is not merely an intellectual pursuit but a transformative inner awakening that reveals the essential unity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). This abstract examines the Upaniṣadic conception of self-realization as a process of uncovering one's true nature, which is inherently pure, infinite, and blissful. The Upaniṣads emphasize that ignorance (*avidyā*) veils this truth, leading individuals to identify with the transient body, mind, and sensory world. Through disciplined inquiry, meditation, ethical living, and the guidance of a realized teacher, the seeker gradually transcends these limitations. Self-realization is the dissolution of the false ego and the direct experiential recognition of this unity. The Upaniṣads describe this realization as the highest human attainment, bringing freedom from fear, sorrow, and the cycle of birth and death. Unlike external forms of knowledge, this realization is inwardly attained and ultimately ineffable, grasped through intuitive insight rather than through sensory perception or logical reasoning alone. In the light of the Upaniṣads, self-realization emerges as both the goal and fulfillment of human existence—a state of liberation (*mokṣa*) characterized by peace, wisdom, and abiding inner freedom. This exploration underscores the enduring relevance of Upaniṣadic teachings in guiding individuals toward a deeper understanding of consciousness and the ultimate unity of all life.

**Keywords:** Upaniṣads, Soul, Ātman, Spiritual, Value, Education.

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### 1. Introduction

The Upaniṣads serve as the foundational scriptures of Vedānta and are among the earliest philosophical explorations into consciousness. Their central theme is the realization of the identity of the individual Self (*ātman*) with the cosmic principle (*brahman*). This realization is not merely intellectual but experiential -an awakening that liberates one from ignorance (*avidyā*) and the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). We, all the creatures in this universe are mortal but the spirit soul by the laws of nature, takes his birth and gets a suitable body and sense organs for enjoying matter in the material world. According to those who acknowledge reincarnation in Indian philosophy the soul assumes a new body after death. So, we the persons mean not our body but our soul. In such way personality development means spiritual development which we should achieve for reestablishment of our lost relationship with the supreme personality of Godhead. The Personality of Godhead, who is fully aware of what happens in His creation, informs us that it is best for us to seek escape from this miserable existence. According to the rules of Bhavachakra the soul reincarnates until the desire for pleasure is fulfilled. So, we should not deeply addict with the material things for becoming a spiritual man. The spiritual activity is not a denial of material needs but a practice to free the mind from the materialistic addiction of our real life. In the Upanisadic teachings we should be interested in seeking eternal life or spiritual existence.

### 1.1 Concept of the Self (*Ātman*) in the Upaniṣads

#### 1.2 Ātman as Pure Consciousness

The Upaniṣads repeatedly assert that the Self is *cit*—pure consciousness, without attributes, eternal, and self-luminous. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes the Self as:

**“ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ”**<sup>1</sup> - The Self must be seen, heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon.

Here, *ātman* is not an object among objects but the witnessing consciousness that makes experience possible. It is the ultimate subject, never reducible to body, mind, or senses. The *Ātman* is further defined as: **“na tasya prāṇā utkrānti, brahmaiva san brahmāpyeti”**<sup>2</sup>

For the knower of the Self, the vital forces do not depart; becoming Brahman, he merges in Brahman. These passages emphasize a non-dual identity between individual consciousness and the cosmic

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<sup>1</sup>*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5

<sup>2</sup>*Ibi d.* 4. 4. 6

absolute. The essence of all existence (*sat*) is identical with the inner Self. Similarly, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad states:

“ahaṁ brahmāsmi”<sup>3</sup>

- 'I am Brahman'

This declaration asserts the non-dual identity that becomes clear through Self-realization. The famous Mahāvākya from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* declares,

“**tattvamasi**”<sup>4</sup> (That Thou Art)

Spiritual development thus involves realizing the non-dual essence underlying all existence. The Upaniṣads advocate recognizing oneself in all beings. The *Īśa Upaniṣad* says:

“*yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmani evānupaśyati*”<sup>5</sup> - ‘He who sees all beings in the Self...’

This vision naturally leads to compassion, non-violence, and spiritual maturity.

### 1.3 Ātman as Beyond Body and Mind

The Upaniṣads portray the Self not as the body or mind but as the witness consciousness. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* describes it as eternal and beyond decay:

“na jāyate mriyate vā vipaścinn  
nāyaṁ kutaścin na babhūva kaścit”<sup>6</sup>

- “The wise Self is not born, nor does it die; it does not come from anywhere nor become anything”

Here, *vipaścit* emphasizes the inherent consciousness of the Self.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* famously asserts a hierarchical model of the human constitution:

“**indriyebhyaḥ parā hy arthāḥ, arthebhyaś ca param manaḥ;**

**manasaḥ parā buddhir, buddher ātmā mahān paraḥ**”<sup>7</sup>

-Beyond the senses are objects; beyond objects is the mind; beyond the mind is the intellect; beyond the intellect is the Self.

This verse situates *ātman* as distinct from and superior to the psycho-physical organism.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1.4.10

<sup>4</sup> Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7

<sup>5</sup> Īśa Upaniṣad 6

<sup>6</sup> Katha Upaniṣad 1.2.18

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 1.3.10–11

## 2. The Necessity of Self-Realization

Every living being on the earth has a soul in its corporal entity which is called Atma. On the basis of physical existence or entity, we can differentiate between human body, animal body, bird body and so on. At this level, there is no difference between humans, animals, birds, etc. based on the basic needs of living beings because food, sleep, sex, etc. are common basic instincts for all. There is only one characteristic called self-awareness that can distinguish a human from animals, birds, etc.

In ultra-modern nuclear age, we are madly addicted with the material things motivated by our desires therefore our morality, humanity and spiritual value is decreasing day by day. I think that's real cause lack of self-realization. We should ask each three questions. Who am I? Where I come from? And why? Actually, we think we mean our body, our out figure, physically existence but nothing is eternal only Atman in this world. Kathopaniṣad says,

“aḥo nityaḥ śāśvato yaṁ purāno na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre.”<sup>8</sup>

and we are all the part of our supreme God who is the creator of this world, everything. So, it is our duty to serve him. But due to lack of this self-realization we think ourselves the owner of the world. Our mindis consisting last, anger, greed, egoism, selfishness. Man is the best of all creature as said in the Mahabharata,

“na hi mānuṣāt śreṣṭhataram kiṁchit”.<sup>9</sup>

and he has the best sense organ but without its proper cultivation of our mind we are making ourselves none but a speaking and thinking animal.

Manas, mind is both pure and impure. Jaiminīyopaniṣad remarks that the mind is a pond filled with the desires,

“sa eṣa hradaḥ kāmānām puranaḥ yan manaḥ”.<sup>10</sup>

Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad observes,

“mano hi dvividhaṁ proktaṁ śuddhaṁ cāśuddhaṁ eva ca  
aśuddhaṁ kāmasamparkāt śuddhaṁ kāmavivarjitam”.<sup>11</sup>

(The mind becomes perturbed when associated with (wild) desires. It became pure when freed from such desires. Naturally when mind is impure - filled with desires, especially wild desires, a person out breaks

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<sup>8</sup> Katha Upaniṣad 1.2.12

<sup>9</sup>Mahābhārat, Śāntiparva 299/20

<sup>10</sup> Jaiminīyopaniṣad 1.58

<sup>11</sup>Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad 6.34

into evil abusive language.)

For a refined, pure sweet speech, the human mind must also be free from wild desires. Action without attachment is the only key to keeping the mind pure. When an action is done without attachment to its results, it is called sattvic action. The pure mind engaged in such actions realizes the truth that the Ultimate reality is One and pervades every atom and controls everything from within. In that supreme reality, hundreds of bright stars become one, all the Vedas become one, all sacrifices become one. The soul, the supreme eternal reality, resides in all of them and can be realized by the meditative pure mind.

### 3. The Path to Self-Realization

#### 3.1 The knowledge of the Real (*Vidyā*) and Ignorance (*Avidyā*)

The Upaniṣads describe ignorance of one's true Self as the root of suffering. Liberation arises through *vidyā*, the direct experiential knowledge of reality. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* distinguishes between *para* (higher) and *apara* (lower) knowledge<sup>12</sup> suggesting that spiritual growth requires transcending intellectual understanding to attain intuitive wisdom. The Upaniṣads present a metaphysical worldview in which reality is unified, eternal, and consciousness-based. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states, “**Ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ**”<sup>13</sup> (The Self must be realized) implying that spiritual development involves introspective discovery of this underlying unity.

In the *Isoṇiṣad* two fundamental knowledge material (*Avidyā*) and spiritual (*Vidyā*) are highlighted. Through material knowledge we can fulfill all of our material desires and through spiritual knowledge we conquer the immortality and liberation. From *Isoṇiṣad*,

“*avidyayā mṛtyuṃ trtvā vidyayāmṛtaṃ aśnute*”.<sup>14</sup>

So, in recent days we should follow the same path so that we can gain both the above goals. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* related to the *Yajurveda*, remarks-

“*tad etat evaisa daivi vag anuvadati stanayitnur da da da iti, damyata, datta, dayadhvam iti*”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.4–5

<sup>13</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5,

<sup>14</sup> *Isoṇiṣad*, ślokaḥ - 1

The heavenly voice of thunder that is sounds da da da – control yourself, give, and be compassionate. One should practice this triad – self-control, giving and compassion. These three instructions provide the base for General Ethics (samanya dharma) but the instruction of ‘datta’ – sharing wealth with others, associated with the concept of yagna is significant.

### 3.2 Proper Accumulation of Upanisadic Education

According to Upaniṣadic seers’ education is the initiation into the life of the spirit, a training of human souls in the pursuit of truth and practice of values. But in the present era man making education provides us a degree or a job, but does not develop our morality and humanity. Therefore, we are living by a critical phase where human civilization witnesses a rapid distortion of moral as well as social values. In the Vedic tradition, the first and Principal value of education was the quest for liberation of individuals from the slavery of evils;

“sā vidyā yā vimuktaye”<sup>16</sup>

According to the Vedic seers man making education is a training of self-realization for the holistic development of humanity and the process by the harmonious combination of material and spiritual science. **Śikṣā (education)** is described as **a process or a means** through which a person acquires **vidyā (true knowledge)**. This *vidyā* is not merely information or skills—rather, it is considered **the ultimate goal of human life** because it leads to inner growth, self-realization, and understanding of truth.

The Kenopaniṣad says;

“ātmanā vindate vīryam; vidyayā vindate amṛtam.”<sup>17</sup>

means: “*Through the self-one gains strength; through knowledge one attains immortality.*”

**Strength (vīrya)** refers to moral, mental, and spiritual strength. **Immortality (amṛtam)** symbolizes liberation, enlightenment, or freedom from ignorance—not physical immortality. So, the idea is that **self-discipline builds inner strength, and true knowledge leads to spiritual liberation.**

In the **Śikṣā Vallī** (education chapter) of the **Taittirīya Upaniṣad**, the teacher gives a **convocation address** to students after their studies. He exhorts,

“satyaṁ vada, dharmam cara, svādhyāyānnā pramadaḥ, satyānna pramaditavyam, dharmānna

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<sup>15</sup> Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 5.2.3

<sup>16</sup> Viṣṇu Purāna 1.19. 41

<sup>17</sup> Kena Upaniṣad 2.4

pramāditavyam, kusalāna pramāditavyam, bhutyai na pramāditavyam,  
svādhyāyapracānanābhyām na pramāditavyam.”<sup>18</sup>

“māṭṛdevo vaba, piṭṛdevo vaba, ācāryadevo vaba, athitidevo vaba.”<sup>19</sup>

(Speak the truth, do your duties, never swerve from the study of the Vedas....Never err from the truth, never fall from duty, never overlook your own welfare, never neglect your prosperity and never neglect the study and the propagation of the Vedas....May the father be, to thee, a good. May the preceptor be, to thee, a God. May the guest be, to thee, a God).

This address emphasizes the cultivation of **human values**, truthfulness, self-discipline, respect for parents and teachers, ethical behavior, and responsibility to society. This reinforces the Vedic idea that education

**is not merely academic learning but character formation.**

Kaṭha Upaniṣad emphasizes self-control:

“indriyebhyaḥ parā hyarthā  
arthebhyāś ca param manaḥ”<sup>20</sup>

- “Beyond the senses are the objects, beyond the objects is the mind...”

The ascent through increasingly subtle layers culminates in recognition of the Self as the highest reality.

“**brahma vid brahmaiva bhavati**”<sup>21</sup>

-“The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman”.

### 3.3 Cultivation of Value Education

Swami Vivekananda addressed the American audience with the words ‘brothers and sisters. Reality the feeling of universal fraternity was running through his veins. Such feelings were fostered in his mind, by the values of universal brotherhood, as reflected in Vedic and Upaniṣadic philosophy. In Sveāśvatara Upaniṣad, the Rṣi addressed his disciples with,

“śṛṇvantu viśve amṛtasya putrāḥ”<sup>22</sup>

(Oh, ye descendants of immortals.)

The ancient seers mean to say that everyone is a *putra*, a descendant of that all-pervading, immortal, eternal

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<sup>18</sup>Taittiriya Upaniṣad, śikṣā vallī, section xi, 1

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 2

<sup>20</sup>Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.10

<sup>21</sup> Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.9

<sup>22</sup> Sveāśvatara Upaniṣad, 2.5

Truth, and as a result, there is the relationship of brotherhood between all beings.

So, these are the thoughts-oriented value of ancient India, which have to be reestablished for our eternal welfare. From the Kathoṣad, we must recall the inspiring instruction of Naciketā, a mere boy of tender age who was determined to know the mystery of death instead of getting the opportunities for a lot of material wealth like horse, elephant, herds of cattle, gold, musical instrument, long life as he wishes and fair maidens etc. But Naciketā said-

“na bittena tarpaṇīyo manuṣyo lapsāyamahe vittamadrakṣma cet tvā  
jīviṣyāmo yābadīṣiṣysi tvam varastu me varaṇīyaḥ sa eba”.<sup>23</sup>

(Wealth can never make a man happy more ever since I have beheld you, I shall certainly obtain wealth I shall also live as long as your rule therefore no boon will be accepted by me but the one that I have asked) So, we can easily understand from the vivid vision of great Naciketā that the education of this period was so enriched that they could realize the spiritual knowledge beyond the material senses and could easily get rid of the material desires. At Taittiriya Upaniṣad it is maintained that every day during the study of the rest of the book the teacher and student both chanted this peace-convocation -

“om saha nāvavatu, saha nau bhunaktu,  
sahavṛīyam karavāvahai  
tejasvi nvāadhītamastu mā vidviaṣāvahai  
om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ”.<sup>24</sup>

(This knowledge may protect us both the teacher and his disciple. We may work together with vigor. Our knowledge may make us illumined. May there be no dislike between us.)

But in the modern college this teaching cannot be learned merely from the bazaar notes. The perfect unison between the teacher and the taught generally gets molested by some misunderstanding between them. It may be either in the form of teacher’s dissatisfaction towards his students or it can be due to the student’s misjudgment of the teacher’s attitude or words.

### 3.4 Śravaṇa: Listening to the Upaniṣadic Teaching:

Self-realization begins with *śravaṇa*—hearing the teachings from a qualified teacher (*ācārya*). This is

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<sup>23</sup>Katha Upaniṣad 1.1.27

<sup>24</sup>Taittiriya Upaniṣad, Brahmānda- vallī, śāntipātha.

emphasized in - “**tad vijñānārthaṁ sa gurum evābhigacchet**”

- “To know that (Brahman), one must approach a teacher”.<sup>25</sup>

The teacher-student dialogues that form the core of the Upaniṣads reflect this method.

### **3.5 Manana: Reflective Contemplation**

After hearing the teaching, the student reflects rationally upon it. The Upaniṣads encourage questioning, as in Yājñavalkya’s debates in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

### **3.6 Nididhyāsana: Meditative Assimilation**

Meditation integrates intellectual knowledge into direct realization. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* states:

“**dhyānayogena vindate**”<sup>26</sup>

—One realizes (Brahman) through the yoga of meditation.

This culmination is described as immediate self-recognition.

The Upaniṣadic path to Self-realization is a disciplined journey from ignorance to intuitive knowledge. Rooted in hearing, reflection, meditation, and ethical cultivation, it culminates in the recognition of one’s identity with *brahman*. This transformation dissolves all fear, grants inner freedom, and affirms the unity of all existence.

## **4. Conclusion**

Self-realization in the Upaniṣads represents one of the most sophisticated and enduring explorations of human consciousness. It is founded on the insight that the essence of the individual is identical with the essence of the universe. This realization is transformative; it dissolves ignorance, ends suffering, and unveils the inherent freedom of the Self. The Upaniṣads do not merely propose metaphysical doctrines; they offer an existential path, combining inquiry, meditation, ethical cultivation, and experiential knowledge. Their teachings continue to inspire seekers, scholars, and philosophers across cultures. Ultimately, the Upaniṣadic vision affirms that self-realization is not the attainment of something new but the discovery of what has always been present—the luminous, infinite, and ever-free Self.

Therefore, we can conclude that the education in Upaniṣadic era and the way of teaching was proper to accumulate the material and especially spiritual knowledge. So, we should recast our modern outlook in the Upaniṣdic framework to overcome the hurdles and bandeaux in our modern educational system. By

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<sup>25</sup>*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12

<sup>26</sup>*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.

reestablishing Upaniṣadic culture, we can lead to a class of properly educated persons who can ignite to the whole society to be a wisely developed.

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