

Upaniṣads and Mahāvākyas

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Upaniṣads are mystic teachings that generally occur in the end portion of the Vedas (Vedānta). The Upaniṣads are the only scriptural texts which deal exclusively with the discovery of essential spiritual truths that lead a human being to attain Self realization. The word Upaniṣad is derived from *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *s(h)ad* (to sit), i.e., sitting down near. Upaniṣadic sages of yore had groups of pupils sitting near them to whom they imparted their profound knowledge of Brahman, the Supreme. Ādi Śankarācārya, however, defines *upanīṣad* as the source of knowledge of Brahman, by which ignorance is loosened or destroyed. He comments that the word Upaniṣad is derived from the root *sad* meaning “to loosen,” or “to destroy,” with *upa* and *ni* as prefixes. So, Upaniṣads are philosophical treatises that deal with knowledge of Brahman and clearly Vedic subjects such as Ātman, Self-realization, yoga and meditation, karma and reincarnation, etc.

The Upaniṣads contain verifiable and verified spiritual truths, the culminating point of which is the spiritual unification of all experience in the *Ātman* or *Brahman*. Upaniṣads declare that all this manifested universe is verily the Brahman, the Supreme. The focus of all science is the search for unity and the Upaniṣadic sages discovered this unity in *Ātman*. Thus, Vedānta is both a religion and a philosophy of the highest order. The late Swāmi Ranganāthānanda (1908-2005) says in his book *The Message of the Upanishads*: “As religion, it discovers the truths of the inner world and fosters the same discovery by the others; as philosophy, it synthesizes this science of the inner world with the other sciences of the outer world, to present a unified vision of total reality, and to impart to human life and character depth of faith and vision along with breadth of outlook and sympathy.”

A large number of Upaniṣads (approximately 1180) have been recognized in the Vedas. Of these, 108 were considered key Upaniṣads as these were apparently given to Śrī Hanumān by Śrī Rāma. These 108 Upaniṣads are mentioned in the *Muktikopaniṣad*. Of these, ten were considered to be the major Upaniṣads as Ādi Śankarācārya (788 to 820 A. D.) chose to write detailed commentaries on them. The ten major Upaniṣads and their Vedic origin are given below.

<u>Major Upaniṣad</u> ¹	<u>Vedic Source</u>
<i>Īśāvāsyā</i>	- <i>Śukla Yajurveda</i> ²
<i>Kena</i>	- <i>Sāmaveda</i>
<i>Kaṭha</i>	- <i>Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda</i>
<i>Praśna</i>	- <i>Atharvaṇaveda</i>
<i>Muṇḍaka</i> ,	- <i>Atharvaṇaveda</i>
<i>Māṇḍūkya</i>	- <i>Atharvaṇaveda</i>
<i>Taittirīya</i>	- <i>Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda</i>
<i>Aitareya</i>	- <i>Ṛgveda</i>
<i>Chāndogya</i>	- <i>Sāmaveda</i>
<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka</i>	- <i>Śukla Yajurveda</i>

¹ The order of listing the *Upaniṣads* is based on a well-accepted convention as given by Swāmi Ranganāthānanda in his book *The Message of the Upanishads*.

² Two branches of *Yajurveda* are recognized: *Śukla Yajurveda* and *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* attributed to sages Yāgñavalkya and Vaiśampāyana, respectively.

It is to the eternal credit of Ādi Śankarācārya that, through his masterful and highly respected commentaries on the ten major Upaniṣads, he brought to limelight this immortal literature of the Vedas. In addition to the ten Upaniṣads mentioned above, a few other Upaniṣads such as *Śvetāśvatara*, *Kaivalya*, *Mahānārāyaṇa*, *Amṛta Bindu*, *Jābāla*, *Bhāvana* and some others are considered important by some commentators.

As described above, the Vedas and the Upaniṣads exist to impart the highest spiritual truths to humanity to enable them to reach God and be freed forever from the cycle of birth and death. From each of the four Vedas, one *Mahāvākya* (great sentence) was selected and that one sentence was supposed to encapsulate the spirit and philosophy of that particular Veda. It is a remarkable feat in itself to be able to select one sentence to represent the spirit of one Veda, since each of them is a large compendium of information. Who selected these *Mahāvākyas* is not known but there is almost universal consensus as to which these *Mahāvākyas* are.

Each of the *Mahāvākyas* originates from a specific Upaniṣad in a given Veda and is a transcendental phrase which establishes the oneness of the individual soul (*Ātman*) with *Brahmaṇ*. The four *Mahāvākyas* are as follows:

prajñānam brahma:—‘Consciousness is Brahmaṇ.’ This is called the Svarūpa Bodha Vākya or Lakṣaṇa Vākya, meaning a “statement of definition” – a sentence that explains the nature of Brahmaṇ or the Self. This is contained in the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* of the Ṛgveda (*Aitareya* V.3)

aham brahma asmi:—‘I am Brahmaṇ.’ This is the Anusandhāna Vākya or Svanubhava Vākya – a “statement of experience” that indicates an aspirant’s realization of oneness between himself or herself and the Brahmaṇ. This is contained in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* of the Yajurveda (I. 4. 10).

tat tvam asi:—‘That Thou Art.’ This is the Upadeśa Vākya, an “instructional sentence,” repeated 9 times in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* of the Sāmaveda (*Chāndogya* VI.8.7—VI.16.3). Through this sentence, the teacher (Sage Uddālaka Āruṇi) instructs his son and disciple Śvetaketu: “You are that Supreme Brahmaṇ.”

ayam ātma brahma:—‘This Self is Brahmaṇ.’ This is the Abhyāsa Vākya – a “statement of practice” that provides a formula for an aspirant to practice and discover the oneness of Ātman and Brahmaṇ. This is contained in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* of the Atharvaṇaveda (*Māṇḍūkya* verse 2)

Of these four *Mahāvākyas*, *tat tvam asi* is considered of great importance. The Guru initiates the disciple into *Brahma Jñāna* (knowledge of Brahmaṇ) through this *Vākya*. It is a profound declaration that comforts a *sādhaka* (seeker) about his/her divinity and infuses inner spiritual strength into the person to realize his/her own divinity. This *Mahāvākya* is simple in the words that it employs, but it requires the well-polished sharp intellect of an advanced aspirant to understand the subtle truth that it conveys.

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A companion article titled [Vedas](#) is also available at this site.