

LECTURE NOTES ON THE UPANISHADS

1. From Veda to Upanishad:

Change in tone. Unsurprising?

- Polytheism to Monotheism?
- Gods lose power to Ritual (become intermediaries) *Brahmanas*
- Ritual to Personal Enlightenment. *Aranyakas* (Shvestaketu, son of Uddalaka)
- Literal understanding of ritual and religion to symbolic understanding.
- Linear time with one life to cyclic time with reincarnation
- The distinction between inner reality and outer appearance.

2. The idea that underlying the vast diversity of the world we experience is some sort of unity.

Not obvious and natural. Archaic cultures often do not make a significant appearance/reality distinction. Things are what they seem. You are defined by your external qualities, your appearance, what you do (especially who you kill in battle), who your family are, your wealth. Think of the Iliad. Other epics. Often rather 2-dimensional characters?

Lying is the worst offense. Why? Odysseus as problematic character.

Archaic cultures typically regard the world as being composed of lots of forces and lots of gods. A natural view. An advance to see these as made from the same stuff. Who would have thought?

3. **Polytheism to Monotheism** ... Not a pantheon of distinct deities with distinct powers and personalities. Often resemblance's etc.... Indra with thunderbolt + Agni (Fire) Fluid identities, roles, descriptions. Search for the sources. Super Gods such as Prajapati (lord of creatures) Visvakarman (Maker of everything)... More abstract principles such as Air, Water, Heat, Desire, ... But all of these bounded/limited.

- Way of negation. Ultimate source as unbounded, beyond human concepts and knowledge.
- But it is an odd form of Monotheism. The reality of the gods not denied!

4. Upanishads offer various slightly different accounts of reality, they all have the same basic pattern, but sometimes the details are different. Knowledge of Brahman and Atman is intuitive/mystical. They cannot be truly known as we know the ordinary things around us. They cannot be truly known as *object*. *These notions are hard to grasp --- and they should be!*

5. **Brahman** Ultimate reality. Unchanging and without qualities. Yet also manifests itself in changing world of experience. So is the world of experience: unreal? of lesser reality? real? And how can we know Brahman?
6. **Atman** Ultimate self.
7. Contrast **Atman** with **jivatman**-- **jivatman** is the social/psychological/biological self--it accumulates *karma*---it is subject to reincarnation *samsara*.
 - Material Self/Living Body/Sensing Self/Thinking Self/Atman.
 - Physical Self/Dream Self/Self of Deep Sleep/Atman.
 - Atman is beyond the bounds of conceptual thought/knowledge.
 - **Atman** ... "the self as subject" ... "the 'I' which accompanies all thought and experience. But what does that mean?"
 - I can think of myself two ways, as *me*, or as an object (as others think of me).
 - Could I have been someone else? Why am I me?
 - The 'I' as subject is like the focus of our visual field, it defines the field but it is not visible within that field itself.
 - You are directly aware of your thoughts and feelings but you are not ever aware of the self, which has them.