

# Interpreting the UPANISHADS

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## *Preface*

Do we know anything that is plainly and simply true, without any of the 'ifs' and 'buts' that complicate everything we perceive through our limited and uncertain personalities?

And is it thus possible to find any common basis of knowledge on which we can always rely, no matter what particular conditions and uncertainties surround our little bodies, senses and minds in a much larger universe?

The Upanishads are early texts that describe just such an enquiry into plain truth. However, there are two problems which complicate our understanding of these texts today.

First, they were composed at a time when knowledge was largely expressed in the imaginative metaphors of myth and ritual. Thus, along with their philosophical enquiry, the Upanishads also describe an archaic mythical and ritual context. It is from this archaic context that the enquiry was made, in times that are now long passed.

And second, as the founding texts of a very old philosophical tradition, they are expressed in a highly condensed way: which leaves them rather open to interpretation and explanation. The condensed statements of the Upanishads were called 'shruti' or 'heard'; because they were meant to be learned by hearing them directly from a living teacher, who would recite and interpret the words. Having received such a statement of condensed philosophical teaching, a student was meant to think about it over and over again, through a sustained process of individual reflection and enquiry. Eventually, after passing through many stages of thinking and rethinking the questions involved, the student was meant to come at last to a thorough and independent understanding of the statement, in his or her own right.

In the two and a half thousand years or more since the Upanishads began to be composed, their original statements have been interpreted and explained in many different ways, through many different schools of thought. Some schools have emphasized a religious approach to truth, through devotion to a worshipped God. Some schools have emphasized a mystical approach, through exercises of meditation that cultivate special states of experience beyond the ordinary limitations of our minds. And some schools emphasize a philosophical approach, through reasoned enquiry into common experience.

This book is focused on the philosophical approach. It follows Shri Shankara's Advaita Vedānta tradition, as interpreted by Shri Ātmānanda, a modern advaita philosopher who lived in Kerala State, India, 1883-1959.

The book asks how some ideas from the Upanishads can be translated into modern terms. This is a somewhat different approach from directly translating the texts. For each idea, selected passages have been translated and placed alongside much freer retellings that incorporate a fair degree of interpretation and commentary.

The retellings have been reproduced from a companion volume, called *From the Upanishads*. The abbreviation *FTU* refers to this companion volume, in page number references that show from where the retellings have been reproduced.

Hence this book and its companion volume form a pair, with cross-references between them. However, each volume can be read quite independently of the other.

Like the original texts, the book is perhaps best read as an anthology of collected passages. Because of their condensed expression, the Upanishads are meant to be thought about selectively, concentrating attention on one passage at a time. In various different passages, the same fundamental principles are approached again and again, in various different ways. Thus, one is free to pick out a particular passage that suits one's interests and one's state of mind at the time.

The trick is to avoid confusing the differing approaches through which the Upanishads ask different questions about one common truth. Then one can concentrate on those particular passages and those particular questions that hold one's attention sufficiently for the hard thinking that the subject requires.

## *‘This’ and ‘that’*

On the whole, the language of the Upanishads is simple. The main problems of interpretation do not come from any excessive complexity of grammar, nor from overly long and technical words. Since the language used is an early form of classical Sanskrit, there is sometimes a little trouble with the occasional archaic usage whose meaning may not be fully remembered; but this is relatively minor and peripheral.

The more basic problem comes from the philosophical character of the Upanishads. Their essential purpose is to stimulate reflection and enquiry. So they often raise questions about what words and concepts mean. This applies particularly to ordinary, common words like ‘know’ or ‘be’, or ‘true’ or ‘real’, or ‘self’ or ‘world’, or ‘this’ or ‘that’. While the meaning of such words is open to question, so too is the interpretation of the Upanishads, which use these words in a way that puts them up for questioning.

In the peace invocation that is often placed at the beginning of the Brihadāranyaka and Īsha Upanishads, there is a striking example of simple language thus used to provoke thought. The language is so simple that it is possible to make a somewhat intelligible word for word translation of the relevant passage<sup>1</sup>, with the order of the words unchanged:

pūrṇam adah pūrṇam idam	The full, that; the full, this.
pūrṇāt pūrṇam udacyate	From the full, the full arises.
pūrṇasya pūrṇam ādāya	Of the full, the full taken back,
pūrṇam evāvashishyate	the full alone remains.

Though just about intelligible, the translation is of course awkward. First, there is a problem of idiom. ‘The full, that’ is a common Sanskrit construction whose idiomatic equivalent in English is: ‘That is the full.’ Similarly, ‘the full taken back’ could be translated more idiomatically as ‘when the full is taken back’. Second, by translating the word ‘pūrṇam’ too narrowly, as ‘the full’, the philosophical implications are not quite rightly conveyed. ‘Pūrṇam’ also means ‘complete’. In the context of the Upanishads, this clearly refers to ‘complete reality’, which might be better translated as ‘all’. So to

<sup>1</sup>Though often placed in the peace invocation at the beginning of the Brihadāranyaka and Īsha Upanishads, the passage may also be found in the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad 5.1.

try making the translation less awkward, perhaps it could be modified as follows:

That is all. This is all.  
All arises out of all.  
Of all, when all is taken in,  
what remains is only all.

This is still quite a literal translation, and it is now in fluent English; but it has a problem of tone. At worst, it could be read as silly doggerel, showing up the absurdity of mystical philosophy. At best, it could be construed to have a tone of mocking irony, using a light-hearted facade to say something more profound. In neither case does it convey the philosophical tone of quiet certainty that is found in the original.

The trouble is that cryptic utterances like 'All arises out of all' are no longer taken seriously, in modern philosophical discussion. In fact, they are held up as glaring examples of 'trivial' or 'tautological' or 'woolly' or 'fuzzy' language, which serves as a cover for half-baked ideas that have not been properly questioned and tested. If anyone makes this kind of cryptic statement today, the immediate response, quite rightly, is that the speaker should explain further and be more specific about what is meant.

How does one try to solve this problem of tone in translating the simple, but sometimes cryptic statements of the Upanishads? There is a temptation to dress up the translation in strange or complicated language, to make it seem that hidden depths are lurking below; but this would be merely pretentious. The only way out is to make a specific interpretation; and to translate accordingly, perhaps adding some further explanation and commentary.

In the above passage from the peace invocation, the words 'that' and 'this' need more specific interpretation. So does the word 'pūrṇam', which is not quite adequately translated as 'the full' or as 'all'. In the retelling reproduced below (from *FTU*, page 41), the word 'that' is interpreted as the known world; the word 'this' is interpreted as the knowing self; and 'pūrṇam' is interpreted as complete reality, which is both knower and known. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as non-dual consciousness: underlying all mentally created divisions of experience into 'this' which knows and 'that' which is known. From underlying consciousness, all appearances of objects arise: as they are perceived by body, senses and mind. And back to this same consciousness, all appearances return: as they are understood and assimilated into knowledge.

That world out there, this self in here,  
each is reality, complete:

from which arises everything,  
to which all things return again,  
in which all seeming things consist;

which stays the same, unchanged, complete.

However, there are other ways of interpreting this passage, as can be seen by comparing a few available translations. Many of them use the traditional concept of 'brahman': which can be thought of as all-inclusive reality, underlying the creation and appearance of everything in the universe.

In the Ramakrishna Math's publication, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 'that' is interpreted as 'Brahman', and 'this' is interpreted as the 'universe'. 'Pūrṇam' is translated as 'infinite'. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as 'the infinite (Brahman)' from which the universe emanates and into which the universe is assimilated. The resulting translation is:

That (Brahman) is infinite, this (universe) too is infinite. The infinite (universe) emanates from the infinite (Brahman). Assimilating the infinitude of the infinite (universe), the infinite (Brahman) alone is left.

Swāmī Śarvānanda, in *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad*, translates 'that' as 'the invisible' and 'this' as 'the visible'. 'Pūrṇam' is translated as 'the Infinite'. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as 'the Infinite': from which the visible universe 'has come out', while the underlying 'Infinite remains the same'. The translation is:

The invisible is the Infinite, the visible too is the Infinite. From the Infinite, the visible universe of infinite extension has come out. The Infinite remains the same, even though the infinite universe has come out of it.

Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, in *The Upanishads*, translate 'that' as 'the things we see not' and 'this' as 'the things we see'. 'Pūrṇam' is translated variously: as 'filled full with Brahman', as just 'Brahman', and as 'all' or 'all that is'. Accordingly, the passage is taken to describe reality as all-filling 'Brahman', out of which 'floweth all that is ... yet he is still the same'. The result is a relatively free and stylish translation, as follows:

Filled full with Brahman are the things we see,  
Filled full with Brahman are the things we see not,

From out of Brahman floweth all that is:  
From Brahman all – yet he is still the same.

R.C. Zaehner, in *Hindu Scriptures*, translates 'that' as 'beyond', 'this' as 'here', and 'pūrṇam' as 'fullness'. The result is a relatively close, yet stylish translation, as follows:

Fullness beyond, fullness here:  
Fullness from fullness doth proceed.  
From fullness fullness take away:  
Fullness yet remains.

S. Radhakrishnan, in *The Principal Upanishads*, makes a carefully literal translation and adds a short commentary. In the commentary, 'that' is interpreted as 'transcendent'; 'this' as 'immanent'; and 'pūrṇam' as 'Brahman', whose integrity is unaffected by the created universe.

*Translation:*

That is full; this is full. The full comes out of the full. Taking the full from the full the full itself remains.

*Commentary:*

Brahman is both transcendent and immanent.

The birth or the creation of the universe does not in any manner affect the integrity of Brahman.

Swami Sivananda, in *The Principal Upanishads*, also makes a fairly literal translation. But he adds the word 'all' before 'that' and 'this'. And he translates 'pūrṇam' as 'the Whole'. The result is:

The Whole is all That. The Whole is all This. The Whole was born of the Whole. Taking the Whole from the Whole, what remains is the Whole.

Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats, in *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, make a translation that is both graceful and nearly literal; by leaving 'that' and 'this' as they are, and by translating 'pūrṇam' as 'perfect'. The translation is:

That is perfect. This is perfect. Perfect comes from perfect. Take perfect from perfect, the remainder is perfect.

What do these differing interpretations show? They show at least how one short passage of simple language can throw into question the meaning of

concepts like 'this' and 'that', 'full' and 'complete', 'creation' and 'dissolution', 'appearance' and 'reality'.

## *Consciousness*

In the third chapter of the Aitareya Upanishad, an enquiry is made into the nature of self. The conclusion reached is simple. The true nature of self is 'prajnyānam' or 'consciousness'.

In Sanskrit, the word 'jnyānam' means 'knowledge'. Used generally, it refers to all the various different kinds of knowledge: to all our various perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and to all the various expressions and instruments of knowledge that we interpret and use in the world. When the prefix 'pra-' is added, the meaning becomes more specific. In particular, the word 'prajnyānam' refers to 'consciousness': as the illuminating principle of experience, which is shared in common by all forms of knowledge.

The prefix 'pra-' can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it means 'before'; and it thus implies a sense of 'priority': like the English 'pre-', as in 'precede'. On the other hand, it means 'forward' or 'onward'; and it thus implies a sense of ongoing continuity: like the English 'pro-', as in 'proceed'.

In the first sense, where 'pra-' is taken to imply priority, 'prajnyānam' refers to consciousness as the underlying principle of illumination that must exist before any form of knowledge can appear. Consciousness is here described as the underlying *basis* of knowledge: which precedes all the various *forms* of knowledge that appear in our experience.

As experience changes, this underlying principle of consciousness continues, as that which knows the changes. It is always present, at every moment that we know; as the illuminating principle which is shared in common by all the various perceptions, thoughts and feelings that succeed each other in our minds. As different perceptions, thoughts and feelings appear and disappear, consciousness continues through experience, knowing all the changing appearances that come and go.

Thus, in the second sense of the prefix 'pra-', where it is taken to imply ongoing continuity, the word 'prajnyānam' refers to consciousness as the continuing principle of knowledge: which carries on through the changes and variations of experience. Here, consciousness is described as the basis of continuity that enables experience to proceed: as knowledge is passed on from past to future and from person to person.

In short, the word 'prajnyānam' defines consciousness through two essential characteristics: first, its self-evident priority, as the illuminating principle

of all experience; and second, its changeless continuity, through all apparent change.

As the Aitareya Upanishad asks what self is, it goes through the various forms of experience that are attributed to a person's self. And then it points out that all these forms of experience are only 'prajnyānasya nāma-dheyāni'. They are only 'attributed names of consciousness'. Or, in other words, they are only apparent attributes which signify the common principle of consciousness underlying them all. By implication, this self-evident and changeless consciousness is the true nature of self, to which the various forms of experience are attributed.

Having thus identified self as consciousness, the Aitareya Upanishad goes on to assert that consciousness is also the true reality of the whole world. This philosophical position is derived in three short statements.

1. '*Prajnyā-netro lokah*': There is an interesting ambiguity here. The word 'netra' can mean either 'eye' or 'leader'. Accordingly, the statement can mean: 'The world is *seen* by consciousness.' Or it can mean: 'The world is *led* by consciousness.' In the first case, the statement answers the question: how is the world known? Clearly, the world is known by consciousness, which illuminates the appearance of objects in each person's experience. But then, what is the experience by which an object appears? The experience presupposes consciousness, without which there could be no appearance at all. Consciousness comes first, and the appearance of objects can only follow after it. Hence, the argument proceeds to the second meaning indicated above: 'The world is *led* by consciousness.'

2. '*Prajnyā pratishṭha*': 'Consciousness is the foundation.' This answers the question: if consciousness comes first, then how do objects exist? The existence of each object is established on the basis of consciousness. Whatever object may appear, and however it may appear, consciousness is always there: as an underlying basis of existence that all appearances show. But just such an underlying basis is also described by the word 'reality'. What then is the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'reality'? This question is answered in the third statement.

3. '*Prajnyānam brahma*': 'Consciousness is all there is.' According to our usual way of thinking about experience, consciousness is that which illuminates each experience, and reality is that which the experience shows. However, even from this description, it is evident that consciousness and reality are always present together, throughout experience. Since both are always present, no person can ever experience one without the other. Though they are thought of differently, they can never be known apart; and so they are

indistinguishable. Two different words are being used to describe the same thing. In truth, consciousness is the underlying reality of each object and of the whole world.

This is the conclusion that is meant to be reached and rigorously tested, by a careful and thorough examination of common experience.

To show how the third chapter of the Aitareya Upanishad might be retold in modern terms, one such retelling is placed alongside a somewhat closer translation below. This is one of the more directly philosophical passages in the Upanishads, and hence it is an example of where a modern retelling could be relatively close to the original text.

**Translation** (from the  
Aitareya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 3-4)

### 3.1.1

What is this  
that we contemplate  
as 'self'?

What is this self  
to which we pay such heed?

Which is the self?

That by which one sees,  
or that by which one hears,  
or that by which  
scents are smelled;

Is it that which sees  
or hears or senses  
our perceptions  
of the world?

or that by which  
speech is articulated,  
or that by which  
taste and tastelessness  
are known apart?

Does it speak?  
Does it tell taste  
from tastelessness?

### 3.1.2

That which is this mind  
and this heart:  
perception, direction,  
discernment, consciousness,  
learning, vision, constancy,  
thought, consideration,  
motive, memory,

Or is it mind and heart:  
which we describe as wisdom,  
judgement, reason, knowledge,  
learning, vision, constancy,  
thought, consideration, motive,  
memory, imagination, purpose,  
life, desire, vitality?

imagination, purpose,  
life, desire, vitality?

All these are only  
attributed names  
of consciousness.

These are but names  
for consciousness.

### 3.1.3

This is brahman,  
comprehending  
all reality.

This is Indra,  
chief of gods.

This is the creator,  
Lord Prajāpati;

all the gods;

and all these  
five great elements  
called 'earth', 'air',  
'ether', 'waters', 'lights';

and these seeming complexes  
of minute things,  
and various seeds  
of different kinds;  
and egg-born creatures  
and those born of womb,  
and those born  
of heat and moisture,  
and those born from sprout;

horses, cattle,  
humans, elephants,  
and whatever living thing,  
moving and flying;

and that which stays in place.

All that  
is seen, and led,  
by consciousness;

Consciousness is everything:  
God, all the gods,  
the elements of which the world is made,  
creatures and things of every kind,  
however large or small,  
however born or formed,  
including all that breathes, walks, flies,  
and all that moves or does not move.

All these are known by consciousness,  
and take their stand in consciousness.

and is established  
in consciousness.

The world  
is seen, and led,  
by consciousness.

Consciousness  
is the foundation.

Consciousness  
is all there is.

### *3.1.4*

By this self,  
as consciousness,  
he ascended  
from this world;

and, attaining all desires  
in that place of light,  
became deathless,  
[that] became.

Coming after consciousness,  
the whole world stands in consciousness.

*Consciousness is all there is.*

One who knows self,  
as consciousness,  
has risen from  
this seeming world  
to simple truth:

where all desires  
are attained  
and deathlessness  
is realized.

## *Consciousness and perception*

In the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, one story is actually told twice, with much of it repeated word for word, but with a little variation and addition. In this story, Yājnyavalkya distinguishes two different kinds of knowledge.

The first kind of knowledge is called ‘vijnyānam’ or ‘prajnyānam’. ‘Vijnyānam’ means ‘knowing apart’, and it refers to the discerning knowledge that knows truth from falsehood. ‘Prajnyānam’ means ‘knowing before’, and it refers to the underlying basis of consciousness that must be present before any apparent knowledge can arise.<sup>1</sup>

In one version of the story, Yājnyavalkya describes the self as ‘vijnyāna-ghana’, which means ‘nothing but discerning consciousness’. In the other version, Yājnyavalkya describes the self as ‘prajnyāna-ghana’, which means ‘nothing but underlying consciousness’. In either case, *the true nature of the self is identified with the first kind of knowledge: as pure consciousness, unmixed with anything other than itself.*

Immediately after this, Yājnyavalkya remarks that what appears must disappear; and then he says abruptly: ‘Having arrived, there is no knowledge.’ But he is now using a different word for knowledge. The word he now uses is ‘sanjnyā’ (short for ‘sanjnyānam’), which means ‘knowing with’. This is *the second kind of knowledge: the apparent knowledge of perception, where consciousness appears mixed with perceived objects.* And Yājnyavalkya is saying that *it turns out to be non-existent, once truth has been attained.*

Yājnyavalkya’s wife Maitreyī is confused, and tells him so. He replies by distinguishing duality from non-duality.

In duality, one thing is taken to perceive another; and this assumption underlies our apparent knowledge of the world perceived by body, senses and mind.

In non-duality, all that is known is nothing but the knowing self; and this pure consciousness is the true knowledge by which the self illuminates experience. Where such true knowledge has been reached, the apparent knowledge of dualistic perception turns out to be non-existent; because it is a mere appearance that is itself nothing but consciousness.

To attain true knowledge, Yājnyavalkya tells Maitreyī that all she needs is a simple question: ‘How can the knower be known?’ And with these words,

<sup>1</sup>For further discussion, see page 6.

he leaves home; so that Maitreyī is left to go on asking the question for herself.

In what follows, the two original versions are first translated, showing their differing and common passages. Where the two versions differ, their translations are placed side by side. Where they are the same, their common translation is placed in the middle of the page.

After thus comparing the two original versions, another comparison is shown; by reproducing the second version's translation alongside a freer retelling that makes use of both original versions and goes on to a little interpretation and explanation.

One particular problem here is to express the distinction of true and apparent knowledge in modern language. In order to do this:

- The word 'vijnyānam' is translated as 'discerning consciousness' or, more shortly, as 'knowledge' or 'understanding'.
- The word 'prajnyānam' is translated as 'consciousness'.
- The word 'sanjnyā' is translated as 'mixed, perceiving consciousness' or, more shortly, as 'perception'.
- An explanation is interpolated into the retelling, where Yājnyavalkya responds to Maitreyī's confusion about 'sanjnyā' (perception). This interpolation is meant to show, a little more explicitly than the original text, how questions of perception lead on to a consideration of non-dual consciousness.

**Translations** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

2.4.12

'It is as if  
a lump of salt  
thrown into water  
were dissolved  
into mere water;  
  
'and what there is of it  
can't be picked out,  
but from wherever taken  
is just salty.

'So too, dear wife,

4.5.13

'Just as  
the essence  
salt itself  
has no inside,  
has no outside,

'but consists  
entirely  
of taste alone;

'so too, dear wife,

this infinite,  
unbounded being  
is throughout

‘nothing else  
but pure, discerning  
consciousness.

this self  
has no inside,  
has no outside,

‘but consists  
entirely  
of nothing else  
but consciousness.

‘That which has  
come together,  
rising from  
these elements,  
vanishes away  
along with them.

‘Having arrived,  
there is no mixed,  
perceiving consciousness.

‘That’s what I say,  
dear wife,’  
said Yājnyavalkya.

*2.4.13*

Maitreyī said:

‘Just here, dear husband,  
you have confused me,  
where you say:

“‘Having arrived  
there is no mixed,  
perceiving consciousness.’”

He said: ‘Dear wife,  
I am not really saying  
anything confusing.

‘It is sufficient  
for understanding.

*4.5.14*

Maitreyī said:

‘Just here, dear husband,  
you have put me  
into confusion.

‘This I don’t  
quite understand.’

‘The self is not  
what vanishes.  
It is by nature  
indivisible  
and indestructible.

## 2.4.14

‘For where duality  
seems to arise,  
  
‘there one thing smells  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing sees  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing hears  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing speaks  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing thinks  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing knows  
something else.

## 4.5.15

‘For where duality  
seems to arise,  
  
‘there one thing sees  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing smells  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing tastes  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing speaks  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing hears  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing thinks  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing touches  
something else,  
  
‘there one thing knows  
something else.

‘But, where all of this  
has become  
the self alone:

‘there by what  
can what be smelled,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be seen,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be heard,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be said,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be thought,

‘there by what  
can what be seen,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be smelled,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be tasted,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be said,  
  
‘there by what  
can what be heard,

‘there by what  
can what be known?’

‘there by what  
can what be thought,

‘there by what  
can what be touched,

‘there by what  
can what be known?’

‘How can one know  
that by which  
all this is known?’

‘This is that self  
which is  
“not this, not that”.

‘It is ungraspable,  
for it is not grasped.  
It is imperishable,  
for it does not perish.  
It is detached,  
for it is not attached.

‘Unrestricted,  
it is not disturbed  
nor suffers harm.

‘Dear wife,  
how can  
the knower  
be known?’

‘Dear wife,  
how can  
the knower  
be known?’

‘You are thus  
explicitly instructed,  
Maitreyī.

‘Just this, dear wife,  
is deathlessness.’

Having said this,  
Yājnyavalkya  
went away.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 93-96)

#### 4.5.13

‘Just as  
the essence  
salt itself  
has no inside,  
has no outside,

‘but consists  
entirely  
of taste alone;

‘so too, dear wife,  
this self  
has no inside,  
has no outside,

‘but consists  
entirely  
of nothing else  
but consciousness.

‘That which has  
come together,  
rising from  
these elements,  
vanishes away  
along with them.

‘Having arrived,  
there is no mixed,  
perceiving consciousness.

‘That’s what I say,  
dear wife,’  
said Yājnyavalkya.

‘Salt that is dissolved in water  
cannot be picked out by fingers,  
can’t be held by grasping hands.  
It’s not a separate lump of salt;  
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it is there in every drop,  
for each drop tastes of saltiness.

‘So too, the self is everywhere;  
though it can’t be picked out by senses,  
cannot be conceived by mind.  
It’s not a bounded piece of world;  
it has no outside nor inside.

‘But it’s here, in all experience,  
always here, as consciousness.

‘All mind and sense, and all the objects  
they perceive, are formed from changing  
elements; in course of time,  
they all must change and pass away.

‘Wherever knowledge is attained,  
no such perception can remain.’

At this point, Yājnyavalkya paused, with the  
remark: ‘Well, that’s what I say.’

#### 4.5.14

Maitreyī said:  
‘Just here, dear husband,

Maitreyī said: ‘Just here, I am confused.  
Where knowledge is attained, how does per-  
ception cease? I can’t make sense of it.’

you have put me  
into confusion.  
This I don't  
quite understand.'

He said: 'Dear wife,  
I am not really saying  
anything confusing.

'The self is not  
what vanishes.  
It is by nature  
indivisible  
and indestructible.

Yājnyavalkya replied: 'It isn't really confusing, if you distinguish the changing perception of apparent objects from the continuing basis of consciousness into which each perception is absorbed.

*Explanatory interpolation*

'As perceptions are absorbed,  
they're known as mere appearances  
produced by acts of sense and mind  
that part reveal and part conceal  
the nature of reality.  
Thus understood, they are dissolved  
in underlying consciousness.

'And consciousness is that which knows  
appearances, as mind and sense  
perceive a world of changing things.

'But no appearance can exist  
apart from knowing consciousness.  
Any appearance that departs  
from consciousness must disappear  
at once, and is no longer there.

'Thus, no appearance has any  
existence outside consciousness;  
and all of the reality  
that each appearance truly shows  
is nothing else but consciousness.

'As consciousness illuminates  
appearances of seeming world,  
in truth, it only knows itself.

‘In it, there’s no duality  
of knowing self and object known.  
It is at once the self that knows  
and all that’s ever really known.

## 4.5.15

‘For where duality  
seems to arise,

‘there one thing sees  
something else,

‘there one thing smells  
something else,

‘there one thing tastes  
something else,

‘there one thing speaks  
something else,

‘there one thing hears  
something else,

‘there one thing thinks  
something else,

‘there one thing touches  
something else,

‘there one thing knows  
something else.

‘But, where all of this  
has become  
the self alone:

‘there by what  
can what be seen,

‘there by what  
can what be smelled,

‘there by what  
can what be tasted,

‘Duality seems to arise  
where it appears that something sees  
or hears or smells or tastes or touches  
something else besides itself;

‘or where it seems that something  
speaks about or thinks about or knows  
some object other than itself.

‘But when all things are realized  
as nothing else but self alone,  
by whom can what be seen? By whom  
can what be heard, smelled, tasted, touched,  
described, conceived, desired and known?

‘there by what  
can what be said,

‘there by what  
can what be heard,

‘there by what  
can what be thought,

‘there by what  
can what be touched,

‘there by what  
can what be known?

‘How can one know  
that by which  
all this is known?

‘This is that self  
which is  
“not this, not that”.

‘It is ungraspable,  
for it is not grasped.  
It is imperishable,  
for it does not perish.  
It is detached,  
for it is not attached.

‘Unrestricted,  
it is not disturbed  
nor suffers harm.

‘Dear wife,  
how can  
the knower  
be known?

‘You are thus  
explicitly instructed,  
Maitreyī.

‘Just this, dear wife,  
is deathlessness.’

‘By whom is knowledge truly known?

‘The knowing self cannot be any  
kind of object in the world.

‘Not this, nor that, nor here, nor there  
in space or time, it never can  
be anything perceived through any  
faculty of any body  
or of any sense or mind.

‘It is unowned, can’t be possessed;  
it does not die, does not decay,  
is unattached, cannot be bound  
or limited or qualified;  
nor can it ever suffer harm  
or be disturbed in any way.

‘Thus, deathlessness may be attained  
by asking, till no lies remain:

‘*“How can the self that knows be known?”*

‘Maitreyī, this is the instruction that you  
asked. Such is the way to deathlessness.’

Having said this,  
Yājnyavalkya  
went away.

With these words, Yājnyavalkya left home.

# Creation

## Underlying reality

In the Vedas, the Upanishads and other texts of the Indian tradition, the creation of the perceived universe is described over and over again, in a bewildering variety of different ways that often seem to contradict one another. Given this rich variety of different descriptions, an obvious question arises. Why did the Indian tradition keep trying to describe creation like this, in so many different ways?

Is there some fundamental principle that these various descriptions are trying to describe in common, beneath their apparent differences and contradictions? And is this same fundamental principle also investigated by other descriptions of creation, in other traditions and in modern physical science?

In any description of the world's creation, there is an implicit attempt to do two things. The first is to *expand* the mind's conception: by stretching it back into the past from which the process of creation comes, and stretching it forward to the future where the ongoing process of creation leads.

As conception is thus expanded, there is also an attempt to *deepen* understanding: from the superficial appearance of narrow objects and events, towards underlying principles that continue through apparent differences. This continuity of underlying principle is the unifying basis on which different objects and events are related together. It is therefore implied wherever conception is expanded from limited perceptions of particular objects and events, towards a broader consideration of creation and existence as a whole.

In the Upanishads, the concept of 'brahman' implies both the above aspects: on the one hand, of expanding conception towards the totality of existence; and on the other hand, of deepening understanding towards underlying principle. The word 'brahman' means literally 'growth' or 'expansion' (from the verbal root 'brih' meaning 'to increase'). Its early use in the Vedas is to describe the outpouring of spiritual power in the chanting of sacred words and the performance of sacred rituals. Subsequently, through the mythical conception of creation as a macrocosmic sacrifice, the use of the word 'brahman' developed a more universal sense. As finally used in the Upanishads, it describes on the one hand the entire reality of all creation; and on the other hand, it describes the underlying principle of reality that is always

fully present everywhere: in each object and each event, at each locality of space and time.

Thus, the word 'brahman' can be translated as 'complete reality', to which nothing remains to be added by further perception. And it can also be translated as 'the absolute', which is the essence of pure being underlying all appearances produced by the partial perceptions of body, senses and mind.

In all the apparent objects and events that are perceived by body, senses and mind, there is a mixture of superficial appearance and underlying reality. The superficialities of appearance are produced by partial and distorted perception, which must somehow be questioned and corrected, as knowledge proceeds towards truth. By seeing through all such obscuring partialities and distortions, knowledge penetrates towards underlying reality: which is pure being in itself, quite independent of perceived appearances.

One way of approaching this underlying reality is to ask how the perceived universe is created. In particular: from what does creation arise? On what does creation depend? And what becomes of created things as they pass away and lose their manifest identity?

A little reflection will show that the arising of creation is understood in two senses. On the one hand, it is conceived as a temporal process: which arises from a beginning, continues on through time and comes to an end. But, on the other hand, this temporal conception also describes an order of logical priority: where all perceived objects and events arise from an implied and thus logically prior principle of underlying reality.

Whatever objects are perceived to exist, and whatever events are perceived to take place, this implied principle of reality is the basis on which we conceive their creation, their continued existence or occurrence, and their changing and passing away.

In the unmanifest state when nothing appears, before the creation of appearances, this logically prior principle of reality must be there on its own: unmixed with any apparent objects or events. It is also there during the process of creation: underlying all the manifestations of creation, as they take place in the course of time. And it is there on its own once again in the unmanifest state of experience that occurs just after one object of attention has passed out of experience, and before attention turns to some other object.

Both these senses, of temporal process and logical priority, can be seen in the following passage from the Taittirīya Upanishad. Here, the word 'brahman' is translated as 'all reality'.

**Translation** (from the  
Taittirīya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 222)

*From 3.1*

... ‘Truly,  
that from which  
these beings are born,  
that by which  
born beings live,  
that into which  
those who depart dissolve,

‘The ground from which all things are born,  
on which depends all that is born,  
and into which all things return,  
this ground is what you need to know.

‘This ground is all reality.’

‘that you must  
seek to know.

‘That is all reality.’ ...

### **Cosmology and experience**

If the same principle of complete reality is conceived to be present everywhere, then it must underlie not only the macrocosm of the external universe but also each microcosm of individual experience. Accordingly, the creation of objective phenomena in the external universe and the creation of subjective appearances in individual experience must both finally arise from this same underlying reality.

In the following passage from the Chāndogya Upanishad (3.14.1-4), it is shown that the whole reality of the entire world may be approached subjectively: as the underlying basis from which appearances of perception, thought and feeling arise, in each individual person’s experience.

First (in 3.14.1), there is a definition of reality (brahman) as ‘tajjalān’. This is a compressed formula which is explained (in the commentary of Shri Shankara) as made up of the four syllables ‘tat’, ‘ja’, ‘la’ and ‘an’. ‘Tat’ means ‘that’, and it represents underlying reality. ‘Ja’ is short for ‘janman’, meaning ‘birth’; ‘la’ is short for ‘laya’, meaning ‘dissolution’; and ‘an’ is short for ‘ana’, meaning ‘breathing’ or ‘living’. Thus, the formula ‘tajjalān’ may be interpreted to define reality as that which underlies birth, dissolution and living on.

Next, the passage turns to personality; and (in 3.14.2) the self is defined as ‘bhārūpa’ and ‘ākāshātman’. By the description ‘bhārūpa’ (literally ‘that whose form is light’), the true nature of self is identified as consciousness, which illuminates all appearances in each person’s experience. In the de-

scription ‘ākāshātman’, the word ‘ākāsha’ (meaning ‘ether’ or ‘space’ or ‘sky’) implies a sense of pervasiveness and continuity through all experience: thus indicating that the self (ātman) is not a particular body, nor a particular mind, nor a particular set of senses, nor any conditioned faculty that is limited to a particular personality in some particular locality of space and time. Taken together, these two descriptions define the self as pure, unconditioned consciousness at the background of experience: which continues unchanged through all the changing actions, perceptions, thoughts and feelings of physical, sensual and mental personality.

Finally (in 3.14.3-4), this changeless self within the heart of each personality is identified as ‘all reality’ (‘brahman’), which includes the entire universe.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 101-102)

### 3.14.1

In truth, all this  
is complete reality.

[It is] that:  
[in] birth,  
[in] dissolution,  
[in] living on.

Thus should  
the tranquil [mind]  
reflect [on it].

And further,  
there is personality,  
which consists  
of purpose and intention.

As is intention  
in this world,  
a person thus becomes:  
on leaving here becomes.

Let him determine  
purpose and intention.

In truth, this many seeming world  
is only one reality,  
in which all things seem to be born,  
seem to live on and pass away.

For those who look, in tranquil peace,  
where all appearances arise,  
where all appearances are based,  
and where they all dissolve again,  
truth shines in all its clarity.

Each personality is made  
of inclinations, good and bad.  
Each person’s inclinations now  
build future personality.

By choosing to incline this way  
or that, each one of us builds up  
what later on our lives will be.

## 3.14.2

Approached  
 through mind,  
 embodied by  
 the breath of life,  
 appearing in  
 the forms of light,  
 conceived as truth,  
 is the self  
 at the background  
 of experience:  
 continuing  
 through space and time,  
 in all actions,  
 in all desires,  
 in all odours,  
 in all tastes,  
 pervading all  
 this [world],  
 unspeaking,  
 unconcerned.

Through all the changes of our lives,  
 in every personality,  
 each one of us experiences  
 a sense of self, that each calls 'I'.

It is the knowing principle  
 within our minds, the principle  
 of life within all living things,  
 the principle of consciousness  
 that lights up all appearances.

In all conceptions it is truth:  
 the background of reality  
 in all the things we seem to see.

It is the ground on which we stand,  
 the ground of all created things  
 we see or hear, conceive or feel.  
 It is the basis of all sense,  
 all thought, all sensibility.

Beyond all partial, bounded forms  
 by which it seems to be expressed,  
 beyond all troubles of the mind  
 and body in this seeming world,  
 self is untroubled, always free.

## 3.14.3

This is my self  
 within the heart,  
 tinier than a grain  
 of rice or barley,  
 or than a mustard seed,  
 or than a millet grain,  
 or than the kernel  
 of a millet grain.

This is my self  
 within the heart,  
 greater than the earth,

This self within each person's heart ...  
 is smaller than the smallest thing  
 that eyes can see or mind conceive ...

is greater than the whole wide earth  
 beneath our feet; is greater than  
 the sky's expanse above our heads,

greater than air and sky,  
greater than heaven,  
greater than these worlds.

than any far-flung universe  
that instruments can show to us,  
than all the complex, subtle worlds  
imagination can conceive.

#### 3.14.4

In all actions,  
in all desires,  
in all odours,  
in all tastes,

pervading all  
this [world],  
unspeaking,  
unconcerned,

this is my self  
within the heart;

this is all reality.

‘In it,  
leaving here [from  
world’s appearances],  
I am come to unity.’

For one who  
can say this truly,  
there is no doubt.

Thus said Shāṇḍilya.

[Thus said] Shāṇḍilya.

In truth, this self within each heart  
is absolute reality:  
found everywhere, in everything,  
beyond all things that seem to be.

Where outside things have been perceived  
through body’s senses or through mind,  
perception introduces doubt  
that mind or body may be wrong.

But where the world’s appearances  
are left behind and self is found,  
there self directly knows itself.

It *knows* because it *is* itself,  
and thus no room remains for doubt.

Whoever realizes self  
knows finally, beyond all doubt,  
unbounded, deathless certainty.

### Creation from self

If each person’s true self is identical with complete reality, then it must be possible to understand this inner core of self as the underlying source of all creation. Such an approach is described in the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, 2.1.20.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 63)

### 2.1.20

‘As a spider  
issues forth with thread,  
‘as from fire  
little sparks come forth;

‘As a spider from its body  
sends out threads and weaves a web,  
or as small sparks come forth from fire;

‘so too, from this self  
are issued forth  
all living energies,  
all worlds, all gods,  
all created beings.

‘so too, from this same self come forth  
all energies, all lives, all worlds,  
all gods and all created things.

‘Of that,  
the final teaching  
is said to be  
“the truth of truth”.

‘This is that final teaching  
which is said to be the “truth of truth”.

‘[Beneath appearances  
or seeming world],  
living energies are truth.  
Of them, this is the truth.’

*‘Truth is all things; and of all things,  
self is the truth of each.’*

## The seed of creation

Each person’s body, senses and mind are only a very small part of a much larger universe. How then could anyone find, within this little personality, a self which is all the reality that underlies the entire vastness of the perceived universe? An answer is given in the Chāndogya Upanishad, 6.12.1-3: where the apparent immensity of the entire universe is conceived to rise from inner self just as a great tree may arise from the unseen essence of fertility within a tiny seed.

In the retelling reproduced below, the original passage is modified by adding a short interpolation that introduces the concept of consciousness, in order to make the meaning a little clearer and more specific for a modern reader. Though this concept of consciousness does not occur directly in the original passage, it is indirectly implied by the word ‘aṇiman’: which occurs three times. The direct meaning of ‘aṇiman’ is ‘minuteness’ or ‘subtlety’, but it comes from the verbal root ‘aṇ’, meaning ‘to sound’ or ‘to breathe’ or ‘to

live'. As this derivation shows, the word does not refer only to minuteness of physical size, but also to subtlety of meaning and life and spirit. It may be of interest to note here that the Sanskrit roots 'an' and 'an' are cognate with the Latin 'anima', meaning 'soul' or 'spirit', and 'animus', meaning 'mind' or 'thinking principle'.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 110)

### 6.12.1

'Bring a fruit  
from this nyagrodha tree.'

'Here, Sir.'

'Break it.'

'It is broken, Sir.'

'What do you see in it?'

'These seeds, Sir,  
like tiny particles.'

'Well, break one of them.'

'It is broken, Sir.'

'What do you see in it?'

'Nothing at all, Sir.'

Then, Shvetaketu's father led  
him to a spreading banyan tree,  
whose fruits had fallen on the ground.

'Pick up a fruit.... Break it open....  
Tell me what you see.' 'Tiny seeds.'

'Break one of these.... What do you see?'

'Nothing. The seeds are much too small.'

### 6.12.2

[Shvetaketu's father]  
said to him:

'Truly, dear son,  
this minuteness  
which you do not see,

'truly, dear son,  
of this minuteness  
the great nyagrodha tree  
thus stands.

'Be sure of this, dear son.

'And yet, within each tiny seed,  
there is a subtle something which  
your eyes don't see, something unseen  
from which this spreading tree has grown.

*Explanatory interpolation*

‘So too, from unmixed consciousness,  
which mind and senses can’t perceive,  
arises this great-seeming world.

*From 6.12.3*

‘That which is  
this minuteness  
is that “this-itself”-ness  
which is all this [world].

‘Pure consciousness, the essence of  
each mind and heart, is all the world’s  
reality. That is the truth.  
*That is what you really are.*’

‘That is truth.  
That is self.

‘Shvetaketu,  
you are that.’...

**Light from the seed**

The following passage from the Chāndogya Upanishad (3.17.7) shows further the intimate and subtle connection that was conceived in the Upanishads between consciousness and the primal seed of creation.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 103)

*3.17.7*

Looking up  
from darkness,  
we perceive  
all around  
our own higher light,  
  
coming from  
the primal seed.

Self is the ancient, timeless seed  
from which all life and world are born.  
Through all that seems obscurity,  
self shines undimmed as consciousness,  
the light that lights all other lights.

*That light is self, and self alone.*

And we have gone  
to the sun:  
the higher god  
among the gods,

the highest light,  
the highest light.

### **The basis of experience**

In the following passage from the Muṇḍaka Upanishad (1.1.3-9), an enquiry is made into the underlying basis of all experience. And the conclusion reached (in 1.1.9) is that this underlying basis is consciousness, from which arises all apparent existence of name, form and matter.

Here, the retelling has been derived by adding in an explanatory introduction, and by elaborating the compressed ideas of the original passage with a fair degree of interpretation and explanation.

- The introduction is meant to explain the concept of reality that is implied by Shaunaka's somewhat cryptic question: 'What is it that being known, all this becomes known?'
- The rest of the retelling elaborates ideas in a way that somewhat modifies the original passage. In particular, the concept of consciousness is brought in rather earlier than in the original, where consciousness is explicitly described only at the end (in 1.1.9): by the three phrases 'sarvajnyah' (translated below as 'that which knows in all experience'), 'sarvavid' (translated below as 'that which knows all that is known') and 'yasya jnyānamayam tapah' (translated below as that 'whose intensity consists of knowledge').

**Translation** (from the  
Muṇḍaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 177-181)

#### *Explanatory introduction added into retelling*

The great householder Shaunaka  
was blessed with an enquiring mind,  
unsatisfied by partial truth.

He thought: 'In this vast universe,  
there are so many different things  
our minds and senses seem to see.

'In each perception we perceive,  
so little of the world seems shown.

'As mind and sense perceive the world  
they show us small appearances,

which change from changing points of view.

‘A mountain seen from far seems small;  
from closer up it grows in size.

‘A person on the lower slopes  
sees grass and trees, hears rustling leaves,  
smells flowers, feels the warmth of sun;

‘but higher up stark cliffs appear,  
with craggy shapes of barren rock,  
and eerie sounds of rushing wind,  
and scentless feel of chilly air.

‘And yet, these different seeming things  
are varying appearances  
through which one mountain can be known.

‘So too, in all experience,  
the many things we seem to see  
are differing appearances  
through which we know one universe.

‘What is this one same universe  
in which our minds and senses see  
so many different seeming things?

‘Is there some way to understand  
this one complete reality  
we know through all appearances  
of everything that seems to be?’

### 1.1.3

The great householder  
Shaunaka duly  
approached Angiras,  
and asked:

‘Sir, what is it  
that being known  
all this  
[apparent universe]  
becomes known?’

So Shaunaka, with due respect,  
approached the teacher Angiras  
and asked: ‘Can knowledge of the world’s  
reality be so complete  
that all the many things we seem  
to see are understood in it?’

‘Can something so complete be found  
that knowing it knows everything?’

*1.1.4-5*

To Shaunaka,  
Angiras said:

‘Those who know  
complete reality  
say that there are two  
kinds of knowledge  
to be known:

‘the higher  
and the lower.

‘Among the lower  
of these are:

‘the Rig Veda,  
the Yajur Veda,  
the Sāma Veda,  
the Atharva Veda,

‘phonetics, ritual,  
grammar, etymology,  
metrics, astrology.

‘And the higher  
is that by which  
the unchanging  
is attained.

‘The truth you seek,’ said Angiras,  
‘is plain to see, and can be found  
by anyone who wishes it.

‘To know it you must go beyond  
all scriptures, sciences and arts:  
for these are mere constructions, made  
by partial body, sense and mind.

‘Beneath all learned structures, built  
of form and name and quality,  
upon what basis do we join  
the partial views of sense and mind,  
to make our knowledge more complete?

‘This basis must be firm. It must  
remain: while mind and body change,  
and changing views give rise to sights,  
sensations, feelings, thoughts that come  
and go in our experience.

*1.1.6*

‘That which can’t  
be seen or grasped,

‘It is no object seen by mind  
and sense; for all such objects come  
into experience when they  
are seen, and go away again  
as our attention turns elsewhere.

‘Unseen by sense, unseen by mind,  
it is the knowing basis which  
must carry on, continuing  
through changing sense and changing mind,  
as seeming objects come and go.

‘It is not body, sense or mind,

for these are merely instruments  
of change and action in the world.

‘It is no object that can act  
on other objects; nor can it  
be acted on, by anything.

‘which has  
no family, no class,  
no eyes or ears,  
no hands or feet,

‘It has no family, nor class;  
nor has it eyes that see, nor ears  
that hear, nor hands that touch or hold,  
nor feet that stand or walk or run.

‘It does not act; it only knows.

‘It is pure consciousness: which lights  
up all appearances that come  
and go in our experience.

‘which is constant  
and continual  
‘in different  
happenings,

‘All space, all time, all difference,  
all change are known by consciousness.  
Thus space and time and difference  
and change cannot apply to it.

‘It is the undivided base  
from which divided space is known,  
the unity in difference,  
the changeless continuity  
which knows all change and passing time.

‘extending everywhere,

‘It’s always here, in every one  
of us, each moment that we know;

‘whatever we may seem to know,  
whatever it may seem we do  
not know, or only know in part.

‘Upon this base of consciousness,  
all objects are perceived and thus  
are manifested in the world.

‘In consciousness, all seeming things  
arise, exist and come to end.

‘completely subtle;  
‘that is the changeless  
source of being

‘Beneath gross things of outer sense,  
beneath all subtleties of mind,  
it is creation’s changeless source:

which the wise  
and steadfast see.

‘from which all seeming things come forth,  
on which each seeming thing depends,  
to which each thing returns again.

### *1.1.7*

‘As a spider  
issues [thread]  
and takes [it] in,

‘as plants grow  
on the earth,

‘as hair from  
a living person’s  
head and body;

‘so too, from  
the unchanging,  
everything arises here.

‘As from a spider thread comes forth  
and is drawn in, or just as plants  
grow out of earth and when they die  
dissolve in earth again; so too  
all things that we perceive, throughout  
the manifested universe,

‘arise from changeless consciousness,  
are manifest as consciousness  
taking on apparent form,  
and when they end are shown dissolved  
as nothing else but consciousness.

### *1.1.8-9*

‘Through  
purposeful intensity,  
reality becomes  
constructed

‘[as a seeming  
universe  
made up  
of seeming things].

‘From that  
food is born.

‘From food,  
living energy,

‘Each moment of experience,  
a person’s mind and sense perceive  
a partial view that seems to show  
some object in the universe.

‘At different times, through different minds,  
through different capabilities  
of sense, we seem to see a vast  
variety of different things.

‘And thus it seems that we perceive  
a universe of vast extent,  
containing more complexity  
than sense or mind can comprehend.

‘In this vast-seeming universe,  
our little senses only see  
small objects, each a little piece  
of matter formed in space and time.

‘When objects interact, we see  
the energy that they exchange;

and thus material things seem formed  
of subtle energy that flows,  
through space and time, to manifest  
the outward world our senses see.

‘If outward things are seen as forms  
of manifesting energy,  
then what is thus made manifest?’

‘What do forms mean? How can they be  
interpreted, to understand  
more than our senses seem to see?’

‘mind,  
truth;

‘Forms are interpreted by mind:  
which is expressed in forms,  
and which reflects within itself  
to ask for truth that forms express.

‘worlds,  
and in actions  
the deathless.

‘Where mind turns back towards its source,  
it is dissolved in consciousness;  
which has no parts, nor suffers change.

‘That which knows  
in all experience,

‘There, partiality and change  
do not apply; and thus complete,  
undying truth is realized.

‘and which knows  
all that is known,

‘whose intensity  
consists of knowledge;

‘But where the mind is turned towards  
an outer world of seeming things,  
there only partial truths are seen,  
expressed by mind in outward acts....’

‘from that is born  
all this  
[apparent] existence:  
name, form and food....’

### **Creation through personality**

In an extended passage from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad (1.4), creation is described as arising, from underlying self, through personality. This passage has two aspects: mythical and philosophical.

The mythical aspect describes creation as an event that took place in the far distant past, at the beginning of time. Here, the universe is mythically conceived to have arisen from an absolute self which existed on its own

before the creation of time; and which continues to exist unchanged, underlying the apparent universe, as created time proceeds.

The philosophical aspect uses this creation myth to explain and investigate experience, as it is known in the present. Here, each person's experience is described as arising from a common, underlying principle of self: which is to be identified through the statement 'aham brahmāsmi' ('I am the absolute' or 'I am complete reality').

In the following translation and retelling (as elsewhere in this book), it is the philosophical aspect that has been emphasized. The translation is fairly literal, but it omits some sections of the original that are too elaborately mythological. And where a word or phrase may be translated in differing ways, the more philosophical alternative has been chosen. In particular, the word 'agre' (which occurs several times in the original passage) has been translated as 'first and foremost', instead of the more usual and more mythological translation 'in the beginning'.

In the retelling, the philosophical aspect is further emphasized, by replacing the past tense of mythical imagination with a present tense of philosophical reflection. Thus, the mythological parts of the original have been modified, through a replacement of mythical metaphor by philosophical interpretation.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 43-49)

#### 1.4.1

First and foremost,  
self alone was this:  
  
which is established  
as purusha  
[the common,  
underlying principle  
of 'human-ness'  
in every person].

He looked, and saw  
nothing else but self.

Right from the start, each person's self  
is common, plain humanity:  
which different-seeming persons share  
through changing times and changing minds  
in different personalities.

Whatever sights a person sees,  
whatever may appear to mind,  
in all of our experiences,  
the self is always present there.

Thus nothing ever is perceived  
without the presence of the self.

<p>He first declared: ‘I am.’</p> <p>Thus, he came to be called ‘I’.</p> <p>And therefore even now, one who is addressed says first just ‘It is I’;  and then speaks another name, which becomes his.</p> <p>He who came first, before all this, burned up all ills.</p> <p>Therefore he is purusha [plain, simple ‘human-ness’].</p> <p>One who knows thus, truly burns up that which seeks to come before this [‘human-ness’].</p>	<p>And nothing anyone perceives can ever be apart from self.</p> <p>First and foremost, every person starts by thinking: ‘This is I.’ And so each person is called ‘I’.</p> <p>When asked for one’s identity, what first response comes up at once, spontaneously, from deep within?</p> <p>One first identifies oneself as ‘I’, and only then come other names by which one is identified.</p> <p>This, which comes first, before all things, burns up all misery and wrong. Anything that tries to push in front of plain humanity burns up, for one who knows just this.</p>
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#### 1.4.2

<p>He was afraid. Therefore, a person who is lonely feels afraid.</p> <p>He himself made this observation:  ‘Since there is nothing else but me, of what then am I afraid?’</p>	<p>But people seem to have known fear: a lonely person feels afraid.</p> <p>When such a person, all alone, observes ‘Of what am I afraid, if there is nothing else but I?’; then with this thought fear vanishes.</p>
---	---

From that alone  
his fear departed.

For, of what  
should one be afraid?  
It's only from  
a second thing  
that fear arises.

### *1.4.3*

But still,  
he was not pleased.  
Therefore,  
a lonely person  
is not pleased.

He desired a second.  
He became the size  
of a woman and man  
in close embrace.

This very self  
he caused to fall  
divided into two.

From that,  
husband and wife  
came into being.

Therefore, this  
[personality]  
is a half-fragment  
of oneself.

This is just what  
Yājnyavalkya truly said.

Therefore, this space  
is just filled  
by a woman.

With her,  
he came together.

Without a second thing to fear,  
what is there to be frightened of?

And people also seem to feel  
unhappiness: a lonely person  
suffers want of warmth and joy.

By longing for companionship,  
life in this world has taken shape  
as male and female intertwined.

The self has thus been made to seem  
divided, fallen into two,  
as male and female have been formed:  
each one an uncompleted half.

Each one then suffers emptiness,  
which must be filled by someone else.  
So male and female join in one,  
and from this match we all are born.

From that,  
human beings were born.

*1.4.5*

He knew:  
'I myself am creation;  
for I created all this.'

The knowing self in each of us  
is underlying consciousness  
from which appearances arise  
in everyone's experience.

Hence  
he became  
creation.

Since everything comes out of it,  
it's that which seems to have become  
this many seeming universe.  
It's all creation in itself.

One who knows thus  
comes to be  
at this very creation  
of his.

To know it is to stand as self,  
which one has truly always been,  
at all creation's timeless source.

*1.4.7*

That itself was this,  
at that time unmanifest.

The world we see is only this:  
which is itself unmanifest.

That, by mere  
name and form,  
was manifested:

Only by name and form has this  
seemed to be manifest, as world.

[conceived] as  
something  
with that name  
or with this form.

That is this, even now,  
by mere name and form  
made manifest:

The world seems manifested when  
some seeming name is used for this,  
some seeming form is seen in this.

[conceived] as  
something  
with that name  
or with this form.

He is this, pervading  
here [in the body],

This is that common principle  
which permeates the universe

up to the tip  
of [a person's] nails:

just as a blade is placed  
within its sheath,  
or as all-sustaining [fire]  
in its all-sustaining web.

Him they do not perceive,  
for [as perceived]  
he is incomplete.

Merely breathing,  
he gets to be  
called 'breath';

speaking, [he is  
called] 'speech';  
seeing, [he is]  
'sense of sight';

hearing, [he is]  
'sense of sound';  
thinking, [he is  
called] 'mind'.

These are only  
names of functions  
of his.

Whoever thus pays heed  
to each, one by one,  
does not know;

for thus [appearing]  
through each [function],  
one by one,  
this [appearance]  
becomes incomplete.

One should heed him  
only as that  
which is called 'self';  
for, in it, all these

into each corner of the world;

just as a blade fits in its sheath,  
or as the energy which forms  
the universe lies there within  
all matter that is formed by it.

This universal principle  
cannot be known through force or power  
of life's intentions, nor through speech,  
nor sight, nor hearing, nor through mind.

These are merely names of functions:  
each of which is incomplete.  
Looking through such partial functions,  
all that's seen is incomplete.

Such means can never quite know truth.

Reflecting on the self alone,  
all partial functions merge in one.  
In all the world that we perceive,  
this self is what we need to reach:

[appearances] turn out  
to be one.

That is this,  
to be attained:  
that which is this self  
of all of this.

For, by this [self],  
one knows all this.

Just as [a tracker  
finds] by footprints,  
one may find.

Who knows this  
finds praise and poetry.

*1.4.8*

That is this,  
dearer than a son,  
dearer than wealth  
and property,  
  
dearer than all else,  
deepest within,  
that which is this self.

Of him who speaks  
of something other  
than the self as dear,  
one may say:

‘He will lose  
what he holds dear’;  
for it may  
very well be so.

One should heed  
only the self as dear.

For one who heeds  
only the self as dear,  
that which is dear  
is indestructible.

for everything is known by this.

True honour, glory, grace, success  
arise unasked for one who knows  
all things as signs of only this.

Beyond all else, it is the self  
that’s near and dear: more than all wealth,  
more than all friends and family.

When anything besides this self  
is thought an object of desire,  
then desire turns to torment:  
even desire for God himself.

In any object of desire,  
self is all we wish to find.

Where self is truly seen in love,  
there love is found to be complete,  
for what is loved can never end.

## 1.4.9

It is said:

‘Given that men think  
of becoming everything  
through knowledge  
of the absolute;

‘what did it know,  
that absolute,  
from which it  
became everything?’

By knowledge of the absolute,  
a person hopes to be complete.

This absolute we thus invoke,  
what does it know, as it creates  
from its own self the world we see?

## 1.4.10

First and foremost,  
this [universe]  
was the absolute itself.

It knew itself:  
‘I am the absolute.’

From that, it became  
everything.

Among the gods,  
whoever recognized it  
became it.

So also among seers.  
So also among men.

Seeing that  
in truth as this,  
the seer Vāmadeva  
reflected: ‘I am Manu  
[first of men].  
I am the sun.’

That is this, even now.  
One who thus knows,  
‘I am the absolute’,  
becomes all this.

The absolute is only this,  
which first and foremost knows itself.

It knows: ‘*I am the absolute.*’

And on this base appear from it  
the many things we seem to see.

Whoever realizes this,  
and knows ‘I am the absolute’,  
becomes complete in everything.

Even the gods themselves

The gods themselves cannot undo

have not the power  
for his undoing;  
for he becomes their self.

But one who heeds  
an alien deity, thinking  
'That is different,  
I am different';  
he does not know.

He is like  
a mere beast  
of the gods.

Just as many beasts  
may serve a man,  
thus each man  
serves the gods.

If just one beast  
is led astray,  
it is not liked.  
What then, of many?

Therefore, it is not liked  
by these [gods] that men  
should know this [self].

#### 1.4.15

That is this:  
the brāhmaṇa  
[the man of knowledge],  
the kshatriya  
[the man of power],  
the vaishya  
[the man of commerce]  
the shūdra  
[the man of service].

That, through fire alone  
has come to be:

one who has found identity  
with that which is their very self.

But if one heeds an alien god  
who seems apart from one's own self,  
truth can't be known; for then one is  
a beast of burden to the gods.

As beasts of burden have their masters,  
so do people have their gods.

It is not liked when any beast  
is taken from its master's fold.  
Nor is it liked when someone finds  
this truth: that in each one of us  
the self is absolute, and free.

It is this absolute that seems  
to have evolved, through course of time,  
as knowledge, power, enterprise  
and service, in society.

the [sacred] absolute  
[worshipped] in the gods,  
the man of knowledge  
among men.

[That] through power  
[has come to be]  
the man of power;  
through commerce,  
the man of commerce;  
through service,  
the man of service.

Therefore,  
people seek the world:  
through fire alone  
among the gods,  
in the man of knowledge  
among men.

For, by these two forms,  
the absolute  
has become [manifest].

But, whoever  
leaves this world,  
without seeing  
his own place;  
[for him it is] unknown.

He does not take  
possession of it, just like  
the Vedas not recited  
or other work not done.

Whoever, here,  
not knowing thus,  
does work  
even of great value;

that same [achievement]  
of his, in the end,  
must be exhausted.

We dream of gods to seek out worlds  
of sublimated energy;  
and in our waking life we seek  
out knowledge of our universe.

For energy and learning are  
both forms in which the absolute  
has been expressed in what we see.

Blindness to our own existence  
robs our lives of all reward;  
every one of our achievements  
must in time dissolve away.

The self alone  
should be heeded  
as [all] the world.

One who heeds  
the self alone  
as all the world,  
his achievement  
is never exhausted.

For, from this same self  
is created  
whatever is desired.

*1.4.16*

In truth, this self  
is the world  
of all beings.

It, through that  
which worships  
and sacrifices,  
is the world of gods.

Likewise, through that  
which recites, [it is]  
the visionaries' [world].

And, through that  
which offers to ancestors  
and desires progeny,  
[it is] the  
ancestors' [world].

And, through that  
which shelters humans  
and nourishes them,  
[it is the world]  
of human beings.

And, through that  
which obtains  
for animals

But, if one only sees the self  
absolute in all existence,  
life's reward can never die.

Everything that is desired  
is produced from this same self.

The world of beings is this self.

It is the mythic world of gods  
created by religious rite.

It is the fancied world of thought  
created by an author's words.

It is the world tradition makes  
respecting past experience  
and also seeking something new.

It is the world we humans make  
from need for home and sustenance.

It is the world of animals,  
where grass and water must be found.

grass and water, [it is  
the world] of animals.

Through that on which,  
in homes of this,  
wild beasts and birds  
[and other creatures]  
even to the ants  
subsist, [it is]  
their world.

As one may wish  
no harm of one's  
own world, so too  
all creatures wish  
no harm, to one  
who knows thus.

That, in truth, is  
what is known,  
what is sought  
to be known.

#### *1.4.17*

First and foremost,  
self alone was this,  
one alone.

He desired: 'May there  
be a wife for me.  
And, may I  
have progeny.  
And, may there  
be wealth for me.  
And, may I do  
[my] work.'

Just this much is desire.  
Not even one  
who wishes to  
can find [by wishing]  
more than this.

It is the earth on which subsist  
beasts, birds and other forms of life,  
in bodies that are homes of this.

One should wish well of one's own world.  
At heart, all beings do wish well,  
seen in that light which knows just this.

Whatever anyone has known,  
whatever anyone has sought  
to know, is nothing else but this.

In truth, there is one single self,  
with nothing else at all besides.

And yet, it seems that people seek  
out company of other selves,  
that people feel desire for birth  
and property and gainful work.

Such limited desires can't  
grow to be more than limited,  
not even if one wants them to.

Therefore, even now,  
a lonely person desires:

‘May there be  
a wife for me.  
And, may I  
have progeny.  
And, may there  
be wealth for me.  
And, may I do  
[my] work.’

So far as he  
does not obtain  
any one of these,  
to that extent he feels  
merely incomplete.

But, [examined] further,  
completeness is his.

[Pure consciousness  
of] mind alone  
is his self.

Speech is the wife  
[that brings forth  
his progeny].

Sight is [his]  
human wealth,  
for by sight he knows it.

Hearing is his  
divine wealth,  
for by hearing he hears it.

Self alone is his work,  
for by the self  
he does work.

He is this:  
fivefold sacrifice,  
fivefold animal,  
fivefold ‘human-ness’.

A lonely person wants to find  
companionship, wants a new life,  
wants things and looks for work to do.

And where such wishes aren’t fulfilled,  
a person does not feel complete.

How can a person be complete?

Through consciousness that’s known as self;  
through speech that’s married to the self;  
through purpose as its progeny.

Through property that, known by sight,  
is known as nothing else but sight;  
through worth that, known by sense, is known  
as only sensibility.

Through work that shows true purity  
of self, on which all life depends.

In all the multiplicity  
of actions, persons, creatures, things,  
throughout this many-seeming world,  
the self is one and one alone.

Fivefold is this:  
all this whatsoever.  
That is this.

Who knows thus  
attains everything.

All is reached, by knowing this.

### **Waking from deep sleep**

How do we experience the creation of the perceived world from inner self? An answer is given in the following passage from the Kaushītaki Upanishad (4.19-20). Here, deep sleep is understood as a state of pure consciousness, unmixed with any appearances of an outside world. Hence, on waking from deep sleep, a person experiences a creation of the apparent world, through waking mind and senses, from underlying consciousness.

This underlying consciousness is the true nature of self. It shines by itself in deep sleep; and it continues unchanged through the dream and waking states: as the ultimate, illuminating basis of all appearances in the dream and waking worlds.

**Translation** (from the  
Kaushītaki Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 153-155)

*From 4.19*

... In depth of sleep  
no dreams are seen.

In depth of sleep, no mind appears  
conceiving different seeming things;  
  
and mind's attention does not direct  
living energy from consciousness  
to different seeming objects  
in some world that mind conceives.

Thus here, in dreamless sleep, all  
outward-seeming energies of life  
have been withdrawn, and differences  
are all dissolved in consciousness:  
which shines alone, by its own light,  
unmixed with any seeming thing.

*4.20*

Then, in this very

Here, every day, unnoticed in

living breath,  
oneness is attained.

Into that  
which is this:

goes speech  
together with all words,

goes seeing  
together with all sights,

goes hearing  
together with all sounds,

goes mind  
together with  
all thoughts.

When one awakes,  
just as from burning fire  
sparks come forth  
in all directions,

so too, from this self,  
living breaths come forth  
each to its place;

from living breaths,  
the senses;  
from the senses, worlds.

This living breath in itself  
is the self  
of consciousness:

which has pervaded  
this [seeming] self  
of body, right to  
the hairs and nails.

the simple peace of dreamless sleep,  
all life attains to unity  
of underlying consciousness,  
from which all lives and minds arise.

Whenever someone falls asleep,  
attention is drawn in: from world  
of waking sense, through dreaming mind,  
to unconditioned consciousness,  
which shines unmixed in depth of sleep.

All speech, all words and all they mean,  
all seeing, hearing, sights and sounds,  
and all perceptions, thoughts and feelings  
then dissolve: absorbed again  
into their underlying base  
of consciousness, from which they rise.

But, when a person wakes from sleep,  
outgoing energies of life  
appear, through various faculties  
of mind and personality.

As sparks come forth from blazing fire,  
so too from consciousness come forth  
the various energies of life  
that mind and personality  
disperse through their activities.

From these activities arise  
appearances of mind and sense;  
and thus, from these appearances,  
the worlds that we perceive are born.

Beneath appearances of world  
perceived by senses and by mind,  
consciousness continues on  
through every moment of experience:

lighting all appearances  
that rise in dream or waking state;

and shining self-illuminated,  
on its own, in depth of sleep.

Just as a razor  
is contained  
within its sheath,  
  
or as the all-sustaining  
[fire] in its  
all-sustaining web;  
  
so too, this self  
of consciousness  
has pervaded  
the [seeming] self  
of body, right to  
the hairs and nails.

That is this self,  
on which these  
[seeming] selves depend:

as on a chief, his own  
[followers depend].

Just as a chief makes use  
of his own [followers];

or, as to a chief  
his own [followers]  
are of use;

so too, this self  
of consciousness  
experiences [the world]  
through these selves;

and even so,  
these selves  
are in service  
to this self.

Indeed, as long as Indra  
[chief of gods] did not  
understand this self,  
demons overcame him.

It is each person's real self:  
the inner principle of life  
that is expressed in every act  
of mind and body in the world.

All seeming selves, of body or  
of sense or mind, depend upon  
this real self of consciousness.

Just as a chief is represented  
by his followers, who act  
with his support and for his sake;

so too, the real self is  
represented by the seeming selves  
of body, sense and mind: whose actions  
all depend on its support  
and are, unknowingly or  
knowingly, done only for its sake.

On consciousness, the real self,  
these seeming selves always depend  
for all they do or seek to do.

But it does not depend on them;  
for it is there in depth of sleep,  
when seeming selves have all dissolved.

As long as this true self is not  
correctly understood and known,  
a person's actions are not firmly  
anchored in the changeless ground

But when he understood,  
he struck down and  
conquered the demons:

attaining pre-eminence,  
independence and  
sovereignty of all gods  
and all beings.

So too,  
one who knows thus  
strikes down all ills

and attains pre-eminence,  
independence and  
sovereignty  
of all beings;

one who knows thus,  
one who knows thus.

from which they come, on which they stand  
and where they find all that they seek.

Thus, if this ground of self remains  
unknown, poor body, sense and mind  
keep being overcome by their  
own demons of uncertainty  
and partiality and ill.

But one who knows the truth of self  
has reached that certain, deathless ground  
of unconditioned consciousness:

where ills have all been overcome  
and freedom has, at last, been won.

### **The creation of appearances**

Appearances are not created only at the moment of waking from deep sleep. They go on being created at every moment of waking and dreaming experience. Thus, each person's experience can be viewed as a stream of changing appearances: created by the perceptions, thoughts and feelings which come and go in that person's mind. As the mind perceives and thinks and feels, it creates the succession of changing appearances that rise up from underlying consciousness, in each person's experience.

Where modern physical cosmology is almost entirely focused upon the objective world, traditional cosmologies had a more pronounced subjective aspect. Before the development of modern telescopes and space exploration, traditional cosmology was used more for metaphorical reflection than for experimental astrophysics. In the Upanishads at least, the purpose of cosmology is clear. It is to meditate and reflect, upon the underlying reality from which the manifest universe is created.

For someone who meditates or reflects, the physical creation of the universe is not of course at hand; for it has taken place over an enormous period of time, stretching back to very remote events in the far distant past. However, what is at hand are the appearances of perception, thought and feeling: rising up and being created from underlying consciousness.

In effect, this is an immediate, mental creation of the world's appearances, as they are manifested in an individual's experience. Through the correspondence that was conceived between the macrocosm of the external universe and the microcosm of individual experience, traditional descriptions of cosmic creation can often be interpreted as metaphors for the creation of appearances from underlying consciousness.

In what follows, an attempt is made to interpret the Nāsadiya hymn from the Rig Veda (10.129) in just this way. First, to give a reader some sense of the original text, a translation by A. A. Macdonell is reproduced.<sup>1</sup> Then, one way is shown as to how the text might be further interpreted and retold, by placing a somewhat extended retelling alongside the appropriate lines (or parts of lines) from Macdonell's translation.

### Hymn of creation

*Rig Veda 10.129 – Macdonell's translation*

Non-being then existed not nor being: There was no air, nor sky that is beyond it. What was concealed? Wherein? In whose protection? And was there deep, unfathomable water?	1
Death then existed not nor life immortal; Of neither night nor day was any token. By its inherent force the One breathed windless: No other thing than that beyond existed.	2
Darkness there was at first by darkness hidden; Without distinctive marks, this all was water. That which, becoming, by the void was covered, That One by force of heat came into being.	3
Desire entered the One in the beginning: It was the earliest seed, of thought the product. The sages searching in their hearts with wisdom, Found out the bond of being in non-being.	4

<sup>1</sup>From *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 5<sup>th</sup> paperback printing, 1973.

Their ray extended light across the darkness:  
 But was the One above or was it under?  
 Creative force was there, and fertile power:  
 Below was energy, above was impulse. 5

Who knows for certain? Who shall here declare it?  
 Whence was it born, and whence came this creation?  
 The gods were born after this world's creation:  
 Then who can know from whence it has arisen? 6

None knoweth whence creation has arisen;  
 And whether he has or has not produced it:  
 He who surveys it in the highest heaven,  
 He only knows, or haply he may know not. 7

**Macdonell's Translation**  
 (of the Rig Veda 10.129)

**Retelling**  
 (from *FTU*, pages 261-265)

*I*

Non-being then  
 existed not  
 nor being:

Before conception has appeared,  
 no absence can arise at all;  
 for objects have not been conceived  
 that may be 'there' or be 'not there'.

There was no air,  
 nor sky  
 that is beyond it.

Nor yet can qualities arise,  
 nor overarching principles  
 pervading different-seeming things;  
 for these too have not been conceived.

What was  
 concealed?...

What is the base of consciousness  
 from which conception must arise,  
 before the world can be conceived?

Unmixed with seeming, doubtful things  
 that rise from mind's uncertainties,  
 what does pure consciousness contain?

... Wherein?...

Where can such consciousness be found?

... In whose  
protection?

Whose is this unmixed consciousness?

How does its knowledge carry on,  
as things appear and disappear,  
conceived by doubtful, changing mind?

Just what provides stability,  
security and certainty,  
as consciousness continues on:

through seeming things that come and go,  
appearing when they are perceived  
and disappearing when they're not?

And was there  
deep,  
unfathomable  
water?

Through changing mind's apparent waves  
of form and name and quality,

what really is the consciousness  
of which each seeming wave consists,  
just like the boundless depths below?

2

Death then existed not  
nor life immortal;

Before conception rises up  
from unconditioned consciousness,  
there is no change nor difference;  
for time and space aren't yet conceived.

With nothing born, there is no death  
and so there can't be deathlessness.

Of neither night  
nor day  
was any token.

Since world has not yet been conceived,  
there's nothing that appears by day  
or disappears again at night.

No world appears as we awake,  
nor disappears when we're asleep.

There is no night. There is no day.  
There is no waking state, nor sleep.

By its inherent force  
the One  
breathed windless:

Within the world that mind conceives,  
our bodies live by breathing air.  
So too, our minds breathe meaning out

through words and acts, and breathe back in perceptions from an outer world.

But consciousness is life itself, which lives by its inherent light that lights itself, without the need for any breathing out or in.

No other thing than that beyond existed.

In truth, as known by consciousness, what seems outside is known within.

There really is no outside world that's separate from some inner mind. There's no outside and no inside.

3

Darkness there was at first by darkness hidden;

When mind looks down to its own depths from where conception seems to rise, a blinding darkness first appears concealed in its own ignorance.

Without distinctive marks, this all was water.

Here, all seems primal, inchoate: with unseen powers surging up from depths of dark obscurity.

That which, becoming, by the void was covered,

From this uncertain, shifting base, whatever truth may be conceived comes dressed in empty vanity:

That One by force of heat came into being.

of mind that's driven blindly on by energies and powers of will it doesn't fully understand.

4

Desire entered the One in the beginning:

Desire turns on consciousness right from the start of seeming life:

It was the earliest seed, of thought the product.

where mind is seeded by desire to form a stream of changing thoughts by which the world is then conceived.

The sages searching  
in their hearts  
with wisdom,

Found out the bond  
of being  
in non-being.<sup>2</sup>

When thought turns back to heart within,  
to clarify obscurities  
and search for undistorted truth,

at first there seems blank nothingness  
where everything has disappeared.

What is this seeming nothingness?

It is the absence of apparent  
things, not of reality.

In it, all seeming thought dissolves  
and what remains is consciousness,  
unmixed with any seeming thing.

As thought dissolves, pure consciousness  
shines out as all reality:

where different-seeming things are joined  
as mere appearances of one.

5

Their ray  
extended light  
across the darkness:

Unseen by body, sense or mind,  
the light of consciousness extends  
through all the universe it shows:

through everything that seems to be  
or not to be, through space and time,  
through every state of changing mind.

<sup>2</sup>This stanza 4 can be translated alternatively (and fairly literally) as follows:

First of all, upon that [One]  
desire has turned entirely.  
This has been mind's primal seed.  
Searching heart with mind intent,  
men of vision, in non-being,  
have found out the bond of being.

The main difference is at the start. (a) 'Agre' is translated by Macdonell as 'in the beginning', but here above as 'first of all'. (b) 'Samavartatādhi' is translated by Macdonell as 'entered', but here above in the more elaborate and literal sense of 'turned entirely upon' ('turned' from 'avartata', 'entirely' from 'sam', and 'upon' from 'adhi').

Where mind completely disappears,  
as in the peace of dreamless sleep,  
there comes a state that mind conceives  
as dark and empty nothingness.

But nothingness cannot seem dark  
unless it's known by consciousness:  
whose light shines unconditioned here,  
unseen by body, sense and mind.

But was the One  
above or  
was it under?

Back in the world that mind conceives,  
just where can consciousness be found?

Is it beneath appearances?  
Is it above what mind desires?

Creative force  
was there,  
and fertile power:

Is it the subtle seeds of mind  
from which creation is conceived?  
Is it the energies and powers  
that shape the world and get things done?

Below was energy,  
above was impulse.

Is it the underlying power  
that moves creation from the start?  
Is it the drive that follows on  
to look for better life beyond?

6

Who knows for certain?  
Who shall here  
declare it?

Who really knows? Just what is it  
in each of us that knows the things  
our minds conceive and senses see?

Whence was it born,  
and whence came  
this creation?

Just who or what in us can tell  
from where appearances are born,  
from where creation is conceived?

The gods were born  
after this  
world's creation:

Our faculties of mind and sense  
are part of the created world.  
They cannot therefore come before  
this world has been conceived by mind.

Then who can know

What then is prior to the mind?

from whence  
it has arisen?

Just who or what in us can know  
from where conception rises up  
to form the world we think we see?

7

None knoweth whence  
creation has arisen;  
And whether he has  
or has not  
produced it:

From where does seeming world arise?  
Does it in truth arise at all,  
or does it only seem to rise  
from incorrect appearances  
mistakenly perceived by mind?

He who surveys it  
in the highest heaven,

The changing things of seeming world,  
and their conception in our minds,  
are known by changeless consciousness:  
which carries on, while seeming things  
and mind's conceptions come and go.

In everyone's experience,  
as feelings, thoughts, perceptions and  
their seeming objects come and go,  
pure consciousness alone remains:  
continuing through time and change,  
to know all these appearances.

He only knows,  
or haply  
he may know not. <sup>3</sup>

It's only from this final base,  
of unconditioned consciousness,  
that world's conception can be known;  
if it is truly known at all.

<sup>3</sup>Stanza 7 can be translated alternatively (and fairly literally) as follows:

From where has this creation come to be?  
Has it been established or has it not?  
Only its witness in the highest heaven  
truly knows [it] or knows if [it is] not.

The main difference is in the last line. 'Yadi' has been translated by Macdonell as 'haply' (i.e. 'perhaps'), thus expressing a sense of doubt about all knowledge of the created world. But, here above, 'yadi' is translated as 'if'. Thus, it is taken to suggest an enquiry into pure, unaffected consciousness: whose self-illuminating knowledge continues independent of whether the created world seems to exist or not.

## *Change and continuity*

### **Movement**

In the first chapter of the Chāndogya Upanishad, there is a short passage (1.9.1) which asks about the nature of movement. And the answer is given that movement is really nothing but space; because all beings arise from space, come to end in space and are contained in space.

How is this passage to be interpreted? In the original Sanskrit, the word used for 'movement' is 'gati', and the word used for 'space' is 'ākāsha'.

Let us first consider the Sanskrit word 'gati'. In general, the word means 'going' or 'moving' (as an abstract noun derived from the verbal root 'gam', meaning 'to go' or 'to move'). Based on this general meaning, the word 'gati' is used in many particular ways. In the sense of 'going *from*' or 'issuing', it can be used to mean 'origin' or 'source' or 'basis' or 'essence'. In the sense of 'going *between*' or 'proceeding', it can be used to mean 'process' or 'means' or 'path' or 'way' or 'state'. In the sense of 'going *to*' or 'reaching', it can be used to mean 'goal' or 'end' or 'refuge' or 'resort'.

Accordingly, the above passage (Chāndogya Upanishad 1.9.1) can be translated in rather different ways.

S. Radhakrishnan interprets 'gati' as 'goal', in the following translation (from *The Principal Upaniṣads*):

'What is the goal of this world?' He replied, 'Space, for all these creatures are produced from space. They return back into space. For space is greater than these. Space is the final goal.'

Juan Mascaro interprets 'gati' as 'origin' or 'source', as implied in the following translation (from *The Upanishads*):

Wherefrom do all these worlds come? They come from space. All beings arise from space, and into space they return: space is indeed their beginning, and space is their final end.

Swāmi Swāhānanda (in *The Chāndogya Upaniṣad*) interprets 'gati' as 'essence':

'What is the essence of this world?' 'Ākāśa,' said (Pravāhaṇa); 'all

these beings arise from Ākāśa alone and are finally dissolved into Ākāśa; because Ākāśa alone is greater than all these and Ākāśa is the support at all times.'

And further, by interpreting 'gati' more simply and directly as 'going' or 'movement', the same passage could also be translated:

'What is the movement of this world?'  
 'It is space,' he said. 'All these beings  
 rise produced from space alone  
 and, given up, return to space.  
 For space is greater than they are.  
 Space is what carries on, beyond.'

This last translation is a little elaborated in the retelling reproduced below (from *FTU*, page 98):

What is this change and movement  
 that appears to form our world?  
 All seeming motion is but space;  
 for everything is formed in space.  
 When formed, each thing is part of space;  
 whatever moves, must move in space.  
 Contained in space, all forms arise  
 and move and change and pass away.  
 All moving things and changing forms  
 arise, take shape, continue on  
 and come to end in space alone.

### **The continuing background**

What is the meaning of the Sanskrit word 'ākāśa', which has been translated above as 'space'?

The word 'ākāśa' can also be translated as 'ether' or 'sky'. Its translation as 'ether' shows that it refers to the *continuity* of space. As 'ether', 'ākāśa' was taken to be an all-pervasive substance which is present everywhere, unconfined and unlimited by the boundaries of any locality in space or time.

This 'ether' is not a gross material substance which is somehow separated into pieces, so as to form the bounded objects that our limited senses perceive. It is too subtle to be perceived by any of the senses, because they are

all limited instruments whose range of perception is always confined within the boundaries of particular localities. Unseen by the senses, the 'ether' is known only by its continuity: as the continuing background of space and time, in which each particular object is located.

Accordingly, the word 'ākāsha' does not refer to 'space' in the narrow sense: as distance and locality, which *separate* particular objects. In Sanskrit, when space is conceived in this narrow sense, it is described by the words 'dik' (literally 'direction', 'quarter') and 'desha' (literally 'place', 'region'). By contrast, the word 'ākāsha' conceives of 'space' in a much broader and more universal sense: as *continuing* space and time, which together contain the entire universe and which thus *connect* different objects. In this conception, all of space and time are taken together: as the pervasive and unifying background of the world, in which each physical and mental thing must be located.

This is why the word 'ākāsha' is also used to mean 'sky'. For the sky was taken to be a continuing, universal background: overarching all particular things on earth. Accordingly, it was a cosmic symbol for the continuing background of experience that enables particular objects to be contrasted or compared, and hence to be distinguished apart or related together.

There is a striking correspondence here with modern physics. At the end of the nineteenth century, light was thought to travel as a wave motion in a highly pervasive material medium called 'ether'. This 'ether' somehow pervaded other substances like glass and water and air: thus enabling light to be transmitted through them. But it was much more rarefied than other substances, because it somehow filled empty space: thus enabling light to be transmitted through a vacuum tube from which the air has been pumped out; and enabling light to be transmitted from the sun and the stars to the earth, though the vast empty spaces that are seen in the sky.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein put forward the theory of relativity: which thinks of light as transmitted by the innate properties of space and time. In this theory, the transmission of light and other phenomena, such as gravity, are conceived to manifest the underlying 'geometry' of space and time. This 'space-time geometry' is simply the way in which apparently different events are connected together, in a 'space-time continuum'.

Here, light is no longer thought to be transmitted through a material medium that must be added on to space and time, as something extra to them. Instead, light is transmitted, and other phenomena are manifested, by the 'space-time continuum' itself. The so-called 'ether' is nothing else but the continuity of space and time.

This new way of looking at the 'ether' went along with a broader and more

fundamental change in the way that physicists conceive the world. The theory of relativity does not think about the world as a mechanical system of pieces of matter that are extraneously added on to space and time. Instead, it has been developing a conception of the entire physical universe as a ‘space-time continuum’: where space, time, matter and energy are essentially inter-related and must be considered together; in order to understand an invariant and continuing reality beneath the variations and changes of relative appearance.

In much the same way, though generalizing their approach to consider mental as well as physical experience, the Upanishads conceive of ‘ākāsha’ as the background continuity of space and time; and they enquire into an unchanging reality that underlies this continuity.

In the following translation and retelling of a passage from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad (3.8.3-11), the word ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘ether’.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 72-74)

### 3.8.3

She said: ‘Yājnyavalkya,

‘that which is  
above heaven,

‘that which is  
below earth,

‘that which is  
between these two,  
heaven and earth;

‘that which was, and is,  
and is to be;

‘that which is  
thus spoken of,  
in what is that woven,  
warp and woof?’

‘Yājnyavalkya ... What is the substance of  
all that is said to be existence: above heaven,  
below earth, in earth and heaven and in be-  
tween, in all that was and is and is to be?’

### 3.8.4

He said: ‘Gārgī,

‘This all-pervasive substance is called  
“ether”. It is not a gross substance, like “earth”,

‘that which is  
above heaven,  
‘that which is  
below earth,  
‘that which is  
between these two,  
heaven and earth;  
‘that which was, and is,  
and is to be;  
‘that which is  
thus spoken of,  
is woven,  
warp and woof,  
in ether.’

which can be fashioned into separate objects, as a potter fashions clay into pots. Instead, this “ether” is the highly subtle substance of underlying continuity: which enables each object or event to be understood, in relation to other objects and events located elsewhere in space and time.

‘Through the limited perceptions of body, senses and mind, limited objects and events appear at the forefront of attention. Each particular object or event is thus a limited and partial appearance of a much larger world. Each such limited appearance, of only one particular object or event, is understood in relation to a background of experience which somehow comprehends other objects and events that are not explicitly seen or thought of at the time.

‘As attention turns from one appearance to another, the background of experience continues, enabling different appearances and different objects and events to be related. In every object or event that appears in experience, this continuing background is understood. Its continuity thus extends throughout experience: through all space and time, through all relationships and through all causes and effects.

‘The subtle substance “ether” is essentially unmanifest. Unlike gross matter, it is not manifested by its separation into different objects and events. Instead, it underlies experience, as the continuing background that is implicitly understood in the perception of all objects and events. It is the continuing background of the entire world: the complete background of all-containing space, time and causality.’

*From 3.8.5 and 3.8.7*

She said: ‘Salutation to you, Yājnyavalkya, who have answered this

‘Yes, this is a satisfying answer, and it leads to my second question. On what basis does this

[first question] of mine. continuing background pervade all of existence?  
 Hold ready for the other....

‘In what indeed is ether woven, warp and woof?’

### 3.8.8

He said: ‘Gārgī, those who know reality describe it as the changeless.

‘The basis of all space, all time, all cause, cannot itself be changed, nor qualified, by changing qualities of space and time and cause. Thus, it is described as “changeless”.

‘Not gross, nor fine, not short, nor long,

‘It is not coarse, nor yet refined; it is not long or short, nor wet or dry; nor has it colour, shade or darkness, taste or smell.

‘not flaming red, nor syrupy,

‘It is not “air”, nor “ether”:  
 for it has no qualities, and it cannot be related to anything besides itself.

‘not shade, nor darkness, not air, nor ether;

‘not connected, without taste or smell, without eyes and ears or speech or mind;

‘It has no eyes, no ears, no speech, no mind; it is not sharp, nor has it vital force, nor face, nor measure. Nor does it consume, nor is consumed. It has no outside, nor inside.

‘not sharp, it has no vital force or face or measure, no inside, no outside.

‘It does not consume anything. Nothing consumes it.

### 3.8.9

‘Under the guidance of this same changeless principle, Gārgī, the sun and moon are kept in place.

‘Based on this changeless principle, the sun and moon are kept on course, and heaven and earth remain in place.

‘Under the guidance  
of this same  
changeless principle,  
Gārgī, heaven and earth  
are kept in place.

‘Under the guidance  
of this same  
changeless principle,  
Gārgī, moments, hours,  
days and nights,

‘fortnights, months,  
seasons, years  
are kept in place.

‘Under the guidance  
of this same  
changeless principle,  
Gārgī, rivers flow  
from white mountains,

‘some eastwards,  
some westwards,  
each in its own direction.

‘Under the guidance  
of this same  
changeless principle,  
Gārgī, people praise  
those who give;

‘the gods are connected  
with the sacrificer,  
the ancestors with  
the darvī offering.

### *3.8.10*

‘Gārgī, whoever  
does not know this  
changeless principle,

‘but in this world

‘Moments pass in due succession,  
days give way to nights and nights to days,  
seasons alternate and years pass by.  
Rivers rise and flow from mountains.  
People work to seek reward.

‘Wherever there is ignorance  
of this one changeless principle,  
work but results in passing gain.

makes offerings  
and sacrifices,

‘and intensifies  
self-discipline,  
thousands of years;

‘for such a person  
that [achievement]  
is merely passing.

‘Gārgī, whoever  
leaves this world  
in ignorance of this  
changeless principle  
is an object of pity.

‘But Gārgī, one who  
leaves the world  
with knowledge of this  
changeless principle  
realizes everything.

‘To leave the world in ignorance  
of changeless truth is misery.

‘But one who knows this changeless truth  
has reached the goal of all desire,  
and leaves the world in deathless peace  
with nothing further to attain.

### 3.8.11

‘This, Gārgī, is that same  
changeless principle  
which is not seen,  
but is the see-er;

‘which is not heard,  
but is the hearer;

‘which is not thought,  
but is the thinker;

‘which is not known,  
but is the knower.

‘Other than this,  
there is no see-er.

‘Other than this,  
there is no hearer.

‘This changeless principle  
cannot be seen:  
it is the see-er.

‘It can’t be heard:  
it is the hearer.

‘It can’t be thought:  
it is the thinker.

‘It can’t be known:  
it is the knower.

‘Nothing else can see or hear  
or think or feel or understand.

‘Other than this,  
there is no thinker.

‘Other than this,  
there is no knower.

‘Gārgī, in this very  
changeless principle,  
the ether is woven,  
warp and woof.’

‘Nothing else can know at all.

‘Gārgī, this changeless, knowing principle is  
the basis on which stands the all-pervading con-  
tinuity called “ether”. This is the ultimate basis  
of all apparent existence.’

### Objective and subjective

Towards the end of the preceding passage, there is a significant change of approach: from objective to subjective. Where Yājnyavalkya has been describing a changeless principle that underlies all the changes of the perceived world, he suddenly reverses the direction of attention, from that which is known to that which knows: ‘This same ... changeless principle ... is not seen, but is the see-er; ... is not known, but is the knower.’ (3.8.11)

In the following translation and retelling from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 3.18.1, the distinction of objective and subjective approaches is made explicit. Here, the word ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘the overarching space of sky’.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 104)

#### 3.18.1

Mind may be  
meditated on  
as all reality:  
this with regard  
to inner self.

Subjectively, the thinking  
principle may be considered  
all reality, all that there is.

Next, with regard  
to gods above:  
the overarching  
space of sky  
as all reality.

And then objectively, the background  
of the world, continuing  
through all appearances in space  
and time, may be considered all  
there is, all true reality.

These two are advised:

Both of these meditations are

with regard  
to inner self,  
and with regard  
to gods above.

advised: the first subjectively,  
the second one objectively.

### **Unchanging self**

What is the subjective approach, which enquires into the nature of ‘the knower’ or the ‘inner self’?

In the following translation and retelling of excerpted passages from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, chapter 4, self is described as the illuminating principle of consciousness: which continues unchanged through all the apparent changes of each person’s experience. Here, ‘ākāsha’ is translated as ‘space’ or as ‘the background of space’.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 81-91)

#### 4.3.7

‘Which is the self?’

‘But then, what is this knowing self?’

‘That which is this,  
whose nature is  
consciousness  
in living functions,

‘It is the light of consciousness  
within each living creature’s heart.

‘the light within the heart,  
purusha [the principle  
of personality].

‘Being the same,  
it journeys through  
both worlds,

‘And though it seems to journey through  
a waking world of outside things  
or inner worlds of dreaming mind,

‘seeming to think  
and move.

‘in truth, it always stays the same  
through all appearances of change.

‘For, sleeping,  
it transcends the world,  
the forms of death.

‘In depth of sleep, the self is shown  
beyond all worlds of changing form.

4.3.8

‘It, this same purusha,  
being born,  
assuming a body,  
is projected  
mixed with ill.

‘Where this self seems born as body,  
it seems to suffer body’s ill.  
Each body dies, all ill must pass;  
that which remains, unchanged, is self.

‘Departing, dying,  
it gives up ill.

4.3.9

‘Of that indeed,  
of this purusha,  
there are two states:

‘There are two seeming states of self:

‘as body in an outside world;

‘this and  
the other-worldly state.

‘or mind, conceiving subtle worlds  
made up of its own thoughts and dreams.

‘At the junction  
is the third:

‘But, joining these apparent states,  
is that third state where seeming stops,  
where thoughts and dreams have all dissolved  
and no appearances remain.

‘the state of sleep.

‘This is the state of dreamless sleep;  
the timeless state that is achieved  
when meditation stills the mind;  
the state between successive thoughts,  
where previous thought has come to end  
and further thought has not begun.

‘Here, in this unconditioned state,  
self shines unmixed with alien things  
that make it seem what it is not.

‘Standing at that  
joining state,  
it sees these two:

‘Remaining always in this state  
of unconditioned purity,  
self lights the body’s waking world  
and worlds of mind that dreaming brings.

‘this and  
the other-worldly state.

‘Now, whatever is the way

‘Whatever state seems to appear,

to the other-worldly state,  
when that way is taken  
both ills and joys are seen.

all seeming ills and seeming joys  
are lit and known by self alone.

‘When it goes to sleep,  
it takes back  
the measure of this  
all-containing world.

‘As mind withdraws from world in sleep,  
the whole created world dissolves  
in all creation’s shining source:  
where self is light which lights itself.

‘Having itself destroyed,  
having itself created,  
by its own radiance,  
by its own light,  
it sleeps.

‘Here, this purusha  
itself is light.

#### 4.3.10

‘In that, there are  
no chariots, nor those  
in harness to chariots,  
nor roads;

‘Here, where all dreams dissolve in light  
from which they come, there is no change,  
nor cause of change, nor place for change.  
There is no need for fancy’s flight,  
there are no bounds, there is no pain.

‘but it projects  
chariots, and those  
in harness, and roads.

‘In that, there are  
no joys, no pleasures,  
no delights;

‘but it projects  
joys, pleasures  
and delights.

‘In that, there are  
no pools of water,  
no lotus ponds,  
no flowing streams;

‘but it projects  
pools, lotus ponds  
and streams.

‘For, it is the creator.

*4.3.11*

‘[On] that,  
there are these verses:

“‘By sleep annihilating  
bodily existence,

“‘this that does not sleep  
looks out  
on sleeping things.

“‘And, taking light  
back in again,  
it comes to [its] place:  
[this] golden purusha,  
sole swan [one spirit  
in all things].

‘When body sleeps, the body’s world  
dissolves in unmixed consciousness;  
as body’s seeming consciousness  
returns again to its true source  
in that unsleeping, deathless self  
which knows all worlds, all dreams, all sleep.

*4.3.12*

“‘Guarding the  
inferior nest [the body]  
by living breath,  
it journeys on undying,  
beyond, outside the nest;

“‘and [thus]  
goes deathless  
where desire [wills]:

“‘[this] golden purusha,  
sole swan [one spirit  
in all things]....”

‘The body’s seeming life is bound  
to breath, to circulating blood,  
to many other vital needs  
that keep our bodies functioning.

‘But self is free, it has no needs;  
it is untouched by seeming change.  
As life itself, it cannot die.

‘Through passing states of wakefulness  
and dream and sleep, the self alone  
goes on from state to state, unchanged.

*From 4.3.15-17*

‘That is just this,  
in this pure serenity.

‘Enjoying itself  
and moving,

‘In sleep, in dreams, in wakefulness,  
the self is always free: unchanged  
by all the good and evil things  
that seem to pass before its light.

‘merely seeing  
good and ill,

‘It only knows, it does not act;  
and so it cannot be attached.

‘it runs back in reverse,  
back to source:  
for sleep itself.

‘There, whatever it sees,  
it is not followed by that;  
for this purusha  
is unattached....

‘That is just this,  
in this sleep.

‘Enjoying itself  
and moving,

‘merely seeing  
good and ill,

‘it runs back in reverse,  
back to source:  
for the very end of waking.

‘There, whatever it sees,  
it is not followed by that;  
for this purusha  
is unattached....

‘That is just this,  
in this end of waking.

‘Enjoying itself  
and moving,

‘merely seeing  
good and ill,

‘it runs back in reverse,  
back to source:  
for the very end of sleep.

#### *4.4.16*

‘That in front of which

‘Before the self, all moments pass,  
each day proceeds and turns to night,

the year revolves  
together with its days;

‘to that  
the gods pay heed:

‘the light of lights,  
the lasting principle  
of deathless life.

each season gives way to the next,  
and seasons cycle into years.

‘For self is knowing consciousness,  
which knows all time, all place, all things.  
It is the ever-present light  
that lights all lights in all we know.

*4.4.17*

‘That in which  
the five groups of five  
and the background  
of space  
are established;

‘by thinking of self  
as that alone,

‘one who [thus] knows  
the deathless absolute  
is deathless.

‘Through all appearances that come  
and go in our experience,  
this knowing consciousness goes on  
from difference to difference,  
from change to change. And through all change  
it is the vital core of life,  
which lasts, as all else comes and goes.

‘This never-changing consciousness  
is that immortal absolute  
upon which all experience rests.  
Just knowing it brings deathlessness.

*4.4.18*

‘Those who have known  
the breath of breath,  
the eye of eye,  
the ear of ear,  
the mind of mind;

‘they have realized  
the ancient,  
primordial  
absolute.

‘It is the living principle  
in all the various lives we lead.  
It is the seeing principle  
in all the various sights we see.  
It is the hearing principle  
in all appearances of sound.

‘It is the knowing principle  
in all our minds’ experiences:  
in all the meanings we perceive,  
in all the various thoughts we think,  
in all the feelings that we feel.

*4.4.19*

‘Through mind alone  
to be perceived,

‘But, in this knowing principle,

‘in it there’s no  
diversity at all.

which knows all change and difference,  
no change or difference exists.

‘Whoever seems to see  
diversity in it,  
goes on from death  
to death.

‘Whoever sees diversity  
and change sees but appearances,  
which only lead from death to death.

#### *4.4.20-21*

‘As one alone  
to be perceived, it is  
immeasurable,  
permanent.

‘Self is that one unchanging truth  
which can’t be known by changing mind.

‘Stainless,  
beyond all space,  
the unborn self  
is great and permanent.

‘Shared in common by all difference,  
stainless through all imperfection,  
never born in all creation,  
limitless through space and time;  
beyond all words, beyond all thought,  
beyond all forms and qualities;

‘Recognizing that alone,  
a steadfast realist  
should work  
for knowledge.

‘self is known by simply being,  
because its nature is to shine.

‘Let there not be  
[mere] thought  
of many words;  
for that  
is weariness of speech.

#### *From 4.4.22*

‘This is that same  
great unborn self,  
whose nature is  
this consciousness  
in living functions.

‘True self is unborn consciousness,  
the ground of all experience,  
from which appearances are born.

‘In this space  
within the heart,  
it rests:  
the controller of all,

‘It is life in living function,  
source and aim of all intention,  
untouched depth of all emotion,  
infinite, within each heart.

the lord and ruler  
of everything.

‘It is not increased  
by work well done,  
nor diminished  
by work ill done:

‘this lord of all,  
this ruler of beings,  
this protector of beings.

‘No action can affect this self:  
good actions cannot make it grow,  
bad actions cannot cause it loss.  
It is complete reality,  
beyond all partial-seeming things.

‘This is the bridge  
that holds apart,  
for the separation  
and the joining  
of these worlds....’

‘It is the underlying ground  
from which all difference seems to rise,  
on which all different things seem to  
exist apart, to which all  
seeming difference must return again....’

## **Continuity**

Towards the end of the preceding translation (4.4.22), the self is said to rest ‘in this space within the heart’: where the word ‘space’ again translates the Sanskrit ‘ākāsha’. What is this ‘space within the heart’?

As described earlier (pages 60-63), when ‘ākāsha’ is conceived objectively, it refers to ‘space’ as the continuing background which relates together the differing and changing objects that we perceive in the outside world. Thus, when ‘ākāsha’ is conceived subjectively, as ‘within the heart’, it evidently describes a corresponding background of ‘inner’ experience. More simply put, it is the background of consciousness: which continues through experience, while perceptions, thoughts and feelings come and go.

But then, what is the relationship between this background of subjective experience and the background of the world? Ultimately, in each person’s experience, everything in the world is known subjectively. Each object is experienced through perception, thought and feeling. As the background of consciousness continues through perceptions, thoughts and feelings, it also continues through all experience of the world. It is thus the continuing background not only of subjective experience, but also of the entire world.

Such a reconciliation of subjective and objective approaches is described in the following translation and retelling of excerpted passages from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 8.1-4. Here, the Sanskrit word ‘ākāsha’ is once again translated as ‘space’ (in 8.1.1,3).

This translation and retelling may be taken as an instance where a rather cryptic and condensed original has been retold by supplementing it with a considerable degree of interpretation, explanation and elaboration. In particular, the retelling includes an explanatory introduction which does not correspond directly to any passage in the original.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 116-120)

*Explanatory introduction added into retelling*

Our bodies, senses and our minds  
keep changing in a changing world.  
And so, whatever they perceive  
is by its nature changeable.

But, as this change keeps going on,  
how is it known that things have changed?  
How can something be compared  
with what it was before it changed?

Where variation is perceived,  
what is it that knows the change  
of passing states which come and go?

It must be there before the change,  
to know the state that was before.  
And it must still be there when change  
has taken place, to know what has  
become of what was there before.

Wherever there is variation,  
that which knows must carry on  
through changing states that come and go.

Each state gives way to other states,  
but that which knows the change remains.

This knowing principle remains  
unchanged, unvarying: through all  
the change and all the variations  
body, sense and mind perceive.

Whatever is perceived must vary;  
that which knows is never changed.

As body, sense and mind perceive,  
appearances of world are formed.  
And all of these appearances  
are known by light of consciousness.

Perception isn't that which knows;  
it only forms appearances  
through changing body, sense and mind.

That which knows is consciousness;  
it lights up all appearances.  
It's always there, throughout experience,  
always shines by its own light.

Perception changes every moment;  
consciousness remains unchanged.

*From 8.1.1*

Om. Assuredly,  
in this stronghold  
of the absolute, <sup>1</sup>  
that which is this  
subtle lotus flower  
is a home.

In it is  
a subtle  
inner space....

At the surface of our minds,  
things appear and disappear:  
as attention is directed  
from one object to the next.

Beneath this stream of changing show,  
different things must be related  
at the background of experience,  
where each thing is understood.

As mind's outer surface changes,  
consciousness continues on,  
putting different things together  
at the depth of understanding:  
changeless background of experience,  
inner basis of the mind.

<sup>1</sup>In 8.1.1 and 8.1.4, the phrase, 'this stronghold of the absolute', refers to personality (i.e. body, senses and mind): in the sense that personality is the apparent 'stronghold' of consciousness, which is in truth the absolute. A little later, in 8.1.5, it is shown that the real 'stronghold of the absolute' is not perishable personality, but the changeless self (which is pure consciousness, unmixed with body, senses and mind). See page 93 and following, for further discussion about these concepts of personality and the impersonal principle that lives within.

*From 8.1.3*

... Just as great as  
the space [of all  
the world] is this inner  
space within the heart.

In itself,  
contained within, are  
both heaven and earth,  
both fire and air,  
both sun and moon,  
lightning and the stars.

Whatever of this is  
and whatever is not,  
all that is  
contained in it.

This unchanging consciousness,  
which shines within each mind and heart,  
has neither magnitude nor form.

And yet, we find contained in it  
everything we seem to see:  
all the entire universe  
of earth and sun and moon and stars,  
all space, all time, all worlds, all minds.

*From 8.1.4*

... If,  
in this stronghold  
of the absolute, <sup>2</sup>  
is contained all this,  
all beings and all desires;

then what remains of this  
when old age comes to it  
or when it is destroyed?

If all existence is thus found  
within each person's mind and heart,  
what happens when a person dies?

Can all of being be destroyed,  
when some poor mind in little body  
suffers harm and passes on?

*From 8.1.5*

... By the ageing  
of this [body],  
it does not age.

By the killing  
of this [body],  
it is not killed.

In truth, as mind and body seem  
to suffer harm and die, such harm  
and death are mere appearances,  
which cannot rise or stand except  
as they are known by consciousness.

<sup>2</sup>See footnote 1, just above.

It is the truth,  
the [real] stronghold  
of the absolute.<sup>3</sup>

In it,  
desires are contained.

It is the self:  
  
free of evils,  
free of old age,  
free from death,  
free from grief,  
free of hunger  
and thirst;  
  
desiring truth,  
thinking truth....

But consciousness illuminates  
itself; it shines by its own light.  
It does not rise or pass away.

It is the self, within us all,  
whose nature is to light itself,  
and thus to light appearances  
which are themselves but consciousness.  
True self, as unmixed consciousness,  
depends on nothing else at all.  
It is untouched by seeming change  
or seeming harm or seeming death.

#### *8.4.1*

Assuredly,  
that which is self  
  
is the bridge  
and boundary  
  
that separates  
and joins these worlds.

No night or day,  
nor age, nor death,  
nor grief,  
nor good action,  
nor bad action,  
  
crosses over  
onto this bridge.

All ills turn back from it;  
for it is free of evils,  
this place of the absolute.

Self is the continuity  
that lives unchanged through change; it is  
the bridge that joins all differences.

And yet, it also is the basis  
of discrimination, by which  
different things are told apart.

When understanding passes from  
appearance to reality,  
no day or night, no height or depth,  
no age, nor death, nor fear, nor grief,  
nor good or bad can pass to self;

for no conditioned quality  
of seeming world applies to it.

<sup>3</sup>See footnote 1, just above.

## 8.4.2

Truly therefore,  
crossing over  
to this bridge,  
the blind becomes  
not blind,  
the wounded becomes  
not wounded,  
the afflicted becomes  
not afflicted.

Truly therefore,  
crossing over  
to this bridge,  
even night turns out  
to be just day,  
for it is fully well  
illuminated, this place of  
the absolute.

As truth of self is realized,  
all blindness is removed from sight,  
all wounds are healed, all pain dissolves,  
all bonds are loosed, all lack is filled;

and darkness shines as dazzling light  
of unconditioned consciousness.

# *Life*

## **Energy**

In the Upanishads, as in so much of traditional thought, life was often conceived through the metaphor of ‘living breath’. This metaphor is expressed in the Sanskrit word ‘prāṇa’. Literally, ‘prāṇa’ means ‘breathing forth’ or ‘breathing onward’. But it also carries a more metaphorical sense of meaning: as ‘life’ or ‘living spirit’ or ‘the breath of life’.

In this sense, life was conceived as a kind of subtle energy: which animates the living actions of our bodies and minds, and which similarly animates the actions of other living creatures that we perceive in the world around us.

Moreover, all movements in the entire universe were conceived to act together, in a single living ‘macrocosm’. Just as each living creature is motivated by its own energy of individual life; so too the entire universe was conceived to be animated by a universal living energy, expressed in everything that happens everywhere.

In Sanskrit, the perceived universe is commonly described by the word ‘jagat’: which is the present participle of the common verb ‘gam’, meaning ‘to go’ or ‘to move’. Thus ‘jagat’ quite simply means ‘moving’; and when it is used to describe the world as a whole, it implies a totality of perceived movements manifesting the universal energy that underlies them all. This conception is described in the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 6.2. Here, the word ‘prāṇa’ is translated as ‘living energy’; and the word ‘jagat’ is translated as the ‘changing universe’.

**Translation** (from the  
Kaṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 34)

6.2

That which is all  
this changing universe,  
whatever has  
come forth,  
is living energy.

The whole created universe  
is made of living energy  
that moves and oscillates and shines.

It moves and oscillates  
and shines:

a great terror,  
an uplifted thunderbolt.

This boundless store of restless  
cosmic energy has terrible  
destructive power. It's like an  
upraised thunderbolt: to petty  
ego's fragile life, identified  
with little body, sense and mind.

They who know this  
become deathless.

But if, transcending petty ego,  
all the world is known as life –  
as only living energy –  
then how can death arise at all?

For one who knows the world like this,  
as only life, there is no death.  
In truth, there's only deathlessness.

## **Expression**

Modern developments in physics, in particular in relativity and quantum field theory, have made us familiar with the idea of a changing universe made up of underlying energy. But what is meant by describing this energy as 'living'?

Basically, movements and actions are called 'living' when they are implied to express some sort of underlying consciousness. And then, we do not understand these movements and actions merely by looking out to external objects that act upon one another. In addition, we reflect back into our own experience, in order to understand the underlying consciousness that is expressed in living behaviour.

By contrast with the objective energy that is described and manipulated through the calculations of physical science, living energy is understood by subjective reflection: as expressing an underlying consciousness that is shared in common by observer and observed.

Such reflective understanding is most obvious in our knowledge of human beings and other living creatures; but it is also an essential, though more subtle component in our knowledge of the world as a whole. For, in order to put our fragmentary knowledge together, objective calculations are insufficient in themselves. They depend upon underlying principles of order and meaning, which we somehow understand in them. And this understanding

requires a subjective reflection into our own consciousness, where underlying principles are found shared in common with the external world.

However we put together knowledge of the world, and however we conceive of its functioning as a whole, our knowledge is based upon subjective principles of order and meaning from our own consciousness.

Thus, both for living creatures and for the world as a whole, there are two different levels of consideration. First, they may be considered objectively: as made up of objects or objective parts that act upon one another. And second, they may be considered subjectively: as expressing consciousness. In the first case, they are treated as mere instruments or objects of action, external to life. In the second case, they are treated as ‘living’ or ‘alive’.

This rather delicate question of expression is raised in the Prashna Upanishad, 3.3, which says that life (‘prāṇa’) appears in the body as a shadow-image (‘chāyā’) produced from inner self by the activity of mind:

ātmana esha prāṇo jāyate	From self, this life is born.
yathaishā purushe	Just as this on purusha
chāy-	is a [mere] shadow-image;
aitasminn	[so too] upon this [self],
etat ātatam	this that is drawn out
manokriten-	by mind’s activity
āyāty asmin charīre	comes into this body.

The literal translation above is meant to show two particular problems that arise when interpreting this passage. One problem occurs in the second line, where the word ‘purusha’ can be interpreted either as ‘a person’ or as ‘the indwelling principle of personality’. The other problem occurs in the fifth line, where the word ‘this’ is used to translate the Sanskrit ‘etat’. The difficulty here is that ‘etat’ is neuter; and hence it cannot refer to any of the preceding nouns, which are all either masculine or feminine. So it is disconcertingly wide open to interpretation.

The following translation and retelling try to be more easily intelligible, by making specific choices that bring out one particular aspect of meaning. The word ‘purusha’ is translated as ‘consciousness’ (by identifying consciousness as the indwelling spirit of personality). And the word ‘etat’ (‘this’) is interpreted as referring specifically to ‘living movement’: or in other words to movement as animated by life. In Sanskrit (as described just above, in the previous section of this chapter), such a concept of animated movement is typically represented by the neuter noun ‘jagat’, to which ‘etat’ could thus be taken to refer.

**Translation** (from the  
Prashna Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 165)

### 3.3

This life is born from self.  
Just like some shadow-image  
[drawn] on consciousness,  
this [living movement] is  
drawn out upon the [self].

Each person's life is born from self,  
appearing like a moving image  
drawn by mind on consciousness.

By mind's activity,  
it comes to be in body here.

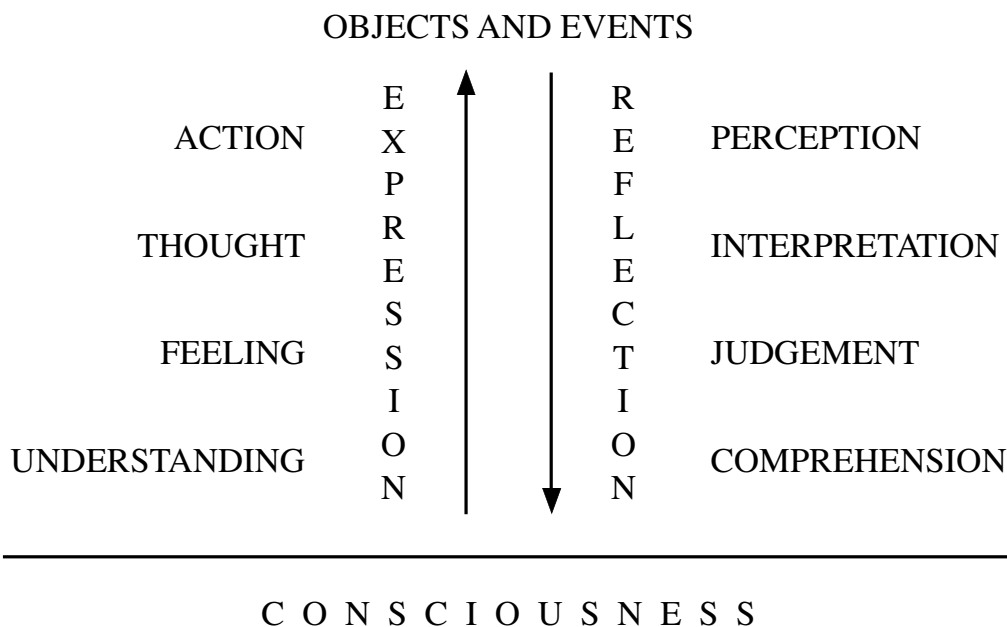
Through this activity of mind,  
life is expressed in body's acts.

## Learning

As consciousness is expressed in the course of experience, a process of learning takes place, through a cyclic reflection of attention back and forth between consciousness and the perceived world. This is shown in figure 1.

- As attention *goes out* from consciousness towards the world, what has been learned from past experience is expressed – through understanding, feeling, thought and action – towards objects and events.
- When attention has thus turned to particular objects and events, consciousness continues to be expressed through perception, interpretation, judgement

*Figure 1*



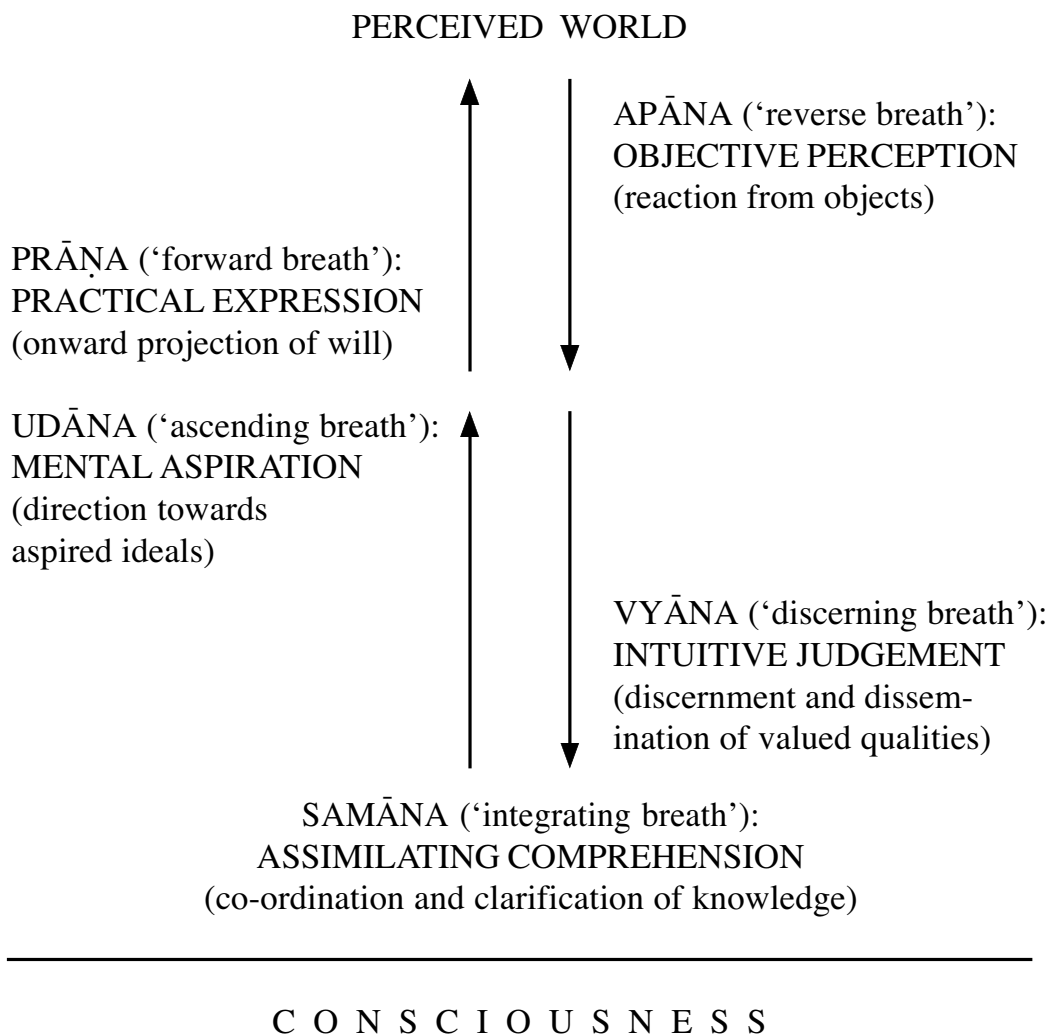
ment and comprehension: which assimilate new learning, through a *reflection* of attention *back* to underlying consciousness.

In the course of future experience, such assimilated learning is expressed in new understanding, feeling, thoughts and actions; and so the cycle continues, thus enabling us to learn, as experience carries on.

This cycle of learning includes the entire process of life, in which all living faculties take part. Accordingly, life as a whole may be conceived as an on-going process of learning and development, in which living experience is repeatedly 'breathed' out and in. From underlying consciousness, learning from past experience is 'breathed' out into the perceived world; thus giving rise to new experiences that are 'breathed' back in.

The traditional metaphor of 'vital breath', or 'prāṇa', was further used to describe a division of life into different vital faculties. In the Indian tradition in particular, the word 'prāṇa' is used in two ways. On the one hand, it is

Figure 2



used to describe life as a continuing whole; and here it has the generic sense of ‘ongoing life’ or ‘ongoing breath’. On the other hand, it was also used to describe five ‘prāṇas’ or ‘vital faculties’, each of which plays a particular part in the whole process of ongoing life.

One of these vital faculties was called ‘apāna’, which can be translated literally as the ‘reverse breath’. A second was confusingly called ‘prāṇa’, where the term is not now being used in its generic sense of ‘ongoing life’ or ‘ongoing breath’, but in a more limited sense that can be translated literally as the ‘forward breath’. The three remaining vital faculties were ‘vyāna’ (literally the ‘discerning or disseminating breath’), ‘udāna’ (literally the ‘ascending breath’) and ‘samāna’ (literally the ‘integrating breath’).

Depending on the context, these five vital faculties (the ‘panca-prāṇas’) can be interpreted in rather different ways. One way is to see them as parts of the cycle of learning (through expression and reflection) which has just been described above. This is shown in figure 2 (previous page).

Essentially, the same interpretation of the five ‘prāṇas’ or ‘vital breaths’ is made in the following translation and retelling of the Prashna Upanishad, 3.4-12. As shown below in the translation of 3.5-6, the original text associates the vital breaths with various bodily organs in which they are supposed to act. However, such bodily organs, like the eyes or the mouth, are clearly meant to represent more subtle living faculties, like sight and speech, with which the vital breaths are more essentially associated. And further, as shown in 3.7 and 3.9-12, the text describes the vital breaths as essentially concerned with the process of ongoing experience: in which old experiences subside and lead on to new experiences, until a clarified understanding of life itself leads finally to undying truth.

The retelling modifies the original text by trying to interpret its bodily metaphors in terms of a more explicitly described cycle of living faculties, which express consciousness in the course of ongoing experience.

**Translation** (from the  
Prashna Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 165-167)

3.4

As an emperor commands  
his officers, telling each  
to govern these villages  
or those villages;

As life expresses consciousness,  
it carries out its purposes  
through various different faculties  
that are divisions of itself.

so too, this prāṇa [life]

appoints the other prāṇas  
each to its own place.

### 3.5-7

Apāna [is appointed]  
to the excretory and  
reproductive organs.

One of these faculties [apāna] reacts  
to objects that have been perceived:  
discarding waste, restricting aims,  
and thus creating partial views  
of world, as it appears perceived.

In eye and ear, together  
with the mouth and nose,  
prāṇa itself is established.

A second of these faculties [prāṇa]  
looks on from what is now perceived:  
projecting choices, from the past,  
through life that carries on in time.

Samāna, however,  
is in the middle;  
for it leads  
offered food  
to assimilation.

A third among these faculties [samāna]  
assimilates perceptions and  
interpretations into knowledge  
at the background of the mind:  
where what is known is understood.  
There, silent understanding knows,  
unmoved by passing wants and needs  
noised out by wish and fantasy.

From that arise  
these seven flames  
[perceptive faculties  
lodged in the seven  
orifices of the head  
– two eyes, two ears,  
two nostrils  
and the mouth].

For, in the heart  
is this self.

Here, there is this:  
a hundred and  
one channels;  
from them a hundred  
[offshoots] each;

A fourth among the faculties [vyāna]  
goes circulating back and forth,  
contrasting and comparing things:  
thus judging valued qualities  
and spreading subtle influence.

in each of these [again]  
seventy-two thousand  
offshoot channels arise.

In these, moves vyāna.

Next, rising up  
through one of these,  
udāna leads:

through good  
to a good world,  
through ill to ill,  
through both indeed  
to the world of men.

A fifth among the faculties [udāna]  
expresses understanding which  
has come from past experience: so  
that learning may continue on.

### 3.8-9

Essentially,  
the sun rises as prāṇa  
[seen in the world]  
outside;

for it is that which assists  
the [inner] prāṇa  
associated with the eye.

That which is this  
divinity in earth  
ties down  
a person's apāna.

And [as for] that  
which is in between:

pervading space,  
that is samāna;

the air is vyāna.

These different faculties relate  
to different aspects of the world  
that everyone experiences.

External choice that's mere reaction  
corresponds to narrow objects  
which attention has selected  
from a world of many things.

Intention looking on through time  
relates to processes of change,  
by which all objects have been formed  
and all objectives are achieved.

Understanding corresponds  
to underlying principles,  
continuing through change and difference  
in the world's appearances.

Discerning judgement corresponds  
to qualities and values that  
our feelings judge and thoughts compare  
in the world that mind conceives.

Essentially, fire is udāna.  
Thus, those in whom  
[life's] fire has subsided  
[go on to]  
renewed becoming,

with senses  
taken into mind.

Expression rising from within  
is manifest in outer world  
by living energy of change:  
which burns what's happened in the past,  
thus forming new experiences.

## 3.10

With what is thought,  
one comes to life [prāṇa].

Life, joined to fire  
and self, leads on  
to world that thus  
becomes conceived.

Each moment of our changing lives,  
we come to life conditioned by  
those influences from the past  
that lead on to our future lives.

Whatever's learnt is thus reborn  
from death of past experiences,  
as seeming life keeps cycling on  
from death to birth and birth to death.

## 3.11-12

Who knows life thus  
is [truly] wise.  
What comes from him  
is never driven,  
nor inadequate.

He realizes  
deathlessness.

As to that  
there is this verse:

'The origin of life,  
its coming [here],  
its standing place,

'and also its  
fivefold extension,  
and indeed its  
self-related-ness:

'knowing [these],  
one obtains  
deathlessness.'

But underlying seeming life  
conditioned by appearances,  
what is the unconditioned ground  
where life arises and returns  
and living truly is alive?

By questioning relentlessly  
towards this unconditioned ground,  
the self that knows all life is known  
and deathless truth is realized.

**The living principle**

What is the essential principle of life, shared in common by all living faculties and all the living acts of a person's body, senses and mind?

In the Kaushītaki Upanishad, 3.2-3, this essential living principle is identi-

fied as ‘prajnyātman’: which means ‘the self that consists of consciousness’ or, more briefly, ‘the self of consciousness’.

**Translation** (from the  
Kaushītaki Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 142-144)

*From 3.2*

... Some say:

‘The living faculties  
proceed towards  
becoming one;

‘for none alone  
would be able  
acting jointly  
to make known:

‘a name through speech,  
a sight through seeing,  
a sound through hearing,  
a thought through mind.

‘Essentially  
becoming one,

‘the living faculties  
arise, one by one,

‘and make all  
these things known.’

When speech speaks,  
all faculties  
are speaking there  
along with it.

When sight sees,  
all faculties  
are seeing there  
along with it.

Each living personality  
seems made of different faculties:  
each one expressing consciousness  
in its own ways, at its own times.

And yet these different faculties  
somehow express a unity  
of knowledge that co-ordinates

names that are known by speaking them,  
sights that are known by seeing them,  
sounds that are known by hearing them,  
thoughts that are known by thinking them.

As different objects are thus known  
in different ways, at different times,  
through different seeming faculties,

these different ways of knowing things  
reflect a unifying base  
of underlying consciousness  
on which each faculty depends.

Thus when speech speaks, all other  
faculties are somehow understood  
to be expressed in what is said.

Or when sight sees, all other  
faculties are somehow understood  
to be expressed in what is seen.

When hearing hears,  
all faculties  
are hearing there  
along with it.

When mind thinks,  
all faculties  
are thinking there  
along with it.

That's how it is....  
and yet, essentially,  
belonging to  
[all] living faculties,  
there is  
a higher principle.

*From 3.3*

One lives  
bereft of speech,  
for we see the dumb.

One lives  
bereft of sight,  
for we see the blind.

One lives  
bereft of hearing,  
for we see the deaf.

One lives  
bereft of mind,  
for we see the infantile.

One lives  
with arms cut off;

When hearing hears, all other  
faculties are somehow understood  
to be expressed in what is heard.

And when mind thinks, all other  
faculties are somehow understood  
to be expressed in what is thought.

Within these living faculties,  
one common principle of life  
is shared beneath their differences.

And this one living principle,  
though from within, contains them all.

What is essential to all life?

It cannot be the faculty  
of speech; for there are those whom we  
call 'dumb', who do not speak, but who  
are still essentially alive.

Nor can it be the faculties  
of sight or hearing; for we know  
of those whom we call 'blind' or 'deaf',  
who do not see or do not hear,  
but who are still essentially alive.

And further too, we know of those  
whose loss of outward sight or hearing  
even strengthens inner life.

Nor can life's essence be the mind.  
For can we say that life has gone,  
where understanding is attained  
and all mind's complex, changing acts  
come to an end in simple truth?

one lives  
with legs cut off.

We say this  
because, we say,  
this is how we see it.

But then, in truth,  
life in itself  
is consciousness,  
the [real] self,  
which holds this  
body all around  
and causes it  
to rise [alive].

Therefore, it is said,  
one should heed  
this alone  
as the source (uktha).

This is the all-obtaining  
in the breath of life.

Essentially,  
that which is  
the breath of life  
is consciousness.

And that which is  
consciousness  
is the breath of life....

Or can we say that life is missing,  
where desires are achieved  
and mind dissolves in happiness?

And can we say that life is absent  
in the state of dreamless sleep,  
where mind's perceptions, thoughts and feelings  
all dissolve in rest and peace?

Life is essentially the source  
from which all living acts arise.  
It is the ground on which they stand,  
and into which they are absorbed  
when they return to source again.

Thus truly known, life in itself  
is consciousness, the real self:  
which holds this body all around  
and causes it to rise, alive.

Wherever life is seen in body,  
consciousness is found implied.  
Wherever consciousness is seen  
expressed in body, so is life.

Thus 'life' and 'consciousness' are different  
names for one same principle:  
which makes this body seem alive,  
and knows all that is ever known  
in everyone's experience.

## *The impersonal basis of personality*

### **‘Human-ness’**

In ordinary Sanskrit, as in many modern Indian languages, the word ‘purusha’ means ‘a man’ or ‘a human being’ or ‘a person’. However, the word has also a special philosophical usage, which occurs over and over again in the Upanishads.

Thus philosophically used, the word ‘purusha’ does not refer to any particular man or human being or person, considered as a differentiated object among other objects in the world. Instead, in its philosophical usage, the word ‘purusha’ describes an essential principle of ‘human-ness’ which is shared in common by all different-seeming men, all different-seeming human beings and all different-seeming personalities.

As it is put in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 2.5.18:

... sa vā	That, in truth,
ayam purushah	is this ‘human-ness’
sarvāsu pūrshu	in all bodies:
purishayah ...	abiding [here] at rest within the body.

In this passage, the word used for ‘body’ is ‘pur’, which literally means ‘a rampart wall’ or ‘a fortified enclosure’ or ‘a fortress’ or ‘a walled town or city’. The body is thus conceived as mere outward fortification: within which the inner principle called ‘purusha’ lives at peace, undisturbed by the conflicts and destructions of the outside world.

Moreover, this inner principle of ‘human-ness’ is not conceived to live only in some special bodies that we call ‘human’, to the exclusion of other bodies in the universe. Instead, all bodies and the entire universe are conceived to somehow express the same living principle which human beings find within themselves. Thus conceived, this same inner principle of ‘human-ness’ is to be found everywhere: expressed in all matter and all personality, throughout the universe.

Such a conception of all-embracing, all-pervading ‘human-ness’ is described in the following translation and retelling from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 2.5 (of which the above quotation is a part).

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 65-66)

2.5.1

This earth is  
the honey of all beings.

All creatures feed on fruit of earth;  
and earth, in turn, is fed by them.

To this earth,  
all beings are honey.

This which is  
in this earth  
is radiant, deathless  
'human-ness'.

Both in earth and in each person,  
that which shines and never dies  
is our common 'human-ness'.

And this which is  
the spiritual [principle]  
associated with the body  
is radiant, deathless  
'human-ness'.

This is just that  
which is this self.

This is the self each person is.

This is deathless.  
This is complete reality.  
This is all.

It is that same reality  
which always lives, unchanged, complete,  
in every partial-seeming thing.

2.5.15

That, in truth,  
is this self:  
the Lord of all beings,  
the King of all beings.

This self is lord and king of all.

Just as all the spokes  
of a chariot[-wheel]  
are fixed together  
at the hub and rim;

As in a wheel, all spokes are joined  
together at the hub and rim;  
so too, all things, all gods, all worlds,  
all lives, all separate-seeming selves  
are joined together in the self.

so too all beings,  
all gods, all worlds,  
all living energies

and all these selves  
are fixed together  
in the self.

*From 2.5.18*

... That, in truth,  
is this 'human-ness'  
in all our bodies:  
abiding [here] at rest  
within the body.

This, which lives in all our bodies,  
is our common 'human-ness'.

There is nothing  
uncontained by it;  
nothing that is  
not pervaded by it.

Outside this, there's no existence.  
Nothing is, apart from this.

*From 2.5.19*

... 'It has become  
the likeness of  
form after form.

It is this that takes the likeness  
of each form that is perceived.

'That is its form, for  
observation round about.

'Through the powers  
of illusion, Indra  
[chieftain of the gods]  
is arisen, many-formed;

From appearance thus created  
come the many forms of God,  
harnessing those many  
different faculties of sense and action  
which create our seeming world.

'for yoked of him  
are [many] horses:  
ten [of them],  
hundreds [of them].'

This, in truth,  
is the horses.

All our senses, all our bodies,  
all the many, countless things  
they see and touch, are nothing but  
this one same self in each of us.

This, in truth, is the ten;  
is the thousands;  
many and unlimited.

That is this  
complete reality:

It is that all-containing truth  
with nothing else beside itself,

with nothing that  
can come before  
or after it;

with no outside  
and no inside.

This self is all reality,  
experiencing everything.

Thus is the teaching.

with nothing else before itself,  
with nothing else that follows on,  
with no outside and no inside.

Thus it is taught: *'This self is in  
itself complete. It knows all things,  
and all it knows is but itself.'*

### **Universal and individual**

The philosophical concept of 'purusha', as 'human-ness', can be approached in two, complementary ways.

- On the one hand, it may be approached universally: as a universal living principle that is found expressed in all personalities, in all minds and in all bodies, and thus in the universe as a whole.
- On the other hand, it may be approached individually: as the individual living principle that is found expressed in each particular personality, in each particular mind and in each particular body in the universe.

These two approaches are described in the following translation and retelling from the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, chapter 3. This chapter describes the part-mystical, part-philosophical conception of 'virāt purusha'; where God is conceived as a universal personality: whose body is the totality of all particular bodies in the world, whose mind is the sum total of all particular minds, and whose self is the complete reality that underlies all physical and mental phenomena throughout the universe.

Over and over again (in 3.2,7,11,13,18,20 and 21), the complete reality of the universal self is explicitly identified with the inner principle of self within each particular individual.

In the following translation, the word 'purusha' is translated as 'the principle of personality'.

**Translation** (from the  
Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 236-241)

*From 3.1*

It is the one

God is conceived to hold the web

with the net, ruling with  
its sovereign powers,

ruling all the world  
with its powers;

this which alone is one:  
in arising  
and in happening....

of circumstance, thus ruling all  
the world, with powers over everything.

This universal principle,  
conceived as 'God', is one alone:  
in all that is created and  
in all that happens in the world.

*From 3.2*

... Not as second  
do they stand....

It stands facing people  
within themselves....

It has no second, as it stands  
here facing everyone within.

*From 3.7*

Beyond that  
is the absolute,  
the great beyond.

[Here] individually  
in every body,  
it is hidden in all beings,  
the one [reality]  
containing all the world....

It is complete reality,  
unlimited and ultimate.

Found present individually  
within each body, it is known  
implicitly in everything.

And yet it is one single unity,  
containing all the world.

*From 3.8*

I know this great  
principle of personality:  
pictured as the sun,  
beyond obscurity....

This all-containing principle  
is consciousness, known pictured as  
the self-illuminating sun,  
beyond all dark obscurity.

3.9

It's that  
beyond which  
there is nothing else,

Beyond it, there is nothing else.

than which  
there's nothing smaller,  
nothing greater.

There's nothing smaller, nothing greater.  
Size does not apply to it,  
nor any kind of quality.

Like a tree,  
it stands as one,  
unmoving,  
in the place of light.

The manifested universe  
is like a tree which seems to grow  
a multiplicity of swaying  
branches, rustling leaves and flowering  
blossoms seen by outward sight.

But like a tree, examined at  
the trunk where it supports itself,  
the many-seeming world turns out  
to be a single unity,  
unmoving in the changeless ground.

This changeless ground is consciousness,  
where the entire seeming tree  
of universal happening  
dissolves in unconditioned light.

By that principle  
of personality,  
all this [entire universe]  
is filled.

All things, in truth, are only light  
pervading all experience  
of the entire universe.

### *3.10*

That which is  
above this [world]  
has no form, and is  
unaffected by all ill.

Transcending all appearances  
perceived by body, sense and mind,  
this principle of consciousness  
is unattached to any form  
and unaffected by all ill.

They who know this  
become deathless.  
But others go  
to pain and misery.

Whoever knows it does not die.  
All others lead a dying life  
that leads to pain and misery.

### *From 3.11*

Its are all faces,  
heads, necks.

All faces, heads and bodies are  
mere instruments of consciousness,

Its home is deep within  
each being's heart.

found here in every person's heart.

It is the all-pervading,  
blessed Lord....

It is the inner principle  
of spirit that pervades the world;  
and thus, it's worshipped as 'the Lord'.

*3.12*

The great Lord is truly this  
principle of personality:

It is the base of changeless light  
on which is founded order, justice,  
goodness, harmony, and guidance  
towards purity and truth.

setting goodness and  
ordered harmony  
in motion;

and ruling the attainment  
of true purity,  
as changeless light.

*From 3.13*

Measured by thumb,  
this principle  
is inner self:

Seen in each individual's own  
experience, this principle  
of consciousness is inner self:

living always  
in the heart  
of those that  
have been born;

the living centre of each  
individual personality.

It's always present, living here  
within each person's mind and heart;

conceived through heart,  
through thought,  
through mind....

and it is found by turning thought  
to question back towards its source:  
back from the world, through mind and heart,  
towards the source where thoughts arise.

*3.14*

This [one] principle  
has a thousand heads,  
a thousand eyes,  
a thousand feet.

As feelings, thoughts, perceptions change,  
pure consciousness continues on.

It is the underlying ground  
that's common to each one of them,  
beneath their many differences  
of quality and name and form.

And it's the same for everyone,  
the common ground that stays the same  
beneath all change and difference.

Because it underlies all differences  
of quality and name and form,  
there's nothing to distinguish it  
from one experience to the next  
or from one person to the next.

It is the common ground on which  
we understand each other's acts;  
as we communicate across  
our physical and mental  
differences, of body and of mind.

All hearts and minds and bodies, and  
all feelings, thoughts, perceptions, acts,  
express this common consciousness.

Encompassing the earth  
on every side,  
it stands beyond,  
ten fingers breadth  
beyond.

All of them are its instruments,  
expressing it and thereby acting  
for its sake; while it remains  
beyond them all, the common background  
of the many-seeming world.

### 3.15

This principle alone  
is all this [world]:

what has been and  
what is to be.

All that is known, throughout the world,  
is only known in consciousness.

Thus, all that's known must be contained  
entirely in consciousness;  
and nothing really is outside.

Pure consciousness is all there is.

It's all the world's reality:  
including all that's come to be  
and everything that's yet to be.

It is at once  
the Lord of deathlessness  
and what grows  
by food consumed.

It is at once the changeless light  
that guides us on to deathlessness,  
and the reality of world  
where everything that's born and grows

is fed by death of other things.

3.16

Its hands and feet  
are everywhere;

eyes, head and face  
are everywhere;

its ears  
are everywhere.

Encompassing everything  
in the [entire] world,  
it stands.

Whatever's known expresses it,  
no matter where or when perceived.

All happenings are its faculties:  
expressing it and thereby acting  
for its sake; while it remains  
beyond them all, the changeless background  
of all changing happenings.

3.17

Lighting all  
qualities perceived  
through any faculty,

it has itself  
no faculties  
that act in any way.

It's chief and Lord,  
the great refuge  
of all.

It lights all of the qualities  
that every faculty perceives:

but it is not itself attached  
to any faculty at all;  
for in itself it does not act.

All faculties and all their acts  
depend on it to be perceived,  
to focus and co-ordinate;

but it does not depend on them.

It is their central principle:  
their origin and common ground,  
their guiding light and stable base  
enabling ordered harmony,  
their final goal and place of rest.

3.18

The swan[-like spirit],  
here embodied  
in the stronghold  
of nine gates,  
is at play outside:

The self that's found embodied here,  
within each person, is expressed  
outside as well, in nature's play  
of circumstance and happening.

as the source  
of all desire,

Remaining in itself unmoved,  
it is the inner principle  
from which all motivation comes.

controlling the  
entire world  
of fixed and  
moving things.

All movements and all standing still,  
no matter where or when perceived,  
are understood expressing it;  
reflecting back to self within.

### 3.19

With neither feet  
nor hands,  
yet moving fast and  
grasping [everything];

It has no feet, yet it keeps up  
with all that moves. It has no hands,  
yet it grasps all experience.

it sees without eyes,  
hears without ears.

It's that which sees and hears; without  
the faculties of seeing sights  
and hearing sounds, of objects in  
some alien world outside itself.

What's to be known,  
it knows;

It's that which knows whatever's known.

but there is no knower  
[other than itself]  
that knows of it.

But it is not an object known  
by anyone who knows of it  
through faculties and instruments  
that act towards a world outside.

It is called  
'the great, primeval  
purusha [the principle  
of personality]'.  
'

Conceived as the 'I'-principle,  
it's what each person really is:  
pure, unconditioned consciousness,  
known prior to all attributes  
superimposed by partial sight.

### 3.20

Subtler than subtle,  
greater than great,  
is the self:

Far subtler than all subtlety,  
far greater than all magnitude  
that senses see or mind conceives,  
the self is found established here  
in every living creature's heart.

set down [here]  
in the living creature's  
cave [of heart].

Freed from grief and misery by the Ordainer's grace, one sees that [self],  unmixed with purpose and desire,  as the Lord in all his majesty.	Set free from grief and misery by gift of grace transcending little ego's petty purposes, one knows the self desireless:    as that which stands beyond all acts of power and greatness in the world.
--	---

3.21

This unaging, ageless self of all is what I know,  [seen] going everywhere through its pervading sovereignty.  Those who discuss reality speak of it as ending birth.  They speak of it as timeless and continual.	This same unaging, ageless self is all that's ever truly known:  perceived extending everywhere through its pervading sovereignty.  It's spoken of as ending birth; for where it's known all time dissolves in deathless continuity.
--	--

**Inner light**

What is the essential principle of personality that is called 'purusha'?

In the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad, 5.6.1, it is identified as 'bhāh satyas tasminn antar-hridaye' or 'the true light within the heart'.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 97)

5.6.1

This purusha, associated with the mind, is the true light within the heart,	The essence of this personality that seems to rise from mind is nothing else but light itself, found here within each person's heart;
--	--

like a grain  
of rice or barley.

just as the essence of a plant  
that seems to rise and grow from seed  
is nothing else but life itself,  
somehow contained within each seed.

It is the Lord of all,  
the ruler of all:  
governing all this,  
all this whatsoever.

This inner principle of light  
guides all experience, and hence governs  
everything that we perceive,  
beneath whatever seems to be.

### **Underlying consciousness**

In the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 5.8-15, 'purusha' is further identified as underlying consciousness, continuing through the changes and variations of world and personality.

**Translation** (from the  
Kaṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 30-33)

5.8

This, which is awake  
in those that sleep,  
is purusha  
[the inner principle],

What is the individual  
life principle that carries on  
behind the changing mask of  
seeming personality? It is  
just this: which always is awake,  
while other things dissolve in sleep.

producing forth  
desire on desire.

From it arises each desire  
that seeks some narrow, passing goal,  
and thus clouds personality  
with incompleteness seeking change.

It alone  
is clear and stainless.

But in itself it's always clear;  
for it is all reality:  
which stays the same, undimmed, unchanged,  
beneath all mere appearances.

It alone  
is all reality.

It alone  
may be called 'deathless'.

It's that alone which does not die.

In it,  
all worlds are based.

In it, all seeming worlds are based.  
Apart from it, there's nothing else.

Nothing at all  
transcends it.

This is just that.

*5.9-10*

Just as one fire,  
permeating the universe,  
has become the likeness  
of form after form;

so too, one self  
within all beings  
has the likeness  
of form after form,  
and is outside as well.

Just as one air,  
permeating the universe,  
has become the likeness  
of form after form;

so too, one self  
within all beings  
has the likeness  
of form after form,  
and is outside as well.

Just as one common principle  
of underlying energy  
is there throughout the universe,  
appearing in the different forms  
that are so differently perceived  
in different objects and events;

so too, one common principle  
of underlying consciousness  
is here throughout experience,  
appearing in the different forms  
that are so differently perceived  
in different personalities.

This underlying consciousness,  
which different people share alike  
beneath all their conditionings,  
is every person's real self.

It's here in body, sense and mind  
and yet it is beyond them all.

*5.11*

Just as the sun,  
the whole world's sight,  
is not affected  
by outside,  
defective sights;

so too, the one  
self in all beings  
is not affected  
by world's misery.

Just as the sun lights what we see,  
quite unaffected by the failings  
of a person's sense of sight;

so too, the self lights all experience,  
unaffected by the failings  
of perception, thought and feeling  
in our senses and our minds.

It is outside.

### 5.12

It is the one  
controller,  
the self within  
all beings;

In course of time, as different actions,  
thoughts and feelings come and go,  
they are co-ordinated by  
this underlying consciousness  
of self, which is their common base  
beneath their seeming differences.

This is the common basis where  
all different persons, and the  
various objects that they see, relate.

It is from here that different things  
and different persons are seen  
functioning together, in an  
ordered and intelligible world.

which makes  
the one seed  
manifold.

And it is only this, one self  
of underlying consciousness,  
whose essence is made manifest  
in all the many forms of world.

The steadfast see it  
standing in itself.

*By turning inwards, this one truth  
is seen, already standing here:  
as one's own self. Just this, and  
only this, brings lasting happiness.*

To them,  
as not to others,  
lasting happiness  
[is found].

### 5.13

It is the continuity  
of changing things;  
the consciousness  
of conscious things;  
the one among the many;  
that which fulfils desires.

It is the continuity  
that is implied by changing things;  
the changeless base of consciousness  
implied by changing mental states;  
the changeless, partless unity  
which all diversity implies,  
and which alone fulfils desire.

The steadfast see it  
standing in itself.

To them,  
as not to others,  
lasting peace  
[is found].

*By turning inwards, this one truth  
is seen, already standing here:  
as one's own self. Just this, and  
nothing else but this, brings lasting peace.*

5.14

It is conceived as  
'that is this';

It is conceived as 'that out there':  
as all the world's reality  
beneath all mere appearances.

And it's conceived as 'this in here':  
as ever-present consciousness,  
by which appearances are known.

But both of these, 'this' consciousness  
and 'that' reality, are always  
present here together: at all times,  
in everyone's experience.

Thus being always here together,  
they can never be distinguished.  
Though we call them by two names,  
they are not two, but only one.

the undefinable,  
supreme happiness.

This final non-duality,  
of knowing self and all that's known,  
is unconditioned happiness;  
for here completeness has been found.

How then  
may I know that,  
whether it  
shines [directly]

How then can it be truly known,  
as it shines out from self within  
and is reflected back from world?

or shines back  
[reflected]?

5.15

There the sun

It does not shine by light of sun

does not shine,  
nor moon and stars;

or moon or stars or burning fire.  
It shines alone, by its own light.

nor do these  
lightning flashes shine;  
much less this fire.

It alone shining,  
everything  
shines after it.

Without it, nothing else can shine;  
for it lights all appearances:  
which shine as its reflected light.

By its light,  
everything here  
shines back.

Thus all the world is nothing else  
but the reflected light of self.

As self illuminates the world,  
it just illuminates itself.

Through all the world's appearances,  
this self-illuminating light  
remains always unchanged, unmixed  
with anything beside itself.

### **The unborn source**

In various accounts of creation in the Vedas and the Upanishads, 'purusha' is described as the unborn source and the underlying basis of the apparent universe. These accounts contain a curious mixture of myth and philosophy, which can make them seem paradoxical and self-contradictory.

- On the one hand, 'purusha' is mythically described as having a personal form: with bodily features such as a head and eyes, and with mental features like thought and will.
- On the other hand, this same 'purusha' is philosophically described as unchanging and impersonal: without form or faculties or mind.

These contradictions may be seen in the following translation of the Muṇḍaka Upanishad, 2.1 (specifically in 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). In the retelling reproduced alongside the translation, an attempt is made to avoid some of the apparent contradiction, by a philosophical interpretation of the mythical metaphor. In particular, 'purusha' is interpreted as an impersonal principle of unchanging, invariant consciousness: which underlies the changes and variations of personality.

**Translation** (from the  
Muṇḍaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 183-185)

2.1.1

‘That is this truth.

‘As from a blazing fire,  
thousands of sparks  
issue forth,  
similarly formed;

‘so too, dear friend,  
from that which  
does not change,

‘manifold beings  
are born forth  
and go back there again.

‘As sparks come forth from blazing fire;  
so too our many seeming lives  
arise from one same consciousness,  
shine out as only consciousness,  
and as they seem to fade away  
leave nothing else but consciousness.

2.1.2

‘For purusha is divine  
[transcendent and  
self-luminous],

‘and has no bodied form.

‘It is outside and inside,  
the unborn [principle]  
of radiant purity:

‘unmixed with mind,  
unmixed with breath  
and vital faculties.

‘It transcends  
transcendent  
changelessness.

‘This principle of unmixed light  
shines out unchanged from deep within  
each changing form of bodied life,

gives life to every breath we take,  
and lights the seeming world outside.

‘It has itself no bodied form.  
It has no birth. It has no breath.  
It has no mind, nor faculties.

‘It is beyond all we conceive  
as here or there, or anywhere.

2.1.3

‘From it is born:

‘life-breath and mind  
and all sense-faculties;

‘From it is born all life, all mind,  
all feeling, thought, perception, sense,  
all principles, all qualities,  
all meanings, all the changing forms

'the ether, air, light,  
water, and the  
all-supporting earth.

and all the many varied things  
of which the universe seems made.

#### 2.1.4-5

'Fire is its head;  
its eyes  
the moon and sun;  
the directions are its ears.

'The world is known by consciousness;  
the world is seen by consciousness;  
all meanings are but consciousness;  
all qualities are consciousness;

'Its speech is  
the revealed Vedas;  
the air, its living breath.

'and everything that feelings feel,  
or thoughts conceive, or senses see,  
is nothing else but consciousness.

'Its heart is all  
the universe.  
From its feet,  
[it is] the earth.

'The world stands but in consciousness,  
which is each person's real self.

'For, of all beings,  
it is the self within.

'From it [comes] fire  
whose fuel is the sun.

'The blazing sun is consciousness;  
the moon's cool light is consciousness;  
dark clouds and rain are consciousness;  
the solid earth and all the crops  
and food it bears are consciousness.

'From the moon [come]  
rain, plants on earth.

'The male sheds seed  
in the female.

'And all the many, varied forms  
of life we creatures seem to lead,  
here born and fed upon the earth,  
are only forms of consciousness.

'From purusha,  
many offspring  
are originated.

#### 2.1.6-8

'From it [come]  
hymns and chants  
and ritual verses,  
consecrations, sacrifices,  
'and all ceremonies,  
sacrificial gifts,

'From consciousness comes all we say,  
all that we do, all we express,  
all speech, all poetry, all song,  
'all acts, intentions, purposes,  
all we perceive or think or feel,

the calendar,  
the sacrificer,

all energy, vitality,  
all justice, truth and happiness.

‘and the worlds  
where the moon  
or where the sun  
illuminates and clarifies.

‘And from it,  
in many ways,

‘the gods are  
brought forth;

‘the accomplished  
celestials;

‘humans, beasts and birds;

‘the forward and  
reverse life-breaths;

‘rice and barley;

‘intent, faith, truth,  
chastity and law.

‘The seven vital breaths  
come forth from it;  
the seven flames, the fuel,  
the seven offerings;

‘these seven worlds  
where move  
the living energies  
laid down [here]  
in the cave [of the heart],  
seven by seven.

### 2.1.9

‘From it, all oceans  
and all mountains;

‘from it flow  
rivers of all forms.

‘Upon this base of consciousness,  
great-seeming mountains are perceived,  
and different rivers seem to flow  
through different regions of the earth  
to join the oceans’ vast expanse.

‘And from it, all plants  
and the essential flavour  
by which it stands  
[associated] with  
the elements of world.

‘For it is  
the self within.

‘In consciousness all forms arise:  
all object-forms, all forms of life,  
all solid things, all changing flow,  
all gross and subtle elements  
of body and of mind in which  
we seem to find our inner selves.

### 2.1.10

‘Purusha alone is  
the entire universe,  
action, intent,  
complete reality,  
the deathless ultimate.

‘One who knows this,  
that’s seated in  
the cave [of heart],

‘cuts through the knot  
of ignorance,  
here [in this life],  
dear friend....’

‘This principle of consciousness,  
this single principle alone  
is all there is: all of the world  
our outward senses seem to see,

‘all action in this outside world,  
all purpose that may be expressed,  
all meaning that our thoughts conceive,  
all value that emotion feels.

‘This deathless, final principle  
of consciousness is here and now  
within each heart: for each of us,  
the centre of experience.

‘Whoever realizes it  
undoes all seeming ignorance....’

## **The unmoved mover**

In the Kena Upanishad, chapter 1, though the word ‘purusha’ is not explicitly used, there is an interesting description which throws some light on the concept of ‘purusha’: as an unchanging, impersonal principle that is expressed in all movement and all personality.

As shown in the following translation and retelling, there is something of a correspondence here with the Aristotelian concept of the ‘unmoved mover’. This concept is usually taken to be a way of describing ‘God’: as the underlying principle of the entire universe. But Aristotle also used this same concept to describe the ‘soul’: as the underlying principle of each individual personality. Such a complementarity of universal and individual interpretations applies to the Kena Upanishad as well.

**Translation** (from the  
Kena Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 130-132)

*1.1*

By what motivated  
does the mind  
fly motivated forth?

What motivates mind's changing show  
of seeming objects, thoughts, desires?

What makes the mind go out to things  
that seem to be outside itself?

What sends the mind, in soaring flight,  
to search for freedom, happiness?

From what does mind come down again,  
to earth: where joy seems always bound  
to pettiness and suffering?

By what enjoined  
does the primal  
breath of life  
go forth?

What joins together various acts –  
of body, sense and mind – to make  
each person's individual life?

By what motivated  
do they speak  
this speech?

From what does meaning come: into  
the things we do, the words we speak,  
the gestures that our bodies make?

Sight, hearing:  
what intelligence  
enjoins them?

What common light co-ordinates  
our differing perceptions  
into fuller knowledge of the world?

*1.2*

It's that which is:  
the hearing [principle]  
of hearing,  
the thinking [principle]  
of thought,  
the very speaking  
[principle] of speech,  
the essential living  
[principle] of life,

One common, inner principle  
of consciousness is found in life,  
in mind and senses, words and acts.

the seeing [principle]  
of sight.

Becoming free,  
the steadfast  
leave the world behind  
and come to deathlessness.

Those who are brave break free from world's  
appearances, and realize  
that self is unmixed consciousness:  
beyond all seeming change and death.

### *1.3*

There, seeing does not go;  
nor does speech,  
nor mind.

This truth cannot be reached by mind  
or senses, nor described by speech.

We do not know,  
we don't discern,  
how it could be taught.

Nor can such faculties explain  
the way in which it may be taught.

### *1.4*

It is quite other  
than the known;  
and further, it's  
beyond the unknown.

In truth, the self, as consciousness,  
is not an object that is known;  
nor is it anything unknown.

This we have heard  
from the ancients,  
who have thus  
explained it for us.

Its knowledge comes from ancient times.  
Its knowledge comes before all time;  
for it must first be known before  
the very thought of time can rise.

### *From 1.5*

It is not that  
which rises up  
from words and speech.

It isn't something conjured up  
by words and thoughts; instead, it is  
the ever-present, knowing ground:

It's that from which  
words and speech arise....

from which all thoughts and words arise,  
on which all thoughts and words depend,  
to which all thoughts and words return.

### *From 1.6*

It's that which is  
not thought by mind;

It isn't something thought by mind;  
instead, it is the principle

[but] that by which  
the mind is thought,  
they say....

of consciousness that lights the mind:  
by which all mind and thoughts are known.

*From 1.7-8*

It's that which is  
not seen by sight;  
[but] that by which  
sight is seen....

It isn't something seen by sight,  
or heard by listening; instead,  
it is the knowing principle  
that lights all sight and sound and sense.

It's that which is  
not heard by hearing;  
[but] that by which  
hearing is heard....

*1.9*

It's that which is  
not breathed by breath  
or lived by life;  
[but] that by which  
breath is breathed  
and life is lived.

It isn't something breathed by breath  
or lived by life; instead, it is  
the living principle by which  
all breath and life are vitalized.

Just that  
is the reality  
which you must know;  
not this  
[world of objects]  
to which this  
[personality]  
pays heed.

This knowing principle of life  
is not a partial object, not  
some little part of world, to which  
our minds and senses can attend.

Instead, it is the common ground  
of all appearances that show  
some part of world, perceived  
by partial body, sense and mind.

This common ground is all there is.  
It is complete reality,  
which each appearance shows in part.

It's known in full as knowing self:  
as pure, unchanging consciousness  
beneath all personality.

**One's own self**

In the following translation and retelling from the Katha Upanishad, 6.17, the individual approach is described: as a focusing of attention inward, towards the essential core of pure, unconditioned self within each personality. This inner principle is to be found most directly by turning attention back into one's own experience: thus seeking out the true essence of one's own self, unobscured by the outward mask of ego's changing attributes.

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 40)

6.17

Measured by thumb,  
purusha [the principle  
of personality]  
is inmost self:

The real self, the inmost  
principle of personality,  
is always present here at heart  
in everyone's experience.

living always  
in the heart  
of those that  
have been born.

With steadfast courage,  
one should choose  
that out, from one's  
own personality;

Each petty ego lives in fear  
for its own false security  
that clings to passing attributes  
of changing personality.

[just as the inner]  
arrow-shaft  
[is drawn out]  
from [a reed of]  
munja grass.

But, putting ego's fears aside  
with steadfast courage, one may choose  
from one's own personality  
that inner, unconditioned core  
which does not fear or change or die  
and is one's true security.

That one should know,  
as deathless purity.

That one should know,  
as deathless purity.

## The 'I'-principle

How can one find the essential, impersonal principle of self within one's own personality?

In the Prashna Upanishad, 4.9-10, a progressive enquiry is suggested: from outward faculties of sense, through inward faculties of thought and discernment, towards the inmost ground of unconditioned, changeless consciousness that underlies all our conditioned and changing faculties.

It is this unconditioned ground that the word 'purusha' finally indicates, as the true principle which each person calls 'I'.

**Translation** (from the Prashna Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 171)

### 4.9

For this is the see-er,  
the toucher, the hearer,  
the smeller, the taster,

It is the inner principle  
of all our different faculties.

It lights all seeing from within.  
It's that which is aware in touch.  
From it, all meaning is expressed;  
it shows all meaning heard in sound.  
And it discerns all taste and smell.

the minder,  
the thinker,  
the creator,  
the knowing self,

It is the thinking principle,  
the knowing subject of the mind:  
which carries on through passing states,  
as thoughts and feelings come and go.

purusha [the principle  
of personality].

It is the common principle  
within a person's changing acts.

It is established  
in the ultimate,  
unchanging self.

And thus, for everyone, it is  
the changeless self that carries on  
through all the different acts it knows.

It's for this self that acts are done.

This principle of knowing self  
is what each person really is.

It's that which everyone calls 'I'.

*From 4.10*

One who truly  
comes to know  
that which is imageless,  
bodiless, uncoloured,  
changeless clarity;

[such a one] attains  
to this same  
changeless ultimate.

[Such a] one,  
dear friend,  
then knowing all,  
becomes all....

It has no image in itself.  
Nor has it any kind of body,  
nor conditioned qualities.

As pure, unchanging consciousness,  
it is the unconditioned ground  
of all conditioned faculties  
and all the world that they perceive.

Whoever comes to know this self  
finds all the world's reality  
and realizes everything.

# Self

## Turning back in

Quite plainly and simply, the Sanskrit word 'ātman' is equivalent to the English word 'self'. This is so both in classical Sanskrit and in the modern Indian languages that derive from Sanskrit. And further, it is so not only in the ordinary, unquestioning usage of everyday life, but also in the reflective usage of philosophical enquiry, where reason turns back to question the very assumptions from which it proceeds.

One such habitual assumption is that a person's self consists of a body, a set of senses and a mind, which are part of a larger world outside. But then, if self is just an object in the world, how can the world be known by it? Or, if self is not just an object, then what else can it be? And how can it be known?

The word 'ātman' is derived from the root 'an', meaning 'to breathe' or 'to live'. In the Rig Veda, it has an early form 'tman', meaning 'the vital breath'. In accordance with this derivation and early usage, the word 'ātman' describes the self as an inner, spiritual principle of life: quite distinct from the outward personality that is seen to act in the external world.

In the Kāṭha Upanishad, 4.1, the true nature of the self is described as 'pratyag-ātman': which means literally 'the turned-back self' or, to elaborate a little, 'the self, returned to self [to its own true reality]'.

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 25)

### 4.1

The self-becoming  
excavated  
outward-going  
apertures [of sense].

It seems our senses are created  
looking out: from self within  
towards a world that's known outside.

Thus one sees outwards,  
not towards  
the self within.

And so, it seems we only see  
external objects in the world,  
as they appear to outward sense.

At first, it seems there is no way

<p>But one brave person, seeking deathlessness, turned sight back in upon itself; and saw the self, returned to self [to its own true reality].</p>	<p>to see the self that knows within, the self from which all seeing comes.</p> <p>But one brave person, seeking deathlessness, turned sight back in, towards the inner source from which sight comes; and thus the self was truly seen: as unconditioned consciousness, from which all seeming things arise.</p>
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### Unbodied light

What is there to be found by turning back within?

In the following story from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 8.7-12, a progressive enquiry is described, through the three states of waking, dream and sleep. At each stage, persistent questioning shows up the inadequacy of previous understanding; until the nature of the self is shown at last to be pure consciousness: unconditioned by the gross external body that appears in the waking state, or by the subtle body of imagination and feeling that appears in dream, or even by the absence of body that appears in the seeming nothingness of deep sleep.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 121-129)

#### 8.7.1

‘That which is self  
dispels [all] ill;  
‘is untouched  
by age, decay  
and death and grief;  
‘does not hunger,  
does not thirst.

‘The real self, in each of us,  
is stainless, undecaying,  
free from hunger, free from thirst,  
untroubled in the midst of grief.

‘It’s that for which  
all thought and all desire  
is only truth.

‘It has no thought nor wish, but truth.  
This is the self we cannot help but seek,  
the truth we seek to understand.

‘It’s that which is  
to be sought out;  
that which we  
must seek to know.

‘Whoever finds  
and knows that self  
attains all worlds  
and all desires.’

Thus said Prajāpati  
[Lord of created things].

‘Whoever sees and knows this self  
gains all the world, and finds  
the goal of all desires.’

These words, the gods and demons heard,  
were said by Lord Prajāpati,  
the Lord of all created things.

### 8.7.2

That, both the gods  
and demons heard.

They said: ‘Well,  
let us seek that self:  
that self which seeking  
one attains all worlds  
and all desires.’

Of the gods, Indra  
himself went forth;  
of the demons, Virocana.

The two came  
independently,  
with sacrificial fuel  
in their hands, into  
the presence of Prajāpati.

To seek this self that gains the world  
and finds the goal of all desire,  
the gods and demons sent their chiefs  
to question him that made the world.

Thus Indra, chief among the gods,  
and demon-king Virocana  
left home and came, in search of truth,  
before their Lord Prajāpati.

Each came with fuel grasped in hand,  
to show their wish that ignorance  
should burn in sacrificial flame.

### 8.7.3

Thirty-two years  
they lived the chaste  
and humble life  
of student discipline.

They put aside their finery,  
their shining ornaments and crowns,  
their life of outward wealth and power.

Thirty-two years they lived instead  
the humble life of supplicants,  
who would prepare themselves to learn.

Prajāpati said to them:  
‘Seeking what, have you  
been living [here]?’

‘‘That which is self  
dispels [all] ill;

‘‘is untouched  
by age, decay  
and death and grief;

‘‘does not hunger,  
does not thirst.

‘‘It’s that for which  
all thought and all desire  
is only truth.

‘‘It’s that which is  
to be sought out;  
that which we  
must seek to know.

‘‘Whoever finds  
and knows that self  
attains all worlds  
and all desires.’’

‘Sir, these words are  
made known as yours.

‘We live [here]  
seeking that.’

#### *8.7.4 and 8.8.1*

Prajāpati spoke to them.

‘This that is seen in sight  
is purusha [the knowing  
principle of personality].

‘This is the self’, he said.

‘It does not die;  
nor has it fear.

It is the absolute.’

Until at last Prajāpati  
asked: ‘What is it you wish to know?’

They said: ‘We’ve heard that you describe  
a stainless, undecaying self  
by which desires are attained.  
This self is what we wish to find.’

‘Then what you seek is close at hand,’  
was the reply. ‘For self is seen  
where sight looks back into itself.  
It is the changeless absolute,  
where death and fear do not arise.’

‘Then, Sir, what is it that’s perceived in water, or in a mirror?’

‘Just this itself is perceived within all these’, he said.

‘Look at [your] self in a pan of water and then tell me what it is of self that you don’t know.’

They looked into a pan of water.

Then, Prajāpati said to them:

‘What do you see?’

They said: ‘Sir, we see it all: the self that’s pictured [here], down to the hairs and fingernails.’

### 8.8.2-3

Next, Prajāpati said to them: ‘Becoming well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed,

‘[then] look into the pan of water.’

Becoming well-adorned, well-dressed, well-groomed, they made to look into the pan of water.

‘But Sir,’ they asked, ‘what is it that a person sees reflected in the stillness of a shining pool or in a mirror’s clarity?’

‘See for yourselves,’ was the reply.

‘One same reality is seen in everything. Go look into a pool of water, and then say what you may find reflected there.’

Thus, Indra and Virocana went to a nearby pool and looked and said: ‘We see of course ourselves, down to our hair and fingernails.’

Prajāpati then said to them:

‘Now dress in all your finery, put on your crowns and ornaments; then look again into the pool and say what is reflected there.’

They dressed and looked and said with pride:

‘We see ourselves as we should be, dressed as befits our kingly state.’

Prajāpati now  
asked them:

‘What do you see?’

They said: ‘Sir, just as  
we are well-adorned,  
well-dressed,  
well-groomed;

‘so too, these [reflections],  
Sir, are well-adorned,  
well-dressed,  
well-groomed.’

‘This is the self,’ he said.  
‘It does not die,  
nor has it fear.  
It is the absolute.’

They went away,  
content at heart.

Prajāpati’s reply was brief:

‘Whatever you may think you see,  
all that you see is only self.  
It is complete reality,  
where death and fear do not arise.’

Then satisfaction seemed to dawn  
on Indra and Virocana.  
It seemed that there was nothing left  
to learn; and so they took their leave  
and made their way towards their homes.

#### 8.8.4

Looking after them,  
Prajāpati said:

‘They go away  
not having reached  
or understood the self.

‘Whoever holds  
this doctrine, be they  
gods or demons,  
shall be overcome.’

Quite satisfied at heart,  
Virocana went  
to the demons; and

But, as they left, Prajāpati  
looked sadly after them and thought:

‘They haven’t understood at all.  
Their faith clings on to false beliefs.  
Whoever lives by such belief  
stays caught in futile misery.’

Virocana, triumphantly,  
went back into his demon world,  
where he proclaimed: ‘Our selves come first!’

to them proclaimed  
this doctrine:

‘Here self alone  
is to be magnified;  
[and] self is to be served.

‘Here magnifying  
self alone  
and serving self,

‘one attains both worlds:  
this world and  
that beyond.’

### 8.9.1

But Indra, before he had  
quite reached the gods,  
saw this anxiety:

‘Just as this [bodily self]  
becomes well-adorned  
in the well-adorned body,

‘[becomes] well-dressed  
in the well-dressed [body],

‘[becomes] well-groomed  
in the well-groomed  
[body];

‘so too, it becomes

‘blind in the [body  
that is] blind,

‘lame in the [body  
that is] lame,

‘crippled in the [body  
that is] crippled.

‘And, consequent upon  
the destruction  
of the body,  
it is destroyed.

‘Let us be strong, increase our power,  
and take by force what we desire.

Let’s feed and clothe and arm ourselves,  
to satisfy our needs and build  
our strength to do just as we please.

‘For it befits our demon state  
that world be bent to serve our needs  
and wishes, as embodied selves.’

But Indra, on his way back home,  
was troubled by a nagging doubt:

‘If self is body, it enjoys  
good fortune as the body does.

‘When body is well-dressed ... so too  
is self; when body gains in wealth  
and power and grace ... so too does self.

‘But, when the body’s eyes are dimmed,  
when body’s wealth and power fade,  
when grace departs; then it would seem ...

‘that self, like body, must decay,  
that self, like body, suffers loss  
of sight and wealth and power and grace.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

‘I *can't* be satisfied with this.’

8.9.2-3

Fuel in hand,  
he came back again.

Thus Indra turned and went again  
before his Lord Prajāpati,  
again with fuel grasped in hand  
to show his unburned ignorance.

Prajāpati said to him:

‘Maghavan, since you  
went off, content at heart,  
together with Virocana,  
seeking what  
have you returned?’

‘What brings you back? You seemed so pleased  
when, just a little while ago,  
you left with King Virocana.’

[Indra] said:

‘Just as this [bodily self]  
becomes well-adorned  
in the well-adorned body,

Indra explained his troubled doubt,  
and lived for thirty-two more years  
a student’s dedicated life;

‘[becomes] well-dressed  
in the well-dressed [body],

‘[becomes] well-groomed  
in the well-groomed  
[body];

‘so too, it becomes

‘blind in the [body  
that is] blind,

‘lame in the [body  
that is] lame,

‘crippled in the [body  
that is] crippled.

‘And, consequent upon  
the destruction  
of the body,  
it is destroyed.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

‘It is just so, Maghavan,’  
said [Prajāpati].

‘However, I will explain  
it further to you.

‘Live [here] another  
thirty-two years.’

[Indra] then lived [there]  
another thirty-two years.

To him, [Prajāpati] spoke.

until Prajāpati spoke out  
again, in different words, about  
the truth that Indra wished to learn:

#### 8.10.1-4

‘This which journeys  
free in dream,  
enabling mind to magnify;

‘this is the self’, he said.  
‘It does not die;  
nor has it fear.  
It is the absolute.’

Then [Indra] went away,  
content at heart.

But, before he had  
quite reached the gods,  
he saw this anxiety:

‘It’s true that even if  
this body becomes blind,  
the [dream self] does  
not become blind;

‘if [the body  
becomes] lame,  
the [dream self] does  
not become lame.

‘Indeed, it doesn’t  
suffer from the ills  
of this [body].

‘Where body’s world  
dissolves in dream  
and mind is free,  
the self shines there.

‘It is the deathless,  
fearless absolute.’

And now to Indra, once again,  
it seemed that he had understood.

He took his leave and started out  
towards his home. But on his way  
a further doubt disturbed his mind  
and brought him back to learn some more;

again with fuel in his hand,  
by which he showed his wish to burn  
the ignorance that still remained.

‘Not by the slaying  
of this [body] is  
the [dream self] slain.

‘Not by the lameness  
of this [body]  
is it lame.

‘And yet [in dream],  
it is as if they kill it,  
as if they strip it,

‘as if it comes to know  
unpleasantness,  
as if it weeps as well.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

Fuel in hand,  
he came back again.

Prajāpati said to him:  
‘Maghavan, since you  
went off, content at heart,  
seeking what  
have you returned?’

Indra said:  
‘It’s true that even if  
this body becomes blind,  
the [dream self] does  
not become blind;

‘if [the body  
becomes] lame,  
the [dream self] does  
not become lame.

‘Indeed, it doesn’t  
suffer from the ills  
of this [body].

‘Not by the slaying  
of this [body] is  
the [dream self] slain.

Prajāpati asked: ‘What is it  
that brings you back again so soon?’

Indra explained: ‘The self in dream  
may not be bound to suffer those  
same ills that trouble body in  
the waking world of outer things.

‘When outward eyes no longer see  
and body has thus lost its sight,  
the self in dreams still seems to see.  
And when gross, outward body dies,  
perhaps the self lives on in dream.

‘Not by the lameness  
of this [body] is it lame.

‘And yet [in dream],  
it is as if they kill it,  
as if they strip it,

‘as if it comes to know  
unpleasantness,  
as if it weeps as well.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

‘It is just so, Maghavan,’  
said [Prajāpati].

‘However, I will explain  
it further to you.

‘Live [here] another  
thirty-two years.’

[Indra] then lived [there]  
another thirty-two years.

To him, [Prajāpati] spoke.

### 8.11.1-2

‘That is this,  
where one who sleeps  
perceives no dream,

‘[but is] withdrawn  
back in to unity  
and peace.

‘This is the self,’ he said.

‘It does not die;  
nor has it fear.

It is the absolute.’

Then [Indra] went away,  
content at heart.

But, before he had  
quite reached the gods,  
he saw this anxiety:

‘But, even in the state of dreams,  
the self does not seem fully free.  
In many dreams, self seems to fear,  
seems to be driven, hunted down;  
it seems in pain, it seems to weep,  
it seems to suffer death and grief.

‘I *can't* be satisfied with this.’

So Indra stayed for thirty-two  
more years again; and when this time  
had passed away, Prajāpati  
spoke out these words that he might learn:

‘In depth of sleep  
which knows no dream,  
self shines as peace.

‘It is the fearless,  
deathless absolute.’

Yet once again, it seemed that truth  
had dawned in Indra’s searching mind.  
But yet again, returning home,  
poor Indra’s mind was seized by doubt.

‘This [deep sleep self],  
such as it is,

‘does not rightly  
know itself,  
face to face,  
as “I am this”;

‘nor [does it know]  
these things  
created in the world.

‘It [thus] becomes  
a something  
that has gone  
into complete  
annihilation.

‘I see no satisfaction here.’

Fuel in hand,  
he came back again.

Prajāpati said to him:

‘Maghavan, since you  
went off, content at heart,  
seeking what  
have you returned?’

[Indra] said:

‘This [deep sleep self],  
such as it is,

‘does not rightly  
know itself,  
face to face,  
as “I am this”;

‘nor [does it know]  
these things  
created in the world.

‘It [thus] becomes  
a something  
that has gone

And yet again, his wish to burn  
the ignorance that still remained  
was shown by fuel in his hand;  
as he returned, in search of truth,  
before his Lord Prajāpati.

He told his doubt: ‘The sleeping self  
can’t know itself by any thought  
that “I am this” or “I am that” ...

‘Nor does it know any object  
other than itself; and, therefore,  
it seems quite annihilated ...

‘In depth of sleep, there seems to be  
no self at all. Does this mean self  
is blank or empty nothingness?’

into complete  
annihilation.

How can this be? There's something here  
I don't quite rightly understand.'

'I see no satisfaction here.'

### 8.11.3

'It is just so, Maghavan,'  
he said. 'However,  
I will explain  
it further to you.

Prajāpati said: 'If you wait  
another five years here, I shall  
explain again; though really there  
is nothing further to explain.'

'There's really  
nothing else,  
other than this.

'Live [here] for  
five years more.'

[Indra] then lived there  
five years more, which  
makes one hundred and  
one years altogether.

So Indra lived there five years more;  
thus making it a total of  
one hundred and one years he lived  
a student's life, instructed by  
his teacher, Lord Prajāpati.

This is what they say:  
One hundred and one  
years it was, that Indra  
lived with Prajāpati.

When the time came, Prajāpati  
enlightened Indra with these words:

To him, [Prajāpati] said:

### 8.12.1

'In truth, Maghavan,  
this body is mortal.  
It is held by death.

'This body is mortal;  
it belongs to death.  
But in it lives  
the deathless self,  
which has no body.

'[But] it is  
the dwelling place  
of the bodiless,  
undying self.

'Whatever's mixed  
with body  
is inevitably held

'Wherever life  
is mixed with body,  
like is followed

by pleasure  
and by pain.

‘For existence  
mixed with body,  
there’s no  
true deliverance  
from pleasure  
and from pain.

‘[But] pain  
and pleasure  
really do not  
touch at all  
existence that  
is bodiless.

### 8.12.2

‘Air is unbodied.

‘Cloud, lightning,  
thunder,  
they are unbodied.

‘It is similar  
to when they rise  
from space out there;

‘and having reached  
the higher light,

‘they issue forth  
into appearance:  
each through its  
own form.

### 8.12.3

‘So too, this peaceful  
[deep sleep self]  
rises up  
from the body;

by dislike,  
pleasure alternates  
with pain.

‘Whoever mixes  
life with body  
seeks escape  
in passing pleasures,  
can’t escape  
from feeling pain.

‘The real self  
transcends the body,  
has no need for  
passing pleasures,  
is untouched  
by body’s pain.

‘When morning wisps  
of mist and cloud  
rise up towards  
the peace and  
clarity of sky,

‘they shine revealed  
as bodiless,  
dissolving radiant  
into light.

‘So too, when forms  
of seeming mind  
approach the peace  
of dreamless sleep,

‘and having reached  
the higher light,  
‘it comes forth  
into appearance,  
through its own form.

‘That is purusha,  
the highest [principle  
of personality].

‘There [in dreams],  
it journeys  
everywhere about;

‘laughing, playing,  
taking delight,

‘with women  
or with chariots  
or with friends;

‘not remembering  
this body  
added on by birth.

‘As a draught animal  
is harnessed to a cart,

‘so too this life  
[here in the  
waking world]

‘is harnessed  
to the body.

#### 8.12.4-5

‘Where sight has  
settled down into  
the background  
continuity  
pervading [it],

‘they are dissolved  
in unobscured,  
untroubled clarity;

‘revealing self  
for what it is:

‘pure, bodiless  
unfading light  
of unconditioned  
consciousness.

‘This is the real self,  
remaining always free:

‘untroubled by the body  
where we falsely think  
self has been born,

‘and where self seems  
to laugh, eat, play,  
to seek out pleasure,  
love and happiness.

‘But where the self  
is thought to be  
encumbered by  
the body’s needs,

‘there life seems caught  
in bondage:  
like a horse  
that’s tethered  
to a cart.

‘The eye is just  
an instrument  
for seeing sights.

‘The ear is just  
an instrument  
for hearing sounds.

‘that is  
the seeing principle  
within each personality.

‘The sense of sight  
is [just an instrument]  
for seeing.

‘Next, that which knows  
“I can smell this”,  
that is the self.

‘The sense of smell is  
[just an instrument]  
for smelling.

‘And that which knows  
“I can say this”,  
that is the self.

‘The voice is  
[just an instrument]  
for speaking.

‘And that which knows  
“I can hear this”,  
that is the self.

‘The sense of hearing is  
[only an instrument]  
for listening.

‘And that which knows  
“I can think this”,  
that is the self.

‘The mind is its  
divine sight.

‘That [self] is truly this.

‘Seeing these desires  
through the divine  
sight of the mind,

‘it is at peace

‘The voice is just  
an instrument  
for speaking words.

‘The mind is just  
an instrument  
for thinking thoughts

‘and dreaming up  
a subtle world  
from feeling and desire.

‘But, in each one of us,  
it is the self that knows

‘the sights that seeing sees,  
the sounds that hearing hears,  
the words that speaking speaks,

‘the thoughts that thinking thinks,  
and all the subtle worlds  
that dreaming dreams  
from feeling and desire.

and takes delight  
in everything.

### 8.12.6

‘In the world of  
expanded  
[consciousness],

‘these who are gods  
pay heed to that  
which is this self.

‘Therefore all worlds  
and all desires  
are held by them.

‘One who finds and  
knows the self  
attains all worlds  
and all desires.’

Thus said Prajāpati.

[Thus] said Prajāpati.

‘This knowing self,  
this common core  
of unconditioned consciousness  
within each personality,

‘is that immortal absolute  
to which the gods pay heed,  
by which they gain their power.

‘This very self,  
within us all,  
is what we seek  
in all of our desires.

‘Whoever sees and knows this self  
gains all the world, and finds  
the goal of all desire.’

## The self in everyone

What common, universal truth is to be found by a subjective enquiry into one’s own self?

The following story from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 5.11-18, describes the concept of ‘ātman vaishvānara’, which can be translated as ‘the universal self’ or ‘the self in everyone’. As these two translations imply, there are two ways of interpreting this concept.

- The first is objective and cosmological: as the self of a universal being that somehow includes all objects in the entire world.
- The second is subjective and philosophical: as a common, impersonal principle that is each person’s real self. This common principle of self is unconditioned consciousness, beneath all seeming differences of body, senses and mind.

As translated and interpreted below, the story moves from various cosmological approaches to a more philosophical understanding of universality: as

the subjective ground of underlying consciousness, beneath all the differing appearances of different people's experience.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 105-106)

*From 5.11.6*

They [the learned  
householders] said [to  
King Ashvapati Kaikeya]:

‘...This same  
universal self  
which you directly know,  
tell us of just that.’

King Ashvapati Kaikeya  
was once approached by a small group  
of learned householders, who asked:

‘Sir, we have heard that you have knowledge  
of a “universal” self.  
Could you explain this self to us?’

*From 5.12.1*

[The king asked:]

‘...What do you heed  
as [this] self?’

‘Just heaven,  
your majesty.’...

King Ashvapati, in reply,  
said: ‘Tell me, first, just what you think  
this “universal” self might be.’

One thought this self was starry heaven,  
which rules what happens in the world.

*From 5.13.1*

... ‘Just the sun,  
your majesty.’...

Another thought this self was sun,  
illuminating world below.

*From 5.14.1*

... ‘Just air,  
your majesty.’...

A third believed this self was air,  
the subtle breath of qualities.

*From 5.15.1*

... ‘Just space,  
your majesty.’...

A fourth believed this self was space,  
pervading all that it contains.

*From 5.16.1*

... ‘Just water,  
your majesty.’...

A fifth believed this self was water,  
flowing into changing forms.

*From 5.17.1*

... ‘Just earth,  
your majesty.’...

The sixth believed this self was matter,  
constituting everything.

*5.18.1*

He said to them:

‘You, who  
are these indeed,  
‘take in nourishment  
[from experience]  
‘knowing this self  
in everyone  
‘as if [it and you  
were] separate.

‘But [of] one  
who heeds  
this self  
in everyone,

King Ashvapati said to them:

‘In all these different, partial views  
of one same “universal” self,  
you draw upon experience  
as if you know this self as something  
different from each one of you.

‘But, surely, “universal” self  
is just that self which all of us  
see in ourselves in different ways.

‘Beneath these different points of view,  
just what is it that’s really here,  
shared in common by us all?

‘Beneath the many differences  
through which our bodies, minds and senses  
view the world, upon what common  
measure of all measured things  
do we rely, in order that  
such differences may be compared?

‘Our knowledge of the world is built  
by joining different measurements.  
But on what base? Is there in us  
one common base of measurement:  
to which each one of us refers  
for everything that’s measured here  
in anyone’s experience?

‘as the measure  
of all measures,

‘This common base of measurement  
is found by turning thought back in:  
to knowing self, from which thought comes.  
This is the self in each of us.

‘and as the  
unmixed intensity  
of self-discerning  
thought;

‘It’s the unmixed intensity  
of thought that’s known as thought alone:  
where knowing self is objectless,  
pure consciousness that knows all things  
as nothing else but self alone.

‘[it may be said  
that such a] one

‘For one who knows this, all experience  
everywhere is drawn upon:  
whatever worlds may seem conceived,  
whatever beings may appear,  
however seen by seeming selves.’

‘draws nourishment  
[from experience]

‘in all worlds,  
all beings,  
all [seeming] selves....’

### **The rider in a chariot**

How can the inner, real self be distinguished from the outward, seeming selves that appear in our conditioned and varying personalities?

In the following translation and retelling from the Kaṭha Upanishad, 3.1,3-4, apparent personality and inner self are distinguished through the metaphor of a chariot.

Like a chariot, the apparent personality moves about and changes in a moving and changing world. The inner self is like the rider in a chariot; it is the living principle for whose sake the personality changes and moves from place to place. But known within, from its own point of view, self stays the same and is in truth unmoved; as scenes of passing world go by, just like the scenes a chariot passes through.

**Translation** (from the  
Kaṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 15-17)

#### *3.1*

‘There are two [spoken of  
as] drinking the justice

‘Within each heart, there seem to be  
two selves, experiencing the truth  
of moral action in the world.

of moral action  
in the world;

‘[as] penetrated  
in the cave [of heart],  
in the ultimate  
place of the ultimate;

‘[as] shadow-image  
and blazing intensity.

‘Knowers of reality  
speak [thus],

‘as also those of the  
five [household] fires  
and those of the  
three Naciketas [fires].

‘Of these two selves, one is described  
as a mere shadow or reflection  
of the other self: the real  
self, which shines by its own light,  
by its own pure intensity.

*‘The shadow self is seeming ego,  
acting in a world outside,  
enjoying good and suffering ill.*

*‘Behind appearances of ego,  
real self is consciousness:  
unmixed with personality,  
unconditioned by the world.*

### 3.3-4

‘Know self  
as one who rides  
within a chariot;

‘then body is  
only the chariot.

‘If changing personality  
is thought of as a chariot,  
then self is living consciousness  
which rides within the chariot.

‘Seen from outside, the chariot takes  
the knowing self from place to place;  
and thus moves on, for sake of self,  
expressing purpose and desire.

‘But, as it knows itself within,  
the self remains unmoved, unchanged;  
while world and chariot move and change.

‘As known from self, the world goes by  
in changing scenes of passing show,  
like scenes a chariot passes through.

‘Just as a chariot is but part  
of changing world in which it moves,  
so too each personality  
is but an object in the world.

‘A moving chariot’s wheels turn round,  
its body suffers strain and shock.

‘And also know  
intelligence  
as chariot-driver,  
  
‘with mind  
as just the reins.

‘The faculties of sense  
are horses, it is said;  
  
‘and objects are  
their paths of travel.

So too, a person’s body suffers  
change and harm, and gets worn out.

‘Just as a chariot’s horses pull  
it on to where it goes; so too  
a person is pulled on by  
sensual faculties and appetites,  
towards the objects of desire.

‘Just as a chariot’s horses are  
controlled by reins; so too, are  
sensual faculties and appetites  
controlled by the intent of will.

‘And as the driver of a chariot  
pulls upon the reins, to guide  
the chariot for the traveller’s sake;

‘so too, the intellect and heart  
think thoughts and feel emotions that  
direct the will, all for the sake  
of knowing self that lives within.

‘The chariot’s body, horses, reins  
and driver are all changing objects  
acting in an outside world,  
of which they are but little parts.

‘So too, a person’s body, senses,  
will and intellect and heart  
are changing objects, each of which  
acts as a partial piece of world.

‘The self within is consciousness.  
Known truly, as it knows itself,  
it does not move; it does not change.  
It is no part of changing world.  
It only knows; it does not act.

‘Its knowledge is no kind of act;  
its very being is to shine.  
It shines itself, by its own light;  
and it is nothing else but light.

‘It’s this pure light of consciousness that lights up all appearances, as body, sense and mind seem to perceive a world of seeming things.

‘Self and mind and senses juxtaposed  
‘are “the enjoyer”, say the wise....’

‘By false identity of self as changing body, sense and mind, the consciousness of knowing self seems mixed with body’s sensual acts and with the acts of thought and feeling carried out by changing mind.

‘And thus, confusing changeless self with changing personality, experience seems conditioned by a physical and mental world of forms and names and qualities that bodies sense and minds conceive.

‘Through such conditioned consciousness, a person seems to taste the fruit of good and bad experiences: enjoying what seems to be good and suffering that which seems ill....’

### **The enjoyer and the witness**

How is experience known by self?

The following passage occurs in both the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad (4.6-7) and the Muṇḍaka Upanishad (3.1.1-2). It distinguishes two kinds of experience.

- In the first kind of experience, knowledge is mixed with the actions of conditioned personality. And accordingly, the experience is conditioned by changing enjoyments and sufferings that result from the successes and failures of such personal action.
- In the second kind of experience, knowledge is pure illumination: quite unattached to any actions or consequences in the changing world. Accordingly, the experiencer is not an enjoyer or a sufferer, but a purely detached witness: quite unaffected by anything that happens in the conditioned world.

Where self is falsely identified as a personal ego, consisting of body or senses or mind, it seems to know experience in the first way: as a conditioned enjoyer

and sufferer. But where the self is understood to know experience in the second way, as a completely detached witness; there the false identification of ego is dissolved, and the true nature of self is realized. Thus known entirely unmixed with any conditioned action or enjoyment, it turns out to be the final goal of love that motivates all actions, and the underlying source of happiness that shines out in all enjoyments.

As shown below, the same passage has been retold rather differently, in the differing contexts of the Shvetāshvatara and Muṇḍaka Upanishads.

**Translation** (from the  
Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 244)

#### 4.6

Two birds  
in close companionship  
are perched upon  
a single tree.

These principles, of inner ‘soul’  
and consciousness, are like two birds  
conceived to live together here,  
on nature’s tree of happenings.

Of these, one eats  
and relishes the fruit.  
The other does not eat,  
but just looks on.

Of these two birds, one eats and tastes  
the fruit, and thus becomes affected  
by its qualities. The other  
does not eat, but just looks on,  
unmoved by nature’s changing acts.

#### 4.7

On the same tree,  
a person in depression  
grieves, deluded by  
non-possession.

On this same tree, a person gets  
depressed and suffers grief: deluded  
by a sense of seeming helplessness,  
and feeling thus quite dispossessed.

When someone [thus  
deluded] sees  
the other,  
as what one [truly] loves,  
as Lord [of all],  
as one’s [own] majesty,

But when one sees what’s truly loved –  
as that which stands beyond all else,  
as one’s own boundlessness, from where  
help comes, where everything belongs –

that someone is  
thus freed from grief.

there one is freed from misery.

**Translation** (from the  
Muṇḍaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 188-190)

3.1.1

‘Two birds  
in close companionship  
are perched upon  
a single tree.

‘Of these, one eats  
and relishes the fruit.  
The other does not eat,  
but just looks on.

‘What really is a person’s self  
that lives in body, senses, mind?

‘It seems to relish pleasant things;  
it seems to suffer misery.

‘It seems a separate ego in  
an outside world, conditioned by  
the fruits of world’s activities.

‘Such ego, acting in the world,  
enjoying pleasure, suffering pain,  
is just a little piece of world,  
consuming fruits of worldly acts.

‘It’s just an object in the world.  
It cannot really be the self.

‘The self is that in us which knows.

‘When body seems to know the world,  
it is called “self”. But when it seems  
that body is an instrument  
through which perceiving senses know,  
then senses seem to be the self.

‘Next, when it seems that senses are  
but instruments of knowing mind,  
then mind appears to be the self.

‘And finally, when mind is seen  
to be a mere activity  
which forms appearances of world,

‘the self is known for what it is:  
pure consciousness, which does not act  
but only lights appearances.

‘This light is no activity  
which starts or runs its course or ends  
or is conditioned by the world.

‘As world’s appearances are formed  
by changing mind, they come and go;  
but every one of them is lit  
by consciousness, which always must  
remain, throughout experience.

‘It is the nature of the self,  
whose very being is to know.

### 3.1.2

‘On the same tree,  
a person in depression  
grieves, deluded by  
the non-possessing  
[aspect of the real self,

‘which does not act  
and has no powers  
or faculties].

‘When someone [thus  
deluded] sees  
[beyond ego]  
the other, [real self]:

‘as what one [truly] loves,  
as Lord [of all],  
as one’s [own] majesty;

‘that someone is  
thus freed from grief....’

‘Appearing caught in changing acts,  
a person gets depressed and  
suffers misery: misunderstanding  
as poor ego’s helplessness  
the non-possessing nature of  
the real self, which does not act  
and has no powers or faculties.

‘But where the self is truly seen,  
transcending ego: as the  
unconditioned centre of all life,  
all love, all happiness; there one  
is free, from ego’s self-inflicted  
pettiness and misery.....’

## **Cleansing the ego**

How can the limitations and partialities of the conditioned ego be transcended, in order to attain a complete and impartial knowledge of undistorted truth?

In the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, 2.14-15, the ego is compared to a dirty mirror, which shows up as an obscuring obstacle to the light that it reflects. But, by understanding ego’s falsities and hence clearing them away, the ego ceases to be an obstacle and becomes instead a means to truth. For it then dissolves into the very light of self that it reflects, thus revealing the ultimate truth of all reality.

**Translation** (from the  
Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 234-235)

2.14

Just as a mirror  
stained by dust  
shines brilliantly  
when cleaned;

so also  
the embodied [ego],  
when it sees  
the self's true nature,  
comes to be  
at one, fulfilled,  
set free from  
misery and grief.

The surface of a mirror shows  
obscurity where it is stained  
by overlying dirt and dust.

But where it's cleaned, it disappears:  
dissolved in its own clarity.

So too, each person's ego shows  
up as an obstacle: where it  
is overlaid with the impurities  
of body, sense and mind,  
which it identifies with self.

But when this false identity  
is understood and cleared away;

then no impurities remain  
and ego disappears, dissolved  
in unconditioned happiness:  
where truth of self shines clarified.

2.15

And by the nature  
of the self,  
as by a lamp,

A person's body, sense and mind  
are only instruments through which  
perceptions of the world appear.

They do not know in their own right;  
for their perceptions shine by light  
of knowing self that lives within.

Light is the nature of the self.  
Its very being is to shine:  
as self-illuminating light.

It is the light of consciousness,  
which lights perceived appearances  
and thus illuminates the world.

one who is joined  
with it can see,

By looking back into the self,  
one joins one's true identity:

right here, the truth  
of all reality:

unborn, unchanging  
and completely pure,  
through all  
[subsidiary] truths.

[Thus] knowing God,  
one finds release:  
through all  
constraining  
bonds and ties.

as consciousness that knows directly,  
face to face, in its own right.

And here, beneath all compromise  
with mediating instruments,  
one knows reality direct:  
unborn, unchanging, absolute.

### **Detachment and non-duality**

What truth of world is realized by discerning the true nature of self?

This question raises an inherent paradox, as described in the following translation and retelling from the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, 5.7-14.

Truth is sought by making distinctions, in particular by distinguishing truth from falsity. However, the purpose of these distinctions is to find an underlying unity, beneath the contradictions of appearance that result from falsity. So, wherever truth is sought, there is this inherent paradox: of distinction seeking its own end in unity.

By distinguishing the true nature of the self, one is meant to come to the end of *all* distinctions: in the non-dual realization that the entire world is nothing else but the reality of one's own self. That world and self, though seeming two, are only one.

**Translation** (from the  
Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 249-252)

5.7

The doer of actions  
which bear fruit  
is that [in us] which is  
conditioned by qualities.

Each doer acts and meets reaction,  
and thus gets to be conditioned  
by resulting qualities.

That [doer] is as well  
the implied enjoyer of  
its own accomplishments.

Each doing personality  
experiences conditioning  
that follows from its previous acts.

That [doer in us]  
is what assumes  
all forms of world.

It's that to which  
the three qualities  
are attributed.

It's that [in us]  
which follows  
the three paths.

It is life's  
ruling principle,  
journeying throughout  
by its own actions.

5.8

Represented  
[in one's person]

by the measure  
of a thumb,

it appears  
[by its own light]  
just like the sun.

Seen by virtue  
of the mind,  
it's that which is  
associated with  
ego and imagination  
that follow in its wake.

But seen by virtue  
of itself,  
as represented  
by the measure of  
a [dimensionless] point  
at the tip of a sharp spike,  
it is beyond [all

Accordingly, it's the enjoyer  
of its past accomplishments,  
as it is shaped through various forms  
of seeming world that it perceives.

In every one of us, the doer  
is the ruling principle  
of life that journeys on through time  
by its own actions in the world.

The individual self appears,  
in every person, like the sun.

It shines by its own light, and thus  
illuminates the seeming world.

As seen by virtue of the mind,  
it gets associated with  
false ego's pettiness of thought  
and will and wishful fantasy.

As seen by virtue of itself,  
it's like a point, dimensionless:  
beyond all measure and compare,  
with nothing else beyond itself.

measure and compare],  
with nothing else  
beyond itself.

## 5.9

The living principle  
of personality  
may be known

as but a part  
of the point  
of a hair,  
divided hundredfold  
a hundred times.

And yet, from it  
arise relationships  
and capabilities  
that extend unlimited  
to all infinity.

The living principle of  
personality may be perceived  
as quite infinitesimal:

as always fine enough to be  
completely present here within  
whatever finite littleness  
may be perceived by act of sense  
or be conceived by act of mind.

And yet, from it arise  
relationships and capabilities  
extending to infinity,  
beyond all bounds of space and time.

## 5.10

Essentially,  
it is not male  
or female,  
nor is it  
even neuter.

Whatever body  
it assumes,  
through that  
it's noticed,  
cherished, cared for  
and watched over,  
[with concern and love].

No gender qualifies its life.

It is not male. Nor is it female.  
Nor has it some neuter gender  
in between, describing it  
as somehow lacking vital life.

But, through the personalities  
superimposed on it by us,  
it's what we cherish, what we care  
for, what we watch and look for with  
concern, in those we come to love.

## 5.11

Through delusions  
of imagination,  
touch and sight,

Fooled by its own delusions of  
imagination, feeling, sight,  
the ego takes itself to be

the self [seems] born  
and [seems to] grow,  
nourished by  
the food and water  
it receives.

But the embodied  
[principle]  
continues on  
in states of change,

successively  
assuming forms  
that follow  
from past acts.

### 5.12

Seen through  
the attributes  
of [various] acts,

the embodied [principle]  
selects a great variety  
of gross and subtle forms,  
along with their  
respective qualities.

But seen through its  
own attributes as self,  
as the co-ordinating basis  
and the unifying cause  
of [all] these  
[various forms],

it is beyond all else,  
with nothing else  
beyond itself.

a personality that has  
been born and grows in many ways,  
through nourishment that it receives.

But self, in truth, is quite impersonal:  
as the unborn, unchanging  
principle that's always here,  
in everyone's experience,  
within each personality.

As body journeys through the world,  
self carries on through states of change:

and thus appears to be a 'soul',  
successively assuming forms  
of changing personality  
that follow on from previous acts.

Seen through the changing attributes  
of mind's and body's various acts,

it seems that the embodied self  
takes on a great variety  
of gross and subtle qualities  
to form a personality.

But, seen through its inherent nature,  
as the changeless, common centre  
where all attributes are joined;

the self is known beyond all else,  
with nothing else beyond itself.

## 5.13

Unbegun and endless  
in the midst  
of a chaotic world  
of mixed-up things,

it's that which takes  
on many forms  
to issue forth  
as everything.

It is the one [reality]  
containing all  
the universe.

[Thus] knowing God  
one finds release:  
through all  
constraining  
bonds and ties.

Here, in the midst of a  
chaotic-seeming world of birth and death,  
it's unbegun and infinite:

as it appears to take on the  
variety of changing forms  
that seemingly condition it,  
creating the appearances  
of everything that seems perceived.

Thus it's the one reality  
containing all the universe.

## 5.14

It's grasped  
only by being it,  
by coming to  
one's own reality.

It is called 'bodiless',  
for no body  
in the world  
can be described  
as its sole resting place.

It is the blessed Lord  
who makes things  
happen or not happen  
in the world.

And it is God  
who makes creation  
and its parts.

It's grasped only by being it:

by looking back into one's self,  
from where sight comes, and thus returning  
to one's own reality.

It is called 'bodiless'; for it  
is not attached or limited  
to any body in the world.

It is the source of love, from which  
all doing and undoing comes.

It is the principle of light,  
from which creation issues forth.

They who know it  
have relinquished  
petty personality.

Whoever knows it leaves behind  
all petty personality.

# *Happiness*

## **Value**

What is the goal of 'happiness' that people seek?

In the Kāṭha Upanishad, 2.1-2, a distinction is drawn between the short-term attraction ('preyas') of changing enjoyments and the long-term value ('hita') of lasting happiness.

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 11)

2.1-2

'What is of value  
is one thing;  
what's just agreeable  
is another.

'These different purposes  
both bind a person.

'Of the two, it is well  
for someone who takes  
what is of value.

'But one who chooses  
merely what's agreeable  
[thus] falls away  
from the intended aim.

'What is of value and  
what is agreeable  
come to a person.

'Someone who  
has strength of mind  
considers and  
distinguishes them.

'So,' said the stranger, 'you've made a distinction. On the one hand, body, senses and mind are attracted by a variety of changing purposes and enjoyments. On the other hand, as these changing attractions keep dying away, they express a continuing principle of value: which is the final, undying basis of all physical, sensual and mental desires....'

‘A strong-minded person  
chooses what’s of value  
as against  
what’s just agreeable.

‘Someone weak and foolish  
chooses the agreeable,  
out of attachment  
and complacency....’

### **Outward desire**

According to the Kāṭha Upanishad, 4.2, lasting happiness is to be found by turning back from outward-going desire, towards a spiritual basis of inner stability within each personality. Unlike the changing and dying objects of outward desire, this inner basis of stability is quite untouched by all the change and death that is perceived in the external world.

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 26)

4.2

The infantile go after  
outward desires;  
[and thus] they go  
into the snare  
of widespread death.

Outward desires lead the mind  
into the widespread snare of death:  
which rules this world of seeming things  
that come to be and pass away.

But the steadfast,  
realizing deathlessness,  
do not seek stability  
here among  
unstable things.

But those of steadfast courage do  
not rest content with the pretence  
of relative stability,  
sought here among unstable things.

Instead, they question all pretence  
until true certainty is found:  
beyond the reach of change and death,  
beyond all trace of fear and doubt.

**Kinds of happiness**

What basis of stability can be found by turning attention back within?

In the following translation and retelling from the Taittirīya Upanishad, 2.8-9, different kinds of conditioned happiness are described as partial and inadequate manifestations of an essential, unconditioned source that lights them from inside. And this essential source of unconditioned happiness may be directly found by drawing back, through seeming personality, to consciousness within.

**Translation** (from the  
Taittirīya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 217-220)

*From 2.8*

... Let us suppose that  
there is a young man:  
accomplished, educated,  
the most dynamic,  
steadfast and strongest  
of young men.

Imagine someone who is young,  
who's open, honest, full of fun,  
well-educated, sensitive,  
alert, adjusted, healthy, strong,  
with all the comforts wealth can bring.  
Take this as 'normal' happiness.

Let us suppose that  
this whole earth  
is full of wealth for him.

[Consider] that  
one [unit of]  
human happiness.

A hundred of these  
[units of] human  
happiness amount to  
one [unit of] happiness  
for human gandharvas  
[celestial spirits],

Much more intense is happiness  
of celebration, breaking free  
from personal conditioning  
that limits ordinary life.

and for one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
[units of] human  
gandharva happiness

amount to one  
 [unit of] happiness  
 for divine gandharvas  
 [celestial spirits],  
 and for one who's learned  
 the sacred texts  
 unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
 [units of] divine  
 gandharva happiness  
 amount to one  
 [unit of] happiness for  
 the ancestors in their  
 long-lasting worlds,

and for one who's learned  
 the sacred texts  
 unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
 [units of] the ancestors'  
 happiness amount to  
 one [unit of] happiness  
 for gods so born by birth,

and for one who's learned  
 the sacred texts  
 unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
 [units of] the happiness  
 of gods so born  
 amount to one  
 [unit of] happiness  
 for those who have risen  
 to be gods by work,

and for one who's learned  
 the sacred texts  
 unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
 [units of] the happiness

And more than this, there's happiness  
 of settled, long experience:  
 which goes on bringing in rewards  
 for relatively many years.

But this depends on happiness  
 of cultivated faculties  
 inherited through family  
 and breeding in society.

And further, there is happiness  
 of capabilities achieved  
 by one's own work and discipline.

Supporting this is happiness  
 of mastering one's faculties:

of gods by work  
amount to one  
[unit of] happiness  
for the [higher] gods,

and for one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
[units of] the happiness  
of [higher] gods  
amount to one  
[unit of] happiness  
for Indra [chief of gods],

and for one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
[units of] Indra's  
happiness amount to  
one [unit of] happiness  
for Brihaspati  
[the creator],

and for one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
[units of] Brihaspati's  
happiness amount to  
one [unit of] happiness  
for Prajāpati  
[the Father],

and for one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

A hundred of these  
[units of] Prajāpati's  
happiness amount

co-ordinating and controlling  
them, towards one's chosen goals.

All this is based on happiness  
of aspiration to the truth,  
beyond all mere appearances  
of seeming objects in the world.

And greater still is happiness  
of coming to creation's source  
from which appearances arise.

But none of these compares at all  
with unconditioned happiness:

to one [unit of]  
the happiness  
of brahman  
[complete reality],

and of one who's learned  
the sacred texts  
unaffected by desire.

It's what *this* is,  
in a person;

and what *that* is,  
in the sun.

It is *one*.

One who knows thus  
leaves this [seeming]  
world behind,

withdraws into this self  
that's made from food,

withdraws into this self  
that's formed  
of living energy,

withdraws into this self  
that just consists of mind,

withdraws into this self  
that only is  
discerning consciousness,

and withdraws  
into this self  
that's nothing else  
but happiness.

On that  
there also is this verse:

where all desires are dissolved,  
and simple truth is realized  
that consciousness is all there is,  
with self and object known as one.

It's consciousness that lights  
appearances, here in a person's mind.

And this same consciousness makes known  
all objects in the seeming world  
perceived by body, sense and mind.

Thus, inward consciousness of mind  
and outward consciousness of world,  
though seeming two, are only one.

As this is known, appearances  
of seeming world are left behind:

withdrawing first through body-self;

then through the self of living energy  
beneath the body's acts;

then through the self of mind beneath  
the purposes of living acts;

then through discerning consciousness  
beneath the judgements of the mind;

and thus at last to unconditioned  
happiness of real self,  
where changeless consciousness is known  
at one with all reality.

## 2.9

‘[It’s that] from which  
all words turn back  
together with the mind,  
unable to attain [it].

‘It is the happiness  
of complete reality.

‘One who knows [it]  
has no fear of anything.

‘Such a one  
does not burn:  
“Why have I  
not done right?”

““Why have I  
done wrong?””

‘One who is thus  
a knower  
[of complete reality]  
‘delivers up these two  
[good and ill]  
as [one’s own] self.

‘For truly,  
one who thus knows  
liberates them both, as  
[nothing else but] self.’

Such is the teaching.

From this all words and thoughts turn back.

For it is not attained until  
they fall away; and only  
consciousness remains: unlimited  
by word or thought, with nothing  
to obscure complete reality  
where lasting happiness is found.

Whoever knows this simple truth  
can have no fear of anything;

nor burn with the anxiety  
of asking: ‘Why have I not done  
what’s right?’ or ‘Why have I done wrong?’

Both these are only ego’s questions.  
Neither can pertain to self.

One who knows truth is liberated  
from all seeming good and ill,  
superimposed by ego’s ignorance  
upon one’s own true self.

### **One common goal**

Through all our differing desires for various different things, is there some common principle that we all seek?

In the following passage from the Kena Upanishad, 4.4-6, this common principle is described as ‘tad-vanam’: which literally means ‘that-desired’ or, to elaborate a little, ‘that which all desire seeks’.

**Translation** (from the  
Kena Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 134)

## 4.4

Of that there is  
this teaching.  
It is this,  
which is said  
to have flashed out  
and vanished back  
in lightning.

This with regard  
to the gods.

Objectively, seen from the world  
created by our faculties  
of outward sense, truth seems to shine  
only in blinding flashes of  
divine illumination that  
immediately dissolve all sense  
of the created universe,  
thus passing on from changing time.

## 4.5

Now with regard to self:  
it is that  
to which this mind  
moves as it were;  
and by it  
this [mind's] conception  
carries on remembering.

Subjectively, seen where the mind  
turns back to self from which it comes,  
truth is at once both goal and base.

It's that to which all mind aspires,  
and that on which all mind depends:  
as it appears to carry on  
through changing time, enabling world  
to be conceived by seeming mind  
from fragments of past memory.

## 4.6

It is just that  
called 'tad-vanam'  
['that-which-is-desired'].

Truth is just that which is desired  
beneath all seeming goals of mind.

It is to be heeded  
as 'tad-vanam'.

It's that which all desire seeks,  
and it should thus be understood:  
beneath the many different forms  
imagined by our partial minds  
to represent the truth they seek.

He who thus knows this,  
him all beings seek.

Whoever knows this truth of love  
is loved, in truth, by everyone.

**Love**

In the following passage from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad (4.5.6-7), the common goal of all desire is identified as each person's real self.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāranyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 92-93)

## 4.5.6

'It isn't really for  
love of a husband  
that a husband  
becomes loved.

'What does a wife love in her husband?  
Is it just that he's a husband?  
If it's that, it isn't love.  
All she can love in him is self.

'But it's for love  
of the self  
that a husband  
becomes loved.

'It isn't really for  
love of a wife  
that a wife  
comes to be loved.

'And when a husband loves his wife,  
is it love if she's just a wife?  
All he can love in her is self.

'But it's for love  
of the self  
that a wife  
comes to be loved.

'It isn't really for  
love of sons  
that sons  
come to be loved.

'So also love of children, friends,  
living creatures, places, objects,  
love of power, love of knowledge.  
All that's loved is only self.

'But it's for love  
of the self  
that sons  
come to be loved.

[And similarly in  
subsequent passages,  
with 'sons' substituted by:  
'wealth', 'cattle',

‘the brahmin’,  
‘the nobleman’,  
‘worlds’,  
‘gods’, ‘the Vedas’,  
‘beings’,  
‘everything’.]

‘Essentially,  
it is the self  
that’s to be seen,  
that’s to be heard,  
and thought about  
and reflected on.

‘Maitreyī,  
when self is seen,  
is heard,  
is thought about,  
is reflected on,

‘then all this  
[entire universe]  
is known.

‘When this self is seen and known,  
then all the world is truly known  
and there is nothing else to know.

#### 4.5.7

‘Brahminhood  
forsakes one who  
knows of brahminhood  
as other than the self.

‘Nobility forsakes one  
who knows of nobility  
as other than the self.

‘The worlds forsake one  
who knows of worlds  
as other than the self.

‘The gods forsake one  
who knows of gods  
as other than the self.

‘Where learning is not realized  
as self, such learning cannot last.  
Where power is not realized  
as self, nor can such power stay.

‘Where worlds or gods or living things  
or any other things are not  
realized as self; such alien things  
must part from self in course of time,  
must be obscured and disappear,  
must seem unstable, seem unsure,  
must seem to change and pass away.

‘The Vedas forsake one  
who knows of the Vedas  
as other than the self.

‘Beings forsake one  
who knows of beings  
as other than the self.

‘Everything forsakes one  
who knows of everything  
as other than the self.

‘This brahminhood,  
this nobility, these worlds,  
these gods, these Vedas,  
these beings,

‘In truth all learning, power, worlds,  
gods, living things and all things else  
are nothing other than the self....’

‘all of this,  
is what self is....’

### **Desire’s end**

In the following translation and retelling from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 4.3.21, each person’s real self is described as the desireless and unaffected goal of love: where all desires and dissatisfactions come to end.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 84)

#### *4.3.21*

‘That is truly  
one’s own nature:

‘this that is  
beyond desire,

‘free from ill,  
untouched by fear.

‘Just as a man,  
in close embrace  
with a beloved wife,

‘does not know

‘When unity has been achieved  
with someone who is truly loved,  
all care dissolves in love itself,  
which shines as peace and happiness.

‘Thus, happiness of love attained  
shows self and world as really one,  
beyond all false duality....’

any outside thing,  
nor anything within;

‘so too a person,  
in close touch  
with his own  
knowing self,

‘does not know  
any outside thing,  
nor anything within.

‘This is truly  
one’s own nature:

‘where desire  
is attained,

‘with all desire  
returned to self,  
desireless,  
beyond all grief...’

## Freedom

In the following translation and (much adapted) retelling from the Chāndogya Upanishad, 8.1.5 – 8.3.2, happiness is described as a realization of the self’s true freedom: from the apparent bondage of egotistical desire.

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 118-119)

*From 8.1.5-6*

... It’s rather like  
those people here  
who only follow  
where directed.

They live their lives  
dependent on  
pursuing some objective  
that desire happens to  
drive them towards,

Ego claiming to be body  
lives in bondage to the world.  
Ego claiming to be mind  
lives in bondage to desire.  
All that mind and body do  
gets undone in course of time.

be it a kingdom  
or a plot of land.

Just as here [in this  
gross world of body],

the state that has been  
won through work  
gets played out  
and passes on;

so also there [in the  
subtle world of mind],  
the state that has been  
won through virtue  
gets played out  
and passes on.

Those who go  
on from here,  
ignorant of self  
and of these true desires,

are not free to move  
as they desire  
in all states.

But those who go  
on from here,  
knowing self  
and these true desires,

are quite free to move  
as they desire  
in all states.

### *8.2.10*

Each objective that  
one comes to desire,  
each desire one desires,  
rises up from one's  
own conception.

When an object is desired,  
ego feels that self is lacking  
something to be found outside.  
Consciousness thus seems divided;  
mind appears, dissatisfied.

With that  
desire attained,  
one is exalted  
and thus comes  
to happiness.

When an object of desire  
is attained; then, for the moment,  
restless ego has subsided,  
self seems to have been completed,  
consciousness seems unified.

Thus, truth of self, within the heart,  
shines out as peace and happiness.

### 8.3.1-2

Those are  
these true desires,  
overlaid with falsity.

But though achievement of desire  
brings a state of happiness,  
such happiness can never last;

Though they are true  
in themselves,  
there is an overlay  
of falsity.

for ego rises up again,  
inherently dissatisfied,  
and seeks some further alien thing.

For, whatever of one's  
[friends or possessions]  
departs from here,

All of ego's life and actions  
are dependent on the self;  
which, through seeming self-deception,  
ego does not understand.

one does not get  
to see that [friend or  
possession] here.

Yet, whatever one  
may long for,

of those alive here  
or departed,

and whatever else  
one wants but doesn't get;

all that one finds  
by going here  
[into one's own self].

For they are here:  
one's true desires,  
overlaid by falsity.

Just as those who  
do not know the land  
may journey back  
and forth repeatedly

over a buried  
golden treasure,

and yet not discover it;

so also all these creatures  
go, day after day,

into the state  
of absolute,  
uncompromised reality,

and do not find it.

For they are kept  
from [seeing] it  
by [self-deceiving] falsity.

Self is thus a buried treasure  
ego keeps on walking over,  
vainly feeling needs and wants  
for things that seem outside itself.

Always seeking alien objects,  
ego does not understand  
that the goal of all desire  
is true self, within the heart;  
for all reality is here.

### **The ground of all reality**

How does the conditioned world relate to the unconditioned happiness of real self?

In the following passage from the Taittirīya Upanishad, 3.6, happiness is described as the complete reality that underlies all experience of the entire world. For this ‘happiness’ is the final principle of value which motivates all perceptions, thoughts and feelings; and it thus always underlies whatever is perceived or thought about or felt, through all experience of the apparent world.

**Translation** (from the  
Taittirīya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 224)

*From 3.6*

‘Happiness is  
complete reality.

‘Reality is nothing else  
but unconditioned happiness:

‘where falsity has been removed

‘For it is essentially  
from happiness,  
that these beings  
are born.

‘By happiness,  
born beings live;

‘[and] into happiness  
those that depart  
dissolve.’...

from consciousness, which is thus known  
at one with all reality.

‘From unconditioned happiness,  
rise all of our experiences.

‘On it, each one of them depends.  
It’s what they want. It’s where they go.

‘It is the self that knows in us  
and all we ever really know.’

### Non-duality

In the following translation and retelling from the Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, 4.3.32, happiness is described as non-dual consciousness: where all the reality of world is known as self, and there is no division left between what knows and what is known.

**Translation** (from the  
Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 86)

*From 4.3.32*

‘The fluctuating ocean  
[of the seeming world],  
‘with all its many,  
changing waves,

‘turns out to be  
one single see-er,  
without duality.

‘This is the state  
of the absolute....

‘This is one’s  
highest attainment.

‘This is one’s  
highest fulfilment.

‘This is one’s  
highest state.

‘As all waves are only water,  
so all seeming things are self,  
which knows all things as but itself,  
as undivided happiness.’

‘This is one’s  
highest happiness.

‘[All] other things,  
that have but come to be,  
subsist upon  
only a measure  
of this happiness....’

## *The three states*

The syllable ‘Om’ is often used as a mantra or chanted sound in traditional practices of ritual and meditation. But it is also a condensed formula for a reasoned, philosophical enquiry into the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep: as described in the following translation and retelling of the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad.

**Translation** (from the  
Māṇḍūkya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 195-199)

*1*

The syllable ‘Om’  
is all this.

Its further explanation is:

What was, what is  
and what will be;  
all that is described  
by just the syllable ‘Om’.

And all else,  
transcending  
threefold time,  
that too is just  
the syllable ‘Om’.

The word that’s spoken out as ‘Om’,  
when rightly understood, shows all  
experience: all that is, all that  
ever was, all that will be.

And thus it shows unchanging truth;  
which stays the same, beyond all time,  
in everything that seems to be.

*2*

For everything  
is this  
complete reality.

Within each person’s mind and heart,  
while objects seem to come and go,  
the self that knows all seeming change  
must carry on. It’s always here,  
in everything we seem to know.

This self  
is all reality.

*This self is all reality.*

This same self  
has four quarters.

Reality and self, though one,  
seem to appear as different things,  
in different states of consciousness.

3

The outward-knowing  
waking state,

The outside world seems to appear  
in what we call the 'waking state'.

with seven limbs  
and nineteen faces,

Here, consciousness seems outward bound:  
from self, through little body's gross  
perceptions, out into a world  
containing all our bodies and  
the many other object-things  
our outward senses seem to know.

experiencing  
gross [objects];

this is the first aspect,  
of universality.

4

The dream state,  
inward-knowing,

But when attention seems to turn  
back in, away from outside things,  
to thoughts and feelings in our minds,  
another state appears, called 'dream'.

with seven limbs  
and nineteen faces,

Here, consciousness remains within  
our minds; and all that can appear  
are subtle forms of changing mind,  
created by imagining.

experiencing  
subtlety;

this is the second aspect,  
of burning energy.

5

Where one who sleeps  
desires no desire at all,  
nor sees any dream;  
that is deep sleep.

When mind subsides and dreams dissolve,  
there comes a state we call 'deep sleep':  
where seeming things do not appear.

The deep sleep state,  
where unity  
has been attained,

Here, consciousness is shown for what  
it is, unmixed with seeming things,  
beneath all mere appearances  
of name and form and quality.

whose content is  
pure consciousness  
and happiness,

In depth of sleep, all bonds are loosed.  
All conflicts, all divisions end.

experiencing happiness,  
[the inner light]  
that's manifested  
in the mind;

this is the third aspect,  
of consciousness.

6

This is the Lord of all.

This is the  
knower of all.

This is the  
inner controller.

This is the source of all,  
the origin and  
dissolution  
of those  
that have become.

7

Not knowing inward,  
nor knowing outward,  
nor knowing both  
[inward and outward];

not just containing  
consciousness,  
not knowing  
or unknowing;

not seen,

Thus, consciousness is clarified;  
and its true nature shines as peace,  
as undivided unity,  
as unconditioned happiness.

All things are known by consciousness.

It is the underlying ground:  
from which all seeming things arise;  
on which they stand, relate together,  
are controlled; and finally,  
in which all seeming things dissolve.

Since consciousness continues through  
all states that we experience;

it can't in truth be called a state:  
in which some seeming thing is known  
or is unknown or partly known.

It is the background of all states:  
the background of reality,  
against which seeming things are known.

And it is also knowing self:  
which lights all seeming things, by its  
own self-illuminating light.

Unseen by mind or any sense,  
it lights all mind and every sense,  
and all that is experienced.

It is itself pure knowing light.

never the object  
of any transaction,  
ungraspable,  
unsigned,  
unthinkable,  
unrepresentable;

the one  
self-evident principle,  
where all appearance  
comes to rest;

at peace,  
in unaffected happiness  
beyond duality;

it is conceived  
as the fourth.

It is the self.

It's that which  
[each of us]  
needs to know.

8

That which is this self  
corresponds  
to the syllable 'Om',  
considered as  
a single sound.

Considering the elements,  
the aspects [of the self]  
correspond

This is its nature as it is;  
to know, it does not need to act.

Its knowledge is no kind of act:  
that may be started up or stopped,  
or be directed or attached  
to changing objects in the world.

It only knows. It does not act.  
Its knowledge is quite unattached.

It can't be grasped, nor quite expressed,  
described, or pointed out, by  
any physical or mental act.

The only way it can be known  
is through its own self-evidence:  
as the essential basis where  
all differences must be resolved.

It is the source of peace and love,  
where self and world are known as one.

Three letters, joined in single sound,  
make up the word pronounced as 'Om'.  
First comes the letter 'a', then 'u',  
then 'm'; together, they form 'Om'.

to the elements  
[of sound],

and the elements  
correspond  
to the aspects.

[The elements are]  
the letter 'a',  
the letter 'u',  
the letter 'ma'.

9

[The aspect] of  
universality and  
the waking state

correspond to  
the first element,  
the letter 'a':

either from 'āpti'  
['attaining'], or from  
'ādimattva' ['being first'].

One who knows thus  
essentially attains  
all desires  
and becomes the first.

10

[The aspect] of  
burning fire and  
the dream state

correspond to  
the second element,  
the letter 'u':

either from 'utkarsha'  
['elevation'], or from  
'ubhayatva' ['being both'].

'A' represents the waking world  
that body's outward senses see.

This is the world of 'common sense',  
from which we start to look for truth  
that stays the same through changing views,  
through various different sights and sounds  
and other such appearances  
perceived from different points of view.

'U' represents the subtle forms  
we dream within our changing minds,  
conceiving thoughts and fantasies  
urged on by feeling and desire.

One who knows thus  
truly elevates  
the tradition  
of knowledge

and becomes  
even-handed.

No one in his family  
comes to be ignorant  
of reality.

*11*

[The aspect] of  
consciousness and  
the deep sleep state

correspond to  
the third element,  
the letter 'ma':

either from 'miti'  
['measuring' or  
'constructing'],

or from 'apīti'  
['merging'].

One who knows thus  
takes the essential  
measure of all this,  
and is absorbed  
[into complete reality].

*12*

The fourth [aspect]  
corresponds  
to no element.

Thus we imagine high ideals,  
in search of deeper, subtler truths  
beneath the gross appearances  
our outward senses seem to see.

'M' represents the merging place  
where consciousness shines out as peace,  
when dreams dissolve in depth of sleep.

From this pure ground of consciousness,  
all qualities, all names, all forms  
arise, and seem to show a world  
outside our senses and our minds.

Whenever anything appears,  
it must be known by consciousness.

Nothing ever can appear  
without support from consciousness.

Thus, each apparent object and  
the whole apparent universe  
must rest upon this knowing ground  
that's here, in all appearances.

And then, as world's appearances  
are understood, all forms and names  
and qualities return to ground,  
absorbed again in consciousness.

The whole word 'Om' continues on  
from 'a' to 'u' and then to 'm':

It cannot be an object  
of any action;

for in it all appearances  
of seeming objects  
come to rest.

It is the unconditioned  
happiness  
of non-duality.

The syllable 'Om' is thus  
only the self.

One who knows thus  
joins back, through self,  
into one's own true self.

thus representing consciousness  
which carries on through changing states  
and so contains them all in one.

In this unchanging consciousness  
where all appearances dissolve,

no separate ego can remain  
and happiness is realized;

for self and world are known as one.

'Om' is thus non-duality:  
where *truth but merges self in self*  
*and self shines by itself, alone.*

## *The divine presence*

### **God and self**

From the Vedas to the Upanishads, there is a general movement away from the myths and rituals of religious worship, towards philosophical questioning. In two of the main Upanishads, the concept of 'God' figures prominently; but it does so in the context of a reasoned enquiry into the nature of reality, knowledge and happiness.

Of these two Upanishads, one is called by the name 'īsha', which means 'God' or the 'Lord'. In Sanskrit, 'ish-' is a verbal root that means both to 'own' and to 'rule'. So, when God is called 'īsha', it implies that all things belong to God and that they are all governed by God.

The Īsha Upanishad adds to this sense of divine belonging and governance, by saying that everything in the world is 'īshā-vāsyam'. Literally, this means that everything is 'for the sake of God to live in'. The implication is clear. God is not some alien owner or ruler who dominates from a distance. Instead, God's presence is immediate, in everything. All things belong to that divine presence, whose home is everywhere. That presence is the single, inner life of the entire universe. Each thing perceived is just an outer habitation of that one inmost life. From that, all governance and guidance comes, in all acts and happenings. All things are for its sake.

Our bodies and our minds are no exception. Each body, each mind, each faculty of body or mind, each physical and mental act belongs to a single, divine presence that is called 'God'. That one presence lives in each personality. It rules each personality from deep within, beneath all outward names and forms and qualities.

That divine presence is obscured by our various personal claims, that our bodies and minds are personal owners and rulers of the life within them. In most of our personalities, there is an egotistical claim: that the personality belongs to its body or its mind. This claim makes it appear that our bodies or our minds are in charge, that they decide their acts and rule their personal experiences. This is a false pretence. It hides the true source from which our decisions and our experiences arise.

Each person's body and mind are driven instruments. They cannot be the real source of anyone's experience. If one looks for such a source, it may be conceived as a 'divine presence', beyond each body and each mind. It is that

presence which lives truly, in every one of us. But most of us misunderstand it, by claiming that we personally own the life within us. Its purity of inner guidance gets confused, with the personal and petty will of our externally conditioned egos.

So, in the Īsha Upanishad, a twofold approach is described. On the one hand, the ego's claims are surrendered; so that all changing things may be more truly enjoyed, as expressions of a divine presence. On the other hand, to enable this surrender, a simple question is asked. Whose are these changing things that appear in the physical and mental world? What is the divine presence to which they belong?

And the answer is given that such a presence may be realized as ātman: the real self that shines unmixed in everyone and everything, beneath all names and forms and qualities of personality and world.

**Translation** (from the  
Īsha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 156-160)

1

This [entire universe]  
is all for God  
to live in it:

All this entire universe  
belongs to God: who lives in it,  
in every smallest bit of it.

whatever changes  
in this changing world.

Thus giving up all things to God,  
whatever changes in this changing  
universe may be enjoyed:

By that renunciation,  
[all of it]  
may be enjoyed.

But do not  
covet [it].

untainted by possessiveness,  
uncompromised by wanting it.

For whose  
is any property?

Whatever there may be to claim,  
to whom, in truth, does it belong?

4

There is no movement  
in the one,  
whose quickness  
far surpasses thought.

It is unmoving unity;  
yet mind and sense cannot catch up  
with it. They always lag behind.

It's that which always  
goes before,  
beyond the reach  
of sense and mind.

Outrunning alien things  
which run on by  
[pursued or in pursuit],

it stands at rest  
[within itself].

On it, all change  
and movement  
are produced,  
from subtle energy.

5

It moves;  
and yet  
it does not move.

It's far beyond  
the furthest reach  
of space and time;  
and yet it is  
immediate, forever close,  
inseparably present here.

It's here inside,  
in everything;

It is the unchanged base of change,  
still centre of all happiness  
which every action seeks to reach.  
And yet, it always stays ahead.

Just by its nature, as it is,  
unmoved itself by any act,  
it is the source of energy  
from which all seeming actions rise.

It does not move; yet it alone  
is all that every movement is,  
and it is all those many things  
that we perceive to move and change.

To sense and mind, it's far beyond  
the furthest distances of space,  
much prior to the early past,  
more final than the end of time.  
Yet nothing else can be so close.

It's here and now: in every sight,  
in every sound and smell and taste,  
in every touch, in every thought  
and feeling, in each mind and heart.

It is the only thing that's known  
immediately; because it is  
the living centre of each heart:  
the knowing self we each call 'I'.

This knowing self is consciousness:  
the background of appearances  
that are perceived by sense and mind.

yet it is outside  
all of this.

It stays through all experience,  
as seeming objects come and go.

It is beyond all seeming things,  
beyond the changing universe  
that mind and senses seem to see.  
And yet, it can be found within  
each object in this seeming world.

Each seeming object that we know  
is known combined with consciousness;  
and thus combined with consciousness  
is but a part of consciousness.

In truth, each object that we know  
is nothing else but consciousness.

Though mind and sense seem to perceive  
external objects in the world,  
the self, in truth, knows everything  
as nothing else but consciousness.

Thus, in each object, what we call  
'reality' is consciousness:  
which is the nature of the self.

As mind and sense see seeming things,  
the self, in truth, knows but itself.

And that is plain reality:  
which is beyond all seeming things;  
yet always *is*, in every thing.

6

For one who sees  
all beings in  
pure self alone,  
and just this self  
in everyone  
and everything,

False ego is a seeming self:  
a self that seems conditioned as  
a little mind or body, which  
is part of a much larger world.

Beneath this false identity,  
of self with body or with mind,  
the real self is utterly  
impersonal; it is the base

of consciousness, upon which all conditions are compared and known.

It is the unconditioned base of all conditions in the world.

Where outward-seeming consciousness is turned back in, towards its source, it is dissolved in truth of self, which is complete reality.

For everything is known in self, and self is known in everything.

When this plain truth is realized, what is there then to be renounced? How can disharmony arise?

there's nothing found not to accept.

There's nothing alien anywhere, from which to hide or shrink away.

7

There, in that knowing where all things, all beings

are but self alone,

what could be found inadequate?

Where knowing is identity of knowing self with what is known, there known and knower are but one;

with nothing alien in between that could obscure plain simple truth: thus making knowledge incomplete, creating partiality, distorted views and nagging doubt.

For self, to know is just to be. Its very being is to shine.

Its nature is to light itself, without an intervening act that could divide it from itself or could obscure its clarity.

Then what dissatisfaction or delusion could apply at all:

What grief, delusion can exist for one who knows true unity, where everything is one with self?

in seeing that  
pure unity?

8

That [self] shines pure,  
through everything:

unconstrained  
by muscled body,

unaffected by all ill,  
untouched by any  
taint of sin.

It's that which sees,  
direct within:

intelligent,  
encompassing,  
depending only  
on itself.

From it, all purposes  
have been assigned,  
throughout  
unending time.

True self is pure, unbodied light  
of unconditioned consciousness,  
pervading all experience.

It has no organs, nor does it  
take part in any kind of act.  
No function can pertain to it.

Untouched by any harm or ill,  
unstained by misery and wrong,  
it is the living principle  
which lights perception, knows all thought  
and shines expressed as what we seek  
through all our feelings and desires.

Self-evident, beyond all things  
that may appear or disappear,  
it simply *is*, in its own right:  
completely known, beyond all doubt,  
as self-illuminating light.

Upon this changeless, certain base,  
each seeming thing pursues a course  
of seeming change through passing time  
that can't be known with certainty.

### **The rule of light**

It is all very well to say that everything is 'ruled by God' or by some ultimate 'self', but what exactly does that mean? What precisely is this 'God' or 'self', and how does it rule?

An answer is very briefly stated in the Īsha Upanishad, stanza 8 (the last stanza translated above). Here, 'God' or 'self' is described as pure light, unaffected by bodily constraints. From that unbodied light, all objectives are determined. God's rule is, quite simply, the rule of unaffected light.

In the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, this conception is described a little further. Here, there are many references to 'God': not only as 'īsha' or the 'Lord';

but, more often, as 'deva'. Both Sanskrit words, 'īsha' and 'deva', can be translated as 'God'; but their roots are quite different. Where 'īsha' implies 'power' and 'domination', 'deva' implies 'light'.

In fact, the Sanskrit word 'deva' is related to the English 'divine'. They each imply the pure light of heaven, unmixed with the obscurities and the limitations of earthly things. So, while 'deva' can be translated as 'God', it can also be translated as the 'principle of light'.

That principle is also called 'consciousness'. It is the common principle of illumination in all experience. In our personalities, it is seen mixed with our limited faculties of mind and body, where it is found expressed. In the world outside, it is seen mixed with the limited objects and happenings that our faculties perceive. But in itself, it's quite unmixed, beyond all limitations.

Found thus unmixed, beneath its mixed appearances, it is the same everywhere: the one complete reality that all experience shows. It is one single consciousness, expressed in everything, throughout the universe.

This conclusion presents us with an immediate difficulty. If the whole universe expresses consciousness, then it is all alive. How can we make sense of that? We recognize that consciousness can be expressed in the feelings, thoughts and actions of living creatures. But how can we find any such expression in objects that are inanimate, like a rock or a mountain?

The difficulty arises because we think of consciousness as somehow tied to our personal faculties of mind and sense. Certainly, we do not find such faculties in a mountain or a rock, not even in some rudimentary form. But is it true that consciousness is tied to any mental or sensual faculties? Not really. If we take a dispassionate view of our personal faculties, they are only expressions of consciousness. They depend on it. Not it on them. It is their underlying ground, beneath their varying activities.

In fact, consciousness and life can be recognized in anything, depending on how we look at it.

On the one hand we can look at something as an object. It is then a piece of world. It's seen by looking outwards: at some picture of an external world. In such a picture, previous objects of perception are found pieced together; and the new object is interpreted by fitting it in with them. But, by thus fitting things together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, we don't treat them as alive. Such external fitting builds our pictures of the world, but that alone does not show any consciousness expressed.

On the other hand, as we interpret our pictures, we have another way of looking at them. We can turn back from our objective picture-building, to look at something reflectively. Then it is seen as somehow akin to us. It shows us underlying principles of order, meaning and value. These are prin-

ciples we share in common with it, at the depth of our experience. As we understand such principles in what is seen, we reflect back, into the ground of consciousness that underlies our pictures and perceptions of the world.

This is how we understand our own actions, thoughts and feelings, when we take them to express the consciousness we find in each of us. It is also how we understand the actions, thoughts and feelings of other living beings, as we communicate with them. For all such communication is based upon a common ground of consciousness.

And we can understand all nature in this way, reflectively: by falling deeper back into our own experience, to common principles that we find expressed within our personalities and in the world outside as well.

For example, suppose a scientist examines a rock, and then reflects upon its construction and its geological location. In this reflection, principles of order get touched upon, as ordered patterns and structures are seen to have some further meaning and function. Thus, principles of meaning and function get touched upon, and even lead to principles of value.

All these principles are naturally expressed in the rock and its geological terrain. And they are understood at the depth of the scientist's mind, by reflecting back there. They underlie the perceiving mind, and the perceived world as well. They are naturally inherent, in both mind and world.

When we thus reflect on nature, we treat it as alive. We then stop fitting bits of it into our imposed pictures. Instead, we listen to what it has to say. By this attitude of listening, we recognize (at least implicitly) that it expresses consciousness.

In the personalities of living creatures, nature's expression is personal, through personal faculties of body and mind. In objects like a rock, where no such faculties are found, nature's expression is impersonal. There nature speaks impersonally, but it speaks all the same. All order, meaning and value are natural expressions of consciousness, whether in personality or outside world. All nature is alive, as it expresses consciousness throughout the world.

In this view of nature, all happenings and faculties are included in it. No happening or faculty remains excluded, to drive nature or to perceive it from outside. In the microcosm of individual experience, nature includes the perceiving body and mind. In the macrocosm of the external world, nature includes all bodies and minds, with all their acts and faculties.

Thus understood, nature includes each act that moves things and each perception that makes things appear. From within itself, nature produces all of its acts and happenings. In this sense, it moves itself and appears by itself, of its own accord.

But as it moves and manifests itself, it inherently expresses consciousness.

That is the source of all the order, meaning and value which we see in nature. That alone keeps nature regulated and coherent. Just that makes nature intelligible. That by itself is nature's underlying motivation. As nature acts, of its own accord, it does so for the sake of consciousness. It's thus that consciousness is seen expressed.

Since consciousness is pure light, it doesn't wish nature to do anything; it doesn't tell nature what to do; it doesn't interfere at all in what takes place. As consciousness shines unaffected through experience, it is the knowing ground beneath all acts and happenings. Unmoved itself by any act, it is the final ground of our experience. From it, all actions rise. On it, all actions take place. Back into it, all actions must return and be absorbed. So, naturally, all acts and happenings arise expressing it.

That is nature's basic inspiration. All nature is inspired, from within, by the very presence of consciousness, throughout experience. In a fundamental sense, it's only for the sake of consciousness that anything is done.

In short, consciousness is the unmoved mover, the originating cause of nature's manifestation. That is the position of the Shvetāshvatara Upanishad, chapter 6, as translated and retold below.

Here, 'deva' is translated as 'God' or 'divinity' or the 'divine' or the 'principle of light'. 'Īsha' is translated as the 'Lord' or 'ruler' or 'governor'.

Towards the end, stanza 6.20 is interpreted to show a curious ambivalence about the concept of 'God'. The stanza speaks of an 'end to grief ... for those who don't discern "God"'. It says that this is possible, when people 'roll up space as if it were an empty skin'. This can be interpreted to mean that space and time are not absolute. Their extension through the world is only a relative conception that stretches an observing mind from narrow objects to the entire universe.

When our minds are stretched out in this way, the concept of 'God' arises: as a universal consciousness that encompasses the universe. But when our minds reflect back deeply, beneath their superficial pictures; then all of space and time is seen enfolded there, in the microcosm of one's own individuality. The whole extent of space and time thus gets rolled up, and consciousness is seen unlimited in individual experience. There is no need then to universalize consciousness, through the concept of 'God'.

In the last stanza (6.23), devotion to a teacher is described as a way of love for the divine. Again, this can be interpreted as showing an individual approach, to the same truth that is more universally approached as 'God'.

**Translation** (from the  
Shvetāshvatara Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 253-260)

6.1

Some poets,  
in delusion, speak  
of ‘self-becoming nature’;  
others, thus, of ‘time’.

Some speak of self-becoming nature,  
or of passing time, as causing  
all that happens in the world.

But in the world, it’s  
by God’s boundlessness  
that the wheel of  
all reality is turned.

But seen more truly, all the  
happenings of time and nature act  
expressing unconditioned truth  
in the conditioned things of world.

6.2

It’s that by which  
all this [entire universe]  
forever is contained.

This truth is all reality,  
containing the entire world.

It is that knowing  
which originates  
all time, holds all  
conditioned qualities,

And further, it’s pure consciousness:  
the changeless source of changing time,  
the unconditioned, knowing ground  
of all conditioned qualities.

knows  
everything.

As moments pass, it carries on:  
enabling different qualities  
to be compared in course of time,  
and lighting all that’s ever known.

Ruled by it  
all acts unfold.

Inspired by the unseen guidance  
of this unconditioned light,  
all world’s conditioned acts unfold.

It may  
be thought about  
as earth, water,  
fire, air,  
and ether.

It gets to be conceived as the  
solidity of earth, as water’s  
changing flow, as fire’s radiance,  
air’s conditioning, and as  
the continuity of space  
and time, pervading everywhere.

## 6.3

Doing work  
and ceasing it  
time and again,  
  
one comes to join  
through principle  
the unity of principle:  
  
through the *one*  
[principle of  
consciousness],  
  
through the *two*  
[principles of  
nature and  
consciousness],  
  
through the *three*  
[principles of quality  
– inertia, energy  
and harmony],  
  
through the *eight*  
[principles of  
the five elements, mind,  
understanding and ego],  
  
and indeed through time,  
and through the subtle  
attributes of self.

In everyone's experience,  
the world is known through various acts  
of mind and body: rising up  
from underlying consciousness  
to take attention out to world,  
and then returning back again  
to take in what is thus perceived.

Time and again, each person acts;  
to learn a little of the world.

And every act ends in its source  
of underlying consciousness,  
as what was learned becomes absorbed.

Here, where all things are understood,  
one comes through various partial truths  
to unity of final truth,  
beneath all difference and change.

## 6.4

That which originates  
conditioned acts  
  
and orders  
all occurrences,  
  
that is their unbecoming  
– where what  
activity has done  
becomes destroyed.

It's from this common, changeless ground  
that all conditioned acts arise.

It is from here that different  
occurrences co-ordinate.

But here itself, there are no acts  
and no occurrences at all.  
Here, all that has been done by doing  
is entirely destroyed.

As actions pass,  
that carries on:  
essentially apart.

At doing's end, the truth remains:  
shown other than the changing world  
of seeming acts and happenings.

6.5

It is the first,  
the unifying cause  
of instrumental causes.

It is the first, the unifying,  
unmoved cause, of causes that  
are moved to act towards results.

It is beyond triple time  
[past, present, future],  
seen undivided into parts,

Thus it is seen beyond all time,  
found undivided into parts;

shown by all forms,  
the happening of  
what's become,

the truth that has of old been heeded  
as a worshipped God: who's  
manifested in all forms, who is  
the happening of all that has  
become, and who stands here within,  
in everyone's own mind and heart.

invoked as God,  
standing in one's  
own mind and heart,

heeded thus of old.

6.6

[Seen] through the tree  
of happenings in time,  
it is beyond, it's alien.

Seen through the tree of branching  
happenings that form in time, the truth  
is known as something else, beyond.

From it,  
this universe  
is cycled  
to and fro.

From it, the whole created world  
goes out and then returns, and is  
thus cycled and recycled round:  
as different appearances  
succeed each other in our minds.

The 'Lord' we worship  
cleanses sin,  
and brings  
well-founded order  
[that holds things  
where they belong].

The 'Lord' who's worshipped with devotion  
cleanses sin, removes all ill,  
brings order, justice, harmony.

Standing as self,  
He's known as that

Thus known, He's that in which all things  
come home. He is that principle

which does not die,  
the home of everything.

abiding here in everyone:  
the self which does not change or die.

## 6.7

That is the ultimate  
great Lord of lords,  
the final God of gods,  
the ultimate controller  
of controllers.

That is the ultimate, great 'Lord  
of Lords', the ultimate  
divinity of all divinities,  
the ultimate controlling principle  
of all controlling powers.

That must  
be known beyond:  
invoked and praised  
as God, as Lord  
of the becoming world.

It's that which must be known beyond:  
as 'Lord' of the becoming world,  
the principle that is invoked  
and worshipped through the name of 'God'.

## 6.8

Of it, there's found  
no faculty that  
causes an effect.

It has itself no faculty  
of doing anything; nor has  
it anything that it must do.

Nothing equal to it,  
nor more than it,  
is seen.

Nor is there anything that is  
its equal or superior.

Nor is there even anything  
that is additional to it.

Its transcending  
capability is heard  
in many ways.

As the *transcendent* source of all  
of nature's energy, it is  
revealed in many different ways.

It is  
inherent nature:  
[immanent in]  
knowledge,  
strength  
and action.

For it is also *immanent*:  
as the inherent principle  
of nature shared in common by  
all faculties that know the world,  
all capabilities of strength  
and all the world's activities.

## 6.9

Nothing, in all the world,  
is its controller,

It has no ruler or controller  
anywhere, in all the world.

nor its ruler,  
nor its  
exclusive sign.

It's the originating cause,  
the overseer of our  
overseeing faculties.

Of it, there is  
no parent source;  
there is no overseer.

*6.10*

Like a spider,  
with threads born from  
its primal substance,

the one divinity  
surrounds itself  
with its own  
self-becoming.

It's that [divinity]  
which grants us  
dissolution in  
uncompromised reality.

*6.11*

The one divinity,  
pervading everything, is  
hidden in all beings: as  
the inner self in everyone.

It's that which  
oversees each act,  
that which lives  
in everything.

It is the witness,  
looking on  
quite unaffected,  
absolute.

Not has it an exclusive sign  
whose absence shows it is not there;  
for it is present everywhere.

It is the underlying cause,  
the common guiding principle,  
of all our guiding faculties.

It has no further source of birth,  
nor any guiding principle,  
found anywhere beyond itself.

Just like a spider weaves a web  
born forth of its own inner substance,

one sole principle of light  
seems to surround itself with an  
apparent universe that's made  
of its own being, self-become.

To it, each one of us may turn,  
from compromise with outward show,  
to find all separateness dissolved  
in unobscured reality.

This single principle of light,  
pervading all the universe,  
is hidden in all beings: as  
the inner self in everyone.

It oversees all seeming acts:  
as that which lives in everything,  
observing all experiences,  
itself completely unattached  
to any kind of changing act.

Through all perceived appearances  
of changing world, it is the witness:  
unconditioned, absolute.

## 6.12

It is the one impelling will, of the many who don't act of themselves.

It is that which makes the one seed manifold.

The steadfast see it, standing as self.

To them, as not to others, lasting happiness [is found].

It's that one principle of activating will, among the many that aren't active in themselves.

And it's the underlying base on which one seed of all creation is made manifold, thus giving rise to the variety of things that happen in the world.

Whoever sees it standing here through all experiences, as one's own self, finds lasting happiness:

which can't be found in alien things that are not realized as self.

## 6.13

It is the constancy of constant things, the consciousness of conscious things,

the one among the many,

that which fulfils desires.

It's the originating cause, approached through sāṅkhya [analysis] and yoga [discipline].

Knowing [that] divinity, one finds release, through all bonds and ties.

It's the unchanging constancy of constant things, the knowing core of consciousness in conscious things,

the one reality among the many seeming things of world,

the central principle of value from which all desires arise.

And it's the underlying cause of all phenomena: approached through analytic reasoning, or through techniques and disciplines that harness energy and power.

6.14

There the sun  
does not shine,  
nor moon and stars;

nor do these  
lightning flashes shine;  
much less this fire.

It alone shining,

everything  
shines after it.

By its light,  
everything here  
shines back.

The sun does not shine here, nor do  
the moon and stars, nor lightning from  
the sky, nor any alien fire.

It shines alone, by its own light.  
Its very being is to shine.

All shines reflecting after it.  
Whatever in the world appears  
reflects its light of consciousness.

Thus all the world is nothing else  
but the reflected light of self.

As self illuminates the world,  
it just illuminates itself.

6.15

One swan [free spirit]  
in the midst of this  
becoming world,

it alone is the fire  
permeated deep within  
the waters' surging flow.

Knowing just that,  
one goes beyond death.

There is no other  
way to go.

It is the one free spirit in  
the midst of a conditioned world.

And it alone is all the fire  
of energy that permeates  
the changes and the transformations  
of the world's conditioning.

Just knowing it takes one beyond  
all seeming bonds, to deathlessness.

There is no other way than this.

6.16

It does everything,  
knows everything.

It is itself  
its own knowing source.

It's the originating cause  
of everything that's known and done;

the self-caused, knowing ground of learning  
and of all conditioned qualities;

Its are all qualities,  
all learning.

It is the time of time  
[which shines where  
passing time has  
passed itself away].

It is the knower  
of the primal field,  
the guiding principle  
that rules all qualities.

It is the cause of states,  
of bondage and liberation,  
in the world  
of birth and death.

### 6.17

It is just that  
which does not die,  
which knows  
through everything;

which stands complete,  
as Lord and guardian  
of this evolving universe.

It's always here, as  
that which governs all  
this moving world.

For this governance,  
no other cause  
is found.

### 6.18

It is what comes before,  
from which Brahma  
[the creator] is set forth.

where all-destroying time  
originates and is destroyed.

It's that which knows the primal field  
of everyone's experience.  
From that one guiding principle  
comes order, meaning, quality.  
All things are ruled by it, within.

It is the cause of bondage,  
and of liberation from the cyclic  
processes of birth and death.

As deathless consciousness, pervading  
everywhere, it is the changeless  
witness of all happening.

It stands complete, as Lord and guardian  
of this changing universe.

From it, all order and all  
regularity originate.

There is no other cause of  
ordered regularity, enabling  
us to understand the world.

In all that is perceived or thought  
or felt within our changing minds,  
it is that inner principle  
of self-illuminating light:

From it, the Vedas are  
brought forth, for him.

In search of liberation,  
I take refuge  
in just that  
which is divine:

the light of self,  
within the mind.

which all creation must assume,  
from which all learning is brought forth,  
and for whose sake what's done takes place.

*6.19*

Partless, it is  
detached from acts,  
at peace.

Blameless, unstained,  
it is the final bridge  
of deathlessness,  
like a fire that  
completely burns  
its fuel.

It's always peaceful: undivided  
into parts, and unaffected  
by all action in the world.

It's free of blame, cannot be stained,  
the final bridge of deathlessness:  
just like a fire burning clean  
to leave no smoke or ash behind.

*6.20*

When humankind  
shall roll up space  
as if it were a skin,

an end to grief  
shall come about,  
for those who don't  
discern 'God'.

When humankind shall turn all space  
back on itself, and shall thus roll  
it up, just like an empty skin;

then there shall be an end to grief  
for the agnostic about 'God'.

*6.21*

By power of discipline,  
and by divine grace,  
Shvetāshvatara spoke  
of pure reality,  
complete and ultimate.

[He spoke] from surety  
of knowledge, to those

advanced along the way,  
delighting the assembled  
company of seers.

## 6.22

The highest secret  
in Vedānta, as declared  
in a past age,  
must not be  
given out to one  
who does not  
come to peace,  
who's not a son  
or a disciple.

The highest secret of philosophy,  
declared and handed down  
from times long past, is not passed on  
except to a disciple who  
thus finds true clarity and peace.

## 6.23

To one whose love  
for the divine  
transcends all else,  
as [is that love]  
for the divine,  
so too [is love]  
towards the teacher.

Where love for truth transcends all else,  
so too does love towards a teacher:  
who is living truth itself,  
for one to whom the truth is shown.

To such a one,  
all meanings told  
shine forth  
from unconditioned self,  
shine forth  
from unconditioned self.

All meanings that are told and heard  
shine forth from unconditioned light  
that is each person's real self.

## *Teacher and disciple*

The relationship of teacher and disciple is central to the Upanishads. In particular, philosophical questions are often discussed by telling a story, in which someone approaches a teacher and receives instruction.

But this teacher-disciple relationship is a delicate matter of emotional sensibility: which could hardly be expected to lend itself to any crude tailoring according to some intellectually prescribed order. On this subject, the Upanishads hold back from their usual style of forthright, definitive assertion. Instead, the teacher-disciple relationship is suggested by example; and its necessity is briefly indicated in a few, rather sparing passages where it is directly described.

Some of these passages are shown translated and retold below.

### **Seeking truth**

**Translation** (from the  
Muṇḍaka Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 183)

*1.2.12*

‘Examining constructed  
worlds built up by action,  
one who seeks reality  
may well arrive  
at disillusionment.

‘Whoever seeks this common source  
must find a teacher who will show  
unchanging truth in seeming change,  
the deathless centre of all life  
that each of us experiences....’

‘For there is nothing  
[here, in these worlds]  
that isn’t fabricated  
by some kind of act.

‘With sacrificial fuel  
in one’s hand,

‘for the sake of knowing  
that [reality  
beyond all acts],

‘one should approach  
only a teacher  
who has heard  
and is established in  
the truth.

### *1.2.13*

‘For one who has  
attained restraint,  
whose mind has turned  
towards tranquility,

‘the knowing [teacher],  
suitably approached,  
has taught  
that knowledge of reality

‘by which one knows  
the changeless principle  
of truth: impersonal  
within all personality....’

## **Not found by speech**

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 39)

### *6.12*

It cannot be attained  
by speech,  
nor by mind  
or sight.

If not through one  
who says ‘It is’,  
how else can it  
be understood?

Mere talking cannot find out truth,  
nor can ideas conceived by mind,  
nor mere sensations of the world  
impressed on mind by any sense.

If not by finding out from one  
who knows it well, beyond all doubt,  
and shows exactly what it is,  
how else can truth be understood?

## Learning from a teacher

**Translation** (from the  
Kāṭha Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, pages 11-12)

2.7

‘It’s that which many  
do not even  
get to hear of;

‘You’ve chosen well to seek this truth.  
Not many hear it; and, of those,  
not many rightly understand.

‘and, of even  
those who hear,  
which many  
do not understand.

‘It’s only someone  
very rare and special  
who attains it and  
can speak of it effectively.

‘For precious few are blessed to find  
a teacher who can show this truth.

‘It’s known  
only by someone  
very rare and special  
who’s been taught  
of it effectively.

‘And even when thus plainly shown,  
only a few want truth enough  
to overcome the fears that rise  
as ego’s self-deceptions die.

2.8-9

‘It’s thought about  
in many ways,

‘Truth is approached in different ways;  
and therefore it cannot be taught  
by one who does not know it well,  
beyond the ways that lead to it.

‘but can’t be  
truly known

‘professed by anyone  
who hasn’t fully  
risen up to it.

‘There is no way  
of getting there,  
unless it’s taught  
by someone else.

‘It’s subtler than the subtlest thing  
that any faculty perceives;  
and therefore it cannot be reached  
without the help of someone else

‘And when it’s taught  
as nothing else  
but one’s own self,

who’s gone beyond all faculties  
of body or of sense or mind.

‘then there’s no  
going there at all  
[because it’s  
here and now  
what one already is.]<sup>2</sup>

‘For it is subtler than  
all measured subtlety,  
beyond all argument.

‘This conviction cannot be  
attained by argument;

‘It’s known beyond all argument  
when it is shown by someone else,  
as nothing else but self alone:  
which different people share alike  
beneath all changing faculties  
of body and of sense and mind....’

‘but, dear friend,  
it can be truly known,  
taught by someone else.

‘This is  
what you’ve attained,  
holding so firmly on  
to truth.

‘For [each of] us,  
would that the questioner  
were like you, Naciketas...’

## **Coming home**

**Translation** (from the  
Chāndogya Upanishad)

**Retelling**  
(from *FTU*, page 111)

### *6.14.1*

‘Dear son, it is as though  
a person from [the land  
of] the Gandhāras

‘How can this truth be understood?’  
‘Suppose a man, blindfolded, finds

<sup>2</sup>The two preceding sentences are different ways of interpreting the same words:  
‘ananya-prokte gatiḥ atra nāsti’.

‘was brought  
blindfolded to some  
inhospitable place,

‘and was  
abandoned there.

‘That person then  
might wander aimlessly

‘towards the east,  
or towards the south,  
or towards the north,  
or towards the west;

‘brought thus  
blindfolded here,  
left thus  
blindfolded here.

6.14.2

‘And it’s as though  
someone might release  
his blindfold and say:

“‘In that direction  
are the Gandhāras.  
That is the direction  
you must travel.”

‘Thus instructed  
and empowered  
with intelligence,

‘he can ask (his way)  
from village to village,

‘and arrive precisely  
at [the land of]  
the Gandhāras.

‘So also, one  
who has a teacher

himself quite lost in a strange place  
and wanders, crying out for help.

‘Suppose that someone takes away  
the blindfold from his eyes, and shows  
him how to seek and find his way.

‘Then he can journey on, from place  
to place, and get back home again.

‘So too, a teacher shows you how  
to seek and find your way back home

‘knows that he’s delayed  
only so long  
as he is not released  
[from ignorance];

‘and thence he knows  
that he’s arrived:  
entirely complete....’

to your own self: where consciousness  
is unconditioned, simple truth  
at one with all reality.’

## Scheme of transliteration

To make things easier for the general reader, this book uses a simplified system of Sanskrit transliteration. In particular, only two kinds of diacritical marking have been used.

- The first is a bar overhead (as in ‘ā’), which indicates a long vowel.
- The second is a dot underneath (as in ‘ṭ’). This indicates a kind of hard consonant, called a ‘retroflex’, as explained further below.

The Sanskrit alphabet is famous for being highly phonetic. In effect, this means that words are written pretty well exactly as they are pronounced. To pronounce Sanskrit correctly, it is largely a matter of knowing the rules, which are very clear and very systematic.

*It is not difficult to get the pronunciation approximately correct; and for anyone who is going to use Sanskrit words and names, it is worth trying, because the ‘shape’ of the sounds is rather important.* During the many thousands of years over which the Sanskrit language has evolved, a great deal of attention and care has gone into developing sounds that evoke appropriate qualities of feeling and attitude. It is a pity to throw this away for not paying a few minutes of attention to what the sounds should be.

Here are a few suggestions.

1. **Vowels:** The general rule here is that a bar over a letter indicates a long vowel. Without a bar, vowels are short, except for ‘e’ and ‘o’, which are always pronounced long. This ‘e’ is not pronounced like ‘e’ in ‘bet’. Instead, it is pronounced like ‘-ay’ in ‘day’. And ‘o’ is not pronounced like ‘o’ in ‘hot’. Instead, it is pronounced like ‘o’ in ‘bold’. The list of vowels is as follows:

‘a’ .....	as ‘-er’ .....	in ‘father’
‘ā’ .....	as ‘a’ .....	in ‘father’
‘i’ .....	as ‘i’ .....	in ‘fit’
‘ī’ .....	as ‘ee’ .....	in ‘feet’
‘u’ .....	as ‘u’ .....	in ‘put’
‘ū’ .....	as ‘oo’ .....	in ‘mood’
‘e’ .....	as ‘-ay’ .....	in ‘day’
‘ai’ .....	as ‘i’ .....	in ‘ride’
‘o’ .....	as ‘o’ .....	in ‘bold’
‘au’ .....	as ‘-ow’ .....	in ‘how’

2. **Consonants:** These are generally pronounced as in English, except with the following peculiarities and modifications:

2.1 **Unmarked consonants are always soft:**

‘c’ is pronounced as ‘ch’ in ‘child’ (not as ‘c’ in ‘case’).

‘t’ is pronounced something like ‘th’ in ‘thought’, but more accurately like ‘t’ in the Italian pronunciation of ‘pasta’.

‘d’ is pronounced rather like ‘th’ in ‘this’, but more accurately like ‘d’ in the Italian ‘dolce’ or in the Spanish ‘Cordoba’.

2.2 **Retroflex consonants are marked with a dot underneath:** This applies to ‘ṭ’, ‘ḍ’ and ‘ṇ’. These are pronounced with the tip of the tongue doubled back and touching the roof of the palate. There is no exact equivalent in English or other European languages. The best approximation for most English speakers is to pronounce:

‘ṭ’ ..... as ‘t’ ..... in ‘table’  
 ‘ḍ’ ..... as ‘d’ ..... in ‘desk’  
 ‘ṇ’ ..... as ‘n’ ..... in ‘noise’

2.3 **Aspirates:** An aspirate occurs whenever h follows a consonant, except for ‘sh’ (which is pronounced as the ordinary English ‘sh’ in ‘should’). Aspirated consonants are not familiar to English speakers; but they are not difficult to pronounce. An aspirated consonant consists simply of a consonant followed by the sound ‘h’: as when a word ending with a consonant is followed immediately by another word starting with ‘h’. For example:

‘kh’ ..... as ‘-k h-’ ..... in ‘pack horse’  
 ‘gh’ ..... as ‘-g h-’ ..... in ‘dog house’  
 ‘ch’ ..... as ‘-ch-h-’ ..... in ‘beach-head’  
 ‘ṭh’ ..... as ‘-th-’ ..... in ‘foothold’  
 ‘th’ ..... as ‘-thh-’ ..... in ‘withhold’  
 ‘bh’ ..... as ‘-bh-’ ..... in ‘abhor’

2.4 **Double consonants:** Again, these are not quite familiar to English speakers, but are not difficult to pronounce. As the name suggests, a double consonant consists simply of a consonant followed by itself: as when a word ending with a consonant is followed immediately by another word starting with the same consonant. For example:

‘ll’ ..... as ‘-l l-’ ..... in ‘coal lamp’

‘nn’ ..... as ‘-nkn-’ ..... in ‘unknown’

Thus, the sound of the Sanskrit word ‘annam’ (meaning ‘food’) could be described as rather like the English ‘un-numb’ (if the reader will forgive the somewhat artificial concoction).

- 2.5 **Compound consonants:** These can occasionally be tricky. In particular, there can be a problem with the ‘jny’ in ‘jnyānam’, ‘prajnyānam’, ‘vijnyānam’, ‘Yājnyavalkya’, and so on. The ‘j’ needs to be pronounced rather delicately and with very little accentuation. It merely adds a sort of emphasis to the following ‘-ny’. When ‘jny’ begins a word, it is a reasonable approximation to ignore the ‘j’ altogether. Thus ‘jnyānam’ can be quite fairly approximated as ‘nyānam’. When ‘jny’ occurs in the middle of a word, the ‘j’ is not sounded separately, but only functions as a silent stop which can be approximated by a specially soft and delicate ‘t’. Hence, ‘prajnyānam’ might be approximated by ‘pratnyānam’, and ‘Yājnyavalkya’ might be approximated by ‘Yātnyavalkya’; remembering that the ‘t’ must be very soft and only very delicately pronounced, to a large extent as a sort of hesitation before the ‘-ny’.

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