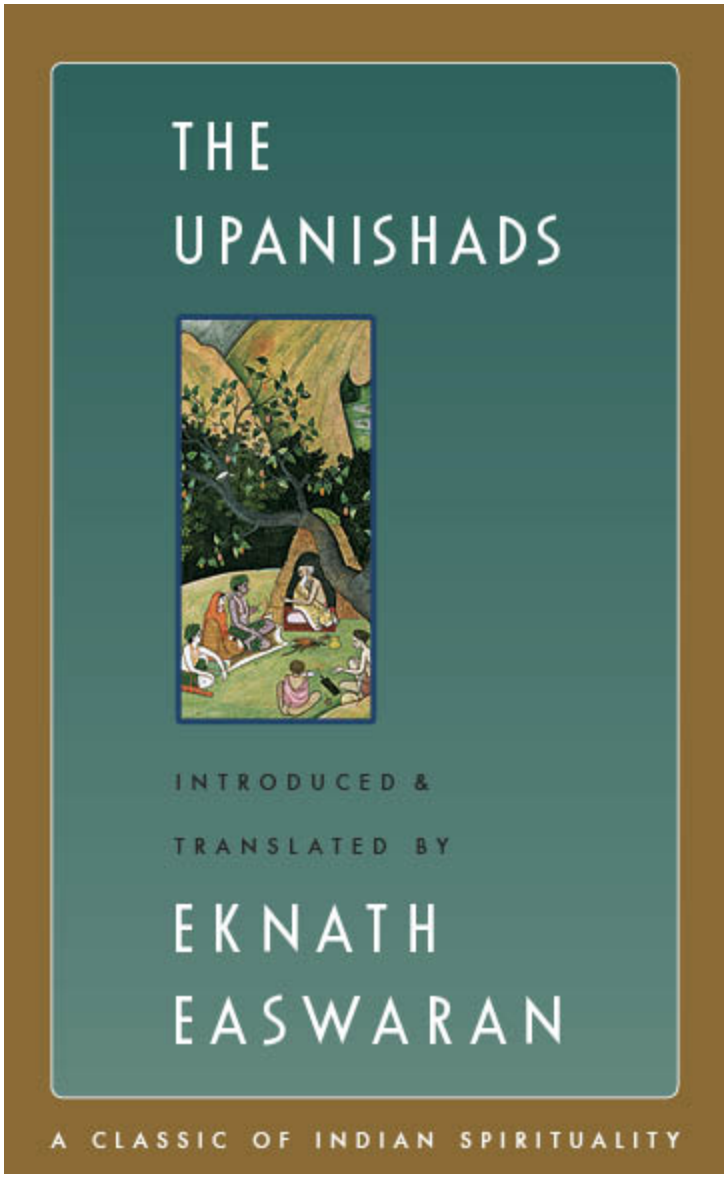

The Upanishads

Introduced & Translated by

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Foreword

The Classics of Indian Spirituality

You are what your deep, driving desire is.

As your desire is, so is your will.

As your will is, so is your deed.

As your deed is, so is your destiny.

[Brihadaranyaka IV.4.5]

Imagine a vast hall in Anglo-Saxon England, not long after the passing of King Arthur. It is the dead of winter and a fierce snowstorm rages outside, but a great fire fills the space within the hall with warmth and light. Now and then, a sparrow darts in for refuge from the weather. It appears as if from nowhere, flits about joyfully in the light, and then disappears again, and where it comes from and where it goes next in that stormy darkness, we do not know.

Our lives are like that, suggests an old story in Bede's medieval history of England. We spend our days in the familiar world of our five senses, but what lies beyond that, if anything, we have no idea. Those sparrows are hints of something more outside – a vast world, perhaps, waiting to be explored. But most of us are happy to stay where we are. We may even be a bit afraid to venture into the unknown. What would be the point, we

wonder. Why should we leave the world we know?

Yet there are always a few who are not content to spend their lives indoors. Simply knowing there is something unknown beyond their reach makes them acutely restless. They have to see what lies outside – if only, as Mallory said of Everest, "because it's there."

This is true of adventurers of every kind, but especially of those who seek to explore not mountains or jungles but consciousness itself: whose real drive, we might say, is not so much to know the unknown as to know the knower. Such men and women can be found in every age and every culture. While the rest of us stay put, they quietly slip out to see what lies beyond.

Then, so far as we can tell, they disappear. We have no idea where they have gone; we can't even imagine. But every now and then, like friends who have run off to some exotic land, they send back reports: breathless messages describing fantastic adventures, rambling letters about a world beyond ordinary experience, urgent telegrams begging us to come and see. "Look at this view! Isn't it breathtaking? Wish you could see this. Wish you were here."

The works in this set of translations – the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Dhammapada – are among the earliest and most universal of messages like these, sent to inform us that there is more to life than the

everyday experience of our senses. The Upanishads are the oldest, so varied that we feel some unknown collectors must have tossed into a jumble all the photos, postcards, and letters from this world that they could find, without any regard for source or circumstance. Thrown together like this, they form a kind of ecstatic slide show – snapshots of towering peaks of consciousness taken at various times by different observers and dispatched with just the barest kind of explanation. But those who have traveled those heights will recognize the views: "Oh, yes, that's Everest from the northwest – must be late spring. And here we're south, in the full snows of winter."

The Dhammapada, too, is a collection – traditionally, sayings of the Buddha, one of the very greatest of these explorers of consciousness. In this case the messages have been sorted, but not by a scheme that makes sense to us today. Instead of being grouped by theme or topic, they are gathered according to some dominant characteristic like a symbol or metaphor – flowers, birds, a river, the sky – that makes them easy to commit to memory. If the Upanishads are like slides, the Dhammapada seems more like a field guide. This is lore picked up by someone who knows every step of the way through these strange lands. He can't take us there, he explains, but he can show us the way: tell us what to look for, warn about missteps,

advise us about detours, tell us what to avoid. Most important, he urges us that it is our destiny as human beings to make this journey ourselves. Everything else is secondary.

And the third of these classics, the Bhagavad Gita, gives us a map and guidebook. It gives a systematic overview of the territory, shows various approaches to the summit with their benefits and pitfalls, offers recommendations, tells us what to pack and what to leave behind. More than either of the others, it gives the sense of a personal guide. It asks and answers the questions that you or I might ask – questions not about philosophy or mysticism, but about how to live effectively in a world of challenge and change. Of these three, it is the Gita that has been my own personal guidebook, just as it was Mahatma Gandhi's.

These three texts are very personal records of a landscape that is both real and universal. Their voices, passionately human, speak directly to you and me. They describe the topography of consciousness itself, which belongs as much to us today as to these largely anonymous seers thousands of years ago. If the landscape seems dark in the light of sense perception, they tell us, it has an illumination of its own, and once our eyes adjust we can see in what Western mystics call this "divine dark" and verify their descriptions for ourselves.

And this world, they insist, is where we belong. This wider field of

consciousness is our native land. We are not cabin-dwellers, born to a life cramped and confined; we are meant to explore, to seek, to push the limits of our potential as human beings. The world of the senses is just a base camp: we are meant to be as much at home in consciousness as in the world of physical reality.

This is a message that thrills men and women in every age and culture. It is for such kindred spirits that these texts were originally composed, and it is for them in our own time that I undertook these translations, in the conviction that they deserve an audience today as much as ever. If these books speak to even a handful of such readers, they will have served their purpose.

Introduction

The Upanishads

"Toward the midpoint of life's way," as Dante says, I reached what proved a crisis. Everything I had lived for – literature, music, writing, good friends, the joys of teaching – had ceased to satisfy. Not that my enjoyment of these things was less; in fact, I had every innocent source of joy the world offered. But I found myself thirsting for something more, much more, without knowing what or why.

I was on a college campus at that time, well trained in the world of books. When I wanted to know what human beings had learned about life

and death, I naturally went to the library. There I found myself systematically mining the stacks in areas I had never been interested in before: philosophy, psychology, religion, even the sciences. India was still British in those days, and the books available confirmed what my education had taken for granted: anything worth pursuing was best represented in the records of Western civilization.

A colleague in the psychology department found my name on the checkout card of a volume by William James and grew suspicious. Everyone likes a chance to play Sherlock Holmes; he did some sleuthing and confronted me. “See here,” he said, “you’re in English literature, but I find you’ve been taking home every significant contribution to my field. Just what are you up to?”

How could I tell a distinguished professor that I was searching for meaning in life? I gave him a conspiratorial wink and replied simply, “Something *big!* ” But nothing I found appeased the hunger in my heart.

About this time – I no longer remember how – I came across a copy of the Upanishads. I had known they existed, of course, but it had never even occurred to me to look into them. My field was Victorian literature; I expected no more relevance from four-thousand-year-old texts than from *Alice in Wonderland.*

“Take the example of a man who has everything,” I read with a start of recognition: “young, healthy, strong, good, and cultured, with all the wealth that earth can offer; let us take this as one measure of joy.” The comparison was right from my life. “One hundred times that joy is the joy of the *gandharvas*; but no less joy have those who are illumined.”

Gandharvas were pure mythology to me, and what illumination meant I had no idea. But the sublime confidence of this voice, the certitude of something vastly greater than the world offers, poured like sunlight into a long-dark room:

Hear, O children of immortal bliss!
You are born to be united with the Lord.
Follow the path of the illumined ones,
And be united with the Lord of Life.

I read on. Image after image arrested me: awe-inspiring images, scarcely understood but pregnant with promised meaning, which caught at my heart as a familiar voice tugs at the edge of awareness when you are struggling to wake up:

As a great fish swims between the banks of a river as it likes, so does the shining Self move between the states of dreaming and waking.
As an eagle, weary after soaring in the sky, folds its wings and flies down to rest in its nest, so does the shining Self enter the state of

dreamless sleep, where one is free from all desires. The Self is free from desire, free from evil, free from fear . . .

Like strangers in an unfamiliar country walking every day over a buried treasure, day by day we enter that Self while in deep sleep but never know it, carried away by what is false.

Day and night cannot cross that bridge, nor old age, nor death, nor grief, nor evil or good deeds. All evils turn back there, unable to cross; evil comes not into this world of Brahman. One who crosses by this bridge, if blind, is blind no more; if hurt, ceases to be hurt; if in sorrow, ceases sorrowing. At this boundary night itself becomes day: night comes not into the world of Reality. . . .

And, finally, simple words that exploded in my consciousness, throwing light around them like a flare: "There is no joy in the finite; there is joy only in the Infinite."

I too had been walking every day over buried treasure and never guessed. Like the man in the Hasidic fable, I had been seeking everywhere what lay in my own home.

In this way I discovered the Upanishads, and quickly found myself committed to the practice of meditation.

Today, after more than forty years of study, these texts are written on my

heart; I am familiar with every word. Yet they never fail to surprise me. With each reading I feel I am setting out on a sea so deep and vast that one can never reach its end. In the years since then I have read widely in world mysticism, and often found the ideas of the Upanishads repeated in the idioms of other religions. I found, too, more practical guides; my own, following the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi, became the Bhagavad Gita. But nowhere else have I seen such a pure, lofty, heady distillation of spiritual wisdom as in the Upanishads, which seem to come to us from the very dawn of time.

The Vedas and The Upanishads

Around 2000 B.C., scholars believe, groups of Indo-European-speaking peoples calling themselves *arya,* or noble, began to enter the Indian subcontinent through the Hindu Kush. There, in the Indus river valley, they found a civilization already a thousand years old, thriving and advanced in technology and trade. From the fusion of these two cultures, the Aryan and the Indus Valley, Indian civilization was born.

The Aryans brought their gods and a religion based on ritual sacrifice, with lyrical, life-affirming hymns meant for incantation in an ancient form of Sanskrit. These hymns, dating from perhaps 1500 B.C., reveal an intimate, almost mystical bond between worshipper and environment, a

simultaneous sense of awe and kinship with the spirit that dwells in all things. Even in translation they have a compelling beauty. They worship natural forces and the elemental powers of life: sun and wind, storm and rain, dawn and night, earth and heaven, fire and offering.

These powers are the *devas,* gods and goddesses sometimes recognizable in other religions of Aryan origin. In the hymns they seem very near, present before us in the forms and forces of the natural world. Fire is Agni, worshipped as the actual fire on the hearth or altar and as the divine priest who carries offerings to the gods. The storm is Indra, leader of the gods and lord of war and thunder, who rides into battle on his swift chariot to fight the dragon-demon of the sky or the enemies of the Aryan hosts. The wind is Vayu. Night is Ratri and the dawn is Usha, loveliest and most luminous of the goddesses. The sun is Surya, who rides his chariot across the sky, or Savitri, the giver of life. And death is Yama, the first being to die and thereby first in the underworld.

Throughout the hymns of this early age there is little or no trace of fear. The forces of life are approached with loving reverence and awe, as allies of humanity in a world that is essentially friendly so long as its secrets are understood. And although the devas must once have been a pantheon of separate deities, it seems clear even in the earliest hymns that one Supreme Being is being worshipped in different aspects. “Truth is one,” one hymn

proclaims, “though the wise call it by many names.”

These poetic outpourings of worship served as liturgy in a complicated ritual religion centering around symbolic sacrifice: the holy words of the hymns were chanted as offerings were poured into the fire. Such ceremonies were performed for the *kshatriyas,* the warriors and rulers of the clans, by priests called brahmins, whose function in society was to preserve rites already too ancient to be understood.

As time passed, brahmins produced commentaries to explain the meaning of these ancient rites. Hymns and commentaries together became a sacred heritage passed from generation to generation. These are the Vedas, India’s scriptures. *Veda* comes from the root *vid,* “to know”: the Vedas are revealed knowledge, given to humanity, according to the orthodox view, at the very dawn of time. They exist in four collections, each associated with its own family tradition: Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva, with the Rig Veda easily the oldest. The first and largest part of each collection, called *karma kanda,* preserves the hymns and philosophical interpretations of rituals used in Hindu worship to this day.

Yet this is only a part of Hinduism, and the least universal. The second part of each Veda, called *jnana kanda,* concerns not ritual but wisdom: what life is about; what death means; what the human being is, and the nature of the Godhead that sustains us; in a word, the burning questions that men and women have asked in every age. The ritual sections of the Vedas define the

religion of a particular culture; but the second part, the Upanishads, is universal, as relevant to the world today as it was to India five thousand years ago.

What is an Upanishad? Etymologically the word suggests "sitting down near": that is, at the feet of an illumined teacher in an intimate session of spiritual instruction, as aspirants still do in India today. Often the teacher is one who has retired from worldly life to an ashram or "forest academy" along the banks of the upper Ganges, to live with students as a family, teaching in question-and-answer sessions and by example in daily living. Other settings are explicitly dramatic: a wife asks her husband about immortality, a king seeks instruction from an illumined sage; one teenage boy is taught by Death himself, another by fire, beasts, and birds. Sometimes these sages are women, and some of the men who come for spiritual instruction are kings.

The Upanishads record such sessions, but they have little in common with philosophical dialogue like Plato's. They record the inspired teachings of men and women for whom the transcendent Reality called God was more real than the world reported to them by their senses. Their purpose is not so much instruction as inspiration: they are meant to be expounded by an illumined teacher from the basis of personal experience. And although we speak of them together as a body, the Upanishads are not parts of a whole

like chapters in a book. Each is complete in itself, an ecstatic snapshot of transcendent Reality.

When these texts were composed, or who composed them, no one knows. The sages who gave them to us did not care to leave their names: the truths they set down were eternal, and the identity of those who arranged the words irrelevant. We do not even know how many once existed. For the last thousand years, however, ten have been considered the "principal Upanishads" on the authority of Shankara, a towering eighth-century mystic who reawakened India to its spiritual heritage. These ten Upanishads are offered in this book, along with one other of equal importance and great beauty, the Shvetashvatara. Four of the so-called Yoga Upanishads have been added to represent later traditions.

Fascinatingly, although the Upanishads are attached to the Vedas, they seem to come from an altogether different world. Though harmonious enough in their Vedic setting, they have no need of it and make surprisingly little reference to it; they stand on their own authority. Rituals, the basis of Vedic religion, are all but ignored. And although the Vedic gods appear throughout, they are not so much numinous beings as aspects of a single underlying power called Brahman, which pervades creation yet transcends it completely. This idea of a supreme Godhead is the very essence of the Upanishads; yet, remarkably, the word *brahman* in this sense does not

appear in the hymn portion of the Rig Veda at all.

These are signs of a crucial difference in perspective. The rest of the Vedas, like other great scriptures, look outward in reverence and awe of the phenomenal world. The Upanishads look inward, finding the powers of nature only an expression of the more awe-inspiring powers of human consciousness.

If mysticism can arise in any age, there is no reason to suppose that the Upanishads are a late flowering of Vedic thought. They may represent an independent tributary into the broad river of the Vedas. Some age-old elements of Hindu faith can be traced more easily to the pre-Aryan Indus Valley civilization than to Vedic ritual, and archaeologists have uncovered there a striking stone image which a Hindu villager today would identify without hesitation as Shiva, Lord of Yoga, seated in meditation, suggesting that the disciplines of mysticism might have been practiced in India before the Aryans arrived.

All this is speculation, of course. But the fact remains that the Upanishads, while fully at home in the Vedas, offer a very different vision of what religion means. They tell us that there is a Reality underlying life which rituals cannot reach, next to which the things we see and touch in everyday life are shadows. They teach that this Reality is the essence of

every created thing, and the same Reality is our real Self, so that each of us is one with the power that created and sustains the universe. And, finally,

they testify that this oneness can be realized directly, without the mediation of priests or rituals or any of the structures of organized religion, not after death but in this life, and that this is the purpose for which each of us has

been born and the goal toward which evolution moves. They teach, in sum,

the basic principles of what Aldous Huxley has called the Perennial

Philosophy, which is the wellspring of all religious faith.

The Supreme Science

Yet the Upanishads are not philosophy. They do not explain or develop a

line of argument. They are *darshana*, "something seen," and the student to whom they were taught was expected not only to listen to the words but to

realize them: that is, to make their truths an integral part of character, conduct, and consciousness.

Despite their idyllic setting, then, these intimate sessions were not casual Ivy League seminars on the commons green. Students were there because

they were prepared to devote a good measure of their lives – the traditional

period was twelve years – to this unique kind of higher education, where

study meant not reading books but a complete, strenuous reordering of

one's life, training the mind and senses with the dedication required of an

Olympic athlete.

In this context, it is clear that the questions the Upanishads record –

"What happens at death? What makes my hand move, my eyes see, my

mind think? Does life have a purpose, or is it governed by chance?" – were not asked out of mere curiosity. They show a burning desire to *know*, to find central principles which make sense of the world we live in. The students gathered in these forest academies were engaged in a colossal gamble: that they could learn to apprehend directly a Reality beyond ordinary knowing, of whose very existence they had no assurance except the example of their teacher and the promise of the scriptures. It is no wonder that such students were rigorously tested before being accepted – tested not merely for intelligence but for singleness of purpose and strength of will. What is remarkable is that candidates were found at all. As the Katha Upanishad says, only a few even hear these truths; of those who hear, only a few understand, and of those only a handful attain the goal.

This fervent desire to know is the motivation behind all science, so we should not be surprised to find in Vedic India the beginnings of a potent scientific tradition. By the Christian era it would be in full flower: Indian mathematicians would have developed modern numerals, the decimal place system, zero, and basic algebra and trigonometry; surgeons would be performing operations as sophisticated as cataract surgery and caesarian section. But the roots of this scientific spirit are in the Vedas. "All science," Aldous Huxley wrote, ". . . is the reduction of multiplicities to unities." Nothing is more characteristic of Indian thought. The Vedic hymns are

steeped in the conviction of *rita*, an order that pervades creation and is reflected in each part – a oneness to which all diversity can be referred.

From this conviction follows a highly sophisticated notion: a law of nature must apply uniformly and universally. In renaissance Europe, this realization led to the birth of classical physics. In ancient India it had equally profound consequences. While the rest of Vedic India was studying the natural world, more or less in line with other scientifically precocious civilizations such as Greece and China, the forest civilization of the Upanishads took a turn unparalleled in the history of science. It focused on the medium of knowing: the mind.

The sages of the Upanishads show a unique preoccupation with states of consciousness. They observed dreams and the state of dreamless sleep and asked what is "known" in each, and what faculty could be said to be the knower. What exactly is the difference between a dream and waking experience? What happens to the sense of "I" in dreamless sleep? And they sought invariants: in the constantly changing flow of human experience, is there anything that remains the same? In the constantly changing flow of thought, is there an observer who remains the same? Is there any thread of continuity, some level of reality higher than waking, in which these states of mind cohere?

These are the kinds of questions the sages asked, but for some reason

they did not stop with debating them. They became absorbed in the discovery that as concentration deepens, the mind actually passes through the states of consciousness being inquired about. And in concentrating on consciousness itself – "Who is the knower?" – they found they could separate strata of the mind and observe its workings as objectively as a botanist observes a flower.

The significance of this discovery cannot be exaggerated. Since consciousness is the field of all human activity, outward as well as inner – experience, action, imagination, knowledge, love – a science of consciousness holds out the promise of central principles that unify all of life. "By knowing one piece of gold," the Upanishads observed, "all things made out of gold are known: they differ only in name and form, while the stuff of which all are made is gold." And they asked, "What is that one by knowing which we can know the nature of everything else?" They found the answer in consciousness. Its study was called *brahmavidya*, which means both "the supreme science" and "the science of the Supreme."

It is important to understand that brahmavidya is not intellectual study. The intellect was given full training in these forest academies, but brahmavidya is not psychology or philosophy. It is, in a sense, a lab science: the mind is both object and laboratory. Attention is trained inward,

on itself, through a discipline the Upanishads call *nididhyasana*: meditation.

The word *meditation* is used in so many different ways that I want to be clear before going further. Meditation here is not reflection or any other kind of discursive thinking. It is pure concentration: training the mind to dwell on an interior focus without wandering, until it becomes absorbed in the object of its contemplation. But absorption does not mean unconsciousness. The outside world may be forgotten, but meditation is a state of intense inner wakefulness.

This is not an exotic experience. Even at the university I had students whose concentration was so good that when they were studying, they would be oblivious to what was going on around them. If I called them by name, they might not even hear. Meditation is closely related to this kind of absorption, but the focus is not something external that one looks at or listens to, such as a microscope slide or lecture. It is consciousness itself, which means that *all* the senses close down.

Similarly, although meditation is not discursive thinking, it is not the same as intuition or imagination. We read about the concentration of great artists, writers, and poets who, by focusing on the impressions the world presents, or on a block of formless stone, seize what fits a unifying vision in their mind and fashion some way to share it. Brahmavidya has affinities with this way of knowing also, which is not so different from the intuition of a great scientist. But brahmavidya is not concerned with the insights that

come from concentrating on a particular part of life; it is concerned with how concentration yields insight at all. Observing what happens as concentration deepens, the sages of the Upanishads learned to make a science and art and craft of insight – something that could be mastered and then taught to others, as a painting master in the Renaissance might take a gifted student to live as part of his family and absorb his art.

Recently I read a penetrating remark by William James, the great American psychologist, which spells out the significance of this skill: "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. An education which should include this faculty would be the education *par excellence*." James was not guessing. He tried to teach himself this skill, at least as it applies to everyday affairs, and he succeeded well enough to lift himself out of a life-threatening depression. In this pivotal achievement he grasped the connection between training the mind and mastering life. He would have acclaimed the forest universities of the Upanishads, which built their curricula on this connection: "education *par excellence*" is almost a literal translation of *brahmavidya*.

Brahmavidya and conventional science both begin when a person finds that the world of sense impressions, so transient and superficial, is not enough in itself to satisfy the desire for meaning. Then one begins to stand back a little from the senses and look below the surface show of life in

search of underlying connections. But the sages of the Upanishads wanted more than explanations of the outside world. They sought principles that would unify and explain the whole of human experience: including, at the same time, the world within the mind. If the observer observes through the medium of consciousness, and the world too is observed in consciousness, should not the same laws apply to both?

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad there is a long, haunting exposition of the states of mind the sages explored. They called them waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep, but somehow they had made the brilliant observation that these are not merely alternate states which a person slips in and out of every day. They also represent layers of awareness, concurrent strata lying at different depths in the conscious and unconscious mind.

In dreaming, the Upanishad observes, we leave one world and enter another. “In that dream world there are no chariots, no animals to draw them, no roads to ride on, but one makes chariots and animals and roads oneself from the impressions of past experience.” And then the leap of insight: “Everyone experiences this, but no one knows the experiencer.” What is the same in both worlds, the observer both of waking experience and of dreams? It cannot be the body, for in dreams it detaches itself from the body and senses and creates its own experiences – experiences which

can be as real, in terms of physiological reactions, as those of waking life. "When a man dreams that he is being killed or chased by an elephant, or that he is falling into a well, he experiences the same fear that he would in the waking state": his heart races, blood pressure rises, stress hormones pour into the body, just as if the event were real. Dream and waking are made of the same stuff, and as far as the nervous system is concerned, both kinds of experience are real.

When we wake up from a dream, then, we do not pass from unreality to reality; we pass from a lower level of reality to a higher one. Havelock Ellis, the psychologist who devoted his life to the study of sex, observed, "Dreams are real as long as they last. Can we say more of life?"

If waking experience is impermanent, should there not be something abiding, something real, to support it? Might it not be possible to wake up into a higher state, a level of reality above this world of constantly changing sensory impressions? The sages found a clue: in dreamless sleep, the observing self detaches itself not only from the body but from the mind. "As a tethered bird grows tired of flying about in vain to find a place of rest and settles down at last on its own perch, so the mind," like the body, "settles down to rest" in dreamless sleep – an observation in harmony with current research, which suggests that in this state the autonomic nervous system is repaired.

This still world is always present in the depths of the mind. It is the deepest, most universal layer of the unconscious. Wake up in this state, the Upanishads say, and you will be who you truly are, free from the conditioning of body and mind in a world unbounded by the limitations of time, space, and causality.

Wake up in the very depths of the unconscious, when thought itself has ceased? The language makes no more sense than a map of some other dimension. Here the Upanishads are like pages from ancient logbooks, recording journeys of exploration into the uncharted waters of the world within. If Freud's limited glimpses of the unconscious can have had such an impact on civilization, the sages who mapped the mind three thousand years earlier must rank with the greatest explorers in history.

Yet this is dangerous territory. We know what forces can buffet us in the dream world, and that is only the foothills of the dark ranges of the mind, where fear, passion, egotism, and desire so easily sweep aside the will. One of Hopkins' "dark sonnets" hints at the dangers of these realms:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May, who never hung there . . .

The Katha Upanishad would agree. In famous words it warns that the

ascent to the summit of consciousness is not for the timid: “Sharp like a razor’s edge, the sages say, is the path to Reality, difficult to traverse.” Nothing in the Upanishads is more vital than the relationship between student and guide. The spiritual teacher must know every inch of the way, every danger and pitfall, and not from books or maps or hearsay. He must have traveled it himself, from the foothills to the highest peaks. And he must have managed to get back down again, to be able to relate to students with humanity and compassion. Not everyone who attains Self-realization can make a reliable guide. I have been saying “he,” but this is not a role for men alone. My own teacher is my mother’s mother.

This spiritual ascent is so fraught with challenge that we can see why the sages took their students young. Exploring the unconscious requires the daring of the years between twelve and twenty, when if someone says “Don’t try to climb that peak, you’ll get hurt,” you immediately go and start climbing. As we grow older, something changes; we start listening to those cautionary voices and say we are learning prudence. So it is no accident that the hero of the Katha Upanishad is a teenager. The message of the Katha, which echoes throughout the Upanishads, is to dare like a teenager: to reach for the highest you can conceive with everything you have, and never count the cost.

What makes a human being dare the impossible? What fires the will

when we glimpse something never done before and a wild urge surges up to cry, “Then let’s do it”? Here in San Francisco a young woman blind from birth decides to sail alone across the Pacific and succeeds; I can’t imagine getting as far as Alcatraz. Mountaineers decide that it is not enough merely to climb Mount Everest; they have to climb it alone, take no oxygen, and choose the most difficult ascent. And just a few months ago a man and woman mortgaged their future to put together a fragile plane with a cockpit smaller than a phone booth, so they could fly around the world without a stop. We ask, “Why did you do it?” And the pilot of the *Voyager* can only reply with a shrug, “Just for the hell of it.” He can give no better reason, yet everyone understands.

The sages would say similarly, “Just for the heaven of it.” Just to reach for the highest. Human beings cannot live without challenge. We cannot live without meaning. Everything ever achieved we owe to this inexplicable urge to reach beyond our grasp, do the impossible, know the unknown. The Upanishads would say this urge is part of our evolutionary heritage, given to us for the ultimate adventure: to discover for certain who we are, what the universe is, and what is the significance of the brief drama of life and death we play out against the backdrop of eternity.

In haunting words, the Brihadaranyaka declares:

You are what your deep, driving desire is.

As your desire is, so is your will.

As your will is, so is your deed.

As your deed is, so is your destiny.

[Brihadaranyaka IV.4.5]

In the end, all achievement is powered by desire. Each of us has millions of desires, from big to trivial, packed with a certain measure of will to get that desire fulfilled. Imagine how much power is latent in the human personality! With just a fraction of that potential, young Alexander conquered continents, Rutan and Yaeger flew *Voyager* around the world, Einstein penetrated the heart of the universe. If a person could fuse *all* human desires, direct them like a laser, what would be beyond reach?

This stupendous aim is the basis of brahmavidya. Every desire for fulfillment in the world outside is recalled – not stifled or repressed, but consolidated in one overriding desire for Self-realization. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, there is nothing drab or life-denying about this apparent reversal of human nature. The passion it requires is not different from what a great ballet dancer or gymnast or musician demands. In Sanskrit this ardent, one-pointed, self-transcending passion is called *tapas*, and the Vedas revere it as an unsurpassable creative force. From the tapas of God, the Rig Veda says, the cosmos itself was born.

What daring the sages of the Upanishads conceal in their anonymity! It is

no wonder that so many came from the warrior caste. There was nothing world-denying when these sages-to-be left their courts and cities for the Ganges forests. World-weariness cannot generate tapas. They yearned to know life at its core, to know it and master it, and that meant to master every current of the mind.

Sex, of course, is the most powerful desire most people have, and therefore the richest source of personal energy. *Brahmacharya*, self-control in thought and action, was a prerequisite in these forest academies. But this was not suppression or repression. Sexual desire, like everything else in the Upanishads, is only partly physical. Essentially it is a spiritual force – pure, high-octane creative energy – and brahmacharya means its transformation. *Tapas*, the sages say, becomes *tejas*: the radiant splendor of personality that shows itself in love, compassion, creative action, and a melting tenderness which draws all hearts.

Nothing is lost in this transformation. It is clear in the Upanishads that sex is sacred, and ashram graduates often went back into the world to take up the responsibilities of family life. But they did so in freedom. Free from conditioning, they had a choice in everything they did, even in what they thought. Their ideal was not to retire from the world but to live in it selflessly, with senses and passions completely under control. This freedom is the hallmark of the Upanishads, and nothing better suits the life-affirming spirit of the Vedas.