

What does the word *Upanishad* mean?

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We have heard and studied many *Upanishads* – *Isha Upanishad*, *Katha Upanishad*, *Mandukya Upanishad*, *Kaivalya Upanishad* and so on. But what does the word *Upanishad* mean? We shall ponder over the meaning of the word *Upanishad* and analyse its various significances in this essay.

Coining the word *Upanishad*

Sri Shankaracharya discusses how the word *Upanishad* has been coined in his introduction to the *Katha Upanishad*.

सदेर्धातोः विशरण-गति-अवसादन-अर्थस्य

उप-नि-पूर्वस्य... रूपमिदम् उपनिषत् ।

Saderdhātoḥ viśaraṇa-gati-
avasādana-arthasya upa-ni-
pūrvasya... rūpamidam upaniṣat

“The word *Upanishad* is derived by adding *upa* and *ni* together as prefixes to the root *sad** which means 1. *viśarana* (to destroy), 2. *gati* (to go, to

propel) and 3. *avasādana* (to decay)”. Thus *Upanishad* = *upa* + *ni* + *sad*. The prefix *upa* is used in the sense of *upasādana* - ‘to approach’ and the prefix *ni* is used in the sense of *nischayena* - ‘steadfastness’. Though *upa* and *ni* mean ‘to approach’ and ‘to be steadfast’ respectively, *sad* can take three meanings ‘to destroy’, ‘to propel’ or ‘to decay’.

Thus with *upa* and *ni* and with the three different meanings of *sad* we see that the word *Upanishad* can have three distinct meanings:

1. *Upanishad* = to approach (*upa*) + to be steadfast (*ni*) + to destroy (*sad*),
2. *Upanishad* = to approach (*upa*) + to be steadfast (*ni*) + to propel (*sad*) and
3. *Upanishad* = to approach

* The suffix ‘*kvip*’ is added to ‘*sad*’ to change its verbal structure to noun form.

(upa) + to be steadfast (ni)
+ to decay (sad).

The following is an exposition of the above three combinations.

1. To approach (Upa) + To be steadfast (Ni) + To destroy (Sad)

Upanishad is that knowledge, which destroys the ignorance of those who approach its teaching and steadfastly abide in it. Sri Shankaracharya presents this idea in his commentary on the *Katha Upanishad*.

ये मुमुक्षवो दृ
सन्तः उपनिषच्छब्दवाच्यां... विद्याम्
उपसद्य उपगम्य तन्निष्ठतया
निश्चयेन शीलयन्ति तेषाम् अविद्यादेः
संसारबीजस्य विशरणात् हिंसनात्
विनाशनात् इत्यनेन अर्थयोगेन विद्या
उपनिषत् इत्युच्यते।

Ye mumukṣavo dṛṣṭānuśravika-
viṣayavitṛṣṇāḥ santaḥ upaniṣac-
chabdavācyaṃ vidyām upasadya
upagamy tanniṣṭhatayā niścayena
śīlayanti teṣāṃ avidyādeḥ
saṃsārabijasya viśaraṇāt himsanāt
vināśanāt ityanena arthayogena
vidyā upaniṣat ityucyate.

“*Upanishad* is that knowledge which splits up, injures or destroys (*sad* in the meaning of ‘to destroy’ – *visharana*) ignorance etc., which is the cause of

samsara for those who after having attained total dispassion towards all the seen (objects of enjoyment in this world) and unseen (objects of enjoyment in heaven) and approach (*upa* – in the sense of going near) the knowledge and who with certainty and steadfastness (*ni* – in the sense of steadfastness) abide in it.”

Please note that Sri Shankaracharya has said that *Upanishad* destroys the ignorance of only those endowed with *mumukshutva* (desire for liberation) and *vairagya* (dispassion).

2. To approach (Upa) + Certainty (Ni) + To propel (Sad)

Upanishad is that knowledge, which propels to *Brahman* those who approach its teaching and steadfastly abide in it. Explaining this Sri Shankaracharya says:

मुमुक्षून् ब्रह्म गमयितृ
ब्रह्मविद्या उपनिषत् ।

Mumukṣūn brahma gamayitṛt-
vena yogāt brahmavidyā upaniṣat.

“Since this Knowledge guides or propels a seeker of liberation to *Brahman*, this *Brahmavidya* (knowledge regarding *Brahman*) is called *Upanishad*.”

3. To approach (*Upa*) + Certainty (*Ni*) + To decay (*Sad*)

Upanishad is that knowledge, which weakens and removes the sorrows of *samsara* for those who approach its teaching and steadfastly abide in it. Sri Ramatirtha, the famous commentator on *Vedantasara* explains this when he says:

ब्रह्मविद्यासंशीलिनां संसारसारतामतिं सादयति
विषदयति शिथिलयति इति ।

Brahmavidyāsamśilinām saṁsāra-
sāratāmatim sādayati viśadayati
śīthilayati iti.

“*Upanishad* is the knowledge which effectively weakens and removes *samsara* for those who are qualified for *Brahmavidya*”.

Thus we have seen the three important meanings of the word *Upanishad*.

Upanishad* is primarily the Knowledge of *Brahman

Thus *Upanishad* destroys ignorance, propels a dispassionate person to *Brahman* and removes the sorrows of *samsara*. A book is inert and insentient and it cannot qualify for the above definition. A book is only a medium of knowledge. It is knowledge alone that can weaken the sorrows of *samsara* by propelling a person to *Brahman* and destroying the igno-

rance. Hence it is said that the knowledge of *Brahman* is *Upanishad*. Sri Shankaracharya in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* says clearly:

उपनिषत् इति विद्या उच्यते ।

Upaniṣat iti vidyā ucyate.

“By the word *Upanishad* is meant the knowledge (of *Brahman*).”

***Upanishad* is a book in the secondary sense**

But by *Upanishad* we also mean books as when we say “We read an *Upanishad* every day,” “Where is my *Upanishad*?”, “We chant the *Taittiriya Upanishad* daily”.

Though from the point of view of the meanings of the root *sad*, destruction of ignorance, leading to *Brahman* and decay of *samsara*, *Upanishad* refers directly to *Brahmavidya* (knowledge of *Brahman*), since the books too are meant to give the very same knowledge they are also called *Upanishads* in a secondary sense. Here are a few common examples to explain this idea:

1. घृ
Ghṛtaṁ vai āyuh.
‘Ghee is verily life’. Life is different from ghee. Ghee is a substance while life is the sense of being alive. Since ghee helps in increasing

one's vitality it is called life by way of praise.

2. लांगलं जीवनम् ।

Lāṅgalam jivanam

'The plough is life'. Here also since the plough provides for farming, which is the livelihood in an agrarian community, it is praised as life itself.

Ghee and the plough are praised as life as they are instrumental for life. In the same way the book too is called the *Upanishad* as it is instrumental in giving *Brahmavidya*. Thus the book is *Upanishad* only in the secondary sense.

Sri Shankaracharya says:

विद्यायां मुख्यया वृ

वर्तते । ग्रन्थे तु भक्त्या ।

Vidyāyām mukhyayā vṛittyā upaniṣacchabdo vartate. Granthe tu bhaktya.

"The primary meaning of the word *Upanishad* is knowledge. The text being *Upanishad* is only in the secondary sense."

Other meanings of the word *Upanishad*

1. *Upa* means to approach as mentioned before. But *ni* can also mean, apart from steadfastness, 'below' or 'under',

and *sad* can mean 'to sit' apart from the three meanings of *sad* given before. Thus using these meanings of *ni* and *sad*:

Upanishad = to approach (*upa*) + below (*ni*) + to sit (*sad*).

This meaning indicates that this knowledge is to be attained by approaching a Teacher, sitting with an attitude of humility (indicated by the prefix *ni* - below) at his feet to absorb the teaching. Thus this definition clarifies that one should get this knowledge by being devoted to a teacher, not pursue it independently for it would only lead to confusions.

2. The prefix *upa* indicates to approach as before. When the prefix *ni* is added to the root *sad* it means to sit down or lie down. Hence *Upanishad* is that knowledge which one should approach as one's supreme welfare lies in it. This idea is expressed by Sri Shankaracharya in his introduction to *Taittiriya Upanishad*:

उपनिषण्णं वा अस्यां परं श्रेय इति ।
Upaniṣaṇṇam vā asyām param śreya iti.

“It is called *Upanishad* as the supreme good lies in it.”

Implication of the word *Upanishad*

It is interesting to note that the word *Upanishad* by itself reveals the *anubandha-catushtaya* – the four preliminary considerations, which are to be laid down by the author before the beginning of any work. These four are:

1. *Adhikari* (the qualified person): The one who desires liberation, has dispassion, is humble, is determined etc.
2. *Vishaya* (subject matter): *Brahman*.
3. *Phala* (result): Destruction of ignorance leading to the cessation of *samsara*.
4. *Sambandha* (relationship): The relation of *bodhya-bodhaka-bhava*, the teacher and the taught, the text being the revealer of knowledge.

Conclusion

To summarise:

- *Upanishad* is that knowledge which destroys ignorance, leads a qualified aspirant to *Brahman*, weakens *samsara* and in which lies one's supreme welfare.

- The word *Upanishad* means primarily knowledge of *Brahman* and secondarily the book.
- The *Upanishads* are to be learnt by approaching a Master and serving him with devotion.
- The word *Upanishad* also reveals its *anubandha-catushtaya* (preliminary considerations).

These *Upanishads* (as texts) generally form the end-portion of the *Vedas* and are hence called the *Vedanta* (lit: end of the *Veda*). They are the culmination of the philosophy of the *Vedas*. They are India's greatest contribution to the world.

The great German mystic of the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer, expresses the glory of the *Upanishads*, “From every sentence (of the *Upanishads*), deep, original and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit. In the whole world there is no study... so beneficial and so elevating as that of the *Upanishads*. They are the products of the highest wisdom. They are sooner or later to become the faith of the people... It has become the solace of my life and will be the solace of my death.”