

The Revelation of Enlightenment in Ancient India



*Lead me from the unreal to the real!
Lead me from darkness to light!
Lead me from death to immortality!*

— Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad

Something happened in India in the period between 800 to 500 BCE – something mysterious. Unexpectedly, as if from nowhere, the sages of the Upanishads revealed the knowledge of pure subjectivity, the knowledge of self, to humanity. For the first time in the history of human evolution, the possibility that a mysterious reality, independent of objects and our psychological identity, existed and could be directly known arose into the collective consciousness. It was at this time that a few more spiritually conscious human beings began to question the objectification of the divine as so-called 'gods' that ruled our fate from a place outside of who we are. And what they discovered was that the divine does not exist externally to our very own deeper consciousness and intelligence.

A Brief History of Hinduism

But before we begin to contemplate it, we need to go back in time a bit. Before the Indo-Aryans invaded India in the period after 2000 BCE, the northwestern area of South Asia, including Northwest India, was occupied by the great Indus Valley Civilization, people known as 'Harappans'. These peoples were advanced in agriculture and architecture, and seemed to be very sophisticated in other ways as well. But little is known about why their civilization collapsed – whether it was due to climate change, infectious disease, decline in trading relations, or invasion and subjugation by other peoples. No one has yet been able to decipher the inscriptions left by them.



There is little knowledge of the development and religious practices of the Harappans, but it is thought that some of their ideas and deities survived in the minds of their descendants, and were subsequently incorporated into Hinduism.

Interestingly, this civilization did not leave any temples, which suggests that their religious worship took place in households. While grand temples evoke a wide range of religious emotions, they also symbolize a view of the divine as an external power, and as such, they can be seen as promoting religious control and dependence, rather than genuine devotion. The original motivations behind building big temples were to intimidate believers and to give more power to religious leaders. This is evident in many cultures and religions, including Christianity.

From around 1800 BCE, the Indo-Aryans invaded and migrated into much of India, imposing their own culture, social structure, beliefs, and religious practices on it. These Indo-Aryans came from the Middle East and other territories. They were skilled warriors, and possessed the newly developed war chariot, which was later depicted in many 'holy' books as the weapon of choice of the 'gods' for conquering 'evil' opposition. Since that time, most of India gradually became 'Aryanized', socially, politically, and in its religion.

It was after the migration of the Indo-Aryans to India that the earliest of the *Vedas* began to be written, and hence this time is referred to as the 'Vedic period' in India. Following their settlement in India, the bloodlines of the Indo-Aryans gradually became mixed with the Harappans and other people who had previously occupied these lands. So present-day Indians are a genetic combination of Aryans, Dravidians, Harappans, as well as of other cultures and races, including people who came by way of the many Muslim invasions of India.

It is most likely that the caste system (a division of people into a hierarchy of priests, warriors, peasants, and traders, and indigenous peoples who were considered impure) was initiated by the Indo-Aryans, but it is possible that this system became stricter with the advent of Hinduism. Practices during the Vedic period were mostly based on the worship of elements of nature, and relied heavily on rituals, chanting, and animal sacrifice. Their gods included Indra, both king of the gods and god of thunderstorms; Vayu, the wind god; Agni, the fire god – and many others.

It was during that time that the Brahmin, priestly, caste was established, making them the ones who, through the use of chants and secret mantras, were the only ones supposedly able to evoke the powers of the gods and protect devotees from their wrath. We could say that the spells, incantations, rituals, and different duties assigned to each of the castes, 'varnas', were essentially meaningless, serving most of all to ensure and preserve the wellbeing and control of those in power, who were themselves lacking in any spiritual evolution. People held many superstitious beliefs, such as that food offerings to the priestly caste would feed their ancestors in heaven, or that animals slain in Vedic rituals would go straight to heaven. These rules and rituals were clearly designed to serve the upper castes, and the Brahmin caste in particular.

From about 800 BC forward, Vedic culture began to decline, and was replaced by what is now known as Hinduism. It is quite possible that the reason was political in nature, including a rebellion against the excessive authority of the Brahmin caste. This could explain why many of the old gods were not eliminated but just renamed. Hanuman, Ganesha, Kali, Rama, Krishna, Subramanya, and other Hindu gods had previously been worshipped under other names as Vedic deities. The worship of idols also became prevalent, and each god became more personified. Shiva and Vishnu had been present in the Vedic religion, but just as minor gods. In Hinduism, their



position and power gained prominence. Some of the main scriptures of Hinduism were the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which were subsequently revised in the *Brahmanas* (commentaries on the *Vedas*) to give them more of a religious character.

The position of women, which had been more tolerable during the times of the Vedic civilization was rapidly declining. Even later on, in Buddhism, there was no equality between nuns and monks. Even Buddha himself appears to have had rather discriminatory views on the matter of gender. At first, Buddha refused to admit women to his sangha: “But as women have gone forth, now, Ananda, the religious life will not last long... as a plentiful rice-field once infested by rice worms will not long remain.” And later he imposed many more rules of conduct on women than on men. As an example, even a very elderly nun was required to make obeisance to a novice monk with folded hands.

It is difficult to define what Hinduism really is. It is perhaps best defined as a polytheistic religion in which a follower worships either a single god or a chosen combination. In many ways, Hinduism was a continuation of the earlier Vedic religion with the addition of new gods to the old pantheon, along with the invention and addition of more mythological stories. Together with these alterations, some new concepts, like reincarnation and karma, developed, and these were gradually integrated into the collective Hindu consciousness. Hinduism also became more relaxed in the practice of its rituals, with less dependency on the Brahmin caste. Brahmins were still responsible for running the temples, but they had now lost most of their earlier power and control.

One of the characteristics of Hinduism was a strong increase in sectarianism. Many of these sects held fanatical beliefs that their god was the one who ruled all the other gods. The best known among these sects were Vishnuism and Shaivism. While these two sects are popularly believed to have originated thousands of years BCE, it is more likely that they came into existence only a few hundred years BCE. The fact that some much older statues resembling the Shiva lingam have been found in different ancient ruins does not necessarily signify that they represented the same Shiva that is presently worshiped in India. While Hinduism is generally very tolerant in allowing many different faiths to coexist without the violence so prevalent in other faiths in the world, religious fanaticism – even among some Hindus – is a feature which is inseparable from dogmatic devotion.

Upanishads: The Birth of the Path to Self-Realization

What is of most interest to us here is that there was more to Hinduism than a colorful pantheon of countless gods with the accompanying fairy tales of their celestial adventures and conquests. The esoteric dimension of Hinduism goes far beyond its folk religiousness and sectarianism. Seen in this light, we could better consider the knowledge that came forth during this period not as the emergence of a world religion, but deeper than that, as a real spiritual awakening that was happening somehow in parallel. This deeper dimension of spirituality was directly linked to the revelatory writings called the *Upanishads*.

Prior to the *Upanishads*, religion was all about worshiping the divine outside of us in the form of personified gods, and this was dominated by religious rituals, pujas, and offerings. The *Upanishads* were revelatory texts that spoke of the self within us as being the only true god, and pointed to the ultimate empowerment of our being by acknowledging the divinity of the very



substance of our subjectivity. For the first time, the *Upanishads* spoke of the divine within us. ‘*Upanishad*’ means ‘to seat near’, which referred to receiving the revelation of one’s divinity at the feet of an illumined being or spiritual master. So while the *Upanishads* call for going beyond dependence on idols and for looking within, they also imply the need to receive help from those who have the experiential understanding of the inner self – the ones who are true ‘Brahmins’ because they have realized Brahman.

There was no clear instruction in the *Upanishads* on how to actualize our inner divinity, but the general idea was that, in addition to grace, it requires spiritual discipline and profound introspection. And it was from the *Upanishads* that the first true yogis, ascetics, and spiritual hermits of various kinds were born. We often hear that Yoga had already existed for many thousands of years, but this is like saying that Buddhism existed before Buddha’s teaching, or that Christianity existed before the time of Jesus. There is no convincing evidence that any path directed people towards self-realization prior to 1000 BCE. In truth, it was that mystic period preceding the 5th century BCE which can be considered the golden age of spiritual revelation. While this does not mean that the science of spirituality was accurately outlined or that the truth of enlightenment was described with great clarity, what happened was that the *ideas* of enlightenment and spiritual liberation were born. Before this time, not only did no one know that these things were possible, but they could not even have imagined them.

When the early and more important of the *Upanishads* were being written, a great passion awoke among the more conscious individuals to discover more. India was flooded with philosophers and mystics who sought to clarify the great matters of enlightenment and the nature of reality. Some were focused on actual self-realization, while others were more content with intellectual speculations.

One school of interest was Charvaka. It had similarities to the Greek school of Hedonism, which claimed the only source of valid knowledge was empirical perception and that inference of any kind resulted in false or doubtful knowledge. The Charvaka school maintained the wisdom of enjoying pleasure and avoiding pain, and it rejected religious rituals and concepts, such as samsara, karma, reincarnation, and the afterlife.

“The Agnihotra ritual, the three Vedas, the triple staff, the ash-smearing, are the ways of gaining a livelihood for those who are lacking in intellect and energy.

The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food, keeping company of young women, using fine clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste... while moksha is death which is cessation of life-breath... the wise therefore ought not to take pains on account of moksha. A fool wears himself out by penances and fasts. Chastity and other such ordinances are laid down by clever weaklings... There is no other world other than this; there is no heaven and no hell; the realm of Shiva and like regions, are invented by stupid imposters.”

— Sarvasiddhanta Samgraha

“The Charvaka school challenged the traditional religious order in India, weakening the authority and reputation of the priests and encouraging a sort of spiritual vacuum in Indian society that compelled the development of new religious alternatives. The materialistic ideas were so strong that the new religions, which arose to replace the old faith, were devotions without a god or gods or, in other words, non-theistic religions. Such an idea might sound like a contradiction in itself, but that was exactly the approach of



some of the main religious movements that appeared as a result of this religious controversy. In a reaction against the priestly class, these new religions originated in the Kshatriyas caste (the warrior rulers caste), opposing the traditional priestly hegemony.”

— Cristian Violatti

The Charvaka school was not the only one that was materialistic in those times, and certainly not the only one that was atheistic. Nowadays, we associate India with worship of all kind of gods, but the India of that time gave birth to many rebellious spirits – thinkers who utterly defied traditional beliefs. We might think of those atheists and materialists as simply unimaginative and non-spiritual in their perception of reality, but we must also appreciate the constructive role they played in human evolution. It is, after all, better to be an atheist or a materialist than to be a spiritual sheep without a mind of one's own. It is better to acknowledge one's ignorance than to believe in the false and keep living in the pretension of 'knowledge'. It is better to be a humble nobody than a pretentious devotee of imaginary gods and petrified scriptures. The spirit of rebellion of the people of those times acted as a stimulus to those who sincerely sought answers to the puzzles of human existence and self-realization, and this stimulus, coupled with doubt and true spiritual longing, allowed them to free themselves from the dogmas frozen in the past and to seek new paths.

Buddhism and Jainism, traditions that entirely cut their links with the *Vedas* and Hinduism and sought to verbalize their own understanding in entirely new ways, followed not long afterwards. We may consider the answers that Buddha or Mahavira (the best known of the founders of Jainism) found are incomplete, or simply limited, but seen in the higher perspective of humanity searching to define itself in the context of the spiritual cosmos, these answers were valuable bricks laid as parts of the foundation of the temple of spiritual understanding. They are our necessary past, and we are their future. While Charvaka and other materialistic schools were criticized by Buddhist thinkers, without their rebellion and courage to defy tradition, Buddha himself might never have challenged the authority of the *Vedas* or other scriptures.

The Origins of Vedanta

Some, who still believed that the *Vedas* and other holy scriptures were written by the gods, developed the *Upanishads*' ideas in a more traditional manner. And it was through those efforts that Vedanta and, later, Advaita Vedanta were born.

'Vedanta' is broad term referring to several philosophical Indian schools that attempted to systematize and further develop the ideas contained in the *Upanishads*. Vedanta means 'the end of the *Vedas*', but since the *Upanishads* themselves are considered to be the final culmination of the *Vedas*, they are the actual 'Vedanta', and these schools were just interpreting their conclusions.

Vedanta was also connected to the *Bhagavad Gita* (a mixture of philosophies from the *Upanishads* and the Samkhya and Yoga schools) and the *Brahma Sutras*, a work of the sage Badarayana, who attempted to summarize the teaching of the *Upanishads* while also debating the heterodox schools of Buddhism, Jainism, and the now forgotten ones like Charvaka and Ajivika (absolute determinism). Basically, all the schools that did not accept the divinity of the *Vedas* were considered heretical. Yoga was also seen as heterodox by some, but became integrated into the



more orthodox Hinduism after somehow gaining the respect of Badarayana and those who studied and commented on his work.

Vedanta was not a unified teaching, and there were many heated debates between its main proponents. The principal schools of Vedanta were dualism and non-dualism, but there were also different interpretations in-between these two. The main propagator of qualified non-dualism (a mixture of dualism and non-dualism) was Ramanuja, according to whom the soul is distinct from god, but can arrive at the state of unity through god-realization. He advocated the path of bhakti, which was considered the highest means by which to attain enlightenment in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text composed around the 2nd century BCE and interpolated into the *Mahabharata*. The key propagator of strict non-duality in this period was Adi Shankara, who, through his charismatic personality and debating skills, may have had the greatest impact on Indian philosophy.

It is interesting that dualism in Vedanta always seemed to be espoused by teachers who identified the supreme reality with Vishnu. For them, attaining a level of oneness or equivalence with Vishnu offended their sense of devotion and was unthinkable. Although they affirmed the reality of the soul, they did not address soul-realization, but assumed that to be self-realized is to realize god. In this sense, their teaching was ignorant of the dimension of me. It is common that people naively assume that our only problem is our soul's separation from the creator. To 'believe' in a soul has nothing to do with being on the path of me and on the path to me. To believe in the soul is not the same as knowing the soul.

Those times were also the beginning of an intellectual awakening which gave rise to many philosophical systems. Unlike philosophy in the West, Hindu philosophy had direct ties to religion, and it adhered to the original ideas revealed by the *Upanishads*. Even if some of these philosophical schools were atheistic, they aspired intellectually to affirm the existence of the absolute reality. It is not surprising that many spiritual leaders, like the Jain Mahavira and Buddha, were actually atheists. Even Yoga was essentially atheistic because it was based on the philosophy of Samkhya. The main philosopher of Samkhya, Kapila, did not think that we need god to explain the existence of this universe. Some of these philosophies tried to explain the nature of reality based on duality, while others looked to non-dual explanations. The best known, Yoga, was based on the duality between soul and nature (*purusha* and *prakriti*), where each soul is individual; whereas Advaita Vedanta spoke about the sameness of Atman and Brahman. Since Buddhism very soon became a widespread religion, Buddhist philosophy was the main influence in the time that followed. Even Hindu thinkers who opposed Buddhism had to master its concepts in order to debate it. As can be seen, the period that began about 800 BCE, with its momentum continuing to around 1000 CE, was a rich one, after which a rapid decline began.

Many of the thinkers of those times had a hard time letting go of the Vedic-Hindu religion. They wanted to fit it into their new systems because they continued to believe that the *Vedas* were the ultimate authority. It is a common tendency for people to praise the past and seek confirmation of their ideas by insisting that they are in alignment with what 'was written'. This tendency is very strange, but it can be seen in all cultures. Sometimes this use of the past comes through sheer lack of imagination and intelligence, but it also can come from misguided devotion. There is nothing wrong with having respect for books of the past and learning from them, but one also has to examine them critically. Even Adi Shankara, an advocate of Advaita Vedanta and a sharp thinker in his own right, argued with other philosophers about the 'correct' interpretation of old scriptures, but never dared to question the authority of the scriptures themselves. His attachment to tradition was more important to him than a deeper exploration of the absolute truth



expounded by the *Upanishads*. Even though Shankara probably learned more from the highly sophisticated Buddhist philosophies (such as Madhyamika, or Mahayana, Buddhism) than from Hinduism itself, he wanted to eradicate Buddhism – because it did not honor the *Vedas* – and to revive Hinduism. In fact, even though these two systems differ in a number of ways, one might even go so far as to view Advaita Vedanta as a form of Buddhism which replaced the term 'no-self' with Brahman.

A Parallel Discovery: The Lower Revelation of Taoism

There was one more known revelation in the world at a slightly later time than the *Upanishads*, Taoism, which occurred around the 5th century BCE. Little is known of Taoism from that time other than the wonderful little book *Tao Te Ching*. While the *Upanishads* point to the awakening of consciousness, the *Tao Te Ching* – more in harmony with the practical Chinese mind – speaks of the art of living in accordance with the Tao, or the 'universal principle of emptiness' – the non-resistance and flexibility that underlies nature and is steeped in the unmanifested.

According to Chuang Tzu, a mystic and skillful writer who followed in Lao Tzu's footsteps, Lao Tzu engaged in meditation practices in which he was entering deep trance-like states of meditative absorption. However, Lao Tzu did not point in any way to self-knowledge or pure subjectivity. His was the insight into the impersonal dimension of being, unknown to Indian spirituality.

In some ways, Taoism reminds one of the Zen term for deep meditation without awakening – 'dark illumination'. Reaching an absorption in being that bypasses the attainment of self-knowledge on the level of consciousness cannot be seen as the proper gateway to the realm of self-realization. It is more of an alternative path on which neither the soul nor I am are met, and only the isness of the source is realized. Taoism might have incorporated work with consciousness later on, but this would mostly have been due to yogic and Buddhist influences, since Buddhism later became a dominant religion in China for a long time.

Vedanta: A Regression from the Upanishads

But returning to these important revelations – what was the essence of esoteric 'Hinduism'? Its essence was to seek the divine within rather than practicing the external worship of deities. If we want to find god, we must stop living in an infantile state of religious belief and stop looking for the divine outside of ourselves. People think that worshiping gods is piety, but it is nothing less than pretending to know something that one does not know. Spiritual beliefs can be seen as hypocrisy and dishonesty disguised as conviction and devotion. If one does not aspire to be truly spiritual, it is much more honest to remain an agnostic, and to get on with one's life instead of wasting time and misleading others through claims of the existence or non-existence of gods.

The problem with Vedanta and other philosophical schools of India is that they are so incredibly intellectual that studying them is unbearably tedious. There are two typical extremes in the Indian approach to spirituality. One is devotion without reason that often borders on fanatical devotion (which they call 'bhakti'), while the other is totally mentally dry intellectualism, juggling with 'clever' concepts and constructs that take one to an entirely abstract sphere of mind devoid of any soul (which some mistakenly call 'jnana yoga').



When the schools of Ramanuja or Shankara argued between each other and with other thinkers about the correct interpretation of scriptures, they actually believed that by debating they could prove the reality of duality or non-duality between the soul and the absolute through logic. Such beliefs are so absurd that one questions whether they had achieved any spiritual evolution at all.

The mind can prove anything and nothing, because there is always a counter argument. This was what Nagarjuna (a prominent Buddhist philosopher) explained very clearly – that all concepts and theories are self-contradicting; hence, Nagarjuna developed the kind of logic that drops all concepts, including the concept of dropping concepts. He called it 'sunyata', or 'non-conceptualization'. Although the term 'sunyata' (emptiness) is often interpreted as a type of ontological void that contains all things, on a deeper level it refers to a mind without support that is absorbed in the pure nature of consciousness.

The sages of the *Upanishads* did not try to prove anything. They just gently guided their pupils to the recognition of the light of the self. With this in mind, it must be concluded that the majority of Vedanta is not a further development of the *Upanishads* at all, but actually a regression in Indian spirituality caused by people who were just intellectualizing about matters they were unable to experience. Only the *Upanishads* were the true Vedanta (the end of the *Vedas*). The rest that followed was a diversion from their truth.

The deeper contributions of Vedanta were mostly borrowed from Buddhism, which added an entirely new conceptual understanding to the science of spirituality. This was for two reasons: the first was that Buddhism did not care about dwelling in the past or in ancient scriptures, and could therefore move on, and the second was that the teaching of Buddha was deeply practical. Buddha did not believe that the metaphysical questions which have perennially puzzled humanity could be ever answered, and hence trying to philosophize about them would not only be devoid of any wisdom, but a distraction from our spiritual purpose of self-realization. As an example, Buddha said: "Whether the world is finite or infinite, limited or unlimited, the problem of your liberation remains the same." When approached by intellectuals, he was often known to 'answer' their questions with silence. Why waste time on metaphysical speculations when everyone is spiritually lost and there is so much human suffering? Buddha compared this kind of intellectual approach to a man who is struck by a poisonous arrow, and instead of pulling it out of his body, he starts to speculate: "Where did this arrow come from? Who shot it? How old is he? Who are his parents? And what is the arrow made of?" Such a man is obviously a fool.

This is not to say that many of those who came after Buddha did not fall into the pitfall of intellectualism. Buddhist philosophers have engaged for centuries in useless speculations about the nature of the world that in many ways has resembled, and perhaps even surpassed, the intellectualism in Hinduism. But this approach was certainly not the message of Buddha himself.

The First One Who Remembered the Self

But what really happened in those 500 years before Buddha? What was the true source of the *Upanishads*? Where did the ideas of enlightenment and realizing the divine within come from? These are very important questions, because what happened in India at that time not only completely changed Indian spirituality, it altered spiritual possibilities for the whole of the human world. Even if people have no understanding of what enlightenment is, even if they keep



distorting its meaning and corrupting it in countless ways – the very *idea* of it has nevertheless become part of our collective consciousness, and nothing can change that. What we do with this idea is up to us, but since then, humanity has, for the first time in its history, had the chance of knowing something that was never known or even dreamed of before.

India was the cradle of the concept of self-realization, and if we find this idea in other places of this world, it is because they took it from India. It was India's gift to humanity. Countless Western spiritual seekers are thrilled when they visit India's colorful sites of devotion and pilgrimage. However, what they see is not India's true spiritual heritage, but more of a folk Hinduism that has nothing to do with the stunning revelation that once took place in this land. India's true spirituality is even hidden from Indians, and it is far beyond and pricelessly more valuable than anything that Hinduism in its present form stands for, including Vedanta's intellectualized distortion of the wisdom of the *Upanishads*. It is beyond gods (theism) and beyond atheism, beyond Dvaita and Advaita, beyond the *Vedas*, and beyond Vedanta. . . It is the naked, unfathomable truth that becomes revealed to each being through his uncompromising devotion to his very self.

The message of the *Upanishads* was to reclaim our power instead of giving it to gods because of fear or greed. There is only one god, and this god is not external to who we are – this god is the transcendental subjectivity, the boundless depth of reality that contains our me. Such a god is not reached by prayer and devotion to deities, meditation techniques, raising kundalini, or self-mortification. It is attained through direct surrender into the light of me, and through that, into the transcendental me of the supreme reality.

Still, the question remains: Who was the one who received the revelation of self? There was an individual, or perhaps a group of individuals, whose name(s) we will never know, who initiated the wisdom that spoke through the mouthpiece of the *Upanishads*. We may assume that a unique being was initiated into pure subjectivity through the intervention of grace. Still, grace alone is futile without landing upon the fertile soil of a mature soul. There cannot be any grace without one's cooperation, and ability to feel the dimension of self intimately, and to have met one's own subjectivity. The true source of grace is not outside in the heavens, but is hidden in the heart of each soul.

Furthermore, since one cannot experience the universal self without having awakened the light of me – even if one is unable to distinguish between these two – it clearly indicates that the person who gave birth to the spirit of the *Upanishads* was an exceptional human being. Even if he failed to illuminate his individual subjectivity with recognition as the subject to the realization of the impersonal self, he must have intuitively known himself to be the axis upon which the self-of-all is known. He must have been the first one on earth to know who he is, Shiva incarnated; indeed, the only way for the creator's incarnation to become conscious in his creation is through the awakening of me. He was the first one to have risen from the existential coma in which humanity had slept since its origins, the first one to have the strength of spirit to penetrate the spiritual amnesia of this planet, the first one to solve the great puzzle and expose the concealed – the first one who Remembered.

Blessings,
Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology, please visit our website at www.anaditeaching.com/glossary

