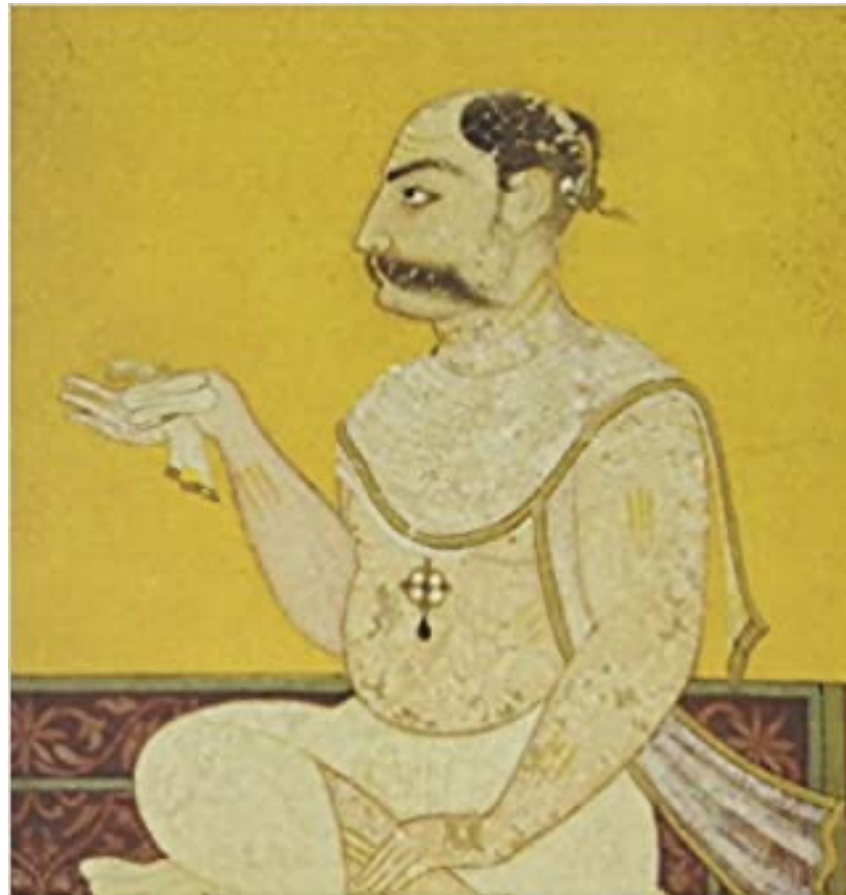


Comparative Conceptions of the Self

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Lecture 1



Upaniṣads

A new translation by Patrick Olivelle

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

The texts of the *Upaniṣads*

A collection of texts composed over several centuries (ca. 700-300 BCE) and in various regions (northern India, ranging from the upper Indus valley to the lower Ganges).

All the product of the geographical centre of ancient Brahmanism (see map in Olivelle, p. xxxviii).

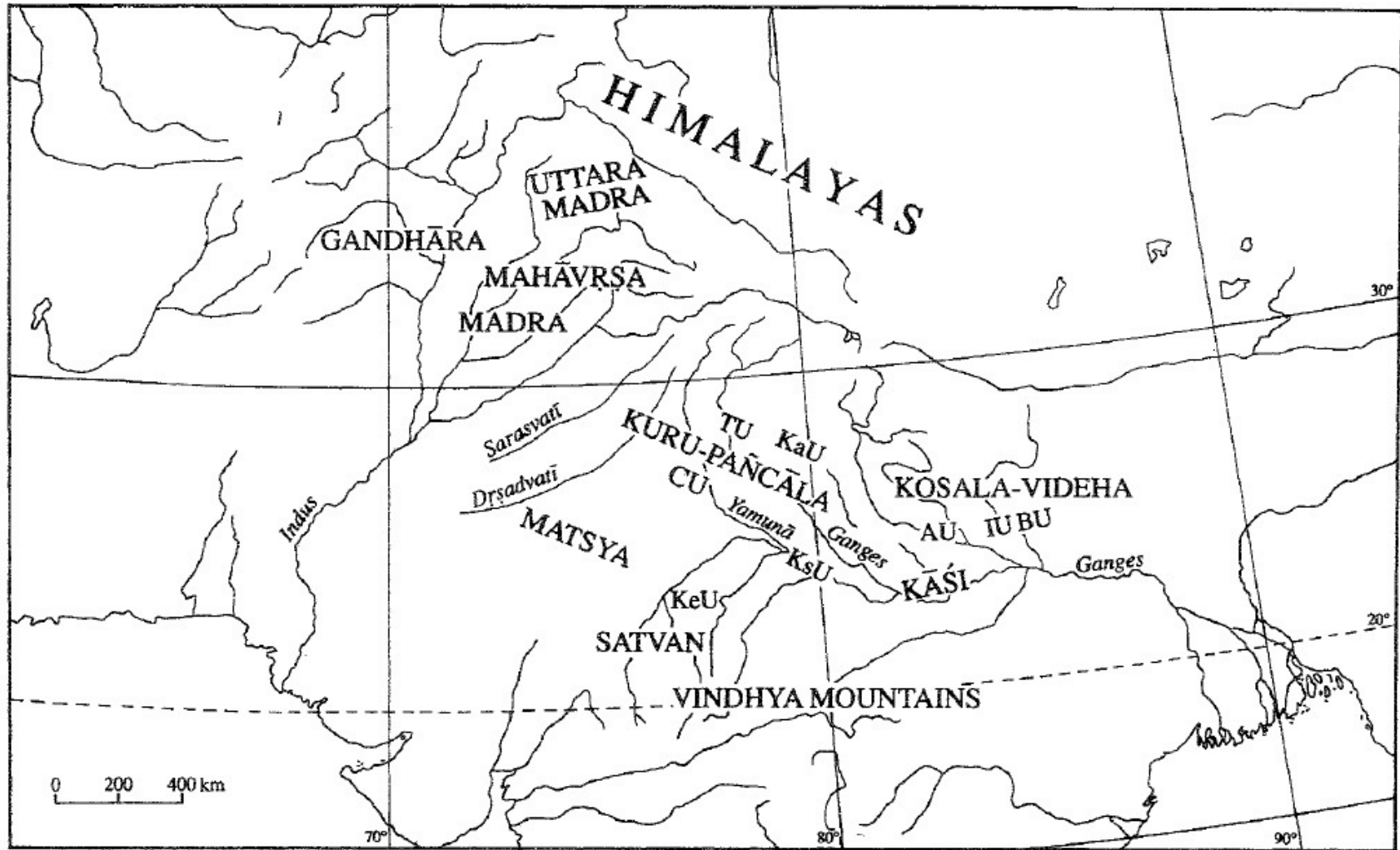


Fig. 2. Map of northern India: The Geography of the Upaniṣads

The word “*Upaniṣad*”

Interpretation 1

- *Upa* (near) + *ni* (down) + *sad* (sit).
- “To sit close beside.”
- The secret teaching passed orally from teacher to disciple.

Interpretation 2

- “Connection,” “equivalence.”
- Hence secret knowledge or doctrines (concerning the hidden connections).
- And the texts containing those doctrines.

Ātman-Brahman

The ultimate secret “equivalence” or “connection” (*upaniṣad*) is between *Ātman*, the essential I, and *Brahman*, the ultimate essence of reality:

“When a man comes to know that highest *brahman*, he himself becomes that very *brahman*.” MuU 3.2.9 (p. 276).

Brahman

In the Vedic hymns, “*brahman*” refers to the power contained in the recited words and hymns.

In the *Upaniṣads*, it means the ultimate and basic essence of the cosmos.

“That from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live; and into which they pass upon death—seek to perceive that! That is *brahman*!” *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 3.1.1 (p. 190).

Ātman

In the Vedic hymns, “*ātman*” refers to the vital breath or life essence of a human being.

In the *Upaniṣads*, it means the “Self,” the ultimate essence of a human being.

“The self (*ātman*) that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real—that is the self that you should try to discover, that is the self that you should seek to perceive. When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled.” CU 8.7.1 (p. 171).

Specific texts

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU) 4.3-4.4 (pp. 58-68).

Chāndogya Upaniṣad (CU) 8.7-8.12 (pp. 171-175).

Kena Upaniṣad (KeU) 1 (pp. 227-228).

Kaṭha Upaniṣad (KaU) (pp. 232-247).

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (MuU) (pp. 268-277)

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (MaU) (pp. 289-90).

Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3-4.4 (pp. 58-68).

A dialogue between the brahmin sage Yājñavalkya and King Janaka of Videha.

Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3-4.4 (pp. 58-68).

Yājñavalkya:

- a great teacher of secret doctrines;
- learned, sarcastic, and irreverent;
- defeats 8 brahmins in debate, including the woman Gārgi, who is the strongest of the lot (and tells the others not to bother once she's been defeated) (see pp. 34-52).
- has two wives—Maitreyī (who is intelligent and interested in philosophical matters) and Kātyāyanī (who isn't so inclined);
- eventually departs from home and takes up the ascetic way of life.

King Janaka

- A great and learned King from Videha (a north-eastern region).

Ātman in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

The true self (*ātman*) – the inner and self-luminous person.

Travels through three realms/has three states – waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep.

Is reborn and becomes what he does (how he acts—*karma*).

But in essence is unborn and the same as *brahman*.

Chāndogya Upaniṣad 8.7-8.12 (pp. 171-175).

A story in which Prajāpati (“Lord of creatures,” the creator god) teaches the demon Virocana and the god Indra about the Self (*ātman*).

Ātman in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad

Neither the self of the physical body, the self of dreams, or the self of dreamless sleep.

The immortal and non-bodily self.

Kena Upaniṣad

“*Kena*” means “by whom?”

This *Upaniṣad* is an inquiry into the nature of the one “by whom” there is perception and knowledge, especially of *brahman*.

It concludes by indicating that it is *ātman* that is the one “by whom” and that *ātman-brahman* is the real power behind the workings of the universe, both internal and external.

KU Verse 1

By whom does the mind soar forth [go toward its object]?

Being directed by whom does the breath [life force] march on as the first [proceed to function]?

By whom is speech impelled [so that one speaks]?

And who is the god that joins the sight and hearing [what force directs sight and hearing]?

KU Verse 2

That which is the hearing behind hearing, the thinking behind thinking, the speech behind speech, the sight behind sight, the breathing behind breathing—free from these the wise become immortal when they depart from this world.

I.e., the wise who separate the *ātman* from the sensory functions, the mind, and the body become immortal.

KU Verse 3

Sight, thinking, and speech do not reach it.

So we do not know it or perceive it or know how to point it out.

It is different from what is known and beyond what is unknown.

KU Verses 4-8

What speech can't express, but that by which speech is expressed; what the mind can't know, but that by which the mind is known; what sight can't see, but that by which sight is seen; what hearing can't hear, but that by which hearing is heard; what breathing can't breathe, but that by which breath is drawn out – that is alone is *Brahman*, and not what people venerate here.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

A dialogue between Naciketas—a brahmin boy—and Yama, the god of death.

In 1879, Edwin Arnold rendered it in verse as “The Secret of Death.”

Somerset Maugham, inspired after reading it, titled one of his novels, “*The Razor’s Edge*,” which is a phrase that comes from this *Upaniṣad* (see p. 240).

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Naciketas' father gives away all his possessions as sacrificial gifts.

The boy, supposing he too is to be given away, annoys his father by asking three times, "To whom will you give me?"

The father, in exasperation, says, "To death."

Since he can't take back his words, he tells Naciketas that, when he arrives at Death's residence, Death will be away and Naciketas will have to stay there three days without food.

Since it's a great discourtesy to let a brahmin guest stay in one's house without food, Yama will have to grant him three wishes.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Naciketas first wish is that Yama return him to his father's house alive.

His second wish is that Yama explain to him how the fire-altar leads to heaven.

His third wish is that Yama explain to him the mystery of death.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Yama replies, even the gods of old had doubts, for it's hard to understand, it's a subtle doctrine. Make another wish.

Naciketas refuses.

Yama then says, choose long life, wealth and many more pleasures.

Naciketas refuses and says these things are ephemeral.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Yama says, “The good is one thing, the gratifying is quite another... The wise assess them, note the difference; and choose the good over the gratifying... Far apart and widely different are these two; ignorance and what’s known as knowledge. I take Naciketas as one yearning for knowledge; the many desires do not confound you” (p. 235).

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Yama goes on to say that the “transit”—the passage from this world to the next—is not understood by many; those who hear of it don’t comprehend it. To comprehend it one has to understand “the primeval one”—*ātman*.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Ātman is hard to perceive, wrapped in mystery, hidden in the cave of the heart.

The word of which the *Vedas* speak and that all the austerities proclaim is *Om*.

That syllable expresses *brahman* (pp. 236-237).

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Yama continues, “The wise one [*ātman*]*—*he is not born, he does not die; he has not come from anywhere; he has not become anyone. He is unborn and eternal; primeval and everlasting. And he is not killed, when the body is killed.” (p. 237)

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

Then follow some of the most famous lines of the *Upaniṣads* (pp. 239-240).

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

If the killer thinks that he kills;
If the killed thinks that he is killed;
Both of them fail to understand,
He neither kills, nor is he killed.

Finer than the finest, larger than the largest
is the self (*ātman*) that lies here hidden
in the heart of a living being.
Without desires and free from sorrow,
a man perceives by the creator's grace
the grandeur of the self.

Kaṭha Upaniṣad

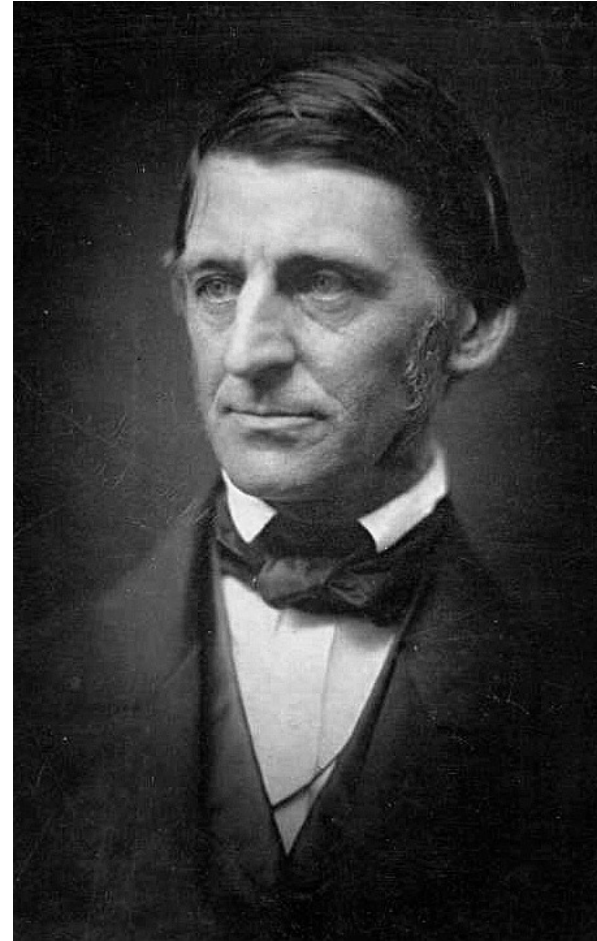
Sitting down, he roams afar.
Lying down, he goes everywhere.
The gods ceaselessly exulting—
Who, besides me, is able to know?

When he perceives this immense, all-pervading self,
as bodiless within bodies,
as stable within unstable beings—
A wise man ceases to grieve.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Inspired by these verses of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* when he wrote his famous poem, “Brahma”:

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.



Imagery of the chariot (pp. 238-9)

Know the **self** as a **rider** in a chariot,
and the **body**, as simply the **chariot**.

Know the **intellect** as the **charioteer**,
and the **mind**, as simply the **reins**.

The **senses**, they say, are the **horses**,
and **sense objects** are the **paths**
around them; he who is linked to the
body, senses, and mind, the wise
proclaim as **the one who enjoys**.



Imagery of the chariot

Self (*ātman*)

Intellect (*buddhi*)

Mind (*manas*)

Senses (*indriya*)

Sense objects (*tanmātras*)

Rider

Charioteer

Reins

Horses

Paths

Imagery of the chariot (pp. 238-9)

When a man lacks understanding, and his mind is never controlled; his senses do not obey him, as bad horses, a charioteer.

When a man has understanding, and his mind is ever controlled; his senses do obey him, as good horses, a charioteer.



Imagery of the chariot (pp. 238-9)

When a man lacks understanding, is unmindful and always impure; he does not reach that final step, but gets on the round of rebirth [*saṃsāra*].

But when a man has understanding, is mindful and always pure; he does reach that final step, from which he is not reborn again.



Hierarchy of functions (p. 239)

Higher than the senses are their objects [*tanmātras*, subtle sense qualities]

Higher than sense objects is the mind [*manas*];

Higher than the mind is the intellect [*buddhi*];

Higher than the intellect is the immense self [*mahat*];

Higher than the immense self is the unmanifest [*avyakta/prakṛti*]

Higher than the unmanifest is the person [*puruṣa*]

Higher than the person there's nothing at all.

That is the goal, that is the highest state.

The razor's edge (p. 240)

Arise! Awake! Pay attention,
when you've obtained your wishes!
A razor's edge is hard to cross—
that, poets say, is the difficulty of the path.

It has no sound or touch,
no appearance, taste or smell;
It is without beginning or end,
undecaying and eternal;
When a man perceives it,
fixed and beyond the immense,
He is free from the jaws of death.

But how does one perceive it (*ātman*)?

By reversing the “outward projection” and turning inward:

“The Self-existent One pierced the apertures outward,
therefore one looks out, and not into oneself.
A certain wise man in search of immortality
turned his sight inward and saw the self within” (p. 240).

This is *yoga* (p. 246) —withdrawing the senses and quieting the mind and intellect, so that they are completely stilled. Then the *ātman* or *puruṣa* shines forth. [cf. Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*].

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (MuU)

This text distinguishes between lower knowledge and higher knowledge.

Lower knowledge includes all written knowledge, including the *Vedas*.

Higher knowledge is “that by which one grasps the imperishable” [*brahman*].

MuU: A cosmic view of brahman

“As from a well-stoked fire sparks fly by the thousands,
all looking just like it,
So from the imperishable issue diverse things,
and into it, my friend, they return.” (p. 271)

MuU: OM as the bow

Take, my friend, this bow
this great weapon of *upaniṣad*;
Place veneration on it
as the whetted arrow;
Stretch it with the thought fixed on the nature of that;
That very imperishable is the target, my friend.
Strike it!

The bow is OM, the arrow's the self,
The target is *brahman*, they say.
One must strike that undistracted.
He will then be lodged in that.
Like the arrow, in the target.

MuU and RV: The two birds

Two birds, companions and friends,
nestle on the very same tree.
One of them eats a tasty fig;
the other, not eating looks on.

Stuck on the very same tree,
one person grieves, deluded
by her who is not the Lord;
But when he sees the other,
the contented Lord—and his
majesty—
his grief disappears. (p. 274)

Two birds, friends joined together,
clutch the same tree. One of them
eats the sweet fruit; the other looks
on without eating. (RV, p. 78)

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (MaU)

Four “feet” or “quarters” of the self:

Waking

Dreaming

Deep and dreamless sleep

The “fourth” (turīya)

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

OM/AUM:

Waking: A

Dreaming: U

Deep Sleep: M

Pure awareness as
underlying unity: AUM or
silence.

