The nature of the Self (Soul/Atman) and Brahman (God/Universe)
(Based on 3000 Years Old Upanishadic Philosophy)
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Introduction

In this article, I aim to explore the nature of Brahman (God) and the Self (Soul) by analysing several ancient Indian Upanishadic texts. After a brief introduction of Upanishads, I will explore how different Upanishadic texts provide teachings around the central concepts Brahman (God) and Atman (Soul), and how both the concepts are identical to each other. The article will further analyse why we human beings cannot realise our true nature: Atman and then explore the teachings provided in several Upanishads to know our true nature. The last section will provide a conclusion based on the texts' understanding of the article's main section.

Upanishad

Eshwaran (2007) states that etymologically, the name Upanishad is composed of the terms upa (near), ni (down) and shad (to sit), meaning something like "sitting down near". The name is inspired by the action of sitting at the feet of an illuminated teacher to engage in a session of spiritual instructions, as aspirants still do in India today.

The Upanishads are a collection of texts of philosophical nature, written in India probably between c. 800 BC and c. 500 BC that means 3000 years old approximately. However, Indian scholars firmly believe that Upanishads are 5000 years old texts. Paniker (2010) states that there are over 108 surviving Upanishads, only 14 are considered to be important, 10 of which (The Brihad Aranyaka, The Chandogya, Taittiriya, Aitareya, Kena, Mundaka, Mandukya, Katha, Prasna and Isha Upanishad) became prominent since Shankracharya around 1400 years back provided commentary on them. Later several other scholars have also presented their analysis on these texts.

The central theme of all Upanishads is to understand the nature of Brahman. Upanishad texts' source material consists of dialogues, debate, and formal teaching by famous teachers of the time. The prominent among these are Yanjavalya in Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, Uddalaka Aruni in the Chandogya Upanishad, Shvetashvatara, Janala, Pravahna Jaivali, Ajatasatru, Sandilya and Satyakama Jabala (Ollivelle, 1996).

Brahman: its nature and attributes

Brahman is a Vedic Sanskrit word that is understood as an eternal or absolute principle. All Upanishads states that Brahman is indescribable, inexhaustible, omniscient, omnipresent, original, first and eternal. All Upanishads states that Brahman is without a beginning, without an end, who is hidden in all and who is the cause, source, material and effect of all creation known, unknown and yet to happen in the entire universe.
Upanishads further describes that Brahman is the incomprehensible, unapproachable radiant being that cannot be known through ordinary senses and intellect but can only be experienced through different Yoga paths (Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana (realised or wisdom knowledge) Yoga or Raja Yoga). Brahman is the mysterious "Being" totally out of the reach of all sensory activity, rationale effort, and mere intellectual, decorative, and pompous endeavour (Madhavananda, 1950).

All Upanishads aim to provide teachings around the Brahman, the Atman’s identity, the Soul or Self, and its link with the Supreme Reality. However, each Upanishad has its particular perspective and the specific concept it seeks to convey (Ollivelle, 1996). The word Atman, Satyam, Akshara, Brahman, and Purusha are used interchangeably in several Upanishads. Some of the Maha-Vakyas – "The Great Sayings" explained within the Upanishads are aham brahmasmi (BAU 1.4.10) "I am Brahman", ayam atma brahman (MU1.2) "this inner self is Brahman", tat tuam asi (CU 6.8.7) "that is what you are", sarvam khav idam brahman (CU 3.14.1) "this whole world is nothing but Brahman".

Brihad Aranyak Upanishad (BAU -1.4.10) states that in the beginning, the world was only Brahman, and it knew only itself, thinking I am Brahman, which made it whole. Also, whoever else, be it God, seers, or human being, realised this became the Whole or Brahman. Probably based on this realisation seer, Vamadeva proclaimed, "I was Manu, and I was the Sun. This is true even now". It is understood that anyone can attain identity with "that which is all thing", by realised knowledge and can become Brahman. Even demigods are not able to prevent us from becoming Brahman. If we venerate another deity, then it means we have not realised that we are Brahman. Worshipping another deity brings duality and is considered a lower level of spirituality (Olivelle, 1998).

Chandogya Upanishad (CU 3.19.1-4) states that before the creation of the world, everything was "asat" means non-existing and what was existing was "that." It is understood that what existed before and after is Brahman. Yajnavalkya in CU describe to Gargi, Brahman as "Akshara that is imperishable" at whose command Sun and Moon stand apart, in other word universe is standing or holding. He illustrates it’s that Imperishable which sees but cannot be seen; which hears but cannot be heard; which thinks but cannot be thought of; which perceives but can't be perceived. Apart from this Imperishable, there is no one that thinks and no one that can perceive it. On this Imperishable, space is woven back and forth.

It is illustrated that anything which is not Brahman is just an illusion (Aparokshanubhuti v.50), and when one gains this realisation "aham brahmasmi" then the illusory existence ceases, moksha (release from the cycle of birth) is achieved, and one becomes what one truly is, Brahman which is Imperishable (BAU 3.8.9-11). Upon realising that we are Brahman, we no longer remain small or powerless and are outside God's control, who seems to control every being in this world.

Katha Upanishad (KU) and Shvetashvatara Upanishad (SU) take a different position than BAU and CU. KU (3.10-11 & 6.10-11) states that beyond our sense are our material objects, beyond objects is our mind, beyond the mind is our intellect, and beyond intellect is our great Self (mahan atma), beyond the great Self is the un-manifest, beyond the un-manifest is the
Purusha, and beyond Purusha there is nothing; he is the limit (Brockington, 1986). At the same
time, SU states that God is a personal being who is more significant than Atman and God as
being the principal expression of human spirituality.

Nature of Self - the Atman (The Soul)

To know Brahman, it seems essential for us to understand ourselves or our true nature, i.e.,
Atman and Upanishadic texts aim to provide that knowledge. Shankracharya, through his
commentaries on several Upanishads, illustrates how human beings are not body and mind
but the Atman who is identical to Brahman - that absolute. Isha Upanishad (IU) explains the
true meaning of soul and states that it is free, unlimited, and beyond the constraints of God’s
material and logic (IU.4). Through the discourse and debate of Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi (BAU
2.4.14), we understand that Atman is identical to Brahman. Yajnavalkya states that when one
attains this position, then who is there to smell, hear, see, greet, or even think of because one
has become whole or Brahman.

In CU, priest Uddalaka, using the Banyan tree and salt & water example, teaches his son
Shvetaketu that the Atman that resides in our heart is Brahman; "tat tuam asi" means "you
are that" (CU 6.10.1-4). KU (5.15) states the nature of Atman as "etad vaitat" and explains it
using the example of a chariot, in which Atman is the rider of a chariot, the body is the
chariot, the horse being the senses, the sense objects as pathways, the intellect the
charioteer, the mind the reins and Self as the passenger.

Both BAU and CU identify that Atman and Brahman are similar phenomena (means Atman is
Brahman); however, KU separates the identity of Atman from Brahman but illustrates that
Atman is an eternally individual spiritual identity that retains its individuality and even after
moksha does not merge into the absolute identity. On the other hand, SU provides a different
dimension of Prakriti (nature), Atman, and Supreme Deity, notably different from other
Upanishads mentioned above.

Why we do not realise our "True Self"

Since our birth, we use our sense organs to experience the world and are always thinking of
ourselves as body or mind. For example, my body, my house; I am hungry, this is my title, I
am sad or happy, due to that, we conceive our Self in terms of our body and mind. This is why
we get mixed with them and forget our true nature that is Atman or Soul. We get accustomed
to body and mind, which seems to be the leading case of our ignorance. IU (IU.3) states that
those who do not understand the true nature of Atman and only experience or understand
the world through senses are the killer of Atman or Soul.

Swami Vimarakananda (1938), in his commentary on Sri Shankracharya's Aparokshanubhuti (A),
explains (A.13) that we are not the body – this body has its origin in the insentient matter,
and as such, it is devoid of consciousness. If we are the body, then we should be unconscious;
but by no means we are so. Therefore we cannot be the body. He further explains that the
physical body has many parts, and it always changes, but Atman (Soul) is unchanging. It is
further elaborated in (A.39) that even our subtle body consists of many parts and is unstable. It is also an object of perception, is changeable, limited, and non-existence by nature. So how can this be the Purusha? The Purusha/Atman is "we" who uses the body and mind, and other sense organs.

Hence our true nature is Brahman, but this is obscured by the vailing power of maya (mind). We do not realise that we are infinite consciousness, but we keep linking our Self to body and mind. This bondage that we have imposed upon our Self can only be negated by removing obscureness caused by body and mind phenomena (the power of maya). Knowledge of oneness is knowledge, and knowledge of many is ignorance (BAU2.4.14).

It is the ignorance - Avidya (IU.9) which has withheld the light of knowledge from us. To get that knowledge, therefore, we have to remove this Avidya. But so long as we are engaged in Kama and Upasana, we remain under its sway. Only when we inquire into the real nature of this Avidya than it gradually withdraws and finally vanishes; then alone, the knowledge shines (A.11).

However, KU provides a different dimension; in this text, Yama, the "Lord of Death," explains to Nachiketa, "The Self cannot be known through the study of scriptures, nor thorough intellect nor through hearing learned discourses (KU6.9-10). It can be attained only by those whom the Self chooses (KU2.23 & IU.10). It further explains that "The ignorant one thinks that the intellect can know the Self, but the enlightened one knows that "He" is beyond the duality of the "knower and the known." Thus, intelligence may give you wisdom and discernment and pave the way, but it cannot give you the experience of pure Self.

**How to get that knowledge of Atman?**

Atman is the highest principle, and one must strive to realise it (CU 3.10 &11). The earlier Upanishads, such as BAU & CU, do not reference the process of gaining the knowledge of Atman. A brief reference to Yoga is made in (KU2.12), but there is a paucity of detail; however, SU provides a process (SU2.8-17) to obtain that knowledge. One cannot perceive Atman through the process of perception or via senses, and hence one needs to acquire keen (or subtle) Sukshma vision through the practice of Yoga (KU 3.12). The first stage in the yoga system is gaining mastery over one's speech, mind, and intellect, making use of the great Self. Only those who possess the subtle vision can only perceive Atman and become immortal. Furthermore, one must transcend diversity and perceive the Self alone (SU.2.13).

KU (3.3-4) suggests that we need to learn to control our senses that run on the material world/objects’ path, and through yoga processes, we can still our mind and sense organ. Once we have control over these, we may be able to get the knowledge of Atman. One who gains the knowledge of Atman or Purusha is no longer subject to fear, joy, or death. Attaining this knowledge is like achieving Amrit (KU. 8-9), which means deathless or immortal, and this person attains Brahman here in the world and achieves moksha that means attaining a state of realised consciousness.
Conclusion

A great wealth of wisdom can be learned from the Upanishads. Upanishads can provide inquiry into the ultimate and absolute principle that sustains the existence that we live in but do not understand because we are caught up in our day to day life and only experience this world through our senses.

It is concluded that *Aham Brahmasmi*, or I am *Brahman*, is a process of becoming as opposed to just knowing. Our *Atman* is held in bondage in worldly things, and this bondage can only be ended through the acquisition of realised knowledge of our true spiritual identity as *Atman* and ultimately *Brahman*. Therefore as stated in (BAU 2.4.5) to break the bondage, one needs to practice Yoga (meditation) through which *Atman* can be realised, be heard of, and profoundly meditate upon.

References:


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