A Commentary on the Upanishads

by

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Isha Upanishad

Seeing All Things in God

Introduction to the Upanishads

The sacred scriptures of India are vast. Their importance is ranked differently according to the particular viewpoint of the individual. In Hinduism there are six darshanas, or systems of philosophy. They often seem to contradict themselves (and their professed adherents usually do contradict those of the other darshanas), but the wise know that they are only different ways of seeing the same thing, and it is that One Thing which makes them both valid and ultimately harmonious. That unifying subject is Brahman: God the Absolute, beyond and besides Whom there is no “other” whatsoever. Yet, according to differences in outlook, there is difference in evaluation of the scriptures. However, all followers of the Eternal (Sanatana) Dharma agree that the Vedas are the supreme authority, and the Vedas are always understood to include those treatises of mystical and speculative philosophy known as the Upanishads. The word “upanishad” comes from the root word upasana, which means “to draw near,” and is usually considered to mean that which was heard when the student sat near the teacher to learn the eternal truths.

We do not know who wrote (or relayed from inner perception) the Vedas or the Upanishads, though we do have the names of those considered the original seers of the Vedic knowledge, though we know virtually nothing about their lives. This has a distinct advantage over the scriptures of other religions, for then the image of a historical, finite personality does not intervene to obscure the revelation they handed on to their students. It is in no way unjust to say that in other religions concentration on, adulation, and worship of the person who gave the revelation has often obscured and even abrogated their purpose in giving the teachings. Words and behavior diametrically opposed to the Messenger’s teachings are sanctified by “devotion,” “love,” and “dedication” to “the Master,” “the Lord,” or “the Savior” who has a heaven to which he will welcome all faithful and believing devotees. “Following” is the ideal rather than becoming what the Teacher was. Lost in the personality of the Messenger, they forget the Message. “Adore the Messenger and ignore the Message” becomes the norm.

The authority of the Vedic scriptures rests not upon those who wrote them down but upon the demonstrable truths they express. They are as self-sufficient and self-evident as the multiplication tables or the Table of Elements. They are simply the complete and unobscured truth. And realization of that Truth alone matters.

The first Upanishad we will look into is the Isha Upanishad, so called from its opening word: ishavasyam.

Translation
The Upanishads have long interested students of philosophy in the West. The English philosopher Hume translated some of them into English in the eighteenth century. Later he travelled to America where he taught Sanskrit to Thomas Jefferson and together they studied the Upanishads in their original form.

The greatest boon seekers of truth in this country have received are the translations of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita—*The Upanishads, Breath of the Eternal*, and *The Song of God, Bhagavad Gita*—made by Swami Prabhavananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California in the nineteen-forties. I was privileged to hear him speak in 1962, and the value and clarity of his insights were remarkable. In his translations he did not attempt an exact literalism, yet they convey the meanings of the texts far better than most who try for literal wording. Reading his translation of the Gita changed my life in 1960, and everything which happened afterward was a consequence of that. My debt to him is incalculable and therefore unpayable. I looked at many translations before taking up the task of commenting on the Upanishads, and I found Swamiji’s version inescapable. The Light of the Self (Atma Jyoti) radiates from the pages, conveying to us the illumination and blessing of his teacher Swami Brahmananda and his Master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, of Whom it can be rightly said: “He shining, everything shines.”

**An instructive story**

Just before going to India for the first time in 1962, I had the great good fortune to meet and hear Sri A. B. Purani, the administrator of the renowned Aurobindo Ashram of Pondicherry, India. From his lips I heard the most brilliant expositions of Vedic philosophy; nothing in my subsequent experience has equaled them. In one talk he told the following story:

In ancient India there lived a most virtuous Brahmin who was considered by all to be the best authority on philosophy. One day the local king ordered him to appear before him. When he did so, the king said: “I have three questions that puzzle—even torment—me: Where is God? Why don’t I see Him? And what does he do all day? If you can’t answer these three questions I will have your head cut off.” The Brahmin was appalled and terrified, because the answers to these questions were not just complex, they were impossible to formulate. In other words: he did not know the answers. So his execution date was set.

On the morning of that day the Brahmin’s teenage son appeared and asked the king if he would release his father if he—the son—would answer the questions. The king agreed, and the son asked that a container of milk be brought to him. It was done. Then the boy asked that the milk be churned into butter. That, too, was done.

“The first two of your questions are now answered,” he told the king.

The king objected that he had been given no answers, so the son asked: “Where was the butter before it was churned?”

“In the milk,” replied the king.

“In what part of the milk?” asked the boy.

“In all of it.”

“Just so, agreed the boy, “and in the same way God is within all things and pervades all things.”

“Why don’t I see Him, then,” pressed the king.

“Because you do not ‘churn’ your mind and refine your perceptions through meditation. If you do that, you will see God. But not otherwise. Now let my father go.”
“Not at all,” insisted the king. “You have not told me what God does all day.”

“To answer that,” said the boy, “we will have to change places. You come stand here and let me sit on the throne.”

The request was so audacious the king complied, and in a moment he was standing before the enthroned Brahmin boy who told him: “This is the answer. One moment you were here and I was there. Now things are reversed. God perpetually lifts up and casts down every one of us. In one life we are exalted and in another we are brought low—oftentimes in a single life this occurs, and even more than once. Our lives are completely in His hand, and He does with us as He wills.” (“He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.” Luke 1:52)

The Brahmin was released and his son was given many honors and gifts by the king.

The Isha Upanishad opens with the answer to the question as to God’s “whereabouts.”

He is within all

“In the heart of all things, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord.” (Isha Upanishad 1) Whatever we experience, whether through the inner or outer senses, it is a covering of the Lord (Isha). Since it conceals, it necessarily blinds, confuses, or inhibits us. It is a door closed in our face. Tragically, throughout lives without number we have not known this simple fact and have as a consequence believed that the experienced, whether objective or subjective, is the sole reality and have dissipated life after life in involvement with it to our pain and destruction. A door is never the way out: the way out is revealed when the door is moved aside—eliminated. Not knowing this, either, we have clawed, hammered, and hewn at the door—at least in those lives when we were not adulating and worshipping it or calling it “God’s greatest gift to us”—to no avail. The root problem is our believing in the door’s reality, thinking that it is the beginning, middle, and end. Only when it disappears will we see the truth that lies beyond “things.”

We must not just get “inside” things, we must get to their heart. And how is that done? By getting into our own heart, into the core of our own being. There everything will be found. The key to the door is meditation.

Another viewing

Prabhavananda has conveyed the ultimate message of these opening words of the Isha Upanishad. The literal translation, however, gives us another view which we should consider: “All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—should be covered by the Lord.” (Translation by Swami Nikhilananda.) Rather than speaking of piercing to the heart of things, the literal meaning is that the Lord should be seen covering—that is, enveloping—all things. This has two meanings.

1) What I have just expressed, that we should experience—not just think intellectually—that God is encompassing all things, that we should not see things as independent or separate from God, but as existing within God. And this vision should extend to us: we, too, exist only within Him.

2) In our seeing of things, God should always be between us and them. First we should see God, and only secondarily see the “things.”

The renowned Swami (Papa) Ramdas in his spiritual autobiography In Quest of God writes of his initial spiritual awakening in these words: “It was at this time that it slowly
dawned upon his mind that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false....All thought, all mind, all heart, all soul was concentrated on Ram, Ram covering up and absorbing everything.”

In the Bhagavad Gita, considered to convey the essence of the Upanishadic wisdom, both Prabhavananda’s and the literal translations are put together when Krishna tells Arjuna that the wise see God in all things and all things in God. “Those who see Me in everything and see everything in Me, are not separated from Me and I am not separated from them.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:30)

**He IS all**

If we accept the foregoing, then we will take the next step and experience that “He alone is the reality.” (Isha Upanishad 1) This can be understood more than one way. We can conclude that God alone is real and everything else is unreal. The problem with that is our tendency to equate “unreal” with non-existent, and wrongly belief that everything is only an illusion, that it has no reality whatsoever. The great non-dual philosopher Shankara explained the accurate view by likening our experience of things to that of a man who sees a rope in dim light and mistakes it for a snake, his mind even supplying eyes that glitter and a mouth that hisses at him. When light is brought, he sees that there is no snake, only a rope. The snake was not real, but his impression, however mistaken, was real. The snake was not real, it was non-existent; but the impression of the snake was real and did exist. The rope was the reality and the snake was an illusion overlain on it. In the same way God is the reality and everything else is illusory like the snake. But illusion does exist. Denying it gets us nowhere; we have to deal with it by seeing through it, by dispelling it. Then we will see the reality: God. After that we can progress to the understanding that even though our interpretation may be wrong, what we perceive does have a real side to it, and that is God Himself. Hence, all things are God in their real side. The “wrong” side is in our mind alone. We can say that God is the reality of the unreal, which we need to see past. And that is the whole idea of the opening verse of the upanishad. He alone is real; He is all things.

**Be at peace**

“Wherefore, renouncing vain appearances, rejoice in him.” (Isha Upanishad 1) All of our sorrows and troubles come from our mistaking vain appearances for reality, from our looking at them with our outer eyes instead of beholding God with the inner eye. But we are addicted to those vain appearances—we have to admit that. Yes, we are even addicted to all the pain and anxiety they bring us. That is foolish, but is it any more foolish than it is to be addicted to drugs or alcohol—or to people that harm us? We are insane on certain levels; this world is a madhouse for people of our particular lunacy. The sooner we understand this and resolve to be cured and released, the better things will be for us. For from “things” we will move on to God-perception.

For this reason the yogis, those who seek God in meditation, should be the most cheerful and optimistic of people. If we look to God we will see only perfection and rejoice in it; if we look at ourselves, others, and the world around us we will see only imperfection and be discontent. Depression comes from looking in the wrong place. It is the bitter fruit of ego-involvement, of ego-obsession. The remedy is not to have “high self-esteem” but rather to have God-esteem. And since we live in God, we will see the divine side even of ourselves and be ever hopeful. Once God spoke to a contemporary mystic and said: “I am He Who Is. You are She Who Is Not.” Now to the ego that may
sound hateful, but to the questing spirit it is a liberating assurance. The unreal which we call “me” need not be struggled with: it is only a ghost, a shadow. Bringing in the light of God-contact will reveal that to be the truth. Then we will be at peace and in perfect joy. What a burden is lifted from those who come to know that God alone is real and true, and that we need only look to Him. When we look within we find Him as the heart of our selves.

We must renounce unreality. As I say, we are addicted to it, so we will have to struggle to break the terrible habit of delusion, just as those addicted to the hallucinations produced by drugs have to break away from them and discard them forever. Then we will “rejoice in Him.”

Desirelessness

“Covet no man’s wealth.” Why? Because it does not exist! It is just a bubble destined to burst leaving nothing in its place. There are no “things” to covet or possess. They are the fever dreams of illusion from which we must awaken. No one really owns anything–firstly because the thing (as we perceive it) does not exist, and the “man” does not exist either; and neither do we—as least so far as our perceptions of “them,” “it,” and “me” go.

God and I in space alone
And nobody else in view.
“And where are the people, O Lord!” I said.
“The earth below and the sky o’erhead
And the dead whom once I knew?”

“That was a dream,” God smiled and said,
“A dream that seemed to be true,
There were no people, living or dead,
There was no earth and no sky o’erhead
There was only Myself–and you.”

“Why do I feel no fear,” I asked,
“Meeting you here in this way,
For I have sinned I know full well,
And there is heaven and there is hell,
And is this the judgment day?”

“Nay, those were dreams,” the great God said,
“Dreams that have ceased to be.
There are no such things as fear or sin,
There is no you–you have never been–
There is nothing at all but Me.”

(“Illusion” by Edna Wheeler Wilcox.)
Living a Life Worth Living

How to live

“Well may he be content to live a hundred years who acts without attachment who works his work with earnestness, but without desire, not yearning for its fruits–he, and he alone.” (Isha Upanishad 2)

It is generally felt that this verse—and other passages from scriptures and books on spiritual life—indicates that one hundred years is the normal lifespan for a human being. On the other hand, the figure of one hundred years may also symbolize the complete lifespan of a person, however brief or long, the idea here being that not one moment of our life need be a burden nor should we ever wish to shorten our life by a single breath—that life should be lived in fulfillment with peace and happiness all the way through. That this is possible has been shown well by the saints and Masters of all religions and ages. We need only know how to do it; and these words give the way.

Acting without attachment and desire

In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna draws very clearly for us the picture of a person who lives in anxiety and misery and him who lives in peace and contentment. Both may be living in exactly the same situation, for it is not external conditions that make us happy or miserable, but our reaction to them. Krishna makes it quite plain that the secret of happiness or misery lies in the absence of two things: attachment and desire. Those who live in attachment to externalities, anxious to fulfill desire, must suffer and live in frustration. On the other hand, those who live without egoic desire are perpetually at peace.

Nonattachment

Krishna not only holds out the ideal for us, He also tells us how to accomplish it.

“Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord. Renounce attachment to the fruits. Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is this evenness of temper which is meant by yoga.” (2:48)

“In the calm of self-surrender you can free yourself from the bondage of virtue and vice during this very life. Devote yourself, therefore, to reaching union with Brahman. To unite the heart with Brahman and then to act: that is the secret of non-attached work.” (2:50)

“When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future.” (2:52)

“The world is imprisoned in its own activity, except when actions are performed as worship of God. Therefore you must perform every action sacramentally, and be free from all attachments to results.” (3:9)

“Whosoever works for me alone, makes me his only goal and is devoted to me, free from attachment, and without hatred toward any creature—that man, O Prince, shall enter into me.” (11:55)

“Therefore, a man should contemplate Brahman until he has sharpened the axe of his non-attachment. With this axe, he must cut through the firmly-rooted Aswattha tree.” (15:3)

“No human being can give up action altogether, but he who gives up the fruits of
action is said to be non-attached.” (18:11)

“When a man has achieved non-attachment, self-mastery and freedom from desire through renunciation, he reaches union with Brahma, who is beyond all action.” (18:49)

In other words, keeping the mind on God frees us from egoic attachment to our activities. This is an extremely high ideal and one very hard to attain; yet we must strive for it through the practice of meditation, for only the clarity of vision reached through meditation can enable us to live out such a lofty ideal.

**Working with earnestness**

Lest we think that negative or passive indifference is detachment, or that carelessness and shoddiness in our daily work is spiritual-mindedness—a view that prevails in much of the Orient and among many in the West—the Upanishad plainly tells us that the wise man “works his work with earnestness.” This is really a great portion of the Bhagavad Gita’s message: that we must work with skill to the best of our abilities—that is our part—while leaving the results to God—that is His part. In that way we truly are “workers together” with God (II Corinthians 6:1) in our life. Sri Ramakrishna said: “If you can weigh salt you can weigh sugar,” meaning that if a person is proficient in spiritual life he will be proficient in his outer life as well. That does not mean that all yogis need to become great successes in business or some other profession, but it does mean that they need to work with the full capabilities they possess and do absolutely the best they can—and no more; that is, they need not worry about the results. In this way they will be at peace both internally and externally.

**Without desire**

The real cankerworm in the garden of our life is desire, whether in the form of wanting, wishing, yearning, desiring, hoping, demanding, or craving. Whether to a little or a great degree, desire destroys our hearts and our chances for inner peace. Desire is a wasting fever which drives us onward to spiritual loss. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36) As Wordsworth wrote: “We have given our hearts away—a sordid boon!” I have spent my entire life watching people gain a little bit of the world and lose their souls. And ultimately they lost the world, too, either in the changes of earthly fortune or through the finality of death.

“And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15-21)

Desirelessness is not a zombie-like passivity, a kind of pious vegetating. Far from it. Krishna lauds the desireless in these words:

He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.
Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined. (2:55)

Not shaken by adversity,
Not hankering after happiness:
Free from fear, free from anger,
Free from the things of desire.
I call him a seer, and illumined. (2:56)

The bonds of his flesh are broken.
He is lucky, and does not rejoice:
He is unlucky, and does not weep
I call him illumined. (2:57)

The tortoise can draw in its legs:
The seer can draw in his senses.
I call him illumined. (2:58)

The abstinent run away from what they desire
But carry their desires with them:
When a man enters Reality,
He leaves his desires behind him. (2:59)

The desireless who have fulfilled themselves in God are the most alive, happy, and satisfied of beings. Surely they—and they alone—are “content to live a hundred years.” For them there is no talk of death being a “blessed release” (which it is not), for they are already freed in spirit.
Spiritual Suicides

“Worlds there are without suns, covered up with darkness. To these after death go the ignorant, slayers of the Self.” (Isha Upanishad 3) (“Verily, those worlds of the asuras are enveloped in blind darkness; and thereto they all repair after death who are slayers of Atman.” This is the translation of Swami Nikhilananda.)

The Upanishadic seer(s?) opened by speaking of the way of fulfilled and joyful life: seeing the Divine in all things, and living on the earth according to Divine Law. But this is not the only world in which we can find ourself as we move through a cycle of continuous birth and death–birth into one world after having died out of another, or another birth into the world where we were just living. When we speak of “birth” we usually think only of physical embodiment on this earth. But when we die in this world we are born into an astral world where we remain for some time and then die to that world and become born back into this world. Although this world remains virtually the same–despite the fact that every generation thinks it is a great advance over previous eras–we can spend time in a vast array of astral worlds, positive and negative, pleasant and unpleasant. The earth becomes a kind of stable place of return for us. Or is it?

Many births, many worlds

Although the earth accommodates a wide range of spiritual and psychological evolution, the astral worlds are more specialized. There is an astral world for every degree of consciousness. These worlds can be classified just as sentient beings are classified. That does not say much, since each person can have a different set of criteria for such classification. But the masters of wisdom have generally agreed: there are two basic kinds of people–suras and asuras, those who dwell in the light and those who live in the dark. “Divine” and “demonic” are commonly used to translate sura–or deva–and asura. A sura/deva is in the light, an asura is not. Sometimes a person dwells in the dark by choice, but most often it is a state of ignorance rather than negative volition. Because of this we need to avoid a “deva is good, asura is bad” reaction in all cases, though there are instances when this is accurate, and to repress it would be foolish–and asuric!

The sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita

Practically speaking, however–that is, looking at the result of manifesting those natures–it is just that simple. An entire chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is directed to this manner of divine (devic) and demonic (asuric) nature as it manifests in human beings. I know it is pretty lengthy, but it is so insightful and complete that it merits inclusion here. Sri Krishna speaks:

“A man who is born with tendencies toward the Divine, is fearless and pure in heart. He perseveres in that path to union with Brahman which the scriptures and his teacher have taught him. He is charitable. He can control his passions. He studies the scriptures regularly, and obeys their directions. He practices spiritual disciplines. He is straightforward, truthful, and of an even temper. He harms no one. He renounces the things of this world. He has a tranquil mind and an unmalicious tongue. He is compassionate toward all. He is not greedy. He is gentle and modest. He abstains from useless activity. He has faith in the strength of his higher nature. He can forgive and
endure. He is clean in thought and act. He is free from hatred and from pride. Such qualities are his birthright.

“When a man is born with demonic tendencies, his birthright is hypocrisy, arrogance, conceit, anger, cruelty and ignorance.

“The birthright of the divine nature leads to liberation. The birthright of the demonic nature leads to greater bondage. But you need not fear, Arjuna: your birthright is divine.

“In this world there are two kinds of beings: those whose nature tends toward the Divine, and those who have the demonic tendencies. I have already described the divine nature to you in some detail. Now you shall learn more about the demonic nature.

“Men of demonic nature know neither what they ought to do, nor what they should refrain from doing. There is no truth in them, or purity, or right conduct. They maintain that the scriptures are a lie, and that the universe is not based upon a moral law, but godless, conceived in lust and created by copulation, without any other cause. Because they believe this in the darkness of their little minds, these degraded creatures do horrible deeds, attempting to destroy the world. They are enemies of mankind.

“Their lust can never be appeased. They are arrogant, and vain, and drunk with pride. They run blindly after what is evil. The ends they work for are unclean. They are sure that life has only one purpose: gratification of the senses. And so they are plagued by innumerable cares, from which death alone can release them. Anxiety binds them with a hundred chains, delivering them over to lust and wrath. They are ceaselessly busy, piling up dishonest gains to satisfy their cravings.

“I wanted this and today I got it. I want that: I shall get it tomorrow. All these riches are now mine: soon I shall have more. I have killed this enemy. I will kill all the rest. I am a ruler of men. I enjoy the things of this world. I am successful, strong and happy. Who is my equal? I am so wealthy and so nobly born. I will sacrifice to the gods. I will give alms. I will make merry.’ That is what they say to themselves, in the blindness of their ignorance.

“They are addicts of sensual pleasure, made restless by their many desires, and caught in the net of delusion. They fall into the filthy hell of their own evil minds. Conceited, haughty, foolishly proud, and intoxicated by their wealth, they offer sacrifice to God in name only, for outward show, without following the sacred rituals. These malignant creatures are full of egoism, vanity, lust, wrath, and consciousness of power. They loathe me, and deny my presence both in themselves and in others. They are enemies of all men and of myself; cruel, despicable and vile. I cast them back, again and again, into the wombs of degraded parents, subjecting them to the wheel of birth and death. And so they are constantly reborn, in degradation and delusion. They do not reach me, but sink down to the lowest possible condition of the soul.”

**Am I an asura?**

What are the basic traits that render someone an asura? The Upanishad has already given them: 1) spiritual blindness, 2) spiritual darkness, 3) spiritual ignorance, and 4) engaging in deeds that “kill” the awareness and the freedom of the eternal, immortal, divine self. The first three are what dispose us to the fourth, destructive trait. Krishna has already given us quite an exposition of the ways of the asuric personality, but it can all be summed up in their effect: the negation of consciousness of the individual spirit.
Now this point that spiritual ignorance is a matter of unawareness of the individual spirit, our own atman, is particularly important because many asuras think to hide their status under an externalized cloak of religiosity, of supposed belief in and dedication to God. But this is all nonsense. Saint John the Apostle comments that no one can legitimately claim to love God Whom they have not seen if they have no love for their fellow human beings whom they have seen. In the same way, it is absurd to pretend that we know or are aware of the infinite Spirit when we are not aware of the finite spirit–our own self–which is right within us. This is why Buddha simply refused to speak about God or gods, and insisted that each one must seek for nirvana alone, rejecting all other matters as harmful distractions.

Another Upanishad states that if we learn about water from a single cup of water we can then know about oceans of water. In the same way, if we come to truly comprehend our nature as spirit we will be able to know God the Infinite Spirit. Thus self-knowledge–knowledge of our spirit–is essential. Shankara says that until we know the self we are all asuras in the absolute sense, but if we are seeking to know the self I expect the distinction is not so drastic.

An asura, then, is one whose life and thought obscure and darken the inner consciousness so the true self remains unknown and buried–often even unsuspected as to its existence. It has nothing to do with what philosophers and theologians say about it; the matter is thoroughly pragmatic. Do we or don’t we, are we or aren’t we? Verbal claims mean nothing here. State of being alone matters.

**The worlds of the asuras**

Because it is their will, asuras are born over and over in worlds “enveloped in blind darkness” at the time of their death, earthly or astral. Naturally our thoughts go to the ideas of “hell” so beloved to all religionists, east and west, whether it is the absurdly simplistic fire pit of Christianity or the horrifically complex and lurid hell(s) of Hinduism, Taoism, or Buddhism. But what is this world in which we presently find ourselves—a world ravaged with hatred, violence, disease, cruelty, and aggressive ignorance and greed? The fact that there is also kindness, love, mercy, and toleration in the world makes it even more crazy: schizophrenic and schizophrenogenic (making us crazy). No wonder *The Onion*, a satirical magazine, ran an article entitled: “God Diagnosed With Bipolar Disorder.” It might seem blasphemous, but it is the preposterous religion prevailing in the West that is blasphemous, and the satire is just pointing it out.

Someone once asked Paramhansa Yogananda if he believed in hell. Paramhansaji smiled and asked: “Where do you think you are?” A very good question, indeed.

We write our own ticket by the way we think and act. No amount of rationalization or assurance from others will change this fact. If we seek darkness we will find darkness; if we seek the light we will find the light. Nothing more; nothing less.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” (Matthew 7:7, 8)

Just be aware of the consequences.
The Undivided, Unmoving Self

The teachings of the Upanishads are the supreme expressions of the eternal wisdom, the eternal vision of the Vedic Seers. Consequently, though simple in their mode of expression, they can be extremely hard to grasp. The rishis lived in a state of consciousness almost opposite to that of most of us. But it is possible of attainment, and so the wise cultivate it. Yet we need guidance along the way, and need to carefully look into the upanishadic dicta for that guidance. There are many things that we need not know, but the truths embodied in the Upanishads and their inspired summary, the Bhagavad Gita, must be known by all who would ascend to higher life. So they merit our intent consideration.

The Four Levels of Understanding

During the last week of his earthly life, Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover season. At one point, while speaking to the crowd, he prayed: “Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him.” (John 12:28, 29) And of course a third contingency heard nothing. This is how it is in this world of unreality when Reality impinges on it. According to the level of development, so the encountering individual reacts to the impingement.

In Indian philosophy there are a lot of numerical divisions, but one of the most prevalent is that of Four. To list some: there are four ages (yugas) of human history, there are four modes of consciousness (waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep and turiya—consciousness itself), there are four stages of dharmic life (student, family, semi-solitary, and monastic), and of course there are four castes (shudra, vaishya, kshatriya and brahmin). All of these relate to the evolutionary development of the individual (as Krishna says: guna and karma) and are fundamentally a matter of internal disposition and capacity. These four levels (is it an accident there are four Gospels?) are depicted in this event. Some people heard what was spoken and knew it was the voice of God; some heard a voice—not the actual words—and thought it was an angel speaking; some heard an indistinct sound and thought it was thunder; and others (no doubt the majority) heard nothing at all. It is not an event that matters as much as our comprehension of it.

Yes, that is everything: comprehension. And that takes place only according to our state of inner development. Krishna spoke of this in the beginning of his instruction to Arjuna at Kurukshetra, saying: “There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:29) Here again are the four levels of comprehension. We pass from one to another in ascending steps only through inner cultivation—in other words, only through meditation, but meditation supported by a entire way of life that facilitates it—in other words: dharma. For if there is neither the practice nor the support for the practice, little will result in the way of developing consciousness. And if consciousness is not developed the teachings of the great sages will be little understood by us, and perhaps greatly
misunderstood or just not understood at all.

Sri Ramakrishna told about a certain group of yogis who were wont to challenge a person with the words: “What station are you dwelling in?” By “station” they meant the habitual state of the individual’s mind. The next verse of the Isha Upanishad is not easy to grasp because it speaks of a mode of being far different from our usual condition. So it will be a real test as to what “station” of consciousness we are dwelling in, as we try to decode it. Here it is:

“The Self is one. Unmoving, it moves swifter than thought. The senses do not overtake it, for always it goes before. Remaining still, it outstrips all that run. Without the Self, there is no life.” (Isha Upanishad 4)

“The Self is one”

“One” has two meanings in Eastern thought: 1) number and 2) quality. This a very important point, since many controversies have arisen philosophically simply because Western thinkers tend to limit “one” to a numerical value only. The incredibly bitter and violent controversy over the so-called “Monophysite heresy” in early Christianity in which tens of thousands of Egyptians and Syrians were killed by the armies of the Byzantine empire, took place only because the Italian-Byzantines could not grasp what the “heretics” meant by the simple word monos when applied to spiritual matters. Both meanings, number and quality, have significance for us who, like the Four Kumaras, are intent on the knowing of the self.

The principle that the self is one should set us to thinking about our own present self-concept and—perhaps even more important—the way we live out our self-concept. Many people think one thing intellectually (or at least verbally, for public consumption) and think another instinctively. For example, I knew a minister who was once challenged by a self-styled atheist who spent about an hour expounding the “truth” of atheism and the folly of theism. When he was finished the minister said: “There are two points about all that you have just said. One: it is complete nonsense. Two: you do not believe a word of it yourself.” The man threw his right hand up in the air and declaimed: “I swear to God in heaven that I do!”

Somewhere I have already mentioned that an Eastern Christian theological student once remarked to me that the worse thing that had ever happened to Western Christianity and Western philosophy in general was the invention of the “pie chart”—those round diagrams divided into “slices” that plagued us throughout school in many subjects, from mathematics to sociology. “People have come to think that they are conglomerations of pieces that make up a whole, rather than a single homogenous being,” he explained. How many times do people speak of having several “roles” in life or of wearing many “hats.” Fragmentation is a terrible plague destroying our capacity to either see or attain unity-integration of our being. We think it is all right to be multiple persons. Where this all began with us is buried in the past, but the present reality cannot be denied. Drawn out from our center of unity, we say: “I am a businessman, a spouse, a parent, a citizen…” etc., rather than: “I am a single person who functions in the area of business, marriage, parenthood, citizenship…” etc. This no small thing, and certainly not merely a philosophical nicety. This is a serious mental and spiritual disorder. Being both fragmented and dispersed in our energies and awareness, rather than operating from a central point of order, the mirror of our life is shattered into innumerable fragments that cannot convey any coherent image of our “face.” The unity that is the true image is defaced, effaced, and even erased—as far as
our consciousness is concerned, even though our true nature can never be altered in any manner. Struggling and submerged in the illusion of multiplicity, the truth of our unity is far from us. For we are not just one numerically, we are absolutely one in nature. This is an eternal truth that must be regained by us. How to do so? By the only process that really unifies the consciousness: meditation.

“Unmoving, it moves swifter than thought”

How can the self move swifter than thought and yet be unmoving? This is not some koan-like platitude meant to faze our mind in relation to self-knowledge; it is simple fact. The self, the spirit, is completely outside of time and space (which are illusions, anyway), yet it can scan time and space, moving backward and forward simply because of the fact that it is one. Being one in the truest sense, the self is everywhere—since there really is no “where” at all. The self is truly Whole and therefore all-embracing. It moves swifter than thought, because a thought requires a time—however small—to arise or be expressed. The self, in contrast, exists only in the Now. The questions “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?” “What was I in the past?” and “What shall I be in the future?” are valuable because they set us on the quest to the discovery that we do not come or go, nor do we have a past or future—only a Present. When Sri Ramana Maharshi was at the end of his physical embodiment he commented: “They say I am ‘going,’ but where shall I go?” Some years later Sri Anandamayi Ma visited Ramanashram. When the Maharshi’s disciples asked her to stay there, feeling that in her they had “refound” their guru, she simply remarked: “I neither come nor go.” This is true of us, as well.

“The senses do not overtake it, for always it goes before”

The self does not move, but it is “always before” the questing senses in the sense that it is always out of their reach. The Mandukya Upanishad, speaking of the consciousness of the self, of turiya, describes it as “not subjective experience, nor objective experience, nor experience intermediate between these two, nor is it a negative condition which is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. It is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression,...it is pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the supreme good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone!” Who can say any more?

“Remaining still, it outstrips all that run”

The self is unmoving, as we have been told. Hence, any “movement” is incompatible with it and blots it from our awareness. That which moves cannot possibly perceive it, nor can any process of movement (including the labyrinthine ways of so much “yoga”) ever result in touching or seeing it. Rather, movement must cease, as Patanjali points out in the very beginning of the Yoga Sutras: Yoga is the cessation of movement in the mind-substance. In other words, when we stop “running” we will rest in our self.

“Without the Self, there is no life”

This is perhaps the hardest lesson for human beings to learn: Without the Self, there is no life. We may engage in frantic activity, running here and there and
“accomplishing” tremendous things, indulging the senses to the maximum and immersing ourselves in ambitions, emotions, and “relationships,” but through it all the truth is simply this: we are dead, mere wraiths feeding desperately on a shadow life that is no life at all—not even a poor imitation. In the self alone do we find life. How hard this is to learn, and how much harder it is to follow through on, for it inevitably leads to the total renunciation of all that is not the self—in other words, to the renunciation of everything we hold dear and identify with as being ours and our “self” when they are no such thing at all. This is a bitter insight in the beginning, but as our inner eye begins to adjust to the truth of it, we find it the source of greatest joy.

“Who knows the Atman knows that happiness born of pure knowledge: the joy of sattwa. Deep his delight after strict self-schooling: sour toil at first but at last what sweetness, the end of sorrow.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:37)

“He knows bliss in the Atman and wants nothing else. Cravings torment the heart: he renounces cravings. I call him illumined. Not shaken by adversity, not hankering after happiness: free from fear, free from anger, free from the things of desire. I call him a seer, and illumined.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:55, 56)

“The recollected mind is awake in the knowledge of the Atman which is dark night to the ignorant: the ignorant are awake in their sense-life which they think is daylight: to the seer it is darkness.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:69)

“This is the state of enlightenment in Brahman: a man does not fall back from it into delusion. Even at the moment of death he is alive in that enlightenment: Brahman and he are one.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:72)

“So, with his heart serene and fearless, firm in the vow of renunciation, holding the mind from its restless roaming, now let him struggle to reach my oneness, ever-absorbed, his eyes on me always, his prize, his purpose.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:14)

“When a man has achieved non-attachment, self-mastery and freedom from desire through renunciation, he reaches union with Brahman, who is beyond all action.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:49)

A great deal is involved when we sincerely pray: “Lead me from death to immortality.”
The Ever-Present Self

“To the ignorant the Self appears to move—yet it moves not. From the ignorant it is far distant—yet it is near. It is within all, and it is without all.” (Isha Upanishad 5)

“The Self appears to move—yet it moves not”
We have just covered the fact that, being outside of the illusions of time and space, the self neither “moves” nor goes through any type of change whatsoever. Yet it “experiences” a multiplicity of externalities as the unmoving witness—momentarily caught up in the movie and thinking it is inside it and undergoing the changes in the scenario. Just as imagining seeing or doing something is not the same as seeing or doing it, so observing the motion picture of countless lives with their attendant joys and sorrows is not the same as actually being born, living, and dying over and over. But we are deluded into thinking so, and the upanishadic sage is endeavoring to wake us up, just as we awaken someone who is having a nightmare and calling out in pain or fear. We, however, having become accustomed (even addicted) to the nightmare, are a lot more difficult to awaken.

“It is far distant—yet it is near”
Since the self is existing in eternity, transcending any degree of relativity, it could not be “further” away from the relative realm of experience (not existence, because the relative does not actually “exist” at all except as an illusion). On the other hand, since relativity is only a concept, the self is the nearest possible because it alone is actually present!
At the end of the Syrian Jacobite Liturgy the celebrant gives a blessing beginning: “You who are far and you who are near…. The reference is not to those who are at the back of the church and those who are at the front, but to those who are far and near in their minds and hearts.
For those who are immersed in the illusion of relativity, nothing could be further away than the transcendent self. Yet, since as I have said, the self alone is ever present, it is nearer than any relative experiencing. It is, as the Kena Upanishad says, the “ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of speech….also breath of the breath, and eye of the eye.” (Kena Upanishad 1:2)

“It is within all, and it is without all”
Nothing can exist apart from the self—even an illusion. A hallucination is a “thing” even though it is solely mental. The self is the substratum upon and within which everything subsists, the screen on which the light-and-shadow play of “life” is projected. It is itself the basis of all that is perceived. From one perspective it can be said that the self (consciousness) is inside everything. From another, since it is forever separate from all things, it can be spoken of as outside–alien to–all things. Whichever way you say it, the idea is the same: the self never touches any “thing.”

The effect of “seeing true”
“He who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, hates none.” (Isha Upanishad 6) Here we come to the practical application of what the upanishad is telling
us about the self. (This is the inestimable value of the Bhagavad Gita. Where the Upanishads express spiritual mathematics in a usually abstract manner, the Gita outlines both the upanishadic principles and what the result will be when they are followed or realized, defining spiritual realities in practical, observable terms.)

If we never lose sight of the self, then we will be able to perceive what is not the self. And since what is not the self is not even real, why would we hate it? Conversely, how could we hate or be averse to the real self? This vision is the foundation of dynamic even-mindedness.

It is also the absolute end of all delusion and negative reaction to it, for the upanishad concludes: “To the illumined soul, the Self is all. For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?” (Isha Upanishad 7)
The All-Embracing Self

“Where one sees nothing but the One, hears nothing but the One, knows nothing but the One—there is the Infinite. Where one sees another, hears another, knows another—there is the finite. The Infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal.” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:24:1)

“To the illumined soul, the Self is all. For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?

“The Self is everywhere. Bright is he, bodiless, without scar of imperfection, without bone, without flesh, pure, untouched by evil. The Seer, the Thinker, the One who is above all, the Self-Existent—he it is that has established perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time.” (Isha Upanishad 7, 8)

“The Self is everywhere”

Being outside of time and space the self is both everywhere and nowhere—depending on one’s point of reference. One thing is definite: the self cannot be separated from to any degree and is always present in the fullest measure. This being so, we need not seek the self, but only realize it. We are always seeing, touching, and living in the self, yet we do not recognize it, just as fish have no perception of water because of its intimate and integral connection with them. The self is even more immediate to us than is water to the fish.

The most practical application of this truth is simple: We should always be aware of the self and centered in the self. And that is done by the continual meditation and japa of Om.

“Meditate on Om as the Self.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6)

“The Self [atman] is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self. He who knows It thus enters the Self [Supreme Spirit] with his self [individual spirit].” (Mandukya Upanishad 1, 8, 12)

“Directly realize the self by meditating on Om.” (Vedantasara Upanishad 1)

“The syllable ‘Om’ is the self.” (Ribhu Gita 10:22)

“Earnest seekers who, incessantly and with a steady mind, repeat ‘Om’ will attain success. By repetition of the pure ‘Om’ the mind is withdrawn from sense objects and becomes one with the Self.” (Ramana Maharshi, Sri Ramana Gita 3:10,11, Ganapati Muni)

“Bright is he”

In the Katha Upanishad it is said of the self: “Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning—nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15. The same statement is found in Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:11.) The self is illumined by no external light, but rather illumines all itself. We could shine the brightest of lights into the eyes of a dead man and he would see nothing. But if the self is present to enliven him, then he will. The self is known—seen—by the self, and therefore it is called swayamprakasā: self-illumined. Hence only those in contact with their self can be said to possess illumination to any degree. Those who under the banner of “devotion” obsess on external practices and deities can only dwell in the
“light that is darkness.” (“If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” Matthew 6:23) We must seek illumination in the self alone, keeping in mind that God is the Self of the self, that to seek one is to seek the other.

Sukram, the word translated “bright,” also means pure in the sense of being of such perfect clarity that no light is obscured. For it is from the core of the self that the Pure Light of God shines forth. Therefore, as just pointed out, to attain self-knowledge is to realize both the atman and the Paramatman. Only when we are centered in our self can we see God. “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8). Only when we are centered in God can we truly know our self.

In a flawless crystal, what do we see? Nothing. So also, in the self there is nothing seen, for all “things” are transcended, and pure Being alone remains in our consciousness. Wherefore the Chandogya Upanishad tells us: “Where one sees nothing but the One, hears nothing but the One, knows nothing but the One–there is the Infinite. Where one sees another, hears another, knows another–there is the finite. The Infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal.” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:24:1)

“Bodiless”

Obviously the self is not material, but it is necessary for us to further realize that the self never touches materiality, that in never “has” a body in the sense that it is integrated with a body and either affects it or is affected by it. This is extremely important, for religion (and a lot of “yoga”) usually leads us astray by getting us to be involved in a multitude of activities that—including intellectual study and conceptualizations—are taking place only in the various bodies (koshas) and therefore have nothing whatsoever to do with the self, and hence are usually irrelevant. It is true that we need to purify and refine the bodies so they will cease to veil or obscure the self, but we should understand that the entire process takes place outside the self and never affects the self to any degree.

It is also necessary to comprehend that the self is not really “in” the body(ies) at all, for by its very nature it cannot be encompassed or contained by anything, including the body. “They are contained in me, but I am not in them,” says Krishna (Bhagavad Gita 7:12). And the same is true of our own self.

To realize the self we must disengage our awareness totally from the bodies, although in the practice of meditation we use the bodies as stepping-stones to approach the self and eventually transcend them altogether. So we need not reject the bodies—simply have the correct perspective regarding them.

“Without scar of imperfection”

Imperfection can occur only in the level of relativity. Being eternally outside of relative existence it is not possible for the self to ever be “marked” for either good or bad—neither of which even exists for the self. In Yoga Sutra 1:24, Patanjali describes the Supreme Lord, saying: “Ishwara is a distinct spirit, untouched by troubles, actions and their results, and latent impressions.” The relevant idea here is that God is beyond all action and therefore incapable of either incurring karma or of being conditioned or affected in any way by action—since He never acts. Exactly the same is true of the self.

“Without bone, without flesh”

Obviously the self has no body—that has already been said—so why this statement about the self being without bone or flesh? The idea being presented is that the self has...
no “inner” or “outer.” It has no essence as a substratum or framework (skeleton) which can become the ground or basis of another, external entity that is an extension of mutation of itself. The self has neither parts nor appendages (upadhis). It is thoroughly homogenous and absolutely one. It cannot be “more” itself or “less” itself. There are no gradations or shadings in the self. It simply IS.

“Pure”

We have already considered the purity of the self and need only add one more point: The self is also “pure” because there is nothing intervening between the self and anything else—including God. It is absolute and direct without admixture of any kind.

“Untouched by evil”

Obviously the self is untouched by evil, for it is not touched (affected) by anything at all or at any time.

“The Seer”

The unwitnessed witness is the self. In truth there is no other witness on the individual level because the senses, mind, and intellect are mere energy constructs that have no consciousness of their own. The eye never really sees, nor does the ear hear. No more does the brain or intellect. Rather, the spirit that is consciousness witnesses their messages, therefore the upanishadic seer said: “The Self is ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of speech. He is also breath of the breath, and eye of the eye. Having given up the false identification of the Self with the senses and the mind, and knowing the Self to be Brahman, the wise, on departing this life, become immortal.” (Kena Upanishad 1:2) And of Brahman it was said: “He who knows Brahman to be the life of life, the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind—he indeed comprehends fully the cause of all causes.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:18)

Regarding the self and the Self of the self, Krishna stated: “Watching over the ear and the eye, and presiding there behind touch, and taste, and smell, he is also within the mind: he enjoys and suffers the things of the senses.” (Bhagavad Gita 15:9)

“The Thinker”

Not being the brain, only its witness and not its possessor, the self is here called “the thinker” only as an attempt to convey the idea that it is the self that both witnesses and knows what it is witnessing. It is not just a screen on which the motion picture of life is projected, nor is it a consciousness of objects alone without cognition of their nature. An infant or an animal perceives exactly what an adult human being perceives, but has no idea what it is perceiving—or even that it perceives, in many cases. The self, on the other hand, does indeed know and comprehend what is presented to its view. And because of its proximity the will and intellect respond to the stimuli, mirroring the consciousness that is the self. Consequently they are often mistaken for the self or wrongly supposed to have a consciousness and intelligence of their own.

“The One who is above all”

There is nothing higher than the self, nothing beyond the self. What about God? God and the self being one, even God should not be thought of as beyond or above it. Further, Brahman is not a “thing” in a hierarchal chain of being that It could possibly
be said to be “above” or “below” any thing whatsoever.

This statement is extremely practical, for it is impossible to conduct a spiritual life without the correct perspective: the spirit is supreme. Not only is everything lesser that the spirit, in truth everything else is nothing in comparison. Those who do not hold this conviction really have no spiritual life in the truest sense. God First. God Alone. This is the only correct perspective.

“Devotees seek to know him by study, by sacrifice, by continence, by austerity, by detachment. To know him is to become a seer. Desiring to know him, and him alone, monks renounce the world. Realizing the glory of the Self, the sages of old craved not sons nor daughters. “What have we to do with sons and daughters,” they asked, “we who have known the Self, we who have achieved the supreme goal of existence?” No longer desiring progeny, nor wealth, nor life in other worlds, they entered upon the path of complete renunciation.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:22)

“The Self-Existent”

The spirit never had a beginning. It always was. Again, this does not mean that the atman is separate from Brahman, or in any way independent of Brahman. Brahman being self-existent and eternal, so also is the self. It is necessary for us to realize that NOTHING conditions or really affects the self— that it is absolutely independent of all objects, places, or conditions. Otherwise we fall into the labyrinth of confusion and false identities

“He it is that has established perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time”

Once again, the unity-identity of the individual self and the Supreme Self cause the upanishadic rishi to make a statement that applies to both, although we are used to thinking only in terms of the Absolute Self. Really, hardly any of us—being conditioned by Western religion—actually believe that there is “perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time” or at the present moment. This reminds me of an incident in the life of Sri Ma Anandamayi. One of those ever-present I Am Going To Make The World A Better Place types once remarked to her that he wanted to attain realization so he could work to make the world a perfect entity. Mother instantly replied: “Who do you think that it is not perfect right now?” And of course it is. It is a mess because we are entities that at the moment need to work our way through a mess! When we come to the point where order is what we need, we will be transferred to an orderly world. This one will remain as it is for those students of life who also need to find themselves in the midst of a mess. The world is a mirror of our mind.

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.” (Luke 18:11) We may like to be Pharisees who think we are not as those around us— but we are. Everything we see in this world is in our mind to some degree, otherwise we would not be here. If we do not like what we see, then we should change ourselves. There is no other remedy, and there certainly is no escape from the necessity for change.

So it is we ourselves that have brought us into this world and provided for ourselves everything we need to evolve through reacting to and solving the problems set before us. A person who whines and pities himself does not learn and therefore is continually faced with the same situations. Have you ever known the kind of person that perpetually complains about being “let down” by others, or those that have a list of
people or situations that “hurt” or cheated them? They are simply slow learners that deserve no pity, for they are doing it all to themselves. Every day Theravada Buddhists monks recite verses of wisdom, some of which say: “I have nothing but my actions; I shall never have anything but my actions.” There it is. Being lazy, cowardly, and egotistical, we hate these truths. But they are the truth and until we face them we will keep on whirling and whining, blaming God, the universe, and everybody else but the real culprit: ourselves. (Note I say “ourselves,” not “our selves.”) Cosmic Destiny is determined by each one of us. God simply has nothing to do with it except for providing us the environment in which we can work out our will. We can see from this that a lot of petitionary prayer and “surrender to the divine will” is idiotic and gets us nowhere. The day we start taking full—and exclusive—responsibility for our past, present, and future is the day we will begin moving toward real perfection.
Perspective on Life

The Full (Purna) picture

“To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to life in the world, and to a greater darkness they who devote themselves only to meditation. Life in the world alone leads to one result, meditation alone leads to another. So have we heard from the wise. They who devote themselves both to life in the world and to meditation, by life in the world overcome death, and by meditation achieve immortality.” (Isha Upanishad 9-11)

Wise teachers have pointed out that even though non-duality is the actual state of things, in our present condition of being netted in Maya we need to know that all is one but live as though duality is also real. The world may not be ultimately real, but we need to work through the puzzles presented to us by relative experience.

Two serious errors can be committed by the thoughtful aspirant: 1) the conclusion that since “none of it is real” nothing really matters and there is no need for spiritual endeavor; and 2) the conclusion that since only the spiritual is real we should ignore the external and the material aspects of life and put all our attention on the inner spiritual side of life. But right there the error is uncovered, for the spiritual is only a “side” of life--as is the material--and together they make the two-sided whole. Or we can look at it in an even better and truer way: the material is the spiritual and therefore demands and deserves our full attention as well as the obviously spiritual aspects of life. This is the meaning of the Vedic verse beginning purnamadah purnamidam:

That is the Full, this is the Full.
The Full has come out of the Full.
If we take the Full from the Full
It is the Full that yet remains.

The two are really--and always--the One. To reject or turn from one is to reject and turn from the All. It cannot be without meaning that the bases of Sanatana Dharma--the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Brahma Sutras--were written by sages who lived fully in the world with families and their attendant responsibilities, including that of making a livelihood. Of course it was the Satya Yuga then, and earthly life was very different from life in our present age. Nevertheless, those who like to excuse themselves from striving for self-realization by citing their involvement in “the world” and worldly responsibilities should consider the historical facts. (And anyway, where exactly do they think the monastics are living?)

From darkness to greater darkness

“To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to life in the world, and to a greater darkness they who devote themselves only to meditation.”

The Purna, the Full (it also means the Complete) is one, yet it is dual. This makes no sense, but considering the limitation of our intellects that should be no surprise. It is our intuition that must come into function when we begin dealing with these higher spheres of reality. We, too, are dual, being image-replicas of the Divine Archetype. Just as God is both relative and absolute, both immanent and transcendent, so are we on a
miniature scale. We, too, then, must learn to function fully in both spheres, for since they are essentially one, if we do not so function we will be partial, incomplete, and therefore faulty rather than perfect—which originally meant to be complete rather than without fault. (“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” Mathew 5:48)

One of the fundamental errors of dualistic religion—Christianity in particular—is its setting of the material against the spiritual and thereby insisting that the material must be rejected and the spiritual alone embraced. This produces deep spiritual psychosis, for it is simply impossible to do and also involves a rejection of an eternal part of ourselves (and God). Sanatana Dharma in contrast makes it clear that the two are really one and must both be cultivated—according to the principles of dharma, of course—for us to attain the consciousness of perfect unity in ourselves and in God.

Those who “devote themselves only to life in the world” become sunk in the limitations of materiality and addicted to its vagaries. Egoism and intense selfishness and exploitation of both the world and those living in it with us can be the sole result of such a limited focus. Having only a perspective of mortality, the higher nature of the individual is suppressed to give free rein to the “dog-eat-dog, every-man-for-himself” attitude that must arise from preoccupation with external existence. Having no idea of the true nature of either the world, ourselves, or our fellow human beings, only chaos and destruction can come to us.

On the other hand, those “who devote themselves only to meditation” or abstract philosophizing to the exclusion of material considerations and practical living, come to a worse result: complete psychological disintegration (literally) and alienation from any form of reality. Hypocrisy also results, because to even eat and drink is to admit the necessity of physicality, and that food must come from somewhere, so dependence on “the ignorant and astray” becomes necessary. It reminds me of a cartoon I saw years ago in an emigre Russian newspaper just after the United States had supplied the Soviet Union with incredibly huge amounts of grain and saved their economy and the life of millions. Two old ladies were sweeping the street in Red Square. One was saying to the other: “It is good we did not kill all the Capitalists; otherwise we would have starved to death.” How can a person justify living off those whose earthly involvement they despise and condemn? The Bhagavad Gita discusses this matter thoroughly and points out the folly of the “spirituals” who pretend to have transcended worldly concerns.

We must function in both matter and spirit. Both elements must be integrated through the following of dharma to complete the picture and solve the evolutionary puzzle. The material must be spiritualized and the spiritual must be materialized in the sense of making both practical and beneficial to one another. In this endeavor the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita are indispensable, for: “Life in the world alone leads to one result, meditation alone leads to another. So have we heard from the wise.” (Isha Upanishad 10)

From death to immortality

“They who devote themselves both to life in the world and to meditation, by life in the world overcome death, and by meditation achieve immortality.” (Isha Upanishad 11)

Life is not just some maze to be somehow gotten through, or a Monopoly board with random advances and regressions—and there is certainly no Get Out of Jail Free!
Rather, life demands the fullest exercise of the two faculties that mark human beings out from the rest of earthly life-forms: developed reason and intuition. Intelligence of the highest order is necessary. This does not mean that the aspirant needs to be an "intellectual," but he must be intelligent. Stupid people simply do not make it—mostly because stupid people never seek it. Nor can the seeker's intelligence be kept on the shelf for only occasional use and amusement. At all times the yogi must be keenly aware of what is going on in his life sphere and ever seeking to understand and work out the mystery. As already said, he needs highly developed intuition as well. Both these are only produced by meditation. This is because both intelligence and intuition (direct knowledge) are divine attributes. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna declares himself to be intelligence (7:10; 10:34) and the knowledge of the mystic (9:12). In the Katha Upanishad Brahman is said to be the "intelligence of the intelligent," and in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad the sage Gargya says: "The being who dwells in the heart as intelligence—him I meditate upon as Brahman." I am not speaking of cunning or cleverness or "savvy;" many stupid—and most evil—people possess them. I am speaking of the intelligence which only arises in those who are of highly evolved consciousness.

It is those who possess right intelligence and right intuition that can live both the inner and outer lives simultaneously—not first one and then the other in alternating cycles—in a spiritually productive (i.e., evolutionary) manner. By doing so they will accomplish two things. One: they will come to understand the real meaning and purpose of all they experience and do and thereby learn the lessons for which they came into relative existence. Two: they will come to experience (not just intellectually think) that the two are really one, manifestations of the One. Having seen the One in all, they have attained immortality even in this mortal life.

A final point. Notice that the upanishadic sage speak of being devoted to the outer and inner lives. This means steadiness and regularity in practice as well as adamant adherence to the required disciplines such as yama and niyama. But most important it means wanting, even loving, to lead the outer and inner lives according to the precepts of dharma. There is no place here for grudging admittance of necessity, of stingy eking out of the barest minimum that is required, grumbling and resenting and wishing it need not be so. Such persons should not even try. They are not just losers, they are losses.

See the perspective of a Christ! Crucifixion was the most horrible of deaths, yet according to Saint Paul: “Jesus… for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Hebrews 12:2) What a different perspective from the morbid and sentimental carryings-on over the passion of Jesus that Christians engage in. Loving the world and the body that links them to the world, nothing seems to them more painful or tragic than the torture and death of that idol. But Jesus hastened to the mockery, the scourging, and the crucifixion for the joy that was set before him. Not wonder he has been misunderstood and rejected through the ages by those who bear his name.

Reinforcing the idea

“To darkness are they doomed who worship only the body, and to greater darkness they who worship only the spirit. Worship of the body alone leads to one result, worship of the spirit leads to another. So have we heard from the wise. They who worship both the body and the spirit, by the body overcome death, and by the spirit achieve immortality.” (Isha Upanishad 12-14)
The basic idea of these verses has already been covered, but we should notice the use of the word “worship.” We are used to thinking of worship only in relation to God, but it comes from an older form, *worthship*, which meant to acknowledge the value and significance of something. Therefore Swami Prabhavananda was wise in selecting this word for his translation.

The lesson here is the need to value both body and spirit. I know that Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other,” (Matthew 6:24) but we are striving to be not men but gods, so we are going to have to manage it. And anyhow, we are not interesting in *serving* the body or the spirit but in *mastering* them.

The body is the instrument of evolution, so to despise and neglect it under the guise of spirituality is foolish. Any machine that malfunctions should be repaired, not despised and tossed away, the body included. Also, hidden within the body are many doorways to higher consciousness. Therefore the body must be worked on to become the evolutionary device it is intended to be. The first step is purification, and that includes two major factors: celibacy and vegetarian diet. There is no getting around it. Just take a look at those who are not purifying themselves in these two ways and you will have proof enough. All the rationalizing and mind-gaming in the world cannot contravene the truth: brahmacharya (continence) and ahimsa (non-killing), are absolute essentials for those who seek higher consciousness. Let us take a look at what the Chandogya Upanishad tells us about food.

“Food when eaten becomes threefold. What is coarsest in it becomes faeces, what is medium becomes flesh and what is subtlest becomes mind. Water when drunk becomes threefold. What is coarsest in it becomes urine, what is medium becomes blood and what is subtlest becomes prana. The mind, my dear, consists of food, the prana of water.” (Chandogya Upanishad 5:5:1, 2, 4)

“That, my dear, which is the subtlest part of curds rises, when they are churned and becomes butter. In the same manner, my dear, that which is the subtlest part of the food that is eaten rises and becomes mind. The subtlest part of the water that is drunk rises and becomes prana. Thus, my dear, the mind consists of food, the prana consists of water.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:6:1-3, 5)

Body and mind come from the food we eat. Thus our food must be both as pure as possible and also blessed by being offered to God. And the conduct of the body must be as pure as possible and its deeds worthy of being offered to God. Action and thought determine the quality of body and mind. Ethics and good thoughts are also essential, but purity of body and mind is the crown jewel. Through these means both body and spirit are truly worshipped and immortality is gained.
Seeing Beyond the Sun

Upanishadic tradition

The final four verses of the Isha Upanishad are recited at the cremation of bodies in India, and are a prayer for ascension to the higher realms that are beyond the compulsion of rebirth in this world. These deal mainly with the sun. Throughout history and throughout the world the sun has been worshipped or considered a symbol of divinity. The full comprehension of the spiritual nature of the sun was discovered in India untold ages ago and embodied in the Upanishads.

Light beyond the light

“The face of truth is hidden by thy golden orb, O Sun. That do thou remove, in order that I who am devoted to truth may behold its glory.” (Isha Upanishad 15)

The sun illumines us and shows us what we assume to be reality. But actually that “seeing” veils the Truth (Reality) behind that veil. Therefore we seek to pierce beyond it. However, the sun actually is that Reality, and we must approach it and petition for the removal of its outer light in order that we may behold its inner Light. (More on this later.)

The golden orb

The “golden orb” has more than one meaning, all of which are significant.

1) The most obvious meaning of the golden orb is the sun itself. All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depend upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution. Sunlight particularly stimulates the activity of the higher centers in the brain, especially that of the pineal gland. Even in the depths of the earth a sensitive man can tell when the sun rises and sets above him. The sun appears to illuminate us, but it is a light that covers the Light in order to lead us to the Light. We must use it to go beyond it.

2) All things have an inner and outer life, and that includes the sun. We may say that there is the outer sun of the material universe, and there is also the metaphysical sun of the psychic universe. They operate simultaneously, being the same thing. The sun truly awakens us in the deepest sense. As the germinating seed struggles upward toward the sun and out into its life-giving rays, so all higher forms of life reach out for the sun, which acts as a metaphysical magnet, drawing them upward and outward toward ever-expanding consciousness. The Chandogya Upanishad discusses it in this way: “Even as a great extending highway runs between two villages, this one and that yonder, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this one and that yonder. They start from the yonder sun and enter into the nadis. They start from the nadis and enter into the yonder sun….When a man departs from this body, then he goes upwards by these very rays or he goes up with the thought of Om. As his mind is failing, he goes to the sun. That, verily, is the gateway of the world, an entering in for the knowers, a shutting out for the non-knowers.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2, 5)

The solar rays do not just flow into this world, they also draw upward through the sun and beyond. In the human body the process of exhalation and inhalation is related to solar energy, and much of the solar power on which we subsist is drawn into the body through our breathing. The solar rays do not just strike the surface of our body,
but actually penetrate into the physical nerves (nadis). The nadis are also the channels in the astral body that correspond to the physical nerves. Just as the electrical impulses flow through the physical nerves, the subtle life force, or prana, flows through the subtle nadis and keeps us alive and functioning. The prana, then, is a vehicle for the solar energies that produce evolution.

When the individual comes into manifestation on this earth he passes from the astral world into the material plane by means of the sun, which is a mass of exploding astral energies, not mere flaming gases. And when the individual has completed his course of evolution within this plane, upon the death of his body he rises upward in his subtle body and passes through the sun into the higher worlds, there to evolve even higher or to pass directly into the depths of the transcendent Brahman.

3) The golden orb is also the entire creation, the means by which through experience the individual spirits can evolve to perfect conscious union with God. Without it we would be unable to attain that union. Yet, just as we use a ladder or stair to ascend and then step beyond it, in the same way the creation is meant to be eventually transcended. We must therefore keep both these aspects in mind while living in this world.

4) The golden orb is also our own mind—that which perceives the world around us and the intelligence which comprehends what is going on and directs our lives accordingly. Potential is not enough; there must be actualization. It is our mind alone that can lead us beyond the mind, our intelligence alone that can lead us onward to intuition. At all stages the mind and intelligence are “golden,” but if we allow ourselves to become stagnated at any point they rapidly “tarnish” and turn from beneficial to harmful. Immersed in this creation, we are like the fish that must keep perpetually moving for they will die of suffocation if they come to a standstill. If we do not move forward we shall move backward—and often mistake it for progress. We must Get On and Get Beyond.

5) Our own self (atman) is also the golden orb. We must come to know our self—our true self—and delight in the self and wonder at its nature. But that is not enough. We must then pass onward to experience the Self of our self, the Paramatman. In a sense we transcend the self—but of course we do not, since the Supreme Self and our individual self are one. This transcendence must ever be kept in mind, for out of ignorance and even laziness a lot of people like the idea that we need only enter into the experience of our self and that is the end. The same wrong-headed view abrogates the need for our evolution and assumes that if we must smash the machine we will get the picture—or even worse, that there is no picture to see or even a seer to see it. However cleverly this view may be worded or how sophisticated it appears, it is nihilism of the deadliest sort, a ruinous pitfall.

6) The golden orb is also the evolutionary impulse within all things which, though life itself to the evolving spirit, yet urges us to continual transcendence of its various stages until we transcend it as well. It is a golden stair that urges us onward to the heights where it cannot come.

The Supreme Sun

The ultimate Golden Orb is the Supreme Self. That is what we are striving toward by the five means just cited. Being transcendent, how shall we reach it? By means of Its immanence within the world in the form of the sacred syllable Om, the Pranava, the Life-giver.
“That which glows [i.e., the sun] is Om,” says the ancient Aitareya-Brahmana (5.32). The life-producing energies of the sun are the energies of Om. Om is the sun of body, mind, and spirit, the Life-Giver of all. All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depends upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution, awakening us in the deepest sense. Sunlight is the radiant form of Om. The sun initiates the entire solar system into Om. Human beings are solar creatures, therefore to intone Om is the most natural thing they can do.

“Now, verily, what is the udgitha is the Om. What is Om is the udgitha. And so verily, the udgitha is the yonder sun and the Om, for the sun is continually sounding ‘Om.”’ (Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.1) The most significant part of this verse is the statement that “the sun is continually sounding ‘Om,” indicating that the evolutionary energy of the sun is a manifestation of Om. Our life depends on the light of the sun, thus our life is also a manifestation of the power of Om. The japa and meditation of Om aligns us with the solar powers that are Om and thereby greatly increase our life force and the evolution of all the levels of our being.

“Even as a great extending highway runs between two villages, this one and that yonder, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this one and that yonder. They start from the yonder sun and enter into the nadis [astral “nerves”]. They start from the nadis and enter into the yonder sun….When a man departs from this body, then he goes upwards by these very rays or he goes up with the thought of Om. As his mind is failing, he goes to the sun. That, verily, is the gateway of the world, an entering in for the knowers, a shutting out for the non-knowers.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2,5) We have already cited this, but there are more meanings for us to explore. The prana, the breath, is a vehicle for the solar energies that produce evolution, and so we join Om to our breathing and merge it into the pranic flow. This practice conditions our subtle levels so that at the time of death we will be oriented toward the solar powers and can ascend upon them—especially if we continue our intonations of Om even after the body has been dropped. Those intonations will guarantee our ascent into the solar world. Those who have imbued themselves with the Pranavic vibrations will enter through the solar gate, whereas those who have not done so will be shut out by it and compelled to return to earthly rebirth.

“By means of Om he [the meditating yogi] sees the way, the way along which his prana goes; therefore one should always repeat It so that he goes along the right way: through the heart-gate, the air-gate, the gate which leads upward, and the opening of the gate of liberation which is known as the open orb [the sun.”] (Amritabindu Upanishad 25, 26) Those who continually invoke and meditate upon Om during their lifetime will remember Om at the time of death, and by means of Om will ascend to the sun and beyond into the real Beyond.

“ ‘It is said: ‘Indeed the sun is this Om;’ therefore one should meditate and make himself ready to unite himself with it.” (Maitrayana Upanishad 6:3) Sunlight is the radiant form of Om. The sun initiates the entire solar system into Om. Human beings are solar creatures, therefore to intone Om is the most natural things they can do.

“At the time of departure from this world, remember Om, the Lord, the Protector” says the Yajur Veda (40:15). Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita: “At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in Me. Then he will be united with Me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life. Therefore you
must remember Me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon Me constantly, you will come to Me. Never doubt this. Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, Who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:5-10)

Whatever we think of most during life we will think of at the time of our death, and that will determine our subsequent state. Those who continually invoke and meditate upon Om during their lifetime will remember Om at the time of death, and by means of Om will ascend to the sun and beyond into the real Beyond.

Qualified seers

Simply wanting a thing does not make it happen or come to us. In the same way, spiritual daydreaming is fruitless. Therefore, he who petitions for the removal of the golden orb describes himself as “I who am devoted to truth.” He is one who wishes to pass from the unreal to the Real, to no longer live in the magic of Maya, but to move onward to the Reality behind all appearance. And he does not just seek truth or think about it—he is devoted to truth. Only those “may behold its glory.”

Stop! so I may Go

“O nourisher, only seer, controller of all—O illumining Sun, fountain of life for all creatures—withdraw thy light, gather together thy rays. May I behold through thy grace thy most blessed form. The Being that dwells therein even that Being am I.” (Isha Upanishad 16)

In Indian philosophy God is often thought of as Mother. This verse bears that out, speaking of the divine as the Nourisher of all beings, the Fountain of Life. God the Mother is frequently addressed in Sanskrit hymns as Jagata Janani, Jagata Palani—the Birthgiver and Nourisher of the world (jagat). In Eastern Christianity, one title given to the Virgin Mother Mary is “Life-giving Spring.” God is also the Seer of All, the Ruler of All, as this verse indicates.

The petitioner then makes an interesting request: “Withhold thy light, gather together thy rays.” How is this? Why does he not ask that the light should flood down upon him? Because the “light” he is speaking of is not the Absolute Light, but the light of relative existence which by its nature veils that Ultimate Light. He asks, then, that God withdraw the light of temporality in order that he might behold and enter into the Light of Eternity.

This has a yogic aspect, as well. We must withdraw all the scattered “rays” of our energies and awareness and unite them to our inmost consciousness. We must gather up that which is dispersed and fragmented and restore our original state of unity. Meditation is the only way this can be accomplished.

The vision

“May I behold through thy grace thy most blessed form.” Two questions arise (or should arise) at these words. What is the grace of God? What is the form of God?

The grace of God is not some kind of favor or “goodie” dropped into our lap by God. Nor is grace something occasionally dispensed by God as a special token to the chosen. All that exists—either relatively or absolutely—is the grace of God. There is nothing that is not the grace of God. If we like, we may say that the grace of God is the Divine Plan for our liberation. And the creation, gross and subtle, is the means for the realization of that Plan, and is itself Grace Divine. So to petition God for grace is as silly
as fish in the ocean praying for water. It is inseparable from us! The grace through which we behold God is the great onward movement initiated by God at the inception of the cosmos.

The Form of God is not a form such as that experienced in relative existence, but is the Substance, the Light, from which all forms arise. It can be said to be formless, and yet all forms exist within it eternally. As Sri Ma Anandamayi frequently said: “Nothing is lost There.” The Form “of” God IS God.

When we see God we also see ourselves in God and can then declare: “The Being that dwells therein even that Being am I.”

“Then Satyakama, son of Shibi, asked him [the Rishi Pippalada]: ‘Venerable Sir, what world does he who meditates on Om until the end of his life, win by That?’ To him, he said: ‘That which is the sound Om, O Satyakama, is verily the higher and the lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the wise man reach the one or the other.’…If he meditates on the Supreme Being [Parampurusha] with the Syllable Om, he becomes one with the Light, the Sun. He is led to the world of Brahman. He sees the Person that dwells in the body, Who is higher than the highest life….That the wise one attains, even by the mere sound Om as support, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:1, 2, 5, 7)
The Final Aspiration

The poet Browning wrote of “the end of life for which the first was made.” That is a lovely expression, but very few really believe it and therefore rarely think of their life’s end. Those of us who seek liberation must from the very beginning be looking toward the end we desire. In the next to the last verse at the close of the Isha Upanishad we are given the perspective we should be living with every moment of our life if we would truly “come to a good end.”

Now


Emily Dickenson wrote: “While others hope to go to heaven at last, I am going all along!” This is the only way for those who would succeed in spiritual life. Nothing should be delayed for the future—it is all now or not at all. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 6:2)

There are many partially awakened people who know that God is the only real goal. Yet they delay their endeavor. “After I get this,” they say, “then I will really dig in and seek God.” But they never do, for as soon as one little short-term goal is reached another arises that seems even more demanding. I know a woman that claimed she would intensely seek God the day after her only child graduated from high school. But then it became after his graduating from college. Then after he was married and “really settled down.” Death found her anticipating still another “after which,” but it was all over. And by her foolishness she had created in her mind the habit of postponing spiritual life, a habit that will surely carry over into the next life and perhaps into others.

How often do we think that the vision of God will somehow interfere with our life—when in reality we have no life outside that vision. Silly children, we dawdle and dally until the night falls, that “night in which no man can work” (John 9:4) which Jesus warned us about. “Now or never” happens to be the simple truth.

Merging in Life

Many people want to “embrace life” so they can egocentrically possess it and exploit it to the full. But they have no idea what life is. Just the opposite, for what they think is life is really death. “The all-pervading life” is the only life, for that is God. And the necessity is not to find or see God as an object (again, to possess), but to merge with God in complete unity-identity. That is, our consciousness must be completely merged in the infinite Consciousness, and irrevocably so. Just as a cup of water poured into the ocean cannot be drawn back out of the ocean, so we need to attain that state of unity which can never be reversed. Many yogis paddle their feet or go for a quick dip in the ocean of Satchidananda, but the goal is to unite with that ocean, to merge in it and become totally one with it. Consequently at ever moment of our life we must be holding in mind and living out the sankalpa: “Let my life now merge in the all-pervading life.”

Those who are unfit for union with God become all anxious and even fearful when
they hear about merging with the Divine. “O! will I go out of existence?” they quaver. “What will happen to me?” Over and over again they plunge headlong into the sea of rebirth, never raising such questions about relative existence, but “going for it” heedlessly. Only when confronted with God do they develop prudence and caution. Jesus has assured us, though: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.” (Luke 17:33) This is because we are truly negative—that is, we are absolutely backwards one hundred and eighty degrees. Consequently what we think will annihilate us will immortalize us, whereas what we think will make us live will destroy us.

Like the great master, Yogananda, we must pray: “Let me drown in Thine ocean and live!”

Understanding the destiny of the body

It is not a simple thing to rid ourselves of the conditionings of billions of lives wherein we identified completely with the body. Even when we have evolved enough to identify more with the mind and the spirit, still the body claims the majority of our attention—and attachment. It is completely reflexive with us, overriding any emotional or intellectual factors to the contrary. Therefore we must continually affirm in word, attitude, and act: “Ashes are my body’s end.” This will only seem painful or pessimistic if we are still identifying with the body. But if not, it will be as happy a statement as an affirmation that our prison is going to evaporate into dust.

We have died many times (or thought we did), but that did not free us at all. And in many lives we were no doubt cremated. Still, that accomplished nothing. Evidently there is a deeper meaning to the “ashes” that are the body’s end. It is the fire of wisdom that turns our “bodies” into ashes. Let us then be busy stoking the fires of yoga and getting on with the burning. Sadhus wear gerua, orange-red color, to remind them of the fire of discrimination and spirit-knowledge that must be perpetually burning in order to reduce all that impels us into embodiment to the ashes of freedom.

“Flying from fear, from lust and anger, he hides in me his refuge, his safety: burnt clean in the blaze of my being, in me many find home.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:10)

“The blazing fire turns wood to ashes: the fire of knowledge turns all karmas to ashes.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:37)

When the “bridges” of all bodies, subtle and gross, have been burned in the holy fires, then we will pass on into the kingdom of Infinity that is our eternal birthright.

Remember!


“Remember Brahman” is extremely easy to say, but how is it done? The Upanishads do not waste our time, but go straight to the mark, saying:

“I will tell you briefly of that Goal which all the Vedas with one voice propound, which all the austerities speak of, and wishing for Which people practice discipline: It is Om.” (Katha Upanishad 1. 2.15-17)

“Om is the Supreme Brahman.” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 1:7)

“God is the Syllable Om.” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:17)

“Om is Brahman, the Primeval Being.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.1.1)

“That [Om] is the quintessence of the essences, the Supreme, the
highest.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.3)

“Om is Brahman.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1)

After the battle of Kurukshetra, before which he had spoken the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna again spoke to Arjuna at length. In that conversation he told him: “The gods, rishis, and the nagas, and the asuras, approaching Prajapati [the Creator], said to Him: ‘Tell us the highest good.’ To them who were inquiring about the highest good, the Venerable One said, ‘Om, which is Brahman in a single Syllable.’” (Anugita XI)

“The monosyllable Om is the highest Brahman,” (Manu Smriti 2:83, 87) said the sage Manu, and Patanjali summed it all up by simply saying: “Its repetition and meditation is the way.” (Yoga Sutras 1:28)

To remember Brahman we engage in the japa and meditation of Om—simple and direct.

“One should meditate on this Syllable [Om].” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.1)

“This [Om] is the best means [of attainment and realization]; this means is the Higher and Lesser Brahman. Meditating on Om, one becomes worthy of worship in the world of Brahman.” (Katha Upanishad 1.2.15-17)

“The Self [atman] is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self. He who knows It thus enters the Self [Supreme Spirit] with his self [individual spirit].” (Mandukya Upanishad 1.8.12)

“Taking as the bow the great weapon of the Upanishads [Om], one should place in It the arrow sharpened by meditation. Drawing It with a mind engaged in the contemplation of That [Brahman], O beloved, know that Imperishable Brahman as the target. The Syllable Om is the bow: one’s self, indeed, is the arrow. Brahman is spoken of as the target of that. It is to be hit without making a mistake. Thus one becomes united with it [Brahman] as the arrow becomes one with the target. He in Whom the sky, the earth, and the interspace are woven, as also the mind along with all the pranas, know Him alone as the one Self. Dismiss other utterances. This [Om] is the bridge to immortality. Meditate on Om as the Self. May you be successful in crossing over to the farther shore of darkness.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6)

“Then Satyakama, son of Shibi, asked him [the Rishi Pippalada]: ‘Venerable Sir, what world does he who meditates on Om until the end of his life, win by That?’ To him, he said: ‘If he meditates on the Supreme Being [Parampurusha] with the Syllable Om, he becomes one with the Light, the Sun. He is led to the world of Brahman. He sees the Person that dwells in the body, Who is higher than the highest life....That the wise one attains, even by the mere sound Om as support, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:1,5,7)

“The knower of the real nature of Brahman that is identical with the Pranava, should cross all the formidable streams [of samsara] with the ferryboat of the Pranava.” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 2:6)

“He who utters Om with the intention ‘I shall attain Brahman’ does verily attain Brahman.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1)

**Alternating remembrance**

The thorough practicality and good sense of dharma is one of its most striking features: *it works*. And it works very well. So it is meaningful that the upanishad tells us to remember Brahman, then remember our own past deeds, then remember Brahman, and then remember our own past deeds in a kind of alternating current. This is to keep us from falling into two serious errors: 1) being so focused on the “spiritual” that we do
not pay attention to what is really going on with us, and 2) becoming so obsessed with ourselves that we utterly leave God out of the picture. Patanjali lists *swadhyaya*—introspective self-study—as an essential ingredient of yoga practice. Yet this self-study must be done in the greater context of divine consciousness: “In thy light shall we see light” (Psalms 36:9) Only in the divine light can we see things as they really are.

So we should meditate on Brahman through Om, and outside of meditation we should look at our past, comparing our past deeds and our past states of mind with our present deeds and mental condition. This will reveal to us whether we are truly progressing or not. I knew a woman who sincerely believed that God was appearing to her in meditation and talking to her so sweetly, making her feel so holy and pure. Then she would come out of meditation and be unspeakably cruel to her daughter, both physically and mentally. In meditation she was an angel, but outside of meditation she was a devil. Wrong meditation gives us a wrong image of ourselves, but right meditation shows us the truth about both God and ourselves.

Of course we have to have a correct memory of our past. Many people are so blinded to the truth about themselves that when they learn to meditate they start saying: “My mind used to be calm, but it has gotten so restless,” or: “I used to be a nice person, but now I am just a wreck and falling apart.” The reality is that their mind was always restless, but not being introspective they did not realize it. They were also a complete ruin, mentally and spiritually, but they had no eyes with which to see it. Now they do, and they foolishly blame meditation. On the other hand, people who are practicing a wrong form of meditation (or a right form wrongly) do become increasingly restless and increasingly negative. I know of several kinds of meditation that really do bring about the mental and spiritual disintegration of those who practice them, and often the physical degeneration, as well. But those who meditate according to the teachings of the upanishads will have no problem.
The Inner Fire

Because bodies are cremated in India, the final verse of the Isha Upanishad addressed to Agni (Fire) is recited when the crematory fire is lighted. But the upanishadic rishis had a far more profound intention when they intoned:

“O god Agni, lead us to felicity. Thou knowest all our deeds. Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin. To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!” (Isha Upanishad 18)

Agni

The most prevalently venerated natural force throughout the history of humanity is the sun. The next is fire, which was considered a divine gift. Fire is a mystery. Throughout my schooling, from grade school to university, I asked many teachers: WHAT is fire? Nobody gave me any answer, much less an accurate-seeming one.

A friend of mine once pointed out an interesting fact about fire. When people—especially young boys or girls—sit around an open fire, the subject of the supernatural in some form or other usually comes up. Ghost stories around the campfire are a staple of campers. How is this? My friend said that it was because fire stimulates awareness of the unseen levels of existence. Certainly this was the opinion in India where fire was considered a channel of communication between this world and the subtle worlds. Long before Christians were lighting candles in church to convey their prayers to Christ and the saints, in India people were reciting prayers in the presence of fire and making offerings into the fire, confident that the prayers and offerings would be transferred by the fire to their intended recipients. Consider in our own time how much attention and meaning is attached to the Olympic Flame—really only a shadow of the original Greek fire.

Everything has multiple layers to its existence, one of which is ideational. That is, everything that exists is a thought in the divine mind. Consequently everything is both meaningful and symbolic. To the yogis of India fire became a most significant symbol, the symbol of the will of the yogi and the transforming power of yoga itself. So much so, that yoga practice came to be called tapasya—the generation of heat. In the twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh wrote extensively on this subject, especially in relation to the yogic symbolism of the Vedic hymns.

Fire and meditation

In Vedic religion the fire rite, the Agnihotra or Havan, is the supreme ritual act. It is emblematic of the soul’s progression to divinity, and its elements and actions can be studied to reveal many secrets of esoteric life and unfoldment. The sacred fire is kindled by the friction of two wooden sticks called aranis or drills. This is an important symbol, for it is considered that the fire is latent in the wood until the friction causes it to manifest. In the same way, enlightenment is latent in the yogi, awaiting the right conditions to be provided for its manifestation.

“As the form of fire when latent in its source is not seen and yet its seed is not destroyed, but may be seized again and again in its source by means of the drill [a pointed stick whirled to produce fire for the Vedic sacrifices], so it is in both cases. The Self has to be seized in the body by means of the Syllable Om. By making one’s body
the lower friction stick and the Syllable Om the upper friction stick, by practicing the friction of meditation one may see the hidden God, as it were.” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 1:13, 14) We are the lower arani, and Om is the upper arani. When they are brought together and made to interact with one another through the japa and meditation of Om, God is revealed to the meditator both within and without. The Hidden becomes manifest, and the Unseen becomes seen through Pranava Yoga. “Through Om the Lord is met face to face.” wrote Shankara in his commentary on the Yoga Sutras.

“Having made oneself the lower arani, and the Pranava the upper arani and rubbing them together through the practice of meditation, see the Lord in His hidden reality.” (Brahma Upanishad 4)

“Making the atman the lower arani and Om the upper arani, and practising the friction of meditation, one should apply himself to the best of his strength to the resonance of the sound of Omkara.” (Dhyanabindu Upanishad 22, 23)

“By making his own inner sense [i.e., awareness] the lower arani and the Pranava the upper arani, the accomplished adept completely burns up and reduces to ashes his ignorance of the atman.” (Kaivalya Upanishad 11)

We see from these upanishadic statements that fire represents meditation, the effects of meditation, and Om, “the Word that is God.” (Bhagavad Gita 7:8) With this in mind we can unravel the intentions of the rishis when they prayed: “O god Agni, lead us to felicity. Thou knowest all our deeds. Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin. To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!”

**Lead us to felicity**

Spiritual practice and the will to practice must go together. Knowing what to do, but having no interest to do it will get us nowhere. At the same time, wanting to succeed and not knowing how is equally useless. But put the two together for the necessary time, and all benefit will be ours. Agni represents the radiance of our self and of God as well as that which is produced by sadhana practice. These three fires will light our way to blessedness. But their combined effect will not just show us the way, it will lead us along the way, illumining our heart and minds with the requisite wisdom for spiritual attainment. It will also draw us along the path, but only in the degree that we are actively walking the path. This is indicated in the Song of Solomon when he prays: “Draw me, we will run after thee.” (Song of Solomon 1:4) Both God and man must actively “seek” each other. It is said in India: “When someone chooses God you can know that God has chosen them.” The liberating power we call Agni is the result of these two forces meeting and combining with one another.

**Thou knowest all our deeds**

After one of his classes on the Narada Bhakti Sutras, Swami Prabhavananda was asked how a person could avoid spiritual pride. His answer was remarkable: You cannot develop spiritual pride if your spiritual practice is correct, for you see yourself correctly and can neither fall into pride or despair. This is certainly true. The light of tapasya reveals all about ourselves we need to know. Self-knowledge, even if fragmentary or dim at the beginning, is an immediate fruit of right meditation, and will in time develop into the full light of spiritual “day.” The Eastern Orthodox hymn to Saint Nicholas begins: “The truth of things revealed thee....” This is profoundly true. When we begin approaching the Real, the Truth becomes revealed, both the Truth of
God and the truth of us.

**Preserve us from the deceitful attraction of sin**

Understanding the nature and consequences of our deeds, we will learn how to truly live as Krishna outlined in the Bhagavad Gita, especially the second chapter. At the closing of the third chapter, Arjuna asks: “Krishna, what is it that makes a man do evil, even against his own will; under compulsion, as it were?” To which Krishna replies:

“The rajoguna has two faces, rage and lust \([kama]: \text{desire}]\): the ravenous, the deadly: recognize these: they are your enemies. Smoke hides fire, dust hides a mirror, the womb hides the embryo: by lust the Atman is hidden. Lust hides the Atman in its hungry flames, the wise man’s faithful foe. Intellect, senses and mind are fuel to its fire: thus it deludes the dweller in the body, bewildering his judgment. Therefore, Arjuna, you must first control your senses, then kill this evil thing which obstructs discriminative knowledge and realization of the Atman. The senses are said to be higher than the sense-objects. The mind is higher than the senses. The intelligent will is higher than the mind. What is higher than the intelligent will? The Atman Itself. You must know Him who is above the intelligent will. Get control of the mind through spiritual discrimination. Then destroy your elusive enemy, who wears the form of lust.”

Meditation and other forms of sadhana are that which protects us from the attraction of folly and ignorance. Wherefore Krishna asks: “The uncontrolled mind does not guess that the Atman is present: how can it meditate? Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?” (Bhagavad Gita 2:66)

**To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!**

There are those who think that sadhana is medicine, a “have to” that they can sigh and grouch about and grudgingly engage in. They are wrong! Their very attitude will destroy any benefits the sadhana might bestow. They should forget about spiritual practice until they get enough good sense to rejoice in it and value it above all else. That does not mean it will not be difficult and even a struggle, sometimes painful, but it is their delusion that galls the wise, not the remedy for it. Meditation should be a kind of “deity” for us by the grace of which we can worship the Divine and our own divine self. The means of meditation should also be worshipped, and so the upanishads say:

“The Syllable Om is to be worshipped as consisting of Brahman, Who is Satchidananda….Because it delivers \([\text{saves}]\), Om is called the Deliverer \([\text{Saving One: Taraka}]\). It should be known as the saving \([\text{delivering}]\) Brahman which should be worshipped—mark this well.” (Rama Uttara Tapiniya Upanishad)

“That which is Om is the indestructible, the supreme Brahman. That alone should be worshipped….It is called Taraka because it enables one to cross this mundane existence \([\text{samsara}]\). Know that Taraka \([\text{Om}]\) alone is Brahman and It alone should be worshipped….He who knows this becomes immortal.” (Tarasara Upanishad)

“Omkara is the holiest of holy things….it is holy and full of sanctifying things. One shall worship Omkara,” says the Vayu Purana.

Shankara said it even more pointedly in his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: “Just as the image of Vishnu or any other god is regarded as identical with that god (for purposes of worship), so is Om to be treated as Brahman.” And in his commentary on the Chandogya Upanishad: “The syllable Om is the inmost essence of all essences. It is supreme because of Its being the symbol of the Supreme Self. It is
competent to be worshipped as the Supreme Self. It is competent to take the place of the Supreme Self since It is to be worshipped like the Supreme Self....The Vedic rites are meant for the worship of the very Om because It is a symbol of the Supreme Self. The worship of That [Om] is surely the worship of the supreme Self.”

“To thee we offer our salutations, again and yet again!”
The Past is the Future

In very ancient times a man named Vajasrabasa decided to perform a rite intended to give the performer great merit. The rite entailed the giving away of all the performer’s possessions. However he had no such intention, and instead was going to give away only his cattle—and of them only the useless ones: the old, the barren, the blind, and the lame. His son, Nachiketa, observing this, came to his father and said: “Father, do not repent thy vow! Consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live. Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season.” (Katha Upanishad 1:1:6)

There is no use denying it: we all follow in the path of Vajrabasa on occasion, though some do it more exuberantly. This is especially deadly in the realm of spiritual life.

I well remember when two newly-made Indian friends from South India asked me wonderingly: “What is an ‘Indian giver?’” When I said it meant someone who promised but did not deliver, or who gave and then took back, they were really bewildered. But when I explained that it was not the Indians who were the “givers” but the deceitful white men, they understood—and to my confusion thought it was very funny. (When I told them about “Honest Injun?” and “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” they laughed till they cried, and thereafter frequently asked: “Honest Injun?” when I told them something.) It is not funny when we are “Indian givers” in spiritual life, just as double-tongued and devious with God and our own spirit as the politicians were with the Native Americans.

One of the funniest and most typical examples is found in the comic motion picture, The End. In one scene Burt Reynolds is swimming in the ocean about to drown. He starts shouting out to God how much of his income he vows to give if he survives. The percentage goes up and up to the total amount. But then he sees that there is a chance he may make it back to shore. So the percentage starts dropping in proportion to how near he gets to the land! Finally he is telling God that he will be giving nothing, and if God does not like it, that is just too bad. We are very much (often exactly) like that ourselves. When we think we are not going to have something, or will have no use for it, we generously offer it to God or renounce it. But the moment we see a need or a use for it, then we announce to ourselves that God would not expect us to hand it over or renounce it.

Many people start out spiritual life with great enthusiasm, ready to dedicate and sacrifice in order to attain liberation. But as time goes by, the sands in the hourglass of will and interest grow less and less, shifting back to the bottom level of ego and the material life until what remains is so feeble and negligible it would be better if it, too, were eliminated in honesty.

The principle that we reap only and exactly what we sow is an absolute in spiritual life. Here are Saint Paul’s words on the subject: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.” (Galatians 6:7-9) Fainting is a very real possibility for all of us, and that is why these warning words of Nachiketa were written in the upanishad: “Father,
do not repent thy vow! Consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live. Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season.”

The law of reaping what has been sown—and conversely not reaping what has not been sown—is to be taken most seriously in all aspects of life, but especially in spiritual matters. Solomon cautions us: “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for...better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.” (Ecclesiastes 5:4) The question here is not that of God being angry or sad at our non-payment, but the negative effect our own perfidy will have on us directly. It is not God that rewards and punishes, but our own self, and its justice is inexorable. So asking God to release us or forgive us means positively nothing—it is our own self we are dealing with and it cannot be gotten around in any degree whatsoever.

Sad to say, there are many examples of “those that have gone before” who foolishly reneged on their own selves and suffered the consequences, from simple unhappiness to abject and long-lasting misery, and even death. This latter is no exaggeration, I know of examples myself. If you will excuse me, I will not cite any examples at all, for it is simply too bleak. Just do not be one yourself! But I will tell you the principle I have seen demonstrated over and over again: Whatever a person abandons his spiritual life to keep or to gain will be (usually abruptly or even violently) taken away from him and he will never regain or restart his spiritual life in this incarnation. I have never seen an exception. Never. (I am, however, not speaking of merely risking or retarding the personal spiritual life—we all do that just from making mistakes or from silly foibles—but of the actual giving up and turning from, even rejecting of, one’s spiritual life and obligations. This is fatal.)

At every step of our spiritual life we must keep in mind the law of cause and effect and “consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live.” And lest we think that if we escape the karmic reaction in this life we are “home free,” Nachiketa added: “Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season.” So there are future lives in which our neglect can come to fruition in many forms—all inimical to our further progress.

Of course, the words of Nachiketa only have meaning to the wise. As Krishna told Arjuna: “Even a wise man acts according to the tendencies of his own nature. All living creatures follow their tendencies. What use is any external restraint? If a man keeps following my teaching with faith in his heart, and does not make mental reservations, he will be released from the bondage of his karma. But those who scorn my teaching, and do not follow it, are lost. They are without spiritual discrimination. All their knowledge is a delusion.” (Bhagavad Gita 3:33, 31, 32)
Seeing Death, Seeing Life

Visiting Death

Long ago a man named Vajasrabasa undertook a ritual to gain divine favor, but deliberately performed it in such a way that only misfortune could accrue to him rather than good. His virtuous sin, Nachiketa, tried to reason with him, but in response he uttered the curse: “Thee I give to Death!”

Nachiketa was no ordinary son. He was an accomplished yogi, one who could penetrate into the unseen worlds, and in keeping with his unjust father’s unjust words he went to the realm presided over by Yamaraja, the King of Death. Yama welcomed him with great respect and told Nachiketa to ask three favors from him. Being a worthy son of an unworthy father, his first request was that his father should suffer no anxiety about his fate, but that his anger should be appeased so that when Nachiketa returned home his father would recognize and welcome him. Yama agreed.

Next Nachiketa asked to learn the sacrificial rite that leads to heaven. Yama agreed to that also and taught him. Then Yama asked him to make his third request. The upanishadic text continues:

“And then Nachiketa considered within himself, and said:

“When a man dies, there is this doubt: Some say, he is; others say, he is not. Taught by thee, I would know the truth. This is my third wish.’

“Nay,” replied Death, ‘even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery. Subtle indeed is the truth regarding it, not easy to understand. Choose thou some other boon, O Nachiketa.’

“But Nachiketa would not be denied.

“Thou sayest, O Death, that even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery, and that it is not easy to understand. Surely there is no teacher better able to explain it than thou—and there is no other boon equal to this.’

“To which, trying Nachiketa again, the god replied:

“Ask for sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years. Ask for cattle, elephants, horses, gold. Choose for thyself a mighty kingdom. Or if thou canst imagine aught better, ask for that—not for sweet pleasures only but for the power, beyond all thought, to taste their sweetness. Yea, verily, the supreme enjoyer will I make thee of every good thing. Celestial maidens, beautiful to behold, such indeed as were not meant for mortals—even these, together with their bright chariots and their musical instruments, will I give unto thee, to serve thee. But for the secret of death, O Nachiketa, do not ask!’

“But Nachiketa stood fast, and said: ‘These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep thou therefore horses and chariots, keep dance and song, for thyself. How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who once has seen thy face? Nay, only the boon that I have chosen—that only do I ask. Having found out the society of the imperishable and the immortal, as in knowing thee I have done, how shall I, subject to decay and death, and knowing well the vanity of the flesh—how shall I wish for long life? ’

“Tell me, O King, the supreme secret regarding which men doubt. No other boon will I ask.’

“Whereupon the King of Death, well pleased at heart, began to teach Nachiketa the
secret of immortality.” (Katha Upanishad 1:1:20-29)

**The mystery**

As Yama told Nachiketa, even those powerful beings that control the forces of the cosmos have been puzzled by the mystery of whether those who have gone beyond death can be said to exist or not to exist. Reflective human beings have agonized over the same problem. When they came to Buddha with the question he refused to give any answer, saying that whichever he told them they would misunderstand and distort his words. So he said nothing. Consequently, to say that Buddha taught the non-existence of an immortal self and individual immortality is perhaps an even worse distortion than that which he sought to avoid through silence.

Yama, however, was not talking to word-juggling ignoramuses, but to an eminently qualified inquirer. Yet, testing the strength of Nachiketa’s interest in such a profound matter, he attempted to dissuade him from pressing the question. When that failed, he resorted to that which has effectively deflected “seekers” through the history of humanity. He offered him long-lived and prosperous progeny, vast material wealth and possessions, unlimited pleasure and unlimited power, and finally, dominion over even the subtle worlds and all that is therein. Throughout countless ages the mere promise or prospect of such acquisitions have turned awakening consciousnesses from the path of immortality and led them further into the morass of mortal life. But Nachiketa could not be moved from his original resolve to learn the truth regarding immortality.

The Katha Upanishad cannot have been unknown to Jesus when he lived and studied in India, and it can be speculated that it was in the context of the teachings of this upanishad that he asked his disciples: “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26) I have to admit that when as a primary grade-schooler I first heard this verse read out in church, I immediately thought: “No. The real question is: ‘What will a man take in exchange for his soul?’” Through the years I kept questioning as to whether things were a blessing for life or a bribe to embrace inner death. This, too, we see so often. From those early years and even till now I have seen so many bribes offered and taken, all of them cheap and paltry compared to what the seekers would have gained if they had turned away from the offers. And as I have pointed out, in every instance the promise was withdrawn unfulfilled or the “gain” was ruthlessly wrested from their grasp and they were left broken and empty. People do not need to die to become “lost souls.” The suffering may not be eternal, but it is no less terrible for that. I can truthfully say that throughout my life the most desolate souls I have met were those that said to me with sad nostalgia: “I used to be...,” and then mentioned some abandoned spiritual calling or involvement. The wheels of life were grinding them down and tormenting them with the bitter memory of their loss along with the impossibility of their regaining that which they had so carelessly and foolishly tossed aside for “life” long ago.

**Let us attend!**

In Eastern Christian worship the exclamation “Let us attend!” is usually uttered before some special reading or prayer is about to be intoned. We should indeed attend to the words of Nachiketa when he replied to Yama’s offer:

“These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep thou therefore horses and chariots, keep dance
and song, for thyself. How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who once has seen thy face? Nay, only the boon that I have chosen—that only do I ask. Having found out the society of the imperishable and the immortal, as in knowing thee I have done, how shall I, subject to decay and death, and knowing well the vanity of the flesh—how shall I wish for long life? Tell me, O King, the supreme secret regarding which men doubt. No other boon will I ask."

In Christianity and Buddhism a great deal of emphasis is placed on the memory of death as a universal principle and the particular mortality of each one of us. In the West this is superficially shrugged off as morbidity and “unhealthy,” but it can be salutary indeed. It was only sensible that Nachiketa, having come face-to-face with Death, should disregard all that which the human race has been madly seeking throughout its existence. For in the East (including Christianity) only that which lasts forever without any change is considered Real. Everything else is unreal, illusory. Therefore that which can change and pass away is even now essentially nothing. Who, then, would value any such? There is no need for a lengthy philosophical analysis of psychic niceties or suchlike. The fact of their evanescent nature turns all desired objects to mere fantasies in the consciousness of the wise.

“Whereupon the King of Death, well pleased at heart, began to teach Nachiketa the secret of immortality.”

In sum: renunciation is the key to the secret of immortality.
The Good and the Pleasant

“The good is one thing; the pleasant is another. These two, differing in their ends, both prompt to action. Blessed are they that choose the good; they that choose the pleasant miss the goal.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:1)

How simple and direct these words are! When, after years of being soaked (sometimes drowned) in mere religion, when I found dharma one of the most beautiful and wonderful things about it was its incredible simplicity. The religion I had had before was simplistic—childishly so—but at the same time it was complex, convoluted and tangled, because that was state of mind that had produced it and which it produced in those unfortunate enough to accept and follow it. (Many avoided the problem by professing the religion but not really following it.) In contrast, the profound dharma was also as simple as the great ocean, gathering all into unity. I had tried reading Western philosophers and theologians, and found them impossible to understand—mostly because they were not really saying anything. The first time I opened a book by Shankara, the greatest philosopher India has ever produced, it was with real anxiety. Would I break apart on the rock of his verbiage? Not at all. Every sentence was so exquisitely clear, every concept so unbelievably simple—and equally vast and deep. I understood why: Shankara knew by his acquisition of Divine Consciousness. When Shankara talked to me God was speaking. And God knows how to communicate.

Neither Shankara nor the Upanishads or the Gita really require a commentary. All a “commentator” can really do is expand what is already there so we do not rush from point to point in the original text and miss so much of it. Actually, all my commentaries are really Pauses and Reflections. There is no need to explain to you what those sacred texts mean. You can easily understand them for yourself. So all I am really doing is ruminating over them with you. We are digesting them together. It is very satisfying. At least to me—I hope it is to you, also.

The good and the pleasant

“The good is one thing; the pleasant is another.” This does not have to be the situation—the problem is in us. Since the good dissolves the ego and frees us from its seemingly eternal domination and bondage, it is only natural that those who are inured, even addicted, to its rule will find the good bitter in the extreme. In the closing chapter of the Bhagavad Gita Krishna speaks of the one who chooses the good: “Deep his delight after strict self-schooling: sour toil at first but at last what sweetness, the end of sorrow.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:37) Who would not choose this? Just about everybody. Why? Because it requires “strict self-schooling.” We have to educate and deliver ourselves. Neither God nor any holy being can do it for us. Therefore those who cling to their ego-addiction avidly “take refuge” in and “surrender” to and “place all my trust” in God, gods, gurus, saints, teachers, a religion, and whatever, knowing at least subconsciously that it will not work, for they alone can do the needful. The Holy Ones have already done all they could do for them. They have given the message and pointed out the way. Now it is their turn to get to work. Otherwise nothing will happen. And in their perversity this satisfies them completely, though they cover it up with religiosity and “devotion.” Those who do wish to achieve the good must shake off their self-hypnosis and begin the labor. They will be surprised at how pleasant it really is,
and in time will come to realize that they were enjoying pain and avoiding the real pleasure that is found only in spiritual life.

Krishna describes the pleasant as essentially “sweet at first but at last how bitter: that pleasure is poison.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:38) It is not just harmful—it is deadly. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of Saint John the Evangelist, wrote of those who, drinking a sweet drink that contains poison, “sweetly drink in their death.” (Epistle to the Trallians) “Aren’t we having fun?” “Come on—live!” “What are you afraid of?” “Why don’t you find out what it is all about?” “What do you know about life?” These are the desperate appeals of those whose consciousness is awakened enough for them to be tormented by the example of those who have more fully awakened and who “touch not the cup—it is death to the soul.”

The wise know that the good and the pleasant utterly differ in their ends. The pleasant leads to ever more addiction, a craving for ever-increasing intoxication, and finally complete collapse and destruction.

“When senses touch objects the pleasures therefrom are like wombs that bear sorrow. They begin, they are ended: they bring no delight to the wise.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:22)

On the other hand: “Self-controlled, cut free from desire, curbing the heart and knowing the Atman, man finds Nirvana that is in Brahman, here and hereafter.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:26)

“For when a man’s heart has reached fulfillment through knowledge and personal experience of the truth of Brahman, he is never again moved by the things of the senses. Earth, stone and gold seem all alike to one who has mastered his senses. Such a yogi is said to have achieved union with Brahman. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:8, 21)

The good also leads to complete collapse and destruction—the collapse and disintegration of the ego and its attendants, ignorance and desire. Then: “He knows bliss in the Atman and wants nothing else. Cravings torment the heart: he renounces cravings. I call him illumined.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:55)

“The man of faith, whose heart is devoted, whose senses are mastered: he finds Brahman. Enlightened, he passes at once to the highest, the peace beyond passion.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:39)

“His mind is dead to the touch of the external: it is alive to the bliss of the Atman. Because his heart knows Brahman his happiness is for ever.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:21)

“Already, here on earth, before his departure, let man be the master of every impulse lust-begotten or fathered by anger: thus he finds Brahman, thus he is happy.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:23)

**Motivating forces**

“These two, differing in their ends, both prompt to action.” Both the good and the pleasant impel us to actions, but they do so in completely different ways.

The good points us to the way of benefit in a completely intelligent and non-emotional way. For example, the good never motivates us by selfish means such as promising reward or threatening punishment—this is the way of evil, including much of religion. The good motivates us toward itself simply by revealing its inherent value.

The pleasant is altogether different. It only shows us its external appearance. It
does not reason with us, but entices or even compels us to seize it. The pleasant only shows us its immediate or short-term effect, but completely hides from us its long-term effects and blinds us to its inherent defects. The archetypal example of this is found in the Bible. There we are told that "when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat." (Genesis 3:6) Here we see all the problems with the pleasant: only the external is considered, emotion and instinct come to dominate and eclipse reason, and the ultimate effect is completely unapparent.

In sum, the good reveals but the pleasant conceals. It is necessary that we see the good as truly good and the pleasant as harmful and even evil. This is not easy.

The bigger picture

One of the problems with prevailing religion of all kinds is its incredible small-sightedness. Like the pleasant-oriented and pleasant-obsessed ego which it supports and feeds, it is concerned with only the moment at hand or with goals that are utterly irrelevant to the real nature of the human being. When we understand who/what we really are, then alone can we comprehend what is the sole purpose of our existence: conscious union with the Absolute. In light of this the upanishad concludes: "Blessed are they that choose the good; they that choose the pleasant miss the goal." So the discrimination between the good and the pleasant is no light matter.

A genuine test of character

In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we find a parable about foolish and wise souls. Most of us do not really care if we are foolish, just as long as no one labels us so. But we should care, and so the upanishad continues its teaching, saying:

"Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men. The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other. The wise prefer the good to the pleasant; the foolish, driven by fleshly desires, prefer the pleasant to the good." (Katha Upanishad 1:2:2) There is a lot of truth in these few lines, some of it embarrassing, but nevertheless beneficial for us. (The good is not the pleasant, even in philosophy.)

"Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men." Whatever may be the excuses we may make for ourselves, even portraying ourselves as weak or victims, no one, NO ONE, forces anything upon us in life, however much it may seem otherwise. Rather, the good and the pleasant simply "present themselves" to us. We are totally responsible for our response to them, although, like Adam and Eve back in Genesis, we try to put the blame on someone else, on some external factor. "And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat…. And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.” (Genesis 3:12,13)

It is really essential to us as we move through life (hopefully forward) that although our deluded experience seems just the opposite, in reality all "things" are completely neutral—it is our response to them that really gives them any character such as good, bad, destructive, positive, etc. A little thought will show this. The deadliest poison is harmless if we do not make contact with it. Conversely, the best medicine is worthless if we do not consume it. Or think of this: garbage seems heavenly food to a starving person, but not to someone who is well fed; a child’s toy means nothing to a mature adult. Nothing has an innate ability to draw or force us—all the drawing and forcing is in our own mind as it responds to the object. We can blame no one at any time. It is all in us. If there are no grass seeds in the soil no grass will grow. The seeds have to be in us.
to sprout and grow and bear fruit as thinking, willing, and acting.

“The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other.” Viveka, the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal, between the true and the false, between the transient and the permanent, is indispensable for the serious spiritual aspirant. The wise possess and exercise this faculty, the eye of wisdom, by deeply examining whatever is presented to them and discerning whether it is the good or the merely pleasant they are being confronted with. Intelligence comes into the foreground, feeling and emotion being banished from the mental field altogether. Human beings operate either rationally or instinctually-emotionally. The wise are rational at all times. For example, real love is clear-sighted—never blind—whereas infatuation masquerading as love is both blinding and blindness.

**Preferring and driven**

If two people are walking, one toward the north and the other toward the south, the difference between them is very little—just the direction they are facing. But in the matter of the wise and the foolish the differences are profound, for they are rooted in their very being, especially the mind and intellect. Even as a child I always thought that the statement of Abraham to Lazarus that “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed,” (Luke 16:26) was spiritually symbolic, that a great gulf did indeed lie between the Godwards and the earthwards. The upanishad is outlining this nature of this gulf for us by describing its effects on both.

The wise prefer the good—they are not enticed, coerced, or “somehow drawn” to the good. They intelligently—yes, intellectually—prefer it because they know its nature and its effects. This is true of everything in their life, mundane, mental, and spiritual. This is markedly true in the matter of religion. The religious expression of the wise is always, peaceful, clear, intelligent, informed, and practical—it works.

The foolish, however are not so. They truly are a “troubled sea” (Isaiah 57:20) “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind” (Ephesians 4:14) as Isaiah and Saint Paul observed. “Driven by fleshly desires,” it only follows that they prefer the pleasant to the good, for the “flesh” cannot even perceive the good to any appreciable degree; but they create a lot of illusions about it—all negative and self-assuring. Their religion is subhuman, of course, catering to their emotions and their demands for the indulgence of their whims and vices. However educated they may be, or how boring and dry their church services, still animality reigns and all manner of subhuman behavior is sanctioned and even elevated and “spiritualized.” Wallowing in the sty of their comforting and indulgent religion, they cast many a contemptuous (and secretly guilty) glance at those who are not so, and create many a *bon mot* about their “unnatural denial and repressions” hinting of sinister implications for those who “run away from life” and “refuse to face themselves,” and “expect too much from themselves and others.” But they are still only talking pigs. Even though they like to say they are “only human” and that God understands they are.

Driven by pleasure/pain, their humanity becomes submerged in the animality impressed in their subconscious by millions of incarnations in subhuman forms. Merely possessing a human body is no guarantee of humanity. The redoubtable Dr. Bronner in a conversation with one of the monks of our ashram referred to some people as “not yet HUMAN!” He was right. A house does not make a home and a human body does not make a human. Humanity only dawns when intelligence dominates and wisdom is gained. We need not be intellectual in the academic sense,
but we must be intelligent. Then if we use our intelligence there is a chance we may become wise and thereby cross the great gulf.

The plain facts

Chances are Nachiketa never got voted “most popular” of anything and may not even have been “a good mixer.” But Yama assessed him quite highly, saying: “Thou, O Nachiketa, having looked upon fleshly desires, delightful to the senses, hast renounced them all. Thou hast turned from the miry way wherein many a man wallows.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:3) Now this is a thumbnail portrait of a wise human being, but it is a test of the wise and the foolish. The wise will accept it and the foolish will not. So we should take a square look at it and our reaction will tell us which we are.

First of all, Nachiketa is not naive or “innocent.” He knows what is going on, even if most things should not be going on. He has not turned away, but has deeply looked into the desires of the flesh and the delights of the senses. He knows what the fake life of the foolish is all about, and he has renounced it all—not just a little bit or even most, but the whole mess. Why? Because he does not identify with the flesh and the senses, but with the intelligence and his true self that is pure consciousness. He knows he is not the perishable body.

“Thou hast turned from the miry way wherein many a man wallows,” says Yama. Nachiketa sees that the world of body-sense enslavement is a suffocating bog—not just ugly and repulsive to the wise, but deadly. He knows, with Jesus, that: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24) He also knows that in reality once a person has reached the level of human evolution he cannot really live like an animal without dire consequences, including terrible suffering. As humans we have simply gone beyond that to which the foolish cling to so obsessively.

This is strikingly illustrated in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son found in the fifteenth chapter of Saint Luke. After wasting his inheritance, the man hired himself out to a pig farmer. This is a symbol of someone who has enslaved himself to the lower nature and the senses—pigs that wallow in filth, eat garbage, and demand more. “And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.” Like nearly all of us, the poor soul wants to feed on and be satisfied with the garbage that the pigs revel in, grunting: “This is living!” But it cannot be; we are not pigs; we are not the senses or the body.

No matter how much we desire to regress to animal living, we cannot really do so. And usually only pain will wake us up from such folly. When we do wake up, like the Prodigal we will resolve: “I will arise and go” forward in the path of evolution, leaving the sty and its pigs behind. The rising and the going will not be easy, but there simply is nothing else for a true human being to do. Moreover, the path will not be long, though it may seem so, for time drags when we are having struggle and pain. Jesus indicates this, saying: “when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.” All the perfected souls that have taught us about spiritual life have assured us that the effort required of us is but a token—nevertheless a token that must be paid. If we can but get a glimpse or conceive a bit of what it will be to have arisen and travelled the way, then the price will seem so small. Amazingly, Saint Paul tells us that Jesus “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2) Just think: the joy. This should be our perspective, too.

Again, renunciation is the way of immortality.
A Commentary on the Katha Upanishad

The Way of Ignorance

The Two Ways

Yama, the King of Death, praises Nachiketa, saying: “Far from each other, and leading to different ends, are ignorance and knowledge. Thee, O Nachiketa, I regard as one who aspires after knowledge, for a multitude of pleasant objects were unable to tempt thee.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:4)

It is interesting to note that the concept of Two Ways of human life are to be found in all religious traditions. Jesus spoke of the Broad Way and the Strait Way, and when they met in Jerusalem and issued a joint spiritual letter—The Didache, usually called The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles—his apostles began by saying there are two Ways in this world. Long before that, the Katha Upanishad spoke of the Way of Ignorance and the Way of Knowledge.

The Way of Ignorance is the subject of the three verses we will be considering, but first Yama tells us the key trait of one who aspires to knowledge: he cannot be tempted by the pleasant. This is because he sees its nature and its results. The pursuers of the Way of Ignorance are not such as Nachiketa, and Yama now tells us about them and the results of their walking in that Way.

The Way of Folly

“Living in the abyss of ignorance yet wise in their own conceit, deluded fools go round and round, the blind led by the blind.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:5) That certainly is plain speaking! Let us go through this verse bit by bit.

Living in the abyss of ignorance. This word “abyss” is very disturbing in this context. It indicates that the condition of ignorance is profound—not something than can easily be removed or escaped. Rather, the person is sunk deep into the darkness of ignorance, so deep that he cannot see anything but darkness, so deep that he can hardly be extricated from it—at least in this life. It is not that his condition is utterly hopeless, but that he simply has neither awareness nor interest. If that dawns, he is on his way out of the abyss. But most of the time it does not happen. In a routine of the Firesign Theatre, a disease is described with the concluding words: “The only cure for which is death.” In many (actually most) cases of abysmal ignorance this is the truth. The individual requires another birth before he can arise from the depths. Until then he should be left alone.

Yet wise in their own conceit. Somewhere I read the words: “The problem with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along.” Since ignorance is a by-product of ego, as ignorance increases so does egotism. Increasing in this alternating cycle, invincible arrogance and invincible ignorance arise, take hold and consume the ignorant person. This is really an ugly picture; but an accurate one. Thinking
themselves wise, how can the ignorant ever see the truth about themselves—both the higher and the lower selves—and try to rectify themselves? They cannot. Not content to revel in their private kingdom of ignorance, they then set about to aggressively expand it through influence of others. And if they cannot influence they will dominate and bully until they have extended their sphere of darkness. Again: ugly but accurate. Living in the fantasy-land of ego, they sink deeper, believing that they are rising.

*Deluded fools go round and round.* Cycling in confusion, the foolish spiral downward, seeming to go up and down but really only going down and down. In their minds they veer back and forth, up and down, agitating themselves and others, but in actuality they just keep on sinking. Because of this they continually go round and round in the wheel of birth and death, perpetually bound to the torture wheel of samsara—and reveling in every moment. They have discovered the secret of happiness in this world: unconsciousness.

*The blind led by the blind.* Ignorance as well as misery loves company, in fact needs it desperately and thrives on it. Supporting each other they stumble through this world until death claims them and they get to do it all over—anda-and over and over. When they are not being the leader and the led, they are the pusher and the pushed, the dominating and the dominated, the victimizer and the victim—alternating in these two roles, they reel onward and downward.

**Blind to eternity**

“To the thoughtless youth, deceived by the vanity of earthly possessions, the path that leads to the eternal abode is not revealed. *This world alone is real; there is no hereafter*—thinking thus, he falls again and again, birth after birth, into my jaws.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:6)

Rendered heedless of the truth about his condition through involvement with materiality—both his body and objects in the world—and deluded by what he thinks is going on, the ignorant never sees the way beyond the abyss in which he dwells. He simply cannot see it, just as we cannot hear frequencies beyond the range of our hearing or see things beyond the range of our sight. He is deaf and blind to spirit in all its aspects. Even if by some chance he should seek the way, if he finds it he will not know it, nor if he come face to face with the way will he realize it. Just the opposite. He will despise and deny it, even denouncing it as delusive or evil. On the other hand, he will exult in devilish religion, teachers, and practices, seeking them out and devoting himself to them. Let me give two examples I know of personally.

A great master used to plead with a young man to learn meditation, assuring him that his progress would be rapid and he would be liberated in this life. But he did not get initiated. When the master was about to leave his body he told his disciples that if the man ever came to the ashram and expressed an interest, one of them was to initiate him immediately. He never did. But a dozen or so years later one of the biggest frauds the “yoga world” has ever produced came to town charging money for a worthless technique. The man was in poor financial condition, and could not really afford it, but he immediately slapped down the cash and got initiated into nothing.

Two Buddhist friends of mine visit a prison and instruct the inmates in Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practice. They are practicers of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. Whenever they try to get the prisoners to chant the liberating name of Amida Buddha they refuse and insist that they chant Tibetan “power mantras” instead. They love bondage and lust after control. They belong where they are.
“This world alone is real; there is no hereafter” is thought by many of the foolish, but there are many more who do not actually think it but live as though they did. Denial of spiritual realities is done more by deeds than by words. It does not matter how devoutly or spiritually we may think, if we live carelessly and materially, as centered on our ego as any ignoramus we would regard as “unspiritual.”

This is the real test. Thinking the material world alone is real, the ignorant return to it again and again, living in the jaws of death. If we do the same, then we are fools. If we do not, then we are wise.
The Mystery of the Self

Seeing is not always seeing and hearing is not always hearing. In some instances it is misperception, and in others it is no perception at all. This is illustrated by an incident from the life of Jesus. While speaking to the people, he prayed: “Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him.” (John 12:28, 29) Four levels of perception are manifested here. One level knew that God had spoken, another thought that an angel had spoken, another thought it had only thundered, and the fourth did not hear a thing.

As a rule, phenomena can be classified in fours. The four castes spoken of in Indian scriptures are not social strata based on physical birth, but four levels of awareness—in fact, they correspond to the four responses to the speaking of God that Saint John has recorded in this Gospel passage. Krishna follows the same classification in the Bhagavad Gita, saying: “There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:29) But it is the Katha Upanishad we are looking into at the moment, so let us see what Yama had to say to Nachiketa about this matter of understanding the Self (atman).

“To many it is not given to hear of the Self. Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Intelligent is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:7)

The “silent” majority

“To many it is not given to hear of the Self.” Most people—by far the most people—have never heard of the Self and never will in this lifetime. Oh, yes, they will hear about an immortal soul/spirit that a tyrannical God will reward or punish according to His whim, but the real nature of that spirit as part of—and therefore one with—the Supreme Reality and therefore supreme reality itself, eternal, immortal, and indivisible, will never be even hinted at nor will they come up with the concept on their own. Further, it will not be even suggested to them, either from within or without, that the spirit nature is the Self—nothing more—and is the only true identity they can ever have.

Being unchanging, this Self cannot be affected or changed by anything—no, not even by God. It is what it is, just as much as God is what He is. It is, therefore, not only the most worthwhile thing for us to get involved with, it is the only thing we can possibly be involved with. Everything else is illusion. This glorious truth of the Self, known only to the seers of Sanatana Dharma (there are others in various religions that hold this, but they are looked upon as mavericks and heretics by those groups), must be the sole perspective in which we view our present situation as consciousnesses experiencing the process of evolution. (It is the ever-shifting dance of prakriti to which we have become attached that evolves; we are ever the same, ever the One.)

Living in the silence of ignorance, what can they do? Not much, obviously.
The uncomprehending

“Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it.” This is true of many who, though ostensibly adherents to Sanatana Dharma, really do not get the idea–especially about the Self. These are those that frequent temples, ashrams and saints as a kind of insurance against calamity and trouble. Then there are those that only run to those holy places when problems arise. Obviously they have no degree of comprehension regarding the Self.

Neither do most who profess to understand the Self. This is seen by their words and deeds. If someone believes the building is on fire we can tell it by their attempts to get out. Similarly, if someone believes in the truth about the Self they will order their entire lives accordingly–not just assent to the concept. To know the Self, to enter into the fullness of its consciousness and being, will be the focus of their life and thought.

Sri Ramakrishna often said that if a thief learned of a great treasure being kept in the room next to where he was living, he would not be able to sleep for thinking about how to break through the wall and get it. In the same way, those who really understand about the wonder of the Self will not rest until they have (re)claimed the Treasure for themselves. Spiritual purification and spiritual practice are the means for breaking through the wall and claiming the prize.

We have a dilemma here, also: Only those who understand about the self will be motivated to engage in tapasya to realize it fully; yet only those who are engaged in tapasya can have any glimmer of the self and be motivated to practice! The solution lies in the fact that in time the Self begins to urge us to its realization, that we will intuit the presence of the Self and start moving toward the point where, when we hear about it, we will accept and act upon what we hear.

It is interesting to see that Yama does not mention those who reject or deny the truth of the Self. Apparently to him they do not even exist.

Wonderful

We joke sometimes about the exaggerations of the theatrical and motion picture industries. “It is colossal! Magnificent! The greatest ever!” and suchlike continually pour out in conversation and advertisements. The song, Hollywood, assures us that out there “you’re ‘terrific’ if you’re good.” Divinity, on the other hand, has a somewhat different viewpoint, so Yama tells Nachiketa: “Wonderful is he who speaks of it.” He is not speaking of a parrot, a spiritual phonograph, but of one who speaks with awakened awareness—even if not from perfect knowledge or realization. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” (Matthew 12:34) The implication here is that we should seek out and only listen to those who speak of the Self, from the Self, and in the perspective of the Self. Theology is usually only so much distracting noise, and so is most “religious” and “spiritual” talk. Buddha likened a true teacher or teaching to a finger pointing at the moon–only that which points us to our own Reality is itself real and worthwhile. Such a teacher or teaching is wonderful indeed.

Intelligent

The word “stupid” gets tossed about in casual conversation as much as does “wonderful,” and no one relishes being thought stupid. (Few care whether they actually are stupid, just as long as nobody notices or points it out.) Yama, with his very definite perspective, assures Nachiketa that the intelligent person is the one who pursues knowledge of the Self. This is done in two ways: listening to or reading the
teachings about the Self of those who have themselves known the self, and—most importantly—by actively seeking to know one’s own Self through careful analysis (swadhyaya) and spiritual practices, most especially meditation. This latter point is very necessary for us to grasp. Intellectually intelligent people love learning—and they should. However, it is easy to fall into the trap of studying all the theory and not getting down to any practice to determine the validity of the theory.

Saint Silouan of Athos said that delight in the study of theology was the false mysticism of the ego. When Swami Turiyananda first met Sri Ramakrishna he was intensely studying Vedanta for at least six hours a day. Upon hearing of this, Sri Ramakrishna was astounded. “What else does Vedanta say except that Brahman alone is real, the world is illusory, and the Self and Brahman are one?” he asked. “So why do you need six hours of study for that?” Turiyananda had the good sense to understand, and began to devote himself to japa and meditation in order to know the Self—not just know about the Self. In the West it is a common error to assume that knowing about something is the same thing as knowing it. More than once I have read in catechisms that knowing God is accomplished by reading the catechism! That is stupid.

Blessed

To be wonderful and intelligent is good, but to be blessed is the ideal. So Yama concludes: “Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it.” This is because a good teacher does not just impart theoretical knowledge, but reveals to the student the practical means by which he can open his understanding through meditation to behold and know the Self. Krishna, being the Supreme Teacher, instructs Arjuna in the Gita about meditation, saying: “If he practices meditation in this manner, his heart will become pure.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:12) “He must be…united constantly with me in his meditation.” (Bhagavad Gita 12:14) “The practice of serenity, sympathy, meditation upon the Atman, withdrawal of the mind from sense-objects, and integrity of motive, is called austerity of the mind.” (Bhagavad Gita 17:16) “Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:8)
How to Either Know or Not Know the Self

Let the student (who is often a “buyer”) beware

“The truth of the Self cannot be fully understood when taught by an ignorant man, for opinions regarding it, not founded in knowledge, vary one from another. Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:8)

By “the truth of the Self” is meant both the philosophical, scriptural truth and the direct perception of the truth experienced in meditation. However Yama is at this point speaking more on the side of learning the intellectual truth about the Self, its nature, and its possibility of realization.

We all know the incredible and impenetrable tangle of theologies that constitute what most people think are the religions of the world. The reason for this is simple: most (almost all) teachers of religion are fundamentally ignorant. Ignorant not in the intellectual sense, but in the intuitive sense. Since we do need an intellectual road map to help us in our search for direct experience of the Self, this is a serious matter. For an attempt to figure out the truth of the Self in a purely theoretical manner will only add to the prevailing confusion. We will just become one more voice in the cacophony of ignorant religion or philosophy. Nothing is worse than an ignoramus that believes he has an “inside track.” As Jesus observed: “If the ‘light’ that is in thee be [actually] darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:23)

Consequently, it is a most detrimental thing to come into the orbit of an ignorant teacher and accept his words— and even worse to act on them. Some years back there was a most interesting motion picture called Apprentice to Murder. It was based on the actual experience of a man who as an adolescent came into contact with a “wise man” in the southern hills. This man conducted a kind of church whose members studied a nineteenth-century book of what might be called folk magic. He had genuine psychic abilities and really did work miracles. This boy became his student and ended up being jailed as an accomplice in the man’s murder of someone he considered a “black magician.” This is a rather drastic example, but frankly it is much less destructive in the long run than involvement with many contemporary teachers, some of the worst of whom are in the yoga world. To be confused is worse than being merely ignorant, and being flawed and distorted by wrong yoga practices is even worse.

Beyond the intellect

“Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic,” says Yama. Being subtler than the subtlest, the Self cannot possibly be perceived by any sense—including those of the subtle bodies—or conceived of by even the highest and subtle reaches of the intellect. Yet, the Self can be known. This is possible only when “taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth” through the practice of meditation, instruction in which a qualified teacher will give. This really marks out the knowledgous teacher from the ignorant teacher. The ignorant teacher will only expound theory, “proving” what he teaches by intellectual means. The worthy teacher may say much the same words, but will point the student to the means by which he can attain the vision of the Self. He will establish
the student in the practice of correct meditation, without which nothing that is real can possibly be known.

A bit more. Yama tells us that the teacher should be one who knows—not a rhetorician or theoretician. Now it is impossible for us to look into the consciousness of a teacher, so how will we know he has real knowledge? We cannot in an absolute sense, but Yama gives us a trait that at least assures us the teacher is not altogether astray: He will affirm the oneness of the Self and Brahman. No matter how cleverly, convincingly, and cutely he may speak, however much he may appeal to our emotions and deluded intellects, if he does not insist on the unity of the Self and Brahman, saying with the Chandogya Upanishad “THAT THOU ART,” he is unworthy and to be turned away from. Unhappily, there are a lot of ignoramuses who appeal to egotistical fools by saying: “You are God.” The true teacher says not that we are God, but that God is us. There is an infinite difference. Furthermore, the real teacher does not just tell us this fact, he instructs in the means to find it out for ourself. These two traits must be present before we even begin to think about accepting a teacher as a valid guide.

The ultimate test of a teacher is our own capacity, made accessible to us by his instruction, to leave all speculation behind and enter into the Reality that is both Brahman and the Self while remaining ever One. Then all the gods and sages will say of us what Yama said of Nachiketa: “The awakening which thou hast known does not come through the intellect, but rather, in fullest measure, from the lips of the wise. Beloved Nachiketa, blessed, blessed art thou, because thou seekest the Eternal. Would that I had more pupils like thee!” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:9)
From the Unreal to the Real

Eternal values

There is an obscure Protestant song entitled “With Eternity’s Values in View.” Musically it is not much, but philosophically it is profound. We are not temporal, mortal beings, and if we live our life as though we were, then only confusion and chaos can result. Instead we must see ourselves as eternal beings presently dreaming the dream of evolution—a dream whose culmination is awakening, toward which all of our attention and awareness should be focused. Nachiketa knew this, but Yama underlined it, telling him:

“Well I know that earthly treasure lasts but till the morrow. For did not I myself, wishing to be King of Death, make sacrifice with fire? But the sacrifice was a fleeting thing, performed with fleeting objects, and small is my reward, seeing that only for a moment will my reign endure.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:10) What are a billion years compared to eternity? Not even a glimmer. Why, then, do we scramble after such short-lived earthly goals, goals that even if attained prove to be worthless since they vanish away so quickly? Why do we continually deny our eternity and affirm the delusion of temporality? Because we identify thoroughly with that which is temporal and finite.

Buddha and two fools

Buddha once encountered two deluded ascetics. One always behaved like a dog and the other like a water buffalo. No explanation is given for their behavior. Perhaps it related to some deity worshipped by them. For example, a dog would be related to Bhairava, a form of Shiva, and a water buffalo to the goddess Durga. However it might be, they wanted to know from Buddha what the results of their way of life would be. He refused to answer, but they kept insisting, so he told them plainly that if they were lucky they would be reborn as a dog and a water buffalo, and if they were unlucky they would find themselves in astral hells corresponding to their aberrative life and thought. As anticipated by Buddha, they wailed and fussed and went away without gaining any sense or rectifying their foolish ways. We are just like them, except we are hypocrites, claiming to believe in the eternal, unconditioned Self and acting just the opposite.

The dilemma of the gods

It is true that there is nothing on this earth we cannot attain if we put forth the effort. In previous creations human beings performed elaborate rituals to become “gods” in this creation, including Brahma the creator. They succeeded, and the result was that they suffer more pain and anxiety than human beings do and are more subject to mental aberrations than humans. Furthermore, they are bound until the end of this creation cycle to fulfil their offices and can in no way shirk or abandon them. So they are more bound than any human being could ever be. In other words, their heaven has turned out to be a hell. Still their main anxiety is fear over falling from their exalted status and returning to human form. They have learned nothing from their experience. (Do we?)
A metaphysical fact

“But the sacrifice was a fleeting thing, performed with fleeting objects, and small is my reward, seeing that only for a moment will my reign endure.” Within this lament of Yama is embedded a profound truth regarding spiritual life.

Only the spirit is eternal and everlasting. Everything else, however highly evolved or sacred, is temporal and impermanent. However long-lived they may be, in time they will dissolve back into the primal energy of manifestation and we will lose them—never really having “had” them at all. Consequently, the wise seek only for the eternal spirit, though using the material and the temporal to aid them in their search. For example, physical health is not enlightenment, but it certainly makes the enlightenment process easier. Material sufficiency relieves us from anxiety and helps us pursue spiritual life without distraction. And so forth.

Discipline is essential for material life, and even more so for spiritual life. Yet, discipline will not take us to the goal—it will greatly facilitate our going, but we must never mistake proficiency in any discipline or practice for spiritual attainment. In the same way, any type of yogic practice that does not deal directly with Consciousness will not result in enlightenment. Like discipline, it may help us in our ascent to higher awareness, but it must not be mistaken for that awareness.

“Sadhana” means spiritual practice that leads to the revelation of the Real (Sat). The temporal does not lead to the eternal, therefore real sadhana must begin and end in spirit consciousness. No material procedure is sadhana, nor is any externally-oriented practice sadhana. The only true sadhana is the turning inward of the mind and the perception of the inmost spirit. In other words, meditation alone is sadhana—meditation free of all mechanics and gimmicks, simple and direct, leading to the ultimate Simplicity that is the Self. We must begin with spirit if we are to end with spirit. That is why Patanjali briefly outlines the nature of God, telling us that “His manifesting Word is Om,” and concluding: “Its japa and meditation is The Way.” For constant japa/meditation utilizing the Eternal Om will render us an Infinite Reward.

In just a few more verses the Katha Upanishad encapsulates it thus: “Of that goal which all the Vedas declare, which is implicit in all penances, and in pursuit of which men lead lives of continence and service, of that will I briefly speak. It is–OM. This syllable is Brahman. This syllable is indeed supreme. He who knows it obtains his desire. It is the strongest support. It is the highest symbol. He who knows it is reverenced as a knower of Brahman.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:16, 17)

The truth

All truth is a two-edged sword. It tells us what IS and what IS NOT. The truth about the Self and Brahman also tells us what is not the Self or Brahman. Those of us who are clinging to the unreal will find this painful or at least uncomfortable. But we have to let go of the unreal to lay hold of the Real. If we do not like this fact we need not bother with Real, but keep on whirling around in our little hamster wheel we call life. But the wise listen and act upon Yama’s next words to Nachiketa:

“The goal of worldly desire, the glittering objects for which all men long, the celestial pleasures they hope to gain by religious rites, the most sought-after of miraculous powers—all these were within thy grasp. But all these, with firm resolve, thou hast renounced.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:11)

To enter into Life we turn away from all fulfillments of material and temporal desires, no longer attracted by their false glitter. Nor do we aspire to some heaven or
heavenly pleasures offered to us by ego-oriented religion—things that also end as painfully as the joys of earth. Even miracles mean nothing to us, for they occur only in the realm of duality, the realm of death.

Where is Life?
Seeing that Nachiketa was yearning to pass from death to Immortality, Yama continues: “The ancient, effulgent being, the indwelling Spirit, subtle, deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart, is hard to know. But the wise man, following the path of meditation, knows him, and is freed alike from pleasure and from pain.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:12)

First of all, before analyzing this, it must be realized that Yama is talking about us. Certainly, we are finite and God is infinite, but substantially (essentially) we are the same. So Yama is talking about our true nature in these amazing words, and we should consider them accordingly.

Ancient
We are puranam—ancient. God is called the Purana Purusha, the Ancient Person. Since we coexist with Him, we, too, are ancient. Shankara in his commentary explains that in this context puranam does not just mean incredibly old, but everlasting. That is, we, too, are primeval beings. “There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be,” Krishna tells Arjuna in the Gita (2:12).

Our eternity is very hard for us to grasp even theoretically because we have been caught in the time-space web for ages beyond calculation. Creations have come and gone as we barely crawled along the evolutionary path. We just cannot conceive of eternity, for it is not time without end, it is that state of being which lies beyond time. Actually, we are living in that state right now, but have completely lost sight of it and imagine we are immersed in the sea of constant change, of constant birth and death with their attendant sufferings.

To view ourselves as eternal, immortal beings is therefore most important, for without that perspective “life” will totally overwhelm us, drowning us in illusions without either numbering or end. Yet when we step back, withdrawing our consciousness into our own reality, it will end instantly. It is the stepping back and withdrawal that takes the time.

Effulgent Being
Devam means “shining one.” We are ourselves “the light that shines in darkness” (John 1:5) for we are a living part of the Light of Life (John 1:4). Consequently we must turn within for illumination. Until we are perfected in that in-turning we do need some external lights such as holy books and teachers, but it is unwise to become dependent on any outer source of knowledge. Eventually we must get it all from within, having become swayamprakash, self-illumined.

Certainly we should be discontented with our present ignorant and bound state of being, but there is no room here for condeming or loathing ourselves for being sinners, weak, foolish, etc. Our discontent with our present state should arise from our conviction that we are ourselves divine—for devam means that as well. We are living far beneath our selves. Knowing that, we should turn around, stop our descent, and begin ascending to our real place—far beyond any childish heaven or relative condition of any
type however exalted.

Since we are self-effulgent, all guidance must eventually come from within. We may not be able to tap the inner light right now to the needed degree, but in time our atma alone must be our guide through and beyond this life. We must learn to rely on our capacity for pure Knowing.

As a child and a young man I looked upon myself as a “Bible-believing Christian,” so naturally I believed that Jesus Christ was the Light of the World (John 8:12, John 9:5). But it was only when I found the wisdom of the Upanishads that I really believed Jesus when he said: “Ye are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14) For the fundamental necessity is to realize that we are the Light also. “God is light” (I John 1:5) and so are we, for we and God are one, not two. No one who claims to be spiritually enlightened can teach otherwise, “for with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.” (Psalms 36:9) The Light of God reveals the Light of our own Self. The closer we get to our real self, the closer we come to God, and vice versa. Then “the sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory.” (Isaiah 60:19) For we shall know ourselves as Light and Glory. This is not egotism, for in the Light the ego melts away. “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” (Proverbs 4:18)

**Indwelling Spirit**

“Indwelling spirit” not only tells us that we are pure consciousness by nature, but the important fact that our consciousness is the noumenon which dwells at the heart of all phenomena. That wherever there is any “thing” there are we as the reality that is the substratum of all existence—even of illusion. That is why we find our selves if we pierce the veil of illusion or look within. We are omnipresent.

**Subtle**

We do not perceive the Self because our conditionings from aeons of relative existence has coarsened our perceptions. Experiencing materiality over and over and over again has oriented and confined our awareness to the grossest levels of existence. Further, it has oriented and confined our awareness to externalities. Any reflective person can readily understand the need to turn our awareness inward to perceive the self, but more is needed: we must refine our minds, rendering them more and more subtle so they can eventually see the Most Subtle: the Self.

Meditation refines the mind no doubt, but we have to do more than that, otherwise an entire life will simply not be enough time to produce the requisite refinement. Therefore Patanjali in Yoga Sutras 2:30,32 lists the necessary means for the physical and psychic refinement without which the Self cannot be realized to any degree. They are:

1) **Ahimsa**: non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness
2) **Satya**: truthfulness, honesty
3) **Asteya**: non-stealing, honesty, non-misappropriativeness
4) **Brahmacharya**: sexual continence in thought, word and deed as well as control of all the senses
5) **Aparigraha**: non-possessiveness, non-greed, non-selfishness, non-acquisitiveness
6) **Shaucha**: purity, cleanliness
7) **Santosha**: contentment, peacefulness
8) Tapas: austerity, practical (i.e., result-producing) spiritual discipline
9) Swadhyaya: introspective self-study, spiritual study
10) Ishwarapranidhana: offering of one’s life to God

All of these deal with the innate powers of the human being—or rather with the abstinence and observance that will develop and release those powers to be used toward our spiritual perfection, to our self-realization and liberation. Equally important is their effect on our minds: harmonization, strengthening, and refinement.

These ten factors and successful meditation are actually interdependent. Without meditation they are impossible to accomplish, and without their steady and complete observance meditation becomes impossible. This is why after nearly forty years of the “yoga boom” in this country nothing significant has been accomplished spiritually. A lot of money has been made, organizations formed and exalted over the lives of their members, and a great deal of folly and neurosis has resulted (what to say of virulent scandals) but that is all. Why? Because these ten needful elements are utterly omitted from the spheres of their existence. They are never mentioned, much less advocated. The only exception is ahimsa—limited only to opposition to war. This is because everybody wants to be nice and the pop-yoga movement was born during the “Hell no, we won’t go!” war-protesting hip era. However, the most obvious personal application of ahimsa: advocacy of abstention from the eating of animal flesh, is usually absent.

The sensible aspirant cannot do otherwise than make these ten disciplines part of his life if he truly wishes to render himself capable of beholding the Self and living as the Self.

Deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart

Why are we out of touch with God and our Self? Because we are skimming on the surface of “things” while Reality is “deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart”—the Core of All. Actually, Reality is deep-hidden in the core of the things we are experiencing. We only need to see into them to find the True. That is why in Buddhism we find the word Penetration so frequently used. We must See Deeply. That is, we need not turn away or withdraw from outer phenomena, but rather develop the capacity to see into them to their ultimate Depth. To do this we do enter inside through meditation, but since there really is neither Inside nor Outside in the truest sense, in time—through the practice of meditation—we come to see all there is to see: The One.

Hard to know

We have all experienced getting a mistaken idea or impression stuck in our head that we could not get rid of even when we knew better. The same is true of habit patterns. Living in conditioned existence we ourselves have become conditioned—or at least we identify with the conditionings of the ever-shifting mind. This is the only reason that the Self is hard to know. It has nothing to do with the nature of the Self, but with the conditioning of the mind—conditioning resulting from billions and billions of lifetimes as everything from an atom of hydrogen onward to where we are now. It is not easy to undo in a few years what we have taken thousands of creation cycles to build up! Yet it can be done and will be done in time. We just have to understand the way things work and that it will take time. Nevertheless, the words “hard to know” assure us that the Self can be known.

The way and its effects
“But the wise man, following the path of meditation, knows him, and is freed alike from pleasure and from pain.” It is the path of meditation that leads to Self-knowledge, none other. “The uncontrolled mind does not guess that the Atman is present: how can it meditate? Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?” (Bhagavad Gita 2:66)

It is not that Self-knowledge renders us incapable of experiencing pleasure or pain, but of being in bondage to them—that is, being subject to reaction to pleasure and pain. “The bonds of his flesh are broken. He is lucky, and does not rejoice: he is unlucky, and does not weep. I call him illumined.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:57) “To obey the Atman is his peaceful joy; sorrow melts into that clear peace: his quiet mind is soon established in peace.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:65)
Finding the Treasure

All the world seeks happiness. Our American Declaration of Independence says that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right for every human being. But see how miserable people really are beneath the frantic veneer of the pursuit of happiness in an ever-changing and pain-producing world. The problem? We are looking in the wrong direction. We are seeking outward when we should be seeking inward. We are seeking the non-self instead of the Self. From the Katha Upanishad we learn the right line of action.

“The man who has learned that the Self is separate from the body, the senses, and the mind, and has fully known him, the soul of truth, the subtle principle—such a man verily attains to him, and is exceeding glad, because he has found the source and dwelling place of all felicity. Truly do I believe, O Nachiketa, that for thee the gates of joy stand open.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:13)

Separate

“The Self is separate from the body, the senses, and the mind.” Therefore the body, senses, and mind cannot even “see” the Self as an object, and certainly cannot possibly experience the Self to any degree. The happiness experienced by body, senses, and mind is not true happiness at all, but an approximation, a sham that distracts us from the real thing, inevitably leading us to frustration and all-around misery. This must be learned. Then the Self itself must be known.

Soul of truth, subtle principle

The Self is the very soul of Truth, of Reality. It is not just the basis of reality, it IS reality. Apart from it there simply is nothing. It is subtle beyond all conception—but not beyond all experience. It is when we enter fully into the Being that is the Self, that we “attain to him,” that boundless happiness shall be ours. For the Boundless itself shall be ours.

Source and dwelling

Yama then tells us an important fact: the Self is the source of all and the dwelling place of all felicity. Now this is most intriguing. We are saying that the Self is all there really is, and then we hear that it is the source of “all.” This is the key to true non-dual comprehension. Sri Ramakrishna explained that at first we follow the path of negation saying “Not this, not that,” the idea being that everything we can see or think of is not the Real. But when we come to the real end of that approach—which is not just intellection or mind-gaming, but the inner path of meditation—and turn back we will say “ALL this!” That is, we will see that everything is the Real, that the unreal was only our way of seeing and (mis)understanding it. The whole world, said Sri Ramakrishna, will then be seen as “a mart of joy.” Unless this is understood at the beginning we will end up being just another dyspeptic world-and-life-denying grouch, claiming that our dryness and grimness is jnana (wisdom). “There is a state beyond bliss, you know,” grunted one of them to a friend of mine who dared to find joy in the Self. India abounds with these anatmic misfits and we have plenty of them in the West, too. (One is too many.)
All that is dwells in—is rooted in—the Self and is therefore an expression of divine Ananda. What a wonderful world-view: one that sees not “the world” but Spirit. We do not go from one point to another to pass from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to the Light, from death to Immortality. It is only a matter of changing our base of perception. This is the real alchemy, changing the lead of mundane experience to the gold of supernal joy.

**The conclusion**

No one is excluded from this glorious truth, it extends to all and is vital to all in an equal degree. No one is nearer or farer from the Self—it embraces all. This is the real Gospel—the *Evangelion*, the Good News humanity needs so desperately: “Truly, for thee the gates of joy stand open.”

Let us pass through them!
The Transcendent Reality of the Self

Previously Yama has spoken to Nachiketa of the manner to experience the Self that is immanent in all that “is.” Now he completes the picture by an exposition of the Transcendent and the means to realize It. He does this in response to Nachiketa’s question: “Teach me, O King, I beseech thee, whatsoever thou knowest to be beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:14) He desires to know about the Transcendental Reality that is beyond all qualities or designations. As the Immanent Being, That has infinite names, forms, conditions, and qualities, but beyond that is something much greater: the Transcendent. That can neither be said to exist or not to exist, to be with form or without form, with qualities or without qualities, for all these propositions are dualities, one presupposing the other. Where there is one there is its opposite—duality is an absolute in the realm of the Immanent Reality. Nachiketa is certainly pleased with the truth that all can be seen as the Divine Unity, but he wishes to complete his knowledge by learning about what lies beyond even that. Sri Ma Anandamayi, when discussing these things, always insisted on the point that there is a state in which even the question of duality/unity, form/formless, and such like cannot even arise. That is the state Nachiketa aspires to comprehend and experience.

The answer is in the question

Everything in manifestation is dual. This is the truth for every aspect of life. There is an interesting divinatory process known as The Alphabet of the Magi. To “work” it a question is formulated and then written on cards—one letter per card. These cards are then shuffled and dealt out in a special way (unknown to me) to form the words that are the answer to the question! It was The Alphabet of the Magi, worked by a Benedictine monk who practiced divination and astrology in Paris after his monastery had been closed by the anti-religious government, that inspired Charlotte Corday to assassinate Marat and inspired Napoleon, then a mere corporal, to aspire to the rulership of France. So it works.

The idea that the answer is inherent in the question is very important, for it means that the questioner already knows the answer on the subconsciously (or superconsciously) level, that the question cannot arise until the answer is subliminally known. The purpose of questioning, then, is to bring out on the conscious level what is known unconsciously. When we seemingly ask another to teach us we are really seeking to stimulate and bring forth our own knowledge. That is why the wise have assured their students that in time they would be able to find the answers within themselves—-it is only a matter of developing intuition through clarifying the mind.

It is very common to hear someone demand: “Why did you ask me if you are not going to accept what I tell you?” The reply should be: “So I can figure the answer out for myself.” The very fact that we reject a given answer indicates that we think we do know what is the truth about the matter. Otherwise we would mindlessly accept what we are told. (Many do, alas.) It is all inside us. Questioning reveals the ripening of our innate knowledge. Knowing this, Jesus said: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be
opened.” (Matthew 7:7, 8) He is not urging us to seek outside ourselves, but to seek within.

Nachiketa seems to be asking Yama about the Transcendent, but his question reveals how much he already knows.

**Beyond right and wrong**

The moment we enter duality—relative existence—we become subject to the situation that some thoughts, words, and acts will impel us onward to higher consciousness and others will impel us to lower consciousness. No matter where we may “be” at the moment, it cannot be permanent. By the nature of things we will keep moving up and down, back and forth. Whenever we think we have attained some stability it is only a matter of the movement being so slow it is imperceptible to us. We are always in danger of incurring suffering because of this. In truth, suffering is inevitable, for even rising requires effort and unsureness or doubt as to the success of our endeavor. As Krishna says of us: “Anxiety binds them with a hundred chains.” (Bhagavad Gita 16:12) We suffer anxiety as to what is the right or wrong and anxiety as to whether we can avoid the wrong and manage to think and do the right. Even more, we are busy getting and losing, anxious to get the good and rid ourselves of the wrong. And of course we are mostly deluded as to what is really right and wrong, usually thinking that the pleasurable is right and the painful is wrong. That is why Krishna told Arjuna: “Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men. The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other. The wise prefer the good to the pleasant; the foolish, driven by fleshly desires, prefer the pleasant to the good.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:2) The danger is obvious.

Nachiketa intuits that this terrible dragging back and forth, this dilemma inherent in “existence,” can come to an end—not in the realm of relative existence, but in its transcendence. Realizing the truth that trying to “rise above” any of the dualities is as foolish as trying to make dry water or cold fire, is a tremendous breakthrough for the developing consciousness and indicates that the end of the search is near. Some of our monks visited a great saint in the Himalayan foothills and spoke with him about spiritual life. He told them: “Your questions show that you are not far from the Goal.”

**Beyond cause and effect**

In ignorant religion “sin” and “righteousness” occupy a great deal of attention, not necessarily because of a sincere desire to be virtuous, but because of their effects. Desire and fear motivate the religionist—at least mentally and emotionally—for sin gets punished and righteousness gets rewarded. Punishment hurts and reward feels good. Punishment takes away and reward supplies. The dispenser of reward and punishment is some kind (or many kinds) of deity who, being an extension of the ignorant egos of the adherents of the religion, judges good and bad on the basis of “I like” and “I don’t like,” “I want” and “I don’t want.” Good sense and practicality have nothing to do with it. The deity is either pleased or displeased and acts accordingly. To complicate matters, the deity can be placated if “sinned against” and, being mollified by groveling and penitence, will reward the sinner as much as if he had been virtuous—maybe even more, so the deity’s “love” and “mercy” can be revealed. We see this behavior in human beings all the time: tears, apology and self-castigation not only stop the anger or displeasure, they evoke a tenderness and openness that should sensibly only be evoked by right conduct. So in evil religion (for ignorance is evil), despite the
assurance that virtue is rewarded, we see that sin and repentance are rewarded and
the sinner assured of salvation. Such a religion becomes a living hell populated and
promoted by living demons.

I expect that just about everyone reading these words are congratulating
themselves on having gotten out of or avoided such religion. Ah, the sane wisdom of
the East. Really? Do we not see that “good karma” and “bad karma” are bugaboos just
as much desired and feared as any heaven or hell proffered by Western religion? I
knew a man that had a metaphysical bookstore. Shoplifting was a real problem. Now, if
he had put a sign on the door so the departing malefactors would have read something
like: “Thou shalt not steal,” (Exodus 20:15) or “The soul that sinneth it shall
die,” (Ezekiel 18:4,20) or “Know thou that God will bring thee into
judgment,” (Ecclesiastes 11:9) it would have had no result–perhaps even the opposite.
For after all, were not his customers “beyond all that Judeo-Christian negativity”? Indeed they were! So he did this. He put a sign on the door for all to see as they
departed saying: “Shoplifting is Bad Karma.” Nearly every day that sign stopped at
least one person. Most sheepishly shuffled back to the shelf and sneaked the book
back. Some actually came to the owner and gave him the book along with an apology.
Why? Had he evoked their higher moral sensibilities? Not a bit. They had traded fear
of sin and hell for fear of bad karma and retribution–maybe even a bad rebirth. The
ego was still in the driver’s seat, and quite liable to stay there for a long time. Karma
may be more “scientific” a concept than sin, punishment, and hell, but the fear
engendered is just as egoic, and therefore just as negative and ultimately ignorant.

Nachiketa had a clear vision of things. The problem was not tears or smiles, but the
LAW of cause and effect, the truth that for every action there is an equal responsive
reaction. Reactivity, inner and outer, is also inherent in relative–dual–consciousness.
But Nachiketa did not just want to get away from the noise and damp of the ocean of
samsara, he wanted to get away from the ocean itself. A jail cell may be miserable or
luxurious, but it is still a prison. Nachiketa aspired to freedom. He wished to attain that
which was beyond cause and effect, not just a means of avoiding them. This is one of
the reasons why religion is usually so pointless: it attempts to make the fire stop
burning rather than showing the way out of the conflagration. It seeks to make
bondage palatable, pleasing to both the egocentric deity and the egocentric devotee. A
confederacy of dunces, indeed.

Beyond past, present, and future

My first reading of the Bhagavad Gita revealed to me something I had intuited all
my life: the fundamental truth that space and time are utter illusions, basic delusions of
human consciousness. What a relief! So when in three or four days I heard one of the
most intelligent of my university professors remark that time and space were the two
fundamental realities, you can imagine how much I appreciated the Gita for clearing
that nonsense up for me. (I appreciated myself, too, for being so clever as to
understand it.)

The time-space continuum is a torment to the awakened consciousness, for it is the
basis for the existence of cause and effect and therefore of right and wrong. It is
impermanence itself, the root cause of all suffering, fear, anxiety, and instability. Since
we have been immersed in relativity for creation cycles beyond number, we find
ourselves in a present whose vast roots are thoroughly unknown, and whose effects
will create an unknown future that will be a fusion of the past and the “present
present.” Uncertainty and confusion are the results of even a small attempt to make sense of the whole thing. And the idea of controlling any aspect is simply beyond our imagination. We are drowning in a shoreless ocean. But we do not just drown once and have it over with. We drown daily—every moment, actually. Only the stupid or the willfully ignorant do not see this. How can we blame those who take refuge in illusion, whatever the form? They do not need an analysis or judgment of their predicament; they need a way out. Nachiketa is asking for that, not for more philosophy or exposition of the problem.

**Transcendent being**

There is not a “place” beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future, but a state of being that transcends them. Nachiketa sought to become an altogether different order of being, to enter into the state of Brahman Itself. Knowing this to be so, Yama does not hesitate, but literally spells it out. He begins:

“Of that goal which all the Vedas declare, which is implicit in all penances, and in pursuit of which men lead lives of continence and service, of that will I briefly speak.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:15)

**Goal**

That which Nachiketa seeks is not an abstraction but a positive reality known to Yama. Perhaps the most heartening thing that can be said about That Which Is is the fact that it is The Goal. Its attainment is not only possible, it is inevitable. The entire field of relative existence, however much we have damaged or corrupted it, and it in turn has damaged or corrupted us, has a single purpose: the attainment of Brahman and the consequent liberation of the questing spirit (atman). This is what everything is all about. So no wonder we have made such a mess of things—literally. Not knowing either their or our purpose, what else could be the result? We are like the character in the Woody Allen movie that tried to play the cello by blowing through the holes. Ignorance is the root of all the trouble.

“Shake off this fever of ignorance. Stop hoping for worldly rewards. Fix your mind on the Atman. Be free from the sense of ego,” (Bhagavad Gita 3:30) counsels Krishna. “You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world’s delusion that gives you these dreams.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:14) “Seek this knowledge and comprehend clearly why you should seek it: such, it is said, are the roots of true wisdom: ignorance, merely, is all that denies them.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:11) “When men have thrown off their ignorance, they are free from pride and delusion. They have conquered the evil of worldly attachment. They live in constant union with the Atman. All craving has left them. They are no longer at the mercy of opposing sense-reactions. Thus they reach that state which is beyond all change.” (Bhagavad Gita 15:5)

**Vedas**

By “vedas” Yama means the teachings of illumined sages regarding the nature of Brahman and the way to conscious union with Brahman. For “veda” means knowledge or wisdom. Although that word has come to be used only in the sense of the ancient Sanskrit hymns found in the Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Vedas, they are not meant here. At the time of Nachiketa the vedas were the orally transmitted wisdom of the Vedic Rishis that only later were written down as the upanishads. In a broader sense,
the Vedas are the words of any enlightened person about the nature of God and the realization of God. Books of speculative philosophy mean nothing to our search for Divine Consciousness. Only the teachings of those who have themselves reached the Goal are relevant and worthy of our attention.

**Implicit in all penances**

The word rather poorly translated here as “penances” is tapasya. Literally it means the generation of heat or energy, but is always used in a symbolic manner, referring to spiritual practice and its effect, especially the roasting of karmic seeds, the burning up of karma. Tapasya means a practical—i.e., result-producing—spiritual discipline which culminates in spiritual evolution and enlightenment.

The important idea in Yama’s words are that our spiritual practice must be congruent with the nature of God. Though tapasya implies a discipline, it cannot just be some type of militaristic coercion or “mortification” of the body and mind that are often nothing more than an expression of self-loathing. The religions of the world abound in admiration for those who torture the body and mind, attaining abnormal psychic states foolishly mistaken for spiritual attainment. But according to Yama, the Goal must be implicit in all disciplines. That is, the disciplines themselves must embody the nature of God—and our own selves, as well. A person unfamiliar with spiritual truth should be able through analysis of authentic practice to actually come to understand the truth regarding the nature of both the seeker and the Goal. If a spiritual practice cannot impart this knowledge by its very mechanics, then it is invalid and cannot possibly lead to the Goal. For this is a very valuable fact: only that practice which from the very first moment puts us in touch with God and begins to reveal our true nature is genuine yoga. All else is illusion. That is why Krishna says: “What is man’s will and how shall he use it? Let him put forth its power to uncover the Atman, not hide the Atman: man’s will is the only friend of the Atman: his will is also the Atman’s enemy.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:5) The plain truth is that putting the force of the will into erroneous practices will hide the Truth from us even more, whereas applying the will in correct practice will reveal Divinity to us. For Divinity is inherent in true yoga.

**In pursuit of which...**

The Upanishads teach us the truth of the unity of the atman and Brahman. Therefore that truth is known as advaita, “not two,” meaning that there is no separation of the atman and Brahman at any time. Simplistic thinkers, especially in the West, immediately begin to decry the idea of tapasya, yoga, or any other discipline, insisting very shrilly that there is no need for such, that to engage in spiritual practice is to affirm a delusion of separation between us and God. They usually end up denying that either we or God even exist, advocating a kind of petulant, bullying nihilism, reminding any sensible person of Krishna’s indictment: “These malignant creatures are full of egoism, vanity, lust, wrath, and consciousness of power. They loathe me, and deny my presence both in themselves and in others. They are enemies of all men and of myself.” (Bhagavad Gita 16:18) Drastic words, these, but they address a drastic mental and spiritual aberration. Read the entire sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita for a full outline of such kinds of people. This is but one of the reasons why a continual study of the Gita is necessary for those who do not wish to go (or be led) astray in their spiritual pursuit. No student of the Gita could ever fall into such absurd pitfalls as
these “advaitans” whose only unity is their absorption in the illusion of the ego.

The truth is that the realization of God not only can but must be pursued. We do not pursue God, understand, for God is everywhere and always one with us. Rather, we pursue the revelation of that eternal oneness and its manifestation on all levels of our present existence. Regarding this, a yogi-adept of the twentieth century, Dr. I. K. Taimni, remarked in his book *The Science of Yoga*: “According to the yogic philosophy it is possible to rise completely above the illusions and miseries of life and to gain infinite knowledge, bliss, and power through enlightenment *here and now* while we are still living in the physical body. And if we do not attain this enlightenment while we are still alive we will have to come back again and again into this world until we have accomplished this appointed task. So it is not a question of choosing the path of yoga or rejecting it. It is a question of choosing it now or in some future life. It is a question of gaining enlightenment as soon as possible and avoiding the suffering in the future or postponing the effort and going through further suffering which is unnecessary and avoidable. This is the meaning of Yoga Sutra 2:16: ‘The misery which is not yet come can and is to be avoided.’ No vague promise of an uncertain postmortem happiness this, but a definite scientific assertion of a fact verified by the experience of innumerable yogis, saints, and sages who have trodden the path of yoga throughout the ages.”

It is absolutely sure: “Seek, and ye shall find.”

**Brahmacharya**

*Brahmacharyam* is the word Swami Prabhavananda translates as “lives of continence and service.” Radhakrishnan renders it “the life of a religious student,” and Swami Sivananda: “life of a brahmacharin.” In India the first stage of life is that of a student, a brahmachari. The brahmachari-student leads a life of discipline, the core of which is sexual continence—a concept utterly lacking in other cultures as their present disintegration reveals. He also serves his teacher in a practical way, for the ideal environment of the brahmacharya ashram is rural, a forest setting being the ideal. At the time the upanishads were first spoken, all Aryas lived in the forests, living an agrarian life of the utmost simplicity. The students of a teacher helped out in the day-to-day routine required by such a lifestyle.

But Yama is not confining brahmacharya to the student’s stage of life, and in “modern times,” whatever the age or outer circumstances of the seeker, it would consist of both self control (abstinence) and practical positive action, including selfless service.

I once saw a cartoon in which a drunk was lying in a gutter and asking a Salvation Army woman: “Can you save me here, or do I have to go somewhere?” Obviously, being “saved” did not interest him very much. But those who are truly interested say with the Prodigal Son: “I will arise and go.” (Luke 15:18) And they do. Living a life of purity and discipline is the way they rise and go.

**Briefly speak.**

It is most significant that Yama says he will briefly speak of the Goal. Why is this? Because the Goal is Brahman, and Brahman can only be spoken of very briefly. This is because Brahman is exceedingly simple, in fact the only really simple (incomplex) “thing” there is. Also, the intellect can only grasp the tiniest bit of the truth about Brahman, so not only can little be said, little can be understood. In a way this makes it
very easy for us. Here is how the Gita teaches us about Brahman:

“Now I shall describe That which has to be known, in order that its knower may gain immortality. That Brahman is beginningless, transcendent, eternal. He is said to be equally beyond what is, and what is not.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:12) “Light of all lights, He abides beyond our ignorant darkness; Knowledge, the one thing real we may study or know, the heart's dweller.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:17)

But Nachiketa does not want to know about Brahman, he wants to know Brahman. With this in mind, Yama reveals both Brahman and the way to Brahman—for they are the same—by saying: “It is—OM.” (Oṃ ity etat. Katha Upanishad 1:2:15)

You cannot be briefer than that. Nor do you need to be. Yama has said it all, for Om is the embodiment of The All.

He has, as I say, said it all, but Yama continues with a brief exposition of the nature of Om.

**Om is Supreme Brahman**

“This syllable is Brahman. This syllable is indeed supreme. He who knows it obtains his desire.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:16)

Om is Brahman. It is not a symbol of Brahman, It IS Brahman. Om is not even a word–It is the very presence of Brahman. “Om is not counted among words,” (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Majumdar translation: 3.17.3) said Sri Ramakrishna. “It is not a word, it is God Himself,” said Swami Vivekananda (Inspired Talks, Sunday, July 21). This assertion is borne out by the fact that in Sanskrit Om is not treated as a word—that is, It does not go through any changes in form according to its grammatical position or status. It has no plural, possessive, subjective, objective, or adjectival forms. It is always just “Om” and nothing else.

I could cite a great many authoritative statements affirming the divine nature of Om, but I recommend our publication, The Glories and Powers of Om, which contains under many headings the scriptural statements on Om.

Obviously Om is supreme, being Itself the Supreme. But Yama has made this seemingly obvious comment to convey the fact that Om is the supreme means to the realization of the Supreme. There is nothing higher than Om, nor is there any means of spiritual cultivation higher than Om. That is why Patanjali simply said: “Its repetition and meditation is the way.” (Yoga Sutras 1:28)

Yama then tells Nachiketa that he who knows Om obtains whatever he desires. Many upanishads state that Om encompasses all existence and therefore literally is all things, that all things are formed of Om just as all clay pots are made of the single substance, clay. Since all things are contained in Om, it can only follow that he who truly knows Om by uniting his consciousness with It through Its japa and meditation shall attain all that he desires as a matter of course. Such a wise one, will of course desire only That which fulfills all desire: Brahman. Commenting on this very verse, Swami Vivekananda said: “Ay, therefore first know the secret of this Om, that you are the Om….” (The Vedanta) Om is the ending of all desire by being the fulfillment of all desire.

**The strongest and the highest**

“It is the strongest support. It is the highest symbol. He who knows it is reverenced as a knower of Brahman.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:17) The need for security is fundamental to human existence. This is especially true in relation to spiritual life.
Even a little observation reveals how incredibly fragile spiritual consciousness and spiritual activity is in human life, for everything militates against it and overwhelms it. Observing this, Jesus’ disciples asked him: “Lord, are there few that be saved?” And he assured them that indeed few manage to be saved. (See Luke 13:23,24; Matthew 7:14; 19:25; 20:16; 22:14.) The New Testament Greek word translated “saved” is *sodzo*, which means to be safe in the sense of delivered from danger or harm. It also means to be healed and become whole. Salvation in the view of Jesus and his disciples was not having sins forgiven and allowed into heaven, but was the same as the upanishadic sages: Liberation (Moksha). All shall eventually attain liberation, but only a few at a time do so. Not because it is so difficult, but that so few even conceive of it, and even fewer persevere in the pursuit of it. Jesus quoted the Gita in his discourses and was certainly familiar with Krishna’s words to Arjuna: “Who cares to seek for that perfect freedom? One man, perhaps, in many thousands. Then tell me how many of those who seek freedom shall know the total truth of my being? Perhaps one only.” (Bhagavad Gita 7:3)

With this perspective, Yama tells Nachiketa that Om is the strongest and highest support. Swami Pabhavananda translated *alambana* the second time as “symbol” no doubt thinking of Om as an object of meditation. Although its supporting power is most important in relation to spiritual life and practice, Yama makes no such explicit qualification, so we can be sure that Om is the empowerment and support of everything positive in our life. This, too, is asserted many times in the upanishads.

**Knower of Om–knower of Brahman.**

“He who knows It is reverenced as a knower of Brahman.” Some translators render this: “He who knows It is revered in the world of Brahman.” For a knower of Om is translated into that world, having been transmuted into Brahman through Om. It is no wonder, then, that the Mundaka Upanishad says about Om: “Dismiss other utterances. This is the bridge to immortality.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.5)

**Om is our self (atman)**

How can Om have such an incredible effect upon us? Because we are Om. It is our own self (atman).

“The Self, whose symbol is OM, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:18)

If Brahman was not at the core of our being, as the core of our being, we could not possibly become one with Brahman. All talk of “becoming” is of course not really accurate if we think of it as becoming something we are not. Rather, it is the becoming aware of, becoming established in, our eternal unity with Brahman. Some years ago, workers in a Burmese temple were moving a huge plaster image of Buddha with heavy equipment. Something went wrong and the image was dropped. To their astonishment the plaster, which was only a layer a few inches thick, broke and fell off, revealing that the image was solid gold! Centuries before it had been covered with plaster to protect it from thieves. Today it is considered the single most valuable image of Buddha in the world. We are like that. A layer of relative existence has been plastered onto our consciousness for so long that we think we are the plaster. When the plaster was broken the image was revealed to be gold, and when our “plaster” is broken we shall be revealed as parts of Brahman, waves of the One Ocean of Being.
We shall then know that we are not born, we do not die, we are neither cause nor effect; we are unborn, imperishable, eternal, unaffected by any conditions of the body whatsoever. For as Shankara sang:

I am not the mind, intellect, thought, or ego;
Not hearing, not tasting, not smelling, not seeing;
I am not the elements—ether, earth, fire, air:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I am neither Prana, nor the five vital airs;
Nor the seven components of the gross body;
Nor the subtle bodies; nor organs of action:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no aversion, clinging, greed, delusion;
No envy or pride, and no duty or purpose;
I have no desire, and I have no freedom:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no merit or sin, nor pleasure or pain;
No mantra, pilgrimage, Veda or sacrifice;
Not enjoying, enjoyable, or enjoyer:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no death or fear, no distinction of caste;
Neither father, nor mother, nor do I have birth;
No friend or relation, guru or disciple:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I am without attributes; I am without form;
I am all-pervading, I am omnipresent;
By senses untouched, neither free, nor knowable:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

We do not really need to become immortal and eternal, for we are that already. Instead we need to get beyond the illusory consciousness of birth and death, cause and effect, and the entire range of relative existence. The japa and meditation of Om is the Way.
The Immortal Self

Yama has just told Nachiketa that “though the body be destroyed, he [the Self] is not killed.” Then he continues: "If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain." (Katha Upanishad 1:2:19) Before considering this upanishadic passage, here is what the Bhagavad Gita, the great digest of the upanishads, has to say about this:

“Bodies are said to die, but That which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed….Some say this Atman is slain, and others call It the slayer: they know nothing. How can It slay or who shall slay It? Know this Atman unborn, undying, never ceasing, never beginning, deathless, birthless, unchanging for ever. How can It die the death of the body? Knowing It birthless, knowing It deathless, knowing It endless, for ever unchanging, dream not you do the deed of the killer....” (Bhagavad Gita 2:18-21)

Dreaming— that is the key. God is dreaming the entire drama of the cosmos, but he knows it and controls the dream. We, too, are dreaming the drama of our life, so Krishna tells us: “You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world’s delusion that gives you these dreams.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:14) The richest people in the world, if they dream they are penniless, suffer the frustration and fear of poverty just as keenly as do those who really are paupers. When they awake, the mental pain disperses, but it was no less real.

This is something we often miss when we subscribe to the theory of Maya. The experiences, such as birth, death, and disease, may be illusion, but the suffering they produce is not. It is real. The grief we feel at the death of a loved one is real, even if the death is not. That is why the Sankhya Karika, the basic text of the Sankhya philosophy upon which the Yoga philosophy is based, opens with a discussion of suffering as our problem. Certainly, illusion should be dispelled, but that will not take care of the deeper problem: our capacity for suffering. It is foolish and callous to bully those who suffer by expounding on the unreality of that to which they are reacting. For there is no thing or situation which can make us suffer. Suffering is our reaction to those things. When we reach the state where we no longer react—for pleasure is as destructive as pain—then we will be free.

Patanjali’s dictum that yoga is the cessation of modifications of the chitta does not refer at all to restless thoughts in the superficial mind. He is speaking of the capacity for any kind of reactivity to outer stimuli. It is when we are unreacting and resting in our true self that we are in the state of Yoga. To merely fiddle around with the shallow thinking mind, believing that calming it makes us yogis, is deluding ourselves. Our problem is far, far greater and deeper than jittery thoughts. It is the capacity for suffering and for being deluded. To be awake in the fullest sense is to be incapable of sleep and dream. (I am speaking metaphorically.) All the philosophy and analysis in the world will not help us. We need to awaken forever. That is what real yoga is all about.

Slayer and slain are roles in the dream-drama of the evolving consciousness. If we know— not just suppose or believe— this, then nothing can move us from the state of peace that is a quality of our true self. Fortunately for us all, the cliche about “There is
naught but thinking makes it so,” is bunkum, another Western “truth” that mercifully is false.

The body can be slain and can be a slayer. Being part of the dream, it really acts and is acted upon in the dream context. The dreamer, however, is not part of the dream, even when it projects an image of itself into the dream and slays or is slain. Nothing external can affect or change the internal reality. Again, awakening is the only solution, and we should accept nothing less. Any view other than this which Yama presents to Nachiketa is but the blind leading the blind.

A great flaw in the thinking of most of us is only accepting half of this great truth. We easily affirm our immortality, saying: “I can never die,” and thus reject the idea that we can be slain. Yet we accept the concept that we can be slayers, and make a great to-do about “sin” and “karma.” Is not that so? Because we want to control the behavior of others by promising rewards and threatening punishments, we have literally bought into this delusion and traded on it for life after life, fooling even ourselves. Though we find the truth in the Upanishads or the Gita, we still keep on worrying about purifying ourselves and clearing out our karma. Half-deluded, we stumble on, distracting ourselves from the real goal, sinking deeper into the morass. Consider the lives of saints. So many of them have been great sinners, even murderers, or incredibly ignorant, and yet we see them either instantly entering into the state of holiness or rocketing to it in a short time. The reason is simple: they had never committed a sin in their eternal lives. Like David, they awoke and found themselves with God. (“When I awake, I am still with thee.” Psalms 139:18)

We need only do the same.
The Indwelling Self

“Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the Self and is without sorrow.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:20) So Yama now tells Nachiketa.

**Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest**

We tend to think of infinity as boundlessly large, when in actuality that which is infinite transcends space and can therefore not be measured in any manner. It cannot be small or large. Which is why there is no thing too small or too great for God to be involved with. The Self, being a part of God, is likewise beyond measurement. It is neither small nor large, gross nor subtle. In fact, the Self is simply beyond description. We can only talk around it, not really express its mystery.

**This Self forever dwells within the hearts of all**

However, there are some things that can be said about the presence of the Self, therefore Yama does tell Nachiketa that “this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all.”

The Self is eternal. It has no beginning and it can never have an end. Whatever it is, it has been forever. What it is not, it shall never be. We say this glibly, but usually do not believe, and rarely manifest it. Nevertheless, it is bedrock truth.

The Self, being beyond time and space, cannot possibly be anywhere. Yet we readily say that it is within. This is as close to the truth about the Self as we can get. At the core of all things, having itself neither periphery or core, is the unchanging Self. It “dwells” in the sense that it abides, yet the Self does not at all “exist” in the way we understand existence, which is completely relative. The Self is absolute, and relativity can never affect or touch it.

The Self abides in the hearts of all. But what is the “heart”? Guha means both cave and heart, but it also means to be “in a secret place.” Within the inmost heart of all things is that which transcends even “inmost.” That is the Self. And there is no thing whatsoever that does not have the Self as its eternal, unchanging indweller. The Self can be within all as their essential being only if the Self is all. This is the Great Revelation. All that we see around us is resting upon the Self as the substratum. All that we “see” objectively is Maya, illusion. That which we cannot see, but which we can “be” is the Self, the all-pervading subject.

This all sounds wonderful, but what possible meaning can it have if we do not experience this glorious truth for ourselves? Nothing, obviously. So Yama proceeds to tell Nachiketa how the Self can be realized.

**When a man is free from desire**

To be truly free from desire is to be incapable of desire. To not be desiring anything at the moment is not what is spoken of here. We mistakenly think that if we can become indifferent to all things and want nothing we will be free from desire. But we will still be in the condition where desire is possible—even if it be in the future—or even a future life.
To desire something we have to feel inadequate, but even more fundamentally, we have to have objective consciousness and a belief in the reality of the objects perceived, and a belief that in some way we can enter into relation with those objects, that we can affect them and they can affect us. What a heap of delusions! Desire is only a symptom of profound ignorance and delusion. In itself it is no more the problem than red blotches on the skin are the disease we call measles. (See? We even name a disease as the symptoms.) However, true desirelessness—and that is what Yama is speaking about—is the state of the liberated, those who know the Self.

**His mind and senses purified**

A few years ago a valuable book was published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Madras: a translation of the *Sankhya Karika* by Swami Virupakshananda. In the Publisher's Note we find this: “Vedanta takes off to ethereal heights only from the granite platform provided by Sankhya....Not only Vedanta, but also modern science, cannot be understood in all their nuances without a firm grasp of the Sankhyan tenets.” And the translator writes: “Of all the philosophical systems, the Sankhya philosophy is considered to be the most ancient school of thought. Sankhya philosophy maintains a prominent place in all the shastras.... In the Mahabharata it is said that there is no knowledge such as Sankhya and no power like that of Yoga. [On which Sankhya is based.] We should have no doubt as to Sankhya being the highest knowledge. (Shantiparva 316-2).” Later he outlines how the Sankhya philosophy is presented in the Chandogya, Katha, and Svetasvatara upanishads particularly. And: “In the Mahabharata and Puranas we find the Sankhya Philosophy fully explained.” The second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita (part of the Mahabharata) is entitled *Sankhya Yoga*, and in five verses (2:39; 3:3; 5:5; 18:13, 19) Krishna mentions Sankhya by name as the truth he is expounding.

I mention this because it is so common for students to approach the upanishads as exponents of the simplistic monism that is erroneously thought to be Advaita. With this distorted frame of reference the upanishadic teachings that are very obviously opposed to their opinion are ignored. But we cannot afford the luxury of wilful ignorance. Simply babbling that “It is all one” and “We are already there” accomplishes absolutely nothing. And besides, it is not true—in the simplistic sense they mean.

God, the Primal Purusha, is eternally associated with Prakriti (Pradhana) on the macrocosmic level, and continually projects and withdraws it as the ever-evolving creation. In the same way each individual purusha is eternally associated with prakriti on the microcosmic level and engages in a series of incarnations, evolving the personal prakriti to the point where it becomes a perfect mirror of the individual purusha and there is a practical separation between the two, just as on the cosmic level. Let us not forget: Patanjali defines yoga (liberation) as a condition of the chitta—of our personal prakriti—not a simple intellectual insight or “realization.”

The essence is this: Each one of us is evolving our own prakriti, just as God is evolving the universe. The difference is that God is not caught in the drama, and we are. Sankhya states that we must learn to separate our consciousness from its enmeshment in prakriti, but that is only the preparation. Then we must engage in the process of bringing our prakriti to a state of perfection in which it no longer produces waves, but becomes a permanently quiescent reflection of purusha—of our true Self, which Buddhism calls our Original Face.

That process is Yoga, and Yama has this in mind when he speaks of the seeker
having “his mind and senses purified.” Merely reading a few books and hearing a few lectures on the nature of the Self will not do it. We must focus our attention on/in the energy fields we call “mind” and “senses” and completely repolarize and reconstruct them. “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind....Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.” (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23).” wrote Saint Paul. Patanjali speaks of the process of kriya yoga, the yoga of purification, consisting of austerity (tapasya), self-study, and devoting the life to God. (Yoga Sutras 2:1) Yama, Saint Paul, Patanjali, and Krishna all tell us the same thing: “Become a yogi.” (Bhagavad Gita, 6:46)

He beholds the glory of the Self

The Self cannot be intellectually conceived or spoken about, but it can be seen—and thereby fully known—by the purified consciousness. And it is seen within the core of our being, within the cave of the heart. Caves are important symbols. Though they are to be found everywhere, we naturally think of yogis as dwelling in caves. Which they do, metaphorically. In the Gospels we see that Christ (Consciousness) is born in a cave and resurrects in a cave. It all takes place in the heart. Wherefore the wise Solomon said: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” (Proverbs 4:23) The practice of yoga (meditation) is the keeping of the heart which transforms the yogi’s life.

It is said that Shiva sits immersed in samadhi, but occasionally awakens, arises, and dances in ecstasy, exclaiming over and over: “O! Who I am! Who I am!” The same wonder at the glory of the Self will be experienced by the persevering yogi.

And is without sorrow

How could there be sorrow or any slightest form of suffering or discontent for those who behold that glory and realize that they are themselves that glory? It can be said of such a one, as Arjuna said of Krishna: “You know yourself through yourself alone.” (Bhagavad Gita 10:15) And as Krishna said of the perfected yogi: “To obey the Atman is his peaceful joy; sorrow melts into that clear peace: his quiet mind is soon established in peace.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:65) “Now that he holds it [the knowledge of the Self], he knows this treasure above all others: faith so certain shall never be shaken by heaviest sorrow.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:22) “Who knows the Atman knows that happiness born of pure knowledge: the joy of sattwa. Deep his delight after strict self-schooling: sour toil at first but at last what sweetness, the end of sorrow.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:37)
The Omnipresent Self

“Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:21)

Yama continues instructing Nachiketa on the nature of the Self. Being a highly developed being, Nachiketa had doubtless intuited most of this already, but for us who were raised in the dry gulch of the West and its “religions” his words are profoundly stirring—astounding, actually. Who could believe that in this chaotic world there were ever—and still are—sages who by direct experience have seen and spoken these truths? We should analyze them carefully, not for mere philosophical exactitude, but for a good, joyful revel in knowing the facts at last.

Unmoving, he moves

Being rooted in Infinity and thereby beyond space, the Self can never “go” anywhere. When we speak of the atma descending into relative existence or coming into matter, we are only describing the mayic experience that is itself nothing more than a training movie. If we see a motion picture about Europe, we do not think we have actually been there—yet, we did see Europe. In the same way, under the spell of Maya we have all kinds of experiences, yet they are mere appearance only. “Appearance,” however is real, even if insubstantial. So we both are and are not here. I experience writing this, and you experience reading it. That is real. But the environment in which we live, including our bodies, is but the picture projected onto the formless screen of consciousness that is our Self.

So, going nowhere, the Self “goes” everywhere. Being no thing, the Self “becomes” all things. Doing nothing, the Self “does” everything. This is the way of it.

Unmoved, he is the mover

Nothing affects the Self, but the Self affects all situations and things. Sankhya philosophy postulates that although Prakriti never touches the Purusha, it is the proximity of the Purusha that causes Prakriti to move and manifest in manifold ways. In the West we find the expressions “uncausel Cause” and “unmoved Mover.” These apply to the individual Self as much as to God.

There is a very practical application of this fact. Being under the spell of Maya we think: “All this is happening to me. All this is being done to me.” But that is erroneous. We are making it all happen, we are “doing” it to ourselves. There are no victims. Everything proceeds from us. Consequently we can study our lives and determine what is going on in our inner mind (which is not the Self, either). Our lives and environment are mirror images, revealing our states of mind. Our life is an exercise in consciousness. There are computer games in which the images on the screen are actually manipulated by the player’s mind and will. That is but a feeble glimpse of the truth about our entire chain of births and deaths. That is also what karma is. “You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world’s delusion that gives you these dreams.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:14)
Who can know him?

We have a terrible conditioning. We believe that all knowledge must come from outside ourselves, that we are blanks that need to be written on. In contemporary America this is very marked. Everybody thinks they need to have classes or lessons on everything. Some years back a friend of our ashram pointed this out about horse-riding. She commented that everyone she knew took horse-riding lessons, in contrast to her children who just got up on a horse and rode. Then she commented: “Everyone thinks they have to be taught to do anything, rather than learning on their own by experience.”

This spills over into our philosophical life, too. We think we are dummies that have to have every nuance, every subtle point, taught to us--and even worse, that they all have to be embodied in technical terms. It is only sensible to inquire about these things from those with more experience and knowledge than ourselves, but childish dependence is no wisdom at all. Dr. Spock began one of his books by telling new mothers that they knew much more about caring for babies than they thought they did, and to trust their inner feelings on the matter. This caused quite a stir. I was only a child at the time, and yet the ripples of consternation even reached me through a magazine review of his “revolutionary” book. We have no confidence, and spiritual laziness often compounds the problem.

For some reason Swami Prabhavanandaji gives us this translation: “Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being.” That is so lofty, so noble, that frankly it paralyzes our aspiration completely. “I am not ‘the purest of the pure,’ so how can I know the Self? I will have to ask others to give me hints about it.” But that is very mistaken. The actual upanishadic question is: “Who else but myself can know that radiant one [devam],” the Self? This is not just an inspiring thought, it is perfect good sense. Being the Self, who else but I can know the divine in me, but I alone can know the divine in me.

In the Chandogya Upanishad we have the thrilling story of Uddalaka instructing Svetaketu on the nature of the Self, saying to him over and over: “Thou art That.” But however stirring that account may be, Uddalaka is only telling him about the Self. It is up to Svetaketu to know the Self. Someone can bring us strawberries, show them to us, and even put them in our mouths, but we alone can know their taste--no one can taste them for us. In the same way, millions may tell us about our Self, but we alone can really know It. It begins and ends with us. Self-knowledge is the most natural thing for us all. We are working very hard to produce and maintain the unnatural state of not knowing the Self. Once we get sensible and literally “wise up” things will change.

Joy and beyond

The self is “this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy.” We are ourselves devas–gods. There is no happiness or joy anywhere but in ourselves, for we are not happy or joyful by nature, we ARE happiness and joy. The idea is that joy is the permanent, eternal, condition of our true Self. The word translated “joy” in this verse is mada, which means delight, intoxication, and exhilaration. To delight in our Self is the ultimate enjoyment. In the last essay I mentioned that it is said that Shiva sits immersed in samadhi, but occasionally awakens, arises, and dances in ecstasy, exclaiming over and over: “O! Who I am! Who I am!” This is delight in the self.

Yet, Yama says that the Self “rejoices and rejoices not.” He is trying to convey that the delight in the Self is not delight in an object, but is totally subjective and inward-
turned. This is very important, for as the yogi develops through his sadhana, his prakriti-nature begins to reflect his inner joy more and more, and he can start delighting in the delight-reflection rather than in the real thing, and come to the conclusion that he has already attained the state Yama is speaking about. This is the state of shuddhasattwa, of extreme purity of the chitta, the mind-substance of the yogi. If he is not careful, he will mistake the mirror image for his true “face” and believe he has attained what still lies before him. Innumerable are the yogis who have been deluded in this way and become trapped in the subtlest reaches of Maya. That is why Lord Krishna said: “How hard to break through is this, my Maya, made of the gunas!” (Bhagavad Gita 7:14) For to delight in the mere picture of the joy that is the Self is to still be trapped in objective, outward-turned consciousness. As Krishna further tells us: “Only that yogi whose joy is inward, inward his peace, and his vision inward shall come to Brahman and know nirvana.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:24)

How do we avoid mistaking the image for the reality? By continuing to practice meditation and other spiritual disciplines until the moment the body drops off! A sure sign of a deluded individual is the belief that he has gone beyond the need for meditation and other spiritual practices. “Baba no longer needs to meditate.” “Baba has transcended these things long ago.” “Baba is always in That, so such things are unnecessary for him.” (You can put “Ma” in place of “Baba” if need be.) But what about Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi? Yes. What about it?

A very famous Indian guru of the twentieth century believed that he had attained sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi, so he announced that he no longer needed to meditate, since there was nothing more it could do for him. While his disciples meditated, he stayed in his room and fiddled around with this and that. After some years he was visited by two Americans who thought of themselves as big guns on the American spiritual scene. Not wanting to scandalize them by messing about while everyone else in the ashram meditated, Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi Baba started attending the meditation sessions and meditating also. After a few days he remarked in wonder to a group of disciples that he could perceive a very marked improvement in his mind and consciousness since starting to meditate daily, and expressed wonder and puzzlement over how that could be. Unfortunately, no one had either the good sense or the courage to tell him, so when the American biggies left, SNSB went back to fooling around in his room during the meditation periods.

Consider the perfect life of Gautama Buddha. To the last moment of his life he lived like a normal monk. He was eighty years of age, yet he went forth and begged for his food every day—no one brought specially-prepared goodies for him. He lived outdoors, under a tree, not in a special “retreat” designed by a renowned architect-disciple. He dressed in the simple, minimal clothing of a monk, not in some expensive rigs donated by disciples to express their “devotion.” He walked everywhere he went. He did not ride in some cart or chariot provided by a rich patron out of consideration for his age. And here is the most important point of all: He meditated for hours a day, even withdrawing for weeks and months at a time to engage in even more intense meditation. He never relaxed his disciplines for an hour, much less a day. In this way he showed us how to not fall into delusion: keep on till the end, until the Self is truly known. And then keep on until death says: The End.
The Sorrowless Self

“Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. The wise man, knowing him in his true nature, transcends all grief. (Katha Upanishad 1:2:22)

Yama continues to instruct us regarding the nature of the Self, using the most simple words yet with the most profound meanings.

**Formless is he, though inhabiting form**

*Ashariram sharireshu*–the bodiless within bodies–such is the Self. Though ever without a “body” or adjunct in any form (as far as its true nature is concerned), yet all bodies are inhabited by the Self. There is no form in which the Self, the Formless, does not dwell. Who can number the forms in which we have manifested from the beginning of our evolutionary peregrinations in relativity, yet we have slipped away from each embodiment as bodiless as we were from the first. Being one with Brahman, it can be said of the Self as well as of Brahman:

“Everywhere are His hands, eyes, feet; His heads and His faces: this whole world is His ear; He exists, encompassing all things; doing the tasks of each sense, yet Himself devoid of the senses: standing apart, He sustains: He is free from the gunas but feels them. He is within and without: He lives in the live and the lifeless: subtle beyond mind’s grasp; so near us, so utterly distant: undivided, He seems to divide into objects and creatures; sending creation forth from Himself, He upholds and withdraws it; light of all lights, He abides beyond our ignorant darkness; knowledge, the one thing real we may study or know, the heart’s dweller.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:13-17)

**In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever**

*Anavastheshu‘ avasthitam*–the stable among the unstable, the unchanging among the ever-changing–so is the Self. For aeons we are entertained with the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of Maya’s web. Finally we are no longer entertained by it, but wearied. Yet we find ourselves addicted to it. Only in the beginning do addicts love their addiction. In time they come to loathe it, yet refuse to even hear of ridding themselves of it. And then at last they see themselves as slaves, hating their bondage but incapable of shedding it. Yet we are ever free.

People bound by various addictions, including alcohol and drugs, would come to Sri Ramakrishna and plead for help. Often he would just touch them, and their enslavement would be gone forever. Learning of this, we naturally glorify Sri Ramakrishna for his power of merciful deliverance, but we must not overlook the great truth it demonstrates: *It was the nature of those people to be free.* Otherwise he could not have freed them.

If we would seek freedom, then, we must seek it only in the Self. And the Self being within, we must seek within. For “Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?” (Bhagavad Gita 2:66)

**All-pervading**

Time and space being mirages, the Self is everywhere. Infinity is not “bigness” so big it cannot be calculated, it is beyond measuring because it transcends the modes of
measurable being. It is simply another mode of existence altogether. The truth is, the atman, like the Paramatman is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. (This latter is easy, since the Self never “does” anything.) So there is no place where the Self is not present. It goes everywhere without moving.

Supreme

The Self is supreme, but not in the sense of earthly entities. It is all-embracing. Not only is there nothing above it, there is nothing beneath it, for such states are not native—and therefore impossible—to it. But Maya is doing a superb job at convincing us otherwise and fooling us into thinking that the purpose of both material life and sadhana is to expand in the illusory realms of conditioned existence, to become large or small, to enter in or depart—none of which are even possible for the Self.

Simply hearing about the Self can make us more ignorant than we were before if we interpret the Self in terms of samsaric delusion.

The wise

The wise are those who know the Self as it is. And that they have accomplished by shedding their association with the unreal and turning back to their own reality.

Transcend all grief

They transcend all grief by removing their center of awareness from the realm in which suffering is possible. Suffering being an illusion, they need only awaken from the dream and abide in the Real. This is not a negative state, for it is not just a removal of sorrow, but the entering into the bliss that is the nature of the Self.

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.” (Matthew 25:21)
Who Can Know the Self?

The sense of nonsense
I once read a long and rather tedious essay on Shakespeare’s policy of putting discomfiting truths into the mouths of fools so people could scorn them and not get upset with him for unmasking their folly. It often happens that what people hope is “just fun” or “nonsense” is really insightful commentary on their foibles. This happens very often in poetry, for everybody “knows” we need not take poetry seriously.

Edward Lear, who protected himself by first claiming that he wrote “nonsense verse,” made some profound observations on life. Some of his limericks have a lot to say about how life should be lived. One of his wisest works was a poem entitled “The Jumblies,” in which he tells us at the end of every verse:

Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

These exotic people went to sea in a sieve. Everyone else said they would drown, considering that a sieve is more holes than anything else. Some even told them that though they might manage, it would be a wrong thing to do. But they did it anyway—excellently and to great profit. Upon their return, all the nay-sayers announced that they, too would go to sea in a sieve. But Lear assures us still that “Far and few, far and few, are the lands where the Jumblies live.” No; everyone will not be going to sea in a sieve. Just the far and few Jumblies.

The requirements
Perhaps Lear, as he wrote the poem, thought of the following from the Gospel of Saint Luke: “Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able,” (Luke 13:23, 24) This is not a statement of pessimism, but of simple fact. All manage in time, but in dribbles.

Yama has been very encouraging in his exposition of the Self, but now having told of its wonder he enters upon the subject of what is required to know the Self. Actually, the “price” he presents to us is quite simple and direct. If we are interested, then the price is substantial but not impossible. If we are only window-shoppers, then the price seems unreasonable and beyond payment. Here it is in two verses:

“The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known.’ Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.”

“By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:23, 24)

Not through study of the scriptures
I was fortunate some years back to live near an ideal Brahmin scholar, a professor
of mathematics at a university. Together we formed a Hindu Parishad to help Indian residents stay focused on Sanatana Dharma while living in the West. At our first meeting several of us spoke. In his discourse, Sri Dwivedi spoke of the nature of true dharma as a way of life and not a system of abstract concepts. In contrast, the other religions of the world are all “people of The Book.” Their entire identity is taken up with following a Book and professing its teachings. As a consequence, he pointed out, they can all “dialogue” with even the Marxists, for they, too, are people of a Book. But what can they say to real dharma, which cannot be gotten out of a book? See how vast are the sacred writings of Sanatana Dharma, yet we know that they are of limited value once true wisdom is gained.

Reading the Bhagavad Gita opened to me a world I had never thought could exist. How many wonderful things I found therein! Many were amazing, not the least being the statement: “When the whole country is flooded, the reservoir becomes superfluous. So, to the illumined seer, the Vedas are all superfluous.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:46) Here was a scripture that told me I should go beyond it and know for myself—and showed me the way to do that! Sri Ramakrishna often used the simile of a letter. Once you read it and know what it says, what more need do you have for it?

The self cannot be known through scriptural study, for Krishna tells us that “he who even wishes to know of yoga transcends the Vedic rites.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:44) Books are nothing more than paper and ink. Obsession with them is detrimental, proving the truth of the statement that: “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” (II Corinthians 3:6) We must get behind the words of even illumined masters and tap the Source of those words.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently pointed out that almanacs predict rainfall, but you cannot get a drop by squeezing them, however hard. In the same way, intense study of scriptures cannot give a drop of spiritual life, for no book can reveal That which lies beyond all we think or know.

**Not through subtlety of the intellect**

We cannot possibly figure out the nature of anything, much less the Self, by mere intellection. This is not the fault of the mind, any more than it is the fault of a blender that you cannot get television programs through it. There is absolutely no faculty which can perceive or reveal the Self. The Self alone knows Itself. As long as we attempt to perceive the Self through any intermediary, just so long shall we be frustrated—or worse, deluded. There is no instrument, however subtle, no capacity of the mind, however refined, that can reveal the Self. Yet, the purified intellect (buddhi) can intuit the presence of the Self and even some of its traits, and this is good, but this is not Self-knowledge. Many intelligent people with highly developed intellects mistake this intuition for direct experience and knowledge. This is a subtle trap we must avoid diligently. How could we know if we have fallen into the trap rather than risen into the Light? That actually is easy to determine. *If we can talk about what we perceive, and define it, then it is not the Self,* but only our approximation. That which lies within the range of speech lies outside the Self. No matter how near we can come to the Self, it is not the same as knowing the Self. For when the Self is revealed, all “knowing” not only ceases, it becomes impossible.

Intelligence should not be confused with intellectuality. Intelligence is a help to the revelation of the Self, but intellectuality is an insurmountable hindrance. That is why Jesus said to God: “Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast
revealed them unto babes.” (Matthew 11:25) To demonstrate this vividly, “Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:2, 3) Think how direct and uncomplicated a child’s mind usually is. Also, they are capable of intensely magical/mystical thought. How unquestioning they accept the idea of the miraculous, including the power of the individual—including themselves—to work marvels. How sad that they ever come to “know better” in a wrong way. A friend of mine was watching a television program in which a pianist seemed to be floating in the air and even turning over and over. “How do you suppose they do that?” she mused to herself aloud. Instantly her five-year-old said: “Easy! There’s a magician hidden in the piano.” And that is so true: there is a magical being hidden in each one of us known as the Self which can do–and does–all things.

Not through much learning

Vyasa was the greatest sage of post-Vedic India, codifier of the Vedas, commentator on the Yoga Sutras, author of the Mahabharata (which includes the Bhagavad Gita), and the Brahma Sutras (Vedanta Sutras). Vast as his writings were, he summed up everything that was taught by these holy books, saying:

I shall tell you in half a verse what has been written in tens of millions of books:

Brahman is real. The world is unreal. The jiva [individual spirit] is none other than Brahman.

That is it. So when the future Swami Turiyananda told Sri Ramakrishna that he studied Vedanta for several hours a day, the great Master was astonished. Quoting the words of Vyasa, he asked: “How can you spend hours studying something so simple? What more is there to say?” Turiyananda got the idea behind the idea and himself became a knower of the Self.

All the learning in the world is futile in relation to the Self and Brahman, for they lie outside the scope of the intellect. The ear cannot hear color, the eye cannot smell fragrance. No thing can know the Self but the Self.

It can be done

Yama’s words of seeming negation are really quite positive, for he then tells Nachiketa: “But by him who longs for him is he known. Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.”

This is a remarkable statement. There are no tools or gimmicks that can mechanically lead us to the vision of the Self. Certainly there are methods that aid in our search—that is what yoga is all about. But it is a mistake to think that a technique can be applied like a crowbar to break open the inner treasury and loot the vault. (And this is the attitude of most “seekers.”) Methods, such as yoga (meditation), worship, and good deeds are necessary to successfully prosecute our quest for God. Their function is twofold: they prepare us–make us capable–for the attainment of self-knowledge, and they are manifestations–evidence, actually–of the genuineness of our aspiration. By engaging in them we live out our intention.

Ma Anandamayi continually assured people that the desire for God was the way to God—everything else were aids or expressions, but it is our own divine self-will that
accomplishes our liberation. This is very important to understand.

It is commonly said that all religions are valid, that they all led to the same goal. That is true to some degree, but it leaves out the real fact: it is the seeking that brings about the finding. Frankly, it is the seekers who validate the religions, not the other way around. People finding God in all religions is not a statement about the worth of those religions, but a statement about the worth of those people. Sri Ramakrishna attained God-vision through the various religions he practiced and thereby demonstrated their viability as spiritual paths. But he also revealed that it is the nature of the individual to attain that vision whatever the path that is followed. For without that innate capacity what value would the religions have? The jivatman by its nature can know the Paramatman. As the Psalmist said: “Deep calleth unto deep.” (Psalms 42:7) Like attracts like; it really does take one to know one.

Swami Prabhavananda notes that an alternate translation can be: “Whom the Self chooses, by him is he attained.” In India they have the saying: “He who chooses God has first been chosen by Him.” Jesus told his disciples: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.” (John 15:16) The very fact that we are seeking God is guarantee of our finding, for it is an indication that He has called us. And He does not call in vain. Nor do we seek in vain. “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” (Matthew 7:7) “Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.”

Yet there are obstacles to knowing the Self: “By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:24)

Learning

Yama lists mere intellectual study, the heaping up of extraneous “knowledge” which by its character is external and superficial as an obstacle—not so much in itself, but by the illusion of knowledge that arises in the self-satisfied mind of the “knower.” Yama’s assertion shows how mistaken it is to translate swadhyaya (self-study) as “study of scriptures” when we encounter it in the Yoga Sutras.

The Kena Upanishad examines this matter, saying: “He by whom Brahman is not known, knows It; he by whom It is known, knows It not. It is not known by those who know It; It is known by those who do not know It.” (Kena Upanishad 2:3) Obviously the word “know” has two meanings here. One is the mere intellection about Brahman, the other is knowledge derived from the direct experience of Brahman, from conscious union with Brahman. There is a knowing that is unknowing and an unknowing that is knowing. That is why Swami Prabhavananda renders the Kena verse: “He truly knows Brahman who knows him as beyond knowledge; he who thinks that he knows, knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known, but the wise know him to be beyond knowledge.”

Persisting in evil

Evil in all forms must be abandoned if the Self, which is all good, is to be known. This should not be hard to understand, but many deny it anyway, or try to skirt around it. Of them Jesus said: “They have their reward” (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16)—a false security that is really “the sleep of death.” (Psalms 13:3) But for us who wish to live it is important to determine what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong.

Sanatana Dharma has a concept of right and wrong unique among the world
religions. The others teach that something is right or wrong because their God or Prophet has said so in their infallible scriptures. “It is in the Bible,” “It is in the ZendAvesta,” “It is in the Koran,” etc. Although the scriptures of Hindu Dharma do mention things as being good or evil, the basis for the statements are utterly different from that of other religions.

Sanatana Dharma does not look upon a thing as wrong because God or gods have declared it wrong or some lawgiver has prohibited it. And the same in relation to the things that are right. Rather, a thing is good or evil according to its innate character. Many times people tried to get Mata Anandamayi to approve or disapprove of something. But she would simply say: “If it takes you toward the Goal it is good. If it takes you away from the Goal it is evil.” That which darkens, obscures, or limits our consciousness is bad. That which lights, clears, and expands our consciousness is good. That which helps in the search for God is good; that which hinders or delays it is not.

We all know people who declare that their addictions and illusions either do not hurt them or even are good for them. Very well; they have their reward. But the intelligent do not engage in such childish rationalization. They impartially examine and conclude accordingly. It is all a matter of the individual’s interest and honesty. In other words, it is all in our hands—as are all the aspects of our life if we face up to it. Sanatana Dharma does not list “bads” and “goods” because it assumes that those who wish to pursue dharma can judge for themselves. Though we can certainly determine whether the Vedic scriptures consider something harmful or helpful, we should look upon the list as neither exhaustive or even binding. Sanatana Dharma is Manava Dharma—human dharma. And human beings use their intelligent reason. Sanatana Dharma also leaves every one free to be wise or foolish. Dharma never condemns or praises. It just waits to be fulfilled.

Lack of sense control

The senses must be controlled, but we usually mistake the way to do so. The upanishads use the simile of horses pulling a chariot, and we mistake that, too, thinking it a symbol of incredible forces to be overcome. But we need not think of it so drastically. Before you control a horse, you tame it. So before we control the senses we “tame” them through purification. Sadhana is the only way. Meditation alone purifies in a lasting manner. At the same time we purify the senses by directing them Godward. We make the eyes look at sacred symbols or depictions, the ears to hear the words of sacred texts and sacred music, the nose to smell the offered incense, the tongue to taste the offered sweets or food, and the inner sense of touch to feel the exalted atmosphere created by worship and contact with the holy. Pilgrimage is valuable because it is a “total sense” experience of holiness. The good news is that we need not struggle with the senses, but turn them in spiritual directions.

Restlessness of mind

Restlessness of mind is itself great suffering. Yama says that a quiet mind is indispensable to self-knowledge. Here is what Krishna has to say about it:

“If a yogi has perfect control over his mind, and struggles continually in this way to unite himself with Brahman, he will come at last to the crowning peace of Nirvana, the peace that is in me.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:15)

“When can a man be said to have achieved union with Brahman? When his mind is
under perfect control and freed from all desires, so that he becomes absorbed in the Atman, and nothing else. 'The light of a lamp does not flicker in a windless place': that is the simile which describes a yogi of one-pointed mind, who meditates upon the Atman. When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements, and becomes still, he realizes the Atman. It satisfies him entirely. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:18-21)

Can I say more than that?

**Without meditation**

“Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?” (Bhagavad Gita 2:66)

The *sine qua non* of self-knowledge is meditation. The Self is ever-present but we do not perceive it because our vision is obscured by the illusion known as Maya. After describing the method of meditation, Krishna says: “If he practices meditation in this manner, his heart will become pure” (Bhagavad Gita 6:12) and the Self will become literally self-evident. In conclusion he remarks: “Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:8)

**The formula**

The Self can be known by those who truly desire to know. And that true desire manifests through desisting from evil, controlling of the senses, quieting (restraining) the mind, and practicing meditation. This is the *real* Formula For Success.
The All-Consuming Self

Somewhere along the line—perhaps when they stopped killing their own people for sacrificial victims and committing genocide for the glory of their gods—the religion of Westerners lost its vigor. “Spiritual” came to be equated with the insubstantial and ethereal, degenerating in time into an airy and vapid sentimentalism of the sickliest character. Languishing in love for God became an ideal along with nobly bearing the terrible burdens God threw onto a groaning and groveling humanity. The keynote of all this was passivity, and not a passivity born of true courage or nobility, but from a crushing sense of impotence and hopelessness. Hell became exalted to heaven, and the contempt of a capricious and tyrannical God became Divine Love, a love that demanded placation and acceptance-obedience. This God of love hated a lot more things than he liked and basically tolerated nothing. His religion in time became just like him, and so did many of his devotees—in attitude and deed. Since he was the ideal Father, they began treating their children just as he did his. Contemporary Western society is the result. Even the rebellion against this madness is as hateful, ignorant, and repressive as that which is being supposedly rejected. Only the pious cover is discarded; the evil core flourishes. The utter insubstantiality of the “spirituelle” has become a logical doorway to denial of any spiritual reality.

In the East (India) things are fundamentally different, even if some of the sillier ways of Western religion are also to be found there, particularly in the “bhakti movement.” The concept of the Self as identified with the Supreme Self rather than a creation whose tenuous existence is continually threatened by the possibility of divine wrath, has produced a psychology and a society the reverse of that found in the West. The Self is as eternal and immovable as God—because it is one with God. Always.

In the nineteenth century the remarkable poet, author, and mystic Emily Bronte became exposed to the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita while studying in Belgium. She had long before instinctually rejected the ignorant religion of her childhood, but now she had an intelligent basis for her rejection. Fortunately it took the form of affirmation rather than negation. She had seen clearly when nine or so that she and all her sisters (and brother) would die young of the same disease (tuberculosis), and had written a poem about it. When death was only a matter of weeks away, she wrote this final poem:

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear.

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life, that in me has rest,
As I, undying Life, have power in Thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy Spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.

Though earth and moon were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou wert left alone,
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou–thou art Being and Breath,
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

Yama’s analysis of the Self has had a very logical progression. Then he tosses out to Nachiketa a single incredible sentence: “To him Brahmins and Kshatriyas are but food, and death itself a condiment.” (Katha Upanishad 1:2:25)

All that we consider worthy of respect, either venerable (brahmin) or powerful (kshatriya), is but a snack to the everlasting Self. Even death, which is ever with us and seemingly rules our destiny, is but a flavoring for the Self at its feast of life, adding spice.

Yama’s words are reminiscent of Arjuna’s vision of the Universal Self in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Since the individual atman and the Paramatman are one they have the same qualities. Just as Arjuna saw that all things emanate from the Supreme and are reabsorbed in the Supreme—are “eaten” by It, so it is with the Self. All that is “us” has come from the Self and shall return to the Self. The Self is the eternal immortal source of that which we think is temporal and perishable. But only the forms are such. Their essence is the Self.

Unborn, the Self moves through many births. Formless, the Self inhabits many forms. Untouched, the Self encounters a myriad objects. Unconditioned, the Self manifests countless qualities. Remaining what it is, the Self appears to be all that it is not. All that it encounters is but its repast, and its births and deaths merely a sauce.

“Licking with your burning tongues, devouring all the worlds, you probe the heights of heaven!” (Bhagavad Gita 11:30)
The Divine Indwellers

“Both the individual self and the Universal Self have entered the cave of the heart, the abode of the Most High, but the knowers of Brahman and the householders who perform the fire sacrifices see a difference between them as between sunshine and shadow.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:1)

The two selves
There are two selves—the many individual selves and the one Universal Self. The Mundaka Upanishad likens them to two birds of the same appearance who sit in the same tree. “Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1) First we come to know the individual self, and that enables us to attain the knowledge of the All-inclusive Self. How the two exist as one yet two is incomprehensible to the intellect but is readily experienced by the inmost consciousness of the persevering yogi. Yet intellectually we need to have some grasp of the unity/duality, otherwise we can have no correct perspective on anything, inner or outer. Extreme dualism is an error, and “monism” of any kind is even worse in its “simplisticism.” For this reason the enlightened use the expression Non-Dual (advaita) as the nearest we can come to conveying the truth of our existence. The verse beginning Purnamadah purnamidam is usually interpreted as a statement that the Relative has come from the Transcendent while retaining essential unity with the Transcendent. But it can also be understood as referring to the individual Self that exists rooted in the Universal Self. It, the atman, originates in the Supreme Self, the Paramatman, and is never separate from that Self. If examined, the two will be seen to be one. How is it possible? The One alone knows—and those who have united their consciousness with the One through yoga.

The cave of the heart
It is easy to see that the individual Self abides in—and as—the heart (hridaya), but when we look at the vast manifestation of Cosmic Life we call “creation” it is natural for our awareness to be drawn outward and thereby forget that the Supreme Self is right there inside in the same space (akasha). The Paramatman is not in the cave of our heart only incidentally, since It is everywhere, but that is Its abode, its “native place,” Its center. Its manifestation can be found everywhere, but It can be found only in the cave of the heart.

“Only that yogi whose joy is inward, inward his peace, and his vision inward shall come to Brahman and know Nirvana.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:24)

“Great is that yogi who seeks to be with Brahman, greater than those who mortify the body, greater than the learned, greater than the doers of good works: therefore, Arjuna, become a yogi.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:46)

How foolish to climb mountains, delve into the earth, wander across the plains, or cross the seas, thinking to find the Abode of God—which is the heart alone.

The two knowers
There are those who know Brahman directly and those who possess a secondary knowledge based on intuition resulting from their seeking of Brahman. Though only the first really know Brahman, yet the others’ “knowing about” Brahman is of such a character that it can lead them on to the direct knowledge of the illumined. Both of these have the same understanding without contradiction. Therefore the Finders never disdain the Seekers.

The difference

What do the Finders and Seekers know? That the atman and the Paramatman, though one, are as different as sunshine and shadow. But not in the sense of being opposite or antithetical to one another. Rather, it means that the individual Self exists only because the Supreme Self exists, just as a shadow can only exist because of the light. As the Rig Veda says of the Supreme Self: “His shadow is immortality.” Also, the idea is that the individual self (jivatman) is a reflection of the Supreme Self (Paramatman). Later, Yama will say: “He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15)

The aspiration

Since the foregoing is true, the next verse of the upanishad says: “May we perform the Nachiketa Sacrifice, which bridges the world of suffering. May we know the imperishable Brahman, who is fearless, and who is the end and refuge of those who seek liberation.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:2)

What is the Nachiketa Sacrifice? It is not a secret fire ritual that produces a magical enlightenment. The Nachiketa Sacrifice is the determined search for knowledge (jnana) which stops not until the Goal is reached. That this is the correct understanding is demonstrated by the results desired by the sacrificer: the knowledge of Brahman.

The search for union with God is the bridge which we cross to be free from this world of suffering. Seeking God is itself the guarantee that we shall find Him. Many who lack confidence worry as to whether they can succeed in spiritual life, if they are “ready,” and so forth. But the very fact that they wish to find God means that they have already travelled far along the path in previous lives. Otherwise they would sleep along with most of the world. “For the man who has once asked the way to Brahman goes further than any mere fulfiller of the Vedic rituals.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:44) “The scriptures declare that merit can be acquired by studying the Vedas, performing ritualistic sacrifices, practising austerities and giving alms. But the yogi who has understood this teaching of mine will gain more than any who do these things. He will reach that universal source, which is the uttermost abode of God.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:28)

Truly, “May we know the imperishable Brahman, who is fearless, and who is the end and refuge of those who seek liberation.”
The Chariot

Perhaps the most perfect simile of our condition as human beings as we meander through the labyrinth of continual birth and death is that given in the Katha Upanishad, and it is worthy of careful analysis.

“Know that the Self is the rider, and the body the chariot; that the intellect is the charioteer, and the mind the reins.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:3) The first idea set forth in this verse is the completely inactive role of the individual Self (atman). The other “ingredients” in the list are actively involved in “living” but the atman is absolutely beyond any activity, and is merely the observer. This is because its nature is pure consciousness—nothing else.

Body-chariot

The body is the chariot, a conglomerate of parts without any consciousness or will of its own. (Did anyone else “out there” grow up hearing certain fundamentalists say: “I don’t sin but my body sins”?) Yet, being pervaded by the intellect (buddhi) it does seem to have “a mind of its own.” It does not, but it is an extension-expression of the mind and as such has great relevance to the spiritual aspirant. Sri Ramakrishna used to study the physical configuration of newcomers and thereby determine their spiritual qualifications. So we must not think of the body as an inert thing. It is alive, but alive through the indwelling spirit. We may not be the body, but the body is certainly an expression of ourself. The body is not only the vehicle of our accumulated karmas it is the embodiment of them. Our karmas are incarnated in the body much more than is the Self.

Intellect-charioteer

“The intellect is the charioteer.” Our movement through “life” is solely through the agency of the intellect, the buddhi. This is why Krishna speaks of Buddhi Yoga as the process of liberation. Yoga is solely under the supervision of the buddhi. Yoga takes place both through the buddhi and within the buddhi. This gives us a tremendous insight into the nature of liberation: it is totally a matter of intellect, of reconstruction of awareness. The wise certainly undertake many external, even physical, disciplines to assist in their practice of yoga, but all of these are intended to affect the buddhi in its striving towards enlightenment. Since the buddhi is the charioteer, its quality determines everything in life. The cultivation of our buddhi, then, must be the focus of our sadhana. Any humanimal can be taught asanas and pranayama, but only the developed human can engage in real yoga. (By “pranayama” I mean only the physical breathing exercises of Hatha Yoga, not the subtle practices of Raja Yoga—that is a different matter altogether.) If you think this previous statement is extreme let me tell you something I learned early on in my “yoga life.”

In 1962 I was privileged to meet and listen to the venerable A. B. Purani, the administrator of the renowned Aurobindo Ashram. Sri Purani had been a fellow revolutionary with the (future) great Master Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (who, incidentally, was a high school teacher and inspirer of Paramhansa Yogananda). Later he became Sri Aurobindo’s disciple and lived in the ashram for many years before the master’s passing.
During one of his brilliant discourses at the East-West Cultural Center in Hollywood, Sri Purani told of an experience he had while travelling to the United States. He had stopped over in Japan where he was invited to speak to a yoga group in Tokyo. This group taught and practiced only Hatha Yoga (asanas and pranayama). At the conclusion of his talk, Sri Purani asked them: “Would you agree that the greatest yogis of recent times were Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Sri Ramana Maharshi?” They expressed unanimous assent to this statement. “Yet,” he pointed out, “not one of them practiced Hatha Yoga. So why do you consider yourselves yogis when you only practice that which they never bothered with?”

No matter how many external assists we may use, yoga is essentially of the buddhi alone.

**Mind-reins**

“And the mind the reins.” By mind (manah) is meant the sensory mind, the intermediary between the intellect and the body—and the entire world, as well. Through the mind the intellect sees whether the body should act or be still. For example, the mind conveys the sensation of a hand burning to the intellect, which then directs the body—again, through the mind—to pull the hand away from the fire and plunge it in cold water or some such remedy.

The next element in the matter are the senses, without which the mind would have nothing to show the intellect. Therefore:

**Sense-horses**

“The senses, say the wise, are the horses; the roads they travel are the mazes of desire.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:4)

It is the senses that drag the chariot of the body along according to their impulses. If the buddhi is weak or underdeveloped, the mind which is driven by pain-pleasure motivation alone takes complete charge in giving “full rein” to the senses. Having no intelligence they plunge onward, ever seeking fulfillment and, not finding it, hurtling even further on the paths of unreason and folly. For “the roads they travel are the mazes of desire” rather than intelligence. As a consequence the individual becomes hopelessly lost and mired in the morass of external sensation. Enslavement to body and senses is the only possible consequence—death in life and ultimately death in “actuality”—of the body and senses.

**Self-definition**

“Who am I?” is the gate to real understanding, for it sets us seeking true knowledge. And the upanishadic verse continues: “The wise call the Self the enjoyer when he is united with the body, the senses, and the mind.” We certainly do not enjoy a great deal of our experiences in/through the body, so perhaps a better translation of bhokta is “experiencer” rather than enjoyer.

The major idea in this verse is that the Self is the actionless consciousness that experiences the intellect, mind, senses, and body. As a consequence we can understand that the Self is never “the doer” at any time. The Gita illumines this for us, saying: “Every action is really performed by the gunas [sensory energies]. Man, deluded by his egoism, thinks: ‘I am the doer.’ But he who has the true insight into the operations of the gunas and their various functions, knows that when senses attach themselves to objects, gunas are merely attaching themselves to gunas. Knowing this,
he does not become attached to his actions.” (Bhagavad Gita 3:27, 28) “You dream you are the doer.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:14) “Let the wise man know these gunas alone as the doers of every action; let him learn to know That Which is beyond them, also.” (Bhagavad Gita 14:19)

There is more material like this, but the sum is: “The truly admirable man controls his senses by the power of his will.” (Bhagavad Gita 3:7) This is because: “The senses are said to be higher than the sense-objects. The mind is higher than the senses. The intelligent will is higher than the mind. What is higher than the intelligent will? The Atman Itself.” (Bhagavad Gita 3:42)

The practical application

“When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable, like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:5, 6)

And more:

“He who lacks discrimination, whose mind is unsteady and whose heart is impure, never reaches the goal, but is born again and again. But he who has discrimination, whose mind is steady and whose heart is pure, reaches the goal, and having reached it is born no more. The man who has a sound understanding for charioteer, a controlled mind for reins—he it is that reaches the end of the journey, the supreme abode of Vishnu, the all pervading.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:7-9)
The Chariot’s Journey

The upanishadic seers have just told us that the Self in the body is like a driver in a chariot. Now they set the intended journey before us.

“The senses derive from physical objects, physical objects from mind, mind from intellect, intellect from ego, ego from the unmanifested seed, and the unmanifested seed from Brahman—the Uncoused Cause. Brahman is the end of the journey. Brahman is the supreme goal.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:10, 11)

It is the genealogy of perception that is being outlined here, for if we reverse the order of perception we will come to perceive the Source, the Eternal Witness Itself. This verse, then, is a exposition of the chain, or progression of consciousness. According to it, the hierarchy of perception is:

- Brahman (Purusha)
- Unmanifested seed (Avyaktam)
- Ego (Atma Mahan—the Great Self or Mahat Tattwa)
- Intellect (Buddhi)
- Mind (Manas)
- Senses (Indriyas)
- Physical objects (Arthas)

The Bhagavad Gita (3:42) gives a similar but simpler list relating exclusively to the individual (microcosm) rather than the Universal (Macrocosm), but we can translate the foregoing list to relate to us as individual beings (jivas). In that case we get:

- The Self
- The unmanifested yet out-turned will-energy
- The sense of “I am”
- The intellect
- The mind
- The senses
- The sense organs.

My list is more literal than that of Swami Prabhavananda. It is not more meritorious when considering the Cosmos, but it is better when looking at the situation of the individual being.

Having descended the ladder, how do we get back up—especially since we have no memory of how we managed the descent? Luckily for us the yogis of India figured that out for us untold eons ago, and it works as well today as it did then. Meditation is the way of ascent back to awareness of the Self. It is possible to work our way back up the ladder, for the “rungs” are not disparate elements but evolutes or emanations of those above them. If all the rungs, including the senses themselves, were not extensions of the Self, we could not reach back to the Self. This is as true on the microcosmic level as it is on the macrocosmic. Fortunately Brahman has not “fallen” and forgotten Itself, but It, too, withdraws and projects himself as creation—as we do ourselves by coming into manifestation and eventually into physical birth. “As above, so below” has many ramifications.

The destination and how to get there

“Brahman is the end of the journey. Brahman is the supreme goal.” But the simple
saying counts for little. So the upanishad continues: “This Brahman, this Self, deep-
hidden in all beings, is not revealed to all; but to the seers, pure in heart, concentrated
in mind—to them is he revealed.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:12) Who sees Brahman? The
sukshma-darshibhih—those who can see the subtle, the inmost Reality.

How, then, can we become seers of the Subtle? By continually developing our
capacity for inner perception and simultaneously refining our inner faculties. To do that
we must “go inside” in meditation and work with our inner mechanism called the
antahkarana by the yogis. As the Taittiriya Upanishad says: “Seek to know Brahman
by meditation.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 3.2.1) And: “Om is Brahman. Om is all. He who
meditates on Om attains to Brahman.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1)

“Within the lotus of the heart hedwells, where, like the spokes of a wheel in its
hub, the nerves meet. Meditate on him as OM. Easily mayest thou cross the sea of
darkness.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.6)

“The mind may be compared to a firestick, the syllable OM to another. Rub the two
sticks together by repeating the sacred syllable and meditating on Brahman, and the
flame of knowledge will be kindled in your heart and all impurities will be burnt
away.” (Kaivalya Upanishad 11) “Let your body be the stick that is rubbed, the sacred
syllable OM the stick that is rubbed against it. Thus shall you realize God, who is
hidden within the body as fire is hidden within the wood.” (Swetashwatara Upanishad
1:14)

Turning back

“The senses of the wise man obey his mind, his mind obeys his intellect, his
intellect obeys his ego, and his ego obeys the Self.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:13) This, too,
is the product/effect of meditation! Meditation is the establishing of order within and
without.

Marching orders!

“Arise! Awake! Approach the feet of the master and know THAT.” (Katha
Upanishad 1:3:14)

In point of fact, the text does not say “approach the feet of the master,” but prapya
varan, which means “having attained boons.” The idea is to seek and attain kripa–
grace. Actually, the scriptures speak of three kinds of kripa: 1) sadhana kripa, the
grace of self-effort; 2) guru kripa, the grace of a teacher, and 3) divya kripa, divine
grace. This wise will gain all three. But there is no denying that kripa is a requisite for
those who, having arisen and awakened, seek Brahman.

The path

The verse continues: “Like the sharp edge of a razor, the sages say, is the path.
Narrow it is, and difficult to tread!” Immediately we think of Jesus words: “Enter ye in
at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction,
and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the
way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matthew 7:13, 14)

Because popular religion, despite its attempt to entice followers, continually implies
or outright states that spiritual life is hard (I grew up with this in fundamentalist
Protestantism and found it outrageous), we tend to look at the principles of Sanatana
Dharma with a tainted perspective. The upanishad is not telling us in the manner of
Western religion how hard it will be to follow the way of life.
The clue to difficulty in spiritual is found in the description of the path as “like the sharp edge of a razor.” The idea is that the path is extremely subtle—not arduous. But that makes it all the more difficult, even impossible, for those of coarse minds. This, and this alone, is what makes the path hard to tread.

No spiritual discipline comes near to being as hard as the things human beings commonly do every day to get the things they want. And “want” is the operative word. If we do not want a thing, then any action needed to obtain it will be tedious and “too hard.” But if we want it intensely, then no effort is too much or too hard. That is why the thirty-fourth Ode of Solomon says: “There is no hard way where there is a simple heart, nor any barrier where the thoughts are upright. Nor is there any whirlwind in the depth of the illuminated thought. Where one is surrounded on every side by pleasing country, there is nothing divided in him.” So the problem is in us, not in the path.

Here, as in the last essay, we see that the solution is to refine our consciousness through meditation. We must also refine our physical and mental bodies through purity of thought and deed and especially purity of diet. The ingesting of animal flesh, alcohol, nicotine and mind-affecting drugs is a frontal attack on spiritual life. It is completely insane for a seeker to engage in such destructive habits (and they are addictions).

The subtle Goal

The absolute necessity for refinement of perception through refinement of all the levels of our being is revealed by the nature of the path’s goal: “Soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odorless, without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable, beyond nature, is the Self. Knowing him as such, one is freed from death.” (Katha Upanishad 1:3:15)

We must become able to hear Silence, see the Formless, touch the Untouchable, live to the Immortal, taste the Tasteless, perceive the fragrance of the Odorless, and transcend all relative measure, and even relativity itself. Such a state is verily inconceivable to us at the present. But it can be achieved through yoga.

Let us arise, awake, pass from death unto life, and lay hold of Immortality.
The Glorious Way

The Katha Upanishad is now going to elaborate on the path so we can better understand how to journey upon it.

“The Self-Existent made the senses turn outward. Accordingly, man looks toward what is without, and sees not what is within. Rare is he who, longing for immortality, shuts his eyes to what is without and beholds the Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:1)

Why?

The first thing this verse teaches us is that the Divine Itself has caused our consciousness to turn outward. This is not the result of any negative force or “fall” on our part. (The fall took place as a wrong response to the outward turn.) What was the purpose of our turning outward? Evolution. We had to enter into relative existence and run the maze of ever-ascending evolution in order to satisfy our innate urge for infinity. (For more on this, see Ladder of Light.) Consequently, there is nothing wrong with the senses turning outward; the problem is when the senses become locked in externalizing. The purpose of our entering the field of evolutionary life was for us to experience the many shades of evolving consciousness while never losing awareness of our true nature or identifying with the costumes we constantly donned and put off as the ages progressed. However it may have been intended, the situation has horribly changed, making us blind to inner realities.

Sunk in awareness of seeming mortality, human beings either seek to distract themselves from the terror and pain which arises from their delusion, or they seek some way to attain immortality. Both searches are based on delusion, so they can only fail. We need not become immortal, but must realize our present, eternal immortal nature. Those who shut their eyes—their consciousness—to the false appearances of external existence and turn within discover the truth of their immortality. No longer do they think that the solution is to be found in some external factor, but clearly see that their own Self is the wondrous answer.

The foolish and the wise

“Fools follow the desires of the flesh and fall into the snare of all-encompassing death; but the wise, knowing the Self as eternal, seek not the things that pass away.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:2)

In its true state, relative existence is a vast field of life, but when it is overlain with the veneer of our inner delusions, it becomes death to us. That which is meant to expand our consciousness and free us into Infinity becomes a prison, a killer of our soul—and this is all our doing. The world remains what it ever was, but we have lost sight of its nature just as we have become blind to our own Self.

The urge to expansion of consciousness through upward-moving evolution becomes distorted into a myriad desires arising from our false identity with the body and its illusory mortality. “Seize the moment!” is our despairing cry. Seeking to live, we plunge ourselves “into the snare of all-encompassing death.”

The wise, who have come to know their immortality through the direct experience produced (only) by meditation, turn from the snare and seek only that which cannot pass away because it has never come into being at some point in time, but is immortal—
like us. In other words, we seek the kingdom of God that is nothing less than God–and our own Self.

There is a seeking that is necessary, but a seeking for deepening consciousness rather than for something that is not already ours. We must not fall into the facile illusion that we have nothing to do or attain. Certainly there is nothing objective to be done or attained, but in the subjective realm of Consciousness there is literally Everything to be sought and attained. “Strive without ceasing to know the Atman, seek this knowledge and comprehend clearly why you should seek it: such, it is said, are the roots of true wisdom.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:11)
To Know The Self

Defining the Self

Recently I read of a yogi who was asked, “What is the Self?” The yogi answered: “The one who knows the mind.” How simple! And the answer to the query, “Who/What is God?” is equally simple: The one who enables the Self to know the mind and Who knows the Self as its Self.

“He through whom man sees, tastes, smells, hears, feels, and enjoys, is the omniscient Lord.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:3a) All the doors of perception function through the Divine Presence, not just the Divine Power. Our consciousness is the Consciousness of God, the finite drawn from the Infinite, as the wave draws its existence from the ocean. It is a grave error to decry the experience of our senses as either illusory or somehow degrading. It is our response to sensory experience that is often illusory or degrading. But we are at every moment living in and by God.

But God is not just the Power by which “we live, and move, and have our being.” (Act 17:28) “He, verily, is the immortal Self. Knowing him, one knows all things.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:3b) He is the all-embracing Consciousness within our consciousness and within all things. If we come to know-enter into the being of—that Infinite One we shall know with His knowing, and therefore know all things. As Saint Paul said: “Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (I Corinthians 13:12) This is the inmost meaning of Saint John’s statement: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2)

“He through whom man experiences the sleeping or waking states is the all-pervading Self. Knowing him, one grieves no more.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:4) All states of consciousness are directly rooted in the Self, individual and universal. When through yoga this is truly known, all grief ceases, for the yogi identifies with his all-perceiving Self.

He transcends fear as well, for “He who knows that the individual soul, enjoyer of the fruits of action, is the Self—ever present within, lord of time, past and future—casts out all fear. For this Self is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:5) What an incredible statement! We are thinking that we are poor, mortal beings swept along by forces alien to us and totally beyond our control, when all the time we are the masters of past and future. All our fear comes from our unawareness of this glorious fact. By turning inward and discovering the truth of ourself we will pass beyond fear. The message of the upanishads is inseparably bound up with the necessity for sadhana if it is not to be no more than dead words on a dead page.

Seeing truly

“He who sees the First-Born—born of the mind of Brahma, born before the creation of waters—and sees him inhabiting the lotus of the heart, living among physical elements, sees Brahma indeed. For this First-Born is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:6) The only way to “see true” is to see The True.

When we turn within, to the core of our being, there we will not only find the individual self, the jiva or atman, but we will find its origin, the Supreme Self, the
Paramatman, the eternal Brahman. This is the true vision of God—that in which the two are seen to be One, although their distinction is eternal. The word “born” is misleading, for the Self is never born. There does come a time when it becomes manifest in relative creation, but it existed before that “birth.” It is not even right to say that God is our “origin,” for the Self is co-eternal with God. As Krishna told Arjuna: “There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:12)

**The all-embracing Self**

It is no news to us that God not only is within all things but in an ineffable way IS all things. But there is a further fact: We, too, embrace all the levels of being on the finite level, just as does God on the infinite level. So the upanishad further says: “That being who is the power of all powers, and is born as such, who embodies himself in the elements and in them exists, and who has entered the lotus of the heart, is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:7) Again, this refers to both the finite and the Infinite spirits.

Therefore we see that in the vision of the upanishadic sages we are not abstract spirits with no connection whatever with the energies of prakriti. Rather, as with God, those energies are our own expanded and “frozen” energies that in time are to be revealed as consciousness and assimilated into our Self—from which they have never really been separate. Everything is consciousness. In the final sense there is no matter or energy at all. Yet, at the moment we find ourselves in the seemingly manifold condition that is necessary for our evolution and ultimate freedom.

We not only mistake our own nature, we mistake the nature of God as well. We are ourselves “the power of all powers,” having willingly embodied ourselves in subtle and gross matter while still living essentially in “the lotus of the heart.” How then can we consider ourselves the servants or slaves of any being—including God? There is no “work of God” in this world for us to do—only our work, the ascension to perfect freedom. There is a theism that is bondage and a theism that is freedom. We must discriminate between the two.

**The source**

Because it fits better with the foregoing, let us skip a verse and read: “That in which the sun rises and in which it sets, that which is the source of all the powers of nature and of the senses, that which nothing can transcend—that is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:9)

The Self and the Supreme Self are both the Chidakasha, the Sky or Ether of Consciousness in which the sun of manifested life rises and sets. The waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states take place within the consciousness that is the Self. The experience of birth and death likewise take place within the Self.

The Self is, like the Supreme Self, the source of the energies that manifest as the various levels of the subtle and gross bodies which we are presently evolving until they manifest as the spirit-self. Nothing is ever destroyed, but is resolved back into its origin, the spirit. This is the great and awesome assertion of the upanishads.

Nothing is beyond or higher than the Self—not even God, for God and the Self are essentially one, as are the ocean and the waves. As long as we dream of separation, so long will we continue to come and go, suffering the pain and fear of continual change. But when we awaken into Unity, all sorrow and fear cease forever.
The Power of Enlightenment

“Agni, the all-seeing, who lies hidden in fire sticks, like a child well guarded in the womb, who is worshipped day by day by awakened souls, and by those who offer oblations in sacrificial fire—he is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:8)

According to the researches of Sri Aurobindo, Agni, the supposed “god of fire,” is really the will power of the individual which manifests specifically in the practice of yoga. This is not the whimsical will power of egoic goals, but the will to liberate our consciousness from all bonds. This manifests exclusively in spiritual practice, not in philosophizing or in feeling “spiritual.” This is the highest form of action possible to any being in relativity, and merits our careful analysis.

Hidden in fire sticks

The fire for the Vedic sacrifice is kindled by the friction of two sticks. The upanishad uses this as a simile, saying that the yogic fire “lies hidden in fire sticks.” Both the Kaivalya and the Swetashwatara Upanishads explain this as follows.

“The mind may be compared to a firestick, the syllable OM to another. Rub the two sticks together by repeating the sacred syllable and meditating on Brahman, and the flame of knowledge will be kindled in your heart and all impurities will be burnt away.” (Kaivalya Upanishad 11) “Fire, though present in the firesticks, is not perceived until one stick is rubbed against another. The Self is like that fire: it is realized in the body by meditation on the sacred syllable OM.” (Swetashwatara Upanishad 1:13) Not only is the will to practice meditation produced by meditation on Om, so is the goal—enlightenment.

“Like a child well guarded in the womb”

The propensity toward the Divine is rare, and it is also fragile because the downward pull accumulated in thousands of previous lives threaten its very existence. Consequently, the wise sadhaka guards it well once it arises, ensuring that it can grow unhindered and in time come forth as the liberating force we need to be successful yogis. The observance of Yama and Niyama are absolutely essential in this (see The Foundations of Yoga), as is the need to reorder one’s life so as not to put this developing power in danger of harm or destruction.

“Worshipped day by day by awakened souls”

The idea of the previous section is being continued. The awakened (though no yet enlightened) soul cherishes the yogic will, and realizes that it is a worshipful thing—the Godward-tending divine power of the divine Self that moves within him like an embryo within the womb. Day by day he worships it by using it to meditate.

“Those who offer oblations in sacrificial fire”

Those who are consciously engaging in Ishwarapranidhana, the offering of the life to God, extend the power of their spiritual will beyond the practice of meditation into every moment of their life and activity, using it to accomplish a spiritualized mode of life. Here, too, the necessity for reordering the life of the sadhaka is evident.

May that divine Agni be enkindled and maintained within us.
The Infinite Self

“What is within us is also without. What is without is also within. He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:10) These words have various levels of meaning, and we should consider them all.

Microcosms

Many years ago, Dr. Judith Tyberg, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and director of the East-West Cultural Center in Los Angeles, told me that she had attended a lecture at Benares Hindu University in which a map of the universe and charts from Gray's Anatomy were compared and seen to be strikingly alike. Our bodies are little models of the universe.

Some months before she told this to me I had experienced this for myself. While meditating one day all ordinary physical sensation vanished. Spatial relation ceased to exist and I found myself keenly aware of being beyond dimension, neither large nor small, but infinite (for infinity is beyond size). Although the terminology is inappropriate to such a state, to make it somewhat understandable I have to say that I perceived an infinity of worlds “within” me. Suns—some solo and others surrounded by planets—glimmered inside my spaceless space. Not that I saw the light, but I felt or intuited it in what Saint Teresa of Avila called an “intellectual vision.” Actually, I did not “see” anything—and yet I did. It is not expressible in terms of ordinary sense experience, yet I must use those terms. I experienced myself as everything that existed within the relative material universe. Or so it seemed, for the human body is a miniature universe, a microcosmic model of the macrocosm. The physical human body is a reflection of the universal womb that conceived it. I had experienced the subtle level of the physical body that is its ideational (i.e., causal) blueprint. On that level it can be experienced as a map of the material creation.

In this matter, it was crucial that I not mistake the copy for the Original and think I was an infinite being or had attained Cosmic Consciousness—Macrocosmic Consciousness. It was microcosmic consciousness—not an insignificant experience, but certainly not the final step in evolution.

“As above, so below”

In the Hermetic Philosophy of the ancient Mediterranean world there was a principle: “As above, so below.” That is, this material plane of existence is a mirroring of higher levels of being all the way up to the Absolute. Therefore, by studying earthly phenomena we can gain some idea of heavenly things. Also, that material conditions are reflections of psychic forces. Astrology is an example of this. The physical planets, through universal gravitation, certainly have some influence on our physical being, but their movements are indications of the arising and subsiding of inner, subtle energies that greatly affect us, both psychologically and externally.

We need to realize that the inner is always more real than the outer. The thirty-fourth Ode of Solomon, one of the earliest Christian hymns, says: “The likeness of that which is below is that which is above. For everything is above, and below there is nothing, but it is believed to be by those in whom there is no knowledge.” (Odes of
Solomon 34:4, 5)

This is also true in yoga. Everything real happens in the head—the Sahasrara, the Thousand-petalled Lotus, the astral/causal brain. This is why Paramhansa Nityananda told his students: “Awareness [buddhi] should be concentrated in the head. Your attention should always be above the neck; never below the neck.” (Chidakasha Gita 276) Yogis should never look to or trust phenomena that take place in the body below the Sahasrara.

Outer/Inner

The outer is the inner; the inner is the outer. We have touched on this slightly. It is of inestimable importance to realize that our outer life is but a mirror image of our inner life, that whatever is taking place in our external body and environment is happening in the depths of our mind. So by studying and analyzing our outer life we come to gauge the true character of our inner life. This is not palatable to the ego, for it means that our misfortunes are our own doing and reveal our inner negativity. As the Chinese maxim has it: When mean-spirited people live behind the door, mean-spirited people come in front of the door. So let us be careful before we indulge in a litany of all the wrongs we have suffered and all the bad people that have done those wrongs to us. We will only be confessing our own sins. It is not sympathy we need, but self-correction. As a very wise book, The Astral City, says: “Self-pity is a symptom of mental illness.”

Consistency

It is also necessary that our inner and outer lives be identical. We are all aware that very corrupt people can act and speak in a seemingly virtuous way. Also, many soft-hearted people pretend to be callous or even prickly. But neither is admirable. “What you see is what you get” should be our rule of life. Our outer life must be an exact imaging of our inner life. In the Gospel of Thomas, section 22, Jesus tells his disciples that they will enter the kingdom of God: “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below.”

The Inner and Outer Reality

God is the inner, and God is the outer. “He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death.” We are bound to the cycle of perpetual births and deaths until we see God, both within and without—until we know that God is the sole reality of both “the world” and ourselves. In that vision we become immortal. The great Swami Sivananda wrote the following expressing this truth:

When I surveyed from Ananda Kutir, Rishikesh,
By the side of the Tehri Hills, only God I saw.
In the Ganges and the Kailas peak,
In the famous Chakra Tirtha of Naimisar also, only God I saw.

In tribulation and in grief, in joy and in glee,
In sickness and in sorrow, only God I saw.
In birds and dogs, in stones and trees,
In flowers and fruits, in the sun, moon and stars, only God I saw.

In the rosy cheeks of Kashmiri ladies,
In the black faces of African negroes, only God I saw.
In filth and scents, in poison and dainties,
In the market and in society, only God I saw.

In Brahmakara Vritti and Vedantic Nididhyasana,
In Atmic Vichara and Atmic Chintana, only God I saw.
In Kirtan and Nama Smaran, in Sravana and Vandana,
In Archana and Padasevana, in Dasya and Atmanivedana, only God I saw.

Like camphor I was melting in His fire of knowledge,
Amidst the flames outflashing, only God I saw.
My Prana entered the Brahmarandhra at the Moordha,
Then I looked with God’s eyes, only God I saw.

I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the all-living, only God I saw.
I enjoyed the Divine Aisvarya, all God’s Vibhutis,
I had Visvaroopa Darshan, the Cosmic Consciousness, only God I saw.

Glory, glory unto the Lord, hail! hail! hail! O sweet Ram.
Let me sing once more Thy Name—Ram Ram Ram, Om, Om, Om, only God I saw.

The seeing mind

Jesus, who said: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God,” (Matthew 5:8) had learned this well in India. For the next verse of the Katha Upanishad tells us: “By the purified mind alone is the indivisible Brahman to be attained. Brahman alone is—nothing else is. He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:11)

The necessary purification is profound, for Saint John tells us: “Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he [God] is pure.” (I John 3:3) Those whose minds have been made pure in the contemplation of God automatically see Him. As Patanjali explains: “God is a Spirit......His designator is Om. Its constant repetition and meditation is the way. From it result the disappearance of obstacles and the turning inward of consciousness.” And, more importantly, they attain God, as the upanishad says. They come to know themselves as gods within God.

The universe and ourselves are in an ineffable way part of the indivisible Brahman. That is why Jesus said: “This is life eternal: that they might know thee the only true God.” (John 17:3) And why the upanishad tell us that “He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death.”

The upanishad calls us to see God and enter into Life Eternal.
The Dweller in the Heart

For numberless ages, in the rest of the world people were intent on the awesome greatness of God—and nothing more. Whereas in India the sages were intent on the awesome greatness of both the individual and the Universal Selves. Perceiving their unity, they understood that whatever can be said about one can be said about the other. Thus their teachings are a unique revelation of the true nature of us all. Without this self-understanding, our life is nothing but confusion with a few random stumblings into insight. It is an absolute necessity that we comprehend the upanishadic teachings and strive to gain the upanishadic vision.

In the lotus of the heart

“That being, of the size of a thumb, dwells deep within the heart. He is the lord of time, past and future. Having attained him, one fears no more. He, verily, is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:12) This verse tells us several things about our true Self.

That being, of the size of a thumb, dwells deep within the heart. Since the Self transcends space, how can it have a measurable size? It cannot. Shankara explains in his commentary that “the lotus of the heart is of the size of a thumb. Existing in the space within the lotus of the heart, [the Self] has the size of a thumb, just like space existing in a section of a bamboo that is of the size of a thumb.” Just as water filling a vessel sunk in the ocean has volume and shape, in the same way the Self seems to have a shape and a measure. But once the vessel is broken, the shape and volume of the water cease to be, and so it is with the Self. Incarnate in a body, the Self pervades it and reflects it, but upon the dissolution of the body those seeming conditions cease instantly, for they have no objective reality. So it is not the Self that is really of the size of a thumb, but rather the lotus of the heart within which it momentarily dwells.

We should not mistake the lotus of the heart for the organ that pumps blood through the body. The real lotus of the heart is the core of the Thousand-Petalled Lotus, the Sahasrara located in the head. This thumb-shaped nucleus is also referred to in yogic teachings as “the Linga in the head.”

“Deep within the heart” indicates that the Self is the inmost level of our being, our absolute essence beyond which we simply do not exist. It also indicates that to know ourself we must meditate and penetrate deep into our consciousness. There is no other way.

He is the lord of time, past and future. It is a grave error to think that we are helpless flotsam and jetsam on the bosom of the ocean of Relativity, being moved about by forces such as karma, our thoughts, and even God. It is our own Self that determines whatever happens to us and is the sole controller of our past, present, and future. Look at the chaotic lives of those who “trust in God” and “surrender to the Divine Will.” They rationalize their disordered state by saying they have peace of mind through their attitude, but that is a poor substitute for the truth. Look at how many people die peacefully. Peace counts for little when it is nothing more than an opiate. We must stop living a lie. It is not our karma, our thinking, or even God that ordains our life. It is our Self. And until we unite our awareness with the Self we shall know nothing but uncertainty and confusion. But when we do, “sorrow melts into that clear
peace” (Bhagavad Gita 2:65) which is ours forever.

_Having attained him, one fears no more._ For what can produce fear in the knower of the Self? As Emily Bronte wrote:

> O God within my breast,  
> Almighty, ever-present Deity!  
> Life, that in me has rest,  
> As I, undying Life, have power in Thee!

> Vain are the thousand creeds  
> That move men’s hearts: unutterably vain;  
> Worthless as withered weeds,  
> Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

> To waken doubt in one  
> Holding so fast by Thy infinity,  
> So surely anchored on  
> The steadfast rock of Immortality.

**The smokeless flame**

“That being, of the size of a thumb, is like a flame without smoke. He is the lord of time, past and future, the same today and tomorrow. He, verily, is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:13) Now we learn some more essential facts about our Self.

_Like a flame without smoke._ The Self is pure light without covering or admixture. In our present state of delusion we think that the Self can be inhibited and even corrupted, but that is not so. The various energy levels within which the Self is dwelling certainly can be inhibited, corrupted, and even destroyed. If we identify with those levels we will live in fear and uncertainty, relieved only occasionally by utterly false hopes. “It is your ignorance, it is the world’s delusion that gives you these dreams” (Bhagavad Gita 5:14) of both hope and fear. But once our consciousness is posited in the Self, all that is past, dispelled by the eternal Light of the Self.

_The same today and tomorrow._ The changeless nature of the Self puts us beyond all fear, concern, and anxiety, “knowing It birthless, knowing It deathless, knowing It endless, for ever unchanging.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:21) The Self really has no past, present or future. It is, itself, the Eternal Now.

**Liberating unity**

“As rain, fallen on a hill, streams down its side, so runs he after many births who sees manifoldness in the Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:14) The “gravity” of delusion pulls inexorably downward those who think that the many layers of their incarnate existence are the Self. Yet, they do not think they are enslaved by the consequences of their ignorance, but think they have free will as they “run” into the valleys of darkness and pain. “It’s my life, and I will do what I want to,” they shout as they roll downward into the jaws of sorrow and death. Only when the unity of our Self is known—both in the fact of its unitary state of being and its eternal oneness with Brahman—will the earthward pull disappear along with the compulsion to continual rebirth. “If a man sees Brahman in every action, He will find Brahman.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:24) It is as simple as that.
Ever the same

“As pure water poured into pure water remains pure, so does the Self remain pure, O Nachiketa, uniting with Brahman.” (Katha Upanishad 2:1:15)

We and Brahman are one Substance. There is no difference. We are not “creations,” we are beginningless and endless, co-eternal with God. “There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:12) Knowing this makes all the difference—the only difference we need. Brahman is Pure Being and we are Pure Being. Uniting with Brahman we remain what we always have been, but no longer subject to ignorance and delusion. As Jesus said: “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out.” (Revelation 3:12) The Self does not change, but becomes irrevocably established in the consciousness of its changelessness.
The Birthless Self

The subject of the Self is virtually inexhaustible. It is the sole object of the upanishads. So Yamaraj continues to expound the Self to Nachiketa.

“To the Birthless, the light of whose consciousness forever shines, belongs the city of eleven gates. He who meditates on the ruler of that city knows no more sorrow. He attains liberation, and for him there can no longer be birth or death. For the ruler of that city is the immortal Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:1)

This verse tells us many aspects of the Self, each of which should be scrutinized in turn.

**Birthless**

A cornerstone of Eastern wisdom is the understanding that verbal formulas can never encompass the truth, but can only be hints, albeit excellent hints—truth is always beyond books, concepts, and words; that in time the aspirant must pass beyond them into the level of spiritual intuition in which direct knowledge is possible. Yet it is understood that the aspirant will not be able to fully translate such direct knowledge into words. As the adage says: “He who knows tells it not; he who tells knows it not.” Not from an attitude of arcane secrecy (always a symptom of spiritual pathology), but from the fact that knowing transcends speech and (discursive) thought.

Nevertheless, “According to your faith be it unto you.” (Matthew 9:29) And faith is conceptual, even if not fully verbal. Consequently, our ideas about ourselves, our nature, and our life have a profound influence on our life and its unfoldment. If we think we are sinful mortals, we shall live like sinful mortals, incapable of reaching God. If we think we are evolving consciousness, moving onward to spiritual heights, we shall evolve beyond human limitations. But if we think we are eternal beings, part of God’s infinite Being, we shall rise to the state of Divine Unity and manifest the declaration: “Ye are gods.” (Psalms 82:6)

“There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:12) It is necessary, then, for us to firmly set in mind that we are birthless beings, that we have never “come into being” or been “created.” Rather, we are co-eternal with God, the Essence of our existence. We never came into being, nor shall we ever cease to be. When we understand that our consciousness is somehow a wave of the Infinite Consciousness that is God, that we are irrevocably a part of God’s infinite Light and Life, it will have a transforming effect on us.

Sri Ramakrishna was fond of the simile of a washerman’s donkey. Each night the washerman passes a rope around the legs of the donkey and then removes it. The donkey believes it has been tied, so it never tries to move away from that spot. Its bondage is imaginary, yet because of its belief it is as bound as though it were tied. It is the same with us. If we believe we are bound, we shall be bound. But if we believe we are free we can manifest that freedom. This is what yoga—and yoga alone—is all about.

**The light of consciousness**

God cannot be defined, but it can be said that God is Light (I John 1:5)—even more, that God is the Light that is Life (John 1:4, 9). In other words, God is Conscious
Light. And so are we. If this is realized, then we will not identify with the change and dissolution that is inherent in relative existence. The hymn says: “Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou Who changest not, abide with me." The mistake is in thinking that what is needed is God as a separate being, when what is really needed is the abiding awareness of our own Self, of which God is the Essence. As the Psalmist sang: “I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness....When I awake, I am still with thee.” (Psalms 17:15; 139:18)

**Forever shines**

Our divine nature may be obscured to our earthly eyes in the way that clouds can hide the sun and even make the earth dark. But the sun ever shines. Night occurs because of the turning of the earth, and spiritual ignorance and darkness arise because our awareness is turned wrong. Yet, as Buddha said: “Turn around and lo! The Other Shore.” And Jesus said over and over: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand”–right here where it has always been. It is only a matter of attunement of consciousness. Again, that is where yoga comes in.

The Self is what It is forever, nothing can alter that. So what we need is a recovering of Consciousness. It need not be produced or even gained–only recognized. This is difficult for us to grasp since we have become habituated to the ways of relativity in which everything is a “process” moving along in stages. Yoga reveals the Truth of our Selves, and since the clouds of illusion have to be moved aside to reveal the ever-shining Self, yoga appears to be a process, too, but essentially it is not. Yoga is simply Seeing True.

**The city of eleven gates**

The human body is usually called “the city of nine gates” for the nine apertures of the body, but here it has the number eleven. Shankara says this is because the navel and the Brahmarandhra, the “soft spot” at the crown of the head are also being counted as gates. This is appropriate, as before birth we are nourished through the navel, and at death we often depart through the Brahmarandhra.

The important point that is being made here is in contradistinction to religions other than Hinduism, and even to the attitudes found today in contemporary Indian philosophy. For it is commonly thought very “spiritual” to disregard the body, push it aside in our consciousness, and despise it as a liability and even a prison. But the upanishad tells us that the body is not alien to the Self (atman), but rather belongs to the Self, just as the cosmos belongs to God–and is in a sense the “body” of God. (It is important to continually keep in mind that whatever can be said of God can usually be said about the individual being, as well.) The body is ours, and is fundamentally a mirroring of our personal consciousness, which is why we can legitimately speak of “the body-mind connection.”

The body is the vehicle through which the individual evolves during the span of life on earth, and must be taken into serious account by the yogi who will discover that the body can exert a necessary effect on the mind. For example, the yogi meditates and discovers that the process of yoga takes place in the thousand-petalled lotus of the brain. For, as Paramhansa Nityananda said: “All takes place to a raja yogi in the brain center.” (Chidakasha Gita 214) “What is called Raja Yoga is above the neck.” (Chidakasha Gita 248)

Furthermore, the yogi joins the japa (repetition) of Om to the breath: “With Om
alone he should breathe” (Amritabindu Upanishad 20). “Because in this manner he joins the breath and the Syllable Om, this is called Yoga [joining] (Maitri Upanishad 6:22-26).

This joining of Om to the breath is what is known as pranayama. “Pranayama is composed of the Pranava, Om; [therefore] he should repeat the Pranava mentally. This only will be pranayama” (Darshan Upanishad 6:2,5,6). “Pranayama is accomplished through concentrating the mind on Om” (Saubhagyalakshmi Upanishad). “The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama” (Shandilya Upanishad 6:2). “Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om” (Yoga Vasishthha 5:78).

The yogi who observes will discover that the diet of the physical body is also the diet of the mind, that whatever is eaten physically will have an effect mentally. One who does not know this is no yogi at all.

No more sorrow

“He who meditates on the ruler of that city knows no more sorrow.” When we meditate on our Self, our atman, we will end all sorrow. The Gita says of the yogi who meditates on the Self: “To obey the Atman is his peaceful joy; sorrow melts into that clear peace: his quiet mind is soon established in peace.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:65) “When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements, and becomes still, he realizes the Atman. It satisfies him entirely. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being. Now that he holds it he knows this treasure above all others: faith so certain shall never be shaken by heaviest sorrow. To achieve this certainty is to know the real meaning of the word yoga. It is the breaking of contact with pain. You must practice this yoga resolutely, without losing heart.” (Bhagavad Gita 6:20-23)

We must meditate on the Self—not on external deities or symbolic forms of psychic states. As Sri Ma Sarada Devi said: “After attaining wisdom one sees that gods and deities are all maya.” (Precepts For Perfection 672.) The upanishads, Gita, and Yoga Sutras know nothing of meditating on “ishta devatas”–only on Om, for Om is our Self. Here are a few upanishadic statements on the subject:

“The Self is of the nature of the Syllable Om.” (Mandukya Upanishad 1.8.12)
“Directly realize the self by meditating on Om.” (Vedantasara Upanishad 1)
“The Self is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self.” (Mandukya Upanishad 1, 8, 12)
“Meditate on Om as the Self.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6)
“Om is the atman himself.” (Narasingha Uttara-Tapiniya Upanishad)
“Om is a single syllable that is of the nature of the Self….Om is the true form of the Self.” (Tarasara Upanishad)

Liberation–no longer birth or death

“He attains liberation, and for him there can no longer be birth or death.”

There is no need for commentary, but here is some corroboration:

“Know this Atman unborn, undying, never ceasing, never beginning, deathless, birthless, how can It die the death of the body?” (Bhagavad Gita 2:20)

“The seers...reach enlightenment. Then they are free from the bondage of rebirth,
and pass to that state which is beyond all evil.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:51)

“Knowing the Atman, man finds Nirvana that is in Brahman, here and hereafter.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:26)

**Immortal**

“For the ruler of that city is the immortal Self.”

The Gita encapsulates it perfectly:

“This true wisdom I have taught will lead you to immortality. The faithful practice it with devotion, taking me for their highest aim. To me they surrender heart and mind. They are exceedingly dear to me.” (Bhagavad Gita 12:20)

“For I am Brahman within this body, life immortal that shall not perish: I am the Truth and the Joy for ever.” (Bhagavad Gita 14:27)
The Shining Self

“The immortal Self is the sun shining in the sky, he is the breeze blowing in space, he is the fire burning on the altar, he is the guest dwelling in the house; he is in all men, he is in the gods, he is in the ether, he is wherever there is truth; he is the fish that is born in water, he is the plant that grows in the soil, he is the river that gushes from the mountain—he, the changeless reality, the illimitable!” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:2)

Where in all the scriptures of the world can we find such a thrilling statement—thrilling and glorious because it is TRUE?

The two that are One

To fully comprehend the teachings of the upanishadic sages we must keep in mind that whatever can be said of the Paramatman on the cosmic, universal level can usually also be said of the jivatman on the level of our individual life within the cosmos. So the upanishads are describing not only God, the Supreme Spirit, but the nature of our own individual spirit.

What is needed

There is another, essential, side to this upanishadic statement—and indeed to all scriptural teachings—that must be kept in mind at all times in our study: We must experience and know the realities spoken of by the sages. They did not write down their perceptions for us to merely accept them and be intellectually convinced of their veracity. Rather, they wrote them down as signposts so we could check our own perceptions against them. Never did they mean for their writings to become dogmas and doctrines. They assume that their readers will be yogis like themselves, sadhaka-pilgrims pressing on toward the ultimate frontiers of consciousness.

This is the absolutely unique character of the basic texts of Sanatana Dharma. All other scriptures, including those of later authorship in India as well as those of other religions, are statements of “truths” we are supposed to accept “on faith” without question. This is why intelligent investigation and analysis are so little valued by the expounders of those scriptures, why nearly all religions warn their adherents away from reading the books of “heretics” and demand that they shun their company. Intellectual fearlessness terrifies “the chosen faithful” and sets their teeth on edge.

But no religious system that employs a single bond can lead us to freedom. For example, in Yoga, yama and niyama are not “commandments” but helpful information. Just as we learn what food is harmful to the body, so from Patanjali we learn what conduct limits and clouds the consciousness of the aspiring yogi. If we wish to ignore his counsel, that is our own concern. No one will call us to account for our heedlessness except our own Self. Those who are fit to be yogis joyfully learn what to cultivate and what to avoid, and live accordingly. Those who drag their feet, sigh, and sullenly demand mitigations, are simply not fit for yoga and should occupy themselves in other areas. This is why Jesus asked: “Which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.” (Luke 14:28-30)
Every yogi must be *adhikarin*—qualified and worthy, fit for yoga and capable of its total practice. Jesus said: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30) It is interesting that he likens spiritual life to the cumbersome wooden yoke of oxen or bullocks, assuring us that it will be restful and easy and light to bear. How is this? To a strong ox or bullock the heaviest of yokes will be of no consequence. So if we are the kind of people for whom yoga is intended, its requirements and disciplines will be light and easy. But if, instead of being oxen or bullocks we are dogs and swine—symbols used by Jesus for the unworthy—the “light and easy” yoke will break our backs! This is why some people should take up bowling or surfing and forget religion altogether, what to say of yoga.

For the serious seekers, though, the ancient rishis hold back nothing, but give the full picture of the Self.

**“The immortal Self”**

The self can appear (please note I say “appear”) to enter into numberless conditions and interior states. It even experiences millions of births and deaths, yet it never really dies, for immortality is a fundamental trait of its nature. It is not easy, but the yogi must cultivate a continual awareness that he is Immortal Being—never anything less, and never anything more—and order his life accordingly. I do not mean by this that he denies his present (seeming) condition, but that, as Yogananda continually advised, he is always aware that he is only sitting in the motion picture theatre of the cosmos watching a movie that, cosmic as its scope may be, can be wiped away in a moment, that only he and the other viewers are real, that all must eventually leave the theater and go home to Infinity. How splendid are the truths of the Vedanta!

**“The sun”**

The Self is the source of all light—the Inner Light of Consciousness that illumines all things. For outside the Self there is no perception of even the brightest of material suns. It is the presence of the Self that produces awareness of all phenomena. Outside the Self nothing at all exists. Within the Self is everything.

**“Shining in the sky”**

The Self shines in the “sky” of the Chidakasha, the subtle Ether (Akasha). The Chidakasha is the infinite, all-pervading expanse of Consciousness from which all “things” proceed; the true “heart” of all things. The “shining” of the Self in the Chidakasha is the emanation of Om. In the individual, the Chidakasha is the subtle space of Consciousness located in the Sahasrara, the Thousand-petalled Lotus that is the astral/causal brain. From that point Om, the Word of Life (Pranava) enlivens and illumines all things; which is why we meditate upon Om in the head.

**“The breeze blowing in space”**

The Self is also that power which moves within the Chidakasha as the wind moves within earthly space. As the wind causes movement in the trees and on the surfaces of earth and water, in the same way it is the Self that produces all movement in the cosmos, in all the worlds gross and subtle.
“The fire burning on the altar”

The Self is the transmuting force of Cosmic Fire on the altar of the universe. In India of the upanishadic rishis there were no temples, nor were there any external religious rites other than the sandhya (morning and evening salutations of the sun) and the havan, the fire ritual in which by the agency of consecrated fire the offerings were transformed into subtle energy forms and transferred into higher worlds. The Self, then is the ultimate transmuting power which evolves both the cosmos and the personal energies of the individual spirits within it. The entire universe is an altar in which, through the power of the Self, all things are offerings unto–and into–Infinite Being.

“The guest dwelling in the house”

All things, even the least atom, are “houses” for the all-pervading Self. All things that exist have the Self as their inmost dweller. Where there is any objective “thing,” there is the Self. Yet, since no things are permanent, the Self is only a momentary Guest–but none the less real for that.

“In all men”

What is meaningful to us is the truth that the Self is the dweller in all consciousness beings. And since they are not “things,” the Self is not a guest but the permanent Indweller as the Self of the Self. The consciousness of each one of us is the only temple in which Spirit ever dwells in Its essential being. Although it can be said that in a sense our bodies are temples of God, that is not really true in the purest sense. Only in our consciousness is Spirit to be found. This is why the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita insist that we must identify with the Self alone, seeing all else as mirages destined to dissolve away and cease to exist. Their message has been summed up by Shankara in these words: “Brahman is real. The world is illusory. The jiva is nothing but Brahman.”

“In the gods”

In the upanishads, “gods” mean not only highly evolved beings that can control the forces of nature, etc., “gods” are also our higher faculties of perception which illumine our awareness of both the inner and outer worlds. Here the idea is that the Self is the enlivening power by which our higher faculties function.

“In the ether”

The Ether, the Chidakasha, is the natural home of the Self. Only in this inmost level of being can the Self be always perceived. In the lesser levels we usually “lose” the Self by losing perception of It. How can we establish ourselves in “etheric awareness”? Through the unique property of akasha: sound–specifically, through the japa and meditation of Om, as Patanjali has stated in the Yoga Sutras. In the Vedanta Sutras of the sage Vyasa (also called the Brahma Sutras) he tells us: “Anavrittih shabdai–By sound vibration one becomes liberated.” (Vedanta Sutras 4.4.22)

“Wherever there is truth”

Wherever there is true knowing, there the Self is operative as the Sun of Consciousness, revealing both relative and absolute truth. For Truth is Its nature. A popular Sanskrit adage is: “Truth alone conquers,” meaning that victory over ignorance and bondage is found only in the Self, the ultimate Truth.
“The fish that is born in water”

Egotism is a prime trait of human beings—usually in the form of outright arrogance. In religion this manifests in the insistence that human beings are superior to all other beings. Even in India we have the idea that “even the gods pray for human birth” because supposedly only human beings can be enlightened. In Christianity there is an insistence that human beings are higher than angels because they alone can be “saved” through Christ. In the most ignorant of religions there is the insistence that only human beings are immortal and that animals are some kind of animated machines, that human beings alone are “in the image of God” and suchlike.

Therefore the upanishad tells us the truth: that even in the dullest of animals—the fish—the Self is present, that the fish is the Self in manifestation, as are we.

“The plant that grows in the soil”

Lest we confine the Self to animal life, the upanishad further tells us that plants are dwellingplaces of the Self, too.

“The river that gushes from the mountain”

And lest we think that the Self is only in “living” things, the seers assure us that in inanimate things the Self is living and moving. Everything is alive in Spirit. What a sublime world-view!

“The changeless reality”

All the things listed as abodes of the Self are ever-changing, and their forms are evanescent, soon seen to be without permanent reality. Since we identify with what we see around us, we continually fall into the snare of thinking that we, too, change and have no ultimate reality. Even if we think otherwise intellectually, we keep acting in a delusive manner. Hence we must keep reminding ourselves that we are changeless and absolutely real.

“The illimitable”

Equally wonderful is the truth that we are beyond limitation, that infinite are our possibilities—for we are the Infinite Self.

The call

Those who embodied their realizations in the upanishads did not do so to furnish us with a bundle of beliefs to “take on faith” and wrangle over. Their intention was to spur us onward to attain the same vision as they possessed, to be sages equal with them, no longer “servants” but “friends.” (“Henceforth I call you not servants;...but I have called you friends.” John 15:15) Their call to us is the same as that of Swami Vivekananda, who continually exhorted his hearers: “Awake! Arise!”
The Life-Giving Self

Just as children babble on aimlessly about things they do not understand, so we do the same, though in a more sophisticated way, especially in religion and philosophy. So the three verses relating to the Self and life are very much needed by us. First the upanishad tells us:

“He, the adorable one, seated in the heart, is the power that gives breath. Unto him all the senses do homage.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:3)

Adorable

The word Prabhavananda translates “adorable” is vamanam, which means adorable, dear, and pleasing. These epithets are traditionally used in relation to Shiva, the symbol of the atman and atmic consciousness. This is important, for the Self is not just Truth or Reality—a mere abstraction—but when experienced as either the individual Self or the Supreme Self produces in us a personal response, literally the response of bhakti (devotion) and even prema (love).

In contemporary India there is the idea that bhakti and prema can only be experienced toward a being that possesses form (rupa) or qualities (guna)—that it is impossible to have these responses to Brahman the transcendent Being. But in the upanishads and the Gita we are constantly exhorted to love Brahman—not just some “forms” of Brahman—and the atman. This also indicates that the ancient upanishadic sages did not believe that the Absolute or the Self was without attributes of any kind. Rather, they considered that, although anything said would be only approximations of divine realities, still human beings could conceive of God in at least a dim way. And they absolutely could experience God, and have reactions and definitions arising from their experience. In Chapter Twelve Krishna speaks of this in more detail, and we will consider it there.

To the yogi, then, the Self and Brahman are equally adorable.

Seated in the heart

God and the Self are seated in the heart, as the upanishads and the Gita continually emphasize. There they abide permanently—it is not a matter of occasional visitations. Knowing this, Jesus said: “Behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21) This, too, is a matter of direct experience. Saint Luke used the word idou—in other words, “See for yourself that the kingdom of God is within you.” This is not something Jesus wants us to believe and act on blindly—he wants us to experience this truth, for only experience produces lasting effects.

The heart is the throne of God and the throne of the divine Self. When Jesus says: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne,” (Revelation 3:21) he is speaking of our heart—not his. Our heart and the heart of God are not the same, but they are ONE.

Power that gives breath

The upanishads literally say that it is the Self which produces our inhalations and exhalations. “Who could live, who could breathe, if that blissful self dwelt not within
the lotus of the heart?” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:7) “The Self is the breath of the breath.” (Kena Upanishad 1:2) “The breaths are the Real, and their Reality is the Self.” (Brihadaranyak Upanishad 2.1.20) “He who breathes in with your breathing in is your Self. He who breathes out with your breathing out is your Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.4.1) “From him is born the breath.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.2, 3) “The shining, immortal person who is breath is the Self, is Brahman.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.4) “Which is the one God? The breath. He is Brahman.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.9.9)

In the spiritual texts of India the word hridaya–heart–means not just the heart, or core, but also is said to indicate the space (akasha) where the inbreath and outbreath merge–the ultimate heart. This is why yoga must involve working with the inhaling and exhaling breaths in the form of subtle pranayama. “The breath is the Supreme Brahman. The breath never deserts him who, knowing thus, meditates upon it. Having become a god, he goes to the gods.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.3) “They who know the breath of the breath...have realized the ancient, primordial Brahman.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.18

The senses do homage

In the primal texts of Sanatana Dharma we find references to “gods” (devas). In modern Hinduism we find a panorama of all kinds of gods, demigods, and suchlike, so it is supposed that the ancient texts refer to them when speaking of “devas.” But a simple perusal of the context of those references reveal that the upanishadic sages meant the senses (jnanendriyas), not some kind of external deific intelligences.

The senses “do homage” in the sense that in the evolved individual they draw near to (upasate) and become merged in the Self, which is their source. Now this tells us two interesting and usually unsuspected things. First, that it is natural for the Self to control the senses, not to be their slave. Second, it is completely natural for the senses to move inward toward the Self and experience the Self by uniting with It. Neither of these is our present experience. Rather, we consider it normal for the Self to be bound by the senses, and for it to require great struggle to turn them inward and bring them to experience of the Self. Evidently we have lived in a subnormal condition so long that we have come to think subnormality is normal. We are like the drunk man who was walking along with one foot on the sidewalk and the other down in the street. When someone stopped him and asked why he was walking that way, he burst into tears and answered: “Thank God! I thought I was a cripple.”

Basically, the Self is the goal of all.

The essence

The upanishad then asks: “What can remain when the dweller in this body leaves the outgrown shell, since he is, verily, the immortal Self?” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:4) The answer is quite simple: nothing but the body remains, for the Self is as different from the body as the pearl is from the oyster and its shell. The departure of the Self produces death and decay, for it is the Self alone that gives--and is--life, the sustenance of the body.

Jesus, himself a yogi having lived over half of his life in India, said: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4) That is, we live not on matter, but on the very Life of God--because matter is only a modification of that Life Energy. The upanishad--which Jesus
would have known—expresses the same idea by saying: “Man does not live by breath alone, but by him in whom is the power of breath.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:5)

It is not breath that makes us live—though breath is the basis of our body’s metabolism. This is why yogis can live without the physical act of breathing. What we cannot do without, and by which we do live is Him who is the source of breath, especially in His primeval form: Om, the Pranava, the Life-Giver, the Word of Life. Through the repetition and meditation of Om as recommended by Patanjali we enter into communication with the Lord, Ishwara, and then into unity with Him.

“For in him we live, and move, and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)
The Eternal Brahman–The Eternal Self

Brahman and the Self

“And now, O Nachiketa, will I tell thee of the unseen, the eternal Brahman, and of what befalls the Self after death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:6)

This is an interesting juxtaposition: Brahman and the Self after death (of the body). The upanishad puts these together because Brahman and the Self are one, and after death the spirit recovers the memory of its immortality–its eternity. One with Brahman, the Self yet experiences many changes. Those changes may only be appearances, but they are nonetheless real, and profoundly affect the Self in its evolutionary journey. So they need to be set forth.

The ignorant

“Of those ignorant of the Self, some enter into beings possessed of wombs, others into plants–according to their deeds and the growth of their intelligence.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:7)

Here again we have a most interesting thing. Instead of discussing the worlds entered by the spirit after bodily death, and their nature as reflections of the spirit’s karma, physical rebirth is immediately being spoken of. This is because it takes a goodly degree of evolution for the subtle worlds to have meaning for the developing spirit. The undeveloped learn neither from earthly or astral experiences. Further, many of them simply go to sleep at the moment of death and awaken only at the moment of birth. The period of time in between does not exist for them in any meaningful sense.

In his commentary on this verse Shankara cites another upanishadic statement: “Creatures are born in accordance with their knowledge.” For evolution is a matter of knowing (jnana). The spirits that are unaware of their true nature come back into two general categories: into living organisms that gestate them in some form or other, and plant life. Obviously, very little goes on in the life of the plant as far as consciousness is concerned. Only those who are “born” and live a life with some degree of control over a body vehicle can develop their consciousness to any significant extent.

Implicit in this verse is the principle of the transmigration of the atman from lower to higher forms of life. We start out as atoms of hydrogen, move into mineral forms, then plant forms, then “living” organisms, and then into the human body from which we shall eventually evolve into forms in higher worlds. For most of the time evolution is automatic and incredibly slow. But at some point we become capable of directing and enhancing our evolutionary movement. At first this is only through thinking and acting, but eventually we become capable of yoga, of fully taking charge of our growth in consciousness. Until this point is reached, little of any importance occurs to us. So the upanishad is starting at a basic rung of the ladder of evolution. But since, as I have said, nothing of much value take place on that level, the upanishad moves ahead quite a bit to the level when we are capable of dreaming—to at least the intelligent animal level.

Dream creation

“That which is awake in us even while we sleep, shaping in dream the objects of our
desire—that indeed is pure, that is Brahman, and that verily is called the Immortal. All the worlds have their being in that, and no one can transcend it. That is the Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:8)

It is a fundamental assertion of India’s primal wisdom that there are four states of consciousness: jagrat (waking), swapna (dreaming), sushupti (dreamless sleep), and turiya, the pure consciousness that witnesses the first three. Turiya is the state proper to the Self—actually is the Self—which is why this verse speaks of It as “that which is awake in us even while we sleep.”

“Shaping in dream the objects of our desire.” But there is more to this Self than consciousness. It is also creative power. Although as yogis we use the terminology of Sankhya and speak of Purusha and Prakriti as two entities, we are only speaking of two aspects or views of the One Existence. They are absolutely One. The upanishad reveals this by telling us that the Self is not only Witness, It is also the Witnessed.

The Self is desireless, yet it shows us in dreams the things we desire. Why? Because the Self is more than Witness, It is Guide and Guru. In every way it is attempting to show us our present spiritual status. Dreams are one of the avenues for its teaching. It is true that dreams arise from the subconscious, but they do so at the impulse of the Self. Unfortunately our subconscious is distorted, like a badly ground lens, so the original imaging of the Self comes through to us distorted or partial, and the message is flawed. However, the more we clarify our minds through meditation, the more faithful our dreams will be to the original impulses from the Self. In time our dreams can become authentic spiritual visions, at least on occasion.

Although showing us our desires, the Self remains pure—the actual word being “white” to signify that the Self has no inherent “colors” (qualities or traits), for it is Brahman by nature. Thus it is also immortal, no matter how many “deaths” we may experience, both through the death of the body and the “little death” we experience each time we sleep—dreams being a kind of “after death” astral experience.

All “worlds,” all levels of experience, arise from the Self in Union with Brahman. Nothing exists apart from the Self. The Self is also the ultimate Being. There is no “going beyond” it. Because it is one with Brahman, even conscious union with Brahman does not cancel out our awareness of the individual Atman. This is a most important principle, for many are led into the delusion that they have transcended the Self and “entered the Not-Self,” when they have merely sunk into the morass of tamasic ignorance. They are suffering from the subtlest form of mental illness which in time will manifest as recognizable psychosis and lead to great mental and moral disintegration—in many instances to attempted or successful suicide.

**The indwelling Self**

“As fire, though one, takes the shape of every object which it consumes, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells. As air, though one, takes the shape of every object which it enters, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:9, 10)

Each individual Self inhabits a vast number of body-vehicles as it moves up the ladder of evolution to the Highest. (For a detailed study of this, see Ladder of Light.) And in each one it appears to actually become that vehicle. Yet the Self remains only Itsel, one and unique. In this way the Self gathers experiences of every form of life that exists. This is necessary for It if It is to approximate the status of Brahman, for Brahman, existing in all forms, has the experience of “being” all those forms. Hence
the microcosmic Self mirrors the Macrocosmic Self.

**The untouched Self**

“As the sun, revealer of all objects to the seer, is not harmed by the sinful eye, nor by the impurities of the objects it gazes on, so the one Self, dwelling in all, is not touched by the evils of the world. For he transcends all.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:11)

Having spoken to us of the fact that the Self somehow takes on the form of its many incarnational forms, the upanishad reminds us that the Self is nonetheless absolutely unmarked by that “formation” and undergoes no alteration or conditioning whatsoever. Even while immanent in relative existence, the Self remains essentially transcendent, in the same relation to its incarnate form as is Brahman to the universe. The divine eye of the Self illumines all things yet is affected by none.

**Bliss and peace**

“He is one, the lord and innermost Self of all; of one form, he makes of himself many forms. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal bliss—to none else, to none else!” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:12)

The Self is ever the Master, however much the forms inhabited by the Self may be bound. The Self is the essential principle of the existence of all those forms, always remaining one and unchanged. He alone who beholds the Self in/as the core of his being possesses eternal bliss.

“Intelligence of the intelligent, eternal among the transient, he, though one, makes possible the desires of many. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal peace—to none else, to none else!” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:13)

Consciousness of the conscious, the eternal link between all the temporal bodies It inhabits, the Self is that which “makes possible the desires of many” through countless incarnations. He alone who beholds the Self in/as the core of his being possesses eternal peace.
Yamaraj has presented his student with a great deal of philosophical knowledge regarding the Self. This is all valuable, but Nachiketa feels impelled to ask a question, without the answer to which all the teaching on the Self means nothing. He asks: “How O King, shall I find that blissful Self, supreme, ineffable, who is attained by the wise? Does he shine by himself, or does he reflect another’s light?” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:14) It is pointless to hear about the Self if we do not know how to find the Self. It is true that in metaphysical realms the majority of people are enamored of theory and discussion without practical application, but the wise see things differently. Nachiketa has already grasped the fundamental nature of the Self.

**Blissful**

Analysis shows that the basic motivation of all beings is bliss (ananda) or happiness (sukham), that all the things we strive for are only prized because their acquisition will give rise to joy. In this perspective we see that all beings are in search of the Self, for It alone is of the nature of joy. Once a person grasps this fact–really grasps it–he can only seek for the Self, all else being seen as insignificant.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad we find the following relevant exposition:

"It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the children, my beloved, that the children are dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of wealth, my beloved, that wealth is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the Brahmans, my beloved, that the Brahmans are held in reverence, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the Kshatriyas, my beloved, that the Kshatriyas are held in honor, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the higher worlds, my beloved, that the higher worlds are desired, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the gods, my beloved, that the gods are worshiped, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the creatures, my beloved, that the creatures are prized, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self.

"The Self, Maitreyi, is to be known. Hear about it, reflect upon it, meditate upon it. By knowing the Self, my beloved, through hearing, reflection, and meditation, one comes to know all things.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4.5)

**Supreme**

The Self is supreme–there is nothing that is higher or more desirable than the Self; there is nothing that exists beyond the Self. It is supreme because It is Existence Itself.
There is no reality other than the Self. We must seek the Self because only the Self can be attained—everything else is a mirage.

**Ineffable**

The Self cannot be defined or evaluated in the terms of relative existence or relative objects—none of which exist outside the Self. Consequently the Self cannot be intellectually understood or even defined. Nevertheless, the Self can be known in a manner beyond any ordinary knowing, for It can be experienced as both object and subject—a quality unique to Itself.

**Attained by the wise**

The Self is attainable. Those who at present are ignorant of the Self can become knowers of the Self. Although only the knowers of the Self are fully worthy of being called wise, we can certainly call those who are seeking the Self also wise. All of us can be the potentially wise if we follow the path to Self-knowledge as outlined in the upanishads, the Gita, and the Yoga Darshan of Patanjali.

**A necessary question**

Nachiketa has declared the Self to be Supreme, yet he prudently follows that statement with a question to dispel any possibility that he may be misunderstanding Yama’s teaching: Does the Self shine by Itself, is Light Its essential nature, or does It reflect another’s light? This is a most crucial inquiry. Is the Self Light, or is Its light drawn from a source other than the Self? This is a question that penetrates to the foundations of the cosmos, demanding a clear insight.

**The sublime answer**

“Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning—nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15) So Yama answers his worthy pupil’s worthy question.

Nothing of heaven or earth illumines the Self or causes It to be radiant. Rather, It is swayamprakash—self-luminous. Furthermore, it is the Self that illumines all beings. “He is the one light that gives light to all.” The Self is the essential nature of all sentient beings that “shine” with consciousness. “He shining, everything shines.”

All glory to the blissful, supreme, and ineffable Self! All glory to the wise who strive to attain that Self as well as the supremely wise who have attained It!
The Universal Tree

“This universe is a tree eternally existing, its root aloft its branches spread below. The pure root of the tree is Brahman, the immortal, in whom the three worlds have their being, whom none can transcend, who is verily the Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:1)

Little needs to be said about this verse, its meaning is quite obvious. We can, however, infer a significant principle: all things are rooted above in the Supreme Consciousness, in Brahman. Everything has Brahman for its essential Being. From this we get the Hermetic principle: As Above, So Below. Applying this principle to our own experience we can come to understand a great deal about the higher— and truer— nature of what is arising and subsiding in our life. Original Christianity, being rooted in the upanishadic teachings of Jesus (Isha Nath), taught the same, and that is why in the oldest text of Christian hymns, The Odes of Solomon, we find this: “The likeness of that which is below is that which is above. For everything is above, and below there is nothing, but it is believed to be by those in whom there is no knowledge.” (Odes of Solomon 34:4, 5) That is, the ignorant believe that “things” have an independent existence—an existence that can cease—rather than the truth that they are not only rooted in Brahman, they are an imperishable extension of Brahman. “For in him we live, and move, and have our being…for we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:28) as Saint Paul pointed out. “And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.” (Colossians 1:17) David simply sang: “For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.” (Psalms 36:9) Brahman is the ultimate state and stage of being. There is no transcending Brahman, for Brahman is truly the Self of all.

From this we see the principle only (comparatively) recently discovered by science: that in essence all things are immortal, that there is not a single atomic particle in creation that can go out of existence, that the changes we think are death and birth are only rearrangements of the living energies of which all consist.

A yogic aspect

Though yoga is not the subject of this verse, we can extract some important yogic information from it.

Since we are miniature cosmuses, little universes, our origin is also “above” in the root ball of the brain, the Thousand-petalled Lotus, the Sahasrara. Therefore, to experience that Source, in meditation we orient our attention toward the head, and we invoke the “pure root” of our being in the form of Om, which is the same as Brahman.

The fearless Source

“The whole universe came forth from Brahman and moves in Brahman. Mighty and awful is he, like to a thunderbolt crashing loud through the heavens. For those who attain him death has no terror.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:2)

“Awful” is outdated English. “Awesome” is much more correct. (In older forms of English, “awful,” “horrible,” and “terrible” all meant awesome, and were positive, but at this point in time they have reversed polarity and become negative descriptions.)

Brahman is Inexorable Power as well as Infinite Consciousness. His presence is like the thunderbolt whose light blinds us to all lesser lights, whose Creative Sound is Om expanding through the Chidakasha, the Ether of Consciousness, in which all
things exist—and of which they consist. Those who unite with this Brahman experience their eternal immortality and become fearless, especially in the face of the mirage called death.

The Divine Will

“In fear of him fire burns, the sun shines, the rains fall, the winds blow, and death kills.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:3)

Here, too, a state of ecstatic awe and wonder is meant. In older English, which Prabhavananda is using, “fear” meant to be filled with awe and respect—not to be afraid. So when we read in the older Bible translations that we should fear God we are actually being told to reverence God.

In awesome reverence of Brahman the creation responds to the Supreme Will—for it is itself an extension of Brahman, as already said. All that occurs is the movement of Divine Consciousness, is response to Divine Will. Brahman moves Brahman, and creation manifests and moves onward. Brahman ceases to move Brahman, and creation resolves into its potential, causal form and seems to cease. At all times it is Brahman reacting upon—and to—Brahman. Even death is only a change of Life.

The root of rebirth

“If a man fail to attain Brahman before he casts off his body, he must again put on a body in the world of created things.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:4)

Perfect knowledge of Brahman resulting from total union of our consciousness with Brahman’s Consciousness is the only passport beyond this world—or any worlds of relative existence. Knowledge is the root determinant of our rebirth or our freedom from rebirth. This is why most religion is so useless—it deals with “good” and “bad,” with “truth” and “error;” on the tiny level of individual human mentalities. The infinite scope of Brahmic Consciousness simply does not come into its purview. Human beings waste lifetimes with such mundane religions that only program them for more and more births upon this earth. Even their ideas of the afterlife and “heaven” only condition them for more birth and bondage. Degenerate Christianity, especially, with its doctrine of physical resurrection and immortality instills material consciousness in its adherents, condemning them to the wheel of perpetual birth and death. Thinking they are “creatures,” they sink into the quagmire of “creation.” Actually, they impel themselves into the morass, calling it the will of God. As Jesus said: “If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:23) If our “truth” be actually untruth, its blinding—and binding—power is nigh well inescapable.

The realm of realization

“In one’s own soul Brahman is realized clearly, as if seen in a mirror. In the heaven of Brahma also is Brahman realized clearly, as one distinguishes light from darkness. In the world of the fathers he is beheld as in a dream. In the world of angels he appears as if reflected in water.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:5)

First, this verse should put the lie to the absurd claim in contemporary Hinduism that enlightenment is impossible unless the individual is born on earth in a human body. What is the truth is the fact that the highest realm of relativity, the heaven of Brahma (Brahmaloka) is the only one in which the capacity for realizing Brahman is inherent in the form proper to that world. In all other worlds the incarnational form is the bar to such realization, for in the minds of the inhabitants of those worlds Brahman
appears only as a dream or a reflection in water.

The most important fact, though, is the statement that Brahman can be “seen” and experienced in the Self of each one of us—no matter what world we may or may not inhabit. We need not aspire to ascend to any other world, thinking that incarnation there is necessary for our spiritual liberation. Not at all. Whatever world we may be in, whatever form we may find ourselves incarnate in, we can realize Brahman perfectly. Why? Because our Self is one with Brahman. This is why we sometimes read in the lore of India about animals that at their death attained moksha (liberation). It is all in the knowing, the jnana.
Hierarchy of Consciousness

The senses

“The senses have separate origin in their several objects. They may be active, as in the waking state, or they may be inactive, as in sleep. He who knows them to be distinct from the changeless Self grieves no more.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:6)

If a lost person could somehow be lifted up high and see his surroundings from that perspective, he could easily see his way out of his confusion. In the same way, those who are lost in the jungle of the senses can find their way by heeding the wisdom of the upanishads.

Sense experience is just that—the experiences of the senses themselves. The Self witnesses these experiences and thinks that it is really undergoing them and being affected by them. This produces great fear and suffering, what to say of the mountain-high heaps of illusions and delusions those experiences produce—not in the Self, but in the mind. The Self, however, attributes these things to itself and fears and suffers even more. Whether the senses are active or inactive, the potential suffering is ever there. If, however, we can realize that such perceptions are utterly separate from us, from our Self, all fear and sorrow cease forever. But we must realize that truth, not just accept it or act as though it is so. In other words, we must become yogis, for only yogis realize the truth of the Self and the error of the Not-Self.

The hierarchy

“Above the senses is the mind. Above the mind is the intellect. Above the intellect is the ego. Above the ego is the unmanifested seed, the Primal Cause. And verily beyond the unmanifested seed is Brahman, the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:7, 8)

It will be good to do some vocabulary building at this point.

By “senses” is meant the five organs of perception: ear, skin, eye, tongue, and nose. At other times “senses” means the five organs of action: voice, hand, foot, organ of excretion, and the organ of generation. Often the word “senses” really refers to the five sense perceptions.

By “mind” is meant the sensory mind; the perceiving faculty that receives the messages of the senses.

“Intelliect” is the faculty of understanding, of reason—the thinking mind.

The “ego” is the false “I”—egoism or self-conceit. It is also the self-arrogating principle “I” that is projected by the mind rather than the real Self. “Ego” is in manifestation whenever “I” is said or claimed by anything other than the spirit-self.

“The unmanifested seed, the Primal Cause” is Prabhavananda’s translation of two terms: Mahat (Tattwa) and Ayyakta. The Mahat Tattwa, or “Great Principle” is the first evolute from Prakriti. It is the principle of Cosmic Intelligence (Buddhi). The Ayyakta is the Unmanifest, the primal Prakriti, from which all things evolve.

It is necessary for us to be aware of this hierarchy, for the lesser levels can be controlled from the higher levels, thus saving a great deal of time and frustration.

The Supreme, the Source
Beyond all these various levels that are the machinery of the individual and the cosmos is That which is the Supreme, the Source of all. Regarding That, the upanishad continues: “And verily beyond the unmanifested seed is Brahman, the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:8)

The Self and Brahman being one, it is the knowledge of our Self that bestows upon us freedom and immortality.

To know the Self
But how do we know this Self—not merely hear about It or believe in It, but truly know It by direct experience?

“None beholds him with the eyes, for he is without visible form. Yet in the heart is he revealed, through self-control and meditation. Those who know him become immortal.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:9)

What could be simpler? We enter into the heart, into the Chidakasha (not the physical organ called “the heart”) that is at the core of our being. There the Self is revealed to the disciplined meditator. Immortality is the result of such knowing. The upanishad continues with a description of the process that leads to Self-knowledge.

“When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not—then, say the wise, is reached the highest state.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:10)

This is extremely, extremely important. Because of the razzmatazz of the Yoga Carnival that has been rioting on from the last century, nearly everyone thinks that the highest state involves chills and thrills in the form of inner sensory experiences of cataclysmic proportion, including “opening of chakras” and “rising of kundalini.” Notice that the upanishad says nothing like that—nor does the Gita or the Yoga Sutras. What it does tell us is that the pure consciousness that is Reality is experienced “when all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not.” That, and that alone, is the highest state which in time becomes permanent and is itself liberation.

Yoga
Obviously much that is called yoga is not yoga at all. This is brought out by the next verse: “This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga. He who attains it is freed from delusion. In one not freed from delusion this calm is uncertain, unreal: it comes and goes.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:11)

The state of calm, or steadiness (sthiram) in awareness of awareness itself, is yoga. This frees us from delusion because it makes us aware of our true nature as the Self. In those who have not attained perfection this state comes and goes. The upanishad tells us this so we will not be foolish enough to think that experiencing it once or even a few times is enough and wrongly think we are enlightened. (People claim enlightenment on the basis of much less.) We must practice diligently to become permanently established in it.

Although I have told about Lahiri Mahashaya’s teaching on the subject of this state—which he called sthirattwa—in the Gita commentary, I would like to repeat it here. Yogiraj Shyama Charan Lahiri Mahasaya continually expounded the idea that the goal of yoga is to be established in sthirattwa, in perfect tranquility.

“A group of spiritual leaders from Calcutta once conspired against Lahiri Mahasay. They invited him to join in an evening discussion on spiritual matters. Lahiri Mahasay
accepted the invitation and accordingly attended the meeting.

“The conspirators had well prepared themselves to trap Lahiri Mahasay. For example, if Lahiri Mahasay were to express his preference for a particular deity, or Istadev, ‘desired Lord,’ then a particular leader would find exception to that choice.

“In fact, each member of the group selected a particular Devata, ‘deity’ such as Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna, Lord Siva, the Goddess Kali (the Divine Mother) and prepared to debate and challenge Lahiri Mahasay’s choice.

“As soon as Lahiri Mahasay arrived, he was received in the traditional manner and shown proper courtesy. After a while one of the members of the group asked Lahiri Mahasay, ‘Upon which deity do you meditate?’

“Lahiri Mahasay looked at him but did not reply. Then another gentleman asked him, ‘Who is your Istadev, “desired deity?”’ Lahiri Mahasay turned his head towards him and looked at him in the same way, while keeping his peace.

“Finally, a third gentleman asked him, ‘Can you tell us upon which deity usually you meditate?’

“Lahiri Mahasay faced him and said very gently, ‘I meditate on Sthirattva (Tranquility).’

“The gentleman replied that he did not understand what was meant by this. Lahiri Mahasay continued to observe silence. After some time, another gentleman asked him, ‘Could you please explain this? I do not understand exactly what you are saying.’

“Lahiri Mahasay, as before, continued to maintain silence. Another gentleman asked, ‘Can you enlighten me as to what you mean by that? I do not understand at all!’ Lahiri Baba told him, ‘You will not be able to understand, and also I will not be able to make you understand (realize) through words.’

“The group was at a loss. All of their preparation and conniving had come to naught. Only silence prevailed. All kept silent.

“After a long time Lahiri Mahasay got up and silently prepared to leave the meeting. All showed him the traditional courtesy as he left.”

As Paramhansa Yogananda, who made Lahiri Mahasay known in the West, often said: “He who knows, knows–none else knows.”

**How can Brahman be known?**

“Brahman words cannot reveal, mind cannot reach, eyes cannot see. How then, save through those who know him, can he be known?” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:12)

Brahman can only be truly known by direct experience in meditation. This verse is not speaking of that ultimate knowing, but of the “knowing about” Brahman so we can be stimulated to seek Brahman. Empty words and intellectual ponderings cannot bring about this knowing, nor can our mind and senses. But those who know of Brahman—even imperfectly—possess a spiritual power in their presence and in their words which convey an intuitive glimmer of the reality of Brahman. That glimmer, entering into our hearts through contact with them, causes our inmost awareness to awaken, arise, and respond, and seek the full realization of Brahman for ourselves. This is why the company of sadhakas is essential for the questing soul. It is like one candle lighting another.

**The two selves**

“There are two selves, the apparent self and the real Self. Of these it is the real Self, and he alone, who must be felt as truly existing. To the man who has felt him as truly
existing he reveals his innermost nature.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:13)

It is common in Western metaphysical thought to speak of the “lower self” that is not truly the Self, but the lesser aspects of human existence, and the “higher self” that is the real Self. We must distinguish between the two, and this is impossible without enough inner development making possible the intuition of the Self, even if It is not directly known. One who has this intuition, if intelligent, will then begin to seek to know the Self, to become a yogi in some manner. To such a one who perseveres, the Self will be revealed in Its fulness. As Swami Gambhirananda renders the first part of this verse: “The Self is to be realized as existing, and then as It really is.” This realization is what is meant by distinguishing between the unreal and the Real.
From Mortality to Immortality

“Lead me from death to immortality” is part of a prayer at the beginning of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In this final part of the Katha Upanishad we are given practical understanding of the way in which immortality is gained.

“The mortal in whose heart desire is dead becomes immortal. The mortal in whose heart the knots of ignorance are untied becomes immortal. These are the highest truths taught in the scriptures.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:14, 15)

When desire dies, when ignorance drops away, immortality is revealed. Practically speaking, we “become” immortal, but in reality we have always been immortal. Yet, like a millionaire who thinks he is a pauper, our immortality is of little meaning to us until we come to realize and experience it.

Furthermore, the upanishad tells us that in essence this truth is the only spiritual teaching there is—not just “the highest truths” as Prabhavananda renders it. Shankara says that this is the only teaching in all the upanishads, however varying the approaches may be. The aspirant must not lose himself in philosophical byways, including those set forth in mountains of books on Yoga and Vedanta. He must keep his vision clear and focused by understanding that liberation is the only “point” the upanishads ever make.

Attaining immortality

It is easy to tell ourselves to rid ourselves of desire and ignorance, but how is that to be done, especially since we have been in the grip of these two ogres for creation cycles? The upanishad gives us the yogic key to rising above desire and ignorance into immortality:

“Radiating from the lotus of the heart there are a hundred and one nerves. One of these ascends toward the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. If, when a man comes to die, his vital force passes upward and out through this nerve, he attains immortality; but if his vital force passes out through another nerve, he goes to one or another plane of mortal existence and remains subject to birth and death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:16)

It is noteworthy that this comes at the very end of the upanishad. Yogananda used to say: “Yoga is the beginning of the end.” So it is appropriate that after all the philosophical exposition the yoga teaching should be given.

By “heart” is meant the hub—located in the midst of the upper trunk of the body—of subtle passages known as nadis (here translated “nerves”) through which the life force (prana) circulates throughout the gross and subtle bodies, just as the blood circulates from the heart through the veins of the physical body. One hundred of these nadis direct the life force to the life processes of the bodies and are the forces of embodiment. One unique nadi, however, rises directly upward from the heart-hub into the head. (This nadi rises from the heart directly into the head—it is not the passage in the midst of the spine.) If at the time of death the departing spirit leaves through that channel, he gains immortality. But if his consciousness attaches itself to any of the hundred other nadis he will be impelled into the subtle worlds that lead inexorably back to incarnation in relativity.

In every meditation, by intoning Om in time with the breath we activate this channel, causing the life force to spontaneously and effortlessly, flow upward into the
thousand-petalled lotus in the head toward the divine radiance that shines above and upon the upper levels of the brain-lotus. That Divine Light is the essence of Om, the Life-Giving Word, the Pranava. Then at the end of life, having prepared himself by this practice, sitting in meditation the yogi ascends upward from the body into the realm of immortality.

**The Supreme Person**

Who is liberated in this manner? In conclusion to his teaching, Yama tells Nachiketa:

“The Supreme Person, of the size of a thumb, the innermost Self, dwells forever in the heart of all beings. As one draws the pith from a reed, so must the aspirant after truth, with great perseverance, separate the Self from the body. Know the Self to be pure and immortal—yea, pure and immortal!” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:17)

If the Self is seen, immaterial as it is, it will appear as an oval light, in the shape of a human thumb. (The shape is also that of a Shiva Linga, which is a symbol of the Self.) Those who have seen this are unanimous in describing it in the manner of the upanishad. In my early teens I met a Christian minister who described the death of his twin brother. He said that at the moment of death his brother’s mouth opened, and as he exhaled for the final time, a white light shaped like a thumb emerged from his mouth and passed from the room.

It is through meditation, as I have described it, that we daily work on the separation of the Self from the body which will finally occur at the time of death. Not that we leave our body in meditation, but we begin conditioning all our bodies so they will not hold on to us at the final moments. As the fully ripened kernel of a nut pulls away from the shell so that when it is cracked the kernel comes out in full separation, so will it be with our Self in relation to the body. Sri Ramakrishna described it as being like the release of a fish back into the river.

May these final words of Yama echo within us: “Know the Self to be pure and immortal—yea, pure and immortal!”

**Nachiketa—and us**

Now the upanishadic sage gives us a final assurance:

“Nachiketa, having learned from the god this knowledge and the whole process of yoga, was freed from impurities and from death, and was united with Brahman. Thus will it be with another also if he know the innermost Self.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:18)
A Commentary on the Kena Upanishad

The Mover of the Moved

In the world we see a prime duality: cause and effect. Yet, we see no cause for the world itself. Inquiry into its cause naturally arises. The lazy and the cowardly insist there is no cause and pursue their exploitation of the world and its inhabitants. The worthy and the bold, however, seek to know. Many are the theories set forth by profound thinkers. But those who have gone beyond thought into pure knowing have unanimously told us of the cause, and in that insight have also come to perfectly understand the effect—the world and all within it.

The question

The Kena Upanishad opens with a question that is answered in the rest of the upanishad: “At whose behest does the mind think? Who bids the body live? Who makes the tongue speak? Who is that effulgent Being that directs the eye to form and color and the ear to sound?” (Kena Upanishad 1:1) Nikhilananda translation: “By whose will directed does the mind proceed to its object? At whose command does the prana, the foremost, do its duty? At whose will do men utter speech? Who is the god that directs the eyes and ears?”

This is one of the few philosophical questions that really matter, for if we come to the wrong conclusion it will cloud, or even distort, our understanding of life. For example, if we say God, or Nature, or happenstance, we will in essence be saying that we have nothing to do with our existence, that a force far beyond us is making all this occur to us, that we are like seaweed being carried along on the wave of the sea, able to yearn for situations and things but unable to bring anything about. If we are theists we believe that if we somehow do the needful, in response God will give us what we want, but still it will be his doing and beyond our capacity to accomplish or even hold on to once we have it. This view of ourselves as utterly helpless and therefore utterly insignificant in the vast universe will cripple and frustrate us, distorting us profoundly. You Are Nothing becomes the watchword of our life—a life which bears that maxim out. Hopeless and helpless we drift along, controlled by everything that is other than us. This is truly a living hell.

Into this darkness shines the realization embodied in the upanishads, a realization that we will somehow recognize from deep within us, for that realization is ours on the inmost level of our existence. We do not learn the truth—we recognize it.

All right, then: who makes the mind think, the body live, the faculty of speech to manifest, and causes the senses to operate?

The answer

“The Self is ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of speech. He is also breath of
the breath, and eye of the eye. Having given up the false identification of the Self with
the senses and the mind, and knowing the Self to be Brahman, the wise, on departing
this life, become immortal.” (Kena Upanishad 1:2)

The ear, mind, speech, breath, and eye are only instruments, only messengers. The
one who causes them to function, the hearer of hearing, the witness of the mind and
thought, the understander of speech, the source of the breath and the seer of seeing, is
the Atman, the Self. External experience may be illusory, but if we trace the illusion
back and back to the perceiver of perception we will find the reality that is the Self. In a
motion picture we see so many images, so many illusions, but when the picture stops
we see the pure white screen that was behind it all the time, without which no picture
would have been possible. Such is the Self. Knowing the Self to be none other than
Brahman, the Absolute, rebirth is no more.

Swami Prabhavananda has translated the word dhira as “the wise,” but in actuality
dhira means those who are steadfast—in this instance those who are firmly established
in the practice of yoga and in the realization arising from yoga.

Brahman the inexpressible

Brahman is beyond all sensory perception or intellectual comprehension. Yet we
can infer the existence of Brahman by that which It causes to occur, by the
consciousness that does perceive and comprehend. So in conclusion the upanishad
says this, which really needs little comment:

“Him the eye does not see, nor the tongue express, nor the mind grasp. Him we
neither know nor are able to teach.

“Different is he from the known, and different is he from the unknown. So have we
heard from the wise.

“That which cannot be expressed in words but by which the tongue speaks know
that to be Brahman. Brahman is not the being who is worshiped of men.

“That which is not comprehended by the mind but by which the mind
comprehends—know that to be Brahman. Brahman is not the being who is worshiped
of men.

“That which is not seen by the eye but by which the eye sees—know that to be
Brahman. Brahman is not the being who is worshiped of men.

“That which is not heard by the ear but by which the ear hears—know that to be
Brahman. Brahman is not the being who is worshiped of men.

“That which is not drawn by the breath but by which the breath is drawn know
that to be Brahman. Brahman is not the being who is worshiped of men.” (Kena Upanishad
1:3-9)

When the upanishad says that we do not know Brahman, it refers to intellectual
knowledge. Therefore, as it continues, we cannot “teach” Brahman as an intellectual
subject.

When it says that Brahman is different “from the unknown” it is not speaking of
Brahman’s unknowability, but rather that Brahman is not an unknown object that in
time the intellect will come to know.

The most striking part of this passage is the statement that “Brahman is not the
being who is worshiped of men.” This presents two significant points. First, that
Brahman is not an object, but the Eternal Subject, and consequently cannot be
worshiped as an object. Second, “men” cannot relate to Brahman at all, but those that
have passed beyond all relative identity can experience Brahman as their own Self.
Knowing that is Ignorance, and Unknowing That is Knowing

At the beginning

All classical commentators say that in this second part of the Kena Upanishad the first two verses are a dialogue between a teacher and a student, and the remaining three verses are an exposition of the discussion. First, the teacher says to the student:

“If you think that you know well the truth of Brahman, know that you know little. What you think to be Brahman in your self, or what you think to be Brahman in the gods—that is not Brahman. What is indeed the truth of Brahman you must therefore learn.” (Kena Upanishad 2:1)

The student responds:

“I cannot say that I know Brahman fully. Nor can I say that I know him not. He among us knows him best who understands the spirit of the words: “Nor do I know that I know him not.” (Kena Upanishad 2:2)

To help us in this, here is the translation of Swami Gambhirananda:

“[Teacher:] If you think, ‘I have known Brahman well enough,’ then you have known only the very little expression that It has in the human body and the little expression that It has among the gods. Therefore Brahman is still to be deliberated on by you.

“Student:] ‘I think [Brahman] is known. I do not think, “I know [Brahman] well enough;” [i.e. I consider] “Not that I do not know: I know and I do not know as well.” He among us who understands that utterance, “Not that I do not know. I Know and I do not know as well,” knows that [Brahman].’”

That may have only compounded the bewilderment, but we can untangle it with patience. These verses are excellent examples of the difficulty we have when we try to speak the Unspeakable and explain the Unexplainable.

An easy mistake

Brahman is not only everywhere, but actually is all things. (This, too, we cannot exactly comprehend, and to express it simplistically is to make things much worse.) Because of this, it is easy for those who have experienced only a hint of Brahman—even a hint of Which is tremendous—to say: “Now I know Brahman.” But that would be like someone who has seen a cup of seawater saying: “Now I have seen the Sea.” If we do not know Brahman fully, we cannot truly say that we know Brahman at all. Yet, there is a knowing that is beyond the intellect and is both knowing and unknowing in an experiential sense. This is why a medieval mystical English text on the knowledge of God is called The Cloud of Unknowing. When we know Brahman we know that It cannot known in the human sense of knowing. The same concept is held in Eastern Christianity, where it is said that God cannot be seen, but you must see God to realize that He cannot be seen.

Is all this said to confuse and mystify us? No; but it does have the purpose of our giving up the hopeless attempt to comprehend Brahman intellectually.

So the teacher says that to think we know Brahman when we have just glimpsed a hint of Its existence is a mistake. The clever student, however, points out that we can
dimly know something of Brahman. He then points out that when come to truly know Brahman we will understand that we both know and do not know Brahman, that it is foolish to say either, “I know Brahman,” or “I do not know Brahman.” In wisdom, the two go together.

If you still do not get the idea, do not worry. The upanishadic author assumed we might not, so he gives us this verse to clear things up:

“He truly knows Brahman who knows him as beyond knowledge; he who thinks that he knows, knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known, but the wise know him to be beyond knowledge.” (Kena Upanishad 2:3)

**Practical experience**

The knowledge of Brahman is not an intellectual matter, and neither is it incapacitating, despite the common misconception that mystical vision renders us unfit for practical life. So the next verse tells us:

“He who realizes the existence of Brahman behind every activity of his being whether sensing, perceiving, or thinking—he alone gains immortality. Through knowledge of Brahman comes power [virya: strength]. Through knowledge of Brahman comes victory over death [amritatvam: immortality].” (Kena Upanishad 2:4)

To live in unbroken consciousness of God is liberation. Liberation is possible even here in this world, while living in the body. For the upanishad continues:

“Blessed is the man who while he yet lives realizes Brahman. The man who realizes him not suffers his greatest loss. When they depart this life, the wise, who have realized Brahman as the Self in all beings, become immortal.” (Kena Upanishad 2:5)
The Blessed

“Blessed is the man who while he yet lives realizes Brahman. The man who realizes him not suffers his greatest loss. When they depart this life, the wise, who have realized Brahman as the Self in all beings, become immortal.” (Kena Upanishad 2:5)

Swami Nikhilananda renders this verse: “If a man knows Atman here, he then attains the true goal of life. If he does not know It here, a great destruction awaits him. Having realized the Self in every being, the wise relinquish the world and become immortal.”

Here and now

It is affirmed over and over in the upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita that perfect realization and liberation is possible even here in the world. This is one of the glories of Sanatana Dharma. It does not hold out some vague “bye and bye” hope to be realized only after death—a sure trait of fraudulent religion. The truth of the Eternal Religion—including Yoga—can be proven at every moment of our life, just as advances in science, especially in physics and astronomy, reveal the truths intuited by the sages of India thousands of years ago.

We need to hold firmly to the fact that we can overcome ignorance and bondage in this very lifetime, that we need not think it will take many incarnations to come to enlightenment. The Bhagavad Gita, particularly, emphasizes the immediacy of our spiritual potential. “Faith”—another trait of false religion—is not needed, either. Our practice of yoga and the resulting maturation of consciousness will enable us to see, experience, and demonstrate the great truths of the upanishads.

What about doubts? They mean nothing, any more than blind beliefs. In some instances, a negative rejection of truth on the subconscious level masquerades as doubts and can hinder our progress. But honest doubts cannot. I could cite for you many instances in which I not only doubted something, I denied its possibility, but still I came to see for myself the truth of what I had not believed. My practice of yoga kept pushing the frontiers of my insight into areas that I had ignorantly thought were superstition or silly. And my doubt and denial did not delay even for a moment my coming to understand the truth I had disbelieved.

This is why no scripture of India is considered to be the “word of God,” the supreme and final authority. Scriptures, like spiritual teachers, can only point the way, but they cannot definitively state “the truth.” Yet through interior development there is nothing that can elude the yogi in his quest for reality. This is why Krishna speaks of Abhyasa Yoga—the Yoga of Practice—as the foundation for those who wish to really know.

The great loss

“What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36) Those who do not realize God suffer the greatest loss, for they “lose” themselves and God. What, then, is left for them? Nothing. Desolate they wander in the desert of their own barren minds and hearts. Shankara says that the mahati vinashtih, the great destruction, is interminable birth and death in the material world with all its attendant pains, sorrows, and fears.
The great gain

On the other hand, the wise whose consciousness is steadfastly fixed in God, turn away from the world—or more exactly, from the bonds and blandishments of the world—and become immortal (amritam bhavanti) by entering forever into Immortal Brahman.

Blessed are those who live their lives in the perspective of this single verse. Realization and attainment shall be theirs. For them immortality shall be their assured and eternal future.
Approaching Brahman

The Kena Upanishad is quite brief, and now concludes with a story and a short reflection on the story. Here is the story:

**The victory of the gods**

Once the gods won a victory over the demons, and though they had done so only through the power of Brahman, they were exceedingly vain.

They thought to themselves, “It was we who beat our enemies, and the glory is ours.” Brahman saw their vanity and appeared before them. But they did not recognize him.

Then the other gods said to the god of fire: “Fire, find out for us who this mysterious spirit is.” “Yes,” said the god of fire, and approached the spirit.

The spirit said to him: “Who are you?” “I am the god of fire. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known.”

“And what power do you wield?” “I can burn anything on earth.”

“Burn this,” said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The god of fire fell upon it with all his might, but could not consume it. So he ran back to the other gods, and said: “I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is.”

Then said the other gods to the god of wind: “Wind, do you find out for us who he is.” “Yes,” said the god of wind, and approached the spirit.

The spirit said to him: “Who are you?” “I am the god of wind. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known. I fly swiftly through the heavens.”

“And what power do you wield?” “I can blow away anything on earth.”

“Blow this away,” said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The god of wind fell upon it with all his might, but was unable to move it. So he ran back to the other gods, and said: “I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is.”

Then said the other gods to Indra, greatest of them all: “O respected one, find out for us, we pray you, who he is.” “Yes,” said Indra, and drew nigh to the spirit. But the spirit vanished,

And in his place stood Uma, God the Mother, well adorned and of exceeding beauty. Beholding her, Indra asked: “Who was the spirit that appeared to us?”

“That,” answered Uma, “was Brahman. Through him it was, not of yourselves, that you attained your victory and your glory.” Thus did Indra, and the god of fire, and the god of wind, come to recognize Brahman. (Kena Upanishad 3:1-4:1)

**The Divine Power**

This is a very straightforward account. The “gods” are mostly the intelligent faculties of the individual human being. The “doctrinal” element is very simple: the senses and mind cannot comprehend Brahman, but Its truth can be revealed by the Divine Feminine aspect of God, Mahashakti or Adishakti, the Great, Primal Power that is the dynamic aspect of Brahman, the Prakriti–Divine Creative Energy–that is inseparable from Purusha–the Supreme Spirit. God the Father is Unmoving Consciousness, whereas God the Mother is Moving Consciousness. The entire field of creation is Mother, the Father being the Transcendental Witness of Her manifestations. The Mother is the Divine Ladder which we ascend to the Bosom of the
Father (John 1:18).

Prakriti proceeds from Purusha, the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father” according to the Nicene Creed of Christianity.

The fundamental idea of the “dance” of the Creative Energy before the “face” of the Supreme Spirit is found in the book of Proverbs where she speaks of herself, saying:

“The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made any thing from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived. Neither had the fountains of waters as yet sprung out: The mountains with their huge bulk had not as yet been established: before the hills I was brought forth: He had not yet made the earth, nor the rivers, nor the poles of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was present: when with a certain law and compass he enclosed the depths: When he established the sky above, and poised the fountains of waters: When he compassed the sea with its bounds, and set a law to the waters that they should not pass their limits: when he balanced the foundations of the earth; I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; playing in the world.” (Proverbs 8:22-31) The Divine Mother dances the dance of creation before the witnessing Lord.

Although Prabhavananda used the expression “Uma, God the Mother,” the Sanskrit phrase is Uma Haimavatim. Uma in Indian history, was the daughter of King Himalaya, and so was called Himavati. She was considered a manifestation (avatara) of the Divine Mother aspect of God. Uma is a name often given the Divine Power. But Shankara has a different, and interesting interpretation of Haimavatim. He say it means “one who was as though attired in dress of gold.”

This is most intriguing, because in the Bible we have similar imagery of the Divine Mother, the Queen—sometimes called “the King’s Daughter” because She emanates from the King—being dressed in gold. David wrote: “Upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir.” (Psalms 45:9) And a few verses later: “The king’s daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold.” (Psalms 45:13)

In the book of Revelation we find: “There appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun.” (Revelation 12:1) In this instance the “gold” is the light of the sun.

The elements

“The god of fire, the god of wind, and Indra—these excelled the other gods, for they approached nearest to Brahman and were the first to recognize him.” (Kena Upanishad 4:2)

As said above, in this upanishadic story, the “gods” are mostly the intelligent faculties of the individual human being. However, Agni, Vayu, and Indra are representative of the primeval Elements fire, air, and ether. These are “closer” to the Self, to Brahman, than are the earth and water elements, whose faculties are smell and taste. The faculties of fire, air, and ether respectively are sight, touch, and sound. In meditation we see light of various colors, experience sensations that are the inner modes of touch, and in our silent japa of Om hear the inner mental sound. These are three revealers of the presence of the Self/Brahman. However:

“But of all gods Indra is supreme, for he approached nearest of the three to Brahman and was the first of the three to recognize him.” (Kena Upanishad 4:3) The etheric body is the nearest to the Self, and its faculty of sound is that which unites our consciousness with Brahman. Thus etheric sound is the supreme “god” by which we
“recognize”–perceive–Spirit.

Brahman in all

Brahman and Shakti (Power) are in reality one. Sri Ramakrishna often used the simile of fire and its power to burn. Fire is the Purusha and the burning power is the Prakriti. It is not amiss to say that Prakriti is the Effect of the presence of Brahman—is Brahman Itself. The upanishad recapitulates this, saying:

“This is the truth of Brahman in relation to nature: whether in the flash of the lightning, or in the wink of the eyes, the power that is shown is the power of Brahman. This is the truth of Brahman in relation to man: in the motions of the mind, the power that is shown is the power of Brahman. For this reason should a man meditate upon Brahman by day and by night.” (Kena Upanishad 4:4, 5)

Wherefore: “Brahman is the adorable being in all beings. Meditate upon him as such. He who meditates upon him as such is honored by all other beings.” (Kena Upanishad 4:6)

It is the presence of Brahman which draws us to seek after or value an object. As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says:

“It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the children, my beloved, that the children are dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of wealth, my beloved, that wealth is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the Brahmins, my beloved, that the Brahmins are held in reverence, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the Kshatriyas, my beloved, that the Kshatriyas are held in honor, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the higher worlds, my beloved, that the higher worlds are desired, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the gods, my beloved, that the gods are worshiped, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the creatures, my beloved, that the creatures are prized, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4.5)

The proof of this is the fact that when we successfully meditate on Brahman other sentient beings will sense the presence of Brahman in us and value us accordingly.

It is now up to us

The teaching is wonderful, but it is not enough. The student of the upanishadic sage intuits this, but comes to a wrong conclusion, asking: “Sir, teach me more of the knowledge of Brahman.” But the teacher responds: “I have told you the secret knowledge.” (Kena Upanishad 4:7) Naturally, the student will assume—as would we—that the “secret knowledge” is the philosophy about Brahman, etc. Therefore the teacher continues:

“Austerity, self-control, performance of duty without attachment–these are the body...
of that knowledge. The Vedas are its limbs. Truth is its very soul.” (Kena Upanishad 4:8)

The importance of this perspective simply cannot be exaggerated. The Secret Knowledge is not philosophic formulations: It is practice—what Krishna calls Abhyasa Yoga, the Yoga of Practice. The Vedas are only its adjuncts. Truth is at its heart to be realized by the practitioners. Tapasya, self-mastery, and karma yoga form the body of the secret knowledge. There are no effects without a cause. These three “cause” the knowing of Brahman. about which the sage concludes:

“He who attains to knowledge of Brahman, being freed from all evil, finds the Eternal, the Supreme.” (Kena Upanishad 4:9)
A Commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad

The Shabda Brahman: Om

Om is a principal subject in the eleven major upanishads, but the entire Mandukya Upanishad is dedicated to an explanation of Its meaning for the sadhaka. It wastes no time, but starts right at the pinnacle, saying: “The syllable OM, which is the imperishable Brahman, is the universe. Whatsoever has existed, whatsoever exists, whatsoever shall exist hereafter, is OM. And whatsoever transcends past, present, and future, that also is OM.” (Mandukya Upanishad 1)

This is so vast, and yet at the same time so simple, that it renders comment impossible and unnecessary. The essential point is the infinity of Om, because It is the infinite Brahman.

The four aspects of the Self

“All this that we see without is Brahman. This Self that is within is Brahman. This Self, which is one with OM, has three aspects, and beyond these three, different from them and indefinable—The Fourth.” (Mandukya Upanishad 2) The three aspects of those within relativity are waking, dreaming sleep, and dreamless sleep. Beyond these three is the pure consciousness itself known as turiya. This fourth state is the sole state of the liberated consciousness. Even if a liberated being reenters into relative existence for the upliftment of those still caught in that net, he remains consciously centered in turiya and experiences the three lower states only peripherally. When the turiya level overwhelms such a one we say he has “gone into samadhi,” but in actuality he has simply become absorbed in his continual state, having momentarily dropped the flimsy dreams of relative existence which we think are so real and binding. I have heard more than one disciple tell of their having to hold Yogananda up and help him walk when toward the end of his earthly time he was continually flying upward into his true state. Often he would see his body moving along far below, as though he were soaring high in the sky.

“As above, so below” is a fundamental truth of the cosmos. What can be said of the macrocosm can also be said of the microcosm. And since the Infinite and the finite are essentially one, the upanishad now begins analyzing the three levels of the Cosmic Man.

Vaiswanara

“The first aspect of the Self is the universal person, the collective symbol of created beings, in his physical nature—Vaiswanara. Vaiswanara is awake, and is conscious only of external objects. He has seven members. The heavens are his head, the sun his eyes, air his breath, fire his heart, water his belly, earth his feet, and space his body. He has nineteen instruments of knowledge: five organs of sense, five organs of action,
five functions of the breath, together with mind, intellect, heart, and ego. He is the enjoyer of the pleasures of sense.” (Mandukya Upanishad 3) This is an extremely explanatory translation, but all correct. The last statement: “He is the enjoyer of the pleasures of sense” should really be: “He is the experiencer of material things.” Other than that, all is well, the idea being that God encompasses all perceptible being.

Taijasa
“The second aspect of the Self is the universal person in his mental nature–Taijasa. Taijasa has seven members and nineteen instruments of knowledge. He is dreaming, and is conscious only of his dreams. In this state he is the enjoyer of the subtle impressions in his mind of the deeds he has done in the past.” (Mandukya Upanishad 4) Subconsciousness is the springboard from which all present action stems. We speak of karma and samskara, the deeds of past lives and their effects, as producing all that we now experience. Actually the field of the subconscious is sown with the seeds of the past that are destined to germinate and manifest on the Vaiswanara level. So to separate Taijasa and Vaiswanara is impossible. They are really only two aspects of a single thing. Further, there is a third aspect through which the unity of consciousness manifests itself: Prajna.

Prajna
“The third aspect of the Self is the universal person in dreamless sleep–Prajna. Prajna dreams not. He is without desire. As the darkness of night covers the day, and the visible world seems to disappear, so in dreamless sleep the veil of unconsciousness envelops his thought and knowledge, and the subtle impressions of his mind apparently vanish. Since he experiences neither strife nor anxiety, he is said to be blissful, and the experiencer of bliss.” (Mandukya Upanishad 5) Gambhirananda’s translation brings out some more aspects of this: “That state is deep sleep where the sleeper does not desire any enjoyable thing and does not see any dream. The third quarter is Prajna who has deep sleep as his sphere, in whom everything becomes undifferentiated, who is a mass of mere consciousness, who abounds in bliss, who is surely an enjoyer of bliss, and who is the doorway to the experience [of the dream and waking states].”

What we have here is a picture of the third layer of experience that underlies the conscious and subconscious levels of the mind. Not only is this layer undifferentiated because it is the raw material out of which the other two emerge, it is also the level of assimilation in which the changes of the two resolve back into their basic constituents. Therefore: “Prajna is the lord of all. He knows all things. He is the dweller in the hearts of all. He is the origin of all. He is the end of all.” (Mandukya Upanishad 6) This is all true, and is a very exact description of our own personal level of prajna as well as the universal Prajna. This verse really sounds like a eulogistic definition of God in ordinary theistic religion. But Sanatana Dharma is not ordinary religion, so it goes much further, far beyond the vistas of “the world’s religions”–a kind of Freudian slip in its way, indicating that they spring from the world, from world-based consciousness. Rather the upanishad tells us of a fourth level of Being.

Turiya: The Self
“The Fourth, say the wise, is not subjective experience, nor objective experience, nor experience intermediate between these two, nor is it a negative condition which is
neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. It is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression, is The Fourth. It is pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the supreme good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone!” (Mandukya Upanishad 7) This is rather a huge lump for the intelligence to chew, swallow, and assimilate, because it mostly consists of what the mysterious Fourth—the Turiya—is not.

Proof

There is one point that for some reason is omitted (ignored) by Prabhavananda and other translators. In this verse the Self is said to be eka atma pratyaya saram. Some translators have rendered it to mean that the Turiya is the essence, the sole factor, of the Self. And of course this is the truth. But Shankara says something quite interesting. He says this phrase means that the proof or evidence of this Fourth is the very belief in its existence! What he means is that when the deep conviction arises from within the consciousness that the Turiya exists it is not a matter of reason—for reason stops at the stage of verse six. Rather, it is a manifestation of the Self as well as the dawning in the individual’s awareness of the Turiya’s reality. It is a kind of primary or preliminary vision of the Self, and not at all a matter of the intellect (buddhi). Obviously, then, the truth about Turiya cannot really be taught to anyone—it has to arise own its own as a result of the individual drawing near to the Self. It is a matter of spiritual evolution alone.

And here is the essence of the essence of subject: “It is the Self. Know it alone!”

Om

The upanishad is not dispensing mere theory to us, but knowledge meant to be put into practice and proven by that practice. So it continues: “This Self, beyond all words, is the syllable OM. This syllable, though indivisible, consists of three letters—A-U-M.” (Mandukya Upanishad 8)

The Self, the Atman, is Om! If we knew only this fact and none other, we would possess the key to liberation. All the philosophy in the world, however profound or true, means absolutely nothing unless we can experience the truth and be freed from the effects of ignorance: karma and rebirth. Om is the means of experience and freedom.

Om is also considered to be formed of the three letters a, u, and m, which represent the three states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep respectively, as well as the physical, astral, and causal levels of existence. In Sanskrit, when a and u are combined they produce the sound of o. However, this only applies to verbal speech. In mental “speaking” we make the pure sound of o, not a and u together. So inwardly Om is only two letters, not three. Nevertheless, the upanishad is considering the three-letter form because Om contains within Itself the three states of conscious that have been discussed, and Om is the way to access and unify the three.

“Vaiswanara, the Self as the universal person in his physical being, corresponds to the first letter—A. Whosoever knows Vaiswanara obtains what he desires, and becomes the first among men.” (Mandukya Upanishad 9) He who masters the waking state through the japa and meditation of Om also masters the material world and becomes himself a master among men—not of men, but among men, for sages have no wish to
control others though they gladly tell us how to control ourselves. The desires of such masters are fulfilled because they are intimately connected with the very essence of creation and whatever they think can be realized. This is how they work miracles, even creating things if needed.

“Taijasa, the Self as the universal person in his mental being, corresponds to the second letter—U. Taijasa and the letter U both stand in dream, between waking and sleeping. Whosoever knows Taijasa grows in wisdom, and is highly honored.” (Mandukya Upanishad 10) Sanskrit is capable of more than one interpretation, and this verse can also say two very interesting things: 1) Such a master increases the knowledge of humanity and even gives inner momentum to assist questing souls to access knowledge, and 2) he becomes one with all human beings in the sense that when they meet him they feel that his is one with them—one of them—and they are so attuned and comfortable with him that they feel he is virtually their own self. This is seen in the great saints. Whether a beggar or a king approaches them, they feel that they are their dear and their own. I saw and experienced this for myself with Swami Sivananda. His greatness was cosmic; he was a virtual god upon the earth; and yet, I felt so at ease with him—even though I was always in awe of him. How many times I have sat looking at his radiant countenance and thought: “If there is anyone in this world who loves me, it is this man.” Of course he was “man” only in form. Within he was the divine Self. Yet he was so accessible and so easy to communicate with. He was as close to me as my Self—for he was one with That Which is my Self.

It is important for us in the West to understand this aspect of holy people because we are so brainwashed with the idea of power and control and much more impressed with the power to curse than the power to bless. Rebuke, curse, deprecate, punish, torment, and destroy—these are the “ways” of the Western “God” who fortunately is a blasphemy and not a reality. No wonder Jesus said: “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” (Matthew 7:22, 23)

Om is the key to the subconscious, just as it is to the conscious, so through Om the master yogi knows all about himself and has no illusions about himself. He also knows all about others and understands them. No one can fool him. I saw this in Sivananda, as well. He was always so kind, and often humorous, but he went right to the truth of things in relation to people’s foibles.

“Prajna, the Self as the universal person in dreamless sleep, corresponds to the third letter—M. He is the origin and the end of all. Whosoever knows Prajna knows all things.” (Mandukya Upanishad 11) Being one with the source and the ultimate goal of all, a self-realized being is omniscient because he ever dwells at the core of all—past, present, and future.

In conclusion

Having said all these amazing things, the upanishad brings us back to the heart of it all: Om.

“The Fourth, the Self, is OM, the indivisible syllable. This syllable is unutterable, and beyond mind. In it the manifold universe disappears. It is the supreme good—One without a second. Whosoever knows OM, the Self, becomes the Self.” (Mandukya Upanishad 12) Gambhirananda: “The partless Om is Turiya—beyond all conventional dealings, the limit of the negation of the phenomenal world, the auspicious, and the
non-dual. Om is thus the Self to be sure. He who knows thus enters the Self through his Self.”

*The partless Om.* In its attempt to convey to our human intellects a bit of the glory of Om, the upanishad has considered It as having four aspects or “parts,” but in reality It is without parts, being absolutely unitary in Its nature. So the upanishad reminds us of this lest we mistake its intent and meaning. Just as we sometimes have to speak inaccurately to children to get our ideas across, so has the upanishad done with us. But now it corrects any wrong impression we may have gotten.

*Beyond all conventional dealings.* Swami Nikhilananda renders this: “without relationship,” meaning that we cannot “deal” with God as we do with a material object or another human being. Nor can it be spoken about as It really is, for It lies beyond phenomena—although It is the source of phenomena. We cannot “relate” to God, but we can know our oneness with God when we ourselves pass beyond all dual relationships.

*The limit of the negation of the phenomenal world.* We must realize that the Self is absolutely like nothing we know in relative existence, and therefore It is beyond the reach of any words. That is the intellectual side of the situation. On the metaphysical side we have to negate all “things” from our consciousness that we find in the phenomenal world.

*The auspicious.* Lest we think this is a losing or a giving up of something worthwhile, the upanishad tells us that the Self is the truly auspicious, the truly fortunate, and producing good fortune. We really only give up and negate a mirage in exchange for The Real.

*The non-dual.* The Real being non-dual, we discover that It is us! So we not only gain everything, we experience it as being us. We recognize ourselves as truly being “the kingdom, the power, and the glory.”

*Om is thus the Self to be sure.* Om reveals the truth of what the upanishad is telling us. Om is not a symbol or designator of the Self, It IS the Self. This can be known.

*He who knows thus enters the Self through his Self.* We enter into our true Being through the japa and meditation of Om—which is our eternal Self. There is no greater or higher knowledge than the knowledge of Om. And now the upanishad has given us that knowledge.
A Commentary on the Mundaka Upanishad

Knowing the ALL

It is an interesting trait of the Western mind that it wants encapsulations of things, lists of “essentials,” advice on “shortcuts,” and “what is the one thing?...” in every department of life and thought. Whether this is a desire for efficiency or a form of intellectual minimalism or outright laziness is hard to say–chances are it varies from person to person. Nevertheless, “getting to the heart of the matter” is something dear to the heart of Americans, especially. They are not alone in this attitude. The upanishads reflect the same mentality. Perhaps that is why Vivekananda considered the West, and America particularly, as being more suited to the teachings of Vedanta—the upanishads—than the contemporary East.

In the first section of the Mundaka Upanishad we find the highest expression of this attitude:

“Out of the infinite ocean of existence arose Brahma, first-born and foremost among the gods. From him sprang the universe, and he became its protector. The knowledge of Brahman, the foundation of all knowledge, he revealed to his first-born son, Atharva.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:1)

A pre-creation story

According to Indian texts, at the beginning of the present creation cycle Brahma, that person who was destined to be the creator/projector of the three worlds, awoke to find himself in infinite, empty space. At first he felt fear, but then he laughed at his foolishness, for there was no one there but him. Who would he fear? Then he pondered his situation, attempting to comprehend it. At one point a great voice resounded all around him, saying a single word: “Tapa”—meaning “do tapasya.” This awakened Brahma’s memory of yoga meditation, so he began to meditate. After some time he attained full memory of his past as well as the knowledge of how to create the worlds—which he did. He also became established in direct perception of Brahman.

Among his “children” brought forth through his meditation, was Atharva, to whom he taught the way to realize Brahman. “In turn Atharva taught this same knowledge of Brahman to Angi. Angi, again, taught it to Satyabaha, who revealed it to Angiras.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:2)

The essence of knowledge

“To Angiras came upon a time Sounaka, the famous householder, and asked respectfully: ‘Holy sir, what is that by which all else is known?’” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:3)

We have already been told that the knowledge of Brahman, Brahmavidya, is the foundation of all knowledge. But Sounaka has a very salutary impatience and ambition.
He wants to know what is the one thing which, being known, causes all to be known. This is both a wise quest and a wise attitude. Little Red Riding Hood ended up in the wolf’s stomach because she dawdled on the way instead of going straight to her destination. If we look at the history of religions we will find that the countries which produce the most enlightened persons are those countries which have produced empires. For when such people turn to spiritual life they go after the loftiest spiritual attainments—they become imperialists of the spirit! They seek out the most direct way…and go there. Sounaka is one of them—and hopefully so are we. Knowledge is the subject of the question, so Angiras lays a foundation for his answer.

“Those who know Brahman,” replied Angiras, “say that there are two kinds of knowledge, the higher and the lower.

“The lower is knowledge of the Vedas (the Rik, the Sama, the Yajur, and the Atharva), and also of phonetics, ceremonials, grammar, etymology, metre, and astronomy. The higher is knowledge of that by which one knows the changeless reality.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:4-5)

Analysis of knowledge

Now we should look at this very carefully. First of all, who do we believe? When I first emerged from the deadly cocoon of fundamentalist Protestantism my intellectual world was quite simple—simplistic, actually. Fortunately I first read the Bhagavad Gita and then *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The next step was to get out of my deadly environment, so within a few months I was on the plane to California and wider horizons.

But I discovered in a short time that wider horizons can have a drawback. I began encountering just about every shade of philosophical and religious thought and attitude, most of them incompatible with each other. Almost daily I was told conflicting things, and always with the utmost confidence. As someone once said: “The problem with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along.” I loved being in the wide-open mental spaces of California (and I still do), but which way should I go? Who could—or should—I trust? Since I had been shaken out of my spiritual entombment by learning of the yoga tradition I wisely followed the principle that only those who know God really know anything. So I sought out the teachings of illumined yogis of past and present, discarding those inauspicious Indian teachers who claimed to have a new revelation for a new age, and only paying attention to those who were right in the center of the Eternal Dharma. (Once somebody asked me what a great yogi’s “distinctive teachings” were. “None!” I replied with satisfaction. “If he taught anything ‘new’ I would have nothing to do with him. Truth is eternal.”) I appreciated it if the English was good (and equally if the book was free from typos), and expressed in a way that someone in the twentieth century like myself could comprehend, but I wanted to know what all the great yogis throughout history knew: the tried and proven way to God.

My great blessing was being able to trek many times to the Vedanta Bookshop in Hollywood. There I found an abundance of eternal wisdom, the same wisdom that had been flowing in a life-giving stream for countless ages—like the holy Ganga. The Ganga that emerges at Gangotri high in the Himalayas is the same Ganga that flows into the ocean at Gangasagar. In the same way I found on the shelves of that little shop the same Sanatana Dharma spoken by the primeval sages of India. A little further east in Hollywood at the Self-Realization Fellowship I listened every Sunday to an ideal
preparation of both the philosophy and spiritual practice of Eternal India. All this
prepared me for India where, as a friend of ours once said about the same pilgrimage,
"I got the idea." And have treasured it ever since.

So those who know Brahman "say that there are two kinds of knowledge, the
higher and the lower." The lower, they say, is the knowledge of scriptures, ritual,
philosophic, expression and suchlike–including, by the way, astrology. Please note that
they do not denounce these things as useless or as ignorance. They are definitely said
to be knowledge, and a sensible person appreciates and learns them to a reasonable
and practical degree. But it must be understood that the essential, "the higher is
knowledge of that by which one knows the changeless reality"–Brahman. The
knowledge which enables us to know is to be sought for and prized above all else.
While writing this previous sentence I could clearly hear in memory the recorded
voice of Yogananda saying: "I walked my feet off from Cape Cormorin to the
Himalayas" in search of the knowledge that would reveal God to him.

The lesser knowledge tells us only of that which changes, including our own short
physical life. But the higher knowledge brings us to the Changeless Reality. "By this is
fully revealed to the wise that which transcends the senses, which is uncaused, which
is indefinable, which has neither eyes nor ears, neither hands nor feet, which is all-
pervading, subtler than the subtlest–the everlasting, the source of all." (Mundaka
Upanishad 1:1:6) The Absolute Consciousness, the Totality of Being, is shown to the
wise—to the yogis—by this knowledge.

And the world?

What about this world in which we find ourselves? Is it to be despised as worthless
and antithetical to Brahman, our Goal? Lest we think such a foolish thing Angiras
further says: "As the web comes out of the spider and is withdrawn, as plants grow
from the soil and hair from the body of man, so springs the universe from the eternal
Brahman." (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:7)

The world, then, is an extension or emanation of Brahman. In other words, the
world IS Brahman. We are living and moving in divinity manifesting as the world. Why,
then, do we say that the world is illusory? It is the world in our mind—our perception,
our interpretation, of the world—that is an illusion, not the world itself. In Indian texts
we continually find the simile of the snake in a rope or a man in tree. That is, in
darkness we see a rope lying on the ground and immediately "see" a snake lying
there—we see the glitter of its eyes and may even hear it hiss! Yet, when light is
brought we see only a rope. The rope was always real, was always there. The snake
was an illusion that existed only in our mind. In the same way, walking in the darkness
we may see a dead tree and mistake it for a human being, taking its branches for arms.
We may even see the “arms” move and think we see a face looking at us. But when we
come closer we see it is only a tree—and a dead one, at that. The tree was real, but the
man was not. Illusion is always a mental phenomenon, never a real or objective thing.
So it is illusion and ignorance we must decry, but never find fault with the world; for
the world is Brahman.

In both instances, rope and tree, we may experience great fear. But the moment we
see them for what they really are, our fear evaporates and we are at peace. This is how
it is with us and this world. Our illusions fill us with terrible fears and anxieties, all of
which will be dispelled when we see its actual nature as Brahman. No wonder, then,
that Krishna told Arjuna: “Even a little of this dharma delivers you from great
fear.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:40)

**The chain of causation**

The sage now gives us an outline of the process of the emanation of the world from Brahman.

“Brahman willed that it should be so, and brought forth out of himself the material cause of the universe; from this came the primal energy, and from the primal energy mind, from mind the subtle elements, from the subtle elements the many worlds, and from the acts performed by beings in the many worlds the chain of cause and effect—the reward and punishment of works.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:8)

Creation is also spoken of as expansions from Brahman, and that is the mode here. Brahman first expands as primordial matter, than as primordial energy. From this comes the intelligence inherent in creation, then the elements, and the various worlds in which they predominate. The final ingredient, though, comes from the sentient beings within the universe: karma. God supplies the stage and we supply the actions and reactions which unfold upon the stage.

“Brahman sees all, knows all; he is knowledge itself. Of him are born cosmic intelligence, name, form, and the material cause of all created beings and things.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:1:9) No wonder, then, that in the Gita, that great digest of the upanishads, we find the words: “Brahman is the ritual, Brahman is the offering, Brahman is he who offers to the fire that is Brahman. If a man sees Brahman in every action, He will find Brahman.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:24)

Seeing is freeing.
Delusion and Ignorance

We usually think of delusion and ignorance in terms of “ordinary” life and its situations. Those who are more occupied with “spiritual” matters assume that they are beyond such, but Angiras thinks differently, and so should we.

“Finite and transient are the fruits of sacrificial rites. The deluded, who regard them as the highest good, remain subject to birth and death.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:7. Swami Prabhavananda has omitted verses 1 to 6 of this section as they enumerate various technical aspects of Vedic sacrifices. Verse seven begins the philosophical exposition of the external rites.) Swami Nikhilananda translates a bit more literally: “Frail indeed are those rafts of sacrifices, therefore they are destructible. Fools who rejoice in them as the Highest Good fall victims again and again to old age and death.” “Back they must turn to the mortal pathway, subject still to birth and to dying,” (Bhagavad Gita 9:3) says the Gita on the same subject.

Karma and religion

I think just about everybody puts karma into two lumps: Good Karma and Bad Karma. But that is not very satisfactory. Karma, like all of life, has many nuances and can vary greatly. Some karma, for example, creates more karma, and some actually dissolves karma. For example, Sri Ramakrishna said that all spiritual practices are part of Karma Yoga, but they deliver us from karma. There are material, mental, and spiritual karmas. The material and mental karmas impel us to more of the same, whether good or bad. But spiritual karma enables us to rise above the material and mental planes and free ourselves from karmic bondage.

Angiras wants us to understand that religious karma is not always spiritual. This should not surprise us when we can readily see that most religion is based on material goals. “Stuff” and “happiness” just about sums up the motives of all the religions of the world, including that of modern India. As a result, most religious acts culminate in more mental and psychological involvement, not freedom. In the verses omitted by Swami Prabhavananda it is pointed out that most religion creates karma that takes us to heaven–and then dumps us back on earth when our “merit” is used up. So we end back where we started. What a gyp.

Just because a religious act is either directed toward God or offered to God does not mean it will ultimately lead to God. Usually it leads us away from God into the labyrinth of relative existence in some form or other. Since most people have been cultivating a taste for earthly things through life after life, this suits them. But it should gall us, and we should refuse the pursuit and get off the merry-go-round.

Great suffering

So there are aspects of religion we should avoid adamantly. Otherwise: “Living in the abyss of ignorance, yet wise in their own conceit, the deluded go round and round, like the blind led by the blind.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:8) “They be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch,” (Matthew 15:14) said Jesus, surely having this verse in mind.

Swami Gambhirananda’s translation points out a sad aspect of all this: “Remaining within the fold of ignorance, and thinking, ‘We are ourselves wise and learned,’ the
fools, while being buffeted very much, ramble about like the blind led by the blind alone.” Buffeted very much. (“Being afflicted by many ills” is the translation of Swami Nikhilananda.) How true. Promising others the cessation of all troubles and sorrows, these religious mountebanks are more afflicted than ordinary people. Whether this is from the negative karma accruing from their dishonesty or a manifestation of their own inner diseases, the result is the same. “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption,” (II Peter 2:19) as Saint Peter put it.

You have better ways to spend your time, so I will not recount to you the observations of over sixty years in which I have seen such hucksters and their dupes literally undergoing “the sufferings of the damned.” And all the while they denounce those taking another path as “deluded” and “of the devil.” Well, as Jesus said: “They have their reward.” (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16) And they must like it, for they certainly cling to it.

Such is the grave danger of externalized religion.

Great delusion

As I say, they love and cling to their miserable condition. As the upanishad continues: “Living in the abyss of ignorance, the deluded think themselves blest. Attached to works, they know not God. Works lead them only to heaven, whence, to their sorrow, their rewards quickly exhausted, they are flung back to earth.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:9)

Then the heart of the matter is revealed in the next verse: “Considering religion to be observance of rituals and performance of acts of charity, the deluded remain ignorant of the highest good. Having enjoyed in heaven the reward of their good works, they enter again into the world of mortals.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:10)

Rituals of worship and good deeds certainly produce good karma, but that is not the force that lifts us above samsara, the ever-turning wheel of birth and death. If our religion consists only of outer observances it will condition our consciousness even more to identify with the material level of existence. And that identification will be a round-trip ticket for our return to another birth after another death!

Even helping others is spiritually valueless if it is not done with a wider, spiritual perspective. One of the hallmarks of today’s ineffectual religion is its obsessive involvement in social action and reform. When we look at the lives of saints we see they were the most generous of people, even sacrificing themselves for others. But they did these things not as their religion, but as an expression of their love for God and His children—which is the true religion.

We must not “remain ignorant of the highest good,” but must seek that Highest Good within through meditation and the cultivation of spiritual consciousness even outside meditation. Unless we do this we will find ourselves shuttled right back to earth on completion of our good “heaven karma.”
Wisdom and Truth

The wise

No one likes to be thought stupid, and all like to be thought intelligent. Even better is it to be thought wise. Of course, in all ages there have been the fools that preferred to be “cool” or “sharp” or “neat” or such idiotic expressions. The sad thing is that the vast majority want to be thought of as smart or wise, but only a small percentage care whether they really are smart or wise. The upanishad is meant for these latter people, so the sage continues: “But wise, self-controlled, and tranquil souls, who are contented in spirit, and who practice austerity and meditation in solitude and silence, are freed from all impurity, and attain by the path of liberation to the immortal, the truly existing, the changeless Self.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:11)

Let us look at the traits of the wise. They are disciplined, and so are self-controlled. As a result of their discipline they have become peaceful. Intent on spiritual development, giving priority to the spirit, they have become contented—for outside the spirit there is no peace or tranquility. This means that they are harmonious and balanced, as well. They continually engage in those disciplines which purify them, and by being so purified they are capable of becoming adept in meditation. As a result of these qualities they are firmly on the path to liberation, and shall without doubt attain to the Self which is the only truly existing thing, changeless and sure from eternity.

Some adjectives

Now a look at some Sanskrit terms will be helpful to us. The wise are said to be aranye–living in the forest. At the time of the Gita, many serious sadhakas lived on the outskirts of towns, preferring to live in the wooded areas where neighbors would not be visible, even if somewhat near. This ideal is found twice in the Gita: “Turn all your thought toward solitude, spurning the noise of the crowd, its fruitless commotion.” (Bhagavad Gita 13:10) And: “When a man seeks solitude,…ever engaged in his meditation on Brahman,…that man is ready for oneness with Brahman.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:52, 53) It is not a matter of surrounding vegetation, but the inward withdrawal from outer association that is being praised here. Even in a crowded city we can live in “the forest” of inner solitude. In the thirteenth chapter of Autobiography of a Yogi, the master yogi, Ram Gopal Muzumdar, asked Yogananda: “Are you able to have a little room where you can close the door and be alone?” When he said that he did have such a room, the saint told him: “That is your cave. That is your sacred mountain. That is where you will find the kingdom of God.” Though that is so, still the aspiring yogi should be extremely sparing of social contacts, and then only with those who benefit him spiritually.

The first words of this verse in Sanskrit describe the wise as tapahshraddhe—an interesting fusion of tapasya and shraddha—ascetic discipline and faith—shraddha in this instance meaning aspiration more than faith. Many people engage in spiritual practice for the wrong reasons, but the right one is a confidence in one’s ability to attain self-realization. Tapah literally means to generate heat, so tapahshraddha can also mean heat-generating faith or aspiration, that which heats us up, builds the proverbial fire under us, gets us moving and keeps us moving. Tapasya is the energy generator of the wise directed by their assurance that the Goal exists and is within grasp.
Tapahshraddha is the radiance (tejas) that fills the proficient yogi. In the Chandogya Upanishad, when a young man returns from a long period of tapasya, his teacher said to him: “My son, your face shines like one who knows Brahman.” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:14:2) This is the effect of tapahshraddha.

The wise are *vidvamsah*—learned. They not only practice, they study and learn and assimilate what they have learned. There is no place in spiritual life for pious ignorance. Sentimental dummies are not “devotees,” they are fools. And fools do not find God. It is very true that many people get what Yogananda called “intellectual indigestion” from reading loads of theories and trivia. But the wise carefully choose books of spiritual wisdom such as scriptures, lives of holy people, and the writings/teachings of those who possess genuine inner illumination. Such books can never do anything but good. It is especially necessary to read the teachings of realized yogis. (I am not talking about super-gurus, glitter-gurus, and empire-building gurus, but real Masters of the spiritual life.) Naturally, they will have to use their own good sense as to whose words are worthwhile and whose are worthless or even poisonous. They will not have a library of thousands of books, I assure you. But they will have a goodly number of spiritual gems which they will perpetually read and ponder daily. Certainly they will not spend hours a day on reading, but they will allot an appropriate amount of time for it. Fake teachers and cults hate what I have just written, insisting that “loyal” and “in tune” cultists will read nothing but what the cult authorizes, so the dupes will not “get confused.” This only reveals their predatory cruelty. Their “protection” of their “sheep” is nothing less than the “protective custody” of the Nazi death camps. They fear that if their followers become informed as to the real nature of traditional philosophy and yoga they will realize they are being lied to, and will sensibly go elsewhere and find real truth. And that is bad for business.

Now comes an interesting adjective: *virajah*—beyond (free from) rajas. This may seem odd, but those of you who have been yogis for some years will remember how at the beginning of your “yoga days” you were very rajasic in your approach. First of all, you wanted to tell everyone about it, and you went around accumulating “spiritual stuff” of all kinds. You really began to star in your own spiritual movie, and you made quite an epic. Your motives were perfectly all right, even laudable, but they were rajasic, filled with activity and “passion” for getting on to the Goal. Again, the intentions were good, but the feverishness and externalization was not. For a lot of people, when the rajas fizzles out so does their impetus toward God. Most abandon any form of spiritual life, while others settle down to a comfortable and ineffectual life in some yoga cult that makes them feel secure and one of the “chosen.” But what is needed is for the rajasic heat to mutate into the steady warmth and radiance of sattwa. Then the aspiration and involvement actually increases, but in a fully effectual way, an increasingly interior way. Spiritual life changes over from a compulsion to an intelligent choice. Spiritual restlessness becomes steadiness in spiritual practice and development. God is no longer the brass ring to strain at but an ever-present Reality whose perception keeps on increasing in a naturally supernatural way.

And the result of all this? The upanishad says: “prayanti suryadvarena,” which Shankara says means: “they move superbly [skillfully] along the path of the sun.” That is, they ascend steadily and skillfully to the solar world, the realm of the Self-existent Light that is Brahman.
Getting in Perspective

Many things are needed in life, but none more important than an overview, a perspective on the values of life. This is true for everyone, so the sage now speaks of it in a spiritual context.

“Let a man devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of such enjoyment, whether here or hereafter, as may be won by good works, and so realize that it is not by works that one gains the Eternal. Let him give no thought to transient things, but, absorbed in meditation, let him renounce the world. If he would know the Eternal, let him humbly approach a Guru devoted to Brahman and well-versed in the scriptures.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:12)

This needs to be looked at bit by bit. Let a man devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of such enjoyment, whether here or hereafter, as may be won by good works, and so realize that it is not by works that one gains the Eternal. Back in high school I came across an eighteenth-century collection of humor and satire. I have forgotten most of it, but there was one story about a man who fell in love with a woman he often saw at the theater. That was when all lighting came from candles, and in that light she looked stunningly beautiful. He got the courage to ask her if he could visit her at home in the daytime. She agreed, and in the daylight he saw that she was horrible-looking, incredibly old, wore a wig and loads of make-up. He fell out of love instantly! It is the same with this and all other worlds and the enjoyments they offer in return for good karma. It is all deathly illusion. What we need is the light of spiritual day.

Seeing the world clearly is the only lasting antidote for the poison of worldliness. First we approach the matter intellectually. Just the fact of inevitable death should begin to turn us from attachment, and the fact that nothing lasts should seal our disillusionment. Yet, old habits do indeed die hard, and there is no habit as strongly entrenched as attraction to the world and its promises. So discipline is needed.

Let him give no thought to transient things. The wise aspirant must exert his will and refuse to even give a thought to the “good things” offered by the world, “good things” that will melt away in time, and that often prove to be anything but good. Look at those that have worldly success. Misery and confusion is their daily bread, but those who envy them are convinced that they alone have found the way to happiness. We must in contrast refuse to even look at the mirages held out to us by the world and our own habit-deluded mind. How will we cure the mind of its awful addictions? By being…

Absorbed in meditation. For meditation cures the fevers of the mind and heart and dispels the hallucinations produced by illusions and desires. The only way to be absorbed in meditation is to be constantly cultivating interior consciousness even outside of meditation. Our whole life must become a meditation process.

Let him renounce the world. The Sanskrit word nirvedam does not really mean renunciation, though many translators use that term. Actually, nirvedam means being indifferent, not being influenced or moved by something—in this case the world and its ways. It is an inner state, a condition of the mind very akin to the non-arising (nirodha) of mental reactions (vrittih) spoken about in the Yoga Sutras as being the state of yoga. “When your intellect has cleared itself of its delusions, you will become indifferent to the results of all action, present or future.” (Bhagavad Gita 2:52) And consequently you
will be indifferent to the actions that produce those results as well as the world-stage on which their dramas are enacted. None of this occurs just for the asking or wishing, so Angiras give us practical advice:

*If he would know the Eternal, let him humbly approach a Guru devoted to Brahman and well-versed in the scriptures.* The ideal of the upanishads often differs from that of later Indian thought which is not based on wisdom but on whimsy—and often on theatrical effect. Today there is a lot of talk about how valueless a teacher is who only knows the scriptures but has no inner realization, and how wonderful is the illiterate—or one who is ignorant of the scriptures—but who has spiritual knowledge. This is silly. First of all, a scholar can tell you what the great masters of the spiritual life taught in the scriptures, and you can learn from them just as you would if they were still on earth. You cannot get spirituality from books, it is true, but you can get spiritual instruction that will lead to the acquisition of spirituality. On the other hand, what kind of a person, supposedly intent on gaining spiritual knowledge, will choose to remain ignorant? Consider Sri Ramana Maharshi. He had no interest in academic matters, but after going to Arunachala and attaining realization he became a living library of countless spiritual texts, having read widely in several languages. So the sage tells us that a worthy teacher has a thorough knowledge of the holy writings and is also Brahmanishtham—established in the experiential knowledge of Brahman.

Such a teacher is rare, but we should accept no lesser teacher. If we find such a one we must learn all we can and then apply it. If we cannot find one, then we should diligently study the words of realized masters and follow them. The Mahayana Buddhists say a very wonderful thing: Whenever someone resolves to seek enlightenment a host of buddhas and bodhisattwas immediately become aware of it and begin blessing and guiding him. Real masters never die, so we can become their disciples no matter how long ago they lived in a physical body. This is especially true of three great Masters who both teach and save even now: Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus. One who sincerely, with right intention, takes refuge in them and prays for guidance will find they respond. Such a one will need to act on what he already knows if he hopes to gain further understanding. And if he is wise he will assiduously avoid all those who claim to be their representatives or intermediaries.

“To a disciple who approaches reverently, who is tranquil and self-controlled, the wise teacher gives that knowledge, faithfully and without stint, by which is known the truly existing, the changeless Self.” (Mundaka Upanishad 1:2:13) By these words we know the qualified student and the qualified teacher. When the two come together the result is Perfect Knowing.
Origin and Return

“The Imperishable is the Real. As sparks innumerable fly upward from a blazing fire, so from the depths of the Imperishable arise all things. To the depths of the Imperishable they in turn descend.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:1) This is a spectacular simile—mostly because it happens to be the absolute truth. But a more literal translation brings out some important points Prabhavananda decided to pass over. Here is Swami Nikhilananda's rendering: “As from a blazing fire, sparks essentially akin to it fly forth by the thousand, so also, my good friend, do various beings come forth from the imperishable Brahman and unto Him again return.” Swami Gambhirananda, the saintly President of Ramakrishna Mission, translated it this way: “As from a fire, fully ablaze, fly off sparks, in their thousands, that are akin to the fire, similarly from the Immutable originate different kinds of creatures and into It again they merge.”

Three prime truths
There are three points being made here that are the bedrock of upanishadic philosophy. First, all beings that exist—past, present, future—are of the same nature, even the same substance, as Brahman. Second, all forms (modes of existence), though ever-changing, proceed from the Unchanging, Unchangeable. This seeming contradiction is made possible by the illusory power of Maya. That is, the changing forms are illusory while the essential being, the Self/Atman is unchanging. Third, having come from Brahman they shall all, without exception return to Brahman. When life is viewed this way we can understand its nature and purpose, and live accordingly. For the upanishads are not interested in giving us empty theory without a practical application.

Some traits of the Source
“Self-luminous is that Being, and formless. He dwells within all and without all. He is unborn, pure, greater than the greatest, without breath, without mind.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:2) Pervading all, both Brahman and the Atman are yet untouched by any forms in which they dwell, knowing themselves through themselves—self-luminous. Both the internal and the external are permeated with the presence of Conscious Spirit. Although the forms floating on the surface of the Ocean of Being are born, conditioned, endowed with mind and senses, and compelled to “live” as a consequence of the sowing and reaping of karma in previous lives, in reality none of this takes place in an absolute, objective sense. Rather, it is the power of Maya that produces these appearances. As the Gita says: “Helpless all, for Maya is their master....” (Bhagavad Gita 9:8) Yet, the sage is telling us in this upanishad that, almighty as Maya seems to be, Spirit is “greater than the greatest.” When we are sunk in delusion, then Maya seems the most powerful, but when we transfer our consciousness into spirit, then we find that the Self is always the master of Maya, on the universal and the individual levels.

Again, Brahman is the Source: “From him are born breath, mind, the organs of sense, ether, air, fire, water, and the earth, and he binds all these together.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:3) God’s “creation” is never separated from Him for an instant. By His
indwelling presence He maintains and unifies them. All that exists is held in the Mind of God, for they are His thoughts made visible or tangible.

“Heaven is his head, the sun and moon his eyes, the four quarters his ears, the revealed scriptures his voice, the air his breath, the universe his heart. From his feet came the earth. He is the innermost Self of all.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:4) The universe is not really God’s creation, it is His manifestation—His “incarnation.” And he remains its Inner Controller (Antaryamin).

“From him arises the sun-illumined sky, from the sky the rain, from the rain food, and from food the seed in man which he gives to woman. Thus do all creatures descend from him.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:5) Though this differs from her style of expression, it reminds me of great wisdom spoken by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. She said that in reality we all come from God, but we ignore the fact. We say: “Everybody in my family gets…” and then name some disease or negative condition. We think it is “genetics” that must manifest. But our real genes are Divine Qualities. Why do we not believe they will manifest in us? Our father and mother were adult human beings, and we became the same. The ultimate Father/Mother is God, so why do we neglect the development of Divine Consciousness? Divinity is our only true nature.

“From him are born hymns, devotional chants, scriptures, rites, sacrifices, oblations, divisions of time, the doer and the deed, and all the worlds lighted by the sun and purified by the moon.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:6) You cannot get more complete than that!

“From him are born gods of diverse descent. From him are born angels, men, beasts, birds; from him vitality, and food to sustain it; from him austerity and meditation, faith, truth, continence, and law.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:7) It is this last part that is of special meaning for us. We are told that austerity (tapasya), meditation, faith, truth, continence, and law arise from God. They are the presence of God manifesting in our life and through us to the world. Who, then, can be more beneficial to the world than a yogi? The word *vidhi*, translated “law,” means both instruction and method. There is an innate order in the universe which each of us should embody. It is not learned intellectually but is intuited by the yogi. The yogi will then order his life accordingly—methodically. Of course the supreme method is the method of meditation itself.

“From him spring the organs, of sense, their activities, and their objects, together with their awareness of these objects. All these things, parts of man’s nature, spring from him.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:8) This explains how human beings are “made in the image of God.”

“In him the seas and the mountains have their source; from him spring the rivers, and from him the herbs and other life-sustaining elements, by the aid of which the subtle body of man subsists in the physical body.

“Thus Brahman is all in all. He is action, knowledge, goodness supreme. To know him, hidden in the lotus of the heart, is to untie the knot of ignorance.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:1:9, 10)
Knowing God

About God

Further description of Brahman is now to be given along with instructions on how to know Brahman. The Upanishad is so clear, and the concepts have been referred to before, so some verses hardly need more than a sentence of comment.

“Self-luminous is Brahman, ever present in the hearts of all. He is the refuge of all, he is the supreme goal. In him exists all that moves and breathes. In him exists all that is. He is both that which is gross and that which is subtle. Adorable is he. Beyond the ken of the senses is he. Supreme is he. Attain thou him!” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:1)

The last part is the most important. What value is it to know about God if we do not go to God? Saint Silouan of Athos used to say that theology is the false mysticism of the ego, for people become satisfied, or even fascinated, with philosophical concepts that are nothing but bare words. Rare are those who want to experience the things they believe. In many instances it may be that people intuit the untruth of their religious beliefs and subconsciously know that they cannot be experienced. But it is sad to see those that have come to understand the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and evolution of consciousness still dawdling along with the theorists instead of getting on to the Goal.

“He, the self-luminous, subtler than the subtlest, in whom exist all the worlds and all those that live therein—he is the imperishable Brahman. He is the principle of life. He is speech, and he is mind. He is real. He is immortal. Attain him, O my friend, the one goal to be attained!” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:2) Not only must we attain God, we must understand while striving that He is the only goal to be attained—for everything else is antithetical to our eternal nature.

The means to reach God

Having hopefully convinced us of the value of seeking God (!) the sage is going to tell us how to find God by telling us the actual means: “Affix to the Upanishad, the bow incomparable, the sharp arrow of devotional worship; then, with mind absorbed and heart melted in love, draw the arrow and hit the mark—the imperishable Brahman. OM is the bow, the arrow is the individual being, and Brahman is the target. With a tranquil heart, take aim. Lose thyself in him, even as the arrow is lost in the target.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:3, 4)

Here is Swami Gambhirananda’s more literal version: “Taking hold of the bow, that is the Great Weapon familiar in the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string with a mind absorbed in Its thought, hit that very target that is the Immutable. Om is the bow; the soul [atma] is the arrow; and Brahman is called its target. It is to be hit by an unerring man. One should become one with It just like an arrow.” This is really a description of meditation, so each point is significant.

Taking hold of the bow (Om is the bow). Right away we are being given a most valuable instruction in meditation. We “take hold” of Om by intoning It within. Our practice must not be passive, but calmly active—we are always to be in charge by taking hold of Om and applying it in meditation through the generation of subtle sound. (See Om Yoga, Its Theory and Practice.) The active character of Om is indicated by Its being
called a bow, for a bow impels the arrow to its target. It is a matter of strength, of power. In the Rig Veda we find the Gayatri Mantra, a great prayer for enlightenment: “We meditate on the Spiritual Effulgence of that Supreme Divine Reality. May That impel us toward It.” Om is the force that impels us toward Divinity.

That is the Great Weapon familiar in the Upanishads. Om is not just a weapon among many. It is the Great Weapon for conquering ignorance that is referred to throughout the Upanishads. This is not a matter of opinion or discussion. In the eleven basic upanishads, the Gita, and the Yoga Sutras the only mantra recommended is Om, and the only meditation set forth is the meditation on Om. An honest perusal of these texts will reveal that this is neither an exaggeration nor a wishful interpretation. Although the wisdom of these sacred texts has been almost totally ignored for past centuries, their truth is not to be denied by any who ascribe to Sanatana Dharma. It is departing from the upanishadic philosophy that has resulted in the confused mess of contemporary Hinduism, the worst of it aspects being the treacherous and destructive idolatry of Gurudom. Because of this aberration people have accepted a myriad substitutes for the upanishadic truth on the basis of “guru bhakti” and “faith in the guru.” The resulting confusion is obvious to those not drowning in it themselves.

One should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with meditation (the Self is the arrow). Our very Self, our very consciousness, is to be united with Om in calm and whole-hearted attention. This can only be done by being “purified by constant meditation” according to Shankara’s commentary. So meditation is itself the way to become proficient in meditation. The simple fact that we are meditating is assurance that we shall become more and more proficient in it. When that proficiency is gained, then we will easily unite our consciousness with Om.

Drawing the string with a mind absorbed in Its thought. Through constant meditation we develop the ability to fill our awareness with the inner intonations of Om which act like the string of a bow to the mind that is fixed on It.

Hit that very target that is the Immutable (Brahman). We do not start out small and work up to bigger things. From the first we aim at Brahman. By means of this determination Brahman alone will be realized by us without wandering into the psychic byways that can confuse and delude the wandering meditator who does not know the method of the upanishads.

It is to be hit by an unerring man. The idea here is that the one who can successfully “hit” the target of Brahman is one who has no distractions or waverings, whose mind remains firmly established in the japa and meditation of Om. There is a kind of parable about this in the Mahabharata. In *Yoga As A Universal Science*, Swami Krishnananda tells it this way:

“Those who are familiar with the Mahabharata know the story of the tournament arranged by Acharya Drona for the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The test of concentration which Dronacharya arranged for those boys was like this. There was a tree with many branches. In one fine twig, he hung a wooden bird. The eye of the bird was looking like a black spot, and that eye was to be shot by the arrow. So he asked the boys: ‘Concentrate yourself on the eye of that bird and hit it. Look! What do you see?’ ‘Well,’ one said, ‘well, I see a bird sitting on the tree.’ Dronacharya said, ‘You are unfit. You are not able to concentrate.’ Then he asked another, ‘What do you see?’ ‘I see the bird sitting on the branch.’ ‘No, you are not able to concentrate.’ Then he asked Yudhishthira, ‘What do you see?’ ‘I see only the eye.’ ‘No. No good,’ he said. He asked Arjuna. Arjuna said, ‘I see only the black spot. I see nothing else.’ ‘Yes, you are the
"man’ said Dronacharya, ‘Hit it!’ Arjuna’s concentration was so intense that he could see only the black spot. He could not see even the eye of the bird there, let alone the bird and the tree and the people around. That was Arjuna.” And that must be us. It may take time, but it nonetheless must come about. 

**One should become one with It just like an arrow.** The arrow embeds itself in the target and becomes one with it. This is not an occasional ascent to higher awareness, but a permanent establishment in the Being of Brahman. It is meditation on Om that can accomplish this.

**What we will perceive in that union**

As a result of our meditation we shall directly perceive: “In him are woven heaven, earth, and sky, together with the mind and all the senses. Know him, the Self alone. Give up vain talk. He is the bridge of immortality.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:5) This verse actually refers to Om, and literally says: “On that [Om] are strung heaven, earth, space, the mind and all the senses. It alone is the sole support of all. Having known the Self [through Om] discard other speech [or mantras] and their results. For this [Om] is the bridge to immortality.” That is a bit different! Om is the all-encompassing Reality from which all things have come. It alone leads us back to Immortality. Om should be our continual–and in meditation our only–thought insofar as it is possible and practical.

**Where we find God**

“Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!” (Job 23:3) lamented the Biblical Job. If he had access to the Upanishads as we do, he would have found the answer in the next verse:

“Within the lotus of the heart he dwells, where, like the spokes of a wheel in its hub, the nerves meet. Meditate on him as OM. Easily mayest thou cross the sea of darkness.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:6) Gambhirananda: “With that [hub] in which are fixed the nerves [nadis] like the spokes on the hub of a chariot wheel, moves this aforesaid Self by becoming multiformed. Meditate on the Self thus with the help of Om. May you be free from hindrances in going to the other shore beyond darkness.”

At the core of all our manifest existence there moves the immortal Spirit-self which has assumed all the forms and aspects we call “us.” Although these numberless veils hide the Self from our present vision, we can meditate on it by the means of Om. This will remove all obstacles and carry us safely over the heaving waves of samsara into the harbor of Spirit. As Patanjali says regarding Om: “Its constant repetition and meditation is the way. From it result the disappearance of obstacles and the turning inward of consciousness.” The same thing is said in the Varaha and Yoga Tattwa (B) Upanishads.

**More about the heart**

When the Upanishads speak of the “heart” they do not mean the physical organ that pumps blood, but the center of our being where the Self ever dwells. The sage now speaks more about this spiritual heart.

“This Self, who understands all, who knows all, and whose glory is manifest in the universe, lives within the lotus of the heart, the bright throne of Brahman. By the pure in heart is he known. The Self exists in man, within the lotus of the heart, and is the master of his life and of his body. With mind illumined by the power of meditation, the wise know him, the blissful, the immortal.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:7) There is a
great deal to learn from this verse.

Since the Self understands and knows all, to be truly knowledgous and wise all we need do is shift our awareness into our own Self.

Although the Self should not be identified with external things such as our body or the world, nevertheless, the glory of our Self—including the Supreme Self—is manifested in our own private universe and the greater universe as well. We can come to perceive spiritual realities hidden within the material illusions.

The Self abides in the core of our being—not in the physical heart. According to the great yogis, we can speak of the thousand-petalled lotus of the brain as our spiritual “heart,” especially the very core of the brain, the cave-like area within which the pineal gland is located. This is sometimes called the Chidakasha, the Space of Consciousness. Both God and the individual Self dwell there. In the Sanskrit text there is the expression Brahmapuri—the City of God—used for this spiritual heart. It further says that God and the Self are known by centering our awareness in this heart.

It is meditation which illuminines the mind and enables us to see and know this blissful, immortal Self all around us, in everything. This is living!

“The knot of the heart, which is ignorance, is loosed, all doubts are dissolved, all evil effects of deeds are destroyed, when he who is both personal and impersonal is realized.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:8) When we enter into the consciousness of our individual spirit and the Infinite Spirit, the blinding veil of ignorance will dissolve away along with all the bonds of karma.

“In the effulgent lotus of the heart dwells Brahman, who is passionless and indivisible. He is pure, he is the light of lights. Him the knowers of the Self attain.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:9) What greater goal can we have than this?

**The Light of lights**

In summation of this section, the sage says:

“Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning—nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines.

“This immortal Brahman is before, this immortal Brahman is behind, this immortal Brahman extends to the right and to the left, above and below. Verily, all is Brahman, and Brahman is supreme.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2:2:10, 11)

These thrilling words need no comment—only response.
The Two Selves

Cross-eyed people see a single object as two. In the same way the ignorant see the One as many. Yet, there is a perversely spiritual cross-eyedness which works just the opposite, making its victims see two as one. This is the disease of half-baked Vedanta that is merely conceptual and not based on the experience that only yoga imparts. There is no such thing as a genuine Vedantist who is not first and foremost a Yogi. Anyway, the upanishad is now going to give us the right understanding of the Paramatman and the jivatman—the Supreme Self and the individual Self—their unity and their distinction, and their relationship with each other. Here, too, only the yogi will really understand what is being said.

“Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:1) This is a case where the Sanskrit original gives very precise information which is necessary for us to careful peruse. Otherwise we will miss some remarkable truths.

Three qualities

This verse gives us three words in relation to the two “birds”—the two Selves: suparna, sayuja, and sak haya. Suparna means intimately related, the idea being that the individual Self and the Cosmic Self exist in an eternal relation. Sayuja means being in a state of union—perpetual union, as Shankara points out in his commentary. A secondary meaning of sayuja is being in the same place—that the two Selves are inseparable, are ever present to one another. According to Shankara, the third expression, sak haya, means that the two Selves have the identical name or designation, and exists in an identical manner. The upanishads say that Om is the name or designator of them both and that they possess the same qualities—one in an absolute degree and the other in a limited degree. Sak haya also means companionship and friendship, indicating the deep personal relation between the jivatman and Paramatman.

The “selfsame tree” is the body—and by extension, the cosmos. The form of every sentient being has two indwellers—the two Selves. However, they do not have the same experience of the tree. The individual, the jiva, “tastes” the fruit of the tree in the form of the inner and outer senses, and according to the quality of that experience is made happy, unhappy, contented, discontented—and so forth. The individual “undergoes” experience. The Supreme Self, on the other hand, “tasting of neither [sweet or bitter experiences], calmly observes.” God experiences being in all forms and is aware of all that the individual spirit experiences, yet, as a more literal translation says, He “looks on without eating”—without being affected or conditioned by it. But he does know exactly the effect and conditioning that accrues to the individual Self. He is experiencing right along with us, but unlike us is not pulled into a mistaken identity with the body-mind and its experiences.

The problem and the solution

On the other hand: “The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of his identity with the divine Self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad. But when he recognizes
the worshipful Lord as his own true Self, and beholds his glory, he grieves no more.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:2) This is quite interpretive, though correctly so. The literal translation of Swami Gambhirananda is: “On the same tree, the individual soul remains drowned, as it were; and so it moans, being worried by its impotence. When it sees thus the other, the adored Lord, and His glory, then it becomes liberated from sorrow.” We are drowned, submerged, in the deadly ocean of samsara, of continual birth, death, unsurety, pain, and confusion. Shankara points out that the individual is overwhelmed with confusion because it cannot understand what is really happening to it, and why. Just like a piece of driftwood on the heaving sea, it is lifted up and down, thrown onto the shore and then pulled out to sea again. So it grieves at its helplessness and hopelessness.

All is changed, though, when the individual sees, right in the core of its being, the very God it has been hitherto worshipping as separate from itself. Experiencing within its own being the presence and the glory of God—and thereby realizing that glory as his own—the individual becomes liberated from sorrow.

The sage elaborates on this, continuing: “When the seer beholds the Effulgent One, the Lord, the Supreme Being, then, transcending both good and evil, and freed from impurities, he unites himself with him.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:3) More literally: “When the seer sees the Purusha—self-effulgent, creator, lord, and source of all [relative existence]—then the illumined one completely shakes off both virtue and vice, becomes taintless, and attains absolute equality [non-duality]. That is, the jiva recognizes that Shiva—the Absolute—is its true nature. Then, no longer bound by “do” and “don’t,” it is able to act according to its essential being. Not that morality will be abandoned, but that there will be no more need to think it “should” or “should not” do something. Rather, it will do the right and the perfect spontaneously, naturally, as a consequence of its rediscovered divinity. For it will be free from all bonds or compulsions whatever. This is because in the divine vision it has become free from all defects or blemish.

But most important is the trait that is listed last: paramam samyam, supreme sameness, literally, but the meaning is absolute unity—and therefore absolute identify—with the Absolute Itself.

Since the two are really one, the upanishad continues describing both the individual and the infinite Selves, as they partake of one another’s traits. “The Lord is the one life shining forth from every creature. Seeing him present in all, the wise man is humble, puts not himself forward. His delight is in the Self, his joy is in the Self, he serves the Lord in all. Such as he, indeed, are the true knowers of Brahman.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:4)

**How to do it**

Anyone who ponders these astounding words with intelligence will be eager to attain Brahman, so the sage tells how that is done.

“This Effulgent Self is to be realized within the lotus of the heart by continence, by steadfastness in truth, by meditation, and by superconscious vision. Their impurities washed away, the seers realize him.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:5) This is quite clear, but some precise terms should be considered to put a fine point on the message of this verse. Swami Gambhirananda renders it: “The bright and pure Self within the body, that the monks with attenuated blemishes see, is attainable through truth, concentration, complete knowledge, and continence, practiced constantly.”

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The Self within the body. The Self is within the body, therefore it is absurd to disdain the body, and even more absurd to engage in a meditation practice that ignores the body and the necessity for its purification and spiritual empowerment. Just forgetting about the material side of things and flying off into pure spirit is an appealing idea—the problem is, it is mistaken and can never work. However long or short a journey, it always begins right from the point where we are. And at this point we are not only in the body, we are tied into it by a multitude of bonds, bonds that must be dissolved. Our yoga practice must cover this situation.

The prime implication, though, is that since the Self is right here in the body It is not far away. We need not even seek It—just see It.

The monks. The word rather poorly translated as “monk” is yati, which actually means a wanderer. This is because in the ancient times in India the wandering ascetics who moved about teaching dharma were given this title. They were not monks or sannyasis in the later sense. Obviously they were not married, as their mode of life prevented that, and their life was dedicated to spiritual discipline and teaching. Nevertheless, they were not considered outside society as the sadhu is today in India. They were simply those who sacrificed personal life to serve others. It was a noble way of life, but not a separation. The original Christian ascetics were just the same. They wore ordinary clothes and were considered Christian laity. The only distinctive thing about them was their way of life. The men usually lived on the edge of towns, usually as hermits. The women lived together in houses within the town for mutual protection. In the eyes of everyone they were pious bachelors and spinsters, not at all distinct from other Christians in an official sense.

All right, that is the historical background, but what is the meaning for us today? No matter where we might live, or how, we must all be “wanderers” in the spirit, aware with both Saint Paul and Saint Peter that we are “strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” (Hebrews 11:13; I Peter 2:11.) Jesus told someone: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20) This is actually the truth about every single sentient being on the earth: there is no place where we can come to rest and be at home, for our nature is Spirit and our home is Infinity.

So the yatis spoken of here are those who have become rootless in relation to this world. Or more to the point, those who have recognized that they have no roots in the world, only in God. (“The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” Galatians 6:14) And so in their hearts they are always on pilgrimage back to the Source, aware that wherever they may be it is only a temporary accommodation on the long journey home—to Brahman.

Attenuated blemishes. The upanishad has a very informative expression: kshinadoshah—those whose mental defects such as anger, etc., have become significantly lessened. Eventually they will be totally eliminated, but even now such persons are capable of the beginning stages of knowing the Self. This is important, because we tend to think that until we are absolutely perfect we cannot know either God or our Self. This is not so. Just as the sky becomes lightened even before the sun appears above the horizon, so it is with those yogis who earnestly strive for realization. The elementary stages of enlightenment dawn for them.

Complete knowledge. Samyag-jnanena, complete insight into the nature of the Self both intellectually and intuitively, also enables us to begin experiencing the realities of the Self. Of course this cannot occur outside of yoga practice that is disciplined and
steady.

*Practiced constantly.* Some translators think this word *nityam*–perpetual–refers to continence (brahmacharya), but others think it refers to constant and uninterrupted observance of all the virtues and practices listed in this verse. That is logical, because a break in any of these will set back the sadhaka to a significant degree, and in some cases can destroy the possibility of his continuance in sadhana by turning his mind away from the Real to the unreal. This is, however, particularly true about brahmacharya as is seen over and over. In *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Yogananda relates this sad but telling incident:

“A year later [after entering the ashram], Kumar set out for a visit to his childhood home. He ignored the quiet disapproval of Sri Yukteswar, who never authoritatively controlled his disciples’ movements. On the boy’s return to Serampore in a few months, a change was unpleasantly apparent. Gone was the stately Kumar with serenely glowing face. Only an undistinguished peasant stood before us, one who had lately acquired a number of evil habits.

“Master summoned me and brokenheartedly discussed the fact that the boy was now unsuited to the monastic hermitage life.

“‘Mukunda, I will leave it to you to instruct Kumar to leave the ashram tomorrow; I can’t do it!’ Tears stood in Sri Yukteswar’s eyes, but he controlled himself quickly. The boy would never have fallen to these depths had he listened to me and not gone away to mix with undesirable companions. He has rejected my protection; the callous world must be his guru still.’” This narrative is particularly ironic, since “Kumar” means a young male virgin.

Now all this is extremely to the point, with no fudging under the guise of diplomacy or moderation. Perhaps that is why the sage then says to us: “Truth alone succeeds, not untruth. By truthfulness the path of felicity is opened up, the path which is taken by the sages, freed from cravings, and which leads them to truth’s eternal abode.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:6) Once again Swami Gambhirananda helps us understand: “Truth alone wins, and not untruth. By truth is maintained for ever the path called Devayana, by which the desireless seers ascend to where exists the supreme treasure attainable through truth.”

Sri Ramakrishna often said that “God is realized if one holds fast to truth. If there is no strictness in observing truth everything is gradually lost.” As this upanishad says: *Satyam eva jayate*–truth alone triumphs, both in material and in spiritual life. The path to liberation, Devayana, “the Path of the Shining Ones,” is opened through truth.

Truth in this context has a much higher and wider meaning than mere accuracy or honesty in speech. It means to be a living embodiment of the truth of our Self-nature, and eventually to be a virtual incarnation of the realized Truth: God, “the supreme treasure attainable through truth.”
The God Within, The Sage Without

**God**

“Brahman is supreme; he is self-luminous, he is beyond all thought. Subtler than the subtlest is he, farther than the farthest, nearer than the nearest. He resides in the lotus of the heart of every being.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:7) This is the great mystery of the Divine. It is subtle beyond subtlety, yet exists equally in the most tangible. God is utterly beyond us, and yet nearer to us than can be expressed. This latter fact is a foundation-stone of spiritual life. The more we can turn inward, the deeper we can penetrate into our own essential being, the closer we will come to God. Yoga is an absolute necessity. Though Prabhavananda uses the expression “lotus of the heart,” the Sanskrit text has guhayam—“in the cave,” referring to the absolute core of our being.

“The eyes do not see him, speech cannot utter him, the senses cannot reach him. He is to be attained neither by austerity nor by sacrificial rites. When through discrimination the heart has become pure, then, in meditation, the Impersonal Self is revealed.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:8) No action or feeling or ideas can reveal God to us. But when the heart has become purified by the spiritual insight that only meditation can produce, then in meditation itself God is revealed. For: “The subtle Self within the living and breathing body is realized in that pure consciousness wherein is no duality—that consciousness by which the heart beats and the senses perform their office.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:9) Meditation is the beginning, middle, and end of spiritual life. There is a remarkable statement made here—that the same consciousness which even now causes the body, senses, and mind to function is the same consciousness in which the Divine Vision takes place. So we need not try to turn ourselves into something other than what we are. We need only use it to free ourselves into Spirit. For that which binds also frees. This is the unique understanding of the ancient sages in India, an understanding needed by the whole world.

**The sage**

The West may have no history of such great wisdom, but we have a little platitude that can say much: “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” As yogis we should keep this principle ever in mind. The results of our yoga practice reveal its character, relevance, and value. The yogi should be thoroughly pragmatic. “What is this doing for me?” should be the constant inquiry regarding his sadhana. That this is not inappropriate is shown by the last verse in this section: “Whether of heaven, or of heavenly enjoyments, whether of desires, or of objects of desire, whatever thought arises in the heart of the sage is fulfilled. Therefore let him who seeks his own good revere and worship the sage.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:1:10)

This tells us two things. First, whatever the liberated sage thinks of, wills, or desires, that comes about. Examples of this are given in *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and manifested all through Yogananda’s life, especially toward its end, as seen in *Paramahansa Yogananda: In Memoriam*. The life of Sri Ramakrishna also demonstrates this. Second, those that seek their highest good—self-realization—should reverence and honor the atmajnam, the one who knows the Self. This is very important. The upanishad is not counseling us to make a god of a master or to
substitute a Brahmajnani for God. When we want to learn something we go to an expert. In the same way, those seeking the knowledge of God should seek out the teachings of great masters of past and present. If very fortunate, the seeker will meet such a person in the flesh and have personal interchange with him. The mere presence of such a great soul can transform our thinking and awaken our consciousness.

If we follow the instructions of an enlightened person regarding our inner development we will come to the exact same state of consciousness revealed in him. Remember, true masters never die. They can bless and guide those who approach them in their hearts. Often this is sufficient for the seeker, and can be much safer than following a physically embodied teacher, for often sentimentality and emotional projection completely blind the seeker to the reality/unreality of the teacher. I personally knew gurus whose presence was stunning, even supernatural, but after their physical death they vanished from the earth plane, leaving their followers empty. But I also knew teachers who became more intimately present to seekers after their physical form had departed, proving themselves to truly be one with the Immortal and Omnipresent. Those who meditate can attune themselves to such masters and benefit from their very real presence.

How can we tell a true master? A true master keeps pointing their students away from themselves to God, the only Goal. And a true disciple is one who goes to God instead of making an idol or fetish of the guru. Anyone silly enough can be a brainwashed groupie, but the wise heed the teacher’s message and go on to God. As Buddha said, a worthy teacher or teaching is like a finger pointing at the moon. The idea is to see the moon—not the finger. Nevertheless, the sage can be a very meaningful factor in our spiritual life, so the upanishad continues with more information for us.

“The sage knows Brahman, the support of all, the pure effulgent being in whom is contained the universe. They who worship the sage, and do so without thought of self, cross the boundary of birth and death.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:1) Here are two more principles: A sage is one who knows Brahman in the absolute sense, and those who honor them without any personal desire for benefit or gain from them will break the ties of earthly rebirth.

This second part gives us a picture of real disciples or students who will attain spiritual benefit from a teacher: they have no egocentric or personal desire coloring the way they relate to the teacher. Their only interest is in the Self. They are not looking for a teacher to give them “power” or a reputation for having the best guru—glory through association is of no interest to them. Nor are they wanting the guru to become a substitute for an unsatisfactory parent, friend, spouse, or lover. They do not want a “personal” relationship with the guru—to either possess the guru or be possessed by the guru. They are not looking for some kind of fulfillment in a “relationship” with the teacher, but only fulfillment in the Self. Swami Bimalananda, a disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda, once told us in a conversation that those who lived in the ashram-headquarters of Self-Realization Fellowship just for the personality of Yogananda eventually left the spiritual life as well as the ashram, but those who came for God remained steadfast in both. I think we can conclude that real disciples are as rare as real gurus! The upanishad is not talking to spiritual fool-arounds, but to the worthy, those who wish, in the actual words of the upanishad, to “transcend the seed of human birth”—the ego.
Two kinds of seekers

Since the sage Angiras has put so much emphasis on the value of approaching and reverencing a master-teacher, he now digresses a bit to point out what makes the student succeed or fail in spiritual life.

“He who, brooding upon sense objects, comes to yearn for them, is born here and there, again and again, driven by his desire. But he who has realized the Self, and thus satisfied all hunger, attains to liberation even in this life.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:2) The Sanskrit implies that those in the grip of desire are born where the objects of desire are to be found, and bring the desire for them along. It does not say that the objects are obtained, however, and we see that this is a continual torment for human beings—wanting something but not able to get it. To be in such a situation will only condition the mind more and more toward grasping at the things desired. After who knows how long, the object is then gotten and either lost, or in danger of loss, or proves to be disappointing or misery-producing. Such is the dilemma of those who desire.

There is no use asking silly questions like: “How do I kill desire?” or: “How do I get rid of the ego?” You do not kill desire or discard the ego, for that is a negative approach that its nature will not work. Rather you take the positive approach: “I SHALL realize the Self.” For realization of the Self alone can quench all desire and dissolve the ego. Until then we ignore the clamor of desires, disregard the demands of the ego, and single-mindedly go after the Self. Along the way the desires will begin dropping away of themselves, and the ego, starved of attention, will become less and less until desires and ego are simply gone forever. It may not be easy, but it is marvelously simple.

“The Self is not to be known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning. But by him who longs for him Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:3) Anyone who has travelled this far through the upanishads is very well acquainted with the fact that the Self is not to be known through the usual avenues of human knowledge. What is striking is the literal meaning of the next phrase: “By the very fact that he seeks for It, does It become attainable.” Elsewhere I have mentioned that Sri Ma Anandamayi often said: “The desire for God is the way to God,” meaning that the desire would prompt us to action, not just mere wishing. No one seeks for God who is not already able to find God, for it is the very nearness of God that prompts his seeking. Seeking God is a guarantee, a symptom, of sure attainment. It is also the thing which enables the Self to reveal Itself to him.

“The Self is not to be known by the weak, nor by the thoughtless, nor by those who do not rightly meditate. But by the rightly meditative, the thoughtful, and the strong, he is fully known.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:4) Too many meanings are being missed by this translation. Here it is literally: “This Self is not attained by one devoid of strength, nor through delusion produced by false experience, nor through tapasya devoid of corresponding externals. But the Self of the man of knowledge who strives with diligence through these means [strength, clarity of sight and mind, and a life ordered in conformity to tapasya] enters the abode of Brahman.” There is a lot to think over here.

The plain truths

Those devoid of the strength imparted by the strict observance of yama and niyama cannot possibly know the Self. Both yama and niyama should be listed here for...
our most serious consideration. Yama (Restraint) consists of ahimsa (non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness), satya (truthfulness, honesty—i.e., non-lying), asteya (non-stealing, honesty, non-misappropriativeness), brahmacharya (sexual continence and control of all the senses), and aparigraha (non-possessiveness, non-greed, non-selfishness, non-acquisitiveness). Niyama (Observance) consists of shaucha (purity, cleanliness), santosha (contentment, peacefulness), tapas (austerity, practical—i.e., result-producing—spiritual discipline), swadhyaya (self-study, spiritual study), and Ishwarapranidhana (offering of one’s life to God).

A great deal of people, including yogis, are simply deluded, mostly because they follow false teachings and teachers whose errors actively harm them or cause them to stagnate spiritually. No matter how dedicated they may be, or even how disciplined, they cannot know the Self because their intellects are confused and distorted—especially by their aberrant meditation practices. Lucky are those “yoga duds” who merely vegetate. But neither reach the Goal.

It is utterly useless to engage in meditation without making the life correspond to the sole purpose of meditation: liberation of the spirit. Yoga has been propagated here in the West for a little over a hundred years, and see how little good and how much devastation and delusion has resulted. The reason is supremely simple: yama and niyama are not followed, and in many instances the fake gurus actually tell their dupes that yama and niyama are unnecessary. I cannot calculate how many tangled-minded “yogis” have boasted to me that they do not need to be vegetarians. If a survey is taken of almost any yoga group, over half will be living together “in a relationship” without being married, and those who are married have no idea of the need for brahmacharya in marriage except for the conception of children—and even then, not unrestrained. Sri Ramakrishna said that after the birth of two children the parents should live in chastity. In my commentary on the Gita I wrote the following that is most relevant here:

“The Dharma Shastras which describe the correct life of non-monastics are quite explicit about the need for husband and wife to lead lives of continence. See how the yogi parents of Paramhansa Yogananda lived it as presented in Autobiography of a Yogi. In the very first chapter we find: ‘Mother made a remarkable admission to my eldest sister Roma: “Your father and myself live together as man and wife only once a year, for the purpose of having children.”’ The fact that Yogananda, a devoted son and a pure-hearted yogi, would reveal this to the world in the pages of a book show how necessary he felt it was for both Eastern and Western readers to be shown the standard of chastity that yogis should observe in their life, not using their non-monastic status as excuse for lesser behavior. He underlined this later in the forty-fourth chapter, giving these words written to Mahatma Gandhi by his wife Kasturbai: ‘I thank you for the most perfect marriage in the world, based on brahmacharya and not on sex.’ Please note that these are examples of married yogis, not monks imposing their ideas on others. Also remember that the guru of Yogananda’s parents was himself a married yogi, so there is no monastic influence in their case.”

I really have no hope that the foregoing will provoke anything but anger and resentment, but it still has to be said in case some do want to reach the Goal whatever the price. The other aspects of yama and niyama are also important, but these two shoals have wrecked many a yogi of East and West.

“But the Self of the man of knowledge who strives with diligence through these means”—strength, clarity of sight and mind, and a life ordered in conformity to tapasya—“enters the abode of Brahman.”
Hail To the Sages!

“Having known the Self, the sages are filled with joy. Blessed are they, tranquil of mind, free from passion. Realizing everywhere the all-pervading Brahman, deeply absorbed in contemplation of his being, they enter into him, the Self of all.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:5) What an inspiring description. These are the things that should motivate us, not such cheap things as promises of heaven and threats of hell, or bribes of “good things” and “power.” To at last be ourselves as we really are, to end all struggle with unreality and ignorance–this is the worthy aim. The only worthy prayer is that of Jesus: “O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.” (John 17:5)

How to become a sage

How do the sages get that way? “Having fully ascertained and realized the truth of Vedanta, having established themselves in purity of conduct by following the yoga of renunciation, these great ones attain to immortality in this very life; and when their bodies fall away from them at death, they attain to liberation.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:6)

Having fully ascertained and realized the truth of Vedanta. First the Vedantic truths—the teachings found in the upanishads—are carefully read and pondered. But this is not enough—in fact it is worthless unless they go on to realize those truths through meditation, for it is this realization which is of supreme value, and the wise diligently seek it.

Having established themselves in purity of conduct. Not wanting empty theory, the wise understand that their lives must be disciplined for the purification of their outer actions and inner consciousness. Moreover, they ground themselves immovably in that purity.

Following the yoga of renunciation. Since neither Angiras or his students were monks, it is mistaken to interpret sannyasa yoga as monastic life. Rather, it is the inner discipline of detachment from all externals (sannyasa) while fixing the mind on the Eternal (yoga).

Immortality in this very life. Those who follow this path of the sages will realize their nature as immortality itself. They will not attain it, they will recover and manifest it. Nor will this happen in some vague heavenly realm, but right here and now.

At death, they attain to liberation. For them there is no longer any need for future birth in the material plane. As the Buddhist texts say: “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.” But they are not just liberated from the earth, they are liberated from all “worlds” and enter The Real as their eternal abode.

The liberation process

“When death overtakes the body, the vital energy enters the cosmic source, the senses dissolve in their cause, and karmas and the individual soul are lost in Brahman, the pure, the changeless. As rivers flow into the sea and in so doing lose name and form, even so the wise man, freed from name and form, attains the Supreme Being, the
Self-Luminous, the Infinite.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:7, 8) There are two aspects to these verses: what is shed by the sage and What he merges with in liberation.

At the time of death, the various bodies no longer retain their configuration. Since they are no longer needed for future incarnations, they resolve back into the elements from which they came. Even the karmic forces, now unnecessary, melt away into basic energy along with the subtle bodies that created and embodied them. What remains? Brahman and their atman-self. Since these are really the source of all the foregoing, in reality nothing whatever is lost—only the conditioning dreams that held them in false bondage for so long. Finitude is traded for infinity—blessed bargain!

“He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. No one ignorant of Brahman is ever born in his family. He passes beyond all sorrow. He overcomes evil. Freed from the fetters of ignorance he becomes immortal.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:9)

Who should learn this?

“Let the truth of Brahman be taught only to those who obey his law, who are devoted to him, and who are pure in heart. To the impure let it never be taught.” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:10)

In India everyone knows the basic principles of Brahmavidya. The sage is not recommending secrecy, but warning us away from wasting our time with people who are wilfully disqualifying themselves for spiritual life. So who are qualified (adhikari) to receive detailed instruction in the eternal truths? Here is a much more literal and complete translation of the verse with some very interesting symbols: “To them alone should one expound this knowledge of Brahman who are engaged in the practice of purificatory disciplines, versed in the Vedas, and devoted to Brahman, who personally sacrifice to the fire called Ekarshi with faith, and by whom has been duly accomplished the vow of holding fire on the head.”

Engaged in the practice of purificatory disciplines. The word translated by this phrase is kriyavantah, which means those who are engaged in the practice of kriyas. In the broad sense a kriya is any practice that entails doing something, because the root of kriya is kri, which means “I do.” Any practice, exercise, rite, or even movement can be called a kriya. Usually, though, kriya means a yogic practice or method which purifies the body and nervous system, as well as the subtle bodies, to enable the yogi to reach and hold on to higher levels of consciousness and being. Only those who are perpetually engaged in such practices need even hear about those states and their meaning. For to anyone else it is mere theory which can easily be misunderstood by those who have no practical yogic experience.

Versed in the scriptures. The word shrotriyah means one who both knows the scriptures and the disciplines and practices they enjoin. Although mere scriptural knowledge is of little value, it is necessary to know the teachings of the upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita in order to retain a right perspective in spiritual life. Buddha said that a seeker for enlightenment must be sure to follow the teachings of the liberated ones that have gone before. A great deal of problems in spiritual life will be avoided if the upanishads and Gita are studied daily and applied in their entirety.

Devoted to Brahman. Shankara says that the Brahmanishthah are those devoted to Brahman as manifested in the cosmos, yet who are actively seeking to know the transcendent Brahman beyond the cosmos. In other words, the prevailing idea that one is either intent on Saguna or Nirguna Brahman—only one aspect to the exclusion of the other—is mistaken. That the worthy seeker starts from where he finds himself—in
the realm of Ishwara, the creation—but strives to know That which lies beyond, as well. This is the real “yoga of synthesis.”

Who personally sacrifice to the fire called Ekarshi with faith. In the Atharva Veda there is a form of sacred fire called “ekarshi,” but in this verse the reference is to “the sole fire”—the “fire” that is Brahman. For ekarshi can be a contraction of “eka-rishi,” the sole Seer. As the Gita says: “Brahman is the ritual, Brahman is the offering, Brahman is he who offers to the fire that is Brahman. If a man sees Brahman in every action, He will find Brahman.” (Bhagavad Gita 4:24) The ultimate “offering” into Brahman is our own Self.

By whom has been duly accomplished the vow of holding fire on the head. Continuing this idea, the rishi speaks of those who have accomplished in due order the shirovratam—a vow of holding or carrying the holy fire in the head. That is, one who has established the Divine Fire of Brahman-realization within himself, who ever carries Brahman in his “head”—his consciousness.

There will not be a great number of students if these criteria are followed, but we must make sure that we are among them.

The sum and substance
In conclusion the upanishad exclaims: “Hail to the sages! Hail to the illumined souls! This truth of Brahman was taught in ancient times to Shounaka by Angira. Hail to the sages! Hail to the illumined souls!” (Mundaka Upanishad 3:2:11)
A Commentary on the Prashna Upanishad

The Right Beginning

This upanishad, the Prashna Upanishad, is called The Question (Prashna) Upanishad because of its format of question and answer throughout. But the first two verses set the stage for the reader, and also indicate what is needed for a successful quest after the knowledge of Brahman–at least that which can be taught and comprehended intellectually.

The seekers

“Sukesha, Satyakama, Gargya, Kousalya, Bhargava, and Kabandhi, devotees and seekers after the truth of the supreme Brahman, with faith and humility approached the sage Pippalada.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:1)

Because it would have no meaning for Western readers, Swami Prabhavananda has omitted the parentage and family ties of these six seekers. Nevertheless, their listing is significant, for a yogi must have psychological “ancestors” in the form of inner spiritual qualities that will help him to persevere in yoga practice. Besides a good inner background, the upanishad cites four good traits needed by every aspirant to higher evolution: devotion in the sense of dedication, desire to know God, faith, and humility.

Dedication is needful, for it keeps us steady when we encounter snags and obstacles in our path, and it keeps us plodding along in times of dryness and uncertainty. It ensures that we will persevere in our efforts to attain spiritual heights.

It is easy to forget why we originally took up spiritual life and wander into byways of lesser endeavor. This is why many become tangled up in externalities of religion, wrangling over philosophical concepts, and even becoming enamored of control over others under the pretence of religious discipline. As Jesus told Martha: “Thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful.” (Luke 10:41, 42)

Because of this the upanishad tells us that these wise seekers were intent on a single thing: the truth of the Supreme Brahman. We should aspire to–and settle for–nothing less.

Faith in the form of conviction of the reality of spiritual matters is also a necessity, for who can persevere in search of something about which they have no inner assurance? We need the conviction-faith that God is real and can be known. Saint Paul encapsulated the whole matter when he wrote: “He that cometh to God must believe that h is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

An interior knowing that God is real and can be experienced will give us the strength we need to keep on to the Goal.

Humility in the sense of a willingness to listen and learn, aware of all we do not know, is essential. Respect is also implied here. In the East they overdo it to the point of grovelling and mindless acceptance, while in the West the casual, one-on-one
attitude is exaggerated into overfamiliarity and virtual disrespect. It is amazing how very wise Western ignoramuses consider themselves. As someone once wrote: “The trouble with ignorance is that it gains confidence as it goes along.”

The seeker must be keenly aware that he lacks something—a great deal, in fact—with emphasis on need. He must not forget that seeking implies needing and asking. Those who strut up to a teacher as though they are visiting the zoo will—and should—receive nothing. On the other hand, the seeker should not grovel or be unthinkingly accepting. The student should carefully examine the prospective teacher to see if he is qualified and worth listening to. The worthy teacher will equally carefully examine the prospective student to see if he has the right attitude and is capable of learning and applying what is learned. A dud on either end ruins the equation.

The requisites

“Said the sage: ‘Practice austerity, continence, faith for a year; then ask what questions you wish. If I can, I will answer.’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:2) Now this is the way of a real teacher of Brahmajnana. He tells what they must do and what he will then do.

There is a story told in India of a young man who came to a guru and asked to learn from him. The guru told him what he would have to do to qualify himself. Not very happy with the list, he asked what the guru would do in all that time. When told that the guru would teach him occasionally, as he would deem appropriate, the would-be disciple remarked: “Why don’t you make me a guru, instead; that sounds a lot easier.” Yes, indeed.

Many approach a teacher while living in a fantasy world projected by their overconfident ego. If the teacher is as false as they and conforms to the fantasy, they are happy. But if the teacher is real, and dares to speak to them realistically about the means and the goal, they are most displeased. We are not of this type, hopefully, so let us look at the requirements Pippalada sets forth.

1) Spiritual discipline (tapasya), most particularly the practice of meditation. 2) Control of the senses (brahmacharya), especially continence. 3) Faith in the teaching of the upanishadic sages regarding the Supreme Goal, the possibility of attaining It, and their assertions as to the means of attainment.

These are absolute necessities—and they must be unwaveringly practiced and held to for a significant length of time before the seeker can possibly be mentally and spiritually capable of comprehending the wisdom of the sages. First the students must be qualified, otherwise a qualified teacher will be of no use to them at all.

The teacher

“Then ask what questions you wish. If I can, I will answer.” This promise contains two major qualities of an authentic spiritual teacher.

First, the teacher will accept and consider whatever the student asks. He will not shrug off even the silliest inquiry, nor will he reject the student’s questioning of the veracity or value of what he believes or teaches. This is one of the most glorious characteristics of Sanatana Dharma—it has no fear of honest inquiry and honest doubt. Not being insecure, the teacher of Dharma is not disturbed by questioning or statements of disbelief.

A friend of mine told me that she quit being a Christian when, as a teenager, she dared to express doubts to her parish priest. He raved at her and threatened hell,
saying that to even ask for explanation of “the mysteries” was a sin and an insult to God. So she walked away and never went back. Over sixty years (!) later she came into the orbit of Sanatana Dharma, asked all her questions, and received answers that restored her faith in Jesus—but not in Churchianity. In true Dharma we find the key to understanding the teachings of all the Masters of all the ages. I have found throughout nearly fifty years that Sanatana Dharma illumines their words to a degree that their professed followers and “isms” cannot even dream of.

Those who would follow Jesus, and Buddha, need to seek out the same source from which they drew their teachings: Sanatana Dharma. Then, like them, they can become Sanatana Dharmis and thereby become their true disciples. Sanatana Dharma expands their horizons to embrace all truth wherever it may be found. It is true that of late there have arisen bigots in India who speak as hatefully and ignorantly about other religions as those religions speak of others. But they are not Sanatana Dharmis, for the Dharma has no place for hate, ignorance, and sectarianism. As Jesus said: “The truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32)

Second, a worthy teacher will acknowledge that he cannot answer some questions. This is because some things are simply beyond verbal expression. Further, no true teacher is egotistical, therefore he will readily admit it if he feels it is beyond his capacity to explain something—just as we find that sometimes we cannot find a word to express what we know well inwardly. And most of all, a good teacher is willing to admit when he just does not know the answer to something. Only a fool thinks he is omniscient, and only a fake wants others to think he is.

In my encounters with teachers, the person nearest to being all-knowing was Swami Sivananda, and he was known to reply: “I really don’t know” to certain questions. But he certainly knew the way to God, as the lives of his disciples attest. (Sometimes a Master does not know the answer to a question because it is trivial and foolish, and his mind is free from triviality and foolishness.)

So we have seen the two elements needed for a meaningful exchange of questions and answers: worthy questioners and worthy answerers.
The Father and Mother of All

The Father and Mother of All

“After a year Kabandhi approached the teacher and asked: ‘Sir, how did the creatures come into being?’” (Prashna Upanishad 1:3) This is the question of any reflective person. There are many answers to it, but this upanishad goes to the root of relative existence as Pippalada replies:

“The Lord of beings,’ replied the sage, ‘meditated and produced Prana, the primal energy, and Rayi, the giver of form, desiring that they, male and female, should in manifold ways produce creatures for him.”’ (Prashna Upanishad 1:4)

Prajapati–Brahma “The Lord of Creation”–did not create the world in the manner understood in the West, rather, he manifested it from the primal energy known as Prakriti by the power of his meditation. This was no new occurrence, for the projection and withdrawal of the cosmos in precise cycles has been going on from eternity. Just as wind moving over water causes it to take on a multitude of wave-forms, so does the creative thought of Brahma. In Genesis we are told: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And…darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1, 2) The Breath (Ruach) of God, the creative thought of God, moved on the causal “waters” and the cosmos began to manifest.

Creation begins and moves on in an exact order, so the first thing that occurred was the manifestation of Prana and Rayi–internal Life and the outer Energy that manifests as form. There are many levels of manifestation, and Pippalada is only speaking of the lower worlds which are manifested by Brahma. The lower worlds mirror the higher ones, and in Christian terminology this coming forth of Prana and Rayi are equivalent to the coming forth of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Transcendent Absolute–the Father–at the very highest level of manifestation.

Prana and Rayi are the two poles of manifesting energy–positive and negative, male and female. This duality is at the heart of all that presently exists, and without it everything dissolves. Prana and Rayi are the “parents” of all things. Creation is their perpetual interaction. As Yogananda wrote in one of his chants: “Spirit and Nature dancing together!” All “creatures”–all that exist in relativity–have sprung from Prana and Rayi. This is why all religions have intuited the existence of a primeval Father and Mother of All.

Sun and Moon

Even more, nearly all religions have had some idea about the original Father and Mother being the sun and moon respectively.

“Prana, the primal energy, is the sun; and Rayi, the form-giving substance, is the moon. Be it known that all this universe, that which is gross and that which is subtle, is one with Rayi. Therefore is Rayi omnipresent. In like manner is the universe one with Prana.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:5) Nothing can exist without duality–Prana and Rayi–at the root of their manifestation, and they are still being maintained by them.

In India they knew from the beginning that the sun and moon were essential even for plant life. In the West, also, people have known for hundreds, if not thousands, of years that although the light and heat of the sun causes the germination of seeds, it is
the moon that guides their growth, and wise gardeners plant according to the lunar cycles. We even have the term “planting moon.” Even more, all “things” are the embodiment of Prana and Rayi. The universe is Prana and Rayi. Spirit–Paramatman and Atman–alone is independent of these two, and untouched by them.

“The rising sun pervades the east, and fills with energy all beings that there inhabit; and likewise when his rays fall on the south, the west, the north, the zenith, the nadir, and the intermediate regions, to all beings that there inhabit he gives life.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:6) Just as the one sun can be reflected in numberless ways, so Prana enlivens all things and moves within them. The life in even an atom is Cosmic Life.

“When Prana and Rayi, uniting, divide the year. Two are the paths of the sun–two are the paths that men travel after death. These are the southern and the northern. Those who desire offspring and are devoted to almsgiving and rituals, considering these the highest accomplishment, attain the world of the moon and are born again on earth. They travel by the southern path, which is the path of the fathers, and is indeed Rayi, the maker of forms.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:9)

There are two paths that can be taken after death: the path that leads to expanding life in higher realms of existence and the path that leads back to the world of material embodiment—the paths of Prana and Rayi.

The “year” spoken here is not the earthly measure of time based on the movement of the earth around the sun, although it is believed to be so in the degeneracy of contemporary Hinduism. Rather, it is the cyclic manifestation of prana within the subtle, mental bodies of each one of us. The “southern” path is the part of the cycle in which the prana becomes more embedded or “grounded” in the consciousness of form—the body. On the other hand, the “northern” path is the part of the cycle in which the prana becomes increasingly active in the spiritual levels of our being, causing the consciousness to rise to higher degrees. The supposed south and north movement of the sun has nothing whatsoever to do with this, even though it is commonly thought so at this time.

The “moon” is a symbol of the material creation which is but a reflection of higher regions of consciousness, just as the moon has no light of its own, but only reflects the light of the sun.

The path of rebirth

“Those who desire offspring and are devoted to almsgiving and rituals, considering these the highest accomplishment, attain the world of the moon and are born again on earth. They travel by the southern path, which is the path of the fathers, and is indeed Rayi, the maker of forms.”
This is quite clear: those who are addicted to family life and external religion are impelled by their own earthly desires to be reborn on earth. For such desires are rooted in earthly experience and perpetuate it.

**The path of liberation**

“But those who are devoted to the worship of the Self, by means of austerity, continence, faith, and knowledge, go by the northern path and attain the world of the sun. The sun, the light, is indeed the source of all energy. It is immortal, beyond fear; it is the supreme goal. For him who goes to the sun there is no more birth nor death. The sun ends birth and death.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:10)

Later in the fifth section of this upanishad it will be explained that by meditation on Om a yogi will be united with the solar light and ascend to the realization of Brahman. But right now the necessary adjuncts to such a meditation are enumerated: austerity [tapasya], continence [brahmacharya], faith [shraddha], and knowledge [vidya]. Those who prepare themselves by these practices—in conjunction with meditation on Om—will ascend to the solar world and, freed from the compulsion to rebirth, will pass onward to the transcendental realm of Brahman.

In the mechanism of the universe there are many wheels within wheels as in clockwork. So the upanishad then speaks of the month as reflection of Prana and Rayi just like the year: “Prana and Rayi, uniting, form the month. Its dark fortnight is Rayi, and its bright fortnight is Prana. Sages perform their devotional rites in the light, with knowledge; fools, in the dark, with ignorance.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:12. Prabhavananda omits the eleventh verse because of its obscure language and symbolism.)

Here, too, the material lunar phases are not being spoken of, but rather the inner cycles of spiritual awareness and spiritual ignorance. The wise do not act blindly, even in spiritual practice, but with understanding of how and why they should engage in meditation and worship. Because they lack the requisite insight, the ignorant engage in superstition, even if externally they seem to be doing the same as the wise. Without inner awakening all is hopeless, and awakening is a matter of evolution. It cannot come from an external source. This is why ordinary propagandizing religion plunges people deeper into ignorance and folly.

Until the inner consciousness begins to manifest only error can be the fruition of any religion. This is why Sanatana Dharma never engages in any form of missionary persuasion or coercion. Adherents of the Eternal Religion know that until a person ripens spiritually even Sanatana Dharma is meaningless and pointless—inevitably confusing and potentially harmful. That this is true is being proven every moment in the West by those who are deforming Dharma into an ego-driven diversion and often a tool for the same negative domination and opportunism that has made Western religion and philosophy into the absurd and destructive force it has been for centuries. And the “advaitins” are the worst.

**Food**

Now a very interesting symbol is introduced: “Food is Prana and Rayi. From food is produced seed, and from seed, in turn, are born all creatures.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:14. Prabhavananda omits the twelfth verse because of its obscure language and symbolism.) Nikhilananda translates this verse: “Food, verily, is Prajapati [the Creator]. From that comes semen [retas]; from semen are all these creatures born.”
The idea here is that Prana and Form, the two aspects of Prajapati, are manifesting as food—not just food that is eaten and digested, but rather all things that “enter” the sentient being’s life and mind and shape him. The body is formed of nothing but food, and the same is true of the four subtler bodies as well. The mind and the senses “eat” also. So we can realize that God is not only the source of all, but the manifester, sustainer, and evolver of all. There is nothing around us that is not divine manifestation. This is the vision the yogi strives for. “At the end of his many births the wise man takes refuge in Me. He knows: ‘All is Vasudeva.’ How very rare is that great soul!” (Bhagavad Gita 7:19)

Sri Ramakrishna once said: “The Divine Mother showed me that there are not two, but one existence only. It is Satchidananda alone that has taken many forms. It is He alone who has become the living beings, the universe and everything. It is He who has become food.” What the rishis perceived so many thousands of years ago can be known even today by the fervent yogi.

Home truths

Now it is time to get down to the solid facts, to the only sensible conclusions that can be drawn if we accept all the upanishad has been saying to us: “Those who worship the world of creation produce children; but those alone attain the world of Brahman who are steadfast in continence, meditation, and truthfulness.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:15)

Guilty, insecure people are always demanding assurance and approval from others. They usually get it from those equally guilty (or equally foolish), and evade facing the truth about themselves. In the long run such avoidance does absolutely no good, but being people who live in the moment they are satisfied with the deception. This especially manifests in “those who worship the world of creation” and materiality by their insisting on being assured that ascetic life is not necessary or superior to their maya-mired mode of existence. They bullyingly demand this assurance from supposed spiritual teachers (and especially monastics) employing a variety of ways to get what they want. But the upanishadic sages are long departed from this world, and their words have been preserved for thousands of years. What they say can be ignored, but it cannot be denied.

World worshippers become gears in “society” and immerse themselves in material involvement with “the world’s goods,” living as they please in egocentric, self-pleasing modes of life. They may not engender actual children now they have learned to frustrate the natural consequences of sex, but the resulting consciousness will be the same. Living as they “please” they are bound by the hopes and “joys” of earthly life, creating for themselves a guaranteed return to the realm of death that is this world. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: “There is no substance at all in worldly life.” And there is no substance in those that expend themselves in and on the world.

The rare few who have seen through the sham of the world and understood the reality of the Self, live in a very different manner. If their karma is very good, they take up the ascetic life early on, otherwise they wake up somewhere along their path in life, turn from the common folly, and become disciplined and purified in their mode of life. Whichever it may be, the life of all the wise is centered in “continence, meditation, and truthfulness.” There is no need for a comment on that, or on the final statement:

“The pure world of Brahman is attainable by those only who are neither deceitful, nor wicked, nor false.” (Prashna Upanishad 1:16)
The Powers That Make Us “Be”

Each of us is both Who and What. The Who is simple to define: Individualized Consciousness or jivatman—Individualized Self. The What, on the other hand is quite complex, which is why we have gotten lost in it and confused for lifetimes beyond number. The first step in learning how to undo this dilemma is learning what is keeping it going. For that reason:

“Then Bhargava approached the teacher and asked: ‘Holy sir, how many several powers hold together this body?” The word Swami Prabhavananda translates “power” is deva—god. He chose this interpretive translation so we could better understand the meaning of the sage’s words. “Which of them are most manifest in it? And which is the greatest?” (Prashna Upanishad 2:1) We need to know who our jailers are and especially who the governor of the jail may be. So:

Our makeup

“‘The powers,’ replied the sage, ‘are ether, air, fire, water, earth—these being the five elements which compose the body; and, besides these, speech, mind, eye, ear, and the rest of the sense organs. Once these powers made the boastful assertion: “We hold the body together and support it.”’” (Prashna Upanishad 2:2)

The five elements (panchabhuta) are forms of cosmic energy which make up the various bodies of the human being, including the five senses. They are not passive, but are living and moving powers. However, Bhargava has asked which powers hold together the body, which itself is formed of the elemental forces. Only one of them is the cohesive force which keeps the others in its magnetic field and enables them to assume form and function within that form. To illustrate this, Pippalada gave him a parable, saying that once all the elements claimed to be the dominant force in the body.

Prana

“Whereupon Prana, the primal energy, supreme over them all, said to them: ‘Do not deceive yourselves. It is I alone, dividing myself fivefold, who hold together this body and support it.’ But they would not believe him.” (Prashna Upanishad 2:3)

We see from this that the five elements are modifications of the cosmic life, the Prana (Vishwaprana), that although the body seems to be formed only of the five elements, the Prana itself is the underlying substratum as the ocean is to the waves. The body, then, is really nothing but Prana, as is anything else in the realm of relative existence. Even the smallest particle of the cosmos is the Universal Life in manifestation.

Another point is the supposed conversation between the elements. This is not just a device in a fable, but is an indication that since all things are manifestations of Cosmic Life they can take on a seemingly independent life (and even consciousness) of their own. This is a fundamental trait of Maya, the Cosmic Illusion, one which lies at the root of most confusion and ignorance.

The proof

“Prana, to justify himself, made as if he intended to leave the body. But as he rose and appeared to be going, all the rest realized that if he went they also would have to
depart with him; and as Prana again seated himself, the rest found their respective places. As bees go out when their queen goes out, and return when she returns, so was it with speech, mind, vision, hearing, and the rest. Convinced of their error, the powers now praised Prana, saying:” (Prashna Upanishad 2:4)

All the elements of the cosmos are rooted in Prana. It is the same with the elements and the senses in the individual's body complex (for the human being has five bodies corresponding to the five elements). Just as the waves are in total dependence upon the ocean for their very being, so everything cosmic and microcosmic depend upon Prana. This is why Om is called the Pranava: It is the sound-form of Prana, the mantric syllable by which the Prana is contacted and controlled. Furthermore, the breath (also called prana) is the outermost, physical manifestation of prana. Because of this the yogi joins his inner intonations of Om to his breath in the highest form of pranayama.

“That which causes all the pranas to prostrate themselves before and get merged in the Paramatman [the Supreme Soul: God], so as to attain identity with Him, is for that reason known as the Pranava.” (Atharvashikha Upanishad 1:10) “With Om alone he should breathe.” (Amritabindu Upanishad 20) “Pranayama is accomplished through concentrating the mind on Om.” (Saubhagyalakshmi Upanishad) “The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama.” (Sandilya Upanishad 6:2) “Pranayama is composed of the Pranava, Om. [Therefore] he should repeat the Pranava mentally. This only will be pranayama.” (Darshan Upanishad 6:2, 5, 6) “Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om.” (Yoga Vashishthha 5:78)

The powers of Prana

He who controls Prana controls all since Prana is all. Therefore the elements praised Prana, saying:

“As fire, Prana burns; as the sun, he shines; as cloud, he rains; as Indra, he rules the gods; as wind, he blows; as the moon, he nourishes all. He is that which is visible and also that which is invisible. He is immortal life.

“As spokes in the hub of a wheel, so is everything made fast in Prana—the Rik, the Yajur, the Sama, all sacrifices, the Kshatriyas, and the Brahmins.

“O Prana, lord of creation, thou movest in the womb, and art born again. To thee who, as breath, dwellest in the body, all creatures bring offerings.

“Thou, as fire, dost carry oblations to the gods; and through thee the fathers receive their offerings. To every organ of sense thou givest its function.

“Prana, thou art the creator; thou art the destroyer by thy prowess; and thou art the protector. Thou movest in the sky as the sun, and lord of lights art thou.

“Prana, when thou showerest down rain, thy creatures rejoice, hoping that they will find food, as much as they desire.

“Thou art purity itself, thou art the master of all that exists, thou art fire, the eater of offerings. We, the organs of sense, offer to thee thy food—to thee, the father of all.

“That power of thine which dwells in speech, in the ear, and in the eye, and which pervades the heart—make that propitious, and forsake us not.

“Whatsoever exists in the universe is dependent on thee, O Prana. Protect us as a mother protects her children. Grant us prosperity and grant us wisdom.” (Prashna Upanishad 2:5-13)

Obviously, then, the yogi cannot neglect the cultivation of Prana and Pranava together.
Prana: Its History and Nature

Sanatana Dharma is not a “shut up and believe and obey” religion. Those who follow the Eternal Dharma must gain the fullest knowledge of how things work, for without that knowledge mastery will be impossible. And mastery is the result of evolution. Prana, the universal life force, must be known about and mastered. So:

Conscious being

“When it was the turn of Kousalya, he put this question: “Master, of what is Prana born; how does he enter the body; how does he live there after dividing himself; how does he go out; how does he experience what is outside; and how does he hold together the body, the senses, and the mind?” (Prashna Upanishad 3:1)

All these questions are going to be answered subsequently, so the only important point is the referring to prana as a conscious being—which it is because it is the life of Brahman and therefore is Brahman. The fact that everything is conscious is unique to the teachings of Sanatana Dharma. Science considers itself extremely bold in cautiously approaching this concept and tentatively postulating it. Those in the West who bravely make the statement as evident fact are those whose thinking has—at least in its ancestry—been derived from the wisdom of India.

The worthy questioner

“To which the sage replied: Kousalya, you ask very difficult questions; but since you are a sincere seeker after the truth of Brahman, I must answer.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:2) This I have seen for myself in India. The great saints just will not bother with the idly curious and the hopelessly shallow. But they will gladly speak with those who are seeking the knowledge of Reality.

Once I made the mistake of taking a Western spiritual wanderer to meet Maitri Devi, a beloved saint in New Delhi. When he told her he wanted to ask a question she replied in Hindi: “I do not speak English.” When he asked if someone could translate his questions she again responded: “I do not speak English.” So I said to him quietly: “Tell me your question and I will ask it.” For quite some time he would softly tell me his questions and I would ask them—in English!—and she would readily answer through a translator. I appreciated her kindness to me, but I also decided to never again bother her with roamabouts. Other saints I met would do the same—some diplomatically, others not so tactfully.

We should learn from this and question ourselves as to why we “seek” and even why we study: To eventually reach the knowledge of God, or just to cram more ideas in our head to show how “wise” we are? Yogananda often spoke of those who had “spiritual indigestion” from cramming useless philosophy into their minds.

But Kousalya is a worthy questioner, so the sage replies:

Prana in us

“Prana is born of the Self. Like a man and his shadow, the Self and Prana are inseparable. Prana enters the body at birth, that the desires of the mind, continuing from past lives, may be fulfilled.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:3)

Just as the cosmos is an extension of the Consciousness that is Brahman, in the
same way our individual prana is an extension of our Self (atman). It is inseparable from the Self because it is the Self. This is the authentic non-duality (advaita) of the upanishads, not a negation or denial of either Prakriti or prana. Seeing them as separate from Spirit, and therefore dual, is the error—not acknowledging their intimate reality.

Prana provides the continuity between our present and past lives—both minds and bodies. It is also the force that enables the continuation of our evolution from past lives, carries us through this present life and through future ones as well. Prana truly is Life itself.

This verse also tells us that karma is a matter of the mind, and not some external force. Change the mind and you change the karma—or even dissolve it. It need never extend into our external existence. “Working out karma” is not a compelling necessity. We are never slaves to karma. We are its creators and its masters, at least potentially. But we have forgotten that fact and lost control of our karma. It must be regained if we would be free.

Its “associates”

“As a king employs officials to rule over different portions of his kingdom, so Prana associates with himself four other Pranas, each a portion of himself and each assigned a separate function.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:4) We usually speak of “five pranas,” but there is really only pure Prana and its four modalities. Their functions will be outlined, but first here is the definition of Prana found in our Brief Sanskrit Glossary:

**Prana:** Vital energy; life-breath; life-force. In the human body the prana is divided into five forms: 1) **Prana:** the prana that moves upward; 2) **Apana:** The prana that moves downward, producing the excretory functions in general. 3) **Vyana:** The prana that holds prana and apana together and produces circulation in the body. 4) **Samana:** The prana that carries the grosser material of food to the apana and brings the subtler material to each limb; the general force of digestion. 4) **Udana:** The prana which brings up or carries down what has been drunk or eaten; the general force of assimilation.

If this is kept in mind the following will be more comprehensible and meaningful.

“The Prana himself dwells in eye, ear, mouth, and nose; the Apana, which is the second Prana, rules the organs of excretion and generation; the Samana, which is the third Prana, inhabits the navel and governs digestion and assimilation.

“The Self dwells in the lotus of the heart, whence radiate a hundred and one nerves [nadis]. From each of these proceed one hundred others, which are smaller, and from each of these, again, seventy-two thousand others, which are smaller still. In all these moves the Vyana, which is the fourth Prana.

“And then at the moment of death, through the nerve in the center of the spine, the Udana, which is the fifth Prana, leads the virtuous man upward to higher birth, the sinful man downward to lower birth, and the man who is both virtuous and sinful to rebirth in the world of men.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:5-7)

This final verse is an interpretive translation saying more than is really there. Swami Nikhilananda translates it literally: “And then udana, ascending upward through one of them, conducts the departing soul to the virtuous world, for its virtuous deeds; to the sinful world, for its sinful deeds; and to the world of men, for both.” As you see, there is no mention of a “nerve in the center of the spine,” the sushumna. The nadi of ascending consciousness is spoken of at the end of the Katha Upanishad thusly: “Radiating from the lotus of the heart there are a hundred and one nerves. One of
these ascends toward the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. If, when a man comes to
die, his vital force passes upward and out through this nerve, he attains immortality;
but if his vital force passes out through another nerve, he goes to one or another plane
of mortal existence and remains subject to birth and death.” (Katha Upanishad 2:3:16)
Here is what I wrote in comment on this verse:

“By ‘heart’ is meant the hub–located in the midst of the upper trunk of the body–of
subtle passages known as nadis (here translated ‘nerves’) through which the life force
(prana) circulates throughout the gross and subtle bodies, just as the blood circulates
from the heart through the veins of the physical body. One hundred of these nadis
direct the life force to the life processes of the bodies and are the forces of
embodiment. One, unique, nadi, however, rises directly upward from the heart-hub
into the head. (This nadi rises from the heart directly into the head–it is not the
passage in the midst of the spine.) If at the time of death the departing spirit leaves
through that channel, he gains immortality. But if his consciousness attaches itself to
any of the hundred other nadis he will be impelled into the subtle worlds that lead
inexorably back to incarnation in relativity.

“In every meditation, by intoning Om in time with the breath we activate this
channel, causing the life force to spontaneously and effortlessly, flow upward into the
thousand-petalled lotus in the head toward the divine radiance that shines above and
upon the upper levels of the brain-lotus. That Divine Light is the essence of Om, the
Life-Giving Word, the Pranava. Then at the end of life, having prepared himself by this
practice, sitting in meditation the yogi ascends upward from the body into the realm of
immortality.”

**Cosmic prana**

Since each of us is a reflection of the universe, there is a cosmic pranic
arrangement also, so the sage continues:

“The sun is the Prana of the universe. It rises to help the Prana in the eye of man to
see. The power of earth maintains the Apana in man. The ether between the sun and
the earth is the Samana, and the all-pervading air is the Vyana.

“The Udana is fire, and therefore he whose bodily heat has gone out dies, after
which his senses are absorbed in the mind, and he is born again. Whatever his thought
at the moment of death, this it is that unites a man with Prana, who in turn, uniting
himself with Udana and with the Self, leads the man to be reborn in the world he
merits.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:8-10)

This final principle is the most important. It is expanded in the Gita in this way: “At
the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness
absorbed in me. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man
remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the
hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this
life. Therefore you must remember me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and
heart are set upon me constantly, you will come to me. Never doubt this. Make a habit
of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will
come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high.” (Prashna
Upanishad 3:5-8)

This is why the japa and meditation of Om is “The Way,” as Patanjali states in the
Yoga Sutras (1:28)
The knowing of Prana: immortality

The importance of knowing the functions of Prana by direct experience—through yoga practice—is summed up by the sage, saying:

“The progeny of him who knows Prana as I have revealed him to you is never cut off; and he himself becomes immortal.

“It was said of old: One who knows the Prana—whence he has his source, how he enters the body, how he lives there after dividing himself five-fold, what are his inner workings—such an one attains to immortality, yea, even to immortality.” (Prashna Upanishad 3:11, 12)

For, as the other upanishads declare: Prana is Brahman.
The Witnessing Self

The one in the three

“Gargya then asked: ‘Master, when a man’s body sleeps, who is it within that
sleeps, and who is awake, and who is dreaming? Who then experiences happiness, and
with whom are all the sense organs united?’” (Prashna Upanishad 4:1)

Anyone who ponders the nature of consciousness comes to realize that there are
three modes of experience: waking, dream, and dreamless sleep. All three of these
states are experienced by a single witness who says: “I slept without dream,” “I slept
and dreamed,” and “I am now awake.” Who is that witness? This is Gargya’s inquiry.
Who is the unchanging witness of change? Who is the unseen seer? For no intelligent
person of unclouded intellect can doubt the existence of such a one.

Sleep

“‘As the rays of the sun, O Gargya, when he sets,’ replied the sage, ‘gather
themselves up in his disk of light, to come out again when he rises, so the senses
gather themselves up in the mind, the highest of them all. Therefore when a man does
not hear, see, smell, taste, touch, speak, grasp, enjoy, we say that he sleeps. Only the
Pranas are then awake in the body, and the mind is led nearer to the Self.’” (Prashna
Upanishad 4:2-4)

Prana is the primal life-force or vital energy. The prana that manifests in the
evolving universe also manifests in the evolving body of each human being. In the
body there are five basic forms of prana: 1) Prana, the prana that moves upward; 2)
Apana: The prana that moves downward, producing the excretory functions in general.
3) Vyana: The prana that holds prana and apana together and produces circulation in
the body. 4) Samana: The prana that carries the grosser material of food to the apana
and brings the subtler material to each limb; the general force of digestion. 5) Udana:
The prana which brings up or carries down what has been drunk or eaten; the general
force of assimilation.

The pranas also correspond to the five elements: earth (prithvi), water (apa), fire
(tejas), air (vayu), and ether (akasha). One of these five elements is the foundation for
one of the five senses: earth=smell, water=taste, fire=sight, air=touch, and ether=hearing/speech.

In the waking state all the pranas are quite active and fundamentally outflowing,
even those that maintain the internal functions of the body being externalized through
being expended in the fulfillment of their tasks. But in sleep they withdraw into the
inner reservoirs of the body and the state of sleep occurs. On the subtlest energy level
they withdraw into the manas, the energy field we call the mind. For the mind is the
highest “sense,” being the sum and goal of them all. It is not amiss to say that the
senses serve the mind—at least when the right order prevails. Otherwise they drag the
mind helplessly along addicting and enslaving it. Breaking the web of this addiction-
slavery is then impossible without the practice of pranayama—control and refinement of
the pranas. For this reason all viable spiritual traditions have methods that involve
breath—the most objective manifestation of prana—to some degree. (See Chapter Four:
Breath and Sound in Meditation in Om Yoga—Its Theory and Practice.)

When the pranas withdraw into the mind, their distracting activities lessen—unless
they occupy and overwhelm the mind with constant and vivid dreaming. When/If the mind is thus granted a reprieve from their clamor, it begins to sense what is behind it, just as it is behind the senses. The mind is the witness of the senses, but it is also witnessed. That ultimate witness is the Self. Therefore the upanishad says that in sleep “the mind is led nearer to the Self.”

Dreams and dreamlessness

Where do dreams come from? Gargya has not asked, but Pippalada tells him: “While in dream, the mind revives its past impressions. Whatever it has seen, it sees again; whatever it has heard, it hears again; whatever it has enjoyed in various countries and in various quarters of the earth, it enjoys again. What has been seen and not seen, heard and not heard, enjoyed and not enjoyed, both the real and the unreal, it sees; yea, it sees all.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:5) Everyone is creative in the dream state, though some are definitely better writer/directors of their inner movies than others. He continues: “When the mind is overpowered by deep slumber, it dreams no more. It rests happily in the body.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:6)

From the very first yogis have spoken of the importance of the dreamless, deep sleep state they call sushupti. This is because in dreamless sleep we are aware of awareness itself with no interference from the senses. We are aware deep within ourselves, aware of our nature as simple, pure consciousness. Dreamless sleep is also proof that the Self exists. For although no objects are presented to the mind, there is a witness of that non-experiencing. Otherwise we would not awaken and say: “I slept but had no dreams at all.” Instead we would not know any time had passed, would not know that we had been asleep. That witness which cognizes the waking, dream, and dreamless states is the Atman itself.

There is a higher form “when sushupti [the dreamless sleep state] is rightly cognized [experienced] while conscious,” says the Shandilya Upanishad. In that state we are “asleep while awake” and are fully conscious of the fact. This is very near the actual experience of the Self and partakes of that experience to some degree, the happiness and ease we feel being a touch of the joy (ananda) that is the nature of the Self. It is extremely valuable because it shows us that when all sensory experience is gone beyond there yet remains the truth of ourselves in the form of pure, unconditioned consciousness that is the Self.

In deep meditation we enter this state intentionally and begin working our inner transformation from this center by the subtle intonations of Om. (See Om Yoga: Its Theory and Practice for more on this.)

To the Self

“As birds, my friend, fly to a tree for rest, even so do all these things fly to the Self: Earth and its peculiar essence, water and its peculiar essence, fire and its peculiar essence, air and its peculiar essence, ether and its peculiar essence, the eye and what it sees, the ear and what it hears, the nose and what it smells, the tongue and what it tastes, the skin and what it touches, the voice and what it speaks, the hands and what they grasp, the feet and what they walk on, the mind and what it perceives, the intellect and what it understands, the ego and what it appropriates, the heart and what it loves, light and what it illumines, energy and what it binds together.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:7, 8)

They “fly to the Self” because the Self is their origin. They are returning to their
source after ages upon ages of separation in relative existence/experience.

“For verily it is the Self that sees, hears, smells, tastes, thinks, knows, acts. He is Brahman, whose essence is knowledge. He is the immutable Self, the Supreme.” (Prashna Upanishad 4:9) The Self is the Experiencer in all beings, the knower of all things, and the doer of all acts. This points out the fact that Maya–illusion–is the misperception of things, not perception itself. Also, sense experience, thought, and actions are NOT illusions. It is our misunderstanding of them that is illusion. The Self is real and its experiences are real. It is true that they are purely mental in nature, but is the mind not real? Again, it is a matter how we perceive.

The Self is a wave of the ocean of Brahman, the Absolute, whose nature is Consciousness. The Self is immutable, and beyond it there is nothing else, for in essence it is one with Brahman, the ultimate Being. Yet, the Self needs to attain itself, needs to attain the consciousness of its Being which is Brahman. Therefore the sage says further:

**The end result**

“He who knows the immutable, the pure, the shadowless, the bodiless, the colorless, attains to Brahman, O my friend. Such an one becomes all-knowing, and he dwells in all beings. Of him it is written: ‘He who knows that immutable Self, wherein live the mind, the senses, the pranas, the elements–verily such an one knows all things, and realizes the Self in all.’” (Prashna Upanishad 4:10, 11)

This is most important, for it indicates that first we know the Self–the individual Self, the jivatman–and then we are enabled to know the Supreme Self, the Paramatman: Brahman. And the Self we will know is itself:

**Immutable.** Eternally changeless, incapable of being either diminished or increased, for it is one with the Infinite.

**Pure.** Ever only itself, never really being influenced or changed by any thing whatsoever. Untainted by any contact, for it is untouchable.

**Shadowless.** The Self is Pure Light within which there is no shadow of darkness or differentiation. It is always exactly what it is.

**Bodiless.** It is perfectly non-dual. It is neither inside or outside of any thing. It cannot be contained. It is absolutely one, having nothing appended to it or necessary to it.

**Colorless.** It has no “qualities” or “characteristics” but is always I AM. The three gunas are not present in it, nor are any gradations of any kind. It is indescribable. All we can really say about it is what it is not.

All of these terms indicate that the Self is the same as Brahman. And the Self that knows its Self–Brahman, “wherein live the mind, the senses, the pranas, the elements”–does in truth come to know all things and the Self in all things.

Omniscience and omnipresence are experienced by that liberated spirit who knows its oneness with The All.
Meditation on Om

So far the questions put to Pippalada have been about the components of the human organism which both empower and limit it. In the last section the subject of the Self was considered—specifically the nature of the Self and the results of knowing the Self. Now we approach the subject of the way in which the Self is known. Without knowing this, all the foregoing teaching is pointless.

Life and death

“Whereupon Satyakama, coming near to the master, said: Venerable sir, if a man meditate upon the syllable OM all his life, what shall be his reward after death?” (Prashna Upanishad 5:1)

Satyakama understood that what really mattered was not short-term gain in this life, but the state of consciousness that would determine where the individual would go after death when stripped of body, possessions, relationships, and all that is “of the earth, earthly”–when he has nothing but his degree of evolution to determine his future.

So he wants to know what will be the result of meditating on Om throughout one’s life. Literally, the Sanskrit texts asks what will be the result of intense meditation (abhidhyana) on Om, and what world (loka) will be won (jayati) by means of that meditation. For the world in which we find ourselves after death reveals our fundamental state of consciousness.

The supreme attainment

“And the master answered him thus: Satyakama, OM is Brahman—both the conditioned and the unconditioned, the personal and the impersonal. By meditating upon it the wise man may attain either the one or the other.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:2)

Brahman is absolutely one, but from our present perspective seems to be of a dual character. In this verse the expression “higher” (para) and “lower” (apara) are used, though Prabhavananda has used the explanatory translations “conditioned and the unconditioned” and “the personal and the impersonal.” It is more usual to use the terms nirguna (without attributes or qualities–guna) and saguna (with attributes or qualities) in relation to Brahman. In A Brief Sanskrit Glossary Nirguna Brahman is defined as: “The impersonal, attributeless Absolute beyond all description or designation.” Saguna Brahman is defined as: “The supreme Absolute conceived of as endowed with qualities like mercy, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc., as distinguished from the undifferentiated Absolute—Nirguna Brahman.” Nirguna Brahman is the “higher” Brahman and Saguna Brahman is the “lower” or lesser. Again, this distinction is just a means of expression adopted for the limitations of our human intellects.

Presently it is commonly assumed—erroneously—that there is one way to meditate on Nirguna Brahman and another way to meditate on Saguna Brahman. But this was not so in the upanishadic era, as can be seen from the texts cited in both Om Yoga and The Word That Is God. It was understood that Om is all-inclusive, since It is Brahman Itself. Consequently, meditation on Om is meditation on both Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. Our perceptions will be according to whichever aspect we wish to contact.
According to our knowing

It also depends on our experience-knowledge of Om, not mere intellectual ideas. For Pippalada then says: “If he meditate upon OM with but little knowledge of its meaning, but nevertheless is enlightened thereby, upon his death he will be immediately born again on this earth, and during his new life he will be devoted to austerity, continence, and faith, and will attain to spiritual greatness.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:3) That is, if for whatever reasons the yogi gains but little experience-knowledge of Om, still he will be enlightened by it to some degree. This being so, he will not spend a long period in the astral world, but will quickly be reborn so he can take up yoga again and make better progress than he did before. To ensure this, in his new life “he will be devoted to austerity, continence, and faith, and will attain to spiritual greatness.”

“If, again, he meditate upon OM with a greater knowledge of its meaning, upon his death he will ascend to the lunar heaven, and after he has partaken of its pleasures will return again to earth.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:4) “The lunar heaven” is the astral world in which the yogi experiences great happiness and even power according to the immense strength of positive karma which is engendered by the practice of yoga. Yet he will in time take birth again on the earth.

“But if he meditate upon OM in the full consciousness that it is one with God, upon his death he will be united with the light that is in the sun, he will be freed from evil, even as a snake is freed from its slough, and he will ascend to God’s dwelling place. There he will realize Brahman, who evermore abides in the heart of all beings—Brahman Supreme!” (Prashna Upanishad 5:5) Those who experience in meditation that Om truly is Divinity Itself—is their own Divine Self—will be freed from the compulsion to earthly rebirth as well as all that has bound them to lower things and, united with the Light of Spirit that invisibly shines upon us through the intermediary of the sun, will ascend to the heights of existence and beyond into the transcendent Being of Nirguna Brahman.

Then Pippalada cites two verses even older than the upanishads that encapsulate all this:

“Concerning the sacred syllable OM it is written: “The syllable OM, when it is not fully understood, does not lead beyond mortality. When it is fully understood, and meditation is therefore rightly directed, a man is freed from fear, whether he be awake, dreaming, or sleeping the dreamless sleep, and attains to Brahman.

“By virtue of a little understanding of OM a man returns to earth after death. By virtue of a greater understanding he attains to the celestial sphere. By virtue of a complete understanding he learns what is known only to the seers. The sage, with the help of OM, reaches Brahman, the fearless, the undecaying, the immortal!” Prashna Upanishad 5:6, 7)

As Sri Ramana Maharshi said: Om ever shines within us as the Self. May we all realize this.
Where is the Self?

“Lastly, Suksesa approached the sage and said: ‘Holy sir, Hiranyanabha, prince of Kosala, once asked me this question: “Suksesa, do you know the Self and his sixteen parts?”’ I replied, ‘I do not. Surely, if I had known them, I should have taught them to you. I will not lie, for he who lies perishes, root and all.’” The prince silently mounted his chariot and went away. So now I ask of thee, Where is the Self?” (Prashna Upanishad 6:1)

This is an introduction to the actual teachings of this section, but it contains a couple of interesting points.

Sixteen parts

The Self is said in this verse to have sixteen “parts.” Yet the Self is one, so how can this be? The upanishad is referring to the “extensions” or instruments of the Self by means of which it manifests within relative existence. They will be enumerated shortly.

Spiritual honesty

It is impressive when a spiritual teacher honestly admits to not knowing something. In a filmed interview, Carl Jung was asked what he thought some dream symbol meant. He laughed and said: “I haven’t the faintest idea!” End of question!

Here we see the integrity of Suksesa who readily admitted not knowing the answer to a question. And his reason he gives, saying: “I will not lie, for he who lies perishes, root and all.” Satya—truthfulness—is one of the essential observances of Yoga according to Patanjali, and here we see why. This should be taken to heart by us throughout our life. Sri Ramakrishna said that a person can realize God by scrupulously adhering to truth.

Abode of the Self

Where is the Self? “The sage replied: “My child, within this body dwells the Self, from whom sprang the sixteen parts of the universe; and in this manner they came into being.” (Prashna Upanishad 6:2)

How precious, then, is the human body! And how foolish it is to think that spiritual experience will involve “escaping” from the body and flying off to some “spiritual world” to hobnob with angels and masters!

Now he will describe the sequence of cosmic manifestation.

Stabilizing Itself within creation

“If, creating, I enter my creation, the Self reflected, what is there to bind me to it; what is there to go out from it when I go out, to stay within it when I stay?” (Prashna Upanishad 6:3) This is a problem for both the infinite and the finite Selves.

“Pondering thus, and in answer to his thought, he made Prana; and from Prana he made desire; and from desire he made ether, air, fire, water, earth, the senses, the mind, and food; and from food he made vigor, penance, the Vedas, the sacrificial rites, and all the worlds. Thereafter, in the worlds, he created names. And the number of the elements he thus created was sixteen.” (Prashna Upanishad 6:4) We need to take this part by part.
Pondering thus, and in answer to his thought, he made.... The world was made by the mere thought of God. As said before, this is the “dream” of God; it is all creative thought. Merely thinking of something gets us human beings nowhere—we have to bring it into manifestation by action and materials. This is not the case with God. He thought—and so it was. Consequently, in the following list of cosmic ingredients, we must not think of them as “stuff” but as cosmic thoughts.

**Prana.** First the Universal Life Force (vishwaprana) was manifested. This was the formless, basic “substance” of relative existence.

**Desire.** Next came the power of intention or aspiration. For unless we are motivated with the idea that something can be attained, we will not act. So the power to desire or will—and thereby to shape and work with the cosmic prana—is absolutely necessary for anything to “happen.” “Desire” is the explanatory translation of Prabhavananda, and I think it is the best one. But the actual word in the Sanskrit is *shraddha*—faith. This was used, Shankara says, to mean a stimulus to the individual spirits (jivas). That is, subliminally all of us know that we have come from God and are intended to return to God. With this aspiration as the deepest impulse of our being, we are moving up the evolutionary path, ever onward, however many delays our ignorance and laziness may bring about.

**Ether, air, fire, water, earth**—the great primal elements and all their variations down to their material manifestations.

**The senses.** Actually, the word is *indriyam*, which means “organs” and often does mean only the five organs of perception (jnanendriyas): ear, skin, eye, tongue, and nose, but Shankara feels (and so do I) that it no doubt includes the five organs of action (karmendriyas): voice, hand, foot, organ of excretion, and the organ of generation. The indriyas are here being thought of as “wrappings” of the individual consciousness as well as being instruments of bodily function.

**Mind.** The indriyas are unconscious. That which activates them is the mind which both perceives and acts through them.

**Food.** By this term is meant all that goes to affect the evolving consciousness, from physical food to psychological and intellectual impressions that shape and move our development either forward or backward, according to their character. That this is so is demonstrated by those things that are said to be “made” from food:

**Vigor.** Virya is the strength and energy that manifests in body, mind, and intellect—especially as will power in the yogi.

**Penance.** Tapasya is practical spiritual disciplines, such as moral observances, self-purification, and the practice of meditation.

**Vedas.** The word is not Veda, but *mantra*—words of power which produce changes spiritually, mentally and physically by their repetition. From vigor comes the capacity for spiritual discipline, which is manifested in the form of the repetition (japa) and meditation (dhyana) centered on mantras, especially the Supreme Mantra: Om.

**Sacrificial rites.** This is not only an interpretive translation, it is a very narrowing one. The actual word is *karma*—a very wide and far-reaching matter, indeed. Here it means the law of action/reaction which fuels the very existence of the world and our bodies within it. Karma causes the manifestation of the cosmos and impels all sentient beings to take incarnation within it in forms appropriate to their level of consciousness and the nature of their past deeds, both physical and mental. Certainly merit-producing actions are part of karma, but karma is much more.

**All the worlds.** The many worlds (lokas) are produced in response to the varying
degrees of evolution and past karma of the sentient beings within them.

Names. The prime factor in relative existence is nama: name. This seems very peculiar to those whose philosophy does not postulate that everything is ideation–thought. But the primeval sages of India perceived through their meditation that the thoughtform, the idea that is the matrix around which the body-vehicle of any manifested entity forms itself is that entity's "name." In the depths of their meditation the sages perceived the primal thought of each "thing." Since everything is formed of vibration, they translated that into spoken forms. In all other languages a word is just an agreed-upon symbol of an object, but in Sanskrit each word is a sound-form of the basic energy pattern of the designated object. Sanskrit is a kind of sonic physics–creative speech. For that reason Sanskrit script is call Devanagari–The City of the Gods–meaning that the divine powers manifesting as all objects "dwell" in the Sanskrit words. In the subtle levels of being the Sanskrit word is the thing designated by the word. That is why it is stated that the Name of God IS God! Om is Divinity Itself. (See the section entitled The Glories and Powers of Om in Om Yoga and The Word That Is God.)

These are the sixteen parts of the cosmic and the individual Selves.

The Great Return

"As the flowing rivers, whose destination is the sea, having reached it disappear in it, losing their names and forms, and men speak only of the sea; so these sixteen parts created from out his own being by the Self, the Eternal Seer, having returned to him from whom they came, disappear in him, their destination, losing their names and forms, and people speak only of the Self. Then for man the sixteen parts are no more, and he attains to immortality. Thus was it said of old: "The sixteen parts are spokes projecting from the Self, who is the hub of the wheel. The Self is the goal of knowledge. Know him and go beyond death." (Prashna Upanishad 6:5, 6)

There is an important principle here: All that exists has emanated from the Cosmic Self and is withdrawn into It–and the same is true of our many levels: they have come from the true "us" and will remerge in us. The idea that "the world" is to be discarded–escaped from–so we can be free is as illusory as the world from which we wish to rid ourselves. It is ignorance alone that we need to banish. We need to refine all our bodies through the practice of tapasya so they will be seen as nothing more than the projections of our mind–projections that can be reabsorbed in the state of perfect knowing. The macrocosm and the microcosm are both "proper" to Spirit and spirit. They are not impositions or prisons (though we make them so), but rays of the Self. They exist because we exist.

The only path to the Self is that of knowledge. Once that arises within us, death dissolves and immortality alone remains.

The right ending

"The sage concluded, saying: What I have told you is all that can be said about the Self, the Supreme Brahman. Beyond this there is naught." (Prashna Upanishad 6:7) So anything more we may say, that has not already been said in the upanishads (and the Gita), will really be nothing–worthless and pointless, if not outright self-deception. This merits being taken to heart. We should toss away our books of idle philosophy and speculation and become genuine yogis. Then we will truly know That Which Is To Be Known.
So: “The disciples worshiped the sage, and said: You are indeed our father. You have led us beyond the sea of ignorance. We bow down to all the great seers! Obeisance to the great seers!”

Those who teach us the truth of the Self—and more: the way to realize the Self—they are our true fathers, begetting us in Knowledge. They are worthy of worship (archanam) and all honor. They are the gods that lead us to God.

_Namah Paramarishibhyah_—Salutations to the Great Rishis!
A Commentary on the Aitareya Upanishad

The Worlds and the Self

In his translations of some upanishads Swami Prabhavananda omitted parts that were in such obscure language that any attempt at translation would really only be speculation. He also omitted very repetitious passages and those that dwelt with matters irrelevant to the knowledge of Brahman and the Self. I think that if you get complete translations of those you will see he was quite justified in this. Anyhow, I am writing this to explain why in the references to the verses of this upanishad there will be some jumping around.

The worlds

Before creation, all that existed was the Self, the Self alone. Nothing else was. Then the Self thought. “Let me send forth the worlds.” He sent forth these worlds: Ambhas, the highest world, above the sky and upheld by it; Marichi, the sky; Mara, the mortal world, the earth; and Apa, the world beneath the earth. (Aitareya Upanishad 1:1:1, 2)

Several times in the upanishads we are told that when nothing else existed, Brahman “was;” and from Brahman proceeded all the worlds. But in these opening verses of the Aitareya Upanishad the word Atman–Self–is used instead of Brahman. This is fitting for two reasons: First, because Brahman is the ultimate Self of all. Second, because what occurred on the cosmic level in relation to Brahman has occurred on the microcosmic level with each one of us, with each individual Self that has entered into the field of relative existence. Just as the various worlds or lokas have emanated from Brahman so the several bodies or koshas have emanated from the individual Self.

The upanishad lists four worlds that are also levels of existence. Ambhas is the highest world. It lies beyond the material realm. Marichi is space itself in which many suns and planets are to be found. For this reason, the upanishad uses the plural term Marichis, but it is correct to use the singular word since it means the entire cosmos. Mara is not just planet earth, but any planet on which sentient beings live. Mara means death, and it is applied to the planets because all beings that live there are mortal. Apa is the name of the submaterial regions from which atomic matter rises.

These worlds have a more metaphysical meaning as well. Ambhas is the causal world, Marichi is the astral world, Mara is the physical world, and Apa is the region where those of low evolution go for a time after death–usually in a kind of sleep. In later Indian cosmology the non-material worlds are divided into those that are beneath the earth plane and those that are above the earth plane. The realms beneath are the regions where animals and low-evolved humans go between incarnations. These worlds include the negative regions we call “hells.” Apa embraces all these. The realms
above are where normal human beings go between lives, and include the world humans graduate into when they no longer need evolution on the material place. These are the astral and causal worlds, Marichi and Ambhas.

The worlds have a psychological meaning, as well. Ambhas is the superconscious mind, Marichi is the higher intelligence, or buddhi, Mara is the sensory, earth-centered mind or consciousness, and Apa is the subconscious mind. These classifications particularly apply to the individual Self of each one of us.

**Their guardians**

“He thought: ‘Behold the worlds. Let me now send forth their guardians.’ Then he sent forth their guardians….He thought: ‘Behold these worlds and the guardians of these worlds. Let me send forth food for the guardians.’ Then he sent forth food for them.” (Aitareya Upanishad 1:1:3, 1:3:1)

The word used here for guardians is lokapala. A lokapala is the ruler or custodian of a world (loka). At the beginning of creation, each world was assigned an overseer or guardian. These are beings who have evolved to the status of “gods” and sometimes are mistaken for the Absolute by those within those worlds whose understanding is imperfect. Nevertheless, to approach them is beneficial, for they will themselves reveal their limited nature and point questing souls to Brahman the Infinite. The lokapalas are like gardeners, for they work with living things and their development as well as their safety. Actually, the picture of Adam in the Bible is very similar—he was to supervise and foster all forms of life, plant and animal. (Many ancient scriptures contain partial or garbled accounts that were once expositions of wisdom. But the centuries have altered and even eroded them.)

The upanishad is speaking of the beginning of things. So immediately after the manifestation of the worlds, the lokapalas were awakened and made aware of their assignments; for their work is part of their personal evolutionary process. It is this work and the “furnishings” of the worlds that are their “food.”

Now the same thing happens with us. We are the custodians of our private worlds or bodies. And our experiences through those bodies and the development we gain are our food—just as it is for the lokapalas.

**Entering the worlds**

“He thought: ‘How shall there be guardians and I have no part in them? If, without me, speech is uttered, breath is drawn, eye sees, ear hears, skin feels, mind thinks, sex organs procreate, then what am I?’ He thought: ‘Let me enter the guardians.’ Whereupon, opening the center of their skulls, he entered. The door by which he entered is called the door of bliss.” (Aitareya Upanishad 1:3:11, 12)

This narrative is more instructive than literally accurate. First of all, there is nothing that is not a manifestation of Brahman. It is not possible for Brahman to enter into anything, for It is always everywhere. But the upanishad is teaching us as we teach children—piecemeal and partially. The idea here is that Brahman is enlivening and enabling all beings, from the lokapalas down to the least evolved of sentient beings.

These two verses are more individual than cosmic, however, and refer to us mostly. Our lokapalas are the various faculties of the mind that administer the different levels of our being as humans. Brahman is, as I said, always present, but this verse speaks of the entry of the individual consciousness into the human complex when it incarnates.
as a human being. The Self enters through the psychic center or energy whorl called the Brahmarandhra—the aperture of Brahman—and from there administers its private cosmos, a god within its finite universe.

According to yogis, when we leave our body we go out through the gate (chakra) that corresponds to our dominant state of consciousness. Those who are depart through the Brahmarandhra. Others leave through the lower centers.

**Within the three states of consciousness**

“The Self being unknown, all three states of the soul are but dreaming—waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. In each of these dwells the Self: the eye is his dwelling place while we wake, the mind is his dwelling place while we dream, the lotus of the heart is his dwelling place while we sleep the dreamless sleep.” (Aitareya Upanishad 1:3:12)

This is quite simple: If the Self is not known, then even our waking is only a sleeping and dreaming. There is a lot of going around and around about the question of the reality of the world. But the upanishad gives us a quite simple answer: To those that sleep, not knowing the Self, the world is unreal; to those that are awake in the knowledge of the Self, the world is real—for the world is the Self. This is the frame of reference Buddha had when, meeting a Brahmin after his liberation, when the Brahman asked: “Who are you?” he replied: “I am awake.”

Therefore: “Having entered into the guardians, he identified himself with them. He became many individual beings. Now, therefore, if an individual awake from his threefold dream of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep, he sees no other than the Self. He sees the Self dwelling in the lotus of his heart as Brahman, omnipresent, and he declares: ‘I know Brahman!’” (Aitareya Upanishad 1:3:13)

This is both the beginning and the end.

**More on the Self**

The four closing verses of the upanishad need little comment. They begin:

“Who is this Self whom we desire to worship? Of what nature is this Self? Is he the self by which we see form, hear sound, smell odor, speak words, and taste the sweet or the bitter? Is he the heart and the mind by which we perceive, command, discriminate, know, think, remember, will, feel, desire, breathe, love, and perform other like acts? Nay, these are but adjuncts of the Self, who is pure consciousness.” (Aitareya Upanishad 3:1:1, 2)

This is extremely important for us, since it is only natural that we would mistake these various faculties for the Self, for they are functions of consciousness, though not Consciousness itself.

“And this Self, who is pure consciousness, is Brahman. He is God, all gods; the five elements—earth, air, fire, water, ether; all beings, great or small, born of eggs, born from the womb, born from heat, born from soil; horses, cows, men, elephants, birds; everything that breathes, the beings that walk and the beings that walk not. The reality behind all these is Brahman, who is pure consciousness.” (Aitareya Upanishad 3:1:3)

This takes us a very necessary step further: Even those things that are not Brahman Itself in the purest sense, in another sense are Brahman and to be regarded as such. This is a bit like telling us to go two ways at the same time, something impossible for the ordinary mind, but quite easy—and natural—for the yogi’s mind.

Swami Gambhirananda’s rendering of the last part of this verse is very revealing:
“All these have Consciousness as the giver of their reality; all these are impelled by Consciousness [Prajna]; the universe has Consciousness as its eye, and Consciousness is its end. Consciousness is Brahman.” What sublime statements. Surely the upanishads are unparalleled in their beauty and profound teaching.

“All these, while they live, and after they have ceased to live, exist in him. The sage Vamadeva, having realized Brahman as pure consciousness, departed this life, ascended into heaven, obtained all his desires, and achieved immortality.” (Aitareya Upanishad 3:1:4)

And so shall we.
A Commentary on the Taittiriya Upanishad

Reflections On Brahman

In his translations of some upanishads Swami Prabhavananda omitted parts that were in such obscure language that any attempt at translation would really only be speculation. He also omitted very repetitious passages and those that dwelt with matters irrelevant to the knowledge of Brahman and the Self. I think that if you get complete translations of those you will see he was quite justified in this. Anyhow, I am writing this to explain why in the references to the verses of this upanishad there will be some jumping around.

Thou art indeed...

“Thou art indeed the manifested Brahman. Of thee will I speak. Thee will I proclaim in my thoughts as true. Thee will I proclaim on my lips as true.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:1:1)

This fervent profession of faith and fidelity seems quite simple, but when we consider what it entails, it is a high aspiration indeed. It is also strikingly in contrast to most of the upanishads, which continually insist on the transcendence of Brahman and the impossibility of comprehending or speaking of It.

While typing in the foregoing sentence my memory reached back to a time of blessed tranquility in the sacred city of Sukhtal in north India. Tradition says that the supreme Master Sukhadeva, the illumined son of Vyasa, came to Sukhtal and taught the dying King Parikshit the principles of Self-knowledge and liberation. Many centuries later I was in Sukhtal at a spiritual gathering (Samyan Saptah) under the aegis of Sri Ma Anandamayi. One of the great souls (mahatmas) also gathered there was Sri Yogeshwar Brahmachari, a venerable saint of Bengal whom I had met and visited with before. Every day he would be seated on the platform near Ma, sitting in profound meditation, not moving for hours or even seeming to breathe. The exception would be when he would give a daily talk on spiritual life. In the evening there would be a question-and-answer session with people putting questions to the various renowned spiritual leaders on the platform. One evening, right after a famous Vedantin had given a rather lengthy answer to a question, Yogeshwar Brahmachari began to speak forcefully. In a matter of moments the tranquil atmosphere was replaced by one of anger and suppressed violence–toward him. It really felt like they were about to physically attack and maul him, the only restraint being the presence of Ma Anandamayi.

Naturally, the next morning found me seeking out Yogeshwar Brahmachari to find what had taken place, since everything had been said in Hindi. I found him happily ensconced in a cowshed (!) where he was sleeping on some straw placed on a stone ledge. I was very aware that not one of the other savants sitting on the platform day
after day would have tolerated such humble and primitive surroundings. But Brahmachariji was very happy, as he could cuddle and talk to the little calf that was tethered nearby.

After some time of giving our latest news to each other, I questioned him about the previous nights' volcanic near-explosion. He laughed merrily and told me that he had challenged and rebuked all the “big Advaitins (Non-dualists)” sitting there, demanding to know why they harped all the time on the transcendence of God and ignored the divine immanence. “Why do you keep telling these people who have so many worldly involvements and problems that the world is unreal, that they should care nothing about it, and that to do otherwise is ignorance? In all these days I have not heard even one of you say just one piece of practical advice that would help them live their lives and remember God. They have come here at great inconvenience and expense, leaving their homes and work behind, seeking ways to keep from drowning in the world. And you just tell them the world is no more than a dream and to forget it! How could they forget it? How many children must they have to care for and how many debts and obligations? What is wrong with you? Why can’t you tell them how to better their lives and rise above their worries and fears? You expect them to honor and support you, but what use are you to anybody? You should be ashamed!” He laughed and concluded: “So their Non-dual ‘realization’ and philosophy went out the window and they got very interested in a dualistic battle with me. If it had not been for Mataji being there I would have gotten some blows!” The thought of the frail saint being assailed by the “big Babas” who were as robust as their tempers, was not a happy one. But my dear friend was quite content with the situation, being firmly committed to the good sense embodied in this opening verse of the upanishad. What the Taittiriya Upanishad now will do is balance out the very true, though one-sided, teachings of some of the other upanishads regarding the nature of Brahman and the world.

Thou art indeed the manifested Brahman. First we must understand that the cosmos is NOT Maya. Maya is the illusion in our mind as to the nature of the cosmos and our relation to it. Maya is a product of our ignorance, it is our wrong seeing and acting. The world “out there” is not Maya. Maya is the world “in here”–in our mind. Maya is the product of ego. Once this inner veil has been destroyed, then we see the world as God in manifestation. In reaction we then exult with the upanishadic sage, also saying: “Thou art indeed the manifested Brahman!”

Of thee will I speak. This will consist of two ways of speaking: denying what the world is not and affirming what the world is. We will speak of the reality of the world as Brahman. We will also speak of the unreality in the minds of ignorant human beings and explain its nature as delusion. Further, we will speak of the nature of the world as an evolutionary ladder, and explain how it is used by the yogi as the means of freedom and ascent.

Thee will I proclaim in my thoughts as true. We will see and know in our minds that which is real in the world, always aware that it is not “the world” at all, but Divinity Itself. This is a matter of knowing, not mere speaking or speculating.

Thee will I proclaim on my lips as true. And this truth will we both live and speak to others. The important point here is that we must know before we speak. Otherwise our words are just empty noise.

The true Knower revels in the affirmation expressed in this first verse.
Protection

All sentient beings—not just humans—seek for security, for safety. “Shelter” means a lot more than a place out of the rain. It is commonly said that there is safety in numbers, but that it not true. There is only one assurance of safety, and the next verse expresses it rightly: “May truth protect me, may it protect my teacher, may it protect us both. May glory come to us both. May the light of Brahman shine in us both.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:1:1, 1:3:1)

*Satyam* means truth, both relative and absolute, truthfulness, and Brahman Who is The Truth. Obviously, this verse is referring mostly to Brahman, but simple truth in the sense of accuracy and honesty is also implied. If Truth is possessed by both student and teaching, then it only follows that renown (*yashah*) and the splendor of Brahman (*Brahma-varchasam*) will accrue to them as well.

A lesson on Om

“Thou art Brahman, one with the syllable OM, which is in all scriptures—the supreme syllable, the mother of all sound. Do thou strengthen me with true wisdom. May I, O Lord, realize the Immortal. May my body be strong and whole; may my tongue be sweet; may my ears hear only praise of thee. The syllable OM is verily thine image. Through this syllable thou mayest be attained. Thou art beyond the grasp of the intellect. Vouchsafe that I forget not what I have learned in the scriptures.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:4:1)

This verse and those following are addressed to the Infinite, to Brahman, but there is a purpose for opening with a declaration that Brahman and Om are the same: what is going to be petitioned for can be attained through the japa and meditation of Om. We should look at these verses in that context.

_Thou art Brahman, one with the syllable OM, which is in all scriptures—the supreme syllable, the mother of all sound._ The more literal description is: “The Om that is the most exalted in the Vedas, that pervades all words, and that emerged from the immortal Vedas as their quintessence.” Om is the crown jewel of the Vedas—which includes the upanishads. All sound, including humans speech, is contained in Om—is actually a variation of the root-sound (*mula shabda*) that is Om. All words, then, are permutations of Om. This indicates that the faculty of speech is the supreme faculty in human beings, the one that most directly links them to their Divine Source—that actually Om IS their Source. The quintessence of the Vedas is the Divine Vision which is their very basis. And Om is identical to that Illumination. No wonder, then, that Patanjali tells us that the japa and meditation of Om is the way to the highest realization. (Yoga Sutras 1:28) Or that the Mundaka Upanishad urges us to “dismiss other utterances.” (Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.5) We should let go of the chitter-chatter of the mind and its irrelevant thoughts and constantly repeat Om. For the Mundaka Upanishad says in the next part of the verse: “This [Om] is the bridge to immortality.”

_Do thou strengthen me with true wisdom._ True wisdom is knowledge of the True (Sat), the knowledge of God. Nothing can impart such knowledge but God—and Om is God. So It is the only way to that knowledge. Om is that “one thing which, when known…all is known.”
May I, O Lord, realize the Immortal. Here, too, Om is the means. Swami Gambhirananda renders this phrase: “May I be the receptacle of immortality.” If we continually fill our consciousness with the invocation of Om we shall be vessels of immortality, of Brahman.

May my body be strong and whole; may my tongue be sweet; may my ears hear only praise of thee. Through Om even our external, material life becomes spiritually glorified.

The syllable OM is verily thine image. Through this syllable thou mayest be attained. There is no need for comment on this—what we need is experience of its truth through our own spiritual practice.

Thou art beyond the grasp of the intellect. Vouchsafe that I forget not what I have learned in the scriptures. Since the nature of Brahman—and therefore of Om, as well—is beyond conception and words, it is only natural that we keep forgetting the Truth of them both, just as Arjuna kept forgetting the true nature of Krishna. Since right now we are not consciously established in the Being of Brahman/Om, the fact keeps slipping away from us. For that reason we need to set the scriptural statements regarding Om most firmly in our minds. (To help in this, see The Glories and Powers of Om.) For the moment, at least, we need to let the sacred texts “remember” for us.

“Thou art the source of all happiness and of all prosperity. Do thou come to me as the goddess of prosperity and shower thy blessings upon me. May the seekers after truth gather round me, may they come from everywhere, that I may teach them thy word.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:4:2) Om is the Manifestor of all, so It is the source of all abundance, spiritual and material. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity, is, like all the other “gods,” a symbol of Om. As we see here, there is no fault in the yogi aspiring to material fulfillment so he can have his mind free to be fixed on the awareness of God.

It is noteworthy that it is not only lawful to desire material welfare, we should also desire to impart to worthy souls around us the truth of “Thy Word”—Om. We should all to some extent be yogacharyas—teachers of yoga. We must share our spiritual wealth with others. “Freely ye have received, freely give.” (Matthew 10:8)

“May I be a glory among men. May I be richer than the richest. May I enter into thee, O Lord; and mayest thou reveal thyself unto me. Purified am I by thy touch, O Lord of manifold forms. Thou art the refuge of those who surrender themselves to thee. Reveal thyself to me. Make me thine own. I take my refuge in thee.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:4:3) This says a lot:

May I be a glory among men. This is not a bid for fame as some translators think. As Swami Prabhavananda understands, our desire must be to manifest glorious humanity on our way to divinity. Even if no one knows we exist, we can still through our sadhana be “a glory among men.” That is a worthy ambition, realized through Om.

May I be richer than the richest. This is done by possessing everything in Infinite Consciousness. What is mere money—or even a mere universe—in comparison to that? Om is Infinite Consciousness.

May I enter into thee, O Lord; and mayest thou reveal thyself unto me. “O Adorable One, may I enter into Thee. O Venerable One, enter into me.” This is Gambhirananda’s rendering. This is the great “Meeting of the Twain.” We unite with Om and Om unites with us.

Purified am I by thy touch, O Lord of manifold forms.

“Om! This Syllable is Brahman. …With frequent application of this divine sound he washes away the stains of the soul.” (Amritabindu Upanishad 20)
“The meditation on Om should not be discontinued. With this divine mantra one should meditate many times for ridding himself of his own impurities.” (Amritanada Upanishad 20)

“The Taraka-Nama [Om], annihilates all sins. The Supreme Brahman shines in him who takes to this Taraka-Nama.” (Sannyasa Upanishad)

“The Pranava [Om] burns away sins;...Hence the Pranava removes all obstacles and destroys all defects.” (Varaha Upanishad 5:68,71)

“The Pranava shall be recited and repeated by those who desire all their sins annihilated.” (Shiva Purana, Vidyeshwarasamhita 17:15)

“Japa of Om purifies the mind.” (Shiva Purana)

“If the devotee repeats the Pranava he becomes pure.” (Shiva Purana, Vidyeshwarasamhita 17:18)

“Just as the bow is the cause of the arrow’s hitting the target, so Om is the bow that brings about the soul’s entry into the Immutable. For the soul when purified by the repetition of Om gets fixed in Brahman with the help of Om without any hindrance, just as an arrow shot from a bow gets transfixied in the target.” (Shankara, Commentary on the Mundaka Upanishad)

Thou art the refuge of those who surrender themselves to thee. Om is the safe haven of the sadhaka.

Reveal thyself to me. It is by the experiencing of Om in its higher and higher (subtler and subtler) forms that It is fully revealed and united with in meditation.

Make me thine own. By ending all separation from Thee. Though we ask the divine blessing for this, it is our effort that enables the Pranava to truly be The Word of Life for us.

I take my refuge in thee. As they often say in India: Japa-Tapa; japa-tapa; japa-tapa. By holding on to Om as “dear life” we enter into Life Itself.

A lesson on Brahman

Now Brahman is addressed in words of those that have crossed the sea of samsara and entered the harbor of the Supreme Self. Rather than obscure them with comments, I will give them just as they are for your inspiration.

“Thou art the Lord, immortal, self-luminous, and of golden effulgence, within the lotus of every heart. Within the heart art thou revealed to those that seek thee.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:6:1)

“He who dwells in thee becomes king over himself. He controls his wandering thoughts. He becomes master of his speech and of all his organs of sense. He becomes master of his intellect. Thou art Brahman, whose form is invisible, like ether; whose Self is truth. Thou art perfect peace and immortality, the solace of life, the delight of the mind. May I worship thee!” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:6:2)

“Om is Brahman. OM is all. He who meditates on OM attains to Brahman.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1)

“Having attained to Brahman, a sage declared: “I am life. My glory is like the mountain peak. I am established in the purity of Brahman. I have attained the freedom of the Self. I am Brahman, self-luminous, the brightest treasure. I am endowed with wisdom. I am immortal, imperishable.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1.10.1)

A lesson on learning

To conclude the first part (adhyaya) of the upanishad, we are given a four-verse
exhortation to a student who is departing from the teacher’s house after the completion of his study. It is fitting for all who are involved in “the world” or society to any degree to take these words to heart. For without them we will lose our way, however much we may have read and learned.

“Let your conduct be marked by right action, including study and teaching of the scriptures; by truthfulness in word, deed, and thought; by self-denial and the practice of austerity; by poise and self-control; by performance of the everyday duties of life with a cheerful heart and an unattached mind.

“Speak the truth. Do your duty. Do not neglect the study of the scriptures. Do not cut the thread of progeny. Swerve not from truth. Deviate not from the path of good. Revere greatness.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:11:1) If we seriously intend to get anywhere in spiritual life, these principles will guarantee our success—as surely as their neglect or omission will guarantee our failure. Spiritual life is not a lark or a bit of spice to add to life. And absolutely it is not some emollient to make a negative and foolish life somehow tolerable. Many years ago at the beginning of the yoga boom sparked off by the Beatles I began outlining a book to be called Is Yoga For You? My intention was to warn people away from wasting their time with yoga if they intended to live a life incompatible with yoga’s fundamental character. But I soon realized that it would be a waste of time to write a book for spiritual idlers and dabblers who really would not care whether they succeeded or failed—they just wanted a diversion and something to impress others with, a topic for conversation. But now is the time for the facts to be set forth. I hope the authority of the upanishads will carry sufficient weight.

Let your conduct be marked by right action. There could be many lists of what constitutes right action, but the best is that of Patanjali the master yogi:

1) Ahimsa: non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness.
2) Satya: truthfulness, honesty.
3) Asteya: non-stealing, honesty, non-misappropriativeness.
4) Brahmacharya: sexual continence in thought, word and deed as well as control of all the senses.
5) Aparigraha: non-possessiveness, non-greed, non-selfishness, non-acquisitiveness.
6) Shaucha: purity, cleanliness.
7) Santosha: contentment, peacefulness.
8) Tapas: austerity, practical (i.e., result-producing) spiritual discipline.
9) Swadhyaya: introspective self-study, spiritual study.
10) Ishwarapranidhana: offering of one’s life to God.

Ahimsa involves gentleness, kindness, mercy, and abstinence from taking life—a matter that necessitates a vegetarian diet. Ishwarapranidhana is not just some noble or sentimental vowing of our life to God, but a very real and practical manner of ordering our life so that every moment brings us closer to God-realization, to union with God.

Including study and teaching of the scriptures. Being justly weary of being beaten over the head by “The Word of God,” both Westerners and Middle-Easterners naturally shy away from the idea of scriptural authority, whether the Torah, the Bible, or the Koran. But they misunderstand the very motivation behind reverence for scriptures in the East. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism do not respect their spiritual texts because of who has spoken them or written them down. Rather, the value of the scriptures rest solely upon their practical value—nothing else. For them, a principle is not true just because it is written in a holy book, rather it was written in the holy book.
because it was the truth—a truth an can be put to the test and demonstrated to be true. For example, water is not hydrogen and oxygen because a science book says so; the book says so because it is true. The only reason we who follow Eastern religions quote scriptures is because they say it so well—often much clearer than we could on our own. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita are masterpieces of concise expression. Worlds of meaning often lie within a single phrase, even a single word. The bottom line is this: the Eastern scriptures WORK. For thousands of years multitudes have proven in their own life that Patanjali’s list has practical value. And so can we. It is also our duty to teach what we know to others who are sincere and qualified. Whether by informal conversation, giving of books to read, or formal instruction, we must help others as we have been helped.

By truthfulness in word, deed, and thought. It is so important to realize that truth is not a verbal formula, but a way of life, a state of mind. We must live truthfully. Since God is the ultimate truth, we must live “godly.”

By self-denial. Here, too, the East means something totally different from the negative “mortification” of Western religion that is nothing more than an expression of self-loathing, a declaration of human “vileness” rather than the divine nature we “Orientals” know to be the truth of ourselves. In the East, “self-denial” means discipline and control of the egoic impulses to indulgence and laziness. It means not slipping into the morass of sensuality and selfishness. Basically it is ignoring the false ego to foster the true Self, the Spirit.

And the practice of austerity. This is not “mortification” or “penance” either. Tapasya is any practice which rouses up and expresses our inner virtue, which clears the way for the revelation of our divine nature. It is not “self-denial” in the Western sense, it is Self-affirmation through spiritual practices that produce results in freeing us from ignorance and limitation.

By poise and self-control. I cannot recall ever hearing anyone exhort someone to cultivate dignity, we are so obsessed with the “plain folks” syndrome that we equate with democracy. How it can be considered a compliment to refer to someone as being “comfortable as an old shoe” is quite beyond me—perhaps an indication of my Eastern samskaras. The sadhaka should have dignity and even an intelligent reserve in dealing with others. This should arise from respect, both for himself and for others. We need not be artificial and put on airs, acting like “Lady Bottomley’s plush horse” (a favorite expression of my father), but we should act with self-respect and awareness. (It was called “circumspection” in a more sensible era.) Anyway, you get the idea.

By performance of the everyday duties of life with a cheerful heart and an unattached mind. This is possible only for a yogi. Cheerfulness is a natural side-effect of valid yoga practice. When you see a “yogi” that is not happy and optimistic, then either the yoga is no good or it is not being practiced. I am not speaking of the manic behavior of some “yogis” that were either cracked before they started yoga or the yoga cracked them. (I am referring to those that laugh raucously at the slightest expression of humor, or grin/smile all the time no matter what. These are the “yoga clowns” whose motto seems to be “Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy.” I heard of a man who once remarked to some of these yoga-hebephrenics: “You know, the way you all smile all the time is spooky.” When they responded by grinning all the more he insisted: “No, I mean it—IT IS REALLY SPOOKY!”) As they say: spot the looney.

Yoga promotes cheerfulness, but so does “an unattached mind”—it may be the major factor. As the Gita says: “He puts aside desire, offering the act to Brahman. The
lotus leaf rests unwetted on water: he rests on action, untouched by action.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:10)

 Speak the truth. This is not easy, especially since you have to first know the truth. Patanjali claims that a person who speaks absolute truth at absolutely all times will find that whatever he says will come to be. This is discussed more fully in The Foundations of Yoga. Here is an example from the first chapter of the first edition of Autobiography of a Yogi available from Crystal Clarity Publishers:

 “Another early recollection is outstanding; and literally so, for I bear the scar to this day. My elder sister Uma and I were seated in the early morning under a neem tree in our Gorakhpur compound. She was helping me with a Bengali primer, what time I could spare my gaze from the near-by parrots eating ripe margosa fruit. Uma complained of a boil on her leg, and fetched a jar of ointment. I smeared a bit of the salve on my forearm.

 “‘Why do you use medicine on a healthy arm?’

 “‘Well, Sis, I feel I am going to have a boil tomorrow. I am testing your ointment on the spot where the boil will appear.’

 “‘You little liar!’

 “‘Sis, don’t call me a liar until you see what happens in the morning.’ Indignation filled me.

 “Uma was unimpressed, and thrice repeated her taunt. An adamant resolution sounded in my voice as I made slow reply.

 “‘By the power of will in me, I say that tomorrow I shall have a fairly large boil in this exact place on my arm; and your boil shall swell to twice its present size!’

 “Morning found me with a stalwart boil on the indicated spot; the dimensions of Uma’s boil had doubled. With a shriek, my sister rushed to Mother. ‘Mukunda has become a necromancer!’ Gravely, Mother instructed me never to use the power of words for doing harm. I have always remembered her counsel, and followed it.

 “My boil was surgically treated. A noticeable scar, left by the doctor’s incision, is present today. On my right forearm is a constant reminder of the power in man’s sheer word.

 “Those simple and apparently harmless phrases to Uma, spoken with deep concentration, had possessed sufficient hidden force to explode like bombs and produce definite, though injurious, effects. I understood, later, that the explosive vibratory power in speech could be wisely directed to free one’s life from difficulties, and thus operate without scar or rebuke.”

 Do your duty. Dharma–here translated “duty”–is the way of life in accordance with the deep wellsprings of our personality–karma and samskaras. These comprise our fundamental nature, our prakriti. Through our personal dharma, our swadharma, we most quickly unfold our inner potential and stimulate our spiritual consciousness. It is so much more than a mere observance of “right and wrong,” “do and don’t.” So important is dharma, that the Gita tells us: “It is better to do your own duty, however imperfectly, than to assume the duties of another person, however successfully. Prefer to die doing your own duty: the duty of another will bring you into great spiritual danger.” (Bhagavad Gita 3:35) This is obviously a very serious matter

 Do not neglect the study of the scriptures. This is not just a helpful hint, it is a major spiritual principle. True dharma is a lifelong study, and dharma is perfectly expressed in the eleven major upanishads (the Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Svetashvatara Upanishads), the
Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras (Yoga Darshana), the Brahma Sutras, and the commentaries on them by Shankara. The Gita should be a daily study of the sadhaka as it contains the essence of all the others in a most practical and easily understood manner. For centuries many spiritual teachers in India have required their students to study the Gita daily. Much of the gross misunderstanding of Hinduism, and Advaita in particular, would be eliminated if the Gita were carefully studied and applied throughout the aspirant’s life.

Do not cut the thread of progeny. Now this is very, very meaningful. For centuries there has been the misperception that the teachings of the upanishads are somehow the property of monastics—that monastics are at the top of the spiritual hierarchy in Indian spiritual tradition. NOT SO. Not one sage mentioned in the upanishads was monastic, nor was a single author of the scriptures listed in the foregoing paragraph a monastic. Sanatana Dharma is founded upon the vision of the rishis—none of whom were monastics. Sanatana Dharma propounds four ways of life that are fitting for seekers after liberation. Only one is that of the totally committed monastic. It is certainly true that through the centuries monastics have been a major factor in the propagation of dharma, that the three schools of Vedanta were formulated definitively by monastics. Shankara, whose commentaries are mentioned also in the foregoing list of philosophical works, was a monk of monks.

Nevertheless, the life of the rishis, who were married and “in the world,” is the norm of Sanatana Dharma. Any philosophy incompatible with that is not dharma. At the same time, this also means that there is no room for spiritually lazy (and cowardly) people who try to shirk or shrug off their spiritual obligations by saying: “that is for you monks.” They do not want to be thought second-class citizens, but they want to live in a second-class manner and leave the complete fulfilling of dharma to the monks. Shame! There is only one spiritual life: the Yoga Life. Whatever the conditions or circumstances, all are obliged to be yogis. Otherwise their dharma is a sham, whether monastic or non-monastic.

What does “the thread of progeny” have to do with this? The clear implication is that a Sanatana Dharmi (one who follows Sanatana Dharma) is duty-bound to marry, have children, and raise those children to also follow dharma—and yoga. The exceptions are those that become monastics from their youth or who have some impediment to leading a normal married life. “Footloose and fancy free” is not the way of the rishis. To see this for yourself, read The Grihya Sutras, translated by Hermann Oldenberg (volumes 29 and 30 in the Sacred Books of the East series). There you will see that Sanatana Dharmis are directed to have children, along with instructions on how to preserve brahmacharya in marriage (!). These are not the rules for monks, nor were they written by monks, as is clear. Behold for yourself how high the ideal is for ALL Sanatana Dharmis, whatever their stage of life (ashrama). Those who do not want to bother should leave dharma alone and join some cheap religion that lets them do as they please. There is a lot of it about.

Swerve not from truth. Patanjali says that the need for absolute truthfulness is “not conditioned by class, place, time or occasion, and extending to all stages.” One sign of a sociopath is the belief that he is not bound by the rules but is a law unto himself. There are a lot of spiritual sociopaths, but we cannot be one and survive spiritually. That is why the next counsel is:

Deviate not from the path of good. “The good” is learned by studying the scriptures and associating with the good—the godly. As Davey Crockett said: “Be sure you’re
right, then go ahead.”

Revere greatness. Only those who can give respect—even reverence—are worthy of respect; only those who bow can rise. Those who cannot see greatness in others have no greatness in themselves. As the saying goes: “Mediocrity recognizes nothing above itself.” The capacity to perceive, value, and honor virtue, wisdom and holiness in another person is an essential ingredient in spiritual life. This is why those religions that open the way to liberation have great veneration for saint and Masters, in contrast to the “bow down and worship me” religions that can only guarantee earthly rebirth whatever their claims and promises may be. (The more they boast, the less they have.) The lives, teachings, and images of holy beings should fill our homes, keeping us aware that the ideals of spiritual life are attainable for us, too.

A lesson on respect

“Let your mother be a god to you; let your father be a god to you; let your teacher be a god to you; let your guest also be a god to you. Do only such actions as are blameless. Always show reverence to the great.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:11:2) The last two sentences have really been just covered, so we will look at the earlier ones.

First, the word translated “god” is deva. Here is the definition given in A Brief Sanskrit Glossary: “Deva: ‘A shining one,’ a god–greater or lesser in the evolutionary hierarchy; a semi-divine or celestial being with great powers, and therefore a ‘god.’ Sometimes called a demi-god. Devas are the demigods presiding over various powers of material and psychic nature.” As you see, deva in no ways means God–Ishwara, Bhagavan, or Brahman. It is indefensible to cite this verse in an attempt to coerce innocent people into worshipping some guru as God.

The meaning is as clear as it is simple. We should revere our mother, father, teacher (acharya), and even our guests as citizens of higher worlds. We need not be blind to their defects, for the gods have defects, also—otherwise they would be free souls and not gods at all. We should do our best to accommodate these earthly gods and to care for them with all love and solicitude. Here, too, exaggeration is not intended. If our parents tell us to commit wrong or damage or neglect our spiritual life we should ignore it, but as much as is sensible we should defer to them in a reasonable manner. This is dharma.

There are many who “do good” grudgingly as though taking bitter medicine, or with a kind of weary “after all it’s my duty” attitude. Many treat the objects of their “care” or charity in a rude and contemptuous manner or adopt the attitude of an exasperated adult toward a worrisome or recalcitrant child. This is not dharma. So the upanishad continues: “Whatever you give to others, give with love and respect. Gifts must be given in abundance, with joy, humility, and compassion.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:11:3) This is a high ideal, but I have seen it done in both America and India by Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. All it requires is a pure heart free from ego and selfishness. One time In Varanasi I saw two people feeding hundreds of poor people. At the end of the meal, each person was given money and clothing. As they left, they walked by the benefactors who saluted each one with folded hands, saying “Thank you” to each of them. They understood: by letting them give in charity, those poor people were enabling them to create good karma for the future.

A lesson on right conduct

Anyone who has a developed conscience is concerned about accurately
determining what right conduct really is. So the upanishad tells us: “If at any time there is any doubt with regard to right conduct, follow the practice of great souls, who are guileless, of good judgment, and devoted to truth. Thus conduct yourself always. This is the injunction, this is the teaching, and this is the command of the scriptures.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 1:11:4) Scriptures are important, but they are sometimes abstract, whereas the lives of saints show us exactly how things should be done. If we can have access to a living saint who will advise us, then we are most fortunate. But if not, we should seek out and read the lives of saints of all traditions and learn how to live. Often we may not at all care for the formal theology of a particular saint’s religious tradition, but his life transcends such things and shows how to live in a divine manner. (Do not forget: many saints have been persecuted by their own religion—even martyred. So we need not accept the religion when we honor the saint.) “Guileless, of good judgment, and devoted to truth”—such are the saints. And so should we be.

Those who learn and follow these lessons given us in the upanishad shall be wise indeed.
The Source and the Goal

Brahman

“He who knows Brahman attains the supreme goal. Brahman is the abiding reality, he is pure knowledge, and he is infinity. He who knows that Brahman dwells within the lotus of the heart becomes one with him and enjoys all blessings.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:1:1a)

This verse contains the famous formula: *Satyam, jnanam, anantam Brahman*—“Brahman is Reality, Knowledge, and Infinity.” The rest of the verse is self-explanatory, except the Sanskrit says that the liberated one knows “Brahman as existing in the intellect [buddhi] in the supreme space in the heart.” This is the seat of Om.

Food

“Out of Brahman, who is the Self, came ether; out of ether, air; out of air, fire; out of fire, water; out of water, earth; out of earth, vegetation; out of vegetation, food; out of food, the body of man. The body of man, composed of the essence of food, is the physical sheath of the Self.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:1:1b)

There are a few listings in the upanishads of the emanation-stages of creation, for it is essential to realize that everything has come from Brahman and shall return to Brahman. Naturally they are broad–very broad–outlines, for the manifestation of relativity has countless subtle stages. First there comes the great elements, forerunners of the elements here on the physical level. When the physical planets are fully formed, then vegetation appears, and then human beings as abodes of the Self. Implied here is the principle that vegetables are the natural and intended food of human beings—certainly of those who intend to manifest the Self. The Gita and upanishads say a great deal about food because the mind is formed of the subtle essence of food. Vegetarian diet is a cornerstone of humanity, and a necessary factor in the aspiration to divinity. No serious aspirant can afford to ignore this or attempt to. So the upanishad continues:

“From food are born all creatures, which live upon food and after death return to food. Food is the chief of all things. It is therefore said to be medicine for all diseases of the body. Those who worship food as Brahman gain all material objects. From food are born all beings which, being born, grow by food. All beings feed upon food, and, when they die, food feeds upon them.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:2:1)

This is a great deal of mental food to digest, but is well worth the effort. Food (annam) is not just something material that an organism subsists on, but includes everything that goes to affect any sentient being. Thoughts and feelings are food, and all life-experiences are food. Intuitions are food. Of course some are positive and some are negative, but they all go to “feed” the evolving consciousness. But frankly if we don’t start with the regulation of physical food we need not bother with the metaphysical food.

Food, physical and subtle, is the medicine for all ills. This the Indian sages knew long before nutritionists or naturopaths existed. I was fortunate to know a truly great man, Dr. Josef Lenninger, who could cure any disease with diet alone. He was never wrong and he never failed to cure anyone who followed his instructions. He even saved
people’s lives—people that I knew. Diet is everything—this I learned from him much better than from any yogi.

When we realize that Brahman is the ultimate “food” then our spiritual health is assured. When we live in harmony with Brahman, all good comes to us on all levels of our existence. Just as bodies are absorbed in the earth from which they and their food came, so finally we are absorbed into our original Source to “life forever” in the greatest sense.

The Bodies of the Bodiless

“Different from the physical sheath is the vital sheath. This is encased in the physical sheath and has the same form. Through this the senses perform their office. From this men and beasts derive their life. This determines the length of life of all creatures. He who worships the vital sheath as Brahman lives to complete his span of life. This sheath is the living self of the physical sheath.

“Different from the vital sheath is the mental sheath. This is encased in the vital sheath and has the same form.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:3:1)

Just as God has encased himself in various layers of manifestation, so has the Self. So knowledge of these sheaths (koshas) is worthwhile.

The pranic and mental (manasic) bodies

Inside the physical body is the pranic body, the body of life-force. Without the pranic body the physical body cannot live. The pranic body is also the most objective astral body, and when seen looks just like the physical body. At death, the grossest part of the pranic body remains, which is why the hair and fingernails grow for a while after death. When it separates from the physical body at death, the pranic body takes on the appearance it had when strongest—usually as the person looked in early middle-age. When projected from the physical while the person still lives in embodiment, however, it looks just like the physical body at that time.

Within the pranic body the currents of life-force move in subtle channels that correspond to the physical nerves. In Sanskrit both the physical and pranic “nerves” are called nadis.

The pranic body draws its substance from food, sunlight, and air. This latter is one of the reasons yogis pay attention to both diet and breathing. Health of the pranic body can produce health of the material body. The pranic body does indeed determine both the health and the length of life of the physical body. Prana is the very Life of God in manifestation, so we live in and by the Divine Life.

In a sense, the pranic body is the “self” of the physical. It is the link between the physical sense organs and the sensory mind, or manas, which is the mental sheath spoken of next. This body also has the form of the embodied person, but is more radiant than the pranic sheath. It, too, is astral, and draws a great deal of its vitality from the pranic body.

Their limitation

These three bodies are mostly integrated with earthly experience—that is their purpose. For this reason they perceive only the slightest hints of spiritual being—of Spirit Itself. Therefore the upanishad interposes this statement:

“Words cannot express the bliss of Brahman, mind cannot reach it. The sage, who knows it, is freed from fear.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:4:1) This is tremendous
information for the yogi. First, it tells him that any words about Brahman and Brahman-experience are worthless, even deceptive, since It cannot be spoken about, nor can the sensory mind perceive Brahman in Its pure Being. Next it tells him that those who know this truth will be freed from great fear and doubts. This is because ignorant people continually mistake physical, pranic, and mental phenomena for spiritual phenomena. Then, when the flaws—and sometimes outright false character—of those phenomena are discovered, the sincere seeker is thrown into doubt, fear, and confusion. Disillusionment with these things sometimes cause the person to forsake spiritual life altogether. Of course, spiritual life is impossible on those levels, so they never really had one—but they aspired to do so. We are being warned by the upanishad to not make similar mistakes. The yogi must continually live higher than these three levels. He must realize that they are delusive to a high degree. Nevertheless they are vehicles of the divine Self and must be cared for.

“The mental sheath is the living self of the vital sheath.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:4:2) The mental sheath draws much of its power from the pranic sheath, as I said, but it greatly controls the pranic sheath and empowers it by directing it. For example, when the sensory mind sees attractive food, it stimulates the pranic sheath to begin the process of physical digestion. When it perceives something pleasant the two other bodies are likewise affected, and when it perceives something fearful or life-threatening its effects are sometimes cataclysmic.

The intellectual body

“Different from the mental sheath is the intellectual sheath. This is encased in the mental sheath and has the same form. All actions, sacrificial or otherwise, are performed through the intellect. All the senses pay homage to the intellectual sheath. He who worships intellect as Brahman does not err; he does not identify himself with the other sheaths, and does not yield to the passions of the body.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:5:1)

Now the upanishad speaks of the jnanamaya kosha, the intellectual sheath, that is also called the buddhi, the intellect. This controls the three lower sheaths through intelligent understanding. Light strikes the eye and imprints an image of a tree on the retina, the nerves, physical and pranic, convey impulses to the physical and astral brains, the intellect perceives it and says: “That is a tree—a maple tree.” Without this function of the buddhi, we would not be human beings at all.

The intellectual sheath is not astral but causal. If we saw it, we would see light—usually formless, but on the lesser levels it could have the general outline of the human body. The senses are messengers to the intellect, its servants, actually. The wise yogi “does not identify himself with the other sheaths,” but centers his awareness in and directs his life mostly from the buddhi. As a result he “does not yield to the passions of the body.” Surely the buddhi is worthy of reverence.

The will body

“Different from the intellectual sheath is the sheath of the ego. This sheath is encased in the intellectual sheath and has the same form.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:5:2a)

The completion of the body complex is the highest body, the anandamaya kosha which is the seat of will and the sense of asmita—“I exist.” The intellect may know it is seeing a tree, but the will decides whether or not to keep looking at it. In this way it
fully controls the lesser levels. It both brings them into function and stops their actions. Just as the buddhi makes us intelligent human beings, the will-body makes us effective human beings.

The anandamaya kosha is the subtlest causal level, so subtle that it “-touches” and partakes of the nature of the spirit-self. Functionally speaking, it is a mixture of subtle energy and pure consciousness—though it is not really, since “beyond all sheaths is the Self.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:5:2b) Sometimes we have to speak inaccurately to get across at least a shadow of higher realities.

**Karma**

All intelligent thought and action are possible because of the buddhi and the will. So they are really the seat of karma. That is why Buddha taught that intention determined the nature of karma more than the act, that a person who accidentally brought about the death of another would not be a murderer. Someone who gives poison to an ill person, fully believing that it is medicine, is not guilty of taking life. Ultimately karma is a matter of the will, for it is the basis of action.

**All together**

These five bodies correspond to the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. They also correspond to five levels of existence: bhuh, bhuvah, swah, maha, and jana lokas. According to which body we mostly “live” in determines what world (loka) we will incarnate in after this life. Fortunately for the yogi, he steps beyond these five bodies and cultivates awareness of the Self. So at death the skilled yogi goes to tapa loka, the world of those who are consciously evolving themselves. Hopefully he will not return to earthly birth, but will continue on from there to the highest world, satya loka, the realm of the liberated ones who know Brahman.

**Brahman and belief**

Beyond the sheaths is the Self, and beyond the Self as Its inmost being is Brahman. Brahman is the basis of all and IS all, as the upanishad will soon discuss. This being so: “Vain and useless becomes his life who thinks of Brahman as nonexistent. He alone who knows Brahman as existent truly lives.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:6:1a) Interestingly, the upanishad literally says: “If anyone knows Brahman as non-existent, he himself becomes non-existent.” How many times do people “know” something that is completely wrong. Our belief in God must not be based on our ignorant mind like the unbelief of the atheist. I have known of people who became atheists when tragedy entered their lives, and I have known people who became believers when tragedy came into their lives. Neither their unbelief nor their belief really amounted to anything. People who come to believe in God as a kind of last resort are like conquered enemies, not free and loyal citizens of the kingdom of God.

We should not believe in God, we should know that God exists. There is a deep intuition of the existence of God in each one of us that comes from our spirit-self. But because of the mental debris we have accumulated in this and prior lives it has become greatly attenuated, distorted, or even obliterated. An external factor can sometimes shift the debris pile to let some light through, but how long will it be before other things shift it back? The only really safe and sure way is to practice meditation and burn up the things that are obscuring our intuition of spirit. Then we will be knowers of the existence of Brahman and well on the way to becoming knowers of Brahman.
Our minds possess the same creative power as the Divine Mind, though to a finite degree. Nonetheless, our mind determines our entire life—the whole course of our evolution in this and all higher worlds. It does rest squarely on us. Remember what Sri Ramakrishna said: The mind is everything. God has created the playing field and supplied all the equipment for the game. But how we play is up to us—none else. If we do not know either the goal of the game or the way it is played, it is hopeless. As the upanishad says, the life of one who does not believe in God is vain and useless. But if we know the goal, the rules, and the way to play, then we will play well—truly live, as the upanishad says.

The only reason for the universe is the attainment of Brahmajnana. So the upanishad finally says: “Surely at death a foolish man does not attain Brahman, but only a wise man.” (Tāttiriya Upanishad 2:6:1b)
Brahman, Creation, and Us

Brahman and creation

Now we are ready for the subject of the creation and its implications for both God and human beings.

“Desiring that he should become many, that he should make of himself many forms, Brahman meditated. Meditating, he created all things. Creating all things, he entered into everything. Entering into all things, he became that which has shape and that which is shapeless; he became that which can be defined and that which cannot be defined; he became that which has support and that which has not support; he became that which is conscious and that which is not conscious; he became that which is gross and that which is subtle. He became all things whatsoever: therefore the wise call him the Real.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:6:1c)

Desiring that he should become many, that he should make of himself many forms, Brahman meditated. Meditating, he created all things. Certainly the One cannot become two, much less many. But he can experience multiplicity through his omniscience. So he willed, and all things came into being through his innate omnipotence. But it was totally an ideational process. The Cosmic Dreamer projected the cosmic dream. Then:

Creating all things, he entered into everything. Entering into all things, he became... all things whatsoever: therefore the wise call him the Real. Pervading all things through his omnipresence he became aware of them and experienced “being” them just as in dream we take on many identities and forms that constantly change until we awaken. Brahman, in contrast, is always awake and knows what “is” and “is not.” There is nothing that Brahman has not become, described and indescribable, sentient and insentient. Brahman “is” all things.

Swami Gambhirananda’s more literal translation brings about a point to be noted. “He wished, ‘Let me be many, let me be born.’” The Birthless actually undergoes birth. And the same is true of us. We have neither birth nor death. Experience is not reality—this we must learn.

“Concerning which truth it is written: Before creation came into existence, Brahman existed as the Unmanifest. From the Unmanifest he created the manifest. From himself he brought forth himself. Hence he is known as the Self-Existent.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:7:1a) Gambhirananda’s more literal translation gives us a better idea: “In the beginning all this was but the unmanifested [Brahman]. From that emerged the manifested. That Brahman created Itself by Itself. Therefore It is called the self-creator” There is really no need for comment.

And us

“The Self-Existent is the essence of all felicity. Who could live, who could breathe, if that blissful Self dwelt not within the lotus of the heart? He it is that gives joy.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:7:1b) Gambhirananda: “That which is known as the self-creator is verily the source of joy; for one becomes happy by coming in contact with that source of joy. Who, indeed, will inhale, and who will exhale, if this Bliss be not there in the supreme space [within the heart]. This one, indeed enlivens.”
One becomes happy by coming in contact with that source of joy. Brahman is of the nature of bliss itself, the source of joy to all beings. It is clear and simple: by coming in contact with that source of joy we will be joyful. A lot of people are hyper and hysterical, and some are so heedless and unaware that they are “happy” like village idiots. But only those who consciously contact Brahman through meditation are truly happy and have inner joy—the only kind that is real and lasting. Seeking happiness in anything but God can only lead to unhappiness. How many “deliriously happy” people have we seen ending up in what John Bunyan calls The Slough of Despond in Pilgrim's Progress? Their false joy evaporates so very quickly. Then they go running after another mirage. And another. And another.

Who, indeed, will inhale, and who will exhale, if this Bliss be not there in the supreme space [within the heart]. This part is of utmost importance to yogis, for it indicates that the breath arises from the Chidakasha, the principle (tattwa) of Conscious Ether, the abode of the Self. This is why all liberating yoga involves breath. For if breath arises from the Source, it will take us to that Supreme Bliss if we understand how to work with it. (See the chapter Breath and Sound in Meditation in Om Yoga.)

Knowing Brahman

This one, indeed enlivens. This is why just a few verses back the upanishad says: “Vain and useless becomes his life who thinks of Brahman as nonexistent. He alone who knows Brahman as existent truly lives.” This is bedrock truth. That is why yoga is the Path to Life. The persevering yogi experiences ever-increasing life on all levels of his being. “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” (Proverbs 4:18)

“When a man finds his existence and unity in the Self—who is the basis of life, who is beyond the senses, who is formless, inexpressible, beyond all predicates—then alone does he transcend fear. So long as there is the least idea of separation from him, there is fear. To the man who thinks himself learned, yet knows not himself as Brahman, Brahman, who drives away all fear, appears as fear itself.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:7:1c)

We reach fearlessness when we know our unity with the Self and Brahman. To attain this fearlessness our consciousness must become more and more centered in That which is “formless, inexpressible, beyond all predicates.” While living in this world we must inwardly dwell in the Transcendent Reality that is Brahman, that is our Self. For “so long as there is the least idea of separation from him, there is fear”—and with good cause. The life separated from God is no life at all, but a mirage of suffering, change, decay, and death.

Perhaps one of the saddest truths in any of the upanishads is this: “To the man who thinks himself learned, yet knows not himself as Brahman, Brahman, who drives away all fear, appears as fear itself.” We see this all the time. Intelligent people fear the idea of living in the state of unity with God lest they lose their “individuality.” They cling to death and call it life while avoiding life as though it were death. How will they get out of that state? Only by a lot of buffeting by what they call life. It is not God who punishes and forsakes us because of this wrong choice—it is the false world that does so from life to life. Yet we grasp in desperation for more of its fake appearances and run from our only Life. In my early teens I spoke with a friend about how wonderful it was to free oneself of “the good things of life” and turn to the Only Life. “Oh!” he exclaimed, “if I lived like that I would feel like I was in prison!” So he chose what the world told him was “real living,” and now he is a broken, miserable old man with nothing but
alcoholism and sexual deviance as his companions. He chose imprisonment, and will no doubt do so in future lives, for enslavement becomes a habit hard to break.

“Concerning which truth it is written: Through fear of Brahman the wind blows and the sun shines; through fear of him Indra, the god of rain, Agni, the god of fire, and Yama, the god of death, perform their tasks.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:8:1) The entire cosmos and all the processes of personal life take place through cognition of God and his purpose. The “fear” spoken of here is awe which cancels out any possibility of defiance or disobedience. In the human being there should be a clear understanding that since God is All, life should be lived accordingly. Along with that should be the realization that God is our Self, that we are “obeying” our own nature in which is all joy, but outside of which there can be nothing but fear.

**Measuring the joy**

In the seventh verse this question was set forth: “Who could live, who could breathe, if that blissful Self dwelt not within the lotus of the heart? He it is that gives joy. Now the upanishad takes up that subject of the joy of the Self.

“Of what nature is this joy?

“Consider the lot of a young man, noble, well-read, intelligent, strong, healthy, with all the wealth of the world at his command. Assume that he is happy, and measure his joy as one unit.

“One hundred times that joy is one unit of the joy of Gandharvas: but no less joy than Gandharvas has the seer to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of Gandharvas is one unit of the joy of celestial Gandharvas: but no less joy than celestial Gandharvas has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of celestial Gandharvas is one unit of the joy of the Pitr in their paradise: but no less joy than the Pitr in their paradise has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of the Pitr in their paradise is one unit of the joy of the Devas: but no less joy than the Devas has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of the Devas is one unit of the joy of the karma Devas: but no less joy than the karma Devas has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of the karma Devas is one unit of the joy of the ruling Devas: but no less joy than the ruling Devas has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of the ruling Devas is one unit of the joy of Indra: but no less joy than Indra has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of Indra is one unit of the joy of Brihaspati: but no less joy than Brihaspati has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of Brihaspati is one unit of the joy of Prajapati: but no less joy than Prajapati has the sage to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.

“One hundred times the joy of Prajapati is one unit of the joy of Brahma: but no less
joy than Brahma has the seer to whom the Self has been revealed, and who is without craving.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:8:2-4)

Joy comes from knowing the Self and becoming free of all desire through the fulfillment that comes from union with Brahman.

**Rising into joy**

“He who is the Self in man, and he who is the Self in the sun, are one. Verily, he who knows this truth overcomes the world; he transcends the physical sheath, he transcends the vital sheath, he transcends the mental sheath, he transcends the intellectual sheath, he transcends the sheath of the ego.” (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:8:5)

This is the real Ascension, and only those who have done so are Ascended Masters. Just as God is untouched by all the worlds that have proceeded from him, in the same way the liberated yogi cannot be affected by his various sheaths (koshas), his own private “worlds.”

It is written: He who knows the joy of Brahman, which words cannot express and the mind cannot reach, is free from fear. He is not distressed by the thought, “Why did I not do what is right? Why did I do what is wrong?” He who knows the joy of Brahman, knowing both good and evil, transcends both. (Taittiriya Upanishad 2:9:1)

He who knows Brahman is freed from all karmic bonds and knows that what he did and did not do will no longer affect him either in the present or the future. Having transcended both good and bad karma, he is free. Sri Ramakrishna described such a person as being like a fish that had been caught in the net but has jumped out into freedom and swims joyfully away.
The Ladder of Understanding

Life is change; nothing ever stands still. When you do find something that is without any kind of change, then that thing is dead—including a lot of religion. A worthy spiritual aspirant is steady and unwavering in his aspiration and his endeavor, but he is always changing, for he is ever learning. He continually sees things either differently or better than before. To show us this, the upanishad is giving the account of Bhrigu’s search for knowledge of Brahman. In the Gita (10:25) Krishna says: “Among the great sages I am Bhrigu,” so this is a very important teaching that is being given us.

Know Brahman...

“Bhrigu, respectfully approaching his father Varuna, said: ‘Sir, teach me Brahman.’ Varuna explained to him the physical sheath and the vital sheath and the functions of the senses, and added: ‘He from whom all beings are born, in whom they live, being born, and to whom at death they return—seek to know him. He is Brahman.’” (Taittiriya 3.1.1)

It is absolutely necessary to “know the territory” in any endeavor, whatever its kind. If equipment is involved, we must know and understand it thoroughly. This is why Oriental religions are so intent on the makeup of the human being. First we have to be a conscious human before we can move on to the next level of evolution. Therefore Varuna taught Bhrigu about the gross and subtle bodies, pointing out to him that all these have proceeded from Brahman—are reflections of Brahman—and that dealing with them is dealing with Brahman in manifestation. Brahman is the totality of all being.

Gambhirananda gives a better version of the latter part of this verse: “Crave to know that from which all these beings take birth, that by which the live after being born, that towards which they move and into which they merge. That is Brahman.” The first point is that we should not just seek to know Brahman, we must crave to know It—there must be an intense hunger, a sense of absolute necessity, a life-and-death attitude behind us. For that is the fuel that propels us onward to realization. At the same time, we are not going against the current, but cooperating with the Eternal Flow, for all beings move toward Brahman through the many stages of evolution, and eventually merge into Brahman. This is the only natural mode of life, the only way of life which puts an end to all suffering and brings supreme fulfillment.

Tapasya

“Bhrigu practiced austerity and meditation. Then it seemed to him that food was Brahman. For of food all beings are born, by food they are sustained, being born, and into food they enter after death. This knowledge, however, did not satisfy him. He again approached his father Varuna and said: “Sir, teach me Brahman.” Varuna replied: ‘Seek to know Brahman by meditation. Meditation is Brahman.’” (Taittiriya 3.2.1)

Bhrigu was highly intelligent, so his concept of “food” was not just what humans eat to stay alive. Rather, as in the teachings of the Prashna Upanishad, “food” is emblematic of anything that sustains or is assimilated to the evolving organism and the inner consciousness. But even that did not satisfy him, for it was too “here and now”
while Reality is mostly transcendent. Varuna opened new vistas for him by saying that Tapasya is Brahman. In A Brief Sanskrit Glossary we find this definition: “Tapasya: Austerity, practical (i.e., result-producing) spiritual discipline; spiritual force. Literally it means the generation of heat or energy, but is always used in a symbolic manner, referring to spiritual practice and its effect, especially the roasting of karmic seeds, the burning up of karma.” Who else but Brahman can incinerate the seeds of karma? Although tapasya includes specific methods of spiritual practice, ultimately it is the power of release, of transmutation into Perfect Being. So tapasya in the highest sense is the active power of Brahman that IS Brahman bringing about liberation (moksha). Tapasya is Brahman within us. This should be the yogi’s constant perspective. But tapasya is the means, not the end, so the search continues. It is necessary to realize this, for some people meditate a bit, get a little experience, and think they are enlightened and know the mysteries of the universe. But, like Bhrigu, we must never be satisfied. Sri Ramakrishna told the following parable:

“Once upon a time a wood-cutter went into a forest to cut wood. Suddenly he came upon a Brahmacari [a monk]. The Brahmacari told him, ‘My good man, go forward.’ The wood-cutter upon returning home began to think, ‘Why did the Brahmacari tell me to go forward?’

“A few days passed. One day as he was sitting idly the words of the Brahmacari came to mind. Then he said to himself, ‘Today I will go further forward.’ Going into the forest and moving deeper he discovered innumerable sandalwood trees. He felt happy and brought back cartloads of sandalwood. And selling them in the market he became a rich man.

“A few days passed and he remembered again that the Brahmacari had said, ‘Go forward.’ He returned to the forest and advancing deeper discovered a silver mine near a river. He had not even dreamt of it. Then he only mined silver and selling it made heaps of money.

“A few more days passed. And one day he thought, ‘The Brahmacari did not tell me to go up to the silver mine alone. He told me to go forward.’ This time going across the river he discovered a gold mine. Then he thought, ‘Ah! That’s why the Brahmacari asked me to go forward.’

“Again a few days afterwards, he advanced further and saw heaps of diamonds and other gems. Then he became prosperous like the god of wealth himself.

“Therefore I say whatever you may do you will find better things if you go forward. Do not think that you have achieved all that is there because you felt a little inspired. If you go still further you will find God.”

Primal Energy–Prana

“Bhrigu practiced meditation and learned that primal energy is Brahman. For from primal energy all beings are born, by primal energy they are sustained, being born, and into primal energy they enter after death. But Bhrigu was still doubtful about his knowledge. So he approached his father again and said: ‘Sir, teach me Brahman.’ Varuna replied: ‘Seek to know Brahman by meditation. Meditation is Brahman.’” (Taittiriya 3.3.1)

The word here translated “primal energy” is really Prana. Prana as used in this verse means the Vishwaprana, the universal life force that makes all things live. It is energy, but that particular energy that manifests as living things as well as the power of life itself.
Mind
“Bhrigu practiced meditation and learned that mind is Brahman. For from mind all beings are born, by mind they are sustained, being born, and into mind they enter after death. Still doubtful, he approached his father and said: ‘Sir, teach me Brahman.’ His father replied: ‘Seek to know Brahman by meditation. Meditation is Brahman.’” (Taittiriya 3.4.1)

The word translated “mind” is manas(a), which means the mind of the senses, that which perceives the message of the senses. It is like the screen on which images are projected. For this reason it is very easy to confuse the mind with consciousness—indeed with the Self. But that is not so.

Intellect
“Bhrigu practiced meditation and learned that intellect is Brahman. For from intellect all beings are born, by intellect they are sustained, being born, and into intellect they enter after death. Not yet satisfied, doubting his understanding, Bhrigu approached his father and said: ‘Sir, teach me Brahman.’ Varuna replied: ‘Seek to know Brahman by meditation. Meditation is Brahman.’” (Taittiriya 3.5.1)

The word translated “intellect” is vijnana. This is one of those instances in which the Sanskrit has more than one meaning, and they are all intended. First, vijnana means the buddhi, the intellect, which is superior to the manas, the merely sensory mind. The buddhi is the intelligent, thinking mind, the faculty that hopefully marks humans out from lesser evolved life-forms. Since the cosmos is Intelligence, it is easy to equate the buddhi with that; but it is not so. The other meaning of vijnana is supreme knowledge, supreme wisdom, and supreme realization: the knowing that transcends mere intellectual knowing. It is the direct intuitive knowing of the spirit. This is so exalted that no one can be faulted for assuming it is the highest. But it is not, so:

Joy
“Bhrigu practiced meditation and learned that joy is Brahman. For from joy all beings are born, by joy they are sustained, being born, and into joy they enter after death. This is the wisdom which Bhrigu, taught by Varuna, attained within his heart. He who attains this wisdom wins glory, grows rich, enjoys health and fame.” (Taittiriya 3.6.1)

Ananda is the word translated here as “joy.” Ananda means bliss, supreme happiness, joy, and delight. It is a very dynamic experience, for Brahman is defined as bliss (ananda). So to experience this supreme bliss (Paramananda) is to be united with Brahman, for Brahman is that bliss.

Some reflections
This account of Bhrigu’s ascent to Brahman-knowledge has some very instructive points. First, no one needed to tell Bhrigu that he had not really found Brahman—his meditation-produced intuition told him that. So he was not deluded by any experience he had; rather, the experience led him onward of itself. Of course, all along he was intuiting Brahman, but only partially, and he knew that. And he knew when he finally had attained to complete realization, Purnananda, the Perfect (Total) Bliss. Equally important is the fact that Varuna never comments on Bhrigu’s experience or
conclusions, but just keeps telling him to engage in tapasya. This is the way of the true Masters. They do not waste the aspirants’ time with hours and hours of theoretical philosophy, but urge them to find out the truth for themselves through the practice of yoga. This is the glory of yoga: it will reveal everything in time. It must also not be overlooked that perfection in yoga brings about abundance in this world as well. Many are the yogis who live simply and frugally, but that is their choice—the treasurehouse of the world is open to them.

**Final teachings**

Swami Prabhavananda skips some verses that are little more than a tedious recap of the “food” part that has gone before and comes directly to the meaningful verses at the very end:

“Brahman is to be meditated upon as the source of all thought and life and action.” (Taittiriya 3.10.2) We must know that Brahman is ALL. “He is the splendor in wealth, he is the light in the stars. He is all things.

“Let a man meditate upon Brahman as support, and he will be supported. Let him meditate upon Brahman as greatness, and he will be great. Let him meditate upon Brahman as mind, and he will be endowed with intellectual power. Let him meditate upon Brahman as adoration, and he will be adored. Let him worship Brahman as Brahman, and he will become Brahman. He who is the Self in man, and he who is the Self in the sun, are one.” (Taittiriya 3.10.3. 4) To know Brahman is to know our Self as well, enabling us to exclaim: “I am that Self! I am life immortal! I overcome the world—I who am endowed with golden effulgence! Those who know me achieve Reality.” (Taittiriya 3.10.6) Anyone who knows who a realized person is knows himself also. This is the true value of meeting those who are liberated—it furthers our own liberation.
The Sanskrit of this upanishad is some of the oldest known, consequently it is not easy to translate accurately. Also, it contains a multitude of extremely complex and arcane symbolic passages. For this reason a great deal has to be omitted—and was done so by Swami Prabhavananda on whose translation these essays are based. That is why you will find a great deal of jumps in the numbering of the verses. If you obtain a complete translation you will see the need for this.

“The world existed first as seed, which as it grew and developed took on names and forms. As a razor in its case or as fire in wood, so dwells the Self, the Lord of the universe, in all forms, even to the tips of the fingers. Yet the ignorant do not know him, for behind the names and forms he remains hidden. When one breathes, one knows him as breath; when one speaks, one knows him as speech; when one sees, one knows him as the eye; when one hears, one knows him as the ear; when one thinks, one knows him as the mind. All these are but names related to his acts; and he who worships the Self as one or another of them does not know him, for of them he is neither one nor another. Wherefore let a man worship him as the Self, and as the Self alone. The perfection which is the Self is the goal of all beings. For by knowing the Self one knows all. He who knows the Self is honored of all men and attains to blessedness.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:7)

Name and form

“The world existed first as seed, which as it grew and developed took on names and forms.”

At first only undifferentiated Unity existed, but inherent in It was all relative existence. Consequently It expanded into the cosmos—causal, astral, and physical—which is nothing but endless variations of name (nama) and form (rupa). This is better pointed out in the translation of Swami Madhavananda: “This (universe) was then undifferentiated. It differentiated only into name and form—it was called such and such, and was of such and such form. So to this day it is differentiated only into name and form—it is called such and such, and is of such and such form.” This could only be true if the universe were fundamentally ideational (conceptual) in nature, and only an idea or “dream” in the consciousness of God and all sentient beings. Everything we see or experience is a thought in the minds of God and ourselves. That is why liberation can only be a matter of awakening, of the transformation of consciousness. Even good deeds are really just good thoughts. Thought and act are the same thing, however differently they may seem to us who are asleep in the dream. (Enlightenment is living awake in the dream. See the tape of Paramhansa Yogananda entitled Awake in the Cosmic Dream.) This is why all true yoga takes place solely in the mind, even if we experience physical phenomena during its
practice. And the results we are after are purely psychological. This is a major fact for yogis to know.

**The indwelling Self**

“As a razor in its case or as fire in wood, so dwells the Self, the Lord of the universe, in all forms, even to the tips of the fingers. Yet the ignorant do not know him, for behind the names and forms he remains hidden.”

Within all things to an absolute degree is Brahman, the sole Reality. It is the Self of all that exists. The similes of razor and fire are used to indicate that It can only be seen and known through the process of evocation that is yoga.

Behind all the idea-dreams of the world is the Thinker, the Dreamer: Brahman. It is hidden from us because we only see Its fragments rather than Its Unitary Being. Only when we unify ourselves will we be capable of seeing that Unity.

**Experiencing the Self in oneself**

“When one breathes, one knows him as breath; when one speaks, one knows him as speech; when one sees, one knows him as the eye; when one hears, one knows him as the ear; when one thinks, one knows him as the mind.”

Everything we experience is Brahman alone. We attribute name and form to It, but everything is really the One. That is why by living long enough in the world we begin to intuit the reality of Brahman behind it all. In this way merely experiencing the world slowly evolves us. Otherwise our situation would be hopeless.

**Knowing the Self**

“All these are but names related to his acts; and he who worships the Self as one or another of them does not know him, for of them he is neither one nor another. Wherefore let a man worship him as the Self, and as the Self alone.” Madhavananda: “These are merely Its names according to functions. He who meditates upon each of this totality of aspects does not know, for It is incomplete, (being divided) from this totality by possessing a single characteristic. The Self alone is to be meditated upon, for all these are unified in It.”

Although we are immersed in countless names and forms we must constantly be aware that they are really only the One, the Self of all. By inwardly training out minds through meditation to be aware of the One we will transcend name and form and become established in Consciousness Itself.

**Perfection**

“The perfection which is the Self is the goal of all beings. For by knowing the Self one knows all. He who knows the Self is honored of all men and attains to blessedness.”

Although the meaning has fallen out of common usage, our English word “perfect” not only means without defect or fault, but also whole and complete. The Self alone is complete (purna); from it all things have come and to It all things are returning–however slowly. Therefore to know the Self is to know all, become the highest of human beings, and share in the blessedness of Brahman.

**The nearer and the dearer**

“This Self, which is nearer to us than anything else, is indeed dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than all beside. Let a man worship the Self alone as dear, for if he
worship the Self alone as dear, the object of his love will never perish.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:8) This is somewhat condensed. Here is the Madhavananda version: “This Self is dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than everything else, and is innermost. Should a person (holding the Self as dear) say to one calling anything else dearer than the Self, ‘(what you hold) dear will die’–he is certainly competent (to say so)–it will indeed come true. One should meditate upon the Self alone as dear. Of him who meditates upon the Self alone as dear, the dear ones are not mortal.”

The Self is ever nearer to us than anything else. Therefore we need not reach outward for It, but turn inward to “find” (perceive) It. It is dearest of all to us because It IS us, and is all that we can ever have–everything else in all the worlds are illusions which will perish. So it certainly is truth that those who turn from the Self to outer things will find that they all “die” and are lost to them. For this reason it is not just noble to cherish the Self alone, it is only good sense. In fact, any other attitude is a form of insanity. By living intent on the immortal we can rise above mortality.

Supreme Self-knowledge

“This universe, before it was created, existed as Brahman. ‘I am Brahman;’ thus did Brahman know himself. Knowing himself, he became the Self of all beings. Among the gods, he who awakened to the knowledge of the Self became Brahman; and the same was true among the seers. The seer Vamadeva, realizing Brahman, knew that he himself was the Self of mankind as well as of the sun. Therefore, now also, whoever realizes Brahman knows that he himself is the Self in all creatures. Even the gods cannot harm such a man, since he becomes their innermost Self. Now if a man worship Brahman, thinking Brahman is one and he another, he has not the true knowledge.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:10)

This universe, before it was created, existed as Brahman. The cosmos does not really go in and out of existence. Rather, it goes in and out of manifestation, in and out of emanation from nameless and formless Being–from Brahman, since it is Brahman. So “creation” has always existed, sometimes in potential form and sometimes in actualized form, moving back and forth in an eternal cycle. There has been no beginning, and there will be no end. This is incomprehensible to us since we know nothing but beginning and ending. Beginningless and endless are traits of Brahman and our own Self; but being out of touch with both, it is, as I say, incomprehensible, and we should not fault those who do not believe it.

‘I am Brahman;’ thus did Brahman know himself. Brahman does not need an object to be “conscious.” Instead, Brahman is totally aware of Its own infinite Being. And, since all exists in It, even when creation is manifest Brahman still knows only Itself.

Knowing himself, he became the Self of all beings. That is, knowing that all is really nothing but Brahman, Brahman is–and knows It is–“the Self of all beings.” The word “became” is necessary in human discussion of the subject, but obviously Brahman never becomes anything in Its great Dream. But It experiences all things, being their inner Self.

Among the gods, he who awakened to the knowledge of the Self became Brahman; and the same was true among the seers. Since we are really parts of Brahman (humanly speaking, for Brahman is One [Unitary] and has no parts), Self-knowledge is itself the knowing: “I am THAT” or “I am Brahman [Aham Brahmasmi],” but in a correct perspective. Many golden ornaments are all gold, not one of them is all the gold that exists. The upanishads use the simile of the ocean and a cup of ocean water. The cup of water is absolutely “ocean,” but it is in no way the ocean in its totality. That is why we say that there is no difference between us and Brahman, but there is a distinction between us and Brahman.
This is a crucial point for the questing yogi. Those who think they are the Infinite are as insane as those lunatics that claim to be great figures of history. And some even claim to be God! There is an old joke about a visitor to a mental institution that was accosted by an inmate who announced: “I am Napoleon!” “Oh, really, smiled the visitor, “How do you know you are Napoleon?” “Because God told me,” came the quick reply. A man nearby spoke up and said: “You liar! I never told you any such thing!” Some “enlightened” “Masters” and “Avatars” need a strait jacket, not an ashram and adoring disciples.

The seer Vamadeva, realizing Brahman, knew that he himself was the Self of mankind as well as of the sun. Therefore, now also, whoever realizes Brahman knows that he himself is the Self in all creatures. Even the gods cannot harm such a man, since he becomes their innermost Self. Human beings, too, can know their Brahman nature, and realize that they are formed of that very Life which manifests in all animate and inanimate nature. Nothing can harm such a one, nor can he harm anyone.

Now if a man worship Brahman, thinking Brahman is one and he another, he has not the true knowledge. That is self-explanatory.

**Something omitted**

Swami Prabhavananda omitted something in the foregoing verse that I think is of value for us. Starting with what he did include, this is Madhavananda’s rendition: “And to this day whoever in like manner knows It as, ‘I am Brahman’, becomes all this (universe). Even the gods cannot prevail against him, for he becomes their self. While he who worships another god thinking, ‘He is one, and I am another’, does not know. He is like an animal to the gods. As many animals serve a man, so does each man serve the gods. Even if one animal is taken away, it causes anguish, what should one say of many animals? Therefore it is not liked by them that men should know this.”

I expect that Prabhavananda did not want to open the subject of gods (devas) versus humans—a situation that is not uncommon in undeveloped religions. But we should be aware of it. *A Brief Sanskrit Glossary* give us this definition of deva: “A shining one,” a god—greater or lesser in the evolutionary hierarchy; a semi-divine or celestial being with great powers, and therefore a ‘god.’ Sometimes called a demi-god. Devas are the demigods presiding over various powers of material and psychic nature. In many instances ‘devas’ refer to the powers of the senses or the sense organs themselves.”

Certainly in this verse the devas are actual external astral beings that trade favors with humans. Many people mistake them for Ishwara, the Lord of All, and of course some religions do worship many such beings as gods. Devas of lower evolution—but with highly developed egos—like being worshipped. They look upon their human devotees as their own property, as cattle, like the upanishad says. They do not want them to know the truth of the divine Self and do whatever they can to prevent them from even hearing of that truth. Religion can be an open door to higher understanding and consciousness, or it can be a closed door keeping people from advancing in knowledge and evolution. Many religions are like the devas, counting their members as so many cattle, and truly keeping them in “animal” consciousness, even teaching them that it is their nature to be be limited and “only human.” They insist on their adherents being totally dependent on them as the only means of their “salvation,” which consists of going to the astral worlds of the gods and being just as limited and bound as they. They hate the supreme truth “Thou Art THAT” and do anything to keep people from realizing it. They, like the “gods,” are really possessive and controlling enemies of humanity.
Humans and dharma

“This universe, before it was created, existed as Brahman. Brahman created out of himself priests, warriors, tradesmen, and servants, among both gods and men.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:11-13)

The idea of caste is so fully treated in the Bhagavad Gita that I ask you to look at it there, rather than taking the great deal of time it would take to expound it here. Let it suffice to say that brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra are terms used to indicate the mentality and karma of humans. Everyone falls into one of these categories. Although we have traits of all four castes, we will have the traits of one in predominance. It is interesting to see that the caste system applies to devas as well as human beings.

The paramount idea here is that just as the universe is Brahman, so are we. It is the realization of this truth that all are working toward. But how do we effectively “work toward” it? There has to be a definite way, so the upanishad continues: “Then he created the most excellent Law [Dharma]. There is nothing higher than the Law. The Law is the truth. Therefore it is said that if a man speak the truth he declares the Law, and if he declare the Law he speaks the truth. The Law and the truth are one.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:14) Dharma is the way to knowledge of the Self—it has no other purpose, even though it also brings peace and harmony in a society which observes dharma, a peace and harmony whose only purpose is to make it easier to pursue Self-knowledge. Dharma is not “God’s will” as that term is usually understood. Rather, it is THE TRUTH and the way to conform to and realize The True: Brahman/Self. It has nothing to do with the likes and dislikes of an anthropomorphic deity. Basically, dharma is supreme realism. Dharma and Self-realization are inseparable.

Know the Self!

“Now if a man depart this life without knowing the kingdom of the Self, he, because of that ignorance, does not enjoy the bliss of liberation. He dies without reaching his goal. Nay, even if a man ignorant of the kingdom of the Self should do virtuous deeds on earth, he would not arrive through them at everlasting life; for the effects of his deeds would finally be exhausted. Wherefore let him know the kingdom of the Self, and that alone. The virtue of him who meditates on the kingdom of the Self is never exhausted: for the Self is the source from which all virtue springs. The Self, out of which the sun rises, and into which it sets—that alone do the wise make their goal.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1:4:15)

Now if a man depart this life without knowing the kingdom of the Self, he, because of that ignorance, does not enjoy the bliss of liberation. Actually, the Sanskrit text speaks of knowing the loka, the realm or world, of the Self. That is not an actual world, but the state of being, the consciousness, that is the Self. Atmajnana, Self-knowledge, is the one thing necessary for liberation (moksha). Its opposite, ignorance of the Self, is the sole obstacle to liberation. That is why the Bhagavad Gita over and over speaks of Buddhi Yoga, the Yoga of Realization, whose prime characteristic is jnana (knowledge).

He dies without reaching his goal. Moksha is the only goal of sentient beings, and without Self-knowing it is not attained, the ignorant slipping back into rebirth in this or subtler worlds with their iron shackles of limitation and ignorance and karma.

Nay, even if a man ignorant of the kingdom of the Self should do virtuous deeds on earth, he would not arrive through them at everlasting life; for the effects of his deeds would finally be exhausted. Virtue is no protection for the ignorant who know not the Self. Good karma is worthless in this matter, for just as it was created, so it will be exhausted. Such karma can only bring unto into the relative worlds that also began and will have an end. To attain the
Eternal, temporal karma means nothing. We can only attain the Eternal through the Eternal, through regaining our eternal status as the Immortal Self. This is only done through Self-knowledge that is experience of the Self. And that is gained only through the intense practice of yoga meditation.

*Wherefore let him know the kingdom of the Self, and that alone.* Yes: That Alone. Self-knowledge is not a spice or condiment to enhance our enjoyment of the deadly delusion we call “life” and “living.” It is meant to utterly replace all else, to absorb us into itself. As Jesus said: “Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33) “Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all, and followed thee. And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.” (Luke 18:28-30)

*The virtue of him who meditates on the kingdom of the Self is never exhausted: for the Self is the source from which all virtue springs. The Self, out of which the sun rises, and into which it sets—that alone do the wise make their goal. Are we wise or foolish? We alone determine that by our life.*
Correcting Our Ideas About Brahman

Now we come to the oldest upanishadic dialogue between teacher and student. Gargya, the student, will speak the truth, but without exact perception. That is, his statements will be either partial, skewed, or not of dead-center accuracy. So I will not stay much about what he says, but concentrate on what the teacher Ajatasatru will say in correcting his statements—which are not false, but imperfect and lacking. (All through this discourse Ajatasatru’s disagreements with Gargya are only that Gargya aims much to low in his views of reality, whereas Ajatasatru keeps insisting on viewing Reality–Brahman–not Its manifestations or appearances.)

It must also be kept in mind that when Ajatasatru speaks of “children” or “progeny” he is speaking of the progeny of the illumined mind. Just as the scriptures speak of “the mind-born sons of Brahma” so each of has mind-born offspring, symbolically speaking. Thoughts, words, and deeds, are all our “children.”

The pride of ignorance

“Gargya, son of Valaka, was a good talker, but exceedingly vain. Coming one day into the presence of Ajatasatru, king of Varanasi, he accosted him with boastful speech. Gargya said: ‘I will teach you of Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Indeed? Well, just for that kind proposal you should be rewarded with a thousand cows. People nowadays flock to King Janaka to speak and hear of Brahman; I am pleased that you have come to me instead.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:1)

The Sanskrit text actually says: “There was a man of the Garga family called Proud Balaki, who was eloquent.” Shankara comments that he was ‘Proud’ because of his very ignorance about the real Brahman.” We see this a lot in every area of life, not just religion. As someone once said: “The problem with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along.” It has been my observation that the more confidence some people possess, the more ignorant they are. When they speak with bullying assurance they should never be believed. This has saved me from a lot of potentially disastrous situations.

As has been the practice in nearly all ancient cultures, at that time cows were prized so highly as to even be a medium of exchange, often preferred to money. (It is interesting that the oldest money found in England are huge blocks of metal embossed with the figure of a cow to indicate that each one possesses the value of one cow.)

Janaka was, as A Brief Sanskrit Glossary says: “The royal sage (raja rishi) who was the king of Mithila and a liberated yogi, a highly sought-after teacher of philosophy in ancient India.” So it was very pleasing to Ajatasatru that someone would approach him for philosophical discourse. However, Gargya came to teach and instead was taught–fortunate man! The fact that he was amenable to being taught indicates that his pride was really harmless, like the pride of a child. This is a trait of a sattwic mind.

Transcendent and transcending knowledge

“Gargya said: ‘He who is the being in the sun and at the same time the being in the eye; he who, having entered the body through the eye, resides in the heart and is the doer and the experiencer–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as transcendent, luminous, supreme. He who meditates upon Brahman as such goes beyond all created beings and becomes the
It is certainly true that Brahman is all-pervading and therefore immanent in all creation, but It is much more, and those further attributes are the ones so necessary for the aspiring yogi to learn. That which Gargya said can be held by any devoted religious person in ignorance. But Ajatasatru’s assertions are “the last word” in the matter, both as to the true nature of Brahman and that which he will himself become who comes to know this of Brahman by the direct experience possible only to adept yogis. Brahman is not confined to this present world-experience, and neither are we in our true nature. This must be realized if we would be free (mukta).

Beyond the mind

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the moon and at the same time in the mind–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as infinite, clad in purity, blissful, resplendent. He who meditates upon Brahman as such lacks nothing and is forever happy.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:3)

Brahman is certainly in the mind [manas], but cannot be grasped by the mind, for it is an instrument of illusory perception. The intellect [buddhi] can be so purified that it becomes a mirror-reflection of Spirit-Being—which is why the Gita emphasizes Buddhi Yoga. The buddhi can perceive Brahman “as infinite, clad in purity, blissful, resplendent.” Such is the gateway to the fulfillment of all right desires and unbroken bliss.

Omnipotence

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the lightning and at the same time in the heart–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as power. He who meditates upon Brahman as such becomes powerful, and his children after him.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:4)

We see astounding phenomena in creation, but they are only appearances, however wondrous. Brahman is their source, but It is the Power that produces those phenomena, It is their foundation without which they could not occur. Brahman is unlimited Potential. And so are those who come to know Brahman.

Omnipresence

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the sky and at the same time in the heart–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as all-pervading, changeless. He who meditates upon Brahman as such is blessed with children and with cattle. The thread of his progeny shall never be cut.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:5)

Brahman is not just in a lot of places, Brahman is everywhere and within all things, for It IS all things. And this all-pervasiveness is eternal–has been so forever.

Invincible

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the wind and who at the same time is the breath within–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as the Lord, invincible and unconquerable. He who meditates upon Brahman as such becomes himself invincible and unconquerable.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:6)

Wind and breath wax, wane, and cease–Brahman never does. It cannot be even
affected by anything, much less controlled.

Forbearing

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the fire and at the same time in the heart–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as forgiving [forbearing]. He who meditates upon Brahman as such becomes himself forgiving, and his children after him.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:7)

The idea here is that, being within all things, Brahman experiences all that happens to them. That is why Bishop James I. Wedgwood, an adherent of Advaita Vedanta, wrote the prayer he called An Act of Union: “Unto Thee, O Perfect One, the Lord and Lover of men, do we commend our life and hope. For Thou art the Heavenly Bread, the Life of the whole world; Thou art in all places and endurest all things, the Treasury of endless good and the Well of infinite compassion.” Brahman is not just in many things, It is the Consciousness inside of all things as the Infinite Witness.

Harmony

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the water and at the same time in the heart–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as harmony. He who meditates upon Brahman as such knows only what is harmonious. Of him are born tranquil children.”’ (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:8)

Water takes the form of any vessel into which it is poured. It is the softest of substances, and has no innate resistance. (Water pressure comes from restraining forms, not from water itself.) Thus it is a perfect symbol of harmony—or “agreeableness” as Madhavananda translates it. Ajatasatru points out that we should not exalt finite objects that exemplify worthy characteristics, but Brahman Which IS those traits, the substances and objects only being tiny reflections of Brahman. We must not mistake the mirror image for the actual object.

Self-effulgent

“Gargya said: ‘The being who is in the mirror–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as effulgent. He who meditates upon Brahman as such becomes himself effulgent, and his children after. He shines brighter than all who approach him.”’ (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:9)

The ancient Indians were far more sophisticated than is known in the West. Although I once read such an idea denounced as “Hindu Fundamentalism” and “Militant Hinduism,” it is my serious belief that India has in the past attained levels of technology, medicine, and all aspects of culture that have been undreamed of elsewhere on earth. India truly has forgotten more than the modern world can possibly know. This verse is an instance of this.

We see our reflection in a mirror because light waves strike the surface of our bodies and clothing, and as they are deflected into the mirror we see an image there. But Brahman is swayamprakash, Its own illumination. That is why Christian mysticism speaks of Divinity as the “Light of light.” Brahman is the source, the cause, not the effect. “He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15)

Life itself

“Gargya said: ‘The sound that follows a man as he walks–that I meditate upon as
Brahman.' Ajatasatru said: 'Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as the vital force. He who meditates upon Brahman as such reaches his full age in this world: breath does not leave him before his time.'” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:10)

Brahman is Life Itself, Existence Itself. All phenomena are simply echoes of Brahman. As just quoted: “He shining, everything shines.” (Katha Upanishad 2:2:15)

“My own Self”

“Gargya said: ‘The being who pervades space–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as a second self, who can never be separated from me. He who meditates upon Brahman as such is never lonely, and his followers never forsake him.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:11)

Brahman is not outside us as any “thing.” Rather, Brahman is our own Self. What is most important about this verse is that it indicates the important truth that Brahman is our second Self—not our Atman in the simplistic sense. For that would mean that we do not even exist—that as false Advaita says, when we attain realization we will cease to exist and only Brahman will remain. This is not the teaching of the upanishads or the Gita. Brahman is the Self of our Self. First we must come to know our own individual Self, and then proceed to know the Supreme Self, Brahman. Brahman is at the core of our Self, inseparable from It. How this can be is beyond human intelligence, but not beyond our experience, our direct knowing. Buddhhi Yoga is the key.

Divine will

“Gargya said: ‘The being who dwells in the heart as intelligence–him I meditate upon as Brahman.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘Nay, nay! Do not speak thus of Brahman. That being I worship as the lord of will. He who meditates upon Brahman as such achieves self-control, and his children after him.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:13)

Intelligence or buddhi is centered in the subtle body known as the jnanamaya kosha, which corresponds to the air (vayu) element. But the subtlest body is the anandamaya kosha, which corresponds to the ether (akasha) element. That is the seat of will, the highest power of the individual. The only thing higher is the Self, and since it borders on the Self, the Self (whose Self is Brahman) is “the lord of will.” We can see this in our daily life. We choose what we will or will not think about. Sometimes we even shove thoughts out of our mind, refusing to think on certain subjects or postponing thought till a later time. So the Self is the direct controller of the will. The will determines everything, and even unsophisticated philosophy considers free will the prime trait of a human being.

Insufficient

“Gargya ceased speaking. Ajatasatru, continuing, questioned him. Ajatasatru said: ‘Is that all that you know of Brahman?’ Gargya said: ‘That is all that I know.’ Ajatasatru said: ‘By knowing only so much, one cannot profess to know Brahman.’ Gargya said: ‘Please, sir, accept me as a disciple, and teach me of Brahman.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:14)

A practical demonstration

“Ajatasatru said: ‘I will teach you.’ So saying, Ajatasatru took Gargya by the hand and rose. Then, as the two walked side by side, they came to a sleeping man. Ajatasatru said to the sleeper: ‘O thou great one, clad in white raiment, O Soma, O king!’ At first the man did
Occasionally in the upanishads we find humor used to make a point, and this is one of them. Coming across a sleeping man, Ajatasatru addressed him as the divine Self: “O thou great one, clad in white raiment, O Soma, O king!” But it did no good, for the man was unconscious. It was pointless to address him at all. In the same way, all the positive affirming and philosophizing are worthless if the speaker and the hearers are spiritually asleep! Sleepers do not need high-sounding words about the Self: they need to awaken. So Ajatasatru shook him until he woke up. We need to be shaken up, to awaken and see with our real eyes and hear with our real ears. Otherwise nothing will really go on. The truth being spoken to us means nothing if we are not awake to hear it. Yoga is the great awakener. Other factors can disturb our sleep, get us to open our eyes a bit and then go back to sleep, and just mumble and turn over and sleep on. Yoga alone awakens. All the religion and piety mean absolutely nothing if we are not awake and clear in the mind. Ajatasatru now analyzes sleep, dream, and dreamless sleep.

The sleeper

“Ajatasatru said to Gargya: ‘This man, who is a conscious, intelligent being–where was he when he was thus asleep, and how did he thus wake up?’ Gargya was silent.

“When this man, who is a conscious, intelligent being, is thus in deep sleep, he enters into the ether within the lotus of the heart, having withdrawn into himself both his senses and his mind. When his senses and his mind are thus withdrawn, he is said to be absorbed in the [lower] self.

“In this state he knows nothing; he enters into the seventy-two thousand nerves [nadis] which go out from the lotus of the heart. Even as a young man, or an emperor, or the best of Brahmins, when he has experienced the ecstasy of love, straightway takes sweet repose, so does a man deep in sleep find rest.

“But when he sleeps, but also dreams, he lives in a world of his own. He may dream that he is a king, or that he is the best of Brahmins; he may dream that he is an angel, or that he is a beast. As an emperor, having obtained the objects of enjoyment, moves about at will in his dominions, so the sleeper, gathering up the impressions of sense, compounds them into dreams according to his desires.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:16-19)

In sleep we withdraw from the physical senses. In dream we are using the astral senses to create whatever our mind decides. In dreamless sleep we are centered in the causal body. We can even think in such a state without waking, though it is not common to do so. Yet, as Ajatasatru points out, we are always conscious, witnessing the dream and dreamless states just as we witness the waking state. Even more, when we awaken we often remember the dreams and even say: “I did not dream,” showing that we remember dreamlessness as vividly as we do dreaming and waking. That witnessing conscious is our Self, pure being itself.

The source

The “bottom line” is that the Self is the source of our waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. It is the source of our entire life, determining every aspect. So Ajatasatru concludes with these words:

“As threads come out of the spider, as little sparks come out of the fire, so all the senses, all the worlds, all the gods, yea, all beings, issue forth from the Self. His secret name is Truth of the Truth.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:1:20)

The Self, and ultimately Brahman, is/are the origin and existence of all things. When
we know that Self we know, possess, and control all. That and that alone is what it means to be a Master.
The Dearness of the Self

Now we come to the best-known dialogue of this upanishad: the conversation between the great sage Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi his wife. Maitreyi and Gargi (whom we will meet later in this upanishad) are evidence that in the time of the ancient sages women were among their number and were teachers of Brahman in their own right. True Hindu traditionalists such as the Arya Samajis make no distinction between male and female in the spiritual rituals (samskaras) received, all wearing the sacred thread (yajnopavita) and performing the Vedic rites. The most perfect and powerful fire sacrifice I have ever attended was that of the high school girls in the Arya Samaj girls’ school in Baroda. I have never seen better “brahmins” than those intelligent and skilled young women. I hope they have retained the glorious wisdom they learned at that true gurukula under the direction of the venerable sage Pandit Anandapriya of the Arya Samaj.

The vital question

“Yajnavalkya said to his wife: ‘Maitreyi, I am resolved to give up the world and begin the life of renunciation. I wish therefore to divide my property between you and my other wife, Katyayani.’

“Maitreyi said: ‘My lord, if this whole earth belonged to me, with all its wealth, should I through its possession attain immortality?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘No. Your life would be like that of the rich. None can possibly hope to attain immortality through wealth.’

“Maitreyi said: ‘Then what need have I of wealth? Please, my lord, tell me what you know about the way to immortality.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘Dear to me have you always been, Maitreyi, and now you ask to learn of that truth which is nearest my heart. Come, sit by me. I will explain it to you. Meditate on what I say.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:1-4)

What a beautiful picture! I cannot count the number of enslaved “spiritual” men who have rhapsodized to me about how “special” their wives were, that turned out to really be materialistic, anti-spiritual, manipulative harpies. Women have better sense; they rarely extol the duds they are married to—though both sexes are quite willing to use their spouse as justification for neglecting or abandoning spiritual life. After all, they have taken “vows” and taken “obligations” on themselves! God, for another life, has to go to the end of the line and wait.

But that is not what we see here. We see a real spiritual marriage in action. Both seek Reality. In those days the life of a sannyasi was one of perpetual wandering, so there is no thought of Maitreyi accompanying Yajnavalkya in his new stage of life. But we can be assured that her sadhana was no less intense than his, for she has been honored for centuries as one of the great illuminati of India, no less than her husband.

Yajnavalkya calls Maitreyi priya, which mean dear, beloved, and pleasing. And he does not mean it in the small-minded egocentric way we are so inured to. And lest she think so, he now begins one of the most quoted passages of the upanishads.

For the sake of the Self

“It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of
the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the children, my beloved, that the children are dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of wealth, my beloved, that wealth is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the Brahmins, my beloved, that the Brahmins are held in reverence, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the Kshatriyas, my beloved, that the Kshatriyas are held in honor, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the higher worlds, my beloved, that the higher worlds are desired, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the gods, my beloved, that the gods are worshipped, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of the creatures, my beloved, that the creatures are prized, but for the sake of the Self.

“It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self.

“The Self, Maitreyi, is to be known. Hear about it, reflect upon it, meditate upon it. By knowing the Self, my beloved, through hearing, reflection, and meditation, one comes to know all things.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:5)

The Self (Atman) is of the nature of bliss (ananda). When the things enumerated above are encountered a person feels a touch of the joy that is the Self. Actually, our response to them opens the barrier between us and the Self for a while, and like the light coming through the shutter of a camera we get a flash, a glimpse of the bliss of the Self. What we are really valuing is that touch of the Self, but in our ignorance we think those objects are the source. Therefore it really is because of—“for the sake of”—the Self that they are thought by us as dear.

The wise seek to know the Self through study, deep thought, and meditation upon the Self. And we are assured that “by knowing the Self through hearing, reflection, and meditation, one comes to know all things.”

All are the Self

To know the Self is to know everything. To not know the Self is to know nothing. So the sage continues:

“Let the Brahmin ignore him who thinks that the Brahmin is different from the Self.

“Let the Kshatriya ignore him who thinks that the Kshatriya is different from the Self.

“Let the higher worlds ignore him who thinks that the higher worlds are different from the Self.

“Let the gods ignore him who thinks that the gods are different from the Self.

“Let all creatures ignore him who thinks that the creatures are different from the Self.

“Let all ignore him who thinks that anything whatever is different from the Self.

“The priest, the warrior, the higher worlds, the gods, the creatures, whatsoever things there be—these are the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:6)

That is certainly clear. And so is this: “As, when the drum is beaten, its various particular notes are not heard apart from the whole, but in the total sound all its notes are heard; as, when the conch shell is blown, its various particular notes are not heard apart from the whole, but in the total sound all its notes are heard; as, when the vina is played, its various particular notes are not heard apart from the whole, but in the total sound all its notes are heard.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:6)
notes are heard—so, through the knowledge of the Self, Pure Intelligence, all things and beings are known. There is no existence apart from the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:7-9)

The incredible spectacle of the endless creations of infinite elaboration springs only from Brahman and has no existence apart from Brahman. The same is true of our own continuing saga of lifetimes: it all emanates from the Self. The cosmic and individual dreams arise only from Consciousness. The dreams are illusion, yet wisdom (jnana) is inherent in them. So Yajnavalkya further says: “As smoke and sparks arise from a lighted fire kindled with damp fuel, even so, Maitreyi, have been breathed forth from the Eternal all knowledge and all wisdom—what we know as the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, and the rest. They are the breath of the Eternal.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:10)

The all-pervading center

“As for water the one center is the ocean, as for touch the one center is the skin, as for smell the one center is the nose, as for taste the one center is the tongue, as for form the one center is the eyes, as for sound the one center is the ears, as for thought the one center is the mind, as for divine wisdom the one center is the heart—so for all beings the one center is the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:11)

In the twenty-second chapter of Autobiography of a Yogi, Paramhansa Yogananda describes seeing with the “eye” of the Self: “Spiritual sight, x-raylike, penetrates into all matter; the divine eye is center everywhere, circumference nowhere. I realized anew, standing there in the sunny courtyard, that when man ceases to be a prodigal child of God, engrossed in a physical world indeed dream, baseless as a bubble, he reinherits his eternal realms. If ‘escapism’ be a need of man, cramped in his narrow personality, can any escape compare with the majesty of omnipresence?”

“As a lump of salt when thrown into water melts away and the lump cannot be taken out, but wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, O Maitreyi, the individual self, dissolved, is the Eternal—pure consciousness, infinite and transcendent. Individuality arises by identification of the Self, through ignorance, with the elements; and with the disappearance of consciousness of the many, in divine illumination, it disappears. Where there is consciousness of the Self, [seeming] individual separation is no more. This it is, O my beloved, that I wanted to tell you.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:12)

A doubt

“Maitreyi said: “‘Where there is consciousness of the Self, individual separation is no more.” This that you say, my lord, confuses me.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘My beloved, let nothing I have said confuse you. But meditate well the truth that I have spoken.

“As long as there is duality, one sees the other, one hears the other, one smells the other, one speaks to the other, one thinks of the other; but when for the illumined soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom? Ah, Maitreyi, my beloved, the Intelligence which reveals all—by what shall it be revealed? By whom shall the Knower be known? The Self is described as Not This, Not That. It is incomprehensible, for it cannot be comprehended; undecaying, for it never decays; unattached, for it never attaches itself; unbound, for it is never bound. By whom, O my beloved, shall the Knower be known?

“This it is that I teach you, O Maitreyi. This is the truth of immortality.’
“So saying, Yajnavalkya entered upon the path of renunciation.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:4:13,14)

Yajnavalkya is not saying that the enlightened go into a kind of non-dual coma in which nothing is perceived. Rather, he says that those who have known Brahman, even though they still hear and see names and forms, they know that they are not seeing something “other,” but are seeing only the Supreme Self. They do not just believe that, they SEE that to be so. Only the One remains, however many “things” might be seen in the cosmic dream.

Nothing “other” can reveal this Consciousness to us, for that is the Revealer, never the Revealed. For the vision of God takes place within, not without—though afterward we do see Divinity both within and without. The machine does not run the operator, the operator runs the machine.

Because of Its transcendent nature, Brahman is described as Neti Neti—Not This, Not That. We can only say what Brahman is not, and when we come to the end, having negated everything, what remains, though unspeakable and inconceivable, is Brahman.

“By whom, O my beloved, shall the Knower be known?” Only to Itself—to our Self.
Divine Sweetness

We have had a discourse on how it is the Self that makes all things dear or beloved to us. We often use the expression “sweet” to express our pleasure or delight in something, and so the upanishad speaks of how all things are “honey” (madhu) because “Brahman is the soul in each; he indeed is the Self in all. He is all.” The nature of Brahman is bliss (ananda), and Brahman is the soul, the Self of all. Consequently all things are joy for the awakened and realized person.

To avoid tedium from the type of repetition that is found in many Sanskrit texts (and in many Pali sutras of Buddhism), I will just give the first “honey” verse and the simply list all of the subjects covered, since except for the keyword each verse is absolutely identical.

“This earth is honey for all beings, and all beings are honey for this earth. The intelligent, immortal being, the soul of this earth, and the intelligent, immortal being, the soul in the individual being–each is honey to the other. Brahman is the soul in each; he indeed is the Self in all. He is all.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:5:1)

Verses two to fourteen affirm the joyful nature of water, fire, air, the sun, space, the moon, lightning, thunder, ether, dharma, truth (satyam), humanity (manusham), and all things (sarvesham).

The upanishad them sums it all up with the following verses:

“This Self is the lord of all beings, the king of all beings. As the spokes are held together in the hub and in the felly of a wheel, just so all beings, all creatures, all gods, all worlds, all lives, are held together in the Self.

“He made bodies with two feet, he made bodies with four feet. He entered into all bodies, and because he dwells within the lotus of the heart, he is known as Purusha. There is nothing that is not surrounded by him, nothing that is not filled with him.

“He assumed all forms. He assumed all forms to reveal himself in all forms. He, the Lord, is revealed in all forms through his Maya. He is tens, he is thousands–he is numberless.

“This Brahman is without cause, without effect, without inside or outside. This Brahman is the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2:5:15,18,19)
The Wisdom of the Wise

The next section of the upanishad is a marvel of wisdom that opens with some humor.

I want those cows!

“Janaka, King of Videha, on a certain occasion performed a sacrifice and in connection therewith distributed costly gifts. Among those who attended the ceremony were the wise men of Kuru and of Panchala. King Janaka observed them and wanted to find out which was the wisest.

“Now it happened that the king kept a thousand cows enclosed in a pen, and between the horns of every one of them were fastened ten gold coins.

“Venerable Brahmins,’ said King Janaka, ‘let him who is the wisest among you take away these cows.’

“The Brahmins dared not stir, save Yajnavalkya alone.

“‘My learned son,’ said Yajnavalkya to his disciple, ‘drive home my cows.’

“‘Hurrah!’ cried the lad, and made for them.

“The rest of the Brahmins were enraged. ‘How dare he call himself the wisest!’ they shouted. At last, Aswala, priest to King Janaka, accosted Yajnavalkya, saying:

“‘Yajnavalkya, are you quite sure you are the wisest among us?’

“‘I bow down,’ replied Yajnavalkya, ‘to the wisest. But I want those cows!’

“Then Aswala began to question him.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:1:2)

As already mentioned, Janaka is considered the prime example of a “worldly” person who attained perfect knowledge. He is also considered the prime example of one who possessed great wealth. “Rich as Janaka” is the Indian equivalent of the West’s “rich as Midas.”

It was the custom for those who attended spiritual events to be given rich gifts, and it was obvious to all those at the sacrifice that the thousand cows and ten thousand gold coins strung between their horns were meant to be given to the one who could best expound philosophy and answer all challenging questions. (It may be that the ten thousand padas of gold mentioned in the text were not coins of one pada each, but covers with large gold knobs that were affixed to the cows’ horns.)

Those who attended the sacrifice were truly wise men, for they were also modest. When told that the cows and gold were for the wisest among them “they dared not stir.”

Yajnavalkya, on the other hand, was tactful. He told a student to take the cows to his home rather than claim he was the wisest, though he was—and knew he was. When challenged by Aswala he said: “I bow down to the wisest, but I want those cows!” In this way he masked his wisdom with humor that appeared to be simple greed. Saints often do this, pretending to be ignorant or unaware, hiding their true status from the truly ignorant and unaware (who, blinded by their ego, are always fooled by the ruse). Swami Sivananda often did this, as I witnessed myself. Only the wise dare to be thought a fool.

Now there follows the questioning of Yajnavalkya.

How to overcome death

“Aswala said: ‘Yajnavalkya, since everything connected with sacrificial rites is pervaded by death, and is subject to death, by what means can the worshiper overcome death?’

Yajnavalkya said: ‘By knowledge of the identity between the worshiper, the fire, and the
ritual word. For the ritual word is indeed the worshiper, and the ritual word is the fire, and the fire, which is one with Brahman, is the worshiper. This knowledge leads to liberation; this knowledge leads one beyond death.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:1:3)

All relative things begin and end, are born and die in a manner of speaking. Everything that is connected with the fire sacrifice is perishable, including the fire itself—all are pervaded by death and subject to death. Obviously, then the sacrifice cannot lead to immortality. So how can we overcome (“go beyond” is the literal wording) death? The answer is simple: by knowing the non-dual Brahman Which alone is immortal and immortality itself.

What “eats” death?

“Aswala held his peace. But Artabhaga asked: ‘Yajnavalkya, everything is the food of death. Is there any power for which death is food?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Indeed, yes. Fire devours everything, and fire, again, is the food of water. Similarly, there is a death to death. The knower of the truth of Brahman overcomes death.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:2:10)

Those who know Brahman have “devoured” death just as the eater of food transmutes it into his own body and lives on it. So death itself is the gateway of immortality to the yogi.

The liberated at death

“Artabhaga said: ‘Yajnavalkya, when such an one gives up his body, do his perceptive faculties, along with his mind, go out of him, or do they not?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘They do not. They merge in the final cause, the Self. The body lies lifeless, inflated, and swollen.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:2:11)

In relative existence we possess five levels. Artabhaga is asking if all but the physical (material) levels or bodies go along with the liberated individual at the departure from the body. Yajnavalkya replies that the pranic (pranamaya) and sensory-mind (manomaya) bodies do not go along with the liberated person, but are resolved back into the universal energy from which they arose when he entered into relativity. We only take with us the buddhi (jnanamaya) and creative will (anandamaya) bodies which are causal in nature, the seats of intellect and intuition respectively. For the liberated are free forever of the physical and astral bodies, though they can take new ones on again if they elect to return to incarnation in the astral or physical worlds as avatar-saviors in those worlds.

The Atman-Self

“Artabhaga held his peace. Then Ushasta asked: ‘Yajnavalkya, what is the ultimate, the immediate Brahman, Brahman himself alone, directly realized as such, the Self which dwells within all?’ Yajnavalkya (pointing to his heart) said: ‘This, thy Self, which is within all.’ Ushasta said: ‘Which self, O Yajnavalkya, is within all?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘That which breathes in is thy Self, which is within all. That which breathes down is thy Self, which is within all. That which diffuses breath is thy Self, which is within all. That which breathes out is thy Self, which is within all. Again I reply: This, thy Self, which is within all.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:4:1)

Brahman is the Self within, the Self that enlivens and activates all through the functions of the five pranas. If we can trace back the pranas, especially through the breath, we will find the Self.

“Ushasta said: ‘As one might say, in distinguishing a cow from a horse, that the cow is the animal that walks, and the horse is the animal that runs, exactly so simple, so clear, O
wise one, has been your teaching about Brahman! But tell me, I ask again, who is the ultimate, the immediate Brahman, Brahman himself alone, directly realized as such, the Self which dwells within all? Yajnavalkya said: ‘This, thy Self, which is within all.’ Ushasta said: ‘Which self, O Yajnavalkya, is within all?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Thou canst not see the seer of the sight, thou canst not hear the hearer of the sound, thou canst not think the thinker of the thought, thou canst not know the knower of the known. Again I reply: This, thy Self, which is within all. Anything that is not the Self perishes.’ Ushasta held his peace.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:4:2)

There is only one Self: the Self that cannot be seen, heard, thought, or known by the limited mind. It, being inside everything, is not an object of perception. If we take away all “things” only the Self remains, knowing Itself by Itself. Naturally this is not easy to grasp intellectually, because the Self is far beyond the intellect. Nevertheless, these truths can be known by the yogi.

“Kahola asked: ‘Yajnavalkya, what is the ultimate, the immediate Brahman, Brahman himself alone, directly realized as such, the Self which dwells within all?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘This, thy Self, which is within all.’ Kohala said: ‘Which self, O Yajnavalkya, is within all?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘That which is beyond hunger, thirst, grief, delusion, decay, and death.

“Having realized this Self, the sages renounce the craving for progeny, wealth, and existence in the other worlds, and live the life of mendicants.

“The craving for progeny leads to the craving for wealth, and the craving for wealth to the craving for existence in the other worlds. Thus there are two cravings–craving for a life of enjoyment here, and craving for a life of greater enjoyment hereafter.

“Therefore should a sage, when he has fully attained the knowledge of the Self, desire to live with that knowledge as his only refuge. When he has fully attained that knowledge, and realized it as his only refuge, he should devote himself exclusively to contemplation of the Self.

“He alone is the true knower of Brahman who directs his mind towards the Self and shuns all other thoughts as distractions.

“How does such a knower of Brahman act and conduct himself? Whatever he may do or howsoever he may conduct himself, he is free from craving, and is forever established in the knowledge of Brahman. Anything that is not the Self perishes.’

“Kahola held his peace.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:5:1)

Those who know the Self turn from the nonsense and ties of the world and lead the life of a bhikshu, a monk. (Although in modern times either “sannyasi” or “sadhu” is used to designate a monk, in earlier centuries “bhikshu”–one who lives on alms–was also quite common usage.) Those without ties, but with good sense, knowing this, lead that life from the beginning of their quest. Those that learn of the Self after have tied themselves to the world and yet are wise, begin right away moving toward the life of renunciation and loosening those ties, anticipating the day when they will walk away into freedom. It is not unknown for a realized person to continue living “at home” but in total separation from any obligations that it might entail for others, and certainly utterly out of the “game” of home life. Such a one was Yogiraj Sri Shyama Charan Lahiri, as a study of his life, especially in Autobiography of a Yogi, will reveal. However, those who do not live exactly as he did are deluding themselves if they think they are like him.

Those who are Knowers consider that knowledge their only refuge, the only stable thing in their life, and live ever in meditation on the Self.

A lot of ignoramuses and skallawags claim to be enlightened and able to teach others the way of enlightenment, but Yajnvaklya tells us: “He alone is the true knower of
Brahman who directs his mind towards the Self and shuns all other thoughts as
distractions.” And: “Whatever he may do or howsoever he may conduct himself, he is free
from craving, and is forever established in the knowledge of Brahman.” It is a pity that
unlike Kahola they do not hold their peace.
The Sutratman, the “Thread” Self

In the Bhagavad Gita we read: “Nothing higher than Me exists. On Me all this universe is strung like pearls on a thread.” (7:7) This concept is upanishadic:

“Uddalaka spoke: ‘Yajnavalkya, we lived as students in Madra, in the house of Kapya, whose wife was once possessed by a Gandharva, a celestial singer. We asked the Gandharva who he was. He replied that he was Kabandha, and proceeded to question Kapya thus: “Dost thou know that thread whereon this life, the next life, and all beings are strung together?” Kapya did not know. The Gandharva continued: “Dost thou know that Inner Ruler who controls, from within, this life, the next life, and all beings?” Kapya did not know. The Gandharva then said: “He who knows that thread and that Inner Ruler knows Brahman, knows the worlds, knows the gods, knows the Vedas, knows the creatures, knows the Self–knows all things.” I myself know these things that the Gandharva taught. Yajnavalkya, if thou, without knowing that thread and that Inner Ruler, take the cows that belong only to the wisest, accursed shalt thou be.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘I know that thread and that Inner Ruler.’ Uddalaka said: ‘Anybody can say, “I know, I know.” Tell us what you know.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:7:1)

This questioning contains a lot of facts regarding the Self:
- It is the connecting foundation of all beings.
- It is the cohesive force that impels all beings through a succession of lives for their evolution.
- It is the absolute Ruler and Controller of all lives and beings as their inmost essential nature.

To know the Self is to know all things, both the Manifester and the manifested.

Now Yajnavalkya responds.

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The subtle principle of life is that thread whereon this life and the next life and all beings are strung. Hence, when a man dies, they say his limbs are loosed, for while he lives they are held together by that principle of life.’ Uddalaka said: ‘That is true, Yajnavalkya. Now speak of the Inner Ruler.”’ (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:7:2)

The Self is the principle of Life itself.

Present but separate

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘He who dwells on earth, but is separate from the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is, and who controls the earth from within–he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in water but is separate from water, whom water does not know, whose body water is, and who controls water from within–he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in fire but is separate from fire, whom fire does not know, whose body fire is, and who controls fire from within–he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in the sky, in the air, in heaven, in the four quarters, in the sun, in the moon, in the stars, in ether, in darkness, in light, but is separate from them, whom none of them knows, whose body they are, and who controls them from within–he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in all beings but is separate from all beings, whom no being knows, whose body all beings are, and who controls all beings from within–he, the Self, is the
inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in odor, speech, sight, hearing, and touch, but is separate from them, whom odor, speech, sight, hearing, and touch do not know, whose body is odor, speech, sight, hearing, and touch are, and who controls them all from within—he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in the mind, but is separate from the mind, whom the mind does not know, whose body the mind is, and who controls the mind from within—he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“He who dwells in the intellect, but is separate from the intellect, whom the intellect does not know, whose body the intellect is, and who controls the intellect from within—he, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“Unseen, but the seer; unheard but the hearer, unthinkable, but the thinker; unknown, but the knower—there is no seer but he, there is no hearer but he, there is no other but he, there is no knower but he. He, the Self, is the Inner Ruler, the Immortal.

“Anything that is not the Self perishes.’

“Uddalaka held his peace.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:7:3-23)

If we have not figured this out already, nothing can be said that will give us the idea. But we do have the idea, and this is an affirmation intended to confirm us in our understanding.

Gargi and the Imperishable

Now we hear from the female sage, Gargi.

“Then arose Gargi, the daughter of Vachaknu, and addressed the sages: ‘Revered Brahmins, I shall ask Yajnavalkya two questions. If he is able to answer them, no one among you can ever defeat him. He will be the great expounder of the truth of Brahman.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Ask, O Gargi.’

“Gargi said: ‘Yajnavalkya, as the son of a warrior from Kashi or Videha might string his loosened bow and with two deadly arrows in his hand rise to give battle, even so have I risen to fight thee with two questions.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Ask, O Gargi.’

“Gargi said: ‘Yajnavalkya, that of which they say that it is above heaven and below the earth, which is between heaven and earth as well, and which was, is, and shall be—tell me, in what is it woven, warp and woof?’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘That of which they say, O Gargi, that it is above heaven and below the earth, which is between heaven and earth as well, and which was, is, and shall be—tell me, in what is it woven, warp and woof?’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘That of which they say, O Gargi, that it is above heaven and below the earth, which is between heaven and earth as well, and which was, is, and shall be—that is woven, warp and woof, in the ether.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:8:1-4)

Ether (Akasha) is the subtlest element, so subtle that it is often indistinguishable from Consciousness. Without it nothing can exist. Yet there is more, so Gargi persists.


“Gargi said: ‘In whom is that ether woven, warp and woof?’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The seers, O Gargi, call him Akshara—the changeless Reality. He is neither gross nor fine, neither short nor long, neither hot nor cold, neither light nor dark, neither of the nature of air, nor of the nature of ether. He is without relations. He is without taste or smell, without eyes, ears, speech, mind, vigor, breath, mouth; he is without measure; he is without inside or outside. He enjoys nothing; nothing enjoys him.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:8:5-8)

“Akshara” means imperishable, indestructible, and immutable. It is sometimes a synonym for the Chidakasha, the Ether of Consciousness in which the element of ether.
rests. As Yajnavalkya makes clear, the Imperishable Brahman and the imperishable Self are No Thing, having not attributes or form whatsoever; yet It is infinite and omnipresent. “He enjoys nothing” because there is no second, no separate object for Brahman to be involved with or relate to. And “nothing enjoys him” because no thing can perceive Brahman. “Things” do not really exist. Brahman, on the other hand, is the sole Existence.

“‘At the command of that Akshara, O Gargi, sun and moon hold their courses. At the command of that Akshara, O Gargi, heaven and earth keep their positions. At the command of that Akshara, O Gargi, moments, hours, days and nights, fortnights and months, seasons and years—all follow their paths. At the command of that Akshara, O Gargi, rivers, issuing from the snowy mountains, flow on, some eastward, some westward, others in other directions.

“‘He, O Gargi, who in this world, without knowing this Akshara, offers oblations, performs sacrifices, practices austerities, even though for many thousands of years, gains little: his offerings and practices are perishable. He, O Gargi, who departs this life without knowing the Imperishable, is pitiable. But he, O Gargi, who departs this life knowing the Akshara, is wise.

“‘This Akshara, O Gargi, is unseen but is the seer, is unheard but is the hearer, is unthinkable but is the thinker, is unknown but is the knower. There is no seer but he, there is no hearer but he, there is no thinker but he, there is no knower but he. In Akshara, verily, O Gargi, the ether is woven, warp and woof.’

“Gargi said: ‘Revered Brahmins, well may you feel blest if you get off with bowing before him! No one will defeat Yajnavalkya, expounder of the truth of Brahman.’ Gargi held her peace.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:8:9-12)

Is it any wonder that men and women throughout the ages have devoted their entire lives to the pursuit of the knowledge of Brahman? What else is there?

“Yajnavalkya addressed the sages: ‘Revered Brahmins, ask me questions if you will—any one of you in the assembly, or all of you. Or if any one of you so desires, I will question him. Or I will question all of you.’ But the Brahmins held their peace.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3:9:27)

Let us hope they returned home and doubled and tripled their efforts to realize Brahman. And so may we, for that is the purpose of this section.
We come now to the lengthiest dialogue in any of the upanishads. Swami Prabhavananda ended his translation of the upanishad at its conclusion, evidently feeling that anything following it would be of vastly inferior value.

Wealth or knowledge?

“On a certain occasion, Janaka, king of Videha, having seated himself to give audience, saw the sage Yajnavalkya among his visitors and accosted him. Janaka said: ‘Yajnavalkya, what brings you here? Do you come for cattle, or for philosophy?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘For both, Your Majesty.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:1)

The great sages, whether past or present, always have a sense of humor. And they are not interested in how they “look” to others. I have seen both of these principles more than once in Swami Sivananda and other great yogis in India.

Humorous though it be, this verse has a real message: the intelligent yogi is interested in the total picture, both material and spiritual. It is ignorance that postulates an incompatibility between material and spiritual life. It is ignorance that creates the problem, not matter or spirit. After all, matter is a manifestation of spirit. Both Janaka and Yajnavalkya were rich in material possessions and in wisdom.

In America we have had two men that were equally successful in finance and spirituality: J. C. Penney, founder of “Penney’s” department store chain and James J. Lynn, whose many-branched multimillion dollar empire could not keep him from becoming one of this country’s greatest yogis and the successor of Paramhansa Yogananda as president of Self-Realization Fellowship. In India I met men of fabulous wealth whose whole mind and heart were centered in spirit-consciousness while working tirelessly for the welfare of the people.

As Sri Ramakrishna said: “If you can weigh salt, you can weigh sugar.”

Word-Brahman

“[Yajnavalkya said:] ‘I wish to hear what your teachers may have taught you.’

‘Janaka said: ‘Jitwa taught me that the word [vak] is Brahman.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘As one who in childhood was instructed adequately, first by his mother and then by his father, and after that was initiated into the sacred mysteries by a sage—as such an one should teach, so has Jitwa taught you the truth when he said that the word is Brahman. For what could a person achieve without the word? But did he tell you about the abode and support of this Word-Brahman?’

‘Janaka said: ‘No, he did not.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘Then you have been only partly taught.’

‘Janaka said: ‘Do you, then, teach me, O Yajnavalkya.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘The organ of speech is its abode, and ether, the primal cause of the universe, is its eternal support. Meditate upon the word as identical with knowledge.’

‘Janaka said: ‘What is knowledge, Yajnavalkya?’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘The word is knowledge, Your Majesty. For through the word a friend is known, and likewise all knowledge, spiritual or otherwise. Through the word is gained knowledge of this world and of the next. Through the word is obtained knowledge of all creatures. The word, Your Majesty, is the Supreme Brahman.’
“Janaka said: ‘I give you a thousand cows with a bull as big as an elephant for teaching me.

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘My father was of the opinion that one should not accept any reward from a disciple without fully instructing him.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:2)

The power of Word, both conceptualization and verbal expression of concepts, is the distinctive feature of the human being, although many other species on earth use sound for communication. There is great power is speech for many reasons, some intellectual and some esoteric. Yajnavalkya points out that it is not enough to appreciate the power of word, but we must know that which gives word it power, what is its “abode and support.” He then tells us that it is the faculty of speech, the innate capacity of the human being for speech, that is the abode of word, for without the faculty of speech there could be no word expressed. Yet that is not the ultimate basis of the word. “Ether, the primal cause of the universe, is its eternal support.” Here, again, the Chidakasha is meant. Sound arises out of the element of ether, and the consciousness behind intelligent sound is the Chidakasha, the Self of the nature of Consciousness. So it is this Consciousness that is the origin of the Word-Brahman, the Shabda Brahman, whose primary form is Om. That Word is to be meditated upon as Prajna (“knowledge”), the inmost consciousness.

“My father was of the opinion that one should not accept any reward from a disciple without fully instructing him.” This tells us two things: Yajnavalkya possessed a spiritual lineage, a tradition with roots. Also he considered that partial knowledge was of little value.

Breath-Brahman

“[Yajnavalkya said:] ‘I wish to know what anyone else may have taught you.’

“Janaka said: ‘Udanka taught me that breath [prana] is Brahman. He did not tell me about its abode and support.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘Prana is its abode and ether [akasha] its support. It should be meditated upon as dear. For life is indeed dear. The primal energy is Brahman.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:3)

When we breathe we live, and when we stop breathing, we die. That is why breath holds such a principal place in the practice of yoga. However, the breath is just the objectified physical manifestation of the inner movement of prana, the primal life energy within the human being. Prana is the force of life itself, but it, like the faculty of speech, has the Chidakasa as its origin and support. The prana is indeed dear, for it is the coin of life.

Sight-Brahman

Now we have another of the same-word passages:

“[Yajnavalkya said:] ‘Tell me what more you have been taught.’

“Janaka said: ‘Barku taught me that the eye [chakshu] is Brahman. But he did not teach me its abode and support.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘Sight [chakshu] is its abode and ether its support. It should be meditated upon as truth. For it is by sight that objects are known. Sight is Brahman. What more have you learned?’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:4)

The word chakshu means both the physical eye and the faculty of sight. The eye is meaningless if one lacks the faculty of sight. And that, too, is rooted in the Chidakasha. Thus we see that all our faculties are but rays of the sun that is the Chidakasha.
The next few verses are going to follow this pattern: the teachers of Janaka will have named the material sense organ, and Yajnavalkya will explain that it is the faculty—and ultimately the Chidakasha—that is the attribute/power of Brahman.

**Hearing-Brahman**

“Janaka said: ‘Gardabhvipati taught me that the ear [shrotra] is Brahman.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Hearing [shrotra] is its abode and ether its support. It should be meditated upon as limitless. For sound is carried by space, and space is limitless. Hearing is Brahman.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:5)

There is a yogic aspect to this, since sound in the form of subtle inner hearing is the quintessential element of meditation practice. This faculty is rooted in the ether element which is all-pervading and limitless. Thus through working with sound in meditation we can access the all-pervading and limitless Consciousness that is Brahman.

**Mind-Brahman**

“Janaka said: ‘Satyakama taught me that the mind [manas] is Brahman.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The mind [manas] is its abode and ether its support. It should be meditated upon as happiness. For by the mind alone is happiness experienced. Mind is Brahman.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:6)

Here the lower, sensory mind is being spoken of whose basis is the higher mind, the intellect (buddhi). The important principle is the fact that happiness is only in the intelligent mind.

**Heart-Brahman**

“Janaka said: ‘Vidagdha taught me that the heart [hridaya] is Brahman.’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The heart [hridaya] is its abode and ether its support. It should be meditated upon as the resting-place. For all beings find rest in the heart. The heart is Brahman.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:1:7)

The “heart” is the faculty of consciousness in the human being, and that rests within the greater Consciousness of Brahman.

**Further teaching**

‘Janaka (descending from his throne and humbly addressing the sage) said: ‘I bow down to you. Yajnavalkya, please teach me.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘Your Majesty, as a person wishing to make a long journey furnishes himself with a chariot or a boat, so have you equipped your mind with sacred wisdom. You are honorable and wealthy, and you have studied the Vedas and learned the Upanishads. Whither then shall you go when you leave this body?’

‘Janaka said: ‘I do not know, revered sir.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘I will tell you where you will go.’

‘Janaka said: ‘Tell me, please.’

‘Yajnavalkya said: ‘Indha is the Self identified with the physical self. Viraj, the physical world is his wife, the object of his enjoyment. The space within the heart is their place of union in dream, when the Self is identified with the subtle body, or mind. The Self in dreamless sleep is identified with the vital force. Beyond this is the Supreme Self—he that has been described as Not This, Not That. He is incomprehensible, for he cannot be comprehended; he is undecaying, for he never decays; he is unattached, for he does not attach himself; he is unfettered, for nothing can fetter him. He is never hurt. You have
Janaka said: ‘May that fearlessness come to you who teach us fearlessness. I bow down to you. Behold, this empire of Videha, and I myself, are at your service.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:2:1-4)

In reality, the liberated person does not “go” anywhere, but abides as the Self. Wherefore let us strive to know the Self and transcend all “coming” and “going.”
Janaka and Yajnavalkya—2

In this next conversation of Yajnavalkya and Janaka, the first seven verses are a complete unit, so to speak.

The light of human beings

“Once when Yajnavalkya came to the court of King Janaka, the King welcomed him with a question.

“Janaka said: ‘Yajnavalkya, what serves as the light for man?’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The light of the sun, Your Majesty; for by the light of the sun man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns home.’

“Janaka said: ‘True indeed, Yajnavalkya.’

“But when the sun has set, what serves then as his light?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The moon is then his light.’

“Janaka said: ‘When the sun has set, O Yajnavalkya, and the moon has set, what serves then as his light?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The fire is then his light.’

“Janaka said: ‘When the sun has set, O Yajnavalkya, and the moon has set, and the fire has gone out, what serves then as his light?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘Sound is then his light; for with sound alone as his light, man sits, goes out, does his work, and returns home. Even though he cannot see his own hand, yet when he hears a sound he moves towards it.’

“Janaka said: ‘True indeed, O Yajnavalkya.’

“When the sun has set, and the moon has set, and the fire has gone out, and no sound is heard, what serves then as his light?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self indeed is his light; for by the light of the Self man sits, moves about, does his work, and when his work is done, rests.’

“Janaka said: ‘Who is that Self?’ Yajnavalkya said: ‘The self-luminous being who dwells within the lotus of the heart, surrounded by the senses and sense organs, and who is the light of the intellect, is that Self. Becoming identified with the intellect, he moves to and fro, through birth and death, between this world and the next. Becoming identified with the intellect, the Self appears to be thinking, appears to be moving. While the mind is dreaming, the Self also appears to be dreaming, and to be beyond the next world as well as this.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:1-7)

This is all quite clear, but it is good note that it is identity with the intellect, the intelligence principle in our makeup that both enables and causes us to move between this world and another, for we think that we are engaging in the functions of the intellect, not realizing that it is but an instrument formed of the three gunas and is not us at all. So we say: “I slept; I woke up; I was dreaming,” and so forth. Another important point is implied here. Notice that Yajnavalkya does not speak of identifying with the body, senses, emotions, etc. This is because the upanishad is intended for the instruction of those who have evolved beyond that type of identity, whose center of awareness in in the intellect, in the highest level of their being. Is this “elitist”? Absolutely! As Jesus said, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.” (Matthew 7:6)

A third point is that the Self is not “beyond the next world as well as this.” That is, It is not subject to coming and going, is neither within nor without any world. It transcends those kinds of designation.
The real “root of all evil”

“When man, the individual soul, is born, and assumes relationship with the body and sense organs, he becomes associated with the evils of the world. When at death he gives up the body, he leaves all evils behind.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:8)

Yajnavalkya does not say that false identity is the problem, rather that mere birth in a body creates unavoidable association with all the troubles and risks that every embodied being endures. We see this in the life of great avatars and masters: their lives were filled with troubles, and many of them died quite painfully. Why anyone would pray to them to remove troubles and disease is beyond comprehension. Why do the good suffer? Because they are in a body. This is a basic fact of life. That is why spiritually intelligent people understand that the real sacrifice made by masters of all ages was their incarnation—and everything went on from there. To endure the limitations and dangers of finite existence is a great, even a terrible, sacrifice they undergo at every moment. Being masters inwardly as well as outwardly, the sacrifice never overwhelms them, and they realized the implications of birth before they were even conceived. Since they are always in charge, they do not experience the mental anguish we do, but they go through the entire range of earthly miseries just like anyone else. With them everything is voluntary, for they have no karma to drag them into birth and through all that happens afterward. They walk through life, while we are pushed and pulled along. But for both them and us, to escape the body is to escape it all. And Atmajnana is the only true escape.

The human status

“There are two states for man—the state in this world, and the state in the next; there is also a third state, the state intermediate between these two, which can be likened to dream. While in the intermediate state, a man experiences both the other states, that in this world and that in the next; and the manner thereof is as follows: When he dies, he lives only in the subtle body, on which are left the impressions of his past deeds, and of these impressions he is aware, illumined as they are by the pure light of the Self. Thus it is that in the intermediate state he experiences the first state, or that of life in the world. Again, while in the intermediate state, he foresees both the evils and the blessings that will yet come to him, as these are determined by his conduct, good and bad, upon the earth, and by the character in which this conduct has resulted. Thus it is that in the intermediate state he experiences the second state, or that of life in the world to come.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:9)

We are either embodied in this world, or disembodied and living in the astral realm. But between the two is the dream state in which we experience both material and astral conditions. For example, we fall off a cliff and experience falling just as we would in the waking state. But when we hit the ground we do not die—it does not even hurt. That is how it is in the astral world. And that is why little children are so fearless and will go right into a life-threatening situation without hesitation—in the astral world it is not threatening at all. It may even be fun. One of Yogananda’s monastic disciples once explained to a group of people that they should not be impatient with the intense reactions of children to pain and frustration. For in the astral world they get anything they want just by wanting, and they can go anywhere and do anything without pain. So when the situation is different in this world they are terrified and angry. They are also miserable in realizing that they are now in a world in which uncertainty is the only certainty. A friend of mine was once found by her father sitting in the midst of the floor crying bitterly. (She was two years old at the
time.) When he asked her what was wrong, she complained that she could not fly. Luckily, he was a metaphysician, so he explained to her that although she could fly in the world she had come from, in this world people could not fly. “Then it’s a dumb world!” she said. “I agree. So do your best not to come back,” was his counsel.

When we leave our bodies we gain a great deal of understanding. We comprehend the life that has just ended and realize its deeper meanings. We analyze it, actually, and learn from it. Sometimes we have helpers in doing this. So even though we underwent things on earth with complete non-comprehension, now then see clearly their roots and their purpose. Those who do not know this often ask what good it is for infants and children to reap negative karmas and die young, for they cannot understand. Indeed, in this world they cannot understand, but the moment they are freed from the body they can and do understand. Also, it was their karma to suffer uncomprehendingly. It all works out to perfection, however it seems at the present moment. A religion that does not teach these facts to its adherents is unworthy of anyone’s attention. And a religion that tells people that God wills it all–is doing it to them because He has “a plan”–is a barefaced liar that deserves only contempt. But of course, many people deserve a contemptible religion. That, too, is karma.

Dream

“‘In the intermediate state, there are no real chariots, nor horses, nor roads; but by the light of the Self he creates chariots and horses and roads. There are no real blessings, nor joys, nor pleasures; but he creates blessings and joys and pleasures. There are no real ponds, nor lakes, nor rivers; but he creates ponds and lakes and rivers. He is the creator of all these out of the impressions left by his past deeds.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:10)

Just see what an incredible power of creative intelligence we all have! Also, even dreams are a matter of karma. Paramhansa Yogananda said that we can work out karma in the dream state.

“‘Regarding the different states of consciousness, it is written: While one is in the state of dream, the golden, self-luminous being, the Self within, makes the body to sleep, though he himself remains forever awake and watches by his own light the impressions of deeds that have been left upon the mind. Thereafter, associating himself again with the consciousness of the organs of sense, the Self causes the body to awake.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:11) In all states we are the self-luminous, untouched Witness. And all states are under our control.

“‘While one is in the state of dream, the golden, self-luminous being, the Self within, the Immortal One, keeps alive the house of flesh with the help of the vital force, but at the same time walks out of this house. The Eternal goes wherever he desires.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:12) Here is clear teaching that in dream we sometimes leave the body and travel in either this world or the next. In that state: “‘The self-luminous being assumes manifold forms, high and low, in the world of dreams. He seems to be enjoying the pleasure of love, or to be laughing with friends, or to be looking at terrifying spectacles.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:13)

This experience is common to all, from the least intelligent to the genius. Yet: “‘Everyone is aware of the experiences; no one sees the Experiencer.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:14) That is the riddle we must all solve.

“‘Some say that dreaming is but another form of waking, for what a man experiences while awake he experiences again in his dreams. Be that as it may, the Self, in dreams,
shines by his own light.’ Janaka said: ‘Revered sir, I offer you a thousand cattle. Instruct me further for the sake of my liberation.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:15)

**Free while bound**

Even a tethered animal can move about as much as it likes within the bounds of the tether. It is the same with us. So we are never absolutely bound, but always experience a great deal of freedom, even if it is mostly psychological. A lot of what follows is obvious and even common knowledge, so no comment is needed.

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self, having in dreams tasted enjoyment, gone hither and thither, experienced both good and evil, attains to the state of dreamless sleep; then again he comes back to dreams. ‘Whatever he may experience in dreams does not affect him, for the true nature of the Self remains forever unaffected.’

“Janaka said: ‘So it is indeed, Yajnavalkya. I offer you another thousand cattle, revered sir. Speak on for the sake of my liberation.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self, having in dreams tasted enjoyment, gone hither and thither, experienced good and evil hastens back to the state of waking from which he started. Whatever he may experience in dreams does not affect him, for the true nature of the Self remains forever unaffected.’

“Janaka said: ‘So it is indeed, Yajnavalkya. Another thousand cattle shall be yours, revered sir. Speak on for the sake of my liberation.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self, having in wakefulness enjoyed the pleasures of sense, gone hither and thither, experienced good and evil, hastens back again to his dreams.’

“As a large fish moves from one bank of a river to the other, so does the Self move between dreaming and waking.’

“As a hawk or a falcon flying in the sky becomes tired, and stretching its wings comes back to its nest, so does the Self hasten to that state where, deep in sleep, he desires no more desires, and dreams no more dreams.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:16-19)

**The transcendent Self**

There now follows one of the most thrilling and exalted passage of the upanishads.

“Indeed, the Self, in his true nature, is free from craving, free from evil, free from fear. As a man in the embrace of his loving wife knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, so man in union with the Self knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, for in that state all desires are satisfied. The Self is his only desire; he is free from craving, he goes beyond sorrow.’

“Then father is no father, mother is no mother; worlds disappear, gods disappear, scriptures disappear; the thief is no more, the murderer is no more, castes are no more; no more is there monk or hermit. The Self is then untouched either by good or by evil, and the sorrows of the heart are turned into joy.’

“He does not see, nor smell, nor taste, nor speak, nor hear, nor think, nor touch, nor know; for there is nothing separate from him, there is no second. Yet he can see, for sight and he are one; yet he can smell, for smelling and he are one; yet he can taste, for taste and he are one; yet he can speak, for speech and he are one; yet he can hear, for hearing and he are one; yet he can think, for thinking and he are one; yet he can touch, for touching and he are one; yet he can know, for knowing and he are one. Eternal is the light of consciousness; immortal is the Self.’

“When there is another, then one sees another, smells another, tastes another, speaks to another, hears another, thinks of another, touches and knows another.’
“Pure like crystal water is that Self, the only seer, the One without a second. He is the kingdom of Brahman—man’s highest goal, supreme treasure, greatest bliss. Creatures who live within the bonds of ignorance experience but a small portion of his infinite being.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:21-32)

For some reason Swami Prabhavananda omitted the next verse, perhaps because it had already appeared in the Taittiriya Upanishad in his translation. Here is Swami Madhavananda’s translation:

“He who is perfect of physique and prosperous among men, the ruler of others, and most lavishly supplied with all human enjoyments, represents greatest joy among men. This human joy multiplied a hundred times makes one unit of joy for the manes who have won that world of theirs. The joy of these manes who have won that world multiplied a hundred times makes one unit joy in the world of the celestial minstrels. This joy in the world of the celestial minstrels multiplied a hundred times makes one unit of joy for the gods by action—those who have attained their godhead by their actions. This joy of the gods by action multiplied a hundred times makes one unit of joy for the gods by birth, as also of one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. This joy of the gods by birth multiplied a hundred times makes one unit of joy in the world of Prajapati (Viraj), as well as one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. This joy in the world of Prajapati multiplied a hundred times makes one unit of joy in the world of Brahman (Hiranyagarbha), as well as of one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless and free from desire. This indeed is the supreme bliss. This is the state of Brahman, O Emperor,’ said Yajnavalkya.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:33)

KNOW THE SELF!
The Process of Reincarnation

The following verses alone in all the upanishads describe to some degree the process of reincarnation.

**Dreaming and waking**

“Janaka said: ‘You shall have still another thousand cattle. Speak on, revered sir, for the sake of my liberation.’

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self, having in dreams enjoyed the pleasures of sense, gone hither and thither, experienced good and evil, hastens back to the state of waking from which he started.’

“‘As a man passes from dream to wakefulness, so does he pass at death from this life to the next. When a man is about to die, the subtle body, mounted by the intelligent Self, groans—as a heavily laden cart groans under its burden.’

“When his body becomes thin through old age or disease, the dying man separates himself from his limbs, even as a mango or a fig or a banyan fruit separates itself from its stalk, and by the same way that he came he hastens to his new abode, and there assumes another body, in which to begin a new life.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:3:33-36)

Passing from life to life is only a shifting in a dream. When the stored-up life force (a form of karma) for a life is running out, just as the charge in a battery is expended and fails, so do the physical and grosser pranic bodies. And, just as the ripe fruit falls from the tree, so the subtle body separates itself from the material body and begins its process toward another earthly birth in a new body. In between births, the individual spends time in the astral regions, sometimes just wandering and frittering his time away, and sometimes in learning and evolving so his next life will be markedly better—and wiser—than the previous one. This time spent in this intermediate state can be anything from a matter of hours to centuries and even thousands of years. This is precisely determined by karma.

(By the way, it is nonsense to say that unevolved people reincarnate quickly and evolved people only come back in thousands of years. Both ends of the spectrum are similar: very unevolved beings reincarnate very fast, and so do those that are highly evolved, for they are getting ready to graduate and are “cramming” for the final test.)

**Leaving the body**

“When his body grows weak and he becomes apparently unconscious, the dying man gathers his senses about him and completely withdrawing their powers descends into his heart. No more does he see form or color without.

“He neither sees, nor smells, nor tastes. He does not speak, he does not hear. He does not think, he does not know. For all the organs, detaching themselves from his physical body, unite with his subtle body. Then the point of his heart, where the nerves join, is lighted by the light of the Self, and by that light he departs either through the eye, or through the gate of the skull, or through some other aperture of the body. When he thus departs, life departs; and when life departs, all the functions of the vital principle depart. The Self remains conscious, and, conscious, the dying man goes to his abode. The deeds of this life, and the impressions they leave behind, follow him.”” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:1,2)
He becomes apparently unconscious. This is important. The person may cease to perceive anything, but that is not being unconscious. We are never unconscious at any time, but we mistakenly call total absence of sensory perception unconsciousness. There is a vital point I want to mention here. The very last sense to fail is the sense of hearing. Sometimes it never fails. A lot of people give up and die because they hear the doctor say there is no hope or that they will soon be dead. So if you are around a dying, “unconscious” person please remember this. You can speak to them and help them either revive or go to higher worlds. That is why both Hindus and Buddhists read scriptures to the dying or recite mantras or sing mantras. In Pure Land Buddhism people sit by the dying and sing the mantra of Amida Buddha, continuing to do so for several hours after the person appears to be dead, knowing that sometimes they may have trouble getting out of the body or may be disoriented when they do.

Yogananda spoke of this to his students, one of whom was the famous opera singer Amelita Galli-Curci. So when her brother was dying she talked to him and called him back to life. When he became “conscious” he told her that he had heard doctor saying he would soon be dead, so he accepted it and began drifting away. Then he heard her voice calling to him from far off, and telling him to return. So he did! At one point he even saw Yogananda, about whom he knew virtually nothing but he recognized Yogananda when his sister showed a picture to him.

It is sometimes possible to revive a person by intoning Om in their right ear. Yogananda also recommended this.

Then the point of his heart, where the nerves join, is lighted by the light of the Self, and by that light he departs either through the eye, or through the gate of the skull, or through some other aperture of the body. This is the Light that so many people tell about seeing who have returned from near-death. There are many gates by which a person may leave the body, and they are all determined by the level of consciousness (bhava) in which he has habitually lived during his lifetime. (This is one of the major teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.) To leave through a center in the head is the best, and will determine what highly evolved world he will enter. Those who leave through the center at the top of the head, the Brahmarandhra, will not return to rebirth. Those who leave at lower centers in the body or spine will go to lesser worlds, and some of the lowest centers are literally gates to negative worlds we call “hells.” Some even lead to rebirth in animal forms, though this is rare.

The Self remains conscious, and, conscious, the dying man goes to his abode. The deeds of this life, and the impressions they leave behind, follow him. Some of low evolution simply go to sleep and only wake a little before reincarnating, and some do not even awaken until they are born. But the people to which this upanishad is addressed will certainly depart in full consciousness and will review their life and be aware of the psychic changes their previous actions have produced. And they will be aware of exactly why and how they eventually find themselves in an astral or causal realm that corresponds to those karmas and samskaras. It is all a matter of learning.

Astral birth

“As a leech, having reached the end of a blade of grass, takes hold of another blade and draws itself to it, so the Self, having left this body behind it unconscious, takes hold of another body and draws himself to it.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:3)

Birth in the astral world is a conscious act. Only on earth or in the negative astral worlds do we mistakenly think that we are helpless and that we are not in charge. That is
why the simile of a leech is used, and why the Sanskrit text literally says that we make another body for ourselves. And that happens in earthly rebirth, too. We choose where to whom we will be born, and we enter the womb of our chosen mother and, taking the material provided by both parents, make our next body-habitation in accordance with our karma and samskara—this is how powerful and intelligent we all are! Yogananda said in his Gita commentary that the individual consciously guides the growth of his body in the womb. (That was the first sentence of Yogananda’s teaching that I read, sitting in a public library in the fall of 1960.)

“As a goldsmith, taking an old gold ornament, molds it into another, newer and more beautiful, so the Self, having given up the body and left it unconscious, takes on a newer and better form, either that of the fathers, or that of the celestial singers, or that of the gods, or that of other beings, heavenly or earthly.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:4)

In the higher worlds, the individual creates a body that is appropriate to the world in which he shall be living until he takes rebirth—also voluntarily. This experience will train him for even more efficiently making his body when he returns to earth.

Sometimes in the subtle worlds an individual takes on a body that is higher than his present evolutionary status and practices living on that level. This prepares him for a higher level on earth, as well. This is mentioned as taking place even for animals in the forty-third chapter of Yogananda’s autobiography, “The Resurrection of Sri Yutkeswar.”

Misidentification

“The Self is verily Brahman. Through ignorance it identifies itself with what is alien to it, and appears to consist of intellect, understanding, life, sight, hearing, earth, water, air, ether, fire, desire and the absence of desire, anger and the absence of anger, righteousness and the absence of righteousness. It appears to be all things—now one, now another.

“As a man acts, so does he become. A man of good deeds becomes good, a man of evil deeds becomes evil. A man becomes pure through pure deeds, impure through impure deeds.

“As a man’s desire is, so is his destiny. For as his desire is, so is his will; as his will is, so is his deed; and as his deed is, so is his reward, whether good or bad.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:5)

Lest in all this we forget that it is really the dream-life of the individual spirit, Yajnavalkya reminds Janaka of this. For in all these changes, the Self is unchanging, in all these births and deaths the Self remains birthless and deathless. The fact that we so easily forget this truth is evidence of how good we are at fooling ourselves! We are always masters of the situation.

Desire

“A man acts according to the desires to which he clings. After death he goes to the next world bearing in his mind the subtle impressions of his deeds; and after reaping there the harvest of his deeds, he returns again to this world of action. Thus he who has desires continues subject to rebirth.

“But he in whom desire is stilled suffers no rebirth. After death, having attained to the highest, desiring only the Self, he goes to no other world. Realizing Brahman, he becomes Brahman.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:6)

It is ignorance that causes our mistaken identification, but the power behind rebirth is desire. Once we cut off desire, rebirth is finished. Desireless, we transcend all worlds and
know ourselves as Eternal Brahman.

"When all the desires which once entered into his heart have been driven out by divine knowledge, the mortal, attaining to Brahman, becomes immortal.

"As the slough of a snake lies cast off on an anthill, so lies the body of a man at death; while he, freed from the body, becomes one with the immortal spirit, Brahman, the Light Eternal."

"Janaka said: ‘Sir, again I give You a thousand cows. Speak on, that I may be liberated.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:7)

All glory to those that have freed themselves by knowing their Self!
The Path of Liberation

The path

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The path of liberation is subtle, and hard, and long. I myself am walking in it; nay, I have reached the end. By this path alone the wise, the knowers of Brahman, attain him while living, and achieve final liberation at death.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:8)

Yajnavalkya was obviously no pop-yogi with a yoga studio filled with yoga babes in tank tops and leotards confident that yoga would firm up their buttocks, eliminate cellulite, and give them the kind of body they want (or that others will want). Nor was he a traveling sideshow yogi perpetually on tour convincing people that yoga (his kind, at least) was cheap, easy, fun, and sure to make life a breeze. I know this because of the following statements he has made:

The path of liberation is subtle. Without refinement of mind and the interior faculties of perception, yoga is not going on. Yoga is itself the purification of the mind and heart in order to allow the highest powers of the individual to come into play and transform his life and consciousness. Because this is so, Patanjali puts ten necessary elements for yoga at the top of his list of the eight limbs of yoga: 1) Ahimsa: non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness; 2) Satya: truthfulness, honesty; 3) Asteya: non-stealing, honesty, non-misappropriativeness; 4) Brahmacharya: sexual continence in thought, word and deed as well as control of all the senses; 5) Aparigraha: non-possessiveness, non-greed, non-selfishness, non-acquisitiveness; 6) Shaucha: purity, cleanliness; 7) Santosha: contentment, peacefulness; 8) Tapas: austerity, practical (i.e., result-producing) spiritual discipline; 9) Swadhyaya: introspective self-study, spiritual study; 10) Ishwarapranidhana: offering of one’s life to God. This is a total overhaul of external and internal life–and it is only the beginning of yoga.

The path of liberation is hard. Yes, indeed. When confronted with Patanjali’s list there will be a lot of indignation, whining and general complaint. Why? Because the path of liberation is hard! Such reaction is proof of that. Only the hardy even really begin the journey, and only the toughest and strongest will end it successfully. This is not a path for the weak and whimsical, and it is definitely not a mere body-splash, a hobby, or a free-time diversion. It is the attainment of Brahman, for God’s sake (literally).

The path of liberation is long. It takes lifetimes–many if we dawdle, and not so many if we knuckle down and go for it. And believe me, those pathetic souls that boast of how they are “taking the jet-plane route to God” while looking and living more like a jet crash, do not have a clue. Yes, it is possible to realize God in one birth–the last birth. Everybody does. So we need to get busy. There can be no periods of coasting along, deluding ourselves that our liberation is assured and just around the next corner. (Real spiritual life goes in a straight line–there no bends or curves.) Buddha meditated and engaged in intense discipline right up to the moment of his leaving the body, even though he had attained enlightenment decades before. And so did Swami Sivananda. All real yogis do the same.

By this path alone…is Brahman attained. And that attainment is not some swell surprise after death. It takes place right here in this world which is no longer an obstacle to enlightenment. By changing himself the yogi changes the effect the world has on him. What hindered him before now helps him. The once-closed door is now open to him.
Death is the final going through that door. For him there will be no return.

**No more worlds**

“Other worlds there are, joyless, enveloped in darkness. To these worlds, after death, go those who are unwise, who know not the Self.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:10, 11)

Any relative “world” is fundamentally joyless and enveloped in darkness—so the truly wise understand. No world is fit to live in, for they are all realms of death and constant change. There is no peace possible for those who live therein. But those who know the Self have ended that compulsion, for: “When a man has realized the Self, the pure, the immortal, the blissful, what craving can be left in him that he should take to himself another body, full of suffering, to satisfy it?” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:12) Desire being the root of rebirth, when it is eliminated rebirth vanishes along with it.

**In the body**

“He that has once known the glory of the Self within the ephemeral body—that stumbling-block to enlightenment—knows that the Self is one with Brahman, lord and creator of all.’

“Brahman may be realized while yet one dwells in the ephemeral body. To fail to realize him is to live in ignorance, and therefore to be subject to birth and death. The knowers of Brahman are immortal; others, knowing him not, continue in the bonds of grief.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:13,14)

The suffering may be very subtle, but it will be there, nonetheless.

**Fearless in knowing**

“He who with spiritual eye directly perceives the self-effulgent Being, the lord of all that was, is, and shall be—he indeed is without fear, and causes fear in none.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:15) Even more, he removes fear from others. This is why we experience such great peace and ease in the presence of enlightened beings. Not only have I experienced this many times, I have seen people walk into the presence of a great master and immediately begin shedding tears of relief. In a moment their anxieties and fears were removed.

“He who knows Brahman to be the life of life, the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind—he indeed comprehends fully the cause of all causes. By the purified mind alone is Brahman perceived.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:18) There are no mysteries or puzzles for the knower of Brahman. All is known to him who knows The All.

“In Brahman there is no diversity. He who sees diversity goes from death to death.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:19) All our lives are but deaths. When we really enter into the Life that is Brahman then birth and death are finished for us.

“Brahman can be apprehended only as knowledge itself—knowledge that is one with reality, inseparable from it. For he is beyond all proof, beyond all instruments of thought. The eternal Brahman is pure, unborn, subtler than the subtlest, greater than the greatest.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:20)

**Therefore:**

“Let therefore the wise aspirant, knowing Brahman to be the supreme goal, so shape his life and his conduct that he may attain to him. Let him not seek to know him by arguments, for arguments are idle and vain.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:21)

We need only to reshape our life and go directly to God, not bothering with critics or
nay-sayers. Just smile, wave, and go on to the Goal.

Know you the journey that I take?
Know you the voyage that I make?
The joy of it one's heart could break.

No jot of time have I to spare,
Nor will to loiter anywhere,
So eager am I to be there.

For that the way is hard and long,
For that gray fears upon it throng,
I set my journey to a song,

And it grows wondrous happy so.
Singing I hurry on for oh!
It is to God, to God, I go.

Sister M. Madeleva, C.S.C.
Some Final Words

Since there are three short parts remaining to be considered, I am putting them in this one closing essay.

The Great Unborn

“Verily is Brahman the great unborn that dwells within the lotus of the heart, surrounded by the senses. He is the intellect of the intellect, protector of all, king of all, lord of all. Good works do not make him more, nor do evil works make him less. Lord, king, protector of all, he transcends the three worlds.

“Devotees seek to know him by study, by sacrifice, by continence, by austerity, by detachment. To know him is to become a seer. Desiring to know him, and him alone, monks renounce the world. Realizing the glory of the Self, the sages of old craved not sons nor daughters. “What have we to do with sons and daughters,” they asked, “we who have known the Self, we who have achieved the supreme goal of existence?” No longer desiring progeny, nor wealth, nor life in other worlds, they entered upon the path of complete renunciation.

“Craving for progeny leads to craving for wealth, and craving for wealth leads to craving for life in other worlds. Two cravings there are: the craving for a life of pleasure in this world, and the craving for a life of greater pleasure in other worlds.

“The Self is to be described as Not This, Not That. It is incomprehensible, for it cannot be comprehended; undecaying, for it never decays; unattached, for it never attaches itself; unfettered, for it is never bound. He who knows the Self is unaffected, whether by good or by evil. Never do such thoughts come to him as “I have done an evil thing” or “I have done a good thing.” Both good and evil he has transcended, and he is therefore troubled no more by what he may or may not have done.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:22)

Verily is Brahman the great unborn that dwells within the lotus of the heart, surrounded by the senses. The ultimate Self of all is Brahman that dwells in each sentient being. It can be said of each of them what Saint Paul said about Jesus: “In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” (Colossians 2:9) The difference between Jesus (and any Master) and other sentient beings is that he knew the Indweller and they do not. The Self is surrounded by the senses like someone in a theater that has a 360-degree screen, or like someone seated surrounded by video monitors. All of us really are “in the picture,” and that is most of our problem.

He is the intellect of the intellect. Every faculty, every quality we possess, is derived from the Self and has its primal archetype in Brahman. This is because everything exists within Brahman as an eternal potential.

Protector of all, king of all, lord of all. This extremely important. The upanishads continually remind us that Brahman is transcendent and beyond all qualities or conception. Yet here we see that Brahman has an intimate relation with all creation, is in contact with all things, and controls all things. Brahman is also Ishwara, the Lord. So it is an error to try to push Brahman completely out of the picture and exile It to a void that is antithetical to all we presently know or are. Brahman is indeed both This and That. In a short while we will be examining a verse that sums this up quite well.

Good works do not make him more, nor do evil works make him less. Brahman never acts, as both the upanishads and the Gita insist. So what does this mean? It means that the
actions of sentient beings in no way change the Self, nor do they increase or decrease the presence of the Self. However, good actions do help us to perceive the Self as present, and evil actions dim our mental vision and cause us to lose awareness of the Self. Because of that we may think that the Self is affected and drawn closer or pushed away, but we will be wrong. Reality is untouched and unaffected by our delusions and illusions.

The rest of the verse is quite clear, only needing a careful and reflective reading.

The Brahman-knower

““The eternal glory of the knower of Brahman, beginningless and endless, revealed by divine knowledge, is neither increased nor decreased by deeds. Let a man therefore seek to obtain it, since having obtained it he can never be touched by evil. Self-controlled is he who knows the Self, tranquil, poised, free from desire. Absorbed in meditating upon it, he sees it within his own soul, and he sees all beings in it. Evil touches him not, troubles him not, for in the fire of his divine knowledge all evil is burnt away. Freed from evil, freed from desire, freed from doubt, he becomes a knower of Brahman. This, O King, is the truth of Brahman. Do thou attain to it!”

“Janaka said: ‘Most revered sir, I offer you the empire of Videha–and myself with it–to be your servant.’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:23)

Our gratitude for this wisdom should be as boundless and all-encompassing as was Janaka’s. Who can calculate the lives we have passed, struggling to comprehend the truth of things, before at last these great truths have come into the sphere of our life and become known to us? May we now hasten to the realization of Yajnavalkya’s final summation:

“Yajnavalkya said: ‘The Self, the great unborn, the undecaying, the undying, the immortal, the fearless, is, in very truth, Brahman. He who knows Brahman is without fear. He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman!’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4:25)

That and This

The simultaneous immanent and transcendent nature of Brahman (and the Self) is not easy to grasp. But the first half of the following verse is very helpful.

“That is the Full, this is the Full. The Full has come out of the Full. If we take the Full from the Full Only the Full remains.

“Om is the ether-Brahman—the eternal ether. It is the Veda known by the knowers of Brahman. For through it one knows what is to be known.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5:1:1)

The word translated “full” is purna, which means both “full” and “complete.” In this verse it means the totality of being: Brahman. So it tells us that the Transcendent (Nirguna Brahman) is the total Reality; but so is the Immanent (Saguna Brahman). The Unmanifest is all that is—and so is the Manifest. The Immanent is a emanation from the Transcendent. If we confine our awareness to the Immanent we will find it to be the Totality of Being. If we turn to the Transcendent and intellectually negate the Immanent, we will perceive that the Transcendent is All. How is this? Because they are one and the same. Further, Brahman cannot be labeled or described, so even the words immanent and transcendent cannot be applied to It.

The second verse is extremely significant, telling us that Om is Brahman vibrating eternally in the Ether. That for those who know Brahman, Om is the real Veda, for it reveals all that is to be known: Brahman Itself.
Da! Da! Da!

“Gods, men, and asuras—all three descendants of Prajapati—lived with him for a time as students.

“Then the gods said: ‘Teach us, sir!’ In reply Prajapati uttered one syllable: ‘Da.’ Then he said: ‘Have you understood?’ They answered, ‘Yes, we have understood. You said to us, “Damayata—Be self-controlled.”’ ‘Yes,’ agreed Prajapati, ‘you have understood.’

“Then the men said: ‘Teach us, sir.’ Prajapati uttered the same syllable: ‘Da.’ Then he said: ‘Have you understood?’ They answered, ‘Yes, we have understood. You said to us, “Datta—Be charitable.”’ ‘Yes,’ agreed Prajapati, ‘you have understood.’

“Then the asuras said: ‘Teach us, sir.’ Prajapati uttered the same syllable: ‘Da.’ Then he said: ‘Have you understood?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have understood. You told us “Dayadhwam—Be compassionate.”’ ‘Yes,’ agreed Prajapati, ‘you have understood.’

“The storm cloud thunders: ‘Da! Da! Da!—Be self-controlled! Be charitable! Be compassionate!’” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5:2:1-3)

Gods, men, and asuras make up our present human nature. The gods are the parts of us that are superior to the normal human condition. They have arisen as we have begun to evolve to the point where we can take the next step up on the evolutionary ladder. Men are our human traits, and the asuras are the animal traits that we have brought along with us in our evolutionary journey. Consequently the advice to be self-controlled, charitable, and compassionate applies to us. And its following will ensure our continued evolution.
A Commentary on the Chandogya Upanishad

The Glory of Om

In this commentary I will be mostly using the translation of Swami Prabhavananda. In his translations of some upanishads Swami Prabhavananda omitted some parts, many that were in such obscure language that any attempt at translation would really only be speculation. He also omitted very repetitious passages and those that dwelt with matters irrelevant to the knowledge of Brahman and the Self. That is why in the references to the verses of this upanishad there will be some jumping around. However, Prabhavananda omitted some passages that I think are extremely important. So I will be supplementing his translation.

Meditation on Om

“One should meditate on the syllable Om, the Udgitha. Of this, the explanation follows.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.1)

This leaves us little doubt as to what the author (or authors) of the Chandogya Upanishad consider the subject of prime importance: meditation on Om. “Udgitha” is the technical, ritual term for Om when It is sung aloud in Vedic recitation. So in the subsequent verses I am just going to put Om wherever Udgitha occurs.

The supreme essence

“The essence of man is speech. The essence of speech is the hymns of the Rig Veda. Their essence is the hymns of the Sama Veda. The essence of the Sama Veda is Om.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.2)

That which marks human beings out from the lesser forms of evolution is the power of vak—of symbolic, creative speech. Most animals make some kinds of sounds that indicate their feelings, but only humans have symbolic words that recount and stimulate both thought and behavior. This is the power of logos spoken of in Greek philosophy and Eastern Christian writings. It is not just a simple trait, but a virtual intellectual ocean that separates us from other sentient beings on earth. It is, as said, a product of evolution, and skill in speech is the mark of an evolved human being, though the most important ability is that of creative thought/conceptualization. Vak is what makes us human.

The highest form of Speech is that of the hymns of the Rig Veda that were revealed in meditation untold thousands of years ago to the Vedic Rishis (Seers). The highest of those hymns were collected into the Sama Veda, whose text is marked (pointed) for devotional singing. And the supreme essence of the Sama Veda hymns is the single syllable: OM. In many texts it is stated that to intone Om is to recite all the Vedic hymns. Therefore:

“The syllable Om which is called Udgitha, is the quintessence of the essences, the
supreme, deserving of the highest place.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.3) This can be said, because Om is the Primal Word, the Original Sound, the First Word “spoken” by God, and by which all that “is” was created, and is being sustained and evolved at this very moment. The Vedic Seers long ago stated: “In the beginning was Prajapati [God the Creator], with Him was the Word, and the Word was truly the Supreme Brahman.” (Prajapati vai idam agra asit. Tasya vak dvitiya asit. Vag vai paramam Brahman. Krishna Yajurveda, Kathaka Samhita, 12.5, 27.1; Krishna Yajurveda, Kathakapisthala Samhita, 42.1; Jaiminiya Brahmana II, Samaveda, 2244) This was much later paraphrased in the opening verses of the Gospel of Saint John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.” (John 1:1,2)

Chandogya Upanishad 2.23.3 says that Brahma the creator concentrated his awareness on the worlds he had projected and: “From them, thus brooded upon, issued forth [as their essence] the syllable Om. Just as all the parts of the leaf, are permeated by the ribs of the leaf, so are all the words permeated by the syllable Om. Verily, the syllable Om is all this—yea, the syllable Om is verily all this.”

Everything is contained in Om, as other upanishadic texts enumerate, including all the possible states of consciousness, the expanse of time (past, present, future), the three worlds (physical, astral, causal)—ALL. The upanishadic teaching is that Om is identical with Brahman Itself. How then can we regard It as anything other than “the quintessence of the essences, the supreme, deserving of the highest place”?

The divine union

“Speech [Vak] and Breath [Prana] taken together form a couple. This couple is joined together in the syllable Om. Whenever a couple come together, they, indeed, fulfill each other’s desire.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.5,6) This is a most important fact, and one that is explained very fully in the fourth chapter (Breath and Sound in Meditation) of Om Yoga: Its Theory and Practice.

Fulfiller of desires

“He who meditates upon Om knowing it thus (as the fulfiller), verily becomes a fulfiller of all the desirable ends. That verily is the syllable of assent, for whenever one assents to a thing, one says only ‘Om’. Assent alone is prosperity. He who meditates upon Om, knowing it thus (as endowed with the quality of prosperity), verily becomes one who increases all the desirable ends.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.7,8)

This is important for two reasons. First, that Om contains within Itself creative power, and IS Creative Power. Naturally, we must both know how to employ It and to be of such a level of consciousness that we can do with It what God does with It. This is certainly possible. I have known yogis who could heal with Om and do many other “magical” things that were really quite normal for the person who knew how. That is why this section is concluded with these words:

“Whatver is performed with knowledge, faith and meditation becomes more effective. Up to this truly is the explanation of (the greatness of) this syllable Om.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.1.10)

The second important point is that the yogi need not be a person who lives in a bare subsistence manner, unworly, impractical and indifferent to all material things including his body. The opposite is true. In the eighth chapter of this upanishad we find these verses: “If the sage desires to see his fathers of the spirit-world, lo, his
fathers come to meet him. In their company he is happy. And if he desires to see his mothers of the spirit-world, lo, his mothers come to meet him. In their company he is happy. And if he desires to see his brothers of the spirit-world, lo, his brothers come to meet him. In their company he is happy. And if he desires to see his sisters of the spirit-world, lo, his sisters come to meet him. In their company he is happy. And if he desires to see his friends of the spirit-world, lo, his friends come to meet him. In their company he is happy. And if he desires heavenly perfumes and garlands, lo, heavenly perfumes and garlands come to him. In their possession he is happy. And if he desires heavenly food and drink, lo, heavenly food and drink come to him. In their possession he is happy. And if he desires heavenly song and music, lo, heavenly song and music come to him. In their possession he is happy. Indeed, whatsoever such a knower of Brahman may desire, straightway it is his; and having obtained it, he is exalted of men.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.2.1-10)

Such is the real yogi, the true adept. I remember a recording of Paramhansa Yogananda in which he spoke about how many mortgages he had paid off, how much property he had bought, and how large a “family” he had supported for decades. “I could have kept away a million dollars and no one would have known,” he said, speaking of the abundance that had come to him after enduring great hardship and remaining faithful to the ideals he had been sent to America to teach and practice. (A Bengali song in his honor says: “Going far away you taught dharma. And that dharma which you taught, you showed perfectly in your life.”) Then he told his hearers that despite all the financial outlay, he only had a little box that was never empty by God’s grace, and he never bothered to count how much was in it. One of India’s greatest yogis was Janaka, whose name is invoked as the symbol of tremendous wealth as well as wisdom. They speak of Janaka in India as we do of Midas in the West.

Such is Om; such are those that meditate upon It.
The Gods and Om

Throughout the upanishads, Gita, and other spiritual texts we find references to gods—in Sanskrit: devas. A Brief Sanskrit Glossary defines deva in this way: “A shining one,’ a god—greater or lesser in the evolutionary hierarchy; a semi-divine or celestial being with great powers, and therefore a ‘god.’ Sometimes called a demi-god. Devas are the demigods presiding over various powers of material and psychic nature. In many instances ‘devas’ refer to the powers of the senses or the sense organs themselves.”

The sun

“Now the meditation on Om with reference to the gods is described. One should meditate on the sun as Om. Verily, when he rises, he sings aloud for the sake of all creatures.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.3.1)

We should skip ahead a little bit to continue this subject.

“Now, that which is Om is verily Pranava and that which is Pranava is Om. The yonder sun is Om and also Pranava, for he moves along pronouncing ‘Om.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.1) That is, the energy of the sun is a manifestation of Om. Scientists have only recently discovered this phenomenon. On page 16 of the July 2004 issue of National Geographic we find this: “Bubbles the size of Texas cover the sun’s face…. Called granules, the short-lived cells of plasma carry heat to the surface through convection, the same way water boils in a pot. The rise and fall of granules creates sound waves, which cause the sun to throb like a drum every five minutes.”

In The Word That is God we find the following comment: “All plant, animal, and human life on this planet depends upon the sun. It is the subtle powers of sunlight which stimulate growth and evolution. Sunlight particularly stimulates the activity of the higher centers in the brain, especially that of the pineal gland. Even in the depths of the earth a sensitive man can tell when the sun rises and sets above him. The sun truly awakens us in the deepest sense. As the germinating seed struggles upward toward the sun and out into its life-giving rays, so all higher forms of life reach out for the sun, which acts as a metaphysical magnet, drawing them upward and outward toward ever-expanding consciousness. Sunlight is the radiant form of Om. The sun initiates the entire solar system into Om. Human beings are solar creatures, therefore to intone Om is the most natural things they can do.” Later the upanishad says: “Reflect upon Om as the rays of the sun.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.2)

Further on we find a section that speaks of the divine Person (Purusha) who ensouls and enlivens the sun: Ishwara. “Now, that Person, effulgent as gold, who is seen within the sun, who is with golden beard and golden hair, is exceedingly effulgent even to the very tips of his nails. His eyes are bright like a red lotus. He is above all evils. (Verily, he who knows thus rises above all evils.) He is Om. Moreover, he controls the worlds which are above that sun, as also the desires of the gods.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.6.6-8)

Even further on we are told that Om is like the flower of the sun. When the yogibees “pressed this Pranava, from It, thus pressed, issued forth as juice: fame, splendor of limbs, alertness of the senses, virility, and nourishment.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3.5.2)
The most important aspect of the solar connection with Om is found in the eighth section of the upanishad. There it speaks of the nadis, the subtle energy channels that function in the subtle bodies of human beings. Then it says that “Just as an extending highway runs between two villages, this as well as that, even so the rays of the sun go to both these worlds, this as well as that. They spread out of the yonder sun and enter into these nadis. Out of these nadis they spread and enter into the yonder sun.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.2) Regarding one who meditates on Om, the upanishad continues: “When he thus departs from this body, then he proceeds upwards through those very rays. He surely goes up meditating on Om. As long as it takes for the mind to travel, in that time he goes to the sun. That indeed is the door to the world of Brahman, an entrance for the knowers and a shutting out for the ignorant.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.6.5) Those who pass through the sun are free from the compulsion to rebirth on the earth. Om!

The breath and Om
The connection between the sun and our breath is next described. “This breath and that sun are the same. Therefore one should meditate on this breath and that sun as Om.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.3.2) This is why in Om Yoga we join our intonations of Om with the breath.

The upanishad continues: “Now with reference to the body: One should meditate on the breath as Om, for he moves along pronouncing ‘Om.’ Thinking thus, sing praise to Om as the manifold pranas. Now, that which is Om, is verily Pranava; and that which is Pranava, is Om–so one should think.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.5.3-5)

Escaping death
Now we have a parable about rising above the realm of death: samsara.
“One should meditate on the syllable Om. Of this the explanation follows. Verily, the gods, being afraid of death, took refuge in the three Vedas. Just as a fisherman would see a fish in water, so did Death observe the gods in the Vedic hymns. They, too, knowing this, arose and entered Om. This syllable Om is indeed immortality and fearlessness. Having entered into Om the gods became immortal and fearless. He who worships this syllable knowing it thus, enters this syllable which is immortality and fearlessness. And having entered it, he becomes immortal by that amrita [Om], by which the gods became immortal.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.4.1-5)

The devas (gods) are all the aspects of the human being. Those who seek life and immortality in external rites–indeed, in anything other than Brahman–will be caught in the net of death just like fish in the fisherman’s net. But when they take refuge in the meditation of Om they rise above the realm of even the possibility of death. Of course this may also be a story of highly evolved beings who found that they were still subject to death in the higher worlds, being forced to drop the subtle bodies proper to those realms and enter bodies on lesser levels or worlds. At the Mahapralaya, the Great Universal Dissolution, all the worlds are shaken and dissolve away. The wise, knowing that, do not content themselves with living in carefree and beautiful wish-fulfilling worlds, but busy themselves with tapasya to ascend beyond relativity. And they do this through meditation on Om.

And so should we.
The Sages and Om

The upanishad gives some very interesting views on Om in the form of a discussion between three sages. We will look at a condensed version.

“In ancient times there were three proficient in Om: Silaka the son of Salavat, Caikitayana of the Dalbhya family and Pravahana the son of Jivala. They said, ‘We are proficient in Om. If you agree, let us enter on a discussion of Om.’ ‘Let it be so’, saying this they sat down.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.8.1,2)

**Ether (Akasha)**

Om is a sound rising from the heart of all things; and the element of ether (akasha), which is its highest form, is consciousness, is the basis of all sound. (Ultimately, Om and consciousness are the same thing.) *A Brief Sanskrit Glossary* defines akasha in this way: “Ether; space; sky; literally: ‘not visible.’ The subtlest of the five elements (panchabhuta), from which the other four arise. It is all-pervading, and is sometimes identified with consciousness–chidakasha. It is the basis of sound (shabda), which is its particular property.” This being so, the dialogue proceeds as follows: “What is the essence of this world?’ Akasha. All these beings arise from akasha alone and are finally dissolved into akasha; because akasha alone is greater than all these and akasha is the support at all times.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.9.1)

Remember, Om is the subject of this discussion, and since akasha is the foundation of sound, it moves on, with this: “It is this Om which is progressively higher and better. This again is endless. He who, knowing thus, mediates upon the progressively higher and better Om, obtains progressively higher and better lives and wins progressively higher and better worlds.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.9.2)

Om is the thread that runs through all levels of existence; It is the core of all worlds, emanating from the Absolute that is beyond them all. By meditating on Om we ascend higher and higher, passing through the states of consciousness that correspond to higher and higher worlds. Whatever the state of mind we are established in at the time of death, it will take us into the corresponding world. “Whatever state of being [bhavam] he remembers when he gives up the body at the end, he invariably goes to that state of being, transformed into that state of being.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:6)

There is another aspect to this. In meditation, our perceptions of Om become subtler and subtler. From being a mental repetition sounding just like it would if we were speaking aloud, it becomes softer and softer, even whisperlike, eventually become a silent ideation or conceptualization while mysteriously remaining a complete word. This mutation takes place as our consciousness is moving into higher and higher states of being or bhavas. Our experiencing of this is experiencing Om and the states of awareness inherent in It.

**The conclusion**

The upanishad sums it up like this:

“Atidhanvan, the son of Sunaka, having taught this to Udarasandilya, said, ‘As long as among your descendants, this knowledge of Om continues, so long their life in this world will be progressively higher and better than ordinary lives. And in that other world also their state will be similar’. He who knows and meditates thus–his life in this world surely becomes progressively higher and better, and so also his state in that other world–yea, in
that other world.” (Chandogya Upanishad 1.9.3,4)
Four Things God REALLY Wants You to Know

Have you ever seen, or been given, a little leaflet entitled “Four Things God Wants You To Know”? When I was young, long ago, it was quite a popular tool of Fundamentalist Protestants. It had four statements—mostly about sin, death, and hell—backed up with Bible quotations. Usually there was a place to sign on the back saying you were willing to let God save you. And that was it! Salvation for the masses. Here in the Chandogya Upanishad we find the real four things we all need to know.

Duty and realization

“The requirements of duty [dharma] are three. The first is sacrifice, study, almsgiving; the second is austerity; the third is life as a student in the home of a teacher and the practice of continence. Together, these three lead one to the realm of the blest. But he who is firmly established in the knowledge of Brahman achieves immortality.” (Chandogya Upanishad 2:23:1) The basis of dharma, of life that leads to spiritual unfoldment has three elements which need scrutiny, each in turn.

Sacrifice, study, and almsgiving. Sacrifice (yajna) means formal religious observance, especially the offering of the daily activities to God, hopefully leading to the perfect offering of oneself to God—Iswharapranidhana. Study (adhyaya) means just that, but study of spiritual texts, of the wisdom of the enlightened, and pondering the ways to incorporate that teaching into one’s own life. This is serious application to holy knowledge and its personal assimilation. Almsgiving (dana) means giving of time and money to the welfare of others. It is also the cultivation of generosity as a trait of mind and heart. These three are discussed in the Bhagavad Gita, especially in chapter seventeen, as absolute necessities on the spiritual path, never to be abandoned—not even by the renunciate. For these are not part of worldly life, but essentials of spiritual life.

Austerity—tapasya—is spiritual discipline, including control of mind, body, the factors of external life, and especially meditation. It is an entire reshaping and purification of the inner and outer life, not a mere dabbling or dalliance. It is total in its scope, and therefore total in its effect.

Life as a student in the home of a teacher and the practice of continence. It is a fact that the earlier we begin spiritual cultivation the more likely we are to persevere and therefore succeed. In the ancient culture of India from an early age everyone lived as a religious student in the house of a recognized spiritual teacher. Although the teacher imparted a great deal of practical, world-oriented knowledge, the primary subject was always spiritual life and development through spiritual practice and religious activities. Since the student remained in the teacher’s house until the attainment of adulthood, brahmacharya, sexual continence, was considered a fundament requisite—so much so that the student was called a brahmachari: one who observes continence.

In the West this system was totally unknown in the Indian form, but through the centuries it was not uncommon for monasteries and convents to permit children to live there and study, some becoming monastics and others leaving and leading a secular life. The Franciscan Order had “minor seminaries” in which young boys began preparation for religious life, especially the priesthood, from a very young age. If one decided that he did
not wish to eventually be a monk or priest he usually returned home and continued an ordinary course of study.

But here in the West the majority of those following Sanatana Dharma come to it as adults. They can engage in sacrifice, study, charity, and spiritual practice, but what about this factor, which the upanishad says is a requirement of dharma? Besides the general study of the basic scriptures of India, such persons will need to devote themselves to a particular form of spiritual cultivation. For example, someone can take up the study of teachings relating to a specific approach, such as the familiar paths of karma, bhakti, and jnana. They may center their attention on a particular teacher, such as Shankara, Ramanuja, Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Paramhansa Yogananda, Swami Bhaktivedanta, or a contemporary teacher, of which there are many. Even if a teacher is no longer in the body, through study and application of his teaching they can be his student. The “home” of a teacher is not a building or ashram, but that teacher’s level of spiritual awareness. It is not easy to live in that real home, but it can and must be done. Only those who attune themselves to the teacher’s consciousness are true disciples. Physical proximity of itself means nothing. In India I have seen people that lived for decades in an ashram, often personally attending on or travelling with the teacher--and many of them never really met the teacher once on the level that counts.

For all students of whatever form or situation, brahmacharya is needed. A teacher that does not tell them that right from the start is no real teacher at all.

The blest and the Blesser

“Together, these three lead one to the realm of the blest. But he who is firmly established in the knowledge of Brahman achieves immortality.”

Honesty in spiritual life is a necessity, on the side of the teacher and the student. True spiritual teaching is not a matter of marketing, of appealing to the consumer. Therefore facts that may not be palatable or comforting are always to be found wherever truth is being taught. Degenerate religion revels in adjusting and dumbing down it teachings in order to gain more adherents, and therefore more power and money. True religion always follows the fundamental principle that the seeker conforms to the teaching, not the other way around. All of us really need to get this through our heads and into our hearts—and thereby into our lives.

I say this because we see that the upanishadic sage tells us the truth about what has been commended to us: they will take us into the “realm of the blest.” Now, he does not mean the earthlike “heaven” of most religions, but the realm of the wise and holy who have evolved to the point where earthly rebirth is no longer needed. They—and those who ascend there—are liberated from that bondage, but they are still subject to rebirth in the higher worlds, of which there is a seemingly infinite number. So, painless as it is, and happy as are the worlds involved in our subtle births and deaths, we are still bound and subject to departing and returning. It is a higher and happy portion of the evolutionary ladder, but still not our transcendental Home beyond the ladder for which attainment we originally came forth into relative existence. So we must assiduously engage in the sacred three in order that we may at least become freed from earthly bonds, but always keeping in mind that there is something more needed: the knowledge of (not just about) Brahman. And we should be striving for that as well. So there really should be four elements in our endeavor.

Only the knower of Brahman has immortality, for only he is freed from birth and death in all forms.
The Light Within

The Light of the Self

“The light that shines above the heavens and above this world, the light that shines in the highest world, beyond which there are no others—that is the light that shines in the hearts of men.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:13:7) Gambhirananda: “Now, that Light which shines beyond this heaven, beyond the whole creation, beyond everything, in the highest worlds which are unsurpassingly good, it is certainly this which is the light within a person.”

It is the Atma Jyoti, the Light of the Self, which is also Divinity Itself. As a student of the upanishadic wisdom through his Master, Jesus, Saint John wrote: “This then is the message which we have heard of him [Jesus], and declare unto you, that God is light.” (I John 1:5) That Light is purely spiritual (Spirit, actually) beyond the light we see in this world, but which nevertheless is also a manifestation or extension of that Light, as is the entire creation. In all the worlds—and beyond all the worlds—it is the One Light that shines in, and as, all. What a glorious concept! A truth as profound as it is simple. “The Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory.” (Isaiah 60:19) This was the Essene teaching which Jesus received even in infancy.

Original Christianity—which was identical with Sanatana Dharma—taught that the Divine Light “was the light of men….the true Light, which lighteth every man” (John 1:4, 9) without exception. That Light cannot be alienated from us, but is ever the essence of our existence, making us “the children of light.” (John 12:36) This is the real Gospel, the Good News, of real religion.

The Light that IS Brahman

This Light is transcendent because God is transcendent—and so are we! Because: “Truly has this universe come forth from Brahman. In Brahman it lives and has its being. Assuredly, all is Brahman. Let a man, freed from the taint of passion, worship Brahman alone.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:1a) Again Gambhirananda: “All this is Brahman. This is born from, dissolves in, and exists in That. Therefore, one should meditate by becoming calm.” Really, what can—or need be—said about this incredible assertion: ALL is Brahman?

What we can consider is the final part, the practical advice, which in the Sanskrit text is only two words: shanta upasita. Literally, they mean: “Draw near peacefully” or: “Go near peacefully.” Upasana means to sit or draw near, and is usually understood to mean either worship or meditation. In the Greek original of the New Testament the word translated “prayer” is prosevki, which also means to draw near. The Greek word translated “worship” is proskuneo, which has the same meaning.

The important thing to realize is that true worship and meditation are both an inner process, for God is the light that shines within each one of us, as the first verse quoted points out. So to draw near to that light we must turn within. As Jesus said: “Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21)

The inner search must be done shanta—peacefully. This is a major key in yoga. All meditation must be done calmly and carefully, otherwise it will be impossible to perceive and assimilate the subtle states of awareness which meditation should produce. The mind must be as still as a mirror to really meditate, and meditation alone produces that stillness. Meditation is being described by Saint Paul when he says: “We all, with open face
beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” (II Corinthians 3:18) That is why in the book of Revelation, which Paramhansa Yogananda said was a book about yoga, it says that a “sea of glass” like a great mirror is before the throne of God, and that the saints “stand” upon it. This symbolizes the perfectly still mind of the yogi by which he experiences higher realities. (Revelation 4:6, 15:2)

**The yogi’s will**

Now the second half of the verse we just examined: “A man is, above all, his will. As is his will in this life, so does he become when he departs from it. Therefore should his will be fixed on attaining Brahman.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:1b)

This is surely one of the most important statements in the Upanishads. The will is the highest faculty we possess. It is higher even than the intellect, for we often say: “I won’t think about that right now…” and we do not, because the will controls it. The only thing higher than the will is the Self. The will approaches closer to the Self than any other aspect of our being. This is so important, because the quality of our religion and our yoga is determined by which aspect is the basis of our belief and practice.

We have five levels or “bodies.” They are: 1) the physical, material body (annamaya kosha), 2) the magnetic or bio-energetic body (pranamaya kosha), 3) the sensory mind (manomaya kosha), 4) the intelligent mind, the intellect (jnanamaya kosha), and 5) the will (anandamaya kosha). These also correspond to the five elements: earth (prithvi), water (apa), fire (agni), air (vayu), and ether (akasha) which are also the seats of the five senses—smell, taste, sight, touch, and hearing.

The will is the anandamaya kosha, which corresponds to the ether element, whose special faculty is sound (shabda), both the passive faculty of hearing and the active faculty of speech. Which is why the highest yoga is based on Sound—specifically, the highest sound: Om. Om Yoga is the way to correct and develop the will. Since we are our will according to the Upanishad, it must be made alive through the continual japa and meditation of the Pranava, the Word of Life: Om. Only through Om can we gain mastery of the will, and thereby of ourselves. We must become Om, “the Word that is God” according to the Bhagavad Gita (7:8. “I am the sacred syllable Om.” 10:25). By becoming Om, we become God—not in the absolute sense, but in the relative sense of knowing ourselves as an eternal part of God, identical in essence, even though not the Whole.

If in this life we become united to Brahman, when we leave this world we will go to Brahman. “Then Satyakama, son of Shibi, asked him [the Rishi Pippalada]: ‘Venerable Sir, what world does he who meditates on Om until the end of his life, win by That?’ To him, he said: ‘That which is the sound Om, O Satyakama, is verily the higher and the lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the wise man reach the one or the other.’…If he meditates on the Supreme Being [Parampurusha] with the Syllable Om, he becomes one with the Light, the Sun. He is led to the world of Brahman. He sees the Person that dwells in the body, Who is higher than the highest life. …That the wise one attains, even by the mere sound Om as support, That Which is tranquil, unaging, immortal, fearless, and supreme.” (Prashna Upanishad 5:1,2,5,7) “When a man leaves his body and departs,...let him take refuge in steady concentration, uttering the sacred syllable Om and meditating upon me. Such a man reaches the highest goal.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:12, 13) You can’t get more detailed—or more authoritative—than that.

“Therefore should his will be fixed on attaining Brahman,” concludes this verse. For as Krishna said: “When a yogi has meditated upon me unceasingly for many years, with an
undistracted mind, I am easy of access to him, because he is always absorbed in me.” (Bhagavad Gita 8:14)

This is the way.
The Self Within

“The Self, who is to be realized by the purified mind and the illumined consciousness, whose form is light, whose thoughts are true; who, like the ether, remains pure and unattached; from whom proceed all works, all desires, all odors, all tastes; who pervades all, who is beyond the senses, and in whom there is fullness of joy forever–he is my very Self, dwelling within the lotus of my heart.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:2)

Rejoicing in the Self

It can reasonably be felt that the Bhagavad Gita is more important than the upanishads because it not only embodies their teachings, it provides practical advice for their personal realization. This is also my opinion, but the upanishads are certainly indispensable for us who seek the Goal. One of their most wonderful aspects—and one that I have never heard mentioned in my nearly half a century of Sanatana Dharma study—is their marvelous ecstatic exulting in the wonder and glory of the Self. Just reading such joyful declarations produces a powerful stirring of the will towards perseverance in the divine search. This verse is one such rapturous affirmation and well worth our savoring carefully.

*The Self, who.* The Self is a Who, NOT a What. That is, the Self is a conscious Person—or more accurately a person who IS consciousness itself. Of course, the Self—individual or Universal—is not the ego, a conditioned personality, but a changeless consciousness. It is certainly true that the Self is not “personal” or even a “person” in the way we know those terms. It is a transcendent reality, of one essence with the Absolute Reality. But it is Conscious and It is Real. This is bedrock truth. Countless ages of realization are behind this principle. We may not understand it fully or flawlessly, but that is only our human limitation. IT is Eternal Truth. That is the truth being presented in this verse, a truth that brings profound joy to those who realize it. It is said that Shiva sits immersed in the Self, but that sometimes he arises and dances, singing: “O! Who I am! Who I am!”

*Is to be realized.* We REALIZE the Self, we do not “find” It because it is ever present–It is us. That is, we enter into and experience our eternal nature. We have always had it, but have lost touch with it. There is nothing to reach out for; rather we need to regain perception of it. It is more “here and now” than anything else, because It IS the Here and Now. It is only a matter of seeing, of experiencing It—and not as an object but as the Subject. Ultimately, it is beyond description, but what can be said is glorious.

*By the purified mind.* “Mind” does not mean the sensory mind (manas), or even the intellect (buddhi), but the principle of consciousness itself (prajna). The simile of a mirror is very apt here. Covered with thick dust and dirt, the mirror is no more than a lump of earth or a slab of wood. But the more the debris is removed, the more things are seen on its surface, until it shines forth in its reflective nature. In the same way our consciousness—or rather the “glass” that covers it—must be cleansed so there is no obstruction to our perception of the Self. That is why Jesus said: “Blessed are those that are pure (katharos: clean, clear, pure) at the center of their being (kardia: heart, core, center), for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8) And Saint John said: “Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” (I John 3:3) The path of this necessary purification is fully outlined in the Yoga Sutras (Yoga Darshan) of Patanjali. (See *The Foundations of Yoga.*)

*And the illumined consciousness.* The Self is consciousness that is swayam prakash—self...
illumined. That is, Its very nature is Light (Jyoti). By Its presence it illuminates all its upadhis–Its various bodies. Being Life as well as Light, it also makes them “live” through Its nearness to them, just as the presence of Brahman makes the worlds “alive.” But it, too, is illumined and enlivened by its essential unity with the Supreme Light, the Supreme Life: Brahman. So it both illumines and is illumined.

Whose form is light. The word Form should really be in quotes, for neither Brahman nor the Atman have a form in the way that is understood in relative existence. Their nature is Light, and although they are inaccessible to the senses, in a mysterious way they can be perceived or intuited as Light. I once heard a great yogi of India speaking of how it was possible to “see” the Self as a blinding light that soothed rather than burned the eyes. “Suppose a thousand suns should rise together into the sky: such is the glory of the Shape of Infinite God.” (Bhagavad Gita 11:12)

Whose thoughts are true. Actually, the word is satyasankalpa, which means a lot more than “true thoughts.” For after all, God does not have thoughts, because He has no mind–and the same is true of the Self. A being that knows does not need to think—actually cannot think. Sankalpa means an act of will, resolution, or intention. This is the nearest we can get to some idea of the movement of consciousness that takes place when God wills or determines something. So we will have to leave it there. Whatever it may be in the consciousness of Brahman, the upanishad assures us that it is always Sat–absolutely true or real. True, in the sense that it is in total keeping with the nature of Brahman; real, in the sense that is always results in something. “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11)

Who, like the ether, remains pure and unattached. This divine Self is said to be akashatma, which Shankara defines as: “one whose nature is like that of space... all pervasive, subtle, and free from form.” Just as the sky contains suns, planets, atmosphere, clouds, smoke, and suchlike, yet is utterly untouched and unaffected by them, so the Self is free from any effects from its continuous rebirths and their experiences. The Self has no karma or conditionings, and so is like the ether at all times.

From whom proceed all works. It is a fundamental tenet of the upanishads and the Gita that the Self never acts. So when the upanishad uses the term sarvakarma—“all karma”—it is to be taken in the context of Sankhya, the philosophy behind them. Sankhya declares that all action takes place only through the proximity of the Self. That the energy bodies (prakriti) in which the Self is encased are like the iron that is heated and expands through the nearness of fire, or like the globes so popular at state fairs in which the little flags rotate because of light shining on them. So all actions occur through the presence of the Self, but are not done by the Self.

All desires. All movements of will or intention (the higher nature of “desire”) are made possible by the Self, by Its transforming influence. But, as with action, the Self does not produce them.

All odors, all tastes. The same is true of the senses and the impressions they convey to the mind. The Self causes them to function and be perceived—again, not through actually “making” them happen, but through simply being there. The prime idea in these three phrases is that all “life” takes place through the Self being present. The Self does not “live” in a relative sense, but is the “life-giver” in the ultimate sense. This is but part of Its wonder.

Who pervades all. This underscores what has just been said. It is the all-pervasive Presence of the Self that causes all phenomena to occur.
Who is beyond the senses. This is said over and over in the scriptures, but it is put here within the context of the realization of the Self. We must turn inward to find the Self, and in that turning we must get beyond the senses. Those who are finding God do not abound in visions, chills, levitations, revelations, surging of energies, cataclysmic experiences, sweepings of emotions, and all such that are nothing but distractions that can NEVER lead to Reality. All phenomena must be left far behind, and we must “walk in the sky” that is free of all clouds—we must expand into consciousness that is free from all types of “experience” and even “existence” in the relative sense. For centuries people have amused themselves with “mystical” experiences and phenomena, remaining ignorant and earthbound despite their psychic powers and aura of “holiness.” We must seek for the One. And to do that we must abandon the Many.

In whom there is fullness of joy forever. If we could only get this truth through our heads and into our hearts! In God alone is the perfection of happiness, love, peace, and all goodness—and in nothing or nowhere else. It is, however, not enough to momentarily touch or enter the joy of the Self. We must be established in It. By that I mean we must totally enter into It, encompass that Consciousness and be encompassed by It. When this is done, our realization is permanent. It will never be lost or diminished in any way. In the Bible this is spoken of as entering or possessing our “inheritance.” It is forever.

He is my very Self. Although we identify with so much from life to life, this which the upanishads have so carefully described is our true Self, and that alone should be our identity. This is made possible through the realization of the Self—not intellectually, but as a state of eternal Being.

Dwelling within the lotus of my heart. Since the Self is there, in the depths of our being: “Only that yogi whose joy is inward, inward his peace, and his vision inward shall come to Brahman and know Nirvana.” (Bhagavad Gita 5:24)

The all-encompassing Self

“Smaller than a grain of rice is the Self; smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a canary seed, yea, smaller even than the kernel of a canary seed. Yet again is that Self, within the lotus of my heart, greater than the earth, greater than the heavens, yea, greater than all the worlds.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:3)

The Atman transcends time and space, is always beyond them. Consequently the Self cannot really be described as large or small. It is beyond such dualities, and beyond any attempt at measurement. Why, then does the upanishad say what has just been cited? It is indicating to us that there is nothing which is not pervaded by the Self—there is nothing so small or so large that it is “outside” of the Self. Rather, the Self encompasses all relative being as well as the absolute. However large or small something may be, the Self is present within it to the fullest degree.

(“The kernel of a canary seed” is not a reference to bird seed, but to the Shyamaka seed that is extremely small and its kernel is infinitesimal.)

The Self encompasses all worlds—all levels of creation. In modern times we know that the physical universe is beyond all conception, it is so vast. Even so, the Self is much greater. But this is true only because It is part of the Supreme Self Who spoke through Krishna to Arjuna, saying: “But what need have you, Arjuna, to know this huge variety? Know only that I exist, and that one atom of myself sustains the universe.” (Bhagavad Gita 10:42)

The Self is within our heart, and within that Self is contained all the worlds. So we carry Infinity within ourselves. No wonder the pinnacle of the spiritual quest is called self-
realization.

The great summing-up

Now the upanishad wraps and sums it all up, saying: “He from whom proceed all works, all desires, all odors, all tastes; who pervades all, who is beyond the senses, and in whom there is fullness of joy forever–he, the heart-enshrined Self, is verily Brahman. I, who worship the Self within the lotus of my heart, will attain him at death. He who worships him, and puts his trust in him, shall surely attain him.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:4a) It is those who “worship” the Self by constantly being intent on the Self through the inward focusing of their japa and meditation of Om, that will shed all false identities and enter into the truth of the Self—if not in this life, then at the time of leaving the body and ascending into higher consciousness.

Even the upanishads recognize the value of citing spiritual authorities, for the second half of this verse says: “Said the seer Sandilya: At the moment of death a knower of Brahman should meditate on the following truths: Thou art imperishable. Thou art the changeless Reality. Thou art the source of life.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:14:4b) This is possible for those who have made Self-knowledge the central and paramount factor of their life’s work. Those who have come to know the Self through profound meditation and constant remembrance of Om, will then know that they are imperishable, changeless, and Life itself.

Krishna

Then a most interesting statement is made: “This highest knowledge, the knowledge of Brahman, having drunk of which one never thirsts, did Ghora Angirasa teach to Krishna, the son of Devaki.” (Chandogya Upanishad 3:17:6) By this we know that Krishna himself is the embodiment of the upanishadic wisdom, and was therefore qualified to give the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which has been called the cream and the essence of the upanishads.
Satyakama

Now we come to a very interesting part of the Chandogya Upanishad which consists of stories of seekers who came to know Brahman.

A feature that will seem odd to Western readers is the instruction of some of the seekers by animals and even by the forces of nature. Any explanation I might give is purely speculative and not worth much, but here they are: 1) The accounts are simply symbolic parables, the animals and nature forces symbolizing powers within the yogis. 2) These are not actual events, but dreams which the yogis had—this, too, is a matter of symbolism. 3) They are intuitions occurring to the yogis as they pondered the animals and the natural forces, wanting to understand the ideas behind them—for the universe is entirely ideational in nature. I do not think that any of these are very satisfactory, so I prefer to just focus on the spiritual teaching and let the rest go by, the way we crack the shell and throw it away, keeping the nut inside which is nourishing. One thing is, evident, though, the pure-hearted will be instructed by other means if human teachers fail to do so (or even be available).

Truthfulness (satya), a foundation of yoga—as expounded in The Foundations of Yoga—is taught here in the story of Satyakama.

A case of identity

“One day the boy Satyakama came to his mother and said: ‘Mother, I want to be a religious student [brahmachari]. What is my family name [gotra]?’ ‘My son,’ replied his mother, ‘I do not know. In my youth I was a servant and worked in many places. I do not know who was your father. I am Jabala, and you are Satyakama. Call yourself Satyakama Jabala.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:4:1, 2)

This is no small thing. At the time of Satyakama it was essential for the teacher (acharya) to know the caste of the student, for the instruction given was according to the student’s caste so as to prepare him for his distinctive life within the society of that era. In this way children were prepared to live the life of Brahmin priests and teachers, Kshatriya administrators and warriors, and Vaishya artisans and merchants. (Shudras—servants—were not accepted in the schools, since education was deemed pointless for their mode of life.) It is true that in very ancient times a student’s caste was finally determined during his education, according to his aptitudes and inclinations, but he started out being considered of the caste of his parents. Later caste was solely a matter of heredity. Whichever era this story took place in, the father’s caste had to be known.

Complicating the whole thing was the matter of gotra. Gotra means clan, family, or lineage, and all the castes were divided in gotras. This, too, could determine what the student would be taught, because different gotras had their own dharma shastras—scriptures which set forth the social and religious rules for members of that gotra. Sometimes these texts governed such minutiae as the student’s style of hair, mode and color of clothing, and even the type of wood their staff should be made of and how long it should be. Those born completely outside such a system may consider this all meaningless complications, but it was not so at the time the upanishad was written, and we should realize the seriousness of all this, even if we do not feel the same way.

Anyhow, Satyakama needed to know his caste and his gotra. Since his mother was a servant, a Shudra, he “should” not be accepted anyway, and on top of it he was
illegitimate—a total bar to assimilation by society on any level, including education. But Satyakama thirsted for knowledge, and with the single-minded intent of a child dared to approach the great sage Gautama, something even those of highest caste might hesitate to do.

Truth

“Thereupon the boy went to Gautama and asked to be accepted as a student. ‘Of what family are you, my lad?’ inquired the sage. Satyakama replied: ‘I asked my mother what my family name was, and she answered: “I do not know. In my youth I was a servant and worked in many places. I do not know who was your father. I am Jabala, and you are Satyakama. Call yourself Satyakama Jabala!” I am therefore Satyakama Jabala, sir.’ Then said the sage: ‘None but a true Brahmin would have spoken thus. Go and fetch fuel, for I will teach you. You have not swerved from the truth.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:4:3,4)

Here we see that character, composed of karma and samskara, was the basis for caste in the Upanishadic age. Truthfulness is a prime trait of a Brahmin, as is indicated here. Though Prabhavananda translates: “None but a true Brahmin would have spoken thus,” the literal meaning is: “A non-Brahmin will not be able to say this.” This is extremely powerful, for it not only indicates that a true Brahmin is in such a purified state that it is impossible for him to not speak the truth—and speak it fully—it also indicates that a Brahmin will not have the egoity that would prevent him speaking truthfully and plainly regarding himself in all aspects of his life. For him there is no ego-based shyness or embarrassment of any sort. A Brahmin will never seek to hide anything about himself by speech or silence. As yogis we must seek to be perfect Brahmans.

The realization

Now I will summarize what is a rather wordy and sometimes obscure text. (You can read it yourself in 4:4:3 to 4:8:1-4, and you will see what I mean.)

Satyakama, at the instruction of his guru, Gautama, lived some years in the forest. During that time, from various sources he learned in stages that the entire cosmos is a manifestation of Brahman, though only a “particle” of Brahman. Even though I say he “learned” this, it was not learning in the ordinary, intellectual sense. Rather it was direct experience gained in the depths of meditation. Thus Satyakama KNEW Brahman, and KNEW Brahman was manifesting as all the worlds, and at the same time transcending them all.

The return

“At last the youth arrived at the home of his master and reverently presented himself before him. As soon as Gautama saw him, he exclaimed: ‘My son, your face shines like a knower of Brahman. By whom were you taught?’ ‘By beings other than men,’ replied Satyakama; ‘but I desire that you too should teach me. For I have heard from the wise that the knowledge that the teacher imparts will alone lead to the supreme good.’ Then the sage taught him that knowledge, and left nothing out.” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:9:1-3)

This reminds us of the radiant Buddha walking down the road after his enlightenment. Like Gautama, a Brahmin met him and also saw the divine radiance and asked him: “Who are you?” Continuing to walk on, Buddha simply said: “I am awake.”

Although he possessed the perfect knowledge of Brahman (Brahmajnana), Satyakama wisely asked that Gautama should teach him. For he knew that his perceptions might be either incorrect or incomplete, and he wanted to check them by hearing from the lips of an
enlightened Master. This is the way of the wise; they are always aware that they may not have perfect knowledge or experience. It is only the ignorant that insist they know the truth and have no need of testing. As Dion Fortune remarked in one of her books, those who are deluded will hysterically insist on the veracity of their “revelations,” even being violent verbally and physically in defense of those delusions. On the other hand, a person who has had valid experiences and garnered true wisdom from them will speak of such things very apologetically—even hesitantly—frequently commenting that they realize their experiences may be delusions or they may be mistaken in their understanding of them even if they are real. Because of his sobriety and humility Satyakama was worthy (and capable) of being instructed fully in the wisdom of the sages (rishis). And so he was.

Such is an ideal spiritual aspirant.
Upakosala

Now we come to the story of another student:

“Upakosala dwelt as a student in the house of Satyakama for twelve years. Though the teacher let other disciples return to their homes after they had been duly taught the way of truth, Upakosala was not allowed to depart. The wife of Satyakama entreated her husband to finish teaching him in order that he might go home like the rest, but Satyakama not only refused to do so but went off on a journey. At this Upakosala was so sad and sick at heart that he could not eat. The teacher’s wife pld him with food, and in everything treated him with tender affection, but to no avail. At last the boy cried out to her: ‘O mother, my heart is still so impure; I am too unhappy to eat!’” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:10:1-3)

The mind of Upakosala

Satyakama did not let Upakosala return home because he had not learned all that was necessary for leading a fully dharmic life according to the scriptural precepts. It is interesting that Upakosala does not consider that his failing is an academic one, but rather one of interior disposition. This shows his fundamental worthiness. “My heart is still so impure” is a misleading translation. The text actually says: “In this person there are these many desires which tend towards many things–I am filled with them.” (He spoke in the third person because he was objective in analyzing himself. This indicates his lack of egotism.)

This reminds us of the following from the life of Jesus: “He entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Upakosala understood this (and Jesus must have studied this upanishad in India), realizing that although desires may not be negative or foolish, yet they pull us in many directions, whirling us around and confusing our minds and depleting our life energies. **Only when the mind is fixed on the One can the many be safely attended to.**

Why...

Why did the sage leave this boy to his sorrow? Those who see with earthly eyes and think only earthly thoughts often accuse the saints of being heartless or even cruel. But they know what they are doing, and are aware that their actions are needed. When Jesus told his disciples that he would be leaving them, they were unhappy. So he said: “Because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” (John 16:6,7) Vivekananda once commented: “A man harms his disciples by staying too long with them,” for they do not develop the independence needed to pursue spiritual life. Swami Sivananda often sent his disciples away to engage in spiritual practice or spiritual work. Even at the time of his
leaving this world, few “old” disciples were present.

There was a man who very much wanted spiritual instruction from one of Sri Ramakrishna’s disciples, but that man sent him to another disciple, who sent him to still another—and that one refused him, too. Becoming very upset, even angry and bitter, the man left Calcutta and returned home. That very night he awoke, feeling that someone was in his room. Indeed there was: Sri Ramakrishna himself in living, physical form! He touched the man, blessing him, and gave him spiritual instruction. The next time that man saw one of his “refusers,” he was told: “We knew you were destined to receive personal instruction from Thakur himself; that is why we did not teach you ourselves.”

The teaching

And so it was with Upakosala. Through a voice from the sacred fire Brahman became his teacher. Here is how:

“Then a voice from out the fire which he was tending said: ‘This life is Brahman. The sky is Brahman. Bliss is Brahman. Know thou Brahman!’ ‘I know that life is Brahman,’ replied Upakosala. ‘But that the sky is Brahman, or that bliss is Brahman, I do not know.’ Again came the voice from out the fire, this time explaining that by sky was meant the lotus of the heart, wherein dwells Brahman, and that by bliss was meant the bliss of Brahman. ‘Both,’ said the voice, ‘refer to Brahman’; and, continuing, it taught Upakosala thus: ‘Earth, food, fire, sun—all these that you worship—are forms of Brahman. He who is seen in the sun—that one am I. He who dwells in the east, in the north, in the west, and in the south, he who dwells in the moon, in the stars, and in water—that one am I. He who dwells in the sky and makes the lightning his home—that one also am I. Know well the true nature of the world that it may never do you harm.’ Thereupon the fire, which had been only an earthly fire with which to prepare sacrifices, assumed a new aspect, and became the Lord himself. The earth was transformed; life was transformed; the sun, the moon, the stars, the lightning—everything was transformed, and deified. And thus it was that to Upakosala the true nature of all things was revealed.” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:10:4,5; 4:11:1,2; 4:12:1, 2; 13:1, 2; 14:1)

This is thoroughly clear, and needs no comment, except to say that here we see the nature of enlightenment as a total transformation of perception. And that is one of the greatest teachings of this upanishad.

The final words

“In due time Satyakama returned home. When he saw Upakosala, he said: ‘My son, your face shines like one who knows Brahman. Who has taught you?’ ‘Beings other than men,’ replied Upakosala. Then said Satyakama: ‘My son, what you have learned is true. True also is this that I teach you now. Lo, to him who knows it shall no evil cling, even as drops of water cling not to the leaf of the lotus: He who glows in the depths of your eyes—that is Brahman; that is the Self of yourself. He is the Beautiful One, he is the Luminous One. In all the worlds, forever and ever, he shines!’” (Chandogya Upanishad 4:14:2 3; 4.15:1,4)

Nothing more can or need be said.
Svetaketu

Now we come to the best known and most valued section of the upanishads: the story of Svetaketu and his learning about Brahman—and also his own Self. Prabhavananda has wisely condensed the narrative as it contains a great deal of repetition which at one time in India was considered high literary style (as the Pali Sutras of Buddhism show).

Learning that was ignorance

“When Svetaketu was twelve years old, his father Uddalaka said to him, ‘Svetaketu, you must now go to school and study. None of our family, my child, is ignorant of Brahman.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:1:1)

What a blessed time it must have been when education was aimed at the attainment of Brahmajnana!

“Thereupon Svetaketu went to a teacher and studied for twelve years. After committing to memory all the Vedas, he returned home full of pride in his learning.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:1:2)

Yes, yes, yes, we all have read over and over that the Vedas are the basis of Sanatana Dharma, and that “belief in the Vedas” makes one a Hindu. But this is not the perspective of the upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita. Vedic study is constantly being decried by them as worthless—so what does that say about the Vedas? (Which, by the way, are said to be three, not four.) Just calling them Shabda Brahman—the Sound Brahman—does not make them so. (Anyhow, anyone who reads the upanishads and Gita knows that OM is the Shabda Brahman!) In the same way in the Bible we find the prophets, including David in the Psalms, denouncing the ways of the Law and deriding those who follow it. (The Essenes declared that the Law, the Torah, had been corrupted and brought into line with the ways of the ignorant religions of the nations which surrounded and intimidated Israel.)

However we may look at the question, there is no doubt that twelve years of Vedic study had left Svetaketu both ignorant and arrogant.

“His father, noticing the young man’s conceit, said to him: ‘Svetaketu, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unhearable, by which we perceive the unperceivable, by which we know the unknowable?’ ‘What is that knowledge, sir?’ asked Svetaketu.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:1:3)

Here we have three words: Ashrutam, amatam, and avijnatam that are most important. Ashrutam means “the unheard,” amatam means “the unthought” or “the unconceived,” and avijnatam means “the unknown.” They also mean “the unhearable,” “the unthinkable,” and “the unknowable.” These are epithets of Brahman, the Absolute Being. Not only do we not at this moment hear, think of, or know Brahman, we cannot do so—not through the mind, that is. But we can know Brahman directly at the core of our Self. When we go beyond the usual perceptors into the Knower…then we will hear without hearing, think without thought, and know without knowing. For it it will be a matter of BEING alone. In other words, we must be yogis.

THE knowledge

Uddalaka now tells Svetaketu: “My child, as by knowing one lump of clay, all things made of clay are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being that all are clay; as by knowing a nugget of gold, all things made of gold
are known, the difference being only in name and arising from speech, and the truth being
that all are gold—exactly so is that knowledge, knowing which we know all.” (Chandogya
Upanishad 6:1:4-6)

This is pretty straightforward, but it has an interesting implication. Uddalaka says that
if we know one lump of clay or one nugget of gold we will know all clay and gold. The Self
(Atman) and Brahman are absolutely one, yet the Self is limited in Its scope, whereas
Brahman is limitless—and willing to share that limitlessness with us. Therefore the way to
know the Paramatman, Brahman, is to know the Jivatman, the individual Self. Once we
know the part we know the Whole. There is more to it than this, because in that knowing
we participate in the infinite Being of Brahman. This is a matter of yoga and beyond the
scope of language to express or explain. That is why the Kena Upanishad says: “He truly
knows Brahman who knows him as beyond knowledge; he who thinks that he knows,
knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known, but the wise know him to be
beyond knowledge.” (Kena Upanishad 2:3)

In response Svetaketu says: “But surely those venerable teachers of mine are ignorant
of this knowledge; for if they had possessed it, they would have taught it to me. Do you
therefore, sir, give me that knowledge.’ ‘Be it so,’ said Uddalaka.” (Chandogya Upanishad
6:1:7)

The ONE

“In the beginning there was Existence, One only, without a second. Some say that in
the beginning there was nonexistence only, and that out of that the universe was born. But
how could such a thing be? How could existence be born of non-existence? No, my son, in
the beginning there was Existence alone–One only, without a second.” (Chandogya
Upanishad 6:2:1,2)

In the beginning–and evermore–there was SAT: Existence; Reality; Being: Brahman,
the Absolute, Pure Being. And this Sat was ekam, evam, adwityam: one only, without a
second. This Absolute Unity is all that ever has been or that can ever be. This is a major
principle of Sanatana Dharma, one that is not easy to always keep in mind since we find
ourselves immersed in the experience of duality. But when through self-purification and
the practice of yoga we sweep aside this delusive curtain we will see the One and know It
within our own Self (atman) as its inmost essence. The Sat is always One, not one among
many, and is absolutely indivisible. Duality cannot arise in It to any degree.

This being so, Uddalaka warns Svetaketu away from the mistaken idea that there was
an original Nothing from which came Something. Certainly, Brahman is No Thing, but
that is a far cry from Nothing. Rather, it is Everything. This is important to us for two
reasons. First, if originally there was nothing, then when we return to our primal state we
will be annihilated, “become” nothing. And, indeed, there are those who believe and even
yearn for this. But it is not so. Second, for us raised in Western religion, it points out the
absurdity of the theological principle that God created the world ex nihilo—from nothing.

Since this second proposition is merely an intellectual perception, it is not particularly
negative, but the first one is, for it deludes us as to what our ultimate state is meant to be.
And it is perfectly possible to enter into an empty, jada state of unconscious inertia that can
be mistaken for Nirvana, that is often wrongly translated “annihilation” or
“extinguishment.”

The “Many”

“He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of
himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being. All that is has its self in him alone. Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so, my child.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:2:3a; 6:3:2; 6:8:7)

This is extremely important. Brahman did not “create” anything: It projected everything out of Its own being—and not as a separate entity, for It is within every thing as its sole Reality, as Its Self, as its subtle Essence.

You might be interested to know that this was the original teaching of Christianity. In the New Testament the word translated “made” in speaking of the origin of the universe is ginomai, which means to be generated—not made from nothing. It also means to arise or be assembled from something already existing. The expression “only-begotten” is monogenis, coming from the same root word. In The Apostolic Constitutions, one of the earliest liturgical texts of Christianity, God is said to have “brought forth all things as from a treasure house”—not from nothing.

After saying all these amazing things, Uddalaka enunciates the highest wonder: Tat Twam Asi: THOU ART THAT. This is the pinnacle of the Upanishads—of all the wisdom scriptures of India. This awesome truth that behind and beneath it all, including our own Self, is THAT, is Brahman. “Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self.”

Svetaketu asked to hear more. In a sense there was no more, but there could be more affirmations of the single truth. So:

The unknowing

“As the bees make honey by gathering juices from many flowering plants and trees, and as these juices reduced to one honey do not know from what flowers they severally come, similarly, my son, all creatures, when they are merged in that one Existence, whether in dreamless sleep or in death, know nothing of their past or present state, because of the ignorance enveloping them—know not that they are merged in him and that from him they came. Whatever these creatures are, whether a lion, or a tiger, or a boar, or a worm, or a gnat, or a mosquito, that they remain after they come back from dreamless sleep. All these have their self in him alone. He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so, my son.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:9:1-4)

All of us in relative existence are enveloped in ignorance. That should not be hard to accept! But whatever the background or past of any sentient being, of whatever level, in dreamless sleep and death they all return to Brahman. But their enveloping ignorance prevents them from knowing Where they are, the way a submarine keeps those inside from being wet. So they are not enlightened in any way, though so close to the Light from Whence they came. Although in that state they have no self-concept, no identity with their present level of evolution, when they awake from sleep or return from death to rebirth, they find themselves in the form that corresponds to their inner development. And of course they immediately get lost in the dream and start wandering around, never really coming to rest anywhere. Yet at all times they are within Brahman and ARE Brahman.

Svetaketu wants more, so his father repeats what he has said from another angle.

“The rivers in the east flow eastward, the rivers in the west flow westward, and all enter into the sea. From sea to sea they pass, the clouds lifting them to the sky as vapor and sending them down as rain. And as these rivers, when they are united with the sea, do not
know whether they are this or that river, likewise all those creatures that I have named, when they have come back from Brahman, know not whence they came. All those beings have their self in him alone. He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so, my child.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:10:1-3)

No comment needed.
Svetaketu asks for more.

The all-pervading Source

“If someone were to strike once at the root of this large tree, it would bleed, but live. If he were to strike at its stem, it would bleed, but live. If he were to strike at the top, it would bleed, but live. Pervaded by the living Self, this tree stands firm, and takes its food; but if the Self were to depart from one of its branches, that branch would wither; if it were to depart from a second, that would wither; if it were to depart from a third, that would wither. If it were to depart from the whole tree, the whole tree would wither. Likewise, my son, know this: The body dies when the Self leaves it–but the Self dies not. All that is has its self in him alone. He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:11:1-3)

Everything is alive, but only because the Living Self, Brahman, inhabits it. If that Presence is withdrawn, then death results. Therefore when the Self leaves the body, the body dies, but not the Self. Yet see how backwards we are in the West. We think that it is being in the body that makes a person alive, that when they leave the body they die. Absolutely backwards! Not only that, we continue to treat the body as the person, dressing it up, putting makeup on it, fixing its hair and putting in a satin-lined box and mourning over it. Even crazier, we will first have drained out its blood and pumped formaldehyde into it. Then we put the box in a concrete box in a grave and pile dirt on top of it, heap flowers on it, and leave. But we keep coming back to “visit” the “dead” with more flowers and even talk to the body as though it were the still-living person who has long ago departed from the body. Now, if that is not insane, tell me what is? And it is not only sanctioned by our stupid religions, it is encouraged by them, especially those that disdain prayers for the departed. Spot the looney.

More, says Svetaketu.

The subtle Essence

“Bring a fruit of that Nyagrodha [Banyan] tree.”
“Here it is, sir.”
“Break it.”
“It is broken, sir.”
“What do you see?”
“Some seeds, extremely small, sir.”
“Break one of them.”
“It is broken, sir.”
“What do you see?”
“Nothing, sir.”

“The subtle essence you do not see, and in that is the whole of the Nyagrodha tree. Believe, my son, that that which is the subtle essence—in that have all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU.
‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:12:1-3)

This is easily understood. What I would like to point out is the fact that Uddalaka says “the whole of the Nyagrodha tree” is in the Divine Essence. It is not part in and part out, as we think in the West, believing that part of us is material and part is spirit, or that part of us lives in this world and part of us in the spiritual world. These distinctions are products of ignorance. There is only The ONE. At all times.

In response to Svetaketu's request, Uddalaka produces another object lesson.

“Put this salt in water, and come to me tomorrow morning.”

Svetaketu did as he was bidden. The next morning his father asked him to bring the salt which he had put in the water. But he could not, for it had dissolved. Then said Uddalaka:

“How the water, and tell me how it tastes.”

“It is salty, sir.”

“In the same way,” continued Uddalaka, “though you do not see Brahman in this body, he is indeed here. That which is the subtle essence—in that have all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self,’ said the youth again. ‘Be it so, my child.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:13:1-3)

For some reason Prabhavananda did not translate this fully. In the original text Uddalaka asks Svetaketu to taste the water from the top, the middle, and the bottom of the bowl. Each time he finds it salty. The idea is that Brahman pervades the entire field of relative existence, AS that field. And we are That.

Yes, Svetaketu wants to hear more.

**Teaching needed**

“As a man may be blindfolded, and led away, and left in a strange place; and as, having been so dealt with, he turns in every direction and cries out for someone to remove his bandages and show him the way home; and as, having so treated may loose his bandages and give him comfort; and as thereupon he walks from village to village, asking his way as he goes; and as he arrives home at last—just so does a man who meets with an illumined teacher obtain true knowledge. That which is the subtle essence—in that have all beings their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, O Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. ‘Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.’ ‘Be it so, my child.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:14:1-3)

The teaching here is of major import. We can know we are blind and lost and need to see and go back home, but it stops there. We have to be made to see and shown the way. This can only happen when we find the teachings of enlightened Masters. If we can meet such a Master face-to-face, our good fortune is incalculable. Over forty years have passed since I received the blessing and wisdom of the first Masters of my acquaintance, and some decades since the last one spoke with me. Yet those memories are my heart’s rosary which I can go over and vividly return in memory to those days. I do not have to believe books: I have seen living embodiments of Sanatana Dharma and listened to their words, many of them addressed personally to me. However, I have spent many, many more hours reading the printed teachings of some of those great Masters, and many more Masters that I have only “met” in books.

However the teachings come to us, it is the application that matters. I saw a lot of do-nothings circulating around the Masters who just played groupie until the Master died and then they wasted their time grieving over the loss of something they never really had, and
waiting for the Master to “give the green light” (a quote from one of them) so they could
die and go to the Master’s “loka” and be with him forever. Small chance! They were not
really with the Master in life, so why in death?

What I want to assure you is that truth is always truth. If you learn mathematics from a
teacher or a book it is the same. Further, this upanishadic simile does not inculcate the
guru-disciple enslavement that is considered so essential for enlightenment. Yes, one
person did take away the bandage and point out the way, but notice that “thereupon he
walks from village to village, asking his way as he goes.” So he has many teachers, not just
one. And it should be the same with us. “Loyalty” to a single teacher should not be a
blindfold on the eyes of our soul. All Masters are living, and as Yogananda said, we should
realize that all Masters are one and not make differences between them. (He is speaking
of Masters, though, not just teachers.)

Ultimately, even the teachers are just the mouthpieces of Brahman, of our own ultimate
Self.

At his request, Svetaketu now receives one last instruction.

Forgetting and remembering

“When a man is fatally ill, his relations gather round him and ask, ‘Do you know me?
Do you know me? Now until his speech is merged in his mind, his mind in his breath, his
breath in his vital heat, his vital heat in the Supreme Being, he knows them. But when his
speech is merged in his mind, his mind in his breath, his breath in his vital heat, his vital
heat in the Supreme Being, then he does not know them. That which is the subtle
essence—in that have all beings their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that,
O Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6:15:1-3)

When we merge with Brahman in Mahasamadhi—the great exit of death—then all that
we “knew” and believed in is nothing to us: only Brahman remains for us to know and
identify with. The long journey is over, Reality gained at last. All that was enslaving and
misery-producing, all the trivia and folly of relativity, is over forever. No return
engagement! No return trip ticket! Home at last; home forever. Home in Infinity; Life to a
degree undreamed of by us for ages beyond calculation. For the final time we close our
external eyes to open the eye of spirit. My grandmother asked me to have a song entitled
“We’ll Say Goodnight Here, But Good Morning Up There” sung at her funeral. It certainly
is “night” here and eternal “morning” in God. But attaining it is not so simple as the song
implies. Nevertheless, one day—beyond all time—it will happen to us all. Then we will really
know: That which is the subtle essence—in that have all beings their existence. That is the
truth. That is the Self. And THAT ART THOU.”
Sometimes the longer upanishads branch off from the central subject and explore a byway or two. This happened in the preceding dialogue between Uddalaka and Svetaketu. Uddalaka began expounding the origin of various components of the human being, including the mind, the manas, which is the sensory mind, the field of energy which conveys the impressions of the sensory impulses of the brain. It is part of our astral bodies, but since it consists of the grossest of astral substance, it is integrated, even interlaced, with the material body and brain. According to Uddalaka the energy of the mind is derived from the physical body. Here are his words:

“Food, when eaten, becomes divided into three parts. What is its grossest ingredient, that becomes feces; what is the middling ingredient, that becomes flesh; and what is the subtlest ingredient, that becomes mind.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.5.1,2) From this we see how important diet is, for the very substance of the mind is the essential energy of the food we eat. For that reason we must be careful both as to what we eat and what its vibration might be. For example, we should avoid meat, fish, eggs, alcohol, nicotine, and mind-influencing drugs—that should be obvious to the yogi. But we must also be careful about the vibration of acceptable food, for if it is a vehicle of negative vibrations it will be poisonous to the mind. When food is cooked or handled, the vibrations of the cook and the handler enter into it, for cooked food is very receptive to vibrations. Usually a prayer or blessing will neutralize any negative energies attached to food, but not always, especially if the cook or handler were mentally disturbed. Restaurant food can be a problem for that reason, and also because the food may be cooked in the same oil in which meat has been cooked, or may have been touched by meat in some way in the restaurant kitchen.

Prana, the subtle life force in the yogi’s body, must also be kept pure, as it affects everything in the physical and astral bodies, and has a major influence on meditation, during which the pranas must be as pure and subtle as possible, since the mental energies and the prana interact with one another intimately. About the prana, Uddalaka says: “Water, when drunk, becomes divided into three parts. What is its grossest ingredient, that becomes urine; what is the middling ingredient, that becomes blood; and what is the subtlest ingredient, that becomes Prana.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.5.1,2) What is said about water stands for any liquid, and we must be as careful about that as about our food.

“Hence, mind is made up of food, Prana is made up of water.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.5.4) Then he repeats this, giving examples.

“Of the curd [yogurt] that is being churned that which is the subtlest part rises upwards and that becomes butter. So also, of the food that is eaten that which is the subtlest part rises upwards and that becomes the mind. Of the water that is drunk that which is the subtlest part rises upwards and that becomes Prana....Hence, mind is made up of food, Prana is made up of water.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.6.1-3,4)

This is extremely valuable knowledge for everyone, but especially for the yogi, as we see that food and drink have a direct effect on the mind and vital force within.
Narada

Now we come to the account of the great sage Narada and his inquiries made to the great Master, Sanatkumara. This contains a lot of rhetoric and repetition, so I will omit some of the first fifteen sections of the seventh chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad as translated by Swami Prabhavananda.

The ladder to reality

“Narada once came to Sanatkumara and asked to be taught. To Sanatkumara’s question, ‘What have you already studied?’ Narada replied that he had studied all the branches of learning–art, science, music, and philosophy, as well as the sacred scriptures. ‘But,’ said he, ‘I have gained no peace. I have studied all this, but the Self I do not know. I have heard from great teachers like you that he who knows the Self overcomes grief. Grief is ever my lot. Help me, I pray you, to overcome it.” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:1:1-4)

This contains a cardinal truth: there is no peace or real happiness outside the knowledge of the Self (atma jnana). Those who wish to end all sorrow must seek that knowledge. Such is the assertion of the great teachers of humanity.

First Sanatkumara taught Narada the ascending steps of reality which we must perfect before we can know the ultimate Reality: that which we hear from others, the faculty of speech, the mind, will, intelligence, meditation, and the wisdom gained from direct spiritual experience.

The Eternal Truth

“Then said Sanatkumara: ‘But, verily, he is the true knower–who knows eternal Truth.’ ‘Revered sir, I wish to be a true knower.’ ‘Then ask to know of that infinite Reality.’ ‘Sir, I ask to know of it.”’ (Chandogya Upanishad 7:16:1)

There are two simple points here. The first is that only the knower of Brahman really knows anything. Only those that know Eternal Being are jnanis–knowers. This is a necessary perspective for those that set out to seek the Absolute, for unless they hold to this outlook they may become distracted along the way and settle for less, or even begin actively seeking the less.

The second point is that the seeker must ask a qualified teacher for teaching, that it will not just be dropped in his hands. Asking is the heart of seeking. An equally important point is implied here: a qualified teacher will not teach unless asked. Somewhere I have mentioned that this was one of my first lessons learned during my first trip to India. I found that fools and fakes went into teaching mode the moment they saw me and being grinding out the philosophical cliches–along with the hints that I should arrange a world tour for them to end in America the Land of Opportunity. Since nineteenth-century translations of the upanishads had the teacher addressing the disciple as “my dear,” these ignoramuses and charlatans always called me “my dear” upon meeting me. In contrast, the real teachers and Masters were kind and most polite, asking me about my purpose in coming to India and where I had been, and suchlike. But they never said a word about either philosophy or yoga. If I asked them for wisdom upon our first meeting, they spoke sparingly in an almost diffident way, in no way pushing their words at me or trying to impose their views on me. (Some would not even answer the first time they were questioned. One teacher only told me anything after I had inquired three times in a row.)
After more contact, they would become very free with me and answer my questions gladly. But still they never volunteered anything. I always had to ask. This is the mark of a genuine teacher. So Narada had to declare his desire to know Infinite Reality.

**Steps on the path**

Next Swami Prabhavananda gives a kind of digest of several verses.

“It is only when a man has realized eternal Truth that he declares it. He who reflects upon it realizes it. Without reflection it is not realized. And only he who has faith and reverence reflects on eternal Truth. And only he who attends on a teacher gains faith and reverence. And only he attends on a teacher who struggles to achieve self-control. And only he struggles to achieve self-control who finds joy in it. Ask to know of this joy. ‘Sir, I ask to know of it.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:16:1-22:1)

This list starts at the top and goes to the bottom, and are the steps to realization according to Sri Sanatkumara.

*It is only when a man has realized eternal Truth that he declares it.* Only one who has realized the Eternal Truth of the Brahman-Self can truly declare It. All others just speak rumor and speculation. So if we want spiritual authority we will have to seek out those that have found Truth and embody it. For their very words will convey awakening and empowerment to the worthy hearer. That is why Jesus made the remarkable statement: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63) This is not true of the words of ordinary teachers.

*He who reflects upon it realizes it. Without reflection it is not realized.* This does not mean mere intellectual thought, just pondering on ideas about Brahman. The word *matih* means thinking of something, reflecting upon it because of love, of great affinity, for it. (Shankara says this in his commentary.) The meaning is that the worthy seeker is purified enough in intellect to intuit both Brahman and his eternal relation with Brahman. As a result a spontaneous inner “recognition” of Brahman arises, along with a reaching out for the experience of Brahman as Reality. Just as a magnet draws metal to itself, so the yogi begins to experience the pull of the Infinite, and loves the drawing and the possibility of the final union. Brahman becomes the most cherished object of his heart, and Its reality is never absent from his consciousness. This is a sign of his nearness to realizing Brahman.

*And only he who has faith and reverence reflects on eternal Truth.* The worthy yogi is not a casual weekender, paddling his feet in the ocean of Infinity. Rather, he is one in whom intuitive conviction of the reality of God and the necessity of finding God has arisen. This insight motivates him from the depths of his own being.

*And only he who attends on a teacher gains faith and reverence.* Actually, the text says nothing about a teacher, just the word *nishtha*, which means steadiness. But Shankara in his commentary says that it indicates the steadfast seeking of a teacher’s wisdom “for acquiring knowledge of Brahman.” So Prabhavananda has translated accordingly. We have already considered that we may have recourse either to a living teacher or the teachings of a realized Master. It is contact with the “vibrations” of a teacher that enable faith to arise in us. Sometimes only the sight of a Master is needed for awakening to begin—even seeing a picture or photograph. Something is stirred deep within, often impressions from a previous life. Wonderful as that may be, it is steadfastness in inwardly and outwardly approaching the teacher that is needed for success in our search.

*And only he who attends on a teacher who struggles to achieve self-control.* For disciple means one who is engaging in discipline. Things do not come automatically or easily to the seeker. That must be faced. And paths that pretend to automatically and easily produce
realization are fake. Discipline—willing discipline—is an absolute requisite for spiritual attainment. Otherwise any effort expended is most likely to be useless. A lot of cultish seekers labor and slave and deprive and torment themselves and end up getting nowhere. But they are not truly disciplined in the sense of intelligent understanding and effort put forth in the context of a viable tradition.

**And only he struggles to achieve self-control who finds joy in it.** This is a signal trait of the worthy seeker: he find joy in the seeking, and rejoices in having at last found the way to real finding. The way is one of discipline and purification, and he loves every bit of it, however it may pain the ego, for he knows it leads to the end of uncertainty and suffering. Such a seeker does not sigh and grudgingly do what is necessary, feeling put upon all the way. That kind will not persevere—and good riddance. No, he is like the men Jesus told about: “The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” (Matthew 13:44-46) They gladly gave all they had. Such are those who find joy in the struggle for self-mastery and Self-realization. Saint Paul says that Jesus himself: “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2)

**“Ask to know of this joy.” “Sir, I ask to know of it.”** Certainly many people seek higher reality as a result of disillusionment and suffering. Some merely seek the cessation of suffering, but the wiser actively seek the joy that is the nature of Brahman.

**The source of joy**

“The Infinite is the source of joy. There is no joy in the finite. Only in the Infinite is there joy. Ask to know of the Infinite.’ ‘Sir, I ask to know of it.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:23:1)

This is not an easy lesson to learn: that there is no joy outside of the Infinite Brahman; there is no joy outside of our own Self. The meditator knows how difficult this his, for the mind keeps running after utter trivia in meditation, turning from the way to ananda and thinking of those things that only bring suffering even though the mind delights in the idea of them. Fool's gold is preferred by the mind to real gold. This is an addiction incredibly hard to be cured. The first step is asking about the Infinite, as this verse shows.

**Experiencing the Infinite**

What now follows is not a definition of the Infinite, because that is impossible since It is beyond conceptualization, and therefore beyond words. But it is possible to give a hint about the experience of the Infinite, even though it will be more of a neti-neti (not this-not that) approach.

“Where one sees nothing but the One, hears nothing but the One, knows nothing but the One—there is the Infinite. Where one sees another, hears another, knows another—there is the finite. The Infinite is immortal, the finite is mortal.’ ‘In what does the Infinite rest?’ ‘In its own glory—nay, not even in that. In the world it is said that cows and horses, elephants and gold, slaves, wives, fields, and houses are man's glory—but these are poor and finite things. How shall the Infinite rest anywhere but in itself?’” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:24:1,2)

I know I have said it elsewhere, but I must say it here: nowhere in the entire world can there be found teachings equal to those of the upanishads. And these two verses are proof
of that.

“Where one sees another, hears another, knows another—there is the finite,” can be understood in two ways, both of which are correct. First, if someone sees anything besides the Infinite, then he is not perceiving the Infinite, for when the Infinite is perceived, all else either disappears or is seen as the Infinite Itself. Second, if anyone sees anything other than his Self—which is one with the Infinite—he is not seeing the Infinite.

“How shall the Infinite rest anywhere but in itself?” This is also true of those who have realized the Infinite.

Where is the Infinite?

“The Infinite is below, above, behind, before, to the right, to the left. I am all this. This Infinite is the Self. The Self is below, above, behind, before, to the right, to the left. I am all this. One who knows, meditates upon, and realizes the truth of the Self—such an one delights in the Self, revels in the Self, rejoices in the Self. He becomes master of himself, and master of all the worlds. Slaves are they who know not this truth.” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:25:1,2)

The knower of the Infinite

“He who knows, meditates upon, and realizes this truth of the Self, finds that everything—primal energy, ether, fire, water, and all other elements—mind, will, speech, sacred hymns and scriptures—indeed the whole universe—issues forth from it. It is written: ‘He who has realized eternal Truth does not see death, nor illness, nor pain; he sees everything as the Self, and obtains all.’ The Self is one, and it has become all things.

“When the senses are purified, the heart is purified; when the heart is purified, there is constant and unceasing remembrance of the Self; when there is constant and unceasing remembrance of the Self, all bonds are loosed and freedom is attained. Thus the venerable Sanatkumara taught Narada, who was pure in heart, how to pass from darkness into light.” (Chandogya Upanishad 7:26:1,2)

Nothing really needs to be said in commentary. What is needed is the resolve to follow the example of Narada and attain the same realization.
Within the Lotus of the Heart

The Chidakasha within

“Within the city of Brahman, which is the body, there is the heart, and within the heart there is a little house. This house has the shape of a lotus, and within it dwells that which is to be sought after, inquired about, and realized. What then is that which, dwelling within this little house, this lotus of the heart, is to be sought after, inquired about, and realized?” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:1:1,2)

The body is the abode of Brahman and the Self. The core-center of each relative, sentient being is its heart. And within the heart is a dahara, a dwelling; and within that dwelling is pure akasha, ether or space. But it is not the akasha that is one of the five primal elements (panchabhuta), but rather the Chidakasha: the space of Consciousness. In other words, the inmost dweller of the heart is Brahman Itself. Such is the import of these verses according to Shankara. So it is Brahman “which is to be sought after, inquired about, and realized.”

The inner cosmos

“As large as the universe outside, even so large is the universe within the lotus of the heart. Within it are heaven and earth, the sun, the moon, the lightning, and all the stars. What is in the macrocosm is in this microcosm.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:1:3)

How is this possible? Because space, like time, is only a idea, only an experience, not a reality. Infinity is within each one of us. I have had various experiences of this fact, but here is an account I wrote down some years ago.

“While meditating one day all ordinary physical sensation vanished. Spatial relation ceased to exist and I found myself keenly aware of being beyond dimension, neither large nor small, but infinite (for infinity is beyond size). Although the terminology is inappropriate to such a state, to make it somewhat understandable I have to say that I perceived an infinity of worlds ‘within’ me. Sun–some solo and others surrounded by planets–glimmered inside my spaceless space. Not that I saw the light, but I felt or intuited it. Actually, I did not ‘see’ anything–and yet I did. It is not expressible in terms of ordinary sense experience, yet I must use those terms. I experienced myself as everything that existed within the relative material universe.”

I was experiencing the mirror-image of the cosmos that exists within the Chidakasha in the heart. No one had ever told me about this, so at first I was at a loss to figure it out. But then in a moment the truth flashed into my mind. When much later I read these words of the Chandogya Upanishad I realized how amazing and invaluable is yoga. The yogi can realize for himself the things written in the wisdom texts of India. He can both experience and understand the meaning of the experience–and all from within.

And yet...

“All things that exist, all beings and all desires, are in the city of Brahman; what then becomes of them when old age approaches and the body dissolves in death? Though old age comes to the body, the lotus of the heart does not grow old. At death of the body, it does not die. The lotus of the heart, where Brahman exists in all his glory—that, and not the body, is the true city of Brahman. Brahman, dwelling therein, is untouched by any deed, ageless, deathless, free from grief, free from hunger and from thirst. His desires are
right desires, and his desires are fulfilled.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:1:4,5)

The mystic Angelus Silesius wrote that if he could die, then God would die; that if he could cease to exist, God would cease to exist. Such was his absolute understanding of the identity of the Self and God. Since this is so, the upanishad tells us that the Immortal is within us, whatever the condition of the body. Moreover, the desires of that Self are satyakama, true desires, and Its will is satyasankalpa, true will. So if we will center our consciousness in the Self, we will not have worry about desire or will—they will be Sat: revealers of the Real.

**True desire and will**

Having spoken of true desire and true will as properties of the Self, the upanishad now outlines the practical aspect of such.

“As here on earth all the wealth that one earns is but transitory, so likewise transitory are the heavenly enjoyments acquired by the performance of sacrifices. Therefore those who die without having realized the Self and its right desires find no permanent happiness in any world to which they go; while those who have realized the Self and its right desires find permanent happiness everywhere.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:1:6) The desires and intentions of those who have not realized the Self, even if seemingly fulfilled, eventually evaporate and come to nothing. But it is vastly different for those who know the Self and act and will accordingly.

“If the sage desires to see his fathers of the spirit-world, lo, his fathers come to meet him. In their company he is happy.

“And if he desires to see his mothers of the spirit-world, lo, his mothers come to meet him. In their company he is happy.

“And if he desires to see his brothers of the spirit-world, lo, his brothers come to meet him. In their company he is happy.

“And if he desires to see his sisters of the spirit-world, lo, his sisters come to meet him. In their company he is happy.

“And if he desires to see his friends of the spirit-world, lo, his friends come to meet him. In their company he is happy.

“And if he desires heavenly perfumes and garlands, lo, heavenly perfumes and garlands come to him. In their possession he is happy.

“And if he desires heavenly food and drink, lo, heavenly food and drink come to him. In their possession he is happy.

“And if he desires heavenly song and music, lo, heavenly song and music come to him. In their possession he is happy.

“Indeed, whatsoever such a knower of Brahman may desire, straightway it is his; and having obtained it, he is exalted of men.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:2:1-10)

This is lengthy and perhaps not too obvious of meaning. The idea is that the realized person has access to and embodies all that is positive from his past lives, both persons and karmic conditions. This being so, he can obtain anything he desires and wills in the present and the future. Yet “he is exalted of men” in a different manner than the dead and departed “greats” of human history. He is exalted in the Self, in Brahman, in Absolute Being.

The hallmark of Sanatana Dharma is its thorough practicality, its good sense, and its demonstrable truth. So the upanishad next says:

**The obstacle and its removal**
“The fulfillment of right desires is within reach of everyone, but a veil of illusion obstructs the ignorant. That is why, though they desire to see their dead, their beloved, they cannot see them.

“Do we wish for our beloved, among the living or among the dead, or is there aught else for which we long, yet, for all our longing, do not obtain? lo, all shall be ours if we but dive deep within, even to the lotus of the heart, where dwells the Lord. Yea, the object of every right desire is within our reach, though unseen, concealed by a veil of illusion.

“As one not knowing that a golden treasure lies buried beneath his feet, may walk over it again and again, yet never find it, so all beings live every moment in the city of Brahman, yet never find him, because of the veil of illusion by which he is concealed.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:3:1,2)

Meditation is the key to the treasure house! So the upanishad next says:

“The Self resides within the lotus of the heart. Knowing this, devoted to the Self, the sage enters daily that holy sanctuary.

“Absorbed in the Self, the sage is freed from identity with the body and lives in blissful consciousness. The Self is the immortal, the fearless; the Self is Brahman. This Brahman is eternal Truth.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:3:3,4)

Om!
Crossing the Boundary

The Boundary-Self

“The Self within the heart is like a boundary which divides the world from THAT. Day and night cross not that boundary, nor old age, nor death; neither grief nor pleasure, neither good nor evil deeds. All evil shuns THAT. For THAT is free from impurity: by impurity can it never be touched.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:4:1)

Setuh literally means a dam. In the experience of conditioned beings within the realm of relativity, the individual Self or jivatman acts as a boundary between Its Supreme Self, Brahman, the Paramatman, and the world of samsara. This is a very interesting fact, made even more interesting by the fact that I have never encountered it except here in this section of the Chandogya Upanishad.

We may think of the Self as a sea wall. On one side is the vast ocean of Brahman, and on the other side is the “earth” of material form and change. On one side the wall is experiencing the wetness of the sea, and on the other the dryness of earth. That in which the individual finds himself immersed only applies to that “side” of his being. However much we may experience birth, death, change, and all that attends them, they never touch the realm of Brahman. Conversely, although we are living in-and as-Brahman, samsara never touches that. Samsara and Brahman are mutually exclusive of one another. But we participate in the “worlds” of both, in a sense linking them with one another. Presently we are centered in samsara, experiencing our own Self as a barrier to Reality. But that barrier can be crossed, so the upanishad continues:

“Wherefore he who has crossed that boundary, and has realized the Self, if he is blind, ceases to be blind; if he is wounded, ceases to be wounded; if he is afflicted, ceases to be afflicted. When that boundary is crossed, night becomes day; for the world of Brahman is light itself.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:4:2) That is so powerful and obvious that there is no place for comment, other than to point out that the conditions listed from which the knowers of the Self are freed are really only illusions, just mirages. The Self being Real, such illusions vanish when It is known.

The way across the boundary

“And that world of Brahman is reached by those who practice continence [brahmacharya]. For the knower of eternal truth knows it through continence. And what is known as worship [yajna], that also is continence. For a man worships the Lord by continence, and thus attains him.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:4:3; 8:5:1)

You cannot get more clear than this! Brahmacharya is THE way to the realm of Brahman (Brahmaloka). Certainly, sexual continence is the core of brahmacharya, but it is really self-restraint on all levels-discipline. This is it: there is no other way to qualify for union with Brahman than through brahmacharya. Yoga is an essential for that union, but frankly the practice of yoga is worthless without brahmacharya. The proof of that is the American and European yoga “scenes.” Nothing is coming of it spiritually, only profiteering and self-delusion.

Brahmacharya is the necessary worship-sacrifice to know God. As the Beloved Disciple wrote: “Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” (I John 3:3) Why claim to follow Sanatana Dharma if the teachings of the upanishads and the Gita are not followed, but ignored and despised-degraded?
Liberation

“What is called salvation is really continence. For through continence man is freed from ignorance. And what is known as the vow of silence, that too is continence. For a man through continence realizes the Self and lives in quiet contemplation.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:5:2) Perhaps I should explain a bit about this fulsome assurance that brahmacharya will accomplish everything.

We, like God, are incarnate in a field of energy which we are intended to evolve just as God evolves the cosmos. When the evolution is completed, that is enlightenment and liberation. This process requires the total application of the inner and outer powers (energies) of the individual, powers that are devastatingly dissipated through sensory experience, emotion, and desire–especially lust. It is like a machine that requires a certain amount of voltage, or an engine that cannot run without the right amount of fuel. This is a purely pragmatic proposition, having nothing to do with concepts of right, wrong, good, bad, or any kind of moral valuation. For example, sex is not dirty, it is destructive. Anything that diverts or dissipates the powers needed for evolution-enlightenment is to be avoided. It is not a “sin” but a hindrance, a distraction. For this reason the intelligent (buddhic) yogi is at all times vigilantly disciplined–in other words, a brahmachari or brahmacharini. Those who do not wish to pay the price of enlightenment are free to pass it by. No one is under coercion. To seek freedom the yogi must be free in that decision (sankalpa) and in the requisite disciplines for success in seeking.

The necessity for brahmacharya is an absolute.

Forest-dwellers

“What people call dwelling in the forest [aranyayanam], that is continence.” This is the first sentence of Chandogya Upanishad 8:5:3.

Most yogis have an inward pull to the forest life, to live in the midst of real nature away from the noise and poisons of city life as well as the noise and pollutions of human society. The Gita describes the yogi as “remaining in solitude, alone” (6:10), and having “distaste for crowds of men” (13:10). Whether this is a samskara or an intuition, it will be found in nearly all serious yogis.

One of my best friends was constantly going out into the wilds and risking life and limb so he would meditate far from any other human being. I am not exaggerating about the risks he took. One time he was literally starving, and even wrote a note to anyone that might find his body, saying that it was his unwise ways that caused his death, and yoga should not be blamed. He had been taken into the wilderness by another man, but he had left his original camp and gone farther into the forest. So when the man came back after some weeks to check on him, he could not be found. As my friend was lying on the ground, preparing to die, suddenly that man came walking up and asked: “Where is that woman?” Hardly able to speak, my friend asked his own question: “What woman?” “That woman with the long black hair in the orange dress! If I hadn’t followed her, I couldn’t have found you.” At first my friend was flummoxed, but then he reached in his pack for his photograph of Paramhansa Yogananda. “Is that the ‘woman’?” he asked, holding it out to the man. “Yes, that’s her!” the man replied. The Master certainly honored my friend’s forest-yearning, however impractical.

Solitude is a matter of interior condition. The incredible Russian Orthodox saint, Saint John of Kronstadt, not only never slept, he was never alone more than two hours in twenty-
four. Yet a man who knew him very well said: “Father John was always alone.” In contrast are those that go miles away from any human being and take the whole world and its population right with them. The teaching of the upanishad is that Brahmacharya is the way to accomplish true inner solitude and quiet.

**Immortality**

“In the world of Brahman there is a lake whose waters are like nectar, and whosoever tastes thereof is straightway drunk with joy; and beside that lake is a tree which yields the juice of immortality. Into this world they cannot enter who do not practice continence. For the world of Brahman belongs to those who practice continence. They alone enter that world and drink from that lake of nectar. For them there is freedom in all the worlds.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:5:3,4)

Since Brahman is beyond materiality and even any kind of subtle name and form, these verses are speaking symbolically of the immortality-bestowing effects of union with Brahman—which can only be effected by those that practice brahmacharya. (Shankara agrees with me in his commentary.) The meaning is pretty obvious: those who enter the ocean of Brahman and “drink” will be filled with bliss, made immortal with the Immortality of Brahman, and will have access to all the worlds of relative existence and mastery in those worlds. Those who find the Absolute do not lose the relative, for the relative is a manifestation of the Absolute.

The core idea, like the preceding verses, is the necessity of brahmacharya.
Devas and Demons Seeking the Self

“It was said of old: ‘The Self, which is free from impurities, from old age and death, from grief, from hunger and thirst, which desires nothing but what it ought to desire, and resolves nothing but what it ought to resolve, is to be sought after, is to be inquired about, is to be realized. He who learns about the Self and realizes it obtains all the worlds and all desires.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.7.1)

This is the very heart of Sanatana Dharma: the Self must be known, otherwise all is lost. Sri Ramakrishna said it quite directly: the purpose of human life is knowing God, so those who do not strive to know God are wasting their life. This is the Truth of truth.

Gods and demons

“The gods [devas] and demons [asuras] both heard of this truth, and they thought to themselves, ‘Let us seek after and realize this Self, so that we may obtain all the worlds and all desires.’ Thereupon Indra from the gods, and Virochana from the demons, went to Prajapati, the renowned teacher.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.7.2)

The sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad is devoted to the idea that human beings are divided into two types: divine (daivic) and demonic (asuras). It should be carefully studied by those who see higher consciousness, for it is bedrock truth. Here in the upanishad we are given an exposition of the two natures by means of a story.

It may seem that the gods and demons had a common goal: to “obtain all the worlds and all desires,” but that is not so. It was certainly the aim of the demons, but the gods desired the realization of the Self, although they certainly knew that “all the worlds and all desires” come to a knower of the Self as a kind of side effect. As Jesus later said in Israel: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33)

The difference in the reactions of gods and demons can be seen today quite glaringly. Multitudes of demons throughout the world are spouting that “we are all God” and “everything is God,” but with a complete misunderstanding of such statements. For, being entrenched in the ego and material consciousness, they have no idea of the real nature of “we” and “everything.” In the same way they have no comprehension of what the divine unity expounded in Advaita (Non-duality) really means, interpreting it according to their own ignorance and limitations, reducing it to a string of childish cliches. Demons have a marked facility for trivializing anything, and degradation is their particular skill.

Approaching Prajapati

Anyhow, Indra the king of the gods, and Virochana, king of the demons, both went to Brahma, to Prajapati the Creator. “For thirty-two years they lived with him as pupils. Then Prajapati asked them why they had both lived with him so long. ‘We have heard,’ they replied, ‘that one who realizes the Self obtains all the worlds and all desires. We have lived here because we want to learn of this Self.”’ (Chandogya Upanishad 8.7.3)

This verse has a lesson, not very obvious, yet nonetheless important for us. The two seekers lived with—or near—the teacher for many years, without asking for what they desired. This is because the teacher should know the disciple and the disciple the guru. When one of my friends, Dr. Mukherji, met his guru, Sri Swami Purnananda of Assam, he was astonished at his evident greatness and asked to become his disciple. “Not at all,” the
master answered. “You must come to know me well, and I must know you well. Visit me as
often as you can and live with me for as much time as you can manage. Then after three
years of observing each other we can talk about you learning yoga from me.” What a
contrast with the drum-beating, self-promoting gurus of today, including those that
pretend to have high standards for accepting disciples, but really try to ensnare everyone
their eyes rest upon. And here we see that Indra and Virochana after thirty-two years had
not even brought up the subject of instruction.

(We need not take so long, but we should be very careful and not rush into accepting
the teachings of anyone. That is one of the value of books. We can read them and discard
them if we find them worthless without any conflict with the teacher. And we can apply
them without becoming the teacher’s slave or dependent on him.)

Now we observe the first step in the discovery of the nature of the Self. It is not
uncommon in the ancient texts for the truth to be presented as a kind of ladder, starting
with either a dim perception of the truth or even a complete misunderstanding and leading
upward bit by bit until the complete truth is comprehended. Just why this was done has
not been said. Perhaps it was to show that even mistaken or partial ideas were to be seen
as steps on the way to perfect understanding. Or it may have been as a kind of yardstick
by which the level of development of a person might be known. On the other hand it may
have been a showing of the logical progression of thought on a subject. However it may
be, this account is part of that tradition.

The body—the Self

“Then said Prajapati: ‘That which is seen in the eye— that is the Self. That is immortal,
that is fearless, and that is Brahman.’

‘Sir,’ inquired the disciples, ‘is that the Self which is seen reflected in the water, or in a
mirror?’

‘The Self is indeed seen reflected in these,’ was the reply.

‘Then Prajapati added, ‘Look at yourselves in the water, and whatever you do not
understand, come and tell me about it.’

‘Indra and Virochana gazed on their reflections in the water, and returning to the sage,
they said: ‘Sir, we have seen the Self; we have seen even the hair and the nails.’

‘Then Prajapati bade them don their finest clothes and look again in the water. This
they did, and returning to the sage, they said: ‘We have seen the Self, exactly like
ourselves, well adorned and in our finest clothes.’

‘To which Prajapati rejoined: ‘The Self is indeed seen in these. The Self is immortal
and fearless, and it is Brahman.’ And the pupils went away well pleased.” (Chandogya
Upanishad 8.7.4; 8.8.1-3)

Brahma asked the two inquirers to have experience for themselves, which they did.
Notice, that they were the first to put forth the idea that the body “which is seen reflected
in the water, or in a mirror” was the Self. The teacher agreed. Puzzling as it seems there is
a great lesson here. It is better to be mistaken on our own than to have the truth imposed
on us. I have known of teachers in India agreeing to very silly ideas or proposals put forth
by disciples because they wanted them to learn for themselves the error of their thoughts.
This is absolutely unique to India, and surely one of the reasons why so many disciples
have become masters in their own right. It is better for an idea to be ours, even if wrong,
than to bow to the belief of another, even if it is more correct. The Gita (3:35) says: “Better
one’s own dharma though deficient than the dharma of another well performed….the
dharma of another invites danger,” and this applies to personal philosophy, as well. Only
when we have the freedom to make wrong conclusions will we develop the capacity for right conclusions. Intellectual integrity is of the utmost necessity, however most religionists are opposed to it.

Indra and Virochana “went away well pleased.” And this is normal. The whole world is happy in delusions and illusions. So a religion or philosophy that “satisfies” us, “answers all our questions,” and in which we are “happy” may be completely worthless. But we need to discover that for ourselves. Though their conclusions were wrong, twice in this passage Brahma has told them that Brahman is immortal and fearless. In this way he planted the seed of truth in their minds.

“But Prajapati, looking after them, lamented thus: ‘Both of them departed without analyzing or discriminating, and without truly comprehending the Self. Whosoever follows a false doctrine of the Self will perish.’

“Now Virochana, satisfied for his part that he had found out the Self, returned to the demons and began to teach them that the body alone is to be worshipped, that the body alone is to be served, and that he who worships the body and serves the body gains both worlds, this and the next. Such doctrine is, in very truth, the doctrine of the demons!” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.8.4,5)

The assertion that “whosoever follows a false doctrine of the Self will perish” is crucial. It tells us that thoughts really are things and they lead us to a revelation of their nature: if false, to confusion and delusion, and if true, to the True. Jesus said: “According to your faith be it unto you.” (Matthew 9:29) Literally we are creating the world of our personal life sphere. As we think it to be, so it will tend to be, though much depends on the strength of our mind and the intensity put forth in exercising its creative power. Brahma let them hold a wrong concept of the Self because they had to discover the right concept for themselves. This is hard for those brought up in coercive religion to accept, but it is true. The nursery rhyme is right: “Leave them alone and they will come home.” But only in the East will this faith in the individual be found. Wherever we find it in the West it is but a ray of the Eastern Light–but none the less valuable for that.

Body-worship, which is really only body-enslavement, is the “faith” of those possessing demonic nature, and they literally do die for it. When demons think about yoga it is always Hatha Yoga—“Virochana Yoga.” The myriads of “yoga studios” in the West are the haunts of the children of Virochana.

“But Indra, on his way back to the gods, realized the uselessness of this knowledge. ‘As this Self,’ he reasoned, ‘seems to be well adorned when the body is well adorned, well dressed when the body is well dressed, so will it be blind when the body is blind, lame when the body is lame, deformed when the body is deformed. When the body dies, this same Self will also die! In such knowledge I can see no good.’ So he returned to Prajapati and asked for further instruction. Prajapati required him to live with him for another thirty-two years, after which time he taught him thus. (Chandogya Upanishad 8.9.1-3)

In Eastern Christianity they say that it is the nature of demons to fall and never rise, and of human beings to fall and rise and fall and rise over and over again. In the same way it is the nature of human demons to adopt an error and hold to it throughout their life. But it is the nature of devic human beings to keep sifting through their ideas, discarding the ones they discover to be mistaken, and using the ones that are true as steps to even more—and higher–truth. Since Indra was not a demon, even before he got back to Indraloka he understood the fallacy of identifying the body with the Self. His reasoning is quite clear. So he returned to Brahman for another period of time, after which he was again instructed.
The astral body—the Self

Brahma told him: “That which moves about in dreams, enjoying sensuous delights and clothed in glory, that is the Self. That is immortal, that is fearless, and that is Brahman.’ Pleased with what he had heard, Indra again departed. But before he had reached the other gods he realized the uselessness of this knowledge also. ‘True it is,’ he thought to himself, ‘that this Self is not blind when the body is blind, nor lame or hurt when the body is lame or hurt. But even in dreams it is conscious of many sufferings. So in this doctrine also I can see no good.’” (Chandogya Upanishad 8.10.1,2)

In the conscious, waking state it is the physical body, including the physical brain, that dominates our consciousness, but in the dream state it is the astral body and brain that come into function and dominate our awareness. This astral body leaves the physical body at death, so it is usually mistaken for the Spirit-Self by the various religions. But, as Indra realized, this cannot be if the definition of the Self formulated by the ancient rishis of India is believed to be accurate. We must go a step higher.

The causal body—the Self

“So he went back to Prajapati for further instruction. Prajapati now bade him live with him for another thirty-two years, and when the time had passed taught him, saying, ‘When a man is sound asleep, free from dreams, and at perfect rest–that is the Self. The Self is immortal and fearless, and it is Brahman.’

“Indra went away. But before he had reached his home, he felt the uselessness even of this knowledge. ‘In reality,’ thought he, “one does not know oneself as this or as that while asleep. One is not conscious, in fact, of any existence at all. The state of one in deep sleep is next to annihilation. I can see no good in this knowledge either.’

“So once more Indra went back to Prajapati, who bade him stay with him yet five years.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:10:3,4; 8:11:1-3)

In dreamless sleep the causal body is dominant, and even in India there are people who try to identify it with the Self, and equate the dreamless sleep state with the eternal state of the Self. This is because of the extreme subtlety of that condition. Here, too, Indra’s reasoning is as clear as it is inevitable.

It is significant that Brahma only required a residence of five years this last time. Obviously Indra is so near the truth that a longer time of purification is not required.

The Self as It is

And when the time had passed, he made known to him the highest truth of the Self, saying: “This body is mortal, always gripped by death, but within it dwells the immortal Self. This Self, when associated in our consciousness with the body, is subject to pleasure and pain; and so long as this association continues, freedom from pleasure and pain can no man find. But as this association ceases, there cease also the pleasure and the pain. Rising above physical consciousness, knowing the Self to be distinct from the senses and the mind–knowing it in its true light–one rejoices and is free.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:12:1,2)

This is as inspiring as it is simple: freedom and bliss (not mere pleasure) are the attributes of the Self–and of those who know the Self. Therefore Brahma concluded his teaching of Indra with these words:

“The gods, the luminous ones, meditate on the Self, and by so doing obtain all the worlds and all desires. In like manner, whosoever among mortals knows the Self, meditates upon it, and realizes it—he too obtains all the worlds and all
desires.” (Chandogya Upanishad 8:12:6)
The Brahman-seekers

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad opens with the clause: “Disciples inquire within themselves.” This is supremely profound.

First of all, the Sanskrit word Brahman is not “disciple” or “student of Brahman” as Swamis Prabhavananda and Tyagisananda translate it, but literally “one who walks the path of Brahman.” Of course, every sentient being is on the path of Brahman, but the upanishad is referring to those who not only know that fact, but are consciously walking the path, taking charge of their life—and therefore their evolution. In other words, they are yogis. Next, they inquire within themselves. Certainly they read spiritual texts and respect spiritual teachers, and they use their intelligent reason. But their real inquiry, their real search, is within themselves.

The inquiry

“Disciples inquire within themselves: ‘What is the cause of this universe?—is it Brahman? Whence do we come? Why do we live? Where shall we at last find rest? Under whose command are we bound by the law of happiness and its opposite?’” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:1) There is no need to analyze this verse, but the upanishad is showing us what real seekers of Brahman want to know. They realize that unless they know how the whole scheme works they will not be able to work their way out. Simplistic people think all they need do is learn some yoga practices, but they are mistaken. We have to know the lay of the land, both inner and outer, and order our entire life accordingly. Otherwise yoga is a pathetic joke, as useless as a wet match in a rainstorm.

Not the cause...

“Time, space, law, chance, matter, primal energy, intelligence—none of these, nor a combination of these, can be the final cause of the universe, for they are effects, and exist to serve the soul. Nor can the individual self be the cause, for, being subject to the law of happiness and misery, it is not free.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:2)

Through ignorance we blame all these things for what happens to us, considering that they are being imposed on us regardless of our will or desire. We also consider that they are the forces pushing us to act or think as we do, and that they produce in us various reactions. In sum, we ignore the sole truth that all our deeds and thoughts proceed from within, that our responses are manifestations of our inner disposition (bhava). Both the ignorant and the wise live from inside out—all is a spontaneous flow from within. Outer circumstances are only a mirroring of that inner landscape I just mentioned. They are, as the upanishad says, only reflections, not even being effects caused by us. Moreover, they are not really hindrances or distractions unless we make them so, for they “exist to serve
the soul” in furthering its awakening and evolution.

Finding the Cause

“The seers, absorbed in contemplation, saw within themselves the ultimate reality, the self-luminous being, the one God, who dwells as the self-conscious power in all creatures. He is One without a second. Deep within all beings he dwells, hidden from sight by the coverings of the gunas—sattwa, rajas, and tamas. He presides over time, space, and all apparent causes.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:3)

Actually, this is a very interpretive, though quite accurate, rendering of this verse, as is the following one of Swami Tyagisananda: “Practising the method of meditation, they realized that Being who is the God of religion, the Self of philosophy and the Energy of science; who exists as the self-luminous power in everyone; who is the source of the intellect, emotions and will; who is one without a second; who presides over all the causes enumerated above, beginning with time and ending with the individual soul; and who had been incomprehensible because of the limitations of their own intellect.”

Swami Gambhirananda gives the exact translation: “By practicing the yoga of meditation [dhyana yoga] they realized the power of the Deity [devatma shaktim] Himself, hidden by its own effect—the Lord who, alone, rules all those sources associated with [i.e., including] Time and the individual soul.” But the other two renderings are worth a study, for they are correct expansions of the Sanskrit words, since the text uses certain keywords, technical terms, that carry the connotations of all that the two Swamis have included in their translations.

So what is the cause of all? Divine power—devatma shaktim. There is no other power or force in the universe. And although that power is manifested outside us (mostly), we cannot discover it except by turning within and plumbing the depths of our inner consciousness that is untouched by all phenomena.

Immmortality

“This vast universe is a wheel. Upon it are all creatures that are subject to birth, death, and rebirth. Round and round it turns, and never stops. It is the wheel of Brahman. As long as the individual self thinks it is separate from Brahman, it revolves upon the wheel in bondage to the laws of birth, death, and rebirth. But when through the grace of Brahman it realizes its identity with him, it revolves upon the wheel no longer. It achieves immortality.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:4-6) That is perfectly clear. We need only get busy and realize it!

Freedom

“He who is realized by transcending the world of cause and effect, in deep contemplation, is expressly declared by the scriptures to be the Supreme Brahman. He is the substance, all else the shadow. He is the imperishable. The knowers of Brahman know him as the one reality behind all that seems. For this reason they are devoted to him. Absorbed in him, they attain freedom from the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:7) Union with Brahman is the only freedom, and that is accomplished only “in deep contemplation.” In this way cause and effect are transcended.

“The Lord supports this universe, which is made up of the perishable and the imperishable, the manifest and the unmanifest. The individual soul, forgetful of the Lord, attaches itself to pleasure and thus is bound. When it comes to the Lord, it is freed from all
its fetters.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:8) Forgetting is bondage, remembering is freedom.

“The Self is all”

“Mind and matter, master and servant—both have existed from beginningless time. The Maya which unites them has also existed from beginningless time. When all three—mind, matter, and Maya—are known as one with Brahman, then is it realized that the Self is infinite and has no part in action. Then is it revealed that the Self is all.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:9) To say that mind, matter, and Maya are only illusion and non-existent accomplishes nothing. We must come to know that they are the dreams of God, plays of the Consciousness that IS God.

The end of ignorance

“Matter is perishable. The Lord, the destroyer of ignorance, is imperishable, immortal. He is the one God, the Lord of the perishable and of all souls. By meditating on him, by uniting oneself with him, by identifying oneself with him, one ceases to be ignorant.

“Know God, and all fetters will be loosed. Ignorance will vanish. Birth, death, and rebirth will be no more. Meditate upon him and transcend physical consciousness. Thus will you reach union with the lord of the universe. Thus will you become identified with him who is One without a second. In him all your desires will find fulfillment.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:10,11)

Meditation alone is the key.

The truth

“The truth is that you are always united with the Lord. But you must know this. Nothing further is there to know. Meditate, and you will realize that mind, matter, and Maya (the power which unites mind and matter) are but three aspects of Brahman, the one reality.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:12)

Many people assume that since they are always the Self, are always really one with Brahman, there is nothing to be done. It is true that nothing can make us anything that we are not already. But yoga can open our eyes to see what we are, and always have been. Those asleep and dreaming do need to awaken. And yoga is the process of awakening, as the next two verses indicate.

The way to truth

“Fire, though present in the firesticks, is not perceived until one stick is rubbed against another. The Self is like that fire: it is realized in the body by meditation on the sacred syllable Om.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:13)

In ancient India they considered that fire was already present in a potential form, but that it needed to be released by friction, by the generation of heat—by tapasya! So the theme of the preceding verse is being continued, but now in a practical manner. The Self is freed even while in the body by meditation on Om.

“Let your body be the stick that is rubbed, the sacred syllable Om the stick that is rubbed against it. Thus shall you realize God, who is hidden within the body as fire is hidden within the wood.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:14)

It is important that we understand that the body must be part of the process of liberation. That is why we join the repetition (intonation) of Om to the physical breath, and why we permit the various power centers of the body to come into play spontaneously as
we engage in the japa and meditation of Om. Also, why it is beneficial to keep our awareness on the thousand-petalled lotus of the head outside of meditation.

For more on this, see the book *Om Yoga, Its Theory and Practice*.

**Truthfulness and tapasya**

“Like oil in sesame seeds, butter in cream, water in the river bed, fire in tinder, the Self dwells within the soul. Realize him through truthfulness [satya] and meditation [tapasya].

“Like butter in cream is the Self in everything. Knowledge of the Self is gained through meditation [tapasya]. The Self is Brahman. By Brahman is all ignorance destroyed.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:15, 16)

No more need be said.
Realizing God

The next seven verses are extremely obscure in the Sanskrit original. Fortunately we have the commentary of Shankara whose stupendous intellect and perfect realization rendered him capable of explaining them. Swami Prabhavananda translated them according to Shankara's insight in this way:

“To realize God, first control the outgoing senses and harness the mind. Then meditate upon the light in the heart of the fire—meditate, that is, upon pure consciousness as distinct from the ordinary consciousness of the intellect. Thus the Self, the Inner Reality, may be seen behind physical appearance.

“Control your mind so that the Ultimate Reality, the self-luminous Lord, may be revealed. Strive earnestly for eternal bliss.

“With the help of the mind and the intellect, keep the senses from attaching themselves to objects of pleasure. They will then be purified by the light of the Inner Reality, and that light will be revealed.

“The wise control their minds, and unite their hearts with the infinite, the omniscient, the all-pervading Lord. Only discriminating souls practice spiritual disciplines. Great is the glory of the self-luminous being, the Inner Reality.

“Hear, all ye children of immortal bliss, also ye gods who dwell in the high heavens: Follow only in the footsteps of the illumined ones, and by continuous meditation merge both mind and intellect in the eternal Brahman. The glorious Lord will be revealed to you.

“Control the vital force. Set fire to the Self within by the practice of meditation. Be drunk with the wine of divine love. Thus shall you reach perfection.

“Be devoted to the eternal Brahman. Unite the light within you with the light of Brahman. Thus will the source of ignorance be destroyed, and you will rise above karma.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:1-7)

The only thing that needs pointing out is the fact that in the sixth verse, what Prabhavananda renders: “Set fire to the Self within by the practice of meditation” is literally: “Where fire is kindled by rubbing.” This is a reference to an earlier verse: “Let your body be the stick that is rubbed, the sacred syllable Om the stick that is rubbed against it. Thus shall you realize God, who is hidden within the body as fire is hidden within the wood.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:14) Now the upanishad returns to that instruction.

Liberating meditation

“Sit upright, holding the chest, throat, and head erect. Turn the senses and the mind inward to the lotus of the heart. Meditate on Brahman with the help of the syllable OM. Cross the fearful currents of the ocean of worldliness by means of the raft of Brahman—the sacred syllable OM.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:8)

The word “heart” in the scriptures can mean the chakra in the center of the chest, but usually it means the core of our being: consciousness. And it means that here. The real message of this verse is that by means of meditation on Om the fearsome ocean of samsara can be crossed. So sure is the upanishad of this, it calls Om “the raft of Brahman,” for Om is Brahman itself according to the upanishads, the Gita, and the Yoga Sutras.

“With earnest effort hold the senses in check. Controlling the breath, regulate the vital activities. As a charioteer holds back his restive horses, so does a persevering aspirant
hold back his mind.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:9) All this is accomplished by the simple practice of joining the repetition of Om to the breath. This is the true pranayama according to the upanishads and the Yoga Vashishtha, a major text on yoga and advaita philosophy. Here are some quotations regarding this:

“With Om alone he should breathe.” (Amritabindu Upanishad 20) “Pranayama is accomplished through concentrating the mind on Om.” (Saubhagyalakshmi Upanishad) “The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama.” (Sandilya Upanishad 1:17) “Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om.” (Yoga Vashishtha 5:78) More citations can be found in Om Yoga: Its Theory and Practice.

Regarding the environment for meditation, the upanishad continues: “Retire to a solitary place, such as a mountain cave or a sacred spot. The place must be protected from the wind and rain, and it must have a smooth, clean floor, free from pebbles and dust. It must not be damp, and it must be free from disturbing noises. It must be pleasing to the eye and quieting to the mind. Seated there, practice meditation and other spiritual exercises.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:10) Frankly, today’s conditions are much more conducive than what is described here. A simple meditation room is much more advantageous on all levels. (See Om Yoga about this, too.)

**Signs of progress**

“As you practice meditation, you may see in vision forms resembling snow, crystals, smoke, fire, lightning, fireflies the sun, the moon. These are signs that you are on your way to the revelation of Brahman.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:11) These are but a few of the visual phenomena that can occur during meditation. If you can find a copy, Sivananda’s book Spiritual Experiences is extremely informative.

“As you become absorbed in meditation, you will realize that the Self is separate from the body and for this reason will not be affected by disease, old age, or death.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:12) This is the real purpose of meditation.

“The first signs of progress on the path of yoga are health, a sense of physical lightness, clearness of complexion, a beautiful voice, an agreeable odor of the person, and freedom from craving.

“As a soiled piece of metal, when it has been cleaned, shines brightly, so the dweller in the body, when he has realized the truth of the Self, loses his sorrow and becomes radiant with bliss.

“The yogi experiences directly the truth of Brahman by realizing the light of the Self within. He is freed from all impurities–he the pure, the birthless, the bright.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:13-15)

**Brahman**

“He is the one God, present in the north, the east, the south, and the west. He is the creator. He enters into all wombs. He alone is now born as all beings, and he alone is to be born as all beings in the future. He is within all persons as the Inner Self, facing in all directions.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2:16)

Here we have the affirmation that Brahman is the core of the consciousness of all beings, that It is “incarnate” in all beings and experiences all they experience. This is how intimately united Brahman is to each one of us.

Therefore: “Let us adore the Lord, the luminous one, who is in fire, who is in water, who is in plants and trees, who pervades the whole universe.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad
A word of introduction

People of undeveloped minds, however intelligent, find it impossible to understand that seeming contradictions, opposites—even seeming incompatibilities and incongruities—are part of realities. The conflicts, of course, are in their minds. This is an inherent defect of what we now call “left-brain” thinking, but to the “right-brainers” such appearances are understood as being just that—erroneous perceptions. For them there is the possibility of developing such a degree in intuition that they can see the whole picture in which no contradictions exist.

It is extremely difficult for Westerners to grasp the unity in diversity and the diversity in unity. This is especially seen in the idea of the Trinity, which is to be found in some form in just about every religion. The utter mess that Christianity has made of the belief in the Trinity is colossal, actually. And every time a theologian sets about to make it clearer, it gets more obscure and nonsensical. They just cannot get the idea of a single absolute unity that manifests in a threefold manner. One problem is their insistence that they are three “persons” in the Godhead. They are horrified at the suggestion that the Three are really three aspects or manifestations of Divinity, or three ways in which the Absolute relates to relativity and those sentient being that are evolving within the cosmos. But that fact is…that is how it is! They propound the existence of three Gods and get furious when it is pointed out to them.

In ancient India the sages clearly understood and expressed the truth that God is Om Tat Sat: divine creative intelligent energy, divine guiding intelligence within that energy, and primal intelligence that transcends those two. Yet there is only One Consciousness, not three. Om Tat Sat is exactly (not approximately) what Jesus meant by “Holy Spirit,” “Son,” and “Father.” He used such symbolic terms in the hope that it would be easier for his hearers to grasp. In most cases it was not, for they were hopeless left-brainers. And it certainly was no help that they were addling their brains by eating the dead and drinking wine and beer. The situation is the same today in the West. But I am not writing for them, but for the kind of people to whom the upanishadic teachings were addressed. For them it will be simplicity itself (as is the case with all truth).

Brahman as Ishwara

“The one absolute, impersonal Existence, together with his inscrutable Maya, appears as the divine Lord, the personal God, endowed with manifold glories. By his divine power he holds dominion over all the worlds. At the periods of creation and dissolution of the universe, he alone exists. Those who realize him become immortal.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:1)

The one absolute, impersonal Existence. These words are an excellent definition of the indefinable Brahman. Brahman always exists. Indeed, there is nothing but Brahman at any time. And Brahman is always One—never two. But Brahman can appear as many.

Together with his inscrutable Maya. It is through Maya, the creative power of Brahman, that Brahman appears as many. Maya is as incomprehensible to the limited human mind as Brahman Itself. For Maya is Brahman, other wise it could not exist.
Appears as the divine Lord, the personal God. When we get the seeming duality of Brahman and Maya we immediately get the appearance of Brahman as Ishwara, the Lord, the personal God. From time beyond memory it is commonly said in India that “the Father is born as the son,” that a man’s son is an extension of his being. So it is only natural to call Ishwara the Son of God. Brahman is the Father, Maya is the Holy Spirit Mother, and Ishwara is their “product”—the “Son of God.” It is all Brahman, of course, but we relate to this threefold appearance of Brahman in a threefold manner, for we are ourselves trinities. We possess a transcendent Self (Atman) which has taken on a complex of coverings (koshas) or bodies and began to function within it as its intelligent guide. We are thus mirror-images of Brahman.

Endowed with manifold glories. Brahman is nirguna, without any qualities or traits, but Ishwara is saguna, possessing innumerable qualities. So although we cannot conceive of Brahman or speak of It, we can say a great deal about Ishwara, even though we cannot encompass His total being. And note that we can use a personal pronoun in relation to Ishwara. For Ishwara is of positive (male) polarity and can be referred to as “He,” just as Maya is of negative (female) polarity and can be called “She.” When we say “God” we usually mean Ishwara.

By his divine power he holds dominion over all the worlds. Ishwara, the Son of God, controls and guides the evolution of all creation through His divine power (Mahashakti) that is Maya. All that is “done” is done by Him in conjunction with Maya, for Brahman never acts.

At the periods of creation and dissolution of the universe, he alone exists. Ishwara, as an emanation of Brahman, arises as the first step in creation, and remains as the last step, as well. Then He merges into “the bosom of the Father” and only Brahman remains. That is why Jesus, referring to Ishwara, not himself, said: “No man [literally: no one] hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (John 1:18) Ishwara is the “only-begotten” because he is the sole emanation from Brahman at the beginning of creation.

Those who realize him become immortal. This is important. Because Ishwara is Brahman, those who approach Him and come to know Him thereby become one with Brahman, and know Brahman. Therefore it is mistaken to say that meditation on Saguna Brahman has a different result than meditation on Nirguna Brahman.

This is well explained in the first eight verses of the twelfth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. There Arjuna asks Krishna: “Some worship You with steadfast love. Others worship God the unmanifest and changeless. Which kind of devotee has the greater understanding of yoga?” Krishna replies: “Those whose minds are fixed on me in steadfast love, worshipping me with absolute faith, I consider them to have the greater understanding of yoga. As for those others, the devotees of God the unmanifest, indefinable and changeless, they worship that which is omnipresent, constant, eternal, beyond thought’s compass, never to be moved. They hold all the senses in check. They are tranquil-minded, and devoted to the welfare of humanity. They see the Atman in every creature. They also will certainly come to me. But the devotees of the unmanifest have a harder task, because the unmanifest is very difficult for embodied souls to realize. Quickly I come to those who offer me every action, worship me only, their dearest delight, with devotion undaunted. Because they love me these are my bondsmen and I shall save them from mortal sorrow and all the waves of Life’s deathly ocean. Be absorbed in me, lodge your mind in me: thus you shall dwell in me, do not doubt it, here and hereafter.”

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The traits of Ishwara

“The Lord is One without a second. Within man he dwells, and within all other beings. He projects the universe, maintains it, and withdraws it into himself.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:2) Being Brahman, Ishwara is Absolute Unity—this must not be forgotten. Ishwara is “incarnate” in each one of us and in all sentient beings. It is Ishwara who creates, sustains, and dissolves the universe, and this all takes place within Him as His creative thought, the Cosmic Dream. “His eyes are everywhere; his face, his arms, his feet are in every place. Out of himself he has produced the heavens and the earth, and with his arms and his wings he holds them together.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:3)

His eyes are everywhere; his face, his arms, his feet are in every place. Out of himself he has produced the heavens and the earth, and with his arms and his wings he holds them together. He is the origin and support of the gods. He is the lord of all. He confers bliss and wisdom upon those who are devoted to him. He destroys their sins and their sorrows. He punishes those who break his laws. He sees all and knows all. May he endow us with good thoughts! (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:3,4)

Ishwara is Consciousness Itself. And in this capacity of omniscient omnipresence He interacts with all beings. Those who wish can enter into the most intimate relationship and communication with Him. He indeed is all possible relationships—father, mother, brother (sister), friend—and all functions: king, master, servant, helper, companion and guide. He it is that in this world as well as the next is the dearest of the dear and the nearest of the near. Through the laws established in his universe, which itself is a great, living “evolution machine,” he “rewards” and “punishes” right and wrong actions—not as do the rulers on earth who take personal vengeance and exact retribution, but for the teaching and furtherance of all sentient beings. His creation reacts to all action in the manner of a mirror, a reflection which reveals to us the true character of our thoughts, words, and deeds—indeed of our whole state of mind and being (bhava). As is said in the Gita: “My face is equal to all creation, loving no one nor hating any. Nevertheless, my devotees dwell within me always: I also show forth and am seen within them.” (Bhagavad Gita 9:29)

Prayer to Ishwara is a very real and effective act.

Praying to Ishwara

How do we address this infinite Being? The upanishad gives us some examples. “O Lord, clothed in thy most holy form, which is calm and blissful, and which destroys all evil and ignorance, look upon us and make us glad.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:5) Ishwara has taken on many forms through which we can approach Him. If a form, whatever the spiritual tradition “is calm and blissful, and which destroys all evil and ignorance,” then we can know it is a legitimate form of God, one which we can use to commune with God. In this prayer the devotee is not asking for “things” but for the joy (ananda) that is the essential nature of God. This is only attained when our own Self—which also is of the nature of bliss—is revealed in the eternal Light of Ishwara.

Now we come to the practical means of approaching God. “O Lord, thou hast revealed thy sacred syllable OM, which is one with thee. In thy hands it is a weapon with which to destroy ignorance. O protector of thy devotees, do not conceal thy benign person.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:6) To those who seek to know—and become one with—God, Patanjali (1:28) simply says regarding Om: “Its repetition and meditation is the way.” It is the direct means to dispel ignorance and reveal God to the devoted yogi.

Finally: “Thou art the supreme Brahman. Thou art infinite. Thou hast assumed the forms of all creatures, remaining hidden in them. Thou pervadest all things. Thou art the
one God of the universe. Those who realize thee become immortal.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:7)
The Upanishadic Seer Speaks of Ishwara

The sage whose name this upanishad bears, now speaks of his realization of Ishwara. In his exposition he will speak of Ishwara in the same manner and in the same terms that all the upanishads speak of Brahman. We should keep this in mind whenever reading of Brahman or Ishwara: what can be rightly said of Brahman can be said of Ishwara, for “they” are the same Being.

Shvetashvatara

“Said the great seer Shvetashvatara: I have known, beyond all darkness, that great Person of golden effulgence. Only by knowing him does one conquer death. There is no other way of escaping the wheel of birth, death, and rebirth.

“There is nothing superior to him, nothing different from him, nothing subtler or greater than he. Alone he stands, changeless, self-luminous; he, the Great One, fills this universe.

“Though he fills the universe, he transcends it. He is untouched by its sorrow. He has no form. Those who know him become immortal. Others remain in the depths of misery.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:8-10)

The only point that needs comment is the statement that Ishwara “has no form.” Actually, all forms are Ishwara’s, for all things are He. What is meant here is that Ishwara has no “native” form, that His nature is absolutely formless. It also means that there is no form that confines Him, that can encompass His total Being, for no form is infinite.

Self-revealing

“The Lord God, all-pervading and omnipresent, dwells in the heart of all beings. Full of grace, he ultimately gives liberation to all creatures by turning their faces toward himself.

“He is the innermost Self. He is the great Lord. He it is that reveals the purity within the heart by means of which he, who is pure being, may be reached. He is the ruler. He is the great Light, shining forever.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:11,12)

The sole purpose of this universe is the evolution and ultimate liberation of all sentient beings within it. And it is Ishwara who guides and awakens those beings. The impulse to enlightenment arises from him in cooperation with the innate impulse of each individual Self to attain conscious and total union with God. From within the depths of each one of us He reveals the possibility of enlightenment and shows us the way. That is why Patanjali says: “He is Guru even of the Ancients.” (Yoga Sutras 1:26) We must ever be in attunement with this guru, and that is accomplished through the japa and meditation of Om, as the upanishad has already stated:

“Fire, though present in the firesticks, is not perceived until one stick is rubbed against another. The Self is like that fire: it is realized in the body by meditation on the sacred syllable Om. Let your body be the stick that is rubbed, the sacred syllable Om the stick that is rubbed against it. Thus shall you realize God, who is hidden within the body as fire is hidden within the wood.” (1:13,14)

“Sit upright, holding the chest, throat, and head erect. Turn the senses and the mind inward to the lotus of the heart. Meditate on Brahman with the help of the syllable OM. Cross the fearful currents of the ocean of worldliness by means of the raft of Brahman—the sacred syllable OM.” (2:8)
“O Lord, thou hast revealed thy sacred syllable OM, which is one with thee. In thy hands it is a weapon with which to destroy ignorance.” (3:6)

Wherefore the upanishad continues: “This great Being, assuming a form of the size of a thumb, forever dwells in the heart of all creatures as their innermost Self. He can be known directly by the purified mind through spiritual discrimination. Knowing him, men become immortal.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:13)

Infinite

“This great Being has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet. He envelops the universe. Though transcendent, he is to be meditated upon as residing in the lotus of the heart, at the center of the body, ten fingers above the navel.

“He alone is all this—what has been and what shall be. He has become the universe. Yet he remains forever changeless, and is the lord of immortality.

“His hands and feet are everywhere; his eyes and mouths are everywhere. His ears are everywhere. He pervades everything in the universe.

“Without organs of sense, yet reflecting the activities of the senses, he is the lord and ruler of all. He is the friend and refuge of all.

“He resides in the body, the city of nine gates. He sports in the world without in innumerable forms. He is the master, the ruler, of the whole world, animate and inanimate.

“He moves fast, though without feet. He grasps everything, though without hands. He sees everything, though without eyes. He hears everything, though without ears. He knows all that is, but no one knows him. He is called the Supreme, the Great One.

“Subtler than the subtlest, greater than the greatest, the Self is hidden in the heart of all creatures. Through his grace a man loses his cravings, transcends grief, and realizes him as Brahman Supreme.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3:14-20)

There is indeed such a thing as the grace of God, the grace of Ishwara, that is the empowerment through which we attain liberation, the light that guides us to the Goal. To gain this grace is a great blessing for the seeker.

This section of the upanishad is now concluded. The great lesson to be learned is that we are depriving ourselves greatly if we think we should reject the personal, Ishwara aspect of Brahman and engage only in various non-dual affirmations, disdaining the path of the Personal God. For this upanishad assures us that it is through Ishwara that we ascend to the ultimate truth of Brahman.
The Prayer of Liberation

This upanishad has a unique feature: it concludes with an ecstatic prayer-invocation addressed to Brahman. It will not need much comment, as you will see.

Thoughts of Thee

"O Brahman Supreme! Formless art thou, and yet (though the reason none knows) Thou bringest forth many forms; Thou bringest them forth, and then withdrawest them to thyself. Fill us with thoughts of thee!" (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:1) This final petition is the crux of the whole matter: our consciousness must be filled with the remembrance-awareness of Brahman, of Om.

Thou art all

"Thou art the fire, Thou art the sun, Thou art the air, Thou art the starry firmament, Thou art Brahman Supreme: Thou art the waters–thou, the creator of all.

"Thou art woman, thou art man, Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden, Thou art the old man tottering with his staff; Thou facest everywhere.

"Thou art the dark butterfly, Thou art the green parrot with red eyes, Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas. Without beginning art thou, beyond time, beyond space. Thou art he from whom sprang the three worlds." (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:2-4)

Maya, the Mother

"Maya is thy divine consort–wedded to thee. Thou art her master, her ruler. Red, white, and black is she, each color a guna. Many are her children the rivers, the mountains, flower, stone, and tree, beast, bird, and man–in every way like herself. Thou, spirit in flesh, forgetting what thou art, unitest with Maya–but only for a season. Parting from her at last, Thou regainest thyself." (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:5)

Maya, Mahashakti, Mulaprkriti, is the Divine Mother wedded to the Divine Father. Formed of the three gunas, all are her "children." This latter sentence is a very unsatisfactory rendering of an very obscure passage whose meaning relates to the individual Self, not Brahman the Absolute Self. The meaning is that when we unite until with Maya, unlike Brahman we forget ourselves. Yet that forgetfulness is only temporary, and when at last we evolve to the necessary level, we part from Maya and are released back into Infinite Spirit.

The two "birds"

"Thou, Brahman Immortal, and thou, woven of clay (two beings, yet one)–like two beautiful birds, golden of plumage, companions inseparable, perched high up on the branches of the selfsame tree–as man thou tastest the sweet fruits of the tree, the sweet and bitter fruits; but as Brahman, master of Maya, Thou remainest unseen, immobile, calmly observing.

"Forgetting his oneness with thee, bewildered by his weakness, full of sorrow is man; but let him look close on thee, know thee as himself, O Lord, most worshipful, and behold thy glory–lo, all his heavy sorrow is turned to joy." (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:6,7)
Knowing

“Changeless thou art, supreme, pure! In thee dwell the gods. The source of all scriptures thou art; yet what shall scriptures avail if they be smooth on the lip but absent from the heart? To him who knows thee comes fullness—to him alone!” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:8)

Scriptures and philosophical words that are glibly reeled of by the shallow and the hypocrites mean absolutely nothing. Rather, the divine teachings of the the liberated sages must be “written” in our hearts by our own experience through yoga. Those who know about God are certainly fortunate, but only those who know God directly are fulfilled and freed.

The glories of Brahman

“Thou art lord and master of Maya, man is her slave. With Maya uniting, thou hast brought forth the universe. The source of all scriptures thou art, and the source of all creeds. The universe is thy Maya; and thou, great God, her lord, wherever the eye falls, there, within every form, thou dwellest.

“One thou art, one only. Born from many wombs, thou hast become many: unto thee all return. Thou, Lord God, bestowest all blessings, thou the Light, thou the Adorable One. Whoever finds thee finds infinite peace.

“Thou art Lord God of all gods, all the worlds rest in thee; thou art ruler of the beasts, two-footed, four-footed: our heart’s worship be thine! Thou art the blissful Lord, subtler than the subtlest. In thee alone is there peace.

“Thou, sole guardian of the universe, thou, lord of all, in the hearts of thy creatures thou hidest thyself. Gods and seers become one with thee. Those who know thee die not.

“Of all religions thou art the source. The light of thy knowledge shining, there is nor day nor night, nor being nor non-being–thou alone art.

“Thou alone art–thou the Light imperishable, adorable; great Glory is thy name. No one is there beside thee, no one equal to thee. Invisible is thy form, invisible to mortal eyes; the seers alone, in their purified hearts–they alone see thee. They alone are immortal.

“Neither male nor female art thou, nor neuter; whatsoever form thou assumest, that thou art.

“Thou dost pervade the universe, thou art consciousness itself, thou art creator of time. All-knowing art thou.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4:9-18; 5:4-6, 10; 6:2)

Reaching the Goal

“At thy bidding Maya, thy power divine, projects this visible universe, projects name and form. Thou art the Primal Being. Thou appearest as this universe of illusion and dream. Thou art beyond time. Indivisible, infinite, the Adorable One–let a man meditate on thee within his heart, let him consecrate himself to thee, and thou, infinite Lord, wilt make thyself known to him.” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6:3-5)

Meditation and dedication: when these are brought to perfection in the yogi and are an unbroken state, then Brahman reveals Itself.

“Thou, womb and tomb of the universe, and its abode; thou, source of all virtue, destroyer of all sins–thou art seated in the heart. When thou art seen, time and form disappear. Let a man feel thy presence, let him behold thee within, and to him shall come peace, eternal peace–to none else, to none else!
“Thou art the eternal among non-eternals, the consciousness of the conscious; though one, thou fulfilllest the desires of many.

“Let a man devote himself to knowledge of thee, let him follow thy path, and he shall know thee: all his fetters shall be loosed.

“Can a man roll up the sky like a piece of skin? Can he end his misery and know not thee?

“If the truths of these scriptures are meditated upon by a man in the highest degree devoted to God, and to his teacher, they will shine forth. They will shine forth indeed!” (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6:6,13,18,19,23)

As you see from the references, a great deal has been skipped by Prabhavananda. That is because all the subjects of the omitted verses have already been covered in the preceding upanishads.

However, we have now come to the end of the major upanishads, whose glory cannot be exaggerated. If anywhere in the world there are “words of life” they are found here in the upanishads. To study and realize them is the supreme life endeavor.

Om. Tat. Sat.

Om.