

TEN THEMES IN THE UPANISHADS...

We will extricate ten major themes in the Upanishads. If you understand these ten themes, then you will be able to clearly have the basis to understand the entire Hindu religion.

BRAHMAN

The first theme is the theme of Brahman. What is Brahman? Who is Brahman? That is a very important question in the Hindu religion. I think this term, “Brahman” represents in some way the key quest of Hinduism. The whole Hindu religion, or more accurately the collection of Hindu religions, are all in some way in search of the answer to the question, “Who or what is Brahman?” It is the determined Sanskrit for ultimate reality. Some would answer the question in terms of personal monotheism. Others, that Brahman in some kind of all-pervading essence or undergirding reality of the universe. Some would answer in more monotheistic terms, others in more monistic terms. This is a very, very difficult concept to nail down in a single definition. So, let’s keep it quite broad.

Brahman is ultimate reality and Hindus will define it in a wide variety of ways. There are Hindus who believe that Brahman is a personal god in ways that are very similar to how a Christian or a Muslim might regard God. There are other Hindus who believe in many, many gods, or even in one pervading essence of the universe. This is one of the key quests of Hinduism. One of the things that Hindus do in discussing Brahman, right in the Upanishads, is making the distinction between two ways that Brahman

is spoken of; either as Nirguna Brahman or as Saguna Brahman. Nirguna means “without qualities”; Saguna means “with qualities.”

Whenever you talk about God with qualities; for example, saying God is love, god is just, god is creator, etc., this is often regarded by some of the Hindu philosophers as speaking of Brahman as “Saguna,” that is, with qualities. It is believed that the higher way of speaking of God, or the higher way of understanding god is never with qualities, but rather without qualities, Nirguna Brahman. If Brahman is spoken of in any kind of descriptive way, it goes to the lower level of Saguna. If he is spoken of in general categories, this is Nirguna Brahman. This is very important obviously for Christian proclamation because Christians often talk about God in very personal, descriptive terminologies: God is personal, God is loving, He came to die on the cross for us, etc. All of that language is reduced to Saguna Brahman, Brahman with qualities, and is believed by Hindus to be ultimately illusory.

Nirguna Brahman is ultimately the only proper way that god can be spoken of. That is, without any descriptive or qualifying elements. Otherwise, they believe it is simply human attempts to impose upon the ineffable reality some kind of human qualities or conceptions which simply cannot be made about the ultimate reality. The word “Brahman” is a very important concept that does dwell clearly in the Hindu firmament and must be understood as part of the major discussion and yet left open-ended in terms of how many Hindus understand the term, “Brahman.”

ATMAN

The second is the term “atman.” Atman is the word for soul or essence in Hinduism. Atman refers to the ground of our being. It is our essence. It is

sometimes translated as “universal soul.” Atman is that which is the basis of all reality. This is a fundamental concept in Hinduism. If you ask the question, “What is the essence of the ‘I’ itself?” the answer is “atman.” This is the stuff which forms the essence of humanity, but also it is the essence of everything, including plants, animals, even rocks and inanimate objects. The atman can be captured within various impurities and finite existences, but it is ultimately detached from physical existence. You may have heard of the doctrine of reincarnation. The atman is that which migrates from body to body and is re-manifested in various lifetimes. This is the essence of the person that lies beneath all the outward accretions, including the human body. This is often why it is translated a “soul” or “self” because they are trying to get it down to the essence of what makes us “us.” The word “atman” is an important term in the Upanishads and continues to play a key role in Hinduism.

TAT TVAM ASI

The third theme in the Upanishads is a phrase which must be understood to understand how the philosophers approached the Upanishads. It is a phrase in Sanskrit, “Tat Tvam Asi.” This is a phrase which means, “thou art that” or “you are that.” It is a phrase that comes from one of the Upanishads, the *Chandogya* Upanishad. It is in reference to a discussion that goes on between a teacher and his student. In the course of this guru talking to his student, he points to various things that he sees and he tells the student that the essence of that item, whether it be a rock or a person or anything, the essence of that is atman and you are that. You are the essence of the sea, you are the essence of the tree, you are the essence of a lump of clay; whatever it is that one points to, it shares the same essence that we share. The key insight of the Upanishads is the recognition that your essence is identical with the essence of the universe. This is the

phrase, “Tat Tvam Asi, you are that.” There is no “I and thou”. There is no “me and you.” We all share an in-common essence, a common ground of being and this ground of being is known as “atman” and “Tat Tvam Asi” is identification between our essence and the essence of the whole universe.

We have already learned that Brahman is the fundamental, undergirding essence of the universe; and of course, the great insight of the Upanishads is that there is no difference between the essence that we have and the essence of the universe or the essence of Brahman, which is the essence of all things. This is a way of identifying your essence with the essence of Brahman and the essence of the whole universe and it is summarized in this phrase, “Tat Tvam Asi.” It is widely believed to be one of the most important insights of the Upanishads and is part of what in Hinduism is often called a cosmical homology. This means the ability to take something small and through it, understand something that applies to the whole universe. The belief is, if you can understand the essence of your own self, which is atman, then by implication you can understand the essence of the whole universe. This idea of extending what you observe on a small scale, to what is true of the whole universe, is very important in Hinduism and it is summarized by this expression, “Tat Tvam Asi.”

SAMSARA

The fourth of our ten key themes in the Upanishads is “samsara.” Samsara literally means “flow.” It is like a river flowing or a wheel that turns around and around and around. Maybe you have seen the Indian flag. You notice that on the flag, in the very center of it, is a wheel. This is a key theme in India, the idea of the ever-turning wheel. It refers to the individual cycle of life and death and rebirth, which never ends in the Hindu worldview until you have this insight of Tat Tvam Asi, that your essence is the same as the

essence of the universe. In the meantime, we are trapped on the little samsara and we continue to be reborn into the world. Samsara is the point of anguish. This is the problem, the key problem in Hinduism. It is from this doctrine of samsara that the important doctrine of transmigration or reincarnation flows within Hinduism. As long as we remain trapped in separate, independent existence; that is, we think that we are separate, we think that there is an “I” and we think that there is a “thou;” rather than seeing everything as a part of that single essence, we will continue to migrate into new forms of existence. Upon death, your atman, that is, your essence, will migrate to a new life and re-born and re-birthed and you will live another life. This will continue repeatedly until you finally break free from the wheel of samsara and are liberated in a term which is called “moksha” which we will look at later: that is, release, a salvation term.

Samsara is important. This is the individual cycle of life and rebirth, and transmigration or reincarnation flows out of that. In the full lecture, we have extensive discussion about how the real samsara is understood in terms of actual years. They believe that this wheel that turns is divided into different periods of time that last anywhere from 432,000 years to 1.7 million years as this wheel turns. It is quite a remarkable way of understanding the Hindu view of time, which is much more cyclical than our more linear time. If you are interested in that discussion, you can listen to the lectures about samsara, which give the full insight about that.

MAYA

Simply put this word refers to illusion. The world is an illusion. But more critical thinkers use it this way – the real world as you see it masks the real world which you don't see. So maya is a false way of looking at reality due to our ignorance.

KARMA

The sixth term of the ten is the term, “karma.” Karma is a term that most of you have heard of, I’m sure. It is certainly a very important term in the broader scheme of Hinduism as well as Buddhism. The word karma means literally, “act or deed.” It is one of the eternal principles present in the universe which Hindus regard as immutable. It is an immutable law of cause and effect or sowing and reaping. Karma states that every action is the effect of a cause; and it is in turn the cause of an effect. All karma is every deed or every act that you perform in your life has a corresponding effect which either further imbeds you in the state of samsara or will further liberate you from the bondage of samsara and ignorance and the way we falsely superimpose our ideas on the world; and eventually we get released into a liberated state. Therefore, karma is an extremely important concept. There are different kinds of karma the Hindus refer to in their writings. Again, the full lectures have a further exposition of what karma is.

MOKSHA

The seventh term is the term “moksha.” Moksha refers to release from the bonds of karma or samsara. This is an important term because this is essentially the salvation or liberation word in Hinduism. This is the esoteric-logical equivalent of salvation in Christianity. Moksha means “release.” This is the goal of Hinduism, that is a result of the realization and the appropriation via good karma of the truth that your atman is one with Brahman. Moksha is what happens when you finally recognize the truth of Tat Tvam Asi, that thou art that, your identity is the same as the identity of

the universe. That is the most important cosmic homology; that is, the ratio between your life and the whole essence of the universe. That identity is the basis of all Hinduism. This why Hinduism is ultimately characterized as monistic; that is, believing in one fundamental reality in the whole universe. That reality is known as “Brahman.” The great insight of Hinduism is that your atman is Brahman. “I am that thou art that” and when you achieve that realisation, you enter moksha and release from the wheel of samsara. You can begin to see how all these terms fit together in creating the building blocks of the Indian worldview.

MONISM

The eighth of our ten terms is the term “monism.” This is actually a term we have already discussed in passing because monism simply means that there is only one ultimate principle of existence or being. Reality is not divided, there is not god and then the other; everything is Brahman. At its essence, there are no distinctions between anything and the essence of the universe and the essence of Brahman. This is a classic example of a monistic religion. However, it is critical to understand that in the Hindu discussion they often do not use the word “monism.” Monism is more often used in western discussions about Hinduism that use classical western categories. I want to introduce you to the concept of monism because it is important in your reading of western literature about Hinduism because it is often regarded as monistic. I want to alert you to the fact that even though this is a very commonly used term in the west in terms of referring to Hinduism as a monistic worldview, in the Indian worldview you will encounter the term, not monism but non-dualism. It is a negated way of saying the same thing. Rather than saying, “We are monistic,” they say, “We are not dualistic” when you are non-dualistic. That is more commonly the way that you hear it referred to among eastern writers.

YOGA

The ninth of the ten terms is the term, “yoga.” Yoga is a term which in many ways will cause us problems because we must first erase our databank about what we think about the word “yoga” and begin to kind of re-establish the word “yoga” from its traditional base to where we are today. Yoga has come into the American vocabulary to refer to certain kinds of guided exercises, kind of like a spiritual aerobics program with an eastern flavor to it, or a more holistic exercise, etc. Actually, the term “yoga” goes back to a very different kind of setting. We need to explain that and then show it is tied into the more American western conception today.

Yoga is one of six schools of Hindu philosophy. Hinduism is divided into six schools of thought that are accepted as legitimate schools of philosophy. One of these is the school of yoga. It is the fourth of the six schools of Hindu philosophy. The reason yoga got associated with all the breathing techniques and various exercises you are familiar with is because the yoga school of philosophy basically says they agree with another school of philosophy in terms of its teaching, the teaching of a school called “Samkhya” who believe that Samkhya, the realization of those truths, could not be realized without performing certain meditative techniques. Yoga became the way that a person could achieve Samkhya, going through various meditation and guided exercises that are now part of the larger world of yoga and how it is viewed in the west.

Yoga must first be seen as a school teaching philosophy and later, a much broader usage, refers to just a way or a path toward liberation. Not just a specific remedy of yoga to achieve the goals of Samkhya; but yoga can be used quite widely to refer to which way on the path of liberation do you follow? What is your means of being liberated from sorrow? What is your

yoga? It can be a path or a way towards liberation. This usage has occurred because yoga has involved a lot of emphasis on breath control, posture, meditation, concentration, etc. That becomes actually a very important aspect of Hindu thought. Because Hindus believe that resonating throughout the universe is an un-struck sound which is often identified with the expression, “aum.” If you know Hinduism, you will know that the most important mantra in Hinduism is this expression, “aum.” It is often spelled “a-u-m” because of the diphthong, the sliding sound from the “a” to the “u” leading to the “m.” This sound, which is made by Hindus all over the world, is believed to be the sound that resonates through the entire universe. Often in meditation Hindus will connect with this sound and will make the sound and try to get into a spiritual resonance with it. They believe that once you get into the resonance with the aum, you can begin to hear the words of revelation and other insights that come out of the Hindu worldview. Yoga was such a specialty in this that it became identified with various techniques and ways people use to attain liberation. Therefore, the term “yoga” has quite a few broad and also very specific usages. You should be aware of that and discuss it in thinking about Hinduism.

SATCITANANDA

The tenth and final concept that we need to look at in this summary is not a theme which is particularly dominant in the Upanishads; but I believe it is vital to be aware of because of the theological implications of it for reflection later on in Hinduism. There are 18 Upanishads that form the collection from which we are now looking at some of the themes. As I mentioned before, Brahman is defined and described in various ways in the text, but other times they refuse to define him. This led to the distinction between Brahman without qualities and Brahman with qualities.

However, at the very end of the Upanishads, in the last Upanishad, there is a point where it seems that the Upanishads are willing to make certain limited statements describing Brahman; and yet clearly making it clear this is Nirguna Brahman. This is the highest level of Brahman. It is in these three words, "Sat chit ananda." This is collectively known as "the doctrine of Sat Chit Ananda. It is essentially moving these three words together into one word. These three terms can be translated in English as "being, consciousness and bliss". Sat is "being." "Chit" is consciousness. "Ananda" is bliss or joy.

This is important because later Indian Christian theologians will use this concept to advance Christian discussion and even the doctrine of The Trinity within the Indian worldview.

The terms, Sat, Chit and Ananda, an important doorway to talk about God at the highest level. Almost anything you say about God is automatically reduced to a lower level, to Saguna which is then in turn denounced as illusory. In Hindu-Christian dialogue, if there is a way to break in with a discussion about God at the highest level; it would be via this concept.

All of these concepts that are there in the Upanishads are actually developed textually in a number of very important ways. which some scholars call the Mahavakyas of the Upanishads. The word "Mahavakya" means "the great utterances of the Upanishads."